



Sectarian Fault Lines in Post-Assad Syria:

Religious Freedom and the Future of Minority Communities in Transitional Syria

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Abstract

This study examines the state of religious freedom in Syria during its transitional period under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa, situating current developments within a legacy of authoritarian rule, sectarian manipulation, and systemic repression. For decades, the Assad regime portrayed itself as a protector of religious minorities—particularly Alawites, Christians, and Druze—while exercising coercive control over all communities. This strategy deepened sectarian divisions by tying minority security to regime survival and obscured the disproportionate suffering of the Sunni majority, who experienced mass detention, torture, displacement, and collective punishment. The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 has not healed these fractures but has instead exposed them in new and destabilizing forms. Despite notable economic initiatives during the transition, Syrian society remains marked by deep mistrust, unresolved grievances, and recurring sectarian violence. Minority communities face ongoing insecurity and extremist threats, while many within the Sunni majority resist narratives that minimize their suffering or protect former regime beneficiaries from accountability. These intersecting fears present a central challenge to Syria’s political and social reconstruction. Using religious freedom as an analytical lens, this study explores pathways for rebuilding coexistence, dialogue, and dignity in a society emerging from prolonged repression. It assesses governance models such as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), highlighting both their contributions to pluralism and their structural limitations. The study also examines how digital misinformation and foreign interference continue to intensify sectarian polarization during this fragile period. The paper argues that Syria’s long-term stability depends not on symbolic protections but on accountability, transparency, and inclusive governance that acknowledge the full scope of past harms. Religious freedom must function as a foundation for reconciliation rather than as a political instrument. While Syria’s transition remains fragile, it offers a rare opportunity to replace fear with trust and coercion with dialogue grounded in justice, dignity, and coexistence.

Keywords: *Syria, Religious Freedom, Minorities, Transitional Government, Accountability, Stability.*

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1. Introduction

S yria’s heritage is rooted in a long history of trade, cultural exchange, and religious coexistence, and it is known for its contributions to spiritual life, scholarship, art, and diplomacy. Syria has long been a spiritual heartland, shaping the foundations of both Christianity and Islam.

In fact, it was on the road to Damascus that Saul became Paul, and centuries later Damascus rose as the Center of the Umayyad Caliphate—making Syria a land of enduring spiritual and historical significance. However, Syria’s modern history is marked by authoritarianism, conflict, and sectarian divide. Now, after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria—once celebrated as a crossroads of civilization—faces a new crossroads of its own. As Syria moves forward in this time of uncertainty, it must confront its recent, horrific history, and the international community has a responsibility to acknowledge every part of the Syrian story.

This transitional period of Syria under Ahmed al-Sharaa does not just expose the deep-rooted division created by decades under Assad's authoritarian rule. However, it also shows the complexity of mistrust that continues to affect Syrian society today. Minorities like Christians, Alawites, and Druze were often labeled as beneficiaries of the Assad regime protection—but never without cost, often coming with strings attached like political obligations, constant monitoring, and coercion. At the same time, the Sunni majority and other opposition groups suffered decades of brutal oppression—facing violent crackdowns on dissent, arbitrary arrests, and torture—leaving generations of scars and grievances. As a result, this new transitional government has inherited a country marked by sectarian division and lingering mistrust—both minorities and the majority hold cautious optimism in Syria’s current crossroads.

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This moment of crossroads begs the question: can the new transitional government protect the rights of all, including religious rights? Can it foster genuine pluralism, address past wounds, and break cycles of persecution and authoritarian rule? Moreover, can a society marked by deep sectarian divisions overcome its mistrust to embrace inclusivity? Lasting change in Syria depends not just on formal promises, legal protections, and economic change, but also on rebuilding trust through dialogue, inclusion, and openness in a digital age that can often fuel division and fear.

The *Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria* (AANES) offers a glimpse of how inclusive governance can work and serves as an example for Syria's transitional government by balancing central government authority with local autonomy. However, Syria has no ready-made road map—decades of authoritarian rule, foreign interference, and sectarian divides mean Syria must forge its own way. International actors and Local voices who have been silenced and manipulated by political agendas must be empowered to guide the transitional government. They must hold leaders accountable and actively shape a society that is inclusive and reflective of its people, rather than being persuaded by external agendas. Communities must not rely solely on the government for change; they must take the initiative to cross sectarian lines and work from the ground up to rebuild trust and foster pluralism and inclusion.

2. Demographic and Religious Landscape of Pre-War Syria

The Syrian government conducted its last official population census in 2004 and last updated its population projections in 2014. However, decades of conflict, migration, and internal displacement have kept Syria's demographics and population in constant flux. Before the civil war, Syria had over 22 million people, with 74% of the population being Sunni Muslims. At the same time, Alawites, Druze, Ismailis, and Twelvers account for about 13% of the population, and Christians make up 10%.¹

¹ Victoria Heath, "Exploring Syria's Religious Landscape," *Geographical*, December 12, 2024; Anna Fleck, "Syria's Sectarian Divides," *Statista*, April 14, 2025; William L. Oschenwald and Albert H. Hourani, "Syria," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, October 2, 2025.

Smaller groups, including Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, and Turkmen, make up the remaining 3%—revealing a largely diverse ethnic and religious fabric of Syria.² These communities are scattered geographically across Syria: Alawites are concentrated in the coastal governorates of Latakia and Tartus; Druze make up the Southern Jabal al-Druze region; Kurds are primarily located in the Northeast region of Syria; and Christians are primarily located in urban areas like Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs, as well as in smaller towns.³ The diverse landscape has shaped Syria’s cultural identity and politics for centuries, through a history of coexistence and pluralism. However, it has also set the stage for the sectarian tensions that persist to this day.⁴

3. Historical Background

3.1 The Assad Regime and Authoritarian Legacy

Syria gained its independence from France in 1946, but in its early decades, it was marked by instability, including shifting power among elites and military coups.⁵ Then in 1963, the Ba’ath Party consolidated. In 1970, Hafez al-Assad seized control through a military coup, ushering in decades of a tight centralized government, focused on security, law enforcement, and the suppression of political opposition—laying the groundwork for a lasting authoritarian regime.⁶ Although the Assad regime presented itself as secular, nation-oriented, and as modernist, it relied heavily on Alawite loyalty to secure the military and intelligence, weaving sectarian patterns into the state’s core.⁷

² Oschenwald and Hourani, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2025.

³ Heath, *Geographical*, 2024.

⁴ Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016); Itmar Rabinovich and Carmit Valensi, *The Syrian Requiem: The Civil War and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

⁵ Itmar Rabinovich and Carmit Valensi, *The Syrian Requiem: The Civil War and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

⁶ Elizabeth Ferris and Kemal Kirişci, *The Consequences of Chaos* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2016).

⁷ Rabinovich and Valensi, *The Syrian Requiem*, 2021.

When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, the presidency was then passed to his son, Bashar. At the start of his presidency, Bashar inspired cautious optimism; his initial speeches emphasized reform, modernization, and openness, leading many to envision a more inclusive Syria.⁸ Although activists and intellectuals launched the Damascus Spring by opening space for discussion, independent media, and calls for reform, the regime swiftly crushed these gains, and Bashar soon reinforced his authoritarian control.⁹ Bashar's early promises of reform and openness were short-lived—proving the apple does not fall far from the tree, sticking to his father's repressive legacy with reliance on intelligence services, restricted political freedoms, and limited civil society's influence.¹⁰

“Although activists and intellectuals launched the Damascus Spring by opening space for discussion, independent media, and calls for reform, the regime swiftly crushed these gains, and Bashar soon reinforced his authoritarian control.”

Bashar al-Assad, like his father, portrayed his regime as the protector of minorities. Religious minorities—such as Alawites, Christians, and Druze—were granted limited protections and even some were given representation within the state, though they were always under the regime's authoritarian control.¹¹ The Ba'athist ideology embraced by Bashar and his father emphasized Arab nationalism and unity, which, on paper, showed a framework for coexistence but suppressed distinct ethnic and religious identities. A prominent example would be the Kurds, who were denied fundamental cultural and political rights for decades.¹² The regime pursued this suppression as a deliberate strategy: Assad relied on minorities, particularly the Alawites, because of their significant role in the military and security forces. By structuring power in this way, the regime tied the Alawite community's security directly to its own survival, making loyalty to the state inseparable from the continuation of Assad's rule.¹³

⁸ Ferris and Kirişci, *The Consequences of Chaos*, 2016.

⁹ Rabinovich and Valensi, *The Syrian Requiem*, 2021.

¹⁰ Myriam Ababsa and Valentina Napolitano, eds., *Syrian Society in Revolution and War (2011–2024): Legacy and Transformations* (Beirut: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2025).

¹¹ Rabinovich and Valensi, 2021.

¹² Ferris and Kirişci, 2016.

¹³ Ferris and Kirişci, *The Consequences of Chaos*, 2016.

Christians were often protected in return for political loyalty, and church leaders maintained cautious relationships with the state.¹⁴ On the outside, it appeared Assad's regime was embracing pluralism, but behind the curtain, the reality was much different for minorities. The Assad regime tightly controlled political and religious life, restricting freedom of expression and religious practice whenever it perceived its authority to be challenged.¹⁵

“On the outside, it appeared Assad's regime was embracing pluralism, but behind the curtain, the reality was much different for minorities.”

3.2 The Syrian Civil War

In early 2011, the Arab Spring swept across the Middle East and North Africa, later reaching Syria and bringing hope for change. What began as a small demonstration calling for political reform soon grew into a nationwide movement. Assad's regime responded in brutality, arresting demonstrators and even opening fire on its own citizens, and cracking down on any opposition.¹⁶ The conflict escalated, sectarian division increased, and the Assad regime positioned itself as a defender against Islamist extremism in order to consolidate minority allegiance and legitimize its repression.¹⁷

Within months, regional and international actors became involved in the war, turning it into a proxy conflict. The Assad Regime recruited Iran and Hezbollah to provide crucial military power and financial backing, and later, Russia entered the war, shifting the balance in Assad's favor.¹⁸ In opposition to the Assad regime, groups were supported by Turkey, the Gulf states, and, later, the Western powers—resulting in a prolonged, multifaceted conflict. Syria's infrastructure was devastated, and millions were displaced, fracturing Syria's communities and social fabric.¹⁹

¹⁴ Rabinovich and Valensi, *The Syrian Requiem*, 2021.

¹⁵ Ferris and Kirişci, 2016.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Rabinovich and Valensi, 2021.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Aron Lund, "The Syrian Jihad: An Interview with Charles Lister," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 24, 2015,

“In opposition to the Assad regime, groups were supported by Turkey, the Gulf states, and, later, the Western powers—resulting in a prolonged, multifaceted conflict. ”

3.3 Impact of the Civil War on Religious and Ethnic Minorities

In Syria, some minorities left in larger masses than others, so as one would assume, demographics shifted in many regions within Syria.²⁰ The Civil War undoubtedly brought great suffering to everyone, but minorities often experienced heightened vulnerability. The Assad regime continued to present itself as the protector against extremist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, which targeted minority communities through killings, kidnappings, and destruction of religious sites.²¹ Many Christians, Alawites, and Druze tolerated the regime out of fear of Islamist control, despite Assad’s forces committing atrocities against civilian populations in opposition-controlled territories.²²

The Kurds, who were long marginalized by the state, used the war to assert their dominance and form new autonomy in northern Syria—marking the rise of the *Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria* (AANES). AANES promoted a model of pluralism and local self-governance, though the coexistence of Arab tribes and rival militias complicated it.²³ For other minority groups, survival depended on fragile local agreements, migration, or exile, as displacement reshaped communities and eroded established demographic balances.²⁴ The Assad regime deepened sectarian divides by positioning itself as the defender of the minorities—creating sectarian tensions that remain today.

“For...minority groups [*other than the Kurds*], survival depended on fragile local agreements, migration, or exile...”

²⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Repatriation Explained: Why Syrian Refugees Are Voluntarily Returning,” March 12, 2025.

²¹ Aron Lund, *The Syrian Jihad*, 2015,

²² Rabinovich and Valensi, *The Syrian Requiem*, 2021.

²³ Ferris and Kirişci, *The Consequences of Chaos*, 2016.

²⁴ Ababsa and Napolitano, *Syrian Society in Revolution and War*, 2025.

The war ingrained narratives of distrust, with Alawites tied to the military and security forces aligned with the Assad agenda and violence, many Sunnis were seen as aligned with opposition groups or extremist factions, and Christians and Druze caught in the middle, all struggling to secure a safe future.²⁵ The long-term impact of Assad's strategy has become the fragmentation of Syria's once diverse social and cultural fabric, leaving minorities questioning whether they will have a place in Syria's future.²⁶

3.4 Collapse of the Assad Regime and the Emergence of Islamist Rule

Although there was never a formal declaration of an end to the civil war, by early 2023, the conflict was at a stalemate, and the Assad regime gained back control of most of Syria. In December 2024, the Islamist group, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), rose to power and took control over Aleppo, and started advancing south to Damascus, taking key territories. Confronted with the collapse of his military, Bashar al-Assad fled to Russia—leaving Damascus and other territories without central authority.²⁷ At the forefront of this Islamist group was Ahmed al-Sharaa, a longtime HTS member with ties to jihadist movements and organizations.²⁸ This new administration asserted control over key services, local councils, and security forces laying the ground for a transitional phase.²⁹ Marking the beginning of Syria's first Islamist-led government, drawing international concern for the stability of the country and for its minority communities.³⁰

“At the forefront of this Islamist group was Ahmed al-Sharaa, a longtime HTS member with ties to jihadist movements and organizations.”

²⁵ Ferris and Kirişci, *The Consequences of Chaos*, 2016.

²⁶ Rabinovich and Valensi, *The Syrian Requiem*, 2021.

²⁷ DW Documentary, *The Rise and Fall of the Assad Regime* (2025); Ji-Hyang Jang, *The Fall of Syria's Hereditary Dictatorship and the Launch of an Islamist Transitional Government: Analysis and Implications* (Seoul: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2025).

²⁸ *Al Jazeera*, “Who Is Abu Mohammad al-Julani, the Leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria?” (2024); Abdul Sayed, “The Reactions of Militant Groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan to Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham's Takeover of Syria,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 17, no. 4 (2025): 1–7.

²⁹ Qutaiba Idlbi et al., *Reimagining Syria: A Roadmap for Peace and Prosperity beyond Assad* (Atlantic Council, 2025).

³⁰ *New Lines Institute*, “Beyond Sanctions: A Measured Approach to Rebuilding Syria” (2025); *Atlantic Council*, “Syria at a Crossroads: Rebuilding a Nation or Repeating the Past” (2025).

4. Transitional Government Under Ahmed al-Sharaa

The group *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) emerged during the Syrian civil war, originating from the union of several jihadist groups, including *Jabhat al-Nusra*, which was the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda.³¹ *Jabhat al-Nusra* first appeared in 2012 during the early stages of the civil war, fighting the Assad regime with strategic goals and ideological motives while competing with other rebel groups for territorial control.³² In 2017, the group claimed independence from *al-Qaeda*, rebranding itself as *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), but keeping much of its original operations and ideology.³³ HTS's growth in northern Syria enabled HTS to secure a territorial base in Idlib, shifting from a nomadic insurgent force to a governing authority.³⁴

Ahmed al-Sharaa first became involved in the Syrian civil war through his association with Islamist factions linked to *al-Qaida*.³⁵ He was labeled a terrorist due to his role in transnational jihadist operations and connections with extremist groups in and outside of Syria.³⁶ HTS, under the leadership of al-Sharaa, targeted both the Assad regime and competing rebel groups—attacking supply routes, strategic towns, and logistic networks. The Assad regime and its foreign supporters—Iran and Hezbollah—perceived al-Sharra and HTS as a major threat. HTS continued to expand, gaining influence in both military strength and political authority, helping form HTS territories in Idlib.³⁷

“The Assad regime and its foreign supporters—Iran and Hezbollah—perceived al-Sharra and HTS as a major threat.”

³¹ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Success for Al-Qaida in Syria?” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): 130–138; Hugo Kaaman, *Shifting Gears: HTS’s Evolving Use of SVBIEDs During the Idlib Offensive of 2019–20* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2020).

³² Ibid.

³³ Abdul Sayed, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 2025.

³⁴ International Crisis Group, *HTS versus ISIS: Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria’s North West* (Brussels: ICG, 2023); Hetav Rojan, *Syria in Transition: Mapping the Local and Transnational Actors Shaping Politics in Syria* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2025).

³⁵ Al Jazeera, *Who Is Abu Mohammad al-Julani?*, 2024; Abdul Sayed, 2025.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Qutaiba Idlbi et al., *Reimagining Syria*, 2025.

After the fall of Assad and the rise of Ahmad al-Sharaa, many Syrians, local and abroad, started to return to their homes, beginning to alter the demographics of Syria yet again.³⁸ According to assessments by the United Nations, nearly 30 percent of Syrian refugees expressed a desire to return, up from almost zero the previous year following the regime's collapse—showing a notable shift in refugee intentions tied to political change.³⁹ As Syrians return, the situation remains uncertain and unstable—they are returning to destroyed homes, ongoing insecurity, and economic collapse, revealing the challenges of the nation's future but also the resilience of its citizens.⁴⁰ Today, the population of Syria is estimated to be close to 26 million, with an estimated 7 million displaced within Syria.⁴¹

The fall of Assad and rise of HTS in Damascus laid the groundwork for Syria's first Islamic government in modern history—drawing significant concern to Syria's various religious minorities.⁴² Because HTS's strict interpretation of Islamic law causes concern for minority groups in Syria—Christians, Alawites, and Druze—and may restrict religious freedoms and cultural practices.⁴³ Human rights organizations and think tanks have indicated that minorities in HTS-controlled areas are vulnerable to coercion, forced migrations, and limited political voice.⁴⁴ Although HTS has sought to present itself as an administratively capable authority, it has maintained basic services, managed security, and selectively engaged local communities.

³⁸ *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, “Repatriation Explained: Why Syrian Refugees Are Voluntarily Returning,” March 12, 2025.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, “Syrian Arab Republic,” September 23, 2025.

⁴² Adam Fefer, *Regime Change and Minority Risks: Syrian Alawites After Assad* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025); *Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ)*, “A Critical Examination of Syria's Religious Landscape After the Regime's Fall: Exclusion, Extremism, and Coercion” (2025).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *New Lines Institute*, “The New Syrian Government: Turning a Page or Rewriting the Script?” (2025); *Atlantic Council*, “Reimagining Syria: A Roadmap for Peace and Prosperity beyond Assad” (2025).

However, these efforts have not dispelled deep skepticism about its long-term intentions.⁴⁵ The continued emphasis on centralized control and security enforcement reinforces the perception that minority protections are granted at the discretion of authorities rather than secured by law.⁴⁶ At the heart of Syria's transition lies a fundamental question: whether state authorities can exercise power without reproducing coercive and exclusionary practices that undermine pluralism and trust.

“Human rights organizations and think tanks have indicated that minorities in HTS-controlled areas are vulnerable to coercion, forced migrations, and limited political voice.”

5. Systematic Repression of Syria's Sunni Majority

The rise of Ahmed al-Sharaa's transitional government finally exposed the brutal reality of the years of persecution faced by Syria's Sunni majority.⁴⁷ For decades, the Assad regime relied on a combination of Alawite loyalty and the selective integration of Sunnis into the military and security forces to project an image of inclusivity.⁴⁸ Researchers find that Alawites made up the majority of the Assad regime's top officials, even though the precise sectarian identity of every senior figure cannot be independently confirmed.⁴⁹ Revealing that Sunni's inclusion within the forces was largely symbolic, and their influence was limited, while absolute authority was concentrated within a trusted Alawite elite.⁵⁰ It is known that some Sunnis were intensely loyal to Assad.

⁴⁵ Qutaiba Idlbi et al., *Reimagining Syria*, 2025.

⁴⁶ *New Lines Institute*, “The New Syrian Government: Turning a Page or Rewriting the Script?” (2025)

⁴⁷ Marie Forestier, “In a Sectarian Syria, the Winners Should Refrain from Taking All,” *Atlantic Council*, 2023.

⁴⁸ Samiran Mishra, “Fall of Assads: How an Alawite Family Ruled over a Sunni Nation for Decades,” *NDTV*, 2023; Chris Zambelis, “Syria's Sunnis and the Regime's Resilience,” *West Point CTC Sentinel*, 2023.

⁴⁹ *Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)*, “Syrian Security Branches and Persons in Charge,” 2025.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

However, the majority of Sunnis, specifically those advocating for political change or part of opposition efforts, were subjected to consistent oppression, causing division within the Sunni community.⁵¹ Although many were aware of widespread oppression, it was not until December 2024, when the Assad regime fell, that the world saw the brutal reality of the atrocities. It is estimated that at least 202,021 civilians were killed, 160,123 were arbitrarily detained or forcibly disappeared, and at least 45,031 people died under torture. The vast majority of these victims were Sunni, with around 80-90% of detainees and those being forcibly disappeared being Sunni males, reflecting the regime's focus on opposition groups, which largely impacted Sunni communities, and reinforced sectarian imbalances.⁵² Like the majority of Syria, Sunni communities were under constant surveillance and oppression. However, the reality of the Sunni majority was much greater than that of those under the protection of the regime.

“It is estimated that at least 202,021 civilians were killed, 160,123 were arbitrarily detained or forcibly disappeared, and at least 45,031 people died under torture.”

The Sunni majority faced discrimination, including restricted access to essential services like water and electricity, while regime-connected networks predominantly benefited from housing, employment, and subsidies.⁵³ Sunni neighborhoods were also repeatedly devastated by the regime's assaults—217 chemical attacks, 254 cluster munition strikes, and more than 81,000 barrel bomb attacks—leaving entire neighborhoods destroyed.⁵⁴ These sustained attacks have displaced over 13 million Syrians, tearing families apart and leaving civilians vulnerable to arbitrary arrest and violent oppression.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Marie Forestier, “In a Sectarian Syria, the Winners Should Refrain from Taking All,” *Atlantic Council*, 2023; Michael Pizzi and Nuha Shabaan, “Sunnis Fill Rebel Ranks, but Also Prop Up Assad Regime,” *USA Today*, 2013.

⁵² *Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)*, “Summary of the Assad Regime's Crimes Against the Syrian People Over the Last 14 Years,” 2025; Chris Zambelis, *West Point CTC Sentinel*, 2016; *Amnesty International*, “Syria: Human Rights at Risk,” 2021.

⁵³ *European Union Agency for Asylum*, *Sunni Arabs*, 2025; *New Lines Institute*, “Persecution of Syrian Minorities Risks the Future of Sanctions Relief,” 2025.

⁵⁴ *Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)*, “The Legal and Moral Necessity of Excluding Criminals from State Institutions during the Transitional Phase in Syria,” October 20, 2025.

⁵⁵ *Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)*, *Summary of the Assad Regime's Crimes*, 2025.

The regime's terror extended as far as systematic torture, executions, and starvation, with well-known detention centers like Saydaya becoming infamous for such abuses. Even today, mass graves of bodies are still being uncovered, exposing the full extent of the Assad regime's brutality and the reality that countless families may never recover their loved ones or be able to give them a proper burial.⁵⁶

Adding to this injustice, Western narratives have also laid the groundwork for the sectarian tensions we see today. Western coverage often focused on the persecution of minorities, specifically Christians, fitting neatly into the West's political agenda. At the same time, Western media largely ignored the suffering of the Sunni majority.⁵⁷ Many reports frequently reduced attacks to "violence against Syrians," glossing over the fact that a large number of Sunni civilians, who called for political reform, were targeted by the regime.⁵⁸ At the same time, the *Islamic State* (ISIS) started making its way into the Western media, dominating headlines. While ISIS committed horrific acts, its scale of violence in Syria does not even compare to the systematic killings, torture, and disappearances carried out by the Assad regime.⁵⁹

As ISIS captured global media attention, most narratives focused on the persecution of minorities—yet the reality is that the majority of its victims in Syria were Sunni Arabs.⁶⁰ One of the most chilling examples was the massacre of al-Sheitat members in Deir Ezzor in 2014.⁶¹

⁵⁶ *United Nations*, "Syria: UN Experts Alarmed by Targeted Abductions and Disappearances," 2025; *The New York Times*, "Inside Syria's Saydnaya Prison: 'We Were Tortured, Killed, and Buried in Secret,'" 2025; *Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)*, Summary of the Assad Regime's Crimes, 2025.

⁵⁷ Marie Forestier, "In a Sectarian Syria, the Winners Should Refrain from Taking All," *Atlantic Council*, 2023; *New Lines Institute*, "Persecution of Syrian Minorities Risks the Future of Sanctions Relief," 2025.

⁵⁸ Cyrus Malik, "Washington's Sunni Myth and the Civil Wars in Syria and Iraq," *War on the Rocks*, 2016; Thomas Pierret, "Syria's 'Sunni Question' Is Here to Stay," *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs*, 2025; Marie Forestier, *Atlantic Council*, 2023.

⁵⁹ *Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)*, "The Most Notable ISIS Violations against Syrian Society and ISIS' Contribution to Distorting the Popular Uprising Calling for Freedom and Dignity," February 10, 2022; *Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)*, "SNHR's 12th Annual Report on Torture in Syria on the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture," June 26, 2023.

⁶⁰ *Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)*, "ISIS | Casualties," February 14, 2022.

⁶¹ *Al Jazeera English*, "Islamic State Group 'Executes 700' in Syria," August 17, 2014

ISIS executed at least 700 tribe members—including men, women, and children—many by beheading, in a period of 6 days, though some reports suggest a higher death toll. ISIS wiped out entire families and burned homes and crops, demonstrating that Sunni communities who resisted the group bore the brunt of its brutality—an aspect overlooked mainly in the West.⁶² Justice for the Sunni majority remains unfulfilled, and even today, minorities remain in the headlines—the Sunni story remains in the shadows. There is no question that minorities have reason for concern, yet building an inclusive society requires acknowledging the past decades of systematic oppression, torture, and economic marginalization.⁶³ The reality of this horrific past is that those who passively benefited from the regime’s protection now have to confront their silence. In contrast, those who enforce the regime’s brutality face accountability for their actions.⁶⁴ For the Sunni majority, the fall of the Assad regime brings a new season of hope, and the rise of Al-Sharaa and the new transitional government offers opportunities for Sunni communities to reclaim their place in society, seek justice, and help build a more inclusive Syria.⁶⁵ However, Syria’s future depends on more than justice alone. It also requires confronting the sectarian divisions sown by the Assad regime, Western narratives, and extremist ideology—rebuilding trust, choosing dialogue over distrust, fostering understanding, and moving forward toward inclusion.

6. Recent Violence Against Minorities

6.1 Christians

Christians make up around 8-10% of Syria’s population, with a wide range of denominations, including Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Melkite Greek Catholic, and various Protestant communities.⁶⁶ Christians are spread throughout Syria with large populations in Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, and the Wadi al-Nasara region.

⁶² *Al Jazeera English*, “Islamic State Group ‘Executes 700’ in Syria,” 2014.

⁶³ Marie Forestier, *Atlantic Council*, 2023.

⁶⁴ Samiran Mishra, *NDTV*, 2023.

⁶⁵ Marie Forestier, *Atlantic Council*, 2023; *New Lines Institute*, “Persecution of Syrian Minorities Risks the Future of Sanctions Relief,” 2025.

⁶⁶ *New Lines Magazine*, “Syria’s Christians Are Facing New Fears,” 2025; *Arab Center Washington DC*, “Arab Opinion Index: Syrian Public Opinion Survey 2025,” 2025.

“Christians make up around 8-10% of Syria’s population, with a wide range of denominations, including Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Melkite Greek Catholic, and various Protestant communities.”

Christians have deep historical roots in Syria—despite many challenges, they continue to preserve their cultural, spiritual, and linguistic heritage by community initiatives, and preservation of historical monasteries and schools.⁶⁷ An example of this preservation is Maaloula, a small town tucked in the Qalamoun Mountains, northeast of Damascus, where locals still speak Western Aramaic, a rare dialect considered closest to the language Jesus spoke.⁶⁸ Other villages and regions like Wadi al-Nasara show Syria’s Christian heritage and linguistic diversity—different Aramaic dialects have persisted for centuries, reflecting a rich legacy of spiritual and cultural persistence.⁶⁹

Like the Alawites, Christians also received protections and privileges under the Assad regime—such as access to government positions, university positions, and the protection to maintain their schools and churches—but these came with conditions—the regime monitored their activities. It leveraged it to project an image of pluralism.⁷⁰ Christians were spared from certain forms of repression, but their security was tightly dependent on their political loyalty. After the fall of Assad in late 2024, that protection disappeared, leaving Christian communities vulnerable to sectarian retaliation and extremist violence.⁷¹

⁶⁷ *New Lines Magazine*, “Syria’s Christians Are Facing New Fears,” (2025).

⁶⁸ Britannica, “Maaloula, Syria,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2025).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ekathimerini*, “A Church Bombing Leads Syria’s Christians to Consider Leaving as Foreign Fighters Remain,” 2025; *The Majalla*, “Damascus Church Bombing Shattered More Lives,” 2025; *Amnesty International*, “Syria: Coastal Massacres of Alawite Civilians Must Be Investigated as War Crimes,” April 2025.

⁷¹ *The Christian Post*, “Syrian Christians Facing Cultural Erasure, Advocate Warns,” 2025; *Rudaw*, “Reports on Sectarian Violence in Coastal Syria,” 2025.

On June 22, 2025, a suicide bomber struck the Greek Orthodox Church of Mar Elian in Damascus, killing 22 worshippers and wounding over 60 during a service, with ISIS later claiming responsibility.⁷² The fears of targeted violence became a reality, marking the beginning of attacks on Christians under Syria’s transitional government, driven not solely by state actions but by a broader extremist activity and the presence of multiple armed factions within Syria.⁷³ Witnesses described the aftermath of the attack as scenes of devastation with collapsed infrastructure. They shattered icons—casting uncertainty over the role of Christians in Syria and their historical roots in transitional Syria.⁷⁴

Soon after, in July 2025, coordinated attacks tore through the southern Sweida district and coastal regions, where jihadist and Islamic factions, some linked to the government in Damascus, carried out violence—torching homes and the Greek Melkite Church of St. Michael in Al-Sura, displacing dozens of families.⁷⁵ Among the many victims was an evangelical Pastor, his wife, and their two children, who were shot and killed while attempting to flee the violence.⁷⁶ Just a few months later, in October, the violence reached Wadi al-Nasara, the “Valley of Christians,” when 4 masked gunmen on motorcycles opened fire on a group of young men, killing 2 and critically injuring a third, sparking outrage and strikes by residents.⁷⁷ All of these incidents expose the far reach of extreme Islamist groups and the vulnerability of Christians under the transitional government.

 **All of these incidents expose the far reach of extreme Islamist groups and the vulnerability of Christians under the transitional government.**

⁷² *Syriac Press*, “Suicide Bomber Attack at Greek Rum Orthodox Church of Mar Elias in Damascus,” 2025; *Ekathimerini*, “A Church Bombing Leads Syria’s Christians to Consider Leaving as Foreign Fighters Remain,” 2025.

⁷³ *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, “Damascus Church Attack: Who Is Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah?,” 2025; *The Majalla*, “Damascus Church Bombing Shattered More Lives,” 2025.

⁷⁴ *Ekathimerini*, “A Church Bombing Leads Syria’s Christians to Consider Leaving,” 2025.

⁷⁵ *Barnabas Aid*, “Pastor Among at Least 12 Christians Killed in Southern Syria Violence,” 2025; *Syriac Press*, “Syria: Three Christians Killed by General Security in Wadi al-Nasara Sparks Outrage and General Strike,” 2025.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Syriac Press*, “Suicide Bomber Attack at Greek Rum Orthodox Church of Mar Elias in Damascus,” 2025.

Many international voices have condemned the attacks on Christians, calling for transparent investigations and accountability while warning that the new government risks mirroring failures and facades associated with the Assad era, perpetuating a culture of fear and mistrust.⁷⁸ Despite these concerns, there have been signs of improvement.

After the attack on the Greek Orthodox Church in Damascus, Syrian security forces maintained a continuous presence to protect the site, with reinforced measures during the 2025 Christmas season.⁷⁹ Throughout December, Christians and many others celebrated in Syria, including in areas previously restricted, suggesting a cautious return of public religious life.⁸⁰ Christian leaders from multiple denominations came together to advocate for unity, peace, and interfaith dialogue, demonstrating resilience and collective commitment to protecting minorities.⁸¹ Fears resurfaced on New Year's Eve when an attempted Islamic State attack on a church was foiled by Syrian security forces, killing one soldier. While the incident showed some operational capacity, it also underscored ongoing extremist threats and persistent doubts among Christians about whether the transitional government can provide consistent and reliable protection. In today's Syria, Christians are generally accepted as part of the country's long-standing social and historical landscape, with many being able to practice their faith publicly and engage in civil life. However, social acceptance does not guarantee security.⁸² Ongoing extremist activity, limited state authority, and unresolved sectarian divisions continue to place Christian communities at risk, leaving them between cautious hope and the persistent reality of vulnerability in post-Assad Syria.⁸³

⁷⁸ *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*, "Syria: UN Experts Alarmed at Attacks on Druze Communities, Including Sexual Violence," 2025; *Amnesty International*, "Syria: New Investigation Reveals Evidence Government and Affiliated Forces Extrajudicially Executed Dozens of Druze People in Suwayda," 2025.

⁷⁹ *Syriac Press*, "Suicide Bomber Attack at Greek Rum Orthodox Church of Mar Elias in Damascus," 2025; *The Majalla*, "Damascus Church Bombing Shattered More Lives," 2025.

⁸⁰ *Catholic News Agency*, "Syria Celebrates Christmas with Hope Amid Lingering Security Fears," 2025; *Syriac Press*, "Suicide Bomber Attack at Greek Rum Orthodox Church of Mar Elias in Damascus," 2025.

⁸¹ *Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation (HCEF)*, "Syrian Christians Look to Christmas with New Hope After a Year of Upheaval," 2025; *Arab News*, "Syrian Christians Call for Unity During Christmas Celebrations," 2025.

⁸² *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, "Christians in the New Syria: Accepted but at Risk," 2025.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

“In today’s Syria, Christians are generally accepted as part of the country’s long-standing social and historical landscape, with many being able to practice their faith publicly and engage in civil life.”

6.2 Druze

The Druze Community is a small religious minority in Syria, primarily located in the Southern Governorate of Suwayda, with smaller communities in urban areas such as Homs and Damascus.⁸⁴ Historically, during the Assad regime, the Druze have maintained a stance of neutrality, emphasizing the preservation of their community’s autonomy and self-governance while steering clear of alignment with dominant political powers.⁸⁵ The Druze were placed under the protective umbrella of the Assad regime, but unlike Alawites and Christians, Druze did not receive special privileges—but like all minorities, despite the regime’s claims to protect them, the Druze remained under surveillance, heavily monitored, and subject to coercion.⁸⁶

Druze governance has traditionally centered on tribal and religious structures, with elders and spiritual leaders guiding local administration, community affairs, and dispute resolution.⁸⁷ In recent years, these traditional systems have been formalized into institutions such as the *Supreme Legal Committee* and local militias—grouped under the *Druze National Guard*—that manage security and defense, demonstrating the communities’ commitment to self-protection and local autonomy. At the beginning of this year, after the fall of Assad, the Druze community was divided over how closely they should engage with the new Syrian Government.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, “Syria’s Druze Stand Alone,” Diwan, May 2025; *Druze Studies Conference*, “Druze in the Levant and the Diaspora-Discourses of Tradition and Modernity,” The University of Kansas, 2025.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *The Conversation*, “Amid Fragile Ceasefire, Violence in Southern Syria Brings Druze Communities’ Complex Cross-Border Ties to the Fore,” 2025; *New Lines Institute*, “It’s Sharaa’s Syria Now: Podcast,” 2025.

⁸⁷ *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, “Syria’s Druze Stand Alone,” 2025.

⁸⁸ *International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, “Non-State Armed Groups in Syria: 2025 Report,” 2025.

“Druze governance has traditionally centered on tribal and religious structures, with elders and spiritual leaders guiding local administration, community affairs, and dispute resolution.”

However, soon the Druze community would unite following events later that summer that would leave them in profound devastation. Those events drew international attention to the undeniable sectarian tensions that regional actors and global observers could no longer ignore.

Druze and Bedouin tribes have coexisted for centuries in southern Syria. Bedouin tribes, traditionally semi-nomadic, claim grazing rights that often extend into Druze farmlands, fueling tensions.⁸⁹ The Civil War only exacerbated these tensions due to economic collapse and scarcity of resources such as water, crops, and market access. After the fall of Assad and the establishment of the transitional government, shifting national priorities and limited administrative reach created gaps in the provision of security. In the Druze governance system, these gaps create a security vacuum, allowing local militias—Druze and Bedouin—to assert authority.⁹⁰ These structural weaknesses, combined with strong tribal codes of honor and retributive justice, contributed to significant conflict in July 2025, after a Druze merchant was assaulted, including theft and serious injury, and briefly kidnapped by members of a Sunni Bedouin tribe.⁹¹ In response, Druze armed groups detained several Bedouin tribe members, escalating the situation to armed conflict.⁹²

“...structural weaknesses, combined with strong tribal codes of honor and retributive justice, contributed to significant conflict in July 2025, after a Druze merchant was assaulted...”

⁸⁹ *Times of Israel*, “Violence Erupts in Druze-Majority Suwayda,” July 2025; *Amnesty International*, “Syria: New Investigation Reveals Evidence Government and Affiliated Forces Extrajudicially Executed Dozens of Druze People in Suwayda,” September 2025.

⁹⁰ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Syria’s Druze Stand Alone,” 2025; *Times of Israel*, “Violence Erupts in Druze-Majority Suwayda,” July 2025.

⁹¹ Daniel Dayan, “Timeline of Druze-Bedouin Clashes in Suwayda,” 2025.

⁹² *Ibid.*

Historically, Druze and Bedouin communities in this region resolved these disagreements through local mediation by tribal elders and religious leaders rather than state intervention, thereby containing disputes and preventing sectarian escalation.⁹³ Within a few days, the fighting had spread to Suwayda city and surrounding villages, and Bedouin armed groups established checkpoints with heavy weaponry, and even Syrian government checkpoints were targeted.⁹⁴ As clashes continued to escalate, the transitional government forces made moves that favored Bedouin factions, acting more as combatants than neutral mediators, alarming the Druze community and undermining established local conflict resolution practices.⁹⁵ Adding to the Druzes' anxiety was the closure of the Damascus-Suwayda highway, which reflected fears of state favoritism and sectarian targeting.⁹⁶

Eyewitness accounts and human rights reports from attacks recorded systematic killings, targeting Druze families. In some cases, victims were questioned about their religion before their execution, highlighting the sectarian nature of the killings. Testimonies shared that bodies were left in homes and streets, looted and broadcast online, reflecting both the magnitude and brutality of the assaults.⁹⁷ Estimates of the death toll due to the clashes vary considerably, with the UN reporting at least 1,400 casualties.

 **Estimates of the death toll due to the clashes vary considerably, with the UN reporting at least 1,400 casualties.**

⁹³ *Arab Center Washington DC*, “From Sectarianism to Tribalism: Rebuilding Syria’s Power Structures,” 2025; Raymond Hinnebusch, “For Syrian Druze, the Latest Violence Is One More Chapter in a Centuries-Long Struggle Over Autonomy,” *The Conversation*, 2025.

⁹⁴ *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*, “Situation Report: Suwayda Clashes and Displacement,” 2025.

⁹⁵ *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, “Making Sure Damascus Learns the Right Lessons from the Suwayda Clashes,” 2025; *New Lines Institute*, “State Resilience and Fragility: Persecution of Syrian Minorities Risks the Future of Sanctions Relief,” 2025.

⁹⁶ *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*, “Situation Report: Suwayda Clashes and Displacement,” 2025; *Al Jazeera*, “More Than 1,400 Killed in Sectarian Violence in Coastal Syria, Report Finds,” July 22, 2025.

⁹⁷ *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*, “Syria: UN Experts Alarmed at Attacks on Druze Communities, Including Sexual Violence,” 2025; *Amnesty International*, “Syria: New Investigation Reveals Evidence Government and Affiliated Forces Extrajudicially Executed Dozens of Druze People in Suwayda,” 2025; *Syriac Press*, “Syrian Inquiry into Suwayda Violence Deepens as New Arrests Signal Shift toward Accountability,” 2025.

In comparison, the *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* cited 1,600 casualties. However, local sources argue the actual number is much higher due to blocked villages and road access, incomplete reporting, and mass graves still being uncovered.⁹⁸ The variations in reporting reflect both the challenges of documenting mass killings in the midst of conflict and the limited transparency of the Syrian authorities.⁹⁹

Many of these killings have been directly linked to Syrian government forces, with evidence showing that military officials and units were involved in ordering attacks on unauthorized militias and civilians perceived as fueling the violence, highlighting the scale and deliberate campaign of state-backed brutality.¹⁰⁰

Although the attacks have drawn international attention and scrutiny, no complete, credible, independent investigation has yet been conducted. The investigations conducted by the UN were constrained by limited access to affected areas and ongoing safety concerns, which limited the investigators' ability to conduct on-the-ground assessments. Government-appointed committees are criticized for bias, while many implicated troops still control access to the affected areas.¹⁰¹ Druze leadership has repeatedly called for internationally supervised investigations, emphasizing that neutral oversight is essential for accountability, particularly in cases involving the government.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*, "Syria: UN Experts Alarmed at Attacks on Druze Communities, Including Sexual Violence," 2025; *Al Jazeera*, "More Than 1,400 Killed in Sectarian Violence in Coastal Syria, Report Finds," July 22, 2025; *International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)*, "Syria: Impartially and Independently Investigate the Crimes Committed in Suwayda," 2025.

⁹⁹ *International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)*, "Syria: Impartially and Independently Investigate the Crimes Committed in Suwayda," 2025; *Amnesty International*, "Syria: A Year After Assad's Fall, Rights of Survivors Must Guide Transition," 2025.

¹⁰⁰ *Amnesty International*, "Syria: New Investigation Reveals Evidence Government and Affiliated Forces Extrajudicially Executed Dozens of Druze People in Suwayda," 2025; *Syriac Press*, "Syrian Inquiry into Suwayda Violence Deepens as New Arrests Signal Shift toward Accountability," 2025.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)*, "Syria: Impartially and Independently Investigate the Crimes Committed in Suwayda," 2025; *Amnesty International*, "Syria: New Investigation Reveals Evidence Government and Affiliated Forces Extrajudicially Executed Dozens of Druze People in Suwayda," (2025).

The leadership also called for practical and just solutions like the reopening of roads, withdrawing troops from occupied villages in the Druze governance, and guaranteeing the safe return of displaced residents.¹⁰³ Then, in November 2025, Syria's national investigative committee adopted a more robust approach and arrested multiple officials from the Defense and Interior Ministries, raising cautious optimism that state authorities might finally hold themselves accountable for the atrocities committed against the Druze community.¹⁰⁴

“The leadership also called for practical and just solutions like the reopening of roads, withdrawing troops from occupied villages in the Druze governance, and guaranteeing the safe return of displaced residents.”

The Chairman of the Syrian National Committee pledged justice for the Druze community, emphasizing independence from political influence, commitment to Syrian Law and international humanitarian standards, and alignment with UN investigation protocols. Although Syrian authorities restricted access to Suwayda city, investigators conducted field visits, interviewed survivors, and gathered forensic evidence.¹⁰⁵ Despite the progress shown by these arrests, the Druze community remains skeptical and insists on complete transparency and comprehensive prosecutions to rebuild trust.¹⁰⁶

The Druze community faces broader structural and geopolitical challenges, given its reliance on Damascus for essential resources; it cannot realistically pursue full autonomy or statehood, unlike the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ *Housing, Land and Property (HLP) Syria Report*, “Suwayda: Forced Displacement as Property and Infrastructure Plundered” (2025); *Syriac Press*, “Syrian Inquiry into Suwayda Violence Deepens as New Arrests Signal Shift toward Accountability” (2025).

¹⁰⁴ *Syriac Press*, “Syrian Inquiry into Suwayda Violence Deepens,” (2025).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*, “Syria: UN Experts Alarmed at Attacks on Druze Communities, Including Sexual Violence,” 2025.

¹⁰⁷ *New Arab*, “Will Druze Demands for Autonomy Redraw Syria’s Political Map?,” 2025; Marilyn Stern, “Ahmad Sharawi on the Druze and Their Prospects in Syria,” *Middle East Forum Podcast* (2025).

Although Israel has positioned itself rhetorically as a protector of the Druze, providing aid and opportunities to Syrian Druze, complete political independence for the Druze is neither Israel's agenda nor within its economic capacity to support due to the region's dependence.¹⁰⁸ Following the July clashes and ongoing Druze displacement, Jordan served as a key forum for dialogue.

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U.S. envoy to Syria, Tom Barrack, facilitated negotiations between the Syrian government and Druze and Bedouin Leadership to address security concerns, road access, and the return of displaced residents.¹⁰⁹ These negotiations achieved some progress, such as temporary ceasefires and humanitarian access routes. The negotiations were limited by broader political dynamics and competing regional security concerns, particularly involving Israel.¹¹⁰

Suwayda's fragile ceasefire, blocked roads, and unresolved displacement highlight the urgent need to protect minority rights and the protection of religious freedom in Syria.¹¹¹ The Attacks against the Druze reveal the deep fear and vulnerability within the community, illustrating how sectarian violence can escalate when minority protections are absent. Religious freedom is an essential focus of U.S. and international policy in Syria, both to protect at-risk communities and address systematic conditions that allow such violence to occur. To restore trust and accountability, the new Syrian government must implement fair investigative structures and hold perpetrators accountable to prevent any further violence and rights violations.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ *Al Jazeera*, "More Than 1,400 Killed in Sectarian Violence in Coastal Syria, Report Finds," July 22, 2025; *Axios*, "U.S. Working on Israel–Syria Deal for Humanitarian Corridor to Suwayda," August 12, 2025.

¹⁰⁹ *Axios*, "U.S. Working on Israel–Syria Deal for Humanitarian Corridor to Suwayda," 2025.

¹¹⁰ *Al Jazeera*, "More Than 1,400 Killed in Sectarian Violence in Coastal Syria, Report Finds," July 22, 2025; *Reuters*, "Bodies Looted from Homes: Syria's Druze Reeling After Sweida Bloodshed," July 18, 2025.

¹¹¹ *Syriac Press*, "Syrian Inquiry into Suwayda Violence Deepens as New Arrests Signal Shift toward Accountability," 2025; *International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)*, "Syria: Impartially and Independently Investigate the Crimes Committed in Suwayda," 2025.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

6.3 Kurdish Communities and Autonomous Governance in NE Syria

Syria's Kurdish population is estimated at around 2-3 million. They mostly reside in the northeast region (AANES), with the majority Sunni Muslim, and smaller groups practicing Yazidism, Christianity, and other religions.¹¹³ Over many decades, the Kurds have faced some of the most severe and systematic oppression of any minority group in Syria. State policies have been made deliberately to eradicate Kurdish Identity, most notably the 1962 census, which stripped around 300,000 Kurds of citizenship and left entire communities stateless.¹¹⁴ Thousands of Kurds were forcibly displaced during the Ba'ath Party's "Arab Belt" project, confiscating their agricultural land along the Turkish border and resettling Arabs to intentionally disrupt Kurdish geographic cohesion and diminish communal strength.¹¹⁵ The Ba'athist state prohibited the public use of the Kurdish language and Kurdish-language education, while security authorities restricted and closely monitored Kurdish cultural practices and religious gatherings. Kurdish political activism was met with imprisonment, torture, and exile.¹¹⁶ These policies were not just discriminatory; they were a deliberate effort to erase Kurdish culture, leaving generations of Syrian Kurds dispossessed, marginalized, and denied rights and protections other citizens enjoyed.¹¹⁷

During the Syrian civil war, Kurdish communities came together to organize politically and militarily to defend their region from both the Assad regime and extremist groups. By 2013-2014, Kurdish forces and local Arab groups established the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also often called Rojava.

¹¹³ Ziryan Rojhelati, *The Great Game in Syria: The Future of the Kurdish Issue in the Middle East* (Rudaw Research Center, 2025); Amy Austin Holmes, *Statelet of Survivors: The Kurdish Question in Syria* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

¹¹⁴ *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "Syria 2025 Annual Report,"* 2025; Harvard University, "Survival and Self-Determination in Northeast Syria," *Epicenter* (2025).

¹¹⁵ Terry Glavin, "No Friends but the Mountains: The Fate of the Kurds," *World Affairs* 177, no. 6 (2015): 57–66; Amy Austin Holmes, *Statelet of Survivors*, 2025.

¹¹⁶ Terry Glavin, "No Friends but the Mountains," 2015; Harvard University, "Survival and Self-Determination in Northeast Syria," 2025.

¹¹⁷ Ziryan Rojhelati, *The Great Game in Syria: The Future of the Kurdish Issue in the Middle East* (Rudaw Research Center, 2025); *Rudaw Research Center*, "Syrian Kurds and the Declaration of the New Syrian Constitution," 2025.

“During the Syrian civil war, Kurdish communities came together to organize politically and militarily to defend their region from both the Assad regime and extremist groups.”

This self-governing region prioritizes pluralism, inclusivity, and local autonomy. It is home to multiple ethnic and religious groups—including Kurds, Arabs, Bedouins, Christians, Sunnis, and other minorities—all of whom are represented in civic structures, local councils, and schools.¹¹⁸ The education system also mirrors this diversity; the schools offer Kurdish, Arabic, Syriac, and other local languages while incorporating and respecting various religious practices.¹¹⁹ This environment gives Kurds a sense of belonging, sharply contrasting with the decades of cultural elimination and suppression.¹²⁰ AANES local governance incorporates religious freedom, allowing communities to maintain their beliefs without fear of state interference—establishing a standard that many countries in the region have to achieve.¹²¹ The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) serve as the region's core military and security force. It brings together Kurdish, Sunni Arab, and other ethnic fighters, reflecting the AANES commitment to a pluralistic framework.¹²² The SDF was instrumental in defeating ISIS in Northeastern Syria, receiving U.S support in the form of intelligence, training, and often organized by the CIA. Through tremendous grit and sacrifice, SDF achieved autonomy for the region, stabilizing formerly war-torn areas, protecting minorities, and demonstrating a model of governance and security that the new government in Damascus can learn from.¹²³

¹¹⁸ *Rudaw Research Center*, “Syrian Kurds and the Declaration of the New Syrian Constitution,” 2025; *New Lines Institute*, “Syria’s Tricky Northeast Region: Podcast,” 2025.

¹¹⁹ *Syria Untold*, “An Interview with Wladimir van Wilgenburg on the Kurdish Question in Syria and Turkey,” 2025; *Peace in Kurdistan Campaign*, “Crafting Stable Local Democracy in North and East Syria,” 2025.

¹²⁰ *New Lines Institute*, “Syria’s Tricky Northeast Region: Podcast,” 2025; *Rudaw Research Center*, “Syrian Kurds and the Declaration of the New Syrian Constitution,” 2025.

¹²¹ Harvard University, “Survival and Self-Determination in Northeast Syria,” 2025; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), “*Syria 2025 Annual Report*,” 2025.

¹²² *Deutsche Welle*, “Syria: Sharaa Signs Integration Deal with Kurdish-Led Forces,” 2025; *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, “Facilitating the New SDF Agreement Is Key to Stabilizing Syria,” 2025.

¹²³ *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, “A Deal in Damascus,” 2025; Ziryayn Rojhelati, “*The Great Game in Syria*,” 2025.

“...SDF achieved autonomy for the region, stabilizing formerly war-torn areas, protecting minorities, and demonstrating a model of governance and security that the new government in Damascus can learn from.”

While pluralism and inclusivity are central to AANES governance, the region continues to face sectarian grievances.¹²⁴ Tensions between Kurdish authorities and local Bedouin tribes over land, resource allocation, and representation in local councils have at times led to clashes, underscoring that pluralistic ideals can be challenged by competing communal interests.¹²⁵ The effectiveness of AANES governance is also hindered by mismanagement, exploitation, and corruption, which affect its institutions and communities. There have been reports that some SDF-affiliated actors carry out arbitrary arrests and label political dissenters as extremists, notably in Sunni areas that resist Kurdish-led authority.¹²⁶ Additionally, restrictions on public celebrations—such as the recent banning of Syrian Liberation Day—show the conditional nature of freedoms in the region.¹²⁷ Even with its emphasis on inclusivity and cultural recognition, these limits reveal that freedoms depend on political loyalty and social compliance rather than law and policy. These challenges reveal the limits of accountability and the complexities of maintaining strong self-governance while ensuring equal treatment for a diverse population. Since the fall of Assad, the relationship between the new Syrian government under Ahmed al-Sharaa and the AANES region has been shaped by both tension and opportunity. Damascus, with support from some Western actors, has pushed for a central government structure to unify the country under one framework.

“Damascus...has pushed for a central government structure to unify the country under one framework.”

¹²⁴ *The New Arab*, “A Fractured Front: Autonomy or Integration for Syria’s Kurds?,” 2025; *Le Monde*, “In Aleppo, a Testing Ground for Integration of Kurds into New Syria,” 2025.

¹²⁵ *New Lines Institute*, “Syria’s Tricky Northeast Region: Podcast,” 2025; Fabrice Balanche, “Territorial and Political Strife: A Test for the Future,” 2025; *Rudaw Research Center*, “Syrian Kurds and the Declaration of the New Syrian Constitution,” 2025.

¹²⁶ *Rudaw Research Center*, “Syrian Kurds and the Declaration of the New Syrian Constitution,” 2025; *Al-Monitor*, “Will Turkey Follow Through on Threats to Attack Syria’s Kurds?,” 2025.

¹²⁷ *North Press Agency (NPA) Syria*, “Restrictions on Syrian Liberation Day in AANES,” 2025; *Al-Monitor*, “Will Turkey Follow Through on Threats to Attack Syria’s Kurds?,” 2025.

However, for many in the AANES region, specifically Kurds, these efforts are seen as a threat to the autonomy they spent years fighting to achieve.¹²⁸ Meanwhile, other Western policymakers advocate for decentralization, viewing the AANES model as a potential blueprint for a pluralistic and inclusive Syria, particularly in protecting religious freedoms and minority rights.¹²⁹ Every government model has limitations, but the AANES region demonstrates how diverse groups can coexist under a system committed to respecting cultural and religious differences.¹³⁰ The AANES model provides important insights for the New government in Damascus, highlighting that long-term stability depends on protecting religious freedoms, respecting linguistic and cultural rights, and guaranteeing local representation in civic structures.¹³¹

However, any political alignment between the two is hindered by long-standing mistrust and geopolitical pressures. For many in the AANES region, memories of the Assad era abuses—statelessness, displacement, and cultural eradication—make both its leaders and communities understandably skeptical of placing full trust in the new government.¹³² At the same time, AANES faces external pressure from Turkey, which is in strong alliance with the new government, equating Kurdish autonomy with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) influence and views the AANES region as a threat, adding further strain to its relationship with Damascus, which is forced to balance sovereignty with the geopolitical realities shaped by Turkey.¹³³

“...AANES faces external pressure from Turkey...adding further strain to its relationship with Damascus...”

¹²⁸ *Deutsche Welle*, “Syria: Sharaa Signs Integration Deal with Kurdish-Led Forces,” 2025; *Rudaw Research Center*, “Syrian Kurds and the Declaration of the New Syrian Constitution,” 2025.

¹²⁹ *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, “Facilitating the New SDF Agreement Is Key to Stabilizing Syria,” 2025; *New Lines Institute*, “Syria’s Tricky Northeast Region: Podcast,” 2025.

¹³⁰ *Rudaw Research Center*, “Syrian Kurds and the Declaration of the New Syrian Constitution,” 2025; *Syria Untold*, “An Interview with Wladimir van Wilgenburg on the Kurdish Question in Syria and Turkey,” 2025.

¹³¹ *Peace in Kurdistan Campaign*, “Crafting Stable Local Democracy in North and East Syria,” 2025; *Harvard University*, “Survival and Self-Determination in Northeast Syria,” 2025.

¹³² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), “*Syria 2025 Annual Report*,” 2025; Ziryan Rojhelati, “The Great Game in Syria: The Future of the Kurdish Issue in the Middle East,” 2025.

¹³³ *Al-Monitor*, “Will Turkey Follow Through on Threats to Attack Syria’s Kurds?,” 2025; Fabrice Balanche, “Territorial and Political Strife: A Test for the Future,” 2025.

These dynamics show how fragile and complex the situation is; both the new government and the AANES region can benefit from an agreement, but mutual respect and patience are necessary.¹³⁴ Both groups have contributed to the greater effort in Syria, each fighting for a new beginning, and both deserve respect. Treating one another as enemies would only undermine both sides and lead to losses neither can afford.

The March 10 agreement briefly raised hopes by outlining a gradual integration of the SDF into Syria's new security institutions while maintaining some autonomy, but soon stalled after growing sectarian attacks, tensions, and regional pressures intensified.¹³⁵ Accumulated mistrust and external pressure around the Kurdish question pushed tensions to a breaking point, resulting in clashes in October 2025, renewed violence in December, and further escalation in early January 2026.¹³⁶ The failure of integration talks and competing claims over territorial control drove the violence.¹³⁷ By late December 2025, violence in Aleppo had expanded into a multi-front confrontation, combining clashes between the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army and the Kurdish-led SDF, as well as rising tensions between the SDF and the new government in Damascus.¹³⁸ Clashes in Aleppo had intensified near Manbij, the Tishrin Dam, and the Qara Qozak bridge, with SDF forces confronting Turkish-backed SNA units over strategic infrastructure.¹³⁹ The situation escalated further in early January 2026 when Damascus, facing strong pressure from Turkey, moved against the remaining SDF forces in Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh, making Aleppo a critical proving ground for Syria's transitional approach.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ *New Lines Institute*, "Syria's Tricky Northeast Region: Podcast," 2025; *Deutsche Welle*, "Syria: Sharaa Signs Integration Deal with Kurdish-Led Forces," 2025.

¹³⁵ *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, "A Deal in Damascus: Prospects for Syria's Postwar Integration," 2025.

¹³⁶ *Reuters*, "Deadly Clashes Resume in Syria's Aleppo Between Government and Kurdish Forces," January 7, 2026.

¹³⁷ *Deutsche Welle*, "Syria: Sharaa Signs Integration Deal with Kurdish-Led Forces," 2025.

¹³⁸ *Al Jazeera*, "Syria Designates Aleppo's Kurdish Areas Closed Military Zones as Clashes Persist," January 7, 2026; *BBC News*, "Deadly Clashes Resume in Aleppo's Kurdish Neighborhoods," January 2026.

¹³⁹ *Reuters*, "Deadly Clashes Resume in Syria's Aleppo," 2026.

¹⁴⁰ *Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)*, "Syrian Army Besieges Kurdish Neighborhoods in Aleppo Following Clashes," January 7, 2026; *Al-Monitor*, "Syria's Sharaa Declares Kurdish a National Language, Recognizes Nowruz," January 2026.

“By late December 2025, violence in Aleppo had expanded into a multi-front confrontation, combining clashes between the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army and the Kurdish-led SDF...”

The question of who initiated the clashes remains unresolved, highlighting the deep mistrust across all parties.¹⁴¹ In Aleppo, competing accusations obscured responsibility for the initial violence. However, multiple reports indicated that government forces moved first to reestablish control over security after months of failed negotiations.¹⁴² Damascus accused the SDF of breaching agreements and shelling civilian neighborhoods, accusations that the SDF strongly denies, characterizing them as manufactured justifications for escalation and warning against unjustified military action.¹⁴³ As the violence escalated, civilians paid the highest price: neighborhoods were shelled, basic services collapsed, and reports of civilian deaths, including medical workers, emerged under disputed circumstances that further weakened confidence in competing accounts.¹⁴⁴ By mid-January, more than 100,000 residents had fled Kurdish-majority neighborhoods such as Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafirah, reviving memories of years of siege, war, and displacement, confirming fears of renewed discrimination.¹⁴⁵ Turkey’s influence in the escalation was obvious, amplifying Kurdish fears, particularly as Ankara’s continued framing of Kurdish self-administration with the PKK, suggesting the push for centralization was driven by regional security concerns rather than national reconciliation.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ *BBC News*, “Deadly Clashes Resume in Aleppo’s Kurdish Neighborhoods,” January 2026.

¹⁴² *Reuters*, “Deadly Clashes Resume in Syria’s Aleppo Between Government and Kurdish Forces,” January 7, 2026; *Al Jazeera*, “Syria Designates Aleppo’s Kurdish Areas Closed Military Zones as Clashes Persist,” January 7, 2026.

¹⁴³ *BBC News*, “Deadly Clashes Resume in Aleppo’s Kurdish Neighborhoods,” January 2026.

¹⁴⁴ *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR)*, “Extrajudicial Killings Reported During Aleppo Clashes,” 2026.

¹⁴⁵ *Kurdistan24*, “Syrian Army Declares Kurdish Districts of Aleppo a Military Zone as Fighting Intensifies,” January 2026; *Reuters*, “Deadly Clashes Resume in Syria’s Aleppo Between Government and Kurdish Forces,” January 7, 2026.

¹⁴⁶ *Al-Monitor*, “Will Turkey Follow Through on Threats to Attack Syria’s Kurds?,” 2025; *New Lines Institute*, “Preventing Another Sectarian Authoritarian System in Syria,” 2025.

“By mid-January, more than 100,000 residents had fled Kurdish-majority neighborhoods..., reviving memories of years of siege, war, and displacement, confirming fears of renewed discrimination.”

As the crisis unfolded, international actors repeatedly called for restraint, with the United Nations warning of potential violations of international humanitarian law and the United States urging de-escalation and renewed dialogue.¹⁴⁷ Ceasefires have repeatedly collapsed, revealing deep tension and distrust that have spilled back into military confrontation. The January 9, 2026, ceasefire briefly paused fighting and allowed Kurdish fighters to withdraw from Aleppo; it did little to resolve deeper disputes over security, representation, and Kurdish political inclusion.¹⁴⁸ In response to Kurdish concerns, on January 16th, 2026, President Ahmad al-Sharaa formally decreed Syrian Kurds as an integral part of Syria. Repealing discriminatory measures stemming from the 1962 census, granting citizenship to stateless Kurds, recognizing Kurdish as a national language, and declaring Nowruz a national holiday.¹⁴⁹ These measures marked a historic departure from decades of exclusion and a major legal milestone for Kurdish rights in modern Syria.¹⁵⁰ For Kurds emerging from current violence and displacement and also experiencing years of discrimination and exclusion, actions matter more than words and constitutional language. Military pressure and coercive measures have eroded trust and prompted skepticism about whether the new government’s reforms are sincere or primarily intended to appear inclusive to foreign observers.

“For Kurds emerging from current violence and displacement and also experiencing years of discrimination and exclusion, actions matter more than words and constitutional language.”

¹⁴⁷ *United Nations News*, “UN Calls for Restraint and Civilian Protection Amid Aleppo Fighting” (2026); *Reuters*, “Deadly Clashes Resume in Syria’s Aleppo Between Government and Kurdish Forces,” January 7, 2026.

¹⁴⁸ *Al-Monitor*, “Syria’s Sharaa Declares Kurdish a National Language, Recognizes Nowruz,” January 2026.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

In the days following the ceasefire attempts, it has become clear that the underlying conflict between the SDF and the Syrian military remains unresolved, and lingering tensions persist beneath unstable and temporary truces.¹⁵¹ While ceasefire extensions have curtailed major hostilities, they have not restored trust nor protected Kurdish civilians from the ongoing clashes and militarization.¹⁵² Kurdish communities across Aleppo, Raqqa, and other parts of the Northeastern region of Syria have borne the brunt of this instability—trapped between competing forces. They have been exposed to displacement, intimidation, economic collapse, food shortages, and electricity cuts, and exposed to harsh winter conditions, ultimately left with deep uncertainty over their future and security.¹⁵³ For the Kurdish population in Syria, the violence has reopened familiar fears and wounds of displacement, destroyed neighborhoods, education disruption, and repeated political decisions made without their involvement—leaving them once again with no agency.¹⁵⁴

At the same time, misconduct by both governing authorities has further weakened their legitimacy claims.¹⁵⁵ According to human rights organizations, Syrian military operations in Kurdish neighborhoods after the clashes involved serious violations, including extrajudicial killings, indiscriminate shelling, and coercive security tactics.¹⁵⁶ At the same time, the SDF is not without responsibility.

**“...misconduct
by both
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authorities has
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claims.”**

¹⁵¹ *The New Region*, “Ceasefires Extended as Tensions Remain High in Northeastern Syria,” 2026; *Rudaw*, “Ceasefire Holds but Tensions Persist Between SDF and Syrian Army,” January 27, 2026.

¹⁵² *UN News*, “UN Raises Alarm Over Renewed Clashes and Prison Break Risks in Northeast Syria,” January 2026; *Pax voor Vrede*, “Crisis in Northeast Syria: A Call for De-escalation,” January 20, 2026.

¹⁵³ *Human Rights Watch*, “Syria: Civilian Protection Lacking Amid Northeast Escalation,” January 25, 2026; *Syria Direct*, “In Encircled Kobani, the Specter of Siege Resurfaces,” 2026.

¹⁵⁴ *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, “A Kurdish Collapse in Northeast Syria: Key Things to Watch,” 2026.

¹⁵⁵ *Human Rights Watch*, “Syria: Civilian Protection Lacking Amid Northeast Escalation,” January 25, 2026.

¹⁵⁶ *Syrian Network for Human Rights*, “Documentation of the Killing of at Least 22 Civilians, Mostly by Snipers, at the Hands of the SDF in Raqqa Governorate,” January 23, 2026; *BBC News*, “Why Syria’s Kurds Feel Increasingly Vulnerable,” January 2026.

There have been reports of arbitrary arrests, restrictions on political expression, and civilian casualties during SDF security operations.¹⁵⁷ Particularly in Arab majority areas, there is resentment and raised concerns that the AANES governance practices authoritarian tactics that it claims to reject.¹⁵⁸ Accounts from some regions suggest that Arab civilians were discouraged from displaying the new Syrian flag or publicly supporting reunification.¹⁵⁹ Together, the patterns reveal a dangerous overlap, as both Damascus and AANES have reverted to security-first approaches mirroring elements of the Assad regime's coercive governance.¹⁶⁰

U.S. involvement has added another layer of complexity to this already fragmented environment.¹⁶¹ After years of close military cooperation against ISIS, many Kurds view Washington's reduced engagement and shifting priorities as a betrayal, deepening feelings of vulnerability and abandonment.¹⁶² Reduced U.S. mediation has left the SDF exposed, and expected to integrate into Damascus' security system without clear guarantees for political participation, cultural protections, or civilian safety.¹⁶³ Without consistent U.S. engagement as a trusted mediator, negotiations between Damascus and the Kurdish leadership risk turning coercive, leaving Kurdish leaders with little alternative to political marginalization or renewed conflict.¹⁶⁴

“Without consistent U.S. engagement as a trusted mediator, negotiations between Damascus and the Kurdish leadership risk turning coercive, leaving Kurdish leaders with little alternative to political marginalization or renewed conflict.”

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ *Alhurra*, “Arab Discontent Grows Under SDF Rule in Northeastern Syria,” 2026.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ *Orion Policy Institute*, “Syria at a Turning Point: Power Shifts, Actors, and U.S. Policy,” 2025.

¹⁶¹ *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, “A Kurdish Collapse in Northeast Syria,” 2026.

¹⁶² *Kurdistan Tribune*, “Kurds and the U.S. Betrayal of Rojava,” 2026.

¹⁶³ *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, “How Syria Can Succeed in Integrating the Kurds,” 2025.

¹⁶⁴ *Orion Policy Institute*, “Syria at a Turning Point,” 2025; *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, “A Kurdish Collapse in Northeast Syria,” 2026.

Despite these dangers, the Kurdish experience in northeastern Syria continues to offer lessons rather than obstacles for Syria's future.¹⁶⁵ The AANES model demonstrates that inclusive governance is possible, empowering religious minorities and marginalized groups, while providing many Kurds with their first sustained experience of dignity, linguistic recognition, and political participation after decades of systematic exclusion.¹⁶⁶ Military pressure alone cannot erase this legacy. At the same time, the AANES governance must confront its own failures if it is to retain legitimacy beyond Kurdish-majority regions.¹⁶⁷

Damascus bears the responsibilities that come with sovereignty: demonstrating restraint, protecting civilians, and consistently implementing constitutional guarantees on the ground. While it brings legitimacy, resources, and national oversight that could enable the integration of AANES into a wider Syrian framework, the new government is held to a higher standard and must also acknowledge past failures, deliver justice for harms committed, and preserve Kurdish autonomy rather than erode it.¹⁶⁸ Integration and unification cannot be imposed through force, just as autonomy cannot endure without accountability. By recognizing AANES's pluralistic governance, historical exclusion, and struggles, while supporting efforts toward inclusivity, Syria can begin to construct a unified state that respects diversity and promotes long-term stability.¹⁶⁹

On January 30th, 2026, the SDF and the Damascus government declared a formal agreement establishing a phased integration of the SDF into Syria's national military structure, a move widely regarded as one of the most significant political developments since the fall of Assad.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, "How Syria Can Succeed in Integrating the Kurds," 2025.

¹⁶⁶ *The Middle East Uncovered*, "The Kurdish Question in Syria," 2025.

¹⁶⁷ *Al Jazeera*, "Syrian Forces Make Gains Against SDF: What It Means for the Country's Kurds," January 21, 2026; *Orion Policy Institute*, "Syria at a Turning Point," 2025.

¹⁶⁸ *Human Rights Watch*, "Syria: Civilian Protection Lacking Amid Northeast Escalation," January 25, 2026.

¹⁶⁹ *New Lines Institute*, "Syria's Tricky Northeast Region: Podcast," 2025; *Rudaw Research Center*, "Syrian Kurds and the Declaration of the New Syrian Constitution," 2025.

¹⁷⁰ *Reuters*, "Syrian Kurdish-Led SDF Agree Ceasefire, Phased Integration Deal with Government," January 30, 2026.

This agreement, reached after months of on-again, off-again negotiations and repeated ceasefires, was described by the U.S. President’s envoy to Syria, Tom Barrack, as a historic milestone that reflects a commitment to inclusion, mutual respect, and the dignity of all Syria’s communities.¹⁷¹ For many in the Kurdish community, the agreement has been met with cautious apprehension rather than relief, as memories of broken promises, displacement, and recent violence remain fresh.¹⁷²

Although the integration framework suggests a potential turning point, its implementation remains vulnerable, with unresolved questions surrounding command structures, civilian safeguards, and political assurances.¹⁷³ For this agreement to go beyond rhetoric, domestic and international oversight mechanisms must hold the new government in Damascus accountable and ensure that the integration process does not reproduce prior patterns of repression.¹⁷⁴ Without restraint, transparency, and demonstrable protections for Kurdish civilians, constitutional recognition and diplomatic language remain inadequate.¹⁷⁵ This moment tests whether Syrian authorities and their international partners will implement inclusion in practice and rebuild trust rather than merely affirm it in constitutional or diplomatic language.

“This moment tests whether Syrian authorities and their international partners will implement inclusion in practice and rebuild trust rather than merely affirm it in constitutional or diplomatic language.”

¹⁷¹ *Al Jazeera*, “Kurdish-Led SDF Agrees Integration with Syrian Government Forces,” January 30, 2026

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Reuters*, “Syrian Kurdish-Led SDF Agree Ceasefire, Phased Integration Deal with Government,” January 30, 2026.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Al Jazeera*, “Kurdish-Led SDF Agrees Integration with Syrian Government Forces,” January 30, 2026.

6.4 Alawites

Historically, Alawites have been concentrated along the coastal areas of Latakia and Tartus. Following the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the civil war, many Alawites migrated further toward the coast out of fear of sectarian retaliation and insecurity, with smaller communities scattered around Homs, Hama, and Damascus, making up about 10-13% of the Syrian population.¹⁷⁶ As a member of the Alawite community, the Assad Family leveraged their Alawite identity politically, presenting the Assad regime as the guardian of the Alawite community against external threats, specifically from Islamic extremist groups.¹⁷⁷ While the regime's rise provided Alawites with security and influence, it also placed them in a politically delicate position, raising concerns that their religious identity could make them to blame for the regime's actions, offering them both protection and unease.¹⁷⁸

Alawites made up a substantial part of the Assad regime's military; around 200,000 Alawites were career military personnel before the civil war.¹⁷⁹ Alawites held critical positions in security and intelligence, while an estimated 80% were employed in the public sector, including civil administration, education, and other governmental roles.¹⁸⁰ Not every Alawite occupied key positions, and many aligned with the regime primarily for survival and communal protection rather than ideological allegiance.¹⁸¹ While the regime's rise elevated a narrow Alawite elite, many Alawites remained economically vulnerable, working as teachers, doctors, civil servants, and low-ranking soldiers not out of political loyalty, but because the state was often the only avenue for stability and survival.

¹⁷⁶ Origins OSU, "Alawites and the Fate of Syria," *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective* (2025); Rudaw, "Reports on Sectarian Violence in Coastal Syria," July 2025.

¹⁷⁷ *New Lines Institute*, "Persecution of Syrian Minorities Risks the Future of Sanctions Relief," 2025; *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, "Sectarian Dynamics in Post-Assad Syria," 2025.

¹⁷⁸ *New Lines Magazine*, "Investigating the Alawite Massacres," 2025; *Wilson Center*, "Syria at a Crossroad After Mass Killings: Can They Build a Just and Inclusive Future?," 2025.

¹⁷⁹ *Middle East Institute*, "Building Syria's New Army: Future Plans and Challenges Ahead," 2025.

¹⁸⁰ *New Lines Institute*, Syria Minorities Report, 2025.

¹⁸¹ Government of the United Kingdom, Home Office, "Country Policy and Information Note: Alawites and Actual or Perceived Assadists, Syria," 2025; *New Lines Magazine*, "Investigating the Alawite Massacres," 2025.

“Not every Alawite occupied key positions, and many aligned with the regime primarily for survival and communal protection rather than ideological allegiance.”

That said, the Assad regime carried out widespread atrocities, placing the Alawite community in a morally complex situation. Many benefited from the system, even as others suffered, and the silence that followed the widespread suffering highlights the tensions between survival, complicity, and accountability.¹⁸² This reality is rooted in a more extended history: long before the Assad era, Alawites were among the most marginalized and impoverished communities in Syria, historically subjected to discrimination, exclusion, and episodes of mass violence.¹⁸³ After the fall of Assad, Syrian transition authorities purged many Alawite workers who had been closely tied to the Assad regime through their roles in the military, security forces, government agencies, and the wider state apparatus. Reports in December 2024 indicated that these purges created economic instability and led some workers to lose their state-provided housing, including government residences.¹⁸⁴ Leaving the Alawites vulnerable to fears that were tragically validated in the sectarian violence of March 2025, just months after the fall of Assad.¹⁸⁵ This wave of sectarian violence swept across the coastal regions that are Alawite-majority, becoming one of the deadliest expressions of sectarian violence since Assad’s fall.¹⁸⁶ The violence was triggered by pro-Assad armed groups targeting the transitional government forces, leading to retaliatory attacks on Alawite citizens.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² ECOI, “Syria Country of Origin Information Report–Security Situation,” 2023.

¹⁸³ *Government of the United Kingdom, Home Office*, “Alawites and Actual or Perceived Assadists, Syria,” 2025; *Associated Press*, “Sectarian Killings Rock Syria’s Alawite Coast after Assad’s Fall,” 2025.

¹⁸⁴ European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), “Alawites,” Interim Country Guidance, 2025.

¹⁸⁵ *AP News*, “Syria: Alawites Fear Targeted Killings and Reprisals,” 2025; *OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights)*, “Syria: UN Experts Alarmed at Targeted Abductions and Disappearances of Alawites,” 2025.

¹⁸⁶ *OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights)*, “Syria” 2025; *SNHR (Syrian Network for Human Rights)*, “Report on Sectarian Violence and Abductions in Post-Assad Syria,” 2025.

¹⁸⁷ *Rudaw*, “Reports on Sectarian Violence in Coastal Syria,” 2025; *Washington Post*, “Alawites in Syria Face New Threats After Assad’s Fall,” August 23, 2025.

“This wave of sectarian violence swept across the coastal regions that are Alawite-majority, becoming one of the deadliest expressions of sectarian violence since Assad’s fall.”

According to the United Nations Commission of Inquiry, 1,500 people were killed, the majority of whom were Alawites.¹⁸⁸ Local organizations and observers on the coast suggest the actual number may have been much higher, potentially adding thousands more casualties and leaving hundreds, if not thousands, of children orphaned.¹⁸⁹ The Attacks reported were revenge killings, arson, and looting—devastating the Alawite majority villages on the coast.¹⁹⁰ Evidence and findings indicate that the attacks were orchestrated by a mix of local militias and former regime forces, revealing the depth of Syria’s sectarian wounds and division and the fragile nature of Syria’s transitional period.¹⁹¹

A fact-finding committee established by the transitional government echoed the UN Commission of Inquiry’s results. However, the fact-finding committee added that many attackers were former regime loyalists, showing how the violence was not just fueled by opposition groups but by internal Alawite power struggles.¹⁹² Amnesty International has repeatedly called for the transitional government’s fact-finding committee to publish its findings and for those responsible to be held accountable. However, the findings remain unpublished, raising concerns about transparency.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ *OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights)*, “Syria,” 2025; *SNHR (Syrian Network for Human Rights)*, “Report on Sectarian Violence and Abductions,” 2025.

¹⁸⁹ *Reuters*, “Syrian Forces Massacred 1,500 Alawites, Chain of Command Led to Damascus,” June 30, 2025.

¹⁹⁰ *Amnesty International*, “Syria: Coastal Massacres of Alawite Civilians Must Be Investigated as War Crimes,” April 2025); *New Lines Magazine*, “Investigating the Alawite Massacres,” 2025.

¹⁹¹ *Wilson Center*, “Syria at a Crossroad After Mass Killings: Can They Build a Just and Inclusive Future?,” 2025; *Al-Monitor*, “UN Commission Finds Violence Against Syria’s Alawites Likely Included War Crimes,” August 2025.

¹⁹² *Reuters*, “Alawite Civilians Targeted in Coastal Syria, Reports Say,” 2025; *OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights)*, “Syria,” 2025.

¹⁹³ *Amnesty International*, “Syria: Coastal Massacres of Alawite Civilians Must Be Investigated as War Crimes,” April 2025.

The composition of the committee has also raised serious concerns: all its members were directly appointed by al-Sharaa, and the current Minister of Justice, who oversees the committee's work, was also a senior member of HTS.¹⁹⁴ In addition, Reuters documented an investigation on the attacks, reporting a similar number of casualties, many of whom were entire families, women, children, and the elderly. They also reported that they found the atrocities were orchestrated through a chain of command leading to Damascus.¹⁹⁵

“The composition of the [*transitional government’s fact-finding*] committee has also raised serious concerns: all its members were directly appointed by al-Sharaa, and the current Minister of Justice...”

This reporting shows the severity of the violence, combined with HTS influence in the attacks— casting doubt on the interim government committee's findings and the validity of the results, especially for minorities and external observers.¹⁹⁶ Since then, Syria has opened its first public trial for the March Coastal violence aimed at the Alawite community by identifying 298 suspects and 14 defendants—seven former Assad-Loyalists and seven from the new government security forces—charged with murder, sedition, looting, and forming armed gangs.¹⁹⁷ While the trial is a step toward accountability and progress, some continue to question the trial's validity. Following the coastal massacres in March 2025, Alawite women and girls became targets of abductions, confirming their fear but also deepening the community's vulnerability.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁴ Rudaw, “Reports on Sectarian Violence in Coastal Syria,” 2025; *Al-Monitor*, “UN Commission Finds Violence Against Syria’s Alawites Likely Included War Crimes,” August 2025.

¹⁹⁵ Maggie Michael, “Syrian Forces Massacred 1,500 Alawites. The Chain of Command Led to Damascus,” *Reuters* (June 30, 2025).

¹⁹⁶ Rudaw, “Reports on Sectarian Violence in Coastal Syria,” 2025; *New Lines Institute*, “Persecution of Syrian Minorities Risks the Future of Sanctions Relief,” 2025; Maggie Michael, “Syrian Forces Massacred 1,500 Alawites. The Chain of Command Led to Damascus,” *Reuters* (June 30, 2025).

¹⁹⁷ *Reuters*, “Syria opens first trial over coastal violence after Assad’s fall,” November 18, 2025; NPA Syria, “Syria opens public trial over coastal killings,” November 18, 2025.

¹⁹⁸ *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*, “Syria: UN Experts Alarmed by Targeted Abductions and Disappearances of Alawite Women and Girls,” press release (July 23, 2025).

Reports show dozens of women being abducted from their homes, being forced into marriages and sexual exploitation, and entire families going missing or being displaced.¹⁹⁹ The United Nations and Amnesty International have condemned the disappearances, urging Syrian authorities to stop gender-based violence and conduct transparent investigations.²⁰⁰ In its November 2025 inquiry, the government fact-finding committee announced that it had only verified one kidnapping out of 42 reported cases.²⁰¹ Categorizing the remaining cases as temporary stays with relatives, fleeing domestic violence, social media fabrications, and extortion raises serious concerns about the legitimacy of the findings.²⁰² Many families and organizations contest the legitimacy of this report, reinforcing fears of collective punishment and highlighting the persistent threat of gender-based violence across Syria. Lack of accountability in such cases towards women shows that all women in the country remain vulnerable to abuse, coercion, and exploitation.²⁰³

“The United Nations and Amnesty International have condemned the disappearances, urging Syrian authorities to stop gender-based violence and conduct transparent investigations.”

Later that year, the violence extended beyond the coastal region. In November, clashes and isolated incidents in Aleppo and Homs targeted Alawite civilians in shootings and grenade attacks amid a broader cycle of revenge and communal violence. These events reflect deep-seated grievances over land, economic issues, and insecurity, rather than purely sectarian motives, and show the transitional government’s inability to protect minority communities.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ *Amnesty International*, “Syria: Coastal Massacres of Alawite Civilians Must Be Investigated as War Crimes,” April 2025); *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*, “Syria,” July 23, 2025.

²⁰¹ *AP News*, “Syrian inquiry finds most allegations of kidnapped Alawite women are false,” November 8, 2025.

²⁰² *Arab News*, “Syrian probe debunks kidnap allegations,” November 2, 2025.

²⁰³ *Christian Solidarity International (CSI-USA)*, “Syrian Government’s Denial of Alawite Women Abductions Contradicts Mounting International Evidence,” November 12, 2025.

²⁰⁴ *New Lines Magazine*, “In Homs, Revenge Is the Only Law Left Standing,” 2025; *Al Jazeera*, “Syrian Gov’t Troops Deployed to Latakia, Tartous after Deadly Clashes,” December 29, 2025.

In response, Alawites united in peaceful, organized demonstrations to express their fears, demand protection, call for political decentralization, and the release of detainees.²⁰⁵ Syrian security forces were deployed to protect these demonstrations and deter further escalation in key cities, even as counter-protests highlighted deep political fragmentation. Public calls emphasized national unity as essential to Syria’s stability, framing dialogue over division as the path forward.²⁰⁶ Peaceful protests are a cornerstone of democracy, allowing citizens to highlight grievances, demand reform, and ensure accountability.²⁰⁷ While the protests in Syria may alarm some observers, they also signal progress, demonstrating that citizens are increasingly willing and able to assert their rights and engage politically without resorting to violence. However, on December 26th, extremist actors escalated sectarian tensions by bombing an Alawite mosque in Homs, killing 8 people and injuring 18. The attack was later claimed by Saraya Ansar al-Sunna, exacerbating fears of sectarian retaliation and destabilizing the region further.²⁰⁸ The attack sparked a new set of protests, with Sheikh Ghazal Ghazal—leader of the Supreme Alawite Islamic Council—at the forefront of the movement, echoing earlier demands, highlighting the community’s frustration with insecurity and political marginalization.²⁰⁹ The seriousness of these protests became tragically clear as demonstrations in coastal cities such as Latakia and Tartous turned violent, with clashes involving Alawite protesters, counter-protesters, and security forces. At least four people were killed, and more than 100 were injured in the unrest, prompting authorities to deploy additional troops and impose curfews in an effort to restore order.²¹⁰

“Syrian security forces were deployed to protect [*Alawite*] demonstrations and deter further escalation in key cities, even as counter-protests highlighted deep political fragmentation.”

²⁰⁵ *Al Jazeera*, “Deadly Protests and Clashes in Syria: What Happened and What’s Next?” December 29, 2025; *Reuters*, “Syrian Security Forces Use Gunfire to Disperse Rival Protests in Alawite Heartland,” 2025.

²⁰⁶ *Reuters*, “Syrian Security Forces Use Gunfire to Disperse Rival Protests in Alawite Heartland,” November 25, 2025.

²⁰⁷ *Protect Democracy*, “Peaceful Protest Is a Bulwark for Democracy,” 2024.

²⁰⁸ *Reuters*, “Syrian Security Forces Use Gunfire,” 2025.

²⁰⁹ *New Arab*, “Assad’s Cousin Criticises Alawite Federalism Demand,” December 2025; *Al Jazeera*, “How Serious Are the Sectarian Tensions Facing Syria?,” December 29, 2025.

²¹⁰ *Al Jazeera*, “Deadly Protests and Clashes in Syria: What Happened and What’s Next?,” December 29, 2025; *Reuters*, “Syrian Security Forces Use Gunfire,” 2025.

Calls for safety, accountability, and justice raised during the protests are neither extreme nor unreasonable; in fact, the demands are valid and basic standards that any state claiming legitimacy must address with honesty and good faith. The new government under Ahmad al-Sharaa bears responsibility for responding to these concerns transparently, not dismissing them through suspicion or collective blame.²¹¹ Many Alawites hold onto a deep fear of retaliation, but less acknowledged is that they also grapple with a sense of collective guilt and are aware that some in their community took part in violence and repression against Sunni civilians, placing them in a challenging position morally and politically.²¹²

However, after the regime's fall, hostility on the streets quickly escalated into open calls for killing Alawites, treating the entire community as a single guilty group, and as pattern attacks against the community continue, the exact repeated phrase, "this is what you deserve." For many families, the life they knew has vanished; the attacks on the coast and ongoing violence will shape the generations to come, and many have pleaded for protection and have been left abandoned and grieving.²¹³

Despite all of this, the Alawite community remains an inseparable part of Syria's social and historical fabric. Their roots in Syria long predated the Assad regime; early Alawite theology developed in Aleppo before communities spread into the coastal mountains, where they found protection amid long periods of marginalization and persecution.²¹⁴ Like many in Syria, Alawites have experienced political exclusion, poverty, and discrimination.

“[Alawite community’s] roots in Syria long predated the Assad regime; early Alawite theology developed in Aleppo before communities spread into the coastal mountains...”

²¹¹ *Reuters*, “Syrian Security Forces Use Gunfire to Disperse Rival Protests in Alawite Heartland,” November 25, 2025.

²¹² *AP News*, “Syria: Alawites Fear Targeted Killings and Reprisals,” 2025; Loubna Mrie, “We Were Tricked,” *London Review of Books* 47, no. 14 (2025).

²¹³ *Aljumhuriya*, “Breaking the Cycle,” May 9, 2025.

²¹⁴ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Maaloula, Syria,” 2025; Yaffa Press, “Alawite Protests and Political Demands in Post-Assad Syria,” 2025.

Just as Sunni communities endured systematic repression for decades under the Assad regime, Alawites historically endured persecution under Sunni-dominated rule, including during the Ottoman period.²¹⁵ These shared stories and histories of suffering highlight brutal truths; neither community is without responsibility, and neither is defined solely by victimhood or blame.²¹⁶

For Syria to move forward, it must acknowledge the full humanity of the Alawite community and reject collective punishment as a means of justice. The suffering of one community cannot justify the oppression of another, just as revenge cannot build a free Syria. Genuine reconciliation demands recognizing shared suffering, confronting injustices without oversimplifying, and understanding that Syria is not a single story but a collage of people, regions, tribes, histories, loss, and survival. Only through mutual recognition of humanity can Syrians lay the groundwork for a future grounded in dignity, justice, and shared belonging.

7. Drivers of Sectarian Polarization in Post-Assad Syria

7.1 Digital Narratives and the Challenge of National Cohesion

Syria's transitional period is taking place in uncharted digital territory, and the rapid rise of social media intersects with long-standing sectarian tensions, shaping how citizens view one another and their government.²¹⁷ As Syria emerges from decades of authoritarian rule, the spread of misinformation and disinformation and online hate speech fuels fear, deepens social divisions, and undermines efforts to rebuild trust across communities.²¹⁸ While physical security remains a concern, the online battlefield is equally so.

²¹⁵ Government of the United Kingdom, Home Office, "Alawites and Actual or Perceived Assadists, Syria," 2025.

²¹⁶ *Wilson Center*, "Syria at a Crossroad: After Mass Killings, Can They Build a Just and Inclusive Future?," 2025.

²¹⁷ *Atlantic Council*, "Sectarianism, Social Media, and Syria's Information Blackhole," 2025; *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP)*, "Truth in Transition: Disinformation in Post-Assad Syria," 2025.

²¹⁸ *Deutsche Welle*, "How Disinformation Intensified Syria's Weekend of Violence," 2025; *Al Jazeera Institute*, "Disinformation and Media in Post-Assad Syria," 2025.

During the Assad era, social media operated within a state-controlled media system that restricted information, silenced dissent, and filtered events through political narratives.²¹⁹ With traditional media widely discredited or inaccessible, Syrians turned to social media news and alternate viewpoints, shaping today’s volatile digital space where verification is elusive, and mistrust runs deep.²²⁰ While these platforms create space for civic participation and grassroots reporting, they also enable extremist groups, sectarian actors, and politically driven influencers to spread disinformation that weakens social cohesion and intensifies existing divisions.²²¹ False narratives have reshaped how communities perceive historical and present injustices. Communities that were either victimized under Assad or implicated in past repression are treated with suspicion, while online rhetoric reduces complex current issues and histories to polarizing narratives. Increasing mistrust and fear, amplified by algorithms, are affecting political discourse and public engagement.²²²

“Communities that were either victimized under Assad or implicated in past repression are treated with suspicion...”

To counter the influence of disinformation, mistrust, and division, the new transitional government must prioritize accountability, and transparency and increase proactive communication with citizens.²²³ Appropriate measures implemented by the new government can help citizens navigate the online environment, distinguishing truth from bias and manipulation, thereby rebuilding trust in governmental institutions and among one another. Without transparency, online disinformation risks reinforcing sectarian narratives, raising fear and concern of persecution of minorities, and weakening the fragile cohesion the transitional government is trying to foster.²²⁴

²¹⁹ *Atlantic Council*, “Sectarianism, Social Media, and Syria’s Information Blackhole,” 2025.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Deutsche Welle*, “How Disinformation Intensified Syria’s Weekend of Violence,” 2025; *Al Jazeera Institute*, “Disinformation and Media in Post-Assad Syria,” 2025.

²²² *Al Jazeera Institute*, “Disinformation and Media in Post-Assad Syria,” 2025.

²²³ *UNESCO*, “Monitoring and Tackling Hate Speech in Syria,” 2025; *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*, “Future of Syria: Balance, UN Commission Sounds Alarm on Renewed Violence Amid Hopes,” 2025.

²²⁴ *Atlantic Council*, “Sectarianism, Social Media, and Syria’s Information Blackhole,” 2025.

Therefore, Syria's digital and political transitions are inseparable, as lasting pluralism and religious freedom rely as much on trustworthy information and open discourse as they do on formal policy and security measures.²²⁵

7.2 Foreign Interference and the Continuation of Proxy Dynamics:

Syria has always been a hotbed for foreign interference, where local grievances have repeatedly been transformed into proxy battlegrounds, exacerbating sectarian divisions rather than resolving them.²²⁶ The civil war itself stands as clear evidence of this dynamic, which began as a domestic protest movement during the Arab Spring and was steadily hijacked by regional and international agendas, turning it into a full-blown proxy war.²²⁷ Because of Syria's strategic location, the country has been treated as a critical land over which outside powers compete to exert influence.²²⁸ This contest for leverage did not end after the fall of Assad; in fact, foreign involvement has taken on new shapes that continue to feed sectarian tensions in different but still concerning ways.²²⁹

Israel's engagement with the Druze community in Southern Syria represents the clearest modern example of this pattern, as Israel frames their actions as a necessity to protect the vulnerable religious minority.²³⁰ These interventions, including airstrikes and cross-border military operations, occur without Syrian consent and tend to create more instability instead of delivering lasting security for Druze civilians.²³¹

²²⁵ The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), "Truth in Transition: Disinformation in Post-Assad Syria" (2025);

²²⁶ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, 2018; *New Lines Magazine*, "How Foreign Agendas Hijacked a Local Crisis in Syria," 2024.

²²⁷ *New Lines Magazine*, "How Foreign Agendas Hijacked a Local Crisis in Syria," 2024.

²²⁸ Frederic C. Hof, "The United States in Syria: Why It Still Matters," *Atlantic Council*, 2019.

²²⁹ *Arab Center Washington DC*, "Arab Opinion Index: Syrian Public Opinion Survey 2025," 2025.

²³⁰ *The Conversation*, "Israel's Attack on Syria: Protecting the Druze Minority or a Regional Power Play?," 2025.

²³¹ *Al Jazeera*, "More Than 1,400 Killed in Sectarian Violence in Coastal Syria, Report Finds," July 22, 2025.

Many scholars and observers argue that Israel exploits legitimate fears of the Druze to maintain territorial and political leverage in areas near the Golan Heights, turning the community into a justification for continual military presence.²³² By prioritizing external protection over domestic inclusion, this approach risks isolating the Druze community and perpetuating the perception that minority security relies on foreign backing instead of equal citizenship.²³³

“Many scholars and observers argue that Israel exploits legitimate fears of the Druze to maintain territorial and political leverage in areas near the Golan Heights...”

Turkey also mirrors this external interference dynamic but in a different way in Northern Syria through its consistent push for centralization, not out of concern for Syria’s stability, but because it views the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) as an existential threat to Turkish national security.²³⁴ Turkey has supported aligned Syrian groups and undertaken military actions aimed at undermining Kurdish self-governance, even though the AANES framework promotes pluralism and legal protections for diverse religious communities.²³⁵ Israel and Turkey’s selective use of humanitarian and unity claims has turned minorities into a political instrument, hindering genuine internal reconciliation in Syria.²³⁶ Survey evidence indicates that many ordinary Syrians also recognise these patterns and dynamics and largely attribute the nation's fragmentation to external forces. According to the Arab Opinion Index: Syrian Public Opinion Survey (2025), 41% of Syrians pointed to foreign interference as the primary driver of sectarian tensions, while 36% cited the absence of citizenship rights and societal tolerance as the root causes.²³⁷

²³² *Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)*, “International Double Standards in Dealing with Repeated Israeli Attacks on Syria,” December 1, 2025; *Alma Center*, “Who Is Behind the Rocket Fire from Syria Toward Southern Golan Heights?,” June 4, 2025.

²³³ *Atlantic Council*, “Israel Is Making a Miscalculation in Southern Syria—Here’s Why,” MENASource, 2025.

²³⁴ *Arab Center Washington DC*, “Arab Opinion Index,” 2025; *Foreign Policy*, “Turkey, Syria, Israel, and the Kurdish Question,” September 9, 2025.

²³⁵ *Newlines Institute*, “After the Coalition: Evaluating the Next Steps for Foreign Forces in Iraq and Syria,” 2025.

²³⁶ *United Nations News*, “Syria’s Transition at Risk amid Renewed Violence and External Pressure,” 2025.

²³⁷ *Arab Center Washington DC*, “Arab Opinion Index,” 2025.

“According to the...Syrian Public Opinion Survey (2025), 41% of Syrians pointed to foreign interference as the primary driver of sectarian tensions, while 36% cited the absence of citizenship rights and societal tolerance as the root causes.”

Survey responses also showed that most Syrians agreed that Israel fosters separatist conflicts by supporting certain groups, underscoring how foreign involvement amplifies sectarian mistrust in Syria.²³⁸ Rather than improving security for civilians or minorities, such interventions have often escalated fear, caused deaths and injuries, and cast doubt over Syria’s prospects for religious freedom and unity.²³⁹ Achieving genuine cohesion in Syria requires the international community to reduce destabilizing external involvement and to allow Syrians the autonomy to reconstruct institutions grounded in equal citizenship, accountability, and internal legitimacy, rather than proxy rivalries.²⁴⁰

8. Religious Freedom as a Foundation for Syria’s Stability and Reconciliation

In a society scarred by decades of authoritarian rule and sectarian violence, religious freedom in Syria represents a necessary foundation for restoring dignity, rebuilding trust, and moving toward reconciliation.²⁴¹ Research is clear: when states protect freedom of religion or belief, they create the conditions for stronger human rights, lower corruption, active civic participation, and institutional resilience—precisely what Syria needs to recover and stabilize for the long-term.²⁴²

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, “External States and Syria’s Challenge of Reunification under a Transitional President,” 2025; *Reuters*, “Under U.S. Pressure, Syria and Israel Inch toward Security Deal,” September 16, 2025.

²⁴⁰ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale University Press, 2018; *United Nations News*, “Syria’s Transition at Risk amid Renewed Violence and External Pressure,” 2025.

²⁴¹ *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)*, “Syria 2025 Annual Report,” 2025.

²⁴² *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs*, “Is Religious Freedom Necessary for Other Freedoms to Flourish?,” 2025.

In a society where mistrust between communities has been deliberately cultivated for decades, ensuring that every citizen feels safe in their religious identity is central to rebuilding social solidarity. The transitional period under Ahmed al-Sharaa is marked by both opportunity and legitimate concern, in part because the government's formalization of Islam's role in governance and constitutional law raises questions about how fully state institutions will include non-Muslim communities.²⁴³ Although the Transitional Constitutional Declaration affirms freedom of belief and legal equality, these guarantees will carry weight only if enforced through accountable institutions and supported by effective on-the-ground protections, especially in communities that have experienced recent violence and insecurity.²⁴⁴

“In a society where mistrust between communities has been deliberately cultivated for decades, ensuring that every citizen feels safe in their religious identity is central to rebuilding social solidarity.”

In shaping policy toward Syria, U.S. and international actors should treat religious freedom not as a mechanism of control or a foreign template, but as a universal human right that resonates with Syria's long-standing traditions of pluralism.²⁴⁵ Continued U.S. engagement with Syria should be tied to protecting religious freedom, supporting civil society, and ensuring accountability for atrocities, while respecting Syria's autonomy and internal political process.²⁴⁶ This approach does not call for adopting Western models of church–state separation, but for acknowledging that pluralism and respect for religious diversity are deeply rooted in Syria's own pluralistic history and necessary for a stable and peaceful coexistence. Imposing external institutional templates without grounding them in local norms and practices risks alienating communities and undermining grassroots efforts toward peaceful coexistence.²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Aaron Y. Zelin, “*Testimony before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom on Syria's Political Transition*,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2025.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)*, “*Religious Freedom in Syria: Transition after Assad*,” 2025); Berkley Center, “*Is Religious Freedom Necessary for Other Freedoms to Flourish?*,” 2025.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ Berkley Center, “*Is Religious Freedom Necessary for Other Freedoms to Flourish?*,” 2025.

“Imposing external institutional templates without grounding them in local norms and practices risks alienating communities and undermining grassroots efforts toward peaceful coexistence.”

Advancing religious freedom in Syria is inseparable from questions of security and representation within the country’s new institutions. The emergence of a Syrian army largely dominated by Sunni formations, with limited minority representation, has raised concerns that security structures may reproduce sectarian imbalances rather than break from the legacy of the previous Alawite-dominated system.²⁴⁸ Excluding ethnic and religious minorities from security and military leadership intensifies fears of marginalization and vulnerability, while undermining confidence in the state’s ability to protect all citizens equally.²⁴⁹ Government leaders cannot address this perception through symbolic gestures of inclusion. It requires meaningful participation by all minority groups at every level of governance and security—showing that Syria’s civic and defense institutions reflect Syria’s full diversity and are genuinely committed to protecting all communities. Protecting religious freedom in practice depends on creating a public order that people believe will defend their lives and beliefs, not one that privileges a dominant identity over minority communities.²⁵⁰

9. Conclusion

The transitional period under Ahmad al-Sharaa exposes how deep the Assad-era wounds run. However, it also revealed an even greater truth that Syrians are still learning to get to know one another. Decades of deliberate political manipulation entrenched mutual distrust, encouraged communities to interpret power through sectarian identity, and reduced political loyalty to a question of survival.

“The transitional period under Ahmad al-Sharaa exposes how deep the Assad-era wounds run.”

²⁴⁸ *New Lines Institute*, “Preventing Another Sectarian Authoritarian System in Syria,” 2025.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Assad's system framed minority 'protection' as security while enforcing conditional control, as Sunni and opposition communities suffered systematic repression, creating grief and trauma that does not just disappear simply because the regime has fallen. Syria will not heal through the single narrative of victims and perpetrators. When violence continues, and accountability remains uneven, unresolved trauma can quickly turn into collective blame—especially among minorities who not only feel unprotected by the state but also carry a long-standing history and trauma of persecution and exclusion.

Given the sectarian legacy of the Assad regime, religious freedom must be treated as a foundational priority rather than a symbolic constitutional promise. Religious freedom extends beyond the right to worship; it also involves restoring dignity, security, and trust, qualities lacking in today's Syria. The concerns of minority communities are grounded in lived experience, shaped by recent violence, disappearances, displacement, and the return of sectarian rhetoric. The new government in Damascus cannot dismiss these fears as mere perception, nor can it demand patience while security failures continue to mount. If the new government seeks legitimacy, it must demonstrate it through restraint, transparency, and accountability, particularly when abuses involve actors affiliated with state institutions. This moment demands a decision from Syria's leadership to move beyond the Assad model of fear-based control, or to replace it with excusing violence, limiting public space, and marginalizing those outside of the unified national narrative.

“The new government in Damascus cannot dismiss these fears as mere perception, nor can it demand patience while security failures continue to mount.”

At the same time, Syria's future cannot rest on the state alone; rebuilding the social fabric will require the active engagement of local communities and citizens, since laws and constitutional changes cannot repair relationships and trust on their own. Dialogue and pluralism are not acts of forgetting or denial, but commitments to ensuring that grief and difference do not become sources of permanent hatred or violence. Syria is still getting to know one another after years of being conditioned to fear one another, and that is exactly why the transition is so fragile, but also why it still holds promise. Syrians deserve to live in dignity, without being forced to choose between personal safety and fundamental freedom.

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About the CFG

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFG) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFG contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating academically-informed analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFG's spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

About the Author

Jessalyn Wienk is a junior at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, double majoring in Interreligious Studies and International Studies. A U.S. Army veteran, she served on active duty from 2019 to 2023 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, experiences that continue to inform her academic and public-service-oriented work. She is a recipient of the U.S. Department of State's Critical Language Scholarship for Arabic as well as the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship, and has pursued immersive Arabic language study in Oman and Jordan. Her academic interests center on the Middle East, with a particular focus on how religion, politics, and displacement shape societies. Her research explores refugee displacement, the role of faith in resisting oppression, and the ways religious and cultural frameworks influence conflict and cooperation. Bridging military service, language study, and interdisciplinary scholarship, Jessalyn brings a perspective grounded in lived experience, cross-cultural engagement, and a strong commitment to dialogue, public service, and global understanding.

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