

SYRIA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares the state shall respect all religions and shall ensure the freedom to perform religious rituals as long as these “do not disturb the public order.” There is no official state religion. Membership in the Muslim Brotherhood or “Salafist” organizations is illegal and punishable to different degrees, including by imprisonment or death. A new law passed on April 2 allows the government to create “redevelopment zones” that will be slated for reconstruction; multiple reports indicated the government planned to utilize the law to reconfigure religious demographics in certain areas at the expense of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), the majority of whom were Sunni Muslims. There were continued media reports the government and its Shia Muslim militia allies (consisting mostly of foreigners) killed, arrested, and physically abused members of opposition groups which were predominantly Sunni Muslim. According to multiple observers, the government continued to employ tactics aimed at bolstering the most violent elements of the Sunni Islamist opposition in order to shape the conflict with various resistance groups so it would be seen as one in which a religiously “moderate” government was facing a religiously “extremist” opposition. As the insurgency continued to be identified with the Sunni population, the government reportedly targeted opposition-held towns and neighborhoods for siege, mortar shelling, and aerial bombardment, including the bombardment of East Ghouta and Daraa, and an April chemical weapons attack against the Damascus suburb of Douma, resulting in mostly Sunni casualties. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) documented 67 attacks by government forces against places of worship during the year. According to nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports, Iran further exacerbated the conflict in areas that remained under its influence by continuing to recruit Shia Afghan refugees and migrants from Iran to travel to Syria and assist the government in its conflict against majority Sunni opposition forces. The government continued to monitor sermons, close mosques between prayer times, and limit the activities of religious groups, and to say the armed resistance comprised “extremists” and “terrorists.” According to international media reports, a number of minority religious groups viewed the government as their protector against violent Sunni extremists. According to multiple human rights groups, the government continued its widespread and systematic use of unlawful killings, including through the repeated use of chemical weapons, enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention to punish perceived opponents, including civilians, the majority of whom were Sunni Muslims.

The United Nations' Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI) and numerous independent sources reported nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the UN, U.S. and other governments, such as ISIS and al-Qaida-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), targeted Shia, Alawite Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities, as well as other Sunnis, with killings, kidnappings, physical mistreatment, and arrests, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians in the areas of the country they controlled throughout the course of the conflict. ISIS lost the vast majority of the territory it once controlled and was reduced largely to a small area in the eastern part of the country by the end of the year. As a result, ISIS witnessed a significant decline in its ability to target religious groups. ISIS claimed credit for a wave of suicide attacks against the majority Druze-inhabited city of Sweida in late July. The attacks left over 250 people dead, and resulted in the capture of more than 30 Druze hostages by ISIS fighters, one of whom was executed by ISIS. Until military operations largely removed ISIS from control of the country's territory, ISIS killed hundreds of civilian men, women, and children through public executions, crucifixions, and beheadings on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, homosexuality, and cursing God. ISIS continued to hold thousands of enslaved Yezidi women and girls kidnapped in Iraq and trafficked to Syria because of their religious beliefs to be sold or distributed to ISIS members as "spoils of war." While many Yezidi women were liberated when coalition forces and the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) liberated ISIS-held territory, thousands remained missing. ISIS punished individuals with floggings or imprisonment for what ISIS said were religious offenses, such as insulting the Prophet Muhammad or failing to comply with standards of grooming and dress. ISIS required Christians to convert, flee, pay a special tax, or face execution. It destroyed churches, Shia shrines, and other religious heritage sites, and used its own police force, court system, and a revised school curriculum to enforce and spread its interpretation of Islam. HTS replaced governmental courts with sharia councils in areas it controlled, authorizing discrimination against members of religious minorities. HTS also continued to indoctrinate children with its interpretation of Salafi-jihadist ideology, including through schools and youth training camps. In January the Turkish Army, along with Turkish-sponsored opposition groups, including elements of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), launched an air and ground campaign against the enclave of Afrin, held by the Kurdish-dominated People's Protection Unit (YPG), displacing approximately 167,000 people, including Kurds, Yezidis, and Christians. According to media reports, displaced Yezidis said FSA forces in Afrin rounded up Yezidis, forced them to convert to Islam, and destroyed Yezidi places of worship.

There were reports of sectarian violence due to tensions among religious groups, exacerbated by government actions, ISIS and HTS targeting of religious groups, and sectarian rhetoric. Alawites reportedly faced attacks because other religious groups believed government policy favored Alawites; sectarian conflict was one of the driving factors of the insurgency, according to observers. Christians reportedly continued to face discrimination and violence, including kidnappings, at the hands of violent extremist groups. Once religiously diverse neighborhoods, towns, and villages were increasingly segregated between majority Sunni neighborhoods and communities that comprised religious minority groups, as displaced members of religious groups relocated seeking greater security and safety by living with coreligionists. There were more than 6.1 million internally displaced Syrians and more than 5.48 million Syrian refugees.

The U.S. President and the Secretary of State stressed the need for a political transition in the country leading to an inclusive government that would respect the right of all persons to practice their religion freely. The Secretary of State highlighted that ISIS was guilty of genocide against religious groups during his remarks in July at the Department of State-sponsored Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. Although the U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in 2012, the Special Representative for Syria Engagement, the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Levant, the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities, and other senior U.S. officials continued to meet elsewhere with leaders of minority religious groups to discuss assistance to vulnerable populations and ways to counter sectarian violence.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 19.5 million (July 2018 estimate). At year's end there were more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees, primarily Sunni, registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in neighboring countries and 6.2 million IDPs. Continued population displacement adds a degree of uncertainty to demographic analyses, but the U.S. government estimates approximately 74 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, which includes ethnic Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and some Turkomans. According to U.S. government estimates, other Muslim groups, including Alawites, Ismailis, and Shia, together constitute 13 percent of the population, while Druze constitute 3 percent.

U.S. government estimates put the Christian population at 10 percent of the overall population, although media and other reports of Christians fleeing the country as a result of the civil war suggest the Christian population is now considerably lower. Before the civil war, there were small Jewish populations in Aleppo and Damascus, and NGOs estimate fewer than 20 Jews remained in the country in 2012. It is unclear how many, if any, Jews currently reside in Syria. There was also a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000 before the civil war.

Sunni Muslims are present throughout the country. Shia Muslims live mostly in rural areas, particularly in several majority-Shia towns in Idlib and Aleppo Provinces. Twelver Shia generally live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. The majority of Alawites live in the mountainous areas of the coastal Latakia Governorate, but they also have a presence in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Damascus. The highest concentration of Ismailis is in the city of Salamiyeh, Hama Governorate.

Most Christians belong to autonomous Orthodox churches, the Eastern Catholic (or Uniate) churches (in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church), or the Assyrian Church of the East and other affiliated independent Nestorian churches. Most Christians continue to live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, or in the Hasakah Governorate in the northeast section of the country. While there were hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christian refugees before the conflict, the majority of the Iraqi Christian population has since moved to neighboring countries or returned to Iraq. Many Druze live in the Jabal al-Arab (Jabal al-Druze) region in the southern Governorate of Sweida, where they constitute the majority of the local population. Yezidis, found primarily in the northeast, also previously lived in Aleppo.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The legal framework described in this section remains in force only in those areas controlled by the government, and even in these areas there is often a breakdown in law and order, leaving militias, often sectarian in nature, in a dominant position. In areas of the country controlled by opposition or terrorist groups, irregular courts and local “authorities” apply a variety of unofficial legal codes with diverse provisions relating to religious freedom.

The constitution declares the state shall respect all religions and shall ensure the freedom to perform religious rituals as long as these do not disturb the public order. There is no official state religion, although the constitution states the religion of the president of the republic is Islam. The constitution states Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation.

The constitution states “[issues] of personal status of the religious communities shall be protected and respected,” and “the citizens are equal in rights and duties, without discrimination among them on grounds of gender, origin, language, religion, or creed.” Citizens have the right to sue the government if they believe it has violated their rights.

According to law, membership in certain types of religiously oriented organizations is illegal and punishable to different degrees. This includes membership in an organization considered by the government to be “Salafist,” a designation the government associates with Sunni fundamentalism. Neither the government nor the state security court have defined the parameters of what constitutes “Salafist” activity. Affiliation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death or imprisonment.

The government bans Jehovah’s Witnesses as a “politically-motivated Zionist organization.”

The law restricts proselytizing and conversion. It prohibits the conversion of Muslims to other religions as contrary to Islamic law. The law recognizes conversion to Islam. The penal code prohibits “causing tension between religious communities.”

By law all religious groups must register with the government. Registered religious groups and clergy – including all government-recognized Muslim, Jewish, and Christian groups – receive free utilities and are exempt from real estate taxes on religious buildings and personal property taxes on their official vehicles.

According to a Washington think tank, in October the government issued a law regulating the structure and functions of the Ministry of Religious Endowments (Awqaf). The new law grants the Awqaf additional powers, including the establishment of a Jurisprudential and Scholarly Council with the power to define what religious discourse is appropriate and the authority to fine or penalize individuals who propagate extremist or deviant thought. The law also charges the council with monitoring all fatwas (religious decrees) issued in the country and

with preventing the spread of views associated with the Muslim Brotherhood or “Wahhabism.” The law concentrates a range of offices and institutions within the ministry, centralizing the government’s role in and oversight over the country’s religious affairs.

All meetings of religious groups, except for regularly scheduled worship, require permits from the government.

Public schools are officially government-run and nonsectarian, although the government authorizes the Christian and Druze communities to operate some public schools. There is mandatory religious instruction in public schools for all students, with government-approved teachers and curricula. Religious instruction covers Islam and Christianity only, and courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Members of religious groups may choose to attend public schools with Muslim or Christian instruction, or attend private schools that follow either secular or religious curricula.

For the resolution of issues of personal status, the government requires citizens to list their religious affiliation. Individuals are subject to their respective religious groups’ laws concerning marriage and divorce. A Muslim woman may not legally marry a Christian man, but a Christian woman may legally marry a Muslim man. If a Christian woman marries a Muslim man, she is not allowed to be buried in an Islamic cemetery unless she converts to Islam. If a Christian wishes to convert to Islam, the law states the presiding Muslim cleric must inform the prospective convert’s diocese.

The personal status law on divorce for Muslims is based on an interpretation of sharia implemented by government-appointed religious judges. In interreligious personal status cases, sharia takes precedence. A divorced woman is not entitled to alimony in some cases; a woman may also forego her right to alimony to persuade her husband to agree to the divorce. Additionally, under the law, a divorced mother loses the right to guardianship and physical custody of her sons when they reach the age of 13 and of her daughters at age 15, when guardianship transfers to the paternal side of the family.

The government’s interpretation of sharia is the basis of inheritance laws for all citizens except Christians. According to the law, courts may grant Muslim women up to half of the inheritance share of male heirs. In all communities, male heirs must provide financial support to female relatives who inherit less. When a

Christian woman marries a Muslim, she is not entitled to an inheritance from her husband unless she converts to Islam.

An individual's birth certificate records his or her religious affiliation. Documents presented when marrying or traveling for a religious pilgrimage also list the religious affiliation of the applicant. There is no designation of religion on passports or national identity cards, except for Jews, who are the only religious group whose passports and identity cards note their religion.

Law No. 10, passed on April 2, allows the government to create "redevelopment zones" to be slated for reconstruction. Property owners are notified to provide documentary proof of property ownership or risk losing ownership to the state. If an individual does not claim ownership successfully during the one-year period, as amended by Law No. 42, the property reverts to the local government. An individual can prove ownership in person or through designated proxies.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

There were continued reports that the war waged by the Alawi dominated government against opposition forces and terrorist groups resulted in significant casualties among the majority Sunni population. The government continued its widespread and systematic use of unlawful killings, including through the repeated use of chemical weapons, enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention to punish perceived opponents, including civilians, the majority of whom were Sunni Muslims.

According to some analysts, religious and sectarian factors were present on all sides of the civil war, but there were also other factors underlying the violent competition for political power and control of the central government in Damascus, and violence committed by the government against opposition groups and civilians inherently had sectarian and nonsectarian elements. According to many observers, including academic experts, the government's policy, aimed at eliminating opposition forces threatening its power, was sectarian in its effects, although it was not motivated primarily by sectarian ideology.

According to the COI, multiple human rights organizations, and media reports, the government and progovernment forces used weaponry incapable of adequately discriminating between civilian and military targets in densely populated areas,

used chemical weapons, and deliberately denied humanitarian aid. In April the government and progovernment forces launched a massive assault on the Damascus suburb of East Ghouta, culminating in the government's recapture of an area it had besieged since 2013. SNHR compiled a list of 1,473 civilians killed in the offensive, most of whom were Sunni Muslims. During the battle for East Ghouta, according to UN and press reports, the government resumed chemical weapons attacks on civilians, with bombing in the predominantly Sunni Damascus suburb of Douma involving the possible use of sarin that killed at least 70 civilians. The government and progovernment forces subsequently launched an assault on opposition-controlled areas of Daraa Province and reasserted government control in July. The government's military victories in the Damascus suburbs of East Ghouta and Daraa resulted in the forced displacement of mostly Sunni residents. The government forced them to relocate primarily to opposition-held Idlib Province due to its suspicion that they were supportive of the opposition.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Commission of Inquiry, SNHR, and Syrian human rights activists reported government-affiliated forces and militias continued to seize the homes of Sunnis with the explicit intention of permanently displacing these individuals and thus altering the demographics of areas held by the regime. Analysts said this was evidenced by population shifts in Homs. Groups such as SNHR said the government's displacement operations were sectarian in nature.

According to numerous reports, government and partner forces, including Iranian-backed Shia militias composed mostly of foreigners, killed, arrested, and physically abused individuals in attacks on opposition-held territory as part of their effort to defeat the armed insurrection mounted by opposition groups, as well as terrorist groups, and to intimidate Sunni communities that might support opposition groups. According to SNHR, the civilian death toll for 2018 was 6,964, including 4,162 killed by government forces and Iranian militias. The COI stated Sunnis accounted for the majority of civilian casualties and detainees.

Human rights organizations and civil society groups reported the government continued to arbitrarily detain tens of thousands of citizens without due process. The SNHR report noted that arbitrary arrests of individuals have been made in the country on a daily basis since the start of the conflict for "exercising one of their basic rights such as the freedom of opinion and expression, or because they were denied a fair trial, or because they were detained after their punishment had ended."

Human rights groups and opposition activists stated the majority of detainees the government took into custody were Sunni Arabs. The UN and human rights organizations reported the continued detention and disappearance of individuals who appeared to be predominantly Sunni Muslims. According to an SNHR report, the government used “enforced disappearance” and secretly arrested more than 95,000 Syrians since 2011. The report stated that detainees were subject to torture intended to “inflict serious physical damage or cause severe pain for numerous purposes, whether to extract information, for retaliation, or to cause panic among detainees.” According to the report, 13,608 individuals died from torture between March 2011 and August 2018. The vast majority of tortured and executed prisoners were Sunni Muslims, whom analysts stated the government targeted believing they were members of the opposition, or likely to support the opposition. The SNHR report stated that at least 7,706 arbitrary arrests were made in 2018.

The SNHR report stated that the government was responsible for at least 87 percent of all arbitrary arrests; nonstate actors also engaged in this practice. In most cases, victims’ families could not accurately identify the entity that made the arrest, since Iranian militias, the predominantly Shia Lebanese Hezbollah, and all other progovernment forces were able to engage in arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances.

Over the course of the summer, government officials released death notices of prisoners held in government detention facilities. SNHR stated that the number of detainees certified as dead was unknown, but it was estimated to be in the thousands. The SNHR noted the government delayed announcing those detainees certified dead until years later as a way to punish the victims’ families. In its review of the notifications, the *Washington Post* wrote that the notices were of detainees who died between 2013 and 2015, with the overwhelming majority of them Sunni Muslim.

Some opposition groups and terrorist groups identified themselves explicitly as Sunni Arab or Sunni Islamist groups in statements and publications and drew on a support base made up almost exclusively of Sunnis, giving government targeting of the opposition a sectarian element. NGO sources also stated the government tried to mobilize sectarian support by branding itself as a protector of religious minorities from Sunni extremist groups, while simultaneously bolstering radical Sunni groups and controlling the activities of religious groups. As a result, a number of minority religious groups viewed the government as protecting them from violent Sunni extremists, according to international media reports.

In May Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported the government's adoption of Law No. 10 would lead to confiscation of property without due process or compensation and would create a major obstacle for refugees and IDPs to return home. HRW said it would be nearly impossible for thousands of refugees and IDPs to claim their property and that the procedural requirements of the law, coupled with the political context, created significant potential for abuse and discrimination, particularly toward the Sunni population. Subsequent to the law's passage in April, an October report by HRW detailed how the government began preventing mostly Sunni displaced residents from former antigovernment-held areas in Darayya and Qaboun from returning to their properties, including by demolishing their properties without warning and without providing alternative housing or compensation.

According to multiple press reports and human rights organizations, the vast majority of refugees and displaced were Sunni and viewed with suspicion by the government. Other human rights organizations joined with HRW in observing that the government could potentially use Law No. 10 to engage in abuse and discriminatory treatment of mostly Sunni displaced residents and residents from areas previously held by opposition forces. They stated they feared Law No. 10 would be used to reconstruct religious demographics. According to the Carnegie Endowment of Peace, significant numbers of the Syrian refugee population indicated that they were unlikely to return if they were unsure of being able to repossess their house or property. According to refugee and human rights organizations, 70 percent of refugees lacked the basic identity documents needed to claim property. The organizations stated that mostly Sunni displaced individuals without the proper documents required to claim property ownership feared persecution, arbitrary arrest, or mistreatment by the security services.

According to HRW, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps continued to recruit Shia Afghan refugees and migrants residing in Iran to assist the government in its conflict against armed opposition groups. HRW reported Iran had supported and trained thousands of Afghans to fight in the country as part of the Fatemiyoun Division since 2013. HRW and other sources estimated the size of the division to be up to 14,000 fighters. The *Washington Post* reported most Afghan fighters of the Fatemiyoun Division were refugees or migrants living in Iran, and hundreds came from poor, ethnic Hazara communities near the Iranian border, as well as other regions of Afghanistan. According to analysts, the use of Shia fighters from as far as Afghanistan as soldiers in an armed conflict against a mostly Sunni opposition further exacerbated sectarian divisions.

According to human rights groups and religious communities, the government continued to monitor and control sermons and to close mosques between prayers. It also continued to monitor and limit the activities of all religious groups, including scrutinizing their fundraising and discouraging proselytizing.

Despite the relatively small indigenous Shia community in the country, Shia religious slogans and banners remained prominent in Damascus, according to observers and media reports. In addition, Hezbollah and other pro-Iran signs and banners remained prevalent in some government-held areas.

The government continued its support for radio and television programming related to the practice and study of a form of Islam it deemed appropriate. State media allowed only those clerics it approved to preach on the air, and booksellers were prohibited from selling literature that the government deemed was against the government's interpretation of Islam.

According to academic experts, religion remained a factor in determining career advancement in the government. The Alawite minority continued to hold an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers, particularly in leadership positions in the military and security services, according to media and academic reports; however, the senior officer corps of the military reportedly continued to include individuals from other religious minorities. The government continued to exempt Christian and Muslim religious leaders from military service based on conscientious objection, although it continued to require Muslim religious leaders to pay a levy for exemption.

Media and academic experts said the government continued to portray the armed resistance in sectarian terms, saying opposition protesters and fighters were associated with "extreme Islamist factions" and terrorists seeking to eliminate the country's religious minority groups and its secular approach to governance. The official state news agency Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported on the government's fight against "*takfiri* terrorist organizations" throughout the year (a group is defined as *takfiri* if it declares another Muslim or a Muslim group as apostate). An August 14 SANA article, referring to a Roman-era historic site destroyed in the civil war, was titled "Zein El-Abidine Palace in Daraa stands witness to Takfiri terrorist crimes."

According to international media reports, leaders from a number of minority religious groups, such as representatives of the Catholic and Orthodox Christian communities as well as prominent Druze activists, continued to state the

government had their support because it protected them from violent Sunni extremists.

The government continued to warn the Sunni population against communications with foreign coreligionists that it described as communication for the purpose of political opposition or military activity. For most other religious groups, the government did not prohibit links between citizens and coreligionists in other countries or between citizens and the international religious hierarchies governing some religious groups. It continued to prohibit, however, contact between the Jewish community and Jews in Israel.

Government-controlled radio and television programming continued to disseminate anti-Semitic news articles and cartoons. SANA frequently reported on the “Zionist enemy” and accused the opposition of serving “the Zionist project.” The government repeated its claim a “Zionist conspiracy” was responsible for the country’s conflict. In response to an alleged Israeli airstrike in July, the government stated “the Zionist enemy returned in its desperate attempts to support defeated terror organizations in Daraa and in Quneitra.”

The government continued to allow foreign Christian faith-based NGOs to operate under the auspices of one of the historically established churches without officially registering. It continued to require foreign Islamic NGOs to register and receive approval from the Awqaf to operate. Security forces continued to question these organizations on their sources of income and to monitor their expenditures. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor continued to prohibit religious leaders from serving as directors on the boards of Islamic charities.

SNHR reported the government continued to conduct indiscriminate aerial and artillery attacks, which at times resulted in damage or destruction of places of worship and religious cultural property, including numerous churches and mosques. Additionally, the government conducted targeted attacks against places of worship the regime claimed were occupied by armed actors. SNHR documented 67 attacks by government forces against places of worship during the year. On January 31, for example, government helicopters dropped barrel bombs near al Omrai al Kabir Mosque in Kafr Amim village, causing moderate damage to the mosque and its furnishings. On February 27, government forces shelled Um Habiba Mosque in Douma city, partially destroying the mosque and putting it out of operation. The government continued to state the mosques it targeted were being utilized by opposition forces for military purposes.

Jews generally were barred from government employment and did not have military service obligations.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

The COI and numerous independent sources reported nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the UN, the U.S., and other governments, such as ISIS and HTS, targeted Shia, Alawite Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities, as well as other Sunnis, with killings, kidnappings, physical mistreatment, and arrests, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians in the areas of the country they controlled throughout the course of the conflict.

As of the end of the year, forces comprised of a coalition of 79 partners and the SDF liberated the vast majority of Syrian territory that ISIS once controlled and governed. Until military operations largely removed ISIS from control of the country's territory, ISIS killed hundreds of civilian men, women, and children through public executions, crucifixions, and beheadings on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, homosexuality, and cursing God.

ISIS was reduced to a small area in the eastern part of the country by the end of the year; it no longer governed large populations, and was limited in its ability to subjugate religious groups and subject them to harsh treatment. It continued, however, to operate and target individuals on the basis of religion on a smaller scale. ISIS and HTS targeted religious minorities, including Shia and Ismaili Muslims, Christians, Alawites, and Yezidis, and members of the majority Sunni community who violated their strict interpretations of Islamic law. In late July, for example, ISIS claimed credit for a wave of suicide attacks against the majority Druze population in the city of Sweida. The attacks left more than 250 people dead and resulted in the capture of more than 30 Druze hostages by ISIS fighters, one of whom was later executed. Al-Qaeda affiliated groups also lost significant territory, and at year's end were mostly limited to the Idlib Governorate and had limited ability to target religious groups outside of their areas of control. On September 7, al-Qaeda-linked rebels fired several missiles at the predominately Christian town of Mhardeh, according to multiple press reports. The missiles killed at least 10 civilians and seriously wounded 20 others. The charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) reported that on January 22 rebels bombed Bab Touma, the Christian district in Damascus, leaving 12 dead and 35 injured. ACN also reported that in early January shelling by rebels caused damage to the Syriac Orthodox patriarchate office in Bab Touma.

Many rebel groups self-identified as Sunni Arab or Sunni Islamist and drew on a support base made up almost exclusively of Sunnis. Armed groups continued to convene ad hoc sharia courts in areas under their control, where each group reportedly implemented its own interpretation of Islamic law. Religious offenses ISIS deemed punishable by death included blasphemy, apostasy, and cursing God. ISIS punished individuals with floggings or imprisonment for other religious offenses, such as insulting the Prophet Muhammad or failing to comply with standards of grooming and dress.

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), as of June, Hezbollah had between 7,000 and 10,000 fighters in Syria, its largest deployment outside of Lebanon. CSIS reports stated the bulk of Hezbollah's forces and proxy militias were deployed along the Lebanese-Syrian border, where there were large numbers of Shia communities and shrines – and near Hezbollah's stronghold in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah also deployed fighters around Damascus and Homs, and as far east as the Deir al-Zour Governorate in the Middle Euphrates River valley.

Hezbollah participated in the military campaigns against the mostly Sunni Damascus suburbs of East Ghouta and Daraa, which resulted in thousands of casualties. Sources reported that Syrian soldiers and government-affiliated militias seized homes in these areas after “reconciliation” agreements forcefully displaced previous inhabitants, who were mostly Sunni Muslims. The May COI report detailed a practice in which, after hostilities ceased and local truces were implemented, government and progovernment forces required individuals from the previously besieged areas to undergo a “reconciliation process” as a condition for remaining in their homes. The option to reconcile reportedly often was not offered to healthcare personnel, local council members, relief workers, activists, dissidents, and family members of fighters. In effect, the COI assessed that the “reconciliation process” induced displacement in the form of organized evacuations of those deemed insufficiently loyal to the government and served as a government strategy for punishing those individuals.

ISIS regularly targeted and massacred Shia Muslims, and used its media arms to target, demonize, and incite violence against Shia.

Numerous sources stated ISIS also targeted Christians throughout the country. Activists, media, and ISIS sources reported ISIS continued to force Christians and other minorities in areas under its control to pay a protection tax – 164,000 Syrian

pounds (\$320) per person, according to a Christian organization – convert to Islam, flee, or be killed.

Starting in 2014, ISIS abducted thousands of Yezidi women from Iraq, as well as numerous Christian and Turkmen women, and brought them to the country to be sold as sex slaves in markets or given as rewards to ISIS fighters as “spoils of war” because of the captives’ religious beliefs. According to numerous sources, ISIS fighters held the women as slaves and subjected them and other captured women and girls to repeated sexual violence, systematic rape, forced marriages, and coerced abortions. While many Yezidi women were liberated when coalition forces and the Kurdish-dominated SDF liberated ISIS-held territory, thousands remained missing.

According to ISIS statements and other sources, in areas once under its control, ISIS police forces continued to administer summary punishments for violations of the ISIS morality code. Men and women continued to face public beatings and whippings for smoking, possessing alcohol, listening to music, having tattoos, conducting business during prayer times, not attending Friday prayers, fighting, and not fasting during Ramadan.

HTS continued to characterize its fight against the government in derogatory terms aimed at delegitimizing and dehumanizing government supporters on the basis of their Alawite religious identity. HTS and other rebel groups also used sectarian language to describe the Kurdish-dominated People's Protection Unit (YPG) and SDF. HTS replaced government courts with sharia councils in areas it controlled, authorizing discrimination against religious minorities.

In January the Turkish army, along with Turkish-opposition groups, including elements of the FSA, launched an air and ground campaign against the YPG-held enclave of Afrin. The attack allegedly was designed to clear out Kurdish YPG fighters from the border region. According to the United Nations, the press, and human rights organizations, approximately 167,000 people, mostly Kurds, Yezidis, and Christians, were displaced. According to media reports, displaced Yezidis said FSA forces in Afrin rounded up Yezidis and forced them to convert to Islam and destroyed Yezidi places of worship. In the aftermath of the conflict, Turkish forces implemented a resettlement policy by moving displaced Sunni opposition forces and their families into the empty homes that belonged to displaced people, comprised mostly of religious minorities.

ISIS, HTS, and some Islamist opposition groups continued to call for establishing a Sunni theocracy in press statements and media interviews.

HTS and affiliated groups continued to use schools, youth training camps, and other means to teach children their Salafi-jihadi philosophy in areas under their control. In “proselytization sessions,” a term used by HTS, the group invited children to participate in games whose content was based on al-Qaida’s religious beliefs.

In September multiple news outlets reported that the SDF shut down 14 Syriac Christian schools in the cities of Qamishli, Hasakeh, and Al-Malikiyeh for their refusal to implement a new school curriculum that required courses to be taught in the Kurdish language. The schools were administered by the Syriac Orthodox Church diocese and had been in operation since 1935, serving Assyrian, Armenian, Arab, and Kurdish communities in the area. School officials accused the SDF of attempting to “erase” Syriac history and culture and imposing a Kurdish nationalist curriculum. In September journalist Soulman Yousph was arrested and detained for five days following an article he wrote criticizing the SDF for closing down Chaldean Catholic Church and Syriac Orthodox Church private schools. The Kurdish authority and the local Syriac Orthodox archbishopric eventually reached a deal that allowed the schools to reopen. Samira Haj Ali, head of the Kurdish authority’s education authority, said the agreement ensured students in the first two grades followed a Syriac version of the Kurdish region’s curriculum. In exchange, the agreement allowed students in classes three to six to follow the Damascus education curriculum with extra Syriac language classes available.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There continued to be reports of sectarian violence due to tensions among religious groups, exacerbated by government actions, cultural rivalries, and sectarian rhetoric.

Christians reported they continued to feel threatened by religious intolerance among the opposition as the influence of violent extremist groups increased. According to observers, the Sunni Islamist character of the opposition continued to drive members of the Christian community to support the government. Greek Orthodox Patriarch John X, Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II, and Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Joseph Absi cosigned an April 14 statement strongly condemning Western air strikes against Syrian government positions while reasserting their support for the Syrian government. The statement saluted,

“the courage, heroism and sacrifices of the Syrian Arab Army, which courageously protects Syria and provides security for its people.”

Advocacy groups reported social conventions and religious proscriptions continued to make conversion relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversions, which were banned by law. They also reported societal pressure continued to force converts to relocate within the country or leave the country to practice their new religion openly.

The Syrian Opposition Coalition, the opposition’s primary political umbrella organization, and the Syrian Negotiations Committee, an opposition umbrella organization responsible for negotiating on behalf of the opposition with the regime, continued to condemn attacks and discrimination against religious groups, both by the government and by extremist and terrorist groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The President and the Secretary of State continued to condemn the government’s failure to respect the human rights of its citizens, including the right to religious freedom. The President repeatedly stressed the need for a political solution to the conflict that would be inclusive of all religious groups in the country.

The Secretary of State continued to work with the UN Special Envoy for Syria, the moderate opposition, and the international community to support the UN-facilitated, Syrian-led efforts in pursuit of a political solution to the conflict that would safeguard the religious freedom of all citizens. In July the Secretary hosted the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom where he discussed the future of the country and supported the UN-led intra-Syria negotiations with foreign counterparts. The Secretary highlighted the ISIS genocide against minority religious groups during his remarks. The Secretary attended the Syria Small Group meeting with ministers from like-minded states during the UN General Assembly session in September, where he and the Small Group Ministers expressed their support for the UN’s role in negotiating a political solution to the conflict in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for free, fair, and inclusive elections in Syria. In addition, the Secretary affirmed the U.S. commitment to Syria’s unity, independence, territorial integrity, and nonsectarian character; to ensuring state institutions remain intact; and to protecting the rights of all individuals, regardless of ethnicity or religious affiliation.

The U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in 2012. U.S. government representatives met with Syrian religious groups and leaders in the U.S. and elsewhere in the region and the world, such as John X, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, leaders from the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, and Moaz al-Khatib, the former imam of the Umayyad Mosque, as part of its effort to promote an inclusive political settlement for the conflict. The U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Levant, the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities, and other high ranking U.S. officials met with members of the Orthodox Christian, Sunni, Druze, and Alawite communities to discuss assistance to vulnerable populations, countering sectarian violence, and encouraging positive dialogue between members of the opposition and minority communities who felt threatened. The Deputy Assistant Secretary and other officials participated in dialogues, roundtables, and working groups focused on increasing religious tolerance and countering extremist violence, including meetings with Yezidi-rights groups, Greek Orthodox leaders, and an August meeting with Metropolitan Joseph of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America.

The U.S. continued to support the documentation of abuses committed by all sides in the conflict through the COI and through direct support to Syrian-led documentation efforts.