

2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria

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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. Sectarian violence continued due to tensions among religious groups that according to NGO and media sources was exacerbated by government actions, ISIS and al Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) targeting of religious groups, and sectarian rhetoric. According to media and NGO sources, the government continued its widespread and systematic use of unlawful killings, including through the repeated use of chemical weapons, persistent attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention to punish perceived opponents, including civilians, the majority of whom were Sunni Muslims. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) estimated the government arbitrarily detained nearly 3,000 citizens. As the insurgency continued to be identified with the Sunni population, the government reportedly targeted largely Sunni opposition-held towns and neighborhoods for siege, mortar shelling, chemical weapons attacks, and aerial bombardment, including a siege of Idlib Governorate and a May 19 chemical weapons attack in Idlib as part of the government’s effort to retake the area. Government and progovernment forces launched major aerial and ground offensives in April that continued through the end of the year to recapture Idlib, northern Hama, Ladhqiyyah, and western Aleppo, killing thousands of civilians and forcing hundreds of thousands more to flee from devastating attacks on civilian infrastructure, including damage or destruction of 51 medical facilities. The government continued to use Law No. 10 to reward those loyal to the government and create obstacles for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to claim their property or return to their homes. Membership in the Muslim Brotherhood or “Salafist” organizations remained illegal and punishable up to imprisonment or death. Progovernment forces were implicated in attacks on Christian places of worship throughout the year. SNHR documented 124 attacks on Christian places of worship from 2011 until September, 75 of which were carried out by progovernment forces. According to nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports, Iran further exacerbated the conflict in areas that remained under its influence by continuing to recruit Shia individuals (such as Afghan refugees and migrants from Iran) to travel to the country 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 state the armed resistance comprised “extremists” and “terrorists.” According to international media reports, a number of minority religious groups, including some Christians, viewed the government as their protector against violent Sunni extremists.

The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria (COI) reported nonstate actors, including terrorist organizations such as ISIS and HTS, targeted religious minorities, as well as other Sunnis, with killings, kidnappings, physical mistreatment, and arrests, which resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians throughout the course of the conflict. Until its territorial defeat in April, ISIS killed hundreds of civilian men, women, and children through public executions, crucifixions, and beheadings on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, and homosexuality. On November 11, ISIS members shot and killed two Armenian Catholic priests and wounded a church deacon as they headed from Hasakah to Deir al-Zour to oversee the renovation of a church. On October 7, the Turkish army, along with Turkish-sponsored opposition groups (TSOs), some of which may include fighters from violent extremist groups, launched Operation Peace Spring (OPS) in areas of northeast Syria held by the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, displacing by October 21, 154,000 persons, including Kurds, Yazidis, and Christians. Since 2014, ISIS abducted an estimated 6,000 women and children, mainly Yezidis, as well as numerous Christian and ethnic Turkmen women; NGOs and activists reported that more than 2,000 have since escaped, been liberated, or been released. The United Nations estimated that ISIS militants killed or kidnapped more than 9,000 Yezidis in “a genocidal campaign.” According to community leaders, more than 3,000 Yazidis remained unaccounted for at year’s end. HTS replaced governmental courts with sharia councils in areas it controlled, authorizing discrimination against members of religious minorities, and seizing the homes and agricultural lands of thousands of Christians in and around the town of Qameshli. According to a U.S. think tank, Iranian-backed Hizballah attempted to ignite intra-Druze conflict and recruited Shia militias to aid Iranian-backed Shia forces aiding the government.

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 6.2 million IDPs and more than 5.6 million refugees at year’s end.

The President and 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. Although the U.S. embassy in Damascus suspended operations in 2012, the Special Representative for Syria Engagement, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Levant, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and other senior U.S. officials continued to meet elsewhere in the region 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 18.6 million (midyear 2019 estimate). At year's end there were more than 5.6 million refugees, primarily Sunni, registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in neighboring countries, as well as 6.2 million IDPs. Continued population displacement adds a degree of uncertainty to demographic analyses, but the U.S. government estimates 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.

The U.S. government estimates the Christian population is 10 percent, although media and other reports, such as those issued by Americans for a Free Syria estimate that figure is considerably lower, approximately 2.5 percent or 450,000 individuals, due to Christians fleeing the country because of the civil war. Before the civil war, there were small Jewish populations in Aleppo and Damascus, and NGOs estimated fewer than 20 Jews remained in the country in 2012. It is unclear how many, if any, Jews currently remain in the country. 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 live in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Damascus. The highest concentration of Ismaili Muslims 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 of the country. While there were hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christian refugees before the conflict, the majority of the Iraqi Christian population has moved to neighboring countries or returned to Iraq. Many Druze live in the Jabal al-Arab (Jabal al-Druze) region in the southern Sweida Governorate, where they constitute a majority of the local population. Yezidis previously lived in Aleppo, but now live mainly in northeast Syria areas controlled by Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF.)

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 those 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 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 the personal status of the religious communities shall be protected and respected,” and “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 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 broadly nor the state security court specifically has defined the parameters of what constitutes “Salafist” activity. Affiliation with the 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 sharia. 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.

A 2018 law regulates the structure and functions of the Ministry of Religious Endowments (Awqaf). The 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 “Salafist” activity, including “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 only Islam and Christianity, 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 to 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. Per the Personal Status Code, a Muslim man may marry a Christian woman, but a Muslim woman may not legally marry a Christian 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 and may not inherit any property or wealth from her husband, even if she converts. The law states that if a Christian wishes to convert to Islam, 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.

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 in 2018, 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 may prove ownership only in person or through designated proxies.

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

Government Practices

According to press and NGO reporting, the government continued its widespread and systematic use of unlawful killings, including through the repeated use of chemical weapons, persistent attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention to punish perceived opponents, including civilians, the majority of whom were Sunni Muslims. 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. According to SNHR, the civilian death toll during the year was 3,364, of which more than half was at the hands of the government and its allies. The COI stated Sunnis accounted for a majority of civilian casualties and detainees.

During the year, SNHR estimated the government and progovernment militias arbitrarily detained nearly 3,000 citizens. According to a September SNHR report, the government used “enforced disappearance” and secretly arrested more than 128,417 citizens since 2011. The report stated 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.” Human rights organizations and civil society groups continued to report the government arbitrarily detained tens of thousands of citizens, mainly Sunnis, with the support of Iranian Shia forces militias, without due process. The SNHR report stated arbitrary arrests of individuals occurred 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.” The SNHR report stated the government was responsible for at least 89 percent of all arbitrary arrests; nonstate actors also engaged in this practice. In most cases, victims’ families could not accurately identify the progovernment entity that made the arrest because Iranian militias, the predominantly Shia Lebanese Hizballah, and all other progovernment forces were able to engage in arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances.

The Syria Justice & Accountability Centre reported government forces operated with impunity while systematic, officially sanctioned torture continued. According to SNHR, since 2011, more than 14,000 persons died from torture in government custody and the vast majority were Sunni Muslims. During the year, government forces were reportedly responsible for 275 deaths by torture. As was the case with others who previously died in government custody, the vast majority were Sunni Muslims, whom analysts stated the government targeted believing they were members of the opposition, or likely to support the opposition.

In 2018 government officials began releasing death notices of thousands of prisoners held in government detention facilities and continued releasing them during the year. The government did not announce publication of notifications on updated state registers, return bodies to families, or disclose locations where remains were interred. According to numerous NGO and media reports, many families were unaware of the status of their detained family members and learned that relatives they believed to be alive had died months or even years earlier. Amnesty International estimated during the year that thousands of citizens, mostly Sunni Muslims, remained missing. SNHR said the

government delayed announcing detainees as certified dead until years later as a way of punishing victims' families. *The Washington Post* reported in March that the notices referenced detainees who died between 2013 and 2015, with the overwhelming majority of them Sunni Muslim.

According to 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 involved sectarian and nonsectarian elements. According to many observers, including academic experts, the government's policy, aimed at eliminating opposition forces that threatened its power, was sectarian in its impact, although it was not motivated primarily by sectarian ideology.

As the insurgency continued to be identified with the Sunni population, according to media and NGOs, the government reportedly targeted opposition-held towns and neighborhoods for siege, mortar shelling, chemical weapons attacks, and aerial bombardment, including a siege of Idlib Governorate as part of the government's effort to retake the area. Government and progovernment forces launched major aerial and ground offensives in April to recapture Idlib, northern Hama, Ladhikiyah, and western Aleppo, killing thousands of civilians and forcing at least one million more to flee following devastating attacks on civilian infrastructure, including damage or destruction of 51 medical facilities. The assault, involving use of heavy weapons and likely use of chemical weapons, devastated the civilian infrastructure in the affected areas and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation. Government and Russian air strikes repeatedly struck civilian targets, including hospitals, markets, schools, and farms, many of which, these parties had been informed in advance, were sheltering vulnerable civilians. According to the COI, multiple human rights organizations, and media reports, government and progovernment forces used weaponry indiscriminately against civilian and military targets in densely populated areas, used chemical weapons, and denied humanitarian aid.

The COI, SNHR, and 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 government. Analysts said this was evidenced by population shifts in Homs. According an April Atlantic Council report, the government continued to implement Law No. 10, which allows for creating redevelopment zones across the country, by revoking property rights, specifically of displaced residents from areas considered to be antigovernment. Groups such as SNHR said the government's displacement operations were sectarian in nature.

Many human rights NGOs reported throughout the year the government invoked positive slogans that depicted itself as a "protector of the people," especially minority communities, such as Christians; however, on the ground, they said the government did the opposite. The SNHR documented 124 attacks on Christian places of worship from 2011 until September, 75 of which were carried out by progovernment forces. Six of these attacks occurred during the year.

Most opposition groups and terrorist groups identified themselves explicitly as Sunni Arab or Sunni Islamist in statements and publications. According to observers, these groups drew on a support base made up almost exclusively of Sunnis, giving government targeting of the opposition a sectarian element. Some NGO sources stated that the government tried to mobilize sectarian support by branding itself as a protector of religious minorities from attacks by Sunni extremist groups. Other NGO sources said that some minority religious groups viewed the government as protecting them from violent Sunni extremists.

The government continued to use Law No. 10 to reward those loyal to the government and create obstacles for refugees and IDPs to claim their property and return to their homes. According to a September report from the Carnegie Middle East Center, since the law's enactment, the government has begun to replace residents in former opposition-held areas with more loyal constituencies, including by allowing only religious institutions submissive to government control to operate in those areas. The government's policies disproportionately impacted Sunni populations. One U.S.-based NGO described the law as part of the government's attempt to legalize demographic change and stated, "it is unlikely that displaced citizens will ever see their property again." In August SHNR said that Law No. 10 and other legislation "constitute a major obstacle to the return of refugees and IDPs, amounting to enforced evictions and to an effort to manipulate demographics and social structures" of the country. According to multiple press reports and human rights organizations, the vast majority of refugees and displaced were Sunni and were viewed with suspicion by the government. In December the UN Secretary-General and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported approximately 284,000 persons fled from their homes, mainly in southern Idlib, due to the large-scale regime assault on the Idlib Governorate.

In January the government extended the window from 30 days to one year for citizens to prove they owned land being seized for development under Law No. 10, but NGOs stated it would be nearly impossible for thousands of refugees and IDPs to claim their property. They said the procedural requirement of the law, coupled with the political context, created significant potential for abuse and discrimination, particularly toward the Sunni population. Subsequently, in a July report, the European Institute of Peace stated many citizens were unable to assert their housing, land, and property rights due to land zoning, titling, and documentation, and the government continued to prevent displaced residents from returning to their properties, including by blocking access to the properties or demolishing their properties with no warning and without providing alternative housing or compensation. Despite the existence of an appeals process, NGOs continued to express serious concern the law was being implemented in an arbitrary and discriminatory manner.

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, Hizballah and other pro-Iran signs and banners remained prevalent in some government-held areas. Voice of America reported during the year that Iranian military advisers were building a new, all-Syrian militia force in an attempt to augment Tehran's support of other Shia militias in the country. According to NGO reports, Iran further exacerbated the conflict in areas that remained under its influence by continuing to recruit Shia individuals, such as Afghan refugees and migrants from Iran, to travel to the country and assist the government in its conflict against majority Sunni opposition forces. Representatives of the Iranian government stated its forces were present in the country to protect the Zainab Shrine, a Shia holy site just outside Damascus, and other Shia holy places.

According to a March report from the Carnegie Middle East Institute, as the government recaptured areas from rebel groups, authorities began reviving their previous model of control through a renewed reliance on trusted local religious actors while introducing institutional measures to ensure the government retained its central influence in the country's religious affairs. State media allowed only those clerics it approved to preach on the air (e.g., the imam of Umayyad Mosque) and coverage of the Qubaysiyat (a pro-regime female religious group) meetings with President Bashar al-Assad.

According to 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; however, the senior officer corps of the military accepted into its ranks 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. There were Christian, Druze, and Kurdish members in parliament. According to observers, Alawites held greater political power in the cabinet than other minorities, as well as more authority than the majority Sunni population.

Media and academic experts said the government and its Russian and Iranian allies led a robust disinformation campaign that continued to portray the armed resistance humanitarian and aid groups in sectarian terms, saying opposition protesters and fighters were associated with "extreme Islamist factions" and were terrorists seeking to eliminate the country's religious minority groups and its secular approach to governance. The official state Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) routinely reported on the government's struggle to "expose the true nature of the organization known as the White Helmets" calling the group, a volunteer rescue and relief organization, a risk to stability and security "because of its terrorist nature."

The government continued to warn the Sunni population against contact with foreign coreligionists, which it characterized as facilitating 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 religious leaders abroad.

Government-controlled radio and television programming continued to disseminate anti-Semitic news articles and cartoons. SANA frequently reported on the “Zionist enemy” and called any Israeli strikes against Hizballah in Syria and Gaza “Zionist aggression.” The government repeated its claim that a “Zionist conspiracy” was responsible for the country’s continuing conflict.

The government continued to allow foreign Christian 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 Islamic 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 to 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 government said were occupied by armed fighters. On September 9, SNHR released a report stating that it had evidence of the government targeting churches, mosques, and other religious sites since 2011. According to the report, there were attacks on 124 Christian houses of worship during this period and progovernment forces carried out 75 of them. During the year, SNHR reported at least 11 Christian places of worship were turned into administrative headquarters – six at the hands of government forces and two at the hands of other parties to the conflict. It was not clear who was responsible for conversion of the three remaining churches.

A May 2018 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 was not offered often 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 through organized evacuations of those deemed insufficiently loyal to the government, and it reflected the government strategy to punish those individuals. This practice continued throughout the year as the government regained control of additional territory.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

The COI and numerous independent sources reported nonstate actors, including a number of groups such as ISIS and HTS designated as terrorist organizations by the United Nations, the United States, and other governments, targeted Shia, Alawite Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities, as well as other Sunnis, including Kurds, with killings, kidnappings, physical mistreatment, and arrests, resulting in the deaths of thousands of civilians in the areas of the country they controlled since the start of the revolution. Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS in the country in March, which

limited its ability to subject large populations to human rights abuses, the group continued to carry out unlawful killings, bombings, and kidnappings, attack members of religious minority groups, and subject women and girls to systematic rape, forced marriages, and sex trafficking. International media reports, such as from the *Independent*, described how ISIS used its media arms to target, demonize, and incite violence against Shia.

At the beginning of the year, forces comprised of a coalition of 79 partners and the SDF liberated territory that ISIS once controlled and governed. Until those operations, ISIS had killed hundreds of civilian men, women, and children through public executions, crucifixions, and beheadings on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, homosexuality, and cursing God.

On November 11, ISIS fighters shot and killed two Armenian Catholic priests and wounded a third individual identified as a church deacon as they traveled from Hasakah to Deir al-Zour to oversee the renovation of a church. On July 11, a car bomb exploded outside a Syriac Orthodox church in Qamishli city, injuring 15 civilians and causing significant damage to the church. The perpetrators of the bombing were not identified, but international media and security experts identified this attack as one of part of a steady increase of ISIS-linked attacks in previously secured, Kurdish-majority cities close to the border with Turkey.

The COI estimated ISIS militants shot, beheaded, burned alive, or kidnapped more than 9,000 Yezidis, in what the United Nations called a genocidal campaign against them. According to community leaders, more than 3,000 Yezidis remained unaccounted for at year's end. Starting in 2014, ISIS abducted an estimated 6,000 women and children, mainly Yezidis, as well as numerous Christian and Turkmen women, during attacks in northern Iraq. NGOs and activists, such as Yazda and the Free Yezidi Foundation, reported more than 2,000 Yezidi women and children had escaped, been liberated in SDF military operations, or been released from captivity. Reuters reported in March that a group of 21 women and children were rescued from ISIS and returned to Iraq, as confirmed by the Kurdistan Regional Government. During the year SNHR reported at least 11 Christian places of worship were turned into administrative headquarters, two by ISIS and one by HTS.

ISIS militants continued to target Christian communities. These communities stated they feared the possibility of a broader ISIS resurgence. At year's end, thousands of ISIS fighters were being held in various detention centers in the northeast region of the country by the SDF.

In October Turkey and its TSO proxies launched OPS in northeast Syria. The Syriac National Council of Syria estimated 40,000-50,000 Christians were living in the area under attack in addition to several million other civilians, including Kurds and other Sunni Muslims seeking refuge from the government. While tens of thousands returned in the months since major operations ceased in October, many others remain displaced. Humanitarian observers believed many ethnic and religious minorities were hesitant to return, given a pattern of intimidation by Syrian groups aligned with Turkey.

According to Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), an international human rights organization, in November TSOs al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Faylaq al-Majed conducted ethnically- and politically-motivated property seizures in addition to other abuses against the local population in Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, including politically motivated detentions, physical abuse, and theft. TSOs reportedly demanded property owners provide land deeds as proof of ownership to reclaim seized properties. In November the Syriac Strategic Research Center reported TSOs seized and looted the 205 houses and 120 commercial and industrial sites belonging to the 75 Christian families that had fled Ras al-Ayn as a result of the Turkish offensive.

Media and NGOs estimated more than 100 civilian casualties, including women and children, in the first few days of the operation; the United Nations confirmed 200,000 civilians were displaced, large numbers of whom, primarily displaced Arabs, have since returned. An international NGO reported Christians continued to be displaced by continuing OPS attacks through the end of the year. According to Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Syrian human rights monitors, and international media such as CNN, the *Guardian*, and *Foreign Policy*, TSOs were also implicated in crimes, including in the killing of Hevrin Khalaf, a Kurdish woman who was Secretary General of Future Syria Party. On October 9, the Turkish military and affiliated TSOs fired shells into Qameshli city that damaged the al Shallah Mosque. That same day, shells landed near St. Georges Assyrian Church in Qameshli city. TSOs also vandalized the Armenian church in Tel Abyad, according to regional media and firsthand eyewitness accounts. Since October 17, Human Rights Watch and Syrian human rights monitors reported TSO seizures of private properties, including those belonging to Christians displaced by OPS. Religious minorities displaced by the Turkish and TSO seizure of Aleppo's Afrin District remained unable to return to their homes.

According to the Wilson Center, HTS followed a hardline Sunni Salafist ideology. The group encouraged sectarian attacks (including against members of the Sunni community who in the view of HTS violated their strict interpretations of sharia), but downplayed sectarian rhetoric to avoid alienating potential allies. A report by the UN Commission on International Religious Freedom also stated HTS repressed religious minorities in areas under its control, including by forcibly confiscating the property of Christian families in Idlib. Media organizations reported the forced conversion of Druze and Alawite civilians in the region, detaining or killing those refusing to comply. Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups controlled territory mostly limited to Idlib Governorate; in the last four months of the year, government forces and their Russian and Iranian allies engaged in an air and ground offensive against al-Qaeda and its allies. According to a September *New York Times* article, UN and U.S. experts acknowledged al-Qaeda's territorial limitations, but expressed concerns that with freedom to maneuver and plan, it had the ability to carry out attacks.

Most 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, in which each group reportedly implemented its

own interpretation of sharia. 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.

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 September STJ reported HTS, along with the Guardians of Religion Organization (an armed insurgent group affiliated with Al-Qaeda) and the Turkish Islamic Party, seized more than 750 homes in the Jisr al-Shughur area of Idlib, a majority of which belonged to Christians. Christians in the area reported that these groups also seized agricultural land that was then rented out to other farmers. Interviews with residents of the village of Yacubiyeh indicated that the remaining Christians were prevented from practicing their religion outside their homes by the Guardians of Religion Organization, which allowed them to visit St. Joseph's Monastery in the village of Qunaya only once annually. STJ reported HTS also seized 100 houses and businesses of Christians who left Idlib during the year due to escalation in government attacks. Most of these businesses were located in the clock and jewelry markets, the biggest markets in Idlib. STJ reported HTS gained revenue from renting out confiscated homes and forcing Christians to pay rent to continue using the business previously confiscated.

According to a Council on Foreign Relations report, HTS and some Islamist opposition groups that continued to call for the establishment of a Sunni theocracy had eclipsed opposition forces fighting for a democratic and pluralistic country.

In October the Middle East Institute reported an Iranian-backed campaign by Hizballah to incite intra-Druze conflict continued in Suwayda Province, where Hizballah was reportedly affiliated with 60 percent of armed groups. According to the report, Hizballah recruited a militia comprised of Bedouins and fostered organized crime networks in Suwayda to promote instability and sow divisions between Druze factions. According to international media, including Reuters and VOA, Hizballah leadership announced in July it had reduced its forces as fighting diminished, although it continued to maintain fighters throughout the country.

In its September report on attacks on Christian houses of worship since 2011, SNHR stated factions of the armed opposition carried out 33 attacks and violent Islamic groups, including ISIS and HTS, conducted 12 attacks.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Christians reported they continued to feel threatened by violent extremist groups. According to observers, the Sunni Islamist character of the opposition continued to drive members of the Christian community to maintain support for the government. Greek Orthodox Patriarch John X, Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II, and Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Joseph Absi met on August 12, releasing a joint statement praying for the safe return of the two abducted Archbishops of Aleppo: Boulos Yazigi and Mor Gregorius Youhanna Ibrahim, who have been missing since 2013. In the statement,

the patriarchs acclaimed “the victory of [government] leadership, army, and people... over terrorism” in the country and discussed the “alarmingly diminishing” numbers of Christians, who are emigrating.

Advocacy groups reported social conventions and religious proscriptions continued to make conversion relatively rare – especially Muslim-to-Christian conversions, which remained 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 government, 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 in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which states that such a solution should establish credible, inclusive, and nonsectarian governance.

Following instability in northeast Syria due to OPS, the President announced in October that he intended to obligate \$50 million in stabilization assistance to protect members of persecuted ethnic and religious minority groups. The Department of State worked to develop an implementation plan to carry out the President’s announced funding to address the immediate needs of religious minorities in Syria, as well as the longer-term goals for the advancement of human rights and accountability in the country.

The Secretary of State continued to work with the UN Special Envoy for Syria, members of the moderate opposition, and the international community to support UN-facilitated, Syrian-led efforts in pursuit of a political solution to the conflict that would safeguard the religious freedom of all citizens. These efforts included support for the Constitutional Committee process that began in October in Geneva aimed at paving the way for political reforms and new elections. The Secretary of State attended the Syria Small Group meeting with ministers from like-minded states during the UN General Assembly session in September. At the meeting, the Secretary and the Small Group Ministers expressed their support for the United Nations’ role in negotiating a political solution to the conflict in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, facilitates free and fair elections, and establishes inclusive and nonsectarian governance. In addition, the Secretary affirmed the U.S. commitment to the country’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 religious groups and leaders in the United States and elsewhere in the region. They met with representatives of the World Council of Arameans, Free Yazidi Foundation, 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. A Deputy Assistant Secretary of State from the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, officials from the Office of Levant Affairs, and other officials participated in dialogues, roundtables, and working groups focused on increasing religious tolerance and countering extremist violence. At the UN General Assembly, the U.S. Special Representative for Syria Engagement hosted with the support of the special envoys from France, Germany, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom a panel discussion on accountability for human rights abuses, including those committed against religious minorities. Groups representing religious minority communities in Syria participated in the event. Department of State officials held meetings with Yezidi-rights groups and Greek Orthodox leaders, and met in July with Metropolitan Joseph of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America.

In July the Department of State announced a “Rewards for Justice,” offering a monetary reward for information on ISIS kidnapping networks or the persons responsible for the kidnapping in recent years of Christian clerics Maher Mahfouz, Michael Kayyal, Gregorios Ibrahim, Boulos Yazigi, and Paolo Dall’Oglio.

The United States continued to support the documentation, analysis, and preservation of evidence of abuses committed by all sides in the conflict, including those committed against religious minorities, through the COI and International Impartial and Independent Mechanism on Syria, as well as through direct support for Syrian-led documentation efforts.