

SYRIA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

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 the 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, and the law prohibits conversion from Islam. Membership in the Muslim Brotherhood or “Salafist” organizations remains illegal and punishable with imprisonment or death.

Sectarian violence continued during the year due to tensions among religious groups that, according to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and media sources, were exacerbated by regime actions, continued economic deterioration, and the broader ongoing conflict in the country. At year’s end, more than half of the country’s prewar population remained displaced, including 6.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 6.7 million refugees. Regime and proregime forces continued aerial and ground offensives in the country’s northwest, killing civilians and displacing over 10,000 additional persons.

There were widespread reports that the regime, supported by its Russian and Iranian allies, continued to commit human rights abuses against its perceived opponents, the majority of whom, reflecting the country’s demographics, were Sunni Muslims that the regime described as violent extremists. There also continued to be reports that the regime and its foreign supporters engaged in the widespread destruction of hospitals, homes, and other civilian infrastructure. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported at least 2,221 cases of arbitrary detentions during the year and documented at least 155,368 Syrians who were detained or forcibly disappeared between 2011 and the end of the year, the vast majority of whom were disappeared by the Bashar al-Assad regime and remained missing. The regime continued to use a law that allows for the creation of

redevelopment zones designated for reconstruction, as well as property confiscations, to reward those loyal to the regime and to create obstacles for refugees and IDPs who wished to reclaim their property or return to their homes; in line with the demographics of the country, this move affected the majority Sunni population more frequently than other groups. The Alawite minority continued to hold an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers, particularly in leadership positions in the military, security, and intelligence services. Sources stated that the regime attempted to project an image as a secular protector of Christians, but human rights organizations reported the regime intentionally destroyed churches and detained numerous Christian citizens. Reports also stated that the authorities used sectarianism, including the politicization of religion, as a “survival strategy.” NGOs continued to report that Iran used its influence, as well as the dire economic situation in Syria and financial incentives, to encourage Sunnis to convert to Shia Islam or to join Iran-affiliated militias.

The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI), human rights groups, and media organizations reported they had reasonable grounds to believe some Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups (TSOs) committed abuses, including torture, rape, looting, and appropriating private property, particularly in Kurdish and Yezidi areas and in and around Afrin. A press report stated that TSOs had wholly or partially desecrated or destroyed 18 of the 19 Yezidi shrines and sanctuaries in northern Syria and had imposed Islam on Yezidi children. Human rights organizations and documentation-gathering groups reported that Yezidis and other residents, particularly in Kurdish areas, were often victims of TSO abuses. Reports also indicated that the small number of Christians remaining in Aleppo were very concerned about possible attacks by TSOs. Human rights organizations stated that ISIS often targeted civilians, persons suspected of collaborating with security forces, and groups ISIS deemed to be apostates. Many former victims of ISIS remained missing.

Christians reportedly continued to face discrimination and violence at the hands of violent extremist groups. NGOs reported social conventions and religious proscriptions continued to make conversions relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversions, which are prohibited by law. These groups also reported that societal pressure continued to force converts to relocate within the country or to emigrate in order to practice their new religion openly.

The President of the United States and senior Department of State officials continued to state that a political solution to the conflict must be based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and respect for the human rights of the country's citizens. Department of State officials continued to work with the UN special envoy for Syria, members of the opposition, and the international community to support UN-facilitated, Syrian-led efforts in pursuit of a political solution to the conflict that would safeguard the human rights and religious freedom of all citizens. The Department of State continued to support the evidentiary-gathering work of UN bodies and NGOs to promote accountability for the atrocities committed by the government and others.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 21.6 million (midyear 2022). At year's end, according to the UN, more than half of the country's prewar population was displaced; there were approximately 5.7 million refugees in neighboring countries as well as 6.9 million IDPs. Continued population displacement adds a degree of uncertainty to demographic analyses, but the U.S. government estimates 74 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, which includes ethnic Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and some Turkmen. Other Muslim groups, including Alawites, Ismailis, and Shia, together constitute 13 percent of the population, while Druze constitute 3 percent.

The U.S. government estimates 10 percent of the population is Christian. There are reports, however, that indicate that number is considerably lower – approximately 2.5 percent. Of the 2.2 million Christians who lived in the country

prior to the war, the NGO Open Doors USA estimates that only approximately 638,000 remain, approximately 3 percent of the population and a decrease of 39,000 Christians from the previous year.

Before the civil war, there were small Jewish populations in Aleppo and Damascus, but in 2020, the *Jewish Chronicle* reported that there were no known Jews still living in the country. Before the civil war, the country also had a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000. While there are no updated official figures on the number of Yezidis in the country, the Afrin Yazidi Union estimates that approximately 2,000 Yezidis remain in Afrin, compared with approximately 50-60,000 prior to 2011.

Sunni Muslims live throughout the country. Shia Muslims live mostly in rural areas, particularly in several majority-Shia towns in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates, although Iranian-backed groups along the Middle Euphrates River valley have encouraged conversions. Twelver Shia Muslims generally live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. Most Alawites live in the mountainous areas of the coastal Latakia Governorate, but they also live in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Damascus. The highest concentration of Ismaili Muslims lives in the city of Salamiyeh, Hama Governorate.

Most Christians belong to autonomous Orthodox churches, such as the Syriac Orthodox Church, Eastern Catholic churches such as the Maronite Church, or the Assyrian Church of the East and other affiliated independent Nestorian churches. 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. While there were hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christian refugees before the conflict, a majority of the Iraqi Christian population has moved to neighboring countries or returned to Iraq. Many Druze live in the Jabal al-Arab (Jabal al-Druze) region in the southern Sweida Governorate, where they constitute a majority of the local population. Yezidis previously lived in Aleppo, but now live mainly in northeast Syria areas held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The legal framework described in this section remains in force only in those areas controlled by the regime, and even in those areas, 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.

By law, membership in certain types of religiously oriented organizations is illegal and punishable to different degrees. This includes membership in an organization considered by the government to be “Salafist,” a designation the government loosely associates with Sunni fundamentalism. Neither the government broadly nor the state security court has specifically defined the parameters of what constitutes “Salafist” activity. The law prohibits political parties based on religion, tribal affiliation, or regional interests. Affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death or imprisonment.

The government bans Jehovah's Witnesses as a "politically motivated Zionist organization."

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.

The law bars publication of content that affects "national unity and national security," harms state symbols, defames religions, or incites sectarian strife or "hate crimes." In April, the regime issued a law on cybercrimes that broadened the scope of what constitutes a cybercrime and established stricter penalties for these offenses. The law extends penalties from one month to 15 years' imprisonment and increased fines from 200,000 Syrian pounds (\$80) to 15 million pounds (\$5,980). The Ministry of Religious Endowments (*Awqaf*) must approve books imported from abroad. Television shows require the approval of religious authorities.

In March, the regime introduced amendments to the penal code raising the minimum and maximum penalties, to include detention, for the crime of "compromising national identity," "undermining the prestige of the state," or "arousing racial or sectarian strife."

By law, all religious groups must register with the government. Registered religious groups and clergy – including all government-recognized Muslim, Jewish, and Christian groups – receive free utilities and are exempt from real estate taxes on religious buildings and personal property taxes on their official vehicles.

The law regulates the structure and functions of the *Awqaf*. The law provides for a Council of Islamic Jurisprudence with the power to define what religious discourse is appropriate and the authority to fine or penalize individuals who propagate extremist thought or deviate from approved discourse. The law also charges the council with monitoring all fatwas issued in the country and with

preventing the spread of views associated with the Muslim Brotherhood or “Salafist” activity, including “Wahhabism.” The law concentrates a range of offices and institutions within the ministry, centralizing the government’s role in and oversight of the country’s religious affairs. The Islamic Jurisprudence Council is chaired by the Minister of Religious Endowments and consists of 40 scholars whose tasks include setting the start and end dates of the month of Ramadan and issuing fatwas.

All meetings of religious groups, except for regularly scheduled worship, require permits from the government.

Public schools are officially government-run and nonsectarian, although the government authorizes the Christian and Druze communities to operate some public schools. There is mandatory religious instruction in public schools for all students, with government-approved teachers and curricula. Religious instruction covers only Islam and Christianity, and courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Members of religious groups may choose to attend public schools with Islamic or Christian instruction or to attend private schools that follow either secular or religious curricula.

For the resolution of issues of personal status, the regime requires citizens to list their religious affiliation. Individuals are subject to their respective religious group’s laws concerning marriage and divorce. Per the personal status code, a Muslim man may legally marry a non-Muslim woman, but a Muslim woman may not legally marry a non-Muslim man. If a Christian woman marries a Muslim man, she is not allowed to be buried in an Islamic cemetery or inherit property or wealth from her husband unless she converts to Islam. The law states that if a Christian wishes to convert to Islam, the presiding Muslim cleric must inform the prospective convert’s diocese.

The personal status law on divorce for Muslims is based on an interpretation of sharia implemented by government-appointed religious judges. In interreligious personal status cases, sharia takes precedence. A divorced woman is not entitled

to alimony in some cases; a woman may also forego her right to alimony to persuade her husband to agree to the divorce. In addition, under the law, a divorced mother loses the right to guardianship and physical custody of her sons when they reach the age of 13 and of her daughters at age 15, when guardianship transfers to the paternal side of the family.

Church law governs personal status questions for Christians, in some cases barring divorce. Some personal status laws mirror sharia regardless of the religion of those involved in the case.

The government's interpretation of sharia is the basis of inheritance laws for all citizens except Christians. According to the law, courts may grant Muslim women up to half of the inheritance share of male heirs. In all communities, male heirs must provide financial support to female relatives who inherit less.

An individual's birth certificate records his or her religious affiliation. Documents presented when marrying or traveling for a religious pilgrimage also list the religious affiliation of the applicant. Jews are the only religious group whose passports and identity cards note their religion.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Some opposition groups identified themselves explicitly as Sunni Arab or Sunni Muslim in statements and publications. According to the NGO Freedom House, "While the largely Alawite-led regime presents itself as a protector of that and other religious minorities, Alawites, Christians, Druze, and members of other smaller sects who are outside Assad's inner circle are politically disenfranchised." Freedom House stated that although the political elite included Sunnis, the Sunni majority, which comprised the bulk of the opposition, bore "the brunt of state repression as a result" of this broader disenfranchisement. Analysis published by the Middle East Institute (MEI) in April said that relative social order and

submersion of sectarian and ethnic differences existed in the country before the war.

The regime continued to target those within the country who criticized or opposed it, the majority of whom were Sunni and whom the regime described as violent extremists. According to an article published by MEI, in regime-controlled areas of the country, “Key positions in the state apparatus, especially the military, are held mostly by Alawites, adherents of a heterodox sect affiliated to Shiism to which President Assad belongs. But the Shiites and Alawites are relatively few, so the regime also relies on a network of mostly Sunni businessmen, who are rewarded for loyalty with state contracts and concessions. ... Serious opponents of the regime are jailed or forced to depart regime-controlled territory.”

There were continued NGO and media reports that in its efforts to retake opposition-held areas, the regime attacked civilian centers in towns and neighborhoods, which, due to prevailing demographics, were inhabited by a majority Sunni population. In June, the COI determined there were reasonable grounds to believe proregime forces on multiple occasions were guilty of the war crime of “launching indiscriminate attacks resulting in death or injury to civilians, or damage to civilian objects,” as well as “the crimes against humanity of murder and other inhumane acts and forcible transfer of populations through airstrikes and artillery shelling of civilian areas.”

The SNHR documented at least 1,282 attacks on mosques in the country between March 2011 and September, attributing 914 attacks to the regime (71 percent) and 204 (16 percent) attacks to Russian forces. The SNHR also documented at least 126 attacks on Christian places of worship during the same period, attributing 76 attacks to the regime, 33 to armed opposition groups, 10 to ISIS, five to other parties, and two to terrorist group Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In June, the *Syrian Democratic Times* reported that Turkish forces targeted an Assyrian Christian village near Tel Tamr, nearly destroying the Mar Sawa Church in May.

According to the SNHR, from March 2011 to June 2022, at least 14,685 persons died from torture, with 98 percent of the deaths attributed to regime forces. Regime forces were reportedly responsible for at least 115 deaths by torture during the year. As was the case with others who previously died in regime custody, most were Sunni Muslims, whom analysts stated the regime targeted believing they were members of the opposition or likely to support the opposition.

According to a January Human Rights Watch report, the Syrian judicial system was characterized by summary decisions, corruption, and a lack of due process. Freedom House reported in February that basic state services and humanitarian aid were reportedly extended or withheld according to a recipient's perceived loyalty to the Assad regime, and that individuals living in regime-held territory who criticized or sought to expose corruption faced reprisals, including detention and dismissal from employment. The report noted that the Sunni majority made up the bulk of the resistance, and thus has borne the brunt of state repression.

According to analysis by the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Affairs (WINEP), Suweida and its surrounding area, inhabited by a 90-percent majority Druze population with a small Christian presence and a few nomadic Sunni Bedouin Arab tribes, has been "stuck between the hammer of the regime's violence and the anvil of growing sectarianism and worsening living conditions." WINEP reported that the local community has faced "incidents of kidnapping, theft, looting, and murder."

Analysts reported the regime continued to use the law allowing the regime to create redevelopment zones as well as property confiscations to reward those loyal to the regime, create obstacles for refugees and IDPs to reclaim their property and return to their homes, and engineer demographic changes. In February, the COI reported that investigations continued into the usurpation of land and property rights of displaced owners, including through public auctions in areas retaken by regime forces. The COI noted that between July and December 2021, such auction lists included more than 1,440 owners and a land area of

approximately 13 square miles. According to NGO reports, since the enactment of the redevelopment zone law in 2018, the regime had replaced residents in former opposition-held areas with more loyal constituencies. These regime policies disproportionately affected Sunni populations, which made up the majority of the population.

In March, the newspaper the *Guardian* reported that former opposition-held areas, such as the predominately Sunni neighborhood of Qaboun in Damascus, were being demolished under the guise of mine clearing operations to make room for new development projects. A former resident described the demolition as a “kind of revenge on the people of Qaboun and to make sure there is nothing to return to.” Media reports and activists previously described the project as an attempt to engineer demographic change and only have regime supporters reside in the district. Sources reported that Iranian companies with ties to Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) would be carrying out construction in Damascus, leading to concerns that IRGC-affiliated factions fighting in Syria would be housed there, as previously seen in other parts of the country. Some sources described this as part of a larger Iranian attempt to engineer religious demographic change in the country. According to an August COI report, regime seizures of property without due process or compensation in areas where hostilities have ceased may amount to violations of housing, land, and property rights.

In a June 30 statement to the UN, during the adoption of the UN Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review on Syria, the NGO CSW (formerly known as Christian Solidarity Worldwide) said, “While the civil war has negatively impacted every religious and ethnic group... the Bahai, Ahmadiyya, Yazidis, and Christians, have suffered particularly appalling treatment. Many have been forced to flee the country due to the hostile environment created by these [Islamist] militias, rendering some areas ‘religiously cleansed.’ Attacks and harassment targeting the Christian community included extortion through kidnapping, rape, seizure and destruction of property, forced conversion under threat of death, and murder.

Alongside discrimination in law, targeted attacks against the Yazidi people have been allowed to continue unabated and with impunity.”

According to human rights groups and religious communities, the regime continued to monitor and control sermons and to close mosques between prayers. It also continued to monitor and limit the activities of all religious groups, including by scrutinizing their fundraising and discouraging proselytizing.

Despite the relatively small Indigenous Shia community in the country, Shia religious slogans and banners remained prominent in Damascus, according to observers and media reports. In addition, pro-Hizballah and other pro-Iran signs and banners remained prevalent in some regime-held areas. A September article published in *Small Wars Journal* noted the proliferation of banners and posters in Deir Ezzour bearing the image of Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, although Sunnis comprise 98 percent of the population in Deir Ezzour. Some sources attributed this to an Iranian attempt to force conversions to Shia Islam.

There continued to be Christian, Druze, and Kurdish members in parliament, though the body did not function independently and was subject to control of the President. According to observers, Alawites held greater political power in the cabinet than other minorities, as well as more authority than the majority Sunni population. In March, the Middle East Monitor stated the regime has long attempted to court minorities “in an effort to present itself as its only viable protector against the threat of Islamic religious militant groups.” The article stated that Assad has tried to project the image of a secular protector of Syrian Christians, but human rights organizations reported that the regime intentionally destroyed churches and detained at least hundreds of Christian citizens.

Some media articles challenged the depiction of the country and the regime’s self-description as religiously tolerant and secular, stating instead that authorities weaponized religion for political gain. A report published by the *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* in July stated that political authorities used sectarianism as a survival strategy and that the mobilization of Shia supporters

was part of the regime's "deliberate attempt to discredit protestors as violent fanatics." The report added that although "the politicization of religion has been an aspect of the conflict" it did not "explain the crisis in its entirety."

According to experts, religion remained a factor in determining career advancement in the government. The Alawite minority continued to hold an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers, particularly in leadership positions in the military, security, and intelligence services, although the senior officer corps of the military continued to accept into its ranks individuals from other religious minority groups. According to a 2020 report by the EU Agency for Asylum, Alawites "hold key regime positions, dominate the police and the army and have high-ranking positions in elite military and militia units." The report also noted that Alawites have higher chances of obtaining employment in the public sector compared to other groups such as Christians, Sunni Arabs, or Kurds. The regime continued to exempt Christian and Muslim religious leaders from military service based on conscientious objection, although it continued to require Muslim religious leaders to pay a levy for exemption.

Key positions in the state apparatus, particularly the military, are held mostly by Alawites. Freedom House continued to report that families and networks with links to the ruling elite received preferential treatment and were disproportionately Alawite, although "Alawites without such connections [were] far less likely to benefit from any special advantages." Freedom House found that given the armed opposition's overwhelmingly Sunni composition, Sunnis were consequently likely to face discrimination by the regime unless they held close ties with it.

Alawites constitute approximately 95 percent of the officers and regular soldiers in the Fourth Division, commanded by the President's brother, Maher al-Assad. During the year, the Fourth Division deployed throughout regime-controlled areas of the country, often with support from Iran and Hizballah, because of a growing lack of confidence in regular army forces and prior defections by Sunni officers in the rest of the army.

Human rights groups described the military conscription law, which allows authorities to confiscate the assets of “[military] service evaders” and their families who failed to pay a military exemption fee, as a regime attempt to extort Syrian citizens living abroad, many of whom fled the country to escape the regime’s military offensive and would be unwilling to serve in the military. The military conscription law disproportionately affected Sunnis and Christians, who comprised the bulk of Syrians who fled the country as a result of the war.

Human rights organizations stated that the new law on cybercrimes and amendments to the penal code raising the minimum and maximum penalties for awakening racial or sectarian strife, among other actions characterized as “crimes,” served as a consolidation of the regime’s practice of restricting freedom of expression under false accusations meant to legitimize its oppression of perceived opponents.

In a nationally televised March 17 address in honor of Syrian Teacher’s Day, President Assad called Ukrainian President Zelensky a “Zionist Jew,” who supports Ukrainian Nazi groups and said this was ironic, since “Zionist Israel... keeps crying about the victims of the Holocaust” and does not oppose Nazism.

Antisemitic literature reportedly remained available for purchase at low prices throughout the country. Regime-controlled radio and television programming reportedly continued to disseminate antisemitic news articles and cartoons. In a January symposium called “Confronting Cultural Invasion, Zionist Literature as a Model,” researchers and writers said that “the Zionist movement sought to distort literature and use it as an arm to spread the falsehood it wanted.” Syrian researcher Ali Badwan argued that Jewish and Zionist culture was “characterized by racism and aggression.”

According to the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency, Assad stated during a three-day International Ecclesiastical Conference in Damascus that “the displacement of Christians is a main goal for the external schemes for the region, but it is mainly

an Israeli goal.” According to the UK-based Foundation for Jewish Heritage, more than half of the Jewish sites in the country were beyond repair or in very bad condition.

The regime continued to allow foreign Christian NGOs to operate under the auspices of one of the historically established churches without officially registering. It continued to require foreign Islamic NGOs to register and receive Awqaf approval to operate. Security forces continued to question these Islamic organizations on their sources of income and to monitor their expenditures. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor continued to prohibit religious leaders from serving as directors on the boards of Islamic charities.

Actions of Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

There continued to be reports that the Iranian government, primarily through the IRGC, directly supported the Assad regime and recruited Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani Shia fighters, as well as Syrians, to fight in the conflict. Media outlets continued to report that Iran used its influence, as well as the dire economic situation in the country and financial incentives, to encourage Sunnis to convert to Shia Islam or join Iranian militias. A September article published in *Small Wars Journal* cited the proliferation of cultural centers aiming to spread Shia doctrine among local youth. According to the article, parents were offered financial and food assistance in exchange for their children’s attendance in courses hosted by the cultural centers. The article stated Deir Ezzour Province in the eastern part of the country was “central to Iran’s ongoing effort to carve out a Shia crescent from Iran through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon.”

In a September article, a WINEP analyst stated Iran has developed a long-term strategy in Syria, based on soft power and cultural/religious influence, to “form a ‘Shia crescent’” loyal to Tehran. According to the analysis, “To this end, Iran is working hard to establish its feet in Syria socially and ideologically by strengthening its influence in pre-existing shrines while also building new ones, such as the shrine of Sayyida Zainab in Damascus. In areas such as Deir Ezzour,

which have an absolute Sunni majority, it has worked to change the very makeup of the region by attracting young people to its militias and attempting to convert youth through social benefits or via cultural activities.” The report stated that Iran is increasing its sectarian “missionary” activities as well.

Experts reported that Iranian efforts to increase the number of Shia in the country were specifically tied to a desire to expand Iranian political and strategic influence.

According to human rights organizations, documentation-gathering groups, and media outlets, TSOs in the northern part of the country committed human rights abuses against Yezidis and other residents, particularly in Kurdish areas, including unlawful detentions, severe physical abuse, sexual violence, evictions, looting and seizure of private property, recruitment of child soldiers, and the looting and desecration of religious shrines. In March, a local media outlet reported that TSOs had wholly or partially desecrated or destroyed 18 of the 19 Yezidi shrines and sanctuaries in northern Syria. The article also stated that Islam was being imposed on Yezidi children and that abduction, extortion, unlawful detention, torture, and forced religious conversion were common occurrences in an ongoing effort to engineer demographic change. TSOs also reportedly abused members of other religious minority groups.

In areas under Turkish influence, TSOs restricted religious freedom of Yezidis through attacks against, and intimidation of, civilians. CSW, in a statement to the COI in March, stated that these groups “regularly violate[d] the rights of local people, and particularly Yezidis and other religious minorities” in Afrin. According to CSW, “Violations include[d] rape, assassination, kidnapping for ransom, confiscation of property, and desecration of cemeteries and places of worship.” According to the COI, abductions and extortions rose in regions where TSOs operated. Members of religious and ethnic minority groups, especially displaced Kurds, Yezidis, and Christians, in areas under Turkish influence, such as in the city of Afrin, reported experiencing human rights abuses and marginalization. In July, a local media outlet reported that according to the Afrin Yazidi Union, only 2,000

Yezidis remained in Afrin, out of the reported 35,000 who lived in the area in 2014 and 50-60,000 before 2011. According to press reports and NGOs, in Afrin, Yezidi women reported to have been kidnapped by TSOs remained missing.

In June, a local media outlet reported that Turkey's threat to launch a military operation in northern Syria prompted Christians to flee the area, fearing massacres and mistreatment by the -Syrian National Army (SNA). An individual living in Aleppo stated that the Christian population of the city, approximately 12 percent before the outbreak of the conflict, was now no more than 1 percent. In October, the international press and NGOs reported that HTS forces seized parts of Afrin and reached the outskirts of the city of Azaz before signing a truce that led to the reported withdrawal of its forces. Civil society organizations expressed concern that some HTS forces had nonetheless remained in the area.

A November article on the Assyrian Journal website reported that a Christian school in Hasakah, in the Kurdish controlled Self Administration of North and East Syria (SANES), received a letter from SANES officials instructing the school that it must stop teaching the regime's curriculum and begin teaching the SANES curriculum or face closure. According to a Syriac Orthodox bishop quoted in the article, 23 Christian-led schools in northeast Syria, 500 staff, and 20,000 students (Arab, Kurdish, and Syriac) were affected by this ruling. The SANES ruling was issued to private schools in areas under its control, including nonreligious schools, although most private schools in the area were Christian. The issue is one component of a larger education debate related to accreditation issues and the use of the SANES-developed curriculum in lieu of the accredited Assad regime curriculum.

As cited in an October 31 article on the Al-Monitor website, SANES issued an official circular on October 23 that announced all students must use school uniforms and may not wear a niqab. This decision was followed by 10 demonstrations in Deir Ezzour and two in the Hasakah countryside against the policies and practices of SANES.

The COI and numerous independent sources reported that during the course of the conflict, nonstate actors, including a number of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United Nations and the United States and other governments, such as HTS, targeted members of religious minority groups as well as Sunnis with killings, kidnappings, physical mistreatment, and detentions. These resulted in the deaths and disappearance of thousands of civilians. Human rights groups continued to report that HTS, which officially denounces secularism, routinely detained and tortured political opponents, journalists, activists, and other civilians in territory it controlled who were deemed to have violated the group's stringent interpretation of sharia.

According to a February report published by Al-Monitor, HTS sought to increase its influence in the northwestern province of Idlib through religious schools. Al-Monitor reported that the religious schools offered attractive incentives and benefits, including free tuition, transportation, and free uniforms "in a bid to educate a more ideological generation that would carry HTS ideas and serve its interests." A researcher told Al-Monitor that HTS had followed a systematic plan "to control the civil education center in Idlib and turn it into an ideological religious education," noting that HTS ensured it had a strong presence in its civilian-led "Salvation Government's" education ministry through the appointment of figures to key positions in the ministry. The SNHR stated HTS took advantage of the vulnerabilities resulting from the dire economic conditions to instill its ideas and that parents often enrolled their children in HTS schools as a last resort, since public schools charged fees and did not offer the same benefits as HTS schools. SNHR compared the HTS approach to that of the Iran-affiliated militias that opened congregation halls to spread Shia ideology.

Media reported that HTS continued to restrict the freedom of Christians in Idlib city, although there were reports the group was attempting to reform its image and Islamist character by allowing the reopening of a church in Idlib following a meeting between the HTS leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, and the Christian community in the area in July. Media outlets reported that Christians from villages in the Idlib countryside held services on a religious feast day on August 28

at an Armenian Apostolic church, 10 years after the church was closed. According to Al-Monitor, sources reported that HTS forces cordoned off the area and established checkpoints to provide security during the celebration. Former HTS members described the move as part of the HTS leader's attempt to expand his power through the exploitation of religion, while others similarly cited HTS' interest in promoting itself as a "semimoderate" group. According to the Middle East Media Research Institute, the event sparked harsh criticism of HTS by Syrian-based jihadi clerics, who said that Christians in Syria "betrayed" Muslims, were not worthy of the protection they received from the Muslim majority and should not be granted freedom of worship in churches.

Human rights organizations, however, continued to report that HTS committed abuses against members of religious and ethnic minority groups, including the seizure of properties belonging to displaced Christians. In its February 2022 report, the COI cited HTS control over the daily life of residents and reported that individuals were detained for comments made in private conversations pertaining to the cost of living or religious matters, with the latter leading to a blasphemy sentence of one year's imprisonment. According to the COI, the entity in charge of policing compliance with HTS' social behavior and dress code rules continued to arrest women for dressing "inappropriately" and not complying with entertainment bans.

HTS reportedly imposed its interpretation of sharia on schools and discriminated against girls in the territories it held. In September, Al-Monitor reported that principals in schools in Idlib said that the Education Directorate of HTS' "Salvation Government" instructed them to ban married female students from attending public schools and universities. HTS imposed dress codes on female teachers and pupils where it allowed girls to remain in school, while preventing large numbers of girls from attending school at all, according to the COI.

The COI and NGOs found that despite its territorial defeat, violent attacks by ISIS remnants persisted. Human rights organizations stated ISIS often targeted civilians, persons suspected of collaborating with security forces, and groups that

ISIS deemed to be apostates. ISIS also claimed responsibility for the killing of more than 200 detention facility staff during its January 20 attack on the al-Sina'a detention facility in northeast Syria that holds suspected ISIS fighters and other individuals affiliated with the group. According to the COI, several sources confirmed that ISIS killed staff inside the facility and mutilated their bodies. The group also claimed responsibility for a June 21 attack on a bus carrying military personnel in Raqqa. Eleven soldiers and two civilians died in the attack. Although ISIS no longer controlled territory, the fate of 8,648 individuals forcibly disappeared by ISIS since 2014 remained unknown, according to the SNHR. Among those abducted in northern Iraq were an estimated 6,000 women and children, mainly Yazidis, whom ISIS reportedly transferred to Syria and sold into sex trafficking, forced into nominal marriage to ISIS fighters, or gave as "gifts" to ISIS commanders. The Yazidi organization Yazda reported more than 3,000 Yazidi women and children had since escaped, been liberated in SDF military operations, or been released from captivity, but that more than 2,700 remained unaccounted for. In the fall, the Kurdish People's Protection Units-affiliated Women's Protection Units reported liberating two Yazidi women being held captive by ISIS sympathizers in al-Hol camp.

With no physical territory under its control and lacking a source of steady income, ISIS relied on other methods, such as extortion of local communities in eastern Syria, to finance its operations, according to an October report from Voice of America.

In areas where regime control was weak or nonexistent, armed groups continued to run local detention centers. Reports of control and oversight varied, and both civilian and religious leaders were in charge of facility administration.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Throughout the year there were continued reports of sectarian violence due to tensions among religious groups, cultural rivalries, and provocative rhetoric.

Christians reportedly continued to face discrimination and violence at the hands of violent extremist groups.

Media outlets reported a July 24 drone attack on the opening of Ayia Sofia, a Greek Orthodox church in al-Suqaylabiyah, about 30 miles northwest of the city of Hama. SANA, the government press agency, said that one person was killed and 12 injured in the attack. SANA attributed the attack, which occurred in a regime-controlled area, to “terrorist organizations.”

Advocacy groups reported social conventions and religious proscriptions continued to make conversions relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversions, which are prohibited by law. The groups also reported that societal pressure continued to force converts to relocate within the country or to emigrate in order to practice their new religion openly.

The National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, the opposition’s primary political umbrella organization, and the Syrian Negotiations Committee, an opposition organization responsible for negotiating with the regime on behalf of the opposition, continued to condemn attacks both by the regime and by violent extremist and terrorist groups. In an October statement, the Syrian Opposition Coalition denounced the use of arms by some armed opposition groups in northern Syria and called on the SNA to protect lives and resolve disputes through peaceful means.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Senior Department of State officials continued to stress the need for a political solution to the conflict in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which states that such a solution should establish credible, inclusive, and nonsectarian governance.

The Department of State continued to support the work of the UN International Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM) as an important

evidentiary-gathering mechanism to promote accountability for the atrocities committed by the government and others. As of year's end, the United States had provided \$3.5 million to the IIIM since its creation as well as approximately \$14 million to the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL, to support its efforts to gather evidence of ISIS crimes, including atrocities against members of the Muslim, Yezidi, and Christian communities. The Department of State also continued to support NGOs working to collect and preserve evidence of potential atrocity crimes. The United States also continued to support the documentation, analysis, and preservation of evidence of abuses committed by all parties to the conflict, including those committed against members of religious minority groups, through the COI.

The U.S. government consistently urged Turkey and the Syrian opposition at the highest levels to comply with their obligations under international law in areas that they or groups they supported controlled or operated. It also continued its calls for armed opposition groups to cease their abuses against all Syrians, including members of religious and ethnic minority groups.

The Secretary of State and Department of State officials continued to work with the UN special envoy for Syria, members of the moderate opposition, and the international community to support a UN-facilitated political resolution to the conflict led by the Syrian people that would safeguard religious freedom for all citizens. These efforts included support for the Constitutional Committee tasked with drafting an amended or new constitution meant to represent the Syrian people as part of the UN-facilitated political process.

On October 25, the U.S. government announced support for the creation of a stand-alone UN mechanism solely tasked with clarifying the fate and whereabouts of those missing and unlawfully detained in Syria.

The U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in 2012. U.S. government representatives continued to meet with religious groups and leaders in the United States and elsewhere in the Middle East region. A Deputy Assistant Secretary of

State for Near Eastern Affairs and other Department of State officials participated in virtual dialogues, roundtables, and working groups focused on accountability and justice efforts, countering extremist violence; and efforts to support persecuted members of religious and ethnic communities. In September, the United States hosted a virtual UN General Assembly side event on accountability for human rights abuses, including those committed against members of religious minority groups. On May 10, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs delivered remarks that identified opportunities for increased support of the country's diverse religious and ethnic communities. He also noted that the state of human rights with regard to freedom of religion or belief in Syria is "dismal" and called for an end to abuses by all parties and for establishing accountability for ongoing atrocities against members of all minority groups.