

# 2017 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. Membership in the Muslim Brotherhood or “Salafist” organizations is illegal and punishable to different degrees, including by imprisonment or death. There were continued media reports the government and its Shia Muslim militia allies 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 extreme 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 a chemical weapons attack in April resulting in mostly Sunni casualties. The government reportedly damaged and destroyed places of worship, including 63 churches and numerous mosques. According to nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports, Iran further exacerbated the conflict in areas that remained under its control 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 prayers, and limit the activities of religious groups, and said 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.

The UN Human Rights Council and numerous independent sources reported nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the 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. Two explosions in March near the Bab al-Saghir cemetery, a well-known Shia pilgrimage site, killed 44 civilians and injured 120, the majority of whom were Iraqi Shia pilgrims. HTS claimed responsibility for the attack. Until military operations largely removed ISIS from control of Syrian territory, ISIS killed hundreds of civilians through public executions, crucifixions, and beheadings of men, women, and children on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, homosexuality, and cursing God. In addition, according to the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI), ISIS’s continued executions of those perceived to violate its strict religious rules applied to women accused of adultery and men accused of sodomy. Moreover, 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 and 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 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 religious minorities. HTS also continued to indoctrinate children with its interpretation of Salafi-jihadist ideology including through schools and youth training camps.

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 minority 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. Neighborhoods, towns, and villages once religiously diverse 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 Syria leading to an inclusive government that would respect the right of all persons to practice their religion freely. On August 15, the Secretary of State stated ISIS was responsible for genocide against Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims, as well as for crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing directed at these same groups and in some cases against Sunni Muslims, Kurds, and other minorities. Although the U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in 2012, the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Levant, the Representative for Syria, the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia, 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**

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The U.S. government estimates the total population at 18 million (July 2017 estimate). At year’s end there were more than 5.48 million Syrian refugees, primarily Sunni, registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in neighboring countries and 6.1 million internally displaced persons (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 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 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 Suweida, where they constitute the majority of the local population. Yezidis, found primarily in the northeast, were previously also in Aleppo.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

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### **Legal Framework**

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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 is 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 defined the parameters of what constituted “Salafist” activity or explained why such activity is illegal. Affiliation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death or imprisonment.

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. Recognized 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.

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 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 minority 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 affiliation with Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. 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 a Muslim 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 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.

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

## **Government Practices**

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*Summary paragraph:* There were continued reports the Alawi-led government's war with opposition forces and terrorist groups resulted in significant casualties among Syria's majority Sunni population. According to civil society activists and journalists, the government continued to engage in extrajudicial killings and detentions. In May the U.S. released satellite imagery showing evidence of a crematorium within the Sednaya military prison compound which would enable the government to dispose of the bodies of executed prisoners, the vast majority of whom were Sunni Muslims. Human rights organizations and civil society groups reported the government continued to detain tens of thousands of citizens without affording them due process, and there were reportedly multiple forced disappearances of Sunnis and continued massive and systematized deaths in state-controlled detention facilities. Sources reported government-affiliated forces and militias seized homes in majority Sunni communities, after "reconciliation" agreements forcefully displaced entire communities. Sources reported the regime intended to alter the demographics of the evacuated communities by installing non-Sunni residents, whom they viewed as supportive of the regime's rule.

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, 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.

In an August speech, President Bashir Asad described enemies of Syria in religious terms. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported the government continued to conduct indiscriminate aerial and artillery attacks that destroyed or damaged places of

worship and religious cultural property, including 63 churches and numerous mosques. Government-controlled radio and television programming continued to disseminate anti-Semitic news articles and cartoons.

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 may support opposition groups. According to the SNHR, the civilian death toll for the year was 10,204 and approximately 207,000 between March 2011 and March 2017. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry stated Sunnis accounted for the majority of civilian casualties and detainees. The government, according to the UN and press, resumed its chemical weapons attacks on civilians, with an April bombing in predominantly Sunni Idlib Province involving sarin that killed at least 83 civilians.

Civil society activists and journalists reported the government continued to engage in extrajudicial executions and detentions. In May the U.S. released satellite imagery and evidence the government installed a crematorium within the Sednaya military prison compound which could be used to dispose of the bodies of executed prisoners with little evidence. The vast majority of tortured and executed prisoners were Sunni Muslims, which analysts stated the government targeted believing they were members of the opposition, or likely to support the opposition. The government reportedly continued to imprison, and on some occasions summarily execute, individuals it deemed to be associated with opposition groups, including armed opposition groups, civil society activists, and media activists, including those whose religious programming did not meeting government criteria. Many citizens previously reported missing were eventually accounted for in prisons, while others were later determined to have been executed by the regime.

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.

Human rights organizations and civil society groups reported the government continued to detain tens of thousands of citizens without due process. The UN and human rights organizations reported the continued detention as well as the disappearance and forcible conscription of civilians, IDPs, and fighters during and following the government's December 2016 assault on rebel-held Aleppo. Sources stated the abuses reported by a UN COI, including multiple forced disappearances and continued massive and systematized deaths in state-controlled detention facilities, remained ongoing. The SNHR reported at

least 6,500 cases of arbitrary arrests, the vast majority of detentions Syrian government forces committed during the year. Human rights groups and opposition activists stated the majority of detainees the government took into custody were Sunni Arabs.

By the end of the year, the government and its partners had placed the Sunni-majority Damascus suburb of East Ghouta under a tight siege. A UN report stated that 1,114 children in East Ghouta were suffering from various forms of malnutrition, including the most dangerous form, “severe acute malnutrition.” The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein stated in October 2017 the siege of Eastern Ghouta was an outrage and he called on the parties to the conflict to allow badly needed food and medical supplies into the area. Subsequent regime military operations in East Ghouta killed and wounded thousands of civilians, causing tens of thousands to flee the fighting and forcing tens of thousands more to evacuate under terms of surrender.

The UN COI, SNHR, and Syrian 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 shifts in Homs. Groups such as the SNHR said the government’s displacement operations were sectarian in nature. Such violence contributed to the widespread displacement of civilians.

According to media reports, the presence of foreign sectarian militias fighting on the side of the government exacerbated and sharpened the sectarian element of the war. Reports indicated the government relied on Shia foreigners from Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and elsewhere to target Sunni-majority opposition groups.

According to Human Rights Watch (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 supported and trained thousands of Afghans to fight in Syria 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. 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.

Shia religious slogans and banners remained prominent in Damascus, according to observers and media reports. The banners expressed the willingness of individuals to sacrifice themselves for Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad revered in Shia Islam. 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, and booksellers were prohibited from selling literature that 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 other 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). In an August speech, President Asad stated Syria was "facing a *takfiri* terrorist enemy the likes of which has never been seen throughout history in terms of treachery, malevolence, and hatred, an enemy backed by several regional and international parties which have been seeking for years to impose their dominance over the whole area through the gate of Syria." 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 threaten Sunnis publicly, warning against communications with foreign coreligionists and defining such communication as opposition political 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.

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 Ministry of Religious Endowments 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.

The SNHR reported the government continued to conduct indiscriminate aerial and artillery attacks, which at times resulted in the destruction of or damage to places of worship and religious cultural property, including numerous churches and mosques, in addition to targeted attacks against places of worship the regime claimed were occupied by armed actors. On November 8, regime warplanes fired missiles in front of al Kabir Mosque in Kafr Batna town in eastern Ghouta east of Damascus, damaging it severely, according to the SNHR. The government continued to state the mosques it targeted were being utilized by opposition forces for military purposes.

## **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

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*Summary paragraph:* Nonstate actors, including ISIS, HTS – a merger of Salafist groups but mostly al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusrah (JAN), a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization – and other groups, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. and other governments, controlled portions of the country's territory in opposition to, or support of, the government. These nonstate actors were responsible for killings, physical mistreatment, kidnappings, and arrests of members of religious groups and those they suspected of opposing their rule. Particularly 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. On April 15, HTS targeted the predominantly Shia Aleppo district of Al-Rashidin, with a car bomb that killed 96 individuals, including 68 children. Following the attack, dozens of persons went missing, with armed groups taking at least 17 civilians hostage, according to a September COI report. 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.

As of December Coalition forces and the SDF liberated the vast majority of Syrian territory that ISIS once controlled and governed. As such, ISIS no longer governed over large populations and was limited in its ability to subjugate religious groups to harsh treatment. It continued, however, to operate as an insurgency and target individuals on the basis of religion on a smaller scale.

ISIS regularly targeted and massacred Shia, and used its media arms to target, demonize, and incite violence against Shia, including the May massacre of 52 civilians in the eastern district of Aqareb al-Safi. Numerous sources stated ISIS also targeted Christians throughout the country. A monitoring group reported ISIS massacred more than 100 Christians in the Christian town of Al-Qaryatayn in October, after temporarily capturing it. 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 – or convert to Islam, or be killed.

There were reports throughout the year by activists and local media organizations that ISIS executed and imprisoned Sunnis in areas of its control for violating regulations based on its strict interpretation of Islamic law. Materials released by ISIS depicted the executions and explained the religious justifications for them.

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. A September COI report noted two explosions in March near the Bab al-Saghir cemetery, a well-known Shia pilgrimage site. The explosions detonated 10 minutes apart in the parking lot of the cemetery, where buses transporting pilgrims were parked. The explosions killed 44 civilians and injured 120, the majority of whom were Iraqi Shia pilgrims. HTS claimed responsibility for the attack. According to the same report, on April 14, a truck bomb exploded in Al-Rashidin near Aleppo, killing evacuees from Fu'ah and Kafraya – two predominantly Shia Muslim towns – who believed the truck would deliver food. The attack killed 95 persons, including 68 children and 13 women, and injured 276, including 42 children and 78 women. Onlookers yelled sectarian insults at the Shia victims. No party claimed responsibility for the attack, and HTS and Ahrar al-Sham explicitly denied involvement. In May ISIS militants attacked the town of Aqarib al-Safiyah and attempted to attack the nearby Al-Manbouja village in Hamah, both predominantly populated by Ismaili Muslims. The attackers killed 52 civilians, the vast majority Ismailis. Survivors reported being verbally insulted by ISIS fighters on account of their religious beliefs.

Human rights groups reported unidentified militias in July killed Dr. Elias Kafarkis Isaq, an Assyrian Christian and former dean of Al-Furat University in Hasakah Province. He was the second Assyrian Christian from that university killed, and the Assyrian Observatory for Human Rights and press reports stated the crimes were part of a campaign targeting Christians.

According to a 2016 UN COI report, Ahrar al-Sham and HTS took hostages, especially women and children, to force prisoner exchanges with the government or other armed groups or for ransom. A September 2017 COI report stated, although some hostages were released during the year, up to 100 men from Adra al-Omaliyah belonging to minority religious groups remained hostages, waiting to be exchanged. Up to 175 women and children from Adra al-Omaliyah were still detained at the end of the year. The status of other individuals kidnapped because of their religious affiliation remained unknown. Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi, kidnapped in 2013, remained unaccounted for at year's end. The condition of Jesuit priest Paolo Dall'Oglio, whom ISIS kidnapped in 2013 in Raqqa, remained unknown.

Thousands of the Yezidi girls and women abducted in Iraq and brought to Syria remained missing after the liberation of ISIS-held Syrian territory. Starting in 2014, ISIS abducted thousands of Yezidi women from Iraq, as well as several Christians and Turkmen, and brought them to Syria for sale as sex slaves in markets or as rewards for 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. In interviews with the COI, the women described multiple rapes by multiple men, including incidents of gang rape. A 2016 COI report entitled *They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis* concluded ISIS “committed the crime of genocide as well as multiple crimes against humanity and war crimes against the Yezidis, thousands of whom are held captive in the Syrian Arab Republic where they are subjected to almost unimaginable horrors.”

Terrorist and other 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. According to opposition armed groups and media reports, this included the authorization of public executions and physical abuse of minorities accused of working with the government, particularly Alawites. In July HTS cemented its power in Idlib by defeating Ahrar al-Sham forces and monopolizing key assets in the province, including many of the local sharia courts. HTS also dissolved local councils in Idlib that were not supporting its objectives.

According to ISIS statements and other sources, in areas 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 whipping for smoking, possessing alcohol, listening to music, having tattoos, conducting business during prayer times, not attending Friday prayers, fighting, and not fasting during Ramadan.

HST 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. In media releases, HST threatened to cleanse Aleppo of Alawites and mutilate their bodies. HST and other rebel groups also used sectarian language to describe the Kurdish-dominated People’s Protection Unit (YPG) and SDF.

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

Antigovernment protests, particularly those that occurred under the auspices of violent extremist groups, and publicity materials from antigovernment groups continued to include anti-Alawite and anti-Shia messages. HTS sponsored several protests in Idlib in which some protestors carried signs denouncing Shia Islam, and the group erected billboards in the province declaring, “The Shia are the enemies of Islam.”

Until the loss of the bulk of its territory, ISIS continued to use curricula based on its interpretation of Islam in schools it governed. According to observers, the group banned several subjects it considered contrary to its ideology, including music, art, and aspects of

history it deemed nationalist. ISIS schools justified ISIS' declaration of a caliphate and described other forms of governance as un-Islamic. The textbooks also sought to justify practices including execution, excommunication, and other punishments for apostasy, heresy, and other religious crimes, according to multiple media reports and the group's own statements. ISIS publicized efforts to "re-educate" teachers who had previously taught in government schools. ISIS maintained a number of "Cubs of the Caliphate" youth training camps throughout its areas of control, releasing several videos documenting the training, including footage of weapons training and video of youth executing prisoners held by ISIS. According to activists from Raqqa and former educators in the city, many families refused to send their children to ISIS schools, choosing to homeschool them instead. HST 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 HST, the group invited children to participate in games whose content was based on al-Qaida's religious beliefs.

In March, according to multiple media outlets, the Democratic Union Party – the political arm of People's Protection Units (YGP) – shut down the headquarters of rival Kurdish and Assyrian parties and announced there would be no gatherings in al-Qamishli to celebrate the Nowruz festival, which had Zoroastrian religious origins.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

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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.

The self-segregation of members of internally displaced religious groups into towns and neighborhoods organized along sectarian lines continued. Internally displaced Sunnis, however, reportedly continued to relocate to traditional Alawite areas along the coast.

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

The Syrian Opposition Coalition, the opposition's primary political umbrella organization, and the Syrian Negotiations Committee (SNC), 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. Many members of the political opposition openly called for an inclusive and democratic state, in which religious minorities would have freedom to practice their faiths. The SNC's blueprint for reaching a political solution to the conflict called for a six-month negotiating process leading to a single transitional

governing body responsible for overseeing a single, decentralized state that would oversee an 18-month negotiation on constitutional reform and election. The SNC's blue print commits to a democratic, nonsectarian state.

## **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

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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. In August the Secretary of State said ISIS was "clearly responsible for genocide against Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims, as well as for crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing directed at these same groups and in some cases against Sunni Muslims, Kurds, and other minorities."

In pursuit of a political solution to the conflict that would safeguard the religious freedom of all citizens, 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-led Geneva intra-Syria negotiations. The Secretary hosted representatives from 17 like-minded nations to discuss the future of Syria during the UN General Assembly session in September. 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 His Beatitude John X, the Patriarch of Antioch, leaders from the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, and the former Imam Moaz al-Khatib of the Umayyad Mosque, as part of its effort to promote an inclusive political settlement for the conflict. The U.S. Acting Deputy Secretary of State, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Levant, the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia, 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 and meetings with leaders of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East. U.S. government officials continued to press the political opposition to expand and include representatives from all religious backgrounds in order to better reflect the diversity of the country's population. The U.S. continued to support the documentation of abuses committed by all sides in the conflict through the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and through direct support to Syrian-led documentation efforts.

