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Syria: The situation of Shias and Alawites, including treatment by authorities and insurgents; whether insurgents consider Shias and Alawites to be loyal to President al-Assad (March 2011-May 2013)

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1. General Information

According to the International Religious Freedom Report for 2012 published by the US Department of State, Alawites [also called Alawis (US 20 May 2013, 2)], Ismailis [a branch of Shia Islam (IIS 17 July 2012)] and Shia [also called Shi'a (AI 14 Mar. 2013) or Shiites (CNN 9 May 2013)] constitute about 13 percent of Syria's population (US 20 May 2013, 2). Sources indicate that the Alawite minority is an "offshoot" of Shiite Islam (US Apr. 2013, 1; CNN 9 May 2013; Reuters 23 Mar. 2013). Minority Rights Group International (MRG) indicates that Ismaili and Ithna'ashari, or Twelver Shia, constitute 2 percent of the population and Alawites make up 11 percent (Oct. 2011). Sunni Muslims account for 74 percent of the population, Druze [a subgroup of Shia (The Times Argus 26 Jan. 2013)] constitute 3 percent and various Christian groups make up about 10 percent of the population (US 20 May 2013, 2). There is also a small Jewish population (ibid.).

The UN Commissioner for Human Rights 2012 report indicates that the conflict between government forces and anti-government armed groups has become "overtly sectarian in nature" (UN 20 Dec. 2012, para. 12). Human Rights Watch also reports that the Syrian war is characterized by a "violent round of sectarian, neighbour-to-neighbour killings" (Human Rights

Watch 13 May 2013). The UN report states that, although other minority groups have been drawn into the conflict, it falls "most sharply between Syria's Alawite community, from which most of the Government's senior political and military figures hail, and the country's majority Sunni community who are broadly (but not uniformly) in support of the anti-Government armed groups" (20 Dec. 2012, para. 14).

2. Treatment of Shia and Alawite Communities by Insurgents

According to the International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, "reports of Sunni revenge, sectarian killings, and violence against Alawis continued to increase" (US 20 May 2013, 9). Amnesty International (AI) also reports that by the end of 2012, insurgents increased their attacks and threats against minority communities, which are perceived to be "pro-government" (2013, 259). AI indicates that Shia and Alawite communities, as well as civilians and journalists working for pro-government media, are perceived by insurgents to be loyal to President al-Assad (14 Mar. 2013, 1). Similarly, the International Religious Freedom Report for 2012 indicates that Alawi and Shia youth were reportedly threatened in schools and universities by Sunni colleagues who perceived them to be supporters of the regime because of their religion (US 20 May 2013, 10). The UN Human Rights Council report also notes that

[c]ivilians from communities who are likely to be perceived as supporters of the Government face particular threats from anti-Government armed groups. The targeting of Shia and Alawite communities by armed groups has been recorded in interviews in Damascus, Homs and Dara'a. (UN 11 Mar. 2013, 3)

Various sources report on incidents affecting Shias, including:

In April 2012, a Shia religious scholar and prayer leader was killed by two gunmen (The Telegraph 1 May 2013). In an interview with the Telegraph, a Shia refugee from Damascus who had fled to Lebanon, indicated that "armed Sunni militiamen waged a campaign of terror in their neighbourhood" and assassinated several other religious leaders (ibid.);

In December 2012, an explosion in a Damascus suburb wounded 14 people and damaged a Shia shrine (US Apr. 2013, 7);

The International Religious Freedom Report for 2012 reports that Sunni extremists attacked Shia mosques in northern Syria in 2012 (US 20 May 2013, 9-10);

In January 2013, insurgents destroyed Shia religious sites in northern Syria (US Apr. 2013, 7);

In January 2013, in Daraya, "anti-Shia extremists" burned down the shrine of Lady Sakina, the daughter of Shia's first imam (SRW 9 Jan. 2013);

In May 2013, in Damascus, rebels dug up the grave of "one of the most revered Shiite figures, a companion of the Prophet Mohamed and early follower of his cousin and son-in-law, Imam Ali" (Human Rights Watch 13 May 2013);

In 2013, several car bombs were used by Sunnis to attack Shia neighbourhoods in southern Damascus (Israel Business Arena 6 May 2013). The insurgents also attacked several Shia villages along the Lebanese border (ibid.).

Corroborating information for the incidents listed above could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to AI, eleven Shia Lebanese men were taken as hostages in May 2012 and at the end of 2012 nine were still being held by the armed group (2013, 259). Xinhua News Agency also reports

that Lebanese Shias were kidnapped by rebels (23 May 2012). For additional information on abductions in Syria please refer to Response to Information Request SYR104425.

3. Treatment of Shia and Alawite Communities by Authorities

Sources report that Shia fighters from Iraq, Lebanon and Iran were helping the Syrian government (The New York Times 27 Oct. 2012; The Guardian 5 May 2013). BBC also reports that Iraqi Shias were coming to Syria to "fight alongside President Bashar al-Assad's forces" (24 May 2013). However, according to Amnesty International, not all members of Shia and Alawite communities are pro-government (AI 14 Mar. 2013, 3). The US Commission on International Religious Freedom also reports that some Alawites abandoned Assad's regime for the opposition (US Apr. 2013, 5).

Sources report that a group of Alawites opposed to the regime met in Cairo in March 2013 (ibid.; The Daily Star 24 Mar. 2014; Reuters 23 Mar. 2013). According to the Daily Star, a Beirut-based English language newspaper (The Daily Star n.d.), the Alawites called for Assad's "overthrow" and "urged their co-religionists in the army to rebel" (ibid. 24 Mar. 2013). Two sources report that the group met to discuss a declaration supporting a united Syria and invited other opposition groups to cooperate in order to prevent sectarian revenge attacks (US Apr. 2013, 5; Reuters 23 Mar. 2013). Other opposition activists, including Sunnis, attended the meeting (The Daily Star 24 Mar. 2013). Further information on the results of the meeting could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to Reuters, among Alawites currently in jail are Mazen Darwish, a free-speech advocate, and Abdelaziz al-Khayyer, who advocated for a peaceful transition to democracy (Reuters 23 Mar. 2013). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Oral sources: Attempts to contact representatives at the following organizations were unsuccessful: Shia Rights Watch, Syrian Network for Human Rights.

Internet sites, including: Al Arabiya; Arabic Network for Human Rights Information; Center for Civilians in Conflict; Deutsche Welle; ecoi.net; Factiva; Freedom House; Forced Migration Review; Global Post; The Globe and Mail; Huffington Post; Human Rights First; Institute of War and Peace Reporting; International Crisis Group; International Federation for Human Rights; Irish Times; Jordan Times; Los Angeles Times; Shia Rights Watch; Syrian Human Rights Committee; Syrian Network for Human Rights; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights; Today's Zaman; United Nations - Integrated Regional Information Networks, High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld; United States - Congressional Research Service; Washington Post; World Organization Against Torture.

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