

# "I Carried My Mother's Remains, Her Limbs Scattered on the Ground": The Bombing of Mar Elias Church in Dweilaa and the Limited Official Response



STJ Calls On The Syrian Transitional Government To Ensure An Independent And Transparent Investigation Into The Church Bombing, To Protect Places Of Worship, Criminalize Hate Speech, And Enable Civil Society And Victims To Participate In Prevention Policies That Uphold Justice, Freedom Of Belief, And Human Rights

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**CEASEFIRE**  
centre for civilian rights

**"I Carried My Mother's Remains, Her Limbs Scattered on the Ground": The Bombing of Mar Elias Church in Dweilaa and the Limited Official Response**

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## 1. Introduction

On the evening of Sunday, 22 June 2025, while hundreds of worshippers were gathered inside Mar Elias Church in the [Dweilaa neighborhood](#) of Damascus,<sup>1</sup> a terrorist bombing occurred, killing **26** people and injuring more than sixty others—all of them Christian civilians, including women and children.

Contrary to expectations, the Syrian transitional government's response to the incident appeared limited both symbolically and procedurally. Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) monitored the official statements issued by the government and its ministers, noting that the only official visit to the church was made by the Minister of Social Affairs—the sole Christian member of the Minister's Cabinet—while senior officials refrained from visiting the bombing site, despite the symbolic and serious nature of the event, particularly during this transitional period. The official statements were also limited to general expressions, lacking clear guarantees regarding the transparency of the investigation or the mechanisms for accountability.

In contrast, the official state-run media reflected the event through a narrow political and security narrative that was imprecisely framed, thereby exacerbating public tension and division instead of fostering societal solidarity. The report also documents serious mismanagement of the crime scene, where journalists and civilians were allowed to enter the site in the early hours before evidence was collected or the area secured, undermining trust in the seriousness of the investigation.

The early announcement—released less than an hour after the bombing—that ISIS was responsible for the attack, issued before any mention of a criminal investigation or presentation of material evidence, sparked widespread doubt about the credibility of the official account. These doubts were further fueled by the absence of any ISIS claim of responsibility in its media outlets, and the appearance of a statement by a group called "Saraya Ansar al-Sunna" that claimed responsibility for the bombing—a group the authorities later described as fictitious.

The report places this incident within a broader pattern of violations targeting Christian citizens in Syria in recent months. It also highlights growing concerns that such attacks—if left unpunished—may signal a dangerous trend of systematic targeting of Christians on religious or sectarian grounds, and a deepening culture of impunity. This calls for urgent action by the authorities to ensure these violations are not repeated, to hold those responsible accountable, and to rebuild trust among all components of Syrian society.

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<sup>1</sup> The Dweilaa neighborhood is located in the southeastern part of the capital, Damascus, and is administratively part of the al-Shaghour district in the Damascus Governorate. The neighborhood is characterized by a diverse population, with a Christian majority alongside Muslim families. Throughout the years of conflict, the area did not witness direct military confrontations like those seen in nearby neighborhoods such as Tabbaleh, Jobar, Ayn Tarma, and Tadamon. Conversely, since 2011, Dweilaa has received a large number of displaced families from areas affected by armed conflict, which has contributed to an increase in its population density and diversity.

For this brief report, STJ conducted **7** in-depth interviews online<sup>2</sup> —**6** through secure messaging applications and one in person. All interviewees were informed of the voluntary nature of the interviews and how their information would be used, including in the publication of this report. **Three** of the interviewees requested anonymity out of fear of retaliation against themselves or their families; thus, pseudonyms were used.

In addition to the interviews, the report draws on other testimonies available from open sources and examines the aftermath of the bombing and the unresolved questions surrounding the perpetrators.<sup>3</sup>

The report recommends that the Syrian transitional government take urgent actions to ensure justice, foremost among them initiating an independent and transparent judicial investigation into the bombing of Mar Elias Church that adheres to international standards and includes forensic experts and human rights organizations. It also calls for respect for detainees' rights, the guarantee of fair trials, the protection of places of worship, and efforts to combat sectarian hate speech through both legislation and awareness campaigns. The report emphasizes the need to empower civil society and victims to participate in protection strategies and to avoid politicizing investigations in order to enhance public trust and preserve social cohesion in Syria.

## 2. The Bombing of Dweilaa Church Through the Eyes of Witnesses:

According to documentation by STJ, the attack began at approximately 6:30 p.m. with gunfire from outside the church that lasted a few minutes. A gunman then stormed into the church and began shooting randomly in all directions. Two of the attendees —brothers Jiryes and Boutros al-Beshara—attempted to stop him and managed to bring him down after a brief struggle. At that moment, the assailant detonated a suicide vest he was wearing. Some testimonies also indicated that a second attacker had entered the church courtyard but managed to flee amidst the chaos following the explosion.

Testimony 1: Laur Joseph al-Nasr (wife of the victim Jiryes al-Beshara)

Laur recounted her testimony to STJ as follows:

"The shooting started at the church windows from outside. The first thing we did was duck down and take cover in front of the altar steps. When the terrorist opened the door and entered the church, my husband Jiryes and his brother Boutros saw him and

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<sup>2</sup> One of them occurred prior to the incident and involved restrictions imposed on Christians.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example:

[Testimony](#) of Milad Hallak (a church chanter), published by Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 24 June 2025.

Eyewitness [video](#) from outside Mar Elias Church in Dweilaa, Rozana Radio, 22 June 2025.

[Video](#) testimony of Father Malatios Shtahi, Sawt al-Asima, 22 June 2025.

[Video](#) testimony of Father Youhanna Suleiman Shehada, pastor of Mar Elias Church in Dweilaa, recorded at the crime scene, Al-Hadath, 22 June 2025. A second [interview](#) was conducted on 24 June 2025 via the YouTube channel "Live."

Eyewitness [video](#), A Facebook Page, 22 June 2025.

[Video](#) of an injured survivor recounting the first moments of the Mar Elias Church bombing in Damascus, Enab Baladi, 23 June 2025.

tried to resist and drive him out. He then pulled out a hand grenade. My husband kicked his hand and the grenade fell without exploding. Boutros quickly grabbed him by the legs to bring him down, and that's when the terrorist detonated himself using a suicide belt he was wearing."

Laur described the horror of the moments that followed:

"At that point, I couldn't hear anything. I just saw people flying through the air. Among them was my husband, who fell in front of the church. Only the upper half of his body remained, along with his liver and abdomen on the ground. As for his brother, only his legs and a piece of his shirt were left, lying beside my husband."

She continued:

"Chaos erupted. We heard that another terrorist was being pursued. He was also planning to blow himself up. We rushed to get the children out of the church, including my husband's niece, who was covered in blood, her head swollen, and unable to see because of the shrapnel in her eyes. My other brother-in-law, Elias al-Beshara, was also injured in his right leg. Our loss is enormous. Seven of our family members were martyred in this bombing."

Testimony 2: Siham (daughter of the victim Julia al-Beshara)

The STJ team spoke with Siham (32 years old, a babysitter), the daughter of Julia al-Beshara (sister of the victims Jiryas and Boutros). Siham confirmed Laur's account and added further details:

"One man entered the church through the main door. He was wearing olive-colored trousers, had a light beard, and wore a black headband across his forehead. My cousin, who saw him up close, believes she had seen him about two months earlier driving an Islamic preaching vehicle through the Dweilaa neighborhood."

Siham continued describing the attack:

"He started firing randomly at the people standing near the entrance, then moved inside where worshippers were seated in the back pews. He killed many of them before my two uncles tried to stop him, and he blew himself up with them."

She added painfully:

"I carried the remains of my mother from inside the church. Her limbs were scattered across the floor."

Testimony 3: Father Youhanna Suleiman Shehada (Pastor of Mar Elias Church in Dweilaa)

In his interview with STJ, Father Youhanna Shehada recounted the moments of horror and shock he experienced alongside the congregation in the church:

"Gunfire started randomly at the peaceful worshippers, who had their hands lifted to the sky, praying to God for the healing of the sick, for the wounded, and for everyone they love or don't love, each person offering their own prayer."

He tried to describe the magnitude of the loss and the number of lives taken:

"As a result of this terrorist act, we held funerals for twenty people. But there are still body parts at the hospital that we haven't been able to receive yet. We're waiting for DNA analysis to identify them."

Father Shehada concluded with a hopeful prayer:

"What I would like to add is my prayer and wish for all Syrians that we may one day reach the moment when we celebrate peace and revive love."

Testimony 4: Sarah, Survivor of the Bombing (Pseudonym)

In tearful words, Sarah (26 years old, a recent engineering graduate) recalled the sound and scene that have haunted her since the moment of the explosion. She told STJ:

"Ever since that moment, the sound has been in my ears, even now, as I speak to you. At first, I completely lost my hearing and started screaming. I couldn't comprehend what had happened. I saw people in pieces. It was an absolutely horrifying scene. Some were completely charred."

Sarah described the moment she escaped and tried to rescue her family amid the wreckage:

"I had to step over a dead person just to reach my father. I thought I was going to lose my mother. She has osteoporosis and can't bend over, but God helped her."

She continued, her voice broken by tears, recalling her own injuries and her mother's:

"I felt like my arm had been severed, and blood was pouring down my face. My mother couldn't walk, she had serious injuries to her pelvis and hip."

Amid this pain, Sarah spoke of the fear and trauma that continue to haunt her:

"I lived through moments of terror I will never forget for the rest of my life. I kept asking myself how I could die in a place where I had lit a candle to ask God for guidance. I don't sleep at all now. Every time I close my eyes, the scene comes back to me."

Testimony 5: Odette, Survivor of the Bombing

Odette, a 31-year-old nurse, began her testimony describing the experience as the most traumatic of her life:

"I fainted from the explosion. When I came to, the scenes were terrifying. Everything was destroyed, people were in pieces. It was heartbreaking. I felt intense pain in my hip, my arm felt like it was on fire, and blood was pouring from it. Wooden chairs were piled



above my head. When I regained some consciousness, I pulled myself out from under the rubble."

She added:

"It's a feeling that's hard to put into words. The fear alone is overwhelming. There was no one near me that I knew. After I left the hospital, I couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, I relived the explosion. The terror is still inside me. Medication is the only thing that helps me sleep. My mental state is very fragile. I think it will take me a long time to return to a normal life."

Testimony 6: Sham, Survivor of the Bombing (Pseudonym)

Sham, a university student around 20 years old, gave her testimony to STJ, recounting the terrifying first moments of the attack:

"The sound of gunfire kept getting louder and louder. I dropped to the ground, and bullets were flying over us. I gave up trying to escape. I closed my eyes and started praying, thinking the gunman was coming toward me and would shoot me. Then came the huge explosion. I felt something in my stomach that was like fire. Everything was destroyed. Wooden beams and pictures were still falling."

She described how she fled the church wounded and tried to reach her family:

"I left the church bleeding and started running down the street until I saw a young man who pointed to an ambulance and helped me. I couldn't hear anything from the shock of the explosion. I looked down, my stomach was open and my flesh was hanging out. My side was open too, with flesh protruding. My fingers were shattered and crushed, the bone was visible, and my arm was broken and hurt terribly. I'll never forget the sounds of people crying and screaming. As for me, I was so shocked, I didn't cry at all."

Sham concluded by describing the psychological effects she still endures:

"Right now, I feel like I'm living in a nightmare. Every time I close my eyes, I remember what happened. This place that people come to for peace, there was no room for peace there. I sleep only because of sedatives. I wake up crying every day. I've developed an overwhelming fear. I will never stay in this country. I'll finish my university studies and leave to any place."

### 3. Public Outrage and Regional and International Reactions:

The bombing —being the first of its kind since the fall of the Assad regime— shocked Syrian public opinion. Masses and prayers were held for the victims in most churches across Syria,<sup>4</sup> and moments of mourning were observed in several areas.<sup>5</sup> Protests also broke out in

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: [the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood in Aleppo](#), as well as in [Daraa](#), [Suwayda](#), [Hama](#), and [Latakia](#).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: in [Damascus](#), [Aleppo](#), [Hama](#), [Qamishli](#), and [Jableh](#).

neighborhoods with Christian majorities, with chants rising in Damascus's Bab Touma neighborhood: **"Free Syria, free Syria, Chechens out!"**<sup>6</sup>

The contours of a crisis of confidence between the Christian public and the Syrian transitional authority became more pronounced than ever, especially after a speech delivered by Patriarch "John X" at the Holy Cross Church in Damascus during the funeral of the bombing victims. In his address, he held the Syrian transitional government fully responsible for the incident and condemned its response as inadequate.<sup>7</sup> (The government's handling of the bombing will be discussed in more detail later in this report.)

A wave of condemnation followed from Arab and international states and organizations. The United Nations condemned the bombing and called for a full investigation.<sup>8</sup> Geir Pedersen, the UN Special Envoy to Syria, **urged everyone to unite in rejecting terrorism, extremism, incitement, and the targeting of any group in Syria.**<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Arab League called on the Syrian transitional government to confront terrorist organizations, while the Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council **"reiterated the stance of the GCC countries, standing with the leadership and people of the Syrian Arab Republic, and its full solidarity with it in combating terrorism".**<sup>10</sup>

The European Union also condemned the attack. The spokesperson for the European Commission's Foreign Affairs division stated: **"This heinous and cowardly violence against Christians is an attack against all Syrians. It is a grave reminder of the need to intensify efforts against the terrorist threat and to ensure the enduring defeat of Daesh and other terrorist organisations."**<sup>11</sup>

France likewise condemned what it called a "horrific terrorist attack" targeting worshippers. It extended its condolences to the victims' families and wished a swift recovery to the wounded. France also reiterated its support for the Syrian people in their pursuit of peace and reaffirmed its determination to combat Islamic terrorism in Syria.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A [video](#) circulated on social media, shared by the Syrian Observatory on 23 June 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Antioch Patriarchate – Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, [Statement](#) by Patriarch John X during the funeral of the martyrs of Mar Elias Church – Dweilaa, at the Holy Cross Church in Damascus. 24 June 2025.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Secretary-General. [Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General on the terrorist attack in Damascus](#). 23 June 2025.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Office of the Special Envoy for Syria. [Statement by United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Mr. Geir O. Pedersen](#). 22 June 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Gulf Cooperation Council. [HE the GCCSG Condemns and Denounces the Terrorist bombing that Targeted St. Elias Church in the city of Damascus](#). 23 June 2025.

<sup>11</sup> European External Action Service. [Statement by the Spokesperson on the terrorist attack at Mar Elias Church in Damascus](#). 23 June 2025

<sup>12</sup> French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. [Syria – Attack in Damascus \(22.06.25\)](#). 22 June 2025.



## 4. Handling the Crime Scene

Preserving a crime scene is one of the fundamental principles of criminal procedure, as it directly impacts the integrity of investigations and the fairness of trials.<sup>13</sup> Any unauthorized interference or tampering with a crime scene can compromise physical evidence and weaken the validity of investigative and judicial findings. Failure to secure a crime scene exposes evidence to potential damage or removal, which can hinder the investigation and obstruct the course of justice. For instance, critical traces might be erased or false evidence planted, potentially leading to the wrongful accusation of innocents or the escape of actual perpetrators.

Chaos prevailed at the crime scene following the terrorist bombing at Mar Elias Church, especially during the first three hours after the explosion. STJ documented several live broadcasts from the scene that circulated on social media and news outlets.<sup>14</sup> Although security forces arrived shortly after the bombing, the site remained open to journalists, civilians, and even armed actors. Meanwhile, civil defense teams began clearing debris and cleaning the church shortly after the victims were evacuated. Security forces did not begin restricting access to the crime scene until several hours had passed, raising doubts about the authorities' seriousness in investigating the crime from the very beginning.

Regarding the security forces' response, Father Youhanna Shehada (pastor of Mar Elias Church in Dweilaa) stated in his testimony to STJ:

"A short while after the incident, the concerned authorities arrived at the scene; civil defense, the police, and the investigative unit. They inspected the area with sniffer dogs to search for any explosive materials that might have been planted in or around the church and collected some evidence from the scene... At the time, we were not fully aware of the situation because of the number of bodies and the dismembered corpses around us. We were trying to gather remains and help those who could still be saved. The authorities did their job and left. To this day, we are still waiting for an official report. Everything we've learned so far has come through the media and social media."

Father Shehada further explained:

"Mar Elias Church and the other churches in Dweilaa had not previously faced any serious attacks. This is because the local community in our area is, in truth, very special. From the earliest moments of liberation, all the residents, from every sect, came together to stand in front of the churches and mosques to protect them. Christians in various parts of Syria have been subjected to attacks, which were always justified as 'isolated incidents.' But now we see that remaining silent about these so-called 'individual cases,' and failing to address them or hold the perpetrators accountable, is what has brought us here. This bombing is not an isolated act. It is a coordinated

<sup>13</sup> UNDP Iraq. [Standard Operating Procedures for Criminal Investigations](#). Developed by the Criminal Justice Committee in coordination with the Higher Judicial Council and the Ministry of Justice. Published 18 March 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Sawt al-Asima – [Live from Mar Elias Church in the Dweilaa neighborhood](#), which was the site of a suicide attack moments ago, at 7:20 p.m. on 22 June 2025.

operation carried out by organized actors. We expect the Syrian government to fulfill its duty in safeguarding civil peace and protecting all segments of Syrian society."

In a follow-up [interview](#) conducted on 24 June 2025, Father Shehada summarized the authorities' efforts at the crime scene as follows:

"The relevant authorities came, inspected the location, and retrieved footage from nearby surveillance cameras... But we were not updated on the results of the investigation. We heard, like everyone else, through the media, that they had arrested a cell affiliated with ISIS."

While securing a crime scene should entail preventing civilians and journalists from entering before evidence is collected, as well as inviting international experts (to enhance transparency) and forensic professionals to oversee and participate in the investigation, the Syrian authorities did the opposite. They left the scene in disarray for several hours—allowing the potential removal of evidence that could have aided the investigation. Later, they issued a decision banning ambassadors and diplomats from visiting the crime scene, claiming the move was **"to ensure the safety of diplomats and to prevent any breach of the security procedures in place at the site, which remains under processing and investigation by the relevant authorities."**<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Disputed Responsibility for the Attack

Less than an hour after the bombing occurred, the Ministry of Interior announced via its official platforms that the "suicide bomber" responsible for the terrorist act belonged to the Islamic State (ISIS).<sup>16</sup>

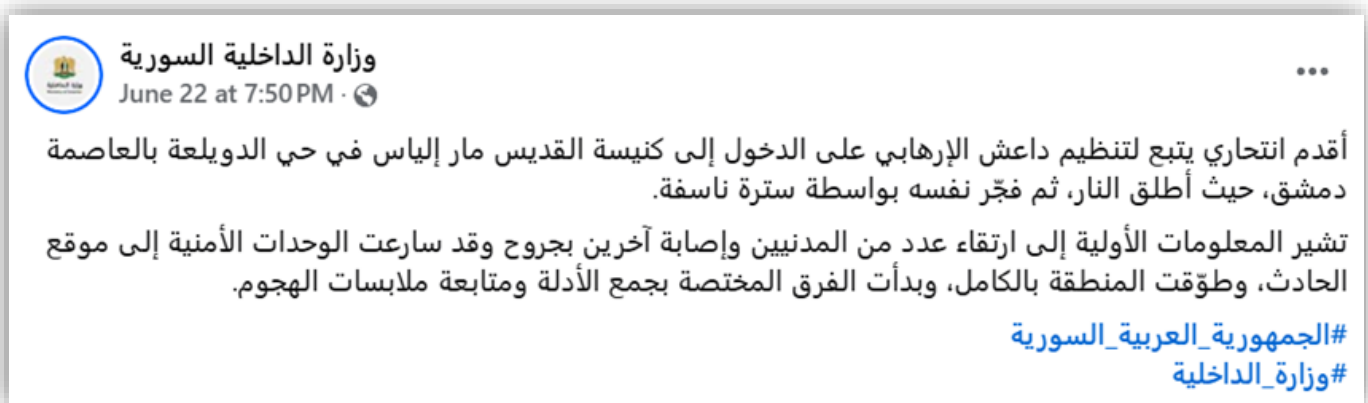


Image 1. Post by the Ministry of Interior.

<sup>15</sup> SANA News Agency. [The Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs calls on ambassadors and heads of missions not to visit the site of the terrorist bombing without prior approval](#). 22 June 2025.

<sup>16</sup>

This announcement raised serious questions about its credibility, particularly given how quickly it was issued —within less than an hour of the attack— at a time when the authorities had not yet announced the launch of a criminal investigation or the detention of any suspects. This speed in assigning blame, without any reference to clear investigative procedures or publicly presented physical evidence, casts doubt on the authorities' commitment to fair and transparent investigations. These doubts are reinforced by comparisons with previous incidents, such as the [Syrian Coast Massacre in March 2025](#), where, despite the existence of visible evidence, the authorities attempted to assign blame to unrelated parties.

In a similar vein, local media outlets and social media users circulated information about a stolen car owner who reportedly [identified his vehicle](#) within a government convoy during the raids following the bombing, further fueling questions about the professionalism of the security response and the rule of law within the security apparatus.

Doubts further deepened after a group calling itself *Saraya Ansar al-Sunna* released a statement claiming responsibility for the bombing and naming an individual —*Mohammad Zain al-Abidin*— as the perpetrator.<sup>17</sup> Although this group has reportedly been active in Syria since February 2025 and has claimed previous attacks targeting Alawite civilians, the Syrian transitional authorities had not made any official comment about it in the four months prior to the bombing. However, in a statement to the media on 24 June, Ministry of Interior spokesperson *Noureddine al-Baba* dismissed *Ansar al-Sunna* as a “**fictitious organization**”. According to the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), he stated:

“The devastating blow dealt to ISIS in Damascus and its surroundings has forced the organization to redirect blame by inventing a fictitious group under the name *Ansar al-Sunna* to claim responsibility on its behalf. He added that the leader of the terrorist cell was affiliated with ISIS leadership, held the title Governor of the Desert, and had recruited suicide bombers from al-Hol camp, taking advantage of the security vacuum following the fall of the former regime. The individual was allegedly involved in numerous crimes and known to security agencies outside Syria.”<sup>18</sup>

On 23 June, the Ministry of Interior announced that it had arrested a group described as “**a terrorist cell linked to the bombing perpetrators**.”<sup>19</sup> After releasing photos and names of the detainees, public debate intensified, and further doubts were raised about the official narrative.

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<sup>17</sup> Qasaa News Network. [Ansar al-Sunna claims responsibility for the terrorist bombing targeting Mar Elias Church in Damascus](#). 24 June 2025. See also: BBC. [Who Are “Saraya Ansar al-Sunna,” the Group That Claimed the Damascus Church Bombing?](#). 24 June 2025. Also: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. [The Damascus Church Attack: Who Is Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah?](#). 27 June 2025.

<sup>18</sup> SANA. [Ministry of Interior Reveals Details of the Arrest of the Cell Responsible for the Mar Elias Church Bombing in Damascus](#). 24 June 2025.

<sup>19</sup> [A reporter from Al-Ikhbariyah documents the arrest of ISIS members by Internal Security Forces in Rural Damascus](#). Al-Ikhbariyah Syria Channel. 23 June 2025. See also: [Suicide vests and explosive mines prepared for detonation were seized by Internal Security Forces in Rural Damascus, along with a booby-trapped motorcycle](#). Photos published on the Syrian Ministry of Interior's official Facebook page on 23 June 2025. Also see: [Photos](#) of the detainees published on the Syrian Ministry of Interior's Facebook page on 24 June 2025.

Spokesperson *Noureddine al-Baba* [claimed](#) that two of the cell's members **"had come to Damascus from al-Hol camp through the Syrian desert and infiltrated the capital after its liberation."** However, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) denied these claims in a [statement](#) issued on 25 June:

"In response to these allegations, the relevant departments within our forces immediately initiated a thorough review and investigation of the records pertaining to the residents of al-Hol Camp, including those who have exited the camp in recent months. The investigation confirmed that the only individuals who left the camp during this period were Syrians, and their departure occurred at the request of the Damascus Government. Additionally, Iraqi nationals were repatriated to Iraqi territory based on verified lists submitted by the Iraqi authorities, who ensured their relocation to the al-Jad'ah Camp."<sup>20</sup>

Separately, after the Interior Ministry published images of the alleged detainees, a [voice recording](#) was released —purportedly from the brother of one of the detainees, [Mahmoud Jamal Khneifis](#)— in which he denied his brother's connection to ISIS. (STJ was unable to verify the authenticity of the recording or the speaker's identity through an independent source.) According to the speaker, **the detainee had been living in Idlib since 2016 with his family and children and was in Damascus on a family visit to see his sister, accompanied by his young son.** He maintained that his brother had a good reputation and no prior security record, and stated: **"It's simply not believable that he would bring his son with him if he intended to carry out such an act."** As of the time this report was written, the Ministry of Interior had not issued any clarification regarding the case.

Finally, STJ reviewed Issue No. 501 of *Al-Naba*, the official newspaper of ISIS, published on Thursday, 26 June 2025 (corresponding to 1 Muharram 1447 AH). The issue included a summary of ISIS operations between 23 and 29 Dhu al-Hijjah (19 to 26 June). Notably, the terrorist bombing at Mar Elias Church on 22 June was absent from the report. The only operation listed in ISIS's "Wilayat al-Sham" (Province of the Levant) during that week was an attack south of Qamishli targeting "a 4x4 vehicle belonging to the apostate PKK militia." STJ considers ISIS's failure to claim responsibility —despite its well-known practice of overtly publicizing its attacks— an additional reason to question the credibility of the investigation, the arrests, and the statements issued by the Syrian Ministry of Interior regarding the party responsible for planning and executing the bombing at Mar Elias Church in the Dweilaa neighborhood.

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<sup>20</sup> In the days following the bombing, social media accounts and pages circulated [misleading information](#) based on forged documents, which were presented as leaked lists from the humanitarian organization *Blumont* operating in al-Hol Camp. These documents included the name "Kinan Ali bin Ramadan," an Iraqi national, who was among those accused by the Syrian Ministry of Interior of planning the Mar Elias Church bombing. However, [Blumont](#) issued a clarification on its official Facebook page stating: "We are aware of images circulating online reportedly from our team's work in Syria. The images are not authentic and do not reflect how we track the distribution of humanitarian assistance."



Image 2. Al-Naba, page 2: Report titled "Harvest of the Soldiers".



Image 3. Al-Naba, page 7: Report titled "A Mujahideen Bombing Targets a PKK Militia Vehicle in Baraka".

## 6. Observations on the Syrian Government's Discourse

A series of condemnations were issued by Syrian ministers and officials in the transitional government following the bombing.<sup>21</sup> The first statement came from the [Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), titled: **"The Syrian Arab Republic Condemns the Terrorist Bombing That Targeted Mar Elias Church in Damascus."** Notably, the title gave the impression that the bombing had occurred in a foreign country, particularly given the issuing authority, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The statement itself echoed the Interior Ministry's narrative, placing blame squarely on ISIS. It also politically capitalized on the event by accusing so-called **"remnants of terrorism"** of attempting to undermine **"the ongoing achievements of the Syrian state and leadership."** Furthermore, it called on **"the international community and the UN Security Council to condemn the attack and support the Syrian state's counter-terrorism efforts."** Meanwhile, condolences to the victims' families were only included in the final paragraph of the statement.

<sup>21</sup> [Ministers condemn the suicide attack on Mar Elias Church and affirm the unity of the people in confronting terrorism](#). Al-Ikhbariyah Syria. 22 June 2025.



On 23 June 2025, the [official Facebook page](#) of the Presidency of the Syrian Arab Republic published a message from Transitional President Ahmad al-Sharaa, offering condolences to the victims' families. The opening line read: ***"President of the Republic Mr. Ahmad al-Sharaa offers condolences to the families of those who perished in the bombing of Mar Elias Church in the Dweilaa neighborhood of Damascus."*** Of particular concern was the fact that, despite the gravity of the incident and widespread domestic and international reactions, the head of the transitional government did not visit the crime scene or offer condolences in person at the church.

Families of the victims, along with several Christian clerics, criticized the failure of most Syrian officials to refer to the deceased as **"martyrs."** Instead, the presidential statement used vague and generic terms such as ***"those who perished in the bombing of Mar Elias Church"*** and ***"innocent civilians."*** Many of the victims' relatives considered this language to be dismissive and inappropriate.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, on 23 June, Al-Ikhbariyah Syria broadcast an [audio recording](#) of a phone call in which Transitional President Ahmad al-Sharaa offered condolences to Romanos al-Hannat, the Patriarchal Vicar of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East. In his words (quoted verbatim):

"I want to offer you my condolences for what happened yesterday, and God willing, we will go after everyone, and we will not hesitate to deliver justice to those who deserve it, God willing... The most important thing is that we stay strong and defiant... There are many people who are bothered by this national unity that has happened in Syria and want to ruin this beautiful atmosphere that has happened in Syria, but we, God willing, with our unity and strength, will stand against them."

This message notably emphasized "national unity" and improving conditions in the country, while avoiding any direct discussion of the investigation's progress, a concrete message to the victims' families, or guarantees regarding accountability and justice.

## 7. The Event in Syrian State Media

Syrian state media —namely SANA and Al-Ikhbariyah Syria— followed [the same political line in capitalizing on the incident](#), showing little regard for the potential harm this exploitation could inflict, first on the victims' families, and second on Syrian society as a whole.

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<sup>22</sup> In a speech addressed to Interim Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa, Bishop Ephraim Maalouli stated: "We had hoped to hear from you, Mr. President, a healing word; a word that would reach every free Syrian household, a word that would reach the ears of every Christian, a word that condemns every aggressor and transgressor, a word that honors the martyrs who fell in the bombing, a word of condolence for the relatives and loved ones of these martyrs, a word that mends the wounds of those lying in hospital beds, a word of comfort for our Antiochian Church, deeply rooted in the nation, a word that strengthens the resolve of those present at the scene, a word that makes us feel that the one steering the ship of free Syria stands equally with all segments of the Syrian people, and alongside all the sons and daughters of this homeland." Source: [Video](#) uploaded to the *Qad el-Sama* YouTube channel. 24 June 2025.



The talk show *"Ala al-Taawleh"* (On the Table), hosted by Moaz Muhareb on Al-Ikhbariyah Syria, aired several episodes that politically weaponized the event to discredit political opponents. On 23 June 2025 –the day after the bombing– an episode titled ["The Mar Elias Church Attack: An Attempt to Undermine National Belonging after the Refusal to Disrupt Government Work"](#) aired. It promoted theories such as: **"The bombing of Mar Elias Church was a punishment for Christians for refusing to join the 'Alliance of Minorities.'"** In addition to the overtly sectarian rhetoric, the logic of such arguments was highly inconsistent, especially given the claim that ISIS was behind the attack, while simultaneously framing it as retaliation against Christians for not aligning with a "minority alliance".

On 25 June 2025, another episode focused on ["Security Failures at al-Hol Camp: How Did the Perpetrators of the Dweilaa Bombing Escape?"](#) The discussion again centered on unverified and questionable claims, specifically that two members of the alleged terrorist cell came from al-Hol Camp, which is under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This claim was then used to accuse the SDF of negligence or even complicity in the attack.

The political exploitation of security incidents is one of the most dangerous forms of crisis manipulation. It leads to the exaggeration or distortion of facts to serve factional narratives, thereby confusing public opinion and deepening societal divisions. It also undermines impartial investigations and turns security institutions into tools of political rivalry instead of guarantors of justice. This approach erodes public trust in the state, fuels extremism, fosters suspicion and scapegoating, and diminishes the moral legitimacy of the authorities. Worst of all, it distorts the very concept of security, turning it from a collective right into a selective privilege used against opponents.

This official rhetoric, echoed by state media, quickly manifested on the Syrian street as hate speech and incitement campaigns, often accompanied by misinformation circulating on social media. STJ monitored dozens of posts that repeated accusations against the SDF or referred to a so-called "Alliance of Minorities" as being behind the bombing. In another example, numerous accounts and pages circulated a fabricated screenshot alleging that journalist Samir Metini had published news of the Mar Elias Church bombing in Dweilaa before it occurred, claiming he later deleted the post.<sup>23</sup>

In parallel, Christian clerics who criticized the transitional Syrian government were targeted by hate campaigns and accusations of betrayal. These attacks peaked after Patriarch John X delivered a speech during the funeral service at the Holy Cross Church in Damascus, in which he held the government fully accountable for the incident and listed several shortcomings in its response.<sup>24</sup> That moment marked a sharp escalation in hate speech campaigns, with a wide-

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<sup>23</sup> It was found upon review that the post in which Metini offers condolences to the victims and those affected was originally published at exactly 7:16 p.m. on the day of the incident, and was then edited one minute later to add the phrase "to all of you". Source: [Taakad](#) platform. 23 June 2025.

<sup>24</sup> The full speech of Patriarch John X was published on the [Facebook page](#) of the Antioch Patriarchate (Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East) on 24 June 2025. Notably, the Qatari-funded Syria TV had been broadcasting the speech live but cut the transmission when the Patriarch began criticizing the Syrian authorities. See also: [Mesat TV channel](#) on YouTube, and [Bab Touma Fi Al-Qalb Facebook page](#), same date.

scale smear effort targeting Patriarch John X and other Christian religious figures across social media platforms.<sup>25</sup>

## 8. Previous Violations Against Christian Citizens:

STJ has documented several violations targeting Christian citizens in Syria, including direct acts of violence, sectarian threats, and the vandalism of places of worship and property. The table below presents a series of consecutive incidents recorded across various regions of the country, from late 2024 through mid-2025. These incidents raise serious concerns regarding the targeting of religious freedoms and the fundamental rights of Christians to practice their faith in safety. Notably, such violations continued even after the church bombing.

Date	Incident
19/12/2024	Attack on the Mar Yaqub al-Nusaibini Church, affiliated with the Syriac Orthodox Church, in the city of Qamishli. <sup>26</sup>
24/12/2024	Unknown individuals set fire to a Christmas tree in al-Suqaylabiyah, Hama countryside. <sup>27</sup>
14/01/2025	A proselytizing vehicle roamed the Qassaa neighborhood in Damascus, calling on local Christians to convert to Islam. <sup>28</sup>
17/02/2025	Crosses inside the Syriac cemetery in the village of Zaidal, Homs, were vandalized. <sup>29</sup>
05/05/2025	A liquor shop owned by a Christian citizen in the town of Rabla, near al-Qusayr in Homs Governorate, was stormed. The shop was vandalized and the Christian employees were insulted. <sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> [Christian Orthodox Sword Facebook page](#), post dated 25 June 2025.

<sup>26</sup> Welat TV Arabic, [Facebook post](#) with images. 19 December 2024.

See also: Daraj Media. [Are there messages behind the attacks on churches in Syria?](#). 24 December 2024.

<sup>27</sup> CNN Arabic. Syria.. [Burning of a Christmas tree and what a faction member said next to priests.. Here's what happened](#). 25 December 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Sawt al-Asima, [video](#). 14 January 2025.

<sup>29</sup> [Al-Mashhad](#). 17 February 2025.

<sup>30</sup> Testimony to "Syrians for Truth and Justice," documented on 7 May 2025. According to the witness, armed individuals in military uniforms stormed a liquor store and ordered it closed, claiming that selling alcohol was forbidden. When the worker explained that they were Christian and their religion does not prohibit it, the assailants grew more agitated. They physically assaulted him, accused him of blasphemy and of following a distorted Bible, and urged the shop owner to convert to Islam, threatening to bomb the store if he refused. They then destroyed the shop's contents and stole the worker's phone and ID. Before leaving, they made it clear that conversion was not optional —they had to declare Islam. See also: [Facebook post](#) that includes photos and video.

12/05/2025	The Diocese of al-Jazira and al-Furat for the Syriac Orthodox Church issued a statement condemning the desecration of Christian graves and theft from churches in Qamishli. <sup>31</sup>
17/05/2025	Attack on the property of a Christian family in the al-Mughayla neighborhood of Hama city, coinciding with the distribution of sectarian threats: "Death to pork-eaters." <sup>32</sup>
20/05/2025	A proselytizing poster reading "Convert to Islam or pay the jizya" was found on the wall of the Maronite church in Tartous. <sup>33</sup>
25/05/2025	Attack on a bar owned by a Christian citizen in Tartous. <sup>34</sup>
08/06/2025	An unidentified gunman fired at the cross atop the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Girdle (Um al-Zunnar) in Homs. <sup>35</sup>
22/06/2025	Threatening graffiti was found on the walls of Mar Elias Church in the city of Kafrbu, Hama countryside, reading: "Your turn is coming." <sup>36</sup>

## 9. Recommendations:

In light of the testimonies and data documented in this report, the observed failures in handling the crime scene, the premature announcement of investigation results, and the detention of individuals without adequate safeguards, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) recommends that the Syrian Transitional Government adopt the following legal and human rights-based measures. These aim to ensure justice and prevent the recurrence of similar violations:

1. **Open an independent and transparent judicial investigation** into the Mar Elias Church bombing, in line with international standards of integrity. This includes involving independent forensic experts, committing to publish the investigation results to ensure victims' right to truth and accountability, and immediately presenting detainees to the competent judicial authorities, without holding them in custody outside the legal framework, in compliance with national law and international human rights standards.

<sup>31</sup> [Syriac Orthodox Community Council in Qamishli](#). 14 May 2025.

<sup>32</sup> Qassaa News Network, [post](#) with images. 17 May 2025.

<sup>33</sup> SOHR. [SOHR warns against serious repercussions of racist campaigns | Unknown individuals stick call-for-Islam sticker stuck on wall of Maronite Church in Tartus city](#). 20 May 2025.

<sup>34</sup> Euro News. [Their Shops Were Destroyed and They Were Asked to Pay Jizya... Syria's Christians Victims of Extremist Factions' Violations](#). 27 May 2025.

<sup>35</sup> [Statement](#) issued by the Archdiocese of Homs, Hama, and Tartous for the Syriac Orthodox Church. 8 June 2025.

<sup>36</sup> [Video](#), Christians of the East. 22 June 2025.

2. **Guarantee detainees' right to legal counsel** from the moment of arrest, **protect them from any form of torture or coercion**, and **uphold fair trial standards** in accordance with relevant international treaties.
  3. **Establish multidisciplinary investigation committees** for serious crimes that include judges, forensic experts, representatives of human rights organizations, and victims' associations. These committees must be independent and credible. Membership must not be limited to individuals from a single entity or political or sectarian group, as occurred with the [Investigation Committee for the Coastal Events](#). Instead, such committees should reflect Syrian society's diversity to enhance public trust in their outcomes.
  4. **Adopt legislative and executive measures to protect places of worship and other religious sites**, strengthen the capacity of security forces for swift and professional response to threats, and ensure the protection of religious privacy and freedom of belief.
  5. **Implement strict laws and policies to combat hate speech and sectarian incitement**, including criminal prosecution of perpetrators and the launch of national awareness campaigns promoting pluralism and coexistence.
  6. **Enable civil society and victims' organizations to participate** in the development and implementation of plans to prevent attacks on places of worship, and guarantee victims' rights to fair compensation, psychological and social support, and comprehensive rehabilitation.
  7. **Reform procedures for crime scene preservation and evidence collection** by adopting and enforcing clear protocols that prohibit tampering with material evidence. Authorities must be required to engage forensic experts and independent investigative professionals to ensure justice and prevent future violations.
  8. **Develop the capacity of law enforcement and criminal investigators** through mandatory, specialized training programs focused on professional crime scene management, evidence collection, preservation, and analysis according to international standards. This guarantees the integrity of investigations and accountability by preventing the loss, contamination, or manipulation of evidence, which is crucial for justice and truth.
  9. **Refrain from exploiting security incidents for political or factional purposes**, and ensure the independence of investigations from propaganda or regional agendas. Politicized handling, such as that observed in the official discourse surrounding the Mar Elias Church bombing, undermines public trust in state institutions, fuels societal division, and weakens the pursuit of justice.
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## 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.

## ABOUT Ceasefire



The Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights aims to empower civilians in situations of armed conflict or prevailing insecurity to document violations of their rights; to seek justice and accountability for violations of civilian rights; and to develop the practice of civilian rights protection and raise public support for the promotion of civilian rights.

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