

# Targeting Christian places of worship in Syria is a threat to world heritage

*The Syrian regime bears primary responsibility for 61% of the targeting of Christian places of worship in Syria*

Syrian Network for Human Rights (05.09.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2kGzwrD> – The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) stated in its report released today that the Syrian regime bears primary responsibility for 61 percent of the targeting of Christian places of worship in Syria.

The report, entitled “Targeting Christian Places of Worship in Syria is a Threat to World Heritage”, says that targeting Christian places of worship is a form of intimidation against the Christian minority in Syria and a means of displacing them, noting that the Syrian regime is indifferent to the damage which this causes to the Syrian state, including the nation’s millennia-old history and civilizational heritage that has passed through Syria down the ages; some of the country’s Christian places of worship, for example, were built in the first century AD, such as the Church of the Lady of the Holy Belt (Um al Zennar) in Homs city, while Qalb al Lawza Church in Idlib suburbs was built in the fifth century AD.

While the specious claim to be a protector of the Syrian people, opposing sectarianism was always central in Bashar al Assad’s efforts to cling to power, the reality and all the evidence, however, directly contradict this claim, with the

regime reliant on fomenting and exploiting sectarianism, as well as attacking and threatening all sections of the population, both from the minority and majority groups, who oppose its tyrannical practices, hereditary status, and totalitarian nature intent on retaining dynastic power forever.

The 22-page report stresses that the current Syrian regime bears direct responsibility for the destruction, displacement and collapse of the Syrian state at various levels because it is the main cause of Syrian state institutions being used to launch a systematic war against the popular uprising, which called for doing away with the hereditary the rule of the Assad family and moving towards a democratically elected government that represents all the components of Syrian society, not one sect or one family.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, Chairman of SNHR, adds:

“The Syrian regime has always invoked good slogans, but on the ground, it has done the opposite. While the regime claims that it has not committed any violations, and that it is keen on protecting the Syrian state and the rights of minorities, it has carried out qualitative operations in suppressing and terrorizing all those who sought political change and reform, regardless of religion or race, and of whether this causes the destruction of the heritage of Syria and the displacement of its minorities. Syria will not become calm without transition to democracy and respect for human rights ”

This report includes the record of attacks carried out by the

main parties to the conflict in Syria against Christian places of worship from March 2011 to September 2019. The report also outlines the most notable attacks against Christian places of worship that occurred since the SNHR's last study at the end of April 2015. The report notes that the record of attacks includes bombings that targeted civilian places of worship, with no military headquarters or equipment nearby, turning Christian places of worship military headquarters by some parties, and places of worship have regularly been subjected to more than one attack, and we document each attack as a separate violation.

The report stresses that under international humanitarian law, civilian objects are classed as being protected from military attacks unless they are used for military purposes, with this protection suspended when these objects are used for military purposes and for the duration of such use; once the civilian object is no longer being used for any military purpose and returns to its former civilian status, military attacks are once again prohibited and the object's protected status is resumed.

According to the report, at least 124 attacks were documented against Christian places of worship by the main parties in Syria between March 2011 and September 2019, 75 of which at the hands of Syrian Regime forces, 10 at the hands of ISIS, while Hay'at Tahrir al Sham was responsible for another two attacks. According to the report, 33 attacks occurred at the hands of factions of the Armed Opposition, and four others at the hands of other parties.

The report reveals that these attacks have caused damage to at least 76 Christian places of worship, six of which have been

attacked by more than one party.

According to the report, the record of attacks against Christian places of worship includes the conversion of 11 places of worship into military or administrative headquarters by the main parties to the conflict, six of which at the hands of Syrian Regime forces, while two at the hands of ISIS and faction of the Armed Opposition each, and one at the hands of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham.

The report adds that the weapons possessed by the Syrian regime, including missiles and barrel bombs, have caused the greatest damage to buildings and contents compared to those of other parties, with the regime followed by ISIS in terms of the scale of damage. Despite the large number of attacks carried out by factions of the Armed Opposition, the damage resulting from their bombing was minor compared to that inflicted by the Syrian regime and ISIS.

The report stresses that international humanitarian law strongly prohibits attacks on protected objects, which must be protected in times of international and internal armed conflict, and prohibits indiscriminate or deliberate attacks and reprisals against these objects, or their being used in the work of the war effort according to (Protocol 2, Article 16).

According to the report, intentional attacks on places of worship constitute war crimes, and repeating such attacks on the same place of worship is a strong indicator of deliberation in regard to these attacks and of a desire to

destroy a place of worship. Also, some of the incidents of bombing have inflicted collateral damage that involved loss of civilian lives or injuries. There are strong indicators suggesting that this damage was excessive compared to the anticipated military benefit.

According to the report, the incidents of bombing have included targeting civilian targets, with the attacking forces thereby violating Articles 52, 53, 54, 55 and 56 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions.

The report calls on Security Council to take further action following the adoption of resolutions 2139 and 2254, to refer the Syrian issue to the International Criminal Court and to hold all those involved in perpetrating crimes accountable, as well as to impose sanctions that include the Syrian and Iran regimes, primarily the imposition of arms embargoes, and to place those directly involved in committing war crimes on the lists of sanctions and international arrest warrants, and to include militias fighting alongside the Syrian government on the international terrorism list.

The report calls on the international community to protect the Syrian people from daily killing and to lift sieges, as well as to increase support for relief efforts. Additionally, the report calls on the international community to enact the principle of universal jurisdiction in local courts regarding these crimes in order to ensure that fair trials are held for all those who were involved, as well as to implement the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine and to impose further sanctions on the Syrian regime, which continues to use aircraft fuel to bomb and destroy places of worship.

The report also calls on OHCHR to submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other organs of the United Nations on the incidents mentioned in this report.

The report calls on the European Union and the USA to make greater efforts to protect civilians and places of worship in Syria, to use force in the event of repeated attacks on world heritage sites, and to target airports that bomb civilians and places of worship.

The report calls on the Russian regime to put pressure on its ally the Syrian regime to stop bombing Christian places of worship and to take a serious stance in the event of repeated targeting, to put pressure on the Syrian regime to remove its forces and military equipment from Christian places of worship, and to undertake to respect and protect these properties, noting that the Syrian regime is the greatest threat to society, the state, societal stability and minorities.

The report also calls on factions of the Armed Opposition to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian objects in all areas, to open investigations into incidents reported in this report, to hold those involved in the targeting of Christian places of worship accountable, and to restore and protect Christian places of worship in areas under their control.

*[Click here to read the full report.](#)*