

Syria's Transitional Honeymoon Is Over After Massacres and Disinformation

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Brief Analysis

Amid mounting civilian deaths and rampant disinformation, the conduct of Syria's fact-finding committee will either make or break the new government's legitimacy and the prospects for a stable transition.

When the Assad regime fell, many feared that sectarian retribution and mass ethnic cleansing would ensue. Until last week, such abuses were limited to small spurts of random vigilantism rather than large-scale, organized violence. On March 6, however, former regime insurgents ambushed the transitional government's security forces in the western coastal town of Jableh, killing 30 of them (with many later found burned to death or in shallow mass graves). In response, government forces and affiliated elements killed 396 civilians and disarmed militants, according to figures [released \(https://x.com/FADELABDULGHANY/status/1899136458813796622\)](https://x.com/FADELABDULGHANY/status/1899136458813796622) by the Syrian Network for Human Rights earlier today. SNHR also reported that Assad remnants killed 383 people during this round of fighting—172 soldiers and 211 civilians. In all, 779 were killed, with the total death more than doubling since March 8. SNHR believes it will rise further as new evidence is uncovered in the coming days.

Most of the civilians killed by government forces were Alawites, though a few Christians have been confirmed dead as well. Those killed by former regime insurgents included Sunnis, Alawites, and Christians.

Making matters worse, the information environment has been polluted with false accounts and misleading “evidence” of what actually happened, making it difficult to separate truth from fiction. The U.S. State Department's [March 9 response \(https://www.state.gov/the-escalation-of-fighting-and-civilian-deaths-in-syria/\)](https://www.state.gov/the-escalation-of-fighting-and-civilian-deaths-in-syria/) was factually sound; it also rightfully condemned the targeting of minorities and called for holding perpetrators to account. Yet even that statement elided a key detail about the sequence of events—namely, that regime remnants triggered the killing, which then led to massacres by government forces and affiliates. As more information is unearthed in the coming weeks—including by the investigating committee that the new government

quickly formed—officials will gain a better understanding of the full picture. Even in the interim, however, it is important to contextualize what led to this situation, untangle the thicket of disinformation, and assess how the new authorities and the international community might best deal with the immediate aftermath.

The Bubbling Insurgency Boils Over

On December 10, transitional authorities announced a general amnesty for all military personnel conscripted during the Assad regime, establishing “settlement centers” in all provinces they controlled so that former soldiers could turn in their weapons, receive temporary ID cards, and settle their accounts with the new state. They were then permitted to return to civilian life as long as they had not been involved in massacres or war crimes during the civil war. Ultimately, tens of thousands of troops took part in this process.

Not everyone in the new government’s alliance agreed with this approach, suggesting it could lead to violence. Yet the new leadership did not want to repeat the failures of Iraq’s de-Baathification process post-2003, which morphed into major purges against former regime elements and exacerbated radicalization trends around the country.

Presumably realizing they would not qualify for amnesty given their past crimes, upper echelon figures from the Assad regime—including senior military and intelligence officials—avoided the settlement centers and began planning to retake the state instead. As part of this effort, they quickly formed new groups and networks focused on insurgency. Many of the known leaders of these groups are former army commanders from the regime’s Iran-aligned 4th Division, meaning they have a history of committing war crimes, including mass executions, burning civilians, and coordinating months-long starvation sieges. The new formations include:

- **The Syrian Popular Resistance**, which has a detachment called the **Coastal Shield Forces** based in the provinces of Latakia, Tartus, Homs, and Hama. The head of Coastal Shield—former Republican Guard commander Miqdad Fatiha—threatened to continue attacking the new government after the March 6 ambush.
- **The Syrian Islamic Resistance Front (aka Uli al-Baas)**, based in Deraa and Quneitra provinces and likely a direct Iranian/Hezbollah proxy (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uli-al-baas-part-2-key-analytic-findings>). In addition to bearing the traditional “fist in the air with a Kalashnikov” logo used by other such proxies, this new organization was first promoted as a “resistance” group in Iranian regime media just one day before last week’s massacres unfolded, even though it had been officially established two months prior.
- **Remnants of the National Defense Forces**, an umbrella group for irregular units during the Assad regime. These forces have begun to reorganize in Deir al-Zour province; a number of them have since been arrested by the new government.
- **The Military Council to Free Syria**, whose creation was announced by Brig. Gen. Ghaith Dala on the morning of the March 6 ambush. Unlike Fatiha, Dala called for negotiations immediately following that attack.

Tellingly, in the lead-up to the insurgent ambush that precipitated the chain of massacres, these Iran-linked Assad remnants were involved in forty-six attacks in multiple provinces going back to mid-January. This helps explain why the new government’s forces were aggressively pursuing, arresting, and fighting insurgent elements in these areas for weeks, culminating in the current crisis.

Command and Control Issues

Immediately after the March 6 ambush—the largest burst of violence since the fall of the regime—Syria’s security forces called for a general mobilization beyond those units already in the coastal region. Tasked with rooting out former regime insurgents, this mobilization included three U.S.-sanctioned militia factions from the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA): Jaish al-Sharqiya, Sultan Suleyman Shah, and the Hamzah Division. They have

previously been accused of human rights abuses against Kurds in northwest Syria. Also involved in the clashes were foreign jihadist fighters from the U.S.-designated group Ansar al-Tawhid and local Syrian civilians looking to avenge regime war crimes.

Most local reports suggest that the vast number of civilian deaths inflicted by government forces were committed by a mix of these SNA factions, foreign fighters, and random civilians. The core forces belonging to the faction that leads the new government, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), are known to be far more disciplined than these other actors, based on years of observing their activities in Idlib province and during Assad's ouster. Even so, some HTS forces were involved in the massacres too and need to be held accountable accordingly.

Moreover, the new government still bears responsibility for all killings carried out by groups under its formal command, including the SNA. Its inability to prevent these crimes highlights its still-limited command and control over areas and factions beyond its traditional base. After reports emerged that massacres were happening, the Interior Ministry issued a twofold statement that (1) called on civilians to refrain from getting involved and leave the response to the government, and (2) ordered all pro-government forces to adhere to procedures used during the offensive that overthrew the Assad regime, namely, no targeting of civilians. Yet much of the killing had already occurred by then, and the statement did not hint at the necessary process of accountability that must follow such incidents in order to prevent further retribution and atrocities.

Dual Traumas and Disinformation Campaigns

Sadly, the aftermath of the massacres has only heightened the trauma on both sides. Attacks committed by Assad remnants before and since then have reminded the Sunni Arab majority and various persecuted minorities of all the crimes committed by the former regime during decades of brutal rule and years of civil war, including barrel bombings, chemical attacks, starvation sieges, massacres, prison torture, and more. Likewise, generational trauma among the Alawite community is now resurfacing, going back to the Sunni-led massacres they suffered beginning in the medieval and Ottoman periods.

Worse, these histories are being turbocharged in a toxic online environment where endless disinformation is posted in a bid to further inflame the situation and create a cycle of violence. For example, networks run by Iranian, Hezbollah, and former regime figures have posted fake death counts, notices, and imagery to exacerbate an already tragic event. Many individuals had to get online and refute reports of their own death, but the damage had already been done—once the disinformation filtered into Western and Israeli forums, it morphed into false reports about a massacre against Christians. (As noted previously, a few Christians were killed, but most of the victims were Alawites and Sunnis.) Christian churches in Latakia even put out a joint statement urging individuals not to be swayed by rumors.

Further complicating matters, supporters of the new government posted a video claiming to show new crimes by regime remnants in Qardaha, but the footage was actually from 2013. Although the scenes highlighted the enduring trauma among those affected by regime crimes, falsely depicting old atrocities as new violations will only undermine the new government.

Government Response

Thus far, transitional president Ahmed al-Sharaa has delivered two national speeches to address the crisis, the most important outcome of which was the creation of a thirty-day fact-finding committee to investigate what actually happened. This body will have the power to recommend individuals who should be referred to the judiciary for crimes committed during the massacres. Unlike the transitional government's previous appointees to committees, ministries, and provincial offices, the seven members of this new committee have no known affiliations with HTS or

its allies—hopefully a sign of how serious Damascus is taking this inquiry.

Also important is the fact that the massacre came on the heels of the hastily planned national dialogue conference on February 25, which many Syrians felt was **not nearly representative or lengthy enough** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-new-syria-first-three-months>) for a country exiting five decades of totalitarian rule. In particular, HTS failed to show a clear path toward a more inclusive government—an essential question among those communities whose forces Damascus is asking to integrate with the national military. This dimmed the new government’s credibility to a degree not seen in its previous two-and-a-half months of rule, and the massacres have further thinned its margin for error. If the fact-finding committee fails to act in a transparent manner, or if the individuals implicated in its final report are not appropriately prosecuted, then Sharaa’s circle will lose all of their remaining credibility.

Policy Implications

Last week’s incidents give Washington and its allies even more reason to push Damascus on launching a substantive process for **transitional justice** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/models-transitional-justice-syria>) and truth and reconciliation. Prior to the massacres, the new government had not done anything on this front aside from a few positive statements. Going forward, the United States should welcome Sharaa’s quick call to establish an investigative committee but remind him that its findings and prosecutorial outcomes will be the true test of the new government’s sincerity in punishing crimes within its own ranks. Relatedly, lifting U.S. sanctions may need to be delayed until such tangible demonstrations of progress are made, with temporary relief provided through measures that Washington can easily rescind, like extended licenses.

The crisis also makes it ever more important for Washington to be closely engaged on Syria policy. This includes partnering with the allies who wrote the Paris Principles to make sure that Syria’s transition **continues in a mutually favorable manner** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/post-paris-steps-syria-could-be-decisive>)—that is, fostering stability, justice, and inclusive governance for Syrians while serving the paramount U.S. interest of countering Iran and its proxies. Iranian meddling is already breathing new life into former Assad regime officials who believe they can retake the state, undermining security even if they have no hope of realizing that fantasy.

Washington also needs to have tough discussions with its allies in Ankara and Jerusalem. Turkey needs to understand that continuing to support the SNA—essentially preventing Damascus from taking full command and control of these forces—will only lead to more violence. Demobilizing the SNA should be seen as going hand in hand with Syrian efforts to address the threat that Turkey originally created the SNA to counter: the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. The gradual process of integrating the SDF into the new Syrian military took a step forward earlier today when Sharaa and SDF commander Mazloum Abdi announced an agreement to integrate “all civil and military institutions in northeastern Syria into the administration of the Syrian state, including border crossings, the airport, and oil and gas fields.” In return, officials should urge the SDF to pledge that it will fully purge its ranks of foreign elements tied to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—an essential part of **assuaging Turkish security concerns** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-latest-pkk-talks-part-1-kurdish-actors-and-interests>).

In Israel, Washington should have candid conversations with officials about their push to hold and secure Syrian border territory while sponsoring Druze forces and other minorities. However understandable these moves may be from an Israeli security perspective, the fact is they are having pernicious effects on the Syrian national project—from Iran-backed insurgents to preventing Syrian citizens and their new leaders from coming to grips with societal fissures and building bridges between communities.

If Syria is not permitted to deal with its legacy of problems free from interference by regional actors, then spoilers will continue to emerge and undermine the transition. Of course, pressuring U.S. partners should not be viewed as absolving the failures of the new government in Damascus. Yet before Washington can accurately point out those failures and craft policies to address them, it needs a clearer understanding of the extremely complicated and sensitive facts on the ground, especially when violence flares up as it did last week and the gears of disinformation start churning.

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Levy Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham>). ❖

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