



GENOCIDE ALERT: THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

Update: September 2014

Violence directed against religious minorities in Syria intensified from May 2013 to August 2014, and credible reports emerged of mass killings of Alawite Muslims and Christians in several locales. Chemical weapons attacks on Sunni Muslim areas of the Damascus outskirts in August 2013, allegedly by government forces, killed as many as 1,400 civilians and dramatically raised the stakes in the conflict by ensuring that a collapse of the Syrian government would be followed by widespread revenge massacres. Christian Solidarity International's Genocide Alert for Syria remains in effect. The international community should make genocide prevention the focus of its involvement in the Syrian conflict.

During the reporting period, the worst fears of Syria's religious minority communities were embodied in the formation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS, the "Islamic State," or *da'ash*), an outgrowth of the al Qaeda-linked Islamic State in Iraq which combines an unyielding interpretation of Islamic law with operative violence, including public crucifixions of its opponents.¹ ISIL's genocidal goals are explicit; one video released by ISIL in June 2014 called on its supporters to "break the crosses and destroy the lineage of the grandsons of monkeys."² In May 2013, after capturing Raqqa, a city in northeastern Syria home to more than one million people, ISIL inaugurated its rule by publicly executing Alawite civilians.³ In September 2013, ISIL publicly burned one church in Raqqa and desecrated another,⁴ as part of a deliberate campaign of terror that drove most Christians out of Raqqa province. As in Syria as a whole, they had constituted 10% of the pre-ISIL population.⁵ In February 2014, ISIL issued draconian *shari'a*-based restrictions on Raqqa's few remaining Christians, including a prohibition on public prayer and a special Christians-only tax to be paid in gold, warning, "If they reject, they are subject to being legitimate targets, and nothing will remain between them and ISIL other than the sword."⁶ The threat prompted a new refugee wave of Christians out of Raqqa province, many into neighboring Iraq, where CSI teams were able to meet and interview them.

Other particularly brutal examples of ISIL violence against religious minorities include the execution of an entire Alawite family in the village of Zanuba, Hama province, in May 2014,⁷ and the massacre of 15 civilians in the village of al-Taliliya in northeastern Syria, probably because the ISIL fighters responsible mistakenly believed their victims to be members of the Yezidi religious sect.⁸ (Other reports indicate that the destruction of Syria's Yezidi community is already complete, the entire population having fled the country).⁹

In early 2014, most anti-regime groups in Syria broke with ISIL over its power-monopolizing behavior and began fighting to drive ISIL out, with limited success. Despite their opposition to ISIL, groups operating under the banners of, variously, the "Free Syrian Army," the "Islamic

Front” and Jubhat al-Nusra, al Qaeda’s official franchise in Syria, cooperated in committing acts of religious cleansing against religious minorities throughout the period May 2013 to August 2014, including:

- **June 11, 2013:** The sectarian massacre of some 60 Shia Muslims in the village of Hatla in eastern Syria.¹⁰
- **August 4, 2013:** The massacre of some 190 Alawite civilians, and the abduction of some 200 more, in rural Lattakia during the so-called “Barouda offensive” undertaken by the Free Syrian Army, ISIL, Jubhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.¹¹
- **August 17, 2013:** The gunning down of 9 Christians in the town of Ein al-Ajouz.¹²
- **September 7, 2013:** The occupation of the Christian holy city of Maaloula, and the concurrent forced flight of its Christian inhabitants, attributed to the Free Syrian Army, Jubhat al-Nusra and the Qalamoun Liberation Front.¹³
- **October 21, 2013:** The siege and occupation of the ancient Christian village of Sadad, in which 41 Christian civilians were killed, including an entire family whose bodies were found in a well following the withdrawal of opposition forces. The attackers included fighters from the Free Syrian Army, Jubhat al-Nusra, and ISIL.¹⁴
- **February 9, 2014:** The massacre of 21 Alawite civilians in the village of Ma’an by Jund al-Aqsa.¹⁵
- **March 21, 2014:** The religious cleansing of the Armenian Christian village of Kassab by Jubhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front, fighting with support from the Turkish military.¹⁶
- **March-June 2014:** A string of car bombings in Homs’ Alawite and Christian districts that killed over one hundred people, following the regime’s successful recapture of the city.¹⁷ Jubhat al-Nusra claims responsibility for at least some of the bombings.¹⁸
- **August 2014:** The siege of the Christian-majority town of al-Maharda by Jubhat al-Nusra.¹⁹

MAY 2013 GENOCIDE ALERT

Christian Solidarity International has issued a Genocide Alert for religious minorities in the Syrian Arab Republic, specifically Alawites, Shia Muslims, Druze, Christians, Yezidis and Jews. Conditions currently exist for a genocide of these groups by armed non-state actors fighting against the Bashar al-Assad regime, particularly Jubhat al-Nusra and other Islamist groups fighting under a wide and ever-shifting collection of names.

Syria is currently in the third year of a conflict that began with peaceful anti-government protests in March 2011, protests which were immediately and repeatedly met with deadly violence from the Syrian state. Because the Syrian state is dominated by members of the Alawi sect, including

President Bashar al-Assad, and because the Assad regime has historically protected and even favored members of religious minority groups in a region that is traditionally hostile to religious minorities, the uprising remained largely restricted to Syria's Sunni Arab majority (approximately 65% of the population.)

The militarization of the revolution, triggered by the Assad regime's unremitting violence against Syria's civilian population and large defections from the Syrian Armed Forces, which then organized into the "Free Syrian Army," did not change this sectarian dynamic. Weapons and funding for the rebels from Islamist-dominated states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, the superior organization of Syrian Islamist groups, and the preexisting sectarianism of the movement contributed to increasing Islamist dominance, until, according to one analyst, "By November 2012, the ideological spectrum of Syria's armed movement had narrowed to one ranging from apolitical Sunni conservatism or rural sufism, across the Muslim Brotherhood's ikhwani Islamism, to the rigid ultra-orthodoxy of salafism. There was little or no room for secular ideologies."²⁰ Another analyst concluded in December 2012 about Syria's armed rebels, "The overwhelming majority, if not all, espouse an Islamist, jihadist, Salafist outlook."²¹

The Islamicization of the Syrian revolution has been accompanied by increased attacks on Syrian religious minorities from armed anti-government groups, including acts of religious cleansing, targeted killings, massacres, attacks on places of worship, and abductions. The anti-minority violence prompted the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria to warn in December 2012 that, "Entire [minority] communities are at risk of being forced out of the country or of being killed inside the country,"²² a prospect that amounts to genocide under the definition of the Genocide Convention. In March 2013, Ambassador Frederic C. Hof, a former special adviser on Syria to the Obama administration, echoed this warning: "Left on its current trajectory, Syria is on the path to state failure and sustained sectarian violence, featuring mass atrocities and cleansing that could amount to genocide in some areas."²³

Anti-government rebels have cleansed several locales in Syria of their religious minority populations, most notably Homs, Syria's third-largest city, where nearly the entire Christian population of 80,000 was forcibly expelled,²⁴ but also Qusayr,²⁵ al-Burj al-Qastal,²⁶ and some rural areas in Idlib and Latakia province.²⁷ At least 14 minority places of worship across Syria, including Christian churches, Shia Muslim mosques and shrines and a Jewish Synagogue, have been deliberately attacked or destroyed. Car bomb attacks targeting Christian and Alawite neighborhoods of Damascus have killed scores of civilians and prompted many to flee.²⁸

According to one particularly disturbing report from February 2013, rebels in Aleppo shot and killed an Armenian Christian man after checking the identity papers of all the passengers on board a bus and noting that his surname sounded Armenian.²⁹ Two Christian priests traveling on a bus in Aleppo province were similarly singled out and abducted by rebels in the same month.³⁰ Sources inside Syria have reported to CSI that several Christians in Raqqa City were murdered by Jubhat al-Nusra after the group seized the city from regime forces in March 2013. The UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported in December 2012 that, "upon capturing Government forces," one FSA battalion in Latakia province imprisoned its Sunni captives, "while Alawites were immediately executed."³¹

Abductions by rebel groups, gangs or common criminals, are a ubiquitous phenomenon in Syria and disproportionately affect religious minorities. In January 2013, some 50 people were

abducted from Hasake province in northeast Syria, half of them Christians.³² A CSI source in Aleppo reports that abductions occur almost daily, “mainly of Christians, as they are thought to be the group that can pay the most for ransom.” A Druze leader reported in March 2013, “Our people get stopped at checkpoints and are asked which sect they belong to. Once the militias hear that they are from Swaida [a province where 90% of the population is Druze], our men disappear.” A Sunni anti-regime activist explained the targeting of Swaida’s Druze, despite their considerable support for Sunnis under government assault in neighboring Daraa province, this way: “Jubhat al-Nusra sees the Druze as infidels, therefore they see attacking and kidnapping them as justified.”³³

Religious minorities in Syria have also been victimized by regime violence. Many Syrian Christian refugees in Lebanon were forced to flee by the regime’s indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas.³⁴ Regime forces murdered Basel Shahade, a young Christian political activist, in Homs in May 2012.³⁵ Bishop Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syrian Orthodox Church was kidnapped in April 2013 after criticizing the regime in public; the regime and the opposition traded blame for the abduction of the bishop, who remains in captivity.³⁶ The Syrian opposition has also blamed the car bomb massacres in the Christian-Druze Damascus suburb of Jaramana on regime intelligence services.³⁷ The regime has contributed significantly to the sectarian nature of the conflict by aggressively recruiting Christians, Alawites and Shiites into pro-government militias. The Assad regime has historically tried to suppress non-Arab Christian identities, such as that of the Assyrian Christian population.

Between 200,000 and 300,000 Christians have fled Syria since the beginning of the war,³⁸ accounting for nearly one-fifth of the total Syrian refugee population, though Christians constituted only one-tenth of Syria’s prewar population. Christian refugees in Turkey report that they are unable to stay in refugee camps set up by the Turkish government, as Jubhat al-Nusra and other rebel groups often impress young men from the camps into fighting against the regime.³⁹

There is precedent for elimination of minority religious groups in Syria’s modern history: following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Syria’s small Jewish population was subjected to repeated pogroms and systematic persecution by the state, leading to the slow exodus of nearly the entire community from the country.⁴⁰

Calls for genocide against religious minorities from rebel leaders in Syria are numerous and frequent. The chant “Alawites to the grave, Christians to Beirut!” has been reported at anti-government demonstrations since the earliest days of the revolution. In early 2013, a YouTube video surfaced of a young Sunni Syrian boy singing to a cheering crowd, “We will slaughter the Shiites in the towns of Kfariya and Fua”⁴¹ (two isolated Shia towns in Idlib province, which would later become the site of a mass abduction of Shia civilians⁴²). In July 2012, a Sunni rebel commander posted a video on YouTube threatening to kill any Sunni who traded with Shia Muslims, “even if it is a single grain of wheat.”⁴³ Many Free Syrian Army battalions have named themselves after Ibn Taymiyya, a 14th century Sunni Muslim scholar who called for the extermination of Alawites.⁴⁴ Following the religious cleansing of Alawites from the village of Jamaliyya in December 2012, a Jubhat al-Nusra fighter said, “We are defending our religion. This is what our revolution is about.”⁴⁵ In July 2012, a Sunni rebel fighter declared, “All Alawites must be slaughtered.”⁴⁶

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