UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on*
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

POLICY UPDATE: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND U.S. POLICY IN POST-ASSAD SYRIA

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Religious Freedom and U.S. Policy in Post-Assad Syria

Overview

At the end of 2024, over 13 years since the onset of Syria's protracted civil war, the country's political landscape dramatically shifted when a coalition of Islamist rebels toppled the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Religious freedom *conditions* had suffered over the course of the civil war under a variety of state and nonstate actors: the Assad regime, the Salafi-jihadi fighters who would later overthrow it, and Turkish-backed political opposition and militias (TSOs). Now, as Damascus continues its political transition under members of U.S.-designated *terrorist* organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—itself a *violator* of religious freedom—freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) faces both ongoing threats and some opportunities for potential growth.

Since then, loyalists to the transitional authorities have targeted civilians in the west and south through mass sectarian attacks, while Turkish military strikes and support for Islamist militias in the north have continued to pose threats to diverse religious communities in the semi-autonomous northeast. Notwithstanding these and other threats to religious freedom, Syria is poised for the reemergence of civil society and religious communities to advocate for FoRB under transitional authorities keen to maintain recent U.S. and international sanctions relief.

The whirlwind shifts in the Syrian political landscape present the U.S. administration with emerging challenges in reshaping its Syria policy, which the United States had long calibrated in reference to the Assad regime. As of this writing, both religious freedom conditions in Syria and related U.S. foreign policy—including President Donald J. Trump's May announcement to lift sanctions on Syria—remain subject to rapid change. This policy update provides an overview of religious freedom conditions since the fall of Assad, refining USCIRF's recent *recommendations* to the U.S. government in its 2025 USCIRF Annual Report to address the country's rapidly evolving conditions.

The End of the Assad Regime and Its Religious Freedom Abuses

In the last few years of its rule, the Assad government controlled up to 70 percent of Syria, having regained some territory during the war through the support of its Russian and Iranian partners. The former regime was an ostensibly secular one, although President Assad and an elite cadre of fellow Alawis—an offshoot of Shi'a Islam and a minority in Syria—wielded religious sectarianism as a tool of war, painting members of the Sunni Muslim-majority opposition as potential terrorists. While the Assad regime committed many grave human rights *abuses* over the course

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of the war, in recent years its public FoRB violations were increasingly political and administrative in nature. For example, government institutions *coopted* Sunni Muslim religious authority, favored Alawis for many key leadership roles, and purported to protect other religious minorities such as Christians and Druze to pressure them into outward support for the regime.

USCIRF has long adapted its policy recommendations to reflect this dynamic. In earlier years of the war, the Commission had recommended Syria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), a designation reserved for state perpetrators of the most egregious FoRB abuses. In 2024, USCIRF began *recommending* that the U.S. Department of State name Syria to the Special Watch List for state violators of severe abuses of religious freedom.

Post-Assad Religious Freedom Violations, Including Attacks on Religious Minorities

In late November and early December 2024, HTS led a coalition of Islamist and other rebel groups, including some TSOs, in a sudden takeover of key cities including Aleppo, Hama, and Homs before reaching Damascus on December 8, toppling the Assad regime. Some Christian residents of Aleppo and Hama fled HTS's offensives in those cities, citing fears HTS would institute religiously *repressive* policies patterned after those in Idlib, its northwestern stronghold during the war. These include forced sex segregation in some public institutions, draconian enforcement of prayer and other worship protocols for Muslims, and arbitrary detention and torture of dissidents. However, later reports suggest HTS exercised comparative discipline in executing its offensives, such as instructing fighters to refrain from attacking Christian institutions. In the first few weeks after those advancements, social media users circulated numerous reports of alleged HTS-led assaults on religious minorities, especially Christians and Alawis. Some community members have suggested many of these early reports were inaccurate or even fabricated, possibly by domestic or regional actors with an interest in fomenting sectarian strife or characterizing minorities as hostile to Syria's new perceived liberators.

However, some reports withstood scrutiny or received confirmation from the affected communities. Shortly after HTS took full control of Hama in December 2024, unidentified fighters attacked at least two churches with gunfire, desecrating the cemetery and vandalizing crosses of one. The Greek Orthodox Diocese of Hama confirmed gunfire on December 18 at one of its churches, thanking the HTS-led transitional security forces for their swift apprehension of the alleged assailants. In Aleppo, some Kurdish Christians—who constitute a significant proportion of Syria's recent converts to Christianity—reported on rebels' orders in December for a female parishioner to put on a hijab despite her protests that she was a Christian.

Transitional Authorities' Loyalists and Affiliates Commit Sectarian Massacres in Early 2025

Less than a month after the fall of the regime, other reports shed light on kidnappings, arson attacks, and revenge killings of Alawi, who have long faced resentment from other groups as the Assad family's coreligionists and presumed beneficiaries of the regime. In late December, possibly in retaliation for an attack on their ranks, unidentified rebels burned Alawi civilians' houses in coastal Latakia, while others waged an arson attack on a major Alawi shrine in Aleppo. In parts of Hama Province, men with possible links to the transitional authorities' security forces reportedly executed Alawis and Twelver Shi'a Muslims.

Source: Congressional Research Service, 2025

In January and February of 2025, additional reports surfaced of HTS loyalists' door-to-door interrogations and select executions of Alawis in their heartland along the Mediterranean coast. By March, the murders escalated to full-blown sectarian massacres of Alawi in Latakia and Tartus, reportedly initially in response to local pro-Assad remnants organizing operations. Some early estimates suggest at least 1,300 people, mostly civilians—almost 65 percent of whom were Alawi—died

in the first 72 hours of those massacres. Later tallies put the confirmed death toll at between 1,700 and 2,246, with the caveat that the actual numbers might be much higher. Recent investigative journalism has documented several examples of the massacres in Jableh and other parts of the coast, noting the executioners—including many foreign fighters with uneven command of Arabic—*slaughtered* civilian families with no known links to the Assad regime, deploying religiously charged slurs against their victims such as "Alaw[i] Nusayri pigs." Further evidence suggests anti-Alawi sentiment may have informed the interim authorities' general mobilization of troops in response to a small initial Alawi insurgence as well as their General Security forces' apparent failure to intervene in armed men's door-to-door executions of several Alawi families.

Although anti-Alawi violence has reduced in scale since March, it has not decisively ended. In May, for example, fighters allegedly affiliated with the transitional Ministries of Defense and Interior kidnapped multiple people from villages in Latakia and Tartus, including Sheikh Saleh Mansour, a prominent Alawi religious leader from Ras al-Ein village.

Syriac Orthodox interlocutors, referring to the chain of events as "Alawi pogroms," stated in March that while the death toll of Christians in their part of Tartus was at that time limited to three people, Islamist militia members regularly intimidated and taunted Christians at checkpoints and looted the homes of Christians with no known links to the Assad regime. Both Christian and Alawi community advocates have identified several assailants as "foreign men," possibly from Central Asia or Uyghur Muslim regions of China. A sizeable number of HTS and TSO members or affiliates hail from these and other countries outside the Arabic-speaking world and have records of *attacking* religious minorities near Idlib. These Syriac community members emphasized that some Sunni Muslim residents offered aid to their Alawi and Christian neighbors despite the violence and harassment, citing diverse religious communities' shared desire for "a free democratic country."

A new wave of mass killings continued in May, this time against the Druze community in areas surrounding Damascus. These massacres began in late April, when militant Islamist supporters of the transitional authorities fired on Druze residents in the Damascus suburb of Jaramana, kicking off several days of clashes with a death toll of at least 134. Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, a Druze religious leader, described the killings as a "genocidal campaign" against Syria's Druze. The initial attacks reportedly retaliated against Druze civilians, including religious leaders whom the assailants blamed for an audio clip circulating on social media that allegedly insulted the Prophet Muhammad. The transitional Ministry of Interior quickly began an investigation into the violence. The Ministry's findings dismissed the initial accusations against the Druze community, but in doing so it shed light on authorities' approach to blasphemy as a legitimate category of legal offense.

Transitional Authorities Promise FoRB, with Mixed Results

Throughout the first few months of their rule—as early as the November 2024 takeover of Aleppo—the transitional authorities have made repeated assurances of protection and inclusion to fearful religious minorities, particularly Christians. As self-appointed interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa promised to form a "comprehensive" government inclusive of all Syrians, including religious and ethnic minorities, echoing his past conciliatory gestures as HTS leader to Christians and Druze in Idlib Province. The new administration has also taken some visible steps: for example, in January, authorities announced they had thwarted an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) plot to bomb the Sayyida Zeinab shrine sacred to Shi'a Muslims, who later met with al-Sharaa to air their fears of future sectarian attacks. Authorities likewise denounced and quickly attributed to ISIS the June *bombing* of Mar Elias Greek Orthodox Church in Damascus; at the time of this report, no actor had claimed responsibility for that suicide attack, which killed at least 25 Christian worshipers during a Sunday liturgy. In February, interim authorities also held a one-day national Dialogue conference in Damascus that brought in Representatives of some religious and ethnic minority groups.

Deficiencies in FoRB Protections in Early Transitional Constitutional Declaration

Following that national dialogue, al-Sharaa tasked a seven-member committee with drafting a temporary constitution. He signed a temporary constitutional declaration in March that confirmed his rebel cohort's appointment of him as interim president and that, in effect, would keep in power his HTS-led administration for a five-year transitional period. The declaration also contains several provisions with implications for religious freedom in Syria, such as enshrining Islamic jurisprudence as *the* major source of legislation—a more specific formulation than the general deference to "the principles of Shari'a" prevalent across much of the region. Additionally, while the document promises freedom of belief, it makes specific provision for only the three "heavenly religions" (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity), exposing a potentially

wide range of other religious groups—especially those that Salafi-jihadi ideology often regards as deviants from Islam—to religious freedom restrictions.

Transitional Authorities Appoint FoRB Violators to Key Roles

Many HTS members beyond al-Sharaa have assumed roles within the interim administration, with potentially concerning implications for religious freedom. The interim Ministry of Defense has retained many HTS foreign fighters—among the most militant violators of religious freedom during the Syrian civil war—and installed them within Syria's military ranks. Al-Sharaa temporarily appointed and subsequently reinstated as intelligence chief Anas Khattab—a U.S.-designated *terrorist*, former al-Qaeda commander, and Jabhat al-Nusra cofounder. Residents of northeast Syria staged protests in May to decry the military appointment of Abu Hatem Shaqra, a.k.a. Ahmed al-Hayes, the U.S.-*designated* and sanctioned leader of TSO faction *Ahrar al-Sharqiya*. He is notorious for his personal participation in executions and egregious FoRB-related abuses such as recruitment of ISIS members and *trafficking* of Yazidi women and girls into sexual and domestic slavery. The State Department characterized interim authorities' appointment of al-Hayes as "*a serious mistake*."

Nonstate Actors and Turkey Continue Threats to FoRB in North and East Syria

In addition to taking over cities and regions the former government had controlled, the interim authorities have had to consider how to approach potential governance of territories that have been outside the Assad regime's direct control. As HTS's own rebel stronghold in the latter part of the war, Idlib in the northwest remains a home base of sorts for the interim authorities. However, interior parts of Syria include relatively ungoverned areas in which Arab tribal groups and nonstate actors such as ISIS have maintained a presence. Most significantly, the multifaith, multiethnic Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) continues to fully administer and govern parts of the north and east, notwithstanding TSOs' seizure of some territory—including Manbij, a strategic and religiously diverse city—during the parallel rebel attack on Damascus. The national dialogue in February conspicuously excluded Kurdish leadership, mirroring the isolation of the DAANES and its U.S.-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the north and east as they continued fighting off Turkey's strikes and proxy attacks. These attacks had escalated during the collapse of the Assad regime as Turkey sought control of the SDF's territory west of the River Euphrates. Indigenous Christian communities remained caught in the ongoing crossfire, which has long spurred their members to vacate villages, churches, and other sites that some advocates described as "strike targets and launching pads" for Turkish and Kurdish-led military operations, respectively. In March, Assyrian Christians reported that a Turkish strike had hit the Mar Sawa Church in Tel Tawil—the same church that a Turkish attack had already destroyed three years prior.

The following week, authorities in Damascus unexpectedly announced a preliminary agreement with the SDF to integrate the northeastern forces into the transitional Syrian military. The surprise deal coincided with—and helped deflect attention from—the outbreak of anti-Alawi massacres on the coast. While the SDF and interim Syrian authorities continue negotiating potential integration of their militaries, suspected Turkish-led attacks on targets in the north and east reportedly have continued in violation of a ceasefire, as in a late April airstrike on a village near Ayn Issa.

Key Role of FoRB in U.S. and International Syria Policy

In granting Alawis heightened political power and characterizing Sunnis as terrorists, the Assad regime fomented sectarianism and used it as a tool of war. Militant Islamist rebel groups responded in kind, invoking religious ideologies in their own repressive policies and violence against religious minorities. As such, religious freedom in the Syria context has been a pivotal axis adjoining several other critical U.S. interests and policy stances, including counterterrorism and security. In 2025, FoRB-related conditions and concerns remain a crucial consideration for U.S. policymakers, especially as they undertake the complicated process of lifting Assad-era U.S. sanctions on Syria.

FoRB in U.S.-Syria Relations and Sanctions Pre- and Post-Assad

Beginning in 2004 under the *Syria Accountability Act* and expanding over the course of the 2011–2024 civil war, the United States imposed on Syria one of the world's most comprehensive state sanctions programs. Pursuant to several executive orders and the seminal *Caesar Civilian Protection Act of 2019,* the United States has also imposed a slew of individual *sanctions* and related human rights abuse designations on Syrian prisons, government officials, and armed groups, including some who violate religious freedom. However, as the sanctions program overall has long focused on the Assad regime for its mass atrocities and other grave human rights abuses,

by extension it has not correlated directly to the sorts of religious freedom violations that nonstate actors have principally advanced.

The HTS-led coalition's ouster of the Assad regime unfolded at the end of the administration of former President Joseph R. Biden. At that time, President Biden *cited* "the protection of religious and ethnic minorities" as one of the factors the United States would "vigilantly" monitor in assessing the rebel-led authorities. Late in December, then Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf *met* with al-Sharaa and other interim authorities, emphasizing the need for an inclusive government in Syria that recognizes the rights of diverse ethnic and religious communities. The administration then announced *General License 24* as a form of sanctions relief, building upon General License No. 22 of 2022, which, in alignment with USCIRF's *recommendations*, authorized certain forms of U.S. economic activity in nonregime parts of Syria, including the DAANES-governed northeast.

Early in 2025, al-Sharaa began openly courting other foreign governments and international institutions in a bid for sanctions relief as Syrians suffered desperate poverty and abysmal electricity, fuel, and other supply and services shortages. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and European Union (EU) *called* for and *announced*, respectively, the easing of some sanctions on Syria. In pursuing sanctions relief, the transitional authorities had promised religious and ethnic inclusivity from the beginning of their tenure in Damascus. Notably, the EU's announcement in late February came after several weeks of sectarian kidnappings, arson attacks, and murders by fighters who supported or had links to the HTS-led coalition.

Conclusion: Updating U.S. Policy to Support FoRB in Post-Assad Syria

In weighing U.S. interests since the overthrow of the Assad regime, the Trump administration has faced the additional challenge of considering potential relations with the HTS-led interim authorities against the rapidly unfolding backdrop of multiple sectarian massacres. Loyalists or close affiliates of these same authorities are the likely perpetrators of such massacres, which, in some cases, transitional leaders have appeared to condone. In April, the U.S. administration took its first visible steps toward contact with al-Sharaa's regime via a letter setting forth a list of prerequisites to potential partial U.S. sanctions relief.

In May, following these early limited and indirect forms of engagement, President Trump announced that the United States would lift sanctions on Syria, signaling a dramatic shift in U.S. Syria policy. Secretary of State Marco Rubio subsequently suggested the United States will ease into sanctions relief with various measures including 180-day *waivers* pursuant to the Caesar Act, facilitating the entry of humanitarian aid. The temporary and incremental nature of such waivers gives the United States leeway to enact the executive's vision of opening Syria to reconstruction and growth while still monitoring and adjusting for Syrian interim authorities' progress on religious freedom.

New legislation and a potential *repeal* of the Caesar Act could give Congress a means of addressing current threats to religious freedom in Syria. Additionally, new legislation could incentivize al-Sharaa's administration to produce tangible evidence of commitment to religious freedom, including publicly investigating and bringing to justice its own loyalists and former foreign fighters who have perpetrated egregious FoRB violations in the first few months of 2025. With these evolving policy considerations in mind, and in addition to USCIRF's policy recommendations for Syria as outlined in the *2025 Annual Report*, the U.S. government should:

- Condition the lifting of sanctions on the transitional authorities' improvement of religious freedom conditions, including investigating and bringing to justice state and nonstate actors' violations of religious freedom and disciplining or purging from military ranks all foreign and other fighters complicit in targeting religious minorities for abuses; and
- Maintain existing and impose additional targeted sanctions, asset freezes, and entry bars on any Syrian entities, including nonstate actors and their leaders, responsible for religious freedom violations both before and after the fall of the Assad regime.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan legislative branch agency established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

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