



## Sectarian hate: the Coastal Massacres of March 2025

In March 2025, a wave of sectarian violence struck Syria's coastal region, targeting the Alawite community. Carried out by HTS and Turkey-backed factions (Amshat and Hamzat), the attacks featured racist slogans and calls for "purification". At least 1,614 civilians were killed, tens of Alawite villages were burned, and tens of thousands were displaced. Tens of women were abducted, raising big concerns about their fate. Aid efforts were blocked, and survivors were left without support.

### Who are the Alawis?

The Alawites are a religious group that originated from Twelver Shia Islam. In the 9th century, they established their own sect, and by the 10th century, they became a distinct movement. They represent about 10–12% of Syria's population, mainly living in the coastal regions (Latakia, Tartus, Nusayriya Mountains) and extending inland to Homs and Hama. After the start of the Syrian war, some migrated to Damascus and Aleppo. There are also Alawite communities in Lebanon, Turkey, and other nearby countries.

Like many Sunni groups, the Ottoman Empire viewed the Alawites as out of the fold of Islam and persecuted them, especially under Sultan Selim in 1516 and again in the 17th and 18th centuries along the coast. Until today, they are considered "heretics" by many Sunni Muslims. During the French Mandate, the French used Alawites to create divisions among religious minorities, incorporating them into special military units. However, not all Alawites supported the French; Sheikh Salih al-Ali led a major revolt against them and became a national hero.

The Assad family belongs to the Alawite religious group. When the Ba'ath Party came to power in 1963, many Alawites rose to state positions, improving their social status. However, rural mountain villages remained impoverished and lacked infrastructure. In the 1960s and 70s, many Alawites joined opposition groups, especially the Communist Party, and faced heavy repression. This shows that politically, they were not a unified bloc. During the rise of extremist groups like al-Nusra and ISIS, many Alawites supported the regime to avoid falling under jihadist control, although not all did. Both because of this and because of the sectarian violence that was already starting, on March 4th, there was an Alawi uprising against the Syrian Ahmed al-Sharaa government.

### The Perpetrators:

HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) – A jihadist organization affiliated with the Sunni Salafi movement. Founded in 2017, it evolved from Jabhat al-Nusra. In Idlib, it established the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). HTS is known for its authoritarian practices and centralized, fundamentalist, and misogynistic behaviour. They are designated a terrorist organization by the UN, U.S., EU, Turkey, and others.

Suleiman Shah Division (Amshat) and Hamza Division (Hamzat) – Turkish state-backed factions that are part of the Syrian National Army. They participated in the occupations of Afrin and Serekaniye, committing human rights violations and acts of violence against women, including kidnapping, rape, forced displacement, and arbitrary killings.



## Evidence of Sectarian Intent

There is substantial evidence indicating the sectarian and religiously fundamentalist motivation behind the attacks:

- Pre-attack incitement: Flyers distributed days before the violence framed Alawites as non-Muslims, fuelling sectarian hostility.
- Prior discrimination and violence: Alawite civilians faced checkpoint discrimination and targeted violence as early as January. For instance, on January 14 in Tasnin, seven homes were burned and six civilians killed. On January 23, four civilians were killed, ten injured, and five arrested across four Alawite-populated villages; civilians were also subjected to degrading treatment and grave desecration.
- During the violence, in many places, people were questioned about their religion, and, if they were Alawi, they were killed
- Among the slogans that Sunni individuals were chanting in some videos while massacring Alawites, we find: “It was the battle for liberation. Now it’s a battle for purification (of Syria)”, “To the Alawites, we’re coming to slaughter you and your fathers,” and “Everyone is going out with guns, we will show you the (strength) of the Sunnis.”
- With their language, at the beginning of the attacks, the HTS authority in Damascus were encouraging the hate and violence instead of working against it.

## Chronology of the violence:

The following chronology documents the most intense period of violence, based on verified reports from multiple human rights organizations. It should be noted that acts of violence also occurred before and after this time-frame, but are not included in this summary and the numbers can be much higher than what is reported here.

Date	Killings	Other
7 March	Baniyas (Tartus) – 60; Al-Mukhtariya – 38-40 (according to the sources); Al-Shir – 24; Qurfays – 22; Al-Haffah – 7; Beyt Ana – 7; Al-Fuqara – about 150 or more; Arzah (Hama) 24	Al-Fuqara: according to witnesses torture (backs broken, eyes gouged, limbs sawed), looting, arson, executions with sectarian chants;
8 March	Tuwaym – 31; Sharifa – 27; Muzayraa, Snobar, Ain al-Arous, Bustan al-Basha: many deaths reported (for a total of 745 deaths in the whole day)	Baniyas: spared civilians executed; Sharifa: homes looted and burned; Muzayraa: funeral attacked; people were prevented from burying the dead; Electricity and water cut off; tens of thousands flee to mountains, Lebanon, or Khmeimim Air Base
9 March	Tartus – 103; Latakia – 194; Hama – 6;	Start of aerial bombings. Beit Al-Ateiq, Hammam Wasel: airstrikes on residential areas
10 March	Hama – 71; Tartus – 42; Latakia – 26; Homs – 4;	Humanitarian situation worsens, looting and arson continue; food delivery suspended



11 March	132	Residents asked about religious affiliation; Alawites executed (OHCHR); families including women and children killed (UN)
12 March	Hama (Al-Rusafa, 62); Tartus (Baniyas, 34)	Access denied to journalists and aid; mass graves used for burials
13 March	93	Qardaha: homes seized, farmland and houses destroyed by fires set by the government
14 March	14	Lack of basic services such as water and electricity; aid and humanitarian teams blocked
16 March	5	
17 March	57	Phone and internet cut off: Information blackout

### Targeted Violence Against Alawite Women

Multiple cases of abductions targeting Alawite women have been documented. These women were forcibly disappeared without formal notification—seized and subsequently declared missing. There are tens of testimonies speaking about Alawi women abducted with different methods, either disappearing on their way somewhere or taken from their homes with violence, especially but not only in the coastal area. The numbers are difficult to verify, but there are estimates of around 50-100 verified cases.

Their disappearances raise a critical alarm, as the pattern of violence exercised by jihadist factions against women mirrors the systematic abuse inflicted upon Yazidi women by ISIS. Yazidi women were also considered “non-Muslim” among the jihadists and for this were sold as slaves or sexual objects in the markets.

### Obstruction of Humanitarian Aid

The Autonomous Administration sent 15 trucks of aid, 4 of which were organised by women. Even though their route had already been coordinated, they had been blocked from Amshat forces in Xanasir, and left without any other option but to turn back. Îptîsam El Hisên, spokesperson for Kongra Star in the Qamishli canton, who was present at the scene, stated: "Forces affiliated with HTS came twice with armed soldiers, attempting to create chaos. Their goal was to threaten the drivers and volunteers distributing aid. They made disrespectful speeches, wore masks, and carried military weapons. They moved among the drivers and aid groups, isolating small groups to intimidate them. They openly said, 'We will eliminate them; they don't need your help.' This was a clear attempt to break our morale and instill fear."