

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Syria dramatically deteriorated as the country’s religiously diverse population struggled to regroup after almost 14 years of civil war. Even as the self-installed transitional authorities [promised](#) to reject the sectarianism of the regime they had overthrown, they demonstrated systematic and ongoing tolerance of particularly severe religious freedom [violations](#) throughout the year. Principally, transitional authorities failed to prevent, curb, or adequately administer justice for multiple mass killings, kidnappings, and other egregious acts of [violence](#) against Alawis, Druze, Christians, and other religious minorities—many of which occurred at the hands of purported loyalists to the new administration.

Among thousands of attacks throughout the year, several notable events amounted to sectarian [massacres](#). On March 7, thousands of militant Sunni Muslim fighters loyal to, affiliated with, or serving directly within the transitional authorities [answered](#) Ministry of Defense officials’ general mobilization calls to subdue a reported pro-Assad Alawi insurgency on the Mediterranean coast. Militants conducted mass door-to-door executions of Alawi civilians in Tartus, Latakia, and Hama, deploying religious slurs such as “Alawi Nusayri pigs” against their victims and killing at least 1,500 people in the first two days. In April, armed actors reacted violently to false social media reports that a Druze leader had insulted the Prophet Muhammad, firing on Druze residents in the Damascus suburb of Jaramana and kicking off several days of [fatal](#) clashes. In June, a likely suicide attacker [bombed](#) the Mar Elias Antiochian/Greek Orthodox Church in Damascus, killing at least 25 Christians during a Sunday liturgy. In July, Sunni Muslim Bedouin tribes kidnapped a Druze merchant from Suweida, [triggering](#) weeks of clashes. Advocates pointed to sensationalistic anti-Druze messaging in state television and other

official outlets as a [factor](#) inciting militant actors. Furthermore, far from subduing the violence, transitional military forces intervened against the local Druze population, contributing to a reported death toll of at least 2,000. Reports suggested several of the same fighters who mobilized in March against Alawi communities [reappeared](#) to commit similar crimes in July against Suweida’s Druze.

Most concerning, investigations by the [United Nations](#) (UN), Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others have confirmed the direct and substantial role that security forces, the Ministries of Interior and Defense, and other authorities played in the extrajudicial and other unlawful killings of Alawis and Druze. In addition to these mass attacks, militant actors perpetrated hundreds of individual kidnappings, tortures, and murders of Alawi, Christian, and Druze community members.

Despite transitional authorities’ [obligations](#) to administer [justice](#) against the perpetrators of these and other atrocities, official accountability processes suffered from slowness, lack of transparency, or inadequate or no punishment for the perpetrators. While the interim president and Ministry of Justice announced investigative committees in the wake of the Alawi [coastal](#) massacres in March and the Druze Suweida crisis in July, respectively, the former committee avoided confirming the number of transitional security forces among the suspects, and the latter’s inquiry took until mid-November to implicate, arrest, and bring to trial some military and security members for unlawful killings. UN [experts](#) and others also highlighted authorities’ unsatisfactory response to several potential kidnappings and sexual [assaults](#) of religious minority women. For example, officials reportedly failed to confirm whether two of the three perpetrators of the September gang rape of an Alawi woman in Hama Province were members of Syrian General Security or merely wearing its uniforms.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Syria as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on, freeze the assets of, and bar the entry to the United States of any Syrian actors—whether nonstate or affiliated with the transitional authorities—responsible for religious freedom violations;
- Condition continued engagement with the transitional authorities on evidence of their active curbing of international

religious freedom-based violence and manifest promotion of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), such as through equal citizenship provisions in the constitution and protections for religious minority representation in transitional legislative bodies and electoral systems; and

- Assist transitional authorities with FoRB-specific training for leaders, military and security forces, and civil servants to identify and combat institutionalized sectarianism.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Conduct bipartisan congressional delegations to Syria to raise religious freedom concerns and the importance of protecting FoRB; and
- Ensure implementation of recent legislation conditioning 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 FoRB and disciplining or purging from military ranks all fighters complicit in religiously motivated or targeted abuses.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** [Religious Freedom and U.S. Policy in Post-Assad Syria](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Syria’s Post-Assad Transition](#)
- Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2

## Background

Syria's demography remained in flux throughout 2025, with over one million former [refugees](#), largely Sunni Muslim Arabs, returning to the country. Estimates from the prior year suggest that 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 likely amount to three percent of the population, while proportions of Christians and Yazidis remained unclear due to these groups' sustained displacement and emigration and the former regime's forced classification of the Yazidi religion as a sect of Islam—a policy the transitional authorities did not reverse.

Shortly after seizing power, the transitional authorities took several administrative actions that systematically limited FoRB. In January, officials announced they would dissolve and integrate into their new administration several rebel entities, ostensibly including their own predecessor organization, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—a longstanding USCIRF-recommended and U.S.-designated Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) for its egregious [violations](#) of religious freedom over the course of the civil war. Authorities took similar action to purge [Alawis](#) and [Christians](#) from government and other posts, appoint ministers and military and intelligence heads with [records](#) of violent religious freedom abuses, and put forward a constitutional declaration lacking adequate FoRB protections and related provisions. In February and October, the country held a national dialogue and parliamentary elections, respectively, that many observers regarded as insufficiently representative of Syria's regions or its diverse religious and ethnic communities.

## Threats to Religious Freedom in Syria's Regional Enclaves

In 2025, HTS's former rebel stronghold of [Idlib](#) in the northwest remained a home base for the transitional authorities and for affiliated militant actors responsible for sectarian-motivated attacks throughout the year in other parts of the country. Large swathes of eastern Syria likewise remained inhospitable to religious freedom, partly due to increasingly resurgent Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) [cells](#). In Suweida and on the Mediterranean coast, Druze- and Alawi-majority communities—once religiously tolerant and stable environments for other religious minorities such as Christians—faced militant actors' violent, sectarian, and ongoing threats and attacks.

In parts of the north and east with sizeable Muslim Kurdish and Arab, Christian, and Yazidi populations, the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) and its U.S.-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued its multi-faith [model](#) of regional governance. However, neighboring Turkey continued to play a role in destabilizing religious freedom in the region—both through sporadic military attacks and support for militant factions that harassed or attacked Yazidis, Christians, and others. In March, Assyrian Christian advocates reported that a Turkish strike

had hit the Mar Sawa Church in Tel Tawil, which a Turkish attack had already destroyed three years before. In June, rights organizations reported that many fighters from abusive Turkish-backed factions—by then affiliated with the transitional Ministry of Defense—remained active near Kobane.

## Key U.S. Policy

In May, President Donald J. Trump announced that the United States would lift [sanctions](#) on Syria, and in June, he signed an executive order directing their [cessation](#), in part due to "[positive actions](#) taken by the new Syrian government under President Ahmed al-Sharaa." In July, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio [revoked](#) the United States' designation of HTS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. In November, President Trump welcomed President al-Sharaa to the White House, the first such meeting between a U.S. and Syrian leader since 1946. Shortly after, Secretary Rubio issued a [suspension](#) of sanctions on Syria mandated by the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 (22 U.S.C. 8791). In March, Secretary Rubio responded to the coastal massacres by [stating](#), "The United States stands with Syria's religious and ethnic minorities, including its Christian, Druze, Alawite, and Kurdish communities."

The U.S. Congress devoted consistent [attention](#) to Syria throughout the year, with some bipartisan alliances [urging](#) the administration to [end](#) broad economic sanctions. In August, the first official bipartisan congressional delegation to Syria in many years reportedly included interfaith events with international religious freedom advocates and local community leaders—including [Hamza Shahin](#), a Druze physician whom armed actors later abducted, tortured, and murdered. In December, President Trump signed Public Law No: 119-60, the [National Defense Authorization Act](#) (NDAA), repealing the Caesar Act's sanctions. In alignment with USCIRF [recommendations](#), the NDAA requires the president to periodically certify that Syria has taken certain steps to protect religious freedom, such as removing foreign fighters from official positions and upholding freedom of worship and political representation for religious minorities.

The United States continued to help broker negotiations to integrate the religiously and ethnically diverse SDF into a transitional national army in which many members identified with groups that justify violence on Islamic religious grounds. The SDF remained a key U.S. [partner](#) in managing the ongoing threat of ISIS and in carrying out search and rescue missions for at least 2,594 Yazidis missing since 2014 following the terrorist group's [genocidal](#) enslavement or conscription. In February, soon after the administration announced a general freeze on U.S. foreign assistance, the United States granted some short-term waivers to contractors supporting al-Hol, an SDF-managed camp housing former ISIS fighters and families. In December, an ISIS member reportedly serving in the transitional security forces killed two U.S. service members and an interpreter. Later that month, U.S. and partner forces conducted a large-scale [strike](#) on ISIS targets in Syria.