



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Syria

Syria – SYR38462 – Failed Asylum
Seekers – Returnees – Christians

15 April 2011

1. Will applying for asylum in Australia result in difficulties on return to Syria? Would asylum seekers be arrested and prosecuted for distributing false information about Syria?

Reports indicate that failed asylum seekers are interrogated and detained upon return to Syria.¹ The period of detention and subsequent treatment by authorities varies depending upon the profile of the returnee.² Reports state that some returned asylum seekers have been charged with distributing false information about Syria.³

The US Department of State report on human rights in Syria during 2010 indicates that returned failed asylum seekers may face prosecution on return to Syria:

¹ US Department of State 2011, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2010 – Syria*, 8 April, Section 2.d – Attachment 1; Danish Immigration Service 2010, *Human rights issues concerning Kurds in Syria: Report from a joint fact finding mission by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and ACCORD/Austrian Red Cross to Damascus, Syria, Beirut, Lebanon, and Erbil and Dohuk, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), 21 January to 8 February 2010*, May, pp.55-56 <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/FF03AB63-10A5-4467-A038-20FE46B74CE8/0/Syrienrapport2010pdf.pdf> – Accessed 18 November 2010 - Attachment 2; UK Home Office 2009, *Operational Guidance Note: Syria*, February, p.13 - Attachment 3; Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2008, SYR102807.E – *Syria: The Syrian government's attitude towards, and its treatment of, citizens who have made refugee or asylum claims, particularly when the claim was made in Canada or the United States (US)*, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada website, 1 May http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/research/rir/index_e.htm?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=451893 – Accessed 13 August 2008 – Attachment 4.

² Danish Immigration Service 2010, *Human rights issues concerning Kurds in Syria: Report from a joint fact finding mission by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and ACCORD/Austrian Red Cross to Damascus, Syria, Beirut, Lebanon, and Erbil and Dohuk, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), 21 January to 8 February 2010*, May, pp.55-56 <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/FF03AB63-10A5-4467-A038-20FE46B74CE8/0/Syrienrapport2010pdf.pdf> – Accessed 18 November 2010 - Attachment 2; UK Home Office 2009, *Operational Guidance Note: Syria*, February, p.13 - Attachment 3; Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2008, SYR102807.E – *Syria: The Syrian government's attitude towards, and its treatment of, citizens who have made refugee or asylum claims, particularly when the claim was made in Canada or the United States (US)*, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada website, 1 May http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/research/rir/index_e.htm?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=451893 – Accessed 13 August 2008 – Attachment 4.

³ Amnesty International 2010, *Amnesty International Annual Report 2010 – Syria*, 28 May - Attachment 5; Danish Immigration Service 2010, *Human rights issues concerning Kurds in Syria: Report from a joint fact finding mission by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and ACCORD/Austrian Red Cross to Damascus, Syria, Beirut, Lebanon, and Erbil and Dohuk, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), 21 January to 8 February 2010*, May, pp.55-56 <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/FF03AB63-10A5-4467-A038-20FE46B74CE8/0/Syrienrapport2010pdf.pdf> – Accessed 18 November 2010 - Attachment 2; Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2008, SYR102807.E – *Syria: The Syrian government's attitude towards, and its treatment of, citizens who have made refugee or asylum claims, particularly when the claim was made in Canada or the United States (US)*, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada website, 1 May http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/research/rir/index_e.htm?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=451893 – Accessed 13 August 2008 – Attachment 4.

The law provides for the prosecution of any person who attempts to seek refuge in another country to escape a penalty in Syria. Persons who have unsuccessfully sought asylum in other countries and who have past connections with the Muslim Brotherhood have been prosecuted upon their return to the country. The government routinely arrested dissidents and former citizens with no known political affiliation who tried to return to the country after years or even decades in exile.⁴

Amnesty International have reported that in September 2009 a failed Kurdish asylum seeker was detained upon return to Syria. According to the report he was charged with propagating ‚false news’ about Syria:

Khaled Kenjo, a member of the Kurdish minority, was arrested in September, 12 days after he was forcibly returned to Syria from Germany, where he had unsuccessfully sought asylum. He was charged with “broadcasting abroad false news that could harm the reputation of the state”. The charge apparently related to his participation, while in Germany, in activities to promote Kurdish minority rights in Syria. On 30 December, Qamishli Military Court ordered his release without dropping the charge. According to Khaled Kenjo, he was tortured in custody.⁵

From 21 January to 8 February 2010 a fact-finding mission into the situation for Kurds in Syria was conducted by the Danish Immigration Service and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation. The report of the fact finding mission provides information on the treatment of returned failed asylum seekers to Syria. According to the report returned asylum seekers are interrogated and detained. The report states that a “Western diplomatic source” stated that one returnee was charged with spreading false information abroad, although according to the returnee’s lawyer his client had not been politically active at all. The report contains the following information on the treatment of returned Syrian asylum seekers:

Nadim Houry, senior researcher, Human Rights Watch, Beirut, stated that returned failed asylum seekers are most likely detained upon return to Syria, although not necessarily for a long period of time. It was added that there is a high likelihood of ill-treatment during their initial detention which can amount to torture if the person is expected to know something of interest to the security service. **What will happen to a returnee depends on what is in the file (if there is one) or on whether the security services believe what the returnee tells. Usually, the authorities release returnees after making a file on them and probably refer them to an investigative judge. Upon release persons are very commonly required to report regularly.**

A Western diplomatic source (5) stated that failed asylum seekers would be detained upon return to Syria simply because of the fact that he or she has been abroad. The person would be subjected to interrogation by the security services. However, it is unclear how the person would be treated during this detention that in some cases could last for weeks or even longer.

...Nadim Houry, HRW, added that the immigration service is not necessarily the first instance which returned failed asylum seekers meet at the border, and that they can as well be detained and interrogated by the security services immediately upon arrival. The security service is generally present at the airport. It could happen that the immigration service at the airport contacts the security service in advance informing them about the returnee so that the security service is already waiting for the returnee at the airport.

Regarding the situation for returned failed asylum seekers, **Nadim Houry, HRW, stated that every returned failed asylum seeker will automatically be detained and interrogated.**

⁴ US Department of State 2011, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2010 – Syria*, 8 April, Section 2.d – Attachment 1.

⁵ Amnesty International 2010, *Amnesty International Annual Report 2010 – Syria*, 28 May - Attachment 5.

...According to a Western diplomatic source (4) persons who have left Syria illegally have been, upon return, subject to investigation by the immigration authorities. This can include detention in the immigration service's own detention centres, which the source considered to be routine if it does not exceed two weeks. It was stressed that in almost all cases known to the source, the detainees the past three months, out of which three were first detained but later released, while **one person was charged with spreading false information abroad as part of his political activities, although the person's lawyer argued in court that his client had not been politically active at all.** The source mentioned that the computer system employed at border controls to screen persons upon their entry into Syria works well. Border guards check whether the name of someone who enters Syria can be found on one of the wanted persons lists of the security services. These lists contain information from the various security services' offices from all parts of the country, including from Qamishli. Immigration authorities are thus able to see whether a returnee has a file with the security services somewhere, and can subsequently inquire about the file's details with the authorities from these cities or municipalities. It was added that there is no single list of wanted persons but that every security agency maintains its own list. If one of the security services has a file concerning a returnee, he or she would be transferred from the immigration services' detention facilities to the security agency's detention centre.

A Western diplomatic source (1) stated that if somebody is called in for interrogation by the security services and the person does not show up, he would be arrested, and if his absence is due to the fact that he has left the country, he would be put on the list of wanted persons. Upon return to Syria, such a person would be arrested and interrogated by the security service. However, it was emphasized that it is very hard to say what exactly would happen in such cases.

A Western diplomatic source (4) stated that amnesties are not reliable in Syria stressing that persons who are on the list of wanted persons remain targeted even after an amnesty.⁶

The UK Home Office's April 2009 operational guidance note for Syria expresses the view that returnees are unlikely to be charged only on the basis of seeking asylum abroad. The report states that:

The law provides for the prosecution of any person attempting to seek refuge in another country to escape a penalty in Syria. Persons who have unsuccessfully sought asylum in other countries and who have past connections with the Muslim Brotherhood have been prosecuted upon their return to Syria. The government routinely arrested dissidents who tried to return to the country after years in exile. However the authorities are unlikely to try a failed Syrian asylum seeker on the basis of applying for asylum alone, although it would not help their case if they were to be tried for some other crime. In addition the Syrian authorities would not automatically know an individual had applied for asylum in the UK.⁷

A report published by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada in May 2008 refers to advice provided by the Syrian Human Rights Committee and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Representation in Canada on the issue of failed asylum seekers returned to Syria. The advice indicates that failed asylum seekers are interrogated upon return to Syria and may be charged with 'spreading false information':

An official from the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC), an independent London-based organization concerned with the freedoms and human rights of Syrians (SHRC 5 Dec. 2003), provided the following information in correspondence with the Research Directorate:

⁶ Danish Immigration Service 2010, *Human rights issues concerning Kurds in Syria: Report from a joint fact finding mission by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and ACCORD/Austrian Red Cross to Damascus, Syria, Beirut, Lebanon, and Erbil and Dohuk, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), 21 January to 8 February 2010*, May, pp.55-56 <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/FF03AB63-10A5-4467-A038-20FE46B74CE8/0/Syrienrapport2010pdf.pdf> – Accessed 18 November 2010 - Attachment 2.

⁷ UK Home Office 2009, *Operational Guidance Note: Syria*, February, p.13 - Attachment 3

... [A]nyone who applies for asylum and [is] known to the Syrian security services will be arrested, prosecuted and detained, for distributing false information about Syria.

This issue is applicable to all countries including Canada and USA. (SHRC 4 Apr. 2008)

An official from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Representation in Canada provided the following information in 14 April 2008 correspondence with the Research Directorate:

According to information available to the UNHCR Representation in Damascus, and confirmed by a number of European Embassies in Syria, **the mere unsuccessful application for asylum abroad will not lead *per se* to prosecution or other forms of persecution in Syria.**

...4. The procedure upon return of the unsuccessful asylum-seeker to Syria is the following:

- a. The person has to report to the Immigration Department in order to apply for new documentation.
- b. The procedure also comprises a visit to the Political Security Branch by which the person will be interrogated regarding the earlier motives and reasons for the illegal departure from Syria. Should this arise, it will be very difficult for the returnee to keep the information on a potential asylum application abroad confidential. Inquiries on the reasons for an asylum application abroad may follow.
- c. Should there be no problem, then the person will obtain, in about three months, new identity documents.
- d. Should the authorities come to the conclusion that the person may be considered as an opponent against the regime, the consequences may be very serious. UNHCR is not aware of the fate of such persons. Human Rights Reports on the conditions and treatment of detainees in different types of detention facilities, in particular of those facilities belonging to different Security Branches, speak for themselves.

The UNHCR also stated that the following information that was provided to the Research Directorate on 28 August 2003 was still accurate:

The Syrian law on departure of Syrian nationals, Law no. 42 of 31 December 1975 remains in force and has not been amended. Available information indicates that the practical implementation of this law has not changed since [April 1995]. Any Syrian national who departs the country illegally faces judicial consequences that may, in principle, result in up to three months imprisonment.

Generally speaking, one may expect the same treatment for unsuccessful Syrian asylum-seekers who have departed the country illegally. ... [T]he response of the Syrian authorities is very much dependent upon the nature of the departure and the profile and background of the individual. If it becomes known that they have applied for asylum, the consequences may be severe. However, if the individual's claim for asylum remains confidential then s/he may avoid further complications with the local law enforcement agencies and judicial authorities. Of course, the maintenance of confidentiality will depend, in part, on the manner in which the individual is returned to the country of origin. (28 Aug. 2003)

Refugees International, a Washington-based organization that provides advice on displacement issues to governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (n.d.), reports on the case of a

man who was deported to Syria from Germany after his asylum application was refused (Refugees International 13 Feb. 2006). Upon his return, he “was sentenced to two years in prison by the high security court and severely tortured” (ibid.). **Refugees International also indicates that “[t]he average length of detention for seeking political asylum abroad was reported to be three to six months” (ibid.).** According to the United States (US) Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2007, “[p]ersons who have unsuccessfully sought asylum in other countries and who have past connections with the MB [Muslim Brotherhood] have been prosecuted upon their return to Syria” (11 Mar. 2008, Sec 2.d).

According to Amnesty International (AI), two men, Abdul Rahman Musa and Usama Sayes were detained by the Syrian authorities after having failed to secure asylum from the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) respectively (13 May 2005). A 2007 AI report indicates that, in June 2005, both Sayes and Musa were sentenced to death but that their punishment was decreased to a twelve-year prison sentence (see also Independent on Sunday 2 July 2006). The Official from the SHRC provided the following information on Musa and Sayes:

Mr Abdul Rahman Musa who was deported to Syria from the USA after applying for asylum was charged with distributing false and fabricated information and undermining the prestige of the state. The same was applied to other deportees including Mr. Usama Sayes who was deported from the UK in 2005 [and] whose sentence was increased [to] two years because he was charged [with] distributing false information and undermining the state’s prestige because he applied [for] asylum in the UK. (SHRC 4 Apr. 2008)⁸

2. Do Christians face systematic harm from Muslims in Syria, particularly Damascus?

No reports were found regarding attacks on Christians by Muslims in Damascus or Syria. Reports indicate that Christians in Syria are generally not subject to systematic mistreatment or targeting by government forces or other social groups.⁹ Christian converts from Islam, however, may face societal discrimination.¹⁰ Proselytising Christians may also face government restrictions, such as house church closures.¹¹

⁸ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2008, *SYR102807.E – Syria: The Syrian government’s attitude towards, and its treatment of, citizens who have made refugee or asylum claims, particularly when the claim was made in Canada or the United States (US)*, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada website, 1 May http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/research/rir/index_e.htm?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=451893 – Accessed 13 August 2008 – Attachment 4.

⁹ Zirulnick, A. 2011, „Who are Egypt’s Copts, and the Middle East’s other Christian populations?“, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 January <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0103/Who-are-Egypt-s-Copts-and-the-Middle-East-s-other-Christian-populations/Syria> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 6; Shanahan, R. 2011, „Syria: The religious dimension“, *The Interpreter*, 30 March <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/03/30/Syria-The-religious-dimension.aspx> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 7; US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*, 17 November, www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148845.htm - Accessed 23 November 2010 - Attachment 8; Amnesty International 2010, *Amnesty International Report 2010 – Syria*, 28 May - Attachment 5; Freedom House 2010, *Freedom in the World – Syria*, June <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2010&country=7928> – Accessed 10 September 2010 - Attachment 9; Human Right Watch 2011, *World Report 2011*, 24 January www.hrw.org/en/world-report-2011 - Accessed 31 January 2011 - Attachment 10; „Syria’s evangelical Christians’ 2010“, *The Economist*, 18 November <http://www.economist.com/node/17528080> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 11; Fadel, L. 2011 „In Syria, many uneasy about where power struggle could lead“, *The Washington Post*, 30 March - Attachment 12; Lyon, A. 2010, „Syrian Christians find tolerance; Despite their concerns about the rise of radical Islam in the region, they enjoy equal rights at home“, *Montreal Gazette*, 12 June - Attachment 13

¹⁰ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*, 17 November, www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148845.htm - Accessed 23 November 2010 - Attachment 8.

¹¹ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*, 17 November, www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148845.htm - Accessed 23 November 2010 - Attachment 8; „Syria’s evangelical

Reports state that as President Assad, as a member of a minority religion, has suppressed sectarian violence and Islamic extremism in Syria. President Assad is an Alawite Muslim.¹² Christians, as a minority group in Syria, have supported President Assad.¹³ Reports indicate that some Christians in Syria have been concerned about recent riots in Syria and possible challenges to the Assad government.¹⁴ News reports state that Christians in Syria fear that a change of government in Syria could result in a rise in radical Islam and the targeting of religious minorities by the Sunni majority.¹⁵

A 2011 article by Christian Science Monitor describes the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Syria as “relatively calm”. The report states that this may be the result of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s status as a religious minority and his crack down of Islamic extremism in Syria. The report states that “Syrian Christians say they have the opportunity to participate in state and society.”¹⁶

A March 2011 report by Dr Rodger Shanahan, non-resident Fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy Institute, also states that, with the exception of the treatment of the Jewish population, the government in Syria “have displayed a high degree of religious tolerance.” Dr Shanahan also attributes this to Presidents Assad’s membership in a religious minority.¹⁷ Similarly, on 6 January 2011, *The Los Angeles Times* reported that “In Syria, the

Christians’ 2010, *The Economist*, 18 November <http://www.economist.com/node/17528080> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 11

¹² Zirulnick, A. 2011, „Who are Egypt's Copts, and the Middle East's other Christian populations?“, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 January <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0103/Who-are-Egypt-s-Copts-and-the-Middle-East-s-other-Christian-populations/Syria> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 6; Shanahan, R. 2011, „Syria: The religious dimension“, *The Interpreter*, 30 March <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/03/30/Syria-The-religious-dimension.aspx> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 7; „Syria's evangelical Christians’ 2010, *The Economist*, 18 November <http://www.economist.com/node/17528080> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 11; „Can the region's Christians survive the 21st Century?‘ 2011, *Los Angeles Times*, 6 January <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2011/01/middle-east-can-the-regions-christians-survive-the-21st-century.html> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 14; Fadel, L. 2011 „In Syria, many uneasy about where power struggle could lead“, *The Washington Post*, 30 March - Attachment 12.

¹³ Samir, K. 2011 „The "Arab spring" between authoritarianism and Islamism“, *Asia News*, 4 April <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-Arab-spring-between-authoritarianism-and-Islamism-21205.html#> - Accessed 15 April 2011 - Attachment 15; „Thousands march in Syrian funerals’ 2011, *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, 25 March - Attachment 16.

¹⁴ Samir, K. 2011 „The "Arab spring" between authoritarianism and Islamism“, *Asia News*, 4 April <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-Arab-spring-between-authoritarianism-and-Islamism-21205.html#> - Accessed 15 April 2011 - Attachment 15; Fadel, L. 2011 „In Syria, many uneasy about where power struggle could lead“, *The Washington Post*, 30 March - Attachment 12; „Thousands march in Syrian funerals’ 2011, *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, 25 March - Attachment 16; Kessler, O. 2011, „Syrians arrest dozens after at least three protesters killed. Golan Druse rally in support of Assad“, *The Jerusalem Post*, 3 April - Attachment 17.

¹⁵ Samir, K. 2011 „The "Arab spring" between authoritarianism and Islamism“, *Asia News*, 4 April <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-Arab-spring-between-authoritarianism-and-Islamism-21205.html#> - Accessed 15 April 2011 - Attachment 15; Shanahan, R. 2011, „Syria: The religious dimension“, *The Interpreter*, 30 March <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/03/30/Syria-The-religious-dimension.aspx> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 7; Fadel, L. 2011 „In Syria, many uneasy about where power struggle could lead“, *The Washington Post*, 30 March - Attachment 12; „Thousands march in Syrian funerals’ 2011, *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, 25 March - Attachment 16; Kessler, O. 2011, „Syrians arrest dozens after at least three protesters killed. Golan Druse rally in support of Assad“, *The Jerusalem Post*, 3 April - Attachment 17.

¹⁶ Zirulnick, A. 2011, „Who are Egypt's Copts, and the Middle East's other Christian populations?“, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 January <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0103/Who-are-Egypt-s-Copts-and-the-Middle-East-s-other-Christian-populations/Syria> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 6.

¹⁷ Shanahan, R. 2011, „Syria: The religious dimension“, *The Interpreter*, 30 March <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/03/30/Syria-The-religious-dimension.aspx> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 7.

country's 10% Christian population has been protected under the Assad regime, although its numbers are also gradually dwindling."¹⁸

Annual major reports on the human rights situation in Syria during 2010 by Amnesty International, Freedom House and Human Right Watch do not state that Christians face harm or have been targeted in Syria.¹⁹

The 2010 US Department of State *International Religious Freedom Report* for Syria states that there are only "occasional reports of minor tensions among religious groups, some of which were attributable to economic rivalries rather than religious affiliation." The report states that Muslim converts to Christianity may experience societal pressure. The report also states that the government monitors all religious groups and discourages proselytising. The report provides the following demographic information on Christians in Syria which indicates that most Christians live in urban areas such as Damascus:

Various Christian groups constitute the remaining 10 percent, although there are estimates that the Christian population, mostly due to migration, may have dropped to 8 percent.

...The majority of Christians adhere to the eastern groups that have existed in the country since the earliest days of Christianity. The main eastern groups belong to the autonomous Orthodox churches, the Uniate churches (which recognize the Roman Catholic Pope), or the independent Nestorian Church.

...The largest Christian group is the Greek Orthodox Church, known in the country as the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East. Most citizens of Armenian descent belong to the Armenian (Apostolic) Church, which uses an Armenian liturgy. The largest Uniate church in the country is the Greek Catholic Church. Other Uniate groups include the Maronite Church, the Syrian Catholic Church, and the Chaldean Catholic Church, which derives from the Nestorian Church, as well as the Armenian Catholic Church. Protestant Christian denominations include Anglicans, Baptists, and Mennonites. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) is also present.

Most Christians lived in urban centers in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, although significant numbers lived in the Hasaka governorate in the northeast.

...The government allowed foreign Christian faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to operate in the country under the auspices of the Catholic or Orthodox Churches. This permitted the NGOs to operate without officially registering.²⁰

A report dated 18 November 2010 by *The Economist* reports on a crackdown on Protestant Christians due to proselytism. The crackdown involved the closure of several buildings holding unsanctioned Christian services, the non-renewal of visas for foreigners serving Protestant churches and the cancelling of several church camps. The report states that "the government does not discriminate against Christianity in particular. It wants to keep Syria secular and religiously harmonious."²¹

¹⁸ „Can the region's Christians survive the 21st Century?’ 2011, *Los Angeles Times*, 6 January

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2011/01/middle-east-can-the-regions-christians-survive-the-21st-century.html> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 14

¹⁹ Amnesty International 2010, *Amnesty International Report 2010 – Syria*, 28 May - Attachment 5; Freedom House 2010, *Freedom in the World – Syria*, June

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2010&country=7928> – Accessed 10 September 2010 - Attachment 9; Human Right Watch 2011, *World Report 2011*, 24 January www.hrw.org/en/world-report-2011 - Accessed 31 January 2011 - Attachment 10.

²⁰ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*, 17 November, www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148845.htm - Accessed 23 November 2010 - Attachment 8.

²¹ „Syria's evangelical Christians’ 2010, *The Economist*, 18 November <http://www.economist.com/node/17528080> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 11.

An article dated 4 April 2011, published by *Asia News*, a Catholic news source, states that Christians in Syria are concerned about pro-democracy riots and challenges to the Assad government. The report states that Christian bishops in Syria do not want political change as the Assad government has outlawed radical Islam and thus “ensures safety and secularism.” The report contains the following analysis of the current political concerns for Christians in Syria:

Christians’ concern for the future: democracy and secularism

Concern for the future of Christians arises particularly in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, where there are local Christian communities.

...In Syria, despite all the riots, perhaps nothing will change. It must be said that the Christian bishops do not want anything to change: the Assad regime (Alawite) ensures safety and secularism, since by his authoritarianism he outlaws radical Islam. Those opposed to Assad are not minorities or Christians, who fear the rise of a Sunni regime. Those fighting (and they are the majority), are the enemies of Assad, in short the Sunnis – who feel excluded from power – and the Muslim Brotherhood, who have been repressed for decades.

As Christians, we want freedom, democracy, justice, as well as secularism, religious neutrality that is, we want everyone to be regarded only as citizens, not as a Muslim, Christian or otherwise. Unfortunately, in the Middle East, having to rule over strong groups and fanatics, secularism can only be imposed by force. Thus it is for Assad, thus it was for the Iraq of Saddam Hussein, for Mubarak in Egypt.

Where the system is weaker, it must necessarily make concessions to Islam. We are consequently caught between two opposites: democracy with secularism or Islam.²²

The above-mentioned March 2011 report by Dr Rodger Shanahan, also states that, unlike the rest of the Middle East, religion is a major factor in the current political unrest in Syria. According to the report the government has exaggerated the role of Sunni fundamentalism in political protests in order to bolster the support of the current regime by religious minorities, such as Christians.²³

Only one report was found in the sources consulted which states that Christians in Syria are subject to systematic mistreatment. Christian Solidarity International claimed in 2007 that Christians in Syria are being “kidnapped, raped, tortured, and killed” and face “economic oppression and religious persecution”.²⁴ A DFAT Report dated 25 July 2007, however, states that “We are not/not aware of any evidence to back up the claims made by Christian Solidarity International about Christians in Syria being „kidnapped, raped, tortured and killed” and „facing economic oppression and religious persecution”. The DFAT report states that it was not aware of any specific barriers which impede access to education, employment, or business opportunities for Christians in Syria. It further states that there are Christian Members of Parliament and senior figures within the Baath party.²⁵

²² Samir, K. 2011 „The "Arab spring" between authoritarianism and Islamism’, *Asia News*, 4 April <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-Arab-spring-between-authoritarianism-and-Islamism-21205.html#> - Accessed 15 April 2011 - Attachment 15.

²³ Shanahan, R. 2011, „Syria: The religious dimension’, *The Interpreter*, 30 March <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/03/30/Syria-The-religious-dimension.aspx> - Accessed 14 April 2011 - Attachment 7.

²⁴ Martin. A. 2007, „CSI Highlights Plight of Persecuted Christians in Syria, Other Mideast Nations’ ChristiansUnite.com, source: *Agape Press*, 3 January http://news.christiansunite.com/Religion_News/religion05510.shtml – Accessed 8 March 2010 – Attachment 19.

²⁵ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2007, DFAT Report No.672 – Syria: Christians: RRT Information Request SYR31953, 25 July – Attachment 20.

3. Does the state provide protection to Christians if harmed by Muslims?

As stated in question one of this request no reports were found regarding attacks on Christians by Muslims in Damascus or Syria. Reports indicate that the Syrian government has suppressed Islamic extremists. Membership in the Muslim Brotherhood is illegal and Islamists are routinely arrested and detained.²⁶ The 2010 US Department of State *International Religious Freedom Report* for Syria states that “the government particularly considered militant Islam a threat to the regime and closely monitored those individuals it considered to be religious militants.”²⁷

Attachments

1. US Department of State 2011, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2010 – Syria*, 8 April.
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