

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, religious freedom conditions, as well as human rights, remained dire in Syria. For most of the year, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continued to carry out mass executions, attack civilian populations, and kidnap religious minorities. By year's end, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS largely had defeated the group in Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor. The Syrian government continued to target and depopulate Sunni Muslim-dominated areas. The year also saw a massive spike in the involvement of the Syrian Local Defense Forces (LDF)—militias backed and funded by Iran and integrated into the Syrian Armed Forces—in sectarian violence targeting Sunni Muslims. Allies of the Syrian regime, including foreign Shi'a fighters recruited by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, also carried out sectarian attacks. Areas held by the armed opposition continued to

vary in levels of restriction of religious freedom. In northeastern Syria, Christians living in the Kurdish-held Autonomous Administration complained of increased interference in private Christian schools and confiscation of property. Armed Islamist opposition groups in northern Syria, including the al-Qaeda affiliated Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), attacked Shi'a pilgrims and harassed those opposed to their strict Islamic rules. Due to the collective actions of the Assad regime, elements of the armed opposition, and U.S.-designated terrorist groups, USCIRF again finds in 2018 that Syria merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2014. USCIRF also finds that, based on conditions in 2017, ISIS merits designation as an "entity of particular concern" (EPC) for religious freedom violations under December 2016 amendments to IRFA.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Syria as a CPC under IRFA;
- Designate ISIS as an EPC under IRFA, as amended by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, for its control of territory and conduct in 2017;
- Condemn the Assad regime's crimes against humanity and brutal persecution of Sunni Muslims and others, and urge other nations to do the same;
- Urge the United Nations (UN) Security Council and its member states to rigorously implement and comply with ratified resolutions, including UN Security Council resolutions [2118](#), [2139](#), [2165](#), [2209](#), and [2254](#);
- Continue to support international efforts to investigate and collect evidence of gross human rights abuses during the conflict, including the UN Human Rights Council-mandated [Independent International Commission of Inquiry](#) (COI) and the UN General Assembly-mandated [International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes in Syria](#) (IIIM);
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Encourage the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, in its ongoing international meetings, to work to develop measures to protect and assist the region's most vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities, including by increasing immediate humanitarian aid and providing longer-term support in host countries for those who hope to return to their homes post-conflict;
- Initiate an effort among relevant UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and like-minded partners among the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to fund and develop programs that bolster intra- and interreligious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and promote respect for religious freedom and related rights, both in neighboring countries and in preparing for a post-conflict Syria; and
- Continue the resettlement of Syrian refugees to the United States—subject to proper vetting—with priority being given to victims of ISIS and vulnerable religious minority communities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass [H.R. 390](#), the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act of 2017; [S. 1158](#), the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2017; and [S. 905](#), the Syrian War Crimes Accountability Act, to help prevent, mitigate, and respond to genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Syria; and
- Pass [H.R. 4238](#), the Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act of 2017, which imposes terrorism-related sanctions on two Iranian-controlled militias, As-Saib Ahl Al-Haq and Harakat Hizballah Al-Nujaba, that have carried out sectarian crimes in Syria.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Syrian Arab Republic

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic, highly authoritarian regime

POPULATION

18,028,549 (July 2017 estimate)

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam (Sunni/Shi'a), Christianity, Judaism, and Druz

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

87% Muslim (includes 74% Sunni and 13% Alawi, Ismaili, and Shi'a)

10% Christian (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian)

3% Druze

>1% Jewish (few remaining in Damascus and Aleppo)

*CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

The Assad family has ruled over Syria for more than 50 years. Following the death of his father, Bashar al-Assad became president in 2000. The Assads are from the Alawite community, an offshoot of Shi'a Islam and a minority group that makes up about 13 percent of Syria's population. Since the Assad family's ascent to power, loyal Alawites have been placed in the government, including in senior security, intelligence, and military positions. Although to consolidate their power the Alawi-dominated government did forge ties with prominent Sunni Muslim families, most of the population lived alongside coreligionists, often distrusting members of other religious groups. As a result, when civil uprising and anti-government demonstrations began in 2011, it did not take long for built-up historical sectarian tensions to emerge.

Shortly after the demonstrations started, the government released from the infamous Sadnaya Prison around 200 prisoners previously designated as "Islamic fundamentalists." Many went on to become leaders of ISIS and the al-Qaeda affiliated HTS. President Assad and his regime played on historical sectarian fears, repeatedly stating the government was fighting

"extreme Islamist factions" that were acting to increase sectarian tensions. Religious minority communities, including Druze, Ismailis, Christians, and Alawis, began to perceive President Assad as the only entity capable of shielding them from Sunni extremists.

The year 2017 saw the following major developments in the Syria conflict: (1) the evacuation of Aleppo, the last major city under armed opposition control; (2) an agreement to create "de-escalation zones" by Iran,

Russia, and Turkey; (3) the liberation of Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor from ISIS by the Global Coalition; and (4) an attack on Idlib by Syrian-, Russian-, and Iranian-backed forces, in addition to a strict siege on the Damascus suburb

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of al-Ghouta, both areas purportedly covered by the "de-escalation zone" agreement. The dynamics of the conflict also changed dramatically after eastern Aleppo City fell to the Syrian Armed Forces and their Iranian allies. Almost immediately, the number of Syrian fighters registered with Iranian-backed militias significantly increased. Since the spring of 2017, LDF units, supported by Iran, have recruited almost 90,000 local Syrian troops. In April 2017, the Syrian parliament passed

legislation formally integrating the LDF into the register of the Syrian Armed Forces. LDF militias report directly to IRGC and/or Hezbollah commanders, and use highly sectarian Shi'a flags and imagery.

As of the end of 2017, ISIS largely had been defeated in Syria. In late 2017, the terrorist organization lost its capital of Raqqa City, as well as its territory in Deir-ez-Zor Province; the group fled to the Hama countryside and other desert areas. The Global Coalition killed many ISIS members in combat. Others fled Syria, some going to the Sinai Peninsula.

The humanitarian consequences of nearly seven years of conflict have been grave. According to the UN, by the end of the reporting period there were almost six million Syrian refugees, as well as more than 6.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs); total deaths exceeded 470,000. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, 10,204 civilians were killed in 2017 alone, including 4,148 by the Syrian regime, 1,436 by Russian forces, 316 by the Kurdish-dominated Autonomous Administration, 25 by HTS, and 186 by various factions of the armed opposition. The Syrian Network for Human Rights also documented a total of 898 attacks on vital civilian facilities during the year, including 431 by the Syrian regime, 239 by Russian forces, 29 by ISIS, nine by HTS, and 182 by other entities. Of the total, 182 were on houses of worship, perpetrated by various armed actors.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Violations by the Assad Regime and Affiliated Groups

In 2017, the Alawite-led Syrian government continued to attack majority-Sunni populations in opposition-held territories. Of the total civilian death toll in Syria, the UN-created COI found that Sunni Muslims accounted for the majority of civilian casualties and detainees, and that the Syrian government used sieges of Sunni-majority opposition areas as weapons of war. For example, the COI documented that Hezbollah and government forces encircled the Sunni-majority town of Madaya from July 2015 until April 2017, forcing residents to resort to “eating

grass, leaves, and cats, which religious leaders were forced to officially sanction as religiously permissible.” The government continued to prohibit Sunni Muslims from communicating with foreign coreligionists, although it allowed members of other religions, such as Christians, to do so. The government continued to prohibit any communication between the Jewish community and Jews living in Israel.

In addition, Shi'a foreign fighters, primarily recruited by the IRGC from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, were relocated to fight alongside the LDF and Syrian Armed Forces. Although the exact numbers of foreign fighters are unknown, at least 2,000 Afghans reportedly have been killed, and another 8,000 injured, while fighting in Syria as part of the Fatemi-youn division; many reportedly were under the age of 14. Most of the Afghan foreign fighters were refugees in Iran promised citizenship in exchange for registering

to fight in Syria, where they were told they would defend Shi'a shrines in Damascus. Instead, they were used to fight elsewhere, including against ISIS in Deir-ez-Zor and against HTS in Idlib, while Hezbollah and IRGC fighters watched over the shrines. Because of Shi'a

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foreign fighter recruitment in countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, Sunni communities have launched attacks on Shi'a communities in those countries, an indicator that the Syrian conflict is exacerbating Sunni-Shi'a tensions elsewhere. As-Saib Ahl Al-Haq and Harakat Hizballah Al-Nujaba, two militia groups controlled by IRGC Commander Qassem Soleimani, also were identified as having committed sectarian crimes, including raping, attacking, and abducting Sunni Muslims in Syria. They fought in the battles to retake Aleppo City and Deir-ez-Zor on behalf of the Syrian regime.

The aftermath of the fall of Aleppo also highlights the forced displacement and depopulation of Sunni-majority areas—such as the suburbs of Damascus and eastern Syria's Deir-ez-Zor Province—and their repopulation with Iraqi, Lebanese, and Iranian Shi'a militias and their families. According to analysts, this follows

a pattern Iran has implemented in other countries, including Afghanistan, of relocating Shi'a Muslims to strategic areas. In Syria, this was most visible in formerly Sunni Muslim areas in the Damascus suburbs, Homs, and Deir-ez-Zor. Christians in Damascus's oldest Christian neighborhoods, such as Bab Tuma and Bab Sharqi, also reported pressure to sell their property to private Iranian businessmen helping to execute this depopulation scheme. According to human rights organizations, Sunni Muslims and Christians who lived in Qusayr, a village in the Homs countryside, were denied entry to return to their homes. After the reporting period, in January 2018, the Assad regime agreed to open in all Syrian cities branches of the Iranian Islamic Azad University, which is closely affiliated with the IRGC.

Ismailis and Druze continued to complain of pressure from the Syrian government to serve in the Syrian Armed Forces. Because the two communities live in areas relatively segregated from other religious groups, they have been easy targets for all armed groups, including the Syrian regime. The government has jailed or kidnapped men from the two communities who resisted the Syrian government's demand that males aged 18 to 42 be conscripted into the army. As a result, most men in this age group have fled the country.

Violations by ISIS

The Global Coalition and the U.S.-backed, largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) liberated numerous prisons, but ISIS had emptied most before their defeat. SDF forces found 100 prisoners still alive in Abu Hamam Prison in the Deir-ez-Zor countryside. However, many religious minority prisoners remain missing. Twenty-five Christian prisoners held by ISIS have yet to be released, and their whereabouts remain unclear. Additionally, the liberation of ISIS-held territory in 2017 highlights the continued disappearance of some of Syria's most prominent Christian leaders, including Italian Jesuit priest Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, Greek Orthodox Archbishop of

Aleppo Paul Yazigi, Armenian Catholic priest Father Michel Kayyal, and Greek Orthodox priest Father Maher Mahfouz, among others.

Throughout the year, ISIS continued its attacks on civilians. In May, ISIS fighters launched attacks on Aqarib al-Safiyah and al-Manboujah, both villages in Hama Province predominantly inhabited by Ismailis, a minority Shi'a Muslim group. The attack on the two villages resulted in the deaths of 52 people. Survivors reported that ISIS fighters verbally harassed them for their religious beliefs. In October, the group seized a bus full of Druze travelers in Hama en route from Damascus to Idlib. The group initially took the 50 people as hostages and shortly thereafter released all but two, who were likely killed.

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had fled in anticipation and out of fear of the group's pending arrival. When the group first entered the town of al-Qaryatan, it took 200 Christians hostage until they agreed to pay a *jizya* (tax) in order to remain in the city.

Armed Opposition Groups

Areas under the control of the armed opposition do not have formal or consistent policies toward Christians or non-Sunni Muslims. In 2017, the Syrian government, along with its Russian and Iranian allies, recaptured much of the territory formerly under the control of the Syrian opposition, leaving fewer areas under their governance. As a result, the armed opposition perpetrated fewer incidents of religious freedom violations than in previous years. That being said, all armed groups continued to commit human rights violations in the areas they continued to control.

For example, the small Druze community living in areas occupied first by ISIS and then by HTS was forced to convert to Sunni Islam in 2015 and remained unable

to freely exercise their religious practices or return to their Druze traditions in 2017.

The COI also reported that in March, HTS claimed responsibility for two explosions in the parking lot of the Bab al-Saghir cemetery, a well-known Shi'a pilgrimage site, that killed 44 civilians and injured another 120, the majority of whom were Shi'a pilgrims. The COI also reported a bombing in the Aleppo City suburb of al-Rashidin, predominately targeting Shi'a evacuees from Fu'ah and Kafriya who were picking up deliveries of food, that killed at least 95 people, including 68 children, and injured another 276. Bystanders chanted sectarian insults as the attack took place. No specific armed group took responsibility.

Additionally, armed groups kidnapped prisoners they viewed as valuable to force prisoner exchanges with the government or other armed groups for ransom. As of September, up to 100 men from the Damascus suburb of Adra al-Omaliyah belonging to religious minority groups remained in captivity as hostages.

Kurdish Autonomous Administration

Religious and ethnic minority communities and non-Kurds have complained of human rights abuses by the Kurdish-majority Autonomous Administration (AA), which controls 30 percent of a de facto autonomous area in northeastern Syria. According to the Assyrian Monitor for Human Rights, non-Kurdish communities in this area reported forced demographic changes, including the displacement of Armenian and Assyrian Christians and Sunni Arab Muslims and their replacement by Kurds, and the imposition of Kurdish language and culture in some areas. The Assyrian Human Rights Monitor also reported increasing pressure on Christian private schools in al-Hasakeh Province to teach the Kurdish language, hire Kurdish teachers, and modify their curriculum—including incorporating lessons about Abdallah Ocalan, leader of the U.S.-designated terrorist organization the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK)—or be shut down. Christian community leaders also informed USCIRF that Kurdish authorities appropriated homes that had been

abandoned due to fighting. In late 2017, a new AA regulation ordered abandoned Christian homes in the city of Tabqa, Raqqa Province, to be appropriated for Kurdish families if their owners had not yet returned. Christian and Sunni Muslim minorities also accused the largely Kurdish SDF of working with the AA to sideline, discriminate against, and at times even attack non-Kurdish populations.

U.S. POLICY

In 2017, the first priority of U.S. policy in Syria was the destruction of ISIS. The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, increasingly assisted by the U.S.-backed Syrian Defense Forces, achieved notable success on that front, freeing approximately 3.2 million Syrians from ISIS control. After the reporting period, in January 2018, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson articulated five priorities for the United States with regard to Syria: (1) preventing both ISIS- and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, such as HTS, from regaining power or carrying out attacks on American citizens at home or abroad or on U.S. allies; (2) remaining committed to resolving the crisis through a UN-led political process prescribed in [UN Security Council Resolution 2254](#), including transparent and free elections under a stable, unified, independent post-Assad Syria; (3) diminishing Iranian influence in Syria; (4) facilitating the safe and voluntary return of Syrian refugees and IDPs to their homes; and (5) ensuring that Syria is free of weapons of mass destruction.

In December 2017, Secretary of Defense James Mattis stated that in order to ensure the stabilization of Syria and

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to prevent the reemergence of ISIS, U.S. military presence in the country will likely last between 18 months and two years. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, as of December 2017 there were approximately 2,000 U.S. troops deployed in

Syria. The United States continues to support both the Geneva peace process led by UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura and the mandate of the COI. The United States does not play an organizing role in either the Astana or Sochi conferences, two other conferences that are supported by Russia, Iran, Turkey, and other regional allies.

Throughout the Syrian conflict, the United States continued to be the largest humanitarian donor to the Syrian crisis. At the end of the reporting period, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) estimated that 13.1 million Syrians remained in need of humanitarian assistance, including 6.3 million IDPs and six million refugees in neighboring countries. Total U.S. assistance since 2012 has exceeded \$7,482,000,000. U.S. funding supported humanitarian programs, including agriculture and food safety, health, nutrition, and protection programs, as well as emergency food assistance.

The U.S. Department of State supported civil society and media programming in opposition-held areas. The United States also has consistently supported international efforts to investigate and collect evidence of gross human rights abuses during the conflict, including the UN Human Rights Council-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI) and the UN

General Assembly-mandated International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes in Syria (IIIM). Several other international initiatives also focused on accountability for atrocities, including the Commission for International Justice and Accountability as well as the Syrian Justice and Accountability Center.

In 2017, the U.S. Congress was considering two companion bills focusing on Iraq and Syria. Both [S. 1158](#), the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2017, introduced in May 2017, and [H.R. 390](#), the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act of 2017, introduced in January 2017, focus on stabilization and peace-building in Iraq and Syria. S. 1158 would direct the secretary of state to establish a mass atrocities task force within the State Department, with the mandate of strengthening the department's efforts at atrocity prevention and response and coordinating the interagency processes on these issues. H.R. 390 would authorize the secretary of state and the USAID administrator to provide assistance to support the efforts of entities, including NGOs, to undertake activities to address ISIS-committed genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Iraq and Syria, including

conducting criminal investigations and collecting and preserving evidence. The bill also would authorize the secretary of state and USAID administrator to provide assistance to entities they determine can effectively manage and deliver humanitarian, stabilization, or recovery assistance to members of Iraqi and Syrian religious or ethnic minorities that have been subjected to ISIS genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes, or are otherwise persecuted groups.

Additionally, [S. 905](#), the Syrian War Crimes Accountability Act, was introduced in June 2017. The bill would require a report on—and authorize technical assistance for—accountability for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in Syria. In

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addition, [H.R. 4238](#), the Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act of 2017, introduced in November 2017, would impose terrorism-related sanctions on two of the most nefarious Iranian-controlled mili-

tias in Iraq and Syria: As-Saib Ahl Al-Haq and Harakat Hizballah Al-Nujaba, which have carried out sectarian crimes throughout Syria.

Then Secretary of State Tillerson stated in August that "ISIS is clearly responsible for genocide against Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims in areas it controls or has controlled. ISIS is also responsible for crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing directed at these same groups, and in some cases against Sunni Muslims, Kurds, and other minorities. . . . The protection of these groups—and others subject to violent extremism—is a human rights priority for the Trump administration." He and other senior U.S. officials reiterated this priority throughout 2017. During the year, former U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Michael Ratney and other officials met with Syrians from diverse religious backgrounds, including members of the Orthodox Christian, Sunni, Druze, and Alawite communities, to discuss assistance to vulnerable populations.