



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Do Syria's clashes with the Druze foreshadow confrontation with the Kurds?



Syria's post-Assad future is still uncertain, with a remarkable level of overall stability having been punctured twice now by heinous sectarian violence in which governing factions have also been implicated.

Are these outbursts an indication of the underlying failure of Ahmed al-Sharaa's government to form an **inclusive** and representative central authority, or are they regrettable but contained bumps on the road to a stable and united Syria?

Syria is flanked by unenviable examples on all sides that show how terribly wrong things can go when one group tries to impose its dominance over the others or what will happen when central authority collapses and internal cohesion disappears.

There is still a possibility that Syria could be heading in the same direction, particularly with the largest ethno-sectarian question, the Kurdish one, heading for a showdown.

Whether in Iraq, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, or elsewhere, sectarian and ethno-religious tensions have riven the region.

Turkey, the great supporter of the new Damascus government, has had a century of violent confrontation with its ethnic Kurdish minority, which can now have grave repercussions for Syria.

This is not to say that such tensions are unique to the Middle East, but they do thrive where central institutions are weak, common purpose is lacking, zero-sum politics is ascendant, and/or foreign meddling trumps collective self-preservation.

Building an inclusive and democratic state

As in some other countries in the region, in Syria a minority, the Iran-aligned Alawites, held sway for decades, albeit with collusion from parts of the Sunni establishment.

Then the country went through almost 14 years of civil war, laying waste to whole cities and regions. It also put large swathes of territory outside government control, allowing local and other factions to run their own affairs, making it harder now to re-establish central control.

It would be unrealistic to expect any new power in Damascus to be able to solve all these issues in so short a timeframe.

The absence of a new can be considered a win for the country and the region

The absence of a new, differently aligned civil war, such as, for example, in Libya, can already be considered a win for the country and the region.

Yet, the question remains whether Al-Sharaa and his government could have avoided the **clashes** in March and now in July and whether he is serious about building an inclusive and democratic state.

Not a small part of the distrust on the part of Syria's minority groups, as well as that voiced by non-sectarian opposition coalitions, such as the Syrian National Democratic Assembly (SNDA), relates to the background of Al-Sharaa and his dominant Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) faction as Islamists and even Al-Qaeda-aligned jihadists.

Despite early promises, the new government has excluded some sectarian groups, particularly the Kurds, at various stages in its formative processes.

Most senior positions are still filled by HTS and its original Idlib-based administration.

Worse, as was also in evidence during the clashes with the Alawite minority in March and the Druze earlier this month, HTS retains a separate identity within the country's security forces, despite vows to integrate all militias under central command.

Regional allies and enemies

Some of this can be explained by Al-Sharaa's need to retain enough freedom of action and force to **persuade** other factions to integrate and cooperate.

Despite an agreement with the Kurdish SDF in the northeast, for example, a confrontation might be inevitable. The same can be said of the for-now-suppressed Alawites, while the Druze form yet a different challenge.

In an echo of 19th-century great-power politics in the region, all of the above groups have regional allies and enemies that also exert pressure on the new government in Damascus.

While this was quite obviously on display during the Israeli **actions** in support of the Druze just last week, Turkey is also stirring the pot in terms of the Kurds.

Both Ankara and Damascus now demand full compliance by the Kurdish SDF to integrate into the Syrian forces and state structures and have given it a one-month deadline.

The SDF has interpreted a March agreement between the two sides as allowing the wholesale integration of Kurdish units into the new Syrian army, but Al-Sharaa resists this.

The Kurds will not want to expose themselves to the situation of the Alawites and the Druze, having seen the result of recent clashes

With American forces drawing down their **presence** in support of the SDF, which was instrumental in defeating ISIS and still runs the largest prison camp housing ex-ISIS members, the Kurds are facing some bleak choices.

They receive a certain measure of support from the neighbouring Iraqi Kurdish region, but the government there is loath to overly antagonise Turkey.

Still, the likelihood is uncertain of Syria's Kurds giving up reliance on their own arms and falling completely under central government control, especially if the Al-Sharaa government appears to be uncompromising.

The Kurds will not want to expose themselves to the situation of the Alawites and the Druze, having seen the result of recent clashes.

On the other hand, some of the Damascus government calculations in confronting unrest in both the Alawite and Druze areas might be to quell any sources of potential unrest in the run-up to what might be an inevitable confrontation with the Kurds.

Israel's ambivalent attitude towards Al-Sharaa

The Kurdish area in the north and east of Syria is quite remote from the capital, the coastal plain, and other population centres, although it stretches to other strategic locations, such as Deir ez-Zor, on the road from Damascus to Iraq, and the former ISIS centre of Raqqa.

In theory, clashes in the northeast could be relatively contained and not affect the control of the new government over the rest of the country, the same way Turkey has been fighting the Kurdish PKK for years in the east, without it much affecting other areas.



Israel's ambivalent - and at times antagonistic - attitude towards Al-Sharaa could undermine the future stability of the new Syrian state

Yet, with the situation in the Alawite and

Druze areas unsettled, the danger would remain present of violence breaking out there on the back of a confrontation with the Kurds. The government's actions could have partly been aimed at sending a signal to forestall that.

Despite all attention in recent weeks having been focused on the Druze in the south and on the Israeli position in support of them, the more significant development for Syria and the region might well play out in the north, involving the Kurds and Turkey.

Even if geographically contained, such a confrontation could sap the new government of its strength and purpose and could give it an impulse towards greater central control and less inclusivity, tolerance, and democracy.

Israel's ambivalent - and at times antagonistic - attitude towards Al-Sharaa could undermine the future stability of the new Syrian state. The same could be said for Turkey pushing Damascus into a confrontation with the Kurds that might be avoidable and for which it is very possibly not ready.