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# Syria

15 July 2025 | POPULATIONS AT RISK



RISK LEVEL: CURRENT CRISIS

*Despite a political transition and significant decrease in hostilities, populations in Syria remain at risk of war crimes.*

## BACKGROUND:

On 8 December 2024 the government of President Bashar al-Assad was overthrown by a coalition of armed opposition groups, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), following a 12-day offensive. The collapse of Assad's government occurred after nearly 14 years of an internationalized country-wide armed conflict between the government and opposition groups characterized by rampant atrocity crimes, including the illegal use of chemical weapons. More than 580,000 people were killed and 13 million Syrians forcibly displaced during the first ten years of the conflict, according to the Human Rights Council-mandated Commission of Inquiry (CoI) on Syria. Despite the overthrow of Assad, hostilities between the Syrian National Army (SNA), Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) and various armed groups continue in northern Syria. Over 500,000 Syrian refugees have returned to the country since 8 December 2024, according to the UN Refugee Agency.

The conflict has its origins in the Assad government's brutal suppression of pro-democracy protests in March 2011. Throughout the armed conflict, the Assad government systematically perpetrated extermination, murder, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, torture and ill-treatment and sexual violence, amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity, according to the CoI. Armed groups, including HTS, the SNA, Turkish-backed groups and the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), were also implicated in atrocity crimes, such as torture, ill-treatment, systematic looting and arbitrary detention.

The CoI has reported over 130,000 arbitrary detentions, abductions or disappearances since 2011, with the majority attributable to the Assad government. Following the collapse of the Assad government, HTS and other groups opened many state-run detention and prison facilities, including the notorious Sednaya prison. While thousands of people were released from arbitrary detention, a number of mass graves were discovered and many Syrians continue to search for missing relatives.

Tens of thousands of people with alleged affiliations to ISIL, mainly women and children, remain trapped in squalid detention camps run by the Kurdish-backed SDF. The CoI has reported that the conditions may amount to cruel or inhuman treatment and may constitute the war crime of outrage upon personal dignity.

During the conflict, the UN Security Council (UNSC) failed to hold perpetrators accountable, as well as sustain access for cross-border humanitarian aid operations. Russia and China repeatedly exercised their veto power, and resolutions that were adopted were either unsuccessfully implemented or directly violated.

Despite UNSC inaction, several processes were initiated to pursue truth, justice and accountability for Syrians. In December 2016 the UN General Assembly (UNGA) established an International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) to assist in the investigation and prosecution of perpetrators of atrocities in Syria. Several countries have initiated proceedings or convicted suspected Syrian perpetrators under universal jurisdiction. In June 2023 the UNGA established the Independent Institution on Missing Persons (IIMP) in Syria to clarify the fate and whereabouts of all missing persons and provide support to victims, survivors and their families. That same month, Canada and the Netherlands jointly initiated proceedings against Syria before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) concerning alleged violations of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

Between 6 to 9 March armed clashes erupted in Latakia, Hama and Tartus governorates after armed groups and individuals loyal to former President Assad ambushed transitional government forces conducting a so-called “security campaign.” More than 1,000 people were reported killed, mostly from the Alawite minority group, who were reportedly specifically targeted. In late April sectarian violence erupted in southern Damascus, resulting in the killing of dozens of members of the Druze minority. In late June at least 25 people were killed and over 60 more injured by a suicide bombing at the St. Elias Church in Damascus.

Since December 2024 Syria’s transitional authorities have taken steps to dissolve remnants of Assad’s government. These include hosting a National Dialogue Conference, adopting a Constitutional Declaration to guide a five-year transition period until elections take place and appointing a new transitional government led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa. Several armed groups have agreed to disband and integrate under the Ministry of Defence. On 10 March the Kurdish-led SDF also agreed to merge into state institutions. On 17 May Syria’s transitional authorities announced the forthcoming establishment of a Transitional Justice Commission and a National Commission for the Missing.

On 20 May European Union (EU) foreign ministers agreed to lift the remaining EU economic sanctions. On 23 May United States (US) President Donald Trump issued orders to begin lifting US sanctions.

## ANALYSIS:

While the ongoing political transition in Syria is a historic opportunity for Syrians to rebuild their country, the future remains uncertain. The transitional authorities have inherited a devastated economy and humanitarian crisis, which has left nearly the entire Syrian population reliant on aid. The transitional government must balance the urgency of rebuilding the country and restoring services with the need to address and remedy a legacy of serious human rights violations and atrocity crimes. The enactment of broad presidential powers under the Constitutional Declaration and absence of political pluralism has raised concerns over how inclusive the political transition will be. While the creation of a transitional justice authority has marked a key step towards establishing a justice process, it has excluded the pursuit of accountability for crimes committed by non-state armed actors and has been limited in its consultations with Syrian civil society.

Minorities across Syria's governorates are at risk of targeted attacks. In May the CoI warned that, "the spread of discriminatory incitement and hate speech, including through social media, is fueling violence and risks threatening Syria's social cohesion." It remains to be seen if the agreement between the transitional authorities and SDF will ensure a sustained ceasefire, including in the northeast where hostilities between the SDF, SNA and other groups have displaced and endangered thousands of civilians.

Though the Assad government has collapsed, rights abuses continue, including the arbitrary detention of thousands in SDF-guarded camps. Justice and accountability must be pursued for victims of serious crimes committed by all perpetrators, including for crimes committed by HTS during the conflict.

## **RISK ASSESSMENT:**

- Legacy of war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated by all parties to the conflict, particularly the former government.
- Impunity enjoyed by all perpetrators for atrocity crimes.
- Insecurity due to ongoing hostilities in northern Syria and escalating attacks against minorities.
- Weak institutions and economic devastation.
- Fragile political and security conditions because of an abrupt change in political power.

## **NECESSARY ACTION:**

The transitional government must ensure a transparent, diverse and inclusive political process. Efforts to build national unity must be grounded in Syria's political, ethnic and religious diversity, including protective provisions in the drafting of the permanent constitution. The National Dialogue Conference must serve as only the start of ongoing national consultations, for which inclusivity is essential. Executive power afforded to the interim president must not be abused, nor exceed the transitional period. The transitional justice commission must ensure ongoing consultation with and inclusion of civil society organizations and victims associations, while also expanding the scope of prosecutable

crimes to include those committed by non-state armed groups. Syrian authorities should continue to be guided by the core underlying principles of UNSC Resolution 2254, regarding a Syrian-led political transition, informed by the aspirations of the Syrian people and with assistance from the UN.

All parties to the conflict must uphold their obligations under international law, including ending attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, and facilitate unimpeded humanitarian access to civilians trapped or displaced by fighting. The transitional authorities should facilitate inclusive discussions with armed groups reluctant to disband, aiming to establish guarantees, define parameters and set a timeline for disbandment and integration. Authorities must condemn the targeting of minorities and ensure that those responsible for Syria's coastal violence are held to account.

Syria should ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, pursue justice and accountability, ensure the implementation of a comprehensive and holistic transitional justice process and maintain cooperation with all UN-mandated investigative mechanisms. The return of refugees and other displaced Syrians must be in accordance with the principle of non-refoulement.