

World  
Watch  
Research

## Syria: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

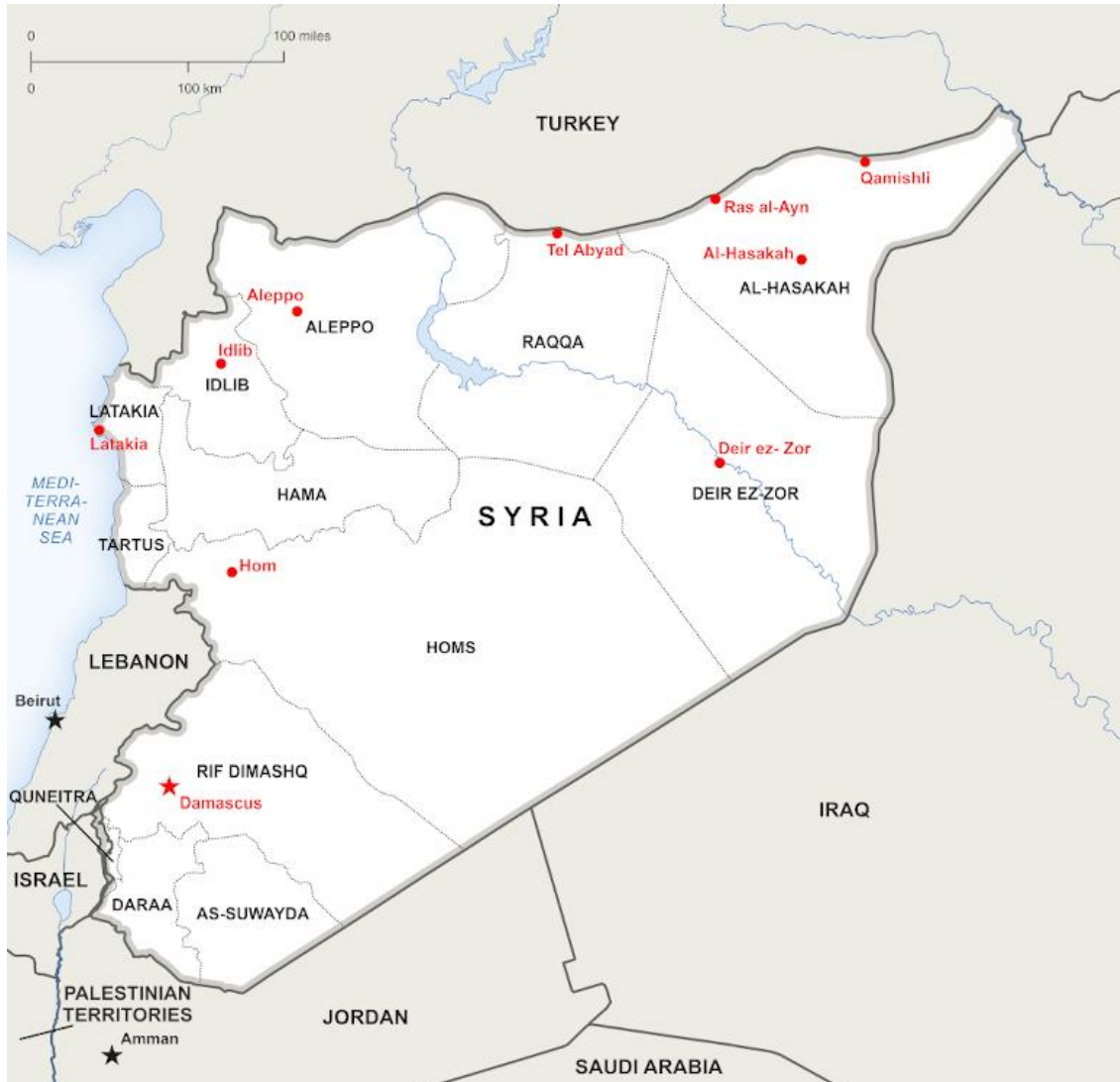
# WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Syria

## Brief country details

Syria: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
20,638,000	579,000	2.8

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

## Map of country



Syria: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	81	12
WWL 2023	80	12
WWL 2022	78	15
WWL 2021	81	12
WWL 2020	82	11

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Syria:	
Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Violent religious groups, Government officials, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Political parties
Islamic oppression	Violent religious groups, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Organized corruption and crime	Violent religious groups, Organized crime cartels or networks, Government officials
Christian denominational protectionism	Religious leaders of other churches, Political parties

*Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.*

### Brief description of the persecution situation

Due to their public visibility, the leaders of historical church communities are particularly targeted for attacks or kidnapping in areas where Islamic militants are active. Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are also in a vulnerable position because they are known for their more Western orientation, missionary drive, fragmentation, often lack of strong leadership, and lack of a foreign spokesman (e.g. a pope or bishop) to act on their behalf.

In areas controlled by radical Islamic groups, most of the church buildings belonging to the historical church communities have either been demolished or used as Islamic centers. Public expressions of Christian faith are prohibited and church buildings or monasteries cannot be repaired or restored, regardless of whether the damage was collateral or intentional. In government-controlled areas, there used to be less control over Christians because of the war conditions, but as the authorities have regained power, so has the control over potential dissidents and others who could harm social stability (such as converts from Islam to Christianity). The political reputation of Christian denominations, churches and local church leaders plays a significant role in the level of oppression they face from groups fighting against President Assad.

The attitude of the Syrian government towards churches is determined by the Christian community to which they belong. It is clear that government officials have one set of standards for dealing with historical churches and another for non-traditional church groups. That does not mean that the historical church communities are not under pressure from the authorities from time to time; they are, however, in a stronger position to defend and claim their rights. They occasionally use this position in an attempt to thwart the growth of non-traditional Christ-

ian communities.

Christians with a Muslim background are especially put under pressure by their families because their conversion brings them great dishonor. This is particularly true in most Sunni areas, where converts are at risk of being expelled from their family homes or worse. Family pressure is less intense in the Kurdish areas of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), as Kurdish Sunnis are generally less radical. Indeed, in the Governorate of Northern Aleppo there are even recognized Kurdish Christian communities, as well as in several major cities of north-eastern Syria. Converts from Islam can also legally change their religion in the Kurdish controlled areas. These favorable conditions have been threatened by the invasion of Turkish forces which began in October 2019; practically all of the improvements in religious freedom made by the Autonomous Administration have been reversed in areas now under Turkish control. In the Tal Tamr area of this region, Turkish-backed Islamist groups regularly launch artillery barrages and raids to capture the Assyrian Christian villages.

According to a June 2020 USCIRF hearing entitled '[Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria](#)', Turkish armed forces attacked, murdered, kidnapped, raped and detained Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians and Yezidis, and destroyed their religious sites. They also moved internally displaced Syrians (IDPs) - predominantly Sunni Arabs - from other parts of Syria to the homes of minority refugees in the north. This is causing a considerable demographic change which will prevent Christians and other minorities returning to their villages. In Afrin, Turkish-backed troops are reported to be targeting Kurdish Christians.

On 10 May 2022, another [USCIRF hearing was held on religious freedom in Syria](#). With regard to armed opposition forces and militant Islamist groups, it was stated that they "target vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities in their attempts to wrest power from the Assad regime and one another. The al-Qaeda offshoot Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continues to brutalize and displace religious minority communities in the northwestern region of Idlib, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has increased its presence in eastern Syria, waging almost daily attacks and destabilizing the region for religious minorities. Opposition groups leverage their Turkish financing and military support to wage campaigns of religious and ethnic cleansing in Afrin."

## Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Syria has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR)
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)
3. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (CAT)
4. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
5. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)



Syria is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian converts are ostracized by their family and community and pressured to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians in northern Syria are killed in violent attacks by revolutionary and paramilitary groups with an Islamist agenda (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christian converts are monitored by local officials upon request of their own families (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christians are denied custody rights of their children because of their faith (ICCPR Arts. 23 and 26)
- Christian female converts cannot marry Christian men and if they do, their marriage is considered illegal (CEDAW Art. 16)

### Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **Looting of churches and public Christian properties:** Churches and other Christian properties have been looted or broken into at least once a month in the coastal area. Elsewhere, on 22 June 2023, an unidentified group of people broke into the Assyrian Church of St. George in Qamishli (northeast Syria). They entered the church through a window and destroyed furniture and crosses and stole some valuable ornaments and icons.
- **Throughout the reporting period,** several Christians were arrested because of their Christian activities and involvement in mission work among Muslims.
- **August 2023:** On 13 August 2023, a Christian man was brutally killed by Muslim students who hit his head several times with a building block.

### Specific examples of positive developments

USCIRF 2023 Syria CPC:

- "The Kurdish-initiated, ethnically diverse, and multi-confessional administration continued to support pluralistic initiatives. In January [2022], the AANES [Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria] hosted the International Conference on Mesopotamian Religions and Beliefs, featuring representatives from a variety of religious and political institutions across the Middle East and North Africa and from numerous faiths and ethnic backgrounds."

### External Links - Situation in brief

- Brief description of the persecution situation: Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria - <https://www.uscifr.gov/events/uscifr-virtual-hearing-safeguarding-religious-freedom-northeast-syria>
- Brief description of the persecution situation: USCIRF hearing was held on religious freedom in Syria - <https://www.uscifr.gov/events/uscifr-hearing-freedom-religion-or-belief-syria>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

## WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Syria

### Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Syria report	AI Syria 2022	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/report-syria/">https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/report-syria/</a>	27 June 2023
BBC News Syria profile - updated 19 April 2023	BBC Syria profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703856">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703856</a>	27 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Syria Report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/SYR">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/SYR</a>	27 June 2023
CIA World Factbook Syria - updated 20 June 2023	World Factbook Syria	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria/</a>	27 June 2023
Crisis24 Syria report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Syria report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/syria">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/syria</a>	27 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Syria profile 2023	EIU Syria profile 2023	<a href="https://country.eiu.com/syria">https://country.eiu.com/syria</a>	27 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Syria	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	27 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Syria not included	Democracy Index 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Syria	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2023</a>	27 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries, Syria not included	Freedom on the Net 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores</a>	27 June 2023
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Syria profile	<a href="https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/syria/">https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/syria/</a>	27 June 2023
Girls Not Brides Syria report	Girls Not Brides Syria	<a href="https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/syria/">https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/syria/</a>	27 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 Syria country chapter	HRW 2023 Syria country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/syria">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/syria</a>	27 June 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Syria	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#sy">https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#sy</a>	27 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Syria	<a href="https://rfsf.org/en/syria">https://rfsf.org/en/syria</a>	27 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Syria	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/syria">https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/syria</a>	27 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Syria	UNDP HDR Syria	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/SYR">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/SYR</a>	27 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Syria	IRFR 2022 Syria	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/</a>	27 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 Syria report – 17 CPC / 11 SWL	USCIRF 2023 Syria CPC	<a href="https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Syria.pdf">https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Syria.pdf</a>	27 June 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Syria - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Syria	<a href="https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277c249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-syr.pdf">https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277c249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-syr.pdf</a>	27 June 2023
World Bank Syria data 2021	World Bank Syria data	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CcountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=SYR">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CcountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=SYR</a>	27 June 2023
World Bank Syria overview - updated 20 October 2022	World Bank Syria overview	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/overview#1">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/overview#1</a>	27 June 2023

### Recent history

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Syria gained independence in 1946, but it suffered from political instability and experienced multiple military coups. It briefly united with Egypt but later separated and re-established itself as the Syrian Arab Republic. The country lost the Golan Heights to Israel during the 1967 war, and stability came under Hafiz al-Assad's rule until his death in 2000, followed by his son Bashar al-Assad's presidency. In 2011, anti-government protests erupted, leading to a civil war fuelled by complex factors such as class conflict and repressed political liberty. The conflict attracted foreign fighters, including the establishment of the Islamic State's caliphate in 2014, but the group lost most of its territory due to intervention by the West and Russia.

In March 2018, approximately 25,000 Free Syrian Army fighters, including battle-hardened Islamists, joined Turkish regular troops and special forces to seize control of areas around Afrin, predominantly Kurdish territory, displacing Kurdish rebels who had been ruling the area. Reports indicated that jihadists allied with Turkey targeted religious minorities, including Christians, in the northwestern region and along the border. Currently, the majority of Syria is under government control, except for Idlib province, Western Aleppo province, the northern region of Hama province, and the northeast, which are controlled by Turkish forces, the Global Coalition, Islamist groups or Kurdish authorities.

Throughout 2019, fighting intensified in Syria. Jihadists took control of the strategically significant town of Idlib, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of civilians and the displacement of hundreds of thousands. IS continued to launch attacks on civilian targets in the northeast, even after losing its last stronghold in the east to Kurdish-led forces in March 2019. In October 2019, Turkey launched a military incursion into northern Syria following the withdrawal of US troops, causing further displacement, including 160 Christian families. Other developments in 2019 included the Syrian army retaking the semi-autonomous Kurdish Region, and a safety zone agreement between Turkey and Russia in the north of Syria.

Other major developments involved successful operations by government and Russian forces in capturing territory from rebels in Idlib province at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. A ceasefire agreement between Russia and Turkey was reached in March 2020 after escalating fighting in February, temporarily halting the regime's military advance towards Idlib city. The fragile treaty faced challenges due to jihadist attacks and Russian airstrikes in the northwest but remained intact.

In July 2020, President Bashar al-Assad emerged victorious in parliamentary elections, despite protests over the dire economic conditions. He further secured a fourth seven-year term by winning the presidential election in May 2021 with an overwhelming majority. However, the international community contested the election results. Meanwhile, the Sochi 2.0 ceasefire agreement in Idlib province faced challenges as jihadist groups, including Sunni Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), clashed with rival factions. IS militants conducted attacks primarily in the central desert but also in other parts of the country. Additionally, clashes occurred between government forces and former rebel groups, as well as between Kurdish forces and government-affiliated factions in the south-western and north-eastern regions. In September 2021, a deal was reached between government forces and rebels to end fighting in the southwest. Despite occasional violations, the March 2020 ceasefire in Idlib persisted. Israel continued to launch missile strikes, targeting Iranian-linked sites in Syria. IS staged a major attack on a Kurdish-run prison in Al-Hasakah in January 2022 to free its prisoners. Turkey initiated a new military campaign in February 2022, purportedly targeting Kurdish militants. Christian communities in the northeast faced Turkish attacks in October 2021 and in 2022. The northwest witnessed deadly clashes among opposition groups as HTS expanded its control beyond Idlib, prompting Turkish deployment and Russian airstrikes in Idlib.

In November 2022, Turkey intensified attacks against Kurdish-led forces, but hostilities eased in December 2022 as HTS raided regime positions and protests erupted in Suwayda. In January 2023, Turkey targeted both Kurdish and government forces, demonstrating a willingness to normalize ties. A devastating earthquake in February 2023 caused significant loss of life, leading the Syrian government to use international aid to break its isolation. In March 2023, hostilities between the Syrian regime and HTS resumed and tensions escalated between US-backed forces and Iran. In April 2023, Damascus intensified normalization efforts, HTS attacked government forces and IS launched attacks. Finally, in May 2023, the Arab League readmitted Syria after a 12-year suspension, marking an important diplomatic milestone. Moreover, Syria and Saudi Arabia announced the reopening of their diplomatic missions. The remainder of the year saw continued hostilities, drone attacks and IS insurgency in several regions of Syria, with significant clashes between HTS and the regime in the northwest. In addition, as of October 2023, there

was evidence of Israeli, US and Iranian-backed groups exchanging fire (as part of a wider reaction to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in Gaza). There were reports of Iranian forces moving fighters to Quneitra and Dara'a and multiple Israeli retaliatory attacks, as well as protests against the government in southern Syria due to deteriorating economic conditions.

## Political and legal landscape

The Economist Intelligence Unit classifies Syria as 'authoritarian' (EIU Syria profile 2023). Bashar al-Assad is fighting for control of his country. He inherited a tightly controlled and repressive political structure from long-time dictator Hafez al-Assad, with an inner circle dominated by members of the Assad family's minority Alawite Shia community. From 2011 onwards, the Syrian opposition became increasingly 'Islamized' and the civil war quickly took the form of a Sunni 'jihad' against the Syrian government. (The establishment of the IS caliphate in June 2014 further accelerated this development, although the group's last remaining territory in eastern Syria fell in March 2019.)

According to FFP's Fragile State Index (FSI 2023 Syria), Syria ranks fifth slightly down from 2022 when it was third. While the country is still very fragile in terms of stability, the situation has eased somewhat in the following areas: Public services, refugees and IDPs, economic inequality, group grievance, human rights. The high indicator scores for security apparatus, factionalized elites, human flight and brain drain, state legitimacy, demographic pressures and external intervention have hardly changed or have not changed. A slight deterioration is particularly visible for the economy indicator.

Fighting continues particularly in areas where government-held territory borders on areas controlled by rebel militias. Here Christians are caught in the crossfire between government troops and rebel forces. Throughout the civil war, Christians in Syria have suffered disproportionately from the fighting and the displacement this has caused. Their vulnerability in the current political power-struggle is due to such factors as:

- A lack of political and military power;
- Alleged connections with the West;
- Resentment against the Syrian Christians' perceived close connections with the Assad regime;
- Living in areas in which fighting between Syrian and Kurdish forces has been particularly intense (e.g. Afrin). Syrian Christians are facing an ongoing lack of safety, basic resources and employment to sustain livelihoods.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Syria):

- "The legal framework described in this section remains in force only in those areas controlled by the regime, and even in those areas, there is often a breakdown in law and order, leaving militias, often predominantly composed of a single religious group, in a dominant position. In other areas of the country, irregular "courts" and local "authorities" apply a variety of unofficial legal codes with diverse provisions relating to religious freedom."

- "The constitution declares the state shall respect all religions and shall ensure the freedom to perform religious rituals as long as these 'do not disturb public order'. There is no official state religion, although the constitution states 'Islam is the religion of the President of the republic'. The constitution states Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation."
- The constitution states, 'The personal status of religious communities shall be protected and respected' and 'Citizens shall be equal in rights and duties without discrimination among them on grounds of sex, origin, language, religion, or creed'. Citizens have the right to sue the government if they believe it violated their rights. Some personal status laws mirror sharia regardless of the religion of those involved in the case being decided."
- "The law restricts proselytizing and conversion. It prohibits Muslims from converting to other religions as contrary to sharia. The law recognizes conversion to Islam. The penal code prohibits causing tension between religious communities."

### Gender perspective

Syria ranked 169th out of 170 countries on Georgetown's 2021/22 Women, Peace and Security Index (GIWPS 2021 Syria), surpassed only by Afghanistan. It performed worst globally on organized violence and worst regionally on community safety for women. It is one of the countries with the most extensive legal discrimination against women. Legislation fails to protect victims from domestic violence, marital rape and so-called 'honor crimes.' Whilst Syria ratified the CEDAW convention in 2003, it maintained a reservation to [Article 16](#) (UNFPA, 2019, p.8), which provides for the elimination of discrimination against women as they enter or exit a marriage. While amendments to the Personal Status Laws in 2019 have been positive – for example by raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 and providing women with greater rights in relation to work, divorce and dowries – there are loopholes for men to commit violence towards women. For instance, provisions allow for the punishment of women for acts of 'disobedience' in relation to mobility restrictions (HRW 2023 Syria country chapter). Additionally, the amendments do not allow for a woman's right to refuse polygamy and pathways remain for girls to be entered into forced marriages by their guardian. Child marriage still persists in several rural provinces in Syria; 13% of girls in Syria are married before they turn 18 (Girls Not Brides Syria).

"Such marriages", an international [inquiry](#) by the United Nations Human Rights Council found "are frequently deployed as a coping mechanism to ameliorate financial hardship exacerbated by the conflict, as well as to protect daughters amid overcrowded living arrangements caused by destruction to homes and displacement and to mitigate reputational risks for family honor amid increased risks of sexual violence" (UNHRC, 12 June 2023, p.2).

## Religious landscape

Syria: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	579,000	2.8
Muslim	19,672,000	95.3
Hindu	1,900	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	100	0.0
Bahai	420	0.0
Atheist	15,300	0.1
Agnostic	369,000	1.8
Other	100	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Due to war and displacement, it is not possible to present a totally accurate representation of Syria’s current religious demography. The table above gives an overview using latest WCD estimates.

Syria is a Sunni-Muslim majority country, however there is a 13% Muslim minority made up of Alawi, Ismaili and Shia (according to the World Factbook Syria).

One of the main features of Syria’s Christian population is its complicated ethnic and religious identity. The geographical concentration of Christians in strategic areas has also been an important factor in their vulnerability: The areas around Aleppo and Damascus and the southern areas of the Homs governorate near the Lebanese border have been vital to both the government and the opposition’s war efforts. According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Syria): "Most Christians continue to live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, or in the Hasakah Governorate in the northeast of the country."

According to Middle East Concern (MEC country profile):

- "Syria’s Christian communities face multiple challenges within the context of the current conflict. In the majority of the country that is under government control, Christians enjoy reasonably good standing in society, though some restrictions apply to recognized Christian communities, especially to activities that could be construed as proselytism. The provision of enhanced powers to the Ministry of Religious Endowments in October 2018, ostensibly to prevent extremism and promote moderation, prompted some Christians leaders to ex-

press concern that the greater reach of Islamic authorities may threaten other faith groups."

- "Of those who have fled from government-controlled areas, including Christians, many have done so to avoid military conscription. A common assumption that Christians are pro-government (often correct, not least because of fear of alternatives) contributes to the tolerance in government areas but adds to Christians' vulnerability in areas controlled by opposition groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Few Christians remain in opposition-held areas, where violence has included attacks against Christians, Christian-owned property and church buildings. Mass displacement of Christians has not been reversed following the military defeat of [IS] in its strongholds of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour in late 2017, and five Christian leaders abducted by extremist groups in 2013 remain unaccounted for."
- "Within predominantly Kurdish areas, indigenous Christian communities have enjoyed reasonable accommodation, though some church leaders have expressed concern that aggressive assertion of Kurdish identity has at times marginalised or been coercive towards Christian communities."
- "In all areas there is strong family and societal pressure against those who choose to leave Islam, and in extreme cases these responses are violent. Those considered apostates can face sanctions in the Shari'a personal status courts such as forcible divorce and removal of child custody. Those who choose to leave Islam are especially vulnerable in opposition-controlled areas."

## Economic landscape

According to UNDP's Human Development Report Syria:

- **GNI per capita:** 4.192 USD
- **Poverty:** 90% of the population live below the international poverty line ([UN](#), 20 March 2023).
- **Unemployment:** 9.6% ([World Bank](#), modeled International Labor Organization estimate, 2022).
- **Employment rate:** This is low with 44.3% of the population over 15 years of age holding jobs ([CEIC](#), last accessed on 13 June 2023).

According to the World Bank's Syria overview:

- "The conflict in Syria has had a devastating social and economic impact, with deteriorating socioeconomic conditions influenced by various factors, including the prolonged armed conflict, economic sanctions, the COVID-19 pandemic, severe drought, economic crises in neighboring countries and the earthquakes of February 2023. The depreciation of the local currency has led to rampant inflation, pushing more people into poverty and eroding real wages. Access to essential services such as shelter, livelihood opportunities, health, education, water, and sanitation has significantly worsened. The healthcare system has suffered greatly, exacerbating the vulnerability of the population, while rising fuel and commodity prices have further strained vulnerable households. Syria now ranks among [the top ten most food insecure countries](#) globally, and the earthquakes of February are projected to cause a 5.5% contraction in real GDP, with an estimated impact of \$5.2 billion primarily affecting sectors like housing, transport, environment, and agriculture."

- "[T]he Syrian conflict broke down bilateral and transit trade routes, destabilized the region, and led to the largest displacement crisis since the Second World War."

Apart from the devaluation of the Syrian pound - which was exacerbated by US sanctions - the widespread poverty is due to unemployment and low wages. Like other Syrians, Christians suffer from the high rate of unemployment and are highly dependent on relief aid. The prices for food, basic needs and medical supplies are high due to increased distribution risks. Many of the Christians left in the country are poor and risk malnutrition. Christians are regarded by many as being wealthy supporters of Assad's government; this adds to their vulnerability, since as non-Muslims they are already part of a fragile minority.

### Gender perspective

According to the World Economic Forum's 2021 [Gender Gap Report](#), Syria has an economic gender gap of 28.5% (p.13) and a labor force participation gender gap of 80% (p.14). Female participation in parliament or ministerial roles is particularly low compared to other countries in the region (p.361). Although women and girls inherit less under Sharia-based [Personal Status laws](#), the Christian and Jewish communities are [exempt](#) from those laws and adhere to equal inheritance between female and male heirs (World Bank, Women, Business and the Law, 2022; UNHRC, 12 June 2023, p.19). Considering these economic vulnerabilities, women – including Christian women – depend heavily on their husbands and families. The devastating earthquakes of early 2023 displaced about 60% of the population in northwest Syria, the majority of them women and children – among whom are [thousands of women](#) who are now required to financially provide for their families (OCHA, 8 March 2023). Studies indicate that female-headed households are [twice as likely](#) to report a total inability to meet basic needs, living in contexts of "exceptional hardship", compared to male-headed households (UNHRC, 12 June 2023, p.2).

### Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Syria:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Arab ~50%, Alawite ~15%, Kurd ~10%, Levantine ~10%, other ~15% (includes Druze, Ismaili, Imami, Nusairi, Assyrian, Turkoman, Armenian)
- **Main languages:** Arabic (official), Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian, French, English
- **Urban population:** 57.4% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** Over 86.4% of the population aged 15 and over can read and write (female: 81%; male: 91.7%) (2015, most recent year).
- **Life expectancy:** 74.6 years (2023 est.).

According to the UNDP's Human Development Report Syria:

- **Education:** The expected years of schooling is 9.2 years, whereas the mean years of schooling is 5.1. 37.1 percent of adult women have reached at least a secondary level of education compared to 43.4 percent of their male counterparts.
- **IDPs/Refugees:** "Over 12 million Syrians remained forcibly displaced in the region, including almost 6.8 million within the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) and 5.4 million living as refugees



in neighboring countries, a slight decline from 5.7 million in 2021." (UNHCR, [Global Report 2022](#)) The earthquakes of February 2023 caused 89% of people displaced in northwest Syria to be displaced again by the conflict (Action For Humanity, [No Place But Displacement](#), 16 March 2023)

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Scoring 0.577, Syria ranks 150th out of 191 countries and falls in the category of 'medium human development' (2021, most recent year).

Syrian society is ethnically diverse and used to be characterized by the presence of a significant middle class. This middle class has diminished greatly, together with its cultural values and lifestyle. Daily life is now more dominated by survival concerns and the ongoing war has led to considerable emotional strain on society, leading to increased levels of fear, sleeplessness, depression, aggression in families and drug abuse. Christians in Syria have reported the breakdown of normal relationships within families and the need for trauma care and social support.

More than 2 million Syrian refugee children are out of school and an additional 1.6 million might drop out ([UNHCR](#), Syria Refugee Crisis, last accessed 15 June 2023).

According to the [UNICEF](#) report "Every Day Counts" published in March 2022:

- "[E]conomic turmoil and the COVID-19 pandemic have compounded mass displacement and destruction of schools, further jeopardizing children's education.."
- "A third of schools were non-functional according to the 2020 Humanitarian Needs Overview, with few schools functioning in north-east (NE) or NW Syria."
- Low rates of school rehabilitation will continue to deter access to schools and mean overcrowded classrooms for years to come negatively impacting school participation and learning outcomes."

The earthquakes and aftershocks of February 2023 further aggravated this situation. According to UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell, they "not only destroyed more homes, schools and places for children to play, they also shattered any sense of safety for so many of the most vulnerable children and families." ([UNICEF](#), 2 March 2023)

Children from Christian families are particularly vulnerable as many Christian schools have been closed or damaged and children have had to attend (Islamic) government schools.

### **Gender perspective**

Young people, especially males, are leaving the country. In consequence, the emerging age gap is contributing to the economic crisis. The young generation are leaving not only in the hope of finding better future prospects but also to avoid [mandatory military service](#) (World Population Review, accessed 14 June 2023). Christians in Syria report that in the church context the ratio of men/women may be more than 1:7. Syria has long been shaped by Islamic norms. However, according to an article by the [Financial Times](#) (25 January 2019), the gender imbalance created by the high loss of men in the civil war may have altered these established gender roles; 80% of those killed in the conflict were reportedly men. Millions of surviving men have fled the country,

fearful of forced conscription upon return. In light of this and the widespread poverty, women have increasingly taken over the role of financial provider and carer, however significant barriers to effective economic empowerment for women remain ([WILPF, 1 April 2022](#)). Christian females are also under pressure to find work and are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In more conservative Sunni areas, women are not usually given the opportunity to fill this gap in the workforce.

## Technological landscape

- **Internet usage:** 35.8% penetration rate - survey date: early 2023 ([Datareportal](#))
- **Facebook usage:** 83.7% penetration rate – survey date: May 2023 ([Statcounter](#), last accessed on 15 June 2023)

According to World Bank Syria data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 80 per 100 people (in 2021).

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2020](#) report (NB: Syria was not included in more recent Freedom on the Net reports), Syria ranked as one of the most most unfree countries in terms of the level of internet and digital media freedom.

Freedom House (Freedom in the World 2023 Syria) reports:

- "In April [2022], Syrian President Bashar al-Assad signed a new decree-law on cybercrime, imposing harsh penalties for online activity that undermines the 'prestige of the state' or 'national unity', among other vague provisions".

The telecommunications sector in Syria has paid a heavy price during the recent years of war and destruction. Telecommunications research site [BuddeComm](#) (last updated August 2023) sums the situation up as follows:

- "The years of civil war and destruction to infrastructure continue to have a toll on the telecoms sector in Syria. Although over the years the major mobile service providers Syriatel and MTN Syria have endeavored to restore and rebuild damaged networks, the operating environment has been difficult. Following disputed demands for back taxes, MTN Group in August 2021 exited the country, after its majority stake had been transferred to judicial guardianship. This effectively meant that the mobile market became a monopoly, with Syriatel as the only operator."
- "Telecommunication services in Syria are highly regulated. Although urban areas can make use of the network built and maintained by the government-owned incumbent Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE), many underserved remote areas in the countryside are obliged to rely on satellite communications. The domestic and international fixed-line markets in Syria remain the monopoly of the STE, despite several initiatives over the years aimed at liberalizing the market."
- "Mobile broadband penetration in Syria is still quite low, despite quite a high population coverage of 3G networks and some deployment of LTE infrastructure. This may provide potential opportunities for growth once infrastructure and economic reconstruction efforts make headway, and civil issues subside."

Finally, recent advances in technology that provide the authorities with new ways to track citizens have increased converts' fears of being discovered.

## Security situation

Syria is embroiled in a civil war that began in 2012, resulting in a dangerous security environment characterized by the indiscriminate use of weapons by both government and rebel groups. The government has received military support from Iran, Russia and Hezbollah, allowing them to regain control of lost territory, but conflicts between the government and insurgents persist. The opposition has received support from international backers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. Daily armed clashes occur in northern and south-western areas of Syria leading to high casualties, while urban centers face the threat of violent attacks by Islamic militants. The ongoing conflict has also led to increased crime rates, deteriorated health systems, and crackdowns on demonstrations, fueling anti-government sentiment (Source: Crisis 24 Syria report).

Fear among Christians has been at a high level over the last years, particularly caused by the threats, intimidation and kidnappings carried out by radical Islamic groups such as the al-Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the Ansar Brigade and the Al-Farouq battalions. Particularly in the northeast, a number of factors (combined with the Turkish invasion of northern Syria) have dealt a blow to Christian confidence in Deir ez Zaur, Al-Hasakah and Qamishli as well as the predominantly Christian villages on the border with Turkey: For instance, the reactivation of IS sleeper cells, church bombings, the murder of an Armenian priest together with his father in November 2019 and the 2022 [attack on a prison in Hasaka](#) (CNN, 21 January 2022) in which several IS militants broke out. The escalation of Turkish aggression and the potential for a large-scale invasion of the border areas make Christian communities feel extremely threatened since the areas are controlled by radical Islamic militias and Turkish authorities.

## Gender perspective

In this context of instability, violence and displacement, Christian men and women face ongoing pressure. One of the greatest threats for men is forced recruitment into the government army or defense forces. Several reports [reveal](#) accounts of "young boys reportedly forcibly removed from their mothers once they reach around 11 years old, never to be seen again" (Deutsche Welle, 11 September 2022). Men in particular face the threat of abduction and killing, particularly if they are in a position of church leadership. Women also risk abduction, as well as the threat of sexual harassment and rape. While the rate of instances has dropped since the re-taking of IS-dominated areas of Syria, this continues to happen in both government and rebel-held territories. According to Georgetown's 2021/22 Women, Peace and Security Index (GIWPS 2021 Syria), there remain extensive reports of conflict-related sexual violence. COVID-19 further exacerbated the security situation, exposing a '[shadow pandemic](#)' of violence against women (UN Women, 2 July 2020).

## Trends analysis

### **1) Syrian Christians are caught in the crossfire between warring parties**

The political climate continues to be fragile and external intervention remains extremely high as does the level of human rights violations. Fighting continues particularly in the northwest where government-held territory borders on areas controlled by rebel militias, as well as in the northeast between Turkish-backed forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces.

### **2) The economic situation in Syria remains very fragile**

The economic destruction caused by the years of conflict has significantly affected state institutions and their capacity to deliver services. The Syrian Pound (SYP) went through a major depreciation in the past years, which has negatively impacted the economic situation of the majority of Syrians. Moreover, the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis has made things worse. In the current unstable economic situation, Christians feel particularly vulnerable.

### **3) As security improves in government-controlled areas, so do the levels of control**

As the regime position is becoming more stable, security is improving in government-controlled areas. This also has a downside: Control on all civilians has reportedly increased, including on Christians - especially those from Muslim and non-traditional Christian backgrounds. Also, in the Kurdish areas of northern Syria where previously Christians (including converts from Islam) enjoyed comparative freedom, pressure on Christians has risen. This pressure is understood to result from a hardening Islamic climate among officials serving the Kurdish authorities.

### **4) Large-scale emigration has major consequences**

The departure of young men in particular has major social and economic consequences and has seriously affected the ratio of men/women in the country (and churches). In addition to the poverty and lack of (young) males available for work, Christian females are under pressure to find work and are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In more conservative Sunni areas, women are not usually given the opportunity to fill this gap in the workforce.

### **5) The future remains uncertain for Syrian Christians**

Despite IS's territorial defeat, the future remains uncertain for Christian communities in Syria. Apart from the fact that IS cells are still present and active, social cohesion between religious groups has diminished and there is a lack of trust. To heal this requires more than just military action. Moreover, according to in-country sources, Christians in the area occupied by Turkish armed forces feel that there is no future for Christian communities there because of Turkish aggression as well as the impact of Shiite militias. Examples include the water cuts and steady bombing by Turkey and its proxies in areas with significant Christian populations e.g., Al Hasakah and Khabour Valley, among others. The lack of water and unsanitary conditions led to outbreaks of dysentery, typhoid and other contagious diseases. Meanwhile, Turkey's Islamic allies built

dams in areas under their control, further reducing the flow of water from the Euphrates. As a result, millions of people are existentially threatened by the resulting drought, which seriously affects agricultural production, drinking water supply and the health of the population. These developments and the role of Shia militias (including kidnappings) continue to have a negative impact on the Christian community and lead to demographic changes in Christian villages and neighborhoods. In combination with the gloomy economic outlook, the motivation remains high - especially of young people - to leave Syria for good.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Political and legal landscape: Article 16 - [https://syria.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Syria%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English\\_1.pdf](https://syria.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Syria%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English_1.pdf)
- Political and legal landscape: inquiry - <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyria/policypapersieges29aywar/2023-06-12-Gendered-impact-women-girls-%20Syria.pdf>
- Economic landscape: UN - <https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/speech-together-people-t%C3%BCrkiye-and-syria>
- Economic landscape: World Bank - <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=SY>
- Economic landscape: CEIC - <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/syria/labour-force-participation-rate#:~:text=Key%20information%20about%20Syria%20Labour%20Force%20Participation%20Rate&text=Syria%20Labour%20Force%20Participation%20Rate%20is%20updated%20yearly%2C%20available%20from,an%20average%20rate%20of%2045.8%20%25%20>
- Economic landscape: e top ten most food insecure countries - <https://www.wfpusa.org/articles/global-food-crisis-10-countries-suffering-the-most-from-hunger/>
- Economic landscape: Gender Gap Report - [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf)
- Economic landscape: Personal Status laws - <https://wbl.worldbank.org/content/dam/documents/wbl/2022/snapshots/Syrian-arab-republic.pdf>
- Economic landscape: exempt - <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyria/policypapersieges29aywar/2023-06-12-Gendered-impact-women-girls-%20Syria.pdf>
- Economic landscape: thousands of women - <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/womens-voices-post-earthquake-syria>
- Economic landscape: twice as likely - <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyria/policypapersieges29aywar/2023-06-12-Gendered-impact-women-girls-%20Syria.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: Global Report 2022 - <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/syria-situation#:~:text=Over%2012%20million%20syrians%20remained,from%205.7%20million%20in%202021>
- Social and cultural landscape: No Place But Displacement - <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/no-place-displacement-report-multiple-displacement-idps-northwest-syria-due-12-years-conflict-and-february-6ths-earthquakes>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR - <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/syria/>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNICEF - <https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/16971/file/Education%20Strategic%20Shift%20Think%20Piece.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNICEF - <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/37-million-children-earthquake-affected-syria-face-catastrophic-combination-threats>
- Social and cultural landscape: mandatory military service - <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-with-mandatory-military-service#:~:text=Syria%20%E2%80%94%2018%20months%20for%20males%20aged%2018-42>
- Social and cultural landscape: Financial Times - <https://www.ft.com/content/14b8708c-1eeb-11e9-b2f7-97e4dbd3580d>
- Social and cultural landscape: WILPF, 1 April 2022 - <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/women-syria-s-economy-feminist-review-women-s-economic-empowerment>
- Technological landscape: Datareportal - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-syria>

- Technological landscape: Statcounter - <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/syrian-arab-republic>
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net 2020 - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-net/2020>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Syria-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses?r=51>
- Security situation: attack on a prison in Hasaka - <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/21/middleeast/isis-attack-prison-iraq-intl/index.html>
- Security situation: reveal - <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-camp-an-open-air-prison-for-children-msf-says/a-63672111>
- Security situation: shadow pandemic' - <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/op-ed-joint-women-at-the-centre-of-syria-crisis-response>

## WWL 2024: Church information / Syria

### Christian origins

The Church has been present in Syria since the time of the New Testament, where the conversion of Saul/Paul is mentioned on the road to Damascus (see Chapter 9 of the Book of Acts). The New Testament confirms that the Syrian cities of Damascus and Antioch had Christian communities. Christian faith spread fast and at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, 22 Syrian bishops were present. There was also persecution: Bishop Ignatius from Antioch (who died in 115 AD in Rome) is just one example of many Syrian martyrs.

The language of Christianity in Syria was Aramaic. Many Syrian Christians followed the [Jacobite form of Christianity](#) that was condemned as heretical at the Council of Chalcedon (451), but the 'Greek' Church also remained popular in Syria ("Jacobites - History and Cultural relations", last accessed 27 December 2023).

In the 7th century AD, Christianity was the majority religion in Syria. When Islam had gained a foothold, Caliph Omar dismissed Christian officials and his successor obliged all Christians to wear distinctive dress. One century later, Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi forced Arab Christians of the Tannukh tribe to convert to Islam. In Homs, Christians revolted in 855 and their leaders were crucified at the city gates. By the 9th century, Islam was gaining the upper hand, many churches had become mosques and, by about 900 AD, approximately half the Syrian population was Muslim.

In 1124 the Aleppo cathedral was made into a mosque. By 1350 Christianity had become a minority religion and out of a population of one million, only 100,000 were Christians. The fall of Constantinople and the Ottoman occupation of Syria were an obstacle to reuniting the Church in the 15th century. However, in the next century, the Orthodox, Jacobite and Armenian Christians were recognized by the Ottoman sultan as independent communities with their own courts and laws.

In 1516, the region became part of the Ottoman Empire and remained so until World War I (1914-1918), when Arab and British troops eventually defeated the Turkish rulers in the region. This ended a century of major persecution incidents targeting Christians. In [1860](#), 25,000 Christians were killed in Damascus in three days of pogroms (Rogan L E, Arabica, T. 51, Fasc. 4, October 2004). At that time, the first American protestant missionaries were working in Syria, with a focus on setting up schools, medical ministries and literature distribution. About half a

century later, beginning in 1915, vast numbers of Armenians fled (or were deported) to Syria in the course of the widespread massacres of approximately 1.5 million Armenian and half a million Assyrian Christians in Turkey.

In 1920, Syria became a French mandate. At that time it received its present name and borders (except for the Golan Heights). It became fully independent in 1946. Politically, the country has been marked by instability. One problem for Syria is that it is a patchwork of religious groups. Hafiz al-Assad ruled Syria from 1970-2000 with an iron fist, forcing it to become secular and modernizing the economy. In 2011 mass uprisings, demanding human rights and equality, led to a full-blown civil war with millions of Syrians - including Christians - fleeing as refugees to Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, North Africa and Europe.

Throughout the centuries, the Christian church in Syria has gone through – and is still going through – considerable levels of discrimination, intolerance and attacks. Due to years of persecution, forced conversion and emigration, Christians now make up less than 3% of the population.

## Church spectrum today

Syria: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	386,000	66.7
Catholic	168,000	29.0
Protestant	20,000	3.5
Independent	2,800	0.5
Unaffiliated	1,200	0.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>578,000</b>	<b>99.8</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	10,000	1.7
Renewalist movement	20,000	3.5

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. , World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox.  
**Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Most of Syria's Christians belong to historical churches (mainly Orthodox and Catholic, plus some traditional Protestant congregations). In areas of Syria controlled by the Assad regime, these communities have generally enjoyed reasonable standing, though they have been affected by the ongoing conflict and economic hardship as much as anyone else. Within some areas controlled by opposition groups (in particular, areas controlled by radical Islamic groups as well as Turkish forces), these communities have been significantly affected; many Christians left such areas in previous WWL reporting periods. There are non-traditional Christian communities in various parts of Syria, particularly in regime-held territory and in Kurdish areas. Within regime-held areas, there is also some pressure from the historical churches on the non-traditional communities. Converts with an Islamic or Druze background are found in most parts of the country, perhaps with particular concentrations in Kurdish areas, Druze areas and also among some IDP communities in regime-held areas. In almost all cases, converts are vulnerable to pressure from family or community (the pressure exerted is likely to be greater in Arab Sunni areas). In opposition-held areas in particular, there would be significant vulnerability to radical Islamic groups should the faith of converts become known.

### Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Christians are particularly under pressure in the last bastions of control by radical Islamic groups in Idlib province in the northwest and in Hasakah province in the northeast, where IS and Turkish military and Turkey-supported opposition forces (TSOs - which include radical Islamic groups) have attacked civilian and church targets. TSOs are operating openly across the northern part of the country (including Hasakah and Qamishli). In October 2019, Turkey invaded northern Syria and created a so-called "safe zone" along the Syrian-Turkish border, where it uses Arab Islamic fighters to control predominantly Kurdish and Christian areas. While historical Christian communities and - to a lesser extent - non-traditional Christian communities enjoy a relative degree of freedom in the rest of the country, pressure on converts exists in the entire country and their situation is particularly dangerous in the northwest and northeast.

### Christian communities and how they are affected

Three of the four WWL categories of Christianity exist in Syria and are affected by violations (mostly related to the civil war).

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation. This category is therefore not scored in WWL analysis.

**Historical Christian communities:** These are mostly Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. As the largest type of Christianity in the country, Christians from historical Christian communities are specifically targeted. They are spread over the entire country and are also present in conflict zones. Several hundred Christian families live in Idlib province - which is controlled by international jihadist groups - where they are threatened with death and attacks and therefore hide their faith. The attacks by Turkey and TSOs have driven out many of these Christians from their homes in the northwest, north and northeast.

The leaders of historical churches are most affected, due to their public visibility. They are recognizable by their clothing which sometimes makes them a target. Historical Christian communities also tend to be more recognizable in society than other types of Christianity, for



instance by very visible church buildings and their members are socio-economically more connected to the state apparatus. The political reputation of denominations, churches and local church leaders plays an important role in the level of oppression they face from groups that are fighting President Assad. It is thus decisive how churches and Christians aligned themselves politically in the past – i.e. whether they were supportive of Assad, tried to stay neutral, distanced themselves from him or even opposed him.

**Converts to Christianity:** Christians from a Muslim or Druze background are especially put under pressure by their family, as it brings great dishonor to them if a family member leaves their religion. This is particularly true in majority Sunni areas, where converts risk being banned from their family homes or worse. In a reaction to the increased radicalization of Islam, opposition from family and society towards converts from a Muslim background has increased particularly within rebel-controlled areas. Pressure from the family is relatively less intense in Kurdish areas (with the exception of desert areas where there is more tribal influence and Islam is more conservative), as Kurdish Sunnis tend to be less radical in general.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are in a vulnerable position as they are known for their Western orientation, fragmentation, lack of strong leadership and lack of a foreign spokesperson (e.g. like a pope or bishop) who can speak on their behalf. Most of the non-traditional Christian communities lack full, official recognition and legal status. There are non-traditional Christian communities in various parts of Syria, particularly in regime-held territory and in Kurdish areas. Those in areas held by Islamist opposition groups are most vulnerable to violence. Within regime-held areas, there is some pressure from Historical churches too. Non-traditional Christian communities are known for their outreach activities and are not allowed to engage in activities outside of churches. Because of their evangelistic activities they are specifically targeted by the Islamic militant groups, but also by the government that wants to maintain stability at all costs.

## External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: Jacobite form of Christianity - <https://www.everyculture.com/Africa-Middle-East/Jacobites-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html>
- Christian origins: 1860 - <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27667683>

# WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Syria

## Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

## Position on the World Watch List

Syria: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	81	12
WWL 2023	80	12
WWL 2022	78	15
WWL 2021	81	12
WWL 2020	82	11

Syria rose one point from 80 points in WWL 2023 to a score of 81 points. Syria's rise in score was due to very slight increases in pressure in all 5 Spheres of life. More information became known about the situation in the Kurdish areas where there was more pressure reported than previously. In addition, it became known that also in areas under government control, Christians stood trial on false accusations with their added vulnerability as a religious minority playing an important role.

## Persecution engines

Syria: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Very weak
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Medium
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Very weak
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Strong

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.*

### **Islamic oppression (Very Strong)**

*Islamic oppression* is the major Persecution engine in Syria and accounts for most of the atrocities and violations committed against Christians. Militants belonging to radical Islamic groups such as al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and Jaish al-Islam as well as members of Turkish-sponsored opposition groups (TSOs), are currently the main drivers of this engine in Syria. They are operating openly in the northwest of Syria and across the northern part of the country (including Hasakah and Qamishli).

Christians used to have a relatively large amount of religious freedom in pre-civil war Syria. This changed with the arrival of militant Islamic groups. IS set up its caliphate covering large parts of Syria and Iraq at the end of June 2014 and a strict version of Sharia law was implemented. The IS-caliphate was finally eliminated in March 2019. However, the threat of revenge actions by IS still exists as the group continues to conduct sophisticated attacks in large parts of Syria. From 2020 onwards, IS militants have been able to reorganize themselves in the deserts of Syria and Iraq.

Turkish military operations (which started in 2016) led to the occupation of territory in northern, north-western Aleppo Governorate, Idlib and - since October 2019 - the so-called "safe zone" in northern Syria along the Syrian-Turkish border. Rebels, among them hardline Islamist groups, were driven north to areas near the Turkish border. Turkey is using radical Islamic Arab fighters to control Kurdish areas.

*Islamic oppression* is also present in government-controlled areas, affecting mostly converts from Islam to Christianity where pressure is exerted by the converts' family and community. Slight pressure is also exerted on indigenous Christians; for instance, during Ramadan in 2019, posters appeared in Christian neighborhoods in Aleppo urging Christian women to veil themselves. In addition one of the main sources for Syria's legislation is Sharia law which makes it impossible for a Muslim to convert to another religion.

### **Dictatorial paranoia (Very Strong)**

In present-day Syria, this engine is predominantly driven by armed groups that control parts of Syria and are willing to use any means to stay in power. This includes TSOs through which President Erdogan apparently aims to restore the past glories of the Ottoman Sultanate. Since October 2019, Turkey and TSOs have several times cut off the water supply to Kurdish and Christian minorities in Hassakeh, as well as the surrounding rural areas inhabited by more than a million people, to force them into submission. Especially during the COVID-19 crisis, water was of vital importance.

From the side of the Syrian government, *Dictatorial paranoia* is mostly evident in the behavior of government officials who monitor churches, for instance, by checking sermons for political content. At the height of the civil war this was less prevalent, but now that President Assad has tightened his grip on government-controlled territory, more monitoring is being reported again. Also, the authorities discourage conversion from Islam to Christianity or to any other religion, as conversions are seen as possibly harming stability in society and causing community conflict. The main objective for the government is to secure social stability rather than protect religious

minorities (including Christians). The government mostly acts against religious groups (Christians included) if they are considered a threat to the status quo either by the authorities or any other local entity. Evangelization or church-work focusing on contact with Muslims could be regarded as such a threat.

### **Clan oppression (Strong)**

Tribalism is characterized by loyalty to one's own tribe or family and the age-old norms and values they embody. As in many countries of the Middle East, tribalism in Syria is very much mixed with Islam and especially affects Christians with a Muslim background. The strength and existence of this engine varies per region and size of cities. Tribalism is especially strong in the Kurdish areas in the north and in the desert areas in central Syria as well as in the southern part of the country.

In the southern regions such as Daraa, Sueda and the surrounding countryside, there are many Druze communities. When a Druze decides to follow Christ, the family usually opposes this decision because it is felt to be a threat to their national security, as an ethnic and religious minority. For many Druze, the control of family, values and heritage are of greater importance than the laws of the state. Compliance with family rules is therefore very important.

### **Organized corruption and crime (Strong)**

Corruption has become part of Syrian daily life. Indeed, on Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions index (CPI 2022) Syria is listed at rank 178/180 and is thus one of the most corrupt countries in the world. In Syria, *Organized corruption and crime* takes place in the civil war situation of impunity and anarchy. Corruption is widespread and also affects access to food and health care. For example, people who have connections or financial means are 'more entitled' to receive medical care and are put higher in the priority list. The majority of employees in government clinics are Muslims, they will give priority to followers of the same faith. For instance, a Christian woman (together with some non-Christian friends) requested medicine at a local clinic in the coastal area. She was given a limited amount, but her friends received everything they asked for. Corruption is a means for self-enrichment; an example is kidnap for ransom, which Syrians of various religious backgrounds have experienced. Behind the kidnapping of Christians there are financial, political and ideological motives. Christians have a reputation for being wealthy and for supporting the regime. Being part of a vulnerable non-Muslim minority also plays a role in their abduction, as Christians do not have political power or connections with high authorities and are therefore a 'soft target'.

*Organized corruption and crime* is especially prevalent in areas occupied by Turkish military and Islamic militant groups as well as in the Druze-dominated areas in the south where gangs and armed groups are active and in areas with a high percentage of Alawites. In the first two mentioned areas, there is no or hardly any government influence. A clear example of this engine could be seen in the seizure of hundreds of Christian-owned houses and businesses by radical Islamic fighters in northwest and northeast Syria between October 2019 and January 2020. However, areas dominated by Alawites are not exempt either: In Latakia, the kidnapping of young Christians has become a major concern for Christian families. Latakia is often considered to be one of the quiet areas, relatively isolated from armed conflict. Some Christians accuse se-

curity officers of being involved in these crimes as a way to gain money.

In general, increasing poverty and challenging economic conditions resulting from the COVID-19 measures, have caused crime (including robberies) to rise dramatically. During the period of lockdown and the resulting absence of state control, corruption also rose in the form of inflated prices.

### Christian denominational protectionism (Medium)

As a result of the Syrian crisis, there were many bridges built between historical church communities and non-traditional groups. These bridges were mostly built through personal interaction between priests and pastors. However, senior leadership in several historical churches resist building any bridges with non-traditional churches. They have accused some non-traditional Christians of betraying their nation by linking up with Western political agendas, thus making them suspect in the eyes of the authorities.

In recent years, the Orthodox Church has received increased government support due to its connections with Russia. This has increased its influence on state decisions regarding the evangelical community (for instance, in the areas of official approval for staging conferences or for the construction of buildings belonging to the Evangelical church). This has meant that Evangelicals have not been given security clearances to conduct activities outside of their church facilities. In addition, there have been accounts of many senior historical church leaders officially and unofficially not recognizing Christians from a Muslim background.

## Drivers of persecution

Syria: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	VERY WEAK	-	STRONG	MEDIUM	VERY WEAK	-	VERY STRONG	STRONG
Government officials	Strong	Very weak	-	Weak	-	-	-	Strong	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	Weak	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	Weak	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Weak	Medium	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	Strong
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

(continued on next page)

Syria: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	VERY WEAK	-	STRONG	MEDIUM	VERY WEAK	-	VERY STRONG	STRONG
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	Medium	-	Medium	Very weak	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	Very strong	-	Strong	Weak	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Weak	-	-	-	Medium	Very weak	-	Medium	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	Weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Drivers of Islamic oppression

- **Violent religious groups (Very strong) and Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Medium):** Some opposition groups are more Islamist than others. Among the various revolutionary and paramilitary groups, those with the more radical agendas pose the greatest threat to Christians and other minority groups (including Muslims considered to be heretical). These mostly Salafist groups have all contributed to the violence against Christians and other minorities, most prominently (but not exclusively) IS, Free Syrian Army (FSA) and al-Qaeda affiliate *Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham* (HTS). There are dozens of jihadist group remnants that have been incorporated into the ranks of the Turkish National Army under control of the Turkish government. They continue to pose an extreme threat to Christian life in northern Syria, in particular.
- **Government officials (Strong):** Security officers may regularly come to church not only to check that the sermons are not political but also to ask the pastors if there are new visitors, to make sure the church is not evangelizing or converting Muslims. Furthermore, government officials are enforcing the law which states that leaving Islam is illegal. Several converts have been imprisoned for this reason.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** In the areas controlled by Islamist opposition factions, Islamic leaders have typically pursued a policy of marginalizing Christians and other minorities or of forcing them to flee to other areas. It is, however, often difficult to distinguish between 'religious leaders' and leaders of 'violent religious groups'. Footage on

social media showed Turkish sheikhs praying for Turkish soldiers to conquer the Kurdish area and bring it back to Islam, whatever the cost. Also in government-controlled areas, hate-speech against Christians by Islamic leaders occurs; however, this is not allowed and in some cases has led to the withdrawal of licenses to preach in mosques. Muslim religious leaders are also known to put pressure on converts directly or indirectly through their families or security agencies.

- **Extended family (Very strong), Ethnic leaders and Normal citizens (Strong):** As in other Middle Eastern countries, converting from Islam to Christianity comes with massive pressure from family, tribe and society as whole. Family hostility is the main source of pressure faced by Christians from a Muslim background. A significant aspect of this pressure is the fear of provoking violent reactions from immediate or extended family. Ethnic leaders that are drivers of Islamic oppression are mostly tribal leaders.

#### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Violent religious groups (Very strong) and Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Strong):** Dictatorial paranoia as a persecution engine in present day Syria is predominantly driven by armed groups that control parts of Syria and are willing to use any means to stay in power, including Turkish backed militants. Islamic militant groups have taken over many Christian-owned properties. Elderly Christians who remained in their homes are in constant fear of being killed or kidnapped by militants in order to take over their houses as well. In north-eastern Syria, the Kurdish authorities have also tried to take over many houses belonging to Christians who left the country. Also in government-held areas, armed groups have attempted to take over church-owned property, such as the monastery in Aleppo.
- **Government officials (Medium):** President Assad emphasizes his regime's commitment to pluralism and inter-faith tolerance and has a positive attitude especially towards traditional Christian communities. As is common in situations of conflict, those in authority in Syria are using control tactics to maintain power. Sunni officials in local authorities are particularly watchful of all religious groups and are known to restrict the activities of evangelical Christians and converts in order to prevent societal instability. Methods of control can include interrogation and monitoring and are sometimes instigated by a convert's family or even by leaders of Historical church communities. Finally, there are claims that Christian soldiers within the Syrian Army are given more dangerous duties than non-Christians and that Christian civil servants have received inferior treatment compared to others.
- **Political Parties (Medium):** Leaders of political parties publicly underline the importance of unity between the different religious groups in Syria, but in practice there is discrimination against Christians. For example, if there is a vacancy for a position in the party, an Alawite would be hired even if a Christian is more qualified. As political parties strive to build an alliance with the Muslim majority, they will compromise at the expense of the Christian minority. On the political front, Christians have little influence; they do not threaten the existence of the ruling party and do not have sufficient connections.

#### Drivers of Clan oppression

- **Extended family, Ethnic leaders and Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Family, tribe, ethnic group and non-Christian religious leaders have put pressure on converts from Islam

to Christianity. For instance a sheikh can permit the execution of a convert and other non-Muslims, they can give permission for Muslims to take their properties, their belongings and even their women. These drivers are especially strong in the Kurdish areas in the north and in the desert areas in central Syria. Also, Assyrian communities report being marginalized at the hands of overly-assertive Kurdish local administrators.

- **Normal citizens (Medium):** Changing one's religion to Christianity is considered a betrayal of the values of the community and leads to great opposition, when discovered. Ethnicity and religion are intertwined and the same dynamics are active here as listed under *Islamic oppression*.

#### **Drivers of Organized corruption and crime**

- **Violent religious groups (Strong), Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium); government officials (Medium):** Christians have been targeted for kidnappings by criminal networks, including IS, although this has now become sporadic. Whilst there may be a religious aspect behind kidnapping, the usual driving factor for the gangs and criminals involved is money - and Christians are perceived as being wealthy. The country is rife with corruption and bribery is part of daily life whenever a Syrian needs to deal with the authorities. For instance, if you want to pass a military checkpoint you might have to pay bribes or face serious intimidation. Government officials are reportedly also putting pressure on bishops to allow them to take some of the emergency aid to support their families. This is just one way the corrupt officials affect the Church.

Converts from a Druze background are also faced with the threat of abduction and robbery by Druze militant groups. Also here, there is a financial and a religious motive; these Christians are additionally vulnerable since they lack protection from militias or local authorities. Lack of security is a major concern for Christians living in the areas controlled by the regime. Many Syrians believe the regime is responsible for this, as a number of common criminals were released in a general amnesty in 2011 who were subsequently recruited into the regime's militias. Even in Latakia, which is regarded as a relatively safe area, the kidnapping of young Christians has become a major concern for Christian families. Furthermore, Alawite armed groups have been making attempts to take over several monasteries.

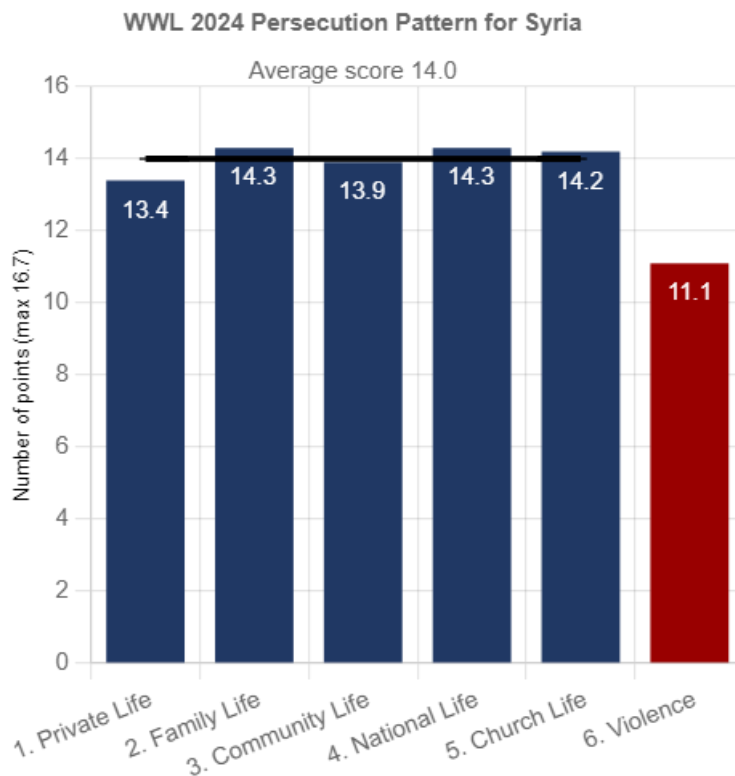
#### **Drivers of Christian denominational protectionism**

- **Religious leaders of other churches (Medium):** In 2020, the patriarchs of the Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches managed to get the government to ban all Evangelicals (including those with a Muslim background) from organizing outside activities. Another example is the attempt by Syriac Orthodox church leaders to prevent the construction of an Evangelical church in the northeast. These church leaders have been teaching their congregations that Evangelicals are i) not Christians, ii) that their churches are not real churches, and iii) that they should be treated as heretics.



- **Political parties (Medium):** This mainly concerns nominal Christians who are part of the Baath Party or the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. They promote atheist values and deny the existence of God and the value of Biblical stories, especially those from the Old Testament. They have a strong influence on the younger generation because the Church has not been giving adequate answers to their questions about the Christian faith. In addition, they reject Evangelicals because they are seen as being part of a larger conspiracy and ideology related to the West. They have a strong influence on the community to isolate Evangelicals.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Syria shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* is at an extremely high level, scoring 14.0 points, just 0.2 point more than in WWL 2023.
- Pressure in four *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level: the *Family* (14.3), *National* (14.3 points), *Church* (14.2) and *Community spheres* (13.9). In the *Private* (13.4) *sphere of life* pressure was very high. This is typical for a situation in which *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia* are the main persecution engines.
- Pressure from *Islamic oppression* is present mostly in the *Private, Family, Community and Church spheres* and is exerted by the social environment.
- The score for violence slightly decreased from the extremely high score of 11.3 points in WWL 2023 to the very high score of 11.1 points in WWL2024. The drop was due to a lower number of Christians murdered (1 vs. 3) and kidnapped (2 vs. 5). On the other hand, there were higher scores for Christians who were detained, convicted and forced to marry – the latter due to the availability of more reports.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).*

### Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

#### **Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.50 points)**

According to state law, Muslims are prohibited from converting to other religions as this is contrary to Islamic law. Therefore, the government and other religious groups strongly discourage conversion, although it is not criminalized. In areas held by Islamist opposition groups, such as Idlib province, which is currently held by HTS militants, conversion from Islam is generally punishable by death. In areas controlled by Kurdish authorities, Muslims are legally permitted to convert to Christianity but they will face societal and public pressure. Most pressure on converts comes from their families.

#### **Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.50 points)**

In all regions of Syria, Christians from a Muslim background are vulnerable to negative backlash if they publicly identify as Christian for example by displaying symbols. However, in areas controlled by Islamist opposition factions, the risks are even greater since their lives are at stake. This is also risky for Christians from historical or non-traditional communities in these restricted areas: in some cases churches have been desecrated and crosses removed earlier in the conflict. Most Christians fled these areas before the WWL 2024 reporting period and the fear of being targeted by their identification as Christian is one of the factors contributing to Christians' refusal to return to such areas.

In areas controlled by the regime, the display of Christian images or symbols by indigenous Christians generally does not lead to pressure - with the exception of Muslim neighborhoods, where for Christians living there or passing through, it is risky to display Christian symbols and objects. For example, in most neighborhoods of Aleppo, Christians usually cannot wear a cross without risking getting into trouble with the local Muslim community.

#### **Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.50 points)**

Christians generally tend not to discuss their faith with members of other religious groups. In the past, the fragile peace between the different groups was maintained by avoiding anything that could be considered offensive or attempts to evangelize. Christian converts from Islam will especially fear for their safety when discussing their faith with (external) relatives and others, as they have brought shame to the family with their conversion. As the main source of pressure comes from family and community, most local believers from non-Christian backgrounds exercise extreme caution when discussing matters of faith with family and community members.

In areas occupied by radical Islamic groups, resistance would of course be greater and any form of alleged evangelism could lead to death, especially if it involved converts.

**Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (3.25 points)**

This poses a particular risk to Christians from Muslim/Druze backgrounds who come from conservative families. As the main source of pressure comes from family and community, most converts are extremely cautious when discussing issues of faith with family members and members of the community. This applies to all areas in Syria, especially Sunni areas. In areas occupied by radical Islamic groups, apostasy can even carry the death penalty.

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

**Block 2.6: Christian couples have been hindered in adopting children or serving as foster parents because of their faith. (3.75 points)**

Syrian law prohibits adoption for all residents regardless of their religion based on the provisions of Islamic Sharia. An exception has been made for Catholics and Syrian Orthodox men, who are legally only allowed to adopt children from their own religious community. This means that all Christian denominations are hindered in adopting: Catholics and Syrian Orthodox cannot adopt babies from another Christian denomination, let alone babies with a Muslim background (i.e. the majority). For the other Christian denominations, they cannot adopt children, regardless of the faith background of the baby's family. This situation is particularly poignant as the number of orphans has increased sharply since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011 due to militarization and social shifts, such as complex marriage patterns (e.g. relationships with IS fighters) and other conflict-related factors, such as forced displacement.

**Block 2.12: Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases. (3.75 points)**

In cases in which a Muslim spouse divorces a Christian convert or an indigenous Christian (though this is more rare), custody rights are usually given to the Muslim party. Some Christian mothers will convert to Islam just to keep her children with her. According to the law, in the event of a divorce, children remain with their mother until they are 8 years old, regardless of their religion. In practice, in a mixed marriage where one parent is Christian and the other Muslim or Druze, the non-Christian parent will take the children. If one of the two parents is Muslim, the children are Muslim by law. According to the law and under normal circumstances, the children stay with the mother until they are 15, at which time the father can request custody of the children. But if the father is Muslim and the mother is not, then he can apply and take the children when they are 8. If the father is a Christian, he will have to wait until they are 15 and then submit a custody request.

**Block 2.1: Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion. (3.50 points)**

The children of Syrian Christians from a Muslim background would automatically be registered as Muslim, because their parents cannot officially change their religion. The Autonomous Ad-

ministration of North and East Syria (AANES) is a rare exception in this regard: It is the only place in the country (as well as in most other countries in the region) allowing Muslims to legally change their religion. However, as the documents issued by the AANES authorities are not recognized elsewhere they ultimately must register their children under the regime system which does not recognize conversion from Islam to Christianity. Therefore, while the possibility of registering as a Christian with the AANES is a positive gesture, in practice, it has little significance.

**Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.50 points)**

As a result of increased Islamic education in government-held areas, children of Christians are experiencing more pressure. Also, many children coming from areas controlled by radical Islamic groups are emotionally charged against what they called infidels: Alawites, Christians and Kurds. Children of converts are considered Muslims and are very likely to be harassed and discriminated against if the faith of their parents is known. Christians from all backgrounds are susceptible to discrimination in areas held by radical Islamic opposition groups.

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

**Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (4.00 points)**

Monitoring takes place in the entire country, especially for Christians known to have a Muslim background and for Christians from non-traditional church groups. Also, all sermons are monitored and controlled. It is very probable that, in all areas, informal monitoring is routinely carried out for all Christian communities by the controlling authorities, often using community informers. The situation is especially serious in areas held by radical Islamic opposition groups.

**Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)**

This applies to converts whose faith becomes known, and potentially to indigenous Christians - especially in opposition-controlled areas. In government-held areas, sectarianism is officially banned and Christians can hold top ranks in the military and state apparatus. However, Alawites, members of Syria's governing sect, hold dominant positions in the army and other security services disproportionate to their numbers. Some Christians are also represented in Kurdish-held territories. More general economic pressure is exerted in much of Syria through means of unemployment. In Aleppo, where Sunni Muslims control the market, they often do not employ Christians. Discrimination against Christians from a Druze background also occurs in majority Druze areas in southern Syria.

**Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.50 points)**

This pressure applies, throughout Syria, especially to children of Christian converts - particularly in relation to access to Christian education. (Under the state system, religious instruction is pro-

vided according to confessional affiliation and converts are considered Muslim.). Children from historical or non-traditional Christian communities face discrimination, bullying and physical harm in public schools and universities, with reports of lower grades and serious provocation. Alawites enjoy educational benefits, while Christians are often marginalized: Discrimination extends to scholarships, where Christians are usually denied opportunities, and even qualified individuals are given limited opportunities compared to Alawites. The government's prioritization of Muslims and the challenges Christians face in exams deliberately scheduled during the Christmas period contribute to a hostile environment. In northeast Syria, the Kurdish-led autonomous administration warned Christian schools to stop teaching the Syrian government curriculum and implement the Kurdish curriculum instead, with the threat of closure if they refused. Christians fear that such threats will lead to more Christians leaving and will affect the Christian existence in the area, although no schools were closed after the deadline passed. In Idlib province, Christians are heavily discriminated against in all levels of education. All universities controlled by HTS also hold classes on radical Islamic teaching with the aim of indoctrinating the upcoming generation of Muslims. Christians are excluded by default.

**Block 3.11: Christians have been hindered in the operation of their businesses for faith-related reasons (e.g. access to loans, subsidies, government contracts, client boycotts). (3.50 points)**

The situation is most serious in Idlib province in north-western Syria, which is under the control of *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS). HTS considers Christian property, including their homes and shops, to be spoils of war according to the US State Department ([IRFR 2020](#)). Since 2015, the HTS has allegedly seized all Christian property in the city of Idlib and other major cities in the governate. In the Syrian government-controlled area, Christians are disadvantaged, including in running their businesses. For example, a Christian owner's factory was closed due to his faith: According to in-country sources, if he had been a Muslim or Alewite, this would have been solved with bribes. If a convert from Islam wanted to start a business and his faith is unknown, then everything would go smoothly. If his faith were known he would not even think of doing this, fearing lack of cooperation by the local authorities or worse. If a convert does run a business, it would surely be boycotted by customers if his Christian faith became publicly known. Christians without a convert background can only run a business with massive government interference, in which discrimination and favoritism play a major role. Boycotts by customers can also bother them. Christians usually buy from Christians and Muslims from Muslims, but this affects Christians to a greater extent because their numbers are smaller.

**Block 3: Additional information**

Community life is extremely limited for all categories of Christians in areas controlled by Islamic militants. If their faith is known, it is problematic for converts in the entire country. In areas controlled by Islamic militants all citizens (including Christians) have to abide by the Islamic dress code. Christians are also forced to pay protection money and to keep commercial and dietary regulations, including a ban on alcohol.

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

### **Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (4.00 points)**

As it relates to the expression of religious views and beliefs, this area of pressure applies to indigenous Christians living in territory occupied by opposition forces (especially where these are radical Islamic groups), and to Christians from a Muslim background throughout the country. All Christians understand the need to avoid deliberately provocative statements, especially statements that are critical of the government or Islam or could be construed as proselytizing. Christians are very aware that they are in a vulnerable position without anyone to protect them or advocate for them. This makes them choose their words carefully.

### **Block 4.16: International monitoring has been hindered when Christians had to stand trial. (4.00 points)**

In general, Christians are unlikely to face trial in government-controlled areas for faith-related reasons, as they are usually considered supporters of the regime. However, in the WWL 2024 reporting period, it became clear that Christians were being tried on the basis of false accusations and that their vulnerability also played a role. International monitoring is not possible from the West as the Syrian government does not allow this due to poor relations. Also in areas occupied by radical Islamic groups (e.g., HTS sets up Sharia courts), it is very unlikely that international supervision would be allowed if Christians were to be tried.

### **Block 4.3: Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience, e.g. regarding military service or in certain professions. (3.75 points)**

In government-held areas, all males between 18 and 42 years of age have to serve in the armed forces or face imprisonment and forced conscription. This is among the factors making Christian refugees reluctant to return to Syria. It is an issue which is not specific to Christians, although some claim that Christians and other minorities are especially vulnerable in the army. Within opposition-held areas there may also be a general pressure to join defense forces or other militias. For instance, the World Council of Arameans expressed concern in January 2018 about the exploitation of Christians by the YPG Kurdish forces in Kurdish areas of northern Syria.

### **Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.75 points)**

Since the law prohibits political parties based on religion, there are no Christian political parties in the Syrian parliament. There are Christian, Druze and Kurdish members of parliament. Within the wider conflict situation, Christian civil society organizations have faced constraints and challenges - often politically motivated (based on actual or perceived ties to warring factions). Christians cannot establish independent Christian civil society organizations as everything must be done in agreement and alignment with the government, which heavily controls all civil society and political activity. In areas controlled by radical Islamic rebels, the establishment of Christian political parties or civil society organizations is impossible due to a strict application of Sharia law.

#### **Block 4: Additional information**

Due to the fractured state of the country, impunity and inequality have increased. In government-controlled areas, Christians are generally not discriminated against in national life. However, they may encounter glass ceilings in the public sector. Evangelism and conversion from Islam are prohibited and converts can be subjected to discrimination, if their faith is known. In areas controlled by radical Islamic elements, all non-Muslims (including Christians) are treated as second-class citizens.

### **Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere**

#### **Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.75 points)**

This area of pressure applies primarily in opposition-held areas controlled by radical Islamic groups, in which most (if not all) churches have ceased to function or have been desecrated over the course of the ongoing conflict. Within government-controlled areas, there is understood to be a routine monitoring of church activities, ostensibly for the protection of churches. However such 'protection' could be used against churches if provocative messages or activities were detected. Most pressure is on church groups of converts, though the pressure is less in Kurdish areas, with the exception of the zone currently occupied by Turkish forces.

#### **Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.75 points)**

From the onset of the crisis in Syria, all gatherings (including church services) have been monitored and church leaders are expected to call on their congregations to support the Assad regime. Most church leaders accept the fact that there is some routine surveillance of activities on church premises, including sermons and teaching. They effectively exercise self-censorship by avoiding provocative or inflammatory messaging, for example about evangelizing Muslims or speaking about Islam in a derogatory way. Also, the Ministry of Islamic Endowment was empowered to approve Christian books that can be sold publicly. This ministry, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, supervises the curriculum for Christian schools in Syria as well. Finally, there is no space for any sort of public Christian teaching in areas controlled by radical Islamic elements.

#### **Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.75 points)**

The Syrian government actively tries to suppress any form of dissent, regardless of the sectarian and social background of the person(s) expressing it. Since there is no freedom of expression, Christian leaders are particularly vulnerable to being accused of political dissent. When speaking in public, people are warned not to discuss religion or politics and most leaders tend to avoid such topics to provoke further pressure and any potential violence. Church leaders are therefore unlikely to speak out publicly against discrimination and acts of persecution by the authorities. For the small Christian communities living in areas of northern Syria controlled by radical Islamic opposition groups backed by Turkey, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, speaking out would be no-

thing short of dangerous.

**Block 5.14: Openly selling or distributing Bibles (or other Christian materials) has been hindered. (3.50 points)**

Despite there being no specific law against the production and distribution of religious literature or other types of media, the government has reportedly used penal code provisions (e.g. to avoid anyone "causing tension between religious communities") to prevent the distribution of religious material by groups it sees as a threat. The regime considers conversion to Christianity and all related activities as a potential threat to public order and since public distribution of Christian materials is considered evangelism, it is not allowed. This can only be done in Christian facilities such as monasteries, special shops and churches, with the exception of areas in northern Syria controlled by radical Islamic opposition groups supported by Turkey, including *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*, where this type of activity is completely prohibited since it is regarded as being a form of missionary work. Converts across the country are at risk of being killed if they become known as Christians, as such it is extremely dangerous for them to publicly distribute Christian materials.

**Block 5: Additional information**

In areas controlled by radical Islamic groups most churches have either been demolished or are used as Islamic centers. Public expressions of Christian faith are prohibited and church buildings or monasteries cannot be repaired, irrespective of whether the damage was collateral or intentional. In the entire country, marriages of Christians with a Muslim background are impossible and as such illegal.

## Violence

*Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:*

**1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced**

*Possible reasons for this may be:*

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

**2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons**

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage*



*is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*

- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

### 3. The use of symbolic numbers

- *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10\* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100\* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000\* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

Syria: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	1	3
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	17	10 *
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	10 *	7
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	1	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	2	5
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	500	10 *
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	10 *	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	50	10 *

*(continued on next page)*

Syria: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100 *
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100 *
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	50	100 *
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	100 *	10 *

**Disclaimer:** In the chaotic circumstances of war it is often not clear whether incidents are religiously motivated or not. Incidents, where Christians were harmed or Christian-owned property was damaged in fighting between government and rebel forces which could be considered 'collateral damage', were generally not included. Motives for attacks are mixed and can include various power mechanisms. However, this does not necessarily rule out anti-Christian motivation. For WWL analysis, cases have only been included i) where it was clear to perpetrators in advance that Christian civilians would be affected (e.g. where a majority Christian town was attacked); and ii) where the local Christian community believed that those responsible were acting out of specific anti-Christian motivation through their adherence to anti-Christian ideology (for instance HTS, IS or other violent Islamic militants).

Since elements within the Turkish Armed Forces and their allies in the Syrian opposition follow Islamist agendas that are hostile not only to Kurds but also to communities that are not Sunni Muslims (as well as Turkish President Erdogan citing Islamic motives for the Turkish military operations), attacks on Christians by these actors are included in the scoring. In WWL 2024, Turkish supported forces continued their attacks on northern Syria at the end of 2022, also targeting Christian majority towns such as Tal Tawil and Tal Tamir. However, it was unclear if and to what extent churches and other Christian-owned buildings were damaged as a result of these attacks.

- **Christians killed:** See above - *Specific examples of violations.*
- **Looting of churches and public Christian properties:** See above - *Specific examples of violations.*
- **Christians arrested:** See above - *Specific examples of violations.*
- **Christians attacked:** Dozens of Christians were reportedly physically and mentally abused, including Christian children. In particular converts reported being tortured or threatened with death.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked, Christians forced to leave their homes:** During the WWL 2024 reporting period, a total of at least 100 Christian homes were seized or looted in Aleppo, Hassaka and Christian villages in the South without legal prosecution or other consequences for the perpetrators. Christians are usually unarmed, which makes them easy

targets. After the February 2023 earthquake, a new wave of emigration among Christian families occurred due to the perceived hostility and insecurity of living among the Sunni Muslim population. The declining Christian population, increased vulnerability, and job discrimination have prompted many to leave the country. Additionally, family members of at least 40 converts to Christianity from Islam were compelled to leave the country for reasons directly related to their Christian faith.

## 5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

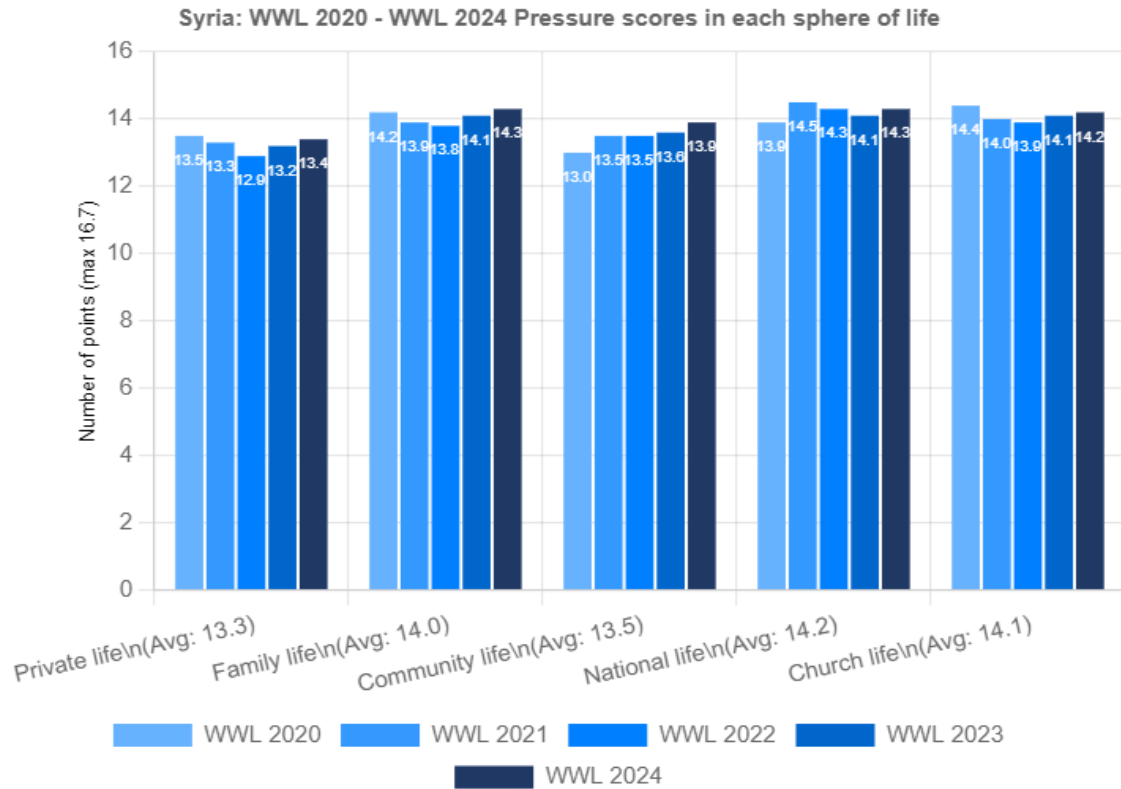
### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Syria: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	14.0
2023	13.8
2022	13.7
2021	13.8
2020	13.8

The table above shows how the average pressure on Christians has been stable at the very high/extremely high range 13.7-14.0 points during the past five years.

### 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

As can be seen in the chart below, until WWL 2022 the trend for virtually all *spheres of life* was generally a decrease in the pressure scores. This decrease reflected the shrinking of IS-held territory and of areas held by other radical Islamic groups as well as the processing of the relatively more favorable situation for Christians in the northeast. However, starting from the WWL 2023 reporting period, scores for all *spheres of life* except the *National sphere* began to increase again; this trend continued in the WWL 2024 reporting period.



### 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



As can be seen in the chart above, the rise in violence to extreme levels in WWL 2019 - WWL 2021 mainly reflected violent acts (including killings) perpetrated by Islamic militants, Turkish forces and TSOs, and the confiscation of property in areas where large numbers of Christians live(d) - especially in the northwest, north and northeast of the country. In WWL 2023 the score of violence again reached extreme levels mostly due to killings and abduction of Christians as well as attacks on churches and other Christian buildings. The WWL 2024 violence score is just 0.2 points lower, mostly due to a slightly lower number of Christians killed (1 vs. 3 in WWL 2023).

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions; Discrimination/harassment via education; Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Denied custody of children; Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse; Forced divorce; Forced marriage; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Abduction; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Targeted Seduction; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Enforced religious dress code; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

After years of ongoing violence, peace remains elusive in Syria. More than half of the population have been internally displaced or have fled the country, and sexual violence remains an ongoing issue of concern ([UN News, 9 March 2022](#)). Human Rights Watch have reported generally on the prevalent risk of sexual violence, including and beyond women and girls ([HRW 2021, Syria country chapter](#)). In a context of instability and restrictions on religious freedom, women and girls risk abduction, sexual harassment and rape. Whilst the rate of instances has dropped dramatically since IS dominated areas of Syria, this still remains a risk in government-controlled areas and in rebel-held territory – though the threat is higher in the latter.

Although there are also some reports of sexual violence against men and boys, women remain more vulnerable to such violent acts. A country expert explains that “there are hardly any safe spaces for women and girls”, they are at risk of sexual violence and harassment at checkpoints, workplaces and on public transportation including buses and taxis. Women are also afraid to report sexual assault to the police for fear of further sexual abuse. An expert shares that “it is also imposed on her to remain silent if she was subjected to any assault because if the matter is known, it affects the honor of the family and the female will be punished and bears the disgraceful consequences, and not the perpetrator.”

Christian women and girls regularly experience acts of discrimination in the public sphere. For example, if a Muslim supermarket owner sees a woman in a Hijab and another who is wearing

a cross, she could keep the Christian waiting and potentially even raise the price for her. Women have also reported being spat at in the street and discriminated against in the workplace. A country expert explains: “Christian women are more vulnerable to persecution in Islamist-held areas ... they have to completely cover themselves and disappear from the public space for fear of violence.” Some have even been seduced deliberately in an attempt to convert them to Islam.

For female converts, violence can come from their own families and communities, particularly those from a Muslim background. Such pressure affects women and girl converts most, then younger men and lastly older men, reflecting the levels of status and freedom generally within Islamic culture. Leaving Islam is a great taboo and seriously violates family honor. They may face domestic abuse, forced marriage to a Muslim, or even be killed to restore the honor of the family.

Female Christian converts married to a Muslim risk divorce, particularly if their conversion becomes known to in-laws. In this instance, they would also be denied custody over their children since Sharia law dictates that rights are given to the Muslim parent. Christian women married to male Christians of Muslim background also face challenges, as the law considers them to still be Muslim. It can be extremely difficult for them to raise their children as Christians, and should the husband die, the Christian wife would be entitled to no inheritance unless she converted to Islam. According to Sharia law, a Muslim woman is not allowed to legally marry a Christian man (vice versa is possible). This makes a marriage between a female Christian of Muslim background and a man from other categories of Christian communities legally impossible.

As women are typically economically dependent, they are more likely to fall into poverty following persecution. A country expert explains: “Women have to rely on their fathers/husbands for financial security. If anything happens to them, they are much more prone to poverty.” Christian widows, for example, often rely on support from their local church for survival.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Abduction; Forced to flee town/country; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

In light of the ongoing violence and proxy conflicts, a common fear among indigenous Christians – and among many other Syrian communities – is that young men will be forcibly conscripted into the Syrian Army or to other military factions, such as the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party referred to as People's Protection Units or YPG (Global Conflict Tracker, last accessed 15 November 2022). In Syria, there is enforced military service for all men at the age of 18; those wishing to be exempt must pay a hefty fine, prompting many men to consider emigration. While not only Christians are targeted in this way, there are often fewer consequences for perpetrators who recruit Christians in this manner when compared with other groups. Service in the armed forces can prevent men from working, or even from starting a family and Christian men face further discrimination: One country expert points out that converts from Islam to Christianity “may be subject to mistreatment or hazardous assignments. To cope, many [such] soldiers conceal their faith ... they are unable to read the Bible in public or pray as a Christian.”

The second major challenge facing Christian men is discrimination in the workplace. Unemployed Christians have immense difficulties obtaining a job, and employed Christians stand little chance of being promoted. Muslims are always given priority. An expert shares that this form of persecution “pushes men to leave the country and flee to a better place where they feel safe and where they can secure a good job, based on their qualifications and not just ... on their religion or denomination.” In Syria's traditional society, males are the main providers and support their families financially. If they lose their jobs, the whole family may have to rely on external financial support to survive. Male converts from Islam face additional forms of freedom of religion violations, as they may be bullied more in the workplace and denied work opportunities if their faith is known. They may further be threatened by their family or expelled from the home.

The threat of abduction of male church leaders continues to have a considerable negative impact on Christian communities. There are numerous Christian leaders that Islamists have kidnapped during the war for political or financial reasons, several of whom have not been found or rescued yet. Christian leaders of Historical church communities are most at risk for these kinds of attacks, as they are recognizable to extremists by their dress. There have been several examples of many others in a community leaving once a leader emigrates, which shows the impact such leaders can have on their churches and towns.

Male converts from a Muslim background also come under strong pressure to marry a Muslim woman. It is additionally difficult for him to marry a woman from a Christian background as he is registered as a Muslim; Christian women would be unwilling to enter such a marriage as their children would automatically be likewise registered as Muslims.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

Traditionally, Syrian society has been composed of a diverse range of ethnic and religious communities. Many other religious minorities face severe violations of freedom of religion in Syria, for instance: Shia, Alewite, Druze, Jews, Yezidis and Zaradashtis. Shia, Alewite and Druze communities have been marginalized, persecuted and discriminated against by Sunni jihadists, not only on the grounds of their faith being considered heretical, but in the case of the Alewites,

also because of their perceived connections with the respective Assad presidents. The government also uses or exacerbates tensions between religious groups to cement its position of power. An example of this is the government's release of detained Sunni Muslims during Ramadan [2022] which angered its Alawi Muslim base, while simultaneously maintaining a significant number of individuals in arbitrary detention.

### **Alewites**

As reported by the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Syria):

- "The Alawite minority continued to hold an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers, particularly in leadership positions in the military, security, and intelligence services. ... Reports also stated that the authorities used sectarianism, including the politicization of religion, as a 'survival strategy'. NGOs continued to report that Iran used its influence, as well as the dire economic situation in Syria and financial incentives, to encourage Sunnis to convert to Shia Islam or to join Iran-affiliated militias."

### **Sunni Muslims**

The religious majority, Sunni Muslims, also suffer human rights violations perpetrated by the government, with the support of its Russian and Iranian allies, because they are seen as adversaries. Of those who died in government custody, most were Sunni Muslims. Furthermore, Iran is said to be using its influence, financial incentives and the dire economic situation in Syria to encourage Sunnis to become Shiites and/or join Iranian militias.

As reported by the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Syria):

- "The SNHR [Syrian Network for Human Rights] documented at least 1,282 attacks on mosques in the country between March 2011 and September [2022], attributing 914 attacks to the regime (71 percent) and 204 (16 percent) attacks to Russian forces."
- "According to the SNHR, from March 2011 to June 2022, at least 14,685 persons died from torture, with 98 percent of the deaths attributed to regime forces. Regime forces were reportedly responsible for at least 115 deaths by torture during the year. As was the case with others who previously died in regime custody, most were Sunni Muslims, whom analysts stated the regime targeted believing they were members of the opposition or likely to support the opposition."
- "The regime continued to use a law that allows for the creation of redevelopment zones designated for reconstruction, as well as property confiscations, to reward those loyal to the regime and to create obstacles for refugees and IDPs who wished to reclaim their property or return to their homes; in line with the demographics of the country, this move affected the majority Sunni population more frequently than other groups. "

### **Druze, Yezidi and Jewish communities**

Particularly the Druze communities (but also Shia and Alawites), have faced abductions, bombings and killings by IS militants. As part of Syria's anti-Zionist narrative, Jews have been marginalized for most of modern Syria's history. Yezidis and Zaradashtis belong to Kurdish religions which are not recognized by the Syrian regime. Their children are registered as Sunni



Muslims and they learn Islam in school. Presumably their situation was harder before the civil war, since Kurdish forces are now taking control of their areas which gives them more freedom.

#### **a) The Druze community**

As reported by the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Syria):

- "According to analysis by the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Affairs (WINEP), Suweida and its surrounding area, inhabited by a 90-percent majority Druze population with a small Christian presence and a few nomadic Sunni Bedouin Arab tribes, has been 'stuck between the hammer of the regime's violence and the anvil of growing sectarianism and worsening living conditions'. WINEP reported that the local community has faced 'incidents of kidnapping, theft, looting, and murder'."

According to USCIRF 2023 Syria CPC:

- "At least 53 kidnapping cases in Druze-majority villages of Idlib Governorate took place between January and August 2022: 23 by HTS, 16 by ISIS, and 14 by other Islamist organizations. Druze in Idlib have expressed concern that despite HTS's public overtures to them, the militant group cannot or will not bring to justice foreign-origin Islamist fighters who target the Druze for violence, as in the case of the murder of an elderly couple in August [2022]."

#### **b) The Yezidi community**

As reported by the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Syria):

- "The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI), human rights groups, and media organizations reported they had reasonable grounds to believe some Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups (TSOs) committed abuses, including torture, rape, looting, and appropriating private property, particularly in Kurdish and Yezidi areas and in and around Afrin. A press report stated that TSOs had wholly or partially desecrated or destroyed 18 of the 19 Yezidi shrines and sanctuaries in northern Syria and had imposed Islam on Yezidi children. Human rights organizations and documentation-gathering groups reported that Yezidis and other residents, particularly in Kurdish areas, were often victims of TSO abuses."
- "In July, a local media outlet reported that according to the Afrin Yazidi Union, only 2,000 Yezidis remained in Afrin, out of the reported 35,000 who lived in the area in 2014 and 50-60,000 before 2011. According to press reports and NGOs, in Afrin, Yezidi women reported to have been kidnapped by TSOs remained missing."

According to USCIRF 2023 Syria CPC:

- "In June [2022], TSOs desecrated Yazidi graves, and in December, on a Yazidi holy day, the Faylaq al-Sham faction vandalized a cemetery near Afrin."
- "The SDF continues to rescue genocide survivors still enslaved within ISIS fighter cells, but in 2022, at least 2,763 Yazidi women and girls kidnapped from Iraq were still missing, many potentially hidden within northeast Syrian camps detaining ISIS fighters and their families."

### c) The Jewish community

As reported by the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Syria):

- "Before the civil war, there were small Jewish populations in Aleppo and Damascus, but in 2020, the *Jewish Chronicle* reported that there were no known Jews still living in the country". However, according to a Jerusalem Post article of 22 September 2022, [four Jews still remained in the country](#).
- "Antisemitic literature reportedly remained available for purchase at low prices throughout the country. Regime-controlled radio and television programming reportedly continued to disseminate antisemitic news articles and cartoons."

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### Islamic oppression

The territorial defeat of IS in March 2019 brought liberation to the affected areas, but the presence of the Persecution engine *Islamic oppression* remains strong, with IS and other jihadist components continuing their attacks in Syria and beyond. According to Crisis24 Syria report (Garda World), "there is an extreme threat from terrorism in most major urban centers." The strict Islamic law imposed by militants in Afrin hinders the return of Christians, while the accelerated return of refugees and IDPs from Lebanon could force Christians to return to areas under the control of Islamic militants where they are vulnerable.

The Turkish invasion of northeast Syria has raised concerns among Christian leaders, as elements within Turkey's forces and their allies pursue Islamist agendas hostile to non-Sunni communities. Land theft, population shifts, and the spread of radical Islamic ideas pose significant challenges for Christians, while Iranian militias actively recruit and spread Shia ideology. According to Christians in the country, there has been an increase in the number of radical Islamic madrassas, leading to a wider spread of radical Islamic ideas and discrimination against religious minorities. The presence of armed mercenary groups and the increasing military forces of Iran and Turkey have heightened tensions and increased the risk of attacks against Christians. The future remains uncertain, and there are concerns about the potential for further persecution and a further decline of the Christian population in Syria.

In addition, Sunnis and Alawites are moving into Christian villages and building mosques before buying houses as a sign of marking their newly conquered territories as a result of Christian immigration, which will greatly influence the religious makeup of previously predominantly Christian areas.

Finally, there are reports of a continued growth in the number of converts from Islam to Christianity, which could lead to an increase in the violations against Christians of an Islamic background. The current repression has forced Kurdish Christians in the area to go underground. A collapse of Russia's involvement in Syria could lead to a vacuum giving increased opportunity for radical Islamic activity to expand, further endangering Syrian Christians.

### **Dictatorial paranoia**

The most important drivers of the engine *Dictatorial paranoia* are currently the armed opposition groups, the Turkish forces in areas under their control as well as the Syrian authorities. With most radical Islamic groups either defeated or pushed into Syria's northwest, the Syrian government has vowed to liberate the strategic north-western town of Idlib. The Turkish forces are also driven by the aim to expand and maintain their power in both the northwest and the northeast of Syria. Christians still living in these areas will no doubt be heavily affected by the fighting. With Russian and Iranian support, President Bashar al-Assad controls much of Syria.

Demonstrations are met with security force crackdowns, which have fueled anti-government sentiment among targeted populations. Despite ongoing demonstrations calling for the departure of President Bashar Al-Assad - particularly in southern Syria due to deteriorating economic conditions - the Economist in its country forecast does not expect a regime change in the coming years. Moreover, it seems that the regime is gaining legitimacy in the region: Syria was readmitted to the Arab League in May 2023. The Syrian government is an autocratic system that has an aggressive and pervasive internal security service. The greater the grip the regime has in the area it controls, the greater its influence on the ground, including monitoring. Like all of the population that lives in Syrian government-controlled areas, Christians are heavily monitored by these security services, especially converts to Christianity, but also communities of non-traditional Christians. The impact of this persecution engine is not expected to diminish in the near future.

### **Clan oppression**

The tribal and ethnic identity of rural Syria is an important factor used by the various national and international powers involved in the civil war. As a result, the different tribes have become very fragmented and have even developed into competing clans, which can force people to rely on their own specific tribe even more. In such circumstances, tribal values - mostly based on Islam - offer security and become increasingly important. In the Kurdish areas, ethnicity is an important factor in the struggle between the Turks and the Kurds. Turkish forces took over the north-western and mostly Kurdish areas around Afrin in March 2018, reportedly using Sunni jihadist groups to "[eliminate the presence](#) of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities along its border" (Religious Liberty Prayer Bulletin 447, 21 March 2018). These religious minorities include Christians, most of whom are Armenian and Assyrian. A similar approach would seem to be in operation in the Turkish invasion and occupation of part of north-eastern Syria since October 2019. This strengthening of the Persecution engine *Clan oppression* affects all Christians in the areas mentioned and will certainly not lessen the pressure families and communities exert on converts - a situation which is not expected to change for the better in the short term especially as the number of converts is reportedly increasing.

### **Organized corruption and crime**

Sanctions on Syrian government-controlled areas, where many Christians live, are also exacerbating challenges for Syrian Christians since the deteriorating economic situation enhances the power of criminal networks.

The Crisis24 Syria report (Garda World) states:

- "Crime rates are also currently high due to the ongoing conflict. Reports of thefts, armed robberies, carjackings and house break-ins have increased as security forces are redeployed to fight insurgents. Kidnapping is a serious threat; abductions can be for financial or political gain and are carried out by both criminal organizations and terrorist groups."

Syrian government-backed militia groups that have involvement with criminal networks are a challenge to Christians who live in government-controlled areas. There are anecdotal reports that impoverished Christian youth are being recruited by these government-backed criminal groups/militias as gunmen and drug runners. The influence of *Organized corruption and crime* is unlikely to diminish in the future and Christians feel that they are being targeted as the weakest party, partly due to their dwindling numbers.

### **Christian denominational protectionism**

This engine has grown slowly but surely in recent years. As mentioned above, Russia's increased influence in Syria has strengthened the position of the Orthodox Church in its dealings with the government. Its position has also been used to the detriment of non-traditional Christian communities. At the moment there are no indications that this influence will decrease any time soon.

## **External Links - Persecution Dynamics**

- Block 3.11: Christians have been hindered in the operation of their businesses for faith-related reasons (e.g. access to loans, subsidies, government contracts, client boycotts). (3.50 points): IRFR 2020 - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/240282-SYRIA-2020-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: (UN News, 9 March 2022). - <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113592>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: HRW 2021, Syria country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/syria>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: four Jews still remained in the country - <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/article-717885>
- Future outlook: "eliminate the presence" - <http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com/2018/03/turkey-in-syria-afrin-falls-christians.html>

## **Further useful reports**

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Syria>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.