

USCIRF—RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Syria remained poor, with both state and nonstate actors contributing to violations. At the close of the reporting period, the nationwide system of political institutions had begun a complex and ongoing [transition](#) under nonstate actors, many of which pledged to respect the rights of religious minorities yet maintained concerning records of religious freedom violations against those very communities. Throughout most of the year, the former government of President Bashar al-Assad engaged in ongoing and systematic restrictions on religious freedom, particularly administrative ones, favoring the Alawite minority and repressing Sunni Muslim, Christian, Druze, and other communities. Its offensives in rebel-held areas killed Sunni civilians and destroyed their mosques. In parts of northern Syria, U.S.-designated [terrorist](#) organization [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) and several Turkish-supported Syrian Islamist opposition groups (TSOs) continued to restrict or violate religious freedom as well. Late in the year, HTS led a coalition of Islamist and other rebel groups, including some TSOs, in an offensive against the government, culminating in the December capture of Damascus and toppling the Assad family's 54-year regime.

Despite seeking legitimacy in recent years through its Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), HTS continued to impose its interpretation of Sunni Islam on both Muslim and non-Muslim residents in Idlib. In July, the SSG Directorate of Religious Affairs announced the return to Idlib of 30 internally displaced Christian families, downplaying HTS's past dispossession of Christians and ignoring its ongoing disenfranchisement of religious minorities. Throughout

the year, Idlib residents staged protests against the authoritarian rule of HTS, which continued to jail and [torture](#) dissidents. In late November, some Christian residents of Aleppo and Hama fled HTS's sudden offensives into those areas, fearing a replication of the group's religiously repressive policies in Idlib.

In parts of Aleppo and Ras al-Ein, TSOs—including Syrian National Army (SNA) factions—terrorized Kurds and religious minorities with extortion, detention, and torture. Despite one SNA leader's promise in July to protect Christians, in September a commander of the Jaysh al-Sharqiyya faction reportedly confiscated 500 acres of land from Christian farmers in Ras al-Ein. In December, the SNA took control of some Kurdish-led parts of northern Syria such as Manbij, reportedly abusing and violently ejecting Kurds, Yazidis, and Christians. This offensive, as well as Turkey's ongoing military strikes in the region—purportedly against Kurdish [terrorists](#)—imperiled religious minority communities in northeast Syria, where the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) throughout the year emphasized the religious inclusivity of its government and U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

2024 marked a decade since the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) began its campaign of [genocide](#) and crimes against humanity targeting Iraqi and Syrian religious minorities. Although ISIS did not reclaim territory, SDF and U.S. military [officials](#) reported it had increased attacks during the year. The SDF continued efforts to locate and rescue nearly 2,600 missing Iraqi Yazidi women and girls, many of whom likely remained hidden in al-Hol and other enclaves since ISIS abducted and enslaved them in 2014.

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, freeze the assets of, and bar the entry to the United States of Syrian entities, including nonstate actors and their leaders, responsible for religious freedom violations; and
- Support religious freedom in Syria by 1) fully implementing General License No. 22 in areas the DAANES governs and encouraging its religious inclusion efforts; 2) offering technical assistance, including identification technologies to assist local partners in locating missing Yazidi women and girls; and 3) maintaining direct humanitarian aid to populations in non-regime areas subject to religious freedom abuses by nonstate or other state actors.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom and issues affecting religious minorities, including

the need for continued U.S. support of repatriations and justice and accountability measures for ISIS members and former regime officials, in Syria-related legislation and in hearings, meetings, letters, and congressional delegation trips abroad; and

- Pass legislation funding the documentation and investigation of crimes against humanity that targeted religious minorities in Syria under the Assad government, to support international efforts to hold accountable violators of freedom of religion or belief.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Solemnly Commemorates the Tenth Anniversary of ISIS's Genocide against Iraqi and Syrian Religious Minorities](#)
- **Podcast:** [10 Years On: Ongoing Threats to Religious Minority Survivors of ISIS's Genocide](#)
- **Podcast:** [Responses to Genocide: Two Former U.S. Officials Reflect on ISIS's Genocide in Iraq and Syria](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

Syria's constitution requires the president to be Muslim and identifies Islamic jurisprudence as a major source of legislation. It provides for the protection of religious communities' personal status, which the former government interpreted to mean separate family laws for Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Druze. In 2024, the former government kept in place bans on Jehovah's Witnesses and restrictions on interfaith marriage and the conversion of Muslims to other religions. It also did not allow former Muslims to register as members of the religion to which they converted.

Demographic figures have fluctuated due to almost 14 years of mass displacement within Syria and to other countries, as well as an influx in late 2024 of hundreds of thousands returning Syrian refugees expelled from host countries and new refugees fleeing Israeli military operations in Lebanon. Syria's [population](#) of 23.9 million is 87 percent Muslim, of whom approximately 74 percent are Sunni, with Alawi, Ismaili, and Shi'a Muslims together constituting 13 percent. Druze are three percent of the population. Proportions of Christians and Yazidis were obscured by these groups' sustained displacement and emigration as well as the government's forced classification of the Yazidi religion as a sect of Islam.

Other Threats to Religious Freedom in Regime and Non-Regime Areas

While it held power during most of the year, the Assad regime continued to use one-year military conscription deferments to pressure Christians into outwardly supporting its operations and broader legitimacy. Druze communities and religious leaders in Suweida continued anti-regime protests, departing from their past tacit support of the government. Despite some ostensible concessions, the regime fatally shot a Druze protester in February, and appointed as governor of Suweida a retired general who helped lead the 2011 government crackdowns that sparked Syria's civil war.

In August, the Assad government announced an initiative to monitor digital platforms for "indecent content" that "violates public morals and offends Syrian societal values and national constants." The program built upon Law No. 19 of 2024, which grants overbroad powers to the Ministry of Information, supplementing the state's arbitrary enforcement of the Cybercrime Law of 2022 exposing Sunni Muslims, nonbelievers, and others to prosecution or detention for online content transgressing the state's religiously justified standards.

Five years since a U.S.-partnered international [coalition](#) achieved the territorial defeat of ISIS, some countries continued to [repatriate](#) and prosecute citizens who joined or aided the terrorist group. Approximately 10,000 ISIS fighters and over 44,000 ISIS [family](#) members remained in prisons and internment camps in northeast Syria following recent repatriations. However, SDF wardens struggled to maintain sanitary and secure conditions, and reports described [al-Hol](#) and other camps as breeding grounds for ISIS ideology. Survivors of

ISIS's 2015 raid on Assyrian Christian villages in the al-Khabur Valley—from which at least one kidnapped Assyrian woman remained [missing](#)—expressed fear of the potential for renewed attacks.

Turkey's military strikes on north and east Syria, as well as its permissive stance toward religiously motivated and targeted TSO violence, created a dire humanitarian situation in and near DAANES jurisdictions. By November, multiple communities in northeast Syria, including religious minority villages, had suffered more than a year of severe [water](#) and electricity deprivation due to a long-term Turkish offensive. SNA brigades reportedly also continued to harass, abuse, and confiscate land from Yazidis and Christians, fueling their further emigration and contributing to potentially Turkish-planned demographic shifts to reduce the local presence of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minority groups. In June, members of SNA faction al-Jabha al-Shamiyya destroyed the Yazidi Mannan shrine in a village near Afrin.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States opposed normalization of [relations](#) with the Assad government, with the U.S. Department of State noting in November the regime's [noncompliance](#) with a 2023 International Court of Justice (ICJ) order to prevent state-sponsored torture. In response to the regime's downfall in December, then President Joseph R. Biden stated the United States would [vigilantly](#) monitor new leaders' commitment to the rule of law and "the protection of religious and ethnic minorities." In late December, then Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf [met](#) with HTS, emphasizing the need for an inclusive government in Syria that recognizes the rights of diverse ethnic and religious communities.

The United States [commemorated](#) the 10th anniversary of ISIS's launch of genocide and other atrocities against Syrian and Iraqi religious minorities. In May, the State Department announced the [repatriation](#) of 11 U.S. citizens from ISIS camps in northeast Syria and encouraged other governments to take similar steps. U.S. support for regional stability included an ongoing [counterterrorism](#) program and maintenance of the USCIRF-[recommended](#) General License No. 22. However, DAANES representatives reported that some U.S.-based banks had expressed reluctance to offer them accounts, notwithstanding the General License's [authorization](#) of U.S. economic activity in DAANES-controlled areas. The United States maintained and imposed new economic [sanctions](#) and designations for actors linked to the Assad government and visa [restrictions](#) on regime officials involved in human rights abuses.

The outgoing U.S. Congress considered but did not pass legislation to bar the United States from [normalizing](#) relations with President Assad's government and allow for additional sanctions in [expansion](#) of the 2019 [Caesar Civilian Protection Act](#).

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) HTS as an EPC under IRFA for engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom.