

2016 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 certain types of religiously oriented organizations is illegal and punishable to different degrees, including by imprisonment or death. The government and its Shia militia allies killed, arrested, and physically abused Sunnis and members of targeted religious minority groups as part of its effort to defeat the armed insurrection mounted by opposition groups. In December, for example, according to activists and observers of the conflict, Iranian-allied militias and government soldiers killed dozens of Sunni civilians in Aleppo city as government forces removed Sunni rebels from the city. According to multiple observers of the conflict, the government employed tactics aimed at bolstering the most extreme elements of the Sunni Islamist opposition in order to shape the conflict 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 towns and neighborhoods for siege, mortar shelling, and aerial bombardment on the basis of the religious affiliation of residents. The government reportedly targeted places of worship, resulting in damage and destruction of numerous churches and mosques. The government continued to monitor sermons, close mosques between prayers, and limit the activities of religious groups. It 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.

Nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States and other governments, such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN, also known as al-Nusra Front), targeted Shia, Alawites, Christians, and other religious minorities, as well as other Sunnis, with indiscriminate attacks as well as killings, kidnappings, physical mistreatment, and arrests in the areas of the country under their control. Extremist groups, for example, launched multiple suicide bomb attacks in Latakia Province, aiming their attacks at Alawite Muslims, according to the groups themselves. ISIS killed dozens through public executions, crucifixions, and beheadings of men, women, and children on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, homosexuality, and cursing God. In Raqqa and elsewhere in Syria, ISIS continued to hold thousands of enslaved Yezidi women and girls kidnapped in Iraq and trafficked to Syria to be sold or distributed to ISIS members as “spoils of war” because of their religious beliefs. ISIS punished individuals with lashings or imprisonment for lesser religious offenses, such as insulting the Prophet Muhammed 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. ISIS used its own police force, court system, and revised school curriculum to enforce and spread its interpretation of

Islam. JAN was responsible for similar executions and punishments, though the number of victims appeared much smaller than the number of ISIS victims. JAN continued to implement policies of forced Islamization in minority communities under its control, particularly among the Druze in Idlib. JAN also continued to indoctrinate children with its interpretation of Salafi-jihadist Islam including through schools and youth training camps.

There were reports of sectarian violence due to tensions among religious groups, exacerbated by government actions, cultural rivalries, and sectarian rhetoric. Alawites reportedly faced attacks because other minority groups believed government policy favored Alawites; sectarian agitation was one of the driving factors of the insurgency, according to observers. Christians reportedly continued to experience decreasing social tolerance and increasing violence including kidnappings as the influence of extremist groups increased. Neighborhoods, towns, and villages that were once religiously diverse were increasingly segregated by religious group as displaced members of minority religious groups relocated, seeking greater security and safety by living with coreligionists.

The U.S. President and the Secretary of State urged the government to respect the rights of all citizens regardless of religious beliefs and stressed the need for a political transition in Syria that would respect the freedom of all religious groups. In March the Secretary of State said that in his judgment ISIS was “responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control including Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims.” The Secretary of State pursued a number of initiatives, including bilateral discussions with Russia and work through the International Syrian Support Group, to find an acceptable formula to end Syria’s war. Although the U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in February 2012, the U.S. Special Envoy for Syria and other senior U.S. officials continued to meet elsewhere with leaders of minority religious groups to discuss assistance to vulnerable populations and ways to counter sectarian violence.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.2 million (July 2016 estimate), although media reporting suggests this figure is continually declining as large numbers of people leave the country to escape the ongoing civil war. 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. Other Muslim groups, including Alawites, Ismailis, and Shia, together constitute 13 percent according to U.S. estimates, while Druze account for 3 percent of the population. 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, but there is no reliable information to confirm their continued residency or current size. There was also a

Yezidi population of approximately 80,000 before the civil war; media reports suggest this figure is higher due to Yezidis who arrived from Iraq as they fled military conflict and persecution by ISIS.

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 tend to 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 in the Hama Governorate.

Most Christians belong to autonomous Orthodox churches, the Eastern Catholic (or Uniate) churches (in full communion with the Roman Catholic pope), 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 are found primarily in the northeast and in Aleppo.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The legal framework described in this section remains fully in force only in those areas controlled by the government. In areas of the country controlled by rebel and extremist 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 the 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. 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 religious and nonreligious meetings of religious groups, except for regularly scheduled worship, require permits from the government.

Public schools are officially government-run and nonsectarian, although the Christian and Druze communities are authorized 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 may follow either secular or religious curricula.

For the resolution of issues of personal status, the government requires citizens to be listed as affiliated 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 person 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 the case of interreligious disputes, 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. Per 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.

Religious affiliation is recorded on an individual’s birth certificate and is required on documents presented when marrying or traveling for a religious pilgrimage and on many other official forms. For such documentation the choices are to be listed as affiliated with

Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. 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

The civil war during the year included religious and sectarian drivers of violence, but observers stated they were not the only factors underlying the violent competition for political power and control of the central government in Damascus. Violence committed by the government against opposition groups and civilians was inherently ambiguous; the government reportedly primarily sought to defend itself from rebel groups of any type that threatened its hold on power. Although not chiefly driven by purely religious motivations, according to many observers the government's policy was sectarian in its effects and designed around religious and sectarian dynamics. Because of the overlap of political, ethnic, sectarian, and religious motivations for violence, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

While rebels identified themselves explicitly as Sunni Arab or Sunni Islamist groups in statements and publications and drew on a support base made up of almost exclusively Sunnis, making government targeting appear sectarian, observers noted that other motivations for the violence clearly existed. The Alawite-led government and allied, mostly foreign, Shia militia allies killed, arrested, and physically abused Sunnis and members of targeted religious minority groups, and intentionally destroyed their property, according to numerous reports, as part of its effort to defeat the armed insurrection mounted by opposition groups. Observers reported the government tried to mobilize sectarian support by increasing religious hate speech and controlling the activities of religious groups. According to multiple observers of the conflict, the government employed tactics aimed at bolstering the most extreme elements of the Sunni Islamist opposition in order to shape the conflict so it would be seen as one in which a religiously moderate government was facing a religiously extremist opposition. These tactics included the release of large numbers of imprisoned Salafi-jihadi and other activists early in the uprising, some of whom, according to journalists, went on to found or join the most sectarian armed opposition groups. According to international media reports, a number of minority religious groups viewed the government as their protector against violent Sunni extremists. Experts argued that violence on both sides was often religiously motivated. By April the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, estimated more than 400,000 individuals had been killed since the start of the conflict in 2011, and the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported 16,913 were killed during the year. According to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, Sunnis accounted for the majority of civilian casualties and detainees.

According to civil society activists and journalists, the government continued to engage in extrajudicial executions and detentions. Amnesty International (AI) reported the extrajudicial killing of up to 13,000 civilian detainees at Sednaya Military Prison between 2011 and the end of 2015, and concluded that such executions likely continued into the year. According to AI, officials authorized the death sentences following cursory military

trials lasting only several minutes. The government reportedly continued to sentence members of the Muslim Brotherhood to death or to lengthy imprisonment. 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 religious programming not meeting government criteria. Multiple sources reported summary executions of civilians and fighters during the government's assault on rebel-held Aleppo in December. The government reportedly killed dozens of Sunni civilians and refused to evacuate rebels or civilians from the city.

Human rights organizations and civil society groups reported the government continued to detain tens of thousands of citizens without affording them due process. The UN and human rights organizations reported the detention, disappearance, and forcible conscription of civilians, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and fighters during and following the government's December assault on rebel-held Aleppo. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry reported multiple forced disappearances of Sunnis and continued massive and systematized deaths in state-controlled detention facilities. The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported at least 10,000 cases of arbitrary arrests, the vast majority of detentions committed by Syrian government forces. Opposition activists stated that majority of detainees the government took into custody were Sunni Arabs.

Sources reported government-affiliated militias seized the homes of Sunnis with the explicit intention of permanently displacing these individuals and changing the religious demography of these areas by populating the area with Shia and Alawite residents. Such violence contributed to the widespread displacement of civilians totaling at least 6.6 million IDPs and more than 4.8 million refugees by September, according to the UN. Throughout the year the government engaged in negotiations to evacuate the opposition-held neighborhood of Daraya of all its inhabitants, including fighters and noncombatants, nearly all of whom were Sunni. In August the government implemented an agreement to evacuate Daraya's 5,000 civilian residents in what members of the opposition described as a campaign of "demographic change" because of the neighborhood's Sunni demographics. The government concluded similar agreements for the Damascus suburb of Mu'damiya and the Homs neighborhood of al-Wa'er. In addition, the government continued attacks described by human rights organizations as indiscriminate against majority Sunni opposition-held neighborhoods in Aleppo throughout the year, a tactic that observers said may have been designed to depopulate those portions of the city of hostile Sunnis rather than solely defeat the insurgent groups fighting there. No reliable information, however, was available on the religious affiliation of pro-government residents moved into these neighborhoods post-evacuation, so the real extent of the religious motivations for the government's actions was unclear.

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 populations. For example, international media and multiple

local opposition news outlets reported throughout the year on the presence of multiple Shia militias fighting on behalf of the government in Aleppo, including Lebanese Hizballah and the Iraqi group Kataib Hizballah.

Neither the government nor the state security court defined the parameters of what constituted “Salafist” activity or explained why it made a group illegal. According to reports, the government attacked areas where they believed Salafi armed opposition groups resided.

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 became increasingly prominent in Damascus, according to observers and media reports. Observers reported banners expressing a willingness to sacrifice themselves for Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad revered in Shia Islam, which many interpreted as an attempt to intimidate Sunnis. Hezbollah and other pro-Iran signs and banners dominated some government-held areas.

The government continued its support for radio and television programming related to the practice and study 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 understanding of Islam, such as writings associated with the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi writers.

In 2015, the government reportedly promoted into religious leadership positions Muslim clergy, such as Grand Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, who in statements and media interviews repeatedly expressed his commitment to preserving the secular nature of the state, and strong support of the government. Throughout the year, Hassoun called for combating “*takfiri* (Muslims who kill other Muslims who do not follow the same belief structure) mentality” and called for support of the army and leadership, according to the official state news agency. In meetings with Islamic scholars in June, President Bashar al-Asad stated the religious establishment should spread a “correct” understanding of religion.

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 the security services, according to media and academic reports; however, the senior officer corps of the military reportedly continued to include individuals from religious minority groups. 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. For instance, the official state news agency, Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), reported on the government’s fight against “takfiri terrorist organizations” throughout the year. In a September interview with AFP, President Asad said “most of the militants belong to extremist groups, such as [ISIS], [JAN], [Ahrar al-Sham], and others...every terrorist is an enemy.” 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, stated the government had their support because it was their protector against 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 example, the government frequently referred to the opposition negotiating body derisively as the “Saudi” delegation but characterized tolerated oppositionists who opposed the departure of President Asad as the “patriotic, healthy” opposition. For most other religious groups, the government did not prohibit links between citizens and coreligionists in other countries or between citizens and the international religious hierarchies governing some religious groups. It continued to prohibit, however, contact between the Jewish community and Jews in Israel.

Government-controlled radio and television programming continued to disseminate anti-Semitic news articles and cartoons. SANA frequently reported on the “Zionist enemy” and accused the opposition of serving “the Zionist project.” The government repeated its claim a “Zionist conspiracy” was responsible for the country’s conflict. In April SANA reported on “al-Quds Cultural Day” in Damascus, a monthly event to address the “Judaization” of Jerusalem and “resistance against the Zionist project.”

The government continued to allow foreign Christian faith-based nongovernmental organizations (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 target places of worship, resulting in damage to and destruction of numerous churches and mosques. Media sources reported more than 20 churches were damaged and destroyed by airstrikes and shelling in the Aleppo area. The SNHR reported government forces targeted mosques in Idlib, Daraa, Aleppo, Damascus, and elsewhere throughout the year. The government continued to state the mosques it targeted served as rallying points for protesters or rebels.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States and other governments, such as ISIS and JAN, controlled portions of the country's territory and continued to be responsible for killings, physical mistreatment, kidnappings, and arrests of members of religious groups they suspected of opposing their rule. Many rebel groups' explicitly self-identified as Sunni Arab or Sunni Islamist and drew on a support base made up of almost exclusively Sunnis. ISIS publicized executions of individuals it accused of violating its interpretation of Islamic law. Religious offenses ISIS deemed punishable by death included blasphemy, apostasy, and cursing God. ISIS also punished individuals with lashings or imprisonment for lesser religious offenses, such as insulting the Prophet Muhammad or failing to comply with standards of grooming and dress. JAN and some allied rebel groups targeted Druze and Shia minorities in the northern part of the country, claiming responsibility for numerous bombings, including suicide attacks, which JAN continued to describe as reactions to the government's "massacres of Sunnis."

According to the media reports, ISIS executed prisoners it described as Shia and Alawite in multiple media releases throughout the year. In October ISIS released a photo series depicting the execution of an individual it said was a captured Shia government soldier in Homs. In September ISIS released an execution video featuring either a Shia or an Alawite "spy."

The Alawite population faced attacks by some elements of the armed opposition, including ISIS, JAN, Jund al-Aqsa, and other extremist groups, reportedly because other minority groups believed government policy favored Alawites. Alawite leaders said they continued to fear a sectarian cleansing would follow a fall of the government. For example, in May ISIS claimed responsibility for bomb attacks in Latakia Province that killed approximately 150 people and said it meant to target Alawites.

According to ISIS reporting and other sources, in areas under its control, ISIS police forces, known as Hisbah, 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. Alleged homosexuals faced execution. In July, August, December, and January, ISIS executed multiple men for alleged homosexual acts in Aleppo and Deir al-Zour provinces, according to the group's own materials.

ISIS continued to attack Syrian Kurdish civilians as part of its ongoing fight against the People's Protection Unit (YPG), a Kurdish-dominated militia with an ideology described by journalists and think tank reports as secular. ISIS characterized its fight against many Syrian Kurds and the YPG in sectarian terms, describing their targets as "atheists" and "apostates." A large truck bomb blast killed approximately 50 people July 27 in Hasaka Province. The attack struck near a Kurdish security force headquarters and was the deadliest of its kind in recent years. In October an ISIS suicide bomber killed at least 22 people at a wedding in a YPG-controlled area of Hasaka Province. An ISIS suicide bomber killed 16 people at a bakery in the YPG-controlled area of Hasaka Province in early July.

ISIS took responsibility for the attack in an online statement saying “it targeted the Kurdish YPG militia.” The attack followed a pattern of ISIS attacks on civilians perceived as supportive of a secular armed group.

ISIS also jailed and executed Sunnis in its areas of control for violating regulations based on its strict interpretation of Islamic law. In September ISIS beheaded 15 civilians on charges of “apostasy” in Deir al-Zour Province. In July ISIS executed a man by crucifixion in northern Aleppo province for apostasy for refusing to join prayers, according to *ARA News*. In May ISIS executed three civilians in Raqqa also on charges of apostasy for spying and fighting against the self-declared caliphate, according to activists. Similar executions in ISIS-controlled territories were reported throughout the year by Syrian activists, local media organizations, and in ISIS-released materials depicting the executions and explaining the religious justifications for them.

JAN and other rebel groups continued to subject the surrounded Shia villages of Fu’a and Kafraya to periodic violence in order to pressure the Syrian government and Iran, according to journalists in touch with the rebels. Observers, including UN officials, stated that political and military considerations overlapped with sectarian and religious motivations. JAN and other rebel groups have treated the villages as hostages targeted for their religious affiliation, their pro-government political orientation, and because of Iran’s interest in protecting Shia coreligionists to deter the Syrian government and Iran from subjecting other besieged Sunni enclaves to violence and starvation, according to observers of the conflict. Rebels continued to refer to the villagers in Fu’a and Kafraya as “*rawafid*,” a derogatory term used to refer to Shia Muslims.

JAN continued to mistreat and threaten non-Sunnis on the basis of their religious affiliation. JAN continued to force residents in a majority Druze area of Idlib Province to convert to Sunni Islam and enforced a strict interpretation of Islamic law. In September the group released a threatening statement “reminding” residents of Kaftin, one of the Druze villages in the area, to “comply with the law of God Almighty [and] make “women wear [Sunni] mandated clothing,” to comply with JAN-mandated prayer rituals, and to participate in a number of other religious and social rituals. JAN also taught a Salafi-jihadi interpretation of Islam to Druze children.

JAN also 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. For example, in August JAN named an offensive against the government in Aleppo after Ibrahim al-Yousef, a Syrian insurgent and member of the “Fighting Vanguard” who massacred Alawite cadets in Aleppo in 1979. In official media releases, JAN threatened to cleanse Aleppo of Alawites and mutilate their bodies. JAN and other rebel groups also used sectarian language to describe the Kurdish-dominated YPG and Syrian Democratic Forces.

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. Armed groups, including those linked to JAN, continued to establish sharia courts in Aleppo and Idlib Governorates and elsewhere, replacing government courts as well as courts organized by other opposition groups. AI reported in July that a number of lawyers were abducted or threatened with abduction for opposing torture in sharia “courts” run by rebel groups including JAN and al-Shamia Front, or more broadly for criticizing their rule. Two of the lawyers told AI that early in the year they publicly criticized what they described as “the incompetence of judges working at the “court” run by the al-Shamia Front.” One was verbally threatened with “disappearance” and the other was abducted and detained for several days by al-Shamia Front forces. The latter was released after pledging not to interfere in or publicly speak about the affairs of the “court.”

Yezidis, the UN, the Iraqi government, and others continued to report ISIS sexually enslaved thousands of Yezidi women and girls, as well as some Turkmen women, in Raqqa and other parts of ISIS-controlled territory. A June report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights detailed abuses against thousands of Yezidi woman and children still held captive in the country. ISIS kidnapped these women and girls in Iraq and then trafficked them to Syria to be sold or distributed to ISIS fighters as “spoils of war” because of their religious beliefs. Escaped captives continued to report systematic rape, sexual violence, and domestic servitude by ISIS members, which ISIS documented in its own videos.

NGOs and media outlets reported the release in February of 42 Assyrian Christians, mostly young women and children, who had been abducted by ISIS in 2015 and held until their religious community raised a ransom payment. 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 April 2013, remained unaccounted for at year’s end. The condition of Jesuit priest Paolo Dall’Oglio, kidnapped by ISIS in July 2013 in Raqqa, remained unknown.

Activists, media, and ISIS sources reported ISIS continued to force Christians in areas under its control to pay a protection tax, reported by a Christian organization to be 164,000 Syrian pounds (\$318) per person; convert to Islam; or be killed.

ISIS continued to teach new curricula based on its interpretation of Islam in schools throughout territory under its control. 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 its declaration of a so-called caliphate and described other forms of governance as un-Islamic. The textbooks also justified ISIS practices, including excommunication and other punishments for apostasy, heresy, and other religious crimes, according to multiple media reports and the group’s own reporting. 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. 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. Resistance to ISIS education was reportedly so widespread that ISIS eventually implemented regulations requiring families to enroll their children in ISIS schools, according to activists and the group itself.

JAN and affiliated groups also used 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 JAN, the group invited children to participate in games whose content was based on al-Qaida’s religious beliefs. In other areas in the north, the Nusra-affiliated Salafi-jihadi NGO Callers to Jihad Center (CJC) engaged in similar activities. For example, in May the CJC held a proselytization session in which dozens of children were encouraged to join violent extremist groups to fight the government. In April Salafi-jihadi preachers gave religious lectures to adults and children, and children were quizzed on their religious knowledge in a CJC session.

The ISIS police continued to punish individuals for accompanying “improperly dressed” female relatives. The al-Khanssaa all-female police force of ISIS continued to enforce prescribed moral regulations, sometimes violently, on women. For example, in November ISIS officials, including police, publicly whipped 39 people in al-Mayadeen, Deir al-Zour province, for fighting over agricultural land, according to activists.

In a recorded speech released in May, ISIS’ late senior leader and spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani called on Muslims throughout the Middle East to rise up against Jews, “Crusaders,” and their “apostate” agents elsewhere in the region. In the speech, he implored followers all over the world to “terrorize” and “make examples of the Crusaders [i.e., Westerners]” by carrying out terrorist attacks, advising that “targeting those who are called ‘civilians’ is more beloved to us and more effective, as it is more harmful, more painful and a greater deterrent to [the infidel West].”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Christians reported they continued to feel threatened by religious intolerance among the opposition as the influence of violent extremist groups increased. ISIS continued to impose a special tax on Christian populations and other powerful rebel groups, including Ahrar al-Sham and JAN, continued to call for establishing a Sunni theocracy in press statements and media interviews. 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 strongholds along the coast.

Advocacy groups reported social conventions and religious proscriptions continued to make conversion relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversions banned by the 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.

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

Some societal and religious leaders continued to take steps to promote religious tolerance and encourage peaceful relations among religious groups. For example, Sheikh Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, a Sunni Islamic scholar and opposition supporter residing outside the country, promoted his book opposing the violence of ISIS and calling on Syrians of all backgrounds to work together to build a state respecting pluralism and minority rights. He focused on promoting his message among Syrian armed opposition groups. Other opposition-affiliated Sunni scholars also rejected extremist sectarian narratives in their writings and on social media.

The Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), the opposition’s primary political umbrella organization, and the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), U.S., Saudi, Qatari, and Turkey backed opposition umbrella organization responsible for negotiating on behalf of the opposition with the regime, continued to condemn actions against religious minorities, both by the government and by extremist and terrorist groups. In June the SOC denounced the ISIS suicide bombing that targeted Assyrian Christians in Qamishli, stating “...this is the fourth attack against the Syriac Assyrians in the past few months, ... which confirms the existence of a criminal scheme designed to terrorize this component of the Syrian society and force them to leave Syria.” The SOC statement also stated that the targeting of Syriac Assyrians had “the aim to uproot them from their homeland.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The President and the Secretary of State continued to urge the government to respect the universal rights of its citizens, including the right to religious freedom. The President repeatedly stressed the need for a political solution to the conflict that would be inclusive of all religious groups in the country. The Secretary of State in April stated, “we believe that the protection of religious and ethnic minorities is a fundamental test not just of our leadership, but of civilization itself,” and noted he had earlier determined that ISIS was committing genocide against religious minorities including Yezidis, Christians, and Shia. The Secretary and other senior U.S. officials reiterated this point at other times during the year.

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 International Syria Support Group. The participating nations affirmed their commitment to Syria’s unity,

independence, territorial integrity, and nonsectarian character; to ensuring that 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 February 2012. U.S. government representatives met with Syrian religious groups and leaders in the United States and elsewhere in the region and the world, such as leaders of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, former Imam of the Umayyad Mosque Moaz al-Khatib, as part of its effort to promote an inclusive political settlement for the conflict. The U.S. Special Envoy for Syria 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 Special Envoy and other officials participated in dialogues, roundtables, and working groups focused on increasing religious tolerance and countering extremist violence. 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 United States 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.