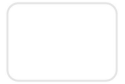


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Freedom in the World 2023 - Syria

NOT FREE

1

/ 100

Political Rights -3 / 40

Civil Liberties 4 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

1 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Political rights and civil liberties in Syria are severely compromised by one of the world's most repressive regimes and by other belligerent forces in an ongoing civil war. The regime prohibits genuine political opposition and harshly suppresses freedoms of speech and assembly. Corruption, enforced disappearances, military trials, and torture are rampant in government-controlled areas. Residents of contested regions or territory held by nonstate actors are subject to additional abuses, including intense and indiscriminate combat, sieges and interruptions of humanitarian aid, and mass displacement.

Key Developments in 2022

- Intermittent fighting continued among regime forces, local insurgents, Islamist militants, Kurdish-led militias, and groups backed by the Turkish army, killing dozens of civilians.
- In late January, the Islamic State (IS) militant group attacked a prison in northeastern Syria to release fighters who had been detained by Kurdish-led forces. Some 45,000 civilians were displaced by the ensuing combat, as Kurdish troops regained control with US and British military support.
- In February, the de facto authorities in the Kurdish-controlled region, led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), suspended the license of a media group based in Iraqi Kurdistan. The following month, local officials began requiring journalists to join the Union of Free Media, which is under the influence of the PYD-led administration.

- In April, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad signed a new decree-law on cybercrime, imposing harsh penalties for online activity that undermines the “prestige of the state” or “national unity,” among other vague provisions. Also that month, the government announced an amnesty for those accused of terrorist crimes, but it was implemented in an opaque manner and ultimately covered only a small fraction of the country’s numerous political prisoners.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The president, who dominates the executive branch, is empowered to appoint and dismiss the prime minister and cabinet. In May 2021, President Bashar al-Assad won a fourth seven-year term, with the government reporting that he received 95.1 percent of the vote. Balloting was conducted under highly repressive conditions and only in government-controlled areas, as opposed to rebel- or Kurdish-held areas. The millions of Syrians living abroad largely refrained from voting.

The election featured an uncompetitive slate of candidates. In early May 2021, the Supreme Constitutional Court allowed only three aspiring candidates, including Assad, to participate. Potential opposition challengers were also obstructed by a law requiring candidates to have lived within Syria for 10 years, effectively disqualifying those in exile. Major democratic states denounced the election as illegitimate.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

Elections for the 250-seat People’s Council were held in July 2020, though only in areas with a regime presence. These elections were also affected by the widespread displacement of the population. The balloting featured no meaningful competition, as exiled opposition groups did not participate, and the authorities do not tolerate independent political activity in the territory they control. The ruling Baath Party and its National Progressive Front coalition won 183 seats. The remaining 67 seats went to candidates running as independents, though all were considered government loyalists.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 0 / 4

There is no transparency or accountability surrounding the official electoral process. The executive authorities, acting through the military-security apparatus, effectively grant or withhold permission to participate in elections in government-held areas. Although some provisional local councils outside government-controlled areas have organized rudimentary elections since the outbreak of civil war in 2011, ongoing attacks by progovernment forces and militant groups have made such processes untenable.

Kurdish-held areas have a provisional constitution that allows local elections, but the PYD exercises ultimate control.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 0 / 4

A 2011 decree allowed new political parties to register but also imposed significant obstacles to party formation and prohibited parties based on religion, regional affiliation, and other criteria. In practice, all legally recognized political groups and independents are either part of, allied with, or heavily vetted by the regime.

In Kurdish-held areas, politics are dominated in practice by the most powerful group, the PYD, whose affiliated security forces frequently detain political opponents. In April 2022, the offices of the rival Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Kurdish National Council, and the Yekiti Kurdistan Party were attacked by unidentified assailants, with at least one of the targeted groups reportedly blaming a PYD-linked youth movement for the incidents.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

The Baath Party has governed Syria without interruption since the 1960s, led by Assad or his late father for nearly all of that time. The 2011 decree and 2012 constitutional reforms formally relaxed rules regarding the participation of non-Baathist parties. In practice, the government maintains a powerful intelligence and security apparatus to monitor and punish opposition movements that could meaningfully challenge Assad's rule.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 0 / 4

In the territory it controls, the regime's security and intelligence forces, militias, and business allies actively suppress the autonomy of voters and politicians. Foreign actors including the Russian and Iranian regimes and the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah also exert heavy influence over politics in government-held areas. In other areas, civilian politics are generally subordinated to locally dominant armed groups, including the Islamist militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the PYD, and forces allied with the Turkish military.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 0 / 4

The largely Alawite-led regime presents itself as a protector of that and other religious minority populations. In practice, political access depends not on sect but on proximity and loyalty to Assad and his associates. Alawites, Christians, Druze, and members of other smaller sects who are outside Assad's inner circle are politically disenfranchised. The political elite includes members of the Sunni sect, but the country's Sunni majority makes up most of the rebel movement and has borne the brunt of state repression as a result.

The opposition's dwindling territory is divided among Turkish-backed rebels, Islamist militias, and radical jihadist militants, with varying implications for ethnic and religious minority groups. In Kurdish-

held areas, the PYD nominally ensures political representation for Arabs but has been accused of mistreating non-Kurdish residents.

Women have equal formal political rights in Syria, holding 11.2 percent of the legislature's seats after the 2020 elections as well as some senior government positions. However, they are typically excluded from political decision-making and have little ability to organize independently amid state and militia repression. All leadership positions in Kurdish-held areas are reportedly shared between a man and a woman, though they have limited political autonomy outside PYD-led structures.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4

De facto authority in government-controlled Syria lies with the president—who is not freely elected—and his political, security, and business allies rather than with formal institutions such as the cabinet and parliament. Foreign states like Iran and Russia also wield considerable influence over regime policy. Opposition forces and Kurdish-led fighters have held large swaths of territory with the help of military forces from countries including Turkey and the United States, respectively.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 0 / 4

The regime and its allies are said to control much of the Syrian economy. The civil war has created new opportunities for corruption among the government, loyalist armed forces, and the private sector. Foreign allies have also benefited from opaque government contracts and trade deals. Basic state services and humanitarian aid are reportedly extended or withheld based on recipients' demonstrated political loyalty to the Assad regime.

Individuals in government-held territory who seek to expose or criticize official corruption face reprisals including dismissal from employment and detention.

Corruption is also widespread in opposition-held areas. Turkish-backed militias have been accused of looting, extortion, and theft. Local administrators and activists complain that little of the international aid reportedly given to opposition representatives abroad seems to reach them, raising suspicions of graft. HTS monopolizes trade in fuel and key services in its territory, regularly confiscates or destroys goods, and seizes the property of absentee owners, often for redistribution to its own commanders.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 0 / 4

The government has long operated with minimal transparency and public accountability, and conditions have worsened during the civil war amid the rise of militias that are nominally loyal to the regime but often free to exploit the population. Officials have broad discretion to withhold government information, and they are not obliged to disclose their assets. Independent civil society groups and media outlets are harshly suppressed and cannot influence or shed light on state policies.

ADDITIONAL DISCRETIONARY POLITICAL RIGHTS QUESTION

Is the government or occupying power deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the political balance in favor of another group? -3

The Syrian government, Kurdish forces, Turkish-backed opposition militias, and Islamist extremist groups have all sought to alter the ethnic composition of their territories, compelling civilians to seek safety among their respective religious or ethnic communities and contributing to the demographic shifts wrought by the civil war.

Sunni Arab civilians bear the brunt of attacks by the Alawite-led government and loyalist militias. In 2018–19, the regime forcibly displaced as many as 900,000 civilians—most of them Sunni Arabs—from captured opposition areas to Idlib Governorate after bombing and besieging their cities.

In late 2019, the Turkish military launched an offensive into northeastern Syria, aiming to create a buffer zone by pushing out its Kurdish adversaries in the area. Turkish-backed militias were subsequently accused of expropriating land and homes.

Sunni Islamist and jihadist groups often persecute religious minority groups and Muslims whom they accuse of impiety or apostasy. Kurdish militias have been accused of displacing Arab and Turkmen communities.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

The constitution nominally guarantees freedom of the press, but in practice the media are heavily restricted in government-held areas, and journalists who report critically about the state are subject to censorship, detention, torture, and death in custody. All media must obtain permission to operate from the Interior Ministry. Private media in government-controlled territory are generally owned by figures associated with the regime.

Media freedom varies in territory held by other groups, but local outlets are typically under heavy pressure to support the dominant militant faction in their area. In February 2022, the PYD-led de facto authorities in northeastern Syria suspended the license of the Rudaw media group, an outlet based in Iraqi Kurdistan, and accused it of misinformation and incitement. In mid-March, the same authorities began requiring journalists to join the Union of Free Media, which is under the influence of the local administration. HTS regularly harasses perceived critics in its area, including journalists.

Journalists face physical danger throughout Syria, especially from regime forces and extremist groups. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 142 journalists and media workers were killed in connection with their work between 2011 and 2022. Another five were imprisoned and eight were missing as of December 2022.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 2 / 4

While the constitution mandates that the president be a Muslim, there is no state religion, and the regime has generally allowed different confessional groups to practice their faiths as long as their religious activities are not deemed politically subversive. The government monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim religious leaders. Jehovah's Witnesses are banned, proselytizing is

restricted, and conversion of Muslims to other faiths is prohibited. The dominance of extremist groups in opposition-held areas of western Syria has threatened freedom of worship for local residents and displaced people. IS, which remains active as a terrorist and guerrilla force, persecutes religious activity that does not conform to its version of Sunni Islam.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 0 / 4

Academic freedom is severely restricted. University professors in government-held areas have been dismissed or imprisoned for expressing dissent, and some have been killed for supporting regime opponents. Combatants on all sides have regularly attacked or commandeered schools. Groups including the PYD and Islamist militants have set up education systems in their territories that feature pervasive political indoctrination.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 1 / 4

The government engages in heavy surveillance of private and online discussion and harshly punishes dissent in areas it controls, though it has employed its surveillance tools inconsistently in recent years amid deepening criticism from traditionally loyal segments of the population. In April 2022, Assad signed a new decree-law on cybercrime, Law No. 20 of 2022, which replaced an earlier law and imposed harsh penalties for any online activity that undermines the “prestige of the state” or “national unity,” among other vague provisions. The maximum sentence under the law is 15 years in prison.

The environment is somewhat more open in areas where neither the government nor an extremist group has a dominant presence, though the PYD and some opposition factions have allegedly suppressed freedom of speech.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

Freedom of assembly is severely restricted across Syria. Opposition protests in government-held areas have been met with gunfire, mass arrests, and torture of those detained. Jihadist groups, the PYD, and some rebel factions have also used force to quash civilian dissent and demonstrations.

Residents of Sweida Governorate, where the Druze community forms a majority, continued to mount sporadic protests against worsening economic conditions during 2022, leading to the deaths of at least one protester and a police officer in December.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 0 / 4

The regime generally denies registration to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with reformist or human rights missions and regularly conducts raids and searches to detain civic and political activists. Grassroots civil society networks that monitor human rights abuses face violence, intimidation, and detention by armed groups and often must operate secretly. In June 2022, a known humanitarian worker was killed by a car bomb in Al-Bab, in northwestern Syria.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 0 / 4

Professional syndicates in state-held areas are controlled by the Baath Party, and all labor unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions, a nominally independent grouping that the government uses to control union activity. The war's economic and political pressures have made functioning labor relations virtually impossible across the country.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The constitution forbids government interference in the civil judiciary, but judges and prosecutors are essentially required to belong to the Baath Party and are in practice beholden to the political leadership.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0 / 4

Military officers can try civilians in both conventional military courts and field courts, which lack due process guarantees. Civilians may appeal military court decisions to the military chamber of the Court of Cassation, though its judges are ultimately subordinate to the military. Extremist groups have set up religious courts in their territories, imposing harsh punishments for perceived religious offenses by civilians. The general breakdown of state authority and the proliferation of militias in much of the country has led to arbitrary detentions, summary justice, and extrajudicial penalties by all sides in the civil war.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

An estimated 500,000 people have been killed in the civil war since 2011. While fighting has subsided somewhat since the defeat of IS in 2019 and a 2020 cease-fire in Idlib, the regime and insurgents frequently target civilians, including through indiscriminate bombardment, extrajudicial killings, and torture of detainees, with the government responsible for most abuses. The regime has been accused of repeatedly using chemical weapons on civilian targets, and its forces have detained and tortured tens of thousands of people since the war began, with many dying or disappearing in custody. In April 2022, the government announced an amnesty for people accused of terrorist crimes, but the decree's text was vague in places, excluded crimes that led to deaths, and allowed civil cases against the accused to proceed. The amnesty effectively excluded thousands of political prisoners, including the many held without charge, and its implementation was opaque and disorderly.

Ongoing fighting across northern Syria involves regime forces, the PYD-affiliated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), HTS, and the Turkish army and its allied militias. Turkish military operations have displaced tens of thousands of people and posed a serious threat to civilians living in the affected area. Infighting among Turkish-backed groups during 2022 enabled HTS advances in the northwest. Separately, in the southern governorate of Daraa, violence involving regime forces and local insurgents continued into 2022 despite a nominal regime victory in 2018 and a Russian-brokered reconciliation deal. A general deterioration of the rule of law has also reportedly contributed to violent criminality in the area.

Since losing control of its last population center in 2019, IS has used guerrilla and terrorist tactics to attack security forces and local civilian leaders. In January 2022, IS attacked an SDF-defended prison in the northeast, attempting to free its detained fighters. Some 45,000 civilians were displaced in the ensuing combat, but the SDF recaptured the facility with military support from the United States and Britain. The SDF reported that about 500 IS fighters, SDF soldiers and prison staff, and civilians were killed. Residents of large detention camps for women and children who were displaced by past campaigns against IS remain at risk of violence, including murders and intimidation by extremists within the camps.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4

Families and networks with ties to the ruling elite receive preferential treatment in legal matters, and are disproportionately Alawite, though Alawites without such connections are less likely to benefit from any special advantages. Similarly, the armed opposition is overwhelmingly Sunni Arab, and members of this population are consequently likely to face discrimination by the state unless they enjoy close ties with the regime.

The Kurdish minority population has faced decades of state discrimination, including restrictions on the Kurdish language and persecution of Kurdish activists, though conditions for Kurds have improved dramatically in areas controlled by Kurdish militias since 2011.

Women are subject to legal and societal inequities, including gender-based disadvantages in social benefits and a severe gender gap in labor force participation. Official mechanisms meant to safeguard women's rights are reportedly not functional, and the general deterioration of law and order has left women exposed to a range of abuses, particularly at the hands of extremist groups that impose their own interpretations of religious law.

Syrian law discriminates against LGBT+ people. According to the 1949 penal code, "unnatural sexual intercourse" is punishable with up to three years in prison. Individuals suspected of same-sex relations are at risk of execution in areas held by extremist groups.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 0 / 4

Ongoing combat and the proliferation of regime and militia checkpoints have severely restricted freedom of movement.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported in December 2022 that there were 5.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria. More than 5.5 million Syrians have sought refuge abroad. Some Syrians have begun returning to their homes in areas where fighting has subsided, though new violence and displacements continued to occur in 2022.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 0 / 4

Property rights have been routinely disregarded throughout the civil war. Businesses are frequently required to bribe officials to operate and complete bureaucratic procedures. Access to markets dominated by regime members or allies is restricted. Militias extort businesses and confiscate private property to varying degrees.

Law No. 10 of 2018 allows the state to designate areas for reconstruction and redevelopment by decree; individuals who cannot meet a number of criteria to prove ownership of affected property risk losing it without compensation.

Personal status laws based on Sharia (Islamic law) discriminate against women on inheritance matters, and societal practices further discourage land ownership by women.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4

Perpetrators of “honor crimes” can receive reduced sentences under the penal code, and rapists can avoid punishment by marrying their victims. Women cannot pass citizenship on to their children. Personal status laws for Muslims put women at a disadvantage regarding marriage, divorce, and child custody. Church law governs personal status issues for Christians, in some cases barring divorce. Early and forced marriages are a problem, with displaced families in particular marrying off young daughters as a perceived safeguard against endemic sexual violence or due to economic pressure. Personal social freedoms for women are uneven in areas outside government control, ranging from onerous codes of dress and behavior in extremist-held areas to formal equality under the PYD in Kurdish-held areas. However, the 2019 defeat of IS, setbacks for other extremist groups, and a decline in the scale of fighting over time has reduced the population’s exposure to the most egregious violations of personal social freedoms.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 0 / 4

Many armed groups forcibly conscript or use child soldiers. Children are also subject to forced labor in the context of severe economic hardship. IDPs and refugees are especially vulnerable to sexual and labor exploitation and human trafficking, even in relatively stable government-controlled areas, as access to employment and investment is often dependent on personal, political, or communal affiliations.

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