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SYRIA

Key Findings

The Syrian crisis has devolved largely into a sectarian conflict, exacerbated by the actions of the Bashar al-Assad regime, with particularly severe violations of religious freedom affecting all Syrians. The regime's targeting of Sunni Muslims and other individuals or groups that oppose it and its indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas have killed tens of thousands of Syrians and displaced millions. In addition, extremist and U.S.-designated terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), target religious minority communities, including Christians and Alawites, because of their faith, and internationally-recognized opposition military groups have committed religious freedom violations when working with other groups to secure strategic areas. The existing humanitarian disaster and egregious human rights and religious freedom violations pose a serious danger to Syria's religious diversity post-conflict. Due to the collective actions of the Bashar al-Assad regime, internationally-recognized opposition groups, and extremist and U.S.-designated terrorist groups, USCIRF recommends, for the first time, that Syria be designated as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act.

Background

The Syrian conflict began in March 2011 with peaceful protests by opponents of the al-Assad regime, mainly Sunni Muslims but also religious minorities. The initial protests had no religious or sectarian undertones and sought repeal of the abusive emergency law, space for political parties, and President al-Assad's resignation. As the protests grew, President al-Assad ordered an increasingly violent crackdown and he and his regime played on sectarian fears by utilizing religiously-divisive rhetoric. In opposition to the al-Assad regime, dozens of domestic and foreign groups, varying widely in goals,

emerged. Some of these groups, including the internationally-recognized Syrian National Council and the Syrian National Coalition, espouse democratic reform. Others, such as the U.S.-designated terrorist organizations, al-Qaeda, ISIL and the al-Nusra Front, are motivated by religious ideologies espousing violence. The regime also is supported by other U.S.-designated terrorist groups, such as Hezbollah and Shabiha.

The conflict became largely sectarian, as the regime responded with violent ground attacks and indiscriminate shelling, and as extremist and terrorist groups that

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opposed the regime became increasingly imbedded and active. Now, Sunni Muslims largely associate all Alawites with the regime of Bashar al-Assad, an Alawite himself, and many Alawites and Christians believe they must support al-Assad or be killed by extremists and terrorists. Initiatives under the auspices of the United Nations and supported by the United States, including the Geneva peace conference meetings, have failed to find a political solution to end the conflict.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2013–2014

Violations by al-Assad Regime and Affiliated Groups

The regime's atrocities have been indiscriminate, primarily targeting the Sunni Muslim population, creating an environment where internationally-recognized and

protected human rights, including religious freedom, do not exist. The UN and most of the international community, including the United States, have found that the al-Assad regime has committed crimes against humanity. The regime has used tactics such as extra-judicial killings, rape, torture of prisoners, chemical weapons, the indiscriminate shelling of civilians, hospitals, places of worship, and schools, and the withholding of food and other aid to maintain its power.

A number of U.S.-designated terrorist groups, including Hezbollah and Shabiha, support the regime. These groups, in the name of the regime, perpetrate egregious human rights and religious freedom violations, especially targeting Sunni Muslim civilians, including women and children. For example, on May

the approximately 3,000 Christians in Raqqa province must either face death, convert to Islam, or be treated as *dhimmis* (non-Muslim citizens of an Islamic state) who must pay a tax for their “protection” and obey serious restrictions on their religious practices.

In April 2013, Bishop Boulos Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church and Bishop John Ibrahim of the Assyrian Orthodox Church were kidnapped by unknown assailants in the northern province of Aleppo. Their whereabouts remain uncertain. Thirteen nuns and three workers from a Greek Orthodox monastery in the Christian village of Maaloula, who were kidnapped by the al-Nusra Front in late November 2013, were freed on March 9, 2014. Maaloula fell to al-Nusra in September 2013. At that time, al-Nusra fighters reportedly attacked

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25, 2012, in what has become known as the Houla massacre, 108 Sunni Muslims, including 49 children, were killed in two opposition-controlled villages in the Houla region of Syria. The United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria determined that most of the victims had been “summarily executed” and “entire families were shot in their houses.” In addition, it is a common tactic of the regime to bomb areas, and then for regime militias to follow.

Violations by Extremist and Terrorist Groups

Extremist groups and terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda and ISIL, also are perpetrating egregious religious freedom violations. They espouse violence and the creation of an Islamic state with no space for religious diversity, and have carried out religiously-motivated attacks and massacres against Alawite, Shi’a, and Christian civilians. NGOs report that several different anti-regime opposition groups have established Shari’ah courts in areas they control. Recently ISIL, a terrorist organization not aligned with the internationally-recognized opposition, announced that

Christian homes, killing at least a dozen people, and burning down a church; most Christians fled and those that remained were forced to convert to Islam.

In August 2013, 20 extremist groups attacked the coastal Latakia province. Human Rights Watch reported that 190 civilians were killed and another 200 taken hostage, the vast majority of whom were Alawite Muslims.

Internationally-Recognized Opposition

During the reporting year, the Syrian National Coalition did not effectively or adequately represent religious minorities. It also did not have oversight of local administrations in areas under its control, some of which are enforcing Shari’ah law. In addition, opposition military units on occasion have worked with terrorist groups to secure strategic areas. These joint operations raise concerns that the internationally-recognized organizations are being pulled closer to extremist ideologies and violent sectarian acts. For instance, in August 2012, the Free Syrian Army fought with terrorist groups during the battle for Mengh military base, which reports said led to the deaths of 200 Alawite civilians.

Refugees, Internally-Displaced People, and Sectarian Spillover

According to UN estimates, as of mid-March 2014, the Syrian crisis had led to more than 2.5 million registered refugees, mostly in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. More than half of the UN-registered refugees are women and girls, and close to half of those are under the age of 17. Whether in refugee camps or cities, the refugees are facing increased societal harassment because they are perceived by their host communities to be taking jobs and using limited resources. Moreover, in many of the host countries, particularly Lebanon and Iraq, sectarianism is growing, putting them at greater risk.

In addition to the millions of refugees, an estimated 9.3 million people in Syria need basic assistance, such as food, water and shelter, including at least 6.5 million internally-displaced people. (The UN stopped counting deaths in mid-January 2014 because of the inability to verify numbers and causes; at the time they estimated at least 100,000 Syrians had been killed, including Syrian military and rebel forces as well as civilians.)

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

All Syrians, including Muslims, Christians, Alawites, and the smallest communities, such as Yezidis and Druze, are living in bleak conditions and face a dire future. The prospect of achieving a post-conflict Syria that values religious diversity, minority rights, and religious freedom is daunting, with an entire generation at risk from fighting, prolonged hunger, disease, and indoctrination into extremist ideologies. In addition to continuing to seek an end to the conflict, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should designate Syria a “country of particular concern” and should:

- Ensure that religious freedom is given a high priority and minorities are given a voice as efforts continue to bring about an end to the conflict;
- Ensure that U.S. government planning for a post-conflict Syria is a “whole-of-government” effort and includes consideration of issues concerning religious freedom and related human rights, and that USCIRF and other U.S. government experts on those issues are consulted as appropriate;
- In U.S. efforts to build the capacity of the internationally-recognized opposition, the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations within the State Department should continue to prioritize training on international standards relating to human rights and religious freedom and stress the need for these groups to include all of Syria’s religious and ethnic communities;
- Initiate an effort among relevant UN agencies, NGOs, and like-minded partners among the Friends of Syria to fund and develop programs that bolster intra- and inter-religious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and promote respect for religious freedom and related rights, both in neighboring countries hosting refugees and in preparing for a post-conflict Syria;
- Consider issuing a new exemption to U.S. immigration law’s “material support bar” for Syrian refugees who supported specific U.S.-backed rebel groups, and properly apply existing exemptions, so that Syrians who pose no threat to the United States and are fleeing the al-Assad regime or terrorist groups are not erroneously barred from the U.S. refugee program;
- Allocate sufficient resources to the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies to expeditiously process applications and conduct security background checks to facilitate the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the United States without compromising U.S. national security; and
- Continue to provide significant funding and logistical support to the UN, humanitarian organizations, and host nations and communities to provide humanitarian aid to refugees and internally displaced persons, and encourage other countries to do the same.