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Minority Rights in Syria's Transition: Identity-Based Violence, Institutional Exclusion and Failures of Protection

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Organization profile

Syrians for Truth and Justice is an independent Syrian human rights organization that documents violations committed by all parties, supports victims and survivors, conducts legal and policy analysis, and engages United Nations human rights and accountability mechanisms. Its work prioritizes equality, non-discrimination, minority rights and inclusive justice.

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I. Introduction and Methodology

1. While Syria's fourth-cycle UPR review period also encompasses violations committed before December 2024, this submission focuses primarily on the rights of ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural communities following the fall of the former government on 8 December 2024. Under the principle of State continuity, the transitional authorities remain bound by Syria's international human rights obligations, including its duty to remedy past and ongoing violations. Syria supported recommendations during its third-cycle UPR to preserve coexistence, ensure the participation of ethnic and religious groups in an inclusive political process, protect civilians, investigate serious violations and ensure accountability; these commitments remain substantially unimplemented.[1]

2. Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) prepared this submission using first-hand interviews with victims, relatives and eyewitnesses, verified open-source material, official statements, and legal analysis contained in STJ reports. The submission uses 'minorities' as a practical human rights term, without treating any community as homogeneous or equating it with an armed or political actor.

3. STJ found recurring, though not identical, patterns affecting Alawite, Druze, Kurdish and Christian communities: identity-based killing and humiliation; arbitrary detention and torture; abduction and gender-based violence; forced displacement and property seizure; discriminatory exclusion from public employment; and incitement to collective punishment. Responsibility varies between State forces, formations incorporated into or operating under State structures, other non-State actors, and authorities that failed to prevent, halt or investigate foreseeable violations.

II. Equality, Participation and Institutional Exclusion

4. The National Dialogue Conference held on 24–25 February 2025 did not provide a sufficiently transparent, inclusive or deliberative basis for the transitional constitutional process. Its announcement shortly before convening, concerns regarding selective invitations and the exclusion of influential political and ethnic actors, and the absence of clear mechanisms to implement or follow up on its outcomes limited meaningful participation. Its final statement remained general and lacked a timetable or detailed framework for the transition. The subsequent seven-member constitutional drafting committee likewise lacked genuine representation of Syria's national, religious and cultural components and broader political and social expertise, further weakening the participatory legitimacy of the process. [2]

5. The resulting Constitutional Declaration includes general guarantees of equality and cultural diversity but does not establish enforceable protections for national, religious, linguistic and cultural pluralism. It retains the designation "Syrian Arab Republic", recognizes Arabic as the sole official language, requires the President to be Muslim, and designates Islamic jurisprudence as the principal source of legislation. These concerns materialized in Decree No. 149 of 7 July 2026, under which the President appointed all seven members of the Supreme Constitutional Court and defined its constitutional review and interpretive functions, including powers exercised at the request of the President or the Speaker of the People's Assembly, without transparent selection criteria or independent oversight. This risks entrenching institutional exclusion rather than ensuring equal citizenship and meaningful participation.[3]

6. The gap between formal recognition and effective participation is further illustrated by Presidential Decree No. 13 of 2026, which recognized Nowruz and Kurdish linguistic and cultural diversity and prohibited ethnic and linguistic discrimination. However, attacks on Kurdish celebrants shortly afterwards demonstrated the continuing gap between legal recognition and implementation. STJ documented assaults, ethnically charged insults, attacks on vehicles, coercion to insult the Kurdish flag, and failures or non-neutral conduct by General Security personnel.[4]

7. Institutional restructuring has also lacked transparent, merit-based criteria. STJ documented dismissals, forced transfers, salary and pension deprivation, and exclusion from public employment without reasoned decisions or effective appeals. Several testimonies indicated that sectarian affiliation, political views, gender or social background influenced decisions; Alawite employees expressed particular fears of collective punishment after the coastal violence.[5]

III. Identity-Based Violence, Arbitrary Detention, Enforced Disappearance and Torture

8. Violence in the coastal and western-central regions in March 2025 disproportionately affected Alawite civilians. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry documented approximately 1,400 reported deaths, predominantly civilians, alongside looting, burning and displacement. In a subsequent investigation covering 10 March to the end of June 2025, STJ documented 64 killings, including nine women and nine children; five abductions; and ten cases of torture, beatings or inhuman treatment. The National Committee's July 2025 public summary acknowledged serious violations and referred 298 suspects to prosecutors; however, only a summary was made public, and possible command responsibility and broader institutional failures remained unaddressed. The evidence reflected recurring sectarian and gendered targeting, inadequate protection and ineffective accountability rather than isolated criminality.[6]

9. Violations against Alawite civilians continued beyond the initial massacres through drive-by killings, home raids, abduction, intimidation, property seizure and pressure to leave. In al-Qadam in Damascus, five testimonies documented arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and ill-treatment against Alawite civilians during December 2024 and March 2025. STJ also documented pressure on coastal families to accept official death-registration narratives portraying civilian victims as 'regime remnants' or attributing their deaths to the remnants, undermining the right to truth and the integrity of official records.[7]

10. In April and May 2025, STJ documented extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, torture, degrading treatment, looting, enforced disappearance, sectarian humiliation and hate speech against Druze civilians in Sahnaya, Ashrafiyat Sahnaya, Jaramana and al-Sawara al-Kubra in Damascus. The violence followed dissemination of an anonymous audio recording falsely attributed to a Druze religious figure. STJ's 16 interviews showed a lack of institutional neutrality and equal protection.[8]

11. During the July 2025 violence in Suwayda, government forces, State-affiliated formations and mobilized tribal fighters committed grave violations against Druze civilians, including unlawful killings, summary executions, torture, arbitrary detention, abduction, looting, destruction and forced displacement. Local Druze armed groups also committed retaliatory killings, torture, detention, looting and displacement against Bedouin civilians. These reciprocal violations reinforce the need for protection of all civilians and individual accountability, while not obscuring the State's heightened duties regarding its own forces and actors under its direction or control.[9]

12. During the January 2026 Aleppo escalation, STJ's nine interviews documented the detention of Kurdish civilians at exit checkpoints, separation of men from women, beatings, humiliation, confiscation of belongings, transfers to temporary or undisclosed sites, and cases in which families remained unable to establish relatives' fate or whereabouts. In Afrin, based on 41 direct testimonies, STJ documented arbitrary detention, incommunicado detention, torture, enforced disappearance, extortion and ethnically charged insults after former Syrian National Army factions were incorporated into Ministry of Defence structures. Returnees were detained under 'security screening' pretexts without judicial safeguards, while integration without vetting or accountability entrenched impunity.[10]

13. Christian communities also faced lethal attacks, sectarian threats and protection failures. On 22 June 2025, a suicide bombing at Mar Elias Church in Dweilaa, Damascus, killed 26 Christian worshippers and injured more than 60, including women and children. STJ documented deficiencies in securing the crime scene, limited transparency concerning the investigation and an inadequate official response. In al-Suqaylabiyah, Hama on 27 and 28 March 2026, collective violence included assaults, gunfire, looting, property damage and anti-Christian slurs. Based on 13 interviews, STJ found that security personnel failed to intervene effectively and, in some accounts, accompanied assailants. A subsequent reconciliation resulted in claims being dropped without an independent investigation into alleged security inaction or complicity.[11]

14. Arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture remained cross-cutting practices after the transition. STJ documented warrantless house raids, checkpoint arrests and disappearances from public or official facilities, followed by failure to acknowledge custody or disclose victims' fate. Detainees also reported beatings, electric shocks, suspension, mock execution, sexual assault, and threats against themselves or relatives. Identity, origin, presumed affiliation, and phone content were used as proxies for guilt, while unregistered sites, denial of family contact and lack of access to lawyers or doctors facilitated abuse.[12]

IV. Gendered Violations against Minority Women and Girls

15. Minority women and girls face intersecting discrimination based on gender and communal identity. An STJ investigation based on 17 interviews examined the abduction of 20 persons between December 2024 and November 2025, including nine women and three children. Alawite women and girls were disproportionately represented and survivors reported beatings, ill-treatment, sexual assault, verbal abuse and forced marriage under threat. In four documented cases, the victims' fate remained unknown.[13]

16. United Nations experts separately expressed concern regarding 38 reported abductions of Alawite women and girls aged between three and 40 across six governorates. Families searching for missing relatives faced fear, stigma and distrust of security bodies. Public denial or reduction of cases to voluntary departure, without confidential and survivor-centred investigations, deepened harm and discouraged reporting.[14]

17. Druze women and girls were likewise exposed to abduction, threats of enslavement, sexual violence and gendered incitement during the Suwayda violence. The Ministry of Justice established a seven-member committee under Decision No. 1287 of 2025 to investigate the events. However, STJ found that its status as an executive-affiliated administrative body, the absence of members specialised in investigating grave violations, and the lack of clear safeguards for confidential, survivor-centred reporting, witness protection and referrals raised concerns regarding its independence and accessibility, particularly for survivors of sexual violence. It therefore did not substitute for a specialised mechanism capable of coordinating searches, preserving evidence, and providing medical, psychosocial and legal support without discrimination.[15]

V. Hate Speech, Collective Stigmatization and Selective Enforcement

18. Hate speech and disinformation repeatedly preceded, accompanied or justified physical violence. During the March 2025 coastal events, calls for general mobilization were broadcast through mosque loudspeakers, while online content included open calls for the 'extermination of Alawites'. False and inflammatory narratives framed a security operation against specific suspects as collective confrontation with an Alawite social base.[16]

19. STJ's forthcoming investigation into the July 2025 Suwayda violence found that narratives concerning 'restoring State control', an 'Israeli project' and 'tribal rescue' moved beyond political description and

became tools of mobilization. Repeated content blurred distinctions between Druze civilians and fighters, recast victims as outlaws, amplified unverified claims, and helped normalize collective responsibility and armed mobilization.[17]

20. In May and June 2026, the multi-platform 'You Are Not a Tree' campaign called for the social and economic isolation of Alawites and Druze, extending to marriage, health care, education, burial and everyday interaction. It published maps and named neighbourhoods, describing minority communities as criminal 'incubators'. STJ documented no public condemnation, announced investigation or request to platforms to remove the campaign, despite rapid arrests in other cases involving offensive posts. This disparity raises concerns regarding selective enforcement and official tolerance of incitement directed at disfavoured groups.[18]

21. Syria lacks a comprehensive policy that distinguishes incitement prohibited under article 20(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights from protected expression under article 19. Vague criminal provisions risk selective censorship, while non-enforcement leaves targeted communities without protection. Any response should apply the Rabat Plan of Action's threshold test, ensure independent judicial oversight, and focus on context, speaker, intent, content, reach and likelihood of harm.[19]

VI. Displacement, Property Rights and Barriers to Return

22. During the January 2026 Aleppo escalation, STJ's 22 interviews documented large-scale displacement from the predominantly Kurdish Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh neighbourhoods under coercive and dangerous conditions and through unsafe exit routes. During residents' forced absence, and after government forces established control, homes and shops were widely looted or damaged without effective protection. In Afrin, 39 interviews documented seizure or destruction of at least 53 homes and confiscation of agricultural land, shops and equipment belonging mainly to displaced Kurdish owners. Extortion, threats and detention, together with the absence of restitution mechanisms, obstructed safe and dignified return.[20]

23. Alawite residents also experienced identity-based displacement and property seizure. In rural Hama, predominantly Alawite villagers were denied security guarantees for return while homes and agricultural land were seized, harvested or leased, depriving families of their livelihoods. In al-Sumaria, Damascus, STJ documented armed raids, discriminatory screening, short eviction deadlines, disregard of ownership documents and prevention of residents from removing belongings. Current residents' rights must be protected without erasing the legitimate claims of families previously dispossessed by the former government.[21]

24. The transitional authorities have not established accessible procedures to determine possession and ownership, remove armed actors from occupied properties, prevent retaliation against claimants, or provide restitution and compensation. These omissions perpetuate displacement and may consolidate demographic changes produced through coercion.

VII. Accountability and Transitional Justice

25. Accountability responses remain fragmented, non-transparent and insufficiently independent. Official fact-finding mechanisms have not consistently published their full findings or adequately addressed command responsibility, while local reconciliations have sometimes displaced victims' rights to investigation and remedy. The integration of armed formations into State military and security structures without individual human rights vetting, review of past conduct or effective civilian oversight increases the risk of recurrence. [22]

26. Presidential Decree No. 20 of 2025 restricts the National Commission for Transitional Justice to violations attributed to the former government. This perpetrator-based mandate excludes violations

by non-State actors and abuses committed after 8 December 2024, including those affecting Alawite, Druze, Kurdish, Christian and Bedouin communities. The current accountability framework also lacks definitions of core international crimes and enforced disappearance consistent with international law, limiting effective prosecution. It creates an impermissible hierarchy among victims and undermines equal access to truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence.[23]

27. The documented violations should not be treated solely as failures of communal coexistence. Concentration of political and security power, weak local participation, selective recognition of rights, instrumentalization of sectarian narratives and lack of independent oversight have created conditions in which identity-based violence can recur. Durable protection requires democratic participation, accountable security institutions and equal citizenship, rather than symbolic inclusion or coercive centralization.[24]

VIII. Recommendations

28. STJ recommends that the Syrian Arab Republic:

- Within two years, adopt and bring into force a comprehensive equality and anti-discrimination law covering religion or belief, ethnicity, language, gender and perceived political affiliation; provide accessible civil, administrative and criminal remedies; and collect disaggregated data with safeguards for privacy and self-identification.
- Before adopting a permanent constitution or holding nationwide elections, review and amend the Constitutional Declaration and electoral framework through a transparent, inclusive and participatory process, with meaningful representation of ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural communities, women, displaced persons and civil society; guarantee equal citizenship, remove religious eligibility restrictions for public office, protect cultural and linguistic pluralism, strengthen independent institutional oversight, and ensure effective participation in national and local decision-making.
- Within 12 months, place all military, security and incorporated armed formations under a unified and publicly defined chain of command and independent civilian oversight; publish and apply individual human rights vetting criteria; prohibit identity-based screening, collective punishment and retaliation; and suspend personnel credibly implicated in serious violations pending investigation.
- Within 12 months, establish a unified registry of all persons deprived of liberty; require family notification and access to counsel within 24 hours and independent judicial review within 48 hours; close unofficial detention sites; immediately disclose the fate and whereabouts of disappeared persons; grant independent national and international human rights organizations and UN mechanisms regular, unhindered and unannounced access to all places of detention to monitor conditions and treatment; and ensure independent criminal investigations into torture, deaths in custody and enforced disappearance.
- Ensure independent and victim-centred investigations into violations in the coastal region, Suwayda, Afrin, Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo, al-Suqaylabiyah and other affected areas, and publish comprehensive findings, prosecution statistics and periodic implementation updates by the UPR mid-term review.
- Within 12 months, establish, within an independent national missing-persons framework, a specialised unit for abducted and missing women and girls with confidential reporting, rapid search procedures, forensic capacity, witness protection, and free medical, psychosocial and legal services; investigate sexual and gender-based violence without requiring public disclosure by survivors.

- Within 18 months, enact legislation and adopt a publicly available national action plan to prevent advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred constituting incitement, in accordance with ICCPR articles 19 and 20 and the Rabat Plan of Action; require prompt public condemnation and proportionate action while safeguarding journalism, documentation and peaceful dissent, and publish annual data on complaints, investigations and outcomes.
- Within two years, establish and operationalise an independent housing, land and property (HLP) restitution mechanism with judicial review, accessible procedures and authority to order restitution or adequate compensation; end occupation and extortion by armed actors; protect claimants from retaliation; recognize alternative evidence of ownership; and ensure safe, voluntary and dignified return.
- Within six months, publish and apply uniform merit-based criteria for public-sector restructuring; provide individually reasoned written decisions and effective appeals; restore salaries, pensions and employment or provide compensation where measures were discriminatory or unlawful.
- Before adopting transitional justice legislation, amend Decree No. 20 of 2025 to cover all victims and violations without discrimination; criminalize genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and enforced disappearance; ensure institutional independence, victim participation and reparations; and ratify the Rome Statute and the ICPPED, recognizing the competence of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances under articles 31 and 32
- Within 18 months, establish and adequately fund an independent national human rights institution in full compliance with the Paris Principles, empowered to receive minority-rights complaints, inspect detention sites, monitor discrimination and report publicly to the legislature.

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