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1. Overview

In its 2015 annual report on Syria, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) indicates that since the conflict in Syria began in 2011, the "al-Assad regime continues to target Sunni Muslim civilians and other individuals that oppose it," while the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) [1] targets regime supporters, "religious minorities and any Muslims opposing its violent ideology" (US 30 Apr. 2015, 115). The US Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report for 2013 indicates that in Syria, "there were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice" (ibid. 28 July 2014, 1). The same source notes that "there were reports of killing, imprisonment, detention, and the intentional destruction of property on the basis of religion" (ibid., 5). Freedom House reports that there is "worsening religious persecution" (2015). Similarly, the International Religious Freedom Report for 2013 indicates that,

[a]s religious affiliation was seen as a determinant of regime loyalty, there were credible reports the regime killed individuals because of their religious affiliation and targeted towns and neighborhoods in various parts of the country for siege, mortar shelling, and aerial bombardments on the basis of the religious affiliation of residents in those locations. (US 28 July 2014, 6)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Executive Director at the Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC), an organization in Syria that "works to ensure that human rights violations are properly documented for transitional justice and peace-building," gave his personal viewpoint that in Syria, "in general, society is becoming closed [in its] political and religious views ... [and] society is becoming less tolerant of atheists [and secularists]" (Executive Director 26 June 2015). The same source explained that there are a lot of individuals in Syria who are atheists, but that they are not organized, and that there are "mixed views" toward such individuals (ibid.). He added that in Syrian society, since there is "no real understanding" of secularism, there is a perception that there is no distinction between secularism and atheism (ibid.). Similarly, according to an article by the Damascus Bureau of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), in Syria, "many Islamists infer when they hear this word [secularism]," that this means an "anti-religious or expressly atheist state," rather than the "separation of state and religion" (IWPR 29 Jan. 2014a).

2. Treatment of Atheists

2.1 Perception and Treatment of Atheists by Authorities

Sources indicate that there is no official state religion in Syria; however, the Constitution stipulates that the President must be Muslim (Freedom House 2015; US 28 July 2014, 3), and that "Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation" (ibid.).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, who specializes in Syrian politics, who specializes in Syrian politics, explained that only Islam, Christianity and Judaism are legally recognized religions, making atheists "an unrecognized category in Syria" (Director 6 July 2015). Similarly, Executive Director of SJAC said that there is no social group identified as "atheists" in Syria (Executive Director 26 June 2015).

Concerning the treatment of atheists by authorities, the Executive Director of the SJAC said that it is "not an issue to be an atheist" for "the regime side," and gave the example that no one is arrested "for merely being atheist or for producing any articles on the issue" (ibid.). For his part, the Director of the Center for Middle East Studies said that the "regime has ignored the existence of atheists," but noted that religious textbooks taught in all the schools of Syria state ... that "atheists follow animal desires and lack morals, thus they must be 'converted or killed'" (Director 6 July 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Freedom House reports that "the regime has generally allowed freedom of worship as long as religious activities do not spill over into the political sphere" (2015). The Executive Director similarly noted that "the main issue is [the individual's] political views towards Assad," that is whether or not they are "pro or anti Assad," as this will "form the authorities' position toward the person" (Executive Director 26 June 2015).

The Executive Director explained that there are a lot of atheists who are on the opposition side, or "anti-Assad"; these people "will be harm[ed] for being anti-Assad, and not for being atheist" (ibid.).

2.2 Perception and Treatment Atheists by Society in Opposition-held Territory

Freedom House states that opposition territory in Syria is "divided among a multitude of armed factions, including moderate, Islamist, radical jihadist, and autonomous Kurdish units, with varying implications for local political life" (2015).

The International Religious Freedom Report for 2013 indicates that "Islamist extremist groups, especially those linked to Al Qa[e]da, increased their targeting of Alawite, Shia Muslim, Christian, and other religious communities" (US 28 July 2014, 1). Freedom House notes that in territory controlled by jihadist groups, ISIL has "implemented harsh restrictions on any religious activity that does not conform to its version of Sunni Islam" (Freedom House 2015). The same source states that ISIL militants "seized and controlled substantial territory ... implementing harsh and discriminatory and frequently violent policies against non-Sunni Muslims, as well as Sunnis perceived as erring in their faith" (ibid.).

Freedom House further reports that "some Islamist rebels and jihadists have set up religious courts in their areas, imposing harsh punishments for perceived religious offenses by civilians" (ibid.). According to the US International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, opposition groups have established religious courts in northern areas based on Islamic law authorizing public executions and torture of minorities (US 28 July 2014, 9). Freedom House reports that there were reports of "some Islamist factions persecuting minorities and secularists" (2015).

The Director said that Islamist militias have acted on the precept that atheists must be either "converted or killed" (Director 6 July 2015). The Director also stated that in some cases, Islamist militias have flogged people who do not attend mosque (ibid.). The Executive Director similarly stated that in most of the opposition-controlled territories, if atheists express their views publicly or if anyone accuses them of being atheists they will face threats to their lives, and "would most likely be killed if they were captured" (Executive Director 26 June 2015). The same source further stated that this occurs in areas controlled by ISIL and other Islamist groups such as Jabhat al Nusra (ibid.).

A news report by the UN news service indicates that the UN Security Council stated that in Syria, ISIL is responsible for "thousands of crimes and abuses against people from all faiths, ethnicities and nationalities and without regard to any basic value of humanity" (UN 26 Feb. 2015). The USCIRF indicated similarly that in Syria, ISIL has been responsible for beheadings and mass murders which are "widespread and well documented" (US 30 Apr. 2015, 116).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a PhD candidate at the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia, who is specializing in the politics of insurgency and has completed field research in Aleppo regarding Syria and ISIL, stated that in the north of Syria, atheists "would be viewed very unfavourably" (PhD candidate 30 June 2015). The same source indicated that

[m]ost people do [not] believe that there are atheists, and would see someone who claimed to be an atheist as an apostate (a Muslim who has turned their back on Islam). Apostates, as a general rule, are treated worse than people born into other religious groups, the idea being that someone born into another religion is ignorant, but someone who has actively turned their back on Islam and converted (even to atheism) is denying God even though they should know better. (ibid.)

The PhD candidate explained that, on the opposition side, "anyone who [is] a vocal atheist would be considered an apostate could expect very, very rough treatment from the opposition groups" (ibid.). Sources indicate that anyone who is atheist would not be forthcoming with such information; they would most likely keep it to themselves (ibid.; Director 6 July 2015).

The Associated Press (AP) reports that ISIL beheaded two women for "sorcery" in June 2015 in Deir el-Zour province, and that the group has "beheaded dozens of people for blasphemy, sorcery and espionage" (AP 30 June 2015).

The Independent newspaper interviewed a Syrian civil rights campaigner in northern Syria who was held captive by Islamist extremists and had "torture inflicted on him" because he had

participated in a large demonstration against the rule of groups such as ISIL and Jabhat al Nusra in Aleppo (The Independent 2 May 2015). During his interrogation, he was accused of "being a kuffir [an unbeliever]," found guilty, and punished by beating and whipping (ibid.).

The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) reported that in January 2014, ISIL raided several media and development organizations in a town that it took over in northwest Syria, confiscating their property, and detaining nine workers (IWPR 29 Jan. 2014b). The detained activists were accused of "spreading secularism, atheism, and blasphemy, opposing Islamic Sharia, and collaborating with the West" (ibid.). The article reports that some of the activists were interrogated, beaten, and insulted during their detention, before being released (ibid.).

The Huffington Post reports that in June 2013, ISIL shot and killed a 15-year-old boy, in the middle of a crowded street and in front of his mother, "in a brutal execution," a day after kidnapping and torturing him for 24 hours (The Huffington Post 10 June 2013). The same source states that the boy was reportedly targeted for saying "even if the prophet Mohammad returns, I will not become a believer" (ibid.). Sources report that the Sharia board of Aleppo accused a 14-year-old boy of blasphemy and ordered his execution (BBC 2 July 2013; US 28 July 2014, 9).

2.2.1 Kurdish-held Territories

The PhD candidate stated that Kurdish groups may be more tolerant of atheists, "but even they would be somewhat suspicious" (30 June 2015). Sources report that the Kurds in Syria have established an autonomous region known as Rojava (The Independent 27 July 2015; World Affairs Journal 17 Nov. 2014) which ISIL views as an "atheist entity that must be destroyed" (ibid.). AP explains that the central political force among Syrian Kurds is the Kurdish Democratic Union party, which the article describes as a "deeply secular" party, and whose forces pushed ISIL militants out of Kobani in January 2015 (AP 27 July 2015). Sources report that in June 2015, Kurdish forces fought and removed ISIL from the town of Tal Abyad (ibid.; Reuters 17 June 2015), working alongside "smaller Syrian rebel groups that are part of the more secular-minded opposition [to Assad]," allowing the Kurds to gain control over a 400 kilometre stretch along the Turkish border (ibid.).

3. State Protection

The Director indicated that, according to him, protection is available only to those who live in a regime-controlled territory; however, that territory is "shrinking all the time" (Director 6 July 2015). The International Religious Freedom Report for 2013 states that the government's respect for religious freedom declined during 2013, as well as "its ability to protect this right in contested and rebel-held regions of the country" (US 28 July 2014, 1).

USCIRF reports that the opposition forces aligned with the US-recognized Syrian National Coalition (SNC), which "espouses democratic reform," "did not effectively or adequately represent religious minorities and internal politics hampered its effectiveness" (ibid. 30 Apr. 2015, 116). Also, according to USCIRF, it is difficult to distinguish "Sunni extremists associated with ISIL and other US-designated terrorist groups from Sunni Muslims opposed the brutal al-Assad regime" because some opposition military units occasionally work with "terrorist groups" to secure territory (ibid.). The PhD candidate gave the view that "there is no such thing as a 'safe haven' in the country for anyone" (PhD candidate 30 June 2015). The same source further stated that, in his opinion, "everyone has credible fears of persecution by someone, since both the armed groups and government agents operate everywhere in the country" (ibid.). The Executive Director said that "in all non-state controlled territories, there is no state protection for anyone" (Executive Director 26 June 2015). The same source explained that

there may be some exceptions, for example atheists may be 'relatively' safe in areas controlled by Kurdish militant groups; however, the control over territories is changing rapidly therefore one cannot be certain that an area is safe due to the fact that things might shift literally [within] hours (ibid.).

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] ISIL is known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State (IS), or Daesh.

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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, 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, anthropology and forced Migration, University of Oxford; Professor, Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures, University of Virginia; Professor of history, University of California; Professor, modern Arab studies, Columbia University; Relief and Reconciliation for Syria; Syria Justice and Accountability Centre; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; Assyrian International News Agency; Catholic Herald; ecoi.net; Factiva; Human Rights Watch; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; International Business Times; International Crisis Group; International Humanist and Ethical Union; IRIN; Mercy Corps; Relief and Reconciliation for Syria; Transparency International; United Nations- Refworld, UNHCR; United States Institute of Peace; The Washington Times.

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