

# WE PLANT THE TREES, THEY CUT THEM DOWN:

Challenges and Promise  
in Post-Assad Syria



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## Contents

Executive Summary	3
Recommendations	5
Background	7
Findings	8
I. Expressions of Optimism	8
II. Concerns About Syria's Future	9
III. Internally Displaced People in the Northeast	21
IV. A Desire for Transitional Justice	25

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## Executive Summary

In April 2025, Human Rights First (HRF) travelled to northeastern Syria to meet with human rights defenders as the country goes through a massive transition following the December 2024 overthrow of the Assad government by a militant group known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The people HRF interviewed expressed joy at the government's demise and voiced hope that Syria might become an inclusive and stable country.

In this vein, some saw promising signs in certain developments since the fall of the Assad government. For example, the new Syrian Transitional Government (STG) has reached agreements with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which operate in the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. These agreements relate to security issues and the protection of Kurdish rights that had never been recognized by the Assad government. Others HRF interviewed noted that a newly promulgated interim constitution speaks – at least in broad strokes – about protecting the rights of all Syrians.

Those positive indications aside, the people HRF spoke to expressed alarm at some events that have transpired in recent months and discussed their anxieties about what the future will actually hold for Syria. More precisely, they expressed apprehension as to whether groups that do not share the religious orientation that has been espoused by top STG officials will be able to participate safely in Syrian society. Many noted that the most critical positions in the government are held by people who have advocated a severe form of Islam. An oft-cited example is that the first minister of justice appointed after the Assad government's collapse can be seen in a video from several years ago, presiding over the execution of two women on a street in Idlib, Syria after he found them guilty of prostitution and corruption.<sup>1</sup>

Others HRF talked with delineated what they see as telling deficiencies in the constitution promulgated by the STG that is to be in effect for a five-year "transitional" period. For example, the constitution gives the president extensive control over not only the executive, but also the legislative and judicial branches of government. It was noted further that the constitution requires the Syrian president to be a Muslim – but not actually Syrian. It was observed that many non-Muslim Syrian citizens born and raised in Syria are barred from the presidency by that provision, while numerous foreign fighters in Syria who are Muslim could hold the office. This was seen by many as an indication that the STG is not intent on creating a truly pluralistic Syria.<sup>2</sup> The constitution also states that "Islamic jurisprudence is the principal source of legislation." People with whom HRF spoke said that this raised questions about the roles that women and non-Muslims might be allowed to play in Syria.<sup>3</sup>

The individuals HRF met with were even more anxious about human rights abuses committed in Syria following the fall of Assad. Most prominent among these abuses are the killings by extremist Muslim fighters (who may have come from STG-aligned militias more than STG forces) of hundreds of people in Syria's coastal areas in March 2025. The primary victims of

<sup>1</sup> This individual, Shadi Muhammed al-Weisi, has been replaced in the current iteration of Syria's government.

<sup>2</sup> A similar provision appeared in a 1973 constitution (Article 3(1)), drafted under the Assad government, which obviously was not known for embracing the rights of Syrians in a pluralistic manner.

<sup>3</sup> The 1973 constitution (Article 3(2)), provided that Islam was to be "a main source of legislation," rather than "the principal source of legislation," a distinction pointed to by several people with whom we spoke.



these killings were Alawites, who seemingly were targeted for revenge.<sup>4</sup> Many Alawites have fled Syria since the massacres began. HRF secured testimonies of such people in Lebanon, most of whom stated that they have no intention of returning, absent dramatic changes in Syria.

There also were violent attacks on Syria's Druze community beginning in April 2025.<sup>5</sup> These attacks, evidently by extremist Muslim militants, started after a Druze cleric was falsely accused of insulting the Prophet Mohammed. Before Druze fighters and government forces restored order, over 100 people had been killed. HRF uncovered other episodes of abuse directed at the Druze community including an instance in which police arrested and assaulted a group of Druze who were driving to a civil society conference in Raqqa.

The question of whether women will be allowed to participate fully in Syrian society was raised by many of those HRF interviewed. The head of the STG's "Women's Affairs Office" has pronounced that, due to their fundamental nature, women "should take care of themselves, take care of their families, and take care of their husbands." The constitution's provisions requiring that sharia be the basis for Syrian law are seen also as indicating STG officials do not value gender equity. In that regard, there are reports from Homs that women who have long served as judges may not be allowed to continue in those positions (similar questions exist in relation to Christian judges). Women in other workplaces have described new practices to segregate them from male colleagues. Several interviewees observed that it would be perverse if women are forced into subservient roles in a future Syria, given the prominence of women in the anti-Assad revolution.

Another very substantial issue relates to internally displaced people. Tens of thousands of Syrians are presently seeking refuge in northeast Syria, having been expelled from Afrin, Serekaniye (Ras al-Ayn in Arabic), and the al-Shahbah area near Aleppo by military campaigns at the hands of Turkiye and allied Syrian militias (the Syrian National Army or SNA).<sup>6</sup> Those campaigns took place, respectively, in 2018, 2019, and late 2024 to early 2025, and involved well-documented human rights violations. HRF visited a camp housing some of these internally displaced people who reported, uniformly, that despite living in squalid conditions and being desperate to return to their homes – which are not far geographically – the continued occupation of those areas by Turkish forces and the SNA made returning too risky. Nothing other than the withdrawal of Turkish forces and cessation of SNA operations would allow these displaced people to go home. (Although not relevant to the issue of displaced people in the north, people we spoke to also complained about Israeli forces occupying areas in the south and bombing around Syria).

Finally, the defenders with whom HRF spoke consistently emphasized Syria's critical need for transitional justice in relation to the grave crimes that have been committed since 2011 by perpetrators on behalf of the Assad government, HTS, the SNA, and other parties to the various conflicts in Syria. The terms of the constitution and the mandate of a transitional justice commission announced by the STG show that the STG intends to try only former members of the Assad government. Those with whom HRF spoke said that such a circumscribed approach is not appropriate, given the range of groups that

<sup>4</sup> Alawites are often described as a minority sect within Shia Islam. The Assad family is Alawite, and the Alawite community represented a core base of support for the Assad government, particularly among the military and intelligence services, although not at all uniformly. BBC, "Fear of A Reckoning Simmers in Assad's Alawite Heartland," December 16, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce8nzjkye42o>; The Washington Institute for East Policy, "Alawites Under Threat in Syria?," December 31, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/alawites-under-threat-syria>.

<sup>5</sup> The Druze faith, as described by one Druze advocacy organization, has "main precepts" of "truthfulness (*Sudk el-lisan*); safeguarding of brethren (*Hifz el ikhwan*); belief in the unity of God in every age and stage; acceptance of His divine acts – whatever they may be; and submission to His will, in private and in public." American Druze Foundation, "About the Druze," <https://www.americandruzefoundation.org/about-the-druze/>.

<sup>6</sup> All three cities are in northern Syria.



have violated international law over the past fourteen years in Syria. Beyond that, HRF spoke to many people who observed that there is a need to establish an independent Syrian court system that has the requisite capacity to address crimes under international law, which will likely require international support.

In sum, the collapse of the Assad government that ran Syria since the early 1970s presents an extraordinary opportunity for the country to remake itself. The challenges in this regard can hardly be overstated, considering – among other things – Syria’s precarious financial position, the hardening of certain factional divisions over recent years, and the fact that past Syrian governments have provided no models to emulate. We submit that the views of the people we spoke to warrant serious consideration in this context.<sup>7</sup>

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## Recommendations

### To the Syrian Transitional Government:

- Until free and fair elections are held, ensure that the Syrian Transitional Government (STG) reflects the composition of the Syrian population by including women as well as religious and ethnic minorities in critical high-level positions.
- Through an inclusive process, revise the Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic (Constitution) to remove provisions that allow explicitly for discrimination based on religion or that potentially could be cited to allow for discrimination based on religion or gender (or any other characteristic referred to in Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights).
- Through an inclusive process, revise the Constitution to provide for an independent judiciary and legislative branch.
- Ensure that human rights abusers, including those who have been sanctioned for such violations, do not hold positions in the STG, including the military.
- Ensure that militias which were allied with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and that have been formally incorporated into the STG, including Syrian National Army forces, are brought within the actual control and command of the STG and ensure that such militias comply with all applicable law.
- Revise the mandate of the Transitional Justice Commission (Commission) so that it (i) includes violations of international law committed not only by the Assad government, but also by the STG or non-state actors, whether before or after the fall of the Assad government; (ii) ensures the Commission’s independence; (iii) directs the Commission to consult meaningfully with Syrian civil society groups and incorporate strategies proposed by such groups as appropriate; and (iv) provides that the composition of the Commission will represent all segments of Syrian society.

<sup>7</sup> For the avoidance of confusion, we make no predictions about whether the STG will succeed or not in creating a pluralistic and stable Syria. Also, we do not attempt to present a comprehensive overview of Syrian public opinion. Rather, this report reflects the sentiments of those we interviewed.



- Take immediate steps to allow for the safe return of people who are internally displaced in Syria or who have fled from Syria, including as a result of recent violence.<sup>8</sup>

#### **To Turkiye:**

- Withdraw all Turkish military forces from Syria unless their presence has been explicitly authorized by the Syrian government and cease attacks into Syria from Turkish territory.
- In the interim, take immediate steps to ensure that Turkish military forces in Syria and any allied local forces follow all applicable law, including in relation to the protection of civilians.

#### **To Israel:**

- Withdraw all Israeli military forces from Syria unless their presence has been explicitly authorized by the Syrian government and cease attacks into Syria from Israeli territory.
- In the interim, take immediate steps to ensure that Israeli military forces in Syria follow all applicable law, including in relation to the protection of civilians.

#### **To NATO countries, particularly the United States, France, and the United Kingdom – and the broader international community:**

- Advocate with Turkiye, Israel, and any other country that maintains an unauthorized military presence in Syria to withdraw said presence.
- Increase support for humanitarian and stability operations in Syria, as well as aid for rebuilding critical infrastructure.
- The United States should restore and increase its support for humanitarian and stability operations in Syria.
- Refrain from forced or premature returns of refugees to Syria which would be counterproductive and exacerbate challenges within Syria, while helping, through the provision of humanitarian and development aid, to create conditions that enable safe and effective returns.
- Pair broad sanctions relief on the Syrian economy and institutions with continued targeted sanctions on individuals responsible for human rights violations.

#### **To countries whose nationals are held in Syria based on potential ISIS involvement**

- Work with authorities in Syria to promptly repatriate citizens to their home countries, consistent with human rights protections, accountability and due process.

<sup>8</sup> Recent estimates by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees are that 7.4 million Syrians are internally displaced and more than 6 million Syrians are refugees. UNCHR, "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," March 13, 2025, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>.



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## Background

The seismic political changes seen in Syria over the past six months have been well documented. To contextualize this report, we recount them briefly. On November 27, 2024, a militant group known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), with allied forces, initiated an offensive against then-president Bashar al-Assad's government. HTS moved rapidly southward from its base in Idlib and, within days, was closing in on Damascus. On December 8, 2024, it was confirmed that Assad had fled to Russia, ending decades of the Assad family's corrupt and brutal rule.

The leader of HTS had been known by his nom-de-guerre, Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani. However, on December 6, CNN interviewed al-Jawlani, and he introduced himself using his given name, Ahmed al-Shara. He called for a peaceful Syria and the protection of all Syrians' rights. These sentiments were welcomed by many, given that al-Shara had long been associated with extremist Muslim groups, including al-Qaeda.<sup>9</sup>

On December 10, HTS announced the establishment of an interim authority called the Syrian Caretaker Government (SCG). Members of the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government, which had run Idlib previously, were appointed to most posts. On January 29, 2025, the "Conference for Announcing the Victory of the Syrian Revolution" was held in Damascus. A government spokesperson announced that al-Shara would be the Syrian president for this transitional phase, a role he had already taken, de facto.

On February 23, a government committee formed by al-Shara announced that, on February 25, a "National Dialogue Conference" (Conference) would begin. It was said that the Conference would be an opportunity for invited participants to discuss the future of Syria. The government did not extend invitations to representatives of northeast Syria, Suwaida province, or Syria's Mediterranean coastal region.

On March 13, al-Shara endorsed a "Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic" (Constitution). A seven-person committee, selected by al-Shara, had drafted the Constitution. By its terms, the Constitution will be in effect for a five-year transition period.

On March 29, Syrian authorities announced the creation of the Syrian Transitional Government (STG) to replace the SCG. The STG includes a 23-member cabinet.

Against the backdrop of these developments and following up on prior Syria reporting, HRF visited northeast Syria in April 2025.<sup>10</sup> HRF spoke with dozens of people, including human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, community leaders, and internally displaced people. Reflecting Syria's ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, the individuals HRF interviewed were from, variously, the Druze, Yazidi, Assyrian, Armenian, other Christian, majority Sunni Muslim Arab, Kurdish, and Alawite

<sup>9</sup> In 2003, al-Shara joined al-Qaeda in Iraq, fighting there before U.S. forces imprisoned him. Upon his release, al-Shara was a commander with the Islamic State in Iraq, before being sent to Syria by the Islamic State in Iraq's then-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In Syria, al-Shara founded Jabhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front), a jihadist militia. After the Islamic State in Iraq became the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, al-Shara allied himself with ISIS rival al-Qaeda. The U.S. listed al-Shara as a Specially Designated National in 2013.

<sup>10</sup> See Human Rights First, "Syrian Refugees," September 19, 2022, <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/syrian-refugees/>; Human Rights First, "Human Rights First Welcomes U.S. Leadership at Syria Refugee Meeting," September 30, 2013, <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/human-rights-first-welcomes-u-s-leadership-at-syria-refugee-meeting/>.



communities.<sup>11</sup> HRF also secured testimonies from Syrians who fled to Lebanon to escape violence that took place in March in the coastal regions of Syria.<sup>12</sup>

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## Findings

### I. Expressions of Optimism

#### **A. Universal Celebration of the Fall of Assad**

Without exception, those we interviewed expressed happiness that the Assad government had been deposed. A Sunni Arab woman who is a human rights activist spoke of a surge of “great hope” she felt upon hearing that Assad had fled to Russia.

At a celebration of the Yazidi New Year in the countryside between Amuda and al-Hasakah city, a community leader recalled that the Assad government never recognized the Yazidis as a people and did not permit instruction about the community or the use of the Yazidi language in schools. Under the watchful eye of male and female Yazidi security forces positioned on hills overlooking the celebration, he said that, with Assad gone, it is possible Syria will become an inclusive country.

An Assyrian civil society leader told HRF that the fall of Assad is a “new birth for Syrian history.” He reported that, for over fifty years, people in Syria had not been able simply to express themselves, but that there is a “chance” to do that now. He spoke about the Assad government’s “propagandistic” positioning of itself as a protector of minority groups, particularly Christians, to appeal to Western countries, even as it crushed dissent when conveyed by those very groups. He noted that, in 2013, the government had arrested Saeed Malki, a leader in the Syriac Union Party, whose fate is still unknown. Another Syriac political leader spoke of having been imprisoned himself by the Assad government for his political expression. “I personally saw many violations in jail,” he said in an understated fashion. “The Assad regime accepted no dissent,” he said.

HRF spoke with Kurdish activists who recounted how the Assad government had, over many years, stripped Kurds of their citizenship, refused to recognize even the existence of the Kurdish people, and outlawed the Kurdish language. Given this history and the nearly unfathomable scale of human rights violations the government committed, particularly since 2011, these activists celebrated the fall of the government. HRF observed that, following the government’s downfall, people in Kurdish areas had destroyed the few signs of the government that had remained, such as photographs of Bashar al-Assad outside a building the government had occupied in Qamishli.

#### **B. Promising Signs from the Syrian Transitional Government (STG)**

Northeastern Syria is an ethnically and religiously diverse area with a majority Kurdish population. Since the war in Syria began in 2011, the northeast has functioned in a largely independent manner under the Democratic Autonomous

<sup>11</sup> While HRF spoke to Sunni Arabs, we did not speak with anyone who claimed to agree with the religious views that the majority of Syria’s current government officials have espoused, at least in the past. Our efforts to interview representatives of the STG were unsuccessful.

<sup>12</sup> We do not suggest that any individual’s views reflect the entirety of opinion of the community to which the individual belongs. But obviously, it is not possible to speak to an entire community. And, in many instances, we spoke to people who had leadership positions within their communities, which perhaps gives them a broader perspective on relevant issues.



Administration of North and East Syria.<sup>13</sup> In 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) came into existence as a successor to various militias that had formed in the region as fighting spread around Syria. The SDF is Kurdish-led, but has members from Arab, Christian and other groups. The SDF has fought – and continues to fight – against ISIS in tandem with the U.S. military.<sup>14</sup>

On March 10, 2025, Syrian President al-Shara and Mazloum Abdi, the head of the SDF, announced an agreement regarding the relationship between the STG and the SDF. The agreement provides that, by year’s end, public institutions in the northeast, including borders, airports, and oil fields, will be brought under government control. The agreement also recognizes that the Kurdish community is native to Syria and provides that the government will guarantee Kurds all constitutional rights. The agreement further states that the government guarantees the rights of all Syrians to representation and participation in the political process, regardless of religious or ethnic background.<sup>15</sup>

HRF spoke with civil society leaders and activists in northeast Syria, including but not limited to Kurds, about this agreement. Generally, those we interviewed noted that the agreement did not address specific steps by which its objectives would be achieved, but expressed satisfaction with the broad principles outlined. Again, some noted that the Assad government had never recognized even that Kurds existed, let alone recognized their rights. As such, the agreement creates the possibility of an improvement from the historical treatment of Kurds in Syria.<sup>16</sup>

Others spoke about what seemed to be additional positive developments in relations between the SDF and the STG. For example, in early April 2025, the STG and the SDF agreed to exchange prisoners held by each side in Aleppo.<sup>17</sup> In addition, they agreed that SDF forces would withdraw from two predominantly Kurdish neighborhoods in Aleppo, allowing for an expansion of government control.<sup>18</sup> There was also an agreement in mid-April that saw SDF forces withdraw from the Tishrin Dam area, along the Euphrates River. The SDF had captured the area from ISIS in 2015 but had increasingly been attacked there by Turkiye and Turkish-backed forces. While the precise terms of the agreement are unclear, STG forces appear to have taken on the mandate of providing security in the area, perhaps with the assistance of local SDF forces and HTS police.<sup>19</sup> These developments were viewed as favorable and promising, to varying degrees, by those we interviewed.

## II. Concerns About Syria’s Future

Notwithstanding the positive – and potentially positive – events noted above, the people HRF spoke with universally expressed anxiety, or in some cases fear, about the future. Specifically, people repeatedly expressed concerns for

<sup>13</sup> We recognize that the term “war” does not aptly describe all violence that occurred in Syria following massive protests against the government in 2011. In many instances the Syrian state attacked peaceful protestors, which cannot be characterized as “war.” We use the term at times for the sake of brevity.

<sup>14</sup> Congressional Research Service, “Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy,” March 11, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487>.

<sup>15</sup> SpecialEurasia, “The Kurds’ Gamble for Survival in The New Syria,” March 17, 2025, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2025/03/17/kurds-news-syria/#:~:text=One%20of%20these%20surprises%20is,endanger%20its%20security%20and%20unity>.

<sup>16</sup> One Sunni Arab activist noted that this agreement was signed during the height of the sectarian violence on Syria’s coast, and that President al-Shara had a critical need in that moment to demonstrate movement toward an inclusive Syria. The agreement might have been the product of politics to a degree, she opined.

<sup>17</sup> The New Arab, “Syrian Government and Kurdish-led SDF Exchange 250 Prisoners in Aleppo,” April 4, 2025, <https://www.newarab.com/news/syrian-government-and-sdf-exchange-250-prisoners-aleppo>.

<sup>18</sup> AP News, “Kurdish Fighters Leave Northern City in Syria as Part of Deal with Central Government,” April 4, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-aleppo-sdf-sheikh-maksoud-achrafieh-withdrawal-9b8cd819c04b222a695455bb426f92df>.

<sup>19</sup> Middle East Eye, “SDF withdraws from key Syrian dam after agreement with Damascus,” April 12, 2025, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sdf-withdraw-key-syrian-dam-after-agreement-damascus>.



communities whose views on issues such as religious freedom, the role of women, or the rule of law do not match those of the officials who now hold the highest positions in government. These anxieties could be viewed as reflecting a need for “minority protection.” However, it is unclear whether a majority of Syrians share the worldview of those officials on social, religious and other issues. As such, rather than speaking of “minority protection” as such, it is likely more accurate to consider the fears of – and the imperative to protect – people and groups not ideologically aligned with the STG.

In this context, those HRF interviewed spoke of many instances of tangible conduct by the government that legitimately raises concerns, as addressed immediately below.

#### **A. President Al-Shara’s Appointments to the STG Cabinet**

Many people expressed worry about the lack of diversity among those appointed to the twenty-three cabinet posts in the STG. As one person put it, “there is one color in the government.” More specifically, those we interviewed noted that individuals they view as religious extremists are in many high-level positions. In the words of a Yazidi community leader, “Syria has everyone, but the cabinet has only Sunni Islamists.” This person observed that Islamists believe Yazidis are “nonbelievers” against whom Islam must be protected. “How can that be good?” he asked.

Perhaps the most serious (and frequent) objection was to Shadi Muhammed al-Weisi’s having served as minister of justice, albeit prior to the technical formation of the STG. The people we spoke to repeatedly referred to videos of al-Weisi’s involvement in the execution of two women in 2015, when he chaired the Supreme Judicial Council in Idlib. The videos, which have been verified, show al-Weisi directing the killings, evidently after convicting the women of prostitution and corruption. In one video, a woman begs to see her children for a final time before she is shot in the head.<sup>20</sup>

Concerns were expressed about the appointment to the STG of other people who held prominent positions in HTS when it presented itself as a jihadist organization. Asaad al-Shaibani was a founding member of the Nusra Front, then the al-Qaeda branch in Syria, and led foreign relations for the Nusra Front when it became HTS. He is now the foreign minister.<sup>21</sup> Murhaf Abu Qasra was HTS’s military commander and now is the defense minister. Anas Khattab, who led HTS’s internal security apparatus, is the interior minister.<sup>22</sup>

HRF also heard repeated concerns about the appointment of individuals who are notorious militia leaders to command positions in the military. For example, Mohammad Hussein al-Jasim, known as Abu Amsha, was sanctioned by the U.S. for various atrocities when he led the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade.<sup>23</sup> He now leads the military’s Hama Brigade.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> NBC News, “He oversaw the public executions of two women. Now he’s Syria’s new justice minister,” January 19, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/syria-justice-minister-execution-video-adultery-assad-regime-rcna186523>. On March 29, 2025, al-Weisi was succeeded by Mazar al-Wais. Al-Wais, a former member of HTS, has made denigrating comments about Alawites. Shahid Alhaqayiq, Facebook, March 11, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=saved&v=1650362802269675>.

<sup>21</sup> The New Arab, “Who is Asaad al-Shaibani, Syria’s New Foreign Minister?,” December 24, 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/who-asaad-al-shibani-syrias-new-foreign-minister>.

<sup>22</sup> SANA, “President Al-Sharaa Announces Formation of The New Government: We Are Witnessing the Birth of a New Phase in Our National Process,” March 30, 2025, <https://www.sana.sy/en/?p=350809>.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Two Syria-Based Militias Responsible for Serious Human Rights Abuses in Northern Syria,” August 17, 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1699>.

<sup>24</sup> Enab Baladi, “Syrian Defense Ministry Appoints ‘Abu Amsha’ as Hama Brigade Commander,” March 2, 2025, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/02/syrian-defense-ministry-appoints-abu-amsha-as-hama-brigade-commander/>.



The STG appointed Sayf al Din Boulad, known as Sayf Abu Bakr, to lead the army's 76th Division in Aleppo.<sup>25</sup> Boulad was sanctioned by the U.S. when he led the Hamza Division, including in connection with kidnappings and abusive treatment of detainees.<sup>26</sup>

Ahmad al-Hayes, known as Abu Hatem Shaqra, led a militia called Ahrar al-Sharqiya, which has been deemed responsible for the 2019 killing of Hevrin Khalaf, a Kurdish politician. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria deemed the killing a possible war crime.<sup>27</sup> The U.S. sanctioned al-Hayes for that and other violations.<sup>28</sup> Al-Hayes now commands Division 86 of the Syrian army.<sup>29</sup>

A Sunni Arab activist observed the irony of also seeing supporters of the Assad government like businessmen Samer Foz and Mohammad Hamsho – who were sanctioned by the U.S. – being brought into the fold by the STG.<sup>30</sup> The activist noted that such figures, while hated by many, have economic power needed in Syria, and that perhaps their return was inevitable.

Several interviewees noted that the STG cabinet includes appointees from minority groups, which might be a sign of inclusiveness. However, it was remarked that those appointees are not in positions of real power and are not individuals of renown. As a Kurdish journalist put it, “Nobody knows the Kurdish person [Mohammad Terko, minister of education] or the Druze person [Amjad Badr, minister of agriculture]. It's not real inclusiveness. They didn't include any real Kurdish leaders.”

### **B. Shortcomings in the New Syrian Constitution**

Many people HRF interviewed observed that the Constitution, which was presented to the country in March 2025, contains broadly positive principles such as guarantees for freedom of belief<sup>31</sup> and the cultural and linguistic rights of all Syrians.<sup>32</sup>

That aside, there are aspects of the Constitution that were described as troubling, including that it allows the president to have great control over all aspects of government. Specifically, the Constitution provides that the president will personally appoint one-third of a transitional parliament. A committee will select the remaining two-thirds of the parliament, but it is the president who appoints the committee members.<sup>33</sup> Thus, directly or indirectly, the president will determine the composition of the legislative branch.

<sup>25</sup> The New Arab, “Sayf Boulad: From a Defector Lieutenant of the Syrian Regime to Commander of the 76th Division in the Syrian Army,” March 24, 2025, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B4%D9%82-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9-76-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A>.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, *supra* note 23.

<sup>27</sup> PBS News, “UN Reports War Crimes on Almost All Sides in Syria,” March 2, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/un-reports-war-crimes-on-almost-all-sides-in-syria>.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Syrian Regime Prisons, Officials, and Syrian Armed Group,” July 28, 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0292>.

<sup>29</sup> RUDAW, “US Says Syria's Appointment of Sanctioned Commander A ‘Serious Mistake,’” September 5, 2025, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/09052025>.

<sup>30</sup> Reuters, “Syria's New Leaders Zero in on Assad's Business Barons,” February 13, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-new-leaders-zero-assads-business-barons-2025-02-13/>.

<sup>31</sup> Constitution, Article 3(2).

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at Article 7(3).

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at Article 24.



As to the judiciary, a Sunni Arab human rights activist said, “The new Constitution puts all courts in the President’s hands and could bring a new era of tyranny.” In particular, a Supreme Constitutional Court is to be established with all members selected by the president, evidently without oversight from any other organ of government.<sup>34</sup> That raises obvious questions about the extent to which the highest court in Syria will be independent and the extent to which it could hold the president accountable.

Similarly, the Constitution provides that a Supreme Judicial Council will oversee the functioning of the judiciary.<sup>35</sup> Nothing is said, however, about the process to create the Supreme Judicial Council. Some have noted the possibility that the president could become the head of that body, as was the case under the 2012 Syrian Constitution.<sup>36</sup>

The Constitution also states that “Islamic Jurisprudence is the principal source of legislation,” and that the president must be Muslim.<sup>37</sup> These provisions have created consternation. A Christian civil society leader said he had been hopeful that, after fourteen years of war, the Syrian government would recognize all Syrians equally. But he pointed to these specific articles to argue that the Constitution fails to recognize the diversity of the Syrian people. “Can we not have Christian or Yazidi or Druze judges if Islam is the source of law?” he asked. “Will Islamic jurisprudence let us have women judges?” he continued. He also made the point that, under the Constitution, a Muslim who is not even a Syrian citizen could become president, while many Syrian citizens born and raised in Syria could not.

Some of these issues were anticipated before the Constitution was unveiled. A female judge from Homs anonymously reported that, after courts reopened in Homs following the Assad government’s departure, a person known as Sheikh Abu Abdullah was appointed to lead the courts. At a meeting of judges, Sheikh Abu Abdullah announced there would be efforts to “conform” the court’s work to Islamic law. A judge of Christian descent asked if that meant all judges had to be Muslim. Sheikh Abu Abdullah replied: “We will rule according to Islamic Sharia in the end.” Sheikh Abu Abdullah was asked about the future role of female judges, and replied, “This decision is left to time...We have to wait and see how the Supreme Judicial Council will vote in the future.” These remarks brought about significant protest, and subsequently Sheikh Hassan al-Aqraa replaced Sheikh Abu Abdullah. Al-Aqraa holds a degree in Islamic Sharia, and it is not clear whether his orientation differs from that of Sheikh Abu Abdullah.<sup>38</sup> At Al-Aqraa’s first meeting with judges, women were made to wear head coverings and sit separately from their male colleagues.<sup>39</sup>

A range of people HRF spoke with lamented that the Constitution was drafted without representatives from many Syrian communities, despite the Constitution’s reference in its introduction to “intensive dialogues between the various components of Syrian society.” Specifically, the committee that President al-Shara appointed to draft the Constitution was made up solely of male Sunni Arabs.<sup>40</sup> A number of individuals noted also that, while the Constitution speaks generally of protecting the rights of all Syrians, it was a missed opportunity for the Constitution not to refer to specific groups whose rights should be enshrined, given the Syrian state’s long history of trampling on the rights of various groups.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at Article 47(2).

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at Article 43(2).

<sup>36</sup> 2012 Syrian Arab Republic Constitution, Article 133.

<sup>37</sup> Constitution, *supra* note 31, at Article 3(1).

<sup>38</sup> DARAJ, “I’m a Female Judge in Homs. What Will Happen to My Career in the New Syria?,” April 4, 2025, <https://daraj.media/en/im-a-female-judge-in-homs-what-will-happen-to-my-career-in-the-new-syria/>.

<sup>39</sup> More to Her Story, “Syrian Activists Voice Alarm Over the Future of Women’s Rights Under HTS,” December 24, 2024, <https://www.moretoherstory.com/stories/syrian-rights-activists-voice-alarm-over-the-future-of-women-under-hts>.

<sup>40</sup> RIC, “Explainer: Syria’s Transitional Constitution,” March 15, 2025, <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2025/03/iexplainer-syrias-transitional-constitution/>.



### C. Human Rights Violations in Post-Assad Syria

For those whom HRF interviewed, the greatest fears arose out of concrete examples of human rights abuses that recently occurred in Syria.

#### 1. Killings on the Syrian Coast in March 2025

Among the abuses that raised fears, the killing of hundreds of people in March 2025 in Syria's Mediterranean coastal areas stood out as a singular cause for alarm.

A Kurdish human rights defender pointed to that violence, saying, "People are panicked at the idea of HTS forces coming to their areas." A Christian civil society leader said the killings had "created tremendous fear" in his community. A journalist in northeast Syria – where the SDF is the primary security element – noted that, "After the coastal attacks even people who don't usually support the SDF are saying at least the SDF protects people." He opined that people in the northeast would not feel any sense of security from an HTS presence. An internally displaced person said, "Look at the coast, and you know HTS can't be trusted."

While this episode has been well reported, we set forth the following chronology for contextual purposes. Hostilities began on March 6 with what appears to have been coordinated attacks on STG security forces by militants linked to the former Assad government in the towns of Beit Ana and al-Daliya, south of Latakia.<sup>41</sup> Reportedly, insurgents killed at least thirty members of the security services.<sup>42</sup> Fighting then spread through the region, as insurgents seized control of city centers and certain military and security headquarters.<sup>43</sup>

While these clashes were ongoing, the "Military Council for the Liberation of Syria" proclaimed its existence under former Assad-era Brigadier General Ghayath Suleiman Dala, in what may have been an attempt to foment a full-scale rebellion by pro-Assad forces.<sup>44</sup> Pro-Assad rebels reportedly engaged in various human rights abuses during this period, firing upon

<sup>41</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Syria: End Coastal Killing Spree, Protect Civilians," March 10, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/10/syria-end-coastal-killing-spree-protect-civilians>; ETANA, @ETANA\_Syria, X, March 7, 2025, [https://x.com/ETANA\\_Syria/status/1897990813218390133](https://x.com/ETANA_Syria/status/1897990813218390133).

<sup>42</sup> Al Jazeera, "A Member of The Syrian Security Forces Was Killed in an Armed Ambush by the Remnants of the Regime in the Latakia Countryside," March 15, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2025/3/6/%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9>; Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "Syria's Transitional Honeymoon Is Over After Massacres and Disinformation," March 10, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrias-transitional-honeymoon-over-after-massacres-and-disinformation>.

<sup>43</sup> Al Quds Arabi, "Remnants' Ambushes Kill Security Personnel On The Syrian Coast," March 6, 2025, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/%D9%83%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%84/>.

<sup>44</sup> The Long War Journal, "Fierce Clashes Erupt Between Assad Loyalists and Government Forces in Western Syria", March 7, 2025, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/03/fierce-clashes-erupt-between-assad-loyalists-and-government-forces-in-western-syria.php>.



hospitals and attempting to take control of them, while continuing to attack security personnel.<sup>45</sup> These attacks are said to have killed at least 211 civilians.<sup>46</sup>

STG forces and allied militias responded. A Telegram channel that appears to be officially utilized by the STG stated, on March 7, that President al-Shara had publicly declared the “era of amnesty and forgiveness is over” and the “era of liberation and purification has begun.”<sup>47</sup> The STG also called for a general mobilization of fighters beyond units already in the coastal areas.<sup>48</sup>

HTS-allied militias joined the fight, including some whose commanders have been sanctioned by the U.S., such as the Hamza Division and the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade.<sup>49</sup> These forces included many foreign fighters in their ranks.<sup>50</sup>

Quickly, an operation that began to neutralize fighters who, evidently, were Assadist-aligned transformed into a campaign of extrajudicial executions in Alawite-majority areas.<sup>51</sup> The highest number of fatalities occurred in and around Latakia and Tartus, where Alawites and some Christians were targeted. Widely circulated videos show that forces likely loyal to the STG killed more than thirty men in Mukhtariya, Latakia Province.<sup>52</sup> In Baniyas, eyewitnesses reported mass killings of Alawites with entire families gunned down in their homes, and the creation of mass graves by foreign fighters believed to be

<sup>45</sup> Institute for the Study of War, “Iran Update,” March 7, 2025, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-update-march-7-2025> ; Levant 24,

[@Levant\\_24](https://x.com/Levant_24/status/1898042773980213289), March 7, 2025, [https://x.com/Levant\\_24/status/1898042773980213289](https://x.com/Levant_24/status/1898042773980213289); SANA,

[@SanaAjel](https://x.com/SanaAjel/status/1898031025495666905), March 7, 2025, <https://x.com/SanaAjel/status/1898031025495666905>; Qalaat Al Mudiq,

[@QalaatAlMudiq](https://x.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/189777644520829401), March 6, 2025, <https://x.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/189777644520829401>; Reuters, “Scores Killed as Syrian Forces Seek to Crush Alawite Insurgency,” March 7, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-imposes-curfew-latakia-tartous-after-clashes-2025-03-07/>.

<sup>46</sup> Syrian Network for Human Rights, “803 Individuals Extrajudicially Killed Between March 6-10, 2025,” March 11, 2025, <https://snhr.org/blog/2025/03/11/803-individuals-extrajudicially-killed-between-march-6-10-2025/>.

<sup>47</sup> Telegram, March 7, 2025, [https://t.me/Syrian\\_Arab\\_R3public/269](https://t.me/Syrian_Arab_R3public/269). We are not aware of any effort by the STG to disavow this statement.

<sup>48</sup> Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “Syria’s Transitional Honeymoon Is Over After Massacres and Disinformation,” March 10, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrias-transitional-honeymoon-over-after-massacres-and-disinformation>.

<sup>49</sup> SyriacPress, “EU Sanctions Turkey-Backed Syrian National Army Militias Sultan Sulaiman Shah Brigade, Hamza Division, and Sultan Murad Division for Human Rights Abuses,” May 30, 2025, <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2025/05/30/eu-sanctions-turkey-backed-syrian-national-army-militias-sultan-sulaiman-shah-brigade-hamza-division-and-sultan-murad-division-for-human-rights-abuses/>.

<sup>50</sup> The Standard, “Syria Violence Leaves More Than 1,000 Dead in Two Days of Brutal Revenge Attacks,” March 9, 2025, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/syria-1000-dead-assad-supporters-latakia-b1215545.html>.

<sup>51</sup> The Wall Street Journal, “Syrian Forces Battle Insurgents in Serious Test for New Government,” March 7, 2025, [https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/syrian-forces-battle-insurgents-in-serious-test-for-new-government-60f87c95?mod=middle-east\\_news\\_article\\_post](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/syrian-forces-battle-insurgents-in-serious-test-for-new-government-60f87c95?mod=middle-east_news_article_post); The New York Times, “More Than 140 Killed in Clashes Between Syrian Forces and Assad Loyalists,” March 7, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/07/world/middleeast/syria-clashes-assad.html%20%20https://t.me/nahermedia/45498>. As noted in the Executive Summary, Bashar al-Assad was an Alawite, and the Alawite community provided support for Assad, although not at all uniformly.

<sup>52</sup> Reuters, “Gunmen Killed Dozens in Syrian Alawite Town, Sources and Monitor Say,” March 7, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gunmen-kill-dozens-syrian-alawite-town-sources-war-monitor-say-2025-03-07/>; Gregory Waters, [@GregoryPWaters](https://x.com/GregoryPWaters/status/1897934299225374937), March 7, 2025, <https://x.com/GregoryPWaters/status/1897934299225374937>.



Chechen or Uzbek.<sup>53</sup> In Latakia, mass abductions of Alawites were reported, with many of the kidnapped believed to be dead.<sup>54</sup>

Videos on social media also show attacks on civilians by uniformed STG government forces.<sup>55</sup> One video shows government soldiers throwing explosives from a helicopter, evocative of the use of barrel bombs by the Assad government during the war.<sup>56</sup> Another video, posted by a perpetrator, shows soldiers wearing HTS insignias, shouting sectarian slurs, burning homes, and executing civilians in the Alawite majority village of al-Sanobar.<sup>57</sup> A masked fighter there filmed himself in a ransacked home, singing “ethnic cleansing, ethnic cleansing” and, in another video, “We’ve come to you with the taste of death,” while bodies lie scattered around.<sup>58</sup> Survivors of the massacre have said that this individual, along with others, executed male family members. One stated, “My father was a 75-year-old retired teacher...they shot my father in the head...they shot my brother in the heart.”<sup>59</sup>

On March 9, a Defense Ministry official asked civilians who had “rushed to support their brothers” to return home, forty-eight hours after they’d been called upon to participate.<sup>60</sup> The worst atrocities had already been committed. Indeed, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights documented the killing of 1,557 civilians in these episodes.<sup>61</sup>

UNCHR reports that 30,000 Alawites fled Syria, with many going to Lebanon.<sup>62</sup> According to consistent and credible testimony secured by HRF, the number of displaced individuals has surpassed that of the original residents in many areas, overwhelming infrastructure. Displaced Syrians are living in dire conditions and relying on limited aid. The majority of interviewees emphasized that this wave of violence came when, in fact, they had expected stability. Many reported being happy at the fall of the Assad government or at least hopeful that life in Syria could improve thereafter. Nonetheless, many of those interviewed said they would not return to Syria without substantive guarantees for their safety.

<sup>53</sup> France 24, “Roads Full of Corpses: Terrified Alawites in Syria Flee Attacks,” March 9, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250309-roads-full-of-corpses-terrified-alawites-in-syria-flee-attacks>; BBC, “Syrians Describe Terror as Alawites Killed in Their Homes,” March 9 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx20p0pj931o>; Al Jazeera, “Syrian Groups to Unite Under One Army,” December 25, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2024/12/25/syrian-armed-groups-to-unite-under-one-army>.

<sup>54</sup> France 24, “Roads Full of Corpses: Terrified Alawites in Syria Flee Attacks,” March 9, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250309-roads-full-of-corpses-terrified-alawites-in-syria-flee-attacks>.

<sup>55</sup> Syria Direct, “Blood on the Coast: Can Damascus Pull Back from the Brink?”, March 8, 2025, <https://syriadirect.org/blood-on-the-coast-can-damascus-pull-back-from-the-brink/>.

<sup>56</sup> Al-Mu'tasim Billah Al-Shahood, @almo2tasem91, March 7, 2025, <https://x.com/almo2tasem91/status/1898016566995808266>; The New York Times, “Hundreds of Civilians Killed by Government Forces in Syria, War Monitors Say,” March 8, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/08/world/middleeast/syria-clashes-assad.html>.

<sup>57</sup> CNN, “‘Ethnic cleansing!’ Videos Show Syrian Government-Aligned Forces Reveling in Massacre of Minorities in Coastal Town,” March 17, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/17/middleeast/syria-massacre-alawite-minority-intl-invs/index.html>.

<sup>58</sup> *Id.*

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*

<sup>60</sup> Telegram, March 9, 2025, [https://t.me/Sy\\_Defense/226](https://t.me/Sy_Defense/226).

<sup>61</sup> The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “As More Massacres Documented | The Number of People Killed During Security Operations in Syrian Coastline Exceeds 2,000,” March 17, 2025, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/357944/>. The Syrian Network for Human Rights’ monitoring is narrower and more conservative, reporting 1,084 extrajudicial killings (445 killed by Assadist rebels, 639 killed by STG-aligned forces). Syrian Network for Human Rights, “Preliminary Report on the Violations That Took Place in the Wake of the Attacks Carried Out by Non-State Armed Groups Linked to the Assad Regime, Mostly in the Governorates of Latakia, Tartus, and Hama,” March 11, 2025, <https://snhr.org/blog/2025/03/11/803-individuals-extrajudicially-killed-between-march-6-10-2025/>.

<sup>62</sup> The New Humanitarian, “Syrian Alawites Flee to Lebanon, With Little Aid to Meet Them,” June 4, 2025, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2025/06/04/syrian-alawites-flee-lebanon-little-aid-meet-them>.



Some people explained that their homes had been destroyed by militants so there actually was little to return to. One person, who came from an Alawite area east of Homs, reported that his house had been burned to the ground and that:

*All Shia and other Alawites in the east and west of Homs, were forced into exile. Some of the houses were not destroyed. Instead, they were captured by HTS. They now consider these properties state assets.*

Others recounted violence they witnessed or experienced, including one who said:

*Regime men interrogated my children, asking them whether they were Alawite or Sunni. My children confirmed that they are Muslims, but the men insisted they give their sect. They then stated that they are Alawites and were beaten. The men told my children they would kill them if they ever saw them again.*

Another person recalled:

*I was at a massacre and saw entire families wiped out. I witnessed militants gouging out the eyes of some Alawites and even cutting out their tongues. On the first day of the conflict, 200 Alawites were killed on the Damascus Road. The bodies were removed from the street and covered with sand to conceal the crime.*

Some of those interviewed showed clear signs of physical injury, including one who recalled:

*I was shot twice in the chest...My wife is a nurse, who treated me at home. I didn't want to go to the hospital. There were Alawite patients at the military hospital and the Al-Bashel hospital [in Tartus] who were attacked.*

There were reports of groups deliberately destroying religious sites as well. One woman recounted, "We [Alawites] saw [our] shrines damaged by militants and later burned down." Another said, "I saw militants targeting Christians and storming churches."

Other victims described humiliating treatment, such as being forced to crawl and make animal sounds. A person said, "They forced others to bark and howl like dogs. During inspections [of homes for weapons], I was beaten by security forces and given ten lashes in accordance with the new Islamic law."

Survivors reported that many, if not a majority, of the armed groups' members were of foreign nationalities, typically Chechen, Afghan, Turkish, Uzbek, and Uighur. "All of the militants were Caucasian and foreign nationals. There were many Chechens, Turks and Afghans, who did not speak Arabic," said one.

The evidence suggests that the violence directed at civilians on the coast was often committed by individuals and groups not directly tied to, even if allied with, the STG.<sup>63</sup> And it does appear that, shortly after the most extreme violence began, the STG took some steps to rein in the worst excesses by asking for militias to leave. Or, as one human rights activist HRF

<sup>63</sup> On May 29, 2025, the European Union imposed sanctions on the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade, the Hamza Division, and the Sultan Murad Division for their roles in the killings. The Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade's founder Mohammad Hussein al-Jasim and Hamza Division chief Sayf al Din Boulad were also added to the sanctions list. France 24, "EU Sanctions Syrian Militia Groups Over Ethnic Violence Targeting Alawites," May 28, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20250528-eu-sanctions-syrian-militia-groups-ethnic-violence-targeting-alawites>.



interviewed put it, “al-Shara tried to restrain the violence and make it a little better.” Nonetheless, the massive scale of the killings has left a profound mark on many communities in Syria.

The aftermath of this episode has done little to ease the anxieties of people with whom HRF spoke. On March 9, President al-Shara announced the creation of the “Impartial Investigation Committee on Coastal Crimes” (Committee).<sup>64</sup> In making this announcement, President al-Shara appeared to place blame for the violence on Assadist insurgents and made no mention of abuses by government or allied forces.<sup>65</sup> Al-Shara directed the Committee to produce a report naming perpetrators within thirty days.<sup>66</sup>

Activists with whom HRF spoke decried the composition of the Committee, which included members of the former HTS-controlled Salvation Government from Idlib, but no international observers. One noted that the Committee included former Assad government Criminal Security Branch General Awad Ahmad al-Ali, who is seen as a human rights abuser himself.

On April 10, President al-Shara said he had granted the Committee a three-month extension at its request.<sup>67</sup> Reportedly, the Committee has not met with families of most of the deceased or even offered tentative findings despite the proliferation of video material documenting the atrocities, including video taken by perpetrators.

## **2. Experiences of Alawite Communities Outside the Coast**

HRF interviewed members of six Alawite families, days after they had fled the city of Homs for northeast Syria. Three of the families had taken up residence in a two-room apartment in a dilapidated building on the outskirts of a city in the northeast.

The family members reported that a variety of factors caused them to leave Homs. They said that after HTS came to power, a 6:00 p.m. curfew was instituted in Alawite neighborhoods in Homs – but not in other areas. In addition, there were regular security patrols and checkpoints in their neighborhoods, but not in others. Men identifying themselves as or appearing to be STG patrol members had a practice of telling Alawite men to make their wives put on niqabs (a garment worn around the head that leaves only the eyes visible).<sup>68</sup> As a result, women began to stay indoors in Alawite areas. It was reported also that these patrols utilized loudspeakers to play chants such as, “Alawites to be buried, and Christians to Beirut.”<sup>69</sup> These patrols were staffed in part by foreign fighters.

<sup>64</sup> Al Jazeera, “Syria’s al-Shara Launches Probe into Deadly Clashes, Vows Accountability,” March 9, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/9/syria-forms-committee-to-investigate-coastal-violence-outbreak>.

<sup>65</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, @azelin, March 9, 2025, <https://x.com/azelin/status/1898804181999432075>. On March 10, the Syrian Ministry of Defense stated that the military operation on the coast had ended and security forces would cooperate with the new investigation committee. Reuters, “Damascus Faces Demands for Accountability After Civilian Killings,” March 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-defense-ministry-announces-completion-military-operations-against-assad-2025-03-10/>.

<sup>66</sup> Aljazeera, “Syria’s Al-Sharaa Extends Deadline for Investigation into Coastal Killings,” April 11, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/11/syrias-al-sharaa-extends-deadline-for-investigation-into-coastal-killings>.

<sup>67</sup> *Id.*

<sup>68</sup> Alawites are often viewed as less observant in practicing Islam than other Syrian Muslims; during interviews with the women in these Alawite families, they did not cover their hair.

<sup>69</sup> This chant, which has been reported elsewhere, is sometimes translated as “Alawites to the grave, and Christians to Beirut.” See Harper’s Magazine, “‘Tell Me How This Ends’: America’s muddled involvement with Syria,” February 9, 2019, <https://harpers.org/archive/2019/02/american-involvement-in-syria/>.



Of even greater concern were reports of girls being kidnapped, people being expelled from their homes, and murders, including a recent killing of a man in a barber shop by an STG-allied group. The families said that if these episodes are reported to local police, the standard response is that nothing can be done about such “common crimes.”

Such accounts are similar to one provided by the female judge whose discussion of events in Homs courts is addressed above:

*Homs today is two different cities. The neighborhoods that participated in the revolution are now filled with a festive atmosphere and safety, cafes and shops are open until late, and the movement is completely normal. But in the neighborhoods that were considered loyal to the former regime, an atmosphere of terror prevails: scores of kidnappings of young men, and one woman have occurred recently. Some were found murdered, and the bodies were thrown away in several areas of the city, with the fate of others still unknown. An atmosphere of fear and insecurity prevails due to compromised security. People return to their homes before sunset, movement stops completely in the evening, and all my acquaintances have installed locks on the doors of the buildings. We always make sure to keep the doors of the buildings closed, and at night, we lock them.<sup>70</sup>*

The women interviewed by HRF who had recently arrived from Homs discussed other disturbing treatment. One had been studying university-level physics in Homs, but quit several months earlier because she was being harassed at checkpoints and on the city bus she took to school for being Alawite. She said that, following HTS’s rise to power, her professors had stopped answering questions in class from her and other women students. Also, there were threats at the university gates from STG police who said they would take female Alawite students to Idlib, the former stronghold of HTS.<sup>71</sup> In addition, it was reported that praying is now required at the university.

HRF spoke also with an Alawite man who had arrived from Homs several weeks earlier. He said that, upon arriving in the northeast, he was interviewed by Rojava TV, a local station, about the reasons for his move. That interview was publicly broadcast. Shortly thereafter, three pickup trucks of HTS police came to the home of his mother-in-law in Homs and attacked family members, accusing the family of collaborating with Kurdish forces. The man said he was making plans so his extended family could escape Homs.

In a similar vein, a human rights advocacy group reported that a small group of Alawites had attempted to flee to Turkiye through Ras al-Ayn (Serekaniye in Kurdish). A Turkish-backed militia apprehended them, and there is no information about their whereabouts.

### **3. Experiences of the Druze Community**

The most dramatic events involving Syria’s Druze community began on April 29, 2025, with the publication of an audio clip that purportedly depicted a Druze cleric insulting the Prophet Muhammad. The STG determined that no such insult had been levelled by the cleric, but armed extremist Muslim groups began attacking areas with Druze populations, including in Jaramana, near Damascus.<sup>72</sup> Druze fighters responded, and the STG sent forces to quell the violence. However, the attacks

<sup>70</sup> DARAJ, *supra* note 38.

<sup>71</sup> There are persistent reports that ISIS took Yazidi women from Iraq to Idlib as “wives” and sex slaves.

<sup>72</sup> The New York Times, “Armed Syrians Take Defense of a Besieged Druze City into Their Own Hands,” May 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/01/world/middleeast/syria-sectarian-attack-druze.html>.



spread to another town near Damascus, Ashrafiyah Sahnaya, and into Suwaida, a province with a majority Druze population.<sup>73</sup>

As of May 11, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that the death toll from these clashes was 137.<sup>74</sup> It appears that the fighting ceased after the STG reached an agreement with representatives of the Druze community providing that Druze fighters would be incorporated into STG forces to police Druze areas, under the STG's authority.<sup>75</sup>

Other incidents of concern to the Druze community were reported. Both a Sunni Arab human rights activist and a Druze community activist from Suwaida reported an episode involving eighteen Druze civil society members from Suwaida who were invited to a conference in the city of Raqqah by civil society groups there. The purpose of the conference was to hold a "Syrian dialogue" to address challenges faced in Syria.

On April 4, the group of eighteen left Suwaida for Raqqah. On their way, they passed through Homs. There, STG police stopped the group and asked where they were going. Upon being told that the group was headed to Raqqah, the police accused them of collaborating with Kurdish forces, assaulted several members of the group, and then arrested all eighteen, taking them to a prison in Idlib.

Family members of the detained protested promptly to the HTS-appointed governor of Suwaida who was able to secure the release of the group. Several of those who had been arrested showed injuries they suffered at a meeting with the governor following their release.<sup>76</sup>

#### **4. Experiences of Women**

Many women – and some men – expressed concern about the roles women will be allowed to play in Syria.<sup>77</sup> More than one person noted that women had played significant roles in the revolution against the Assad government, and that it would be a cruel irony if the overthrow of that government resulted in more limited opportunities for women than had existed previously. Evidence hinting at such a reality has emerged.

On December 28, 2024, shortly after HTS swept into Damascus, Aisha al-Dibs, then the newly appointed head of the Women's Affairs Office, publicly said, "Women should not surpass their essential [God-created] nature. They should take care of themselves, take care of their families, and take care of their husbands." She proclaimed further, "I will not allow

<sup>73</sup> The New York Times, "Death Toll Rises Sharply in a Wave of Sectarian Violence in Syria," May 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/01/world/middleeast/syria-sectarian-violence-100-killed.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "A few days after having been arrested | Two young men executed in Ashrafiyat Sahnaya," May 11, 2025, [https://www.syriahr.com/en/361700/?fbclid=IwY2xjawKS3JlleHRuA2FlbQlxMQBicmlkETE1ZXJQRGxPbHJUVU1cFR0AR6JShv8LhKFDsOZQRnWGy4i9vys\\_KrOP1j83JLVt6X7nEHlqIChvsFC5f\\_3Uw\\_aem\\_2n4dfcY7F8iMqwcuD4SpA](https://www.syriahr.com/en/361700/?fbclid=IwY2xjawKS3JlleHRuA2FlbQlxMQBicmlkETE1ZXJQRGxPbHJUVU1cFR0AR6JShv8LhKFDsOZQRnWGy4i9vys_KrOP1j83JLVt6X7nEHlqIChvsFC5f_3Uw_aem_2n4dfcY7F8iMqwcuD4SpA).

<sup>75</sup> Al Jazeera, "Syria's Druze Divided as Sectarian Tensions Linger After Violence," May 9, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/9/syrias-druze-divided-as-sectarian-tensions-linger-after-violence>; see also AP News, "Syrian Druze Spiritual Leader Slams Government Over Deadly Sectarian Clashes," May 1, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-hts-druze-clashes-0acfaf3b59c492e29ede352217bef921>.

<sup>76</sup> Alsared News, "A Meeting Between the Governor of Sweida and Citizens Who Were Arrested and Tortured at a Public Security Checkpoint," April 7, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfdLfcgSPDo>.

<sup>77</sup> International observers have raised these issues as well. Gulf Center for Human Rights, "Syria, End of an Era: From the Fall of Brutality to the Rise of Uncertainty," May 21, 2025, <https://www.gc4hr.org/syria-end-of-an-era-from-the-fall-of-brutality-to-the-rise-of-uncertainty/>.



space for those who disagree with my views.”<sup>78</sup> In response to a question about the future role of women in the judiciary, she replied “The Constitution will decide, and the basis will be Sharia law.”<sup>79</sup>

A woman employed at the Homs Justice Palace reported at the end of December 2024 that senior HTS officials had ordered the termination of female judges.<sup>80</sup> It is not clear if this step was taken. However, as addressed, Sheikh Abu Abdullah, who was at least briefly in charge of courts in Homs, did not commit to allowing women (or Christians) to work as judges.<sup>81</sup>

The Homs Justice Palace employee reported also on a meeting held after Sheikh Hassan Al-Aqraa replaced Sheikh Abu Abdullah (due to Sheikh Abu Abdullah’s remarks about women and Christian judges). At that meeting, which involved judges and all other staff, head coverings were required for women who also were made to sit separately from their male colleagues.<sup>82</sup> As noted above, a female judge who attended the meeting recounted questions that were put to al-Aqraa about the roles of women as judges. He replied that these questions would be left to the future, even though women in Homs had previously occupied all judicial positions, including as judges at all levels and public prosecutors.<sup>83</sup>

There also have been unconfirmed reports from a woman who works at the Ministry of Education in Damascus that all women are being required to wear hijabs, while a female employee at the Homs Oil Refinery reported the creation of separate entrances for men and women.<sup>84</sup>

More than one woman remarked with disappointment that the STG cabinet includes only a single woman and twenty-two men.<sup>85</sup>

##### **5. Issues of Concern to Other Groups**

A Yazidi community leader discussed ISIS’s kidnapping of approximately 3,000 Yazidi women and children from Sinjar, Iraq in 2014.<sup>86</sup> There are persistent reports that some abducted women were brought to Idlib by ISIS militants, including their “husbands.”<sup>87</sup>

The community leader reported that Yazidis had hoped the STG would investigate whether Yazidi women were being held in Idlib, particularly given that it has long been an HTS stronghold. Such a step, the leader opined, would show good faith

<sup>78</sup> TRT, “Post-Assad Syria | Violations Against Syrian Women Under the Former Regime,” December 30, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xp-Jep91jtI>.

<sup>79</sup> The Syrian Observer, “Syrian Women between the Discourse of Empowerment and the Legacy of Marginalization: A Critical Analysis of Aisha al-Dibs Statements,” January 1, 2025, <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/syrian-women-between-the-discourse-of-empowerment-and-the-legacy-of-marginalization-a-critical-analysis-of-aisha-al-dibs-statements.html>.

<sup>80</sup> More to Her Story, *supra* note 39.

<sup>81</sup> DARAJ, *supra* note 38.

<sup>82</sup> More to Her Story, *supra* note 39.

<sup>83</sup> DARAJ, *supra* note 38.

<sup>84</sup> More to Her Story, *supra* note 39.

<sup>85</sup> Al Jazeera, “Syrian President Al-Sharaa Unveils Transitional Government,” March 30, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/30/syrian-president-unveils-transitional-government>.

<sup>86</sup> Middle East Forum, “Ten Years On, It Is Essential to Recognize the Yazidi Genocide Is Not Fully Over,” November 20, 2024, <https://www.meforum.org/mef-observer/ten-years-on-it-is-essential-to-recognize-the-yazidi-genocide-is-not-fully-over>.

<sup>87</sup> Al-Monitor, “Decade After IS Abduction, Yazidi Survivor Returns To Iraq,” January 10, 2025, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/01/decade-after-abduction-yazidi-survivor-returns-iraq>; The Guardian, “Still Going Through Hell: The Search For Yazidi Women Seven Years On,” August 3, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/aug/03/still-going-through-hell-the-search-for-yazidi-women-seven-years-on>.



on the part of the STG not only to Yazidis, but to all Syrian minority groups. However, according to the community leader, no action has been seen. More broadly, he reported that the STG had not engaged in any outreach to the Yazidi community.

Several members of Christian civil society groups – and others – noted with consternation that the STG minister of culture, Mohammad Yassin Saleh, had said publicly that the Syriac language is nothing more than a “dialect” of Arabic.<sup>88</sup> One individual noted the ancient roots of the Syriac language and said, “He is trying to erase people, just like Assad.” The Strategic Assyrian Center for Studies requested an apology but received no response.

Others told HRF that, as HTS moved toward Damascus in late 2024, some Christians were pushed out of Aleppo, and conditions have not allowed for their return. They referred to reports from Christians in Homs of a general lack of security and intimidating conduct by STG forces. Reports have emerged from Christian areas of Damascus that loudspeakers are broadcasting calls for Christians to convert.

Given reports such as these and the violence seen in coastal areas, members of the Christian community in the northeast told HRF that they had grave misgivings about what would happen if STG-aligned security forces came to their communities. One said, “There is a lot of fear of the STG. That’s why we need local areas providing their own protection.” Another said, “Five years [the timeframe for the Constitution] is a very long time to let HTS dig in. I don’t know if they will allow the moderate nature of most Syrians to be expressed. We really need diverse representation in the government.”

### III. Internally Displaced People in the Northeast

#### A. *Displacements from Afrin in 2018 and Serekaniye in 2019*

Afrin is a city in northwest Syria that long had a Kurdish-majority population. In early 2018, Turkiye and Syrian-based militias that Turkiye supports (the Syrian National Army or SNA) initiated a military operation in and around Afrin against the SDF. Without irony, Turkiye dubbed this operation “Olive Branch.”

After two months of fighting, on March 18, 2018, Turkiye and the SNA occupied Afrin.<sup>89</sup> Turkish government spokesman Bekir Bozdog said Turkish forces would return Afrin to its “real owners,” meaning the area’s Kurdish population would be driven out.<sup>90</sup> And it is estimated that Operation Olive Branch expelled between 150,000 and 200,000 people from the Afrin area.<sup>91</sup> According to local human rights groups, over half of those people went to camps in the al-Shahbah area north of Aleppo with most of the rest moving further into northeastern Syria.

<sup>88</sup> SyriacPress, “Syria’s Transitional Minister of Culture Sparks Controversy Over Syriac Language Remarks; ‘The Syriac Language Is One of the Arabic Dialects,’ He Claims,” May 4, 2025,

<https://syriacpress.com/blog/2025/04/05/syrias-transitional-minister-of-culture-sparks-controversy-over-syriac-language-remarks-the-syriac-language-is-one-of-the-arabic-dialects-he-claims/>. Syriac is in the Aramaic language family that has historically been a language of Syriacs and other Christian communities. *Id.*

<sup>89</sup> CSIS, “Understanding Turkey’s Afrin Operation,” January 25, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-turkeys-afrin-operation>; PBS, “Turkey’s Forces Capture Syrian Kurdish Town of Afrin,” March 18, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/turkeys-forces-capture-syrian-kurdish-town-of-afrin>.

<sup>90</sup> Reuters, “Erdogan Says Turkey May Extend Afrin Campaign Along Whole Syrian Border,” March 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/erdogan-says-turkey-may-extend-afrin-campaign-along-whole-syrian-border-idUSKBN1GV1U8/>.

<sup>91</sup> ReliefWeb, “UNHCR - Syria Factsheet (January - November 2018),” January 9, 2019 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-syria-factsheet-january-november-2018> (estimate of 151,0003); information provided by PÊL-Civil Waves (estimating 200,000 displaced).



The city called Serekaniye in Kurdish (Ras al-Ayn in Arabic) sits on the Syrian-Turkish border. One human rights defender said to HRF that “Serekaniye was like a miniature version of Syria with Kurds, Arabs, Yazidi, Christians, and others.” In 2019, Türkiye launched the “Peace Spring” military operation in Serekaniye and Tall Abyad (Grespi in Kurdish). This operation led to the displacement of approximately 300,000 people from those cities.<sup>92</sup> A human rights defender told HRF that in and around Afrin there are forty-five Kurdish, eight Yazidi villages, and four Christian villages that remain nearly empty today.

A range of credible human rights reporters have documented serious human rights abuses by Turkish forces and the SNA in Afrin, Serekaniye, and Tall Abyad since these areas were occupied. There have been abductions, arbitrary arrests, sexual violence, torture, and killings. SNA militants have engaged in looting, property seizures, and extortion.<sup>93</sup>

In some instances, military occupiers have made obvious efforts to erase the cultural heritage of the people who were expelled, consistent with Bozdag’s statement that Afrin would be given back to its “real owners.” Turkish and SNA forces destroyed a roundabout in Afrin that had contained a statue of “Kawa,” a character from Kurdish legend linked to the new year’s celebration of Nawroz.<sup>94</sup> Yazidi shrines and graveyards have been looted and partially destroyed.<sup>95</sup> A civil society group that formed to represent the interests of internally displaced people from Afrin told HRF that the Turkish lira is used as the currency in Afrin and photographs of Turkish President Erdogan are displayed prominently there.

### **B. People Are Displaced for a Second Time in Late 2024 and Early 2025**

As HTS began its march to Damascus in late November 2024, the SNA launched “Operation Dawn of Freedom.” With Turkish air and artillery support, the SNA targeted areas the SDF controlled in Manbij, Tall Rifat, and Aleppo, including al-Shahba, where perhaps 100,000 people continued to seek refuge after escaping Afrin in 2018. The SNA operation forced these already displaced people to flee again, farther to the northeast.<sup>96</sup> Human rights advocates described this journey as a treacherous one, during which SNA forces committed kidnappings and assaults. It was reported that several babies succumbed to the cold. The people who were displaced again are now living in ad hoc accommodations in schools, government buildings, shelters, and tents around Qamishli, Raqqa, and al-Hasakah city.

<sup>92</sup> Refugees International, “Displacement and Despair: The Turkish Invasion of Northeast Syria,” November 12, 2019, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/displacement-and-despair-the-turkish-invasion-of-northeast-syria/>; Brussels International Center, “Operation Peace Spring: Delusion in Turkey’s Objectives,” [rhr.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/Mohammed%20Sami\\_Final%20Policy%20Report%20official.pdf](https://rhr.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/Mohammed%20Sami_Final%20Policy%20Report%20official.pdf).

<sup>93</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Everything Is by the Power of the Weapon,” February 29, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/29/everything-power-weapon/abuses-and-impunity-turkish-occupied-northern-syria>; Syrians for Truth and Justice, “Five Years of Injustice Are Enough: Investigative Study on Violations Against Kurds and Yazidis in Northern Syria,” November 13, 2023, <https://stj-sy.org/en/five-years-of-injustice-are-enough/>; European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, “Crimes In Syria: The Neglected Atrocities Of Afrin,” <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/case/crimes-in-syria-the-neglected-atrocities-of-afrin/>; Amnesty International, “Syria: Damning Evidence Of War Crimes And Other Violations By Turkish Forces And Their Allies,” October 18, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies-2/>; Human Rights Council, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” August 14, 2020, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/45/31>.

<sup>94</sup> Reuters, “Turkey-Backed Forces Pull Down Kurdish Statue In Afrin Town Center: Statement,” March 18, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/turkey-backed-forces-pull-down-kurdish-statue-in-afrin-town-center-statement-idUSKBN1GUOCU/>.

<sup>95</sup> Human Rights Council, *supra* note 93.

<sup>96</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Events of 2024,” December 12, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/syria>; Syrians for Truth and Justice, “Syria/Afrin: Promises by Transitional Authorities to Restore Rights and End Violations Against Kurds,” April 11, 2025, <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-afrin-promises-by-transitional-authorities-to-restore-rights-and-end-violations-against-kurds/>; interviews with human rights defenders.



### C. *Serekaniye Camp*

On the outskirts of al-Hasakah city is Serekaniye Camp, which houses nearly 17,000 people, mostly from the city of Serekaniye. Camp administrators said the camp was opened by the regional administration, rather than the international community. The camp's operations have been handled largely by regional authorities as well.

One camp administrator, who fled the city of Serekaniye as Turkish warplanes attacked in October 2019, explained that the U.N. has never officially recognized Serekaniye as an internally displaced persons' camp.<sup>97</sup> He said that, originally, this was because the U.N. coordinated the delivery of aid with the Assad government rather than authorities in the northeast. As a result, international aid organizations were less inclined to assist than they might have been otherwise, contributing only 25% of the aid necessary to sustain the camp. Making matters worse, shortly before HRF visited the camp, the U.S. government had cut off funding. This removed a critical, if relatively small, source of support. Administrators had yet to figure out how to make up for the shortfall.

Camp administrators reflected on the effect of these aid cuts beyond the camp's borders. The area around al-Hasakah city continues to see ISIS sleeper cell attacks, as do other parts of the northeast. There were 260 such attacks in the northeast in 2024,<sup>98</sup> and 55 from January through April 2025.<sup>99</sup> The cuts in U.S. funding have curtailed a range of stability efforts, including an education program that aimed to deradicalize people in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. The concern expressed to HRF is that ISIS recruits far more easily when there are few viable alternatives for young people, and that diminished funding for a range of social programs would worsen that dynamic.

As to Serekaniye camp, conditions reflect the limited resources available. Rows of tents and the occasional small cinderblock building line unpaved streets. Entire families, no matter how large, live in single tents, although at times insufficient tents have been available even to give one to each family. In winter, low-quality furnaces have caused tents to catch fire. Sanitation is a constant challenge with an inadequate number of facilities. There have been floods in winter. Dust is everywhere.

HRF spoke with a family of eight that lost two children to Operation Peace Spring. The family, which had operated a farm, lives in a single tent. Attempting to supplement their diet, the family had planted a garden in a plot that measures perhaps 5 feet x 5 feet, adjacent to their tent. This garden appeared to be producing vegetables despite those dimensions and the generally grimy conditions in the camp, seemingly a tribute to the family's agricultural skills.

Uniformly, the people HRF spoke to in Serekaniye camp reported fleeing their homes as Turkish artillery or airplanes struck, or as the SNA attacked on the ground. Many described having left their homes with little to nothing. And several reported that family members were killed as they fled.

Those HRF interviewed expressed gratitude for being physically safe. However, people repeatedly expressed anxiety about a lack of education for children, insufficient medical care, sometimes inadequate food supplies, and the general angst of living indefinitely in crowded tents amidst dismal conditions.

<sup>97</sup> North Press Agency, "AANES Says UN Fails to Recognize IDPS in NE Syria," March 27, 2024, <https://npasyria.com/en/112595/>.

<sup>98</sup> RIC, "Annual Sleeper Cell Report 2024," March 2, 2025, <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2025/03/annual-sleeper-cell-report-2024/>.

<sup>99</sup> RIC, "Sleeper Cell Report February 2025 – ISIS Attacks Down In NES; US Targets Al-Qaeda's Syria Branch In Idlib," March 3, 2025, <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2025/03/sleeper-cell-report-february-2025-isis-attacks-down-in-nes-us-targets-al-qaeda-syria-branch-in-idlib/>; RIC, "Sleeper Cell Report April 2025 – Two Security Campaigns Launched in NES Camps," <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2025/05/sleeper-cell-march-2/>.



#### **D. Potential Return of Internally Displaced People**

Universally, those we spoke to in Serekaniye camp expressed a strong desire to return home. The family of farmers tending the plot next to their tent said they had been desperate to go home since the day they fled, noting it was only about 45 miles away. However, the father said he could not consider returning while the area was still occupied by Turkiye and the SNA. The risk to his family's safety was just too great. This sentiment was expressed without exception by those we interviewed. Many noted that their fears were not the result only of having had to flee, but also based on reports from the relatively small number of people who have attempted to return.

In this context, one human rights organization reported on people who sought to return to Afrin after STG forces had arrived in the area, following the fall of Assad. Despite the presence of the STG, several SNA factions promptly arrested ten Afrin returnees in February 2025. Perhaps the arrival of STG personnel had at least a moderating effect, though, given that SNA forces had arrested over two dozen returnees the month before, in January.<sup>100</sup> Another advocacy group reported that SNA forces were continuing to commit violence and extortion against civilians, including using arrests to demand ransoms.<sup>101</sup> In fact, a number of sources told HRF that arrests (often based on accusations about associations with the SDF) are simply precursors to demands for payment, and that there is no legal process.

One activist reported that a widespread challenge arises when those who return to cities like Afrin find others living in their homes. In some cases, people occupying homes demand payment to leave and in some cases SNA forces demand payment to facilitate the departure of those who are occupying homes – or simply refuse to help. According to the civil society group of Afrin IDPs we interviewed, the small number of people who have returned saw better success in reclaiming their homes in Afrin proper where STG police have a larger presence. In areas outside the city, STG forces have told returnees to seek assistance from the SNA, which is often unavailing.

HRF did interview people who remarked on a few potential signs of progress in this context. President al-Shara met with Kurdish leaders on February 15, 2025 in Afrin, saying his administration was committed to returning confiscated properties to their owners.<sup>102</sup> The March 10, 2025 agreement between President al-Shara and the SDF, similarly speaks to ensuring the return of all displaced Syrians.

Several people, including Ilham Ahmed, an official with the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, reported that some SNA factions are being integrated functionally into the STG, some SNA forces have pulled back from civilian areas, and there has been a reduction in SNA checkpoints. One activist said that some of the people who had moved into homes in areas around Afrin, after fleeing from places such as Homs, Damascus, and Hama, are returning to their original places of residence.

These potentially positive developments aside, the continued presence of certain notorious SNA groups, including the Hamza Division and the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade, will prevent any large-scale return. In the words of one member of

<sup>100</sup> Syrians for Truth and Justice, "Syria/Afrin: Promises by Transitional Authorities to Restore Rights and End Violations Against Kurds," April 11, 2025, <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-afrin-promises-by-transitional-authorities-to-restore-rights-and-end-violations-against-kurds/>. Strictly speaking, SNA forces were incorporated into the STG in December 2024, but here we distinguish between those still operating functionally as part of SNA groups rather than as STG personnel.

<sup>101</sup> Insight, "Human Rights Violations in Syria in the First Quarter Of 2025," April 20, 2025, <https://insight-md.org/en/?p=1192>.

<sup>102</sup> Kurdistan 24, "Syrian Transitional President Visits Afrin," February 16, 2025, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/825100/syrian-transitional-president-visits-afrin>.



the Afrin IDP civil society group, “Nothing will change while they are there. It’s always the same. We plant the trees, they cut them down.”<sup>103</sup>

Advocates, journalists, and others HRF interviewed opined that, ultimately, it is Turkiye that wants to keep its foothold in northern Syria by maintaining its SNA proxies (and keeping its own forces) there. Unless Turkiye is persuaded to leave and withdraw its support for those proxies, the SNA will remain. One Sunni Arab activist said, “Assad was controlled by Iran. The current government and SNA are controlled by Turkiye.” A Kurdish journalist remarked, “The SNA was supposed to be fighting Assad, but their attacks continued after the fall of Assad.” He said, “It would be hard enough for Syrians to reconcile after fourteen years of war, but when Syrian groups are proxies for foreign powers, it is really complicated.”

Of note, President al-Shara pronounced that the STG has “nullified past agreements between Syria” and other countries, including Turkiye, and is “in the process of developing new ones.” He added, “We told all the parties that this military presence has to be in line with Syria’s legal framework” and that any new agreements must ensure “Syria’s independence, the stability of its security, and that no country’s presence creates a threat or danger to other nations via Syrian territory.”<sup>104</sup> The details of any agreement between the former Syrian government and Turkiye (if that is what President al-Shara refers to as “past agreements”) are unclear as are the details of any potential new agreement with Turkiye.

In sum, those with whom HRF spoke outlined the following prerequisites for large-scale returns of internally displaced people to areas in and around Afrin, Serekaniye and Tall Abyad: (i) the withdrawal of Turkish forces; (ii) the withdrawal of SNA factions; (iii) the release of people being held in Turkish or SNA detention facilities; (iv) assistance reclaiming homes; and (v) the provision of security by local police forces that existed in these areas between 2014 and 2018.

#### IV. A Desire for Transitional Justice

Aside from wanting to see Syrians live peacefully in their homes, the hope most universally voiced by people we interviewed was for victims of the myriad crimes committed over the past fourteen years to have justice. People spoke of wanting accountability for crimes regardless of whether the perpetrators were acting on behalf of the Assad government, ISIS, the SNA, the SDF, or other parties to the armed conflicts Syria has seen.

The recently promulgated Constitution provides that a “Transitional Justice Commission” “shall be established, adopting effective, consultative, victim-centered mechanisms to determine accountability mechanisms.” It provides further that, “War crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and all crimes *committed by the former regime are excluded* from the principle of non-retroactivity of laws.”<sup>105</sup> (emphasis added). Given this language, it appears the STG is contemplating transitional justice that focuses exclusively on crimes committed by forces of the Assad government. Underscoring this point, on May 17, 2025, the STG announced the creation of the National Commission for Transitional Justice (Commission) contemplated by the Constitution. The Commission’s mandate is to “uncover the truth about the grave violations *caused by the former regime*.”<sup>106</sup> (emphasis added). It is critical that perpetrators from the Assad government are held to account,

<sup>103</sup> There have long been reports that Turkish and allied forces in and around Afrin have cut down olive trees and stolen olives. BBC, “Turkey in A Pickle Over Syrian Olives,” January 31, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-47069403>.

<sup>104</sup> The New York Times, “Syria’s Jihadist-Turned-President Seeks New Allies,” April 23, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/23/world/middleeast/syria-president-al-shara-interview.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Constitution, *supra* note 31 at Article 49.

<sup>106</sup> Bangkok Post, “Syria Announces Commissions For Missing Persons, Transitional Justice,” May 18, 2025, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/3028245/syria-announces-commissions-for-missing-persons-transitional-justice>.



but a transitional justice effort that does not address crimes committed by all actors, including from HTS, the SDF, or the SNA, cannot be reconciled with fundamental purposes of transitional justice, *i.e.*, holding offenders to account regardless of affiliation, and providing redress for all victims.

Beyond these flaws in the STG’s approach to date, many other questions must be addressed before there is a legitimate prospect of transitional justice. As a number of human rights defenders explained, most fundamentally, Syria needs an independent court system that functions in all parts of the country. While courts officially re-opened in early 2025, there appears to be little judicial activity, given the many outstanding issues facing the justice system.<sup>107</sup> For example, the new Syrian Ministry of Justice set March 4 and then April 21, 2025, as deadlines for judges who defected from the Assad government to apply for reinstatement. It is said that such applications will undergo a rigorous vetting process.<sup>108</sup> Relatedly, there have been reports from Aleppo about lawyers and civil society figures demanding accountability for judges accused of collaborating with the former government.<sup>109</sup> Also, as addressed, there have been reports that courts in Homs have yet to resolve questions about whether women and Christian judges will be allowed to serve.

The situation is somewhat different in northeast Syria. There, the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria created a court system, including a branch called the Defense Court for the People (Defense Court) that hears cases of Syrians suspected of terrorism. As described to HRF by a serving female judicial official, the Defense Court was created in 2014 in the face of attacks by ISIS, the Nusra Front, and other militias. Lawyers drafted a terrorism law for the Defense Court based on analogous laws from Turkiye, Switzerland, the U.S., Lebanon, and other countries. The initial venue of the Defense Court was Afrin. However, SNA forces targeted that location specifically during their 2018 attacks, forcing a relocation. Today, there are Defense Courts in Kobane (Ayn al-Arab in Arabic), Raqqa, and Qamishlo. Together, the Defense Courts have tried approximately 10,000 cases.

The judicial official told HRF that these cases are heard by panels of three judges, which always include at least one female judge. In the event of a conviction, a different panel of three judges pronounces the sentence. In a break with Syrian law, but consistent with international standards, the death penalty is not available. After a conviction, the defendant has the right to appeal. Defense counsel is provided without cost if necessary for all stages of the case. For those convicted of providing civilian support to terrorist groups, sentences typically range from two to four years. In addition, amnesties have been granted to such defendants at times that effectively commuted their sentences. We note that the Defense Courts have been the subject of criticism.<sup>110</sup>

Northeastern Syria is also home to detention facilities and camps holding approximately 3,100 non-Syrians suspected of involvement with ISIS, many of whom were captured in 2019 by the SDF with their U.S. allies.<sup>111</sup> As the judicial official HRF

<sup>107</sup> The Syrian Observer, “Syria’s Dissident Judges at the Heart of Judicial Restoration,” April 15, 2025, <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/syrias-dissident-judges-at-the-heart-of-judicial-restoration.html>.

<sup>108</sup> Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “Unknown Gunmen Open Fire on Lawyer in Front of Headquarters of Bar Association in Aleppo,” May 8, 2025, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/361546/>.

<sup>109</sup> *Id.*

<sup>110</sup> Syria Accountability, “Reintegrating Former ISIS Affiliates in Northeast Syria,” September 2024, <https://syriaaccountability.org/content/files/2024/09/Perspectives-on-Justice---English.pdf> (stating that “these trials fail to meet basic human rights standards. They are held in secrecy and defendants often have no legal representation. Decisions about who is released and who remains in custody are opaque.”)

<sup>111</sup> United Nations Human Rights: Office of the High Commissioner, “UN Experts Urge End To ISIL-Related Arbitrary Detention in North-East Syria and Accountability for International Crimes,” April 7, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/04/un-experts-urge-end-isil-related-arbitrary-detention-north-east-syria-and>.



interviewed said, “Many of these people are dangerous, but it is still a human rights violation not to try them.” For authorities in northeastern Syria, the resources required to try these suspects are not available. As a result, authorities have been advocating for years to have foreign countries repatriate their nationals – or provide resources to create a special court in Syria. To date, foreign countries have not facilitated either result.

Most of the advocates HRF spoke to opined that foreign governments should bring their citizens home and try them as appropriate there. A few expressed a preference for trying foreign ISIS suspects in Syria, where alleged crimes occurred and victims are located, but said international support would be needed to do that, whether in the form of training for local judges or the creation of tribunals that include international judges.

There was universal agreement among those HRF interviewed that Syrians suspected of wartime offenses should be tried in Syria. Although there have been calls for a Syrian-only process in this context, the people HRF spoke to believe that some form of international support would be necessary, given the current state of the Syrian judiciary. Some said that international efforts to build a court system and train judges would be ideal. Others favored the creation of specialized courts located in Syria that could include international judges and prosecutors.

The judicial official HRF interviewed suggested that the northeastern courts, including the Defense Court, could be a basic model for other areas in the country. “You can’t get convicted by one biased judge here. You have the right to a lawyer and an appeal. People in other parts of Syria want that too.”<sup>112</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Again, the Defense Courts have been the subject of criticism. Amnesty International, “New Law Paves Way for Justice for Prisoners Convicted in Flawed Trials in North-East Syria,” July 23, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/new-law-paves-way-for-justice-for-prisoners-convicted-in-flawed-trials-in-north-east-syria/>.



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## About Human Rights First

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization founded in 1978 to address the lack of legal protection for refugees and asylum seekers. We work alongside human rights defenders, hold human rights abusers accountable, fight for the conditions that uphold democracy, and provide tools that bring the power of AI and advanced technologies to justice and human rights movements. Human Rights First is based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

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