

## Imprint

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# Iraq and Syria – Christians in Fear

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# Iraq and Syria – Christians in Fear

## 1. Introduction

When talking about Iraq or Syria today, it is urgent to consider that these two countries no longer exist as unified political entities. Even though they are members of the UN, it is not possible to speak of complete sovereignty of these two mainly Arab-Muslim states. In the case of Iraq, where nowadays only 150,000 Christians live, there is still talk of an Arab Iraq and a Kurdish Iraq. Furthermore, there are large differences between regions with Shia majorities in the south and Sunni majorities in the west of the country. Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime by the U.S. invasion in 2003, the so-called "Sunni triangle" bordering Syria and Jordan, has been largely dominated by different Sunni groups, most recently, from 2014 to 2017 by the "Islamic State" (IS). In these "Sunni areas", except of the governorate/province of Ninawa with its capital Mosul, hardly any Christians lived.

The situation in war-torn Syria is even more complex than in Iraq. The revolt of March 2011, which resulted in a brutal civil war, gradually led to the de facto collapse of the state. Only about 500,000 to 700,000 Christians live in the civil war country of Syria today. The Syrian Arab Republic is today (March 2019) divided into at least five spheres of power: Most of the country, about 58 percent, is controlled by the Bashar al-Assadist regime; about 27 percent by the "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF). The SDF is a military alliance led by Kurds. Around eleven percent of Syria is dominated by "Hai'at Tahrir ash-Sham" (HTS), an offshoot of the terrorist network al-Qaeda; about three percent are under Turkish occupation and the rest are held by the USA or other rebels. By spring 2019, the IS has lost almost all of its territories either to the SDF or to the Syrian army. Therefore, the situation of Christians in Iraq and Syria is depending on who is in control of the area or locality, that is populated by Christians.<sup>1</sup>

The details in this report are based on interviews conducted by STP employees in Iraq and Syria.

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<sup>1</sup> The Syria section of this report was partly published on <https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Syrien-Christen-in-Angst-4401137.html?seite=all>

# Iraq and Syria – Christians in Fear

## 2. Christians in Iraq

Christians in Iraq belong to various churches such as the Chaldean, the Old Apostolic Church of the East, the Assyrian, the Syriac Orthodox, the Syriac Catholic and other smaller Christian churches. Nearly all Christians belong to an ethnic group with various names.<sup>2</sup> In this report, this ethnic group is referred to as Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaeans or just as 'Christians'. The Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaeans and the Mandaean<sup>3</sup> – also a non-Muslim minority – are the actual natives (better: indigenous inhabitants) of Iraq. They are one of the oldest Christian communities in the world and the only ones who still speak the language of Jesus: Aramaic. This community is now threatened with extinction: Before the first Iraq war, Christians still made up about ten percent of the population, before the second war about five percent. Today, we assume that only 150,000 Christians are still living in Iraq. This number corresponds to about 0.39 percent of the total Iraqi population, which is around 38 million people. It is feared that by 2020 there will be no more Christians in Iraq.

During Saddam Hussein's regime, the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaeans in northern Iraq shared the fate of the Kurds. They were victims of toxic gas attacks, massacres, forced relocations, and experienced the destruction of their villages. They fled, together with the Kurds, to the snow-covered mountain regions of Turkey and Iran in January 1991. After the invasion of US troops in 2003, there were repeated attacks on Christians in Iraq. The offenders were mainly Islamists. Christians, like other ethnic groups, have been and still are victims of abductions and murders. Bomb attacks are carried out on their churches. Christians were and still are subject to systematic religious persecution. They were accused of collaborating with the American occupiers, of working for them and therefore having more money than the rest of the population. Since 2003, thousands of Christians have been killed in Iraq by extremist Muslim attacks. At least 70 churches were destroyed by bombings, some of them completely, and 15 priests were murdered. Dora, the former centre of the Christians in the Iraqi capital Baghdad, with its many churches and the centre of priest formation, is now partly deserted.

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<sup>2</sup> The Assyrians/Aramaeans/Chaldeans refer to their ancient homeland differently: „Beth Nahrain“ (the house/land between two rivers), „Mesopotamia“, „ Assyria “, or „Aram“ Two rivers refer to the biblical rivers Euphrates and Tigris.

<sup>3</sup> Iraq has also always been home to the Yezidi and Mandaean religious non-Muslim minorities.

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Of the former 500 churches in Iraq, only 57 are still open today. And even in these, the pews usually remain empty on Sundays.

### 2.1 No Unrestricted Freedom of Belief

„No law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam “, is one point in Article 2 of the Iraqi constitution, which was approved by referendum on 15 October 2005.<sup>4</sup> Another point of this article of the constitution "guarantees" freedom of belief to all religious minorities. At the same time, however, Islam is declared the "state religion". This discrepancy is an almost insoluble legal problem that Christians, but also other non-Muslims as well as women in Iraq, must struggle with. Islamic Sharia law has remained a central reference point in the adoption of laws that apply not only to Muslims but also to Christians. Even though the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-confessional orientation of the country is laid down in Article 3, and Christians, Yezidis<sup>5</sup>, and Mandaean are mentioned in Article 2 of the constitution, the tension remains. This tension can be used by conservative judges or parliamentary majorities of Shia and Sunni parties to restrict the freedoms of Christians, Yezidis, and Mandaeans. So the government led by Nuri Maliki, who belongs to the Islamic Dawa Party, enacted „at the end of 2015, a law that legally obliges Christian and all other non-Muslim children to become Muslim if their fathers convert to Islam or if their Christian mothers marry a Muslim“.<sup>6</sup> In February 2014 the same government contributed to the introduction of a law allowing the marriage of minors.

In July 2018, Iraqi Christians accused their country's Ministry of Education of disseminating Islamist ideas also in the subject of the Arabic language in schools. Arabic exam papers circulated on social media showing that Christian, Yezidi, and Mandaean pupils are confronted with tasks that can easily be misunderstood and seem to justify violence against people of other faiths. In their exams, pupils had to grammatically interpret not only many verses from the Koran, but also a poetic verse in which the violent ideology of the "Islamic State" (IS) was

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq\\_2005.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en)

<sup>5</sup> Members of the Yezidi (Yazidi, Êzidi) religious community usually speak Kurdish (Kurmanji). Yezidis are an ethno-religious group and a homogeneous, independent religious community. Their historical homeland is Kurdistan. Today they live in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Russia, Armenia, Georgia and in exile in countries such as Germany. The Yezidis consider themselves either as ethnic Kurds or just as Yezidis.

<sup>6</sup> <https://de.gatestoneinstitute.org/13227/ausloeschung-christen-irak>

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propagated. The poetic verse literally reads: "Let them kill except the little children and the old!" Islamist ideas were also part of the lesson material in the subjects of history and social studies.<sup>7</sup> This school policy in Iraq is very dangerous. It could increase the feeling among Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans that they are being tried to be Islamised. If pupils are prevented from being critically educated about historical contexts, other cultures, and religions, they will hardly develop tolerance towards non-Muslims. Issues such as the genocide of the Christian Armenians and Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaeans in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 or the Holocaust should not be taboo in Iraq either.

In view of the Islamisation tendencies, many Christians, Yazidis, and members of other minorities in Iraq are contemplating to flee or emigrate from their country. It's said that after the rise of IS in 2014 until the end of 2017, at least 15,000 Christian families emigrated from Iraq and Syria to Europe, Australia, the USA, and Canada. Even though radical Sunni Islam, to which the IS members belong, posed the greatest threat to Christians and other religious minorities until the end of 2018, Shia Islam remains no less dangerous for the country's ethnic and religious diversity if it becomes radicalised and gains the upper hand. Christians will no longer see a future for themselves in Iraq if the influence of radical Islam is not significantly limited. Since 2015, the number of Christians has declined there from 275,000 to only about 150,000.

### 2.2 Christians in Baghdad and Mosul

**Baghdad** has always been a centre of Iraqi Christians. Scattered throughout the city there are still dozens of Christian churches. In the past few years, however, it has been reported that some church buildings have been sold. This is a sign that many Christians have left Baghdad.<sup>8</sup>

Since the US invasion in 2003 and due to the militias and terrorist organisations spreading throughout Iraq, Christians have been trapped between the frontlines, especially in Baghdad. Repeatedly, there were targeted attacks on the Christian population. The ongoing attacks and the worsening of the humanitarian situation in Baghdad, as in all of Iraq, which in March 2008 was described by the International Committee of the Red Cross as the worst humanitarian

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gfbv.de/de/news/irak-islamistisches-gedankengut-im-schulunterricht-9255/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.fides.org/de/news/65353>

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situation in the world, had a far-reaching impact on Christian life in the Iraqi capital and throughout the country. Two years earlier, the situation of Christians in Iraq was described by the STP as "the greatest persecution of Christians in contemporary times". A year later, our human rights organisation published a report titled: „The Greatest Christian Persecution of the Present - Exodus of the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaeans from Iraq“. <sup>9</sup>

How many Christians lived in Baghdad before 2003 is not known. But there were at least 100,000. Today, it is assumed that there are only about 1,500 Christians living in Baghdad. Most of them live in the **Dora** district, which is located on the right side of the Tigris River in the south of the capital. Dora is an important industrial area. That is the reason why most Baghdad Christians used to live there.

Some Christians also still live in the opposite district of **Karrada**, located on the left side of Tigris. Here, as well, Christian institutions have repeatedly been the target of attacks by radical Muslims. One of the worst attacks happened on 31 October 2010, when armed men from the "Islamic State" or Al-Qaeda stormed the Syrian Catholic Sayidat-al-Nejat Cathedral and took many people hostage. In the subsequent liberation operation by Iraqi security forces, 68 people lost their lives and about 60 were wounded.

Further north on the Tigris River lies the northern Iraqi metropolis of **Mosul**, mainly inhabited by Sunni Arabs. More than 50,000 Christians are said to have lived here before 2003. In 2010, Mosul had a total of three million inhabitants. Many Christians have left the city in the following years and went to Iraqi Kurdistan. In the summer of 2014, when IS attacked Mosul, the number of Christians was about 25,000. There were around 35 churches and monasteries in Mosul, some of them centuries old. Many Christian places of worship have been damaged by the fighting or destroyed by attacks by Islamists in recent years. In the summer of 2014, the IS attacked Mosul. Almost all Christians, Yezidis, and members of the Shia Shabak-Minority<sup>10</sup> had to leave the city in the direction of Kurdistan. IS has marked the houses and properties of Christians and Shiites in Mosul with various symbols. Some Christians reported to STP staff at this time, that many Christian buildings had been marked with the Arabic letter

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.gfbv.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Reporte\\_Memoranden/2007/0607report\\_christen.pdf](https://www.gfbv.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Reporte_Memoranden/2007/0607report_christen.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> The Shabak people are an ethno-religious group and a heterodox religious community in the north of Iraq that speaks "Shabaki". The Shabaks are either Shiites or Sunnis. Some of the Shabaks consider themselves as Kurds.

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"N". "N" stands for "Nasara" which translates as "Christians". After the conquest of Mosul, the radical Islamists of IS advanced to the so-called **Nineveh Plains**. The Nineveh Plains is a region in the Iraqi province of Ninawa. It borders the city of Mosul to the south and west. The plain consists of three districts: Tel Kaif, Al-Hamdaniya and ash-Shikhan. The ancient Assyrian ruins of the cities of Nineveh, Nimrud and Dur Sarrukin, are also located in this area.

Christians in the towns and villages of this plain formed a large minority until the IS attack. Because the region was a part of the Assyrian Empire in ancient times, many Christians want to form an autonomous region in the Nineveh Plains. However, this question is controversially discussed in Baghdad as well as in Kurdistan. Due to the brutal attack by IS and the mass exodus of Christians from this region, the autonomy aspirations of the Christians are off the table for the time being. The Christians are now again exposed to the danger of a demographic change. Even though the IS is largely driven out, most Christians still cannot return because they lack the resources to rebuild their destroyed homes. Despite many promises by the authorities, reconstruction is progressing too slowly. Their return is urgently needed, because there is a real danger that members of other ethnic groups will take possession of vacant buildings and land, thus would drive the Christian former owners out of the region once and for all. According to Iraqi Christians, a total of 13,904 houses need to be rebuilt or newly constructed in the Nineveh Plains. So far, only half of these houses are said to have been completed. 9,060 Christian families are stated to have returned to the Nineveh Plains from Iraqi Kurdistan by November 2018. This represents slightly more than 45 percent of all Christians who had to flee the region from IS in the summer of 2014. Representatives of local Christian churches report that another 2,000 families would like to return to the Nineveh Plains, but urgently need more assistance measures and security guarantees. The process is so slow and many of them see so few prospects for the future, that more and more Christians are considering emigration. Many would immediately set out to Europe if they had the means and opportunity to do so.

To stop this development, Christians need to urgently be involved in decision-making processes for the future of Iraq. In addition, more financial support is needed to strengthen the language, culture, and traditions of Christians throughout the country to preserve Christians in Iraq. Some kind of political self-government for Christians and other minorities in



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the Nineveh Plains could still be an important signal that Christians are welcome in their region of origin and are not seen as people of second class.

At the end of January 2019, representatives of the Christians contacted the STP and described new problems. They indeed fear a gradual demographic change at the expense of their Christian ethnic group, especially in the Nineveh Plains. „More and more Muslims are settling there“, explained speakers from the Christians.<sup>11</sup> Due to the settlement of Muslims in ancient Christian localities, tensions between the ethnic groups are increasing. These tensions must be prevented. For the authorities to finally act more decisively, the central government in Baghdad and the “Kurdistan Regional Government” (KRG) need to finally agree on who should be responsible for the Nineveh Plains. Only after the administrative affiliation of this and other disputed areas is clarified, and the communities living there are given a share in shaping the future, Christians and other minorities in the Nineveh Plains will feel secure again. Especially in the city of Bartalla (15 kilometres east of Mosul), which was previously inhabited only by Christians, the Christians feel pressured by Muslims. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the city, which today has around 30,000 inhabitants, took in around 10,000 mainly Christian refugees from Arab Iraq. Since 2013, a new urban district with the project name "Sultan City" is to be built in Bartalla. 182 residential units are planned. Only Muslims could afford to buy one of the very expensive flats there, complain local Christians who have lost their fortunes through the war. The Christians demand that mainly Christian families should move in there because the buildings would, after all, be erected on land that has always belonged to Christians. There are reports that land registers are being manipulated in order to reject this criticism. A flat in the "Sultan City" will probably cost an average of around 75 million Iraqi dinars - the equivalent of about 55,000 Euros.<sup>12</sup> About 80 percent of the Christian population of Bartalla belong to the Syriac Orthodox Church, the remaining 20 percent are Syriac Catholics. They all speak Aramaic.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gfbv.de/de/news/nordirak-christen-in-bedraengnis-9563/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gfbv.de/de/news/nordirak-christen-in-bedraengnis-9563/>

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## 2.3 Christians in Kurdistan

Today's "Iraqi federal state" Kurdistan came into being after 1991. At that time, allied troops under US leadership attacked the regime of Saddam Hussein after the Iraqi dictator's troops had occupied Kuwait. The USA signalled the Kurds to start an uprising against Saddam Hussein. The Kurds, with the participation of the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans, other Christians, Yezidis, and other minorities, had quickly liberated all their villages and towns. But then, under pressure from Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the Allies abandoned the people of Kurdistan: The Iraqi Air Force was able to attack Kurdistan with all its violence. Fearing Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, more than 1.5 million people fled towards the Turkish and Iranian borders.<sup>13</sup> After worldwide mass protests against the violent expulsion of the Kurds and minorities living with them, the Western states decided to establish a "Protection Zone" in northern Iraq. As a result, people returned to their villages and towns. Saddam Hussein had his administration removed from Kurdistan. The Kurds established their own administration, which was strengthened after 2003. Kurdistan became a federal region under the new Iraqi Constitution. After decades of bloody conflicts, the two competing major parties of the Kurds, the "Kurdish Democratic Party" (KDP) of Masud Barzani, and the "Patriotic Union of Kurdistan" (PUK) of Jalal Talabani, converged under US pressure. A parliament and a cabinet were formed. However, Kurdistan is de facto divided into two parts until today (March 2019). The KDP dominates in the provinces of Arbil (Kurd.: Hawlêr, also regional capital) and in Dohuk (Aramaic: Nuhadra); the PUK dominates in Sulaymaniyah. Both parties have unrestricted control in their respective areas of power. In addition, the central government in Baghdad and the regional government in Kurdistan are disputing to whom some areas, such as Kirkuk or the Nineveh Plains, are administratively assigned.<sup>14</sup>

According to its own information, Iraqi Kurdistan has about six million inhabitants (2018). About 85 percent of the population are Kurds. The remaining 15 percent are Turkmen, Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans, Arabs, and Armenians. The Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans and Armenians are Christians of different churches. More

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<sup>13</sup> In the 1980s, Saddam Hussein also had targets in Kurdistan attacked with toxic gas.

<sup>14</sup> This ongoing dispute between Baghdad and Kurdistan over the so-called disputed territories is increasingly affecting Christians and other minorities living there.

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than 85 percent of the population in Kurdistan belongs to Islam, the great majority are Sunnis. The Shiites make up only about six percent. Christians and members of other religions are also represented with about six percent. In addition to the two main branches of Islam and Christianity, numerous ancient oriental religions have persisted, including those of the Yezidis and Shabaks. Members of the oriental Christian communities are represented by the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Ancient Apostolic Church of the East, the Gregorians, Roman and Syriac Catholics, Armenian Christians, as well as the Old Syriac Orthodox Church, etc. In addition, there are smaller minorities such as Kakai-Ahle Haq.<sup>15</sup>

Since the beginning of 2009, an electoral law for Kurdistan determines that out of 111 seats in the regional Parliament, eleven seats are allocated to non-Kurdish nationalities. Of these, five seats are reserved for Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaeans. One seat is reserved for the small Armenian ethnic group. For the provincial councils, there is also an extensive quota system for the smaller communities: In Sulaymaniyah, one seat is reserved for the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaeans; in Arbil, there are three seats for Turkmen, two for Aramaic-speaking Christians, one for Armenians; and in Dohuk, two seats are reserved for the Aramaic-speaking Christians and one for Armenians. In Kurdistan, there is a Turkmen and a Neo-Aramaic education system with a total of 58 Aramaic, 16 Turkmen, and two Armenian schools. Both nationalities have their own media (press, radio, television), and Cultural Institutes in their own languages.

Besides Dohuk, **Ankawa**, a suburb of the regional capital Arbil, is the most important centre for Christians in Kurdistan. Today Ankawa had between 25,000 and 40,000 inhabitants. Almost all of them are Christians. In the 1990s, there were only about 8,000 people living in Ankawa. The population grew rapidly after more and more Christian refugees from Baghdad and Mosul settled here. Ankawa also serves as a "transit station" for refugees to Europe. There are several churches and chapels in the town. The oldest one is the Mar Gourgis church. It was built in 816. It is said that Ankawa was founded in the 1st century by the Apostle Thomas. As a district of Arbil, Ankawa is protected by Kurdish security forces. Since many foreign diplomatic representations are also based here, the security situation is much better

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<sup>15</sup> The Ahl-e Haqq (People of Truth) are also called Yarsan or Kaka'i. Their origin is Kurdistan in Iraq or in Iran. This religious community has distinct facets and elements of Yezidism and Alevism.

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compared to other regions of Kurdistan. Many political and cultural institutions of the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans are located in Ankawa.

But the Christians in Ankawa fear a "foreign infiltration" due to the unstoppable growth of Arbil. The settlement of people from outside (Christians and Muslims) could very soon lead to Ankawa losing its historical and unique face forever. For this reason, the Society for Threatened Peoples recommends that building permission for the construction of new buildings only be granted if the population has agreed to it. Also, the expansion of Arbil International Airport should not be pursued at the expense of the area of Ankawa, and property owners should be compensated adequately. Moreover, the influx to Ankawa should not be expanded uncontrollably. The KRG should work together with representatives of the civil society in Ankawa to decide on the further development of the town. An initiative to protect Ankawa has already achieved a first success. The construction project of the so-called "Four Towers" (a hotel complex) was stopped by the KRG on 16 January 2012.

Criticism of the work of the "Kurdistan Regional Government" (KRG) is rejected by the ruling Kurdish parties KDP and PUK. They consider that "the wishes of all nationalities, especially the Christian Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans are taken into account in the laws of Kurdistan". Indeed, many cultural rights of the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans are guaranteed. Besides Kurdish and Arabic, New Aramaic and Armenian are also recognised as languages of the smaller nationalities. Kurdistan has taken in millions of refugees, including Christians, from southern and central Iraq, Syria, and Iran. And the refugees are very grateful to Kurdistan for its willingness to receive them. But even though the Christian Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans and Armenians have many rights in Kurdistan<sup>16</sup>, more needs to be done for the Christian minority. In the STP's opinion, it would be the right decision to grant local or regional autonomy to Christians in those communities or regions where they form the majority or large minorities. Even though freedom of belief is mostly guaranteed in Kurdistan, the "tension" and discrepancies between freedom of belief, which is "guaranteed" by the Iraqi constitution, and the principle of Islamic Sharia law remain noticeable in. Although the situation in Kurdistan is not comparable to that in Arab Iraq, there are also legal

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<sup>16</sup> [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=c6d71cba-1337-07c8-2321-a08ecb38c1c7&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=c6d71cba-1337-07c8-2321-a08ecb38c1c7&groupId=252038)

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contradictions in Kurdistan between the two principles of the Iraqi constitution, "freedom of belief" and "Islam as the state religion". It is to be feared that due to the increasingly strengthened political Islam, Islamist tendencies in legislation will prevail in Kurdistan as well.

### 2.4 Recommendations for Action and Demands on the Central Government in Baghdad and the Regional Government in Kurdistan:

1. The Christian Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaeans and other minorities should be involved in the decision-making processes of the future of Kurdistan.
2. The quota system for Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaeans and other minorities for appointments to the Federal Parliament in Baghdad and the Regional Parliament in Kurdistan should be extended to other bodies. Christians should be represented wherever possible.
3. Contacts and road connections between villages where Christians live, in Kurdistan and in the Nineveh Plains, must be maintained. These must not be hindered or impeded because of the conflict between Baghdad and Kurdistan over the future of the so-called "disputed" areas.
4. More financial support is necessary to strengthen the language, culture, and traditions of the Assyrians/Chaldean/-Aramaeans.
5. In order for all people to peacefully and equally live together, streets or public places should, wherever possible, also be named after personalities from the history, literature, and culture of the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaeans.
6. The property disputes among Christians and Muslims in villages and towns like Ankawa or the Nineveh Plains must be resolved peacefully and fairly. The Christian population must not be disadvantaged.
7. No concessions may be made to radical Sunni and Shia groups in reforming laws or the constitution.
8. Full equality between Christians and other minorities in the courts must be guaranteed.

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9. Agitation against Christians, Yezidis, and people of other faiths by radical mullahs in mosques must be stopped and sanctioned by the courts.
10. Cultural autonomy for Christians and other minorities could help deescalate conflicts among ethnic groups.
11. In order to support and strengthen dialogue, it would be useful if there were regular meetings between representatives of the Kurds, Shiites, Sunnis, and the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaeans in the diaspora.

### 3. Christians in Syria

Until the outbreak of the revolt in March 2011, Syria was the country with the largest Christian minority in the Middle East after Egypt. Two to three million Christians lived there. These Syrian Christians are very diverse in their denominations, as there is a great variety of Christian churches in Syria. In the following text, Christians in Syria are mainly referred to collectively as "syrian Christians". Only when a Christian group of a particular denomination is reported, is this stated by naming their affiliation to a particular church. Armenian Christians are explicitly referred to as such.

With around one million believers, the Rum Orthodox made up the largest proportion of Christians in the country. They generally see themselves as representatives of an Arab Christianity that accepts Islamic culture as a constitutive context. This self-image is expressed in the liturgy of the Rum Orthodox, which is held exclusively in Arabic.

Compared to the Rum Orthodox, the Syrian Orthodox attach great importance to the autonomy of their church. This is reflected in their liturgy, which is celebrated in Syriac. For this, they were once persecuted by the Rum Orthodox. Many Syrian Orthodox, especially in the north of Syria, are descendants of refugees. After the persecution and genocide of up to 500,000 Christians of all denominations during World War One, in what is now south-eastern Turkey, many survivors sought refuge in Syria. The 62,000 Syrian Catholic Christians, whose church is united with the Roman Catholic Church, are a separation from the Syriac Orthodox Church. The approximately 15,000 members of the Assyrian Apostolic Church as well as the 15,000 Chaldeans, whose church split off from the Apostolic Church of the East, are also descendants of refugees. The Chaldeans identify themselves as part of the Roman Catholic Church.

There are also Maronites living in Syria. Their number, around 49,000 followers, is far smaller today than it was in the middle of the 19th century. As a result of tensions between Druze and Maronites as well as massacres in 1866 in the Damascus area, many Maronites fled to Lebanon. In Syria today, the Maronite religious community stands in the shadow of its once great history. Maronites as well as Chaldeans recognise the Roman Catholic Pope as their religious leader. Originally, their liturgy was Syriac, but Arabic has largely supplanted the

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Syrian language in religious ceremonies and rites, with only a few exceptions. In addition, there are about 25,000 Protestants, whose churches originated from European missionary efforts, and 15,000 members of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Assyrians/Arameans are a kind of special case. They have preserved their language Aramaic (Old Syriac) and are considered the indigenous population of Syria. They are also tolerated as Christians by the regime. Nevertheless, many of them, as members of an ethnic minority, have been deprived of their historical Old Syrian or Assyrian identity (linguistically and culturally) through forced governmental Arabisation measures. Therefore, many Syrian Christians call themselves Arabs today. However, it is probable that these Christian Arabs are of Assyrian/Aramaic descent.

**Armenians** are also Christians and usually descendants of refugees, namely of the survivors of the genocide of 1915 to 1917. Hundreds of thousands, according to Armenian sources as many as 1.5 million Armenian and 500,000 Assyrian/Aramaic Christians, were killed in the Ottoman Empire at that time. They speak their Armenian language, in which they also celebrate their liturgy. The Armenian Catholic Church in Syria, which is united with Rome and whose patriarch resides in Lebanon, has about 21,500 members and the Armenian Apostolic Church about 200,000.

Syria has been a home for Armenians for centuries. The country has also always served as a place of protection and refuge. Especially during the Armenian genocide between 1915 and 1917, many Armenians fled to Syria to escape the Turkish army. In 1918, the Armenian community was estimated at 142,000 members. In 2011, there were about 300,000 Armenians living in Syria, of whom the largest community, numbering between 30,000 and 40,000 people, resides in the now embattled city of Aleppo. There are smaller Armenian communities in Damascus, Qamishli, and in Kassab. Armenians in Aleppo are a small group in the Syrian mosaic of religions and ethnicities but distinguish themselves through their active participation in the economic and cultural life of the country. Armenians, for example, are considered the best craftsmen in Syria.

During the genocide at the beginning of the last century, many Armenians could be saved in Syria. However, integration is not to be interpreted as assimilation here. Armenians live in a "perfect" parallel society: they formed autonomous communities within their own group.



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Because of political and economic reasons, many Armenians left Aleppo and Qamishli in the late 1960s. Even though the former Soviet Republic of Armenia took in many Syrian Armenians at this time, most of them emigrated to America, Europe, and Australia. Because of the brutal civil war in Syria, this emigration has intensified further. It could mark the end of a community that has found a home in Syria several centuries ago. Today's Republic of Armenia has had to deal with a major wave of immigration in recent years. Many Syrian Armenians found shelter there.

As monotheists, Christians in Syria are referred to as "protected persons". Their rights are considerably restricted. According to the Syrian constitution, no Christian can become president. There are also many laws that discriminate Christians, especially in the spheres of culture and education. These laws restrict, and sometimes make it even impossible, for Christians to freely express their cultural autonomy and identity. Nevertheless, Christians have been able to practice their religion largely freely, and the secular character of the Syrian Arab Republic has made it possible for them to live in peace. The Assad regime at least grants Christians the right to practice their religion and tolerates Christianity as a religious community, even though there is more to far-reaching religious freedom than that. The situation of Syrian Christians described above, has been marked by negative changes since the beginning of the uprising against the Syrian regime. In the last few years, Christians throughout the Middle East have repeatedly been the victims of excessive violence. The focal points were Egypt and Iraq, but violent attacks on Christians have also occurred in Syria since the beginning of the revolt against the dictator Assad.

How many Christians live in Syria today (2019) can only be a matter of speculation. There are estimates saying that the Christian population there has declined by up to 50 percent compared to 2010. According to this, there are only about 500,000 to 700,000 Christians left in Syria. Impressions from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in 2018 showed a slightly more positive picture: according to this, the number of Christians in Damascus, in the Valley of Christians, in Latakia, and in Tartus is estimated at a total of 500,000 to 750,000.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=2d06e96e-3a30-9ba2-95d7-b0cabb070188&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=2d06e96e-3a30-9ba2-95d7-b0cabb070188&groupId=252038)

# Iraq and Syria – Christians in Fear

## 3.1 Christians under Bashar al-Assad

As already mentioned, Syria is divided into different spheres of control. The following describes the situation of Christians in Bashar al-Assad's sphere of influence. In the "Syrian Arab Republic", there was no official state religion in the areas under the control of Assad's army until the outbreak of the revolt in March 2011. But according to the constitution, the president of Syria must be a Muslim and Islamic jurisprudence is the main reference point for legislation. Freedom of religion is guaranteed in Article 3.3 of the Syrian Constitution, provided that the exercise does not threaten public security. Furthermore, citizens may not be discriminated because of their religious philosophy (Article 33.3). The constitution also contains legal mechanisms to ban religious groups that the government classifies as "extremist". These include not only Muslim extremists but also, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses. Membership in Salafist organisations is illegal, although the government has not further defined the hallmarks of Salafism. By law, affiliation to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death. Despite discriminatory laws and regulations, such as the prohibition for Christians to provide the president of Syria, Christians under Assad's government were and still are able to practice their religion in the Syrian Arab Republic mostly without restrictions.

In recent years, both, anti-government cleric, such as the Italian-born Jesuit priest Paolo dall'Oglio, but also pro-government bishops, such as Mor Gregorius Yuhanna Ibrahim or Mor Boulos Yazigi from Aleppo, have been abducted. At the end of 2011, the Assad regime had declared the Jesuit priest Paolo dall'Oglio a 'persona non grata', after he had spent three decades trying to bring understanding between Christians and Muslims in Syria. In October 2014, the Al-Nusra Front arrested Franciscan priest Hanna Jallouf and about 20 other clerics. In April 2014, the Dutch Jesuit priest Frans van der Lugt was murdered in **Homs**. He had denounced the starvation of the old city of Homs by the government.

At the end of 2013, twelve Syrian Orthodox nuns were abducted by the Al-Nusra Front in the town of **Ma'alula**. The Christian minority in the northern Syrian areas controlled by IS is particularly at risk. Here, at the end of February 2015, more than 300 Assyrian Christians were abducted in several villages in the province of al-Hasakeh (al-Hasaka). The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) also denounced multiple crimes against Assyrian Christians in the north-east of the country, including the execution of 2,000 Assyrian Christians. Other reports

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tell of the recapture of IS posts in north-eastern Syria by Kurdish forces, liberating 14 villages inhabited by Assyrian Christians.

„In Syria, as in much of the Middle East, the Christian presence is becoming a shadow of its former self.“ This is the assessment of the International Religious Freedom Report for 2013 of the US Department of State and it substantiates the statement with exemplary figures for the city of Homs. According to this, the Christian community in Homs numbered 160,000 members before the outbreak of the armed conflict, while in 2013 only a few thousand were still registered. In Aleppo, Christians make up the largest religious minority. Even before 2011, there was a large Armenian Christian community there. Many Christians have fled the fighting from the most affected districts in recent years. In the process, the number of internal migrants from Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo in the coastal mountains increased, but so did the number of refugees. German human rights organisations had already warned of an exodus of the Christian community in Syria in August 2013. They demanded that the German government pay special attention to the protection of Christian minorities in its foreign policy decisions.

Whenever the rebels advanced, Christians fled in tens of thousands either to the areas under Assad's control in the west of the country or to the regions controlled by Kurds, in the north. One region where the Christians found refuge is the so-called “**Wadi al-Nasara**” (English: Valley of Christians). This region in western Syria near the Lebanese border belongs administratively to the government of Homs. Most of the people in the region are Greek Orthodox Christians. Including the internally migrated people, about 150,000 live today in the 40 villages of the “Valley of Christians”.<sup>18</sup> The “Wadi al-Nasara” is considered a historical stronghold of Syrian Christians. Over the past years, tens of thousands of Christian refugees from Homs and other cities and provinces have sought shelter here. In the small village of Nasar, for example, about 100 families have sought refuge in the last few years.<sup>19</sup> Many Christians also fled to the areas on the Mediterranean coast of Syria that are predominantly populated by Alawites<sup>20</sup>. Many have found a home there in **Latakia**. Prior to the civil war,

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<sup>18</sup> <https://de.zenit.org/articles/syrien-gefechte-im-tal-der-christen/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://ostkirchen.info/syrien-die-barmherzigen-samariter-im-tal-der-christen/>

<sup>20</sup> Assad belongs to the Alawite minority.

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Latakia had around 600,000 inhabitants. In the years up to 2018, the population increased to two million.<sup>21</sup> In Aleppo there were between 150,000 and 170,000 Christians (2010). One-third fled to the "Valley of Christians" and another third fled abroad.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.2 The Syrian Rebellion and the Christians

While some Christians took part in the protests against the government in 2011, the majority of the Christian population distanced themselves very early on due to the rapid militarisation, radicalisation, and Islamisation of the insurgency. Despite this, some of the best-known politicians in the Islamist-infiltrated opposition are Christians. The Assad regime presents itself as the protecting force of Christians and demonstrates its solidarity with the Christian community through media-effective performances, such as Assad's appearance in the well-known Christian place of pilgrimage Ma'aloula in April 2014. As the war intensified, there were growing fears that Christians' stance of being "pro-regime" would make them a target for armed non-governmental groups. These fears are instrumentalised by the regime. Under the Assad regime, the situation for Syrian Christians was calm. They were largely tolerated and were not subjected to targeted religious persecution. Assad had declared himself the "protector of the Alawites, Christians, and other minorities" from radical Muslims. Some clerics, however, described this as a mere gesture of political power, which was not followed by actions. But, no one dares to speak openly against the regime because Christians fear stronger repression. Thus, even the church leadership - at least officially - appeals to its members to stay out of political conflicts so as not to get trapped between the political blocs. Surveys showed that a clear majority of Syrian Christians supported Assad at the beginning of the conflict. Since then, thousands of Syrian Christians have also become victims of the conflict. It often remains unknown whether the acts were committed by followers of the regime and its security apparatus, or by radical Muslims from the Islamist opposition.

As a human rights organisation that advocates for the rights of persecuted or threatened ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities, the STP is particularly concerned about Syria's Non-Arab and Non-Sunni Muslim population. At least 45 percent of the country's inhabitants are

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<sup>21</sup> [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=2d06e96e-3a30-9ba2-95d7-b0cabb070188&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=2d06e96e-3a30-9ba2-95d7-b0cabb070188&groupId=252038)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

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members of ethnic and religious minorities. Even if Christians and other minorities do not actively defy the Assad dictatorship, they did not "agree" with this policy of oppression. In the beginning, the protests against Assad were also associated with hope. Now, Syria's ethnic and religious minorities must fear that they will hardly fare better in a "new" Syria under the Sunni Opposition supported by Turkey or Qatar. With the persecution of the few Christians living in the regions dominated by pro-Turkish rebels, all hopes for democratic change in Syria have been dashed. Now, Syrian minorities are facing a new threat. The totalitarian Islamist ideology, which Jihadists from all over the world want to impose by means of violence, is sometimes falling on fertile ground within the Syrian Sunni opposition. The majority of the approximately 21 million Syrians are Arab and profess to Islam. Most of the population belongs to the Sunni branch of Islam. The Shia minority includes the Druze, the Ismailis and the Alawites. President Bashar al-Assad, who is an Alawite Muslim, also belongs to this group. The non-Muslim population of Syria is mainly composed of Christians and Yezidis. These religious minorities live in permanent uncertainty and fear. The gradual radicalisation of the Opposition is a major risk for religious minorities, as the radical Islamists mostly regard members of such populations as "infidels".

In early December 2013, twelve Syrian Orthodox nuns were abducted from their convent after Islamist groups captured the town of Ma'alula. Although a video was released in which the nuns testified to being taken to safety by the Islamists, the superior of the convent testified that the women were used as "human shields" by the Islamists. The nuns were finally released in early March 2014. When the Christian village of Kanayé was occupied on 16 December 2013, Jihadists forced the population to comply with Islamist laws, and forced conversions were threatened. This was the repetition of a well-known strategy of conquest which had already been used in neighbouring villages. It was also reported that Islamist groups, whose aim is to finally drive Christians out of Syria, had destroyed churches. Spiritual books and icons were burnt, and church crosses were replaced by Islamist flags.

Christians and other minorities are thus increasingly becoming the real losers of the war. While almost all other social or religious groups receive partly massive support from abroad, the Christian population is largely abandoned by the churches in the West. They are increasingly caught between the fronts and must watch helplessly as their cultural, social, and

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religious institutions are destroyed. Except for an armed Christian militia of Assyrians/Arameans in the province of al-Hasakeh, they are the only non-armed population group. Since they cannot expect any protection from the destabilised state authority, many Christians no longer even dare to walk on the streets. Children often stopped going to school, young men go into hiding for fear of being drafted into military service, and even well-educated women often give up their jobs. The risk of being kidnapped in the street on the way to work is simply too high. Despite the "neutrality" of the Christians in Syria, the misery of the war has long reached them. The ever-present threat causes many of them to abandon their homes and flee.

### 3.2.1 Radicalisation of the Syrian Opposition

Before the uprising, there was no legally organised opposition in Syria, as the regime did not allow and suppressed it. However, after the first peaceful protests were put down in a bloody way, an opposition formed, united above all by the will to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad and his regime. Even though the Arab Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar), Turkey, the USA, Germany, and Great Britain tried to take a joint stand against Assad, there was no unified action at any time. These states have supported the "National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces" (The Syrian National Coalition - al-tilaf), which was founded in 2012, with varying degrees of intensity. Some states even recognised this group as the "only legitimate representative of the Syrian people"<sup>23</sup>. The longer the conflict lasted, however, the more fractures became visible within the rebellion.

Even though some members of minorities such as Christians, Kurds, Assyrians/Arameans, Alawites, and Druze are represented in the "Syrian Coalition", the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was and still is the most dominant force there. De facto, hardly any important decision could and can be taken without the consent of the representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood. They coordinate their decisions with the Turkish government as well as with the Gulf state of Qatar.

After the start of direct Russian military intervention in Syria on 30 September 2015, conflicts arose between Turkey and Russia. Fearing that Russia would support the Syrian Kurds, Turkey

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/515094/6add202f3f24cc5c6295548c897f0d07/wd-2-043-17-pdf-data.pdf>

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brokered a deal with Russia. Soon a three-way cooperation emerged between Russia, Iran, and Turkey. While the Russians backed Assad with airstrikes, Turkey supported the Syrian Islamists. After the Saudi military intervention in Yemen in 2015, Turkey gained influence in Syria. The Saudis had to focus more on Yemen. Therefore, the "Syrian Coalition" and other Syrian groups based in Turkey were financially and logistically dependent on Turkey. Also because of the increasing political differences between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the influence of the Saudis on the Syrian Islamists declined. There are two main reasons for this development: The Saudis refuse to support the Muslim Brotherhood and have no direct access to Syria. And the Saudi as well as the Western aid for the Islamists has usually gone through Turkey. That is the reason why, in the end, Turkey has determined which group is strengthened or weakened in Syria. It bears the main responsibility for strengthening IS and other radical Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq. The support that the "Syrian National Coalition" additionally receives from countries like the USA, France, and Germany usually also goes through Turkey. Consequently, the Syrian Islamists and Erdogan's Islamist government are the main beneficiaries of this Western aid. Even though the Muslim Brotherhood describes itself as "Islamic-moderate", many observers assume that it will demand the introduction of Sharia law if it is successful against the regime. This is exactly what the minorities were afraid of. Therefore, many of them distanced themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood. If Christians and other minorities were given a choice today, the majority would choose the Assad dictatorship rather than the Islamists' Sharia law.

One incident exemplifies the danger that Christians and other religious minorities face. There is still no trace of the two Christian bishops who were abducted by an armed Islamist group on 22 April 2013. Ibrahim Hanna, Bishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Aleppo, and Bishop Boulos Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church were abducted near Aleppo. Their driver, a deacon, was shot dead by the kidnappers during the raid. Here, too, the Islamist inclination of the Syrian opposition and above all the "Free Syrian Army" (FSA) comes to the fore. For many radical Islamists, Christians are infidels and violence against infidels is often considered legitimate.

The consequences of the civil war and the radicalisation of the rebellion are visible in the example of the Christian minority in many places. While reports of cruel executions, targeted

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killings, abductions and rapes of Christians and members of other minorities by radical Islamists are increasing, more and more minorities are leaving the country out of fear. The neutrality of Christian leaders during the rebellion, which was supposed to prevent Christians from getting trapped between the frontlines, also carries dangers. Now, crimes against them are already being justified by the argument that they were "not on the side of the revolution" and therefore supposedly on the side of the regime. If the civil war ends with the establishment of an Islamic state, it is to be feared that more and more Syrian Christians will either feel forced to flee or be expelled. Living a Christian daily life would then be almost impossible and discrimination against those, who do not let themselves be assimilated or converted, would be unavoidable.

### 3.2.2 Exodus of Christians from regions under Islamist power

As mentioned above, whenever the rebels advanced, Christians fled either to the areas under the control of Assad's government forces or to the regions controlled by Kurds. The Syrian Islamist rebels control several areas in the north of Syria such as Azaz, Jarabulus, Al-Bab, and Afrin. All these areas belong administratively to the province of Aleppo. In addition, there is the province of Idlib as well as parts of the provinces of Hama and Latakia, which are occupied by Syrian Islamists and by Turkey. Turkey claims that these regions are under the control of the Syrian opposition, but in fact the power of Turkey is unrestricted there. These regions, especially Afrin, are Syrian state territories occupied by Turkey in violation of international law.<sup>24</sup> With the exception of Afrin, which was mainly inhabited by Kurds, these areas are generally populated by a majority of Arab Sunnis.

Idlib's Christians lived in the same-named provincial capital and in some villages such as Yacoubiya, Ghassania, Quenya, and El Jadida. Some Christians also lived in the city of Jisr ash-Shughur until 2011. Before the advance of the Syrian rebels, the FSA, the Al Nusra Front, or the IS most Christians have fled to the regions under the control of Assad's forces. Even if the FSA described itself as moderate, there is not much difference between the behaviour of its fighters towards Christians and the behaviour of members of the Al Nusra Front or IS. It is not

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.bundestag.de/blob/546854/07106ad6d7fc869307c6c7495eda3923/wd-2-023-18-pdf-data.pdf>



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known exactly how many Christians lived in Idlib. But it is assumed that there were about 12,000. According to various sources, almost all Christians have left Idlib.<sup>25</sup>

### 3.2.3 End of Christian Living under the Turkish Occupation

As already stated, barely any Christians live in the areas dominated by the Syrian Islamists and the Turkish military, such as in Afrin. This Syrian-Kurdish region was an oasis of religious freedom. With the Turkish army's occupation of Afrin in March 2018, the youngest Christian community in the Middle East was destroyed. Almost all Christians have fled Afrin or have been driven out. Islamists allied with Turkey are now wreaking havoc there and Islamic Sharia law now applies in Afrin. This hits especially women and people of other faiths hard. But those who do not submit to it are punished in draconian ways. Apart from Sunni Kurds, Afrin was also home to Kurdish Yezidis, Alawis/Alawites, and Christians. When a member of the STP visited the region in February 2015, only one Armenian and his son were still living there. As the area was almost completely sealed off by Turkey in the north and west, and by Syrian Islamist rebels in the south and east, Armenians were only allowed to move within Afrin. The other Christians in Afrin had converted to Islam in the past years. According to the Evangelical Christian Union Church, there were about 200 to 250 Christian families (about 1,200 people), before the invasion of the Turkish army. All these Christians had to flee Afrin with the invasion of the Turkish troops. Today, no Christians live there anymore.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.3 Christians in the SDF's Sphere of Power

Syria is a multi-ethnic country, although the vast majority is Arab. The Kurds are the largest ethnic minority. They have now also become a separate party to the conflict, partly because many of them focus solely on Kurdish interests. They are striving for autonomous self-administration of their settlement areas, following the example of the autonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq. The Syrian Kurds are largely militarily organised, but the majority are not fighting on any of the sides in civil war. They have been oppressed by the regime in the past decades and are therefore not allies of President Assad. However, there is also no alliance with the rest of the Syrian opposition. This is partially because it is supported by Turkey and

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/arabic/in-depth-42613066>

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.gfbv.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Reporte\\_Memoranden/2018/2018-o5\\_Memorandum\\_Afrin\\_GfbV.pdf](https://www.gfbv.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Reporte_Memoranden/2018/2018-o5_Memorandum_Afrin_GfbV.pdf)

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the relationship between the Kurds and Turkey is burdened by decades of persecution of the Kurds by all governments of Turkey. The “Kurdistan Workers' Party” (PKK), which is banned in Germany, has been active there since 1984. Turkey's war of aggression against the Kurdish region of Afrin in the far north-west of Syria, which violated international law<sup>27</sup>, led the majority of Kurds in Syria to break with the Syrian pro-Turkish opposition for good. Most of the Kurds would now choose the Assad dictatorship rather than the governance of the Islamists, who are supported by Turkey.

After the occupation of Afrin by Turkey in March 2018, the Kurdish-led military alliance “Syrian Democratic Forces” (SDF) still controlled the region from the Euphrates to the Tigris in north-eastern Syria. This area, in the province of al-Hasakeh, is the home of the Christian Assyrians/Arameans. In recent years, many Christians from other parts of the country have also found shelter here.<sup>28</sup> This area is of great importance today: Without agreement or consent of the government in Damascus or other states, Kurdish organisations had divided the "Kurdish area" in the north of the country into the three cantons and declared it autonomous in January 2014. In the canton of Jazira, as the province of al Hasakeh is called, Assyrians/Arameans, who can look back on a long tradition in this region, were given long unfamiliar rights: Their almost extinct language Aramaic was recognised as an official language for the first time in the region's history, even in school education. Moreover, in Jazira they can practise their religion freely and do not have to fear discrimination. A constitution was established to secure these rights. The region, which is frequently attacked by Islamist groups, is of great importance for Syria's Assyrians/Arameans, but would urgently need external support for its persistence. There is a special need for the development of school infrastructures, water supply, and the agricultural sector. But not all Christian organisations want to cooperate with the Autonomous Administration that is dominated by Kurds. Christians often fear sanctions from the Assad regime or from Turkey if they cooperate with the "Kurdish Administration". Embedded in the Autonomous Administration is the Christian “Syriac Union Party” (SUP). This party also has its own militia, which is integrated into the SDF. The SUP provides the Vice-President of the Executive Council of the authority in the Jazira

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.bundestag.de/blob/546854/07106ad6d7fc869307c6c7495eda3923/wd-2-023-18-pdf-data.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.gfbv.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Reporte\\_Memoranden/2016/Nordsyrien\\_Reisebericht\\_compressed.pdf](https://www.gfbv.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Reporte_Memoranden/2016/Nordsyrien_Reisebericht_compressed.pdf)

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Canton.<sup>29</sup> Another Christian organisation, the “Assyrian Democratic Organisation” (ADO), is part of the opposition.<sup>30</sup> During a stay in al-Hasakeh and Qamishli in 2019, STP employees also met representatives of the ADO. The ADO is an Assyrian organisation in Syria as well as in Europe. It was founded in 1957. According to its own account, the ADO fights for the protection and preservation of the interests and the minority-rights of the Assyrian people. It is involved in the "Syrian National", which has been infiltrated by Syrian Islamists. Unlike the ADO, the SUP works closely with the PYD and is involved in all political, administrative, and military structures of the Autonomous Authority in northern Syria.

In al-Hasakeh, STP employees have visited the headquarters of the Christian militia Sutoro several times in recent years. This is a Christian Assyrian/Aramaic militia that is active in north-eastern Syria, especially in the province of al-Hasakeh. It is subordinate to the SUP and is said to have at least 1,000 fighters. Around 2011, around 150,000 Christians have lived in the entire province of al-Hasakeh (today the canton of Jazira), half of whom have emigrated since then.<sup>31</sup>

The form of government of the future Syria is of existential importance for the Christians. Many Christians in northern Syria supported the concept of autonomous administration. On the other hand, many opposition groups want "more Islam" in all state structures. "But we want a democratic, pluralistic, decentralised, secular system in Syria that guarantees the rights of all minorities" stated Abu Al-Majd, a member of the Christian Sutoro militia from al-Hasakeh.<sup>32</sup> The self-administration in the Kurdish-held areas of northern Syria, often called "Rojava", guarantees the linguistic and cultural rights of the Christian Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans. Authorities of the Autonomous Administration generally use three languages: Arabic, Kurdish, and Aramaic. This equality is very important, especially for Aramaic. This language, which is one of the endangered languages, is getting more and more attention in Rojava. Even though Christians are a minority, Aramaic has been introduced as an official language in the region. For example, on signs of the authorities of the

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<sup>29</sup> The SUP is a political party in Syria that claims to represent the interests of the Assyrian/Aramaic people.

<sup>30</sup>[https://www.gfbv.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Reporte\\_Memoranden/2016/Nordsyrien\\_Reisebericht\\_compressed.pdf](https://www.gfbv.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Reporte_Memoranden/2016/Nordsyrien_Reisebericht_compressed.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with the author on 25. March 2016 in al-Hasakeh..

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Autonomous Administration, one also finds information in Aramaic. In the Christian villages, trilingual street signs have also been introduced.

Now and then there are disputes between Christians who work with the Autonomous Administration and those who are against the autonomy. In summer 2018, the so-called "curriculum and language dispute" escalated. At the insistence of the SUP, the self-proclaimed autonomous administration in Jazira arranged for all private Christian schools to register themselves. These included schools run by various Christian churches as well as private individuals, belonging to the Assyrian/Aramaic and Armenian minorities. The aim of this decision was to have the Aramaic language prevail in teaching, administration, and in the educational materials at these private schools. Lessons there are usually in Arabic. But Schools, certificates, and educational materials, would not have been recognised by the government in Damascus. Therefore, the schools resisted the registration. There were also demonstrations by Christians against the school policy of the Autonomous Authority. They wanted to prevent their children from obtaining an unrecognised school-leaving certificate. The private schools also feared a certain ideologization of the educational materials by the Christian organisation SUP or by the pro-Kurdish "Democratic Union Party" (PYD), which governs in northern Syria. At that time, the STP appealed to the Autonomous Authority to resolve this dispute in the interest of all those involved.<sup>33</sup> The head of the Syrian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Ignatius Ephräm II Karim, also mediated in the conflict.

### 3.4 The Flight of the Christians from Syria

When Christians from Syria flee abroad, the neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, or Iraq come to their mind first. One reason why many Christians flee to these countries are the connections to their "mother-churches". For example, once they arrive in Lebanon, the refugees look for help from the respective churches that exist in Lebanon. However, the Lebanese state fears being drawn into the Syrian civil war, so it often does not help the refugees in the way they need. Initially, the Lebanese government also did not want to set up camps for refugees because they believed that these camps could turn into rebel strongholds. Moreover, most of the refugees were Muslim. Therefore, many Christians did not dare to

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.gfbv.de/de/news/christen-fuerchten-schliessung-ihrer-schulen-in-nordsyrien-9354/>

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register for aid programmes. They feared being betrayed to Islamist groups. This fear was even palpable where host countries like Turkey set up camps especially for Christian refugees. Many refugees preferred – probably not always entirely voluntarily – to move to the villages in the surrounding area and stay with the Christian families living there. But this is not considered a permanent solution by the hosts. It is also problematic that due to the wide dispersion of refugees, there is no possibility of centralised information supply, such as about possible asylum offers.

### 3.5 Recommendations for Action and Demands on the Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria and the SDF

1. New and unconditional dialogues between all political parties including the KNCS<sup>34</sup>, the Kurdish National Alliance<sup>35</sup>, and the Kurdish Peşverû Party<sup>36</sup> as well as the ADO, on the expansion of the structures of autonomous administration must be initiated immediately. A broad political base of self-government will increase Rojava's chance of existence as well as strengthen democracy, and human and minority rights.
2. It is necessary to ensure that the work of the authorities in northern Syria becomes more transparent. Without transparency, an administration cannot be successful for long.
3. It must be ensured that the fundamental right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press are fully guaranteed.

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<sup>34</sup> KNCS (The Kurdish National Council of Syria) is an alliance of Kurdish organisations that stands in total opposition to the Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria and works closely with the Syrian opposition, which is supported by Turkey and infiltrated by Islamists.

<sup>35</sup> Kurdish: *Hevbendî*.

<sup>36</sup> Peşverû Party is the oldest Kurdish political party in Syria.

### 4. Recommendations for Action and Demands on the German Federal Government

The German government has been providing aid to the Syrian opposition for years.<sup>37</sup> Financial aid is often provided through Turkey or from Turkey. For this reason, the STP calls on the German government to lobby both, the Turkish government and the Syrian Islamist groups receiving aid from Germany, to ensure that:

1. the violence of Islamist fighting units of the opposition against the civilian population, especially against Christians and other minorities, is stopped.
2. all opposition groups guarantee to respect human rights. Opposition groups must guarantee freedom of expression and demonstration, as well as human rights for everyone in any areas under their control. They must allow free access for international and local commissions that wish to investigate the prisons they maintain.
3. those who are responsible for the worst human rights violations and war crimes are held accountable.

#### **Furthermore, the German Government is called upon, to**

1. ensure that the Turkish war of aggression and the occupation in Afrin, which is contrary to international law, are condemned internationally. The Turkish army must withdraw from this area and from other regions of Syria. Turkey's policies are leading to more instability, more conflicts, more refugees and, above all, more radical Islam in Syria. The status of Afrin as an autonomous region within Syria must be restored.
2. ensure that the civilian population throughout Syria is adequately supplied with medicine and foodstuff. The civilian population must be protected from attacks.
3. consider plans in cooperation with other Western governments for military intervention in Syria only if there is a complete concept for the resolution of the existing internal Syrian conflicts. Minorities and the entire civilian population must be

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/49-millionen-euro-fuer-assad-gegner-bundesregierung-hilft-idlib-rebellen-in-syrien/23247768.html>

## Iraq and Syria – Christians in Fear

protected not only from Assad's air force, but also from marauding armed groups of all stripes. The local population in Syria must not be left to their fate after a military intervention, as happened in Somalia, for example.

4. attach support for any opposition groups in Syria to the condition of a new constitution ensuring the linguistic, cultural, and administrative rights of the Assyrians/Aramaeans/Chaldeans, Kurds, Armenians, and other ethnic minorities. Christians, Yezidis, Alawites, and Druze must enjoy full religious freedom.
5. convene an international conference on Syria as soon as possible. At this conference, a peace process must be initiated in which all Syrians are involved. This includes not only the opposition and the regime, but also all minorities. In addition, all foreign actors must cooperate in finding a constructive solution to the conflict.
6. ensure that the civilian population in autonomous self-governing northern Syria also receives humanitarian assistance, especially in the provision of drinking water and electricity. Increased financial support should also be given to the civil society aid organisations that are engaged in northern Syria.
7. help resolve the conflicts among Kurdish parties as well as between Kurds and Assyrians/Aramaeans/Chaldeans peacefully and in the interest of all those involved.
8. persuade the Turkish government to open border crossings to northern Syria, Afrin, Kobani, and Qamishli permanently for people, trade and, above all, humanitarian aid.
9. not support the Turkish government's intended "protection zone" in northern Syria. Instead, Ankara should try to reach a settlement with the Christians and Kurds there.