



SYRIA

Quick Facts

Population: 20,384,316 (July 2021 est.)

Area: 187,437 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab ~50%, Alawite ~15%, Kurd ~10%, Levantine ~10%, other ~15% (includes Druze, Ismaili, Imami, Nusairi, Assyrian, Turkoman, Armenian)

Government: presidential republic; highly authoritarian regime

GDP (official exchange rate): \$50.28 billion (2015 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated May 2021)

Overview

The history and demography of Syria, its governmental structure as a hereditary dictatorship, and the political staying power of clans from among the Alawis, a sect regarded by most Muslims as beyond the bounds of the faith, has made Syria uniquely fertile ground for Islamist and jihadist opposition.¹ The Islamic State (IS), in its various forms dating back to its affiliation with Al Qaeda, received support from the Assad regime to wage war on the Iraqi government and Coalition forces after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.² The Assad regime has also provided shelter and support to various Islamist movements, including Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas movement. Since the outbreak of the country's popular uprising in March 2011, the government worked with allied extremist groups to help destroy the rebellion – a conflict which continues, in more muted form, to this day.

Today, the Syrian civil war has largely abated, despite ongoing violence in pockets of the country and the presence of Islamist forces on Syrian soil. The Assad regime, assisted by strategic partners Russia and Iran, continues to seek to eliminate opposition to its rule, secular and Islamist alike. Since the collapse of the Islamic State caliphate in 2019, the country has also seen the rise of a new problem – that of IS elements and their families now located in refugee camps in the country's northeast. These facilities, such as the notorious Al-Hawl camp, have emerged as an issue of significant concern for the international community because of their size and the prevalence of IS ideology within them. Both Western and regional officials now worry that these camps have the potential to breed a new generation of jihadists.

LEVEL OF ISLAMIST ACTIVITY: Severe

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB)

The SMB is the oldest and most prominent of the country's oppositional Islamist movements. The Syrian

chapter of the Brotherhood was established in 1946 under the leadership of Mustafa al-Siba'i.³ Emboldened by the French departure from Syria, and influenced by his time spent in Cairo with Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna, Al-Siba'i openly identified his network as that group's Syrian chapter.⁴ Like the Brotherhood's original branch in Egypt, the SMB promoted an anti-imperialist ideology.

This does not mean, however, that the SMB was a carbon copy of its parent organization at its founding; rather, the SMB retained its unique identity as a conglomeration of indigenous Sufi Islamic societies.⁵ Moreover, the Syrian branch of the Brotherhood was a small, elitist, and parliamentary institution. The SMB was always careful to stress its subordination to the Brotherhood's Supreme Guide (the organization's spiritual leader) in Cairo, but the operational significance of this allegiance appears to have been minimal, and the SMB has always been almost entirely autonomous.⁶

The SMB had always been careful to present a non-sectarian image, even as it worked for a Sunni empowerment that would in practice have meant a reduction in the status of Syria's minorities.⁷ With Ba'athist rule beginning in 1963 (something that is, to date, uninterrupted), the societal dynamics in Syria became less accommodating for the SMB. The group was banned in 1963 and membership was deemed punishable by death in 1980.⁸ In response, the group went into systemic opposition and became a powerful element of the Islamist current that would dominate the anti-Ba'athist movement between 1963 and 1982.⁹

Following the 1982 Hama uprising, in which the military, under the direction of Hafez al-Assad, killed as many as 40,000 people in that city in less than a month,¹⁰ some members ceased opposition activity altogether and disaffiliated from the SMB. After a period of dormancy, in 1996 Ali Sadredeen al-Bayanuni took over the SMB, which was by then headquartered in Jordan. Al-Bayanuni sought to distance the SMB from violence and sectarianism, reinventing the group as a moderate conservative force that was committed to parliamentary democracy and rights for religious minorities—even going to far as to say a Christian or an Alawi would be acceptable as president,¹¹ and renouncing violence in 2001.¹²

Al-Bayanuni worked assiduously in the early 2000s to strengthen the Brotherhood's ties to the secular opposition, and signed onto the October 2005 Damascus Declaration alongside a broad spectrum of Syrian oppositionists. The statement called on the Assad regime - weakened after its assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, which prompted a rebellion in Lebanon that ended the Syrian occupation there and generated global condemnation and isolation - to permit a "peaceful, gradual" democratic reform process.¹³

The Declaration did little to mobilize internal resistance to Assad, however. In 2006, the SMB formed an alliance with Abd al-Halim Khaddam, a prominent regime defector and Sunni ex-Ba'athist who had once served as vice-president. This union went nowhere, however. In 2009, after Israel's Operation CAST LEAD against Hamas in Gaza, the SMB under Al-Bayanuni changed direction again: publicly embracing a militant posture, attempting to defuse tensions with the Assad regime, using its support for Hamas to suspend opposition activities, and trying to have Qatar and Turkey mediate with Damascus. However, Assad did not bite and, in 2010, Al-Bayanuni and his Aleppine supporters lost the internal elections, being replaced by a Hamawi faction led by Muhammad Riad al-Shaqfa and his deputy, Mohammed Faruq Tayfur.¹⁴

In March 2011, the Arab revolutionary wave arrived in Syria in the form of mass anti-regime protests. In the latter months of 2011, after six months of mostly peaceful demonstrations, protesters began to pick up weapons to defend themselves from the regime's onslaught and Syria spiraled into an armed rebellion.

Both the protests and subsequent violence took the Brotherhood and its affiliates by surprise. The group's standard operating procedure is to work within systems to change them in directions it finds congenial, rather than fomenting revolution.¹⁵ In the peripheral towns, where the Ba'ath party was more influential and where more economically disenfranchised people lived, people resorted to violence earlier. This class division—with the city-dwellers "bristl[ing] at the idea that they would be led by provincials"—was one of many cleavages Assad would seek to inflame to prevent a united front against his government.¹⁶

The Brotherhood had no infrastructure of its own to contend with these events, so, for the purposes of distributing resources within the rebellion, it created a Civilian Protection Commission (CPC) in late 2011. By March 2012, the Brotherhood had openly endorsed violent resistance against the Assad regime.¹⁷

In January 2013, the SMB formed the Shields of the Revolution Council, an alliance of militarized anti-government factions.¹⁸ However, by August of the following year, the group dissolved, and its constituent parts were either absorbed by the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council¹⁹ or absorbed into the so-called Sham Legion with other groups not previously affiliated with the SMB.²⁰

Meanwhile, in November 2013, the SMB announced the formation of the National Party for Justice and the Constitution (otherwise known as the “Waad” or “Promise” Party). Waad’s abilities to mobilize and organize have proven lacking; although years in the making, the party’s founding and beginnings were tumultuous.²¹ It formally launched in March 2014 from Istanbul, where some SMB members, including current leader Dr. Mohamed Hikmat Walid, had been in exile during the civil war.²² Like other Brotherhood-linked parties, Waad has attempted to distance itself from its Islamist links in favor of a nationalist platform.²³ However, this has not stymied speculation that it simply serves as an instrument of the Brotherhood’s will in Syrian politics; in November 2014, the then-head of Waad resigned to assume leadership of the SMB. Moreover, the organization still funds much of the party’s operations.²⁴

Currently fractured among several countries – including Syria itself after 2015, when hundreds of SMB members began to return despite membership in the organization being a capital offense²⁵ – the Syrian Brotherhood remains politically weak. Despite continued backing from the Turkish government, the SMB is not affiliated with any current member of the UN-guided post-civil war constitutional assembly.²⁶ While the official excuse was that the process was not sufficiently independent and therefore illegitimate, the real reason has more to do with the group’s marginalization; the only constituent to the assembly affiliated with the SMB, Ahmad Sayyed Yousef, was forced out of the process days before any official stance by the Brotherhood was taken.²⁷

Hezbollah

Hezbollah, a key Iranian proxy designated a terror group by the U.S. State Department,²⁸ has been active in Syria in various capacities for decades. In 1982, the Assad regime allowed Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) to set up a training camp within Syria’s borders, in the Beqaa Valley. The activity was driven by Iran and Syria’s shared adversarial relationship with Israel, whom the IRGC planned to target with the new fighters. Hezbollah’s inaugural class was formed from this cadre.²⁹ However, the relationship fell apart due to infighting in the latter half of the decade, when the two countries began to compete for influence. The rift would last until 1990, when Iran and Syria agreed to cease their conflict and cooperate strategically.³⁰

The 1990s and 2000s marked a shift in the relationship between Hezbollah and the Syrian government. While the two were previously hostile, they now complimented one another, working toward mutual goals. When Syrian-Israeli peace talks ultimately failed in January 2000 and the latter unilaterally withdrew from Lebanon that May, the relationship between Syria and Iran, a historic adversary of Israel, was preserved.³¹ Between June 2000, when Bashar al-Assad ascended to head the Syrian government, and the outset of the Arab Spring in March 2011, the relationship between the Syrian government and the Iranian proxy assumed a more equal footing. In 2006, when Hezbollah and Israel engaged in a summer of conflict, Syria supplied Hezbollah with weaponry.³² In January 2011, Hezbollah party members and their allies, then in positions of authority within the Lebanese government, precipitated its constitutional collapse by simultaneously withdrawing from their posts.³³ This followed failed efforts by the Syrian and Saudi governments to jointly mediate tensions between Hezbollah and Lebanon’s unity government after the latter permitted UN investigations into the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, of which Hezbollah was suspected.³⁴

After the onset of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, the Syrian regime was increasingly propped up

and defended by both Iran and Hezbollah.³⁵ For Hezbollah, the decision to do so was a strategic one; the group hoped to increase its foothold in Syria as a result of its involvement. In 2016, during an interview with Iranian state TV, retired General Mohammad Ali Al Falaki stated that Hezbollah had formed a new branch, the “Shia Liberation Army,” the primary objective of which “would be to fight in Arab countries and would recruit heavily from non-Iranian Shia Muslims across the world.”³⁶

Estimates from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights place the number of Hezbollah fighters killed in the conflict at 1,697 as of March 2020.³⁷ This figure has likely increased since due to ongoing fighting involving Hezbollah.³⁸ Death at such a scale reflects that a significant contingent of the Hezbollah fighters has been dispatched to Syria over the conflict. In September 2017, one commander of the group claimed that as many as 10,000 Hezbollah members had been dispatched to Syria at the height of the group’s involvement.³⁹ While other estimates place the figure lower, at 7,000,⁴⁰ it nonetheless represents the largest deployment of Hezbollah fighters outside Lebanon to take place in the group’s history.

The cost to Hezbollah has not been solely human. In May 2020, an Iranian parliamentarian told state media that the country – Hezbollah’s largest financial backer – likely spent roughly \$20-30 billion in Syria since the onset of the civil war.⁴¹ However, this figure could be higher than reported. Sources within the Lebanese security apparatus estimated in 2013 that Iran, by way of Hezbollah, was spending roughly \$600-700 million per month in Syria.⁴² Notably, this estimate was provided before fighting in Syria reached its peak intensity.

With the effective end of the Syrian civil war and the victory of the Assad regime, Hezbollah has begun withdrawing fighters from that front.⁴³ Multiple sources told *al-Arabiya* in September 2020 that roughly 2,500 Hezbollah fighters remained in Syria – a significant decrease in numbers over years past.⁴⁴ However, this drawdown has not precluded the group from continuing to fight Israeli forces and their allies in the country.⁴⁵

JIHADI ORGANIZATIONS

Sunni Islamism is an opposition movement in Syria, but the picture is complicated by the ruling regime’s attempts to coopt and weaponize it. Many *jihadists* that have fought the Syrian government over the last decade can trace their roots, in some way, to March-May 2011, when the Assad regime released hundreds of political prisoners in an attempt to placate anti-regime protestors.⁴⁶ Among the list of previous detainees were members of *Al-Nusra* and the Islamic State, as well as those who would go on to become the leaders of Jaysh al-Islam, Liwa al-Haq, Ahrar al-Sham, and Suqur al-Sham – some of the most formidable Islamist units in the insurgency.⁴⁷ Simultaneously, the Assad dynasty has used terrorism of every ideological shade as an instrument of its foreign policy since its foundation, as Western statesmen who have engaged the regime continually find.⁴⁸

Today, despite the end of the Syrian civil war, the situation remains complicated. While the Islamic State’s physical *caliphate* has been eliminated, the terror group has not ceased violent activity in Syria, and has given clear indications that it is attempting a resurgence. According to the Counter Extremism Project, Islamic State militants “carried out at least 35 attacks, killing at least 76 pro-Assad regime fighters in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, Hama, and Aleppo governorates” in August 2020 alone.⁴⁹ The following month, they carried out at least 32 attacks, killing as many pro-regime fighters, as well as 12 civilians, in the same regions.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, al-Nusra has been absorbed by, and morphed into, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which has gradually transitioned into a Turkish proxy organization⁵¹ in the face of U.S. drone strikes and Syrian government forces.⁵² Ahrar al-Sham, meanwhile, has seemingly endorsed HTS as the leading resistance organization,⁵³ suggesting that it might soon fall under the HTS banner. As for Hamas, it is currently on the outs with the Syrian regime, but receiving backing from Turkey and Russia and appears to be hoping to use these latter relationships to repair the former.⁵⁴

The Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS) and Al-Nusra Front

Ahmad al-Shara (Abu Muhammad al-Jolani) was dispatched to Syria in the summer of 2011 as part of the Islamic State's advance team, which sought to expand the group's reach from Iraq into Syria. In doing so, it established satellite organization Jabhat al-Nusra (now Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS).⁵⁵ When ISIS's then-leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, tried to publicly take ownership of *Al-Nusra* in 2013, Al-Shara refused and instead swore allegiance to al-Qaeda, which soon expelled ISIS.⁵⁶ The Assad regime's role in supporting ISIS is something the group itself has since documented in its newsletter.⁵⁷ This support included freeing imprisoned *jihādists* to disrupt anti-government forces and protestors,⁵⁸ transporting Islamic State fighters to Idlib to fight,⁵⁹ and buying oil from ISIS-controlled territory.⁶⁰

One of the key leaders that enabled the group to expand in Syria—and to nearly destroy Al-Nusra by secretly recruiting many of its *emirs* and foreign fighters—was Amr al-Absi (Abu al-Atheer). Al-Absi was arrested in 2007, during one of the Assad regime's periodic crackdowns on *jihādists*, but was subsequently released by the Syrian government, along with hundreds of other hardened radicals, in May or June of 2011.⁶¹ The jail cells at the infamous Sednaya prison had been emptied of *jihādists* within a few months of the start of the uprising, and those cells were instead filled with peaceful protesters.⁶² “The regime did not just open the door to the prisons and let these extremists out,” explained one military defector, “it facilitated them in their work, in their creation of armed brigades.” In January 2017, the al-Nusra Front announced that it dissolved and formed Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in its place.⁶³

By December 2017, the Islamic State presence in Syria was drastically reduced as a result of coordinated counterterror efforts between global governments and local forces. This included Raqqa, a city designated as the capital of the *caliphate*.⁶⁴ In March 2019, the U.S.-aligned Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) officially declared victory over the Islamic State after the battle of Baghouz.⁶⁵ Now, the terror group is involved in what the Center for International Security and Cooperation refers to as “a decentralized, guerilla-style insurgency” that continues to “carry out attacks through sleeper cells” in, among other places, Syria.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, dozens of governments from all over the world are currently grappling with how to manage the thousands of men, women, and children who travelled to Syria from their homes – some of whom swore allegiance to the Islamic State and fought on its behalf – and are now returning to their countries of origin.⁶⁷

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, or “Organization for the Liberation of the Levant”)

HTS was formed in January 2017 as an amalgamation of other *jihādist* organizations, including Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra), Harakat Nour al-Din al-ZInki, Liwa al-Haq, Jaysh al-Sunna, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din.⁶⁸ Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham's public ideological separation from al-Qaeda – the catalyst for its rebranding – carried over when it evolved into HTS as a collective. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the *emir* of al-Qaeda, publicly denounced HTS's formation as an unsanctioned “violation of the covenant.”⁶⁹

Led by Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, a veteran *jihādist* with ties to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the late leader of the Islamic State's precursor group,⁷⁰ HTS has evolved into one of the leading resistance forces fighting the Syrian government. Like other *jihādist* factions involved, HTS's focus is domestic; it seeks to form an Islamic *caliphate* specific to Syria by “toppling the criminal regime and expelling the Iranian militias.”⁷¹ It has also, at various times during its struggle, fought the Islamic State and the National Liberation Front (NLF) for control or primacy.⁷² In its conflict with the latter, HTS would gain territory in the Idlib governorate and cease fighting in 2019, thereafter turning its attention toward the Syrian regime.⁷³ Today, the remainder of the anti-Assad resistance, including HTS, continues fighting the regime in Idlib. This does not, however, mean that the resistance is unified; in June 2020, HTS was involved in fighting different defector factions, including Hurras al-Deen, which has become al-Qaeda's newest Syrian surrogate.⁷⁴ HTS itself “insists it is independent, but the UN and the US both regard it as associated with al-Qaeda.”⁷⁵

Harakat al-Muqāwamah al-'Islāmiyyah (Hamās, or “Islamic Resistance Movement”)

Hamas, a Sunni fundamentalist, anti-Israel paramilitary organization that now most notably serves as the *de facto* governing body of the Gaza Strip in the Palestinian territories, has had a tumultuous relationship with the Syrian regime. Hamas established military ties to Damascus beginning in 1993, and opened its central office in Damascus in 1999.⁷⁶ When Bashar al-Assad ascended to the Syrian presidency in 2000, he adopted staunch anti-Israeli stances and allowed Hamas to propagate in the country's Palestinian refugee camps. In turn, the organization provided social services and gained grassroots support among that constituency.⁷⁷

However, the dynamic between Hamas and the Syrian government shifted dramatically during the Arab Spring and subsequent Syrian civil war. The shift was largely a product of the Syrian government's widespread, fatal abuse of protestors, thousands of whom were refugees from the Palestinian territories. (According to one prominent Syria-focused human rights organization, the Syrian government has, as of summer 2020, killed nearly 3,200 Palestinian refugees, nearly 500 of whom were tortured to death. Over 2,600 others "disappeared" into state intelligence prisons.⁷⁸) Facing significant pressure from its support network in the Palestinian territories, and after months of silence out of fear that the party would draw the ire of the Assad regime,⁷⁹ Hamas officially endorsed ongoing open armed rebellion against the Syrian government in February 2012.⁸⁰

Now that the Syrian civil war is effectively over, and the Assad regime is reestablishing control over the country, Hamas is attempting to repair this damaged relationship. So far, however, the Assad regime has proved unwilling to reconcile. In June 2019, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that Iran and Hezbollah were mediating discussions between Hamas and the Syrian government. However, at the time, the office of Bashar al-Assad released public statements that reiterated its accusations that Hamas supported terrorism in Syria.⁸¹ Later that year and continuing into 2020, Hamas was reportedly engaged in high level conversations with the Russian government (an ally and supporter of the Assad regime). In March 2020, Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas' political leader, supported Assad's sovereignty over Syria while attending a conference in Moscow.⁸²

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (Otherwise known as Ahrar al-Sham, or "The Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant") 83

Ahrar al-Sham formed after Hassan Abboud and other anti-Assad political prisoners were released by the regime during the Arab Spring between March and May of 2011. The group announced itself in Idlib in January 2012.⁸⁴ Over time, Ahrar al-Sham has grown in size and stature, proving itself capable of absorbing Jaysh al-Islam and Suqur al-Sham, as well as Kateeb Thawar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, Tajamo Fastaqim Kama Umirat, and al-Jabha al-Shamiya.⁸⁵

Ahrar's start-up funders were linked to al-Qaeda networks on the Gulf. Among its founders was Muhammad al-Bahaya (Abu Khaled al-Suri), a veteran *jihadi* and the personal emissary to Syria of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁸⁶ Institutionally, Ahrar's decision to work in lockstep with Al-Nusra was the single most important factor in the latter's empowerment.⁸⁷ The group spent years attempting to differentiate itself from al-Qaeda.⁸⁸ One way in which it sought to do so is through the definition of its goals and ideology; while, like other Sunni-*jihadi* organizations, it seeks to establish an Islamic state, its efforts are domestic in nature, focused entirely on Syria.⁸⁹

In 2018, Ahrar al-Sham merged with the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, another Sunni Islamist rebel group, to form the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF), which, in turn, would join the National Liberation Front (NLF) along with other anti-Assad groups. This was due, in part, to increasing tension between those groups with HTS.⁹⁰ However, fighting between the two factions ended in 2019, after the NLF lost most of its control over Idlib and agreed to recognize HTS' dominion. The two now coordinate anti-regime efforts.⁹¹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

As of October 2020, an estimated 87% of the people in Syria identify as Muslim, according to the CIA World Factbook. More specifically, roughly 74% of the country identifies as Sunni, while the other 13% identifies as Alawi, Ismaili, or Shia.⁹² However, it is currently not fully clear how the Syrian civil war has impacted religious demographics inside the country. According to the United Nations, as of mid-October 2020 there are roughly 5.57 million registered Syrian refugees in other countries, including Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.⁹³ There are also roughly 6.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) still living in Syria, according to U.S. intelligence estimates.⁹⁴

In the decades leading up to the Syrian civil war, several smaller cities in the country grew in population and economic prosperity. As a result, mosques grew in prominence, assuming the role of community centers. While approval by the central government was still required to serve as an *imam* in Syria (see the section on “Islamism and the State”), because mosques increasingly depended on local (rather than federal) funding, this dynamic had the effect of making religious identity and political Islam more localized. With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, cities became more isolated from one another, and this localization accelerated.⁹⁵

Because Syria’s religious landscape was now almost entirely decentralized by the regionalization of the country, mosques both became 1) more prominent in the local *milieu*, and 2) increasingly under the control of opposition groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, whose Salafi ideologies were antithetical to the Assad regime’s Alawite Shi’ism.⁹⁶ Thus, propagation of Salafism in those isolated areas became more common, while Sufism and more moderate interpretations of the religion were pushed out.⁹⁷

Some attribute this Islamic awakening to the fact that donations from the Arab Gulf states and private Arab donors outpaced assistance from the West. According to such “resource mobilization” explanations,⁹⁸ the influx of cash from Salafi donors not only strengthened *jihadi* forces vis-à-vis the FSA, but also led relatively secular groups within the FSA to adopt Salafi dress and customs.⁹⁹ Many rank and file fighters of Salafi-*jihadi* militias are devout Sunnis with no firm extremist convictions. Rather, in the words of one expert, “[s]ize, money and momentum are the things to look for in Syrian insurgent politics—ideology comes fourth, if even that.”¹⁰⁰

As of writing, Syrian people are reconciling with, among countless other things, residual sentiment for *jihadi* organizations. Whether these groups have been able to recruit people in Idlib based on Islamic principles or because of anti-government sentiment, however, is unclear. The collapse of the IS *caliphate* in 2019 also gave rise to a new phenomenon: that of displaced foreign fighters and their families. Many of these individuals are now located in refugee camps in the country’s northeast, administered by the Kurdish Syrian Defense Forces (SDF). However, there are widespread concerns regarding the conditions in these camps (including the most prominent, known as Al-Hawl). Experts and policymakers alike have worried that Al-Hawl and other facilities are largely unregulated, remain hotbeds of IS ideology, and could end up breeding a new generation of Islamic extremists.¹⁰¹ Millions of other Syrian refugees, who had been driven out of their homes by regime forces during the course of the conflict, are currently living in the Idlib region of northwest Syria, which remains controlled by the *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*.¹⁰² These refugees are unlikely to return home while Bashar al-Assad remains in power, and some may take up arms against the regime in the future.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In the early years of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, there was some talk of liberalization. Assad tried to maintain open lines of communication with the country’s religious opposition and even attempted to court their support. He made religion a topic of his speeches,¹⁰³ and state universities held Qur’an recitation competitions.¹⁰⁴ There were even prisoner releases for Islamists who had been imprisoned during the rule of his father, Hafez. The ban on women wearing the headscarf in public schools was likewise lifted,¹⁰⁵ and

mosques were permitted to remain open between prayer times.¹⁰⁶ However, within a year of taking power in 2000, Bashar was already moving to restrict the space for opposition elements, and religious institutions remained under firm state control.¹⁰⁷

A key element of the Assad regime's public messaging after the civil war began in 2011 revolved around its purported efforts to protect religious minorities. Realistically, however, Syria's governance is focused on controlling religious discourse to orient it toward pro-state attitudes.¹⁰⁸ The Assad regime has now succeeded in creating a unified Sunni clerical establishment that is under firm state control. However, as previously mentioned, this centralization appears brittle, with those clerics serving the system discredited by the association, and the extreme pressure brought to bear by the regime has succeeded in creating a unified opposition establishment.

Assad's Syria has long served as a state sponsor of terrorism. According to the State Department's most recent *Country Reports on Terrorism*:

Syria continued its political and military support to various terrorist groups... The Assad regime's relationship with [Hezbollah] and Iran grew stronger in 2019 as the regime became more reliant on external actors to fight opponents and secure areas. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) remains present and active in the country with the permission of President Bashar al-Assad... Over the past two decades, the Assad regime's permissive attitude towards AQ and other terrorist groups' FTF facilitation efforts during the Iraq conflict fed the growth of AQ, ISIS, and affiliated terrorist networks inside Syria. The Syrian government's awareness and encouragement for many years of terrorists' transit through Syria to Iraq for the purpose of fighting U.S. forces before 2012 is well documented. Those very networks were among the terrorist elements that brutalized the Syrian and Iraqi populations in 2019.¹⁰⁹

Iran's support for the Assad regime is framed by, among other things, ideological motivations. Although the historically secular Syrian state and the Shi'a Islamic Republic of Iran may not have similar end goals, the Iranian regime saw the opportunity to confront *takfiri* (non-believers – in this case the Islamic State, Sunni terror opposition groups, and Israel) on Syrian soil.¹¹⁰ What's more, keeping the Alawite Assad regime in power furthers Iran's goals of establishing a "Shi'a crescent" and extending its own influence throughout the region and presented an opportunity to put its own troops on the Israeli border.¹¹¹ The Assad regime has acquiesced to Iran's intrusion because it has, in recent years, required near-comprehensive support in order to maintain its hold on power – something the Iranian government provided via equipment, Shi'a militia groups and other fighters, intelligence support, guidance from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and financial assistance.¹¹²

The winddown of the Syrian civil war over the course of the past year-and-a-half has seen the Assad regime remain in power, although without full control over the entirety of its territory. Despite Western pressure, Russian military forces remain entrenched in the country, as do Iranian paramilitary troops and Iranian-supported irregulars.¹¹³

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