

# Sectarian Conflict in Syria

BY M. ZUHDI JASSER

Syria's civil war is now well into its third year. The international community, including the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and many non-governmental organizations, largely agree that the Assad regime has committed wide-ranging human rights abuses during the conflict. This includes violating its obligations under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I, a 1977 amendment that added provisions that the government has clearly violated, including indiscriminate attacks on civilian populations, and destruction of food, water, and other materials needed for survival. In addition, extrajudicial killings, rape, and torture have been well documented. Most recently, U.S. President Obama confirmed that the Syrian regime has unleashed chemical weapons. There are also groups associated with the opposition who have committed crimes against humanity including extrajudicial punishments as well as targeting Christian clergy. With human suffering and risks to regional stability rising, there is a growing urgency to end the strife and plot a course to ensure stability for all Syrians. As the son of Syrian-American immigrants and a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the violence in Syria is personal. My immediate and extended family in Aleppo and Damascus deal with this war and humanitarian disaster every day.

Healing ethno-sectarian divisions is necessary for ending hostilities and transitioning to a democracy where the rule of law protects fundamental civil and religious liberties. Both current President Bashar al-Assad and his late father, former President Hafez al-Assad, have manipulated inter-communal divisions to maintain power, routinely selecting for favor individual Syrians based on their identity, in addition to their fealty to the national socialist Ba'ath Party. A cessation of current hostilities is necessary, but will be insufficient to stem sectarian differences, first planted by the Assad regime, that have spread like wildfire in Syria. Once the civil war started in 2011, Assad began pitting groups against each other and amplified long quiet ethno-sectarian divisions.

In addition to the issues above this article reports findings from a ten day UNHCR delegation trip in June 2013, in which USCIRF staff visited Syrian refugee communities in Jordan and Turkey. It will conclude with some of the Commission's chief recommendations that are also highlighted in the report released in April 2013, *Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria*.<sup>1</sup>

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## The Conflict

Since the conflict began with the violent repression of peaceful protests in 2011, the Assad regime has targeted majority Sunni Muslim communities with exceptions being made for the few who displayed continued loyalty to the regime. The London-based Syrian Network for Human Rights reported in September 2012 that the regime already had destroyed more than 500,000 buildings, including mosques and churches.<sup>2</sup> The same NGO reports that the regime targeted 1,451 mosques and that at least 348 have been destroyed. Opposition forces have also attacked mosques and churches, but with far less frequency.

The Syrian regime has created one of the worst humanitarian crises in memory. The United Nations reports that more than 110,000 Syrians have died, more than 1.7 million are now refugees, and 4.5 million have been internally displaced.<sup>3</sup> It is estimated that by the end of 2013 more than half of Syria's population - over 10 million people - will need urgent humanitarian assistance. Women and children have been affected disproportionately: nearly three-quarters of all refugees who fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and elsewhere are women and children under the age of 17.

The Assad regime has turned an initially peaceful political protest into an overtly sectarian conflict. By introducing the element of armed conflict, the regime's actions brought in foreign fighters who fuel the sectarian fires of the conflict. Members of the regime, and to a lesser extent the opposition, are supported by foreign military aid and training. Inflows of foreign fighters, some of whom the United States has designated as terrorists, such as Hizballah members, have increased

significantly. Since 2012 the sources of foreign military aid to the opposition and to the regime fall almost wholly along the Sunni-Shi'a divide. The notable wildcard is that the Assad regime has a long history of working closely with terrorist groups like Hamas and al-Qaeda as part of its divide and conquer strategy. It has, in fact, given radical Sunni Islamists even more access to Syria today than they had during the Iraq War, when the Assad regime supported al-Qaeda militants entering Iraq through Syria to kill Americans. In addition, terror elements from Hizballah receive unfettered access to Syrian communities fighting alongside the regime.

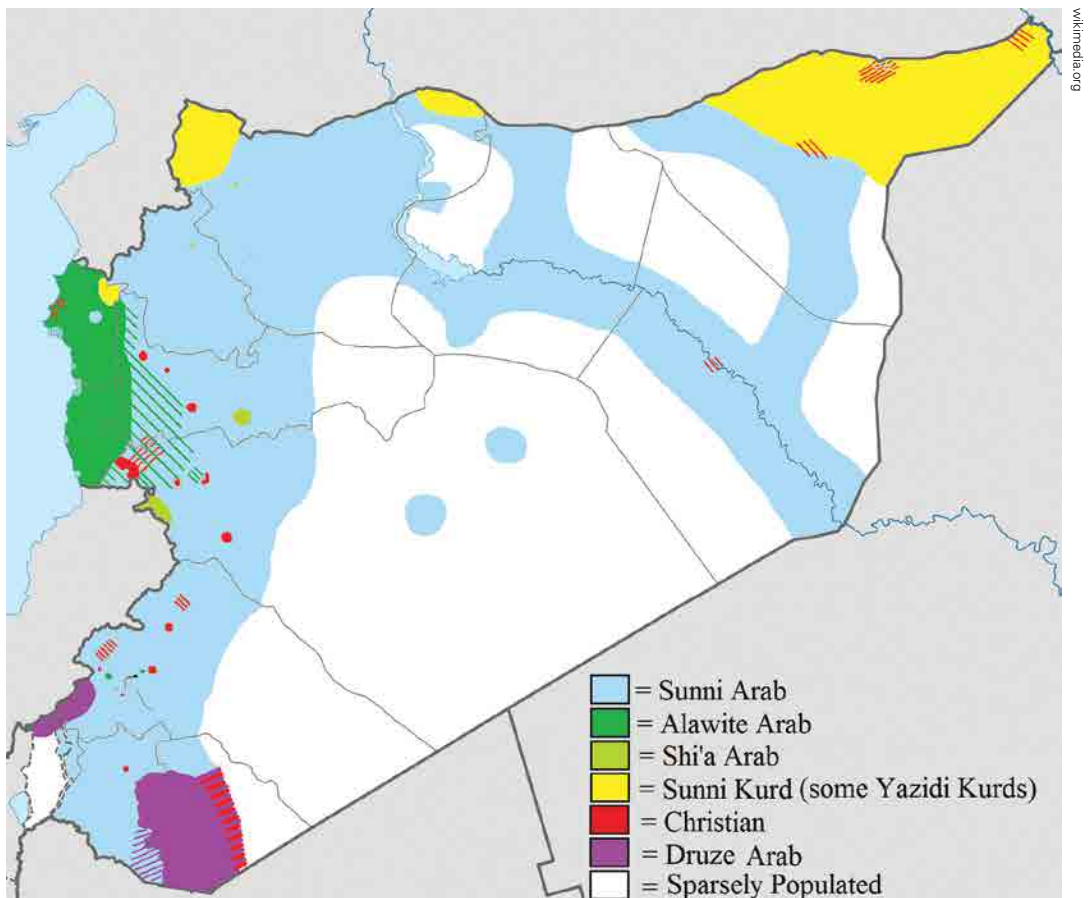
Additionally, U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia and Qatar are supporting various warring parties, providing considerable assistance to the Islamist factions of the opposition. Islamist factions from within Syria and from abroad came not to fight for freedom, but to fight a religious "jihad" against Assad's secular government. Islamist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are by definition inherently motivated by sectarian animus and essentially do not believe in the nation state of Syria. Instead they are motivated by a desire to implement Sharia law and establish an Islamic state. The moderate opposition, the spark of Syria's revolution, has slowly lost its prominence on the ground and in the court of public opinion.

A recent story in the Wall Street Journal describes a war being fought on multiple fronts, one of which exists within the opposition itself, between militant Islamists and the Free Syria Army.<sup>4</sup> As the sectarian nature of the conflict broadens, individuals will be targeted not only because of their perceived or true allegiance to a particular political side, but simply because they follow a particular faith.

Additionally, the massive numbers of refugees fleeing Syria are destabilizing an already unstable region. Economically and politically fragile countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon have been put under even greater economic pressure by hosting hundreds of thousands of Syrians (Egypt 90,000, Jordan 500,000, and Lebanon 600,000). In these countries already struggling with the Arab awakening and sectarian blowback, an influx of Syrian Sunni Muslim refugees, radicalized by a sense of hopelessness, could have a disastrous impact.

**Background**

Syria is a multi-religious country, where people have traditionally lived together as Syrians without religious or sectarian animosities. Its prewar population of 22 million broke down generally as follows: 75% Sunni, of which 14% is Kurdish Sunni, 12% Alawite, 10% Christian, 4% Druze, and 1% Yazidi. There are also very small Jewish communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo. Alawites, which include the Assad family in their ranks, practice an offshoot of Shi'a Islam.



A map showing the ethnic and religious distribution of Syria's sects

The Assad family's 40-year old authoritarianism created the political conditions for the current conflict and its sectarian components. Both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad banned political opposition to the Ba'ath Party, and under each security forces perpetrated egregious human rights abuses against government critics. In response to this repression, dozens of groups emerged to oppose the regime. Some of these groups, including the internationally recognized Syrian National Coalition, espouse democratic reform. Other groups are driven by religious ideologies advocating violence, such as the U.S.-designated terrorist organization, al-Nusra Front. Some are comprised of Syrians – others are made up of foreigners. The varied nature of these groups constrains their ability to work together, further complicating the situation and prospects for human rights and religious freedom in Syria.

Sectarian tensions pervade the conflict. Prior to 2011, both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad selectively permitted or denied religious rights. The country's smallest religious minority groups, including Christians, were permitted to worship freely so long as they did not oppose the regime. Assad restricted Sunni religious freedom in a variety of ways, including controlling the selection of imams. Additionally both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad restricted Sunni participation in government and ability to organize political parties.

### **A Sunni-Alawite War?**

The Assad regime and its most loyal supporters, predominately Alawites associated with Assad's Ba'athist Party, portray opposition forces, predominately Sunni Muslims, as a threat not just to their power but to the very existence of Alawites in Syria. To ensure continued support for the regime, the government

capitalizes on Alawite fears of Sunni rule. The regime spreads rumors of Sunni atrocities against Alawites and depicts the conflict as a fight to prevent Alawite extermination. In late December 2012, Time Magazine reported allegations that the Assad government provided up to \$500 per month to individuals posing as members of the opposition and painting graffiti on buildings or chanting slogans with overtly sectarian rhetoric, including, "the Christians to Beirut and the Alawites to the Tarboot (Grave)."<sup>5</sup> In response to growing fears, civilian Alawites formed pro-Assad and government-supported domestic militia such as Jaysh al-Sha'bi (The People's Army) and Shabiha (pro-Assad armed gangs). The U.S. government has designated both as terrorist organizations, which have committed gross human rights violations against Sunni communities.<sup>6</sup>

The Assad regime, including its army, security forces and related militias, has deliberately targeted Sunni Muslims. In May 2013, the regime killed more than 200 civilians, including women and children, in al-Bayda, a massacre described by many as the worst sectarian attack against Sunnis during the conflict. On May 25, 2012, in what has become known as the Houla massacre, 108 Sunni Muslims, including 49 children, were killed in two opposition-controlled villages in the Houla region just north of the central city of Homs. The United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) determined that most of the victims were "summarily executed" and "entire families were shot in their houses," and that regime-supported Shabiha were the likely perpetrators.<sup>7</sup> Some victims reportedly had pro-Shi'a or regime slogans carved into their foreheads. In July 2012, more than 200 Syrians, mostly Sunni Muslim civilians, were killed in

a village in the opposition-held Hama region. The Syrian army attacked the village with helicopters and tanks, followed by militia forces, which reportedly executed civilians including women and children.

In June 2012, USCIRF staff members travelled to the region to speak with Syrian refugees about religious freedom in Syria. Refugees reported that the regime forced Sunnis to proclaim that Assad is their god, with refusal met by torture and death. A former Syrian officer confided that regime forces only killed Sunnis and that his senior officer said they were fighting Sunni terrorists. When this officer refused to kill women and children who had been deemed Sunni terrorists, he was arrested and tortured for months. The government has also attacked and desecrated Christian churches. In February 2012, for example, regime forces raided the historic Syriac Orthodox Um al-Zennar Church in Homs.<sup>8</sup> Anti-regime activists have reported that the government plants people within refugee camps and elsewhere, both within and outside Syria, to stoke sectarian fears.<sup>9</sup>

Regime abuses have led Sunnis to view the conflict not as Assad's ruthless attempts to stay in power, but an Alawite-led attack against them. Some Syrian refugees in Jordan and Egypt expressed strong anti-Alawite sentiments, referring to Alawites as "dogs."<sup>10</sup> They apparently opposed Alawites due to, not their faith, but the perception that they were invariably pro-Assad and anti-Sunni. There have been reports of Sunni groups attacking Alawites and Shi'a Muslims. A December 2012 video released by the Saudi-sponsored Takfiri Wahhabi, a Sunni opposition group, shows a Shi'a mosque that was burned down amid dozens of individuals congratulating each other.<sup>11</sup> That same month, a suicide bomber

detonated explosives in a Damascus suburb, wounding 14 people and damaging one of Shi'a Islam's holiest shrines, a mausoleum of the Prophet's Muhammad's granddaughter.

The opposition also has targeted religious minorities, including Alawite and Christian civilians. It is unclear who kidnapped two Orthodox Bishops, Yohanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yaziji, or why. This kidnapping reportedly occurred in April 2013 near the town of Kafr Dael, close to Aleppo in northern Syria. Most individuals allege that the kidnappers were opposition fighters, while some opposition groups claim regime affiliates kidnapped the Bishops to further inflame sectarian fears.

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In January 2013, Human Rights Watch reported that opposition forces destroyed and looted minority religious sites in northern Syria. Human Rights Watch also reported that two churches were stormed and ransacked in the villages of Ghasaniyeh and Jdeideh, in the region of Latakia, in November and December 2012.<sup>12</sup> Various reports indicate that the Christian population of the city of Homs—approximately 160,000—almost entirely has fled for safety, with only 1,000 Christians remaining.<sup>13</sup> In late 2012, opposition forces reportedly attacked churches and used as safe houses an evangelical school and a home for the elderly in Homs.

### Religious Minorities in Crossfire

Religious minority communities, including Christians, Druze, Ismailis and other non-Alawite minorities, largely have tried to stay

out of the conflict. But the violence described above is forcing them to choose sides. Regime rhetoric pushes these groups as well. The regime refers to the opposition, and sometimes all Sunni Muslims, as extremists and terrorists who seek to transform Syria into an Islamic state unwelcoming to religious minorities. The regime cites the plight of Egyptian Coptic Christians and Iraqi Christians to show what would happen to Syrian Christians if the opposition prevailed. The presence of foreign terrorists affiliated with al-Qaeda supports this argument.

### Outside Forces Fuel Sectarian Strife

A number of outside actors are entering Syria and increasing sectarian divisions. Hizbollah, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards, and Shi'a fighters from Iraq have arrived to support Assad bolstered by financial and political backing from Iran and Russia. The civil war has ripped Syrian communities apart, devolving into a primal, Darwinian battle for survival. The opposition has become more influenced by radical Islamist groups funded by Islamist sympathizers from abroad in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate originating in Iraq, which the United States has deemed a terrorist organization, has gained fighters and at last esti-

for militant Islamists seeking the thrill of "jihad." They have hijacked the national awakening for freedom of the majority of Syrians. Like the regime, some of the more extremist groups utilize sectarian rhetoric and iconography to perpetuate fear and sectarianism.

While al-Nusra, al-Qaeda, and the other extremists groups are becoming more influential, most fighters in Syria are Syrians and are fighting an inherently decentralized chaotic campaign against the Assad regime. The loosely organized opposition are affiliated with the Free Syria Army (FSA), and number approximately 100,000. Since the United States weighed in on possibly supplying lethal aid to the FSA in April 2013, reports suggest that Saudi Arabia and Qatar have hinted they will then actively back off supporting militant Islamist groups and direct more of their aid also to vetted elements of the FSA. In conversations with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Egypt, all of them Sunnis, USCIRF found that they expressed disagreement with the religiously motivated ideologies of extremist groups. Nonetheless, they supported the shared goal of removing Assad from power.

### The Refugee Crisis and Religious Minorities

Religious minorities in Syria are not fleeing the country in numbers as anticipated. The overwhelming majority of the more than 1.7 million Syrian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa are Sunni Muslims. UNHCR reports that, as of the end of April, less than one percent of each minority community -- Christians, Alawite, Ismaili, Mandaean and Yezidi -- is registered in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon.<sup>15</sup> There are reports that upwards of 300,000 Christians are internally displaced.

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mate has as many as 10,000.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the Syrian Liberation Front, also thought to be dominated by Islamists, has numbers upwards of 37,000. Syria has become a global magnet

Accurate figures for other communities are unavailable.

The small number of minorities in the refugee population reflects two phenomena, which apply to Christians and Alawites in particular. First, Christians and Alawites are moving to their home areas or to regime-held areas because these areas tend to be safe from government bombing. This suggests that Christians and Alawites may be accepting the regime's argument that Alawites and Christians are safer with the government than with the opposition.

Second, evidence suggests that if Christians and Alawites do flee Syria, they are simply not registering with the local UN refugee agency because, as USCIRF staff was told, they fear being associated with the Assad regime. Some refugees try to pass as Sunni Muslims by, among other measures, wearing the hijab. Minority refugees do not return home because they also fear government officials viewing them as disloyal for having sought safety outside of Syria.

### Regional Dangers

As mentioned, more than 1.7 million Syrians have fled the country, representing a massive humanitarian crisis and an emerging destabilizing threat to the region. Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey now each host more than half a million Syrians. While Egypt is hosting about 90,000 refugees, it is expecting at least 120,000 more.

These refugees are putting enormous economic and political strains on already-weak governments. In Jordan, 80 percent of the refugees live outside of camps and no Syrian refugee camps exist in either Lebanon or Egypt. Instead, refugees live in cities and towns, competing with Egyptians, Jordanians, and

Lebanese for housing, jobs, and access to services provided by health clinics and schools. Further destabilization of such countries will have negative implications for the region, as well as beyond, including for U.S. national security.

Alarmingly, Syria's sectarian conflict itself now appears to be spreading beyond its borders. In the last few months, Lebanon has experienced fighting between Alawite and Salafi groups. In addition, it is widely argued that Iraq's spike in sectarian violence that has left about 2,500 people dead between April and July is a spillover from the Syrian crisis.

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

### Recommendations

Dealing with sectarian divisions, exacerbated by the regime and extremists, is central to any lasting peace in Syria. Healing the sectarian divides of a diverse nation like Syria is not only necessary, but can become a focal point for a future more secure, stable, and democratic region. Protecting religious freedom and human rights for every Syrian is crucial. More detail on ways to heal this divide and next steps can be found in the April 2013 report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) entitled, "Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria."<sup>16</sup> Our recommendations for the United States fell into four categories: 1) Promoting Protection for Religious Freedom in Syria; 2) Prioritizing Human Rights in U.S. relations through the Friends of Syria Group; 3) Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief

through U.S. Programs; and 4) Addressing the Situation of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees.

Below are seven specific recommendations:

- The U.S. should, where appropriate, assist the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and any future post-Assad government to provide security to protect likely targets of sectarian or religion-motivated violence. This includes areas where religious or minority communities live or congregate, such as neighborhoods with religious sites and places of worship. The protection of religious minorities is a key element to the possibility of a successful Syrian evolution out of the Assad era and a three-year civil war. Nations which protect the religious freedom of their minorities are far more likely to enjoy security and freedom;
- To offset the influence of extremist groups who are establishing Sharia courts in liberated areas, the U.S. government should provide technical training and support to local councils, courts, lawyers and judges on domestic laws and international standards relating to human rights and religious freedom. The ability to provide viable legal alternatives to Shi'a courts or Assad's authoritarianism in establishing the rule of law in a diverse Syria will be essential to free Syria of the divisions of sectarianism;
- With Saudi Arabia and Qatar vying for influence in Syria against the region's Shia powers behind Assad, the U.S. government should form a special coalition with like-minded partners for a third pathway among the Friends of Syria. This pathway would fund and develop efforts to promote intra- and inter-religious tolerance and respect for

religious freedom and related rights to ensure that a future Syria respects these fundamental freedoms. The ability of countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar to increase Sunni Islamist influence thus far was due to the vacuum created by the end of regime military control in certain regions. It was also due to the lack of western civil society programs to engage the Syrian population. Without advocates from our democratic allies in the West for genuine liberty on the ground in Syria, the majority of Syrians will continue to be lost in a sectarian battle that gives them two equally distasteful and oppressive alternatives.

- The U.S. government should ensure that all international cooperation with the Syrian opposition leadership emphasizes the importance of ensuring the rights to freedom of religion or belief. It should also ensure freedom of opinion and expression, as well as protection of minority religious communities;
- The U.S. government should direct U.S. officials and recipients of U.S. grants to prioritize religious tolerance and understanding, foster knowledge of and respect for universal human rights standards, and develop the political ability of religious minorities to organize themselves and convey their concerns. Studies have shown that the prioritization of religious liberty provides the necessary foundation of liberty for nations that will then keep them more secure and less torn apart by religiously motivated conflict.
- The U.S. government should establish a refugee resettlement program for Syrian refugees fleeing targeted religious persecution by Syrian government forces, affiliated militias, or non-state actors opposed to the Assad regime. This resettlement will help



prevent the regional destabilization which the over two million displaced Syrians are currently fueling in their host nations;

■ In anticipation of another mass exodus from Syria, this time of religious minorities, who could be targeted for sectarian reprisal attacks in refugee camps, we must encourage UNHCR to make preparations for increased refugee flows of religious minorities, to develop a protection program to ensure their safety in refugee camps, and to sponsor interfaith dialogues among the various refugee communities. A post-Assad Syria which devolves even deeper into a society of retribution will undercut any chance that the revolutionaries had hoped to provide of religious freedom emerging out of the dust of over 42 years of Assad regime oppression.

If post-Assad Syria is ever to heal and move forward, human rights, including freedom of religion, must be woven tightly into the fabric of its new national life. Only by replacing the government's divide-and-conquer approach toward sectarian groups with one that affirms the fundamental identity and rights of every Syrian – irrespective of group membership -- can this deeply fractured land be made whole again. **PRISM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria," Special Report, April 2013, [http://www.uscifr.gov/images/Syria%20Report%20April%202013\(1\).pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/images/Syria%20Report%20April%202013(1).pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Syrian Network for Human Rights, "Major violation of media freedom in Syria in September 2013," [http://dchrs.org/english/File/SNHR\\_Major\\_violation\\_of\\_media\\_freedom\\_September\\_2013.pdf](http://dchrs.org/english/File/SNHR_Major_violation_of_media_freedom_September_2013.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Statistics can be found at the website for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: <http://www.unocha.org/crisis/syria>

<sup>4</sup> Malas, Nour, "Rebel-on-rebel violence seizes Syria," *the Wall Street Journal*, September 18, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Ajami, Fouad, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford, CA: The Hoover Institution Press, 2012), 111.

<sup>6</sup> The Alawite community is hardly monolithic on this matter. Some Alawite elites have abandoned the Assad regime for the opposition and denounced the violence perpetrated against civilians. In March 2013, a group of Alawites supporting a democratic alternative met in Cairo to discuss a declaration supporting a united Syria and opposing sectarian revenge attacks.

<sup>7</sup> Nebehay, Stephanie, "Most Houla victims killed in summary executions: U.N.," *Chicago Tribune*, May 29, 2012

<sup>8</sup> USCIRF Special Report, April 2013

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See video here, published December 13, 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2rx8fjeCCw>

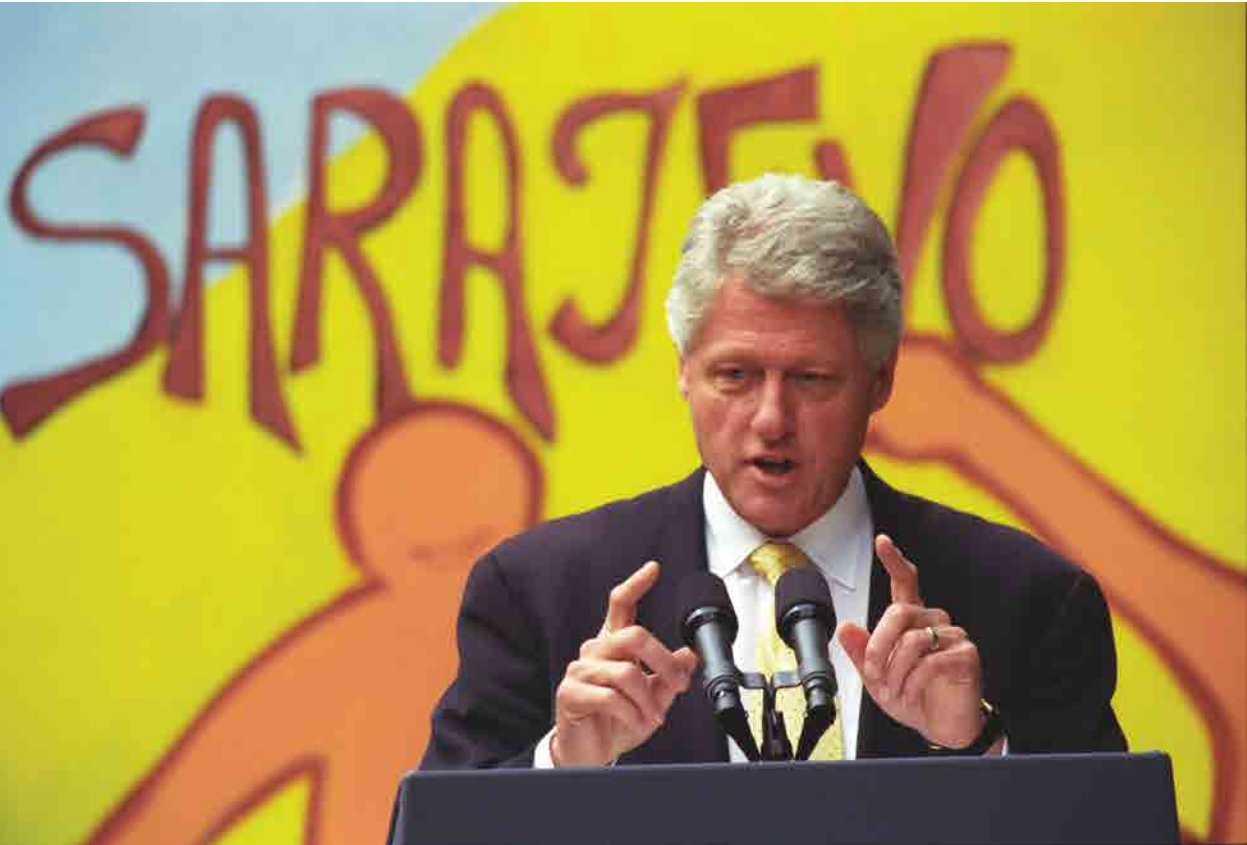
<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Attacks on Religious Sites Raise Tensions," January 23, 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/01/23/syria-attacks-religious-sites-raise-tensions>

<sup>13</sup> "Syria: Situation and treatment of Christians since March 2011; whether insurgents perceive Christians to be loyal to President Assad; treatment of Christians by insurgents in Homs," Report by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – Syria, June 29, 2012, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5121fde92.html>

<sup>14</sup> Ignatius, David, "Al-Qaeda affiliate playing larger role in Syrian rebellion," *Washington Post*, November 30, 2012 [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/al-qaeda-affiliate-playing-larger-role-in-syria-rebellion/2012/11/30/203d06f4-3b2e-11e2-9258-ac7c78d5c680\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/al-qaeda-affiliate-playing-larger-role-in-syria-rebellion/2012/11/30/203d06f4-3b2e-11e2-9258-ac7c78d5c680_blog.html)

<sup>15</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Syria: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

<sup>16</sup> USCIRF Special Report, April 2013



President Bill Clinton addressing the Third High School in Sarajevo