



**Open Doors International**

# Vulnerability Assessment of Syria's Christians



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*“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them.”*  
*(Matthew 4:23-24, NIV)*



**OpenDoors**  
Serving persecuted Christians worldwide

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## Executive summary

This report, coordinated by the World Watch Unit of Open Doors International, contextualizes, analyzes and interprets current developments in Syria, with a particular emphasis on the position of its Christian population.

### Sectarian conflict

The first section of this report, written by political analyst Nicholas Heras<sup>1</sup>, provides an overview of the main political, social and economic trends that characterize Syria as a country. Heras shows that although social discontent with a failing economy and government corruption, in addition to the violent repression of demands for political reforms, were the main triggers for the Syrian civil war, the roots of the conflict are deeper and more complicated, and include class conflict, rural versus urban divisions, and repressed political liberty. This finding in part explains why the conflict has so rapidly evolved into a sectarian identity conflict.

The description of the main political forces in the country sheds light on the composition of the pro-government and anti-government actors. The government's power base includes parties close to the Assad clan, specialized divisions of the country's military and informal paramilitary groups (the *Shabiba* and the popular committees, which are frequently associated with Syria's minority communities).

Though often overlooked, Heras' report clearly shows that anti-government factions are heavily divided. Their core is formed by the Syrian National Council (which is dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood) and its military arm, the Free Syrian Army. However, the SNC is rivaled by important independent groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, the Syrian Islamic Front and Alwiya Ahfaad ar-Rasool, which all have an ideological Islamist program.

### Regional influence

The Syrian civil war has also become a battlefield for regional influence, displaying the rivalry between the Sunni-majority Gulf Coordinating Council led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which endorse several factions of the Syrian opposition, and the Shi'ite-majority Islamic Republic of Iran and its "Resistance Axis", indirectly through Hezbollah or directly supporting Assad's government.

Heras concludes that the complexity of Syria's sociological composition '*makes Syria's civil war a potentially intractable, and highly divisive, conflict.*' Moreover, what will happen in the post-conflict phase is not clear: '*either an al-Assad government or an opposition victory in the civil war raises significant important questions about the future of the country and the preservation of its civic peace.*'

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas A. Heras is an analyst in the field of international relations with particular regional expertise on the Middle East/North Africa and the Sahara regions. He has over seven years' experience analyzing the cultures, societies, and the politics of identity in the Middle East/North Africa at organizations such as the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, the American University Center for Global Peace, and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Heras holds a B.A. in International Relations and an M.A. in International Communication from the American University (D.C.).

### Christians in strategic areas

The second section, also authored by Nicholas Heras, is a profile of Syria's Christian community, which provides additional insights about the position of Syria's Christians, and includes case studies of two hot spots in the conflict: the areas of Aleppo and Homs. It comprehensively describes some of the greatest current and future threats to the Christian community.

One of the main features of Syria's Christian population is its combined (or confused) ethnic and religious identity. Another feature of the Syrian Christian community is its numerical presence, which translates into its economic and political relevance. Particularly significant for the understanding of the position of Christians in the context of the current civil war is the concentration of Syria's Christians in strategic areas of the country that are vital to both the government and the opposition's war efforts, such as in and around the cities of Aleppo and Damascus, and in the southern areas of the Homs governorate near the Lebanese border. The geographical concentration of Christians in strategic areas is an important factor in their vulnerability.

***The geographical concentration of Christians in strategic areas is an important factor in their vulnerability.***

Regarding specific threats and risks to the Syrian Christian community, Heras finds that the ongoing Syrian civil war is placing enormous stress on them, with large communities having left their original homes, becoming Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or refugees in Lebanon or Turkey. For example, the entirety of the small Christian community in the southeastern governorate of Deir ez-Zor is reported to have been forced to leave the governorate following threats by Salafist groups.

### Not on one side

In contrast to other religious minorities such as the Alawites and the Kurds, who are generally suspicious towards the Syrian opposition, the situation for Syrian Christian communities *'is more nuanced and complicated.'* Heras explains that *'contrary to a widespread perception amongst some members of the Syrian opposition, not all Christians are aligned politically with the al-Assad government'*, as in the case of several leading opposition members who are Christians, including the President of the Syrian National Coalition, George Sabra, and prominent dissidents Michel Kilo, and Faiz Sara. In fact, Heras indicates that *'Christian communities participated in political demonstrations against the al-Assad government prior to the outbreak of fighting throughout the country.'*

At the same time, Heras finds that other Christian communities actively support the Syrian government, or are willing to accept its weapons and training in order to protect their villages and urban neighborhoods from the armed opposition, some even joining the pro-Assad *Shabiha* militias, or mobilizing in local popular committees. Heras estimates that *'perhaps tens of thousands of Syrian Christians of various denominations are participating in pro-government or anti-opposition popular committees.'*

### Disproportionate suffering

As with other communities, Syria's Christians are vulnerable. Heras' report finds much evidence that Syria's Christians have been the victims of the conflict, '*although there is no clear indication that they were targeted specifically because they were 'Christian.'*' Nevertheless, fears among Christians are high, particularly caused by threats, intimidation and kidnappings by Salafist groups such as the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, the Ansar Brigade or the the al-Farouq Battalions.

Disproportionate suffering affects different minority groups, including Christians. However, in Aleppo particularly, and now in Homs, it is clear there has been disproportionate suffering of Christians and that they are particularly at risk from the war. Heras estimates that of the 160,000-270,000 Christians in Aleppo, between 20,000-30,000 have fled the city as a result of the fighting, and fear for the future: "*Christians displaced from the fighting in Aleppo face the prospect of never being able to return to their homes and businesses, or to return to a civil order in the city that is less pluralistic and accepting of minority rights than before the war.*"

***Fears among Christians are high, particularly caused by threats, intimidation and kidnappings by Salafist groups.***

In Homs, an important area for the armed Syrian opposition because it is contiguous with areas in Lebanon that are necessary to maintain a route of supply and

transit of Syrian opposition fighters, at least 10,000 of the area's 250,000 Christians have been displaced because of the fighting.<sup>2</sup> This has been a direct consequence of targeted threats by militant Islamist opposition groups, including the al-Qaeda ally Jabhat al-Nusra.

As the conflict progresses and the fighting intensifies, Christians in Homs face the challenge of its militarization. Heras interprets that because of the insecure environment of the governorate, which is increasingly impacted by sectarian disputes at the local level, '*Christian fighters are increasingly becoming associated with armed groups that are sympathetic to the al-Assad government.*'

### Medium outlook trends

As a medium term outlook for Syrian Christians, Heras notes five important trends:

- (1) the Christian community will remain fearful of sectarian motivated attacks against it and will be more cautious in public displays of Christian traditions;
- (2) the Syrian opposition is increasingly "Islamizing" and the civil war is more and more taking the form of a "jihad" against the Syrian government;
- (3) Although the systematic militarization of Christian Syrians in these regions is in its incipient stage, it is being encouraged by the mobilization of the "National Defense Army" by the al-Assad government.
- (4) The militarization of Syria's Christian communities in diverse, sectarian and ethnically mixed region of the country is likely to become a significant trend in the near future;

<sup>2</sup> Due to the current situation in Syria, it is extremely difficult to obtain reliable estimates on the number of IDPs. Several sources estimate the number of IDPs much higher than Heras.

- (5) Although there are prominent Christian dissidents in the Syrian National Coalition, including the organization's president George Sabra, the Christian community inside of the country would have no tangible benefit in vocally calling for the removal of the al-Assad government and will not likely do so in the near future.

### **Vulnerability assessment**

From this background, the third section of this report, directly coordinated by a researcher of the World Watch Unit of Open Doors International, provides an assessment of the vulnerability of the Christian population in Syria, seeking to understand in which ways Syria's Christians are specifically vulnerable to suffering hostilities, amidst the intense conflict the whole country is going through. Based on the input of experts from the field and the systematization of publicly available reports, this Vulnerability Assessment lists and describes 14 specific threats to which Syria's Christians are vulnerable in varying degrees.

The conflict is such that all Syrians can be expected to suffer, but the Vulnerability Assessment provides a picture of the specific threats/risks to which Christians are particularly vulnerable. The basic findings of this tool comprehensively describe the vulnerable position of Syria's Christians and the ways they are suffering from the conflict.

The threats to which the whole Syrian population is vulnerable, including Christians, are the following:

- *Environmental security is virtually inexistent in Syria, affecting the whole population, including Christians.*
- *Lands of Christians have been confiscated.*
- *Christians suffer greatly from the absence of food security, especially in the areas held by the opposition.*
- *Christians face severe health insecurity.*

The threats to which the whole population is vulnerable, but Christians in particular, are:

- *The destruction of the Syrian economy because the civil war affects the whole population, including Christians.*
- *The Syrian civil war has to a large extent become a "sectarian conflict".*
- *Christians are caught in the crossfire of the strife between government and opposition forces and suffer violence from both parties.*
- *Christians are soft targets for criminal groups.*
- *Women in general, but particularly Christian women, are vulnerable to sexual abuse.*
- *Christian men are being forced to join the government army or the rebel forces.*

The Vulnerability Assessment finds that Christians are specifically vulnerable to these threats:

- *Christians suffer disproportionately from the violence, insecurity and overall impunity in Syria.*
- *There are comparatively more refugees and internally displaced people amongst the Christian population than amongst any other religious or ethnic group.*
- *Christian refugees are comparatively more disadvantaged than other refugees and suffer great hostilities in refugee camps.*
- *Christians are deliberately being targeted by Islamist groups.*

The report closes with a set of conclusions and recommendations, and establishes possible future scenarios for the position of Syria's Christians. These conclusions can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Christians are not always targeted deliberately, but this does not mean they are not a vulnerable group. The Vulnerability Assessment included in this report provides evidence to assert the specific vulnerability of Syria's Christians;
- (2) **The factors of the vulnerability of Syria's Christians can be contextual, political, economic, criminal and sometimes religious;**
- (3) Although the vulnerability of Christians can have many causes, it is directly linked to the **overall impunity;**
- (4) Sometimes Christians are **deliberately targeted** by political groups, by Islamists or by criminals;
- (5) The vulnerability of Syria's Christians also knows different degrees, depending on the nature of the threat. For this reason, **three degrees of vulnerability** were distinguished, depending on whether the threat is equally applicable to all Syrians, applicable to all Syrians but to Christians in particular, or very specifically to Christians.

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## I. Country brief<sup>3</sup>

Syria is a country in southwestern Asia which borders the Mediterranean to its west, Turkey all along its northern regions, Lebanon and Israel to its south-west and south-central regions, Jordan to its south-central and south-eastern regions, and Iraq all along its eastern regions. The capital of Syria is Damascus and its head of state is President Bashar al-Assad. Several areas of Syria are active battlefields in the country's ongoing civil war and large sections of the country are no longer under the control of the Syrian government, particularly in the northwest, south-west, and throughout its eastern regions.

### Geography

The country's terrain is dominated by fertile plains in its coastal western, south-western, northern, and north-eastern regions, semi-arid steppe land in its central-western and south-western region, and desert with a fertile strip of land immediately adjacent to the Euphrates River in its south-central and south-eastern regions. Syria is divided into 14 *muhafazaat* ("governorates"), divided into 63 *nawahi* ("districts").

The majority of Syria's population lives in its western regions. The population of Syria is approximately 22 million people. The most populated governorates of Syria are: the north-western governorate of Aleppo with its capital in Aleppo city; the central governorate of Damascus with its capital in Damascus city; the central-western governorate of Homs with its capital in Homs city; and the central-western governorate of Hama with its capital in Hama city.

### Population

Around 6.5 million people in Syria, around one-third of the country's population, are youth between the ages of 15-30.<sup>4</sup> Approximately 90% of Syria's population is ethnically Arab, 74% of whom are Sunni Muslims. Ethnic Kurds, Armenians, Turkmen, and Circassians, whose origins are in the Russian Caucasus, are approximately 10% of the country's population.

Syria also possesses significant sectarian diversity, including Alawites, Christians (both ethnically Arab and non-Arab such as Armenians), Druze (a heterodox sect that evolved from Ismaili Shi'ism), Shi'ites, Ismailis, and Jews. Alawites and Christians (both Arab and non-Arab) each represent approximately 10% of the country's sectarian population, while the Druze are approximately 3% of the population. Shi'ites and Ismailis are approximately 3% of Syria's sectarian population, with small Jewish communities in Aleppo, Damascus, and the northeastern city of Qamishli. The top leadership of Syria's ruling Ba'ath Party is drawn from the Alawite sect.<sup>5</sup> Syria is also home to several transnational Arab tribes including the Bagghara, the Shammar, the Ouigaidat, the Taie, the Jabbour, and the Zoubi, primarily living in the eastern and southwestern regions of the country.

Some of Syria's ethnic and sectarian minority groups are largely resident in distinct areas of the country, providing them with significant local support and communal solidarity. Syria's Alawites are most heavily concentrated in the coastal governorates of Tartus and Lattakia; the country's Druze population is most heavily concentrated in the southwestern governorate of

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<sup>3</sup> This section was authored by Nicholas Heras.

<sup>4</sup> "Syria." *CIA World Factbook*. April 17, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Suwaida; its Kurdish population is most heavily concentrated in the northwestern governorates of Idlib and Aleppo and the northeastern governorate of Hasakah; and its Turkmen population in Idlib governorate.

### Refugees

In addition to its native population, there are large numbers of refugees from neighboring countries in the Middle East who are resident in Syria. The two largest refugee populations in Syria are the Palestinians and Iraqis. There are approximately 600,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria, the majority of whom entered the country following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Palestinians in Syria are given access to many Syrian government-run social services including health and social welfare services. The majority of the Palestinian population in Syria is Sunni Muslim, with the minority Christian. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for the Near East (UNRWA) administers health, education, and social welfare programs in 12 Palestinian camps throughout the country.<sup>6</sup>

There are also approximately 500,000 Iraqi refugees in Syria. Most Iraqi refugees in Syria entered the country after the onset of the Sunni-Shi'a Muslim sectarian civil war that started in Iraq in February 2006. The largest concentration of Iraqi refugees in the country is in the suburbs of Damascus, followed by the city of Aleppo. Iraqi refugees in Syria represent all of Iraq's ethnic and sectarian communities although it is believed that the largest Iraqi sectarian group in the country is Shi'a Muslim. This population of Iraqi refugees lives in the densely populated Damascus suburb of Sayyida Zeinab, which is a major Shi'a Muslim shrine and pilgrimage site.<sup>7</sup>

## 1.1 Socio-Political Context<sup>8</sup>

### Repressed civil liberties

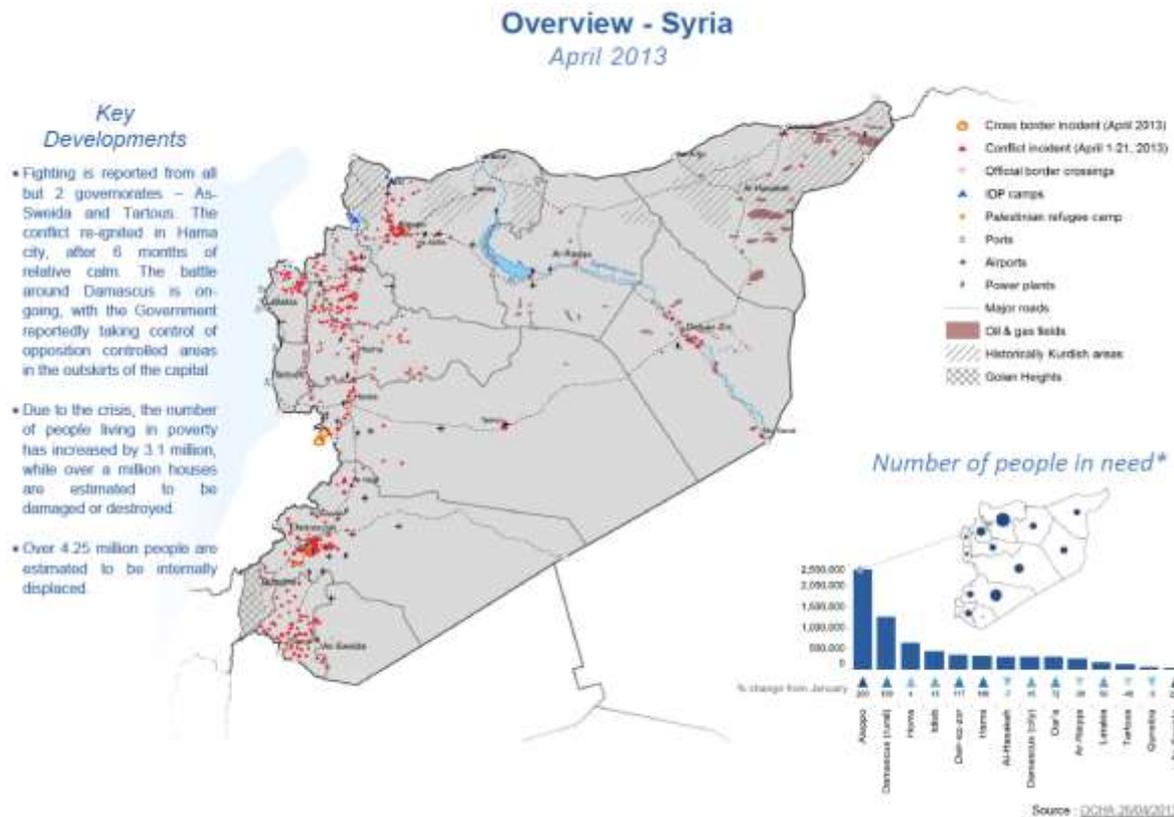
Currently, Syria's civil war dominates the political and socio-political context of life in the country. Prior to the outbreak of civil war, civil liberties in Syria were severely repressed and the country's civil society placed under the authoritarian rule of the Ba'ath Party. A National Security Emergency Law which had been instituted in 1963 at the initial outset of Ba'ath Party rule gave the Syrian government wide powers to arrest, detain, imprison, and restrict the civil rights of Syrians. Syria was ranked as one of the worst countries in the world for judicial freedom, freedom of expression and assembly, and for religious freedom, by several international human rights advocacy organizations, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Committee to Protect Journalists. Internet access in Syria was widely monitored and several websites and social media services, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, were blocked entirely. In addition to the restriction of civil liberties, thousands of political prisoners were held in detention in Syrian prisons.

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<sup>6</sup> "Syria." *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for the Near East (UNRWA)*. January 1, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Fisk. "President Assad's Army is Starting to Call the Shots in Syria." *The Independent*. April 14, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Information in this section derives from the author's field experience in and study of Syria as a commentator on events in the country. For in-depth discussions of Syrian socio-politics and political actors, particularly prior to the current civil war, see also: Nikolaos Van Dam. *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Assad and the Ba'ath Party*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996; Patrick Seale. *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.



The Syrian civil war, like the other uprisings that occurred throughout the Middle East and North Africa region since January 2011, was sparked by countrywide protests against repressive Syrian government policies towards political and human rights, and demands for reform of endemic corruption by established governments and economic growth promotion policies for increasingly impoverished and frustrated populations, especially amongst youth. Although there was widespread hope for political liberalization at the beginning of his tenure as President in 2000, few substantial political reforms have been the result of Bashar al-Assad's rule. Bashar has utilized the state dominated by the Syrian Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party that he inherited from his father to tightly control and punish political expression and dissent in Syria, including from secular liberals, Islamists, and Kurdish cultural activists.

The Ba'ath Party oversees a political system that is an autocratic syndicate. Bashar al-Assad's rule is supported by members of his family and his extended family, his key Alawite kinsmen in the military, intelligence, and paramilitary apparatus, and by leading families of other sectarian communities, especially Sunni Muslims and Christians, who have vested business and personal interests in supporting the Ba'ath Party. Syrian society is diverse, with sectarian, ethnic, class, urban versus rural, tribal, and geopolitical rivalries that were all co-opted, suppressed, or fought against by the Ba'ath Party. One of the foundations of social support for the Ba'ath Party has been small, rural landowners who were empowered by the agricultural collectivizing policies of the early years of Hafez al-Assad's rule.<sup>9</sup>

## Protests

Bashar al-Assad has responded to the country-wide protests with a mixture of conciliation and combat towards his political opponents. He has supported certain reforms demanded by protesters and his opponents while ordering the Syrian military and security services to continue to act with force against his opponents.

<sup>9</sup> "Syrian Arab Republic." *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*. January 1, 2012.

Amongst the reforms he has approved include: the lifting of a long-standing national security emergency law and the disbanding of the Supreme State Security Court; the release of thousands of mainly Islamist activist political prisoners; recognition of the citizenship of hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds who were formerly without Syrian nationality; and the end of *de jure* dominant status of the Ba'ath Party written into the Syrian Constitution. These reforms have been enacted in the context of widespread Syrian military engagements with armed members of the Syrian opposition as well as intensified Syrian Army military operations against political demonstrators, and mass arrests as well as reports of torture and indefinite detention of political activists.

The Syrian opposition charges that political demonstrations led to armed conflict due to the Syrian military firing on and killing unarmed protestors at demonstrations throughout the country. Opposition members assert that the Syrian government was purposefully labeling the opposition as “terrorists,” and that the aggressive posture held towards demonstrations by Syrian security forces exacerbated emotions against the al-Assad government. The defection of Syrian military units that refused to fire on civilians, and the formation of the initial armed opposition groups on a local and regional basis by both defected soldiers and local, anti-Assad gunmen, were factors contributing to the escalation of the conflict.<sup>10</sup>

## 1.2 Political Actors

### Parliamentary system

Officially, Syria's government is, and was prior to the onset of popular demonstrations and the civil war, a parliamentary system dominated by one political party, the Syrian Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. The Syrian parliament, called the “People's Assembly,” is a 250-seat legislature, with 168 seats held by the “National Progressive Front” led by the Ba'ath Party and 9 allied political parties of mainly socialist and Arab nationalist ideological persuasion. In addition to the National Progressive Front, there is an “opposition” coalition called the “Popular Front for Change and Liberation.”

Currently, the Ba'ath Party holds 134 of the 168 seats in parliament claimed by the National Progressive Front. 77 seats in the Syrian People's Assembly are held by independent parliamentarians, the majority of whom are co-opted by the Ba'ath Party. The Popular Front for Change and Liberation, comprises the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, holding 4 seats in the People's Assembly, and the People's Will Party, holding 1 seat.<sup>11</sup>

The nine other political parties in the National Progressive Front are: the Arab Socialist Movement; the Arab Socialist Union; two factions of the Syrian Communist Party; the Social Democratic Unionists; the Socialist Unionists; the Democratic Socialist Unionist Party; the Arab Democratic Unionist Party; and the National Vow Movement.

Syria's May 2012 parliamentary election, which was held in spite of mass civil demonstrations, an opposition boycott, and increasing armed conflict throughout the country,

<sup>10</sup> “Origin.” *Free Syrian Army*. May 16, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> “People's Assembly.” Syrian Arab Republic. May 16, 2013.

did not substantively change the political makeup of the country's People's Assembly or the strong control of the government by the Ba'ath Party's elite.

## Pro-Government Political Actors

### *Al-Assad family*

The head of state of Syria is President Bashar al-Assad. The al-Assad family is Alawite from the town of Qardaha in the coastal, northwestern province of Latakia where the majority of the country's Alawite population lives. Bashar al-Assad has been President of Syria since 2000, when he replaced his father Hafez al-Assad, who ruled Syria from 1970 unto his death. Bashar al-Assad is also the Field Marshal of the Syrian Armed Forces, and the Chairman of the Syrian Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. The Ba'ath Party is an umbrella organization that has members from all of Syria's ethnic and sectarian communities, with the al-Assad family and members of its sectarian Alawite, local Kalbiyya clan holding the most power in the party's command.

### *Syrian military*

The al-Assad government is supported in the civil war by the country's military, its intelligence services, and paramilitary forces that engage in both direct action against the armed opposition, or serve as auxiliary village and urban district security forces. As the conflict has become bloodier, more geographically dispersed within the country, and increasingly more sectarian in its ideological divisions, the Syrian military has been subject to a significant number of defections of its officers and rank and file to the opposition, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims.

***The Syrian military has been subject to a significant number of defections the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims.***

Although the entire Syrian military is engaged in the conflict, there are certain divisions within it that have been particularly active in the fighting or represent the foundation of the military's support for the al-Assad family. These are the Republican Guard, the 4<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division, and the Syrian Air Force Intelligence Directorate.

The Republican Guard is an elite division of the Syrian military. It is responsible for the protection of the Syrian government and specifically the al-Assad family and senior Ba'ath Party leaders. It is nominally commanded by Bashar al-Assad's brother, Maher al-Assad. The Republican Guard is reported to have approximately 25,000 active duty members and it is typically based in Damascus. Currently the Republican Guard operates in Damascus and its suburbs where it has established military checkpoints on all the highways entering the city and in strategic neighborhoods surrounding important Syrian government ministries, and military and intelligence headquarters. The majority of the Republican Guard's officers and

(the majority of) its rank and file are Alawites from the al-Assad family's Kalbiyya clan. The Republican Guard is provided the best weapons available in the Syrian military's arsenal.<sup>12</sup>

Like the Republican Guard, the 4<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division is also an elite Syrian military division. The number of soldiers in the division is estimated to be 11,000-13,000. It is also commanded by Maher al-Assad. The 4<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division's primary function is to engage in direct action operations in complicated hostile environments. During the civil war, the 4<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division has been organized into a quick reaction force at the battalion level and has been sent into policing and combat operations throughout Syria. The officer corps and the majority of the rank and file of the 4<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division are Alawites. Like the Republican Guard, the 4<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division is provided with the best weapons available in the Syrian military's arsenal.

In addition to its combat role, companies of the 4<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division are reportedly utilized to observe and direct the combat operations of Sunni Muslim majority Syrian army divisions which are suspected of potential sympathies with the Syrian opposition. The fearsome reputation of the 4<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division is considered to be an intimidating factor that limits potential defection in other divisions.<sup>13</sup>

The Syrian Air Force Intelligence Directorate (AFID) is the most powerful of Syria's security intelligence organizations. It was, until his assassination by the armed opposition in August 2012, commanded by General Jamil Hasan who was a member of the al-Assad family's Kalbiyya clan. It is unclear who the current head of the AFID is. The AFID has multiple responsibilities including: providing security and intelligence gathering in Syrian embassies and consulates worldwide; monitoring passengers on Syria's national airline Air Syria; monitoring and assessing threats by foreign nationals entering Syria; and serving in a support role for Syria's elite military forces including the Republican Guard and the 4<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division. Over the course of the civil war, the AFID has expanded its activities to include monitoring and detaining Syrian opposition activists, and engaging in direct action against armed opposition groups, particularly along the restive Lebanese-Syrian border in the southern Homs governorate.<sup>14</sup>

### *Shabiha paramilitaries*

In addition to the formal military and security actors raised by the al-Assad government, paramilitary and local defense forces are also assisting Syrian security forces. These include the *shabiha* ("ghosts") paramilitaries and the Popular Committee village and neighborhood defense forces. The *Shahiba* evolved from criminal syndicates that smuggled goods from Turkey into Syria and Lebanon. They receive tacit Syrian government acceptance in exchange for a percentage of the profits from their activities and intelligence gathering on persons of interest to the Syrian government.

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<sup>12</sup> Patrick Clawson. "Syria's Praetorian Guards: A Primer." *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*. August 5, 2000. "Post-Assad Syria: Opportunity or Quagmire?" *National Defense University Strategic Forum*. February 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ahed al-Hendi. "The Structure of Syria's Repression." *Foreign Affairs*. May 3, 2011; "Bashar al-Assad's Inner Circle." *BBC News*. July 30, 2012; Katherine Jane O'Neil. "Syrian Female Prisoner Spared Regime Brutality for Being Christian." *Al-Arabiyya*. March 15, 2013.

*Shabiha* units have been deployed as police against Syrian opposition demonstrators and have engaged in combat with armed Syrian opposition groups throughout Syria. It is reported that the majority of *Shabiha* units are Alawite with the minority being Sunni Muslim and Christian government loyalists. *Shabiha* units are believed to operate semi-autonomously at the local level. There is no verified leadership structure of the *Shabiha*, although it is reported that Maher al-Assad, the brother of Bashar al-Assad, maintains overall operational command of the *Shabiha* while delegating their recruitment and armament to his first cousins Munzer and Fawaz al-Assad. The *Shabiha* are accused by the Syrian opposition of perpetrating human rights abuses including torture, rape, and extrajudicial killing of Syrian civilians.<sup>15</sup>

### **Popular Committees**

The Popular Committees are frequently associated with Syria's minority communities, including Christians, Druze, and Alawites. Both men and women are fighters in the Popular Committees.<sup>16</sup> Popular Committees are generally reported to be mobilized to defend specific sectarian villages or urban enclaves, such as Christian districts, against armed opposition attack.<sup>17</sup> Several Popular Committees have been raised throughout the country.

**The al-Assad government is stated to be seeking to integrate the Popular Committees into a larger "National Defense Army."**

The al-Assad government, seeking to enhance the effectiveness of the Popular Committees in assuming a greater burden of local and regional defense against the armed opposition, is stated to be seeking to integrate the Popular Committees into a larger "National Defense Army," (NDA) reportedly trained with the assistance of the Iranian Quds Force.<sup>18</sup> Hezbollah, at least in the strategic central-western province of Homs, is also believed to be assisting in the mobilization, training, and deployment of Popular Committees.<sup>19</sup> The integration of village and urban district-level Popular Committees, assumed to be composed of primarily one ethnic or sectarian group from the local area, into the NDA, is stated to raise pro-Assad, pro-Syrian nationalistic morale instead of favoring communal group identity.<sup>20</sup>

### **Regional supporters**

Hezbollah and Iran have been the strongest regional supporters of the al-Assad government. Hezbollah has used its influence in the Lebanese government to push for the Lebanese military to strenuously police Lebanon's border with Syria in order to prevent armed and unarmed Syrian opposition members from building a base of operations in Lebanon from which to attack the al-Assad government. In addition to training the NDA, Iranian forces are

<sup>15</sup> Harriet Alexander and Ruth Sherlock. "Syria Unrest: Who are the Shabiha?" *BBC News*. May 29, 2012; Hugh MacLeod and Annasofie Flamand. "The Shabiha: Inside Assad's Death Squads." *The Telegraph*, 02/06/2012; "Syria: Shabiha Militia Member Tells it Like it Is." *PBS NewsHour*. June 15, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> "Syria Builds Paramilitary Force Aided By Iran." *Agence France Presse*. January 21, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> "Asia/Syria: Christians Form 'Popular Committees' Armed to Prevent Violence." *Agenzia Fides*. September 18, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> "Syria Builds Paramilitary Force Aided By Iran." *Agence France Presse*. January 21, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Bassem Mroue. "Hezbollah-Backed Shi'ites Fight in Syria." *Associated Press*. April 14, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Firas Choufi. "On the Front-Line of the Battle for Syria's Lebanese Villages." *Al-Akhbar*. March 2, 2013.

***Hezbollah and Iran have been the strongest regional supporters of the al-Assad government.***

reported to be providing the Syrian government with intelligence and military assets to police and combat the Syrian opposition, as well as arms and logistical support. Both Hezbollah and Iran have publicly stated their support for the al-Assad government while calling on the Syrian opposition to engage in non-violent negotiation with the Syrian government for reform.

### **Kurdish community: split**

Of special note is Syria's Kurdish community, concentrated across several governorates in the northwest and northeastern regions of the country, and split between pro and anti-Assad organizations. Prior to April 2011, an estimated 120,000 Syrian Kurds resident in the northeastern Hasakah governorate of Syria had been denied Syrian citizenship. Stateless Kurds were not able to inherit property from their families, and have their marriages to Kurds with Syrian citizenship recognized by civil authorities. The Kurdish language was forbidden to be spoken by pupils among each other in schools, all of which were state-run, and Kurdish language media and cultural centers were banned. Bashar al-Assad granted stateless Kurds Syrian citizenship in April 2011, in a move that was widely considered to be calculated to "win" Kurdish support against the opposition.<sup>21</sup>

The Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) are the most powerful Kurdish parties in Syria. Although the two groups are nominally allies with one another towards the goal of improving the traditionally marginalized status of Kurds in Syria, they are distrustful of each other. The KNC is an affiliate of the Syrian opposition and is believed to have the support and military training of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). It is seeking a post-Assad political arrangement that would affirm and guarantee Kurdish rights, but not autonomy from the rest of Syria. The PYD is an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and is in a tacit alliance with the al-Assad government and the armed opposition, and is believed to be actively seeking the autonomy of the Kurdish regions of Syria.<sup>22</sup> PYD fighters have also engaged in fierce fighting against armed opposition groups that encroach on Kurdish-majority areas.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> "Stateless Kurds in Syria Granted Citizenship." *CNN*. April 8, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Tim Lister. "Kurds' Ambitions Add Explosive Element to Syria Equation." *CNN*. August 14, 2012; Tim Arango. "Kurds to Pursue More Autonomy in a Fallen Syria." *New York Times*. September 29, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> "Fears of a New Front as Syria Fighters Clash with Kurds." *Agence France Presse*. October 28, 2012; Tim Arango. "Wider Chaos Feared as Syrian Rebels Clash with Kurds." *New York Times*. December 6, 2012; Tracey Shelton and Peter Gelling. "Syria: Rebels and Kurds Clash in Aleppo." *GlobalPost*. April 26, 2013.

## Who's who in Syria's battlefield

Key rebel groups, their leaders and ideology

Name	Leader	Aims
<b>Main fronts:</b>		
Supreme Military Command (SMC)	General Salim Idriss, a defector	Set up in December 2012 under the Syrian National Coalition in an effort to unite rebels backed by Western and Arab Gulf governments. Has limited control on the ground
Syrian Islamic Front	Collective leaders' council: chair is Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi	Syrian Islamists. Includes Ahrar al-Sham and other Salafist groups. Co-operates with SMC
Syrian Liberation Front	Sheikh Ahmed Issa, head of Saqour al-Sham	Coalition of Islamist groups. Independent of mainstream fighters, but works closely with them. Some leaders sit on SMC
<b>Fighting groups:</b>		
Jabhat al-Nusra	Abu Muhammad al-Golani	Salafist jihadists with a global vision of an Islamist state. Mainly foreign leadership, Syrian soldiers. Linked to al-Qaeda
Ahrar al-Sham	Abu Abdel Rahman al-Suri, Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi, Abu Ayman (political leader)	Salafist jihadists with national aims. Co-operate with other groups. Strongest component of Syrian Islamic Front
Farouq Battalions	Osama Sayeh al-Jinidi	A mixed bunch, ranging from devout to mild Islamists. Started in Homs, now nationwide; includes Farouq al-Shamal in the north. Controls some border crossings
Liwa al-Tawhid	Abdulkader Saleh (Haj Marea)	Umbrella force in Aleppo, included in the Syrian Liberation Front. Its leader sits on the SMC
Saqour al-Sham	Sheikh Ahmed Issa	Most powerful fighting force in Idleb. Islamist. Its leader heads the Syrian Liberation Front
Ansar al-Islam	Abu Moaz al-Agha	Umbrella for Islamist factions around Damascus, including powerful Liwa al-Islam
Ahfad al-Rasul	Ziad Haj Obeid	Part of Ansar al-Islam in Damascus, where it has carried out assassinations; also has offshoot in Idleb
Ghurabaa	Omar Hilal	Islamist group with growing presence in Aleppo and Raqqa; works with all other groups
Democratic Union Party (PYD)	Salih Muslim	Syrian offshoot of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Neither with the regime nor with the rebels. Its militias control Kurdish areas in north-east Syria

Sources: Institute for the Understanding of War; *The Economist*

### Anti-Government Political Actors

Syria's anti-Assad political actors can generally be divided into the armed and unarmed opposition, and into the opposition in exile and the opposition resident in Syria. As a result of the highly incipient, diverse, politically divided, and regionally and locally-based nature of the Syrian opposition groups, their relative strength and deportment vis-à-vis each other and the al-Assad government undergoes considerable shifts. Presently, armed opposition groups throughout Syria are the most powerful actors in the revolution inside the country, with the unarmed opposition in exile possessing the most important connections to sympathetic, anti-Assad foreign actors such as the United States, the European Union, and the Sunni Muslim monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The exile opposition is dominated by the National Coalition for Syrian Opposition and Revolutionary Forces, which was founded in Doha, Qatar in November 2012. The Syrian National Coalition, as it is referred to, is officially recognized by many anti-Assad foreign

actors as the legitimate transitional authority for a post-Assad Syria.<sup>24</sup> This National Coalition is meant to subsume the diverse and fractious Syrian opposition groups into a cohesive body politic that is representative of Syria's population. Its current President is George Sabra, a Syrian-American Christian and social democratic opposition figure who was formerly the head of the Syrian National Council (SNC) and jailed frequently by the Syrian government under Hafez al-Assad.<sup>25</sup> The current Prime Minister of the National Coalition's opposition government is Ghassan Hitto, a Syrian-American engineer and dissident.

Supporting the Syrian National Coalition is the "Friends of Syria" (FOS), which is a coalition of countries that seek to support the Syrian opposition in its attempt to remove the al-Assad government from power. The FOS includes three United Nations Security Council (UNSC) permanent members – the United States, Great Britain, and France – and two of the richest and most powerful members of the Arab League: Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In addition to morally and politically supporting the Syrian opposition

**Syrian opposition groups are of a highly incipient, diverse, politically divided, and regionally and locally-based nature.**

the FOS is pursuing several courses of action to weaken the al-Assad government including: economic sanctions on important members of the Syrian government and trade restrictions on key industries linked to state control; UNSC sanctioned international observer missions to assess the al-Assad government's compliance with international human rights law; pledging funding for the armed Syrian opposition through the Syrian National Council; and providing lethal and non-lethal military and communications equipment for the armed Syrian opposition.

### *Syrian National Council*

Although the Syrian National Coalition is a "supra-group" of the opposition parties, it is dominated by the Syrian National Council, which is, in spite of international recognition of the Syrian National Coalition as the foundation of the next governing authority in the country, the most powerful political organization in exile. The SNC is, like the Syrian National Coalition, an umbrella organization of Syrian opposition parties operating in exile. It was formally established in October 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey. Several different political movements are part of the SNC, the most prominent of which are the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the Kurdish Future Movement Party, the Assyrian Democratic Organization, and various smaller exiled parties and individuals.<sup>26</sup>

The SNC also includes the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs), which are community-level activist organizations that prior to the widespread outbreak of armed conflict organized protests. The LCCs currently communicate to the outside world developments on the ground against the al-Assad government, and report casualties and human rights abuses to the international community and Syrian organizations in exile. The LCCs are organized on the

<sup>24</sup> "Guide to the Syrian Opposition." *BBC News*. April 23, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> "Profile: George Sabra." *Al-Jazeera*. April 22, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> "Members." *Syrian National Council*. May 2, 2013; "Guide to the Syrian Opposition." *BBC News*. April 23, 2013; Neil MacFarquhar. "Syrian National Council Resists Unification with Other Groups." *New York Times*. November 10, 2012.

national level by the National Coordination Council (NCC), which exists to bring all of the LCCs into one representative body. Although the NCC is allied with the Syrian National Council (SNC), the LCCs still remain the primary functioning local authority in the rebelling areas of Syria.

### *Syrian National Council and Coalition-Syrian Muslim Brotherhood*

Within the SNC, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) is considered to be the most powerful faction in the Syrian National Council (SNC), with over half of the SNC's representative chairs. Its nominal leader is Mohammad Riad Shaqfa. It was founded in 1945 in Hama, Syria, as an ideological sibling of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (EMB). The original objective of the SMB was to implement an Islamic state in Syria, by force if necessary.

The SMB has a far more violent history than its Egyptian sibling and engaged in armed conflict with the Ba'ath Party in 1964 and from 1976 to 1982. A splinter group of the SMB, the Armed Vanguard, engaged in the majority of violence with the Syrian government with the ideological and at times operational support of the SMB. The Armed Vanguard nearly succeeded in assassinating the former President of Syria, Hafez al-Assad, in July 1980. As a result of this action, membership of the SMB was made a capital offense by the Syrian government in 1980, a ruling that is presently still in effect. The SMB and the Armed Vanguard were decisively defeated in Hama in February 1982 and their surviving members forced into exile.<sup>27</sup>

***The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is considered to be the most powerful faction in the Syrian National Council.***

The SMB has taken a more “moderate” ideological stance in the years since its near-destruction at Hama. It released a new Covenant in March 2012 which promised that it would support a pluralistic, multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian post-Assad Syria. The Covenant is believed to be a reaction to criticism that the SMB was moving to dominate the SNC in order to win international approval for its ultimate agenda to impose an Islamic state on Syria.<sup>28</sup> It is reported that the SMB is working actively to resuscitate its

formerly extensive mosque-based socio-political networks inside Syria by working within Sunni Islamist groups in Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Saudi Arabia is also believed to be a major supporter of the SMB and its objectives in Syria.

Within Syria, the civil conflict consists of several rebel areas that are operating autonomously at a village or urban neighborhood level, and are not centralized into one contiguous territory under a single civil and military authority. The Syrian opposition groups consist mainly of defecting elements of Syria's society who used to be under the domination of the Syrian security state, including soldiers, religious leaders, civil society groups, and tribal leaders and members. These Syrian opposition members have thus far been unable to coalesce into one

<sup>27</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this period see Nikolaos Van Dam. *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba'ath Party*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996; Umar F. Abd-Allah. *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*. London: Mizan Publishing, 1983.

<sup>28</sup> “Muslim Brotherhood Denies Extremist Control in Syria.” *Agence France Presse*. April 15, 2013.

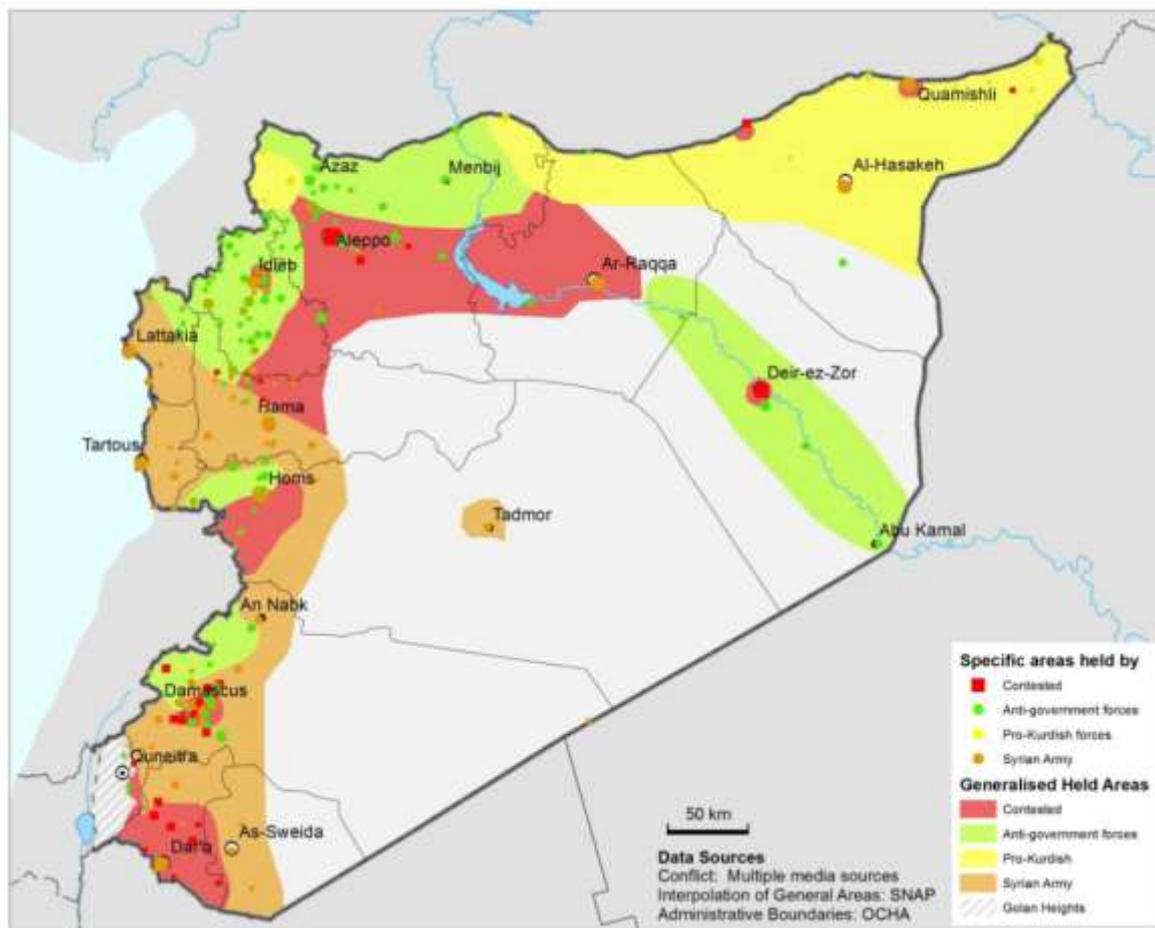
national movement within the country, which weakens their position vis-à-vis the armed opposition groups that have the ability to fight and confront the Syrian government.

The fighters in the armed opposition belong to militias at a local, village or regional, level and are generally Sunni Muslims of rural backgrounds. Many of them were impoverished by Syria's severe economic struggles prior to the outbreak of civil unrest. Although a number of armed opposition fighters are defected Syrian soldiers, it is reported that the majority of them are disaffected Syrians who responded to the systematic repression and force they faced from the Syrian government following the start of anti-government protests in March 2011 with force of their own. Ideologically, the armed Syrian opposition groups range from secular nationalists to militant Sunni Salafists aligned with al-Qaeda, with the majority of the fighting groups holding a Syrian nationalist, Sunni Islamist perspective.

### *Free Syrian Army*

Currently, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is the opposition armed group that is given recognition by anti-Assad foreign actors as the legitimate security organization of a transitional, post-Assad Syrian state. The FSA is led by the Supreme Military Council (SM), a 30-person leadership coalition of the highest ranking defected Syrian military officers and the most powerful militia leaders within Syria itself.

**Government and anti-Government held areas as at February 2013**



Nominally, the FSA is the military authority adjunct to the Syrian National Coalition, although the two organizations thus far have limited interoperability due to the incipient and still developing organization of the Syrian opposition. The Supreme Military Council is believed to have been organized at the request of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the two wealthiest and most active financial supporters of the Syrian opposition. General Salim Idriss, a defector from the Syrian military, is currently the Commander-in-Chief of the SMC.<sup>29</sup> Military assistance for the armed opposition is supposed to be coordinated through the logistical networks of the SMC.<sup>30</sup>

The FSA is itself an umbrella organization of defected Syrian military members and allied armed anti-Assad groups. It consists of several autonomous and semi-autonomous combat units within Syria, organized into *kata'ib* ("battalions") at the local level. Ideologically, *kata'ib* of the FSA range from secularists to Sunni Islamists, with representation from across Syria's sectarian and ethnic groups. The FSA is, however, reported to be overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim.

***Saudi Arabia and Qatar are the two wealthiest and most active financial supporters of the Syrian opposition.***

In addition to defected Syrian military soldiers, the FSA "label" is being applied to a large number of armed fighters organized into anti-Assad militias at the local level who declare their loyalty to the FSA. Currently, it is estimated that there are approximately 145,000 rebel fighters in total in Syria, although approximate figures for the number of Syrian rebels that fight only for the "Free Syrian Army" have yet to be determined.<sup>31</sup> The lack of exact numbers is due to conflicting definitions concerning whether armed opposition organizations with ties to the Supreme Military Council, such as the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, are actually part of the FSA, or are in fact independent entities.

### ***Jabhat al-Nusra***

Distinct from the FSA is the radical Salafist militant organization *Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl ash-Sham* ("The Victory Front for the People of the Levant"), which is one of the most powerful, widespread, and militarily committed fighting fronts against the al-Assad government. *Jabhat al-Nusra* is officially aligned with the al-Qaeda affiliate, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).<sup>32</sup> It is found throughout the country with particular strength in the Aleppo, Idlib, and Damascus governorates, and in the southeastern governorate of Deir ez-Zor, where it administers a nascent form of Islamist civil society according to sharia Islamic law.<sup>33</sup>

It is reported that *Jabhat al-Nusra* has between 5,000-12,000 fighters, many of whom are believed to have fought in international jihadist operations against the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, and against Shi'a Muslims in Iraq. It is also reported that a large number of

<sup>29</sup> Neil MacFarquhar and Hwaida Saad. "Rebel Groups in Syria Make Framework for Military." *New York Times*. December 7, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Emre Peker. "U.S. Allies to Coordinate Aid to Syrian Rebels." *Wall Street Journal*. April 21, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> "Nusra Pledge to Qaeda Boosts Syrian Regime: Analysts." *Agence France Presse*. April 13, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Tom A. Peter. "Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syrian Rebel Group *Jabhat al-Nusra* Make it Official." *Christian Science Monitor*. April 11, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Deborah Amos. "Courts Become a Battleground for Secularists, Islamists in Syria." *NPR*. March 14, 2013.

FSA kata'ib are joining Jabhat al-Nusra because of its reputation for fearlessness in battle and the supposed superiority of its weapons and equipment, which are reported to be funded through international jihadist channels, wealthy benefactors from the Arabian Gulf countries, and by Muslim communities throughout the world.<sup>34</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra has also conducted several suicide bombing attacks against Syrian military targets throughout Syria.<sup>35</sup>

### *Syrian Islamic Liberation Front and the Syrian Islamic Front*

There are two major coalitions of Syrian armed opposition groups that are nominally allied with the FSA and whose member organizations hold an Islamist ideology. These are the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF) and the *Harakat Ahrar ash-Sham al-Islamiyya* ("Islamic Movement of the Freeman of the Levant"). The SILF is considered to be the more "moderate" Islamist network of armed opposition groups, while *Harakat Ahrar ash-Sham* is considered to be the more conservative Islamist network. Combined, these coalitions reportedly have tens of thousands of fighters and are geographically located throughout Syria.

**Many of the armed opposition groups draw inspiration from the Sunni Islamist groups that fought the United States in Iraq.**

While nominally allied with one another, these coalitions in practice follow their own directives and strategies. The SILF includes four of the most powerful opposition fighting groups in Syria, including: the al-Farouq Battalions which were raised in Homs governorate and are active throughout the country; *Suqoor ash-Sham* ("Falcons of the Levant") which is active in the north-western Aleppo and Idlib governorates; *Liwa al-Islam* ("Banner of Islam") which is active in Damascus governorate; and the *Tawhid* ("Unity") Brigade, which is active in Aleppo governorate.<sup>36</sup> These organizations within the SILF have been fierce combatants against the al-Assad government.

The *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham* is dominated by the organization *Ahrar al-Sham*, which was raised in Aleppo governorate but has a presence throughout Syria. Other smaller fighting fronts in the network include the *al-Fajr* ("Dawn") Brigade that was raised in and is active in Aleppo and Idlib governorates; the *Hamza ibn Abd al-Mutallib* Brigade raised in and active in Damascus governorate; and the *al-Haqq* ("Divine Truth") Brigade raised and active in Homs governorate.<sup>37</sup>

The *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya* is the most powerful Salafist fighting force in Syria, and is the most significant competitor to Jabhat al-Nusra for the allegiance of more conservative Sunni opposition fighters. *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham* represents an ideological strain of Islamism that is similar to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's Fighting Vanguard

<sup>34</sup> Mona Mahmood and Ian Black. "Free Syrian Army Rebels Defect to Islamist Group Jabhat al-Nusra." *The Guardian*. May 8, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Noman Benotman. "Jabhat al-Nusra: A Strategic Briefing." *Quilliam Foundation*. January 9, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Mariam Karouny. "Syria's Islamist Rebels Join Forces Against Assad." *Reuters*. December 29, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Jad Yatim. "11 Fighting Battalions Announce the Formation of a 'Syrian Islamic Front' to Overthrow Assad and Build a 'Civilized Islamic Society.'" *Al-Hayat*. December 22, 2012.

which fought against the al-Assad government during the 1976-1982 period of civil strife in the country. Jabhat al-Nusra represents the evolution of the Fighting Vanguard's ideology after its defeat in the city of Hama in 1982, when some of the group's surviving members became fighters in the nascent al-Qaeda network against the Soviet Union's forces in Afghanistan.

### *Alwiya Ahfaad ar-Rasool*

Another powerful armed opposition coalition is *Alwiya Ahfaad ar-Rasool* ("Brigades of the Descendants of the Prophet"). It is an increasingly powerful national umbrella organization of locally-based Syrian Sunni Islamist armed opposition fighting groups which are active belligerents against the al-Assad government. The group is a "franchise" organization whose constituent *kata'ib* announce that they are formally part of, and fight under the banner of, the national "Alwiya Ahfaad ar-Rasool." Ideologically, the *kata'ib* of Alwiya Ahfaad ar-Rasool can generally be described as "Syrian Sunni-Islamist nationalist," although some of them may also be inclined towards more secularist or militant Salafist ideological persuasions. Alwiya Ahfaad ar-Rasool claims to fight in 13 Syrian governorates, and has an estimated 15,000 fighters in its constituent *kata'ib*.

Many of the armed opposition groups allied with the FSA, SLF, and SILF draw inspiration from the Sunni Islamist groups that fought the United States in Iraq. Frequently, armed opposition groups are named after themes in the Qur'an. Some them, such as the powerful al-Farouq Battalions, Hamza ibn Abd al-Mutallib Brigade, and the Khalid ibn al-Walid Brigade of the FSA, also name themselves after historical figures from the first Islamic conquest of the Arabian Peninsula and Syria that are very important to Sunni sectarian historiography. This, and the popular identification of pro-Assad paramilitary organizations with the Shi'a, Alawite, and Christian sects, further complicates communal relations in Syria.

Due to business, tribal, and Syrian refugee relationships the FSA has established limited strategic depth outside Syria in Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq and it has used all of these countries to regroup, rearm, and rehabilitate its fighters. The northern Lebanese city of Tripoli and its adjacent Akkar region in particular are growing into important sites of strategic depth for the armed opposition due to their majority Sunni Muslim local population's political and sectarian positions against the al-Assad government.

## 1.3 Socio-Economic Context

### **Socialist history**

Syria has a primarily state-planned socialist economy that was instituted by the Syrian Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party following its ascension to power in 1963. The Syrian government under President Hafez al-Assad collectivized farmland in rural communities in Syria that had been under the control of traditional landlords, granting planting rights to the peasants who had worked the land, and organized urban labor into pro-Ba'ath unions in factories and other industries. Historically, Syria's urban economy was dominated by mercantile elites in its two largest cities, Aleppo and Damascus, and by the landed gentry with large farms outside the provincial market towns such as Hama, Homs, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor.

## Corruption

Opposition demonstrations in Syria were largely caused by a combination of frustration with the political oppression of the majority of the Syrian people by the Ba'ath Party, and by deep dissatisfaction and anger towards the country's stagnant and corrupt economy. Thus, the socio-economic context of the Syrian people immediately prior to the civil war was in many ways the "spark". Initial protests in Syria against the rule of Bashar al-Assad were to a great degree instigated by its collapsing economy and by the domination of the country's economy by a syndicate of well-connected people who were viewed as the strongest supporters of Ba'ath Party rule. Syria's macro-economy is endemically corrupt and controlled by Syrians with close ties to the Ba'ath Party.

One particularly prominent figure charged with benefiting the most from this state-sanctioned, neo-liberal corruption was Rami Makhlouf, the maternal cousin of Bashar al-Assad and one of Bashar's closest personal confidants. Rami Makhlouf inherited his father's large, state-approved business ventures which benefitted from the patronage and approval of Hafez al-Assad. He has utilized his favored position in Syrian politics to benefit from the economic liberalization policies of Bashar Al-Assad, building a personal business empire that is reported to control 60% of the Syrian economy. Makhlouf is in control of a diverse portfolio of business interests in the real estate, construction, telecommunications, air transportation, banking, importation, energy, media, and free trade zone sectors.<sup>38</sup>

Makhlouf is the principal investor and Vice-Chairman in Cham Holdings, which is the largest private company in Syria and he was until 2011 a significant investor in Syria's largest cellular phone company, SyriaTel. Rami's influence with the al-Assad government has reportedly given his enterprises the ability to win exclusive contracts with the Syrian government, exclusive licensing with foreign companies, and the ability to use Syrian security forces to intimidate his Syrian business rivals.<sup>39</sup> In Dera'a, where widespread protests against the al-Assad government began, Rami Makhlouf is reported to have worked with Syrian security forces to intimidate potential local investors and small business owners in the Dera'a duty free shop, and in the gas stations and markets along the highway leading to the border crossing. This corruption added to the economic malaise in Dera'a that contributed to protesting.<sup>40</sup>

Certain areas of Syria benefitted from the policies of economic liberalization encouraged by Bashar al-Assad prior to the outbreak of civil conflict in the country. Damascus and Aleppo, traditionally Syria's most important and wealthiest cities, experienced significant commercial development and international investment, primarily in their tourist industries. In spite of these gains, the cities, like the rest of the country, also experienced rising economic disparities between rich and poor that were exacerbated by the endemic corruption and economic stagnation affecting most Syrians. The Syrian Drought Crisis from 2000-2010 is one of the most important events in the recent history of the country, and it is one of the major socio-economic stress factors that led to revolution.

## Drought crisis

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<sup>38</sup> "Bashar al-Assad's Inner Circle." *BBC News*. July 30, 2012; "Rami Makhlouf Designated for Benefitting from Official Corruption." *United States Department of the Treasury*. February 21, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> "Rami Makhlouf: Buying Syria One Bank at a Time." *al-Akhbar*. July 10, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Zina Moukheiber. "Target of Deadly Protests in Syria has US Investors." *Forbes*. March 22, 2011.

The Drought Crisis was exacerbated by years of Syrian government mismanagement, overuse of local water resources, and endemic corruption leading to the relaxed regulation of water resources for well-connected Syrian businessmen and farmers. It was considered responsible for the devastation of Syria's agricultural economy, which is reported to have shrunk by half between the years 2004 and 2009. It is estimated that 65% of rural Syrians lived in poverty and 25% of rural Syrian young men were unemployed due to the Drought Crisis.<sup>41</sup>

Intense labor competition in menial labor sectors in Syria was the result of the Drought Crisis. Competition at the lowest levels of Syrian society became increasingly severe and was exacerbated by the near collapse of Syria's rural economy. Unemployed and hungry rural Syrians were moving to the urban regions of western Syria in large numbers.<sup>42</sup> Menial service sector work in Syria's increasingly crowded cities was insufficient to meet the labor needs of impoverished Syrians.

The Drought Crisis, and the intense pressure it put on Syria's rapidly expanding and young population in its major urban areas, created significant social pressures against the al-Assad government. The demonstrations in the southwestern city of Dera'a on the Jordanian border that inspired the initial widespread anti-Assad demonstrations were heavily influenced by the collapse of the local agricultural and labor market in the region. This collapse was indicative of economic suffering throughout Syria, and was the result of insufficient local water supplies for farming and the competition from hundreds of thousands of itinerant Syrian agricultural workers from northeastern Syria.<sup>43</sup>

Syria's resident refugee populations, already highly vulnerable prior to the conflict, are further threatened by war. Both Iraqi and Palestinian refugees suffer from relatively high rates of poverty with low rates of education and school enrollment for youth. Iraqi refugee women and female heads of household in particular are vulnerable, with a number of them reported to be forced to engage in prostitution to meet the existential needs of their families.<sup>44</sup>

The liberalization of Syria's formerly state industry centric economy prior to the civil war, combined with a drought crisis in the country's most productive agricultural regions, placed enormous strain upon the Syrian people. Syria's economy, uneven prior to the civil war, has been worsening for most Syrians over the course of the conflict, with increasing costs of living and shortages of essential goods including food, heating and cooking fuel, and in some areas of the country with a large influx of IDPs, increased rents on housing. A reduction in Syrian government subsidies further threatens impoverished people in the country.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "Syria: Drought Crisis Pushing Millions into Poverty." *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*. September 9, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> "Syria: Drought Driving Farmers to the Cities." *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*. September 2, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Robert F. Worth. "Drought Withers Lush Farmlands in Syria." *New York Times*. October 14, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Melissa McNamara. "Iraqi Refugees Turn to Prostitution." *CBS*. February 11, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Jamal Mahamid. "Syria's Frail Economy, Before and After the Revolution." *Al-Arabiyya*. April 1, 2013.

## 1.4 Main Trends

Syria is currently deeply affected by ongoing civil war throughout its territory. The Syrian civil war, which evolved from widespread popular demonstrations in the country since March 2011, is estimated to have killed approximately 70,000-94,000 people, the majority of whom are civilians.<sup>46</sup> In addition to those Syrians killed by the fighting, more than 3.8 million people have been internally displaced in the country.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, more than 1.5 million Syrians have been made refugees in several countries neighboring Syria, the majority of whom are in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq.<sup>48</sup>

**Due to the conflict an estimated 94,000 people have been killed, 1.6 million people have been made refugee with an additional 3.8 million Syrians being internally displaced.**

### Sectarian conflict and regional rivalry

In addition to the direct cost of the fighting, it is reported that conflict that is defined on the basis of communal identification, such as “Sunni” versus “Alawite,” is becoming more common. This sectarian conflict of identity, however, is not the only factor that is inflaming the civil war in Syria.

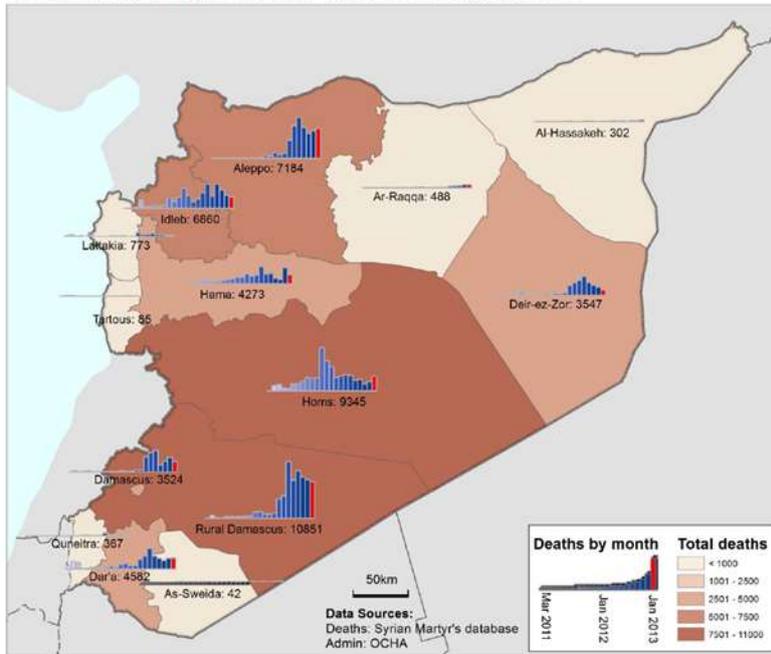
Although the civil war in Syria is popularly considered to have been inflamed by regional rivalry between the Sunni-majority Gulf Coordinating Council led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the Shi’ite-majority Islamic Republic of Iran and its “Resistance Axis” that includes Hezbollah, Syria’s civil war demonstrates more complicated conflicts of identity that include class conflict, rural versus urban divisions, and repressed political liberty. The al-Assad government is supported not just by Alawites and minorities such as Christians, Druze, Ismailis, Shi’a, and others, but also by Sunni Muslims who benefitted from the government or are skeptical of the armed opposition’s plan for the future of Syria. This makes Syria’s civil war a potentially intractable, and highly divisive, conflict.

<sup>46</sup> Mariano Castillo and Fred Pleitgen. “World Seeks Answers as Syria Civil War Evolves.” *CNN*. April 30, 2013; “Tens of Thousands of Previously Undocumented Deaths from Alawite Areas Makes Death Toll Exceed 94,000.” *Syrian Observatory of Human Rights*. May 14, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> “More than 3.8 Million IDPs in Syria.” *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre*. March 28, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> “Syria Regional Refugee Response.” *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*. May 1, 2013.

Estimated deaths by governorate – March 2011 to January 2013



**Use of Syrian Martyr's database as a source:**  
 There are a variety of sources for data on the number of deaths from the conflict in Syria. A report by OHCHR details seven key databases with documented killings from the conflict. The Syrian Shuhada (SS) database (Syrian Martyr's database) has been used for the purposes of mapping the number of death data by settlement and / or Governorate for the following reasons:

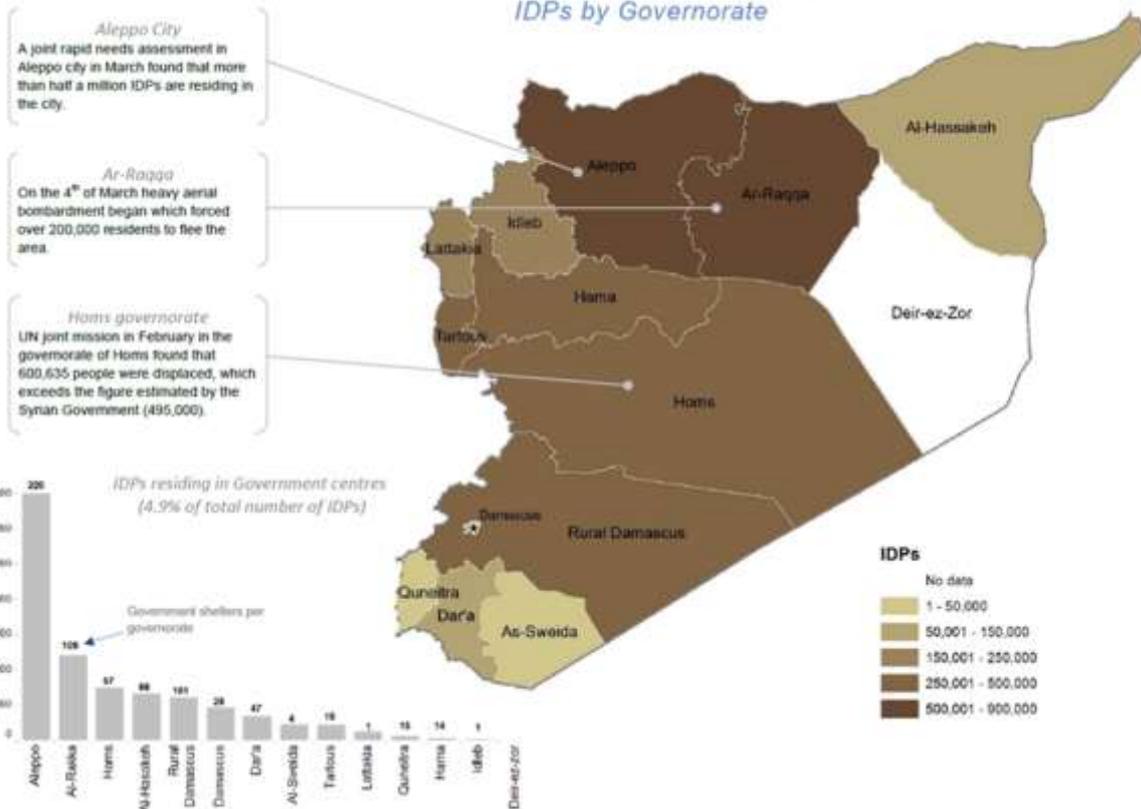
- Willingness of SS to share raw data files for city / province and death count (useful for verification and mapping against P-codes as issued by OCHA)
- Ability to report killings by Governorate, City, Date
- Extent of documented killings (in excess of 50,000)
- Evidence such as pictures / videos to verify the killing
- Trend is in line with results of other databases

OHCHR was able to verify 71% of the SS database. The remaining 29% of reported deaths were not able to be verified due to insufficient data, although this is to be expected from documenting during a conflict.

(Benetech 2013/01/02, SS n.d.)

Of the 55,211 killings documented by the Syrian Shuhada database, 13% (7,004) were classified as armed rebels or military defectors. SAF deaths are not included in the database, which is one reason why the total number of deaths documented is lower than the UN estimate of 70,000. (SS n.d., 2013-02-21)

Internal Displacement  
 IDPs by Governorate



## 1.5 Medium Term Outlook

The Syrian civil war is likely to continue into the medium term. Continuing conflict in Syria threatens to significantly jeopardize not only the life, property, and well-being of the country's population, but also could severely restrain its post-war economic development. The country's most important commercial center, Aleppo, is currently a fiercely fought-over battleground, and many cities, towns, and villages throughout Syria have been partially or completely destroyed by fighting.

In addition, either an al-Assad government or an opposition victory in the civil war raises significant important questions about the future of the country and the preservation of its civic peace. These questions are important to a post-war transition in Syria and include: who will be the guiding civilian authority in the country?; what military and security forces will keep the peace in the country and will they have local and national legitimacy?; what will be done to incorporate disaffected communities in the country?; and perhaps most complicated and vital to the future stability of the country, how will the Syrian economy be revitalized and improved?

## II. Profile of Syria's Christian community<sup>49</sup>

Christians are a significant minority in Syria, numbering approximately 2.3 million people, or one-tenth of the country's population.<sup>50</sup> The majority of Syria's Christians are ethnically Arab, with substantial numbers of ethnic Armenian Christians, and ethnic Assyrian Orthodox Christians and smaller communities of ethnic Assyrian Chaldean Catholics. "Christianity" is a sectarian identity to most non-Christian Syrians, regardless of ethnicity, with particular denominations of Christianity commonly associated with particular ethnic groups.

Syria's Christian community is concentrated in its largest numbers in the Aleppo governorate in the city of Aleppo; Homs Governorate in the Orontes River valley near the Lebanese-Syrian border and in the *Wadi al-Nasara* ("Valley of the Christians") northwest of the city of Homs near the governorate of Tartus; in and around the city capital of Damascus; and in the northeastern governorate of Hasakah in and around the city of Qamishli. Smaller Christian communities are scattered throughout the country, including in the Tartus, Latakia, Hama, Raqqah, and Idlib governorates.

The Christians of Syria are divided into a number of denominations, including ethnic Armenian Orthodox, Arab Greek Orthodox, Arab Greek Catholic, Assyrian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, and Syriac Catholic. Syria's largest Christian denomination is the Greek Orthodox Church with approximately 500,000 ethnic Arabs and a small number of ethnic Greek members, followed by the Armenian Orthodox Church with 110,000-160,000 ethnic Armenian members, and the ethnic Assyrian Syriac Orthodox Church with approximately 89,000 members.<sup>51</sup>

***Christians are one of the most numerous minority communal groups in Syria.***

Syria's Christians are a very important community in the country. Christians in Syria, as an entire "sectarian community," are one of the most numerous minority communal groups, rivaling both the Alawites and the Kurds for percentage of population. The Christians of Syria are divided into numerous denominations, however, and are not as centrally concentrated as the Alawites of the coastal regions of Latakia and Tartus, or the Kurds who are concentrated in the north-western regions of Aleppo and Idlib governorates and in the northeastern governorate of al-Hasakah.

Both of these communities, Alawites and Kurds, are considered the most intransigent and suspicious communities, as a whole, towards the Syrian opposition. Syrian Christian communities are located in large concentrations, however, in strategic areas of the country that are vital to both the government and the opposition's war efforts, such as in and around the cities of Aleppo and Damascus, and in the southern areas of Homs governorate near the Lebanese border.

<sup>49</sup> This section was authored by Nicholas Heras.

<sup>50</sup> The statistics used by the author of this chapter differ slightly from the figures used by the World Watch Unit of Open Doors International. Open Doors estimates the total numbers of Christians in Syria at 1.7 million in 2013 (1.9 million in 2012), which corresponds to 8% of the population. The decreasing numbers of Christians is due to emigration (before the civil war) and the number of refugees caused by the civil war.

<sup>51</sup> "Syria's Beleaguered Christians." *BBC News*. April 23, 2013.

## 2.1 Specific Threats and Risks to the Syrian Christian Community

### Deir ez-Zor

The ongoing Syrian civil war is placing enormous stress on the country's Christian community. Syrian Christian leaders assert that more than 1,000 Syrian Christians have been killed in the fighting, more than 400,000 internally displaced or made refugees in the country's neighboring countries, and more than 40 Christian churches, orphanages, and medical centers destroyed or damaged as a result of the conflict.<sup>52</sup> The entirety of the small Christian community in the southeastern governorate of Deir ez-Zor is reported to have been forced to leave the governorate following threats by Salafist groups in the region, and the ancient "Church of Christ the King," in the city of Deir ez-Zor destroyed.<sup>53</sup>

### Refugees

Christian Syrian refugees, like all Syrian refugees, are at risk of losing their property and livelihoods in the areas of the country that they have fled from. In Lebanon, which is reported to be receiving an increasing number of Syrian Christian refugees, many Syrian Christians do not register with local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have programs established to assist refugees. It is believed that these refugees do not register with these NGOs out of the hope that their presence in Lebanon will be temporary, either to return to Syria or to seek third country repatriation in Europe.<sup>54</sup>

**Many Syrian Christians do not register with local or international NGOs.**

Turkey, a major destination country for Syrian refugees, is reported to be establishing specific refugee camps for ethnic Kurds and Assyrian Christians who have fled from Syria's northeastern al-Hasakah governorate. The camp for Assyrian Christians is being erected on the donated property of a wealthy Turkish Assyrian man.<sup>55</sup>

## 2.2 Syrian Christians and the Syrian Civil War

### Opposition

Although there is a widespread perception amongst the Syrian opposition that the Christians of the country are aligned politically with the al-Assad government, the reality of the situation is more nuanced and complicated. Several leading opposition members are Christians, including the President of the Syrian National Coalition, George Sabra, and prominent dissidents Michel Kilo, and Faiz Sara.

<sup>52</sup> John Pontifex. "Syria: Patriarch Makes Urgent Peace Appeal." *Aid to the Church in Need*. April 15, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> "Syria: The Capuchin Church in Deir ez-Zor is Hit." *Order of Capuchin Friars Minor*. April 20, 2013.

<sup>54</sup> "Syria's Christian Refugees Seeking European Future." *Al-Akhbar*. April 18, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Burch. "Turkey Building Refugee Camps for Syrian Christians, Kurds." *Reuters*. April 10, 2013.

Christian communities participated in political demonstrations against the al-Assad government prior to the outbreak of fighting throughout the country.<sup>56</sup> Syria's Christian community was reported to be initially hoping for greater political freedom and social rights, leading some Christians to participate in political demonstrations, while the majority of the Christian community maintained tacit support for the Syrian government which is led by another, Islamist-fearing minority community.<sup>57</sup>

***Christian communities participated in political demonstrations against the government prior to the outbreak of fighting throughout the country.***

### ***Partisan of God Brigades***

The FSA, which is an umbrella organization of armed opposition groups representing a wide range of Syria's sectarian and ethnic communities, also includes some fighting fronts that are composed entirely of anti-Assad Christian militants, most famously the "Partisans of God Brigades." The Partisans of God Brigades are based in and around Damascus and call for a united Syria that is without sectarianism and is free from the rule of the al-Assad government.<sup>58</sup>

At the present time, it is difficult to determine exactly how many Syrian Christians have joined armed opposition fighting groups such as the Partisans of God Brigades, although, based on YouTube footage that these groups upload, there are potentially hundreds to a few thousand pro-opposition Christian fighters openly declaring their dissent to the al-Assad government.

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<sup>56</sup> Nir Rosen. "On Syria's Protest Movement." *Al-Jazeera*. February 20, 2012.

<sup>57</sup> "Syrian Christians in Danger." *LFTV*. February 29, 2012.

<sup>58</sup> "Syrian Christians Make Up Partisans of God Brigades." *Free Revolutionaries YouTube Page*. September 20, 2012; "Christians Joining the Partisans of God Brigades." *Sailor9991 YouTube Page*. December 31, 2012.

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*Michel Kilo is a famous Syrian journalist, author, and civil and human rights activist currently living in Paris, France. Born and raised in the coastal city of Lattakia, in Lattakia governorate which has a majority Alawite population, he was a prominent member of the opposition party “Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change” in 2005 which called for peaceful reform and communal peace and dialogue in Syria. As a result of his advocacy for civil and human rights in Syria, Michel Kilo was imprisoned by the al-Assad government from 2006-2009, when he was released from prison. Currently resident in France, Kilo established an exile Syrian opposition group called “Syrian Christians for Justice and Freedom,” with its stated goal being to establish strong relations between the Syrian Christian community and the “majority” of Syria’s population, i.e. Sunni Muslims. Michel Kilo also attracted some derision from the Syrian Christian community when he stated that, ‘...the Christians who support the regime are either shabiha themselves, or misguided by the church.’*

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**Although there is a widespread perception amongst the Syrian opposition that the Christians of the country are aligned politically with the al-Assad government, the reality of the situation is more nuanced and complicated. Several leading opposition members are Christians.**

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*George Sabra is currently the President of the Syrian National Council, the most powerful coalition organization within the opposition Syrian National Coalition. Born and raised in Qatana, a suburb of Damascus, he is based in Istanbul, Turkey. Sabra was educated in the United States at Indiana University, after which he returned to Syria and became a famous writer for both television and newspapers. He was a prominent dissident against both Bashar al-Assad and his father Hafez al-Assad, and was arrested and imprisoned multiple times for his advocacy for human and civil rights in Syria.*

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*Faiz Sara is a journalist and opposition activist leader from Damascus. Sara, like Michel Kilo, was a founding member of the Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change, and was arrested several times for advocacy for civil and human rights in Syria prior to the outbreak of widespread popular protests against the al-Assad government in 2011. An active member of the peaceful protest organized by the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), Sara is reported to have been arrested and imprisoned by Syrian security forces a number of the national leaders of the umbrella National Coordinating Committee (NCC), which attempts to organize the protests of the LCCs under a national strategy of protest.*

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### Pro-Government

Though some Syrian Christians support the revolution against the al-Assad government, there are other Christian communities that actively support the Syrian government, or are willing to accept its weapons and training in order to protect their villages and urban neighborhoods from the armed opposition. Some Christian leaders also have openly sided with the al-Assad government, such as the Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregorios Laham III, who stated that Syrian opposition movements were “terrorists” that were enacting a foreign plot.<sup>59</sup> Militant Sunni Islamists in the Syrian opposition are a particular cause for concern for Syrian Christians who fear an escalation of sectarian-motivated attacks similar to the attacks upon the Christian community in Iraq.<sup>60</sup>

### *Shabiha's and Popular Committees*

Syrian Christians have also joined pro-Assad *shabiha* militias, or have mobilized local Popular Committees to allow Syrian military forces to engage the armed opposition in the most fiercely contested front-line areas of the country. Based on media reports, YouTube video footage of Popular Committees, and the demographics of the villages affected by direct conflict in Aleppo, the Damascus suburbs, and the Orontes River Valley in southern Homs governorate, perhaps tens of thousands of Syrian Christians of various denominations are participating in pro-government or anti-opposition popular committees.

***Though some Syrian Christians support the revolution, there are other Christian communities that actively support the Syrian government.***

One large Syrian village, Saidnaya, a popular pilgrimage site for the global Christian community that boasts 44 churches, is a famous center of support for the Syrian government. Its residents, without fear of appearing on television to an international audience, raised a Popular Committee for village defense, and claimed to take periodic mortar fire from neighboring, anti-Assad Sunni Muslim villages.<sup>61</sup> Syrian Christians have been forming Popular Committees throughout the country in order to protect their villages and urban districts from reprisals from Salafist armed opposition groups.

The Popular Committees are frequently associated with Syria's minority communities, including Christians, Druze, and Alawites. Both men and women are fighters in the Popular Committees.<sup>62</sup> Popular Committees are generally reported to be mobilized to defend specific sectarian villages or urban enclaves, such as Christian districts, against armed opposition attack.<sup>63</sup> Several Popular Committees have been raised in the mixed-sectarian villages in the Orontes River valley region.

<sup>59</sup> “Syrian Melkite Patriarch Says Nation ‘United Against Foreign Plot.’” *BBC World Service*. April 7, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Alexandra Zavis. “Syrian Christians Worry About Life After President Bashar Assad.” *Los Angeles Times*. March 7, 2012.

<sup>61</sup> “Christian Militia Standing Behind Assad.” *CNN*. February 4, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> “Syria Builds Paramilitary Force Aided By Iran.” *Agence France Presse*. January 21, 2013.

<sup>63</sup> “Asia/Syria: Christians Form ‘Popular Committees’ Armed to Prevent Violence’.” *Agenzia Fides*. September 18, 2012.

The al-Assad government, seeking to enhance the effectiveness of the Popular Committees in assuming a greater burden of local and regional defense against the armed opposition, is stated to be seeking to integrate the Popular Committees into a larger “National Defense Army” (NDA) reportedly trained with the assistance of the Iranian Quds Force.<sup>64</sup> Hezbollah, at least in the strategic central-western province of Homs, is also believed to be assisting in the mobilization, training, and deployment of Popular Committees.<sup>65</sup> The integration of village and urban district-level Popular Committees, assumed to be composed of primarily one ethnic or sectarian group from the local area, into the NDA, is stated to raise pro-Assad, pro-Syrian nationalistic morale instead of favoring communal group identity.<sup>66</sup>

### 2.3 Syrian Christians Deliberately Targeted

The Christian community in Syria, like all of its communities, is vulnerable to the disruption of the country's civil society and commerce due to the fighting and destruction of the conflict. Syrian Christians, like all of the country's communities, have also been the targets of kidnapping and assassination by criminal and militant groups, although at the present time there is no evidence of systematic violence perpetrated especially against the Christian community in Syria. This situation could change, however, as Syrian Christian communities become increasingly militarized and associated with the al-Assad government due to a rising sense of fear of the predominately Sunni Muslim armed opposition.<sup>67</sup>

#### Abducted clergymen

Syrian Christian priests have been the victims of the conflict, although there is no clear indication that they were targeted specifically because they were “Christian.” In October 2012, Father Fady al-Haddad, the Greek Orthodox priest of the mixed Christian-Sunni village of Qatana, west of Damascus, was abducted and murdered by kidnappers who did not belong to either the government or the opposition. Father al-Haddad had been negotiating the ransom of a prominent local Christian doctor who had been kidnapped by the same people who abducted and killed him.<sup>68</sup> Recently, two Christian religious leaders, Boulos Yaziji of the Greek Orthodox Church and Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church, were abducted by unidentified gunmen near Aleppo.<sup>69</sup>

***The abduction of two bishops from Aleppo has added to the widespread fear among Syrian Christians that they will be deliberately targeted.***

<sup>64</sup> “Syria Builds Paramilitary Force Aided By Iran.” *Agence France Presse*. January 21, 2013.

<sup>65</sup> Bassem Mroue. “Hezbollah-Backed Shi’ites Fight in Syria.” *Associated Press*. April 14, 2013.

<sup>66</sup> Firas Choufi. “On the Front-Line of the Battle for Syria’s Lebanese Villages.” *Al-Akhbar*. March 2, 2013.

<sup>67</sup> Tracey Shelton. “Syria’s Christians Caught Between Regime and Revolution.” *Global Post*. April 17, 2013.

<sup>68</sup> “Priest Who Negotiated Syria Hostage Releases Slain.” *Agence France Presse*. October 25, 2012.

<sup>69</sup> “Gunmen Abduct Two Bishops in Northern Syria.” *BBC News*. April 23, 2013.

The abduction of bishops Yaziji and Ibrahim, known religious leaders of their communities in Aleppo, has received significant attention in Syria. The two men were highly regarded for their humanitarian work amongst Christians in Aleppo who were directly impacted as a result of the fighting in the city, and were considered to be “politically neutral” in the conflict. As the civil war becomes more “sectarian”, their abduction has added to the widespread fear among Syrian Christians that Christians in front-line areas such as Aleppo and Damascus, will be deliberately targeted.<sup>70</sup>

### Fear of radical Muslim organizations

Christians throughout Syria have voiced fear and concern at the potential victory of radical Muslim Salafist organizations in the civil war, such as the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, and worry how such a victory would negatively impact their lives. While this fear of militant Salafist organizations is reported to be increasing, it is also tempered by the realities of local circumstances in the conflict. Some diverse, front-line areas that are ostensibly under the control of the armed opposition, such as the north-central city of Ras al-‘Ayn on the Turkish-Syrian border, are reported to have relatively tolerant communal relations, with some local Christians voicing their belief that organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra are more trustworthy than the al-Assad government.<sup>71</sup> In the central governorate of Hama, the Christian villages of Mahrada and Sqailbiyeh, where Popular Committees are organized, have been directly threatened with death by the leader of the Ansar Brigade.<sup>72</sup> The threat drew condemnation from the international Organization of the Islamic Conference.<sup>73</sup>

Similar accusations of threats against Christians occurred in the city of Homs in 2012, there perpetrated by the al-Farouq Battalions. Opposition fighters associated with the al-Farouq Battalions are reported to have intimidated Christians in Homs that they accused of being pro-Assad and demanded a *jizya* tax, an Islamic religious tax placed on protection of non-Muslims such as Christians and Jews, from them. This incident is stated to have significantly contributed to an atmosphere of fear amongst the Christian community in Homs that led to the cancellation of public Easter celebrations that year.<sup>74</sup>

***The fear of attacks against their community has limited the free participation in holidays such as Christmas and Easter.***

The fear of attacks against their community by groups such as the Ansar Brigade has limited the free participation in holidays such as Christmas and Easter for Syria's Christians.<sup>75</sup> Wealthy Christians, like other Syrians, are the targets of kidnapping, and individual Christians who live in neighborhoods close to the fighting are reported to have been killed out of

<sup>70</sup> Sarkis Kassargian. “Syria Orthodox Easter Marred by Bishops in Captivity.” *Agence France Presse*. May 3, 2013.

<sup>71</sup> Danny Gold. “Syria’s Christian Minority Lives in Fear of Kidnapping and Street Battles.” *The Atlantic*. April 18, 2013.

<sup>72</sup> Barbara Surka. “Syrian Christians Fear Bleak Future After Assad.” *Associated Press*. December 23, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> “OIC Condemns Syria ‘Ansar Brigades’ Threat to Storm Two Christian Towns in Hama.” *An-Najaf Al-Ashraf*. December 24, 2012.

<sup>74</sup> “Syrian Opposition Army Imposes Islamic Tax on Christians in Homs.” *BBC News*. April 10, 2012.

<sup>75</sup> Anne Barnard. “A Wary Easter Weekend for Christians in Syria.” *New York Times*. March 30, 2013; Barbara Surka. *Ibid*.

sectarian-motivated murder and due to the perception that the majority of the country's Christian community is pro-Assad.<sup>76</sup> Referring to the situation of Christians in Syria, Samir Nassar, the Maronite Catholic Archbishop of Damascus, has stated that the country's Christians will have to '...choose from two bitter chalices: die or leave.'<sup>77</sup>

## 2.4 Disproportionate Suffering of Syria's Christian Community

Civilian members of the Syrian Christian community, like all civilians in front-line areas of the conflict, have suffered disproportionately from the civil war. Of the Christian communities affected by the war, the Syrian Christian community in Aleppo, in particular, has suffered as a result of the deprivations of war as their city has become one of the major sites of combat in the conflict.

The Christians of Aleppo have been particularly hard hit by the fighting, as the city is currently one of the major battlefields of the civil war. While Aleppo is one of the major sites of Christian suffering in Syria, the governorate of Homs is emerging as a potential battlefield between Christians and other sectarian communities, particularly Sunnis. The strategic value of Homs, the ongoing reported militarization of its Christian community, and the active intervention of Hezbollah against the armed Syrian opposition in the governorate, makes it a potentially deadly arena for communal conflict. Both Aleppo and Homs are used as case studies to demonstrate the challenges faced by Syria's Christian community.

### 2.4.1 Case Study: Aleppo

Aleppo is an extremely influential city in contemporary Syria. It had the country's second largest economy after Damascus. In 2006 it was named the "Islamic Cultural Capital of the World," and the city and its suburbs have a strong Islamic culture in spite of its ethnic and sectarian diversity. Prior to the outbreak of civil conflict, Aleppo was experiencing significant growth in its tourist industry due to its historical sites and authentic Arab cultural heritage.

Aleppo, like Damascus, experienced inflation, increasing unemployment and a depressed wage market in several sectors due to an influx of economic migrants from rural areas in northeastern Syria. These displaced and unemployed Syrians, primarily Sunni Muslim youth from dispossessed, rural backgrounds, are generally the mainstay of armed opposition groups in the city. Islamist militant groups are reported to have made threats against the city's Christian population since early 2012, prior to the onset of armed conflict in Aleppo.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> "Christians Under Attack in Syria." *CBS News*. March 28, 2013.

<sup>77</sup> "Syria's Beleaguered Christians." *BBC News*. April 23, 2013.

<sup>78</sup> "The Declining Number of Christians in Aleppo." *Syria Comment*. February 18, 2012.

### Less pluralistic city

With a pre-war population of approximately 160,000-270,000 Christians, half of whom are Armenian Orthodox and the other half split between Arab Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics, Aleppo's Christian community is particularly at risk from the war. The Chaldean Catholic Bishop of Aleppo, Antoine Audo, asserts that between 20,000-30,000 Christians of all denominations have fled the city as a result of the fighting in and around it.<sup>79</sup> Christians displaced from the fighting in Aleppo face the prospect of never being able to return to their homes and businesses, or to return to a civil order in the city that is less pluralistic and accepting of minority rights than before the war.<sup>80</sup>

Several predominantly Christian districts of Aleppo, including Telal, Sulaymaniyeh, and Jdeide in Aleppo's Old City, and Sheikh al-Maksoud, which has a significant minority of Christians, have been fiercely contested fronts in the fighting for the city.<sup>81</sup> Christians residing in front-line areas of Aleppo, like all of the city's residents in these areas, do not have reliable access to running water, electricity, or telephone and television communications.<sup>82</sup> Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, the Archbishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Aleppo, asserts that more than a third of the city is destroyed by the war, with shortages of food, and that schools, social welfare services, and civil society organizations are severely depleted or non-functioning.<sup>83</sup>

**Between 20,000-30,000 Christians have fled Aleppo as a result of the fighting; more than a third of the city is destroyed by the war.**

### Armenia

As the conflict for Aleppo has become worse, members of the Armenian community in the city have attempted to leave Syria for the Republic of Armenia in the Caucasus. Approximately 7,000 Syrian Armenians, who speak a different dialect of Armenian and have a different cultural and historical upbringing from their Republic of Armenia hosts, are currently resident in Armenia. Many of these Syrian Armenians are having difficulty affording the higher cost of living in the Republic of Armenia, particularly in the capital and largest city of Yerevan, and are finding fewer opportunities for social advancement than they had in Syria.<sup>84</sup> In order to accommodate the increasing desire of Syrian Armenians to leave the ongoing conflict in the country, Armenian authorities in Yerevan have opened elementary schools that teach Arabic and follow a Syrian curriculum for schoolchildren and have simplified the visa process for Syrian Armenians to travel to the Republic of Armenia.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>79</sup> "Syrian Bishop Says that 30,000 Christians Have Fled Aleppo." *Agence France Presse*. March 21, 2013.

<sup>80</sup> "Aleppo Christians Don't Want to be a 'Page in History.'" *Agence France Presse*. September 13, 2012.

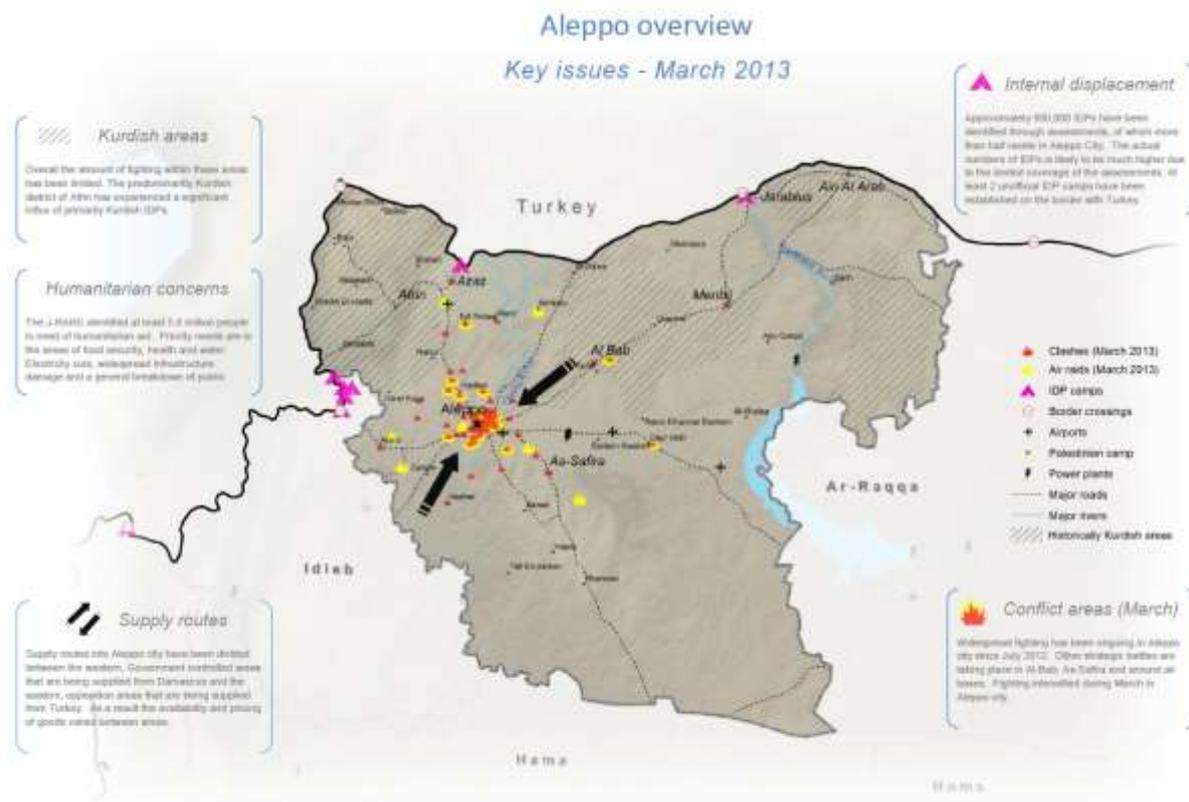
<sup>81</sup> "Syrian Army Retakes Aleppo's Christian Areas." *Agence France Presse*. August 23, 2012.

<sup>82</sup> "Aleppo Christians Find Safe Havens Near Front Line." *Agence France Presse*. January 5, 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Amy Assad. "A Bishop's View of Aleppo." *Majalla*. December 22, 2012.

<sup>84</sup> Alia Malek. "Syrian Armenians Seek Shelter in Armenia." *New York Times*. December 11, 2012.

<sup>85</sup> Diana Markosian. "Armenia Tries to Help as Christian Armenians Flee Syria." *USA Today*. February 14, 2013.



In response to the impact of the conflict in Aleppo upon the Syrian-Armenian community, the Republic of Armenia's Ministry of the Diaspora, and the large Armenian Diaspora communities in Europe, North America, South America, and in Lebanon, have provided direct aid to their friends and relatives through their relatives living in Aleppo, church organizations, and ethnic organizations such as the Armenian Relief Society. Armenians in Syria report to their family members in the Diaspora that the greatest threats they face are from indiscriminate artillery and mortar bombardments by both sides in the conflict, targeted kidnapping for ransom by armed criminal groups taking advantage of the security vacuum, and lack of essential goods including food, potable water, and medicine. As a result, the majority of funding raised by the Armenian Diaspora is used to pay for food, medicine, heating, cooking gas and potable water for affected Armenian Syrians in and around Aleppo.<sup>86</sup>

**Armed criminal groups  
take advantage of the  
security vacuum.**

## 2.4.2 Case Study: Homs

One of the largest concentrations of Christians in Syria is in the governorate of Homs. Homs is a large central Syrian governorate that borders Lebanon with a provincial capital in Homs City in the southwestern region of the governorate. In the context of the Syrian civil war, the area around Homs along the Lebanese border is considered strategic because it links

<sup>86</sup> Author's research among Armenian-American diaspora community in the Washington, DC and Boston, MA urban areas.

Damascus to generally pro-government coastal regions of Syria by highway. Homs is an important area for the armed Syrian opposition because it is contiguous with areas in Lebanon that are necessary to maintain a route of supply and transit for Syrian opposition fighters residing in and around the area of Tripoli and the region of the Akkar in northern Lebanon, and in and around the cities of Damascus and Idlib.

It is estimated that there are approximately 250,000 Christians currently residing in Homs governorate.<sup>87</sup> Christians in Homs generally belong to the Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, and Roman Catholic denominations.<sup>88</sup> The Christian community in Homs is concentrated in the southwestern region of the governorate, within close proximity of the Lebanese border. Two districts within this region, southwest of the city of Homs in the Orontes River valley that abuts the Lebanese border near the city of al-Qusayr, and in the *Wadi al-Nasara* ("Valley of the Christians") northwest of the city of Homs that abuts the Lebanese border and the Syrian governorate of Tartus, have the heaviest concentration of Christians.

### Valley of the Christians

The Christian residents in the "Valley of the Christians" have strong social ties to their co-religionists throughout western Syria and in Lebanon's northern Akkar plains which abut Homs. There are approximately 30 Christian-majority villages in the area.<sup>89</sup> Prior to the civil war, several significant historical sites in the Valley of the Christians made it one of the most well-traveled tourist destinations in Syria. These sites include the Krak des Chevaliers, perhaps the best-preserved Crusader era fortress, and the ancient Monastery of St. George.

***One of the largest concentrations of Christians in Syria is in the governorate of Homs. Recent reports suggest that the majority of them have left the city.***

Christian communities in these areas live within close proximity of Syrians of other sectarian backgrounds, including Alawites and Sunnis. The social demography of the areas of the Orontes River valley in particular is complex. Approximately 30,000 residents of 25 villages in the region claim Lebanese citizenship, the majority of them being Shi'a Muslims, but with significant minorities of Christians, Sunnis, and Alawites.<sup>90</sup>

Although there was a large number of Christians in Homs City prior to the outbreak of civil war, in the Hamadiya and Bustan al-Diwan neighborhoods, recent reports suggest that the majority of the Christian population of the city of Homs has left it to live with their co-religionists in the villages of the Valley of the Christians and in the Orontes River valley, or have fled to nearby Lebanon. Homs' Christians are reported to have left the city due to its

<sup>87</sup> Various sources estimate the population of Christians in the city of Homs to have been 80,000 people prior to the Syrian civil war, with another 150,000 Christians living in villages near the city of Homs in the Orontes River valley and in the "Valley of the Christians."

<sup>88</sup> Boumedién al-Sahili. "al-Qusayr Residents Bewildered by the Events Around Them." *As-Safir*. March 4, 2013.

<sup>89</sup> Bill Spindle and Sam Dagher. "Can Syria's Christians Survive?" *The Wall Street Journal*. August 11, 2012.

<sup>90</sup> Information in this paragraph taken from various sources.

general insecurity as a result of fighting between the Syrian military and the armed opposition.<sup>91</sup> Fighting in al-Qusayr, and threats against the city's Christian community, are reported to have displaced most of the city's pre-war population of approximately 10,000 Christians.<sup>92</sup>

### 2.4.3 Challenges Faced by the Christian Community in Homs and its Militarization

The challenges that confront the Christian community of Homs governorate are the result of the insecurity caused by fighting between the Syrian military and its allies, and the armed Syrian opposition. Christian communities in the governorate, particularly those that lived in Homs city and the Christians in the southwest Orontes River valley, live within close proximity to areas of conflict, and as a result, risk being targeted in the conflict or drawn into the fighting directly.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, displaced Christians from Homs, whether internally displaced in the governorate or refugees in Lebanon, suffer from the loss of property, livelihood, and in some instances, trauma from witnessing destruction and death caused by war.<sup>94</sup>

**Christians in Homs governorate assert that they were targeted by militant Islamist opposition groups.**

#### General atmosphere of insecurity

Fighting between the Syrian military and the armed opposition has occurred throughout Homs governorate, leading to what is stated to be a general atmosphere of insecurity. In addition to the battlegrounds of Homs and al-Qusayr, the Valley of the Christians has also been impacted by sporadic violence, as for a time armed opposition members seized control of the Krak des Chevaliers, resulting in heavy conflict between Syrian security forces and opposition fighters in and around Homs' greatest concentration of Christians. The fighting is reported to have killed 3 people and made hundreds internally displaced in the Christian majority village of Howache near the fortress.<sup>95</sup> Recent renewed fighting for control of the Krak des Chevaliers challenges the Syrian military's ability to preserve security in the area.<sup>96</sup> In spite of this

<sup>91</sup> "Syria's Christians Fear Iraq Scenario." *Asharq Al-Awsat*. March 6, 2013; Milena Murr. "Syrian Christians Seek Refuge Beyond Lebanon." *Al-Akhbar*. April 17, 2013.

<sup>92</sup> Soraya Naufal. "Caritas Lebanon Comes to Aid of Syrian Refugees." *Caritas Internationalis*. April 12, 2013. "Syria's Ultimatum to Christians: 'Leave Qusayr.'" *Agenzia Fides*. September 6, 2012; Ulrike Putz. "'We're Too Frightened to Talk'" Christians Flee from Radical Rebels in Syria." *Der Spiegel*. July 25, 2012; James Palmer. "Battered and Bloodied, Syrian Town Refuses to Give In." *USA Today*. September 8, 2012.

<sup>93</sup> Father George Massouh. "The Valley of the Christians." *An-Nahar*. April 4, 2012.

<sup>94</sup> Milena Murr. "Syrian Christians Seek Refuge Beyond Lebanon." *Al-Akhbar*. April 17, 2013; Steven Dockery. "Aid Options Scarce for Christian Syrian Refugees." *The Daily Star*. August 3, 2012.

<sup>95</sup> "Asia/Syria: Violence and Death in the 'Valley of the Christians': 150 Thousand Faithful in Terror." *Agenzia Fides*. December 12, 2012.

<sup>96</sup> "Free Army Militias Target Wadi al-Nasara and Syrian Army Strikes Them in a-Khaladia." *Breaking News Network*. April 2, 2013.

fighting, Christian and Sunni Muslim community leaders signed a joint statement renouncing communal violence in the area of the Valley of the Christians.<sup>97</sup>

### Sectarian-motivated attacks

Christians in Homs governorate assert that they were targeted by militant Islamist opposition groups, including the al-Qaeda ally Jabhat al-Nusra, and as a result of these threats were forced to leave their homes in fear of their lives.<sup>98</sup> Syrian opposition leaders, including the writer Michel Kilo who has been a committed opponent of the al-Assad government for many years, assert that Christians in Homs governorate have been threatened by militant Salafist groups.<sup>99</sup> In particular, the brutal fighting in and around the city of al-Qusayr has led to assertions of sectarian-motivated attacks against Christians. Syrian Christian refugees from al-Qusayr assert that Salafist fighting groups from the city and its environs, drawing from local Sunni recruits, have targeted the city's Christian community as a population that supports the al-Assad government and the Syrian military's efforts to defeat the rebellion.<sup>100</sup>

As an indicator of the draw of the region of al-Qusayr for militant Salafist groups, in 2012, Abdel Ghani Jawhar, a commander of the Lebanese militant Islamist front Fatah al-Islam who was wanted on charges of terrorism by the Lebanese government, was killed while manufacturing explosives in the city of al-Qusayr.<sup>101</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra is extremely active in the fighting in al-Qusayr, performing operations ranging from suicide bombing to conventional military attacks against targets ranging from the Syrian military to village and urban neighborhood militias, and organizations allied with the Syrian military including Hezbollah.<sup>102</sup>

***If communal conflict continues in Homs, the opportunity for transitional justice in a post-war environment will decrease.***

Currently, the region around the city of al-Qusayr, within close proximity of the Lebanese border in Homs governorate, is receiving a great deal of international attention as a result of the Lebanese political party and militant group Hezbollah's involvement in the area, and the importance of the control of Homs governorate to both the al-Assad government and the armed opposition. While the area of the Valley of the Christians has been generally unaffected by the fighting, other than to serve as a site of refuge for the displaced from the vicinity of Homs city, the Orontes River valley is located within the strategic, contested region near the city of al-Qusayr.

<sup>97</sup> "Islamic and Christian Leaders Meet in Wadi al-Nasara and Al-Hosen Areas of Homs and Sign a Statement Renouncing Sectarianism and Calling for Civil Peace." *Syrian Center for Documentation*. September 2, 2012.

<sup>98</sup> Kim Sengupta. "The Plight of Syria's Christians: 'We Left Homs Because They Were Trying to Kill Us.'" *The Independent*. November 2, 2012.

<sup>99</sup> Jean Aziz. "Syria's Christians are on the Front Lines of Religion, the Ramparts, and the Oil Pipelines." *Al-Monitor*. April 23, 2013.

<sup>100</sup> Mary Wakefield. "'Die Slowly, Christian Dog': Paranoia Among Syria's New Refugees." *The Spectator*. October 27, 2012.

<sup>101</sup> Aryn Baker and Rami Aysha. "In Syria, Lebanon's Most Wanted Sunni Terrorist Blows Himself Up." *Time*. April 23, 2012.

<sup>102</sup> Boumedien al-Sahili. "al-Qusayr Residents Bewildered by the Events Around Them." *As-Safir*. March 4, 2013.

### Christian fighters

As the fighting in Homs governorate has intensified, Christian fighters are increasingly becoming associated with armed groups that are sympathetic to the al-Assad government. Reports from Homs indicate that extended families of Christians, similar to clans, worked with their Alawite neighbors to raise local security forces to confront the armed opposition in their areas.<sup>103</sup> One model of local defensive militias adopted by Syria's anti-opposition, or neutral communities, is the "Popular Committees."

The Christians of Homs are challenged by the insecure environment of the governorate, which is increasingly impacted by sectarian disputes at the local level. If communal conflict continues in Homs, the opportunity for transitional justice in a post-war environment will decrease, potentially leading to significant and intractable conflict. Furthermore, the strategic value of the governorate of Homs, particularly its southwestern region near the city of al-Qusayr that is contiguous with Lebanon, makes it a site of likely future conflict, even if the Syrian military and its allies, including local Christian militias, are successful in taking the city and its suburbs from the control of the armed opposition.

In the event that the al-Assad government would have to "contract" into a smaller Syrian state with direct narrow control over a strip of land stretching from the coastal provinces of Tartus and Lattakia, and extending from Homs into Damascus by a narrow strip of territory bordering the east-west highway, the Homs governorate would be essential to this effort. The potential participation of Homs' Christian community in a loyal, militarily committed, and heavily sectarian-minority popular base of support for the al-Assad government in this scenario is a topic for serious future consideration. This scenario, and the widely-held perception by the more militant, generally Sunni armed opposition groups that the country's Christian population is as a sect sympathetic to the al-Assad government, has significant impact upon the safety and daily lives of the Christian communities in Homs.

## 2.5 Medium Term Outlook for Syrian Christians

### Islamization

The Syrian Christian community is fearful of sectarian-motivated attacks against it, and in an ongoing unstable political and security environment, will reduce as much as possible its public displays of Christian traditions. Syrian Christians will most likely continue to experience discomfort with the devolving political and security situation in the country, and will join local defense militias such as the Popular Committees in increasing numbers. Reports of the increased "Islamization" of the Syrian

***Reports of the increased "Islamization" of the Syrian opposition, will continue to contribute to Syrian Christians' fears.***

<sup>103</sup> Bill Spindle and Sam Dagher. "Can Syria's Christians Survive?" *The Wall Street Journal*. August 11, 2012.

opposition, particularly the armed Syrian opposition, will continue to contribute to Syrian Christians' fears.<sup>104</sup>

The Islamization of the armed opposition is occurring as a result of the increased sectarian calls by the opposition to wage "jihad" against the Syrian government, which is dominated at its highest levels by Alawites.

### **Militarization**

This militarization of Syria's Christian communities in diverse, sectarian and ethnically mixed regions of the country is likely to become a significant trend in the near future. Although the systematic militarization of Christian Syrians in these regions is in its incipient stage, it is being encouraged by the mobilization of the "National Defense Army" by the al-Assad government. Christian militarization in Syria through the Popular Committee structure of the National Defense Army is a very sore point for the country's opposition, Christian and non-Christian, and could lead to the very cycle of communal conflict that Syrian Christian community leaders have sought to avoid. The insecurity that certain Christian communities feel towards the other communities in the country, particularly Sunni Muslims, is leading to these communities arming themselves with the cooperation of the al-Assad government and its allies, confirming the suspicions of certain armed opposition groups that Syrian Christians are their enemies and must be confronted and defeated.

### **Call for peaceful negotiations**

Syrian Christian leaders will most likely continue to call for peaceful negotiations between the Syrian government and the opposition and to emphasize their support for national unity. Although there are prominent Christian dissidents in the Syrian National Coalition, including the organization's president, George Sabra, the Christian community inside the country would have no tangible benefit in vocally calling for the removal of the al-Assad government and will not likely do so in the near future. It may even become a more active participant in the Syrian government's ongoing counter-insurgency campaign against the armed opposition, particularly in areas of the country, such as in Homs governorate, where significant communal violence is beginning to occur.

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<sup>104</sup> Youssef, op cit.. Lauren Williams. "Syrian Bishops' Kidnap Raises Christian Fears." *Daily Star*. April 26, 2013; Nick Fagge. "Syria Rebels 'Beheaded a Christian and Fed Him to the Dogs' as Fears Grow Over Islamist Atrocities." *The Guardian*. December 31, 2012; Surka, op cit.



### III. Vulnerability Assessment of Christians in Syria

This Vulnerability Assessment Tool of Christians in Syria was realized with the input of a number of experts active in the field, relief workers, Open Doors field staff and contacts, journalists, representatives of religious communities, as well as publicly available sources and research reports. The Vulnerability Assessment Tool (VAT) is basically a way of organizing all available facts, analyses, anecdotes and expert opinions, in order to substantiate the hypothesis that the Christians of Syria face some degree of vulnerability, or are vulnerable in specific ways.

The nature and extent of the conflict is such that it causes all Syrians to suffer, but the Vulnerability Assessment Tool provides a picture of the specific threats/risks to which Christians are particularly vulnerable. In other words, the VAT provides concrete and objective answers to the following questions:

- *To what extent are Christians in Syria targeted specifically?*
- *Are Christians in Syria suffering disproportionately?*

Information was collected from a number of experts, and based on their input all threats to which Christians are considered vulnerable – effectively threatening human dignity – were listed in the six categories corresponding to the components of human security as defined by the United Nations Development Program (1994): environmental security, economic security, political security, personal security, food security and health security<sup>105</sup>.

The basic findings of this tool comprehensively describe **the vulnerable position of Syria's Christians**<sup>106</sup> and the ways they are suffering from the conflict. As these findings are shared by a large number of experts and objective sources, they can be considered to be reliable. The initial list was submitted to an extensive process of expert validation (personal communications, focus groups and validation of draft versions of this report), which brought additional focus and nuance to its conclusions.

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<sup>105</sup> The methodology for the Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool (RM-VAT) was developed by Dennis Pastoor, drawing on Taylor Owen (T. Owen, *Measuring Human Security: A New View of Cambodian Vulnerability*, MA Thesis, The University of British Columbia, September 2002) and UNDP (1994).

<sup>106</sup> This report focuses on all Christians in Syria and considers them equally, regardless of their denomination (Assyrians, Syriacs, Chaldeans, Arameans, etc.)

Table 1

**Vulnerability Assessment Tool – Christians in Syria**

UNDP (1994) Components of Human Security	Step 1: To which threats are Christians vulnerable? <sup>107</sup>	Step 2: Data collection <sup>108</sup>	Step 3: Assess the intensity of each threat (Low/Med/High)
<b>ENVIRONMENTAL: Environmental security: resource depletion; vulnerability to pollution and environmental degradation</b>	Environmental security is virtually inexistent in Syria, affecting the whole population, including Christians.	See section 3.1	Low
<b>ECONOMIC: Economic security: poverty; vulnerability to global economic change</b>	The destruction of the Syrian economy because of the civil war affects the whole population, including Christians.	See section 3.2	Med
	Lands of Christians have been confiscated.	See section 3.3	Low
<b>POLITICAL: Political security: political repression; vulnerability to conflicts and warfare</b>	The Syrian civil war has to a large extent become a "sectarian conflict".	See section 3.4	Med
	Christians suffer disproportionately from the violence, insecurity and overall impunity in Syria.	See section 3.5	High
	Christians are caught in the crossfire of the strife between government and opposition forces.	See section 3.6	Med
	There are comparatively more refugees and internally displaced people amongst the Christian population than amongst any other religious or ethnic group.	See section 3.7	High
	Christian refugees are comparatively more disadvantaged than other refugees and suffer great hostilities in refugee camps.	See section 3.8	High
<b>PERSONAL: Personal security: violence; vulnerability to conflicts, natural hazards, and "creeping" disasters</b>	Christians are soft targets for criminal groups.	See section 3.9	Med
	Women in general, but particularly Christian women, are vulnerable to sexual abuse.	See section 3.10	Med
	Christians are deliberately being targeted by Islamist groups.	See section 3.11	High
	Christian men are being forced to join the government army or the rebel forces.	See section 3.12	Med
<b>FOOD: Food security: hunger and famine; vulnerability to extreme climate events and agricultural changes</b>	Christians suffer greatly from the absence of food security, especially in the areas held by the opposition.	See section 3.13	Low
<b>HEALTH: Health security: injury and disease; vulnerability to disease and infection</b>	Christians face severe health insecurity.	See section 3.14	Low

Source: Own elaboration

Before commenting on each of the specific findings of the Vulnerability Assessment, it is important to bear in mind that Christians are vulnerable to each of the presented threats in distinct matters.

Three degrees of vulnerability can be distinguished, depending on the nature of the threat:

- (1) *The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, including Christians;*
- (2) *The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, but Christians in particular;*
- (3) *Christians are specifically vulnerable to this threat.*

<sup>107</sup> Experts were asked to list all threats in each category to which they consider Christians are vulnerable (no laundry list approach). By way of illustration, for the environment, this could be an annual flood, or for personal, this could cover a high risk of landmines. There are no limits to the number of threats in any category as the only criterion is that they surpass the threshold of human security (= threatening human dignity).

<sup>108</sup> Both quantitative and qualitative sources were used, including external experts, field staff, statistics and public reports.

The degree of vulnerability of Christians to each of these threats shall be clearly indicated. Whether these threats should be labeled as “persecution” is a semantic discussion.<sup>109</sup> Not everything should be considered as religious persecution *per se*, but all listed threats correspond to situations to which Christians are, to some degree, specifically vulnerable.

### 3.1 Environmental security is virtually inexistent in Syria, affecting the whole population, including Christians

*Degree 1: The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, including Christians.*

Environmental security was already an issue before the beginning of the civil war, as Rupen Das<sup>110</sup>, Program Director for Minority Religions in Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the Institute for Middle East Studies in Beirut, Lebanon indicates, recalling the negative effect water mismanagement and drought has had on the country's agriculture. The Syrian civil war, which entered its third year in March 2013, has only worsened this situation and had a devastating effect on the degree of environmental security, with high levels of resource depletion, pollution and environmental degradation. According to Das, *‘urban devastation has destroyed water and sanitation systems in most cities other than central Damascus. This is having a ripple effect on the health and nutritional status of the population.’*

***Urban devastation has destroyed water and sanitation systems in most cities other than central Damascus.***

The situation varies depending on the region and on the moment a region got involved in the civil war, but globally the absence of environmental security is a reality throughout the country. The absence of environmental security affects the whole population, including Christians. Several representatives of Syriac/Assyrian Christian organizations indicate:

- *‘The environment is in danger; even animals received significant damage from the sound of weapons and air pollution with gunpowder. Pollution caused by various manifestations and in general the major cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Daraa and Deir El-Zor received significant damage; many destroyed houses, roads and a lot of natural places have been burned. There is no more interest and no priority in gardens, trees and the environment. As a result of the last mentioned conditions, Syriac Christians living in areas such as Homs, Aleppo, Idlib and Damascus live in so many difficulties: environmental resources have been polluted; water and soil also lead to damaging crops.’* (Rima Tüzün, Head of Foreign Affairs, European Syriac Union<sup>111</sup>.)

<sup>109</sup> Open Doors' corporate definition of persecution of Christians is as follows: *Persecution is 'any hostility, experienced from the world, as a result of one's identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians both from within and outside Christianity'.*

<sup>110</sup> Rupen Das, personal communication, March 2013.

<sup>111</sup> Rima Tüzün, personal communication, April 2013. Speaking on behalf of the European Syriac Union, Rima Tüzün declares: *‘Our assessment on Syria is based on all Syriac Christians living in Syria.*

- *'In most regions and due to lack of heating materials (gas and coal), people cut trees in urban areas, including city parks, and use them for heating.'*(Abdulmesih BarAbraham, Chairman of the Trustee Board, Yoken-bar-Yoken Foundation & Board Member of the St. Ephrem Foundation<sup>112</sup>.)

### 3.2 The destruction of the Syrian economy because of the civil war affects the whole population, including Christians

*Degree 2: The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, but Christians in particular.*

All consulted experts agree that the civil war has significantly deteriorated the Syrian economy, mentioning the huge depreciation of the Syrian Pound (inflation), the closure or destruction of many factories and businesses, the ceasing of oil production, and the increase of poverty. Abdulmesih BarAbraham indicates, *'many dependent on regular income as workers (salaried employees) have lost jobs and/or income due to major disruption of countrywide trade as a basis of business; however, state institutions still pay salaries. In addition, Christian business owners are coerced by rebel groups to financially support their fight against the government or otherwise risk their businesses being destroyed and themselves killed.'*

Economic conditions are a major reason for emigration from the country, for those who can afford it: *'The vulnerability and instability in Syria has an impact on the economy in Syria. Thus economic conditions are a major reason for emigration from the country, for those who can afford it'* (Rima Tüzün).

Although this situation affects all Syrians, there are indications that Christians in particular have suffered from the destruction of the economy, simply because Christians *'had a great part in Syria's economy'* (Rima Tüzün). Additionally, both Rima Tüzün and Abdulmesih BarAbraham indicate that as thefts multiplied, many Christian stores were robbed.

### 3.3 Lands of Christians have been confiscated

*Degree 1: The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, including Christians.*

An Open Doors field worker reported several cases of Christian lands being confiscated, under different circumstances. A testimony by a Christian Syrian refugee in Lebanon included in the report *Between Barbed Wire* by Swedish journalist Nuri Kino<sup>113</sup> says: *'Two men from a strong Arabic tribe decided one day to occupy our farmland, just like that. When I went to the police to report, I was told there was nothing they could do. The police chief was very clear that they would not act, as they didn't want the tribe to turn against the regime'* (p. 19).

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*For our opinions and views in this assessment we used the information from the field through our partner organization in Syria, which is organized throughout all Syria.'*

<sup>112</sup> Abdulmesih BarAbraham, personal communication, March 2013.

<sup>113</sup> Nuri Kino, *Between the barbed wire*, 11/01/2013, [www.nurikino.com](http://www.nurikino.com).

The WCA received reports from refugees that they had to leave their houses because the rebels wanted to use them for their strategic location or value. In many cases, Aramean Christians owning flour mills or shops were told that their properties now belong to the rebels, because it's in the interest of the rebels to control who receives flour.

### 3.4 The Syrian civil war has to a large extent become a “sectarian conflict”

*Degree 2: The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, but Christians in particular.*

At this stage of the conflict, qualifying the Syrian civil war as a “sectarian conflict” might seem obvious. Indeed, there is an important sectarian-religious component to the conflict, with Alawite Shi'ites, associated with the Assad regime, fighting Sunni rebels, and Syria's Christians either perceived as protégés or supporters of Assad<sup>114</sup>.

However, in the initial stages of the conflict, the civil war was much more often described as a *political* conflict, opposing “the regime” and “the opposition” In this interpretation the protagonists of the conflict are presented as social protesters demanding social and political reforms; and Syria is simply viewed as the next country affected by the revolutionary wave in the Middle East that has become known as the “Arab Spring”.

#### Understanding threats for minorities

There is no doubt a political dimension to the Syrian conflict, but qualifying the Syrian civil war as an essentially sectarian conflict, i.e. recognizing that the conflict is between opposing ethnic and religious groups, is an important step to fully understanding that religious and ethnic minorities could very well be vulnerable as a group to specific threats.

Renowned human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and the Minority Rights Group agree in labeling the Syrian conflict as a sectarian conflict:

- *‘Minority groups including Alawite Muslims, the community of the al-Assad family, are facing an increased risk of human rights abuses by armed opposition forces. There has been a recent rise in sectarian violence in Syria, particularly by those opposed to*

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<sup>114</sup> *‘The mass exodus of the 2.3 million Christians from Syria is not a secondary matter. Of the previous 60,000 Christians in Homs, less than 1,000 remain. Christians are being killed and tortured while their women are being raped and their churches destroyed. Schirrmacher explains that the rebels see Christians as supporters of Assad, while Assad's loyalists do not trust Christians. Repeatedly refugees report that “terrorists” with green or black headbands beat up Christians and destroy their property while announcing that a similar fate awaits Christians who do not soon flee to other countries. Some Christians are being used as human shields on the battlefields. Yet it is conspicuous that most Christians neither speak negatively about their Muslim neighbors nor mention the religious identity of the terrorists. Rather, they continue to hope that they can return to a peaceful condition in their homeland.’* Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher, chair of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, “WEA Makes Call for Help for Syria's Christians; 2.3M Christians Flee in Mass Exodus From Syria”, 28/03/2013, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/wea-makes-call-for-help-for-syrian-christians-2-3m-christians-flee-in-mass-exodus-from-syria-92843/#YmFtH8i7rguGs3TJ.99>.

*President Bashar al-Assad. Among those targeted have been Alawite, Druze and Shi'a Muslims, along with Christians' (Amnesty International<sup>115</sup>).*

- *'MRG is extremely concerned about reports of violent attacks against Shi'a, and other minorities by elements of the opposition and draws attention to the plight of Syria's Kurdish and Syriac minority. According to rights groups, Kurds have suffered abductions, killings and increased surveillance from the security forces over the last year, whilst prominent Syriac Christians have been arrested and subjected to torture' (Minority Rights Group<sup>116</sup>).*

The statements by these organizations implicitly recognize the particularly vulnerable position of religious minorities due to the conflict. Several religious minorities share this vulnerability, but the Minority Rights Group mentions Assyrian Christians especially: *'The fact that the government is dominated by Alawites, an offshoot of Shiism, places Alawite and other Shi'a communities at risk if the conflict intensifies or if the government falls. Assyrian Christians are also deeply concerned about the possibility of attacks from Sunni militants.'*<sup>117</sup>

Christian organizations and relief workers use even stronger words and speak of an *'ongoing ethnic cleansing of Christians'*<sup>118</sup> and *'another Arab country losing its Christian Assyrian minority.'*<sup>119</sup>

Daniel Maes, a Belgian priest living and working in Syria states: *"the Christians have to disappear in the Middle East because they are living the freedom of religion."*<sup>120</sup> An Open Doors field worker indicates, *'Christians live in fear of what might come, they did not choose what is happening, there is a big threat on them because they are minorities with no support, no weapons, and are considered infidels in the eyes of extremists.'*

**Christian organizations  
and relief workers speak  
of an 'ongoing ethnic  
cleansing of Christians'.**

### Dual identity

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that Syria's Christians are not only a religious minority. Syriacs are also an ethnic minority. Rima Tüzün explains: *'Our Syriac people has a dual identity: a religious identity as Christians and an ethnic identity as Syriacs. Stopping to*

<sup>115</sup> Amnesty International, "Protection of minorities must take priority in Syria transition", 10/01/2013, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/protection-of-minorities-must-take-priority-Syria-transition-2013-01-10>.

<sup>116</sup> Minority Rights Group, "MRG condemns attacks against civilians by Syria's security forces and raises concerns for minorities", 07/03/2013, <http://www.minorityrights.org/?lid=11346>.

<sup>117</sup> Minority Rights Group, "Overview of Middle East", September 2012, <http://www.minorityrights.org/?lid=3576&tmpl=printpage>.

<sup>118</sup> Agenzia Fides, "Abuse of the opposition forces, "ethnic cleansing" of Christians in Homs, where Jesuits remains", 21/03/2012, <http://www.fides.org/en/news/31228?idnews=31228&lan=eng#.UW83xbWQW9E>.

<sup>119</sup> "Nina Shea, Director of Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom then quoted Archdeacon Emanuel Youkhana of the Assyrian Church of the East in a message she had received as saying: "We are witnessing another Arab country losing its Christian Assyrian minority. When it happened in Iraq nobody believed Syria's turn would come. Christian Assyrians are fleeing massively from threats, kidnappings, rapes and murders. Behind the daily reporting about bombs there is an ethno-religious cleansing taking place, and soon Syria can be emptied of its Christians." Dan Wooding, "The Silent Exodus of Syria's Christians", 10/02/2013, <http://www.assistnews.net/Stories/2013/s13020054.htm>.

<sup>120</sup> Daniel Maes, personal communication, April 2013.

*designate our people as only a religious minority is essential to promote and defend the rights of the Syriacs and all Syrian minorities in a post-Assad regime. Syriacs are the indigenous and historically the original people of Syria. The very name, Syria, means homeland of the Syriac people. Our people lived in Syria BC (Assyrians, Arameans, Chaldeans, Babylonians ..). We have our own language and culture. In Syria there are only two religions, Christianity and Islam. If we are accepted as religious minority only, we will be a target, especially for radical extremist Islamists. The best example is the war in the name of Jesus in Lebanon; Christians against Muslims; we lost what we had. But if we are accepted with our ethnic identity, we will have allies, for example the Kurds, Druze and others. If we cannot protect our identity, we cannot survive. We are proud of being Christians, but with this designation our lives and future in Syria are under big risk, the best example is, as you mentioned in your assessment the ongoing migration and the crisis in Syria are becoming a "sectarian conflict".'*

### **3.5 Christians suffer disproportionately from the violence, insecurity and overall impunity in Syria**

*Degree 3: Christians are specifically vulnerable to this threat.*

The Syrian civil war is more and more compared to the violence in Iraq that followed the United States' invasion. The current violence has reached an unseen level of intensity. Insecurity is widespread and crime is generally left unpunished. Naturally, all Syrian civilians can be expected to suffer greatly from this situation. However, it is not an overstatement to claim that Syria's Christian communities suffer disproportionately from the violence, and particularly from the overall impunity.

Nuri Kino collected the following testimony from a Syrian refugee: *'In certain parts of Syria a Christian can no longer report injustices or crimes. We are hostages of the growing Islamism while the rest of the world either watches on or turns the other cheek'* (p. 17). Open Doors field reports confirm that Christians indeed suffer disproportionately from the growing levels of impunity in Syria, with frequent bomb explosions in Christian neighborhoods, kidnapping of Christians, torture of kidnapped Christians, large numbers of destroyed homes and churches, and displaced people. The disproportionality of the violence against Christians is also corroborated by several news services.<sup>121</sup>

#### **Vulnerable areas**

The first reason for the specific vulnerability of Syria's Christians to this threat is that most of the areas with an important Christian concentration are conflict areas. Rupen Das points out that *'all the Christian majority areas (other than Tartous, Latakia and Wadi Nasara) are also*

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<sup>121</sup> See as an example the following: 'Fides reports that kidnappings for ransom and intimidation are becoming endemic, especially in the Kurdish and Assyrian/Syriac-dominated north-east, south of Kurdish-dominated eastern Turkey and west of Assyrian-homeland Nineveh Province, northern Iraq. Fides reported on 4 February that in recent weeks "there were fifty kidnappings, and almost half against Christians" in the city of Al-Hasakah, Syria (about 120km due west of Mosul, Iraq).' Elizabeth Kendal, 06/02/2013, RLPB 196.

*areas of heavy conflict. Christians are either in opposition held areas or in contested areas. So the toll on them is very heavy.*<sup>122</sup>

Another important aspect that makes Syria's Christians specifically vulnerable to impunity is the fact that they generally do not organize in militias, and are therefore defenseless when attacked by either opposition rebels or plain criminals:

- Abdulmesih BarAbraham explains: *'Christians are the most vulnerable in the conflict and warfare in Syria as they are unarmed and "militarily" NOT organized; even offered arms, they have refused to take those, as it contradicts with Christian values to use violence/force against anybody else.'*
- A statement by the World Council of Arameans reads: *'While the war in Syria escalates, it is clear that minorities across the country are fearful for their future. The most vulnerable members of society in wartime are typically those who cannot defend themselves. In this case, it is the Christian community.'*<sup>123</sup>
- Said Malki, Vice-President of the Syriac Union Party, quoted in a European Syriac Union Newsletter declares: *'The objective of Christians is not to attack but simply to defend themselves against all harassments and attacks.'*<sup>124</sup>
- Tuma Abraham declares: *'The Christian minority in Syria has no militia and is targeted by everyone.'*<sup>125</sup>

In general, Christians do not defend themselves militarily or politically. Rima Tüzün notes: *'Christian people were politically not strong. Some people still support the regime and others work with the opposition, but the majority of Christians are still silent, impartial and don't want to join any of the parties. All their interest is in the security that they lost.'*

**In general, Christians do not defend themselves militarily or politically.**

### **No protection**

Also, the overall impunity implies that Christians when attacked do not receive any protection from the state. Given the current state of the country, the authorities can hardly protect any of their citizens, but one could question whether protecting Christians is a priority for the Assad regime. Whatever the situation may be, in the areas where the opposition is in control, it is absolutely clear that no justice is being done with regards to Christians who suffer violence. Nina Shea analyzes: *'They feel they are targeted for being Christian, which means that militants and criminals can assault them with impunity. Some point to a government that fails to protect them; others to Islamists rebels who want to drive them out.'*<sup>126</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Also see: Jean Aziz, "Syria's Christians Threatened By Ideology, Geography", Al Monitor, 23/04/2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/syria-christians-threatened-ideology-geography.html>

<sup>123</sup> World Council of Arameans, "The reality of sectarian violence in Syria", N/D, <http://www.wca-ngo.org/humanrightsfiles/the-syria-crises/347-pr-reality-sectarian-violence>.

<sup>124</sup> European Syriac Union, Newsletter, March 2013.

<sup>125</sup> AINA, 08/02/2013, <http://www.aina.org/news/20130207181447.htm>.

<sup>126</sup> Hudson Institute, "The Silent Exodus of Syria's Christians", 08/02/2013, [http://www.hudson.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=publication\\_details&id=9492](http://www.hudson.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=publication_details&id=9492).

Not only Christian organizations highlight the specific vulnerability of Christians to impunity. A document by the United Nations Human Rights Council mentions the following incidents:

- ‘On 21 October, at least one car bomb was reported as having exploded outside a police station in Bab Touma, a predominantly Christian neighborhood in Damascus. Media reported that 13 people were killed and 29 injured.’
- ‘On 29 October, two car bombs exploded in different places in Damascus. The first was detonated outside a bakery in Jaramana, a predominantly Christian and Druze area of the city. There were some indications that a nearby police station may have been the intended target. There were no reported casualties, though 32 people were said to have been injured.’<sup>127</sup>

### Militias

This being said, there are some signals that some Christian groups are currently being drawn into the conflict<sup>128</sup>, and are even organizing in militias<sup>129</sup>. Some Christians are effectively organizing in militias now, some on the side of Assad, some on the side of the Free Syrian Army, and some are not taking sides but seeking to “police” their areas and protect themselves against violence. This is also confirmed by Rima Tüzün who declares: ‘*Syriacs have realized that they need to protect and defend themselves, because no one else will do it. The Syriacs have expected primarily on support from the West. If the Syriacs are supported, they can quickly organize and thus defend themselves.*’

However, this is not the general picture. Most Christians are defenseless when attacked or robbed, and chose not to organize in militias because of their Christian convictions, at least initially. Analyst Nicholas Heras<sup>130</sup> considers the incipient militarization of a few Christian communities as a direct result of their vulnerable position: ‘*As a result of the insecurity that Syria's Christians feel, they turn to arming themselves in an organized manner which is facilitated by the Syrian government and its allies, which in turn brings the wrath of certain armed*

***There are signals that some Christian groups are currently being drawn into the conflict, and are even organizing in militias.***

<sup>127</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, A/HRC/22/59, 5 February 2013.

<sup>128</sup> ‘*Outside our hotel, Promenade, stands an artist from Syria. He has something important to tell us and he has been waiting for us. We sit down in the lobby. “Please, I have been told you are taking part in donations to Syria. I am from Qamishli, what we need there is bulletproof vests and weapons to defend ourselves. We are about a hundred young men who are ready to form a security army. We are not going out in war, merely defending our own. We are aware that we can’t protect ourselves against bombs and missiles but we can, if we receive weapons, defend ourselves against the nearby danger. We can protect Christian families against burglaries, kidnappings, rape and abuse*’ (Kino, op cit, p. 22).

<sup>129</sup> ‘*Some minority communities, notably Alawites and Christians, have formed armed self-defense groups supposedly to protect their neighborhoods from anti-Government fighters by establishing checkpoints around their areas. Some of those local groups – also known as Popular Committees – were allegedly armed and equipped by the Government and have participated alongside Government forces in military operations in Damascus and Homs. Statements indicated that some of these groups were also supported by external sponsors in neighboring countries. Armed clashes have occurred between these Committees and anti-Government armed groups in multi sectarian localities and neighborhoods or cases where armed insurgents have reached areas inhabited by minority communities*’ (United Nations Human Rights Council, A/HRC/22/59, 5 February 2013).

<sup>130</sup> Nicholas Heras, political analyst, personal communication, May 2013.

*opposition groups upon them.*<sup>131</sup> Rima Tüzün considers, ‘Christians are vulnerable mainly because they are not able to protect themselves; look what happened in Iraq. Our determination is, that if Syrians do not protect and defend themselves, they will be wiped out.’

Moreover, Heras explains that Christians, unlike the Alawites and Kurds, did not turn to militarization initially: ‘In regard to the militarization of Christians in the country, it is in its incipient stage, and only in the last six to nine months has it become a policy of the al-Assad government through the structure of the National Defense Army. The militarization of Christians, according to all reports and to my interview research, is happening particularly in southern Homs governorate and in Damascus. This process, however, is just beginning, but it could become a more significant trend in the very near future.’

Commenting on the militarization of Syriac Christians, Rima Tüzün says: ‘The al-Assad government and its different affiliations had tried and still continue, by various means to militarize Syriac Christians in the National Defense Army in order to push them into the conflict. But the strategy of the Syrian government did not succeed. Only few people accept to take arms, which can be considered as tiny minority. According to the first hand and inside information from Syria, 10.000 Syriac Christians had been called to military in the Homs governorate. Syriac Christian youths refused the call and did not join Al-Assad military. Even Syriac Christians who are currently in military service are deserting.’

Markus Tozman, a political analyst<sup>132</sup>, agrees: ‘The deteriorating security situation shows the dilemma Christians face. Though they never wanted to be dragged into the conflict, the advance of the “Free Syrian Army” which is thoroughly undermined by jihadists exposes them much more to open violence directly targeted against them. In comparison to the Kurds however, who initially also tried to stay out of the conflict, the Christians have no one to turn to for help and they do not arm themselves. Their vulnerable position makes them a much easier target for jihadists or for anti-Assad rebels who want to take revenge on Christians for their alleged acquiescent stance towards the regime.’

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<sup>131</sup> In addition, Heras indicates: ‘Current reports indicate that this scenario might play out in Homs governorate's Orontes River valley and may become the case in Aleppo, Damascus, and in Hama governorates. In Homs and Damascus governorates, there is evidence of the systematic militarization of Christians, even if only on the level of their villages and urban districts. These are very, very unstable times for Syria's Christians as a result. Syria's Christians are also concentrated in strategic areas, namely Aleppo and Homs but also in Damascus, where an armed and committed presence could severely weaken the rebels' ability to concentrate on defeating the al-Assad government. The risk, of course, is that this would create a “Lebanon” effect in Syria, and this would mean that Syria's Christians would go from “neutral or mildly pro-Assad” to “active combatants.” In a potential post-Assad Syria, that would be bad news for transitional justice and civil society peace building.’

<sup>132</sup> Markus Tozman. “A short overview of the status quo of Christian minorities in Egypt, Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Lebanon”, research paper commissioned by the World Watch Unit of Open Doors International, 2012.

### 3.6 Christians are caught in the crossfire of the strife between government and opposition forces

*Degree 2: The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, but Christians in particular.*

Reporting of the conflict has tended to consider that Syria's Christians suffer mainly because they are seen as allies or protégés of Assad<sup>133</sup>, and are therefore a political target for the opposition forces. In some cases this may be true, although several experts indicate that Christians prefer not to take sides<sup>134</sup> and rather adopt a neutral position, as Sarah Bakir<sup>135</sup>, Head of the IST Humanitarian

**Christians are stuck  
between the three big  
combatants.**

Aid Committee and Deputy Director EU and Council of Europe for the World Council of Arameans, highlights: *'Most (Aramean) Christians do not want to take sides in this crisis. However, the rebels are threatening the Aramean men with horrible scenarios involving their family members. Recent escalations of these threats have evolved after several Muslim leaders have issued fatwas that allow assaults on non-Sunni Muslims (physical, sexual, etc.). This has led 500 Christians to flee Aleppo and they are now trying to find refuge in south east Turkey at the Syriac-Orthodox monastery and churches.'*

Moreover, our research reveals that Christians are truly caught in the crossfire between the parties in conflict, which is an essential feature of their specific vulnerability in Syria:

- Brother Said<sup>136</sup>, pastor of a Syrian evangelical church in Rotterdam says: *'The situation of the Christians is very tragic. They are stuck between two evils, between two fires.'*
- An Open Doors field worker declares: *'The opposition is looking at minorities that did not take their side, even if they were not taking the side of the regime either, as traitors. Christians in general, fall under this category, and thus they have become a target in their areas with snipers, shells, mortars, etc.'*
- A personal testimony by former Syriac soldiers collected by Nuri Kino says, *'We Christians are stuck between the three big combatants – the Syrian army, The Free Syrian army and the [Salafists]. The two latter want to evacuate Syria of Christians [sic] and permit us to cross the borders. That is why we are here today. And none of us wants to be part of a war. We don't want to fight or kill.'*<sup>137</sup>
- United States Congressman Frank Wolf says in a report: *"Turning to Syria, in the midst of devastating bloodshed and civil war, the Christian population is particularly*

<sup>133</sup> Rupen Das: *'Because the Christians (other than the Jesuits) have been identified as pro-regime, they are increasingly being targeted by opposition fighters.'*

<sup>134</sup> *'Part of the Christians in Syria decided not to have real position in this conflict and other part chose to be in the regime side because they are afraid of who will be the next leader of the country, they are afraid so much of Islamism, for this position which is not clear there is a lot of kidnapping of the Christian people from anti regime because they want to press on them to enter this conflict...the Christians are not really in this problem as much they are affected by it'*, staff worker, Caritas Augsburg, personal communication, April 2013.

<sup>135</sup> Sarah Bakir, personal communication, April 2013.

<sup>136</sup> Brother Said, pastor of Light of the World Church, personal communication, March 2013.

<sup>137</sup> AINA, 10/04/2013, <http://www.aina.org/releases/20130410164541.htm>.

*vulnerable. A recent Associated Press story reported, '[Christians] are fearful that Syria will become another Iraq, with Christians caught in the crossfire between rival Islamic groups.'*<sup>138</sup>

- Markus Tozman analyzes: *'Irrespective of their denomination, [Christians] are reluctant to choose a side in the conflict because they fear the vengeance of the opposite group. In many cases, they are forced by both sides to take guns and fight. Fears run high (and I am personally convinced that these fears are highly justified) that if Assad falls, the consequences for the Christian groups in Syria will be disastrous. Their acquiescence in the Assad regime and their relative religious freedom, compared to the Sunni Muslims whose Muslim Brotherhood was strongly suppressed during the rule of the Assads, will be fatal for them. The parallels to Iraq cannot be dismissed. My apprehensions are confirmed by the fact that jihadist groups like al-Nusra already form the most powerful and well-trained group amongst the "freedom" fighters.'*<sup>139</sup>

### 3.7 There are comparatively more refugees and internally displaced people amongst the Christian population than amongst any other religious or ethnic group

*Degree 3: Christians are specifically vulnerable to this threat.*

The Syrian civil war has caused an enormous number of Syrians to become internally displaced people and refugees. At the time of writing, the United Nations Refugee Agency UNHCR had registered nearly 1.3 million refugees who have fled Syria, but reports there are over 1.5 "persons of concern" including those who are still awaiting registration<sup>140</sup>. Daily, 8000 people flee the civil war and its violence. Within Syria more than 4 million people are displaced<sup>141</sup>.

These are official numbers, but real numbers could be much higher as many people, particularly Christians, do not register. ASSIST News Service reports: *'Even though Christians make up more than 10 percent of Syria's population, this amount is not reflected in the UNCHR registered refugees numbers who fled to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. The*

<sup>138</sup> Frank Wolf, "First the Saturday People Then the Sunday People. The Exodus of Jews and Christians from the Middle East." Report on a trip to Lebanon & Egypt, February 2013.

<sup>139</sup> In his paper for Open Doors (op cit.), Markus Tozman shows that the emigration of Syria's Christians did not start with civil war in 2011. Although it is certainly true that the civil war caused huge numbers of Christians (and other minorities) to flee the country, societal pressure on Christians caused by a radicalization of the Islamic Sunni population has in fact been growing for decades: *'Growing societal pressure caused by a radicalization of the Islamic Sunni population exacerbated the Christian's stance in the last decades. For this reason and because of the general economic lack of prospect, many Christians decided to leave the country for the West. Talking to Christian students two years ago, many told me they were eager to leave Syria for Europe or the US to look for jobs and a better life.'*

<sup>140</sup> UNHCR Data, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, accessed 16/05/2013.

<sup>141</sup> NRC Handelsblad, "VN: 1,35 miljoen Syriërs het land ontvlucht, gemiddeld 8.000 per dag", 17/04/2013, <http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2013/04/17/vn-135-miljoen-syrische-vluchtelingen-gemiddeld-8-000-per-dag/>. Also see: <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-syria-refugee-fact-sheet-april-2013>.

*mostly ignored tragedy of the Christians in Iraq has convinced Christians of Syria that international authorities will not step up to protect them. While their plight is well known to the western media outlets they still are forgotten by international aid organizations. They are fleeing massively.*<sup>142</sup>

These findings are corroborated by Open Doors' field staff. Open Doors reported there were 1,9 million Christians in Syria in 2012, but its field reports indicate this number has shrunk to 1,7 million in 2013, and many Christians are still leaving the country.<sup>143</sup>

In his contribution to this report, Nicholas Heras mentions another reason why Christian refugees do not register: *'many Syrian Christians do not register with local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have programs established to assist refugees. It is believed that these refugees do not register with these NGOs out of the hope that their presence in Lebanon will be temporary, either to return to Syria or to seek third country repatriation in Europe.'*

**Christians happen to live in key strategic locations where heavy fighting takes place. This has led to higher numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons.**

Moreover, there are comparatively more refugees and internally displaced people amongst the Christian population than amongst any other religious or ethnic group, simply because of the fact that Christians happen to live in key strategic locations where heavy fighting takes place. This has led to higher numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons (Heras 2013)<sup>144</sup>.

Writing in 2012, Markus Tozman explains: *'The majority of Christians from Homs but also Christians from other places in Syria have fled to the north-east where they have relatives and big Christian communities.'*<sup>145</sup> *Already in August [2012], more than 100,000 Syrians had fled Syria, heading for Lebanon, with more than 1,000 Christian families amongst them and thousands have followed since then. In an interview with Patrick Seale, Syria expert with many contacts within the country, I was told that more than 250,000 Syrians have fled to Turkey and more than 200,000 to Lebanon, several thousands of others have crossed the borders to Iraq and Jordan'*<sup>146</sup>. *At least three million Syrians are internally displaced and refugees in their own country.*<sup>147</sup>

<sup>142</sup> ASSIST News Service, "Hundreds of Assyrians seek refuge in Turkey", 08/04/2013,

<http://www.christiantoday.co.uk/article/hundreds.of.assryians.seek.refuge.in.turkey/32066.htm>.

<sup>143</sup> Whilst reliable numbers are difficult to obtain, some analysts assume that close to 1/4 of all Syria's Christians are displaced, which is disproportional when compared with the total refugee population, because it implies that between 400.000 and 500.000 of the 4 million displaced people are actually Christians. Nederlands Dagblad, "Syrische christenen hopen op aanblijven Assad", 29/03/2013, <http://www.nd.nl/artikelen/2013/maart/29/-syrische-christenen-hopen-op-aanblijven-assad>.

<sup>144</sup> See Heras in Chapter 2 of this report.

<sup>145</sup> Syriac Universal Alliance (20.11.2012). *The Reality of Sectarian Violence in Syria*. <http://www.wca-ngo.org/publications/press/336-the-reality-of-sectarian-violence-in-syria>.

<sup>146</sup> See also; Interview with Dr. Kamal Sido, regional expert on the Middle East, from *Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker*. (13.11.2012). <http://www.domradio.de/audio/zur-situation-der-christen-in-syrien.html>.

<sup>147</sup> Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker. <http://www.gfbv.de/pressemit.php?id=3188&stayInsideTree=1>.

It is very difficult to obtain reliable numbers on the total of refugees among the Christian population. Markus Tozman explains: *'The situation in Syria cannot but be described as a civil war. Because of this, it is very difficult to specify the currents of refugees in terms of religious affiliation. Nevertheless, eyewitness reports highlight the fact that Christians are particularly hard hit and explicitly persecuted because of their religion and not because they are part of the conflict groups'*<sup>148</sup> (Tozman 2012).

### 3.8 Christian refugees are comparatively more disadvantaged than other refugees and suffer great hostilities in refugee camps

*Degree 3: Christians are specifically vulnerable to this threat.*

Syria's Christians are not only more likely to be refugees, they are also comparatively more disadvantaged than other refugees. In general, Christians prefer not to stay in refugee camps that are administrated by UNHCR, because other refugees in those camps, who are generally Sunni Muslims, cause them to suffer great hostilities.

**Christian refugees fear registering with UNHCR.**

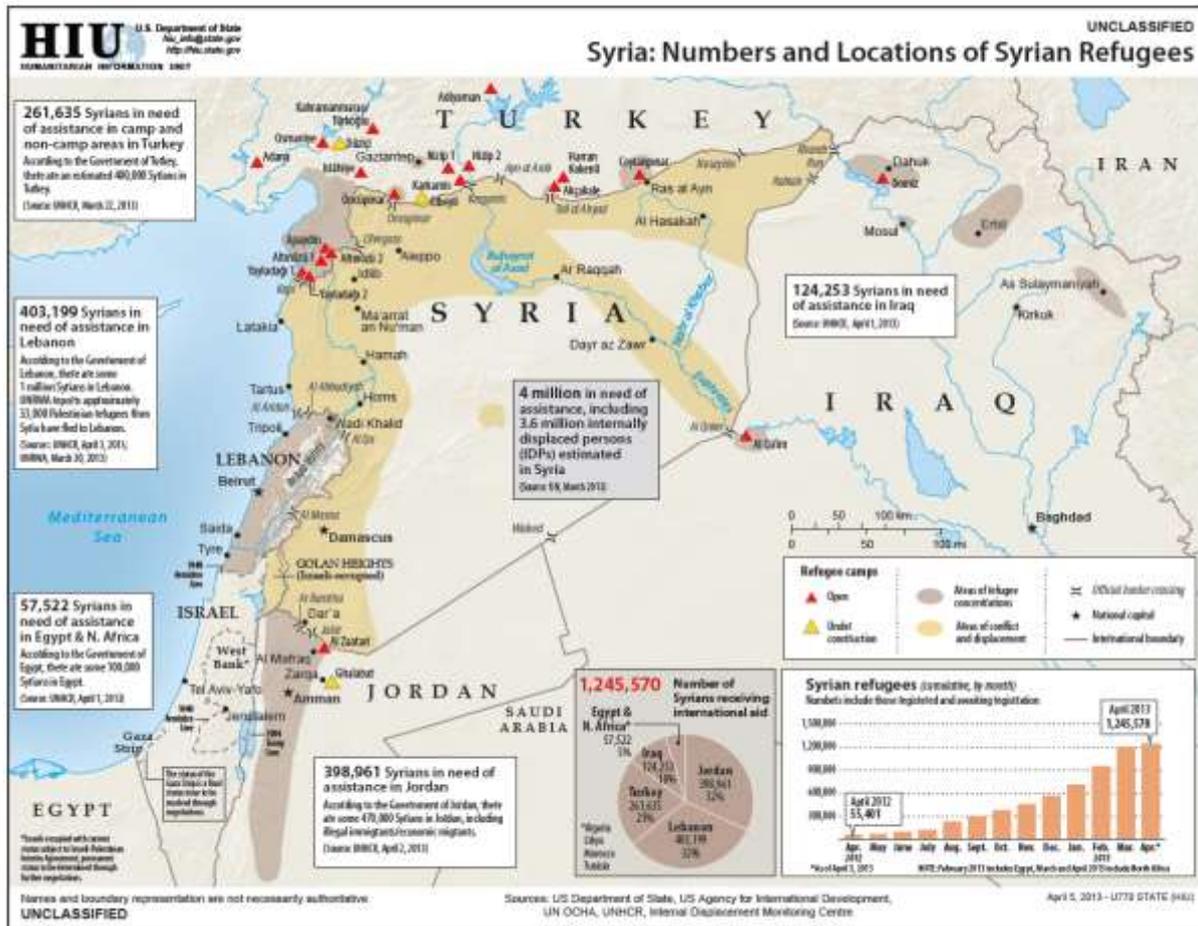
Sarah Bakir explains: *'Since the Christian refugees fear sectarian violence in the UNHCR camps, they avoid entering them. This causes the Christians to be secluded from all the humanitarian aid entering Syria and the camps in the surrounding countries. Whereas the Christians in the surrounding countries can turn to the Church (in some occasions) the ones remaining in Syria are left to find their own solutions.'*

#### **Fear of human trafficking**

The fact that Christian refugees fear registering with UNHCR because they fear bad treatment in refugee camps is also mentioned by several Open Doors field workers who point to the risk of human trafficking in refugee camps. Sarah Bakir adds that *'Christian refugees avoid entering the UNCHR camps, because of fear of sectarian violence and the wellbeing of their female population (forced prostitution, rape, etc.). Instead they remain in the Syriac-Orthodox churches and monasteries (Turkey and Lebanon).'* Abdulmesih BarAbraham remarks that *'Christians are easily identified within the camps: Women and girls are not veiled and men do not join the obligatory Friday mosque prayer. They are harassed and in refugee camps in Turkey pressured to join Sunni men in the fight against the Syrian government.'* Nuri Kino, in his report from Istanbul, writes that *'Assad fighters hiding in Turkey still fear persecution for being Christians.'*<sup>149</sup>

<sup>148</sup> Assistnews.net (10/02/2013).

<sup>149</sup> AINA, 10/04/2013, <http://www.aina.org/releases/20130410164541.htm>



In addition, the New York Times reports: ‘Bypassing Turkish refugee camps on the border, fleeing Christians have headed for the monasteries and towns of Mardin and Midyat in Tur Abdin, an ancient region in southeastern Turkey, less than 50 kilometers, or 30 miles, from the Syrian border that is the historical heartland of the Syriac Orthodox Church. “They are afraid to stay in the camps. They feel safer with their own people,” said Father Joseph, a Syriac monk looking after four families and several single refugees in Mor Hananyo. “We are fleeing from the rebels, and the camps are full of rebels,” said the mother of the three little boys, a schoolteacher who did not want to be named for fear of rebel reprisals against relatives at home.<sup>150</sup>

**Fleeing the refugee camp**

This situation is particularly poignant then, as Christians who fled the violence in Syria also have to flee from UN refugee camps. Issam Bishara, Regional Director of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA) in Lebanon, Egypt, Syria and Iraq says: ‘In Syria, some 300,000 Christian refugees [are] also fleeing from UN camps. In Syria, Christians are neutral and do not want to be used for photo ops. The United Nations, however, automatically registers them as members of the opposition. The head of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA) appeals on behalf of 1,200 families currently helped only by the

<sup>150</sup> Susanne Güsten, “Christians Squeezed Out by Violent Struggle in North Syria”, New York Times, 13/02/2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/14/world/middleeast/christians-squeezed-out-by-violent-struggle-in-north-syria.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/14/world/middleeast/christians-squeezed-out-by-violent-struggle-in-north-syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

*Church and generous families. (...) More than 300,000 Christians have fled their villages and towns to escape the war, but also UN refugee camps.*<sup>151</sup>

### Less legal protection

Not registering with UNHCR gives Christians less legal protection in the countries where they seek asylum. Because of the risk of sectarian violence in refugee camps, Syria's Christians either choose to stay in their war-torn home areas, or find shelter in precarious houses whenever they cannot flee to monasteries or churches<sup>152</sup>. An additional problem they face when they flee to a neighboring country, that their refugee status does not allow them to work, makes it increasingly difficult for them to provide for their daily expenses.

***The absence of rule of law causes Christians to be one of the least, if not the least, protected minority in Syria.***

It is for this reason that 'Syriac leaders are petitioning Turkish officials to establish a separate camp in southeastern Turkey for those who have fled violence in Syria.' Plans to do this are discussed with the Turkish authorities<sup>153</sup>. The World Council of Arameans reports that the Christian refugee camp is currently being built on the property of the Syriac-Orthodox St. Abraham monastery in Midyat, Turkey, and should give room to approx. 10,000 Christian refugees<sup>154</sup>.

## 3.9 Christians are soft targets for criminal groups

*Degree 2: The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, but Christians in particular.*

*'There is a high risk of personal insecurity not only because of the conflict and violence but also due to criminal elements – including kidnapping and ransom demands', says Rupen Das. 'Personal safety is virtually non-existent. Violence threatens anyone, wherever found,*

<sup>151</sup> Asia News, "In Syria, some 300,000 Christian refugees also fleeing from UN camps", 04/04/2013 - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/In-Syria.-some-300.000-Christian-refugees-also-fleeing-from-UN-camps-27566.html>.

<sup>152</sup> Sarah Bakir says: *'Since the Christians fear (e.g.) sectarian violence, they do not enter UNHCR camps in Syria or the surrounding countries. Instead, they remain in their own homes trying to live off of what they have left. Since most of the shops have closed or are simply destroyed, it is very difficult to get a hold of basic food and items. The WCA and the people on the ground are jointly registering their needs to which the WCA tries to get humanitarian aids societies to provide the Arameans in their need. Others who have fled the country to (mostly) Lebanon, Turkey and Greece remain either with family, in the churches and monasteries or are renting a small apartment till their money runs out. Seeing the value of their funds in the neighboring countries, the refugees are mostly turning to the churches and monasteries after a month or two.'*

<sup>153</sup> Hurriyet Daily News, "Syriac leaders are petitioning Turkish officials to establish a separate camp in southeastern Turkey for those who have fled violence in Syria", 12/12/2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syriacs-want-separate-refugee-camp-in-turkey.aspx?pageID=238&nid=36652>.

<sup>154</sup> See also Nuri Kino, "The Camp. Turkey is building a tent city for thousands of Syria's Christians. Why?", World Watch Monitor, 05/05/2013, [http://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/05/article\\_2467916.html](http://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/05/article_2467916.html).

*kidnapping and murder doesn't leave anyone behind*', says Rima Tüzün. To different extents, all Syrians are vulnerable to this threat, but Christians in particular. Within Syria, but also in refugee camps outside Syria, Christians are soft targets for criminal groups. *'The absence of rule of law described earlier, causes Christians to be one of the least, if not the least, protected minority in Syria,'* says Abdulmesih BarAbraham referring to the numerous abductions of Christians in all regions in Syria to extort money: *'Local criminals from various Arab tribes have taken advantage of the chaotic situation and continue to execute violence against Christians in the Al-Hasake district in North-East Syria.'*

### **Kidnapping**

Sarah Bakir explains that *'next to the sectarian violence, the Christians also face the problem that they are being targeted by criminals that kidnap them. The reason behind this is that Christians are generally well educated and hold higher positions within organizations and thence wealthy.'*

Rima Tüzün adds, *'Hundreds of Christian people were kidnapped by several parties, in order to use the money for ransom and now all Syriac Christian find themselves at risk and just recently more than 18 women were raped by extremist groups. The people have no political power or military capable of protecting; only some small groups and weapons located among Christians in general, are individual weapons for self-defense.'*

Similar testimonies have been collected by news outlets such as the New York Times<sup>155</sup>, ASSIST News<sup>156</sup> and Christian Post<sup>157</sup>, and by journalist Nuri Kino<sup>158</sup>. Open Doors field workers also confirm the findings<sup>159</sup>. Additionally, there have been several kidnappings of Christian clergymen in Syria. The two kidnapped bishops are the most senior church figures who have been abducted since the beginning of the uprising and their whereabouts are still unknown.<sup>160</sup>

<sup>155</sup> 'Violence against Christians is escalating in the governorate of Al-Hasakah in northeastern Syria, which is home to tens of thousands of Syriac Christians, the refugees said. (...) While fighting is sporadic, the region has succumbed to lawlessness, and Christians have become the target of armed rebel gangs, Father Gabriel Akyuz, the metropolitan vicar of Mardin, said in an interview in Mardin last week.' Susanne Güsten, "Christians Squeezed Out by Violent Struggle in North Syria", New York Times, 13/02/2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/14/world/middleeast/christians-squeezed-out-by-violent-struggle-in-north-syria.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

<sup>156</sup> Christian Post, "Christians in Syria Being Targeted for Kidnapping by Islamic Extremists", 20/02/2013, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/christians-in-syria-being-targeted-for-kidnapping-by-islamic-extremists-90446/>.

<sup>157</sup> "According to Nina Shea, Director of Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom ([www.hudson.org](http://www.hudson.org)), in Syria's rebellion, "no religious or ethnic group has been spared horrific levels of loss and suffering, but its 2,000-year-old Christian minority is now facing a distinct persecution." Writing for the National Review ([www.nationalreview.com](http://www.nationalreview.com)), Shea says, "Under the cover of war and chaos, this group, which alone lacks militias of its own, is easy prey for Islamists and criminals, alike. These assaults are driving out the Christians en masse. This 2,000-year-old community, numbering around 2 million is the largest church in the Middle East after Egypt's Copts, and it now faces extinction." ASSIST News, "The Silent Exodus of Syria's Christians", 10/02/2013, <http://www.assistnews.net/Stories/2013/s13020054.htm>.

<sup>158</sup> 'In a war between countries, you know who the enemy is. In Syria, you don't know who your friend is and who your enemy is. The wealthy have it the worst. Criminals wait in line to kidnap them' (Nuri Kino, op cit, *Between the barbed wire*, p. 11).

<sup>159</sup> Open Doors field worker: 'We have confirmed reports about priests being killed, even after having paid ransoms, we have confirmation on Christians being kidnapped, on basis of their Christian id.'

<sup>160</sup> Saed Abedine, 24/04/2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/04/24/world/meast/syria-civil-war/>, [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/04/23/praying\\_for\\_the\\_kidnapped\\_syrian\\_bishops/en1-685674](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/04/23/praying_for_the_kidnapped_syrian_bishops/en1-685674),

### 3.10 Women in general, but particularly Christian women, are vulnerable to sexual abuse

*Degree 2: The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, but Christians in particular.*

‘Young unmarried women are directly threatened by kidnappings and rape,’ shares a Syrian refugee with Swedish journalist Nuri Kino (p. 7).<sup>161</sup> Within a context of impunity and absence of rule of law, women are increasingly vulnerable to suffer from sexual abuse. In the conflict Christian women are twice as vulnerable for being women and for being Christians: ‘women in general – particularly Christians – have become easy targets for male criminals’ (Nuri Kino, p. 18)<sup>162</sup>.

The sexual assaults on women are the work of both criminals – supported by the impunity for their acts – and Islamist fighters. The latter are strengthened by a theological justification of rape as Muslim clerics issued several fatwas authorizing the rape of non-Sunni women, even speaking of a “sexual jihad”<sup>163</sup>:

***It is lawful for opponents of the regime of Bashar al-Assad to rape "any Syrian woman not Sunni".***

- ‘Fr David said: "Yesterday, Yasir al-Ajlawni – a Jordanian Salafi sheikh, resident in Damascus, released a fatwa on YouTube, declaring that it is lawful for opponents of the regime of Bashar al-Assad to rape "any Syrian woman not Sunni. According to the sheikh, capturing and raping Alawi or Christian women is not contrary to the precepts of Islam."’<sup>164</sup>
- ‘New Fatwa Permits Rape of non-Sunni Women in Syria. Yet another Islamic cleric recently made it permissible for the Islamic fighters waging a jihad in Syria, – politely known as “the opposition” – to rape the nation’s women. Salafi Sheikh Yasir al-‘Ajlawni, a Jordanian of origin who earlier lived in Damascus, Syria for 17 years, posted a YouTube video last week where he said he was preparing to issue a “legitimate fatwa” making it legal (in the eyes of Islam) for those Muslims fighting to topple secular president Bashar Assad and install Sharia law to “capture and have sex with” all non-Sunni women, specifically naming Assad’s own sect, the Alawites, as well as the Druze and several others, in short, all non-Sunnis and non-Muslims.’<sup>165</sup>

<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/04/23/Syrian-bishops-in-hands-of-Chechens-church-sources-say.html>.

<sup>161</sup> Kino, op cit, *Between the barbed wire*.

<sup>162</sup> Open Doors field reports include one Christian girl from the Tabaleh area in Damascus who was kidnapped in 2012 and later found in a house with other women in a “freedom fighter” area where she was used as a sex prize after their fight. When she was returned home, she committed suicide.

<sup>163</sup> See: A Big Message, “Tunisia – Teenage Girls Going To Syria In Response To Alleged Fatwa On Sexual Jihad”, 02/04/2013, <http://www.abigmessage.com/tunisia-teenage-girls-going-to-syria-in-response-to-alleged-fatwa-on-sexual-jihad.html>.

<sup>164</sup> Independent Catholic News, “Syria: Christians flee rebel areas as fatwa authorizes rape of non-Sunni women”, 07/04/2013, <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=22286>.

<sup>165</sup> fRaymond Ibrahim, “New Fatwa Permits Rape of Non-Sunni Women in Syria”, 02/04/2013, <http://www.raymondibrahim.com/from-the-arab-world/new-fatwa-permits-rape-of-non-sunni-women-in-syria/>.

### 3.11 Christians are deliberately being targeted by Islamist groups

*Degree 3: Christians are specifically vulnerable to this threat.*

#### **Growing influence of Islamists**

In recent months, several newspapers started to recognize the growing influence of Islamists amongst the rebel fighters. For example, the Washington Post notes: 'Islamic law comes to rebel-held Syria: The evidence was incontrovertible, captured on video and posted on YouTube for all the world to see. During a demonstration against the Syrian regime, Wael Ibrahim, a veteran activist, had tossed aside a banner inscribed with the Muslim declaration of faith. And that, decreed the officers of the newly established Sharia Authority set up to administer rebel-held Aleppo, constitutes a crime under Islamic law, punishable in this instance by 10 strokes of a metal pipe.'<sup>166</sup> This conclusion is certainly relevant for our vulnerability assessment, as it clearly points to the possibility of religious identification as a factor in the vulnerability of Syria's Christians.

#### **Religiously motivated attacks**

Christians are not only targeted for political reasons – when they are associated with the Assad regime – or for criminal reasons – because they are seen as wealthier than the rest of the population. The evidence is overwhelming that Christians are deliberately being targeted by several Islamist groups, some of them affiliated to the Free Syrian Army. For example, Rupen Das indicates '*there is increasing violence from Jabhat al Nusra and their allies focused on Christians.*' Abdulmesih BarAbraham also finds that '*in many cases, Jihadists external to Syria have incited the local Muslim population against Christians.*' In these cases, the persecution suffered by Christians is indeed religiously motivated<sup>167</sup>.

**Christians are deliberately being targeted by several Islamist groups, some of them affiliated to the Free Syrian Army.**

A great number of other sources confirm this conclusion:

- '*The question of whether Syria's Christians are being specifically targeted in this war is not yet settled in international political and human rights circles. Some writers suggest that attacks are more discriminate than deliberate. However, the recent*

<sup>166</sup> Liz Sly, "Islamic law comes to rebel-held Syria", Washington Post, 19/03/2013, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-03-19/world/37840878\\_1\\_al-nusra-deir-aleppo](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-03-19/world/37840878_1_al-nusra-deir-aleppo).

<sup>167</sup> '*Jihadis are intentionally targeting the Christian minority, specifically as a source of money/extortion. So they kidnap and hold for ransom Christians in the hopes of gaining money; otherwise they take as rightful "plunder" or ghanima, the fleeing Christians' possessions. What's interesting to me is the fact that, what's happening now in Syria (and what happened earlier in Iraq) is precisely what happened over the course of centuries of Islamic history, especially in the very early years, when the Arab conquerors were trying to establish empire. The Christian inhabitants were seen and treated as "milking camels" – one caliph called them just that to be exhausted of all their wealth to fill the coffers of Islam. Otherwise, they had no justification to live – hence why the jihadis in Syria are treating Christians as objects to get rich off and then discard*', Raymond Ibrahim, personal communication, March 2013.

*escalation in violence against Christians now suggests otherwise. It appears that these devastating incidents mark the beginning of the end for all Christians in Syria. The Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Matta Roham from the Hassake province believes that “Christians are more severely impacted by this crisis. After Homs, Aleppo and now Ras al-Ayn, I am not sure Christians will have anywhere else to go. Given recent activities in the north of Syria, we are afraid that Qamishli and Hassake will be attacked next. What’s left for the Christians? In the face of death they will likely try to leave this wonderful country and nobody can stop them from doing so.”* (World Council of Arameans<sup>168</sup>).

- *‘The Christians have been targeted by extreme Islamic factions that threaten to get the upper hand in Syria. They intimidate, threaten and physically assault the Christians of Syria. E.g. these groups will threaten to harm (murder, (sexually) abuse, etc.) the female family members of a Christian man. Just recently four women were gang raped in front of their parents, whilst the perpetrators yelled out “God is great” in Arabic.’* (Sarah Bakir).
- *‘The Muslim Jihadists have kidnapped [Arameans] for ransom, attacked places of worship and created a climate of fear, forcing many Assyrians to abandon their homes and villages and seek safety in Turkey.’* (ASSIST News<sup>169</sup>).
- *‘It is true that some Islamist fighters harassed Christian passengers between Hassaka and Aleppo a few months ago and asked Christian girls to wear veils.’* (Fadi Halliso, Jesuit priest in Syria<sup>170</sup>).
- *‘We hear more about deliberate attacks from various Jihad groups on Christians as a target group. Certain elements started to target Christians in Syria. I see it as a turning point in the Syrian conflict. Up to now Christians were targeted incidentally, but all of a sudden it seems that Christians are aimed for much more specifically.’* (Open Doors field worker).
- *‘At the church on Friday night, many parishioners said the coexistence of Christians and Muslims was deeply ingrained in Syrian society, and they did not believe that the rebels were targeting them because of their religion. Their main fear was that Christians, perceived as wealthy, were targets for financially motivated kidnappers. But they worried that the equilibrium had changed. They have heard stories of churches being burned. They are hosting Christians who have fled Damascus suburbs as fighting encroached, some of them saying they were pushed out by hostile Sunni fighters. Although the nominal rebel leadership outside the country has vowed that all sects will be treated equally if Mr. Assad falls, some rebel groups inside Syria have called for an Islamic state. That means different things to different people, but some fighters have alarmed Christians by calling for archaic practices from the days of the caliphates, like taxing religious minorities.’* (New York Times<sup>171</sup>).

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<sup>168</sup> World Council of Arameans, “The reality of sectarian violence in Syria”, N/D, <http://www.wca-ngo.org/humanrightsfiles/the-syria-crisis/347-pr-reality-sectarian-violence>.

<sup>169</sup> ASSIST News, “500 Assyrians from Syria Flee to Turkey in Last Three Days”, 07/04/2013, <http://www.assistnews.net/Stories/2013/s13040036.htm>.

<sup>170</sup> Fadi Halliso, personal communication, March 2013.

<sup>171</sup> New York Times, “Wary Easter Weekend for Syria’s Christians”, 30/03/2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/world/middleeast/wary-easter-weekend-for-syrian-christians.html?nl=todaysheadlines>.

- ‘A woman from Hassake recounts how her husband and son were shot in the head by Islamists. “Our only crime is being Christians,” she answers when asked if there had been a dispute’ (ASSIST News<sup>172</sup>).
- ‘Syrian Christian leaders continue to note that there are political and economic motivations in many of [the] attacks. However, they identify a rising tendency for religiously motivated attack, linking this to the increasing prevalence and influence of religiously extremist groups amidst the opposition movement.’ (Middle East Concern<sup>173</sup>).
- ‘From the Iraq war to the uprising in Syria, [Christians] have been the victims of policies targeted at vulnerable ethnic and religious groups.’ (European Syriac Union<sup>174</sup>).
- ‘One of those interviewed was a survivor of a killing at a factory in an area of Damascus predominantly populated by Christians. He indicated that the vast majority of the factory’s workers were Christian. On 3 September, he and the other workers were on the factory floor when “20 armed men with their faces covered... broke into the room with Kalashnikovs”. The men were dressed in civilian clothes. One of the armed men shouted “we know who you are and which region you come from. We ask you to leave this factory and your region. Otherwise you will be in danger.” The factory’s director came on to the floor and was shot dead by one of the armed men, who then left. The interviewee believes that the workers of the factory were targeted specifically because of their religious affiliation. He never returned to factory [sic] and fled Syria shortly afterwards.” (UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council, 5 February 2013).
- ‘Both the bishop and the minister have met Christian Syrian families who fled in panic. The circumstances vary with each refugee, but they all fear for [sic] Islamists. And all of them are able to testify to reprisals and kidnapping,” the bishop says.’ (Nuri Kino, p. 14).
- ‘With the conflict dragging on and the rebels gaining more force, the situation for the Christians in Syria becomes more disastrous. Several sources reported conscious attacks against churches and Christians led by jihadists.<sup>175</sup> A pattern, well-known from Iraq, repeats itself in Syria: (Wealthy) Christians are kidnapped and only released after paying a high ransom. In Rableh, Homs province, more than 150 Greek Catholic Christians were kidnapped in September and released again. A priest has recently been tortured and killed trying to negotiate the release of a member of his parish who was kidnapped by jihadists. Car bomb explosions in front of churches in Aleppo and Damascus (in the Christian district of Bab Touma) were reported, too. These examples, however, are just a few out of many. The slogan “Alawites to the grave, Christians to Lebanon” has reportedly been shouted by jihadists in the streets of several towns with Christian inhabitants and does not bode well for the Christians in Syria.’ (Markus Tozman).

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<sup>172</sup> Dan Wooding, “The Silent Exodus of Syria’s Christians”, 10/02/2013, <http://www.assistnews.net/Stories/2013/s13020054.htm>.

<sup>173</sup> Middle East Concern, “Syria: increasing incidence of religiously-motivated attacks against Christians”, 11/03/2013, [http://www.meconcern.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=597:syria-increasing-incidence-of-religiously-motivated-attacks-against-christians&catid=7:prayer-requests&Itemid=12](http://www.meconcern.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=597:syria-increasing-incidence-of-religiously-motivated-attacks-against-christians&catid=7:prayer-requests&Itemid=12).

<sup>174</sup> Minority Rights Group, “Syria/Iraq: Toward the end of Syriac Christians?”, N/D, <http://www.minorityvoices.org/news.php/es/1028/syriairaq-toward-the-end-of-syriac-christians>.

<sup>175</sup> *Inter alia*: Compassdirect.com; Syriac Universal Alliance; <http://www.franziskanermission.de/?q=node/154>.

Table 2

**Persecution incidents targeting Christians in Syria recorded in the media (2012-2013)<sup>176</sup>**

Hard facts	2012 (January-December)	2013 (January-June)	Total (2012-2013)
<b>Killings<sup>177</sup></b>	105	1010	<b>1115</b>
<b>Physical Aggression</b>	242	4	<b>246</b>
<b>Threats</b>	4	5	<b>9</b>
<b>Destruction of Churches or Christian Buildings</b>	17	27	<b>44</b>
<b>Attempts to destroy Churches or Christian Buildings</b>	2		<b>2</b>
<b>Closed or Hindered Churches or Christian Buildings</b>	3		<b>3</b>
<b>House Expulsion or Destruction (Displacements)</b>	6	2	<b>8</b>
<b>Kidnap for Ransom or Intimidation (Abductions)</b>	227	7	<b>234</b>
<b>Sexual Assaults (Rape, Forced Marriages, etc)</b>		2	<b>2</b>
<b>Arrests</b>	283		<b>283</b>
<b>Forced to Leave the Country</b>	498003	402	<b>498405</b>
<b>Others</b>	6	1	<b>7</b>

Source: Hard Facts List, World Watch Unit, Open Doors International, 2013

### 3.12 Christian men are being forced to join the government army or the rebel forces

*Degree 2: The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, but Christians in particular.*

Several reports indicate that Christian men are being forced to join the government army and even the rebel opposition forces. The whole population is to some extent vulnerable to this threat, but particularly Christians are afraid of this. If they refuse, they can face dire consequences<sup>178</sup>: ‘For example, in Ras al-Ayn, 200 Aramean families escaped into neighboring cities, many making their way to Hassake. Some of the women from Ras al-Ayn have returned to retrieve valuables from their homes. The men do not dare to enter the city because they would likely be killed or recruited by either side to fight in the war’ (World Council of Arameans<sup>179</sup>).

The New York Times reports: ‘Many of the Christian refugees are young men who have fled conscription in the army and now fear being drafted into rebel ranks if they enter the Turkish camps, Evgil Turker, the president of the Federation of Syriac Associations in Turkey, said in an interview. Al Nusra Front “and other rebel groups are entrenched in the refugee camps,” Mr. Turker said. “They round up young men in the camps, sometimes 20 or 30 a day, and

<sup>176</sup> **Disclaimer:** The Hard Facts List of persecution incidents is based exclusively on media and internet research. We have tried to include all hard facts about Christian persecution that appeared in the media and on the internet in this database. As such, the database only counts facts that were reported in the media and on the internet. If you think a case is missing or was erroneously reported about, please inform the World Watch Unit. Please be aware that many incidents of persecution are not reported in the media or on the internet, and therefore not included in our database.

<sup>177</sup> The real number of killings is probably much higher, but reports about Syria do not always label killings of Christians as acts of persecution.

<sup>178</sup> Open Doors field worker, personal communication.

<sup>179</sup> World Council of Arameans, “The reality of sectarian violence in Syria”, N/D, <http://www.wca-ngo.org/humanrightsfiles/the-syria-crises/347-pr-reality-sectarian-violence>.

*send them through the border fence back into Syria.*<sup>180</sup> Nuri Kino collected the following testimony: *'I'm an engineer, but I had to escape Syria in order not to be called into the army and participate in this war'* (p. 7)<sup>181</sup>. A Caritas staff worker says: *'Christians are afraid for their children because the government was asking the young people more than 18 to go to the army, so those who had the chance they send their children out of Syria.'*<sup>182</sup>

### 3.13 Christians suffer greatly from the absence of food security, especially in the areas held by the opposition

*Degree 1: The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, including Christians.*

All Syrians, including Christians, suffer greatly from the absence of food security. According to Rupen Das, *'food insecurity is a huge concern, especially in the six northern governorates held by the opposition. Already, cases of malnutrition are evident and are increasing as the conflict continues.'* In addition to the generalized food shortage, the harsh winter conditions and the absence of heating systems add to the challenges.

#### Hunger and famine

Abdulmesih BarAbraham expects the lack of sufficient and affordable food will result in hunger and famine. Rima Tüzün shares this analysis: *'Food and drink in general has become difficult to get due to lack of materials and its high prices, for example children's milk is not available. People are suffering from an acute shortage of bread. The aid sent from different countries, mostly don't reach the people and the Christians are suffering the same bad conditions like the other citizens. Agriculture started to deteriorate two years ago as a result of the lack of potentials for farmers such as fertilizers and pesticides, which led to a lack of agricultural products in general'* (Rima Tüzün).

**Cases of malnutrition are evident and are increasing as the conflict continues**

Abdulmesih BarAbraham adds that *'Turkey has been hindering aid initiatives in the form of food and clothes aimed to help the Assyrians in Qamishly and Hassake region to cross the borders, while regularly allowing armed rebels groups to enter into Syria. For that reason, and in collaboration with the local Caritas organization in Augsburg, Germany, we shipped three containers of aid goods to the Syriac Churches in Lebanon for distribution to refugees residing in Churches and monasteries.'*<sup>183</sup>

<sup>180</sup> Susanne Güsten, "Christians Squeezed Out by Violent Struggle in North Syria", New York Times, 13/02/2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/14/world/middleeast/christians-squeezed-out-by-violent-struggle-in-north-syria.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/14/world/middleeast/christians-squeezed-out-by-violent-struggle-in-north-syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>181</sup> Kino, op cit, *Between the barbed wire*.

<sup>182</sup> Staff worker, Caritas Augsburg, personal communication, April 2013.

<sup>183</sup> Personal communication, April 2013.

### 3.14 Christians face severe health insecurity

*Degree 1: The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, including Christians.*

All Syrians, including Christians, are vulnerable to health insecurity and injury as ‘*more than half to two thirds of the hospitals and clinics have been destroyed resulting in lack of access to healthcare*’ and ‘*the pharmaceutical industry has collapsed resulting in a severe shortage of medicines inside the country*’ (Rupen Das)<sup>184</sup>. To some extent, Christians can be considered more vulnerable to this threat because ‘*they are targeted by major insurgent groups and have less access to medical resources*’, says Abdulmesih BarAbraham. He also asserts that ‘*disease and infection rates are higher amongst Christians.*’<sup>185</sup>

Rupen Das notes a ‘*significant rise in water borne diseases (typhoid and hepatitis) due to the destruction of the water system and lack of access to safe water, and numerous cases of vitamin C deficiency, and leishmaniasis.*’ In addition to the shortage of medicines, an Open Doors field worker reports that numerous shot wounds and other wounds by explosions are left unattended. Moreover, Christians are generally unable to have decent burials.

**More than half to two thirds of the hospitals and clinics have been destroyed and the pharmaceutical industry has collapsed.**

Unquestionably, the health security of Christians is under pressure. Sarah Bakir says: ‘*As mentioned before, the Christians mostly turn to the Church or relatives in the surrounding countries for aid. Though few of the churches do have pharmacies, the refugees with medical conditions have no access to medical care. In most cases this is due to lack of finance and in others simply because there are no or not enough doctors to help them.*’<sup>186</sup> Rima Tüzün concludes: ‘*public health has declined in Syria as a result of the lack of resources needed to run hospitals such as electricity. As a result of environmental pollution, many infectious diseases spread; people are suffering from a severe shortage of medicines and it is difficult to diagnose them. Many doctors have emigrated and left their places vacant, which has had a negative impact on the country.*’<sup>187</sup>

<sup>184</sup> Personal communication, March 2013.

<sup>185</sup> Personal communication, March 2013.

<sup>186</sup> Personal communication, April 2013.

<sup>187</sup> Rima Tüzün, personal communication March 2013: ‘*Now there are 4 million internally displaced people in Syria and their living and health circumstances have deteriorated significantly and the destruction of homes and public places affect people's health negatively and lead to the spread of a lot of diseases such as:*

*1 - Allergic and Respiratory diseases: allergic asthma, allergic bronchitis, allergic rhinitis, tuberculosis. This is the result of bombing and the use of gases, as well as bad living conditions for displaced people forced many of them to live in the ancient and small caves characterized by moisture and lack of oxygen.*

*2 - Digestive diseases: malaria, cholera, typhoid fever, brucellosis and diarrhea. Due the lack of attention in streams sanitation, and water pollution for unpurified, the disintegration of the dead bodies and with the accumulation of dirt and rubbish in the streets.*

*3 - Dermatology: Scabies, Pediculosis, eczema, urticarial, leshmaniasis. The reason for the high prevalence of leshmaniasis is the spread of rubbish and stagnant water; lack of medicines and the failure of the government to use pesticides.*

## IV. Conclusions

### 4.1 Main findings and recommendations

Freedom House, in its 2013 *Freedom in the World* report, summarizes the recent developments in Syria as follows: ‘*Syria has suffered by far the worst repercussions from the Arab Spring. In 2011, the regime of President Bashar al-Assad responded to peaceful demands for political change by waging war against his own people. In 2012, amid inaction by the international community, the bloody conflict developed starker sectarian overtones and drew in fighters affiliated with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.*’

#### From popular uprising to sectarian conflict

Indeed, the Syrian civil war began as a popular uprising in 2011, with demands for increased political liberties and economic reforms, similar to other Arab countries at that same period. This uprising escalated and very rapidly degenerated into an **extremely violent sectarian conflict** that has now lasted for more than two years.

Looking back, one can discern that the ingredients for the civil war were long present. Dissatisfaction with the preferential treatment of a few minorities by the Assad regime, the harsh economic conditions and the growing influence of radical Islamic movements are not new to the country, but have been present under the surface for some time.

Now, the violence has reached inhumane proportions. What is worse, an end to the violence does not seem near especially because, as Nicholas Heras concludes in this report, it will be very complex to find a viable political configuration for the country when the civil war ends, especially because of the sectarian component of the conflict.

***The ingredients for  
the civil war were  
long present.***

#### Increasing risk of targeted violence

As indeed the conflict is becoming more and more sectarian, the risk of targeted violence against Christians is increasing by the day. The sectarian dimension of the conflict is indeed a factor that makes Christians, as a religious/ethnic minority, more vulnerable. The USCIRF, in a special report entitled *Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria*<sup>188</sup> points out: ‘*Due to the intensifying conflict between government forces and affiliates supporting Bashar al-Assad’s regime and anti-government elements seeking his overthrow, the Syrian people have experienced egregious violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief.*’

4 - Malignant diseases: which will appear in the future, such as cancers, especially lung and skin as a result of the major pollution and manual oil refining operations.

5 - Chronic diseases: diabetes, especially insulin-dependent, ulcerative colitis, rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, thyroid disease, chronic epilepsy, and other diseases based on drugs now missing.

6 - Psychological illness: post traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety, especially with children under the age of 12.

7 - HIV that may result from random cases of rape, gonorrhoea’

<sup>188</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Special Report, *Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria*, April 2013.

However, the sectarian dimension of the Syrian civil war is not its only dimension, as political, economic and ethnic elements are also in play. However, it is a dimension of the conflict that greatly compromises prospects for sustainable development in post-conflict Syria, as more and more communities are being drawn into the conflict.

In the conflict, all Syrians are suffering greatly, but some groups are in a more vulnerable position than others. A statement by the Religious Liberty Partnership issued in April this year emphasizes the need *'to pay particular attention to vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities.'*<sup>189</sup>

This report has focused on the specific position of Syria's Christians within the context of the civil war. Our conclusions are nuanced, but clearly indicate that **Syria's Christians are a particularly vulnerable religious and ethnic minority, who occasionally suffer deliberate attacks.**

Whilst the questions asked in the introduction of the Vulnerability Assessment (*To what extent are Christians in Syria being targeted specifically? and Are Christians in Syria suffering disproportionately?*) cannot be answered univocally, it cannot be denied that *'with the start of the civil war in 2011, the situation for Christians has deteriorated considerably'*, as Markus Tozman indicates<sup>190</sup>.

#### **No evidence of systematic specific targeting yet**

But, are Christians in Syria **targeted specifically**? In his report, Nicholas Heras indicates his research has not yet found evidence of systematic targeting of Christians but the author is realistic that this might well happen in the future, especially when Christians become more actively involved in fighting, defending and joining the Popular Committees, which are used by Assad to defend his regime.

***The sectarian dimension greatly compromises prospects for sustainable development in post-conflict Syria.***

Heras cautions: *'At the present time, there is no systematic evidence that Christians in Syria, as a communal group that is specifically identified as "Christians," are particularly targeted by the rebels. In certain front-line areas Christians are targeted because of the perception that they are in favor of the al-Assad government, however, I have been very careful to use assertion on this point that has multiple sources, because the question of whether Christians in Syria are particular targets is a matter of great controversy.'*<sup>191</sup>

Similarly, Markus Tozman recounts: *'Talking to two bishops of the Syrian Orthodox church in May 2012, I was told that there was no sectarian violence directed against Christians in particular. Christians were killed in the conflict, indeed, but not particularly because they were Christians, they said. Yet, they did not deny reports that their Christian community in Homs, of around 50,000, was expelled and when they tried to return they found their homes occupied by Islamists telling them that they should never come back again. The Cathedral and*

<sup>189</sup> Istanbul Statement on the Church in Syria Issued by the Religious Liberty Partnership, April 2013, [http://www.rlppartnership.org/downloads/statements/RLP\\_Istanbul\\_Statement\\_on\\_Syria\\_2013.pdf](http://www.rlppartnership.org/downloads/statements/RLP_Istanbul_Statement_on_Syria_2013.pdf).

<sup>190</sup> Tozman, op cit

<sup>191</sup> Nicholas Heras, personal communication, May 2013.

*Bishopric of Homs, dedicated to the Mother of God and dating back to the first days of Christianity in the first century AD, has been destroyed. Several sources claim that the Christian community of Homs does not exist anymore. The Christian community in Aleppo, too, is under immense pressure, since the fighting reached the economic capital of Syria. An expert in the region mentioned that if the Kurds flee from Aleppo, the Christians will not be able to stay there on their own and will leave too. Reportedly, the Christian quarters of the city have been relatively spared so far, but if that changes, a massive flight will probably follow. The wealthier inhabitants of the city, many of whom are Armenians, have already left the city and the country.*<sup>192</sup>

Tozman also points at the increasing number of “conscious attacks” against churches and Christians led by jihadists, examples of which were included in this report. The USCIRF confirms: “Government forces and affiliated militias have perpetrated religiously-motivated attacks against Sunni Muslim civilians and members of religious minority communities, and have increased sectarian divides through rhetoric and religiously-motivated violence.”<sup>193</sup>

Finally, USCIRF states: ‘The nature of the conflict in Syria makes it difficult to determine whether attacks are based on political, ethnic, or religious affiliation, or some combination thereof. Nevertheless, both pro- and anti-government forces have been accused of perpetrating religiously-motivated attacks.’<sup>194</sup>

The issue of Christians being directly targeted as “Christians” is complex. Naturally all Syrians suffer, but the Vulnerability Assessment included in this report contains evidence to justify the notion that **Christians are a vulnerable group** within the conflict. This does not mean they are necessarily deliberately targeted, but implies they are in varying degrees liable to suffer specific threats.

### **Vulnerable group**

No claim will be made that the suffering of Christians is more intense than that of other religious or ethnic groups. In fact, all religious minorities, including the Sunni majority, are suffering. Within the complexity of the political power field, it is difficult for many to remain neutral. Alawites are targeted by Sunnites, Sunnites are victims of the government forces, Muslims fight each other such as in Homs, and Christians suffer violence from being in the crossfire. However, this report provides evidence from numerous sources in the field that Christians are **vulnerable in specific ways**.

It is important to understand that this vulnerability is not necessarily the result of religious motivations. More often, the vulnerability of Syria's Christians is the result of **contextual factors**, such as the overall impunity, the geographical location of the fighting, the refusal of a great number of Christians to join any armed group, or their presumed wealth which makes them soft targets for criminals, who seek a business in kidnapping for ransom or robbing shops owned by Christians.

In other words, **the vulnerability of Christians to suffer hostilities is generally the direct result of the overall context of lawlessness** and the fact that none of the fighting parties has a specific interest in protecting the country's population. The vulnerability of Christians can in

<sup>192</sup> Tozman, op cit

<sup>193</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), op.cit.

<sup>194</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), op.cit.

many cases be described as “collateral damage”, a consequence of them being caught in the crossfire of the strife between government and opposition forces. In particular, the strategic role of Homs and Aleppo in the conflict and the fact that many Christians happen to live there, implies they are affected heavily as a group.

### Soft targets

Though the vulnerability of Syria's Christians is often the result of contextual factors, **Christians are nevertheless sometimes deliberately targeted for political, religious and sometimes religious reasons.** It is political when Christians are associated with the Assad regime and therefore seen as part of the political opposition by rebel fighters. It is criminal when generally more prosperous Christian communities become soft targets for criminal organizations. It is religious when Christians become targets of Islamists because of their faith, even simply for displaying religious symbols.

It must be said that the overall impunity encourages both criminals and Islamists to pursue their objectives as they know that any crimes against Christians – as with any other vulnerable group – are not likely to be punished or avenged. In the case of Syria, the impunity is probably the most important factor in the vulnerability of the Christian communities.

One could argue how far from reality this exclamation of a Syrian refugee in Lebanon to Nuri Kino is: *‘You have to understand that this is deliberate, they want to empty Syria of non-Muslims whilst the West encourages it. It’s like the US and other countries have gone blind or even crazy. Do we really want an Islamic state instead of the Assad regime? Is it any better?’* Nevertheless, Nicholas Heras’ review of the main political actors that are part of the opposition shows a predominance of radical Islamist organizations. The symbolic scope of the kidnapping of two bishops in April this year, and the fact that Sharia has been implemented in several parts of the country are telling.

**Christian women are particularly vulnerable**, first because they are women and second because they belong to a minority that has no protection. Numerous testimonies reveal that women in general, but particularly Christian women, are vulnerable to **sexual abuse**. The large number of reports of various forms of sexual abuse – **gender-based violence** – is enough to qualify this issue as structural, deserving urgent attention.

The impunity is especially increased because most Christians do not have militias to protect themselves. There are reports of Christians who are now **militarizing**, particularly in the area of Homs, but it should be stressed that the militarization of Christians is incipient – it is only taking place after two years of armed conflict –and is born out of the absence of viable alternatives.

### Militarization or self-defense

There is an important **difference between militarization and self-defense**, as militarization implies an active part in the fighting and self-defense simply the protection of one’s community. Heras’ report is realistic about Christians taking up arms out of self-defense, but it also foresees a trend of possible militarization of Syria’s Christian communities. However, many Christians still do not militarize. Open Doors field reports do however mention that Christians have been organizing for self-defense since summer 2012.

The militarization of Christians should not be taken as a sign that Christians are active actors in the conflict, but as an additional confirmation of their vulnerability. Heras agrees that the

militarization is actually a threat to Christians, and the direct consequence of their vulnerable situation. He asserts: *'The militarization of the Christian community is itself a very important and dire threat, and must be treated as such. The 'Popular Committee' militarization is in fact a vulnerability of Christian communities because they are fearful enough to turn to arms to protect their communities, and as a result, there is strong evidence that the al-Assad government is trying to make that a process that it endorses and formalizes in the Popular Committee/National Defense Army structure. Post-conflict, that will have potentially horrible repercussions for Christian communities that fought against the opposition.'*<sup>195</sup>

Summarizing, based on our research we are able to conclude that:

- (1) Christians are not always targeted deliberately, but this does not mean they are not a vulnerable group. The Vulnerability Assessment included in this report provides evidence to assert the specific vulnerability of Syria's Christians.
- (2) **The factors in the vulnerability of Syria's Christians can be contextual, political, economic, criminal and sometimes religious.**
- (3) Although the vulnerability of Christians can have many causes, it is directly linked to the **overall impunity**.
- (4) Sometimes Christians are **deliberately targeted** by political groups, by Islamists or by criminals.
- (5) The vulnerability of Syria's Christians also knows different degrees, depending on the nature of the threat. For this reason, **three degrees of vulnerability** were distinguished, depending on whether the threat is equally applicable to all Syrians, applicable to all Syrians but to Christians in particular, or very specific to Christians.

As aforementioned, the vulnerability of Syria's Christians causes them to suffer, but whether the suffering of Christians is **disproportional** is hard to establish. This can only be concluded when considering the violence, insecurity and overall impunity in Syria that may cause some Christians to suffer disproportionately, both within their home areas and in refugee camps. Also, it is outstanding that there is such a large number of refugees and internally displaced people amongst the Christian population in comparison to other religious or ethnic groups.

***Post-conflict peace-building, while providing protection for Syria's vulnerable communities, should be a priority.***

### **Refugee camps**

In particular, the testimonies included in this report that indicate that **Christians face hostilities in UNHCR refugee camps** is an issue that deserves further research. Sources included in this report mention cases of Syrian Christians who, after having fled their homes, need to flee from refugee camps, finding anything but refuge there.

The suggestion to build **refugee camps specifically for Christians** has been raised by some involved actors as a response to this issue. This is now being undertaken in Turkey, but initial

<sup>195</sup> Nicholas Heras, personal communication, May 2013.

explorations by World Watch Monitor reveal that the plans are not completely turning out as expected.<sup>196</sup>

### Humanitarian crisis

Many threats related to health security, food security, personal security and environmental security affect all Syrians equally. However, threats related to political and economic security, and a number of threats related to personal security are specific to Christians. This research shows that to specific threats the whole population is vulnerable, but Christians in particular. These threats are in large part related to the sectarian nature of the conflict, religious clashes and political issues, but also have to do with criminals targeting Christians.

Finally, beyond the debate about the particular vulnerable position of Christians in Syria, one must never lose sight of the unseen humanitarian crisis the country is going through. Christians are indeed a vulnerable group that deserves protection, but they are not the only vulnerable group. Focusing on post-conflict peace-building, while providing protection for the country's vulnerable communities, should be a priority.

## 4.2 Future outlook

The development of future scenarios for Syria's Christians will take the main findings of the Vulnerability Assessment as its starting point. The Vulnerability Assessment is made out of three methodological steps: **(1)** consultation of experts to establish the threats to which Christians are most vulnerable, **(2)** data collection and **(3)** assessment of the intensity of each threat (Low, Med, High).

In order to develop future scenarios, only the threats that are assessed with "High" intensity will be used, as they correspond to the areas in which Christians are specifically vulnerable. The Christian minority is vulnerable to all the listed threats, but those categorized as "Low" or "Med" are less specific to them as a group, and to varying extents apply to all Syrians. The future outlook for Christians will mainly be determined by the evolution of the threats that are characterized as "High."

Two additional methodological steps will be undertaken to complete the Vulnerability Assessment: **(4)** from the list of identified threats, the two main factors which are particularly threatening the Church will be selected from the threats with a high intensity and **(5)** the development of 4 scenarios based on these two selected main factors.

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<sup>196</sup> See also Nuri Kino, "The Camp. Turkey is building a tent city for thousands of Syria's Christians. Why?", op cit.

Table 3

**Vulnerability Assessment Tool – Future Scenarios for Syria's Christians**

Step 1: To which threats are Christians vulnerable?	Step 2: Data collection	Step 3: Assess the intensity of each threat (Low/Med/High)	Step 4: Define 2 main factors	Step 5: Develop 4 scenarios
Environmental security is virtually inexistent in Syria, affecting the whole population, including Christians.	See section 3.1	Low		
The destruction of the Syrian economy because of the civil war affects the whole population, including Christians.	See section 3.2	Med		
Lands of Christians have been confiscated.	See section 3.3	Low		
The Syrian civil war has to a large extent become a "sectarian conflict".	See section 3.4	Med		
Christians suffer disproportionately from the violence, insecurity and overall impunity in Syria.	See section 3.5	<u>High</u>	<u>Main factor</u>	
Christians are caught in the crossfire of the strife between government and opposition forces	See section 3.6	Med		
There are comparatively more refugees and internally displaced people amongst the Christian population than amongst any other religious or ethnic group.	See section 3.7	<u>High</u>		
Christian refugees are comparatively more disadvantaged than other refugees and suffer great hostilities in refugee camps.	See section 3.8	<u>High</u>		
Christians are soft targets for criminal groups.	See section 3.9	Med		
Women in general, but particularly Christian women, are vulnerable to sexual abuse.	See section 3.10	Med		
Christians are deliberately being targeted by Islamist groups.	See section 3.11	<u>High</u>	<u>Main factor</u>	
Christian men are being forced to join the government army or the rebel forces.	See section 3.12	Med		
Christians suffer greatly from the absence of food security, especially in the areas held by the opposition.	See section 3.13	Low		
Christians face severe health insecurity.	See section 3.14	Low		

Source: Own elaboration

Of the four threats with a high intensity, the following two threats were selected as the main factors on which the future of Syria's Christians is expected to be highly dependent and which are most significant for the situation of the Church:

1. **Christians suffer disproportionately from the violence, insecurity and overall impunity in Syria.**
2. **Christians are deliberately being targeted by Islamist groups.**

These two threats were chosen above the other two threats (there are comparatively more refugees and internally displaced people amongst the Christian population than amongst any other religious or ethnic group; Christian refugees are comparatively more disadvantaged than other refugees and suffer great hostilities in refugee camps) because both threats are subordinate to the two main factors – their improvement or deterioration will depend on the evolution of the two main factors –and because they partly correspond to the situation in refugee camps *outside* Syrian territory. They are nevertheless very important issues that should be urgently addressed.

The way the overall impunity can be addressed in the post-conflict era can only result in either one of the two following outcomes:

- 1.1 Impunity remains structural, and no viable solution to the conflict is found.***
- 1.2 The civil war ends and the rule of law is reestablished.***

Depending on the outcome of the civil war – a victory of Assad, a victory of the opposition, a truce between both parties – and the degree to which the opposition Islamizes, the influence of fundamentalist Islam can take different shapes:

- 2.1 The civil war leads to a victory of Islamist factions, and Syria effectively becomes an Islamic state.***
- 2.2 Islamization is a residual element of the civil war and is not a relevant element of post-conflict Syria.***

Based on the former, the following four scenarios are relevant to understanding the country's future and its significance for the Church:

<b>2.2 Islamization is a residual element of the civil war and is not a relevant element of post-conflict Syria.</b>		
<b>1.1 Impunity remains structural, and no viable solution to the conflict is found.</b>	D. Structural violence and impunity continue, but the sectarian dimension of the conflict becomes less important.	A. The Assad regime prevails.
	C. Islamists take control of Syria, but violence and fighting continue.	B. Islamists take control of Syria and rule out all opposition.
<b>2.1 The civil war leads to a victory of Islamist factions, and Syria effectively becomes an Islamic state.</b>		<b>1.2 The civil war ends and the rule of law is reestablished.</b>

➤ **Scenario A. The Assad regime prevails.**

In this scenario the Assad regime prevails, i.e. manages to hold on to power and to get the country back under control. In the short term, a definitive end to the violence is unlikely – but two main threats to Syria's Christians are effectively taken away: Islamist radicalization is less an issue than expected, and the civil war leads to some form of reestablishment of the rule of law. However, a conflict spark will persist, and it could be argued whether this scenario would be the most favorable possible situation for Syria's Christians.

➤ **Scenario B. Islamists take control of Syria and rule out all opposition.**

Scenario B is the worst case scenario for Syria's Christians. Syria would become an Islamic state, similar to Iran or Saudi Arabia, where government control of all areas of society is tight. Alternatively, because of the ethnic composition of Syria, the country could move to a situation that is comparable to Egypt: the Christian minority is under pressure, but tolerated. This scenario is not absolutely unlikely, depending on which side will be victorious in the civil war.

➤ **Scenario C. Islamists take control of Syria, but violence and fighting continues.**

This scenario will take place if the opposition, dominated by Islamists, is victorious in the civil war, but does not succeed in completely destroying Assad's government and forces loyal to him continue fighting. The violence, and the resulting impunity, will continue, similarly to the current situation in Iraq. Scenario C seems the most likely scenario<sup>197</sup>.

➤ **Scenario D. Structural violence and impunity continue, but the sectarian dimension of the conflict becomes less important.**

In scenario D, structural violence continues, as the civil war effectively goes on. However, the sectarian dimension of the conflict would be downplayed, and the conflict would center around political lines. This scenario seems unlikely because the sectarian dimension of the conflict has become one of its main defining elements.

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<sup>197</sup> “As the civil war in Syria has dragged on, the rebels have become more Islamist and extreme. For Western governments pondering whether to arm them, Jabhat al-Nusra (Victory Front) is the biggest worry. Its global jihadist ideology justifies violence to bring about a nation where all Muslims unite. It enjoys murky sources of private funding, including regular payments from al-Qaeda in Iraq. Ahrar al-Sham has more local aims, but its comrades are also vehemently Islamist. Other umbrella groups, such as Liwa al-Tawhid in Aleppo, Syria's embattled second city, are harder to classify, in part because they serve as franchises or bring together smaller groups with a range of ideas. The Farouq Battalions, whose territorial reach goes from Homs to Hasaka in the north-east, is another mixed bag, ranging from Islamists to people with no particular ideology. The Supreme Military Command, led by General Salim Idriss, a Sunni defector from President Assad's army, includes some able commanders but still lacks the cash and arms to match either the regime's forces or Jabhat al-Nusra, which ignores the military command. Ominously, rebels from more secular-minded or more moderately Islamist groups speak openly of a second war to come—against Jabhat al-Nusra.” “Who's who in Syria's battlefield”, The Economist, 17/05/2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2013/05/daily-chart-12>.







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