

Alawites Under Threat in Syria?

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Brief Analysis

At a time when Westerners are questioning the Islamist takeover in Damascus, Sunni Arab treatment of the Assad family's broader Alawite base will offer insights into the nascent government's true stance on religious tolerance, transitional justice, and state-building.

For more than half a century, the fate of Syria's Alawites was linked to their coreligionists and patrons in the Assad family. In 2011, their solidarity with Bashar al-Assad's regime enabled him to hold off the rebellion and preserve his tottering rule until Russia intervened in 2015. By November 2024, however, the Alawite community had been bled dry after thirteen years of conflict, with a third of its men between ages twenty and fifty having fallen in combat.

The results were inevitable: when Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) led other rebel factions in their sweeping offensive a few weeks ago, the army's Alawite pillar simply did not fight. Homs, a city that is half Alawite, resisted for only a few days. HTS then seized the coastal region, the stronghold of the Alawite community, which offered no resistance despite being expected to form a defensive enclave to shield fleeing Alawites from potential acts of revenge by Syria's new Islamist authorities.

From Oppressed to Oppressors—and Back Again?

Alawism is often classified as a heterodox version of Shia Islam, with a core belief in metempsychosis (the transfer of souls) that is rejected by orthodox Muslim authorities in the Twelver Shia and Sunni communities. Much of Alawite doctrine is a pastiche drawn from the great monotheistic religions (including Islam) and Zoroastrianism, and many of its rites have been secret and initiatory, rendering it an object of strong suspicion over the centuries. The famous Muslim theologian Ibn Taymiyyah even called for the sect's eradication.

Alawites were not formally recognized as Muslims until 1932, when the Grand Mufti of Palestine, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, issued a fatwa seeking to undermine the foundations of French colonialism in Syria. France had

established an Alawite statelet on the coast in 1920, based on the Lebanese model and intended to serve as a refuge from perceived Sunni persecution. Husseini's fatwa offered the Alawites equal treatment in an independent Syria dominated by Sunnis. Yet this circumstantial ruling failed to convince many in the Sunni majority that Alawites were not "heretics."

Social conditions for Alawites only improved with the rise of the Baath Party in 1963—and then especially after Hafiz al-Assad took power in 1970 and systematically appointed them to key positions in the army, intelligence services, and state ministries. By eliminating tribal leaders who rebelled against his power, he effectively made the Alawite community a monolith. Alawites were used to carry out regime campaigns of oppression, including the 1982 Hama massacre in which Assad targeted an uprising led by the Muslim Brotherhood, leaving 30,000 dead. Hafiz's son Bashar continued this strategy for years, then made the Alawites the pillar of his counterinsurgency policy after 2011. In response to this long history of abuses, many elements of the new Sunni leadership in Damascus and their followers presumably carry a legacy of religious and social enmity toward Alawites in general. The sect could face a risk of collective punishment, even including those Alawites who opposed rather than helped Assad.

The new leadership will presumably begin by purging the military and the civilian bureaucracy. Indeed, **signs of this** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/washington-returns-damascus-high-stakes-syrias-transition>) could be seen after the rebels starting taking ground while advancing toward the capital. Under Assad, more than 80 percent of Alawites worked for the state, comprising most of the army and intelligence officer corps, most of the government's senior administrators, and most of the management in public industries. During the civil war, the wives and children of slain Alawite troops received public jobs to compensate for their losses, swelling the ranks of those who owed their livelihoods to the state and the Assad family.

HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani (aka Ahmed al-Sharaa) has used a similar strategy since his time overseeing the group's stronghold in Idlib province—but for the benefit of sympathetic Sunnis rather than Alawites. Under the pretext of carrying out "de-Baathification" inside the army and government, he will almost certainly usher in a "de-Alawitization" process. This means that the Alawite coastal region will have to rediscover its vocation as a refuge. Many Alawites living in Damascus, Homs, and surrounding inland areas will likely feel compelled to move back to their homes there—properties that they established not just as holiday getaways, but as insurance for the future. If they stay in other parts of Syria, their lives could quickly become difficult and even dangerous amid the return of displaced, potentially vengeful Sunnis.

After all, the mixed regions between Homs and Hama saw many of the regime's worst community massacres during the war, with Alawite-led forces causing significant Sunni displacement toward Idlib, Lebanon, and Turkey. Alawite paramilitary fighters looted houses along the way; in Tartus, a market even emerged for the proceeds of this theft called "the Sunni souk." Entire Sunni areas were depopulated and destroyed, such as Bab al-Amr in Homs, al-Qusayr, and Qalaat al-Hosn on the slopes of the famous Crusader fortress. Of course, Alawite localities suffered a similar fate at the hands of Sunni Islamists in places like **Arima** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24486627>) (Latakia) in August 2013 and **al-Zarah** (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/alawite-civilians-killed-homes-opposition-attack-hama-village>) (Homs) in May 2016. In the both cases, the HTS predecessor Jabhat al-Nusra was involved in the massacre of Alawite civilians.

Policy Implications

In assessing what might happen next, foreign officials will need to consider that Alawism diverges sharply from the Salafist doctrine embraced by Syria's new authorities. In many practical ways, the Alawite way of life differs from the one Jolani, HTS, and other Sunni political Islamist elements might now introduce—a contrast seen not just in Idlib, but throughout the conservative Sunni regions that made up much of the country before the war. Previously, state power made life possible for minorities in these areas. Will the next government be willing to guarantee the

safe existence of Alawites in Syria? And will it be powerful enough to back up this guarantee?

Alternatively, new government policies may themselves pose a threat to the Alawite way of life. For example, will veils now become obligatory in communities like Tartus and Latakia? Will the consumption and production of alcohol be prohibited? What will happen to the Alawite mausoleums that dot the countryside and serve as places of popular devotion? Indeed, the destruction of an Alawite shrine in Aleppo on December 25 drove thousands of Alawites into the streets (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/12/syrians-protest-after-video-attack-alawite-shrine>) of Homs, Latakia, Jableh and Tartus. And, finally, will a revamped Ministry of Religion launch a plan to build mosques in Alawite communities and “set them on the right path”? Notably, the Ottomans tried such a course in the nineteenth century after American Protestant missions expeditiously converted Alawites to Christianity, facilitated by the poverty of the former and the wealth of the latter. Ottoman authorities in turn closed the evangelical schools and churches and expelled the missionaries, while compelling most Alawites to return to their old faith. Attempts to direct them to Sunnism failed, however.

So far, HTS has consistently stated that Alawites will be part of the new Syria, that there will be no reprisals against them, and that those involved in Assad-regime crimes will be held accountable via the justice system, not vigilantism. HTS officials have also been holding meetings (<https://www.alwatanonline.com/%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%89-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B0%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85/>) with local Alawite representatives. And Jolani himself has repeatedly stated that HTS will not impose sharia restrictions on minorities. Meanwhile, the new authorities have set up reconciliation centers where members of the former regime’s armed forces can register and surrender their weapons—an essential step in any amnesty process. Hopefully, this will not be a prelude to their eventual mass arrest or discreet elimination once disarmed.

These reconciliation efforts are also tied to the broader question of transitional justice for Alawites and other servants of Assad who committed human rights violations against Sunnis as part of what the regime called a “counterinsurgency.” Described in 1940 by the French geographer Jacques Weulersse as “forgotten by history,” the Alawites now find themselves at the center of one of the bloodiest chapters in Syria’s history. As noted above, they may be subjected to collective punishment as a result, which could rise to the level of ethnic cleansing.

Even the notion of Alawites retreating from other parts of Syria entirely and establishing a solid enclave on the coast may not be feasible. The idea has been considered (<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03175765>) at various points in the past but never realized due to various internal and external factors. More important, the new masters of Damascus would never give up the country’s lone maritime access point just for this purpose.

At a time when Westerners are questioning (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-landed-us-terrorist-lists-and-why-it-should-stay-there-now>) the HTS-led takeover in Damascus, the group’s treatment of Alawites will provide concrete information regarding its true stance on religious tolerance, transitional justice, and state-building. Humanitarian aid and diplomatic relations with the next government must be conditioned on equal rights for minorities. Otherwise, Syria may once again become a hotspot for endless sectarian bloodshed.

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