



# SYRIA

## Key Findings

Syria's religious communities are largely deprived of religious freedom, and its history of religious diversity may be lost. After four years of conflict, religious diversity and freedom are victims of the actions of the al-Assad regime, as well as of internationally-recognized opposition fighters and U.S.-designated terrorist groups, in particular the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The Syrian crisis has evolved into a largely sectarian conflict. By the systematic targeting and massacre of primarily Sunni Muslims, the al-Assad regime created the environment in which ISIL could rise and spread, threatening the entire region and all religious communities that reject its violent religious ideology, with the smallest religious minority communities facing an existential threat. The al-Assad regime continues to target Sunni Muslim civilians and other individuals or groups that oppose it, including indiscriminately shelling civilian areas. Likewise, ISIL targets the regime, its supporters, religious minorities,

## Background

The Syrian conflict began in March 2011 with peaceful protests by opponents of the al-Assad regime, mainly Sunni Muslims but also religious minorities. The initial protests were not overtly characterized by religious or sectarian undertones and sought repeal of the abusive emergency law, space for political parties, and President Bashar al-Assad's resignation. As the protests grew, al-Assad ordered an increasingly violent crackdown and he and his regime played on sectarian fears by utilizing religiously-divisive rhetoric. In support of the regime were U.S.-designated terrorist groups, such as Hezbollah and Shabiha. In opposition to the Assad regime, dozens of domestic and foreign groups, varying widely in goals, emerged. Some of these groups, including the U.S.-recognized National Coalition of Syrian Revolution & Opposition Forces (commonly known as the Syrian National Coalition (SNC)), espouse democratic reform. Others, such as ISIL, are motivated by religious ideologies espousing violence.

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and any Muslims opposing its violent religious ideology. Well over half of Syria's pre-conflict population has fled to neighboring countries or is internally displaced. Moreover, it is not certain how many members of religious minority communities still live in Syria, a formerly religiously diverse country. Because of the actions of the al-Assad regime and non-state actors, in 2015 USCIRF recommends for the second year that Syria be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC.

Now entering its fifth year, the conflict has become largely sectarian. Sunni Muslims generally associate all Alawites and Shi'a Muslims with the regime of President al-Assad, an Alawite himself, and many Alawites, Shi'a Muslims, Christians, and others believe that they will be killed by ISIL and other extremist Sunni groups if the al-Assad government falls.

Before the conflict, Syria's total population was approximately 22.5 million. Sunni Muslims constituted 74 percent; other Muslims, including Alawites, Ismailis, and Shi'a Muslims, were estimated at 13 percent of the

total population; Druze were about three percent of the population; and various Christian groups, including Syriac, Armenian, and Greek Orthodox communities, were estimated at 10 percent.

### **Religious Freedom Conditions 2014–2015 Violations by al-Assad Regime and Affiliated Groups**

The regime's atrocities have been indiscriminate, primarily targeting the Sunni Muslim population and where they live, creating an environment where internationally-recognized and protected human rights, including religious freedom, do not exist. The UN and

beheadings and mass murders, are widespread and well documented. Moreover, ISIL and other similar groups that control significant areas of Syria have been establishing systems that resemble governing structures, including creating Shari'ah courts that violate human rights, in areas they control.

### **Opposition Groups**

During the reporting year, the SNC did not effectively or adequately represent religious minorities, and internal politics hampered its effectiveness and ability to agree on whether to reopen negotiations with the al-Assad regime. Reports that the Free Syrian Army, its affiliates,

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most of the international community, including the United States, have found that the al-Assad regime has committed crimes against humanity. The regime and its supporters, including terrorist groups, utilize tactics such as extra-judicial killings, rape, torture, chemical weapons, indiscriminate shelling of civilian sites, including mosques and churches, and withholding food and other aid to maintain the regime's power.

### **Violations by ISIL and other Extremist and Terrorist Groups**

ISIL, al-Qaeda, Khorasan, al-Nusra and numerous other extremist groups and radicalized individuals from across the globe are fighting in Syria in opposition to the regime or in support of the spread of their extreme, violent religious ideology. ISIL's declaration of a so-called "Islamic State" in June 2014 that cuts across Syria and Iraq is especially troubling for human rights and religious freedom. ISIL and other similar groups and individuals espouse violence and allow no space for religious diversity, targeting religious minority communities that have existed in Syria for centuries, as well as Muslims that reject their worldview. ISIL and four years of conflict have seriously damaged the country's religious diversity. Its gruesome attacks, including

and opposition fighters have committed human rights atrocities, including massacres of Shi'a Muslim civilians, surfaced in the last year. In addition, opposition military units on occasion have worked with terrorist groups to secure strategic areas, making it difficult for the international community to separate Sunni extremists associated with ISIL or other U.S.-designated terrorist groups from Sunni Muslims opposing the brutal al-Assad regime.

### **Refugees, Sectarian Spillover, and Internally-Displaced People**

The duration of the conflict and the large populations of refugees in neighboring countries are causing sectarian tensions, and increasing the risk of sectarian violence and instability, in those countries. Most Syrian refugees reside in urban or rural areas, rather than official refugee camps, creating a significant burden for the host countries' economies and infrastructure. Increasingly refugees are facing societal harassment because they are perceived as taking jobs and using limited resources.

As of mid-January 2015, the Syrian crisis had led to more than 3.3 million registered refugees, mostly in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt, according to the UN refugee agency. Hundreds of thousands more

are believed to be unregistered. More than three-quarters of the UN-registered refugees are women and children under the age of 17. Tens of thousands of babies have been born stateless, as they are ineligible for citizenship in the host countries where they were born. Additionally, Syrian refugees who fled to Iraq are once again finding themselves in a dangerous situation with conflict increasing there. In addition to the millions of refugees, an estimated 9.3 million people in Syria need basic assistance, such as food, water and shelter, including more than 6.5 million internally-displaced people.

### **U.S. Policy**

U.S.-Syria relations have long been adversarial. Under the Hafez and Bashar al-Assad regimes, Syria has been on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism since 1979. With the U.S. military presence in neighboring Iraq beginning in 2003, U.S.-Syria relations worsened. The

Coalition (formerly the Syrian Opposition Coalition) as the legitimate representative of the country's people and its offices in Washington, DC and New York as diplomatic missions, but it has stopped short of recognizing the Coalition as the official government of Syria.

The United States led in the creation of the Friends of Syria group, a collective of countries and organizations that periodically met outside of the UN Security Council to discuss the Syrian crisis. The group arose after Russia and China vetoed a number of Security Council resolutions that would have condemned the al-Assad regime's actions, and it met four times between 2012 and 2013. Most recently, China and Russia blocked a May 2014 UN Security Council Referral of Syria to the International Criminal Court. The United States also has been instrumental in the creation of the 60-nation Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. The United States and coalition members have been engaging in airstrikes

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al-Assad regime failed to prevent foreign fighters from entering Iraq, refused to deport from Syria Iraqis supporting the insurgency, and continued to pursue weapons of mass destruction, among other U.S. concerns. For these reasons, in 2004 the U.S. levied economic sanctions under the Syria Accountability Act, which prohibits or restricts the export and re-export of most U.S. products to Syria. In 2008, sanctions prohibiting the export of U.S. services to Syria were added.

The regime's violent response to peaceful protestors in 2011 led to further sanctions, with the U.S. government designating groups and individuals complicit in human rights abuses and supporters of the al-Assad regime. In 2012, the United States closed its embassy in Damascus, and in March 2014 it ordered the Syrian embassy and consulates in the United States to close. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the United States has called for the al-Assad regime to step down. The U.S. government has recognized the Syrian National

against ISIL-held territories in Syria. In addition, the United States has provided non-lethal aid and some light weaponry and funding to some groups fighting against ISIL in Syria. In January 2015, the Pentagon announced that several hundred U.S. military training personnel would be deployed to train and equip vetted Syrians beginning in spring 2015.

The United States is the largest donor to the international humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis. According to a February 2015 Congressional Research Service report, the United States allocated more than \$3 billion to assist in the humanitarian crisis between September 2012 and mid-December 2014. As of early 2015, the U.S. government had resettled very few Syrian refugees to the United States, as compared to the scale of the crisis – only 450 since FY 2011. In December 2014, Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration Anne Richard said that the United States expected the resettlement of Syrians to “surge” in 2015

and beyond. In January 2015, Reuters reported that, according to a State Department official, 1,000-2,000 Syrian refugees were likely to be admitted in FY 2015 and a few thousand more in FY 2016.

## Recommendations

All Syrians, including Sunni, Shi'a and Alawite Muslims, Christians, and the smallest communities, such as Yazidis and Druze, are living in bleak conditions and face a dire future. The prospect of achieving a post-conflict Syria that values religious diversity, minority rights, and religious freedom is fading, with an entire generation at risk from fighting, prolonged hunger, disease, poverty, and indoctrination into extremist ideologies. In addition to continuing to seek an end to the conflict, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should designate Syria as a CPC and should:

- Ensure that religious freedom and diversity are given a high priority in diplomatic planning and engagement that seeks to reach a political solution to the conflict;
  - Encourage the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, in its ongoing international meetings, to work to develop measures to protect and assist the region's most vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities, including by increasing immediate humanitarian aid, prioritizing the resettlement to third countries of the most vulnerable, and providing longer-term support in host countries for those who hope to return to their homes post-conflict;
  - Ensure that U.S. government planning for a post-conflict Syria is a "whole-of- government" effort and includes consideration of issues concerning religious freedom and related human rights, and that USCIRF and other U.S. government experts on those issues are consulted as appropriate;
  - Encourage the Syrian National Coalition to be inclusive of all religious and ethnic groups and provide training to members on international standards relating to human rights and religious freedom;
  - Call for or support a referral by the UN Security Council to the International Criminal Court to investigate ISIL violations in Iraq and Syria against religious and ethnic minorities, and continue to call for an International Criminal Court investigation into crimes committed by the al-Assad regime, following the models used in Sudan and Libya;
- Initiate an effort among relevant UN agencies, NGOs, and like-minded partners among the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL to fund and develop programs that bolster intra- and inter-religious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and promote respect for religious freedom and related rights, both in neighboring countries hosting refugees (especially Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey), and in preparing for a post-conflict Syria;
  - Increase the U.S. refugee ceiling from 70,000 to at least 100,000, with additional reserves for the Middle East region.
  - Consider issuing an exemption to U.S. immigration law's "material support bar" provision for Syrian refugees who supported specific U.S.-backed rebel groups or provided "support" by force or under duress to terrorist organizations, and properly apply existing exemptions, so that Syrians who pose no threat to the United States and are fleeing the al-Assad regime or terrorist groups are not erroneously barred from the U.S. refugee program;
  - Allocate sufficient resources to the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies to expeditiously process applications and conduct security background checks to facilitate the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the United States without compromising U.S. national security; and
  - Continue and increase funding and logistical support to the UN, humanitarian organizations, and refugee host nations (especially Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey), and communities to provide humanitarian aid to refugees and internally displaced persons, and encourage other countries to do the same.

