

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Syria remained poor amidst the ongoing civil war and continuing political fragmentation, humanitarian crises, and contested governance. The government of President Bashar al-Assad—which controlled [two-thirds](#) of Syria’s territory—committed egregious human rights abuses such as [arbitrary detention](#) and torture, [enforced disappearance](#) and, with its allies, [civilian-targeted](#) fatal [attacks](#) in opposition- and rebel-held regions. While President Assad appeared in March at a Christian [ecclesiastical conference](#) in Damascus, the government’s treatment of other groups such as Druze [challenged](#) its claims of protecting religious minorities. In July and December, state security and government-affiliated militias responded with [lethal](#) force to Druze communities’ anti-regime protests. The government [angered](#) its [Alawi](#) Muslim base by releasing hundreds of detained Sunni Muslims—whom it has long deemed militants—during the holy season of Ramadan. Yet, the regime kept [at least 136,000](#) people in arbitrary detention and continued to capitalize on the conflict-fueled [sectarianism](#) it helped establish, [appropriating](#) Sunni Muslims’ religious authority and stoking [Alawis’ fear](#) of Sunnis gaining power.

Nonstate actors, such as Turkish-supported armed opposition groups (TSOs) in the [north-central region](#) and former al-Qaeda affiliate and U.S.-designated [terrorist](#) group [Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) in Idlib in the northwest, perpetrated many violations against religious minorities. Emboldened by Turkey’s support and [intensifying](#) military action in northern Syria, TSOs continued to [target religious minorities](#), especially Yazidis, for rape, assassination, kidnapping for ransom, confiscation of property, and desecration of cemeteries and places of worship. In June, TSOs [desecrated](#) Yazidi graves, and in December, on a Yazidi holy day, the [Faylaq al-Sham](#) faction [vandalized](#) a cemetery near Afrin. Despite HTS’s robust [campaign](#) to distance itself from its past massacres and

other crimes against religious minorities, the group’s [governance](#) in the northwest advanced a Salafi-Jihadist ideology [disenfranchising](#) Christians and Druze. HTS continued to expropriate property, restrict religious rituals, arrest and detain religious minorities and [nonconforming](#) Sunni Muslims, and impose religiously justified [dress codes](#) on women. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a longstanding perpetrator of mass atrocities against Syria’s religious minorities, did not regain territory. However, it asserted its presence via a major [prison break](#) in Hasaka in January and numerous attacks on civilians and the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Its morality police (Hisba) used religion to justify [killing](#) people accused of prostitution and witchcraft in Deir al-Zor and to [extort](#) [zakat](#), or religious alms, from local populations. [Turkey, Iran, and Russia](#) contributed to the devastation and displacement of [endangered religious minority communities](#) in Syria via direct military actions such as airstrikes, drones, and bombings. In November, Turkey conducted airstrikes in northern Syria and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan amplified [longstanding threats](#) to escalate land operations there, ostensibly in retaliation for a November 13 bombing in Istanbul that Turkey [attributed](#) to Syrian-based Kurdish terrorists. The U.S. Department of State acknowledged Turkey’s concerns about terrorism but stressed the need for [de-escalation](#). The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and its SDF militia—which have helped stabilize religious freedom conditions in parts of northern Syria—[expressed concern](#) that Turkey’s threatened military encroachment would prevent the SDF’s ability to secure the region against the threat of ISIS insurgency and the TSOs that have laid waste to [religious minority communities](#). Already [displaced](#) within and outside Syria, and vulnerable on the basis of their religious identity, minorities in rebel-held areas face [precarious conditions](#) subject to ruin from any additional crisis, such as the massive 2023 [earthquakes](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Syria as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and redesignate HTS as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
 - Impose targeted sanctions on additional Syrian government agencies and officials, HTS principals, and the leadership of TSOs 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; and
 - Support religious freedom in north and east Syria by: 1) fully implementing General License No. 22 in areas the AANES governs; 2) encouraging inclusion of the AANES in any U.S.-backed political solution for Syria, pursuant to United Nations (UN) Resolution 2254, including Geneva-based talks to resolve the conflict “as the basis for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition;” and 3) assisting the efforts of local partners to ascertain the whereabouts of kidnapped and missing Yazidi women and girls.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise the profile of Syria’s vulnerable religious minority communities through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, or other actions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Freedom of Religion or Belief in Syria](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Welcomes the U.S. Government’s Issuance of a General License Including Northeast Syria](#)
- **Podcast:** [The Suffocating Hold of HTS on Northwest Syria](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Religious Freedom in Syria under Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#)

Background

Article 3 of Syria's [constitution](#) states that the president must be Muslim and that Islamic jurisprudence is a major source of legislation. The same article calls for the government to respect all religions, to protect the personal status of religious communities, and to ensure the freedom to practice religious "rituals that do not prejudice public order." The government continued to [ban](#) Jehovah's Witnesses, restrict proselytization, and prohibit the conversion of Muslims to other religions.

The demography of Syria reflects over 11 years of war resulting in mass casualties and displacement. Over 87 percent of the almost 21.5 million-person [population](#) is Muslim, with 74 percent Sunni Muslims and the remaining 13 percent Shi'a, Alawi, and Ismaili Muslims. Christians—including Syriac-Assyrians, Maronites, Armenians, and other groups—constitute between two and 10 percent of the population, with some humanitarian organizations reporting that war-related displacement and migration has [diminished](#) Christian numbers from 1.5 million before 2011 to only 300,000 in 2022. Druze comprise approximately three percent, the Jewish community is now essentially [gone](#), and estimates for Yazidis are obscured by the Syrian government inaccurately classifying them as Muslims.

The war—triggered in 2011 by the government's repression of peaceful protests—has [narrowed](#) in territorial scope. Major areas of ongoing conflict include the northern swath encompassing the border with Turkey, Idlib Governorate in the west, the Jazira region in the east, and three Turkish "cantons" including Afrin and those formed by the Euphrates Shield and Peace Spring military operations.

Religious Minorities' Concerns

Throughout the war, Druze communities have [avoided](#) countering the Assad regime's portrayal of itself as the protector of religious minorities from militant jihadist groups. However, in [July](#) and [December](#), Druze-majority villages in the southern province of Suweida staged large protests expressing long-simmering resentment against the Assad regime, resulting in a government crackdown and [fatal](#) clashes with Syrian security forces and affiliated militias. Non-regime-held regions such as Idlib have proven even more inhospitable to Druze. At least 53 [kidnapping](#) cases in Druze-majority villages of Idlib Governorate took place between January and August 2022: 23 by HTS, 16 by ISIS, and 14 by other Islamist organizations. Druze in Idlib have expressed concern that despite HTS's public overtures to them, the militant group cannot or will not bring to justice foreign-origin Islamist fighters who target the Druze for violence, as in the case of the [murder](#) of an elderly couple in August.

Christians experienced political disenfranchisement as well as violent attacks. In July, an [explosion](#) destroyed a Greek Orthodox church during its inauguration in the Hama Governorate, which HTS partially controls. Christian communities in some parts of Idlib

[approached extinction](#) due to displacement and flight from TSO and HTS harassment and attacks. [Those who remain](#) in other villages face HTS and other militant groups' restrictions on their rituals and houses of worship, appropriation of land and other property, kidnappings, and murder.

While the international community [took steps](#) toward [accountability](#) for Syrian ISIS members who participated in the Yazidi genocide that began in 2014, Yazidis within Syria remain [subject](#) to legal discrimination across multiple regions' frameworks of governance, and militant jihadist groups target them for forced conversion, rape and other sexual violence, and murder. The SDF continues to [rescue](#) genocide survivors still enslaved within ISIS fighter cells, but in 2022, at least [2,763](#) Yazidi women and girls kidnapped from Iraq were still missing, many [potentially hidden](#) within northeast Syrian camps detaining ISIS fighters [and their families](#).

Religious Freedom Conditions in the North and East

Areas governed by the AANES remained more conducive to religious freedom than government or rebel-held regions. The Kurdish-initiated, [ethnically diverse, and multi-confessional](#) administration continued to support pluralistic initiatives. In January, the AANES hosted the [International Conference on Mesopotamian Religions and Beliefs](#), featuring representatives from a variety of religious and political institutions across the Middle East and North Africa and from numerous faiths and ethnic backgrounds. Some Sunni Muslim Arab and Christian residents objected to the AANES's educational reforms, such as bans in October on [niqabs](#) in school settings and on Assyrian schools' use of the Syrian government's [curriculum](#) over that of the AANES. Overall, however, the AANES's stabilization of the region for religious minorities contrasted favorably with the violence and displacement advanced by TSOs and the Turkish military.

Key U.S. Policy

[U.S.-Syria relations](#) have been strained for several decades, and since 1979, the United States has named Syria on its list of state sponsors of terrorism. Over the course of the present civil war, the United States has introduced several [sanctions](#) on Syria and [related](#) individual actors, pursuant to the [Caesar Civilian Protection Act of 2019](#) and various [executive orders](#). In May, the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced the release of a [general license](#) authorizing wider forms of private economic activity in certain non-regime-held [areas](#), including—and as recommended by USCIRF since 2021—those within the AANES, a region [uniquely supportive](#) of religious freedom.

In May and [September](#), the State Department announced \$808 million and \$756 million, respectively, in additional humanitarian assistance to Syria, making the United States the largest humanitarian donor since the beginning of the conflict.