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Freedom Status: Not Free

Aggregate Score: -1 (0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 7.0 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Political Rights: 7 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Civil Liberties: 7 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Quick Facts

Population: 17,200,000

Capital: Damascus

GDP/capita: \$2,080

Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Net Freedom Status: Not Free

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, while 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 2017:

- In April, government forces used banned chemical weapons in an attack on the town of Khan Sheikhoun in rebel-held Idlib Province, killing more than 70 civilians. The United States retaliated with missile strikes on the air base allegedly used to carry out the attack.
- In May, regime forces captured the Damascus suburb of Barzeh from opposition forces, compelling hundreds of people to relocate to Idlib Province, where extremist militant groups played an increasingly dominant role.
- In October, U.S. troops and allied fighters from the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) liberated the city of Raqqa from the Islamic State (IS) militant group. Meanwhile,

government forces made parallel gains against IS in Deir ez-Zor Province to the southeast, leaving the militants with no major towns under their control at year's end.

POLITICAL RIGHTS: -3 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 0 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

President Bashar al-Assad was elected for a third term in 2014 with what the government claimed was 88.7 percent of the vote. The balloting was conducted only in government-controlled areas amid war and severe repression. Major democratic states denounced the election as illegitimate.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The most recent elections for the 250-seat People's Council were held in April 2016, but only in government-controlled territory. Several opposition groups that were traditionally tolerated by the authorities boycotted the polls, and state workers reportedly faced pressure to vote. Members of the military were permitted to participate in the elections for the first time. The ruling Baath Party and its declared allies took 200 of the 250 seats; the remainder went to nominal independents.

A3. 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 in rebel-held areas have organized rudimentary elections in recent years, ongoing attacks by progovernment forces and Islamist militants have largely made such processes untenable. Kurdish-held areas in the north have a provisional constitution that allows local elections, but the Democratic Union Party (PYD) exercises ultimate control.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 0 / 16

B1. 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 the registration of new political parties, but it also imposed significant obstacles to party formation and prohibited parties based on religion, regional affiliation, and other criteria. In practice, all legal political groups and independents are either part of, allied with, or heavily vetted by the regime.

The local councils active in some opposition areas are often sponsored or appointed by prominent families or armed groups. In Kurdish areas, decentralized governance theoretically allows for open political participation, but in practice political affairs are dominated by the most powerful group, the PYD, which engages in arbitrary detentions of its political opponents.

B2. 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, but in practice the government maintains a powerful intelligence and security apparatus to monitor and punish opposition movements that could emerge as serious challengers to Assad's rule.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 0 / 4

In its territory, the regime's security and intelligence forces, militias, and business allies are a serious obstacle to the autonomy of voters and politicians. Foreign actors including Russia, Iran, and the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah also exert heavy influence over politics in regime-held areas due to their involvement in the war and material support for the government. In opposition areas, civilian politics are often subordinated to armed groups and external funders, while the PYD and its affiliated militias exercise control over the political choices of residents in Kurdish regions.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 0 / 4

Although the government is often described as an Alawite regime and a protector of other religious minorities, it is not an authentic vehicle for these groups' political interests. Political access is a function not primarily of sect, but of proximity and loyalty to Assad and his associates. The political elite is not exclusively Alawite and includes members of the majority Sunni sect, which also makes up most of the rebel movement. Meanwhile, Alawites, Christians, and Druze outside Assad's inner circle are just as politically disenfranchised as the broader Sunni population.

The opposition's dwindling territory is divided among moderate, Islamist, and radical jihadist rebels, with varying implications for ethnic and religious minorities. The PYD nominally ensures representation for minorities, but it has been accused of mistreating non-Kurdish residents, particularly those suspected of IS sympathies.

Women have equal political rights; they hold 13 percent of the seats in the legislature, and some have been appointed to senior positions in recent years. However, women are typically excluded from political decision-making in practice and have little ability to organize independently given state repression and the presence of hostile armed groups. All leadership positions in Kurdish areas are reportedly shared between a man and a woman, and women are well represented in political life, though they have limited autonomy outside PYD-led structures.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 0 / 12

C1. 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 in formal institutions such as the cabinet and parliament. Foreign powers like Iran and Russia also wield considerable influence over state policy, and both opposition forces and Kurdish-led fighters hold large swaths of territory with the help of countries including Turkey and the United States, respectively.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 0 / 4

Members and allies of the ruling family are said to own or 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. The regime has regularly distributed patronage in the form of public resources, and implemented policies to benefit favored industries and companies, to secure its support base. Government contracts and trade deals have also been awarded to allies like Iran, possibly as compensation for political and military aid. Even basic state services are extended or withheld based on a community's demonstrated political loyalty to the Assad regime, providing additional leverage for bribe-seeking officials. Similar manipulation has been alleged in the distribution of humanitarian aid.

Corruption is also widespread in rebel-held areas. Some rebel commanders, including from brigades nominally aligned with democratic powers and their allies, 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.

C3. 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 largely autonomous and free to exploit the population in areas they control. Officials have broad discretion to withhold government information, and they are not obliged to make public disclosures of 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 / 0

Sunni Arab civilians bear the brunt of attacks by the Alawite-led government and loyalist militias. The regime has forcibly transferred thousands of civilians from captured opposition areas, and it continued to bomb and besiege others during 2017. Sunni Islamist and jihadist groups often persecute religious minorities and Muslims they deem impious. Kurdish militias have been accused of displacing Arab and Turkmen communities in the context of their fight against IS. In the face of these threats, civilians of all backgrounds have sought safety among their respective religious or ethnic groups, contributing to the demographic changes wrought by the war.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 2 / 60

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 2 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

The constitution nominally guarantees freedom of speech and the press, but in practice freedom of expression is heavily restricted in government-held areas, and journalists or ordinary citizens who criticize the state face censorship, detention, torture, and death in custody. All media must obtain permission to operate from the Interior Ministry. Private media in government areas are generally owned by figures associated with the regime. Media freedom varies in territory held by other groups, but local outlets are generally under heavy pressure to support the dominant militant faction in the area. Journalists face physical danger throughout Syria, especially from regime

forces and extremist groups. At least eight were killed in 2017, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, bringing the death toll to 115 since the war began in 2011.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 1 / 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 politically subversive. The government monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim religious leaders. The growing dominance of extremist groups in opposition-held areas of western Syria has threatened freedom of worship for local residents and displaced people, though IS's military defeats in the east during 2017 effectively reduced its ability to persecute religious activity that does not conform to its version of Sunni Islam.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 0 / 4

Academic freedom is heavily 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 of the war have regularly attacked or commandeered schools. Groups including IS and the PYD have set up education systems in their territories, but they are infused with political indoctrination.

D4. 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. 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: 0 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4

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

E2. 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 with reformist or human rights missions, and regularly conducts raids and searches to detain civic and political activists. A variety of new grassroots civil society networks emerged in many parts of Syria following the 2011 uprising, monitoring human rights abuses by all sides and attempting to provide humanitarian and other services in opposition areas. However, such activists face violence, intimidation, and detention by armed groups, and must operate secretly in some cases.

E3. 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: 0 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

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

F2. 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. While civilians may appeal military court decisions with the military chamber of the Court of Cassation, military judges are neither independent nor impartial, as they are subordinate to the military command. Extremist groups have set up religious courts in their territories, imposing harsh punishments for perceived offenses by civilians under their interpretation of religious law. 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. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4

More than 400,000 people have been killed in the civil war since 2011. Both the regime and insurgent groups frequently engage in extreme violence against civilians, including indiscriminate bombardment, extrajudicial killings, and torture of detainees. However, abuses by the government are the largest in scale. Regime forces have detained and tortured tens of thousands of people since the uprising began, and many have died in custody, though detention conditions that amount to enforced disappearance mean the fate of most detainees is unknown.

Among other violations, the regime has been accused of repeatedly using chemical weapons on civilian targets. An attack that employed a chemical nerve agent in the Idlib Province town of Khan Sheikhoun killed more than 70 people in April 2017, prompting the United States to conduct missile strikes on a government air base that was allegedly used to carry out the attack.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4

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.

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

Syrian law discriminates against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people. According to the 1949 penal code, "unnatural sexual intercourse" is punishable with up to three

years in prison. Individuals suspected of same-sex sexual activity are at risk of execution in areas held by extremist groups.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 0 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 0 / 4

The proliferation of regime and militia checkpoints and ongoing combat have severely restricted freedom of movement. Nearly 2.9 million people were displaced by the conflict during 2017, for a total of more than 6 million internally displaced since 2011. Another 5 million have sought refuge abroad.

The government and other forces have systematically blockaded regions controlled by their opponents. The number of people living under siege declined somewhat during 2017 as the government captured territory from rebels and IS, leaving about 700,000 people trapped at year's end, according to the Syria Institute, a U.S.-based think tank. In May, regime forces captured the Damascus suburb of Barzeh from opposition forces, compelling hundreds of people to relocate to Idlib Province. In October, U.S. troops and SDF fighters defeated IS in the city of Raqqa, and government forces made parallel gains against the militant group in Deir ez-Zor, part of which had long been under siege by IS. The besieged rebel-held district of Eastern Ghouta, outside Damascus, came under increasing pressure from the regime late in the year.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or non-state actors? 0 / 4

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

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

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 0 / 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. Conditions for women are uneven in areas outside government control, ranging from sexual slavery and onerous dress codes in extremist-held areas to formal equality under the PYD in Kurdish areas.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 0 / 4

Many armed groups engage in forced conscription or the use of child soldiers. Displaced people are especially vulnerable to labor exploitation and human trafficking, and there is little equality of

opportunity 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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