

syria

PERSECUTION 101






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Targeted by warring militaries fighting for territorial control, Syria's religious minorities are regularly subjected to the worst violations imaginable

Only partially controlled by strongman President Bashar al-Assad, Syria has long been torn by destabilizing conflicts, egregious human rights abuses, and severe persecution of religion. Though conditions are dire for Christians and other religious groups in south, where Assad wields most of how power, the situation is not better in the north where Turkish-backed terrorists continue to fight for territory and perpetrate heinous acts of violence against Kurdish and Yazidi religious communities.



QUICK FACTS



Type of Government

Presidential Republic



Head of Government

Bashar al-Assad



Total Population

Approx. 22.93 million



Religious Demography

87% Muslim - 19.95 million
10% Christian - 2.29 million
3% Druze - 688,000



Ethnic Demography

50% Arab
15% Alawite
10% Kurd
10% Levantine
15% Other

TYPES OF PERSECUTION



Government Restrictions

The Assad regime has been relentless in its repression of religious minority rights through the law, though its loose control of the country means that these laws tend to be enforced arbitrarily.



Torture and Imprisonment

The Syrian government and Turkish-backed terrorists alike engage in the worst forms of extrajudicial detention and torture imaginable.



Militant Terrorism

Fighters associated with al-Qaeda, Islamic State, and other designated terrorist groups enjoy unwavering support from the Turkish government in their brutal campaign of violence against Christian communities and others in northern Syria.



ICC IN SYRIA

Despite harsh government restrictions imposed by the Assad regime on outside groups—especially religious ones—working in the country and the harsh realities of rampant terrorism, ICC has managed to grow a sustained operation in Syria that reaches many persecuted Christians with much-needed aid and assistance.

In many cases, Syrian Christians live in desperate poverty. ICC helps break them out of what can be a vicious cycle by providing food and helping them to create sustainable sources of income that can carry them forward economically and socially. In the wake of the February 2023 earthquakes that killed tens of thousands in the region, ICC helped provide medical support for church communities cut off from other sources of aid because of their faith.



Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Syria

Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000, continuing his family's dynastic control of Syria that now stretches over 50 years. Watchers in the West were initially hopeful that Assad would bring reform to the country, but aside from the occasional token gesture he has only moved Syria toward more severe form of authoritarianism.

Faced with an array of sanctions from the west for his ongoing, egregious violations of human rights, including the use of chemical weapons against his own people, Assad makes some attempt to cast himself as secular and a protector of Christian communities. Little credence is given to these claims, which ring hollow when held up actions like his regime's 76 attacks on Christian places of worship in 2022.

Churches are not the only targets—he is known to attack homes, hospitals, and even schools in his efforts to wipe out any trace of resistance to his authority.

Syria today is largely controlled by two rival powers—the Assad regime, which controls roughly 70% of the country, and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), which administers territory in the north alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces. Though far from perfect, the AANES offers a rights-based alternative to the Assad regime. Though not recognized internationally, the AANES operates a fledgling, three-branched government. The Executive Branch houses the Office of Religion and Beliefs responsible for promoting religious freedom and interfaith tolerance in the region.

Perhaps more pressing than developing inclusive curriculum for its schools, though, is the issue of Turkish militant aggression in the region and its support for an array of terror groups dedicated to the eradication of the AANES.



“Emboldened by Turkey’s support and intensifying military action in northern Syria,” the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote in its 2023 report, Turkish-supported armed opposition groups “continued to target religious minorities, especially Yazidis, for rape, assassination, kidnapping for ransom, confiscation of property, and desecration of cemeteries and places of worship.”

Though ISIS managed to stage a large prison break in 2023, it has seen little territorial gain in recent months. Still, it continues to impose its extremist interpretation of Sharia law in areas that it does control, extorting the local population and policing those areas to stamp out religious dissent.

When a massive earthquake struck in early 2023, the AANES and religious minority communities had a particularly difficult time obtaining relief, which in most cases had to come through Turkey. With tens of thousands dead and scarce resources to address the devastation, marginalized communities continually found themselves left out of aid distribution and dependent on their own ingenuity or relief from the few Christian NGOs, such as ICC, able to access the area.

The international community should support the AANES and the Syrian Democratic Forces as the only viable defenders of human rights in Syria. Ethnically diverse and inclusive of multiple religious perspectives, the AANES is at least a step in the right direction and deserves protection from the ruthless attacks levied against it by Turkey and the Assad regime.

Resources and Reports

[Understanding the Current Climate for Religious Freedom in Syria](#)

[State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom — Syria Chapter](#)

[USCIRF 2023 Annual Report — Syria Chapter](#)

