

# SYRIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## 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. Sectarian violence continued due to tensions among religious groups that, according to nongovernmental organization (NGO) and media sources, was exacerbated by government actions, the deterioration of the economy, and the broader ongoing conflict in the country. At year’s end, more than half of the country’s prewar population was displaced, including 6.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and approximately 5.6 million refugees. Government and progovernment forces continued major aerial and ground offensives initiated in 2019 to recapture areas of the northwest of the country, killing more than 1,000 civilians and forcing nearly one million people to flee prior to the brokering of a ceasefire in March that largely held through the remainder of the year. The government, with the support of its Russian and Iranian allies, continued to commit human rights abuses and violations against its perceived opponents, the majority of whom, reflecting the country’s demographics, were Sunni Muslims, as well as widespread destruction of hospitals, homes, and other civilian infrastructure. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported at least 1,882 arbitrary detentions during the year and documented at least 149,361 Syrians who were detained or forcibly disappeared between 2011 and December, the vast majority of whom were disappeared by the Assad regime and remained missing. The government continued to use Law No. 10, which allows for creating redevelopment zones across the country designated for reconstruction, to reward those loyal to the government and create obstacles for refugees and IDPs who wished to claim their property or return to their homes. The majority of the population is Sunni Muslim, but the Alawi minority continued to hold an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers, particularly in leadership positions in the military and security services. A March study by the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center (Carnegie Middle East Center) noted that all of the top 40 posts in the armed forces were held by Alawites. In a joint paper, the Middle East Institute and NGO Etana stated that there are 31 percent fewer Christians and 69 percent fewer Shia Muslims in the country’s southwest than when the Syrian conflict began. Membership in the Muslim Brotherhood or “Salafist” organizations remained illegal and punishable with imprisonment or death.

The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI) reported that it had reasonable grounds to believe some Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups (TSOs) committed abuses that may have amounted to war crimes, including torture, rape, hostage-taking, looting, and appropriating private property, particularly in Kurdish areas, as well as vandalizing of Yezidi religious sites in areas under their control. The COI, human rights groups and media organizations reported multiple firsthand accounts of killings, kidnappings, arbitrary detentions, and torture of civilians; the desecration and looting of minority religious and cultural sites; and the looting and seizure of private properties in and around Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. Community representatives, human rights organizations such as the NGO Syrians for Truth and Justice, and documentation-gathering groups reported victims of TSO abuses were often of Kurdish or Yezidi origin. The Wilson Center reported in September that ISIS was responsible for 640 attacks in the country from October 2019 through June, often targeting civilians, persons suspected of collaborating with security forces, and groups that ISIS deemed to be apostates. Despite ISIS's territorial defeat, media and NGOs reported its extremist ideology remained a strong presence in the country. In the northeast, formerly the stronghold of the ISIS caliphate, thousands of former ISIS members and their family members were being held either in detention centers or were living in the closed al-Hol camp at year's end. Many former victims of ISIS remained missing.

Christians reportedly continued to face discrimination and violence at the hands of violent extremist groups. NGOs reported social conventions and religious proscriptions continued to make conversions – especially Muslim-to-Christian conversions, which remained banned by law – relatively rare. These groups also reported that societal pressure continued to force converts to relocate within the country or to emigrate in order to practice their new religion openly. The state news agency SANA reported that Adnan al-Afiyuni, the Sunni mufti for Damascus Province, was killed when a bomb planted in his car exploded in the town of Qudssaya. International observers considered al-Afiyuni to be close to President Bashar Assad.

The President and Secretary of State of the United States continued to state that a political solution to the conflict must be based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and respect for the human rights of the country's citizens, including the right to religious freedom. The Secretary of State continued to work with the UN Special Envoy for Syria, members of the opposition, and the international community to support UN-facilitated, Syrian-led efforts in pursuit of a political solution to the conflict that would safeguard the religious freedom of all citizens.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 19.3 million (midyear 2020 estimate). At year's end, more than half of the country's prewar population was displaced; there were approximately 5.6 million refugees registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in neighboring countries as well as 6.6 million IDPs. Continued population displacement adds a degree of uncertainty to demographic analyses, but the U.S. government estimates 74 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, which includes ethnic Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and some Turkomans. According to U.S. government estimates, other Muslim groups, including Alawites, Ismailis, and Shia, together constitute 13 percent of the population, while Druze constitute 3 percent.

The U.S. government estimates 10 percent of the population is Christian. However, there are reports that indicate that number was considerably lower – approximately 2.5 percent. Of the 1.5 million Christians who lived in the country prior to the war, it is estimated that only approximately one-third of them – or approximately 450,000 – remain. Before the civil war, there were small Jewish populations in Aleppo and Damascus, but in June, the *Jewish Chronicle* reported that there were no known Jews still living in Syria. There was also a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000 before the civil war.

Sunni Muslims are present throughout the country. Shia Muslims live mostly in rural areas, particularly in several majority-Shia towns in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates. Twelver Shia Muslims generally 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 live in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Damascus. The highest concentration of Ismaili Muslims is in the city of Salamiyeh, Hama Governorate.

Most Christians belong to autonomous Orthodox Churches, Eastern Catholic Churches, 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 of the country. While there were hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christian refugees before the conflict, the majority of the Iraqi Christian population has moved to neighboring countries or returned to Iraq. Many Druze live in the Jabal al-Arab (Jabal al-Druze) region in the southern Sweida Governorate, where they constitute a majority of the local population. Yezidis previously lived in Aleppo, but now

live mainly in northeast Syria areas controlled by Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The legal framework described in this section remains in force only in those areas controlled by the government, and even in those areas there is often a breakdown in law and order, leaving militias, often sectarian in nature, in a dominant position. In areas of the country controlled by opposition or terrorist groups, irregular courts and local “authorities” apply a variety of unofficial legal codes with diverse provisions relating to religious freedom.

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 public order. There is no official state religion, although the constitution states “Islam is the religion of the President of the republic.” The constitution states Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation.

The constitution states, “The personal status of religious communities shall be protected and respected,” and “Citizens shall be equal in rights and duties without discrimination among them on grounds of sex, origin, language, religion, or creed.” Citizens have the right to sue the government if they believe it violated their rights. Some personal status laws mirror sharia regardless of the religion of those involved in the case being decided.

According to 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 the government associates with Sunni fundamentalism. Neither the government broadly nor the state security court has specifically defined the parameters of what constitutes “Salafist” activity. Affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death or imprisonment. The law prohibits political parties based on religion, tribal affiliation, or regional interests.

The government bans Jehovah’s Witnesses as a “politically-motivated Zionist organization.”

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

The law bars publication of content that affects “national unity and national security,” harms state symbols, defames religions, or incites sectarian strife or “hate crimes.”

By law, all religious groups must register with the government. Registered 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.

The law regulates the structure and functions of the Ministry of Religious Endowments (Awqaf). The law provides for a Jurisprudential and Scholarly Council with the power to define what religious discourse is appropriate and the authority to fine or penalize individuals who propagate extremist thought or deviate from approved discourse. The law also charges the council with monitoring all fatwas (religious decrees) issued in the country and with preventing the spread of views associated with the Muslim Brotherhood or “Salafist” activity, including “Wahhabism.” The law concentrates a range of offices and institutions within the ministry, centralizing the government’s role in and oversight of the country’s religious affairs.

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

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

For the resolution of issues of personal status, the government requires citizens to list their religious affiliation. Individuals are subject to their respective religious groups’ laws concerning marriage and divorce. Per the personal status code, a Muslim man may marry a Christian woman, but a Muslim woman may not legally

marry a Christian man. If a Christian woman marries a Muslim man, she is not allowed to be buried in an Islamic cemetery unless she converts to Islam and may not inherit any property or wealth from her husband, even if she converts. The law states that if a Christian wishes to convert to Islam, 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 interreligious personal status cases, 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. In addition, 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 laws for all citizens except Christians. According to 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.

An individual's birth certificate records his or her religious affiliation. Documents presented when marrying or traveling for a religious pilgrimage also list the religious affiliation of the applicant. There is no designation of religion on passports or national identity cards except for Jews, who are the only religious group whose passports and identity cards note their religion.

Law No. 10, passed in 2018, allows the government to create "redevelopment zones" to be slated for reconstruction. Property owners are notified to provide documentary proof of property ownership or risk losing ownership to the state.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

The government, with the support of its Russian and Iranian allies, continued to commit indiscriminate human rights abuses and violations against civilians, as well as participate in the widespread destruction of hospitals, homes, and other civilian infrastructure. According to press and NGO reporting, the government continued its widespread use of unlawful killings, attacks on civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure, enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention to punish

perceived opponents, the majority of whom, reflecting the country's demographics, were Sunni Muslims.

Some opposition groups identified themselves explicitly as Sunni Arab or Sunni Muslim in statements and publications. According to observers, these opposition groups drew on a support base made up almost exclusively of Sunnis. Some NGO sources stated that the government tried to mobilize sectarian support by branding itself as a protector of religious minorities from attacks by violent Sunni extremist groups. Other NGO sources said that some minority religious groups viewed the government as protecting them from violent Sunni extremists. A May report by the Carnegie Middle East Center stated, "The destruction during the conflict was not solely collateral damage. Its scale, nature, and consequences implied that it was used as a weapon of war to eradicate the populations of opposition areas.... Additionally, many believe the damage took place along sectarian lines, with a majority of destroyed areas being Sunni."

The government's counterinsurgency campaign continued to be aimed at those within the country who criticized or opposed the government, the majority of whom are Sunni and whom the government described as violent extremists. There were continued reports that in its efforts to retake opposition-held areas, the government targeted civilian centers in towns and neighborhoods, which, due to prevailing demographics, were inhabited by a majority Sunni population. From December 2019 to early March 2020, the government, with the support of its Russian allies, launched a large-scale military attack in Idlib Governorate that killed hundreds of civilians as well as several dozen Turkish military personnel deployed in Idlib. The United Nations estimated that nearly one million persons were forced to leave their homes and that entire areas were left depopulated. The assault, which involved the use of heavy weapons, devastated the civilian infrastructure and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation. Syrian and Russian airstrikes repeatedly struck civilian sites, including hospitals, markets, schools, settlements for internally displaced persons, and farms, many of which were included in UN deconfliction lists, a status meant to exempt them from military targeting. Turkey reinforced its military position in Idlib to halt the offensive, and on March 5, Russia and Turkey agreed to a ceasefire that included joint patrols and that largely held for the remainder of the year.

The attacks in Idlib resulted in the destruction of several mosques. For example, on March 2, government forces shelled the Othman Bin Affan Mosque in Balyoun village, in the Jabal al-Zaweya area of Idlib Governorate, partially destroying the building, according to the SNHR.

The SNHR reported at least 1,882 arbitrary detentions during the year and documented at least 149,361 individuals who were detained or forcibly disappeared between 2011 and December, the vast majority of whom were disappeared by the Assad regime and remained missing.

Media and NGOs continued to report that government forces continued to detain, torture, and kill citizens in connection with their political dissent and expression of opinions despite the right to freedom of opinion and expression being protected by the constitution and international law. The SNHR estimated the government and progovernment militias arbitrarily detained approximately 900 citizens during the year, including those associated with NGOs, human rights activists, journalists, relief workers, religious figures, and medical providers. The Syria Justice and Accountability Center reported government forces operated with impunity, while systematic, officially sanctioned torture continued. According to the SNHR, since 2011, more than 14,300 persons have died from torture in government custody. During the year, government forces were reportedly responsible for 157 deaths by torture. As was the case with others who previously died in government custody, most were Sunni Muslims, whom analysts stated the government targeted believing they were members of the opposition or likely to support the opposition.

According to a March Freedom House Report, individuals living in government-held territory increasingly exposed corruption among local officials and among the government's business allies and security services. The Freedom House report stated that the government harassed and detained those who did so, and that the government and loyalist militias punished Sunni Arab civilians more harshly than Alawites.

A July 24 Middle East Institute report stated that during the parliamentary elections in summer 2020, the Baath Party announced the list of candidates for different governorates and removed the name of at least one Christian candidate, justifying the change by stating that a Christian representative was not needed because there were no Christians left in Idlib.

The government continued to use Law No. 10 of 2018 to reward those loyal to the government and create obstacles for refugees and IDPs to claim their property and return to their homes. According to NGO reports, since the law's enactment, the government has replaced residents in former opposition-held areas with more loyal constituencies, including by allowing only religious institutions submissive to government control to operate in those areas. These reports stated that the



government's policies disproportionately impacted Sunni populations. One U.S.-based NGO described the law as part of the government's attempt to legalize demographic change and stated, "It is unlikely that displaced citizens will ever see their property again." In response to a conference focused on refugees hosted by the government in November, the SHNR released a statement that said that Law No. 10 and other legislation "constitute a major obstacle to the return of refugees and IDPs, amounting to enforced evictions and to an effort to manipulate demographics and social structures" of the country.

According to human rights groups and religious communities, 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.

Despite the relatively small indigenous Shia community in the country, Shia religious slogans and banners remained prominent in Damascus, according to observers and media reports. In addition, Hizballah and other pro-Iran signs and banners remained prevalent in some government-held areas.

According to 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 leadership positions in the military and security services, although the senior officer corps of the military continued to accept into its ranks individuals from other religious minorities. 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.

In a March study, Muhsin al-Mustafa, a researcher for the Carnegie Middle East Center, stated that "every single one of the top 40 posts in the Syrian armed forces was held by a member of President Assad's Alawite sect." He added, "The entire Syrian military is not built on one particular sect. But in recent years the institution has been characterized by an unprecedented degree of sectarianism." The SNHR in a June report stated, "The vast majority of the leaders of the security services and the army (which are the two most prominent institutions ruling in Syria) are from the Alawite sect, a form of blatant discrimination on the basis of sectarianism..." Yazid Sayigh, a senior fellow in the Carnegie Middle East Center, wrote in March, "The regime has increased dependence on Alawi recruits and on militarizing the Alawi community..." However, Abdulrahman al-Masri, writing for the Atlantic Council in September, stated that the support of the

Alawite community for the government came at great cost – it suffered disproportionate battlefield losses and continued to be hurt by deteriorating living conditions – while it endured increased isolation from the rest of society.

On June 15, the *New York Times* reported that some in the military said the collapse of the Syrian currency had made their salaries virtually worthless, with army generals earning the equivalent of less than \$50 per month and soldiers earning less than a third of that. It noted, “Anger about sinking livelihoods has flared even among members of...[the] Alawite minority, whose young men fought in large numbers...only to find that they will share in the country’s poverty instead of reaping the benefits of victory.”

There were Christian, Druze, and Kurdish members in parliament. According to observers, Alawites held greater political power in the cabinet than other minorities, as well as more authority than the majority Sunni population. The Atlantic Council, in an August 12 report, stated, “The Syrian regime deals with all groups and sects in the same way.... In reality, the regime is neither a protector of minority rights nor an advocate of women’s rights – let alone a promoter of peace and reconciliation. It operates merely to preserve itself, it undermines chances of Syrians uniting across religious and ethnic lines, and [it] gouges the government’s chances of effectiveness by manipulating positions, all while retaining the true decision-making power for itself.”

According to a June Carnegie Middle East Center report, the civil war “has altered the Sunni Muslim religious landscape of the capital, Damascus.” The report stated that Damascus was previously home to disparate and often times competing Sunni religious institutions. Many of these institutions and individual Sunni leaders have been forced into exile for being “insufficiently subservient” to the Assad regime and many have now united into a single opposition organization, the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC).

In a joint paper released in March, *Manufacturing Division: the Assad Regime and Minorities in South-West Syria*, the Middle East Institute and Etana Syria stated that tens of thousands of minority citizens in the country’s southwest have fled to Damascus or left the country. Compared with 2011, when the civil war began, there were 31 percent fewer Christians and 69 percent fewer Shia in the area. The report stated the government promoted itself as the champion of minorities and as a firewall against Islamic radicalism, intentionally stoking sectarian fears while simultaneously recruiting members of the Alawite and Shia communities to join the ranks of militias allied with the government. According to the report, “The

weaponization of specific sects has eroded historically strong ties between Sunni, Shia, Christian, and Alawite communities in the southwest.” The paper also concluded that the government cultivated relationships with influential members of the Christian clergy, Druze leadership, and Circassian elite, granting these local powerbrokers disproportionate authority and influence in their communities, resulting in the breakdown of traditional social hierarchies and the appointment of progovernment minority figures to positions of power.

According to a report published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, anti-Semitism was endemic and had taken root at every level of society. The paper stated that religious leaders “quote – out of historical and religious context – Quranic scriptures to drive this ideology of hate, while many Syrian intellectuals and the artists adopt the hateful rhetoric of this dictatorship without question.” Anti-Semitic literature remained available for purchase at low prices throughout the country. Government-controlled radio and television programming continued to disseminate anti-Semitic news articles and cartoons.

In May, the SANA Cinema and Television Industry Committee called on broadcasters to denounce the screening of a documentary series produced by the Dubai-based Middle East Broadcasting Center that called for normalization with Israel. The committee statement said, “Producers in Syria denounce the normalization with the Zionist entity through broadcasting such a series with a low message to deal with the enemy and distort facts.” A May 18 article in the official newspaper of the Syrian government, the daily *Al-Thawra*, stated that the COVID-19 virus had been developed by the United States and was deployed according to a plan by “the Zionist Freemasons, the Rothschilds, and the Rockefellers,” who control the United States “empire” and seek to prevent its collapse and to renew their “global control.”

Discussing Arab states’ normalization of relations with Israel, Mohammed Abdul-Sattar al-Sayyed, the Minister of Religious Endowments, said in an October 27 television interview, “Every single surah in the Quran that mentions Israelites talks about their disgrace [and] their violation of treaties[.]”

The Foundation for Jewish Heritage and the American Schools of Oriental Research’s joint Jewish Cultural Heritage Initiative reported in May that the condition of 62 percent of Jewish-built heritage sites in the country was poor, very bad, or beyond repair.

The national school curriculum did not include materials on religious tolerance or the Holocaust.

The government continued to allow foreign Christian 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 Awqaf to operate. Security forces continued to question these Islamic 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.

### **Actions of Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

There continued to be reports that the Iranian government directly supported the Assad government primarily through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and that it recruited Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani Shia fighters to the conflict. The Turkish press agency Anadolu stated that poverty and ideological motivations seemed to be the main reasons for foreign Shia to volunteer, and that while Iran promised jobs and an income, it also abused faith as a tool of sectarian-ideological exploitation. According to the report, in its recruitment efforts, Iran emphasized religious shrines and graves targeted and desecrated during the civil war and aroused hatred against Sunni groups fighting on the side of the opposition in Syria. The report also stated that Iranian recruiters promised that anyone who died in the war would be regarded as a martyr and be buried in Iran's holy city of Qom. On March 1, Radio Farda reported that Iran buried 21 Afghan and Pakistani militia members in Qom. The Atlantic Council estimated in November that the Afghan brigade had an estimated 3,000 to 14,000 fighters spread between three battalions in Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama Governates and that the Pakistani brigade had an estimated 1,000 to 5,000 fighters deployed in Damascus, Aleppo, Daraa, and Hama Governate.

A November report by the Atlantic Council stated that Iran encouraged the Shia minority in Syria to form special militias inside Syria, adding that "some of the Shia militias in Syria were and continue to be recruited on a sectarian basis under the pretext of defending places considered holy by the Shia community. For example, campaigns are being conducted in the areas housing holy Shia shrines in Damascus in the Sayeda Zeinab district." The report also stated, "Iran recruited from the Shia minority... mainly from northern Aleppo, northern Homs, and parts of Raqqqa." The report stated that Iranian-recruited Syrian militia had between 5,000 and 8,000 members.

According to the news website IranWire, pro-Iranian militias reinforced government forces undertaking operations against opposition groups in the southwest of the country in June. Since 2011, the government permitted Iran to open primary and secondary schools on the coast, including in Latakia, where there previously was no Shia community. In March, a new center in Deir ez-Zor affiliated with the Alawalaya Scouts was inaugurated, supported by the Iranian Cultural Center. According to a notice in front of the center, the latter sponsors “cultural activities, sports, the arts, volunteer opportunities, developmental work, and educational and Holy Quran activities.”

According to community representatives, human rights organizations such as Syrians for Truth and Justice, and documentation gathering groups, TSOs in northern Syria committed human rights abuses, reportedly targeting Kurdish and Yezidi residents and other residents, including detentions and abductions of civilians, torture, sexual violence, forced evacuations from homes, looting and seizure of private property, transfer of detained individuals across the border into Turkey, cutting off water to local populations, recruitment of child soldiers, and the looting and desecration of religious shrines. TSOs also reportedly abused members of other religious minorities.

In areas under Turkish control, TSO groups operating under the Syrian National Army (SNA) restricted religious freedom of Yezidis through attacks against and the intimidation of civilians. The COI in March reported that Yezidi civilians in Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad were attacked and stated, “Videos published on the Internet, purportedly by SNA fighters, used language comparing their enemies to ‘infidels,’ ‘atheists,’ and ‘pigs’ when referring to civilians, detainees, and property, which further amplified fears and created an environment conducive to abuse.”

In December, the Voice of America reported that Yezidi community members in the northwest of the country said they were in a state of fear after Turkey-backed rebels in control of the area launched a weeklong blockade and arrest campaign against the Yezidi community in Afrin. The campaign started after an explosion near the two predominantly Yezidi villages of Basoufan and Ba’ay in southern Afrin targeted a TSO leader.

Religious and ethnic minorities, especially displaced Kurds, Yezidis, and Christians, in areas under Turkish control, such as in the city of Afrin, reported persecution and marginalization. In August, regional news media reported that TSOs kidnapped 14 Syrian Kurds living in Afrin who had converted to

Christianity. According to press reporting, TSOs attacked the predominantly Christian city of al-Suqiyabiyeh on November 6. In August, the press reported that a TSO in Afrin detained Radwan Mohammed, a Christian school headmaster, after he refused to convert his school into an Islamic educational center. The TSO alleged that Mohammed had committed apostasy.

The COI report in March stated, “Civilians in and around Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad reported numerous cases of looting and property appropriation by members of the SNA primarily affecting Kurdish residents and, on occasion, Yazidi owners who had fled in October.”

A March news report from Kurdistan 24, an Erbil-based Kurdish broadcast news station, reported anti-Yezidi abuses during the 2019 Operation Peace Spring offensive by Turkey had compounded those experienced during the Turkish incursion into Afrin in 2018. The report stated that experts on the Yezidis warned that the small community in Syria could “go extinct as the result of years of victimization by the Islamic State, the Syrian civil war, and ongoing Turkish threats.” The COI reported in March, “Anticipating attacks on their community, Yezidi women, men and children, who populated some 13 villages across Ra’s al-Ayn District, also left.” Reports stated that only 15,000 of 50,000 Yezidis in northeast Syria remained and that it was feared more would flee. Yezidi Council spokesman Adnan Hassan told the *Arab Weekly* in an October report that since Turkish cross-border operations had begun in Afrin, 28 Yezidi villages had been evacuated, including one village that was transformed into a Turkish military base. Hassan also stated that Islamist factions in the region tried to force Yezidis to change their religion.

According to the COI, Yezidi women were detained by TSO groups and on at least one occasion were urged to convert to Islam during interrogation. In Afrin, Yezidi women who were reported to have been kidnapped by TSOs remained missing. The COI reported in September that it was “currently investigating reports that at least 49 Kurdish and Yezidi women were detained in both Ras al-Ayn and Afrin by [SNA] members between November 2019 and July 2020.”

The September COI report referenced a case in which the TSO’s Interim Government’s Ras al-Ayn Local Council and a Turkish NGO, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, converted two TSO-seized, private, Kurdish-owned properties in Ras al-Ayn into religious centers. The owner of the properties said he objected to the properties’ conversion and was not compensated, but the conversions

proceeded. The Ras al-Ayn Local Council deputy chair stated this sequence of events was correct.

A September COI report identified cases from April in which “several Yezidi shrines and graveyards were deliberately looted and partially destroyed across locations throughout the Afrin region, such as Qastel Jindo, Qibar, Jindayris, and Sharran, further challenging the precarious existence of the Yezidi community as a religious minority in SNA-controlled regions.” Human rights groups and Syrian media reported that militants of the TSO group Sultan Suleiman Shah looted the archaeological hill of Arnada, in the area of al-Sheikh Hadid west of Afrin, with heavy equipment. The looting heavily damaged the hill. In April, the NGO Ezdina documented the destruction of Yezidi shrines in Afrin by TSOs, including the shrines of Sheikh Junaid, Sheikh Hussein, Gilkhan, and Sheikh Rikab. In July, the NGO Bellingcat reported on the destruction of multiple Yezidi shrines and graves in Afrin, including Qibar Cemetery. These organizations also reported cases in which TSOs imposed restrictions on religious freedom and harassed Yezidis.

In the northeast of the country, civilians, many of them members of religious minorities, including Christians and Yezidis, faced threats from TSO groups to cut off water, via the deliberate shutdown of or interference with the Alouk Water Station, which since October 2019 was controlled by TSO groups. One press report stated that human rights groups reported TSOs had specifically threatened minority Christian and Yezidi communities recovering from ISIS abuses. In August, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II of Antioch appealed to the UN Secretary General regarding what he termed was the use of water from the Alouk station as a “weapon,” stating that the cutting off of water amounted to “a flagrant violation of fundamental human rights.”

The COI and numerous independent sources reported that, during the course of the conflict, nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United Nations, the United States, and other governments, such as ISIS and al-Qa’ida-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), targeted Shia, Alawite Muslims, Christians, and members of other religious minorities, as well as other Sunnis, including Kurds, with killings, kidnappings, physical mistreatment, and detentions. These resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians. In areas where government control was weak or nonexistent, localized corrections structures emerged. Reports of control and oversight varied, and both civilian and religious leaders were in charge of facility administration.

The Wilson Center reported in September that ISIS was responsible for 640 attacks in the country from October 2019 through June, often targeting civilians, including persons suspected of collaborating with government security forces, and members of groups that ISIS deemed to be apostates. Despite ISIS's territorial defeat, media and NGOs reported its extremist ideology remained a strong presence in the region, according to a January report by the NGO Open Doors. The report said that many Christians, fearing the possibility of an ISIS resurgence, did not feel safe. Thousands of ISIS fighters and their family members were being held in detention in the northeast of the country by the SDF or living in the closed al-Hol camp.

Although ISIS no longer controlled significant territory, the fate of 8,143 individuals detained by ISIS since 2014 remained unknown, according to the SNHR. Among those abducted in northern Iraq were an estimated 6,000 women and children, mainly Yezidis, whom ISIS reportedly transferred to Syria and sold as sex slaves, forced into nominal marriage to ISIS fighters, or gave as "gifts" to ISIS commanders. The Yezidi organization Yazda reported more than 3,000 Yezidi women and children have since escaped, been liberated in SDF military operations, or been released from captivity, but almost 2,800 remained unaccounted for.

According to media reports, different Islamic factions subjected Christians in Idlib Governate to the application of sharia as well as the introduction of *jizya* (a tax imposed on non-Muslims) to pressure them to leave their homes. Media reporting indicated that HTS increased such restrictions on Christians in Idlib city. According to these reports, the HTS office of "Christians' properties" notified Christian tenants and landlords to check with the HTS administrative offices before renewing leases or setting new terms, including raising the rents of houses and shops, since HTS considered Christians' properties to be spoils of war. According to the COI, the HTS committed a wide range of abuses based on sectarian identity in areas it controlled.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Throughout the year there were reports of sectarian violence due to tensions among religious groups, cultural rivalries, and provocative rhetoric.

Advocacy groups reported social conventions and religious proscriptions continued to make conversions – especially Muslim-to-Christian conversions, which remained banned by law – relatively rare. These groups also reported that societal



pressure continued to force converts to relocate within the country or to emigrate in order to practice their new religion openly.

The state news agency SANA reported that Adnan al-Afiyuni, the Sunni mufti for Damascus Province, was killed when a bomb planted in his car exploded in the town of Qudssaya. The perpetrators of the attack remain unidentified. International observers considered al-Afiyuni to be close to President Assad.

The Syrian Opposition Coalition, the opposition's primary political umbrella organization, and the Syrian Negotiations Committee, an opposition umbrella organization responsible for negotiating with the government on behalf of the opposition, continued to condemn attacks and discrimination against religious groups, both by the government and by extremist and terrorist groups.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The President and Secretary of State continued to condemn the government's failure to respect the human rights of its citizens, including the right to religious freedom. The President stressed the need for a political solution to the conflict in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which states that such a solution should establish credible, inclusive, and nonsectarian governance.

In June, wide-ranging U.S. sanctions against Syria went into effect. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, passed into law as part of the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, requires the administration to impose sanctions on any foreign person who knowingly provides significant support to the Syrian government, entities owned or controlled by the government, or government-affiliated military contractors, mercenaries, and paramilitary forces, including forces operating in a military capacity inside Syria on behalf of Russia and Iran.

The Department of State continued to support the work of the UN International Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM) as an important evidentiary-gathering mechanism to promote accountability for the atrocities committed by the government and others. Since its creation, the United States has provided \$3.5 million to the IIIM, as well as awarded \$3.4 million to the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD) to support its efforts to gather evidence of ISIS crimes, including atrocities against members of Muslim, Yezidi, and Christian communities.

The U.S. government consistently urged Turkey and the Syrian opposition at the highest levels to comply with their obligations under international law in areas which they or groups they supported controlled or in which they operated.

The Secretary of State continued to work with the UN Special Envoy for Syria, members of the moderate opposition, and the international community to support UN-facilitated, Syrian-led efforts in pursuit of a political solution to the conflict that would safeguard religious freedom for all citizens. These efforts included support for the Constitutional Committee, designed to pave the way for political reforms and new elections, which met several times throughout the year. The Secretary of State took part in a virtual Syria Small Group meeting with counterparts from the UK, France, Germany, Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia in October. At the meeting, the Secretary and the other Small Group ministers expressed their support for the United Nations' role in negotiating a political solution to the conflict in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. In addition, the Secretary affirmed the U.S. commitment to Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and nonsectarian character; to ensuring state institutions remained intact; and to protecting the rights of all individuals, regardless of ethnicity or religious affiliation.

The U.S. embassy in Damascus suspended operations in 2012. U.S. government representatives continued to meet with religious groups and leaders in the United States and elsewhere in the Middle East region. A Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs and other Department of State officials participated in virtual dialogues, roundtables, and working groups focused on increasing religious tolerance and countering extremist violence. The U.S. Special Representative for Syria Engagement hosted a virtual panel discussion in October on accountability for human rights abuses, including those committed against religious minorities. Groups representing religious minority communities in Syria participated in the event.

The United States continued to support the documentation, analysis, and preservation of evidence of abuses committed by all sides in the conflict, including those committed against religious minorities, through the COI and IIIM, as well as through direct support for Syrian-led documentation efforts.