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Immigration and  
Refugee Board of Canada

Commission de l'immigration  
et du statut de réfugié du Canada

## Syria: Frequency of abductions and extortion of civilians committed by rebel groups; rebel groups particularly involved in these acts and their areas of operation in the country; whether rebel groups target a particular social group, including Christians [SYR104425.E]

Syria: Frequency of abductions and extortion of civilians committed by rebel groups; rebel groups particularly involved in these acts and their areas of operation in the country; whether rebel groups target a particular social group, including Christians

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

### 1. Frequency of Abductions

According to Agence France-Presse (AFP), it is "impossible to know how many people have been abducted" in Syria (AFP 4 Apr. 2013). The *Washington Post* similarly states that it is "difficult to quantify" the extent of the threat of kidnapping (23 Apr. 2013).

According to AFP, the Director of the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, a London-based rights group, estimated that 2,000-3,000 people had been kidnapped between March 2011 and September 2012 (19 Sept. 2012). In April 2013, the same director stated that "several hundred people have been kidnapped on a sectarian basis, and several thousand more for money" (qtd. in AFP 4 Apr. 2013). According to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a New York-based organization that aids refugee populations around the world, kidnappings in Syria are "widespread" and "thousands" of people have gone missing (Jan. 2013, 6). According to Canadian Press, there have been "hundreds" of sectarian kidnappings [kidnappings motivated to promote a religious sect] based in the north (7 Mar. 2013).

Several sources report that the number of kidnappings has been increasing (*Washington Post* 23 Apr. 2013; Xinhua 16 Mar. 2013; *The Telegraph* 7 Sept. 2012). The AFP explains that abductions increase when violence increases (19 Sept. 2012), while the *Washington Post* states that kidnappings have increased as the conflict moved from rural to urban areas (23 Apr. 2013).

Several sources explain that kidnappings by rebel groups occur within a context of increasing "lawlessness" (BBC 26 Nov. 2012; *The Christian Science Monitor* 14 May 2013; *Washington Post* 23 Apr. 2013) and "chaos" (BBC 26 Nov. 2012; AFP 19 Sept. 2012; UN 13 May 2013).

The motives of rebel groups for kidnapping include political reasons (AFP 19 Sept. 2012; AI 14 Mar. 2013, 4), such as belonging to the ruling Ba'ath party (ibid.); sectarianism (AFP 4 Apr. 2013; AI 14 Mar. 2013, 4); prisoner exchanges (AFP 4 Apr. 2013; AI 14 Mar. 2013, 4); or for ransom (AFP 4 Apr. 2013; AI 14 Mar. 2013, 4; *Washington Post* 23 Apr. 2013). Some rebel groups have reportedly kidnapped people for ransom in order to buy weapons (ibid.; Xinhua 16 Mar. 2013), or have asked for payment in ammunition (AFP 19 Sept. 2012).

## 2. Extortion

Sources indicate that extortion is a problem in rebel-held areas (AFP 2 Nov. 2012; VOA 28 Mar. 2013; Carnegie Middle East Center 3 Apr. 2013). AFP reports that extortion by rebel groups "has become rampant" (2 Nov. 2012). Media sources note that reports of extortion are occurring particularly in northern Syria (AFP 30 Nov. 2012; VOA 28 Mar. 2013).

Reuters reports that businessmen and industrialists in Aleppo have been subject to extortion by rebel groups (24 Oct. 2012). The same source indicates that many of the factory owners pay protection money to gangs, with monthly fees ranging from \$4,000 to \$5,000 plus a down payment of as high as \$100,000 depending on the size of the factory (Reuters 24 Oct. 2012). According to Reuters, there have been several cases in which factories were burned or people were killed in retaliation for not paying extortion fees (24 Oct. 2012). The *Globe and Mail* also reports that rebel groups use extortion in Aleppo (15 Mar. 2013).

The Carnegie Middle East Center, a public policy think-tank based in Beirut that focuses on regional political and socio-economic issues (n.d.), reports that extortion is one of the reasons for civilians leaving some of the rebel-controlled areas (Carnegie Middle East Center 3 Apr. 2013). The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), a Geneva-based international monitoring body that was established by the Norwegian Refugee Council (n.d.), similarly indicates that "intimidation" in rebel areas is one of the causes of displacement (IDMC 31 July 2012, 8-9).

## 3. Rebel Group Involvement

Sources report that some kidnappings in rebel-held or disputed areas are perpetrated by "criminal gangs" (Xinhua 16 Mar. 2013), armed groups without any affiliation (*The Christian Science Monitor* 14 May 2013), or by armed groups "posing as rebels or loyalist militias" who kidnap for "extortion purposes" (ANSA 29 Jan. 2013).

Several sources indicate that there are multiple groups involved in abductions and there are fine lines between rebel activity and criminality (AFP 19 Sept. 2012; *Globe and Mail* 15 Mar. 2013; UN 13 May 2013). An Aleppo-based activist, as quoted by AFP, explained that "some thieves pose as rebels, some rebels act like criminals, and armed supporters of the regime take the law into their own hands" (AFP 19 Sept. 2012). Another Aleppo activist described some of the rebel groups that are active in the area as "no more than organized crime syndicates" that engage in kidnapping, extortion and other crimes (*Globe and Mail* 15 Mar. 2013). According to the Director of the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, "[p]ro and anti-regime forces kidnap each other, to exchange prisoners or demand money, while [there are] also bands of criminals who just want to extort the families of the victims for ransom" (qtd. in AFP 19 Sept. 2012). The UN IRIN indicates that there are "hundreds of different militias and battalions operating on the ground," with each group following their own rules (UN 13 May 2013). Similarly, Human Rights Watch explains that many of the rebel groups that carry out abuses, such as kidnapping, are not part of an organized command structure and do not follow the orders of the Syrian National Council (SNC) (20 Mar. 2012).

Several sources indicate that the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is responsible for some kidnappings (*The Telegraph* 7 Sept. 2012; *The Christian Science Monitor* 10 Aug. 2012; Human Rights Watch 20 Mar. 2012; AI 14 Mar. 2013, 3). Some sources refer to kidnappings perpetrated by a "corrupt" faction of the FSA in Aleppo (*USA Today* 13 May 2013; *The Christian Science Monitor* 14 May 2013), or by armed groups "claiming" to be members of the FSA (*The Christian Science Monitor* 14 May 2013; Human Rights Watch 20 Mar. 2012; BBC 26 Nov. 2012).

The names of particular rebel groups or brigades allegedly responsible for kidnappings, as reported by media and human rights organizations, include:

- Abu Bakr al-Siddiq brigade in Aleppo (*The Telegraph* 7 Sept. 2012);
- Suqoor al-Sham rebel brigade (AFP 4 Apr. 2013);
- Al-Nur battalion in Saraqeb, a Salafist group that is not part of the FSA organization (Human Rights Watch 20 Mar. 2012);
- Asifat al-Shimal Brigade, a group that operates in northern Syria near the Turkish border and is reportedly responsible for the kidnapping of 11

Lebanese Shi'a traveling through Syria on their return from a pilgrimage to Iran (AI 14 Mar. 2013, 4);

- al-Baraa' Brigade, a group affiliated with the FSA who reportedly abducted 48 Iranian hostages, held them from Aug. 2012 to Jan. 2013, and exchanged them for 2,130 Syrian civilians held by authorities (ibid.). This brigade reportedly operates in Damascus and its suburbs (ibid.).

According to Voice of America (VOA), a news broadcaster funded by the US government (n.d.), the Farouq battalions in the north have a reputation for extortion, among other crimes (28 Mar. 2013). This rebel group reportedly controls the "lucrative" border crossings to Turkey at Tal Abyad and Bab al Hawa (VOA 28 Mar. 2013).

### 3.1 Places of Abductions

According to the Middle East director of Human Rights Watch, kidnappings are "either happening in areas outside government control or they're happening in areas with tacit approval of the shabiha [pro-government militias] or members of the security services" (qtd. in *Washington Post* 23 Apr. 2013).

Sources report that kidnappings have occurred in the following places:

- Damascus (BBC 26 Nov. 2012; AFP 19 Sept. 2012; *Washington Post* 23 Apr. 2013). Associated Press (AP), reports that Damascus has had a spike in kidnappings (24 Apr. 2013);
- Dummar, a residential district 10 minutes from Damascus, known for "many incidents of kidnapping" (BBC 26 Nov. 2012);
- Yarmuk, a Palestinian refugee camp in southern Damascus (sharp increase in kidnappings) (AFP 19 Sept. 2012);
- Aleppo (ibid.; *USA Today* 13 May 2013; *The Christian Science Monitor* 14 May 2013)
- on the road between Aleppo and Damascus (AFP 4 Apr. 2013);
- villages in the northern province of Aleppo (sharp increase in kidnappings), including Zahraa and Nabul (ibid. 19 Sept. 2012);
- northern Syria (AP 24 Apr. 2013; Canadian Press 7 Mar. 2013). AP reports that northern Syria has had a spike in kidnappings (24 Apr. 2013);
- Ras-al-Ayn in northeastern Syria (*USA Today* 19 Apr. 2013);
- Jebel Al-Krud (*Asharq Al-Awsat* 14 Mar. 2013);
- Al-Hasakah governate in northeastern Syria (*New York Times* 14 Feb. 2013);
- Idlib province in northern Syria (AP 16 Feb. 2013);
- Taftanaz, a village in Idlib province (Human Rights Watch 20 Mar. 2012);
- Saraqeb (AFP 2 Nov. 2012; Human Rights Watch 20 Mar. 2012). According to AFP, Saraqeb is "notorious for kidnappings" (2 Nov. 2012);
- al-Bab (*The Telegraph* 7 Sept. 2012);
- Homs (Human Rights Watch 20 Mar. 2012; Reuters 26 Jan. 2012).

### 4. Targets of abductions

Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (ANSA), a Rome-based news agency, explains that the threat of kidnapping in Syria "afflicts members of every group and faction in a war that also feeds on personal and clan vendettas, settling old scores, rivalries over scarce resources, profiteering, and common criminality" (ANSA 29 Jan. 2013). The *Washington Post* similarly describes the increasing threat of kidnapping faced by "ordinary" Syrians in the context of increasing lawlessness and the development of kidnapping for ransom as a "criminal enterprise" (23 Apr. 2013). In addition to the threat to men, sources report kidnapping cases of children (BBC 26 Nov. 2012; ANSA 29 Jan. 2013; *New York Times* 14 Feb. 2013) and women (Reuters 26 Jan. 2012; IRC Jan. 2013, 6). The IRC reports that they were told of accounts in which women and young girls were kidnapped and raped (Jan. 2013, 6).

Sources indicate that rebels have kidnapped wealthy people (BBC 26 Nov. 2012; *The Telegraph* 7 Sept. 2012). Several sources indicate that businessmen have been targeted for abductions (BBC 26 Nov. 2012; *Washington Post* 23 Apr. 2013; Xinhua 16 Mar. 2013). Reuters reports that the chamber of commerce estimates that at least 100 businessmen have been kidnapped since the start of the conflict (24 Oct. 2012). Media sources indicate that rebel groups have kidnapped professionals (*Washington Post* 23 Apr. 2013; Xinhua 16 Mar. 2013), including doctors (*Washington Post* 23 Apr. 2013). Human Rights Watch provides an example of an account in which a person who worked in the administration of the National Hospital in Aleppo was kidnapped and detained in Saraqeb by opposition forces (Human Rights Watch 20 Mar. 2012).

Several sources indicate that civilian supporters of the government have been victims of kidnapping (GCR2P 15 Mar. 2013, 2; AFP 4 Apr. 2013). Refugees at the Jordanian border, as reported by *The Christian Science Monitor*, say that family members of those connected to the regime have disappeared (*The Christian Science Monitor* 10 Aug. 2012).

Sources indicate that Syria's minorities are a target of kidnapping by rebel groups (*The Irish Times* 4 May 2013; AI 14 Mar. 2013, 3; AFP 4 Apr. 2013). According to a Human Rights Watch researcher, as reported by AFP, religious minorities are more vulnerable to kidnappings, because they are viewed as being government supporters (4 Apr. 2013). Amnesty International (AI) indicates that minorities, including Alawite Muslims, Shi'a Muslims and Christians are often perceived as "pro-government," although some members of these groups support the opposition (14 Mar. 2013, 3). AI found that some of the abductions of minorities occurred within the context of their perceived alliance with the government (as informers, collaborators, or members of pro-government militias), while others occurred solely because of "their sectarian identity" (14 Mar. 2013, 3). AFP reports that "sectarian hatred" is more common as a motive for kidnapping in militarily contested areas, where different religious communities live in close proximity to each other (AFP 4 Apr. 2013).

Several sources indicate that victims of abductions include Alawites (Human Rights Watch 20 Mar. 2012; Reuters 26 Jan. 2012; ANSA 29 Jan. 2013). Reuters explains that the Alawite sect is an offshoot of Shiite [also known as Shi'a] Islam, and that many Alawites have been part of Assad's elite political and military structure (26 Jan. 2012). Sources indicate that Assad is an Alawite (AI 14 Mar. 2013, 3), but not all Alawites support Assad's regime (ibid.; Reuters 26 Jan. 2012). Human Rights Watch provides an example in which an Alawite man's elderly parents were abducted from their home in Karam el Zeytoun, Homs, by an armed gang (20 Mar. 2012, 4). As told by the couple's son, the captors reportedly asked for ransom in the form of money and weapons, but killed the couple the following day (ibid.). The son claimed that his parents had no affiliation with the government, and that the kidnapping was motivated by sectarianism and money (ibid.). Corroboration of this account could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Several sources report of abductions in which Sunnis are targeted by Shiites and Shiites by Sunnis (ANSA 29 Jan. 2013; AP 16 Feb. 2013; Reuters 26 Jan. 2012). Shiites from Zahraa and Nabul in the Aleppo countryside claim that more than 100 of their relatives were abducted by rebels, who ordered 1,500 bullets each for their return (AFP 19 Sept. 2012).

ANSA reports that other Syrian minorities affected by the threat of kidnapping include Druze, Kurds and Armenians (29 Jan. 2013). Human Rights Watch states that civilians from countries believed to be supporting Assad's regime, such as Russia, Ukraine, and Iran, have also faced threats by rebel groups and have been victims of kidnappings (22 Dec. 2012). On 17 December 2012, two Russian workers and an Italian were reportedly abducted by unknown attackers in Latakia (Human Rights Watch 22 Dec. 2012). In October 2012, a Ukrainian journalist was abducted by rebels who accused her of supporting the Syrian military (ibid.). Sources also report on the kidnapping of Lebanese Shiites (ibid.; ANSA 29 Jan. 2013; AI 14 Mar. 2013, 4), as well as abductions of Iranian nationals by the FSA (Human Rights Watch 22 Dec. 2012; *The Christian Science Monitor* 10 Aug. 2012; AI 14 Mar. 2013, 4).

#### 4.1 Targeting of Christians

Media sources report that Christians have been abducted by rebel groups (ANSA 29 Jan. 2013; AI Jazeera 22 Apr. 2013; *USA Today* 19 Apr. 2013), including in: Aleppo (AI Jazeera 22 Apr. 2013); Ras-al-Ayn (*USA Today* 19 Apr. 2013); and Saraqeb (AFP 2 Nov. 2012).

Several sources report on a high-profile kidnapping case that occurred in April 2013, in which two archbishops from Aleppo--Syrian Orthodox bishop, Yohanna Ibrahim, and Greek Orthodox bishop, Boulos Yaziji--were abducted from their car when travelling between Aleppo and the Turkish border (*The Irish Times* 4 May 2013; AP 24 Apr. 2013; AI Jazeera 22 Apr. 2013). According to AI Jazeera, the incident occurred in the village of Kfar Dael on the road between Bab al Hawa and Aleppo (22 Apr. 2013). While media sources indicate that it is not clear who abducted the bishops (AP 24 Apr. 2013; AI Jazeera 22 Apr. 2013; Reuters 23 Apr. 2013), some of the interviewees believed that the kidnappers were Chechen fighters (AP 24 Apr. 2013; *The Irish Times* 4 May 2013; Reuters 23 Apr. 2013), affiliated with the group Jabhat al-Nusra (AP 24 Apr. 2013). The head of the rebel council in Aleppo reportedly said that their group was not responsible for the kidnapping (Reuters 23 Apr. 2013). Two sources state that the bishops had been on a mission to negotiate the release of two priests kidnapped earlier (*The Irish Times* 4 May 2013; Reuters 23 Apr. 2013), while another source says that the bishops were carrying out humanitarian work in Aleppo province (AI Jazeera 22 Apr. 2013). Their driver was reportedly killed by the abductors (AP 24 Apr. 2013). According to *The Irish Times*, as of 4 May 2013, the bishops were still being held (4 May 2013).

AFP reports that on 29 October 2012, nine Christian men, including seven Armenians, were abducted near Saraqeb from a bus going from Beirut to Aleppo when it was stopped at a checkpoint (AFP 2 Nov. 2012). A Syrian rights activist claimed that the Al-Nusra Front, an "extreme Islamist" group, was responsible (ibid.). A

source from the Armenian community in Aleppo claimed the group was being held by Jund Allah, a group close to the Al-Nusra Front (ibid.). One kidnap victim was released to secure a ransom of 3.3 million Syrian pounds (\$48,000) to begin negotiations for the release of the other men, including his son (ibid.). One member of the Aleppo Armenian community claimed that the kidnapping was also motivated by money because "[t]hey know Christians have money and will pay" (AFP 2 Nov. 2012). Corroborating information about this incident could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In another incident reported by AFP, a 37-year-old Christian said that he was kidnapped by the Suqoor al-Sham rebel brigade because of his affiliation with the pro-regime political party Syrian Social Nationalist Party (AFP 4 Apr. 2013). He said that he was held for several weeks and subject to "torture," but was later released as part of a prisoner exchange (AFP 4 Apr. 2013).

The Metropolitan vicar of Mardin, a Turkish city housing Syrian refugees in a Syrian Orthodox monastery, said that armed rebel gangs have targeted Christians in the governate of Al-Hasakah, a region in the northeast of Syria that he describes as having "succumbed to lawlessness" (*New York Times* 14 Feb. 2013).

According to *The Irish Times*, Christians, and other minorities, have been targets for kidnapping by "radicalised Muslim fundamentalist rebel factions" (4 May 2013). The same sources claims that Christians feel they are "most threatened" by the group Jabhat al-Nusra (*The Irish Times* 4 May 2013). Sources describe this group as Islamist with links to al-Qaeda (ibid.; *USA Today* 19 Apr. 2013).

IDMC indicates that the al-Faruq battalion of the FSA has reportedly imposed "taxes" on Christians (IDMC 31 July 2012, 9).

## 5. Recourse for victims

*The Christian Science Monitor* states that "[t]he opposition has created makeshift police units, courts, and prisons, but crime has grown at a rate that far outpaces efforts to control it" (14 May 2013). *Asharq Al-Awsat*, a London-based daily Arabic newspaper published in 14 cities on four continents (n.d.), reports that the FSA tried to establish a policing unit in Jebel Al-Krud when the regime forces were defeated, but what started out as a 40-person operation turned into 4 volunteers due to the lack of salaries (14 Mar. 2013).

An article published by the Carnegie Middle East Center states that neither the SNC nor the FSA are able to control the "disparate" rebel groups (3 Apr. 2013). Similarly, Canadian Press reports that the SNC "has no control over fighters on the ground" (7 Mar. 2013).

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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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Attempts to contact representatives of the following organizations were unsuccessful: Human Rights Watch, Syrian Network for Human Rights. A representative of the Center for Civilians in Conflict was unable to provide information.

**Internet sites, including:** Albawaba; Alkarama; Arabic Network for Human Rights Information; Center for Civilians in Conflict; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; ecoi.net; ECRE; Freedom House; *Forced Migration Review*; Human Rights First; Institute of War and Peace Reporting; International Crisis Group; International Federation for Human Rights; Jamestown Foundation; MSF; Middle East Media Research Institute; Middle East Review of International Affairs; Minorities at Risk; Minority Rights Group International; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; Syrian Human Rights Committee; Syrian Network for Human Rights; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights; United Nations — IRIN, Refworld, ReliefWeb; United States — Congressional Research Service; Washington Institute for Near East Policy; World Organization Against Torture.