



Lemkin Institute
*for Genocide Prevention
and Human Security*

Red Flag Alert for Syria: Genocidal Sectarian Violence against Alawites

Released 11 March 2025

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention is issuing an urgent Red Flag Alert for Syria due to the critical risk of genocide against Syrians from the Alawite sect, particularly in Syria's Coastal region.

At the moment, numerous videos and reports have emerged of dozens of unarmed civilians, including women, children, elderly persons, and infants, being executed by fighters representing the newly-installed General Security of the Syrian Transitional Government as well as armed groups affiliated with the formally disbanded militant group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Syrian National Army (SNA). Perhaps most horrifying is the image of what appears to be fighters dumping bodies into a mass grave near the city of Baniyas.

In addition to the documented killings, another group of disturbing videos has emerged. In these videos, men are tortured and humiliated in public and forced to bark before being executed. A third group of images and videos shows dead bodies strewn about the streets of neighborhoods and towns with significant Alawite populations, including Baniyas, Al-Mukhtariya, Al-Tuwaym, Al-Haffah, Al-Datour (Latakia) and Jableh. One witness in Latakia described the scenes of "bodies in the street," and how armed groups killed 150 in one neighborhood alone. On top of this, HTS-affiliated channels on social media (Telegram, for instance) are mocking the dead by posting heads of Alawite community members for sale (the footage is no longer available due to violation of Telegram's Terms of Service). In another video, Syrian forces celebrate the killing of at least 20 people, which appear to mostly be men and in various states of undress, with the majority of bodies lined up face down within a room off a street.

Notably, the militants in much of the footage use derogatory sectarian language against Alawites, such as "ya khanazir ya nusayri" (which means 'Oh Alawite pig' - with *nusayri* being a derogatory term for 'Alawite') suggesting the attackers are targeting members of this

ethnoreligious group. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also confirms the sectarian nature of the violence taking place.

Along with indiscriminate executions and torture of civilians, there are reports of property damage (burning of houses, cars, etc.) and looting. Areas of the coast were heavily bombarded from the ground and the air by the Military Operations Administration, triggering fear and panic among civilians. Chechen forces under HTS have also posted on social media a statement saying, “We are Cleaning Further.”

So far, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) has identified the names of 1093 civilians killed since March 6. The deaths include multiple members of the same family. Both the SOHR and local witnesses have estimated that the number may have reached into the thousands based on available information as of March 8th. SOHR notes that it is “discovering a new massacre every hour”.

Due to the lack of access to remote areas, we strongly believe that these death tolls are undercounts. Thousands of people have been internally displaced, with many purportedly seeking refuge at the Russian Hmeimim air base near Jableh. According to the SOHR, local authorities are depriving civilians in these regions of necessities including food, electricity, and water, despite the Syrian government announcing an end to the “security operation.”

The current escalation began on Thursday, March 6. At that time, the new government initiated a violent crackdown on the region after it experienced deadly clashes between local armed insurgents, referred to as remnants of Assad's former regime (“fulul al-nizam”), and members of the General Security, which provoked the retaliatory massacres of the Alawite residents in the Coastal region.

It is important to note, however, that in the months after the fall of Assad’s government, the new transitional government launched multiple “security campaigns” across the country, which disproportionately targeted people of the Alawite sect under the pretext of going after “criminals” of the former regime. Numerous cases of arbitrary arrests, kidnapping, torture, and murder against men, women, elderly, and children have been documented by SOHR, and more cases were reported by community members on the ground. The newly formed government and much of the general public chose to engage in denialism, dismissing the cases as “isolated incidents” despite a clear and systemic pattern of violations towards the Alawite community.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising and subsequent civil war, Alawites have often been scapegoated as supporters of the former ruling regime and party, despite the fact that the former regime in Syria was bolstered and backed by various power structures and networks regardless of sect (including those from the majority Sunni sect). Because of this false association, Alawites

have often been disproportionately targeted throughout the war by members of the armed opposition as well as armed extremist groups like Jabhat Al-Nusra (Al-Nusra Front), Ahrar Al-Sham, and ISIS.

For example, following the Assad government's bloody siege of majority Sunni neighborhoods in the city of Homs during late 2011 and early 2012, armed groups often responded by attacking Alawite civilians and public employees. Alawites were also targeted in August 2013 in the Northern Latakia countryside where Al-Nusra Front (HTS's predecessor organization) massacred more than 190 Alawite civilians and forcibly disappeared hundreds more, leading to the emptying of 11 villages of their residents. Other massacres include the attack on the village of Eshtabraq in April 2015 in Idlib governorate, which killed over 200 civilians, as well as the Adra massacre in December 2013, among others.

Given that the interim president of Syria, Ahmad al-Sharaa (formerly known as Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani), was the former leader of Al-Nusra Front, the current spiral of violence in Syria against the Alawites by militants and members of General Security drawn from HTS reflects a history of deliberate targeting and persecution of people based solely on their ethnoreligious identity.

According to local sources, a mobilization is taking place in various cities of Syria – often through mosques, where extremist imams (many installed by the new government) fuel hatred against Alawites – calling for “revenge” and justifying atrocities. Use of religious institutions for demonization of a group is a common tactic used by perpetrators of genocide.

The ongoing violence showcases the absence of transitional justice mechanisms in Syria. A governmental transition should never be used as cover and justification for so-called “revenge attacks” or extremist violence. Lack of action to prevent atrocities, the fueling of hateful speech, and lack of control over militants and members of the General Security not only illustrate weak state security, but also the complicity of the current government in the massacres of Alawite Syrians.

The Lemkin Institute firmly condemns the massacres launched by the new governmental forces and other militant factions. Neither the argument for “security” nor the targeting of “regime remnants” can be used as justification for mass slaughter of an entire community. The new Syrian government is guilty of fueling hatred against Alawites and deliberately ignoring civilian calls to end the ongoing massacres. Just because the former president of Syria, Bashar Al-Assad, and a certain number of his supporters happened to be Alawites does not imply a collective guilt on the part of the Alawite community for the crimes of the previous dictatorship. Assad's ethnoreligious identity does not green-light the genocide of the entire group.

The Lemkin Institute calls upon all international powers to take measures to immediately ensure the safety and protection of the Alawite community and other ethnic and religious minorities in Syria from genocidal intentions of the militant groups and General Security members. If necessary, the United Nations Security Council should authorize a UN Charter Chapter VII peacekeeping intervention to protect ethnic, national, and religious minorities. This is in the interest of the Syrian people, the Levant region, the present government of Syria, and the international community.

We further call on international bodies to swiftly coordinate and carry out an impartial fact-finding investigation on the ground to ensure that perpetrators of high crimes are held accountable for the mass killings.

The Lemkin Institute also appeals to the government of Syria to immediately cease the massacre of civilians and hold perpetrators accountable. We urge the new government to take all necessary actions to provide the Alawite community with physical safety and mental health support in overcoming this traumatic experience. It is imperative for the new Syrian government to take a firm decision to put an end to its extremist past and not allow fundamental extremist ideology to become central in its state affairs for the sake of safety and security of all residents of Syria.

We urge the people of Syria to stand united in solidarity, extend support to their compatriots, and demand justice. There is no opportunity for Syria to become a democratic state for all Syrians if the country continues to operate through toxic sectarian lenses that promote the supremacy of a ruling identity at the expense and oppression of other identities.

Finally, the Lemkin Institute urges global religious institutions to condemn the sectarian massacres and reject violent extremism. In this holy time of the year for all the Abrahamic religions, statements of solidarity are especially important for peace and reconciliation. Given that religious authorities have historically been influential in shifting public discourse within their respective communities, it is all the more important to condemn such crimes against humanity.

The Lemkin Institute will continue closely monitoring the situation in Syria and issuing updates accordingly.