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**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC
FOR THE 54TH SESSION OF THE
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) was founded in 1998 and is a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) for the 54th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

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Background

1. This submission is made in the context of the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria), scheduled for the 54th session of the UPR Working Group. It focuses primarily on the situation of Christians in Syria and is based on information gathered by the ECLJ during interviews conducted in 2026 with religious leaders, humanitarian organizations, and a foreign academic specializing in Syrian affairs.

2. Syria is a country located along the Mediterranean Sea and has a population of approximately 23.781 million people.¹ The population is predominantly Sunni Muslim with approximately 74% of the population identifying as Sunni Muslim, 11% as Shia Muslim, 5% as Orthodox Christian, 3% as nonreligious, 3% as Druze, 2% as Catholic, and 2% other.²

3. Syria remains one of the most religiously and ethnically diverse countries in the Middle East. Before the conflict, the population was predominantly Sunni Muslim, alongside significant Alawite, Shia, Ismaili, Christian, and Druze communities.³ This diversity has been dramatically affected by the civil war, forced displacement, violence perpetrated by jihadist groups like the Islamic State (ISIS), economic crises, and political upheavals since December 2024. Over 90% of the population is believed to be living below the poverty line.⁴

4. Syria's last review was held on January 24, 2022.⁵ As a result of the review, Syria received 287 recommendations, 207 of which it accepted.⁶ It was recommended by the Holy See, and supported by Syria, that the government "[i]nvolve fully all religious and ethnic groups in a transparent and inclusive negotiating process with a view to building a peaceful future."⁷ Additionally, Syria accepted several recommendations to bring its legislation into line with its international human rights obligations (133.63), to revise provisions discriminating against women (133.70), and to eliminate prejudicial provisions targeting ethnic and religious groups (133.89).⁸ As of 2026, Syria's legal framework still does not guarantee freedom of religion or belief in full compliance with Article 18 of the ICCPR, nor does it ensure effective equality among all citizens. Further, the regime change makes it difficult to assess recommendations made to the previous government. Several concerns raised during the last UPR cycle remain fully relevant, however, including freedom of religion or belief, equality before the law, participation in public life, rejection of impunity, and conditions enabling the safe return of displaced persons.

5. In its 2026 World Watch List, Open Doors ranked Syria as the 6th worst country for Christians.⁹ The situation of Syrian Christians illustrates this fragility. Christian population numbers have fallen from approximately 2 million before 2011 to a few hundred thousand today.¹⁰ This demographic collapse stems from the factors listed above and has generated fears of a lasting erosion of religious pluralism. Additionally, in Syria, the personal status system continues to be based largely on religious affiliation. Marriage between a Muslim woman and a Christian man remains prohibited,¹¹ while conversion from Islam to another religion remains impossible in practice. Islamic jurisprudence being the primary source of legislation raises questions regarding the equality of all citizens regardless of their religion or beliefs.

6. In our last report on Syria, we discussed the fact that Christians in Syria face threats of violence and the general lack of protection for religious liberty. While some progress has been made, Christians continue to have their rights violated.

Legal Framework

7. Article 3 of Syria's Constitutional Declaration of March 13, 2025, stipulates that the President's religion is Islam and that Islamic jurisprudence constitutes the primary source of legislation. It also guarantees freedom of belief and respect for "divine religions."¹² Article 10 proclaims citizens equal before the law,¹³ and Article 12 provides that the rights guaranteed by international treaties which Syria ratified are an integral part of the Constitutional Declaration's framework.¹⁴

8. Syria is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees freedom of religion (Art. 18) as well as equality before the law and protection against discrimination (Art. 26).¹⁵

Unfulfilled Citizenship and Political Underrepresentation

9. Several recommendations from the last UPR cycle called on Syria to strengthen the participation of all citizens in public life and to guarantee equal access to national institutions.¹⁶

10. The new authorities have issued numerous public statements affirming their commitment to building an inclusive state that respects religious diversity.¹⁷ Christian representatives have been involved in certain initiatives, and a Christian woman, Hind Kabawat, has been appointed to the transitional government.¹⁸ These developments are encouraging, but they have not yet translated into structural reforms that guarantee equality for all citizens.

11. The Christian leaders interviewed by the ECLJ reject being viewed merely as a "religious minority." As one senior Christian leader explained: "We are Syrian citizens with the same rights and responsibilities as all Syrians. We do not seek privileges, but simply equality." As a historic component of the Syrian nation, they seek equal citizenship rather than special protection.

12. Several interviewees expressed concern about the underrepresentation of Christians in political, administrative, judicial, and security institutions, even though Christians have historically participated in Syria's economic, educational, and cultural life. This underrepresentation is particularly evident in the structures overseeing the political transition, where key leadership positions are held by figures from the political and military circles of the new authorities.

13. These concerns are further reinforced by delays in the effective functioning of the new People's Assembly. Although indirect parliamentary elections were held in October 2025, the Assembly was non-operational because President Ahmed al-Sharaa had yet to appoint the remaining one-third of its members as required by the Constitutional Declaration of March 2025.¹⁹ BBC reported in July 2026 that President al-Sharaa appointed the remaining 70 members²⁰ and the Syrian parliament held its first post-Assad session in mid-July.²¹ As the body responsible for adopting legislation, overseeing the government, and preparing the future permanent Constitution, its delayed establishment raises broader concerns about inclusiveness and representativeness in Syria's new regime.

14. The ECLJ posits that the recommendations regarding equal citizenship and participation in public life have been only partially implemented. Despite some initiatives toward openness, Christians remain underrepresented in the decision-making processes shaping the ongoing political transition.

Freedom of Religion, Social and Economic Pressures, and Emigration

15. Several previous UPR recommendations called on Syria to combat discrimination and guarantee equality for all citizens.²² Despite the political changes and the constitutional guarantees adopted in 2025, several religious leaders and civil society representatives interviewed by the ECLJ emphasized that religious freedom remains fragile in practice.

16. Concerns center particularly on freedom of conscience, the ability to change one's religion, pressure on Christian converts, and the growing Islamization of the public sphere. One senior church representative reported that Islamic street-preachers are calling for the "true religion." One humanitarian worker active in Syria also referenced this rhetoric, adding that such preaching has been done by unknown groups or young men who enter majority-Christian neighborhoods to call on residents to convert to Islam, while the local authorities do nothing to intervene despite the tensions created.

17. Other frequent concerns are women being pressured regarding wearing the veil, growing Islamic references in school curricula, and reported restrictions on female civil servants' appearances. One source reported that couples must prove their marriage status by carrying marriage certificates. Several interviewees viewed these developments as part of a broader trend toward the Islamization of public life. They indicated that such measures reinforce the perception that certain religious identities and customs are less accepted in the public sphere.

18. One bishop recounted: "The mayor of Damascus prohibited the sale of alcohol. There were demonstrations against this ban; therefore, it created the impression that Christians want alcohol." Another church representative also decried the measure, which did not extend to the predominantly Christian neighborhoods of Bab-Touma, Bab-Sharqi, and Qassaa: "This decision was considered insulting by Syrian Christians, giving them, and others, the impression that drinking is immoral and consequently they are themselves immoral."

19. Other concerns involve the future of Christian educational institutions. Several local stakeholders have cited increasing administrative pressure and have questioned whether their autonomy and distinct identity can be preserved in the current climate. The aforementioned bishop reported that his private Christian school must pay 22% of tuition fees in *jizya* taxes (taxes levied against non-Muslims), despite more than half of its students receiving free education. Additionally, many examinations are scheduled on Sundays despite Christian schools being closed because of worship services.

20. These developments compound the economic hardships affecting the entire population. After more than a decade of conflict and resulting impoverishment, many young people struggle to envision a future in Syria. Demonstrations have recently erupted across the country protesting the failed economic reforms of the new government.²³ Interviewees emphasized that emigration remains particularly high among young graduates and families. "All young people want to leave," reported the bishop: "No work, no money. Those from Idlib [the ruling Islamist class] are paid very well." Several interlocutors stressed that emigration is driven not only by insecurity and economic hardship but also by the perception that Christians no longer have realistic prospects for their future in Syria.

21. One academic warned that this pattern of emigration is becoming self-reinforcing, since shrinking Christian communities make it increasingly difficult to sustain schools, parish life, and family formation, a concern echoed by Assyrian and Armenian community representatives. In some areas, those remaining are predominantly elderly persons, economically vulnerable families, or individuals who depend heavily on church support. Some interlocutors also expressed concern about increasing pressure on Christian-owned property and fear that continued emigration could accelerate the loss of the historic Christian presence in certain cities.

22. The ECLJ warns that the recommendations relating to non-discrimination have not been effectively implemented. Reports of social pressures and continued emigration of Christians show that the conditions necessary for their presence in Syria have not yet been met.

Security of Christians and Protection of Places of Worship

23. During the previous cycle, several States recommended that Syria protect civilians, ensure the security of vulnerable populations, and combat violence based on religious or communal identity.²⁴

24. Despite the commitments made by the transitional authorities, Christians continue to face a climate of insecurity. On June 22, 2025, a suicide attack targeted the Greek Orthodox Church of Mar Elias in Damascus, killing at least 25 people and injuring 60.²⁵ It was the deadliest attack against a Syrian church in several years.²⁶ This attack deeply affected the Christian community and revived fears of returning sectarian violence.²⁷

25. Other incidents confirm the persistence of threats against Christians and their places of worship. In December 2025, Syrian authorities announced that they had foiled a planned attack against a neighborhood in Aleppo that exposed a wider ISIS plot for suicide attacks targeting, with crowded public spaces and churches.²⁸ On March 28, 2026, armed men attacked the predominantly Christian town of Sqaylabiyah in Hama Province, sparking fear among residents and causing significant structural damage.²⁹ Several religious leaders interviewed by the ECLJ expressed concern about the authorities' ability to prevent such attacks and to provide lasting protection for affected populations. Even regarding the attack in Sqaylabiyah, the vandals were released the following morning, lamented one senior church representative.

26. Beyond these high-profile attacks, numerous sources report a more diffuse climate of insecurity. Interviewees described acts of intimidation, threats against churches, and hostile rhetoric targeting Christians in certain public spaces and on social media. The academic also noted that Christians are frequently portrayed as supporters or remnants of the former regime ("*fouloul*"), exposing them to intimidation, discrimination, or violence without such acts being explicitly framed in religious terms. At the same time, he observed that Christians appear to benefit from the authorities having greater caution with Christians than some other communities, largely because of sustained international attention to their situation. This relative restraint, however, should not be interpreted as effective protection.

27. One humanitarian worker interviewed by the ECLJ explained that, despite the establishment of transitional institutions, real power often remains fragmented among former armed factions, local security commanders, influential religious figures, tribal actors, and armed groups that have only been partially integrated into official institutions. Such unconsolidated security mechanisms render doubtful the authorities' ability to ensure equal protection for vulnerable communities.

28. Christians are not the only ones affected by this insecurity. Since the fall of the Assad regime, violence targeting Alawites on the Syrian coast in March 2025³⁰ and the deadly clashes in Suwayda in July 2025³¹ further illustrate the unstable environment within Syria. Several sources reported that Christian villages and churches were also affected by the violence in Suwayda, resulting in displacement, damage to religious property, and increased insecurity among local Christian communities.

29. The ECLJ emphasizes that the recommendations for effective protection of civilians and religious communities have been inadequately implemented. The Mar Elias Church attack, the Sqaylabiyah violence, and the general climate of insecurity reported by numerous religious leaders show that the transitional authorities have not yet succeeded in guaranteeing effective protection for places of worship and worshippers themselves.

Accountability, Impunity, and the Rule of Law

30. Several recommendations previously made called on Syria to investigate human rights violations, prosecute those responsible, and guarantee victims' access to justice.³²

31. Since June 2026, demonstrations have taken place in several Syrian cities calling for transparent trials, accountability for crimes committed under the former regime, and effective transitional justice. The United Nations has emphasized that the credibility of the forthcoming justice process will depend on its ability to address serious crimes committed by all perpetrators, not solely those associated with the former Assad regime.³³ Syria's new authorities have announced several investigations into acts of violence committed since the fall of the Assad regime as well as the establishment of investigative committees.³⁴

32. However, several religious leaders and civil society representatives interviewed by the ECLJ questioned the independence, transparency, and effectiveness of these mechanisms. While some high-profile perpetrators under the old regime have been charged,³⁵ the new authorities associate religious minorities with the former government and in practice, permit vandalism, abductions, and extrajudicial killings against these communities.³⁶

33. One humanitarian described this need for impartiality more fully: "I would not say that the authorities provide effective protection. In some cases, they intervene after the damage is done; in other cases, they appear passive, slow, or selective. Their response is often reactive rather than preventive, and more focused on public relations than on justice." Several interlocutors also believed that the absence of credible prosecutions contributes to public mistrust and undermines efforts toward national reconciliation by increasing the risk of revenge attacks and extrajudicial retaliation.

34. In light of these findings, the ECLJ considers that, despite the political transition initiated in December 2024, the recommendations accepted during the previous UPR cycle have not yet been effectively implemented in several key areas, including equal citizenship, freedom of religion or belief, protection against sectarian violence, and accountability. The next phase of the transition will be decisive in determining whether Syria succeeds in building institutions based on equal citizenship, the rule of law, and effective protection for all religious communities.

Recommendations

35. The ECLJ recommends that the Syrian Arab Republic:

36. Guarantee, in the future Constitution and in national legislation, the equality of all citizens regardless of their religion or beliefs in accordance with Articles 18 and 26 of the ICCPR, notably by removing discriminatory provisions relating to religious conversion and personal status.

37. Conduct independent, impartial, and transparent investigations into all sectarian violence committed since December 2024, including the attack against the Mar Elias Church, the massacres committed against Alawites on the Syrian coast, and the violence in Suwayda; publish the findings of these investigations; and prosecute those responsible at all levels of command.

38. Establish effective mechanisms to protect places of worship and religious communities, systematically record acts of violence motivated by religion, and guarantee the security of public religious celebrations.

39. Ensure the effective participation of Christians and other religious and ethnic components of Syrian society in constitutional, legislative, judicial, administrative, and security processes, on the basis of equal citizenship.

40. Adopt a national strategy aimed at preserving Syria's historic religious and cultural pluralism, notably by guaranteeing property rights, the voluntary and safe return of displaced persons, the autonomy of faith-based educational institutions, and conditions enabling younger generations to remain in the country.

¹ Verity Elizabeth Irvine, et al., *Syria*, BRITANNICA, (July 14, 2026), <https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria>.

² *Id.*

³ *Country Update: Syria*, U.S. COMM'N ON INT'L RELIGIOUS FREEDOM 1 (May 2026), <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2026-05/2026%20Syria%20Country%20Update.pdf>.

⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Syria*, BTI TRANSFORMATIONAL INDEX 4 (2026), https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2026_SYR.pdf.

⁵ *Universal Periodic Review Third Cycle – Syrian Arab Republic*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/upr/sy-index> (last visited July 15, 2026).

⁶ *Syria Arab Republic – Infographic*, OHCHR, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/sessions/session40/sy/2023-01-09/SyriaArabRepublic_Infographic_40th.pdf (last visited July 15, 2026).

⁷ *UPR of Syrian Arab Republic (3d Cycle – 40th Session), Thematic List of Recommendations*, OHCHR 6, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/sessions/session40/sy/2023-01-09/UPR40_Syria_Thematic_List_of_Recommendations.doc (last visited July 16, 2026).

⁸ Rep. of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Syrian Arab Republic: Addendum, at 3-4, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/50/6/Add.1 (June 1, 2022), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3982082?ln=en&v=pdf>; see also *UPR of Syrian Arab Republic (3d Cycle – 40th Session), Thematic List of Recommendations*, *supra* note 7, at 2, 4.

⁹ *Syria*, OPEN DOORS INT'L, <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/syria/> (last visited July 15, 2026).

¹⁰ See 2.4.5. *Christians*, EU AGENCY FOR ASYLUM (2025), https://www.euaa.europa.eu/coi/syria/2025/country-focus/24-ethno-religious-minorities/245-christians#footnote_24_xp9X9TJ5h6LKf5lpAE0gPMurkZs0TpWv0GypoFmyxc_a3dqt12WjdYx; see also *The Christians of Syria: An Ancient Community in Crisis*, ARCHONS OF THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE (Jan. 22, 2025, at 8:59).

¹¹ *Country Policy and Information Note: Women, Syria, December 2025 (Accessible)*, GOV. UK, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syria-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-women-syria-december-2025-accessible#fn:11> (last updated Apr. 14, 2026).

¹² CONSTITUTIONAL DECLARATION OF THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC 2025, art. 3,
<https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2025/ar/150231>.

¹³ *Id.* art. 10.

¹⁴ *Id.* art. 12 § 13.

¹⁵ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights arts. 18 § 1, 26, *adopted* Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights> (ratified by Syrian Arab Republic Apr. 21, 1969).

¹⁶ Rep. of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Syrian Arab Republic, ¶¶ 133.79, 133.243, 133.250, 133.263, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/50/6 (Mar. 31, 2022),
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¹⁷ See *Position Statement by Syrian and International Organizations on the Renewal of the Mandate of the International Commission of Inquiry on Syria*, SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUM. RTS. (Apr. 20, 2026),
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¹⁸ See Lyse Doucet & Lina Shaikhouni, *Syria's Only Female Minister Pushes for Change: 'I'm Not Here for Window Dressing'*, BBC (Feb. 1, 2026).

¹⁹ David Gritten, *Syria's President Names Final 70 Lawmakers to New Post-Assad Parliament*, BBC (July 1, 2026), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cljyk4985xwo>.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Syria's New Parliament Holds First Session Since Ouster of Ex-President Assad*, AP NEWS,
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²² Rep. of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Syrian Arab Republic, *supra* note 16, ¶¶ 133.12, 133.13, 133.70, 133.88, 133.89, 133.109.

²³ Muriel Rozelier, *'Enough is Enough': Syrians' Anger Over Reforms*, LA CROIX (June 14, 2026),
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²⁴ Rep. of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Syrian Arab Republic, *supra* note 16, ¶¶ 133.68, 133.83, 133.93, 133.101, 133.102, 133.109, 133.111, 133.115, 133.116.

²⁵ Lina Sinjab, *'We're Not Safe Here Anymore' – Syria's Christians Fear for Future After Devastating Church Attack*, BBC (June 30, 2025), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c79q8p8qx1do>.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Foiled New Year Plot Underscores ISIS Enduring Threat in Syria*, THE ARAB WKLY. (Jan. 2, 2026),
<https://the arabweekly.com/foiled-new-year-plot-underscores-isis-enduring-threat-syria>.

²⁹ Omar Albam, *Sectarian Attacks Rock a Christian Town in Syria After a Dispute*, ASSOCIATED PRESS,
<https://apnews.com/article/syria-christians-sectarian-attacks-suqaylabiyah-d3c66fd9713084c1fbab0c307c77bcf9> (last updated Mar. 28, 2026, at 8:57 EDT).

³⁰ Indep. Int'l Comm'n of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Rep. on Violations Against Civilians in Coastal and Western-Central Regions of the Syrian Arab Republic (January–March 2025), at 1, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/59/CRP.4 (Aug. 11, 2025),
<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/a-hrc-59-crp4-en.pdf>.

³¹ Indep. Int'l Comm'n of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Rep. on Int'l Hum. Rts. L. and Int'l Humanitarian L. Violations Committed During the July 2025 Violence in Suwayda, Syria, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/61/CRP.7 (Mar. 27, 2026),
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³² Rep. of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Syrian Arab Republic, *supra* note 16, ¶¶ 90, 124, 133.15, 133.36, 133.37, 133.43, 133.51, 133.110, 133.115, 133.125, 133.138, 133.146, 133.148, 133.153, 133.159, 133.160, 133.161, 133.163.

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³⁶ *Religious Freedom and Rule of Law in Syria*, U.S. COMM'N ON INT'L RELIGIOUS FREEDOM 29 (May 14, 2026), <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/religious-freedom-and-rule-law-syria>.