

POLICY BRIEF



Syria

Ensuring equal dignity and rights for Christians and other minorities

Christians in Syria face ongoing targeted violence, including attacks on churches, killings and kidnappings, and damage to cemeteries and Christian symbols. They also face harassment and intimidation by security forces, and experience discrimination in both public and private sector employment.¹ These violations are occurring during a political transition in which neither the state nor rival armed actors have been held accountable.

Syria is in the aftermath of a protracted civil war that began in 2011 and ended with the fall of the Assad government in

December 2024. The conflict involved domestic, regional, and international actors over fourteen years, resulting in more than half a million deaths and the displacement of millions of people.² The civil war caused widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and severe economic decline.³

Control of Syrian territory remains fragmented. The transitional government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, installed as interim president in January 2025, exercises authority over much of the country but faces ongoing security challenges.⁴ The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition

¹ "Syria: Country Dossier", World Watch Research, January 2026, pp. 1 - 7. Available at <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/country-dossiers/>

² <https://www.global2p.org/countries/syria/>

³ <https://ourworldindata.org/data-insights/the-syrian-civil-war-has-killed-hundreds-of-thousands-displaced-millions-and-caused-poor-health-and-widespread-poverty>

⁴ <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/prospects-for-syrias-democratization-under-ahmed-al-sharaa/>

of Islamist militants, former Free Syrian Army units, and Turkmen militias, retains a presence in northern Syria.⁵ Many factions associated with the SNA formally agreed in 2025 to integrate into the structures of the Syrian Transitional Government and Ministry of Defense.⁶ However, concerns remain regarding accountability for abuses committed by some constituent factions and the uneven implementation of integration arrangements. Unlike SNA, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), continues to operate as an insurgent organization opposed to the Syrian state and conducts attacks on civilian and religious targets across parts of the country. In 2014, ISIS had seized control of large areas of eastern Syria; it was territorially defeated by 2019 but has since reconstituted as an insurgent force.⁷ During the period of its territorial control, Christian communities in IS-held areas faced killings, sexual assaults, abductions, forced displacement, and the destruction of churches and religious sites.

Forces aligned with the transitional government, Sunni extremist groups, and Bedouin armed groups have carried out targeted reprisals against Alawites and Druze.⁸ Members of the Shia community have also faced attacks and harassment, in some cases involving individuals linked to government forces.⁹ Recent mass violence affecting Alawite and Druze communities demonstrates that weaknesses in accountability, command structures, and rule-of-law institutions present risks for multiple religious communities and are not confined to any single faith group.

Constitutional provisions and their implications for religious minorities

The interim constitutional declaration adopted in March 2025 establishes Islamic law as the principal source of legislation and requires that the President of the Republic be Muslim under Article 3(1). This marks a shift from the 2012 Constitution, which identified Islamic jurisprudence as a major source of legislation rather than the principal source. While the declaration provides for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and states that recognized divine religions are to be protected, these protections are limited to Abrahamic faiths and do not extend to all religious communities in Syria. Article 3(3) protects the personal status matters of religious minorities, but the declaration contains no explicit protections for ethnic minorities.¹⁰ This omission is significant because many Syrian

Christian communities are defined not only by their religion but also by their distinct ethnicities. For them¹¹, religious and ethnic identity are inseparable, their faith, language, and cultural heritage form a single, indivisible identity. Therefore, protecting their right to FoRB while leaving their ethnic identity unprotected safeguards only part of who they are.¹²

The designation of Islamic law as the primary legislation has created legal uncertainty for Muslims who convert to Christianity and limits the independence of Christian personal status tribunals, which operate within a legislative framework influenced by Islamic law.¹³ It also raises concerns about the future of public religious expression, and the implementation of guarantees for FoRB.¹⁴ This vulnerability is compounded by the concentration of power in the presidency, an office from which Christians are explicitly excluded. The President appoints all seven judges of the Higher Constitutional Court and exercises significant control over the composition of the People's Assembly.¹⁵ As a result, constitutional safeguards affecting Christians and other religious minorities depend largely on executive implementation, with no independent judicial or parliamentary mechanism through which minorities can seek redress.¹⁶ This leaves them in a structurally subordinate position, with the protection of their rights relying on executive discretion rather than enforceable constitutional protections.

Legal restrictions and societal pressure

The constitutional ambiguities outlined above are reflected in statutory law and its implementation. The Personal Status Law (Legislative Decree No. 59 of 1953) prohibits marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man under Article 48; such marriages are void unless the non-Muslim man converts to Islam. By contrast, a Muslim man may marry a Christian or Jewish woman without her converting (Article 305). However, Article 264 bars inheritance between spouses of different religions regardless of which spouse is Muslim: a Christian woman married to a Muslim man cannot inherit from her husband unless she converts, and children of such marriages are considered Muslim by law regardless of the mother's faith. While conversion from Islam is not criminalized under the criminal code, it is treated as apostasy under Sharia principles, and the state does not legally recognize a change of religion from Islam to another faith. Religious affiliation is also recorded on birth certificates and personal-status documents.¹⁷ This

⁵ <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/turkeys-lingering-influence-in-syrias-new-army/>

⁶ <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/col/syria/2025/country-focus/13-security-institutions/132-integration-armed-groups>

⁷ UN's Twenty-first report of the Secretary General, 1 August 2025.

⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2026/country-chapters/syria>

⁹ <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487>

¹⁰ [https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/13%20-%20Constitutional%20declaration%20\(English\).pdf](https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/13%20-%20Constitutional%20declaration%20(English).pdf)

¹¹ For example Assyrian, Syriac, and Armenian Christians etc.

¹² <https://stj-sy.org/en/diversity-and-the-syrian-constitution-overbroad-texts-that-fail-to-protect-minority-rights/>

¹³ <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2025/11/22/aid-to-the-church-in-need-world-report-syria-religious-freedom-wavers-amid-political-upheaval-and-rising-sectarian-threats/>

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ <https://syriaaccountability.org/a-problematic-constitutional-declaration/>

¹⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/25/syria-constitutional-declaration-risks-endangering-rights>

¹⁷ <https://damascusinstitute.org/en/researches/syria-15/>



While violence has thinned Christian communities in Syria, some remain and continue to gather.

means converts cannot obtain identity documents showing their new faith, exposing them to the risk of losing inheritance rights, automatic dissolution of marriage, loss of custody, and inability to register their children under their chosen faith.

Christian women face pressure to wear headscarves, avoid mixed-gender spaces, and remove visible crosses or religious jewelry. In some areas, armed groups have entered Christian neighborhoods to enforce dress codes and gender segregation in public spaces.¹⁸ Article 3(2) of the interim constitution makes the right to practice one's religion conditional on compliance with "public order", a limitation that is only lawful under international standards when clearly defined and proportionate, neither of which the declaration requires. This creates potential for restrictions on religious freedom. Beyond these social and legal pressures, Christians also face property and economic pressures, including the confiscation of homes and shops belonging to displaced Christians, the imposition of taxes or tributes by armed factions, attacks resulting in the destruction or defacement of churches and Christian symbols, including crosses, and threatening inscriptions on church buildings.¹⁹

Demographic decline of Syria's Christian community

Christians have experienced one of the most significant demographic declines of any religious community since the

conflict began in 2011.²⁰ Before the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, Christians from all denominations made up around 10% of Syria's population.²¹ Since then, targeted violence, displacement, economic hardship, and sustained emigration have reduced the community to less than half of its pre-war size, with Christians now accounting for only a small share of the country's population.²² The transition of power since December 2024 has not reversed this trend.²³ Instead, the erosion of constitutional protections, the continued application of restrictive personal status laws, and the broader climate of legal and societal pressure outlined in this brief have contributed to continued emigration. This has raised concerns among Christian religious leaders about the long-term sustainability of Syria's historic Christian communities, and their future place in Syrian society.²⁴ Christians also remain excluded from meaningful representation in the security forces and local governance, both in areas under Damascus's direct control and increasingly in northeastern Syria as authority is consolidated under the central government. This exclusion further weakens confidence in their long-term security and political inclusion and may contribute to further emigration.²⁵ While the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic continues to document human rights violations, no dedicated UN mechanism has systematically examined the FoRB and religious minority dimensions of the post-December 2024 transition.²⁶

¹⁸ <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2025/11/08/syriac-strategic-research-centre-field-report-documents-rising-attacks-and-institutional-discrimination-against-christians-in-syria/>

¹⁹ <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2025/11/08/syriac-strategic-research-centre-field-report-documents-rising-attacks-and-institutional-discrimination-against-christians-in-syria/>

²⁰ "Syria: Country Dossier", *Ibid.*, pp. 1

²¹ <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/doi/syria/2025/country-focus/24-ethno-religious-minorities/245-christians>

²² According to Open Doors' latest estimates, the remaining Christian population stands at approximately 300,000, suggesting the community may have declined to around 15–20% of its former size. See "Syria: Country Dossier" above.

²³ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

²⁴ <https://apnews.com/article/syria-christians-assyrians-attack-anniversary-islamic-state->

²⁵ "United States Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2026 Annual Report", *USCIRF*, March 2026, pp. 47. Available at: https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2026-03/USCIRF_2026_AR%20%282%29.pdf

²⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/03/un-syria-commission-calls-justice-reform-and-international-support-syrias>

Recommendations:

To stop the continuous and severe violations of fundamental rights of Syrians, Open Doors makes the following recommendations:

1 To ensure the protection of the inherent and inalienable rights of all Syrian citizens, irrespective of race, religion or other status, the Syrian Transitional Government should:

- Amend Article 3(1) to reinstate the protections provided under the 2012 Constitution. Islamic jurisprudence should be designated a source of legislation rather than the principal source, removing the constitutional privileging of one religious tradition over others in governing a religiously plural population;
- Amend Article 3 of the Constitution by removing adherence to Islam as an eligibility criterion for the presidency, in line with Article 33(3) of the Constitution and Article 26 of ICCPR; and ensure the establishment of a secular and inclusive source of legislation;
- Amend provisions such as, but not limited to, Article 48 of the 1953 Personal Status Law and 264 of Syria's Civil Code, to ensure alignment with international human rights standards, namely Articles 18 and 26 ICCPR.

2 To protect religious minorities from legal restrictions and societal pressure:

- The Syrian Transitional Government should establish a National Interreligious Forum on Pluralism within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, comprising senior representatives of all religious communities and chaired on a rotating annual basis. The Forum should have a statutory right to prior consultation on all legislation, regulations, and curricula affecting religious practice, personal status, education, and religious property and endowments. It should carry enforceable implementation duties, including parliamentary oversight, annual reporting, and judicial remedies;
- The International Community should make diplomatic engagement and international assistance to the Syrian Transitional Government conditional on verifiable progress against specific freedom of religion or belief benchmarks. These should include constitutional guarantees of full

and equal citizenship for all Syrians, regardless of religion or ethnicity, and corresponding reforms in all related laws. Progress should be assessed every six months, with each phase of diplomatic engagement and international assistance conditioned on:

- (i) demonstrable protection of all religious communities;
- (ii) independent investigations into sectarian violence;
- (iii) judicial independence reforms;
- (iv) equal citizenship regardless of religion; and
- (v) meaningful minority inclusion in public institutions.

3 To prevent further demographic decline of Syria's Christian communities:

- The Syrian Transitional Government should implement a National Strategy to guarantee equal citizenship and equal constitutional protection for all Syrians, focused on improving security, restoring property rights, removing legal barriers, ensuring equal access to public services and employment, and enabling the safe and voluntary return of displaced Christians;
- The International Community should support the expanded mandate of the Syria Commission of Inquiry by sponsoring its renewal at the Human Rights Council, providing dedicated funding for religion-based violence against minorities and witness protection, supporting the submission and verification of civil society evidence, and committing to use the Commission's findings to inform diplomatic engagement and assistance decisions.