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Freedom in the World 2017

Syria *Profile*

FREEDOM STATUS: NOT FREE

Freedom in the World Scores

Aggregate Score



(0=Least Free, 100=Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 7/7

Political Rights



Civil Liberties



(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:



Syria's civil war has bred an atmosphere of extreme violence, impunity, and intolerance by state and nonstate actors alike. In much of the country, people cannot meaningfully participate in political or civic life. Those that do risk harassment, detention, or death.

Key Developments in 2016:

- The ruling Baath Party and allied factions took 200 of the 250 contested seats in parliamentary elections held in government-controlled areas.
- The government transferred thousands of civilians from besieged areas taken from rebels to other parts of the country.
- At least 14 journalists were killed in connection with their work in 2016, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.
- Over a million people were thought to be living under siege conditions.

Executive Summary:

Syria's civil war continued unabated in 2016, with the country effectively divided into four main zones, controlled respectively by the repressive government of President Bashar al-Assad; multiple militias comprising opposition forces; the Islamic State (IS) militant group; and Kurdish authorities. By the end of 2016, the conflict had internally displaced some 6.3 million people and created 4.8 million Syrian refugees. By September 2016, roughly

430,000 people had been killed during the conflict since it started in 2011, according to the independent Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Institutions and rule of law continued to weaken during the year, and corruption was rampant in regime and opposition-held areas.

In April 2016, parliamentary elections took place in government-controlled areas amid an opposition boycott, heavy repression, and open warfare in parts of the country. However, political power remains monopolized by President Assad, his family, and their security and business allies, though foreign actors also express influence.

The regime besieged major opposition-held population centers in a “surrender or starve” strategy by which it limited aid deliveries, and displaced thousands of civilians from captured rebel areas. There were consistent reports of torture and mistreatment of detainees held in government custody. Insurgents also committed serious human rights violations, including detention, torture, and execution of perceived political dissidents and rivals, though conduct varied between different rebel groups. Receding state control in some areas, on the other hand, has allowed for freer expression. The opposition in exile is comprised of delegates from various opposition groups and has been recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by the Arab League, the United States, and many European countries. However, it does not effectively represent the demands and interests of the population in rebel-held areas.

Political Rights

Political Rights -3/40

A. Electoral Process 0 / 12

A1. Is the head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

A2. Are the national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair?

Bashar al-Assad assumed power after the death of his father, longtime president Hafez al-Assad, in 2000. Constitutional revisions adopted in 2012 introduced presidential elections, replacing a referendum system in which the ruling Baath Party candidate nominated a single candidate. However, among other restrictions, candidates needed support from at least 35 members of parliament to qualify for consideration.

Assad was reelected for a third term in 2014 with what the government claimed was 88.7 percent of the vote amid 73.4 percent turnout. The voting was conducted only in government-controlled areas in a climate of severe repression. Observers were invited from friendly authoritarian countries including North Korea, while major democratic states denounced the voting as illegitimate.

Members of the 250-seat, unicameral People's Council serve four-year terms but hold little independent legislative power. Almost all power rests in the executive branch. The most recent legislative elections were held in April 2016, in government-controlled territory. Several opposition groups 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 election for the first time. The ruling Baath Party and allied factions took 200 of the 250 contested seats.

Opposition-held Syria—as distinguished from IS and Kurdish territory—continued to lack an effective or unified governing structure in 2016. The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, or Etilaf, was formed in 2012 to act as the opposition’s international representative body. Comprising delegates from opposition groups in exile, it has been recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by the Arab League, the United States, and many European countries. Etilaf has undergone several changes of leadership through internal elections; in March 2016, it elected Anas al-Abdah as president. These elections are competitive to an extent, but heavily influenced by the coalition’s foreign backers. Moreover, Etilaf’s links to local leaders and fighters inside Syria remain tenuous, casting serious doubt on the degree to which it is genuinely representative of civilians or fighters in the country.

Provisional local councils in certain rebel-held areas have organized rudimentary elections, and some appear to have been fairly competitive and even impartially monitored. Separately, Syria’s Kurdish north, known locally as Rojava, declared autonomy from Damascus in 2014 and adopted a provisional constitution. It has decentralized political and administrative structures and decision-making, allowing elections at the neighborhood and municipal levels. However, in Rojava and elsewhere, experiments in civilian self-government are vulnerable to derailment by hostile militant groups, bombardment and siege by regime forces, and chronic resource shortages. IS does not allow elections of any kind in areas under its 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 open to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?
- B2. Is there a significant opposition vote and a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?
- B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, totalitarian parties, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group?
- B4. Do cultural, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

Formally, the state forbids parties based on religious, tribal, or regional affiliation. Until a 2011 decree allowed the formation of new parties, the only legal factions were the Baath Party and its several small coalition partners. Independent candidates are heavily vetted and closely allied with the regime. The 2012 constitutional reforms 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.

Within the domestic progovernment camp, politics, security, and decision making are dominated by Assad, his extended family, and a close circle of business and security allies. Although the government is often described as an Alawite regime and a protector of 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. Foreign actors

including Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia also exert heavy influence over the regime due to their critical contribution to the war effort.  

Political activity in rebel-held areas is more vigorous than in regime areas, but it is still seriously constrained, and in some places nonexistent. Civilians' political aspirations are often subordinated to local armed groups. Opposition territory is divided among moderate, Islamist, and radical jihadist rebels, with varying implications for local political life. Local councils are often sponsored or appointed by prominent families and armed groups, and overwhelmed by addressing humanitarian needs and delivering basic services.

In the Kurdish region, in theory the decentralized governance structure allows for wide political participation, including by ethnic and religious minorities. However, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the most powerful Syrian Kurdish group, dominates politics and the Kurdish-led armed forces in practice. It has been accused of arbitrarily detaining perceived opponents.

No political activity is permitted in IS-controlled territory. Those who oppose IS rule must either refrain from expressing their views openly or flee to other areas, as dissent is severely punished.

C. Functioning of Government 0 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

C2. Is the government free from pervasive corruption?

C3. Is the government accountable to the electorate between elections, and does it operate with openness and transparency?

Government institutions lacked public accountability and were plagued by corruption even before the armed conflict. Authority lies with the president and his political, security, and business allies rather than formal institutions, and corruption is rampant.

Those who question state policies or use of public funds face harassment, imprisonment, or death. 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 between 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. In September 2016, dozens of aid groups suspended their participation in joint relief efforts with the United Nations, saying that Assad was manipulating the aid distribution process in ways that deprived certain areas of assistance.

The government's lack of public accountability has 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 regime-held areas. They have reportedly engaged in looting, extortion, and the erection of arbitrary checkpoints.

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. In addition, 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.



Islamist factions appear somewhat more disciplined and eager to enforce their decrees, though the more extreme militant groups such as IS are not accountable to the public. IS runs an extensive extortion network and smuggling operations that extends into Iraq and Turkey.

Additional Discretionary Political Rights Question B -3/0

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?

1. Is the government providing economic or other incentives to certain people in order to change the ethnic composition of a region or regions?
2. Is the government forcibly moving people in or out of certain areas in order to change the ethnic composition of those regions?
3. Is the government arresting, imprisoning, or killing members of certain ethnic groups in order change the ethnic composition of a region or regions?

The armed conflict is largely sectarian, with Sunni Arab civilians bearing the brunt of government and progovernment militia attacks, some Islamist factions persecuting minorities and others they deem insufficiently pious, and civilians of all confessions seeking safety among their respective groups. The result is significant, ongoing change in the country's demographics, including as deliberate military strategy. The Assad regime in 2016 forcibly transferred thousands of people from rebel-held areas to other parts of the country; rebels were effectively forced to assent

to the evacuations as a result of the “surrender or starve” strategy by which the government had blocked aid deliveries to rebel-held areas. Separately, in 2015 Amnesty International accused Kurdish militias of destroying Arab and Turkmen settlements and displacing their inhabitants for suspected sympathies with IS or other rebels.



Civil Liberties

Civil Liberties 2/60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief 2 / 16

- D1. Are there free and independent media and other forms of cultural expression?
- D2. Are religious institutions and communities free to practice their faith and express themselves in public and private?
- D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free of extensive political indoctrination?
- D4. Is there open and free private discussion?

The constitution nominally guarantees freedom of speech and the press, but this is not implemented 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. The regime controls most domestic news outlets, substantially hindering access to information. 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. The state

has stopped trying to block Facebook but instead uses it to   monitor opponents and dissidents. Meanwhile, the progovernment Syrian Electronic Army has mounted several cyberattacks on opposition supporters, activists, and major foreign media.

Media freedom varies in rebel territory, but local outlets are generally under heavy pressure to support the dominant militant faction in the area. Journalists face physical danger throughout Syria. At least 14 journalists were killed in connection with their work in 2016, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, bringing that total to 108 since early 2011. Several were executed by the Islamic State. Others were killed by unclaimed terrorist bombings or regime shelling or air strikes. Many journalists remained missing, were kidnapped, or imprisoned but eventually released.

While the constitution mandates that the president be a Muslim, there is no state religion, and the regime has generally allowed freedom of worship as long as religious activities are not politically subversive. The government monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim religious leaders. In opposition-held areas, freedom of worship also generally prevails, except under extremist Islamist groups. IS has destroyed numerous religious and cultural sites and artifacts in its region, and harshly restricts any religious activity that does not conform to its version of Sunni Islam. Christians in IS-held areas are reportedly forced to pay special taxes and remove all outward symbols of their faith from their homes and persons. The war has increased sectarian hostility and polarization in both government and rebel-held areas. The regime has massacred Sunni civilians, while Sunni extremists have done the same to non-Sunni civilians.

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. The civil war has greatly disrupted education in general. Combatants on all sides have regularly attacked or commandeered schools. IS has reconstituted an educational system of sorts in some of its territory, though it is based on religious and political indoctrination. Schooling in regime areas continues to emphasize political indoctrination as well. The PYD began to introduce Kurdish-language education in 2015, with critics alleging that its curriculum too served to advance the party's political agenda.



Private discussion is subject to heavy surveillance in areas controlled by the government and IS, but the environment is somewhat more open than before the uprising in some areas where government control has receded, though this depends which particular militias control them. The PYD and Jaish al-Islam, an opposition group with a presence in eastern Ghouta, allegedly suppress freedom of speech in their territory. The Assad government monitors online communications, including e-mail and social media, and persecutes internet users engaging in speech it objects to.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights 0 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly, demonstration, and open public discussion?

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations?

E3. Are there free trade unions and peasant organizations or equivalents, and is there effective collective bargaining? Are there free professional and other private organizations?

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. 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. IS, the PYD, and some rebel factions have also used force to suppress civilian dissent and demonstrations.

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.

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?

F2. Does the rule of law prevail in civil and criminal matters? Are police under direct civilian control?

F3. Is there protection from political terror, unjustified imprisonment, exile, or torture, whether by groups that support or oppose the system? Is there freedom from war and insurgencies?

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

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. Military officers can try civilians in both conventional military courts and field courts. 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.

Government forces have arrested and tortured tens of thousands of people since the uprising began in 2011. In 2014, a military police forensic photographer defected and revealed some 55,000 images documenting the large-scale torture, starvation, and death of prisoners. In 2015, Human Rights Watch concluded the photos showed at least 6,786 different detainees who had died in government custody and showed signs of torture and other abuse. The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented more than 10,000 arbitrary arrests in 2016.

IS and some other Islamist militant groups have set up crude religious courts in their areas, imposing harsh punishments for perceived offenses by civilians. IS routinely carries out public executions, and insurgent factions including Jabhat al-Nusra have also been accused of summary killings of civilians and torture of detainees. More generally, the breakdown of state authority and the proliferation of both loyalist and rebel militias has led to warlordism, crime, and arbitrary abuse by all sides.

The Kurdish minority has historically faced official discrimination and severe restrictions on work, travel, property ownership, and cultural and linguistic expression, though their situation improved significantly after 2011 due to receding state authority. Syrian law also 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.¹ Separately, there were multiple reports in 2015 of IS executing men for their alleged homosexuality.



G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights 0 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of travel or choice of residence, employment, or institution of higher education?

G2. Do individuals have the right to own property and establish private businesses? Is private business activity unduly influenced by government officials, the security forces, political parties/organizations, or organized crime?

G3. Are there personal social freedoms, including gender equality, choice of marriage partners, and size of family?

G4. Is there equality of opportunity and the absence of economic exploitation?

The proliferation of checkpoints manned by various armed groups, heavy combat, and general insecurity have severely restricted the free movement of people and vital supplies since 2011. The regime has systematically blockaded regions controlled by rebels, and rebel and IS forces have done the same to regime-held territories. As of May 2016, more than 1,000,000 Syrians were living under siege conditions, according to the Syria Institute, a U.S.-based think tank.

Rampant corruption predated the Syrian uprising, affecting the daily lives of Syrians. Citizens are frequently required to bribe officials to complete bureaucratic procedures, and business investors and owners must often pay bribes to operate. Since the war broke out, Syrians who fear persecution have been wary of approaching official institutions to request critical documentation, and must resort to the black market. Rebel groups, IS, regime, and

Kurdish forces also extort businesses and confiscate private property to varying degrees.



Women are underrepresented in Syrian politics and government, and face serious legal discrimination. They hold just 13 percent of seats in the legislature, though some have been appointed to senior positions, including speaker of parliament and one of the two vice presidential posts. Husbands may prevent their wives from leaving the country with their children, and women cannot pass citizenship on to their children. Male perpetrators of killings classified as “honor crimes” can receive reduced sentences under the penal code. Personal status law for Muslims is governed by Sharia (Islamic law) and is discriminatory in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters. Church law governs personal status issues for Christians, in some cases barring divorce.

In addition to increased sexual violence associated with the armed conflict, domestic abuse is endemic. Rates of early marriage are reportedly high, with displaced and refugee families in particular marrying off young daughters as a perceived safeguard against rape, a means of covering up such crimes, or a response to economic pressure. Forced prostitution and human trafficking are also serious problems among these populations.

Conditions for women are uneven in areas outside government control, ranging from extreme discrimination, sexual slavery, and onerous codes of dress and behavior in IS territory, to formal equality under the PYD in Kurdish areas. All government positions in Rojava are reportedly shared between a man and a woman, and women are well represented in political life and military service.

Forced labor is widespread in Syria, as many armed groups are engaged in forced conscription or the use of child soldiers.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**X = Score Received****Y = Best Possible Score****Z = Change from Previous Year****Full Methodology**

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