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KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions remained dismal in Syria, generally trending the same as the previous year. As a consequence of the complex sectarian dynamics of the country's ongoing civil war, more than 500,000 people have died and more than 12 million people have been displaced. Although the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) ostensibly faced near-complete defeat in its control of territory in Syria and Iraq in 2017, the group maintained a visible but diminishing presence in several parts of Syria throughout 2018. It continued to threaten and perpetrate violence against religious minorities and Muslim communities who did not share its radical Islamist ideology. At the same time, an al-Qaeda affiliate, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), significantly bolstered its presence in the country's northwest, particularly Idlib Province, where it had almost overtaken rival armed opposition groups by the end of the reporting period. In addition to perpetrating wider human rights abuses, HTS repressed religious minorities in the growing expanse of territory under its control, reportedly including the forcible confiscation of property from Christian families and other forms of sectarian violence. Syrian government forces continued to consolidate their hold over a significant portion of the country that was once held by various opposition forces, with significant support from their Russian, Iranian, and Lebanese allies. In so doing, armed forces loyal to or allied with the regime persisted in a clear wartime agenda of marginalizing and punishing Sunni Muslim communities for their real or perceived support of the

opposition. Turkish-backed rebel forces exploited a United Nations (UN)-brokered ceasefire in the northern district of Afrin to persecute and displace religious and ethnic minorities in that area. Religious and ethnic minorities in Kurdish-controlled areas of the country's northeast, where they have generally experienced a relatively high degree of religious freedom, also faced mounting concerns at the close of 2018 regarding potential ramifications of the pending withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeastern Syria. Those concerns included the possibility of a large-scale Turkish offensive against Kurdish forces in that area and the threat of an ISIS resurgence.

Due to the collective systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom perpetrated by radical Islamist elements of the Syrian opposition, including U.S.-designated terrorist groups such as ISIS and HTS, and the Assad regime and its allies, USCIRF again finds in 2019 that Syria merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF also finds that, based on conditions in 2018 that included its ongoing—albeit shrinking—control of territory as well as its potential for rapid resurgence, ISIS merits renewed designation as an "entity of particular concern" (EPC) for religious freedom violations under December 2016 amendments to IRFA. USCIRF also finds that, based on conditions in 2018 that included its expanding control of territory, HTS merits designation as an EPC for religious freedom violations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Provide immediate and effective assistance to Syria's vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities under the terms of the Iraq and [Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2018](#) (P.L. 115-300), and utilize the resources enacted under the [Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018](#) (P.L. 115-441) to avert further disaster for those communities, particularly in northern Syria;
- Ensure that the planned withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeastern Syria is conducted in such a manner that will not negatively impact the rights and survival of vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities;
- Advocate for the inclusion of representatives from the autonomous administration of Kurdish-majority northeast Syria, which has supported the promotion of religious freedom in its territory, in the UN-led committee charged with rewriting the Syrian constitution;
- Support efforts through relevant UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and like-minded partners among the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to fund and develop programs in Kurdish-controlled northeast Syria that bolster intra- and interreligious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and promote respect for religious freedom and related rights; and
- Continue and prioritize the resettlement of Syrian refugees to the United States—subject to proper vetting—with priority being given to victims of ISIS and vulnerable religious minority communities.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Syrian Arab Republic

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic, highly authoritarian regime

POPULATION

19,454,263

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam (Sunni/Shi'a), Christianity, Judaism, Druze

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

87% Muslim (74% Sunni Muslim; 13% Alawi, Ismaili, Shi'a Muslim)

10% Christian (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian)

3% Druze

<1% Jewish (few remaining in Damascus and Aleppo), Yazidi, and other

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook and the U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

The Assad family has ruled Syria since former president Hafez al-Assad seized power in a Ba'athist coup in 1970. His son, Bashar al-Assad, became president in 2000 following the death of his father. The Assads hail from the Alawis, an offshoot of Shi'a Islam that represents approximately 13 percent of Syria's population. Following their rise to power, the Assad family placed loyal Alawis in key positions throughout the Ba'athist government, including in the security, intelligence, and military sectors. Both Assad regimes also spent decades forging strategic ties with prominent Sunni Muslim families and religious authorities in order to consolidate their hold on political and economic power, even as they maintained a rigid but uneasy framework of authority over the country's diverse religious and ethnic groups. They also courted support from Christians, Druze, and other non-Muslim communities by allowing them to worship freely and practice their faith, but their particularly authoritarian and nationalist brand of Arab Socialism also led to the forcible suppression of

all expressions of Kurdish, Assyrian, and other forms of non-Arab identity.

This fragile balance of religious, ethnic, and ideological identities persisted for decades, until it finally collapsed in early 2011 as mass uprisings proliferated throughout the Middle East. Despite the largely nonviolent nature of antiregime demonstrations that spread across the country beginning in March of that year, the Assad government responded with a violent crackdown that repressed the peaceful movement while allowing armed rebel factions to dominate the uprising, as the situation steadily devolved into a full-scale civil war later that year. As opposition forces increased in number and prominence, so too did their ideological variety:

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defectors from the Syrian military comprised the leadership and fighters of some secular factions that enjoyed early battlefield successes, but a spectrum of Islamist fighters also quickly emerged. For its part, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) received

crucial help from domestic, regional, and international allies—including National Defense Forces (NDF) loyalists, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC),

Lebanese Hezbollah, and Russia by mid-2015—which collectively prevented the fall of the Assad regime and progressively turned the tide of the conflict against the opposition. Amid this complicated and seemingly intractable conflict, many religious minorities, such as Druze, Ismailis, Christians, and Alawis, came to perceive the Assad regime as the only entity capable of shielding them from the growing threat of violent sectarian attacks by radical Islamist groups.

The steady rise of radical Islamist groups from 2011 to 2014 culminated in the emergence of ISIS as a territorial power across parts of eastern Syria and northwestern Iraq, including its provincial capital of al-Raqqah along the Euphrates River in north-central Syria. Between the time of ISIS’s declaration of a so-called “caliphate” in mid-2014 and its significant loss of territorial control by late 2017, it had perpetrated massive religious freedom violations, sexual violence, and other atrocities across the areas under its control, including kidnapping and executing thousands of Christians, Yazidis, Shi’a Muslims, and even fellow Sunni Muslims who opposed its authority.

By the end of 2018, the Syrian conflict had fragmented into several different zones of control, each of which presented a unique set of religious freedom conditions. The Assad regime, along with its domestic and international allies, controlled most of the country’s south, west, and center, where it reserved its harshest repression for the Sunni Muslim population over its perceived support for the opposition movement. Islamist groups such as HTS, and to a lesser extent ISIS, controlled several noncontiguous pockets of territory, particularly in Idlib and other northern areas, where they sought to enforce highly repressive codes of religious and social order. The Turkish-allied Free Syrian Army (FSA) occupied Afrin and other sections of the northern border region, at times vying with HTS for additional territory while also displacing thousands of religious and ethnic minorities. In addition, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its Kurdish-majority Autonomous Administration (AA) of North and

East Syria controlled a large swath of territory in which Christians, Yazidis, Sunni Muslims, and other communities experienced relatively open religious freedom, albeit with some limitations.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Violations by the Assad Regime and Affiliated Groups

In 2018, the Syrian government reasserted authority over significant portions of the country that were once under opposition control, including predominantly Sunni Muslim areas that had served as key strongholds for the latter. The regime and regime-allied forces continued to employ brutal methods of destruction in their advance. In Ghouta, a stronghold of the Islamist militia Jaysh al-Islam, the SAA declared victory in April 2018 after a grueling five-year siege and intense two-month offensive that led to widespread devastation—including the destruction of an estimated 93 percent of buildings in one district—and displaced tens of thousands of residents to northern areas still under opposition control. In June, more than 330,000 civilians fled their homes in southern Syria in advance of a regime offensive to retake that part of the country, including the symbolically important city of Daraa where protestors first sparked antiregime protests in early 2011. Crucially, the SAA was joined or supported in the above offensives by primarily Shi’a Muslim foreign fighters, many of whom

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were recruited by the IRGC from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, in addition to Syrian Alawi, Shi’a Muslim, and other domestic militias under the umbrella of the NDF. Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, two factions of

the Iraqi PMF under the control of the IRGC, continued to operate in Syria but with a less visible role than in 2017 when they participated in the SAA’s recapture of Aleppo and other urban centers.

The Assad regime continued its longstanding effort to push previously unaligned religious minorities such as the Druze to join its military ranks, even as it sought to exclude, restrict, and repress Sunni Muslims in areas

over which it had retaken control. The regime has long tried to lure Druze men from their southern heartland of the Suwayda/Jebel Druze area to join the SAA, forcing an estimated 30,000 men to abscond into hiding or exile in Lebanon and elsewhere. The impact of this loss was keenly felt during a massive ISIS attack on the area in July 2018, as few able-bodied fighters were left to defend the traditionally reclusive community. Meanwhile, the Assad government passed a new law in October 2018 that delegated to the Ministry of Religious Endowments significantly greater state authority to control all Islamic affairs across the country; this law will likely have the greatest impact on the religious life of Syria's Sunni Muslims. Finally, the regime has increasingly marginalized Sunni Muslims from public and residential life across the country, handing traditional Sunni Muslim-held offices to Christian and Shi'a Muslim loyalists, while redistributing Sunni Muslim homes and districts to Shi'a Muslim fighters in parts of the country over which it has regained control. Its security forces have refused to grant permits for most Sunni Muslim civilians to return to their family homes in cities like Homs,

and the government's new Law No. 10 of 2018 placed severe restrictions on the ability of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees to reclaim family homes and properties. That law is widely expected to prevent many of those dispossessed persons, among whom Sunni Muslims are disproportionately represented, from returning to their homes and communities of origin, or to discourage them from returning to the country altogether, thereby permanently reshaping Syria's demographics to the regime's advantage.

Violations by ISIS

In 2018, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (GCDI), the U.S.-backed, largely Kurdish SDF, and to a lesser extent the SAA and its allies, continued to liberate territories from ISIS, driving its estimated 14,000 fighters into either hiding or ever-smaller pockets of territory. However, ISIS continued to represent a clear and present danger to GCDI and SDF forces as well as to Syrian civilians

throughout the reporting period, both from its fighters who have fled underground and its forces that remained engaged in fighting near Hajin. Few of the more than 9,000 Assyrian Christians who fled Hasaka Province during a massive ISIS offensive in 2015 have returned, and the fate of some 25 Christians who ISIS abducted at that time remains uncertain. Likewise, the whereabouts of several Christian leaders whom ISIS and its predecessors abducted in previous years are still unknown, including Italian Jesuit priest Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo Paul Yazigi, Armenian Catholic priest Father Michel Kayyal, and Greek Orthodox priest Father Maher Mahfouz, among others.

In July 2018, ISIS fighters launched the deadliest attack to date on Druze communities of al-Suwayda,

likely from the terrorist group's desert stronghold in al-Badiya, reportedly bombing, shooting, and stabbing more than 300 Druze to death. It also abducted 20 Druze women and 16 children, although all but two who died while in captivity

were later freed through a combination of negotiations, ransom, and prisoner swap.

Violations by Other Islamist and Non-Islamist Opposition Groups

As the ISIS threat has diminished, religious freedom has come under increasingly dire threat from Islamist opposition factions that are allied with al-Qaeda, particularly in the northwestern province of Idlib, and with Turkey, especially in Afrin and other parts of the country's north-central and northeastern region. Islamist forces under the umbrella of HTS—led by Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate with a particularly sordid history of violence against religious minorities—played a dominant and increasing role in Idlib Province, where they seized territory from rival opposition groups while either subsuming or eliminating almost all of them. At the same time, while broadly using political violence such as arrests and kidnappings against its Sunni Muslim

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opponents, HTS enforced its strict Islamist interpretation of Islamic law that suppresses all expression of non-Muslim religion in public spaces. The group also reportedly engaged in a campaign to expropriate Christian homes and land: in November 2018, multiple reports emerged that it had distributed notices to an unknown number of Christian families, many of whom had long since fled the area, ordering them to report to the “Office of Properties and Spoils of War,” which suggested an effort to seize their properties. In other cases, HTS reportedly directly seized the shops and homes of absentee Christian owners in order to collect income from renters. Although it is difficult to obtain clear documentation of many of these incidents, these reports contributed to an already hostile environment for religious and ethnic minorities in Syria, further discouraging them from returning to their homes and places of worship.

Religious freedom conditions deteriorated significantly in the area of Afrin, home to a once-diverse population of Kurdish Muslims, Syriac Christians, and Yazidis. Between January and March 2018, Turkish forces and their Arab and Turkmen allies in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) launched an offensive under the name of “Operation Olive Branch”

to seize territory from Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) forces in that area. In the wake of that offensive, around 137,000 people fled their homes and sought refuge mainly in territory controlled by the Autonomous Administration (AA) and protected by the

SDF. Those numbers reportedly included more than 400 Kurdish converts to Christianity, who feared repression from Islamist factions of the FSA. While some of those IDPs sought to return to Afrin during 2018, FSA elements had seized or destroyed properties and redistributed a number of homes to Sunni Muslim IDPs who had fled the regime’s recapture of Eastern Ghouta just weeks earlier. Islamist elements within the FSA reportedly destroyed Kurdish monuments as well as Yazidi, Sufi Muslim, and Alawi shrines, cemeteries, and other sacred sites, employing tactics similar to those of ISIS in an effort

to religiously cleanse the area. According to religious freedom groups, FSA fighters seized one church in Afrin in June 2018 for use as a base, while others burnt another church and covered its remains in Islamist graffiti.

Conditions in the Autonomous Northeastern Region

The AA has maintained generally positive religious freedom conditions over the territory under its control, allowing Muslims, Christians, and other communities to openly practice and express their beliefs—even including the freedom for Muslims to convert to other traditions and for residents to express unbelief or atheism. Representatives of religious and ethnic minorities living in the autonomous region told USCIRF that they have experienced not just safe refuge but also a substantial degree of religious freedom, gender equality, and representation in local governing bodies such as the Syrian Democratic Council. One of the few concerns has been a simmering dispute between Kurdish authorities and Christian communities over school curriculum—a longstanding point of contention over the boundaries of ethnic, religious, and national identity—which reached

a boiling point in August 2018, when authorities reportedly ordered the closure of up to two dozen Assyrian and Armenian schools, accusing them of having failed to implement an AA-approved curriculum. For their part, school administrators, and Christian activists who took to the

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streets in Hasaka Province in late August to protest those closures, complained that the AA-mandated curriculum denied them their own unique ethnoreligious identities, instead substituting the ardent Arab nationalism of the Ba’athist Assad regime for a Kurdish nationalist platform. Nevertheless, barring a large-scale Turkish invasion or ISIS resurgence to dislodge the local authorities’ years of effort, there is strong evidence to suggest that northeast Syria has come to represent an imperfect but largely positive model for the promotion and protection of religious freedom.

U.S. POLICY

Several events toward the end of 2018 typified U.S. policy regarding religious freedom in Syria during the year. First, the SDF successfully captured the city of Hajin in early December, representing the fall of one of the last remaining territories under the direct control of ISIS. Although intense fighting between the SDF and ISIS remnants in and around that city persisted at the end of the reporting period, the successful capture of the city represented the culmination of efforts by the GCDI and particularly by its SDF partners throughout 2018 to destroy the remaining operational capabilities of ISIS in Syria and neighboring Iraq—although its organizational potential to regroup and its ideological attraction still remain for many radical Islamist fighters still operating there. While the emphasis of U.S. policy following the end of the reporting period appeared to reconcentrate on Iranian influence in Syria, 2018 was otherwise marked by a primary focus on defeating ISIS and ending the genocidal threat it posed to Christians, Yazidis, Shi’a Muslims, and other religious and ethnic communities in Syria and Iraq.

On December 11, President Donald J. Trump signed into law the [Iraq and Syria Genocide and Relief Accountability Act of 2018](#) (P.L. 115-300), which declared that ISIS “is responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and other atrocity crimes against religious and ethnic minority groups in Iraq and Syria, including Christians, Yazidis, and Shia, among other religious and ethnic groups.” The law directed the U.S. government to assist in meeting the “humanitarian, stabilization, and recovery needs” of those communities as well as to support the efforts of governments and nongovernmental organizations to hold ISIS members accountable for the above. The framework for implementing this aid in the quickly evolving Syrian context was unclear at the end of the reporting period, particularly in contrast to Iraq where the United States maintains clear ties to Iraqi government officials,

Kurdish regional authorities, and nongovernmental organizations. However, the 2018 law is expected to eventually supply a mechanism for holding ISIS members accountable and providing relief and rehabilitation for Syria’s religious and ethnic minority communities.

In addition, President Trump [announced](#) on December 19 his intention to immediately withdraw all U.S. troops from the Syrian front, citing the ostensible defeat of ISIS as the conclusion of the U.S. mandate there. That announcement precipitated a rapid scramble among armed factions—Arab, Kurdish, and Turkish alike—for the renegotiation and reconfiguration of military and economic dynamics in northeastern Syria. The White House announced in February 2019, after the reporting period, that 200 U.S. military personnel will continue to assist the SDF in the northeastern region as part of a multinational observer force, while an additional 200 personnel will reportedly remain in southeastern Syria in the area of al-Tanf, near the Iraqi and Jordanian borders.

The pending withdrawal of most U.S. military personnel has also sparked widespread anxiety among religious and ethnic minorities in that same area regarding the possibility that, in its zeal to root out the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)-linked YPG, Turkey might seek to exploit a subsequent, perceived military void by launching a large-scale incursion into Kurdish-held territory. Representatives of some of those communities have expressed to various media outlets, and to USCIRF directly, that they fear such an operation would replicate on a larger scale the disastrous results of Turkey’s Afrin operations: paving the way for the proliferation of radical Islamist FSA factions, effectively ending all advances in religious freedom conditions in that area, trapping tens of thousands of civilians in the crossfire, creating an opportunity for ISIS to regroup, and displacing vulnerable Syrian minorities yet again.