



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN SYRIA

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Religious Freedom in Syria Under Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

Syria remains fragmented 11 years after the onset of its brutal civil war, as a range of internal and external actors control territory in areas outside the governance of President Bashar al-Assad's Ba'athist regime. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—a former al-Qaeda affiliate; an evolving conglomerate of militant Islamist Syrian rebel groups; and [U.S.-designated](#) terrorist group since 2018—continues to grow and consolidate its administrative power over the northwestern province of Idlib.

Although HTS has cut formal ties with al-Qaeda, engaged in self-promotional [interviews](#) with international media, and attempted to rebrand itself as a legitimate civic authority, it remains a potent source of a [Salafi-jihadism](#) that restricts the religious freedom of non-conforming Sunni Muslims and threatens the property, safety, and existence of religious minority groups such as Alawites, Christians, and Druze. Further, HTS's cultivation of a mutually and politically expedient relationship with Turkey—which itself represents a distinct threat to vulnerable religious minority groups via its military incursions in northern Syria—compounds the perilous religious freedom conditions in and near Idlib.

Evolution of HTS

HTS, or Organization for the Liberation of the Levant, has undergone several name and purported identity changes since its [origins](#) in 2011 as Jabhat al-Nusra, originally a Syrian [front](#) for the [Islamic State in Iraq](#), which at the time was itself an Iraqi affiliate of al-Qaeda. HTS's successive [renamings and "rebrandings"](#) appear to echo al-Qaeda's own strategy in Syria of establishing branches and [presenting them](#) as locally-grown organizations arising in response to Syrians' needs. This practice is especially notable for purposes of evaluating HTS's religious freedom progress: the organization's 2016 advertised [break](#) with al-Qaeda and a 2021 campaign to [rehabilitate](#) its militant image follow an established trajectory of repackaging and marketing anew the same core values of a Salafi-jihadism fiercely intolerant of perceived or actual [dissent](#).

While the Assad government has [regained or maintained control](#) of approximately 70 percent of Syria, the northwestern region, particularly the governorate of Idlib, constitutes a significant pocket of rebel resistance. Today, HTS is the dominant [regime-opposed force](#) of this sort and, via the "Salvation Government" [it controls](#), the de facto administrative authority in Idlib. However, the Salvation Government's HTS-rehabilitation experiment remains in its early stages; any change in the geopolitical calculus of Syria could trigger HTS's escalation of brutality. For example, if the Assad regime [reclaims](#) territory in the northwest, HTS's resulting loss of "state-building" as a legitimate platform could prompt its return to large-scale acts of insurgency

and terrorism, with severe consequences for religious freedom. Moreover, the group has accompanied its claims to additional territory with assertive and sometimes violent expressions of religious ideology. Most recently, in October 2022, HTS—along with its Turkish-backed Syrian rebel allies—[advanced](#) on the strategically important city of Afrin and other parts of the Aleppo governorate, mounting a lethal campaign against rival Turkish-backed militias and gaining partial control of [the area](#). HTS [partially withdrew](#) its forces at Turkey’s apparent behest, but not before instituting stringent, religiously-justified [dress codes](#) on local women and reportedly invoking religious ideology to commit crimes such as crop theft and the torture and murder of a teenager.

Religious Freedom Violations

In 2021 and 2022, HTS has continued to perpetrate some of the [same human rights abuses](#)—including torture, forced disappearance, rape and other sexual violence, and killing in detention—that the United Nations’ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria [documented](#) for the organization and its predecessors through 2020. Having taken over government prisons and established additional [jails](#), HTS has used [sectarian-motivated](#) detention and related abduction and demands for ransom against members of minority groups. Religious minorities, including non-Sunni Muslims and Druze—both longstanding targets of Sunni rebel groups’ discrimination, harassment, and compelled Sunnism—have [converted to Sunni Islam or fled](#) HTS territories, and those who remain are not [represented](#) in the official bodies governing the area.

Some of the organization’s human rights abuses have clear implications for religious freedom in Syria’s northwest. For example, HTS employs [arbitrary detention](#) and criminal prosecution for a variety of reasons, including punishing as “[slander and blasphemy](#)” individuals’ private conversations related to religious matters. In May 2021, HTS personnel apprehended two men praying in an Aleppo governorate mosque and [arrested](#) them for incorrect praying practices. The arrestees, who are students from the Memorizing the Holy Quran Institute of Mus’ab Bin Omair Mosque, suffered detention and suspected torture. [Markaz al-Falah](#)—formerly a branch of the Hesba religious police and [rebranded](#) in September 2021 as a “morality police”—[enforce religiously-justified dress codes](#) against women, arresting them for being “inappropriately dressed” and for using or participating in entertainment banned on religious grounds. In 2021, the Syrian Network for Human

Rights estimated that at least 2,246 Syrian citizens were “still [detained or forcibly disappeared](#)” in HTS detention centers.

Religious minorities, too, suffer serious harm within HTS’s authoritarian regime. Since 2015, religious minorities such as [Christians](#) and Druze have [lost their homes and land](#) to HTS and its predecessors. Under the present Salvation Government, the Properties Committee (formerly the “Spoils of War” Committee) continues to [misappropriate Christians’ private properties](#) and either redistribute them to HTS members and their families or rent them to internally displaced persons for the Salvation Government’s profit. Evidence suggests that this confiscation scheme, which includes the “targeting” of Christians, may amount to the war crime of [pillage](#).

As part of a broader effort to accelerate his public relations campaign, HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani [met](#) with Idlib’s Christians in July 2022, agreeing to form a committee to review requests by many Christian owners whose properties were seized and restore their confiscated lands, orchards, and shops. Likewise, in the summer of 2022, the Jolani regime publicized its building of [a well](#) to supply water to Druze-majority villages in the northern Idlib area of Jabal al-Summaq. At the well’s inauguration in June, al-Jolani made statements distancing HTS from the 2015 [massacre](#) of 20 Druze residents by HTS’s predecessor group.

Despite such recent overtures toward religious minorities, HTS forces continue to harass religious minorities and prevent them from the [free practice](#) of their religion, forbidding Christians’ ringing of church bells or holding some religious ceremonies. HTS’s highly sectarian appeal to Sunni identity continues to assert itself in both direct and indirect ways, including its [unamended policy](#) requiring Druze to renounce their faith and declare conversion to Sunni Islam.

Education is another sphere in which HTS’s restriction of religious freedom has been deeply burdensome, especially to women and girls. Although some observers have suggested that the group’s religious curriculum promotes slightly less “[harsh interpretations](#)” of Shari’a relative to the schools of other radical Islamist groups, HTS-established schools still leave little room for theological or ideological dissent from the group’s Salafi-jihadist [version](#) of Islam. In August 2022, for example, building upon existing religiously justified and compulsory sex segregation in schools and [wider society](#), the Education Directorate of the Salvation Government gave oral instructions to teachers

and administrators to [block](#) married female students—including girls subjected to forced child marriage—from attending public schools and universities.

Political Context in the Northwest

In addition to the religious freedom violations just described that are definitively attributable to HTS, observers have identified HTS as one of [a few](#) rebel groups with Turkish links who may have orchestrated recent violent attacks on religious minorities, such as a July 2022 [explosion](#) that targeted a Greek Orthodox church [inauguration](#) in Hama—a governorate that HTS partially controls.

As compared to Syrian opposition militias that receive direct backing from Turkey, such as factions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), HTS has a more complicated symbiotic relationship with Turkey—a powerful military aggressor seeking to secure its border against Syrian Kurdish foes and to [potentially resettle](#) in northern Syria millions of displaced Syrians who are currently living as [refugees in Turkey](#). Turkey has designated HTS as a terrorist organization, yet, perhaps in tacit exchange for HTS's services as a watchdog and [security force](#), it has not actively impeded the rebel group from gaining administrative power in Idlib in recent years. Ultimately, HTS's relations with Turkey have serious ramifications for religious freedom, especially given the [escalating encroachment](#) in parts of northern Syria of Turkey's military and Syrian proxies, which continue to devastate religious minority groups already at [heightened risk for extinction](#).

Some analysis has affirmed HTS's [narrative](#) that it has successfully [expelled foreign fighters](#) and kept at bay transnational jihadist activity in areas it controls. However, others have [questioned](#) whether HTS has effectively subdued the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in particular, pointing to the unlikelihood that two ISIS leaders whom the United States killed in 2022 could have existed in the Idlib area without HTS's [knowledge](#).

HTS's strategy for dealing with various jihadist and rebel groups, both within Syria and beyond, likely poses an indirect threat to religious freedom for the residents in the northwest. If HTS fulfills its authoritarian promise of stamping out *rival* jihadist or rebel groups, its approach could "[exacerbate radicalization](#)" among those who otherwise may not have aligned ideologically with ISIS and al-Qaeda but "are pushed by their grievances and shared enmity of al-Jolani to join such groups." Conversely, HTS's weaknesses in regulating other radical militant groups may prove equally dangerous: experts have raised "questions about [HTS's] ability to prevent Idlib from becoming a [staging ground for transnational jihadists](#)"—groups that present a proven threat to the safety, existence, and religious freedom of local populations, especially religious minorities. The Idlib governorate's Druze community, for example, has expressed concern that HTS cannot or will not bring to justice foreign-origin Islamist fighters who target the Druze for crimes such as the potentially sectarian murder in August 2022 of an elderly Druze couple.

Conclusion

Despite HTS's concerted public relations campaign to rehabilitate its image, its authoritarian and ideologically driven governance—as well as its ever-evolving relations with other non-state and state actors vying for control in parts of Syria—puts northwest Syria's religiously diverse population at continued risk. For some of these religious communities, challenges to freedom of religion or belief amount to threats to their very existence.



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