

**Refugee Review Tribunal
AUSTRALIA**

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

- 1. Please provide information about Mr Radwan Tahlawi, Deputy Dean at the University of Damascus in the 1990s.**
- 2. If possible, could you also tell me approximately what proportion of university students in Syria is female?**
- 3. Do Sunnis form the majority of the university student population?**

RESPONSE

- 1. Please provide information about Mr Radwan Tahlawi, Deputy Dean at the University of Damascus in the 1990s.**

Dr Radwan Tahlawi is listed as the Dean of the University of Damascus' School of Architecture on ArchNet (an international online community of scholars, students, and professionals concerned with architecture, planning, and landscape design; developed at the MIT School of Architecture and Planning and the University of Texas at Austin, School of Architecture). In September 2005 he was on the International Advisory Board and the committee for the [EuropIA](http://europia.org/EuropIA10/index.htm) 10th International Conference on Design Sciences & Technology, held at the University of Damascus ('University of Damascus: School of Architecture' (undated), Archnet website <http://archnet.org/institutions/DAMARCH/aboutus/> – Accessed 9 February 2007 – Attachment 1; '10th International Conference on Design Sciences & Technology, September: 13-15, 2005 – Damascus – Syria' (undated), EuropIA.10 website <http://europia.org/EuropIA10/index.htm> – Accessed 9 February 2007 – Attachment 2).

The available information does not indicate whether Dr Tahlawi is still a staff member at the University of Damascus. The English version of the University of Damascus website does not list the names of any university staff members. The Faculty of Architecture website at the University of Damascus is in Arabic

(<http://www.damasuniv.shern.net/arabic/faculties/arceng/index.htm>).

2. If possible, could you also tell me approximately what proportion of university students in Syria is female?

Women in Syria are receiving university degrees at a rate close to men, according to a 2005 Freedom House study titled *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Citizenship and Justice*. The country report on Syria states that:

While low participation rates are a problem, Syria has succeeded in considerably narrowing the gender gap in access to education and illiteracy since the 1970s. In 1970, 80 percent of women were illiterate compared to 40 percent of men, while women's illiteracy rate in 2002 was 25.8 percent, and men's was 9 percent. Women are also receiving university degrees at a rate close to men. **According to UNIFEM, the percentage of women graduates from Syrian universities was 40.6 and the percentage of women graduates from professional training institutes was 49.0 in 2000** [researcher emphasis added] (Freedom House 2005, 'Country Reports – Syria', *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Citizenship and Justice*, 14 October <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=183> – Accessed 9 February 2007 – Attachment 3).

According to a 2005 report by the Syrian Arab Republic, women constituted 46.1% of university enrolments in 2002, up from 42.4% in 1998. A consideration of this report by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) states that:

The proportion of female to male graduates from higher and intermediate institutes is 116 per cent (Statistical Compendium of 2004). The proportion of female to male graduates from university education, however, falls to 88 per cent, although the proportion of females to males in the 25-29 age group amounts to 105 per cent (Statistical Compendium of 2004).

... The proportion of women to men in the group aged 20 to 29 years, which is the presumed age of graduation for the majority, is 105 per cent. The proportion of women to men in general in Syria is 95.4. The proportion of women to male graduates from the branches mentioned is as follows: 60 per cent for veterinary medicine, dentistry and pharmacology; 47.6 per cent for all types of engineering; 80 per cent for agriculture; 60 per cent for science; and 38 per cent for law (UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) 2005, 'Syria Response to the Questionnaire on Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcome of the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly (2000)', 25 August <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/SYRIAN-ARAB-REPUBLIC-English.pdf> – Accessed 9 February 2007 – Attachment 6; UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 2005, 'Consideration of reports submitted by States Parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – Syria', 29 August <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/517/77/PDF/N0551777.pdf?OpenElement> – Accessed 9 February 2007 – Attachment 7).

A 2004 analysis on Arab women and development by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) states that in 2000/01 the majority of female university students were enrolled in the fields of education, arts and humanities, and comparatively fewer women studied engineering and other scientific courses. UNESCO estimates that in 2004 about 20% of women and 21% of men were enrolled in tertiary education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2006, 'Education in Syrian Arab Republic', updated July http://www.uis.unesco.org/profiles/EN/EDU/countryProfile_en.aspx?code=7600 – Accessed 9 February 2007 – Attachment 5; Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

(ESCWA) 2004, *Where do Arab Women Stand in the Development Process? A Gender-Based Statistical Analysis*, 12 January, p. 11

[http://domino.un.org/unispal.nsf/85255db800470aa485255d8b004e349a/8ad9a6b459cb542c85256f34004a8057/\\$FILE/sdd-04.pdf](http://domino.un.org/unispal.nsf/85255db800470aa485255d8b004e349a/8ad9a6b459cb542c85256f34004a8057/$FILE/sdd-04.pdf) – Accessed 9 February 2007 – Attachment 4).

According to the latest US Department of State report on human rights in Syria (2005):

The constitution provides for equality between men and women and equal pay for equal work. Moreover, the government sought to overcome traditional discriminatory attitudes toward women and encouraged women's education by ensuring equal access to educational institutions, including universities. However, the government has not changed personal status, retirement, or social security laws that discriminate against women.

... Women constituted approximately 13 percent of judges, 15 percent of lawyers, 57 percent of teachers below university level, and 20 percent of university professors.

... The government provided free, public education to citizen children from primary school through university. Education is compulsory for all children, male and female, between the ages of 6 and 12. According to a 2005 joint study by the UNDP and the Syrian State Planning Commission, 49.6 percent of students through the secondary level were female. Nevertheless, societal pressure for early marriage and childbearing interfered with girls' educational progress, particularly in rural areas where the dropout rates for female students remained high (US Department of State 2006, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2005 – Syria*, March, Section 5 – Attachment 8).

3. Do Sunnis form the majority of the university student population?

No information was found as to whether Sunnis form the majority of the university student population. A report for the US Congress by two analysts in Middle East policy, Alfred Prados and Jeremy Sharp, states that "it is taboo in Syria to publicly mix politics and religious affiliation." Sunni Muslims comprise over 70% of the Syrian population, while Alawites constitute approximately 12%. According to the US Department of State International Religious Freedom Report on Syria for 2006: "Government policy officially disavows sectarianism of any kind; however, in the case of President Asad's Alawi Muslim group, religion can be a factor in determining career opportunities. For example, Alawis held dominant positions in the security services and military that were disproportionate to their percentage of the population" (Prados, A.B. & Sharp, J.M. 2005, 'Syria: Political Conditions and Relations with the United States after the Iraq War', US Department of State website, source: Congressional Research Service, 10 January <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/42483.pdf> – Accessed 13 February 2006 – Attachment 9; US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 – Syria*, September, Section 2 – Attachment 10).

Some excerpts regarding Alawites and Sunnis, from the above mentioned CRS report for Congress, are included below:

The Alawite Sect.

The Alawite religious sect, which evolved from the Shi'ite sect of Islam, constitutes approximately 12% of the Syrian population. Formerly the most economically deprived and socially disadvantaged group in Syria, the Alawites rose rapidly in the ranks of the military establishment and the ruling Ba'th Party in the 1960s and have dominated political life in Syria since then. The Alawite community as a whole, and the Asad family in particular, constituted an important power base for the late President Hafiz al-Asad and at least for the

time being have rallied behind his son and successor. Though committed to maintaining the primacy of the Alawite community, the Asads have sought with some success to coopt support from other sects; in fact, many senior positions including that of prime minister are held by members of the Sunni Muslim majority. However, most key positions, particularly in the security institutions, remain in Alawite hands and some observers believe that any weakening of the central regime or an outbreak of political turmoil could precipitate a power struggle between entrenched Alawites and the majority Sunni Muslims, who comprise over 70% of the population. Others see the possibility of a split within the Alawite community itself, possibly over succession issues. In the past, sectarian cohesiveness has been sufficient to avoid a major split within the Alawite leadership.

...Sunni Business Elites.

The well-to-do and mainly Sunni Muslim business community, largely eclipsed during a period of extreme socialist measures in the 1960s, has undergone a partial revival since the gradual adoption of more pragmatic economic policies under the Asads. Along with surviving remnants of the old bourgeoisie, this community includes a new commercial and, to a lesser extent, industrial class that has been able to find a niche in what might be called Syria's postsocialist economy. According to one commentator, writing in the mid-1990s, "Syria's political leadership has been able to improve its standing within both the petty and the grand bourgeoisie." Another commentator, writing in the same time frame, notes that under Asad, "the enriched Alawi [variant spelling] officers and their families built up a kind of coalition with the...Sunni[s]."

...Religious Identity in Syria.

Syria, although over 70% Sunni Muslim, features a number of religious minorities, including the politically-dominant Alawite sect, an off-shoot of Shiite Islam. Alawites were historically a rural underclass in Syria until the time of the French mandate (1920-1946), when French authorities encouraged religious minorities to join the army. Over time, Alawites came to dominate the Syrian officer corps and, beginning in the early 1960s, gradually took hold of the reins of power in Syria. In order to divert attention from the sectarian nature of its rule, the Asad family, acting through the Ba'th party apparatus, has historically emphasized Syria's secular Arab identity and integrated many Sunni elites into the ruling political structure. Indeed, it is taboo in Syria to publicly mix politics and religious affiliation (Prados, A.B. & Sharp, J.M. 2005, 'Syria: Political Conditions and Relations with the United States after the Iraq War', US Department of State website, source: Congressional Research Service, 10 January <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/42483.pdf> – Accessed 13 February 2006 – Attachment 9).

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Government Information & Reports

Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade <http://www.smartraveller.gov.au/>

Danish Immigration Service <http://www.udlst.dk/english/default.htm>

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/cgi-bin/foliocgi.exe/refinfo_e

UK Home Office <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/>

US Department of State <http://www.state.gov/>

US Library of Congress <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html>

United Nations (UN)

UNIFEM <http://www.unifem.org/>

UNESCO www.unesco.org/education/

UN Statistics Division <http://unstats.un.org>

Non-Government Organisations

Amnesty International <http://www.amnesty.org/>

Freedom House <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=1>

Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/>

Topic Specific Links

World Bank <http://genderstats.worldbank.org/home.asp>

University of Damascus http://www.damasuniv.shern.net/english/index_en.htm

Search Engines

Google search engine <http://www.google.com.au/>

Staggernation.com <http://www.staggernation.com/>

Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIMA Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

1. 'University of Damascus: School of Architecture' (undated), Archnet website <http://archnet.org/institutions/DAMARCH/aboutus/> – Accessed 9 February 2007.
2. '10th International Conference on Design Sciences & Technology, September: 13-15, 2005 – Damascus – Syria' (undated), EuropaIA.10 website <http://europaia.org/EuropaIA10/index.htm> – Accessed 9 February 2007.
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4. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) 2004, *Where do Arab Women Stand in the Development Process? A Gender-Based Statistical Analysis*, 12 January [http://domino.un.org/unispal.nsf/85255db800470aa485255d8b004e349a/8ad9a6b459cb542c85256f34004a8057/\\$FILE/sdd-04.pdf](http://domino.un.org/unispal.nsf/85255db800470aa485255d8b004e349a/8ad9a6b459cb542c85256f34004a8057/$FILE/sdd-04.pdf) – Accessed 9 February 2007.
5. UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2006, 'Education in Syrian Arab Republic', updated July http://www.uis.unesco.org/profiles/EN/EDU/countryProfile_en.aspx?code=7600 – Accessed 9 February 2007.
6. UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) 2005, 'Syria Response to the Questionnaire on Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcome of the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly (2000)', 25 August <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/SYRIAN-ARAB-REPUBLIC-English.pdf> – Accessed 9 February 2007.
7. UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 2005, 'Consideration of reports submitted by States Parties under article 18 of the

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – Syria’, 29 August

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8. US Department of State 2006, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2005 – Syria*, March.
9. Prados, A.B. & Sharp, J.M. 2005, ‘Syria: Political Conditions and Relations with the United States after the Iraq War’, US Department of State website, source: Congressional Research Service, 10 January
<http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/42483.pdf> – Accessed 13 February 2006.
10. US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 – Syria*, September.