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Responses to Information Requests

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24 January 2013

SYR104275.FE

Syria: The situation of Christians, including acts of violence against them; positions held by Christians in President al-Assad's regime (July 2012-January 2013)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa |

1. Positions of Christians under President al-Assad's Regime

According to the Catholic French daily *La Croix*,

[translation]

Neither the sociology nor the political behaviour of the Christian minority in Syria is constant. As in all communities, a wide range of attitudes coexist, often within a same family, from loyalty to the regime, to the wait-and-see attitude of a silent majority eroded by fear, to active support for the revolution. (13 Dec. 2012)

Some media sources state that many Christians remain neutral in the conflict between President Bachar al-Assad's regime and the opposition forces (AFP 22 Dec. 2012) or they have tried to do so (AAP 23 Dec. 2012; *The Independent* 2 Nov. 2012). Other sources say that the majority of the Christian population has tried to steer clear of the conflict (*The Irish Times* 17 Aug. 2012; *Le Figaro* 2 Aug. 2012).

According to the the Maronite Archbishop of Damascus, the government forces and the opposition are pressuring the Christian community to engage in the conflict (*The Irish Times* 17 Aug. 2012). A report published in December 2012 by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, established by the United Nations, indicates that, "[f]eeling threatened and under attack, ethnic and religious minority groups have increasingly aligned themselves with parties to the conflict" (United Nations 20 Dec. 2012, para. 20).

1.1 The Opposition

In July 2012, the *Economist* was of the opinion that Christians, "if still often privately," were becoming increasingly more supportive of the opposition, and it noted that many of them were members of the Syrian National Council (SNC) (21 July 2012). Notably, Georges Sabra, a Christian, was elected president of the SNC in November 2012 (Reuters 9 Nov. 2012; *Le Monde* 9 Nov. 2012). An Italian Jesuit priest who lived in Syria for 30 years before being expelled in June 2012 stated in an interview with Reuters that many Christians are against the regime and are working hard, especially on the humanitarian level, to help the people (12 Sept. 2012).

1.2 Al-Assad's Government

Sources indicate that Christians generally support President al-Assad (United Nations 20 Dec. 2012, para. 21; AP 23 Dec. 2012). According to World Watch Monitor, a Christian news site formerly known as Compass Direct News (World Watch Monitor n.d.), part of the Christian community "actively" supports the regime (ibid. 30 Nov. 2012). Reuters notes that Christians have held "prominent" positions in al-Assad's government, giving the example of the Minister of Defense, Daoud Rajha (12 Sept. 2012). Daoud Rajha was appointed minister in 2011 and killed in a bombing in Damascus in July 2012 (Al Jazeera 19 July 2012; *The Telegraph* 18 July 2012; *The New York Times* 18 July 2012). Moreover, most church leaders have supported the regime (*Marianne* 28 July 2012; Reuters 12 Sept. 2012; AFP 24 Dec. 2012). Some sources explain that minority groups support al-Assad because he protects their rights (Xinhua News Agency 1 Aug. 2012; VOA 5 Oct. 2012). Other sources indicated that Christians have stayed loyal to the government because they fear the Islamists (AFP 22 Dec. 2012; AP 23 Dec. 2012; AAP 23 Dec. 2012). Sources also state that Christians are often seen as supporters of al-Assad (*Le Figaro* 2 Aug. 2012; *The Majalla* 25 Dec. 2012), particularly because a large number of them try to avoid taking part in the conflict (*The Irish Times* 17 Aug. 2012). Moreover, two sources indicated that the government spreads the fear of sectarian violence among minority groups in order to draw them closer to the government (VOA 5 Oct. 2012; *Le Monde* 11 Dec. 2012).

In an interview with Agence France-Presse, Lebanon's Maronite Christian patriarch stated that he thought that Christian Syrians want stability above all, and that they support the state of Syria rather than al-Assad's regime (6 Sept. 2012).

1.3 Popular Committees

In some parts of Damascus, Christians and other minorities have organized armed groups (Reuters 12 Sept. 2012) known as "popular committees" (UN 20 Dec. 2012, para. 8). According to media sources, those popular committees are allied with the government (Reuters 12 Sept. 2012; BBC 28 Nov. 2012). The report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic indicates that certain committees are said to have participated in government military operations near Damascus and have received uniforms and arms from government forces (UN 20 Dec. 2012, para. 8). However, a few sources note that the main goal of the committees is self-defence and the protection of their neighbourhoods against rebel groups (ibid.; BBC 28 Nov. 2012) or violence from the two parties involved in the conflict (Agenzia Fides 29 Nov. 2012).

2. Situation of Christians since July 2012

According to the report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, most of the 80,000 Christians in Homs have fled to Damascus or Beirut (20 Dec. 2012, para. 23). Some media sources indicate that the last Christian in Homs was killed in October 2012, after the majority of the population had been evacuated from the city because of the conflict (Agenzia Fides 31 Oct. 2012; World Watch Monitor 30 Nov. 2012). Moreover, the *Majalla*, a magazine established in London in 1980 that covers news in the Arab world (7 Mar. 2011), indicates that the Archbishop of Aleppo estimated that at least a third of Syrian Christians had fled the country (25 Dec. 2012).

Many Christians have sought refuge in Jaramana, a suburb of Damascus (Agenzia Fides 29 Nov. 2012; *La Croix* 13 Dec. 2012). Several articles report that certain Christian neighbourhoods of Damascus were "spared" by the violence at the beginning of the uprising (AFP 5 Jan. 2013; RFI 1 Aug. 2012; *La Nouvelle République* 2 Aug. 2012). Nevertheless, those neighbourhoods are no longer able to escape the violence (ibid.; RFI 1 Aug. 2012; *La Croix* 13 Dec. 2012).

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic indicates that it had received "credible" information about attacks by anti-government armed groups against Alawites and other pro-government minority communities (UN 20 Dec. 2012, para. 17). Moreover, several sources believe that the civil war is becoming increasingly sectarian (*The Independent* 2 Nov. 2012; *The Majalla* 25 Dec. 2012; Reuters 12 Sept. 2012). According to *Le Figaro*, [translation] "some clergymen say that Salafist groups have undertaken a 'hunt for Christians,' particularly in Homs" (2 Aug. 2012). An article published in the *Independent* indicated that many Christians are facing "persecution" and other attacks despite their attempts to remain neutral in the conflict (*The Independent* 2 Nov. 2012). In the same article, two Syrian Christian leaders blamed the violence against Christians on "Islamists" or "jihadists" (ibid.).

However, *Le Figaro* notes that, according to other Christian leaders, including Jesuits in Homs, the Damascus Apostolic Nuncio and the Syrian Christians for Democracy established by a member of the opposition in exile, Christians are not being targeted by the opposition forces (2 Aug. 2012). In December 2012, the new Greek Orthodox leader in Syria called for Christians to remain in the country, noting that Christians and Muslims face the same difficulties (AFP 24 Dec. 2012). According to World Watch Monitor, the armed groups have also repeatedly denied targeting minority groups (30 Nov. 2012). Rebels with the Free

Syrian Army (ESL) in Aleppo have said they will protect Christians (ANSAmEd 31 August 2012; CWN 3 Sept. 2012).

Reuters indicated that, “[a]mid the relentless and increasingly sectarian violence, it is hard to know whether Christians have been victims of targeted attacks or swept up in the broader, indiscriminate bloodshed” (12 Sept. 2012). Likewise, World Watch Monitor stated that “[a] clear distinction is often hard to make between violence specifically aimed at Christians on the one hand, and on the other hand the reality of war which Christians, like other groups, get caught up in” (30 Nov. 2012). Moreover, sources noted that it is difficult for journalists to corroborate reports of violence, given difficulties in getting into the country (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 7 Aug. 2012, 4; CNN 20 Sept. 2012).

3. Incidents of Violence

3.1 Kidnapping

According to some Christian leaders in Syria, there are Christians who have been kidnapped for ransom (*Marianne* 28 July 2012; Reuters 12 Sept. 2012). The *Independent* reports four kidnappings of Christians and one attempted kidnapping in December 2012 in the Christian town of Maloula, northwest of Damascus, and notes that the priest of a convent located near Maloula stated that “life has become more dangerous for Christians, particularly for those thought to have money” (18 Dec. 2012). World Watch Monitor also explains that Christians are considered prime targets for kidnappings for ransom because many of them are considered to be relatively prosperous and their kidnappers believe that they may have family in the West (30 Nov. 2012). The World Watch Monitor article also reports that an Orthodox priest was mutilated in October 2012 in Qatana, southwest of Damascus, after trying to negotiate the release of one of his parishioners, who had been kidnapped (30 Nov. 2012). In July 2012, the *Economist* reported that two Christians had been kidnapped in Qusayr, near Homs, for supporting al-Assad’s regime (21 July 2012). In correspondence sent to Agenzia Fides, the Vatican’s news agency (n.d.), the Assyrian Democratic Organization, a Christian group that is part of the Syrian opposition, stated that in the region of Hassaké, Christians suspected of supporting the government have been kidnapped to force their children to fight with the opposition (7 Dec. 2012). Additional information on this topic could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints for this Response.

3.2 Bombings

Various sources report car bombings, notably:

- In Jaramana, a suburb of Damascus with large Christian and Druze communities (Xinhua News Agency 1 Aug. 2012; BBC 28 Nov. 2012), 12 people were killed in August 2012 (Al Jazeera 3 Sept. 2012). According to Al Jazeera, the government called the bombing a “terrorist” attack, while opposition activists claimed that the government had organized it in order to provoke sectarian conflicts in the district (ibid.).
- On 21 October, in the historic Christian district of Damascus, Bab Touma, at least 10 people were killed (*The Majalla* 25 Dec. 2012; World Watch Monitor 30 Nov. 2012). World Watch Monitor indicates that a bomb exploded near a police station and two churches as local Christians were making their way to Sunday mass (ibid.).
- On 29 October 2012 in Jaramana, 11 people were killed (BBC 28 Nov. 2012; World Watch Monitor 30 Nov. 2012). According to World Watch Monitor, 10 of the victims were Christians (ibid.).
- On 28 November in Jaramana, at least 34 people were killed (BBC 28 Nov. 2012; Agenzia Fides 29 Nov. 2012; World Watch Monitor 30 Nov. 2012). No group has claimed responsibility for the bombings (BBC 28 Nov. 2012; World Watch Monitor 30 Nov. 2012; *Le Monde* 10 Dec. 2012). World Watch Monitor stated that the bombings “appeared to target” two communities in a district that is “known for its loyalty to President Assad’s government” that have not yet joined the uprising (30 Nov. 2012). Nevertheless, Agenzia Fides reports that eight Christians were among the victims, most of whom were Muslims or Druze (29 Nov. 2012).

3.3 Other Incidents

Agenzia Fides reports that, according to [Agenzia Fides English version] “a young Christian of the opposition” in Ras al-Ain [also Ras el-Ain], near the Turkish border, ESL fighters expelled civilians from their homes in November 2012 in order to use them as battle stations and, [Agenzia Fides English version] “with a ‘black list’, went from one house to another looking for their enemies. Among these were the names of the heads of Christian families” (Agenzia Fides 30 Nov. 2012). The same source indicated that 70,000 people have fled the city, including Kurds, Arabs and Christians, but only the Christians were [Agenzia Fides English version] “immediately expelled from their homes” (ibid.). In an appeal to the Pope and the international

community, three bishops from the region claimed that armed groups had occupied Ras al-Ain and that 30,000 people had fled the city (Hindo 22 Nov. 2012). The *New York Times* indicates that, according to Turkish officials, more than 4,500 Syrians had fled to Turkey on 9 November 2012 as a result of clashes between opposition groups and government forces in Ras al-Ain (9 November 2012).

A Syrian Christian refugee in Lebanon stated in an interview with the *Independent* that, in Qusayr, anti-Assad rebels from the region had threatened, insulted and killed Christians who refused to take up arms against the government (2 Nov. 2012). In December 2012, a rebel brigade threatened to attack two predominantly Christian villages in the province of Hama if the inhabitants did not expel the government armed forces (AP 23 Dec. 2012; AFP 22 Dec. 2012).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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