

**United Nations Human Rights Council
Universal Periodic Review of Member-State Syria (officially the Syrian Arab Republic)**

Jubilee Campaign USA, Inc., in special consultative status with ECOSOC, submits this analysis of religious freedom and human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) as a contribution to the Universal Periodic Review of UNHRC member-state Syria.

A. Freedom of Religion

1. Sunni Muslims make up 74 percent of Syria's population. Other Islamic sects including Alawi, Ismaili, and Shia account for another 13 percent of the population. Christians make up a 10 percent minority, and finally Druze make up a 3 percent minority.
2. According to the Syrian constitution, the official religion of Syria is Islam, and Islamic teachings have constitutional authority to influence legislation. However, the constitution states that all religions shall be respected, public religious rituals may be performed as long as they do not disturb public order, religious communities shall be protected, and no political parties may be formed on the basis of religion. The government forbids membership to any Salafist organization to prevent extremist ideology.
3. Students are required to participate in a religion class throughout the twelve years that they are enrolled in school. The student may be enrolled in either a class on Islam or Christianity, depending on the religion of their parents. While it is wonderful that classes on Christianity are offered for Christian students, Christianity is the only minority religion that is given this privilege. There have also been concerns surrounding the curriculum of the class on Islam; reports have indicated that the class promotes hatred towards the Jewish community.
4. The Syrian civil war and violence from multiple groups who have terrorized the country have resulted not only in enormous destruction to civilians but also added tension between religious groups which has exacerbated violence and insecurity in the country.
5. Syria, at one time boasting as one of the most religiously tolerant countries in the Middle East, now finds itself to be one of the worst persecutors in the world. In 2011, Syria was placed on the "World Watch List," a ranking of the top 50 countries with the worst persecution of Christians, at number 38 meaning the country had moderate persecution. Today it ranks number 5 in the world as it is now considered to have severe persecution of Christians.

a. Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

1. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has been the primary terrorist organization involved in Syria committing war crimes and genocide against religious minorities, namely Christians and Yazidis. Though ISIL's activities have been widely publicized and their targeting of religious minorities in killings and abductions are well-known, major states and international organizations have been delayed in terming the violence as genocide. Due to ISIL's activities that are in line with the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment the Crime of Genocide, their violence can justifiably be deemed genocide. The following examples support this claim.

2. The Genocide Convention identifies causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a group or killing members of the group to be a form of genocide. ISIL has repeatedly sexually abused Christian and Yazidi women and girls causing both bodily and mental harm. Outside Aleppo in August 2015, two Christian women were publicly raped and then beheaded for refusing to renounce their faith and convert to Islam. This was part of a larger ordeal that ended in a death toll of 12 people from the village, including the women, for refusing to renounce their Christian faith. Four of those killed, including a young boy who was publicly tortured before his death, were executed by crucifixion.
3. Many underage girls have been taken for sex slavery or brides. A report was given just this February of a three-year-old girl who was taken from her parents by ISIL for their sex industry. This is just one example of the thousands of Yazidi and Christian girls who have been abducted and sexually abused. Christian girls being taken to become brides of Muslim men qualifies genocide by “forcibly transferring children from one group to another group.”
4. There have also been a multitude of reports of Christians who have been abducted by ISIL. It is reported that over 380 Christians have been kidnapped in Syria thus far. This causes significant mental trauma to loved ones who remain unaware of the status of the missing person. Often families are even forced to choose one of their family members to be surrendered over to ISIL.

b. Jabhat al-Nusra

1. ISIL is not the only terrorist organization that has terrorized the people of Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra formed due to association with Al Qaeda in Iraq and has acted as a rebel organization in Syria since 2012.
2. Though al-Nusra’s main mission has been announced as defeating the Assad regime, which motivates them to oppose any activities of the United States in the region, they have conducted various attacks that specifically target civilians and Christians.
3. In September 2013, al-Nusra attacked the town of Maaloula. The terrorist group killed 20 people, abducted 15 others, all of whom were Christian, and also destroyed Christian buildings.
4. Though the al-Nusra’s relationship with ISIS has had a complicated history, and they now do not admit to any current cooperation, their joint efforts in the past have been reported. Al-Nusra was involved in an attack on the Christian village Sadad in October and November 2013. 1,500 families were held hostage and 45 people were killed, including an entire family of six people ranging from a teenage boy to an eighty-five-year-old grandfather who were thrown down a well. At the time, this incident was reported as the worst persecution that Christians had faced since the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011.
5. In December 2013, twelve Christian nuns were abducted from a monastery in Maaloula by al-Nusra returning as a follow up from their attack on the town in September. The nuns were kept in al-Nusra’s control until March 2014 when they were released escorted by Lebanese and Qatari officials.
6. In recent years, various priests have been targeted for abductions, some of which al-Nusra has been responsible. The most recent reported abduction was on Father Diyaa Aziz, who was taken from the Christian village of Yaacobiya in 2015. A

surge of abductions of priests began in 2013 and have resulted in the murder of some, while others' whereabouts have remained unknown.

c. Bashar al-Assad

1. President Assad has a history of providing some protection to the Syrian Christian minority. Many Christians have expressed concerns that if the Assad regime is overtaken by Islamist extremist groups, Christianity could completely be wiped from Syria. However, the Assad regime has committed harsh atrocities on civilians, so Christians find themselves between two evils; they are repulsed by Assad's crimes, and yet they are desperate for protection from extremist groups like ISIL and al-Nusra, leaving them with no stable party to turn to.
2. Among the worst of Assad's crimes is his alleged use of chemical weapons against rebels. Attacks using chemical weapons such as chlorine bombs have been used as recently as last year, two years after the supposed dismantle of Syrian chemical weapons.
3. Assad's violent attacks have hit Syrians of all religions, especially Sunni Muslims, who make up most of those rebelling against the regime.

B. Recommendations

1. State actors from all parts of the world must recognize the genocide taking place in Syria and step up in appropriate action to protect victims and put a stop to the genocide. These actors must target ISIL in joint efforts with the mission to dismantle the terrorist group and hold members accountable for their acts of genocide.
2. Jabhat Al-Nusra must also be held accountable for its numerous attacks against non-Islamic persons and continue to be monitored for acts that qualify as genocide. All efforts should be made by outside states to also destroy al-Nusra, as it has contributed to a significant amount of the violence that has taken place in Syria.
3. Despite President Assad's history of providing relative protection for religious minorities, he has committed serious war crimes and must be held accountable for them.
4. If the Assad regime collapses, heightened emergency protection must enter Syria to protect religious minorities who are extremely vulnerable to the overwhelming presence of Islamist extremists.