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State Centrality and Minorities in Syria: Negotiate, not Weaponise, Difference

by Amjed Rasheed

- Syria's post-Assad transition is replicating old patterns of domination, with minorities still securitised, instrumentalised and coerced rather than engaged as political partners.
- Negotiations anchored in force, not rights, are entrenching mistrust, as seen in the SDF-Damascus standoff, where military pressure substitutes for genuine political dialogue and constitutional guarantees.
- A stable future requires a shift from weaponising identity to negotiating difference, through an inclusive political settlement.

Recent images from Aleppo are deeply alarming. The latest offensive by the Syrian Army to seize areas held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) by force – including a particularly vicious battle in the Ashrafieh and Sheikh Maqsoud districts of Aleppo, under the control of the Kurdish local police (Asayish) since 2011 – marks a new and uncertain chapter for Syria. The mounting tensions in the south and along the country's coastline are no less troubling. In Sweida, Druze are being framed as **separatists**, and the Alawites as **supporters** of Assad's dynasty repressive policies. This reveals the enduring influence of Syria's centralised governance traditions.

After the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-led offensive that toppled Bashar al-Assad in late

Amjed Rasheed *is Lecturer in Defence Studies (Regional Security Studies) in the Defence Studies Department of King's College London.*
✉ *amjed.rasheed@kcl.ac.uk*

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December 2024, many Syrians understandably glimpsed a measure of hope. A smaller number remained pessimistic; having lived through the 2003 war in Iraq and its aftermath, and having spent the past decade researching the causes of conflict, I found myself among those who saw the glass as half empty. Early post-Assad months confirm it: actors and symbols have shifted, but minority instrumentalisation remains.

Syria's current crisis must be situated within the historical fragility of the modern West Asia and North Africa (WANA) state to understand how borders, citizenship and early state-building practices entrenched domination as the primary mode of managing diversity. These old governance habits have re-emerged in post-Assad Syria, as highlighted by the recent SDF-Damascus standoff, which perpetuates the state's coercive logic. Overall, Syria's stability depends on replacing coercive centralisation with a negotiated, rights-anchored political settlement.

A state born fragile

The modern state in WANA was born structurally fragile. Its borders were engineered to divide spheres of influence rather than reflect social realities, producing thin citizenship regimes in which loyalty to the state was often extracted rather than cultivated. In Syria, as elsewhere, equal citizenship rights expanded or contracted according to political convenience. When crises emerged, ruling centres defaulted to repression, which deepened social fractures and implanted domination as a governing logic.

This historical architecture matters for the present. From the French Mandate through the early independence period led by *al-Kutla al-Wataniyyah*, to Ba'athist rule, Syrian elites relied on managing communities through co-optation, selective repression and identity manipulation. Minorities were concurrently marginalised and instrumentalised for regime survival. The Kurds experienced denationalisation in 1962. The Druze revolts were met with force. The Alawite communities were incorporated by the Assad dynasty into security structures yet remained politically peripheral.

Assad's was long framed as an Alawite "minority regime", but this mischaracterises reality. Assad did not govern *for* Alawites. He sectarianised society to **shield his power**, casting them as both protective buffer and expendable scapegoat. From Hafez's 1970 coup, Alawites dominated elite security units, yet power stayed with Assad's inner circle. Propaganda fused their fate to regime survival, while dissent met ruthless suppression. This dynamic explains why post-Assad orders echo the old: new centres exploit the same fears and networks.

Despite this fraught history, these same communities possess local legitimacy, social capital and cross-regional networks that consistently function as stabilisers. Their buy-in is not only a matter of justice but also a prerequisite for any sustainable authority in Damascus. A state born fragile can govern only by recognising, not suppressing, the pluralism on which its cohesion depends.

Yet as Syria's political order enters a new phase, the dynamics forged in its fragile birth seem continue to shape how power is exercised, and how minorities are positioned within the state.

Old patterns in the new Syria

Post-Assad Syria has not shed its older governing instincts. While the fall of Bashar al-Assad in late 2024 initially raised hopes for a new political order, the months that followed revealed how coercive centralisation remains.

The current SDF-Damascus standoff illustrates this continuity. For over a decade, the Kurdish led SDF has been central to the fight against ISIS, gaining local legitimacy and building autonomous security structures. Yet the interim government now frames them as obstructing state consolidation. The late-**January security agreement** between SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi and President Ahmed al-Sharaa – brokered

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by the KRG and the United States – halted clashes between the two parties but did little to address core political questions.

The problem is political. Negotiations have focused almost exclusively on security arrangements, sidelining political guarantees on cultural rights, representation and local autonomy. The SDF fears an integration that would dismantle its command structure, undermine cohesion and erode the sense of self security built since 2011. These fears are reinforced by **reports** according to which Damascus asked the SDF to fight the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces and their allies – demands the SDF categorically rejected.

The contradiction deepened when President al-Sharaa issued a **decree** granting Kurds full cultural, linguistic and citizenship rights – while, in parallel, Syrian forces launched harsh military campaigns in Kurdish-majority areas. The clashes in Aleppo, which resulted in deaths and the displacement of thousands, starkly exposed the gap between symbolic inclusion and coercive practice. Even after hostilities formally ceased under the 30 January agreement, the **ongoing siege** of Kobani is fuelling a deep humanitarian crisis and entrenching mistrust.

The persistence of these coercive reflexes reveals that without a fundamental shift in how the state engages diversity with political maturity, Syria will remain locked in a cycle of violence. A different path requires reimagining political negotiation itself.

Recognising difference through dialogue

What Syria confronts today is a **crisis of a state**, a state that feeds cycles of violence and displacement, sooner or later. When states use force rather than dialogue, governance becomes domination, and domination inevitably produces resistance. Miguel de Unamuno's warning "You will win, but you will not convince" captures the dilemma facing Syria's rulers today. Minorities respond predictably to coercion by adopting survival strategies and resisting incorporation into a political order they cannot trust.

Breaking this cycle requires constructing a safe political space where questions of autonomy, cultural rights, power-sharing and representation are openly negotiated rather than militarily imposed. The SDF-Damascus dynamic demonstrates that neither extreme decentralisation nor rigid centralisation offers a viable model. Decentralisation without constitutional guarantees becomes vulnerable in crises; forced centralisation only deepens alienation.

What Syria needs is an *incremental* constitutional settlement that protects cultural, linguistic and political rights for all communities; devolves power to enhance post-war governance; establishes local security arrangements within a unified constitutional framework; and treats disagreement as a normal feature of politics, not a threat to state integrity.

The road of state consolidation through dialogue and persuasion will be slow and uneven. But if Syria continues the post-2024 pattern of negotiation punctuated by coercion, its future will remain defined by cycles of violence and displacement. Yet Syria is not condemned to this. The country's pluralism can be the foundation of a more legitimate and resilient state if power is shared, rights are guaranteed, and dialogue replaces coercion.

Peace will not come quickly, it never does – but it remains possible if Syrians choose a politics of inclusion over a politics of fear.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17
I-00186 Rome, Italy
T +39 06 6976831
www.iai.it

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Editor: **Leo Goretti** (l.goretti@iai.it)
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