



## **Syria – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 24 and 27 February 2012**

### **Information regarding the religious or ethnic elements of the fighting in Daraa.**

A *Voice of America News* report refers to the ethno-religious composition of Daraa as follows:

“Daraa is a mostly Sunni Arab town while both Hezbollah and Iran's leadership are Shi'ite. Syria is governed by the minority Alawite group, which is an offshoot of Shi'ism.” (*Voice of America News* (23 March 2011) *Syrian Security Forces Storm Mosque*)

The 2011 *US Department of State* religious freedom report for Syria, in “Section I. Religious Demography”, states:

“The minority Alawite sect holds an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers because President Assad and his family are Alawites and ensure that other Alawites occupy key government positions.” (*US Department of State* (13 September 2011) *July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report*)

See also “Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom” which states:

“Government policy officially disavows sectarianism of any kind, but religion can be a factor in determining some career opportunities. For example, Alawites hold dominant positions in the military and other security services disproportionate to their numbers.” (*ibid*)

An *Agence France Presse* report states:

“Major Maher Nouaimi, based in Turkey, told AFP by telephone that ‘even though the army has huge military capabilities, soldiers no longer have the will to fight or are ready to do so.’ He said there was growing discontent among officers and the rank and file against commanders, who are largely drawn from Assad's Alawite community, an offshoot of Shiite Islam. Most conscripts in the military are from Syria's majority Sunni Muslim community.” (*Agence France Presse* (3 February 2012) *Syrian Arab Republic (the): Russia rejects Syria text as deaths mount*)

Reports of Sunni Muslims being particularly targeted in Daraa were not found among sources consulted by the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints.

However, a *Reuters* report on the killing of Sunni Muslims in Homs states:

“Elsewhere, activists said they were still recovering bodies from the killings of Sunni Muslims in a neighbourhood of the flashpoint city Homs, which they blamed on pro-Assad militiamen belonging to the president's minority Alawite sect.” (*Reuters AlertNet* (28 January 2012) *Arab League suspends Syria mission as violence rages*)

See also a *Human Rights Watch* report which, in a section titled “Homs: A Restive Governorate” states:

“The crackdown increased sectarian tensions between Sunni Muslims, many of whom support the protest movement, and Alawites, who have in large part remained loyal to the Syrian government. Many Sunni residents of the governorate told Human Rights Watch that some Alawites were actively taking part in the crackdown by for example enlisting in pro-government gangs referred to as *shabeeha*. For their part, Alawite residents in Homs reported to Human Rights Watch that anti-government protesters have shouted sectarian chants against them during the protests and killed and mutilated Alawite officers and other citizens.” (Human Rights Watch (11 November 2011) *“We Live as in War”*: *Crackdown on Protesters in the Governorate of Homs*, p.13)

An *International Crisis Group* report, in a section titled “A Deepening Crisis”, states:

“Assad has registered only two achievements, albeit highly ambivalent ones. First, the regime in effect took the Alawite minority hostage, linking its fate to its own. It did so deliberately and cynically, not least in order to ensure the loyalty of the security services which, far from being a privileged, praetorian elite corps, are predominantly composed of underpaid and overworked Alawites hailing from villages the regime has left in a state of abject underdevelopment. As unrest began, the regime staged sectarian incidents in confessionally-mixed areas as a means of bringing to the surface deeply-ingrained feelings of insecurity among Alawites who, in centuries past, had been socially marginalised, economically exploited and targets of religious discrimination. To stoke fear, authorities distributed weapons and bags of sand - designed to erect fortifications - to Alawites living in rural areas long before any objective threat existed; security services and official media spread blood-curdling, often exaggerated and sometimes wholly imaginary stories of the protesters' alleged sectarian barbarism. With time, the Alawites' conspicuous role in putting down protest, disseminating propaganda and staging pro-regime demonstrations transformed anti-Alawite feelings - initially latent and largely repressed - into a perilous reality. The regime's behaviour conformed to the worst anti-Alawite stereotypes. It revived age-old prejudices about the community's ‘savagery’. It exacerbated historic grievances regarding ownership of land, which in some parts of the country had been transferred from Sunni feudal elites to Alawite serfs during the agrarian reform that began in the 1950s. It intensified resentment over the inequitable use of state institutions, which have been a key source of employment for Alawites and, over time, have become an instrument with which to plunder the public while serving the ruling family's interests. As repression escalated in recent months, many Syrians have shifted from blaming elements of the regime, to blaming the regime as a whole and, finally, to blaming the Alawite community itself.” (International Crisis Group (24 November 2011) *Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, p.2)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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