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# “Are you Alawi?”

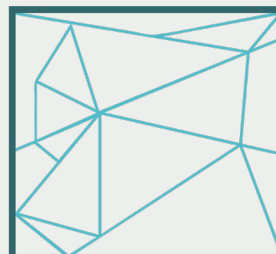
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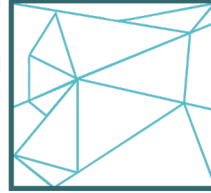
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## **“Are you Alawi?”**

**Identity-Based Killings During Syria’s Transition**

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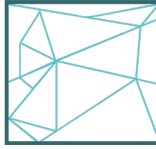
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# “Are you Alawi?”

## Identity-Based Killings During Syria’s Transition

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# Summary

In early March 2025, the veneer of stability that marked the first days of post-Assad Syria shattered following deadly insurgent attacks against government forces along the coast by armed men whom officials described as loyalists of the former government. Dozens were killed, triggering a wave of violent abuses against Alawi communities.

Government forces, comprising Defense and Interior Ministry units, alongside government-aligned armed groups and armed volunteers swept through Alawi-majority neighborhoods, towns, and villages in Tartous, Latakia, and Hama governorates leaving behind torched homes, piled bodies, mass graves, and broken communities. The answer to one question repeated during methodical house-to-house raids and before brutal executions often determined whether you lived or died: “Are you Alawi?”

This report, researched and produced jointly by Human Rights Watch, Syrians for Truth and Justice, and Syrian Archive, documents widespread abuses carried out by government forces and government-aligned armed groups during so-called security “combing” operations. Though framed as efforts to root out “regime remnants” and confiscate stockpiled weaponry, these operations resulted in grave violations targeting civilians based on identity.

Drawing on more than 100 interviews, hundreds of verified videos and photographs, and satellite imagery, the report presents evidence that these forces committed widespread summary executions, deliberate destruction of property, and abuse of detainees.

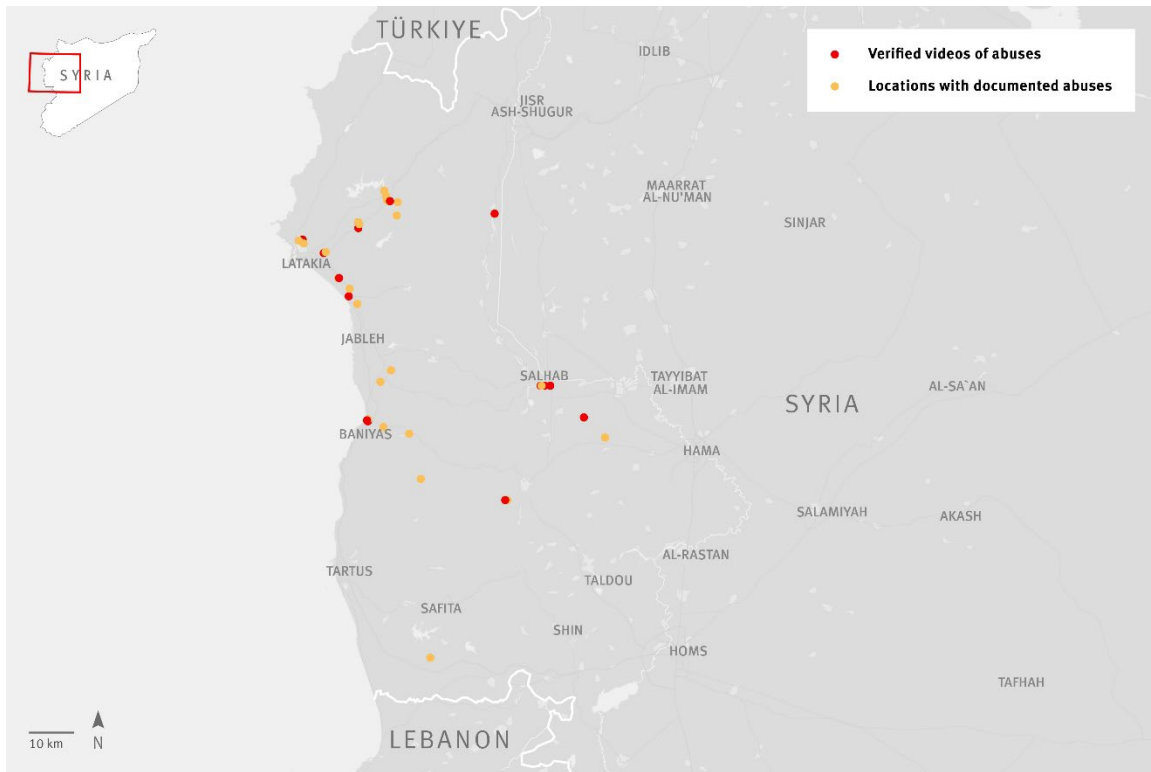
Between March 7 and at least March 10, government forces and other armed groups stormed through more than 30 Alawi-majority towns, villages, and neighborhoods, with the professed aim of targeting former government affiliates and uncovering arms depots. In the process they killed at least 1,400 people. In many cases, they moved house-to-house, demanding to know residents’ sect, looting valuables, torching homes, and executing children, women, and men, including older people, often using overtly anti-Alawi slurs and rhetoric. In some places, fighters wiped out entire families.

Atrocities also included acts of humiliating abuse: men forced to crawl and bark like dogs before being shot and older detainees beaten on camera. Survivors described multiple waves of armed men, masked, in military fatigues or civilian clothes, repeatedly sweeping through their homes and communities. In Salhab in Hama Governorate, a video shows the Ministry of Interior's General Security forces executing detainees at point blank range. In other areas, curfews imposed by authorities lulled families into staying home, only to be executed in their living rooms hours later. Fighters carried out many of the massacres under the pretext of "investigation," but the patterns of abuse and identity-based targeting revealed a darker intent: to punish Alawi communities collectively, regardless of individual guilt or innocence.

While this investigation does not uncover direct evidence of orders to commit violations, the atrocities that engulfed Syria's coastal region and Hama in March unfolded during a centrally coordinated military operation overseen by the Ministry of Defense, which mobilized tens of thousands of fighters, assigned operational zones to different factions, and facilitated joint deployments across Latakia, Tartous, and Hama. Fighters from at least a dozen factions, many formally or informally integrated into the Ministry of Defense, described receiving direct orders from the ministry, participating in shared operations rooms with other factions, and handing control over areas to General Security forces after sweeps.

Within this coordinated operation, the scale, duration, and consistency of the documented abuses make clear they were not isolated incidents. Although the majority of killings and mass abuses occurred during the first four days of the operation, violations persisted in multiple locations for several days thereafter, and according to fighters, senior officials and commanders continued coordinating with armed units long after grave abuses had become public.

Real-time videos shared online and verified by researchers, as well as public statements issued by authorities on March 7 and 8 urging protection of civilians, acknowledging "infractions" and announcing the formation of an oversight committee, prove that the senior officials and military commanders were aware of ongoing violations. These measures proved insufficient to stem the violence. Some interim government forces reportedly acted to evacuate civilians or intervene against abuses by other fighters. Yet the overall lack of meaningful, timely action, despite these public acknowledgments, points to a failure by both civilian and military authorities to uphold their duties.



Graphic © 2025 Human Rights Watch

In its August report on the March events, the UN Commission of Inquiry found that interim government forces, and private individuals, as well as pro-former government fighters, committed serious violations—including murder, torture, abductions, pillage, and destruction of property—that likely amount to war crimes.

Senior civilian officials and military commanders can bear individual criminal responsibility for international crimes committed by their subordinates under the principle of command responsibility should they have failed to take all necessary and reasonable steps to prevent or punish these crimes.

Participation in the abuses by individuals who were not part of the security forces, officially portrayed as spontaneous and voluntary, further undermines the authorities' narrative. Interviews with fighters and volunteers reveal that men unaffiliated with the security forces were actively recruited, armed, organized, and deployed alongside formal units by Defense Ministry representatives. Despite public statements instructing unaffiliated participants to withdraw, some remained involved in combat, checkpoints, and house raids well beyond March 8. Authorities sought to distance themselves from



violations by attributing abuses to “unorganized elements,” but statements by interviewees and deployment patterns suggest otherwise: volunteers were embedded in official operations and, in some cases, directed by Ministry of Defense officials.

Moreover, the March atrocities did not erupt in a vacuum. They were the culmination of months of incitement, reprisals, and unchecked violence in post-Assad Syria, and decades of structural sectarianism, weakened rule of law, and impunity for systemic crimes perpetrated by the Assad government. After the former government’s collapse in December 2024, the interim government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, previously known by his nom-de-guerre Abu Muhammad al-Jolani in his capacity as leader of the armed group Hay’et Tahrir al Sham (HTS), raced to assert control, merging dozens of armed factions into a fledgling Ministry of Defense. But integration was nominal. Many groups retained their structures and loyalties. While formal command structures were weak or still forming, the Defense Ministry actively coordinated deployments, issued mobilization orders, and integrated fighters into joint operations. In doing so, it assumed responsibility for forces it failed to meaningfully supervise. Efforts to vet fighters and commanders lagged, allowing previously unaccountable units to rebrand as state forces and act with impunity. Meanwhile, insurgent attacks against government forces often served as the trigger for retaliatory raids. What followed was a period marked by deepening mistrust and growing insecurity, especially in Alawi-majority areas perceived as former strongholds of the Assad government.

By February 2025, reports of summary killings, disappearances, and arbitrary detentions of Alawis had become frequent. Witnesses described house raids, arbitrary arrests, and checkpoint harassment, often justified as rooting out “regime remnants.” In several towns across Latakia, Tartous, Hama, and Homs, former government soldiers and security forces who had “settled their status” with interim authorities through official reconciliation procedures in hopes of protection were killed or subjected to violence and detention by government-affiliated forces nonetheless.

And identity-based abuses have persisted across Syria. In mid-July, formally deployed state units sent to Sweida to “restore order” were soon accused of field executions, looting, and arson in acts disturbingly reminiscent of the March massacres.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, the absence of a functioning justice system has left a vacuum filled by revenge killings and growing public disillusionment. Violent actors ranging from the extremist armed group Islamic State (ISIS) to rogue local groups have exploited the government’s limited capacity to deliver justice, carrying out assassinations and stoking fear.

This report examines early efforts at accountability for the March atrocities by Syria’s transitional authorities. It describes the creation of two official bodies, the Fact-Finding Committee and the Civil Peace Committee, tasked with investigating the violence and easing communal tensions. It also notes arrests and other limited disciplinary measures announced by authorities, alongside the introduction of a Military Code of Conduct and a Transitional Justice Commission with a narrow mandate.

To curb renewed violence and build lasting stability, the transitional government should overhaul the security sector and launch a comprehensive justice process. That means bringing every integrated faction under a single, civilian-supervised chain of command, vetting commanders and rank-and-file alike, dismantling abusive units, and strictly enforcing the new Military Code of Conduct. At the same time, authorities should publish the full fact-finding report, prosecute those it implicates, and thoroughly examine the responsibility of senior officials and commanders who persisted in directing deployments and coordinating operations despite clear and mounting evidence of widespread abuses.

This should go hand-in-hand with advancing broader efforts towards comprehensive accountability for the crimes of the Assad era and those committed in the aftermath of his ouster, including ongoing cooperation with international efforts aimed at supporting justice, including the UN International Impartial and Independent Mechanism and Commission of Inquiry. Without a serious reckoning with the past, Syria risks entrenching a new cycle of impunity and sectarian violence. The choices made now, at this fragile juncture, will shape not only the legitimacy of the transitional government, but the future

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<sup>1</sup> OHCHR, *Syria: UN experts alarmed by attacks on Druze communities, including sexual violence against women and girls*, published 21 August 2025. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/08/syria-un-experts-alarmed-attacks-druze-communities-including-sexual-violence>.

of Syria's social fabric. Donors, in turn, should make security assistance conditional on measurable progress in reforms to guarantee that justice and human rights remain at the center of Syria's transition.

Justice in Syria cannot be delayed. The scale and brutality of the March atrocities and ongoing identity-based abuses demand more than symbolic acts or piecemeal reforms. Justice must be inclusive, prompt, and unwavering in its commitment to all victims.



A damaged residential area in Jableh district in Latakia, Syria on March 11, 2025. © 2025 Izettin Kasim/Anadolu via Getty Images.

# Recommendations

## Security Sector Reform

### *To the Transitional Government of Syria:*

- Ensure that all armed factions integrated into the Syrian military are subordinated to a unified command and undergo full restructuring to dismantle internal chains of loyalty and factional identities.
- Ensure that all military and security personnel are identifiable by faction or agency during operations.
- Establish a civilian-led inspectorate or oversight body empowered to investigate misconduct by security forces and refer cases for prosecution.
- Rigorously vet commanders and fighters from all factions before granting them positions within state institutions and publicly disclose the vetting process.
- Enforce the newly adopted Code of Military Conduct by creating clear disciplinary mechanisms and ensuring regular training in human rights and international humanitarian law.
- Establish a body to receive claims and award compensation or other forms of reparations to victims of unlawful violence and property destruction committed by members of the security forces since December 2024.

### *To Türkiye, Gulf States, and other Donor Governments:*

- Condition training, funding, and arms on: (1) proof of unified command, (2) public vetting criteria, (3) measurable disciplinary action.
- Publicly commit to supporting reforms that guarantee civilian protection and inclusive and rights-respecting security institutions.
- Offer technical assistance for force restructuring, but freeze support if vetted abusers remain in command roles.

## Securing Accountability

### *To the Transitional Government of Syria:*

- Incorporate international crimes and associated modes of liability, such as command responsibility, into Syrian domestic law to enable effective investigation and prosecution, including so that both civilian and military superiors can be held criminally accountable when they order, facilitate, or fail to prevent or punish violations committed by subordinates. The law should apply retroactively to enable accountability for international crimes committed under previous and transitional authorities.
- Publicly release the full investigative report of the Fact-Finding Committee, with appropriate safeguards to protect witness identities and ensure due process for those accused.
- Ensure that judicial proceedings examine not only individual crimes, but also institutional responsibility.
- Ensure that all investigations, official reporting, and accountability processes systematically disaggregate data by age, gender and ethno-religious identity and explicitly document the impact of violations on children and older people. This includes recording child and older victims in casualty figures, ensuring their experiences are reflected in fact-finding reports, and developing tailored protection and support measures that address their specific protection needs.
- Support all credible efforts to pursue impartial and independent justice for victims and survivors of crimes committed by all parties to the 2011-2024 conflict, including by explicitly expanding the mandate of the national Transitional Justice Commission, excluding amnesties for core international crimes and engaging proactively with established international mechanisms. This should include unhindered access and establishment of offices and cooperation frameworks with UN bodies such as the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, the Commission of Inquiry, and the Independent Institution on Missing Persons, including on evidence collection, preservation, and analysis, as well as suspect tracking and arrests.

### *To Other Governments (Including Türkiye, Gulf States, and International Supporters)*

- Urge the Syrian transitional government to commit to non-selective, Syrian-owned justice and revise relevant legal frameworks to uphold judicial independence, due process for all detainees and civilian oversight.
- Use diplomatic and financial leverage to ensure accountability is a central pillar of Syria's reconstruction and transition agenda.
- Increase long-term funding and support for Syrian civil society and documentation groups involved in justice and truth-telling initiatives.
- Ensure all justice mechanisms and initiatives prioritize the protection and inclusion of victims and survivors, especially in their engagement and testimony.

## **Reparations**

### *To the Transitional Government of Syria:*

- Publicly acknowledge responsibility for serious human rights violations, including those committed during the March 2025 atrocities, and recognize the right of all victims of serious human rights violations to reparations, including those harmed by prior governments.
- Establish a transparent and inclusive national reparations mechanism that addresses both the March atrocities and broader conflict-related abuses across Syria.
- Ensure that reparations are delivered transparently and equitably, without reinforcing identity-based or political divisions.
- Coordinate with the United Nations and relevant international bodies to secure technical and legal support.
- Ensure reparations include compensation, psychosocial and physical rehabilitation (including assistive devices), restitution of property, satisfaction including truth-telling about the atrocities, and guarantees of non-repetition.
- Consult with victims and civil society in the design and implementation of all reparations measures, ensuring respect for victims' rights, dignity, and safety.

### *To Donor States and International Partners:*

- Provide funding, technical help, and political backing for a credible, victim-centered reparations scheme that offers interim support (medical,



psychosocial, rehabilitation services) and is built into all future reconstruction talks, ensuring it covers every victim of serious abuses, regardless of perpetrator. Ensure targeted reparations for people who have acquired a disability, including psychosocial disability, as result of violations of international human rights or humanitarian law.

- Support Syrian civil society working on justice, including initiatives that document violations, advocate for victims' rights, and strengthen their ability to access international and regional justice mechanisms.

## Methodology

This report is based on research conducted jointly by Human Rights Watch, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), and Syrian Archive between January and May 2025.

Human Rights Watch and STJ conducted in-person and remote interviews with over 85 individuals, including survivors, witnesses, relatives of victims, journalists, and military personnel involved in March 2025 operations and an additional 45 individuals harmed during earlier security sweeps. All interviews were conducted privately in Arabic with informed consent. Researchers explained to interviewees the research purpose and participants' right to decline or withdraw; identities were anonymized where necessary for safety.

Syrian Archive and STJ reviewed over 600 publicly available videos, photographs, and social media posts shared directly with researchers or collected from social media platforms including Telegram, Facebook, and X. The reviewed material covered incidents from 27 different locations that took place between March 7, 2025, and March 11, 2025. By matching visible landmarks with satellite imagery, street-level photographs, or other visual material, Syrian Archive and STJ used the videos and photographs collected to, where possible, corroborate the location and approximate date of some attacks. Researchers also reviewed public statements, death notices, and casualty lists.

On May 6, representatives from Human Rights Watch and STJ met with members of the Syrian Fact-Finding Committee tasked with investigating the deadly events of early March, to discuss the scope and findings of this investigation. On May 26, Human Rights Watch sent formal correspondence to the Syrian transitional authorities outlining preliminary conclusions, posing specific questions, and requesting access to impacted areas. No response has been received as of time of publication.

# I. Background

The fall of President Bashar al-Assad on December 8, 2024, ended decades of authoritarian rule and triggered a volatile transition. A new government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly Abu Mohammed al-Jolani) emerged, promising reform but immediately facing challenges of security, justice, and legitimacy.

## Efforts at Military Integration

To consolidate control, the transitional authorities moved quickly to unify armed factions under a newly formed Ministry of Defense, led by former Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) commanders.<sup>2</sup> Turkish-backed factions like Sultan Suleiman Shah, Hamzat, and Sultan Murad were integrated, and their leaders appointed to senior positions, despite the factions' abusive records.<sup>3</sup>

In the south, an early-January deal<sup>4</sup> with Druze leaders placed Sweida's security forces under Interior Ministry oversight, but July clashes led to a U.S.-brokered ceasefire and withdrawal of Damascus troops, effectively returning day-to-day security to Druze hands. In

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<sup>2</sup> Al Jazeera, "Syria Says Ex-Rebel Groups Agree to Integrate Under Defence Ministry," *Al Jazeera*, December 24, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/24/syria-says-ex-rebel-groups-agree-to-integrate-under-defence-ministry>; Emirates Policy Center, "Challenges of Integration and Consensus: Can the New Syrian Administration Build a Unified Army?" *Emirates Policy Center*, accessed July 8, 2025, <https://epc.ae/en/details/featured/challenges-of-integration-and-consensus-can-the-new-syrian-administration-build-a-unified-army>.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, "*Everything is by the Power of the Weapon: Abuses and Impunity in Turkish-Occupied Northern Syria*," February 29, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/29/everything-power-weapon/abuses-and-impunity-turkish-occupied-northern-syria> (see section "Mohammad al-Jassem, also known as Abu Amsha"); Mohammad al-Jassem (@abo33amsha), X, April 18, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250514095634/https://x.com/abo33amsha/status/1916121067363459120>. Human Rights Watch, *Syria: Türkiye-Backed Armed Groups Detain, Extort Civilians*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/14/syria-turkiye-backed-armed-groups-detain-extort-civilians>; Sinan Ciddi and David Adesnik, "U.S. Sanctions Target Turkey-Backed Militias in Syria but Not Turkish Authorities," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, August 21, 2023, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/08/21/u-s-sanctions-target-turkey-backed-militias-in-syria-but-not-turkish-authorities/>; Syria TV, *Saif al-Din Boulad Appointed Commander of the 76th Division in the Syrian Army in Aleppo*, June 15, 2024, <https://www.syria.tv/تعيين-سيف-الدين-بولاد-قائداً للفرقة-76-بالجيش-السوري-في-حلب>. Enab Baladi, "Eighth Brigade in Daraa Dissolves Itself," April 13, 2025, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/04/eighth-brigade-in-daraa-dissolves-itself/>. BBC Monitoring, "*Sultan Murad Division – The Sultan Murad Division Is a Key Component of the SNA's Levant Front*," accessed July 8, 2025, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/bo0033nz>; Syria TV, *What Position Did Faheem Eisa Assume in the Syrian Ministry of Defense?*, April 1, 2024, <https://www.syria.tv/-ما-المنصب-الذي-تقلده-فهييم-عيسى>. في-وزارة-الدفاع-السورية؟

<sup>4</sup> France 24, "Syria Monitor Says 9 Killed in Sectarian Clashes as Govt Vows Accountability," *France 24*, April 29, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250429-syria-monitor-says-9-killed-in-sectarian-clashes-as-govt-vows-accountability>.

the northeast, a March 10, 2025, framework mentioned phased integration of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces into the national army, though Kurdish commanders still retain localized authority pending full implementation.<sup>5</sup> Both arrangements remain precarious; a single flashpoint could push either region back into open conflict.

## Settlement Process, Security Sweeps, and Regime Remnants

A major priority was dismantling remnants of the Assad-era military and security services. Authorities launched a nationwide “settlement” process to vet former personnel, especially in Alawi-majority coastal areas where tens of thousands registered at reconciliation centers.<sup>6</sup>

In parallel, security forces launched widespread raids across northwest and coastal Syria, particularly in Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia governorates, professedly aimed at detaining former military and security personnel involved in past abuses and confiscating stockpiled weaponry. These operations triggered reports of misconduct, arbitrary arrests, and mounting tension in communities already on edge.<sup>7</sup>

## Structural Legacies and Alawi Marginalization

While not all Alawis supported Assad, their disproportionate representation in the military leadership, security apparatus, and public sector, shaped by both government strategy and limited economic alternatives, left many structurally tied to the state.<sup>8</sup>

Across Latakia, Homs, Damascus, and Tartous governorates, thousands have lost livelihoods since December 2024 through mass dismissals from public jobs and the

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<sup>5</sup> Reuters, “Syria Reaches Deal to Integrate SDF within State Institutions, Presidency Says,” *Reuters*, March 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-reaches-deal-integrate-sdf-within-state-institutions-presidency-says-2025-03-10/>.

<sup>6</sup> Verify-Sy, *What Is the Truth Behind the Video of the Young Man Who Burned the Settlement Card Given to Dismissed Soldiers of the Syrian Regime?*, June 25, 2024, <https://verify-sy.com/ar/factcheck/2506251451>; Al Jazeera, *Al Jazeera Net Inside a Center for the Status Regularization of Former Fighters*, January 14, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2025/1/14/الجزيرة-نت-في-مركز-للتسوية-أوضاع-عناصر>.

<sup>7</sup> Enab Baladi, “How Effective Are Security Campaigns Against Remnants of Assad’s Regime?” January 22, 2025, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/01/how-effective-are-security-campaigns-against-remnants-of-assads-regime/>.

<sup>8</sup> Kamal Shahin, “The Existential Challenge for Syria’s Alawites,” *New Lines Magazine*, May 12, 2025, <https://newlinesmag.com/spotlight/the-existential-challenge-for-syrias-alawites>.

disbandment of former military and security units.<sup>9</sup> Many families have also faced forced evictions from state housing and private homes, leaving entire communities that once depended on the state for income, shelter, and protection in deepening precarity.<sup>10</sup> The dismissals disproportionately affected Alawis due to the makeup of the Assad-era Syrian state.

Decades of government propaganda that equated the survival of the state with the survival of the community left many Syrians viewing Alawis as synonymous with Assad-era repression. At the same time, rising hate speech, often amplified online and left unchallenged by local authorities, has heightened feelings of alienation and vulnerability. While a handful of transitional officials, including President Ahmed al-Sharaa, have occasionally condemned blanket accusations against Alawis in the wake of sectarian violence, there has been no sustained, broad-based public campaign making clear that responsibility for past crimes lies with specific perpetrators rather than entire communities. The government's reticence to address these divisions proactively has left the Alawi community caught between the legacies of perceived Assad-era privilege and post-Assad retribution.

## Random Identity-Based Targeted Killings and Disappearances

In the months preceding the March 6 escalation, a disturbing pattern of criminal and sectarian-motivated abductions, killings, and disappearances also emerged, primarily targeting Alawi civilians. Between December 2024 and early March 2025, Human Rights Watch and STJ recorded 18 abductions and killings of Alawi civilians across Homs, Latakia, Tartous, and Damascus, leaving at least 16 people dead or missing.

Perpetrators operated with apparent impunity. Multiple families said authorities refused to accept complaints, obstructed investigations, or gave conflicting accounts of their relatives' whereabouts. In some cases, attackers identified themselves as affiliated with certain armed groups or hardline Islamist factions. Several killings were accompanied by ransom demands, sectarian slurs, or signs of torture.

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<sup>9</sup> *Le Monde*, "In Syria, a Climate of Purge in the Public Sector," February 21, 2025, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/02/21/in-syria-a-climate-of-purge-in-the-public-sector\\_6738400\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/02/21/in-syria-a-climate-of-purge-in-the-public-sector_6738400_4.html).

<sup>10</sup> Amina Ismail, "Minutes to leave: Syria's Alawites evicted from private homes at gunpoint," *Reuters*, April 30, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/minutes-leave-syrias-alawites-evicted-private-homes-gunpoint-2025-04-30/>.

According to a June 2025 investigation by Reuters, at least 33 Alawi women and girls, some as young as 16, had been abducted or gone missing in 2025 across Tartous, Latakia, and Hama.<sup>11</sup> These findings were later echoed by a July 2025 Amnesty International report and a concurrent UN Commission of Inquiry statement.<sup>12</sup>

## Coastal Clashes and the March 6 Insurgency

This pattern of targeted violence heightened fears of rising sectarian retribution and deepening lawlessness—conditions that set the stage for the broader escalation of violence that unfolded after March 6, when insurgent networks already active in parts of Syria, which government officials described as loyalists to Syria’s ousted president Bashar al-Assad or remnants of the former government, launched a series of coordinated attacks on government personnel and checkpoints in coastal areas.<sup>13</sup> Former military officers appeared in videos declaring a new “Military Council for the Liberation of Syria.”<sup>14</sup>

The attacks marked the most serious challenge yet to the transitional government led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa and ignited one of the bloodiest episodes of sectarian violence in Syria since the former government’s collapse.

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<sup>11</sup> “‘She’s Not Coming Back’: Alawite Women Snatched from Streets of Syria,” *Reuters*, June 27, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/shes-not-coming-back-alawite-women-snatched-streets-syria-2025-06-27/>.

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International, “Syria: Authorities must investigate abductions of Alawite women and girls,” July 15, 2025; and UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, “UN experts alarmed by targeted abductions and disappearances of Alawite women and girls,” press release, July 17, 2025. Both available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/07/syria-authorities-must-investigate-abductions-of-alawite-women-and-girls/> and <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/07/syria-un-experts-alarmed-targeted-abductions-and-disappearances-alawite>, accessed July 28, 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Jusoor Center, *The Theater of Military Operations Against the Remnants in the Syrian Coast*, March 13, 2025, <https://www.jusoor.co/ar/details/مسرح-العمليات-العسكرية-ضد-الفلول-في-الساحل-السوري>; A first-person account published in the *London Review of Books* suggested that many participants were not acting out of loyalty to Assad, but in response to repression and despair under the new authorities. See Loubna Mrie, “We Were Tricked,” *London Review of Books*, Vol. 47 No. 14, August 14, 2025, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v47/n14/loubna-mrie/we-were-tricked>; *Alawi Disparities in Relation to the State and the Fallout of 6 March*, Arab Reform Initiative, 2025, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/Alawi-disparities-in-relation-to-the-state-and-the-fallout-of-6-march/>.

<sup>14</sup> Al Jazeera, *Miqdad Fatiha: The Butcher of the Syrian Coast and Leader of the ‘Coastal Shield’ Militia*, May 31, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2025/5/31/مقداد-فتيحة-سفاح-الساحل-السوري-الذي>; El Manshar, *Who Is Ghiath Suleiman Dalla, Founder of the Military Council for the Liberation of Syria?*, March 7, 2025, <https://elmanshar.com/2025/03/07/ال-غياث-سليمان-الدلا-مؤسس-المجلس-ال>.



Over four days, insurgents killed at least 238 government personnel.<sup>15</sup> According to the UN Commission of Inquiry's August report on the March violence, pro-former government forces also carried out attacks against civilians, journalists, and medical facilities.<sup>16</sup> The attacks marked a dramatic turn in Syria's already fragile transition under interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa. Security forces scrambled to contain the violence, utilizing heavy weaponry in populated areas, mobilizing thousands of fighters, declaring curfews, and launching what they described as "combing operations" throughout Latakia, Tartous, and Hama governorates. Hundreds of videos from those operations immediately flooded social media showing men in military fatigues executing detainees, ransacking homes, firing indiscriminately into civilian areas, and unleashing sectarian abuse.

By March 9, reports across local media were already placing the death toll in the thousands, with hundreds of civilians among the victims.<sup>17</sup> While independent verification remained limited, the scale and ferocity of the violence sent shockwaves through the country.

The scale and nature of the violence in coastal Syria in March 2025, between the interim government and organized armed elements, supports the conclusion that a non-international armed conflict persisted at the time, thereby triggering the continued application of international humanitarian law alongside Syria's obligations under international human rights law.

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<sup>15</sup> Al Jazeera, "Syria's al-Sharaa Vows to Punish Forces Responsible for Mass Killings," *Al Jazeera*, March 10, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/10/syrias-al-sharaa-vows-to-punish-forces-responsible-for-mass-killings>.

<sup>16</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria to the Human Rights Council, fifty-ninth session (A/HRC/59/CRP.4)*, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/a-hrc-59-crp4-en.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> *L'Orient Today*, "More than 1,300 Dead in Syrian Clashes, Including 830 Alawite Civilians," March 10, 2025, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1450973/clashes-in-western-syria-resulted-in-over-1000-deaths-in-a-few-days-live.html>.

## II. Documented Atrocities and Abuses

Between March 6 and at least March 10, Alawi communities in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia, and Hama suffered a harrowing escalation of violence.

Over the course of several days, security forces made up of General Security under the Ministry of Interior, former HTS and SNA and other factions formally brought under the Ministry of Defense, as well as other state-affiliated and non-state armed elements,<sup>18</sup> combed through Alawi-majority villages, towns, and city neighborhoods, going house to house, with the stated aim of rooting out insurgents and confiscating weaponry. The national fact-finding committee later reported that around 200,000 armed men mobilized from across Syria.<sup>19</sup> These operations rapidly escalated into widespread atrocities, including extrajudicial killings, outrages on personal dignity, looting, and the destruction of property.

According to the national fact-finding committee on July 22, at least 1,426 people, mostly Alawi men, were killed across 33 locations<sup>20</sup> in the affected governorates.

Some communities reported high death tolls, with most individual locations recording between 30 and 90 fatalities, and at least two villages documenting at least 150 deaths each.<sup>21</sup> In some locations, entire families were killed. In Baniyas city in the Tartous governorate, a high school posted an obituary for over 80 teachers, students, and relatives of faculty killed in the March violence on Syria's coast.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Armed Factions' Mobilization to the Syrian Coast in March 2025*, Syrian Archive, July 8, 2025, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://syrianarchive.org/en/investigations/armed-factions-mobilization-to-the-syrian-coast-in-march-2025>.

<sup>19</sup> Reuters, "Syrian committee reports 1,426 killed in March violence, says commanders did not order it," *Reuters*, July 22, 2025, accessed August 18, 2025,

<sup>20</sup> Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), "National Fact-Finding Committee on the Coastal Events: Our work is only the beginning of achieving justice and redress for victims," July 22, 2025. Available at: <https://www.sana.sy/?p=2251643>, accessed July 28, 2025.

<sup>21</sup> Sanobar Jableh and Mukhtariya, according to casualty records.

<sup>22</sup> Martyr Faheem Mohammad Official High School, *Facebook*, April 6, 2025, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbido31n6b5h35TRpnePFkct4KqueZQbTE2pGuQG162rKbSZjZp6XZnJnE5HoCrrEq17Zrl&id=61565571994790](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbido31n6b5h35TRpnePFkct4KqueZQbTE2pGuQG162rKbSZjZp6XZnJnE5HoCrrEq17Zrl&id=61565571994790). The post is an official condolence statement from the school staff, mourning the loss of numerous teachers, students, and their family members in Baniyas.

Due to the scale of killings and the continued general insecurity in the impacted locations, families told researchers they were unable to hold traditional burial ceremonies and instead buried their dead hurriedly in their backyards or days later in mass graves.

Beyond the killings, there were widespread reports of looting and the burning of homes.<sup>23</sup> Alongside the killings, armed factions systematically looted and torched homes, shops, and vehicles across the coast. In one village, at least 26 houses and a dozen cars were burned or stolen, while gold, cash, and phones were taken;<sup>24</sup> similar patterns were reported in elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> Survivors from two city neighborhoods described militants who, after executing male relatives, returned repeatedly to strip houses and demand cash, and who looted Alawi-owned shops and set them ablaze.<sup>26</sup> These attacks have left many families in severe economic distress. On March 8, the Latakia governor acknowledged “widespread theft” during the operation<sup>27</sup> and said some suspects had been arrested,<sup>28</sup> but residents have yet to see meaningful restitution or accountability.

Thousands of people have since fled, taking shelter in remote mountain villages, the Russian Hmeimim airbase near Latakia city, and across the border in Lebanon.<sup>29</sup> According to Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov, thousands of Syrians remain at Hmeimim airbase as of June 2025.<sup>30</sup>

In its August report on the March events, the UN Commission of Inquiry found that interim government forces, and private individuals, as well as pro-former government fighters,

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<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Watch and STJ documented reports of looting from 45 interviewees and destruction of property from 41 others.

<sup>24</sup> Remote interview with “Ali” on March 17, 2025. Video of damage on file with Human Rights Watch; Remote interview with “Marwan” on March 25, 2025, videos and photos he shared on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>25</sup> Photos on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>26</sup> Remote interview with “Roa” on March 17, 2025; video on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>27</sup> Alaraby Television, Facebook post quoting the governor of Latakia stating “We carried out operations to arrest thieves who stole private property during the recent events,” March 8, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/alarabytelevision/posts/1206504571048738/>, accessed July 8, 2025.

<sup>28</sup> Facebook video, posted March 8, 2025, showing security forces reportedly arresting individuals for looting. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1554777328532967>, accessed July 27, 2025.

<sup>29</sup> Sky News, “Alawites Take Refuge from Syrian Army at Russian Airbase,” *Sky News*, March 10, 2025, <https://news.sky.com/video/alawites-take-refuge-from-syrian-army-at-russian-airbase-13325857>; National News Agency (Lebanon), “Labaki to NNA: 1,476 Families Displaced from Syria to Akkar; No Security Threat at Present,” March 10, 2025, <https://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/عكا/البيكي-الوطنية-1476-عائلة-نزحت-من-سوريا-إلى-عكا/764628/سياسة>.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Jumhuriya.net, “Moscow Urges Syria to Safeguard Russian Airbases, Address Displacement at Hmeimim,” Facebook, June 19, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1270256161560198>.

committed serious violations—including murder, torture, abductions, pillage, and destruction of property—that likely amount to war crimes.<sup>31</sup>

## Extrajudicial and Unlawful Killings

Our investigation shows that in at least 24 locations, most killings followed or occurred during house raids. Witnesses describe masked gunmen, many in army fatigues, who first shelled or bombarded neighborhoods, then stormed homes multiple times, questioning victims about their Alawi identity, hurling anti-Alawi slurs, and executing them on the spot.

### *House-to-House Raids*

The security sweeps launched by the Ministries of Defense and Interior were routinely accompanied by imposed curfews. On March 7, the Interior Ministry’s General Security Directorate ordered Latakia residents indoors from midnight through the next morning;<sup>32</sup> Tartous imposed a similar lockdown, lifted only for Friday prayers and iftar.<sup>33</sup> Local Facebook pages in Baniyas and other towns echoed the stay-home directives.<sup>34</sup>

“Khaled,” a Baniyas resident, described the panic and confusion that set in as military convoys entered the neighborhood of al-Qusour around midday on March 7: “Whoever had a car fled. We didn’t, and my dad heard HTS had reassured people they’d be safe if they stayed home, so he trusted them.”<sup>35</sup> But by afternoon, he heard that his cousin and his friend had both been executed. News of more killings followed: neighbors, relatives, and family friends, some dragged from homes, others shot in the streets. All in all, Khaled recounted the killing of at least 13 people he personally knew in Baniyas.

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<sup>31</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/59/CRP.4)*, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/a-hrc-59-crp4-en.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Syrian Arab News Agency – SANA (@SanaAjel), X, May 3, 2025, 6:03 p.m., <https://x.com/SanaAjel/status/1897971863466188830>; Syrian Arab News Agency – SANA (@SanaAjel), X, May 3, 2025, 11:50 a.m., <https://x.com/SanaAjel/status/1897759497654849774>.

<sup>33</sup> Syrian Arab News Agency – SANA (@SanaAjel), X, May 3, 2025, 9:44 a.m., <https://x.com/SanaAjel/status/1897714925318885476>; Syrian Arab News Agency – SANA (@SanaAjel), X, May 3, 2025, 5:03 p.m., <https://x.com/SanaAjel/status/1897947569868746801>.

<sup>34</sup> Baniyas al-Balad, Facebook, May 3, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/BANIASALBALAD/posts/661793656240051>. (Post announces curfew in Baniyas from 9 p.m. to 7 a.m.)

<sup>35</sup> WhatsApp interview with Baniyas resident “Khaled” on March 11, 2025.

That same day, a Ministry of Defense official appeared in a video reassuring the public. “The situation is fully under control, and operations are continuing according to plan with precision. There is no need to worry,” he said.<sup>36</sup> This assurance proved tragically misleading.

In Brabshbo, a small village in southern Latakia where at least 43 people were reported killed during house raids in a single afternoon, residents who had fled to nearby hills after hearing of earlier massacres in surrounding villages said they were told by General Security personnel early on March 9 that the situation was under control and that it was safe to return home. Assured of their safety, many complied, only to be killed hours later during a security sweep that afternoon.<sup>37</sup>

“Jameela,” a resident of Brabshbo, recounted how she and her husband remained at home with their three children on March 8 after being assured by local officials and General Security forces that civilians who stayed indoors would not be harmed. That evening, armed men entered their home, asked about their sect, and upon learning they were Alawi, took her husband outside and shot him at the doorstep. “They didn’t ask about his work or anything, they just shot him,” she said.<sup>38</sup>

In a geolocated video from Brabshbo, at least 16 shrouded bodies are seen laid out on the main road leading into the village. The majority of those gathered around the bodies are women, including older women, and older men, many visibly grieving and some audibly weeping.<sup>39</sup> A second video from the same location shows village residents carrying the bodies and placing them into a truck. The woman filming in this video is heard stating, “Today is 10 March; this is the Brabshbo massacre.”<sup>40</sup>

In al-Sharifa, one kilometer east of Brabshbo, one witness who helped recover bodies estimated at least 29 people were killed on March 7, and another witness corroborated his account.<sup>41</sup> The second interviewee reported three civilians, including one boy, also killed on the main road leading into Zobar village, around 500 meters west of Brabshbo, with the

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<sup>36</sup> Syrian Ministry of Defense (@Sy\_Defense), *Telegram*, January 2025, [https://t.me/Sy\\_Defense/226](https://t.me/Sy_Defense/226).

<sup>37</sup> Remote interviews with four Brabshbo residents between March and July 2025.

<sup>38</sup> In person interview with Brabshbo resident, “Jameela,” on March 14, 2025.

<sup>39</sup> Video provided by Brabshbo resident, on file with Human Rights Watch and STJ.

<sup>40</sup> A second video provided by the same Brabshbo resident, on file with Human Rights Watch and STJ.

<sup>41</sup> Remote interview with “Mohammad” on April 5, 2025; remote interview with “Marwan” on March 25, 2025.

total toll there likely higher.<sup>42</sup> Daghrioun and Safkoun villages saw at least two killings each. Based on six independent interviews, as well as casualty lists shared with researchers and posted online, the total number of civilians killed in these five villages is estimated between 79 and 83.<sup>43</sup>

An analysis of casualty records from the villages of Brabshbo, Zobar, Daghrioun, and Safkoun indicates that among the 52 identified victims, 27 were adults over the age of 50, one of whom was 90.<sup>44</sup> At least six women are among the deceased and two children, both aged 14. The presence of multiple people with the same family name among the victims underscores the indiscriminate nature of the violence with no distinction between anyone targeted for being in the armed insurgency or those targeted for being Alawi.<sup>45</sup>

Across numerous locations, survivors described armed men moving methodically from house to house, forcing entry, lining up male residents, and questioning them about their sect or perceived loyalty to the Assad government. Several witnesses said that the raids were repeated over successive days, often by different factions, some behaving decently and leaving families unharmed, others looting or executing at will, leaving families unsure of whom to trust or whether they would be targeted again. The use of sectarian slurs and identity-based questioning was a consistent feature of these operations, suggesting an intent to terrorize and collectively punish communities associated—rightly or wrongly—with the former government.

In the Latakia village of Sanobar Jableh, which recorded the second highest casualty count in Latakia governorate – at least 148 people killed<sup>46</sup> – “Roaa,” a pharmacist, recounted the harrowing events that unfolded in her community starting on March 6.<sup>47</sup> That evening, she said, as gunfire erupted nearby, residents shuttered their shops and sought refuge in their homes, gripped by fear. Throughout the night, the sounds of gunfire intensified, leaving residents of the village awake and anxious, she said. By the next morning, armed factions

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<sup>42</sup> Remote interview with “Marwan” on March 25, 2025

<sup>43</sup> A second casualty list available to Human Rights Watch corroborates earlier information, recording 29 people killed in al-Sharifa and 52 in the villages of Brabshbo, Zobar, Daghrioun, and Safkoun.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> The UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic reported that an estimated 216 people were killed in Snobar on 7 and 8 March 2025, of which it verified 29. See: UN COI Report, A/HRC/59/CRP.4 (3 July 2025).

<sup>47</sup> Remote interview with “Roaa” on March 17, 2025.



began entering the village, conducting aggressive house-to-house searches. Roa described how the first group forcibly broke into her home, demanding to know if any weapons were present. Finding none, they departed, but subsequent groups followed. One faction confiscated the mobile phones of her father and brother. Another attempted to detain her brother, a 27-year-old engineer and the family's only son. After he pleaded and presented his military exemption papers, the assailants relented but warned that he would be shot if seen near a window, she said.<sup>48</sup>

The UN Commission of Inquiry investigated the events in Sanobar Jableh and found that armed factions including former SNA and HTS units, alongside foreign fighters, killed and injured scores of Alawi civilians and left entire neighborhoods destroyed, while General Security forces present failed to prevent the violence.<sup>49</sup>

Later that evening, a particularly brutal group of fighters entered their home, she said. They forced her father and brother to kneel, subjected them to verbal abuse, and ignored her grandmother's pleas, even mocking her when she fainted. Despite the family's assertions of their civilian status and lack of weapons, the assailants dragged the men outside and executed them behind the house, along with other male relatives and neighbors, Roa said. Roa attempted to reach their bodies but was shot in the leg. She recalled the perpetrators laughing and celebrating the killings.<sup>50</sup>

In Hamam Wasel, a village in the Baniyas countryside, on March 9, residents awoke to chaos amid a wave of massacres that had recently struck nearby areas including Baniyas, Isqabla, and Barmaya. Fearing a similar fate, families scrambled to flee.<sup>51</sup>

“Talin” shared how, after escaping Hamam Wasel with her family, her father returned with her brother later that day to check on their home after hearing reports of widespread looting and destruction of property. There, he found his brother, who has a physical disability and uses a wheelchair, dead in bed, with two gunshot wounds to the stomach,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/59/CRP.4)*, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/a-hrc-59-crp4-en.pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> WhatsApp interview with “Talin” on March 13, 2025.

Talin said. Others killed in the neighborhood, said Talin, included their neighbor with an intellectual disability.<sup>52</sup> Talin shared images of the two men both alive before the attack and after they were killed. In one of the photos, half of the neighbor's head had been blown off.<sup>53</sup>

On Friday, March 7, 2025, armed men attacked the village of al-Matrakiyeh near Jableh in Latakia governorate.<sup>54</sup> "Mohammad," who was working as a construction laborer in a nearby village at the time, said the attackers broke into his family's home, pointed their weapons at his relatives, and forced them outside.<sup>55</sup>

Inside, the assailants ransacked the house, damaging furniture and stealing valuables including gold, cash, phones, chargers, two motorbikes, and even a power bank. They took Mohammad's father and his brother, a local barber. He said they also tried to take his 10-year-old son who clung to his mother in tears. Her desperate pleas spared the boy, he said.<sup>56</sup>

The attackers then rounded up more men from the neighborhood, forcing them to kneel outside the house. They mocked and filmed them, shouting orders and making them bark like dogs. Mohammad shared a video filmed outside that shows nine kneeling men, including three older men, surrounded by armed men in fatigues. The men are ordered to lie down, bark, then kneel again.<sup>57</sup>

According to Mohammad, the detained men were later taken in a van to a warehouse near the Jouba bridge.<sup>58</sup> There, his father later told him, the attackers tortured, humiliated, and executed the detainees one by one. Mohammad shared two videos he said showed the incident. At least seven mostly shirtless men, some older men, are seen kneeling in what appears to be a warehouse, being beaten and mocked by armed men wearing what appear

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. حمام واصــــل ضيعتنا, Facebook post, March 9, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1DsBVjJHWt/>, accessed September 3, 2025.

<sup>53</sup> Photos on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>54</sup> Village location coordinates: 35.455989, 35.919570

<sup>55</sup> Remote interview with "Mohammad" on March 21, 2024.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Video on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>58</sup> Village location coordinates: 35.465343, 35.901947

to be military-style fatigues.<sup>59</sup> In another video posted to Telegram, which appears to be filmed in the same location, a man Mohammad identified as his brother is ordered to leave a room holding more men. He is forced to kneel next to a wall and bark. A man wearing military fatigues then shoots him five times. Researchers could not independently confirm the location or time these videos were filmed.<sup>60</sup> Moments before his father was to be executed, a man from the armed group intervened, telling the others to send the surviving men home, Mohammad said. His father and two others were spared. They walked barefoot in the dark back to the village. Seven men, including older residents, were killed, Mohammad said. Their bodies were returned to their families three days later.<sup>61</sup>

Based on a survivor's interview, accounts from relatives, video statements posted online, and verified footage from the scene, a harrowing picture emerged of what happened in the adjacent rural Latakia villages of al-Mukhtariya and Khreiba on March 7, often referred to collectively as al-Mukhtariya, where the highest number of casualties in Latakia governorate alone was recorded as at least 151 men and boys. The Commission of Inquiry verified 55.<sup>62</sup>

At around dawn, "Hasan," the survivor, recalled seeing the first convoys of armed factions arriving via the M4 highway from Idlib and Aleppo. "The convoys had a beginning but no end," he said.<sup>63</sup> Images posted that morning by a journalist embedded with Ministry of Defense-affiliated fighters show long lines of military vehicles and pick-up trucks that appear to be carrying men in military fatigues along with civilian vehicles along the M4 just before al-Mukhtariya bridge; one image shows some of the vehicles carrying some of the men in military fatigues turning off the M4 in the direction of the village.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Videos on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>60</sup> Video on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>61</sup> Remote interview with "Mohammad" on March 21, 2024.

<sup>62</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/59/CRP.4)*, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/a-hrc-59-crp4-en.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> Remote interview with "Hasan" on March 13, 2025.

<sup>64</sup> Bahaa Al-Nayef (@bahaa.alnayef.2), Instagram post, March 7, 2025, [https://www.instagram.com/bahaa.alnayef.2/p/DG41J5\\_MTb5/](https://www.instagram.com/bahaa.alnayef.2/p/DG41J5_MTb5/), accessed July 8, 2025.

Hasan said gunfire had rung out the night before from a nearby checkpoint for nearly ten hours, apparently to provoke a response. “They wanted someone to shoot back,” he said. “But no one did. We were all civilians, we stayed at home.”<sup>65</sup>

By 6:00 a.m., he said, the village was attacked. Armed men in pickups mounted with what he identified as 23mm cannons opened fire, as thousands of fighters lined the M4 opposite Mukhtariya. “They wanted to erase the village,” he said. Some residents ran. Others, like Hasan and his brother, sought refuge in nearby homes. Hasan hid in a storeroom at his aunt’s house. His brother, he later learned, had gone to their older brother’s house, where the three siblings and a cousin were soon captured, taken to a nearby warehouse, and executed, Hasan said. He named 10 others from three families who were killed alongside them, including one 14-year-old boy.<sup>66</sup>

Ahmad from Khreiba told researchers he woke up that morning to see news of a massacre in his village. He was unable to reach his father and brothers by phone. A cousin living nearby told him armed men had entered the village at dawn and began pulling men and boys from their homes. His father and two brothers were among those executed, he later confirmed.<sup>67</sup>

Videos verified and geolocated by the French newspaper *Le Monde* and confirmed by Syrian Archive and STJ that were filmed that day show masked and unmasked fighters in military fatigues and black clothing moving through the two villages.<sup>68</sup> In two clips from Khreiba, at least a dozen men and boys are seen crawling on the ground, being beaten and forced to bark like dogs while gunmen fire into the air around them. One of the men is bleeding from his shoulder.<sup>69</sup> Behind them, what appear to be dead bodies, some with

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<sup>65</sup> Remote interview with “Hasan” on March 13, 2025.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> WhatsApp interview with “Ahmad” on March 7, 2025.

<sup>68</sup> A *Le Monde* investigation also verifies several videos filmed that day showing masked and unmasked fighters in military fatigues and black clothing moving through the villages. See: Liselotte Mas, Poline Tchoubar, Elisa Bellanger, and Adrien Sahli, “Syrie : des vidéos authentifiées par « Le Monde » prouvent que des hommes du nouveau régime étaient bien impliqués dans les massacres d’alaouites,” *Le Monde*, April 25, 2025, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/video/2025/04/25/syrie-les-videos-prouvent-que-des-hommes-du-nouveau-regime-etaient-bien-impliques-dans-les-massacres-d-alaouites\\_6599880\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/video/2025/04/25/syrie-les-videos-prouvent-que-des-hommes-du-nouveau-regime-etaient-bien-impliques-dans-les-massacres-d-alaouites_6599880_3210.html), accessed September 15, 2025.

<sup>69</sup> Videos on file with Human Rights Watch.

blood on their torsos, are visible. Videos and photographs verified and geolocated by Human Rights Watch show at least 32 men's bodies on the ground, many lying in blood.<sup>70</sup>

### *Under the Pretext of Investigations*

Twelve interviewees told researchers that fighters took relatives and neighbors from their homes on the pretext of investigation, only to summarily execute them later.

In Al-Rusafah village in Hama governorate, where at least 63 villagers were killed over the course of three days starting on March 7, including children, women, and older people, some victims had previously “settled their status” with the authorities, believing this would offer them protection. Despite presenting settlement documents, many were executed, often after being taken from their homes supposedly for investigation. Researchers interviewed nine witnesses, victims, and relatives from al-Rusafah and geolocated 15 videos, 14 of which are video statements from fathers, mothers, and wives of men killed in al-Rusafah.<sup>71</sup>

Early in the morning on March 7, around 30 fighters stormed “Amin’s” home, where his extended family had gathered for the weekend, Amin said. Despite showing settlement papers and proof of civilian employment for his three sons—one with Immigration and Passports, one with the Traffic Police, and the third an administrative accountant—the fighters ignored their status. They beat the three sons at the door and separated them. One was executed by the village well, another near a public building, and the third was killed and found dumped on a roadside two days later, Amin told researchers.<sup>72</sup>

At around 11:00 a.m., armed men stormed “Hani’s” home, beating the family, hurling sectarian insults and detaining his two sons—one just 17 and ill with leukemia, the other a 25-year-old student, Hani said. A short distance from the house, as the attackers were taking his two sons away, another group of armed men intervened, convincing the attackers to release the younger son. Hani said they took his elder son away and the second group convinced Hani that they would investigate him and send him back if there was no evidence of wrongdoing. That evening, Hani got a call, callously informing him his

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Remote interview with “Amin” on April 16, 2025.

son had been killed, and directing him to a spot in the village where his body lay. He found his son's body—shot, stripped, and mutilated, his heart removed. With help, he brought him home and buried him beside four cousins also killed that day, which left his brother without any surviving sons.<sup>73</sup>

One verified execution video, filmed on the village's outskirts, shows a man lying by a roadside. Two men—both in military fatigues—shoot him multiple times. One of the shooters then kicks the man's body down the verge next to the road into the brush below where a second body lies. The man filming taunts, "We told him, the pig, we told him: don't pass through here or you'll slip."<sup>74</sup>

Other cases followed a similar pattern in which fighters assured families they were merely detaining men for investigation, only to execute them hours later.

The UN Commission of Inquiry investigated the events in al-Rusafa verifying 24 of the killings.<sup>75</sup>

Researchers did not collect witness interviews from either the Basnada neighborhood of Latakia city or al-Shir village in Latakia governorate, but geolocated video evidence from both sites points to repeated and deliberate acts of abuse and extrajudicial execution. Right on the border between Basnada and Datour neighborhoods, six geolocated videos from the same location, filmed at different times, show fighters detaining people, carrying out executions, and locals later retrieving bodies. Two videos capture clear executions, while another shows at least nine bodies at the same spot. One video, filmed from a distance, shows two vehicles and about a dozen fighters standing over at least 10 people lying on the ground, their condition unclear. Two more videos document fighters and an armored vehicle entering the neighborhood from the southeast, past a makeshift barrier.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Remote interview with "Hani" on April 7, 2025.

<sup>74</sup> Video on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>75</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/59/CRP.4)*, August 11, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/a-hrc-59-crp4-en.pdf>.

<sup>76</sup> Videos on file with Human Rights Watch.

In al-Shir, one video verified by researchers shows men wearing military fatigues detaining two men in civilian clothing. The detained men are unarmed and kneeling by the side of a road. The men in military fatigues insult, beat and finally execute them – one with a gunshot to the head. Another geolocated video captures further executions nearby, with at least five corpses visible lying in pools of blood. Sounds of gunfire can be heard.<sup>77</sup> Additional footage shows fighters abusing detainees. In one video, a fighter films himself as he rides on the back of a crawling detainee who the person filming the videos forces to bark like a dog, while the bodies from earlier executions remain in view.<sup>78</sup> Another video, filmed after the fighters withdrew, shows the same location strewn with at least 11 corpses.

Further east, in the Hama countryside, the grandson of Sheikh Shaban Mansour, a prominent Alawi religious figure in Salhab town, told researchers that on the evening of Thursday, March 6, armed men entered the village in large numbers, some on foot and others in vehicles, firing in the air and shouting sectarian slogans meant to incite fear among the local population.<sup>79</sup> “They were yelling, ‘We’ve come to slaughter you, Alawis,’” Sheikh Mansour’s grandson said. He said his family stayed inside their home, believing they would be safe because they had no weapons.

The next morning, fighters stormed the family home where the sheikh, his children, and grandchildren were. They forced them to kneel, beat them with rifle butts, and threatened them with gunfire. The fighters mocked the sheikh, an older man, and dragged him from his bed. The family tried to intervene. The sheikh’s son Hussein blocked their way and pleaded, but was beaten and shot twice in the side. As he lay wounded, they dragged Sheikh Shaban away.

They took him about a kilometer to a nearby area and executed him with three gunshots. The family said they couldn’t retrieve the body for five hours due to the fighters’ presence. When they tried to take Hussein to the hospital, gunmen fired on their car, forcing them to turn back. Hussein died two hours later en route to medical care. That afternoon, both were buried near a hospital the sheikh had been building, attended by relatives and villagers.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> Remote interview with “Jamal,” March 17, 2025.

<sup>80</sup> Obituary for Sheikh Shaban on file with Human Rights Watch.

The grandson said that at least 30 villagers were killed that day and others detained without explanation. He named eight men he personally knew.<sup>81</sup>

Three verified and geolocated videos corroborate witness accounts of executions in and around Salhab and implicate General Security forces. The first video was filmed on the main road just before the smaller road turns off into Salhab town.<sup>82</sup> It shows three men, two dressed in black and one in civilian clothing, beating an apparently unarmed man with their rifle butts until he collapses. They then step back, execute him and continue to fire on him for over 15 seconds. As the camera pans left, dozens of armed men are visible walking along the road, and a clearly marked General Security vehicle is parked directly behind the execution site. The second video, filmed in an alleyway behind a car repair shop at the town's outskirts, shows one unmasked gunman in black and another masked man, clearly marked with General Security insignia, leading two cowering detainees with their faces covered into the alley.<sup>83</sup> Three dead bodies lie nearby. The detainees are forced to kneel and then lie face down, covering their heads. At least three men then shoot them at close range. One of the shooters, also bearing General Security insignia, is seen cocking his rifle and opening fire. A third General Security officer moves past the camera's frame during the incident.

A third video, filmed in front of a police station in Salhab, shows dozens of detainees being pulled from a transport truck and violently beaten by both uniformed police officers and fighters in military and civilian clothing. The men are forced to lie face down on the station's steps, some stacked on top of one another, as a crowd of armed men surround them, kicking and striking them across their bodies. One man yells directly at the camera, "We want to slay them!" while another orders the detainees to bark. Some greet each other and shake hands, smiling in a congratulatory fashion. Multiple men shoot their rifles into the air as others beat the detainees with rifle butts. Towards the end of the clip, a man in military fatigues standing above the crowd urges calm, telling the group he appreciates their "enthusiasm."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Remote interview with "Jamal" on March 17, 2025.

<sup>82</sup> Video on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>83</sup> Video on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>84</sup> Video on file with Human Rights Watch.



In Baniyas city, researchers interviewed 15 survivors and relatives of victims, all of whom reported killings, lootings, and destruction of homes and shops in the neighborhood. Researchers also interviewed two military personnel and one man from Baniyas who volunteered to join the security operations, and reviewed 14 videos and photos showing executions, looting, arson, and mass graves.

In the Qusour neighborhood on March 6, “Rana” was at home with her parents and two boys, ages 6 and 8.<sup>85</sup> After hearing violent knocking, Rana’s 71-year-old dad opened the door and two armed men walked in, asked her dad to step outside, inquired about their sect, asked if they had weapons and proceeded to search the house. “We had no weapons and all the while I was holding my children to my chest.” Outside, her dad was made to stand with his neighbor and his neighbor’s two sons, one just 16 years old, and another neighbor, a university student. “They started taking them away, my mother ran after them, but one of the armed men shouted at her to go back into the house, threatening her with his weapon,” Rana said.

On March 10, Rana learned that her father and the others taken with him had been killed. She said, “We found out from a video shared by our neighbor [the mother of the 16-year-old boy].” The video showed five bodies lying on the side of the street near a parked car.<sup>86</sup> One of the bodies, which Rana confirmed was her father’s, was covered by the body of what appears to be a child. A second video filmed at dusk at the same location shows five burned and charred bodies. Smoke is rising from the car.<sup>87</sup> An armed man in military fatigues, unmasked, stepped on one of the bodies and mocked the victims, calling them “Alawi dogs.” The man filming, also armed and unmasked, threatened to burn more bodies, saying, “We’re going to burn all of you.” The videos were both geolocated to a location near Baniyas’ main road, about 500 meters from Rana’s house.

All of those interviewed confirmed that large-scale killings had taken place in Baniyas during that week, especially in the Qusour neighborhood. For days afterward, people described bodies littering the streets, hastily dug mass graves, and refrigerated trucks carrying unidentified bodies. Several survivors recounted how fighters invoked past

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<sup>85</sup> Remote Interviews with “Rana,” “Dana,” and “Majed”, siblings between March and June 2025.

<sup>86</sup> Video on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>87</sup> Image on file with Human Rights Watch.

atrocities by the Assad government, often as justification for exacting revenge. In 2013 for example, Human Rights Watch documented the mass execution of at least 248 people in the towns of Baniyas and nearby al-Bayda by former government forces, where many, primarily Sunnis, were killed after opposition fighters retreated.

“Jad,” a 22-year-old university student from Al Qutaibliyeh in Jableh countryside, who was taken to the Baniyas National Hospital after being shot and injured by gunmen on his way back to his village on March 6, described the horrifying scenes he saw over the course of several days in Baniyas:

In the hospital courtyard, the bodies were lined up across the entire area, and at the end of the courtyard, there was a mound of bodies. We asked one of the nurses, and he told us that the refrigerators were full. Throughout the day, trucks came to load the bodies, as if they were vegetables or something.<sup>88</sup>

After his treatment, Jad decided to go stay with family in the Qusour neighborhood of Baniyas. There, he witnessed more horrors:

There were bodies in the middle of the street, and we had to drive over the sidewalk to avoid driving over them. There were bodies of children, women, and older people.<sup>89</sup>

All in all, researchers collected and verified 27 videos filmed by armed persons depicting humiliation and degrading treatment of detainees or dead bodies.

## Inability to Access Medical Care

Some of the victims died from injuries that could not be treated in time, either because families were too afraid to travel to a medical facility or because medical teams were unable to access the area due to ongoing insecurity, according to witnesses.

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<sup>88</sup> Remote interview with “Jad,” March 15, 2025.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

In al-Rusafa village, “Shermeen,” a student sheltering with her family, witnessed her father’s killing during the third raid on their home on March 7. Earlier, a second group had beaten him with a rifle, leaving a deep head wound and throwing him under the stairs, she said. When the third group arrived, they dragged him outside and shot him eight times in the legs. As the family struggled to stop the bleeding, they tried contacting staff at the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), who said they could not reach the village. A doctor in Damascus tried to explain to the family by phone how to provide ad hoc medical care, but their efforts failed. He died by 4:00 p.m.<sup>90</sup>

“Mazen,” a resident of Barmaya, told researchers that on March 8, armed groups killed his uncle, who was a doctor, along with his wife and their child Ali, over 18 years old, and his twins Obada and Janada, under 18 years old. He said that his uncle’s wife, who was pregnant at the time, was seriously injured after being shot in the stomach and managed to call them to explain that everyone else had been killed and that she was the only survivor. According to Mazen, after making that call, she died from her injuries because no one was able to reach or help her.<sup>91</sup>

## Women

The massacres that week claimed the lives of at least 90 women.

On the evening of March 7, starting at around 9:00 p.m., Al-Tuwaym village in rural Hama was rocked by a sudden and brutal assault. Shadi, a resident, told researchers that four black vans without license plates rolled into the village, carrying armed men.<sup>92</sup> These attackers, he said, unleashed indiscriminate gunfire, shouting militant slogans, and targeting men, women, and children alike.

“Shadi” said the village’s main entrance, usually guarded by fighters from the former Jaish al-Izza, a Sunni Islamist armed group, was quickly overrun as those at the checkpoint fled. Nearby security forces along the Hama-Masyaf road heard the gunfire and responded, initially suspecting insurgents. Upon meeting fleeing villagers, they contacted authorities and tried to coordinate assistance. As survivors fled to neighboring villages like Um Al-

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<sup>90</sup> Remote interview with “Shermeen” on April 11, 2025.

<sup>91</sup> Remote interview with “Mazen” on March 23, 2025.

<sup>92</sup> Remote Interview with “Shadi” on March 10, 2025.

Tuyour, fighters stationed at local checkpoints helped evacuate the wounded and reached out to humanitarian groups, though professional medical aid only arrived hours later.

Shadi emphasized that the attackers seemed to be outsiders taking advantage of a chaotic security environment. He shared photos of corpses, including those of women and children, and a casualty list of 31 residents, four of whom are women and 11 children aged between three and 16 years.<sup>93</sup>

On March 7 at around 1:00 p.m., “Samer,” who lives in the Qusour neighborhood of Baniyas, received a call from his brother’s neighbor in the same neighborhood, telling him that his brother, his wife, their 3-year-old daughter, and his 66-year-old mother had been killed. He said the family had decided to stay home, expecting looting but not murder. He recalled, “There was no fear of weapons, and we did not participate in any combat or hostile actions. My brother is a math teacher, his wife is a science teacher, and my mother is retired.” The neighbor, he said, explained that the attackers had spared them because they were Christian, but when they arrived at Samer’s brother’s house, they broke down the door, shot his mother in the neck, and shattered his brother’s wife’s skull.

## Children

In addition to the child victims mentioned in the cases above, many more were reported killed across the region. A joint Tiny Hand and Daraj investigation documented over 60 children killed throughout the region between March 6 and 9, 2023, with victims ranging from infants to teenagers killed alongside their families in their homes.<sup>94</sup>

Despite the apparent scale of child casualties, official reporting has been inadequate. The National Committee investigating the events on the coast omitted any mention of children altogether, while the UN Commission of Inquiry acknowledged that children were among the victims but did not provide an estimate of cases documented.

In the aftermath of the violence, social media platforms were inundated with personal tributes mourning the loss of relatives, including entire families. One individual expressed

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<sup>93</sup> Photos on file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>94</sup> Daraj Media, “The Stories and Names of Over 60 Children Executed in the Syrian Coast Massacres,” August 22, 2023, <https://daraj.media/en/the-stories-and-names-of-over-60-children-executed-in-the-syrian-coast-massacres/>.

grief over the loss of his parents, both educators, and his sister, a pharmacist, emphasizing their commitment to peace and their roles in the community.<sup>95</sup> Another lamented the killing of her mother and two brothers, highlighting their nonviolent stance and the brutal nature of their deaths.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, one woman mourned the loss of her aunt and her husband, both doctors and their sons, one a dental student and the other in high school, questioning the rationale behind such killings and expressing deep anguish over the sectarian violence.<sup>97</sup> These obituaries underscore the indiscriminate nature of the violence, where entire families became victims.

## Older People

Older people have been similarly overlooked: our research found older victims among those executed, detained, or humiliated, yet they remain largely invisible in broader analyses. The National Committee did not reference older victims in its report, whereas the UN Commission of Inquiry acknowledged that older people were also among those killed, though it offered no estimate of cases documented.

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<sup>95</sup> Hazem Hamam, Facebook post, March 7  
<https://www.facebook.com/hazem.hamamh.7/posts/pfbidoW5LDk62oEodJk1UoYSuZTL6PSRrGip9wdFvJz7omidq5mbNpmg5RqeM7yTtJARhAl>, accessed July 8, 2025.

<sup>96</sup> Rasha Mohammad, Facebook post, March 7  
<https://www.facebook.com/Rasha245/posts/pfbidooezDXCeN9BgrRaCc1G75JfVw4ujwMmTafc8sGQo2XrPvg3exSHx2YndB7GnnZehl>, accessed July 8, 2025.

<sup>97</sup> Hala Mansour, Facebook post, March 7,  
[https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=9204020843024781&id=100002508714236&rdid=Gl38EejPUjdGj6c](https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=9204020843024781&id=100002508714236&rdid=Gl38EejPUjdGj6c), accessed July 8, 2025.

### III. Establishing Responsibility

This chapter is based on 17 interviews with military personnel involved in the operations, three individuals who voluntarily joined the mobilization, and two journalists embedded with factions traveling from Homs and Idlib to the coast. These accounts were corroborated with geolocated videos, many filmed by fighters or embedded media and shared on pro-faction channels. Syrian Archive used this material to map unit movements and security deployments across affected areas, as detailed in their published July 8 report.<sup>98</sup> The investigation also drew on public statements by military officials and Ministry of Defense representatives to assess coordination and command structures.

The security operation that swept across Latakia, Tartous, and Hama governorates starting March 7 was centrally coordinated. Public statements by government officials described the deployment of tens of thousands of fighters under Ministry of Defense orders, and interviews with fighters from multiple locations confirm that these operations were not spontaneous but planned, coordinated, and executed through military channels.

Within this centrally directed structure, consistent patterns of abuse emerged. In dozens of locations, forces and private individuals participating in the sweeps carried out summary executions, looted homes and burned down property. While there is no evidence that these abuses were explicitly ordered from above, the widespread nature of the violations, committed by units operating under the umbrella of the defense ministry's operation, suggests they were neither isolated nor unforeseen.

Senior ministry officials' failure to prevent or stop these violations, despite clear indications of misconduct, including real-time footage and public outcry, risks breaching their obligations to prevent and punish crimes committed by those under their command. Senior officials and commanders in the ministry knew or should have known what was unfolding yet continued to coordinate the operation and allowed abusive units to remain in the field. The same obligation would apply to faction commanders, who maintained operational control over their forces and were responsible for their conduct.

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<sup>98</sup> Syrian Archive, *Armed Factions Mobilization to the Syrian Coast in March 2025*, July 8, 2025, <https://syrianarchive.org/en/investigations/armed-factions-mobilization-to-the-syrian-coast-in-march-2025>

## The Ministry of Defense and Centralized Mobilization

Government officials publicly responded to insurgent attacks in a series of statements and actions beginning March 6. That day, Latakia’s public security director announced a full security mobilization of the governorate’s forces, and the Ministry of Defense (MoD) quickly mobilized “huge” reinforcements, deploying troops and allied factions to areas along the coast, particularly in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, and Jableh.<sup>99</sup>

The Syrian Archive analysis of pro-government Facebook posts shows that deployments began March 6 via main highways from Damascus, Idlib, and Homs. Factions deployed included at least eight divisions affiliated directly with Hay’et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), along with units from the HTS-aligned National Liberation Front (NLF), some of which were already stationed in the area. These forces were quickly joined by newly formed Ministry of Defense divisions, created after December 2024, many of which were composed of former opposition fighters now operating under official military structures. Nearly all major former Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) factions also reported deployments to the coast—some of which had been formally integrated into the military, at least on paper. Locally organized militias and self-armed individuals from areas such as rural Damascus also joined the campaign, either informally or in loose coordination with official armed groups.

All 17 fighters interviewed described receiving deployment orders from MoD officials or operating in coordination with them, either through orders from MoD commanders, joint operations with MoD-linked units, or handovers of terrain to General Security forces. Named ministry figures were frequently cited as channels for mobilization orders, logistical support, or liaison with local authorities. This coordination continued well after evidence of mass killings and atrocities had proliferated, they said.

One HTS commander described the coastal campaign as initially spearheaded by HTS in support of General Security, beginning on March 7. After suffering losses due to poor terrain knowledge and resistance from “regime remnants,” he said HTS submitted a report to the defense ministry, which then assumed centralized command and issued formal mobilization orders. According to him, HTS retained oversight across all combat fronts while other factions were distributed geographically. The commander noted that while the

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<sup>99</sup> Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), Telegram post, [https://t.me/sana\\_gov/124261](https://t.me/sana_gov/124261), accessed July 8, 2025; Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), Telegram post, [https://t.me/sana\\_gov/124265](https://t.me/sana_gov/124265), accessed July 8, 2025.

first three days followed a structured plan, battlefield dynamics quickly disrupted coordination, and units began acting autonomously.<sup>100</sup> Most of the killings documented occurred during the first three days.

A fighter from the HTS-affiliated Liwa ‘Uthman bin ‘Affan faction described extensive coordination between his unit and the Syrian Ministry of Defense during the post-March 6 military operations. According to him, the Ministry of Defense issued direct orders to HTS-aligned and Syrian National Army (SNA) factions, organizing multi-front deployments to the coastal region. “Everyone was moving on official orders from the ministry,” he said, describing how his unit, comprising roughly 600 fighters and equipped with artillery teams, snipers, vehicle crews, and infantry squads, mobilized on March 8 and was routed through Homs, where it linked up with additional convoys from multiple HTS and SNA factions including Sultan Murad<sup>101</sup> and Sultan Suleiman Shah<sup>102</sup>, before continuing toward Baniyas. He said that Sultan Murad Division, was tasked with securing Tartous with approximately 800 fighters. The Sultan Suleiman Shah faction, was dispatched to Latakia and Baniyas with a reported 1,000 fighters supported by armored vehicles. Meanwhile, Liwa ‘Uthman bin ‘Affan was ordered to enter Baniyas directly, he said.<sup>103</sup>

Another fighter affiliated with the HTS-aligned Liwa al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, a faction made up mostly of foreign fighters, described how, on March 10, his unit of 450 fighters deployed to the Latakia countryside in response to a Ministry of Defense mobilization order. He reported that coordination occurred at multiple levels: his commander met directly with a Defense Ministry military official and further liaised with other faction

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<sup>100</sup> Remote interview with an HTS commander on April 14, 2025.

<sup>101</sup> Sultan Murad Division (*Firgat al-Sultan Murad*) is a Türkiye-backed Syrian Turkmen faction formerly active under the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army. Its former commander, Fehim Issa, was appointed Assistant Minister of Defense for the Northern Region and commander overseeing military operations in northern Syria (including Aleppo and surrounding zones) on April 12, 2025.

<sup>102</sup> Sultan Suleiman Shah brigade is a Turkish-backed militia formerly active under the Syrian National Army, led by Mohammad al-Jassem (Abu Amsha). Al-Jassem now leads his group under the banner of the 62<sup>nd</sup> division of the Syrian Army.

<sup>103</sup> Remote interview with a fighter from the HTS-affiliated Liwa ‘Uthman bin ‘Affan on March 20, 2025; Syria TV, “*شملت وزير الدفاع... القيادة العامة في سوريا تعلن عن ترقيات لضباط في الجيش*,” December 29, 2024, <https://www.syria.tv/%D8%B4%D9%85%D9%84%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%84%D8%B6%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4>.

The article includes Ashhad al-Salibi among a list of military officers reportedly promoted, stating he was elevated to the rank of Colonel.



leaders to ensure synchronized advances based on mapped target zones. The fighter named several participating formations, including Kataeb al Turkistan, Ansar al-Islam, Jund al-Islam, and Jund al-Tawhid, collectively comprising over 600 fighters. He described how these units jointly advanced through villages in northern and eastern Latakia engaging in combat, house-to-house searches, and raids aimed at locating remnants of former government forces and affiliated militia members. The fighter described widespread arrests and, in some cases, immediate executions depending on the “situation and context” of each raid. He noted that the Ministry of Interior and General Security forces took over security duties on March 16, following the withdrawal of combat units.<sup>104</sup>

In a public interview, commander of Division 62 (formerly the Sultan Suleiman Shah faction) Mohammad al-Jassem (Abu Amsha), reinforced accounts proving central coordination of the operations.

While al-Jassem’s account downplays the duration and intensity of his faction’s deployment, and denies any involvement in reported violations, it aligns with a broader trend across accounts from military personnel: that the Ministry of Defense served as the primary operational hub for mobilization, geographic assignment, and inter-factional coordination. At the same time, the persistent occurrence of abuses, despite widespread awareness, suggests that senior defense ministry officials failed to intervene or impose discipline even when violations were known.

## Operational Conduct Across Locations

All interviewed fighters confirmed participation in sweep operations and home raids in Alawi-majority areas between March 8 and 10, the period when the most severe abuses were recorded. One fighter reported being mobilized on March 7, five on March 8, eight on March 9, and three on March 10, and fighters reported receiving orders to withdraw between three days and a couple of weeks later, often handing control of areas to General Security.

While some claimed they attempted to avoid targeting civilians, nearly all acknowledged widespread looting, retaliatory violence, and unlawful killings by their own or allied units.

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<sup>104</sup> Remote interview with a fighter from the HTS-aligned Liwa al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar on April 20, 2025.

Across 14 interviews, including with 11 fighters, two volunteer participants, and one embedded journalist, summary executions were reported. Victims were described as former government collaborators, suspected informants, and people associated with the Alawi sect—often with little to no process of verification. Several factions, Sultan Murad, Hamzat Division, Maghawir al-Sham, and Katibat al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, were directly named in accounts of extrajudicial killings and sectarian violence. Other factions, including Sultan Suleiman Shah, Liwa al-Majd, and HTS-affiliated groups, were also observed by interviewees looting homes and executing civilians during search operations.

On March 8, as military convoys were still deploying, the Ministry of Defense publicly announced the closure of roads to the coastal region and the formation of an oversight committee to investigate violations: clear indications that it was aware of the violations being carried out.<sup>105</sup> Yet despite these measures, coordinated patterns of abuse persisted across dozens of towns, including house raids, identity-based killings, and looting.

One HTS commander acknowledged that fighters from “all factions” committed abuses, including civilian killings and looting, despite reporting receiving official instructions not to harm civilians. He claimed General Security was later tasked with investigating these violations.<sup>106</sup>

One fighter recounted how his 70-man unit was sent from the Damascus countryside to rural Hama on March 10. After linking up with convoys under the command of the Ministry of Defense, the group began home raids in al-Haydariyah. He described executions of men who had previously “settled their status” with the authorities: “They were executed out of blind sectarian hatred or a thirst for revenge.”<sup>107</sup>

Another fighter with the HTS-aligned Liwa ‘Uthman bin ‘Affan faction acknowledged that they killed many people he described as “regime remnants” as they hid in homes and arrested and handed over to General Security others based solely on perceived collaboration. “During these operations, we killed many remnants who were hiding inside houses, and we also arrested many civilians who had cooperated with the remnants or

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<sup>105</sup> Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), *Ministry of Defense Announces Road Closures to the Coastal Region to Curb Violations and Restore Stability*, March 8, 2025, <https://sana.sy/?p=2196437>.

<sup>106</sup> Remote interview with HTS commander on April 14, 2025.

<sup>107</sup> Remote interview with a fighter with Maghawir al Sham on April 14, 2025.

resisted us as we entered the city,” he said. He also reported that other factions executed multiple Alawi men and women inside their homes without any evidence of combatant activity.<sup>108</sup>

A fighter from the HTS-aligned Omar bin al-Khattab Brigade, who took part in operations around Sheikh Badr and Safita in rural Tartous, described a coordinated deployment involving General Security forces and other HTS-affiliated units, following direct orders from his brigade commander. After initial clashes with “regime remnants,” his group helped secure control of the area. Beginning on March 10, they conducted house-to-house raids to search for weapons and detain individuals suspected of former government affiliation. While some detainees were transferred to General Security, the fighter admitted that allied units carried out a wave of retaliatory killings. Referring to these as “individual violations,” he explained: “They killed a significant number of men and youths in the area, some civilians, others from families of regime remnants. The death toll was around 170, in revenge for their support of the Syrian regime and in retaliation for the brothers we lost during the clashes.”<sup>109</sup>

Several fighters, while aiming to justify or downplay their roles, implicitly confessed to unlawful conduct by their factions and the convoys they had joined, often recounted as routine aspects of their operations. One member of Faylaq al-Sham described sweeping through neighborhoods, homes, storage facilities, and basements, stating that his unit “killed anyone seen helping regime remnants or who fired a shot from their house.”<sup>110</sup> He added that they also executed several men and young adults during these sweeps after discovering weapons or ammunition in their homes.

One embedded journalist confirmed similar scenes in Tartous, Jableh, and Baniyas, including shootings, property seizures, and assaults carried out by fighters, some of whom had affiliation with formal military units. He traveled alongside convoys under the command of the Ministry of Defense from central Syria into Tartous, and later to Baniyas, witnessing a pattern of ad hoc and often retaliatory violence. Near Talkalakh, the convoy he accompanied opened indiscriminate fire in response to a stray shot, endangering

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<sup>108</sup> Remote interview with a fighter from the HTS-affiliated Liwa ‘Uthman bin ‘Affan on March 20, 2025.

<sup>109</sup> Remote interview with fighter from the HTS-aligned Omar bin al-Khattab Brigade on April 13, 2025

<sup>110</sup> Remote interview with Faylaq al-Sham fighter on March 14, 2025.

civilians. In Tartous, he witnessed chaotic gunfire by fighters meant to intimidate, and in Baniyas, described scenes of looting, coercion, and executions in Alawi-majority neighborhoods. “Seven members of a single family were lined up against a wall and told: ‘Either we kill you or we take your car,’” he recalled. Days later, when he returned to Jableh, he said bodies were still being recovered from homes, and Civil Defense teams were conducting door-to-door searches to locate the dead.<sup>111</sup>

A second embedded journalist, traveling with a convoy of Ministry of Defense-affiliated armed groups on March 7, recounted widespread misconduct en route to Tartous, describing how a single gunshot fired at the convoy prompted an overwhelming and indiscriminate response, with fighters firing heavily into surrounding villages. In one disturbing incident, the journalist witnessed a man—believed to be Alawi—attempts to hand out food to the convoy. “Some fighters jumped out, beat him, and then one of them shot him. I’m sure he’s dead,” the journalist said. Once in Tartous, journalists were barred from accompanying units conducting raids, with access restricted to faction-affiliated media. The journalist ultimately left the area, citing safety concerns.<sup>112</sup>

While not all factions may have operated under direct or continuous command supervision, the recurring patterns observed across dozens of widely dispersed areas—sweep operations and house raids, followed by unlawful acts such as identity-based targeting, looting, and public executions—demonstrate that these abuses were not isolated incidents. These violations occurred within the framework of a centrally coordinated military campaign, during which different factions operated under a shared plan of deployment and geographic assignment. Our investigation did not find evidence that senior officials of the Ministries of Defense and Interior explicitly ordered these violations or that abuses themselves were operationally coordinated. However, the consistency of violations across multiple units underscores senior defense ministry officials’ failure to exercise effective oversight or establish effective control of their forces once abuses became apparent. At the same time, faction commanders retained operational control over their units and are responsible for the conduct of their fighters during these operations.

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<sup>111</sup> Remote interview with journalist who embedded with military convoys on April 6, 2025.

<sup>112</sup> Remote interview with journalist who embedded with military convoys on March 28, 2025.

On March 8, as convoys were still actively deploying to the Syrian coast, the Ministry of Defense issued a public statement—reported by SANA—announcing the closure of roads into the coastal region “to contain infractions, prevent violations, and gradually restore stability.”<sup>113</sup> The ministry confirmed the formation of an oversight committee tasked with documenting violations and referring offenders to military courts, and it declared the closure of roads into coastal zones to prevent further “infractions” and “restore stability.” These measures, taken at the height of mobilization, prove that the Ministry was acutely aware of the extent of undisciplined violence unfolding on the ground.

The Ministry of Defense’s failure to interrupt abusive practices, hold units accountable, or clearly delineate chains of command points to its role not only in mobilization but also in allowing conditions under which such abuses could unfold on a broad scale.

Abuses by state security forces and affiliated armed groups remain ongoing, with credible reports of arbitrary detentions, sectarian targeting, and unlawful killings continuing well beyond the March 2025 atrocities.

## Participation of “Unorganized Elements”

Calls issued in mosques and public squares across Syria urged people to volunteer in support of security forces following the March 6 attacks.<sup>114</sup> Telegram channels claiming to be affiliated with the Military Operations Command, an umbrella body that coordinated operations among armed factions in the days leading up to the ouster of Bashar al-Assad and for some weeks after, amplified these calls, encouraging mass mobilization to the coast.<sup>115</sup> These messages framed participation as both a national duty and a chance to avenge fallen security personnel, contributing to the influx of volunteers and former fighters into frontline roles alongside formal military units.

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<sup>113</sup> Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), *Ministry of Defense Announces Road Closures to the Coastal Region to Curb Violations and Restore Stability*, March 8, 2025, <https://sana.sy/?p=2196437>.

<sup>114</sup> YouTube video titled “Idlib mosques call for general mobilization as convoys from across the provinces head to the coast,” published on March 6, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-j381SJTd8>. The video shows mosque loudspeakers issuing mobilization calls.

<sup>115</sup> Telegram channel “*Operations Room*” (@rd3\_al3dwan), post dated March 6, 2026, 12:05 (Damascus time), [https://t.me/rd3\\_al3dwan/6516](https://t.me/rd3_al3dwan/6516), accessed September 15, 2025, and post dated March 6, 2025, 11:48 (Damascus time), [https://t.me/rd3\\_al3dwan/6511](https://t.me/rd3_al3dwan/6511), accessed September 15, 2025.

On March 7, Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa called for calm, urging insurgents to surrender and pledging to uphold state authority and protect civilians, while condemning the mutiny as a threat to Syria's stability. His remarks, however, also marked a shift in tone, declaring that the "time for forgiveness had passed" and invoking the need to "liberate" and "purify" the region.<sup>116</sup>

On March 8, a Defense Ministry official publicly instructed private individuals to disengage, emphasizing that the situation was fully under control and that operations were proceeding as planned.<sup>117</sup> An Interior Ministry source later acknowledged "individual violations" committed by "unorganized elements."<sup>118</sup> However, volunteers who were actively involved in fighting said that they continued to participate on or after the day of the Ministry of Defense's directive to withdraw.

Maher, a Sunni man from Baniyas, described how on the morning of March 8, a Defense Ministry-affiliated figure arrived to organize and deploy volunteers recruited by a sheikh at a local mosque alongside General Security and army units. Maher was deployed in Baniyas city, where his main role was to help around 150 General Security personnel navigate the city. He said that during these operations he participated in home raids and witnessed beatings, killings, and detentions of what he described as "regime remnants." In one instance, he said: "We were raiding a house and discovered a group of ten people hiding inside. General Security surrounded them, killed six, and arrested the rest." Far from being demobilized, Maher was integrated into ongoing security operations and continued to assist security forces in locating wanted individuals well beyond March 8.<sup>119</sup>

Another volunteer, Udai from Homs, said that he was also recruited alongside 30 other volunteers by a local mosque sheikh on March 10 and later integrated into a convoy of

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<sup>116</sup> Al Jazeera, "Syria's al-Sharaa vows to punish forces responsible for mass killings," March 10, 2025. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/10/syrias-al-sharaa-vows-to-punish-forces-responsible-for-mass-killings>, accessed July 27, 2025.

<sup>117</sup> Telegram post from the official Syrian Ministry of Defense channel, *Sy\_Defense*, dated March 8, 2025, 06:53 (Damascus time), stating: "Our forces continue to pursue remnants (al-fulul) according to adopted operational plans." [https://t.me/Sy\\_Defense/226](https://t.me/Sy_Defense/226), accessed September 15, 2025.

<sup>118</sup> Syrian state media (SANA), citing the Interior Ministry, reported on March 7, 2025, that "individual violations" had occurred in the coastal region due to "large, unorganized popular crowds." The ministry claimed the actions did not reflect the will of the Syrian people and that steps were being taken to contain the situation. Reported by: *Awqat al-Sham News Agency*, March 7, 2025, <https://shaamtimes.net/478935>, accessed July 27, 2025.

<sup>119</sup> Remote interview with an armed volunteer on March 19, 2025.

around 200 fighters under formal Ministry of Defense command. He was deployed to the Latakia countryside near the villages of Mukhtariyah and al-Zobar, where he participated in combat and supported joint sweeps with government forces. Udai recounted that they raided residential homes, detained men, and killed four who resisted arrest. Udai participated in raids, manned checkpoints, and remained active in the coastal region until at least March 18, ten days after the Ministry's statement.<sup>120</sup>

In contrast, one volunteer said that he participated entirely outside official command structures. He admitted that his group of about 90 armed volunteers deployed from Idlib under the leadership of a local preacher and entered the neighbouring villages of Sinjwan, al-Khalalh, al-Hannadi, and Baksa near Latakia city on March 8 without coordinating with Ministry of Defense affiliates. They conducted house-to-house searches and killed dozens of young men, many of whom they claimed were armed or collaborators, in what the participant described as a revenge operation. "We returned that same night around midnight after avenging ourselves," he said, mentioning a general order from the Defense Ministry barring any fighters outside its command from remaining in the combat zones.<sup>121</sup>

## Patterns of Prior Abuse

Violations in the context of combing operations, including summary killings, have been reported since at least early January, including in Alawi-majority villages in the western Homs countryside.<sup>122</sup> Across these operations, witnesses reported the same hallmarks later seen on the coast, sectarian slurs, detainees forced to crawl and bark, systematic looting, and impunity, demonstrating that the March killings were an escalation of an already established pattern.

On January 23, general security forces conducted a combing operation in Fahel village, during which they arrested and publicly beat dozens of residents, including retired and reconciled army officers, according one villager.<sup>123</sup> Fourteen former military personnel, some of whom were detained earlier during the operation, and two civilians were killed

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<sup>120</sup> Remote interview with an armed volunteer on May 27, 2025.

<sup>121</sup> Remote interview with armed volunteer on May 25, 2025.

<sup>122</sup> Syrians for Truth and Justice, "Take Him to the Ghoul: 16 People Executed in a Single Day in Fahel Village, Homs Countryside," May 2, 2025, <https://stj-sy.org/en/take-him-to-the-ghoul-16-people-executed-in-a-single-day-in-fahel-village-homs-countryside>, accessed July 28, 2025.

<sup>123</sup> Remote interview with "Khaled" on February 8, 2025.

that day, according to the villager and another resident.<sup>124</sup> Homs officials later blamed “criminal groups” unaffiliated with state forces.<sup>125</sup> *Al-Jumhuriya* reported that officials from General Security asserted that “those killed were unarmed and were arrested and executed outside the framework of the law.”<sup>126</sup>

Among the localities repeatedly impacted by this ongoing violence was the village of Arza in eastern Hama, which suffered an earlier attack in early January and again on March 7.

On January 31, gunmen bypassed a Hay’et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) checkpoint, set up at villagers’ request, by taking a back agricultural road. They stormed three homes, rounded up all the men inside, and executed seven men and a teenage boy, according to two witnesses. “They killed them one by one on the spot,” said Dina, 25. Women were locked in a room under armed guard.

Security forces responded by sealing off the village and arresting three suspects. But on March 7, armed men from nearby Sunni-majority villages returned and carried out a second massacre, killing 25 more residents and forcing the rest of the village to flee.

According to *The National*, the attackers in both incidents were loyal to Sheikh Abou Jaber, a former rebel fighter who had returned to his hometown of Khattab in December. Abou Jaber denied taking part but confirmed his presence during the March 7 massacre. He openly justified the killings as revenge for past abuses allegedly committed by Arza’s residents during the Assad era. “Old or young, everyone in Arza is guilty,” he said. He added that the killings stopped only because “the new authorities requested it” and warned the displaced not to return: “We’ve been displaced for 13 years – they can wait a few months or years.”

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<sup>124</sup> “‘Take Him to the Ghoul’: 16 People Executed in a Single Day in Fahel Village, Homs Countryside,” STJ, May 2, 2025, <https://stj-sy.org/en/take-him-to-the-ghoul-16-people-executed-in-a-single-day-in-fahel-village-homs-countryside/>, accessed May 11, 2025.

<sup>125</sup> Asharq News-Syria, *Facebook*, January 28, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1692421051339002>, accessed May 11, 2025.

<sup>126</sup> Al-Jumhuriya.net, *Facebook*, January 27, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/aljumhuriya.net/posts/pfbido2ajvs4M3fFK7YbQZjnLomXD1QAaM59hyb1UMMAp6eFgNJsLFuSQ8FQP7ciRxs7Cnl>.



Arza's repeated targeting was not an isolated case but part of a broader cycle of retaliatory violence and sectarian killings. The failure to intervene more forcefully after the January massacre, and the ease with which attackers evaded known checkpoints, reflects a pattern of impunity and official negligence in protecting vulnerable communities.

The Commission of Inquiry found reasonable grounds to believe that interim government forces, including General Security, committed serious violations in January 2025, including arbitrary killings, torture and other ill-treatment and arbitrary detentions.

## **Command Responsibility**

The operations that unfolded across coastal Syria in March 2025 reflect more than a breakdown in discipline. They point to practices, tolerated and repeated, that have taken place throughout the transitional period.

The patterns of abuse documented in Latakia, Tartous, and Hama—executions, sectarian targeting, looting, and public humiliations—mirror conduct observed in earlier security operations in Homs and Hama. Their recurrence across governorates, timeframes, and armed groups suggests not isolated misconduct, but a replicable playbook shaped by a permissive operational culture.

This report does not claim that all violations were centrally ordered or uniformly implemented. Interviews with fighters indicate variations in conduct. Still, the Ministry of Defense played a central role in coordinating the military operation, issuing mobilization orders, shaping deployments, coordinating between factions, and intervening publicly only after abuses had escalated. Senior officials failed to prevent, interrupt, or meaningfully redress widespread violations, despite knowledge that grave abuses were being carried out in a widespread manner.

Under customary international law and Article 28 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, commanders may be held criminally liable for international crimes committed by forces under their effective control when they knew or had reason to know such acts were being committed and failed to take necessary and reasonable measures to prevent them or punish those responsible. This standard applies to both military and civilian superiors, and it does not require evidence of a direct order. Rather, it imposes a

continuing duty of oversight, demanding action to prevent foreseeable abuses, intervene where violations are ongoing, and ensure accountability when crimes occur.

Certain crimes, including murder, and persecution on grounds including religion or ethnicity, can amount to crimes against humanity if committed as part of a widespread or systematic ‘attack directed against a civilian population’, meaning repeated crimes committed pursuant to a state or organizational policy.

## IV. Accountability Efforts

In response to the March violence, the presidency created two bodies on March 9: a Fact-Finding Committee to investigate the killings and a three-member Civil Peace Committee to calm sectarian tensions.<sup>127</sup>

The investigation panel, judges, one lawyer, and a military officer, visited over 30 sites, interviewed survivors and commanders, and, after a three-month extension, reported on July 22 that at least 1,426 people were killed and 298 suspects referred to prosecutors.<sup>128</sup> The committee did not disclose the ranks or positions of those referred, leaving unclear whether senior officials or unit commanders were included. It found no evidence of direct orders from senior leaders. It also made no reference to command responsibility – namely the legal obligation of those in positions of authority to prevent or punish international crimes by forces under their effective control. This omission effectively shields senior officials and unit commanders from accountability, despite patterns of abuses that should have triggered scrutiny of their role.

Beyond these initiatives, tangible accountability has been limited. Officials told the UN Commission of Inquiry that 42 individuals that report to the Ministry of Defense had been arrested and referred to the judiciary, some identified through self-incriminating online material, with efforts reportedly underway to identify additional suspects.<sup>129</sup> It remains unclear, however, what specific charges—if any—these individuals face. The Interior Ministry also announced the creation of a Complaints Office to receive citizen reports of security force misconduct. There is no indication that any senior officials have faced charges.

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<sup>127</sup> Reuters, “Syria’s Sharaa Grants Three-Month Extension to Committee Probing Coastal Killings,” April 11, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-sharaa-grants-three-month-extension-committee-probing-coastal-killings-2025-04-11/>, accessed July 8, 2025. *Syria Times*, “Presidential Decision to Form a Supreme Committee for the Preservation of Civil Peace,” April 5, 2025, <http://syriatimes.sy/presidential-decision-to-form-a-supreme-committee-for-the-preservation-of-civil-peace/>, accessed July 8, 2025.

<sup>128</sup> Enab Baladi, “Syria’s coastal fact-finding committee submits report to President al-Sharaa,” July 23, 2025, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/07/syrias-coastal-fact-finding-committee-submits-report-to-president-al-sharaa/>.

<sup>129</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/59/CRP.4)*, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session59/a-hrc-59-crp4-en.pdf>.

Syrian transitional authorities have taken some steps toward reforming the highly decentralized and ideologically diverse security sector. Alongside efforts at accelerating the integration of armed factions under a single command, with pledges to dissolve unaccountable units and bring all weapons under state control, on May 30, the Ministry of Defense issued a Code of Military Conduct and Discipline, outlining prohibitions against mistreating civilians, committing discriminatory acts, or abusing detainees.<sup>130</sup>

Enforcement, however, remains uncertain. Many armed factions have long operated independently, with competing ideologies, loyalties, and leadership structures making unity within a centralized army difficult to enforce. Loyalty to individual commanders remains strong, and disputes over rank, influence, and resource allocation have already created friction.<sup>131</sup>

On May 16, Syrian authorities announced the creation of a Transitional Justice Commission, tasked with addressing crimes committed under the former government. A National Commission for the Missing, mandated to document cases of enforced disappearance and support affected families, was established soon after.

The Transitional Justice Commission's limited mandate, focusing exclusively on former government abuses, has stirred public skepticism, especially in light of recent violence and impunity by other actors.<sup>132</sup> Despite rhetorical commitments to "victims-centered justice" and limited consultations with civil society, the absence of clear, inclusive mechanisms for victim participation has created a perception of delay and disengagement. Without concrete steps to involve a diversity of stakeholders, efforts risk appearing symbolic rather than substantive.

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<sup>130</sup> Syrian Ministry of Defense (@Sy\_Defense), X, May 30, 2025, 12:03 p.m., [https://x.com/Sy\\_Defense/status/1928482324808614181](https://x.com/Sy_Defense/status/1928482324808614181), accessed July 8, 2025.

<sup>131</sup> Mohammed Hassan, Middle East Institute, "Building Syria's New Army: Future Plans and Challenges Ahead," June 12, 2025, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/building-syrias-new-army-future-plans-and-challenges-ahead>, accessed July 8, 2025.

<sup>132</sup> Koontz, Kayla, and Gregory Waters, "Without Accountability, Syria's Sectarian Violence Will Only Worsen," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 10, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/without-accountability-syrias-sectarian-violence-will-only-worsen>, accessed September 15, 2025.

The absence of a functioning justice system has also created an environment ripe for retaliatory violence, assassinations, and communal score-settling across the country.<sup>133</sup> Journalists have linked a wave of targeted killings to groups such as ISIS and Saraya Ansar al-Sunna, noting that victims turn to vengeance when courts fail.<sup>134</sup>

Key international bodies including the UN's IIIM, IIMP, and COI continue to face significant operational constraints, including the absence of permanent, unhindered access to Syrian territory. These limitations obstruct their ability to conduct in-country investigations, engage directly with affected communities, and build necessary relationships with local institutions. Moreover, Syria has yet to ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Ensuring a credible transitional process requires broadening the Transitional Justice Commission's mandate, making the inquiry report public, and cooperating with international accountability bodies.

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<sup>133</sup> UN Web TV, *UN Human Rights Council, 20th Meeting – 59th Session*, 27 June 2025, <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1/k1leqonf3g>.

<sup>134</sup> Hussam Hammoud (@HussamHammoud), X, June 10, 2025, 5:54 a.m., <https://x.com/HussamHamoud/status/1932375865502859657>.

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The report was written by Zayadin. Adam Coogle, deputy director in the Middle East and North Africa Division, edited and reviewed the report. Clive Baldwin, senior legal advisor, and Tom Porteous, deputy program director, provided legal and program reviews. An officer in the Middle East and North Africa Division, provided editorial assistance. Specialist reviews were provided by colleagues in Human Rights Watch's Children's Rights Division, Disability Rights Division, Women's Rights Division, Transitional Justice Program, and the Digital Investigations Lab, as well as colleagues from Syrians for Truth and Justice and Syrian Archive.

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# “Are you Alawi?”

## Identity-Based Killings During Syria’s Transition

In early March 2025, deadly insurgent attacks on government forces in Syria’s coastal region triggered a wave of identity-based violence against Alawi communities. Government security forces, affiliated armed groups, and armed volunteers swept through Alawi-majority areas of Tartous, Latakia, and Hama governorates, killing at least 1,400 people and leaving behind torched homes, mass graves, and shattered communities.

Drawing on more than 100 interviews, hundreds of verified videos and photographs, and satellite imagery, “*Are You Alawi?*,” a joint report by Human Rights Watch, Syrians for Truth and Justice, and Syrian Archive, documents widespread abuses across more than 24 towns, villages, and neighborhoods between March 6 and March 10. These included summary executions, house raids, looting, arson, and sectarian abuse. The report finds that the acts of violence were neither random nor isolated, but unfolded within the framework of a coordinated, large-scale military operation, during which different factions operated under a shared plan of deployment and geographic assignment.

Senior officials and faction commanders knew or should have known of these abuses and failed to effectively prevent or punish them. Human Rights Watch urges Syrian authorities to investigate their role in line with the doctrine of command responsibility, and to implement urgent security-sector reforms with clear chains of command and enforceable codes of conduct.



*Syrian government forces in the western city of Latakia, Syria, on March 9, 2025. © 2025 OMAR HAJ KADOUR/ AFP via Getty Images*