

World Watch Research

Syria:

Background Information

September 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

September 2024

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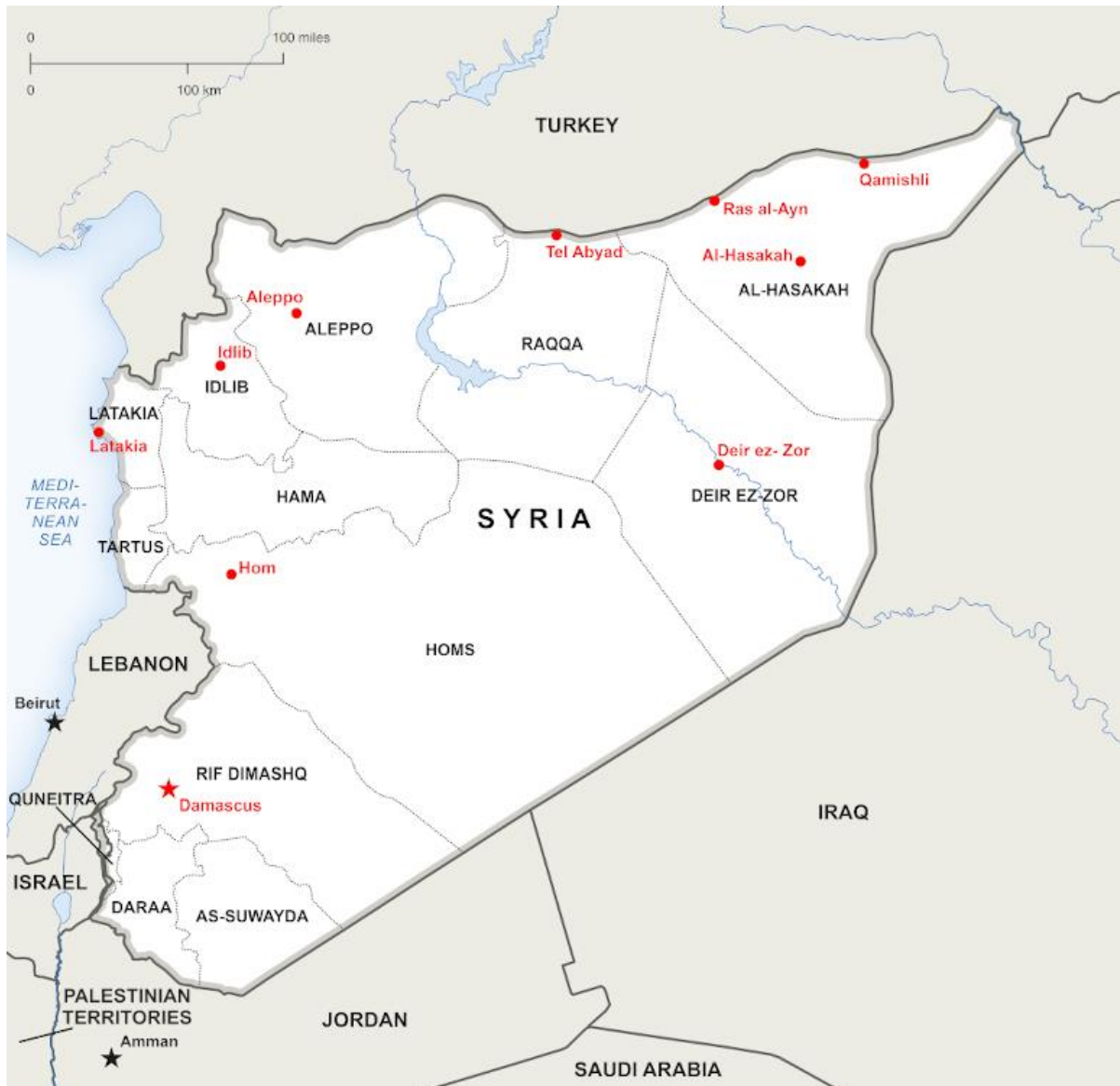
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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Syria: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
24,348,000	579,000	2.4

OD-estimate of number of Christians

Recent history

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Syria gained independence in 1946, but it suffered from political instability and experienced multiple military coups. It briefly [united with Egypt](#) (1958-1961) but later separated and re-established itself as the Syrian Arab Republic (Britannica, accessed 29 July 2024). The country lost the Golan Heights to Israel during the 1967 war, and stability came under Hafiz al-Assad's rule until his death in 2000, followed by his son Bashar al-Assad's presidency. In 2011, anti-government protests erupted, leading to a civil war fueled by complex factors such as class conflict and repressed political liberty. The conflict attracted foreign fighters, including the establishment of the

Islamic State's caliphate in 2014, but the group lost most of its territory due to intervention by the West and Russia.

In March 2018, approximately 25,000 Free Syrian Army fighters, including battle-hardened Islamists, joined Turkish regular troops and special forces to seize control of areas around Afrin, predominantly Kurdish territory, displacing Kurdish rebels who had been ruling the area. Reports indicated that jihadists allied with Turkey targeted religious minorities, including Christians, in the northwestern region and along the border. Currently, the majority of Syria is under government control, except for Idlib province, Western Aleppo province, the northern region of Hama province, and the northeast, which are controlled by Turkish forces, the Global Coalition, Islamist groups or Kurdish authorities.

Throughout 2019, fighting intensified in Syria. Jihadists took control of the strategically significant town of Idlib, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of civilians and the displacement of hundreds of thousands. IS continued to launch attacks on civilian targets in the northeast, even after losing its last stronghold in the east to Kurdish-led forces in March 2019. In October 2019, Turkey launched a military incursion into northern Syria following the withdrawal of US troops, causing further displacement, [including many Christian families](#) (Council for Foreign Relations, 13 October 2020). Other developments in 2019 included the Syrian army retaking the semi-autonomous Kurdish Region, and a safety zone agreement between Turkey and Russia in the north of Syria.

Other major developments involved successful operations by government and Russian forces in capturing territory from rebels in Idlib province at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. A ceasefire agreement between Russia and Turkey was reached in March 2020 after escalating fighting in February, temporarily halting the regime's military advance towards Idlib city. The fragile treaty faced challenges due to jihadist attacks and Russian airstrikes in the northwest but remained intact.

In July 2020, President Bashar al-Assad emerged victorious in parliamentary elections, despite protests over the dire economic conditions. He further secured a fourth seven-year term by winning the presidential election in May 2021 with an overwhelming majority. However, the international community contested the election results. Meanwhile, the Sochi 2.0 ceasefire agreement in Idlib province faced challenges as jihadist groups, including Sunni Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), clashed with rival factions. IS militants conducted attacks primarily in the central desert but also in other parts of the country. Additionally, clashes occurred between government forces and former rebel groups, as well as between Kurdish forces and government-affiliated factions in the south-western and north-eastern regions. In September 2021, a deal was reached between government forces and rebels to end fighting in the southwest. Despite occasional violations, the March 2020 ceasefire in Idlib persisted. Israel continued to launch missile strikes, targeting Iranian-linked sites in Syria. IS staged a major attack on a Kurdish-run prison in Al-Hasakah in January 2022 to free its prisoners. Turkey initiated a new military campaign in February 2022, purportedly targeting Kurdish militants. Christian communities in the northeast faced Turkish attacks in October 2021 and in 2022. The northwest witnessed deadly clashes among opposition groups as HTS expanded its control beyond Idlib, prompting Turkish deployment and Russian airstrikes in Idlib.

In November 2022, Turkey intensified attacks against Kurdish-led forces, but hostilities eased in December 2022 as HTS raided regime positions and protests erupted in Suwayda. In January 2023, Turkey targeted both Kurdish and government forces, demonstrating a willingness to normalize ties. A

devastating earthquake in February 2023 caused significant loss of life, leading the Syrian government to use international aid to break its isolation. In March 2023, hostilities between the Syrian regime and HTS resumed and tensions escalated between US-backed forces and Iran. In April 2023, Damascus intensified normalization efforts, HTS attacked government forces and IS launched attacks. Finally, in May 2023, the Arab League re-admitted Syria after a 12-year suspension, marking an important diplomatic milestone. Moreover, Syria and Saudi Arabia announced the reopening of their diplomatic missions.

The remainder of the year saw continued hostilities, drone strikes, and IS insurgencies in several regions of Syria, with significant clashes between HTS and the regime in the northwest, with the regime and Russia increasing their bombardments, while Turkey intensified its attacks in the northeast and IS maintained its desert insurgency.

As of October 2023, Israeli, US and Iranian-backed groups exchanged fire as part of a wider reaction to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in Gaza. There were reports of Iranian forces moving fighters to Quneitra and Dara'a and multiple Israeli retaliatory attacks, as well as protests against the government in southern Syria due to deteriorating economic conditions. In January 2024, clashes between Iranian-backed groups and US forces intensified, with Israel targeting Hamas and Iranian commanders after Iran-aligned fighters launched rockets into the Golan Heights. The hostilities persisted, culminating in [Israel's attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus](#) in April 2024 (Chatham House, 22 April 2024). Concurrently, Turkey continued its strikes on Kurdish targets, and fighting in the northwest persisted. In the east, resistance to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) rule by government- and Iranian-supported Arab militias remained strong, while IS conducted attacks in May 2024, and tensions rose among Turkish-backed groups.

Political and legal landscape

The Economist Intelligence Unit classifies Syria as 'authoritarian' ([EIU Democracy Index 2023](#)). Bashar al-Assad inherited a tightly controlled and repressive political structure from long-time dictator Hafez al-Assad, with an inner circle dominated by members of the Assad family's minority Alawite Shia community. From 2011 onwards, the Syrian opposition became increasingly 'Islamized' and the civil war quickly took the form of a Sunni 'jihad' against the Syrian government. (The establishment of the IS caliphate in June 2014 further accelerated this development, although the group's last remaining territory in eastern Syria fell in March 2019.)

According to FFP's Fragile State Index ([FSI 2024](#)), Syria ranks fourth slightly up from 2023 when it was fifth. The country scores (almost) maximum on the FSI for the following indicators: security, factionalized elites, economy, state legitimacy, public services, refugees and IDPs and external intervention. Compared to the 2023 index, these scores have remained the same or increased slightly. The demographic pressures indicator increased the most, while group grievances, human flight and brain drain as well as human rights decreased slightly though still retaining a relatively high score.

Fighting continues particularly in areas where government-held territory borders on areas controlled by rebel militias. Here Christians are caught in the crossfire between government troops and rebel forces. Throughout the civil war, religious minorities in Syria have suffered disproportionately from the fighting and the displacement this has caused. Christian 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;
- Resentment against the Syrian Christians' perceived close connections with the Assad regime;
- Living in areas in which fighting between Syrian and Kurdish forces has been particularly intense (e.g. Afrin). Syrian Christians are facing an ongoing lack of safety, basic resources and employment to sustain livelihoods.

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Syria](#)):

- Even in areas controlled by the regime, "there is often a breakdown in law and order, leaving militias, often predominantly composed of a single religious group, in a dominant position. In other areas of the country, irregular "courts" and local "authorities" apply a variety of unofficial legal codes with diverse provisions relating to religious freedom."
- "The constitution declares the state shall respect all religions and shall ensure the freedom to perform religious rituals as long as these 'do not disturb public order'. There is no official state religion, although the constitution states 'Islam is the religion of the President of the republic'. The constitution states Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation."
- The constitution states, 'The personal status of religious communities shall be protected and respected' and 'Citizens shall be equal in rights and duties without discrimination among them on grounds of sex, origin, language, religion, or creed'. ... "Citizens have the right to sue the government if they believe it violated their rights. Some personal status laws mirror sharia regardless of the religion of those involved in the case being decided."
- "The law restricts proselytizing and conversion. It prohibits Muslims from converting to other religions as contrary to sharia. The law recognizes conversion to Islam. The penal code prohibits causing tension between religious communities."

Gender perspective

Syria ranked #171 out of 177 countries in Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index ([GIWPS Syria](#), accessed 29 July 2024). It performed worst globally on organized violence and worst regionally on community safety for women. It is one of the countries with the most extensive legal discrimination against women. Legislation fails to protect victims from domestic violence, marital rape and so-called 'honor crimes.' Whilst Syria ratified the CEDAW convention in 2003, it maintained a reservation to [Article 16](#) (UNFPA, 2019, p.8), which provides for the elimination of discrimination against women as they enter or exit a marriage. While amendments to the Personal Status Laws in 2019 have been positive – for example by raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 and providing women with greater rights in relation to work, divorce and dowries – there are loopholes for men to commit violence towards women.

As per Human Rights Watch: "In government-held areas, women face ongoing discrimination in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance under the Personal Status Law. This law denies financial support to women who refuse to live with their husbands without a 'valid excuse' or work without their husband's consent, despite 2019 amendments. ... [O]ther provisions still allow reduced sentences for violence against women" ([HRW 2024 Syria country chapter](#)). Additionally, the amendments do not allow for a woman's right to refuse polygamy and pathways remain for girls to be entered into forced marriages by their guardian. Child marriage still persists in several rural provinces

in Syria; 13% of girls in Syria are married before they turn 18 ([Girls Not Brides Syria](#), accessed 29 July 2024).

“Such marriages”, an international [inquiry](#) by the United Nations Human Rights Council found “are frequently deployed as a coping mechanism to ameliorate financial hardship exacerbated by the conflict, as well as to protect daughters amid overcrowded living arrangements caused by destruction to homes and displacement and to mitigate reputational risks for family honor amid increased risks of sexual violence” (UNHRC, 12 June 2023, p.2).

Religious landscape

Syria: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	579,000	2.4
Muslim	23,328,463	95.8
Hindu	2,319	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	121	0.0
Bahai	484	0.0
Atheist	18,751	0.1
Agnostic	418,362	1.7
Other	111	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024 (adapted according to OD-estimate)

Due to war and displacement, it is not possible to present a totally accurate representation of Syria’s current religious demography. The table above gives an overview using latest WCD figures adapted according to the Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians in the country.

Syria is a Sunni-Muslim majority country, however there is a 13% Muslim minority made up of Alawi, Ismaili and Shia (according to the [World Factbook Syria](#), accessed on 4 July 2024).

One of the main features of Syria’s Christian population is its complicated ethnic and religious identity. The geographical concentration of Christians in strategic areas has also been an important factor in their vulnerability: The areas around Aleppo and Damascus and the southern areas of the Homs governorate near the Lebanese border have been vital to both the government and the opposition’s war efforts. According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Syria](#)): “Most Christians continue to live

in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, or in the Hasakah Governorate in the northeast of the country."

According to Middle East Concern ([MEC Syria country profile](#), accessed 29 July 2024):

- "Syria's Christian communities face multiple challenges within the context of the current conflict. In the majority of the country that is under government control, Christians enjoy reasonably good standing in society, though some restrictions apply to recognized Christian communities, especially to activities that could be construed as proselytism. The provision of enhanced powers to the Ministry of Religious Endowments in October 2018, ostensibly to prevent extremism and promote moderation, prompted some Christians leaders to express concern that the greater reach of Islamic authorities may threaten other faith groups."
- "Of those who have fled from government-controlled areas, including Christians, many have done so to avoid military conscription. A common assumption that Christians are pro-government (often correct, not least because of fear of alternatives) contributes to the tolerance in government areas but adds to Christians' vulnerability in areas controlled by opposition groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Few Christians remain in opposition-held areas, where violence has included attacks against Christians, Christian-owned property and church buildings. Mass displacement of Christians has not been reversed following the military defeat of [IS] in its strongholds of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour in late 2017, and five Christian leaders abducted by extremist groups in 2013 remain unaccounted for."
- "Within predominantly Kurdish areas, indigenous Christian communities have enjoyed reasonable accommodation, though some church leaders have expressed concern that aggressive assertion of Kurdish identity has at times marginalized or been coercive towards Christian communities."
- "In all areas there is strong family and societal pressure against those who choose to leave Islam, and in extreme cases these responses are violent. Those considered apostates can face sanctions in the Shari'a personal status courts such as forcible divorce and removal of child custody. Those who choose to leave Islam are especially vulnerable in opposition-controlled areas."

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP's Human Development Report Syria](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **GNI per capita:** 4.192 USD
- **Poverty:** 90% of the population live below the international poverty line ([UNHCR](#), February 2024).
- **Unemployment:** 13.5% ([World Bank](#), modeled International Labor Organization estimate, 2023).

According to the [World Bank's Syria overview](#) (last updated: 20 October 2022):

- Ongoing since 2011, "the conflict in Syria has inflicted an almost unimaginable degree of devastation and loss on the Syrian people and their economy. More than half the country's pre-conflict population (of almost 21 million) has been displaced, both internally and as refugees, mostly in neighboring countries. As a result of the destruction of physical capital, casualties, forced displacement, and the breakup of economic networks, Syria's GDP shrank by more than a half between 2010 and 2020. The dramatic decline in Gross National Income per capita prompted the World Bank to reclassify Syria as a low-income country since 2018."

- "[T]he Syrian conflict broke down bilateral and transit trade routes, destabilized the region, and led to the largest displacement crisis since the Second World War."

Apart from the devaluation of the Syrian pound - which was exacerbated by US sanctions - the widespread poverty is due to unemployment and low wages. Like other Syrians, Christians suffer from the high rate of unemployment and are highly dependent on relief aid. The prices for food, basic needs and medical supplies are high due to increased distribution risks. Many of the Christians left in the country are poor and risk malnutrition. Christians are regarded by many as being wealthy supporters of Assad's government; this adds to their vulnerability, since as non-Muslims they are already part of a fragile minority.

Gender perspective

According to the World Economic Forum's 2021 [Gender Gap Report](#), Syria has an economic gender gap of 28.5% (p.13) and a labor force participation gender gap of 80% (p.14). Female participation in parliament or ministerial roles is particularly low compared to other countries in the region (p.361). Although women and girls inherit less under Sharia-based [Personal Status laws](#), the Christian and Jewish communities are [exempt](#) from those laws and adhere to equal inheritance between female and male heirs (World Bank, Women, Business and the Law, 2022; UNHRC, 12 June 2023, p.19). Considering these economic vulnerabilities, women – including Christian women – depend heavily on their husbands and families. The devastating earthquakes of early 2023 displaced about 60% of the population in northwest Syria, the majority of them women and children – among whom are [thousands of women](#) who are now required to financially provide for their families (OCHA, 8 March 2023). Studies indicate that female-headed households are [twice as likely](#) to report a total inability to meet basic needs, living in contexts of "exceptional hardship", compared to male-headed households (UNHRC, 12 June 2023, p.2).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Syria](#) (accessed 29 July 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Arab ~50%, Alawite ~15%, Kurd ~10%, Levantine ~10%, other ~15% (includes Druze, Ismaili, Imami, Nusairi, Assyrian, Turkoman, Armenian)
- **Main languages:** Arabic (official), Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian, French, English
- **Urban population:** 57.4% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** Over 86.4% of the population aged 15 and over can read and write (female: 81%; male: 91.7%) (2015, most recent year).
- **Life expectancy:** 74.8 years (2024 est.).

According to the [UNDP's Human Development Report Syria](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Education:** The expected years of schooling is 7.4 years, whereas the mean years of schooling is 5.7 (2022). 37.1 percent of adult women have reached at least a secondary level of education compared to 43.4 percent of their male counterparts.

- **IDPs/Refugees:** "Over 12 million Syrians remained forcibly displaced in the region, including almost 6.8 million within the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) and 5.4 million living as refugees in neighboring countries, a slight decline from 5.7 million in 2021." (UNHCR, [Global Report 2022](#)) The earthquakes of February 2023 caused 89% of people displaced in northwest Syria to be displaced again by the conflict (Action For Humanity, [No Place But Displacement](#), 16 March 2023) "Humanitarian needs in Syria continue to rise inexorably. Escalating violence in 2023, violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL), have led to further displacement and suffering. The socioeconomic situation has continued to deteriorate, further exacerbated by the February earthquakes, negatively impacting social cohesion, and amplifying vulnerabilities. The effects of economic deterioration and lack of livelihood opportunities further expose women and girls to the risk of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) and other forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in the effort of accessing food and job opportunities. In 2024, 16.7 million people are expected to require assistance, the largest number ever since the beginning of the crisis in 2011" ([UNOCHA](#), March 2024)
- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Scoring 0.557, Syria ranks 157th out of 193 countries and falls in the category of 'medium human development' (2022, most recent year).

Syrian society is ethnically diverse and used to be characterized by the presence of a significant middle class. This middle class has diminished greatly, together with its cultural values and lifestyle. Daily life is now more dominated by survival concerns and the ongoing war has led to considerable emotional strain on society, leading to increased levels of fear, sleeplessness, depression, aggression in families and drug abuse. Christians in Syria have reported the breakdown of normal relationships within families and the need for trauma care and social support.

Nearly 2.5 million Syrian children aged 5-17 years are out of school. "These children fall prey to child labor, early and forced marriage, trafficking, and recruitment into the fighting." ([UNICEF](#), last accessed 4 July 2024).

According to UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell, the earthquakes of February 2023 "not only destroyed more homes, schools and places for children to play, they also shattered any sense of safety for so many of the most vulnerable children and families" ([UNICEF](#), 2 March 2023).

Children from Christian families are particularly vulnerable as many Christian schools have been closed or damaged and children have had to attend (Islamic) government schools.

Gender perspective

Young people, especially males, are leaving the country. In consequence, the emerging age gap is contributing to the economic crisis. The young generation are leaving not only in the hope of finding better future prospects but also to avoid [mandatory military service](#) (World Population Review, accessed 14 June 2023). Christians in Syria report that in the church context the ratio of men/women may be more than 1:7. Syria has long been shaped by Islamic norms. However, according to an article by the [Financial Times](#) (25 January 2019), the gender imbalance created by the high loss of men in the civil war may have altered these established gender roles; 80% of those killed in the conflict were reportedly men. Millions of surviving men have fled the country, fearful of forced conscription upon return. In light of this and the widespread poverty, women have increasingly taken over the role of financial provider and carer, however significant barriers to effective economic empowerment for

women remain ([WILPF, 1 April 2022](#)). Christian females are also under pressure to find work and are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In more conservative Sunni areas, women are not usually given the opportunity to fill this gap in the workforce.

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal/Digital 2024: Syria](#) (23 February 2024) - survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 35.8% penetration rate
- **Social media usage:** no data
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 72.3% of the total population

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2020](#) report (NB: Syria was not included in more recent Freedom on the Net reports):

- Syria ranks as one of the most most unfree countries in terms of the level of internet and digital media freedom.

Freedom House ([Freedom in the World 2024 Syria](#)) reported:

- "The government engages in heavy surveillance of private and online discussion and harshly punishes dissent in areas it controls, though it has employed its surveillance tools inconsistently in recent years amid deepening criticism from traditionally loyal segments of the population. In April 2022, Assad signed a new decree-law on cybercrime, Law No. 20 of 2022, which replaced an earlier law and imposed harsh penalties for any online activity that undermines the 'prestige of the state' or 'national unity', among other vague provisions. The maximum sentence under the law is 15 years in prison."

The telecommunications sector in Syria has paid a heavy price during the recent years of war and destruction. Telecommunications research site [BuddeComm](#) (last updated July 2024) sums the situation up as follows:

- "The years of civil war and destruction to infrastructure continue to have a toll on the telecoms sector in Syria. Although over the years the major mobile service providers Syriatel and MTN Syria have endeavoured to restore and rebuild damaged networks, the operating environment has been difficult."
- "Telecommunication services in Syria are highly regulated. Although urban areas can make use of the network built and maintained by the government-owned incumbent Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE), many underserved remote areas in the countryside are obliged to rely on satellite communications. The domestic and international fixed-line markets in Syria remain the monopoly of the STE, despite several initiatives over the years aimed at liberalizing the market."
- "Mobile broadband penetration in Syria is still quite low, despite quite a high population coverage of 3G networks and some deployment of LTE infrastructure. This may provide potential opportunities for growth once infrastructure and economic reconstruction efforts make headway, and civil issues subside."

Finally, recent advances in technology have provided the authorities with new ways to track citizens; this has increased the fears of converts to Christianity being discovered.

Security situation

Syria's civil war, ongoing since 2011, has created a dangerous security environment. The government has received military support from Iran, Russia and Hezbollah, allowing them to regain control of vast areas 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. Daily armed clashes occur in northern and south-western areas of Syria leading to high casualties, while urban centers face the threat of violent attacks by Islamic militants. The ongoing conflict has also led to increased crime rates, a deterioration in medical care and crackdowns on demonstrations, which has all served to fuel anti-government sentiment (Source: [Crisis 24 Syria report](#), accessed 29 July 2024).

Fear among Christians has been at a high level over the last years, particularly caused by the threats, intimidation and kidnappings carried out by radical Islamic groups such as al-Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the Ansar Brigade and the Al-Farouq battalions. Particularly in the northeast, a number of factors (combined with the Turkish invasion of northern Syria) have seriously affected the Christian communities in Deir ez Zaur, Al-Hasakah and Qamishli as well as the predominantly Christian villages on the border with Turkey: For instance, the reactivation of IS sleeper cells, church bombings, the murder of an Armenian priest together with his father in November 2019, and the 2022 [attack on a prison in Hasaka](#) (CNN, 21 January 2022) in which several IS militants broke out. The escalation of Turkish aggression and the potential for a large-scale invasion of the border areas make Christian communities feel extremely threatened since the areas are controlled by radical Islamic militias and Turkish authorities.

Although not impacting Syria directly, since October 2023 the Israel-Hamas conflict has heightened geopolitical tensions. As a result, Iran-backed proxy groups in Syria have escalated their attacks on US military interests, a trend likely to continue. Additionally, occasional rocket attacks from Syria targeting the Golan Heights are likely to persist, prompting Israeli counterstrikes that could also target Damascus and Aleppo international airports (Source: [Crisis 24 Syria report](#), accessed 29 July 2024).

Gender perspective

In this context of instability, violence and displacement, Christian men and women face ongoing pressure. One of the greatest threats for men is forced recruitment into the government army or defense forces. Several reports [reveal](#) accounts of "young boys reportedly forcibly removed from their mothers once they reach around 11 years old, never to be seen again" (Deutsche Welle, 11 September 2022). Men in particular face the threat of abduction and killing, particularly if they are in a position of church leadership. Women also risk abduction, as well as the threat of sexual harassment and rape. While the rate of instances has dropped since the re-taking of IS-dominated areas of Syria, this continues to happen in both government and rebel-held territories. According to Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index ([GIWPS Syria](#), accessed 29 July 2024), there remain extensive reports of conflict-related sexual violence. COVID-19 further exacerbated the security situation, exposing a '[shadow pandemic](#)' of violence against women (UN Women, 2 July 2020).

Christian origins

The Church has been present in Syria since the time of the Bible's New Testament, where the conversion of Saul/Paul is mentioned on the road to Damascus (see Chapter 9 of the Book of Acts). The New Testament confirms that the Syrian cities of Damascus and Antioch had Christian communities. Christian faith spread fast and at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, 22 Syrian bishops were present. There was also persecution: Bishop Ignatius from Antioch (who died in 115 AD in Rome) is just one example of many Syrian martyrs.

The language of Christianity in Syria was Aramaic. Many Syrian Christians followed the [Jacobite form of Christianity](#) that was condemned as heretical at the Council of Chalcedon (451), but the 'Greek' Church also remained popular in Syria ("Jacobites - History and Cultural relations", accessed 29 July 2024).

In the 7th century AD, Christianity was the majority religion in Syria. When Islam had gained a foothold, Caliph Omar dismissed Christian officials and his successor obliged all Christians to wear distinctive dress. One century later, Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi forced Arab Christians of the Tannukh tribe to convert to Islam. In Homs, Christians revolted in 855 and their leaders were crucified at the city gates. By the 9th century, Islam was gaining the upper hand, many churches had become mosques and, by about 900 AD, approximately half the Syrian population was Muslim.

In 1124 the Aleppo cathedral was made into a mosque. By 1350 Christianity had become a minority religion and out of a population of one million, only 100,000 were Christians. The fall of Constantinople and the Ottoman occupation of Syria were an obstacle to reuniting the Church in the 15th century. However, in the next century, the Orthodox, Jacobite and Armenian Christians were recognized by the Ottoman sultan as independent communities with their own courts and laws.

In 1516, the region became part of the Ottoman Empire and remained so until World War I (1914-1918), when Arab and British troops eventually defeated the Turkish rulers in the region. This ended a century of major persecution incidents targeting Christians. In [1860](#), 25,000 Christians were killed in Damascus in three days of pogroms (Rogan L E, Arabica, T. 51, Fasc. 4, October 2004). At that time, the first American protestant missionaries were working in Syria, with a focus on setting up schools, medical ministries and literature distribution. About half a century later, beginning in 1915, vast numbers of Armenians fled (or were deported) to Syria in the course of the widespread massacres of approximately 1.5 million Armenian and half a million Assyrian Christians in Turkey.

In 1920, Syria became a French mandate. At that time it received its present name and borders (except for the Golan Heights). It became fully independent in 1946. Politically, the country has been marked by instability. One problem for Syria is that it is a patchwork of religious groups. Hafiz al-Assad ruled Syria from 1970-2000 with an iron fist, forcing it to become secular and modernizing the economy. In 2011 mass uprisings, demanding human rights and equality, led to a full-blown civil war with millions of Syrians - including Christians - fleeing as refugees to Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, North Africa and Europe.

Throughout the centuries, the Christian church in Syria has gone through – and is still going through – considerable levels of discrimination, intolerance and attacks. Due to years of persecution, forced conversion and emigration, Christians now make up approximately 3% of the population.

Church spectrum today

Syria: Church networks	% Christians
Orthodox	69.0
Catholic	27.9
Protestant	2.5
Independent	0.3
Unaffiliated	0.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0.0
Total	100.1
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>	
Evangelical movement	1.3
Pentecostal-Charismatic	2.5

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Most of Syria's Christians belong to historical churches (mainly Orthodox and Catholic, plus some traditional Protestant congregations). In areas of Syria controlled by the Assad regime, these communities have generally enjoyed reasonable standing, though they have been affected by the ongoing conflict and economic hardship as much as anyone else. Within some areas controlled by opposition groups (in particular, areas controlled by radical Islamic groups as well as Turkish forces), these communities have been significantly affected; many Christians left such areas in previous WWL reporting periods. There are non-traditional Christian communities in various parts of Syria, particularly in regime-held territory and in Kurdish areas. Within regime-held areas, there is also some pressure from the historical churches on the non-traditional communities. Converts with an Islamic or Druze background are found in most parts of the country, perhaps with particular concentrations in Kurdish areas, Druze areas and also among some IDP communities in regime-held areas. In almost all cases, converts are vulnerable to pressure from family or community (the pressure exerted is likely to be greater in Arab Sunni areas). In opposition-held areas in particular, there would be significant vulnerability to radical Islamic groups should the faith of converts become known.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Syria>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

- Recent history: united with Egypt - <https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria/The-union-with-Egypt-1958-61>
- Recent history: including many Christian families - <https://www.cfr.org/blog/despite-ceasefire-agreement-turkey-implicated-more-eight-hundred-violations>
- Recent history: Israel's attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus - <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/04/strike-irans-consulate-syria-could-be-spark-ignites-middle-east>
- Political and legal landscape: EIU Democracy Index 2023 - <https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: FSI 2024 - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Political and legal landscape: IRFR 2023 Syria - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/547499-SYRIA-2023-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: GIWPS Syria - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/syrian-arab-republic/>
- Political and legal landscape: Article 16 - https://syria.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Syria%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English_1.pdf
- Political and legal landscape: HRW 2024 Syria country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/syria>
- Political and legal landscape: Girls Not Brides Syria - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/syria/>
- Political and legal landscape: inquiry - <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyria/policypapersieges29aywar/2023-06-12-Gendered-impact-women-girls-%20Syria.pdf>
- Religious landscape description: World Factbook Syria, - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria/#people-and-society>
- Religious landscape description: IRFR 2023 Syria - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>
- Religious landscape description: MEC Syria country profile - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/syria/>
- Economic landscape: UNDP's Human Development Report Syria - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/SYR>
- Economic landscape: UNHCR - <https://www.unhcr.org/sy/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2024/04/2024-Needs-Overview-Factsheet-.pdf>
- Economic landscape: World Bank - <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=SY>
- Economic landscape: World Bank's Syria overview - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/overview#1>
- Economic landscape: Gender Gap Report - https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf
- Economic landscape: Personal Status laws - <https://wbl.worldbank.org/content/dam/documents/wbl/2022/snapshots/Syrian-arab-republic.pdf>
- Economic landscape: exempt - <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyria/policypapersieges29aywar/2023-06-12-Gendered-impact-women-girls-%20Syria.pdf>
- Economic landscape: thousands of women - <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/womens-voices-post-earthquake-syria>

- Economic landscape: twice as likely - <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyria/policypapersieges29aywar/2023-06-12-Gendered-impact-women-girls-%20Syria.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook Syria - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria/#people-and-society>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP's Human Development Report Syria - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/SYR>
- Social and cultural landscape: Global Report 2022 - <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/syria-situation>
- Social and cultural landscape: No Place But Displacement - <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/no-place-displacement-report-multiple-displacement-idps-northwest-syria-due-12-years-conflict-and-february-6ths-earthquakes>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNOCHA - <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-2024-humanitarian-needs-overview-february-2024>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNICEF - <https://www.unicef.org/syria/situation-children-syria>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNICEF - <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/37-million-children-earthquake-affected-syria-face-catastrophic-combination-threats>
- Social and cultural landscape: mandatory military service - <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-with-mandatory-military-service#:~:text=Syria%20%E2%80%94%20months%20for%20males%20aged%2018-42>
- Social and cultural landscape: Financial Times - <https://www.ft.com/content/14b8708c-1eeb-11e9-b2f7-97e4dbd3580d>
- Social and cultural landscape: WILPF, 1 April 2022 - <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/women-syria-s-economy-feminist-review-women-s-economic-empowerment>
- Technological landscape: Datareportal/Digital 2024: Syria - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-syria>
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net 2020 - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-net/2020>
- Technological landscape: Freedom in the World 2024 Syria - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2024>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Syria-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses?r=51>
- Technological landscape: - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Syria-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses?r=51>
- Security situation: Crisis 24 Syria report - <https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/syria>
- Security situation: attack on a prison in Hasaka - <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/21/middleeast/isis-attack-prison-iraq-intl/index.html>
- Security situation: Crisis 24 Syria report - <https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/syria>
- Security situation: reveal - <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-camp-an-open-air-prison-for-children-msf-says/a-63672111>
- Security situation: GIWPS Syria - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/syrian-arab-republic/>
- Security situation: shadow pandemic' - <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/op-ed-joint-women-at-the-centre-of-syria-crisis-response>
- Christian origins: Jacobite form of Christianity - <https://www.everyculture.com/Africa-Middle-East/Jacobites-History-and-Cultural-Relations.html>
- Christian origins: 1860 - <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27667683>