

Testimony

Before the

**Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and
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and the

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

on

Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle.

By

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I am Dr. M. Zuhdi Jasser, a Commissioner at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Thank you for the opportunity to testify today before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa on *Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle*. This important hearing highlights the increasingly sectarian nature of the Syrian civil war, which is well into its third year, and the widespread implications both for religious freedom or belief and the regional stability. I will mention up front that the war in Syria hits especially close to home for me not only as a USCIRF commissioner but as the son of Syrian immigrants. Many of our immediate and extended family still call Syria home and remain in the crosshairs of this civil war and humanitarian disaster.

USCIRF has been monitoring closely the crisis in Syria and in April issued a special report, *Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria*. The report, USCIRF's first ever on Syria, highlighted that the Syrian people have experienced egregious violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. The international community, including the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and numerous non-governmental organizations, all agree that the Assad regime has committed gross abuses of human rights and violated its obligations under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I. Extrajudicial killings, rape, and torture have all been well-documented. And most recently, President Obama has confirmed that the regime has utilized chemical weapons. Some groups associated with the opposition also have committed crimes against humanity.

If the crisis continues and current conditions persist and intensify, the Syrian people will experience indescribable horrors perpetrated against them, and an entire generation of young Syrians will be lost. The international community must come together to deal with the crisis both within Syria and in neighboring countries. If it does not, the crisis will spread beyond Syria and into the region and beyond.

In my testimony, I will focus on the increasing sectarian nature of the Syrian crisis, the effects on religious minority communities and the impact on the region. I also will report on some findings based on a June 1 -11, 2013 UNHCR delegation trip in which USCIRF participated that included speaking with refugees. I will conclude with some recommendations for your consideration.

The Nature of the Conflict

Since the conflict began, all religious communities in Syria have experienced religiously-motivated violence against their persons, places of worship, homes, businesses, and villages, towns and cities. For example, the London-based Syrian Network for Human Rights reported in September 2012 that the regime had already destroyed more than 500,000 buildings, including churches and mosques. The same NGO reports that 1451 mosques were targeted by the regime and that at least 348 mosques have been destroyed completely. The opposition reportedly has attacked four mosques, in each case because the Syrian army used the minaret as a sniper position.

While religious minority communities will be more vulnerable in a post-Assad Syria should extremist groups take power, it is important to note that the Assad regime overwhelmingly has

targeted Sunni Muslims and committed the most egregious human rights violations against them. Additionally, women and children have been adversely affected: nearly three-quarters of all refugees who have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and beyond are women and children under the age of 17.

The regime's actions have created a humanitarian crisis that the world has not seen in recent memory. The United Nations reports that at least 93,000 individuals have died, that there are more than 1.6 million refugees, and 4.2 million Syrians have been internally displaced. It is estimated that by the end of 2013 more than half of Syria's population, or over 10 million people, will need urgent humanitarian assistance from the international community.

The Assad regime has turned a peaceful political protest with no religious or sectarian undertones into an overtly sectarian conflict. Regime-associated individuals (and to a lesser extent the opposition) that were born and bred in Syria now are supported by foreign military aid and training, and with inflows of foreign fighters by groups the United States has designated as terrorist organizations. Additionally, countries that the U.S. considers allies are supporting the warring parties. The regime and foreign fighters in particular fuel the sectarian fires of this conflict. As the sectarian nature of this conflict widens, individuals will be targeted not only because of their perceived or true allegiance to a particular political side, but simply because they follow a particular faith.

Additionally, the massive numbers of refugees fleeing Syria are destabilizing an already unstable region. Economically and politically unstable countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon have been put under severe economic pressure by hosting hundreds of thousands of Syrians.

Background

Syria's pre-conflict population of 22 million had broken down as follows: Sunni Muslims constituted Syria's largest religious community, making up roughly 75% of the population. Alawites, adherents to an offshoot of Shi'a Islam, made up about 12% of the population and various Christian denominations about 10%. Other religious communities in the country include Druze (4%); Yezidis (1%) -- whom the government categorizes as Muslims; and a very small Jewish community found in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo.

These figures reflect that Syria historically has been a religiously diverse country where its people have traditionally lived together without religious or sectarian animosities. However, some argue that sectarian divides existed under the surface due to the Assad regime favoring religious communities loyal to his government.

Prior to the conflict, the Assad family's government selectively permitted freedom of religion or belief based on its political calculations. The Assad government tolerated the country's smallest religious minority groups, including Christians, permitting them to worship freely, as long as they did not politically oppose his regime. With regard to Sunni Muslims, the Assad regime limited their religious freedom by controlling how their imams were selected, as well as imposing other restrictions. Also limited under Hafez and Bashar Assad was the Sunni Muslim majority's ability to participate in the government and have political parties.

The Assad family's brutal authoritarian rule for over 40 years created the political conditions for the current conflict. Under both Hafez and Bashar, no political opposition was allowed and Syrian security forces perpetrated egregious human rights abuses to oppress anyone critical of the government. Due to these conditions, dozens of groups -- domestic and foreign -- have emerged in opposition to the regime. They vary widely in composition, from where they are drawn from, and their goals. Some of these groups, including the internationally-recognized Syrian Opposition Council, espouse democratic reform. Others, however, are motivated by religious ideologies espousing violence, such as the U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Nusra Front. The varied nature of these groups affects their ability to find consensus and work together, further complicating the current and future situation for human rights and religious freedom in Syria.

Religious Minorities Caught in the Middle

By and large, religious minority communities, including Christians, Druze, Ismailis and other non-Alawite minorities, have attempted to disassociate themselves from the conflict and stay above the fray. However, circumstances increasingly are forcing them to take a position either in favor of the regime or the opposition.

From the beginning of the conflict, the Assad regime used sectarian rhetoric and military strategy as tactics to discourage Christians and other religious minorities from supporting and joining the opposition. The regime refers to the opposition and all Sunni Muslims as both extremists and terrorists who seek to turn Syria into an Islamic state which would be unwelcoming to religious minority communities. Assad and government officials stoked fears among Christians, citing the plight of Egyptian Coptic Christians and Iraqi Christians to depict what would happen to Syrian Christians should the opposition be successful. The presence of foreign terrorists affiliated with al-Qaeda and the wide deployment of Shabiha (regime terror squads) gives credibility to this argument.

The Assad regime and its most loyal supporters, predominately Alawites associated with the Ba'athist political party, appear to view opposition forces, predominately Sunni Muslims, as a threat to, not only to their ability to remain in power, but also the very existence of their religious community in Syria. However, the Alawite community is not monolithic. Some Alawite elites have abandoned the al-Assad regime for the opposition and denounced the violence perpetrated against civilians. In March 2013, a group of Alawites opposed to al-Assad and supporting a democratic alternative met in Cairo to discuss a declaration supporting a united Syria and preventing sectarian revenge attacks.

In February 2012, regime forces raided the historic Syriac Orthodox Um-al-Zennar Church in Homs. Additionally, the regime has bombed and desecrated a number of other Christian churches in Syria. Anti-regime activists have reported that the regime plants individuals within refugee camps and in key localities both within and outside Syria to stoke sectarian fears. In late December 2012, *Time Magazine* reported allegations that the regime and local government officials provided up to \$500 per month to individuals to pose as opposition supporters and graffiti buildings or chant slogans at protests including "The Christians to Beirut..."

The opposition also has targeted religious minorities. Just a few weeks ago the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA) reported that armed rebels affiliated with the Free Syrian

Army raided the Christian-populated al-Duvair village and massacred all its civilian residents, including women and children.

Also, after more than two months we still do not know who kidnapped two Orthodox Bishops, Yohanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yaziji, or why. This kidnapping reportedly occurred near the town of Kafr Dael, near Aleppo in northern Syria. Most individuals allege that they were kidnapped by opposition fighters, while some opposition groups claim regime affiliates kidnapped the Bishops to further inflame sectarian fears.

These are not the only incidents against Christians during the war. In January 2013, the NGO Human Rights Watch reported that opposition forces destroyed and looted minority religious sites in northern Syria. Human Rights Watch also reported that two churches were stormed and ransacked in the villages of Ghasaniyeh and Jdeideh, in the region of Lattakia, in November and December 2012. Various reports indicate that the Christian population of the city of Homs—approximately 160,000—has almost entirely fled for safety, with reports suggesting that only 1,000 Christians remain. In late 2012, opposition forces reportedly attacked churches and occupied as safe houses an evangelical school and a home for the elderly in Homs.

A Sunni-Alawite War?

Assad's tactic of dividing the Syrian people along Sunni-Alawite sectarian lines appears to be succeeding. To ensure continued Alawite support for the regime, the government capitalized on Alawite fears of Sunni rule by spreading rumors of Sunni atrocities against Alawites and depicting the conflict as a fight to prevent Alawite extermination. For example, in late December 2012, *Time Magazine* reported allegations that the regime and local government officials also paid individuals to pose as opposition supporters and graffiti buildings or chant slogans at protests including "...Alawites to the grave."

In response to their growing fears, civilian Alawites formed the pro-Assad and government-supported domestic militia such as Jaysh al-Sha'bi and Shabiha. The U.S. government has designated both as terrorist organizations that have committed gross human rights violations in Sunni communities.

The government's language and violence, including indiscriminate bombings, extrajudicial killing, and torture of the largely Sunni opposition and non-combative Sunni Muslim communities, has led Sunnis increasingly to view the conflict not as a regime's attempts to stay in power, but rather an Alawite-led attack against Sunni Muslims.

The al-Assad regime, including its army, security forces and related militias, has targeted Sunni Muslims. In May 2013 the regime killed more than 200 civilians, including women and children in al-Bayda, a massacre described by many as the worst sectarian attack against Sunni Muslims during this conflict. On May 25, 2012, in what has become known as the Houla massacre, 108 Sunni Muslims, including 49 children, were killed in two opposition-controlled villages in the Houla region of Syria just north of Homs. In the aftermath, the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) determined that most of the victims had been "summarily executed" and "entire families were shot in their houses," and that regime-supported *Shabiha* were the most likely perpetrators. Reportedly some victims had pro Shi'a or regime slogans carved into their foreheads.

In July 2012, more than 200 Syrians, mostly Sunni Muslim civilians were killed in a village in the opposition-held Hama region. The Syrian army attacked the village with helicopters and tanks, followed by militia forces reportedly killing civilians including women and children “execution style.”

USCIRF staff members Tiffany Lynch and Sahar Chaudhry, who recently travelled to the Middle East to speak with Syrian refugees about religious freedom conditions in Syria, were told of some of the tactics the regime uses to increase sectarian divides between Sunnis and Alawites. One tactic used by the regime is to force Sunnis to proclaim that Assad is their god and they are loyal only to him - if they are unwilling to do so, torture and death are likely. A former Syrian officer told USCIRF staff that regime forces only killed Sunnis and that his senior officer continuously reiterated that they were fighting Sunni terrorists. When this officer refused to kill women and children the Army accused of being Sunni terrorists, he was arrested and tortured for months until he was released and was able to defect and travel to Jordan.

Some Syrian refugees in Jordan and Egypt expressed to USCIRF staff strong anti-Alawite sentiments, including referring to Alawites as “dogs.” They made these comments largely in the context of their perceiving Alawites as being pro-Assad and anti-Sunni Muslim, rather than their making a derogatory statement against the Alawite faith.

There have been reports of groups attacking Alawites and Shi’a Muslims. For example, a December 2012 video released by Saudi-sponsored Takfiri Wahhabi, a Sunni opposition group, shows a Shi’i mosque that was burned down and dozens of individuals congratulating each other. Also in December 2012, a suicide bomber detonated explosives in a Damascus suburb wounding 14 people and damaging one of Shi’i Islam’s holiest shrines, a mausoleum of the Prophet’s Muhammad’s granddaughter.

Outside Actors Stoking Sectarianism

A number of outside actors are entering Syria and stoking the sectarian nature of the Syrian civil war, including Hezbollah, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards, and Shiite fighters from Iraq – all in support of Assad.

Additionally, over the last two-plus-years the dozens of groups which constitute the opposition include a number of foreign groups motivated by religious ideologies espousing violence, such as the U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate. Like the regime, some of the more extremist groups utilize sectarian rhetoric and iconography to perpetuate fear and sectarianism. While al-Nusra, al-Qaeda and other extremists groups and fighters undoubtedly are becoming more influential, the numbers of their fighters in Syria are in dispute. Still, the majority of fighters in Syria are Syrians.

In conversations USCIRF had with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Egypt, the refugees – all of whom were Sunni Muslims -- by and large expressed disagreement with the religiously-motivated ideologies of the extremist groups. However, they supported the end goal, removing Assad from power.

Religious Minorities in the Refugee Crisis

Despite being caught in the middle of this conflict and in a precarious situation, religious minorities in Syria are not fleeing the country in the numbers anticipated. Of the more than 1.6 million Syrian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa, the overwhelming majority are Sunni Muslims. UNHCR reports that at the end of April less than one percent of each minority community -- Christians, Alawite, Ismaili, Mandaean and Yezidi -- are registered in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon.

There are reports that upwards of 300,000 Christians are internally displaced. Unfortunately reports for other communities are not available.

The small number of minorities in the refugee population reflects two displacement trends among these communities, especially among Christians and Alawites. The first is that Christians and Alawites are moving to their home areas or to regime-held areas because these areas tend to be safe from regime bombing. This suggests that as the conflict drags on longer than some had anticipated some Christians and Alawites are joining their-co-religionists, and perhaps buying into the government's rhetoric that they are safer with the government than with the opposition. . Second, evidence suggests that if Christians and Alawites do flee the country to Lebanon or Jordan, for instance, they are not registering with the UN refugee agency.

As USCIRF staff was told while meeting with refugees, Christians and Alawites fear identifying themselves as refugees for two reasons that highlight their precarious situation trying to exist between the two warring parties. One, they do not want other refugees to perceive them as supporting the Syrian government simply because of their religious affiliation. And second, if they should go home and the Assad government remains in power, they do not want government officials to view them as disloyal to the regime by having sought safety in another country.

It is believed that a small percentage of minority refugees are trying to pass as Sunni Muslims by, among other measures, wearing the hijab, to protect them from possible backlash.

Effects on the Region

As mentioned, more than 1.6 million Syrians have fled the country, thereby creating a massive humanitarian crisis and an emerging destabilizing threat to the region. Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey now each host more than half a million Syrians. Although Egypt currently is hosting 80,000 refugees, it is expecting at least an additional 120,000 Syrian refugees by the end of the year.

These refugees are putting enormous economic and political strains on already weak governments in the region. In Jordan, 80 percent of all refugees live outside of camps and no Syrian refugee camps exist in either Lebanon or Egypt. Instead, refugees live in cities and towns, competing with Egyptians, Jordanians, and Lebanese for housing, jobs, and access to services such as health clinics and schools.

For Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, all countries that already have pre-existing economic and political challenges, hosting and providing for the large number of refugees is creating further destabilizing conditions. Further destabilization of countries in this already troubled region will have negative implications for the region, as well as beyond, including for U.S. national security.

Alarming, Syria's sectarian conflict now appears to be spreading beyond its borders, including to Lebanon and Iraq. In the last month, Lebanon has experienced fighting between Alawite and Salafist groups. In addition, it is widely argued that the spike in sectarian violence in Iraq that has left about 1,000 people killed is a direct spillover effect from the Syrian crisis. This is the largest death toll Iraq has experienced since 2006-2007

Additionally, scarce resources and jobs in all host countries are further exacerbating local tensions, potentially causing further economic and political destabilization. The international community will disregard these tensions at its peril.

Some analysts have suggested that a significant number of Syrians and current refugees will seek entry into Europe and that European nations need to both focus on aiding refugees in current host countries and start planning for inflows to Europe.

Recommendations

In late April, USCIRF released the special report, *Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria*, in which the Commission provided recommendations grouped in four categories: 1) Promoting Protection for Religious Freedom in Syria; 2) Prioritizing Human Rights in U.S. relations with the Friends of Syria Group; 3) Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief through U.S. Programs; and 4) Addressing the Situation of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees.

While USCIRF offered 20 recommendations in the report, below are seven key recommendations:

- The U.S. should, where appropriate, assist the Syrian Opposition Coalition and any future post-Assad government to provide security to protect likely targets of sectarian or religious-motivated violence, including areas where religious or minority communities live or congregate, as neighborhoods, religious sites and places of worship;
- To offset the influence of extremist groups who are establishing Shariah courts in liberated areas, the U.S. government should provide technical training and support to local councils, courts, lawyers and judges on domestic laws and international standards relating to human rights and religious freedom;
- As other nations such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar are vying for influence to shape Syria towards their goals, the U.S. government should form a special coalition with like-minded partners among the Friends of Syria to fund and develop efforts to promote intra- and inter-religious tolerance and respect for religious freedom and related rights to ensure that a future Syria respects these fundamental freedoms;

- The U.S. government should ensure that all international cooperation with the SOC emphasizes the importance of ensuring the rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of opinion and expression, as well as protection of minority religious communities;
- The U.S. government should direct U.S. officials and recipients of U.S. grants to prioritize projects that promote multi-religious and multi-ethnic efforts to encourage religious tolerance and understanding, foster knowledge of and respect for universal human rights standards, and develop the political ability of religious minorities to organize themselves and convey their concerns effectively;
- The U.S. government should establish a refugee resettlement program for Syrian refugees fleeing targeted religious persecution from Syrian government forces, affiliated militias, or non-state actors opposed to the al-Assad regime; and
- In anticipation of any mass exodus of religious minorities who could be targeted for sectarian reprisal attacks in refugee camps, encourage UNHCR to make preparations for increased refugee flows of religious minorities, to develop a protection program to ensure their safety in refugee camps, and to sponsor interfaith dialogues among the various refugee communities.