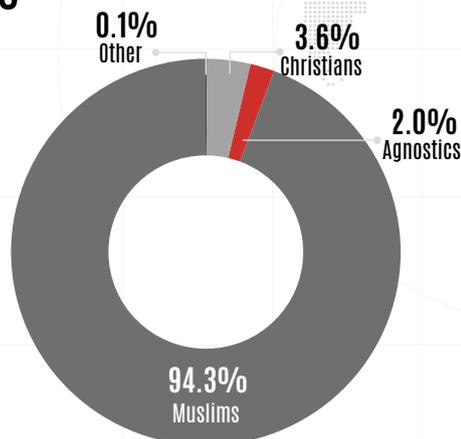




SYRIA

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

In March 2011, following anti-government demonstrations, protesters clashed with the security forces of President Bashar Al-Assad's government. By the summer, the violence had spiralled into a full-blown civil war and the opposition had begun to arm.¹ In addition, with the intervention of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, among others, as well as the United States and Russia, the conflict became, according to many observers, a proxy war.²

Most Syrians are Sunni Muslims. Alawites (or Alawis), Christians and Druze are also part of the country's traditional religious mosaic. Kurds are the most important non-Arab ethnic group.³ Most Kurds follow Sunni Islam. Since 2011, the situation of religious freedom has sharply deteriorated. Before the war, Christians comprised about 10 per cent of the population.⁴

President Assad belongs to the Alawite community. Under Assad's father, President Hafez Al-Assad, Shia scholar Musa Al-Sadr issued a fatwa in 1974 recognising the Alawites as a branch of Shia Islam. Alawites are held in contempt by a number of majority Sunnis, many of whom

see them as heretics.⁵

According to Article 3 of Syria's constitution,⁶ approved by a referendum in 2012, "The religion of the President of the Republic is Islam; Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation; the State shall respect all religions, and ensure the freedom to perform all the rituals that do not prejudice public order; the personal status of religious communities shall be protected and respected." Article 8 forbids, "Carrying out any political activity or forming any political parties or groupings on the basis of religious, sectarian, tribal, regional, class-based, professional, or on discrimination based on gender, origin, race or colour". Article 33 states: "Citizens shall be equal in rights and duties without discrimination among them on grounds of sex, origin, language, religion or creed." Article 42 says: "Freedom of belief shall be protected in accordance with the law."

The government restricts proselytising and conversions. It prohibits the conversion of Muslims to other religions. Although conversion from Islam to Christianity is not allowed, the government recognises Christian conversions to Islam. The penal code prohibits "causing tension between religious communities".⁷ Article 462 of Syria's Penal Code provides that anyone who publicly defames religious

practices is punishable with up to two years' imprisonment.⁸

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

In July 2018 Daesh, also known as the Islamic State group (IS), abducted dozens of Druze women and children when the militant group attacked their villages in Sweida, a province in the south. "At least 36 Druze women and children were abducted after the attacks," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported. Daesh considers the Druze to be heretics.⁹

In August 2018 the Orthodox monastery of St Tekla in Maalula announced that it would soon be open to visitors again after reconstruction was completed. The monastery was under Islamist occupation before it was liberated in 2014.¹⁰

After a temporary closure imposed by Kurdish forces, Christian schools in Qamishli, Hassaké province, reopened in September 2018.¹¹

In November 2018 the Syriac Orthodox Church inaugurated the Antioch Syrian University (ASU) in the village of Maarat. "The inauguration ceremony was attended amongst others by the Syrian Minister of Higher Education, Atef Al-Naddaf, and by Cardinal Mario Zenari, Apostolic Nuncio to the Arab Republic of Syria," Fides reported.¹²

In November 2018 the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch hosted a summit in Damascus with Syrian Sunni delegations and Russian Christians from the Moscow Patriarchate in attendance.¹³

In January 2019 Syrian President Bashar al Assad pledged state funding to rebuild the Armenian Genocide Memorial Church located in the city of Deir ez-Zor. The complex was blown up by Daesh forces in September 2014.¹⁴

In January 2019 a copy of the Icon of the Mysterious Supper was brought to the Greek Melkite Catholic shrine of St Sergius and Bacchus in Maalula. The original copy had been stolen in 2014 when al-Nusra forces occupied the Aramaic-speaking village.¹⁵

During a January 2019 visit to Moscow, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch Yohanna (John) X Yazigi thanked the Orthodox Patriarchate of Moscow for helping to reconstruct and Syrian shrines and monasteries.¹⁶

In March 2019 media reports indicated that the Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo, Mar Gregorios Yohanna

Ibrahim, was in the hands of Daesh in the Baghuz area of eastern Syria, and that "negotiations" for his release were under way. However, at the time of writing, the prelate is still missing.¹⁷ Earlier reports claimed that Jesuit Father Paolo Dall'Oglio was also held by Daesh; his fate too remains unknown.¹⁸

In March 2019 Baghuz, Daesh's last stronghold in Syrian territory, fell. At least 3,000 jihadists surrendered to the Arab-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) whose offensive was supported by US air strikes.¹⁹

In May 2019 the predominantly Christian town of Al-Sqaylabiyeh in the Governorate of Hama came under artillery and mortar fire from rebel forces, causing the death of at least four Christian teenagers and their teacher. The fighting was part of an escalation in the conflict between the government and rebel forces still in control in Idlib province.²⁰

In May 2019, during a meeting with Aram I, the Armenian Apostolic Catholicos of the Grand House of Cilicia, President Assad invited Syrian Armenians to return to the country and rebuild their homes. As a result of the civil war, many Armenian Christians have left for Lebanon, Armenia or Western countries.²¹

In July 2019, during a meeting with Syrian Catholic youth at Mar Tuma Monastery in Saidnaya, Syrian President Assad stated that Christians in Syria "have never been foreigners," but have helped to build Syria's civilisation by bringing their message to the whole world, side by side with their "Muslim brothers".²²

In July 2019 a Syriac Orthodox church in Qamishli was targeted by terrorists. According to reports, more than 10 persons were wounded, some of them seriously. Daesh claimed responsibility for the attack.²³

In July 2019 Pope Francis, through his personal envoy, Cardinal Peter Turkson, sent Syrian President Assad a letter in which he "reaffirms support for the restoration of stability in Syria". In his letter, the Pope asks the President to "protect the lives of civilians" and "preserve the main infrastructures" of the country.²⁴

In a report published in September 2019, the Syrian Network for Human Rights blamed the Syrian government for 61 per cent of targeted attacks against Christian places of worship in Syria.²⁵ Reacting with caution, Catholic Chaldean Bishop Antoine Audo of Aleppo said that "it is difficult to give an objective answer" when faced with such information. "When armed groups lose ground, this kind of

propaganda gets cranked up again.”²⁶

In October 2019, Daesh’s self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was killed in Syria’s north-west Idlib province in a US special forces’ raid ordered by US President Donald Trump.²⁷

In November 2019, Fr. Hovsep Hanna Petoyan, an Armenian Catholic priest, and his father, Hanna Petoyan, were killed by gunmen while travelling from Hassake province to Deir ez-Zor. Archbishop Boutros Marayati, the Armenian Catholic Archbishop of Aleppo, said: “For us, they are martyrs. And what happened to them is a confirmation that the war is not over here, as we had hoped”. Daesh claimed responsibility for the murder.²⁸

In a November 2019 press conference with US President Donald Trump, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan emphasised that the Turkish government is “particularly sensitive” to the situation facing Christian communities in the Middle East. With Turkey’s contribution, Syrian Christians will see “their sanctuaries come back to life and their churches will be rebuilt, so that they will be able to return to their lands and start praying there again.” Erdoğan reportedly sought to counter criticism that Turkey’s military intervention had negatively affected Christian communities in northeastern Syria.²⁹

In January 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Syrian counterpart, President Assad, visited the Greek Orthodox cathedral of the Syrian capital, where the leaders were greeted by Greek Orthodox Patriarch Yohanna X Yazigi. Putin presented a Marian icon as a gift.³⁰

In January 2020 an investigation led by a Syrian researcher put forward a theory that two abducted Syrian bishops had been killed in December 2016. Greek Orthodox Archbishop Boulos Yazigi and Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim were abducted in April 2013.³¹

In February 2020 the Syrian parliament recognised the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire, thus making Syria the first Arab country to do so.³²

In April 2020 a source claimed that the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA) had destroyed the Sheikh Ali Yazidi shrine in the village of Basufan (or Basofan).³³ Another source blamed the act of desecration on the Fayaq al-Sham or Sham Legion, which partly destroyed the shrine as its fighters said the Takbir (“God is greater”), “claiming that the shrine belongs to atheists and infidels”.³⁴ Ostensibly, according to Ezdina.com (a Yazidi news Facebook page), the aim was to provoke a Yazidi exodus from

their villages or force them to convert to Islam. Armed groups had already stolen and destroyed its contents in January 2019.

In June 2020, the human rights organisation Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reported that more than 100 Christian families had returned to Kharraba in Syria’s Djebel Drus region. The city had been liberated in 2018 after it was occupied by Islamists in 2014.³⁵

In July 2020, Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), a major contributor to the restoration, reported the official reopening and re-consecration of the Maronite Cathedral of Saint Elijah in Aleppo after years of reconstruction to repair major damage sustained during Syria’s civil war.³⁶ Between 2012 and 2016, the cathedral suffered at least three major mortar attacks, the worst one taking place in 2013 when jihadist rebels attempted to destroy all signs of Christianity in the cathedral’s neighbourhood.³⁷

In September 2020 the former Holy Land College of Aleppo, a historic establishment belonging to the Custody of the Holy Land, was officially returned by the Syrian State to the Franciscan Fathers.³⁸

In October 2020, Sheikh Mohammad Adnan al-Afiyuni, the Sunni Muslim Mufti for Damascus, was killed in a car bomb in the town of Qudsaya, state media reported.³⁹

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The Syrian conflict that started in 2011 is not over. The Syrian government is still trying to regain control over certain areas such as Idlib province, the last jihadist stronghold in the country.⁴⁰ If the regime succeeds, religious freedom prospects are expected to improve for traditional faith communities.

However, human rights organisations have accused the government and its allies of egregious human rights abuses and war crimes during military operations in Sunni-majority areas⁴¹ and some Christian regions.⁴²

Given the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to identify whether an attack is motivated by religion or other factors such as financial gain.

North-east Syria remains a region of particular concern with respect to religious freedom. Until the Turkish invasion in October 2019, Kurds, Christians and other religious minorities felt protected. Since then, numerous reports have

been published about how the Turkish invaders and their Islamist allies have attacked religious minorities.⁴³

Kurdish-Arab forces, which include Christian fighters, together with US troops, brought Daesh rule to an end.⁴⁴ However, despite claims by then US President Donald Trump, Daesh is not yet defeated. Although Daesh lost all its territory in Syria and its leader was killed, it has shown it still has the capacity to terrorise the country and its religious minorities, albeit on a much smaller scale.⁴⁵

The effect of the war on the local Christian community has been immense. Despite reconstruction and resettlement efforts, the emigration of Christians continues⁴⁶ to the extent that their share of the Syrian population has fallen to around 2 per cent, down from 10 per cent before 2011.⁴⁷ The outlook for religious freedom in Syria remains dire.

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