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# In the Name of Protection: Minorities and identity in the Syrian conflict



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# Introduction

In March 2011, Syrians took to the streets to protest a ruling party that had been in place since 1970, led first by Hafez Al Assad and then by his son, current president Bashar Al Assad. The largely peaceful protests were met with violence; children were arbitrarily detained, civilians shot at, and activists were detained and tortured in different state security directorates and branches.

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Ten years on, Syrian civilians have been exposed to human rights violations and atrocities that have shocked the world, forcing millions to leave their country in one of the world's largest refugee crises on record. Regional and international state actors, including Russia, Iran and Turkey, as well as armed groups and militias backed by a plethora of interested players, have played their roles during the last decade.

Driven by their own interests, the Syrian state, and other actors have leaned on a variety of narratives to justify their actions and interventions. Most significant among those narratives is one of protection, specifically the protection of Syrian minorities. The issue of minorities in Syria has become a contentious topic. Identities have been politicized regardless of individuals' political positions and used as a political chip in the ever-shifting domestic, regional and international interests in the Syrian conflict. The Assad government plays on minority fears to legitimize itself as the only viable option for their survival. Meanwhile, Turkey has expanded its influence in northern Syria, backing armed groups named after Ottoman sultans, and Russia lights candles in Syrian Orthodox Churches to reinforce its

political discourse around Syria.<sup>1</sup> Even former US president Trump has expressed his support for Syrian minorities, referring to Syrian Christians to bolster support from his conservative Christian base.<sup>2</sup>

While the exact demographic numbers are unclear, the landscape of ethnic and religious minorities in Syria is diverse and spans the country; it includes Isma'ilis, Druze, Christians, Alawis, Yezidis, Kurds, and others.<sup>3</sup> Despite this diversity, narratives about minorities in Syria and internationally often deal with them as an homogeneous group, whose interests lie with whatever the political interests of the speaking party are. The Assad government, in particular, has marketed itself as the 'protector of minorities', drawing on life before 2011 and the Hafez Al Assad era as one that guaranteed the safety of minorities. Belonging to the Alawi minority, the largest religious minority in Syria,<sup>4</sup> the Assad government has continued to capitalize on this narrative post-2011, proposing itself as the best alternative in the face of 'terrorists', a rhetoric often used to disparage Sunni protesters and opponents of the government.<sup>5</sup> Concurrently, the spread of armed groups across the country further complicates the picture. Regardless of their own ex-

periences as activists or civilians, the position of minorities is assumed; the state assumes their allegiance, and Islamist groups, armed or otherwise, assume the same.

The weaponization of religion and sect is far-reaching in the Syrian political landscape. The state's use of symbols and spectacle in public spaces has a long history.<sup>6</sup> The melding of Alawi religious symbols, imagery and other aspects of Alawi identity in state security agencies such as the Air Force Intelligence Directorate is one example of how representations of Alawi identity have been hijacked to merge with the state.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, armed groups such as Jabhat Al Nusra (which has since evolved into Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham) and others have been open in labelling as apostates and killing anyone who does not subscribe to their version of violent extremist Islamism.

While the Assad government has historically appointed Sunni Arab politicians to senior political positions, it has also systematically demonized Sunnis, particularly in the post-2011 context. Protesters in the 2011 uprisings, who by demographic make-up were broadly Sunni Arab Muslims, have been dismissed by the state as 'terrorists' rather than citizens seeking political, economic and social justice.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the narrative of 'protection of minorities' is used against the backdrop of vilification of a Sunni Arab Muslim majority. Coupled with the rise of armed Islamist groups across Syria, state rhetoric has relied on conflating peaceful protesters and civilians in Sunni-majority areas with such armed groups.

This report challenges and complicates widespread assumptions made about minorities in Syria by documenting a range of individual experiences during the conflict. Between August 2020 and January 2021, Ceasefire conducted 14 in-depth interviews with activists and civilians from di-

verse minority backgrounds, documenting human rights violations they have been subjected to and analysing the relationship of those violations to their minority status. The interviews shed light on the spectrum of experiences, from activists arbitrarily detained and tortured by Syrian state forces to civilians attacked and kidnapped by armed groups. Thirteen out of 14 interviewees come from a religious minority background, while one is a member of the Kurdish ethnic minority. The difference in experience between religious minorities and ethnic minorities highlights the Assad dynasty's systematic persecution of Syrian Kurds, including denial of their cultural and linguistic rights.<sup>9</sup>

*Chapter 1, 'The state and minorities'*, offers a historical, political and cultural account of how Syrian minorities have been represented by the government's political discourse, and how narratives of the political allegiances and interests of Syrian minorities have been developed. *Chapter 2, 'Legal frameworks'*, provides a legal background to violations against minorities in both the Syrian Constitution and international human rights conventions, including the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Eleven out of 14 interviewees in this report were arbitrarily detained. *Chapter 3, 'Violations against activists'*, documents these 11 cases, 10 of which involved detention by Syrian state forces based on the interviewees' oppositional politics and activism, while one involved an interviewee kidnapped and detained by the former armed Islamist group Jabhat Al Nusra.<sup>10</sup> Arbitrarily detained interviewees are referred to as activists, and many do not consider themselves practising or religious individuals or identify as minorities. In those instances, they have been referred to as 'minority-background' as per their preference. However, this does

not exempt them from being perceived as minorities, whether by their jailers or interrogators, or more broadly by Syrian society. As such, their experiences shed light on the reality of negotiating their identities, whether they serve to protect or harm them.

*Chapter 4, 'Violations against civilians'*, documents the testimonies of three women, reflecting on their experiences as minority women and, in some cases, the violations they have been subjected to as a result. The wider impact of the conflict on minority communities is also discussed, including forced conscription into the Syrian army. Syrian minorities, and minorities more broadly, are often referred to as one homogeneous group, void of the

multitude of variables that contribute to the human experience, such as gender, class, region, age, or social, cultural and political capital. This report places the testimonies of all 14 interviewees at the heart of documenting their violations, in an attempt to break the cycle of minorities being 'spoken for'. For the Syrian minorities of this report, their testimonies are in their own words, sometimes contradicting, sometimes in agreement with each other, yet always breaking prevalent stereotypes of Syrian minorities today.

To protect the identities of interviewees, all names in this report are fictional and marked with an asterisk. All civilians and activists interviewed in this report are no longer based in Syria.

# 1

## The state and minorities

Discussing the experience of minorities in Syria is a complex endeavour. Each minority has its own accounts of history and grievances, particularly in a post-2011 Syria. Led by former president Hafez Al Assad and then by his son and current president, Bashar Al Assad, the ruling Ba'ath party has curated a narrative portraying itself as the protector and the defender of religious minorities in Syria.

### Minority narratives

The protection narrative suggests that religious minorities are in danger and need protecting from the majority.<sup>11</sup> While Sunni Muslims make up the majority of the population (75%), Alawis are the largest minority (12%) followed by Christians (10%), including Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Maronite, Syrian Catholic, Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic.<sup>12</sup> Then come Druze (3–4%), Isma'ilis and Ithna'ashari or Twelver Shi'a (2%) and Yezidis (1%). These figures provide an estimated count, as exact demographic data on Syrian minorities is currently unavailable.<sup>13</sup>

Concerning ethnic minorities, Kurds form the largest group and then come Armenians, Circassians and Turkmen.<sup>14</sup> Yet conflation between religious and ethnic minorities must be avoided, as the experiences of Syrian Kurds, in particular, have differed significantly. The ruling Ba'ath party has systematically suppressed Syrian Kurds, including through denial of cultural and linguistic rights, restricted access to public services and denial of citizenship.<sup>15</sup> The 2004 suppression of Kurdish protesters is an example of how the state's relationship with Kurds differs from that with reli-

gious minorities.<sup>16</sup> As an ethnic minority, the Syrian state associated the demand of rights for Syrian Kurds as a threat to the state, and was quick to associate any Syrian Kurdish dissidence with regional Kurdish politicians such as Abdullah Ocalan, Masoud Barzani, Jalal Talabani and others. This political association by identity is discussed by Jamal\*, who has been detained multiple times by the Syrian state, in chapter 3, 'Violations against activists'.<sup>17</sup>

The roots of associating the state with the Alawi minority lie with Hafez Al Assad's rise to power in 1970. Following a coup d'état against his Ba'athist comrades, the first thing Assad did was get rid of many Ba'ath party leaders from different communities, including minorities.<sup>18</sup> Systematic recruitment of Alawis into the army and security services, the *Mokhabarat*, laid the foundation for an appropriation of Alawi identity by the state.<sup>19</sup> Coastal accents, often associated with the Alawi community, came to represent power. Seven out of 14 interviews conducted for this report referred to interrogators, state security officers and other government officials changing their regional and city accent for that of a coastal accent.<sup>20</sup> A popular joke reflects this lived reality:

*'An army officer welcoming a new cohort of recruits reassures them that in the army sectarianism has no place, there are no Muslims or Christians or Druze, in the army we are all Alawis.'*<sup>21</sup>

Abdul Haleem Khaddam, former Vice President of Syria and a Sunni, contended in an interview that when Hafez Al Assad came to power the military academy would accept 300 cadets per year from all around Syria; Assad changed the yearly intake to 3,000, increasing admissions from the Alawi sect, 'his people', to protect him and keep him in power.<sup>22</sup> Concurrently, Assad also made sure that the political class was dominated by Sunni politicians, as in the position of vice president.<sup>23</sup> This political strategy inducted a Sunni political elite into the state, quelling accusations of the state as sectarian and placating a Sunni majority with political representation.

Assad's dual strategy of the militarization of Alawi communities and the appointment of Sunnis to high political office carries on into the political dynamics of Syria today. The nuances of political power and allegiance involve more than minority status; class, regionalism, gender and political views all have a role to play. Opposition activists of minority background detained by the state are a prime example of this, as detailed later in this report.

From the outset, the ruling Ba'ath party has engaged in systematic suppression of political opposition. The suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s, culminating in the 1982 Hama massacre, where an estimated 20,000 civilians were killed, is one infamous example.<sup>24</sup> Official state discourse promoted the idea that Islamist terrorists were attacking the country and had to be crushed. One Ceasefire interviewee recounts an obligatory school chant, sung across Syria, that reflects this discourse:

*'Our pledge is to confront imperialism, Zionism and reactionaries, and to crush their criminal tool, the Muslim Brotherhood puppet gang.'*<sup>25</sup>

However, this portrait of a solely Islamist opposition denied the reality of civil society members, socialists, leftists, students and secular activists detained in prisons and accused of being members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

## Sectarian state rhetoric

In his first speech after the uprising of March 2011, Bashar Al Assad stood before parliament and said:

*'They [referring to the protesters] took the other axis, which is a sectarian axis. The sectarian axis relied on incitement, it relied on messages sent by mobile phones, short messages, saying to one sect, pay attention, the other sect will attack, and to the second sect, the first sect will attack. In order to enhance the credibility of this thing, they sent masked people to knock on the doors of two adjacent neighbourhoods of two sects – I do not say different sects, I say sister sects – to say to the first sect that the second group has taken to the street so be careful, go down to the street, and they were able to bring people down to the street.'*<sup>26</sup>

Drawing on a rhetoric that claimed nefarious sectarian intentions on the part of protesters early on set a tone of delegitimization, painting protesters as automatic enemies of Syria's diverse religious communities. Assad insisted on emphasizing sectarian fears again when he declared:

*'There is chaos in the country for various reasons, mainly under the name of reform. This chaos and reform will lead to turbulent sects, sects that disagree with each other, that clash, and the hypothetical defeat of Syria will be achieved in another way.'*<sup>27</sup>

In keeping with this rhetoric, Syrian politician and media and political adviser to Assad, Buthaina Sha'aban, alluded to external:

*'Targeted attempts on the beautiful coexistence that exists in Syria. As you have seen, this region is targeted so that it becomes sectarian, regionalist, ethno-centric. Everyone who comes to Syria is aware of this beautiful coexistence that all Syrians live, in all their sects, religious affiliations and ethnicities.'*<sup>28</sup>

Sha'aban went on to wish Kurdish communities a happy *Nowruz*, the Kurdish solar new year, in a state rhetoric that denies the systemic suppres-



sion of Kurdish identity by the Syrian state, including language, and cultural celebrations such as *Nowruz*.<sup>29</sup>

Yet 'external attempts' as mentioned by Sha'aban are by no means the only perceived threat denounced by the state. Addressing a room of Sunni clerics, the following speech by Bashar Al Assad highlights the vilification of 'internal threats', specifically 'Syrian terrorists', with a clear allusion to Sunni Muslims:

*If we start from the fact that in front of tens of thousands of Syrian terrorists – I am not talking about terrorists who came from abroad – when we talk about tens of thousands of terrorists, it means that behind them is a social incubator. There is a family, there is a relative, a neighbour, a friend, and other people. I mean we are talking about hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of Syrians, even if a million – let's say millions. The figure may not seem large, but when we talk at a national level about a million or more, or even hundreds of thousands, in a society of 23 million, it means that we are facing a state of moral and social failure, and the result is a failure at a national state level.*<sup>30</sup>

As Assad paints Syrians opposing his family's 50-year rule of Syria as domestic terrorists, he also demonizes millions of Syrians, the broad majority of whom are Sunni Muslims, as 'social incubators' by virtue of being related to a Syrian opposition member. Assad's audience of Sunni clerics during this speech is also noteworthy. The state's relationship with religious Sunni institutions is a carefully cultivated one, with the state even intervening in educational curricula in the past.<sup>31</sup>

However, after 2011 Syria saw a shift in the relationship between a centralized state steering Sunni religious doctrine, and local communities in villages and towns across the country, as opposition groups took control.<sup>32</sup> While the ideologies of each opposition group differed from town to town, an inevitable shift towards local religious leaders took place, threatening the Islamic Sunni establishment aligned with Assad's political agenda.<sup>33</sup>

## Weaponized minorities

In framing the 2011 uprising through a lens of 'Us versus Them', with the Syrian government projecting itself as an 'us' that protects minorities and co-existence from a militant, Islamist, Jihadist 'them', the government promoted a narrative of external threat. Studies in social psychology have demonstrated repeatedly the influential role of perceived threats on hostility towards the 'outgroup', and even on extremism and radicalization.<sup>34</sup>

By fuelling a narrative that paints the opposition as nothing more than Islamist terrorists with an agenda to eradicate all minorities, the government has managed to instil a culture of 'Us versus Them', where sect, religion, class, regionalism and social identities are strengthened and nourished more than a national identity. The stronger these social identities are, the greater the threat is perceived to be, and the more fear and vigilance towards the other is experienced along with a need for further protection.<sup>35</sup>

The delegitimization of protesters has been a multifaceted process, including an orchestration of sectarian behaviour on the part of the government, as some activists interviewed in this report claimed. This tactic on the part of the government has also been reported by international media, as one Syrian Alawi eyewitness said to *Time* magazine that many of his friends in government jobs were paid to shout sectarian slogans in opposition demonstrations and to graffiti such slogans in public spaces.<sup>36</sup> Manaf Tlass, former brigadier of the Syrian Republican Guard, claimed in a televised interview that the Syrian government provided weapons to groups and protesters, encouraging their use to incite violence, and encouraging the narrative of protesters as violent.<sup>37</sup>

Preying on the fears and concerns of religious minorities to maintain their loyalty is no new tactic to the Syrian government. However, the government was not the only actor feeding these fears and divisions, as other regional and international forces participated in utilizing and weaponizing minorities.<sup>38</sup> Iranian, Turkish and Russian influence have all played their role by supporting, mobilizing and sometimes arming minorities they view as allies. Iran has created militias of Shi'a fighters<sup>39</sup> and has taken action to make demo-

graphic changes by repopulating certain areas in Syria with members of the Shi'a sect that come from other parts of Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.<sup>40</sup> Russia has used minorities as one justification for intervention, staging public displays of support in Christian Orthodox churches in Damascus, while Turkey has extended support to Turkmen fighters in north-western Afrin.<sup>41</sup>

Another tactic used by the government to weaponize minorities is through creating ties with religious figures and giving them special privileges in exchange for loyalty and for encouraging popular support for the government through their religious authority and influence.<sup>42</sup> Church leaders and Druze clergy declaring their support for the government has reinforced the image of the government as the champion of minorities.<sup>43</sup> As a result, the government has built a religious retinue from all sects while presenting itself as a secular government. The Syrian government's narrative, presenting itself as the 'protector of minorities', has implicated minority communities regardless of their own views, fuelling further divisions between them and the Sunni majority. It has even been reported that Alawis and Christians sometimes fear registering with refugee bodies because they expect to be persecuted by Sunni refugees or to face retaliation from the government if they return to Syria.<sup>44</sup> This tense political and social environment renders Syrian minorities double minorities, caught in the crossfire of narratives that have weaponized and politicized their identities.

Bashar Al Assad has often justified the state's extensive use of violence as necessary to eradicate 'terrorists' when asked about protesters and armed opposition groups.<sup>45</sup> This state rhetoric not only demonizes Sunni-majority protesters, but deliberately conflates their Sunni identities with that of a politicized Sunni Islamist one, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Ironically, as the Syrian state attempts to paint itself as an enemy of such groups, it denies the special relationship it has had with Islamist jihadists in the past. Many were encouraged by the Syrian government to go

to Iraq to fight US soldiers after 2003; many of these jihadists were then arrested upon their return to Syria.<sup>46</sup>

More recently, on 31 May 2011, hundreds of jihadists were released under an amnesty, many of whom joined or later formed armed Islamist groups.<sup>47</sup> Zahran Alloush, who led the Saudi Arabia-backed Jaish Al Islam and Hassan Abboud, who led the Qatar-backed Ahrar Al Sham until they died, were both released under the Sednaya amnesty.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, pro-democracy secular activists and peaceful protesters have been arrested and tortured in prison, as highlighted in chapter 3 of this report.

Furthermore, these Islamist groups have been accused of several incidents of kidnapping activists and citizen journalists in areas they control in Eastern Ghoutah.<sup>49</sup> Many accuse the Syrian state of using armed Islamist groups with the purpose of subverting the 2011 uprising. A former member of Syria's Military Intelligence Directorate accused the government of building an armed Islamist revolt deliberately so that Assad could be perceived as the lesser evil by the international community, garnering support from religious minorities and the moderate mainstream population.<sup>50</sup> Another former state official says he witnessed higher ranked officers saying:

*'It was necessary to provoke sectarian bloodshed there, including the slaughter of fellow Alawi officers by Sunni rebels, in order to "serve the nation".'*<sup>51</sup>

The Syrian government's narrative, claiming to be the 'protector of minorities', has been adopted but also rejected by both religious minorities and mainstream Sunnis. In the violent context of post-2011 Syria, where armed groups and international actors have played out their agendas at the expense of civilians, minorities have been weaponized, their identities hijacked, and their communities treated as politically monolithic. In chapters 3 and 4, Cease-fire interviews minority civilians and activists who challenge these homogenizing narratives imposed upon their identities.

# 2

## Legal framework

Syria's modern legal framework has emerged in the context of over fifty years of Ba'ath party rule, following the 1963 military coup that first brought the party to power. While promoting an outwardly secular ideology, the Ba'ath party has sought to consolidate an Arab nationalist identity throughout Syria and has suppressed dissent through heavy restrictions on civil and political rights. A state of emergency, in place since the 1963 coup, allowed for the detention of activists without due process and the prosecution of civilians in military courts.

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After the start of the uprising in 2011, President Bashar Al Assad lifted the state of emergency and in 2012, a new Constitution was approved, setting term limits for future presidents and removing a previous reference to the Ba'ath party as the leading party in society and the state. However, the constitutional referendum was rejected by the opposition and did not lead to an improvement in patterns of human rights abuses. Despite the lifting of the state of emergency, serious violations of civil and political rights continued to be justified through other legal tools.

While the legal framework described in this section is in force in government-controlled areas of Syria, the conflict has also led to the emergence of parallel governance structures in parts of the country. In opposition- or rebel-held areas, armed groups opposed to Assad have implemented their own legal codes, and the experience of civilians has varied from area to area. Where armed groups with extremist orientations have taken control, religious minorities have witnessed a sharp deterioration in their rights. In

north-east Syria, the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration has put forth its own Constitution and laws recognizing ethnic and religious minorities, although these are not recognized by the Syrian government or the international community.

### Religious freedom

While promoting a strongly Arab nationalist identity, Syria's 2012 Constitution contains some basic guarantees of religious freedom. Article 33(3) states that: 'Citizens shall be equal in rights and duties without discrimination among them on grounds of sex, origin, language, religion or creed.'<sup>52</sup> There is no state religion, but Article 3 requires the President of the Republic to be Muslim and designates Islamic jurisprudence as 'a major source of legislation'. The same article stipulates that: 'The State shall respect all religions, and ensure the freedom to perform all the rituals that do not prejudice public order.'<sup>53</sup> However, this freedom is

limited in practice through restrictions on conversion; while religious minorities can become Muslims, conversion away from Islam is not possible.

The Constitution requires the state to protect and respect the personal status of religious communities. Prior to 2004, all religious minorities had to follow personal status laws that were solely based on Sunni Islam.<sup>54</sup> Now, however, some religious minorities have separate personal status courts that allow them to apply their own religious laws in matters such as marriage and divorce. Yazidis are not officially recognized as a religious group and are not able to register their identity or apply their own personal status laws.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to excluding some groups, the religious freedom granted by the state does not extend to politically oriented activity. Article 8(4) of the Constitution prohibits political activity or the formation of political parties or groupings on the basis of religion or sect.<sup>56</sup> Affiliation with organizations that the government considers 'Salafist' is illegal, and membership in the Muslim Brotherhood is a crime punishable by death.<sup>57</sup> The government has also banned Jehovah's Witnesses, which it considers a 'politically-motivated Zionist organization'.<sup>58</sup> All religious groups must register with the government and obtain permits for any group meetings, except for worship.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the secular principles enshrined in the Constitution, in practice the government exercises a heavy degree of control over the religious sphere. Among Muslims in particular, it discourages religious expression that diverges from the state-sponsored version of Islam. In public schools, the government-approved Islamic curriculum is taught to Sunnis, Shi'a, Alawites, Isma'ilis, Yazidis and Druze, which serves to instil a homogenized conception of Islam that minimizes differences between sects. Only Christian students are able to follow a separate religious curriculum in public schools. The government also closely monitors mosques, the appointment of Muslim leaders, and the content of religious sermons.<sup>60</sup>

A new law passed in 2018 significantly expanded government control over the religious sector by granting the Ministry of Religious Endowments (Awqaf) a greater economic role and enhanced powers in determining appropriate religious dis-

course and controlling the activity of religious clerics.<sup>61</sup> For example, imams are now banned from attending conferences inside or outside Syria without permission from the Minister of Awqaf.<sup>62</sup>

## Arbitrary detention

Although the state of emergency was lifted in 2011, the Syrian government has continued its suppression of political activism through other means. The Ministry of the Interior passed a law at the same time requiring citizens to obtain permissions to demonstrate and imposed a complete ban on political gatherings.<sup>63</sup> The government also relies on several broadly worded provisions in the Criminal Code to detain and convict activists. These include charges such as 'issuing calls that weaken national sentiment' (Article 285), 'spreading false or exaggerated information that weakens national sentiment while Syria is at war or is expecting a war' (Article 286), or undertaking 'acts, writings or speech that incite sectarian, racial, or religious strife' (Article 307).<sup>64</sup>

Syria is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which contains a number of due process guarantees and protections against arbitrary detention. Many of these protections are incorporated in Syria's own Constitution. For example, Article 53 stipulates that '[n]o one may be investigated or arrested, except under an order or decision issued by the competent judicial authority', and that: 'Any person who is arrested must be informed of the reasons for his arrest and his rights, and may not be incarcerated in front of the administrative authority except by an order of the competent judicial authority'.<sup>65</sup>

Syria's Code of Criminal Procedures further requires that all accused persons be examined by an investigating judge within 24 hours of their arrest, or brought to the public prosecutor.<sup>66</sup> If an accused person is held in custody for more than 24 hours without being questioned or presented to a public prosecutor, the case is treated as an arbitrary arrest.<sup>67</sup> Under Article 358 of the Criminal Code, the punishment for admitting a prisoner without a court warrant is a penalty of 1–3 years' imprisonment.<sup>68</sup>

However, in 2011, Syria passed Legislative Decree No. 55, allowing suspects to be held for up to 60 days

pending investigation and interrogation.<sup>69</sup> In July 2012, it also passed Anti-Terrorism Law No. 19, and established the Anti-Terrorism Court. In practice, charges brought under the Anti-Terrorism Law are frequently used to target human rights activists and deny them due process guarantees.<sup>70</sup> Activists detained under the law are often held for longer than 60 days without judicial review, denied the right to a lawyer, and convicted in trials that do not respect the presumption of innocence and depend on confessions extracted through torture.<sup>71</sup>

## Torture

Syria acceded to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) in 2004. However, it registered a reservation to Article 20 of the CAT, and as a result does not recognize the competence of the Committee Against Torture to carry out inquiries into allegations of systematic torture. Syria has not ratified the Optional Protocol to the CAT either, which establishes a system of regular inspection visits to places of detention.

Furthermore, Syria's domestic legal framework does not effectively punish or deter torture in a manner consistent with its international obligations. Although Article 53(2) of the Constitution

states that '[n]o one may be tortured or treated in a humiliating manner',<sup>72</sup> Syria's criminal law does not fully define the offence or prescribe an appropriate punishment. Article 391 of the Penal Code penalizes the use of excessive force to extract a confession or information, but does not capture the other dimensions of the crime of torture as defined in the CAT.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, by imposing a penalty of only three months' to three years' imprisonment, it fails to reflect the gravity of the offence of torture. The Penal Code also does not prohibit cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment not amounting to torture.<sup>74</sup>

In addition, Syria's legal framework contains major barriers to the prosecution of military and security officials, even when they have committed crimes as serious as torture. Under Legislative Decree No. 14 of 1969, members of state intelligence departments cannot be prosecuted for crimes they commit while on duty unless an order is issued by the director of the department.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, Legislative Decree No. 69 of 2008 prevents the initiation of legal proceedings against police officers, customs police and political security officers before regular courts without the prior permission of the army commander.<sup>76</sup> Finally, there is nothing in the Code of Criminal Procedure that prevents perpetrators of torture from being covered by amnesties or pardons.<sup>77</sup>



# 3

## Violations against activists

The detention of activists has long been a practice of the Syrian state, and has often been accompanied by patterns of verbal, physical and psychological abuse. In a series of in-depth interviews conducted by Ceasefire with activists detained by Syrian state forces and the group formerly known as Jabhat Al Nusra, the weight of religious or sectarian identity as a precursor to the level of abuse committed against detainees is evident, complex and varied.

As one former detainee put it, on her not being physically abused by Syrian state interrogators:

*'The fact that I'm Alawi played a role, but at the same time my mother was also in detention, she isn't Alawi, and her accusations were a lot worse than mine. Her case was more serious, and she wasn't beaten. There are also other people who weren't beaten. There are lots of factors that can contribute to you not being physically abused. It could be one of the factors [being Alawi] that I wasn't beaten, but there are also Alawis who were.'*<sup>78</sup>

This chapter documents the testimonies of 11 minority-background activists, 10 of whom were detained by the various branches of the Syrian state security apparatus and one by Jabhat Al Nusra. The Syrian government's concerted effort to project itself as the 'protector of minorities' is challenged in the testimonies of detained activists in this report.

While most interviewees define themselves as a-religious, secular, or even outright reject the term 'minority',<sup>79</sup> all

come from minority backgrounds from across Syria, including Druze, Christians, Alawis, Isma'ilis, and Kurds. Crucially, activists detained by Syrian state forces were detained based on their political views in opposition to the Syrian government and political status quo. Their testimonies acknowledge the reality that while they may not choose to define themselves through their sect or minority background, it does, to varying degrees, play a role in their perception by the Syrian state and segments of opposition circles.

Similarly, Islamist terrorist groups such the former Jabhat Al Nusra subscribe to the use of physical, verbal and psychological abuse and torture.<sup>80</sup>

Whether detained by branches of the Syrian state security apparatus or Jabhat Al Nusra, the psychological and, in some cases, physical impact of detention are evident. Interviewees reflect on the scars of their detention, and how, in some cases, it still impacts their lives today. Detention testimonies are not limited to the post-2011 era but include detentions from 2004 onwards. Whether it is detention by the

Syrian Air Force Intelligence Directorate, Political Security Directorate or Military Intelligence Directorate, or Jabhat Al Nusra, each detainee described references to their sect by interrogators or prison guards.

## Detention of activists and organizers

*'I don't like the term "minorities", I'm against it. For us to see people as blocs with demands is a problem. I don't want equality between minorities and majorities, or minorities between each other. This is a waste of time. For me, we want equal citizens. I want to be a citizen. I don't want a religious regime to protect me or pay a jizyeh [minority tax].... I want to be a citizen in a country that protects me, and that's all.'* – Zeid\*, journalist detained by Syrian state forces

Faris\*, a self-described secular civil society activist, was detained by Syrian Air Force Intelligence Services in 2012 for helping organize a campaign outside the Syrian parliament called 'Stop the killing, we want a Syria for all Syrians':<sup>81</sup>

*'My job was to film everything. Just because I was filming, the secret security services followed me, so I got into my car and drove away and was then stopped by traffic wardens. I was then dragged out of my car and beaten by the secret security services in the middle of the street.'*

*'I was then detained blindfolded and taken to Syrian Air Force Intelligence Services.'*<sup>82</sup>

Subjected to whippings by electric wires and other forms of torture, Faris\* describes how interrogators changed their approach upon discovering that he was of Druze background:

**'I don't like the term "minorities", I'm against it. For us to see people as blocs with demands is a problem. I don't want equality between minorities and majorities, or minorities between each other. This is a waste of time. For me, we want equal citizens. I want to be a citizen. I don't want a religious regime to protect me or pay a jizyeh [minority tax].... I want to be a citizen in a country that protects me, and that's all.'**

Zeid\*, journalist detained by Syrian state forces

*'During this period, I was subject to torture that could have really killed me. And then over time, they became more lenient with me because they found out that I was Druze, even though I always rejected this forced affiliation by them. They used to insist. In fact, one of the officers once asked me, "How do you participate in protests with those Salafists and terrorists? You should be with us. The president protects minorities. We are cousins, Alawis and Druze are close to one another, so you should be with us." This was the kind of language he was using. At this point, you can't say anything, you can't answer because you know that anything you say will result in violence.'*<sup>83</sup>

The push and pull approach used by interrogators towards detainees of minority background worked as a double-edged sword. While belonging to a minority in some instances shielded a detainee from a degree of abuse, it was not a guarantee of consistent preferential treatment by interrogators. As one interviewee pointed out, activists of minority backgrounds were killed by torture in state security prisons.<sup>84</sup> However, when Faris\* was asked whether his minority background played a positive role in his detention, he agreed:

*'To be honest, yes. Even if someone were secular, leftist, a-religious, non-believer... as soon as they found out that you were from a Sunni area, you would be subject to torture ten times worse, ten times worse, and this was a real crime going on in the prisons. Not a lot of people would say this, but I can say this and give examples. They were a little afraid of us to be honest. We weren't from one area'<sup>85</sup> [from Sunni-majority areas], we were well known in 'intellectual' circles, if you like.*

*'The way we were tortured as minorities or as secular activists was genuinely different. You don't belong to a "revolting" area, you're not from Dar'aa, you're not from Douma, you're not from Daraya. I know children, 11 children, who were tortured in Syrian Air Force Intelligence Services, kids in year 10 and 11 who spray painted words like 'freedom' and 'revolution' on the walls of their school. They picked them up from Daraya ... those kids were beaten so badly, broken hands, noses, whip marks on their backs ... they couldn't haven't been more than 16 years old.'*<sup>86</sup>

Using violence to target children from 'revolting' areas is a common tactic of Syrian state forces, with 13-year-old Hamza Al Khatib an early victim of the security apparatus in 2011.<sup>87</sup> Dar'aa, Douma and Daraya, as referred to by Faris\* are Sunni Muslim-majority areas.<sup>88</sup> Faris's\* own experience implies that Sunni children were subjected to more violence than even he, as a self-proclaimed opposition activist, would be, as a result of belonging to a religious minority.

Interrogators abusing detainees framed their anger and incredulity towards minority-background activists by leaning on the discourse propagated by the government as the 'protector of minorities':

*'After the torture is concluded, there's always a rhetoric of blame. As in, "Why are you doing this? Look at Swaida,<sup>89</sup> they're all with the regime." They start to give examples of people who are from your sect who are close to the regime. They say things like "You and us should be one hand together against radicalism and these terrorists."' <sup>90</sup>*

This discourse goes back to the early days of Hafez Al Assad and has evolved in accordance with the government's interest in self-preservation after 2011 (see chapter 1). Jad\*, a Christian lawyer, writer, veteran political activist, twice detained by the Syrian state, emphasized this point in his testimony.<sup>91</sup> Jad's\* activism and politics defy the government's attempts to co-opt minorities. Jad's\* activism included participating with a delegation of Christians in the wakes of Muslim families who had lost their loved ones, to express their condolences and, as Jad\* puts it:

*'To reduce the sectarian tension that the regime had caused, made a song and dance of, and tried to inflame in Baab Touma<sup>92</sup> and Christian areas more broadly.'*<sup>93</sup>

Jad's\* activism and opposition to the government eventually landed him in detention twice, first with the Military Intelligence Directorate in February 2012, and then with Unit 40 of Internal Branch 251 (Al Khatib Branch) of the General Intelligence Directorate in August 2012. Further to his experience of physical and psychological torture, including sleep deprivation, consistent beat-

ings and verbal abuse (including sectarian language), Jad\* stressed the deliberately unsanitary and unhygienic conditions in the detention centres. Disease and infection were widespread, with detainees often falling victim to these conditions.<sup>94</sup> Similar to Faris's\* testimony, Jad\* also witnessed children from the Sunni-majority area of Douma who were detained and subjected to the same treatment, purely based on their belonging to a 'revolving area'.<sup>95</sup>

The testimony of Salem\*, an activist and protest chanter from Masyaf, reflects the Syrian state's fluctuating policy towards activists of minority backgrounds. Detained in February 2011 for participating in a solidarity sit-in with Libyan protesters in front of the Libyan embassy in Damascus, Salem\* described the incident as follows:

*'We were chanting for Libya, but there was something in us that was chanting against the regime. I was detained. I was beaten a lot. At the time, I had long hair and I was dragged by my hair and belt. They dragged me like that for about 200 metres. First, they put us in a small car, they put me in the boot of the car. There was someone below me in the boot, but I honestly don't know who it was. I couldn't see anything.'*<sup>96</sup>

Following Salem's\* release and return to Masyaf, he was visited by officers from the Military Intelligence Directorate, asking him to report to authorities regarding his conscription. Despite being interrogated for nine hours over the course of two days by two separate interrogators, Salem\* describes his interrogation as 'friendly'; they shared two pots of herbal tea, and Salem\* was dropped off in front of his father's bakery by the second interrogator, despite admitting that he had attended protests.<sup>97</sup> Salem\* attributes his mild interrogation to his minority background:

*'I think there was a policy in the early days not to inflame "minorities". This was my feeling the second time I was interrogated in Masyaf. That they didn't want anything to happen in minority areas.'*<sup>98</sup> *They would say things like "We want to stay far from what's happening, we want to live in peace" and that kind of thing. So yes, it played a positive role in my case.'*<sup>99</sup>

## Prison politics

The ideological split of Islamist versus secular activists resisting the Syrian government is aptly reflected in veteran activist, organizer, and filmmaker Saleh's\* 2012 detention in Adra prison. Arrested for being a key organizer of early Damascus protests, Saleh's\* experience, from his detention to his imprisonment, highlights how his minority background was targeted for manipulation:

*'Among the accusations made against me were that I was an Israeli agent. The regime prepares a set of accusations for each person. For Druze, this particular accusation is always ready, that you work with Israel.'*<sup>100</sup>

This accusation alludes to the 1956 agreement between Druze community leaders in Israel and the state of Israel for Druze men to perform mandatory service in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF).<sup>101</sup> The militarization of Arab Druze in Israeli society is a contentious issue, and one that has been challenged by numerous conscientious objectors to military conscription.<sup>102</sup> The Syrian government's specific use of this accusation against Druze activists assumes loyalty to sect over nation, in which Syrian Druze would prioritize their Druze identity to coordinate with Israel-based Druze over their Syrian identity. The 1956 agreement serves as a sticking point on the political motivations of activists of Druze backgrounds and is superficially strengthened by the Syrian government's sensitive relationship with Israel, especially on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.<sup>103</sup>

Saleh\* elaborates on the perfunctory nature of his accusation:

*'I was told that I could leave prison if I agreed to create an opposition party for the regime within the boundaries of an approved "opposition figure" or I would be accused eternally of working with Israel and being an enemy of the state.'*<sup>104</sup>

The Syrian government's fluctuating game of minority politics often seems contradictory. As narrated by Faris\*, interrogators adapted their techniques and rhetoric upon discovering his Druze background. While the experiences of activists of minority background in detention differ

even among members of the same minority, the weaponization of those identities works to serve the government itself:

*'At the end of the day, religion is a tool that these regimes use as a weapon.'*<sup>105</sup>

Refusing to yield to the conditions set by interrogators for his release, Saleh\* recounts his experience of abuse in detention:

*'On one occasion, I was beaten non-stop for four hours, to the extent that I couldn't even put on a t-shirt or trousers afterwards because I was so bruised and swollen. I was in boxers for around 15 days after this incident. I slept for 20 days in the corridor. I couldn't sleep because of the swelling. After those 20 days, I was taken to a 100m cell with around 150 people in it.'*<sup>106</sup>

In parallel, the ideological split between secular revolutionary activists and Islamists during Saleh's\* 2012 Adra prison detention is one he describes as 'tense'.<sup>107</sup> Saleh\* describes some Islamists' reaction to a fellow activist of Alawi background:

*'They started saying he's a kafir [non-believer] and that they would go after him. But we were powerful in the prison and we made it very clear to them that if they came after any one of us there would be retaliation.'*<sup>108</sup>

The prison experience undoubtedly heightens existing tensions. Yet despite both secular activists and Islamists being in opposition to the Syrian government, sectarian language among members of the opposition was not unheard of:

*'I heard it more than once, many times, from Islamist activists in conferences and meetings. They would say "Ah, what would've happened if you were Sunni?" alluding to the fact that they've "lost" me because I am Druze. In fact, most of the organizers in Damascus<sup>109</sup> were minorities, if you like.'*<sup>110</sup>

Activist detainees of minority backgrounds like Saleh\* and his colleagues face a double battle, first in their opposition to the Syrian government, and second with radical Islamists who reject their presence in the sphere of political opposition.

Sami\*, a journalist and activist, experienced these heightened tensions in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta in 2013, with his team of journalists.<sup>111</sup> An early opposition stronghold, Eastern Ghouta was besieged by Syrian state forces beginning in April 2013 in what would result in what the United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry on Syria identified as 'the longest running siege in modern history', surpassing five years and eventually ending in April 2018.<sup>112</sup> Consequently, armed groups such as Jaysh Al Islam, a radical Islamist group, emerged in 2013 to become the main armed groups in combat with the Syrian government and its allies.<sup>113</sup>

Sami\* and his colleagues were kidnapped and detained in solitary confinement for three days by what Sami\* suspects was a mercenary group commissioned by Jaysh Al Islam:

*'In April 2013, I was kidnapped by a faction of the opposition; during this time, I was working in Eastern Ghouta. I was sleeping at the office – we made our flat the office. It was dark. A masked armed man entered the flat and kicked and dragged me out the bedroom into the living room. I found my colleague handcuffed on the ground surround by five masked, armed men. I shouted and asked them what they were doing. One of them loaded his gun. I understood that they were serious, I thought it was a joke at first. Their behaviour was strange. This was a liberated area, the whole area was under the opposition's control, and I had been there for a year, people knew me, and I knew them.'*<sup>114</sup>

Sami\*'s description of this incident as 'strange' is understandable, since Sami\* himself was detained and tortured by Syrian security forces in 2011 for organizing and participating in protests; his political allegiance was clear.<sup>115</sup> While Sami\*'s minority background was not mentioned at all, the experience affected his faith in a united opposition. With the Syrian state, Sami\* 'knew [his] enemy', but with this experience:

*'I no longer felt that I was among comrades. I no longer had any trust or felt safe, I felt that my back was exposed.'*<sup>116</sup>

The emergence of Islamist factions in the opposition fractured trust with secular opposition activists. In



addition to differences in political views, religious identities and background became a source of mistrust and contention. Sami\* elaborates:

*'You always had to justify yourself and say "Guys, Salamiyeh came out with one of the biggest protests!" This feeling is really painful, that you have to explain and justify yourself, and remind people that you are in opposition, simply because you are Isma'ili or different. The second I say I am from Salamiyeh,<sup>117</sup> I am accused [of being with the regime]. I am accused and have to prove my innocence.'*<sup>118</sup>

Whether they identify as minorities or not, the efforts and experiences of minority-background activists is weaponized against them. The Syrian government has strategically used the narrative of being the 'protector of minorities' to the point that it can be exploited against minority-background activists fighting to resist the Syrian state itself.

Fadi\*, a business owner of Isma'ili background twice detained by the Syrian state, agrees that it plays on minorities.<sup>119</sup> Detained in August 2011 and February 2012 for organizing and participating in protests against the Assad-led government, Fadi\* was held in the Political Security Directorate, Adra prison, and the General Intelligence Directorate including the infamous Internal Branch 251 (also known as Al Khatib Branch) and its subdivision, Unit 40.<sup>120</sup> Fadi\* reports that Hafez Makhoulf, the former colonel and long-condemned perpetrator of multiple human rights violations, was then the head of Internal Branch 251.<sup>121</sup>

Despite being subjected to torture and other forms of physical and verbal abuse, Fadi\* maintains that in his experience, his minority status protected him from the 'extremes of torture', with interrogators hesitant to leave any scarring or evidence of torture on his body.<sup>122</sup> This included detaining Fadi\* for an additional 15 days to ensure that bruises sustained on his face would heal before his release; cold water was also splashed on his legs after being beaten to control evidence of bruising.<sup>123</sup> In contrast, a non-minority detainee in the adjoining cell, held on the same charges, was tortured more violently according to Fadi\*.<sup>124</sup>

The dynamics of detention differ from unit to unit. However, in Fadi's\* detentions, he recounts

the difference in approaches adopted by interrogators versus prison guards, specifically when referring to his Isma'ili background. Sectarian language was more common among prison guards than interrogators:

*'The relationship with the interrogator is different; it's political. Because, in theory, the interrogator is supposed to be more educated than them. So, there's propaganda that the prison guard believes which is that he's there to defend minorities against the Sunnis.'*

*'The interrogator is a different story. He has your full file, has been in the unit for 20 years and knows where each person is from and what their story is, so he doesn't speak to me in the language of minorities, but politically. Isma'ili or not, it doesn't matter, because he knows that I'm not religious. So, this story [the regime defending minorities] falls apart. This is a crucial difference between the interrogator and the prison guard. The prison guard genuinely believes that he's defending his existence as a minority.'*

Fadi's\* treatment is split across his politics and minority status. His irreligiosity is understood by the interrogator and accounted for in his treatment, since it is understood that Fadi\* identifies primarily through his politics, rather than his minority background. The prison guard, on the other hand, is unable to understand Fadi's\* politics to begin with, considering his minority background. In this respect, the relationship with interrogator and prison guard is different.

## Violations by armed groups

The precariousness of identity in the Syrian conflict exists not only in state detention centres or opposition spheres, but more broadly across the post-2011 Syrian landscape. Murad\*, an Isma'ili photographer, experienced this volatility. Kidnapped, detained, and tortured by Jabhat Al Nusra in 2015 and then harassed by the Islamist armed group Faylaq Al Sham,<sup>125</sup> Murad\* was physically and psychologically tortured and abused by Jabhat Al Nusra as he was accused of photographing clashes between armed groups in Idlib on behalf of the government.

After confiscating his camera, phone and laptop, and finding no evidence of this, Murad\* recounts:

*I was then accused of being Alawi. They discovered from my personal ID that I'm from an area where there are minorities [Masyaf] and accused me of being an Alawi, not Isma'ili. It would've been less of a disaster if they found out I was Isma'ili rather than Alawi.'*<sup>126</sup>

The perceived association of the Alawi sect with the ruling party was to Murad's\* detriment; simply being Alawi was an accusation of its own. While kidnappings and detentions carried out by Jabhat Al Nusra by no means exclusively target minorities, being a minority detained at the hands of Jabhat Al Nusra is a dangerous circumstance in which to be. Detained in the group's infamous Al 'Okaab prison,<sup>127</sup> Murad\* was subjected to lashes, the *shabh* (ghost) torture technique (a technique also favoured by Syrian state security in which the victim is suspended from the ceiling by the wrist(s) or ankle(s) and abused),<sup>128</sup> and overcrowded conditions in small cells, resulting in food and sleep deprivation.<sup>129</sup> Murad\* was eventually able to get a message out to his friends via a detainee being released, who were able to negotiate his own release with Jabhat Al Nusra.<sup>130</sup>

Violations committed by armed groups have been documented by Ceasefire, Amnesty International, and many others.<sup>131</sup> This includes external state-backed armed groups, such as the now Turkish-backed armed group Faylaq Al Sham, which harassed and intimidated Murad\* for his vocal activism against Turkish intervention in Syria.<sup>132</sup> Syria's state-affiliated militias, also known as '*shabiha*', have also committed serious violations to advance Assad's political agenda.<sup>133</sup> Colloquially, '*shabiha*' also translates to 'thugs' and reflects the set of behaviours often expected from such groups.<sup>134</sup>

## Ethnic minorities

Ethnic minorities such as Kurdish communities have experienced the impact of four Turkish military interventions in Syria, most notably the 2018 occupation of Afrin, which resulted in significant demographic changes in the region.<sup>135</sup> However, suppression of Kurdish identity and culture by no

means began with Turkey's interventions. Jamal\*, a 32-year-old Syrian Kurdish student, activist, and multiple detainee of the Syrian security services, described his first experience of being confronted with his Kurdish identity at school:

*I discovered I had no right to speak Kurdish at school. I wasn't allowed to speak Kurdish and I couldn't speak Arabic. In Year 1, in class, you're sitting there just trying to understand what's going on, what the teacher is saying. Every time I entered class, the teacher would pull me by my sideburns and sit me down in class because she couldn't communicate with me. If you spoke Kurdish, you'd get smacked.'*<sup>136</sup>

Cultural traditions such as *Nowruz*, the spring equinox marking a new year celebrated by communities across the Middle East and Central Asia,<sup>137</sup> were perceived as threatening by the state. During annual *Nowruz* celebrations, Jamal\* recalls the Syrian Political Security Directorate would shut down celebrations, detain activity organizers, and threaten them so they would not participate in any protests.<sup>138</sup> Jamal\* recounts the type of language used by political security officials with detainees:

*They would say "Hey you, animal, who do you love more? Hafez, Bashar or Ocalan or Masoud Barzani or Jalal Talabani?" And you would have to say "Of course Hafez and Bashar. I don't like the others." You would have to say that, and they would tell you "swear at them" as they beat you ... we were kids, with one slap you would swear at Barzani and all he believes in.'*<sup>139</sup>

In this instance, the use of this language by political security officers assumes a Kurdish identity automatically associated with Kurdish political party leaders,<sup>140</sup> regardless of the individual's views. Through physical abuse, performative loyalty is demanded, where the victim must declare loyalty to the government as he or she is beaten.

Detained and tortured on four occasions between 2004 and 2012, Jamal\* argues that post-2011, the security forces were not focused on whether protesters were minorities or not, but rather that they were simply protesting.<sup>141</sup> Yet the type of language used when abusing minorities in opposition is, as recounted by Jamal\*, specific:

*They [the regime] used to say things like “Oi, you Kurd, we’re letting you live in the country and you want to start a revolution? We’re hosting you here!” even though the country is your country, you know what I mean? So, there was this type of violence; that you are a Kurd, a minority like an Alawi and you are being defiant. And that the Sunnis want to kill you and so on. That we’re [the regime speaking] the ones that are hosting and protecting you in the country. That was the basis of the discussion.’<sup>142</sup>*

In July 2012, Syrian state forces withdrew from the Kurdish-majority areas of northern Syria to confront the uprising in other parts of the country. This eventually allowed for the formation of the Autonomous Administration in northern Syria, led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Kurdish political party, and its armed forces, the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ). The YPG and YPJ are also part of the military configuration known as Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a key partner of the United States and its allies in their war against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).

The Autonomous Administration has gone to significant lengths to establish itself as a place where ethnic and religious minorities are respected, breaking with the policies of the Assad government and the ideology of extremist groups such as ISIS. The 2016 Social Contract, which serves as a constitution for the Autonomous Administration, explicitly recognizes the ethnic and religious groups that make up northern Syria, including ‘Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians, Chechens, Circassians, Muslims, Christians, Yazidis’.<sup>143</sup> The administration also introduced Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac as the three languages of government and education.

The administration’s multi-ethnic and multi-religious character is often publicly lauded by the SDF’s foreign allies, particularly in the context of the war with ISIS. Western policy analysis often describes northern Syria as an ‘oasis’ of tolerance and progress, and a senior US official, who visited northern Syria in October 2020, stated that she would give the region ‘perfect marks’ for religious freedom.<sup>144</sup> This demonstrates how the Autonomous Administration, as an emerging governance structure, has also benefited strategically from the idea of protecting minorities. The ‘oasis’ narrative, however, is

hotly disputed by some minorities living under the Autonomous Administration, especially Assyrian Christians, some of whom view the Kurdish nationalist project as authoritarian and dismissive of Assyrian history and identity. Assyrian Christians have also reported expropriation of their private property, including some villages in their entirety, and instances of violence against those who challenge the PYD’s control.<sup>145</sup> The Kurdish-led authorities have also demolished Arab and Turkmen villages and forcibly displaced their residents.<sup>146</sup>

## Gender and detention

The state narrative of ‘protection’ is an emergent theme in testimonies collected by Ceasefire for this report. However, the nuances and intersectional variables of each activist’s experience must be taken into account. In addition to minority status, regional identity, class, gender, likability, perceptions, *wasta* (social connections or leverage), a multitude of other variables play a role in how a minority activist may be treated in detention.

Two-time detainee and activist Layla’s\* testimony reflects how gender and a perceived network of power can act as variables in treatment by different agencies and branches of the Syrian state security apparatus.<sup>147</sup> Accused of working with the Syrian Communist Party in 2008, Layla\* was detained at Branch 235, also known as the Palestine Branch of the Military Intelligence Directorate in Damascus.<sup>148</sup> This particular branch has been noted for its reputation for torture.<sup>149</sup> Verbally abused with sexist language, Layla\* recounts her experience during an interrogation with the head of the branch:

*‘He was screaming, and banging this and that, on the verge of hitting me. But you know how it is. I told him there’s no need to scream and that I would answer his questions. I was trying to calm him down. Whatever he asked, I would say “Yes, you’re right.”’<sup>150</sup>*

Coming from a well-connected Isma’ili family background,<sup>151</sup> Layla\* reflects on how the interrogator felt limited in the level of abuse he could inflict upon her, for fear of repercussions:

*‘He said that if I wasn’t from Salamiyeh<sup>152</sup> and didn’t have relatives from (x) family, from this*

*area, he wouldn't have let me leave here in a good state.'*<sup>153</sup>

While the head of the branch was aggressive in his approach, Layla\*'s experience with the four interrogators that followed was civil. The push and pull approach of different interrogators is also reflected in Beesan's\* testimony. An Alawi student from Tartous, Beesan\* was detained in 2012 for three months with her mother, also in the Palestine branch of the Military Intelligence Directorate in Damascus, for her political views.<sup>154</sup> Beesan's\* reflection on whether her Alawi identity played a role in how she was treated in detention is an example of how layered and often circumstantial treatment can be:

' ... So further to my political views, I was in a deeper situation because I was in love with a Sunni man. In every interrogation they'd bring it up. They'd ask how my father felt about it, they'd say "Why aren't you with an Alawi man?" I heard this kind of language from two interrogators and two prison guards. ... They wanted to get a better idea of my context ... But as for the prison guards, on two separate occasions, one said, "Wow, an Alawi woman with a Sunni man? If we were related, I'd slaughter you." Another said, "I swear to God your boyfriend won't leave this place until he's in a wheelchair."'

*'When they find out that I'm Alawi, the accusation that I'm looking to support an Islamic state and so on collapses ... just because I'm Alawi. This is how some of them saw me, that I'm still young and "as she gets older, she'll understand". Others saw it as "Oh, you're Alawi and you're against the regime? You traitor, you're good for nothing. You have no roots."'*<sup>155</sup>

Beesan's\* Alawi identity is simultaneously politicized along the lines of the naïveté of youth and treacherous behaviour. Furthermore, Beesan's\* relationship with a Sunni man, also in detention, was the subject of curiosity, scrutiny, and violent sexist language.<sup>156</sup>

*'They would mention it a lot. As in, "How are you Alawi and in a relationship with a Sunni man?" So further to my political views, I was in a deeper situation because I was in love with a Sunni man. In every interrogation they'd bring it up. They'd ask how my father felt about it, they'd say "Why aren't you with an Alawi man?" I heard this kind of language from two interrogators and two prison guards. With the interrogators, I felt like they were genuinely curious, asking how, how? During every interrogation they'd ask this. They wanted to get a better idea of my context rather than pressurizing me to end the relationship. But as for the prison guards, on two separate occasions, one said, "Wow, an Alawi woman with a Sunni man? If we were related, I'd slaughter you." Another said, "I swear to God your boyfriend won't leave this place until he's in a wheelchair."'*

Despite the circumstances of Beesan's\* detention, she maintains that the absence of physical abuse is more complicated than her Alawi identity.<sup>157</sup> Beesan's\* mother, a Sunni woman, for example, was not physically abused, while other Alawi women in detention with Beesan\* were. Over the years, cases of torture and abuse against women at the hands of the Syrian state, including rape and the threat of rape, have been documented in the testimonies of survivors.<sup>158</sup> In a November 2020 report, the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the deaths of 28,405 women between March 2011 and 25 November 2020, 91 of whom were killed under torture.<sup>159</sup> The largest number of deaths was attributed to Syrian state forces, which were responsible for 21,943 deaths.<sup>160</sup>



## Physical and psychological impact of violations

'I don't know what it means to be happy. I don't know what it means to look at something and feel joy. I don't see anything beautiful ... this is something that's really affecting me as a human being. There are lots of moments when I don't feel like a normal human being.'

Jamal\*, activist and former detainee

Violations against activists are often treated as a moment in time, without addressing the long-term impacts of those violations on the lives of those subjected to them. In interviews conducted for this report, all activists refer to physical or psychological abuse and torture, including solitary confinement, beating, sexual and sectarian verbal abuse, intimidation and humiliation techniques, and food and sleep deprivation.<sup>161</sup> It is a point to note that all activists interviewed are no longer based in Syria, yet some still suffer the repercussions of the violence committed against them years later. Long-term symptoms discussed by activists include nightmares, anxiety, depression, self-doubt, amnesia, teeth grinding, fear of the violation being repeated, fear of being in Syria, disillusion, kidney problems, and other physical ailments.<sup>162</sup>

While not all activists have sustained physical scars from violations committed against them, the psychological impact on some, in their own words, is evident. As such, a lack of physical scarring does not diminish the reality of a violation having occurred, nor the ability to identify it as torture.<sup>163</sup> Murad's\* capture, detention, and torture by Jabhat Al Nusra in 2015 illustrates the psychological effect of abuse:

*'I was tortured while I was there, shabb on my hands and feet. But what had the most impact on me was the psychological torture. For the first week, I didn't know why I was there. I had done nothing wrong. And in that state of mind, you begin to doubt yourself. I began to doubt myself to the extent that I might've done something but didn't know what it was.'*<sup>164</sup>

The use of psychological torture techniques can have long-term mental health impacts and has been condemned by the UN, the World Health Organization and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), scholars, and human rights organizations.<sup>165</sup> One of the most-cited, long-term impacts of violations against activists was nightmares. These included nightmares of being back in detention or solitary confinement, being chased by intelligence officers, and being back in Syria.<sup>166</sup> The Istanbul Protocol identifies nightmares as one of the chronic impacts of torture, sometimes in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>167</sup> The fear of repeated detention, and willingness to die rather than undergo another detention, was also a sentiment expressed by ex-detainees and activists. When asked about the biggest impact of detention, Beesan\* says:

*'Fear. Fear that I might go through something similar again.'*<sup>168</sup>

The fear and trauma associated with detention is one that Zeid\* summarizes:

*'To put it simply, I left Syria because I knew I could be detained a third time. I was prepared to die rather than be detained again.'*<sup>169</sup>

Sami\* also reached the same conclusion:

*'I had made a decision; I would rather die than be detained again.'*<sup>170</sup>



# 4

## Violations against civilians

'We were being shelled by the regime from the sky and attacked by Al Nusra on the ground. Everyone was praying to their own God at this point.'

– Luna\*, civilian.

Civilians are caught in the crossfire of conflict across the globe, and Syria is no exception to this. The proliferation of armed groups across Syria, with intervening state actors such as Turkey and Russia, has further complicated the picture.<sup>171</sup> The September 2020 report of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic highlighted the systematic suffering of civilians, with the Commission's Chair Paulo Pinheiro commenting that there 'are no clean hands in this conflict'.<sup>172</sup> The UN's last estimate of the civilian death toll in Syria was in 2016, with 400,000 estimated dead.<sup>173</sup> As of 2018, independent monitoring groups estimate a death toll exceeding 560,000 people.<sup>174</sup> Civilians across the country have been subjected to aerial bombings, sexual harassment, kidnapping and detentions by various armed groups, forced internal displacement, property theft and loss of livelihood, and a multitude of other violations.<sup>175</sup>

Faced with an ever-shifting political landscape, civilians are forced to adapt and navigate the real-life impact of that political reality. Civilians of minority backgrounds face the challenge of their identities being politicized along both sectarian and political lines. Regardless of their political

views, civilian minorities run the risk of being targeted based on their minority status. This chapter documents four testimonies from civilians of minority background, including two Christian women and two Isma'ili women. Two out of the four testimonies refer to direct violations, while the remaining two include reflections on living as a Syrian minority in both pre- and post-2011 Syria.

While the violations in this chapter do not involve torture and detention, they do reflect the reality of what it means to exist as a Syrian minority; this includes facing intimidation tactics, discrimination, micro-threats and aggressions, and, in the case of Luna's\* testimony, the specific targeting of minorities at the hands of armed groups such as Jabhat Al Nusra.

### Attacks on civilians

Luna's\* testimony exemplifies the reality of a civilian of minority background. A Christian from Damascus, Luna\* moved to Aleppo in 2013 for a job opportunity. Living in a neighbourhood in Aleppo, Luna\* claims that her building

was targeted and stormed by the former armed Islamist group Jabhat Al Nusra:

*I had neighbours, an elderly couple with three daughters. They hid their daughters in their top closets near the ceiling because they were afraid that they [Al Nusra] would beat and rape them. They burned their house. I will never forget their screams, until this day I remember their screams.'*<sup>176</sup>

As the building was being stormed, Luna\* could hear Al Nusra gunmen shouting for where the Christians were in the building. Al Nusra was targeting minorities to kill in the building.<sup>177</sup> Seeking refuge in her upstairs Muslim neighbour's house, Luna\* describes her initial hesitancy and fear upon going to her neighbour:

*To be honest, in the beginning I was scared, I thought what if he hands me in? Because they used to scare you like that. After the revolution, people would say if anything happened, your Muslim neighbour would turn you in. Beware of him.'*<sup>178</sup>

Yet Luna's\* neighbour disproved her fear. He shielded her from Al Nusra and helped her out of the building with his family, claiming she was a family member when questioned by the armed group. With the help of her neighbour and his family, Luna\* was able to escape the area, crossing roads with snipers, and walking to her friend's house on the other side of Aleppo. Following her experience, and subsequent struggles after leaving Aleppo, Luna\* rejects the notion of the government as a 'protector of minorities':

*'When people died from missiles, it was Muslims and Christians. It wasn't like Muslims were running away and*

*only Christians were being killed. In an explosion, Muslims and Christians would die. When you look at those dead, it was both. But they [the government] had planted the ideas in their heads; that I protect you, and if I go those [Islamists] will want to kill you. Straight to the slaughter.'*<sup>179</sup>

Unprotected by the state, and targeted by armed groups, Luna's\* testimony highlights the layered threats a Syrians face, and in Luna's\* case, as a minority. The emergence of armed groups, in some cases backed by states,<sup>180</sup> has further complicated a volatile political landscape and consequently the safety of civilians.

The lived experience of being a woman in conflict holds a unique dynamic. Layla's\* experience with a 'shabiha'<sup>181</sup> (as described by her) bus driver en route to Salamiyeh in 2014 left a particularly strong impact. Travelling with her son, Layla\* was kicked off the bus for objecting that the seat she had paid for her 8-year-old son was occupied.<sup>182</sup> Layla\* claims:

*'The driver stopped in the middle of the route to Homs and said that I had to get out and began verbally abusing me in front of my son, with really sexually graphic language, that he was going to do this and that to me. And that I was a slut and a whore in front of everyone on the bus and that I had to get off the bus right there and then. He said "Let them all fuck you", and that he's going to leave me at the next checkpoint.... He was driving in a wild manner because he was afraid.... There wasn't any insult that he didn't use towards me, everything, everything, in front of everyone.'*<sup>183</sup>

When asked why she thought the bus driver's reaction was so extreme:

*'Because the Shabiha were in control. They had guns, they could say, you and your son get out in the middle of nowhere and go die. Yallah. I'm a woman with a child, unveiled, and so he knew that I was from Salamiyeh.'*<sup>184</sup>

A lack of accountability or fear of repercussions can heighten existing sexism and discrimination. Layla's\* destination of Salamiyeh, a city with a significant Isma'ili community,<sup>185</sup> coupled with her being unveiled 'marked' her identity. In these instances, women's bodies become sites for identity. As Luna\* was smuggled out the building with her Muslim neighbour past Jabhat Al Nusra, she wore a veil to quell suspicions of her minority background. In both cases, Luna\* and Layla\* understood that their being veiled or unveiled was subject to interpretation and deduction of their identities.

While this is by no means exclusive to minority women, as many Muslim women are unveiled, the circumstances in which Luna\* and Layla\* found themselves accelerated assumptions that could put both their lives at risk or protect them. In Layla's\* activist life, she refers to being followed by Syrian state security who were looking for her and her colleague. When she entered a restaurant, put on a veil and abaya, and sat down with her colleague to order two fruit cocktails, state security walked straight past without recognizing them.<sup>186</sup>

## Minority reflections

Further to negotiating and adapting one's appearance, Serene\*, a 38-year-old Isma'ili woman, points to the importance of spoken accents in managing minority identities for safety. Serene's\* oppositional views alienated her at work, and it was well known that her father had been detained multiple times by the state. When asked whether the state treated minorities differently, Serene\* disagreed in theory, but went on to elaborate:

*'On the ground, I did experience a few situations where my being a minority protected me. For example, when I was in a taxi at a checkpoint, I wouldn't be inspected based on how I dressed and looked. It was clear that I was "baloud" [from the countryside]; in fact they*

*would say that to me – that I was "one of them". As for my accent, I used to change it. I wouldn't speak with a Damascene accent; I would speak with a "kaaf" so I could signal to them that I was a minority. I wanted to protect myself, I was pregnant.'*<sup>187</sup>

Serene's\* lack of a veil combined with her adopted provincial accent identified her as 'baloud'; a Syrian colloquial term referring to a someone from the countryside or provinces, where minority communities exist. To protect her pregnancy, Serene\* drew on dress and accents to 'present' as a minority at Syrian state checkpoints, despite her own oppositional views.

Sasha\*, an architecture student of Christian background, says that an increase in verbal sexual harassment on the streets of her hometown post-2011 helped fuel minorities' fears of change:

*'The fear [of Islamist armed groups] was rooted in the idea that, if this guy on the street is brazen enough to comment on what I wear and how he's going to cover me up, you begin to think, who is going to come after [the government]?''*<sup>188</sup>

As time went on, armed groups identifying as revolutionaries cropped up across the country, carrying out violations of their own. Sasha's\* own family home was looted and occupied by armed Sunni Islamist groups:

*'They used the logic of, whether you're with us or against us, we're protecting our neighbourhood, our town and our country ... and so it's our right to use whatever is available to us. It's our right to stay in these houses to protect ourselves ... that kind of logic.'*<sup>189</sup>

Sasha\* eventually left Syria, citing a lack of sense of safety in Syria as the driving factor.<sup>190</sup> Sasha's\* minority status as a Christian woman also played into this decision; both her and her family felt that as Christians, they no longer had a future as Syrians.<sup>191</sup>

The politicization of religious identity during the conflict has also had negative impacts for Alawi communities. Forced army conscription of Alawi men for example, has had a devastating impact on Alawi communities, with estimates ranging from

thousands to tens of thousands of deaths.<sup>192</sup> Furthermore, attacks on Alawi majority coastal towns by groups such as the Islamic State for Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat Al Nusra have also been reported.<sup>193</sup> As sectarian tensions heighten, civilians become more vulnerable to identity-based violations. In 2016, Alawi religious leaders released a document condemning sectarian strife in Syria and asserting their identities as Alawis rather than Twelver Shi'a, as the politicization of their identities by regional powers such as Iran continues. Meanwhile, domestically, the Assad's belonging to the minority Alawi sect has painted the political positions of Alawi's as one and the same, much to the detriment of some Alawi communities.<sup>194</sup>

## Physical and psychological impact of violations

The testimonies of Luna\*, Layla\*, Serene\* and Sasha\* reflect the impact of the last 10 years on daily civilian life in Syria. The gendered impact of war on women is unavoidable, whether it is negotiating image and identity or the constant fear and threat of sexual abuse and harassment. As a Christian woman, Luna\* recounts this fear as she crossed an Al Nusra checkpoint on a bus:

*I was upset, couldn't they (the Syrian soldiers on the bus) see that they (Al Nusra) wanted to take me? And make me one of their sex slaves and then kill me? What else would they want with me, a Christian woman? So they can "have a good time" ... but I couldn't say a word.'*<sup>195</sup>

The threat and fear of rape and sexual abuse are well-founded. In 2018 the Commission of Inquiry

on Syria released a report documenting systematic use of rape and sexual abuse against women and girls by Syrian state forces, ISIS and other armed groups such as Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham.<sup>196</sup> Living in fear has an inevitable mental health impact, coupled with the plethora of potentially devastating circumstances civilians are subjected to, such as losing one's home, possessions, and life savings to an armed group as Luna\* did.<sup>197</sup>

Access to mental health and psychiatric facilities in Syria has deteriorated since 2011, with limited mental health resources and practitioners available before that; it is estimated that only approximately 100 psychiatrists existed across the country prior to 2011.<sup>198</sup> The impact of conflict continues to take a toll on the mental health of Syrians, particularly those who have become refugees or internally displaced persons.<sup>199</sup> According to recurring data on mental health and conflict, higher rates of mental health concerns tend to arise among women, especially those subjected to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).<sup>200</sup>

The fear and trauma conflicts inflict upon civilians comes at a high cost. Coupled with the list of insecurities emergent in conflicts, the threat of sexual and gender-based violence is another layer of fear that women must grapple with. Women must further contend with political and extremist narratives projected upon them, whether that is in dress, accent, or otherwise. In this context, minority women often find themselves 'double minorities', having to navigate all the pre-existing narratives, discourses and norms of their society in a constantly shifting conflict environment. Sasha\* aptly sums this up:

*'As a minority you've become even more of a minority.'*<sup>201</sup>



# Conclusion

Syrian minorities have been caught in the crossfire of conflict and political narratives. A decade on from 2011, their identities continue to be politicized, their political allegiances assumed, and their diversity homogenized. Syria, Russia, Turkey, Iran and others continue to refer to minorities as a political strategy to justify their role in the conflict. This political strategy has a tangible impact on the ground in the daily lives of civilians. As activists, Syrian minorities protesting against the government are rendered double minorities, challenging a government that claims to protect them. As civilians, Syrian minorities navigate a tumultuous political landscape that includes extremist Islamist groups, such as former Jabhat Al Nusra (now Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham) and others, that represent the foundation of minority fears and a threat to their way of life.

As the Syrian government continues to tout its narrative of protection, it continues to detain and torture activists of minority backgrounds and subject them to various degrees of abuse. Sunni activists in detention also feel the impact of

this narrative. Painted as 'terrorists', Sunnis are automatically associated with an Islamist discourse that seeks bring down the state on that basis. As documented in this report, even children are detained for belonging to 'revolting' Sunni-majority areas.

The Syrian government's narrative of protection is clear: it serves its own interest of self-preservation. As Luna\* highlighted, when state forces barrel-bomb entire neighbourhoods, they do not carry out a survey of Syrian religious backgrounds; all Syrian civilians suffer those consequences. The power of narrative, rhetoric and discourse should not be underestimated, as reflected in the testimonies of interviewees in this report. In state detention units, prison guards and interrogators refer to and justify violence in the name of protection. International actors involved in the Syrian conflict continue to weaponize minorities to serve their own political interests, and armed groups backed by these actors further complicate an entangled conflict.



# Recommendations

## To the Government of Syria

1. Ensure that all military operations are conducted in compliance with international humanitarian law and international human rights law.
2. Cease support for armed groups responsible for widespread violations of international humanitarian law and gross abuses of human rights.
3. Uphold protections and guarantees for Syrian detainees as mandated by the Syrian Constitution, the Code of Criminal Procedures, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention against Torture.
4. Release all arbitrarily detained individuals.
5. Retract laws that contribute to arbitrary detention, including Legislative Decree No. 55 and Anti-Terrorism Law No. 19.
6. Uphold Article 53(2) of the Syrian Constitution that states '[n]o one may be tortured or treated in a humiliating manner'.
7. Retract Legislative Decree No. 14 of 1969 and Legislative Decree No. 69 of 2008 to enable the prosecution of state security officials accused of committing torture and other serious human rights violations.
8. Amend the Syrian Penal Code to incorporate a definition of torture that complies with the definition found in the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and specify an applicable range of penalties that reflect the gravity of the crime.
9. Remove the reservation to Article 20 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, allowing the Committee Against Torture to conduct investigations of allegations of systematic torture.
10. Provide fair and adequate compensation and other forms of reparation to victims of torture and/or their dependents, as stipulated in Article 14 of the Convention against Torture.
11. Allow independent journalists, human rights monitors and observers into Syrian state detention units, including all branches of the General Intelligence Directorate, Political Security Directorate, Military Security Directorate, and Air Force Intelligence Directorate, where torture and sub-standard detention conditions have been reported.
12. Ensure that perpetrators of gross human rights violations are tried before ordinary civilian courts, in accordance with international standards.
13. Ensure the equitable representation of all religious minorities in high political office and state institutions.
14. End the use of sectarian language to characterize political opposition in official state discourse and prevent the dissemination of such content in the media.
15. Uphold the guarantees of religious equality found in the Syrian Constitution by ensuring that all religious groups benefit from official recognition, can register their identities, and have the right to freedom of religious expression and peaceful worship.

**To all other parties to the conflict in Syria, and the international community:**

16. Cease funding of armed groups responsible for widespread violations of international humanitarian law and gross abuses of human rights.
17. Prosecute former Syrian officials who have committed crimes of torture and other serious violations of international law, if identified within the jurisdiction of another state.
18. Provide access to psychosocial support and rehabilitation for Syrian victims of torture and other traumatic human rights violations claiming asylum in other states.
19. Pressure the Syrian government to remove its reservation to Article 20 of the Convention against Torture allowing the Committee Against Torture to conduct investigations of allegations of systematic torture.

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# In the Name of Protection: Minorities and identity in the Syrian conflict

## In brief

Syrian religious minorities have been at the heart of a war of political narratives. The Assad-led government in particular has portrayed itself as a 'protector of minorities' in one justification for its continued hold on power. By touting this narrative of protection, the government has both co-opted Syrian religious minorities, regardless of their own political views, and demonised millions of Sunni protestors, in rhetoric that has dismissed them as 'terrorists' rather than citizens seeking political, economic and social justice. Sectarian state rhetoric has therefore contributed to deepened fissures between different religious communities.

Syrian religious minorities are often assumed to be politically aligned with the Syrian government, eliminating a space for civilians and activists to express their own views and experiences, on their terms, during the conflict. On the ground, this narrative has been used by both the Assad-led government and armed groups to justify human rights violations against detained minority-background activists and perpetrate harm against civilians more widely.

Between August 2020 and January 2021, Ceasefire conducted 14 in-depth interviews with individuals from diverse minority backgrounds, documenting human rights violations they have been subjected to and analysing the relationship of those violations to their minority status. Ten out of 14 interviewees were arbitrarily detained by Syrian state forces based on their oppositional politics and activism, while one was detained by the armed Islamist group formerly known as Jabhat Al Nusra (now merged into Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham). Violations against minority background activists reveal fluctuating patterns in the level and scale of abuse committed, ranging from 'friendly' warnings to consistent physical and psychological torture, bringing into question the state's 'protection' narrative.

On the other hand, even civilians who are not involved in political activism have been forced to grapple with the consequences of their identities being politicised along sectarian and political lines.

For civilians from minority backgrounds, the real-life impacts of these dynamics have included being subjected to intimidation tactics; facing discrimination, micro-threats and aggressions; and in the worst cases, being targeted for violence by armed actors on the basis of their identity. To navigate this volatile landscape, civilians have negotiated their minority identities, adapting everything from accents to appearance, as reflected in the remaining testimonies in this report.

The politicisation of religious identity has become a weapon during the Syrian conflict, resulting in human rights violations and the hijacking of the voices of religious minorities. Through documenting a range of individual experiences, this report challenges and complicates widespread assumptions made about religious minorities in Syria. In an attempt to break the cycle of Syrian minorities being 'spoken for', the testimonies of all 14 interviewees are the focal point of this report.

### This report recommends:

- Releasing all arbitrarily detained individuals.
- Allowing independent journalists, human rights monitors and observers into Syrian state detention units, including all branches of the General Intelligence Directorate, Political Security Directorate, Military Security Directorate, and Air Force Intelligence Directorate, where torture and sub-standard detention conditions have been reported.
- Using all available legal avenues to prosecute Syrian officials who have committed crimes of torture and other serious violations of international law.
- Ending the use of sectarian language to characterize political opposition in official state discourse and prevent the dissemination of such content in the media.
- Providing access to psychosocial support and rehabilitation for Syrian victims of torture and other traumatic human rights violations.

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