



# Restoring Security in Post-Assad Syria: Lessons from the Coast and Suweida

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PREVENTING WAR. SHAPING PEACE.

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** Close to a year after Bashar al-Assad's fall, Syria's new leadership has made remarkable progress in rehabilitating its global image, but it faces governance and security challenges at home. These require the same focused attention that it has paid to external relations.

**What happened?** In 2025, two major security interventions went awry, spiralling into atrocities. The first took place in coastal and central regions of Syria that are home to many Alawites. The second, in the southern province of Suweida, even drew in Israel.

**Why does it matter?** The bloodshed has deepened rifts in Syrian society and fed perceptions, particularly within communities on the receiving end of violence, that the new authorities do not protect all Syrians equally. These trends threaten to spawn more conflict and derail the transition to a stable post-conflict order.

**What should be done?** Damascus should integrate armed groups into the military, impose discipline upon them, hold abusers accountable and involve local communities in security arrangements. While express conditionality is unlikely to work, donors should press for concrete improvements in these areas.

## *Executive Summary*

The warm reception for President Ahmed al-Sharaa at the UN General Assembly in September, and at the White House on 10 November, demonstrates the new Syrian government's remarkable success in burnishing its global image – but it has much else to do. Almost a year after Bashar al-Assad's fall, security breakdowns have marred Syria's transition. In March, government efforts to subdue insurgents loyal to the ousted regime descended into sectarian slaughter. Hundreds of civilians were killed, mainly from the Alawite religious minority to which the Assad family belongs and that was heavily represented in its regime. Then, in mid-July, the government's attempt to quell violence between Druze and Bedouin in the southern Suweida province escalated into a confrontation that drew in Israel. Further flare-ups like these could throw the transition off track. The new rulers need to turn their attention to internal security challenges to regain the trust of those parts of Syrian society that feel alienated from the new order.

Since the former jihadist group Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham marched on Damascus in late 2024 and took the reins of power, a sense has grown among Alawites and others that Syria's new dispensation has no place for them. In late January, the new rulers summarily dismissed the old regime's security apparatus, in which Alawites were disproportionately represented. This measure created a huge pool of unemployed men with military training and few prospects, in a country that remains awash in small arms. The insurgency that emerged in March should not have been a surprise.

The March clashes came after three months of simmering violence in central and coastal Syria. Most of the victims were Alawites, whom many Syrians hold collectively responsible for the fallen regime's abusive rule. Retribution often seems to have been behind the attacks, while the language and behaviour of perpetrators frequently suggested sectarian motives. For many among the country's minorities, the experience confirmed a feeling that Syria's new rulers are incapable or perhaps even uninterested in protecting them, with Alawites particularly inclined to see an existential threat to their community.

Then, in July, the government's attempt to end clashes between Bedouin and Druze in Suweida led the latter to see Damascus as siding with their enemies. Reports of sectarian abuse by government forces fanned the flames of reprisal. The death toll rose well above 1,000, with hundreds of civilians among the victims, and some 200,000 people were displaced. Israel, which had begun making military incursions into Syrian territory and conducting airstrikes on strategic locations in December 2024, stepped in. Ostensibly to protect the Druze,

it attacked government armour near Suweida and defence institutions in Damascus, creating a stalemate between the sides that prevails to this day.

While the triggers of these rounds of violence have varied, flaws in the government's security approach have been a consistent theme. Once the authorities entered the fray, they used overwhelming force, but the troops they sent were often undisciplined. Attempts to rein in transgressions, such as there were, proved insufficient. Combined, these shortcomings contributed significantly to the escalation of manageable unrest into serious bloodshed.

Bigger challenges may still be to come. For some time after it wrested power from the Assad regime, the new leadership enjoyed the benefit of the doubt from a war-weary population hoping for better days. But after nearly a year, minorities, as well as a growing number of secular and liberal Syrians, feel increasingly excluded. The damage seems cumulative: with each new round of fighting and sectarian atrocities, the number of Syrians who see Damascus as a threat rather than a protector will only grow. These dynamics could also strain the already precarious relations with the Kurdish-dominated Autonomous Administration in the north east and its military arm, the Syrian Democratic Forces, which controls an area comprising some 25 per cent of Syrian territory and has tens of thousands of fighters. The example of Suweida seems to have convinced many in the north east that Damascus cannot be trusted. Many now feel they must keep forces under arms for their own security and a stake in the transition.

The Syrian government needs to urgently address the flaws in its security approach, first and foremost by establishing firm command of all the armed groups that it has integrated into the army, as well as improving their professionalism. It should also avoid sending units with poor discipline to sensitive areas. To its credit, Damascus has begun taking steps in this direction, including tightening recruitment procedures for the army and General Security (the internal security force), as well as redeploying unruly troops away from places where they could do the most additional harm.

Still, more needs to be done. The government should improve its capacity to stop violence at an early stage and with measures that reduce, not increase, the potential for escalation. Specific training, emphasising community engagement, for vetted members of General Security should be a priority. Active involvement of local communities in security provision under the supervision of central authorities will allow for meeting challenges more swiftly than relying almost entirely on non-locals, while helping build trust among the affected populations. To stabilise Suweida, Damascus should focus on service provision and economic integration, working with respected local intermediaries to

gradually restore trust, creating the necessary conditions for political dialogue down the road.

Most importantly, the government needs to signal credibly that it will protect all Syrians, regardless of communal and political affiliation, through concrete, observable steps. All segments of Syrian society – minorities, but also those from among the Sunni Arab majority who disagree with the new leadership’s political and social orientation – need to see evidence that they can help shape the country’s future. Security and inclusion are not a luxury in today’s Syria. Rather, they will be a key condition for building social consensus around a new political order that can handle the challenges lying directly ahead – and further into the future.

**Damascus/Brussels, 26 November 2025**

# Restoring Security in Post-Assad Syria: Lessons from the Coast and Suweida

## I. Introduction

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Syria has whipsawed between hope and frustration since 8 December 2024, when rebels led by Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) swept into the capital Damascus, taking over from President Bashar al-Assad and his entourage, who had left the country, and ending thirteen years of devastating civil war. Many Syrians experienced sheer jubilation at the hated Assad regime's demise, coupled with anticipation that their long-suffering country might enter a new era of peace, prosperity and more participatory governance.

Others, however, remained anxious about what sort of rule the new authorities would establish in Assad's place – to wit, whether they would try to accommodate Syrians outside their Sunni Islamist base and whether they could take the edge off the intercommunal animosities sharpened by the regime's wartime atrocities. A particularly strong sense of vulnerability and victimisation developed among the Alawites, the religious community to which the Assad family belongs. Kurds and Druze, who in the course of the civil war managed to wrest parts of the areas where they have historically settled from central control, were also wary of the new leadership attempting to assert itself throughout Syrian territory.

Syria's new rulers have scored remarkable successes since their triumph in December 2024, in particular building a great deal of external legitimacy. Within months of taking the reins in Damascus, they not only secured funding pledges from Gulf donors, but also obtained sanctions relief from the U.S., the European Union and the UK, along with removal of HTS from the U.S. list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations and the British list of proscribed terrorist organisations.<sup>1</sup> (The failure of the U.S. Congress to repeal the "Caesar sanctions" – so named after a photographer who recorded horrific images of Assad regime atrocities – stands out as a regrettable exception.) In notable signs of diplomatic pragmatism, they worked to maintain

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<sup>1</sup> Nanar Hawach, "Syria's Home Front Missteps Threaten Its Foreign Policy Gains", Middle East Institute Singapore, 27 September 2025; "Revoking the Foreign Terrorist Organization Designation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham", U.S. Department of State, 7 July 2025; "UK removes Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham from terrorist organisation list", UK Government, 21 October 2025.

relationships with Russia and Iran, while also engaging in security talks with Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Domestically, however, the record is more mixed. While the new authorities have refrained from imposing an Islamist agenda, as some feared, many Syrians feel that they are falling short of creating an inclusive political order. The transition, at least so far, has seen a steady centralisation of power within former HTS ranks, with other political and social components having limited representation.<sup>3</sup> Key decision-making bodies and security portfolios remain in the hands of a narrow circle, raising concerns among some that the political process that is ostensibly driving the transition is largely performative, intended more to tick boxes than to enable genuine participation.

One area where the interim authorities have faced particularly steep challenges is in asserting the state's monopoly on the use of force. While the former rebel groups that participated in the offensive that overthrew the Assad regime have been formally integrated into the state's security institutions, many of them retain most of their original structures and at times act on their own accord. Former rebel factions now make up the bulk of the army. Meanwhile, General Security – the body in charge of internal security throughout the country – draws heavily for its personnel from the former HTS forces in Idlib, the north-western province the erstwhile rebels held for many of the civil war years, though it also has large numbers of new recruits. Beyond the formal security apparatus, there are several armed actors that are outside and potentially hostile to central command, including former Assad regime elements, Druze factions in the south and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that control the north east.

Against this backdrop, this report focuses on two major outbreaks of violence that shook Syria over the course of the past year – one along the coast and in the centre in March, and another in Suweida province to the south of Damascus in July. In analysing the drivers of these two crises, the report warns that failure to make course corrections could lead to fresh crises of even greater magnitude, undermining efforts to build a stable new political order. It also offers recommendations for steps the interim authorities might take to avoid such escalations in the future and help external actors might offer toward this end. The report does not look at developments in the north east, which forthcoming Crisis Group publications will examine in detail.

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<sup>2</sup> “Iran confirms receiving ‘messages’ from new Syrian government”, Al Arabiya, 15 February 2025; “Syria’s Sharaa tells Putin he will respect past deals with Moscow”, Reuters, 15 October 2025; “Exclusive: Syria and Israel in direct talks focused on security, sources say”, Reuters, 27 May 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Jerome Drevon and Nanar Hawach, “What Lies in Store for Syria as a New Government Takes Power?”, Crisis Group Commentary, 25 April 2025.

The report is based on some 135 interviews with people with firsthand knowledge of events in the coastal areas and the south, such as former regime military and security officers, interim government officials, factional commanders, fighters with Druze militias and irregular groups, community leaders, civil society figures, lawyers, medical staff, activists and ordinary residents. The interviewees included 30 women, reflecting the gender imbalance in positions of political and social leadership. International officials and Syrian experts comprised some 40 additional interlocutors. Most of the interviews related to the March events took place between February and May 2025; interviews related to the fighting in the south were conducted in April and July-August, with follow-up interviews in the autumn.

## II. The Ingredients of Instability

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The drivers of violence in March and July were related to both what is happening in the Syrian state and what is happening in Syrian society after over a decade of internationalised civil war, whose security, political and humanitarian implications continue to shape conditions today. The interim government has often struggled to ensure public safety outside Damascus, with overstretched forces whose discipline appears uneven, including in Syria's central and coastal areas, where the civil war's legacy continues to weigh heavily.

At the same time, intercommunal tensions have festered. While many Syrians continue to feel a palpable sense of relief that Assad is gone, his rule left more than enough lingering bitterness to go around. Some who belong to communities that were on the receiving end of regime atrocities harbour a desire for retribution, particularly against Alawites, whom many hold collectively responsible for Assad's crimes, given their over-representation in the former regime's repressive apparatus. Alawites, in turn, feel unprotected by the new rulers and fear unjust collective punishment. These grievances play into the hands of insurgents in the core Alawite areas on the coast and in nearby mountains.

It is thus hardly surprising that just days after Assad's fall, attacks on Alawites and other minorities commenced, particularly in the central regions of Homs and Hama, often motivated by desire for revenge for the former regime's misdeeds. In parallel, remnants of the former regime forces fired sporadically on the new state's troops, hitting checkpoints or ambushing patrols that were pursuing former regime officials. By February, these operations were showing an increasing degree of coordination. Nor is what has transpired purely a story of tensions between the Sunni Arab majority and the Alawite, and later Druze, minorities: while polling in April showed broad nationwide support for the new leadership, many Syrians – particularly among minority and secular constituencies – report feeling unsafe, under-represented and sceptical of the new authorities.<sup>4</sup> Many are also nervous about the new leadership's ideological background, fearing a drift toward an authoritarian order underpinned by Islamist tenets, which will leave no room for diversity, be it religious, ethnic or political.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Syrians are still surprisingly upbeat", *The Economist*, 2 April 2025. A June poll suggested that views on the transition are significantly more positive among Sunni Arabs than among minorities. "Public Opinion on Syria's Transition", ETANA, 17 June 2025.

<sup>5</sup> "Joint Position Paper on the Progress of the Transitional Process in Syria: A Letter to the Damascus Dialogue Day Conference", Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, 14 November 2025. While no census has been conducted since the war began in 2011, Syria experts estimate that Alawites make up 15-20 per cent of Syria's population and Druze up to 3 per cent. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, August

### A. *Lack of Security*

After Assad's fall, HTS quickly established security in the capital, but it was unable to fully do so everywhere.<sup>6</sup> Even before the interim government formally dismantled the Assad regime's security apparatus in late January, it sent most of the personnel home, to the extent they had not already spontaneously left their posts as the old regime collapsed.<sup>7</sup> Districts like the coastal region, and the centrally located Hama and Homs governorates (including Homs city), areas with highly diverse populations, which include minorities such as Alawites, Christians and Ismailis, posed a distinct challenge: the civil war was particularly ferocious in these areas, leaving many people desiring retribution.

Damascus simply could not secure the whole country, as its forces, though it sought to augment them, were too small.<sup>8</sup> Their numbers expanded rapidly thanks to a national recruitment drive, with a foreign ministry official claiming in late February that General Security had doubled its personnel since December, but building a sufficiently big and coherent force was clearly going to take time.<sup>9</sup> Limited staffing remained a nationwide problem, with regions such as Aleppo, Hama and Deir al-Zor also seeing violence.<sup>10</sup>

At the time it faced the coastal uprising in March, the government had three layers of forces at its disposal. The former HTS elements now formally integrated into the army (led by former HTS commanders) and into General Security (comprising the units that HTS had relied on for policing and intelligence functions in Idlib) constituted the first

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2025. Sunni Arabs were estimated to comprise around 65 per cent of the population in 2010. "Country Guidance: Syria – 4.10.1. Sunni Arabs", European Union Agency for Asylum, April 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Even in Damascus, HTS kept only a limited armed presence, relying primarily on local committees to patrol neighbourhoods. Crisis Group observations, Damascus, February 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former regime army officers, Tartous, Homs, Hama and Latakia, February 2025.

<sup>8</sup> The government mostly deployed General Security personnel to their home areas, expecting that they would have good contacts there, but it lacked troops from Alawite areas. Crisis Group interview, government-affiliated figure, Latakia, 21 February 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 24 February 2025. Immediately before the clashes, a General Security officer put the number of new recruits at 8,000. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 2 March 2025. The force reportedly numbered some 17,000 by February. "To enhance security... One thousand police officers graduate in Damascus", Syria TV, 5 February 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Syria security expert, 13 May 2025. See also "222 Civilian Deaths, Including 17 Children and Women, as well as Nine Deaths due to Torture, Recorded in February 2025 in Syria", Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), 1 March 2025; and "Syria: Country Focus – 5.8. Security Situation and Conflict Impact on Civilians by Governorate", European Union Agency for Asylum, 2025.

layer, which was closest to the political leadership.<sup>11</sup> The second layer comprised Sunni Islamist factions such as Ahrar al-Sham, Faylaq al-Sham and Jaysh al-Izza, which HTS had subdued during its rule over Idlib.<sup>12</sup> The third layer included the constitutive groups of the Syrian National Army (SNA), another collection of erstwhile rebels who had largely been backed by the Turkish army during the civil war. While formally answering to the defence ministry in Damascus, some of these groups were still on the Turkish payroll months into 2025, and preserved much of their original structure, limiting the ministry's sway over them.<sup>13</sup>

Most violent incidents before March appeared to involve either criminals or elements of the third tier of the HTS-led apparatus, ie, the former SNA factions, and not General Security.<sup>14</sup> Yet those at the receiving end could not always tell the difference.<sup>15</sup> Assailants would often claim affiliation with General Security and HTS to deter bystanders from intervening. When General Security began wearing uniforms replete with identification numbers, the impostors promptly donned genuine-looking fakes. Good-faith efforts by the official force to build trust, such as there were, thus often fell flat.<sup>16</sup>

Nor did government troops' comportment always inspire confidence. In some cases, General Security reportedly used ham-fisted tactics that alienated the population. Homs residents say General Security squads looking for suspected former regime enforcers often drove unmarked cars with tinted windows, making it difficult if not impossible to distinguish between formal arrests and kidnappings. A local mediator in Homs said his first step after a reported arrest was invariably to verify that it was indeed the authorities who had apprehended the person.<sup>17</sup> On more than one occasion, government forces sent after fugitive regime elements entered villages and neighbourhoods in large

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<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, Homs and Latakia, February 2025. Crisis Group telephone interviews, former and current HTS fighters; General Security officers; security expert, March-April 2025.

<sup>12</sup> These groups formed the bulk of the "administration of the military operation" that started the offensive against the Assad regime in November 2024. Most of their commanders were quickly promoted into leadership positions in the new army after the old regime fell.

<sup>13</sup> Since June, Türkiye has gradually transferred payment of these salaries to the Syrian defence ministry, though limited exceptions reportedly persist. Crisis Group interviews, members of former SNA factions integrated into the army, June 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, Homs, Hama and Masyaf, February 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, residents of Baniyas, Jableh and Latakia, March 2025. Crisis Group interviews, Baniyas and Latakia, May 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, victims of looting and General Security officer, Homs, 11 February 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interview, residents and local mediator, Homs, 11 February 2025.

convoys, shooting in the air and instilling fear among minorities already wary of the new rulers.<sup>18</sup>

The picture was not entirely negative, though. As tensions continued to mount between December and February, the new authorities took mitigation measures. A General Security officer in Homs said his unit received instructions on 2 January to fire only if fired upon and otherwise show restraint (a seemingly basic step that nevertheless contrasted favourably with the shoot-in-the-air tactics previously reported).<sup>19</sup> Discipline was particularly important during searches for former regime figures in Alawite-majority neighbourhoods. In Latakia and Tartous, officials said that outreach to the Alawite community was a priority, while acknowledging the importance of defusing disputes between Alawite and Sunni residents. A Sunni sheikh in Latakia said the authorities had helped resolve such disagreements.<sup>20</sup> In parts of rural Hama, local authorities reported taking similar measures. An Alawite villager said General Security had set up checkpoints to prevent attacks by Sunni neighbours.<sup>21</sup>

In some cases, residents of coastal and central Syria began to reciprocate with shows of support for the authorities. On 24 January, for instance, word circulated that Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher would return to Syria with 5,000 fighters to launch an insurgency. Residents massed at a checkpoint in western Hama to reassure the HTS guards that they were on the new rulers' side. They stayed overnight, until the rumour was debunked.<sup>22</sup> But improved relations in some places did not suffice to stem the steady deterioration of security in most of these areas, creating a sense of existential threat that rose highest among Alawites living in the central plain around Homs and Hama.<sup>23</sup> Women were particularly fearful, as they faced increasing gender-based har-

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<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, Homs and Qardaha, February 2025. See also "Syria's new security forces conduct sweeps in Homs, looking for ousted Assad's loyalists", Associated Press, 2 January 2025.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interviews, General Security officer, Homs, 11 February 2025; and General Security officers, Homs, 4 May 2025. The officers emphasised that they always obey President Ahmed al-Sharaa's orders, even if it means having to protect those they perceive as antagonists, like many Alawites.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sunni sheikh and government officials, Latakia and Tartous, February 2025.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, Masyaf, 18 February 2025. The interlocutors reported feeling safe in areas patrolled by General Security, but not travelling between checkpoints, when they continued to fear attack by criminal gangs.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of western Hama and Masyaf, 18 February 2025. See also "How a Syrian YouTuber fooled supporters of the ousted regime", *Verify-Sy*, 25 January 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents of Homs city and Hama's western countryside, February-March 2025.

assessment and danger, restricting their mobility, especially in Homs and along the coast.<sup>24</sup>

### B. *The Legacy of Civil War*

Minorities, particularly Alawites, have borne the brunt of insecurity in post-Assad Syria. Retribution is the main driver: many Syrians blame Alawites as a group for the atrocities committed under the Assad dynasty's rule over five decades.<sup>25</sup> As part of its survival strategy, the old regime kept society fragmented by cultivating vertical ties with various constituencies through patronage while systematically suppressing the emergence of an independent civil society or other connections that spanned sectarian and ethnic cleavages. Alawite men often got favoured treatment in the form of appointments in the security services and military hierarchy.<sup>26</sup> The Assad regime exploited these rifts during the civil war, as a means of rallying loyalists against those who backed the rebellion or were perceived as doing so.

Some elite military units like the Republican Guard and the 4th Division were almost entirely Alawite. Elements of these forces committed atrocities against civilians, most of whom were Sunni, as they sought to crush the uprising against Assad's rule that began in 2011, reinforcing Alawites' association with the regime in popular perceptions.<sup>27</sup> In mixed areas such as Homs, the regime's intelligence agencies fostered the militarisation of Alawite neighbourhoods by creating "popular committees", which it set against Sunni residents. Thus, Sunnis increasingly saw Alawites as regime supporters, which in turn impressed on Alawites that if the regime were to fall, they would likely be targeted in reprisal.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kidnapping for ransom has generally been on the rise since the old regime fell. Sources say Alawite women are over-represented among the victims because criminals perceive them not just as easy prey but also as "fair game". Crisis Group telephone interviews, head of women's rights organisation and activist, May 2025. Absent an effective government response, families are forced to plead for the return of their daughters on social media, which can subject the women to additional stigmatisation. Crisis Group telephone interview, family member of woman kidnapping victim, 16 May 2025.

<sup>25</sup> Kamal Shahin, "The existential challenge for Syria's Alawites", *New Lines Magazine*, 12 May 2025.

<sup>26</sup> Alawites themselves also faced repression from regime-affiliated thugs, the *shabiha*, who were led mainly by Assad family members, for running afoul of powerful figures or failing to display sufficient loyalty. Crisis Group interviews, residents, Latakia, February 2025. See also "He killed a brigadier general in the regime forces and was imprisoned for only five years ... Suleiman al-Assad is out of prison", *Enab Baladi*, 30 November 2020 [Arabic].

<sup>27</sup> Reinoud Leenders, "How the Syrian Regime Outsmarted Its Enemies", *Current History*, vol. 112 (December 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Aziz Nakkash, "The Alawite Dilemma in Homs: Survival, Solidarity and the Making of a Community", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, March 2013.

The Assad regime also actively prevented the emergence of Alawite representative structures separate from the state like those that serve other religious groups in Syria, such as Sunnis, Christians, Ismailis and Druze.<sup>29</sup> As a result, when the regime collapsed, the Alawites had no obvious leadership with which the new rulers could enter dialogue and that could authoritatively disavow the fallen regime in the community's name.<sup>30</sup>

This lack of communal representation became a significant problem following Assad's overthrow. Some Syrians, hearing no pronouncement from Alawite leaders after the regime's demise, took it as a sign of enduring complicity with Assad. In February, non-Alawite activists in Homs expressed anger at what they perceived as the Alawite community's silence. One commented, "Until today, no one, no local official, no civil society representative has come forward to say, 'We apologise'".<sup>31</sup>

Such perceptions fed sectarian resentment that in turn fuelled insecurity. Many of the killings and kidnappings after December 2024 took place in Homs and its western countryside, areas where Alawite and Sunni neighbourhoods and villages sit cheek by jowl. Attackers often tried to identify residents as Alawites with clues such as names and birthplaces. In mid-December, a firefighter accompanying an army patrol said he had collected around 30 bodies in the streets of Homs in just one day, all of people who were killed in such attacks.<sup>32</sup> Over fifteen days the following February, nineteen Alawites were kidnapped, many of whom were later found dead.<sup>33</sup>

Some evidence suggests that the absence of transparent accountability for former regime officials has contributed to an atmosphere where Alawites are at risk.<sup>34</sup> Fady Sakr, former head of the National Defence Forces, a pro-regime militia that allegedly perpetrated numerous atrocities, has resurfaced in an official capacity linked to "civil peace" initiatives.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, and despite abundant references by the leadership to the old regime's crimes, victims have received no com-

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<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Alawite sheikhs, Homs and Masyaf, February 2025.

<sup>30</sup> Alawite councils were eventually created on 4 February and began gaining momentum following the March violence. Crisis Group interviews, heads of Alawite councils, Homs and Latakia, February 2025.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interviews, activist and resident, Homs, 11 February 2025.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, firefighter, 22 December 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, local mediator, 19 March 2025.

<sup>34</sup> Other prominent figures from the Assad era, such as the sanctioned business tycoons Mohammed Hamsho and Samer Foz, are being mainstreamed into public life. "Exclusive: Syria's new leaders zero in on Assad's business barons", Reuters, 13 February 2025.

<sup>35</sup> "Don't kill us twice: Steps disturbing path to justice in Syria", *Enab Baladi*, 26 June 2025.

pensation, leaving many feeling forgotten or dismissed.<sup>36</sup> Since there have been no formal measures, some of the aggrieved appear to view attacks on any Alawite person as justified. Criminals apparently at times go after Alawites because they consider them the most vulnerable to predation; the criminals may claim to be seeking retribution for regime abuses to discourage intervention.<sup>37</sup>

Fuelling such tensions is a surge of online disinformation. The collapse of Assad-era censorship allowed for freer expression, but it also unleashed hate speech, disinformation and inflammatory rhetoric. Assad loyalists began taking advantage, exaggerating or fabricating reports of sectarian violence that they framed as government-sanctioned ethnic cleansing, thus discouraging minorities from cooperating with the new authorities.<sup>38</sup>

Former regime loyalists have increasingly seized upon incidents of violence against Alawite women in particular to amplify Islamophobic and anti-government narratives. In various outlets, they recycle claims of Alawite women being kidnapped or forced to marry Sunni militants, portraying Syria's new rulers as extremists in the mould of the Islamic State.<sup>39</sup> The head of a women's rights organisation said women are caught in a sort of rhetorical crossfire between former regime loyalists, who exaggerate threats against women for political gain, and government supporters, who frequently downplay or deny incidents for fear of undermining the new authorities.<sup>40</sup>

The summary dismissal in January of the entire Assad-era security apparatus, reportedly some 500,000 personnel (the vast majority of them men), had a particularly harsh economic effect on Alawites, who were disproportionately represented in this sector due to the regime's recruitment practices.<sup>41</sup> Wives of officers reportedly also often lost their public-sector jobs, such as in education and health, after appar-

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<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interview, resident, Homs, 11 February 2025. See also "Money of regime's close allies and businessmen: Settlement or seizure", *Enab Baladi*, 21 January 2025.

<sup>37</sup> A resident said men calling him an "Alawite pig" stole his car, warning him not to contact General Security. After he reported the incident, General Security identified members of a criminal gang as the perpetrators, suggesting that the sectarian slur may have been merely an attempt at intimidation. Crisis Group interview, resident, Homs, 11 February 2025.

<sup>38</sup> "Disinformation stokes Alawi unease as Assad loyalists pursued in Syria", *Middle East Eye*, 26 December 2025.

<sup>39</sup> "Captivity in the Age of Disinformation: Propaganda Disguised as Victimhood", *Verify-Sy*, 14 May 2025.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, head of women's rights organisation, 30 May 2025.

<sup>41</sup> "Victory Conference': Declaration of the revolution's triumph, dissolution of the constitution, the Baath Party, the army and al-Sharaa as president of the republic", Shaam Network, 29 January 2025 [Arabic].

ently being deemed guilty by association.<sup>42</sup> For many, losing their jobs also entailed losing government-provided housing, leaving them no choice but to return to their birthplaces in the already troubled central and coastal areas. On 1 September, the authorities reinstated most non-security public-sector employees, but as of early November, inconsistencies remained. Those from the security sector remain excluded.<sup>43</sup>

The formal demobilisation process for dismissed security personnel, known as “clearance” (*taswiya*), seem to have created additional problems.<sup>44</sup> At first, many feared a trap, leading to imprisonment or execution, if not attack en route to a clearance centre.<sup>45</sup> Eventually, it became clear that while *taswiya* itself was safe, it did not always offer the promised benefit of freedom of movement for those who went through it.<sup>46</sup> Guards at checkpoints would sometimes interpret clearance papers as evidence of complicity in the old regime’s crimes, exposing the bearer to the risk of arrest, kidnapping or even death.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, thousands of dismissed personnel skipped the clearance process. They remained stuck in their home villages, hanging on to their arms.<sup>48</sup>

### C. *The Seeds of Insurgency*

Mass dismissals from the security forces created a large group of increasingly destitute men with few prospects in the new order. Armed and with military training, they formed a ready-made recruitment pool

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<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, opposition politician and civil society activist, Damascus, 25-26 February 2025.

<sup>43</sup> See “Syrian Presidency decides on workers’ leave and temporary contracts”, *Enab Baladi*, 28 August 2025; and “Employees at the Syrian Telecommunications Company complain about being excluded”, *Enab Baladi*, 9 September 2025. Crisis Group telephone interview, public-sector employee, 3 November 2025.

<sup>44</sup> The identification cards of Assad-era security personnel indicated their former jobs, exposing them to detention or worse in any encounter with the new authorities. After surrendering their weapons, dismissed security men would receive the *taswiya* document, to confirm that they were no longer active, which was to allow them to move freely.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former regime army, security and militia members, Homs, Latakia, Tartous and Jableh, February 2025. A local mediator in Homs confirmed that several cases of imprisonment, execution and attack on the road to *taswiya* centres did indeed occur. Crisis Group interview, Homs, 22 February 2025.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former army members, Homs, Qardaha and Latakia, February and May 2025.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, residents of Latakia’s countryside, 20 March 2025; and Crisis Group interviews, residents, Tartous and Qurfais, 5 May 2025. As a result, some began referring to clearance documents as “death warrants”.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government official and prominent Alawite figure, Tartous, 14 February 2025. On the coast (Tartous, Latakia and Baniyas), around 85,000 former regime personnel had undergone *taswiya* and handed in their arms by February. Crisis Group interview, General Security officer, Latakia, 16 February 2025.

for insurgents seeking to exploit their bitterness and anomie. As a former regime army officer said, “We’re dying slowly. By picking up arms at least we die with dignity”.<sup>49</sup>

Officers of the ousted regime started enlisting insurgent fighters at a small scale in December 2024, but the initial response was lacklustre. Many potential recruits feared the new authorities’ wrath, as did the population in coastal and central areas. Interlocutors close to the insurgency said many locals would tell General Security if they thought someone was going to join. “The biggest threat to the budding insurgency was the Alawites themselves”, said an ex-soldier.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, recruitment gained traction as violent incidents, sometimes blown out of proportion by pro-Assad regime social media accounts, instilled a sense of existential threat in the community.<sup>51</sup> Allegedly, a number of businesspeople loyal to the Assad family financed insurgent cells, as rumour spread that Russia would join the fray once the revolt got off the ground.<sup>52</sup>

Insurgent action first gained momentum following a widely publicised incident on 24 December 2024, when a Christmas tree was set on fire in Suqaylabiya, in western Hama, triggering protests. In several Syrian cities, Christians and others sympathising with their cause called upon the government to protect minorities. The impression that the new authorities were unwilling to do so lent the insurgency momentum.<sup>53</sup> Two days later, footage of a burning Alawite shrine circulated on social media, sparking more unrest, before it was revealed that the video, while authentic, dated to the rebel offensive in Aleppo the previous November.<sup>54</sup> The same day, Assad regime loyalists attacked a checkpoint in western Hama and laid an ambush in Tartous, killing fourteen General Security personnel who were trying to arrest the former head of the infamous Sednaya prison.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, former regime army officer, Jableh, 17 February 2025.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former army officer, Jableh, 16 February 2025; ex-soldier, Qardaha, 17 February 2025.

<sup>51</sup> From December through February, most of the attacks on Alawites occurred in the central plains around Homs, but the insurgents tended to be based in the coastal mountains, which are better suited for guerrilla warfare and constitute the Alawite heartland. “The Syrian Government Must Investigate the Targeting of Alawite Civilians in Homs”, Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, 13 May 2025.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former army officers, Latakia, 5 May 2025. See also Suhaib Anjarani, “Investigating the Alawite massacres”, *New Lines Magazine*, 12 May 2025. Crisis Group interview, former 25th Division fighter, Jableh, 17 February 2025.

<sup>53</sup> “Protests in Syria over Christmas tree burning”, BBC, 24 December 2024.

<sup>54</sup> “Updated: Statement from shrine leaders clarifies the incident at al-Khasibi shrine in Aleppo”, *Verify-Sy*, 25 December 2024.

<sup>55</sup> “14 Syrian police officers killed in clashes with remnants of the Assad regime in Tartous”, *Shohub News*, 26 December 2025 [Arabic].

Insurgents stepped up attacks in late February, perhaps calculating that a harsh government response would sway more Alawites to their side.<sup>56</sup> Again, online disinformation heightened tensions. An incident in Qardaha, the Assad family's ancestral home, offers an illustrative example. Former regime forces opened fire on a police station on 26 February, prompting government forces to set up a checkpoint in the town to search for those responsible. Online accounts portrayed these measures as indicating an impending attack, prompting residents to demand that government forces withdraw.<sup>57</sup> Competing versions of what happened spread among local Sunnis and Alawites, leading people from both communities to stage parades with sectarian flags and chants in Latakia neighbourhoods.<sup>58</sup>

As suspicion of the new authorities mounted among non-Sunni Arab communities, the interim government's limited communication with them hindered various counter-insurgency efforts. In Qardaha, government forces repeatedly moved to seize weapons and arrest figures linked to the former regime, but to no avail, as residents refrained from cooperating and instead tipped off the insurgents.<sup>59</sup> The new authorities received ever less assistance from the population in identifying suspects or locating arms caches, while insurgents increasingly moved freely.

#### D. *Meanwhile, in Suweida*

As on the coast, a gradual degradation of relations between Damascus and residents of Suweida in the south preceded a slide into violence. The Druze, a religious minority concentrated in Suweida, had maintained a cautious *détente* with the Assad regime throughout the civil war – partly because the regime claimed to be protecting minorities from the excesses of Sunni Islamist groups.<sup>60</sup> But the Druze also sought to preserve a degree of local autonomy. A series of protests starting in 2023, referred to as the “Druze uprising”, were sparked by economic decline and desire for a greater say in governance. These paved the way for armed Druze factions, in effect, to take control of the province, though with nominal regime oversight, roughly a year before the final

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<sup>56</sup> Tweet by Charles Lister, @Charles\_Lister, Syria analyst, 2:20pm, 4 March 2025.

<sup>57</sup> “Security reinforcements in the Syrian town of Qardaha after an attack on the police”, Al Jazeera, 26 February 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Alawite resident of Qardaha and Sunni resident of Latakia, 2 March 2025.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, Alawite dignitary, Qardaha, 16 February 2025.

<sup>60</sup> Crucially, Druze recruits were allowed to perform their mandatory military service in Suweida, rather than being sent to other parts of Syria. Trust eroded sharply after a 2018 ISIS attack in Suweida city that killed more than 250 people, which many saw as the Assad regime failing to deliver on its promise. “Suweida province: Isis knocked on doors then slaughtered families”, *The Guardian*, 27 July 2018.

rebel push toward Damascus in December 2024.<sup>61</sup> The Druze factions joined this offensive as it gathered speed.

After Assad's fall, the Druze factions signalled a willingness to work with the new authorities, despite concerns about their Islamist tendencies.<sup>62</sup> Shortly before the March violence in Alawite areas, even Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, one of the three most prominent Druze spiritual leaders, and the one most suspicious of the new rulers' intentions, expressed readiness for "participation in the Syrian state". He also renounced Israeli offers of protection.<sup>63</sup> (Israel's relationship with Syria's Druze, discussed in more detail below, is a function of their kinship ties with Israel's own Druze population, many of whom hold significant places in the Israeli army.) Numerous delegations from Suweida – including factional leaders, businesspeople, activists and other notables – travelled to Damascus for meetings with interim officials, including President Ahmed al-Sharaa, to exchange messages of reassurance.

Yet Damascus often handled these contacts in ways that disquieted rather than reassured potential partners in Suweida. Organisers of the February "national dialogue" conference excluded the Druze leadership from the preparatory committee, sending invitations instead to lower-level communal representatives, and conditioning participation on disarmament (a step most Druze factions were unprepared to take at this stage), in effect sidelining most Druze actors.<sup>64</sup> Subsequent gestures, such as appointing Amjad Badr, who is Suweida-born but unaffiliated with a political or military movement in the province, as the sole Druze minister in the transitional government established on 29 March, were made without consulting political actors in the province. They therefore deepened perceptions that Damascus was making symbolic gestures meant to display commitment to diversity while in fact relying on pliant intermediaries.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> "The (sub)National Guard: The Druze of Syria now have an army", Syria in Transition, 28 September 2025.

<sup>62</sup> Incidents in Idlib had set a troubling precedent. In 2015, fighters from the HTS precursor organisation Jabhat al-Nusra killed at least twenty Druze in Qalb Lawze, an Idlib village. While engagement with minorities subsequently improved under HTS rule, reports by human rights organisations noted continued restrictions on Druze religious practices. "Idlib's Druze Complain of Persecution", Syrians for Truth and Justice, 24 November 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, Suweida, 27 February 2025. See also "Israel won't allow HTS forces in southern Syria, Netanyahu says", Reuters, 23 February 2025.

<sup>64</sup> "Syrian groups must disarm to take part in national dialogue, official says", Reuters, 13 February 2025; "Syria to hold dialogue conference amid criticism over inclusivity", Reuters, 24 February 2025.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interviews, civil society figures and activists, Damascus, August 2025.

In parallel, Damascus tightened its grip on Suweida's administrative institutions and services, appointing officials loyal to the leadership and dismissing hundreds of public-sector employees, a devastating move in a governorate with minimal private-sector opportunities. While the government took similar measures nationwide, it was not always perceived as such by Suweida locals, many of whom felt that the province was being singled out.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, influential local figures appeared sidelined and a Damascus-aligned figure, Mustafa al-Bakour, was named governor, overriding the nomination of a prominent Suweida activist by community networks as well as Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri.

Druze factions resisted integration into the government's security apparatus. A senior government official described this posture as mostly self-serving: according to his interpretation, Druze hardliners rejected a merger outright because they believed their leverage depended on keeping fighters under arms outside the state's aegis. "We offered them [armed Druze factions] incorporation into the army with no conditions on their numbers and ranks ... but they feared losing their influence", the official said.<sup>67</sup> Efforts by the interim authorities to work with more accommodating figures alienated the hardliners, while aggravating rivalries among Druze factions. Druze, by contrast, emphasise how Damascus sowed mistrust by bypassing local leaders, as in the national dialogue preparations and the appointment of a governor. The massacres on the coast soured Druze on the new order to the point where many feared an existential threat to the community.<sup>68</sup>

At the same time, Israel stepped up efforts to present itself as a protector of Syria's Druze, providing itself with a seemingly humanitarian rationale for meddling in the country.<sup>69</sup> Syrian Druze have ties with Druze in Israel, some of whom have prominent positions in the Israeli army; since December 2024, Israeli Druze leaders have increased contacts with their counterparts in Syria, as Israeli officials vowed to shield the Druze from alleged coercion by the interim authorities. Israeli forces, meanwhile, advanced beyond the 1974 disengagement line on the Golan Heights, creating a new buffer zone in the country's south.

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<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interviews, civil society figures and activists, Damascus, February-May 2025. See also "Candidate for governor of Suweida: There are fears of religious rule", *Al Arabiya*, 16 January 2025 [Arabic]; and "Governor of As-Suwayda signs understanding agreement with al-Hijri: Key details unveiled", *Enab Baladi*, 12 March 2025.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior government security official, Damascus, 29 August 2025.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interviews, civil society figures and activists, Damascus, August 2025.

<sup>69</sup> Dareen Khalifa and Mairav Zonszein, "How Israel's Overreach in Syria May Backfire", Crisis Group Commentary, 17 March 2025.

On 23 February, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cautioned the Syrian interim government against deploying forces south of Damascus, while announcing Israel's intention to "defend the Druze".<sup>70</sup> Days later, clashes broke out in Jaramana, a Druze-majority Damascus suburb, between Druze factions and government forces, leaving at least one officer dead. The next day, state forces staged raids that led to a civilian death. In response, Netanyahu and Defence Minister Israel Katz instructed the Israeli army to prepare to march on Jaramana, claiming that it was under attack.<sup>71</sup> For Damascus, the rhetoric surrounding the incident signalled a new phase of Israeli encroachment in the south under the guise of solidarity with the Druze.<sup>72</sup>

Further violence in late April deepened the rift between Damascus and the Druze leadership. On 28 April, a leaked voice note cursing the Prophet Mohammad, wrongly attributed to a Druze religious figure, circulated online, triggering anti-Druze protests and hate speech throughout Syria.<sup>73</sup> Pro-government Sunni armed groups attacked Jaramana; mortar fire and street battles left at least six Druze fighters and seven Sunni gunmen dead. General Security, working alongside Druze factions to defend the area from the Sunni armed groups, established a buffer zone around it.

But fighting resumed the next night in the nearby Druze-majority suburb of Ashrafiyet Sahnaya, killing scores more. Damascus began shifting the blame for the unrest onto the Druze factions, claiming that they – and not the Sunni attackers – were butting heads with General Security. Israel then intervened with airstrikes near the presidential palace, reportedly as a warning to Damascus. Interim government forces took control of Ashrafiyet Sahnaya, leading many locals to deduce that Damascus was exploiting the hostilities to consolidate power around the capital.<sup>74</sup> By early May, over 100 people had been killed in clashes that extended along the road from Damascus to Suweida and well into the province itself. Thus, the heavy-handed response to the Suweida violence in July only further tore at relations that had already frayed.<sup>75</sup> Seemingly seeking to bend the local leadership to their will through a mix of coercion and divide-and-rule, the authorities galva-

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<sup>70</sup> "Israel won't allow HTS forces in southern Syria, Netanyahu says", Reuters, 23 February 2025.

<sup>71</sup> "Netanyahu and Katz direct IDF to 'prepare to defend' Syrian Druze suburb of Damascus", *Times of Israel*, 1 March 2025.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior government security official, Damascus, 29 August 2025.

<sup>73</sup> Nanar Hawach, "Fighting in Damascus Exposes Syria's Sectarian Tensions", Crisis Group Analyst's Notebook, 2 May 2025.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, Druze leadership figure, Druze faction member and Ashrafiyet Sahnaya resident, Damascus, 6 May 2025.

<sup>75</sup> "The (sub)National Guard: The Druze of Syria now have an army", op. cit.

nised support for hardline figures and drove away or undermined potential partners, rather than empowering them to bring the Druze into the new national dispensation.

### III. Understanding the March Atrocities

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The March violence along the coast and in the centre thus occurred against the backdrop of Assad's unresolved legacy and persistent insecurity. What began as a nascent insurgency quickly escalated into massacres of Alawite civilians, exposing deep fractures within the security apparatus and parts of Syrian society that have bedevilled the interim authorities during the political transition.

#### A. *What Happened in March*

In the afternoon of 6 March, former regime elements staged coordinated attacks on government forces in the coastal cities of Jableh and Baniyas, reportedly killing sixteen.<sup>76</sup> The same day, a group calling itself the Military Council for the Liberation of Syria circulated on social media a pledge to overthrow the interim government.<sup>77</sup> Many of the insurgents reportedly had been members of the old army's elite 4th and 25th Divisions, two largely Alawite units that had allegedly perpetrated countless war crimes in spearheading many of the former regime's offensives against rebel-held areas.<sup>78</sup> The 6 March pledge bore the signature of Ghiath Dallah, a former 4th Division brigadier general under U.S. sanctions for his role in wartime atrocities.<sup>79</sup> Already before March, former members of the 25th Division had regrouped under the banner of a so-called Coastal Shield Brigade commanded by Miqdad Fatiha; they now joined the Military Council.<sup>80</sup> A number of area residents rallied to the insurgents' side, using their own rifles to shoot at government troops from rooftops.<sup>81</sup>

The violence caught the government off guard. Damascus sent forces to the coast, largely from among the first tier of troops most loyal to the leadership, but they proved unable to contain the insurgency. At that point, the authorities dispatched reinforcements from the second and third tiers, with a far lower level of discipline (see Section II.A above), while others mobilised independently.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, the Syri-

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<sup>76</sup> "Coastal attack highlights threat of Assad loyalists", *Jusoor*, 10 March 2025.

<sup>77</sup> Tweet by ETANA, @ETANA\_Syria, Syrian civil society organisation, 7:40am, 7 March 2025.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former regime army officer and retired former regime army officer, Latakia and Baniyas, February 2025.

<sup>79</sup> "Specially Designated Nationals List Update", OFAC, 20 August 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview, former 25th Division soldier, Jableh, 17 February 2025;

Crisis Group telephone interview, former regime army officer, 12 March 2025.

<sup>81</sup> "803 Individuals Extrajudicially Killed Between March 6-10, 2025", SNHR, 11 March 2025.

<sup>82</sup> Telegram video post by the Military Operations Administration, 8:42am, 7 March 2025 [Arabic]. In the video, a defence ministry spokesman said the ministry began sending reinforcements to support General Security in Latakia and Tartous provinces by the early morning of 7 March. Two separate sources reported that the

an Islamic Council, a body of Islamic scholars, staged demonstrations in several cities to summon all Syrians to stand up to what it described as “the sectarian manoeuvres of the Assad remnants”.<sup>83</sup> Following such calls, thousands of irregulars under no one’s command picked up their own guns and poured toward the coast.<sup>84</sup> In the ensuing battles, hundreds of fighters were killed on both sides, and insurgents briefly captured stretches of the two main coastal highways, M1 and M4. Over the course of 24 hours, the government got the upper hand and all but suppressed the revolt.<sup>85</sup>

But the situation was not yet resolved. Clashes persisted in Baniyas, as well as Latakia city and the surrounding countryside, throughout the next day. At the same time, on 7 March, armed groups descended on Alawite neighbourhoods and villages across the area, summarily executing hundreds.<sup>86</sup> Violence raged for three days, with an array of government-aligned armed groups massacring Alawite civilians and looting and destroying properties. The operations in the countryside had largely halted by midday on 8 March, witnesses said, but not yet in other places. Convoys of armed men began withdrawing from coastal towns and Hama on 10 March, perpetrating more extrajudicial killings as they pulled back.<sup>87</sup> The same day, the defence ministry announced the end of its operations along the coast.<sup>88</sup>

Who was responsible for the murder of civilians remains contested. Local officials say it was troops belonging to the third tier of the security apparatus, that is, those with the lowest level of discipline and the farthest removed from central control, along with ordinary people seeking revenge for wartime losses, who did most of the killing.<sup>89</sup> They

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Suleiman Shah Brigade and Suqour al-Sham, two SNA factions integrated under the defence ministry, received orders to deploy to the coast. Crisis Group interview, factional leader, Homs, 26 May 2025; and Crisis Group telephone interview, international Syria expert, 23 April 2025.

<sup>83</sup> “The Syrian Islamic Council supports the ‘general mobilisation’ to assist the state against the remnants of the regime and their sectarian manoeuvres”, Sham Network, 6 March 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>84</sup> “Blood on the coast: Can Damascus pull back from the brink?”, Syria Direct, 8 March 2025.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interview, insurgent, Latakia, 5 May 2025. See also “Syrian coast: Intense clashes with remnants in the cities and towns of Jableh, Qardaha and Latakia”, Syria TV, 7 March 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>86</sup> For a map indicating the geographical distribution of the violence, see “Armed Clashes & Sectarian Violence on Syria’s Coast 6-11 March”, ETANA.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, residents of Baniyas city and countryside, Jableh’s countryside, Latakia, Qardaha’s countryside, Qadmous and Hama’s western countryside, March 2025; Crisis Group interviews, residents, Baniyas, 5 May 2025.

<sup>88</sup> “The military spokesperson for the Syrian defence ministry announces the end of military operations on the Syrian coast”, Facebook post, 10 March 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, local officials, Baniyas and Tartous, March 2025. Some claimed that these groups arrived in the area without orders from Da-

point in particular to the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade and Al-Hamza Division, both former SNA components, emphasising their past abuses and tendency to ignore commands from higher up.<sup>90</sup> Other reporting (which government supporters in turn dispute) also suggests involvement of General Security in the violence.<sup>91</sup> Eyewitnesses were mostly unable to identify the perpetrators, many of whom were masked, as belonging to particular groups or units, instead referring to “factions” and “armed civilians” as the culprits.<sup>92</sup> Some interlocutors also said members of General Security had perpetrated extrajudicial killings, albeit at a much lesser scale than the SNA fighters.<sup>93</sup> Local accounts also indicate that some of the attackers were residents of villages that had suffered atrocities at the hands of Assad’s forces in the civil war’s early years.<sup>94</sup>

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mascus; in the afternoon of 6 March, however, the Military Operations Administration, the former Idlib-based coalition led by HTS, announced on its Telegram channel that Defence Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra had “directed all military formations to move to the areas on the coast where clashes are occurring ... to break the remnants of the regime and make an example of them”. Telegram post by the Military Operations Administration, 1:53pm, 6 March 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, sources close to local administration on the coast, 28 March 2025. Both groups were under U.S. sanctions for alleged human rights violations before December 2024. “Treasury Sanctions Two Syria-Based Militias Responsible for Serious Human Rights Abuses in Northern Syria”, OFAC, 17 August 2023; “‘Everything is by the Power of the Weapon’: Abuses and Impunity in Turkish-Occupied Northern Syria”, Human Rights Watch, 29 February 2024. The leader of the Suleiman Shah Brigade, Muhammed al-Jassem, rejected the accusations, saying Alawite civilians had commended his unit for treating them well. “‘I just want security’: Fear remains for Syrian massacre survivors awaiting justice”, *The Guardian*, 27 May 2025. On 28 May, the EU sanctioned the two groups and their leaders, in addition to the Sultan Murad Division, for their roles in the March violence. Council Decision (CFSP) 2025/1110, European Union, 28 May 2025.

<sup>91</sup> “Syrian forces massacred 1,500 Alawites. The chain of command led to Damascus”, Reuters, 30 June 2025. “Armed Factions’ Mobilization to the Syrian Coast in March 2025”, Syrian Archive, 8 July 2025; “Post Assad ... Before Building the State Violations in Syria’s Coast and Hama – March 2025”, Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, 15 July 2025.

<sup>92</sup> The eyewitnesses distinguished between these groups, on one hand, and General Security and former HTS units integrated into the army, on the other. For example, a former regime police officer said integrated HTS units and General Security were preoccupied with fighting insurgents in urban areas of Latakia and Baniyas, while other armed groups ran amok, killing and looting, in the countryside. Crisis Group telephone interview, 16 March 2025.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interview, residents, Baniyas, 5 May 2025; Crisis Group telephone interviews, residents of Baniyas countryside, April 2025. See also “Syrian forces massacred 1,500 Alawites. The chain of command led to Damascus”, *op. cit.*

<sup>94</sup> A witness to the massacres in Baniyas said men from Bayda, a nearby village where Assad regime forces had killed more than 150 men, women and children in 2013, were among the gunmen who entered the city. “Syrians describe the violence targeting Alawite minority: ‘Tomorrow, there won’t be a man left alive in my village’”, *Le Monde*, 9 March 2025. On the 2013 massacre in Bayda, see “‘No One’s Left’: Summary Executions by Syrian Forces in al-Bayda and Baniyas”, Human

Regardless of which of these politically charged narratives is closer to the truth, it seems clear that in response to the insurgent attacks, Damascus sent in troops it could not sufficiently control. It did not prevent self-mobilised fighters from heading en masse for the coast, and it did not stop the massacres for nearly three days after government officials acknowledged that abuses were occurring.<sup>95</sup>

In contrast to its failures along the coast (and in some central areas as well), General Security acted swiftly to protect Alawites in the city of Homs. As violence erupted, Sunni residents appeared in the streets bearing arms, but General Security formed a cordon around Alawite neighbourhoods to ward off attacks.<sup>96</sup> It may have been more effective in Homs partly because the armed groups most likely to cause trouble were busy on the coast, and partly because it was aware of the potential for trouble there after the rising violence of the preceding months. Together, these factors helped prevent a new round of bloodshed in a city where nerves are still raw due to brutal wartime violence between Alawites and Sunnis.<sup>97</sup>

In the aftermath of the March violence, Syria's interim president, al-Sharaa, condemned it and vowed to hold those responsible accountable. Multiple investigations were launched by the government, civil society and journalistic outfits, generating estimates ranging from 1,000 to 1,700 Alawite civilians killed in Latakia, Tartous and Hama provinces on 6-10 March. While the vast majority of the dead were men, over

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Rights Watch, 13 September 2013. Other witnesses reported that Sunnis living in Baniyas and its environs joined the assault early on, assisting the factions with identifying Alawite households. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Baniyas residents, March 2025. Similar reports emerged from Latakia, where residents of the neighbouring villages of Bzift, Babna and al-Haffa reportedly participated in and facilitated the attacks. Crisis Group telephone interviews, residents of Baniyas and Latakia, March 2025; Crisis Group interviews, displaced people from Brabshbo (north east of Latakia city); city residents, Latakia, 5 May 2025. Eyewitnesses from the Sunni-majority village of al-Haffa said some Sunni residents went to neighbouring Alawite villages of Babna and Sharifa, killing civilians at random. Reportedly, they were looking for anyone they thought had killed "one of their own". Crisis Group telephone interviews, March 2025.

<sup>95</sup> On 7 March, an interior ministry official stated, "After remnants of the former regime assassinated several police and security personnel, large, unorganised crowds of people headed to the coast, which led to some individual violations. We are working to stop these excesses, which do not represent the Syrian people as a whole". Quoted by SANA, 7 March 2025 [Arabic]. A spokesperson for an international human rights organisation said: "The Ministry of Defence sent in those forces, so whatever exactly happened after, they have command responsibility". Crisis Group telephone interview, 16 June 2025.

<sup>96</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Homs residents, March 2025.

<sup>97</sup> A religious intellectual close to the government insisted that the army division present in Homs sent its men to fight insurgents on the coast and to protect Alawite neighbourhoods in the city. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 30 August 2025.

two hundred women and children were also among the victims.<sup>98</sup> Nearly 40,000 Syrians sought refuge in Lebanon during and following the massacres.<sup>99</sup>

Al-Sharaa also appointed a fact-finding mission, composed entirely of men, which included five judges, an army officer and a lawyer to document violations, identify perpetrators and recommend accountability measures within 30 days, later extended to three months.<sup>100</sup> The committee presented its findings at a press conference on 22 July.<sup>101</sup> While it acknowledged widespread attacks on civilians, it seemed to diffuse responsibility by portraying the massacres as occurring during a chaotic popular uprising that involved up to 200,000 armed men and in which state forces, cast as agents of order, were simply unable to contain the violence. The report attributed the abuses largely to revenge for insurgent raids, downplaying their sectarian dimension. Many Syrians critical of the government dismissed the report as a whitewash.<sup>102</sup> Meanwhile, families of the victims say they live in fear that another massacre could occur at any time.<sup>103</sup>

In an important step toward accountability, public trials of alleged perpetrators of violence in coastal areas began in mid-November. Half the fourteen defendants were insurgents tied to the former regime, while the other half were members of the new government's forces.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> "1,562 Deaths, Including 102 Children and 99 Women, as well as 33 Medical Personnel, Recorded in March 2025 in Syria", SNHR, 9 April 2025. The Initiative for Civil Peace in Syria reported over 1,700 dead in 62 villages, towns and neighbourhoods. Facebook post, 29 March 2025. See also "Inside a city swept by roving gunmen, deadly grudges and fear", *The New York Times*, 20 April 2025. Insurgents attacked Sunni civilians as well, if on a far lesser scale, reportedly relying on Idlib licence plates to identify presumed government supporters. "803 Individuals Extrajudicially Killed Between March 6-10, 2025", SNHR, 11 March 2025.

<sup>99</sup> "New Arrivals to North Lebanon", UNHCR, 12 June 2025.

<sup>100</sup> "Syria: Coastal massacres of Alawite civilians must be investigated as war crimes", Amnesty International, 3 April 2025; and "Syria's Sharaa grants three-month extension to committee probing coastal killings", Reuters, 11 April 2025.

<sup>101</sup> "National Committee for Investigation and Fact-Finding: 938 testimonies were collected, 238 security and army personnel, 1,426 mostly civilians were killed", Syrian Arab News Agency, 22 July 2025.

<sup>102</sup> In a statement on 23 July, 25 civil society organisations demanded that the report be released. "Breaking the Cycle of Violence: Publish the report, Establish Accountability and Prevent a Repeat", SNHR, 23 July 2025 [Arabic]. A prominent member of the anti-Assad opposition commented: "The only reason they won't publish their findings is because it wouldn't last ten minutes in the public sphere". Tweet by Rami Jarrah, @RamiJarrah, 2:23pm, 22 July 2025. "UN Syria Commission finds March coastal violence was widespread and systematic: outlines urgent steps to prevent future violations and restore public confidence", OHCHR, 14 August 2025.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interviews, families of massacre victims, Baniyas, 5 May 2025.

<sup>104</sup> "Syria opens first trial over coastal violence after Assad's fall", Reuters, 18 November 2025.

## B. *The Aftermath*

Syria's Alawite community remains on edge. While most opposed the insurgency, many also blame the government for the massacres. Even those who do not hold the government directly responsible for the bloodshed argue that Damascus created the conditions for it by sending or encouraging armed factions not fully under government control to put down the insurgency, while failing to protect civilians.<sup>105</sup> For many, the March violence eroded trust in the government, transforming General Security from a perceived protector into something viewed, at best, as the lesser of two evils, the greater one being the ex-SNA factions integrated into the army.<sup>106</sup> Confidence in General Security evaporated not only because of its failure to safeguard civilians but also owing to reports that some of its personnel had participated in the atrocities. Families of victims also feel that the government has made no serious effort to hold perpetrators accountable or to signal that such abuses will not recur.

The fear is palpable. While most internally displaced civilians returned home, many of the Syrians who fled to Lebanon remain abroad, and many Alawites who stayed in Syria say they want to leave because they think more violence may be in the offing.<sup>107</sup>

Continued attacks on Alawite civilians add to the anxiety of many. More abuses by armed factions outside General Security took place weeks after the major violence ceased. Since July, the government has introduced measures intended to be corrective – including reducing the number of checkpoints, changing the guard at certain locations (such as by replacing defence with interior ministry staff) and arresting individuals linked to earlier violations.<sup>108</sup> These steps have helped curb overt misconduct by government-affiliated forces but seem to have done little to bolster the security apparatus in performing its appointed task of protecting the vulnerable. Minorities thus remain exposed to recurring violations by non-state armed actors and dangers resulting from intercommunal tensions. In central governorates such as Homs and Hama, particularly in rural districts, Alawites are still reporting instances of harassment, kidnapping and extrajudicial killing.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, coastal residents, late March 2025.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hama, Latakia, Baniyas, Tartous, Qardaha and Jableh, February 2025.

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, coastal residents, March 2025. See also “UNHCR Lebanon flash update – 2 May 2025”, UNHCR, 2 May 2025.

<sup>108</sup> Gregory Waters, “A New Syria Starts to Take Shape”, Syria Revisited, 29 September 2025.

<sup>109</sup> “‘Are You Alawi?’ Identity-Based Killings During Syria’s Transition”, Human Rights Watch, 23 September 2025; “Oral Update by Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic at the 60th Session of the Human Rights Council”, OHCHR, 23 Septem-

This persistent insecurity has also deepened the socio-economic aftershocks of the March violence, which have disproportionately affected women. Since most of the fatalities were men, the number of women-headed households has increased. Beyond the trauma of loss, the absence of male family members in a patriarchal society has left these households exposed to external pressures, such as exploitation by relatives or neighbours seeking to appropriate property, land, harvests or money. It has also increased the risk of gender-based violence and harassment. Interlocutors said women were berated when attempting to obtain death certificates, with public employees at the civil registry referring to their deceased husbands and sons as “traitors” and “insurgents”.<sup>110</sup> The death of male family members also often means that the main breadwinner is gone, undermining economic stability in a society where men are traditionally expected to fulfil this role. Some of the women who have lost husbands and sons are also afraid to return to their jobs after the massacres.

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ber 2025; “Syria: Authorities Must Investigate Abductions of Alawite Women and Girls”, Human Rights Watch, 28 July 2025.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, Baniyas, 4 May 2025.

## IV. What Happened in Suweida

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The clashes in the southern Suweida province in mid-July had echoes of the March violence along the coast and in the centre. Troops supposedly deployed to end a local conflict reportedly engaged in sectarian abuse, while thousands of armed irregulars rushed to the troubled area. Faced with what to them looked like an impending repeat of the coastal killings, Druze leaders, some of whom had previously been prepared to compromise with Damascus, instead closed ranks, fought back and even accepted Israeli protection.

### A. Another Crisis

Starting on 11 July, a conflict pitting Druze against members of the Bedouin communities in Suweida province escalated into broader violence. Clashes between Druze armed groups and Bedouin militias were triggered when Bedouin gunmen beat and robbed a Druze merchant, prompting a retaliatory kidnapping by Druze factions. The initial firefights left dozens dead, including civilians, and displaced numerous villagers.<sup>111</sup> Reports described arbitrary killing, looting and burning, with most of it visited upon Druze.<sup>112</sup> Meanwhile, Druze factions besieged the Bedouin-majority al-Maqwas neighbourhood of Suweida city.

When the Syrian government finally intervened on 14 July, it deployed massively, seizing areas on the outskirts of Suweida city, which resulted in major casualties.<sup>113</sup> Shortly after their deployment, several army and security personnel were killed when government units came under attack by Druze armed groups, further accelerating the escalation.<sup>114</sup> Spearheading the operation was the army's 42nd Division, previously implicated in the violence on the coast.<sup>115</sup> Damascus may have felt emboldened by its talks with the U.S. and Israel, perceiving that it had a green light to send troops south, which Israel had previously said it

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<sup>111</sup> "A Compromise is Urgently Needed in Southern Syria", Crisis Group Statement, 18 July 2025.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Suweida civil society figures and residents, July 2025. See also "Firing squads and forced death leaps: A tipping point in Syria", *New York Times*, 22 October 2025.

<sup>113</sup> "Update of Latest Toll: At least 814 Syrians Have Been Killed and More than 903 Others Injured in Suwayda Governorate since July 13", SNHR, 24 July 2025; "Syria: New investigation reveals evidence government and affiliated forces extrajudicially executed dozens of Druze people in Suwayda", Amnesty International, 2 September 2025.

<sup>114</sup> "Attacks on Syrian security forces sent to quell sectarian clashes leave 18 dead as Israel strikes targets to protect Druze", Reuters, 14 July 2025.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interview, 42nd Division commander, 29 August 2025.

should not do.<sup>116</sup> A senior security official told Crisis Group that government forces intervened to contain the clashes, and to prevent escalation, as tribal elements were mobilising across the country, stressing that Damascus did not want a “coastal-style scenario”.<sup>117</sup> Yet many Druze viewed the move as the government siding with the Bedouin to assert control of the region, a perception reinforced by state-run media references to Druze factions as “outlaw groups”.<sup>118</sup>

To stop the fighting, Druze spiritual leaders on 15 July endorsed a deal under which Druze fighters would stand down and the state would restore calm, but the truce collapsed within hours, with prominent figures, including Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, calling on Druze factions to resume the fight.<sup>119</sup> Accounts of the reason for the breakdown differ sharply, with government supporters claiming treachery by al-Hijri and his supporters.<sup>120</sup> The latter, by contrast, insist that while they were still negotiating the operational details of the ceasefire, government troops and government-affiliated armed factions moving into Suweida city started to engage in sectarian killings and other violence. Fear spread of atrocities like those on the coast in March. Execution-style murders of Druze civilians, including medical staff and patients, by government troops at the National Hospital in Suweida city deepened the dread.<sup>121</sup>

The same day, Israel followed through on its previous pledges to “protect the Druze”, firing missiles at government tanks in Suweida city

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<sup>116</sup> “Exclusive: Syria believed it had green light from US, Israel to deploy troops to Sweida”, Reuters, 19 July 2025.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior government security official, Damascus, 29 August 2025. Some observers suspect that the government intentionally delayed addressing the crisis, allowing it to fester so as to frame taking over the area as a measure to restore order. Crisis Group telephone interviews, civil society figures and activists, July-August 2025. Members of a local mediation initiative said when the government forces started arriving, negotiations aimed at resolving the conflict were at an advanced stage. According to them, the conflict was “similar to previous clashes, which were always resolved this way within a couple of days”. Crisis Group interviews, Jaramana, 13 September 2025.

<sup>118</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, residents of Suweida and Damascus, July 2025. The Druze faction Rijal al-Karama shared a similar sentiment in a statement, accusing Damascus of “letting its aligned factions intervene harmfully and take sides in Suweida’s clashes”. Facebook post, 14 July 2025 [Arabic]. An example of state media coverage is “Outlaw groups commit massacres against civilians and tribesmen in Sweida countryside”, SANA, 17 July 2025.

<sup>119</sup> “A Compromise is Urgently Needed in Southern Syria”, op. cit.

<sup>120</sup> “Interior ministry: Rebel gangs in Sweida violate ceasefire agreement”, SANA, 3 August 2025.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Suweida residents and aid workers, July 2025. Interlocutors said these killings prompted Druze residents of over 30 villages to flee their homes. “Syria: New investigation reveals evidence government and affiliated forces extrajudicially executed dozens of Druze people in Suwayda”, op. cit.

and the province's western countryside.<sup>122</sup> In parallel, Druze fighters pushed back into the city, prompting Damascus to call for additional reinforcements from the army and security forces.<sup>123</sup> On 16 July, Israel escalated further, striking the defence ministry and near the presidential palace in Damascus, seemingly to deter the government from a full-scale assault on the Druze factions in Suweida.<sup>124</sup>

Behind the scenes, U.S., Arab and Turkish mediators moved quickly to keep the situation from escalating out of control. On 17 July, President al-Sharaa, thanking those mediators, announced that local security would be handed back to Druze forces and that government troops would depart.<sup>125</sup> Yet, even then, the violence did not subside. The withdrawal of government forces initiated a new round of fighting, with Druze factions staging attacks on Bedouin, including systematic killings, looting and forced displacement of civilians, in what appeared to be an effort to expel Bedouin residents from the area.<sup>126</sup>

In response, Bedouin tribal leaders called in reinforcements, prompting another wave of mobilisation of non-state armed actors aligned with the government from across the country, including Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Deir al-Zor and Idlib, who launched an assault on Druze fighters and pushed toward Suweida city.<sup>127</sup> On 18 July, Damascus sent in General Security forces, after Israel signalled that it would tolerate a limited garrison in the south, an agreement endorsed by the Druze leadership.<sup>128</sup> While this deployment succeeded in ending most of the fighting, Druze, Bedouin and government troops continued to face off – all blaming each other for failing to achieve a permanent solution. The humanitarian situation in the city has been troubling. While access and aid delivery has improved somewhat since July, shortages of food, water, fuel, medical supplies and electricity remain a cause for concern, as does displacement.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> "Israel strikes Syrian city, vows to protect Druze from government forces", Reuters, 15 July 2025.

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, General Security officer, 4 August 2025.

<sup>124</sup> "Israel strikes Syria's defence ministry in third day of attacks", *The Guardian*, 16 July 2025.

<sup>125</sup> "Sharaa slams Israeli 'plot to divide Syria' as Suweida truce goes into effect", *The New Arab*, 17 July 2025.

<sup>126</sup> "Syria crisis: Hundreds killed in ongoing violence, hospitals overwhelmed", UN News, 18 July 2025.

<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Barda clan member, 21 July 2025. See also "Tribes launch a counterattack in the Suweida countryside after declaring a general mobilisation", *Al-Araby*, 18 July 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Suweida Military Council fighter, 23 July 2025. See also "Israel and Syria agree ceasefire as Israel allows Syrian troops limited access to Sweida", Reuters, 19 July 2025.

<sup>129</sup> "Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Response in Southern Syria – Situation Report No. 2 (as of 06 October 2025)", OCHA, 8 October 2025.

On 16 September, the government, the U.S. and Jordan, which borders Suweida, agreed on a roadmap to stabilise the province and reintegrate its institutions into the state. The plan calls for a UN investigation into the July violence, reopening the Suweida-Damascus road, restoring services, and forming an inclusive local police and provincial council, along with pursuing security understandings with Israel.<sup>130</sup> As discussions about the roadmap did not include Druze communal leaders, some see it as imposed on Suweida.<sup>131</sup> Some locals protested the roadmap, while the Supreme Legal Committee rejected its core provisions and persisted with calls for “self-determination or secession”.<sup>132</sup>

On the ground, in any case, implementation of the roadmap has been limited at best.<sup>133</sup> As of the end of October, the situation in Suweida was largely unchanged. Suweida’s governor said the interior ministry has deployed troops to secure the road leading to Damascus. But other aspects of the plan are advancing slowly, he said, due to shortages of work crews and weak coordination between provincial and central authorities, as well as what he described as Druze factions’ obstruction of aid deliveries and the return of displaced residents.<sup>134</sup> On 28 October, gunmen attacked a passenger bus on the Damascus-Suweida highway, killing two and injuring several, underscoring the continued insecurity.<sup>135</sup> As of mid-November, Druze factions and government forces were again clashing in Suweida, with the sides trading blame for violating the ceasefire.<sup>136</sup>

## B. *Assessment*

While the triggers of unrest in Suweida differed from those along the coast, the government’s response followed a similar pattern in both cases, reflecting flaws in its security strategy. This approach eroded state legitimacy and deepened sectarian divisions, thereby

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<sup>130</sup> “The Suweida Roadmap: Navigating Local Fractures and External Pressures”, *The Syrian Observer*, 18 September 2025.

<sup>131</sup> “BRIEF: Suwayda roadmap agreement faces pushback”, ETANA, 23 September 2025. Instead, the roadmap appears guided by Lebanese Druze figure Walid Jumblatt. Tweet by Tom Barrack, @USAMBTurkiye, U.S. special envoy for Syria, 12:29pm, 17 September 2025.

<sup>132</sup> “Syria’s Suwayda: Internationally backed roadmap faces local rejection”, *Enab Baladi*, 22 September 2025; Facebook post by Suweida Documentation and Media Center, 17 September 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>133</sup> “As-Sweida Emergency Response Situation Report #5”, International Medical Corps, 6 October 2025. See also tweet by *Al-Araby*, @alaraby\_ar, 10:30am, 30 October 2025.

<sup>134</sup> “Suwayda’s governor details worsening conditions and communication deadlock”, *Levant 24*, 9 October 2025.

<sup>135</sup> “Two civilians, one of them a woman, were killed and six others wounded by gunfire from unidentified assailants on the Damascus-Suwayda road on October 28, 2025”, SNHR, 30 October 2025.

<sup>136</sup> “Druze groups and Syrian forces exchange ceasefire violation claims as clashes in Sweida resume”, *Arab News*, 14 November 2025.

potentially undermining efforts to reintegrate parts of Syria that are still outside government control, particularly in the north east, by non-violent means.

In both cases, local violence – initiated by a nascent insurgency on the coast and arising from intercommunal discord in Suweida – prompted a heavy-handed government response. Though this response was aimed at restoring order, it escalated rather than defused the crisis. In Suweida, the government’s deployment of two divisions (one equipped with heavy armour) appeared disproportionate to the actual problem and alarmed locals who were already suspicious of Damascus. With the events on the coast still fresh in mind, it seemed to take only a few reports of abuses to convince Druze leaders that they were facing an existential threat, prompting them to rally around hardline figures.<sup>137</sup>

The political effects of the July crisis linger. After reversing his previous interest in finding a viable compromise with Damascus, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri moved toward explicitly calling for Israeli protection and asking for Druze self-determination.<sup>138</sup> The confrontation with government troops has generated broad popular support for these positions among Druze in Suweida, sidelining those willing to cooperate with Damascus and support the state’s monopoly of violence. Under al-Hijri’s auspices, a number of Druze leaders have come together in a de facto governing body in Suweida named the Supreme Legal Committee, while all the armed Druze factions have consolidated under the umbrella of a “national guard”, also supported by al-Hijri. Meanwhile, the space for Suweida’s vibrant civil society has narrowed, with reports that elements aligned with al-Hijri have tried to intimidate his critics.<sup>139</sup>

The government’s pronouncements on accountability in the aftermath met with scepticism. The 22 July press conference to present the results of the investigation into the March violence, held amid the Suweida crisis, was viewed by many minority representatives as a diversion, and the subsequent announcement of a similar fact-finding committee for Suweida also got a tepid response.<sup>140</sup> Meanwhile, official narratives concerning the Suweida events appear to focus blame on the Druze armed factions, with President al-Sharaa praising Bedouin tribal fighters for “standing by the state”, while continuing to

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<sup>137</sup> “Syria: What do we know about the Druze, Hikmat al-Hijri’s statement, and why does Israel protect them?”, CNN Arabic, 16 July 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>138</sup> “Syrian Druze leader al-Hijri demands ‘separate’ region for his community”, Al Arabiya English, 25 August 2025; “Syria Druze leader rejects Damascus talks, praises Israel”, *The New Arab*, 18 September 2025.

<sup>139</sup> “Sectarian separatist agendas deepen ongoing crisis in Suwayda”, *Levant* 24, 18 August 2025.

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, civil society figures and activists, July 2025.

refer to Druze factions as “outlaw groups”.<sup>141</sup> In what could signal a course correction, however, the government has since agreed to allow the UN Commission of Inquiry to investigate the Suweida events, which launched its probe in late September. So far, investigators have met with victims’ families and witnesses, after the government provided full access.<sup>142</sup>

In the end, the bloodshed in Suweida and on the coast widened communal divides and deepened the sense of existential threat among both the Druze and the Alawites. In the absence of state protection, many in these communities have gravitated toward belligerent elements. Interlocutors indicate that anti-government figures, such as Druze Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri and the Alawite Council’s Sheikh Ghazal Ghazal, have gained traction, at the expense of others who are more willing to give the government a hearing.<sup>143</sup> For their part, a broad range of people in north-eastern Syria, including SDF representatives, independent civil society figures and opponents of the Kurdish-dominated Autonomous Administration, cite the Suweida episode as a cautionary tale. Damascus, they say, cannot be allowed to take control of their area.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> “President al-Sharaa: The recent events in Suweida constituted a dangerous turning point. The strength of the state stems from the cohesion of its people”, SANA, 19 July 2025 [Arabic]; “Syria: Abuses, Humanitarian Emergency Amid Sweida Clashes”, Human Rights Watch, 22 July 2025.

<sup>142</sup> “International Inquiry Commission Launches Probe into Suweida Violence”, The Syrian Observer, 23 September 2025; “The future of Syria is in the balance: UN Commission sounds alarm on renewed violence amid hopes for justice and peace”, OHCHR, 30 October 2025. In late October, a prominent Syria researcher claimed that the authorities had arrested at least 300 pro-government fighters for allegedly committing crimes in Suweida but refrained from publicising this fact, fearing backlash from their social base. Tweet by Robin Yassin-Kassab, @qunfuz2, 12:57am, 25 October 2025.

<sup>143</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Druze figures, Suweida, July-August 2025.

<sup>144</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Qamishli and al-Hassakeh, 23-29 September 2025.

## V. Maintaining Security in Post-Assad Syria

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The remarkable rapprochement with the U.S. and other Western countries, the lifting of sanctions and the warm reception at the UN for President al-Sharaa in September, and at the White House in November, all reflect a staggering amount of progress in bringing an isolated Damascus in from the cold. Much of this diplomatic turnaround was aided by regional actors – particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Türkiye – which championed Syria’s reintegration and helped pave the way for renewed dialogue with Western governments. Indeed, so much has gone better than could have been imagined, even a year ago, that it is tempting to overlook the things that are going less well or to write them off as extraneous details. But the security lapses that led to surges of violence in March and July are more serious than that. They bespeak problems that exist far outside the affected areas and may jeopardise efforts to reintegrate Syria under central rule.

Among the biggest threats to the transition is the perception among many Syrians that they need to remain armed and even solicit foreign backing to protect themselves and their stake in post-Assad Syria. These impressions are dangerous to efforts to stabilise the coast and Suweida. Nor will they help the fraught process of reintegrating northeastern Syria, which is under the control of the Kurdish-dominated SDF, into the Syrian state’s administrative structures and the SDF itself into the Syrian army.

Consecutive unaddressed security failures can also create the conditions for recurrence. For the reasons explained, the severity of the unrest in Suweida clearly owed a great deal to the March coastal violence and the April clashes in Druze-majority suburbs of Damascus. For this reason, Damascus needs to focus both on making structural reforms and on shoring up stability in Suweida.

### A. *Structural Recommendations*

#### 1. Security reforms

As both the March and July episodes demonstrated, the interim authorities need to address flaws in the security apparatus. They face an immense task: rebuilding institutions after decades of authoritarian rule and civil war. Building a stable security apparatus requires asserting a genuine monopoly over the use of force. Damascus should establish complete command of all units integrated into the state forces. So far, Damascus has taken several encouraging steps, including centralising recruitment for the army and General Security, as well as tightening vetting procedures for the latter. Salaries that were previously paid directly by Türkiye to some of the ex-SNA factions now

instead go to the defence ministry, which disburses them, increasing the government's control of these groups.<sup>145</sup> Still, much more remains to be done.

An area where there has been progress but there is room for more is the stationing of army units with records of abuse. To its credit, Damascus appears to have moved some of the units held in the worst opprobrium away from the coast – including the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade, now the 62nd Division (which was sent to Hama province early in the year) and the Hamzat Division, now the 76th Division (which was dispatched to Aleppo).<sup>146</sup> Moreover, following the Suweida clashes, the 42nd Division (which has a similarly troubling reputation) went back to its main base in the Syrian desert.<sup>147</sup>

While these are good steps, Damascus might also consider relocating the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade away from parts of north-western Hama where the communal mix could lead to tensions. Using these army units to intervene in such places, where memories of civil strife are often fresh, would be a recipe for disaster – even more so if the government does not prevent self-mobilised armed irregulars from joining in.

Moreover, just removing these units is insufficient to restore security to the coast or to central Syria. Violence – kidnappings and killings, mostly of Alawites – remains at a disturbingly high level.<sup>148</sup> The state's failure to provide protection remains a potential rallying cry for insurgents who claim that officials motivated by sectarianism are colluding with the perpetrators.<sup>149</sup> Part of the solution could involve addressing the shortage of security personnel that the government continues to face despite accelerated recruitment in the past months. In early November, an interior ministry spokesman said “tens of thousands” have joined General Security, which was originally 8,000 strong. Nonetheless, he said, Damascus still needs to triple this body's size, highlighting the massive task ahead.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials and former SNA commanders, August 2025.

<sup>146</sup> There were reports of the 62nd Division conducting demining in Latakia province in September. Tweet by Qalaat Al Mudiq, @QalaatAlMudiq, historian, 4:33pm, 17 September 2025. “Who is Saif al-Din Bulad, commander of the 76th Division in Aleppo?”, *Enab Baladi*, 24 March 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>147</sup> Tweet by Qalaat Al Mudiq, @QalaatAlMudiq, historian, 5:11pm, 6 October 2025.

<sup>148</sup> “Child abduction raises fears in Latakia”, *Enab Baladi*, 9 October 2025 [Arabic]; “A crime that shook Homs: Teacher Reham Hammouda was killed by a hand grenade in front of her house in the al-Walid suburb”, *Damapost*, 25 October 2025 [Arabic].

<sup>149</sup> These were the same conditions that led to the March violence. “Are You Alawi? Identity-Based Killings During Syria's Transition”, *op. cit.*

<sup>150</sup> Telegram video post by Syria TV, 12:45pm, 9 November 2025 [Arabic].

In addressing this shortfall, Damascus should consider recruiting people from all constituencies to police their own places of origin. Doing so would serve a dual purpose: harnessing locals' knowledge of neighbourhood dynamics would help in identifying genuine threats and avoiding errors of judgment that might lead officers working in unfamiliar places they perceive as hostile to respond to incidents with a heavy hand. Locally rooted personnel may also be better able to contain mundane conflicts – eg, over property ownership or land and agricultural rights – before they escalate to acquire a political dimension. Indeed, in its first months after coming to power, the interim government was already involving locals in security provision in Aleppo and Damascus – with success that it could try to replicate elsewhere.<sup>151</sup>

Damascus should also be open to vetting and rehiring former regular police officers, of course screening out those with poor human rights records.<sup>152</sup> Many have no such record but do have valuable skills, including in mediating disputes, as well as local knowledge. At the very least, they have more experience than new General Security recruits, who receive only ten to fifteen days of training before they are deployed.<sup>153</sup> While any such forces will need training and a degree of rehabilitation – for instance, to avoid the resumption of prior practices involving petty corruption – building on their previous experience might yield faster results than preparing new recruits – and in ensuring public safety, time seems of the essence.

In parallel, efforts to improve force discipline, which appear to be under way in central and coastal areas, should be stepped up. In some localities, close coordination with community representatives appears to be yielding significant improvement.<sup>154</sup> Scaling up such efforts and adopting them systematically could be a path toward more effective local policing.

## 2. Accountability

Accountability is also crucial, both for post-war attacks on Alawites and Druze and for Assad-era abuses. Moving slowly to hold perpetrators of the March atrocities to account for months created an impression of impunity, which added to the trepidation of the Druze leadership as

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<sup>151</sup> In certain majority-Alawite areas in Damascus, General Security has enlisted unarmed Alawite residents in neighbourhood watches, which locals say has improved public safety. General Security reportedly rejected forming similar bodies in Homs, citing fears that local Alawites would “turn against them”. Crisis Group telephone interview, head of Alawite Islamic Council, 5 April 2025.

<sup>152</sup> “Syria: Briefing to the Committee against Torture”, Amnesty International, 20 April 2010.

<sup>153</sup> “Where it succeeded and where it failed: Syria’s interior ministry caught between security setbacks and abuses undermining public trust”, *Enab Baladi*, 13 August 2025.

<sup>154</sup> Waters, “A New Syria Starts to Take Shape”, *op. cit.*

some of the reportedly implicated forces were sent into their areas. Repeating that pattern after the Suweida episode could spell more trouble elsewhere.

At the same time, many Syrians believe that numerous former regime officials have got away scot-free despite having committed serious crimes. A credible justice process could reduce the motivation for people to take matters into their own hands and the appeal of armed groups that, whether motivated by sectarian bigotry or greed, seek to exploit this sentiment to justify their own abuses. Prosecuting high-ranking former officials implicated in regime atrocities, or prominent war profiteers, would send an important signal, even if a broader reckoning will take time. Importantly, any mechanism for addressing Assad-era crimes must be designed to focus on individual criminal responsibility, not collective or communal guilt, and pursued in a way that assures Alawites that their community is not being subjected to vindictive prosecutions. The sequencing of these efforts is therefore critical. To provide this assurance and defuse tensions, accountability mechanisms should be clearly framed and potentially phased alongside broader reconciliation and confidence-building measures, demonstrating from the outset that the goal is forward-looking justice, not retribution.

In mid-May, President al-Sharaa took a step in this direction, announcing formation of a Transitional Justice Commission tasked to investigate post-2011 abuses by the Assad regime and to provide recommendations for prosecution, in coordination with the justice and interior ministries. By early August, the Commission had finished writing its internal regulations, formed a team and begun coordinating with Interpol for the handover of war criminals, to pursue accountability for regime figures.<sup>155</sup> Yet its establishment by presidential decree, rather than legislation (not an option in the absence of a parliament), has raised concerns about its impartiality and about whether crimes perpetrated by HTS and its precursor, Jabhat al-Nusra, will be investigated.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> The thirteen-member commission is headed by a former opposition politician, Abdulbaset Abdullatif, with a Kurdish lawyer, Zahra al-Barazi, serving as deputy. Its remaining members include legal and human rights specialists, as well as civil society figures. “Syria forms transitional justice, missing persons commissions”, Reuters, 18 May 2025. In July, the commission participated in a dialogue event in Geneva. “ICTJ Convenes International Dialogue in Geneva to Support Syria’s National Commissions for Transitional Justice and the Missing”, International Center for Transitional Justice, 9 July 2025; “Justice commission’ coordinates with Interpol to hand over war criminals in Syria”, *Enab Baladi*, 6 August 2025.

<sup>156</sup> “Joint Statement on Decree No. 20 Stipulating the Establishment of a National Commission for Transitional Justice”, Syrians for Truth and Justice, 23 May 2025; “Syria’s Transitional Justice Commission: A Missed Opportunity for Victim-Led Justice”, Human Rights Watch, 19 May 2025. A senior security official indicated

To maximise legitimacy and credibility, it must be clear that accountability does not amount to doling out victor's justice. The former regime, with its vast security apparatus, was undoubtedly responsible for most of the atrocities during the civil war, yet the government should clarify that the Commission's mandate covers abuses by all sides. The Commission should also involve representative civil society organisations from across the country, including women-led groups, that have documented abuses by all sides in the civil war. To be effective in promoting reconciliation, transitional justice must go hand in hand with initiatives aimed at repairing social cohesion, addressing intercommunal grievances and providing compensation for victims. It will be equally important to hold those responsible for the March and July violence to account, to demonstrate that the new authorities will not tolerate crimes committed by those under their command, even if only nominally.<sup>157</sup>

While there is far to go, the mid-November opening of the first trial for fourteen participants in the coastal violence, seven of them members for the new government's forces and seven of them insurgents, is a promising step toward accountability.<sup>158</sup> Around the same time, the authorities arrested several members of government forces on charges of involvement in abuses in Suweida.<sup>159</sup>

### 3. Inclusion, opportunity and donor support

Accountability is a necessary but not sufficient condition to rebuild trust in the government that has been undermined by the violence. Syrians with secular and liberal leanings see a direct connection between the leadership's exclusionary attitude and the repeated security breakdowns.<sup>160</sup> The concentration of power in the hands of a small coterie of former HTS commanders has clearly alienated many, not only among minorities. Appointing minority members (and just one woman) to ministries, along with granting limited representation in the new parliament, is unlikely to address the trust deficit.

When growing parts of the population believe that they will have no say and perhaps no place in Syria's future, the likelihood increases that contentious issues, such as conflicting visions of the social order

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that abuses by the SDF, the SNA and ISIS would also fall within the investigation's scope, but he did not mention HTS or Jabhat al-Nusra. Crisis Group interview, 25 August 2025.

<sup>157</sup> "Syria's long and fragile path to transitional justice", *The New Arab*, 29 May 2025.

<sup>158</sup> "Syria opens first trial over coastal violence after Assad's fall", op. cit.

<sup>159</sup> "National committee probing Sweida events pledges justice and accountability", SANA, 16 November 2025; "Members of Syria's security forces, military detained over violence in Sweida", Al Arabiya English, 16 November 2025.

<sup>160</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, activist in Damascus, 23 June 2025. See also "Statement on the terrorist attack against the St. Elias Church in Dweil'a", Syrian Democratic Gathering, 22 June 2025.

or the internal organisation of the state, will lead to violent conflict. The room for compromise recedes. Conversely, reaching out to those who now feel excluded and opening the forthcoming stages of the transition to broader participation could help dispel distrust in the authorities, which in turn might improve the chances of meeting security challenges in a non-escalatory fashion.<sup>161</sup>

The economic dimension will also be crucial for restoring security. Syria will not be able to break out of cycles of violence until the economy generates more job opportunities for its citizens. With extreme poverty on the rise, many, especially armed groups, could remain engaged in smuggling, for instance what remains of the trade in Captagon, an illicit stimulant, or in providing armed protection for such activities. Absent alternatives, unemployed former members of the military and the security services are vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups or criminals with disposable funds.

That said, improvements in security cannot wait until the economy picks up. To avoid a breakdown of public order, the Syrian state urgently needs cash infusions. Western governments may be reluctant, or even legally unable, to fund the interim government's forces directly, but others can. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have started transferring money for public-sector salaries, and they should continue doing so. In September, they committed to a monthly grant of \$28 million for three months, with the possibility of extension, to be allocated to civilian public-sector salaries, including health care and education, in coordination with the UN Development Programme, highlighting the scale of need.<sup>162</sup> Supporting other budget lines, such as salaries for civil servants, and the health and education sectors, would allow the government to allocate more of its scant resources to security provision.<sup>163</sup>

But paying regular salaries may not suffice to professionalise Syria's police and General Security. External actors should also provide training and advice to build up the interim government's capacity to re-

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<sup>161</sup> A prominent political activist said: "The easiest way to stop the Druze from looking toward Israel is to open the road to Damascus". He also said many activists want a genuine national conference, suggesting one that brings together "all unified political forces" and allows local formations to nominate participants from their areas – not only religious figures but also secular, opposition and community actors – so that the discussions represent real constituencies and the outcomes feed into the constitutional process. Crisis Group interview, southern suburb of Damascus, 22 August 2025.

<sup>162</sup> "Gulf grant of \$89 million to cover salaries in Syria", *Enab Baladi*, 25 September 2025.

<sup>163</sup> An international aid official in Damascus said, "The definition of early recovery is flexible enough to cover, for instance, repairing the energy infrastructure. Forty per cent of schools are destroyed and 50 per cent of Syrian children are out of school; addressing that would be humanitarian assistance, since education is a basic human right". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 26 February 2025.

spond to security threats and manage communal tensions.<sup>164</sup> Particularly important are the daily interactions between security forces and civilians at the checkpoints that dot the country. Procedures at the checkpoints vary widely, with the guards' conduct ranging from respectful to near predatory. The authorities should hold all personnel to the highest standard, but outside actors may be able to help as well.<sup>165</sup> Assistance aimed at improving these forces' professionalism can help reduce the risk of future violence. Work is under way: Saudi Arabia and Qatar are helping train interior ministry personnel; Türkiye continues to provide security advice to the defence ministry; and the UK is in talks with the same ministry to offer technical support.<sup>166</sup>

Donors may be tempted to condition such assistance on milestones in the political transition, but that approach appears risky. Many benchmarks may not be achievable in the short term, and renewed violence could derail the entire process. At the same time, these external actors should clearly signal to Damascus that failure to tighten its forces' discipline will compromise the good-will it now enjoys and constrain the political space Western governments have to offer support. Without using strict conditionality, they should press for improvements in compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law, including an end to arbitrary detentions, and accountability for abuses.<sup>167</sup>

Donors should likewise support the emergence of a vibrant civil society. While civil society organisations in parts of Syria that fell outside the former regime's control received substantial international aid, the scope for independent activity in regime-held areas remained circumscribed. The legacy is particularly apparent among Alawites, leaving the community poorly equipped to advocate for meeting collective needs or gaining access to resources. Nor can it easily engage in intercommunal dialogue to bridge social rifts and help prevent violent escalation. To help fill the gap, donors and UN agencies should engage directly with communities on the coast. With targeted assistance, including for intercommunal dialogue initiatives on the coast and in Suweida, local civil society organisations could offer peaceful avenues for engagement. They could also help direct discontent into channels other than violent resistance to the new government.

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<sup>164</sup> "Syria's new security forces undergo intensive training in Qatar and Saudi Arabia amid fears of collapse", *The Syrian Observer*, 22 May 2025.

<sup>165</sup> Crisis Group interviews and observations, Damascus, Suweida, Rif Dimashq, Homs, Masyaf, Tartous, Baniyas, Jableh and Qardaha, February-March 2025.

<sup>166</sup> "Syria's new security forces undergo intensive training in Qatar and Saudi Arabia amid fears of collapse", *op. cit.*; "Exclusive: Turkey backing Syria's military and has no immediate withdrawal plans, defence minister says", *Reuters*, 4 June 2025; and "Defence minister discusses issues of common interest with a delegation from UK military attaché", *SANA*, 16 May 2025.

<sup>167</sup> "SNHR's Monthly Report on Arrests/Detentions in Syria", *SNHR*, 4 June 2025.

As concerns sanctions: while the U.S. has moved with impressive speed in getting rid of many penalties, Congress has been more reluctant to lift the “Caesar sanctions” put in place to punish the Assad regime for human rights abuses, instead issuing successive 180-day waivers. After meeting with al-Sharaa during his visit to the U.S., Representative Brian Mast, chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, indicated his willingness to repeal the sanctions in their entirety, though he spoke of provisions for reinstating them if Syria fails to meet certain conditions during the transition.<sup>168</sup> Legislators from the House and Senate are due to settle on language prior to a vote, which is expected in the coming weeks. These signs are promising: the Caesar sanctions have outlived their purpose and they will have to be rescinded entirely in order for Syria to attract the long-term investment and trade opportunities that it needs.

### B. *Stabilising Suweida*

With sectarian resentment running high and external interference persisting, stabilising Suweida will likely be a complex, long-term undertaking. Consequently, Damascus should pause efforts to force a comprehensive settlement and instead focus on de-escalation through service provision and economic integration. Deepening the province’s reliance on state services and infrastructure would be the most effective way to undermine separatist narratives and foreign meddling.

To this end, the government should keep working to ensure the availability of fuel and water, including with pledges to protect wells, many of which came under attack during the unrest.<sup>169</sup> A promising start was the early November appointment of a locally respected Druze figure to run the water department’s branch office in Suweida, a post that no local has occupied before. This appointment has encouraged Druze civil society groups to cooperate with the state.<sup>170</sup> Steps such as helping the apple trade, a major source of income in Suweida, would further cement the state’s role as the area’s economic engine. The national government has traditionally boosted this trade by purchasing and transporting the apple harvest to market. Simultaneously, the government should empower government-aligned Druze to help bring displaced families back to their homes. By proving that the central state is indispensable for livelihoods and stability, authorities can lower the temperature and gradually restore trust, creating the necessary conditions for eventual political dialogue.

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<sup>168</sup> Mast is a Republican from Florida. “GOP’s Mast drops opposition to Syria sanctions repeal – with conditions”, *The Hill*, 20 November 2025.

<sup>169</sup> “Flash updates: Escalation of hostilities in As-Sweida Governorate 2025”, UNICEF, 25 August 2025.

<sup>170</sup> Crisis Group interview, civil activist and member of judicial committee in Suweida, Damascus, 17 November 2025.

## VI. Conclusion

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Successful as the new Syrian authorities have been in forging bonds with outside actors, there is no ignoring the country's internal challenges. The March violence in central and coastal regions marked a turn for the worse in the post-Assad transition. It laid bare the limits of the interim government's authority and the flaws in its security approach. Sectarian resentment and economic desperation continue to fuel instability, particularly in areas where trust in the new order is tenuous. Moreover, July's clashes in majority-Druze Suweida underlined that the March violence was not a one-off breakdown, but part of a pattern of growing alienation from the new government on the part of many Syrians. That trend could generate still more fighting and, if it escalates sufficiently, it could threaten the entire transition. North-eastern Syria, whose circumstances Crisis Group will explore in a forthcoming report, may become the next flashpoint.<sup>171</sup>

To achieve the kind of success at home that it has abroad, the government will need to turn in its second year to domestic affairs. One imperative is to open the political space, allowing broader participation in governance, to build a sense of shared ownership in the new order. Another is to enhance public safety: Damascus will need to improve security throughout the country, corral the factions not fully under its control and build better relations with local communities. Events in Suweida counsel an approach that emphasises economic integration. External actors should bolster these efforts by offering assistance that helps fill gaps, including in payment of salaries and local policing capacity. Conditioning such support on long-term political reforms risks delaying stabilisation and deepening Syria's fragmentation, but the country's partners should use their influence to press the government to improve the professionalism of security forces, including their adherence to international humanitarian and human rights law.

Syria has moved further in one year than anyone might have expected, but the road ahead will be long and difficult. Confronting the challenges outlined in this report is the only way ahead if the country is to repair what decades of authoritarian rule and thirteen years of brutal civil war have broken.

**Damascus/Brussels, 26 November 2025**

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<sup>171</sup> "SDF' and 'Syrian defense ministry' trade accusations over agreement violations in Aleppo", *Enab Baladi*, 12 August 2025. A ceasefire on 7 October, achieved partly as result of a visit by U.S. envoy Tom Barrack and CENTCOM chief Brad Cooper, paused the fighting, but the truce does not end the possibility of future confrontations, especially if integration talks fail to reach a conclusion by year's end. "Syrian army and SDF reach ceasefire deal in Aleppo city following clashes", Reuters, 7 October 2025; "Erdogan says Turkey will not allow Syria's fragmentation", Reuters, 1 October 2025.

## **Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group**

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes CrisisWatch, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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