



European Parliament

SYRIA ZERO HOUR

The EU in pursuit of a new policy toward Damascus



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Executive Summary

- The EU's approach to Syria is at a crossroads, balancing diplomatic engagement, humanitarian aid, and strategic interests.
- The fall of Assad and the rise of HTS under Jolani have raised grave concerns about human rights, ethnic cleansing, and the exclusion of minorities.
- EU assistance has not been fully conditioned on the establishment of a democratic political system, inclusive governance, protection of minorities, and a clear democratic transition.
- The EU should take a stronger stance against radicalization while maintaining its geopolitical leverage in Syria.

The transformation of Syria's political landscape presents both challenges and opportunities for European policymakers. The EU must carefully navigate this new phase of the conflict, ensuring that its engagement supports stability, democratic governance, and the protection of minority communities. Furthermore, with the war's ripple effects reaching Europe—through migration, security threats, and geopolitical realignments—the EU must reassess its strategy toward Syria in a way that aligns with its long-term interests and values.

1. Introduction

This report is based on primary information and direct testimonies collected during a personal visit to Damascus, organized by Professor Nikolas Farantouris, a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) and member of the Security and Defense Committee, and his foreign affairs advisor, Dr Athanasios Grammenos.

The visit, held on March 8-9, 2025, was initiated at the invitation of Greek Orthodox Patriarch John X, the Greek community, and various Greek Orthodox and other Christian groups, in light of the atrocities committed against minorities in coastal areas, by militias and irregulars closely associated with the ruling regime in Damascus. The objective was clear: to engage with vulnerable communities, hold discussions with Syrian officials, and develop a well-informed perspective on the challenges, threats, and prospects for peace and prosperity in Syria. Traveling via Beirut, Professor Nikolaos Farantouris gained firsthand insight into the realities on the ground, assessed the needs of local populations, and formulated actionable recommendations to ensure their safety and survival.



Figure 1: Nikolas Farantouris (MEP) at the Syrian-Lebanese borders.

This analysis is based on in-depth conversations with members of both Muslim and Christian minority communities, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch John X, and key figures within the Syrian regime. Given the precarious security situation and the sensitive political context, some sources have been granted anonymity.

What follows is not just an account of facts but a synthesis of firsthand experience and strategic

assessment. The report begins with an overview of the Syrian conflict, then examines key minority groups, such as the Alawites and the Kurds. It analyzes the European Union's stance and the policies of individual EU governments, and evaluates Turkey's evolving role. This factor directly competes with European influence, introducing new challenges to regional stability. Finally, the report concludes with concrete proposals for EU parliamentary and institutional action.

At a time when Syria's future hangs in the balance, European policymakers must move beyond rhetoric and adopt a proactive stance. This report seeks to provide the insights necessary to inform that approach.

2. Background: The Syrian Conflict and Its Current Realities

Syria gained independence in 1946, but its modern history has been defined by authoritarian rule and conflict. In 1970, Hafiz al-Assad, of the socialist Baath Party, seized power and ruled until his death in 2000. His son, Bashar al-Assad, was appointed president after a referendum and remained in power through subsequent elections in 2007 and 2014.

In March 2011, amid the broader Arab Spring, anti-government demonstrations erupted across Syria. The government's harsh crackdown escalated into an armed conflict involving domestic, regional, and global actors. Over the past 13 years, the war has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, displaced millions, and created one of the worst humanitarian crises of our time.

The Evolution of the Conflict

The civil war saw the rise of extremist groups, including Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, the Al-Nusra Front (2012), and the emergence of ISIS (2013), further complicating the battlefield. While large-scale hostilities have diminished, the situation remains tense. In October 2024, armed clashes restarted primarily in Syria's northwest, with sporadic violence in the northeast. The country was fragmented, with various factions exerting control over different regions.



Figure 2: Rebel fighters ride in a vehicle after they seized Damascus and ousted President Bashar in Syria, December 9, 2024. Mohamed Azakir/Reuters

The humanitarian situation is dire. More than a decade of war has devastated infrastructure, leaving millions without access to healthcare, education, housing, or food. Widespread unemployment and poverty have made large segments of the population dependent on humanitarian aid, with no viable path to economic recovery.

Recent Developments: A Shifting Power Balance

A turning point came in 2024 when Israel dealt a significant blow to Hezbollah in Lebanon (one of Assad's key allies) weakening Syria's western flank. Combined with the declining capabilities of the Syrian army, this created an opening for the Islamic organization (and former Al-Nusra Front affiliate) Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to advance toward Damascus with little resistance.

HTS, following Assad's ousting, pledged to respect minority rights. However, its governance remains uncertain. Its leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa (Jolani), announced the dissolution of all armed factions and their integration into a newly formed Syrian army. Yet, many of these factions remain beyond government control, raising concerns about long-term stability. Furthermore, HTS dismissed most civil servants and dismantled the former Syrian military structure, consolidating power but leaving the state

apparatus in disarray. Recent violence in the coastal areas, predominantly inhabited by Alawites and Christians, revealed that the new regime in Damascus is either impotent or unwilling to prevent the persecution of minorities by its own members.

3. Al-Sharaa's (Jolani) unsuccessful dialogue

Following our visit to Damascus, we witnessed the deep divisions within Syria under the al-Sharaa administration. While the government has attempted to hold a national dialogue, it proved to be anything but substantial, and its failure to include significant portions of the population—such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Druze leadership, and Christian communities—has led to widespread criticism. The lack of genuine representation and the exclusion of key stakeholders suggest that the dialogue is more symbolic than substantive, and thus falls short of being a genuine effort toward national reconciliation.¹

The failure of the interim regime's "diplomatic offensive" to gain traction with Syria's Christian and Ismaili communities further emphasizes the complexity of the situation. The criticism from Patriarch John X reflects a growing sentiment that Syria's governance model needs to be more inclusive and pluralistic, recognizing its diverse ethnic and religious makeup rather than adopting an exclusive Sunni Islamist framework.

This unfolding situation suggests that the future of Syria's governance lies in a more inclusive, power-sharing model that accounts for its multifaceted identity, something that the current administration has struggled to achieve.

4. Legislative Actions of Al-Sharaa

On March 14, 2025, Ahmed al-Sharaa (Jolani) signed a temporary constitution, establishing an Islamist rule for a five-year transitional phase. This move effectively made al-Sharaa the de facto President of Syria, granting him vast ruling powers without elections during this period. However, this interim Constitution raises significant questions about the kind of polity that is under construction. The role of religion appears to be pivotal, and Sunni fundamentalism might be the major component for the new regime.

The key Constitutional Changes, compared to the previous Constitution, are:

¹ <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/analysis/could-federalism-solve-syrias-religious-and-ethnic-hostilities/>

1. Islam as the Foundation of Legislation

- Article 3 of the 2012 Syrian Constitution already required that the president be a Muslim and recognized Islamic jurisprudence as a major source of legislation.
- However, under Jolani's interim constitution, this was further restricted:
 - Article 3.1 states that *"Islamic jurisprudence is **the** principal source of legislation."*
 - Article 3.2 adds that *"The State respects all divine religions and guarantees the freedom to perform all their rituals."*

2. Legal Status of Religious Minorities

- While Jolani's constitution guarantees religious freedom, this protection applies only to "divine religions"—Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, which are considered to have originated from divine revelation.
- Excluded from this protection are **Alawites**, **Druze**, and **Ismailis**, who are viewed by Islamic law as heretics rather than followers of a "heavenly" faith.
- From an Islamic perspective, these groups are accused of Shirk (associating partners with God, considered idolatry), making them vulnerable to persecution and discrimination under the new legal framework.

Al-Sharaa's constitutional changes mark a significant Islamization of the Syrian legal system, reinforcing sectarian divisions and raising concerns over the future of religious minorities in the country.

5. The Alawites: History, Identity, and Persecution

The Alawites are an ethno-religious minority that traces its origins to a branch of Shia Islam with esoteric influences. Emerging between the 10th and 11th centuries in modern-day Iraq, they later settled primarily in Latakia province, on Syria's western coast.

While their religious doctrine stems from Shia Islam, it incorporates distinctive theological interpretations that differ from mainstream Twelver Shiism. This has led to long-standing opposition from Sunni Islam, which views Alawite beliefs as heretical, resulting in centuries of persecution. Despite this, Iran and Hezbollah have sought to incorporate Alawites into the broader Shia camp, aligning them politically and militarily within their regional network.

Demographics and Political Role

As of 2008, global estimates suggested that approximately 2.6 million Alawites exist, with the majority residing in Syria (including the Golan Heights), Lebanon, Turkey, and Australia. Within Syria, they constitute the most significant ethno-religious minority, comprising 10-12% of the population.

The Assad family belongs to the Alawite community, and the regime has historically relied on specific Alawite factions and tribal structures for key military and intelligence positions. However, this support was not uniform, as the Assad regime excluded certain Alawite groups from power while securing the loyalty of others through a narrative of existential threat, particularly in the face of Islamist uprisings, such as the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency of the 1980s.

Syria: religious and ethnic composition

In 2018, Sunni Arabs comprised half of the population while the Alawites - the community from which the Assad family originates - represented 17%

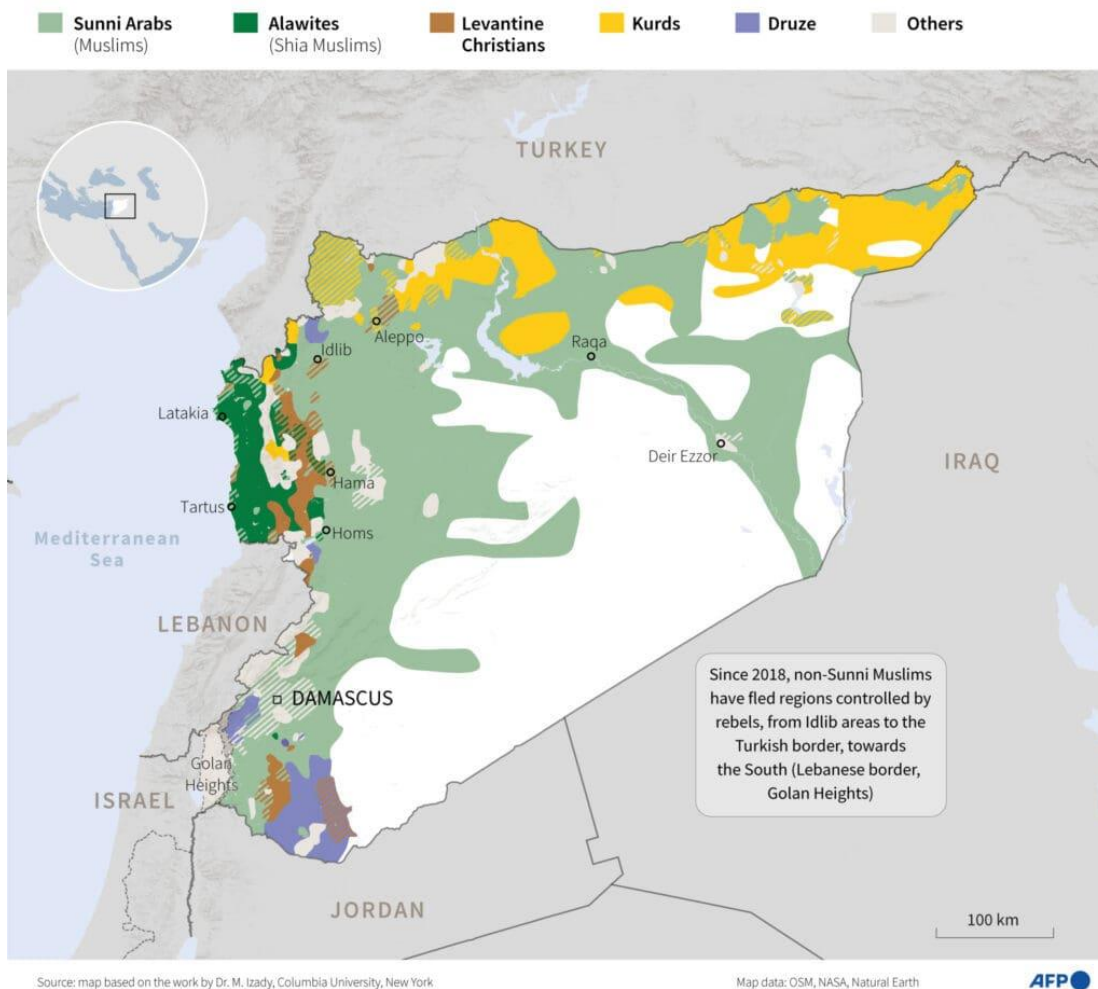


Figure 3: Religious and ethnic composition of Syria. AFP

Economically, the western coastal region, the Alawite heartland, was deliberately underdeveloped, leaving many Alawites dependent on military careers for economic

survival. This policy strengthened the Assad regime's hold over them, reinforcing the belief that without the regime, chaos and persecution would ensue.

HTS and the Targeting of Alawites

From the perspective of HTS and Sunni extremist factions, the Alawite community is inextricably linked to the Assad regime. This perception, deeply ingrained in Salafist-jihadist narratives, frames the Alawites as both political and religious enemies, justifying their persecution.

The strategic importance of Syria's western coastal region further incentivizes HTS to assert control over it. The coastal region is vital for Syria's security and provides direct access to the Mediterranean, making it a geopolitical priority for both the Syrian government and external actors.

The Atrocities of March 6-10, 2025

In early March 2025, interim President al-Sharaa issued a general mobilization order, ostensibly aimed at eliminating "remnants of the regime." This was accompanied by calls for jihad from mosques across Syria, which incited armed factions to attack Alawite-majority villages along the western coast.

Key Developments (March 2025):

- March 6: Assad loyalists, including remnants of the Syrian Arab Army, launched a counteroffensive, targeting HTS-controlled positions on the coast.
- March 7-10: In response, thousands of HTS-aligned militias, foreign fighters, and irregular Islamist groups from Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan carried out retaliatory massacres against Alawite civilians.
- Reports and our original research, indicate that between 5,000 and 7,000 civilians—many of them women, children, and elderly individuals—were executed, tortured, or subjected to inhumane treatment.
- Looting and destruction were widespread, with homes and businesses systematically ransacked and burned.
- The Damascus regime tolerated, if not directly facilitated, the massacres, failing to intervene despite its claimed control over Syrian security forces.

Evidence and International Reactions



Independent reports,² including our own investigation, confirm that HTS-aligned forces participated in systematic killings, often torturing captured Alawites before execution.

Estimates vary, but we suggest that 5,000-7,000 Alawite civilians were assassinated. Also, approximately 200 Islamist fighters were reportedly killed in retaliatory attacks by Assad loyalists.³

Condemnation from Christian Leaders

In response to the escalating violence, the heads of Syria's Christian Churches issued a joint statement condemning the massacres.

Signed by:

- Greek Orthodox Patriarch John X of Antioch,
- Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, and
- Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Youssef Absi,

The statement decried the targeting of innocent civilians, the destruction of homes, and the widespread looting, describing these events as “a blatant violation of human and moral values.”⁴

² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/10/syria-end-coastal-killing-spree-protect-civilians>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/15/the-streets-are-empty-no-one-dares-go-outside-syrias-alawites-terrorised-by-revenge-killings>

⁴ <https://orthodoxtimes.com/patriarchs-of-syria-condemn-escalating-violence-call-for-peace-and-national-reconciliation/>



Figure 4: Professor Farantouris (MEP) with Patriarch of Antioch John X in Damascus.

Furthermore, Patriarch John X explicitly addressed al-Sharaa in his Sunday homily on March 9, stating:

“The majority of the victims were not militants but innocent, unarmed civilians—women and children among them. I call upon you to put an immediate end to these massacres. Stop them at once and restore security and stability for all Syrians, regardless of their affiliations. Let sectarianism fall, and let the nation live.”⁵

The Christian leadership also reaffirmed their commitment to Syrian territorial unity and rejected any attempt to fragment the country along sectarian lines.

6. The Kurds (SDF): Integration into the Syrian Transition

On March 10, 2025, a U.S.-backed agreement was signed between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Syrian transitional government in Damascus. The agreement outlines the formal integration of the (US-backed) SDF into the newly structured Syrian Army and the incorporation of northeastern Syria (currently under SDF control) into the governmental structures of Damascus.



Figure 5: Syria's Kurdish regions.

⁵ <https://antiochpatriarchate.org/en/page/Homily%20of%20Patriarch%20JOHN%20X%20Sunday%20of%20Orthodoxy/2873/>

Strategic and Military Considerations

HTS and its affiliated factions, including foreign jihadist fighters, make up to 1/3 the size of the SDF⁶ and thus lack the manpower and logistical capabilities to consolidate power over the entire Syrian territory. The SDF, with an estimated 100,000 highly trained fighters, represents a crucial military asset for ensuring territorial stability and countering insurgent threats.⁷ The integration of the SDF is therefore a strategic necessity for the viability of the Syrian state.



Figure 6: Syria's interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa (R), shakes hands with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) commander-in-chief Mazloum Abdi after the signing of an agreement to integrate the SDF into the state institutions, in the Syrian capital, Damascus, on March. AFP

Under the agreement, the main provisions are as follows:

1. The SDF will be integrated into the Syrian Army as the 2nd Army, comprising three corps and one division.
2. The Asayish police force (56,000 manpower) will remain a separate entity but will be officially recognized by Damascus.
3. The SDF will retain control over its heavy weapons and share intelligence with the newly structured Syrian Army.
4. Oil and gas resources will be shared with Damascus, but revenues from exports will remain under the control of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

⁶ <https://news.sky.com/story/who-are-the-different-rebel-groups-in-syria-and-what-territory-do-they-control-13270302>

⁷ <https://www.europeaninterest.eu/the-hows-and-whys-of-the-agreement-between-the-syrian-transitional-government-and-the-sdf/>

The agreement represents a pragmatic step toward national reintegration, as resolving the status of northeastern Syria through peaceful negotiations strengthens the legitimacy of the transitional administration.

Economic Implications: Control Over Oil and Resources

The agreement also has significant economic ramifications. More than 90 percent of Syria's oil reserves are currently under the control of the SDF. Bringing these resources under at least partial state control is critical for post-war economic reconstruction and the equitable distribution of national wealth. Additionally, this agreement provides the legal framework necessary for Kurdish authorities to engage in international oil trade, allowing them to export resources without diplomatic obstacles.

The integration of Syria's oil-producing regions into the national economy is expected to:

- Facilitate post-war reconstruction efforts and stabilize the Syrian economy.
- Ensure fairer resource distribution, preventing monopolization by any one faction.
- Strengthen economic ties between northeastern Syria and the central government, reducing the likelihood of future conflict.

Political Tensions: SDF's Rejection of Jolani's Interim Constitution

Despite agreeing to military and economic integration, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the political wing of the SDF, strongly opposed the adoption of the interim constitution introduced by Jolani in Damascus.

In a statement, the SDC firmly rejected the proposed constitutional framework, describing it as a reproduction of authoritarianism in a new form.

The SDC further emphasized that:

“We strongly reject any attempt to recreate dictatorship under the guise of a ‘transitional phase.’ Any constitutional declaration must be the result of genuine national consensus, not a project imposed by one party. We call for a complete reformulation of the declaration. It must ensure a fair distribution of power, guarantee freedom of political activity, and recognize the rights of all Syrian components. Furthermore, it should adopt a decentralized democratic system of governance with clear mechanisms for achieving transitional justice.”⁸

⁸ <https://x.com/SDCPress/status/1900475659035525233>

This rejection underscores a fundamental political divide between HTS-led governance in Damascus and the Kurdish administration in northeastern Syria. While the military and economic agreements provide a framework for cooperation, the Kurdish leadership remains wary of HTS's centralizing tendencies and its failure to guarantee minority rights.

7. The EU factor and interests in Syria's Transition

The European Union currently faces a pivotal moment in shaping its security and defense strategy. The shift in U.S. foreign policy after Donald Trump's reelection demands a decisive response from Europe, particularly in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Despite the American intent to reset relations with Russia and bring an end to the war, Europe remains committed to its anti-Russian stance, constructing a metaphorical "iron curtain" along Ukraine's plains. This focus on Russia has, however, come at the cost of overlooking the human rights violations committed by HTS in Syria. Despite mounting evidence, EU officials, including those at the highest levels, have met with al-Sharaa, prompting criticism for engaging with a group responsible for human rights abuses.

The recent comments on the ethnic cleansing of Alawites have drawn considerable controversy. The European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Union's



Figure 7: The EEAS response to the anti-Alawite attacks.

diplomatic service, run by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Vice President of the European Commission, Kaja Kallas, posted a statement on social

media condemning attacks on civilian populations, reportedly perpetrated by pro-Assad forces, as well as violence against interim government forces in Syria's coastal regions.

“The European Union strongly condemns the recent attacks, reportedly by pro-Assad elements, on interim government forces in the coastal areas of Syria and all violence against civilians.”⁹

This comment equated the victim and the aggressor and provoked justified reactions. Possibly, al-Sharaa’s evolving approach, combined with the removal of Bashar al-Assad from power, has led to a more favorable reception from the EU.

However, while the new regime has made apparent strides toward de-radicalization and moderation, the group's shift appears more stylistic than substantive. The reason for this fresh attitude was that Syria’s new authorities’ top priority is the lifting of sanctions imposed under Assad's regime, a move aimed at rejuvenating Syria’s ailing economy and fostering the development of a functional state with a professional army. The EU's stance on this matter is becoming increasingly important as the bloc weighs its options.

The Brussels IX Conference (March 18, 2025)

A major milestone in the EU’s engagement with Syria took place at the Brussels IX Conference, held on March 18, 2025. This meeting brought together EU member states, representatives of the Syrian transitional government, Syria’s neighboring countries, international partners, and donors, including the United Nations. In a show of continued support, the EU committed €2.5 billion for 2025-2026, as part of a total pledge of €5.8 billion from the donor community, aimed at aiding Syria's transition and socio-economic recovery. These funds will also address urgent humanitarian needs in Syria and its neighboring countries, including Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Türkiye.

Ahead of the Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Kaja Kallas emphasized the need to lift sanctions to restore economic and social stability in Syria. When asked about the impact of atrocities against Alawites and Christians on the EU’s decision-making, Kallas refrained from setting conditions. Instead, she focused on the necessity for Syria’s leadership to take accountability for past atrocities, stressing that economic recovery is paramount to avoid further instability and prevent future violence. The EU hopes that by empowering the transitional government, it will be able to investigate the massacres and hold the responsible parties accountable.

⁹ https://x.com/eu_eeas/status/1898487797348225207

Germany's Strategic Engagement with Syria

Following Jolani's rise to power, EU countries, including France, Germany, and Italy, have sought to establish a role in Syria's rebuilding process, pursuing reconstruction contracts and securing energy exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁰

This goal, however, presents a paradox, as human rights concerns continue to cast a shadow over the new regime's legitimacy.



These are decisive times for #Syria. The hope for a better future for all lies in the hands of the transitional government. It is the transitional government's responsibility to keep extremists within their ranks under control & restore lost trust. - @ABaerbock in Damascus 1/4



9:23 PM · Mar 20, 2025 · 175.1K Views

Figure 8: A German delegation visits Al-Sharaa.

Despite these concerns, the EU has prioritized strengthening economic relations with Jolani's government over ensuring the protection of minorities. On March 20, 2025, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock visited Damascus for the reopening of the German embassy.

In a statement, the German Foreign Ministry emphasized the urgency of holding accountable those responsible for massacres, including the killing of Alawites. Baerbock's

comments echoed the Ministry's position, stating:

"These are decisive times for Syria. The hope for a better future for all lies in the hands of the transitional government. It is the transitional government's responsibility to keep extremists within their ranks under control & restore lost trust."¹¹

This position, however, is contentious. It challenges the common European belief that extremists should not have a place within a civilized state, particularly in government or military structures. Al-Sharaa's inability to rein in extremist factions within his ranks is seen as a threat to international peace and security, raising serious concerns about the viability of a stable and inclusive political order in Syria under his leadership.

¹⁰ <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2025/02/the-eu-returns-to-syria?lang=en>

¹¹ <https://x.com/GermanyDiplo/status/1902803249155150117>

That was her second visit following a contentious incident in January 3, 2025, with French Foreign Minister Jean Noël Barrot, when al-Sharaa refused to shake hands with her.

The HTS leadership must continue to cultivate political, economic, and diplomatic relationships to maintain its hold on power.

8. Turkey's Strategic Interests in Syria

Turkey views the Kurdish autonomous regions in Syria as a direct national security threat, fearing they could inspire separatist movements among Turkey's own Kurdish population. SDF includes the People's Defense Units (YPG), which Ankara perceives as an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and is designated as a terrorist organization.

To counter this perceived threat, Turkey launched Operation "Euphrates Shield" (2016)¹² and later supported the formation of the Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition of armed opposition groups that helped Turkey establish a buffer zone along the border.¹³ The Turkish army and its backed militants occupy 8,835 square kilometers in Syria. This initiative also aimed to address Turkey's refugee burden by relocating displaced Syrians into these areas. Turkey hosts more than 3.5 million refugees, with growing social, political, and economic repercussions.

Turkey's Role in Northern Syria

Until the dissolution of HTS in January 2025, Turkey maintained a complex relationship with the group, providing indirect support by maintaining Turkish military positions in Idlib province and facilitating humanitarian aid. This strategy allowed Turkey to shield HTS from Syrian government offensives while increasing its influence in northern Syria.

Turkey's policy remains focused on three key objectives:

1. Eliminating the YPG's influence in Syria¹⁴
2. Encouraging the return of Syrian refugees to Turkish-controlled territories
3. Reducing Western military presence in eastern Syria

¹² In 2018 Turkey extended its intervention in Syria with Operation "Olive Branch."
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS-Briefing-642284-Turkeys-military-operation-Syria-FINAL.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/02/24/10-things-to-know-about-turkeys-interventions-and-influence-in-syria/>

¹⁴ <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/what-role-turkey-playing-syrias-civil-war>



Figure 9: Turkey's operations in Syria. Carnegie

Strategic Positioning and Regional Ambitions

Following the collapse of the Assad regime and Iran's diminishing influence, Turkey has positioned itself as a central actor in Syria's reconstruction.¹⁵ President Erdoğan seeks a compliant government in Damascus that aligns with Turkey's regional goals and strengthens its strategic leverage in the Levant. Ankara has offered military support, training, and reconstruction aid to the new Syrian authorities, with Turkish firms expected to benefit from post-war economic contracts.

At the same time, Turkey has distanced itself from both the EU and the U.S. (decoupling), adopting an increasingly independent foreign policy. This shift coincides with Ankara's growing authoritarianism, anti-Western rhetoric, and actions that often contradict transatlantic security interests.¹⁶

Implications for Europe and the West

Turkey's evolving stance has geopolitical implications that extend beyond Syria. European leaders, once critical of Erdoğan's policies, have softened their approach as Ankara's influence in regional security grows. Some, including the EU Commission's Chief Ursula von der Leyen and French President Emmanuel Macron,

¹⁵ <https://muslimmirror.com/turkiyes-slide-towards-autocracy/>

¹⁶ <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/06/the-stakes-in-the-syrian-turkish-border-zone?lang=en>

see Turkey as a potential stabilizing force in Syria and a possible security contributor in Ukraine.

With Turkey's strategic decoupling from the West, the EU and NATO face the challenge of managing relations with an increasingly assertive Ankara while balancing security interests in the region.



Figure 10: Turkish troops in Idlib (AFP 2020)

9. The U.S. policy shift vis-à-vis Syria

The study visit of Professor Farantouris drew significant attention from the U.S. media. **Roger Stone**, a renowned Republican strategist and analyst, publicly



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acknowledged and praised Farantouris's trip to Damascus, highlighting it as a global story through his popular "The Roger Stone Show" on March 13, 2025. Following public outrage over the atrocities against minorities, based on Farantouris' reflections, the U.S. Secretary of State, **Marco Rubio**, described the events as "a massacre that cannot be condoned." He then called for "an independent international investigation to identify those responsible for these crimes."¹⁷

However, on May 14, the U.S. foreign policy witnessed a sudden turn. In an unexpected policy reversal, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that his administration is exploring

¹⁷ https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/rubio-says-syria-must-punish-islamists-foreign-jihadis-behind-alawite-massacre/

the normalization of relations with Syria, after a high-profile meeting with Syria's interim President, al-Sharaa. Their 37-minute conversation in Riyadh, facilitated by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was symbolically significant, especially given that Sharaa was under a \$10 million U.S. bounty until December.

Trump cited the influence of Saudi and Turkish leaders in his decision to begin lifting sanctions on Syria. Despite Sharaa's ties to the jihadist group HTS, which remains listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S., UN, and UK, Trump praised him as a "tough guy" with potential. It is visible that since assuming leadership, Sharaa has attempted to rebrand himself as a unifying figure, adopting Western attire and signaling openness to diplomacy. The U.S. sanctions relief brought immediate optimism to Syria, where 90% of the population lives in poverty. Aid agencies



Figure 11: Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa meets with U.S. President Donald Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on May 14, 2025. Saudi Press Agency

anticipate easier access, and hopes are rising for foreign investment, infrastructure rebuilding, and the return of exiled Syrians.

Trump, however, has made clear that normalization is conditional.¹⁸ He expects Syria to join the Abraham Accords, aligning with Arab states that have formalized relations with Israel. Sharaa has hinted at a willingness to consider such steps. However, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu remains skeptical and opposed to lifting sanctions, citing security concerns and the presence of foreign fighters.

While many uncertainties remain, Trump has framed the move as a bold opportunity in foreign policy. At the same time, Syrians hope it signals the beginning of real change after years of war, hardship, and isolation.

¹⁸ <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/05/providing-sanctions-relief-for-the-syrian-people/>

10. Addendum: Violence against Minorities and Political Developments (May-June 2025)

Despite prior international concern following the March massacres of Alawite civilians, the security environment for religious and ethnic minorities in Syria continued to deteriorate throughout May and June 2025. Targeted acts of violence against Christian, Alawite, and Druze communities were reported with increasing frequency, particularly in the western and southern regions of the country.

Ongoing Attacks on Christian Communities

The period witnessed a series of hostile incidents directed at Christian communities, including reports of harassment, intimidation, and the desecration of religious sites. In areas recently brought under civil control by the regime's forces, Christian religious leaders documented heightened surveillance and restrictions on worship gatherings, contrary to prior assurances from the transitional government that religious freedoms would be respected.



Figure 12: People and rescuers inspect the damage at the site of a reported suicide attack at the Mar Elias Greek Orthodox church in Damascus' Dweila area on June 22, 2025. (Louai Beshara/AFP)

The most egregious incident occurred on June 22, 2025, during the Sunday liturgy at the Greek Orthodox Church of Mar Elias in the Dweila neighborhood of Damascus. A suicide bomber detonated an explosive device concealed beneath his clothing,

resulting in 25 fatalities and over 60 injuries.¹⁹ Authorities subsequently reported that arrests had been made, although no further details were released.

In response to the ongoing violence, Professor Nikolaos Farantouris submitted an urgent parliamentary question to the High Representative and Vice-President of the European Commission, Kaja Kallas, urging immediate EU engagement.²⁰ His proposal included:

- a. the dispatch of a high-level EU delegation to Damascus,
- b. the establishment of a fact-finding mission to document attacks and identify perpetrators, and
- c. a comprehensive review of the EU's sanctions regime and current engagement strategy with Damascus, including pressure on HTS authorities to commit to a binding electoral timeline.

The Spokesperson for EU Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Anouar El Anouni, issued a statement that falls short of expectations, saying that the EU

“stands in solidarity with the Syrian people and supports all efforts by the transitional authorities aimed at ensuring the security of all Syrians with no discrimination on the basis of ethnic and religious background.”²¹

The Spokesperson made no remarks in relation to potential measures from the EU against the Syrian regime, which failed again to stop the Islamist terrorists from killing Christians.

Escalation of Violence Against the Druze

Since March 2025, a series of coordinated attacks by Islamist armed groups have targeted the Druze-majority town of Jaramana, near Damascus, as well as other Druze communities in southern Syria. The Druze, a religious minority numbering approximately 700,000 within Syria, have come under increasing threat. Human rights monitors reported over 100 civilian deaths across Druze areas during this period.²²

While Al-Sharaa issued public condemnations and pledged that those responsible would be held accountable, no tangible action followed. In response, the Israeli government significantly escalated its military posture inside Syria. Citing a responsibility to protect the Druze minority—many of whom are Israeli citizens or serve in the Israeli military—Jerusalem launched targeted strikes near the presidential palace in Damascus. The Israeli leadership framed these actions as a

¹⁹ <https://apnews.com/article/syria-church-attack-damascus-mass-da2ed505d6625fce1fc9de9e88c200a3>

²⁰ <https://x.com/NFarantouris/status/1937209756638413284>

²¹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/syria-statement-spokesperson-terrorist-attack-mar-elias-church-damascus_en

²² <https://medyanews.net/druze-activists-demand-international-protection-amid-deadly-attacks-in-syria/>

dual message: an operational effort to deter further violence and a geopolitical signal demanding credible guarantees for minority protection.

Key military commanders suspected of orchestrating or allowing the attacks remain in office, further fueling perceptions of impunity. In a strongly worded statement, the Syrian Druze Council based in Jaramana accused the central government of deliberate inaction and warned of rising communal tensions with potential regional implications.

11. Proposals for Immediate Action: A European Approach to Syria

The European Union must demonstrate the political will to innovate and lead in addressing Syria's future. Given Syria's strategic significance and its implications for European security and values, as well as the competition with regional powers on the ground, the European Parliament should consider the following steps:²³

1. **Deploy an Inter-Parliamentary Delegation**

The European Parliament should dispatch a fact-finding mission to Syria, including representatives from all parliamentary groups, to conduct an independent assessment of the political, security, and humanitarian situation on the ground.

2. **Condition EU Engagement on Tangible Democratic Reforms**

The Council's decision of February 28 must be based on the principle of conditionality. The EU must be in a position to make measurable progress on justice, governance, and constitutional amendments that enshrine equal rights for all Syrians, regardless of religion or ethnicity.

3. **Hold Perpetrators of Atrocities Accountable**

The European Parliament must push for accountability mechanisms to investigate and prosecute those responsible for crimes against humanity, including Al-Sharaa and other actors involved in ethnic cleansing campaigns against Alawite and Christian communities.

4. **Ensure that EU future Assistance is tied to Democratic Governance**

Any financial, technical, or diplomatic support from the EU in the future must

²³ The aforementioned steps have been proposed to the EU Parliament President Roberta Metsola, the EU Council President, Antonio Costa, the EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, and the High Representative/Vice President Kaja Kallas by Professor Nikolas Farantouris (MEP) with his letter on March 17, 2025, after the return from Damascus.
<https://x.com/NFarantouris/status/1901685051999318119>.

be strictly conditional on the establishment of a genuinely representative government and the enforcement of democratic principles and the rule of law.

A Strategic and Moral Imperative

Europe faces critical security and geopolitical challenges along its eastern borders. Syria remains at the heart of these challenges, not only as a strategic partner but also as a test of Europe's commitment to its fundamental values.

Many of Syria's indigenous minority communities share historic and cultural ties with Europe, having lived in the region for centuries. The EU has both a moral responsibility and a strategic interest in supporting a genuine democratic transition while countering the spread of Islamist extremism. This threat has already caused instability in the Middle East and beyond.

A decisive and principled European approach to Syria is not only necessary but also long overdue. The time to act is now.

MEP Nikolas E. Farantouris is Jean Monnet Professor of EU Law at the International & European Studies Department, University of Piraeus, Greece. Elected Member of the European Parliament, 2024-2029, the Left Group. Member of the European Parliament's Committees on Security and Defence (SEDE), Budgets (BUDG), Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI), and Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) as a Coordinator. Member of the EU-US Parliamentary Delegation and the EU-African States Parliamentary Delegation. He studied law at the University of Athens and completed a Master's degree (MJur) in European and Comparative Law and a Doctorate (DPhil) in European Law, both at the University of Oxford. He has worked as an attorney at law at Norton Rose in London and Brussels for many years and has gained experience as a Board member of Hellenic Competition Commission, a Board member, General Counsel and Chairman of the Board of the Public Gas Corporation of Greece (DEPA) S.A. (2019-2019) and Chair of the Legal Affairs Committee of EUROGAS, the association of 45 energy companies in Europe (2016-2019). He is a member of the Energy Committee of the Academy of Athens and Board member of the Spinelli Group, Brussels. Married, 3 children.

*Athanasios Grammenos (Ph.D.) is the Executive Director of the Council for International Relations–Greece (CfIR). He teaches in the postgraduate program “Religion, Geopolitics and Global Security” at Aristotle University's Theology Department and in Brandeis University's BOLLI Institute. He has extensive experience in political analysis, cooperating with leading European think tanks. He has published widely in peer-reviewed journals and the Press. His new book, *Modern Greece Revisited: A Study in Foreign Policy and International Relations*, is scheduled for release in July 2025.*

12. Appendix



Member of the European Parliament, Professor Nikolas Farantouris, has once again highlighted the plights that minorities are experiencing in Syria, saying that the new ruling Islamist regime of Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa, also known by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, has "intensified attacks."

"The situation in Syria is deteriorating rapidly. Jolani's Islamist militias have intensified attacks on minorities, targeting Druze, Alawite, and Christian communities," said Farantouris, who is also a member of the European Parliament's Security and Defense Committee, on social media.

"Following my visit to Damascus last March during the massacres in Latakia and Tartous, I regret to be receiving every day dozens of messages from Syrians reporting atrocities. The situation is worsening, not improving."



"In recent days, violent assaults on the Druze-majority town of Jaramana have left many dead, allegedly triggered by fabricated accusations of blasphemy."

"Meanwhile, over 1,500 civilians – mostly Alawites, but also Christians – were killed in March alone, reportedly by elements of Syria's interior, defense, and auxiliary forces."

"Europe's patience must not be mistaken for indifference. Human rights and minority protection are not negotiable."

"As a member of the European Parliament's Defense and Security Committee and Constitutional Affairs Committee, I will demand urgent scrutiny of these crimes and call for targeted sanctions against those ordering or facilitating ethnic cleansing."

The MEP traveled to Damascus on March 8-9 at the height of the massacres against Alawites and Christians.

He met with representatives of the Christian and Alawite communities, representatives of other national and religious communities, such as Ismailis and Druze, the Greek Community of Damascus, Greek Orthodox Patriarch John X of Antioch, and government officials from the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



It is recalled that he previously sent a letter to the heads of the European Institutions and his intervention in the Plenary calling for action for the persecuted populations in Syria.

"Christians and other communities with a presence of thousands of years are on the verge of extinction. An Islamist regime is leading Syria into a fundamentalist state and pretends not to control the paramilitaries and the associated gangs that are murdering," he said last month.

"After I met with Syrian officials, as well as community representatives, it is now clear to me that the transitional government in Damascus is ruling factionally, excluding all other communities and entrenching extremism. It does not intend to proceed with elections as promised," the MEP added, before calling on the EU to not lift sanctions if the persecution and massacres continue.



Following his visit to Damascus, Farantouris said that at least 7,000 Christians and Alawites were slaughtered on March 7-9 by the Turkish-backed Islamist forces, which has put Christian and other communities "at risk of extinction."

READ MORE: Turkish Media: "Mitsotakis supports plans against our rights - Greece shows the Aegean as a Greek lake."

Advertising



To: Ms. Roberta Metsola
President of the European Parliament

Mr. António Costa
President of the European Council

Ms. Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Commission

Ms. Kaja Kallas
EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the
European Commission

Brussels, 17/03/2025

Subject: URGENT - Concerns regarding the situation in Syria

Dear President Metsola,
Dear President Costa,
Dear President von der Leyen,
Dear High Representative / Vice-President Kallas,

In view of the 9th International Conference in Support of Syria commencing today, 17 March, in Brussels, I wish to bring to your attention my recent visit to Damascus on 8-9 March 2025, following invitation from ethnic and religious communities in Syria.

During my visit, I witnessed firsthand the grave humanitarian crisis and escalating violence. It is deeply concerning that paramilitary groups and foreign combatants from Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan have joined forces to attack Alawite and Christian communities in the coastal regions of Latakia, Tartus, and Hama, committing large-scale atrocities. Reports indicate that up to 7,000 people -predominantly Alawites, along with Christians- have been killed. The UN Human Rights Office has documented the massacre of entire families, including women and children. These attacks, driven by religious fundamentalism and sectarian hatred, are either tolerated if not actively supported by the ex-Al Qaeda-affiliated regime in Damascus.

Senior representatives of ethnic and religious communities conveyed to me the severe humanitarian suffering across the country. For thousands of Christians and many Muslims, the Orthodox Patriarchate's food aid remains their only means of survival. Despite initial promises of inclusive governance, the regime has failed to meet even the most basic expectations of its

Question for written answer E-001399/2025

to the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Rule 144

Nikolas Farantouris (The Left)

Subject: Ongoing threats and persecution of Christians and other religious and ethnic communities in Syria

In the last twenty-four hours, images of the continued targeting of Christian and other religious communities in Syria by forces and extremists close to the al-Jolani regime have come to light. By way of illustration, on Sunday 6 April, Islamists invaded the Church of St George in the Greek Orthodox town of Budan [sic], doused the seats with petrol and planted explosive devices, which fortunately did not detonate. Other reports state that high-ranking Government officials from the Ministry of Interior - 'former' members of extremist organisations and Al-Qaeda - support terrorist attacks, such as the plan circulating online to bomb the Roman Catholic Church of the Virgin Mary in Tartus. It is clear that Alawites, Christians and other communities in Syria are under threat from the regime in Damascus. In these circumstances, the EU must urgently intervene to do what Jolani refuses to do, to protect the lives of all Syrians, regardless of religion.

Given the above:

1. Why is the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy not intervening decisively with the Government in Damascus, demanding the protection of Christian and other threatened communities?
2. Why is the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy not finally sending a team of observers to document the massacres and incidents of violence?
3. Why is the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy not coordinating a humanitarian aid mission to the threatened coastal areas, with the participation of Member States such as Greece, Cyprus, France and others, as requested by the representatives of the affected and terror-stricken areas?

Submitted: 7.4.2025

Question for written answer E-000295/2025

to the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Rule 144

Nikolas Farantouris (The Left)

Subject: Protecting ethnic minorities and religious communities in Syria

Developments in Syria, which have seen the overthrow of the Assad regime and the emergence of a transitional Islamic government, have raised concerns about the future of the country and the wider region. At the same time, the actions of Türkiye and other non-EU countries in the territory of Syria, competition for and tensions over the region¹ and talk of possible larger scale intervention² compound the risks and geopolitical instability in the region. Against this backdrop, concerns are growing about the protection of the rule of law and respect for the rights of ethnic minorities and religious communities in Syria. Given the current geopolitical instability in the region and the need to ensure a smooth and inclusive political transition, based on democratic legitimacy and free from foreign interference, in the spirit of UN Security Council Resolution 2254³, will the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy say:

1. Does she intend to carry out an official visit to Syria and engage with the country's new transitional regime?
2. If so, will she formally raise the issue of fully protecting the rights of ethnic minorities (such as Kurds) and religious communities (such as Christians) in Syria?
3. What assurances has she received or does she intend to seek in relation to the above issue?

Submitted: 23.1.2025

¹ <https://www.foxnews.com/world/tensions-between-israel-turkey-escalate-over-syria-its-time-pay-attention>

² <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan-syria-rebels-kurds-ypg-israel/>

³ https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf

EN

E-000295/2025

Answer given by High Representative/Vice-President Kallas
on behalf of the European Commission
(10.4.2025)

The EU stands with all Syrians, both in the country and in the diaspora, in their efforts to reunite and rebuild their country, restore justice and ensure accountability. The High Representative/Vice-President and other members of the Commission have engaged with Syria's interim authorities discussing restoring stability, supporting an inclusive political transition as well as Syria's recovery and future reconstruction. The EU is also stepping up its presence in Damascus and aims to fully reopen its Delegation, security conditions allowing.

Whether in public statements or diplomatic engagements, including in coordination with international partners, the EU has called on transitional authorities to ensure that all Syrians, from all components of society, are protected and included in the transition process. The EU systematically and consistently calls for all actors in Syria to uphold the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all Syrians in their diversity, based on their equal rights as citizens. All external actors must respect the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Syria.

The EU is attentive to the reassuring statements of the new transitional authorities but most important to their actions which it follows closely. It will adjust its approach, if needed, with the overarching aim of supporting the Syrian people, and an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned transition, guided by the respect for international law, human rights, fundamental freedoms, pluralism and tolerance among all components of society.

**Priority question for written answer
to the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign
and Security Policy**
Rule 144
Nikolas Farantouris (The Left)

Subject: Bomb attack on Orthodox Church in Damascus.

On Sunday, 22 June, a suicide bomber affiliated with the so-called Islamic State opened fire and then blew himself up inside the Greek Orthodox Church of Prophet Elias in Damascus during the Sunday service, killing at least 30 and injuring more than 60 Greek Orthodox Christians. This heinous act of religious fundamentalist violence adds to the string of bloody assaults targeting schools, churches, and both public and private spaces in Syria. On 23 January¹, 17 March², and 7 April³, I publicly warned against the massacres being carried out under the direction, or at the very least the tolerance, of the Islamist al-Jolani regime. I also called on the EU to step up and take specific actions in response.

In light of these events, the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy is asked the following:

1. Will the EU urgently send a delegation of European officials to Damascus, along with a fact-finding mission, to document these attacks and atrocities on the ground?
2. Will the EU immediately reconsider its cooperation framework and the potential lifting of sanctions towards the Government of Damascus?
3. Will the EU demand that the al-Jolani regime commit to holding elections within a specific and verifiable timeframe?

Submitted: 23.6.2025

¹ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-000295_EN.html

² https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=642935808482110&id=100082970882824&mibextid=wwXIfr&rdid=RXcoxKXUii42yf4D#

³ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-001399_EN.html