

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, as in the prior year, religious freedom in Syria remained under serious threat, particularly amid the country’s ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad brutally enforced its authority over populations under its control, including its efforts to solidify an iron grip on religious affairs. In beleaguered Idlib Province, radical Islamist al-Qaeda affiliate [Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS)—which the U.S. Department of State designated as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in December—[continued to vie](#) with other local factions within and outside of its so-called [Syrian Salvation Government](#) for political and military dominance over civilian areas. Meanwhile, Turkish armed forces maintained control over territory inside northern Syria that they had captured in three invasions between 2016 and 2019, endangering religious minorities in areas that included the vicinity of Afrin as well as a swath of land extending roughly 75 miles from west of Tel Abyad to east of Ras al-Ayn.

In regime-controlled areas, the Syrian government continued to brutalize communities and individuals that it perceived as having participated in or supported political or armed opposition movements. In areas over which it retained or regained control, the government continued to solidify its hold on all aspects of political, economic, and religious life. President Assad, for example, persisted in [framing](#) his rule in Islamic terms—alongside his standard Ba’athist-Arab Nationalist approach—and he has progressively shifted religious authority away from the traditional, marginally independent cadre of Sunni Muslim scholars (ulama’) in favor of the regime-controlled

[Ministry of Endowments](#). Despite the government’s [indifference](#) toward houses of worship and other sites of importance to religious minorities throughout a decade of conflict, it continued to [present itself](#) as the sole defender of these communities—implicitly in exchange for their quiescence and support. Indeed, the regime largely left alone members of such minorities in regime-controlled territories if they had no specific record of opposition participation, essentially implementing the self-fulfilling prophecy it has long spun. Even so, it showed no change in its rigid [rhetoric](#) and control over such communities. For example, the Ministry of Justice [reaffirmed](#) in December—although not publicly announced until February 2021—its de facto classification of Yazidism as an Islamic “sect” rather than a separate religion, thereby subjecting Yazidis to Islamic law and denying the community the right to self-identify as a distinct religion.

Meanwhile, as in prior years—and in stark contrast to other parts of Syria and most of the wider region—north and east Syria remained a uniquely promising area in terms of positive religious freedom conditions. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) fostered these conditions through its political foundation in the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and military support from the U.S.-allied [Syrian Democratic Forces](#) (SDF). It continued to allow Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and others to practice openly, express, and even change their religious identities—while facing significant peril due to threats from Turkey, Turkish-allied militias, regime forces, and remnants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Syria as a CPC and redesignate HTS as an EPC for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Syrian government agencies and officials, HTS principals, and the leadership of militias within the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA) responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Exert pressure on and engage with Turkey to provide a timeline for its withdrawal from all territory that it occupies as a result of cross-border operations into north and east Syria, and in the interim demand that it order armed factions under its control or influence to cease all activities negatively impacting religious and ethnic minorities in that area;
- Recognize the AANES as a legitimate, local government, and accordingly expand U.S. engagement with its institutions, lift sanctions from all areas it governs, and demand its inclusion in all activities pursuant to United Nations (UN) Resolution 2254, including Geneva-based talks to resolve the Syrian conflict “as the basis for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition”; and
- Contribute to efforts in AANES-governed territory to fund and develop local programs to promote religious tolerance and pluralism; strengthen school curriculum to meet the needs of local families, including addressing the unique concerns of religious and ethnic minorities; and advance religious freedom and related rights.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [U.S. Leaders Must Stand against Turkey’s Atrocities in Northern Syria](#) (in *Newsweek*)

Background

[Estimates](#) place Syria's population at just over 20 million, but the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees recorded 6.6 million Syrians as refugees and another 6.7 million as internally displaced persons (IDPs) [by the end of 2020](#). That population is religiously diverse: Sunni Muslims account for 74 percent; Alawite, Shi'a, and Isma'ili Muslims comprise 13 percent; Assyrians, Maronites, Armenians, and other Christians comprise 10 percent; Druze account for 3 percent; and a small number of Syrian Jews remain in Damascus and Aleppo. However, it is difficult to confirm these figures amid the country's 10-year conflict, given the [staggering number](#) of displaced persons. A disproportionately high number of religious minority communities have fled during the decade of violence; some estimates [suggest](#) that as many as 677,000 Christians have left the country, diminishing from around 10 percent to 3.6 percent of the population.

While Syria is a Sunni Muslim-majority country, the Alawite religious minority has dominated its political and military classes since Hafez al-Assad, current president Bashar al-Assad's father, seized power in 1970. Over the subsequent four decades, the two Assad regimes retained a stranglehold on power through a complicated framework of Ba'athist ideology, repressive coercion, enticement of economic elites, and the cultivation of a [perception](#) of protection for other religious minorities. However, that fragile framework collapsed following a popular uprising in March 2011, which, after a brutal government response, devolved into armed conflict—first domestic, but encompassing a range of regional and global actors by mid-2015. The conflict has since been marked by the government's utter disregard for civilian casualties, including targeting of hospitals, [churches](#), and even [schools](#) in its effort to crush opposition.

Positive Conditions under the AANES

Not only has the AANES [declared](#) its systematic commitment to religious freedom, but it has also implemented that framework against the backdrop of serious external threats, complicated [tribal dynamics](#) that cross fraught ethnic and religious divides, and other potential barriers. Some practical religious freedom and political challenges persist under the AANES, stemming from the complicated relationship of its founding constituents with Kurdish nationalism and armed movements. These challenges include reports of underage conscription and ongoing—if [diminishing](#)—concerns from the Syriac Christian community regarding school curriculum, as well as persistent and pervasive fear among religious minorities of ISIS, the Assad regime, and Turkish-allied militias. Despite the AANES's sincere efforts to assure that religious and other freedoms extend to members of all ethnic and religious communities under its administration, the fragility of its circumstances throughout 2020 translated to a religiously and ethnically diverse population that was justifiably uncertain whether it would remain as such in the years to come.

Religious Freedom Violations under Turkish Occupation

The Turkish occupation of a wide swath of territory across northern Syria remained a serious threat in 2020—not only to the [vulnerable population](#) of that area, but also to the AANES itself. A significant part of that danger came from Turkey, as its government and military make no distinction between U.S.-designated terrorist group the [Kurdistan Workers' Party \(PKK\)](#) and the AANES—given the latter's origins in Syria's Kurdish-led opposition and waning ties between the PKK and the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is part of the SDF. Turkey's incessant shelling of civilian areas in AANES/SDF areas across northern Syria, and the potential for expansion of its occupation, represented a [direct threat](#) to religious and ethnic minorities in those towns. However, its support for radical Islamist factions of the TFSA, also known as the Syrian National Army (SNA), was equally insidious and damaging, as they engaged in religious violence, abduction for ransom, and other atrocities. For example, Faylaq al-Sham—a TFSA faction operating in Turkish-occupied Afrin—[laid siege](#) to the town of Basufan and arrested a number of its inhabitants in December, including a Yazidi woman, [Ghazala Mannan Salmo](#), who reportedly faced severe torture in detention. This militia and others also defaced or [destroyed](#) a series of Yazidi [shrines](#) in the same area and across the occupation zone, potentially as many as 18 since 2018. Syriac, Armenian, and other Christian communities, too, faced parallel [threats](#); for example, in August, a TFSA-backed court in Afrin detained [Radwan Muhammad](#), a Kurdish convert to Christianity, and charged him with apostasy for his beliefs.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. policy toward Syria in 2020 continued to confront the complicated and shifting dynamics that have confounded it since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and the country's subsequent devolution into armed conflict. In late 2019, then President Donald J. Trump announced the withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeast Syria, in part precipitating Turkey's renewed invasion of parts of the area and prompting uncertainty regarding the sustainability of the U.S.-SDF partnership. It later became clear, however, that a limited [U.S. military presence](#) would remain in the area indefinitely, as was the case throughout 2020.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) remained a crucial conduit of help for beleaguered civilians in Syria; in September, then Acting Administrator John Barsa [announced](#) a new package of \$720 million in humanitarian assistance for Syria, bringing the total of U.S. aid since the start of the conflict to over \$12 billion. The Caesar Civilian Protection Act of 2019 also [came into effect](#) in June 2020, resulting in a series of [U.S. sanctions](#) on Syrian regime officials along with regime-affiliated entities and businesses suspected of enabling or committing atrocities on civilian populations.

Individual Views of Commissioners Gary L. Bauer, Anurima Bhargava, James W. Carr, Frederick A. Davie, Nadine Maenza, Gayle Manchin, Tony Perkins, and Nury Turkel

The recommendations to the U.S. government for Syria have strong bipartisan support among USCIRF's Commissioners.

Many independent organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and even the United Nations, have produced reports documenting the atrocities that the Turkish military and its Islamist militias are committing against Christians, Yazidis, and other religious and ethnic minorities in the areas Turkey has invaded and occupies in northeast Syria. Those atrocities include killings, kidnappings, rape, extortion, and forced conversion, among other crimes. By contrast, the areas governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) have produced remarkable religious freedom conditions allowing all to practice their faith freely, even Islamic converts to Christianity, otherwise unheard of in the region.

Our recommendations to give political recognition to AANES as a legitimate local government and to lift sanctions on just the area it governs would reward it as a government that supports religious freedom—in a way that is consistent with how USCIRF recommends sanctions for those that commit religious freedom violations. We are hopeful these actions would allow AANES to continue to be a refuge for Yazidis, Christians, and other religious and ethnic minorities.