



Religious Freedom in Syria's Post-Assad Transition

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Thank you to Commissioners Soloveichik and Schneck as well as members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for inviting me to testify today on religious freedom in Syria's post-Assad transition. Discussing these issues is complicated by the fact that religious freedom in the new Syria is not a black or white issue. It also comes in the context of a country that is attempting to exit fourteen years of civil war. Nor does it help that the prior regime was sectarian in nature and focused much of its political suppression against the majority Sunni Arab population. Therefore, certain actions that some perceive as sectarian could also be seen by those in power now as political in nature because they are arresting former regime officials involved in war crimes during the Syrian civil war. That being said, there have also been actual crimes over the past eleven-plus months. Therefore, distinguishing between these dynamics is important for determining the true scope of the issue in the new Syrian environment.

To better understand these dynamics, this testimony will first explore the legal regime put in place by the transitional authorities related to religious freedom, then explore how this has played out in practice, and conclude with some brief policy recommendations. As context, the main religious groups in Syria include Sunni Muslims, Alawites, Christians, Druze, and Ismailis. There are also very small communities such as Twelver Shia and Yazidis that make up less than 1% of the population each.

Legal Regime

Syria's new Constitutional Declaration—which is the main reference point during the transitional period and is supposed to last for five years—has a few provisions related to religion and religious freedom. According to Article 3.1, “the religion of the President of the Republic is Islam and Islamic jurisprudence is the principal source of legislation.” This means anyone who is not Muslim cannot become president, which at the low end could eliminate up to 10% of the population but at the high end could eliminate up to 25%. Based on their past views, those in power now would not regard Alawites, Druze, Ismailis, or Twelver Shia as truly Muslim, but instead as apostates. However, since the current transitional president is Sunni, that issue has not been put to the test.

That being said, Article 3.2 states, “Freedom of belief is protected. The State respects all divine religions and guarantees the freedom to perform all their rituals, provided that this does not disturb public order.” Generally speaking, since the fall of the regime, the new authorities have not stopped anyone from conducting their religious practices.

As for Article 3.3, it notes that “the personal status of religious sects is protected and respected in accordance with the law.” There again is no sign of interference. A greater issue is more related to the capacity of the new authorities than whether they are allowing individuals to follow personal status within their own communities, since the government is still building up its institutions and hiring new people.

Finally, Article 10 says that “citizens are equal before the law in rights and duties, without discrimination based on race, religion, gender or lineage.” In many ways, it is still too early to assess this since the judiciary is being overhauled due to the mass abuse within the former regime’s system. At the same time, for all individuals whether in the majority or minority, the new Ministry of Justice has yet to be fully transparent about its processes. Put together, while the Constitutional Declaration legally has provisions that protect religious minorities, questions still remain about how this will all play out in practice since the new institutions are still being developed.

Complicated Relations with Religious Minorities

When I spoke with Ahmed al-Sharaa earlier this year, he told me that the “state is not under any sect” and that Syria doesn’t “have majorities and minorities, just the law.”¹ Rather, the focus of the government is on those that have merit and “individual competencies.”² He cautioned, however, that with such a viewpoint and policies based on it, the government “will not be able to satisfy everyone.”³

Some like Haid Haid have argued that the ministerial cabinet needs true representation and “not token appointees to check the ‘diversity’ box.”⁴ The representation discussion is even more stark regarding the recent indirect parliamentary election, which had a low share of minorities and women.⁵ Many within the pro-government camp have argued that this is why Sharaa will be appointing the remaining 72 of 210 seats, to balance these issues out. At the time of this writing, Sharaa has yet to announce who will be represented in these remaining seats, so it is difficult to judge one way or the other. The new parliament is expected to start its first session sometime in November according to Foreign Minister Assad al-Shaibani.⁶

Therefore, at the end of the first year of the transition, there is a divide in society between those

¹ “Exclusive interview with Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa,” Syria TV, February 3, 2025, <http://youtube.com/watch?v=QRicA-qVG6E>.

² Ibid.

³ Ahmed al-Sharaa, “Speech During the Eid al-Fitr Greetings at the People’s Palace in Damascus,” March 31, 2025, <https://jihadology.net/2025/03/31/new-video-message-from-ah%CC%A3mad-al-shara-speech-during-the-aid-al-fitr-greetings-at-the-peoples-palace-in-damascus>.

⁴ Haid Haid, “Rejection and red flags: Syria’s new government off to shaky start,” *Al Majalla*, April 7, 2025, <https://en.majalla.com/node/325068/politics/rejection-and-red-flags-syrias-new-government-shaky-start>.

⁵ “First results for Syria’s new parliament show low share for minorities, women,” Reuters, October 6, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/first-results-syrias-new-parliament-show-low-share-minorities-women-2025-10-06>.

⁶ See https://x.com/Sana_gov/status/1984904222026911879.

who feel things are headed in the right direction (56% according to a mid-September poll) and those less positive (25% in the same poll).⁷ According to Sharaa, “Before carrying out military operations to liberate Syria, we made many contacts with the Alawite, Druze, and Christian sects in the country. We built some bridges of trust between us and them.”⁸ All minority groups have been engaged at varying levels of the new Syrian government. It should be noted, however, that Sharaa has not met with any Ismailis or Alawites, at least publicly. The latter omission is somewhat understandable considering there might be security risks, since many communal Alawite leaders had been attached to the former regime. According to Gregory Waters, “Damascus is aware of these shortcomings but has continued to complain about the difficulty in finding and vetting ‘trustworthy’ Alawite interlocutors, particularly for the security sector.”⁹

This is in contrast to Ismailis, who might be deemed the “model minority” in Syria post-Assad since there have been very few issues between the community and the new government. Unlike the Ismailis or Alawites, Christian leaders met with Sharaa as early as late December 2024 and have included representatives from many denominations.¹⁰ While the Christian community has generally been safe security-wise like the Ismailis, there have also been a number of larger incidents. For example, during Christmas-time 2024, foreign jihadist fighters burned a Christmas tree in al-Suqaylabiyah; on February 17, a group of youths destroyed crosses in a cemetery in rural Homs; on March 6 during the coastal massacre, a half dozen Christians were killed; on April 6, assailants attempted to burn down a church in Damascus; on May 17, the car of a Christian family in Hama city was burned, and threatening leaflets were left in the area; on June 8, a church in Homs city was shot at; and during the massacre in Suwayda in mid-July, the Greek Melkite Church of St. Michael in the village of al-Sura was attacked and set ablaze.¹¹

The Christian community has also been a huge target for the Islamic State (IS) since the fall of the regime. According to the Ministry of Interior, IS suspects confessed that they were planning to conduct a car bombing against a church in Maaloula on New Year’s Day.¹² Most notably, however, was the unfortunately successful June 22 suicide attack targeting the Mar Elias Greek Orthodox church in the Damascus neighborhood of Dweila, killing at least twenty-five people and injuring sixty-

⁷ “Arab Opinion Index: Syrian Public Opinion Survey 2025,” Arab Center, September 18, 2025, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/arab-opinion-index-syrian-public-opinion-survey-2025>.

⁸ Samia Nakhoul, Maya Gebeily, and Timour Azhari, “New Syrian leader Sharaa says killings of Alawites threaten unity, vows justice,” Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/new-syrian-leader-sharaa-says-killings-alawites-threaten-unity-vows-justice-2025-03-10>.

⁹ Gregory Waters, “Local Governance in Post-Assad Syria: A Hybrid State Model for the Future?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 15, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/07/local-governance-in-post-assad-syria-a-hybrid-state-model-for-the-future>.

¹⁰ <https://jihadology.net/2020/05/27/a-timeline-of-abu-muhammad-al-jawlanis-appearances>

¹¹ Gregory Waters, “Dispatch from Syria’s Christian strongholds: A new government, a full political spectrum,” Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/dispatch-from-syrias-christian-strongholds-a-new-government-a-full-political-spectrum>; Gale Davlak, “Houses destroyed, church burnt: New wave of violence against Syrian Christians,” National Catholic Reporter, July 18, 2025, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/houses-destroyed-church-burnt-new-wave-violence-against-syrian-christians>.

¹² Syrian Ministry of Interior, “In the Grip of Security: An Inevitable Fate,” March 18, 2025, <https://jihadology.net/2025/03/18/new-video-message-from-syrias-ministry-of-interior-in-the-grip-of-security-an-inevitable-fate>.

three—the largest attack against Syria’s Christian community since 1860. It was claimed by a shadowy group called Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah, an IS front organization.¹³

Bad actors from the Assad regime have attempted to take advantage of these fearful sentiments to sow more discord within society. For example, according to the Ministry of Interior, former regime remnants tried to conduct a false flag attack on August 6 against the Mar Elias Maronite Church in al-Khraybat in Tartus, seeking to have it blamed on IS in order to create sectarian tensions.¹⁴

Outside the government-controlled areas, Christians residing in zones controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) recently attempted to use the new Syrian government’s curriculum so that students can sync their education with the new authorities. However, due to the continued issues and negotiations between Damascus and the SDF, the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) shut down these churches for going against the local administration’s wishes.¹⁵ Although the SDF ended up backing down weeks later,¹⁶ the dispute showed that worries over Christians in Syria should not just be focused on government-controlled areas.

Besides attacks on the Christian community, there have been massacres against Alawites and Druze in March and July. According to the Syrian government’s fact-finding committee on the coastal massacre, which was released in July, 200,000 individuals ended up being involved in the mobilization.¹⁷ As context, prior to the fall of the regime, Sharaa’s former group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) had only around 30,000 fighters, illustrating the continuing problem of the new government not being able to establish a monopoly on violence; indeed, many weapons remain out of the state’s control.

According to Syrian Archive, twenty-four distinct groups were among the elements involved in the massacres following the general mobilization: twelve from the Syrian National Army, four from the HTS-allied National Liberation Front, four legacy HTS divisions, and four newly formed Ministry of Defense divisions.¹⁸ Based on interviews on the ground in the aftermath, Human Rights Watch found that “government forces and other armed groups stormed through more than 30 Alawi-majority towns, villages, and neighborhoods, with the professed aim of targeting former government affiliates and uncovering arms depots...In many cases, they moved house-to-house, demanding to know the residents’ sect, looting valuables, torching homes, and executing children, women, and men, including older people, often using overtly anti-Alawi slurs and rhetoric. In some places, fighters wiped out entire families.”¹⁹

¹³ Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Damascus Church Attack: Who Is Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah?” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 25, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/damascus-church-attack-who-saraya-ansar-al-sunnah>.

¹⁴ <https://x.com/azelin/status/1953043044011290636>

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/q.n.ym.ywsf/posts/pfbid05FN4xobb39o7ha9mAMu3u3RZdJmTmRw87S2N7GnSJUEdSk2BhWU3b5pTCV8QouYRl>

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/MorGiorges/posts/pfbid0BLTWQzjr5d8FKKxm1ZCMLipXSTuaHVDaJzNebDca6dhDNaqyp7t57sdwzUmZ5HUkl>

¹⁷ “Syrian committee reports 1,426 killed in March violence, says commanders did not order it,” Reuters, July 22, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-committee-reports-1426-killed-march-violence-says-commanders-did-not-2025-07-22>.

¹⁸ “Armed Factions’ Mobilization to the Syrian Coast in March 2025,” Syrian Archive, July 8, 2025, <https://syrianarchive.org/en/investigations/armed-factions-mobilization-to-the-syrian-coast-in-march-2025>.

¹⁹ “‘Are you Alawi?’ Identity-Based Killings During Syria’s Transition,” Human Rights Watch, September 23, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/09/23/are-you-alawi/identity-based-killings-during-syrias-transition>.

In the end, according to the Syrian government's fact-finding committee, 1,426 civilians were killed, with most being Alawite, though dozens were also Sunni civilians killed in the initial regime remnant insurgency. Another 238 security personnel from the new government were killed.²⁰ Since then, the fact-finding committee has referred 563 suspects involved in the coastal violence to the judiciary.²¹ Further, Minister of Justice Mazhar al-Wais announced that the trials would be public—not only for the coastal massacre, but also for the massacre in Suwayda.²²

In late April, in response to deepfake audio of an alleged Druze cleric insulting the Prophet Muhammad, random civilians as well as individuals affiliated with the security forces attacked Druze in Jaramana and Ashrafiyat Sahnaya in the Damascus suburbs.²³ This led to dozens of Druze being killed. Three months later, the Syrian Network for Human Rights reported that at least 814 individuals were killed and 903 injured during the massacre that took place between July 13 and 24.²⁴ However, local sources in Suwayda claim that up to 2,000 people were killed,²⁵ while the UN has suggested that at least 1,000 died.²⁶ All told, Human Rights Watch reported that the massacre included “summary executions, arson attacks on homes, looting of property, and the forced displacement of civilians.”²⁷ According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 192,000 people were displaced,²⁸ thirty-three Druze villages were burned,²⁹ and numerous

²⁰ Gregory Waters, “Examining Coastal Massacre Investigations,” July 27, 2025, <https://www.syriarevisited.com/p/examining-coastal-massacre-investigations>.

²¹ “Fact-finding committee refers 563 suspects in Syrian coastal events to judiciary,” *Enab Baladi*, September 28, 2025, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/09/fact-finding-committee-refers-563-suspects-in-syrian-coastal-events-to-judiciary>.

²² “Wazir al-’adl: muhakamat ‘alniyat li-l-mutahimin bartakab jara’im khilal ahadath al-sahil wa-l-suwayda’,” Syria TV, October 30, 2025, <https://www.syria.tv/%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%83%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85-%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AB-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1>.

²³ “BRIEF: Armed clashes erupt in Jaramana & Sahnaya,” *ETANA*, May 1, 2025, <https://etanasyria.org/brief-armed-clashes-erupt-in-jaramana-sahnaya>.

²⁴ “Update of Latest Toll: At least 814 Syrians Have Been Killed and More than 903 Others Injured in Suwayda Governorate since July 13,” Syrian Network for Human Rights, July 24, 2025, <https://snhr.org/blog/2025/07/24/update-of-latest-toll-at-least-814-syrians-have-been-killed-and-more-than-903-others-injured-in-suwayda-governorate-since-july-13>.

²⁵ Mazen Ezzi, “Suwayda’s Tribes: The Social Map and Dynamics of the Struggle.” Daraj, July 28, 2025, <https://daraj.media/en/suwaydas-tribes-the-social-map-and-dynamics-of-the-struggle>.

²⁶ “Syria: UN experts alarmed by attacks on Druze communities, including sexual violence against women and girls,” OCHA, August 21, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/08/syria-un-experts-alarmed-attacks-druze-communities-including-sexual-violence>.

²⁷ “Syria: Abuses, Humanitarian Emergency Amid Sweida Clashes,” Human Rights Watch, July 22, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/07/22/syria-abuses-humanitarian-emergency-amid-sweida-clashes>.

²⁸ “Syrian Arab Republic: Flash Update No. 5—Escalation of Hostilities in As-Sweida Governorate (as of 31 July 2025),” July 31, 2025, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-flash-update-no-5-escalation-hostilities-sweida-governorate-31-july-2025>.

²⁹ “Syria: UN experts alarmed by attacks on Druze communities, including sexual violence against women and girls,” OCHA, August 21, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/08/syria-un-experts-alarmed-attacks-druze-communities-including-sexual-violence>.

businesses were looted by those involved in the massacre, images of which have since showed up on CCTV footage.³⁰

Even more problematic is the alleged involvement of IS in the violence against the Druze, as explained by Ahmad al-Dalati (the government's head of security in Suwayda during these events), further confirmed by U.S. Special Envoy Tom Barrack, and hinted at by IS supporters themselves online.³¹ Months later, Sharaa admitted, "Mistakes happened from all sides. From the Druze community, from the Bedouins, even from the state itself."³² As of this writing, the government has yet to release its fact-finding committee results on the Suwayda massacre.

Policy Challenges

Beyond specific violence against minorities, there is a general epidemic of vigilantism within Syrian society. While minorities are definitely a target, the majority Sunni population has been a target too. This goes to a fundamental issue related to Syria's transition thus far: the incomplete and slow transitional justice process.

It is true that the new government has set up a Commission on Transitional Justice, which was announced in mid-May and began its work in late August. Those working for the commission also have the approval of many within civil society.³³ The commission has engaged local stakeholders within Syria and even traveled to Rwanda to learn about their experience.³⁴ Further, I have heard from folks within the new government that the commission is doing a good job, but they worry that publicizing its work too much could undermine the process.³⁵

Yet because many Syrians continue to see former regime officials roaming the streets who were involved in crimes against individuals and families, there is an epidemic of vigilante violence happening in many areas of the country. If authorities do not get this problem under control, it could further undermine trust in the new Syria and create a new cycle of violence.

Therefore, one U.S. imperative should be to help the new transitional authorities get the vigilante issue under control by getting a better handle on who in society has access to weapons. Washington also needs to urge authorities in Damascus to be more forthcoming about the transitional justice process so that there is greater trust regarding how past wounds will be resolved. Hopefully, this will create a better environment for all Syrians to move toward a better future.

³⁰ <https://x.com/suwayda24/status/1960810374422270091>

³¹ See https://x.com/Levant_24/status/1947982556034453891 and "Briefing: Pro-IS voices hint at Suweida role after US Syria envoy comments," BBC Monitoring, July 24, 2025.

³² "The Full Interview of President Ahmad al-Shar'a with the Syrian News Agency," September 12, 2025, <https://youtu.be/HADoiyAGA1M>.

³³ <https://x.com/verobellin/status/1961386070630601079>

³⁴ "The Transitional Justice Commission Holds Its First Forum in Deir Ezzor," *Deir EzZor 24*, October 14, 2025, <https://deirezzor24.net/en/the-transitional-justice-commission-holds-its-first-forum-in-deir-ezzor>; "Syria explores Rwanda's experience on the path to transitional justice," *Enab Baladi*, October 29, 2025, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/10/syria-explores-rwandas-experience-on-the-path-to-transitional-justice>.

³⁵ Meeting with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, September 17, 2025.