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KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom in Syria remained threatened from numerous quarters, reflecting the country’s 10-year violent conflicts and humanitarian crises. President Bashar al-Assad’s May [reelection](#) further cemented his authoritarian regime, which [styles itself](#) as protecting religious minorities from militant Islamists—even as the [fallout](#) from its clashes with opposition groups imperiled religious minority communities in contested areas, including their property and places of worship. While the regime [preserved synagogues](#) and promoted outreach to exiled Syrian Jewish communities abroad, this likely was an attempt to maintain its [posture](#) of paternalism toward religious minorities. Although [ostensibly secular](#), the regime is [dominated](#) by the President’s Alawi-minority branch of Islam; in 2021, it [accelerated its nationalization](#) of religion by [increasingly subsuming](#) the Sunni Muslim majority’s power within its own religious institutions. In November, Assad [fired](#) the most senior Sunni leader, Sheikh Ahmed Hassoun, by abolishing his position of Grand Mufti—the powers of which the President had already limited since 2018—and [redistributing](#) authority to the Majlis al-Im al-Fiqhi, a regime-managed jurisprudential council. The government also continued to strip religious minorities of their autonomy; in February, it finalized its [classification](#) of Yazidis as a sect within Islam, forcing them under the legal and religious jurisdiction of a religion to which they do not subscribe.

At the same time, armed opposition forces and militant Islamist groups targeted vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities in their attempts to wrest power from the Assad regime and one another. The al-Qaeda offshoot [Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#) remained the

[dominant governing and religious force](#) in the northwestern region of Idlib. It continued to brutalize minority communities, [restricting](#) the worship of Idlib’s indigenous Christians and [displacing](#) them by seizing their properties and churches—already rendered vulnerable from attacks by the Assad regime. Additionally, Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups—collectively sometimes called “[TSOs](#)”—such as the Syrian National Army (SNA) and factions of its Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA) leveraged their Turkish financing and military support to [merge](#) under the Syrian Liberation Front, further enabling their campaigns of destruction and harassment against minority communities. In acts of religious and ethnic cleansing, TSOs near Afrin [terrorized](#) Yazidis and Kurds with shelling and [targeted](#) them—especially women and girls—for kidnapping, sex trafficking, and lethal torture. Although the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) did not regain territory, it [increased its presence](#) in areas defended by the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), such as Deir al-Zor in eastern Syria, where the militant Islamist group waged [almost daily attacks](#) on SDF bases and checkpoints.

Promising environments for religious freedom and intrareligious cooperation remained limited to the areas of north and east Syria held by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), including its military branch, the SDF, and the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). As in prior years, the AANES continued to openly support pluralism and collaboration among religious and ethnic groups. That positive environment reflected the AANES’s status as one of the only principal actors within Syria to actively and intentionally foster religious freedom and [diversity](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Syria as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and redesignate HTS as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Impose targeted sanctions on additional Syrian government agencies and officials, HTS principals, and the leadership of TSOs responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Exert pressure on Turkey to withdraw from all territory that it occupies as a result of cross-border operations into north and east Syria; in the interim, ensure enforcement of Turkey’s obligations under the 2019 ceasefire agreement; and demand that Turkey order armed factions under its control or influence to cease all activities negatively impacting religious and ethnic minorities in Syria;
- Recognize the AANES as a legitimate, local government; grant a waiver of sanctions in areas it governs; and demand its inclusion in any U.S.-backed final solution for Syria, pursuant to United Nations (UN) Resolution 2254, including Geneva-based talks to resolve the Syrian conflict “as the basis for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition”; and
- Contribute to efforts in AANES-governed territory to fund and develop local programs to promote religious pluralism and advance religious freedom and related rights.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Commends Targeted Sanctions against Religious Freedom Violators in Syria](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Commemorates Fifth Anniversary of ISIS Genocide Recognition](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation: Accountability for Crimes against Humanity](#)

Background

Article 3 of Syria's [constitution](#) identifies Islam as the religion of the President and Islamic jurisprudence as a major source of legislation. It also requires the state to ensure the freedom of religious rituals that do not disrupt "public order." Other laws and legal interpretations [restrict](#) religious freedom, including bans on Jehovah's Witnesses, prohibition of Muslims' conversion to other religions, and deterrents to religious extremism and proselytization.

Despite Syria's rich history of religious and ethnic diversity, a decade of conflict and instability has significantly affected its demography, displacing Syrians from both the Sunni Muslim majority and religious minority communities inside and outside the country. Approximately 87 percent of Syria's estimated current population of [20 million](#) belong to branches of Islam; Sunni Muslims represent up to 74 percent, while Alawi, Shi'a, and Isma'ili Muslims together comprise at least 13 percent. Christians, including Syriac-Assyrians, Maronites, Armenians, and other groups, officially comprise 10 percent—although some estimates suggest that emigration has dramatically reduced that figure. Druze comprise three percent and Jews are nearly nonexistent. Estimates for the numbers of [Yazidis](#) remain [confounded](#) by the Syrian government's classification of them as Muslims.

Alawi Muslims rose to power in the 1970s under the late Hafez al-Assad, whose son President Bashar al-Assad has further advanced the group's dominance since assuming the presidency in 2000. The civil war—which began in 2011 after a peaceful [grassroots uprising](#) triggered a brutal crackdown—has amplified once-subdued fault lines between religious groups, imparting a [heightened sectarian element](#) to the conflict.

In 2021, the Assad regime—buoyed by [relationships](#) with outside actors such as Russia and Iran—maintained or had regained control of approximately [70 percent of Syria](#); various opposition forces continued to control or contest the remaining territory. The regime has actively contributed to intrareligious tensions by casting many Sunnis as violent extremists who [threaten](#) both religious minorities and the purported modernism of the state.

Contrasting Religious Freedom Conditions in AANES- and Turkish-Controlled Areas

The AANES's Executive Council and Bureau of Religions and Beliefs maintained a [diverse leadership and membership](#) of Kurds, Arabs, Circassians, and Turkmen; Yazidis; Syriac-Assyrians and other Christians; and Sunni Muslims. Following several years of efforts to increasingly reflect such diversity, the SDF is now [majority Arab](#) and the AANES offers a [broadly pluralistic](#) environment, including religious minorities—in stark contrast to the violent intolerance of nearby TSOs in Turkish-occupied areas.

Turkey continued to threaten the AANES and religious freedom in north and east Syria. Direct Turkish occupation and military attacks in northern Syria as well as TSO operations—by factions such as Faylaq al-Sham and others—laid waste to vulnerable [Yazidi](#), Christian, and Turkmen areas. Turkish attacks included airstrikes and continuous [shelling](#) in AANES/SDF areas across northeastern Syria and a [September attack](#) on the civilian infrastructure of the Christian-majority town of Tel Tamer, forcing many residents into [targeted displacement](#).

The Turkish government also persisted in falsely [conflating](#) the AANES with the U.S.-designated terrorist group the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Turkey made similar accusations of terrorism against other Syrian Kurdish and Arab actors, including the People's Protection Units (YPG), a division of the SDF. In June, a Turkish court [sentenced](#) three Syriac Orthodox Christians to life in prison for "membership in a terrorist organization" for alleged or actual ties to the YPG in fighting the Turkish occupation of their village in northern Syria. These men were among up to 200 other Syrian nationals whom TSO forces had captured in 2019 outside Ras al-Ain following Turkey's invasion and [transferred](#) to detention in Turkey.

Key U.S. Policy

In May 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and the foreign ministers of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom issued a [statement](#) warning that the forthcoming presidential elections in Syria would be "neither free nor fair" and "denouncing" the Assad regime for holding an election outside [UN Security Council Resolution 2254's](#) roadmap for the Syrian peace process. In June, Secretary Blinken [announced](#) \$436 million in humanitarian assistance, building on the more than \$13.5 billion the United States has provided to Syrians during the conflict.

Although the United States withdrew the majority of its forces from northeastern Syria in 2019, it has maintained a small [military presence](#) that many local religious and ethnic minority [communities](#) regarded as crucial to [maintaining stability](#). On February 25, the United States executed [airstrikes](#) on the Syria-Iraq border in response to Iran-backed militias' rocket attack on U.S. coalition personnel at an airport in Erbil, Iraq.

Pursuant to the [Caesar Civilian Protection Act of 2019](#), the administration continued to issue targeted sanctions against Syrian officials and TSO leaders for atrocities against civilians. In July, the Departments of [State](#) and the [Treasury](#) sanctioned TSO Ahrar al-Sharqiya. The Treasury Department also sanctioned Ahrar al-Sharqiya's leader [Ahmad Ihsan Fayyad al-Hayes](#)—commonly known as Abu Hatem Shaqra—for trafficking Yazidi women and children and integrating former ISIS members into his TSO's ranks. Additional Treasury Department sanctions targeted the Syria-based terrorist [Farrukh Fayzimatov](#) for his "material support" to HTS, which the State Department in November [redesignated](#) as an EPC.