

The Syrian civil war has negatively impacted every religious and ethnic community. In areas controlled by Islamist militias, religious minorities have suffered particularly appalling treatment. Many have been forced to flee the country due to the hostile environment created by these militias, rendering some areas 'religiously cleansed.'

By July 2014 Islamic State (IS) was reported to be in control of around 35% of Syria's territory, with other hard-line militants controlling large swathes elsewhere. Shari'a courts were set up in areas occupied by IS to enforce conformity with their extreme interpretation of Islam.

Although IS has now lost the territory it once held, Syria remains a war zone. There is an urgent need for a credible and effective ceasefire that also protects civilians and combats enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions. Components of truth, reconciliation and transitional justice should also be included in any negotiated ceasefire, and it must generate measurable improvements in humanitarian access. This will also assist in re-activating the economy, which has been severely damaged by years of fighting. Improving local economies would create jobs and encourage the re-integration of fighters into society, which is a vital step towards a sustainable political solution.

Violations against the Christian community

The murders and disappearances of prominent Christian clergy provided the first clear indication of a religiously motivated campaign targeting Syria's ancient Christian community. Notable cases include:

- Reverend Basilius Nasser, a Christian priest from the Greek Orthodox Church, murdered by a sniper in January 2012.
- Father Fadi Haddad, abducted in October 2012.
- Archbishop Boulos (Paul) Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church and Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church, abducted on 22 April 2013 - their whereabouts remain unknown.
- Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, an Italian Jesuit priest, abducted on 29 July 2013 - his whereabouts remain unknown.
- Frans van der Lugt, an elderly and respected Dutch priest, murdered in April 2014.
- Father Ibrahim Farah, an Orthodox priest in Idlib, kidnapped by the Al-Nusra Front, the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda, in 2015. He fled to exile in Turkey after negotiations secured his release, and subsequently migrated to Canada.

In addition to these and other abductions, the campaign against the Christian community has included extortion through kidnapping, rape, seizure and destruction of property, forced conversion under threat of death, and murder. An estimated 650,000 Christians have fled the country, with many more displaced internally. Cities such as Aleppo and Homs, once home to large Christian communities, are now left with a fraction of the previous population.

Under IS rule, the Christian community in Raqqa was ordered to pay jizya or dhimmi tax, adopt the Islamic dress code, and worship behind closed doors. In addition, Christians were subjected to harsh living conditions in an effort to compel their conversion. Raqqa was home to nearly 13,000 Christians before 2014; fewer than 80 remain.

Violations against the Druze community

Syria's Druze ethnoreligious minority, believed to constitute around 3.2% of the population, has also been targeted in recent years. Originating from the Near East, the Druze self-identify as 'Unitarians' or 'People of Monotheism.' Their religious belief is deemed heretical by hard-line Islamists, and they have faced massacres, suicide attacks and abductions at the hands of various terrorist groups.

The Turkish incursion into northeast and northwest Syria

On 18 March 2018 a coalition of Islamist militias supported by the Turkish army entered the Kurdish town of Afrin after a fierce battle with PYD (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat) forces, who had to withdraw after suffering serious losses due to heavy artillery and aerial bombardment. Tens of thousands of civilians fled to safety, including approximately 200 Kurdish Christian families. The only Kurdish Evangelical Church in Afrin closed, and its pastor moved to Aleppo.

On 1 March 2020 Turkey launched a fresh military offensive in northwest Syria in retaliation to a Syrian airstrike that killed nearly 50 Turkish soldiers. The operation created a massive security, humanitarian and refugee crisis, the very issues the Turkish government claimed it wanted to resolve through the operation. Whilst maintaining watertight control of the border with Syria and preventing the entry of Syrians attempting to flee the fighting, Turkey encouraged tens of thousands of refugees already living in Turkey to move to its border with Greece, providing free transportation and opening border gates for them.

Many credible sources and reports accuse Turkey of facilitating the influx of thousands of foreign Jihadis into Syria, including many Turkic Jihadis belonging to the Turkistan Islamic Party, who are currently operating in Idlib province. Turkish forces in Idlib province appear to co-habit peacefully with many terrorist groups that operate there, including the former Al-Nusra Front. Less than 50 Christians remain in Idlib province, down from approximately 10,000 until 2014, when the Al-Nusra Front took control of the region.

Islamist militias loyal to Turkey have implemented an Islamic system in Afrin, enforcing Shari'a law and education. CSW receives regular reports of grave violations being perpetrated by these groups against local people, and particularly against Yazidis. Violations include rape, assassination, kidnapping for ransom, confiscation of property and desecration of cemeteries and places of worship. Extremist groups have also repeatedly detained members of the Christian and Yazidi communities.

Recommendations

To the government of Syria:

- Agree to a nationwide ceasefire that prioritises the protection of civilians and precludes enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions.
- Ensure that freedom of religion or belief and the protection of religious and ethnic minorities are prioritised during peace negotiations.
- Increase efforts to counter sectarian narratives and conduct detailed investigations into all instances of violence against religious minorities.
- Abide by the principles of international humanitarian law and take every necessary precaution to protect civilians.
- Recognise the Yazidi community as a religious group and grant them permission to establish courts mandated to resolve civil and personal matters in accordance with their faith.
- Ensure that any new constitution reflects Syria's heritage of religious and ethnic pluralism and promotes equal citizenship and rule of law.
- Issue a standing invitation to all UN Special Procedures, ensuring they have unhindered access to all areas of the country, and that members of civil society can freely meet with them without reprisal.

To the government of Turkey:

- Respect international humanitarian law and ensure that no further attacks on Syrian civilians occur.
- Open borders to refugees in order to avert further loss of life.
- Restrain Islamist groups responsible for attacks on aid organisations in the Idlib region.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Urge Syria to enter into dialogue with the UN, including by cooperating with the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI), ensuring that a political solution to the ongoing conflict is based on an inclusive Syrian identity, rule of law, and advances human rights and accountability measures.
- Urge Syria to guarantee the right to freedom of religion or belief for all, including the right to choose, change and practice the religion or belief of one's choice without interference, in accordance with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which the state is party.
- Call on Syria to ratify the Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CED).

- Condemn all attacks, kidnappings, and killings of religious minority communities and intensify efforts to investigate and prosecute those responsible for violations targeting them, ensuring perpetrators no longer enjoy impunity and that support and rehabilitation is provided for victims.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the COI, Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to freedom of religion or belief in their reporting on Syria, acknowledging the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities.

To the government of the United States of America:

- The State Department should continue to closely monitor FoRB in Syria and designate the country as a Country of Particular Concern, as recommended by the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).
- Deny US travel visas and consider sanctioning Syrian government officials directly responsible for FoRB violations.

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free to believe**

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