

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Syria remained poor, though many of the worst violations occurred in areas under the control of nonstate entities. While the government of President Bashar al-Assad committed a range of other human rights abuses, its violations of freedom of religion or belief were generally political and administrative in nature. Nonstate entities in conflict with the Assad government, including the U.S.-designated [terrorist](#) organization [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) and several Turkish-supported Syrian Islamist opposition groups (TSOs), were the primary drivers of severe religious freedom violations in Syria.

In the 70 percent of territory under the Assad government's control, political threats to religious freedom included continuing favoritism toward members of the president's Alawi Muslim community and pursuing bureaucratic control of Sunni Muslim religious authority. The government continued to style itself as a protector of religious minorities, although some faith communities diverged from their longstanding acquiescence to the Alawi Muslim-dominated administration. For a second year, Druze in the southern city of Suweida staged antiregime protests, this time with more visible support from prominent Druze religious leaders such as Sheikh Hikmat Hajri. In government-controlled parts of the Hama governorate in the west, authorities did not adequately address social hostilities against religious minorities or the apparent religious dimensions of some crimes. For example, community liaisons reported that the August killing of a young Christian man in Hama occurred after his assailants professed outrage that a Christian had attempted to break up their street fight. In a December speech, President Assad

falsely claimed there was no evidence that six million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust.

Parts of northern Syria remained among the last territories still in the hands of rebel groups opposed to the Assad regime. These included TSOs as well as HTS, the de facto governors of Idlib in the northwest and whose Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) administers the territory. In 2023, HTS continued its campaign to erase its former ties to al-Qaeda and reposition itself as a state-like administrative regime that acknowledges religious diversity. The group publicized its tolerance of the first Christian liturgy celebrated in Idlib in over a decade and pledged to redistribute property it had confiscated from Christians and Druze. However, HTS continued to impose its interpretation of Sunni Islam on both Muslim and non-Muslim residents of Idlib. In August, the SSG invoked its interpretation of Shari'a in new rules for Idlib's schools, and HTS security forces continued their arbitrary and unlawful [detention](#) of human rights advocates and private individuals critical of HTS's "rule or religious doctrine."

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. The SDF led missions to locate and rescue Yazidi women and girls whom ISIS kidnapped from Iraq as part of its 2014 [genocide](#). Almost 2,700 women and girls remained missing, with an unidentified number presumed still in Syrian detainee camps and ISIS enclaves.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Syria on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom, pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- 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 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 Syria by: 1) fully implementing General License No. 22 in areas the AANES governs and encouraging the inclusion of the AANES in a political solution to the Syrian conflict; 2) assisting the efforts of local partners to ascertain the whereabouts of kidnapped and missing Yazidi women and girls; and (3) taking diplomatic action in multilateral fora to facilitate the flow of humanitarian and reconstruction aid and ensure its effective disbursement to vulnerable communities, including religious minorities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom and issues affecting religious minorities in Syria-related legislation and in hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, and other actions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Anti-Conversion Laws Compendium](#)
- **Special Report:** [Blasphemy Law Compendium](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#)

Background

Under Article 3 of Syria's [constitution](#), the president must be Muslim, and Islamic jurisprudence is a major source of legislation. Although the constitution provides for respect toward all religions and protection of different religious communities, the government has wide latitude to limit religious rituals if they appear to "prejudice public order." Bans on Jehovah's Witnesses remain in place, and other laws [prohibit](#) interfaith marriage and the conversion of Muslims to other religions.

Thirteen years of violent conflict have shaped Syria's current population through mass internal displacement and dispersal of refugees throughout the world. The [population](#) of 22.9 million is estimated at 87 percent Muslim, of whom 74 percent are Sunni, with Alawi, Ismaili, and Shi'a Muslims together constituting 13 percent. Druze are approximately three percent of the population. Estimates of Christians—believed to have fallen to between 2.5 and 10 percent—and Yazidis were obscured by these groups' displacement and emigration and the government's forced classification of the Yazidi religion as a sect of Islam. The Jewish population is now nonexistent, reflecting decades of government persecution and forced emigration.

Threats to Religious Freedom in Non-Regime Areas

The Assad government continued its partnerships with Russia and Iran to renew its offensive against nonstate entities in areas outside regime control. Observers reported that regime and allied forces' attacks on civilian areas affected some houses of worship. On February 6, 2023, two high-magnitude earthquakes decimated large areas of the same region, which is home to religious minority communities. The Assad regime allegedly [mismanaged](#) and embezzled external aid to earthquake victims, and advocates for religious minorities expressed concern over potentially discriminatory distribution of aid.

Turkey posed one of the most significant threats to religious freedom in Syria via its occupation of territory and its military strikes in and near AANES jurisdictions, in pursuit of what the Turkish government termed Kurdish [terrorists](#). Beginning on October 5, 2023, Turkish forces intensified their attacks on civilian infrastructure in Hasakah, Raqqa, and Aleppo. Human rights advocates reported patterns of Turkish shelling, drones, and airstrikes targeting communities with religious minority populations. Factions of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) destroyed mosques in Afrin and bulldozed the Yazidi shrine of Chal Khaneh and other religious monuments and cemeteries. The Turkish government's permissive stance toward the brutality of these TSOs against civilian populations and their targeting of religious minorities—such as confiscating property and forcing at least two Yazidis in Afrin to [convert](#) to Islam—rendered

Turkish-controlled areas among the least secure and most damaging to religious freedom in Syria.

Key U.S. Policy

While the Arab League readmitted Syria in May 2023 after more than a decade of suspension, the United States avoided normalization of [relations](#) with Syria. In May and September, Congress introduced the bipartisan [Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act](#), which would bar the United States from recognizing any government led by Bashar al-Assad and allow for additional sanctions, reinforcing and expanding the 2019 [Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act](#). In August, U.S. lawmakers [visited](#) rebel-held northwest Syria in what was U.S. politicians' first publicly reported trip to the country in six years.

The United States supported regional [stability](#) via an ongoing counterterrorism program and implementation of the USCIRF-[recommended](#) General License No. 22, which [authorizes](#) U.S. economic activity in areas controlled by the AANES. Throughout the year, Iran-linked attacks on U.S. military targets increased, sometimes prompting U.S. retaliatory strikes and intensifying following Hamas's October 7 terrorist attack on Israel and the resulting conflict in Gaza.

The United States continued to designate terrorists with links to Syria and maintained its robust sanctions program against Syria and related individual actors, pursuant to the Caesar Act and various [executive orders](#). In April, the U.S. Department of State [designated](#) a leader of Hurras al-Din (HaD), which shares HTS's roots as an al-Qaeda affiliate, as a global terrorist, citing his group's responsibility for "violence targeting members of religious minority groups." In May, the U.S. Department of the Treasury, in coordination with the government of Turkey, applied joint [sanctions](#) on potential fundraisers for militant groups, including HTS. In August, the Treasury Department announced [sanctions](#) against TSOs with records of serious human rights abuses.

In June, the State Department [welcomed](#) the initiation of legal proceedings by Canada and the Netherlands at the International Court of Justice to "hold Syria accountable for the reported torture of thousands of individuals at the hands of the Assad regime." That same month, the United States announced [\\$920 million](#) in additional humanitarian assistance for Syria, the largest aid package to date. The allotment, expanded in response to the February earthquakes, brought U.S. humanitarian [assistance](#) to [\\$1.1 billion](#) in fiscal year 2023 and almost \$16.9 billion since the 2011 onset of the civil war.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department renewed its [designation](#) of HTS as an EPC under IRFA, in alignment with USCIRF's [recommendation](#). However, it did not designate Syria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) or place it on the Special Watch List for particularly severe or severe violations of religious freedom.