

SYRIA BRIEF

Understanding the Current Climate for Religious Freedom in Syria

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Overview and Contents

The history of religion in Syria is long and complicated with many different peoples travelling through and settling in the region. In modern day, the complexity remains with one central government, two primary governing groups (Assad’s Regime and AANES), four main foreign actors, and at least five active terrorist forces. Each of these actors have their own laws and implementation regarding religious freedom. Although there are many entities within Syria that have tried to gain power since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, as of 2023, the two main groups controlling most of the country’s territory are Damascus-based Bashar al-Assad’s central government and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). This report will attempt to unpack recent developments as well as outline the status of religious freedom for each of these bodies with a special focus on the situation for Christians.

The Bashar al-Assad Regime

Bashar al-Assad came into power in 2000 after the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, who had been in power for 3 decades. Assad is a member of the Ba’ath political party and is a follower of Alawism, a minority religious group that originated from the teachings of Shi’i Islam. Though initially there were expectations among western nations that Bashar would bring economic and political reform to the authoritarian regime of his father, Bashar’s rule has been characterized by suppression of dissent, including imprisoning hundreds of thousands of political opponents, nepotism, and strong anti-western rhetoric. Towards the beginning of his regime, Assad made small advances including loosening government restrictions on freedom of expression and the press and releasing several hundred political prisoners. Within months of these changes, however, the regime began using threats and arrests to discourage pro-reform activism.

After the 2011 protests began in Syria as a part of the broader so-called “Arab Spring”, the regime began using armed forces to violently crack down on protestors in cities that started forming groups of resistance against the regime. Assad justified his actions by claiming his goal was to fight terrorists in the country who, in coordination with foreign powers (such as Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United States) were seeking to overthrow his regime’s order and stability in Syria. Russia and Iran began supporting Assad in 2015 with complex objectives of their own, but with an overall goal to strengthen Assad’s regime. They ultimately helped the regime accomplish a partial military victory while remaining in power.

Article 3 of the Syrian constitution declares that “the state shall respect all religions and shall ensure the freedom to perform religious rituals as long as these do not disturb the public order.” However, several other provisions are incompatible with this protection. For example, while there is no official state religion, the constitution stipulates that Islam shall be the religion of the President and that Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation. Syrian law also prohibits conversion from Islam. The President has used these laws to justify his actions by claiming minority beliefs are a threat to the regime and Syria’s stability. Since “public order” is a relatively vague term and is attributable to characteristics determined by the President, this has been most apparent in the past decade of conflict, where Assad has been able to use state power to take violent actions against those who oppose him.

Due to the ambiguity of these rules and laws, the Assad regime is legally able to take many extreme actions and remain uncontested.

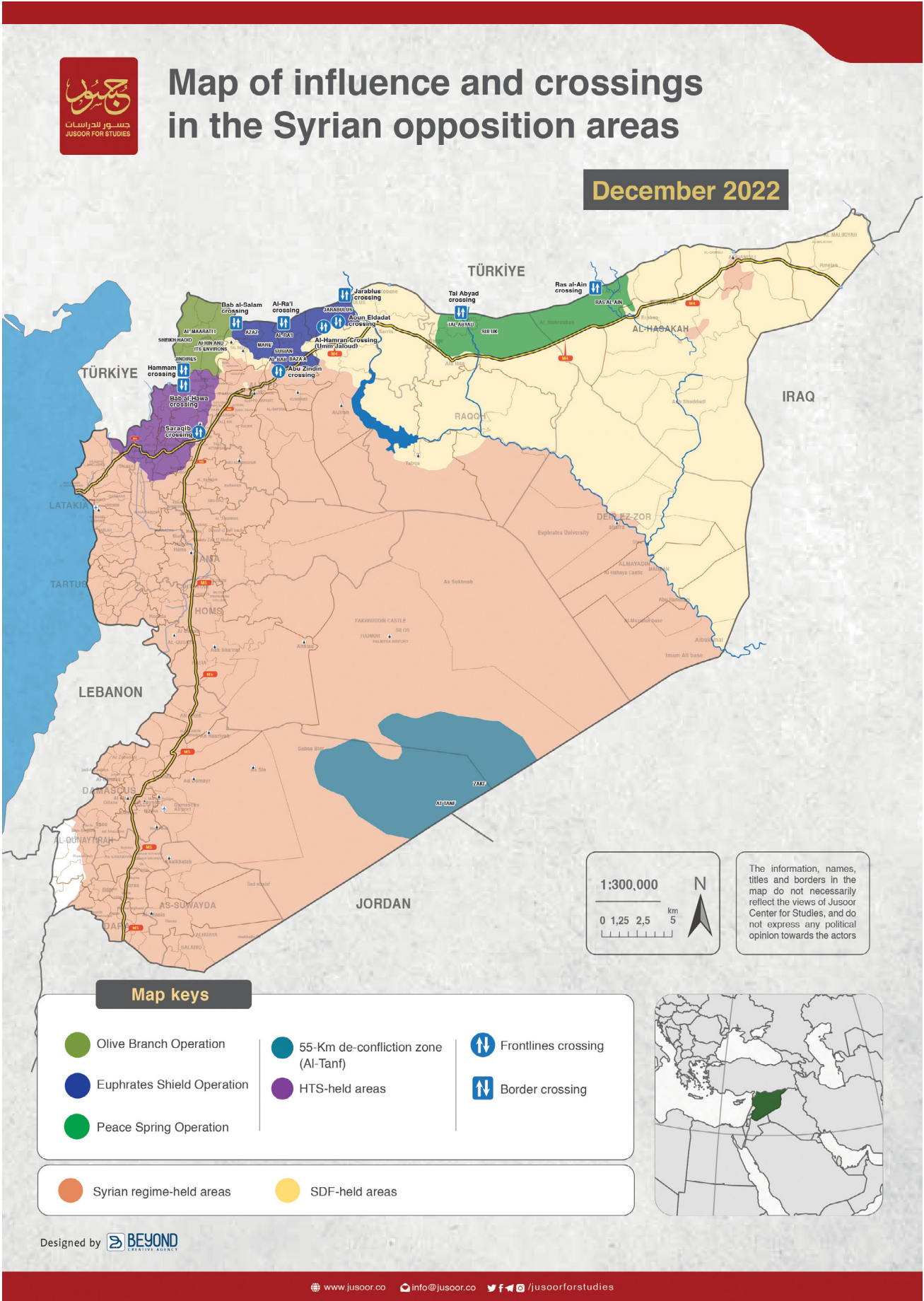
One such avenue the Assad regime uses violence is through attacking places of worship. According to the United States International Religious Freedom Report of 2022, the Assad regime is responsible for 76 attacks on Christian places of worship in 2022 alone. While the regime does not have to cite any documentation for these acts of violence, these examples are widely agreed upon by many humanitarian aid organizations around the world as intentional violence against Christians.

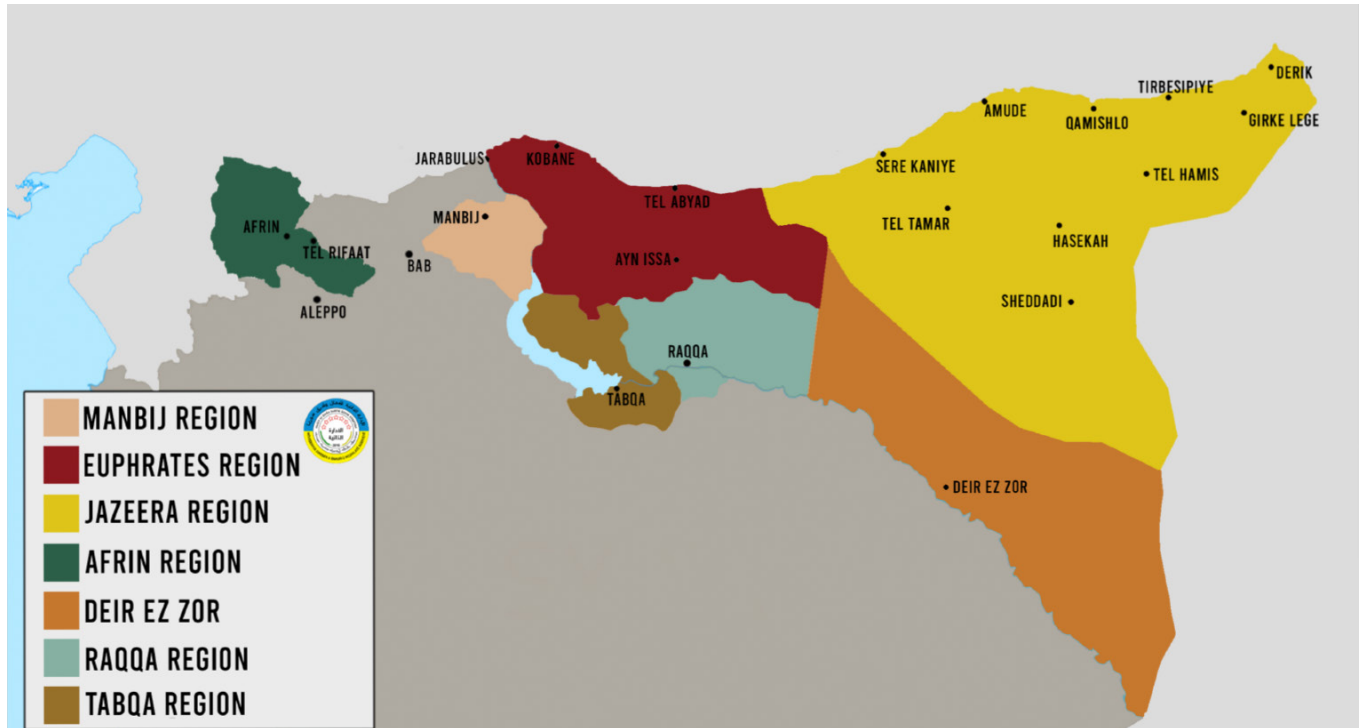
President Assad’s regime has used each of these elements to engage in widespread destruction of hospitals, homes, and other civilian infrastructure as well as many incidents of torture and other egregious human rights violations under the terms of upholding public order and maintaining his regime’s power. The broad use of violence against the Syrian people has also exasperated sectarian divisions across the country and helped stimulate the growth and formation of sectarian based militia and terrorist groups that have specifically targeted Syrian Christians.

According to the US Report on International Religious Freedom, the regime attempted to project an image as a secular protector of Christians, but human rights organizations, including the Middle East Monitor and the Syrian Network for Human Rights, reported the regime intentionally destroyed churches and detained numerous Christian citizens.

President Assad is currently restoring relations with many Arab states and European countries are considering following suit. Assad is seeking to gain international legitimacy again for his regime while securing the needed support for rebuilding his nation’s collapsed economy and destroyed infrastructure. With seemingly little immediate threat to his power locally, Assad’s political grip on Syria is protected internationally by Russia’s continued support from the UN Security council and crucial air support on the ground in Syria.

Map Source: <https://www.jusoor.co/en/details/map-of-influence-and-crossings-in-the-syrian-opposition-areas>





The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

As stated on their official website, the goal of the AANES governance is to “support the effective participation of the AANES in a peaceful political process to resolve the Syrian crisis while providing security, stability, education, health, and public services to the people living within.”

With a long and complicated history, much of the Northeastern portion of Syria gets its fundamental ideological background from the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), a Kurdish leftist guerilla group fighting for greater autonomy of Turkey’s Kurds since the 1980s and has developed into a group focused on social, economic, and political equality, especially for women.

In 2011, beginning with the Arab Spring and the many protests against the ruling Ba’ath Party, a social movement began pushing for a more democratic society. Following the creation of the Peoples Defense Unites (YPG) in 2011, the Women’s Defense Force (YPJ) in 2012 and the establishment of the autonomous regions of Jazeera, Afrin, and Kobani in 2014, there was the establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2015. This group soon established their own constitution and territory with the Proclamation of the Democratic Federation of Rojava- Northern Syria in March 2016.

Today, the AANES, alongside the SDF, covers a sizable portion of Northeastern Syria and supports the seven autonomous regional administrations of Jazeera, Raqqa, Deir ez Zor, Tabqa, Euphrates, and territories within Afrin. Each one of these seven regions is comprised of three general councils of Legislative, Executive, and Justice. Under the Executive branch there are 10 commissions and 8 offices. One of the offices in the AANES is the Office of Religion and Beliefs.

According to their official website, the office is in charge of ensuring religious institutions and beliefs are given the right to function and promote their activities without discrimination or interference. This includes developing religious education systems which promote tolerance and inclusivity, uniting the effort to counter the radical interpretation of religion, and promote moderation.

Each of these aspects contribute to the progress of religious freedom in Syria. Nadine Maenza, former chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and current president at IRF (International Religious Freedom) Secretariat, said the AANES offers “among the best religious freedom conditions in the Middle East” and “it is in the best interest of the United States and the international community to stand with people of the northeast as they work to build a stable future.”

The current objective of the AANES is to try to create a sustainable peace agreement with the Syrian government. The SDF and AANES want to “preserve some form of political and military autonomy they have enjoyed since 2012 since its official establishment” says William Christou, a correspondent for The New Arab’s Levantine.

The main issue the AANES now faces, however, is a lack of international recognition and a lack of international protection from neighbors, particularly Turkey, who opposes the fledgling Syrian Kurdish administration. Because Turkey has had a decades long conflict with the PKK, an organization they say is linked to the AANES, they have opposed recognition of the AANES. Turkey

also considers the US-backed SDF as an armed terrorist organization and has conducted three official military operations against the AANES from 2016-2019, while continuing to regularly bombard and conduct strikes against border areas and key SDF leaders.

Additionally, as international peace talks are typically facilitated by the United Nations, the AANES will not be allowed to participate unless first internationally recognized, depriving millions of Syrians from participating in the diplomatic efforts of determining the future direction of their country.

Bazad Amou, an employee of the Syrian Democratic Council media office, said recognition of the authority would “certainly put the Autonomous Administration in a stronger position in its negotiations with the regime.”

He continues saying, “The regime sees the solution as reconciliation and acceptance of its conditions without conceding to any of the demands of the Syrian people. International recognition prevents the regime from overreaching and fulfilling its military ambition to retake control [in northeast Syria].”

In a piece on the current situation, The New Arab reported that “the AANES is currently negotiating with Damascus to secure its autonomous status within Syria” despite little progress since 2019.

Future Action

The United States must interact cautiously with the Assad regime. Recognizing that due to years of uncertainty and differing value systems, the regime is extremely mistrusting of the United States government, limiting US policy options in the ongoing efforts to broker a resolution to end the Syrian conflict. Additionally, multiple years of conflict between Turkey and the Kurdish groups in the northeast region has led to a contentious dynamic between two US allies, NATO-allied Turkey, and the US leading ally in the fight against ISIS, the SDF.

International Christian Concern redommends that the United States consider the following actions:

1. Continue supporting the religious freedom gains of the AANES in their efforts to build a more inclusive society for Syrians.
2. Encourage Turkey to halt all military operations against the SDF in Syria.
3. As Syrian groups and foreign players in the Syrian conflict move towards normalization, the United States must look for ways to constructively encourage and integrate religious freedom progress into any new Syrian reforms and reconstruction.

Continuing to Support AANES

Currently, the regime has an established prerequisite that requires the United States to withdraw all military forces from Syria before negotiations between the regime and the AANES can begin. However, the United States must continue to take this narrative with caution as the absence of US military presence in the Northeast would mean little to no protection against the regime or Turkish invasion of the AANES which would endanger the hard-fought military gains against ISIS, create a massive humanitarian crisis, and eliminate any religious freedom gains made by the AANES.

AANES-Turkish Relations

Due to the longstanding conflict between Turkey and the Kurdish backed forces in Syria, Turkey has conducted many military operations and land-grabs in northern Syria, including Afrin in 2018. This tension places the United States in a difficult political situation and must look to strategically leverage their relationship with Turkey in NATO to move Turkey’s hand to halt all military operations against US allies against ISIS in Syria, such as the SDF.

If the United States is able to encourage Turkey to limit invasions into the country, it may lead to better relations making AANES an increasingly recognized international group deserving of support while also promoting peace in the region for further gains in religious freedom and human rights progress in Syria.





Religious Freedom Progress within the Syrian Government

While negotiations regarding a compromise between the Assad regime and AANES is ongoing, the United States can look for different ways to prioritize religious freedom as a topic of discussion within any future normalization negotiations. While the Syrian government does not currently have friendly diplomacy contact with the United States, with very little apparent concern for US policy pressures on Syria due to their international support from Russia and Iran, the United States can work with allies and partners involved in the process to ensure that human rights such as religious freedom is protected and integrated into any new political reforms or compromises. Also, as the Syrian regime normalizes with more nations in the coming months and years, billions of dollars in reconstruction funds will likely begin pouring into Syria. In cases where the US has some control or influence in the expenditure of those funds, it must ensure that such reconstruction efforts be targeted towards promoting the protection and freedom of all Syrians and not discriminatory against religious minorities or tide with political favors of the government.

Map Source: <https://www.syriandemocraticcouncil.us/1418-2/>

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