

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

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6 August 2015

SYR105229.E

Syria: The situation of Christians, including whether Christians are perceived to be loyal to President Assad; treatment of Christians by the regime and the opposition forces, including incidents of violence against them; state protection (2013-July 2015)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

Sources report that Christians are a minority in Syria and represent approximately 10 percent of Syria's population (BBC 25 Feb. 2015; CNN 24 Jan. 2014; US 28 July 2014, 2), although the figure could be closer to 8 percent due to the emigration of Christians fleeing the conflict in Syria (ibid.). Sources indicate that most Christians in Syria belong to Orthodox churches, Uniate churches (which recognize the Roman Catholic Pope), or to the Assyrian Church of the East (ibid.; BBC 25 Feb. 2015). According to the BBC, the largest Orthodox congregation in Syria is the Greek Orthodox Church (approximately 500,000 members), followed by the Armenian Apostolic Church (112,000 to 160,000 members) and the Syrian Orthodox Church (89,000 members) (ibid.). The same source states that Uniate Churches include the Melkite Greek Catholic Church (the largest with 118,000 to 240,000 members), the Syrian Maronite Church of Antioch, the Armenian Catholic Church, the Syrian Catholic Church and the Chaldean Catholic Church, while the Assyrian Church of the East has 46,000 members (ibid.).

Sources note that Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad [Asad], is an Alawite (*The Telegraph* 7 Apr. 2015; Church in Chains 19 Mar. 2015), a Shi'ite sect that accounts for 12 percent of Syria's population, while the majority of Syria's population is Sunni Muslim (ibid.). Sources state that al-Assad has been in power since 2000 (BBC 4 May 2015; US 25 June 2015, 1). Sources report that the civil war in Syria began in 2011 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 25 June 2015; Church in Chains 19 Mar. 2015). Crux, a website that focuses on "the worldwide institution of the Catholic Church" (Crux n.d.), reports that the war has wounded 1 million people, created 4 million refugees and has displaced 7 million people inside Syria (ibid. 26 Feb. 2015). American news magazine and website *Newsweek* similarly reports that 6.5 million Syrians have been internally displaced (*Newsweek* 26 Mar. 2015). Sources indicate that 700,000 Syrian Christians have fled the country (ibid.; Open Doors n.d.b; Church in Chains 19 Mar. 2015), and almost entire Christian populations have fled in some cities (ibid.).

Sources indicate that the government conducted attacks against civilians (AI 25 Feb. 2015, 353-354; US 25 June 2015, 2), including "air and ground-based military assault" on "cities, residential areas and civilian infrastructure," including hospitals, homes, schools, mosques, churches and synagogues (ibid.). The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014* notes that "some extremist opposition organizations," including "armed terrorist groups" such as the al-Qaida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra committed a variety of abuses including "massacres, bombings, and kidnappings; unlawful detention; torture; summary executions; and forced evacuations from homes based on sectarian identity" (ibid., 3). Minority

Rights Group International (MRG) similarly reports that extremist groups have been targeting minorities due to their faith (July 2015, 242).

2. Situation of Christians

The US Department of State's 2013 *International Religious Freedom Report* notes that Christians have reported that "societal tolerance for Christians was dwindling with the influence of extremist groups" (28 July 2014, 11). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a research fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center [1], whose research focuses on the relationship between state and religion, including religious minorities in Syria, indicated that the situation for Christians is "very difficult, [especially] in the areas of confrontation between the Syrian regime and the armed groups" (6 July 2015). *Newsweek* cites Nicholas Heras, a political analyst who has conducted research on Syrian Christians, as stating that Christians are vulnerable since "the majority" live in militarily "strategic areas of the country" where "heavy fighting is taking place," including Homs, Aleppo and Damascus (*Newsweek* 26 Mar. 2015).

A report by Open Doors, a global organization aiming to assist and empower Christians facing persecution (Open Doors n.d.a), indicates that Christians "are frequently attacked, abducted and killed" (ibid. n.d.b). *Newsweek* quotes Samer Massouh, a Roman Catholic lawyer with recent work experience in the Christian city of Homs, as stating that "Christians are under threat from all sides in Syria" including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (also known as the Islamic States of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) or simply the Islamic State (IS)), Assad's regime, and anti-regime forces (*Newsweek* 26 Mar. 2015). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a PhD candidate in political science at the University of British Columbia who specializes in the politics of insurgency (UBC n.d.) and who has completed field research in Aleppo (PhD Candidate 30 June 2015), similarly indicated that "if you are not a Shia on the government side, or [you] are not a Sunni on the opposition side, you have very credible reasons to flee the region as quickly as possible" (ibid.). The same source further noted that "Christians might seek some shelter on the government side, or even with the Kurds on the opposition side, but there is no such thing as a 'safe haven' anywhere in the country for anyone" (ibid.).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, who has published journal articles on Syria and ISIL, stated that Christians who lived in areas controlled by rebel groups, have "largely fled" and that most [m]ilitia, who are Islamist, view Christians as "second class citizens [who] must pay money for protection" (6 July 2015). *The Times of Israel*, a Jerusalem-based online newspaper (*The Times of Israel* n.d.), explains that "according to classic Islamic law, Christians ... living under Muslim sovereignty must pay a tax known as *jizya* in return for the Muslim ruler's protection, known as *dhimma*" (ibid. 27 Feb. 2014). BBC similarly reports that in areas which have been seized by the IS, Christians have been ordered to convert to Islam, pay *jizya*, or face death (BBC 25 Feb. 2015).

Sources report that in the northern city of Raqqa [Ar-Raqqah], ISIS issued a statement giving Christian inhabitants the choice to convert to Islam, pay a tax (UN 14 Nov. 2014, 5; *The Times of Israel* 27 Feb. 2014; MRG July 2015, 246) or risk death (ibid.). According to the *Times of Israel*, 20 Christian leaders in Raqqa signed a document agreeing to "pledge submission to Islam" (*dhimmitude*) in February 2014 in exchange for protection from "physical harm or religious targeting" by local ruling ISIS insurgents (27 Feb. 2014). The article indicates that Christians in Raqqa agreed to the following conditions under *dhimmitude*:

to abstain from renovating churches or monasteries in Raqqa; not to display crosses or religious symbols in public or use loudspeakers in prayer; not to read scripture indoors loud enough for Muslims standing outside to hear; not to undertake subversive actions against Muslims; not to carry out any religious ceremonies outside the church; not to prevent any Christian wishing to convert to Islam from doing so; to respect Islam and Muslims and say nothing offensive about them; to pay the *jizya* tax worth four golden dinars for the rich, two for the average, and one for the poor, twice annually, for each adult Christian; to refrain from drinking alcohol in public; and to dress modestly. (ibid.)

The Director of the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom in Washington, DC [2], quoted in an article by the *Christian Science Monitor* (CSM), "an independent international news organization," website and magazine (CSM n.d.), similarly states that Christians in Raqqa are "forbidden from reading scripture indoors loud enough for Muslims outside to hear, and the practice of their faith must be confined within the walls of their remaining churches, not exercised publicly" (ibid. 10 Mar. 2014). Sources report that Christians under ISIS rule in Raqqa are prohibited from displaying crosses in public and renovating churches (MRG July 2015, 246; CSM 10 Mar. 2014), "many of which have been damaged in the war" (ibid.).

2.1 Perception of Christians' Loyalty to President Assad

Sources report that Christians do not want to take sides in the war (CNN 24 Jan. 2014; World Watch Monitor 9 Nov. 2013). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Executive Director at the Syrian

Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC) [3], who provided his personal viewpoint based on information collected by the organization, stated that Christians have managed to stay neutral, "leaning more towards the government of President Assad but are not fighting on anyone's side" (13 July 2015). However, other sources report that Christians support the Assad regime, but are likely doing so out of fear (BBC 25 Feb. 2015; CNN 24 Jan. 2014; Gatestone Institute 4 Apr. 2014). BBC reports that when the conflict in Syria began, Christians "were cautious and tried to avoid taking sides," but that due to the increased violence in Syria and the IS's growth, some Christians have shown support for Assad, fearing that if Assad is overthrown, they will be targeted (25 Feb. 2015). CNN reports that Christians support the Assad regime based on fear that the "end of the current government could lead to instability" (24 Jan. 2014). The Carnegie Middle East Center Research Fellow similarly stated that "the majority" of Christians are more in support of the regime, "not because they support it, but mostly because they fear a chaotic situation or to be under the control of the Islamic armed groups" (Carnegie Middle East Center 6 July 2015). However, Archbishop Jean-Clément Jeanbart, head of the Melkite Greek Catholic Archdiocese in Aleppo, was quoted by Crux as stating that the "Christian clergy" in Syria is not pro-Assad (28 Apr. 2015).

Sources report that Christians are perceived to be supporters of Assad's regime (Director 6 July 2015; PhD Candidate 20 June 2015; Christian Freedom International n.d.). According to the Executive Director of the SJAC, this is the general perception of both the public and the regime (SJAC 13 July 2015). Other sources state that opposition groups perceive Christians to be supporters of Assad's regime (*The Telegraph* 2 Aug. 2013; MRG July 2015, 240; Gatestone Institute 4 Apr. 2014). In contrast, the Executive Director of the SJAC maintained that opposition groups do not perceive Christians to be "loyalists to the revolution," nor are they "perceived as enemies" (SJAC 13 July 2015). He explained that the "most important" factor in the perception of Christians is that they are not fighting with Assad (ibid.). He expressed the opinion that "there is no general hatred sentiment against Christians in Syria" and that "opposition groups do not hold them accountable or responsible for Assad's attacks" (13 July 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Treatment of Christians

3.1 Treatment of Christians by President Assad's Regime

Without providing further detail, Church in Chains, an Irish organization that supports persecuted Christians worldwide (Church in Chains n.d.), notes that those Christians who try to remain neutral in the war and who do not support the regime or its opposition "are in danger from government security agents" (ibid. 19 Mar. 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), a UK-based human rights NGO (SNHR n.d.), reports that the government destroyed several Christian religious sites, including the shelling of 33 churches (SHRC 2 Sept. 2013).

3.2 Treatment of Christians by Opposition Forces

The PhD Candidate noted that the treatment of Christians varies depending on the opposition force and explained that Christians "could expect" unfavourable treatment

at the hands of ISIS and al-Nusra. The FSA [Free Syria Army] and so-called 'secular' Arab groups might not persecute Christians, but would [not] have a favourable view of them either. The Kurdish groups would likely be the most acceptable of Christians, however would also be suspicious since Christians are at times viewed as being pro-Assad. (PhD Candidate 30 June 2015)

The 2013 *International Religious Freedom Report* states that there were reports that "Islamic extremist groups, especially those linked to Al Qaida, increased their targeting" of religious groups including Christians (US 28 July 2014, 1). Human Rights Watch indicates that ISIS executed an Alawite and Christian resident in a main square after taking over the town of Bukamal (29 Jan. 2015, 519). Sources note that opposition groups have established religious courts in northern areas based on Islamic law (Freedom House 2015; Reuters 4 Sept. 2014; US 28 July 2014, 9), authorizing public executions and "torture" of minorities (ibid.).

Freedom House states that IS "destroyed several religious and cultural sites and artifacts" and "implemented harsh restrictions on any religious activity that does not conform to its version of Sunni Islam" (2015). The UN similarly reports that the group destroyed and desecrated Christian sites in northeast Syria in February 2015 and the UN Security Council states that the group is responsible for "thousands of crimes and abuses against people from all faiths, ethnicities and nationalities" (UN 26 Feb. 2015).

4. Incidents of Violence

The 2013 *International Religious Freedom Report* notes that there were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious belief and that incidents of harassment of Christians increased during the

year (US 28 July 2014, 1). The source notes that in July 2013 a video was released showing militants "reportedly affiliated with ISIL beheading two Christian men" (ibid., 9). A Christian priest was killed in June 2014 when US-designated terrorist organization Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) attacked a monastery in Idlib province (ibid., 8-9).

Sources report that in October 2013, Islamist militants invaded Saddad [Sadad] (US 28 July 2014, 9; World Watch Monitor 9 Nov. 2013), a "predominantly Christian town" (ibid.). Reports alleged that 45 civilians were killed and buried in mass graves (ibid.; US 28 July 2014, 9).

Sources report that between 70 and 220 Assyrian Christians [4] were abducted from north-eastern Syria in February 2015 by ISIL (UN 26 Feb. 2015; International Business Times 24 Feb. 2015; AP 1 Mar. 2015). According to the Associated Press (AP), the group attacked villages along the Khabur River in late February 2015, "pulling families from their homes" (1 Mar. 2015). *Newsweek* reports that in addition to the hostages taken by ISIL, "thousands" of inhabitants in the predominantly Assyrian Christian villages targeted by the group were forced to leave (26 Mar. 2015). Crux reports that "according to sources in the Assyrian Christian Church, approximately 15 of the 350 hostages taken by ISIS ... have been shot, beheaded, or both" (26 Feb. 2015). The Huffington Post notes that the group reportedly released 19 of the hostages in March 2015 but that the fate of the remaining 200 hostages "remains unclear" (2 Mar. 2015). The Christian Post, a US Christian news publication reporting on national and international news (Christian Post n.d.), similarly reports that dozens of hostages have been released, however ISIL has since demanded "close to \$30 million to free the others" (1 May 2015). Further information on the current status of the Assyrian Christian hostages could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. For information on the frequency of abductions by rebel groups and whether they target particular groups including Christians, see Response to Information Request SYR105231.

4.1 Violence in Homs

A report by Open Doors notes that people in Homs, where 60,000 Christians once lived, face the threat of attack and starvation "every day" (Open Doors n.d.a.). Amnesty International (AI) similarly notes that civilians in areas under attack like Homs "faced starvation, lack of medical care and basic services, and were repeatedly exposed to artillery shelling, bombing from the air and sniper fire from government soldiers" (AI 25 Feb. 2015, 355). On 7 April 2014, Father Frans van der Lugt, a 75-year old Catholic priest in Homs, was shot to death by a "gunman" (BBC 26 Apr. 2014; *The New York Times* 7 Apr. 2014). *Newsweek* reports that due to the war, approximately 10,000 Christians from the area around Homs have left their homes or have been displaced (26 Mar. 2015).

4.2 Violence in Hassakeh [Hasakah, Al-Hasakah]

Newsweek reports that the Assyrian Christians abducted in February 2015 (see section 4) lived close to the city of Hassakeh (26 Mar. 2015). Sources similarly report that the abduction of Assyrian Christians in February 2015 took place in Hassakeh province (BBC 25 Feb. 2015; AP 1 Mar. 2015), along the Khabur River (ibid.).

According to British daily the Guardian, ISIL has "shelled" Christian areas in Hassakeh province in north-eastern Syria, "ransacked its ancient core, and chased men, women and children into exile," capturing hundreds as hostages and "killing dozens more" (The Guardian 3 Mar. 2015). According to the source, approximately 8,000 Assyrians remained near the province of Hassakeh in March 2015, however "that number could be as low as 2,000 and is falling fast" (ibid.). The article quotes an official from the Syriac Union Party, a political party, as stating that "2,000 refugees have fled to the provincial capital" of Hassakeh (ibid.). Sources report that St. Mary's Assyrian Church in the village of Tel Nasri in Hassakeh province was bombed in April 2015 by the IS (Press TV 6 Apr. 2015; The Hindu 6 Apr. 2015) on Easter Sunday (ibid.).

The 2013 International Religious Freedom Report notes that "activists and media reported in August that extremist groups forcibly converted Christians" in Hassakeh province (28 July 2014, 10). UK daily the Telegraph similarly reports that Christian residents in Hassakeh province alleged they were forced to convert to Islam by jihadists (2 Aug. 2013).

4.3 Violence in Aleppo

Sources indicate that the city of Aleppo had one of the largest Christian communities in the country (The Catholic World Report 31 Oct. 2014; BBC 8 July 2015). BBC reports that before the war, Aleppo had a Christian population of 160,000 but that the city has been "devastated" by the fighting between the government, rebels and jihadists (ibid.). According to Christian leader Jean-Clément Jeanbart, head of the Melkite Greek Catholic Archparchy in Aleppo, there are currently around 100,000 Christians left in the city

(Crux 28 Apr. 2015). According to political analyst Nicholas Heras, approximately 30,000 Christians have fled Aleppo (*Newsweek* 26 Mar. 2015).

AI notes that IS "shelled" areas around Aleppo, including Zahraa, Nobel and the area around Aleppo Central Prison, cut off supplies to civilians including food and water, prevented the distribution of humanitarian aid and "attacked and detained" medical workers (25 Feb. 2015, 356).

Human Rights Watch reports that between February and July 2014, "there were over 650 new major impact strikes in Aleppo neighbourhoods held by armed opposition groups"; the strikes resulted in "damage consistent" with barrel bombs, an explosive device being used by the government (29 Jan. 2015, 516). Crux indicates that rocket bombs were dropped in the city during this year's Easter holiday, killing 15 Christians (28 Apr. 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

BBC reports that 240 people from Aleppo, who are "mainly Christians," were moved out of the city by civil society groups to Lebanon and eventually Belgium (8 July 2015).

Human Rights Watch states that a local group reported that approximately 3,557 civilians have been killed in aerial attacks in the Aleppo governorate in 2014 (29 Jan. 2015, 516). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4.4 Violence in Maaloula

The town of Maaloula, which is located 60 kilometres northeast of Damascus (The Huffington Post 5 Nov. 2013), has a large Christian population (Church in Chains 16 Oct. 2013; The Catholic World Report 31 Oct. 2014). *Newsweek* describes Maaloula as one of the "oldest Christian communities in Syria" (26 Mar. 2015).

Sources report that in September 2013, the city was attacked and taken over by Islamic rebels (Church in Chains 16 Oct. 2013; *Newsweek* 26 Mar. 2015; AP 8 Sept. 2013). Rebel groups destroyed churches (*Newsweek* 26 Mar. 2015; Church in Chains 16 Oct. 2013) and attacked Christian homes (ibid.; AP 8 Sept. 2013; The Catholic World Report 31 Oct. 2014). The attacks forced Christian residents to flee the town (*Newsweek* 26 Mar. 2015; AP 8 Sept. 2013; Church in Chains 16 Oct. 2013). Sources report that the majority of the town's population fled (ibid.; *Newsweek* 26 Mar. 2015). According to Church in Chains, the majority of the town's 5,000 Christian and 2,000 Muslim residents fled as a result of the attacks (ibid.). Some sources state that civilians were reportedly killed by the rebel groups (AP 8 Sept. 2013; Church in Chains 16 Oct. 2013; The Catholic World Report 31 Oct. 2014). Sources report that rebel groups reportedly forced Christians to convert to Islam at gunpoint (Church in Chains 16 Oct. 2013; US 28 July 2014, 10). Sources report that Christians who refused to convert were killed (ibid.; Church in Chains 16 Oct. 2013).

Newsweek reports that control over the town switched back and forth between the regime and opposition forces until control was regained by the government in April 2014 (26 Mar. 2015). The same source further notes that, as of March 2015, the Syrian army maintained control of Maaloula, however only 150 Christian families had returned to the town (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5. State Protection

The Telegraph estimates that "tens of thousands Syriac Christians" from the provinces of Hassakeh and Deir al-Zour in northeastern Syria have fled, owing to "conflict in the area, desperate economic conditions, lawlessness and persecution by rebel groups" (2 Aug. 2013). Sources report that law and order have broken down in Syrian cities (Church in Chains 19 Mar. 2015; Christian Freedom International n.d.); "lawlessness has become the norm" in "many" Syrian towns (ibid.). In a statement to the UN, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, noted that the "warring parties" have failed to "protect civilians" and appear to deliberately "put civilian's in harm's way" (UN 23 June 2015). He also stated that "[w]ith each passing day, there are fewer safe places in Syria, as evidenced by the mass displacement of civilians within and out of the country" (ibid.).

According to the Executive Director of the SJAC, "in all non-state controlled territories, there is no state protection for anyone," including Christians (13 July 2015). The source further noted that there may be some exceptions, for example Christians may be "relatively" safe in areas controlled by Kurdish militant groups, however state protection would not be available should they "face violence" (ibid.). He also explained that control over territories is changing "rapidly," possibly shifting "in literally hours," and one therefore cannot be certain that an area is safe (ibid.). The Center for Middle East Studies Director similarly indicated that protection is available only to those who live in "regime territory," however that is "shrinking all the time" (Director 6 July 2015).

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.

Notes

[1] The Carnegie Middle East Center is a Beirut-based "independent policy research institute" that is affiliated with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Carnegie Middle East Center n.d.), a "global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East and the United States" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace n.d.). The center collaborates with other Carnegie research centers and provides analysis of the "political, socioeconomic, and security issues facing the Middle East and North Africa" (Carnegie Middle East Center n.d.).

[2] The Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom "promotes religious freedom as a component of U.S. foreign policy" and collaborates with a "worldwide network of religious freedom experts to provide defenses against religious persecution and oppression" (Hudson Institute n.d.).

[3] The SJAC is an organization in Syria that works to ensure that human rights violations are properly documented for use in transitional justice and peace-building (SJAC n.d.). The centre collects, catalogues and analyzes documentation about human rights violations from available sources, assists individuals documenting violations in Syria, and collaborates with other similar organizations (ibid.).

[4] Assyrians are an ancient group belonging to the Syriac Christian sect (International Business Times 24 Feb. 2015).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: The following were unable to provide information for this Response: professor, Department of Political Science, University of British Columbia.

The following were unable to provide information within the time constraints of this Response: assistant professor, Department of Political Science, Northwestern University.

Attempts to contact the following were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: associate professor, Department of History, University of Notre Dame; associate professor of politics, the Catholic University of America; assistant professor, Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics, University of Virginia; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; assistant professor, Middle East studies, Department of Political Science, Northwestern University; Director, Centre for Critical Development, University of Toronto; professor of anthropology and forced migration, University of Oxford; professor, Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures; professor of history, University of California; professor of modern arab studies, Columbia University; Relief and Reconciliation for Syria; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Internet sites, including: Assyrian International News Agency; eoi.net; Factiva; GlobalSecurity.org; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; International Business News; IRIN; Mercy Corps; Relief and Reconciliation for Syria; Transparency International; UN – Refworld; United States Institute of Peace; *The Washington Times*.

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