

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom in Syria remained under serious threat, particularly amid the country's ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis. The most notable positive development was the [successful conclusion](#) in March to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (GCDI) campaign to clear Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters from their final stronghold, in the eastern town of Baghouz. While it still actively controlled territory, ISIS' genocidal ideology and actions [represented](#) the single greatest threat to religious freedom for the country's myriad of religious minorities as well as the Sunni Muslim majority. However, the failure to provide a durable solution to the more than 68,000 fighters and family members [placed](#) in detention camps, and the persistence of [attacks](#) by ISIS remnants on civilians as well as GCDI and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) personnel, were important reminders that the ISIS threat [remained](#).

Furthermore, although the year began with a reversal of U.S. plans to withdraw forces from the northeast, that pullout and a long-threatened Turkish [invasion took place](#) in October, precipitating the displacement of some ethnic and religious communities from a so-called "safe zone" that Turkey established with its Free Syrian Army (FSA) allies. These events also [raised fears](#) that the Turkish government had begun to move Syrian refugees

en masse—many originally from other parts of Syria—into this occupation zone in the sort of forced religious, ethnic, and cultural replacement that it oversaw in Afrin in 2018. Meanwhile, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) maintained control of the rest of the northeast and continued to uphold its commitment to providing for a relatively high degree of religious freedom and other civil rights in areas under its authority.

While there was less evidence in 2019 of explicit religious freedom violations in areas under regime control, the government continued to perpetrate massive repression of human rights, including [severe repercussions](#) for returnees and communities suspected of participation in anti-regime activism or fighting. Conditions for religious and ethnic minorities—along with all civilians—remained dire in Idlib Province where regime forces and Iranian, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Russian [allies](#) targeted armed factions and [civilian infrastructure](#) in their effort since April to retake remaining rebel-held areas. Although it remained difficult to clearly assess religious freedom conditions under such circumstances, reports emerged that the U.S.-designated terrorist group [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), which operates in Idlib province, persisted in religious repression, including the [assault and stoning](#) of an Armenian woman in July.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Syria as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Designate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) as an "entity of particular concern," or EPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA, rather than limiting the EPC designation only to its al-Nusra Front subsidiary;
- Provide assistance to support Syria's vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities under the terms of the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2018 ([P.L. 115-300](#)); utilize the resources enacted under the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018 ([P.L. 115-441](#)), and release the full amount of the additional \$50 million that the White House [announced](#) in mid-October;
- Exert significant pressure on Turkey to provide a timeline for its withdrawal from Syria, while ensuring that neither its military nor FSA allies expand their area of control in northeast Syria, carry out religious and ethnic cleansing of that area, or otherwise abuse the rights of vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities there; and
- Expand U.S. engagement with and assistance to the AANES, including examining a potential sanctions exemption for only AANES-governed areas as well as contributing to efforts, through relevant nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and like-minded international partners, to fund and develop local programs to promote intra- and inter-religious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and advance religious freedom and related rights.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites](#)
- **Press Statement:** [Turkish Offensive in Northeast Syria](#)
- **Press Statement:** [International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief](#)

Background

[Estimates](#) place Syria's population at just under 20 million, but, [as of November 2019](#), 6.7 million Syrians remained outside of the country as refugees and another 6.1 million were internally displaced persons (IDPs). That population is both ethnically and religiously diverse; around 74 percent is Sunni Muslim and 13 percent Alawite, Shi'a, and Isma'ili Muslim, while Assyrian, Maronite, Armenian and other Christians comprise 10 percent, Druze 3 percent, and a small number of Syrian Jews remain in Damascus and Aleppo. However, it is difficult to assess the accuracy of these figures amid the country's nine-year conflict, given the staggering number of refugees and IDPs.

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 all opposition.

End of ISIS-Controlled Territory

During its time in power, ISIS perpetrated massive atrocities across the areas under its control, including kidnapping and executing thousands of Christians, Yazidis, Shi'a Muslims, and fellow Sunni Muslims who opposed its authority. The fall of its last outpost in Syria in March 2019 therefore represented an important step for the protection of religious freedom in the entire region. However, despite the loss of territory and the indefinite [imprisonment](#) of fighters and their families [under harsh conditions](#), ISIS remnants continued to attack GCDI and SDF forces as well as religious minorities and other vulnerable communities. In [July](#) and [December](#), for example, ISIS-suspected car bombs detonated near churches in Qamishli, wounding a number of civilians. On November 11, ISIS claimed responsibility for the assassination of Armenian Catholic Father Hovsep Bedoyan and his father near Deir al-Zor. Furthermore, an August report to U.S. Congress on GCDI operations, from the Lead Inspector General for oversight of overseas contingency operations, [warned](#) that ISIS likely retained 14,000-18,000 fighters between Syria and Iraq, who were already showing signs of resurgence.

Fragile Conditions in the Northeast

Areas of northeastern Syria under AANES control—under SDF protection but with limited support from the United States and GCDI at year's end—remained a crucial center of positive religious freedom conditions in Syria. As in the prior year, AANES authorities continued to allow Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and others to openly practice their faiths and express their religious identities.

However, the AANES's hard-fought ability to foster an environment of religious and other freedoms remained at serious risk at the end of 2019, due to the partial withdrawal of U.S. forces in October and the subsequent incursion of Turkish forces. While the latter claimed to limit their attacks on civilians within the 75-mile strip of territorial control, human rights groups have [accused](#) the FSA—under Turkey's control—of serious human rights abuses. On October 12, Ahrar al-Sharqiya fighters pulled Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf from her car and [executed her](#), while just days later, members of another militia reportedly [defaced](#) an Armenian church in Tel Abyad in an attempt to make it appear that Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) had filled it with their propaganda. Over 200,000 people fled initially from the area as a result of this violence and for fear of an expansion of Turkish operations; around 75,000 [remained](#) in IDP shelters or schools in the northeast or in [refugee camps](#) in northern Iraq by late 2019, and estimated 117,000 civilians had [returned](#). According to USCIRF sources, others who stayed in place—including members of a community of Kurdish Christians from Muslim backgrounds—had not yet faced direct violence, but [remained](#) in a constant state of fear. A fragile détente developed in that border zone by the end of the year as a result of the Turkish, Russian, Syrian, and U.S. contingents who [patrolled](#) the main roads to prevent escalation. Religious minorities in other areas that Turkey seized earlier, such as Afrin, continued to experience persecution and marginalization, especially displaced Yazidis and Christians.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. policy toward Syria in 2019 continued to face the shifting dynamics that have confounded it since the outbreak of armed conflict. U.S. leadership of the GCDI, in partnership with the SDF and other allies, contributed to the most significant breakthrough in 2019: the collapse of ISIS territory in March. However, northeastern Syria—once the center of ISIS power and yet the area that has shown the most potential for expanded religious freedom over the last two years—once again presented a policy challenge to the administration of President Donald J. Trump. The White House [announced](#) a full U.S. withdrawal from northeastern Syria on October 6, [following talks](#) with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The subsequent incursion of Turkish forces [prompted](#) a flurry of negotiations among the area's major players, a White House [warning](#) to Turkey to limit operations to the border region, and an eventual ceasefire, [brokered](#) by Vice President Michael R. Pence and Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo. U.S. forces resumed limited patrols and [pledged](#) to protect vital resources in AANES-governed territory, contributing to an awkward détente among the various armed forces operating along the border. The United States continued to support humanitarian relief efforts throughout Syria, including the [distribution](#) of nearly \$1.5 million to such initiatives in 2019. In October, the White House [announced](#) its allotment of an additional \$50 million toward stabilization and relief efforts for vulnerable communities in Syria, but the actual disbursement of those funds remained unclear at the end of the reporting period.