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08 November 2005

SYR43576.FE

Syrian Arab Republic: Treatment of Christians by the authorities and by society, and protection offered (2005)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Approximately 10 per cent of the Syrian population is Christian (UN 17 Oct. 2005; US 28 Feb. 2005, 8).

The *International Religious Freedom Report 2004* states that "[r]elations among the various religious communities generally are amicable, and there is little evidence of societal discrimination or violence against religious minorities" (15 Sept. 2004, Sec. III).

For example, Syria's Grand Mufti Ahmed Kuftaro has engaged in activities promoting Christian-Muslim understanding (*International Religious Freedom Report 2004* 15 Sept. 2004, Sec. II).

The government ensures that the Christian minority is well represented within its administration (UN 17 Oct. 2005) and in the officer ranks of the armed forces (*International Religious Freedom Report 2004* 15 Sept. 2004, Sec. II; see also US 28 Feb. 2005, 8).

Although certain schools are administered by Druze and Christian minorities, most schools, where religion is taught separately to Christians and Muslims, are government-run (*International Religious Freedom Report 2004* 15 Sept. 2004, Sec. II). Religious groups apply "their respective religious laws on marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance" (ibid.).

Joshua Landis, a University of Oklahoma professor living in Syria, said that "Christians feel more insecure than other minorities in Syria because they are thinly spread throughout the country," living mainly in the cities (UN 17 Oct. 2005).

Economic downturn and internal political tensions sometimes cause "friction between religious faiths" (*International Religious Freedom Report 2004* 15 Sept. 2004, Sec. III).

Bachir Isaac Saadi, chairman of the political bureau of the Assyrian Democratic Organization, said that "Christians in Syria aren't afraid of the government any longer. . . .They're afraid of their neighbors" (*The New York Times* 29 Dec. 2004). Nevertheless, the Syrian government "continues to monitor the activities of all groups, including religious groups" (*International Religious Freedom Report 2004* 15 Sept. 2004, Intro.).

The *International Religious Freedom Report 2004* indicates that conversions are relatively rare in Syria, particularly conversions from Islam to Christianity (ibid., Sec. III). "Societal pressure" often forces those who convert to relocate to another region of the country or to another country altogether (ibid.).

Although his candidacy was illegal under a provision of the Syrian constitution that requires the president to be Muslim, Vahan Kirakos, a Syrian of Armenian ethnicity and a Christian, ran for president (*The New York Times* 29 Dec. 2004). "As a result of his activism," Kirakos lost his engineering job and his family has received harassing telephone calls (ibid.).

The New York Times reported that in late October 2004, "more than 2,000 Assyrian Christians" held a demonstration in Hasakah calling for "equal treatment by the local police" (ibid.). The demonstration, which was a first for the Assyrians, followed the killing of two Christians by Muslims who had called them "Bush supporters" and "Christian dogs" (ibid.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

International Religious Freedom Report 2004. 15 September 2004. "Syria." United States Department of State. <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35508.htm>> [Accessed 1 Nov. 2005]

The New York Times. 29 December 2004. Katherine Zoepf. "The Conflict in Iraq: Regional Fallout; New Hope of Syrian Minorities: Ripple Effect of Iraqi Politics." (Factiva)

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United States (US). 28 February 2005. Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress. Alfred B. Prados and Jeremy M. Sharp. *Syria: Political Conditions and Relations with the United States After the Iraq War*. <<http://www.usembassy.it/pdf/other/RL32727.pdf>> [Accessed 3 Nov. 2005]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: The Center for Religious Freedom (Freedom House) and the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) did not provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, European Country of Origin Information Network, Factiva, Human Rights Watch, International Christian Concern, *International Religious Freedom Report 2003*, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, World News Connection.

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