

# Syria

NOT FREE

1

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	-3/40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	4/60

## LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

0/100 **Not Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



TOP

## Overview

Political rights and civil liberties in Syria are severely compromised by one of the world's most repressive regimes and by other belligerent forces in an ongoing civil war. The regime prohibits genuine political opposition and harshly suppresses freedoms of speech and assembly. Corruption, enforced disappearances, military trials, and torture are rampant in government-controlled areas. Residents of contested regions or territory held by nonstate actors are subject to additional abuses, including intense and indiscriminate combat, sieges and interruptions of humanitarian aid, and mass displacement.

## Key Developments in 2020

- The regime and its allies continued a military offensive that had begun in late 2019 against antigovernment forces occupying much of Idlib Governorate. The fighting killed hundreds of people and displaced more than 900,000 others before a cease-fire was brokered by Russian and Turkish representatives in March.
- In June, President Bashar al-Assad dismissed the prime minister, who had held his post since 2016. The move came amid deteriorating economic conditions and just ahead of parliamentary elections in July, which were conducted only in regime-held areas and featured no meaningful competition.
- The regime allegedly suppressed information on the true scope of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, in part by intimidating journalists and medical workers. About 11,300 confirmed cases and 700 deaths were reported for the year, but evident strains on the health system and reports of burials suggested that the actual figures were significantly higher.

## Political Rights

### A. Electoral Process

**A1** 0-4 pts

**TOP**

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

0/4

The president, who dominates the executive branch, is empowered to appoint and dismiss the prime minister and cabinet. President Bashar al-Assad was elected for a third seven-year term in 2014 with what the government claimed was 88.7 percent of the vote, defeating two nominal opponents. The balloting was conducted only in government-controlled areas amid war and severe repression. Major democratic states denounced the election as illegitimate.

In June 2020, Assad dismissed Imad Khamis, who had served as prime minister since 2016, and appointed Hussein Arnous, then the water resources minister, to replace him.

**A2** 0-4 pts

**Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?**

0/4

Elections for the 250-seat People's Council were held in July 2020, though only in areas with a regime presence. About half of Syria's population were refugees or internally displaced at the time. The balloting featured no meaningful competition, as Syria's exiled opposition groups did not participate, and the authorities do not tolerate independent political activity in the territory they control. The ruling Baath Party and its National Progressive Front coalition won 183 seats, and the remaining 67 seats went to candidates running as independents, though all were considered government loyalists.

**A3** 0-4 pts

**Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?**

0/4

There is no transparency or accountability surrounding the official electoral process. The executive authorities, acting through the military-security apparatus, effectively grant or withhold permission to participate in elections in government-held areas. Although some provisional local councils outside government-controlled areas have organized rudimentary elections since 2011, ongoing attacks by progovernment forces and militant groups have largely made such processes untenable. Kurdish-held areas

**TOP**

have a provisional constitution that allows local elections, but the Democratic Union Party (PYD) exercises ultimate control.

## B. Political Pluralism and Participation

**B1** 0-4 pts

**Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?**

0 / 4

A 2011 decree allowed new political parties to register but also imposed significant obstacles to party formation and prohibited parties based on religion, regional affiliation, and other criteria. In practice, all legal political groups and independents are either part of, allied with, or heavily vetted by the regime.

The local councils active in areas outside of government control are often sponsored or appointed by prominent families, armed groups, or foreign powers. In Kurdish-held areas, decentralized governance theoretically allows for political competition. In practice, however, politics are dominated by the most powerful group, the PYD, whose affiliated security forces frequently detain political opponents.

**B2** 0-4 pts

**Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?**

0 / 4

The Baath Party has governed Syria without interruption since the 1960s, led by Assad or his late father for nearly all of that time. The 2011 decree and 2012 constitutional reforms formally relaxed rules regarding the participation of non-Baathist parties. In practice, the government maintains a powerful intelligence and security apparatus to monitor and punish opposition movements that could emerge as serious challengers to Assad's rule.

**B3** 0-4 pts

**Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?**

0/4

In its territory, the regime's security and intelligence forces, militias, and business allies actively suppress the autonomy of voters and politicians. Foreign actors including the Russian government, the Iranian regime, and the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah also exert heavy influence over politics in regime-held areas due to their involvement in the war and material support for the government. In other areas, civilian politics are often subordinated to Turkish-backed armed groups.

The PYD has politically dominated both Arabs and Kurds in the country's Kurdish regions, though the area under its control was reduced after the Turkish-led invasion and occupation of the northwest in 2018 and the northeast in 2019.

**B4** 0-4 pts

**Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?**

0/4

Although the regime is led primarily by Alawites and presents itself as a protector of that and other religious minorities, the authoritarian government is not an authentic vehicle for minority communities' political interests. Political access is a function not primarily of sect, but of proximity and loyalty to Assad and his associates. Alawites, Christians, Druze, and members of other smaller sects who are outside Assad's inner circle are politically disenfranchised along with the rest of the population. The political elite also includes members of the Sunni sect, but the country's Sunni majority makes up most of the rebel movement and has borne the brunt of state repression as a result.

The opposition's dwindling territory is divided among Turkish-backed rebels, <sup>TOP</sup> Islamist militias, and radical jihadist militants, with varying implications for ethnic and religious minorities. The Kurdish PYD nominally ensures political representation for Arabs, but

it has been accused of mistreating non-Kurdish residents, particularly those suspected of sympathizing with the Islamic State (IS) militant group.

Women have equal formal political rights, holding 11.2 percent of the legislature's seats after the 2020 elections as well as some senior positions in the government. However, they are typically excluded from political decision-making and have little ability to organize independently amid state and militia repression. All leadership positions in Kurdish-held areas are reportedly shared between a man and a woman, though they have limited autonomy outside PYD-led structures.

## C. Functioning of Government

**C1** 0-4 pts

**Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?**

**0** / 4

De facto authority in government-controlled Syria lies with the president—who is not freely elected—and his political, security, and business allies rather than with formal institutions such as the cabinet and parliament. Foreign states like Iran and Russia also wield considerable influence over regime policy, and both opposition forces and Kurdish-led fighters have held large swaths of territory with the help of countries including Turkey and the United States, respectively. Ankara's military offensives into Kurdish territory and its subsequent efforts to form a "buffer zone" in the border area have given it an opportunity to expand its influence over Syrian politics.

**C2** 0-4 pts

**Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?**

**0** / 4

Members and allies of the regime are said to own or control much of the Syrian economy. The civil war has created new opportunities for corruption among **TOP** government, loyalist armed forces, and the private sector. The regime has regularly distributed patronage in the form of public resources, and implemented policies to benefit favored industries and companies. Government contracts and trade deals have also been awarded to representatives of foreign allies like Russia and Iran. Even basic

state services and humanitarian aid are reportedly extended or withheld based on recipients' demonstrated political loyalty to the Assad regime. Movement restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic created still more opportunities for corruption in 2020, as those who could afford it paid bribes to officials and security forces in order to circumvent the rules.

Individuals in government-held territory who seek to expose or criticize official corruption, for example on social media, face reprisals including dismissal from employment and detention.

Corruption is also widespread in opposition-held areas. Turkish-backed militias have been accused of looting, extortion, and theft. Local administrators and activists complain that little of the international aid reportedly given to opposition representatives abroad seems to reach them, raising suspicions of graft.

**C3** 0-4 pts

<b>Does the government operate with openness and transparency?</b>	<b>0 / 4</b>
--	--------------

The government has long operated with minimal transparency and public accountability, and conditions have worsened during the civil war amid the rise of militias that are nominally loyal to the regime but often free to exploit the population. Officials have broad discretion to withhold government information, and they are not obliged to disclose their assets. Independent civil society groups and media outlets are harshly suppressed and cannot influence or shed light on state policies.

The regime allegedly worked to suppress independent information about the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic in Syria during 2020, in part by warning medical workers not to share their experiences or speak with foreign media outlets. Evidence of strains on the health care system and an increase in burials suggested much larger numbers of cases and deaths than were reflected in official data.

**Add Q**

**TOP**

<b>Is the government or occupying power deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the political balance in favor of another group?</b>	<b>-3</b>
---	-----------

The Syrian government, Kurdish forces, Turkish-backed opposition forces, and Islamist extremist groups have all sought to alter the ethnic composition of their territories, forcing civilians of all backgrounds to seek safety among their respective religious or ethnic communities and contributing to the demographic shifts wrought by the civil war.

Sunni Arab civilians bear the brunt of attacks by the Alawite-led government and loyalist militias. In 2018, the regime forcibly transferred thousands of civilians—most of them Sunni Arabs—from captured opposition areas to Idlib Governorate after bombing and besieging them. The government targeted Idlib again when it launched offensives against rebel forces there in April and December 2019. As many as 900,000 people were internally displaced, some for a second time, and pushed toward the border with Turkey before a March 2020 cease-fire was announced.

In October 2019 the Turkish military launched an offensive into northeastern Syria, aiming to create a buffer zone by pushing out its Kurdish adversaries in the area. A previous Turkish-led offensive in the northwestern district of Afrin in 2018 was reportedly followed by the seizure and destruction of Kurdish civilian property. Turkish-backed militias continued to be accused of expropriating land and homes during 2020.

Sunni Islamist and jihadist groups often persecute religious minorities and Muslims they deem impious. Kurdish militias have been accused of displacing Arab and Turkmen communities in the context of their fight against IS.

## Civil Liberties

### D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

**D1** 0-4 pts

**TOP**

Are there free and independent media?

0/4

The constitution nominally guarantees freedom of the press, but in practice the media are heavily restricted in government-held areas, and journalists who report critically about the state are subject to censorship, detention, torture, and death in custody. All media must obtain permission to operate from the Interior Ministry. Private media in government-controlled territory are generally owned by figures associated with the regime. Media freedom varies in territory held by other groups, but local outlets are typically under heavy pressure to support the dominant militant faction in the area.

Journalists face physical danger throughout Syria, especially from regime forces and extremist groups. Four were killed in 2020, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), bringing the reported death toll to 139 since the war began in 2011. Three of the four apparently died in Russian air strikes near Idlib; the fourth, Hussain Khattab, was assassinated by gunmen while working for the Turkish state broadcaster in an opposition-held portion of Aleppo Governorate. Also during the year, journalists were increasingly vulnerable to censorship or intimidation by local authorities over reporting on COVID-19.

**D2** 0-4 pts

**Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?**

**2/4**

While the constitution mandates that the president be a Muslim, there is no state religion, and the regime has generally allowed different confessional groups to practice their faiths as long as their religious activities are not deemed politically subversive. The government monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim religious leaders. Jehovah's Witnesses are banned, proselytizing is restricted, and conversion of Muslims to other faiths is prohibited. The dominance of extremist groups in opposition-held areas of western Syria has threatened freedom of worship for local residents and displaced people.

IS, which persecuted religious activity that did not conform to its version of Islam, was militarily defeated in Syria when its last population center was captured by US-backed coalition fighters in March 2019. However, the militant group reportedly remains active as a terrorist and guerrilla force, and it continues to recruit from and intimidate the roughly 65,000 IS suspects and family members being held in camps by Kurdish-led forces in eastern Syria.

**D3** 0-4 pts

**Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?**

**0/4**

Academic freedom is severely restricted. University professors in government-held areas have been dismissed or imprisoned for expressing dissent, and some have been killed for supporting regime opponents. Combatants on all sides of the war have regularly attacked or commandeered schools. Groups including the PYD—and prior to its military defeats, IS—have set up education systems in their territories that feature pervasive political indoctrination.

**D4** 0-4 pts

**Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?**

**1/4**

The government engages in heavy surveillance of private and online discussion and harshly punishes dissent in areas it controls. However, the government has employed its surveillance tools inconsistently in recent years amid deepening criticism from traditionally loyal segments of the population. The environment is somewhat more open in areas where neither the government nor an extremist group has a dominant presence, though the PYD and some opposition factions have allegedly suppressed freedom of speech. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the regime closely monitored medical staff and warned them against speaking about the scope of the contagion or the government's response.

## **E. Associational and Organizational Rights**

**E1** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom of assembly?**

**0/4**

**TOP**

Freedom of assembly is severely restricted across Syria. Opposition protests in government-held areas have been met with gunfire, mass arrests, and torture of those detained. Jihadist groups, the PYD, and some rebel factions have also used force to quash civilian dissent and demonstrations.

In June 2020, residents of the largely Druze city of Al-Suwayda engaged in a series of protests against economic deprivation that also criticized the regime. A leading organizer and a number of participants were arrested, while others faced assaults by security forces and government supporters.

**E2** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?**

**0** / 4

The regime generally denies registration to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with reformist or human rights missions and regularly conducts raids and searches to detain civic and political activists. A variety of new grassroots civil society networks emerged in many parts of Syria following the 2011 uprising, monitoring human rights abuses by all sides and attempting to provide humanitarian and other services in opposition areas. However, such activists face violence, intimidation, and detention by armed groups and must operate secretly in many cases. Independent groups that attempted to provide aid during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 attracted the suspicion of regime intelligence agencies, deterring more widespread or open activism.

**E3** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?**

**0** / 4

Professional syndicates in state-held areas are controlled by the Baath Party, and all labor unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), a nominally independent grouping that the government uses to control union activity. The war's economic and political pressures have made functioning labor relations virtually impossible across the country.

# F. Rule of Law

**F1** 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

0/4

The constitution forbids government interference in the civil judiciary, but judges and prosecutors are essentially required to belong to the Baath Party and are in practice beholden to the political leadership.

**F2** 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

0/4

Military officers can try civilians in both conventional military courts and field courts, which lack due process guarantees. While civilians may appeal military court decisions to the military chamber of the Court of Cassation, military judges are neither independent nor impartial, as they are subordinate to the military command. Extremist groups have set up religious courts in their territories, imposing harsh punishments for perceived offenses by civilians under their interpretation of religious law. The general breakdown of state authority and the proliferation of militias in much of the country has led to arbitrary detentions, summary justice, and extrajudicial penalties by all sides in the civil war.

**F3** 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

0/4

More than 500,000 people have been killed in the civil war since 2011, according to prevailing estimates. While the scale of the fighting has continued to subside with the defeat of IS in 2019 and the Idlib cease-fire in March 2020, the regime and insurgent groups frequently engage in extreme violence against civilians, including indiscriminate bombardment, extrajudicial killings, and torture of detainees, with the government responsible for the greatest number of abuses. Regime forces have detained and

tortured tens of thousands of people since the uprising began, and many have died in custody, though detention conditions that amount to enforced disappearance mean the fate of most detainees is unknown. Dire conditions in detention facilities placed detainees at increased risk from COVID-19 in 2020, and repeated regime targeting of health facilities in opposition territories have left populations there especially vulnerable.

Among other violations, the regime has been accused of repeatedly using chemical weapons on civilian targets, including during its 2019–20 offensives into Idlib Governorate. The offensives in Idlib had killed hundreds of people and displaced hundreds of thousands of others by the time of the March 2020 cease-fire.

Although IS lost control of its last population center in March 2019, the group has since resorted to guerrilla and terrorist tactics to attack security forces and local civilian leaders. Separately, Turkish military operations in northern Syria have displaced tens of thousands of people and posed a serious threat to civilians living in the affected area.

Despite a nominal regime victory in the southern governorate of Daraa in 2018, as well as a Russian-brokered reconciliation agreement, violence involving regime forces and local insurgents continued into 2020 and has killed hundreds of people. A general deterioration of the rule of law has also reportedly contributed to violent criminality in the area.

**F4** 0-4 pts

**Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?**

**0** / 4

Families and networks with ties to the ruling elite receive preferential treatment in legal matters, and are disproportionately Alawite, though Alawites without such connections are far less likely to benefit from any special advantages. Similarly, armed opposition is overwhelmingly Sunni Arab, and members of this group are consequently likely to face discrimination by the state unless they enjoy close ties with the regime.

**TOP**

The Kurdish minority has faced decades of state discrimination, including restrictions on the Kurdish language and persecution of Kurdish activists, though conditions for Kurds have improved dramatically in areas controlled by Kurdish militias since 2011.

Women are subject to legal and societal inequities, including gender-based disadvantages in social benefits and a severe gender gap in labor force participation. Official mechanisms meant to safeguard women's rights are reportedly not functional, and the general deterioration of law and order has left women exposed to a range of abuses, particularly at the hands of extremist groups that impose their own interpretations of religious law.

Syrian law discriminates against LGBT+ people. According to the 1949 penal code, "unnatural sexual intercourse" is punishable with up to three years in prison. Individuals suspected of same-sex relations are at risk of execution in areas held by extremist groups.

## G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

**G1** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?**

**0** / 4

Ongoing combat and the proliferation of regime and militia checkpoints have severely restricted freedom of movement. The regime imposed curfews and other constraints on travel in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, though enforcement was uneven due to bribery and other factors.

More than six million people remained internally displaced at the end of 2020. Another 5.5 million have sought refuge abroad. Although some Syrians have been returning to their homes in areas where fighting has subsided, the government's offensive in Idlib that began in 2019 had displaced an estimated 900,000 people by early 2020.

**G2** 0-4 pts

**Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?**

0/4

Property rights have been routinely disregarded throughout the civil war. Businesses are frequently required to bribe officials to operate and complete bureaucratic procedures. Access to markets dominated by regime members or allies is restricted. Militias also extort businesses and confiscate private property to varying degrees.

Law No. 10 of 2018 allows the state to designate areas for reconstruction and redevelopment by decree; individuals who cannot meet a number of criteria to prove ownership of affected property risk losing it without compensation.

Personal status laws based on Sharia (Islamic law) discriminate against women on inheritance matters, and societal practices further discourage land ownership by women.

**G3** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?**

1/4

Perpetrators of “honor crimes” can receive reduced sentences under the penal code, and rapists can avoid punishment by marrying their victims. Women cannot pass citizenship on to their children. Personal status laws for Muslims put women at a disadvantage regarding marriage, divorce, and child custody. Church law governs personal status issues for Christians, in some cases barring divorce. Early and forced marriages are a problem, with displaced families in particular marrying off young daughters as a perceived safeguard against endemic sexual violence or due to economic pressure. Personal social freedoms for women are uneven in areas outside government control, ranging from onerous codes of dress and behavior in ex-ist-held areas to formal equality under the PYD in Kurdish areas. However, the defeat of IS, setbacks for other extremist groups, and a decline in the scale of fighting over time has reduced the population’s exposure to the most egregious violations of personal social freedoms.

*Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 because the gradual reduction of territory controlled by radical jihadist groups and affected by heavy fighting has lowered the number of people exposed to extreme forms of organized sexual violence and control over personal dress and social behavior.*

**G4** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?**

**0/4**

Many armed groups engage in forced conscription or the use of child soldiers. Displaced people are especially vulnerable to labor exploitation and human trafficking, and there is little equality of opportunity even in relatively stable government-controlled areas, as access to employment and investment is often dependent on personal, political, or communal affiliations. The regime's mismanagement of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 led to more dangerous working conditions. Among other measures, the government required state employees to appear for work unless they could confirm that they had COVID-19 by presenting a medical report, the cost of which was prohibitive for many Syrians.



#### **On Syria**

See all data, scores & information on this country or territory.

[See More >](#)

#### *Country Facts*

Global Freedom Score

**1/100** Not Free

**TOP**

Internet Freedom Score

**17/100** Not Free

*Other Years*

2022

## Be the first to know what's happening.

Join the Freedom House monthly newsletter

Email

**Subscribe**

ADDRESS

1850 M St. NW Floor 11  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 296-5101

GENERAL INQUIRIES

[info@freedomhouse.org](mailto:info@freedomhouse.org)

PRESS & MEDIA

[press@freedomhouse.org](mailto:press@freedomhouse.org)

@2022 FreedomHouse

**TOP**