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Events of 2015

Syria's diverse ethnic and religious minorities include Alawites, Christians, Druze, Ismailis, Kurds, Turkmen, Twelver Shi'a and Yezidis. Since the outbreak of armed conflict in 2011, Syria's minorities have suffered alongside the majority Sunni Muslim population from spiralling violence and the humanitarian crisis caused by the war. While government forces have deliberately and indiscriminately targeted densely populated areas, leading to devastating civilian death tolls and the destruction of vital infrastructure including hospitals and schools, armed groups fighting against the government have also targeted civilians and obstructed humanitarian aid flows. Hundreds of civilians have also been killed or injured in international coalition airstrikes against ISIS. As of October 2015, more than 250,000 people had been killed in the conflict, of which nearly half were civilians. Over 4 million Syrians have been made refugees, while a further 7.5 million are internally displaced.

Targeted attacks against minorities were not a central part of the conflict in its early stages, although certain minorities may have been more exposed to violence. For example, due to their concentration in urban centres such as Aleppo, Damascus and Homs, which have been the scene of intense fighting, a large number of Syria's Christians have fled the country. However, many argue that the actions of the government led by President Bashar Al-Assad escalated the sectarian dimensions of the conflict, leading to indiscriminate attacks against civilians on the basis of their identity and perceived association with the government or the opposition. The increased involvement of international actors in Syria, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, has further amplified these tensions. The launching of Russian airstrikes in support of the Assad government, a key development in 2015, has also led to shockingly high civilian casualty levels, leading rights groups to criticize Russia's apparent targeting of residential areas in which no military targets were present. Turkmen community representatives also accused Russia of targeting Turkmen civilians in an attempt to ethnically cleanse their community from the north-west of the country.

Minorities have been caught in the middle of this sectarian climate and their loyalties are divided. While many have sided with the Assad government, viewing it as the only viable guarantor of their security, other members of minorities have been vocal members of the opposition. Minority

activists have been arbitrarily arrested, detained incommunicado and tortured in Assad's prisons alongside their Sunni Muslim counterparts. Some minority detainees have reported being subjected to particularly harsh treatment by interrogators on account of their identity, in addition to religious and ethnic slurs.

Since 2014, the rising power of extremist armed groups and their expansion into increasingly large swathes of the country has meant that minorities are increasingly prone to grave human rights violations from militants. Groups such as ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra have imposed a reign of terror on minorities in the areas they control, suppressing freedom of religion and singling them out for attack, while imposing harsh punishments on all those who oppose their control. Moreover, they have systematically destroyed innumerable historical and religious sites in an attempt to destroy all traces of minority cultural heritage.

Syria's Christians have faced kidnappings of their religious leaders throughout the conflict, while some of their towns have been consumed by fighting between government and anti-government forces. The advance of ISIS into further Christian-majority areas in 2015 led to an upsurge in kidnappings and other violations. On 23 February, ISIS attacked 35 Assyrian Christian villages along the Khabour River in the north-eastern Al-Hasakah governorate. According to Assyrian news outlets, the armed group kidnapped 253 Assyrians, including many women and children, caused an estimated 3,000 to flee the area and destroyed 11 churches. Although the villages were subsequently recaptured from ISIS, very few Assyrian Christians returned. On 23 September, ISIS released a video showing the execution of three Assyrian Christian men kidnapped in February. As of December 2015, 105 still remained in captivity. On 6 August, ISIS captured the town of Qaryatain, near Homs, kidnapping at least 230 civilians, including dozens of Assyrian Christians. ISIS later released a charter for the town's Christian inhabitants, imposing *jizya* (tribute) payments and restricting their rights to religious expression.

Anti-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. On 31 March, ISIS attacked Mabouja in Hama governorate, a town with a large Ismaili population, killing an estimated 46 civilians and abducting 50 others, including 10 Ismailis. In April, Jabhat Al-Nusra and other armed groups attacked the predominantly Alawite village of Ishtabraq in Idlib Governorate, killing civilians as they fled and blowing up Alawite shrines. After capturing the city of Deir Ez-Zour in May, ISIS carried out public executions of Alawite and Shi'a men accused of fighting for the government.

Syria's Druze population, concentrated in the southern governorate of Suweida as well as Idlib, has largely avoided openly taking sides in the conflict. Most have been reluctant to enlist in Assad's army, fearing they would be sent to fight on distant battlefronts and risk creating tensions with their Sunni neighbours. The community's increasingly vocal resistance to conscription throughout 2015 has left it at loggerheads with the government, while opening it to attack by anti-government armed groups. On 10 June, Jabhat Al-Nusra fighters killed 30 Druze in the village of Qalba Loza, Idlib governorate. Inhabitants of the village had previously faced pressures by the armed group to renounce their faith. Militants also destroyed shrines and dug up Druze graves.

As in Iraq, the course of the conflict in Syria has involved the widespread destruction of places of worship and other sites of cultural heritage. While the demolition of large sections of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, by ISIS between May and October attracted international condemnation, it was only part of a wider assault by militants on heritage that has seen the destruction of countless places of worship, statues and other artifacts associated with religious minorities. These have also provided the group with an important source of revenue, with some reports suggesting that illegal trade in antiquities was the second-largest source of finance for ISIS after oil, reaching volumes of over US\$100 million a year. Nevertheless, despite the notoriety ISIS has created through these acts, the Syrian Network for Human Rights reported during the year that government forces were in fact responsible for the majority of attacks on houses of worship. By the end of April 2015, of the 63 targeted churches documented by the monitoring group, 40 were attacked by government forces compared to 14 by ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and other extremist organizations, as well as another 14 by armed opposition groups. Moreover, as early as June 2013 the group recorded that government forces had already attacked 1,451 mosques, of which 348 were completely destroyed.