

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-led takeover

On 27 November 2024 a coalition of rebel groups led by the Islamist armed group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched a surprise attack and managed to capture the northern city of Aleppo, the second largest in Syria. The groups swept south very quickly and took the cities of Hama and Homs within a few days, causing the army to retreat. On 8 December the HTS reached Damascus, forcing President Bashar al-Assad to flee to Moscow, and marking the end of 54 years of widespread and systematic violations of international human rights and humanitarian law that amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Since the takeover, the HTS has given repeated assurances of protection and inclusion to religious minority communities. On 29 March 2025 Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa announced the formation of a transitional government, appointing members of the Alawite, Christian and Druze communities to ministerial positions in a diverse cabinet. Al-Sharaa stated that the transitional government will remain in power until Syria is able to hold elections, which he said could take up to five years.

Syria held parliamentary elections on 5 October 2025. Most new members of the revamped People's Assembly are Sunni Muslim and male, with an electoral commission spokesperson reporting that only four percent of the 119 members selected in the indirect vote were women, and only two Christians were among those elected.¹

In November 2025 President al-Sharaa became the first Syrian leader to visit the White House since the country became independent, after the US removed his terrorist designation. The administration agreed to a 180-day suspension of the imposition of US sanctions under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act,² amid reports that Syria would be joining the Global Coalition to Defeat Islamic State (IS),³ and would move forward with a plan to integrate the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the Syrian army.

Legal framework

On 13 March 2025 Interim President al-Sharaa signed a five-year temporary constitutional declaration that retains some aspects of its predecessor, including the stipulation that the head of state must be a Muslim and that Islamic jurisprudence is the principal source of legislation (Article 3).⁴

Article 3 of the interim constitution also states that 'Freedom of belief is protected'; however, it makes specific provision for the 'divine religions' only (i.e. Christianity, Islam and Judaism), potentially exposing other religious communities, including those that Salafi-jihadi ideology often regards as deviating from Islam, to violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). The document also includes provisions enshrining freedom of expression and of the press (Article 13), and the 'social, economic and political rights of women' (Article 21).

The interim constitution has been criticised for granting excessive authority to the executive branch of government. Although it asserts the separation of powers in Article 2, it also grants the president considerable control that potentially undermines this principle.

While Assad's 2012 constitution allowed a president to 'dissolve the People's Assembly' at will,⁵ the interim constitution does not include that power, but nevertheless advances the reach of the executive.

For example, Article 24 grants the president the power to appoint one-third of the parliament, as well as a committee to select the remaining two-thirds, 'subject to his approval.' Article 41 allows him to declare a state of emergency with the approval of the National Security Council, a body he appoints and leads, and Article 27 enables the president to appoint every member of the constitutional court, responsible for reviewing and enforcing the constitution.

On 18 May 2025 the presidency announced the establishment of a National Transitional Justice Commission with a remit of 'exposing the truth about the grave violations committed by the former regime and holding those responsible accountable, in coordination with relevant authorities'.⁶ President al-Sharaa also announced the formation of a National Commission for Missing Persons, which will be tasked with investigating and uncovering the fate of missing and forcibly disappeared persons, documenting cases, creating a national database, and providing humanitarian and legal support to their families.

Sectarian violence

The Alawite community

The Alawite community comprises approximately ten percent of Syria's population and resides primarily in the governorates of Hama, Latakia and Tartus. Although most Alawites were not affiliated with the former regime, the

1 Al Jazeera, 'Syria shares results of parliamentary election amid inclusivity concerns', 6 October 2025 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/6/syria-declares-results-of-1st-parliamentary-poll-amid-inclusivity-concerns>

2 US Department of State, 'Sanctions Relief that Gives the Syrian People a Chance at Greatness', 10 November 2025 <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/11/sanctions-relief-that-gives-the-syrian-people-a-chance-at-greatness/>

3 Reuters, 'Syria signs cooperation declaration with Global Coalition to Defeat Islamic State, minister says', 10 November 2025 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-signs-cooperation-declaration-with-global-coalition-defeat-islamic-state-2025-11-10/>

4 Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic <https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025.03.13%20-%20Constitutional%20declaration%20%28English%29.pdf>

5 Article 111.1, Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic 2012

6 Reuters, 'Syria forms transitional justice, missing persons commissions', 18 May 2025 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-forms-transitional-justice-missing-persons-commissions-2025-05-18/>

community has been viewed with hostility and suspicion in the wake of the HTS takeover due to its shared ethnoreligious identity with ousted President Assad.

On 6 March 2025 fighters loyal to the deposed Assad regime ambushed and killed 13 Syrian security officers in Latakia Governorate, prompting the authorities to call for a 'general mobilisation' that saw thousands of pro-government fighters descending on the region. The ensuing violence claimed the lives of over 1,000 people within two days, including 745 civilians primarily belonging to the Alawite community who were mostly killed 'execution style'.⁷

In March 2025 the president appointed an independent national Commission of Inquiry to investigate the sectarian violence against the Alawite community. On 22 July 2025 the commission held a press conference to summarise its findings, stating it was able to identify 1,426 victims and 298 perpetrators, 265 of whom were supporters of the former regime and the rest of whom were members of the security forces of the current government. Although the commission handed the report to the president, it is still not available publicly, and the names of the perpetrators have been kept confidential. However, many who took part in the violence have reportedly been arrested and are being tried.

In June 2025 Reuters reported that at least 33 Alawite women and girls aged between 16 and 39 had been abducted or gone missing since the HTS takeover. In some cases abductees sent their families text or voice messages saying they had been taken out of the country.

In August 2025 the United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry on Syria released a report in which it determined the violence in the coastal and western central regions since January 2025 included acts which could constitute war crimes, placed the death toll at around 1,400, and warned that Alawite civilians were still being targeted.⁸

On 19 August 2025 a 14-year-old student identified only as Ghina was hit in a drive-by shooting as she stood on the balcony of her home in the Wadi al-Dhahab district of Homs.⁹ She died in her mother's arms.

On 28 September 2025 Al-Ezzeldin, 46, died after being shot three times by a masked man on a motorcycle as he locked up the family business in Homs at night. He was one of three Alawites murdered that day. In remarks to the BBC his brother highlighted that the murder occurred shortly after the removal of a security checkpoint located outside the shop.¹⁰

On 25 October 2025 Alawite schoolteacher Reham Hammouda was killed in the al-Walid neighbourhood of

Homs after an unknown assailant on a motorcycle threw a hand grenade at her family home. Ms Hammouda's relative Sarah Mouhammad Hamidoush was severely injured in the attack. Residents complained to CSW sources about a lack of police action, with some accusing the police and local authorities in Homs of being complicit in attacks.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 57 Alawites were killed in similar attacks in October 2025 alone.¹¹ Nineteen of these killings occurred in Homs.

On 21 November 2025 Alawites Wissam Daher al-Ali and Mouhammad Saleh al-Ali were stoned to death in the village of Abou Hakfa in Homs' eastern countryside.

On 23 November 2025 anti-Alawite riots erupted in Homs following the killing of a Sunni Muslim couple. The riots resulted in the destruction of hundreds of houses, shops and cars belonging to the Alawite community. Later, investigations revealed that the inciting incident was a burglary perpetrated by a family member who killed the couple when they discovered his identity, then inscribed phrases insulting Sunnis on the walls to disguise his crime.

On 26 December 2025 an explosive charge was detonated inside the Imam Ali Bin Abi Taleb Alawite mosque in Homs, killing eight civilians. An extremist group called Ansar al-Sunna claimed responsibility.

On 8 January 2026 four Alawites were killed and one was injured when unidentified armed men opened fire on them as they were entering a taxi outside the al-Kindi Hospital in Homs.

On 18 February Alawites Khidr Karakeet and his fiancée Nada Salem were killed when two masked men riding a motorcycle shot them at close range in the predominantly Alawite neighbourhood of Akrama. Five days later, on 23 February, Iman Jarrous, a 47-year-old Christian schoolteacher, was shot in the head in the same neighbourhood. She was killed instantly. CSW sources believe her attackers assumed she was an Alawite because she was not wearing a hijab.

July 2026 saw another uptick in attacks on Alawites in Homs. On 15 July Ibrahim Harmoush was killed in his office in the city. Three days later, on 18 July Amna Qaeer, her 14-year-old daughter Lujayn Khansa, and nine-year-old son Issa Khansa were shot dead on the balcony of their family home in the al-Sabeel neighbourhood by masked men on a motorbike who opened fire then fled the scene. Then on 26 July Youmna Hallaq was shot dead in the Wadi al-Dahab neighbourhood and her 13-year-old son Zayn Ibrahim was badly injured by an unidentified gunman who reportedly used a suppressor.

7 The Guardian, 'More than 1,000 people killed in two days of clashes in Syria, war monitor says', 9 March 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/09/more-than-1000-people-killed-in-two-days-of-clashes-in-syria-war-monitor-says>

8 UN News, 'Syria: Violence in Alawite areas may be war crimes, say rights investigators', 14 August 2025 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165649>

9 BBC News, 'Killed because they are Alawites': Fear among Syria's minorities after the fall of Assad', 10 November 2025 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/crwx1zp3213o>

10 Ibid.

11 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 'During this month, Homs has been teetering between chaos, violence, and sectarian killings' (Arabic), 25 October 2025 <https://bit.ly/47K7r7E>

The Al-Murshidi community

The Al-Murshidi, or Al-Murshidiyyah, is a Syrian religious community which emerged in the 1940s as an offshoot of the Alawi/Nusayri sect. There are no official statistics on the number of adherents; however, several reports estimate the community comprises approximately 300,000 persons living primarily in the Western Syrian Governorates of Homs, Latakia and Tartus, and in some suburbs of Damascus.

An estimated 67 Al-Murshidi civilians have been killed and dozens more injured in sectarian attacks since the HTS takeover.

On 18 April 2025, for example, Manal Hassan and her two 19-year-old daughters were fired upon by two men wearing balaclavas and riding a motorcycle as they were crossing a road in the Karm al-Louz neighbourhood of Homs. Ms Hassan and her daughter Lynn Haydar died at the scene, while Ms Hassan's other daughter, Luna, succumbed to her injuries in hospital on 22 April.

On 13 June 2025 Hadi Mouhammad Qasem and Mouhammad Walid Darwish, both aged 19, were abducted from their workshop in the al-Adawya neighbourhood of Homs by unidentified armed men who stole money, a laptop and a motorcycle, and destroyed other equipment. A few hours later, their dead bodies were found in the al-Khaldya neighbourhood, also in Homs, with gunshot wounds and signs of torture.

Days later, on 17 June 2025, Mahmood Ghassa, a 59-year-old agricultural engineer, was stopped by members of an unidentified armed group whilst driving his car in broad daylight in the al-Qusoor neighbourhood of Homs. Eyewitnesses report that the assailants forced Mr Ghassa into their vehicle, and that when he resisted he was assaulted. His body was found the next day in the village of Rabiaa, to the west of Homs, with signs of torture and gunshot wounds.

CSW sources report that a number of Murshidi leaders have met with the president and other senior officials to raise concerns regarding the violence against the community, and have been reassured that the government will step up efforts to protect them.

Christians

While several media outlets expressed concerns over impending threats to Syria's Christian community following the HTS takeover, so far fears of potential ethnic cleansing, persecution and genocide of Christians have not materialised.

There have been several disturbing incidents, however. On 22 June 2025 two terrorists armed with machine guns attacked Saint Elias Orthodox Church in Dwelaa, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Damascus, at around 5pm. Sources informed CSW that one of the attackers fled the scene while the other entered the church, which was packed

with worshippers, and detonated an explosive vest he was wearing, killing 25 people and injuring over 70 others.

A statement by the Ministry of Interior Affairs blamed IS for the attack. Several government officials, including the mayor of Damascus and the head of the police force, swiftly visited the church to offer condolences to the local priest and congregation. Sources informed CSW that the government also deployed police units around churches and Christian neighbourhoods in Damascus immediately, and stepped-up security measures across the country.

On 1 October 2025 cousins Wissam and Shafiq Mansour, both aged 39 and from the village of Anaz in Wadi al-Nasara (Valley of the Christians) in Homs, were shot dead while enjoying coffee and cigarettes with a friend. According to members of the local community, the gunman who killed them and injured their friend arrived from the direction of a nearby Sunni Muslim village, with several claiming Wissam Mansour may have been targeted for his former role as a member of a pro-Assad militia that had protected the village.¹²

In March 2026 leaders from the Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox churches issued statements announcing that public celebrations of Easter would not take place following an outbreak of sectarian violence in the Christian town of Suqaylabiyah in western Syria on 28 March.

CSW sources in the town said that violence erupted after two young Muslim men from the nearby Muslim town of Qalaat al-Madiq were verbally harassing Christian women in Suqaylabiyah, and were eventually assaulted by local Christian men. The young Muslims went back to their town, returned with dozens of other men on motorcycles and stormed Suqaylabiyah, attacking shops, properties and cars, and firing guns in the air. The attackers also destroyed a shrine to the Virgin Mary in the town. Local sources reported that some national security personnel participated in the violence.

Druze

The Syrian Druze are believed to constitute around 3.2 percent of the population. Originating from the Near East, the Druze self-identify as 'Unitarians' or 'the People of Monotheism,' and are deemed by hard-line Islamists to be heretics. Druze communities in Idlib Governorate in north-western Syria have historically been subjected to several attacks.

On 28 April 2025 sectarian violence broke out in the towns of Ashrafeih Sahnaya and Jaramana on the outskirts of Damascus after a voice clip circulated on social media purporting to be a Druze cleric insulting the Prophet Mohammed. The clip sparked widespread anger among Syria's Sunni population, although the Interior Ministry issued a statement saying that its initial investigation showed that the cleric was not the person speaking in the clip. Dozens were killed in ensuing violence that continued

¹² Op. cit. fn 9

until 30 April, with armed groups affiliated with the government attacking both towns, which are home to large Druze and Christian populations.

On 13 July 2025 clashes broke out between Druze militia and government forces supported by tribal forces the government had mobilised to protect the Sunni minority in As-Suwayda Governorate. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least 1,265 people were killed in violence that continued for over a week until a ceasefire came into effect on the morning of 21 July.¹³ Violations documented during this period included sexual violence, the extrajudicial killing of children, doctors and medical staff, and the destruction of Druze shrines, churches and sacred objects. In addition, more than 80 Druze women were reported missing. The situation was exacerbated by Israeli strikes intended to prevent Sunni forces from entering Suwayda City, which heightened sectarian tensions and incitement.

The UN International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reported that over 128,000 people were displaced by the violence, and on 21 July the Syrian government announced plans to evacuate 1,500 members of the Bedouin community to neighbouring Daraa Governorate.¹⁴

Among those killed was a Druze convert to Christianity, Khalid Mizher, along with 20 other members of his immediate and extended family. Mr Mizher was an independent church/community activist; he was not an ordained pastor, neither was he affiliated with any formal church.

On 27 October 2025 Druze community leader Dr Hamza Shaheen was abducted by masked armed men who stormed his family home in Deir Ali near Damascus. The kidnappers subsequently called Dr Shaheen's family several times, demanding a significant ransom whilst repeatedly refusing to provide evidence that he was still alive. On 4 November security forces arrested the kidnappers, who confessed that Dr Shaheen had died due to severe mistreatment he had suffered whilst in captivity. CSW sources report that his kidnappers belong to an extremist group.

On 28 October 2025 Aya Salam and Kamal Abdulbaqi were killed and 11 people were injured when unidentified gunmen opened fire on a coach carrying Druze civilians on their way from Suwayda City to Damascus. Druze activists accused Sunni tribesmen loyal to the government of being responsible for the attack.

On 7 February 2026 four Druze civilians were killed instantly when a policeman opened fire on them in an unprovoked attack whilst they were working in olive fields in al-Matouna village in the countryside of Suwayda Province. A fifth victim

was severely wounded and taken to hospital where he passed away on 15 February.

Shi'a Muslims

On 9 July 2025 prominent Shi'a cleric Sheikh Rassoul Shahoud was shot dead in Homs by unidentified gunmen as he was walking home at around 6pm. The incident sparked protests in the victim's home village of al-Mazraa near Homs, and the authorities pledged to investigate the attack.

On 1 May 2026 Sheikh Farhan al-Mansour, the Imam of Sayyeda Zaynab Mosque and Shrine in Damascus, was killed shortly after leaving the mosque after Friday prayers when an unknown assailant threw a hand grenade into his car which exploded and killed him instantly. The police arrived quickly and launched a criminal investigation into the incident. Sheikh al-Mansour had taken part in several interfaith dialogue initiatives since the fall of the Assad regime.

Missing Yazidi women

Human rights organisations estimate the number of Yazidi women still missing since the August 2014 IS invasion of Iraq and Syria to be over 2,500, many of whom are believed to be held in different locations in Syria and Türkiye.

Recommendations

To the transitional government of Syria:

- Accelerate the transitional justice process and launch a national dialogue initiative to address sectarianism and divisions between different ethnic and religious groups, and 'the conditions conducive to terrorism, including prolonged unresolved conflicts, discrimination, and exclusion.'¹⁵
- Ensure the inclusion of all religious and ethnic communities, diverse political orientations and civil society in the process of drafting the final constitution.
- Ensure that all Syrian citizens receive protection from sectarian violence and equal treatment under the law, regardless of their religion, belief or ethnicity.
- Bring the perpetrators of violence and hate speech targeting ethnic and religious communities to justice, and deal swiftly and decisively with sectarian incitement.
- Redouble efforts to find and liberate the approximately 2,500 Yazidi women and girls who are still missing, and the 33 Alawite women and girls and 80 Druze women abducted more recently, and to hold those responsible for these abductions to account.

13 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 'Al-Suwayda bloodshed in seven days | Primary death toll in Al-Suwayda reaches 1,265 including 194 executed before ceasefire implementation', 21 July 2025 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/366344/>

14 Al Jazeera, 'Syria evacuates Bedouins from clashes-hit Suwayda as shaky ceasefire holds', 21 July 2025 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/21/syria-evacuates-bedouins-from-clashes-hit-suwayda-as-shaky-ceasefire-holds>

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

- ‘Allow prompt, independent investigations, prosecute perpetrators, and establish the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared.’¹⁶
- Make the findings of the independent commission of inquiry appointed by the president to investigate the sectarian violence against the Alawite minority in March 2025 publicly available.

To the government of the United States:

- Condition the permanent lifting of sanctions on the improvement of the situation of FoRB, as per the recommendation of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF),¹⁷ and establish clear benchmarks to enable sanctions to be lifted progressively.
- The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, once nominated and confirmed, and USCIRF commissioners should request an invitation to visit Syria, with unhindered access to all parts of the country and the ability to meet freely with representatives of diverse religious communities and indigenous groups.
- Given Syria’s recent history and ongoing sectarian tensions, emphasise the importance of ensuring inclusion, equality of citizenship, individual freedoms, and respect for human rights and diversity; and model best practice by avoiding exclusive minority language that risks reinforcing sectarian divides.
- Deny travel visas to individuals responsible for serious FoRB violations before and after the HTS takeover, including members of both the ousted and transitional governments, and non-state actors.
- Urge the transitional government of Syria, at every appropriate opportunity, to implement the recommendations highlighted above ‘To the transitional government of Syria’.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Urge the transitional government of Syria to uphold the pledges it made in its March 2025 constitutional declaration.
- Support the transitional government in pursuing legislative, judicial and institutional reforms to ensure that laws and bodies respect and protect the rights of all citizens, regardless of religion, belief or ethnicity.
- Encourage the transitional government to ‘allow prompt, independent investigations, prosecute

perpetrators, and establish the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared’.

- Support efforts to find and liberate the approximately 2,500 Yazidi women and girls who are still missing, and the 33 Alawite women and girls and 80 Druze women abducted more recently, and to hold those responsible for these abductions to account.
- Support efforts to protect and preserve evidence of violations and abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law for future accountability processes.
- Ensure the inclusion of Syrian civil society at all stages of the transition, including in shaping a credible, survivor-centred transitional justice process that prioritises truth-telling and reparations.
- Support the Syrian people through the provision of humanitarian aid and sanctions relief.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Commission of Inquiry on Syria, Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to FoRB in their reporting.
- Utilise the Universal Periodic Review process to raise FoRB violations in Syria and offer recommendations to advance FoRB.
- Support the Commission of Inquiry on Syria as it monitors and reports on the situation of human rights in the country, ensuring the mandate is fully resourced.
- Given Syria’s recent history and ongoing sectarian tensions, emphasise the importance of ensuring inclusion, equality of citizenship, individual freedoms, and respect for human rights and diversity; and model best practice by avoiding exclusive minority language that risks reinforcing sectarian divides.
- Urge the transitional government of Syria, at every appropriate opportunity, to implement the recommendations highlighted above ‘To the transitional government of Syria’.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, ‘Religious Freedom and Policy in Post-Assad Syria’, July 2025 <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025%20Syria%20Policy%20Update.pdf>

**CSW everyone
free to believe**