



# **GENOCIDE ALERT: THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC**

## **CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY INTERNATIONAL**

**MAY 2013**

Christian Solidarity International has issued a Genocide Alert for religious minorities in the Syrian Arab Republic, specifically Alawites, Shia Muslims, Druze, Christians, Yezidis and Jews. Conditions currently exist for a genocide of these groups by armed non-state actors fighting against the Bashar al-Assad regime, particularly Jubhat al-Nusra and other Islamist groups fighting under a wide and ever-shifting collection of names.

Syria is currently in the third year of a conflict that began with peaceful anti-government protests in March 2011, protests which were immediately and repeatedly met with deadly violence from the Syrian state. Because the Syrian state is dominated by members of the Alawi sect, including President Bashar al-Assad, and because the Assad regime has historically protected and even favored members of religious minority groups in a region that is traditionally hostile to religious minorities, the uprising remained largely restricted to Syria's Sunni Arab majority (approximately 65% of the population.)

The militarization of the revolution, triggered by the Assad regime's unremitting violence against Syria's civilian population and large defections from the Syrian Armed Forces, which then organized into the "Free Syrian Army," did not change this sectarian dynamic. Weapons and funding for the rebels from Islamist-dominated states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, the superior organization of Syrian Islamist groups, and the preexisting sectarianism of the movement contributed to increasing Islamist dominance, until, according to one analyst, "By November 2012, the ideological spectrum of Syria's armed movement had narrowed to one ranging from apolitical Sunni conservatism or rural sufism, across the Muslim Brotherhood's ikhwani Islamism, to the rigid ultra-orthodoxy of salafism. There was little or no room for secular ideologies."<sup>1</sup> Another analyst concluded in December 2012 about Syria's armed rebels, "The overwhelming majority, if not all, espouse an Islamist, jihadist, Salafist outlook."<sup>2</sup>

The Islamicization of the Syrian revolution has been accompanied by increased attacks on Syrian religious minorities from armed anti-government groups, including acts of religious cleansing, targeted killings, massacres, attacks on places of worship, and abductions. The anti-minority violence prompted the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria to warn in December 2012 that, "Entire [minority] communities are at risk of being forced out of the country or of being killed inside the country,"<sup>3</sup> a prospect that amounts to genocide under the definition of the Genocide Convention. In March 2013, Ambassador Frederic C. Hof, a former special adviser on Syria to the Obama administration, echoed this warning: "Left on its current trajectory, Syria is on the path to state failure and sustained sectarian violence, featuring mass atrocities and cleansing that could amount to genocide in some areas."<sup>4</sup>

Anti-government rebels have cleansed several locales in Syria of their religious minority populations, most notably Homs, Syria's third-largest city, where nearly the entire Christian population of 80,000 was forcibly expelled,<sup>5</sup> but also Qusayr,<sup>6</sup> al-Burj al-Qastal,<sup>7</sup> and some rural areas in Idlib and Latakia province.<sup>8</sup> At least 14 minority places of worship across Syria, including Christian churches, Shia Muslim mosques and shrines and a Jewish Synagogue, have been deliberately attacked or destroyed. Car bomb attacks targeting Christian and Alawite neighborhoods of Damascus have killed scores of civilians and prompted many to flee.<sup>9</sup>

According to one particularly disturbing report from February 2013, rebels in Aleppo shot and killed an Armenian Christian man after checking the identity papers of all the passengers on board a bus and noting that his surname sounded Armenian.<sup>10</sup> Two Christian priests traveling on a bus in Aleppo province were similarly singled out and abducted by rebels in the same month.<sup>11</sup> Sources inside CSI have reported that several Christians in Raqqa City were murdered by Jubhat al-Nusra after the group seized the city from regime forces in March 2013. The UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported in December 2012 that, "upon capturing Government forces," one FSA battalion in Latakia province imprisoned its Sunni captives, "while Alawites were immediately executed."<sup>12</sup>

Abductions by rebel groups, gangs or common criminals, are a ubiquitous phenomenon in Syria and disproportionately affect religious minorities. In January 2013, some 50 people were abducted from Hasake province in northeast Syria, half of them Christians.<sup>13</sup> A CSI source in Aleppo reports that abductions occur almost daily, "mainly of Christians, as they are thought to be the group that can pay the most for ransom." A Druze leader reported in March 2013, "Our people get stopped at checkpoints and are asked which sect they belong to. Once the militias hear that they are from Swaida [a province where 90% of the population is Druze], our men disappear." A Sunni anti-regime activist explained the targeting of Swaida's Druze, despite their considerable support for Sunnis under government assault in neighboring Daraa province, this way: "Jubhat al-Nusra sees the Druze as infidels, therefore they see attacking and kidnapping them as justified."<sup>14</sup>

Religious minorities in Syria have also been victimized by regime violence. Many Syrian Christian refugees in Lebanon were forced to flee by the regime's indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas.<sup>15</sup> Regime forces murdered Basel Shahade, a young Christian political activist, in Homs in May 2012.<sup>16</sup> Bishop Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syrian Orthodox Church was kidnapped in April 2013 after criticizing the regime in public; the regime and the opposition traded blame for the abduction of the bishop, who remains in captivity.<sup>17</sup> The Syrian opposition has also blamed the car bomb massacres in the Christian-Druze Damascus suburb of Jaramana on regime intelligence services.<sup>18</sup> The regime has contributed significantly to the sectarian nature of the conflict by aggressively recruiting Christians, Alawites and Shiites into pro-government militias. The Assad regime has historically tried to suppress non-Arab Christian identities, such as that of the Assyrian Christian population.

Between 200,000 and 300,000 Christians have fled Syria since the beginning of the war,<sup>19</sup> accounting for nearly one-fifth of the total Syrian refugee population, though Christians constituted only one-tenth of Syria's prewar population. Christian refugees in Turkey report that they are unable to stay in refugee camps set up by the Turkish government, as Jubhat al-Nusra and other rebel groups often impress young men from the camps into fighting against the regime.<sup>20</sup>

There is precedent for elimination of minority religious groups in Syria's modern history: following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Syria's small Jewish population was subjected to repeated pogroms and systematic persecution by the state, leading to the slow exodus of nearly the entire community from the country.<sup>21</sup>

Calls for genocide against religious minorities from rebel leaders in Syria are numerous and frequent. The chant "Alawites to the grave, Christians to Beirut!" has been reported at anti-government demonstrations since the earliest days of the revolution. In early 2013, a YouTube video surfaced of a young Sunni Syrian boy singing to a cheering crowd, "We will slaughter the Shiites in the towns of Kfariya and Fua"<sup>22</sup> (two isolated Shia towns in Idlib province, which would later become the site of a mass abduction of Shia civilians<sup>23</sup>). In July 2012, a Sunni rebel commander posted a video on YouTube threatening to kill any Sunni who traded with Shia Muslims, "even if it is a single grain of wheat."<sup>24</sup> Many Free Syrian Army battalions have named themselves after Ibn Taymiyya, a 14th century Sunni Muslim scholar who called for the extermination of Alawites.<sup>25</sup> Following the religious cleansing of Alawites from the village of Jamaliyya in December 2012, a Jubhat al-Nusra fighter said, "We are defending our religion. This is what our revolution is about."<sup>26</sup> In July 2012, a Sunni rebel fighter declared, "All Alawites must be slaughtered."<sup>27</sup>

Christian Solidarity International calls on the international community to:

- Issue a Genocide Alert for Syria's endangered religious minorities.
- Impose and fully enforce an immediate arms embargo on the Syrian Arab Republic, applied equally to the Syrian regime and all anti-regime groups.
- Extend support to regime and opposition elements working to find a political solution to the conflict and protect Syria's religious pluralism.
- Announce that regime and opposition elements implicated in acts of religious cleansing and genocide will be held accountable.
- Fully support and protect refugee camps established for religious minorities from Syria.

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