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From The European Association
of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

Contribution to the Report of the U.N. High
Commissioner for Human Rights on the
implementation of the new review mechanism of the
Human Rights Council, established by GA Resolution
60/251 and by the Human Rights Council in Resolution
5/1 of 18 June 2007 for the 12th session 2011 of the UPR
(Dates of the WG: October 2011).

SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

Marcel Gillet

Chairman of the Religious Freedom Subcommittee

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JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES—SYRIA

January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2010

BACKGROUND

Jehovah's Witnesses have been practicing their religion in Syria since the 1940's. In the beginning they were frequently arrested, but in the 1950's, they won a number of court cases proving that their association is open, religious in nature, and not a secret or political organization. Their worship is based on the Holy Scriptures which defines love as God's greatest quality.

On May 12, 1964, the Israel Boycott Office of the League of Arab Nations Secretariat in Damascus issued Recommendation No. 570, effectively banning the work of Jehovah's Witnesses in all Arab countries. Jehovah's Witnesses tried to have the ban overturned in court but were unsuccessful, and remain under ban in Syria.

It appears that the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses in most Arab lands originates with the above-mentioned Recommendation. Unequivocally, Jehovah's Witnesses are not "insinuated/inspired by International Zionism," nor are they "working according to [Zionism's] directions and serving its interests."

The worldwide association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses is saddened that the reputation of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses who live in Syria has been tarnished by a defaming and unfounded assimilation. In fact, we strongly declare that the support of Zionism or any other political arrangement is totally against our beliefs and unacceptable to any member of the International Community of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses. (Please see attached statement.)

In January 2007, the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses wrote to the Israel Boycott Office in Damascus requesting a meeting to discuss rescinding the 1964 Recommendation. An answer was received saying that it is not the proper time to discuss this issue. A similar answer was received to a 2008 letter. Jehovah's Witnesses are still trying to obtain an appointment with the officials in the Israel Boycott Office in Damascus.

RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Meetings for worship are prohibited, though Witnesses succeed in meeting in private homes.

Obtaining religious literature is also prohibited; when literature is received by mail, authorities usually destroy, return, or confiscate it.

The government forbids any communication with their co-religionists outside Syria and with world headquarters.

The government prohibits Jehovah's Witnesses from employment in government offices. Any employee who becomes one of Jehovah's Witnesses is discharged once it becomes known.

It is very difficult for Jehovah's Witnesses to obtain a passport, and they are not allowed to leave the country. Their names are kept at the borders with a written notice to prevent them from departing. If any Witness travels without their permission for any reason, they get the same treatment that Nader Nseir received (see below).

As for any Syrian Witness coming to Syria from abroad, he or she is expected to report to the authorities upon arrival. He or she is asked to sign a paper wherein he or she declares not to perform any activity related to Jehovah's Witnesses.

ABUSES OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The authorities try to frighten the Witnesses by interrogating them regularly, intending also to intimidate any potential converts from becoming Witnesses. Since 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

These tactics are a return to methods used against Jehovah's Witnesses in 1991. It seems that one objective of this pressure is to keep Jehovah's Witnesses from meeting with one another, and it has had the effect of greatly reducing the number who can meet together.

Detention/Mistreatment While in Custody

Nader Nseir, who had lived in Lebanon for 17 years, was placed under house arrest when he went to visit his relatives in Syria at the end of February 2009. He was required to appear before the Intelligence Department daily. He did manage to return to Lebanon, but in early **May 2010** the Lebanese authorities arrested him when they discovered a conflict in his residence permit. The matter would have been settled if Nader was not one of Jehovah's Witnesses, but the Lebanese authorities sent him back to Syria in response to the Syrian authorities' demand.

On **May 7, 2010**, he was taken into custody and incarcerated at an unknown prison. He was beaten many times severely. One of the interrogators in the High State Security—branch No. 285—beat him many times on his face and head. Nader lost about 20 kilograms in detention. On **September 23, 2010**, Nader was able to communicate with his wife for the first time since he was taken into custody. The authorities released him on **October 11, 2010**, through a lawyer. He will continue defending his case in the court through his lawyer.

SOCIETAL ABUSES AND DISCRIMINATION

All Jehovah's Witnesses and their homes are watched, and they are regularly called on for interrogations. Even when treated well by police, this surveillance has adverse repercussions for Witnesses. Once neighbors see a policeman at the doorstep of one of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses, they become afraid of getting involved with the government and avoid the Witness family. This has brought many material and social difficulties upon Jehovah's Christian Witnesses.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM OBJECTIVES

The Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses has requested the Embassy of The Syrian Arab Republic in Washington, D.C., to convey their request for the visit of an international delegation to Damascus so that any misunderstandings about Jehovah's Christian Witnesses may be resolved. This effort would not only benefit Syrian citizens who worship as Jehovah's Witnesses but also the government that dignifies its people by respecting their right to freedom of worship. Representatives of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses are available to meet at the convenience of the competent authorities.

Jehovah's Christian Witnesses in Syria would appreciate the opportunity to worship in their homeland, as they have enjoyed in the past. Jehovah's Witnesses in Syria and as a worldwide organization respectfully request the government of Syria to:

- (1) End the mistreatment and the pressure applied in an attempt to coerce Jehovah's Christian Witnesses into abandoning their conscientiously-held religious beliefs. They also appeal for an end to the efforts by some Syrian authorities to enlist Jehovah's Witnesses to spy upon others and become informers who betray their co-religionists.
- (2) Allow them more freedom in their worship as responsible, law-abiding citizens of their country, including the right to peaceably assemble for worship. They would be grateful to have the permission to build or buy modest but dignified places of worship where they can meet as congregations, without interference.
- (3) Permit them to openly import Bibles and Bible literature used in their weekly program of Scriptural education and worship.

Jehovah's Witnesses prize the opportunity for an open and transparent dialogue with the Syrian authorities and are ready to meet them in Damascus as soon as possible.

Statement

Our Beliefs - Jehovah's Witnesses and Zionism

(See <http://www.jw-media.org/aboutjw/article33.htm>; also in Arabic)

Jehovah's Witnesses are Christians who base their beliefs on the Holy Bible. While some religions teach that the gathering of Jews in Palestine is related to Bible prophecy, Jehovah's Witnesses do not hold this view. They do not believe that such political events are specifically foretold in the Bible.¹ In fact, the Bible does not promote any one human government or exalt one ethnic group or people over another.² *The Watchtower*, the official magazine of Jehovah's Witnesses, has unequivocally stated: "There [is] no Scriptural support for political Zionism."³

Zionism has been described as a "Jewish nationalist movement that has had as its goal the creation and support of a Jewish national state in Palestine."⁴ Its roots are both religious and political. Jehovah's Witnesses do not advocate Zionism as a religious doctrine, and they are completely neutral toward political Zionism.

The organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is entirely religious and does not advocate any political arrangement, which would include Zionism. The political neutrality of Jehovah's Witnesses has been well documented, and in some lands the Witnesses have suffered severe persecution rather than compromise that neutrality.

A core tenet of the religious beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses, regardless of where they live, is obedience to the laws of secular governments. They do not agitate against governmental authorities or participate in armed conflict.

¹ *Vindication*, Vol. 2: 1932, published by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. In 1952, Jehovah's Witnesses published the following statement: "Nothing in the modern return of the Jews to Palestine and the setting up of the Israeli republic corresponds with Bible prophecies concerning the restoration of Jehovah's name-people to his favor and organization."—"Let God Be True," p. 217 (1952 Edition), published by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society.

² [Acts 10:34, 35](#).

³ *The Watchtower*, March 1, 1958, pp. 135-6.

⁴ *Encyclopædia Britannica 2003 Ultimate Reference Suite CD-ROM Network Version*, "Zionism."