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IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Syria: Information on the opposition forces involved in abductions and extortions and their areas of operation in the country; frequency of abductions and extortions of civilians committed by rebel groups; whether rebel groups target particular social groups, including Christians (2015-July 2017) [SYR105972.E]

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1. Overview of Opposition Forces Involved in Abductions and Extortions and Their Areas of Operation in Syria

1.1 Free Syrian Army (FSA)

An April 2017 article by the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), "an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher" (CFR n.d.), indicates that the FSA was originally the main opposition force formed at the beginning of the conflict, but that a series of battlefield defeats and a lack of effective central control over its affiliated militias has resulted in a number of militias becoming affiliated with Islamist groups or becoming criminal outfits (CFR 28 Apr. 2017). The same source notes that the FSA is "the predominant opposition force in the country's south" via the "loosely-aligned Southern Front," and that FSA-linked brigades are also active in the north, but "have largely been marginalized" by Islamist groups there (CFR 28 Apr. 2017).

1.2 Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS)

Sources report that Jabhat al-Nusra [al-Nusra Front] was established in late 2011 (*Jane's Intelligence Review* 3 Aug. 2016), or early 2012 (Amnesty International 5 July 2016, 11). *Jane's Intelligence Review*, an open-source intelligence provider on security issues and country risks (IHS Markit n.d.), reports in an August 2016 article that Jabhat al-Nusra was established by Syrian Al-Qaeda members, and the group was officially linked to the core Al-Qaeda network until 28 July 2016, when it renamed itself as Jabhat Fath al-Sham (JFS), or The Front for the Conquest of the Levant, and split from Al-Qaeda (*Jane's Intelligence Review* 3 Aug. 2016). CFR reports that JFS is active in northern Syria, particularly in Idlib [Idleb] province, including along the Syria-Turkey border between Aleppo and Latakia

(CFR 28 Apr. 2017). The Wilson Center, a US-based "non-partisan policy forum for tackling global issues through independent research and open dialogue to inform actionable ideas for the policy community" (Wilson Center n.d.), reports that in January 2017, JFS merged with four other groups to create Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS), or the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant (Wilson Center 24 Apr. 2017). In a July 2017 article, Syria Deeply, "an independent digital media project led by journalists and technologists that explores a new model of storytelling around a global crisis" (News Deeply n.d.), describes HTS as "an al-Qaida-led alliance of insurgent fighters," and notes it "has become a dominant force" in Idlib province (News Deeply 25 July 2017).

1.3 Ahrar al-Sham [Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement] and Jaysh al-Fatah

In a July 2016 report on abductions, torture and killings in territories controlled by armed groups in Syria, Amnesty International indicates that Ahrar al-Sham is a coalition of four armed groups established in early 2013, and "is present in Idleb, Aleppo, Damascus and Hama and is part of several military operation rooms across the country" (Amnesty International 5 July 2016, 11). *Jane's Intelligence Review* reports in its August 2016 article that Ahrar al-Sham is part of an alliance called Jaysh al-Fatah with JFS and Faylaq al-Sham, and that "as of July 2016, Jaysh al-Fatah was by far the most powerful and significant insurgent alliance in northern Syria," and had "significant influence" in other areas (*Jane's Intelligence Review* 3 Aug. 2016). CFR reports that Ahrar al-Sham is among nationalist Islamist groups that are "largely limited to territory in northern Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama provinces, as well as pockets around Homs and Damascus" (CFR 28 Apr. 2017). Business Insider, a business news website, reports in a July 2016 article that Ahrar al-Sham is based in the Idlib province (Business Insider 12 July 2016).

1.4 Jaish al-Islam [Jaysh al-Islam]

In a 2016 article, Syria Deeply reports that Jaish al-Islam [Army of Islam, Jaysh al-Islam] was established in late 2011 as Liwa al-Islam [Brigade of Islam], and subsequently merged with "50 other Salafist factions" in late September 2013 to form Jaish al-Islam (News Deeply 22 Mar. 2016). The same source, in its 2017 article, describes Jaish al-Islam as a "hard-line armed opposition group" that controls the eastern Damascus suburb of Douma, which is east of the capital (News Deeply 25 July 2017). The 2016 article by Business Insider reports that the group has "a formidable presence east of Syria's capital, Damascus" (Business Insider 12 July 2016).

1.5 Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

CFR reports that the YPG, which "is the militia arm of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Kurdish party that de facto governs the Kurdish-majority cantons of northern Syria known as Rojava," also operates outside of Kurdish-majority areas in Syria (CFR 28 Apr. 2017). Sources report that the YPG is the dominant group within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), (*Jane's Intelligence Review* 19 Jan. 2016; CFR 28 Apr. 2017; RBSS 10 July

2017), a military alliance of Kurdish forces and "remnants of the non-jihadist Arab Sunni rebellion in northern Syria," that was formed in October 2015 (*Jane's Intelligence Review* 19 Jan. 2016).

1.6 Islamic State [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Daesh, Da'esh, IS]

CFR reports that Islamic State forces are "most prominent in the country's northeast and eastern desert provinces contiguous with Iraq's Anbar province" (CFR 28 Apr. 2017). The same source further reports that "[s]ome of the Islamic State's fiercest fighting has been against the Kurdish YPG in the north" (CFR 28 Apr. 2017). IHS Conflict Monitor, "an open-source intelligence collection and analysis service" based in London, reports that between January 2015 and June 2017, the Islamic State lost 60 percent of territory it held in Iraq and Syria, including "oil rich areas in Raqqa and Homs", and that the group was under pressure from SDF forces in the outskirts of Raqqa and from Syrian government forces in Deir al-Zour [Deir Ezzor, Deir ez-Zor] (IHS Markit 29 June 2017).

1.7 Shamiyya Front [al-Jabha al-Shamiya, Al-Shamia Front, Levant Front]

Sources report that the Shamiyya Front was established in December 2014 as an alliance of armed groups in Aleppo (Amnesty International 5 July 2016, 10; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 26 Dec. 2014; Reuters 25 Dec. 2014), including factions from the Islamic Front, and the Mujahideen Army, the Nouredin al-Zinki Brigades and other groups (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 26 Dec. 2014; Reuters 25 Dec. 2014). Amnesty International, in its July 2016 report, indicates that the Shamiyya Front "governs parts of Aleppo city and other areas of the governorate and manages the Bab al-Salam border crossing with Turkey" (Amnesty International 5 July 2016, 11)

1.8 Nour al-Dine Zinki Movement [Nouredine al-Zinki Brigades, Harakat Nour al Din al Zinki]

Sources report that the Nour al-Dine Zinki Movement was formed in late 2011 and is led by Toufic Shebab al-Dine [Sheikh Tawfiq Shahabuddin] (Amnesty International 5 July 2016, 11; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 26 Dec. 2014). The Wilson Center reports it was originally one of the strongest groups within the FSA, but pursued alliances with other groups following the withdrawal of American arms support in early 2015 (Wilson Center 24 Apr. 2017). According to Amnesty International's July 2016 report, the Movement "governs parts of Aleppo city and al-Qassemiya village in the western part of Aleppo governorate" (Amnesty International 5 July 2016, 11).

2. Extortion

Freedom House, in its *Freedom in the World 2016* report for Syria, indicates that "[r]ebel groups, IS, and Kurdish forces also extort businesses and confiscate private property to varying degrees" (Freedom House 7 June 2016). The same source further reports that Islamic State "runs an extensive extortion network and smuggling operations that extend into Iraq and Turkey" (Freedom House 7 June 2016). The *New York Times*, in a November 2015 article on Islamic State financing, reports that the group "has taken over the legitimate revenue collection operations of the governments it has usurped. And it has used the ever-present threat of violence to extract as much as it can from the people, businesses and property it now controls," adding that "some officials estimate that the Islamic State is extracting as much as \$800 or \$900 million, possibly more, from residents or businessmen inside the territory it controls" (*The New York Times* 29 Nov. 2015). Further information on the use of extortion by armed opposition groups in Syria could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Abductions of Civilians by Opposition Forces

3.1 Frequency

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), a UK-based "independent, non-partisan, non-governmental, non-profit organization" that "works on documenting human rights violations in Syria" and "is a primary source for the United Nations on all death toll-related statistics in Syria" (SNHR n.d.), reports that in 2015, there were 11,953 cases of arbitrary arrest: 846 by Kurdish forces, with 359 being released, 317 forcibly disappeared, and 4 killed under torture; 1,956 by Islamic State forces, including 835 forcibly disappeared; 886 by JFS forces, including 218 forcibly disappeared; and 214 by armed opposition groups, including 61 forcibly disappeared (SNHR 6 Jan. [2016], 4-5). The same source reports that there were 10,047 cases of arbitrary arrest in 2016, with 1,419 individuals arrested by Islamic State forces, 234 by JFS forces, 673 by Kurdish forces, and 178 by "armed opposition factions" (SNHR 5 Jan. 2017, 4). The SNHR further reports that for the first half of 2017, there were 3,157 cases of "arbitrary arrest and enforced-disappearance at the hands of the parties to the conflict in Syria," with 328 attributable to Islamic State forces, 249 to Kurdish forces, 139 to JFS forces, and "no less than" 115 to "armed opposition factions" (SNHR 3 July 2017, 5).

3.2 Targets

Amnesty International indicates, in its 2016/2017 report on Syria, that "both IS and other non-state armed groups abducted civilians and held them hostage" (Amnesty International 22 Feb. 2017). Human Rights Watch similarly notes in its 2017 report that in Syria, non-state armed opposition groups, including Islamic State and JFS forces, engaged in kidnappings during the previous year (Human Rights Watch 12 Jan. 2017, 1). According to the US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016*, in Syria,

[a]rmed extremist groups not affiliated with the government also reportedly kidnapped individuals, particularly in the northern areas, targeting religious leaders, aid workers, suspected government affiliates, journalists, and activists. (US 3 Mar. 2017, 22)

According to a 2015 report by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI) [1], based on investigations conducted between 10 January - 10 July 2015,

[w]omen have also been targeted because of their familial links, actual or assumed, with male members of opposing warring parties. For the belligerents, the very act of detaining a woman, with all the risks to her person that this implies, appears designed to humiliate not only the woman, but also – and arguably, primarily – her male relatives. (UN 13 Aug. 2015, para. 50)

The same source further reports that opposition forces have kidnapped women for the purpose of exchanging them for prisoners held by the government (UN 13 Aug. 2015, para. 55). According to the UN COI, out of approximately 100 women and children taken by "a coalition of armed groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar Al-Sham, during an attack on Alawite villages in the Latakia countryside in August 2013," approximately 40 have so far been released in prisoner exchanges (UN 13 Aug. 2015, para. 56).

Minority Rights Group International (MRG), an international NGO that supports "minority and indigenous people as they strive to maintain their rights" (MRG n.d.), indicates in its *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016* report that in Syria,

[a]nti-government armed groups have reserved some of their most vicious treatment for Alawites and other Shi'a minorities, due to their perceived association with the Assad government. Towards the end of March, Jabhat Al-Nusra and Free Syrian Army forces took control of Busra Al-Sham in Daraa governorate. Killings and kidnappings of Shi'a civilians were documented in the previous months, while Shi'a married to Sunnis were threatened with death or sexual violence once the town fell. (MRG 12 July 2016, 199)

The UN COI reports that "[i]ndividuals taken hostage, usually for the purpose of prisoner exchange or to extract ransom, have on occasion died or been murdered while in the custody of armed groups" (UN 13 Aug. 2015, para. 96).

According to the US *Country Reports for 2016*, in Syria,

[o]pposition forces kidnapped and killed journalists. According to RSF [Reporters Without Borders] and SNHR, the PYD subjected journalists to harassment and detention. According to the [UN] COI, Da'esh abducted journalists and activists working to document its abuses in territories under its control. According to the

SNHR Da'esh killed 14 media activists including a woman and held others in detention. The SNHR also reported that opposition groups killed six media activists and injured two ... (US 3 Mar. 2017, 31)

The UN COI reports that "Syrian media workers continue to suffer at the hands of the [Islamic State]. Dozens, both foreign and Syrian, remain in captivity, detained and ill-treated because of their professional activities" (UN 13 Aug. 2015, para. 158). According to Amnesty International's July 2016 report, "[t]he abduction of journalists, lawyers and activists appears to have increased since 2014 as armed groups, in particular Jabhat al-Nusra, have demonstrated intolerance towards freedom of expression or protests in areas under their control" (Amnesty International 5 July 2016, 5). The same source, citing the SNHR, reports that "367 journalists and media activists were abducted by armed groups in Aleppo and Idleb governorates between early 2012 and June 2016" (Amnesty International 5 July 2016, 15).

The July 2016 report by Amnesty International indicates that

Lawyers, political activists and humanitarian workers, both men and women, have also faced reprisal attacks from armed groups on account of their activities, perceived religious beliefs and political opinions.

Amnesty International has conducted interviews with three lawyers, two political activists and one humanitarian worker who reported that they had been abducted, detained and later released by an armed group in Aleppo or Idleb in the period between 2014 and 2016. Two of them said they had been held by Jabhat al-Nusra, one by the Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement, one by the Nour al-Dine Zinki Movement and two by the al-Shamia Front. Two of those held by the armed groups, a political activist who alleged abduction by Jabhat al-Nusra and a humanitarian worker who alleged abduction by the Nour al-Dine Zinki Movement, said they had been tortured... (Amnesty International 5 July 2016, 18)

3.3 Abductions, Arrests and Detention by Opposition Groups

The UN COI reports that opposition forces have set up "makeshift" detention centres in Syria (UN 13 Aug. 2015, para. 96). In its July 2017 article, Syria Deeply quotes a "media activist from Douma," as stating that "[r]andom arrests take place all around Eastern Ghouta," a rebel-held area east of Damascus, and are undertaken by Jaish al-Islam (News Deeply 25 July 2017). The same source reports that "there are no accurate statistics on the number of detainees" in a prison held by the group in eastern suburbs of Damascus (News Deeply 25 July 2017). A March 2016 article by the same source reports that the group has detained persons "under the age of 16, and some of them have been detained for longer than 18 months for criticising Jaish al-Islam policies," and quotes a resident of Eastern Ghouta as stating that "[b]y the end of 2015, they [had] imposed some very repressive policies and arrested anyone who opposed them" (News Deeply 22 Mar. 2016). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Human Rights Watch reports, in a November 2015 article, that rebel groups in Eastern Ghouta have placed detained soldiers and civilians in cages throughout the area so as to deter government attacks, and cites the accompanying text to a November 2015 video by a local opposition network as stating that "[r]ebels in Ghouta have distributed 100 cages, with each cage containing approximately seven people and the plan is afoot to produce 1,000 cages to distribute in Eastern Ghouta" (Human Rights Watch 2 Nov. 2015). The same source cites the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a UK-based organization with a network of members and affiliates in Syria that reports on human rights violations in Syria (BBC 28 Dec. 2011), as blaming Jaish al-Islam for using caged hostages, but notes that the group has not claimed responsibility (Human Rights Watch 2 Nov. 2015). Human Rights Watch further reports that there is concern that Alawite civilians abducted by Jaish al-Islam and Jabhat al-Nusra in 2013 are among the hostages in cages (Human Rights Watch 2 Nov. 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

A 2017 report by the UN COI notes that on 24 August 2016, "armed groups began an intensive campaign of arbitrarily arresting citizens perceived to be sympathetic to [Islamic State]" after FSA captured the city of Jarablus from the Islamic State (UN 10 Mar. 2017, para. 71). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The July 2017 article by Syria Deeply cites Assem Zidan, a founder of Jabhat Al-Nusra Violations Documentation Team, a monitoring group that documents abuses by HTS, as stating that

HTS crackdowns and arrests target any individual or group that has a large following and is capable of 'changing public opinion' in its respective area of control. These people, are often presented with three options... detention, death or following their [HTS] ideology. (News Deeply 25 July 2017)

Sources report the following incidents of the abduction of civilians by JFS forces:

- "[A]t least 11 civilians" were abducted from their homes in Idlib in January 2016 by JFS, and "[t]heir fate and whereabouts remained undisclosed at the end of the year" (Amnesty International 22 Feb. 2017).
- Women and children were abducted by JFS forces following an attack on Ishtabraq in late April 2015 (UN 13 Aug. 2015, para. 74).
- On 10 January 2016, JFS seized two media activists in the town of Kafranbel (Al Araby 10 Jan. 2016; AP 10 Jan. 2016). They were later released (Al Araby 10 Jan. 2016).

- On 12 May 2016, Ahrar al-Sham and JFS attacked the Alawite village of al-Zara in western Syria, and "dozens" were still missing following the attack and are believed to have been abducted (Reuters 13 May 2016).
- In the week prior to 25 July 2016, "dozens of civilians" were kidnapped in Idlib by HTS (News Deeply 25 July 2017).

A September 2015 article by Amnesty International, based interviews with detainees conducted in August 2015 in Qamishli and Malikiya, indicates that

[t]he Democratic Union Party (PYD)-led autonomous administration in northern Syria is using a crackdown against terrorism and the armed group calling itself the Islamic State (IS) as a pretext to unlawfully detain and unfairly try peaceful critics and civilians believed to be sympathizers or members of alleged terror groups. (Amnesty International 7 Sept. 2015).

According to the US *Country Reports for 2016*, in Syria, "[i]t also alleged that PYD-affiliated Kurdish forces arrested Arab civilians, activists, and politicians and took them to unknown destinations" (US 3 Mar. 2017, 15). A February 2016 report by the UN Secretary-General notes that on 9 January 2016, a Kurdish schoolteacher was abducted in Qamishli, and cites the Kurdish National Council as accusing the YPG of being behind the abduction (UN 18 Feb. 2016, para. 22).

Sources reported the following incidents of abductions by Islamic State forces between 2015 and July 2017:

- Islamic State forces abducted 10 Ismaili civilians from Mabouja in Hama, in March 2015 (UN 13 Aug. 2015, para. 128; MRG 12 July 2016, 199).
- On 6 August 2015, Islamic State militants captured Qaryatain, a town near Homs, and kidnapped "at least 230 civilians" (MRG 12 July 2016, 199).
- After an attack in January 2016, the Islamic State militants kidnapped 400 people in Deir al-Zour (Xinhua News Agency 17 Jan. 2016, quoting pan-Arab television channel al-Mayadeen; Reuters 17 Jan. 2016). Reuters, citing the SOHR, further reports in a 19 January 2016 article that 270 of the 400 kidnapped civilians, mostly women and children, were later released, but that in the interim, another 50 men had been taken from the city of Deir al-Zor (Reuters 19 Jan. 2016).
- Over 300 workers at a cement plant near Damascus were kidnapped by Islamic State militants in April 2016 (*The Wall Street Journal* 8 Apr. 2016).
- In August 2016, Islamic State forces abducted around 2,000 civilians in the city of Manbij (SANA 12 Aug. 2016; AFP 12 Aug. 2016) to use them as human shields (SANA 12 Aug. 2016).

- During an attack on 28 July 2017 on the SDF in al-Karama, east of Raqqa, which hosts a camp for displaced Syrians, Islamic State forces abducted "a number of people" (Reuters 28 July 2017).

3.4 Recruitment by Opposition Forces

An August 2017 report on recruitment practices in Syria by the Danish Immigration Service and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), based on interviews conducted in Beirut and Amman between 26 March and 5 April 2017, reports that

[a]n international organization highlighted that jihadist groups such as Jabhat Al-Nusra use force in recruiting and refusing to join jihadist groups would be considered equal to siding with the regime. Contrarily, a major international non-governmental organization said that a group such as Al-Nusra only trusts and recruits persons whom it knows and whose families are known to them. (Denmark and DRC Aug. 2017, 21-22)

The same source further cites an international organization as indicating that generally, the FSA did not use force in recruitment, but "in the face of attacks from the Syrian government, armed groups, including the FSA, forced everyone to join them" (Denmark and DRC Aug. 2017, 22). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS), a group that exposes human rights abuses inside Islamic State-held territory (*The Independent* 30 Oct. 2015), reports that according to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), men between the ages of 18 and 32 "are obligated to join what is called the 'Self Defense Forces,'" and that SDF militias have demanded that "young men in the newly controlled villages join the SDF before their families can be allowed to return to their homes" (RBSS 10 July 2017). The same source further reports that in July 2017, the SDF arrested "dozens" of men from recently acquired areas in the Raqqa countryside, and indicates that they are subsequently "taken to training camps where they are drilled on military tactics and weapon's operations" (RBSS 10 July 2017). RBSS reports that arrests by SDF have occurred in the following areas: Ayn Arous, Baq Qarna, Al-Trwazieh, Asal, Agyoog, Ziban, Hamam Turkman, Dogania, Dij, Hawijah, Atshana and Shyokh (RBSS 10 July 2017). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report that in August 2017, Islamic State called for conscription of men between the ages of 20 and 30 in Deir al-Zour province in eastern Syria (SOHR 16 Aug. 2017; *Newsweek* 4 Aug. 2017). *Newsweek*, an American news magazine and website, citing the Associated Press, reports that Islamic State ordered men within the identified age bracket to report to mobilization offices, and that any man between the ages of 20 and 30 who did not enlist "would face questioning and potential punishment" (*Newsweek* 4 Aug. 2017). SOHR reports that Islamic State has been

"carrying out large-scale arrests of young men, boys and men "in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor" for the purposes of enlistment (SOHR 16 Aug. 2017). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The 2017 report by the UN COI indicates that "YPG forces continue to forcibly conscript men and boys for military service," and further reports that in the summer of 2015, a 17-year old boy was arrested by Kurdish police forces at a checkpoint between Tal Brak and al-Hasakah and held for a year, due to not having joined the YPG (UN 10 Mar. 2017, para. 94). According to the US *Country Reports for 2016* for Syria, "[m]ultiple reports accused the PYD or PYD-aligned forces of targeting Assyrian Christians and Yezidis for compulsory military service" (US 3 Mar. 2017, 13). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.5 Abductions of Christians

An August 2015 article by the *Guardian* cites Neil Sammonds, a Syria researcher for Amnesty International, as stating that "[w]e know that Christians and 'collaborators' are a target of IS. They are at the highest risk, either for some kind of summary justice or, for Christians in particular, some kind of high ransom demand or exchange" (*The Guardian* 7 Aug. 2015). According to MRG, "[t]he advance of ISIS into further Christian majority areas in 2015 led to an upsurge in kidnappings and other violations" (MRG 12 July 2016, 199).

Sources report that 253 people were kidnapped by Islamic State forces from Assyrian villages along the Khabour [Khabur] River in al-Hasakah [al-Hasakeh] on 23 February 2015 (MRG 12 July 2016, 199; Amnesty International 24 Feb. 2016). Amnesty International reports that 48 were released (Amnesty International 24 Feb. 2016). The 2015 report by the UN COI indicates that over 200 Assyrian Christians were being held by Islamic State forces at the time, and that ransoms had been demanded by the group, but that some hostages had been released without ransoms (UN 13 Aug. 2015, para. 121). MRG further reports that as of December 2015, 105 Assyrian Christians remained in captivity (MRG 12 July 2016, 199).

MRG reports that, among the 230 civilians kidnapped by Islamic State militants in Qaryatain on 6 August 2015, were "dozens of Assyrian Christians" (MRG 12 July 2016, 199). The *Guardian*, citing SOHR, reports that "many" of the 230 kidnapped were Christians, and further cites a statement from the Syrian Orthodox archdiocese for Homs and Hama, as confirming that Islamic State "was holding approximately 250 Christians captive in Qaryatain" (*The Guardian* 7 Aug. 2015).

The US *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015* for Syria indicates that in October 2015, three Assyrian Christians who had been kidnapped in February 2015 from villages along the Khabour River were reportedly executed by Islamic State forces

(US 13 Apr. 2016, 22). MRG reports that on 23 September 2015, Islamic State "released a video showing the execution of three Assyrian Christian men kidnapped in February [2015]" (MRG 12 July 2016, 199).

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.

Note

[1] "The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic was established on 22 August 2011 by the Human Rights Council through resolution S-17/1 adopted at its 17th special session with a mandate to investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law since March 2011 in the Syrian Arab Republic." (UN n.d.)

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ecoi.net summary:

Query response on opposition forces involved in abductions and extortions and their areas of operation; information on targeted groups (2015 - July 2017)



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