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SYRIA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

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 remained illegal and punishable with imprisonment or death. Sectarian violence continued during the year due to tensions among religious groups that, according to nongovernmental organization (NGO) and media sources, was exacerbated by government actions, the deterioration of the economy, and the broader ongoing conflict in the country. At year’s end, more than half of the country’s prewar population was displaced, including 6.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and approximately 5.6 million refugees. Government and progovernment forces continued aerial and ground offensives initiated in 2019 in the northwest of the country, killing civilians and forcing the additional displacement of more than 11,000 people. The government, with the support of its Russian and Iranian allies, was reported to have continued to commit human rights abuses and violations against its perceived opponents, the majority of whom, reflecting the country’s demographics, were Sunni Muslims and whom the government described as violent extremists. There also continued to be reports that the government, with its foreign supporters, continued to engage in the widespread destruction of hospitals, homes, and other civilian infrastructure. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported at least 972 cases of arbitrary detentions during the first half of the year and documented at least 150,049 Syrians who were detained or forcibly disappeared between 2011 and November 2021, the vast majority of whom were disappeared by the Assad government and remained missing. The government continued to use Law No. 10, which allows for creating redevelopment zones across the country designated for reconstruction, to reward those loyal to the government and to create obstacles for refugees and IDPs who wished to reclaim their property or return to their homes; in line with the demographics of the country, this move impacted the majority Sunni population more frequently than other groups. 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. Some researchers and media stated that under the Assad government, sectarianism and the advancement of the Alawite minority had become more entrenched, disenfranchising non-

Alawite Muslims, as well as Christians, Druze, and members of other religious minority groups; others said political access remained primarily a function of proximity and loyalty to the regime.

In March, *Foreign Policy* reported Iran used its influence, the dire economic situation in Syria, and financial incentives to encourage Sunnis to convert to Shia Islam or join Iranian militias. The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI) again reported it had reasonable grounds to believe some Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups (TSOs) committed abuses, including torture, rape, looting, and appropriating private property, particularly in Kurdish areas, as well as vandalizing Yezidi religious sites in areas under their control. The COI, human rights groups, and media organizations reported killings, arbitrary detentions, rape, and torture of civilians, and the looting and seizure of private properties in and around Afrin. Community representatives, human rights organizations such as the NGO Syrians for Truth and Justice, and documentation-gathering groups reported Yezidis were often victims of TSO abuses. The COI found that despite its territorial defeat, violent attacks by ISIS remnants had increased, while human rights organizations stated that ISIS often targeted civilians, persons suspected of collaborating with security forces, and groups ISIS deemed to be apostates. Many former victims of ISIS remained missing.

Christians reportedly continued to face discrimination and violence at the hands of violent extremist groups. NGOs reported social conventions and religious proscriptions continued to make conversions – especially Muslim-to-Christian conversions, which remained banned by law – relatively rare. These groups also reported that societal pressure continued to force converts 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 must be based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and respect for the human rights of the country's citizens. The Secretary of State and 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 and religious freedom of all citizens. It continued to support the evidentiary-gathering work of UN bodies and NGOs to promote accountability for the atrocities committed by the government and others. In July, the United States imposed sanctions on eight Syrian prisons, five Assad regime officials in the institutions

that run those facilities, two militia groups, and two militia leaders implicated in human rights abuses. In December, the United States imposed sanctions on two senior Syrian Air Force officers responsible for chemical weapons attacks on civilians in 2017 and 2018 and three senior officers in the security and intelligence apparatus for human rights abuses.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 20.4 million (midyear 2021). At year's end, according to the UN, more than half of the country's prewar population was displaced; there were approximately 5.6 million refugees registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in neighboring countries as well as 6.6 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 Turkomans. 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. However, there are reports 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 estimates that only approximately 677,000 remain. According to the Catholic news site Asia News, the Assyrian Democratic Organization, a party linked to the Self Administration of North and East Syria in the northeast, reported two-thirds of the country's Christians have fled Syria since 2011. In a paper published by the think tank Middle East Institute, a researcher noted, however, "War and displacement have... played havoc with those figures over the last 10 years."

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. There was also a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000 before the civil war. There are no updated figures on the number of Yezidis currently living in the country

Sunni Muslims are present 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. 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 live in the city of Salamiyeh, Hama Governorate.

Most Christians belong to autonomous Orthodox Churches such as the Syria Orthodox Church, Eastern Catholic Churches such as the Maronite Church, or the Assyrian Church of the East and other affiliated independent Nestorian Churches. Most Christians continue to live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, or in the Hasakah Governorate in the northeast of the country. While there were hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christian refugees before the conflict, the majority of the Iraqi Christian population has moved to neighboring countries or returned to Iraq. Many Druze live in the Jabal al-Arab (Jabal al-Druze) region in the southern Sweida Governorate, where they constitute a majority of the local population. Yezidis previously lived in Aleppo, but now live mainly in northeast Syria areas controlled by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The legal framework described in this section remains in force only in those areas controlled by the government, 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 shall ensure the freedom to perform religious rituals as long as these 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.” 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.

According to law, membership in certain types of religiously oriented organizations is illegal and punishable to different degrees. This includes membership in an organization considered by the government to be “Salafist,” a designation the government loosely associates with Sunni fundamentalism. Neither the government broadly nor the state security court has specifically 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 the conversion of Muslims 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 Ministry of Religious Endowments (Awqaf) must approve books imported from abroad. Television shows require the approval of religious authorities.

By law, all religious groups must register with the government. 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 power 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 law also charges the council with monitoring all fatwas (religious decrees) 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 government’s role in and oversight of the country’s religious affairs.

On November 15, President Bashar al-Assad issued legislative decree No. 28 for 2021, expanding the role and authorities of the Islamic Jurisprudence Council to include those previously relegated to the Grand Mufti, the highest Islamic authority

in the country, whose position was also eliminated under the same decree. The council will consist of 40 scholars and will be chaired by the Minister of Endowment. Its tasks will include setting the start and end dates of the month of Ramadan and declaring fatwas.

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. There is mandatory religious instruction in public schools for all students, 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 government 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 Christian woman, but a Muslim woman may not legally marry a Christian man. If a Christian woman marries a Muslim man, she is not allowed to be buried in an Islamic cemetery unless she converts to Islam and may not inherit any property or wealth from her husband, even if she converts. The law states that if a Christian wishes to convert to Islam, the presiding Muslim cleric must inform the prospective convert's diocese.

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.

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.

Law No. 10, passed in 2018, allows the government to create "redevelopment zones" to be slated for reconstruction. Property owners are notified to provide documentary proof of property ownership or risk losing ownership to the state. The law makes no provision to accommodate refugees and IDPs.

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

Government Practices

According to UN, press, and NGO reporting, the government, with the support of its Russian and Iranian allies, continued to commit indiscriminate human rights abuses and violations against civilians, as well as participate in the widespread destruction of hospitals, homes, and other civilian infrastructure. These sources stated that the government continued its widespread use of unlawful killings, attacks on civilians and civilian sites, including homes and hospitals, enforced disappearances, torture, arbitrary detention, and confiscation of property to punish perceived opponents, the majority of whom, reflecting the country's demographics, were Sunni Muslims. On September 24, Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, told the UN Human Rights Council that from March 2011 to March 2021, more than 350,000 identifiable individuals had been killed in the course of the conflict in the country. The commissioner noted that the figure indicated "a minimum verifiable number," and that it was "certainly an under-count of the actual number of killings." Other groups attributed more than 550,000 killings to the conflict. This discrepancy was largely due to the high number of missing and disappeared Syrians, whose fates remained unknown at year's end.

Some opposition groups identified themselves explicitly as Sunni Arab or Sunni Muslim in statements and publications. Sources stated that political access was primarily a function of proximity and loyalty to the regime, not sectarian identity. According to the NGO Freedom House, Alawites, Christians, Druze, and members of other religious minorities considered to be outside of the regime's inner circle were "politically disenfranchised along with the rest of the population." 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 government continued to target those within the country who criticized or opposed the government, the majority of whom were Sunni and whom the government described as violent extremists. There were continued NGO and media reports that in its efforts to retake opposition-held areas, the government targeted civilian centers in towns and neighborhoods, which, due to prevailing demographics, were inhabited by a majority Sunni population. In June, regime forces, supported by pro-regime militias, broke the Russian-brokered ceasefire negotiated in 2018 and besieged and shelled the city of Daraa al-Balad, an area with a Sunni majority population. The attack came after Daraa al-Balad residents protested in May against the presidential election. According to NGO and media reports, the regime’s ground military operation resulted in civilian casualties; damage to civilian infrastructure, including the only medical facility in the city; forced displacement; and acute food and medicine shortages. Following the clashes, the regime demanded the expulsion and relocation of several perceived opponents. According to UN estimates, approximately 38,600 persons fled Daraa al-Balad as a result of the fighting. From June to August, according to press and NGOs, the regime blocked humanitarian access to the affected areas and communities. In its August report, the COI found that pro-regime forces’ use of siege-like tactics may have amounted to the war crime of collective punishment.

The SNHR documented at least 1,279 attacks on mosques in the country between March 2011 and November 2021, attributing 914 attacks to the regime and 204 attacks to Russian forces. The SNHR also documented at least 126 attacks on Christian places of worship during the same time period, attributing 76 attacks to the regime, 33 to armed opposition groups, 10 to ISIS, five to other parties, and two to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

The SNHR reported at least 972 arbitrary detentions during the first half of the year and documented at least 150,000 individuals who were detained or forcibly disappeared between March 2011 and November 2021, approximately 88 percent of whom SNHR estimated were disappeared by the Assad regime and remained missing. These included perceived opponents and those associated with human rights activists, journalists, relief workers, and medical providers. According to the SNHR, from March 2011 to September 2021, more than 14,580 persons died from torture in government custody. Government forces were reportedly responsible for at least 78 deaths by torture during the year. As was the case with others who previously died in government custody, most were Sunni Muslims, whom analysts

stated the government targeted believing they were members of the opposition or likely to support the opposition.

According to a June Freedom House Report, corruption was rampant and basic state services and humanitarian aid were reportedly extended or withheld according to a recipient's perceived loyalty to the Assad regime. Freedom House also stated individuals living in government-held territory who criticized or sought to expose corruption faced reprisals, including detention and dismissal from employment. The press reported the kidnapping of an 88-year-old Greek Orthodox merchant, Nazih Shehadeh, from his home in the Druze majority city of al-Suwayda in June. Syrian-born *al-Jazeera* journalist Faisal al-Qasim said that Shehadeh's abduction followed his refusal to participate in the May 26 presidential election. After angry reactions from the city's population, local news outlets, without clarifying details of his detention or release, reported that Shehadeh returned home.

Analysts reported the government continued to use Law No. 10 of 2018 to reward those loyal to the government and to create obstacles for refugees and IDPs to reclaim their property and return to their homes. According to NGO reports, since the law's enactment, the government had replaced residents in former opposition-held areas with more loyal constituencies. These government policies disproportionately affected Sunni populations, which made up the majority of the population. According to SNHR, seizing the property of regime opponents was part of the regime's strategy of forced displacement to "engineer the demographic and social structure of the Syrian state [in a manner] that automatically constitutes a major obstacle to the return of refugees and IDPs."

According to human rights groups and religious communities, the government continued to monitor and control sermons and to close mosques between prayers. It also continued to monitor and limit the activities of all religious groups, including scrutinizing their fundraising and discouraging proselytizing.

Despite the relatively small indigenous Shia community in the country, Shia religious slogans and banners remained prominent in Damascus, according to observers and media reports. In addition, Hizballah and other pro-Iran signs and banners remained prevalent in some government-held areas.

There continued to be Christian, Druze, and Kurdish members in parliament. According to observers, Alawites held greater political power in the cabinet than other minorities, as well as more authority than the majority Sunni population.

During the 2020 parliamentary elections, the number of Sunni members of the 250-seat Parliament increased to 169 from 165 in 2016, while the number of Christians dropped from 22 to 18. The number of Druze dropped from nine to eight. The Middle East Institute stated these changes “were not large enough to signal any major shift in the regime’s policy towards these religious groups.”

Some media articles challenged the depiction of the country and the government as religiously tolerant and secular. A paper published by the Middle East Institute on April 12 stated, “The ultimate irony is that within so-called secular Syria as represented by the nominally secular Ba’ath Party, in power under the Assads for the last 50 years, sectarianism has been consistently on the rise... Before the Assads, religious identities were pluralistic, and were only relevant at the social level. They were not politicized or institutionalized.” In a February 8 article published by the New Lines Institute, a Syrian researcher wrote, “The regime was never truly secular. It has instrumentalized religion in order to further tear apart society and deepen the sectarian abyss.” A report released in June by the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, a London-based NGO focusing on international humanitarian law and human rights, entitled *In the Name of Protection: Minorities and identity in the Syrian conflict* stated, “The weaponization of religion and sect is far-reaching in the Syrian political landscape... The melding of Alawi religious symbols, imagery and other aspects of Alawi identity in state security agencies... is one example of how representations of Alawi identity have been hijacked to merge with the state.”

In its June report *In the Name of Protection*, the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights said the ruling Ba’ath party had “curated a narrative portraying itself as the protector and defender of religious minorities.” The NGO stated the regime had “both co-opted Syrian religious minorities, regardless of their own political views, and demonised millions of Sunni protestors, in rhetoric that dismissed them as ‘terrorists’ rather than citizens seeking political, economic, and social justice. Sectarian state rhetoric has therefore contributed to deepened fissures between different religious 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 into its ranks individuals from other religious minority groups. The government 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.

In June, Freedom House reported that 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.” The report also 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.

According to an analysis released September 24 by the Middle East Institute, the government was increasingly reliant upon the army’s Fourth Division, commanded by the President’s brother Maher al-Assad. According to the analysis, Alawites constitute approximately 95 percent of the Fourth Division’s officers and regular soldiers. During the year, the Fourth Division deployed throughout the country, often with support from Iran and Hizballah, because of a growing lack of confidence in regular army forces and a considerable number of defections by Sunni officers in the rest of the army. During the summer, the unit, supported by pro-Iranian militias, led the attack on Daraa al-Balad, an area which, due to prevailing demographics, had a Sunni majority population.

According to the British-based NGO CSW, on February 14, the Ministry of Justice rejected the Yezidi community’s request to recognize it as a religious group, which would allow Yezidis to establish their own personal status courts. The Council for Syrian Yezidis issued a statement describing the decision as “a flagrant violation of basic human rights.”

Antisemitic literature reportedly remained available for purchase at low prices throughout the country. Government-controlled radio and television programming reportedly continued to disseminate anti-Semitic news articles and cartoons.

On January 15, in a Friday sermon at Damascus’s Umayyad Mosque that aired on state-run Nour al-Sham TV, Mohammed Sa’id Ramadan al-Bouti, the mosque’s government-appointed imam, spoke about the “filthy history” of the Jews. In his sermon, al-Bouti said that the Jews offended Moses and killed John the Baptist and other prophets, becoming known as the “slayers of prophets” whose history is one “of treachery and betrayal.” Al-Bouti stated that Jews were “inciting strife and wars” and “spreading moral depravity, debauchery, and licentiousness.”

In January, the Foundation for Jewish Heritage, the American Schools of Oriental Research, and the Center for Jewish Art announced they had collaborated to identify “important Jewish heritage sites” in Europe, Iraq, and Syria to be added to Western military protection lists. In 2020, the Foundation for Jewish Heritage reported that more than half of the Jewish sites it had identified in Syria were beyond repair or in very bad condition.

The national school curriculum did not include materials on religious tolerance or the Holocaust.

The government continued to allow foreign Christian NGOs to operate under the auspices of one of the historically established churches 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.

Actions of Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

There continued to be reports that the Iranian government, primarily through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, directly supported the Assad government and recruited Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani Shia fighters, as well as Syrians, to fight in the conflict. In March, *Foreign Policy* reported that Iran used its influence, the dire economic situation in the country and financial incentives to encourage Sunnis to convert to Shia Islam or join Iranian militias. In March, the NGO Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that Iranian forces invited residents in a town in Deir Ezzour to attend a course on the doctrines of Shia Islam at the local Iranian Cultural Center, offering approximately \$200 and a food basket to those who passed the course. SyriacPress.com reported that Hizballah, Iran’s ally in Lebanon, offered new recruits in Deir Ezzour a monthly salary of \$150 to enlist. According to the March *Foreign Policy* report, Iran restored and built new shrines “almost as if trying to rewrite the religious history of Syria, which is majority-Sunni and had a very small Shia population before the war.” Experts reported that the “demographic and cultural penetration” was aimed at increasing the number of Shia in the country to allow Iran to “claim political power on their behalf.”

According to human rights organizations such as Syrians for Truth and Justice, and documentation gathering groups, TSOs in the northern part of the country committed human rights abuses against Yezidi residents and other residents,

particularly in Kurdish areas, including arbitrary detentions of civilians, torture, sexual violence, evictions, looting and seizure of private property, recruitment of child soldiers, and the looting and desecration of religious shrines. TSOs also reportedly abused members of other religious minority groups.

In areas under Turkish influence, TSO groups operating under the Syrian National Army (SNA) restricted religious freedom of Yezidis through attacks against and intimidation of civilians. A January COI report noted that the commission had documented the looting and destruction of archeological sites and Yezidi shrines and graves by the SNA in Afrin. Speaking at the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. on August 10, a Voice of America (VOA) correspondent stated that local human rights groups documented abuses and violations against residents of Afrin, mainly against Yezidis, including kidnappings for ransom; imprisonment; torture; the imposition of a “protection fee” on some villages; the destruction of Yezidi shrines and graves; and the looting and confiscation of land and property.

According to the COI, abductions and extortions rose in regions where hostilities between TSOs and government forces had created a security vacuum. In March, CSW reported the release of Radwan Mohammed, a Kurdish Christian headmaster abducted in 2020 by a TSO, Failaq al-Sham (the Legion of the Levant), in Afrin after he refused to convert his school into an Islamic educational center. The group also prevented Mohammed and his family from washing and shrouding the body of his wife, who had died prior to his detention. Both Mohammed and his wife were converts from Islam to Christianity, and Failaq al-Sham had charged him with apostasy.

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. In an August post on a Wilson Center blog, a VOA journalist stated that according to human rights groups, of 25,000 Yezidis who lived in 22 villages in Afrin before the 2018 Turkish incursion, just 5,000 remained. In September, VOA reported Christian leaders said Turkish shelling in northeast Syria during the year had driven Christians and other minorities from their homes in Tel Tamer and surrounding villages southeast of the Operation Peace Spring area. According to press reports and NGOs, in Afrin, Yezidi women reported to have been kidnapped by TSOs remained missing.

The COI and numerous independent sources reported that during the course of the conflict, nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist

organizations by the United Nations, 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. According to a COI report released in February that covered the period from 2011 to the end of 2020, throughout areas under its control, HTS “caused severe psychological and physical harm to women, girls, men and boys, by imposing religious dress codes and, in the case of women and girls, denying their freedom of movement without a male relative... Unauthorized ‘courts’ established by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and various armed groups imposed death sentences that amounted to the war crime of murder and were used to impose such groups’ draconian social strictures...”

Media reported that HTS continued to restrict the freedom of Christians in Idlib city. According to a June report published by the Middle East Institute, HTS seized hundreds of properties belonging to displaced Christians, including at least 550 homes and shops in Idlib Governate, between late 2018 and late 2019.

The COI found that despite its territorial defeat, violent attacks by ISIS remnants had increased. Human rights organizations stated ISIS often targeted civilians, persons suspected of collaborating with security forces, and groups that ISIS deemed to be apostates. According to the COI’s February report, “The stoning of women and girls on charges of adultery and the executions of homosexuals were also recurrent in areas under ISIL control, as were forced marriages to fighters.”

Although ISIS no longer controlled territory, the fate of 8,648 individuals forcibly disappeared by ISIS since 2014 remained unknown, according to the SNHR. Among those abducted in northern Iraq were an estimated 6,000 women and children, mainly Yezidis, whom ISIS reportedly transferred to Syria and sold as sex slaves, forced into nominal marriage to ISIS fighters, or gave as “gifts” to ISIS commanders. In a September 14 letter to the UN General Assembly, the Yezidi advocacy organization Yazda and more than 80 other signatories stated that 2,763 individuals remained unaccounted for. Yazda reported that more than 3,000 Yezidi women and children had escaped, been liberated in SDF military operations, or been released from ISIS captivity since the start of the conflict, but that more than 2,700 remained unaccounted for at year’s end.

In areas where government control was weak or nonexistent, localized detention centers emerged. Reports of control and oversight varied, and both civilian and religious leaders were in charge of facility administration.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Throughout the year there were 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.

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

The National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, the opposition’s primary political umbrella organization, and the Syrian Negotiations Committee, an opposition organization responsible for negotiating with the government on behalf of the opposition, continued to condemn attacks both by the government and by extremist and terrorist groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On May 6, the President condemned the Assad government’s “brutal violence and human rights violations and abuses.” The President and senior Department of State officials continued to stress the need for a political solution to the conflict 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 government and others. As of year’s end, the United States had provided \$3.5 million to the IIIM since its creation, as well as awarded \$5.9 million to the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da’esh/ISIL (UNITAD) to support its efforts to gather evidence of ISIS crimes, including atrocities against members of Muslim, Yezidi, and Christian communities. The Department of State also continued to support NGOs working to collect and preserve evidence of potential crimes.

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 that they or groups they supported controlled or operated.

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.

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. A Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs and other Department of State officials participated in virtual dialogues, roundtables, and working groups focused on accountability and justice efforts, and countering extremist violence. The acting U.S. Special Representative for Syria Engagement hosted a virtual panel discussion in March on accountability for human rights abuses, including those committed against members of religious minority groups.

The United States continued to support the documentation, analysis, and preservation of evidence of abuses committed by all sides in the conflict, including those committed against members of religious minority groups, through the COI and IIIM, as well as through direct support for Syrian-led documentation efforts.

On July 28, the United States imposed sanctions on eight Syrian prisons, five Assad regime officials in the institutions that run those facilities, and two militia leaders implicated in human rights abuses. The United States also imposed sanctions on Saraya al-Areen (Brigades of the Den), a regime-affiliated militia that participated in the regime's 2020 offensive operation to regain control of Idlib Governorate. That offensive contributed to the mass displacement of civilians. The sanctions also targeted the TSO Ahrar al-Sharqiya (Free Men of the East) for the commission of serious human rights abuses, including murder, abduction, and torture.

On December 7, the U.S. Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC), pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, imposed sanctions on senior Syrian Air Force officers Muhammad Youssef

al-Hasouri and Tawfiq Muhammad Khadour for their responsibility for chemical weapons attacks on civilians in 2017 and 2018, respectively. OFAC also sanctioned Adeeb Namer Salameh, Assistant Director of Syrian Air Force Intelligence (SAFI), senior SAFI officer Qahtan Khalil, and senior Syrian Military Intelligence official Kamal al-Hassan for human rights abuses committed against civilians.