

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

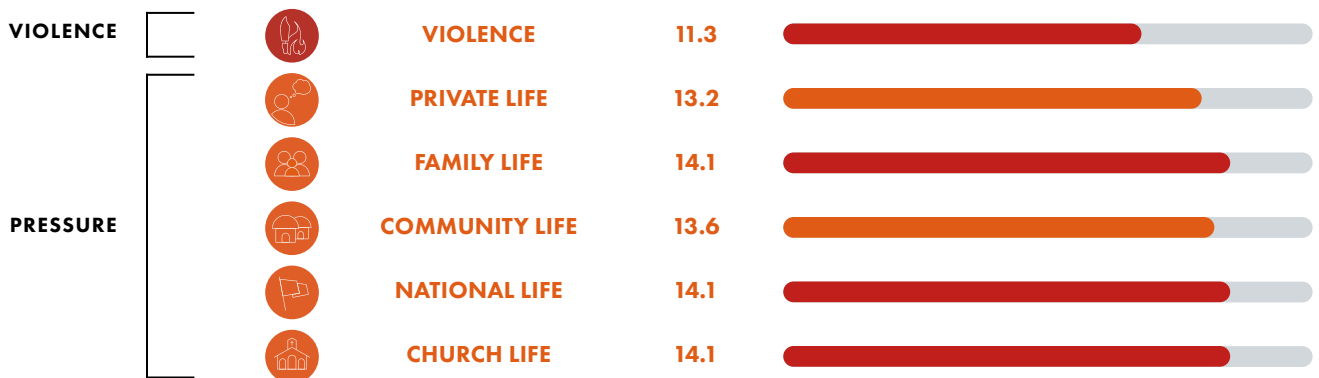
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
12

Syria



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Leaders of historical churches are physically identifiable and have been targeted for attacks, abduction, or death in areas where Islamic militants are active. Their churches have been either demolished or turned into Islamic centers by Islamic groups and other violent Islamist groups. Evangelical church leaders are also vulnerable since they are seen as Western-oriented, proselytizing and fragmented, lacking guidance from a strong leader with political influence, such as a pope or bishop. In government-controlled areas, there used to be less monitoring of Christians (during the early years of the civil war). As the authorities regain power, control of possible dissidents has increased. The government mostly tolerates historical churches. Christians from a Muslim or Druze background are put under pressure by

their families and communities, as conversion brings great dishonor to them. This is particularly true in majority-Sunni areas, where converts risk being attacked or expelled from family homes. Since the Turkish invasion in October 2019, Turkish forces have [attacked, raped, abducted and murdered](#) Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians and Yazidis. They are also moving Sunni Arab internally displaced people (IDPs) from other parts of Syria into the homes of minority refugees in the north, causing demographic change. Religious minority communities in the north-west region of Idlib have been displaced due to continued brutal attacks by the al-Qaeda offshoot Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Eastern Syria has an increased presence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) who carry out regular attacks, almost on a daily basis.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Bashar al-Assad

POPULATION

19,365,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

603,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Authoritarian Presidential Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	603,000	3.1
Muslims	18,390,000	95.0
Agnostics	353,000	1.8
Atheists	15,500	0.1

Source²

Syria is classed as [authoritarian](#). President Bashar al-Assad took over power from his father in 2000. 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 government resorted to military force, which was met with armed opposition. The battle attracted foreign jihadist fighters, including the Islamic State (IS), which established its caliphate in June 2014. The majority of the country is now under government

control except for the Idlib Province, Western Aleppo Province, the northern region of Hama Province and the north-east. These areas are currently controlled by Turkish forces, the [Global Coalition](#), Islamist groups or Kurdish authorities. In January 2019, jihadists took control of Idlib. IS has continued attacking civilian targets in the north-east. Around 160 Christian families were displaced due to the Turkish-led incursion into north Syria in October 2019. A [ceasefire](#) was agreed between Russia and Turkey in March 2020 which halted the regime's military advance towards Idlib city, although this was strained by jihadist attacks as well as by Russian airstrikes in the north-west in the subsequent months. In July 2020, President Bashar al-Assad won [parliamentary elections](#) in spite of protests against the severe economic conditions. Assad also won the presidential election in May 2021 by an overwhelming majority.

Syria is a Sunni-Muslim majority country, however

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

there is an estimated 13% Muslim minority made up of Alawi, Ismaili and Shia. There is no official state religion, though the Constitution states that the president must be Muslim and that Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation. Christians enjoy [reasonably good standing](#) in government-controlled areas, though activities that could be construed as proselytism are restricted. The assumption that Christians are pro-government (often correct, not least because of fear of alternatives) contributes to this tolerance. Within opposition-controlled areas, Christians have been significantly affected. In the predominantly Kurdish areas in the north, historical Christians have reasonable living conditions. In the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), Muslims are officially allowed to change their faith and register as Christians. However, the Syrian government does not recognize this registration.

Christian children are particularly vulnerable as many Christian schools have been closed or damaged and children have had to attend (Islamic) government schools. 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 HTS, the Ansar Brigade and the Al-Farouq battalions. Particularly in the north-east, 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. 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 Islamist militias and Turkish authorities. In the WWL 2023 reporting period, dozens of churches, monasteries, Christian cemeteries and other buildings vital to the Christian community were attacked, damaged or looted in the west and north-east of the country, mostly due to intense shelling by Turkish forces and Turkish-supported opposition (TSO) or by criminals.

How the situation varies by region

Christians are particularly under pressure in the last bastions of control by radical Islamic groups, in Idlib Province in the north-west and in Hasakah Province in the north-east. In these areas, IS has continued to attack civilian targets. Turkish military and Turkey-supported opposition (TSO) forces (which include Islamic militants) are operating openly across the northern part of Syria, to Hasakah and Qamishli.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and 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 throughout the country and are also present in conflict zones. The few traditional Christian families left in Idlib Province, which is controlled by international jihadist groups, are threatened with death, torture, or assault and therefore hide their faith. The attacks by Turkey and TSOs have driven out many of these Christians from their homes in the north-west, north, and north-east. Clergy from historical churches are recognizable by their clothing, which sometimes makes them a target. The political reputation of denominations, churches, and local church leaders (neutral, pro or contra-Assad) plays an important role in the level of oppression they face from groups fighting President Assad.

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 (except for desert areas where there is more tribal influence and Islam is more conservative), as the Kurdish Sunnis are generally less radical.

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 (such as a pope or bishop) who can speak on their behalf. Most of the non-traditional Christian communities lack full, official recognition and legal status. Because of their evangelistic activities, they are specifically targeted by Islamic militant groups, but also by the government, which wants to maintain stability at all costs.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

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 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 operate openly in the north-west of Syria and across the northern part of the country (including Hasakah and Qamishli). Christians used to have a relatively high level of religious freedom in pre-civil war Syria, but this changed with the arrival of militant Islamic groups. IS set up its caliphate covering large parts of Iraq and Syria in June 2014; most Christians in these areas fled. Although the caliphate was eliminated in March 2019, IS still conducts sophisticated attacks. Islamic militants currently control approximately 15% of Syria's population. Turkish military operations, beginning in 2016, led to the occupation of territory in northern Syria and, since October 2019, the so-called "safe zone" along the Syrian-Turkish border. Turkey is using Arab Islamist fighters to control Kurdish areas. Islamic oppression is also present in government-controlled areas, mostly affecting converts from Islam to Christianity, where pressure is exerted especially by family and community. Slight pressure is also exerted on historical Christians; for instance, during Ramadan 2019, posters appeared in Christian neighborhoods in Aleppo urging Christian women to veil themselves.

Dictatorial paranoia:

This pressure primarily comes from armed groups which control parts of Syria, including the Turkish-supported opposition forces (TSOs). Through this control, President Erdoğan aims to restore the past glories of the Ottoman Sultanate. Since October 2019, 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. Militant groups have taken over many Christian-owned properties. On the government side, although President Assad shows a positive attitude towards historical Christians, his main objective is social stability rather than protecting rights of religious minorities. The government will act against Christians (and other groups) considered a threat to the status quo, such as those involved in evangelism. Surveillance and interrogation by the authorities are reportedly increasing.

Clan oppression:

Tribalism in Syria is mixed with Islam, especially in the northern Kurdish areas and the central desert areas. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is considered a betrayal of the community and a threat to national security. If discovered, it leads to great opposition from family and local leaders. A sheikh can permit the execution of converts and can give permission for Muslims to take their properties, belongings, and even their women.

Organized corruption and crime:

Corruption and bribery are widespread; [Transparency International](#) lists Syria as the third most corrupt country. This takes place within the context of impunity and anarchy and affects access to food and health care. Christians, who have a reputation for being wealthy, have been kidnapped for ransom by criminal networks. Organized corruption and crime is especially prevalent in areas occupied by Turkish military and Islamic militant groups, in southern, Druze-dominated areas and in areas with a high percentage of Alawites. In Latakia, dominated by Alawites, the kidnapping of young Christians has become a major concern. The economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have caused crime and corruption to rise dramatically.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

In the context of ongoing instability and restrictions on religious freedom, women from religious minority groups, including Christians, risk abduction, sexual harassment, and rape. While the rate of instances has dropped dramatically since IS dominated areas of Syria, this can happen both in government-controlled areas and in rebel-held territory. Rape is used to shame Christian families and destabilize communities. Female converts also face violence from their own families. They may face domestic violence or be forced to marry a Muslim, or even be killed to restore the honor of the family.

- Abduction
- Denied custody of children
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Young indigenous Christians fear being forcibly conscripted into the Syrian Army or to other military factions. Some are conscientious objectors, and this can prompt consideration of emigration. Unemployed Christians have immense difficulties obtaining a job, and those who are employed stand little chance of

promotion. As men are usually the financial providers, this makes the wider family vulnerable. Converts face additional pressures and may be threatened by their family, beaten, or denied their inheritance. Male converts from a Muslim background also come under strong pressure to marry a Muslim woman.

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Imprisonment by the government
- Military / militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	12	80
2022	15	78
2021	12	81
2020	11	82
2019	11	82

Syria increased by two points from 78 to a score of 80 points. This increase is mainly due to a higher number of reported violent incidents. For example, in WWL 2023, three Christians died because of their faith, several churches and Christian buildings were damaged in attacks by Turkish supported forces, and at least five Christians were kidnapped.



Ferial, a Syrian Christian woman.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **April 2022:** Gunmen shot dead two Christian civilians in Kharaba in southern Syria. The culprits violated their land, and it appears that the two Christians were killed while trying to defend their land.
- **July 2022:** Another Christian was killed in a drone strike during the dedication of a Greek Orthodox church in Al-Suqaylabiyah. In addition, six people were injured, most of whom suffered minor injuries.
- **May 2022:** A church in the Assyrian Christian village of Tel Tawil in northern Syria was seriously damaged by an attack by Turkish troops. Turkish air raids on predominantly Christian villages in northern Syria have seriously damaged many Christian buildings, cemeteries, Christian owned homes, and other properties in the past reporting period. Many Christians have left this area because of this. At least four Assyrian villages were completely emptied because of Turkish bombardments between October 2021 and September 2022.

WWL Year	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated	Christians' business property damaged or confiscated	Christians internally displaced	Christians forced to flee their countries
2023	100*	100*	100*	10*
2022	100*	100*	23*	11*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

Private life

In areas controlled by Islamist opposition groups (such as Idlib Province), it is dangerous for Christian communities to discuss their faith with non-Christians. Conversion from Islam is generally punishable by death. In areas controlled by Kurdish authorities, although Muslims are legally allowed to convert, they will face pressure mostly from their families. In government-controlled areas, discussion of faith is risky for converts or where it could be regarded as attempted evangelism (prohibited by law). Otherwise, Christians, except for converts, may express their faith in writing as long as they do not mention politics or other faiths. Muslims are legally prohibited from converting to other religions (except for AANES), though this is not criminalized.

Family life

There is no legal scope in Syria for a female Christian from a Muslim background to marry a male from a historical or non-traditional Christian family. Their marriage would be illegal. There is a huge social stigma around interfaith marriages, which can lead to estrangement, discrimination and persecution by family members, and even murder. The honor of a Muslim man is put to shame if his wife or daughter converts to Christianity. Both culture and religion

say the right thing to do is kill her, but divorce is the more common solution. If a Muslim spouse divorces a Christian, custody rights are ordinarily given to the Muslim party. Some Christian mothers will convert to Islam just to keep custody of their children. From birth, the children of converts from Islam are considered Muslim because their parents cannot officially change their religion. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria is a rare exception; it is the only place in Syria that allows Muslims to legally change their religion. However, this is not recognized by the Syrian government. As a result of increased Islamic education in government held areas, Christian children, especially those of converts, experience discrimination and harassment.

Community life

Christians are monitored throughout Syria, especially in areas held by Islamist opposition groups. In government-controlled areas, converts and non-traditional church groups are watched particularly closely and sermons monitored. Religious instruction is provided in schools according to confessional affiliation. Converts are still considered Muslim, so their children receive an Islamic education. Christians can face discrimination in employment. In Aleppo, where

Sunni Muslims control the market, they often do not employ Christians.

National life

The 2012 Syrian Constitution stipulates the president must be Muslim and Islamic law the major source of legislation, which provides a basis for discriminatory treatment of non-Muslims. The Constitution obliges protection for all religions as long as they "do not disturb the public order". Conversion from Islam is not recognized except in AANES.

In areas held by Islamist opposition groups, Sharia law applies, which severely restricts the freedom of all non-Sunni religious groups. In government-held areas, adult males have to serve in the armed forces or face imprisonment and forced conscription. This factor prompts male Christians to flee Syria and makes them reluctant to return.

The religious majority, Sunni Muslims, also suffer human rights violations by the government since they are perceived as its opponents. Of those who died in government custody, most were Sunni Muslims, according to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2021 Report.

Church life

Church services have been monitored since the start of the crisis, and church leaders are expected to encourage members to support the Assad regime. Even before the civil war, leaders avoided speaking about evangelizing Muslims or speaking disrespectfully about Islam. In areas controlled by Islamist groups, most churches have either been demolished or are used as Islamic centers. The incorporation of converts within recognized churches has always been discouraged by the government on the grounds that this could produce religious sectarianism or provoke conflict between communities. Many churches in Islamist-controlled areas have been desecrated, especially by the removal of crosses.



International obligations & rights violated

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)

Situation of other religious minorities

Many other religious minorities face various levels of persecution including Shia, Alewite, Druze, Jews, Yazidis, and Zaradashtis. Shia, Alewite, and Druze communities have been marginalized and persecuted 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. Yazidis 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.



A young Syrian Christian boy with his mother.

Open Doors in Syria

Open Doors is encouraging the local church through strengthening its leadership and helping leaders take advantage of the many opportunities for ministry, even in the ongoing crisis situation in the country. It does so in cooperation with local church partnerships. Opportunities include:

- Literature distribution: Bibles, study Bibles, children's Bibles, New Testaments and Christian books
- Discipleship training for leaders so they might teach others
- Leadership training and specific youth leader training
- Big picture training
- Various types of training on request of the various local churches in Syria
- Trauma counseling and debriefing for people who have gone through very stressful situations
- Partnering with the local church to care for and provide relief aid and rehabilitation programs to the many Syrian Christian internally displaced people (IDPs)
- Building bridges between the various Christian denominations by sponsoring conferences to which all denominations are invited

Open Doors is also raising prayer support for believers in difficult situations, and prayer for the situation in general.

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
