



1. Please provide updated information on the effectiveness of State protection in Syria (and Homs in particular) for a Christian woman who is a widow.

Violence against women, particularly domestic violence, is reportedly a common occurrence in Syria and is severely underreported. Sources indicate that police tend to be reluctant to intervene in cases of violence against women unless the woman is well-connected by virtue of her family. No reports were located that specify the religion of the victim, and no reports were located about widowed women being targeted for violence.

Reports indicate that violence against women is common and is occurring frequently since the uprising. The United States Department of State (USDOS) reported in 2011 that ‘there were a minimum of 1,300 cases of rape in 2009’.¹ A 2010 report from Freedom House noted the high incidence of family violence in the results of a 2005 survey of Syrian families:

Of the women surveyed, 67 percent said they had been “punished” in front of their families, either through verbal insults, revocation of pocket money, or, in 87 percent of these cases, physical beatings. In the same survey, 21.8 percent of women claimed to have been “exposed to violence.” Of those who had been beaten, family members – particularly husbands and fathers – were the perpetrators 80.4 percent of the time.²

A recently launched website, ‘Women Under Siege’³, documents cases of women who have been sexually assaulted since the uprising began in early 2011. There are reports on the website of women being raped in prison by guards⁴, at checkpoints by security forces⁵, and rounded up and raped by groups of Syrian security forces in Homs⁶. The website collates reports from various sources that cannot be independently verified and many reports do not refer any action being taken by police or government forces in response to the crimes. The reports do not mention Christian women being a target.

Legal protection

¹ United States Department of State 2011, *2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Syria*, 8 April <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/160478.pdf>> Accessed 10 April 2012

² Freedom House 2010, *Women’s Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 - Syria*, 3 March <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b99011dc.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012

³ Women Under Siege is a website run by the Women’s Media Center, a non-profit media and women’s rights advocacy group.

⁴ ‘Al-Jazeera: Protester raped in prison’ 2012, Women Under Siege, 16 March <<https://womenundersiegesyria.crowdmap.com/reports/view/28>> Accessed 18 April 2012

⁵ McEvers, K. 2012, ‘Defectors Offer Insider’s View Of Syrian Army’, *NPR News*, 9 April <<http://www.npr.org/2012/04/09/150257045/defected-soldiers-offer-insiders-view-of-syrian-army>> Accessed 18 April 2012

⁶ ‘Government security forces reportedly kidnap and rape 25 girls in Homs’ 2011, Women Under Siege, 4 October <<https://womenundersiegesyria.crowdmap.com/reports/view/5>> Accessed 18 April 2012

The Penal Code criminalises violence against women⁷; however, there is no law in Syria that specifically addresses domestic violence.⁸ Other laws reportedly ‘create loopholes that allow perpetrators to have their penalties reduced or abolished’ in cases of rape or family honour.⁹ According to Freedom House, Article 192 of the Penal Code ‘permits a large measure of discretion for judges in sentencing those convicted of any crime associated with restoring family honor’.¹⁰ The Institute for War and Peace Reporting noted in 2008 that ‘[t]he lack of laws that specifically address domestic violence remains an obstacle to change’, and while human rights advocates have drafted a law that addresses domestic violence, the ‘Syrian government has still not made any steps to endorse the law’.¹¹

Police response

Reports state that police can be reluctant to intervene in cases of violence against women, and there are reports of women who have attempted to file a police report being assaulted by police officers. In May 2010, the Research Directorate of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRBC) interviewed a retired United States Government intelligence officer, who specialises in Middle Eastern issues. In this interview, the intelligence officer noted that ‘while the police would not be totally “blasé” about a woman reporting death threats, threats to individual freedom are not perceived to be as high a priority as they are in North America, for example’.¹² Similarly, USDOS reported in 2011 that while ‘the police and judiciary have shown a willingness to prosecute rapists’, there are cases of police officers not responding to complaints of violence by women, as well as cases of assault perpetrated by police:

Observers reported that when some abused women tried to file a police report, the police did not respond to their claims aggressively, if at all. Women reported incidents at police stations of sexual harassment, verbal abuse, hair pulling, and slapping by police officers when attempting to file police reports.¹³

Reports note that the religious status and family connections of the victim can affect how police respond to complaints of violence. The IRBC noted in 2010 that a woman experiencing death threats ‘would commonly go to the police with her husband and/or father, as well as any notable person with whom she was connected’, and ‘if the woman is well-connected by virtue of her family or notable individuals, she will be perceived [by police] to have more

⁷ Social Institutions and Gender Index, n.d., *Gender Equality and Social Institutions in Syria*, <<http://genderindex.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/SYR.pdf>> Accessed 12 April 2012

⁸ United States Department of State 2011, *2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Syria*, 8 April, Section 6, <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/160478.pdf>> Accessed 10 April 2012 ; Freedom House 2010, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 - Syria*, 3 March <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b99011dc.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012 ; Institute for War and Peace Reporting 2008, *Growing Pressure to Tackle Domestic Abuse*, 11 December <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4959de291e.html>> Accessed 12 April 2012

⁹ Social Institutions and Gender Index, n.d., *Gender Equality and Social Institutions in Syria*, <<http://genderindex.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/SYR.pdf>> Accessed 12 April 2012

¹⁰ Freedom House 2010, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 - Syria*, 3 March <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b99011dc.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012

¹¹ Institute for War and Peace Reporting 2008, *Growing Pressure to Tackle Domestic Abuse*, 11 December <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4959de291e.html>> Accessed 12 April 2012

¹² Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2010, *SYR103487.E Syria: State protection and recourse available to a person who is receiving death threats, in particular a woman not in the context of domestic violence*, 6 May <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4dd0c8c82.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012

¹³ United States Department of State 2011, *2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Syria*, 8 April <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/160478.pdf>> Accessed 10 April 2012

credibility and influence’.¹⁴ The IRBC also interviewed a representative of the Middle East Forum¹⁵ who similarly stated that ‘the police would consider factors such as the family the woman is from, her religious status, or whether or not she had any connections to the ruling elite’.¹⁶

In 2010, Freedom House noted that police response to women victims of domestic violence can be unsympathetic:

Women have little redress in such situations, as police tend to be unsympathetic to victims of domestic violence and there are few public shelters... When the police do become involved, they generally attempt to reconcile the husband and wife, and only very rarely do women press criminal charges against men.¹⁷

USDOS did note, however, that employees of a domestic violence shelter in Damascus had said ‘police had been increasingly helpful in referring women to the shelter’.¹⁸

Social attitudes to violence against women

Reports note that social stigma and family pressure are obstacles to justice for women who experience violence. USDOS also stated in 2011 that domestic violence victims ‘have traditionally been reluctant to seek assistance outside the family for fear of social stigmatization’.¹⁹ As a result, ‘[t]he majority of domestic violence and sexual assault cases went unreported’.²⁰ In 2008, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting quoted Nihad Tuhmaz, a professor of sociology at the Baath University in Homs, stating ‘[d]omestic violence is seen as a private matter in our society’.²¹ Similarly, Freedom House noted that ‘[f]amilies tend to discourage women from making formal complaints so as to avoid public attention, though they may confront the perpetrator behind closed doors’.²² Freedom House also cites a lack of understanding of the law as a reason for women not accessing their rights:

Many women, particularly those living in rural areas, do not fully understand their legal rights and cede what rights they do have in response to social or family pressure.²³

¹⁴ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2010, *SYR103487.E Syria: State protection and recourse available to a person who is receiving death threats, in particular a woman not in the context of domestic violence*, 6 May <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4dd0c8c82.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012

¹⁵ The Middle East Forum is an independent organization “promoting American interests” through research.

¹⁶ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2010, *SYR103487.E Syria: State protection and recourse available to a person who is receiving death threats, in particular a woman not in the context of domestic violence*, 6 May <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4dd0c8c82.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012

¹⁷ Freedom House 2010, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 - Syria*, 3 March <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b99011dc.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012

¹⁸ United States Department of State 2011, *2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Syria*, 8 April <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/160478.pdf>> Accessed 10 April 2012

¹⁹ Freedom House 2010, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 - Syria*, 3 March <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b99011dc.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012

²⁰ Freedom House 2010, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 - Syria*, 3 March <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b99011dc.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012

²¹ Institute for War and Peace Reporting 2008, *Growing Pressure to Tackle Domestic Abuse*, 11 December <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4959de291e.html>> Accessed 12 April 2012

²² Freedom House 2010, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 - Syria*, 3 March <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b99011dc.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012

²³ Freedom House 2010, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 - Syria*, 3 March <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b99011dc.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012

State protection for Christians

Three reports were located related to the possibility that Christians may be vulnerable if the regime in Syria changed. Though these reports are entirely speculative, they indicate a prevalent fear among the Christian community that a new government could affect the safety of Christians in Syria. A January 2012 article published in the *Economist* notes that:

[M]any fear that, after four decades of secular autocracy, a Sunni Muslim takeover would prompt a wave of persecution, perhaps even driving [Christians] out of the country... "If the regime falls," says a Christian woman, "I'll have to wear the veil or leave the country."²⁴

Similarly, an article from the *International Business Times*²⁵ published 2 March 2012 states:

Christians fear a radical Islamist government will take over once al-Assad is gone. A radical government that will not only further restrict social possibilities for Christians but might even allow extremists to actually attack Christians.²⁶

A March 2012 *Washington Post* article also stated that '[r]eligious minorities worry that if the Sunni majority came to power, Syria could become a repressive Islamic state'.²⁷

General state protection

The police service in Syria are also reportedly 'not known to be particularly expert; they lack funding and training', according to a 2010 IRBC report.²⁸ Freedom House also noted in 2010 that 'corruption in the judicial system is rife' as the judiciary is not independent, which negatively effects access to justice.²⁹

One report was located indicating that crime has increased in Syria since the uprising as police resources are being employed elsewhere. *USA Today* reported on 25 March 2012 that Syria is experiencing a crime wave as 'security forces are now too distracted' and 'there is no security and people are now behaving as they want'.³⁰

²⁴ 'The country's religious minorities are getting understandably nervous' 2012, *The Economist*, 7 January <<http://www.economist.com/node/21542425>> Accessed 20 January 2012

²⁵ *International Business Times* is a business journalism website, focusing on economic, political and societal events. It is based in New York City.

²⁶ Ghosh, P.R. 2012 'Syria's Christians: Caught Between Supporting Assad and Fears of an Islamist Takeover', *International Business Times*, 2 March <<http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/308247/20120302/syria-assad-christians-kurds-islamists-regime-opposition.htm>> Accessed 12 April 2012

²⁷ Fadel, L. 2011 'In Syria, many uneasy about where power struggle could lead', *The Washington Post*, 30 March <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-president-accepts-cabinets-resignations/2011/03/29/AFVTAjuB_story.html> Accessed 10 April 2012

²⁸ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2010, SYR103487.E *Syria: State protection and recourse available to a person who is receiving death threats, in particular a woman not in the context of domestic violence*, 6 May <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4dd0c8c82.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012

²⁹ Freedom House 2010, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 - Syria*, 3 March <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b99011dc.html>> Accessed 11 April 2012

³⁰ 'Amid chaos of uprising, crime wave hits Syria' 2012, *USA Today*, 25 March <<http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2012-03-24/syria-violence/53747466/1>> Accessed 18 April 2012

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