

# SYRIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom for some majority and minority groups, while providing a legal mechanism for targeting religious groups deemed “extremist” by the government. The constitution provides for freedom of faith and religious practice as long as religious rites do not disturb the public order. In practice, the government used the “extremist” label to target members of religious groups seen as political opponents. The government’s respect for religious freedom declined during the year, as did its ability to protect this right in contested and rebel-held regions of the country. The government outlawed groups it claimed were “Muslim extremist groups” as well as Jehovah’s Witnesses. It continued to monitor the activities of all religious groups and to discourage proselytizing. The country’s escalating civil war resulted, according to some estimates, in more than 130,000 deaths between the start of the uprising in 2011 and year’s end. While the conflict was not entirely sectarian, the Asad regime increasingly characterized it in sectarian terms and targeted religious groups it considered opposition-aligned, particularly members of the country’s Sunni majority. The government perpetrated targeted killings, arbitrary and unlawful detentions, and harassment of members of religious groups considered anti-regime or living in neighborhoods thought to be harboring rebel fighters.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Islamic extremist groups, especially those linked to Al Qaida, increased their targeting of Alawite, Shia Muslim, Christian, and other religious communities. At the same time, regime-aligned militia groups composed of Iraqi Shia and Hezbollah fighters targeted members of groups seen as aligned with the opposition, especially Sunnis. Although the Asad regime most often rationalized attacks in political terms, an increasing number of violent acts targeted the victims simply for their religious affiliation. Reports of harassment of Christians increased during the year, including reports of forced conversions, with many choosing to flee as refugees.

There has been no U.S. diplomatic presence inside the country since the closure of the U.S. embassy in February 2012, but U.S. officials continued to consult with religious leaders and groups to promote religious tolerance. Officials in Washington engaged with members of Syrian civil society groups, religious leaders, and opposition leaders to organize events and develop practices aimed at combating increasingly sectarian rhetoric. In public statements, the U.S.

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government continued to urge the Syrian government and opposition to respect the universal rights of all citizens, including the right to religious freedom.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 22.5 million (July 2013 estimate). Sunni Muslims constitute 74 percent of the population and are present throughout the country. The Sunni population includes Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and some Turkomans. Other Muslim groups, including Alawis, Ismailis, and Shia, together constitute 13 percent. Druze account for 3 percent of the population. Various Christian groups constitute the remaining 10 percent, although the Christian population may be closer to 8 percent due to emigration as Christians flee the country. There is also a very small Jewish population in Aleppo and Damascus. Media reports estimate approximately 50 Jews remain in the country, a decline from the previous year.

Most Christians belong to the autonomous Orthodox churches, the Uniate churches (which recognize the Roman Catholic Pope), or the Assyrian Church of the East and other affiliated independent Nestorian churches. There is a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000, but the government does not recognize the Yezidi as belonging to a group distinct from Islam.

Most Christians live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, or in the Hasaka governorate in the northeast section of the country. While Syria hosted hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christian refugees prior to the Syrian conflict, the majority of the Iraqi Christian population in the country either moved to neighboring countries or returned to Iraq over the past two years. The majority of Alawis live in the mountainous areas of the coastal Latakia governorate, but they also have 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 vast 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/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom for some majority and minority groups, while providing legal mechanisms for targeting religious groups the government deems “extremist.” Laws and government

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policies grant freedom of faith and religious practice provided that religious rites “do not disturb the public order.” The government bans groups it considers “Muslim extremists,” and also bans Jehovah’s Witnesses. Citizens have the legal right to sue the government when they believe it has violated their rights.

Membership in any organization considered “Salafist,” a designation generally denoting conservative Sunni fundamentalism, is illegal. The government and the State Security Court have not defined the exact parameters of what constitutes a Salafist activity or explained why it is illegal. According to Law 49, affiliation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death. Until 2012, the sentence was typically commuted to 12 years in prison. During the year, however, sentencing ranged from lengthy imprisonment to the death penalty. Additionally, the government often extrajudicially detained and killed such individuals, rather than prosecuting them in court.

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.

The government restricts proselytizing and conversion. The government does not recognize the religious status of Muslims who convert to other religions, and considers such converts subject to sharia (Islamic law). It does recognize Christian converts to Islam. While there is no civil law prohibiting proselytizing, the government discourages it and occasionally expels or prosecutes missionaries for “posing a threat to the relations among religious groups.”

There is no specific law against the production and distribution of religious literature or other types of media. The penal code, however, prohibits “causing tension between religious communities,” a provision the government uses to prosecute groups it deems harmful to society, mostly those it views as Salafist, and to restrict their distribution of religious materials.

All religious groups must register with the government, which monitors fundraising and requires permits for all religious and nonreligious group meetings except for 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

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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. The government does not require the designation of religion on a passport or national identity card.

A Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian man, but a Christian woman can 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 wants 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 Islamic law, and government-appointed religious judges interpret some of its provisions in a manner that discriminates against women. In the case of interreligious disputes, Islamic law takes precedence.

Inheritance is based on Islamic law for all citizens except Christians. Accordingly, women are usually granted half the share of inheritance that male heirs receive. 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 hierarchies that govern some religious groups. It prohibits, however, contact between the Jewish community and Jews in Israel.

The government permits 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 is common.

The government allows 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

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work directly to provide humanitarian assistance in cooperation with the various churches in the country.

Recognized religious minority groups, with the exception of Jews, are represented among the senior officer corps. The law does not permit conscientious objection to military service. Historically, both Christian and Muslim religious leaders are exempted from military service, although Muslim religious leaders must pay a levy to be exempted. In keeping with the government's policy of secularism, there are no chaplains of any faith in the military.

All public schools are officially government-run and nonsectarian, although in practice the Christian and Druze communities operate some schools. There is mandatory religious instruction in public schools for all religious groups, with government-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 minority sect curricula. Groups participating in Islamic courses include only Sunni, Shia, Alawi, Ismaili, Yezidi, 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." There is no mandatory religious study at the university level.

### Government Practices

There were reports of killing, imprisonment, detention, and the intentional destruction of property on the basis of religion. Human rights organizations estimated that more than 130,000 have perished since the start of the conflict. As the conflict devolved further into civil war, the government increased its attacks against members of religious groups it deemed a threat, using the "extremist" label to target members of these groups and those suspected of harboring them, particularly among members of the country's Sunni majority. The government continued to portray the armed resistance in sectarian terms, maintaining that opposition protesters and fighters were associated with "extreme Islamist factions" and terrorists bent on eliminating Syria's religious minority groups. Government religious officials called on Syrians to engage in jihad in support of the regime, and government forces damaged or destroyed many religious sites. The government continued to monitor and limit the activities of all religious groups and to

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discourage proselytizing. Violence or repression against those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood was common practice for the regime.

The government targeted, arrested, abused, and killed those it accused, often falsely, of participation or cooperation with anti-regime “extremists,” broadly defining this category to include anyone suspected of disloyalty to the regime. As religious affiliation was seen as a determinant of regime loyalty, 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 bombardments on the basis of the religious affiliation of residents in those locations. For example, on February 22, the regime bombarded the predominantly Sunni neighborhoods of Ard al Hamra and Tariq al Bab in Aleppo, killing at least 91 civilians, according to Human Rights Watch. In May pro-regime and government forces killed up to 450 Sunni civilians in the towns of Banyas and Bayda in Tartus Governorate. The UN also reported that government and Hezbollah forces killed as many as 450 individuals, half of whom were civilians, during their siege of the predominantly Sunni town of Qusayr. The government cut residents off from food and water during the siege, which lasted three weeks in May and June. The regime also reportedly staged military strikes from villages and towns with specific religious demographics in order to bolster its sectarian narrative.

The government undertook judicial prosecution primarily against individuals perceived as constituting a political threat to the country’s secular system and the survival of the regime.

Human rights groups reported that many of the accused were targeted for being followers of a particular preacher or mosque rather than participants in any extremist groups, although escalating conflict led to the emergence of several anti-government groups of various religious makeups. The government rarely furnished documentation on the number arrested; however, observers noted the government had detained tens of thousands of citizens since the unrest began. Almost none of the detained were provided due process.

The government also carried out extrajudicial punishments against those defined as religious extremists, particularly targeting Sunni clerics, according to human rights groups. In June the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported that since the start of the conflict, there were at least 15 documented deaths of Sunni clerics while in regime custody. It reported a total of 48 Sunni clerics killed since the start of the conflict.

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The government increased the number of imprisonments and summary executions of individuals it deemed to be associated with opposition radio and television programming, including religious programming that did not meet government criteria.

There were credible reports the government targeted religious sites, predominantly Sunni mosques. In June SNHR reported the government partially or completely destroyed more than 1,450 mosques since the start of the conflict. In some cases, the mosques were reportedly targeted because they served as rallying points for protesters.

In late March there were reports that the Jobar Synagogue in Damascus was damaged. The Syrian army and opposition forces blamed each other.

The government also destroyed a number of Christian sites. In September SNHR issued a report documenting government shelling of at least 33 Christian churches, some on multiple occasions, and accusing government forces of using churches as barracks for military forces.

Government security services monitored all groups, religious and nonreligious, as well as individuals, but particularly those it considered a threat to the regime. The government openly threatened members of the Sunni majority, 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 government-sanctioned forms of Islam.

The government allowed foreign Christian faith-based NGOs such as the Jesuit Refugee Service to operate under the auspices of one of the historically established churches but 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 prohibited religious leaders from serving as the directors of boards for Islamic charities. This was a sharp policy change; traditionally, clerics headed nearly all Islamic charities in the country.

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The government continued to prosecute and harass those suspected of proselytizing, with reported cases of government surveillance of and fines imposed on Christian and Sunni organizations. Most charges carried sentences of imprisonment from five years to life; in the past, these had been reduced to one or two years.

Stated policy disavowed sectarianism of any kind, although the government directly employed sectarianism in practice. The regime continued its widespread marketing campaign against *fitna*, or sectarian strife, while simultaneously attributing opposition violence to religious extremists and terrorists. In May the Dar al-Ifta Council headed by Grand Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun issued a religious decree deeming “defense and jihad” for the regime “a national and a religious duty.” Opposition figures continued to accuse the authorities of systematically using sectarian fear as a strategy to counter anti-government demonstrations.

Religion was a factor in determining some career opportunities. The minority Alawi sect, of which President Asad and his family are members, continued to hold an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers, including in the military and other security services. Christians complained about growing limitations on their influence and positions in the government.

The government continued to sponsor anti-Israeli media coverage and rhetoric, and the media continued to disseminate anti-Semitic material through radio and television programming, news articles, cartoons, and other mass media. The grand mufti (a government-appointed position), Sheikh Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, issued multiple public statements alleging that attempts to fragment the region along sectarian lines were “designed to serve the Zionist entity in the region.”

### **Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations**

Rebel forces, particularly those linked to Al Qaida, perpetrated killings, unlawful detentions, kidnappings, and the intentional destruction of property.

The UN concluded that in June, anti-regime fighters, including U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), in Deir al-Zour Province killed at least 20 Shia civilians and burned down a Shia mosque while reportedly chanting sectarian slogans. In September Human Rights Watch reported that armed extremist groups killed at least 190 civilians during an August offensive in predominantly Alawite communities in Latakia Province. In October media

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reported that residents returning to the Christian town of Sadad found mass graves there with the bodies of over 45 civilians, after JAN and other militants occupying it were pushed out.

In addition to the killing of minorities during armed attacks, opposition groups established ad hoc courts throughout the northern areas based on Islamic law that authorized the public execution and torture of minorities, particularly Alawites, accused of working with the regime. In June media and the UN Commission of Inquiry reported that the sharia board of Aleppo ordered the execution of a 14-year-old boy, Mohammad Qataa, accusing him of blasphemy. Armed groups, including those linked to JAN, established sharia councils in Aleppo Province and elsewhere, replacing both other opposition courts upholding the current Syrian penal code and regime courts. In December Amnesty International reported on a network of detention centers in northern Syria run by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an al-Qaida offshoot. According to the report, those targeted for detention in these centers included people suspected of ordinary crimes such as theft or murder, those accused of religiously prohibited acts such as consuming alcohol or blasphemy, and activists and others seen as opposing ISIL domination.

Anti-regime and foreign fighters committed targeted killings of individuals, sometimes as part of propaganda to promote sectarian violence. In May Khalid al-Hamad, a rebel fighter affiliated with the al-Farouq Brigade, was filmed cutting out the heart of a regime soldier while saying, "I swear to God we will eat your hearts, Alawite soldiers of Bashar the dog." In July a video surfaced depicting militants reportedly affiliated with ISIL beheading two Christian men.

Unknown assailants kidnapped Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi on April 22; their whereabouts remained unknown at year's end. In June Christian priest Father Francois Mourad was killed when JAN fighters attacked the Monastery of Saint Anthony in Ghassaniyah, Idlib Province. Members of ISIL kidnapped Jesuit priest Father Paolo Dall'Oglio in July in Raqqa. There were conflicting reports at year's end as to his whereabouts and condition. During fighting over the town of Maalula on December 2, rebel fighters took a group of nuns hostage and, according to news reports a few days later, were holding them with plans to use them as leverage to exact concessions from the Asad regime. There was no known resolution to their abduction by year's end.

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In July Reuters reported that the Islamic law council of Aleppo's Fardous neighborhood issued a religious edict to force all Muslim women to adhere to its interpretation of Islamic standards of dress.

Extremist groups also attacked religious sites. In January the NGO Shi'a Rights Watch reported that anti-regime forces burned down a Shia shrine of Lady Sakina in Daraya. In May extremists destroyed the ancient Christian Monastery of Holy Prophet Elias near al-Quasyr near the border with Lebanon. In September ISIL militants attacked a Christian church in Raqqa Province, reportedly in an effort to convert it to a military stronghold. In October members of ISIL reportedly blew up the Sufi shrine of Shaikh Eisa Abdul Qader Al Rifaiy in the rebel-held town of Busaira.

Activists and media reported in August that extremist groups forcibly converted Christians in Hassakeh Province. Residents in the historic Christian town of Maalula in Aleppo Province reported in September that extremists forced at least one person to convert to Islam at gunpoint and executed another after he refused.

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

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Some prominent societal and religious leaders and armed local militias contributed negatively to sectarian tensions and infringement of religious freedom. In addition to attacks and killings against individuals and groups due to their religious affiliation, religious groups increasingly self-segregated into sectarian-based neighborhoods or towns.

There were reports of tensions among religious groups, exacerbated by government actions, economic and political competition, 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 as well. For example, JAN claimed responsibility for numerous bombings, including suicide attacks, across the country during the year, in many cases stating that such attacks were reactions to the regime's "massacres of Sunnis." There were also bombings for which neither side in the conflict took responsibility. For example, in late March a suicide bomber killed a Sunni Muslim cleric and 42 other people inside Iman Mosque in Damascus.

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Accusations that the regime favored the Alawi population continued, culminating in opposition attacks, reportedly by extremist elements, on Alawi populations. News reporting stated that Alawis were chased from their villages near the Turkish border. Alawis increasingly feared sectarian cleansing would follow a fall of the regime. At the same time, some Sunni residents in Alawi-dominant areas around the city of Homs reported being repeatedly threatened and forced to flee their homes. Homs was described as a “city of cantonments” for almost 18 months, with security walls dividing Alawi neighborhoods from the rest of the city.

Damascus-based Alawis reportedly moved away from previously mixed neighborhoods to relocate to provinces or neighborhoods heavily populated by Alawis. In other areas of the country, however, Sunnis reportedly relocated to traditional Alawi strongholds, believing they would be safer from regime-driven sectarian violence.

Some Christians reported societal tolerance for Christians was dwindling with the influence of extremist groups, triggering the flight of many Syrian Christians from the country as refugees. Likewise, Iraqi Christian refugees who had resided in the country for years prior to the uprising continued to leave in large numbers. For example, various reports indicate that the Christian population in the city of Homs dwindled to as few as 1,000 from approximately 160,000 before the conflict. Some Christians perceived employment discrimination in the private sector to be a growing problem.

Alawi and Shia youth reported being threatened in schools and universities by Sunni colleagues due to their religious affiliation and perceived support for the regime. Anti-government protests occasionally carried specific anti-Alawi messages.

Clashes between Kurdish groups and extremists intensified throughout the year, resulting in kidnappings, assassinations, and killings. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, fighting between Kurdish groups and ISIL from July to October claimed the lives of an estimated 470 ISIL fighters and 190 Kurdish fighters. Reports suggest that some Free Syrian Army fighters fought with ISIL during this time.

Social conventions and religious proscriptions made conversion relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversion, which was technically illegal. In many cases societal pressure forced such converts to relocate within the country or leave the country to practice their new religion openly.

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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. The Syrian Opposition Coalition condemned actions against religious minorities, both by the government and by various extremist and terrorist groups.

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

Although the U.S. embassy in Damascus closed in February 2012, the U.S. government maintained strong relationships with Syrian religious groups and leaders. U.S. officials reached out to religious groups and leaders in Syria, the United States, and throughout the world. The Ambassador and other high-ranking U.S. officials met with members of the Orthodox Christian, Sunni, Druze, and Shia communities during the year, focusing on providing assistance to vulnerable populations and countering sectarian violence. The Ambassador and other officials participated in dialogues, roundtables, and working groups focused on countering sectarianism and retributive violence. High-level U.S. officials, including the President and Secretary of State, continued to urge the government and both the political and military opposition to respect the universal rights of all citizens, including the right to religious freedom. The U.S. government continued to press the political opposition to expand and include representatives from all religious and ethnic backgrounds in order to better reflect the diversity of Syria's population. The United States continued to support the documentation of violations committed by all sides of the conflict through the UN Commission of Inquiry and through direct support to Syrian-led documentation efforts.