Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's Refworld website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment please email ✉ Basesdedonnees.DatabaseUnit@irb-cisr.gc.ca.

11 August 2015

SYR105231.E

Syria: Information on the opposition forces involved in abductions and extortions and their areas of operation in the country; frequency of abductions and extortion of civilians committed by rebel groups; whether rebel groups target particular social groups, including Christians (2013-July 2015)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview of Opposition Groups in Syria

The Congressional Research Service (CRS), a legislative branch agency within the US Library of Congress that provides policy and legal analysis to members of Congress (US n.d.), indicates that according to US intelligence, "the strength of the insurgency in Syria ... [is] 'somewhere between 75,000 or 80,000 or up to 110,000 to 115,000 insurgents, who are organized into more than 1,500 groups of widely varying political leanings'" (ibid. 27 June 2014, 3).

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS), the Islamic State (IS), "or 'Daesh' in Arabic" (ibid. 25 June 2015, 1), Jabhat al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham are all key components of the Islamic Front, an alliance against Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad (ibid. 27 June 2014, 5; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 14 Jan. 2014). According to the CRS, the three groups consist of approximately 26,000 members (US 27 June 2014, 3). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The CRS notes that ISIL, Jabhat al Nusra, and Ahrar al Sham are the "most effective opposition forces [against the Syrian state]" (ibid.). The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014* describes Jabhat al Nusra as an extremist terrorist organization linked to al-Qaida [Al Qaeda] (US 25 June 2015, 3).

On 29 June 2014, ISIL declared itself a "caliphate" [1] (US 25 June 2015, 1; UN 16 June 2015, 5) and renamed itself the Islamic State (IS) (ibid.). Sources report that Al-Raqqa [Raqqa] has become ISIL's "informal capital" (MRG July 2015, 246; US 25 June 2015, 1) and that since 2013, the group has "increasingly" taken control over Dayr al-Zawr in the east (ibid.). The UN notes that ISIL controls large "swathes of territory in the governates of Aleppo, Ar-Raqqah, Idlib, Al-Hasakah and Dayr Az-Zawr" (16 June 2015, 5).

Sources report that in late 2013, several Islamist militia groups announced the creation of the Islamic Front (US 27 June 2014, 5; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 14 Jan. 2014). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a global network of policy research centres (ibid. n.d.), indicates that the Front consists of the following 7 rebel factions:

- The Islamic Ahrar al-Sham Movement: "a hardline Islamist Group with units all across Syria";
- The Suqour al-Sham Brigades: "a strong faction centered on the Idlib Province in northwest Syria";
- The Tawhid Brigade: "perhaps the single most powerful group in Aleppo";
- The Haq Brigade: "wields major influence in Homs";
- The Ansar al-Sham Battalions: "based in northern Latakia and Idlib";
- The Islam Army: "a strong faction with roots in eastern Damascus"; and
- The Kurdish Islamic Front: "a rare, small faction of Islamist Kurds." (ibid. 14 Jan. 2014)

According to the CRS, the following armed groups constitute the "core" of the Islamic Front and are the "original signatories of its charter": "Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement, Suqur al Sham Brigades, Ansar al Sham Battalions, Jaysh al Islam, Liwa al Tawhid and Liwa al Haqq" (US 27 June 2014, 5-6).

Reuters reports that there is tension between Islamist groups and groups supporting secularism in Syria (25 Sept. 2013). The Daily Beast,

an independent news source reporting on "politics, pop culture, world news and more" (Daily Beast n.d.), states that secular and Islamist groups aligned with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) [a non-state armed group (Human Rights Watch 29 Jan. 2015, 521)], "are becoming increasingly corrupt" (ibid. 1 Dec. 2013). Human Rights Watch indicates that the FSA is responsible for abductions in Syria (Human Rights Watch 29 Jan. 2015, 521). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Extortion

Global business news organization and newspaper the *Financial Times (FT)* notes that ISIL engages in extortion in Syria (*FT* 5 Jan. 2015). The same source reports that locals are "complaining" that ISIL is "commandeering their resources" (ibid.). *FT* further notes that ISIL gains a million dollars a day from oil and through extortion rackets; and that the group has "seized control of three dams and at least two gas plants in Syria" (ibid.). The UN similarly reports that ISIL has expanded its control over natural resources in Syria, "consolidating" the group's financial capabilities (16 June 2015, 5). The *National Post* notes that ISIL controls "approximately 60 percent of Syria's oil fields" (28 Aug. 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Abductions of Civilians by Opposition Groups
3.1 Frequency of Abductions

Country Reports 2014 notes that incidents of kidnapping "markedly increased in Aleppo" and other northern areas outside of the government's control (US 25 June 2015, 26). The same source indicates that the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Syria reported a "dramatic rise in hostage taking, which was often sectarian in nature" (ibid., 25). Al Jazeera reports that "tens of thousands of people have disappeared without a trace" and that the "kidnappings in western Idlib province highlight the growing problem" of disappearances throughout the country (14 Oct. 2013).

According to Amnesty International (AI), armed groups were responsible for "numerous abductions and detentions" (25 Feb. 2015, 356). According to *Country Reports 2014*, "ISIL detained 486 women and 455 children, and other armed groups detained 580 women and 1,000 children" in 2014 (US 25 June 2015, 5).

3.2 Targets of Abduction

Sources indicate that armed groups abducted civilians (Human Rights Watch 29 Jan. 2015, 517; AI 25 Feb. 2015, 356; US 25 June 2015, 25). Sources report that armed groups also abducted suspected government supporters, journalists, aid workers, activists (AI 25 Feb. 2015, 356; US 25 June 2015, 25), as well as religious leaders and members of regime forces (ibid.). AI reports that armed groups subjected many of those taken hostage to "torture or other ill-treatment and some to unlawful summary executions" (AI 25 Feb. 2015, 356). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The UN similarly reports that in 2014, journalists and human rights defenders were abducted by ISIL or "made to disappear" (16 June 2015, 8). *Country Reports 2014* indicates that, according to the UN COI, there is a "documented pattern" of medical workers including physicians being detained by ISIL and a targeting of journalists, women, children and minorities for kidnapping (US 25 June 2015, 5, 29).

The UN reports that ISIL has targeted both religious and ethnic groups (16 June 2015, 8). Minority Rights Group International (MRG) similarly reports that in 2014 Jabhat an-Nusrah and ISIL targeted minorities due to their faith (MRG July 2015, 242). The same source further indicates that opposition militia targeted minorities including "Alawis, Christians, Druze, Ismailis, Kurds, Turkmen, Twelver Shi'a and Yezidis…on the assumption that they support the regime" (ibid., 240). Sources indicate that Christians are perceived to be supporters of the existing government (Christian Freedom International n.d.; *The Telegraph* 2 Aug. 2013; MRG July 2015, 240).

Sources state that abductions have become a source of income for rebel groups (PhD Candidate 26 June 2015; SJAC 26 June 2015; Church in Chains 13 July 2015). *Country Reports 2014* notes that "anti-government armed groups abducted civilians and members of regime forces to enable prisoner exchanges and for ransom money" (US 25 June 2015, 25). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a PhD candidate of Political Science at the University of British Columbia who specializes in the politics of insurgency and who has completed field research in Aleppo regarding Syria and ISIL, indicated that rebel groups often target people for money, rather than based on their ethno-religious grouping (PhD Candidate 26 June 2015).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Executive Director at the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC), an organization in Syria that works to ensure that human rights violations are properly documented for "transitional justice and peace-building" (SJAC n.d.), indicated that

abductions and extortions of civilians committed by rebel groups have happened on a limited scale, and usually the victim is a specific target for his political views [including their] relations with the Assad government (ibid. 26 June 2015).

The same source further explained that other criminal groups who are not directly affiliated with a "warring [political] party" take advantage of the lack of "basic security" and target civilians for kidnapping based on their wealth rather than their political or religious views (ibid.).

3.3 Incidents of Opposition Group Kidnappings

Sources report that in May 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL abducted 153 Kurdish children (MRG July 2015, 242; Human Rights Watch 29 Jan. 2015, 517). According to Human Rights Watch, the children were later released (ibid.).

Human Rights Watch states that approximately 54 Alawite [Alawi] women and children were abducted "by non-state armed groups" in August 2013 during a military offensive in the city of Latakia and, as of 29 January 2015, continued to be held by the "Mujahadeen" (29 Jan. 2015, 521). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report that on 9 December 2013 Razan Zeitouneh, a well-known human rights defender, and three other activists were abducted in Douma, a city outside of Damascus (AI 11 Dec. 2013; Human Rights Watch 29 Jan. 2015, 521) which is under the control of armed opposition groups, including the Army of Islam (ibid.). According to Human Rights Watch, as of 29 January 2015, the individuals had not yet been released (ibid.).

4. Targeting of Christians

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Director at the Center of Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, who specializes in Syrian politics, indicated that rebel groups target specific groups, including Christians (26 June 2015).

Sources report that in areas that have been seized by ISIL, Christians have been ordered to convert to Islam, pay *jizya* (a religious tax), or

face death (BBC 25 Feb. 2015; UN 14 Nov. 2014, 5; MRG July 2015, 246). For further information regarding jizya, see Response to Information Request SYR105229.

According to Church in Chains, an Irish-based charity supporting Christians who are persecuted worldwide (Church in Chains n.d.), Christians are being kidnapped because they are perceived to be wealthy, though the poor are also being kidnapped (ibid.13 July 2015). Open Doors USA, the US chapter of Open Doors, a global organization aiming to assist and empower persecuted Christians (Open Doors USA n.d.b), reports that Christians are kidnapped "out of financial, political and ideological motives" (Open Doors USA n.d.a). The SJAC Executive Director further stated that "to the best of [his] knowledge, none of the rebel groups have targeted Christians because they are Christians; rather, some individual Christians were targeted for their role with the regime" (SJAC 26 June 2015).

For further information regarding the treatment of Christians in areas under ISIL's control, see Response to Information Request SYR105229.

4.1 Incidents of Kidnappings of Christians

Sources report the following instances of abductions of Christians:

- In April 2013, Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi were kidnapped by unknown assailants (US 28 July 2014, 9).
- In July 2013, Jesuit Priest Father Paolo Dall'Oglio was kidnapped by ISIL in Raqqa (ibid.).
- In September 2013, Rebels linked to al-Queda kidnapped 15 Christians, after "besieging" the village of Ma'aloula (Church in Chains 13 July 2015).
- In December 2013, a group of nuns was taken hostage by rebel fighters in Ma'aloula (CNN 24 Jan. 2014; US 28 July 2015, 9). Sources report that they were released after being held for three months (*The New York Times* 9 Mar. 2014; *The Christian Science Monitor* 10 Mar. 2014).
- In October 2014, Hanna Jallouf, a Franciscan priest, and approximately 20 of his parishioners were abducted by Jabhat al-Nusra; as of 25 June 2015, their whereabouts remained unknown (US 25 June 2015, 26).
- In February 2015, between 70 and 220 Assyrian [2] Christians were abducted from north-eastern Syria by ISIL (UN 26 Feb. 2015; International Business Times 24 Feb. 2015; AP 1 Mar. 2015). Crux, a website that focuses on "the worldwide institution of the Catholic Church" (Crux n.d.), reports that "according to sources in the Assyrian Christian Church, approximately 15 of the 350 hostages taken by ISIS ... have been shot, beheaded, or both" (26 Feb. 2015). The Huffington Post notes that the group reportedly released 19 of the hostages in March 2015 but that, as of 2 March 2015, the fate of the remaining 200 hostages "remains unclear" (2 Mar. 2015).

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.

Notes

[1] A caliphate is "a state governed in accordance with Islamic law" (BBC 29 June 2015).

[2] Assyrians are an ancient ethnic group belonging to the Syriac Christian sect (International Business Times 24 Feb. 2014).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: The following were unable to provide information for this Response: assistant professor, Department of Political Science, Northwestern University; Mercy Corps; professor, Department of Political Science, University of British Columbia.

Attempts to contact the following were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: associate professor, Department of History, University of Notre Dame; associate professor of politics, The Catholic University of America; assistant professor, Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics, University of Virginia; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; assistant professor, Middle East studies, Department of Political Science, Northwestern University; director, Centre for Critical Development, University of Toronto; professor, anthropology and forced migration, University of Oxford; professor, Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures; professor of history, University of California; professor, modern arab studies, Columbia University; Relief and Reconciliation for Syria; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Internet sites, including: Assyrian International News Agency; ecoi.net; Factiva; Gatestone Institute; GlobalSecurity.org; The Huffington Post; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre; International Business News; International Crisis Group; IRIN; Jane's Information Group; Mercy Corps; The Middle East Media Research Institute; National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism; Relief & Reconciliation for Syria; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights; Transparency International; UN – Refworld; United States Institute of Peace; *The Washington Times*.

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