

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

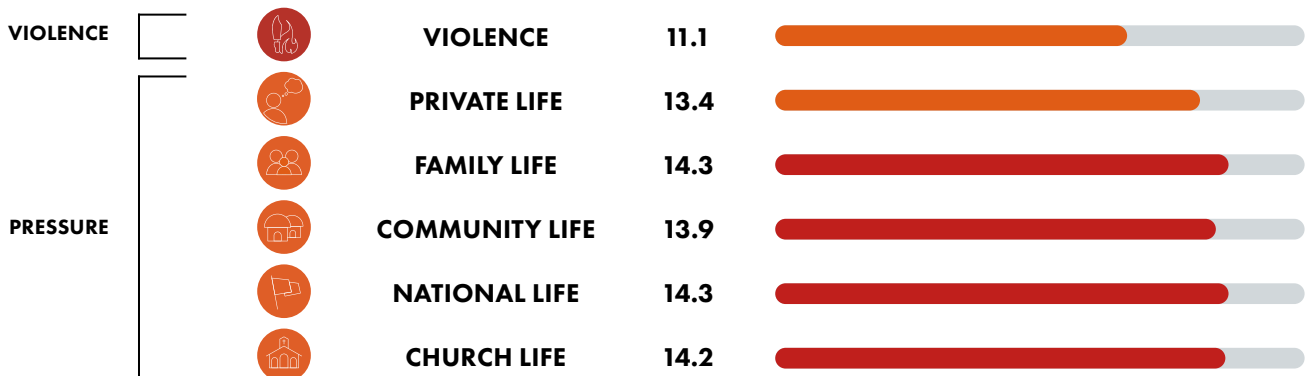
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

SYRIA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
12



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

The government mostly tolerates historical churches. However, their leaders are physically identifiable and have been targeted for attacks, abduction, or death in areas where Islamic militants are active. Their churches have been either demolished or turned into Islamic centers. Evangelical church leaders are also vulnerable since they are seen as Western-oriented, proselytizing and fragmented, lacking guidance from a strong leader with political influence, such as a pope or bishop. In government-controlled areas, there used to be less monitoring of Christians (during the early years of the civil war). As the authorities regain power, control of possible dissidents has increased. Christians from a Muslim or Druze background are put under pressure by their families and communities, as conversion brings great dishonor to them. This is particularly true in majority-Sunni areas, where converts risk being attacked or expelled from family homes. Since the Turkish invasion in October 2019, Turkish forces have [attacked, raped, abducted and murdered](#) Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians and Yazidis. The forces have also moved Sunni Arab internally displaced people (IDPs) from other parts of Syria into the homes of minority refugees in the north, causing demographic change.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Bashar al-Asad

POPULATION

20,638,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

579,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Authoritarian Presidential Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	579,000	2.8
Muslims	19,672,000	95.3
Agnostics	369,000	1.8
Atheists	15,300	0.1

Source²

Syria is embroiled in a civil war that began in 2011 resulting in a dangerous security environment characterized by the indiscriminate use of weapons by both government and rebel groups. The government has received military support from Iran, Russia and Hezbollah, allowing them to regain control of lost territory, but conflicts between the government and insurgents persist. The opposition has received support from international backers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. In addition, the Kurdish militias (known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, or AANES), are supported by the US government which also has a military base in At Tanf, located in the far eastern part of Syria.

The majority of the country is now under government control except for the Idlib Province, Western Aleppo Province, the northern region of Hama Province and the north east. These areas are currently controlled by Turkish forces, the [Global Coalition](#), Islamist groups or Kurdish authorities.

Syria is a Sunni-Muslim majority country; the Constitution states that the president must be Muslim and that Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation. Most of Syria's Christians belong to historical churches (mainly Orthodox and Catholic, plus some traditional Protestant congregations). Christians enjoy [reasonably good standing](#) in government-controlled areas, though activities that could be construed as proselytism are restricted. Within opposition-controlled areas, known Christians have been targeted for threats, intimidation and kidnappings by radical Islamic groups.

Throughout the civil war, Christians in Syria have suffered disproportionately from the fighting and the displacement this has caused. Their vulnerability in the current political power struggle is due to such factors as a lack of political and military power, alleged connections with the West and resentment against Syrian Christians' perceived close connections with the Assad regime.

In the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), Muslims are officially allowed to change their faith and register as Christians. However, the Syrian government does not recognize this registration. Family pressure on converts is also less intense in this region, as Kurdish Sunnis tend to be less radical. These favorable conditions have been threatened by the invasion of Turkish forces which began in October 2019; practically all improvements in religious freedom made by the Autonomous Administration have been reversed in areas now under Turkish control.

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

How the situation varies by region

Christians are particularly under pressure in the last bastions of control by radical Islamic groups, in Idlib province in the north west and Hasakah province in the north east.

While historic Christian communities and - to a lesser extent - non-traditional Christian communities enjoy a relative degree of freedom in the rest of the country, pressure on converts exists in the entire country and their situation is particularly dangerous in the north west and north east.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Historical Christian communities

These are mostly Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. As the largest type of Christianity in the country, Christians from historical Christian communities are specifically targeted. They are spread throughout the country and are also present in conflict zones. The few traditional Christian families left in Idlib Province, which is controlled by international jihadist groups, are threatened with death, torture or assault and therefore hide their faith. The attacks by Turkey and TSOs have driven out many of these Christians from their homes in

the north west, north, and north east. The political reputation of denominations, churches, and local church leaders (neutral, pro or anti-Assad) plays an important role in the level of oppression they face from groups fighting President Assad.

Converts to Christianity

Christians from a Muslim or Druze background are especially put under pressure by their family, as it brings great dishonor to them if a family member leaves their religion. This is particularly true in majority-Sunni areas, where converts risk being banned from their family homes or worse. In reaction to the increased radicalization of Islam, opposition from family and society towards converts from a Muslim background has increased, particularly within rebel-controlled areas. Pressure from the family is relatively less intense in Kurdish areas (except for desert areas where there is more tribal influence and Islam is more conservative), as the Kurdish Sunnis are generally less radical.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are in a vulnerable position as they are known for their Western orientation, fragmentation, lack of strong leadership and lack of a foreign spokesperson (such as a pope or bishop) who can speak on their behalf. Most of the non-traditional Christian communities lack full, official recognition and legal status. Because of their evangelistic activities, they are specifically targeted by Islamic militant groups, but also by the government, which wants to maintain stability at all costs. Evangelical churches are not the only churches involved in evangelism. Several historical churches, especially Catholic, are also involved.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression

Islamic oppression is the major persecution engine in Syria and accounts for most of the atrocities and violations committed against Christians. Militants belonging to radical Islamic groups such as al-Qaeda affiliates HTS and Jaish al-Islam as well as members of TSOs, are currently the main drivers of this engine in Syria. They operate openly in the north west of Syria and across the northern part of the country (including Hasakah and Qamishli). Islamic militants currently control approximately 15% of Syria's population. Turkish military operations, beginning in 2016, led to the occupation of territory in northern Syria and, since October 2019, the so-called "safe zone" along the Syrian-Turkish border. Turkey is using Arab Islamist fighters to control Kurdish areas. Islamic oppression is immense in opposition-controlled areas. Islamic oppression is also present in government-controlled areas, mostly affecting converts from Islam to Christianity, where pressure is exerted especially by family and community.

Dictatorial paranoia

This pressure primarily comes from armed groups that control parts of Syria, including the Turkish-supported opposition forces (TSOs). Through this control, President Erdoğan aims to restore the past glory of the Ottoman Sultanate. Since October 2019, TSOs have several times cut off the water supply to Kurdish and Christian minorities in Hassakeh, as well as the surrounding rural areas inhabited by more than a million people, to force them into submission. Militant groups have taken over many Christian-owned properties. On the government side, although President Assad shows a positive attitude towards historical Christians, his main objective is social stability rather than protecting the rights of religious minorities. Surveillance and interrogation by the authorities are reportedly increasing. The government will act against Christians (and other groups) considered a threat to the status quo, such as those involved in evangelism.

Clan oppression

Tribalism in Syria is mixed with Islam, especially in the northern Kurdish areas and the central desert areas. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is considered a betrayal of the community and a

threat to national security. If discovered, it leads to great opposition from family and local leaders. A sheikh can permit the execution of converts and can give permission for Muslims to take their property, belongings and even their women.

Organized corruption and crime

Corruption and bribery are widespread. [Transparency International](#) lists Syria as the third most corrupt country. This takes place within the context of impunity and anarchy and affects access to food and health care. Christians, who have a reputation for being wealthy, have been kidnapped for ransom by criminal networks. Organized corruption and crime is especially prevalent in areas occupied by Turkish military and Islamic militant groups, in southern Druze-dominated areas and in areas with a high percentage of Alawites. In Latakia, dominated by Alawites, the kidnapping of young Christians has become a major concern.

Christian denominational protectionism

As a result of the Syrian crisis, there were many bridges built between historical church communities and non-traditional groups, mostly through personal interaction between priests and pastors. However, senior leadership in several historical churches resist building any bridges with non-traditional churches. They have accused some non-traditional Christians of betraying their nation by linking up with Western political agendas, thus making them suspect in the eyes of the authorities.



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

In a context of ongoing instability and restrictions on religious freedom, women from religious minority groups, including Christians, risk abduction, sexual harassment and rape. While the rate of instances has dropped dramatically since IS dominated areas of Syria, this can happen both in government-controlled areas and in rebel-held territory. Rape is used to shame Christian families and destabilize communities. Female converts also face violence from their own families. They may face domestic violence or forced marriage to a Muslim, or even be killed to restore the honor of the family.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied custody of children
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

Men

Young indigenous Christians particularly fear being forcibly conscripted into the Syrian Army or other military factions. Some are conscientious objectors, and this can prompt emigration. Unemployed Christians have immense difficulties obtaining a job, and those who are employed stand little chance of promotion. As men are usually the financial providers, this makes the wider family vulnerable. Converts face additional pressures and may be threatened by their family, beaten or denied their inheritance. Male converts from a Muslim background also come under strong pressure to marry a Muslim woman.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – death

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	12	81
2023	12	80
2022	15	78
2021	12	81
2020	11	82

Syria's rise in score was due to very slight increases in pressure in all five Spheres of Life. However, the violence score slightly decreased from 11.3 points in WWL 2023 to 11.1 points in WWL 2024. The minimal difference of just one point compared to last year's total score is mainly due to more information about the situation in the Kurdish areas, where there is more pressure than previously known. In addition, it became known that in areas under government control, Christians stood trial on false accusations, with their added vulnerability as a minority playing an important role.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **22 June 2023:** the Assyrian Church of St. George in Qamishli was targeted by a group who entered through a window. The attackers destroyed furniture, desecrated crosses, committed indecent acts at the church's altar and stole copper crosses and icons. According to local experts, churches and other Christian buildings in the coastal area in the west of Syria, are vandalized or looted at least once a month.
- During the reporting period, we received reports that a total of at least 100 Christian homes were seized or looted in Aleppo, Hassaka and Christian villages in the South without legal prosecution or other consequences for the perpetrators. Christians are usually unarmed, which makes them easy targets.
- After the February 2023 earthquake, a new wave of migration among Christian families has emerged due to their perceived unwelcome and unsafe conditions among Sunni Muslims. The declining Christian population, increased vulnerability, and job discrimination have prompted many to leave the country. Additionally, family members from at least 40 converts to Christianity from Islam who were compelled to leave the country for reasons directly related to their faith.

WWL Year	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians forced to flee their countries
2024	100*	17	50	100*
2023	100*	10*	10*	10*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

Private life

In areas controlled by Islamist opposition groups (such as Idlib Province), it is dangerous for Christian communities to discuss their faith with non-Christians. Conversion from Islam is generally punishable by death. In areas controlled by Kurdish authorities, although Muslims are legally allowed to convert, they will mostly face pressure from their families. In government-controlled areas, discussing their faith is risky for converts, as it could be regarded as attempted evangelism (prohibited by law). Otherwise, Christians, except for converts, may express their faith in writing as long as they do not mention politics or other faiths. Muslims are legally prohibited from converting to other religions (except for AANES), though this is not criminalized.

Family life

There is no legal scope in Syria for a female Christian from a Muslim background to marry a male from a historical or non-traditional Christian family. Their marriage would be illegal. There is a huge social stigma around interfaith marriages, which can lead to estrangement, discrimination and persecution by family members, and even murder. The honor of a Muslim

man is put to shame if his wife or daughter converts to Christianity. Both culture and religion say the right thing to do is kill her, but divorce is the more common solution. If a Muslim spouse divorces a Christian, custody rights are ordinarily given to the Muslim party. Some Christian mothers will convert to Islam just to keep custody of their children. From birth, the children of converts from Islam are considered Muslim because their parents cannot officially change their religion. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria is a rare exception; it is the only place in Syria that allows Muslims to legally change their religion. However, this is not recognized by the Syrian government. As a result of increased Islamic education in government-held areas, Christian children, especially those of converts, experience discrimination and harassment.

Community life

Christians are monitored throughout Syria, especially in areas held by Islamist opposition groups. In government-controlled areas, converts and non-traditional church groups are watched particularly closely and sermons monitored. Religious instruction is provided in schools according to confessional affiliation. Converts are still considered Muslim, so

their children receive an Islamic education. Christians can face discrimination in employment. In Aleppo, where Sunni Muslims control the market, they often do not employ Christians.

National life

The 2012 Syrian Constitution stipulates the president must be Muslim and Islamic law the major source of legislation, which provides a basis for discriminatory treatment of non-Muslims. The Constitution obliges protection for all religions as long as they “do not disturb the public order”. Conversion from Islam is not recognized except in AANES. In areas held by Islamist opposition groups, Sharia law applies, which severely restricts the freedom of all non-Sunni religious groups. In government-held areas, adult males have to serve in the armed forces or face imprisonment and forced conscription. This factor prompts male

Christians to flee Syria and makes them reluctant to return.

Church life

Church services have been monitored since the start of the crisis, and church leaders are expected to encourage members to support the Assad regime. Even before the civil war, leaders avoided speaking about evangelizing Muslims or speaking disrespectfully about Islam. In areas controlled by Islamist groups, most churches have either been closed, demolished or are used as Islamic centers. The incorporation of converts within recognized churches has always been discouraged by the government on the grounds that this could produce religious sectarianism or provoke conflict between communities. Many churches in Islamist-controlled areas have been desecrated, especially by the removal of crosses.

International obligations & rights violated

Syria has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Syria is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian converts are ostracized by their family and community and pressured to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians in northern Syria are killed in violent attacks by revolutionary and paramilitary groups with an Islamist agenda (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christian converts are monitored by local officials upon request of their own families (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christians are denied custody rights of their children because of their faith (ICCPR Arts. 23 and 26)
- Christian female converts cannot marry Christian men and if they do, their marriage is considered illegal (CEDAW Art. 16)

Situation of other religious minorities

Many other religious minorities face various levels of persecution including Shia, Alewite, Druze, Jews, Yazidis and Zaradashtis. Shia, Alewite and Druze communities have been marginalized and persecuted by Sunni jihadists, not only on the grounds of their faith being considered heretical but, in the case of the Alewites, also because of their perceived connections with the respective Assad presidents. Yazidis and Zaradashtis belong to Kurdish religions, which are not recognized by the Syrian regime. Their children are registered as Sunni Muslims and they learn Islam in school.

Open Doors in Syria

Open Doors is encouraging the local church by strengthening its leadership and helping leaders take advantage of the many opportunities for ministry, even in the ongoing crisis situation in the country. It does so in cooperation with local church partnerships. Opportunities include:

- Literature distribution: Bibles, study Bibles, children's Bibles, New Testaments and Christian books
- Discipleship training for leaders so they might teach others
- Leadership training and specific youth leader training
- Big picture training
- Various types of training on request of the various local churches in Syria
- Trauma counseling and debriefing for people who have gone through very stressful situations
- Partnering with the local church to care for and provide relief aid and rehabilitation programs to the many Syrian Christian internally displaced people (IDPs)
- Building bridges between the various Christian denominations by sponsoring conferences to which all denominations are invited

Open Doors is also raising prayer support for believers in difficult situations, and prayer for the situation in general.



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

Some of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
