

POLICY REPORT
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Preventing Another Sectarian Authoritarian System in Syria

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THE NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

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Visitors tour the Aleppo Citadel, a significant Syrian historical site that was reopened after extensive restoration work on Sept. 27, 2025. The interim Syrian government continues to make progress on rebuilding the country's war-torn infrastructure. (Bakr Al Kasem/ Anadolu via Getty Images)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The downfall of former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime ended an authoritarian government dominated by his Alawite sect. Despite the promises of his successor, transitional President Ahmed al-Sharaa, of establishing a system of governance based on pluralism, inclusion, and respect for minorities, Sunnis control the country's top Cabinet positions. Minority groups, including Christians, Alawites, and Druze, are almost absent from the leadership of security and military institutions, including intelligence, and tend to lack substantive representation to influence decision-making in the government. The exclusion of minority groups has increased tensions, eroded trust, and fueled sectarian violence. If Damascus does not institute policy reforms and improve communication with the country's minority communities, Syria is at risk of state fragmentation. This could bring refugee flows, particularly from those minority groups, and create opportunities for external actors to undermine state sovereignty. These outcomes directly threaten U.S. interests the region.

1 EXCLUSION OF MINORITIES FROM SYRIAN SECURITY INSTITUTIONS ELEVATES MINORITY FEARS

2 SYMBOLIC CABINET INCLUSION OF MINORITIES

3 SECTARIAN VIOLENCE CONTINUES WITH INADEQUATE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

4 REGIONAL POWERS EXPLOIT MINORITY GRIEVANCES

5 IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Key Findings

Transitional President Ahmed al-Sharaa's government has excluded ethnic and sectarian minorities, including Yazidis, Kurds, and Christians, from intelligence services, military leadership, and security institutions responsible for protecting minorities from sectarian violence. These practices mirror former President Bashar al-Assad's approach, undermining government promises of pluralism.

While minorities hold some Cabinet positions, they control no meaningful security or intelligence roles.

Under al-Sharaa, minorities have faced violent attacks. Government investigations of those incidents remain ineffective, eroding trust between minority communities and Damascus.

Israel's military support for Druze forces and Iran's backing of Shia communities allow external actors to exploit minority insecurity to further their own interests, undermining Syrian sovereignty and fueling sectarian divisions.

Without substantive minority inclusion in security institutions and effective protection from violence, Syria faces renewed sectarian conflict, state fragmentation, refugee flows, and opportunities for extremist groups to exploit grievances, threatening U.S. regional goals.

Introduction

The end of former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime ended a period in which Syrian governance was dominated by Arab Alawites,¹ but under interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa, the country's majority Sunnis now dominate the government.² The inclusion of minorities in the country's governance remains a core issue for its stability and for the government's legitimacy, especially after a long period of sectarian conflict and decades of authoritarian practices.

The dynamic of minority groups in Syria's transitional government can be studied by analyzing whether the approach to minority politics under al-Sharaa represents genuine power-sharing or is instead a signaling mechanism designed to gain political legitimacy while maintaining Sunni control over key decision-making. Under al-Sharaa, minority groups including Alawites, Christians, Druze, and Kurds continue to face exclusion, violence, and marginalization. The consequences of Syria slipping into another authoritarian regime increases the risk of sectarian violence, state fragmentation, and regional instability.

The stakes for U.S. foreign policy are substantial. It is critical to address minority political exclusion in Syria to avoid the rise of political violence and regime instability that could damage American interests there. The absence of substantive representation and inclusion of minority groups in governance poses a number of challenges, including a decrease in representation of minority groups in government institutions; the rise in political, social, and economic grievances; increased sectarian conflicts and violence; and the rise in demands for separation from the central government and/or federalism. These developments could reduce U.S. leverage in the region, especially if other actors back different groups, as Iran has done with the Alawites³ and Israel with the Druze.⁴ This could transform the country into a proxy where external powers compete through sectarian groups.

The weakening of Iran-backed Shiite proxy groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas gives Tehran an opening to shift resources from Lebanon and Gaza toward armed groups in Syria. On Aug. 28, a new Alawite-led council called for federalism in central and western Syria, in provinces such as Latakia, Tartus, Homs, and parts of rural Hama.⁵

Syria's Demographic Structure

Before the start of the civil war, Syria's 21 million citizens included a diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds. While Arab Sunnis represented a majority of the population, minority groups – Alawite, Christian, and Druze among them – shaped the country's political and social dynamics in different ways.⁶ Alawites represent just 12% of Syria's population, yet they were able to gain control of key political institutions after the 1963 military coup, followed by the 1966 coup that placed Syria in their hands for the first time. Their control lasted until the end of the Assad regime.⁷

Under the rule of Bashar al-Assad's predecessor and father, Hafez al-Assad, the government systematically consolidated power in the hands of Alawites,

1 Adam Brooks Fefer, "Regime Change and Minority Risks: Syrian Alawites After Assad," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/07/syria-alawites-minority-postwar-post-assad?lang=en>

2 "Syria's President Al-Sharaa Forms New Transitional Government," Reuters, March 29, 2025. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2025-03-29/syrias-president-al-sharaa-forms-new-transitional-government>

3 "Iran Rejects Claims of Involvement in Syria Violence," Al Arabiya English, March 10, 2025. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2025/03/10/no-justification-for-attacks-on-alawites-and-other-minorities-in-syria-iran>

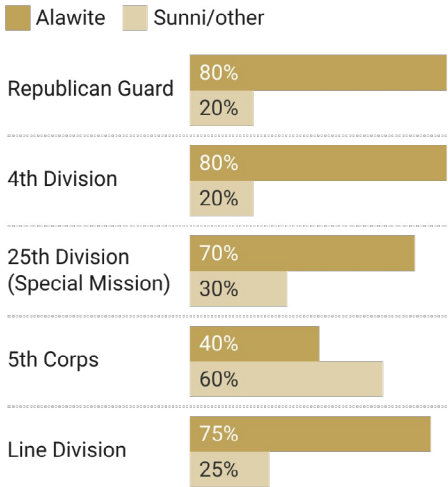
4 Lior Ben Ari, "Israel Arms Thousands of Druze in Southern Syria Amid US Push for Peace Talks," Ynetnews, September 16, 2025. <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/bkdp1dseq>

5 "New Alawite Council Calls for Federalism in Western and Central Syria After Sectarian Violence," The New Arab, September 18, 2025. <https://www.newarab.com/news/new-alawite-council-calls-federalism-west-central-syria>

6 U.S. Department of State, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, accessed Oct. 1, 2025. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria>

7 Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991).

Syria's Military by Sect Under Assad



Sources: The Times, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Chatham House, SNHR, Reuters

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particularly over key decision-making institutions. The Assad regime removed minority groups including Druze from key political and military positions, replacing them with Alawites. When Bashar took power, his strategy to protect his own sect and maintain legitimacy was to implement laws and policies that protected minorities such as Alawites from being ruled by the Sunni majority. The Baath Party’s secular focus heavily opposed any inclusion of religion in state matters, culminating in the bloody 1982 Hama massacre directed at the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood.⁸

To prevent the perception of Alawite dominance, the Assad regime appointed Sunnis to high-ranking positions while maintaining Alawite control over the deep-state structure. This system created complex relationships between the regime and minority communities. The regime successfully built fears among various groups where their protection depended on the state.

Minority Inclusion Under the Assad Regime

Bashar al-Assad’s regime was centralized around his ability to maintain power. Positions in security and military institutions were filled with Assad loyalists, mostly Alawites with some Sunni Muslims.⁹ Assad personally controlled senior appointments by decree, including those of the heads of the four security agencies and their branches.

Alawite leadership overwhelmingly dominated elite military formations under Assad. The Republican Guard and 4th Armored Division, functioning as regime protection units, were about 80% Alawite at the leadership level. The 25th Special Mission Forces also drew heavily from loyalist Alawite communities (about 70%). By contrast, the 5th Corps, created with Russian backing and incorporating reconciled ex-rebels, was more mixed (about 40% Alawite and 60% Sunni/other). Line divisions across the Syrian Arab Army remained majority Alawite at the command level (about 75%), even as lower ranks were more demographically mixed. This pattern underscored how the regime concentrated coercive power in Alawite hands while selectively incorporating Sunnis in formations designed for outreach, legitimacy, or Russian influence.¹⁰

Assad’s judiciary system was hampered by vaguely written laws about equality with Islamic identity and no minority recognition. This framework left protection and legal frameworks as mostly implied rather than obligatory. Only formal minority laws and protections related to family-law forums without power-sharing or representation were guaranteed. Therefore, regional court leadership reflected Baathist political control. Minorities were suppressed by lack of quotas for minority representation or laws to protect them and ensure they had a voice. There were some minority judges, but appointments were patronage based, giving Assad political control.¹¹

The Syrian uprising that began in 2011 initially featured a national opposition to Bashar al-Assad, reflecting demands for political reform and social justice that transcended ethnic and religious divisions. Assad later played a role in transforming this cross-sectarian movement into a sectarian conflict.^{12, 13}

8 Azmat Khan, "On 30th Anniversary of Hama Massacre, Syrian Troops Lock Down City," PBS Frontline, February 2, 2012. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/on-30th-anniversary-of-hama-massacre-syrian-troops-lock-down-city/>

9 Charles Lister and Dominic Nelson, "All the President's Militias: Assad's Militiafication of Syria," Middle East Institute, December 14, 2017. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/all-presidents-militias-assads-militiafication-syria>

10 Joseph Holliday, "The Syrian Army Doctrinal Order of Battle," Institute for the Study of War, February 2013. <https://understandingwar.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/SyrianArmy-DocOOB.pdf>

11 "Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic," 2012, Constitute Project, accessed Oct. 1, 2025. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Syria_2012

12 Maha Yahya, "Syria's Path From Civic Uprising to Civil War," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2016. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2016/11/syrias-path-from-civic-uprising-to-civil-war?lang=en>

13 Ramazan Kiling, "Why Syria's Reconstruction May Depend on the Fate of Its Minorities," The Conversation, December 18, 2024. <https://theconversation.com/why-syrias-reconstruction-may-depend-on-the-fate-of-its-minorities-245913>

Al-Sharaa's Government Structure and Minority Representation

Throughout al-Sharaa's rapid rise to the interim presidency, he made remarkable commitments to pluralism and inclusion. But the current approach by his government to protect minorities raises concerns about the credibility of those pledges.¹⁴ Assad's fall created both unprecedented opportunities and existential threats for Syria's minority communities. What unites Christians, Alawites, Kurds, and other groups is their shared concern over Syria's future direction. None want to live under an Islamic regime dominated by Sunni leaders. Instead, they want their leaders to see, acknowledge, respect, and, most importantly, protect them.¹⁵

Even though al-Sharaa's government has offered numerous reassurances¹⁶ to minority groups, including Alawite communities, they have been excluded from decision-making since he assumed the presidency in December. Violent attacks on Christian religious sites, including churches, triggered mass protests demanding protection.¹⁷ At the same time, Kurdish community members have expressed concerns about representation and inclusion in the new government.¹⁸ The challenge facing al-Sharaa extends beyond simple minority protection or inclusion to fundamental questions of building trust in a country that has experienced prolonged and significant ethnic and sectarian violence.¹⁹ This complex historical background of minority rule, sectarian power structure, and civil war provides an important context for understanding the current dynamics of minority groups in Syria's transitional government.

Consolidation of Power Under the Interim Constitution

Al-Sharaa's approach to governance has fundamentally restructured Syria's political system through the implementation of a highly centralized presidential framework. On March 13, he signed an interim constitution designed to govern Syria for a five-year transitional period, which concentrates unprecedented power in the executive branch while providing minority protection guarantees.²⁰ Such concentration of power over judicial and legislative appointments means there are few or no checks or oversight – essential components of a democratic system even in a transitional period to ensure accountability, including toward minority groups.²¹

The interim constitution specifically grants al-Sharaa authority to select lawmakers and top judges, giving him effective control of all three branches of government. For instance, the president will appoint all seven members of the Higher Constitutional Court, while one-third of the members of the People's Assembly will be directly appointed by the president, with the rest chosen by

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- 14 Simona Foltyn, "Syria's Minority Sects Concerned New Government Won't Protect Them," PBS NewsHour, February 21, 2025. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/syrias-minority-sects-concerned-new-government-wont-protect-them>
 - 15 "Worst Violence in Years in Syria Revives Fears Among Minority Alawite and Christian Communities," America Magazine, March 13, 2025. <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2025/03/13/syria-revives-fears-among-minority-communities-250161/>
 - 16 Mat Nashed, "Don't Trust Anyone: Have Syria's Alawites Lost Faith in New Government?," Al Jazeera, March 20, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/3/20/dont-trust-anyone-are-syrias-alawis-losing-faith-in-the-new-government>
 - 17 Widyane Hamdach, "The Fall of Bashar al-Assad: Winners, Losers, and Challenges Ahead," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, May 13, 2025. <https://giia.georgetown.edu/2025/05/07/the-fall-of-bashar-al-assad-winners-losers-and-challenges-ahead/>
 - 18 Ahmad Sharawi, "Syria's Fragile Truce with the Kurds Is Falling Apart," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, April 30, 2025. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/policy-briefs/2025/04/30/syrias-fragile-truce-with-the-kurds-is-falling-apart/>
 - 19 Mohamad El Chamaa, "Syrian President Signs Deal with Kurds, Grapples with Sectarian Killings," *Washington Post*, March 10, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/10/syria-sharaa-kurds-alawites/>
 - 20 "Syria's al-Sharaa Signs Temporary Constitution," Al Jazeera, March 13, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/13/syrias-al-sharaa-signs-five-year-temporary-constitution>
 - 21 Ahmad Sharawi, "Syria's New Constitution: A Shift Toward Unchecked Presidential Powers," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, March 19, 2025. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/policy-briefs/2025/03/19/syrias-new-constitution-a-shift-toward-unchecked-presidential-powers/>

Al-Sharaa Cabinet by Sect

President	Sunni
Minister of Youth and Sports	Sunni
Minister of Social and Labor Affairs	Greek Orthodox
Minister of Public Works and Housing	Sunni
Minister of Finance	Sunni
Minister of Emergency and Disaster Management	Sunni
Minister of Defense	Sunni
Minister of Culture	Sunni
Minister of Administrative Development	Sunni
Minister for Transportation	Alawite
Minister for Local Administration and Environment	Sunni
Minister for Interior	Sunni
Minister for Information	Sunni
Minister for Higher Education	Sunni
Minister for Health	Sunni
Minister for Foreign Affairs and Expatriates	Sunni
Minister for Energy	Sunni
Minister for Education	Sunni
Minister for Economy and Foreign Trade	Sunni
Minister for Communications and Information Technology	Sunni
Minister for Awqaf	Sunni
Minister for Agriculture and Agrarian Reform	Druze

Sources: The New York Times, Next Century Foundation, israel-alma.org, Rudaw, Reuters

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a committee he also appoints.²² As president, al-Sharaa controls the executive branch, including the Cabinet of Ministers, who he alone has the power to appoint and dismiss. The constitution also empowers the president to declare a state of emergency with approval of the National Security Council, a body he appoints himself and leads. This concentration of power in the hands of one person creates uncertainty and mistrust among minority groups who are looking for protection, inclusion and trust in the central government.

The constitution maintains an Islamic orientation despite promises of pluralism. It requires the head of state to be Muslim and establishes Islamic law as the main source of jurisprudence, while designating Islamic jurisprudence as the main source of legislation.²³ This religious and ideological framework creates systemic threats to minorities in Syria in different ways. The constitutional requirement that only a Muslim can hold the presidency means the exclusion of all non-Muslim minorities from the highest office in the country. This was the same requirement under Assad regime.

In March, al-Sharaa announced the formation of a transitional government with 23 Cabinet members.²⁴ The religious and sectarian distribution of Cabinet members revealed significant gaps in representation and raised questions about the regime's commitment to power-sharing. Muslims hold 13 of the 15 critical Cabinet positions such as security and finance, with Sunnis controlling 12 of them.²⁵ Yet the issue is not just how many of minority members are in the government but rather that these minority members hold weak or secondary Cabinet positions. For instance, Yarub Badr, an Alawite, leads the transport ministry, and Amgad Badr, a Druze, leads the agriculture ministry. We can conclude from this distribution of seats that al-Sharaa's approach to minority inclusion in the government consists of symbolic minority representation that maintains Sunni control over key decision-making power and state institutions. This inclusion comes without substantive power-sharing that could address minority communities' fundamental security and political concerns. The result is the rise of mistrust between the government and many minority groups.²⁶

The Military and Security Institutions

The composition of the leadership of Syria's military institutions reflects how minorities are represented in al-Sharaa's government. The ethnic and sectarian makeup of the country's security leadership reveals the most concerning aspect of minority exclusion under the current regime. Security data shows that Sunnis hold virtually every key position, including minister of defense, chief of general staff, deputy minister, assistant minister, intelligence heads, and military academy leadership, with minimal Druze representation that is confined to lower-level police roles. This near-complete exclusion of minority leadership from security institutions responsible for protecting minority community safety and preventing sectarian violence is particularly problematic. These findings suggest not only misrepresentation of minorities but also a mistrust between minority groups and the central government that can lead to regime instability.

22 "Syria: Constitutional Declaration Risks Endangering Rights," Human Rights Watch, March 25, 2025. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/25/syria-constitutional-declaration-risks-endangering-rights>

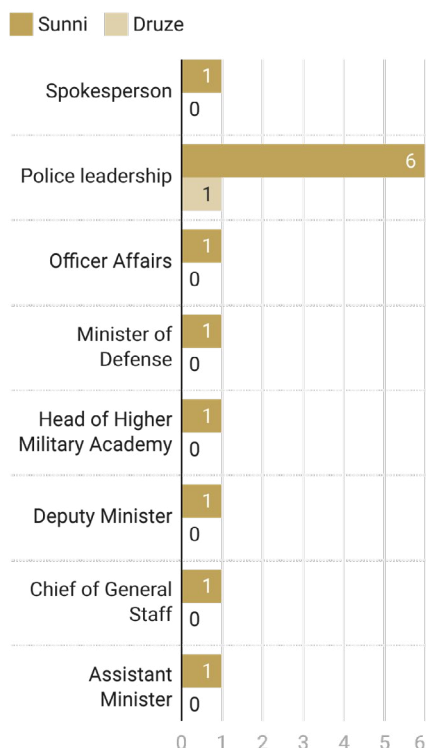
23 "Syria's al-Sharaa Signs Temporary Constitution," Al Jazeera, March 13, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/13/syrias-al-sharaa-signs-five-year-temporary-constitution>

24 Thomas Rands, "The Makeup of the New Syrian Government," Next Century Foundation, April 15, 2025. <https://www.nextcenturyfoundation.org/the-makeup-of-the-new-syrian-government/>

25 Loveday Morris, "Syria Announces a New Transitional Government," Washington Post, March 29, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/03/29/syria-al-sharaa-cabinet/>

26 Cathrin Schaer, "How Inclusive Is Syria's New Technocratic Cabinet?," DW, March 31, 2025. <https://www.dw.com/en/is-syrias-new-technocratic-cabinet-as-inclusive-as-it-could-be/a-72100412>

Security Leadership of the Al-Sharaa Government



Sources: The Times, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Chatham House, SNHR, Reuters

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Sunni Arab Dominance and Its Implications

Military leadership is composed of Sunni Arabs and dominated by former commanders who served with al-Sharaa's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other rebel groups. Sunnis and former HTS commanders hold the three most critical appointments – minister of defense, chief of staff, and head of intelligence services – and minority representation in security roles largely does not exist, with no Alawites, Kurds, or Christians in senior positions. The only substantive minority involvement in security matters is through local forces, such as the Druze-led Suwayda Military Council, which operates with limited autonomy.²⁷

This pattern signals a fundamental credibility gap in al-Sharaa's promises of an inclusive system of governance. While minorities may have received symbolic Cabinet positions in relatively low-level civilian ministries, their absence from the security system signals minority groups must remain dependent on Sunni goodwill for their basic protection. Such practices are the inverse of the Assad regime's approach, in which Alawites dominated security institutions while Sunnis held less critical roles. One possible reason al-Sharaa may have concentrated military decision-making power in the hands of the Sunnis is because of a lack of trust in members of other communities and concerns about possible regime instability if power were to be distributed outside his circle of connections.²⁸

Domestic and International Implications

Al-Sharaa's government must make decisions that satisfy demands from both inside and outside the country. The inclusion of minority leaders in civilian positions comes from recognition that Syria's minorities, representing 26% of the total population, cannot be ignored, lest it lead to serious political and institutional concerns as well as a recurrence of political violence.

The complete exclusion of minorities would likely generate grievances that would weaken the legitimacy of the government and create security concerns. The Druze population maintains relationships with Israel,²⁹ which represents a threat to the new regime in the form of Israeli military strikes against Syrian targets and direct support for Druze that bypasses Damascus.³⁰ This creates a dangerous pattern in which foreign powers can undermine state sovereignty by claiming to protect minorities. Al-Sharaa's current strategy raises fundamental questions about the sustainability of this governance model and the capacity of this regime to build mutual trust in this new system.

Judicial System Under al-Sharaa

To maintain a stable regime, it is imperative that the state has a well-grounded judicial system and institutions to manage political conflict and protect the rights of all citizens, contributing to the longevity and stability of the status quo. A solid judicial system can build a regime's legitimacy and public trust by showing civilians that its leaders have a commitment to fairness and equal justice. This both increases public confidence and establish the rule of law and reduces government corruption. Similarly, the inclusion of minorities enhances the public trust and confidence in the government and its justice system.

27 "Druze Seek Sweida Autonomy and Turn Toward Israel, Adding New Twist to Syria's Tensions," Associated Press, September 30, 2025. <https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/detail?itemid=3bd819a084b9471f896302c0a04fb700&mediatype=video>

28 Haddon Barth, "The West Is Helping Syria Build a Government No Minority Wants to Join," Lawfare, August 17, 2025. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-west-is-helping-syria-build-a-government-no-minority-wants-to-join>

29 Tom Perry, "Who Are the Druze and Why Does Israel Say It Is Hitting Syria for Their Sake?," Reuters, July 17, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/who-are-druze-why-does-israel-say-it-is-hitting-syria-their-sake-2025-07-17/>

30 "Why Did Israel Bomb Syria? A Look at the Druze and the Violence in Suwayda," Al Jazeera, July 16, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/16/why-did-israel-bomb-syria-a-look-at-the-druze-and-the-violence-in-suwayda>

Al-Sharaa's legal system is based on the 2025 Interim Constitutional Declaration.³¹ The transitional constitution dissolved the country's existing judicial systems and created a new Supreme Constitutional Court with members appointed by al-Sharaa. Court system changes under the new constitution affect minorities and their access to the judiciary system. In Article 3(1) of the 2025 Interim Constitution, Syria's leaders have maintained the declaration of Islam as the official religion and the main source of legislation. However, Article 3(3) recognizes family matters of non-Islamic religious minorities, such as Christians and Druze, are protected and respected.

Al-Sharaa's constitutional declaration states that his government is committed to protecting freedom of religion if public order is not disrupted, imprecise language that gives the government the ability to be vague with minority communities about their rights. It also engenders further uncertainty in Syrians who do not trust the new government. Additionally, there is much uncertainty on the reforms of religious courts for non-Muslims, or how changes in status laws will be managed and updated.

Why al-Sharaa's Approach Increases Risk

Both Assad and al-Sharaa centralized power within their own sectarian groups, but their approaches to minority inclusion reveal different risks for Syrian stability. Assad used a "protective patronage" model, placing minorities in visible civilian positions while keeping Alawites in control of security institutions. This created dependency relationships that maintained regime control but offered minorities some protection from sectarian violence.

Al-Sharaa, on the other hand, employs "symbolic integration," appointing minorities to a handful of Cabinet positions while excluding them entirely from security institutions. This difference matters because al-Sharaa's approach creates greater instability risks than Assad's system did. Under Assad, minorities felt insecure but were generally protected by the state's coercive apparatus. Under al-Sharaa, minorities face both exclusion from power and inadequate protection from violence, driving them toward external patrons like Israel or Iran. This dynamic threatens to fragment Syria into spheres of foreign influence and could transform Syria into a proxy theater in which external powers compete through sectarian groups.

These developments would directly undermine U.S. interests in regional stability and effective counterterrorism cooperation. The comparison shows that al-Sharaa's government risks creating the conditions for renewed sectarian conflict and state collapse that Assad's authoritarian system, however brutal, managed to prevent.

Governance Patterns and Their Impact

Intelligence services from the Assad era underwent structural reforms that dissolved old Baathist agencies and replaced them with the General Intelligence Service. The agency's leadership is fully Sunni Arab, drawn from HTS ranks, with little to no representation by minorities in decision-making roles.

The new structure of intelligence and security dynamics in Syria has greatly reduced the levels of trust that citizens have in the government. The exclusion of minorities from governance creates an opportunity for external actors to exploit the grievances of those groups by encouraging them to seek to separate from the central government.³² According to a survey of 1,400 Syrians con-

31 Ward, Euan. "Syria Has a New Temporary Constitution. Here Are the Highlights." *The New York Times*, March 14, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/14/world/europe/syria-constitution-new-government.html>

32 Mohammad Salami, "Saudi Arabia's Cautious Approach to the Syrian Kurds: Balancing Stability and Geopolitical Interests," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 9, 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2025/04/saudi-arabias-cautious-approach-to-the-syrian-kurds-balancing-stability-and-geopolitical-interests?lang=en>

Safety Perception in Damascus

Responses to, "Do you feel safe in your area under the current authorities in Damascus?"

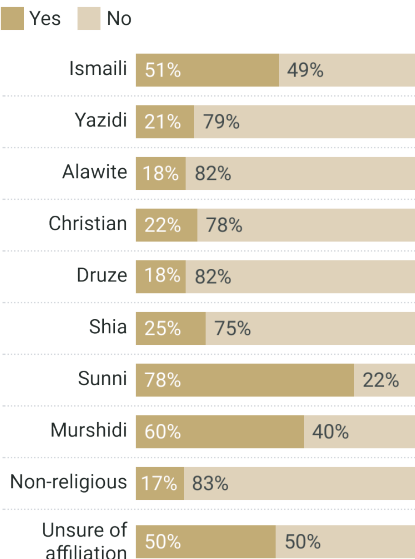
Overall



Freedom Perception in Syria

Responses to, "Are you satisfied with the level of freedom you currently experience in Syria?"

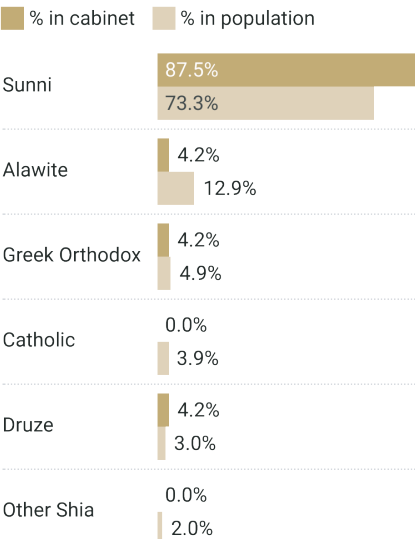
By sects



Source: ETANA Syria

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Cabinet Representation by Sect



Source: Syrian Observer

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ducted by ETANA after the fall of Assad, 78% of Sunnis in Damascus reported feeling safe under current authorities, while minorities such as Druze (82%), Alawites (82%), Christians (78%), and Yazidis (79%) overwhelmingly do not feel safe.³³ There is still little to no collaboration with minority groups on sensitive issues such as security and police forces.

Constitutional decrees and policies alone are not sufficient to effectively create transformative bodies of government. While al-Sharaa’s government has not yet shown it is able to work with all groups, it also has not shown the necessary qualities of an independent, representative, and effective government. Centralizing power in the presidency to appoint ministers, one-third of parliament, and all constitutional court judges limit democratic possibilities and possible pathway to a positive system of representation. Without reforms that protect minority groups and give them an opportunity into decision-making roles, the current government risks reinforcing Assad-era authoritarian practices.

Substantive Versus Symbolic Representation

The composition of Syria’s Cabinet under the al-Sharaa government shows a clear pattern of Sunni overrepresentation that raises significant concerns about the regime’s commitment to genuine power-sharing. Sunnis are overrepresented in the Cabinet, holding 18 of the 23 positions. This imbalance suggests the new government may be prioritizing sectarian loyalty over proportional representation. The underrepresentation of Syria’s religious minorities in the Cabinet is particularly striking when examined against their demographic weight. For example, Alawites, who make up roughly 12% of the population, now hold just one Cabinet position – a stark reversal from their historical dominance under Assad. Most concerning when examining minority representation in the government is the complete absence of Catholics from the Cabinet.

This pattern of Sunni dominance raises fundamental questions about whether the al-Sharaa government’s approach to minority inclusion represents substantive power-sharing or merely symbolic tokenism designed to project legitimacy to international observers. Every minority sect is represented below its demographic weight, while Sunnis are overrepresented. Concentrating decision-making authority in one sect, even if it represents the demographic majority, risks perpetuating the sectarian governance dynamics that have historically fueled conflict in Syria. For a transitional government seeking to build sustainable institutions and national reconciliation, the failure to achieve meaningful representation might suggests that minorities may view their participation as peripheral rather than meaningful – a perception that could undermine long-term stability.

The sectarian composition of the al-Sharaa government also risks triggering broader societal unrest by failing to address the fundamental grievances that minority communities harbor about their place in post-Assad Syria. Christians, who faced persecution and displacement during the civil war, may interpret their minimal Cabinet presence as a signal that the regime views them as second-class citizens. The perception among minorities that they lack a meaningful voice could fuel emigration, economic disinvestment, and passive resistance – all of which weaken state legitimacy.

This sectarian imbalance creates vulnerabilities that could be exploited by external actors. Al-Sharaa’s regime has transitioned Syria from one form of sectarian dominance to another. The movement from one model of sectarian rule to another, rather than toward genuine inclusivity, could set the stage for renewed conflict if excluded groups mobilize against perceived Sunni hegemony.

33 ETANA Syria, "Survey: Public Opinion on Syria's Transition," May 2025. <https://etanasyria.org/survey-public-opinion-on-syrias-transition/>

Inter-Communal Relations and Trust Deficit

The minority groups in Syria have deep skepticism and fear of al-Sharaa's government,³⁴ despite official reassurances of protection and inclusion.³⁵ This mistrust transcends religious boundaries and reflects fundamental concerns about survival under Sunni Islamist rule. Such mistrust between minority groups and al-Sharaa's government has been fueled, in part, by the violence targeting their communities.

The Alawite community faces particular vulnerability in post-Assad Syria. Attacks on Alawite communities in March fundamentally altered their perceptions of the new government. Hate speech and violence were directed against Alawites, both in the streets and on social media. These events created a climate of terror that extends beyond immediate security concerns to existential fears about the community's future in Syria.³⁶ Many Alawites now view themselves as collective targets for retribution due to their historical association with Assad's regime,³⁷ regardless of individual political positions.³⁸

Syria's Christian population, which has declined from 10% to approximately 2.5% of the total population due to war and emigration, has had cautious engagement with al-Sharaa's government while maintaining profound reservations about long-term security. Christians and other minorities are raising the alarm on issues related to inclusion in governance.

The Kurdish community, Syria's largest ethnic minority at approximately 10% of the population, has adopted the most confrontational stance toward al-Sharaa's government. Kurdish opposition reflects broader concerns about Arab supremacist governance. The Kurdish community perceives the current constitution more concerning and dangerous because it replicates another form of authoritarianism.³⁹

Syria's Druze community, despite constituting only 3% of Syria's population, has adopted increasingly defensive reactions to the al-Sharaa government, including armed resistance to central authority.⁴⁰ Unlike with the Alawites, where violence erupted after an unprovoked Alawite attack that killed 300 government soldiers, the Druze conflict appears to have been triggered by political provocations and government aggression against the community first.⁴¹ The Druze faced targeted attacks from Syrian security forces and allied militias in Suwayda province, with reports of extrajudicial killings, looting, and burning of homes that prompted armed resistance. While both communities have experienced severe violence under al-Sharaa, the Druze case represents a clearer pattern of state-initiated persecution rather than retaliatory violence.

34 ETANA Syria, "Survey: Public Opinion on Syria's Transition," May 2025. <https://etanasysyria.org/survey-public-opinion-on-syrias-transition/>

35 AFP, "Syria's Sharaa Renews Pledge to Protect All Minorities," *The Times of Israel*, July 19, 2025. https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/syrias-sharaa-renews-pledge-to-protect-all-minorities/

36 Tezcür, Güneş Murat. "Understanding the Violence against Alawites and Druze in Syria after Assad." *The Conversation*, July 23, 2025. <https://theconversation.com/understanding-the-violence-against-alawites-and-druze-in-syria-after-assad-255292>

37 Güneş Murat Tezcür, "Understanding the Violence against Alawites and Druze in Syria after Assad," *The Conversation*, July 23, 2025. <https://theconversation.com/understanding-the-violence-against-alawites-and-druze-in-syria-after-assad-255292>

38 Fabrice Balanche, "Alawites Under Threat in Syria?," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 31, 2024. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/alawites-under-threat-syria>

39 Loqman Radpey, "Syria's Temporary Constitution Ensures an Islamist Sunni State," *Middle East Forum*, March 14, 2025. <https://www.meforum.org/mef-observer/syrias-temporary-constitution-ensures-an-islamist-sunni-state>

40 Arraf, Jane. "Druze Population Resists Syrian Government's Push to Disband Militias." NPR, April 11, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/11/nx-s1-5343505/druze-population-resists-syrian-governments-push-to-disband-militias>

41 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. "UN Syria Commission Finds March Coastal Violence Was Widespread and Systematic." August 2025. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/08/un-syria-commission-finds-march-coastal-violence-was-widespread-and>

“Religious leaders from minority communities face intense pressure to accept the new government while protecting their communities’ interests.”

Events in early 2025, particularly the massacres of Alawites, only increased Druze anxiety about their own fate under Sunni Islamist rule.⁴² The Druze have maintained armed autonomy and secured external protection, particularly from Israel, which in the name of defending the Druze conducted over 160 airstrikes against Syrian government forces.

Cross-Sectarian Dialogue and Reconciliation Efforts

Al-Sharaa’s government has initiated symbolic reconciliation efforts, primarily through meetings with religious leaders, but these have been viewed as superficial by minority communities.⁴³ The government established investigative committees following the spate of violence in March, but their effectiveness remains questionable.⁴⁴

Local reconciliation committees, which historically played important roles in Syrian conflict resolution, face severe constraints under the new system. In Idlib, tribal and religious leaders played a key role in leading reconciliation efforts. However, al-Sharaa’s government has limited the autonomy and effectiveness of these traditional mechanisms.⁴⁵ International actors such as the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor have supported Syrian civil society efforts, with limited success.⁴⁶

Role of Civil Society and Religious Leaders

Religious leaders from minority communities face intense pressure to accept the new government while protecting their communities’ interests.⁴⁷ Christian bishops have largely avoided public endorsement of the regime, while maintaining dialogue to protect their congregations. Similarly, Druze spiritual leaders have sought to balance community protection with political pragmatism.

Syrian civil society also operates under severe constraints, with most independent organizations either fled, destroyed, or co-opted during the civil war. The new government’s approach to civil society remains unclear, though international support continues for documentation, transitional justice, and reconciliation efforts.

External Dimensions and International Responses

The United States has adopted a cautiously supportive approach toward al-Sharaa’s government while maintaining specific conditions related to minority protection and counterterrorism. The decision by the administration of President Donald Trump to lift sanctions represents a significant policy shift in Washington toward Syria.⁴⁸

The European Union, meanwhile, has adopted a graduated approach, linking sanctions relief to concrete progress on minority rights and democratic gover-

42 “Syria’s Druze Fear for Their Future after Sectarian Clashes.” *Washington Post*, July 25, 2025. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/07/25/syria-druze-clashes-bedouins/a1381f40-692f-11f0-ac4f-195fdb8ee9a8_story.html

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44 Syrians for Truth and Justice. “Syria: Serious Concerns Regarding Integrity, Independence, and Effectiveness of the Investigation Committee for Coastal Events.” April 7, 2025. <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-serious-concerns-regarding-integrity-independence-and-effectiveness-of-the-investigation-committee-for-coastal-events/>

45 “Analysis: Syria’s Path to Reconciliation Faces New Sectarian Violence.” UPI, July 25, 2025. https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2025/07/25/lebanon-syria-ahmed-sharaa-decisions/2121753460139

46 U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, *Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle*, 113th Cong., 1st sess., June 25, 2013. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113hhrg81692/html/CHRG-113hhrg81692.htm>

47 Simona Foltyn, “Syria’s Minority Sects Concerned New Government Won’t Protect Them,” PBS NewsHour, February 22, 2025. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/syrias-minority-sects-concerned-new-government-wont-protect-them>

48 Patricia Karam, “Lifting US Sanctions on Syria: A New Chapter for Damascus and Beirut,” Arab Center Washington DC, July 18, 2025. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/lifting-us-sanctions-on-syria-a-new-chapter-for-damascus-and-beirut/>

nance⁴⁹ despite an agreement by EU foreign ministers to lift all remaining economic sanctions against the country. European engagement, however, remains conditional. This suggests continued European skepticism about long-term minority protection under Islamist governance.

International Human Rights Organizations

Human Rights Watch and other international organizations have expressed serious concerns about Syria's constitutional framework and minority rights prospects.⁵⁰ These organizations continue documenting human rights violations and advocating for accountability mechanisms, though their influence on ground-level minority protection remains limited.

Multilateral Coordination Challenges

International coordination on Syrian minority issues faces significant obstacles due to competing strategic interests, limited leverage over the new government, and disagreements about engagement strategies. The absence of unified international pressure reduces incentives for al-Sharaa's government to prioritize meaningful minority inclusion over symbolic gestures. The international community's focus on economic reconstruction and stability may inadvertently deprioritize minority rights concerns, particularly if sectarian tensions appear manageable in the short term. This dynamic mirrors international responses to other postconflict transitions where stability concerns overshadow human rights protection, including in Iraq where the country enjoys some stability and security, yet concerns continue toward human rights protection for women, children, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.⁵¹

Conclusion

Syria risks transitioning from Alawite-dominated sectarian authoritarianism under Assad to Sunni-dominated sectarian authoritarianism under Al-Sharaa, directly threatening U.S. interests in the region. Al-Sharaa's exclusion of minorities from security institutions while failing to protect them from violence creates conditions for renewed sectarian conflict and foreign interference. Al-Sharaa's government must implement substantive minority inclusion in security institutions and protection mechanisms or risk state fragmentation that eliminates any possibility of effective governance, counterterrorism cooperation, or regional stability. The Syrian people cannot endure another transition to sectarian authoritarianism disguised as pluralism.

49 "Syria: Council Statement on the Lifting of EU Economic Sanctions," Council of the European Union, May 20, 2025. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/20/syria-council-statement-on-the-lifting-of-eu-economic-sanctions/>

50 Human Rights Watch. "Syria: Constitutional Declaration Risks Endangering Rights." *Human Rights Watch*, March 25, 2025. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/25/syria-constitutional-declaration-risks-endangering-rights>

51 "World Report 2025: Iraq," Human Rights Watch, January 16, 2025. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/iraq>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 ENCOURAGE INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

2 SUPPORT SECURITY SECTOR REFORM THROUGH GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

3 TARGET ECONOMIC AID TO BUILD INCLUSIVITY

1 ESTABLISH A JOINT U.S.-EU SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

2 ENCOURAGE REGIONAL POWERS TO WORK THROUGH DAMASCUS

3 SUPPORT TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

For the United States

The U.S. should encourage additional minority representation in al-Sharaa's government. This means ensuring minorities are represented not only in civilian ministries but also in parliament, the judiciary, and security forces to build mutual trust in government institutions. The U.S. should encourage institutional reforms that reduce the risk that al-Sharaa's promises of pluralism become purely symbolic. Progress toward that end should be monitored through international observers and local civil society partners.

Instead of empowering minority groups to defend themselves, the U.S. should support Syrian government institutions under the condition that they undergo significant reforms. Washington should press for minority recruitment and promotion in the armed forces, police, and intelligence services. This would ensure minorities are protected within national institutions rather than through parallel structures.

U.S. engagement should focus on prioritizing recovery in minority regions such as Latakia (Alawites), Suwayda (Druze), Hasakah and Afrin (Kurds), and Christian-majority areas like Wadi al-Nasara. However, funding should be delivered transparently in cooperation with the Syrian government to avoid creating the perception of bypassing central authority. Conditionality should ensure that minorities benefit equally from reconstruction while reinforcing the legitimacy of national institutions.

For the European Union and International Partners

The U.S. and EU should coordinate their support for Syria through a framework that links sanctions relief, aid, and reconstruction investment to measurable steps toward minority inclusion. This framework would press the Syrian government to adopt proportional representation mechanisms in politics and security institutions, while avoiding fragmented or contradictory Western policies that Damascus could exploit.

Israel, Türkiye, and Gulf states must be engaged diplomatically to discourage unilateral action. Israel's direct support for Druze militias and Türkiye's backing of armed factions in Kurdish and Christian areas undermine Syria's sovereignty and fuel sectarian divisions. The U.S. and EU should press these actors to coordinate protection measures through Damascus to ensure minority safety while strengthening Syria's national authority.

International partners should invest in transitional justice mechanisms to support the Syrian judiciary. Hybrid tribunals, investigative committees, and truth commissions should be established in coordination with Damascus, ensuring minority voices are included in shaping justice processes. Holding perpetrators accountable for atrocities committed both under Assad and during the transition period will help rebuild trust between minorities and the state.

1 ADVANCE CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE GOVERNMENT

For Syrian Civil Society and Governance Reform

The interim constitution reflects Sunni dominance by requiring the president to be Muslim and emphasizing that Islam and Islamic practices are the main source of laws and jurisprudence. The U.S. and international partners should encourage Damascus to amend these provisions through dialogue and conditional support. Amendments should guarantee proportional minority participation in legislative, executive, and judicial institutions and recognize Syria's ethnic and linguistic diversity.

2 STRENGTHEN CIVIL SOCIETY AS A PARTNER TO THE STATE

International donors should support Christian churches, Druze councils, Kurdish organizations, and Alawite networks to build connections between these groups and the central government. Funding should prioritize initiatives that enhance dialogue, monitor rights abuses, and engage constructively with ministries. This ensures civil society strengthens the legitimacy of the state rather than creating an alternative center of decision-making.

3 INSTITUTIONALIZE QUOTAS WITHIN STATE INSTITUTIONS

Rather than parallel arrangements, minority inclusion should be formalized within Syrian judicial and policing institutions. International partners should encourage Damascus to adopt quotas for minority appointments in police, judicial institutions, and national ministries. Transparent appointment processes can reduce mistrust while strengthening state legitimacy.

CORE POLICY IMPERATIVES FOR THE UNITED STATES

Engagement on security sector inclusion: The U.S. must encourage the inclusion of minority in the government, including minority recruitment in armed forces, police, and intelligence services. Symbolic cabinet representation without security sector participation leaves minorities vulnerable to violence and foreign exploitation.

Support institutional reforms over parallel structures: Washington should press Damascus to adopt quotas for minority appointments in security institutions rather than allowing minorities to seek protection from external actors like Israel or Iran.

Coordinate with allies to prevent fragmentation: The U.S. and EU must establish unified frameworks that discourage unilateral interventions by Israel, Turkey, and Iran that undermine Syrian sovereignty while claiming minority protection.

REGIONAL STABILITY REQUIREMENTS

Prevent proxy competition: Without substantive minority inclusion in institutions, Syria risks becoming a proxy where Iran supports Alawites, Israel arms Druze, and other powers exploit sectarian grievances.

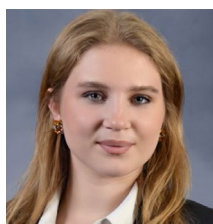
Address root causes of foreign interference: Al-Sharaa's "symbolic integration" approach creates the vulnerabilities that external actors exploit.

Link reconstruction to inclusive governance: Economic aid must prioritize minority regions while reinforcing central government legitimacy through transparent, quota-based appointment processes.



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