



# Birth of a "New" or Rebirth of the "Same" Syria?

Marwan Abdallah

# Table of Contents

<u>About the Danube Institute</u>	iv
<u>About the Author</u>	v
<u>Abstract</u>	vi
<u>Introduction</u>	1
<u>Historical Context</u>	2
<u>Post-2011 Conflict and the Fall of Bashar al-Assad</u>	5
<u>Key Events (Late 2024-Early 2026)</u>	7
<u>Assessment of Minorities' Situation</u>	9
<u>International and Regional Perspectives</u>	11
<u>Challenges for the Near Future</u>	14
<u>Conclusion</u>	15

All rights reserved. Printed in Hungary. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Author:  
Marwan Abdallah

Danube Institute Leadership

President: John O'Sullivan  
Executive Director: István Kiss  
Director of Research: Calum T.M. Nicholson

Original Design by: Carlos Roa  
Designed by: Hubert Kucharski

© 2026 by the Danube Institute  
January 2026

Covers: Designed by Hubert Kucharski

Image: Poster with Bashar al-Assad on building facade

## About the Danube Institute

The Danube Institute, established in 2013 by the Batthyány Lajos Foundation in Budapest, serves as a hub for the exchange of ideas and individuals within Central Europe and between Central Europe, other parts of Europe, and the English-speaking world. Rooted in a commitment to respectful conservatism in cultural, religious, and social life, the Institute also upholds the broad classical liberal tradition in economics and a realistic Atlanticism in national security policy. These guiding principles are complemented by a dedication to exploring the interplay between democracy and patriotism, emphasizing the nation-state as the cornerstone of democratic governance and international cooperation.

Through research, analysis, publication, debate, and scholarly exchanges, the Danube Institute engages with center-right intellectuals, political leaders, and public-spirited citizens, while also fostering dialogue with counterparts on the democratic center-left. Its activities include establishing and supporting research groups, facilitating international conferences and fellowships, and encouraging youth participation in scholarly and political discourse. By drawing upon the expertise of leading minds across national boundaries, the Institute aims to contribute to the development of democratic societies grounded in national identity and civic engagement.

## About the Author



Marwan Abdallah is the Head of the Foreign Affairs Department at the Lebanese Kataeb Party. He started his political activism in high school, against the Syrian Occupation of Lebanon, and was elected to the Student Council at the Lebanese American University (LAU) in 2009 while studying International Affairs & Political Science. While pursuing his M.A. studies in Diplomacy & Strategic Negotiations, Marwan worked in public policy in the Lebanese Parliament, reviewing policies and drafting laws, while taking part in street demonstrations against the government. He assumed his current position in October 2023 after serving for five years as the International Secretary of the Kataeb Party, a leading opposition group in Lebanon on the center-right. In his capacity, he attends conferences with international political organizations and parties representing Lebanon, connects with international partners - Governmental and Non-Governmental - working in Lebanon, and helps draft the party's Foreign Affairs strategies.

He is the co-founder of three NGOs and has hands-on experience in Energy Security & Geopolitics, Governance, Local Development, Minorities, and Rule of Law, among other topics.

Marwan is the current Executive Director of the Organization for Petroleum & Energy Sustainability (OPES) with the topics of Energy Security, Sustainability, and Renewables as priorities of OPES' work. He also lectures at "La Sagesse University" in Beirut where he teaches two Masters level courses on Oil & Gas Business and Global Energy Markets

Marwan was elected as the Vice Chairman of the International Democracy Union (IDU) in June 2022.

## Abstract

Following the fall of the dictator Bashar Al-Assad in December 2024, is Syria really building a new political order or is it simply recycling old patterns of rule under new labels? This paper focuses on how Syria's minorities are faring during the transition and what that reveals about the emerging state. The aim here is threefold: first, to assess the key developments affecting minorities since late 2024 security incidents, pressures to displace, and changes in local power arrangements; second, to consider what transitional governance and constitutional/legal measures are really offering in terms of citizenship, rights, and political participation; and third, to evaluate how these domestic dynamics are already affecting Syria's regional environment (and Lebanon in particular). The paper begins with a description of the historical context, with a special focus on the impact on minorities. It then examines the key events that have taken place in the country since late 2024. These events are assessed in relation to the positions of the various minorities. They are also considered in relation to Syria's relations with its neighbours. The paper concludes with specific recommendations for Syria's leaders and policy-makers.

# Introduction

The transition in the wake of the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria is often being described as an opening for a "new Syria". Yet, the early indications emerging from late 2024 through early 2026 raise a much tougher question. *Is Syria really building a new political order or is it simply recycling old patterns of rule under new labels?*

A practical way to test this is to look first at minorities not as a niche human-rights topic, but as a governance indicator. This is because minority security, equal citizenship, and political inclusion tend to be the first areas where states either demonstrate impartial authority or fall back on coercion, patronage, and communal bargaining.

There has been a persistent occurrence of displacement and armed control, especially at the local level, as well as reports of attacks and intimidation in minority areas: this suggests that the validation of the transition's credibility will not just occur at high or sub-national levels. Most importantly, it will be seen in the daily provision of protection and representation.

As a result, the paper focuses on how Syria's minorities are faring during the transition and what that reveals about the emerging state. The aim here is threefold: first, to assess the key developments affecting minorities since late 2024 security incidents, pressures to displace, and changes in local power arrangements; second, to consider what transitional governance and constitutional/legal measures are really offering in terms of citizenship, rights, and political participation; and third, to evaluate how these domestic dynamics are already affecting Syria's regional environment.

This means, in particular, Lebanon through refugee movements, border insecurity, and economic spillovers: however, it is also shaping the calculations of major external actors.

The main issue concerns stability. If minorities experience insecurity or exclusion, the transition risks creating an internal militarisation of politics around new fault lines and an export of instability across borders.

The analysis spans from late 2024 to early 2026 and focuses on eight communities repeatedly linked in Syria's political order and trajectories of conflict. These are: Christians, Alawites, Druze, Kurds, Yazidis, Turkmen, and the broader Sunni-Shi'a/sectarian contexts.

The paper employs a methodological triangulation approach which draws upon a combination of three types of sources.

The first source pertains to primary transition documents as well as constitutional texts, where accessible. The second is international monitoring and human-rights reporting about violence, protection risks and displacement. Finally, the third source is that of decision-maker relevant policy and country-information assessments that synthesize trends. The approach is purposefully comparative and policy-oriented: Rather than providing a comprehensive account of the war, it links security conditions, political representation and legal guarantees to the feasibility of state reconstruction and the risk of regional spillover.

The central claim of this paper is that the fate of Syria's transition will be decided not by rhetoric about "unity" or "reform," but by whether transitional authorities replace sectarianized "protection" arrangements and militia influence with credible rule of law, accountable security institutions, and effective guarantees of enforceable equal citizenship.

# Historical Context

## Syria's Modern Political History

Syria's current political order emerged in the late Ottoman era. The aftermath of World War I saw contested state-building efforts. In the process, an external ruler and an internal fragmentation shaped the institutions of Syria.

However, a stable national compact could not form. During the French Mandate period (1920-46), Syria briefly contained the ingredients of a more decentralised or quasi-federal arrangement. It had multiple administrative units and locally rooted governance, yet the nationalist direction ultimately favoured a unitary state.

This was a result of an association of decentralisation with partition and foreign interference rather than consensual power-sharing. During the French Mandate, the territory was split into several administrative units, such as the Alawite State on the coast and a Druze statelet in Jabal al-Druze, a move widely recognized as an attempt to undermine pan-Syrian nationalism by promoting localized, communal identities. The experience during the French Mandate era is relevant today due to the fact that it sows a recurrent tension in Syrian politics: the fear of fragmentation that haunts the centre, and the fear of absorption that haunts minorities. This resonates with the mistrust of the state that many minorities feel.

The French Mandate legacy created an internal conflict between the minority regions which analyzed their need for national unity versus their desire for regional self-governance. Saleh al-Ali's anti-French revolution which occurred from 1919 to 1921 and took place in the coastal mountain region serves as a historical example: it demonstrates the refusal of people to accept foreign-imposed divisions while they demanded full control over their land. The shared historical memory of the past now raises a contemporary question which emerged after 2011 because the state fails to provide equal protection to its citizens.

Minority groups in this area, especially Christians, have started to examine special-status or autonomy options which they compare to Mount Lebanon's Mutasarrifate as a means to protect themselves from security threats and revenge attacks and social exclusion during times of political instability. After the Ottoman Empire collapsed, decentralization became seen as a unity threat.

However, nowadays, people consider decentralized federal arrangements as the best solution for minority groups and moderate political factions who want protection that is not dependent on the Damascus government.

The Ba'ath era—from 1963 until Hafez al-Assad established his regime between 1970 and 1971—created new political tensions that remained unresolved. The Ba'athist project established three official goals, which included Arab unity, state-driven modernization and a unified security apparatus. Nevertheless, its actual operations depended on close connections between party organizations and military forces and security divisions.

Over time, regime survival developed into a system which depended on special recruitment patterns that advanced personnel who were loyal to the regime: meanwhile, sectarian and regional identities served as unofficial assessors of reliability within the armed forces' institutions. This model resulted in the destruction of pluralistic systems, together with the rising use of security measures. These measures required communities to maintain social unity through fear, state-sponsored violence and patronage systems.

## Minorities in Syrian Society

The social structure of Syria contains multiple religious groups which include Sunni Muslims Shi'a Muslims and other Muslim communities, together with Alawite, Druze, Yazidis and various Christian Catholic and Orthodox denominations.

These various communities maintain separate historical ties to governmental power through their relationships with religious authorities and local leaders—as well as through military duties and involvement in political opposition activities.

The political significance of this diversity emerged during both the French Mandate period and the subsequent state-building phase because matters of minority identity continuously affected governance operations.

Over the long run, the result resembled a divide-and-rule equilibrium: instead of a durable equal-citizenship compact, communal boundaries became a substitute for institutional trust, and political order depended on bargaining, patronage, and fear more than transparent rules.

That legacy is central to the paper's broader question—"new Syria" or "same Syria"—because post-2024 transition debates on decentralization, protection, and representation are, at their core, debates about whether Syrians can build institutions that do not require communities to seek survival through sectarian patrons or armed protectors. Where that institutional shift fails, minority politics becomes a predictable early-warning system for renewed instability, both domestically and through spillover to neighbors.

An example is the conflict between the Syrian Christians, and their regional/international sponsors Israel and the Syrian Druze, on one side and Lebanese-Syrian Alawites on the other.

# Post-2011 Conflict and the Fall of Bashar al-Assad

## The Civil War's Impact on Minorities

Since 2011, Syria has become a decentralized security state with local governance resulting from a struggle between the state, the opposition forces, and the foreign armed groups. This fragmentation mattered for minorities because protection ceased to be a uniform public good and instead became a negotiated outcome—often tied to which armed actor controlled a district, which checkpoints regulated movement, and which community could secure a patron or deterrent.

These parallel systems of rule often blurred the boundary between civilian administration and armed authority, as militias often presented themselves as local service providers or providers of local governance.

In other words, the fragmentation had an important international aspect to it. This, in turn, meant that the war became a direct combat or kinetic operation arena among multiple state and non-state actors, further undermining central authority and making the notion of a singular "chain of command" over violence even more complex.

This "internationalized" fragmentation of the war meant it became a scene for direct or kinetic engagements by diverse state and non-state actors, further exacerbating the already deteriorating central authority and thus complicating any "chain of command" over violence, with key actors including the Syrian Arab Army and pro-regime proxies such as the National Defence Forces; Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and aligned networks; Hezbollah (Lebanon); Iraqi militias associated with the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Shaabi); Russia's military intervention; Turkey's military and Turkey-backed Syrian factions; U.S. forces; the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and, finally, Israel's repeated air operations.

Displacement turned out to be the conflict's most consequential demographic device, shifting local balances, property relations and communal perceptions of "who belongs". The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has described Syria as hosting an enormous internal displacement (in the order of millions) while also having one of the world's largest refugee crises, making returns, restitution, and reintegration central and politically sensitive issues in any transition.

For minority communities, displacement pressures often translated into long-term insecurity. Emptied villages, contested housing and land, and the collapse of local economies fed off each other to accelerate emigration, and to undermine the social infrastructure (schools, churches, religious endowments, local networks) that has historically sustained communal resilience.

The displacement has also contributed to perceptions of demographic change: this mostly concerns a rising Sunni Islamic presence in some parts of the coastal Alawite and Christian dominated areas—which this paper will assess in a later section. There were fears of intimidation and revenge violence under the interim authorities in the wake of the March 2025 coastal killings, which mainly targeted the Alawite minorities.

The displacement has also exerted pressure on the neighboring countries – mainly Lebanon, which has one of the world's highest shares of refugees per capita – because of the protracted large refugee inflows, which places strain on housing and rent markets, wages and informal employment, electricity and water systems, schools and hospitals. The displacement has the potential to magnify domestic political tensions and security concerns.



### Transition after Bashar al-Assad's Fall (Late 2024)

The fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 was a symbolic end to half a century of regime structure, but it did not automatically resolve the country's underlying governance problem. *The key challenge was how to rebuild monopoly of legitimate force and credible institutions without reproducing authoritarian control.*

The Constitutional Declaration's narrative treats 8 December 2024 as "liberation" and the beginning of a new age, acknowledging the extent of institutional ruin and social disruption left by security-oriented rule and fourteen years of war. In practice, the period following the fall of Bashar al-Assad opened a political vacuum in which interim authorities had to be legitimizing, negotiating with armed actors and simultaneously reassuring a scared community (including minorities) that the new order was not going to be a vehicle of revenge or exclusion.

Following this political opening, a series of prominent attacks resulted in the gap between transitional discourse and the actual protection of vulnerable communities being immediately identified. There was a suicide bombing at the Mar Elias Church in Damascus in June 2025, killing at least 25 people and causing Christians to be afraid that extremism might return. These events caused an international outrage and a perception that ISIS-like attacks will resurface again in Syria. More destabilizing still were the killings of Alawites in coastal regions between 7 and 9 March 2025, in which a Reuters investigation 'reconstructed a three-day wave of killings in dozens of locations'. The investigation recorded 2,585 Alawite victims, with many more being declared missing: all this instilled a degree of vulnerability among a people long identified, properly or otherwise, with the preceding incumbent regime.

Violence targeting Druze in southern Syria was reported in mid-July 2025, with UN experts describing killings, abductions, and calls for sectarian violence in the Sweida Governorate, further undermining minority confidence in transitional authorities' rule of law enforcement abilities.

In the northeast, the renewed confrontation between the authorities in Damascus and Kurdish-led forces in late 2025 and early 2026 highlighted that Syria's minority question is also institutional in character: local powers can often be coercive, and may resort to violence.

### Legal Framework Changes

One big step came on 13 March 2025, when leaders released the Transitional Constitutional Declaration - to guide laws during the shift. Though it promises wide rights like equal treatment regardless of faith, plus bans on torture and forced disappearances, it still hands strong control to the President. This person gets to shape main institutions, pick many lawmakers, and even choose judges.

For groups outside the ruling circle, things look uncertain: written pledges sound bold, yet real outcomes hinge on how much authority gets checked. Power sits centralized, so progress might grow - or shrink - based on who holds office and what pressures follow.

What stands out most in discussions among minorities about belonging and national character are two key points. Not only does Article 3 declare Islam as the religion of the President, it positions Islamic law as the main foundation for laws - yet includes protections for individual beliefs and recognizes distinct religious communities' rules on personal matters.

Another part, far from just symbolic, is the pledge within the Declaration to honor cultural variety along with language and cultural rights across Syria - a point that lines up closely with what Kurds seek regarding schools, speech, and self-rule at local levels. What holds things back is not whether rights appear on paper: it is how wide the space remains between those promises and any real ability to carry them out after years when weapons, land, and governing control were split in so many directions. Proof won't come from wording but from seeing what actions follow.

# Key Events (Late 2024-Early 2026)

### Sectarian Violence and Minorities

That first year was marked by harm hitting minority communities - not just bodies maimed but messages sent: power might shift in Damascus even as danger grew far from the city. What stood out earliest came along the coast - March 7-9, 2025 - when Alawites were attacked in several spots. An account of the violence later pieced together by Reuters counted 1,479 dead plus others vanished.

Fear tightened around group lines after that, sparking doubts about who gave orders and who would answer under the new rule. In the summer of 2025, risks increased further when a bomber entered a church in Damascus during June, killing no fewer than 25. This made Christian unease grow sharper over whether extremists could return and if sacred spaces in the heart of the country still offered any protection. Less violent events have gone unpunished. From February 2025, and across multiple regions, Alawite women and girls suffered gender-based violence. Although this was witnessed shortly afterwards by United Nations observers, there was little effort to investigate what had happened. The result was that doubts grew over the rule of law and availability of impartial justice.

Attacks with weapons surged soon after against Druze villages near Sweida Province beginning 13 July 2025, according to those same observers, bringing deaths, kidnappings, stolen belongings, burned homes, and assaults on women, all unfolding while authorities failed to shield minority groups or check wrongdoing properly.

### Kurdish Political Actors and Federalisation

In the north of the country, a self-run system of government led by Kurds took shape over years of conflict: it was separate from Syria's old regime and untouched by central oversight.

This arrangement, sometimes called Rojava or the Democratic Autonomous Administration, became the clearest alternative to governing the country. When change started unfolding nationally, attention turned toward what comes next for Kurdish regions - both in terms of security but also the shape of institutions.. The challenge was that regional and international actors tended to support the notion of Syria being run by a centralized authority.

This raised the questions about how the authorities and local defence forces in the Kurdish regions would be integrated into national governance - yet without a return to tight centralized control.

### Humanitarian and Displacement Realities

On the ground, how people were moving and surviving became the clearest test of whether the shift in power would hold weight. By late January 2025, nearly 250,000 Syrians had returned to the country in the wake of the fall of Bashar al-Assad, according to UNHCR. That number might climb - possibly reaching 1.5 million refugees returning this year. That figure does not include two million displaced people who never left the country.

Such movement could bring renewal, yet also danger, given that homes lie broken, water and power stays absent from many places, and jobs remain scarce. For ethnic and religious minority groups, heading home is not only about transport or shelter. It involves safety, legal proof of identity, reclaiming land taken years ago, and being shielded at the community level. In several senses, the country is in a state of flux.

# Assessment of Minorities' Situation

## Security and Protection Issues

As inter-communal violence mounted, one downstream effect was the emergence of informal, externally oriented political initiatives framed as "minority protection." The Tel Aviv "Minorities Conference" became a revealing platform—and a flashpoint—because it turned the insecurity and unanswered abuses inside Syria into political demands about structure and guarantees: some participants and supporters argued for separatism or federal arrangements, and for international mechanisms (including special courts) to investigate massacres. It also signaled a rhetorical inversion driven by insecurity: Israel was discussed less through the lens of the old symbolic conflict and more as a potential guarantor against violence and impunity under Islamist de facto rule.

Taken together, the conference reads less as a standalone event than as a symptom of a failing transition test: instead of building a neutral, credible monopoly of protection that makes citizenship meaningful, Syria is again pushing communities to seek substitutes for safety—autonomy, foreign patronage, or separation.

Shadi Abou Karam, a Syrian researcher and Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) specialist makes a point in the *Syrian Oxygen* digital media platform that symbolic gestures (like raising an Israeli flag in Sweida) should not be read as ideological conversion, but as the political symptom of collapsed trust: when the state fails to protect, people redefine friend/enemy by survival and search for deterrence wherever it exists. This collapse in trust helps explain why minority discourse is also shifting in identity terms: alongside demands for decentralization or externalized accountability raised around the Tel Aviv "Minorities Conference," some Druze and Alawite voices increasingly present themselves as "indigenous" and, at times, explicitly non-Arab.

They invoke history over the long-term to argue prior presence and to frame their distinctive doctrines/heritage as something long forced into concealment under threat.

## Political Participation

Security failures are now shaping minority political participation, not just minority fear: when protection is uneven, representation becomes a survival question, and communities organize outside state channels rather than trust "national" processes. In that climate, the long-running claim that the Bashar al-Assad system was simply an "Alawite regime" is increasingly contested by Alawite diaspora actors themselves, who argue they were not empowered as a community but managed through state-controlled structures and securitized recruitment.

What is clearly changing after Bashar al-Assad's fall is the space for independent Alawite political mobilization abroad. Within roughly a year, Alawite diaspora activity expanded dramatically. This included the April 12, 2025 "Mannheim Conference" in Germany, which gathered Alawite figures and organizations from Europe and the United States and announced a permanent follow-up committee focused on documentation, advocacy, and accountability.

The post-Assad period also saw the formalization of new diaspora umbrellas, including the International Federation of Alawite Organizations (IFAO), which states that it is composed of over 30 Alawite associations worldwide, each represented equally by its President or a delegated representative. In the United States, the Alawite Association of the United States was also linked to a "Syrian-American Conference for Democracy" planned for May 12, 2025, with stated goals centered on democratic pluralism and protections for minorities.



Syrian nationals protesting against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Germany (Shutterstock)

This matters for the transition's political credibility, because participation is not measured by constitutional language alone, but by who holds real agenda-setting power and who feels safe enough to dissent. If minorities perceive that security institutions remain factional, that accountability is selective, and that representation is symbolic, they disengage from formal channels: instead, they shift toward diaspora lobbying, community protection strategies, and decentralization/federalism demands as practical substitutes for equal citizenship.

### Social and Economic Conditions

Social and economic hardship has become a direct extension of the security crisis, especially on the coast. After the March violence, Alawite families fled toward northern Lebanon in large numbers—around 100,000 by local firsthand accounts—adding a new displacement wave to an already exhausted border zone. At the same time, coastal communities entered this period with long-standing structural vulnerability: in local readings, the Assad-era “protector” narrative coexisted with deliberate underdevelopment that kept many Alawites poor and made military service one of the few stable livelihood options.

Across Syria, recovery is still constrained by war damage, institutional collapse, and the absence of a coherent, transparent reconstruction program. On the ground, many residents—especially in heavily destroyed Sunni areas—see little serious rebuilding. Residents also point to the ongoing donation campaigns across Syrian governorates as further evidence of opaque governance: funds are collected publicly in the name of relief and rebuilding, yet many locals allege large-scale diversion and speak of millions of dollars being stolen by networks close to the “new” authorities, echoing the corruption patterns associated with the “former regime”.

These pressures are now shaping demographic and political outcomes. When safety and livelihoods do not improve, families who can leave often do so, accelerating emigration and thinning local representation over time. For many Syrians, this reinforces a bleak continuity: the system changes its slogans, but coercion and exclusion remain—now increasingly associated with extremist Islamist actors and de facto authority structures.

# International and Regional Perspectives

## Major International Actors

Major international engagement with Syria in the wake of the fall of Bashar al-Assad has been practical and limited: the clearest “new” strategic effect is that Syria is no longer the main corridor anchoring Iran's so-called “Shia crescent,” and the emerging order is widely read as shifting toward a Sunni-leaning alignment that does not present the same level of organized threat to Israel's national security. Beyond that, Syria's main regional importanceso far is not diplomacy or development: it is the management of the spillover of previous conflict. In practical terms, this means a focus on the return of refugees. This issue matters most to Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan.

The aims and aspirations of other international actors are very varied. Financially, the biggest coordinated initiative has been European: the European Union (EU) pledged about €2.5 billion for 2025–2026 and tied support to an inclusive transition while keeping leverage through conditionality and the option to reverse course.

In parallel, UNHCR shifted toward facilitating voluntary return, projecting up to 1.5 million returns in 2025 and coordinating return support with host states and Syrian authorities. Meanwhile the government of Lebanon—in conjunction with UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM)—launched an Organized Voluntary Return Programme in mid-2025. The United States remains focused mostly on security-and-sanctions issues. Russia's interest remains in what is left of previously established networks.

Turkey is a key international actor because it directly shapes northern Syria's security and governance, and it is also using policy tools to push refugee returns (including tightening parts of the temporary-protection framework and promoting “dignified return”).

Ankara's priorities—blocking Kurdish autonomy on its border, maintaining leverage over cross-border trade routes, and managing the refugees—give it a practical veto over any settlement that treats decentralization as open-ended sovereignty.

Meanwhile, the Arab states' engagement is limited. They are more concerned about the stabilization of borders and the limiting of Iranian influence than underwriting full reconstruction. Saudi Arabia, for its part, has moved from cautious re-engagement to explicit investment promises as a way to stabilize the new order and gain influence over Syria's reconstruction. In July 2025, Saudi Arabia announced an investment package reported at \$6.4 billion in Syria, framed as support to rebuild after the war. By February 2026, Reuters also reported a new Saudi investment push: the \$2 billion Elaf Fund will be investing in airports at Aleppo and other infrastructure projects.

In summary, there is no unanimity among the international actors in relation to the governance of Syria in the wake of the fall of Bashar al-Assad. Some governments and international agencies advocate equality of rights and the rule of law for all minorities in the country. Others see order as being important to their own interests: they are prepared to overlook the concerns of the minority. The risk is that Syria's social and security situation remains in a state of flux for a long time.

### Relations with Neighbours

Spillover dynamics still define Syria's neighbourhood relations. In Lebanon, displacement and cross-border flows of refugees add to economic strain. The movement (and ultimate return) of refugees is the most important issue in bilateral relations. For Israel, the dominant issue is the entrenchment in Syria of, and transfers of weapons to, hostile non-state groups in Syria.

Turkey's relationship with the new Syria is similarly couched in terms of security issues: Ankara's priorities—containing Kurdish autonomy, shaping northern security arrangements, and managing refugee returns—pull Syrian internal governance questions into a cross-border bargaining framework. This is why "local rule," militia integration, and border administration in the north cannot be treated as purely domestic issues; they are key concerns of Turkey.

A recent report was titled: "Who saves the new Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa?" The author frames Syria's regional positioning as a recurring pattern rather than a new choice. He argues that Hafez al-Assad aligned with a strategically useful but non-border partner (Iran) to balance immediate border threats from Turkey, Iraq, and Israel. Bashar al-Assad took a similar approach.

The author suggests that, after the Assad dynasty's collapse, Ahmad al-Sharaa faces a similar dilemma and may seek a comparable "distant patron". On this occasion, though, Saudi Arabia would be the most likely partner. For the purposes of this paper, the point is simple: even if Syria's ideology and leadership change, the external alignment strategy may remain the "same"—a search for an offshore guarantor to offset pressures from Syria's neighbours.



# Challenges for the Near Future

## Constitutional Reform and State Institutions

Now comes the hard part. This involves Syria's future turning not on words but on whether new rules actually hold power to account. A declaration signed in March 2025 laid out rights and created structure, yet gave one office - that of the President - too much control. Trust must now grow from practice, not paper. Who gets chosen matters because paths to power reveal intent far better than pledges ever could. Watch how supervision unfolds, since real limits only show up when someone tries to stop them.

One thing stands clear. The rules about who counts as a citizen need to stay fair and workable. There should be favoring one group, with everyone treated the same under law, since how safe people feel from day-to-day shapes their view of change. Safety comes next. Rights for smaller groups cannot float in vague words: they require real tools like courts or watchdogs ready to act when language, belief, or custom face threat. Then there is structure. Splitting power between regions and central government is not about theory. It is about letting areas govern themselves within firm national limits and with appropriately decentralized policing and security administration.

## Internal Security and Rule of Law

Stopping violence means shifting power from armed groups back to accountable state authority—without triggering revenge cycles, and without rebranding militia dominance as “order.” When attacks hit the coastal regions in early 2025, followed by abductions and threats targeting minority communities, a basic lesson resurfaced. Justice isn't optional goodwill: it is the mechanism that prevents fear from turning into self-arming, dependence on patrons, or flight.

A realistic policy has to move in sequence. Truth must come before reconciliation, and major crimes need clear consequences. If that step is skipped, “forgiveness” is read as impunity, which fuels public anger and invites retaliatory violence.

Two additional safeguards should be explicit. First, the state should not grant citizenship papers or national IDs to foreign fighters who entered Syria for “jihad”. Legal status must not become a reward for participation in violence, and documentation policy should prioritize lawful residency rules, security screening, and the integrity of the national registry.

Second, Syria should request an international investigative and judicial mechanism for war crimes and mass atrocities—an international court or court-mandated process with credible authority—to investigate massacres across all sides and deter future abuses through prosecutions.

Finally, rule of law must include restoring equal protection for minorities, including Alawites, not as a political favor but as a constitutional principle. Legal authorities should be empowered to halt collective punishment and to reverse unlawful dismissals, confiscations, or land seizures carried out on the basis of religion or presumed political affiliation, using due process.

The process should include documentation of claims, judicial review, restitution or compensation, and penalties for officials or armed actors who enforced discriminatory removals.

# Conclusion

Syria's transition will not be defined by the fall of a family, but by whether the state can rebuild impartial authority—a monopoly over force that is constrained by law, not exercised through factional privilege. Since late 2024, the decisive signals have come from the periphery. When minorities face violence, intimidation, or dispossession and see no credible path to justice, the “new Syria” stops being a promise and starts looking like a recycled order with different symbols.

This is the core test posed by this paper's title—“Birth of a ‘new’ Syria or Rebirth of the ‘same’ Syria?”. The test will not be passed with rhetoric alone. The country's next phase hinges on three hard choices.

First, accountability must be treated as a security instrument. Without truth-telling, prosecutions for grave crimes, and enforceable restitution, reconciliation becomes a cover for impunity and a generator of future mobilization.

Second, the security sector must be rebuilt as an institution, not a coalition: integrating armed men into uniforms without vetting, discipline, pay transparency, and civilian oversight merely formalizes militia rule.

Third, Syria needs a governance design that prevents communal arming: bounded decentralization, paired with security decentralization under national standards, is the practical middle ground between a brittle hyper-central state and a fragmented divided area.

## References

**ConstitutionNet (International IDEA network)**, Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic (English translation), 13 March 2025 (PDF).

**ConstitutionNet**, *Constitutional Declaration – Syria (2025)* (resource page hosting the document and metadata).

**UNHCR (ReliefWeb)**, *Operational Framework: Voluntary Return of Syrian Refugees and IDPs (2025)*, 5 February 2025.

**UNHCR Data Portal**, *Voluntary Return of Syrian Refugees and IDPs (2025)* (document entry; PDF download available).

**UNHCR**, *Syria Regional Refugee Response (data portal / situation page)* (for regional displacement context).

**Reuters (investigation)**, *How Reuters counted the dead in the March killings of Syrian Alawites*, 30 June 2025.

**Reuters (investigation)**, *Syrian forces massacred 1,500 Alawites*. The chain of command led to Damascus, 30 June 2025.

**OHCHR (UN Special Procedures press release)**, *Syria: UN experts alarmed by targeted abductions and disappearances of Alawite women and girls*, 22 July 2025.

**OHCHR (UN Special Procedures press release)**, *Syria: UN experts alarmed by attacks on Druze communities, including sexual violence against women and girls*, 20 August 2025.

**Reuters**, *Syrians back freedoms, constitutional process at landmark dialogue* (Syrian National Dialogue Conference coverage), 25 February 2025.

**Al Jazeera**, *Syria's al-Sharaa signs five-year temporary constitution* (transition/legal milestone reporting), 13 March 2025.

**UN News**, *Syria: Return of millions brings hope but challenges remain*, 23 September 2025.

**UN News**, *Syria: Effort to buttress human rights since Assad's fall...*, 4 December 2025.

**Reuters**, *Twenty killed in suicide bombing at Damascus church*, 22 June 2025.

**Reuters**, *Syria's Christians ask 'Why us?' after suicide bombing at Damascus church*, 23 June 2025.

**Minority Rights Group International**, *Syria* (country profile; minorities overview).

**EUAA (European Union Agency for Asylum)**, *Syria: Country Focus 2025 – Ethno-religious minorities (Alawites section)*, 15 December 2024.

**Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**, *Regime Change and Minority Risks: Syrian Alawites After Assad*, 20 July 2025.

**Country Studies (Library of Congress mirror)**, *Syria – The French Mandate*.

**“Mosaics of power: Fragmentation of the Syrian state since 2011”** (PDF; used for the fragmentation framing).

**Council on Foreign Relations**, *Conflict in Syria – Global Conflict Tracker*.

**Reuters**, *Syria's Kurds protest Aleppo violence as fears of wider conflict grow*, 13 January 2026 (Kurdish–Damascus tensions/clashes context).

**New York Times**, *Clashes Between Syrian Government and Kurdish-Led Militia Restart After Deaths*, 7 January 2026.

**Al Jazeera**, *Syrian army, Kurdish-led SDF agree to stop deadly fighting in Aleppo*, 23 December 2025.

**Middle East Institute**, *Lebanon and Syria October 2025: A Snapshot* (Lebanon–Syria spillover framing).

**Mercy Corps Lebanon (PDF)**, *Regime Change in Syria: Implications for Lebanon* (policy-oriented spillover analysis).

**OHCHR / UN experts (archived copy via ecoinet)**, *UN experts alarmed by attacks on Druze communities...* (same OHCHR statement mirrored).

**OHCHR / UN experts (archived copy via ecoinet)**, *UN experts alarmed by targeted abductions... (Alawite women and girls)* (same OHCHR statement mirrored).

**EU (European Commission Presscorner)**, *EU opens new chapter in its relations with Syria*, 7 January 2026.

**Ahmad Ghosn**, “Who saves the new Syrian President Ahmad al Sharaa?”, *The Liberum*, <https://theliberum.com/who-saves-the-new-syrian-president-ahmad-al-sharaa/>

**European Parliament (Answer to Parliamentary Question)**, E-000307/2025(ASW), 8 April 2025 (EU conditionality/sanctions framing).

**Human Rights Watch**, *US, EU, UK: Lift Syria Sanctions Hindering Recovery*, 17 February 2025 (sanctions vs recovery debate).

1. “فإن سافا غنرشكف ددجفا مجنفا: بيا فتري تافا ركتوك.” Almodon, (Opinion), 30 October 2025.

**Shadi Abou Karam**, “؟كفغفا غر كجغزأ إغفم”, *Oxygen Syria*, 16 February 2026.

**Mustafa Al-Miqdad** (Progress Center for Policies – Damascus), “The Minorities Conference in Tel Aviv: A Personal Initiative or a Political Message?”, *Progress Center for Policies*, 30 October 2025.

**“Alawite Memorial” (website)**, <https://alawitememorial.org/>

**Benjamin Amir**, “A Fall from Grace: Syria's Alawites,” *The Times of Israel (Blogs)*, 20 August 2025.

**International Federation of Alawite Organizations (IFAO)**, “Members,” *Alawite Federation (website)*, <https://alawitefederation.org/members/>

