

Statement



SNHR Was the Second Most-Cited Source in the US Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report on Syria

While the Syrian Regime Portrays Itself as a Secular Guardian of Christians, It's Deliberately Destroyed Churches and Imprisoned Many Christian Citizens, as well as Exploiting Sectarianism, Including Politicizing 'Religion as a 'Survival Strategy

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.

The US Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) has released its annual report on international religious freedom for the year 2022, including in Syria. The report notes that sectarian violence, fueled and exacerbated by the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict, is still continuing, while also shedding light on the widespread destruction of infrastructure and the targeting of individuals on a sectarian basis by the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict.

The report draws upon a number of sources, which are ordered below by the number of times they were cited:

- Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI): 14 citations.
- Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR): seven citations.

The report also cites other sources, such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP).

The report notes that sectarian violence is still going on in Syria due to the tensions between religious groups, further exacerbated by regime actions, worsening economic conditions, and the ongoing conflict in a broader sense. The report further notes that about half of the population living in Syria before the start of the popular uprising in Syria in March 2011 has either been internally displaced or become refugees in other countries (6.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 6.7 million refugees). As the report further reveals, the Syrian regime's government, with the backing of its allies Russia and Iran, continues to commit human rights violations against dissidents, who are mostly Sunni Muslims, with regime forces also destroying places of worship, hospitals, houses, and other civilian infrastructure in a widespread manner.

Furthermore, the report stresses that the Alawite majority in Syria still enjoys an "elevated political status" disproportionate to the size of the country's Alawite population, particularly in leadership positions within the army, security, and intelligence apparatuses. As the report states, "The regime attempted to project an image as a secular protector of Christians, but... [the regime] intentionally destroyed churches and detained numerous Christian citizens... Authorities used sectarianism, including the politicization of religion, as a "survival strategy.""

The report further notes that the Iranian regime has directly backed the Assad regime, primarily through its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and has recruited Iraqi, Afghani, and Pakistani Shia soldiers to fight on Assad's behalf in the Syrian conflict.

Moreover, the report notes that some Turkish-backed armed opposition factions have also committed violations amounting to war crimes, including torture, rape, taking hostages, pillaging, and seizing private properties, especially in Kurdish-majority areas, not to mention the desecration of Yazidi religious sites in the areas under their control.

Meanwhile, the report describes the military conscription law that enables the authorities to seize the assets of "military service evaders" and their families who have failed to pay an exemption fee as a "regime attempt to extort Syrian citizens living abroad, many of whom fled the country to escape the regime's military offensive and would be unwilling to serve in the military. The military conscription law disproportionately affected Sunnis and Christians, who comprised the bulk of Syrians who fled the country as a result of the war."

Citing SNHR, the report notes that the group documented no fewer than 2,221 civilian deaths resulting from the conflict during 2022, while no fewer than 155,368 of the Syrian citizens arrested since March 2011 were still detained and/or forcibly disappeared as of the end of 2022.

The report also reveals that SNHR documented no fewer than 1,282 attacks on mosques in Syria between March 2011 and September 2022. Of these attacks, SNHR attributed responsibility to the Syrian regime in 914 cases and Russian forces in 204 others. Meanwhile, SNHR also documented no fewer than 126 attacks on Christian places of worship in the same period, attributing responsibility for 76 of these to the Syrian regime, 33 to armed opposition factions, 10 to ISIS, five to other parties, and two to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

As the report further reveals, the fate of 8,648 persons disappeared at the hands of ISIS since 2014 remains unknown, as documented by SNHR, despite the fact that ISIS has lost all of the territory it controlled in Syria.

In conclusion, the report stresses that the US President has stated that a political solution must be reached in Syria on the basis of Security Council resolution 2254 that calls for establishing a "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance."

The report further notes that the US will continue to support the process of documenting, analyzing, and preserving evidence on violations committed by all parties to the conflict, including those committed against religious minorities, through supporting the efforts of the COI and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), as well as through directly supporting the documentation efforts by Syrian human rights groups.

On October 25, the US government expressed its support for establishing a separate UN mechanism with the sole mandate of “clarifying the fate and whereabouts of those missing and unlawfully detained in Syria.”

SNHR reaffirms our preparedness to contribute to all reports by states and international organizations on the state of human rights in Syria. We shall continue in our commitment to spare no effort in reporting the violations and incidents that take place with integrity and impartiality to the best of our abilities as part of our mission to protect civilians in Syria, hold accountable all perpetrators of violations, and initiate progress in pursuing the course of change towards democracy.

To download the full report, which was released by the US Department of State on Monday, May 15, 2023, please [click here](#).¹

1. Only available in English



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