

A Critical Examination of Syria's Religious Landscape After the Regime's Fall: Exclusion, Extremism, and Coercion



STJ Calls For Safeguarding Religious Spaces In Syria By Ensuring Freedom Of Belief, Countering Hate Speech, Ending Religious Exclusion And Coercion, Holding Perpetrators Accountable, And Enacting Laws That Uphold Pluralism And Prevent The Politicization Of Religion In Line With International Standards

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For Truth
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1. Introduction

Since the fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024 and the new government taking power in Syria, the country has entered a delicate transitional phase that calls for a thorough restructuring of state institutions, including the religious establishment. This sector has undergone significant changes, marked by the dismissal of many imams and preachers, the rise of more hardline religious movements, and the expansion of proselytizing campaigns with increasingly exclusionary tones, especially in areas with religious and sectarian diversity. Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) has documented these developments through multiple testimonies and local sources, all pointing to a troubling new reality that raises serious concerns about the future of religious pluralism and freedom of belief in Syria.

This report is based on verified field testimonies and open-source materials collected by STJ. It examines the main examples of transformation in the religious sphere during the initial months following the collapse of the former regime. The report also explores the legal and social dimensions of these changes and concludes with practical recommendations directed at the Syrian transitional government and relevant international actors. These recommendations aim to protect religious rights, safeguard public freedoms, and promote social cohesion in the post-conflict phase.

2. Restructuring the Traditional Religious Framework: Changing Imams and Adopting a New Discourse

The religious establishment was among the first sectors to undergo restructuring by the Syrian transitional authorities.¹ This restructuring was clearly reflected in the appointment of imams and preachers, as well as in the content of religious discourse. One of its most prominent manifestations was the replacement of former religious figures with new ones and the adoption of a more hardline rhetoric. This was confirmed by [Sheikh Dr. Abdul Qader Mohammad al-Hussein](#), a Professor of Tafsir and Qur'anic Sciences at Yalova University and a former faculty member at the University of Damascus. He appeared in a [video](#) responding to complaints from the people of Aleppo that their city had become a haven for Wahhabis who excommunicate others and spread sectarianism in their sermons, stating,

¹ As an example, Sheikh Osama al-Rifai was appointed Grand Mufti of the Syrian Arab Republic in March 2025, despite his controversial background. In August 2021, al-Rifai made public [statements](#) against women that carried a distinctly hardline tone. He criticized Syrian women working in civil society organizations, accusing them of spreading atheism and moral corruption. This rhetoric reflects an exclusionary and discriminatory attitude that contradicts the principles of equality and respect for freedoms. Additionally, al-Rifai was cited as one of the signatories of a [fatwa](#) issued by the Syrian Fatwa Council in Istanbul in 2018. This fatwa classified the fight against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Afrin as a legitimate jihad and allowed the confiscation of property belonging to SDF members as "spoils." It also included stringent positions regarding prisoners and the wounded, clearly violating the principles of international humanitarian law and demonstrating the use of religious rhetoric to justify violence and discrimination. Furthermore, he was one of the signatories of a second [fatwa](#) that sanctioned the seizure of property belonging to Kurdish fighters in the Afrin region during Operation Olive Branch. This action was later seen as a religious justification for the systematic looting of Kurdish civilian property in the area.

“Not less than 100 imams and preachers have been dismissed without any justification. The policy of removing preachers and imams continues across vast areas of Aleppo, replacing them with graduates of Wahhabi institutes, many of whom lack mastery of basic religious sciences. Some Qur'an learning centers have been shut down to establish others under Wahhabi supervision. Moreover, scholars within the Directorate of Endowments are being insulted and slandered with false and unjust accusations of supporting the former regime, despite the fact that they have remained steadfast in their duties under immense hardship and pressure.”

Testimonies and documentation gathered by STJ also point to a campaign aimed at removing imams and preachers linked to the former religious establishment, claiming it is due to their loyalty to the previous regime. Many of them were replaced by individuals associated with Islamic factions, especially those from the jihadist Salafi movement.

In some major cities, such as Damascus and Aleppo, these measures were often carried out under a legal guise through official decrees issued by the Ministry of Endowments of the transitional government. However, in the Damascus countryside, many imams were forced to step down either coercively or under pressure following public accusations of collaboration with the former regime. Their replacements were brought in from areas like Idlib or were originally displaced individuals from the same regions².

A mosque imam from the Damascus countryside testified to STJ that he faced direct pressure from security authorities to remove him from his position.³ In his account, he described an incident on 2 January 2025, when the “security emir” of the city visited his home, accompanied by sheikhs who were among the returning displaced individuals. They informed him of his dismissal, claiming it was due to his alleged support of the regime, whether through prayer or even a single word. The witness noted that all his attempts to contest this decision were unsuccessful, and he was threatened with imprisonment if he returned to the mosque. He emphasized that he is an official employee of the Ministry of Endowments and cannot be dismissed without following due legal procedures. He added,

“Not everyone who was in regime-controlled areas was a supporter of the regime.”

In the city of Zamalka in the Damascus countryside, the imam of a local mosque confirmed to STJ that he was beaten and threatened by members affiliated with the new government in an attempt to force him to leave the mosque. According to his account, on the night of 17 January 2025, a leading figure in the authority, Abu Hamza al-Shami, arrived at his home accompanied by masked gunmen. They dragged him by his hair and severely beat him, all while hurling insults and issuing direct threats, saying,

“You are the regime's sheikh, the dogs' sheikh. I swear I will make an example out of you and every sheikh who stood by the regime and the Ba'ath Party... If you do not stay

² “[Syria: A New Lineup of Mosque Preachers and Awqaf Officials](#)”, Al-Modon Newspaper, 2 February 2025.

³ STJ does not disclose the names of witnesses in this report to ensure their safety and security.

home, I will make you wish for death. Do not you dare return to the mosque and defile it.”

The imam has not returned to the mosque since the incident, despite filing an official complaint with General Security. No legal action has been taken against the attackers, and Abu Hamza continues to move freely throughout the city without facing any consequences. Additionally, no official organization has intervened to reinstate the imam or restore his dignity.

On February, the Directorate of Endowments in Damascus issued a [decision](#) to dismiss Sheikh Ibrahim Dannoun, imam of the Afridoun al-Ajami Mosque in al-Shaghour, and Sheikh Mohammad Youssef Khurshid, imam and preacher of al-Huda Mosque in Mezzeh. The decision also prohibited them from conducting or participating in any religious activities in the city's mosques after reviewing the information circulated about them. This action was particularly taken after the [Zaman Al Wasl](#) news website obtained a security card issued by the National Defense Militia, bearing Khurshid's name and photo, which confirmed his official affiliation with the militia. These decisions sparked widespread objections, with many [perceiving](#) them as part of an organized campaign to undermine public trust in traditional religious figures in Syria and replace them with politically favored individuals.

Khaldoun Taha, a follower of Sheikh Khurshid, [defended](#) his sheikh by denying that he ever praised or prayed in support of the former regime. He argued that the militia membership card mentioned could have been obtained by anyone for a fee, solely to facilitate passage through checkpoints, without indicating any actual political stance. He stated,

“If there is any further defamation from any page, I will personally file a complaint with the Public Prosecutor in Damascus. Enough with the defamation of the moderate sheikhs of Damascus known for their balanced discourse.”

In a concerning development reflecting the increase of religious-political violence in the country, two prominent religious sheikhs were kidnapped, humiliated, and beaten; one was killed, while the fate of the other remains unknown. These incidents sparked widespread controversy and growing fears about the targeting of moderate religious leaders.

On 5 January, activists shared [photos](#) of the arrest of Imam Omar Houri, the sheikh of Mus'ab ibn Umair Mosque in the Baramkeh neighborhood. He was charged with being a “*shabih*” (regime thug) and one of the intelligence arms of the former regime, allegedly involved in detaining dozens. According to activists, General Security agents paraded him through the city streets with his hands tied and eyes blindfolded before taking him to an unknown location. His death was later [announced](#) on 27 January 2025. His family [declared](#) the cancellation of all funeral and mourning ceremonies, justifying, “to preserve everyone's safety and to affirm our commitment to the martyr's approach of rejecting discord and promoting brotherhood and unity among the nation's people.”

On 28 January 2025, the Association of Syrian Scholars and Preachers issued an [urgent statement](#) confirming the abduction of the Sufi Sheikh Asaad Al-Kahil by an armed faction in Damascus. They reported that he was severely beaten, resulting in two broken ribs and a critical health condition requiring immediate medical intervention. The Association directed the



statement to the new Syrian government, urging it to transfer him to a hospital and provide the necessary medical care.

3. The Rise of More Extremist Discourses on Pulpits: Politicization of Religion and Growing Hate Speech

The expansion of religious influence during the transitional phase is not limited to appointments and more extreme discourses; it is also seen in some religious organizations' efforts to strengthen their institutional presence and oversee state activities. In an [interview](#) with the newspaper Al-Quds Al-Arabi on 2 April 2025, Sheikh Mohammad Naeem Arqassousi, a member of the Supreme Fatwa Council, stated that the council's duties include overseeing laws and ministerial decisions and correcting government policies to ensure their compliance with Islamic Sharia. Although he later retracted these remarks in a [statement](#) to the SANA, denying that they represented the council's official position and describing them as "a personal, advisory viewpoint," these statements reflected a concerning tendency toward establishing a religious guardianship role that extends beyond issuing fatwas to influencing legislation and public administration.

This expansive tendency in the authority of the religious establishment aligns with the transformations witnessed across the country during the current year, particularly concerning the nature of religious discourse from the pulpits. [Friday sermons](#) and religious admonitions have shifted towards a more hardline and extremist rhetoric, reflecting the jihadist Salafi orientations of many newly appointed imams. This shift has stripped the pulpit of its traditional guiding role and transformed it into a tool for political and religious mobilization and incitement.

In his testimony to STJ, a Sharia student at the University of Damascus expressed his disappointment with the direction of religious discourse under the new authorities, saying,

"I had hoped the [new] authorities would adopt a committed Islamic approach, but it turned out to adopt a rhetoric that is more hardline and violent."

The witness attributed the blame to the newly appointed imams, who he claimed were "endorsed by Islamic military groups," accusing them of inciting hatred and calling for jihad against those who differ politically or sectarianly.

The witness stated that he chose not to return to the neighborhood mosque, which he had attended for many years, after being disturbed by the sermons given by the new imam, who was not originally from the area. The imam urged worshippers to "fortify themselves" and to avoid engaging with those who held different opinions or sectarian affiliations, claiming that this was necessary for protecting their faith and preventing discord. The witness added,

"I was shocked because this is not what we learned about Islam, which teaches justice and kindness even towards those who disagree with us or follow other religions."

He expressed regret over what he described as "the politicization of the pulpit and the change in religious discourse according to political and social circumstances," stressing the need to confront those who exploit religion for political purposes, as he articulated.





In another example illustrating the dangers of this rhetorical shift, the city of Hama witnessed an incident that sparked widespread controversy. On 4 March 2025, activists documented [videos](#) showing a clash between worshippers and armed militants outside the Al-Sharia Mosque. The confrontation escalated to gunfire in the air after the militants considered the manner in which the Tarawih prayers were performed to be an “innovation” (bid’ah).

A local sheikh [commented](#) on the incident, saying,

“The extremists’ provocation of worshippers and labeling them as misguided is something that will not be tolerated.”

warning of popular backlash if such assaults happen again.

This was not an isolated incident. A [fight](#) also broke out inside the Mus’ab ibn Umayr Mosque in Hama, where physical clashes erupted between worshippers and a hardline Salafi group. The group stormed the mosque during a dhikr gathering, accusing the worshippers of practicing “heretical rituals,” which led to a violent confrontation that ended with the group being expelled from the mosque by the worshippers.

4. Preaching Campaigns and Symbolic Coercion: Using the Religious Sphere to Reinforce a Unilateral Discourse

One of the most worrying outcomes of the changes in the religious landscape after the fall of the regime is the rise of exclusionary preaching activities, characterized by pressure and a one-sided approach, especially in areas known for their religious and sectarian diversity. Since the first weeks of the new government taking power, many Syrian cities have experienced a surge in preaching campaigns⁴.

On 29 December 2024, activists circulated a [video](#) from the city of As Suqaylabiyah in rural Hama showing a preacher urging a Christian man to become a Muslim. The man reluctantly agreed, appearing visibly fearful and hesitant. This scene, which captured a moment of symbolic coercion, sparked widespread outrage due to its exploitation of religious authority in the absence of a safe and balanced environment.

In his testimony to STJ, the imam of a mosque in As Suqaylabiyah shared details about his removal from the position after facing repeated harassment from worshippers who had recently moved to the city. These individuals accused him of promoting a “lenient” discourse that advocated for tolerance among religions and opposed violence. The witness pointed out that the new imam who took over adopted a much harsher rhetoric, saying,

“Friday sermons now include statements promoting violence against non-believers and stirring up animosity toward members of different sects.”

⁴ See for example: [Video 1](#), [Video 2](#), [Video 3](#), [Video 4](#), [Video 5](#), [Video 6](#).



He explained that the new imam's sermons included direct calls to "fortify against innovations" and "avoid mixing with the People of the Book," which sparked widespread discontent even among the moderate Muslim community in the city.

The witness noted during the interview that his removal was not an isolated case, but rather coincided with the dismissal of the imam of the nearby Qalaat Al Madiq town's mosque and the appointment of a preacher known for his hardline views in his place; an action he described as part of a "systematic campaign." The witness confirmed that he filed an official complaint with the Governor of Hama. According to the imam's account, the governor attributed the situation to the chaos and the many hardline factions within the new administration trying to impose their vision on the religious sphere.

The witness concluded:

"This is not what we fought for. We did not carry out a great revolution against injustice only to fall under another oppression of a different color. It is as if we have returned to the ages of ignorance."

In Damascus and its surroundings, proselytizing activities have escalated, particularly in neighborhoods with a Christian majority such as [al-Qassaa](#), [al-Qishla](#), [Bab Touma](#), and [Dwel'a](#). Starting in mid-January 2025, preaching cars and street preachers began roaming the streets, addressing passersby, both men and women, inviting them to embrace Islam and urging women to wear the hijab. This behavior has sparked significant sectarian tension in these areas.

An imam from a mosque in the Bab Touma area confirmed these incidents, noting that many of those involved in these activities are preachers from various nationalities, including Chechens, Turkmen, and Egyptians. They claim to be affiliated with the official proselytizing office authorized by the new government and possess official licenses. The imam explained,

"These individuals carry an ancient, ignorant mentality; they accuse people of disbelief, stop women in the streets to place coverings on their heads, or order them to wear proper Islamic dress, which provokes widespread anger and resentment in the area."

He added that these groups did not stop at harassment but also personally threatened him and some worshippers, saying,

"They told me: 'We will fight these apostates and infidels, whether Christians or others'."

5. Legal Opinion

The testimonies and field evidence mentioned above highlight troubling examples of the increasing politicization of the religious sphere and violations of the principle of state neutrality toward religions and sects. These developments also raise serious concerns about their impact on social cohesion, particularly at a time when the country urgently needs to rebuild trust and promote pluralism. In this context, this section of the report examines the legal dimensions of these practices under both Syrian domestic law and international human rights law.

Firstly, the content of certain religious sermons that incite hostility towards non-Muslims directly contradicts the [Constitutional Declaration](#) issued by the Syrian Transitional Government in March 2025. This declaration explicitly states that, "Freedom of belief is guaranteed, the state respects all monotheistic religions, and ensures the freedom to perform all religious rites, provided that this does not violate public order." This provision requires the state to uphold religious pluralism and actively prevent any form of religious discourse that promotes exclusion or discrimination.

Secondly, the dismissal of imams from their positions, whether through decisions made by the directorates of religious endowments or coercive actions taken by armed groups, constitutes a violation of the [Basic Law on State Employees No. 50 of 2004](#), which establishes strict conditions for any disciplinary action against public employees.

According to this law, dismissal from public service is considered one of the most serious disciplinary penalties, and it may only be enacted by a decision issued by the appropriate disciplinary court responsible for adjudicating cases involving employees of public institutions.⁵ Administrative authorities are prohibited from unilaterally enforcing such decisions without following due judicial procedures.

Thirdly, the incidents of imams being subjected to beatings, humiliation, and death threats by security or armed personnel reported by witnesses constitute criminal offenses punishable by law under the [Syrian Penal Code No. 148 of 1949](#). This code criminalizes intentional bodily harm and threats of committing a felony,⁶ and its provisions are intended to be enforced immediately to hold perpetrators accountable, especially in cases where formal complaints have been filed.

Fourthly, some sermons delivered by newly appointed imams, which incited hostility toward members of other religious sects and called for the imposition of Islam or the rejection of People of the Book, constitute a violation of Article 307 of the Syrian Penal Code. This article criminalizes any act, writing, or speech that is intended to, or results in, the incitement of sectarian or racial strife or the provocation of conflict among different sects.

Fifthly, the torture of Sheikh Omar Houri and Sheikh Asaad al-Kaheel represents a serious violation of the rule of law and the right to personal liberty and security, as outlined in Article 9 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\) of 1966](#). This covenant is part of the legal obligations that the transitional Syrian state is required to uphold. Abducting individuals without a judicial warrant and subjecting them to physical or psychological torture is a clear breach of international human rights law, particularly the Convention against [Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment \(CAT\)](#). Furthermore, the extrajudicial killing of Imam Omar Houri, executed without a fair trial or legal grounds for the charges, constitutes an arbitrary execution that is strictly prohibited. These incidents highlight the danger of unregulated armed groups or security institutions becoming tools for political and religious purges. It is essential to hold the perpetrators accountable to ensure they do not evade

⁵ Articles 68-69-70 of the Basic Law on State Employees.

⁶ Articles 540 et seq. and 560 et seq. of the Syrian Penal Code.

justice and to reinforce constitutional guarantees that protect the rights to life, fair trial, and freedom of belief.

From the perspective of international human rights law, the invitations in this report to convert to Islam in a context dominated by a party wielding security and military power, exemplified by the As Suqaylabiyah incident, violate the principle of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This principle is enshrined in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\) of 1948](#) and the ICCPR of 1966. Even in the absence of physical coercion, using religious influence, symbolic intimidation, or social pressure to force individuals to change their beliefs infringes on the core principles of religious freedom. Furthermore, preventing worshipers from performing their religious rituals, such as when armed individuals interrupt Tarawih prayers, amounts to unlawful interference with the freedom of worship and religious practice. This conduct violates Article 18 of the ICCPR, which guarantees individuals the right to practice their religion, whether alone or in community with others, in both public and private settings.⁷

Finally, forcing women in public spaces to wear the hijab or Islamic dress (Sharia-style dress), whether through direct or indirect moral pressure, constitutes a form of moral coercion that undermines the true meaning of freedom of belief. It also creates a situation of religious discrimination based on gender and religion, which violates not only the ICCPR but also the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#). Although Syria has expressed reservations regarding this convention, the fundamental principles of non-discrimination remain in effect due to the binding rules of international law.

6. Recommendations

To ensure the rule of law, safeguard freedom of religion and belief, and uphold religious pluralism in Syria during the transitional period and beyond, STJ recommends the following:

6.1. At the national level

- Comply with international agreements, especially the ICCPR, ensuring the right to life, personal security, freedom of religion and belief, and freedom of expression, while refraining from any form of direct or indirect pressure to force individuals to change their beliefs;
- Halt coercive or pressuring religious campaigns, whether conducted from pulpits or in public spaces, and ensure that religious or security authorities are not used to influence individuals' religious convictions;
- Enact a national law that clearly defines and criminalizes hate speech in accordance with international standards, preventing any incitement to violence or exclusion based on religion while ensuring that this law is not misused to unjustly restrict legitimate freedom of expression;
- Hold accountable those involved in incitement to religious hatred, or in making threats or practicing religious coercion, whether they are imams, preachers, or security personnel, and enforce relevant local laws;

⁷ Article 18 of the UDHR and the ICCPR.



- Launch national campaigns to raise awareness of human rights culture and religious tolerance, and promote values of diversity and coexistence, in partnership with civil society organizations and moderate religious leaders;
- Guarantee the right of imams who have been dismissed from their positions to seek judicial review and grievance within a fair legal framework, adhering to administrative accountability procedures outlined in Syrian laws, ensuring that no dismissal or removal penalty is imposed without a competent judicial ruling.

6.2. At the international level

- Support dialogue initiatives that foster interfaith and inter-sect understanding, and finance community programs that advance civil peace and social cohesion, particularly in areas with religious and sectarian diversity;
 - Allocate funds for independent monitoring mechanisms that address violations of freedom of religion and belief in Syria, ensuring the publication of trustworthy periodic reports that illuminate these violations and evaluate their impact on the social fabric;
 - Encourage the [Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#) and the [Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression](#) to undertake field visits to affected regions to verify facts and prepare thematic reports for submission to the Human Rights Council.
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ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.