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Flash Executive Summary Report

GEOIntelligence

Last month, the GEOIntelligence Group reported on the dramatic changes, challenges, and opportunities in Syria (please see Bancroft GEOIntelligence Flash-Executive Summary on Syria and the Economic Implications).

Unfortunately, violence is increasing in Syria, specifically against religious minority groups. As such, this report examines the post-Assad transition in Syria through the lens of the several minorities in Syria, with a deep dive into the plight of the Druze community. The report also explores how the collapse of central authority has exposed select, previously protected minorities under the Assad regime to renewed violence, political exclusion, and forced displacement. While the interim government under President Ahmed al-Sharaa claims to uphold pluralism and equal citizenship, its failure to deliver meaningful protections has deepened sectarian divides and eroded trust among religious and ethnic minorities. In particular, the July 2025 clashes between Druze militias and Bedouin tribes in Suwayda province in Southern Syria underscore the volatility of Syria's fragmented postwar order.

Using the Druze as a case study, this report argues that Syria's promises of national unity ring hollow without structural reforms, decentralized governance, and credible security guarantees. It also considers how external actors – especially Israel – have shaped minority experiences through selective intervention and strategic alliances. By tracing the historical distinctiveness of the Druze and their persistent resistance to centralized rule, the report highlights a broader challenge facing Syria – the failure to reconcile a multi-sectarian society under a credible and inclusive state.

Significant Minority Groups in Syria:

Below is an overview of several minority groups in Syria, especially those that are persecuted.

The Alawites are a sect of Shia Islam whose origins date back to the 9th century. Historically seen as heretical by both Sunni and mainstream Shia authorities, they lived in relative isolation and marginalization for centuries. Their fortunes changed under French colonial rule in the 20th century, when France actively recruited minority groups like the Alawites into the military and bureaucracy. This provided a path to upward mobility, culminating in the rise of Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite army officer who took power in 1970. Under Hafez and later his son Bashar, the Alawites gained outsized control over Syria's military and intelligence institutions, securing their position at the heart of the regime. Though they represent only about 13% of the population, their power fosters deep resentment, making them targets in post-Assad Syria and raising fears of collective punishment.

The **Kurds** are an ethnic group that constitutes roughly 10% of Syria's population and is concentrated in the northeast. Predominantly Sunni Muslims, they are part of a larger Kurdish nation spread across Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, none of which grants them full sovereignty. In Syria, decades of state discrimination stripped many Kurds of citizenship, banned their language in public life, and repressed

political expression. The outbreak of civil war in 2011 gave them space to build the autonomous administration of Rojava, led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Defense Units (YPG). Promoting secularism, gender equality, and local democracy, Rojava gained Western support during the anti-ISIS campaign. However, its autonomy remains unrecognized by Damascus, and future relations with the central government are fraught with tension.

Syrian Christians, comprising around 6% of the population, trace their roots to the earliest centuries of Christianity. Represented by diverse denominations – Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Armenians, Melkite Catholics, and Protestants – they are concentrated in urban centers such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. While not part of Syria's Sunni majority, Christians have historically been influential in commerce, education, and the civil service. The secular Ba'athist regime under the Assad family presented itself as a protector of minorities, earning Christian support in exchange for security and inclusion. However, with the rise of Islamist factions during the civil war, Christians became increasingly vulnerable – many aligned with Assad for protection. This move left them exposed after the regime's fall. Today, Christians remain politically sidelined and socially insecure in the face of continuing sectarian instability and extremist threats.

The Druze are a distinct ethno-religious group, making up about 3% of Syria's population and concentrated mainly in the southern Suwayda province. Their faith, which emerged in the 11th century, is closed to outsiders and governed by a spiritual elite, the Uqqal, fostering strong communal cohesion. This insularity, however, has often led to suspicion from both Sunni and Shia majorities. Politically, the Druze have long resisted centralized rule, asserting autonomy under Ottoman, French, and Syrian governments. During the Assad years, they maintained cautious neutrality, receiving limited self-governance in exchange. In the current fragmented landscape, they remain fiercely protective of local control and wary of any state that threatens their independence.

Al Sharaa – Policy vs. Reality:

Since assuming power in December 2024, interim President Ahmed al Sharaa (also known as Abu Mohammed al Jolani) has repeatedly affirmed his government's commitment to treating all of Syria's religious and ethnic minorities with dignity, fairness, and equality. He argues that Syria's Islamic governance model inherently promotes coexistence and equal citizenship, declaring that "because we are Islamic, we must be just." He has consistently emphasized the inclusion of Muslims, Alawites, Kurds, Christians, Druze, and other groups within a unified national identity.

Approximately 13 million Sunni Muslims dominate Syria's population, but the country is also home to a wide range of minority communities. Again, the largest religious minority is the Alawites – roughly 2.5 million, or 13% of the population. Kurds, an ethnic rather than religious minority, number about 2 million (10%). Christians account for 1.5 million (6%), while the Druze community comprises around 700,000 (3%). Smaller minorities (all under 1%), including Ismailis, Armenians, Circassians, and Shia Muslims, also contribute to Syria's diverse social fabric.

In speeches and official statements, al-Sharaa has condemned sectarian violence and declared it a threat to national cohesion. He has pledged to prosecute those responsible for recent massacres, regardless of affiliation, and has established an independent commission to investigate atrocities.

Despite this rhetoric, widespread violence against minority communities since Assad's fall has exposed a widening gap between official policy and reality. Many minority groups remain deeply skeptical of al-Sharaa's government and accuse it of failing to provide meaningful protection or political inclusion.

Although minority figures have been appointed to some government roles, key reforms such as decentralization, local autonomy, and security guarantees remain absent, fueling mistrust and risking further fragmentation in Syria's fragile transition.

Violence Against Minorities:

Since Assad lost power in December 2024, Syria has experienced a resurgence of sectarian and ethnic violence, particularly affecting its minority populations. Despite public commitments from interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa to protect all Syrians equally, the minority communities have each faced distinct forms of violence, exposing the fragility of Syria's post-war transition.

In the Alawite-majority coastal provinces, violence escalated dramatically between March and June 2025. Over 1,600 Alawite civilians were killed in coordinated attacks, and more than 40,000 fled to Lebanon. These massacres were primarily carried out by pro-government aligned militias and framed as retribution for the Alawites' historic support for the Assad regime. For decades, Alawites held dominant positions within the military and intelligence services, leading some to view the entire community as complicit in the regime's abuses. As a result, civilians became targets of what many human rights observers have called collective punishment. The brutality of these attacks has further alienated Alawites from the transitional government, despite al-Sharaa's claims of inclusiveness and national unity.

Violence involving the Kurdish minority in Syria has followed a distinct trajectory from that faced by other groups. Since December 2024, tensions have risen between the interim government and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). When the new regime demanded that all armed groups submit to the central authority, Kurdish leaders refused without firm guarantees of autonomy and political inclusion. In early 2025, the SDF and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) clashed. Turkish airstrikes caused civilian casualties and further fueled Kurdish mistrust of both Ankara and Damascus. On January 22, the Syrian defense minister warned the SDF that force could be used if they resisted integration. Of note, the United States has a longstanding relationship with the Kurds and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

A partial breakthrough came on March 10, when President Ahmed al-Sharaa and SDF commander Mazloum Abdi signed an agreement recognizing Kurdish citizenship and language rights. It transferred key infrastructure to government control while preserving Kurdish local councils and security forces. However, the deal's implementation has been slow. Disputes continue over military integration and Kurdish demands for federalism, which Damascus rejects. Sporadic clashes throughout the summer reflect deep mistrust. While open conflict has eased, unresolved power-sharing issues threaten to reignite instability in northeast Syria.

Christian communities were also subjected to increasing threats, beginning shortly after Assad's fall. Churches were raided, religious symbols defaced, and in June 2025, a suicide bombing at the Mar Elias Church in Damascus killed at least 30 worshippers. Though Christians are not viewed as a military threat, their historical association with secular governance and perceived Western ties have made them targets for extremist factions seeking to inflame sectarian tensions. These attacks have severely eroded Christian trust in the state's ability to protect religious minorities.

The Druze community, primarily based in Suwayda province in Southern Syria, faced severe violence in 2025, culminating in July's deadly clashes between Druze militias and Sunni Bedouin tribes, which resulted in over 1,300 deaths and the displacement of 176,000 people. Unlike other minorities, the Druze are targeted not for their past political alignments but for their tradition of local autonomy and refusal to submit to centralized rule. The government's failure to prevent or de-escalate the violence has reinforced Druze skepticism toward the state's intentions.

Deeper Dive on the Druze:

As highlighted above, though extremists target several minority groups in Syria, the challenges faced by the Druze are a telling story.

As mentioned earlier, the Druze originated in Egypt in the early 11th century. The movement was founded by Hamza ibn Ali ibn Ahmad, a Persian Ismaili scholar, and incorporated elements of Ismaili Shi'ism, Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, and other esoteric traditions. Initially part of the Ismaili Shia branch of Islam, the Druze faith quickly evolved into a distinct religion.

Druze do not consider themselves Muslims and are not recognized as such by mainstream Islamic authorities. Though the faith retains some Islamic influences, it also incorporates elements of Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, an ancient belief system that emphasizes salvation through secret knowledge and views the material world as flawed, and Neoplatonism, a philosophical tradition rooted in Plato's ideas that teaches all existence comes from a perfect divine source with the soul seeking to return to that source through spiritual growth.

Central to the Druze faith is the belief in one, all-powerful and indivisible God, along with the pursuit of hidden spiritual truth through esoteric knowledge – teachings that are deliberately kept secret and accessible only to a select, spiritually prepared few. These teachings are reserved for a group within the Druze community known as the Uqqal (the Wise), who undergo moral and spiritual training. The majority of Druze, called the Juhhal (the Uninitiated), follow the community's moral and ethical code but are not taught the deeper theological doctrines.

Unlike mainstream Islamic practice, Druze do not observe the Five Pillars of Islam, such as ritual prayer, fasting during Ramadan, or pilgrimage to Mecca. Instead, the Druze path focuses on personal virtues like honesty, loyalty, modesty, and self-discipline. Outward religious rituals are minimal; the emphasis is placed on inner spiritual development and moral behavior. A defining feature of Druze belief is reincarnation - the idea that the soul is eternal and is reborn into another human body after death. Reincarnation is not symbolic for the Druze; it is treated as a real and lived experience.

In 1043, the Druze closed their religion to outsiders, meaning no conversions have been permitted

since then. Conversion has not been permitted since the 11th century, and membership in the faith is passed down by birth. This exclusivity developed as a means of protection during centuries of persecution by both Sunni and Shia Muslims, who often viewed the Druze as heretics. As a result, the Druze have maintained strong internal cohesion, favoring marriage within the faith and keeping their beliefs guarded from the public. Their exclusivity, along with their unorthodox beliefs, contributed to their isolation and historical persecution. Due to this persecution, the Druze quickly left Egypt shortly after the religion's founding.

The Druze have historically been concentrated in the Levant, particularly in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel, where they have maintained a distinct identity for centuries. Today, the largest Druze population resides in Syria (700,000), primarily concentrated in the Suwayda region in Southern Syria. This mountainous area, also known as Jabal al-Druze, serves as the heartland of the Syrian Druze community, with the city of As-Suwayda being the largest Druze-majority city in the country. Lebanon hosts the second-largest Druze community (350,000). The Lebanese Druze are mainly found in the central Mount Lebanon region in central Lebanon. In Israel, the Druze (150,000) are primarily concentrated in the northern Galilee region and the Golan Heights.

Beyond the Levant, a significant Druze diaspora exists. Venezuela is home to the largest Druze diaspora population, estimated at around 60,000. The U.S. has a Druze community of about 30,000, with the highest concentration in Southern California. Australia hosts roughly 20,000 Druze, and Canada has an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 members of the community.

Druze-Bedouin Violence, Southern Syria:

Historically, clashes between Druze and Bedouin communities were rooted in long-standing disputes over land use, grazing rights, and access to water. Druze communities have a tradition of being agriculturalists, and as such, have often come into conflict with nomadic Bedouin tribes over these shared resources. Although not based in religious animosity, these tensions have deepened over the years due to weak governance, the proliferation of armed militias, and the absence of effective mediation structures.

More recently, the trigger was a highway incident involving the abduction and robbery of a Druze truck driver by armed Bedouins. In response, a Druze militia retaliated by kidnapping members of a Bedouin tribe. What began as a localized dispute quickly spiraled into widespread violence, as Druze forces took over several villages and government checkpoints. In reaction, Bedouin tribes from across Syria mobilized to defend their kin, bringing tens of thousands into the conflict zone. Although Syrian government forces initially intervened in an attempt to stabilize the situation, many Druze accused the state of partiality, claiming that military units had assisted or even armed Bedouin fighters. This perception of bias led to a dramatic escalation, with Druze leadership – particularly Sheikh Hikmat al Hijri and the Suwayda Military Council – rejecting state authority, expelling Bedouin families, and asserting autonomous control over the region.

Both sides contributed to the bloodshed. Druze militias carried out reprisals, while Bedouin fighters engaged in counterattacks and looting. Within days, the scale of violence had become catastrophic. Estimates report more than 1,300 fatalities, and over 176,000 civilians were displaced, numerous towns were torched, and critical infrastructure, including medical and aid services, collapsed under the pressure.

Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa eventually brokered a ceasefire with support from the U.S. and regional partners. Government forces withdrew from contested areas, and security in Suwayda was handed over to Druze control. However, the episode exposed serious fractures in Syria's post-Assad governance and highlighted the volatile mix of historical grievances, armed autonomy, and weak state authority still plaguing the country.

Israel's Military Actions in Syria:

Since December 2024, Israel has conducted a series of military operations in Syria, including airstrikes, drone attacks, naval bombardments, and special forces raids. These actions are officially described as "preventive defense". They are driven by three central goals: securing Israel's northern border and the Golan Heights through the expansion of a demilitarized zone, preventing Iranian and Hezbollah arms transfers by striking weapons facilities, and defending Syria's Druze minority.

The operations have significantly weakened Syria's military capabilities by targeting its legacy weapons systems, air and naval assets, and command infrastructure, particularly in the wake of the Assad regime's collapse.

Israel's largest campaign began in early December 2024 with Operation Arrow of Bashan. Over 350 airstrikes were launched in 48 hours, targeting missile depots, airfields, chemical weapons facilities, and naval bases, destroying 15 vessels and crippling most of Syria's strategic arsenal. Ground troops also moved into buffer zones near Mount Hermon to prevent hostile militias from encroaching on Israeli territory.

In March and April 2025, Israeli drone strikes and special operations targeted suspected weapons transfers in southern Syria, particularly near Damascus. These also served as warnings to Syrian military units not to target Druze populations.

The conflict escalated on July 16, 2025, when Israel struck Syrian military sites in Damascus following deadly clashes between Druze militias and Sunni Bedouin tribes in Suwayda province. Accusing government forces of supporting anti-Druze violence, Israel launched precision strikes near the presidential palace. A U.S.-brokered ceasefire followed, compelling the Syrian military to withdraw from the region.

Israel's defense of the Syrian Druze serves both strategic military and political purposes that go beyond humanitarian concern. First and foremost, protecting the Druze aligns with Israel's broader goal of securing its northern frontier, particularly the Golan Heights. By shielding Druze communities in southern Syria, many of whom live near or within the buffer zone, Israel helps stabilize areas adjacent to its territory, prevent hostile militia entrenchment, and create a de facto cordon of friendly or at least non-hostile actors. This reinforces Israeli control over contested borderlands and deters Iranian or Hezbollah expansion in the region.

Second, Israel's Druze citizens, numbering around 150,000, are deeply integrated into the state, including high levels of participation in the military and public life. These communities wield meaningful political influence, and any perceived abandonment of fellow Druze across the border could trigger domestic backlash. Thus, defending the Druze also functions as a way to maintain internal cohesion and uphold Israel's commitment to its government minority members.

Conclusion:

In sum, Syria's post-Assad transition remains precarious, marked by deepening sectarian rifts, fragile governance, and a mismatch between official rhetoric and on-the-ground realities. The failure to guarantee minority rights, address historical grievances among armed civil groups, or establish a legitimate central authority has allowed violence and fragmentation to define the new order. The Druze experience, in particular, underscores how historical autonomy, unaddressed grievances, and distrust of state institutions can fuel separatist tendencies and entrench local militias.

As regional and international actors continue to shape Syria's trajectory, often in pursuit of their own strategic goals, any sustainable path forward will require more than ceasefires or symbolic gestures. It will demand a fundamental reimagining of Syrian governance: one grounded in decentralization, power-sharing, and genuine inclusion of the country's diverse communities. Without such a transformation, the promise of reconciliation will remain elusive, and Syria will remain trapped in a cycle of instability, exclusion, and sectarian strife.

Key Takeaways:

Renewed violence against minorities, including Alawites, Kurds, Christians, and Druze, reflects longstanding grievances and weak governance, severely undermining trust in the state, further sectarian fracturing, and jeopardizing prospects for peaceful reconciliation.

The deadly conflict in Suwayda province in Southern Syria reveals how unresolved local disputes and government failures to mediate escalate into broader violence, prompting minority groups like the Druze to reject state authority and assert autonomous control. This dynamic is mirrored in ongoing Kurdish tensions, where partial agreements have yet to resolve disputes over federalism and integration, threatening continued instability in northeast Syria.

Israeli military actions aimed at weakening Syrian forces and protecting minorities significantly influence Syria's internal dynamics, showing how external actors exploit Syria's fragmentation to advance their strategic interests.

Economic Implications:

As a reminder from last month's report on Syria, here are the major economic factors in play for Syria.

In response to improving political conditions in Syria, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) provided immediate conditional sanctions relief to Syria in May 2025. Simultaneously, the U.S. Department of State issued a conditional waiver of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, resulting in immediate relief to most sanctions except export controls. While the relief is conditional, the Secretary of the Treasury, under the direction of the President, is encouraging new investment by the U.S. and its allies and partners across the globe in Syria. The lifting of the sanctions enables Syria to participate in the global financial system, which is a precondition of attracting investment for reconstruction, poverty relief, and access to global markets, including in the energy sector and mineral markets.

The impacts of civil war and global sanctions have driven Syria to be among the poorest nations in the world. While Syria has strategic importance in the Middle East, it also has natural resources with untapped potential to participate in regional and global markets economically, thereby improving its domestic production and quality of life for its citizens.

Despite the increasing violence, it is unlikely that the U.S. would reimpose sanctions on Syria, but there are scenarios where this could occur. An example would be if interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa shifted his support towards ISIS or the like.

The U.S. Department of Interior's Geological Survey from January 2025 highlights oil as its most significant resource and was the driver of pre-civil war revenues for the country. While its production has been small thus far, it has proven to have large reserves. The economic impact of increased oil supply and providing alternatives for Turkey and India to Russian oil could balance trade and increase economic pressure on Russia. As mentioned earlier, Syria has substantial natural gas reserves as well. While natural gas has been developed for domestic use, with investment, it could also expand regionally and globally, increasing supply in the global markets

The long-term potential for rare earth minerals is another potential driver of economic value. Industrial minerals are another natural resource that would increase the global supply of phosphate, which is used in fertilizer for the agricultural sector, and construction minerals such as cement materials and marble.

The economic opportunities for Syria and its potential direct foreign investors and trading partners are significant if the country complies in good faith with the conditions of the sanction relief. Without the ability to participate in the global financial system and provide a rule of law to protect investments, financial resources will not be invested by free-market nations. While the U.S. government is encouraging investment, a cautious approach to Syria will likely remain until the new government provides transparency to the world of its intent and ability to create healthy conditions for foreign investors.
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