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2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Syria

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. Membership in certain types of religiously oriented organizations is illegal and punishable to different degrees, including by imprisonment or death. The government and its Shia militia allies killed, arrested, and physically abused Sunnis and members of targeted religious minority groups as part of its effort to defeat the armed insurrection mounted by opposition groups. As the insurgency increasingly became identified with the Sunni population, the government reportedly targeted towns and neighborhoods for siege, mortar shelling, and aerial bombardment on the basis of the religious affiliation of residents. The government reportedly targeted places of worship, resulting in damage and destruction of numerous churches and mosques. The government continued to monitor sermons, close mosques between prayers, and limit the activities of religious groups. It said the armed resistance comprised “extreme Islamist factions” and terrorists. According to international media reports, a number of minority religious groups viewed the government as their protector against violent Sunni extremists.

Nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States and other governments, such as Da’esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and the al-Nusra Front (ANF), targeted Shia, Alawites, Christians, and other religious minorities, as well as other Sunnis, with killings, kidnappings, torture, and arrests in the areas of the country under their control. Da’esh killed more than 60 Christians and other members of religious minorities through public executions, crucifixions and beheadings of men, women, and children on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, and cursing God. In Raqqa Da’esh held thousands of enslaved Yezidi women and girls kidnapped in Iraq and trafficked to Syria to be sold or distributed to Da’esh fighters as “spoils of war” because of their religious beliefs. Da’esh punished individuals with lashing or imprisonment for lesser religious offenses, such as insulting the Prophet or failing to comply with standards of grooming and dress. Da’esh required Christians to convert, flee, pay a special tax, or face execution. It destroyed churches, Shia shrines, and other religious heritage sites. Da’esh used its own police force, court system, and revised school curriculum to enforce and spread its interpretation of Islam. The ANF was responsible for killing more than 20 Druze and Christians as “infidels” in separate incidents. The ANF also continued to indoctrinate children with its interpretation of Salafi-jihadist Islam including through schools and youth training camps.

There were reports of sectarian violence due to tensions among religious groups, exacerbated by government actions, cultural rivalries, and sectarian rhetoric. Alawites reportedly faced attacks because other minority groups believed government policy favored Alawites. Christians reportedly continued to experience decreasing social tolerance and increasing violence including kidnappings as the influence of extremist groups increased. Previously religiously heterogeneous neighborhoods, towns, and villages continued to become segregated by religious group as displaced members of minority religious groups relocated, seeking greater security and safety by living with coreligionists.

The U.S. President and the Secretary of State urged the government to respect the rights of all citizens regardless of religious beliefs and stressed the need for a political transition in Syria which would respect the freedoms of all religious groups. In November the International Syrian Support Group, in which the Secretary of State brought together 20 nations, issued a statement supporting a solution to the conflict affirming the unity and nonsectarian character of the country while protecting the rights of all citizens regardless of religious denomination. Although the U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in February 2012, the U.S. Special Envoy for Syria and other senior U.S. officials continued to meet elsewhere with leaders of minority religious groups to discuss assistance to vulnerable populations and ways to counter sectarian violence.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.9 million (July 2015 estimate), although media reporting suggests this figure is continually declining as large numbers of people leave the country to escape the ongoing civil war. The continued population displacement adds a degree of uncertainty to demographic analyses, but the U.S. government estimates approximately 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 according to U.S. estimates, while Druze account for 3 percent of the population. Previous estimates put the Christian population at 10 percent of the overall population, although media and other reports of Christians fleeing the country as a result of the civil war suggest the Christian population is now considerably lower. Before the civil war there were small Jewish populations in Aleppo and Damascus, but there is no reliable information to confirm their continued residency or current size. There was also a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000 before the civil war; media reports suggest this figure is higher due to Yezidis arriving from Iraq as they flee military conflict there.

Sunni Muslims are present throughout the country. Shia Muslims live mostly in rural areas. Twelver Shia (who believe in twelve divinely ordained imams) tend to live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. The majority of Alawites live in the mountainous areas of the coastal Latakia Governorate, but they also have a presence in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Damascus. The highest concentration of Ismailis (who are Seveners, believing Ismail ibn Ja'far was the seventh and last imam) is in the city of Salamiyeh in the Hama Governorate.

Most Christians belong to autonomous Orthodox churches, the Eastern Catholic (or Uniate) churches (in full communion with the Roman Catholic pope), 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 section of the country. While the country hosted hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christian refugees before the conflict, the majority of the Iraqi Christian population has since moved to neighboring countries or returned to Iraq.

Many Druze live in the Jabal al-Arab (Jabal al-Druze) region in the southern Governorate of Suweida, where they constitute the majority of the local population. Yezidis are found primarily in the northeast and in Aleppo.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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 the religion of the president of the republic is Islam. The constitution states Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation.

The constitution states “the civil status of the religious communities is protected and respected,” and “the citizens are equal in rights and duties, without discrimination as to religion or confession.” Citizens have the right to sue the government if they believe it has violated their rights.

According to the 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 generally denoting a subset of Sunni fundamentalism. Affiliation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, a political Islamist movement, is punishable by death or imprisonment.

The law restricts proselytizing and conversion. It prohibits the conversion of Muslims to other religions as contrary to Islamic law. The law recognizes Christian conversion to Islam. The penal code prohibits “causing tension between religious communities.”

By law all religious groups must register with the government. Recognized 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.

All religious and nonreligious meetings of religious groups, except for regularly scheduled worship, require permits from the government.

Public schools are officially government-run and nonsectarian, although the Christian and Druze communities are authorized 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 Islam and Christianity only, and courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Members of religious minority groups may choose to attend public schools with Muslim or Christian instruction, or attend private schools which may follow either secular or religious curricula.

For the resolution of issues of personal status, the government requires citizens to be listed as affiliated with Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Individuals are subject to their respective religious groups' laws concerning marriage and divorce. A Muslim woman may not legally marry a Christian man, but a Christian woman may legally marry a Muslim man. If a Christian woman marries a Muslim man, she is not allowed to be buried in a Muslim cemetery unless she converts to Islam. If a person wishes to convert from Christianity to Islam, the law states 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 the case of interreligious disputes, 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. Additionally, 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 for all citizens except Christians. Per 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. When a Christian woman marries a Muslim, she is not entitled to an inheritance from her husband.

Religious affiliation is recorded on an individual's birth certificate and is required on documents presented when marrying or traveling for a religious pilgrimage and on many other official forms. For such documentation the choices are to be listed as affiliated with Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. The government does not require the designation of religion on passports or national identity cards.

Government Practices

The Alawite-led government and its Shia militia allies killed, arrested, and physically abused Sunnis and members of

targeted religious minority groups, and intentionally destroyed their property, according to numerous reports, as part of its effort to defeat the armed insurrection mounted by opposition groups. As the insurgency increasingly became identified with the Sunni population, according to experts, the government targeted towns and neighborhoods in various parts of the country for siege, mortar shelling, and aerial bombardment on the basis of the religious affiliation of residents. Observers reported the government tried to mobilize sectarian support by increasing religious hate speech and controlling the activities of religious groups. According to international media reports, a number of minority religious groups viewed the government as their protector against violent Sunni extremists. Because of the overlap of political, ethnic, sectarian, and religious motivations for violence, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

By May the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) estimated more than 215,000 individuals had been killed since the start of the conflict. In many areas, according to observers, the Alawite-led government, which included President Asad and his family, viewed religious affiliation as a proxy for political beliefs and assumed most Sunnis supported the opposition to its rule. For example, in February SNHR reported government forces and Shia militias kidnapped 320 Sunni villagers from Ratan village in Aleppo and used them as human shields. Forty-eight civilians, including 10 children, were killed. In July the SNHR reported government forces had killed at least 100 Sunni civilians in Aleppo.

The government reportedly continued to imprison, and on some occasions summarily execute, individuals it deemed to be associated with opposition radio and television programming, including religious programming not meeting government criteria.

The government reportedly continued to sentence members of the Muslim Brotherhood to death or to lengthy imprisonment. According to civil society activists, the government also continued to engage in extrajudicial detentions and to execute detainees rather than prosecute them in court.

The government also continued to prosecute individuals it reportedly perceived as constituting a political threat to its survival or its secular identity. Human rights groups reported the government targeted many of the individuals it accused for being followers of a particular preacher or mosque rather than participants in extremist groups. Human rights organizations and civil society groups reported the government continued to detain tens of thousands of citizens without affording them due process.

Sources reported government-affiliated militias seized the homes of Sunnis with the explicit intention of permanently displacing these individuals and changing the religious demography of these areas by populating the area with Shia and Alawite residents. Such violence contributed to the widespread displacement of civilians totaling at least 7.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and more than 4.2 million refugees by June according to the UN.

According to media reports, the presence of foreign sectarian militias fighting on the side of the government exacerbated and sharpened the sectarian element of the war. Reports indicated the government relied on Shia foreigners from Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and elsewhere to target Sunni populations. For example, *The Washington Post* reported in October on the presence of multiple pro-regime Shia militias fighting on behalf of the government in Aleppo, including Lebanese Hizballah and the Iraqi group Kataib Hizballah.

The government allowed religious groups to operate informally while awaiting approval of their registration applications.

Neither the government nor the state security court defined the parameters of what constituted “Salafist” activity or explained why it made a group illegal.

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.

The government reportedly continued to permit the use of religious language in public, including banners bearing religious slogans at prominent public landmarks during religious holidays. The government also reportedly continued to permit the display of nativity scenes and other symbols associated with Christmas.

The government continued to use provisions in the penal code prohibiting “causing tension between religious communities” to restrict distribution of religious materials by groups it deemed a threat. At the same time, the government continued its support for radio and television programming related to the practice and study of Islam it deemed appropriate.

The government reportedly promoted into religious leadership positions Muslim clergy, such as Grand Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, who committed to preserving the secular nature of the state, did not threaten core government interests, and avoided political criticism of the government.

According to academic 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 the military and the security services.

The senior officer corps of the military reportedly continued to include individuals from 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.

Media and academic experts said the government continued to portray the armed resistance in sectarian terms, saying opposition protesters and fighters were associated with “extreme Islamist factions” and terrorists seeking to eliminate the country’s religious minority groups and its secular approach to governance. For instance, in an interview with Italian TV channel RAI UNO in November, President Bashar al-Asad called the armed opposition “extremists.” who “deviated from the real religion...Islam, towards extremism,” saying “whoever holds a machine gun and terrorizes people and destroys private or public properties or kills innocents and whoever is a terrorist, he’s not opposition.” Government-appointed religious officials, including Endowments Minister Muhammad Abdul Sattar al-Sayyed, in June continued to urge citizens to engage in “jihad” in support of the government. Other officials and government-controlled media portrayed the government’s violence as targeting “*takfiri* terrorist organizations,” an Arabic term referring to groups or individuals accusing and targeting other Muslims for alleged apostasy. According to international media reports, leaders from a number of minority religious groups stated the government had their support because it was their protector against violent Sunni extremists.

The government continued to threaten Sunnis publicly, warning against communications with foreign coreligionists and defining such communication as opposition political or military activity. For most other religious groups, the government did not prohibit links between citizens and coreligionists in other countries or between citizens and the international religious hierarchies governing some religious groups. It continued to prohibit, however, contact

between the Jewish community and Jews in Israel.

Government-controlled radio and television programming continued to disseminate anti-Semitic news articles and cartoons. Government-appointed Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun disparaged rebels as serving a “Zionist agenda.” The government repeated its claim a “Zionist” conspiracy was responsible for the country’s conflict. For example, government official media outlet SANA reported on a meeting in Damascus to “discuss popular resistance role in face of Wahhabi-Zionist mentality.”

The government continued to allow foreign Christian faith-based nongovernmental organizations (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 approval from the Ministry of Religious Endowments to operate. Security forces continued to question these 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.

The SNHR reported the government continued to target places of worship, resulting in damage to and destruction of numerous churches and mosques. The SNHR reported government forces targeted mosques in Idlib, Daraa, Aleppo, Damascus, and elsewhere throughout October and November and damaged three churches in Hasek Province in February and April, bringing the total number of churches damaged or destroyed since 2011 to 40. The government continued to claim the mosques it targeted served as rallying points for protesters or rebels.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors

Nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United States and other governments, such as Da’esh and ANF, controlled portions of the country’s territory, and continued to be responsible for killings, torture, kidnappings, and arrests of members of religious groups they suspected of opposing their rule. Da’esh publicized executions of individuals it accused of violating its interpretation of Islamic law. Religious offenses Da’esh deemed punishable by death included blasphemy, apostasy, and cursing God. Da’esh also punished individuals with lashing or imprisonment for lesser religious offenses, such as insulting the Prophet Muhammad or failing to comply with standards of grooming and dress. ANF and some allied rebel groups targeted Druze and Shia minorities in the northern part of the country, claiming responsibility for numerous bombings, including suicide attacks, which the ANF continued to claim were reactions to the government’s “massacres of Sunnis.”

According to the media reports, Da’esh in March shot, burned, or beheaded at least 30 non-Sunnis, including women and children, at a village in the suburbs of Hama. In March Da’esh also published a video of militants beheading eight Shia in Hama.

According to the BBC, in June ANF fighters in Idlib province killed at least 20 Druze villagers, whom a foreign ANF commander reportedly called “infidels” before ordering their killing.

On December 30, Da’esh suicide bombers bombed three restaurants owned and frequented by Assyrian Christians in the town of Qamishli in northeastern Syria, killing at least 16, including three who were not Assyrian or Christian, and injuring approximately 45. Known Da’esh public affairs websites and Twitter accounts reported the attack.

According to an isolated NGO report, in October Da’esh militants entered a village near Aleppo and told 11 Christian workers there, including a 12-year-old boy, to renounce Christ or leave. When they refused, the militants tortured and beat them before crucifying them.

In June media reported Da’esh crucified two boys under the age of 18 for eating during Ramadan and publicly displayed their bodies. Also in June Da’esh reportedly executed two women and their husbands for sorcery.

After rebels expelled government authorities from Idlib city in March, they surrounded the nearby majority Shia villages of Fu’a and Kafraya, and targeted both with shelling and suicide bombings. The rebels referred to the villagers in Fu’a and Kafraya as “*rawafid*,” a derogatory term used to refer to Shia Muslims.

According to the *New York Times*, following the expulsion of the government authorities from Idlib city, reports circulated ANF fighters had killed two Christians for working in a liquor store.

In Aleppo Governorate, several rebel groups, including ANF and Ahrar al-Sham, attacked the Shia towns of Nubl and Zahra, which other rebels had been besieging, and portrayed violence against the villages in sectarian terms.

Opposition groups reportedly continued to target religious minorities in kidnappings.

Media reported on February 23 Da’esh overran the Khabour River region in Hasekah Governorate forcing thousands of Assyrian Christians and others to flee and kidnapping over 250 Assyrian Christians. Da’esh released 19 hostages a week later and periodically released small numbers of others throughout the year as a result of negotiations with members of the Assyrian community. Da’esh executed three hostages in September and released a video of the execution 10 days later. At year’s end more than 100 remained hostage.

Yezidis, the UN, the Iraqi government, and others continued to report Da’esh held thousands of Yezidi women and girls in Raqqa. Da’esh kidnapped these women and girls in Iraq and then trafficked them to Syria to be sold or distributed to Da’esh fighters as “spoils of war” because of their religious beliefs. Escaped captives continued to report sexual assaults by Da’esh members, which Da’esh documented in its own videos.

In March ANF kidnapped Father Ibrahim Farah and held him for 20 days. In May Da’esh kidnapped Father Jacques Mourad from his monastery near Homs; he escaped in October. In July ANF fighters kidnapped Father Dhiya Aziz, the parish priest at the Yacoubieh monastery in Jisr al-Shougur area in Idleb countryside, before releasing him 10 days later. Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi, kidnapped in April 2013, remained unaccounted for at year’s end. The condition of Jesuit priest Paolo Dall’Oglio, kidnapped by Da’esh in July 2013 in Raqqa, remained unknown.

Terrorist and other armed groups continued to convene ad hoc courts in areas under their control, where each group reportedly implemented its own interpretation of Islamic law. According to opposition armed groups and media reports, this included the authorization of public executions and torture of minorities accused of working with the government, particularly Alawites. Armed groups, including those linked to ANF, continued to establish sharia courts in Aleppo and Idlib Governorates and elsewhere, replacing government courts as well as courts organized by other opposition groups.

In February ANF released a statement reporting it was forcing Druze villagers in northern Idlib Governorate to convert to Islam, destroying Druze holy sites such as tombs, forcing women to dress in accordance with ANF's interpretation of Islamic law, and teaching a Salafi-jihadi interpretation of Islam to Druze children.

Activists, media, and Da'esh reported Da'esh continued to force Christians in areas under its control to pay a protection tax, convert to Islam, or be killed. After Da'esh took over the mostly Christian town of Qarytain in Homs Governorate in August it released a video in which the group said some residents had converted to Islam and it had imposed a tax on those who had not. Da'esh also reportedly desecrated Christian holy sites in the town.

Da'esh introduced new curricula based on its interpretation of Islam in schools throughout territory under its control. According to *The Daily Telegraph*, the group banned several subjects it considered contrary to its ideology, including music, art, and aspects of history the group deemed nationalist. In October and November Da'esh reportedly unveiled new textbooks for use in its schools whose content justified Da'esh's declaration of a so-called caliphate and described other forms of governance as un-Islamic. The textbooks also justified Da'esh's practices including excommunication and other punishments for apostasy, heresy, and other religious crimes, according to multiple media reports and the group's own reporting. Da'esh publicized efforts to "re-educate" teachers who had previously taught in government schools. The group reportedly opened a number of "Cubs of the Caliphate" youth training camps throughout its areas of control, releasing several videos documenting the training.

ANF and affiliated groups also used schools, youth training camps, and other means to teach children their Salafi-jihadi philosophy in areas under their control. In "proselytization sessions," a term used by ANF, the group invited children to participate in games whose content was based on al-Qaida's religious beliefs. In other areas in the north, the Salafi-jihadi NGO Callers to Jihad Center engaged in similar activities.

According to Da'esh reporting and other sources, in areas under its control, Da'esh police forces, known as Hisbah, continued to administer summary punishments for violations of Da'esh's morality code. Men and women continued to face public beatings for smoking, possessing alcohol, listening to music, having tattoos, conducting business during prayer times, not attending Friday prayers, and not fasting during Ramadan. The Da'esh police also continued to punish individuals for accompanying "improperly dressed" female relatives. Da'esh's al-Khanssaa all-female police force continued to enforce Da'esh-prescribed moral regulations, sometimes violently, on women.

In a number of recorded speeches Da'esh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Da'esh spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani called on Muslims throughout the Middle East to rise up against Jews, Crusaders, and their "apostate" agents elsewhere in the region.

Da'esh continued its campaign to attack and destroy minority religious sites as well as ancient heritage sites in areas it held. For example, in January Da'esh forced villagers to remove a cross from the church in Tel Hormizd, threatening to bomb the church if they did not. In April Da'esh destroyed the Virgin Mary Church in Tel Nasri. In August Da'esh destroyed the 1,500-year-old Saint Elian Monastery in the Homs countryside and desecrated a number of churches in the nearby town of Qaryatain. Between May and December Da'esh destroyed large parts of UNESCO World Heritage Site Palmyra, calling the ancient city's archaeological treasures "pagan ruins." On May 23, Da'esh destroyed the Lion of Lat and other statues. Sometime on or before August 23, Da'esh fighters destroyed the Temple of Baalshamin. Several days later, the group destroyed the Temple of Bel. On September 4, sources reported Da'esh had destroyed a number of significant tower tombs. On October 5, the group destroyed a number of other buildings at the site.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There reportedly continued to be reports of sectarian violence due to tensions among religious groups, exacerbated by government actions, cultural rivalries, and sectarian rhetoric.

The Alawite population faced attacks by some elements of the armed opposition, including ANF, Jund al-Awqsa, and other extremists groups, reportedly because other minority groups believed government policy favored Alawites. Alawite leaders said they continued to fear a sectarian cleansing would follow a fall of the government.

Syrian Christians reported they continued to experience decreased social tolerance as the influence of extremist groups increased. In October unknown individuals kidnapped four Christians from the Tartous region. According to the *Catholic Herald*, Christians continued to flee the country as refugees or moved to Kurdish or government-controlled areas.

The self-segregation of internally displaced religious groups into towns and neighborhoods organized along sectarian lines continued. Internally displaced Sunnis, however, reportedly continued to relocate to traditional Alawite strongholds along the coast.

Alawite and Shia youth reported Sunni colleagues continued to threaten them in schools and universities due to their religious affiliations and perceived support for the government.

Advocacy groups reported social conventions and religious proscriptions continued to make conversion relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversions banned by the law. They also reported societal pressure continued to force converts to relocate within the country or leave the country to practice their new religion openly.

One Christian civil society organization continued to report the exclusion of Christians in the northwest from the distribution of humanitarian aid because of perceived Christian support for the government due to their religious affiliation.

Antigovernment protests reportedly continued to include anti-Alawite messages as well. Some societal and religious leaders continued to take steps to promote religious tolerance and encourage peaceful relations among religious groups. For example, in August Sheikh Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, a Sunni Islamic scholar and opposition supporter, issued a fatwa opposing the violence of Da'esh and calling on Syrians of all backgrounds to work together to build a state respecting pluralism and minority rights.

The Syrian Opposition Coalition continued to condemn actions against religious minorities, both by the government and by extremist and terrorist groups.

In June the Free Syrian Army-affiliated Southern Front rescued two Christians from unknown militants, releasing a video stressing its commitment to religious tolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The President and the Secretary of State continued to urge the government to respect the universal rights of its citizens, including the right to religious freedom. The President repeatedly stressed the need for a political solution to the conflict which would be inclusive of all religious groups in the country. The Secretary of State in October stated, “The rights of all Syrians, despite their religious beliefs or ethnic group, should be protected and observed.” The Secretary and other senior U.S. officials reiterated this point at other times during the year.

In pursuit of a political solution to the Syrian conflict which would safeguard the religious freedom of all Syrian citizens, the Secretary of State in October and November brought together 20 nations in what became known as the Vienna process. The participating nations, together known as the International Syria Support Group, issued a statement in November affirming their “commitment to Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and nonsectarian character; to ensuring that state institutions remain intact; and to protecting the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination.”

The U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in February 2012. The U.S. government nevertheless met with Syrian religious groups and leaders in the United States and elsewhere in the region and the world as part its effort to promote an inclusive political settlement for the Syrian conflict. The U.S. Special Envoy for Syria and other high-ranking U.S. officials met with members of the Orthodox Christian, Sunni, Druze, and Alawite communities to discuss providing assistance to vulnerable populations and countering sectarian violence. The Special Envoy and other officials participated in dialogues, roundtables, and working groups focused on increasing religious tolerance and countering extremist violence. U.S. government officials continued to press the political opposition to expand and include representatives from all religious backgrounds in order to better reflect the diversity of the country's population. The United States continued to support the documentation of abuses committed by all sides in the conflict through the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and through direct support to Syrian-led documentation efforts.