Please cite as: EUAA, '1.3.4. Other religious and ethnic minorities' in *COI Report - Syria: Country Focus*, March 2025.

1.3.4. Other religious and ethnic minorities

The new Syrian leadership has pledged to uphold minority rights and promote national unity amid concerns of marginalisation under Islamist rule.204

As part of efforts to reassure minority communities, Ahmad Al-Sharaa met with Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt on 22 December.205 He later convened with Christian leaders, including Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican clerics, following a series of attacks targeting religious minorities.206 This engagement took place after protests triggered by the 23 December burning of a Christmas tree by foreign fighters affiliated with HTS207 in a predominantly Christian town in Hama, alongside additional reports of harassment.208 Following the attack on the Christmas tree, the transitional government apprehended the foreign fighters it identified as responsible for what it characterised as an isolated incident. Furthermore, government offices were closed for the Christmas holiday and the following day, 23 December.209 Meanwhile, France24 reported that while Christmas celebrations took place in Damascus, Christian residents kept a low profile, with some refraining from purchasing alcohol due to fear and uncertainty.210

Reports indicate a rise in targeted incidents against Christian communities, including an attack by unidentified gunmen on a Greek Orthodox church in Hama on 18 December and increased tensions in Christian areas of Damascus due to threatening actions, such as jihadist songs broadcasted in public and a menacing message displayed on an armoured vehicle.211

Human rights organisations have documented various restrictions on religious freedoms. Richard Ghazal, executive director of In Defense of Christians, highlighted measures such as alcohol bans, and the presence of Islamic State flags in areas near Damascus. Similarly, Nadine Maenza from the Washington-based International Religious Freedom Secretariat documented at least a dozen eyewitness accounts of attacks against religious and ethnic minorities in the Shehba region, near Aleppo, in late December. However, Rafif Jouejati, a scholar at the Middle East Institute, suggested that these incidents should be viewed as isolated cases rather than evidence of a broader pattern of systematic intolerance.212

In Damascus' Al-Qassaa district, armed individuals distributed flyers imposing restrictions on women's attire, smoking, and social interactions. HTS deployed patrols in response, attributing the incidents to unidentified individuals and denying endorsement. However, concerns remain over the frequency of such actions.213

The new administration underscored its commitment to inclusivity through the promise of the National Dialogue Conference, which aimed to engage various communities, including Christians, Kurds, artists, and intellectuals, in shaping Syria's future.214 When the National Dialogue Conference took place, it failed to alleviate concerns regarding inclusivity. Of the seven individuals appointed to the preparatory committee, only one was from a religious minority, Syrian Christian activist Hind Kabawat, while the others were Sunni Muslims, with some having close ties to Sharaa or HTS. Kurdish-led authorities from the northeast were entirely omitted from the conference. Some Christians stated that they are withholding judgment until a new constitution is drafted and general elections take place. The transitional government lacks Christian representation and is primarily composed of ministers who previously served in the Idlib government.215

Further scepticism has persisted, particularly following the unilateral reform of the national curriculum.216 The new education minister, Nazir Mohammad Al-Qadri, assured that both Islam and Christianity would remain part of the school curriculum as subjects of study.217 However in early January, the transitional administration's education ministry announced curriculum changes that reflect a more Islamic perspective while eliminating references to the Assad era. Proposed changes include the removal of evolution and the Big Bang theory from science lessons, the omission of pre-Islamic deities and their statues from history courses, and a diminished emphasis on Queen Zenobia of Palmyra. Civil society activists have expressed concerns that these changes indicate a disregard for diverse perspectives and could undermine the administration's stated commitment to inclusivity.218 The ministry, however, denied these interpretations of the changes, emphasising that the only changes made pertained 'to the removal of symbols of the previous regime and its glorification, and the adoption of images of the new Syrian flag (the flag of the revolution) instead of the previous flag, on all school books'. The minister explained that the adjustments included correcting 'incorrect' information that the previous government relied on in explaining some Quranic verses, adopting what is found in exegesis books for all educational stages.219

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