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The Middle East Desk

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The Caliphate Next Door: Syria's Islamist Regime and the Future of Its Minorities

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Preface

The dramatic changes unfolding in Syria since the collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 have thrown the nation and the wider Middle East into dire uncertainty. As various minority communities such as the Druze, Alawites, and Kurds endure escalating violence under the new rule of Ahmed al-Sharaa (al-Jolani), a former al-Qaeda affiliate, the lines between local conflict and regional instability have blurred. This paper offers a detailed account of recent atrocities and the existential threats now facing Syria's minorities. It seeks to contextualize these events within the broader rise of radical Islamist ideologies emanating from Syria, examining their sectarian motivations, regional implications, and the growing spillover risks for Israel and neighboring states. By scrutinizing the interplay between ideology, strategic alliances, and territorial ambitions, this analysis warns of a potential shift toward a transnational Islamic threat whose repercussions may extend well beyond Syria's borders.

Executive Summary

- **Rise of Radical Islamic Regime:** The fall of the Assad regime in late 2024 and the ascent of al-Jolani - a figure deeply rooted in al-Qaeda's Salafi-jihadist ideology - have transformed Syria, amplified sectarian conflict and placed its minorities in extreme danger.
- **Persecution of the Druze Minority:** Recent months witnessed mass atrocities against the Druze community, with the regime and allied Islamist militias orchestrating massacres, kidnappings, and sieges in areas like Jaramana, Sahnaya, and As-Suwayda. These acts have left thousands dead or displaced, revealing a strategy of religious and ethnic cleansing.
- **The Broader Islamic Threat:** The ideology driving these attacks is not merely Sunni versus minority, but a radical Salafi-jihadist worldview that seeks to remake Syria - and potentially its neighbours - into an extreme Sunni Islamic state. The same ethos underlying the Hamas massacre in Israel is now evident in Syria, pointing toward a region-wide threat.
- **Strategic Implications for the Middle East:** The persecution of minorities in Syria signals a metastasizing threat: attacks on Druze communities near Israel's northern border could presage future aggression toward Israel itself. Events in Syria serve as a warning call for policymakers about the risk of further destabilization, the rise of new terror sanctuaries, and mass refugee flows.
- **Kurds and Alawites Vulnerable:** Alongside the Druze, Kurdish and Alawite communities are facing mounting pressure as the regime pushes for Islamist hegemony. Turkish interventions against the Kurds and the "de-Alawitization" campaign reveal tactical expansions of this threat, deepening ethnic and sectarian divides.

- Axis of Extremism and Pragmatism: While Sunni and Shia radicals often clash, Iran's pragmatic alliances with groups like Hamas highlight that strategic interests can override sectarian divides. Alongside Iran's Shiite axis, which includes Sunnis, al-Joulani is also making pragmatic alliances with those who are not his natural allies.
- Global and Regional Consequences: The rapid consolidation of jihadist rule, collapse of multi-ethnic governance, and persistent violence in Syria risk turning the country into a new hub for transnational terrorism, much like Afghanistan under the Taliban. This endangers not just the immediate region but also international security.
- The events described reveal that the "Islamic threat" now erupting from Syria is rooted in the rise of radical Salafi-jihadist actors intent on eradicating minorities and exporting violence. The attacks against the Druze, the imposition of hardline Islamic governance, and the strategic alliance-building with extremist groups are harbingers of a wider conflict: a religious war with the potential to engulf the entire Middle East. If unchecked, Syria may become both a proving ground and launching pad for ideological terror like the "Hamas model," threatening regional stability and challenging the global order itself.

The "Druze October 7" in Syria

About 700,000 Druze live in Syria, constituting approximately 3.2% of the country's population. Most Druze reside in specific areas such as Jabal al-Druze (as-Suwayda Governorate), in the suburbs of Damascus like Jaramana and Sahnaya, as well as in villages in the Syrian Golan Heights, including Kafr Hadar in the Syrian part of Mount Hermon.

The first escalation against the Druze by al-Julani's regime loyal forces, began in May 2025, when a controversial recording circulated on social media, allegedly capturing a Druze sheikh insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Although many experts claimed the recording was fake, it served as a pretext for Islamist militias supporting the new regime - whose leader has a history as a radical jihadist - to attack Druze concentrations in the Damascus suburbs, mainly in Jaramana and Sahnaya. These attacks caused dozens of casualties and injuries and were even referred to as "a massacre".¹

The rise of al-Julani's regime in Syria and the Sunni regime's hatred toward the Druze ignited southern Syria and led to persecution and harassment of the Druze minority, primarily based on sectarian and religious grounds. The Druze in Syria have been persecuted since the inception of their community in the 11th century, as the Druze began to emerge as a distinct religious and social group in the region. Persecution arose when the orthodox Islam began to regard them as heretics. In 2011, the Syrian Civil War broke out, during which the Druze suffered persecution at the hands of Islamist extremists, especially extreme Sunnis: Jihadist and extremist Islamist organizations, such as forces affiliated with Al-Qaeda and extremist Sunni militia organizations that operated in the Druze areas of southern Syria.

¹ <https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/f239747af17c5910/Article-5f94a8065669691026.htm>

About three months after Assad's regime fell to al-Jolani's forces, clashes erupted in southern Syria between his forces and the Druze operations room, which was supported by Israel. As a result, the Druze community in Syria requested Israel to "assist the community and prevent the destruction of the Druze community in Syria." It should be noted that there is a large Druze community in Israel, and this is a significant factor that influences Israel's decision-making in the Druze context in Syria. Following an Israeli situation assessment, it was decided to provide humanitarian and medical aid to the Druze and to protect the community from aggression by the Syrian regime. Additionally, Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu and Israeli minister of defense, Yisrael Katz sent a sharp message to the al-Jolani regime: "We will not allow any danger to the Druze community"². Also, Israeli Chief of Staff, Eyal Zamir instructed the IDF that "preparations should be made to strike targets of the Syrian regime if the violence against the Druze does not cease".³

The turning point in the escalation against the Druze occurred after a young Druze man was attacked on the road connecting the governorate to Damascus, seriously injured, and abandoned in a remote area. In retaliation, the Druze kidnapped several members of the Bedouin tribes. Al-Julani's regime then sent Syrian military and security forces to the area, deploying troops in the village of al-Mazraa, near As-Suwayda.⁴ Shortly thereafter, on July 13, 2025, the Druze in As-Suwayda area, were brutally attacked in a coordinated effort by al-Julani's forces, Bedouin tribes and radical militias affiliated with ISIS.⁵

According to data reported by the "We Are Brothers" association, established after the Druze massacre on the initiative of Shiri Fein Grossman, a former senior National Security Council official, entire villages were wiped out, more than 2000 were killed, over 70 were kidnapped, thousands were injured, and As-Suwayda remains under siege without access to life-saving medical treatment, water, electricity, or communication.⁶ Women, children, elderly, and men were massacred solely because they are Druze.⁷

The Syrian regime views the Druze with great suspicion due to their unique religious identity and social autonomy, which sets them apart from the majority Sunni population. In addition, the figure of al-Julani, an extremist affiliated with al-Qaeda, continues the tradition of persecution and violence against the Druze. Massacres and attacks against Druze communities are used both to punish opponents and to strengthen the regime's control over strategic areas, including southern Syria.

Phone calls, videos, and recordings sent in real time from Druze family members in Syria to their families in Israel have revealed horrific events referred to as "the Druze October 7", aimed at turning Syria into an extreme Sunni state. These include graphic and harsh descriptions of the rape of young girls in front of their parents' eyes, torture, executions in hospitals including medical staff, mass executions sometimes of 35 men from the same family, piles of bodies, some unidentifiable, desecration of religious symbols, and hundreds of dead and missing. Behind the

² <https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/f239747af17c5910/Article-5f94a8065669691026.htm>

³ <https://www.c14.co.il/article/1201963>

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZxMc_8Qejg

⁵ <https://www.maariv.co.il/journalists/opinions/article-1215369>

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/together4druze/videos/1271008074575276>

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/together4druze>

attacks stand extreme Sunni militias identified with Al-Qaeda ideology, operating with the intention to take control of the area and annihilate the Druze minority living there.

Salafi ideology, as embraced by al-Qaeda, is an extremist interpretation of Islam that seeks to return to what its followers consider the pure practices of the early Muslim community (the Salaf). It emphasizes strict adherence to Sharia law, rejects modernist or secular influences, and often justifies violent jihad against those perceived as apostates or enemies of Islam. Al-Qaeda uses this ideology to legitimize attacks on governments, civilians, and groups they view as threats to their vision of an Islamic state.

One of the many pieces of evidence that these are murderous attacks motivated by extreme religious hatred are the images showing Druze men and religious leaders having their beards forcibly shaved:



Al-Jolani affiliated militias shaving Druze mustaches and beards^{8 9}

While al-Jolani's regime claims moderation and a change in its extremist ideological path, it permits atrocities and ethnic cleansing on religious grounds, causing severe violations of human rights. These harsh events were carried out similarly by Hamas in the October 7, 2023 massacre. The serious acts committed against the Druze in Syria are not disconnected from the massacre committed in Israel in October by Hamas. In fact, Hamas' roots lie in extremist Sunni ideologies, in a way reminiscent of the atrocities documented in Syria.

⁸ <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3765657>

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https://www.instagram.com/reel/DMJ4Rh6qRD5/?igsh=a3V4eTM1N2Zkcm1w&fbclid=IwY2xjawMHFeFleHRuA2FibQIxMQABHvmjJIG5OfwEaO0CxGcc8rf2pNDgB91NWruuN03JJnMzYMYL5NVpqYKcwy7v_aem_D00n5wgkxN4JAGcJ7v2L3Q

The human rights violations in Syria, at times depicted as domestic sectarian rifts, increasingly appear to lie upon religious sediments that threatens to target any opponents to the extreme Sunni ideology.

This ideology, rooted in Salafi jihadist thought, promotes violent expansion and targets individuals who do not adhere to it as part of a broader global struggle. It seeks not only to impose strict religious and social norms locally but also to extend its influence internationally through transnational networks, propaganda, and recruitment of foreign fighters. By framing its actions as a global religious war, it aims to destabilize regions, intimidate governments and populations, and challenge the international order wherever it can gain a foothold.

Despite being a Shi'ite country, Iran has proven that when strategic interest demands it, it can overcome ideological barriers and form alliances with extreme Sunni groups such as Hamas.

The shared interest of Iran and Hamas, despite the differences between their sects (Iran being Shi'ite and Hamas Sunni), is the destruction of the State of Israel. This common interest has forged a strategic alliance that transcends sectarian divides, allowing Iran to project influence in the Palestinian arena and Hamas to receive financial, military, and logistical support. Iran provides Hamas with roughly \$30 million each month - about \$360 million annually - a budget that was increased after Operation *Guardian of the Walls* to enable Hamas to “upgrade its capabilities.” This marks a rise from the previous annual allocation of \$300 million.¹⁰ Their cooperation illustrates how pragmatic objectives can override ideological differences, creating a powerful axis capable of challenging regional stability and security.

Hamas, whose origin and support are rooted in the Sunni ideology, has received training, funding, and arms from Iran that prepared it for attacks against Israel, demonstrating Tehran's strategic flexibility. In the weeks following Assad's regime collapse, Tehran even tried to establish ties with the new regime and renew its representation in Damascus. In January 2025, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi appointed his special envoy to the Middle East, Mohammad-Reza Shibani, as his special representative for Syria. In the announcement of the appointment, Araghchi emphasized that Iran would normalize its relations with any governing system based on the will of the Syrian people, mutual interests, and international law.¹¹

Between Erdogan and al-Jolani: The Kurdish Struggle in Syria

The issue of ethnic and religious conflicts in Syria requires an overview of the Kurds, who constitute approximately 10% of the population and are primarily concentrated in the northern regions of the country, including Afrin, Jazira, and Kobane. In addition, significant Kurdish communities are present in urban areas such as the Rukneddine district of Damascus and the city

¹⁰ <https://idsf.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Nuclear-Iran-1.pdf>

¹¹ <https://humanities.tau.ac.il/ZmanIranNo86>

of Aleppo. The majority of Syrian Kurds are of Turkish-Kurdish origin, having migrated across the border during the 20th century to escape political repression in Turkey.^{12 13}

The Syrian civil war and the Turkish incursions

Following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, several Kurdish-majority areas, including al-Hasakah, Kobane (Ayn al-Arab), and Afrin, were gradually incorporated into the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria, initially known as Rojava and then as DAANES (Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria).

These regions benefited from a strategically advantageous position that enabled Kurdish forces to capitalize on the power vacuum left by the gradual withdrawal of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces (SAAF). As the conflict progressed, intensified clashes with the jihadist faction Jabhat al-Nusra (renamed Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham in 2017) compelled the SAAF to redirect its focus toward the defense of major urban centers. Consequently, many Kurdish-majority areas in the north and northeast were retrieved with minimal resistance. In this context, Kurdish groups were able to establish an autonomous territorial entity along the Syrian Turkish border with relatively limited military engagement.

As the Syrian government forces retreated from certain territories, Kurdish forces affiliated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a group ideologically aligned with the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), swiftly mobilized and formed the People's Protection Units (YPG). These armed militias assumed control of predominantly Kurdish towns and villages.

The PKK, based in the mountainous Kurdish-majority regions of Turkey, north-eastern Syria and northern Iraq, is designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the US and the EU. Ankara considered the Syrian Kurdish groups an extension of the PKK and a direct threat to its territorial integrity, and thus began preparing a large-scale attack.

As the expansion of the DAANES increased, in August 2016 Erdogan ordered operation "Euphrate's Shield", carried out by the Turkish armed forces with the backing of the Free Syrian Army, which lasted 7 months and resulted in the conquest of over 2,000 square kilometers of territory along the Syrian Turkish border.

In January 2018, Ankara launched another military offensive, named operation "Olive Branch", to capture Afrin and expel the Kurds, replacing them with Turkmen populations. On March 18, 2018, the city fell, and 150,000 Kurdish civilians fled to Assad-controlled areas.^{14 15}

¹² Fabrice Balanche, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2018

¹³ "Kurds in Syria", (Minority Rights 2018), <https://minorityrights.org/communities/kurds-5/>

¹⁴ Mevlut Cavusoglu, "The meaning of operation Olive Branch", *Foreign Policy*, 5 April 2018; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/05/the-meaning-of-operation-olive-branch/>

¹⁵ Sinan Ulgen and Can Kasapoglu, "Operation Euphrates Shield: Aims and Gains", *Carnegie EIP*, 19 January 2017; <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2017/01/operation-euphrates-shield-aims-and-gains?lang=en>

In October 2023, Turkish forces once again pounded north-eastern Syria, intensifying attacks against Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria and specifically PKK hideouts along the Turkish-Iraqi border.¹⁶

The 2024 regime change and the Islamist threat

Between November and December 2024, the Assad regime's military forces began to rapidly collapse as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa (also known as al-Jolani), advanced swiftly and seized control of Damascus, effectively bringing an end to the regime.

Although Assad appealed for support, Kurdish forces declined to intervene. Concurrently, Russian troops withdrew from their positions in the region and consolidated their presence in military bases around the Latakia region. This represented a notable retrenchment by Russia, given that the Assad regime had long been Moscow's principal ally in the Middle East, with substantial Russian military presence.

In March 2025, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa announced that there would be no armed militias outside the national army, signaling the beginning of efforts to dismantle the Kurdish military autonomy. The following month, Badran Jia Kurd, a DAANES senior official told Reuters that the Kurdish leadership was preparing to formalize the request for a federal system in post-Assad's Syria. For years, Kurdish authorities had avoided the term "federalism", preferring expressions like "democratic decentralization".¹⁷

Alawites in the Crossfire: The Collapse of Assad and al-Jolani's Islamist Surge Threaten Syria's Alawites Minority

The fall of Bashar al-Assad and the rise of Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, once known as Ahmad al-Sharaa and a former al-Qaeda affiliate - at the head of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has dramatically reshaped Syria's landscape. As the new authorities cement power, the specter of Islamic governance looms large over the country's minorities, most notably the Alawites, who for decades formed the regime's backbone. This new "Islamic threat" is not merely rhetorical, it is shaping the daily realities of Syrian society, politics, and security.

The HTS, under al-Jolani's leadership, built its power base in Idlib and, following Assad's ouster, swept through cities with surprising speed, precipitating the collapse of key institutions. Although al-Jolani has publicly declared his intention to establish a government based on "institutions and people's councils" rather than autocracy, the HTS regime's Sharia-focused policies - and its deeply

¹⁶ Samer al-Ahmed; Mohammed Hassan, "Turkish escalation in northeastern Syria amid changes in military strategy". *Middle East Institute*, 11 October 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkish-escalation-northeastern-syria-amid-changes-military-strategy>

¹⁷ Orhan Qereman, "Kurds say they will push for federal system in post-Assad Syria", *Reuters*, 10 April 2025; <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kurds-push-federal-system-post-assad-syria-2025-04-10/>

rooted jihadist ideology are a source of existential fear for the Alawite community. The establishment of the Syrian Salvation Government, a political-administrative wing that governs alongside a religious council, embeds Islamic law at the center of policymaking, with significant implications for minority groups.

For Syria's Alawites, these developments evoke both historical memory and immediate violence. This is a community whose very survival was intertwined with the Assad dynasty: as the regime crumbled, so too did the Alawites' sense of security. In recent months, waves of targeted abductions, reprisal killings, and mob violence have ravaged coastal Alawite towns such as Jableh and villages in Latakia and Tartous. Documented incidents include armed raids by groups in HTS uniforms, execution of Alawite civilians, and public statements by appointed officials endorsing exclusionary interpretations of Islamic law - sometimes citing religious justification for barring women from public life or encouraging violence against "infidels".



Al_Jolani forces raids in Latakia and Tartous, March 2025¹⁸

Although Jolani periodically assures the international community and domestic audiences of minority protection and the need for reconciliation, these claims are undermined by reports of “de-Alawitization” - a systematic campaign to remove perceived regime loyalists from positions of influence under the guise of de-Baathification. The underlying reality is stark: the HTS regime's jihadist heritage casts all members of the community as complicit in the previous government's crimes, regardless of their actual involvement.

Beyond Syria: The Islamic threat on the region

The risk is not confined to Syria's borders. HTS's dramatic ascent and the imposition of its Islamist vision have provoked alarm across the region. Israel, for instance, has responded to the perceived threat of a jihadist state on its frontier with hundreds of intensified airstrikes and a deepened military presence in southern Syria, fearing both spillover instability and direct confrontation with

¹⁸ Source: https://t.me/daraa24_org

a regime led by an ex-al-Qaeda figure. Iran and Hezbollah, already bruised by setbacks in Syria, are recalibrating their posture, wary of a state that may become a haven for transnational jihadists and a launchpad for regional violence. Even the UN and Western governments remain deeply concerned about the prospects for renewed mass atrocities, the unraveling of the fragile, post-Assad order, and the emergence of new sanctuaries for global terrorism.

The broader Islamic threat posed by the al-Jolani regime thus has several dimensions. Domestically, it means an existential crisis for minorities like the Alawites, possibly triggering a lasting sectarian unraveling of Syrian society and mass refugee flows; regionally, it raises the risk of open conflict with Israel, Turkish intervention, and the proliferation of radical groups across borders; internationally, it creates the possibility of a new Syria functioning as a base for terrorist operations, much as Afghanistan under the Taliban once did. In the short term, any hopes for stability are undermined by persistent violence, the consolidation of hardline governance, and the persistence of sectarian fault lines - proof that the collapse of Assad has not delivered peace, but rather opened the door to new and unpredictable dangers for Syria and the entire Middle East.

In conclusion, the Islamic rule of the al-Jolani regime represents a dual threat: for Syria's Alawites, it is an existential danger: of displacement, violence, and systemic exclusion, and for the Middle East, it risks exporting instability and fueling a climate of religious radicalism with far-reaching consequences. If left unchecked, these dynamics may well reshape the region's political and security order for years to come.



Operations carried out by the Internal Security Division and Syrian Ministry of Defense forces around the port in the city of Tartus. Some of the members are wearing patches with the ISIS flag and logo¹⁹

¹⁹ Source: https://t.me/daraa24_org