

World
Watch
Research

Syria: Country Dossier

December 2020



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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Introduction

World Watch List 2021

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	94	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.2	94	93	94	93	89
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.3	9.8	92	92	91	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.4	15.9	16.3	16.3	12.4	92	90	87	86	78
5	Pakistan	13.9	14.2	15.1	14.9	13.5	16.7	88	88	87	86	88
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	11.1	88	87	86	86	82
7	Yemen	16.6	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	3.9	87	85	86	85	85
8	Iran	14.5	14.5	13.9	15.7	16.5	10.6	86	85	85	85	85
9	Nigeria	13.3	13.2	13.9	14.1	14.1	16.7	85	80	80	77	78
10	India	13.0	12.9	13.5	14.9	13.7	15.4	83	83	83	81	73
11	Iraq	13.6	14.6	14.2	14.8	13.8	11.5	82	76	79	86	86
12	Syria	13.3	13.9	13.5	14.5	14.0	12.0	81	82	82	76	86
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	13.7	13.6	15.7	9.1	79	85	87	87	87
14	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.9	14.4	15.8	16.6	2.2	78	79	77	79	76
15	Maldives	15.4	15.5	13.9	15.8	16.6	0.4	77	78	78	78	76
16	Egypt	12.5	13.2	11.5	12.7	11.0	14.1	75	76	76	70	65
17	China	12.6	9.7	12.0	13.2	15.4	11.1	74	70	65	57	57
18	Myanmar	11.9	12.0	13.1	12.9	12.3	11.9	74	73	71	65	62
19	Vietnam	12.1	8.8	12.7	14.0	14.5	10.0	72	72	70	69	71
20	Mauritania	14.3	14.0	13.5	14.1	13.6	1.9	71	68	67	57	55
21	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	1.3	71	73	74	73	71
22	Laos	12.1	10.2	13.6	13.5	14.3	6.9	71	72	71	67	64
23	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.5	70	70	69	68	67
24	Algeria	13.9	13.9	11.5	13.1	13.4	3.9	70	73	70	58	58
25	Turkey	12.5	11.5	10.8	13.3	11.6	9.3	69	63	66	62	57
26	Tunisia	12.0	13.1	10.4	11.5	13.2	7.4	67	64	63	62	61
27	Morocco	12.6	13.5	11.2	12.4	14.1	3.7	67	66	63	51	49
28	Mali	9.4	8.2	12.7	10.3	11.5	15.4	67	66	68	59	59
29	Qatar	14.0	13.9	10.8	13.1	14.1	1.5	67	66	62	63	66
30	Colombia	11.4	8.8	12.4	11.0	9.7	13.9	67	62	58	56	53
31	Bangladesh	11.5	10.3	13.0	11.3	10.1	10.6	67	63	58	58	63
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.4	11.8	14.3	67	66	48	-	-
33	Tajikistan	14.0	12.3	11.9	12.5	13.2	2.2	66	65	65	65	58
34	Nepal	12.4	9.7	9.9	13.0	12.3	8.5	66	64	64	64	53
35	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.1	9.6	9.9	15.6	66	68	70	61	58
36	Ethiopia	9.9	8.5	10.7	10.3	10.8	14.4	65	63	65	62	64
37	Mexico	10.3	8.1	12.4	10.7	10.3	12.6	64	60	61	59	57
38	Jordan	13.1	13.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	2.0	64	64	65	66	63
39	Brunei	13.9	14.6	10.7	10.9	13.5	0.7	64	63	63	64	64
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	11.2	9.4	11.6	16.1	64	56	55	33	-
41	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	11.0	12.5	13.4	2.4	64	64	63	63	56
42	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.0	12.3	15.7	64	60	54	38	-
43	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	11.9	12.7	13.8	0.0	64	61	64	62	61
44	Oman	13.2	13.5	10.3	12.5	13.0	0.9	63	62	59	57	53
45	Mozambique	9.3	7.6	11.3	7.9	11.1	16.1	63	43	43	-	-
46	Malaysia	12.1	14.3	12.9	11.5	10.0	2.4	63	62	60	65	60
47	Indonesia	11.5	11.4	12.4	10.7	9.3	7.8	63	60	65	59	55
48	Kuwait	13.2	13.5	9.9	12.2	13.2	1.1	63	62	60	61	57
49	Kenya	11.7	9.2	10.5	8.0	10.3	12.8	62	61	61	62	68
50	Comoros	12.5	11.1	11.4	11.3	14.2	1.9	62	57	56	56	56

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
51	Cuba	10.9	7.7	11.8	12.9	13.4	5.4	62	52	49	49	47
52	Sri Lanka	12.2	9.1	11.7	12.2	9.7	7.0	62	65	58	57	55
53	UAE	13.4	13.3	9.7	12.0	12.4	1.1	62	60	58	58	55
54	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.6	10.6	62	60	52	45	47
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.2	10.4	12.0	1.3	58	57	56	54	48
56	Palestinian Territories	12.5	13.3	9.1	10.4	11.7	0.9	58	60	57	60	64
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	10.2	58	55	52	53	59
58	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.5	12.1	3.9	57	60	60	51	46
59	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	56	56	57
60	Bahrain	12.1	12.5	9.1	10.7	10.5	0.9	56	55	55	57	54
61	Azerbaijan	12.8	9.8	9.4	11.1	12.6	0.0	56	57	57	57	52
62	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	3.7	53	56	48	40	-
63	Nicaragua	6.9	4.6	9.9	11.3	10.0	8.1	51	41	41	-	-
64	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.9	48	48	43	-	-
65	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	12.0	47	48	47	46	53
66	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.9	47	45	46	-	-
67	Honduras	6.8	5.0	10.6	7.6	9.0	7.6	46	39	38	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	10.1	11.4	7.2	46	43	42	-	-
69	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	44	44	-	-
70	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	0.6	43	43	43	-	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	0.7	43	41	42	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	8.1	42	42	41	-	-
73	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.3	42	42	43	-	-
74	El Salvador	6.6	4.9	9.8	4.2	8.7	7.8	42	38	30	-	-

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.
- The WWL 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2021 Short country profile / Syria

Brief country details

Syria: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
18,924,000	677,000	3.6

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Syria: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	81	12
WWL 2020	82	11
WWL 2019	82	11
WWL 2018	76	15
WWL 2017	86	6

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Syria: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Violent religious groups, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Government officials, Political parties

Islamic oppression	Violent religious groups, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Organized corruption and crime	Violent religious groups, Organized crime cartels or networks, Government officials
Christian Denominational protectionism	Religious leaders of other churches, Political parties

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Due to their public visibility, the leaders of historical church communities are particularly targeted for attacks or kidnapping in areas where Islamic militants are active. Baptist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal congregations are also in a vulnerable position because they are known for their more Western orientation, missionary drive, fragmentation, lack of strong leadership, and lack of a foreign spokesman (e.g., a pope or bishop) to act on their behalf.

In areas controlled by radical Islamic groups, most of the church buildings belonging to the historical church communities have either been demolished or used as Islamic centers. Public expressions of Christian faith are prohibited and church buildings or monasteries cannot be repaired or restored, regardless of whether the damage was collateral or intentional. In government-controlled areas, there used to be less control over Christians because of the war conditions, but as the authorities have regained power, so has the control over potential dissidents and others who could harm social stability (such as converts to Islam). The political reputation of Christian denominations, churches and local church leaders plays a significant role in the level of oppression they face from groups fighting against President Assad.

The attitude of the Syrian government towards churches is determined by the Christian community to which they belong. It is clear that government officials have double standards when it comes to dealing with the historical churches as compared to the evangelical churches. That does not mean that the historical church communities are not under pressure from the authorities from time to time; they are, however, in a stronger position to defend and claim their rights. They occasionally use this position in an attempt to thwart the growth of non-traditional Christian communities.

Christians with a Muslim background are especially put under pressure by their families because their conversion brings them great dishonor. This is particularly true in most Sunni areas, where converts are at risk of being expelled from their family homes or worse. Family pressure is less intense in the Kurdish areas of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), as Kurdish Sunnis are generally less radical. Indeed, in the Governorate of Northern Aleppo there

are even recognized Kurdish Christian communities, as well as in several major cities of north-eastern Syria. Converts from Islam can also legally change their religion in the Kurdish controlled areas. These favorable conditions have been under pressure since the invasion by Turkish forces in October 2019; practically all of the religious freedom improvements made by the Autonomous Administration have been reversed in areas now under Turkish control.

According to a June 2020 USCIRF hearing entitled '[Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria](#)', Turkish armed forces have attacked, murdered, kidnapped, raped, detained, and detained Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians and Yazidis, and destroyed their religious sites. They are also moving Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs) - predominantly Sunni Arabs - from other parts of Syria to the homes of minority refugees in the north. This is causing a considerable demographic change which will prevent Christians and other minorities returning to their villages. In Afrin, Turkish-backed troops are now reported to be targeting Kurdish Christians, especially converts.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Syria has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR)
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)
3. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (CAT)
4. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
5. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

Syria is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian converts are ostracized by their family and community and pressured to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians in northern Syria are killed in violent attacks by revolutionary and paramilitary groups with an Islamist agenda (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christian converts are monitored by local officials upon request of their own families (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christians are denied custody rights of their children because of their faith (ICCPR Arts. 23 and 26)
- Christian female converts cannot marry Christian men and if they do, their marriage is considered illegal (CEDAW Art. 16)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **October 2019:** Turkey-sponsored opposition groups (TSOs) confiscated and looted 205 houses and 120 commercial and industrial sites of 75 Christian families who had fled Ras al-Ayn as a result of the Turkish offensive in October 2019. These armed groups also destroyed the Armenian Church in Tel Abyad on 9 October 2019. (US Department of State, [2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria](#))
- **11 November 2019:** An Armenian Catholic priest and his father were killed in terrorist attack claimed by Islamic State (IS) in al-Zir village in the al-Busayrah sub-district of Deir ez-Zor. Reportedly a third man, a deacon from Al-Hasakeh, was injured in the attack. ([Rudaw](#), 11 November 2019)
- **11 November 2019:** Two cars and a motorcycle packed with explosives was detonated near a café and a Chaldean church in the Christian quarter of Qamishli, killing seven Christians and wounding at least 70. IS claimed responsibility for this attack. ([AsiaNews](#), 12 November 2019)
- **January 2020:** In Idlib, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized up to 550 houses and businesses belonging to Christians who were forced by the war to leave the city between October 2019 and January 2020 ([Syrians for Truth and Justice](#), 14 January 2020).

Specific examples of positive developments

A rare exception in the region: The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) is allowing Muslims to legally change their religion. In these Kurdish areas there is relatively more tolerance of religious minorities such as Christians, including converts from Islam. Christians can worship freely and evangelization is legally allowed. However, this freedom has been under pressure since Turkish forces (together with Islamic militants) invaded and occupied the northern part of this region. In the areas under Turkey's control, practically all religious freedom improvements have been reversed.

External Links - Short country profile

- Brief description of the persecution situation: Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria - <https://www.uscifr.gov/events/uscifr-virtual-hearing-safeguarding-religious-freedom-northeast-syria>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Rudaw - <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/111120191>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: AsiaNews - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/ISIS-is-targeting-Syria%E2%80%99s-Christians.-Vicar-of-Aleppo:-We-are-under-siege-48523.html>

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Syrians for Truth and Justice - <https://stj-sy.org/en/hts-confiscates-no-less-than-550-homes-and-businesses-belonging-to-christians-in-idlib/>

WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Syria

Link for general background information

- [Syria country profile - BBC News](#)

Recent history

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Syria was granted independence in 1946, but lacked political stability and faced several military coups. In 1958, Syria united with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic. The two countries separated three and a half years later and the Syrian Arab Republic was re-established. Syria lost the Golan Heights region to Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israeli six day war. Political stability came when Hafiz al-Assad of the socialist Baath party took power in 1970 and ruled as president until his death in 2000. His son, Bashar al-Assad, was then appointed president by popular referendum, and again for a second term in 2007.

In March 2011 anti-government protests started that developed into a civil war. The background is complex and includes class conflict, rural/urban divisions and repressed political liberty. This explains why the conflict spread so quickly and evolved into a sectarian identity conflict. The government first responded with concessions, but soon resorted to military force which was met with armed opposition. The battle attracted foreign jihadist fighters and in June 2014 the radical Islamic State group (IS) established its caliphate in large parts of Syria, with Raqqa as its capital. In 2016 and 2017 IS lost most of its territory due to military intervention by the West and Russia.

In March 2018, around [25,000 Free Syrian Army fighters](#) (Religious Liberty PB, 20 March 2018), many being battle-hardened Islamists, were fighting alongside Turkish regular troops and special forces and took control of areas around the north-western (and mostly Kurdish) city of Afrin forcing out Kurdish rebels ruling the area. International religious liberty analyst and advocate Elizabeth Kendal reported in March 2018: "Hundreds of civilians have been killed and wounded; many thousands are now displaced from what had long been one of Syria's great safe havens. Sources on the ground report that 'Jihadists allied with Turkey are hunting down [Christian and other] religious minorities to kill them in Syria's north-west [and] along its border'" ([RLPB 447](#), 21 March 2018).

The majority of the country is now under government control with the exception of Idlib Province, Western Aleppo Province, the northern region of Hama Province and the north east. These remaining areas are currently controlled by Turkish forces, [the Global Coalition](#), Islamist groups or Kurdish authorities (Global coalition, accessed 18 September 2020). In January 2019, jihadists took control of the strategic north-western town of Idlib. Fighting intensified throughout 2019, killing hundreds of civilians and displacing hundreds of thousands. Meanwhile, the Islamic State group (IS) continued attacking civilian targets in the northeast, even after its last bastion in the east was taken by Kurdish-led forces in March 2019. A Turkish-led incursion took place into north Syria in October 2019 after the USA withdrew its troops from the front-

lines. This move was strongly condemned by the Assyrian Democratic Organization who recorded that 160 Christian families were displaced by the fighting. Subsequent developments in 2019 were the retaking of the semi-autonomous Kurdish Region by the Syrian army and the [agreement of 22 October 2019](#) made between Turkey and Russia regarding a 'safety zone' in the north of Syria (The Defence Post, 22 October 2019).

More recent major developments have been the successful operations by government and Russian forces to capture territory from rebels in Idlib Province at the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020. A [ceasefire](#) was agreed between Russia and Turkey in March after fighting escalated in February 2020 which halted the regime's military advance towards Idlib city (BBC News, 6 March 2020). The fragile treaty was strained by jihadist attacks as well as by Russian airstrikes in the northwest in the subsequent months.

In July 2020, President Bashar al-Assad won [parliamentary elections](#) in spite of protests against the severe economic conditions (Middle East Monitor, 22 July 2020).

Political and legal landscape

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) classifies Syria as authoritarian; the country scored fourth lowest in the EIU's [Democracy Index 2019](#) (EIU, 3 September, 2020). Bashar al-Assad - in power since taking over from his father in 2000 - is fighting for control of his country. He inherited a tightly controlled and repressive political structure from long-time dictator Hafez al-Assad, with an inner circle dominated by members of the Assad family's minority Alawite Shia community.

From 2011 onwards, the Syrian opposition became increasingly "Islamized" and the civil war quickly took the form of a Sunni "jihad" against the Syrian government. The establishment of the IS caliphate in June 2014 further accelerated this development, although since 2016 IS began to lose large parts of its territory as a result of international intervention. In March 2019 their last remaining territory in eastern Syria fell.

According to FFP's [2020 Fragile State Index](#), political indicators show that external intervention remains extremely high as do human rights violations. There is a minimal increase in public services, but the overall political climate remains fragile while the Syrian government continues to engage external actors such as Russia and Iran to bolster its strength and legitimacy. Fighting continues particularly in areas where government-held territory borders on areas controlled by rebel militias. Here Christians are caught in the crossfire between government troops and rebel forces.

Christians in Syria have been openly attacked and harassed by IS militants and in the nine years of war have suffered disproportionately from the fighting and the displacement this has caused. Their vulnerability in the current political power-struggle is due to such factors as: i) A lack of political and military power; ii) alleged connections with the West; iii) resentment against the Syrian Christians' perceived close connections with the Assad regime; and iv) living in areas in which fighting between Syrian and Kurdish forces has been particularly intense (e.g. Afrin). Syrian Christians are facing an ongoing lack of safety, basic resources and employment to sustain livelihoods.

The US State Department's [2019 Report on International Religious Freedom](#) (IRF) describes the Syrian legal framework as follows: "The constitution declares the state shall respect all religions and shall ensure the freedom to perform religious rituals as long as these do not disturb public order. There is no official state religion, although the constitution states the religion of the president of the republic is Islam. The constitution states Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation. The constitution states, '[Issues] of the personal status of the religious communities shall be protected and respected,' and 'Citizens are equal in rights and duties, without discrimination among them on grounds of gender, origin, language, religion, or creed.' Citizens have the right to sue the government if they believe it violated their rights."

Conversion to Islam is permitted, but leaving Islam is prohibited. Proselytism is restricted by law. Regarding areas in the country where opposition or militant Islamic groups are in control, the IRF 2019 report states that "irregular courts and local 'authorities' apply a variety of unofficial legal codes with diverse provisions relating to religious freedom".

Religious landscape

Syria: Religious context	Number adherents	of %
Christians	677,000	3.6
Muslim	17,852,000	94.3
Hindu	1,900	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	100	0.0
Bahai	400	0.0
Atheist	16,000	0.1
Agnostic	377,000	2.0
Other	100	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Due to war and displacement, it is not possible to present a totally accurate representation of Syria's current religious demography. The table above gives an overview using latest WCD estimates.

Syria is a Muslim majority country and, according to the [CIA World Factbook](#) (accessed 18 September 2020), 74% of all Muslims are Sunni and 13% are Alawi, Ismaili and Shia.

One of the main features of Syria's Christian population is its complicated ethnic and religious identity. The geographical concentration of Christians in strategic areas has also been an important factor in their vulnerability: The areas around Aleppo and Damascus and the southern areas of the Homs governorate near the Lebanese border have been vital to both the government and the opposition's war efforts.

According to [Middle East Concern](#) - MEC (last accessed 17 September 2020):

- "Syria's Christian communities face multiple challenges within the context of the current conflict. In the majority of the country that is under government control, Christians enjoy reasonably good standing in society, though some restrictions apply to recognized Christian communities, especially to activities that could be construed as proselytism. The provision of enhanced powers to the Ministry of Religious Endowments in October 2018, ostensibly to prevent extremism and promote moderation, prompted some Christians leaders to express concern that the greater reach of Islamic authorities may threaten other faith groups."
- "Of those who have fled from government-controlled areas, including Christians, many have done so to avoid military conscription. A common assumption that Christians are pro-government (often correct, not least due to fearing what disadvantages the anti-government alternatives could bring) contributes to a general climate of tolerance in government areas but adds to Christians' vulnerability in areas controlled by opposition groups. Few Christians remain in opposition-held areas, where violence has included attacks against Christians, Christian-owned property and church buildings. The mass displacement of Christians has not been reversed following the military defeat of IS in its strongholds of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour in late 2017, and five Christian leaders abducted by radical Islamic groups in 2013 remain unaccounted for."
- "Within predominantly Kurdish areas, indigenous Christian communities have reasonable living conditions, although some church leaders have expressed concern that the aggressive assertion of Kurdish identity has at times marginalized or been coercive towards Christian communities. This is not for reasons of faith, but because of the ethnic background of the historic church, such as the Syriac identity of the Orthodox Church in the Northeast."
- "In all areas there is strong family and societal pressure against those who choose to leave Islam, and in extreme cases these responses are violent. Those considered apostates can face sanctions in the Sharia personal status courts such as forced divorce and removal of child custody. Those who choose to leave Islam are especially vulnerable in opposition-controlled areas."

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300 onwards):

- **GNI per capita:** Between 1990 and 2018, Syria's GNI per capita decreased by approximately 20.6 percent to 2,725 USD. It reached its highest point in 2010 and its lowest in 2016 after which it has been slowly rising.
- **Poverty:** 80% of the population live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day ([ICRC](#), 28 June 2020).
- **Employment:** The [Human Development Index](#) (last accessed 17 September 2020) notes that the employment rate is low at 37.8% of the population over 15 years of age holding jobs.

According to [World Bank's May 2020 update](#):

- "The social and economic impact is huge and worsening: the lack of sustained access to health care, education, housing, and food has exacerbated the effects of the conflict, pushing millions of people into unemployment and poverty. ... In addition, the severe decline in oil receipts and disruption of other trade have placed more pressure on Syria's external balances, leading to a rapid depletion of its international reserves."

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) this situation, combined with continued fighting in parts of the country and the effects of sanctions "are pushing millions of people in Syria towards deeper poverty and hunger as the tenth anniversary of the conflict approaches." In particular the food security and livelihoods of Syrians have been affected ([ICRC](#), 28 June 2020). To make matters worse, many relief and humanitarian programs remain underfunded.

This widespread poverty is due to unemployment, low salaries and the devaluation of the Syrian pound. Christians suffer from the high rate of unemployment and are highly dependent on relief aid. The prices for food, basic needs and medical supplies are high due to increased distribution risks. Many of the Christians left in the country are poor and risk malnutrition. Christians are regarded by many as being wealthy supporters of Assad's government; this adds to their vulnerability, since as non-Muslims they are already part of a fragile minority.

According to FFP's [2020 Fragile State Index](#), FSI indicators show that human flight and 'brain drain' continue, as does external intervention.

The COVID-19 lockdown measures throughout the entire country exacerbated the already serious economic crisis in the country and brought local economies as well as international trade to a standstill. With subsequent rising unemployment rate and consumer good prices, it is the ordinary Syrian in particular who bears the burden in this crisis situation. No significant compensation mechanisms can be deployed in the current conditions of war-economy, corruption, poor governance and lack of sufficient funds, according to a publication by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung ([FES](#), July 2020). This political foundation, FES, argues that the crisis has "exacerbated existing social and economic injustices across the country."

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300) and the [Word Factbook](#) (accessed September 2020):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Arab ~50%, Alawite ~15%, Kurd ~10%, Levantine ~10%, other ~15% (includes Druze, Ismaili, Imami, Nusairi, Assyrian, Turkoman, Armenian)
- **Main languages:** Arabic (official), Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian, French, English
- **Urban population:** 55.5% of total population (2020)
- **Literacy rate:** Over 86.4% of the population aged 15 and over can read and write

According to [World Bank's May 2020 update](#):

- **Population/age:** The average age is 25.6 years
- **Education:** The expected years of schooling is 8.9 years, whereas the mean years of schooling is 5.1.
- **IDPs/Refugees:** "About 6.2 million Syrians are internally displaced—more than a third of them children—and over 5.6 million officially registered as refugees" ([UNHCR, 10 October 2019](#)). Escalating hostilities in north-western Syria have resulted in the displacement of more than 950,000 people since the end of 2019 ([UNHCR, 27 February 2020](#)).

According to the [UN Global Human Development Indicators](#) (2019):

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Syria ranks 154th out of 189 countries and falls in the category of 'low human development'.
- **Life expectancy:** 71,8 years
- **Gender inequality:** Syria ranks 136th out of 162 countries on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index. "In the Syrian Arab Republic, 13.2 percent of parliamentary seats are held by women, and 37.1 percent of adult women have reached at least a secondary level of education compared to 43.4 percent of their male counterparts. ... Female participation in the labour market is 12.0 percent compared to 70.3 for men."

Syrian society is ethnically diverse and used to be characterized by the presence of a significant middle class. This middle class has diminished greatly, together with its cultural values and lifestyle. Daily life is now more dominated by survival concerns and the ongoing war has led to considerable emotional strain on society, leading to increased levels of fear, sleeplessness, depression, aggression in families and drug abuse. Christians in Syria have reported the breakdown of normal relationships within families and the need for trauma care and social support. According to FFP's [2020 Fragile State Index](#), social indicators show improvement in demographic pressures, but the needs of IDPs remain at the highest possible levels.

It was reported in 2018 that about [2 million](#) school-aged children were failing to get school education as a result of the war (The Spokesman Review, 7 September 2018), thus leading to a potentially high risk of illiteracy. However, in 2019, compared to previous years there were more children going to school, since fewer areas were now affected by fighting. Christian children are particularly vulnerable as many Christian schools have been closed or damaged and children have had to attend (Islamic) government schools.

Young people, especially males, are leaving the country. In consequence, the emerging age gap is contributing to the economic crisis. The young generation are leaving not only in the hope of finding better future prospects but also to avoid mandatory military service. Christians in Syria report that the ratio of men/women in Syria is 1:7 and in the church context it may be even more. In addition to the widespread poverty and lack of (young) males available for work, Christian females are under pressure to find work and are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In more conservative Sunni areas, women are not usually given the opportunity to fill this gap in the workforce.

In addition, water scarcity and poor sanitation threaten the lives of millions of Syrian children and adults. According to the [United Nations Office for the coordination of Human Affairs](#) (UNOCHA, accessed 18 September 2020), across Syria, an estimated 11.1 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance making it one of the largest humanitarian crises worldwide.

The COVID-19 outbreak and temporary shutdowns put even greater pressure on the country's already dysfunctional health system, crippled by a lack of medical supplies and manpower and by years of sanctions, including the latest US sanctions referred to as the [Caesar Act](#) (US State Government Fact Sheet, 17 June 2020). It is Syria's most vulnerable citizens who are most at risk of infection and have the least access to medical treatment.

The churches that currently provide food parcels etc. in their locality are struggling to make ends meet. Even more Christians (and other Syrians) are likely to attempt to flee the country to avoid hunger and famine. COVID-19 and the authorities' policy of disinformation makes matters worse. The churches were closed to the public over the Easter period and many Christians are losing hope. Positive developments such as the return of 100 families to the Daraa region cannot belie the general downward trend Christians are facing in Syria.

Technological landscape

According to [World Internet Stats](#) (accessed June 2020):

- **Internet usage:** 43.5% penetration - survey date: December 2019
- **Facebook usage:** 43.5% penetration – survey date: February 2020

According to [World Bank's Country profile](#) (2018):

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 101.1 per 100 people

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net Report 2019](#):

- Syria ranks as the third most unfree country in terms of the level of internet and digital media freedom; only Iran and China rank higher.
- "Internet freedom remained heavily restricted in Syria. While no major internet shutdowns occurred during the coverage period, blocking of numerous websites persisted. Moreover, individuals continued to face a serious risk of violence in reprisal for their online activity. Political rights and civil liberties in Syria are severely compromised by one of the world's most repressive regimes and by other belligerent forces in an ongoing civil war. The regime

prohibits genuine political opposition and harshly suppresses freedoms of speech and assembly. Corruption, enforced disappearances, military trials, and torture are rampant in government-controlled areas. Residents of contested regions or territory held by nonstate actors are subject to additional abuses, including intense and indiscriminate combat, sieges and interruptions of humanitarian aid, and mass displacement."

The telecommunications sector in Syria has paid a heavy price during the recent destructive years. Telecommunications research site Budde.com (last updated 10 August 2020) sums the situation up as follows:

- "The years of civil unrest in Syria have taken their toll on telecom infrastructure and while the capital Damascus has survived reasonably well, it is the outskirts, rural and remote areas which have felt the brunt of the destruction. ... Telecommunication services in Syria are decentralized and some of the remote areas rely on expensive satellite communications while the urban areas utilise the highly regulated network supplied by the government-owned incumbent Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE). The domestic and international fixed-line markets in Syria remain under the strict monopoly of the STE. Initiatives have been launched to liberalise the market in the past but without much success. Mobile broadband penetration in Syria is still quite low, despite quite a high population coverage of 3G networks and some deployment of LTE infrastructure. This may provide potential opportunities for growth once infrastructure and economic reconstruction efforts make headway and civil issues subside."

Security situation

Although IS has been militarily defeated, its influence has not disappeared. Fighting also continues in Idlib Province against other jihadist factions backed by Turkey. Christians are caught in the crossfire between government troops and rebel forces especially at the frontlines. Think-tank IHS Markit makes the following assessment of the security situation in its update on 18 July 2020:

- "The Islamic State's 'caliphate' has been eliminated, but the group retains its operational reach in much of Syria, primarily via roadside improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on Kurdish security forces and their foreign backers. Hay'a Tahrir al-Sham and other jihadist groups occasionally target government, civilian, and strategic assets in government-held areas with vehicle-borne IEDs. The Syrian-Kurdish Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) similarly targets towns controlled by the Turkish army and its Syrian opposition proxies. Foreigners are at severe risk of kidnapping across the country by insurgents and pro-government forces."

Fear among Christians has been at a high level over the last years, particularly caused by the threats, intimidation and kidnappings carried out by radical Islamic groups such as the al-Qaeda-affiliated *Jabhat al-Nusra* (now called *Hayat Tahrir al Sham*, HTS), the Ansar Brigade and the al-Farouq Battalions. Particularly in the northeast, the reactivation of IS sleeper cells, church bombings and the murder of an Armenian priest in combination with Turkey's incursion into northern Syria have dealt a blow to the confidence of Christians in Deir ez Zaur, Hassake and Qamishli.

The sudden rise of IS as a powerful military force in Syria was only possible due to weak and corrupt state institutions, and has led to a deep divide between the Christian and Sunni communities. These challenges need to be addressed first before dealing with the levels of fear among Christians concerning their future.

A Syrian Christian stated in an interview in 2018 that relations between Christian and Sunni communities in Syria have been severely damaged: “We cannot forget that we were left alone when Islamist groups took control of our neighbourhoods. No one stood by our side. Maybe they were afraid rather than being supportive of these groups, but for us the outcome is the same.” ([The Future of Christians in the Middle East after the Defeat of Islamic State](#), G. Fahmi, European Institute of the Mediterranean Yearbook 2018). Added to this lack of trust, the fear surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and its disastrous effects on the economy have been felt throughout the country and have served to increase the overall worry about the future of the Christian church in Syria.

Trends analysis

1) Syrian Christians are caught in the crossfire between warring parties

The political climate continues to be fragile and external intervention remains extremely high as does the level of human rights violations. Fighting continues particularly in the northwest where government-held territory borders on areas controlled by rebel militias, as well as in the northeast between Turkish backed forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces.

2) The economic situation in Syria remains very fragile

The economic destruction caused by the years of conflict has significantly affected state institutions and their capacity to deliver services. The Syrian Pound (SYP) went through a major depreciation at the end of 2019, which has negatively impacted the economic situation of the majority of Syrians. Moreover, the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis is likely to make things worse for the majority of Syrians.

3) As security improves in government-controlled areas, so do the levels of control

As the regime position is becoming more stable, security is improving in government-controlled areas. This also has a downside: Control on all civilians has reportedly increased, including on Christians - especially those from Muslim and non-traditional Christian backgrounds. Also, in the Kurdish areas of northern Syria where previously Christians (including converts from Islam) enjoyed comparative freedom, pressure on Christians has increased in the WWL 2021 reporting period. This pressure is understood to result from a hardening Islamic atmosphere among officials serving the Kurdish authorities.

4) Large-scale emigration has major consequences

The departure of young men in particular has major social and economic consequences. Syrian Christians report that the ratio of men/women in the country is 1:7 and for Christians this is probably even more. In addition to the poverty and lack of (young) males available for work, Christian females are under pressure to find work and are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In more conservative Sunni areas, women are not usually given the opportunity to fill this gap in the workforce.

5) The future remains uncertain for Syrian Christians

Despite IS's territorial defeat, the future remains uncertain for Christian communities in Syria. Apart from the fact that IS cells are still present and active, social cohesion between religious groups has diminished and there is a lack of trust. To heal this requires more than just military action.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: Syria country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703856>
- Recent history: 25,000 Free Syrian Army fighters - <http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com/2018/03/turkey-in-syria-afrin-falls-christians.html>
- Recent history: RLPB 447 - <http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com/2018/03/turkey-in-syria-afrin-falls-christians.html>
- Recent history: the Global Coalition - <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/partners/>
- Recent history: agreement of 22 October 2019 - <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/10/22/russia-turkey-syria-mou/>
- Recent history: ceasefire - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-51763926>
- Recent history: parliamentary elections - <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200722-assads-baath-party-wins-syria-election-as-expected/>
- Political and legal landscape: Democracy Index 2019 - <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2019-download-success>
- Political and legal landscape: 2020 Fragile State Index - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Political and legal landscape: 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>
- Religious landscape description: CIA World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>
- Religious landscape description: Middle East Concern - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/syria/>
- Economic landscape: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>
- Economic landscape: ICRC - <https://www.icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/1920/syria-economic-crisis-compounds-conflict-misery-as-millions-face-deeper-poverty-hunger/0/eyJpdil6ljZTWNyYdDROVFV6cmd2QVlVUldzT0E9PSIsInZhbHVlIjoik2xyRnpSbGZ2djFnXC9EZGkrUWFoa1E9PSIsIm1hYyI6IjJkMWE2ZDY3YjNmMzlwNDY0OTc4NGI5YzJlN2Y4Yjc5ODE2OTdmNWQzNjA1MGEzYzQ4MWFmNmFhM2U2OTg5MDUifQ==>
- Economic landscape: Human Development Index - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/SYR>
- Economic landscape: World Bank's May 2020 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria>
- Economic landscape: ICRC - <https://www.icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/1920/syria-economic-crisis-compounds-conflict-misery-as-millions-face-deeper-poverty-hunger/0/eyJpdil6ljZTWNyYdDROVFV6cmd2QVlVUldzT0E9PSIsInZhbHVlIjoik2xyRnpSbGZ2djFnXC9EZGkrUWFoa1E9PSIsIm1hYyI6IjJkMWE2ZDY3YjNmMzlwNDY0OTc4NGI5YzJlN2Y4Yjc5ODE2OTdmNWQzNjA1MGEzYzQ4MWFmNmFhM2U2OTg5MDUifQ==>
- Economic landscape: 2020 Fragile State Index - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Economic landscape: FES - https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342816698_COVID-19_AND_THE_SYRIAN_ECONOMY_IMPLICATIONS_FOR_SOCIAL_JUSTICE
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: Word Fact Book - https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/print_sy.html
- Social and cultural landscape: World Bank's May 2020 update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR, 10 October 2019 - <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/10/5d9f10eb4/hundreds-thousands-harms-way-northern-syria.html#:~:text=Over%206.2%20million%20more%20are%20displaced%20inside%20Syria,to%20those%20in%20need%2C%20mostly%20women%20and%20children.>

- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR, 27 February 2020 - <https://www.unhcr.org/ph/17665-feb2020-enews-syria.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Global Human Development Indicators - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/SYR>
- Social and cultural landscape: 2020 Fragile State Index - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Social and cultural landscape: 2 million - <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2018/sep/07/back-to-school-but-not-for-all-of-syrias-children/>
- Social and cultural landscape: United Nations Office for the coordination of Human Affairs - <https://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/about-ocha-syria#:~:text=Across%20Syria%2C%20an%20estimated%2011.1,displaced%20more%20than%20950%2C000%20people.&text=The%20impact%20of%20present%20and,of%20humanitarian%20needs%20in%20Syria.>
- Social and cultural landscape: Caesar Act - <https://www.state.gov/caesar-syria-civilian-protection-act/>
- Technological landscape: World Internet Stats - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#sy>
- Technological landscape: World Bank's Country profile - https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=SYR
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net Report 2019 - https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/11042019_Report_FH_FOTN_2019_final_Public_Download.pdf
- Technological landscape: Budde.com - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Syria-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses?r=51>
- Security situation: IHS Markit - <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/syria>
- Security situation: The Future of Christians in the Middle East after the Defeat of Islamic State - https://www.iemed.org/recursos-compartits/pdfs/IEMed_Christians_Mideast_Medyearbook2018_George_Fahmi.pdf

WWL 2021: Church information / Syria

Christian origins

The Church has been present in Syria since the time of the New Testament, where the conversion of Saul/Paul is mentioned on the road to Damascus (see Chapter 9 of the Book of Acts). The New Testament confirms that the Syrian cities of Damascus and Antioch had Christian communities. Christian faith spread fast and at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD 22 Syrian bishops were present. There was also persecution: Bishop Ignatius from Antioch (who died in 115 AD in Rome) is just one example of many martyrs.

The language of Christianity in Syria was Aramaic. Many Syrian Christians followed the [Jacobite form of Christianity](#) that was condemned as heretical at the Council of Chalcedon (451), but the 'Greek' Church also remained popular in Syria ("Jacobites - History and Cultural relations", accessed 3 December 2020).

It was in the 7th century, when Christianity was still the majority religion in Syria, that Caliph Omar dismissed Christian officials and his successor obliged all Christians to wear distinctive dress. One century later, Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi forced Arab Christians of the Tannukh tribe to convert to Islam. In Homs, Christians revolted in 855 and their leaders were crucified at the city gates. By the 9th century, Islam was gaining the upper hand, many churches had become mosques and, by about 900 AD, approximately half the Syrian population was Muslim.

In the 12-13th centuries, Syria was the target of several [crusades](#) (Fanack website, last accessed 18 September 2020). In 1124 the Aleppo cathedral was made into a mosque. By 1350 Christianity had become a minority religion and out of a population of one million, only 100,000 were Christians. The fall of Constantinople and the Ottoman occupation of Syria were an obstacle to reuniting the Church in the 15th century. However, in the next century, the Orthodox, Jacobite and Armenian Christians were recognized by the Ottoman sultan as independent communities with their own courts and laws.

In 1516, the region became part of the Ottoman Empire and remained so until World War I (1914-1918), when Arab and British troops eventually defeated the Turkish rulers in the region. This ended a century of major persecution incidents targeting Christians. In 1860, 25,000 Christians were killed in Damascus in three days of pogroms. At that time, the first American protestant missionaries were working in Syria, with a focus on setting up schools, medical ministries and literature distribution. About half a century later, beginning in 1915, vast numbers of Armenians fled (or were deported) to Syria in the course of the widespread massacres of approximately 1.5 million Armenian and half a million Assyrian Christians in Turkey.

In 1920, Syria became a French mandate. At that time it received its present name and borders (except for the Golan Heights). It became fully independent in 1946. Politically, the country has been marked by instability. One problem for Syria is that it is a patchwork of religious groups. Hafiz al-Assad ruled Syria from 1970-2000 with an iron fist, forcing it to become secular and modernizing the economy. In 2011 mass uprisings, demanding human rights and equality, led to a full-blown civil war with millions of Syrians - including Christians - fleeing as refugees to Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, North Africa and Europe.

Throughout the centuries, the Christian church in Syria has gone through – and still is going through – considerable levels of discrimination, intolerance and persecution. Due to years of persecution, forced conversion and emigration, Christians now form less than 4% of the population.

Church spectrum today

Syria: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	450,000	66.5
Catholic	200,000	29.5
Protestant	23,000	3.4
Independent	2,500	0.4
Unaffiliated	1,000	0.1

Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	676,500	99.9
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	10,000	1.5
Renewalist movement	20,000	3.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Most of Syria's Christians belong to historical churches (mainly Orthodox and Catholic, plus some traditional Protestant congregations). In areas of Syria controlled by the Assad regime, these communities have generally enjoyed reasonable standing, though they have been affected by the ongoing conflict and economic hardship as much as anyone else. Within some areas controlled by opposition groups (in particular, areas controlled by Islamist groups as well as Turkish forces), these communities have been significantly affected; many Christians left such areas prior to and during the WWL 2021 reporting period. There are non-traditional Christian communities in various parts of Syria, particularly in regime-held territory and in Kurdish areas. Within regime-held areas, there is also some pressure from the historical churches on the non-traditional communities. Converts with an Islamic or Druze background are found in most parts of the country - perhaps with particular concentrations in Kurdish areas, Druze areas and also among some IDP communities in regime-held areas. In almost all cases, converts are vulnerable to pressure from family or community (the pressure exerted is likely to be greater in Arab Sunni areas); in opposition-held areas in particular, there would be significant vulnerability to Islamist groups should the faith of converts become known.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: Jacobite form of Christianity - <https://www.everyculture.com/Africa-Middle-East/Jacobites-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html>
- Christian origins: crusades - <https://fanack.com/syria/history-past-to-present/crusades-1095-1291/>

WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Syria

Reporting period

01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

Position on the World Watch List

Syria: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	81	12
WWL 2020	82	11
WWL 2019	82	11
WWL 2018	76	15
WWL 2017	86	6

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

With a score of 81 points, Syria ranked 12 in WWL 2021, one point as well as one rank lower than in WWL 2020. The level of pressure remains the same as in WWL 2020 but there was a slightly lower number of violent incidents - although the score for violence is still at an extreme level. For instance, in the current reporting period there were nine Christians killed for their faith whereas this was 10 in WWL 2020. There were also fewer cases of abduction and one less case of forced marriage.

Persecution engines

Syria: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Very weak
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Strong
Christian Denominational protectionism	CDP	Medium

Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Weak
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Strong

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Islamic oppression (Very Strong):

Islamic oppression is the major Persecution engine in Syria and accounts for most of the atrocities and violations committed against Christians. Militants belonging to radical Islamic groups such as al-Qaeda affiliate *Hayat Tahrir al Sham* (HTS) and *Jaish al-Islam* as well as members of Turkish-sponsored opposition groups (TSOs), are currently the main drivers of this engine in Syria. They are operating openly in the north-west of Syria and across the northern part of the country to Hasakah and Qamishli.

Christians used to have a relatively large amount of religious freedom in pre-civil war Syria. This changed with the arrival of militant Islamic groups. IS set up its caliphate covering large parts of Syria and Iraq at the end of June 2014 and a strict version of Sharia law was implemented. The IS-caliphate was finally eliminated in March 2019. However, the threat of revenge actions by IS still exists as the group continues to conduct sophisticated attacks in large parts of Syria. In 2020, IS militants have been able to reorganize themselves in the deserts of Syria and Iraq.

Turkish military operations (which started in 2016) led to the occupation of territory in northern, north-western Aleppo Governorate, Idlib and - since October 2019 - the so-called "safe zone" in northern Syria along the Syrian-Turkish border. Rebels, among them hardline Islamist groups, were driven north to areas near the Turkish border. Turkey is using Arab Islamist fighters to control Kurdish areas. Islamic militants currently control approximately 15% of Syria's population.

Islamic oppression is also present in government-controlled areas, affecting mostly converts from Islam to Christianity where pressure is exerted by the converts' family and community. Slight pressure is also exerted on indigenous Christians; for instance, during Ramadan in 2019, posters appeared in Christian neighborhoods in Aleppo urging Christian women to veil themselves. In addition one of the main sources for Syria's legislation is Sharia law which makes it impossible for a Muslim to convert to another religion.

Clan oppression (Strong):

Tribalism is characterized by loyalty to one's own tribe or family and the age-old norms and values they embody. As in many countries of the Middle East, tribalism in Syria is very much mixed with Islam and especially affects Christians with a Muslim background. The strength and existence of this engine varies per region and size of cities. Tribalism is especially strong in the

Kurdish areas in the north and in the desert areas in central Syria as well as in the southern part of the country.

In the southern regions such as Daraa, Sueda and the surrounding countryside, there are many Druze communities. When a Druze decides to follow Christ, the family usually opposes this decision because it is felt to be a threat to their national security, as an ethnic and religious minority. For many Druze, the control of family, values and heritage are of greater importance than the laws of the state. Compliance with family rules is therefore very important.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very Strong):

In present-day Syria, this engine is predominantly driven by armed groups that control parts of Syria and are willing to use any means to stay in power. This includes TSOs through which president Erdogan aims to restore the past glories of the Ottoman Sultanate. Since October 2019, Turkey and TSOs have several times cut off the water supply to Kurdish and Christian minorities in Hassakeh, as well as the surrounding rural areas inhabited by more than a million people to force them into submission. Especially during the COVID-19 crisis, water has been of vital importance.

From the side of the Syrian government, *Dictatorial paranoia* is mostly evident in the behavior of government officials who monitor churches, for instance, by checking sermons for political content. At the height of the civil war this was less prevalent but now that President Assad has tightened his grip on government-controlled territory, more monitoring is being reported again. Also, the authorities discourage conversion from Islam to Christianity or to any other religion, as conversions are seen as possibly harming stability in society and causing community conflict. The main objective for the government is to secure social stability rather than protect religious minorities (including Christians). The government mostly acts against religious groups (Christians included) if they are considered a threat to the status quo either by the authorities or any other local entity; evangelization or church-work focusing on contact with Muslims could be regarded as such a threat.

Organized corruption and crime (Strong):

Corruption is quite strong in Syrian society and has become part of daily life. Indeed, on Transparency International's [2019 Corruption Perceptions index](#) Syria is listed as the third most corrupt country. In Syria, *Organized corruption and crime* takes place in the civil war situation of impunity and anarchy. Corruption is widespread and also affects access to food and health care. It is a means for self-enrichment; an example is kidnap for ransom, which Syrians of various religious backgrounds have experienced. Behind the kidnapping of Christians there are financial, political and ideological motives. Christians have a reputation for being wealthy and for supporting the regime. Being part of a vulnerable non-Muslim minority also plays a role in their abduction, as Christians do not have political power or connections with high authorities and are therefore a 'soft target'.

Organized corruption and crime is especially prevalent in areas occupied by Turkish military and Islamic militant groups as well as in the Druze-dominated areas in the south where gangs and armed groups are active and in areas with a high percentage of Alawites. In the first two

mentioned areas, there is no or hardly any government influence. A clear example of this engine has been the seizure of hundreds of Christian-owned houses and businesses by radical Islamist fighters in northwest and northeast Syria between October 2019 and January 2020. However, areas dominated by Alawites are not exempt either: In Latakia, the kidnapping of young Christians has become a major concern for Christian families. Latakia is often considered to be one of the quiet areas relatively isolated from the armed conflict in the rest of the country. Some Christians accuse security officers of being involved in these crimes as a way to gain money.

In general, increasing poverty and challenging economic conditions resulting from the COVID-19 measures, have caused crime (including robberies) to rise dramatically. During the period of lockdown and the resulting absence of state control, corruption also rose in the form of inflated prices. For these reasons the strength of this engine was adjusted from 'medium' in WWL 2020 to 'strong' in WWL 2021.

Christian denominational protectionism (Medium):

As a result of the Syrian crisis, there were many bridges built between historical church communities and non-traditional groups. These bridges were mostly built through personal interaction between priests and pastors. However, senior leadership in several historical churches resist building any bridges with non-traditional churches. They have accused some non-traditional Christians of betraying their nation by linking up with Western political agendas, thus making them suspect in the eyes of the authorities.

In recent years, the Orthodox Church has received increased government support due to its connections with Russia. This has increased its influence on state decisions regarding the evangelical community (for instance, in the areas of official approval for staging conferences or for the construction of buildings belonging to the evangelical church). This has meant that evangelicals have not been given security clearances to conduct activities outside of their church facilities. In addition, there have been accounts of many senior historical church leaders officially and unofficially not recognizing Christians from a Muslim background.

Drivers of persecution

Syria:									
Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	VERY WEAK	-	STRONG	MEDIUM	WEAK	-	VERY STRONG	STRONG
Government officials	Strong	Very weak	-	Weak	-	-	-	Medium	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	Weak	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	Weak	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Weak	Medium	-	-	-	-

Syria:									
Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	VERY WEAK	-	STRONG	MEDIUM	WEAK	-	VERY STRONG	STRONG
Violent religious groups	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	Strong
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	Medium	-	Medium	Very weak	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	Very strong	-	Strong	Weak	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Weak	-	-	-	Medium	-	-	Medium	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	Weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

- **Violent religious groups (Very strong) and Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Medium):**

Some opposition groups are more Islamist than others. Among the various revolutionary and paramilitary groups, those with the more radical Islamist agendas pose the greatest threat to Christians and other minority groups (including Muslims considered to be heretical). These mostly Salafist groups have all contributed to the violence against Christians and other minorities, most prominently (but not exclusively) IS, Free Syrian Army (FSA) and al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham (HTS). There are dozens of jihadist organization remnants that are summarized as the Turkish National Army under control of the Turkish Government. They continue to pose an extreme threat to Christian life in northern Syria, in particular.

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):**

In the areas controlled by Islamist opposition factions, Islamic leaders have typically pursued a policy of marginalizing Christians and other minorities or of forcing them to flee to other areas. It is, however, often difficult to distinguish between 'religious leader' and

leaders of 'violent religious groups'. Footage on social media showed Turkish sheikhs praying for Turkish soldiers to conquer the Kurdish area and bring it back to Islam, whatever the cost. Also in government-controlled areas, hate-speech against Christians by Islamic leaders occurs; however, this is not allowed and in some cases has led to the withdrawal of licenses to preach in mosques. Muslim religious leaders are also known to put pressure on converts directly or indirectly through their families or security agencies.

- ***Extended family (very strong), Ethnic leaders and Normal citizens (Strong):***

As in other Middle Eastern countries, converting from Islam to Christianity comes with massive pressure from family, tribe and society as whole. Family hostility is the main source of pressure faced by Christians from a Muslim background. A significant aspect of this pressure is the fear of provoking violent reactions from immediate or extended family. Ethnic leaders that are drivers of Islamic oppression are mostly tribal leaders.

Drivers of Clan oppression:

- ***Extended family, Ethnic leaders and Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):***

Family, tribe, ethnic group and non-Christian religious leaders have put pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity. For instance a sheikh can permit the execution of a convert and other non-Muslims, they can give permission for Muslims to take their properties, their belongings and even their women. These drivers are especially strong in the Kurdish areas in the north and in the desert areas in central Syria. Also, Assyrian communities report being marginalized at the hands of overly-assertive Kurdish local administrators.

- ***Normal citizens (Medium):***

Changing one's religion to Christianity is considered a betrayal of the values of the community and leads to great opposition, when discovered. Ethnicity and religion are intertwined and the same dynamics are active here as listed under *Islamic oppression*.

Drivers of Christian denominational protectionism:

- ***Religious leaders of other churches (Medium):***

In 2020, the patriarchs of the Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches managed to get the government to ban all evangelicals (including those with a Muslim background) from organizing activities outside their church facilities. Another example is the attempt by Syriac Orthodox church leaders to prevent the construction of an Evangelical church in the Northeast. These church leaders have been teaching their congregations that evangelicals are i) not Christians, ii) that their churches are not real churches, and iii) that they should be treated as heretics.

- ***Political parties (Medium):***

This mainly concerns nominal Christians who are part of the Baath Party or the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. They promote atheist values and deny the existence of God and the value

of Biblical stories, especially those from the Old Testament. They have a strong influence on the younger generation because the Church has not been giving adequate answers to their questions about the Christian faith. In addition, they reject evangelicals because they are seen as part of a larger conspiracy and ideology related to the West. They have a strong influence on the community to isolate evangelicals.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- ***Violent religious groups (Very strong) and Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Strong):***

Dictatorial paranoia as a persecution engine in present day Syria is predominantly driven by armed groups that control parts of Syria and are willing to use any means to stay in power, including Turkish backed militants. Islamic militant groups have taken over many Christian-owned properties. Elderly Christians who remained in their homes are in constant fear of being killed or kidnapped by militants in order to take over their houses as well. In north-eastern Syria, the Kurdish authorities have also tried to take over many houses belonging to Christians who left the country. Also in government-held areas, armed groups have attempted to take over church-owned property, such as the monastery in Aleppo.

- ***Government officials (Medium):***

President Assad emphasizes his regime's commitment to pluralism and inter-faith tolerance and has a positive attitude especially towards traditional Christian communities. As is common in situations of conflict, those in authority in Syria are using control tactics to maintain power. Sunni officials in local authorities are particularly watchful of all religious groups and are known to restrict the activities of evangelical Christians and converts in order to prevent societal instability. Methods of control can include interrogation and monitoring and are sometimes instigated by a converts' family or even by leaders of Historical church communities. Finally, there are claims that Christian soldiers within the Syrian Army are given more dangerous duties than non-Christians and that Christian civil servants have received inferior treatment compared to others.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:

- ***Violent religious groups (Strong), Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium); government officials (Medium):***

Christians have been targeted for kidnappings by criminal networks, including IS, although this has now become sporadic. Whilst there may be a religious aspect behind kidnapping, the usual driving factor for the gangs and criminals involved is money - and Christians are perceived as being wealthy. The country is rife with corruption and bribery is part of daily life whenever a Syrian needs to deal with the authorities. For instance, if you want to pass a military checkpoint you might have to pay bribes or face serious intimidation. Government officials are reportedly also putting pressure on bishops to allow them to take some of the emergency aid to support their families. This is just one way the corrupt officials affect the Church.

Converts from a Druze background are also faced with the threat of abduction and robbery by Druze militant groups. Also here, there is a financial and a religious motive; these Christians are additionally vulnerable since they lack protection from militias or local authorities. Lack of security is a major concern for Christians living in the areas controlled by the regime. Many Syrians believe the regime is responsible for this, as a number of common criminals were released in a general amnesty in 2011 who were subsequently recruited into the regime's militias. Even in Latakia, which is regarded as a relatively safe area, the kidnapping of young Christians has become a major concern for Christian families. Furthermore, Alawite armed groups made attempts to claim and take over several monasteries during the WWL 2021 reporting period.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Christians are particularly under pressure in the last bastions of control by radical Islamic groups in Idlib Province in the northwest and in Hasakah Province in the northeast, where IS has continued to attack civilian and church targets. Turkish military and TSOs which include Islamic militants are operating openly across the northern part of the country to Hasakah and Qamishli. In October 2019, Turkey invaded northern Syria and created a so-called "safe zone" along the Syrian-Turkish border, where it uses Arab Islamic fighters to control predominantly Kurdish and Christian areas. Pressure on converts exists in the entire country, but their situation is particularly dangerous in the northwest and northeast.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Three of the four WWL categories of Christianity exist in Syria and are affected by violations (mostly related to the civil war).

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation. This category is therefore not scored in WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

These are mostly Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. As the largest type of Christianity in the country, Christians from historical Christian communities are specifically targeted. They are spread over the entire country and are also present in conflict zones. Several hundred Christian families live in Idlib Province - which is controlled by international jihadist groups - where they are threatened with death, torture or assault and therefore hide their faith. The attacks by Turkey and TSOs have driven out many of these Christians from their homes in the northwest, north and northeast.

Of this group, it is the leaders that are mostly affected, due to their public visibility. Clergy from historical churches are recognizable by their clothing which sometimes makes them a target. Historical Christian communities tend to be more recognizable in society than other types of Christianity, for instance by clearly recognizable churches and their members are socio-economically more connected to the state apparatus. The political reputation of denominations, churches and local church leaders plays an important role in the level of oppression they face

from groups that are fighting President Assad. It is thus decisive how churches and Christians aligned themselves politically in the past – i.e. whether they were supportive of Assad, tried to stay neutral, distanced themselves from him or even opposed him.

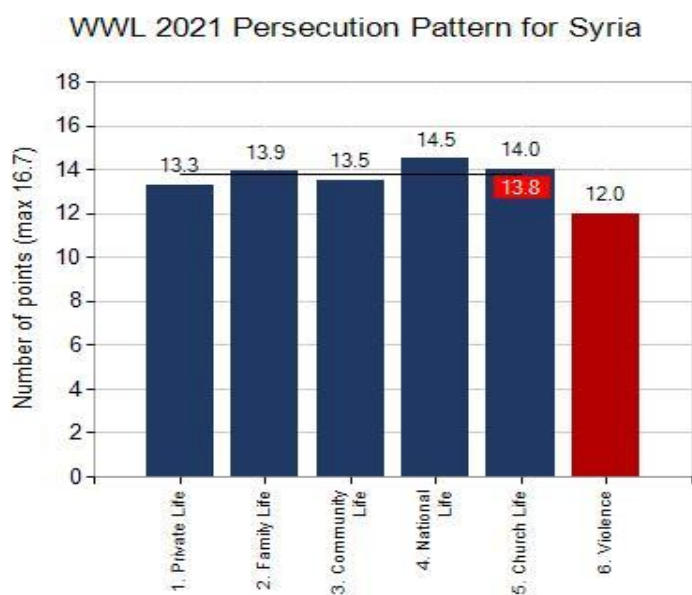
Converts to Christianity:

Christians from a Muslim or Druze background are especially put under pressure by their family, as it brings great dishonor to them if a family member leaves their religion. This is particularly true in majority Sunni areas, where converts risk being banned from their family homes or worse. In a reaction to the increased radicalization of Islam, opposition from family and society towards converts from a Muslim background has increased particularly within rebel-controlled areas. Pressure from the family is relatively less intense in Kurdish areas (with the exception of desert areas where there is more tribal influence and Islam is more conservative), as the Kurdish Sunnis are generally less radical.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are in a vulnerable position as they are known for their Western orientation, fragmentation, lack of strong leadership and lack of a foreign spokesperson (e.g. like a pope or bishop) who can speak on their behalf. Most of the non-traditional Christian communities lack full, official recognition and legal status. There are non-traditional Christian communities in various parts of Syria, particularly in regime-held territory and in Kurdish areas. Those in areas held by Islamist opposition groups are most vulnerable to violence. Within regime-held areas, there is some pressure from Historical churches too. Non-traditional Christian communities are known for their outreach activities and are not allowed to engage in activities outside of churches. Because of their evangelistic activities they are specifically targeted by the Islamic militant groups, but also by the government that wants to maintain stability at all costs.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Syria shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level and scored 13.8 points, the same as in WWL 2020.
- Pressure in three *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level and was strongest in the *National* (14.5 points), *Church* (14.0) and *Family* (13.9). In the *Community* (13.5) and *Private* (13.3) *spheres of life* pressure was very high. This is typical for a situation in which *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia* are the main persecution engines.
- Pressure from *Islamic oppression* is present mostly in the *Private*, *Family*, *Community* and *Church* spheres and is exerted by the social environment.
- The score for violence went slightly down from 12.6 in WWL 2020 to 12.0 in WWL 2021 – mostly explained by one less targeted killing, a lower number of Christians abducted and one less case of forced marriage.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2021 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.75 points)

In areas controlled by Islamist opposition groups, it is dangerous for all Christian communities to discuss their faith with non-Christians. In the rest of the country this is particularly risky for converts, but also for non-convert Christians where it could be regarded as attempted evangelism, which is prohibited by law. The fragile peace between the various religions used to be maintained by avoiding anything that could be considered offensive or an attempt at evangelization.

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.25 points)

According to state law, Muslims are prohibited from converting to other religions as this is contrary to Islamic law. Therefore, the government and other religious groups strongly discourage conversion, although it is not criminalized. In areas held by Islamist opposition groups, such as Idlib Province, which is currently held by HTS militants, conversion from Islam is generally punishable by death. In areas controlled by Kurdish authorities, converts will face societal and public pressure but not as much as in the rest of Syria. Most pressure on converts comes from their families.

Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.25 points)

This is primarily a risk for converts if they are caught in possession of a Bible or other Christian material by a disapproving member of the family or community; it could lead to serious negative repercussions. For converts from Islam in areas held by Islamists, the discovery of these materials could be very dangerous as it risks revealing their conversion.

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.25 points)

In areas controlled by Islamist opposition groups, this can be risky for all categories of Christian communities. In the rest of the country, this is likely to prompt a hostile reaction primarily from family and community toward converts. In Kurdish areas, the reaction may be less severe since there is a higher level of tolerance, except for the zone currently occupied by Turkish forces. In government-controlled areas it is not risky for indigenous Christians (i.e. from a Christian background) to express their faith in written form as long as it does not cause controversy and it is a mere expression of faith (i.e. with no mention of politics, other faiths or evangelization).

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.12: Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases. (4.00 points)

In cases in which a Muslim spouse divorces a Christian convert or an indigenous Christian (though this is more rare), custody rights are ordinarily given to the Muslim party. Some Christian mothers will convert to Islam just to keep her children with her.

Block 2.11: Spouses of converts have been put under pressure (successfully or unsuccessfully) by others to divorce. (3.75 points)

There is a massive social stigma to interfaith marriages, which can lead to estrangement, discrimination and persecution by family members - even murder. The honor of a Muslim man is put to shame if his wife (or daughter) converts to Christianity. Both culture and religion say the right thing to do is kill her. Divorce is the second and more common solution. Therefore it is highly likely that - if her faith is discovered - a female convert will be rejected by her husband and her husband's family. As such she will probably be chased, eventually robbed of her children and divorced. If a husband becomes a Christian, his in-laws will likely put pressure on his wife to leave him and try to claim custody of the children. In some cases, when the husband convinces his wife, she becomes a Christian.

Block 2.1: Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion. (3.50 points)

The children of Syrian Christians from Muslim backgrounds would automatically be registered as Muslim, because their parents cannot officially change their religion. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) is a rare exception in this regard: it is the only place in the region allowing Muslims to legally change their religion.

Block 2.2: Registering the birth, wedding, death, etc. of Christians has been hindered or made impossible. (3.50 points)

There is no legal scope in Syria for a female Christian from a Muslim background to marry a male from an indigenous Christian family. Their Christian marriage would be illegal. From birth, the children of converts from Islam are considered Muslim. Upon death, it would be normal for the Muslim families to apply for Muslim burial rites for a convert. However, if the conversion is known to the community, they will not allow a burial in a Muslim cemetery since he had rejected Islam.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.50 points)

As a result of increased Islamic education in government-held areas, children of Christians are experiencing more pressure. Also, children who came from Islamist-controlled areas are emotionally charged against what they called infidels: Alawites, Christians and Kurds. Children of converts are considered Muslims and are very likely to be harassed and discriminated against if the faith of their parents is known. Christians from all backgrounds are susceptible to discrimination in areas held by Islamist opposition groups.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.75 points)

Monitoring takes place in the entire country, especially for Christians known to have a Muslim background and for Christians from non-traditional church groups. Also, all sermons are monitored and controlled. It is very probable that, in all areas, informal monitoring is routinely carried out for all Christian communities by the controlling authorities, often using community informers. The situation is especially serious in areas held by Islamist opposition groups.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.50 points)

This pressure applies, throughout Syria, to families of Christian converts - particularly in relation to access to Christian education. (Under the state system, religious instruction is provided according to confessional affiliation and converts are considered Muslim.) In Idlib, Christians are heavily discriminated against in all phases of education. All universities controlled by HTS also implement Islamist teachings with the aim of indoctrinating the upcoming generation of Muslims. Christians are excluded by default.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

This applies to converts whose faith becomes known, and potentially to indigenous Christians - especially in opposition-controlled areas. In government-held areas, sectarianism is officially banned and Christians can hold top ranks in the military and state apparatus. However, Alawites,

members of Syria's governing sect, hold dominant positions in the army and other security services disproportionate to their numbers. Some Christians are also represented in Kurdish-held territories. More general economic pressure is exerted in much of Syria through means of unemployment. In Aleppo, where Sunni Muslims control the market, they often do not employ Christians. Discrimination against Christians from a Druze background also occurs in majority Druze areas in southern Syria.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

It is mainly converts and non-traditional Christians who are affected by interrogations by the local authorities. For example, converts have been questioned by Turkish-backed militias in the northwest of the country. If Evangelicals want to organize an activity such as training, setting up a conference or inviting a speaker from abroad, they must report everything and can also expect to receive a call to be questioned. Any guests from abroad will also be monitored because of the authorities' distrust of the relationship between Christians and the outside world. In this way they want to exclude any threat to the regime. Christians involved in ministry with converts are also very likely to be questioned regularly.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (4.00 points)

As it relates to the expression of religious views and beliefs, this area of pressure applies to indigenous Christians living in territory occupied by opposition forces (especially Islamist), and to Christians from a Muslim background throughout the country. All Christians understand the need to avoid deliberately provocative statements, especially statements that are critical of the government or Islam or could be construed as proselytizing. Christians are very aware that they are in a vulnerable position without anyone to protect them or advocate for them. This makes them choose their words carefully.

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.50 points)

The Syrian Constitution of 2012 specifies that the President must be a Muslim. It also establishes Islamic law as a major source of legislation - which provides a fundamental basis for the discriminatory treatment of non-Muslims. The Constitution affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion, and obliges the State to respect all religions and to ensure that freedom to perform religious rites is protected - all on the condition that they "do not disturb the public order". Conversion from Islam to any other religion is not recognized. In areas held by Islamist opposition groups, Sharia law applies, which severely restricts the freedom of all non-Sunni religious groups.

Block 4.2: Officials have refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identify cards (etc.). (3.50 points)

With Sharia as a principle source of legislation, conversion from Islam to another religion out of Islam is illegal in Syria. No Christian from a Muslim background would apply to have their conversion officially recognized because they know that this cannot be granted and because to make such an application would expose them to potential danger. Currently, this situation is worst in Idlib. A positive exception in this respect is the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) where Muslims can legally change their religion.

Block 4.3: Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience, e.g. regarding military service or in certain professions. (3.50 points)

In government-held areas, all males between 18 and 42 years of age have to serve in the armed forces or face imprisonment and forced conscription. This issue is among the factors making Christian refugees reluctant to return to Syria. This is an issue which is not specific to Christians, although some claim that Christians and other minorities are especially vulnerable within the army. Within opposition-held areas there may also be a general pressure to join defense forces or other militias. For instance, the World Council of Arameans expressed concern in January 2018 about the exploitation of Christians by the YPG Kurdish forces in Kurdish areas of northern Syria.

Block 4.12: Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols. (3.50 points)

For indigenous churches, this applies primarily in opposition-held areas controlled by Islamist groups. Many churches have been desecrated, especially through the removal of crosses. Within these areas, many remaining Christians would be wary of publicly displaying Christian symbols in ways which could be provocative. For Christians from Muslim backgrounds throughout Syria, care would also be taken to avoid any provocative display of Christian symbols.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.75 points)

This area of pressure applies primarily in opposition-held areas controlled by Islamist groups, in which most (if not all) churches have ceased to function or have been desecrated over the course of the ongoing conflict. Within government-controlled areas, there is understood to be a routine monitoring of church activities, ostensibly for the protection of churches. However such monitoring could be used against churches if provocative messages or activities were detected. Most pressure is on church groups of converts, though the pressure is much less in Kurdish areas, with the exception of the zone currently occupied by Turkish forces.

Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.50 points)

Recognized churches include the Greek Orthodox Church, the Syriac Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic Churches, the Greek, Armenian, Chaldean, Roman, Maronite and Syriac Catholic Churches, the Syriac Church of the East, and the Presbyterian, Baptist, Alliance and Nazarene Churches. Other churches, including Pentecostal groups, do not have official recognition - though many have nevertheless been able to meet with little interference. In areas held by Islamist opposition groups as well as in government controlled areas, Christians from a Muslim background are also not able to have a formally recognized church - though many are members of other recognized groups or non-traditional churches meeting informally. The picture is mixed within opposition-controlled areas - generally, the recognized churches have freedom to operate in Kurdish-held areas, while there are severe restrictions for all Christian communities in areas controlled by Islamist groups.

Block 5.7: Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts. (3.50 points)

The incorporation of converts within recognized churches has always been discouraged in Syria on the grounds that this could produce religious sectarianism or provoke conflict between communities. Also, it could potentially be a ground for criminal prosecution. Non-traditional church groups generally have a more open attitude towards converts. In areas held by Islamist opposition groups, openly integrating converts in churches would be unthinkable and very dangerous. Also in this respect, the Kurdish autonomous areas in the northeast are a positive exception.

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.50 points)

From the onset of the crisis in Syria, all gatherings (including church services) have been monitored and church leaders are expected to call upon members to support the Assad regime. Most church leaders accept the fact that there is some routine surveillance of activities on church premises, including sermons and teaching. They effectively exercise self-censorship by avoiding provocative or inflammatory messaging, for example about evangelizing Muslims or speaking about Islam in a derogatory way. Also, the Ministry of Islamic Endowment was empowered to approve Christian books that can be sold publicly. This ministry, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, supervises the curriculum for Christian schools in Syria as well. Finally, there is no space for any sort of public Christian teaching in Islamist-held areas.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (A symbolic number of 10 could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100 could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure.

Syria: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	9	10
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	5	5
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	3	2
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	2	27
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	10	1
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	1	2
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	83	25
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	480	400
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	395	50
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	600	600
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	263	10

Disclaimer: *In the chaotic circumstances of war it is often not clear whether incidents are religiously motivated or not. Incidents where Christians were harmed or Christian owned property was damaged in fighting between government and rebel forces which could be considered "collateral damage" were generally not included. Motives for attacks are mixed and include power mechanisms. However, this does not necessarily rule out anti-Christian motivation. For WWL analysis, cases have only been included i) where it was clear to perpetrators in advance that Christian civilians would be affected (e.g. where a majority Christian town was*

attacked); and ii) where the local Christian community believed that those responsible were acting out of specific anti-Christian motivation through their adherence to anti-Christian ideology (for instance Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Islamic State (IS) or other violent Islamic militants).

It is important to note that the WWL 2021 reporting period overlaps one month with the previous one and it was in this month (October 2019) that several incidents took place as a result of the Turkish offensive into north-eastern Syria, causing many Christians to flee the area.

- **Christians killed:** Nine Christians were killed for faith-related reasons. Examples are listed above under "Specific incidents of persecution".
- **Churches attacked:** Five churches or Christian buildings were attacked, damaged, desecrated or closed mostly by Islamic State, Turkish forces or Turkey-sponsored opposition groups, or Alawite gangs.
- **Christians attacked:** As an example, in the above mentioned attack on the church in Qamishli, at least 70 Christians were injured as well as the deacon who was injured in the attack on the priest and his father close to Deir ez-Zor. There were also reports of at least 12 converts from Islam who were physically or mentally abused.
- **Christians arrested:** Three Christians were detained, among them two converts from Islam. They were detained by a Turkish backed militia for faith related reasons in Afrin in late July 2020 and are said to face apostasy charges. Two of the three Christians were released on bail, one convert is still being held.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Turkey-sponsored opposition groups (TSOs) confiscated and looted 205 houses and 120 commercial and industrial sites of 75 Christian families who had fled Ras al-Ayn as a result of the Turkish offensive in October 2019. In Idlib, *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) seized up to 550 houses and businesses belonging to Christians who were forced to leave the city between October 2019 and January 2020 due to heavy fighting.
- **Christians forced to leave their homes:** Hundreds of Christians fled the Turkish attacks. According to country researchers, the number was at least 863 Christians but in reality it could be thousands.

5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

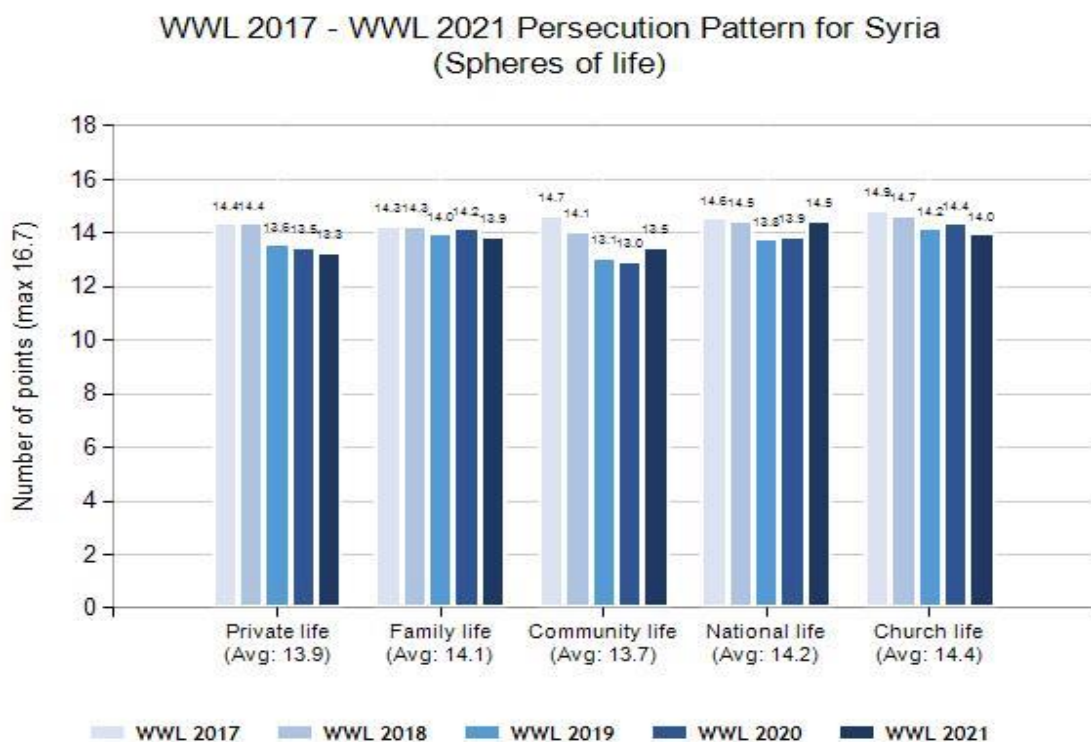
5 Year trends: Average pressure

Syria: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	13.8
2020	13.8

2019	13.8
2018	14.4
2017	14.6

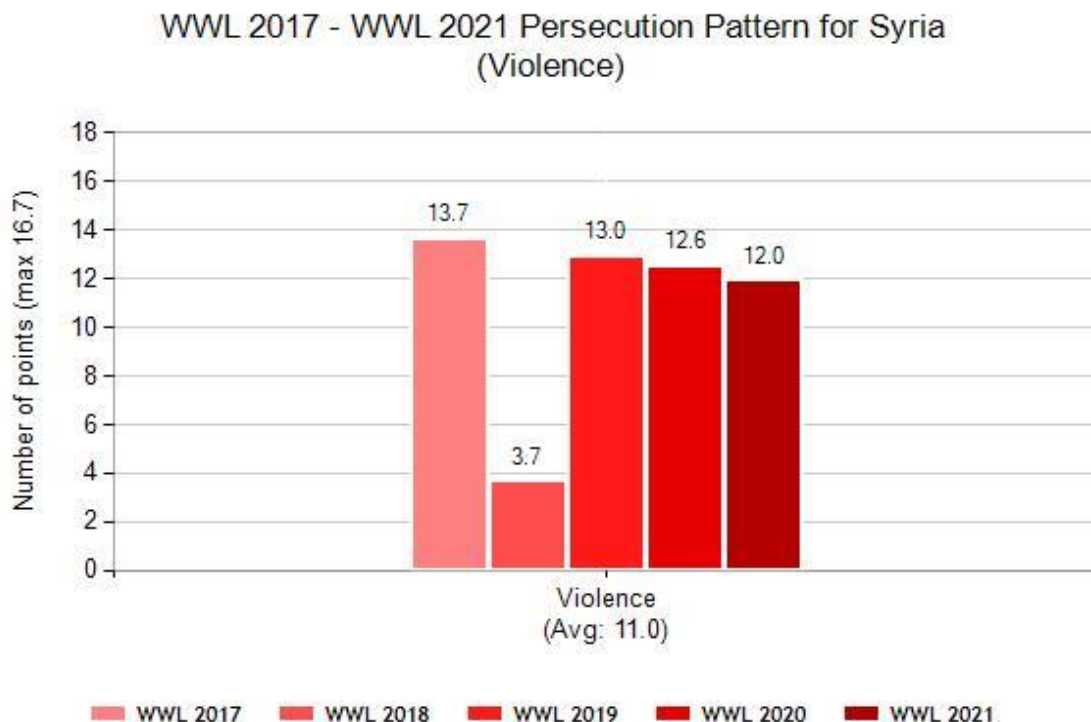
The above table shows how the overall level of pressure on Christians has been at an extremely high level over all five WWL reporting periods. The average pressure now appears to have stabilized at 13.8 points.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The trend for all *spheres of life* is now towards a decrease in pressure, compared to the higher levels in the first few reporting periods. This decrease reflects the shrinking of IS-held territory and of areas held by other Islamic militant groups. However, the levels did increase slightly in WWL 2021 for *Community Life* and *National Life*, whereas it somewhat decreased in *Private Life*, *Family Life* and *Church Life*. Scores for *Family*, *National* and *Church Life* remain extreme.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The scores for violence targeting Christians above show extremely high levels of violence in WWL 2017 when IS still controlled parts of Syria. This steep fall in WWL 2018 is explained by the fact that fewer violent incidents were reported as the IS-dominated areas shrunk further, and also by the fact that accessing verified information in the chaos of civil war was particularly difficult. For instance, weeks after WWL 2018 had been published, it became known in October 2017 that IS had killed more than 100 Christians in the [Christian town of al-Qaryatayn](#), which would have led to a higher score in violence (The Independent, 23 October 2017). The rise in violence to extreme levels again in WWL 2019 - WWL 2021 mainly reflects violent actions (including killings) perpetrated by Islamic militants, Turkish forces and TSOs, and the confiscation of property in areas where large numbers of Christians live(d) - especially in the northwest, north and northeast of the country. There was also more access to detailed information in the later WWL reporting periods.

Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Abduction
Denied custody of children
Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse

Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Enforced religious dress code
Forced divorce
Forced marriage
Incarceration by family (house arrest)
Trafficking
Violence – death
Violence – physical
Violence – sexual

According to an August 2020 report by the [United States Institute of Peace](#) (ISIP): "Now in its 10th year, the Syrian conflict has led to more than 500,000 deaths and displaced an estimated 13 million—over half of Syria’s pre-war population. Over 6.2 million Syrians are internally displaced, and 5.6 million are refugees, predominantly in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey" ([USIP, 26 Aug 2020](#)). In a context of instability and restrictions on religious freedom, women and girls from religious minority groups, including Christians, risk abduction, sexual harassment and rape. Whilst the rate of instances has dropped dramatically since IS dominated areas of Syria, this can happen both in government-controlled areas and in rebel-held territory - though the threat is higher in the latter. Although there were also some reports of sexual violence against men and boys, in a situation in which sexual violence against women became increasingly normalized through Islamists re-introduction of female slavery, women remain much more affected by such violent acts.

Rape is used to bring shame upon Christian families and destabilize communities. The brutal gang-rape and murder of Suzan, a 60-year-old Armenian Christian, in July 2019, [reported](#) by International Christian Concern, is a recent religiously motivated example. Most of the women from Suzan’s predominately Christian village have [reportedly](#) since left due to the violent aggression of the radical groups, reflecting the ongoing dangers facing Christian women (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 1 Aug 2019). Cases of women fleeing however are rare.

Not only Islamic militant groups constitute a threat for Christian women and girls. For female converts, violence can come from their own families and communities, particularly those from a Muslim background. Such pressure affects women and girl converts most, then younger men and lastly older men, reflecting the levels of status and freedom generally within Islamic culture.

Leaving Islam is a great taboo and seriously violates family honor. Women are, as a country expert described, a “soft target.” They may face domestic violence, forced marriage to a Muslim, or even be killed to restore the honor of the family. There is little protection from family violence for women and girls, either [in law](#) or practice (UNDP, “Syria: Gender Justice and the Law”, 2018).

Female Christian converts married to a Muslim risk divorce, particularly if their conversion becomes known to in-laws. In this instance they would also be denied custody over their children since Sharia law dictates that rights are given to the Muslim party. Christian women married to male Christians of Muslim background also face challenges, as the law considers him to still be a Muslim. It is extremely difficult for them to raise their children as Christians, and should the husband die, the Christian wife would be entitled to no inheritance unless she converted to Islam. According to Sharia law, a Muslim woman is not allowed to legally marry a Christian man (vice versa is possible). This makes a marriage between a female Christian of Muslim background and a man from other categories of Christian communities legally impossible.

Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
Abduction
Denied inheritance or possessions
Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Imprisonment by government
Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Violence – death
Violence – psychological
Violence – Verbal

According to [World Politics Review](#) (WPR): “The Syrian civil war that has decimated the country for nine years now, provoking a regional humanitarian crisis and drawing in actors ranging from the United States to Russia, appears to be drawing inexorably to a conclusion...The fighting is not yet fully over, though, with the northwestern Idlib region remaining outside of government control” (WPR, 23 November 2020). Within this context, a common fear among indigenous Christians – and also among many other Syrian communities - is that young men will be forcibly conscripted into the Syrian Army or to other military factions (including the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party referred to as People's Protection Units or YPG). In Syria there is enforced military service for all men at the age of 18. Within opposition-held areas there may

also be a general pressure to join defense forces or other armed units. Some Christians are conscientious objectors, and this can prompt consideration for emigration.

Violations against Christian men affects their families considerably, particularly if they are killed or abducted. In Syria's traditional society, males are the main providers and support their families financially. If they lose their jobs or are abducted/killed, the whole family is dependent on external financial support to survive. Male converts from Islam face additional forms of freedom of religion violations and may be threatened by their family or denied their due inheritance.

The abduction of male church leaders continues to have a considerable negative impact on Christian communities. In November 2019, a Catholic priest and his father were targeted and killed by IS whilst on their way to check on church restoration in Deir al Zor. Christian leaders of Historical church communities are most at risk for these kind of attacks, as they are recognizable to extremists by their dress. There have been several examples of many others in a community leaving once a leader emigrates, which shows the impact such leaders can have on their churches and towns.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department's IRF 2020 report](#) (pages 40-41):

- "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. (...) Furthermore, although the year (HK: 2019) 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."
- "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."

Traditionally, Syrian society has been composed of a diverse range of ethnic and religious communities. Many other religious minorities face severe violations of freedom of religion in Syria, for instance: Shia, Alewite, Druze, Jews, Yazidis and Zaradashtis. Shia, Alewite and Druze communities have been marginalized, persecuted and discriminated against by Sunni jihadists, not only on the grounds of their faith being considered heretical, but in the case of the Alewites, also because of their perceived connections with the respective Assad presidents.

Particularly the Druze communities (but also Shia and Alawites), have faced abductions, bombings and killings by IS militants. As part of Syria's anti-Zionist narrative, Jews have been marginalized for most of modern Syria's history. Yazidis and Zaradashtis belong to Kurdish religions which are not recognized by the Syrian regime. Their children are registered as Sunni Muslims and they learn Islam in school. Presumably their situation was harder before the current crisis, as Kurdish forces are now taking control of their areas which gives them more freedom.

Examples of violations:

- The [International Religious Freedom Report 2019](#) included the following religious violations against Yazidi's starting from 2014: "The COI estimated ISIS militants shot, beheaded, burned alive, or kidnapped more than 9,000 Yezidis, in what the United Nations called a genocidal campaign against them. According to community leaders, more than 3,000 Yezidis remained unaccounted for at year's end. Starting in 2014, ISIS abducted an estimated 6,000 women and children, mainly Yezidis, as well as numerous Christian and Turkmen women, during attacks in northern Iraq. NGOs and activists, such as Yazda and the Free Yezidi Foundation, reported more than 2,000 Yezidi women and children had escaped, been liberated in SDF military operations, or been released from captivity."

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression:

The territorial defeat of IS in March 2019 naturally means significant liberation for people living in the areas concerned. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that the presence of the Persecution engine *Islamic oppression* has weakened considerably. IS has continued its terror activities in the northeast of Syria as well as in the rest of the Middle East and elsewhere to show that it is still a relevant factor in world politics. Moreover IS is not the only driver of this engine which is also boosted by jihadist components of the Sunni opposition. For instance, Islamic militants controlling Afrin have imposed strict Islamic law which makes Christians reluctant to return. In addition, if the return of refugees and IDPs is accelerated, as envisaged by current Lebanese Government policy, Christians could be forced to return to areas under the control of Islamic militants where they are vulnerable. Furthermore, since the Turkish invasion of northeast Syria in October 2019, Christian leaders are growing increasingly worried. According to [Middle East Concern](#) (MEC, 11 October 2019):

"[E]lements within Turkey's forces and their Syrian opposition allies are pursuing Islamist agendas that are hostile not just to Kurds but also to any communities that are not Sunni Muslim. This fear would be compounded if the security of prisons holding extremists is compromised. They also fear that Turkey's refugee repatriation plans, whereby Syrians who fled from other areas would be resettled in northeast Syria, constitute an intentional programme of 'demographic engineering' in the region, intended to boost the Arab Sunni presence to the detriment of Kurds and other communities such as Christians."

This is currently ongoing. Land and property belonging to Christians are being stolen and taken over. Finally, there are reports of a continued growth in the number of converts from Islam to Christianity, which could lead to an increase in the violations against Christians of an Islamic background. Turkey is also beginning to target Kurdish Christians (converts from Islam): Two converts were arrested in Afrin in July 2020 and reportedly charged with apostasy. The current repression has forced Kurdish Christians in the area to go underground.

Clan oppression:

The tribal and ethnic identity of rural Syria is an important factor used by the various national and international powers involved in the civil war. As a result, the different tribes have become very fragmented and have even developed into competing clans, which can force people to rely on their own specific tribe even more. In such circumstances, tribal values - mostly based on Islam - offer security and become increasingly important. In the Kurdish areas, ethnicity is an important factor in the struggle between the Turks and the Kurds. Turkish forces taking over the north-western and mostly Kurdish areas around Afrin in March 2018, reportedly used Sunni jihadist groups to ["eliminate the presence of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities along its border"](#) (Religious Liberty Prayer Bulletin 447, 21 March 2018). These religious minorities include Christians, most of whom are Armenian and Assyrian. A similar approach would seem to be in operation in the Turkish invasion of north-eastern Syria in October 2019. This strengthening of the Persecution engine *Clan oppression* affects all Christians in the areas mentioned and will certainly not lessen the pressure families and communities exert on converts - a situation which is not expected to change for the better in the short term.

Dictatorial paranoia:

The most important drivers of the engine *Dictatorial paranoia* are currently the armed opposition groups as well as the Turkish forces in areas under their control. With most Islamist groups defeated or pushed into Syria's north-west, the Syrian government has vowed to liberate the strategic north-western town of Idlib. The Turkish forces are also driven by the aim to expand and maintain their power in both the northwest and the northeast of Syria. Security company [Garda World](#), expects that "the COVID-19 virus outbreak is unlikely to mitigate fighting along front lines across northern Syria" (Garda World, Syria Country Report, updated July 2020). Christians still living in these areas will no doubt be heavily affected by the fighting.

The [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) projects the Sochi 2.0 ceasefire deal between Turkey and the regime troops in Idlib Province to remain intact until the beginning of 2021, but anticipates the risk of war will again increase later in 2020. The think tank also expects President Bashar al-Assad to "win a decisive victory in the 2021 presidential election despite facing criticism over the economy, with increasingly frequent protests in some regime-held areas." While the regime appears to be increasingly firm in its saddle, its influence on the ground, including monitoring, is increasing. Christians are also affected by this - particularly converts to Christianity, but also communities of non-traditional Christians. This development is expected to expand in importance in the near future.

Organized corruption and crime:

This engine appears to have grown in significance with the arrival of the COVID-19 crisis. Also, organized crime has become more widespread through the low levels of government control in some parts of the country. The collapse of the Syrian economy has had a negative impact on the economic situation of the majority of Syrians and the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 measures is likely to exacerbate the situation. Under these circumstances, the influence of *Organized corruption and crime* is likely to increase in the future.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: 2019 Corruption Perceptions index - <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results>
- 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians description: Christian town of al-Qaryatayn - <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-al-qaryatayn-syria-attack-kills-civilians-raqqa-islamic-state-army-revenge-a8014746.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: United States Institute of Peace - <https://www.usip.org/index.php/publications/2020/08/current-situation-syria>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: USIP, 26 Aug 2020 - <https://www.usip.org/index.php/publications/2020/08/current-situation-syria>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: reported - <https://www.persecution.org/2019/07/17/christian-woman-stoned-death-syria/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: reportedly - <https://www.persecution.org/2019/07/17/christian-woman-stoned-death-syria/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: in law - <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Syria%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: World Politics Review - <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/28041/the-syria-civil-war-might-be-ending-but-the-crisis-will-live-on#:~:text=The%20Syrian%20civil%20war%20that%20has%20decimated%20the,appears%20to%20be%20drawing%20inexorably%20to%20a%20conclusion.>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's IRF 2020 report - https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf
- Persecution of other religious minorities: International Religious Freedom Report 2019 - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>
- Future outlook: Middle East Concern - <https://www.meconcern.org/2019/10/11/syria-christians-request-prayer-for-northeast-syria/>
- Future outlook: "eliminate the presence of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities along its border" - <http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com/2018/03/turkey-in-syria-afrin-falls-christians.html>
- Future outlook: Garda World - <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/syria>
- Future outlook: Economist Intelligence Unit - <http://country.eiu.com/syria>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Syria>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Syria>
- [Iraq and Syria – The enduring relevance of the church in the Middle East: December 2017](#)
- [Understanding the recent movements of Christians leaving Syria and Iraq: June 2017](#)

- [The role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – Summary report – April 2016](#)
- [Future role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – April 2016](#)
- [Historic Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – March 2016](#)
- [Current Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – February 2016](#)