

# Dynamics of sectarian conflict in post-Assad Syria

## Will civil war occur?



By **Mohammad-Reza Babaei**  
Researcher on Middle Eastern affairs

### OPINION

The Levant region has, for centuries, been transformed into an epicenter of sectarian disputes. Although this region experienced a brief interval of stability and social cohesion during certain junctures of history, in most political crossroads, sectarian tensions were effectively reproduced and assumed novel configurations. The origins of these tensions and religious confrontations consist of an ensemble of interwoven factors and elements. Therefore, in order to comprehend the essence of these disputes, apprehending the entanglements of demography and geopolitics is deemed indispensable. The geopolitical position of the Levant has, since antiquity, transformed this region into a fulcrum of ideologies and doctrines in which sects and denominations encounter one another at a singular point of convergence. As indicated, this blessing or affliction is predominantly a consequence of the geopolitical position of the Levant. The absence of a central authority in this region was experienced for centuries, and scarcely did any political power succeed in consolidating and stabilizing its authority over this realm. The geographical configuration of the Levant territory — encompassing impassable mountains, desert expanses, and flat plains in a single continuum — constituted one of the catalytic elements in the formation of quasi-anarchies and centrifugal polities.

This condition and geopolitical capacity prepared the political and social groundwork for the expansion of the influence of myriad religious sects in the political sphere of this region. Among these religious sects, the role of the Druze and the Alawites is particularly accentuated throughout the historical evolution of Syria. Although the origin and cradle of the Nusayri doctrine (attributed to Muhammad ibn Nusayr, whose adherents were later designated as Alawites) was in Kufa, and the Druze doctrine emerged in Cairo during the era of al-Mustansir Billah of the Fatimid dynasty, the geopolitics of the Levant served as an impregnable bastion safeguarding them against political adversaries and guaranteeing their survival.

### Incomplete transfiguration of Syrian nation-state

During the First World War, the Hijaz became the point of departure for a major Arab uprising against the Ottomans. This uprising was executed with the support of the Allied forces and under the leadership of Sharif Hussein and his sons. The primary objective of this armed uprising, at first instance, was the establishment of an independent Arab emirate; however, due to the conflict of interests between France and Britain concerning the future of the region in the post-World War I era, this objective was reduced to the formation of the so-called Greater Syria (the present-day Syria and Lebanon), and eventually Faisal bin Hussein governed this territory for a brief period.

The French, who were far from content with the Sykes-Picot Agreement with Britain, ultimately attacked Syria and placed this country under their protectorate

for more than two decades. The presence of France in the Levant region during the 1920s to 1940s influenced the form and demographic structure of Syria and its impact on the future political system of this country.

During this period, each religious group, in order to attain greater political and socio-cultural autonomy, inclined toward one of the regional or international actors. The Christians of the Levant had, since the 18th century, been regarded as one of France's natural allies in this region. In addition to them, a segment of the Sunni social elites of Syria considered the period of French mandate over their country as a set of lessons for practicing democracy and civil governance. Shukri al-Quwatli stood at the apex of these elites, and after the independence of Syria, he became the first president of this country. The proximity of Sunni elites to the French was largely oriented toward preserving the territorial integrity of Syria and creating a political balance against the Alawites and the Druze.

The relationship between the Alawites of the Syrian coast and France was de facto. On one hand, the Alawites were discontent with the French due to the cession of the Alawite-inhabited region of Iskenderun to Turkey in 1939, for this action transformed the demographic balance of Syria to the detriment of this religious minority. On the other hand, the absorption of numerous Alawite youth into the local army under French supervision propelled them from the margins of Syrian society toward its center and generated a positive impact on their economic status. The prominent presence of the Alawite minority in the local army during the mandate period assisted them in preserving their role and standing in Syrian military institutions after the French departure and ultimately enabled them to seize power for more than five decades through a military coup.

The situation regarding the Druze is somewhat different. The relationship between this religious minority and the French is almost irreconcilable. These hostilities date back to the mid-18th century, when religious wars erupted between the Druze community and the Maronite Christians. Ultimately, Paris's diplomatic initiatives resolved the conditions to the advantage of the Christians. This development caused the Druze during World War I and even thereafter to incline more toward Britain and its traditional ally in the region, Jordan. It is noteworthy

that in 1925, the Druze, under the leadership of Sultan Pasha al-At-rash, initiated a major uprising against the French, and the flames of this uprising spread to other regions of Syria.

The relations shaped by religious inclinations and tendencies, and the reduction of nationalism to sub-national orientations in which the role of regional and international actors was more or less evident, constituted the principal cause of the failure of nation-state building in Syria and brought this country to the condition that we witness today.

### Syria from independence to post-Ba'ath transition

The independence of Syria never culminated in national cohesion; on the contrary, sectarian disputes in each period were reproduced in new forms and repeatedly propelled Syria toward civil war. However, after Hafez al-Assad's rise to power, the authoritarianism imposed upon society by the military preserved these sectarian disputes like embers beneath ashes for years. It should not remain unmentioned that the wars between Arabs and Israel, on one hand, and the civil war in Lebanon, on the other, exerted a significant influence in silencing these tensions.

The era of Hafez al-Assad provided a suitable substratum for religious minorities, including the Alawites and the Druze. The ascent of an Alawite president created an opportunity for many Alawites to obtain a greater share of power distribution compared with the past. This principle was equally applicable to the Druze. Before Hafez al-Assad's rise to power, the Druze community was consistently suspected of collaboration and alignment with Israel and Jordan. However, during Assad's era, they too acquired a larger share of power relative to the past.

The event known as the Arab Spring, which began in the final days of 2010 in Tunisia, soon affected Syria. The popular protests in Syria, which began on March 18, 2011, within five months transformed into one of the bloodiest civil wars in the contemporary history of the region. This civil war, whose objective was the overthrow of Assad's government, propelled Syria into a new phase of sectarian disputes.

Merely one year into this war, the discourse of transnational jihadism replaced the dominant secular nationalist discourse; the cause of this development was the rise and influence of Salafi groups and the



▲ Demonstrators gather at the al-Azhari Square in Latakia, Syria, on November 25, 2025.  
● AFP



The relations shaped by religious inclinations and tendencies, and the reduction of nationalism to sub-national orientations in which the role of regional and international actors was more or less evident, constituted the principal cause of the failure of nation-state building in Syria and brought this country to the condition that we witness today.

gradual diminution of the role of moderate and secular armed groups. The empowerment of Islamist groups — and foremost among them the group known as the Islamic State (Daesh or ISIS) — rendered the international community more cautious than before regarding any political transition in the region. This was due to the prevailing security concern that a power vacuum might create the groundwork for the rise and emergence of fundamentalist groups.

The entry of the counter-terrorism coalition led by the United States and the military intervention of Russia gradually shifted the balance to the advantage of the central government, and this transformation compelled several factions and groups with radical Islamist antecedents to undergo a transfiguration. A transfiguration through which more pragmatic and simultaneously more pluralistic interpretations of political Islam were presented in order to exhibit a semblance of alignment with the international community. Some maintain that these ideological shifts constitute a political tactic for interacting with actors in the international political arena primarily.

The Russian military attack against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and the October 7, 2023, incident in Gaza were two major developments that played crucial roles in the revision of the policies of the United States and the West toward the Middle East. Although the Syrian government had effectively lost a considerable portion of its economic capacities and political power during the Syrian civil war, it nevertheless endeavored to gradually regain its international standing and initiate new relations with the Arab states of the region and Turkey.

In Idlib as well, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani (Ahmad al-Sharaa), through the so-called Salvation Government, administered the territories under his control in northwestern Syria and established the institutions that a government requires in these areas. The period from March 2020 to November 27, 2024, constituted an opportunity for Ahmad al-Sharaa to demonstrate his model and style of governance to the international community and to instill in them the impression that he was capable of playing a constructive role during the transition era.

Although abundant doubts and skepticism regarding al-Sharaa's intentions persisted in Washington, the war in Ukraine and the October 7 incident compelled the United States and the West to

endeavor to weaken the Axis of Resistance and challenge Russia's hegemony in the region. The Israeli military attack against Hezbollah in Lebanon ultimately prepared the prelude for the resumption of military operations by the armed opposition and ultimately the downfall of Assad. Nearly one year has passed since the collapse of Assad's government, but this country continues to traverse part of its turbulent transition, and recent developments have demonstrated that Syria remains considerably distant from desirable governance. The transition era not only failed to ameliorate the political condition of this country but also reproduced a new wave of sectarian violence that continues to claim victims. The interim cabinet ruling Syria is, in truth, a rushed response or expedient solution intended to weaken the Iranian and Russian axis. Although the intensification of sectarian disputes may in the not-too-distant future ignite the flames of a new civil war or impair the international image of the new rulers of Damascus and ultimately overthrow them, American decision-makers still lack a defined outlook regarding post-transition Syria.

The Damascus government, in practice, does not control the eastern and northeastern regions of the country, which contain more than two-thirds of Syria's oil and gas. The central government's dominance and influence in the south are challenged by the Druze, local armed groups, and Israeli military forces. In the Syrian coast as well, Alawite protests against the Damascus government and intermittent armed clashes by militant cells against state forces persist.

The issue of minorities constitutes a strategic asset for Israel and the United States against Ahmad al-Sharaa and will play a pivotal role in future bilateral and multilateral negotiations. However, at present, the issue of minorities functions more as an instrument of pressure against Damascus, compelling it to acquiesce to maximalist demands; for the occurrence of a new civil war in Syria and the intensification of political-security vacuums in this country may challenge the policy of disarming Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq — pursued by Israel and the United States — and transform Syria once again into a substratum for the influence of the Axis of Resistance.

*The article was first published in Persian by the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies.*



▲ Bedouin fighters deploy at Mazraa village, on the outskirts of Suwayda city, Syria, as smoke rises from the clashes between the Bedouin clans and Druze militias on July 18, 2025.  
● GHAIETH ALSAYED/AP