



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020

Syria

NOT FREE

0
/100

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

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

0 /100 Not Free

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



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 2019

- The Islamic State (IS) militant group was pushed out of its territory in Syria in March after Kurdish forces overran its last stronghold. IS fighters have since used guerrilla tactics to attack security forces and local civilian leaders throughout the year.
- In April, the government launched an offensive into Idlib Governorate to defeat rebel forces there, killing hundreds of people and displacing at least 440,000. An August cease-fire offered a respite before the government launched a new offensive in December, which forced 200,000 to flee by the end of the year.
- The Turkish government launched an offensive into northern Syria in October, targeting armed Kurdish fighters in the region and pledging to create a “buffer zone” that could house as many as one million Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

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. The balloting was conducted only in government-controlled areas amid war and severe repression. Major democratic states denounced the election as illegitimate.

A2 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

The most recent elections for the 250-seat People's Council were held in 2016, but only in government-controlled territory. Several opposition groups that were traditionally tolerated by the authorities boycotted the polls, and state workers reportedly faced pressure to vote. Members of the military were permitted to participate in the elections for the first time. The ruling Baath Party and its declared allies took 200 of the 250 seats; the remainder went to nominal independents.

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 Islamist militants have largely made such processes untenable. Kurdish-held areas in the north 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

<p>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?</p>	<p>0 / 4</p>
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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 or armed groups. In Kurdish areas, decentralized governance theoretically allows for political competition. In practice, politics are dominated by the most powerful group, the PYD, which frequently detains political opponents.

B2 0-4 pts

<p>Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?</p>	<p>0 / 4</p>
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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
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In its territory, the regime’s security and intelligence forces, militias, and business allies prevent the autonomy of voters and politicians. Foreign actors including Russia, Iran, 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 politically dominated both Arabs and Kurds in Kurdish regions, amid a US military presence there. The United States’ October 2019 withdrawal, and the subsequent invasion of Turkish forces, has since given Turkey an opportunity to exert more influence instead.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	0 / 4
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Although the regime is often described as Alawite, and as a protector of other religious minorities, the government is not an authentic vehicle for minorities’ political interests. Political access is a function not primarily of sect, but of proximity and loyalty to Assad and his associates. The political elite is not exclusively Alawite and includes members of the majority Sunni sect, which also makes up most of the rebel movement. The Sunni majority has borne the brunt of state repression as a result. Alawites, Christians, and Druze outside Assad’s inner circle are also politically disenfranchised.

The opposition’s dwindling territory is divided among moderate, Islamist, and radical jihadist rebels, with varying implications for ethnic and religious minorities. The

Kurdish PYD nominally ensures representation for Arabs, but it has been accused of mistreating non-Kurdish residents, particularly those suspected of IS sympathies. The PYD has since allowed the government to assume control of its territories in return for their support against invading Turkish forces in late 2019, putting residents at risk of government-led repression instead.

Women have equal formal political rights, holding 12.4 percent of the legislature’s seats 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 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
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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 in formal institutions such as the cabinet and parliament. Foreign powers like Iran and Russia also wield considerable influence over state 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. Turkey’s October 2019 offensive into Kurdish territory and its subsequent efforts form a “buffer zone” in the area have given it an opportunity to expand its influence over Syrian policy.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?	0 / 4
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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 the 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 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.

Individuals in government-held territory have increasingly exposed corruption among local officials, along with the regime's business allies and security services, in 2019. The regime harassed and detained those who did so, and punished perceived opposition sympathizers more harshly than Alawites.

Corruption is also widespread in opposition-held areas. Some rebel commanders 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

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	0/4
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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 in areas they control. 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.

Add Q

ADDITIONAL DISCRETIONARY POLITICAL RIGHTS QUESTION	-3
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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? -3 / 0

The Syrian government, Kurdish forces, and Islamist and jihadist 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 groups 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 largely-Sunni civilians from captured opposition areas to Idlib Governorate after bombing and besieging them. The Syrian government targeted Idlib again when it launched an offensive against rebel forces there in April 2019. As many as 440,000 were internally displaced, some for a second time, and were pushed towards the border with Turkey before an August cease-fire was announced. That cease-fire broke in December, when Syrian forces launched a second offensive that forced 200,000 to flee by year's end.

Turkey forcibly moved thousands of Syrian refugees to the border in September 2019, and announced that it would return at least one million more, many of them Arab, into Kurdish territory that same month. In October, Turkey launched a military offensive into the area, aiming to create a buffer zone where it would send these refugees. A previous Turkish-led offensive in Afrin in 2018 was reportedly followed by the seizure and destruction of Kurdish civilian property.

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 the IS.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	0/4
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The constitution nominally guarantees freedom of speech and the press, but in practice freedom of expression is heavily restricted in government-held areas, and journalists or ordinary citizens who criticize the state face censorship, detention, torture, and death in custody. All media must obtain permission to operate from the Interior Ministry. Private media in government areas 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. Seven were killed in 2019 according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), bringing the death toll to 134 since the war began in 2011.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	2/4
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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 politically subversive. The government monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim religious leaders. The growing dominance of extremist groups in opposition-held

areas of western Syria has threatened freedom of worship for local residents and displaced people.

The IS, which persecuted religious activity that did not confirm to its version of Sunni Islam, was militarily defeated in Syria in March 2019. However, the militant group has since worked to recruit and intimidate the residents of the Al-Hol camp in the northeast; 70,000 people, including the children and former spouses of IS fighters, are held there by Kurdish forces.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?	0 / 4
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Academic freedom is heavily 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, the IS—have set up education systems in their territories, but they are infused with 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
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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 2019, after facing 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.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	0/4
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Freedom of assembly is severely restricted across Syria. Opposition protests in government-held areas are usually 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.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?	0/4
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The regime generally denies registration to nongovernmental organizations 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.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	0/4
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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
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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
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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 with 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
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More than 500,000 people have been killed in the civil war since 2011, according to prevailing estimates. Both the regime and insurgent groups frequently engage in extreme violence against civilians, including indiscriminate bombardment, extrajudicial killings, and torture of detainees, with the government being the greatest abuser. 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.

Among other violations, the regime has been accused of repeatedly using chemical weapons on civilian targets. A suspected chemical weapons attack killed more than 40 people in the opposition-held Damascus suburb of Douma in 2018, and the United States subsequently accused the government of using the same tactic in May 2019, during its offensive into Idlib Governorate. That overall offensive killed hundreds of people and displaced several hundred thousand more in 2019.

Although the IS lost control of its Syrian territory in March 2019, the group has since resorted to guerrilla tactics to attack security forces and local civilian leaders throughout the year.

Turkish military operations in northern Syria have displaced tens of thousands of people since they began in October 2019, and pose a serious threat to civilians still living in the area .

F4 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

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.

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

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. More than 6 million people remained internally displaced at the end of 2019. Another 5 million have sought refuge abroad. Although some Syrians began returning to their home areas when fighting subsided in 2018, government offensives in Eastern Ghouta, Daraa, and Quneitra and the Turkish-led campaign in Afrin resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. The government’s offensives in Idlib displaced hundreds of thousands more during 2019.

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.

In 2018, the government enacted Law No. 10, which allows the state to designate areas for reconstruction and redevelopment by decree. Individuals would then be required to meet a number of criteria to prove ownership of affected property or risk losing it without compensation. The context of the war, including mass displacement and widespread lack of proper documentation, and the already-poor quality of official recordkeeping in Syria make it likely that property rights will be violated under the law.

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

<p>Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?</p>	<p>0 / 4</p>
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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 extremist-held areas to formal equality under the PYD in Kurdish areas.

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.



On Syria

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

0/100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

17/100 Not Free

Other Years

2019

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