

Syria: Arbitrary and Extrajudicial Killings Target Civilians Ahead of Coastal Violence



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1. Introduction

After the fall of the Syrian regime in December 2024, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documented several extrajudicial killings of civilians, including two children and a woman. These incidents took place in the Aleppo countryside, the Baniyas countryside in Tartous Governorate, and three distinct areas in Latakia Governorate, between December 2024 and February 2025.

Most victims were Alawite, suggesting the killings may have been sectarian in nature. This followed other disturbing instances where entire families—including women, children, and individuals hors de combat—were killed, with predominantly Alawite cities and villages targeted in particular between 6 and 10 March 2025, as [reported](#) by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

For its part, Amnesty International [investigated](#) 32 killings in the city of Baniyas that occurred between 8 and 9 March. It concluded that these killings were deliberate, targeted at the Alawite minority sect, and unlawful, attributing responsibility to militias linked to the transitional government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa.

The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) [reported](#) that violence along the coast resulted in the deaths of 1,169 civilians, including 732 in Latakia, 276 in Tartus, and 161 in Hama. Additionally, the independent Civil Peace Group - Seen documented a total of 1,743 civilian deaths on the Syrian coast between 6 and 10 March 2025, as [stated](#) in its latest statistics published on 29 March 2025.

The Syrian caretaker government, now known as the transitional government, took power following the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime on 8 December 2024. This change resulted from [Operation Deterrence of Aggression](#), which was launched by the now-dissolved Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other opposition factions. Ahmad al-Sharaa, the former leader of HTS, was [appointed](#) president on 29 January 2025.

In four cases documented in this report, killings were carried out by members of the transitional government's General Security Service during raids targeting suspects or during extensive security campaigns; the other four cases involved unconfirmed armed individuals. In three of these cases, the perpetrators were foreign fighters, while in the fourth case, the militants identified themselves as members of HTS. These findings are based on five detailed testimonies collected by STJ from relatives of the victims and witnesses to the incidents. All individuals requested that their identities and identifying details be kept confidential for fear of reprisals. Therefore, pseudonyms have been used to refer to them when quoting their testimonies.

The authorities' responses to the killings varied depending on the circumstances, but were notably similar in nature. Despite their different approaches to these incidents, they failed to disclose the outcomes of the investigations they initiated, the identities of the perpetrators, or the processes involved in holding them accountable. In three of the cases, no public investigations were initiated at all. Monitoring and verification conducted by the STJ team—which involved tracking reports of killings by militants and armed groups on social media platforms and news websites—indicate that the cases documented in this report are part of a broader pattern of violations observed in various regions of Syria during the first three months of the transitional government's rule, leading up to the events of 6 March 2025. These violations were often justified as "[individual mistakes](#)."

Among the documented cases, the STJ [reported](#) an incident involving the killing of three judges by unidentified gunmen at the Rabia Masyaf junction in the northwestern Hama countryside on 24 December 2024. The victims; Youssef Ghanoum, Muhammad Hammoud, and Munther Hussein, were civilian real estate judges serving at the Hama City Court, not military judges. All three were Alawite and originally hailed from the cities of Masyaf and al-Qadmus in Hama. As with other cases documented in this report, authorities opened an investigation into the incident; however, the findings have not been made public.

STJ team also documented the [field executions](#) of ten individuals in the Alawite village of Arza, located in the Hama countryside, by unknown gunmen on 31 January 2025. Additionally, STJ verified the execution of sixteen people in a single day in the [Alawite village of Fahel](#), in the Homs countryside, on 23 January 2025. This incident occurred during a General Security campaign aimed at targeting Fahel and other areas in the western Homs countryside. STJ plans to provide a detailed report on this matter separately. Furthermore, in Homs, human rights organizations [documented](#) the torture-related killing of Louay Talal Tayara, a young man, just 24 hours after his arrest by General Security.

2. Killing a Civilian in Rural Baniyas

On 2 January 2025, residents of Beit al-Sheikh Ali village, located in the al-Khariba area of Baniyas city, Tartous, which Alawites predominantly inhabit, discovered the body of a 29-year-old man named Youssef Saleh. He had suffered five gunshot wounds – two to the abdomen and three to the head. This information was shared by a relative of the victim named Youssef Ali, who reported that he and several other friends rode their motorcycles to the outskirts of the village, unarmed, after receiving information about potential thieves breaking into an empty house. Suddenly, armed men, claiming to be from the HTS, opened fire on them from approximately 200 meters away. Ali narrated,¹

“Some armed men emerged from the agricultural land where they were positioned on both sides of the road. As we approached, a motorcycle headlight appeared, and we heard a strange sound, like a screeching noise. We all shouted, ‘Who is there?’ One of the men stepped out and yelled, ‘Get down, you dogs! We are HTS!’ He fired two shots into the air. We were all terrified and quickly retreated in different directions. They began shouting from within the agricultural area, ‘Get down, you guys! Get down, get down!’ Then they started firing randomly.”

Ali added that after he returned home, two cars approached the houses in the village. The occupants of one of the cars shouted, “Where are you, you men, you Alawites!” before driving away. He confirmed that the cars had come from the neighboring Sunni village of Beit Janad and had returned there after the incident, even though village elders denied any connection to the vehicles when questioned by dignitaries from the victim’s village.

As the cars departed, the young men went to retrieve their bikes and discovered Youssef’s body. His cell phone, ring, and silver bracelet had been stolen. Ali mentioned that a friend called the Youssef’s number, and an unknown man answered, threatening to kill the villagers and enter the village with military convoys.

¹ Interviewed online by an STJ researcher on 23 February 2025.

In response to the killing, Ali reported that the victim's family met with the area manager in Baniyas, who attempted to evade responsibility, stating, "We will enter the village to search whenever we want, and we will conduct security campaigns at any time."

Ali further mentioned that the family sought to open a criminal investigation and requested an inquiry; however, the relevant agencies, including the General Security offices and local authorities, responded negatively. He noted that the family also faced difficulties in obtaining a forensic report.

Regarding the victim, Ali shared that he was married and had a one-year-old child. He was dedicated to his work as a barber and had not engaged in any military or political activities since being discharged from compulsory military service. Ali explained that the victim had served for a year and a half in the Jdaydet Artooz area at the 100th regiment of the Artillery College and was the sole breadwinner for his family.

3. Killing Six Civilians in Different Areas of Latakia

On 20 January 2025, General Security received information about a wanted person named Abu Ali hiding in a friend's home in the al-Saliba neighborhood of Latakia. This prompted the security forces to organize a raid on the house to apprehend him. Fares al-Jassem, a resident of the neighborhood, stated that Abu Ali had been involved in numerous crimes in Latakia, including threatening families and committing acts of violence against innocent people, and was linked to cases of arrest and torture associated with the shabiha. He described the atmosphere in the area as "tense," noting that, "some armed groups affiliated with the former Syrian government were attempting to enforce their control after the liberation."²

Fares stated that during the raid, a civilian woman named Mona al-Abdullah was killed by a member of the General Security forces. She was the wife of the man in whose house Abu Ali was hiding. Fares mentioned that the suspect was a Sunni from the Idlib countryside, while the family sheltering Abu Ali belonged to the Alawite sect. He also pointed out that the al-Saliba neighborhood has a diverse population, including Sunnis, Christians, and Alawites.

Fares noted that the incident occurred after Public Security officers attempted to contact the suspect, urging him to leave peacefully by knocking on the door of the house. However, the suspect refused to respond. Fares explained,

"As time passed, the soldiers began to lose patience and started banging on the door more violently, hoping to force the suspect to come out. While they attempted to break down the door, the owner's wife was inside. The situation was unclear, and no one knew what was happening behind closed doors. As the pressure mounted, one of the officers fired a shot randomly, hitting the wife, who was in the kitchen, causing her to fall to the floor. This was a tragic and shocking situation for everyone involved. Then, the door was quickly opened, and the soldiers were stunned to discover that the wife had been killed."

A member of the security forces attempted to provide first aid to the victim, but she did not respond due to her critical condition, according to Fares. He stated that orders were issued for a thorough internal investigation into the incident to determine accountability. Initial

² Interviewed online by an STJ researcher on 7 February 2025.

investigations indicated that the incident was caused by “disorganized and hasty actions by some security team members.” The source noted that the incident triggered a wave of condemnation among the population and heightened tensions between civilians and the authorities.

In the village of [Ain Ash Sharqiyah](#), located in the city of Jableh, Latakia, Ammar Ezzeddine, a 55-year-old employee of the Dams and Water Authority, was killed along with his son Musa Ezzeddine, 17, and another teenager, Muhammad Issa, also 17. All three victims were Alawites. They were shot at close range by armed men who blocked their path while heading to Ammar’s land. According to the forensic report and the victims’ relative, Ahmed Musa,³ the incident occurred around 9:30 a.m. on 8 January 2025.

Ahmed reported that residents who discovered the bodies after hearing gunfire noticed the criminals fleeing and entering the [107th Brigade](#), located near Ain Ash Sharqiyah. He explained that this brigade was once a camp for the former Syrian Army and, following the regime’s fall, was repurposed as a stationing point for armed factions. According to residents who have seen them multiple times, most members of these factions are foreigners who speak fluent Arabic and possess non-Syrian features. The brigade is situated approximately half a kilometer from the victim’s farmland. Some social media [accounts](#) have suggested that these fighters may be Chechens.

In the two images (numbers 1 and 2) below, STJ’s open-source information analysis expert identified the location of the mentioned brigade. The images provide geographical coordinates ([35.338833](#), [36.077824](#)) linked to a screenshot from a video titled “The 107th Brigade in Jableh was Completely Liberated from the Terrorist Gangs of Tahrir al-Sham*,” published on 7 March 2025 by [Hussein Abu Ali](#), a user on the “X” platform.



Image 1.

³ Interviewed online by an STJ researcher on 10 February 2025.



Image 2.

In images 3 and 4, the expert identified the approximate location (coordinates: [35.334502, 36.066750](#)) where the bodies of the three victims were discovered. This location is linked to a screenshot from a video showing the bodies being found, published by the [Syr Doc](#) Telegram channel.



Image 3.



Image 4.



Image 5- The distance between Brigade 107 and the approximate location of the victims' bodies, which is slightly less than 250 meters.

On the day of the incident, the village witnessed a large [demonstration](#) by residents who condemned the killings and the presence of what they referred to as “murderous gangs” claiming to be part of the new government. The residents demanded that those involved be held accountable under the law. Meanwhile, a video surfaced featuring Sheikh Saleh Mansour, who has recently been recognized as a representative of the Alawite sect. In the video, he [stated](#) that “[t]he HTS pledged to investigate and hold accountable those who committed the act” and emphasized the need to prevent the recurrence of “individual mistakes.” He also mentioned that the brigade would be evacuated of its members, confirming that they were not Syrian. This was followed by a [visit](#) from Governor Mohammed Othman of Latakia and his team to the village to offer condolences to the residents on 12 January 2025. However, no further reports have been released regarding the outcomes of the authorities’ investigations or the identities of the perpetrators.

Local social media pages [reported](#) that a convoy from HTS [arrived](#) in the village on 14 January 2025. Residents expressed their concerns and urged the convoy to address issues related to the presence of foreign elements within the mentioned brigade.

▪ **“Kneel to Me, You!”**

In a third incident, civilians Fadi Shamlous and Hassan Kousa were killed by General Security forces during a security operation in the predominantly Alawite neighborhood of [al-Da’tour](#) in the city of Latakia on 6 February 2025. A group identifying itself as members of the General Security entered the neighborhood in several vehicles equipped with heavy and medium machine guns. Some of the officers were masked and are believed to have taken informants from the neighborhood with them, according to Ahmad Muhammad,⁴ a relative of the victim, Fadi, who was an Alawite civilian in his mid-thirties. Ahmad recounted,

“When the informants saw Fadi, a group of security personnel got out of their cars and approached him. One of them asked, ‘Where are you going?’ Fadi replied, ‘To my house, where else should I go?’ Then another security personnel said, ‘Kneel to me, you.’ To this, Fadi responded, ‘Who are you that I should kneel to you?’ As the security personnel attempted to assault him, Fadi began to defend himself and struck back at them with his hands. During the struggle, one of the personnel shot him in the leg. After being hit, Fadi tried to stand up again, but all the security personnel fired a barrage of bullets at him, killing him.”

As for Hassan Kousa, he was killed by a stray bullet during the same security campaign. The bullet struck his car and became lodged in his back, according to Muhammad. He mentioned that Kousa’s wife and children were in the car with him, which was parked about one kilometer from the location where Fadi was killed.

Human rights reports [attributed](#) the deaths of two young men to being shot during clashes between members of the General Security and unidentified gunmen in the al-Da’tour neighborhood of Latakia. On 6 February 2025, the same day as the incident, the Syrian Ministry

⁴ Interviewed online by an STJ researcher on 7 February 2025.

of Interior released a [statement](#) from Lieutenant Colonel Mustafa Knefati, head of the General Security Directorate in Latakia Governorate. The statement read: “A group affiliated with the remnants of the ousted regime opened fire from within residential neighborhoods on a Ministry of Interior patrol, injuring a civilian named Hassan Kousa and a member of the patrol. We are currently pursuing the shooters in Latakia, and we will hold accountable anyone involved in criminal acts. We will continue our operations against those involved in shedding the blood of Syrians.”

4. Killing a Civilian During a Raid in Rural Aleppo

In the first half of December 2024, after the Military Operations Command consolidated its control over Aleppo and the surrounding areas, a General Security force entered the village of [Mansoura](#), located northeast of Aleppo, which has a predominantly Sunni population. The force received information indicating the presence of sleeper cells in the area that might be responsible for recent bombings targeting vital facilities. According to Mazen al-Sayed,⁵ a source familiar with the incident, their primary objective was to assess the security situation and raid several suspected homes. He noted that the village was experiencing heightened tensions at the time due to the presence of some armed groups affiliated with the regime, which were attempting to infiltrate through the mountain roads. During the operation, one of the security force members shot and killed Mahmoud Naour, a 35-year-old Sunni aluminum fabricator. Mazen recounted,

“As they approached a house, the group noticed some movement and decided to search. At that moment, a family member, Mahmoud Naour, a father of three, became startled. He believed he was being threatened by security personnel and ran into the house, attempting to close the door. However, one of the soldiers reacted quickly and fired at the door, mistakenly thinking Mahmoud was a threat. The shots struck Mahmoud directly in the chest, causing him to fall to the ground, unconscious. While his wife and mother screamed, the soldiers cautiously approached the house, believing Mahmoud might be armed. It later became evident that Mahmoud was just an ordinary civilian who did not pose any real threat.”

Mazen reported that another individual violently assaulted the victim’s mother in front of witnesses, leaving the family in a state of shock and fear for their safety. As a result, they felt compelled to leave their home and relocate to the city of Ariha in the Idlib countryside to seek refuge. Mazen noted that the incident sparked “resentment and rejection among the residents toward the security services,” leading the community to demand an investigation into what transpired. He added that representatives from General Security visited the family, inquired about the incident, and offered their apologies. However, they did not provide any additional information regarding the status of the investigation or whether the perpetrator has been arrested.

5. Legal Opinion and Comment

a. According to international laws

⁵ Interviewed online by an STJ researcher on 4 February 2025.

The right to life is recognized as a basic and fundamental human right that cannot be waived. This right is protected by various international and national laws and agreements aimed at safeguarding individuals from murder and extrajudicial execution. The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\)](#) affirms that everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person (Article 3). Similarly, the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#) states, “Every human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life.” (Article 6.1). The same Covenant emphasizes that these provisions must not be violated, even in exceptional circumstances threatening the nation’s life (Article 4).

Furthermore, the [UN Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions](#) highlights the need for governments to prohibit such practices and classify them as crimes under their criminal laws. It requires that penalties for perpetrators be appropriate to the seriousness of the crime. The Manual clearly states that exceptional circumstances – such as a state of war, a threat of war, internal political instability, or any other public emergency – cannot be used as justification for these executions. Such actions are prohibited under all circumstances, including internal armed conflicts and the excessive or unlawful use of force by public officials or by any individuals acting at the instigation, with the express consent, or acquiescence of public officials.

Even in the context of military operations, international humanitarian law (IHL) strictly prohibits the killing or targeting of civilians and civilian objects. The four [Geneva Conventions](#) of 1949 forbid any form of violence against individuals who are not directly participating in hostilities, including all types of murder (Common Article 3). [Additional Protocol I](#) to the Geneva Conventions also requires conflicting parties to distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives and accordingly shall direct their operations only against military objectives (Article 48). The same Protocol states that the civilian population must not be a target for attacks and prohibits any acts or threats of violence aimed primarily at spreading terror among civilians (Article 51). The [rules of Customary international humanitarian law \(customary IHL\)](#) further reinforce these principles⁶.

STJ argues that the killings documented in this report may amount to war crimes under the [Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court](#). Based on the testimonies presented, STJ believes that these operations specifically targeted the Alawite population, which could be categorized as “sectarian killings.” It is evident that the killings discussed herein targeted civilians who were not involved in hostilities and are thus entitled to the legal protections outlined in the relevant international conventions. This situation necessitates holding those responsible for these violations accountable due to their apparent transgressions of these conventions and the obligations imposed on them under the [UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials](#), which states, “Law enforcement officials may use force only when strictly necessary and to the extent required for the performance of their duty” (Article 3). The commentary on this article emphasizes that the use of force by law enforcement officials should be exceptional. In general, firearms should not be used except when a suspected offender offers armed resistance or otherwise jeopardizes the lives of others, and less extreme measures are not sufficient to restrain or apprehend the suspected offender. According to the testimonies

⁶ Rules (1-2-7-89) of customary IHL.

collected for this report, all those who were targeted and killed were civilians who did not resist the public security forces or any associated militants.

b. According to local laws

The Syrian legislator has adopted a strict approach to the crimes discussed in this report. According to [Penal Code No. 148 of 1949](#), murder is classified as a felony and severe penalties are imposed on those found guilty. If murder is committed intentionally, the penalty can be the death sentence. Additionally, life imprisonment with hard labor may be imposed if the murder involves two or more victims or is executed for a base motive⁷. As previously mentioned in this report, these killings specifically targeted the Alawite sect, which constitutes discrimination based on religion or sect. Such discrimination qualifies as a base motive. Furthermore, these killings involved more than two victims, making the relevant legal provisions applicable, given that the number of victims reached two or more.

6. Recommendations from STJ

- a. The Syrian Interim Government must conduct necessary investigations into the killings and other violations that have affected civilians along the Syrian coast. Those responsible should be held accountable per established laws, ensuring that trials adhere to the principles of justice, integrity, and transparency as outlined in international charters and conventions. In this context, STJ highlights the role of the National Fact-Finding Committee for Investigation into Events on the Syrian Coast. This Committee could expand its mandate to include all killings and violations that occurred both before and after the coastal events.
- b. The Syrian Interim Government must assume responsibility for protecting civilians. It should provide clear instructions to general security forces and other law enforcement agencies to adhere to international charters, conventions, and norms. These guidelines emphasize the importance of differentiating between civilians and military personnel and mandate that civilians must not be targeted under any circumstances.
- c. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI-syria) should prepare a report on all extrajudicial killings that occurred along the Syrian coast and, if feasible, identify the responsible parties for these violations.
- d. Human rights organizations that aim to document both local and international human rights violations should focus on recording incidents on the Syrian coast and throughout Syria. They must adhere to the principles of integrity, neutrality, and independence in their work. Additionally, these organizations should conduct awareness campaigns to promote human rights and encourage all parties involved in the conflict, particularly those affiliated with the Syrian government, to refrain from committing violations. It is essential to protect civilians and all individuals not participating in combat, as well as civilian infrastructure.

⁷ Articles (534-535) of the Penal Code.



ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.

This publication was made possible with the support of Impunity Watch and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of Impunity Watch or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands.



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Netherlands

