

## **SYR104132.E**

Syria: Situation and treatment of Christians since March 2011; whether insurgents perceive Christians to be loyal to President Assad; treatment of Christians by insurgents in Homs

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### **1. General Information**

Sources indicate that Christians constitute 10 percent of Syria's population (MRG Oct. 2011; US 8 June 2012; BBC 1 Mar. 2012). Christians in Syria belong to a variety of denominations, including Greek Orthodox, Syrian (or Syriac) Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, and Greek Catholic (ibid. 11 Oct. 2011; MRG Oct. 2011). Sunni Muslims (74 percent), Druze (3 percent), other Muslims (2 percent) and Alawite [also called Alawis] (11 percent) (ibid.), who follow an "offshoot" of Shia Islam, make up the remainder of the population (ibid. n.d., 2; UN 23 Feb. 2012).

President Bashar al-Assad, an Alawite himself (*The Irish Times* 8 June 2012; AFP 25 Dec. 2011), has been in power since 2000 (US 8 June 2012; MRG Oct. 2011). President Assad's father ruled Syria from 1970-2000 (US 8 June 2012; UN 23 Feb. 2012). Alawites "dominate" the military (*The Irish Times* 8 June 2012; *The Times* 8 June 2012;) and the government (ibid.).

The insurgency in Syria began as small "pro-reform" demonstrations in February 2011 (AI 2012). It escalated to mass protests in March 2011 (ibid.; *The New York Times* 13 Apr. 2012). According to Amnesty International (AI), the Syrian government has been committing "brutal attacks," "crimes against humanity," and "war crimes" (AI 31 May 2012). Human Rights Watch similarly indicates that the Syrian government has carried out a "brutal crackdown" involving "crimes against humanity, such as arbitrary detention, torture, and the killings of thousands of civilians" (n.d.). Human Rights Watch has also indicated that armed opposition groups, including the Free Syrian Army, which is a group of thousands of members mostly comprising Syrian army defectors (Al Jazeera 25 Jan. 2012), have also conducted "serious human rights abuses," including "torture," kidnapping, detention, and executions (Human Rights Watch 20 Mar. 2012). Al Jazeera reports that, according to the head of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, there is a "full-scale civil war" in Syria (12 June 2012). Sources provide varying figures for the number of people killed in Syria since the start of the insurgency, which range from more than 9,000 (MRG [2012], 2; AP 8 June 2012) to 13,000 or more (ibid.; Al Jazeera 8 June 2012). According to Al Jazeera, state authorities say that over 2,600 security force personnel have been killed (12 June 2012).

### **2. Treatment of Christians before March 2011**

Minority Rights Group International (MRG) indicates that Christians have been "widely tolerated" in Syria, and have been able to celebrate Christian holidays and attend separate classes for religious education (n.d.). According to France Télévisions, Christians in Syria have a [translation] "decent status" and hold positions in the government and in business (29 Feb. 2012). The US Congressional Research Service (CRS) similarly indicates that Christians have been "well represented" in President Assad's government organizations (24 May 2012, 24), while Boston-based news source, GlobalPost, indicates that Christians work in "high-ranking government and military positions" (6 Feb. 2012).

### **3. Christian Positions on President Assad's Regime**

Sources state that Christians fear the uncertainties of their future without the Assad regime (ibid.; France 29 Feb. 2012; *The New York Times* 27 Sept. 2011; AP 17 May 2012). The *New York Times* reports that Christians fear that they will lose the "protection" that they have been offered under the Assad regime, and also fear reprisals from a future "conservative Sunni leadership" because of perceived Christian support for the Assad regime (27 Sept. 2011).

Sources indicate that generally Christians support President Assad's regime (BBC 1 Mar. 2012; *The Guardian* 16 Feb. 2012; RT 7 Mar. 2012). However, other sources indicate that Christian loyalties are not monolithic (*The New York Times* 27 Sept. 2011; US 24 May 2012, 24). According to the UN Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), the Christian bourgeoisie in Aleppo and Damascus is loyal to President Assad, but that, some Christian and Sunni urban traders that are facing economic hardship due to the conflict are beginning to lose support for the regime (23 Feb. 2012). Sources also state that some Christians have joined the opposition against Assad's regime (BBC 6 Apr. 2012; *The New York Times* 27 Sept. 2011; AP 17 May 2012). According to the US Congressional Research Service (CRS), some Christians are "rumored" to have joined the Free Syrian Army (US 24 May 2012, 24). The Associated Press reports that a Christian council member ran for the head of the Syrian National Council, an opposition group mainly composed of members of the "Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, secular elites, intellectuals, and independents" (ibid., 22), but lost to his Sunni opponent (17 May 2012). The BBC indicates that some Christian intellectuals have "openly opposed" President Assad and were subsequently imprisoned (BBC 6 Apr. 2012). According to UN IRIN, Christians have not joined demonstrations "en masse" (UN 23 Feb. 2012).

## **4. Treatment of Christians since March 2011**

### **4.1 Incidents Outside of the City of Homs**

Sources report on incidents affecting Christians since the beginning of the civil unrest, including:

- Agenzia Fides, a Vatican news agency dedicated to "informing and promoting missionary activity" (Agenzia Fides n.d.), reports that, in Qusayr, an announcement was made by the military chief of the armed opposition indicating that Christians must leave within 6 days, expiring on 8 June 2012 (ibid. 9 June 2012). Only 1,000 Christians out of 10,000 reportedly stayed in the city (ibid.).
- On 18 March 2012, a car bomb exploded in a Christian district in Aleppo (CNA 27 Mar. 2012), reportedly targeting a security headquarters, killing 3 people and wounding 30 people (*The Irish Times* 19 Mar. 2012);
- On 17 March 2012, suicide bombings in Damascus killed 27 people and wounded more than 100 people (ibid.). One of the bombs exploded near a criminal investigation department in the Christian area of al-Qasaa (ibid.). Although a state newspaper said that the attacks were conducted by "terrorists," both the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army indicated that they were not responsible (ibid.);
- Human Rights Watch reported on the injury of one Christian and the death of one Christian resulting from an army shelling in February 2012 in al-Qusayr, in the Governorate of Homs (22 Mar. 2012);
- In February 2012, an unexploded shell hit a convent in Saidnaya, a Christian town (GlobalPost 6 Feb. 2012). GlobalPost indicates that no group took responsibility for the attack (ibid.);
- Without reporting a date, *USA Today* indicated that a mortar struck a monastery in the Christian town of Saidnaya; the attack was reportedly blamed on the "rebels" (11 May 2012);
- Syrian Christians for Democracy, a non profit organization based in the US (SCD [Mar. 2012]) with a mandate of "reporting on the violence perpetrated by the Assad regime against its people, be they Christian or Muslim" (ibid.), indicates that a

Christian church in Aleppo was bombed on an unidentified date; the opposition was blamed, but the organization maintains that there was "no evidence" to make that conclusion (ibid. 23 Mar. 2012).

Minority Rights Group International lists Assyrian Christians as a group under threat, noting that these Christians are "deeply concerned about the possibility of attacks from Sunni militants" ([2012], 2-3). However, according to the National News Agency of Lebanon, an agency run by Lebanon's Ministry of Information (NNA n.d.), Syria's Greek Orthodox Archbishop indicated that there is "no danger on Christians in Syria" (31 May 2012). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 4.2. Situation and Sectarian Clashes in Homs

Homs has been described as a region that has been highly affected by violence (AP 8 June 2012; *The Telegraph* 2 Apr. 2012; Reuters 23 Feb. 2012). MRG states that the most severe fighting and loss of life has taken place in Homs (1 Mar. 2012), and Reuters reported that one third of the deaths in Syria have taken place in Homs and the surrounding areas (23 Feb. 2012). The UN indicated that there was a state-imposed blockade on Homs (UN 22 Feb. 2012, para. 73). The UN also reports that the Syrian army has attacked Homs with "heavy weapons" causing "massive casualties" (ibid., para. 20). On 25 May 2012, 108 civilians were killed in Houla, in the Homs Governorate, most of whom sources say were reportedly killed by a pro-government militia called the Shabbiha (*The Irish Times* 8 June 2012) and the Syrian army (*The Washington Post* 3 June 2012). President Assad declared that his government was not responsible (ibid.). The *New York Times* reports that, according to residents, insurgents in Homs are killing government supporters and informers (1 Oct. 2011). The UN indicates that members of the Free Syrian Army have "tortured" and executed Shabbiha members and have taken security agents and their families hostage in exchange for the release of their allies (22 Feb. 2012, para. 114, 117).

Sources indicate that there is sectarian tension in Homs (Reuters 23 Feb. 2012; *The New York Times* 1 Oct. 2011; UN 22 Feb. 2012, para. 26), and the UN states that crimes have "sectarian undertones" in Syria, especially in Homs (ibid.). The *New York Times* reports that sects are afraid of traveling to neighbourhoods populated by different sects (1 Oct. 2011). The *Guardian* reports that there are disputes between Christians and Sunnis in Homs (16 Feb. 2012), and the *Telegraph* states that, according to church leaders, Muslim neighbours are turning against Christians (2 Apr. 2012). Sources state that a common slogan used in protests is "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the Tomb [or to the Coffin]" (*The Irish Times* 8 June 2012; *USA Today* 11 May 2012). A "local leader" interviewed by the *Guardian* accused some Christians of joining the pro-Assad Shabbiha militia and attacking Sunnis (16 Feb. 2012). He also indicated that there have been kidnappings between Christians and Sunnis, and the *Guardian* said that "tit for tat kidnappings have led to sectarian mass killings" (16 Feb. 2012). In July 2011, Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported 30 deaths due to clashes between Christians, Sunnis, and Alawites (19 July 2011), and indicated in December 2011 that deaths due to sectarian clashes "have increased," adding that the majority of the victims are Sunnis and Alawites (25 Dec. 2011). However, according to AFP Syria's National Organization for Human Rights indicated that there are no sectarian clashes in Homs, but rather undercover state forces are attacking civilians (19 July 2011). The Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), the official Syrian state-run news source (SANA n.d.), indicates that "Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist groups" are committing massacres in Homs countryside (27 May 2012).

## 4.3 Treatment of Christians in the City of Homs

Sources indicate that Muslim leaders have tried to assure Christians of their safety in meetings with them (*The Telegraph* 2 Apr. 2012) and have used social networks to say "that Christians and

Muslims have for centuries lived together in Syria" (RIA Novosti 14 May 2012). Sources indicate that there have been reports of foreign fighters arriving in Homs to assist with the insurgency (BBC 10 Apr. 2012; *The Telegraph* 2 Apr. 2012), which, according to a Jesuit priest, has frightened Christians (ibid.). The Jesuit magazine *America Press* reports that, according to a local source, Christians in Homs are living in hiding (9 Apr. 2012). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources indicate that 90 percent of Christians have fled Homs (CNA 27 Mar. 2012; Al-Haqiqah 18 Mar. 2012; *America Press* 9 Apr. 2012) to "other regions of the country" (RIA Novosti 14 May 2012), and that approximately 1,000 Christians have remained (*America Press* 9 Apr. 2012; *Agenzia Fides* 26 Mar. 2012; *The Telegraph* 2 Apr. 2012). Sources report different reasons for the fleeing, including that Christians were "driven out by fighting" (*The Telegraph* 2 Apr. 2012), forced to flee by the Syrian Army (SCD 23 Mar. 2012), or forced to leave by insurgents (*America Press* 9 Apr. 2012; CNA 27 Mar. 2012). The Catholic News Agency, a source reporting on news "affecting the Universal Church" (The CNA n.d.), says that Christians fled "persecution," and that they "have borne the brunt of the violence" (27 Mar. 2012).

Sources report that Christians' homes have been confiscated and occupied by insurgents reportedly linked to al-Qaida (CNA 27 Mar. 2012; *America Press* 9 Apr. 2012; Al-Haqiqah 18 Mar. 2012). However, *Agenzia Fides* indicated that, according to the Jesuit Community of Homs, Christians "fled on their own initiative because of fear and conflict and were not forced to leave their homes because of threats on behalf of Islamist militia" (*Agenzia Fides* 26 Mar. 2012). The Jesuit Community of Homs further stated that Christians' empty houses were occupied by displaced families, but were given back to their owners upon their return (ibid.).

Sources report on the destruction of churches in Homs (*The Columbus Dispatch* 8 June 2012; *USA Today* 11 May 2012; *The Telegraph* 8 Apr. 2012). While *The Telegraph* reported that churches have been destroyed by the Syrian forces' heavy shelling (8 Apr. 2012), *USA Today* reports that, based on reports from Christians in Homs, a church was damaged in February 2012 by "foreign-backed armed gangs" (11 May 2012). According to *USA Today*, church leaders have received letters stating that they are "next to go" after President Assad (11 May 2012). *The Telegraph* indicates that Christians are gathering in private homes to worship (8 Apr. 2012). Russian state news agency, RIA Novosti, states that Christian homes in Homs have been damaged and shops have been looted (RIA Novosti 14 May 2012). RIA Novosti also indicates that Muslim leaders have used social networks to disassociate themselves with damage of Christian homes and churches (ibid.).

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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