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Thread: [Protests erupt in Syria over Christmas tree burning](#)

\$!uo2H%gE# - December 24, 2024, 2:30 am

Protests have broken out in Syria over the burning of a Christmas tree near the city of Hama.

A video posted on social media showed masked gunmen setting fire to the tree on display in the main square of the Suqaylabiyah, a Christian-majority town in central Syria.

The main Islamist faction which led the uprising that toppled President Bashar al-Assad said the men responsible for the arson were foreign fighters and had been detained and that the tree would be swiftly repaired.

Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets across the country, demanding the new Islamist rulers protect religious minorities.

In the Bab Touma neighborhood of Damascus, protesters carried a cross and Syrian flags, chanting "we will sacrifice our souls for our cross".

"If we're not allowed to live our Christian faith in our country, as we used to, then we don't belong here anymore," a demonstrator named Georges told AFP news agency.

Syria is home to many ethnic and religious groups, including Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Christians, Druze, Alawite Shia and Arab Sunnis, the last of whom make up a majority of the Muslim population.

Just over two weeks ago, Bashar al-Assad's presidency fell to rebel forces, ending the Assad family's more than 50-year-rule.

How the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group will govern Syria remains to be seen. The group has a jihadist past, which it has distanced itself from, and an Islamist present.

As fighters marched to Damascus earlier this month, its leaders spoke about building a Syria for all Syrians. Representatives have also said that the rights and freedoms of religious and ethnic minorities would be protected. HTS remains designated as a terrorist organisation by the UN, US, EU and UK, though there are signs that a diplomatic shift may be underway.

On Friday, the US has scrapped a \$10m (£7.9m) bounty on the head of HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa, following meetings between senior diplomats and representatives from the group.

The US is continuing its military presence in Syria. It said on Friday that it carried out an air strike in the northern city of Deir Ezzor - killing two members of the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group.

The presence of foreign fighters, Islamic extremists, or even regime supporters who have interest in causing insecurity and attacking minorities to shake the country's stability are the big challenge that the new Islamic leadership will face.

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0lTe6-Amh8>]