

World
Watch
Research

Syria: Full Country Dossier

December 2021



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Man in Syria (c) Open Doors International

Introduction

World Watch List 2022

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
1	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	15.0	98	94	93	94	93
2	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	13.1	96	94	94	94	94
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.5	91	92	92	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.2	16.3	11.5	91	92	90	87	86
5	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	5.2	88	87	85	86	85
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.6	11.1	88	88	87	86	86
7	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.3	14.5	14.4	16.7	87	85	80	80	77
8	Pakistan	13.6	14.0	15.1	14.9	13.1	16.7	87	88	88	87	86
9	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.6	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	86	85	85	85
10	India	12.7	12.7	12.9	14.7	13.3	15.6	82	83	83	83	81
11	Saudi Arabia	15.1	15.1	15.0	15.9	16.7	3.1	81	78	79	77	79
12	Myanmar	12.4	11.5	13.8	13.4	13.1	14.8	79	74	73	71	65
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	14.3	13.6	15.7	8.5	79	79	85	87	87
14	Iraq	14.0	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	6.9	78	82	76	79	86
15	Syria	12.9	13.8	13.5	14.3	13.9	9.3	78	81	82	82	76
16	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.4	77	77	78	78	78
17	China	12.6	9.8	12.2	14.4	15.5	11.1	76	74	70	65	57
18	Qatar	14.2	14.1	11.1	13.0	14.3	7.2	74	67	66	62	63
19	Vietnam	11.3	9.7	12.7	14.1	14.5	8.7	71	72	72	70	69
20	Egypt	12.7	13.2	11.5	12.7	10.8	10.0	71	75	76	76	70
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	14.1	11.8	15.6	1.7	71	71	73	74	73
22	Algeria	14.0	14.0	11.1	13.4	14.1	4.1	71	70	73	70	58
23	Mauritania	14.3	13.9	13.1	14.0	14.1	0.9	70	71	68	67	57
24	Mali	9.4	8.2	13.9	10.3	12.8	15.0	70	67	66	68	59
25	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	13.3	15.7	0.6	69	70	70	69	68
26	Laos	12.0	10.3	13.2	13.3	14.1	5.9	69	71	72	71	67
27	Morocco	13.1	13.8	10.8	12.8	14.2	3.9	69	67	66	63	51
28	Indonesia	11.3	11.5	11.5	11.0	9.6	13.5	68	63	60	65	59
29	Bangladesh	11.8	10.7	12.9	11.3	10.2	11.3	68	67	63	58	58
30	Colombia	11.5	8.8	13.1	11.0	9.9	13.3	68	67	62	58	56
31	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.6	9.6	11.4	15.6	68	66	68	70	61
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.6	12.1	14.8	68	67	66	48	-
33	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.9	7.2	12.8	14.8	68	62	60	52	45
34	Bhutan	13.4	12.4	11.7	13.7	13.8	1.7	67	64	61	64	62
35	Tunisia	11.9	12.7	10.6	11.3	13.4	6.5	66	67	64	63	62
36	Oman	13.8	14.0	10.3	13.2	13.4	1.5	66	63	62	59	57
37	Cuba	12.3	8.1	12.6	13.2	14.0	5.9	66	62	52	49	49
38	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.3	12.3	9.8	66	65	63	65	62
39	Jordan	12.9	14.0	11.0	12.3	12.5	3.0	66	64	64	65	66
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	12.0	15.6	66	64	56	55	33
41	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	11.3	7.9	12.5	15.6	65	63	43	43	-
42	Turkey	12.6	11.5	11.4	13.2	11.6	4.6	65	69	63	66	62
43	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	10.8	10.3	12.6	65	64	60	61	59
44	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.4	65	64	60	54	38
45	Tajikistan	13.8	12.3	12.0	12.6	13.2	0.7	65	66	65	65	65
46	Brunei	14.8	14.5	10.3	11.0	13.2	0.6	64	64	63	63	64
47	Kazakhstan	13.4	11.6	11.1	12.6	13.5	1.7	64	64	64	63	63
48	Nepal	12.4	9.8	9.9	13.6	12.7	5.2	64	66	64	64	64
49	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	63	62	60	61
50	Malaysia	12.5	14.3	11.5	11.6	10.2	3.3	63	63	62	60	65

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
51	Kenya	11.7	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	11.1	63	62	61	61	62
52	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.9	11.4	11.3	9.4	7.8	63	62	65	58	57
53	Comoros	12.7	11.1	11.2	12.4	14.2	0.9	63	62	57	56	56
54	UAE	13.4	13.6	10.1	11.8	12.2	1.3	62	62	60	58	58
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	13.7	61	58	55	52	53
56	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.9	9.3	11.0	13.4	3.3	60	56	57	57	57
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.4	9.8	10.2	12.0	0.9	59	58	60	57	60
58	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	11.1	10.0	12.2	0.7	59	56	56	56	56
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.1	11.1	10.4	12.0	1.5	58	58	57	56	54
60	Bahrain	12.5	13.2	9.1	11.1	10.2	0.9	57	56	55	55	57
61	Nicaragua	9.1	5.6	11.1	11.8	11.3	7.6	56	51	41	41	-
62	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.6	12.3	2.2	56	57	60	60	51
63	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.6	55	53	56	48	40
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.1	52	48	48	43	-
65	Venezuela	5.6	4.5	11.2	9.4	11.1	9.6	51	39	42	41	34
66	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	10.1	11.4	7.8	51	46	43	42	-
67	Rwanda	8.1	5.5	6.7	10.3	10.1	9.3	50	42	42	41	-
68	Honduras	7.2	5.1	10.5	7.7	9.2	8.7	48	46	39	38	-
69	Uganda	8.1	4.6	7.4	6.7	9.1	11.7	48	47	48	47	46
70	El Salvador	7.7	4.6	10.7	5.7	9.1	7.2	45	42	38	30	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	2.4	44	43	41	42	-
72	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.7	44	43	43	43	-
73	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	2.0	43	47	45	46	-
74	South Sudan	5.7	0.9	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	43	44	44	-
75	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	7.9	2.0	42	42	42	43	-
76	Israel	9.8	8.4	5.6	6.6	6.6	4.3	41	40	38	39	40

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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).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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 2022 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 In-country networks, Open Doors country researchers, External experts, WWR analysts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that – as in the previous reporting period – WWL 2022 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

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

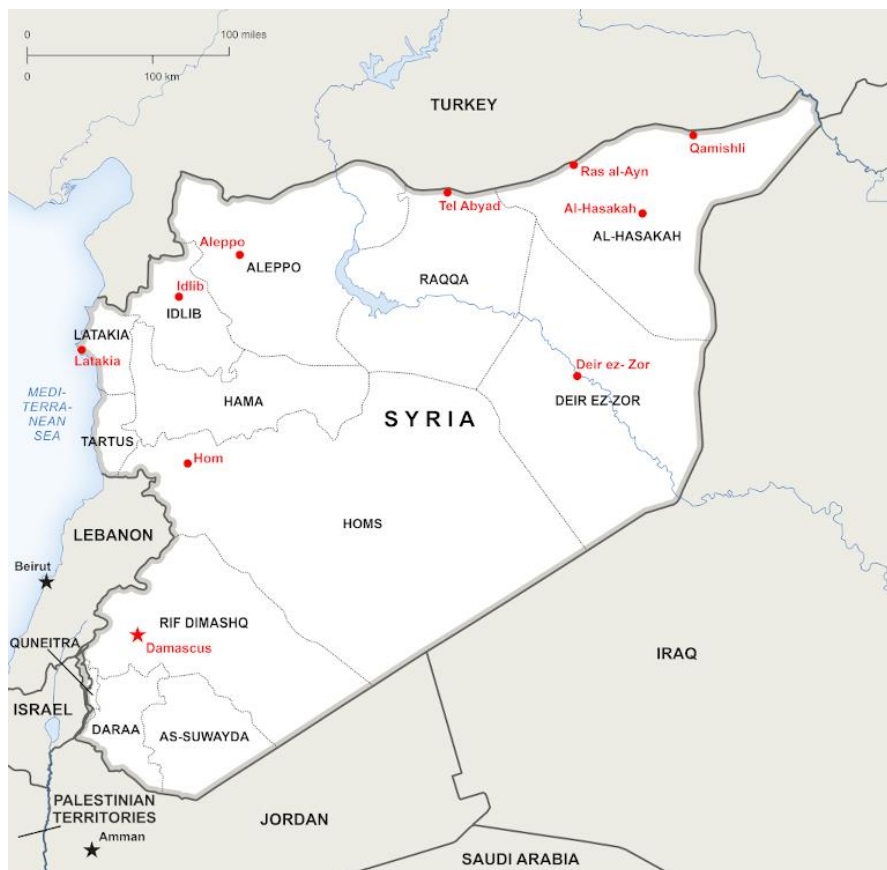
WWL 2022 Situation in brief / Syria

Brief country details

Syria: Population (UN estimate for 2021)	Christians	Chr%
19,586,000	638,000	3.3

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

Map of country



Syria: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	78	15
WWL 2021	81	12
WWL 2020	82	11
WWL 2019	82	11
WWL 2018	76	15

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Syria: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Violent religious groups, Government officials, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, 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	Political parties, Religious leaders of other churches

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, often 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 dissi-

dents and others who could harm social stability (such as converts from Islam to Christianity). 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 one set of standards for dealing with historical churches and another for non-traditional church groups. 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 threatened by the invasion of Turkish forces which began in October 2019; practically all of the improvements in religious freedom 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 and detained Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians and Yezidis, and destroyed their religious sites. They are also moving internally displaced Syrians (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

- **30 October 2020:** Islamists removed the cross from the roof of a Greek Orthodox Church near Raqqqa, a region under Kurdish control.
- **22 November 2020:** The Mar Touma Church in Ras al Ain was looted. According to priest Mikhail Yaacoub, members of Turkish-backed armed opposition groups broke the locks and carried out the robbery.
- **January - September 2021:** Six Christians were reported to have been arrested, including three converts from Islam for faith reasons. Three other Christians were arrested by the People's Protection Units (YPG) of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Two of them are members of the Christian Orthodox Syrian Creed Council and the reason for their arrest was the "refusal of the council to adopt the SDF-mandated education curriculum in its control areas in council-affiliated schools". They were released the next day. According to country sources, the repeated detention of Christians in northeastern Syria appears to be a strategy to spread terror and insecurity among the local Christian community.
- **Since April 2021:** Many Christian properties have been destroyed in attacks by the Turkish occupation in Tel Tamer and Shehba in northern Syria. During the Turkish offensive, the homes of hundreds of Christian families were seized and given to the families of Arab/Muslim militia fighters, evidently to change the demographic situation of the region.
- **May 2021:** Members of Islamic militias vandalized four Christian cemeteries in the northwest and the center of Syria.
- **30 August 2021:** An Assyrian Christian village in north-eastern Syria (Tell Tawil) was destroyed when the Turkish air force bombed positions allegedly held by the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). In the preceding weeks, Turkish airstrikes also targeted several other Christian towns in the Assyrian Christian region along the Khabur River, leading to widespread displacement of Christians.

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, converts report that they do not feel safe under the Kurdish Labor Party and this 'freedom' has become restricted 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 - Situation in brief

- Brief description of the persecution situation: Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria - <https://www.uscirf.gov/events/uscirf-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>

WWL 2022: Keys to understanding / Syria

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International country report	AI 2021	https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/	9 July 2021
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703856	9 July 2021
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020	BTI 2020	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard-SYR.html	9 July 2021
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria/	9 July 2021
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2020	EIU 2020	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf	9 July 2021
FFP's Fragile States Index 2021	FSI 2021	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	9 July 2021
Freedom House's 2021 Democracy index (Syria not included)	Freedom House/Democracy 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2021 Global Freedom index	Freedom House/Global Freedom 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2021	9 July 2021
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2020 report	Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020	https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-net/2020	9 July 2021
Garda World country report	Garda World	https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/syria	9 July 2021
Human Rights Watch World Report 2021	HRW 2021	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/syria	9 July 2021
Internet World Stats 2021	IWS 2021	https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#sy	9 July 2021
Middle East Concern	MEC country profile	https://www.meconcern.org/countries/syria/	9 July 2021
RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index	World Press Freedom 2020	https://rsf.org/en/syria	9 July 2021
Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index	CPI 2020	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/syria	9 July 2021
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators	HDI	http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/SYR	9 July 2021
US State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom country report	IRFR 2020	https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/	9 July 2021
USCIRF 2021 country report	USCIRF 2021	https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/Syria%20Chapter%20AR2021.pdf	9 July 2021
World Bank country report	World Bank	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria	9 July 2021

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, 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 frontlines. 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 but held out.

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). Assad also won the presidential election in May 2021 by an overwhelming majority, securing a fourth seven-year term. Meanwhile, the Sochi 2.0 ceasefire agreement between Turkey and government-aligned forces in Idlib Province is under pressure, with fighting between jihadist group *Hei'at Tahrir al-*

Sham (HTS) and rival jihadist groups, Russian airstrikes and attacks by IS militants, mostly in central desert areas but also elsewhere in the country. There were also clashes in southwestern and northeastern areas between government forces and former rebel groups as well as between Kurdish and government-affiliated forces. In September 2021, government forces struck a deal with rebels to end fighting in the Southwest.

Political and legal landscape

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) classifies Syria as 'authoritarian' (EIU 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 the group's last remaining territory in eastern Syria fell in March 2019.)

According to FFP's Fragile State Index (FSI 2021), Syria ranks third and is among the top 5 countries which have shown long-term deterioration in the period 2011-2021. 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. Throughout the civil war, Christians in Syria 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.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2020):

- The Syrian legal framework is described 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 'Islam is the religion of the President of the republic'. The constitution states Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation. The constitution states: 'The personal status of religious communities shall be protected and respected', and: 'Citizens shall be equal in rights and duties without discrimination among them on grounds of sex, origin, language, religion, or creed.' Citizens have the right to sue the government if they believe it has violated their rights. Conversion to Islam is permitted, but leaving Islam is prohibited. Open proselytism is legally not allowed."

- In areas where opposition or militant Islamic groups are in control, "irregular courts and local 'authorities' apply a variety of unofficial legal codes with diverse provisions relating to religious freedom".

According to Georgetown’s [Women, Peace and Security Index](#) 2019/20, Syria is in the top 5 countries with the most extensive legal discrimination against women. Legislation fails to protect victims from domestic violence, marital rape and so-called ‘honor crimes.’ Whilst Syria ratified the CEDAW convention in 2003, it maintained [a reservation](#) to Article 16 (UNFPA, 2018), which provides for the elimination of discrimination against women as they enter or exit a marriage. [Amendments](#) to the Personal Status Laws in 2019 have been positive – for example by raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 and providing women with greater rights in relation to work, divorce and dowries – but remain inadequate (Library of Congress, 8 April 2019). The amendments do not allow for a woman’s right to refuse polygamy and pathways remain for girls to be entered into forced marriages by their guardian. The government has [come under criticism](#) for seeking to appear to advance women’s rights, whilst doing little to improve the reality of daily life for Syrian women on the ground (Chatham House, June 2019).

Religious landscape

Syria: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	638,000	3.3
Muslim	18,552,000	94.7
Hindu	1,900	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	100	0.0
Bahai	410	0.0
Atheist	15,700	0.1
Agnostic	378,000	1.9
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 April 2021)

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 Factbook, 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 country profile):

- "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 because of fear of alternatives) contributes to the tolerance in government areas but adds to Christians' vulnerability in areas controlled by opposition groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Few Christians remain in opposition-held areas, where violence has included attacks against Christians, Christian-owned property and church buildings. 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 extremist groups in 2013 remain unaccounted for."
- "Within predominantly Kurdish areas, indigenous Christian communities have enjoyed reasonable accommodation, though some church leaders have expressed concern that aggressive assertion of Kurdish identity has at times marginalised or been coercive towards Christian communities."
- "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 Shari'a personal status courts such as forcible divorce and removal of child custody. Those who choose to leave Islam are especially vulnerable in opposition-controlled areas."

Economic landscape

According to the [UNDP's full 2020 report](#) (page 343 onwards):

- **GNI per capita:** 3,613 USD
- **Poverty:** Over 80% of the population live below the international poverty line ([ICRC](#), 26 March 2021).
- **Employment:** The Human Development Index (HDI) notes that the employment rate is low at 40.4% of the population over 15 years of age holding jobs.

According to World Bank:

- "Now moving into its eleventh year, the conflict in Syria has inflicted an almost unimaginable degree of devastation and loss on the Syrian people and their economy. More than 400,000 deaths have been directly attributed to the conflict so far, with millions more non-lethal casualties known to have occurred. More than half the country's pre-conflict population (of almost 21 million) has been displaced—one of the largest displacements of people since World War II—and, partly as a result, by 2017, economic activity in Syria had shrunk by more than 60% compared to what it had been in 2010. The social and economic impact of the conflict is also large—and growing. A lack of sustained access to health care, education, housing, and food have exacerbated the effects of the conflict and pushed millions of people into unemployment and poverty. With a severely degraded healthcare system, Syrians remain extremely vulnerable to additional shocks, such as the COVID-19 outbreak still unfolding."

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross ([ICRC](#), 26 March 2021):

- "Millions more Syrians have been pushed into poverty and hunger since the start of the pandemic last year, and it is estimated that 60% of the population can't find or afford enough food daily. Additionally, the destruction of critical services means millions of people do not have access to clean water or electricity. Half of all health facilities are out of service or only partially functioning and millions of children are out of school".
- COVID-19 lockdown measures coupled with the implosion of Lebanon's neighboring economy - Syria's "banking lifeline" - ongoing fighting in parts of the country and the impact of sanctions, have led to a very serious crisis both economically and socially.

The widespread poverty is due to unemployment, low wages and the devaluation of the Syrian pound, the latter exacerbated by US sanctions, including the Caesar Act. Like other Syrians, 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 Georgetown's [Women, Peace and Security Index](#) 2019/20, Syria is the second worst performing country for female employment after Yemen, evidence of the impact of conflict and humanitarian emergencies. The rates of boys and girls in education has fallen dramatically since the beginning of the conflict, which [according to UNICEF](#) is likely to contribute to higher rates of child marriage and forced labor in the coming years (UNICEF USA infographic, 2018). Making women and girls further vulnerable, they inherit less under Sharia rules of inheritance. Considering these economic vulnerabilities, Christian women depend heavily on their husbands and families. Should this support be lost, they are likely to be without the means to financially support themselves.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP's full 2020 report](#) (page 343 onwards): and the CIA Factbook:

- **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:** 56.1% of total population (2021)
- **Literacy rate:** Over 86.4% of the population aged 15 and over can read and write.

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI 2020):

- **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:** 6.6 million Syrian refugees have left the country since 2011, most of them live in Syria's neighboring countries. In addition, some 6.7 million Syrians are still displaced in their own country, of whom over two third are women and children ([UNHCR](#), last accessed 6 July 2021).
- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Scoring 0.567, Syria ranks 151th out of 189 countries and falls in the category of 'medium human development'.
- **Life expectancy:** 72,7 years
- **Gender inequality:** Syria ranks 122th out of 162 countries on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index (GII) with a value of 0.482. "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 14.4 percent compared to 74.1 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.

There are approximately 2.4 million Syrian IDP children out of school - nearly 40 per cent are girls - and an additional 1.6 million who might drop out ([UNHCR](#), last accessed 6 July 2021, [UNICEF](#), 24 January 2021). According to UNICEF, "this number has likely increased in 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which exacerbated the disruption to education in Syria. One in three schools inside Syria can no longer be used because they were destroyed, damaged or are being used for military purposes. Children who are able to attend school often learn in overcrowded classrooms, and in buildings with insufficient water and sanitation facilities, electricity, heating or ventilation." 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 in the church context the ratio of men/women may be more than 1:7. Syria has long been shaped by patriarchal, Islamic norms. However, according to an article in the [Financial Times](#) (25 January 2019), the gender imbalance created by the high loss of men in the civil war may alter these established gender roles; 80% of those killed in the conflict were reportedly men. Millions of surviving men have fled the country, fearful of forced conscription upon return. In light of this and the widespread poverty, women have increasingly taken over the role of financial provider and carer. Christian females are also 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. The [United Nations Office for the coordination of Human Affairs](#) (UNOCHA, 19 February 2021) estimates 13.4 million people are in need of humanitarian and protection assistance - an increase of more than 2 million people compared to 2020 - making it one of the largest humanitarian crises worldwide.

The COVID-19 outbreak and temporary lockdowns 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.

Technological landscape

According to World Internet Stats (IWS 2021):

- **Internet usage:** 46.5% penetration - survey date: March 2021
- **Facebook usage:** 46.5% penetration – survey date: March 2021

According to the World Bank:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 113.6 per 100 people (in 2019).
Whilst small compared to other regions, there remains a [gender gap](#) (in relation to mobile phone usage across the Middle East (GSMA, 2020, p.9).

According to Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020:

- As in 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 in Syria is severely restricted due to government repression of dissent and the effects of the ongoing civil war. Journalists and online activists operate in an acutely dangerous environment, and security forces often arrest, detain, and torture citizens and journalists for their online activity. Amid the war-related economic crisis, the authorities have implemented an 'internet rationing' scheme that limits the amount of data citizens are able to use each month. Censorship is rampant, specifically targeting opposition news sites and anti-government content. 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 the civil war. The regime prohibits genuine political opposition and harshly suppresses freedoms of speech and assembly. Corruption, enforced disappearances, military trials, and deaths in custody are endemic 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 [BuddeComm](#) (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."

Finally, recent advances in technology that provide the authorities with new ways to track citizens have increased converts' fears of being discovered.

Security situation

Although IS has been militarily defeated, its influence has not disappeared and its deadly attacks continue especially in central desert areas. Fighting also continues in Idlib Province between *Hayat Tahrir al Sham* (HTS) and rival jihadist groups. There are also clashes in the southwest and northeast, respectively between government forces and former rebel groups as well as Kurdish and government-affiliated forces. 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](#) together with his father in November 2019 (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 11 November 2019), 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 the disastrous effects of the COVID-19 measures 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.

In this context of instability, violence and displacement, Christian men and women face ongoing pressure. One of the greatest threats for men is forced recruitment into the government army or defense forces. They also face the threat of abduction and killing, particularly if they are in a position of church leadership. Women also risk abduction, as well as the threat of sexual harassment and rape. Whilst the rate of instances has dropped since the re-taking of IS-dominated areas of Syria, this continues to happen in both government and rebel-held territories. COVID-19 has exacerbated the security situation further, exposing a '[shadow pandemic](#)' of violence against women (UN Women, 2 July 2020).

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.

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 risen in the WWL 2022 reporting period. This pressure is understood to result from a hardening Islamic climate 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 and has seriously affected the ratio of men/women in the country (and churches). 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. Moreover, according to in-country sources, Christians in the area occupied by Turkish armed forces feel that there is no future for Christian communities there because of Turkish aggression.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- 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: Women, Peace and Security Index - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: a reservation to Article 16 - <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Syria%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: Amendments - <https://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/syria-womens-rights-in-light-of-new-amendments-to-syrian-personal-status-law/>
- Political and legal landscape: come under criticism - <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/new-amendments-to-personal-status-law-offer-small-gains-for-womens-rights>
- Economic landscape: UNDP's full 2020 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020.pdf>
- Economic landscape: ICRC - <https://www.icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/1949/syria-icrc-president-urges-new-approach-by-international-community-after-decade-of-brutal-crisis>
- Economic landscape: ICRC - <https://www.icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/1949/syria-icrc-president-urges-new-approach-by-international-community-after-decade-of-brutal-crisis>
- Economic landscape: Women, Peace and Security Index - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Economic landscape: according to UNICEF - <https://www.unicefusa.org/infographic-education-crisis-syria>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP's full 2020 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR - <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/syria/>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR - <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/syria/>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNICEF - <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/ten-years-war-syria-more-half-children-continue-be-deprived-education>
- Social and cultural landscape: Financial Times - <https://www.ft.com/content/14b8708c-1eeb-11e9-b2f7-97e4dbd3580d>
- Social and cultural landscape: United Nations Office for the coordination of Human Affairs - <https://www.unocha.org/story/daily-noon-briefing-highlights-syria-12>
- Social and cultural landscape: Caesar Act - <https://www.state.gov/caesar-syria-civilian-protection-act/>
- Technological landscape: gender gap - <https://www.gsma.com/r/gender-gap/>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm - <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: murder of an Armenian priest - <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenian-catholic-priest-killed-in-northeastern-syria/30264784.html>
- 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
- Security situation: shadow pandemic' - <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/op-ed-joint-women-at-the-centre-of-syria-crisis-response>

WWL 2022: 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	425,000	66.6
Catholic	187,000	29.3
Protestant	22,200	3.5
Independent	2,600	0.4
Unaffiliated	990	0.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	637,790	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	9,900	1.6
Renewalist movement	19,800	3.1

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

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 2022: Persecution Dynamics / Syria

Reporting period

01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021

Position on the World Watch List

Syria: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	78	15
WWL 2021	81	12
WWL 2020	82	11
WWL 2019	82	11
WWL 2018	76	15

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

With a score of 78 points, Syria ranked 15 in WWL 2022, three points lower than in WWL 2021. The level of pressure remains generally the same as in WWL 2021 but there were a lower number of reported violent incidents - although the score for violence is still at a very high level. For example, nine Christians were recorded as killed in the WWL 2021 reporting period compared to none in WWL 2022. Also, there was a report of forced marriage in WWL 2021 while there were none reported in WWL 2022. On the other hand, there was an increase in the reported number of church/cemetery attacks and Christians arrested.

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	Very 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 (including 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.

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 apparently 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.

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.

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. For example, people who have connections or financial means are more entitled to receive medical care and are put higher in the priority list. The majority of employees in government clinics are Muslims, they will give priority to followers of the same faith. For instance, a Christian woman (together with some non-Christian friends) requested medicine at a local clinic in the coastal area. She was given a limited amount, but her friends got what they asked for. Corruption 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 armed conflict. 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.

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	VERY WEAK		VERY STRONG	STRONG
Government officials	Strong	Very weak		Weak				Strong	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	Strong		Strong				Weak	
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	Strong		Strong				Weak	

Syria:									
Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	VERY WEAK		STRONG	MEDIUM	VERY WEAK		VERY STRONG	STRONG
Religious leaders of other churches				Weak	Medium				
Violent religious groups	Very strong							Very strong	Strong
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	Very weak		Medium	
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Medium							Strong	
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak	Medium							Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	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 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 group remnants that have been incorporated into the ranks of 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.
- Government officials (Strong):** Security officers may regularly come to church not only to check that the sermons are not political but also to ask the pastors if there are new visitors, to make sure the church is not evangelizing or converting Muslims. Furthermore, government officials are enforcing the law which states that leaving Islam is illegal. Several converts have been imprisoned for this reason.

- **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 leaders' 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 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 convert's 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.
- **Political Parties (Medium):** Leaders of political parties publicly underline the importance of unity between the different religious groups in Syria, but in practice there is discrimination against Christians. For example, if there is a vacancy for a position in the party, an Alawite would be hired even if a Christian is more qualified. As political parties strive to build an alliance with the Muslim majority, they will compromise at the expense of the Christian minority. On the political front, Christians have little say amongst others since they do not threaten the existence of the ruling party and do not have sufficient connections.

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 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 have been making attempts to take over several monasteries.

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 outside activities. 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 being part of a larger conspiracy and ideology related to the West. They have a strong influence on the community to isolate Evangelicals.

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 attacked civilian and church targets. Turkish military and Turkey-supported opposition forces (TSOs - which include Islamic militants) are operating openly across the northern part of the country (including 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. While historic Christian communities and - to a lesser extent - non-traditional Christian communities enjoy a relative degree of freedom in the rest of the country, pressure on converts exists in the entire country and 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.

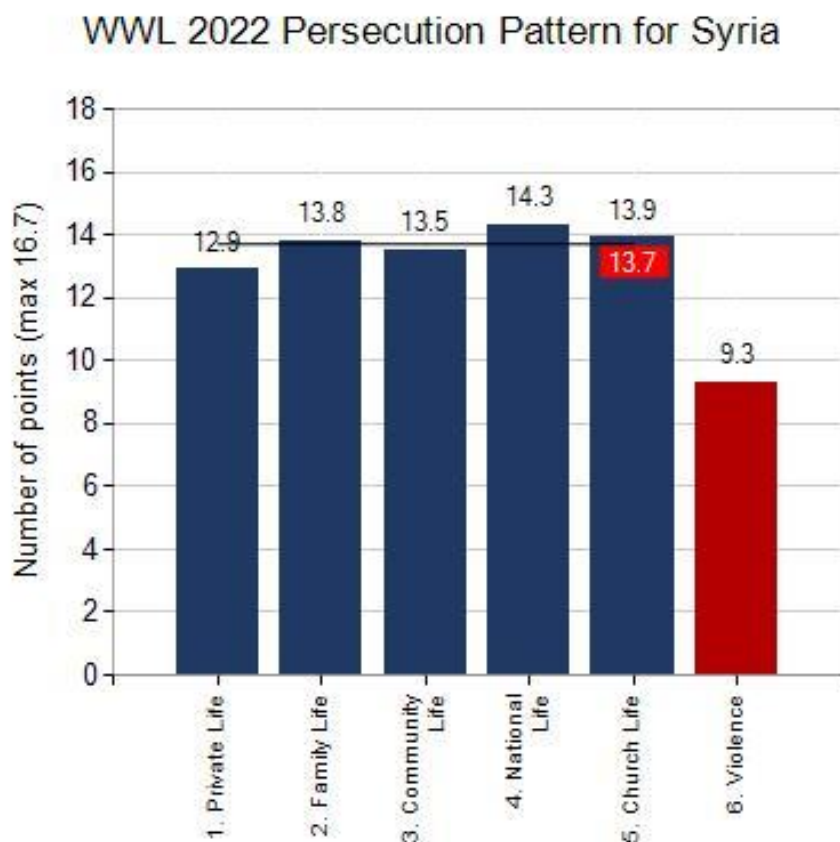
Historical Christian communities: These are mostly Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. As the largest type of Christianity in the country, Christians from historical Christian communities are specifically targeted. They are spread over the entire country and are also present in conflict zones. Several hundred Christian families live in Idlib Province - which is controlled by international jihadist groups - where they are threatened with death and attacks 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 most 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 2022 Persecution pattern for Syria shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* is at the borderline very high/extreme level, scoring 13.7 points, just 0.1 point less than in WWL 2021.
- Pressure in three *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level and was strongest in the *National* (14.3 points), *Church* (13.9) and *Family spheres* (13.8). In the *Community* (13.5) and *Private* (12.9) *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 down from 12.0 in WWL 2021 to 9.3 in WWL 2022, mostly explained by a lower number of reported violent incidents. For example, there were no reported killings this year, compared to nine in WWL 2021. However, the violence score is still at a very high level and there was even an increase in reported attacks on church/cemeteries and arrested Christians.

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: <https://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). (3.50 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, Muslims are legally permitted to convert to Christianity but they will face societal and public pressure, though not as much as in the rest of Syria. Most pressure on converts comes from their families.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (3.25 points)

This poses a particular risk to Christians from Muslim/Druze backgrounds who come from conservative families. As the main source of pressure comes from family and community, most converts are extremely cautious when discussing issues of faith with family members and members of the community. This applies to all areas in Syria, especially Sunni areas. In areas occupied by Islamists, apostasy can even carry the death penalty. In areas under the control of the Kurdish Authority, the pressure is less intense.

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.). (3.00 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).

Block 1 - additional information

All questions in the Private sphere in Syria have a score of 3 points or more. Pressure is especially strong in areas under the control of radical Islamic groups. All types of Christians are restricted in their personal worship of God, e.g. they cannot sing out loud. Under the influence of growing radicalism, converts throughout Syria experience a higher level of pressure in their private religious observance than non-converts. For other Christian communities, any act that can be understood as an attempt to spread their faith will not be well received.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

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 2.12: Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases. (3.75 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. According to the law, in the event of a divorce, children remain with their mother until they are 8 years old, regardless of their religion. In practice, in a mixed marriage where one parent is Christian and the other Muslim or Druze, the non-Christian parent will take the children. If one of the two parents is Muslim, the children are Muslim by law. According to the law and under normal circumstances, the children stay with the mother until they are 15, at which time the father can request custody of the children. But if the father is Muslim and the mother is not, then he can apply and take the children when they are 8. If the father is a Christian, he will have to wait until they are 15 and then submit a custody request.

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 a Muslim background 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 country (as well as in most other countries in the region) allowing Muslims to legally change their religion.

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.

Block 2 - additional information

Converts face particular pressure in this sphere of life, if their new faith is discovered. However, pressure is less intense in the Kurdish Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). This is the only location in the region where converts are able to change their religious identity in official documents and it is unlikely that these documents are recognized outside of the Kurdish controlled areas. Apart from the AANES, converts cannot register (Christian) weddings, baptisms and burials. In areas controlled by Islamic militants, these issues are problematic for all categories of Christians.

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 3.10: 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 3.11: Christians have been hindered in the operation of their businesses for faith-related reasons (e.g. access to loans, subsidies, government contracts, client boycotts). (3.50 points)

The situation is most serious in Idlib Province in northwestern Syria, which is under the control of *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS). HTS considers Christian property, including their homes and shops, to be spoils of war according to the US State Department (IRFR 2020). Since 2015, the HTS has allegedly seized all Christian property in Idlib City and other major cities in the governate. In the Syrian government-controlled area, Christians are disadvantaged, including in running their businesses. For example, a Christian owner's factory was closed due to his faith: According to in-country sources, if he had been a Muslim or Alewite, this would have been solved with bribes. If a convert from Islam wanted to start a business and his faith is unknown, then everything would go smoothly. If his faith were known he would not even think of doing this, fearing lack of cooperation by the local authorities or worse. If a convert does run a business, it would surely be boycotted by customers if his Christian faith became publicly known. Christians without a convert background can only run a business with massive government interference, in which discrimination and favoritism play a major role. Boycotts by customers can also bother them. Christians usually buy from Christians and Muslims from Muslims, but this affects Christians to a greater extent because their numbers are smaller.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.25 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 levels of education. All universities controlled by HTS also hold classes on Islamist teaching with the aim of indoctrinating the upcoming generation of Muslims. Christians are excluded by default.

Block 3 - additional information

Community life is extremely limited for all categories of Christians in areas controlled by Islamic militants. If their faith is known, it is problematic for converts in the entire country. In areas controlled by Islamic militants all citizens (including Christians) have to abide by the Islamic dress code. Christians are also forced to pay protection money and to keep commercial and dietary regulations, including a ban on alcohol.

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 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.75 points)

Since the law prohibits political parties based on religion, there are no Christian political parties in the Syrian parliament. There are Christian, Druze and Kurdish members of parliament. Within the wider conflict situation, Christian civil society organizations have faced constraints and challenges - often politically motivated (based on actual or perceived ties to warring factions). Christians cannot establish independent Christian civil society organizations as everything must be done in agreement and alignment with the government, who heavily controls all civil society and political activity. In areas controlled by radical Islamic rebels, the establishment of Christian political parties or civil society organizations is impossible due to a strict application of Sharia law.

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 4.3: 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 is among the factors making Christian refugees reluctant to return to Syria. It is an issue which is not specific to Christians, although some claim that Christians and other minorities are especially vulnerable in 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 - additional information

Due to the fractured state of the country, impunity and inequality have increased. In government-controlled areas, Christians are generally not discriminated against in national life. However, they may encounter glass ceilings in the public sector. Evangelism and conversion from Islam are prohibited and converts can be subjected to discrimination, if their faith is known. In areas controlled by radical Islamic elements, all non-Muslims (including Christians) are treated as second-class citizens.

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 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.75 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.

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 5.14: Openly selling or distributing Bibles (or other Christian materials) has been hindered. (3.50 points)

Despite there being no specific law against the production and distribution of religious literature or other types of media, the government has reportedly used penal code provisions regarding "causing tension between religious communities" to prevent the distribution of religious material by groups it sees as a threat. The regime considers conversion to Christianity and all related activities as a potential threat to public order and since public distribution of Christian materials is considered evangelism, it is not allowed. This can only be done in Christian facilities such as monasteries, special shops and churches, with the exception of areas in northern Syria controlled by Islamist Syrian armed opposition groups supported by Turkey, including *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*, where this type of activity is completely prohibited as a form of missionary work. Converts across the country are at risk of being killed if they become known as Christians, as such it is extremely dangerous for them to publicly distribute Christian materials.

Block 5 - additional information

In areas controlled by radical Islamic groups most churches have either been demolished or are used as Islamic centers. Public expressions of Christian faith are prohibited and church buildings or monasteries cannot be repaired, irrespective of whether the damage was collateral or intentional. In the entire country, marriages of Christians with a Muslim background are impossible and as such illegal.

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, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.
- In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.
- If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.
- In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

3. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. The use of symbolic numbers: In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. 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 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

5. The symbol "x" in the table: This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Syria: Violence Block question	WWL 2022	WWL 2021
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	9
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?	10	5
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	6	3
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)?	0	2
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	1
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	10 *	83
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?	100 *	480
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?	100 *	395
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	23	600
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	11	263

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 can include various 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).*

- **Churches attacked:** Ten churches or Christian buildings including cemeteries were attacked, damaged, desecrated, looted or closed mostly by radical Islamists and Turkish forces or Turkey-sponsored opposition groups.
- **Christians arrested:** Six Christians were arrested, including three converts from Islam who were detained by an Islamic militia, Turkish forces and Syrian government officials. Three other Christians were arrested by the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Two of them are members of the Christian Orthodox Syrian Creed Council and the reason for their arrest was the "refusal of the council to adopt the SDF-mandated education curriculum in its control areas in council-affiliated schools". They were released the next day. According to our local contact, the repeated incidents of detention of Christians in the Northeast appears to be a strategy to spread terror and insecurity among the local Christian community.
- **Christians attacked:** Several Christians were physically and mentally abused. In particular converts reported being tortured or threatened with death.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked, Christians forced to leave their homes:** Many Christian properties have been destroyed in attacks by the Turkish occupation authorities in Tel Tamer and Shehba in northern Syria. During the Turkish offensive, the homes of hundreds of Christian families have been seized and given to the families of Arab/Muslim militia fighters in order to change the demographic situation of the region. An Assyrian Christian village in northeastern Syria (Tell Tawil) was destroyed when the Turkish Air Force bombed positions allegedly held by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Turkish planes also hit several other Christian towns in the Assyrian Christian region along the Khabur River, leading to widespread displacement of Christians.

5 Year trends

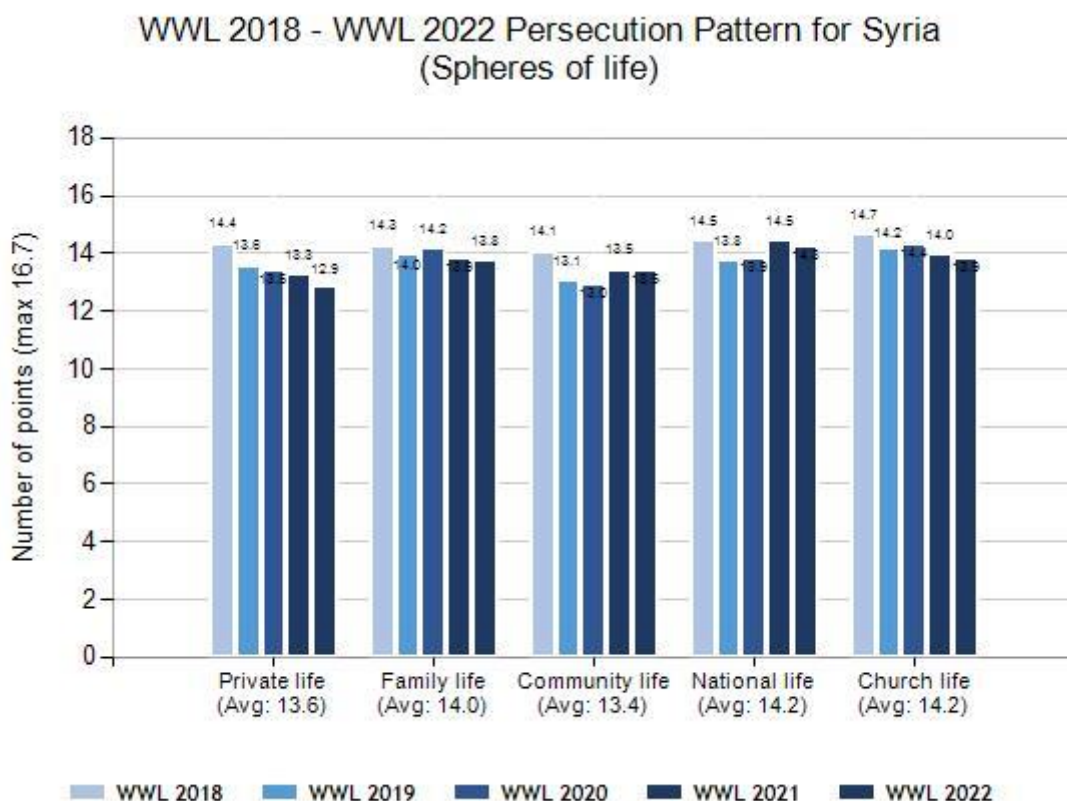
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Syria: WWL 2018 - WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2022	13.7
2021	13.8
2020	13.8
2019	13.8
2018	14.4

The table above shows how the overall pressure on Christians has been at an extremely high level during the first four of the past five WWL reporting periods. Due to a minimal drop of only 0.5 point, the average pressure is now borderline 'very high'/'extreme'.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

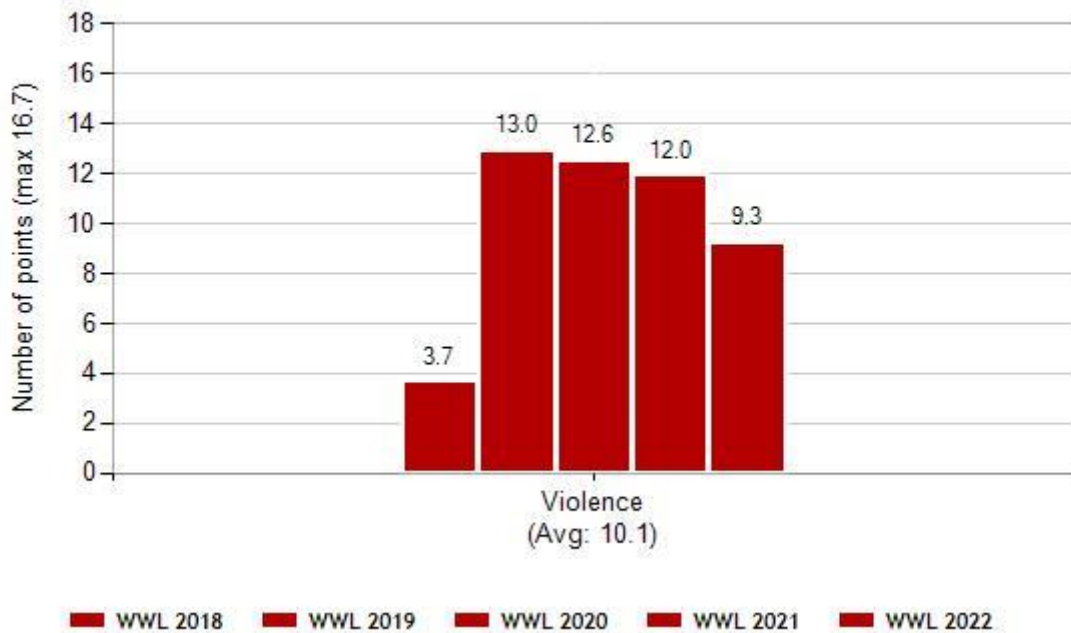


The trend for all *spheres of life* (less so in *Community* and *National life*) is towards a decrease in pressure, compared to the higher levels in the first few reporting periods. This decrease reflects the shrinking of IS-held territory and of areas held by other Islamic militant groups as well as the processing of the relative more favorable situation in the northeast. Despite this, levels for *National*, *Church*, and *Family spheres of life* remain at extremely high levels, while those for *Private* and *Community spheres* are very high.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

In WWL 2018, the score for violence targeting Christians was 3.7 points, reflecting the fact that fewer violent incidents were reported as IS-dominated areas continued to shrink. Verifying information in the chaos of civil war is particularly difficult and after WWL 2018 had been published, it was verified that in October 2017 IS had killed more than 100 Christians in the Christian city of al-Qaryatayn, which would have led to a higher score on violence ([The Independent, 23 October 2017](#)). The rise in violence to extreme levels in WWL 2019 - WWL 2021 mainly reflects violent acts (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. The score of violence in WWL 2022, although lower, was still very high, especially due to violent activities by TSOs.

WWL 2018 - WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern for Syria (Violence)



Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Denied custody of children; Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse; Forced divorce; Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Targeted Seduction; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Denied/restricted healthcare; Enforced religious dress code; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

After years of ongoing violence, peace remains uncertain in Syria. More than a million people have been displaced through the conflict ([Global Conflict Tracker](#), last accessed 22 December 2021) and sexual violence remains an ongoing issue of concern (HRW 2021). 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 remains a risk 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, women remain more vulnerable to such violent acts.

Not only Islamic militant groups constitute a threat for Christian women and girls. Christian women and girls regularly experience harassment and acts of discrimination in the public sphere. For example, if a Muslim supermarket owner sees a woman in a Hijab and another who is wearing a cross, she could keep the Christian waiting and potentially even raise the price for her. Women have also reported being spat at in the street and discriminated against in the workplace, or while accessing medical services. Christian women are most vulnerable to persecution in Islamist-held areas. In northeast Syria, where Islamic State’s religious police has made a comeback, they must completely cover themselves in public space for fear of violence ([Al-Monitor, June 2021](#)).

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.

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.

As women are typically reliant on their fathers and husbands for financial security, they are more likely to fall into poverty following persecution. Christian widows, for example, often rely on support from their local church for survival.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Abduction; Forced out of home – expulsion; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Within a context of [ongoing violence and proxy conflicts](#), a common fear among indigenous Christians – and among many other Syrian communities - is that young men will be forcibly conscripted into the Syrian Army or to other military factions, such as the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party referred to as People's Protection Units or YPG (Global Conflict Tracker, last accessed 22 December 2021). In Syria there is enforced military service for all men at the age of 18; those wishing to be exempt must pay a hefty fine, prompting many men to consider emigration. Service within the military can prevent men from working, or even starting a family. Within the military, Christian men face further discrimination. As an expert explains, “A Christian in the military can only go up with promotion to a certain point, they will never make a Christian highest on the ranking. This forces Christians in the army or government to apply for early retirement.”

The second major challenge facing Christian men is discrimination in the workplace. Unemployed Christians have immense difficulties obtaining a job, and employed Christians stand little chance of being promoted. Muslims are always given priority. In Syria's traditional society, males are the main providers and support their families financially. If they lose their jobs, the whole family is dependent on external financial support to survive. Male converts from Islam face additional forms of freedom of religion violations, as may be bullied more in the workplace and denied work opportunities if their faith is known. They may further be threatened by their family or expelled from the home. In the past reporting year, a young man was beaten severely

The threat of abduction of male church leaders continues to have a considerable negative impact on Christian communities. There are numerous Christian leaders that Islamists have kidnapped during the war for political or financial reasons, several of whom have not been found or rescued yet. Christian leaders of Historical church communities are most at risk for these kinds 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.

Male converts from a Muslim background also come under strong pressure to marry a Muslim woman. It is additionally difficult for him to marry a woman from a Christian background as he is registered as a Muslim; Christian women would be unwilling to enter such a marriage as their children would automatically be likewise registered as Muslims.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to USCIRF 2021 (pages 44-46):

- In 2020, as in the prior year, religious freedom in Syria remained under serious threat, particularly amid the country's ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad brutally enforced its authority over populations under its control, including its efforts to solidify an iron grip on religious affairs. In beleaguered Idlib Province, radical Islamist al-Qaeda affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—which the U.S. Department of State designated as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in December—continued to vie with other local factions within and outside of its so-called Syrian Salvation Government for political and military

dominance over civilian areas. Meanwhile, Turkish armed forces maintained control over territory inside northern Syria that they had captured in three invasions between 2016 and 2019, endangering religious minorities in areas that included the vicinity of Afrin as well as a swath of land extending roughly 75 miles from west of Tel Abyad to east of Ras al-Ayn.

- 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. The religious majority, Sunni Muslims, also suffer human rights violations by the government, with the support of its Russian and Iranian allies, since they are perceived as its opponents. Of those who died in government custody, most were Sunni Muslims.

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 US State Department's [IRFR 2019](#) included the following religious violations against Yazidis, starting from 2014:
"The COI estimated ISIS militants shot, beheaded, burned alive, or kidnapped more than 9,000 Yazidis, in what the United Nations called a genocidal campaign against them. According to community leaders, more than 3,000 Yazidis remained unaccounted for at year's end. Starting in 2014, ISIS abducted an estimated 6,000 women and children, mainly Yazidis, as well as numerous Christian and Turkmen women, during attacks in northern Iraq. NGOs and activists, such as Yazda and the Free Yazidi Foundation, reported more than 2,000 Yazidi women and children had escaped, been liberated in SDF military operations, or been released from captivity." These women and children were kidnapped from Iraq and then transferred to Syria, where most of the violent incidents took place. Even at the end of 2020, abducted Yazidi women were released from Al Hol refugee camp in north-eastern Syria, where many women and children of IS fighters reside (Source: [Syrian Observer](#), 2 November 2020).
- According to IRFR 2021:
A radical Islamist Turkish backed faction operating in Turkish-occupied Afrin "laid siege to the town of Basufan and arrested a number of its inhabitants in December, including a Yazidi woman, Ghazala Mannan Salmo, who reportedly faced severe torture in detention. This militia and others also defaced or destroyed a series of Yazidi shrines in the same area and across the occupation zone, potentially as many as 18 since 2018." Mrs. Salmo was handed over to Turkey for trial on terrorism charges.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression

The territorial defeat of IS in March 2019 naturally meant 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 imposed stricter 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 program 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. In addition, Sunnis and Alawites are moving into Christian villages and building mosques before buying houses as a sign of marking their newly conquered territories as a result of Christian immigration, which will greatly influence the religious makeup of previously predominantly Christian areas. 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): in 2020 and 2021, several converts were arrested in Afrin and allegedly accused of apostasy. The current repression has forced Kurdish Christians in the area to go underground.

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. In its country report, security company Garda World expects that "the COVID-19 virus outbreak is unlikely to mitigate fighting along front lines across northern Syria". Christians still living in these areas will no doubt

be heavily affected by the fighting. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2021) finds that cracks are forming in the Sochi 2.0 ceasefire agreement between Turkey and regime forces in Idlib Province and estimates that the risk of new fighting is high. While the regime appears to be increasingly firmly in place in the area it controls, its influence on the ground, including monitoring, is increasing. Christians are also affected - especially converts to Christianity, but also communities of non-traditional Christians. This development is expected to increase in importance in the near future.

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 and occupation of part of north-eastern Syria since 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.

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.

Christian denominational protectionism

This engine has grown slowly but surely in recent years. As mentioned earlier, Russia's increased influence in Syria has strengthened the position of the Orthodox Church in their dealings with the government, which have also been used to the detriment of non-traditional Christian communities. At the moment there are no indications that this influence will decrease any time soon.

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: The Independent, 23 October 2017 - <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: Global Conflict Tracker - <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-syria>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Al-Monitor, June 2021 - <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/islamic-state-revives-religious-police-northeast-syria>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: ongoing violence and proxy conflict - <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-syria>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: IRFR 2019 - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Syrian Observer - <https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/61625/yazidis-abducted-by-isis-released-from-syrias-al-hol-camp.html>
- 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-aftrin-falls-christians.html>

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:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://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](#)

External Links - Further useful reports

- Further useful reports: Iraq and Syria – The enduring relevance of the church in the Middle East: December 2017 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Iraq-and-Syria-The-enduring-relevance-of-the-church-in-the-Middle-East.pdf>
- Further useful reports: Understanding the recent movements of Christians leaving Syria and Iraq: June 2017 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Understanding-the-recent-movements-of-Christians-leaving-Syria-and-Iraq.-Hope-for-the-Middle-East.pdf>
- Further useful reports: The role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – Summary report – April 2016 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/The-role-and-contribution-of-Christians-in-Syria-and-Iraq-Summary-report-April-2016.pdf>
- Further useful reports: Future role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – April 2016 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Future-role-and-contribution-of-Christians-in-Syria-and-Iraq-April-2016.pdf>
- Further useful reports: Historic Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – March 2016 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Historic-Relevance-of-the-Church-in-Syria-and-Iraq-March-2016.pdf>
- Further useful reports: Current Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – February 2016 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Current-Relevance-of-the-Church-in-Syria-and-Iraq-February-2016.pdf>