

Syria remains one of the Middle Eastern countries in which religious freedom is guaranteed to a certain extent, thanks to the secularising ideology of the ruling Baath Party which, since 1970, has been largely dominated by the Alawite minority (a dissident Muslim Shi'a sect).

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If one speaks of a secularising, rather than a secular, ideology it is because there is neither a separation nor a distinction between the temporal and spiritual spheres as happens in most western secular models. As far as religious freedom is concerned, there is effectively freedom of worship but not freedom of conscience. Just like Muslims, Christians have the right to build their own places of worship and to teach their children Catechism but the Churches are not permitted to proselytise among Muslims and Muslims are not permitted to abandon their own religion to choose another. If they are non-believers, they remain Muslims.

Nonetheless, in its opposition to Israel and to the United States of America, the regime has ambiguous relations with certain movements and certain forms of both Sunni and Shi'a Islamism. Thus, Hamas has political headquarters in Damascus, where its leader, Khaled Mechaal, lives. Furthermore, Hezbollah is also present and has close links with Iran and with its Lebanese branch.

One must also take note that the movement of re-Islamisation influencing the whole Muslim world also has repercussions in Syria in its more radical form, with the implementation of the visible signs of Islamism, such as women wearing the full veil. Furthermore, in the course of the past two years, there have been religiously inspired crimes committed against Christians. According to the website Elaph.com, which reports on such events, attacks have increased significantly in Syria, especially in the eastern regions of the country where numerous religious and ethnic communities, mainly Kurds, coexist.