

4.10.1. Sunni Arabs

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, this document has been reviewed and updated. Please consult '[Interim Country Guidance: Syria \(2025\)](#)'

COMMON ANALYSIS

Last update: February 2023

COI summary

[Main COI reference: [Targeting 2022](#), 9, pp. 85-88]

Sunni Arabs were the hardest hit by the war and the GoS' repressions and have experienced the greatest exodus/displacement from Syria. This group, who used to represent a clear majority of Syria's population, estimated by one source to be at around 65 % in 2010 [[Targeting 2020](#), 10.1, p. 75], was in 2020 estimated to make up only between 49 % and 52 % of the population [[Targeting 2022](#), 9.1, p. 87]. Sunni Muslims reside throughout the country. There is a huge diversity among the members of the Sunni Arab community in Syria and they cannot be perceived as an unified group. Sunni Arabs vary according to their political affiliation, practice and identity, as well as regional and tribal loyalties [[Targeting 2020](#), 10.3, p. 77].

According to various sources, even though the GoS forged strategic ties with prominent Sunni families and religious authorities, the majority of high-ranking officers in Syrian Army and the security apparatus were Alawites. This led to a sense of injustice among Sunni Arabs, especially in areas where Sunnis and Alawites lived in close proximity. As the conflict ensued, the percentage of Alawites in the military increased as a result of Sunnis' defections and sectarianism. Conditions for Sunni conscripts in the SAA were reportedly worse than those of the Alawite minority. Sunni soldiers were kept near the front lines for months, were poorly paid and insufficiently supplied [[Actors](#), 2.3.1, p. 27]. As a result, Sunni Arabs suffered most casualties in the Syrian war. In 2021, it was reported that among the 40 highest-ranking officers heading various Syrian army units, either all were held by Alawites or only one Sunni was represented. Sunni officers who did retain high-ranking posts commanded less influential units and were put under close supervision of officially lower ranking Alawite colleagues [[Targeting 2022](#), 9, p. 86].

Although the political elite included Sunnis, the Sunni majority makes up most of the anti-GoS opposition and has been the most heavily repressed by the authorities because of this perceived affiliation. Sunnis were reportedly found to be the group most frequently subjected to human rights abuses and violations by the GoS as well as the majority of those deemed opponents of the same. [[Targeting 2022](#), 9.1, pp. 86-87]

It was reported that Syrian law required all religious groups to register with the GoS, and membership in an organisation considered by the GoS to be linked to Sunni fundamentalism, may result in arrest, torture and execution. In November 2021, President Bashar Al-Assad eliminated the position of Grand Mufti in Syria and transferred the tasks to a council appointed by the GoS. Experts reportedly assumed that the fatwas of the newly established council will not correspond to the wishes of the Syrian Sunnis [[Targeting 2022](#), 9.1, p. 87].

Moreover, Sunni Arabs faced discrimination compared to ethno-religious minorities. According to a report, Sunni-populated areas in Damascus lacked essential services, such as electricity and water, while Shia-inhabited neighbourhoods did not face any of these issues. It was previously reported that Sunnis were warned by the GoS against any communication with any foreign adherents of Sunni Islam as it was perceived as an act of political opposition or military activity, while such communication was not banned for other ethno-religious groups [[Targeting 2020](#), 10.3.1, p. 78].

The GoS continued to impede the return of Syrians through laws such as Law No 10/2018, which was reportedly used for the confiscation of property and land of refugees and IDPs without due process. Sunnis suffered disproportionately from the negative impact of this Law. One source referred to the situation as a 'demographic swap in which Shiites from Iran and Afghanistan were transferred to the area once the Sunnis were expelled' in order to consolidate the Shiite presence and replace Sunni Arab communities. [[Targeting 2022](#), 9.2, p. 88]

Apart from the GoS, extremist groups like ISIL, HTS and Jaysh al-Islam who identified themselves as Sunni Arab, targeted Sunnis Muslims who did not adhere to the group's interpretation of the Sharia. These groups killed hundreds of civilians, carrying out public executions, beheadings and crucifixions as a punishment for religious offences such as blasphemy, apostasy or cursing God. [[Targeting 2020](#), 10.3.4, p. 79]

Regarding the treatment of Arabs by SDF/YPG, see profile [4.5. Persons perceived to be opposing the SDF/YPG](#).

Conclusions and guidance

Do the acts qualify as persecution under Article 9 QD?

Acts reported to be committed against Sunni Arabs perceived to be affiliated with ISIL or to support anti-government armed groups are of such severe nature that they amount to persecution (e.g. arbitrary arrest, death penalty, torture). When the acts in question are (solely) discriminatory measures, the individual assessment of whether discrimination could amount to persecution should take into account the severity and/or repetitiveness of the acts or whether they occur as an accumulation of various measures.



What is the level of risk of persecution (well-founded fear)?

Being a Sunni Arab in itself would normally not lead to the level of risk required to establish well-founded fear of persecution. In most cases where a well-founded fear of persecution is substantiated, it would be related to circumstances falling under other profiles included in this guidance, such as [4.1. Persons perceived to be opposing the government](#). The individual assessment should also take into account risk-impacting circumstances, such as the regional specifics (e.g. living in areas controlled by extremist groups or in areas considered by the GoS as opposition strongholds).



Are the reasons for persecution falling within Article 10 QD (nexus)?

Available information indicates that where well-founded fear of persecution is substantiated, it may be for reasons of (imputed) political opinion. In the case of persecution by extremist groups, it may also be for reasons of religion.

See other topics concerning ethno-religious groups:

- [4.10.1. Sunni Arabs](#)
- [4.10.2. Kurds](#)
- [4.10.3. Druze](#)
- [4.10.4. Alawites](#)
- [4.10.5. Christians](#)
- [4.10.6. Yazidis](#)
- [4.10.7. Palestinians](#)