

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	465
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	Minority Rights Group International
Titel:	State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Syria
Udgivet:	3. juli 2014
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	19. september 2014

State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Syria

Publisher [Minority Rights Group International](#)

Publication Date 3 July 2014

Cite as Minority Rights Group International, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Syria*, 3 July 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53ba8dd22f.html> [accessed 18 September 2014]

Disclaimer This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

While the unrest in Syria began in 2011 as a series of peaceful demonstrations by youth and underprivileged sections of Syrian society, calling for political change, since then the conflict has taken on an increasingly sectarian dimension. This development was initially encouraged by the Syrian authorities as a strategy to present themselves as protecting minorities against the threat of Sunni Muslim extremists. The sectarian narrative has also been fuelled by a variety of commentators outside the country, ranging from mass media and influential Sunni clerics overseas to Salafi groups.

The politicization of religious identities has had severe consequences for the civilian population, particularly minorities. During the year, many were subjected to indiscriminate violence and targeted attacks because of their religious or ethnic affiliation. The year 2013 saw a pronounced escalation of the hostilities, with the number of IDPs almost tripling over the year to reach 6.5 million, while the refugee population outside the country rose from 0.5 million to 2.3 million by year's end. In total, more than 40 per cent of the pre-conflict population have left their homes. In July, the UN estimated that more than 100,000 persons had died since the beginning of the conflict. At the start of 2014, it announced that it would not be updating its estimate due to the difficulty of accessing reliable data in the country.

Syria experienced in 2013 a 'dramatic increase in attacks on religious personnel and buildings' according to the UN, reflecting the growing importance of religiously motivated violence in Syria. Shi'a mosques and shrines, Christian churches and a Sunni mosque were looted and destroyed during the year. Meanwhile, a number of priests were abducted. Another priest and an Alawite imam were killed. Violence also reached unprecedented levels during the year. Large-scale practices of enforced disappearance and torture in detention facilities were documented. Women, men and children have been victims of rape and sexual violence.

President Bashar al-Assad belongs to the Alawite community, a religious minority with roots in Shi'a Islam. Alawites and Shi'a more generally, representing around 13-16 per cent of the Syrian population, were subjected to revenge attacks in connection with the presence of pro-government forces in their towns and villages. In May, Alawite farmers were abducted and killed by snipers as a reprisal against Syrian Air Force shelling coming from their village in Al-Ghab Valley. The attacks have made cultivation impossible for certain villages, depriving them of food and a key source of income. Shi'a enclaves in predominantly Sunni areas in villages near Aleppo were also besieged on the same pretext. In June, at least 30 civilians were summarily executed by combatants from the extremist Jabhat Al-Nusra in the town of Hatla. Two months later, at least 190 civilians, including women and children, were killed by armed groups in a cluster of Alawite villages in Al Hiffa. Islamist militias also killed 18 civilians in September in Alawite villages around Homs. A large number of civilians were also kidnapped or taken hostage during the year, including hundreds of Alawite women and children abducted by anti-government armed groups, and often used for prisoner exchanges. Pro-government forces have also taken Sunni women and children as hostages for the same purpose.

However, the violence has extended beyond the Sunni-Shi'a conflict to include other minority groups as well. Christians were victimized during the occupation of the village of Sadad by al-Qaeda fighters in October. According to HRW, more than 40 civilians were killed. Druze communities, while largely spared the worst of the violence, have reportedly been pressured by militants to conform to *Sharia* law. Living mostly in the south of the country and representing around 3 per cent of the population, this small religious minority has maintained a position of neutrality in the conflict and welcomed refugees from both sides. Bedouin tribes, because of their perceived sympathy with the opposition, were targeted by pro-government forces. In April, an entire family was executed around Homs; at least eight Bedouin men were summarily shot between July and September.

While Sunni Arabs represent around two-thirds of the overall population, they form local minorities in several predominantly Alawite or Shi'a areas. This has exposed them to targeted assaults from armed groups. The Sunni towns of Al-Bayda and Ras Al-Nabe', located in the predominantly Alawite region of Tartus, were attacked by the National Defence Force in May. Approximately 300 to 450 civilians were summarily executed during the two-day operation, including scores of women and children. The UN has confirmed that chemical attacks have been used, specifically sarin, during the conflict. In August, for example, an indiscriminate chemical attack on the predominantly Sunni district of Al-Ghouta, a stronghold of the opposition in the outskirts of Damascus, claimed the lives of between 300 and 1,500 people. The UN stated that the evidence suggests that the assailants had access to the Syrian military's stockpile as well as had the technical knowledge necessary to use the chemical agents safely.

The Kurdish minority, long oppressed by the Syrian government, are concentrated in the oil-rich north-east provinces. In 2013, the Kurds tried to distance themselves from both sides while continuing to seek greater autonomy. According to reports, their security forces have presented themselves as a pan-ethnic organization defending all the communities in the region, including local Christian communities such as the Syriacs. The establishment of a non-religious civil marriage ceremony in the Kurdish-controlled area in December is a symbolic effort to assert the region's self-rule ambitions while also moving away from the sectarianism elsewhere in the country.

In July, Kurdish forces launched a campaign to gain control over towns and villages controlled by al-Qaeda affiliated militias in Kurdish-inhabited enclaves in the north. Following military victories, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party announced steps towards self-rule of the Kurdish-dominated regions in November. During the offensive in July, Kurdish inhabitants living in Islamist controlled areas of Ar-Raqqah and Aleppo were threatened through announcements on mosque loudspeakers and ordered to leave or face immediate attack, resulting in massive displacement and a number of abductions.

A number of factors contributed to the sectarianization of the conflict during the year. First, the composition of armed forces on both sides has become increasingly divided along religious lines. The Syrian Armed Forces, loyal to Bashar al-Assad, have become more reliant on external support from paramilitary groups to compensate for defections from the army. Lebanese Shi'a Hezbollah announced in May that it would join the fight in Syria and Iraqi Shi'a militias stepped up their military engagement. Most significantly, in early 2013, pro-government civilian volunteers formed a 'National Defence Force', reportedly composed largely of members of Alawite and Shi'a minorities. At the same time, a myriad of Sunni jihadist armed groups, including Jabhat Al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), both affiliated to al-Qaeda, have become active alongside the Free Syrian Army.

Furthermore, the nature and pattern of the violence has also reinforced the sectarian aspect of the conflict and blurred the line between civilian and military targets. Governmental forces positioned artillery and bases in Alawite, Shi'a and Christian towns and villages, for example, while anti-government militias made similar deployments in Sunni areas. In this context, the civilian populations in these areas have come to be collectively associated with one or other warring party.

The widespread use of inflammatory language has also reinforced the representation of the conflict as a war of religions. A study published in *Foreign Policy* shows that Sunni and Shi'a clerics and politicians alike have consistently typecast the other group as non-believers serving foreign interests. In June, for example, prominent Egyptian Islamic theologian Yusuf al-Qaradawi denigrated the Alawite community and called on Sunnis to join the jihad against the government in Syria. A month later, an opposing *fatwa* casting Syrian rebels as 'infidels' and encouraging Shi'a to join the war was issued by Iranian Grand Ayatollah Kazim al-Haeri. Thousands of foreign fighters, encouraged by such rhetoric, continued to enter Syria during the year to engage in the conflict.

Hate speech from clerics and other prominent figures has not only been broadcast on television, but also shared on Twitter, Facebook and other websites, reaching a large audience in the process. Internet and satellite channels also serve as platforms for stories, photographs and footage from the battlefield, such as the video posted online in May of a combatant apparently extracting the heart of a dead soldier while uttering threats towards Alawites. This profusion of shocking images and stories has been used by stakeholders on both sides to stoke hostility and dehumanize other groups.

Copyright notice: © Minority Rights Group International. All rights reserved.