

Syria



Persecution / Improved ↑

Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **93.3%**
- Christians : **4.6%**
- Agnostics : **2%**
- Others : **0.1%**

18,564,000

185,180 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

In March 2011, following anti-government demonstrations in Syria, protesters clashed with forces from the government of President Bashar Al-Assad. The violence spiralled into a full civil war by the summer when the opposition started to become militarised. With the intervention of regional powers –notably Iran and Saudi Arabia – and international ones – the USA and Russia – the conflict became, according to many observers, a proxy war. Accurate figures are very hard to obtain because of the inaccessibility of many areas and conflicting statistics given by different parties. That said, a 2016 UN report estimated the death toll at around 400,000.^[1]

As a result of the fighting, most of the country's infrastructure has been destroyed, and half of the population has been displaced either inside or outside the country. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre,^[2] Syria's refugee crisis is the largest in the world, with 2.9 million displaced people in 2017 alone, the highest figure globally. In June 2016, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that Syria had a record 4.9 million refugees by the end of 2015, more than two million above second-placed Afghanistan.

Most Syrians are Sunni Muslims. Alawites, Christians and Druze are part of the country's traditional religious mosaic. Kurds are the most important non-Arab ethnic group. Most of them adhere to Sunni Islam. Since 2011 the situation of religious freedom has sharply deteriorated. Before the war, Christians comprised a significant portion of the population, about 10 percent. Most of them belong to Eastern Churches, such as the Melkite Greek Catholic Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church. Church leaders have praised the atmosphere of tolerance that existed before the war. Because the Christians were concentrated in strategically important zones affected by war, they have fled in large numbers; many have been displaced internally and others fled abroad as refugees.

President Assad is an Alawite, an off-shoot of Islam held in contempt by a number of main-stream groups – “many Sunnis

call Alawites heretics”.[3] However, in the time of Assad's father, President Hafez Al-Allsad, a 1974 fatwa by Shia scholar Musa Al-Sadr recognised the Alawite community as a branch of Shia Islam.

According to article three of Syria's constitution [4], approved by a referendum in 2012 (in force only in government-held areas), “The religion of the President of the Republic is Islam; Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation; the State shall respect all religions, and ensure the freedom to perform all the rituals that do not prejudice public order; the personal status of religious communities shall be protected and respected.” Article eight forbids “Carrying out any political activity or forming any political parties or groupings on the basis of religious, sectarian, tribal, regional, class-based, professional, or on discrimination based on gender, origin, race or colour”. Article 33 states: “Citizens shall be equal in rights and duties without discrimination among them on grounds of sex, origin, language, religion or creed.” Article 42 says, “Freedom of belief shall be protected in accordance with the law”.

The government restricts proselytising and conversions. It prohibits the conversion of Muslims to other religions, deemed contrary to Shari'a. Although conversions from Islam to Christianity are not allowed, the government recognises Christian conversions to Islam. The penal code prohibits “causing tension between religious communities”.[5] Article 462 of Syria's Penal Code provides that anyone who publicly defames religious practices is punishable with up to two years' imprisonment. [6]

Matters involving personal status such as marriage and inheritance are regulated in accordance with each community's rules. Muslims are subject to Shari'a. Christians and other religious minorities come under their respective laws. There is no civil marriage. Muslim women cannot marry non-Muslim men, but Muslim men can marry women from another recognised religion.

Incidents

The UN-created Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights found that Sunni Muslims accounted for most civilian casualties and detainees, and that the Syrian government used the blockading of Sunni-majority opposition areas as a weapon of war.[7] Because of the recruitment of foreign Shia fighters in countries including Afghanistan and Pakistan, Sunni communities have launched attacks on Shia communities in those countries, indicating that the Syrian conflict is exacerbating Sunni-Shia tensions elsewhere. Traditionally Sunni areas of Damascus, Homs and Deir-ez-Zor Province (eastern Syria) were reportedly being settled by Iranian, Iraqi, and Lebanese Shia fighters and their families. Some reports suggest that Christians in areas of Damascus, including Bab Tuma and Bab Sharqi, were pressured to sell to Iranians.[8]

Ismailis and Druze have been easy targets for armed groups, because of their concentration in certain areas. Both groups have also complained of government pressure to serve in the military. The regime has seized Ismaili and Druze men, aged 18 to 42, who resisted conscription, driving most of them out of the country.[9]

The presence of Islamist groups among the numerous opposition militias has caused major problems for the country's minority communities. For example, Al-Nusra Front – subsequently renamed Fateh Al-Sham Front, which then merged with other groups to become Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham in early 2017– has been implicated in many of the atrocities against Christians during the course of the war including Ma'aloula and Sadad. The complex relations between different rebel groups have meant that the so-called moderate opposition militias have – whether intentionally or not – collaborated in the attacks on Christians. For example, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) fought alongside Al-Nusra to prevent Sadad being retaken in 2013 when the latter were committing war crimes against the town's Christian inhabitants. However, as the war has progressed there have been attempts by groups including the FSA to distance themselves from both Al-Nusra and Daesh (ISIS).[10]

Many members of religious minority groups held by Daesh are still missing, including 25 Christians. The liberation of Daesh-held territory in 2017 highlighted that some of Syria's most prominent Christian leaders are still missing, such as 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.^[11]

In October 2017 Daesh seized a bus full of Druze travellers in Hama on their way from Damascus to Idlib. It initially held the 50 people as hostages but later released all but two, who it is suspected were killed.^[12]

On 1st October 2017 Daesh militants retook Al-Qaryatayn, Homs Province, a town with a large Christian population. In the three weeks the extremists held Al-Qaryatayn before it was liberated by Syrian regime forces, Daesh executed 116 people.^[13] The town, home to 2,000 Christians before the rise of Daesh, had only a few hundred Christians by the time the extremists first took control of Al-Qaryatayn in August 2015, as many had fled in anticipation of the group's arrival. When Daesh first occupied the town, the militants took 200 Christians hostage until they agreed to pay the jizya tax, which is levied on non-Muslims. Payment would allow them to remain in the city, Daesh said!^[14]

In May 2017, Daesh fighters launched attacks on Aqarib Al-Safiyah and Al-Manboujah, two villages in Hama Province inhabited predominantly by Ismailis, a minority Shia Muslim group, killing 52 people!^[15]

In 2017, the Syrian government, along with its Russian and Iranian allies, recaptured much of the territory formerly under the control of opposition groups. As a result, fewer violations of religious freedom occurred in areas held by the armed opposition perpetrated than in previous years.

In general, all armed groups have violated human rights in the areas they control throughout the course of the conflict. For example in 2015, Al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra forced the small Druze community in an area once controlled by Daesh to convert to Sunni Islam. In 2017, the Druze were unable to freely practise their religion and traditions!^[16]

A January 2017 report by a coalition of mainly UK-based Christian charities working in Iraq and Syria asserted that it was "vital that Christians and other minority populations have support for their political and security concerns if they are to feel reassured enough to return [...], rebuild their communities and undertake any reconciliation process"^[17] In an interview given to Hungary-based news agency BosNewsLife the same month, Patriarch Ignatius Ephrem Joseph III Younan, the leader of the Syriac Catholic Church, urged the West and the United Nations to end without delay sanctions against his country and to stop supporting rebels. He said: "I still hope that the Western countries, that means the Western politicians, would accept to stop financing and arming so-called rebels because there would be otherwise no end to the sectarian war."^[18]

In March 2017, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (Al-Nusra Front) carried out a double bomb attack in the car park of the Bab Al-Saghir cemetery, a well-known Shia pilgrimage site, killing 44 and wounding 120, mostly Shia pilgrims!^[19]

Armed groups have kidnapped people for ransom or prisoner exchange with the government or other armed groups. As of September 2017, up to 100 men from the Damascus suburb of Adra Al-Omalayah belonging to religious minority groups were still held as hostages.^[20]

In Kurdish-controlled areas, minority groups have complained of human rights abuses by Kurdish groups that de facto administer about 30 percent of north-eastern Syria. According to the Assyrian Monitor for Human Rights (AMHR), non-Kurdish communities in the area have reported demographic changes, including the displacement of Armenian and Assyrian Christians and Sunni Arab Muslims in favour of Kurds, and the imposition of Kurdish language and culture in some areas. The AMHR also noted growing pressure on private Christian schools in Al-Hasakeh Province to change their curriculum or risk being closed. Changes include teaching Kurdish, hiring Kurdish teachers, and learning the ideas of Abdallah Ocalan, the jailed leader of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), which the US has designated as a terrorist organisation.^[21]

In September 2016 the Kurdish Peoples Protection Unit was accused of carrying out acts of violence and intimidation against Christians in Al-Hasakeh. Listing a numbers of incidents, Syriac Catholic Archbishop Jacques Behnan Hindo of Al-Hasakeh-Nisibi told Agenzia Fides that he believed the Kurds were planning to force out Christians. He said: "The epicentre of their raids and acts of force is always the area of the six churches, where most of the Christians live. In many

cases they expelled the Christians from their homes under the threat of Kalashnikovs. And where they enter, they loot everything”.^[22]

Christian community leaders have also complained that Kurdish authorities seized homes abandoned during fighting. In late 2017, under a new regulation, abandoned Christian homes in the city of Tabqa, Raqqa Province, were to be given to Kurdish families if their owners had not yet returned. Christians and Sunni Muslims have also accused the largely Kurdish Syrian Defence Forces of working with Kurdish authorities to sideline, discriminate against, and at times even attack non-Kurdish populations.^[23]

In December 2017, the World Watch Monitor news agency published an article on Christian families going back to the Syrian city of Homs five years after fleeing it. Despite “little incentive” to return, some of them were able to rebuild their homes ^[24]. Many Christians interviewed for the article said that “the Middle East is no longer a home for [them]”^[25] Interviewees insisted on the need for a “national accountability mechanism” to deal with incidents of religious and ethnic persecution and discrimination in Iraq and Syria, in order “to restore faith in a system that ensures all religious and ethnic communities are [treated] as equal citizens and deserving of protection, while also deterring negative actors from taking adverse actions against these communities.”^[26]

A new law introduced in April 2018 by President Bashar El-Assad, calling on Syrians to register their private properties with the Ministry of Local Administration within 30 days, could allow the government to seize the properties of displaced Syrians. As such, the law could be seen as part of a plan to change the demographics of Syria, settling Shias from Syria, Lebanon and Iraq in previously Sunni areas. It could also be seen as a way for the government and its allies to further pursue their strategic interests by creating Shia areas under their direct control.^[27]

From January to March 2018, bombs fired from rebel-held East Ghouta hit Christian areas of Damascus. This prompted Church sources in Syria to allege that these were targeted attacks, such as were seen during the repeated bombing of the Christian quarter of Aleppo. Maronite Archbishop Samir Nassar in Damascus was almost killed when a bomb landed in his bedroom in the Maronite Cathedral complex. He only survived because he had got up to use the bathroom shortly before the shell exploded. In Bab Touma, the Melkite Cathedral and Patriarchate on Straight Street, which is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, was hit. The nearby convent of Mary and Jesus in Bab Touma was hit twice^[28] Christians criticised the western media and other organisations for downplaying the casualties, which they stressed were occurring on both sides. Writing to the World Council of Churches (WCC) on 2nd March 2018 about the bombing of Damascus, Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II of the Syriac Orthodox Church wrote:

You mention 550 victims killed in Eastern Ghouta... However, you neglect to mention hundreds of civilians including many children killed by the mortars and missiles coming from Eastern Ghouta, especially when most of these mortars have long targeted areas populated by Christians from churches which are members of WCC...Your statement clearly shows a biased position concerning what is happening in Syria in general, and in Damascus in particular.”

Prospects for freedom of religion

In general, in a situation of a sectarian conflict it is not always clear if infringements on the religious freedom of individuals and groups are solely or mainly motivated by the perpetrator’s hatred for a specific faith. In Syria, ethno-religious divisions have existed for centuries. Political factors might be as important as religious ones. More often than not, they in fact go together since religion and political affiliation to overlap.

There are two main groups who have violated religious freedom in Syria. The first group is the Assad government and its military allies such as Hezbollah, the Shia militia from Lebanon, and Shia volunteers from Iraq and Iran. They fight together against what they see as a terrorist threat and Sunni Jihadist insurgency against the Syrian government and state. Some reports suggest that they have intentionally targeted Sunni areas.

The second main group is made up of non-state actors who have de facto established state-like control over certain

areas. They break down into two sub-groups.

One includes Sunni jihadist groups among the rebel militias, such as Daesh or Al-Nusra Front. The militias of the so-called moderate opposition are in many cases also driven by Sunni ideology and pursue a religious vision for the country's future – usually less extremist than that of Daesh or Al-Nusra. Often, they tactically cooperate with jihadist groups, even when it has meant they are tacitly supporting acts of genocide being committed against religious minorities.^[29] Daesh and Al-Nusra have committed grave acts against the religious freedom of Christians, Druze, and Sunnis in the areas they control. They have also attacked Shias and Alawites in terrorist attacks. The successful struggle to push back Daesh and other extremists across many parts of Syria has brought with it an end to the egregious violations of religious violations by hyper-extremist groups who can only be described as having committed a genocide against minority faith communities.

The other sub-group is mainly Kurdish militias in northern Syria. They control areas including the Khabur River region in northern Syria that has numerous well-established Christian settlements.

With the conflict now in its eighth year and no political solution in sight, the ongoing humanitarian crisis and the situation of religious freedom will not improve any time soon. Given the atrocities committed by all sides, it may prove difficult to bring the groups together again to live side by side once the fighting has stopped.

In June 2018, World Watch Monitor published an article on Syrian Armenians titled “70,000 Syrian Armenians have fled during the war, and few will return”, which reflects a reality faced by many religious minorities who used to live in the country.^[30]

Endnotes / Sources

[1] “Syria death toll: UN envoy estimates 400,000 killed”, Al Jazeera, 23rd April 2016,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/staffan-de-mistura-400000-killed-syria-civil-war-160423055735629.html> (accessed 13th July 2018).

[2] “Syria”, Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, <http://internal-displacement.org/countries/syria>, (accessed 11th July 2018); “Syria Population (LIVE)”, Worldometers, <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/syria-population/> (accessed 11th July 2018).

[3] Reuters, ‘Alawites: A secretive and persecuted sect’, 31st January 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-alawites-sect/syrias-alawites-a-secretive-and-persecuted-sect-idUSTRE80U1HK20120131> (accessed 23rd July 2018)

[4] Syrian Arab Republic’s Constitution of 2012, constituteproject.org, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Syria_2012.pdf?lang=en (accessed 16th July 2018).

[5] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “Syria”, Report on International Religious Freedom for 2017, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2017/nea/281006.htm> (accessed 10th July 2018).

[6] Code pénal syrien en application de la loi n°148 de 1949 (en français), Institut d’étude sur le droit et la justice dans les sociétés arabes, <https://iedja.org/ressources/par-pays/syrie/> (accessed 10th July 2018).

[7] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *op. cit.*

[8] “Syria”, 2018 Annual Report, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2018USCIRFAR.pdf> (accessed 10th July 2018).

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] See for example “Frustration drives Aarsal’s FSA into ISIS ranks,” Daily Star (Lebanon), 8th September 2014,

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Sep-08/269883-frustration-drives-arsals-fsa-into-isis-ranks.ashx> (accessed 19th July 2018)

[11] "Four years later, family reports 'silence' on kidnapped priest in Syria", Crux Now, 30th July 2017, <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2017/07/30/four-years-later-family-reports-silence-kidnapped-priest-syria/> (accessed 14th July 2018).

[12] "Syria", 2018 Annual Report, op. cit.

[13] "IS recaptures 'symbol of interfaith coexistence' Syrian town", World Watch Monitor, 6th October 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/10/syria-islamic-state-retakes-christian-enclave/> (accessed 11th July 2018); "Syria", 2018 Annual Report, op. cit.

[14] "Syria", 2018 Annual Report, op. cit.

[15] Ibid.

[16] "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Formerly Jabhat al-Nusra)", Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/493?highlight=Al+Nusrah+front> (accessed, 16th July 2018); "Syria: Situation of the Druze, including whether they are perceived to be loyal to President Assad by the insurgent groups; treatment by the authorities and the insurgent groups (January 2015-November 2015)", 25th November 2015, Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, <https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-information/rir/Pages/index.aspx?doc=456249> (accessed 16th July 2018).

[17] "Christians 'excluded' from Iraq's reconstruction plans", World Watch Monitor, 27th January 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/01/christians-excluded-from-iraqs-reconstruction-plans/> (accessed 11th July 2018).

[18] Stefan J. Bos, "Syria's Catholic Leader Urges End To Western Sanctions", Bos News Life, 13th January 2017, <http://www.bosnewslife.com/37393-syrias-catholic-leader-urges-end-to-western-sanctions> (accessed 13th July 2018).

[19] "Syria", 2018 Annual Report, op. cit.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] "Archbishop Hindo: violence and intimidation of the Kurd militias on Christians increase in Hassaké", Agenzia Fides, 20th September 2016, www.fides.org/en/news/60791 (accessed 19th July).

[23] "Syria", 2018 Annual Report, op. cit.

[24] "Syria: Homs Christians return to rebuild homes and lives", World Watch Monitor, 5th December 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/12/syria-homs-christians-return-rebuild-homes-lives/> (accessed 13th July 2018).

[25] "Security not only concern for Syrians returning home", World Watch Monitor, 4th July 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/security-not-concern-syrians-returning-home/> (accessed 13th July 2018).

[26] "National Accountability Mechanism for Iraq and Syria – Proposal for EU parliament", World Watch Monitor – Policy Paper, June 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/National-Accountability-Mechanism-for-Iraq-and-Syria-Position-Paper-EU-Parliament.-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 12th July 2018).

[27] Martin Chulov, "Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control", The Guardian, 14th January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence> (accessed 11th July 2018).

[28] John Newton, "Bishop miraculously avoids death – as bomb lands in his bedroom", ACN News, 12th January 2018 <https://acnuk.org/news/syria-bishop-miraculously-avoids-death-as-bomb-lands-in-his-bedroom/> ; John Pontifex, "When the sky turned black with bombs", ACN News, 21st February 2018, <https://acnuk.org/news/syria-when-the-sky-turned-black-with-bombs/> (accessed 19th July 2018).

[29] As noted by John Pontifex and John Newton: "the Free Syrian Army (FSA) fought alongside Al-Nusra to prevent Sadad being retaken at the very time when the jihadist group was committing war crimes against its Christian inhabitants". Aid to the Church in Need, Persecuted and Forgotten? 2015-17 edition, <https://acnuk.org/pfsyria/> (accessed 18th July 2018)

[30] Zara Sarvarian, "70,000 Syrian Armenians have fled during the war, and few will return", World Watch Monitor, 27th June 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/06/70000-syrian-armenians-have-fled-during-the-war-and-few-will-return/> (accessed 11th July 2018).