



Institute for the Documentation of
Human Rights Violations against
Religious Minorities in the Levant

WHERE SILENCE ENDS AND JUSTICE BEGINS

A Syria for All?

Reclaiming Pluralism and Justice in the Wake of al-Sharaa

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Hosted by the Intergroup on Christians in the Middle East

European Parliament

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Most Honorable Members of Parliament, Esteemed Colleagues,

I am serving as the director of the Institute for the Documentation of Human Rights Violations against Religious Minorities in the Levant IDHRV-ARMIL. I will speak on behalf the victims and survivors as well as documenters and human rights advocates who have borne witness to the traumatic atrocities that happened to members of indigenous religious minorities of Syria—among these Alawites, Christians, Druze, Ismailis, Murshids, Yezidi. As director of the organization IDHRV-ARMIL, I will speak on their behalf and ensure that their experiences and perspectives are represented with accuracy, dignity, and respect.

The question I was asked to address today is not a rhetorical one—it is an existential one: *A Syria for All?* or to put it differently: *Does Syria have a future for all its people?* With the rise of President Ahmad al-Sharaa, also known by his nom de guerre al-Jolani, we must ask whether Syria will be able to uphold human dignity, ethnic and religious diversity, and basic human rights for all its citizens—or whether it will allow its rich social fabric to be reshaped by politics of exclusion and repression leading to the erasure of entire communities and the annihilation of a whole culture and way of life.

In the aftermath of Syria's political transition, the promise of renewal has been eclipsed by a deepening crisis of humanity and dignity. The al-Sharaa administration, while heralded by some as a break from dynastic authoritarianism, has presided over a system of exclusion, dispossession, and sectarian violence that demands urgent international scrutiny.

Many observers believe that the hastily conducted election was nothing more than a farce. According to al-Sharaa himself, it is too early after the war to hold free and direct elections. Probably, this was a means to exclude the Kurdish regions and the governorate of Swaida. Thus, there is no guarantee that the new constitution or government would—even in a sliver of representation—reflect the lived, yet fragmented, realities of the ethnically diverse population of Syria. Yet all Syrians are in their own way survivors of torture, displacement, siege, and suppression. They are all victims. But what future awaits these components of Syrian society?

Recent Political Upheaval and Religious Minority Risks

With the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad on December 8, 2024, the radical Islamist rebel group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) took power with Ahmad al-Sharaa as Syria's new leader. My research and available data show that Alawites and Christians seemed to be willing to turn the page. They laid down the weapons in their possessions and signaled that they would cooperate with the new rulers.

However, as it turned out, they became easy and defenseless victims and were shocked and surprised by what subsequently happened to them. This was a complete and irrevocable breach of trust to which the transitional government only responded with lukewarm—if not cynical and highly questionable—comments. Since the collapse of the Assad regime, Syria has witnessed a troubling escalation in identity-based violence. Beginning in early 2025 (with first instances already happening in late 2024), targeted attacks against Alawite, Christian, and Druze communities have intensified, marking a dangerous shift in the conflict's trajectory. After the first large-scale and highly orchestrated massacres in the coastal areas, the situation for religious minorities indigenous to the cultural and ethnic landscape of Syria has become precarious and remains extremely alarming even today. Along with these dangers, the threat of killing, rape, and abduction among members of these communities is ever present.

The governance of Syria is now based on a radical interpretation of the Sharia and has removed all legal protections for vulnerable populations who do not follow this vision and interpretations of Sunni Islam, and who now face constant menacing from all types of militant factions. Alawites and Druzes are specifically targeted because they are seen as apostates and heretics that abandoned the house of Islam. Even though Christians are not viewed in that way, there is evidence of relentless attempts at encouraging them to convert to Islam. In contrast to Christians, however, Alawites and Druze are dehumanized and treated more like animals. The trail of corpses left after the massacres in Latakia and Swaida was not treated with any dignity. They were mutilated, burned, and left in the open to decompose and be eaten by animals. In some cases, family members were not even allowed to bury their dead.

Until today, the transitional government has not shown any sign of accepting liability or taking these atrocities seriously as a threat to public security. Militant groups like the Sultan Murad Brigade and Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade or SNA and HTS have never faced accountability for their actions. These occurrences are simply brushed aside as acts of an outburst of revenge against the so-called remnants of the Assad regime or terrorists that seek independence and self-governance instead of unconditionally approving the centralist government.

The lack of accountability by the new regime and its negligence of the fundamental rule of law made most members of religious minorities distrustful of the transitional government's leadership and its way of handling the dark legacy of the Assad regime. These developments demand urgent attention. They reflect not only a breakdown of state protection but also the emergence of new power configurations that instrumentalize ethnic and religious divisions. The imperative is clear: it is of critical importance to support mechanisms of accountability, reinforce protections for vulnerable communities, and ensure that international engagement does not inadvertently legitimize actors who are complicit in these abuses.

The list of atrocities is long and too extensive—both in scale and in psychological weight—to recount in full. I will therefore highlight three critical turning points in Syria’s recent developments that demand attention, based on interviews that I conducted and together with data collected and verified by documentation teams working for IDHRV-ARMIL.

In the following, I will refer to the three most significant massacres that took place:

- On **March 7**, coordinated massacres began against mostly civilian Alawite populations in the **coastal regions**, signaling a deliberate campaign of sectarian cleansing.
- On **June 22**, a suicide bombing struck the Greek Orthodox **Mar Elias Church** in Damascus, devastating the Christian community and underscoring the vulnerability of religious minorities in urban centers.
- On **July 13**, in **Swaida**, the Druze and Christian communities started enduring a sustained military siege, with reports of restricted access to humanitarian aid and forced displacement.

March 7 Massacres against Alawites

Let me begin with the **March 7 massacres against Alawites**. Our data suggest that the massacres were orchestrated by groups loyal to the new regime. Available evidence from Syria’s coastal regions—particularly provided through extensive interviews with survivors of the massacres in Jableh, Latakia, and Baniyas—points to a series of highly coordinated massacres carried out by Amshat and Hamzat, the former militias of the Syrian National Army (SNA), as well as foreign fighters often identified as Uighur and Turkmen. They were using intelligence and targeting Alawite communities, executed with clear intent and operational precision.

These atrocities were not spontaneous, as claimed by the government to deflect responsibility. Eyewitness accounts and independent reports consistently implicate militant factions loyal to government forces as the primary instigators. Convoys of pick-up trucks, some stretching for kilometers and equipped with massive air defense systems, were observed entering and exiting these regions.

Independent accounts from different regions also seem to suggest that the convoys were organized into tightly structured units with ten militants per unit led by an Emir. Within these, pairs of two were systematically assigned to conduct search and kill operations per civilian household. Across affected neighborhoods, four distinct operational groups were consistently identified:

- **General Security Forces**, whose presence preceded and facilitated the attacks.
- **Search Units**, typically composed of masked men with long hair and beards, dressed in black or camouflage. These units conducted invasive apartment searches, demanding items like weapons and electronic devices, and valuables like gold, jewelry, and money.
- **Execution Squads**, tasked with targeting male residents. After being identified as Alawites, victims were forcibly removed from their homes and executed publicly—either in the streets or on rooftops—in front of their families.
- **Looting and Arson Teams**, which pillaged shops and homes, removing portable goods and destroying immovable property. These groups often included women and children, many were identified as dark-skinned individuals who had begun appearing in the area since December 2024. A final wave of looters, mainly Bedouins from the neighborhood and the Homs and Hama regions, arrived within hours of the massacres, further compounding the devastation.

Members of the White Helmets who are supportive of the government and working alongside the militant factions cleared up evidence in the most affected neighborhoods directly after the massacres happened. While tactical variations existed across neighborhoods, the operational blueprint remained consistent. One main question was key to the stealing, killing, and looting: Are you Alawite or Sunni? All families were greeted with this one question. Throughout, one standard narrative stood out and was reiterated by the perpetrators, regardless of context—namely, that their brothers were killed by the Alawites and that they were displaced for some fourteen years now. One of the most striking patterns is geographic: all units were observed arriving from and returning to Idlib, suggesting centralized coordination and logistical planning.

The June 22 Mar Elias Church massacre targeting Christians to convert

The attack on Greek Orthodox Mar Elias Church in Damascus on June 22—while distinct in its execution—follows a recognizable pattern of targeted intimidation. For weeks prior to the attack, checkpoints had been stationed directly in front of the church. In addition, cars with loudspeakers were used to publicly broadcast calls for the Christian communities in the Dweilaa neighborhood of Damascus to convert to Islam. These broadcasts occurred daily, and despite their provocative nature, the local Christian community endured them in silence, seeking to avoid confrontation.

However, the situation escalated during a funeral procession, when mourners respectfully requested that the broadcasts be halted in recognition of their grief. This interaction led to an

argument with an individual operating the loudspeaker. A formal complaint was filed with the general security forces, resulting in the individual's brief detention. Nonetheless, he was released shortly thereafter and subsequently circulated a video accusing the Greek Orthodox Christian community of harassment and intimidation.

Despite heightened tensions and the presence of security forces directly outside the church, there were no direct indications of an impending attack. The absence of preventive measures, combined with the prior pattern of unchecked provocation, raises questions about institutional complicity and the failure of state mechanisms to protect vulnerable communities. According to independent eyewitness accounts—though not all fully consistent and not yet independently verified—the circumstances surrounding the June 22 attack on Mar Elias Church raise concerns about security oversight and institutional complicity.

Before the attack, the neighborhood surrounding the church had been sealed off by three layers of checkpoints, severely restricting traffic and movement. This heightened security perimeter begs the obvious question of how the perpetrator—fully armored and armed—was able to pass through all of the barriers without obstruction. Upon entering the church compound, he opened fire on members of the Christian community gathered outside for an evening ceremony of the Divine Liturgy, killing several. He then forced entry into the church itself, where he targeted the priest and other congregants before attempting to detonate a suicide belt. In a final act of resistance, three men from the community rushed to the attacker and managed to drag him toward the entrance of the church. It was there that he detonated the device, which is perhaps why almost all the community members inside the church are still alive.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the June 22 attack on Mar Elias Church—confirmed by two independent sources—is the complete breakdown of emergency response in its immediate aftermath. For some 45 minutes following the explosion, all telephone lines in the vicinity of the church were reportedly not functioning, leaving survivors unable to call for help. No ambulances arrived during this critical window. In desperation, victims and witnesses resorted to stopping vehicles passing to transport the wounded to the nearest hospital. As one eyewitness recounted, just minutes after the massacre, while entering a civilian car, he observed seven general security officers standing across the street. One appeared to be smoking, and none showed visible signs of urgency or distress despite the scale of the attack.

When an ambulance finally arrived—nearly an hour after the attack—all victims had already reached medical facilities through improvised means, relying on passing vehicles and community assistance. Although not verified, one account suggested that the ambulance's arrival coincided with the appearance of government-affiliated clean-up teams. These teams, supported by general security personnel, focused on removing rather than investigating the available evidence and

sanitizing the church compound. The general public's perceptions of the security team are conflicting and remain inconsistent. However, the identity of the perpetrator was never revealed by the general security.

This incident—occurring within a tightly controlled zone and in the presence of state security infrastructure—demands urgent attention. The ability of a heavily armed assailant to penetrate multiple checkpoints and carry out such an attack suggests either a catastrophic failure of security protocols or a more troubling pattern of selective enforcement and institutional negligence. When no one is held accountable, crimes against minorities are treated as acceptable. Hence, religious minorities feel exposed and powerless, reinforcing a cycle of expected abuse.

The Siege on Swaida against the Druze and Christian communities

The Swaida province is in the southern part of Syria at the border to Jordan and is considered the homeland of the Druze community. It is home to an estimated 24,000 Christians, who have historically coexisted with the Druze majority in a context of relative intercommunal stability. However, recent attacks in July 2025 disrupted this fragile coexistence, resulting also in significant harm to Christian civilians and the destruction of religious and cultural property.

It is important to recognize that the July assault on Swaida was months in the making and part of a broader strategy to subdue the Druze and other resistant minorities. The ten-day siege from April 30 to May 10 felt like a trial run for what followed. As in the coastal areas, the main assault was incited by a provocation and abduction of a Druze by armed Bedouins just days before the main military operation and siege of Sweida.

Syria's interim government first announced it was sending security forces to Suwayda province to reduce violence. But instead of protecting civilians, these forces—drawn from the Ministries of Interior and Defense—sided with Bedouin clans and extremist groups. Starting early on July 14, Suwayda, a city with a mostly Druze population, was invaded by troops in what became a deliberate campaign of sectarian violence against Druze and Christian communities.

Although officials described the events as clashes between rival groups, survivor accounts and video evidence show the attacks were planned, aiming to drive out and eliminate Druze civilians. General Security forces under the Syrian Ministry of Defense carried out repeated raids against Druze and Christian communities across densely populated areas in Swaida province. These operations involved violent forced entry, use of heavy weapons, as well as armored units deployed in residential neighborhoods. Eyewitnesses and geospatial data confirm the raids targeted zones with no armed resistance, active fighting, or military presence.

Verified evidence—including survivor accounts, photos, and field reports—shows a clear pattern of abuse by General Security forces and allied groups during operations in Swaida province. Civilians faced physical violence, psychological harm, and exploitation. Arrests, led mainly by General Security forces, were carried out without warrants, legal oversight, or due process. The victims were civilians, many targeted for their religion or community ties. General Security forces and allied groups deliberately targeted hospitals and medical centers across Swaida province.

These were not isolated attacks, but part of a wider strategy. There is evidence collected through eyewitnesses that these were intended to weaken civilian resilience and block access to care. Several medical facilities were surrounded, shelled, and stripped of equipment, leaving them unusable and putting patients and staff in grave danger. Medical professionals in the region report that at least 115 Druze women and girls were raped during the July 2025 campaign, with 79 now reportedly pregnant. These figures are based on clinical evidence, confidential survivor accounts, and injuries consistent with sexual assault. Druze civilians were deliberately targeted because of their religious identity. They faced verbal slurs, sectarian threats, and attacks on sacred sites. Perpetrators used dehumanizing language about their faith, revealing clear discriminatory intent.

According to an interview conducted with Father Tony al Butrus of Saint Philip's Catholic Church in Shahba and supported by a subsequent official letter, approximately 70 Christian homes were burned, looted, or otherwise destroyed during the coordinated assaults. In addition, six churches, including historic and active places of worship, were deliberately targeted and set ablaze. These attacks were not incidental; they reflect a pattern of religiously motivated violence and cultural erasure. The targeting of Christian civilians and places of worship alongside attacks on Druze communities suggests a broader campaign of sectarian cleansing.

Let me sum up the corroborating evidence collected and verified by the IDHRV-ARMIL clearly confirm converging patterns of intent and the incitement of violence before the actual massacres took place. Besides, the collected data seem to suggest that there is a clear collaboration of perpetrators that would seem unlikely without the large-scale coordination of actions and maneuvering of militias, troops, and security forces, considering that tanks, aircraft, and drones were used to terrorize and even kill defenseless and fleeing civilians.

The Present Situation

At this present time, similar patterns are recurring in the most recent assaults emerging in the Kurdish neighborhood of Aleppo, which is also home to a considerable number of Alawites and Christians. Aside from these instances, structural patterns of oppression and exploitation become

tangible based on the evidence collected by the documentation teams working for the IDHRV-ARMIL. These are the following:

Population Decline and Displacement

The Christian population in Syria has dropped dramatically from 1.5 million in 2011 to an estimated 300,000 in 2024 due to violence, persecution, and economic hardship. In Aleppo, Christians now comprise less than 2% of the region, down from 12% pre-conflict.

Legal and Social Challenges

Systemic discrimination continues in legal matters, such as restrictions on inheritance for Christians, and the prohibition of conversion from Islam to Christianity. Alawites, Christians, as well as Jews are subjected to property seizures.

Dispossession and Ethnic Cleansing

Land and homes have been seized under the guise of unpaid loans and religious taxation. Entire neighborhoods in and around Latakia have been ethnically cleansed, like the al-Qusour neighborhood in Baniyas where Christians were not targeted in this region. In Hama and Homs, Christian communities face displacement, open calls for conversion, and incitement to violence. The government's complicity in these atrocities is not speculative—it is documented.

Environmental and Cultural Destruction

Forests and farmland have been deliberately set ablaze, with no governmental support for extinguishing fires. This ecological sabotage parallels a cultural and religious revolution that seeks to erase indigenous tradition in Syria. What remains is a hollowed-out landscape—spiritually, socially, and, in many cases, physically.

Social Engineering and Sectarian Reordering

The reconfiguration of Idlib as Syria's economic and strategic center—due to its proximity to Turkey—has enabled a new form of social engineering. Property transfers, religious taxes, and jurisdictional exclusions have institutionalized sectarian hierarchy. Alawites are denied legal standing, presumed guilty by association with the former regime.

Gendered Violence and Silencing

The abduction of women, often under the pretext of security operations, reflects a gendered dimension of repression. Minorities are forced into silence and submission; testimonies are nearly impossible, as it is very difficult to convince such traumatized victims to testify. Evidence is destroyed. The threat of death looms over every attempt to speak.

No Due Process, No Public Security

The absence of juridical safeguards has enabled tens of thousands of soldiers and armed factions to operate with impunity. Emirs and local warlords wield unchecked power, while loyal Sunni militias retain weapons and enforce extreme interpretations of Sharia law. Alawites and Christians have been disarmed, rendering them defenseless amid escalating violence.

Recurrent Patterns of Impunity and Deflection as Guiding Principle of Governance

These incidents underscore the broader climate of impunity and fear in which religious minorities are forced to navigate daily life. The pattern of violence unfolding in Syria reveals a systematic campaign targeting religious and ethnic minorities. These attacks—whether against Alawite, Christian, Druze, and most recently Kurdish communities—should not be treated as isolated incidents. They are incited and enabled by actors closely aligned with the prevailing government ideology, and—in certain cases—directly facilitated by state forces.

Government units have repeatedly played a dual role: not only enabling atrocities, but also actively obstructing accountability. Evidence is routinely destroyed, eyewitnesses are silenced through intimidation, and entire neighborhoods are threatened with annihilation should they deviate from the state-imposed narrative. Power in many regions now rests with local emirs—figures who exercise unchecked authority over life and death. These authorities function without oversight, and their actions are shielded by a security apparatus that is itself implicated in the abuses.

The term “general security,” as used by the regime, bears no resemblance to the protections understood in international law or democratic governance. Instead, it serves as a mechanism of repression, particularly against religious minorities. At the heart of this deterioration lies the collapse of the rule of law.

Professionally trained lawyers and judges have been dismissed, imprisoned, or forced into exile. In their place, authority is concentrated in the hands of actors who enforce a radicalized interpretation of Sharia law, with no judicial oversight and no recourse for victims. This legal vacuum has enabled impunity and emboldened perpetrators. It has dismantled the very structures that might have protected vulnerable populations or held aggressors accountable.

Framing the Image of the New Syria: al-Sharaa's Denigrating Comments on the Massacres against Religious Minorities

To better understand how unity and disunity in Syria are produced and materialize not only by acts but also by words, it is important to recognize the rhetoric used to frame the new image of Syria.

On March 8, following massacres in Latakya, Jableh, and Baniyas, al-Sharaa expressed hope for peaceful coexistence—an appeal celebrated by his followers and fighters. Yet his message was likely aimed at rival factions within his own ranks, not at reconciliation with Alawites, whom he had recently—and repeatedly—described as cancer or disease to be excised for the nation's recovery.

During the June 22 massacre at Mar Elias Church in Damascus, Christians killed for refusing to convert to Islam were portrayed as victims—but not martyrs. In al-Sharaa's vision of Islam, martyrdom is reserved for those who die for the true faith. This, of course, excludes Christians. There was no need to mourn Christians as martyrs if Islam does not conceptualize this, but a gesture would have been welcome and was much needed for the deeply disturbed Greek Orthodox community. The promised National Day of Mourning never took place, likely by design: al-Sharaa offered no public condolences, nor did he visit the victims and their families or the site of the attack as many statesmen might do as a symbolic gesture of healing, care, and compassion.

After the attacks in Swaida province, al-Sharaa declared that those who disobeyed orders would be held accountable. Yet he never clarified what those orders were—nor what consequences would follow. The real intent of the operations became evident through unintended revelations. Meanwhile, militant factions were absorbed into the military, as eyewitnesses confirmed. The only change was their uniforms and tighter coordination; their actions mirrored the same atrocities previously committed in the coastal regions.

To grasp the reality that I have tried to most truthfully depict, take al-Sharaa at his word, then imagine its most cynical and exact opposite. All evidence presented here today shows that deception is at the heart of how the new image of Syria is framed and projected to the outside world. The system of governance that strategically deflects responsibility by stating that the past cannot be measured by the present and the present cannot be measured by the past is placing the guiding principle of al-Qaida on the political world stage.

Hence, survivors and victims of these atrocities call on the international community to look beyond empty rhetoric and examine the facts with scrutiny and care. Truth and justice only begin to surface when misleading narratives are called out as what they are.

Conclusion or a means to move forward

If we are serious about envisioning a Syria for all—not a Syria defined by or confined to the ideological frameworks of figures like al-Jolani—we must rigorously interrogate the categories through which we assess the present. The existing frameworks and analytical lenses risk reproducing exclusionary narratives. A more inclusive and accurate understanding demands that we rethink the assumptions embedded in our discourse.

IDHRV-ARMIL stands unequivocally with the victims—those Alawite, Christian, and Druze men, women, and children whose lives have been shattered and threatened by massacres, abductions, and systemic erasure. Thus, we call on the European Parliament to act now, determined and decisively by amplifying survivor voices, using all diplomatic means and legal measures at their disposal by insisting on inclusive constitutional processes of transitional justice as defined in international law.

The question of humanity and dignity must not be deferred to future reconciliation. It must be answered now—with accountability, protection, and international solidarity. Syria's key lesson from the Assad era is clear: without true constitutional equality for all citizens—minorities and majorities alike—it cannot preserve its borders or control its resources.

A stable, inclusive Syria depends on safeguarding minorities and ensuring their peaceful coexistence. This is just as crucial for Kurds and Sunni Muslims, even if they currently feel secure. Any imbalance of power may seem advantageous now, but it risks empowering external forces with aggressive regional agendas.

Even if equal representation in a Syrian constituent assembly remains a distant ideal, it is an urgent necessity for any durable order grounded in democratic rule of law and human rights. Syria's history—where a Sunni minority once dominated the majority—shows that majority rule alone cannot deliver peace or stability. To foster balanced internal equilibrium, the EU must treat the return of displaced Syrians as a strategic security investment and mobilize funds accordingly.

Is a unified Syria possible? Maybe, and we strongly hope so. But for now, this might sound far-fetched and rather illusory for the victims and survivors with whom I have spoken. For them, unity under the current regime means continued repression, extortion, and erasure. If they had the means, they would leave. It would be Syria without them. What remains is exhaustion, trauma, and a system in which they can no longer believe. This is not a Syria for all. It is a Syria for the armed, the aligned, and the ascendant.

What European Institutions Could Contribute:

To prevent further massacres and the deterioration of legal means of persecution, and to prevent a new wave of migration from Syria, it is crucial that European institutions:

- Demand **independent, unconditional, and comprehensive investigations** into all massacres and dispossessions, past and present.
- Support **survivor-led documentation** and **legal persecution** according to the consequential logic of international law.
- Condition diplomatic recognition on the **restoration of human rights for all Syrian communities** and the rule of law.

Justice delayed is justice denied. And silence, in the face of such suffering, is unequivocal complicity. Only if the voices of the victims are heard will justice be found. You decide where silence ends and justice begins.

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