FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

SYRIA

LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

Contents

WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Syria

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703856

Recent country history

Until 1920, Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire. After its dissolution, the League of Nations gave France a mandate over Syria. In 1946, Syria was granted independence but lacked political stability and faced several military coups. In 1958, Syria united with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic. The two countries separated three and a half years later and the Syrian Arab Republic was re-established. Syria lost the Golan Heights region to Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israeli six day war. Political stability came when Hafiz al-Assad of the socialist Baath party took power in 1970 and ruled as president until his death in 2000. His son, Bashar al-Assad, was then appointed president by popular referendum, and again for a second term in 2007.

Anti-government protests started in March 2011 and they would develop into a civil war. The main factors triggering them were: i) The so-called Arab Spring uprisings occurring elsewhere in the region; ii) The social discontent with a failing economy and government corruption; iii) The violent repression of demands for political reforms. However, the roots of the conflict are more complex and include class conflict, rural/urban divisions and repressed political liberty. This explains why the conflict spread so fast and evolved so rapidly into a sectarian identity conflict. The government responded to the unrest at first with concessions and some new laws, for instance, permitting new political parties. However it soon resorted to military force which was met with widespread armed opposition. The battle attracted foreign jihadist fighters and in June 2014 the radical Islamic group Islamic State (IS) established its caliphate in large parts of Syria and Iraq, with Raqqa in Syria as its capital. In 2016 and 2017 IS lost most of its territory due to military intervention by the West and Russia. However, pockets of IS presence including other radical Islamic groups are still found in the country.

As such, some 25,000 Free Syrian Army fighters, many of whom are battle-hardened Islamists, were fighting alongside Turkish regular troops and special forces when they took the areas around the northwestern (and mostly Kurdish) city of Afrin in March 2018 to force out Kurdish rebels ruling the area. International religious liberty analyst and advocate Elizabeth Kendal reports in the Religious Liberty and Prayer Bulleting of March 2018: "Hundreds of civilians have been killed and wounded; many thousands are now displaced from what had long been one of Syria's great safe havens. Sources on the ground report that 'Jihadists allied with Turkey are hunting down [Christian and other] religious minorities to kill them in Syria's north-west [and] along its border'".

As stated in the CIA World Factbook: "Political negotiations between the government and opposition delegations at UN-sponsored Geneva conferences since 2014 have failed to produce a resolution of the conflict. Russia, Iran, and Turkey since early 2017 have held negotiations in Astana to establish de-escalation zones to reduce violence in Syria." Turmoil continues in Syria, and according to a March 2018 Syrian Observatory estimate, more than 500,000 were killed since the war began in 2011. As of October 2018, UNICEF reported that approximately 13.1 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, with 6.2 million people displaced internally, and that an additional 5.3 million Syrian refugees were registered, making the Syrian situation one of the largest humanitarian crises worldwide. On 18 September 2018, a Russian-Turkish agreement concerning one of the last rebel-held strongholds in northwestern Syria, Idlib, came into effect. This has greatly reduced violence in the area and no airstrikes were reported in the region since. The majority of the country is now under

government control whereas remaining areas are under the influence of Turkey or the Global Coalition.

The religious landscape

An accurate representation of Syria's current religious demography is impossible due to the dramatic changes caused by the civil war with its high death toll, vast number of refugees fleeing the country, and the influx of large numbers of foreign fighters. The vast majority of the population are Sunni Muslims. Though the ruling Assad family is Alawite, this group is a small minority. Other minorities are Shiites, Druze, Twelver Shiites and Christians.

Fear among Christians were high in the last years, particularly caused by the threats, intimidation and kidnappings carried out by radical Islamic groups such as the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra now called Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the Ansar Brigade or the al-Farouq Battalions who consider Christians to be infidels. The flood of foreign jihadist fighters and the imposition of Islamic State's (IS) caliphate in 2014 clearly added a religious component to the persecution of Christians in the civil war. Already in February 2014 Christians in the city of Raqqa were forced to sign a 'dhimmi contract' violating their (religious) freedom.

In February 2015 the BBC reported: "In areas seized by the jihadist group Islamic State (IS), Christians have been ordered to convert to Islam, pay jizya (a religious levy), or face death. In the Syrian province of Hassakeh in February 2015, hundreds of Christians are feared to have been kidnapped by the militants. Senior Christian clerics have also been kidnapped by unknown gunmen. Suspicion for the abductions has fallen on the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate."

As a result of the increased influence of radical Islamic groups, the population in general radicalized, especially in areas controlled by those radical groups. In the meantime, IS has lost most of its territory in Syria but IS fighters and other radical Islamic groups (such as HTS) are still present. As the position of the Assad regime consolidates with Russian support and the influence of radical Islamic groups is steadily being marginalized, the level of fear among Christians is decreasing. Although many Christians have left the country or are internally displaced, there are many Christians who are sincerely committed to staying in Syria and serving the country - particularly in this time of civil war. While there has been an ethnic shift produced by the ongoing war, numbers of Christians remain relatively stable at 10% between 2010 and 2018. A growth in the number of Muslims who have converted to Christianity has also been reported.

The political landscape

The government's power base includes parties close to the Assad clan, specialized divisions of the country's military and informal paramilitary groups (the Shabiba and the popular committees, which are frequently associated with Syria's minority communities). Anti-government factions are heavily divided. Their core is formed by the Syrian National Council (SNC) which is dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and its military arm, the Free Syrian Army. However, the SNC is rivalled by important independent groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra now called Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, the Syrian Islamic Front and Alwiya Ahfaad ar-Rasool, which all have an ideological program along Islamist lines. The complexity of Syria's sociological composition makes Syria's civil war potentially intractable and highly divisive. The Syrian opposition has increasingly "Islamized" and the civil war has increasingly taken the form of a "jihad" against the Syrian government.

The establishment of Islamic State's (IS) caliphate in June 2014 further accelerated this development, although in 2016 and 2017, IS lost large parts of its territory as a result of international intervention and in 2018 only small pockets of IS presence were left. The position of the Syrian government appears secure and has clearly benefitted from the continued support by Russia and Iran, despite occasional airstrikes against positions of the regime by US, UK and French forces. Christians are caught in the crossfire between government troops and rebel forces. Christians are regarded by many as being wealthy and supporters of Assad's government; this adds to their vulnerability, since as non-Muslims they are already part of a fragile minority.

The socio-economic landscape

Not surprisingly, Syria's economy has suffered considerably from the civil war, decreasing by more than 70% from 2010 to 2017. According to the CIA World Fact Book (updated 3 December 2018): "The government has struggled to fully address the effects of international sanctions, widespread infrastructure damage, diminished domestic consumption and production, reduced subsidies, and high inflation, which have caused dwindling foreign exchange reserves, rising budget and trade deficits, a decreasing value of the Syrian pound, and falling household purchasing power. In 2017, some economic indicators began to stabilize, including the exchange rate and inflation, but economic activity remains depressed and GDP almost certainly fell. During 2017, the ongoing conflict and continued unrest and economic decline worsened the humanitarian crisis, necessitating high levels of international assistance, as more than 13 million people remain in need inside Syria, and the number of registered Syrian refugees increased from 4.8 million in 2016 to more than 5.4 million."

There is widespread poverty, due to unemployment, low salaries and the devaluation of the Syrian pound. Christians also 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 Christians left in the country are poor and risk malnutrition. Water scarcity and poor sanitation threaten the lives of millions of Syrian children and adults. 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. About 2 million school-aged children are failing to get school education as a result of the war, which leads to high risks of illiteracy. However, in comparison to previous years, more children have been going to school in 2018 as there are now fewer areas affected by fighting. Also, inflation seems to be slowing and trade is likely to pick up along the borders with Jordan after Syrian forces retook control of the border crossing. As BMI Research puts it in its November 2018 Country report: "Regions held by the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad will remain better off than those occupied by the rebels (...)".

Concluding remarks

The Economist Intelligence reports: "The position of the president, Bashar al-Assad, appears secure, largely due to the backing of Russia and Iran, despite recent airstrikes against regime positions by the US, the UK and France. A peace deal will remain elusive with intermittent fighting continuing on a more localised scale. As such, a de facto partition of the country into a Turkish-backed rebel-held area in the north, a US-backed mainly Kurdish area in the east, and the government-held west, will take hold."

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Syria

- Recent country history: 25,000 Free Syrian Army fighters
  http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com/2018/03/turkey-in-syria-afrin-falls-christians.html

- Recent country history: Religious Liberty and Prayer Bulleting
  http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com/2018/03/turkey-in-syria-afrin-falls-christians.html

- Recent country history: CIA World Factbook
  https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html

- Recent country history: Syrian Observatory
  https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-observatory-says-war-has-killed-more-than-half-a-million-idUSKCN1GO13M

- Recent country history: UNICEF
  https://www.unicef.org/appeals/syria.html

- Recent country history: Global Coalition
  http://theglobalcoalition.org/en/mission-en/

- The religious landscape: BBC
  https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22270455

- The religious landscape: hundreds of Christians are feared to have been kidnapped by the militants
  http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-31622883

- The socio-economic landscape: decreasing
  https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html%20

- The socio-economic landscape: CIA World Fact Book
  https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html

- The socio-economic landscape: 2 million
  http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2018/sep/07/back-to-school-but-not-for-all-of-syrias-children/

- Concluding remarks: Economist Intelligence
  http://country.eiu.com/Syria

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Syria

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
18,284,000	814,000	4.5

Source: WCD estimate: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

How did Christians get there?

The Church has been present in Syria since the time of the New Testament, where the conversion of Saul/Paul is mentioned on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9). The Apostle Paul was initially part of the church in Antioch, where Jesus' disciples were first called Christians. Over the next centuries Christianity spread from there to all parts of Syria. It was in the 7th century, when Christianity was still the majority religion in Syria, that 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.

The 12th and the 13th centuries were marked by problems which Christians experienced in areas controlled alternately by armies of the Crusaders and Muslims. In 1124 the Aleppo cathedral was made into a mosque. By 1350 Christianity had become a minority religion: 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.

European pressure forced the Ottoman Empire to make reforms in the 19th century: The equality of all citizens was proclaimed, whatever their religion. Sectarian tensions between the two main religious groups of central Lebanon, Druze and Christians led to massacres of Christians in Mount Lebanon, which spread to Damascus in 1860, where 25,000 Christians were killed. 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. Throughout the centuries, the Christian church in Syria has gone through – and still is going through – considerable levels of persecution. Currently, the civil war has caused many Syrian Christians to leave their country, settling mostly in Lebanon, Turkey and the West.

What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Syria	Christians	%
Orthodox	528,000	64.9
Catholic	253,000	31.1
Protestant	32,100	3.9
Independent	4,100	0.5
Unaffiliated	4,100	0.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-6,900	-0.8
Total	**814,400**	**100.0**
(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)		

Evangelical movement	13,400	1.6
Renewalist movement	25,000	3.1

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: Believers 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. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Source: WCD estimate: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

According to WCD, the main denominations are Orthodox and Roman Catholic. The number of Protestants is small, but increasing – most are from Orthodox or Catholic backgrounds, but there are also some with a Muslim background.

Religious context

Religious Context: Syria	Numbers	%
Christians	814,000	4.5
Muslim	17,033,000	93.2
Hindu	2,200	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	0	0.0
Jewish	93	0.0
Bahai	470	0.0
Atheist	20,600	0.1
Agnostic	413,000	2.3
Other	100	0.0

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source: WCD estimate: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

Syria is a Muslim majority country: According to the CIA World Factbook, 74% of all Muslims are Sunni and 13% are Alawi, Ismaili and Shia. 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: Such areas as Aleppo and Damascus with surrounding areas, and in the southern areas of the Homs governorate near the Lebanese border, have been vital to both the government and the opposition's war efforts.

Notes on the current situation

In the chaos and impunity of civil war, minorities are additionally vulnerable. This is also true for Syria's Christians who have been targeted for attacks, causing many to flee the country. In general, Christians have grown in confidence in the Assad regime as it has consolidated its position (with the help of

Russia) and has further marginalized opposition groups, including Islamist groups. State pressure on Christians from a Muslim background in government controlled areas is low due to other priorities.

However, Christians are very aware of ongoing threats. There has been a deterioration of the situation of Christians in Kurdish controlled areas: Both in Afrin which is now under control of Turkish-backed Islamist groups, and in the Hassaka region in northeast Syria where there are deepening tensions with the Kurdish administration. The problems in these areas are highly politicized, based on the deference of key church leaders to the Assad regime. In Afrin, Christians were among the thousands who were displaced during the attacks by Turkish forces which started in January 2018. Though in general Christians are relatively safe in government held areas, this is not always the case: Rebels bombed majority Christian village Mhardeh in September 2018, killing twelve Christians. The situation is especially dangerous for villages and towns that are close to rebel-held areas.

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 82 points, Syria ranked 11 in WWL 2019.

What type of persecution dominates?

Islamic oppression: Radical Islamic militants remain a threat to Christians and is particularly strong in areas controlled by Islamist opposition factions. In the second half of 2018 these areas of control cover less than 25% of Syria. However even in government-controlled areas, Christians from a Muslim background are likely to face opposition from family and community due to their faith.

Ethnic antagonism: Tribal norms and values (e.g. family honor) are especially forced upon Christians with a Muslim background, mostly in the Kurdish areas in the north and in the central desert region. As in many countries of the Middle East, tribalism in Syria is very much mixed with Islam.

Dictatorial paranoia: In present-day Syria, this persecution comes mostly from armed groups that control parts of Syria and are willing to use any means to stay in power.

Organized corruption and crime: In Syria, *Organized corruption and crime* takes place in the civil war situation of impunity and anarchy. Corruption is widespread, also affecting access to food and health care. Syrians of different religious backgrounds are being kidnapped. Behind the kidnapping of Christians there are financial, political and ideological motives.

Who is driving persecution?

Islamic militant groups threaten all Christians. The extended family is the main source of persecution for converts from Islam. Government authorities are known to restrict the activities of evangelical Christians and converts to prevent instability. These are sometimes interrogated and monitored. This police activity is sometimes instigated by the converts' family or even historical churches. Hate speech against Christians by Islamic leaders occurs but is not allowed in government-controlled areas. Muslim religious leaders are also known to have put pressure on converts, directly or indirectly, via the converts' families or security agencies.

What it results in

Due to their public visibility, the leaders of historical churches are particularly targeted for abduction. But Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are also in a vulnerable position as they are known for their more Western orientation, fragmentation, lack of strong leadership and lack of a foreign spokesperson (e.g. like a Pope or bishop) who can speak on their behalf.

In areas controlled by radical Islamic groups, most historic churches have been either demolished or used as Islamic centers. Public expressions of Christian faith are prohibited and church buildings or monasteries cannot be repaired or restored irrespective of whether the damage was collateral or intentional. In government-controlled areas, there is less monitoring of Christians due to the circumstances of war. The political reputation of denominations, churches and local church leaders plays an important role in the level of persecution or oppression they face from groups that are fighting President Assad. Christians from a Muslim background are especially put under pressure by their

family, as their conversion brings great dishonor to them. This is particular true in majority Sunni areas, where converts risk being expelled from their family homes or worse. Pressure from the family is somewhat less intense in Kurdish areas, as the Kurdish Sunnis are generally less radical. Indeed, in the North Aleppo Governorate there are recognized Kurdish Christian communities.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

Syria	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	14	75	0	7	160
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	26	0	1	10

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

Disclaimer: In the chaotic circumstances of war it is often not clear whether motives are religiously motivated or not. Often motivations are mixed. Under violent incidents against Christians listed here we only included those cases where the local Christian community believed that there were specific anti-Christian elements. Incidents where Christians were harmed or Christian owned property was damaged in fighting between government and rebel forces which could be considered "collatoral damage" were generally not included. An exception was made for instances where jihadist fighters (IS or al-Qaeda-linked groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham [HTS]) were involved, for example in attacking majority Christian villages including those on the front line.

- 7 September 2018: Twelve inhabitants - including six children - of Mardeh, a Christian village in north east Syria were killed in a bomb attack. Twenty were injured in this attack which was reportedly committed by an al-Qaeda-linked opposition group and the Free Syrian Army.

- January-March 2018: An estimated 150 Kurdish convert families (in total about 450 persons) left Afrin during the January-March 2018 Turkish offensive against the Kurdish People's Protection Units, afraid of being captured by Islamic militant groups. They are scattered between the refugee camps around Afrin and Aleppo city.

- June 2018: The Free Syrian Army confiscated the Alliance Church in Afrin on 1 June 2018 to use it as their base. Also in Afrin Islamic militants set fire to the Good Shepherd Church and painted its walls with jihadist slogans. Due to the lack of priests, all churches in Afrin remain closed. Finally, a house church for converts from Islam was closed. For security reasons no details can be given.

- According to US commission on International Religious Freedom 2018 Report, 25 Christians are still being held by IS and two other Christian leaders were abducted. Several other cases were known, including nine Christian youth who were abducted by People's Protection Units (YPG militants - the Syrian offshoot of the PKK) in Kurdish areas in northern Syria to fight for them against Turkish forces.

- HTS forced Christians in Idlib province to leave their farm lands behind and were as such at least partly robbed from their income. About 150 elderly people came just to get payment for a small part of the harvest, just enough for themselves but were robbed of the rest. Others did not dare to come back. In October 2018 HTS claimed all empty houses in Idlib for themselves. According to Arab Newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat, HTS had "sent notices to Christian property owners in Idlib to hand over their properties by the end of November." An Egyptian Islamic institution cited in the article of 26 November 2018, protested against this move and pointed out that "targeting Christians is one of the constants of extremists and terrorists, who have always killed Christians under different pretexts" and consider Christians as war booty.

External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: killed
  https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/09/syrian-village-bombed-five-children-under-15-three-from-same-family-among-12-killed/

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: 25 Christians are still being held by IS
  https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2018USCIRFAR.pdf

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: People's Protection Units (YPG militants - the Syrian offshoot of the PKK)
  https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/11/18/580416/Turkey-US-Syria-YPG-Cavusoglu-SDF-Afrin-PKK

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: sent notices to Christian property owners
  https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1479276/egypt%E2%80%99s-dar-al-ifta-condemns-expulsion-idlib%E2%80%99s-christians-their-homes

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 82 points, Syria ranked 11 in WWL 2019. In WWL 2018, Syria ranked 15 with a score of 76 points. The main reason for the major increase in points is the higher score for violent incidents. The scores for pressure in the different *Spheres of life* diminished slightly in most parts of the country with the further reduction of IS held-areas, but the number of reported violent incidents (attacks, looting and closure of churches and monasteries; physical or mental harm, confiscation of Christian owned agricultural lands) increased, especially in rebel-held areas.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Syria	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Strong
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

Islamic oppression is the major persecution engine in Syria and accounts for most of the atrocities and acts of persecution committed against Christians. Militants belonging to radical Islamic groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra now called Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and Jaish al-Islam, are currently the main drivers of persecution in Syria. They are operating openly in the north-west of Syria and across the northern part of the country to Hasakah. Christians used to have a relatively large amount of religious freedom in pre-civil war Syria. This changed with the arrival of militant Islamic groups. IS set up its caliphate covering large parts of Syria and Iraq at the end of June 2014 and a strict version of Sharia law was implemented. Most Christians fled IS-controlled areas, but since the beginning of 2016, IS has been losing more and more of its territory and even lost control over its self-proclaimed capital Raqqa in October 2017. However, the threat of revenge actions by IS is still there. In October 2018, it became clear that Islamic militants were in control of less than 25% of Syria's territory. *Islamic oppression* is also present in government-controlled areas, affecting mostly converts from Islam to Christianity where pressure is exerted by the converts' family and community.

Ethnic antagonism (Strong):

Tribalism is characterized by loyalty to one's own tribe or family and the age-old norms and values they embody. As in many countries of the Middle East, tribalism in Syria is very much mixed with Islam and especially affects Christians with a Muslim background. The strength and existence of this engine varies

per region and size of cities, tribalism especially being strong in the Kurdish areas in the north and in the desert areas in the center. In the Kurdish areas, ethnicity is an important factor in the struggle between the Turks and the Kurds. The Turkish forces which took over the north-western and mostly Kurdish areas around Afrin in March 2018, reportedly used "hardline jihadist proxies including Islamic State and al-Qaeda militants, to eliminate the presence of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities along its border." These religious minorities include Christians, most of whom are Armenian and Assyrian.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

In pre-civil war Syria, *Dictatorial paranoia* was mostly evident in the behavior of government officials. The state monitored churches, for instance, checking sermons for political content. Also, the authorities would discourage conversion from Islam to Christianity or to any other religion, as conversions were seen as possibly harming stability in society and causing community conflict. The latter point is still relevant: The main objective for the government is to secure social stability rather than protect religious minorities including Christians. The government would mostly act against Christians (and any other group) if they are considered a threat the status quo - which could include evangelisation or ministry towards Muslims - either by the government or any other local entity. Today government officials hardly monitor Christians anymore as they are preoccupied with their fight against the various opposition groups. Due to the circumstances of war, there is also hardly any attempt to ensure religious freedom for Christians. In present-day Syria, this persecution engine is predominantly driven not by the government, but by armed groups that control parts of Syria and are willing to use any means to stay in power.

Organized corruption and crime (Medium):

In Syria, *Organized corruption and crime* takes place in the civil war situation of impunity and anarchy. Corruption is widespread and also affects access to food and health care. It is a means for self-enrichment; an example is kidnap for ransom. Syrians of different religious backgrounds are being kidnapped. Behind the kidnapping of Christians there are financial, political and ideological motives. Christians have a reputation for being wealthy and for supporting the regime. Being part of a vulnerable non-Muslim minority also plays a role in their abductions.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Syria	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	STRONG	WEAK	-	-	STRONG	MEDIUM
Government officials	Weak	-	Weak	-	-	-	Medium	Weak
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	Weak	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	Weak	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	Weak	Medium	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	Strong
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	-	Medium	Very weak	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	Strong	Weak	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Weak	-	-	-	-	-	Weak	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	Weak
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

In the increasingly small areas controlled by Islamist opposition factions, Islamic leaders have typically pursued a policy of marginalizing Christians and other minorities or of forcing them to flee to other areas - although in these areas it often is difficult to distinguish between 'religious leader' and 'violent religious group'. Even in government-controlled areas, converts from a Muslim background are likely to face family- or community-based opposition, with potential involvement from local religious leaders. Hate-speech against Christians (and mockery) by Islamic leaders occurs but is not allowed in government-controlled areas and has led to the withdrawal of licenses to preach in mosques. Muslim religious leaders are also known to have put pressure on converts directly or indirectly through their families or security agencies.

Drivers of Ethnic antagonism: Tribe, ethnic group leaders and family put pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity and are especially strong in the Kurdish areas in the north and in the desert areas in the center. Also, Assyrian communities report being marginalised at the hands of overly-assertive Kurdish local administrations.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

Government authorities are known to restrict the activities of evangelical Christians and converts in order to prevent societal instability. This move (which can include interrogation and monitoring) is sometimes instigated by the converts' family or even Historical church leaders. In present-day Syria however, this persecution engine is predominantly driven not by the government, but by armed groups that control parts of Syria and are willing to use any means to stay in power. Islamic militant groups took over a lot of Christian-owned properties. Christian elderly people who remained in their homes are in constant fear of being killed or kidnapped by militants in order to take over their houses as well. In north-eastern Syria, Kurdish authorities have also tried to take over many houses belonging to Christians who left the country. Also in government-held areas, there have been efforts to take over church-owned property, such as the monastery in Aleppo. Finally, some Christians have claimed that Christian soldiers within the Syrian Army are given more dangerous duties and that Christian civil servants have received inferior treatment compared to others.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:

Christians have been targeted for kidnappings by organized crime cartels or networks, although this has now become sporadic. Whilst there may be a religious aspect behind kidnapping, the usual driving factor is money - and Christians are perceived as being wealthy. The country is rife with corruption and bribery is part of daily life whenever a Syrian needs to deal with the authorities. For instance, if you want to pass a military checkpoint you might have to pay bribes or face serious intimidation.

Context

The Syrian civil war began as a popular uprising in 2011, with demands for increased political liberties and economic reforms, similar to the Arab Spring uprisings in other countries at that same period. However the roots of the conflict are deeper and more complicated, and include class conflict, rural versus urban divisions, and repressed political liberty. This in part explains why the conflict so rapidly evolved into an extremely violent sectarian conflict that has meanwhile entered its eighth year. The religious component of the conflict is primarily Sunni versus Alawite. However, many Sunnis in government-controlled cities support the Assad regime in order to withstand the influence of violent religious groups. With the influx of foreign radical Islamic fighters, the Syrian opposition has become increasingly "Islamized" and the civil war has increasingly taken on the form of a *jihad* against the Syrian government. In the conflict, all Syrians are suffering greatly, but some groups are in a more vulnerable position than others.

One of the main features of Syria's Christian population is its combined ethnic and religious identity. Particularly significant for understanding the position of Christians in the context of the current civil war is the concentration of Syria's Christians in strategic areas of the country that are vital to both the government and the opposition war efforts, such as in and around the cities of Aleppo and Damascus, and in the southern areas of the Homs governorate near the Lebanese border. The geographical concentration of Christians in strategic areas is an important factor in their vulnerability, as is their alleged support to the government.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Three of the four WWL categories of Christianity exist in Syria and are affected by persecution related to the civil war.

Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation. This category is therefore not scored.

Historical Christian communities: These are mostly Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. As the largest type of Christianity in the country, Christians from historical Christian communities are specifically targeted. They are spread over the entire country and are also present in conflict zones. Of this group, it is the leaders that are mostly affected, due to their public visibility. Clergy from historical churches are recognizable by their clothing which sometimes makes them a target. Historical Christian communities tend to be more recognizable in society than other types of Christianity, for instance by clearly recognizable churches and their members are socio-economically more connected to the state apparatus. The political reputation of denominations, churches and local church leaders plays an important role in the level of persecution or oppression they face from groups that are fighting President Assad. It is thus decisive how churches and Christians aligned themselves politically in the past – i.e. whether they were supportive of Assad, tried to stay neutral, distanced themselves from him or even opposed him.

Converts to Christianity: Christians from a Muslim or Druze background are especially put under pressure by their family, as it brings great dishonor to them if a family member leaves their religion. This is particular true in majority Sunni areas, where converts risk being banned from their families or worse. In a reaction to the increased radicalization of Islam, opposition from family and society towards converts from a Muslim background has increased particularly within rebel-controlled areas. Pressure from the family is somewhat less intense in Kurdish areas, as the Kurdish Sunnis are generally less fundamentalist. Since the state authorities currently have other priorities to deal with, the slight governmental pressure on converts that there had been in earlier years, has diminished.

Non-traditional Christian communities: Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are in a vulnerable position as they are known for their Western orientation, fragmentation, lack of strong leadership and lack of a foreign spokesperson (e.g. like a Pope or bishop) who can speak on their behalf. Most of the non-traditional Christian communities lack full, official recognition and legal status. There are non-traditional Christian communities in various parts of Syria, particularly in regime-held territory and in Kurdish areas. Those in areas held by Islamist opposition groups would be most vulnerable to violence. Within regime-held areas, there is some pressure from traditional churches.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence
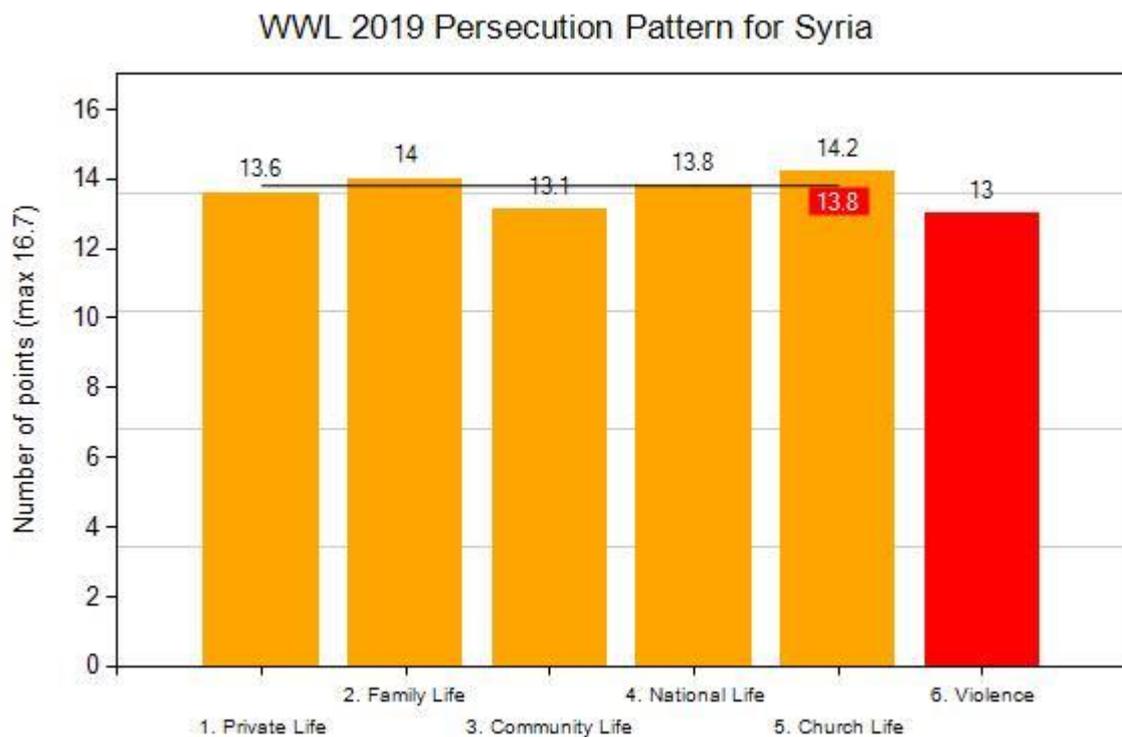
The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Syria shows:

- The average pressure on Christians over all *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level, but went down from 14.4 in WWL 2018 to 13.8 in WWL 2019. This decrease is mostly due to IS-controlled areas shrinking and also due to adjustments based on the availability of more information.

- Pressure in three *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level and was strongest in the *Church* (14.2), *Family* (14.0) and *National* (13.8). In the *Private* (13.6) *and Community* (13.1) *spheres of life* pressure was very high. This is typical for a situation in which *Islamic oppression* is the main persecution engine, combined with *Dictatorial paranoia*.

- Pressure from *Islamic oppression* is present mostly in the *Private*, *Family, Community* and *Church spheres* and is exerted by the social environment.

- The score for violence increased from 3.7 in WWL 2018 to 13.0 in WWL 2019 – a difference almost 10 points which brings it into the extreme level. The number of reported violent incidents increased in rebel-held areas in particular.

Private sphere*:*

Pressure is especially strong in areas under the control of radical Islamic groups. All types of Christians are restricted in their personal worship of God, e.g. they cannot sing out loud. Under the influence of increased radical sentiments, converts in the entire country (especially in those areas controlled by radical Islamic groups, and with the exception of Kurdish areas) experience a higher level of pressure in their private religious observance. For other Christian communities, any act that can be understood as an attempt to spread their faith will not be well received.

Family sphere*:*

Converts face particular pressure in this *sphere of life*, if their new faith is known. However, this is slightly less intense in Kurdish areas. Also, converts are not able to change their religious identity in official documents except in the Kurdish regions where this was recently made possible. Furthermore, they cannot register (Christian) weddings, baptisms and burials. In areas controlled by Islamic militants, these issues are problematic for all types of Christianity. In the entire country, Christian spouses of Muslims are likely to be excluded from custody of children in cases of divorce.

Community sphere*:*

Community life is extremely limited for all types of Christianity in areas controlled by Islamic militants. If their faith is known, it is problematic for converts in the entire country. In areas controlled by Islamic militants all citizens (including Christians) have to abide by the Islamic dress code. Christians are forced to pay protection money and to keep commercial and dietary regulations, including a ban on alcohol.

National sphere*:*

Due to the fractured state of the country, there is now more impunity and inequality. In government-controlled areas, Christians are generally not discriminated against in national life. However, they may encounter glass ceilings in the public sector. Converts can be subjected to discrimination, if their faith is known. Evangelism and conversion from Islam are prohibited. In areas controlled by radical Islamic elements, all non-Muslims, including Christians, are treated as second-class citizens.

Church sphere*:*

In areas controlled by radical Islamic groups most churches have either been demolished or are used as Islamic centers. Public expressions of Christian faith are prohibited and church buildings or monasteries cannot be repaired or restored irrespective of whether the damage was collateral or intentional. In government-controlled areas, there is less monitoring of Christians due to the circumstances of war. In the entire country, marriages of Christians with a Muslim background are impossible and as such illegal.

Violence*:*

Violent incidents included killings, attacks, looting and closure of churches and monasteries; physical or mental harm and the confiscation of Christian-owned agricultural land. In the chaotic circumstances of war it is not always clear whether incidents are religiously motivated or not. Often motives are mixed. Under violent incidents against Christians, the WWL analysis has only included those cases where the local Christian community believed that there were specific anti-Christian elements. Incidents where Christians where harmed or where Christian-owned property was damaged in fighting between government and rebel forces (which could be considered "collateral damage") were generally not included. An exception was made for instances where jihadist fighters (IS or al-Qaeda-linked groups like Hay'at Tahrir *al*-Sham [HTS]) were involved, for example in attacking majority Christian villages.

For a summary of the statistics on violence and examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

5 Year trends

The trend for all *spheres of life* is now towards a decrease in pressure (first chart), after having shown an increase in the first few years of the last five reporting periods. However, the levels remain extreme in the *Family*, *National* and *Church life spheres*. This decrease reflects the shrinking of IS-held territory and of areas held by other Islamic militant groups. The second chart, showing average pressure, also shows how the overall level of pressure on Christians at first crept up over the years and is now diminishing. However it, too, is still at an extremely high level in WWL 2019. The scores for violence (third chart) shows extremely high levels of violence from the point that IS established its caliphate in 2014 (covered by WWL 2015), only to decrease slowly to fairly high levels in 2017 (WWL 2018) when it took a steep fall. This fall is explained by the fact that fewer reported violent incidents were reported as the IS-held areas shrunk further, and also by the fact that accessing verified information from a country in the chaos of civil war is difficult. For instance, weeks after WWL 2018 had been published, it became known that IS had [massacred more than 100 Christians in the Christian town of Al-Qaryatayn in October 2017](), which would have led to a higher score in violence. The rise in violence in WWL 2019 - again to an extremely high level - mainly reflects Islamic militant actions against Christians, the confiscation of property in areas where large numbers of Christians live and the access to more information.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Syria (Spheres of life)
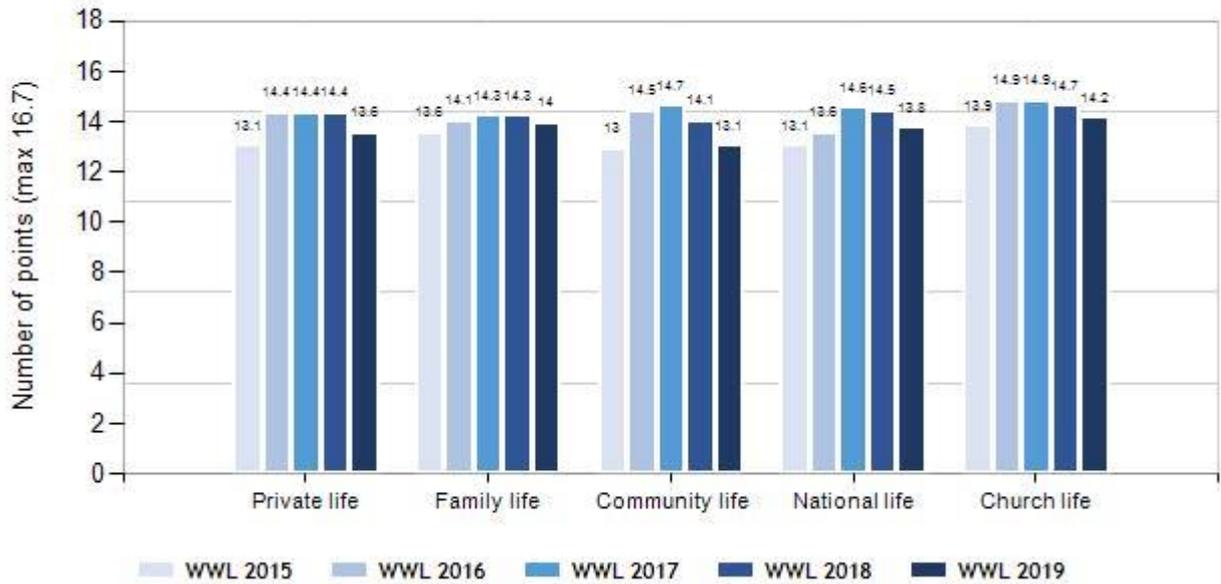
WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Syria	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	13.8
2018	14.4
2017	14.6
2016	14.3
2015	13.3

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Syria (Violence)

Gender specific persecution

Female:

Women and girls from religious minority groups, including Christians, risk sexual harassment and rape. This can happen both in government-controlled areas and in rebel-held territory, though the threat is higher in and near the latter. In both areas, female converts can be abducted and/or forced to marry Muslims. Kidnapped Christian women and girls have been married off to IS fighters, sometimes to several fighters per Christian. IS published a message in their magazine that Christian and Yezidi women may be treated as "spoils of war". Many of them are raped. There are credible reports on rape being used as a weapon of war to induce intimidation, regardless of one's faith, although religion can be an additional motive.

Not only Islamic militant groups constitute a threat for Christian women and girls. For female converts violence can come from their own families if their new faith is discovered. Women are particularly vulnerable to the Islamic culture of honor and shame. Leaving Islam is a great taboo and seriously violates family honor. This includes assaults and honor-killing risks. Moreover there is limited protection from family violence in practice (if not in law) for women and girls in general. According to Sharia law, a Muslim woman is not allowed to legally marry a Christian man (vice versa is possible). This makes a marriage between a female Christian of Muslim background and a man from other categories of Christian communities legally impossible.

Female converts from Islam to Christianity married to a Muslim risk divorce, particularly if their conversion becomes known to in-laws. In that case, they are very likely to be excluded from having custody over their children. In cases of divorce, other Christian women married to a Muslim also face the risk of losing their children. Although the attitude of the wider family is crucial, there is always a risk of losing custody to relatives as this issue falls under Sharia law which gives all rights to the Muslim spouse. Also, Christian women can only inherit from their Muslim husbands, if they convert to Islam. This is especially problematic for Christian women married to Muslims or to male Christians of Muslim background, who are still considered Muslims by Sharia law. As a result of the above described situation, it is very hard for female converts and Christian women married to Muslims to raise their children in a Christian way.

Male:

For Christians from a Muslim background, pressure would come most commonly from family and community. Such pressure affects women and girls most, then younger men and lastly older men, reflecting the levels of status and freedom generally within Islamic culture. A common fear among indigenous Christians is that young men will be forcibly conscripted into the Syrian Army (or to other military factions, including YPG or aligned militias). Although this fear is a common one in many Syrian communities (not just Christian communities), some claim that Christians are particularly vulnerable within military structures (e.g. they are deployed at more dangerous positions). In Syria there is enforced military service for all men reaching the age of 18. Some Christians are conscientious objectors and this can prompt consideration of emigration. The persecution of Christian men affects their families considerably, particularly if they are killed or abducted as the family might well lack any income and be unable to afford basic needs. In Syrian culture the men are the main provider for the family.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Traditionally, Syrian society has been composed of a diverse range of ethnic and religious communities. Many other religious minorities face various levels of persecution in Syria, for instance: Shia, Alewite, Druze, Jews, Yazidis and Zaradashtis.

Shia, Alewite and Druze communities have been marginalized and persecuted by Sunni jihadists, not only on the grounds of their faith being considered heretical, but in the case of the Alewites, also because of their perceived connections with the respective Assad presidents. Particularly the Druze communities, but also Shia and Alawites, have faced abductions, bombings and killings by Islamic State militants. As part of Syria's anti-Zionist narrative, Jews have been marginalized for most of modern Syria's history. Yazidis and Zaradashtis belong to Kurdish religions which are not recognized by the Syrian regime. Their children are registered as Sunni Muslims and they learn Islam in school. Presumably their situation was harder before the crisis, as Kurdish forces are now taking control of their areas which gives them more freedom.

Examples of persecution:

- In July 2018 Islamic State militants abducted more than 30 Druze women and children in south-western Syria, according to a [BBC report](#) on 30 July. The abductions were reported after "a series of suicide bombings that targeted an area dominated by the Druze ethnic minority on 25 July. More than 200 people were killed."

- The [International Religious Freedom Report 2018](#) included the following religious violations against Shia and Ismaili Muslims committed in 2017: "A September COI report noted two explosions in March near the Bab al-Saghir cemetery, a well-known Shia pilgrimage site. The explosions detonated 10 minutes apart in the parking lot of the cemetery, where buses transporting pilgrims were parked. The explosions killed 44 civilians and injured 120, the majority of whom were Iraqi Shia pilgrims. HTS claimed responsibility for the attack. According to the same report, on April 14, a truck bomb exploded in Al-Rashidin near Aleppo, killing evacuees from Fu'ah and Kafraya – two predominantly Shia Muslim towns – who believed the truck would deliver food. The attack killed 95 persons, including 68 children and 13 women, and injured 276, including 42 children and 78 women. Onlookers yelled sectarian insults at the Shia victims. No party claimed responsibility for the attack, and HTS and Ahrar al-Sham explicitly denied involvement. In May ISIS militants attacked the town of Aqarib al-Safiyah and attempted to attack the nearby Al-Manbouja village in Hamah, both predominantly populated by Ismaili Muslims. The attackers killed 52 civilians, the vast majority Ismailis. Survivors reported being verbally insulted by ISIS fighters on account of their religious beliefs."

Future outlook

The political outlook:
Political solutions to the conflict in Syria are still a long way off. The [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) (EIU) summarizes Syria's current situation and expectations for the next few years as follows: "The position of the president, Bashar al-Assad, appears secure, largely due to the backing of Russia and Iran, despite recent airstrikes against regime positions by the US, the UK and France. A peace deal will remain elusive with intermittent fighting continuing on a more localised scale. As such, a de facto partition of the country into a Turkish-backed rebel-held area in the north, a US-backed mainly Kurdish area in the east, and the government-held west, will take hold."

The outlook for Christians - viewed through the lens of:

- **Islamic oppression:** The considerable reduction in IS-held territory naturally means significant liberation for people living in the areas concerned. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that the presence of the persecution engine *Islamic oppression* will weaken considerably. It is expected that IS will continue its terror activities – in the Middle East and elsewhere – to show that it is still a relevant factor in world politics. Moreover IS is not the only driver of this engine which is also boosted by jihadist components of the Sunni opposition. For instance, Islamic militants controlling Afrin imposed stricter Islamic law which makes Christians reluctant to return. Also, IS still wants the world to see that it has a role to play, as has been demonstrated by the atrocities committed against Druze communities in southern Syria in the summer of 2018. In addition, if the return of refugees and IDPs is accelerated, as envisaged by current Lebanese Government policy, Christians could be forced to return to areas under the control of Islamic militants where they are vulnerable. Furthermore, broader tensions could arise with the return of Christian communities as trust has to be rebuilt. Finally there are reports of continued growth in the numbers of converts from Islam to Christianity, which could lead to an increase in incidents of persecution against Christians from an Islamic background.

- **Ethnic antagonism:** The tribal and ethnic identity of rural Syria is an important factor used by the various national and international powers involved in the civil war. As a result, the different tribes have become very fragmented and have even developed into competing clans, which can force people to rely on their own specific tribe even more. In such circumstances, tribal values - mostly based on Islam - offer security and become increasingly important. In the Kurdish areas, ethnicity is an important factor in the struggle between the Turks and the Kurds. The Turkish forces which took over the northwestern and mostly Kurdish areas around Afrin in March 2018, reportedly used "hardline jihadist proxies including Islamic State and al-Qaeda militants, to eliminate the presence of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities along its border." These religious minorities include Christians, most of whom are Armenian and Assyrian. This strengthening of the engine *Ethnic antagonism* affects all Christians in the area and will certainly not lessen the pressure families and communities exert on converts - a situation which is not expected to change for the better in the short term.

- **Dictatorial paranoia:** Christians do not currently experience much monitoring from the side of the Syrian regime as the government is still too busy fighting opposition forces. As the regime is increasingly reconquering territory this might change. Especially if new security measures are implemented which restrict religious freedom, particularly for converts to Christianity and communities of non-traditional Christians. In October 2018, President Assad signed into law regulations for the state-control of Islamic teaching and appointments in Syria. The new legislation expands the authority of the Ministry of Religious Endowments (MRE) in a bid to prevent Muslim clerics from taking advantage of religious platforms for political purposes, many of whom are likely to be supporting militant groups opposing the government. The MRE will now have significant influence in the areas of education and law (among others). On the one hand, Assad would seem to be increasing his control over the Sunni Muslim population, but on the other hand he might be seeking to use Islam to unify the seriously fragmented country. If the latter is the case, this could lead to Christians feeling distinctly unwelcome in Syria in the future.

  The most important drivers of the engine *Dictatorial paranoia* are currently the armed opposition groups in areas under their control. In the north, efforts are being made to form a national opposition army. This could lead to a major and decisive clash with the government army, a situation which could put greater pressure than before on all religious minorities, including

Christians – for instance, when it comes to choosing sides. With most Islamist groups defeated or pushed into Syria's north-west, the Syrian government has vowed to liberate the strategic north-western town of Idlib. Christians still living in Idlib or Afrin will be under immense pressure when fighting starts and be heavily affected. Another potentially dangerous situation concerns the Kurdish areas of north-east Syria. An armed conflict with the regime over control of these areas is likely to come with a heavy toll for local Christians. Also, with much of the external opposition removed in Kurdish areas, local Christians are reportedly increasingly nervous about the imposition of a Kurdish political agenda on all communities under the control of the Kurdish administration. Several Assyrian and Armenian schools in north-east Syria were [closed](#) in August and September 2018 after they refused to implement a new curriculum forced upon them by the People's Protection Units (YPG). The YPG is the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the Syrian offshoot of the PKK. The PKK is labelled as terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union and Turkey.

- **Organized corruption and crime:** The influence of organized crime in the form of ransom for kidnapped Christians seems to have decreased according to in-country researchers. However, it has certainly not disappeared altogether. Even though the number of recorded incidents of abductions has become lower, in a country where society is built on corruption and where rule of law is lacking in many places, this persecution engine is not expected to weaken considerably in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion:

With most Islamist groups defeated or pushed into Syria's north-west, the Syrian government has vowed to liberate the strategic north-western town of Idlib. Christians still living in Idlib or Afrin will be under immense pressure when fighting starts and be heavily affected. Another potentially dangerous situation concerns the Kurdish areas of north-east Syria. An armed conflict with the regime over control of these areas is likely to come with a heavy toll for local Christians. Also, with much of the external opposition removed in Kurdish areas, local Christians are reportedly increasingly nervous about the imposition of a Kurdish political agenda on all communities under the control of the Kurdish administration.

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: hardline jihadist proxies including Islamic State and al-Qaeda militants, to eliminate the presence of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities along its border. http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com/2018/03/turkey-in-syria-afrin-falls-christians.html

- 5 Year trends: massacred more than 100 Christians in the Christian town of https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper

- 5 Year trends: Al-Qaryatayn in October 2017 https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper

- Persecution of other religious minorities: BBC report https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45004063

- Persecution of other religious minorities: International Religious Freedom Report 2018 https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper

- Future outlook: Economist Intelligence Unit
  http://country.eiu.com/syria

- Future outlook: atrocities
  https://www.timesofisrael.com/islamic-state-said-to-executes-druze-hostage-from-syrias-sweida/

- Future outlook: hardline jihadist proxies including Islamic State and al-Qaeda militants, to eliminate the presence of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities along its border.
  http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com/2018/03/turkey-in-syria-afrin-falls-christians.html

- Future outlook: national opposition army
  https://www.albawaba.com/news/opposition-groups-north-syria-seek-set-national-army-1172670

- Future outlook: closed
  http://www.aina.org/news/20180815182256.htm

Additional Reports and Articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/ (password: freedom).

Middle East Research: 2016 – 2017

Iraq and Syria – The enduring relevance of the church in the Middle East: December 2017
Understanding the recent movements of Christians leaving Syria and Iraq: June 2017
The role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – Summary report – April 2016
Future role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – April 2016
Historic Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – March 2016
Current Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – February 2016

Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/ (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/

Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: http://opendoorsanalytical.org/ (password: freedom).

External Links - Additional Reports and Articles

- WWR in-depth reports: Iraq and Syria – The enduring relevance of the church in the Middle East: December 2017
  http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Iraq-and-Syria-The-enduring-relevance-of-the-church-in-the-Middle-East.pdf

- WWR in-depth reports: Understanding the recent movements of Christians leaving Syria and Iraq: June 2017
  http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Understanding-the-recent-movements-of-Christians-leaving-Syria-and-Iraq.-Hope-for-the-Middle-East.pdf

- WWR in-depth reports: The role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – Summary report – April 2016
  http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/The-role-and-contribution-of-Christians-in-Syria-and-Iraq-Summary-report-April-2016.pdf

- WWR in-depth reports: Future role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – April 2016
  http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Future-role-and-contribution-of-Christians-in-Syria-and-Iraq-April-2016.pdf

- WWR in-depth reports: Historic Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – March 2016 http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Historic-Relevance-of-the-Church-in-Syria-and-Iraq-March-2016.pdf

- WWR in-depth reports: Current Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – February 2016 http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Current-Relevance-of-the-Church-in-Syria-and-Iraq-February-2016.pdf