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In the shadow of change

Since the fall of Assad, there has been an increase in attacks on Syria's Alawite population, hampering a democratic restart

The collapse of the Assad regime has cast uncertainty on the situation of Syria's Alawite population. Since the transfer of power in December 2024, reports of targeted attacks and retaliation against Alawites have been on the increase. This violence is an expression of a deeply entrenched stigmatisation, fuelled for decades by a narrative based on an 'Alawite regime'. Rather than persisting with retaliation and suppression, Syria needs a fresh democratic start that protects and guarantees the rights of all minorities. This is the country's only path to a peaceful, democratic future.

And yet, the vulnerability of the Alawite population, both in Syria and the Middle East, is nothing new. Historically, it is rooted in the rejection of reforms and divergent faiths by orthodox Sunni Islam. It is, therefore, not surprising that many non-Sunni orthodox Muslim groups such as Alawites, Druzes and Yazidis have – in fear of persecution – traditionally settled in remote mountain areas that are difficult to access.

Two central narratives

Since the 1970s, this fear has been reinforced in today's Syria by a narrative propagated by Syrian Islamists. This twisted, widespread narrative is based on two central pillars — one religious and the other political. The first claim is that Alawites are not Muslims. And the second is the suggestion that, under the Assad family, the Alawites were the sole, absolute rulers.

It is true that Alawites were strongly represented in some state institutions, particularly the secret service (al-Mukhabarat). It is also no secret that the regime instrumentalised fear of the Alawites and other minorities to preserve power. And yet, this does not imply that the regime had been composed exclusively of Alawites or other minorities. Instead, it pursued a clientelist approach that was not based on strict

sectarian lines but involved different social groups on the lookout for economic and social gain. This policy of patronage is deeply rooted in socioeconomic developments in Syria in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

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Syrian statehood is a comparatively recent phenomenon, characterised by social and political conflict. Following the end of Ottoman rule in 1918, local elites attempted to establish a stable political order that was, however, interrupted by French colonial rule. France's 'divide and conquer' strategy only served to heighten sectarian friction. The Alawite population was among the most disadvantaged social groups. Many Alawites benefited, however, from free education during French rule and climbed the ranks of state institutions. The rise of Hafez al-Assad from a simple officer to dictator is a prime example of this. Following his seizure of power in the 1970s, the Alawites' position was strengthened in areas of strategic importance — particularly in the security apparatus and to some extent in the army.

Nevertheless, the army was by no means purely Alawite. It came to form a battleground between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood during the Syrian uprising from the mid-1970s until the early 1980s. The Muslim Brotherhood employed anti-Alawite rhetoric to mobilise support and committed targeted attacks on Alawite officers. The narrative of an 'Alawite regime' was further reinforced at the start of the insurrection in 2011. The violence of the regime, as well as the presence of transnational Islamist and Jihadi fighters, led to an escalation of violence in the conflict's early years. Countless ideologically motivated attacks on Alawite villages, as well as massacres of civilians, have been documented (by Human Rights Watch, among others). The regime used these religious tensions to create closer ties to Alawites and other minorities. As a result, the Alawites became caught in the crossfire between a brutal regime and an equally cruel Jihadi threat.

At the start of the protests against the regime in 2011, minorities and the Sunni middle classes took a back seat. The miltarisation of the conflict, however, saw many young people from minorities supporting the regime in its battle against an alliance of rebellious Islamists and transnational Jihadis. This alliance, now known as *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS),

seized power in Damascus following the toppling of the Assad regime in December 2024.

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As a result, many minorities are fearing for their lives. HTS officially promised protection and non-discrimination, repeatedly emphasising that Syria could not afford any violence and that no one should fear revenge. At the grassroots level, however, these promises appear to have barely resonated. Since 8 December, attacks on Alawites are on the rise. Their stigmatisation has continued for decades and still holds sway over Islamists and Jihadis at a grassroots level. Countless reports and photos show armed fighters affronting people in the Syrian coastal region. Journalists are reporting that inhabitants live in constant fear. Since the overthrow of the regime, a military presence has been maintained, with atrocities never far away. Academics, civil servants and prominent religious figures are being abducted or found dead.

The increasing violence reached a climax on 23 January 2025 when an operation was initiated in Homs to persecute the 'remnants of the regime'. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights based in England reported dramatic increases in acts of violence against Alawites, Shiites and Murshids on 25 January. HTS denies these allegations, claiming that they are only isolated cases. Critics, on the other hand, regard this as an attempt to mask the true extent of persecution.

A new democratic beginning is urgently required. Any serious attempt to come to terms with the past should be initiated by a democratic government that guarantees the rule of law. A selective justice that only penalises the deposed regime, allowing crimes committed by HTS to go unpunished, would hinder reconciliation. A free Syria can only emerge if its citizens oppose injustice together and advocate for a future in which law and protection apply to everyone.

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