



World Directory of Minorities

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Christians, Armenians and Assyrians

Profile

Christians of various denominations make up around ten per cent of Syria's population.

There are several hundred thousand members of the Antiochene (Antiochian) Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church (Greek or Byzantine Orthodox Church) in Syria. They are concentrated in and around Damascus and also in Latakia, Aleppo and the neighbouring coastal region. Orthodox Christians continue to prosper in Syria and do not suffer erosion by emigration to the same extent as other Christian communities. Of more than a million members of the Greek Catholic Church worldwide, about 100,000 live in Syria and their Patriarch is based in Damascus. As with many other Christian communities, Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities are well-versed in their societies, and are Arab Syrians. They also have cordial ecumenical relations amongst themselves, as much as amongst them and the society within which they live in Syria. Greek Orthodox or Catholic communities are called Greek not for ethnic reasons but in order to highlight that their religious celebrations are focused on the Greek / Byzantine rites.

There is a small community of Maronite Christians mainly in the Aleppo region. The Maronite community is a surviving remnant from before the majority sought safety in Mount Lebanon in the sixth century. It has maintained ties to Rome since the twelfth century, and the liturgy is in Syriac.

Ethnic Armenians, almost all of whom are Christians, live mainly in Aleppo, but also in Damascus (primarily in the Hay al-Arman district) and the Jazira. Most belong to the Armenian Apostolic or Orthodox Church (Gregorian), and some belong to the schismatic Armenian Catholic Church, and a few to the Evangelical Church. Armenians are by and large city-dwellers, and they are perhaps one of the least assimilated communities in Syria. They keep their traditions, and usually tend to avoid politics and public life.

The Suryanis, or members of the Syriac Orthodox Church, are the second largest Christian minority and are located mainly in the Jazira, Homs, Aleppo and Damascus. Very similar in liturgical traditions to the Armenians, they are also monophysites who believe that Jesus' divinity overpowered his humanity.

There are also adherents to the Syrian Catholic Church, in small communities mainly in Aleppo, Hasaka and Damascus.

Assyrians live in the Khabur valley in the Jazira (north-east Syria). Most belong to the Assyrian Ancient Church of the East (see Iraq), and some to the Chaldean Catholic Church.

Historical context

Having rejected the verdict of Chalcedon, 451, the Suryanis were virtually eradicated by Roman imperial forces. Muslim Arab conquest was a relief from persecution and their numbers grew. They were numerically preponderant in the Syrian countryside until virtually exterminated by Tamarlane's forces in the late fourteenth century. Some of the Suryani today are survivors from the massacres carried out around Mardin by Turkey in 1915. They dislike being described as Jacobite (after Jacob Baradeus, who led the community after expulsion at Chalcedon, 451).

Orthodox Christians never identified with the Christian West (which ransacked the Orthodox capital Constantinople in

1204). They feel comfortable as Christians within an Islamic culture and some view the Prophet Muhammad as founder of a united Arab nation. Orthodox Christians took a lead in nationalist thinking during the twentieth century. The appointment of an Arab, rather than Greek, Patriarch of Antioch in 1898 was the first overt expression of Arab nationalism. After that, Orthodox Christians played an active part in the short-lived Kingdom of Syria, in Syrian nationalist movements and in Arab nationalism.

The Melkite (Imperial) Church (Greek Catholic Church) split from the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch to enter union with Rome in 1724. It immediately appointed an Arab rather than Greek Patriarch.

The uniate Syrian Catholic Church was established in 1781 by schismatics from the Syriac Orthodox Church. Its liturgy is similar to that of the Syriac Orthodox, and its language is Arabic.

About 9,000 ethnic Assyrians moved from Iraq to Syria following the Iraqi massacre of 1933. The present-day Assyrians are Nestorian Christians and speak Syriac. They settled in the Jazirah near Tall Tamir on the upper Khabur River. The French established this Assyrian settlement with the assistance of the League of Nations, and in 1942 it became an integral part of Syria. The Assyrian settlement on the Khabur valley consists of about 20 villages, primarily agricultural. They have faced severe economic pressures over the years, despite owning their own irrigated lands, and some of them emigrated to the USA where there exists a large community.

Some Armenians are descended from those who left Anatolian Armenia in the eleventh century and Cilicia a century later. The majority, however, are descendants of the waves of descended 100,000 or so survivors of the genocide in Anatolia during the First World War.

Current issues

Christians are widely tolerated in Syria. State schools provide Muslim and Christian religious education in separate classes, church authorities are granted broad leeway in certain areas of family law for Christians, and state holidays include Western Christmas, as well as Orthodox and Western Easter.

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