

63 Churches Topple as Muslims Move to Destroy Christian Worship Centers

Sixty-three churches have been damaged or destroyed so far during four years of civil war in Syria, says the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

In a comprehensive 21-page report, first published in Arabic on 7 May and now in English, the rights group, known for being anti-government, launches a withering attack on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces, claiming they were responsible for almost two thirds of the attacks.

The SNHR blames opposition forces for 14 and Islamic extremist groups for seven (ISIS, six; Al-Nusra Front, one). Two are unattributed; the remaining 40 are blamed on the "ruthless" al-Assad regime.

The report, 'Targeting Christian Places of Worship in Syria', took five months to compile, says the SNHR, which claims it verified each of its photos and videos that were provided by locals or obtained from social media. However, the group acknowledges it "might not have been able to document all incidents."

Dr. Wael Aleji, spokesperson for SNHR, acknowledges in the report that war is often indiscriminate—"Christians and their places of worship have suffered as much as the rest of the Syrian people. Scud missiles, chemical weapons or barrel bombs do not differentiate between Christians and non-Christians."

However, both extremist groups and government and opposition forces are accused of committing war crimes through "deliberate targeting" of churches and not just "random" attacks. All three are also accused of breaching international

law by using churches as military bases.

In a report weighted heavily against the government, it should be noted that, although eye witnesses report one incident of government troops deliberately desecrating and burning a church in Kasab, a source contacted by World Watch Monitor claimed the responsibility lay with the al-Nusra Islamist group.

Meanwhile, it is only ISIS which is accused of hauling down crosses from the tops of churches and breaking them. ISIS is also accused of burning four churches to the ground and turning two others into bases. Both ISIS and the al-Nusra Front are accused of ransacking churches and destroying religious icons.

“After the rise and expansion of terrorist groups ... Christians have become trapped and squeezed between the fire of [the] Assad government and the hell of the extremist groups,” says Aleji.

Despite consistent criticism of the al-Assad regime, the SNHR admits that “most of the targeted churches [by government forces] were located in opposition-controlled areas.”

The government’s reported “targeting”—sometimes “deliberate”—of churches also appears to have followed a fairly regular pattern: 40 churches in total, up from 19 in the previous SNHR report at the end of 2012.

The SNHR accuses each party of “random and sometimes deliberate” attacks. But it is unclear whether destruction caused by shelling or mortars is an unintended consequence of a brutal war, while the destroying of crosses and burning down of churches appears to be more deliberate.

In conclusion, the SNHR calls for the U.N. to “take further actions to ensure the safety of civilians” and “increase the pressure on countries supporting the government forces”—and

the Kurdish Democratic Union Party. It calls for the “Syrian issue” to be referred to the International Criminal Court, and says that “all those who have committed crimes against humanity should be held accountable.”

Finally, the SNHR asks for a “political solution” that would “bring peace and justice ... and save the lives of Syrian people and their heritage.”