

**Refugee Review Tribunal
AUSTRALIA**

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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Country: Syria
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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

Please provide an overview of

- 1. Basic beliefs of Sunni Moslems (in Syria, if they differ in some basic way from beliefs of other Sunnis) – a brief summary.**
- 2. Are converts to Christianity able to go to church freely in Syria? Are they subjected to any serious discrimination or harm?**
- 3. Is sexual harassment of women a widespread problem in Syria, and do the police generally provide protection to women who report incidents of sexual harassment or assault?**
- 4. Do “Westernised” women in Syria face any serious discrimination?**

RESPONSE

- 1. Basic beliefs of Sunni Moslems (in Syria, if they differ in some basic way from beliefs of other Sunnis) – a brief summary.**

According to *Religious Bodies in Australia*, Islam means “purity, peace, submission to God’s will and obedience to his laws”. The following extracts of *Religious Bodies in Australia* provide information on the Koran, the Six Articles of Belief, the Five Pillars of Islam and Islamic worship practices:

Muslims believe that their sacred book, the Koran was dictated by God to Mohammed through the angel Gabriel and this they view it as the word of God. The Koran (6,226 verses) outlines the faith of Islam; describes the way in which God is to be worshipped; outlines legislation relating to civil and criminal laws, laws of war, peace treaties between states, laws concerning marriage, divorce, inheritance, wills. Also incorporated are:– the Old Testament Ten Commandments; the Six Articles of Belief; the Five Pillars of Islam. Together these two are known as ‘The Heart of Islam’.

The Six Articles of Belief are:

1. God is One and this is Allah.
2. The Koran is God’s inspired book.

3. God's angels are heavenly beings created to serve God and they are opposed by evil spirits (led by a chief spirit called Satan).
4. God sent his various prophets to the earth at appointed times for particular purposes; the last and greatest of these was Mohammed.
5. The last day of world history – the Day of Judgment will find good and evil weighed in the balance. The wicked, will be punished with the physical torments of hell. Those judged by Allah and found to be just will enjoy eternal life in Paradise. Paradise is thought to incorporate a direct sight of vision of God. Islam, unlike Christianity, does not believe that human beings can achieve union with God.
6. The lives and acts of all people are foreordained by an all-knowing God. However, individuals are still to be viewed as being free agents, able to make or mar their own eternal future by their lifestyle while on earth.

The Five Pillars are:

1. The recital of the creed ('There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet').
2. The recital of prayer five times daily; facing Mecca.
3. The giving of tithes for the support of the poor and the extension of the faith.
4. The observation of Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar based Islamic calendar (requiring complete fasting in daylight hours by all adult Moslems) commemorating the giving of the Koran to Mohammed.
5. A pilgrimage to Mecca, when financially able.

...In Islamic communities the call to prayer is made 5 times a day by the muezzin, a mosque attendant with a strong voice who issues his call from the top of the mosque. The faithful Muslim in obedience to Mohammed's instructions should pray for about 5 minutes on rising and retiring and at 3 other periods in the day – early and late in the afternoon and at sunset. The worshipper kneels and prostrates the head to the ground in the direction of Mecca. A ritual washing of hands, face and feet must precede one of the daily prayer times.

The Mosque service held each Friday has the following features:

1. Attendance obligatory to men, optional to women.
2. Service is led by an 'imam'.
3. Follows a set ritual of prayer (verses from the Koran), a number of prostrations and a sermon by the 'imam'.
4. Koranic texts must be recited, silently or aloud, in Arabic only.
5. No musical instruments.
6. No seating is provided because of the practice of prostration.
7. Worshipers discard their shoes before entering the mosque.
8. As Islamic law forbids making of likeness or images of animals or human figures, mosques are decorated with geometric and other non-figurative patterns.

Other Mosque services are held to coincide with the end of Ramadan and the end of the Hijj (pilgrimage to Mecca) (Humphreys, Robert & Ward, Rowland 1995, 'Other World Monotheistic Faiths: *Islam*', *Religious Bodies in Australia: A Comprehensive Guide*, 3rd Edition, New Melbourne Press, Melbourne, pp.275-277 – Attachment 1).

The following extract of *Religious Bodies in Australia* provides information on Sunni Islam:

The major sects of Islam are: the *Sunni* or Orthodox Islamic School (embracing nearly 80% of the world's Muslims). They recognize the three early Caliphs (successors to Mohammed in the leadership of the Muslim community), Abut Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman, as being 'rightly guided in their interpretation of the Kroan'. The Sunni sect has four different schools of Koranic interpretation: Hanafi, Shafi'I, Maliki, Hanbali (Humphreys, Robert & Ward, Rowland 1995, 'Other World Monotheistic Faiths: *Islam*', *Religious Bodies in Australia: A Comprehensive Guide*, 3rd Edition, New Melbourne Press, Melbourne, p.276 – Attachment 1).

According to the US Library of Congress, “the Shafi school and the more liberal Hanafi school, which places greater emphasis on analogical deduction and bases decisions more on precedents set in previous cases than on literal interpretation of the Quran or Sunna” are represented in Syria (US Library of Congress 1987, ‘Sunnis’, *A Country Study: Syria*, April <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html> – Accessed 4 December 2006 – Attachment 2).

2. Are converts to Christianity able to go to church freely in Syria? Are they subjected to any serious discrimination or harm?

Treatment of Converts to Christianity

Information on the treatment of converts to Christianity in Syria was scarce amongst the sources consulted.

The US Department of State reports that conversion was “relatively rare” in Syria and that societal pressure forced converts to relocate within Syria or leave the country:

Societal conventions, and religious and theological proscriptions, made conversions relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversions. In many cases, societal pressure forced those who undertook such conversions to relocate within the country or leave the country to practice their new religion openly (US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report 2006 – Syria*, 15 September, Section III – Attachment 3).

According to Jim Jacobson, President of Christian Freedom International, “If you convert you’d better leave the country”. Jacobson continues:

“Syria isn’t Saudi Arabia, but it’s one of the big untold stories out there,” he said. For those who want to convert from Islam to Christianity, “you’re disowned by your family, if the local mosque issues a death threat, no one is going to do anything about it, you’ll just end up dead. Nothing is done, no police action, that’s just understood (Unruh, Bob 2006, ‘Christians flee Iraq, find Syria “ruthless”’, WorldNetDaily, 29 December http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=53549 – Accessed 3 January 2007 – Attachment 4).

According to Todd Nettleton, Spokesman of Voice of the Martyrs, “there is virtually no freedom for a Muslim to convert to Christianity”. Nettleton continues:

“There is persecution, primarily from within the family, when a Muslim chooses to convert,” he told WND.

One such case, as reported by WORLD magazine, involved Samer, a Jordanian man who converted from Islam to Christianity and was arrested Aug. 22 by Syrian police on no defined charges.

He wasn’t released from prison until Oct. 10, and he immediately fled to the U.S (Unruh, Bob 2006, ‘Rick Warren’s Syria assessment disputed’, WorldNetDaily, 22 November http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=53061 – Accessed 3 January 2007 – Attachment 5).

World Magazine provides further details on Samer, a Jordanian who converted to Christianity 15 years ago and fled to Syria after being arrested by the Jordanian intelligence agency and

handed over to the Shariah courts. In July 2006, the United States accepted Samer and his family as refugees. On 22 August 2006 Samer was arrested by Syrian police and imprisoned for 50 days. The exact nature of his alleged crime remains unclear although according to Samer, “Some said it was because of our ministry to the Kurdish people...Others said it was because I was trying to get Kurdish-language bibles into Syria, and the Kurdish language is illegal there.” Samer’s wife, seven months pregnant, was turned out onto the street when her landlord found out Samer was in jail. On 10 October 2006 Samer was released. The reason for his release also remains unclear (Vincent, Lynn 2006, ‘Free at last’, *World Magazine*, 11 November, Vol. 21, No. 43 <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/12405> – Accessed 3 January 2006 – Attachment 6).

Treatment of Christians

Sources are in conflict over the treatment of Christians in Syria. Some sources report that Christians are free to practice their religion in Syria and that the Ba’athist government favours Christians. Other sources report that Christians are unable to freely practice their religion in Syria and that Christians are subject to arrest, imprisonment and violence.

Government & NGO Reports

According to the US Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report 2006*, “there was little evidence of societal discrimination or violence against religious minorities.” The US Department of State provides the following useful information on religious freedom and the treatment of Christians in Syria:

During the reporting period the Government sometimes encouraged negative – even violent – expressions of Islamic religious sentiment, at least in part to curry favor with the Syrian Sunni majority. The clearest example of this occurred on February 4, 2006, when the Government allowed Muslim groups to demonstrate publicly against the publication of the cartoons, and later failed to control a mob of several thousand Muslims protesters that attacked and set fire to the building housing the Danish, Swedish, and Chilean embassies, and later set fire to the Norwegian Embassy. [Section II Legal/Policy Framework]

...Proselytism is not prohibited by civil law; however, the Government discouraged such activity which it deems a threat to the relations among religious groups. Foreign missionaries were present but operated discreetly. In the past, some proselytizers were prosecuted for “posing a threat to the relations among religious groups.” Most charges of this kind carried sentences of imprisonment from five years to life, although often such sentences were reduced to one or two years. There were not reported cases of any prosecution on this charge during the last four years.

The security services were constantly alert for any possible political threat to the State, and all groups, religious and nonreligious, were subject to surveillance and monitoring by government security services. [Section II Restrictions on Religious Freedom]

...The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were occasional reports of minor tensions between religious groups mainly attributable to economic rivalries rather than religious affiliation [Section III] (US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report 2006 – Syria*, 15 September – Attachment 3).

According to Freedom House's *Countries at the Crossroads 2005*, "Generally speaking, the country's Christian minority groups (about 10 percent of the population)...have been free to practice their religion without government restrictions and interference" (Freedom House 2005, *Countries at the Crossroads 2005 – Syria*, 2 June – Attachment 7).

News Reports

An article dated 29 December 2006 on WorldNetDaily reports that thousands of Christians are fleeing Iraq to Syria. According to Jim Jacobson, President of Christian Freedom International, "We're very concerned about the future of Christians in the region. When people are choosing to go to Syria, which certainly is no friend of Christians at all, it's a pretty bad situation". Jacobsen reports that "If you're a Christian, you don't talk about it. If you try to share your faith, distribute Christian literature, distribute a Bible – something any religion should be allowed to do – you're going to get arrested and asked to leave the country. You can't do that there" (Unruh, Bob 2006, 'Christians flee Iraq, find Syria "ruthless"', WorldNetDaily, 29 December http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=53549 – Accessed 3 January 2007 – Attachment 4).

According to pro-Christian Voice of the Martyrs, and reported by WorldNetDaily on 29 December 2006, Syria is a nation where Christians face "arrest, imprisonment, physical torture and death" According to the Voice of the Martyrs, and reported by WorldNetDaily on 14 December 2006, Syria is among nearly 50 nations where Christians were persecuted in 2006 ('Encourage someone in jail just for being Christian!' 2006, WorldNetDaily, 14 December http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=53368 – Accessed 3 January 2007 – Attachment 8; and Unruh, Bob 2006, 'Christians flee Iraq, find Syria "ruthless"', WorldNetDaily, 29 December http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=53549 – Accessed 3 January 2007 – Attachment 4).

An article dated 22 November 2006 on WorldNetDaily reports that US government sources and religious freedom organisations are disputing the claim by Pastor Rick Warren that "Syria is a model of religious freedom in the Middle East":

Other groups cite Syrian as a "restricted" nation for Christians and one posts Syria in the top four dozen worst violators of religious freedoms worldwide.

...While Syria is not listed among the 10 or even 20 nations that violate religious rights worldwide, it is listed at No. 47 on the Open Doors World Watch list, published by Open Doors USA, the ministry to the persecuted Christian church launched by Brother Andrew, who smuggled Bibles behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War.

...The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said in a report that Christians in some parts of Syria report that the government has "confiscated their property...without compensation and...Assyrian Christians also alleged that the Kurdish Democratic Party-dominated judiciary routinely discriminated against non-Muslims" (Unruh, Bob 2006, 'Rick Warren's Syria assessment disputed', WorldNetDaily, 22 November http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=53061 – Accessed 3 January 2007 – Attachment 5).

An article dated 2 October 2006 in *The New York Sun* by Amnon Rubenstein, President of the Inter-Disciplinary Centre in Israel, quotes Ivan Rioufol's 26 May 2006 column in *Le Figaro*

in which “Mr Rioufol estimates that the Christian population of Iran has been decimated and that similar “cleansing” has been “observed in Iran, Syria, Palestine and Egypt”” (Rubenstein, Amnon 2006, ‘The Forgotten Christian’, *New York Sun*, 2 October <http://www.nysun.com/pf.php?id=40738> – Accessed 3 January 2007 – Attachment 9).

An article dated 17 October 2005 in *IRIN News* reports that “the secular Ba’athist government of Bashar al-Assad ensures they [Christians] are well represented in government and have access to jobs.” Professor Joshua Landis of the University of Oklahoma’s Department of International Studies who lives in Syria “maintains that Syrian Christians benefit from having an Alawite president, since Assad often turns to Syria’s minority groups for support in face of the occasionally restive Sunni majority.” Landis says that Christians feel more insecure than other minorities in Syria because “Christians are one of the more affluent groups and are largely concentrated in the cities...They don’t have a region in which they are the majority, which would guarantee them representation in elections. And they don’t believe that Muslims would necessarily vote for a Christian candidate.” Georgette Atiya, a prominent Christian intellectual disputes this. Atiya who ran unsuccessfully for parliament in 2003 claims she got a large number of votes from the Muslim quarter of Meedan in Damascus (‘Bridging the gap between Muslims and Christians’ 2005, *IRIN News*, 17 October http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=49586&Select%20Region=Middle_East&SelectCountry=SYRIA – Accessed 4 January 2007 – Attachment 10).

An article dated 29 December 2004 in *The New York Times* reports that Mr Kirakos, a Christian Armenian activist, announced his bid for Syria’s presidency in September 2004 on a pro-democracy website. The campaign is illegal as Syria’s Constitution stipulates that the President must be a Muslim. Despite losing his engineering job and his family receiving phone calls from the secret police as a result of his activism, Mr Kirakos is unfazed (Zoepf, Katherine 2004, ‘New hope of Syrian Minorities: Ripple Effect of Iraqi Politics’, *New York Times*, 29 December – Attachment 11).

According to Christian Solidarity International, “Violence against Christians often goes unpunished”. Christian Solidarity International provides the following example:

On December 1, 2004, Western oil executives and Syrian government officials shook hands and celebrated festively the signing an oil exploration deal in the northern Syrian town of al-Hasake. But only a six weeks beforehand, al-Hasake was the scene of the murder of two local Christian.

On 15 October, Naseer Abraham, Christian proprietor of a café in Nasra, asked several Muslim guests, politely but firmly, to leave his premises, after their game of cards had ended in violence. For daring to challenge the unruly Muslims, Naseer Abraham was punished. The following day gang members and a Syrian police officer, Mudhar al-Rahdi, returned to the cafe. They dragged Naseer Abraham from his premises, handcuffed him and then beat him to death. Yalbas Yacoub, a Christian friend, was shot while trying to offer first aid assistance to the victim. Two weeks later in a Damascus hospital he, too, died from his injuries.

Local Christians demanded the arrest of the perpetrators. But their appeals fell on deaf ears. For the Muslim authorities, the death of these two Christians was of no more importance than that of dogs run over by a passing car. Finally some friends of the murdered men took the law into their own hands, burning empty houses and shops belonging to the friends and relatives of the perpetrators. At this point the previously passive law enforcement authorities sprang into action. The police arrested 42 Christians, most of whom had nothing to do with the

events. Not until April 2005 were all except four of them released. The murderers of Naseer Abraham and Yalbas Yacoub, however, remain at large. The countdown for Christians in Syria goes on (Christian Solidarity International (undated), 'Countdown for Christians in Syria' http://csi-int.org/countdown_for_christians.php?slId=01149622190 – Accessed 4 January 2007 – Attachment 12).

A *New York Times* article reports that in October 2004 more than 2,000 Assyrian Christians demonstrated in Hasakah City calling for equal treatment by local police following the killing of two Christians by Muslims who called them “Bush supporters” and “Christians dogs” (Zoepf, Katherine 2004, 'New hope of Syrian Minorities: Ripple Effect of Iraqi Politics', *New York Times*, 29 December – Attachment 11).

3. Is sexual harassment of women a widespread problem in Syria, and do the police generally provide protection to women who report incidents of sexual harassment or assault?

Information on sexual harassment was scarce amongst the sources consulted. Sources report the existence of sexual harassment in Syria. Sources also report that sexual harassment is prohibited by the *Penal Code* and that women face problems in accessing justice.

In May 2006 UNIFEM and the General Union of Women “released the first-ever comprehensive field study of violence against women in Syria”. For information on the General Union of Women please see Attachment 13 (UNIFEM 2006, 'Violence against women in Syria', 8 June http://www.unifem.org/news_events/story_detail.php?StoryID=462 – Accessed 4 January 2007 – Attachment 13). The study included 1,891 families from urban and rural areas of the 14 Syrian governorates. The report is only available in Arabic, however key findings are provided in English. The following key findings relate to sexual harassment in Syria:

- 14.1% of women were exposed to sexual harassment;
- 52.8% of women were sexually harassed by a male family member, 18.6% by an unknown person and 16.5% by a known person;
- Fists were used against women in 65% of sexual harassment cases;
- Sticks were used against women in 20% of sexual harassment cases;
- In 72% of sexual harassment cases some family members defended the assaulted women and blamed the assaulters. “In the remainder of cases, family members blamed women, reproached or prevented them from social life or cursed or beat them”;
- “Fear of the assaulters, of their own families, from creating problems for their families and from traditions and customs were the main reasons that prevented women from informing their families about the assault they had been experienced”; and
- “Women informed their families about the kidnapping cases, the robbery, the bodily assault and the sexual harassment cases respectively” (UNIFEM & General Union of Women 2006, *Violence Against Women Study Syria 2005*, May http://www.unifem.org/attachments/stories/currents_200606_SyriaVAWstudyKeyFindings.pdf – Accessed 4 January 2007 – Attachment 14).

The US Department of State reports that sexual harassment was “rarely reported” in Syria (US Department of State 2006, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2005 – Syria*, 8 March, Section 5 Women – Attachment 15). According to Freedom House, there are no reliable statistics on violence against women in Syria:

It is difficult to know the extent of violence against women as there are no reliable statistics on the problem. Social custom discourages families from reporting crimes, and crimes are often masked as accidents. While women receive special legal protection from verbal and physical violence outside the home, they rarely, if ever, make use of these protections by reporting the crime. Many women remain silent about abuse, feeling shame and responsibility, because Syrian society places the burden of sexual morality on women. (Freedom House 2006, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Citizenship and Justice – Syria*, 11 April – Attachment 16).

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women reports that the *Employment Act* contains no provisions on sexual harassment in the workplace:

As for sexual harassment in the workplace, the provisions of the Penal Code criminalize sexual harassment and impose a stiffer penalty where such harassment is perpetrated against women in the workplace. In that connection, however, no measures worthy of note have been taken and women usually resort to individual solutions for this problem. Because there are no special provisions in the Employment Act covering sexual harassment, the effect of such harassment also varies depending on the perpetrator (UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women 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, European Country of Origin Information Network website http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/228_1159809771_syria.pdf – Accessed 4 January 2007, pp.35 & 55 – Attachment 17).

According to Freedom House, Articles 476, 489, 491, 492, 493, 495, 496, 497, 502, 504, 505 and 506 of the *Penal Code* prohibit violence and harassment against women. A copy of the *Penal Code* was not found amongst the sources consulted (Freedom House 2006, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Citizenship and Justice – Syria*, 11 April – Attachment 16).

Freedom House notes that Article 508 of the *Penal Code* provides that if the perpetrator of sexual harassment marries the victim then there is no charge and that this option may be favoured to mitigate public scandal:

Article 508 of the penal code states: “If there is a contracted marriage between the man who commits rape, sexual abuse, kidnapping, sexual harassment and the victim, then there is no charge or the punishment is stopped.” Victims’ families may favour this option in order to mitigate public scandal. Many women do not have the choice of refusing marriage in such cases either due to family pressure or due to fear of further harassment and social stigma (Freedom House 2006, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Citizenship and Justice – Syria*, 11 April – Attachment 16).

Freedom House provides the following information on women’s access to justice:

Women are treated as full persons in the civil and criminal court system. In the Shari’a court, however, a woman’s testimony is considered to be worth only half that of a man. While there are no additional legal barriers to women’s access to justice, social barriers prevent them from taking advantage of the judicial system to the same extent as men. For example, women are discouraged from presenting their claims in police stations, which are largely staffed by male police officers, for fear of experiencing shame, discomfort, or sexual harassment (Freedom House 2006, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Citizenship and Justice – Syria*, 11 April – Attachment 16).

The US Department of State provides the following information on women's access to justice:

The vast majority of cases were likely unreported, and victims generally were reluctant to seek assistance outside the family. In some cases observers reported that the abused women tried to file a police report, but the police did not respond aggressively, if at all, to their claims. Women reported incidents at police stations of sexual harassment, verbal abuse, hair pulling, and slapping by police officers when attempting to file police reports, particularly at the Criminal Security branch at Bab Musallah in Damascus. Battered women have the legal right to seek redress in court, but few did so because of the social stigma attached to such action (US Department of State 2006, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2005 – Syria*, 8 March, Section 5 Women – Attachment 15).

4. Do “Westernised” women in Syria face any serious discrimination?

An article dated 4 April 2006 on the Flying Broom website reports that conservative cleric Abdelaziz al-Khatib at the al-Darwishaya mosque in Damascus said women's rights activists were “imitating the West” in demanding reforms to the personal status law (‘Women's rights activists face resistance’ 2006, Flying Broom website, 4 April http://en.ucansupurge.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=119&Itemid=45 – Accessed 5 January 2007 – Attachment 18). No other information on the treatment of Westernised women in Syria was found amongst the sources consulted.

A number of references to headscarves and female dress standards in Syria were found amongst the sources consulted. A sample follows:

- 7 December 2006, *Sunday Mail*:
Even though (because of the large number of Saudis who live there) **about 50 per cent of women wear hijab with a full face veil**, my short, uncovered, spiky white hair roused no hostility (Cotes, Alison 2006, ‘On the road to Damascus’, *Sunday Mail*, 7 December, News.com.au website <http://www.news.com.au/travel/story/0,23483,20880702-27987,00.html> – Accessed 5 January 2006 – Attachment 19);
- 28 November 2006, *Your World Today*:
This is the average street in Damascus, in Syria. The **majority of women here are veiled**. You might call it the hijab comeback. ...Out on the streets of the Syrian capital, although most women say on camera that they cover their hair for purely religious reasons, some admit they wear the hijab because of social pressure (‘Mending Fences in Turkey; The Hijab Comeback; President Bush Arrives for Talks With 25 Other NATO Leaders’ 2006, *Your World Today*, 28 November, CNN website <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0611/28/ywt.01.html> – Accessed 5 January 2007 – Attachment 20);
- 31 October 2006, *International Herald Tribune*:
The **wearing of headscarves is up**, even though the government of the majority Sunni country remains secular. Only a small number, however, wear the face veil, or niqab (‘A look at the wearing of veils, and disputes on the issue, across Muslim World’ 2006, *International Herald Tribune*, source: Associated Press, 31 October http://www.ihl.com/articles/ap/2006/10/31/africa/ME_GEN_Mideast_Veil_Glance.php – Accessed 5 January 2007 – Attachment 21);
- 13 September 2006, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade:
There are **conservative standards of dress** and behaviour in Syria, particularly around religious sites, and you should take care not to offend (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2006, *Travel Advice – Syria*, 13 September <http://www.smartraveller.gov.au/zw-cgi/view/Advice/Syria> – Accessed 5 January 2007 – Attachment 22);

- 29 August 2006, *The New York Times*:
Ms. Ghayeh and Ms. Kaldi each remember with emotion the day, early in President Bashar al-Assad's tenure, when he changed the law to **allow the wearing of Islamic head scarves in public schools**, a practice that was forbidden under his father, Hafez al-Assad (Zoepf, Katherine 2006, 'Islamic Revival in Syria Is Led by Women', *New York Times*, 29 August <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/29/world/middleeast/29syria.html?ei=5088&en=c98e734191b92ae7&ex=1314504000&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&pagewanted=print> – Accessed 5 January 2007 – Attachment 23);
- 5 January 2006, Blog by an American male living in Damascus:
Since most Syrians are Sunni Muslims (roughly three quarters), **the majority of women wear the hijab**. Most of those people cover their hair, ears and neck with a tightly pinned scarf. A small percentage have only their eyes showing, and an even smaller have their entire face covered with a piece of fabric. I don't know all the details about the practices of the various other sects, but a number of them also wear the hijab. In addition to this, many Christians (especially older women) wear a scarf over their hair, though this is in a distinguishably different style from the Muslim headscarves. [For more information please refer directly to the blog which is included as Attachment 24] ('Clothes, clothes, and more clothes' 2006, A Foreigner in Syria blog, 5 January <http://insyria.blogspot.com/2006/01/clothes-clothes-and-more-clothes.html> – Accessed 5 January 2007 – Attachment 24); and
- 2006, First48 UK Operator – Tours, Adventures & Holiday Travel Services:
Jordanian and Syrian women **predominately wear headscarves and loose fitting clothes**. ...Again, there is a greater change between the town and the rural areas. In the rural areas, headscarves at least are almost certainly worn, and many others wear either a full chador or long coats to hide the human figure ('The Muslim Clothing Guide' 2006, First48 website <http://www.first48.com/guide/features/muslimcode.php> – Accessed 11 January 2007 – Attachment 25).

According to Freedom House, women in Syria “experience various restrictions on their social freedoms due to religious and social conservatism that limits their participation in public life”:

Syrian society traditionally grants men the public sphere and women the private sphere. Women throughout the country experience various restrictions on their social freedoms due to religious and social conservatism that limits their participation in public life. Generally women in rural areas and lower socioeconomic classes experience greater restrictions on their access to the public sphere, education, health care services, and marriage and family decisions.

...Women's abilities to influence community life are limited by the fact that public life is largely the domain of men by social custom. Instead, women have an influence on community life through their family responsibilities. They shape attitudes toward social issues and influence the family's economic situation by controlling expenses. Within the community, women are free to speak out on neighborhood and quality of life issues (Freedom House 2006, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Citizenship and Justice – Syria*, 11 April – Attachment 16).

For more information on women in Syria please see the following attachments;

- US Department of State 2006, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2005 – Syria*, 8 March, Section 5 Women – Attachment 15;
- Freedom House 2006, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Citizenship and Justice – Syria*, 11 April – Attachment 16;

- Oweis, Khaled Yacoub 2006, 'UN study calls on Syria to grant women more rights', *Reuters News*, 28 April – Attachment 26;
- Zoepf, Katherine 2006, 'Islamic Revival in Syria Is Led by Women', *New York Times*, 29 August
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/29/world/middleeast/29syria.html?ei=5088&en=c98e734191b92ae7&ex=1314504000&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&pagewanted=print> – Accessed 5 January 2007 – Attachment 23; and
- Moubayed, Sami 2006, 'A History of Syrian Women', 17 December, *Washington Post PostGlobal Blog*, 17 December
http://blog.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/sami_moubayed/2006/12/a_history_of_syrian_women.html – Accessed 5 January 2007 – Attachment 27.

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)

UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>

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

World Health Organisation <http://www.who.int/>

Non-Government Organisations

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

European Country of Origin Information Network <http://www.ecoi.net/>

Flying Broom <http://en.ucansupurge.org/>

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

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

International News & Politics

CNN <http://www.cnn.com/>

International Herald Tribune <http://www.iht.com/>

IRIN News <http://www.irinnews.org/>

New York Sun <http://www.nysun.com/>

New York Times, 29 August <http://www.nytimes.com/>

News.com.au <http://www.news.com.au/>

Newsdesk.org <http://www.newsdesk.org/news/>

Washington Post PostGlobal Blog <http://blog.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/>

World Magazine <http://www.worldmag.com/>

WorldNetDaily <http://www.wnd.com/>

Topic Specific Links

The Christian Science Monitor <http://www.csmonitor.com/>

Christian Solidarity International <http://csi-int.org/index.php>

Compass Direct <http://www.compassdirect.org/en/index.php>

International Christian Concern <http://www.persecution.org/newsite/index.php>

International Coalition for Religious Freedom <http://www.religiousfreedom.com/>

WorldWide Religious News <http://www.wwrn.org/>

Worthy News <http://worthynews.com/>

Search Engines

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

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

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