

SYRIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

Religious freedom continued to decline. Although the constitution formally expresses government respect for and freedom to exercise all religions, significant limitations and restrictions were imposed in practice. With the worsening conflict, the government did not control significant terrain within the country, rendering it incapable of governing those portions of the country. Government regime repression increased against Sunni Muslims, whose religious status the government viewed as a proxy for political opposition to the government. Regime forces and allied Shia militias targeted Sunnis and religious minority groups with killings, torture, arrests, and attacks on Sunni and religious minority neighborhoods and religious sites. For example, Lebanese Hizbollah killed 200 civilians in February near Rasm an-Nafl, and the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade, a domestic Shia militia allied with the government, killed 26 Sunni civilians near Aleppo in February. Regime forces and their Shia militia allies arrested Sunni clerics and destroyed Sunni mosques.

Extremists groups targeted Shia, Alawites, and religious minorities with killings, kidnapping, torture, and arrests in the areas of the country under their control. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) publicly executed Western hostages, referring to them as “dogs of Rome” and “crusaders,” and stoned to death and beheaded men, women, and children on charges of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy. ISIL established court and policing systems in areas it controlled and handed down strict punishments based on its interpretation of sharia. ISIL lashed men for not following its proscriptions about religious observance. ISIL required Christians to convert, flee, pay a special tax, or face execution in territory it controls, and systematically destroyed churches, Shia shrines, and other religious sites. The al-Nusra Front (al-Nusra) killed a Dutch priest in Homs in April and seven Druze clerics and eight other Druze in August. Al-Nusra abducted members of religious minority groups, including a Catholic priest and 20 other Christians in Quenyeh Village in October.

There were reports of tensions among religious groups, exacerbated by government actions, cultural rivalries, and sectarian rhetoric and violence. As the death toll of the conflict increased (the United Nations reported at least 200,000 conflict-related deaths by year’s end) and the regime took more violent action, reports of sectarian killings, Sunni reprisals, and violence against minority groups continued. Previous religiously heterogeneous neighborhoods in cities, as well as towns and villages,

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continued the trend of becoming increasingly monocultural as religious groups relocated, seeking greater security and safety by living with their coreligionists.

The U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in February 2012. The U.S. government, however, maintained relationships with Syrian religious groups and civil society representatives in the United States, Syria, and throughout the region. The President and the Secretary of State voiced the expectation that Syria's government should, at present and in the future, respect and protect the rights of all citizens regardless of religious beliefs. Senior officials reiterated this point throughout the year. The U.S. Special Envoy for Syria and other U.S. officials met with Christians, Sunnis, Shia, Alawites, Ismailis, Druze, and Yezidis to discuss assistance to vulnerable populations and ways to counter sectarian violence. U.S. humanitarian, non-lethal assistance to Syrians, including religious groups, throughout the region totaled approximately \$3.3 billion during the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at approximately 17.9 million (July 2014 estimate). Sunni Muslims are estimated to constitute 74 percent of the population and are present throughout the country. The Sunni population includes ethnic Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and some Turkomans. Other Muslim groups, including Alawites, Ismailis, and Shia, together constitute 13 percent. Druze account for 3 percent of the population. Christian groups constituted 10 percent of the population before the civil war, although the Christian population may have been reduced to less than 8 percent as Christians continue to flee the country. Before the war there were small Jewish populations in Aleppo and Damascus, although there is no reliable information to confirm their continued residency or current size. Media and NGO reports and a social media page purportedly administered by Syrian Jews stated there were fewer than 20 Jews left in the country. There was also a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000 before the war, but media reports indicate that it has grown due to Iraqi Yezidis fleeing across the border into Syria. All population figures and demographic percentages are estimates that contain a considerable degree of uncertainty due to the ongoing civil war and resulting large-scale population displacement.

Most Christians belong to the 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.

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Most Christians live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, or in the Hasakah governorate in the northeast section of the country. While the country hosted 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. The majority of Alawites live in the mountainous areas of the coastal Latakia governorate, but they also have a significant presence in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Damascus. 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. The highest concentration of Ismailis is in the city of Salamiyeh in the Hama governorate.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The 2012 constitution states that the government respects all religions and provides freedom to exercise of all religions. It also provides legal mechanisms to target religious groups the government deems “extremist.” The constitution grants freedom of faith and religious practice provided that religious rites “do not disturb the public order.” The constitution states, “the civil status of the religious communities is protected and respected,” and “the citizens are equal in rights and duties, without discrimination as to religion or confession.” Citizens have the right to sue the government when they believe it has violated their rights.

Membership in any organization considered “Salafist,” a designation generally denoting Sunni fundamentalism, is illegal. The government and the State Security Court have not defined the exact parameters of what constitutes “Salafist” activity or explained why it is illegal. According to the law, affiliation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death.

There is no official state religion, although the constitution requires the president be Muslim and stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation. The government selects for religious leadership positions those Muslims who commit to preserving the secular nature of the state and avoid criticism of the government, as is the case with the country’s current grand mufti.

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The government restricts proselytizing and conversion. The government prohibits the conversion of Muslims to other religions, since this is deemed contrary to sharia. The government does not permit conversion from Islam to Christianity, but does recognize Christian converts to Islam. The penal code prohibits “causing tension between religious communities.”

All religious groups must register with the government, which monitors fundraising and requires permits for all religious and nonreligious group meetings except for regularly scheduled worship. The registration process can be complicated and lengthy, but the government usually allows groups to operate informally while awaiting approval. 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.

For issues of personal status, the government requires citizens to be affiliated nominally with Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Religious affiliation is documented on the birth certificate and is required on legal documentation when marrying or traveling for a religious pilgrimage and on many other official forms. The government does not require the designation of religion on passports or national identity cards.

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 from Christianity to Islam, the law states that the presiding Muslim cleric must inform the prospective convert’s diocese.

Individuals are subject to their respective religious groups’ laws concerning marriage and divorce. The personal status law on divorce for Muslims is based on sharia, and government appoints religious judges. In the case of interreligious disputes, sharia takes precedence. A divorced woman is not entitled to alimony in some cases, such as if she foregoes 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.

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The government's interpretation of sharia is the basis of inheritance law for all citizens except Christians. Accordingly, courts usually grant Muslim women 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.

The government generally does not prohibit links between its citizens and coreligionists in other countries or between its citizens and the international religious hierarchies that govern some religious groups. It prohibits, however, contact between the Jewish community and Jews in Israel.

Public schools are officially government-run and nonsectarian, although in practice the Christian and Druze communities operate some public schools. There is mandatory religious instruction in public schools for all students, with regime-approved teachers and curricula. Religious instruction is provided for Islam and Christianity only, and courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Members of religious minority groups can choose to attend public schools with Muslim or Christian instruction, or attend private schools that follow either secular or religious curricula. Groups participating in Islamic courses include only Sunnis, Shia, Alawites, Ismailis, Yezidis, and Druze. Although Arabic is the official language in public schools, the government permits the teaching of Armenian, Hebrew, Syriac (Aramaic), and Chaldean in some schools on the premise that they are "liturgical languages."

Government Practices

The government regime and allied militias, Lebanese Hizballah, and Shia militias made up of foreign fighters engaged in violence and discrimination against most religious minority groups and Sunnis. The regime targeted Sunnis disproportionately, largely viewing religious affiliation as a proxy for political beliefs, and assuming most Sunnis supported the opposition to its rule. The regime and its Shia militia allies killed, arrested, and physically abused members of targeted religious minority groups as well as Sunnis, and intentionally destroyed their property. The UN estimated by year's end that more than 200,000 individuals had been killed since the start of the conflict in the country. Sources reported that regime-affiliated militias seized the homes of Sunnis who had fled, 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.

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Media and academic experts said the government portrayed the armed resistance in sectarian terms, maintaining 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, in a news conference in September, Bashar al-Jaafari, the Syrian Ambassador to the UN, accused the opposition of being comprised of terrorists and claimed that government forces are “fighting terror on behalf of the whole world.”

Government-appointed religious officials called on citizens to engage in “jihad” in support of the regime. According to the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI), the rise in government-supported minority militias (*shabiha*) and the positioning of militias within their respective supportive communities fostered hostilities along sectarian lines.

There were credible reports the regime killed individuals because of their religious affiliation and targeted towns and neighborhoods in various parts of the country for siege, mortar shelling, and aerial bombardment on the basis of the religious affiliation of residents. For example, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported in August the presence of multiple pro-regime Shia militias fighting on behalf of the government in Aleppo early in the year, including Lebanese Hizballah and the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade. A civilian in the southern Aleppo countryside reported that fighters from Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas killed 26 men February 22 after abducting them from a cultural center building, accusing them of being terrorists and “Yazid sons,” lining them against a wall, and opening fire. The SNHR also reported witness testimony from a June 21 incident in Rasm An-Nafl Village in Aleppo where the regime bombed residents, killing 192 civilians, including 27 children and 21 women in one day. In February the UK newspaper *The Guardian* reported that Shia and Sunni factions in Aleppo engaged in heavy fighting that resulted in the death of several hundred civilians.

Campaigns of violence specifically targeted on the basis of faith contributed to the widespread displacement of civilians that numbered 7.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and more than 3.2 million refugees by year’s end, according to the UN. Actual figures may have been higher.

The government regime undertook judicial prosecution primarily against individuals perceived as constituting a political threat to its survival, including its secular identity. Human rights groups reported that many of the accused were targeted for being followers of a particular preacher or mosque rather than participants in extremist groups, although several antigovernment groups of

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various religious makeups, some exhibiting violent extremist behavior, had emerged since the start of the conflict. The government rarely furnished public documentation on the number arrested; however, human rights organizations and civil society groups reported the government had detained tens of thousands of citizens since the unrest began. Reportedly, almost none of the detained were afforded due process.

According to the Syrian American Council, there were at least 16 documented deaths of Sunni clerics and religious figures while in regime custody, bringing the reported total to at least 64 Sunni religious clerics killed since the start of the conflict. Activists said the actual figure is likely much higher.

Violence or repression against Sunni opposition groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, was common practice. Until 2012, the sentence for membership in the Muslim Brotherhood was typically commuted to 12 years in prison. During the year, however, sentencing ranged from lengthy imprisonment to the death penalty. Additionally, according to civil society activists, the government often engaged in extrajudicial detentions and killed such individuals rather than prosecuting them in court.

The government continued to imprison, and on some occasions summarily execute, individuals it deemed to be associated with opposition radio and television programming, including religious programming that did not meet government criteria.

The government engaged in forcible religious re-education programs. For example, media reported in February that the governor of Homs Province announced nearly 200 men, evacuated from Homs City during a cease-fire in the besieged city, were being held by Syrian security services and would receive religion classes to “modify their incorrect interpretation of Islam.” Their fate remained unknown at year’s end.

The SNHR reported that the regime deliberately targeted places of worship, including churches and mosques, and also converted them to bases to launch shelling into surrounding areas. The SNHR stated that regime forces targeted at least 244 places of worship throughout the year.

On February 13, regime forces targeted the St. Paul Church in Daraya outside of Damascus, severely damaging the building. Also in February the regime shelled

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one of the oldest Christian sites of worship in the world, the Church of Saints Constantine and Helen in Yabroud, whose structure dates back to the first millennium.

During the first two weeks in June the regime severely damaged dozens of Sunni mosques in Aleppo, including the more than 200-year-old Haroon Dada Mosque, as well as the Subhan and Firdous Mosques. According to the SNHR, regime forces bombed the Othman bin Affan Mosque in Aleppo and the town mosque in Madyara in February and March, respectively. In some cases, the regime reportedly targeted mosques claiming that they served as rallying points for protesters. Regime forces converted the Mahrada Monastery in Hama Province to a small military base, using it to shell neighboring areas and to store military vehicles and heavy artillery.

In May regime security forces shelled and significantly damaged the historic Eliyahu Hanabi Synagogue (also known as the Jobar Synagogue) in Damascus. The synagogue had been a center for Jewish worship and devotion for more than 400 years and was reportedly the repository of thousands of religious and historical artifacts.

The government continued to monitor and limit the activities of all religious groups and to discourage proselytizing. While there is no law prohibiting proselytizing, the government discouraged it and occasionally expelled or prosecuted missionaries for “posing a threat to the relations among religious groups.”

The government permitted the use of religious language in public, including banners bearing religious slogans at prominent public landmarks during religious holidays. The display of nativity scenes and other symbols associated with Christmas was common.

The government allowed foreign Christian faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to operate in the country under the auspices of the Catholic or Orthodox Churches and without officially registering. Many of these NGOs worked directly to provide humanitarian assistance in cooperation with the various churches in the country.

Recognized religious minority groups, with the exception of Jews, were represented among the senior officer corps of the Syrian military. While the law

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does not permit conscientious objection to military service, historically both Christian and Muslim religious leaders have been exempted, although Muslim religious leaders were required to pay a levy for exemption.

The regime openly threatened Sunnis, warning against increased communications with foreign coreligionists, defining such communication as opposition political or military activity. The government monitored and controlled sermons and often closed mosques between prayers. At the same time the government continued its support for radio and television programming related to the practice and study of Islam that it deemed appropriate.

The government allowed foreign Christian faith-based NGOs to operate under the auspices of one of the historically established churches without officially registering. It required foreign Islamic NGOs, however, to register and receive approval from the Ministry of Religious Endowments to operate. Security forces regularly questioned these organizations on their sources of income and monitored their expenditures. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor continued to prohibit religious leaders from serving as directors on the boards of Islamic charities, maintaining the previous year's departure from traditional practice under which clerics headed most Islamic charities in the country.

There were limits placed on the distribution of religious media. Despite having no specific law against the production and distribution of religious literature or other types of media, the government reportedly used provisions in the penal code to prohibit "causing tension between religious communities" to restrict distribution of religious materials by groups it deemed a threat.

The regime continued to condemn sectarian strife, for example during public speeches by prominent government-affiliated figures such as Grand Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, while attributing opposition violence to religious extremists and terrorists. Opposition figures continued to say the authorities systematically used sectarian fear as a strategy to counter antigovernment demonstrations and justify government attacks on civilian and residential areas.

Religion was a factor in determining some career advancement. The minority Alawite group, of which President Asad and his family are members, continued to hold an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers, particularly in the military and other security services.

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The media continued to disseminate anti-Semitic material through government radio and television programming, news articles, cartoons, and other mass media. Government-appointed Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun continued to evoke sectarian rhetoric and disparage “Zionist control” of holy sites in Jerusalem in his public remarks. The regime also regularly cited a “Zionist conspiracy” as responsible for the conflict and violence the country is currently experiencing.

In March, following the highly publicized release of the 12 nuns taken captive from Maloula, regime media described the nuns as “traitors to the nation.”

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

Terrorist groups, including ISIL and al-Nusra, perpetrated killings, arrests, torture, kidnappings, and the intentional destruction of property against most religious groups in the country. ISIL publicly executed five western hostages, using the terms “dogs of Rome” and “crusaders” as purported justification. The group also beheaded women and men it had accused of blasphemy and apostasy.

A religious freedom advocacy organization reported that in February unidentified opposition forces attacked the primarily Alawite village of Maan, killing 40 people. Media widely reported that on April 7, al-Nusra shot and killed Dutch Jesuit priest Frans van der Lugt in Homs governorate. According to media reports, in August al-Nusra killed seven Druze clerics and eight other residents in the predominantly Druze town of Deir Dama, near Suweida City in Dara Province. In August ISIL killed seven members of an Ismaili family in Salamiyeh, Hama Province, according to media and human rights reports. In November ISIL beheaded an Ismaili after accusing him of apostasy, and in December it beheaded at least five men it accused of blasphemy.

ISIL transported to a village in northeast Syria more than 25 Iraqi Yezidi men it had captured in Iraq, and forced them to convert to Islam, pay a \$50,000 ransom, or be killed. According to reports from Yezidi advocacy groups, ISIL beat and tortured the men while in custody, insulting and cursing the Yezidi religion. ISIL released a small number of them after their families paid a ransom for them, but ISIL reportedly killed the rest after they refused to convert to Islam.

According to media accounts and ISIL’s own videos, on August 27, ISIL physically abused and killed an estimated 160 Syrian army soldiers captured at

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Tabqa military base and the surrounding area. During the episode, ISIL systematically insulted the Alawite faith, dehumanizing the captives as “Nusairi herds” (a derogatory term in Arabic to describe members of the Alawite faith). ISIL beat the men, stripped them, and marched them barefoot over 60 miles to an area near Raqqa City. ISIL subsequently beheaded them and displayed their decapitated heads on fence posts in the city’s main square. In a video, ISIL said this treatment was justified because Alawites were “enemies of God.”

Anti-regime and foreign fighters committed targeted killings of individuals, sometimes as part of efforts to promote sectarian violence. The COI, activists, and media reported in February ISIL issued an ultimatum that Christians in Raqqa convert to Islam, pay a protection tax, or face execution. Media reports documented large numbers of Christians fleeing Raqqa in response to this announcement. Former residents of Raqqa estimated there were no more than 30 Christians left in Raqqa City, paying an unknown amount in protection taxes (*jizya*), and without access to public places of worship. ISIL converted all churches in Raqqa into mosques and forbade public worship of any other faith. One former resident of Raqqa reported that ISIL required Christian families to pay 60,000 Syrian pounds (\$335) in *jizya* per family per year. ISIL reportedly seized the abandoned homes of Christians in Raqqa who fled following ISIL’s public ultimatum in February.

An offensive led by al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham against the Armenian Christian town of Kassab in March reportedly forced nearly 2,500 civilians to flee. Media reported that on June 1, ISIL confiscated houses and land belonging to Christian families in the area of Ein al-Issa in Raqqa Province and forced residents to leave the area. ISIL attacked Shia mosques and shrines in Raqqa, destroying the Uwais Al-Qami Mosque and desecrating seventh century tombs in late May, which former residents said prompted the mass flight of Shia residents. Other Shia residents of Raqqa converted “to survive,” according to a COI report.

Extremist opposition groups engaged in kidnapping targeted against religious minorities. Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi, kidnapped in April 2013, remained unaccounted for at year’s end. In March al-Nusra freed the twelve nuns that it had taken captive during fighting over the town of Maloula in December 2013. In October al-Nusra fighters abducted a Catholic priest and 20 other Christians in the village of Qunyah. Several days later, they were released unharmed. The whereabouts and condition of three other Christian men kidnapped in the Khabour region of

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Hasakah Province by armed individuals believed to be affiliated with ISIL remained unknown.

The whereabouts and condition of Jesuit priest Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, kidnapped by ISIL in July 2013 in Raqqa, remained unknown.

Al-Nusra claimed responsibility for numerous bombings, including suicide attacks, across the country, in many cases stating that such attacks were reactions to the regime's "massacres of Sunnis."

Yezidis, the UN, the Iraqi government, and others reported that ISIL captured thousands of Yezidi women and girls in Iraq. Yezidi activists and civil society groups reported more than 4,000 remained in ISIL captivity at year's end, and that many of these had been trafficked to Syria and were sold or distributed to ISIL fighters there as "spoils of war." Escaped captives reported ISIL held hundreds of Yezidi women and children in Raqqa, and sexually assaulted many of them, which ISIL also reported in its own videos. An ISIL publication said it conducted this "large-scale enslavement" of Yezidi women and children because of the Yezidis' religious beliefs.

In addition to killing members of religious groups during armed attacks, terrorist groups and other armed groups ran ad hoc courts throughout the northern areas based on varying interpretations of Islamic law that authorized the public execution and torture of minorities, particularly Alawites, accused of working with the regime. Armed groups, including those linked to al-Nusra, established sharia councils in Aleppo Province and elsewhere, replacing both regime-affiliated courts and opposition courts upholding the current Syrian penal code.

In areas under its control, ISIL established a police force and system of courts that administered justice in accordance with its extreme interpretation of Islamic religious law. ISIL police forces, known as Hisbah, administered summary punishment for violations of a strict morality code. Men and women faced public beatings for smoking, possessing alcohol, listening to music, having tattoos, conducting business during prayer times, not attending Friday prayers, and not fasting during Ramadan. Others were punished for accompanying "improperly dressed" female relatives. ISIL also established the al-Khanssaa all-female police force, comprised of mostly non-Syrian foreign women in Raqqa, that enforced ISIL-prescribed moral regulations, sometimes violently, among women.

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ISIL engaged in a campaign to attack and destroy minority religious sites in the areas it held. For example, in March ISIL bombed and destroyed an important Shia shrine in Raqqa, the Mosque of Ammar bin Yassir and Oweis al-Qarni. In September ISIL destroyed an Armenian church in Deir el Zour.

ISIL altered school curricula to use schools as a platform for indoctrination according to its interpretation of religious principles and for the propagation of its ideological priorities. For example, ISIL used Al Bouhtri School in Al-Bab as a training facility for boys under age 18, and the Sharea youth camp near Tabqa trained over 350 boys between five and 16 years of age for “jihad.” ISIL also banned several basic academic subjects, such as chemistry, Christian religious education, and non-ISIL Islamic education.

The New York Times reported on November 13 that ISIL commander Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called on Muslims throughout the Middle East to rise up against “the agents of the Jews and crusaders, their slaves, tails, and dogs.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some prominent societal and religious leaders and armed local militias contributed negatively to sectarian tensions and religious freedom. There were also bombings for which neither side in the conflict took responsibility. For example, an October bombing outside of a school in a primarily Alawite neighborhood in Homs killed 41 children.

There were reports of tensions among religious groups, exacerbated by government actions, cultural rivalries, and sectarian rhetoric and violence. As the death toll of the conflict increased and the regime took more violent action, reports of sectarian killings, Sunni reprisals, and violence against minority groups continued to increase.

Accusations that the regime favored the Alawite population continued, culminating in opposition attacks, reportedly by extremist elements, on Alawite populations. Alawites increasingly feared sectarian cleansing would follow a fall of the regime. Homs remained a “city of cantonments,” with security walls dividing Alawite neighborhoods from the rest of the city.

Religious groups continued to self-segregate into sectarian-based neighborhoods or towns. Damascus residents reported Alawites based in Rif Damascus moved away

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from previously mixed neighborhoods to relocate to provinces or neighborhoods heavily populated by Alawites. In other areas of the country, however, Sunnis internally displaced by regime-perpetrated violence reportedly relocated to traditional Alawite strongholds along the coast, believing they would be safer from regime-driven sectarian violence.

In May media reported conflict between Shia militia fighters from Iran and Iraq and Alawite factions near the Sayyideh Zainab neighborhood in Damascus over religious differences.

Some Christians reported societal tolerance for Christians dwindled as the influence of extremist groups increased, triggering the flight of many Christians from the country as refugees or into Kurdish and regime-controlled areas. For example, media reported tens of thousands of Christians left Aleppo since the start of the conflict, with many departing following reports of ISIL's treatment of Christians in Raqqa and in Mosul, Iraq in June and July. Media reports indicated that at least 20,000 Christians had relocated to Armenia since the start of the conflict, with several thousand also relocating to Turkey. Christian refugees in Turkey reported to media outlets they lost property and personal possessions to extortion by criminal gangs and extremist groups.

Alawite and Shia youth reported being threatened in schools and universities by Sunni colleagues due to their religious affiliations and perceived support for the regime. One Christian civil society organization reported instances in the northwestern part of the country of Christians being excluded in the distribution of humanitarian aid because of perceived support for the regime due to their religious affiliation. Antigovernment protests occasionally carried specific anti-Alawite messages.

Social conventions and religious proscriptions made conversion relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversion, which was not legal. Societal pressure forced converts to relocate within the country or leave the country to practice their new religion openly, according to reports by advocacy groups.

Some societal and religious leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom, actively countering sectarian narratives, encouraging peaceful relations among religious groups, and calling on all parties to the conflict to respect human rights. For example, in October an Episcopal bishop in Homs convened a local reconciliation meeting that brought together 40 local religious and community

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leaders from various Sunni, Alawite, and Christian communities. The Syrian Opposition Coalition condemned actions against religious minorities, both by the regime and by extremist and terrorist groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in February 2012. The U.S. government nevertheless continued existing relationships and developed new relationships with Syrian religious groups and leaders. The President and the Secretary of State urged the government to respect the universal rights of its citizens, including the right to religious freedom. The President in September stated his position that the only solution to the Syrian crisis was a political one that “responds to the legitimate aspirations of all Syrian citizens, regardless of ethnicity or creed.” This includes Sunni and Shia Muslims who are at grave risk, as well as tens of thousands of Christians and other religious minorities. The Secretary of State in January affirmed the expectation that Syria be a country that “respects its citizens and that protects the rights of every group, every sect, every faith...where all people are represented without discrimination...” The Secretary and other senior U.S. officials reiterated this point at other times during the year.

U.S. officials sought out religious groups and leaders in Syria, the United States, and throughout the world. The Special Envoy for Syria and other high-ranking U.S. officials met with members of the Orthodox Christian, Sunni, Druze, and Shia communities, focusing on providing assistance to vulnerable populations and countering sectarian violence. The Special Envoy and other officials participated in dialogues, roundtables, and working groups focused on countering sectarianism and retributive violence. U.S. government officials pressed the political opposition to expand and include representatives from all religious and ethnic backgrounds in order to better reflect the diversity of the country’s population. The United States supported the documentation of violations committed by all sides of the conflict through the COI and through direct support to Syrian-led documentation efforts.

U.S. humanitarian and non-lethal assistance to vulnerable Syrian populations, including religious groups, was approximately \$3.3 billion during the year.