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World Watch Research

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# Syria:

# Persecution Dynamics

January 2025



**Open Doors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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## World Watch List 2025 – Top 50

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	98	96	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.7	11.1	94	93	92	91	92
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	89	89	88	87
4	Libya	16.0	16.2	15.9	16.2	16.4	10.6	91	91	88	91	92
5	Sudan	14.1	14.2	15.5	14.9	15.3	16.1	90	87	83	79	79
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.9	12.2	89	89	89	88	88
7	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.6	14.9	14.5	16.7	88	88	88	87	85
8	Pakistan	13.6	13.9	15.0	15.0	12.9	16.7	87	87	86	87	88
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.9	16.5	10.9	86	86	86	85	86
10	Afghanistan	15.6	15.9	15.9	16.4	16.7	5.0	85	84	84	98	94
11	India	12.2	12.9	13.3	14.9	13.9	16.5	84	83	82	82	83
12	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.8	16.6	3.3	81	81	80	81	78
13	Myanmar	12.6	11.1	13.5	14.1	12.9	16.5	81	79	80	79	74
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	13.0	15.2	15.6	80	79	76	70	67
15	China	13.2	10.1	12.8	14.6	16.1	11.1	78	78	77	76	74
16	Maldives	15.6	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.7	78	78	77	77	77
17	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.3	14.8	13.9	6.1	78	79	76	78	82
18	Syria	13.5	14.4	13.9	14.4	14.3	7.0	78	81	80	78	81
19	Algeria	14.7	14.3	11.5	14.7	16.0	6.3	77	79	73	71	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	14.0	15.6	76	75	71	68	67
21	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.6	12.9	14.3	8.3	74	71	69	69	67
22	Laos	11.8	10.7	13.5	14.1	13.9	9.8	74	75	68	69	71
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	2.8	74	72	72	70	71
24	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.7	11.3	10.4	16.1	74	71	69	68	67
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.5	12.4	15.5	4.4	73	71	71	71	71
26	Cuba	13.2	8.5	13.9	13.3	15.1	9.1	73	73	70	66	62
27	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	14.0	15.6	72	70	70	68	66
28	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	14.6	15.7	72	70	70	68	62

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
29	Turkmenistan	14.3	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.3	1.5	71	70	70	69	70
30	Nicaragua	12.4	7.6	13.7	13.3	14.1	9.6	71	70	65	56	51
31	Mexico	11.7	9.0	12.5	11.8	11.0	14.6	71	68	67	65	64
32	Oman	14.5	14.1	10.9	13.8	14.1	3.0	70	69	65	66	63
33	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	15.6	70	69	66	66	65
34	Tunisia	12.4	13.2	10.1	12.6	13.8	8.1	70	69	67	66	67
35	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	10.8	14.5	16.1	70	67	67	66	64
36	Bhutan	13.2	13.2	12.3	14.1	14.2	2.2	69	68	66	67	64
37	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.9	68	68	68	65	63
38	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.6	12.2	12.8	14.2	4.3	68	65	65	64	64
39	Tajikistan	14.1	12.7	12.7	13.2	13.7	1.9	68	66	66	65	66
40	Egypt	12.7	13.7	12.1	12.4	10.9	6.3	68	68	68	71	75
41	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.7	67	67	68	74	67
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	2.6	67	66	66	63	62
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.4	13.1	16.1	67	66	65	65	64
44	Vietnam	10.8	9.5	12.2	14.1	14.1	5.9	67	68	70	71	72
45	Turkey	13.0	11.7	11.7	13.2	11.5	5.4	67	64	66	65	69
46	Colombia	11.0	7.9	12.7	11.5	10.5	12.6	66	68	71	68	67
47	Kyrgyzstan	13.5	10.3	11.7	11.4	12.4	6.9	66	59	59	58	58
48	Brunei	14.8	14.8	10.8	10.8	14.0	0.6	66	66	65	64	64
49	Chad	11.0	8.2	10.2	9.9	10.3	15.9	65	61	58	55	53
50	Jordan	12.9	14.3	10.4	12.2	12.8	2.4	65	65	65	66	64

## World Watch List 2025 – Ranks 51-78

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
51	Malaysia	12.8	13.7	11.7	12.4	11.2	3.0	65	64	66	63	63
52	Azerbaijan	13.3	10.2	9.6	12.2	13.7	5.6	65	60	59	60	56
53	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.9	64	63	64	63	62
54	Nepal	12.2	10.6	9.5	12.6	12.3	5.9	63	62	61	64	66
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.4	63	62	63	61	58
56	Russian Federation	12.7	7.9	10.7	13.1	14.1	4.4	63	58	57	56	57
57	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.1	1.7	61	61	60	59	56
58	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	61	64	64	63
59	Indonesia	10.9	11.9	10.9	11.6	10.2	5.7	61	66	68	68	63
60	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.6	61	61	62	62	62
61	Sri Lanka	12.7	8.7	11.5	11.5	8.5	7.6	60	60	57	63	62
62	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	10.3	10.7	12.1	0.2	60	60	60	59	58
63	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	14.6	59	57	55	52	48
64	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	12.1	9.4	58	58	57	50	42
65	Honduras	7.9	4.7	11.7	7.3	9.9	13.1	55	55	53	48	46
66	Togo	9.2	6.7	10.4	7.1	11.5	9.3	54	52	49	44	43
67	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	0.6	54	55	55	57	56
68	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	8.9	54	52	48	43	47
69	Ukraine	6.8	5.0	7.8	12.5	13.5	7.2	53	44	37	37	34
70	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	8.3	53	52	52	51	46
71	Venezuela	6.3	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	9.6	52	53	56	51	39
72	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	16.1	52	52	51	48	47
73	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	9.6	51	44	44	42	42
74	Lebanon	11.5	10.1	7.0	6.2	6.7	7.2	49	48	40	35	34
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	4.4	48	47	44	44	43
76	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	8.1	15.6	47	46	46	43	43

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
77	Belarus	9.9	3.7	5.0	10.8	14.1	3.1	47	46	43	33	30
78	Philippines	9.2	6.6	6.6	6.1	5.7	8.5	43	40	32	34	26

## Copyright, sources and definitions

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- [Background country information](#) (published annually in summer)
- [Persecution dynamics](#) (published annually in January/February).

These documents are the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. They include data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and 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 end of each document under the heading “External links”. These documents may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © Open Doors International.

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/>.

## Reporting period

The WWL 2025 reporting period was 1 October 2023 - 30 September 2024.

## Brief country details

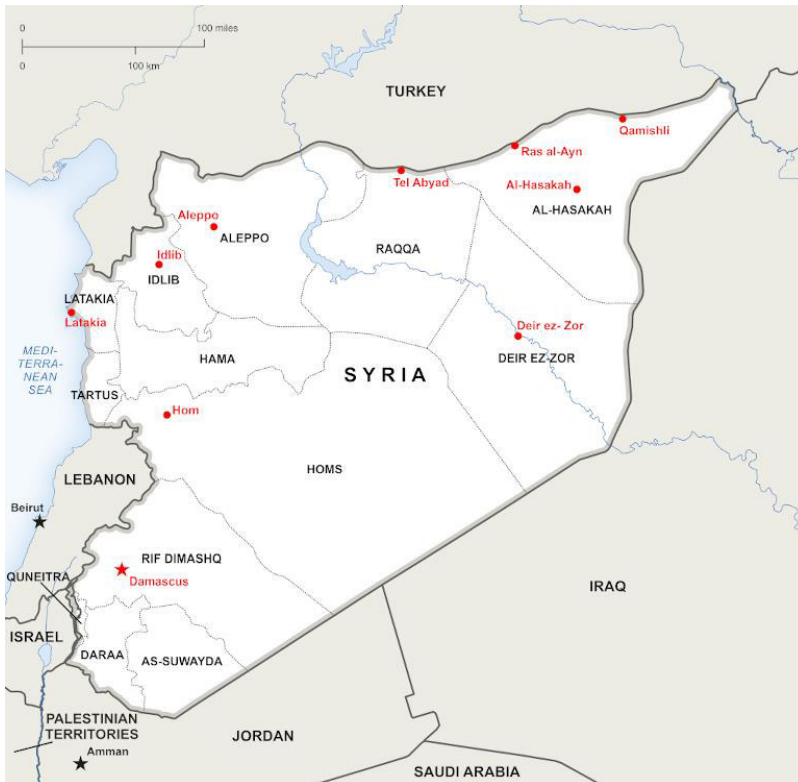
In the table below, the number of Christians shown is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

Syria: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
24,348,000	579,000	2.4

Syria: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	579,000	2.4
Muslim	23,328,463	95.8
Hindu	2,319	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	121	0.0
Bahai	484	0.0
Atheist	18,751	0.1
Agnostic	418,362	1.7
Other	111	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024 (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

## Map of country



## 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

Just a few weeks following the close of the WWL 2025 reporting period, the Assad regime fell: On 8 December 2024, forces aligned with the al-Qaeda affiliate *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) captured Damascus after a fast offensive throughout the country. This pivotal shift in the conflict makes the situation for Christians precarious, with widespread concerns for their safety under HTS rule. It is uncertain how the situation will unfold in the coming months. Within the WWL 2025 reporting period itself, there was little change compared to WWL 2024.

In recent years, leaders of Historical church communities have mainly been targeted by Islamic militants because of their visibility and perceived support of the Assad government, while non-traditional churches have been vulnerable because they are known for their more Western orientation, missionary drive, fragmentation, often lack of strong leadership, and lack of a foreign figure of authority (e.g., a pope or bishop) to act on their behalf.

In areas controlled by radical Islamic groups, most church buildings belonging to Historical Christian communities have either been demolished or used as Islamic centers, and public expressions of Christian faith have been banned. Church buildings or monasteries cannot be repaired or restored, regardless of whether the damage was collateral or intentional.

In areas controlled by the Assad government, Christians faced increasing scrutiny - particularly converts from Islam - who are considered potential threats to social stability. The political reputation of Christian denominations, churches and local church leaders played a significant role in the level of oppression they face from groups fighting against President Assad. The Assad government treated churches differently based on their denomination, applying stricter standards to non-traditional



Christian groups. While Historical church communities sometimes faced pressure, they were in a stronger position to defend their rights and occasionally used this position to hinder the growth of non-traditional churches. On the other hand, the perceived support of the Assad-government by the Historical Christian communities risked making them more vulnerable.

Christians with a Muslim background faced intense pressure from their families, particularly in Sunni areas, where conversion to Christianity can lead to expulsion or worse. In contrast, Kurdish areas in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) offered more freedom, with recognized Kurdish Christian communities and legal religious conversion. However, these favorable conditions have been threatened by the Turkish invasion of northern Syria since October 2019, reversing improvements in religious freedom in Turkish-occupied territory and leading to attacks on Christian villages by Turkish-backed Islamist groups.

In a June 2020 [USCIRF hearing](#), it was reported that Turkish forces murdered, kidnapped, raped, displaced and detained Kurds and other minorities - including Christians and Yezidis - and destroyed their religious sites. The forced relocation of Sunni Arabs to minority refugees' homes has caused significant demographic changes, making it difficult for Christians and other minorities to return to their villages. In Afrin, Turkish-backed troops have been reported to be targeting Kurdish Christians.

On 10 May 2022, another [USCIRF hearing on religious freedom in Syria](#) highlighted that armed opposition forces and militant groups, including Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS), targeted vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities in their power struggle against the Assad regime. These groups, supported by Turkish financing and military aid, carried out campaigns of religious and ethnic cleansing, particularly in regions like Idlib and Afrin. IS increased its presence in eastern Syria, carrying out almost daily attacks and destabilizing the region for religious minorities.

## 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

- **Closure of or breaking into churches:** Three house churches were closed, and at least one church was targeted in a burglary.
- **Seizure of Christian owned properties and Christians fleeing the country:** Christian-owned private properties continue to be seized, and Christians are still fleeing Syria, though fewer incidents were reported compared to WWL 2024, when the earthquake significantly impacted the situation.

## Specific examples of positive developments

- At the beginning of 2024, an office of the High Committee for Real Estate was opened in Raqqa, northeast Syria, to protect Christian-owned properties that were at risk of illegal expropriation following years of conflict. The initiative focuses on cataloging and ensuring the return of properties belonging to displaced Armenian, Assyrian and Syrian Christians. It operates in cooperation with the autonomous administration of the region. This effort aims to facilitate the return of Christians and restore their presence in areas heavily affected by the war and IS occupation ([Agenzia Fides](#), 15 February 2024).
- The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) transferred Christian holy sites in Raqqa and Tabqa back to the Committee for the Protection of Christian Properties, marking a key step for the return of displaced Christians. These sites, previously managed by the Democratic Islamic Conference, include three churches and a cemetery abandoned during IS rule. This handover, supported by the Endowments Law, is seen as a turning point for restoring Christian presence and peace in the region, though the Christian population remains drastically reduced ([North Press Agency](#), 16 April 2024).
- As reported by [USCIRF 2024 Syria](#) (SWL, p.68): "In Kurdish-majority areas in the north and east outside of rebel control, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), supported by its Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), continued to highlight religious freedom as a governing principle".

## 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 Christians 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 Turkish-supported armed

opposition groups (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 have been socio-economically more connected to the Assad-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 were 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 what was Assad-regime-held territory and in Kurdish areas. Those in areas held by Islamist opposition groups are most vulnerable to violence. Within Assad-regime-held areas, there was 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, and were so also by the Assad-government which wanted to maintain stability at all costs.

## **Areas where Christians face most difficulties**

Christians face particularly pressure from radical Islamic groups in Idlib province in the northwest and in parts of 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.

in September 2023, HTS reportedly started the operation to return confiscated property to Christians in their area of control (Idlib province in the northwest of Syria) , though the process was complex and excluded those linked to the Assad regime. While some improvements were made, such as allowing Christians to hold church services and restore churches, the restrictions on the ringing of church bells

and display of crosses raised doubts, suggesting that these actions were possibly more about presenting a facade of legitimacy rather than genuine concern for religious freedom.

TSOs have been 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. Since Turkey's occupation of one of the main cities in the area, Sere Kaniye (Ras Al-Ayn or Tel Abyad), the once-thriving Christian community has been nearly entirely displaced, with only a few remaining under persistent harassment and insecurity. Radical Islamic factions have seized Christian properties, restricted religious practices, and imposed demographic changes by settling families linked to these armed groups, which together with ongoing violence has prevented the return of displaced Christians to their homes. Two Christian men were arrested in Sere Kaniye in November 2023 after demanding the return of their seized property.

In the rest of the northeast, in areas under AANES control, Christians enjoy a relatively high degree of religious freedom. In most areas previously controlled by the Assad government, this applied to some degree to Historical Christian communities and - to a lesser extent - to non-traditional Christian communities. However, there has always been pressure on converts across the entire country and their situation is especially dangerous in areas under the control of Islamic militants and TSOs.

## Position on the World Watch List

Syria: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2025	78	18
WWL 2024	81	12
WWL 2023	80	12
WWL 2022	78	15
WWL 2021	81	12

In the WWL 2025 reporting period, Syria's score fell three points from 81 points in WWL 2024 to a score of 78 points. Although average pressure increased slightly, the violence score saw a significant decrease from 11.1 points in WWL 2024 to a still notably high 7.0 points, primarily due to a reduction in reported attacks on churches. Rising crime, increased corruption, growing religious discrimination, and political instability continued to fuel fear among Christians. These factors have been driving emigration, considerably reshaping demographics, weakening churches, and posing serious challenges to the future of Christian life in the region.

## Persecution engines

Syria: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Very weak
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Very weak
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 have been operating openly in north-western 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 were 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* was also present in Assad-government-controlled areas, affecting mostly converts from Islam to Christianity where pressure is exerted by the converts' family and community. Slight pressure was 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.

With the fall of the Assad-regime on 8 December 2024, it is feared - but still uncertain - whether the effects of this persecution engine will intensify in the future with the country under HTS control.

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

This engine has been 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 Assad government, *Dictatorial paranoia* was mostly evident in the behavior of government officials who monitored churches, for instance, by checking sermons for political content. At the height of the civil war this was less prevalent, but monitoring resumed when President Assad tried to tighten his grip on government-controlled territory 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 Assad government was to secure social stability rather than protect religious minorities (including Christians). The Assad-government mostly acted against religious groups (Christians included) where they were 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, Transparency International's [2023 Corruption Perceptions index](#) ranks Syria at #177/180 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 Assad-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 security 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)**

During the Syrian civil war, 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 received increased Assad-government support due to its connections with Russia. This 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 meant that Evangelicals were not given security clearances to conduct activities outside of their church facilities. In addition, there were 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	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	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
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	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-



In the table above, 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 have been 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 have been controlling 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 emphasized his regime's commitment to pluralism and inter-faith tolerance and had a positive attitude towards Historical Christian communities. As is common in situations of conflict, those in authority in Syria have been 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 have been given more dangerous duties than non-Christians and that Christian civil servants 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 was 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 property, 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

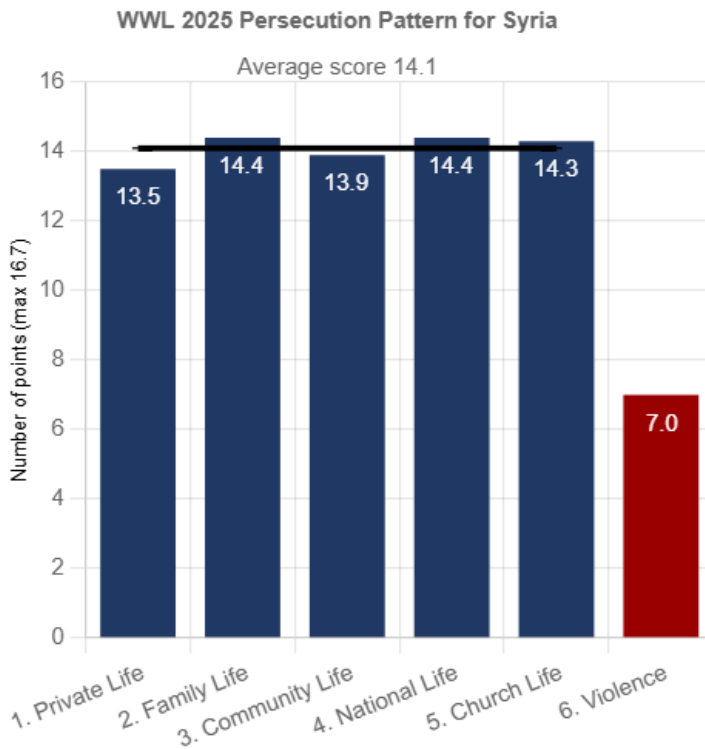
- **Violent religious groups (Strong), Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium); government officials (Medium):** Christians have been targeted for kidnappings by criminal networks, including IS, although this has now become sporadic. Whilst there may be a religious aspect behind kidnapping, the 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 securi-

ty was a major concern for Christians living in the areas controlled by the Assad-regime. Many Syrians believed the regime was 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 had made 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 were part of the Baath Party or involved with 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 2025 Persecution pattern above for Syria shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* is at an extremely high level, scoring 14.1 points, just 0.1 of a point more than in WWL 2024.
- Pressure in four *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level: the *Family* (14.4), *National* (14.4 points), *Church* (14.3) and *Community spheres* (13.9). In the *Private* (13.5) *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 decreased considerably from the extremely high score of 11.3 points in WWL 2024 to the still very high score of 7.0 points in WWL2025. The decline was primarily due to a reduction in the number of reported attacks on churches, which were mainly characterized by looting and burglaries.

## 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 2025 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://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/>.*

### 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 held by HTS militants in the WWL 2025 reporting period, 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 Christian 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 both from historical or non-traditional communities in these restricted areas; in some cases churches were desecrated and crosses were removed earlier in the conflict. Under HTS control in the north-western Idlib province, Christian clergy have been prohibited from wearing their clerical clothing in public, as it makes them easily identifiable as priests or pastors. Most Christians fled these areas before the WWL 2025 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 (meanwhile defunct) Assad-regime, the display of Christian images or symbols by indigenous Christians did not generally lead to pressure - with the exception of Muslim neighborhoods, where for Christians living there or passing through, it was 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 under President Assad prohibited adoption for all residents regardless of their religion based on the provisions of Islamic Sharia. An exception was made for Catholics and Syrian Orthodox Christians, who are legally allowed to adopt children solely from their own religious community. This means that all Christian denominations are hindered in adopting: Catholics and Syrian Orthodox cannot adopt infants from another Christian denomination, let alone any with a Muslim background (i.e., the majority). For the other Christian denominations, they cannot adopt children, regardless of the faith background of the infant's family. This situation is particularly poignant as the number of orphans 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 have usually been given to the Muslim party. Some Christian mothers will convert to Islam just to keep her children with her. According to the law during the Assad era, 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 Administration 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 areas held by government forces when Assad was in power, children of Christians experienced an increase in pressure. Also, many children coming from areas controlled by radical Islamic groups have learnt to be hostile towards 'infidels' - i.e., 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. Under President Assad, in government-held areas, sectarianism was officially banned and Christians could hold top ranks in the military and state apparatus. However, until December 2024, Alawites, members of Syria's governing sect, held 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 provided 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 Christian students receiving 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 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. In August 2023, the HTS-linked administration in Idlib imposed stricter Sharia regulations on educational institutions. These regulations included enforcing gender segregation, requiring Sharia-compliant attire, banning certain forms of media (for instance, music) and an order to remove drawings and pictures from the walls of classrooms.

***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 areas (pre-December 2024), Christians have been 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 Alawite, 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 Christian 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 have been unlikely to face trial in government-controlled areas for faith-related reasons, as they have usually been considered supporters of the Assad-regime. However, in the previous reporting period (WWL 2024), it became clear that Christians were being tried on the basis of false accusations and that their vulnerability also played a role. International monitoring has not been possible from the West as the Assad government did 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 had to serve in Assad's armed forces or face imprisonment and forced conscription. This has been 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 under President Assad prohibited political parties based on religion, there have been no Christian political parties in the Syrian parliament. There are, however, 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 have not been able to establish independent Christian civil society organizations as everything had to be done in agreement and alignment with the Assad-government, which heavily controlled all civil society and political activity. In areas controlled by radical Islamic rebels, the establishment of Christian political parties or civil society organizations has been 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. Under President Assad, in government-controlled areas, Christians were generally not oppressed for their faith in national life. However, they were likely to encounter discrimination and glass ceilings in the public sector. Evangelism and conversion from Islam were prohibited and converts could be subjected to discrimination, if their faith became 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 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (4.00 points)***

The Assad government actively tried to suppress any form of dissent, regardless of the sectarian and social background of the person(s) expressing it. Since there has been no freedom of expression, Christian leaders were particularly vulnerable to being accused of political dissent. When speaking in public, people have been warned not to discuss religion or politics and most leaders tended to avoid such topics in order not to provoke further pressure and any potential violence. Church leaders have therefore been 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 nothing short of dangerous.

***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. In Christian villages under control of HTS, crosses on church walls have been removed, women are compelled to wear hijabs, private gatherings are banned and church bells are prohibited from ringing. Under the Assad-regime, within government-controlled areas, there was 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 in 2011, all gatherings (including church services) were monitored and church leaders were expected to call on their congregations to support the Assad regime. Most church leaders accepted the fact that there was some routine surveillance of activities on church premises, including sermons and teaching. They effectively exercised 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 could be sold publicly. This ministry, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, supervised the curriculum for Christian schools in Syria as well. Finally, there has been no space for any sort of public Christian teaching in areas controlled by radical Islamic elements.

***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 Assad-government reportedly used penal code provisions to prevent the distribution of religious material by groups it saw as a threat (to avoid anyone "causing tension between religious communities"). The Assad-regime considered conversion to Christianity and all related activities as a potential threat to public order and since public distribution of Christian materials was considered evangelism, it was 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 large numbers of churches have either been demolished or 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 2025	WWL 2024
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	1
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?	4	17
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *
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?	0	1
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	2	2
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	500	500
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	10 *	10 *
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	10 *	50
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?	10 *	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?	10 *	100 *
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	10 *	50
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	10 *	100 *

In the WWL 2025 reporting period:

- **Looting of churches and public Christian properties:** Three house churches were shut down, and in Aleppo at least one church was targeted in a burglary.
- **Christians arrested:** Because of their Christian activities and involvement in mission work among Muslims, various Christians were arrested at different times in the reporting period.

- **Christians attacked:** Dozens of Christians were reportedly physically and mentally abused, including Christian children. In particular converts reported being physically attacked and threatened with death.
- **Christians forced to leave their homes:** Christian families are still leaving Syria due to the instability of the security situation in their areas. Their disadvantaged position as a vulnerable minority plays a major role in this as well. The symbolic number of 10\* has been selected, as it is certain that dozens of Christians are leaving the country. Due to a lack of verified information, it was not possible to select the symbolic number of 100\* as was the case in WWL 2024, but this should not be understood to imply that fewer Christians are leaving the country for religious reasons or because of their disadvantaged position.

## 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.

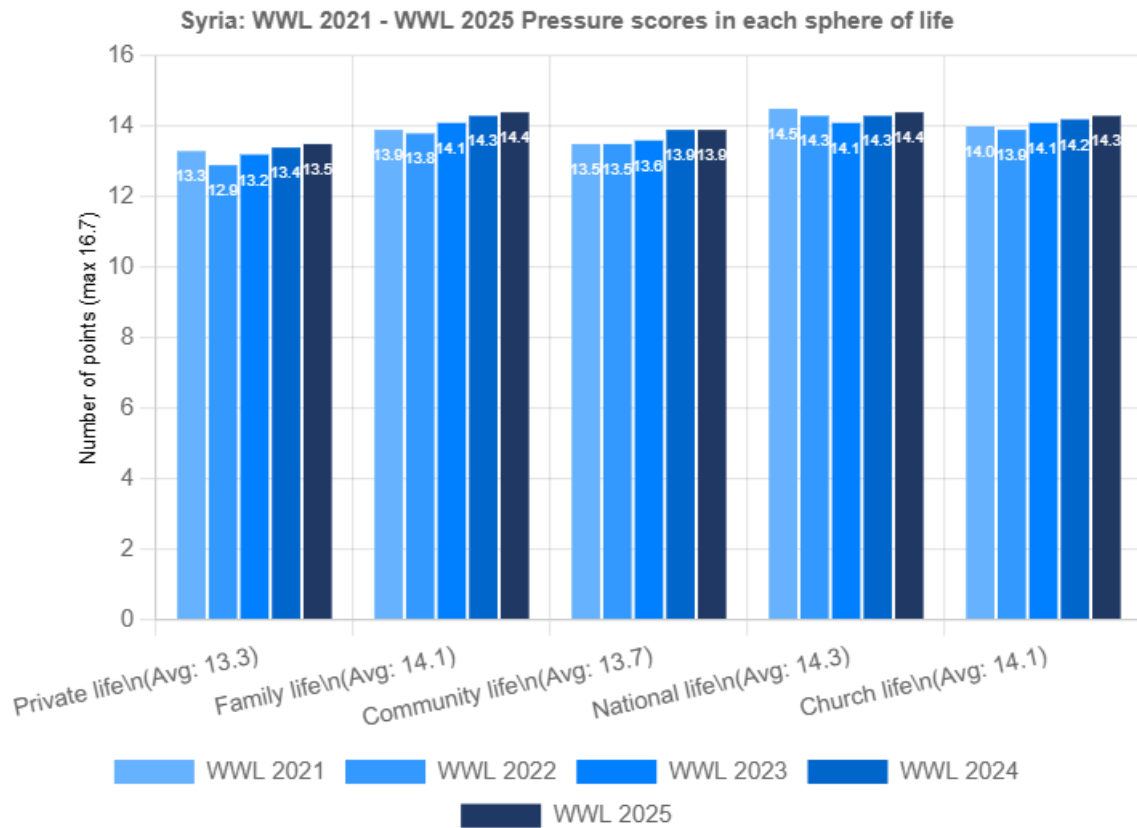
### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Syria: WWL 2021 - WWL 2025	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2025	14.1
2024	14.0
2023	13.8
2022	13.7
2021	13.8

The table above shows how the average pressure on Christians has been stable at the very high/extremely high range 13.7-14.1 points during the past five WWL reporting periods.

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

Until WWL 2022 the trend for all *spheres of life* was mostly a decrease in 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 2025 reporting period. (See chart colored blue below.)



### 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



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 was just 0.2 points lower, mostly due to a slightly lower number of Christians killed. In WWL 2025, the violence score saw a significant decrease from 11.1 to a still notably high 7.0, primarily due to a reduction in reported attacks on churches.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

### Syria Female Pressure Points Most frequently recorded PPs: WWL 2019 - WWL 2024

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

After years of ongoing violence, peace has remained 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](#), [Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, UN, 24 May 2024](#)). Human Rights Watch have reported generally on the prevalent risk of sexual violence, including and beyond women and girls ([HRW 2024, 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 remained a risk in government-controlled areas (under President Assad) and in rebel-held territory – though the threat has always been 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. A country 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

Syria	Male Pressure Points Most frequently recorded PPs: WWL 2019 - WWL 2024
	Abduction Economic harassment via business/job/work access Imprisonment by government Military/militia conscription/service against conscience Violence – death

In light of the ongoing violence and proxy conflicts, a common fear among indigenous Christians – and among many other Syrian communities – has been that young men will be forcibly conscripted into the Assad-government 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. Under President Assad, there was enforced military service for all men at the age of 18; those wishing to be exempt had to pay a hefty fine, prompting many men to consider emigration. While not only Christians were targeted in this way, there were often fewer consequences for perpetrators who recruited Christians in this manner when compared with other religious 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 Zardashtis. 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 Assad government allegedly also used or exacerbated tensions between religious groups to cement its position of power.

### **Alewites**

As reported by the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 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 ... Media outlets continued to report that Iran used its influence, as well as the dire economic situation in the country and financial incentives, to encourage Sunnis to convert to Shia Islam or join Iranian militias."

### **Sunni Muslims**

The religious majority, Sunni Muslims, also suffered human rights violations by the Assad-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 was 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 2023 Syria](#)):

- "The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) documented at least 33 attacks on mosques in the country during the year, attributing 31 attacks to the regime (94 percent) and two (6 percent) attacks to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)."
- "According to the SNHR, from March 2011 to October 2023, the regime was responsible for at least 15,051 persons who died from torture. According to the SNHR, at least 59 individuals, including one child and two women, died due to torture by conflict parties during the year, with the regime responsible for 34 of these deaths. As was the case with others who previously died in regime custody, most were from the country's Sunni majority, whom analysts stated the regime targeted believing they were members of the opposition, or likely to support the opposition."
- "Analysts reported the regime continued to use the law allowing it to create redevelopment zones as well as confiscate property to reward those loyal to the regime, create obstacles for refugees and IDPs to reclaim their property and return to their homes, and engineer demographic changes. NGOs reported investigations continued into the usurpation of land and property rights of displaced owners, including through public auctions in areas retaken by regime forces. According to NGO reports, since the enactment of the redevelopment zone law in 2018, the regime replaced residents in former opposition-held areas with more loyal constituencies. These regime policies disproportionately affected Sunni populations, which made up the majority of the population."

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

Particularly the Druze communities (but also Shia and Alawites), have faced abductions, bombings and killings by IS militants. The Druze have been traditionally seen as a minority that supported Assad because his government - to a certain degree - protected religious minorities; however, many Druze stopped supporting Assad due to growing economic despair and political discontent. In September 2023, Druze protests were violently crushed, with protesters being fired upon by the Assad-regime and in February 2024 protests escalated after a protester was killed by security forces. The Druze were reportedly the first minority religious group in the country's complex sectarian mosaic to demand Assad's departure.

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.

According to [USCIRF 2023 Syria](#) (Country of Particular Concern):

- Nearly 2,700 Yezidi women and girls remain missing, with many presumed to still be held in Syrian detention camps and ISIS-controlled areas.

- Starting on 5 October 2023, Turkish-backed forces intensified their attacks on civilian infrastructure in the north of Syria, including the destruction of the Yazidi Chal Khaneh shrine in Afrin. In addition to this, at least two Yazidis in Afrin were reportedly forced to convert to Islam amidst the ongoing violence and religious persecution.

As reported by the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Syria](#)):

#### a) The Druze community

- "According to analysis by the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Affairs (WINEP), Suwayda 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'."

#### b) The Yezidi community

- "The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI), human rights groups, and media organizations reported abuses by some armed Syrian opposition groups, which operated with the support of Turkey, reportedly focused on Kurdish and Yezidi residents in and around Afrin as well as other civilians. Those reported abuses included: killings; abduction and disappearance of civilians; physical abuse, including rape and sexual violence; forced displacement from homes; transfer of detained civilians across the border into Turkey; recruitment or use of child soldiers; looting; appropriating private property; and desecration of religious sites"
- "STJ [Syrians for Truth and Justice] documented large-scale confiscations of Yezidi-owned property by various armed groups. According to STJ's report, 'the perpetrators expropriated several houses, shops, and olive groves owned by members of the Yezidi religion'."

#### c) The Jewish community

- "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](#)." [More recently, the Middle East Quarterly reported on 7 July 2024 that "[under 100 Jews have remained in Syria](#), including some that have either converted to Islam or married Muslims".]
- "In an April 7 [2023] Friday sermon delivered in Idlib, Mahmoud al-Hubeish said Jews are the 'enemies of Allah' who violate the agreements they make, 'and who cast aside any covenant they make'. He said: 'Two things are mutually exclusive: Jews and agreements' and described Jews as 'wanton infidels' and 'descendants of apes'.
- "In a December 18 [2023] speech posted to YouTube, President Assad said that there was no evidence that six million Jews died in the Holocaust and that the Nazis did not employ a special method of torture or killing for the Jews. He said that the Jews who were killed had died like other victims of World War II."

## Trends Summary

### 1) Christians caught in the crossfire between warring parties

Christians in Syria remain caught between the conflict of warring parties. While areas under Assad-government control saw improved security, the broader situation in rebel-held zones, especially in the northwest and northeast (e.g., Turkish-backed forces vs. Syrian Democratic Forces), continued to involve high levels of violence. Christians are still vulnerable to the repercussions of this ongoing conflict .

### 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 US-led sanctions, the earthquakes of February 2023, ongoing internal conflicts and the broader regional tensions such as the Israel-Hamas conflict all made things worse. In the current unstable economic situation, Christians feel particularly vulnerable.

### 3) Security increased in areas under Assad-government administration - but so did the levels of control

As the areas under Assad-regime appeared to be becoming more stable, security improved. This also had a downside: Control on all civilians 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 always remained 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., in Al Hasakah and Khabour Valley, among others. Unsanitary conditions and the lack of water led to outbreaks of dysentery, typhoid and other 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 for young people - to leave Syria for good. With the fall of the Assad-regime on 8 December 2024, it is as yet unknown how the future under HTS control will develop. This pivotal shift in Syria makes the situation for Christians precarious and there are widespread concerns for their safety under HTS rule.

## Further useful reports

Further background information per country and 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/wwl-background/>
- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

## External Links

- Copyright, sources and definitions: Background country information - <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background/>
- Copyright, sources and definitions: Persecution Dynamics - <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/country-dossiers/>
- Brief description of the persecution situation: USCIRF hearing - <https://www.uscirt.gov/events/uscirt-virtual-hearing-safeguarding-religious-freedom-northeast-syria>
- Brief description of the persecution situation: USCIRF hearing on religious freedom in Syria - <https://www.uscirt.gov/events/uscirt-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>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Agenzia Fides - [https://www.fides.org/en/news/74730-ASIA\\_SYRIA\\_An\\_office\\_opened\\_in\\_Raqqa\\_to\\_protect\\_the\\_properties\\_of\\_Christians\\_in\\_north\\_east\\_Syria](https://www.fides.org/en/news/74730-ASIA_SYRIA_An_office_opened_in_Raqqa_to_protect_the_properties_of_Christians_in_north_east_Syria)
- Specific examples of positive developments: North Press Agency - <https://npasyria.com/en/113241/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: USCIRF 2024 Syria - <https://www.uscirt.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/Syria.pdf>
- Persecution engines description: 2023 Corruption Perceptions index - <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/syria>
- 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: Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, UN, 24 May 2024 - <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/SG-2023-annual-reportsmallFINAL.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: HRW 2024, Syria country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/syria>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: IRFR 2023 Syria - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: IRFR 2023 Syria - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: USCIRF 2023 Syria - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Syria.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: IRFR 2023 Syria - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: four Jews still remained in the country - <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/article-717885>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: under 100 Jews have remained in Syria - <https://www.eurasiareview.com/07072024-the-jews-of-syrias-qamishli-short-history-lasting-legacy-analysis/>