Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	**2080**
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria
Udgivet:	30. juni 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	22. juli 2024

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution declares the state shall respect all religions and shall ensure the freedom to perform religious rituals as long as these "do not disturb the public order." There is no official state religion, although the constitution states, "Islam is the religion of the President of the republic." The constitution states Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation, and the law prohibits conversion from Islam. Membership in the Muslim Brotherhood or "Salafist" organizations remains illegal and punishable with imprisonment or death.

Sectarian violence continued during the year due to tensions among religious groups that, according to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and media sources, were exacerbated by regime actions, continued economic deterioration, and the broader ongoing conflict in the country. At year's end, more than half of the country's prewar population remained displaced, including 6.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 5.1 million refugees. Regime and proregime forces continued aerial and ground offensives in the country's northwest, killing civilians and displacing over 10,000 additional persons. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) documented at least 33 attacks on mosques in the country during the year, attributing 31 attacks to the regime (94 percent) and two (6 percent) attacks to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

There were widespread reports that the regime, supported by its Russian and Iranian allies, continued to commit human rights abuses against its perceived opponents, the majority of whom, reflecting the country's demographics, were Sunni Muslims that the regime described as violent extremists. There also continued to be reports that the regime and its foreign supporters engaged in the extensive destruction of hospitals, homes, and other civilian infrastructure. The SNHR reported at least 2,317 cases of arbitrary detentions or forcible disappearance during the year, including 129 children and 87 women. As of December, the SNHR reported at least 156,457 persons who remained arbitrarily detained or forcibly disappeared by the regime or other conflict parties between 2011 and December. The Assad regime is responsible for 87 percent (136,047 including 3,696 children and 8,495 women) of these cases. Members of the Alawite minority group continued to hold an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers, particularly in leadership positions in the military, security, and intelligence services.

On January 14, the regime issued Legislative Decree No. 2 to regulate the affairs and welfare of the 1.2 million orphans in the country. According to Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), the decree stated that a child of unknown parentage is a "Muslim unless proven otherwise" and that a foster family can apply to foster a child only "if the couple and the child share the same religion." In August, the Druze community in Suwayda and Dara'a started a wave of antigovernment protests over rising fuel prices and economic conditions that continued through the end of the year. On September 13, regime forces fired on demonstrators in Suwayda who were attempting to close the Baath Party headquarters, injuring three individuals. A senior Druze cleric in Suwayda said, "everyone who supports this defunct [Baath] party is … outside of the religious values and principles on which we were raised." In a December 18 speech posted to YouTube, President Assad said that there was no evidence that six million Jews died in the Holocaust and that the Nazis did not employ a special method of torture or killing for the Jews. He said that the Jews who were killed had died like other victims of World War II. According to the Middle East Institute, the Alawite community, among other religious communities, have expressed growing frustration over the economy and the centralization of power in the Assad family. In response, Waseem al-Assad, identified as a militia leader, drug lord, and distant cousin of the president, criticized the regime's traditional Alawite supporters on social media, reminding them of their privileged position in society.

The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI), human rights groups, and media organizations reported abuses by some armed Syrian opposition groups, which operated with the support of Turkey, reportedly focused on Kurdish and Yezidi residents in and around Afrin as well as other civilians. Those reported abuses included: killings; abduction and disappearance of civilians; physical abuse, including rape and sexual violence; forced displacement from homes; transfer of detained civilians across the border into Turkey; recruitment or use of child soldiers; looting; appropriating private property; and desecration of religious sites. Reports also indicated that the small number of Christians remaining in Aleppo were very concerned about possible attacks by Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey. STJ documented large-scale confiscations of Yezidi-owned property by various armed groups. According to STJ's report, "the perpetrators expropriated several houses, shops, and olive groves owned by members of the Yezidi religion." In August, the COI noted Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) control over the daily life of residents in areas under its influence in northwest Syria and reported that HTS continued to unlawfully detain activists, journalists and private citizens who were critical, including on social media, of their rule or religious doctrine. According to an October NGO report, HTS forced farmers in Idlib to pay levies and "taxes" on wheat harvests under the pretext of collecting "zakat" (almsgiving required as one of the five pillars of Islam). ISIS engaged in terrorist attacks during the year, including attacks near Palmyra in February, March, and April on individuals collecting truffles, resulting in numerous deaths. Human rights organizations stated that ISIS often targeted civilians, persons suspected of collaborating with security forces, and groups that it deemed to be apostates. Many former victims of ISIS remained missing.

Throughout the year, there were continued reports of sectarian violence due to tensions among religious groups, cultural rivalries, and provocative rhetoric. Christians reportedly continued to face discrimination and violence at the hands of violent extremist groups. In July, two bombs exploded in separate attacks near the Shia shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, a site of mass pilgrimage for Shias from across the world, including Shia militia fighters, in a Damascus suburb in the days before the holy day of Ashura. Two persons were injured in the first explosion on July 25, while the second blast, on July 27, killed at least six individuals and injured dozens.

NGOs reported social conventions and religious proscriptions continued to make conversions relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversions, which are prohibited by law. These groups also reported that societal pressure continued to force converts from Islam to Christianity to relocate within the country or to emigrate in order to practice their new religion openly.

The President of the United States and senior Department of State officials continued to state that a political solution to the conflict should be based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and respect for the human rights of the country's citizens. Department of State officials continued to work with the UN special envoy for Syria, members of the opposition, and the international community to support UN-facilitated, Syrian-led efforts in pursuit of a political solution to the conflict that would safeguard the human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, of all citizens. In September, a senior State Department official met with a senior Druze leader to discuss the ongoing protests in southern Syria. The Department of State continued to support the evidence-gathering work of UN bodies and NGOs to promote accountability for the atrocities that the regime and ISIS have committed, as well as abuses committed by other parties to the conflict.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 23.9 million in 2023. At year's end, according to the UN, more than half of the country's prewar population was displaced; there were approximately 5.1 million refugees in neighboring countries as well as 6.8 million IDPs. Continued population displacement adds a degree of uncertainty to demographic analyses, but the U.S. government estimates 74 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, which includes ethnic Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and some Turkmen. Other Muslim groups, including Alawites,

Ismailis, and Shia, together constitute 13 percent of the population, while Druze constitute 3 percent.

The U.S. government estimates 10 percent of the population is Christian. There are reports, however, that indicate that number is considerably lower – approximately 2.5 percent. Of the 2.2 million Christians who lived in the country prior to the war, the NGO Open Doors USA, citing the World Christian Database, estimates that only approximately 579,000 remain, 2.8 percent of the population.

Before the civil war, there were small Jewish populations in Aleppo and Damascus, but in 2020, the *Jewish Chronicle* reported that there were no known Jews still living in the country. Before the civil war, the country also had a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000. While there are no updated official figures on the number of Yezidis in the country, the Afrin Yezidi Union estimates that approximately 2,000 Yezidis remain in Afrin, compared with approximately 50-60,000 prior to 2011. Yezidis previously lived in Aleppo, but now live mainly in areas of northeast Syria held by the SDF.

Sunni Muslims live throughout the country. Shia Muslims live mostly in rural areas, particularly in several majority-Shia towns in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates, although Iranian-backed groups along the Middle Euphrates River valley have encouraged conversions of the local Sunni population to Shia Islam. Twelver Shia Muslims generally live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. Most Alawites live in the mountainous areas of the coastal Latakia Governorate, but they also live in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Damascus. The highest concentration of Ismaili Muslims lives in the city of Salamiyeh, Hama Governorate.

Most Christians belong to autonomous Orthodox churches, such as the Syriac Orthodox Church, Eastern Catholic churches such as the Maronite Church, or the Assyrian Church of the East and other Nestorian churches. Most Christians continue to live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, or in Hasakah Governorate in the northeast of the country. While there were hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christian refugees in the country before the conflict, a majority of those refugees have moved to neighboring countries or returned to Iraq. Many Druze live in the Jabal al-Arab (Jabal al-Druze) region in the southern Suwayda Governorate, where they constitute a majority of the local population.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The legal framework described in this section applies only in those areas controlled by the regime, and even in those areas, there is often a breakdown in law and order, leaving militias, often predominantly composed of a single religious group, in a dominant position. In other areas of the country, irregular “courts” and local “authorities” apply a variety of unofficial legal codes with diverse provisions relating to religious freedom.

The constitution declares the state shall respect all religions and ensure the freedom to perform religious rituals if they “do not disturb public order.” There is no official state religion, although the constitution states “Islam is the religion of the President of the republic.” The constitution states Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation.

The constitution states, “The personal status of religious communities shall be protected and respected” and “Citizens shall be equal in rights and duties without discrimination among them on grounds of sex, origin, language, religion, or creed.” The constitution stipulates that “[c]arrying out

any political activity or forming any political parties or groupings on the basis of religious, sectarian, tribal, regional, class-based, or professional discrimination, or on discrimination based on gender, origin, race or color may not be undertaken." Citizens have the right to sue the government if they believe it violated their rights. Some personal status laws mirror sharia, regardless of the religion of those involved in the case being decided.

By law, membership in certain types of religiously oriented organizations is illegal and punishable to different degrees. This prohibition includes membership in an organization that the government considers "Salafist," a designation the government loosely associates with Sunni violent extremism. Neither the government broadly nor the state security court specifically has defined the parameters of what constitutes "Salafist" activity. The law prohibits political parties based on religion, tribal affiliation, or regional interests. Affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death or imprisonment.

The government bans Jehovah's Witnesses as a "politically motivated Zionist organization."

The law restricts proselytizing and conversion. It prohibits Muslims from converting to other religions as contrary to sharia. The law recognizes conversion to Islam. The penal code prohibits causing tension between religious communities.

The law bars publication of content that affects "national unity and national security," harms state symbols, defames religions, or incites sectarian strife or "hate crimes." The law extends penalties from one month to 15 years' imprisonment and increased fines from 200,000 Syrian pounds ($23) to 15 million pounds ($1,700). The Ministry of Religious Endowments (*Awqaf*) must approve books imported from abroad. Television shows require the approval of religious authorities.

The penal code provides for penalties, to include detention, for the crimes of "compromising national identity," "undermining the prestige of the state," or "arousing racial or sectarian strife."

By law, all religious groups must register with the regime. Registered religious groups and clergy – including all government-recognized Muslim, Jewish, and Christian groups – receive free utilities and are exempt from real estate taxes on religious buildings and personal property taxes on their official vehicles.

The law regulates the structure and functions of the Awqaf. The law provides for a Council of Islamic Jurisprudence with the authority to define what religious discourse is appropriate and the authority to fine or penalize individuals who propagate "extremist" thought or deviate from approved discourse. The Minister of Religious Endowments chairs the council, which consists of 40 scholars whose tasks include setting the start and end dates of the month of Ramadan and issuing fatwas. The law also charges the council with monitoring all fatwas issued in the country and with preventing the spread of views associated with the Muslim Brotherhood or "Salafist" activity, including "Wahhabism." The law concentrates a range of offices and institutions within the ministry, centralizing the regime's role in and oversight of the country's religious affairs.

All meetings of religious groups, except for regularly scheduled worship, require permits from the government.

Public schools are officially government-run and nonsectarian, although the government authorizes the Christian and Druze communities to operate some public schools. Religious instruction is mandatory for all students in public schools, with government-approved teachers and curricula. Religious instruction covers only Islam and Christianity, and courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Members of religious groups may choose to attend public schools with Islamic or Christian instruction or to attend private schools that follow either secular or religious curricula.

For the resolution of issues of personal status, the regime requires citizens to list their religious affiliation. Individuals are subject to their respective religious group's laws concerning marriage and divorce. Per the personal status code, a Muslim man may legally marry a non-Muslim woman,

but a Muslim woman may not legally marry a non-Muslim man. If a Christian woman marries a Muslim man, she is not allowed burial in an Islamic cemetery or inheritance of property or wealth from her husband unless she converts to Islam. The law states that if a Christian wishes to convert to Islam, the presiding Muslim cleric must inform the prospective convert's diocese. The law prohibits adoption based on the provisions of Islamic sharia, with the exception of Catholic and Syriac Orthodox adoptions that follow a specific set of conditions.

The personal status law on divorce for Muslims is based on an interpretation of sharia implemented by government-appointed religious judges. In interreligious personal status cases, sharia takes precedence. A divorced woman is not entitled to alimony in some cases; a woman may also forego her right to alimony to persuade her husband to agree to the divorce. In addition, under the law, a divorced mother loses the right to guardianship and physical custody of her sons when they reach the age of 13 and of her daughters at age 15, when guardianship transfers to the paternal side of the family.

Church law governs personal status questions for Christians, in some cases barring divorce. Some personal status laws mirror sharia regardless of the religion of those involved in the case.

The government's interpretation of sharia is the basis of inheritance laws for all citizens except Christians. According to the law, courts may grant Muslim women up to half of the inheritance share of male heirs. In all communities, male heirs must provide financial support to female relatives who inherit less.

An individual's birth certificate records his or her religious affiliation. Documents presented when marrying or traveling for a religious pilgrimage also list the religious affiliation of the applicant. Jews are the only religious group whose passports and identity cards note their religion.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

Some opposition groups identified themselves explicitly as Sunni Arab or Sunni Muslim in statements and publications. According to the NGO Freedom House, "While the largely Alawite-led regime presents itself as a protector of that and other religious minorities, Alawites, Christians, Druze, and members of other smaller sects who are outside Assad's inner circle are politically disenfranchised." Freedom House stated although the political elite included Sunnis, the Sunni majority, which comprised the bulk of the opposition, bore "the brunt of state repression as a result" of this broader disenfranchisement.

The regime continued to target those within the country who criticized or opposed it, the majority of whom were Sunni and whom the regime described as violent extremists. However, according to major news outlets, in August the Assad regime began to encourage other denominations, particularly Jews and Christians, to practice their respective religions. According to a July report in the *Economist*, "the Assad dynasty has allied its own Alawite sect … with Syria's myriad religious minorities in order to bolster the regime's dominance over the country's Sunni Muslim majority." The report stated this is an effort to increase the regime's minority base and improve its international standing. Before the civil war, the regime previously allowed evangelical Christians to open churches in houses where Muslim converts to Christianity could worship, permitted the opening of yoga studios, and encouraged Jews of Syrian origin to visit Damascus.

Regime and pro-regime forces continued aerial and ground offensives in the country's northwest, killing civilians and displacing over 10,000 additional persons. There were continued NGO and media reports that in its efforts to retake opposition-held areas, the regime attacked civilian centers in towns and neighborhoods, which, due to prevailing demographics, were inhabited by majority

Sunni populations. In September, the COI determined there were reasonable grounds to believe pro-regime forces on multiple occasions were guilty of the war crime of "launching indiscriminate attacks resulting in death or injury to civilians, or damage to civilian objects," as well as "the crimes against humanity of murder and other inhumane acts and forcible transfer of populations through airstrikes and artillery shelling of civilian areas."

The SNHR documented at least 33 attacks on mosques in the country during the year, attributing 31 attacks to the regime (94 percent) and 2 (6 percent) attacks to the SDF.

According to the SNHR, from March 2011 to October 2023, the regime was responsible for at least 15,051 persons who died from torture. According to the SNHR, at least 59 individuals, including one child and two women, died due to torture by conflict parties during the year, with the regime responsible for 34 of these deaths. As was the case with others who previously died in regime custody, most were from the country's Sunni majority, whom analysts stated the regime targeted believing they were members of the opposition, or likely to support the opposition.

The SNHR reported at least 2,317 cases of arbitrary detentions during the year, including 129 children and 87 women, by parties to the conflict. The regime was responsible for 1,063 of these arbitrary arrests, according to the SNHR. The SNHR reported at least 156,457 individuals, including 5,235 children and 10,199 women, were detained or forcibly disappeared between 2011 and December. According to SNHR, the regime was responsible for approximately 87 percent of these cases (136,047 including 3,696 children and 8,495 women).

According to analysis by the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Affairs (WINEP), Suwayda and its surrounding area, inhabited by a 90-percent majority Druze population with a small Christian presence and a few nomadic Sunni Bedouin Arab tribes, has been "stuck between the hammer of the regime's violence and the anvil of growing sectarianism and worsening living conditions." In August, the Druze community in Suwayda and Dara'a started a wave of antigovernment protests over rising fuel prices and economic conditions that continued through the end of the year. During the demonstrations, protestors destroyed posters of Assad and his father, smashed a statue of Assad's father, shut the local office of the ruling Baath party, waved the Druze flag, and raised pictures of Sultan al-Atrash, a Druze leader who led a campaign against France in the 1920s. The preeminent Druze religious body in Suwayda, the Masyakhat al-Aql, remained split on the protests; two of its three members including Hikmat al-Hajri, considered the most prominent religious leader of the Druze, expressed support for the protests, while a third said Suwayda would not "deviate from the decisions of the Syrian state." A writer for the Paris-based Arab Reform Initiative stated, "Sheikh Al-Hijri's living room [has] became a hub for opposition activists and dissidents to gather, seek his counsel, and gain legitimacy for their political activities." In September, responding to government forces firing on demonstrators, al-Hijri said, "everyone who supports this defunct [Baath] party is … outside of the religious values and principles on which we were raised."

According to a WINEP report, "From the very beginning, the active participation of local Druze religious leaders has also been notable, and their presence [at the demonstrations] is often visible." The WINEP analyst stated, "Because the protests emerge from a major Druze center, these calls for an end to the regime are particularly powerful in the face of the regime's repeated efforts to validate its rule by claiming to be the protector of minorities." In September, Ehud Yaari, an Israeli commentator wrote, "The Druze became the first minority group in the Syrian complex sectarian mosaic to demand Assad's ouster" and Ryan Marouf, a civic activist and editor of the local Suwayda 24 news website said, "This is civil disobedience that is unprecedented and draws wide societal support from a large section of the Druze community and its religious leaders."

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

Analysts reported the regime continued to use the law allowing it to create redevelopment zones as well as confiscate property to reward those loyal to the regime, create obstacles for refugees and IDPs to reclaim their property and return to their homes, and engineer demographic changes. NGOs

reported investigations continued into the usurpation of land and property rights of displaced owners, including through public auctions in areas retaken by regime forces. According to NGO reports, since the enactment of the redevelopment zone law in 2018, the regime replaced residents in former opposition-held areas with more loyal constituencies. These regime policies disproportionately affected Sunni populations, which made up the majority of the population.

The regime continued to allow foreign Christian NGOs to operate under the auspices of one of the "historically established churches" (a designation made by the government) without officially registering. It continued to require foreign Islamic NGOs to register and receive Awqaf approval to operate. Security forces continued to question these Islamic organizations on their sources of income and to monitor their expenditures. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor continued to prohibit religious leaders from serving as directors on the boards of Islamic charities.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

Christians, Druze, and Kurds continued to hold seats in parliament, although the body did not function independently and was subject to control of the President. According to observers, Alawites held greater political power in the cabinet than members of other minority groups as well as more authority than the majority Sunni population.

Some media articles challenged the depiction of the country and the regime's self-description as religiously tolerant and secular, stating instead that authorities weaponized religion for political gain. The regime continued to control strictly the dissemination of information, including on developments regarding fighting between the regime and the armed opposition, human rights abuses perpetrated by the regime, and trials of regime officials in third-country courts. Prohibited topics included criticism of the regime, sectarian tensions, and problems facing members of religious and ethnic minority communities.

According to experts, religion remained a factor in determining career advancement in the government. The Alawite minority continued to hold an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers, particularly in leadership positions in the military, security, and intelligence services, although the senior officer corps of the military continued to accept individuals from other religious minority groups into its ranks. According to a 2020 report by the EU Agency for Asylum, Alawites "hold key regime positions, dominate the police and the army and have high-ranking positions in elite military and militia units." The report also noted Alawites have higher chances of obtaining employment in the public sector compared to other groups such as Christians, Sunni Arabs, or Kurds.

The regime continued to exempt Christian and Muslim religious leaders from military service based on conscientious objection, although it continued to require Muslim religious leaders to pay a levy for exemption.

Alawites held most key positions in the state apparatus, particularly the military. Freedom House continued to report families and networks with links to the ruling elite received preferential treatment and were disproportionately Alawite, although "Alawites without such connections [were] far less likely to benefit from any special advantages." Freedom House found that, given the armed opposition's overwhelmingly Sunni composition, Sunnis were consequently likely to face discrimination by the regime unless they held close ties with it.

Alawites constituted approximately 95 percent of officers and regular soldiers in the Fourth Division, under the command of the President's brother, Maher al-Assad. The Fourth Division deployed throughout regime-controlled areas of the country, often with support from Iran and Hizballah, because of a growing lack of confidence in regular army forces and prior defections by Sunni officers in the rest of the army. According to New Lines Institute, a Washington-based think tank, "Alawites make up about 70 percent of career soldiers in the Syrian army. The military's most elite divisions, the Republican Guard and the Fourth Division, are exclusively Alawite." The same report also stated, "Since the eruption of conflict in 2011, the Assad regime has strategically and

pragmatically positioned the Fourth Division as a dynamic, sectarian actor to manipulate Syria's complex social fabric."

Human rights groups described the military conscription law, which allows authorities to confiscate the assets of "[military] service evaders" and their families who failed to pay a military exemption fee, as a regime attempt to extort Syrian citizens living abroad, many of whom fled the country to escape the regime's military offensive and would be unwilling to serve in the military. According to human rights groups, the military conscription law disproportionately affected Sunnis and Christians, who comprised the bulk of Syrians who fled the country as a result of the war.

Human rights organizations stated the law on cybercrimes and amendments to the penal code raising the minimum and maximum penalties for inciting racial or sectarian strife, among other actions characterized as "crimes," served as a consolidation of the regime's practice of restricting freedom of expression under false accusations meant to legitimize its oppression of perceived opponents.

In January, the government issued Legislative Decree No. 2 to regulate the affairs and welfare of children of unknown parentage. According to the website of the Arabic news channel al-Arabiya, there are 1.2 million orphans in the country. According to STJ, the decree stated that a child of unknown parentage is a "Muslim unless proven otherwise" and that a foster family can apply to foster a child only "if the couple and the child share the same religion." The NGO report stated the new provisions are unfair to non-Muslims, and neglected to specify factors that would allow a change in the child's religion from Islam to another later in life.

In a December 18 speech posted to YouTube, President Assad said there is no evidence that six million Jews died in the Holocaust and that the Nazis did not employ a special method of torture or killing for the Jews, who were killed just like other victims of World War II. Assad stated that the Holocaust was "politicized" and used as a false pretext to transfer the Jews from Europe to Palestine and that the Jews who came to Palestine, are pagan converts from the Khazars rather than the People of Israel. According to the American Jewish Committee, "antisemites push the conspiracy that Ashkenazi Jews – Jews descending from Eastern Europe – are not 'real Jews' [having descended from the Khazars, a tribal people that lived in Central Asia and the Caucasus] and are working to infiltrate other nations on their quest for world domination. The Khazar trope is also used to undermine the Jewish connection to Israel, and therefore Israel's right to exist, because it falsely says Jews originated from the northern Caucasus region and were part of the Turkic empire – and not the Land of Israel."

Antisemitic literature reportedly remained available for purchase at low prices throughout the country. Regime-controlled radio and television programming routinely disseminated antisemitic news articles and cartoons.

According to the Middle East Institute in August, the Alawite community has expressed growing frustration over the economy and the centralization of power in the Assad family. In response, Waseem al-Assad, identified as a militia leader, drug lord, and distant cousin of Assad, criticized the regime's traditional Alawite supporters on social media, reminding them of their privileged position in society.

ACTIONS OF FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

There continued to be reports that the Iranian government, primarily through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp, directly supported the Assad regime and recruited Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani Shia fighters, as well as Syrians, to fight in the conflict. Media outlets continued to report that Iran used its influence, as well as the dire economic situation in the country and financial incentives, to encourage Sunnis to convert to Shia Islam or join Iranian militias.

Experts reported Iranian efforts to increase the number of Shia in the country were specifically tied to a desire to expand Iranian political and strategic influence.

According to human rights organizations, documentation-gathering groups, and media outlets, factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition of armed Syrian opposition groups supported by the government of Turkey in the northern part of the country, committed human rights abuses which reportedly targeted Kurdish and Yezidi residents and other civilians. Those abuses included: killings, abduction and disappearance of civilians, unlawful detentions, severe physical abuse, sexual violence, forced displacement from homes, transfer of detained civilians across the border into Turkey, recruitment or use of child soldiers, looting and seizure of private property, and the looting and desecration of religious shrines. Media reports also stated SNA fighters had imposed Islam on Yezidi children and that abduction, extortion, unlawful detention, torture, and forced religious conversion were common occurrences in an ongoing effort to engineer demographic change. SNA factions also reportedly abused members of other religious minority groups.

In areas under Turkish influence, the SNA restricted religious freedom of Yezidis through attacks against, and intimidation of, civilians. Members of religious and ethnic minority groups, especially displaced Kurds, Yezidis, and Christians, in areas under Turkish influence, such as in the city of Afrin, reported experiencing human rights abuses and marginalization. According to press reports and NGOs, Yezidi women in Afrin who the SNA had reportedly kidnapped remained missing.

The COI and numerous independent sources reported during the course of the conflict, nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United Nations and the United States and other governments, such as HTS, targeted members of religious minority groups as well as Sunnis with killings, kidnappings, physical mistreatment, and detentions. These resulted in the deaths and disappearance of thousands of civilians. Human rights groups continued to report that HTS, which officially denounces secularism, routinely detained and tortured political opponents, journalists, activists, and other civilians in territory it controlled who were deemed to have violated the group's interpretation of sharia. In March and September, the COI reported HTS continued to detain civilians "arbitrarily" including activists, journalists, and others who were critical of its rule and religious doctrine.

According to press reports, HTS sought to increase its influence in the northwestern province of Idlib through religious schools. These schools offered attractive incentives and benefits, including free tuition, transportation, and free uniforms, "to educate a generation that would reflect HTS' ideology and serve its interests." NGOs stated HTS took advantage of the economic vulnerabilities of the local population to instill its ideas and that parents often enrolled their children in HTS schools as a last resort, since public schools charged fees and did not offer the same benefits as HTS schools.

Human rights organizations continued to report HTS committed abuses against members of religious and ethnic minority groups, including the seizure of properties belonging to displaced Christians. In its August report, the COI noted HTS control over the daily life of residents in areas under its control and reported HTS continued unlawfully to detain activists, journalists and private citizens who were critical, including on social media, of their rule or religious doctrine. One man spent three months in detention because he complained of the lack of public services provided by HTS and about increasing taxes and prices. Another man was detained for a week in January after he criticized speeches made by imams in mosques in HTS areas.

According to an October report from STJ, HTS forced farmers in Idlib to pay levies and taxes on the wheat harvest under the pretext of collecting "crops *zakat.*" ("Zakat" is almsgiving required as one of the five pillars of Islam). HTS issued a circular imposing these requirements in June 2019 and has collected them since that time. In July, during the harvest season, HTS established several checkpoints in areas under its control in Idlib to force farmers to pay these royalties under the pretext of collecting zakat.

Press and NGO reports stated HTS in recent years has directed its fighting toward ISIS and other jihadist groups, in some cases leading to new violence and complicating ongoing international humanitarian aid efforts. On August 4, HTS denied ISIS statements that blamed HTS for the killing of ISIS leader Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurayshi. On August 6, AFP, citing the Syrian

Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), reported HTS fighters killed six government soldiers in Latakia Province.

According to press reporting, in August HTS imposed new rules on educational institutions in areas under its control. Among these rules, HTS ordered the removal of drawings and pictures from classroom walls, ordained female students to wear "loose, Islamic dress," directed that male and female students should be separated, and said that cell phones and offensive music were prohibited.

The COI and NGOs found despite its territorial defeat, violent attacks by ISIS remnants persisted. Human rights organizations stated these remnants often targeted civilians, persons suspected of collaborating with security forces, and groups that ISIS deemed to be apostates. In a July 31 report to the UN Security Council, the UN Secretary-General stated, "Despite significant attrition of the Da'esh [ISIS] leadership and a reduction in activity in the core conflict zone, the risk of resurgence remained. The group has adapted its strategy, embedding itself with local populations, and has exercised caution in choosing battles that are likely to result in limited losses, while rebuilding and recruiting from camps in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic." The report later added, "In the Syrian Arab Republic, Da'esh continued to wage asymmetric attacks, albeit at a slightly lower frequency. Ongoing military activity has largely contained the group in the central desert, Badiyah, which, while a haven for Da'esh with regard to training and reorganizing, is characterized by difficult terrain and lack of critical infrastructure, thereby limiting its ability to operate or disseminate propaganda effectively."

ISIS engaged in terrorist attacks during the year, including reported attacks near Palmyra in February, March, and April on individuals collecting truffles, resulting in numerous deaths. After one attack in February, according to local media, authorities found at least 61 dead, with gunshot wounds to the head. Subsequent attacks on truffle hunters resulted in 15 and 26 persons killed. In an August 11 attack on a military bus in Deir Ezzour Province, ISIS killed 33 soldiers, according to press reports. Earlier that week, according to SOHR, ISIS killed 10 soldiers in Raqqa Province. On November 8, SOHR reported ISIS waged parallel attacks in the regions of Raqqa, Homs, and Deir Ezzour, resulting in at least 30 deaths.

In areas where regime control was weak or nonexistent, armed groups continued to run local detention centers. Reports of control and oversight varied, and both civilian and religious leaders were in charge of facility administration.

Yezidis, Druze, Christians, Shia, and members of other religious minority groups were subject to violence and discrimination by ISIS, HTS, the SNA, and other groups.

In an April 7 Friday sermon delivered in Idlib, Mahmoud al-Hubeish said Jews are the "enemies of Allah" who violate the agreements they make, "and who cast aside any covenant they make." He said, "Two things are mutually exclusive: Jews and agreements" and described Jews as "wanton infidels" and "descendants of apes."

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Throughout the year there were continued reports of sectarian violence due to tensions among religious groups, cultural rivalries, and provocative rhetoric. Christians reportedly continued to face discrimination and violence at the hands of violent extremist groups.

On July 25, two people were injured in a bombing near the Shia shrine of Sayyida Zeinab in a Damascus suburb in the days before the holy day of Ashura, when Shia Muslims mourn the death of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Mohammad. In a second bombing at the same location on July 27, at least six individuals were killed and dozens injured. Sayyida Zeinab, the Prophet Mohammad's granddaughter, is venerated by Shia Muslims and her shrine is a site of popular

pilgrimage for Shias from across the world, reportedly including members of Shia militias operating in Syria.

According to Open Doors, a group of unknown individuals targeted the Assyrian Church of St. George in Qamishli. The attackers destroyed furniture, desecrated crosses, committed indecent acts at the church's altar, and stole copper crosses and icons. Local church members stated churches and other Christian buildings in the coastal area in the west of Syria, are vandalized or looted at least once a month.

Advocacy groups reported social conventions and religious proscriptions continued to make conversions relatively rare, especially conversions from Islam to Christianity, which are prohibited by law. The groups also reported societal pressure continued to force converts from Islam to Christianity to relocate within the country or to emigrate in order to practice their new religion openly.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Senior Department of State officials continued to stress the need for a political solution to the conflict in the country in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which states that such a solution should establish credible, inclusive, and nonsectarian governance.

The Department of State continued to support the work of the UN International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM) as an important evidentiary-gathering mechanism to promote accountability for the atrocities committed by the regime and ISIS as well as abuses committed by others. As of year's end, the United States had provided $3.5 million to the IIIM since its creation as well as approximately $14 million to the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL, to support its efforts to gather evidence of ISIS crimes, including atrocities against members of the Muslim, Yezidi, and Christian communities. The Department of State continued to support NGOs working to collect and preserve evidence of potential atrocity crimes. The United States also continued to support the documentation, analysis, and preservation of evidence of abuses committed by all parties to the conflict, including those committed against members of religious minority groups, through NGOs and the COI. The United States led efforts in the UN Human Rights Council, UN General Assembly, and Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to condemn and call on all actors to end abuses.

The U.S. government consistently urged Turkey and the Syrian opposition at the highest levels to comply with their obligations under international law in areas where they, or groups they supported, operated or exerted control. The United State also continued its calls for armed opposition groups to cease their abuses against all Syrians, including members of religious and ethnic minority groups. On August 17, the United States imposed sanctions under Executive Order 13894 on SNA faction Suleiman Shah Brigade and its leaders Mohammad Jasim "Abu Amsha" and his brother Walid Jasim as well as SNA faction Hamza Division and its leader Sayf Boulad Abu Bakr in connection with serious human rights abuses in northern Syria. In the announcement, the United States highlighted the abuses against women as well as local Kurdish populations, which contributed to the latter's displacement.

The Secretary of State and Department of State officials continued to work with the UN special envoy for Syria, members of the moderate opposition, and the international community to support a UN-facilitated political resolution to the conflict led by the Syrian people that would safeguard religious freedom for all citizens. These efforts included support for the Constitutional Committee tasked with drafting an amended or new constitution meant to represent the Syrian people as part of the UN-facilitated political process.

On June 29, in a vote in the UN General Assembly, the U.S. government supported the creation of a stand-alone UN mechanism tasked with clarifying the fate and whereabouts of the over 156,000 missing and unlawfully detained in Syria as well as providing adequate support to victims, survivors, and families of the missing.

The U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in 2012. U.S. government representatives continued to meet with religious groups and leaders in the United States and elsewhere in the Middle East region. Department of State officials participated in virtual dialogues, roundtables, meetings on the margins of the UN General Assembly, and working groups focused on accountability and justice efforts, countering extremist violence, and efforts to support persecuted members of religious and ethnic communities. In September, the United States hosted a hybrid UN General Assembly side event on accountability for human rights abuses, including those committed against members of religious minority groups. In September, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs met with senior Druze leaders to discuss the ongoing protests in southern Syria. He called for an end to abuses by all parties and for establishing accountability for ongoing atrocities [and abuses], including against members of minority groups.