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Kurdish Centre for Studies & Legal Consultancy




# ‘We will kill you one by one’:
## Violations in Suwayda and Syria’s coastal region



**Cover photo:**
Suwayda, Syria, 14 July 2025.

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**Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights**

The Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights is an initiative to develop 'civilian-led monitoring' of violations of international humanitarian law or human rights, to pursue legal and political accountability for those responsible for such violations, and to develop the practice of civilian rights. The Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights is registered as a charity and a company limited by guarantee under English law; charity no: 1160083, company no: 9069133.

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YASA is a non-governmental and non-profit organization working to promote and advocate for the human rights of Kurds in their country of origin and in the diaspora. YASA was founded in August 2005, in Bonn, and now works for the interests of Kurds in the areas of human rights, integration and culture. On the political level, YASA operates through the use of national, regional and international legal instruments and works with governmental and non-governmental organizations, which also promote the implementation of human rights.

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# 1 Introduction

On 8 December 2024, Syrian opposition forces ousted President Bashar al-Assad, ending not only his 24-year-long rule but a total of 53 years of the Assad family's rule over Syria. Under the Assad family, Syria was characterized by censorship, suppression of civil liberties, state-sponsored violence, and economic disparity. Since 2011, the country had been in a civil war that took the lives of over 580,000 people and forcibly displaced nearly 13 million.[1]

Following the fall of the Assad regime, the Syrian Transitional Government was formed under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa. The new government promised to stabilize and unify the country while simultaneously protecting minorities.[2] In an effort to consolidate power, it dissolved the former army and security agencies in favour of new institutions[3] and initiated disarmament campaigns.[4] Some armed factions were integrated into Syria's new military[5] such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, which were both known to have committed numerous violations of human rights law and humanitarian law.[6] (HTS had been designated as a terrorist group by the United Nations (UN) Security Council although that status was revoked in February 2026.)[7] The new forces quickly began engaging in security raids purportedly aimed at restoring order and disarming those unaffiliated with the state.[8]

YASA – Kurdish Center for Studies and Legal Consultancy collected over 170 testimonies documenting violations against Alawi and Druze civilians that occurred after the transitional government came to power. The testimonies focus on violations that occurred in Syria's coastal region in March 2025 and in Suwayda in July 2025 but are not limited to these events. The collected testimonies reveal recurring patterns of violations against minorities, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, torture, displacement, gender-based violence, and attacks on civilian infrastructure.

The interviews were carried out by local contacts and partnering organizations between September 2025 and March 2026. YASA then collected either summaries or full transcripts of these interviews via a secure online reporting tool designed by the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights (testimony identification numbers in the endnotes refer to the corresponding case posted on the Ceasefire-MENA platform). The testimonies stem from victims as well as eyewitnesses. Names and other details that would permit the identification of those interviewed are omitted in the report to ensure their anonymity and safety. The findings are supplemented with secondary data where necessary and evaluated under international human rights and humanitarian law.

# The Syrian Transitional Government

President Bashar al-Assad was overthrown in a military offensive which started on 27 November 2024 and was carried out by a coalition of oppositional groups led by HTS. Within a few days, the oppositional forces managed to seize control over significant parts of Syria's territory while pro-government forces rapidly disintegrated until, on 8 December 2024, Assad fled the country.[9] Since then, Ahmed al-Sharaa has been the de facto leader of Syria. He was officially appointed as President at the 'Conference for Announcing the Victory of the Syrian Revolution' on 29 January 2025.[10] The conference was criticized for excluding certain minorities such as the Kurds.[11]

Al-Sharaa, who was previously known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Mohammad al-Julani, was one of Syria's most influential Islamist commanders before he took office. In 2011, he formed Jabhat al-Nusra to serve as al-Qaeda's Syrian branch. The organization later merged with several other armed groups, thereby forming HTS. The group had previously severed external links to al-Qaeda and distanced itself from global jihadist ideas in favour of Syrian Islamism, thereby gradually rebranding itself as a local revolutionary actor.[12] Since al-Sharaa has attained power, he has further distanced himself from Sunni Islamist ideas, claiming to fight for national reconciliation.[13]

On 13 March 2025, al-Sharaa signed a Constitutional Declaration providing for a five-year transition period. The declaration enshrines the right to political participation, separation of powers, freedom of expression, limited women's rights such as the right to education and work, freedom of belief and the protection of human rights in general. It also, however, significantly empowers the executive with regard to law-making and security matters, and stipulates that 'Islamic jurisprudence is the principal source of legislation.'[14]

On 29 March 2025, al-Sharaa announced his transitional government. It consisted of 23 ministers, including ministers from Alawi, Christian, Druze and Kurdish backgrounds. The ministers from ethno-religious minorities were not affiliated with any known political factions and were thus quickly criticized as merely symbolic. Hind Kabawat, Minister for Social Affairs and Labour, is the only woman in the government. Many of the most influential ministers, such as the Minister of Defence and the Minister of the Interior, are former members of HTS or other Islamist groups.[15]

The strong representation of former HTS members in the new government and security agencies, in combination with the lack of democratic legitimacy and safeguards against executive overreach, as well as the limited representation of minorities were criticized by human rights groups.[16]

# 2 Violations against Alawis

Alawis constitute a religious minority within Syria and are estimated to make up 9–15 per cent of the Syrian population.[17] Alawis have experienced intense periods of persecution throughout Syria's history as they are considered heretics under orthodox interpretations of Sharia. Sunni theologian Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) declared Alawis to be more 'infidel than the Jews, the Christians and even than many polytheists',[18] and even called for their eradication. Ibn Taymiyya's fatwas still serve as a source of inspiration for some Islamist groups.[19]

Under the Assad government, Alawis were disproportionately represented in state institutions in general, but most importantly among Syria's political elite and senior ranks of the armed forces. While some Alawis profited from this system, many Alawis suffered under the violence and economic decline of Assad rule. However, the Assad family's Alawi background and its patronage networks led to a common misconception that all Alawis were loyal to the former regime.[20]

After the transitional government came to power, it created settlement centres for members of the dissolved army and security institutions to hand over their weapons and settle their status. According to a report from the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, in Latakia and Tartus alone, 123,000 individuals settled their status.[21] Both are governorates with a particularly high Alawi population as most Syrian Alawis live in the coastal region.[22]

Some Alawis, however, were scared to give up their arms in the face of increased sectarian violence. Some joined new armed groups consisting of Assad-loyalists, generally referred to as 'Pro-Former Government Forces' (PFGF), 'remnants of the Assad regime', or simply 'remnants'.[23]

The new government started to conduct security raids, aimed at disarming and arresting members of the previous army who had not handed over their weapons. These raids quickly turned into acts of revenge and featured numerous violations of human rights law. The first raids documented by YASA took place in the village of Fahel in Homs Governorate on 23 January 2025. Government forces entered the village and imposed a curfew on the residents, stating that this was done to facilitate a calm search. The forces reportedly started firing into the air shortly after their arrival and then started to search the houses. Members of the security forces reportedly looted homes, used sectarian insults, and

beat residents. During these raids, 50 men were arrested and 15 were killed in summary executions.[24]

On 6 March 2025, PFGF attacked members of the General Security and Ministry of Defence when they attempted to arrest an individual associated with the former government.[25] This marked the beginning of a series of attacks on government forces by PFGF, which was met with a counteroffensive launched by the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior. Government forces received support from associated armed groups and some individuals spontaneously taking up arms. During the following days, these forces entered Alawi-majority communities all over Syria's coastal region and committed extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions and torture.[26] Approximately 1,500 Alawis were killed during these attacks.[27] While this report focuses on violations committed against Alawis, it is important to note, that PFGF committed similar violations against civilians, although on a smaller scale.[28]

YASA received 66 reports describing these and other violations that took place in the coastal region after the new government came to power, examined further below.[29]

# Patterns of violations

## Targeting of civilians and extrajudicial killings

During the security raids in the coastal region, armed forces reportedly started firing indiscriminately as soon as they entered the respective villages, but sometimes directly targeting houses.[30] The forces then searched the houses, using sectarian insults and stealing from the residents. Some residents were reportedly beaten during these searches and some houses were burned. The forces would then order the men in the house to accompany them or drag them out by force. In many instances, the men were taken to a place in their neighbourhood where they were subsequently shot alongside their neighbours.

Before being executed, the men were often subjected to sectarian insults and beatings. One witness from the village of Al-Mukhtariya in the Latakia countryside stated that some victims were forced to howl like dogs before they were executed and some victims were forced to undress before being killed.[31] Another witness from the same village stated that the armed forces broke windows, threw the glass on the men they had gathered and then trampled on them before killing them.[32] Most men were shot in the head, stomach or chest. One witness from the village of Bustan al-Basha explained that the executed men were found lying on their stomachs, indicating that they were shot from behind. The witness further noted that there were possible signs of torture as some of the victims had fractured legs and their feet were twisted backwards.[33]

Other men were killed directly in front of their homes with their families witnessing the execution. In one case, an armed group stormed the home of an 80-year-old religious Sheikh who had previously suffered a stroke and consequently suffered from severely impaired mobility. The group gathered the family in the living room, started beating them and forced them to lie down. They asked about the Sheikh and were told that he was in bed as he was too ill to get up, upon which the forces dragged the Sheikh from his room. His son stood up as he wanted to prevent the men from leaving with his father and was consequently shot twice. His family was prevented from helping him at gunpoint while a vehicle remained parked outside the house preventing others from helping. He died before he could reach the hospital and his father was found dead a few hours after he was taken away.[34]

While women and children were usually spared in the cases documented by YASA, the UN estimates that 100 women were killed in March 2025.[35] Several of the collected reports, however, recount killings of elderly or disabled men. A man who had been disabled following a car accident 10 years prior was reportedly thrown out of his window from the second floor. When he survived the fall, he was shot.[36] Another report concerns two men who were unable to flee when the forces arrived as both of them were disabled and could not run. They were taken from their homes and shot.[37]

One witness reported that government forces fired indiscriminately while driving between villages. The victim, a young man who was driving a motorcycle, attempted to leave the road when he no-

ticed the military convoy. He did not manage to get away in time and was hit in the side and in the hand which caused him to fall off his motorcycle and fracture his hand. He stated that the military convoy was accompanied by an ambulance but it did not stop to help him.[38]

There is no indication that the armed forces attempted to differentiate between civilians and combatants. This is highlighted by the killings of disabled and elderly men as well as the indiscriminate shooting that accompanied most of the attacks. One witness reported a case in which a member of the attacking forces recognized a man who was a doctor in a civilian hospital. He was dragged outside his house and killed nonetheless.[39]

While most killings took place during the attacks in March, the security raids did not end there. For instance, on 25 April 2025, at least 13 young men were reportedly taken from their homes in several neighbourhoods in the city of Homs. Two of the men were later found dead. It was not reported what happened to the other men.[40]

Extrajudicial killings also took place outside of these kinds of raids. Several reports indicated that men were arrested at security checkpoints set up by the government forces with some of them being killed later or simply disappearing.

## Arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance

YASA documented several cases of arbitrary detentions, some of which amount to enforced disappearance. Most victims were held in police stations, prisons or at security checkpoints. Additionally, some victims reported being held in a villa or hotel that had been repurposed as security headquarters and detention facilities. The exact locations are omitted to protect the victims' identities.

Most victims were detained during security raids, at security checkpoints, on the road or in their neighbourhood, oftentimes just outside their house. Arresting officers often decided to arrest an individual after having looked at their ID or asked what sect they belonged to. The arrests were usually accompanied by sectarian insults, and sometimes inflammatory questions insinuating blasphemy. Sectarian insults regularly included calling Alawis pigs, dogs, blasphemous or infidels. Some individuals were beaten during the arrest and one man reported being shot in the foot when he refused to accompany the arresting officers.[41]

The overwhelming majority of individuals who were arbitrarily detained were male. Women, in turn, were more likely to be kidnapped by private individuals. These cases will be further analysed in the section on gender-based violence.

The detainees were most commonly accused of being remnants of the Assad regime, of possessing a weapon, and, less frequently, of other offences[42] such as drug-related crimes[43] or, in one case recorded by YASA, insulting symbols of the Syrian state.[44] One man, the father of a journalist, never faced any charges himself but was instead arrested only to be questioned about the whereabouts of his daughter. When he refused to answer, he was tortured. The man was only released after his daughter had turned herself in. At that point, he had been detained for 48 hours.[45]

Most men that were detained reported being tortured with severe beatings. Two victims described being placed on a wheel before being beaten.[46] Beatings were delivered using hands, sticks, the butts of rifles, whips, or other objects that were used as a whip.[47] The victims were usually beaten during interrogations in an attempt to force confessions although, in some cases, victims were beaten independently of interrogations.

That was the case for one victim who reported being told that there were no charges against him, but that he as an Alawi would have to remain in detention a while longer a few days after his arrest. The victim added that the torture continued nonetheless and that he spent almost two months in detention. Shortly before his family was allowed to visit him for the first time and before he was released, the torture stopped and a doctor came to treat his wounds. The victim further reported an incident in which prison guards actively incited violence among detainees. The guards in question brought two men to a cell, introduced the new prisoners as remnants of the Assad regime, and then instructed the remaining prisoners to 'deal with them'.[48]

The prison conditions varied. Two detainees stated that they received enough food[49] while two other

detainees reportedly lost a significant amount of weight during their detention.[50] Two victims reported that they were either rarely or not at all allowed to go outside for fresh air.[51] One man stated that he was held in a cell measuring 1.5m by 1.5m with four other people, one of whom celebrated his 18th birthday in that cell.[52] Another victim reported that he was held in a cell of only 9 sq m alongside 13 other men.[53]

Some detainees were granted no visitation rights at all while others were able to see their families, usually in the presence of security officers and only for 10–30 minutes. Most individuals who were permitted visits had already spent several months in detention. One family reported being told that they would only be allowed to visit their daughter once she was brought before a judge. Yet, within the almost two months that passed from the time of her detention to the report being recorded, the woman was not brought before a judge.[54]

The families of the victims were usually not informed of the arrests, at least initially, and instead had to actively search for their relatives. Some families reported facing further discrimination in the form of sectarian insults when looking for their loved ones. In many cases, the families of victims only learned of their relative's whereabouts through information discreetly provided by individual members of the security forces, bribes, civil peace committees, or, in one case, through the secret phone of another prisoner.[55] Even in cases where the victims were arrested in front of witnesses or the families were able to ascertain the victim's whereabouts in some other way, facilities often denied having the person in question. Some families were still wondering what happened to their loved ones at the time of their interview.

Only one of the victims in the reports collected by YASA was brought before a judge. He was released immediately afterwards. He further stated that out of approximately 500 detainees who were imprisoned alongside him, only 12 were brought before a judge.[56] On top of that, many families reported that they were not allowed to appoint a lawyer.

Two reports described the planting of evidence. In the first case, an item, which later turned out to be a drone, was placed in a shop by a private individual suspected of working with the authorities. The owner of the business was locked into his shop immediately after the item was planted until security forces arrived to arrest him. The victim informed the authorities of what had happened and provided witnesses that supported his account. After his family managed to appoint a lawyer, the family was asked to pay a sum for his release. The family considered paying the sum at first but decided against doing so as they feared that this would lead to further financial extortion. The family believes that he has not been brought before a judge on purpose, as a judge would release the man and therefore make such extortion impossible.[57]

In the other case, a young man was arrested at a security checkpoint along with some colleagues. The men were directly questioned as to why they were 'blaspheming' or 'insulting the Divine Being' after showing their ID cards. They were then beaten and insulted as 'Alawi pig[s]' and 'Assad's dogs'. The men were ordered to bark like dogs during the torture but refused. The beating was so severe that the young man in question fainted. He and his colleagues were then transferred to a police station where he was woken up. He pleaded with the officers to take him to a hospital, but they continued to beat him until he fainted again. He was then finally transported to a hospital but arrived dead. Following this, a security patrol arrived at his home. After searching the home, one of the officers came out and claimed they had found a military kit and grenades. According to witness statements, the kit in question was with one of the officers when they entered the home. After the death of the young man gained widespread media attention, the district chief who had claimed, just a day earlier, that the man and his three companions were remnants involved in the violence of March 2025 and refused to release them on these grounds, released the other three men.[58]

## Forced displacement and property rights

The events of March 2025 caused a mass displacement of Alawis. The UN reported that over 40,000 people fled from Syria's coastal region to Lebanon between March and May 2025, with others taking shelter at Russia's Hmeimim air base or in the nearby mountains.[59]

Alongside the displacement caused by destruction and violence, YASA collected reports of people

being systematically forced to leave their homes in Al-Sumariya neighbourhood of Damascus and Arza, a village in the Hama countryside. Both are predominantly inhabited by Alawis.

On 27 August 2025, security forces led by an interior ministry commander known as Abu Hudhayfah entered Al-Sumariya and conducted security raids without warrants. During these raids, they marked houses for eviction and distributed eviction notices. The eviction notices were issued by the 'Public Housing Committee of the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic' and ordered the residents to leave within 24–72 hours. The notices neither indicated who had signed them nor when they were issued and there appears to be no record of the committee's establishment. The security forces justified the evictions by claiming that the residents were not the rightful owners of the land. Al-Sumariya used to be a Sunni-majority neighbourhood until the Assad regime evicted Sunni residents in the 1970s to house soldiers and their families. It is unclear who is currently in possession of the land and to what extent the previous owners were compensated.[60]

YASA received a report detailing a case where the forces were particularly harsh. The house in question belonged to the parents of a journalist.[61] Upon entering the home, the officers directly asked about the whereabouts of their daughter. The parents were reportedly ordered to sit in a corner of the house facing the wall and rifles were placed against their backs. The other members then searched their house, stole the family's savings of about 3 million Syrian pounds, took their electricity generator and broke 'whatever they could'. The parents were subjected to sectarian insults and threatened with death should they not leave their house. The family was forced to leave within hours and prevented from taking their personal belongings. The family believes this was an act of retaliation considering that other families were given 24–72 hours to vacate their homes.[62]

The residents of Arza were displaced during the events of March 2025. The residents faced an armed attack, reportedly led by a man known as Abu Jaber al-Khatabi, in which dozens of civilians, including women and children, were killed and displaced. The attackers threatened the residents that they would be killed if they did not evacuate their homes within hours. Abu Jaber al-Khatabi, who has since been in control of the village, has reportedly redistributed the homes among his acquaintances.[63] One victim described how he learned that a family had taken over his home after he was displaced. The victim detailed further that after videos of the village and the displacement started to gain widespread media attention, he received threats from the family that had moved into his house. Immediately after these threats, he was approached by a Sunni who offered to buy his house for a third of its worth and promised to sort things out with the new residents. The victim refused at first but later gave in as his hopes of the authorities intervening faded and he urgently needed money. At this point, he had already been displaced from his home for a year.[64]

YASA received another report from the village concerning a large family that owned several homes and shops in the area. When one member of the family returned home, he was prevented from entering his home and found two of the family's shops under renovation while the family's homes were reportedly inhabited by people from the neighbouring village of Khattab. The victim, along with other villagers, reported this to the security checkpoint stationed at the village entrance as well as the Governor of Hama but no action was taken. As of September 2025, when the case was recorded, the family was still displaced.[65]

In addition to these systematic forms of displacement, YASA recorded individual cases of people being forced out of their homes.

In one case that took place in September 2025, a woman was unable to open her home as a member of the security forces had broken into her home, changed the locks, and started living there. She filed multiple complaints at the local police station, the Ministry of Interior and the Public Prosecutor's Office but received no help. Instead, she reported facing sectarian questions and personal interrogations by the Ministry of Interior and the officers from the police station and quoted the station chief to say 'You Alawis must suffer what we Sunnis suffered under the Assad regime.' The Public Prosecutor's office stated that it was not possible for them to intervene as the house was seized by a security officer. The victim posted the details of her case online after which the officer in

question contacted and threatened her. On top of losing her home, the woman was forced to pay the electricity bills as they were issued in the name of the homeowner.[66]

In another case, government forces seized a house in December 2024 and converted it into military headquarters. The victim contacted the security commander of the city, the administrative authorities of the governorate and attempted to bring the case to court but no action was taken and the court refused to register the case as it involved the security forces. He later managed to get his house back with the help of the Qatari embassy but found it completely looted.[67]

YASA documented two additional cases in which a member of the security forces or someone with connections to the security forces took over a home and the authorities took no action. While these cases, as opposed to the cases YASA documented in Al-Sumariya and Arza, appeared to be uncoordinated, there nonetheless seems to be a larger pattern behind them. The findings not only amount to forced displacement but indicate a forced demographic change.

## Arbitrary dismissals, civil rights, and judicial standards

In January 2025, the transitional government shared plans to cut back on a third of all public sector employees. These layoffs were supposedly going to target employees who did not actually work or worked very little and were described as a measure to reverse corruption and improve the state's economy.[68]

YASA collected four reports from public sector employees who were dismissed.[69] The dismissals were usually of a collective nature and delivered without prior warning or an official explanation. In three of the cases, the victim stated that Alawis seemed to be disproportionately or even exclusively affected by the dismissals. One victim reported that people on permanent contracts were dismissed while some people on temporary contracts retained their positions. The victim added that the dismissal decisions were accompanied by 'security checks', during which employees were questioned about their families and affiliations, including whether they had relatives who had served in the disbanded army.[70]

Many Alawis lost their source of income through these arbitrary dismissals, and most were left without any recourse as the reports collected by YASA indicate a significant disregard for both civil rights and judicial standards.

Two reports[71] described a security operation in the village of al-Daliya in the Jableh countryside that started on 4 June 2025 and lasted approximately 48 hours. The authorities claimed the operation was in response to an attack on the village's telecommunications centre, which had allegedly been set on fire. Photographs taken shortly after the operation contradict this. Testimonies from villagers furthermore indicate that what had happened at the centre was merely a verbal altercation between an official at the centre and employees whose salaries had been suspended. Three men were reportedly killed during the attack although, according to one witness, none of the victims had any connection to the incident. The witness added that since then, there had not been a single protest against the suspension of salaries in the village.[72]

This violent suppression of criticism cannot be viewed as an isolated incident but instead falls in line with other reports detailing the persecution of opponents of the new regime.

In one case documented by YASA, police officers from the Damascus Governorate confiscated books related to the Alawi or Shia faith. The bookseller who reported the incident stated that bans on books were usually communicated through an official circular and issued by the Ministry of Culture. He added that, after the new government came to power, he began to experience harassment and interference from the police, public security personnel and religious figures. Popular books relating to love and women were reportedly also affected by this. The bookseller stated that he did not dare to continue selling these books, even in secret, as he was threatened with severe punishment should he do so.[73]

YASA additionally recorded numerous cases of Alawis facing discrimination within the judicial system. Several Alawis reported being treated unfairly when trying to pursue legal action against members of the security forces, private actors suspected of being connected to members of the se-

curity forces, or sometimes simply against Sunni Muslims in general. Complaints or inquiries were often met with sectarian insults and, in one case, officials refused to even record a complaint because it was submitted by an Alawi.[74]

Connections to the previous authorities or army were sometimes used as an excuse for discriminatory treatment by the authorities. In one case regarding the seizure of the home of an Alawi landlord by his Sunni tenant, a Sheikh considered to be the highest local authority in the area stated that he would not intervene as the landlord's father was a former officer. The tenant who seized the house, however, was also the son of a former officer, according to the report.[75]

The reports not only revealed a pattern of discrimination against Alawis in the judicial system but also a system that protects perpetrators as long as they have the right connections or affiliation. One witness reported that a man was killed right outside his business by two men wearing uniforms of government forces. The victim's mother stated that they went to the police and handed over the shop's camera footage but were asked to sign a document stating that the man had been killed by remnants of the Assad regime. Six months after the incident, the family had not been able to obtain a death certificate as they refused to sign the document.[76]

## Gender-based violence

YASA received comparatively few reports detailing violence against women. (This may be due to the stigmatization women who are sexually assaulted face in Syria.) The most common form of gender-based violence that was recorded was the abduction of women. The reports included five abductions and one case that appears to have been an attempted kidnapping or sexual assault. Not all victims were able to identify their attackers, but two women stated that they believed them to be members of the security forces.[77]

Only one case recorded by YASA concerns a woman who was raped. The victim was abducted by armed men in July 2025 and held in an abandoned industrial facility for seven days. During her confinement, she received one meal a day and was repeatedly beaten, slapped, threatened and insulted. She was raped twice which caused a pregnancy that she had to terminate with medication. The victim overheard a conversation indicating that another woman was being held captive in the same location. Following her release, she explained what had happened to her to the police. They instructed her not to share this information with others, purportedly to protect other women that were being held at the location. The victim reportedly refused psychological support out of fear and shame.[78]

Fear and shame appear to have silenced several victims of kidnappings. One victim whose family had publicized her abduction found comments insulting her online. This triggered severe anxiety and her family refused to give further details on what happened to her.[79] In another case, the family of an abducted woman planned a peaceful sit-in but ended up cancelling it even though they had received official approval. According to the family, they did so because they received calls from foreign numbers threatening to kill the remaining young men of their village and two neighbouring villages if they did not cancel the sit-in. The callers first claimed that the woman had fled to a friend's house, and later, that she had fled with a lover.[80] Claims that missing women ran away with lovers are generally frequent. In response to an investigation from Reuters, a media officer for Latakia Governorate alleged that many women eloped with their lovers and accused the families of missing women of fabricating abduction stories to avoid social stigma. A media officer for the Governor of Tartus purported that the women simply ran away, either from forced marriage or because they were seeking attention.[81]

In two cases recorded by YASA, kidnapped women were brought to Idlib.[82] Idlib is a governorate with a Sunni majority that neighbours the Alawi-majority Latakia Governorate. According to the UN report on the violence of March 2025, some women were told to 'go to Idlib to prepare for Jihad' after some of their male relatives had been killed. They further reported that several men asserted that Alawi women should be taken as slaves or 'used for entertainment'.[83] YASA received one report entailing a similar statement. The victim who was raped stated that one of her captors had said that all Alawi women were slaves and created for the pleasure of their captors.[84]

Since the authorities were generally of little help in these cases, several families resorted to social media to spread information about their kidnapped relatives. After conducting a review of such social media posts, Reuters stated that new cases emerged almost daily.[85] In one of the cases collected by YASA, a family that posted about their kidnapped relative was subsequently contacted by people claiming to have the victim. They asked the family to pay ransom but contact broke when the family asked for proof.[86] This is not necessarily connected to social media posts and also happened in another case where it is unclear whether the abduction was publicized.[87] Reuters conducted interviews with the families of 16 missing women and found that, in seven cases, they had been asked to pay ransom.[88] This hints at a larger pattern of financial extortion of families looking for their female relatives.

Out of the seven cases Reuters recorded in which the families of victims were asked to pay ransom, three victims sent text or voice messages to their families stating they had been taken abroad. In one case, the captors reportedly stated that if the family did not pay the requested sum, they would traffic the victim into slavery.[89] This supports claims that appeared on social media that abducted women were being taken out of the country to be sold into slavery. While these claims are rather hard to prove, especially considering many victims of sexual violence are scared to disclose what happened to them, YASA has collected one report that may align with such claims.[90] The case concerns a young woman who was kidnapped in November 2025 by a man wearing a camouflage military uniform. The victim returned home later that day where she told her family that there were five other women in the car with her. The women were released at the Lebanese border after the car had stopped for several hours. During that time, the victim overheard her kidnappers making several phone calls. If the claims that women are being sold into slavery abroad are to be believed, the women were possibly saved by failed negotiations.

# 3 Violations against Druze

Approximately 3 per cent of Syria's population is Druze.[91] The majority of Syria's Druze live in Suwayda Governorate, where Druze are estimated to make up approximately 88 per cent of the population.[92] Like the Alawis, the Druze have experienced intense periods of persecution and were declared to be heretics by Ibn Taymiyyah,[93] a sentiment that persists among many Islamists.[94]

The Druze community of Suwayda played a significant role in Syria's struggle against French colonial rule and has since fought to maintain a certain degree of autonomy.[95] While they enjoyed limited autonomy under the Assad government,[96] the Druze, like most Syrians, experienced severe political repression and economic neglect under Assad's rule. These grievances led to several anti-government protests in Suwayda which, in the final years of the regime, entailed chants to overthrow the government.[97]

After the fall of Assad, with the transitional government dominated by former members of HTS and other Islamist groups, many Druze feared what the future would hold for them.[98] Some were reluctant to disarm in favour of a centralized army, resulting in a relationship of mutual suspicion.[99]

In April 2025 a series of clashes began with an attack on the Druze-majority suburb of Jaramana.[100] The attack followed the circulation of an audio recording insulting the Prophet Muhammad which was falsely attributed to a Druze Sheikh. Even though the Ministry of the Interior confirmed that the accused Sheikh was not responsible for the recording,[101] and several Druze leaders and community members clearly distanced themselves from its content, this fuelled hostility against the Druze.[102] Social media platforms were used to spread hate speech and incite violence against the Druze.[103] YASA has obtained proof of a WhatsApp group spreading such hate, in which addresses of Druze university students were shared.

Tensions were further fuelled by Israel's attempts to portray itself as a protector of the Druze in Syria. Following the fall of the Assad government, Israel had invaded part of southern Syria and it now attempted to strengthen its ties with Syria's Druze community and repeatedly stated it would protect them.[104] The majority of the community and its leaders rejected these attempts, insisting that they could protect themselves.[105] Nonetheless, the Druze were increasingly portrayed as traitors, particularly after Israel started bombing Damascus and southern Syria. The role of Druze spiritual leader Hikmat al-Hijri has been central to these accusations: Al-Hijri called for the international community,

including the US and Israel, to protect the Druze in July 2025 and later called the Druze community 'an integral part of the State of Israel'.[106]

The violence in July 2025 was sparked by tensions between Bedouin tribes, whose members are mostly Sunni, and the Druze. The relationship between the two communities has long been difficult, with conflicts centring around issues such as water and land rights.[107] The power vacuum that was left behind by the dissolution of the former security institutions, combined with recent changes to local security arrangements,[108] created conditions in which sectarian violence could increase. Tensions ultimately escalated when a Druze merchant was abducted near the Khirbat Al-Shayab Checkpoint on 11 July 2025. The next day, Druze fighters retaliated by abducting several Bedouin men. There followed retaliatory attacks by Bedouin tribal fighters, exchanges of heavy gunfire and attacks on Druze villages, during which homes were burned.[109]

On Monday, 14 July 2025, government forces were deployed to Suwayda, purportedly to restore order.[110] However, government forces fought alongside tribal fighters and quickly started raiding homes and attacking civilians.[111] This marked the beginning of the first major wave of violence against the Druze. There was some resistance by Druze armed groups which caused casualties among government forces,[112] but the Druze forces appeared to be significantly outnumbered. On 16 July, Israel launched several airstrikes on government-controlled facilities, contributing to a temporary halt in the government's operations. Later that day, a ceasefire was announced between government forces and Druze armed groups.[113]

Some Druze armed groups rejected the ceasefire and attacked Bedouin civilians in retribution. While these attacks were on a much smaller scale, they included similar violations of human rights and humanitarian law. This in turn led to a wider tribal mobilization, marking the beginning of the second wave of violence against Druze communities.[114] Although government forces had formally withdrawn from the governorate at that stage,[115] members of these forces reportedly still fought alongside tribal fighters, with some stripping their uniforms either partially or in full.[116] The reports collected by YASA indicate that Islamist groups, or at least individual members of such, participated in the attacks and several witnesses further reported that foreign fighters were among the forces.

YASA documented numerous violations of human rights and humanitarian law committed by government forces, tribal fighters, and those who fought alongside them. These violations included the killing of civilians, arbitrary detention, desecration of bodies, and the looting and burning of homes. Several testimonies additionally described religiously motivated violations. The practice most frequently reported was the shaving of moustaches. Moustaches are deeply connected to the religious identity of Druze men. The shaving of moustaches is therefore considered to be a profoundly humiliating practice.[117]

According to the UN Commission of Inquiry, approximately 1,350 Druze were killed in the events, with most killings taking place between 15 and 16 July, prior to the formal withdrawal of government forces.[118] The second wave of violence, however, caused a more extensive destruction of civilian infrastructure, with some 35 villages being deliberately burned.[119] Otherwise, the patterns of violations were similar. One possible explanation for the higher number of fatalities during the first wave of violence is that many civilians had not returned to their villages before the tribal mobilization, or that they fled again once they learned that the tribal forces were advancing.

YASA collected over a hundred reports describing violations committed against Druze civilians, the findings of which will be presented and analysed below.[120]

# Patterns of violations

## Targeting of civilians

Out of the more than a hundred reports YASA collected regarding the violence in July 2025, almost all mention the killing of civilians. The vast majority of reports describe arbitrary executions, with most victims being killed in their home, taken from their home to be killed, or killed on the road while attempting to flee.

Reports described the attacking forces arrived with multiple different vehicles and weapons including tanks and drones. The forces typically started shooting indiscriminately on entering a village, then spread out while snipers positioned themselves on rooftops. Numerous witnesses stated that this was accompanied by shouts of 'Allahu Akbar'.

Multiple witnesses reported that, while a village or neighbourhood was being attacked, any movement that was detected would attract fire. This prompted many to hide in their houses, often without food, water, electricity, or internet for several days. Many were left wondering if their relatives were still alive with no way of contacting them. Some people attempted to leave their home while the forces were still stationed in their village, either to look after someone or get food, and were shot at, even if they identified themselves as civilians.

Several families attempted to flee either before their village was attacked, since they had already learned about the attacks in other villages, or while the forces were already stationed in their village. Flight proved extremely difficult, not only because of the danger of being shot at but also because many cars were stolen, damaged or set on fire. One witness reported seeing some four or five families fleeing in a single car.[121] Most major roads had snipers stationed along them, who would fire at any vehicle passing by. This resulted in several injuries and deaths, especially of women and children, as men would often stay behind to protect their homes while women and children of the village were gathered to reach safety collectively.

According to the reports collected by YASA, people who were killed in their homes had often been visited by other armed men prior to being killed. Visits were generally accompanied by sectarian insults, beatings and looting. At times, armed groups would tell the residents that they would return to kill them, ask them how they wanted to be killed or tell them that a Sheikh would decide their fate. Some also warned residents that if they stayed, the next group that would come to visit them would kill them.

The armed groups usually took men outside before killing them or took the women and children to another room before killing the men. Although women and children were less likely to be attacked than men, YASA documented a number of cases where women, children, elderly, and disabled people were directly attacked and killed.

In one case, an armed group entered the home of a family and started searching the house. They then took the women to the third floor where they immediately opened fire. The woman who reported the incident was the sole survivor of the attack. She reported that she took cover behind her grandmother's body but was hit in the foot and hand. The group then locked the door on the second floor and went downstairs where they proceeded to kill all the men of the family, including her paralysed grandfather. Upon hearing the group leave, she crawled down to the second floor and attempted to open the door with a knife. The attackers returned before she could do so, forcing the injured woman to go back upstairs and continue to hide among the bodies of her female relatives for several hours. Twelve people were killed in the attack.[122]

The attacks often included physical or psychological torture. In one case, a mother reported that her sons were beaten so severely that their bones were broken and their teeth knocked out before they were taken away to be killed.[123] A survivor of the Badr massacre[124] was ordered to pick up empty shell casings from the ground while a gunman counted to four before shooting near his head, forcing the victim to dodge the bullets.[125] Another case involved a family that encountered an armed group which ordered the 12-year-old son of the family to run for his life and his mother to scream at the top her lungs, stating that they would spare her son if she complied. When she did, they told her to scream even louder and despite her compliance, they proceeded to shoot her son before killing her and her husband.[126]

YASA documented two cases in which the armed forces employed tactics to draw out people that were hiding in their homes. One woman who had hidden her children described how a man fired a shot and took the lack of a reaction to this to mean that there was no one in the house. She described how grateful she was that her children had managed to stay silent in that moment.[127] In the other case, a man was forced at gunpoint to knock on his neighbour's door.[128]

In some cases, a member of the attacking forces demonstrated mercy either by sparing people's lives or by ordering others to uphold certain limits. One member of the security forces reportedly told his men not to attack unarmed civilians,[129] while others intervened on behalf of women and children.[130] Women were sometimes taken away and, either directly or after some time in detention, handed over to the Red Crescent.

While some reports mention the use of arms in defence by Druze faction members or unaffiliated men from the local community, the vast majority of reports received focus on unarmed civilians. The killing of people after they identified themselves as unarmed civilians, and the killing of elderly people, children, women, and disabled people show a clear disregard for the principle of distinction. The targeting of any detected movement or any vehicle passing along a road indicates that no effort was made to distinguish between civilians and combatants. In addition to these clear violations of international humanitarian law, multiple witnesses stated that members of the attacking forces openly declared that they would kill everyone or that people were ordered not to leave any Druze alive. Some of these statements were attributed to members of the Syrian security forces.

## Abductions, arbitrary detention, and missing people

Several reports collected by YASA mention people being abducted or imprisoned although few give further details. Due to the lack of more detailed reports, it is not always clear who the perpetrators were, but the UN Commission of Inquiry found that members of both the Syrian security forces and Bedouin tribal forces detained people, with some tribal forces later handing over their abductees to the security forces, indicating close cooperation.[131]

Victims were reportedly severely beaten, faced sectarian insults, and were threatened. One woman stated that her husband spent two weeks in detention while her son was detained for a month. Both were beaten and her husband's pelvis was broken. When he was taken to hospital he needed two operations.[132]

Another report concerned a man in his seventies who was abducted by two men. The abductors tied his feet, put a cover over his head, and carried him to a car. He reported that, whenever he tried to lift the cover over his head, they would beat him. At their destination, he was thrown into an animal pit. A woman came to him and threatened to slaughter him, saying that it would be just as they had killed her husband. The man understood this to mean that her husband was among the forces that had entered Suwayda. He was beaten, resulting in his foot being heavily bruised, before he was released at the roadside.[133]

Only one report provided a detailed description of the detention conditions in government facilities. A man working in a restaurant described how security forces entered the restaurant and asked who was Druze. The armed men then took the eight Druze workers of the restaurant away after blindfolding them. When the men arrived at the regional headquarters, they were beaten for about 15 minutes while still blindfolded, then interrogated separately and beaten further while their phones were searched. The men were asked questions such as 'Why don't you pray?' and faced sectarian insults. The security forces ended up releasing them but told them that if they were still in the area in two days, they would kill them.[134]

The longest concluded detention documented by YASA involved a woman and her disabled son who were taken away by two men who claimed they were protecting the family's neighbours. The mother and her son were held in a house alongside their neighbours for four months. Another woman, who had just lost her husband, accompanied them but was shot on the roadside by the men claiming to offer protection before they had reached the house.[135]

Most people in Suwayda who were taken from their homes were killed almost immediately afterwards. Nonetheless, the fate of some victims is unclear and they remain missing, as, for example, in the case of two young men who were stripped of their clothes in front of their house before being taken away. Their family has not heard from them since.[136]

In various areas, the danger from attacks prevented people from leaving their house to recover the body of a relative. Furthermore, due to both the attacks and blocked roads, bodies could not be recovered by civil defence organizations for some time, allowing the bodies to decompose in Syria's

July heat. One witness reported seeing animals feast on the dead.[137] Moreover, several witnesses reported that armed groups mutilated or burned bodies. While many bodies were brought to hospitals, the number quickly exceeded the capacities of the hospital morgues leading to bodies remaining in the heat either way.

In one case recorded by YASA, a man attempted to get the women and children of his family and his ill father out of the town. He was shot almost immediately after leaving the house. His mother then fled to her father's house where she told her family what had happened. Her brother attempted to recover the body of her son only to be shot as well as soon as he left the house. His body remained on the street for 18 days with cars driving over it. The body of his nephew remained on the street for six days before it was recovered by the Red Crescent. His family had to identify him by his watch and his ring as his body was already severely decomposed.[138]

Numerous bodies were buried in mass graves, either by neighbours or by the National Hospital. Additionally, several reports indicated that people buried the bodies of neighbours or relatives before the attack had ended. If people who did so were killed before they could inform others of the burial, this could potentially be another source of uncertainty over the location of the missing.

## Displacement and attacks on civilian infrastructure

The vast majority of reports included violations of property rights. During the security raids, phones, gold, money and other valuables were taken from residents. Later on, houses were completely looted. Furniture, electrical appliances such as washing machines and refrigerators, windows, doors, and metal were taken from the homes. Following this, numerous houses were burned. The destruction was not limited to private homes, however. Businesses, municipal offices, medical centres, pharmacies, religious places and schools were also targeted. The UN Commission of Inquiry stated in its report that across northern and western Suwayda, in at least 35 villages, nearly every home and business was deliberately looted and burned.[139]

In addition, some witnesses reported that livestock was stolen and that trees, most commonly olive trees, were cut down. Two witnesses further reported that the forces stole tractors and other agricultural machines.[140] This almost complete destruction led to many victims losing their source of income in addition to losing their homes. Without a source of income, the victims also lack the funds to rehabilitate their homes.

Several witnesses reported that water wells were either destroyed or filled with rubble and the pumps stolen. Private water tanks and water meters were reportedly also stolen. This in turn led to a severe shortage of water in the area. Additionally, many complained about a lack of food, stating that they were not receiving enough flour and therefore bread due to a siege. While there was no official siege, the UN Commission of Inquiry reported that access to fundamental provisions was instrumentalized by both sides of the conflict, with the government wanting to create a feeling of dependency on the Syrian state while al-Hijri has used the narrative to further his intentions of opening a humanitarian corridor to Israel.[141]

The area is also experiencing a severe shortage of electricity. Several witnesses reported that electricity is only turned on a few times a day, with most reports mentioning the electricity only being turned on for somewhere between 10 minutes and 60 minutes, with six-hour breaks in between. The armed forces reportedly stole private generators and power cables, leaving no possibility to supplement the electricity provided by the state.

In one case documented by YASA, an elderly couple were visited by several armed groups, one of whom stole the couple's solar power system, which powered an oxygen machine that the husband depended on. The last group that visited them told the couple they would be given the choice between death by shooting or beheading. After that group left, the woman pulled her husband out of the back door of the house and laid him down on a blanket under a tree. She stayed with her husband until the next morning, when their house was bombed, causing smoke to fill the air. The husband's breathing difficulties increased and he ended up asking his wife to leave him. She complied and left her husband to die while she fled to the city.[142]

Most people fled their homes in such a hurry that they left only with the clothes on their backs. This

led to many people losing personal documents such as IDs, family registers, bank cards or property deeds. In some cases, these documents were also taken from families by the armed groups.

The UN recorded 192,000 people being displaced from their homes in Suwayda in July 2025.[143] The report, published in March 2026, further stated that 155,000 people were still displaced at the time the report was written.[144] In most cases recorded by YASA, displaced Druze were being hosted in schools that were being used as shelters. Others found family members to take them in. Most people cannot afford to return to their homes while others are reluctant to return out of fear, as control over Suwayda is currently divided and smaller clashes continue to take place. With the level of destruction, many simply have nothing to return to.

## Suwayda National Hospital

YASA collected ten reports documenting the events that unfolded at the Suwayda National Hospital during the attack on the governorate in July 2025. Three of the reports were written by patients or their family with the other seven reports coming from people who worked or volunteered at the hospital during the time of the attack.

The hospital had been receiving an increasing number of casualties from Sunday, 13 July. On Tuesday, 15 July, government forces entered the city of Suwayda which led to the hospital receiving even more patients, some of whom belonged to government forces. Several witnesses[145] reported an incident that took place after six members of the security forces, some of whom were injured, entered the hospital on Tuesday. The nurses who reported the incident stated that the injured were treated while other security force members were placed in the hospital's police station.[146] The nurses highlighted their duty to help all those injured, regardless of their affiliation.

On Wednesday 16 July, government forces were stationed directly in front of the hospital, and the hospital was fully surrounded. Fighting that took place right outside the hospital caused collateral damage to the hospital and injured bystanders. It also prevented those who were injured from reaching the hospital. It was further reported that at least one tank that was stationed right outside the hospital started shooting directly at it. It hit the cardiology department on the second floor first and then several other parts of the hospital. The patients were reportedly taken to the corridors to protect them. One witness described how glass was shattering and flying around and that the entire hospital shook during the attack.[147] Leaving the hospital was not an option as there was no safe way home, leading to staff members working for three days straight.[148] One nurse additionally reported that, on the Tuesday, an ambulance had attempted to reach the site of a massacre but had to return as the roads were blocked.[149]

Government forces entered the hospital around 3.30 pm and gathered the medical staff in the lobby on their knees. At that point, Mohammed Rafiq al-Bahsas, a volunteer at the hospital, came down to join his colleagues. The soldiers accused him of not helping one of their injured men. Mohammed told them to bring him the patient so that he could help although he was not part of the medical staff, but an engineer who had volunteered to help as there were too many casualties arriving for the staff to handle the situation. One of the soldiers then hit Mohammed on the head. One witness stated that this was because he had raised his hands to explain the situation.[150] Mohammed then started to fight one of the soldiers by putting his arm around his neck and subsequently fell to the floor, pulling the soldier down with him. The soldier got back up quickly and he and another soldier shot Mohammed in the chest and head while he was still lying on the floor.[151]

Witnesses recounted several other attacks on staff members. One witness described seeing a member of the security forces attack the guard of the cardiology department. The man put his foot on the guard's neck while the guard was lying on the floor. A nurse intervened, stating that his men had claimed they were there to protect the staff and patients and that the guard was only doing his job. While the attack on the guard stopped, the guard was not permitted to keep his position in front of the cardiology department.[152] It was further reported that the forces attempted to get access to the hospital's CCTV system and shot one of the hospital's staff members when he refused to provide them with the necessary passwords.[153] Witnesses additionally reported that snipers were stationed on the hospital's roof. According to the UN Com-

mission of Inquiry, hospital staff were forced to open up access to the rooftop at gunpoint.[154]

Witnesses further stated that the security forces attacked patients and interfered in the medical staff's responsibilities. Both staff members and patients reported the use of sectarian insults and some members of the security forces are quoted as saying things such as: 'You Druze should not be allowed to live'[155] or 'We'll kill you one by one'.[156] The women were forced to wear headscarves and, as many didn't have any with them, they had to resort to putting other pieces of clothing over their head.[157] The forces threatened those who took pictures or spoke up and stole phones, money and jewellery from patients and staff members. They additionally shaved off the moustache of a young religious man and physically assaulted some of the patients. They reportedly stomped on the foot of a man who had just had his toe amputated.[158]

Several witnesses[159] reported that a young man with an injured leg, who had somehow reached the hospital through the ensuing chaos, took refuge at the main entrance. He could not enter the hospital as the armed forces had previously sealed the door and medical staff were prevented from going outside to help the man. An officer then approached the young man asking him where his weapon was upon which he replied that he had no weapon. Thereafter, the officer asked him to come closer and, when he complied, shot him.

The government forces withdrew at some point during the night between Wednesday and Thursday. One nurse explained how she realized only then that some patients had died as she and her colleagues were not able to tend to their patients properly and some medical appliances had stopped working.[160] Although the hospital had already run out of space for patients as well as bodies, more casualties started to arrive at that point.[161]

Following the attack, much of the hospital's equipment was broken, the hospital had run out of medical supplies such as disinfectant, and the hospital's electricity and water supply was no longer functional. While some of the damage was caused by collateral damage, one witness stated that the MRI machine was deliberately shot at[162] and another witness explained that the forces directly targeted equipment.[163] Due to these circumstances, and the number of casualties exceeding the hospital's capacity by far, even under regular conditions, the hospital was forced to close several departments and transfer patients to other hospitals.

## Gender-based violence

While several reports mentioned that women were assaulted or raped during the attacks in July 2025, such statements rarely relied on firsthand knowledge, and YASA has received no reports detailing such violations. As with Alawi women, there may be under-reporting due to the stigmatization experienced by victims of sexual violence in Syria. The UN Commission of Inquiry wrote that it received reports of rape 'including credible reports of women seeking post-rape care from medical professionals', which remain under investigation.[164]

Some witnesses indicated that they feared their female relatives would be violated, with one woman stating that if the security forces had entered the place where they took shelter, she would have killed her daughter and herself.[165] One witness reported that a group of attackers told her family to lock the door, as the following group would 'slaughter the men and kidnap the girls'.[166]

Several witnesses reported incidents concerning missing, imprisoned or kidnapped women, but the reports contained few details. Some women were taken away by members of the armed forces and later brought to the Red Crescent. It was not always clear if their captors were trying to help them or if they intended to imprison them and decided to release them later on. Further, it was not always clear whether they were simply released or used in a prisoner exchange. YASA documented at least one prisoner exchange. Three women were reportedly taken by the security forces and severely beaten before they were released.[167]

One family attempted to hide on their roof when the armed forces arrived. The forces started firing towards the roof, killing two members of the family instantly. They then started to climb up to the roof with the witness stating that more than twenty people arrived on the roof. They shot her husband, the only man of the family who had survived that long, as her son had been killed by the indiscriminate shooting prior to the forces climbing the roof. They then started to take the woman's

granddaughters down the stairs while the house had already been set on fire. One of the girls was in nursery school at the time, with the other being one and a half years old. When they had climbed down, the men reportedly started fighting about what to do with the women and girls who had not been killed. Suggestions included taking them prisoner, killing them with a car, using them for a prisoner exchange, and taking them as slaves. They ended up imprisoning them, for over a week.[168] While it is unclear, whether they were released in a prisoner exchange or independently, abducting people specifically for such exchanges amounts to the taking of hostages.

Some witnesses reported invasive searches of women during which their breasts were touched, with one report[169] stating that 'lower private parts' were also searched. The searches were usually conducted to find valuables. One witness to the attack on the Suwayda National Hospital stated that a young girl was subjected to such a search as well.[170]

# 4 Legal findings

The gravity of the violations in the coastal region and Suwayda requires accountability. This chapter considers the first steps taken by the transitional government to investigate what happened and the obligations under international law to ensure that justice is served.

The Syrian Transitional Government established an Independent National Commission for Investigation and Fact-Finding Concerning Events in the Syrian Coastal Region, which reported in July 2025. The commission reported the killing of 1,426 civilians, including 90 women, and of 238 military and security personnel. It referred 563 suspects to the justice system, including both those accused of attacking security forces and those affiliated with the government accused of violations. An initial group of accused were tried before a military criminal court in Aleppo, with the first four verdicts handed down in September 2026. Two individuals were convicted of participating in attacks against government forces and one acquitted; one government soldier was convicted of murder for an extrajudicial execution.

The Syrian Ministry of Justice also established a National Committee for Investigation into the Suwayda events, which released its final report in March 2026. It documented 1,760 deaths in the July violence, the majority of them from the Druze community. While the committee said that it did not have the mandate to refer suspects for prosecution, the Ministry of Justice coordinated action to detain 23 military and security personnel who were allegedly involved in violations, pending trial.

While these investigative efforts were generally well received, many criticize a lack of transparency in regard to the work of the two bodies. Members of the Alawi and Druze communities remain sceptical about whether the governmental investigations will result in a substantive justice process and it remains to be seen whether these proceedings will lead to any meaningful consequences.[171]

While the launching of official probes into both sets of events marks a welcome departure from Syrian practice under the Assad government, there are also important differences between how violations were characterized by the national committees and by external observers. For example, the head of the National Committee on the Suwayda events stated that violations had been individual rather than systematic but the UN Commission of Inquiry emphasized the widespread nature of the violations and stated that they may amount to war crimes, or even crimes against humanity.[172] Based on the cases documented in the present report, further legal findings are discussed below.

## State responsibility

During the attacks against both the Alawis and the Druze, individuals or armed groups not formally belonging to the state fought alongside the government forces. In the case of the Druze, during the first wave of attacks, government forces cooperated closely with Bedouin tribal fighters.

Under international law of state responsibility, a state is not only responsible for the acts of their organs but also those of private actors if they are acting on the instruction of, or under the directions or control of that state. While it is debated whether overall or effective control is required,[173] as the government forces and tribal fighters were operating in close proximity as part of the same operation, even the higher standard of effective control is fulfilled. This is further highlighted by the government claiming that non-affiliated groups were prevented from entering Suwayda.[174]

During the second wave of attacks on the Druze, while the government forces had officially withdrawn, some members of the government forces continued to participate in the violence. While some stripped their uniform partially or in full, many witnesses nonetheless identified members of the security forces during that time. Under international law, this is sufficient to engage state responsibility as the conduct of an organ of the state is attributable to the state, even when it exceeds its authority or contravenes instructions as long as the organ acts in its official capacity.[175]

As for the tribal fighters and other armed groups that participated in the second wave of violence against the Druze, they are themselves bound by international humanitarian law.

In March 2025, government forces were joined by private individuals. The degree of their involvement seemingly varied, as some fighters were integrated into the government's forces and others acted outside of official command structures.[176] Acts of these individuals would therefore have to be analysed individually and assessed based on the degree of the perpetrators' integration.

## International humanitarian law

For a non-international armed conflict to exist under international law, there is required to be sufficiently intense violence either between government forces and organized armed groups, or solely between organized armed groups.[177] The intensity requirement distinguishes non-international armed conflicts from smaller internal disturbances such as riots, short-lived insurrections, and isolated or sporadic acts of violence.[178] While most events described in this report concern attacks on civilians, with the PFGF and several Druze militias engaging in hostilities against government forces and their allies, in both cases a non-international armed conflict can be identified. It can be debated when the conflicts crossed the threshold to a non-international armed conflict and if they are still above it, but at least the events of March and July 2025 fit that categorization.[179]

Consequently, international humanitarian law is applicable to these events. Syria is a party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 but has not ratified Additional Protocol II Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts. The applicable law is therefore found in Common Art. 3 of the Geneva Conventions as well as customary international law.

The findings documented by YASA indicate that government forces and their allies committed several violations of Common Art. 3 of the Geneva Conventions, which prohibits certain acts against persons not actively taking part in the hostilities. The violations include murder, cruel treatment, and torture. YASA further documented abductions that might amount to the taking of hostages. The summary executions of Alawis indicate violations of the prohibition to carry out executions without previous judgment. The reports collected by YASA further imply that the forces committed several outrages on personal dignity[180] such as:

- the shaving of moustaches,
- forcing individuals to bark like dogs,
- sexual violence or threats of such,
- forced nudity,
- the desecration of the dead by burning, mutilating, driving over or stepping on them.

The shaving of moustaches and forcing individuals to bark furthermore contravenes the prohibition against adverse distinction founded on religion or faith. Sectarian insults which accompanied most incidents further indicate distinction based on religious grounds. YASA additionally collected several cases that indicate a violation of Art. 3 II of the Geneva Conventions, which states that the wounded and sick shall be collected and cared for. In some cases recorded by YASA, forces even actively prevented others from helping wounded people.

The forces involved in the coastal and Suwayda events further violated several rules of customary international humanitarian law[181] by engaging in:

- widespread looting amounting to pillage,
- the targeting or burning of civilian objects,
- attacks on religious sites and hospitals,
- attacks on medical and religious personnel,
- attacks on objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population such as electrical infrastructure, agricultural machines, crops, livestock, water installations, and medical institutions,
- arbitrary detentions of civilians,
- enforced disappearance, and
- acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population.

Most notably, forces violated the principle of distinction. It was frequently reported that forces fired at random or shot every passing car, which may amount to indiscriminate attacks. Moreover, forces frequently targeted civilians directly, highlighted by the attacks on women, children, elderly and disabled people.

# International criminal law

The violations documented in this report may further amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. As Syria has only signed the Rome Statute but has not ratified it, the applicable law is found in customary international law.

War crimes are defined as serious breaches of international humanitarian law. Violations of international humanitarian law are usually considered to be serious when they endanger protected persons or objects or breach important values.[182] Violations documented by YASA that are generally considered to be serious in that sense include:

- directing attacks against civilians,
- directing attacks against religious buildings or hospitals,
- torture or cruel treatment,
- pillage,
- depriving prisoners the right to a fair and regular trial,
- arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance,
- committing outrages upon personal dignity.[183]

As war crimes establish personal responsibility, they must be committed either intentionally or recklessly. While the required form of *mens rea* varies depending on the crime,[184] the violations documented by YASA appear to have been committed intentionally in the vast majority of cases. In regard to the war crime of directing attacks against civilians, examples can be seen in the killing of women, children, elderly and disabled people, or in statements made by individual members of the forces concerned.

Crimes against humanity are specific acts that are committed as part of a widespread *or* systematic attack directed against a civilian population, with knowledge of the attack.[185] Acts that can amount to crimes against humanity include, among others:

- Murder
- Torture and cruel treatment
- Sexual violence including forced nudity
- Forced displacement
- Persecution based on ethnic or religious grounds
- Arbitrary detention and other forms of severe deprivation of physical liberty
- Enforced disappearance.[186]

The attacks on both the Druze and Alawi civilian population followed a consistent pattern and occurred across various locations, indicating a widespread and systematic nature. As the events were extensively covered by the media, most perpetrators will likely have known of the extent of the violence.[187]

To constitute a crime against humanity, an attack on civilians must further occur pursuant to a state or organizational policy.[188] Such a policy can develop during an ongoing operation and does not need to be explicit.[189] In certain cases, a policy may be a policy of omission, but a mere failure to prevent certain crimes does not constitute a policy of omission. Instead, the policy must amount to a conscious facilitation of the crimes.[190] The existence of such a policy could be seen in the decision to proceed with operations in spite of the knowledge that attacks on civilians were taking place. As it had already become clear that parts of the government forces were willing to commit such crimes in March during the attacks on Alawi communities, the evidence is stronger in the case of the attacks on the Druze. Additionally, the fact that government forces did not prevent tribal forces from entering Suwayda may indicate a policy to facilitate crimes against the Druze population.[191]

Under international criminal law, superior officers can be held liable for the crimes of their subordinates, or forces effectively under their command, if they knew or had reason to know that such crimes were being committed and failed to prevent them.[192]

# Human rights

Syria has ratified several of the core international human rights treaties[193] and is bound by customary international law on human rights. Human rights remain applicable during armed conflicts beside international humanitarian law.

The documented findings indicate serious violations of fundamental human rights such as:

- Freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment
- The right to life
- Freedom of speech
- The right to liberty and security
- The right to property
- The right against arbitrary or unlawful interference with one's privacy, family, home or correspondence and against unlawful attacks on one's honour and reputation
- Freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief
- Equality before the law
- The right to a fair trial
- The right to non-discrimination.

The right to freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and the right to life are non-derogable. The state, furthermore, is not only obligated to respect the human rights mentioned above but also carries a positive obligation to protect them from violations by private actors.

# 5 Conclusion and recommendations

The findings in this report demonstrate a clear pattern of violations against Druze and Alawi civilians as well as a lack of accountability.

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In the case of the situation in Suwayda, while a ceasefire is currently in place, smaller clashes are occurring regularly. About 155,000 people in Suwayda remain displaced with no real prospects of returning to their home towns in the near future. Several reports highlight a rise in sectarian hostility since the new government came to power and show a deep mistrust of the government fuelled by the attacks on civilians in July 2025.

The documented violations against Alawi and Druze communities also reveal deep patterns of societal cleavage. Violations included acts directly instigated by the authorities, such as forced evictions, but also abuses committed by private actors, motivated by revenge or sectarian hatred and facilitated by a widely discriminatory judicial system. The climate of impunity thus fostered places civilians from minority communities under permanent threat of further violations that could originate from anyone, including neighbours or colleagues.

The violations against the Druze and Alawis not only shed significant doubt on the government's ability to protect minorities (including Syria's Kurdish population), unify the country, and create stability but also on the government's willingness to do so. Several of the witnesses stated they fear that the government has not left its jihadist roots behind. The presence of Islamist armed groups fighting alongside members of government forces, and the use of sectarian or even genocidal rhetoric accompanying the violence raise particular concern.

The recommendations below are therefore aimed both at securing justice for the violations committed in Suwayda and the coastal region, and at ensuring they do not recur and rebuilding the inter-communal trust that has been so badly damaged.

## Recommendations

### To the Syrian Transitional Government

- Ensure that the perpetrators of serious violations against Druze and Alawi civilians documented by international mechanisms and by the national investigative bodies on the events in Suwayda and the Syrian Coastal Region are held accountable.
- Conduct independent, impartial, and effective investigations into further serious violations described in this report and ensure that the perpetrators are held accountable.
- Release all detainees who have not been charged with any crime.

- Ensure that all detainees who are suspected of crimes are held in official places of detention, adhering to internationally prescribed detention conditions, and receive adequate legal representation as well as a prompt trial.
- Expand efforts to locate and liberate those abducted by armed groups.
- Investigate reports of gender-based violence and allegations of gender-based kidnappings with sensitivity.
- Provide reparations to the victims of violations and appropriate psycho-social support to victims and witnesses.

## Preventing further violations

- Facilitate the clear identification of security forces by enforcing the prohibition of masks.
- Introduce screening mechanisms preventing the recruitment of known or suspected perpetrators of serious violations and individuals known to hold extremist views.

## Improving community relations

- Strengthen dialogue between government representatives and minority communities, and between leaders of different communities.
- Facilitate genuine participation of minorities in public life, including in state political institutions.
- Ensure impartiality of state organs, including within the judicial system, and strengthen official complaint mechanisms.

## To the International Community

- Exert pressure on all parties responsible for serious violations to adhere to international humanitarian law and human rights law.
- Support the development of inclusive and comprehensive national transitional justice institutions.
- Renew the mandate of the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and other UN mechanisms tasked with investigating violations of international law in Syria.
- Respect the right of *non-refoulement*, not deporting or returning any individual to Syria where their life, safety or freedom is threatened.

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CEASEFIRE centre for civilian rights

YAZA Kurdish Centre for Studies & Legal Consultancy

# ‘We will kill you one by one’: Violations in Suwayda and Syria’s coastal region

**In brief**

The downfall of Bashar Al-Assad in December 2024 brought an end to the era of mass human rights violations perpetrated under Assad rule. However, serious human rights abuses have continued in Syria since. This report focuses on two major episodes of killings and other violations, committed in 2025 in Suwayda and the coastal region, and considers the accountability needed to bring justice to civilians.

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