

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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## Responses to Information Requests

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Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the [Knowledge and Information Management Unit](#).

12 November 2013

### SYR104649.E

Syria: Situation of Jehovah's Witnesses, including treatment by society and authorities; state protection available in cases of discrimination or mistreatment (2009-November 2013)  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### 1. Situation of Jehovah's Witnesses

Several sources state that Jehovah's Witnesses are banned in Syria (TEAJCW 2 Mar. 2011; AI 9 July 2010; US 17 Nov. 2010) and that this ban has been in place since 1964 (AI 9 July 2010; TEAJCW 2 Mar. 2011). The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report 2006* states that in 1964, the Syrian government branded Jehovah's Witnesses as being "a 'politically motivated Zionist organization" (US 2007).

Sources indicate that Jehovah's Witnesses are prohibited from meeting for worship (TEAJCW 2 Mar. 2011; US 2007). However, sources also note that Jehovah's Witnesses have succeeded in holding private meetings (TEAJCW 2 Mar. 2011; AI 9 June 2010; US 2007). The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012* states that Jehovah's Witnesses "must conduct their activities without attracting government attention" (US 2013). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the President of Syrian Christians for Peace, a non-profit organization of Syrian Christians who support the "Syrian revolution" and which has board members in the US, United Arab Emirates, UK, Canada and France (Syrian Christians for Peace 12 July 2013), said that Jehovah's Witnesses are operating in secret "under different names under Protestant churches" (4 Nov. 2013). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

On 1 November 2013, the Associate Director of Legal Affairs at the Jehovah's Witnesses Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Canada provided the Research Directorate with what he explained was the "most current information" available about Jehovah's Witnesses in Syria, consisting of a 2 March 2011 submission to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, covering the year 2010, by The European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses (TEAJCW), a registered UK charity that assists Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide (TEAJCW 24 Apr. 2013). The TEAJCW indicated that Jehovah's Witnesses are prohibited from obtaining religious literature, and that "when literature is received by mail, authorities usually destroy, return or confiscate it" (2 Mar. 2011). The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2006* similarly indicates that the government prohibits Jehovah's Witnesses from receiving religious literature through the mail (2007).

Sources indicate that the Syrian government prohibits Jehovah's Witnesses from working in the public sector (TEAJCW 2 Mar. 2011; US 2007). TEAJCW indicated that the government fires employees who become Jehovah's Witnesses (2 Mar. 2011). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. According to the US *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*, Jehovah's Witnesses "were often discriminated against when seeking employment" (17 Nov. 2010).

Sources indicate that Jehovah's Witnesses are prohibited from leaving Syria (US 2007; TEAJCW 2 Mar. 2011). According to TEAJCW, "[i]t is very difficult for Jehovah's Witnesses to obtain a passport ... Their names are kept at the borders with a written notice to prevent them from departing" (ibid.). TEAJCW also states that any communication between Jehovah's Witnesses in Syria and "co-religionists outside Syria and with world headquarters" is prohibited by the government (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 2. Treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses by Authorities

TEAJCW states that Jehovah's Witnesses are interrogated "regularly" (2 Mar. 2011). Freedom House indicates that Jehovah's Witnesses are "routinely subjected to interrogation and harassment" (2011). TEAJCW indicates that

[s]ince early 2009, the Syrian authorities have increased the pressure applied to Jehovah's Witnesses in their regular interrogations. The Witnesses are pressured to sign a statement that states:

- I declare that I do not perform any activity related to the group of Jehovah's Witnesses
- I do not meet with them
- I do not read their publications and do not surf the Internet to read it
- I hold responsibility toward that, and for this reason I sign. (TEAJCW 2 Mar. 2011)

According to the July to December 2010 US *International Religious Freedom Report*, Jehovah's Witnesses reported that in January 2009, "government authorities beat a Jehovah's Witnesses elder and demanded he sign a pledge that he would cease attending religious meetings, reading Jehovah's Witnesses' publications, and 'sharing his faith with others'" (US 13 Sept. 2011). The US *International and Religious Freedom Report 2010* reports that, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses 2009 country report on Syria, in February 2009, "government authorities interrogated a Jehovah's Witness, asking that he sign a document forswearing participating in Jehovah's Witnesses' activities. The individual refused to sign the document, and security agents have repeatedly called him in for questioning" (US 17 Nov. 2010). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Amnesty International (AI) indicates that Nader Nseir, a Syrian who was living in Lebanon, was "summoned to the Political Security branch in Latakia, western Syria" when he was visiting Syria in 2009, where he reportedly refused to be an informer on Jehovah's Witnesses (9 July 2010). TEAJCW says that some Syrian authorities "enlist Jehovah's Witnesses to spy upon others and become informers who betray their co-religionists" (2 Mar. 2011). AI reports that Nseir's ID card was confiscated by authorities, so he returned to Lebanon illegally, leading Lebanese authorities to arrest him and return him to Syria (9 July 2010). Sources indicate that Nseir was arrested upon his return to Syria on 7 May 2010 and detained in an undisclosed location (AI 9 July 2010; TEAJCW 2 Mar. 2011). TEAJCW states that Jehovah's Witnesses who travel without permission "get the same treatment that Nader Nseir received" (2 Mar. 2011). The July to December 2010 US *International Religious Freedom Report* indicates that, according to the general counsel for Jehovah's Witnesses, Nseir was "tortured and experienced other ill-treatment" (US 13 Sept. 2011). TEAJCW indicates that Nseir was "beaten many times severely" and lost approximately 20 kilograms in detention (2 Mar. 2011). TEAJCW indicated that Nseir was released on 11 October 2010 and was "defending his case in the court" (ibid.). The July to December 2010 US *International Religious Freedom Report* indicates that, according to Jehovah's Witnesses, although Nseir was released on bail, he faced "unknown charges" (US 13 Sept. 2011). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

TEAJCW states that "[a]ll Jehovah's Witnesses and their homes are watched" (2 Mar. 2011). They add that the surveillance has resulted in making people avoid Jehovah's Witnesses, and has had "adverse repercussions" for Jehovah's Witnesses, including "many material and social difficulties" (TEAJCW 2 Mar. 2011). Further information on the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses by society could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Information on the situation and treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses since March 2011 could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

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 sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

## References

- Amnesty International (AI). 9 July 2010. "Detained Jehovah's Witness At Risk of Torture." <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE24/016/2010/en/d87217cb-72d4-44c8-ab65-0a0886d916e0/mde240162010en.pdf>> [Accessed 29 Oct. 2013]
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- Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Canada. 1 November 2013. Correspondence from the Associate Director of Legal Affairs to the Research Directorate.

## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Attempts to contact the following individuals and organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Assistant Professor of Science and Religion, Harvard Divinity School; Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies; Director, Middle Eastern Studies Program, George Mason University; Professor of Political Science, California State University at Stanislaus; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. A Professor of International Relations, University of Southern California, and a Professor of Middle Eastern studies, Harvard University were unable to provide information for this Response.

**Internet sites:** Al Jazeera; BBC; ecoinet; Factiva; Human Rights Watch; Jehovah's Witnesses Official Website; Minority Rights Group International; Syrian Arab News Agency; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights; United Kingdom – Border Agency; United Nations – Integrated Regional Information Networks, Refworld.

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