

SYRIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, although the government imposed restrictions on this right. The government's respect for religious freedom declined during the year. The constitution provides for freedom of faith and religious practice as long as religious rites do not disturb the public order. The government increased its targeting and surveillance of members of faith groups it deemed a "threat," including members of the country's Sunni majority. This occurred concurrently with the escalation of the civil conflict that resulted in the regime killing 35,000 civilians between the start of the uprising in 2011 and year's end. Such targeting included killing, detention, and harassment. There were credible reports that the regime targeted citizens based on religious affiliation in mixed neighborhoods in Homs and rural Aleppo. The government outlawed groups it claimed were "Muslim extremist groups," as well as Jehovah's Witnesses. It continued to monitor the activities of all religious groups and to discourage proselytizing, which it deemed a threat to relations among and within different faiths.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. While opposition to the government began as a series of peaceful protests calling for reform and an end to regime abuses, the regime framed the protests and subsequent armed resistance in sectarian terms, maintaining that protesters and oppositionists were associated with "extreme Islamist factions." At times, some protesters associated the entire Alawi minority with the regime, holding Alawis accountable for the regime's brutality and killing of civilians. Consequently, Alawis were particularly targeted for reprisal as tensions, violence, and killing rose between Sunni and Alawi communities. The majority of those killed during the year were Alawi, Shia, or Sunni, although Christians, Druze, and Kurds were also victims. Societal pressure sometimes caused Muslim converts to Christianity to leave their places of residence. Reports of harassment of Christians, mostly in the context of ongoing political unrest, increased during the year.

After the U.S. embassy closed in February, there was no U.S. diplomatic presence inside the country, but U.S. officials continued to consult with religious leaders and groups. Officials in Washington worked with members of Syrian civil society groups, religious leaders, and the opposition to organize events and develop practices aimed at combating increasingly sectarian rhetoric. High-level U.S.

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government officials continued to urge the government to respect the universal rights of all its citizens, including the right to religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to a U.S. government source, the population is approximately 22.5 million, although emigration increased throughout the year due to ongoing violence, unrest, and economic hardship. Sunni Muslims constitute 74 percent of the population and are present throughout the country. The Sunni population includes Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and some Turkomans. Other Muslim groups, including Alawis, Ismailis, and Shia, together constitute 13 percent. Druze account for 3 percent of the population. Various Christian groups constitute the remaining 10 percent, although the Christian population may be closer to 8 percent due to emigration as Christians flee the country. There is also a small Jewish population in major urban areas.

Most Christians belong to the autonomous Orthodox churches, the Uniate churches (which recognize the Roman Catholic Pope), or the independent Nestorian Church. There is a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000, but the government does not recognize the Yezidi as belonging to a group distinct from Islam. Many of the approximately 100 Jews in the country at the beginning of the year have reportedly emigrated due to the ongoing conflict.

Most Christians live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, or in the Hasaka governorate in the northeast section of the country. Iraqi Christians frequently migrated to Syria in past years, but very few entered during the year due to ongoing unrest and violence. The majority of the Iraqi Christian population in the country either moved to neighboring states or returned to Iraq. The majority of Alawis live in the mountainous areas of the coastal Latakia governorate, but they also have significant presence in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Damascus. Many Druze live in the rugged Jabal al-Arab region in the southern governorate of Suweida, where they constitute the vast majority of the local population. The few remaining Jews are concentrated in Damascus and Aleppo. Yezidis are found primarily in the northeast and Aleppo. The Kurdish population is located in the northern and eastern border areas with Turkey and Iraq, largely in Hassakeh, Raqqah, and Halab.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, although the government restricts this right, particularly for members of groups it considers “extremist.” Government policies and the judicial system allow many groups to worship freely, provided that religious rites “do not disturb the public order.” The government bans groups it considers “Muslim extremists” and also bans Jehovah’s Witnesses. These groups must conduct their activities without attracting government attention. Citizens have the legal right to sue the government when they believe it has violated their rights.

Membership in any “Salafist” organization, a designation generally denoting conservative Sunni fundamentalism, is illegal. The government and the State Security Court have not defined the exact parameters of what constitutes a Salafist activity or explained why it is illegal. According to Law 49, affiliation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death. Until this year, the sentence was typically commuted to 12 years in prison. Now, however, sentencing ranges from imprisonment to the death penalty.

There is no official state religion, although the constitution requires that the president be Muslim and stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation. The government selects for religious leadership positions those Muslims who commit to preserving the secular nature of the state.

The government restricts proselytizing and conversion. The government does not recognize the religious status of Muslims who convert to other religions, and considers such converts subject to Sharia (Islamic law). It does recognize Christian converts to Islam. While there is no civil law prohibiting proselytizing, the government discourages it and occasionally expels or prosecutes missionaries for “posing a threat to the relations among religious groups.”

There is no specific law against the production and distribution of religious literature or other types of media. However, the penal code prohibits “causing tension between religious communities,” a provision the government uses to prosecute groups it deems harmful to society, mostly those it views as Salafist.

All religious groups must register with the government, which monitors fundraising and requires permits for all religious and nonreligious group meetings except for worship. The registration process can be complicated and lengthy but the government usually allows groups to operate informally while awaiting approval. Recognized religious groups and clergy, including all government-

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recognized Muslim, Jewish, and Christian groups, receive free utilities and are exempt from real estate taxes on religious buildings and personal property taxes on their official vehicles.

For issues of personal status, the government requires citizens to be affiliated nominally with Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Religious affiliation is documented on the birth certificate and is required on legal documentation when marrying or traveling for a religious pilgrimage. The government does not require the designation of religion on a passport or national identity card.

A Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian man, but a Christian woman can marry a Muslim man. If a Christian woman marries a Muslim man, she is not allowed to be buried in a Muslim cemetery unless she converts to Islam. If a person wants to convert from Christianity to Islam, the law states that the presiding Muslim cleric must inform the prospective convert's diocese.

Members of religious groups are subject to their respective religious laws concerning marriage and divorce. The personal status law on divorce for Muslims is based on Islamic law, and government-appointed religious judges interpret some of its provisions in a manner that discriminates against women. In the case of interreligious disputes, Islamic law takes precedence.

Inheritance is based on Islamic law for all citizens except Christians. Accordingly, women are usually granted half the share of inheritance that male heirs receive. When a Christian woman marries a Muslim, she is not entitled to inheritance.

The government generally does not prohibit links between its citizens and coreligionists in other countries or between its citizens and the international hierarchies that govern some religious groups. However, it prohibits contact between the Jewish community and Jews in Israel.

The government permits the use of religious language in public, including banners bearing religious slogans at prominent public landmarks during religious holidays. The display of nativity scenes and other symbols associated with Christmas is common.

The government allows foreign Christian faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to operate in the country under the auspices of the Catholic or Orthodox Churches and without officially registering. Many of these NGOs

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work directly with the Iraqi refugees in cooperation with the various churches in the country.

Religious minority groups, with the exception of Jews, are represented among the senior officer corps. The law does not permit conscientious objection to military service. Historically, both Christian and Muslim religious leaders are exempted from military service, although Muslim religious leaders must pay a levy to be exempted. In keeping with the government's policy of secularism, there are no chaplains of any faith in the military.

All public schools are officially government-run and nonsectarian, although in practice the Christian and Druze communities operate some schools. There is mandatory religious instruction in public schools for all religious groups, with government-approved teachers and curriculums. Religious instruction is provided for Islam and Christianity only, and courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Members of religious minority groups can choose to attend public schools with Muslim or Christian instruction, or attend private schools that ascribe to either secular or minority sect curricula. Groups participating in Islamic courses include only Sunni, Shia, Alawi, Ismaili, Yezidi, and Druze. Although Arabic is the official language in public schools, the government permits the teaching of Armenian, Hebrew, Syriac (Aramaic), and Chaldean in some schools on the premise that they are "liturgical languages." There is no mandatory religious study at the university level.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Orthodox and Western Easter, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country, including reports of imprisonment and detention. The UN estimated that nearly 35,000 civilians were killed during the year. As part of the escalating conflict during the year, the government increased its targeting and surveillance of members of religious groups it deemed a "threat," including members of the country's Sunni majority. While opposition to the government began as a series of protests in response to widespread regime abuses, the regime framed the protests and later the armed resistance in sectarian terms, maintaining that protesters and oppositionists were associated with "extreme Islamist factions." The government continued to monitor the activities of all religious groups and to discourage proselytizing, deemed a

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threat to relations among and within different faiths. Violence or repression against those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood was common practice for the regime.

The government targeted, arrested, abused, and killed those it accused, often falsely, of cooperating with the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist, or other movements it considered “extreme.” There were credible reports the regime killed people because of their religious affiliation in mixed neighborhoods in Homs and rural Aleppo. In January members of the pro-regime militia known as the “shabbiha” killed 14 members of a Sunni family in Karm al-Zeitoun, including eight children ranging in age from eight months to nine years. There were unconfirmed reports that Alawi residents left the town days earlier after advance warning from the regime.

The government also broadened the scope of those it considered both Muslim Brotherhood affiliates and religious extremists, and used such labels to justify the mistreatment of potential oppositionists. Extrajudicial punishment of these individuals and groups was exacted during the year as the result of the ongoing conflict. Fourteen Sunni men were reportedly tortured and killed in October by Air Force intelligence officials due to their criticism of the regime. The funeral procession for one of the men was bombed outside Al-Zaitoona mosque in Muadamiyet al-Sham, a known rallying point for anti-government protests. High-level defectors from the armed forces reported Sunni soldiers and their families increasingly faced detention and other forms of harassment due to their religious affiliation.

Prosecutions were primarily based on the perceived political threat posed by alleged Muslim Brotherhood affiliates and religious extremists to the country’s secular system and the survival of the regime. Human rights groups alleged that many of the accused were simply followers of a particular preacher or mosque rather than participants in any extremist groups, although escalating conflict led to the emergence of several anti-government groups of various religious persuasions. The government rarely furnished documentation on the number arrested; however, observers noted the government had detained tens of thousands more citizens since the unrest began. Almost none of the detained was provided due process. The regime referred to all anti-government protesters as “armed gangs” affiliated with “extremist” or terrorist movements.

In September the body of Greek Orthodox priest Reverend Fadi Jamil Haddad was found outside Damascus. The priest was reportedly kidnapped by unknown

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perpetrators as he was trying to secure the release of another kidnapping victim. There were no reports that the government investigated the matter. Some accounts accused the regime of responsibility while others blamed opposition militias, extremist groups, or common criminals.

Opposition activists claimed that the regime targeted Christians, Kurds, and other minorities. The network Al-Arabiya reported that, in February, government forces attacked, raided, and confiscated property from the historic Syriac Orthodox Um al-Zennar Church in Homs, sparking a rise in Christian participation in anti-government protests. In May authorities arrested some Christian worshippers and drove others away from St. Cyril's Church in Damascus during a memorial service for an activist killed earlier.

Government surveillance of religiously affiliated groups such as Christian NGOs increased during the year, because the regime occasionally characterized such groups as "fronts" for opposition assistance transfers. On February 26, local newspapers reported that the government ordered all banks to cease transactions with the Greek Orthodox Mariamite Church because of allegations that the church was funneling donations from foreign churches to the opposition. The regime reportedly also fired a non-explosive missile at the Convent of our Lady of Saidnaya because it was reportedly providing medicine and supplies to bombed regions. In June the government expelled the founder of the monastic community at Deir Mar Musa al-Habachi, Italian Jesuit Paolo Dall'Oglio, after 30 years of residency in the country. The expulsion was based in part on his interfaith work and his condemnation of the regime's human rights violations. Father Paolo was initially ordered to leave the country in November 2011 but was ultimately allowed to stay until June.

Government security services monitored all groups, religious and nonreligious. The government considered militant Islam a particular threat to the regime and closely monitored those individuals it considered to be religious militants. The government openly threatened members of the Sunni majority, warning against increased communications with foreign coreligionists, defining such communication as opposition political or military activity. While the government allowed mosques to be built, it monitored and controlled sermons and often closed mosques between prayers. The government increased the imprisonment and summary execution of individuals it deemed to be associated with opposition radio and television programming, including religious programming that did not meet government-sanctioned criteria.

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The rate of prosecution or government harassment for proselytizing increased, with reported cases of government surveillance of and fines imposed on Christian, Druze, and Sunni organizations. Most charges carried sentences of imprisonment from five years to life, although such sentences were in the past often reduced to one or two years. The government issued numerous threatening statements suggesting that sentences for proselytizing and for membership in illegal religious groups were to become increasingly harsh.

Government policy claimed to disavow sectarianism of any kind, but religion was a factor in determining some career opportunities. The minority Alawi sect, of which President Asad and his family are members, continued to hold an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers, including in the military and other security services. Christians often complained about growing limitations on their influence and positions in the government. The regime continued its widespread marketing campaign against “fitna,” or sectarian strife, while simultaneously attributing opposition violence to religious extremists and terrorists. Opposition figures continued to accuse the authorities of systematically using sectarian fear as a strategy to counter anti-government demonstrations.

The regime continued to frame opposition actions as targeting the Christian population. At the same time, it increased its own targeting of Christian and Alawi anti-regime activists in order to eliminate minority voices that might counter its narrative of “Sunni-sponsored violence.” For example, in addition to ongoing violent attacks, the regime issued instructions to all banks across the country to stop transactions with the Greek Orthodox Mariamite Church on charges of money laundering, as the Church allegedly was receiving funds from expatriates to support opposition activities. Opposition members continued to highlight these regime actions as evidence of the government’s attempts to bolster sectarianism in order to justify its crackdown.

Government-sponsored media coverage and rhetoric was consistently anti-Israeli, as it has been in the past, and the media continued to disseminate anti-Semitic material through radio and television programming, news articles, cartoons, and other mass media. The government continued its support for radio and television programming related to the practice and study of government-sanctioned forms of Islam.

The grand mufti of the country, Sheikh Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, continued to call on Muslims to stand up to Islamic fundamentalism and urged leaders of the various religious groups to engage in regular dialogue for mutual understanding.

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The grand mufti was a controversial figure throughout the unrest; he publicly allied his comments and positions with those of the regime. On April 27 the grand mufti blamed the Arab Spring and the ongoing violence in Syria on a “Western plot that will benefit the Zionist entity.”

The government allowed foreign Christian faith-based NGOs such as the Jesuit Refugee Service to operate in the country under the auspices of one of the historically established churches but without officially registering. However, it required foreign Islamic NGOs to register and receive approval from the Ministry of Religious Endowments to operate. Security forces regularly questioned these charities on their sources of income and monitored their expenditures. The regime suspected Islamic charitable organizations of serving as conduits of foreign funding for the opposition.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor prohibited religious leaders from serving as the directors of boards for Islamic charities; traditionally, clerics headed nearly all Islamic charities in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Some prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom, actively countering sectarian narratives, encouraging peaceful relations between religious groups, and calling on all parties to the conflict to respect human rights. Others contributed negatively to sectarian tensions and infringement of religious freedom.

There were reports of tensions between religious groups, exacerbated by government abuses, economic and political competition, cultural rivalries, and sectarian rhetoric and violence. As the death toll of the conflict increased and regime abuses worsened, reports of Sunni revenge, sectarian killings, and violence against Alawis continued to increase as well. Violent extremist activity intensified as the civil conflict escalated, amplifying sectarian tension in the country. For example, U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization Jabhat al-Nusra claimed responsibility for numerous bombings across the country during the year, in many cases stating that such attacks were reactions to the regime’s “massacres of Sunnis.” Accusations that the regime favored the Alawi population continued, culminating in opposition attacks, reportedly by extremist elements, on Alawi populations. Alawis increasingly feared retribution would follow a fall of the regime. There were reports of presumed Sunni extremists attacking Shia mosques

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in northern Syria. Christian sources reported that in some cases armed oppositionists occupied churches and Christian schools in the Aleppo and Homs areas.

The chaos of the civil conflict lent itself to accusations of “false flag” attacks in which one group (pro-regime or otherwise) committed an attack under the guise of another. Such claims were both symptoms of and catalysts for increased suspicion and tensions across sectarian lines. A YouTube video surfaced in November in which gunmen claiming affiliation with Jabhat al-Nusra shot men insisting they were Sunni. Some speculated that pro-regime forces created the video under the guise of being Jabhat al-Nusra as an attempt to discredit the group. In August a bombing by unknown perpetrators killed twelve and wounded dozens during a funeral procession in Jaramana for two pro-Asad Druze killed in a bombing the previous day. Members of some vulnerable groups reportedly began to acquire weapons and organize militias as a means to protect their communities, which further fueled the conflict.

Alawi and Shia youth reported being threatened in schools and universities by Sunni colleagues due to their religious affiliations and perceived support for the regime. Anti-government protests occasionally carried specific anti-Alawi messages. In February Salafi Sheikh Adnan al’Arour stated on his television program that Alawis who continue to support Asad “should be ground up in a meat grinder and fed to the dogs.” He was a controversial figure due to the conservative religious beliefs he regularly espoused on Saudi television.

A Reuters poll in April found that most Alawis reported they had been threatened during the uprising because of their religion, and feared stating their names in cities where Sunnis were the majority. Journalist Nir Rosen noted many Alawis with distinctive accents or speech patterns began to mask their speech patterns to avoid being perceived as Alawis.

Opposition media coverage was largely targeted against the regime, but also used anti-Semitic messaging. One opposition figure claimed in a television interview that Israel’s apparent desire to see Asad kill Syrian citizens was proof that Jews used the blood of non-Jews in baking matzos for Passover.

Most members of the military officer corps who defected during the year were Sunni, although Shia and Alawi officers reportedly also defected or were planning to defect.

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Social conventions and religious proscriptions made conversion relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversion, which was technically illegal. In many cases societal pressure forced such converts to relocate within the country or leave the country to practice their new religion openly.

Some Christians perceived employment discrimination in the private sector to be a growing problem. Some Christians reported societal tolerance for Christians was dwindling and this was a major factor for the surge of emigration of Syrian Christians.

Iraqi Christian refugees who had resided in the country for years prior to the uprising also began to leave in large numbers. In June in the town of Qusayr, Sunni extremist opposition groups reportedly issued an ultimatum calling for Christians to either join the opposition or leave the city. A sniper reportedly killed Maurice Bitar, a Christian resident of Qusayr, for not complying with the ultimatum.

Selected in November as the president of the newly formed Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces, prominent Muslim preacher Mouaz al-Khatib delivered numerous statements calling for unity among religious groups and for establishing an inclusive post-Asad government that respects the rights of all Syrians. Many members of the coalition reiterated this commitment during the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Although the U.S. embassy closed in February, the U.S. government maintained strong relationships with Syrian religious groups and leaders. U.S. officials reached out to religious groups and leaders in Syria, the United States, and throughout the world. The ambassador and other high-ranking U.S. officials met with members of the Orthodox Christian, Sunni, and Shia communities during the year, focusing on providing assistance to vulnerable populations and countering sectarian violence. The ambassador and other officials participated in dialogues, roundtables, and working groups focused on countering sectarianism and retributive violence. High-level U.S. officials, including the president and secretary of state, continued to urge the government to respect the universal rights of all its citizens, including the right to religious freedom.