

Syria

Country:[Syria](#)**Year:**

2016

Freedom Status:

Not Free

Political Rights:

7

Civil Liberties:

7

Aggregate Score:

-1

Freedom Rating:

7.0

Overview:

The civil war that started in the wake of a peaceful 2011 uprising continued unabated in 2015. By December it had displaced some 6.6 million people within Syria and created roughly 4.3 million Syrian refugees; most of those who remained in the country were in need of humanitarian assistance. The United Nations stopped providing casualty figures in January 2014, but the independent Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported a total of 330,000 dead as of August 2015.

The Syrian regime survived despite losing significant territory to three distinct and mutually hostile groups: the self-declared Islamic State (IS), Kurdish militias, and a loose coalition of rebel factions ranging from relatively moderate forces to radical Islamist organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra, an affiliate of Al-Qaeda. President Bashar al-Assad appeared to enjoy active or passive support among constituencies including religious minorities—Alawites, Christians, and Druze—given the threat of Sunni Muslim extremism. Russia, Iran, the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, and Shiite militias from Iraq continued to provide the regime with critical military, material, and political support. Russia stepped up its involvement in September 2015, moving troops and equipment into the country and beginning a campaign of air strikes from Syrian bases. While Russia largely targeted rebel-held areas, a U.S.-led international coalition continued its own air strikes against IS.

Human rights violations by the regime persisted as it besieged major opposition-held population centers in what amounted to a “surrender or starve” strategy, causing malnutrition and civilian deaths. The government maintained its obstruction of international efforts to aid affected populations, in violation of UN Security Council resolutions, and reports of torture and other mistreatment of detainees continued to emerge. Human Rights Watch as well as Syrian medical and civil defense personnel accused regime forces of using chlorine bombs during 2015, despite

the previous year's completion of an international program designed to eliminate Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons.

Insurgent groups also committed serious human rights violations, though the United Nations reported that these were dwarfed by the regime's abuses. Rebel atrocities included detention, torture, and execution of perceived dissidents and rivals, and sectarian killings of civilians. The worst violators were jihadist militant groups, particularly IS, which suffered some territorial losses to Kurdish and Arab militias but was able to capture new territory and population centers during 2015. Most notably, IS captured the city of Palmyra from government forces in May. Among a variety of other human rights abuses, evidence emerged during the year that IS had used chemical weapons, most likely a mustard agent, against its opponents.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: -3 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

Bashar al-Assad assumed power after the death of his father, longtime president Hafez al-Assad, in 2000. Constitutional revisions adopted in 2012 provided for future presidential elections, replacing a presidential referendum system in which the sole candidate was nominated by the ruling Baath Party. However, among other restrictions, candidates needed support from at least 35 lawmakers to qualify.

Assad was reelected for a third term in June 2014 with what the government claimed was 88.7 percent of the vote amid 73.4 percent turnout. The voting was conducted only in government-controlled areas and in a climate of severe repression. Observers were invited from friendly authoritarian countries including North Korea, while major democratic states denounced the voting as illegitimate.

Members of the 250-seat, unicameral People's Council serve four-year terms but hold little independent legislative power. Almost all power rests in the executive branch. The last legislative elections were held in May 2012 amid open warfare and an opposition boycott. The Baath Party and allied factions took 168 seats, progovernment independents secured 77, and a nominal opposition group won 5.

Opposition-held Syria—as distinguished from IS territory and the Kurdish region—continued to lack an effective or unified governing structure in 2015. The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, or Etilaf, was formed in 2012 to act as the international representative body of the revolution. Comprising delegates from opposition groups in exile, it has been recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by the Arab League, the United States, and many European countries. Etilaf has undergone several changes of leadership through internal elections; in January 2015, delegates meeting in Istanbul chose Khaled Khoja to serve a six-month term as president; he was subsequently reelected in August. These elections are competitive to an extent, but heavily influenced by the coalition's foreign backers. Moreover, Etilaf's links to local leaders and fighters inside Syria remain tenuous, casting serious doubt on the degree to which it is genuinely representative of civilians or fighters in the country.

Provisional local councils in certain rebel-held areas have organized rudimentary elections, and some appear to have been fairly contested and even impartially monitored. Separately, Syria's Kurdish north, known locally as Rojava, declared autonomy from Damascus in January 2014 and adopted a provisional constitution. Its decentralized political and administrative structure prioritizes decision making at the neighborhood and municipal levels, where representatives are directly elected by residents. Elections at these levels took place throughout 2015. However, in Rojava and

elsewhere, experiments in civilian self-government remain vulnerable to derailment by hostile militant groups, bombardment and siege by progovernment forces, and chronic resource shortages. IS does not allow elections of any kind in areas under its control.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16

Formally, the state forbids parties based on religious, tribal, or regional affiliation. Until a 2011 decree allowed the formation of new parties, the only legal factions were the Baath Party and its several small coalition partners. Independent candidates are heavily vetted and closely allied with the regime. The 2012 constitutional reforms relaxed rules regarding the participation of non-Baathist parties, but the government maintains a powerful intelligence and security apparatus to monitor and punish opposition political activity in practice.

Within the domestic progovernment camp, politics and decision making are completely dominated by Assad, his extended family, and a close circle of business and security allies. The president's relatives control key elements of the security forces. Although the government is often described as an Alawite regime and a protector of religious minorities, it is not an authentic vehicle for these groups' 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 indeed includes members of the majority Sunni sect, which also makes up most of the rebel movement; meanwhile, Alawites, Christians, and Druze outside Assad's inner circle are just as politically disenfranchised as the broader Sunni population. Foreign actors including Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia also exert heavy influence over the regime due to their critical contribution to the war effort.

Political activity in rebel-held areas is more vigorous than in regime areas, but it is still seriously constrained, and in some places nonexistent. Civilians' political aspirations are often subordinated to whatever armed group controls a given area. Opposition territory is divided among a multitude of armed factions, including moderate, Islamist, and radical jihadist units, with varying implications for local political life. Local councils are often sponsored or appointed by prominent families and armed groups, and overwhelmed by addressing humanitarian needs and delivering basic services.

In the Kurdish region, the decentralized governance structure allows for the participation of most citizens in political life, including ethnic and religious minorities. However, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the most powerful Syrian Kurdish group, dominates political life in practice and controls most of the Kurdish area's armed forces. It has been accused of arbitrarily detaining perceived opponents.

No political activity is permitted in IS-controlled territory. Those who oppose IS rule must either refrain from expressing their views openly or flee to other areas, as dissent is severely punished.

C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12

Government institutions lacked public accountability and were plagued by corruption even before the armed conflict. Those who question state policies or use of public funds face harassment, imprisonment, or death. Members of the ruling family and their inner circle are said to own or control much of the Syrian economy. The civil war has created new opportunities for corruption within the government and its relations with the private sector. The regime has regularly distributed patronage in the form of public resources, and implemented policies to benefit favored industries and companies, to shore up its base of support. Government contracts and trade deals have also been awarded to allies like Iran as compensation for political and military aid. Even basic state services are extended or withheld based on a community's demonstrated political loyalty to the Assad

regime, providing additional leverage for bribe-seeking officials. Syria was ranked 154 out of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The government's lack of public accountability has been exacerbated during the civil war by the rise of militias that are nominally loyal to the regime but increasingly autonomous and free to exploit the population in regime-held areas. They have reportedly engaged in abuses including looting, extortion, and the erection of arbitrary checkpoints.

Corruption is also widespread in rebel-held areas. Some rebel commanders, including from brigades nominally aligned with democratic powers and their allies, have been accused of looting, extortion, and theft. In addition, 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.

Islamist factions appear somewhat more disciplined and eager to enforce their decrees, though militant groups such as IS are not accountable to the public. IS runs an extensive extortion network and smuggling operations that extend into Iraq and Turkey.

Discretionary Political Rights Question B: -3 / 0

The armed conflict has grown increasingly sectarian, with Sunni civilians bearing the brunt of government and progovernment militia attacks, some Islamist factions persecuting minorities and others they deem insufficiently pious, and civilians of all confessions seeking safety among their respective groups. The result is significant, ongoing change in the country's demographics. In 2015, belligerents negotiated large-scale sectarian population transfers in an apparent attempt to secure their hold on strategic territory, though full implementation of the agreements remained stalled at year's end. Separately, Amnesty International accused Kurdish militias of destroying some Arab and Turkmen settlements and forcibly removing their inhabitants for suspected sympathies with IS or other armed factions.

Civil Liberties: 2 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 2 / 16

The constitution nominally guarantees freedom of speech and the press, but this is not implemented in practice. Freedom of expression is heavily restricted in government-held areas, and journalists or ordinary citizens who disseminate critical views are subject to the regime's coercive measures, including censorship, detention, torture, and death. Most domestic news outlets are controlled by the regime, which substantially hinders access to information. All media are required to obtain permission to operate from the Interior Ministry. The state controls major newspapers, while private media in government areas are generally owned by figures closely associated with the regime. The state has stopped trying to block Facebook but instead uses it for surveillance, monitoring the pages of opponents and dissidents. Meanwhile, the progovernment Syrian Electronic Army has mounted a series of cyberattacks on opposition supporters, activists, and news outlets, including major foreign media.

Media freedom varies in other parts of Syria, but local outlets are generally under heavy pressure to support the dominant militant faction in their area. Journalists in every region suffer from a lack of physical security. At least 14 journalists were killed in Syria in 2015. IS executed a Japanese journalist in January, and in December suspected IS militants murdered editor Ahmed Mohamed al-

Moussa of Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, a citizen journalist group that operates clandestinely in IS-held territory. Others were killed while reporting on front lines, by terrorist bombings, or by regime air strikes. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, as of July some 25 journalists remained missing. Many others have been kidnapped or imprisoned but eventually released.

While the constitution mandates that the president be a Muslim, there is no state religion, and the regime has generally allowed freedom of worship as long as religious activities do not spill over into the political sphere. The government tightly monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim religious leaders. In opposition-held areas, freedom of worship also generally prevails, except in territory controlled by the more extreme Islamist groups. IS has destroyed numerous religious and cultural sites and artifacts in its region, and implemented harsh restrictions on any religious activity that does not conform to its version of Sunni Islam. Christians living in IS-held areas are reportedly forced to pay special taxes and remove all outward symbols of their faith from their homes and persons. The war has increased sectarian hostility and polarization in both government and rebel-held areas. The regime has carried out massacres of Sunni civilians, while non-Sunni civilians have been killed by Sunni jihadists.

Academic freedom is heavily restricted. University professors in government-held areas have been dismissed or imprisoned for expressing dissent, and some have been killed in response to their outspoken support for regime opponents. Education in general has been greatly disrupted by the civil war, with school facilities regularly attacked or commandeered by combatants on all sides. IS has reconstituted an educational system of sorts in some of its territory, though it is based on religious and political indoctrination. Schooling in regime areas continues to emphasize political indoctrination as well. The PYD began to introduce Kurdish-language education in 2015, with critics alleging that the curriculum advanced the party's political agenda.

Private discussion is subject to heavy surveillance and punishment in areas controlled by the government, IS, and the more extreme insurgent groups, but the environment is somewhat more open than before the uprising in some rebel-held districts. The PYD allegedly suppresses freedom of speech in its areas.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12

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. 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. IS, the PYD, and some rebel factions have also used force to suppress civilian demonstrations.

A variety of new grassroots civil society networks have emerged in many parts of Syria since the 2011 uprising, monitoring human rights abuses by all sides in the conflict and attempting to provide humanitarian and other services in areas with no state presence. However, such activists face violence, intimidation, and detention by armed groups, and must operate secretly in some cases.

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, a nominally independent grouping that the government uses to control union activity. The economic and political pressures of the war have made functioning labor relations virtually impossible across the country.

F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16

The constitution forbids government interference in the civil judiciary, but all judges and prosecutors must belong to the Baath Party and are in practice beholden to the political leadership. Military officers can try civilians in both conventional military courts and field courts. 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.

Government forces have been responsible for the arrest and torture of tens of thousands of people since the uprising began in 2011. An archive of some 55,000 images that came to light in 2014—compiled by a military police photographer who defected from the regime—documented the torture, starvation, and death of prisoners on a massive scale. In 2015, a Human Rights Watch analysis of the photos concluded that they showed at least 6,786 different detainees who had died in government custody and showed signs of torture and other mistreatment. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, more than 117,000 people were arrested and detained between 2011 and late 2015.

IS and some other Islamist militant groups have set up crude religious courts in their areas, imposing harsh punishments for perceived offenses by civilians. IS routinely carries out public executions, and insurgent factions including Jabhat al-Nusra have also been accused of summary killings of civilians and torture of detainees. More generally, the breakdown of state authority and the proliferation of both loyalist and rebel militias has led to warlordism, crime, and arbitrary exercise of authority by all sides in the conflict.

The Kurdish minority has historically faced official discrimination and severe restrictions on work, travel, property ownership, and cultural and linguistic expression, though their situation improved significantly after 2011 due to receding government authority. Syrian law also discriminates against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people; according to the 1949 penal code, “unnatural sexual intercourse” is punishable with up to three years in prison. Separately, there were multiple reports in 2015 of IS executing men for their perceived sexual orientation.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 0 / 16

The proliferation of checkpoints manned by various armed groups, heavy combat, and general insecurity have severely restricted the free movement of people and vital supplies since 2011. The regime has systematically blockaded regions controlled by rebels, and rebel and IS forces have done the same to regime-held territories. As of late 2015, more than 400,000 Syrians were living under siege conditions, unable to leave their place of residence.

Rampant corruption predated the Syrian uprising, affecting the daily lives of Syrians. Citizens are frequently required to bribe officials to complete bureaucratic procedures, and business investors and owners must often pay bribes to operate. Since the war broke out, Syrians who fear persecution have been wary of approaching official institutions to request critical documentation, and must resort to the black market. Rebel groups, IS, and Kurdish forces also extort businesses and confiscate private property to varying degrees.

Women are underrepresented in Syrian politics and government, and face serious legal discrimination. They hold just 12 percent of the seats in the legislature, though some have been appointed to senior positions, including one of the two vice presidential posts. Husbands may prevent their wives from leaving the country with their children, and women cannot pass citizenship on to their children. Male perpetrators of killings classified as “honor crimes” can receive reduced sentences under the penal code. Personal status law for Muslims is governed by Sharia (Islamic law) and is discriminatory in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters. Church law governs personal status issues for Christians, in some cases barring divorce.

In addition to increased sexual violence associated with the armed conflict, domestic abuse is endemic. Rates of early marriage are reportedly high, with displaced and refugee families in particular marrying off young daughters as a perceived safeguard against rape, a means of covering up such crimes, or a response to economic pressure. Forced prostitution and human trafficking are also serious problems among these populations.

Conditions for women are uneven in areas outside government control, ranging from extreme discrimination, sexual slavery, and onerous codes of dress and behavior in IS territory, to formal equality under the PYD in Kurdish areas. All government positions in Rojava are reportedly shared between a man and a woman, and women are well represented in political life and military service.

Forced labor is widespread in Syria, as virtually every armed group engages in forced conscription and the use of child soldiers.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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