

**Statement for the Record at a Hearing before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on
“Syria at a Crossroads: U.S. Policy Challenges Post-Assad”**

Submitted by
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Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Meeks, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement today on behalf of the Foundation for the Development of Western Syria, a nongovernmental organization dedicated to safeguarding minority rights and promoting interfaith cooperation in Syria, for whom I serve as U.S. counsel.¹ This hearing comes at a pivotal moment in Middle Eastern history. The fall of the Assad regime has ended decades of brutal autocracy, but it has also unmasked deep-seated sectarian fractures that now threaten to consume the Syrian state.

Regional stability and the advancement of human rights in the eastern Mediterranean region, also known as “the Levant,” depend entirely on what happens next in Damascus. As the United States evaluates its policy toward the Interim Government of Ahmed al-Sharaa, this Committee must exercise rigorous oversight. We cannot allow the vacuum left by one dictator to be filled by a new era of sectarian ethnic cleansing. Vigilance is required to ensure that Syria’s transition does not come at the cost of its minority populations, whose presence is the only true bulwark against a mono-cultural, extremist state.

The Syrian Mosaic: A Heritage at Risk

Syria is not merely a political entity; it is a rich mosaic of cultures, ethnicities, and religions that have coexisted for millennia. It is the cradle of early Christianity – where the Apostle Paul experienced his conversion on the Road to Damascus and where the first Christian communities flourished, as recounted in the Bible (*Acts* 9:1-19).² Today, Syria remains home to the world’s largest Druze community and a vibrant, if embattled, Alawite minority population. We must also acknowledge the Kurds, whose extraordinary valor in the vanguard against ISIS – serving as America’s indispensable partner on the ground – was decisive in shattering the territorial caliphate of the Islamic State. Their sacrifice earned them a seat at the table of Syria’s future – a seat that is currently being pulled out from under them.

The Fraying Fabric of Multiculturalism

Unfortunately, this Syrian multicultural fabric is in jeopardy. Under the Assad regime, the Christian population was decimated, falling from approximately 1.5 million in 2011 to an

¹ Disseminated by Tiger Hill Partners, a registered foreign agent, on behalf of the Foundation for the Development of Western Syria through Joseph E. Schmitz PLLC. More information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

² Syria holds a pivotal place in early Christian history as one of the first regions beyond Judea to host organized Christian communities. Historical sources describe Syria – particularly Antioch and Damascus – as a “cradle of Christianity” due to its role in the faith’s early expansion, theological development, and missionary outreach.

estimated 500,000 to 700,000 today.³ While Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa makes bold promises of “equal citizenship” in meetings with Western diplomats, the reality on the ground tells a darker story. Over the last 12 months, his interim government and its associated militias have, to be charitable, turned a blind eye, and at worst, presided over a systematic campaign of violence against minorities. Below is a representative timeline, documented by independent media sources and entities such as the United Nations and UK Parliament, of some of the violence committed against minorities groups over the past year.

Timeline of Minority Targeting (February 2025 – January 2026)

1. **February 28, 2025:** Clashes erupt between transitional government forces and Druze factions in Rif Dimashq, signaling the start of a protracted insurgency against the new central authority.⁴
2. **March 6–10, 2025:** In the most brutal escalation to date, over 1,500 Alawites—predominantly civilians—are massacred in Latakia and Tartus. UN investigators found that while the violence was sparked by an arrest operation, it devolved into systematic "revenge attacks" by government-aligned fighters.⁵
3. **March 12, 2025:** The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that 52 Alawite individuals were executed in the towns of Al-Mukhtariya and Al-Shir by security forces over a 48-hour period.⁶
4. **April 29, 2025:** Sectarian violence in a Damascus suburb populated by Druze leaves at least 100 dead, including security forces and civilians, following accusations of “blasphemy” against Druze scholars.⁷
5. **June 22, 2025:** A suicide bombing at the Mar Elias Christian Church in Damascus kills 25 worshippers. While the government blamed ISIS, critics point to the security vacuum created by al-Sharaa’s inability or unwillingness to protect Christian sites.⁸

³ See Sarah Dadouch, *For Syria’s Christians, Christmas Is a Time to Grapple With Hope and Fear*, Wash. Post (Dec. 25, 2024).

⁴ See House of Commons Library, *Syria One Year After Assad: Religious Minorities* (Dec. 11, 2025), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10429>.

⁵ See U.N. Human Rights Council, *Violations Against Civilians in the Coastal and Western-Central Regions of the Syrian Arab Republic* (January–March 2025), U.N. Doc. A/HRC/59/CRP.4 (Aug. 14, 2025), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/a-hrc-59-crp4-en.pdf>; see also Press Release, OHCHR, *UN Syria Commission Finds March Coastal Violence Was Widespread and Systematic: Outlines Urgent Steps to Prevent Future Violations and Restore Public Confidence* (Aug. 14, 2025), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/08/un-syria-commission-finds-march-coastal-violence-was-widespread-and>; see also House of Commons Library, *Syria One Year After Assad: Religious Minorities* (Dec. 11, 2025), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10429>.

⁶ See Hwaida Saad, *Syria Violence Marked by Sectarian and Revenge Killings*, *War Monitor Says*, N.Y. Times (Mar. 12, 2025), <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/12/world/europe/syria-alawite-killings-human-rights.html>.

⁷ See Ben Hubbard, *What to Know About Syria’s Minorities and Sectarian Violence*, N.Y. Times (June 3, 2025), <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/01/world/middleeast/syria-druze-alawites-kurds.html>.

⁸ See *Suicide Bombing at Damascus Church Kills 25, Syrian Authorities Say*, BBC News (June 22, 2025); see also *Syrian Church Bombing Comes Amid Growing Threat from Islamic State*, International Christian Concern (June 25, 2025), <https://www.persecution.org/2025/06/25/syrian-church-bombing-comes-amid-growing-threat-from-islamic-state/>.

6. **July 13, 2025:** Massive clashes break out in Suwayda between Druze and Bedouin tribes. UN experts report that interim government forces aided the Bedouin militias in attacks that killed over 1,000 people.⁹
7. **July 14, 2025:** Renewed clashes in Najran and Al Thaala result in the displacement of thousands of Druze civilians, prompting an eventual Israeli intervention to protect the border and its Druze kin.¹⁰
8. **September 3, 2025:** Archpriest Michel Naaman of the Syriac Catholic Cathedral in Homs is brutally assaulted and robbed by masked men, part of what the Church describes as a “troubling pattern of insecurity hitting Christian communities.”¹¹
9. **December 31, 2025:** A suicide bomber detonates near a Christian church in Aleppo on New Year’s Eve, killing one security officer and injuring others.¹²
10. **January 6, 2026:** The Syrian transitional government launches a military offensive to capture the Kurdish-inhabited Sheikh Maqsood neighborhood of Aleppo, leading to heavy civilian casualties.¹³
11. **January 13, 2026:** Syrian government and Turkish-backed forces launch a wider offensive against the Kurdish-led SDF in northern Syria, capturing strategic oil fields and displacing approximately 150,000 people.¹⁴

The timeline above illustrates a disturbing pattern: over the past year, the Interim Government has repeatedly failed to protect minority communities, often appearing complicit in or tolerant of sectarian violence that has claimed thousands of lives among Druze, Christians, Alawites, Kurds, and others. Far from fostering the inclusive transition promised by President al-Sharaa, these events reveal a deeper systemic shift toward exclusionary and retributive practices that undermine any genuine reconciliation.¹⁵ Those who carried out bombings and targeted civilians

⁹ See *Almost 600 Killed in South Syria Violence, Monitoring Group Says*, BBC News (July 17, 2025), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9395qwzgd0>; see also Press Release, OHCHR, Syria: UN experts alarmed by attacks on Druze communities, including sexual violence against women and girls (Aug. 21, 2025), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/08/syria-un-experts-alarmed-attacks-druze-communities-including-sexual-violence>; see also Syrian Network for Human Rights, *The Death of 1,013 Syrians – Civilians and Militants – Were Recorded as A Result of the Events in Suwayda Governorate* (Aug. 1, 2025), <https://snhr.org/blog/2025/08/01/the-death-of-89-civilians-including-13-children-and-10-women-and-one-death-due-to-torture-recorded-july-2025-in-syria/>.

¹⁰ See *Israel Bombs Syrian Forces Entering Druze City After Sectarian Clashes*, BBC News (July 15, 2025), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c89e3j4e9110>.

¹¹ *Security Breakdown in Syria: Syriac Catholic Archpriest Attacked*, EWTN News (Sept. 5, 2025), <https://www.ewtnnews.com/world/us/security-breakdown-in-syria-syriac-catholic-archpriest-attacked>.

¹² See *Suicide Bomber in Syria Kills Security Officer in New Year’s Eve Attack*, N.Y. Times (Dec. 31, 2025), <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/31/world/middleeast/aleppo-syria-suicide-bomber-new-years-eve.html>.

¹³ See *Thousands Flee Clashes Between Syrian Government and Kurdish Fighters in Aleppo*, BBC News (Jan. 7, 2026), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn0y1pnq00qo>.

¹⁴ See *Rapid Rollback of Kurdish-Led Forces Reshapes Sharaa’s Syria*, BBC News (Jan. 22, 2026), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c931110d40qo>.

¹⁵ See Int’l Centre for Counter-Terrorism, *Syria Embarks on a Transitional Justice Project* (Sept. 1, 2025), <https://icct.nl/publication/syria-embarks-transitional-justice-project> (describing the National Commission for Transitional Justice’s mandate as limited to Assad-era crimes, excluding violations by HTS and other groups, rendering efforts selective rather than comprehensive); see also Middle East Forum, *The Year in Review: Renewed Syrian Authoritarianism Masquerades as Transition* (Dec. 26, 2025), <https://www.meforum.org/mef-observer/the-year-in-review-renewed-syrian-authoritarianism-masquerades-as-transition> (noting transitional justice efforts have yielded little substance and serve as tools for political retribution focused solely on Assad crimes).

over the past 14 years are now occupying key security and military positions.¹⁶ For example, Muhammad al-Jassem Abu Amsha – long sanctioned by the United States and the European Union for serious human rights abuses, including abductions, extortion, and torture – is one such figure, having been promoted to command significant forces despite these designations.¹⁷ Meanwhile, prisons and detention centers are again overflowing, with widespread reports of arbitrary detentions targeting thousands of Alawites and Christians, echoing the repressive practices of the Assad era and underscoring a troubling continuity in authoritarian tactics.¹⁸

Even more alarming, the interim president's administration has summarily dismissed thousands of Syrians from government and security positions – including many Alawites, Christians, Druze, and more recently Kurds – replacing them with personnel drawn from Sunni and loyalist backgrounds in a process that appears to favor sectarian allegiance and political reliability over merit or competence.¹⁹ Nor can we ignore the deeply disturbing reports of Alawite women and girls kidnapped from the Syrian coast, with credible allegations that some have been trafficked and subjected to sexual violence or sold into slavery in areas like Idlib.²⁰

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, “Are you Alawi?”: *Identity-Based Killings During Syria's Transition* (Sept. 23, 2025), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/09/23/are-you-alawi/identity-based-killings-during-syrias-transition> (reporting on the integration of dozens of armed factions – many with histories of abuses – into the Ministry of Defense following the collapse of the Assad government).

¹⁷ See U.S. Dep't of the Treasury, Press Release, *Treasury Sanctions Two Syria-Based Militias Responsible for Serious Human Rights Abuses in Northern Syria* (Aug. 17, 2023), <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1699> (sanctioning Mohammad Hussein al-Jasim, aka Abu Amsha, for abuses including abduction and extortion); see also France 24, *EU Sanctions Syrian Militia Groups over Ethnic Violence Targeting Alawites* (May 28, 2025), <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20250528-eu-sanctions-syrian-militia-groups-ethnic-violence-targeting-alawites> (EU sanctions on Abu Amsha and his brigade for involvement in killings and abuses against Alawites in 2025, despite his continued prominence).

¹⁸ See Reuters, *Syrians Emptied Assad's Prisons. They're Filling Up Again, and Abuse Is Rife* (Dec. 22, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/investigations/syrians-emptied-assads-prisons-theyre-filling-up-again-abuse-is-rife-2025-12-22/> (documenting reopened prisons crowded with detainees, including hundreds to thousands of Alawites post-March 2025 violence, held without charges amid reports of abuse); see also Times of Israel, *A Year Post-Assad, Syrian Jails Are Again Filling Up, with Widespread Accounts of Abuse* (Dec. 22, 2025), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-year-post-assad-syrian-jails-are-again-filling-up-with-widespread-accounts-of-abuse> (noting mass detentions of Alawites and others, reviving Assad-era patterns).

¹⁹ See Washington Inst. for Near E. Pol'y, *Syria's Post-Baath Mass Dismissals: Transitional Justice or Catalyst for Division?* (Oct. 10, 2025), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrias-post-baath-mass-dismissals-transitional-justice-or-catalyst-division> (detailing sweeping purges disproportionately affecting Alawites and others tied to the former regime, risking deepened sectarian divisions); see also EU Agency for Asylum, *Country Guidance: Syria – Comprehensive Update 2025* (Dec. 2025), https://www.euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2025-12/Country_Guidance_Syria-Comprehensive_update_2025.pdf (describing Transitional Government dominance by Sunni Arabs in leadership roles, with restructuring prioritizing new loyalists and impacting minority-heavy sectors).

²⁰ See *Kidnapped, Abused: Reports of Missing Alawite Women in Syria*, DW (Sept. 22, 2024), <https://www.dw.com/en/kidnapped-abused-reports-of-missing-alawite-women-in-syria/a-73217254> (reporting on the systematic disappearance of Alawite women traveling near the Syrian coast); *'She's Not Coming Back': Alawite Women Snatched from Streets of Syria*, Reuters (June 27, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/shes-not-coming-back-alawite-women-snatched-streets-syria-2025-06-27/> (providing journalistic verification of widespread sexual violence and abductions); see also *Syria's Stolen Daughters: The HTS Campaign to Enslave Alawite Women*, The Cradle (Aug. 15, 2024), <https://thecradle.co/articles/syrias-stolen-daughters-the-hts-campaign-to-enslave-alawite-women> (detailing the transport of victims to Idlib and specific allegations of trafficking and slavery).

Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers

As Congress conducts oversight of U.S. policy toward post-Assad Syria, policymakers should insist on the following concrete commitments from the al-Sharaa regime in order to ensure the protection of minorities and security and stability of the country:

1. **Recognition and Security:** The al-Sharaa regime must publicly recognize the historical presence of Syria's minority populations and commit that law enforcement in their regions include officers drawn directly from those same communities.
2. **Removal of Foreign Jihadist Elements:** al-Sharaa must declare that all foreign jihadist fighters and militias will be withdrawn from Syria's coastal ports and territories.
3. **Regional Representation:** Minority populations must have political representation in Damascus based on regional constituencies to ensure inclusive reconstruction.
4. **Verification Mechanisms:** The United States must insist on clear mechanisms, subject to monitoring by independent observers, to ensure compliance with these commitments.

Conclusion

U.S. policy must remain clear: regional stability and the protection of minorities are not mutually exclusive; they are codependent. A Syria that allows the ethnic cleansing of Alawites, the persecution of Christians, the disenfranchisement of Druze, or the military subjugation of Kurds will never be stable. Ensuring the safety, security, and freedom of religion for all groups is the only way to build the national cohesion necessary for an inclusive state.

Thank you.