



SYRIA

Key Findings

Syria's religious communities are largely deprived of religious freedom due to the actions of President Bashar al-Assad's regime, elements of the armed opposition, and U.S.-designated terrorist groups, in particular the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), among others. The Syrian crisis has evolved into a largely sectarian conflict. The al-Assad regime continues to target Arab Sunni Muslim civilians and other individuals or groups that oppose it, including through indiscriminate bombings, sieges, starvation, and the use of chemical weapons. ISIL targets the regime and its supporters, religious minorities, and any Muslims opposing its violent version of Islamist ideology. Syrian and international groups alike have documented attacks on places of worship, kidnappings and killings of religious leaders, and public beheadings and mass murders of anyone who does not submit to the control and authority of ISIL. Due to the collective actions of the Bashar al-Assad regime, elements of the armed opposition, and U.S.-designated terrorist groups, USCIRF again recommends in 2016 that Syria be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has recommended since 2014.

forces were permitted to perpetrate egregious human rights abuses to oppress anyone critical of the government. An adherent of the minority Alawite community, an off-shoot of Shi'a Islam, Hafez al-Assad named himself president in 1970. To maintain control over all aspects of Syrian society, he placed Alawites loyal to him in key positions of his government, army, and security forces and oppressed political opposition from the majority Sunni Arab population. Following Hafez's June 2000 death, he was succeeded by his son, Bashar. While there were hopes that Bashar al-Assad would usher in a new political openness, he maintained his father's status quo of strict political restrictions to oppress any opposition.

In March 2011, the current Syrian conflict began, with peaceful protests initially calling for democratic reforms, a repeal of the abusive emergency law, and space for political parties to compete with the ruling Ba'athist party. As more protests were held around the country, President al-Assad ordered a brutal crackdown to discourage the gatherings that were widely covered by the international media. As a result, violence quickly escalated across the country. By mid-to-late 2012, the strife between the government and protesters had turned into a full-blown military confrontation.

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Background

The al-Assad family's brutal authoritarian rule for over 40 years created the political conditions for the current conflict. Under both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, no political opposition was allowed and Syrian security

in mid-2011, the government released numerous prisoners previously designated as "Islamic fundamentalists," including prominent Sunnis who became leaders in Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIL, and other factions, and facilitated the "Islamization" of the armed opposition. President al-Assad and his regime played on

sectarian fears, repeatedly stating it was fighting “extreme Islamist factions” that were acting to increase sectarian tensions. Five years into the conflict, many Sunni Muslims have come to associate Alawites and Shi’a Muslims with the regime of President al-Assad, an Alawite himself, and many Alawites, Shi’a Muslims, Christians and other groups believe that they will be killed by ISIL and other extremist Sunni groups if the al-Assad government falls.

The involvement of international actors has produced mixed results, but in many cases it has contributed to increased ethno-sectarian tensions throughout the country. The Iranian-backed, U.S.-designated terrorist group, Hezbollah, has provided military support for the Syrian Arab Army. Human rights groups have documented Hezbollah’s sectarian rhetoric against Sunni Muslims. Additionally, ceasefire and negotiations overseen – and at times orchestrated – by Iran and Hezbollah have facilitated the forced relocation of Sunni Muslims to northern Syria and Shi’a Muslims to Damascus. The Russian government denies calling its intervention in Syria a “holy war” and disputes the authenticity of pictures of Russian Orthodox priests

opposition have not successfully attracted ethno-sectarian minorities to join their ranks, leaving communities such as the Kurds, Druze, and Christians feeling disenfranchised and sidelined in the political process, even if they are not supportive of the al-Assad regime. While minority groups have not been driven out of opposition-controlled areas, they have felt the need to maintain a low profile, sometimes adopting Muslim attire and avoiding going to their religious institutions so as not to attract attention.

ISIL has attacked pro-Assad and anti-Assad groups alike, and while it managed to seize significant territory in 2014, it lost territory in 2015. According to some estimates, ISIL has lost 10 to 20 percent of its territory in Syria, along with oil wells, refineries, and military bases. Despite military setbacks inflicted by the U.S.-led anti-ISIL coalition and the armed opposition, ISIL’s method of governance continues to be brutal. Reports have emerged from all groups, including Muslims, Christians, Ismailis, and others, of gross human rights violations, including beheading, rape, murder, torture of civilians and religious figures, and the destruction of mosques and churches.

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bleeding missiles headed to Syria. However, it consistently has compared even the moderate elements of the armed opposition to extremist Chechen rebels in an attempt to delegitimize their aims. Additionally, as of September 2015, according to Russia’s Federal Migration service, only 2,000 of the 12,000 Syrian refugees in Russia (most of whom are Muslim Circassians) have legal status. Meanwhile, the armed opposition, which has received support from various countries including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, has been led primarily by Islamist factions on the ground. Many of these groups have established Shari’ah courts and imposed Islamic regulations, such as prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol. The political and military

More than five years of conflict has led to a devastating humanitarian crisis. The death toll is significantly greater than 250,000 according to most sources. As of January 2016, more than 4.7 million Syrians were registered with UNHCR as refugees in neighboring countries, more than 6.5 million were internally displaced, and over 140,000 children had been born stateless. Such large numbers of refugees are straining resources and exacerbating sectarian tensions in neighboring countries.

Prior to the onset of the conflict in 2011, Syria was home to a multitude of religious groups. The U.S. government, based on official Syrian government figures, estimates that the country’s religious demography before the

conflict was as follows: 87 percent Muslim (comprising 74 percent Sunni and 13 percent Alawi, Ismaili, and Shi'a), 10 percent Christian, three percent Druze, and a very small number of Jews in Damascus and Aleppo. Other 2010 estimates include the following breakdown: 92.8 Muslim, 5.2 percent Christian, two percent unaffiliated, and all other groups less than 0.1 percent.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2015–2016

Violations by al-Assad Regime and Affiliated Groups

According to human rights groups, the regime and its allies, Russia and Iranian-backed Hezbollah, have indiscriminately targeted primarily Arab Sunni Muslim residential neighborhoods, market places, schools, and hospitals. The United Nations and many of its member states, including the United States, have reported the use of rape, extrajudicial killings, starvation, sniper attacks, and torture by the al-Assad regime and its military in its attempt to maintain power. In addition, paramilitary units, previously known as the *shabiha* but now recognized as the National Defense Forces, also have been accused of extortion, blackmail, kidnapping, and extrajudicial killing. The National Defense Forces have been described by many as “mafia-like gangs” modeled after the Iranian Basij Resistance Force, comprised mostly of local Shi'a and Alawite fighters (including females).

Members of the Christian community also have been victims of the Syrian government. Since 2011, at least 50 Christians have been killed and at least 450 remain detained, although the numbers cannot be confirmed. Offices of Christian pro-democracy and charity groups have been raided, and prominent Christian civil rights activists, humanitarian workers, and religious leaders have been among the detained and killed.

Violations by ISIL

ISIL makes little distinction between sects and ethnicities in its attempt to seize and maintain control of its territory. It has established brutal governing structures that apply strict Shari'ah law to everyone, violating due process and international human rights standards. Since 2014, ISIL has killed at least seven non-Syrian journalists and humanitarian workers, including Americans James Foley and Kayla Mueller. According to SNHR, of the more than 5,800 individuals ISIL killed in Syria since 2014, at least 97 percent were Muslims. ISIL reportedly has killed at least 100 individuals from religious minority communities, including 50 Christians. Additionally, since 2014, ISIL has kidnapped roughly 450 Christians; it has periodically released them in small groups (10-20 at a time) through negotiations between ISIL and Sunni Arab tribes, but about 150 remain in captivity. ISIL has also kidnapped well-known

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According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), in 2015, the Syrian regime killed more than 12,000 civilians, and Russian forces killed 832 civilians. More than 6,909 individuals were arrested, including 452 children, and 1,546 individuals died under torture. According to various sources, the regime used chemical weapons at least 64 times. In 2015, the regime targeted at least 166 places of worship. More specifically, since 2011, according to various sources, 50 to 63 percent of Christian places of worship were targeted by govern-

ment forces. Christian leaders, including the Italian Jesuit Priest, Paolo Dall'Oglio. The group has attacked and closed down all churches and non-Sunni mosques in areas it controls, often destroying the buildings altogether or converting them to ISIL administrative buildings or military bases. There also is evidence that ISIL and other extremist groups have seized and sold on the black market Christian relics and artifacts. In December 2015, USCIRF concluded that ISIL was committing genocide against the Christian, Yazidi, Shi'a, Turkmen,

and Shabak communities in the areas it controls in Iraq and Syria, and crimes against humanity against these and other groups. After the reporting period, on March 17, 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry announced that, in his judgment, ISIL “is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control, including Yezidis, Christians, and Shi’a Muslims [and] for crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing directed at these same groups and in some cases also against Sunni Muslims, Kurds, and other minorities.”

pressure, however, the Alawites were removed from the cages the next day.

Political Opposition Groups

Throughout most of 2015, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the organization recognized by the United States as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, continued to include insufficient minority representation. The organization’s lack of funding, uncertain future, and

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Armed Opposition Groups

Religious freedom conditions vary by locality. According to reports, there are at least 228 armed opposition groups, ranging from Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies to independent, U.S.-backed, moderate opposition groups. Not all groups have violated religious freedom to the same degree. In Idleb and Aleppo, where al-Nusra is strongest, minority religious groups often hide their identity (for example, Christians refrain from selling alcohol and dress in Muslim attire), although they have not been forced from their homes. Some armed groups have characterized clashes on the basis of religious identity as “individual actions” not supported by a group’s leadership. For example, in June 2015, after Jaish al-Fateh seized control of Idleb Province, there were clashes between villagers and al-Nusra that resulted in the deaths of 12 Druze accused of allying with the regime. Waleed Jumblatt, a well-known Druze leader in Lebanon, was able to mediate between the two groups, and al-Nusra attributed the killings to individual soldiers and punished the perpetrators. In another widely-reported incident in November 2015, the armed group Jaish al-Islam placed 700 Alawite soldiers and their families in 100 cages throughout Eastern Ghouta. The group argued that using the Alawites as “human shields” was acceptable because it protected hundreds of thousands of residents under siege from aerial bombardment by the al-Assad regime. Due to international

intra-Syrian disputes continue to hinder its ability to protect the interests of all Syrians, especially those from religious minority groups. In October 2015, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), which includes the United States, launched the Vienna Process. This political process aims to include Syrians from a variety of ethno-sectarian backgrounds in political negotiations with the al-Assad regime.

Kurdish Groups

The Kurdish military group, the YPG, remains one of the most capable armed groups in the fight against ISIL. However, human rights groups have accused both the YPG and the Kurdish administration in the *de facto* autonomous area of Rojava in northern Syria of demolishing Arab and Turkmen villages and homes and ousting non-Kurdish groups from Rojava lands or preventing them from returning to their homes. Kurdish groups, including the Rojava leadership, deny these accusations and blame the demolitions on YPG-ISIL fighting or the Syrian Arab Army’s Air Force. The Rojava also denied blocking non-Kurds from returning home, except for families that it believed were still in communication with ISIL members.

U.S. Policy

On August 18, 2011, only five months after the conflict in Syria began, President Obama called on President

al-Assad to step down and issued an executive order immediately freezing all Syrian government assets subject to U.S. jurisdiction. The order also prohibited Americans from engaging in any transactions involving the Syrian government. In 2012, the United States closed its embassy in Damascus, and in March 2014, it ordered the Syrian Embassy and consulates to close in the United States. In December 2012, the U.S. government recognized the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, and in May 2014, it recognized the Washington, DC and New York offices as diplomatic foreign missions. However, the United States has stopped short of recognizing the Coalition as the official government of Syria.

France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United Nations, and the United States. At the end of the reporting period, the ISSG had met three times: in October and November 2015 and February 2016. This process has produced the Vienna Statement, a framework document for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition based on the 2012 Geneva Communiqué.

The anti-ISIL coalition, dubbed Operation Inherent Resolve, is led by the United States, and includes 65 countries. Coalition nations conducting air strikes are Australia, Bahrain, Canada, France, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom. The coalition has conducted over

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The United States continues to advocate for a political solution to the Syria crisis. The Vienna Process, launched in October 2015, brought together the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), made up of the Arab League, China, Egypt, the European Union,

10,000 strikes, at least 3,500 of which have been in Syria and most of which have been carried out by the United States. As of January 2016, the total cost of the anti-ISIL operations exceeded \$6 billion. In October 2015, President Obama announced the deployment of 50 U.S. special operations forces to advise local forces fighting ISIL but not play a direct combat role. The coalition's successes include the retreat of ISIL from Kobani and Tel Abyad, both cities along the Turkish-Syrian border. Air support provided by the United States and its allies to the YPG in Kurdish-held areas in al-Hasakeh Province has kept ISIL from making new advances in northeastern Syria, something ISIL was able to do effectively before the air strikes.

Recommendations

Since 2011, Syria has been a hostile place for all ethno-sectarian groups, including Christians, Druze, Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, Alawites, and Turkmen. With over 13.5 million people in Syria in need of humanitarian assistance, the protection of human rights and religious freedom is especially challenging. In addition to continuing to seek an end to the Syrian conflict, USCIRF

recommends that the U.S. government should designate Syria a CPC and should:

- Condemn the al-Assad regime's brutal persecution of, and crimes of humanity against, Sunni Muslims and others, and urge other nations to do the same;
- Urge the UN Security Council and its member states to rigorously implement and comply with ratified resolutions, including UN Security Council resolutions 2118 (elimination of Syrian chemical weapons), 2139 (calling for humanitarian access into besieged areas and an end to barrel bombs), 2165 (approving humanitarian access across conflict lines), 2209 (calling for an end to the use of chlorine bombs), and 2254 (ceasefire and road map for peace in Syria);
- Continue to call for an International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation into crimes committed by the al-Assad regime, following the models used in Sudan and Libya;
- Call for or support a referral by the UN Security Council to the International Criminal Court to investigate ISIL violations in Iraq and Syria against religious and ethnic minorities;
- Encourage the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, in its ongoing international meetings, to work to develop measures to protect and assist the region's most vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities, including by increasing immediate humanitarian aid, prioritizing the resettlement to third countries of the most vulnerable, and providing longer-term support in host countries for those who hope to return to their homes post-conflict;
- Ensure that religious freedom and diversity are given a high priority in the Vienna Process by encouraging both the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and any negotiating teams developed by the ISSG to be inclusive of all religious and ethnic groups; the ISSG should also provide training to negotiating teams on international human rights standards;
- Ensure that U.S. government planning for a post-conflict Syria is a "whole-of-government" effort and includes consideration of issues concerning

religious freedom and related human rights, and that USCIRF and other U.S. government experts on those issues are consulted as appropriate;

- Initiate an effort among relevant UN agencies, NGOs, and like-minded partners among the Global Coalition to Combat ISIL to fund and develop programs that bolster intra- and inter-religious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and promote respect for religious freedom and related rights, both in neighboring countries hosting refugees (especially Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey), and in preparing for a post-conflict Syria;
- Commit to a goal of resettling 100,000 Syrian refugees to the United States, subject to proper vetting and a prioritization based on vulnerability, in order to aid those Syrians in the greatest peril, demonstrate U.S. leadership in efforts to address this extraordinary humanitarian crisis, and show support for governments in the Middle East and Europe that are hosting millions of Syrian refugees;
- Allocate sufficient resources to the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies that conduct the rigorous individualized vetting of refugees being considered for resettlement to allow them to expeditiously process applications and thoroughly conduct background checks, in order to facilitate resettlement without compromising U.S. national security; and
- Consider issuing an exemption to U.S. immigration law's "material support bar" provision for Syrian refugees who supported specific U.S.-backed rebel groups or provided "support" by force or under duress to terrorist organizations, and properly apply existing exemptions, so that Syrians who pose no threat to the United States and are fleeing the al-Assad regime or terrorist groups are not erroneously barred from the U.S. refugee program.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Include in the Fiscal Year 2017 Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill, or in another appropriate vehicle, a provision that would permit the U.S. government to appropriate or allocate funds for

in-kind assistance to genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes cases at the ICC on a case-by-case basis and when in the national interest to provide such assistance.