

CSW (Christian Solidarity Worldwide) and CSW-Nigeria are human rights organisations specialising in the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). This joint submission, prepared ahead of The Syrian Arab Republic's fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR), outlines critical rights issues pertaining to FoRB in the country during the reporting period.

Previous Universal Periodic Review

1. Under President Bashir al-Assad, Syria supported 207 out of 287 recommendations and noted or rejected 80 during the third UPR cycle. Accepted recommendations included calls to 'conduct a review of national laws and repeal any provisions that are discriminatory against ethnic and religious minorities'¹; to 'preserve coexistence between all cultural and religious components of Syrian society'²; to 'involve fully all religious and ethnic groups in a transparent and inclusive negotiating process with a view to building a peaceful future'³, and to end attacks against civilians and protected civilian infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and humanitarian facilities, and end all restrictions on religious freedoms for Christians and other minorities.⁴
2. However, the government's decision to reject multiple recommendations to end enforced disappearances, abductions, arbitrary arrests and detention, extrajudicial killings, systematic use of torture, and sexual and gender-based violence were telling, and indicative of the widespread and systematic violations of international human rights and humanitarian law meted out during the al-Assad era, including those amounting to crimes against humanity and war crimes, as reported by the United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry on Syria (COI Syria).
3. In addition, recommendations accepted by Syria to ratify the Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CED), and to become party to the Optional Protocols to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR-OP) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW-OP) are yet to be implemented.

Recommendation to the Syrian Arab Republic:

4. *Implement outstanding recommendations accepted during the second cycle of the Universal Periodic*

Review.

Significant political changes

5. During the reporting period, there have been significant political changes in Syria. For 54 years the al-Assad family ruled Syria, supported by Russian and Iranian military. Violations committed during this time include routine enforced disappearance, torture, extrajudicial execution, as well as modern-day sieges, and extreme military force, including aerial bombardment, and the use of heavy artillery and chemical weapons. Mass displacement and the lack of humanitarian access was further exacerbated by Türkiye's refusal to allow refugees across its borders with Syria.
6. On 27 November 2024 a coalition of rebel militias led by the Islamist armed group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched a surprise attack and managed to take the northern city of Aleppo, the second largest in Syria. They swept south very quickly, taking the cities of Hama and Homs within a few days, and causing the army to retreat. On 8 December 2024 the HTS reached Damascus, forcing Assad to flee to Moscow,
7. Syria used to be divided into three entities: areas under government control, areas controlled by Islamists loyal to Türkiye, and the North-East which was under self-administration. However, following the takeover by HTS and a major offensive in early 2026 in which the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northeast ceded much of their territories to Damascus, the central transitional government now holds formal control over most of the country.
8. Since the takeover, HTS has also given repeated assurances of protection and inclusion to religious 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.
9. Syria held parliamentary elections on 5 October.⁵ 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

1 United Nations, Report of the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review: Syrian Arab Republic, 31 March 2022, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/50/6> (Recommendation 133.89 from Lithuania); United Nations, Report of the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review: Syrian Arab Republic, Addendum, 'A/HRC/50/6/Add.1, 1 June 2022.

2 Ibid, Recommendation 133.90 from Lebanon

3 Ibid, Recommendation 133.93 from Holy See

4 Ibid, Recommendation 133.109 from Ecuador

5 The chamber has 210 seats. Two-thirds of lawmakers were chosen last year by regional electoral colleges chosen by the authorities, while President al-Sharaa appointed the remaining 70 members. Nationwide elections were not feasible because of the complex logistical challenges created by years of conflict, including inaccurate population records. After only six seats were won by women and 10 by minority candidates, President Sharaa used his appointments to address the imbalance; 15 of the new lawmakers are women and 13 were imprisoned during the rule of Bashar Al-Assad. On 12 July 2026, the chamber convened its first session and elected a speaker and two deputy speakers, one of whom is a female christian member.

and only two Christians were among those elected.⁶

10. In November 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,⁷ amid reports that Syria would be joining the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS,⁸ and would move forward with a plan to integrate the Kurdish-led SDF into the Syrian army.
11. CSW tentatively welcomes the transitional government's cooperation with the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syrian Arab Republic (COI Syria). This positive development stands in contrast to the recommendation rejected by the Assad government during the third UPR cycle, which urged the government to 'ensure access to the Syrian Arab Republic for humanitarian assistance and independent human rights monitors, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, to investigate all human rights abuses and violations.'⁹ In March 2026, the COI Syria made an official visit to the country and 'noted progress in developing a transitional justice law, and the start of trials in relation to Assad-government-era human rights and international humanitarian law violations.'¹⁰
12. Since the takeover, tens of thousands of political prisoners have also been released from prison. In 2025, the COI Syria published a conference room paper detailing 'the web of agony' caused by enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment of Syrians by the Assad government, acts which 'amounted to widespread, gross violations of human rights and crimes against humanity and since the emergence of armed conflict, violations of international humanitarian law and war crimes.'¹¹
13. However, they also expressed concern, following their visit to the country regarding a lack of progress in ensuring detainees are held lawfully in humane conditions, especially in the north and north east, many

of whom are children, and regarding the transfer of detainees to Iraq, including 'an indeterminate number of vulnerable children'.¹²

Recommendations to the Syrian Arab Republic:

14. *Take measures to protect and preserve evidence of violations and abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law for future accountability processes.*
15. *Cooperate with and facilitate unhindered access to independent investigative and judicial mechanisms, including the UN COI, and International Criminal Court (ICC), to ensure perpetrators of violations are brought to justice.*
16. *Guarantee the inclusion of Syrian civil society at all stages of the transition, including in shaping a credible, survivor-centred, gender-sensitive transitional justice process that prioritises truth-telling and reparations.*
17. *Provide protection to and facilitate the unhindered access of humanitarian aid and sanctions relief organisations.*
18. *Immediately establish the fate and whereabouts of detained and disappeared Syrian nationals in the country, as well as those who have been transferred out of Syrian territory to Iraq.*
19. *Ensuring that all those held in detention are held lawfully and humanely.*
20. *Provide human rights training for the judiciary, police, prison guards, and political appointees to better enable them to protect and promote human rights in their work.*

Legal framework

21. 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 has to be a Muslim and that Islamic jurisprudence is the principal source of legislation (Article 3).¹³
22. Article 3 of the interim constitution also states that 'Freedom of belief is protected'; however, it makes

6 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>

7 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/>

8 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/>

9 United Nations, Report of the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review: Syrian Arab Republic, 31 March 2022, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/50/6> (Recommendation 133.51 from Lithuania); United Nations, Report of the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review: Syrian Arab Republic, Addendum, 'A/HRC/50/6/Add.1, 1 June 2022.

10 United Nations, 'UN Syria Commission concludes latest visit to Syria, 8 July 2026, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2026/07/un-syria-commission-concludes-latest-visit-syria?sub-site=HRC>; United Nations, 'Syria: UN Commission of Inquiry completes Syria mission in midst regional clashes, encouraging respect for human rights', 6 March 2026, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/03/syria-un-commission-inquiry-completes-syria-mission-midst-regional-clashes>

11 United Nations, Independent International Commission of Inquiry, Syria: Conference Room Paper: 'Web of Agony: Arbitrary Detention, Torture, and Ill Treatment by former Government forces in the Syrian Arab Republic (Companion Report to A/HRC/46/55)', 27 January 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session58/A-HRC-58-CRP-3.pdf>

12 *Ibid*

13 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>

specific provision for the ‘divine religions’ only (i.e. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity), 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).

23. 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. Assad’s 2012 constitution allowed a president to ‘dissolve the People’s Assembly’ at will.¹⁴ While the interim constitution does not include that power, it nevertheless advances the reach of the executive.
24. 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.
25. On 18 May 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.’¹⁵ 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.

Recommendations to the Syrian Arab Republic:

26. *Continue to reform the political system, formulating a new law regulating political parties, allowing for the formation of new political parties, and the political participation of minorities and women.*
27. *Facilitate free and fair elections, including for the new parliament, and take measures towards a civilian led transition.*
28. *Uphold the pledges made in the March 2025 constitutional declaration, and consult religious and ethnic communities in the drafting of the final constitution.*

29. *Remove provisions that make Islamic jurisprudence the principal source of legislation or restrict the presidency on religious grounds.*

Freedom of religion or belief

30. The Syrian civil war negatively impacted every religious and ethnic community. In areas controlled by Islamist militias religious minorities suffered particularly appalling treatment. Many were forced to flee the country due to the hostile environment created by these militias, rendering some areas ‘religiously cleansed.’
31. Less than two years since Assad fell, the country remains unstable. Anxieties persist for many religious and ethnic minorities regarding the direction the country will take and whether the transitional authorities will impose stricter restrictions on FoRB, and social and personal liberties.
32. By law, all religious groups must register with the government, and meetings beyond regular worship require permits. Registered religious groups recognised by the government are able to receive free utilities and are exempt from real estate taxes on religious buildings and personal property taxes on their official vehicles. Reports suggest it has become easier for Christian leaders to register places of worship, for example, and that they have been treated respectfully, but challenges remain for other religious and ethnic groups, including the Alawite and Druze communities.
33. Hate speech, sectarian incitement and violence remain commonplace and need to be addressed in accordance with international standards. While CSW has not received reports of incitement by interim government officials, reports of Imams using their positions for hate speech and incitement to violence have been documented, with the main targets of hate speech being religious minorities, women’s rights groups and liberal activists. The COI Syria welcomed ‘positive developments in expanded freedom of speech and general media freedom’¹⁶ but also expressed concern about the need to protect the right to freedom of expression while countering hate-speech and the use of media to incite violence.
34. The HTS has made repeated promises to protect the rights of religious minorities; however, the security situation remains volatile and attacks by religious extremists, including bomb attacks, continue to occur. In a recent incident, the Jihadist group Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah claimed to be behind a July 2026 bombing at a café in Damascus which left nine dead and over 22 injured,¹⁷ but authorities have also pointed the finger at IS.

The Alawite community

¹⁴ Article 111.1, Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic 2012

¹⁵ 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/>

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ BBC News, bomb blast in Damascus café kills nine, Syrian state media says, 2 July 2026, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn0vwxyz40zo>

35. The Alawite community comprises approximately 10% of Syria's population and resides primarily in the governorates of Homs, Hama, Latakia and Tartus. Although most Alawites were not affiliated with the former regime, the entire 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. Sectarian incitement by Imams loyal to al-Sharaa, and attacks on areas with large Alawite communities mean tensions continue to run high.
36. 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 just two days, including 745 civilians primarily belonging to the Alawite community who were mostly killed 'execution style'.¹⁸
37. In August 2025 the COI Syria released a report in which it determined the violence in March could constitute war crimes, placed the death toll at around 1,400, and warned that Alawite civilians were still being targeted.¹⁹
38. On 19 August 2025 a 14-year-old Alawite 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.²⁰ She died in her mother's arms.
39. Then 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 who was 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.²¹
40. 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.
41. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 57 Alawites were killed in similar attacks in October 2025 alone.²² Nineteen of these killings occurred in Homs.
42. 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.
43. 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.
44. 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.
45. 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.
46. 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.
47. 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 killers assumed she was an Alawite because she was not wearing a hijab.

The Al-Murshidi community

48. 49. The Al-Murshidi, or Al-Murshidiyyah, is a 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 Tarsus, and in some suburbs of Damascus.
49. An estimated 67 Al-Murshidi civilians have been killed and dozens more injured in sectarian attacks since the HTS takeover.
50. On 18 April 2025, for example, Manal Hassan and her

18 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>

19 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>

20 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>

21 Ibid.

22 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 'During this month, Homs has been teetering between chaos, violence, and sectarian killings' (Arabic), 25 October 2025 <https://www.syriahr.com/%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%B5-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AC%D8%AD-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B6/782239/>

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.

51. 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.
52. Days later, on 17 June, 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.

Christians

53. 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.
54. 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.
55. 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, quickly visited the church to offer condolences to the local priest and congregation. Sources also informed CSW that the government immediately deployed police units around churches and Christian neighbourhoods in Damascus, and stepped-up security measures across the country. The authorities have since announced the arrests of those involved and the case has gone to trial.
56. On 1 October 2025, cousins Wissam and Shafiq Mansour, who were both aged 39 and were 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 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.²³

57. 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.
58. CSW sources in the town said that violence erupted after two young men from the nearby Muslim town of Qalaat al-Madiq started 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 of the Virgin Mary in the town. Local sources reported that some national security personnel participated in the violence.

Druze

59. The 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 attacks.
60. 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 the ensuing violence that continued until 30 April, with armed groups affiliated with the government attacking both towns, which are home to large Druze and Christian populations.
61. 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 the ensuing violence which continued for over a week until a ceasefire came into effect on the morning of 21 July.²⁴ Violations documented during

23 BBC, '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>

24 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/>

this period included sexual violence, the extrajudicial killings 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.

62. 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.²⁵
63. Among those killed was a Druze convert to Christianity, Khalid Mizher, along with 20 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.
64. 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 and demanded 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 reported that his kidnappers belong to an extremist group.
65. 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 from Suwayda City to Damascus. Druze activists accused Sunni tribesmen loyal to the government of being behind the attack.
66. 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 community

67. 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.

68. 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 following Friday prayers by an unknown assailant who 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.

Recommendations to the Syrian Arab Republic

69. *Guarantee the right to FoRB for all, including the right to choose, change and practice a religion or belief of one's choice without interference or violence, in accordance with Article 18 of the ICCPR, and ensure all citizens receive protection and equal treatment in law and practice.*
70. *Address hate speech targeting ethnic and religious communities, deal swiftly and decisively with sectarian incitement, and establish a national dialogue initiative to address hate speech, sectarianism and divisions between the different ethnic and religious groups.*
71. *Condemn all attacks on minority religious communities, ensuring perpetrators are brought to justice, and provide support and rehabilitation for victims.*
72. *Press for urgent civilian-protection measures in areas experiencing sectarian violence, and ensure security forces are trained to protect communities, places of worship and religious leaders without discrimination.*

Violence against women and girls

73. During the previous UPR, Syria accepted recommendations to 'carry out effective measures to combat sexual and gender-based violence and trafficking in women and girls'²⁶ and to 'allocate the human, technical and financial resources necessary to effectively implement its national plan to combat human trafficking, with a focus on trafficking in women and children'.²⁷ However, violations against women and girls continued during the reporting period. Many women and girls have been consistently subjected to severe forms of gender-based violence by all warring parties, especially by IS and government forces. Violations include sexual abuse and harassment, an enforced dress code, restrictions on the right to education and restrictions on movement virtually amounting to house arrest.
74. Women arbitrarily detained by the Syrian government were often subjected to abuse in both official and secret detention facilities, including privations, torture, threats, solitary confinement, sexual harassment, rape

²⁵ 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>

²⁶ United Nations, Report of the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review: Syrian Arab Republic, 31 March 2022, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/50/6> (Recommendation 133.178 from Nepal); United Nations, Report of the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review: Syrian Arab Republic, Addendum, 'A/HRC/50/6/Add.1, 1 June 2022.

²⁷ *Ibid*, Recommendation 133.83 from Fiji

and threats of rape.

75. The conflict in Syria severely impacted the role and status of women. The majority of internally and externally displaced Syrians are women and children, many of whom have been displaced multiple times and who are exposed to serious risks inside and outside camps. These risks vary from intimidation and exploitation to rape and sexual abuse.
76. The abduction and enforced disappearance of women and girls is also of concern.
77. 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.
78. In June 2025 Reuters²⁸ 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.

Recommendations to the Syrian Arab Republic:

79. *Hold all perpetrators of gender-based violence and abuse to account.*
80. *Provide protection and rehabilitation for women and children who have been displaced or have suffered violations, along with psychosocial support.*
81. *Redouble efforts to locate and liberate all women and girls who have been abducted and forcibly disappeared, including Yazidi, Alawite and Druze women and girls who are still missing, and hold those responsible for these abductions to account.*

28 Reuters, 'She's not coming back: Alawite women snatched in streets of Syria', 27 June 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/shes-not-coming-back-alawite-women-snatched-streets-syria-2025-06-27/>