Syria in Transition

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Guilty for being Sunni

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Syria's new government faces growing attacks not for what it does, but for who it is: a Sunni-majority leadership.

Syria ended its first year of liberation with jubilant celebrations in cities governed by the new government. In areas held by the Syrian Democratic Forces or by Hajari's Druze forces, festivities were banned. The country appeared badly split.

The collapse of the old regime ended decades in which power revolved around the Assad family and its Alawite-dominated security institutions. Once the machinery of coercion fell away, the long-suppressed Sunni majority – after an 11-day battle and fourteen years of sacrifice – returned to the political centre stage.

Two narratives quickly took shape. One viewed the new order as a long-overdue correction to historic imbalance and the end of a minority monopoly on power. The other portrayed events as a shift from "minority dictatorship" to "Sunni domination".

The "jihadist background" charge

From the moment Ahmad al-Sharaa arrived in Damascus, critics insisted that his militant past would isolate Syria diplomatically and obstruct the lifting of sanctions. Yet the first year proved otherwise. Most sanctions were removed, Caesar Act sanctions are set to follow, and the country reopened to a broader array of diplomatic engagements and investments. The president undertook twenty-one foreign visits, including a landmark trip to the White House.

Opponents also attempted to resurrect the issue of foreign fighters to stoke fears. But their presence remained limited and restricted largely to military roles. Contrary to the stereotype of the "roving jihadist", most operated within a government-set national framework.

Domestic demonisation

Inside Syria, apprehensions about the new government draw on a mix of fear, damaged interests, and the long echo of regime propaganda targeting religious and sectarian minorities. Conditioned for years to believe their safety depended on Assad's survival, some minority elites now interpret every administrative misstep as proof of a "Sunni revenge agenda".

Simultaneously, networks linked to the former regime have been recycling these fears through sectarian messaging that casts them as protectors of minorities or as "voices of reason" warning of an advancing Sunni tide. Their aim is to recapture political leverage, capitalising on any delay or difficulty in building inclusive institutions which they themselves obstruct.

This demonisation continues despite the president's declared policy of "victory without vengeance", and despite the widely circulated images of Assad's soldiers departing Damascus on 8 December 2024 without a single recorded act of retribution against them.

Arab double standards

Regionally, reactions to Syria's transition are coloured by the anxieties of certain governments. The success of a post-revolutionary administration led by Sunni figures – yet presenting itself firmly as a national rather than sectarian project – is the sort of model some rulers fear might inspire their own populations or embolden their oppositions. This helps explain why parts of the regional media fixate on the religious identities of Syrian leaders rather than their policies, or magnify tensions with minority groups and present them as proof that "Sunni rule is inherently incompatible with coexistence". Local causes of disputes are consistently underplayed.

Western governments have, overall, engaged the Sharaa administration pragmatically and openly. Yet in parts of the Western policy world and media, old reflexes persist: the new authorities are often filtered through the language of Islamist extremism, while debates fixate on minority rights in the abstract, crowding out more concrete discussions of transitional justice, institutional rebuilding, and economic recovery.

When criticism is fair and when it isn't

The new government is not beyond criticism. It faces profound challenges, and not every setback can be attributed to remnants of the old order or irresponsible minority actors. But demonisation begins when Sunni identity becomes a political indictment in its own right, and when the majority is presumed to harbour exclusionary intent before its policies are even laid out and examined.

The problem worsens when isolated failings are generalised to an imagined Sunni monolith, or when analysts ignore the diversity within Sunni society itself: its varied ideologies, social

strata, and local priorities.

Persisting with this line of attack solely because the government is Sunni-majority carries serious consequences. It deepens communal divides, keeps minorities in perpetual fear, and convinces many Sunnis that they are judged for who they are rather than what they do. This creates a fertile soil for reactionary voices claiming that "the world will never accept Sunni leadership in Syria, regardless of its conduct".

Citizenship, not demonisation

Breaking this cycle does not require shielding the government from scrutiny but raising the level of public debate. Citizenship must become the organising principle: evaluate the state by how it treats all Syrians, not being fixated by the sectarian background of those in office. This also means acknowledging that the Assad era is finished and will not return.

Much minority anxiety is anticipatory and is fuelled by decades of regime messaging and unrealistic regional fears, rather than grounded in the new government's actual behaviour. Syria now needs a media discourse that moves beyond sectarian binaries and judges power by institutions and conduct, not by the background of those who hold office.