

COUNTRY PROFILE

SYRIA



While Syria's civil war has affected all faiths, ethnicities and other groups, in terms of displacement and migration, the Christian community has been affected "disproportionately".²²⁷ Christians, who were more than 1.5 million before the war began in 2011,²²⁸ have been reduced to as few as 250,000²²⁹ amid growing fears for the Church's very survival in some parts of the country.²³⁰

In northern Syria, much-reduced Christian groups face different pressures. In the north-western Idlib governorate, Islamist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) declared an end to persecution of Christians by, for example, allowing the re-opening of the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Anna, closed for 10 years.²³¹ But HTS continued to ban religious practices and seize property, in some cases converting buildings into mosques.²³² Clergy have recounted attempts to erase Christian symbols from churches and monasteries. Christians in Idlib region have fallen from 20,000 faithful to barely 600²³³ and in some areas "approached extinction".²³⁴ The February 2023 earthquake triggered further waves of migration.²³⁵

In Al-Hassake, north-east Syria, an escalation of Turkish attacks²³⁶ and security fears severely hampered the Christian community's recovery. Senior clergy report that there are now no Assyrian Christians left in 30 villages previously occupied by Daesh (ISIS).²³⁷

In the 70 percent²³⁸ of the country under Assad government control, the state has declared a pro-Christian policy. However, the mass migration of the last decade, triggered by extreme anti-Christian persecution, continues apace, largely driven by severe economic hardship. Aleppo's Christians, formerly 250,000-strong (12 percent of the region's population) fell to 30,000 (1.4 percent), according to Syria's apostolic nuncio Cardinal Mario Zenari. In April 2024 he reported that 500 Syrian Christians were leaving Syria every day. He said: "We see the churches die."²³⁹

SELECTED INCIDENTS

DECEMBER 2022 Christians in Idlib reported that HTS still massively restricted Christmas worship, limiting prayers to church halls and prohibiting bell ringing.²⁴⁰

DECEMBER 2022 Describing a visit to Hassaké-Nisibi Archdiocese, Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan said Christian numbers had collapsed from 100,000 in the 1970s to less than 20,000. He added: "This poses a most dangerous challenge for our survival in the land."²⁴¹

MARCH 2023 Northern Syria's Christian community has been "irrevocably damaged".²⁴² Areas formerly controlled by jihadists and others seized by Turkish-backed forces have been nearly emptied of indigenous Christian populations. Christians in Raqqa have declined from 11,000 in 2011 to barely 100. Over the same period Christians in Deir ez-Zor, which previously numbered nearly 5,000, have all but disappeared, and Assyrian Christians in Khabour Valley have shrunk from 15,000 to less than 1,000.²⁴³

SEPTEMBER 2023 Desperate Christians in Syria and Lebanon suffering extreme poverty "no longer have confidence in their country" and "there is no light at the end of the tunnel", according to the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Youssef Absi. He said: "We are doing everything possible to help our faithful, to provide them with essential services.... Without support, we can no longer convince them to stay." The Patriarch said the situation could improve if the West lifted sanctions.²⁴⁴

NOVEMBER 2023 Nazira Gawriya, co-chair of the Syriac Union Party, said Christians are at risk from a resurgence of Daesh, especially in the north-east. She said Daesh may exploit Syrian security weakness caused by an escalation of attacks by Turkey. Ms Gawriya said the country's much-diminished Christian presence faces an existential threat as a result of displacement caused by the violence.²⁴⁵