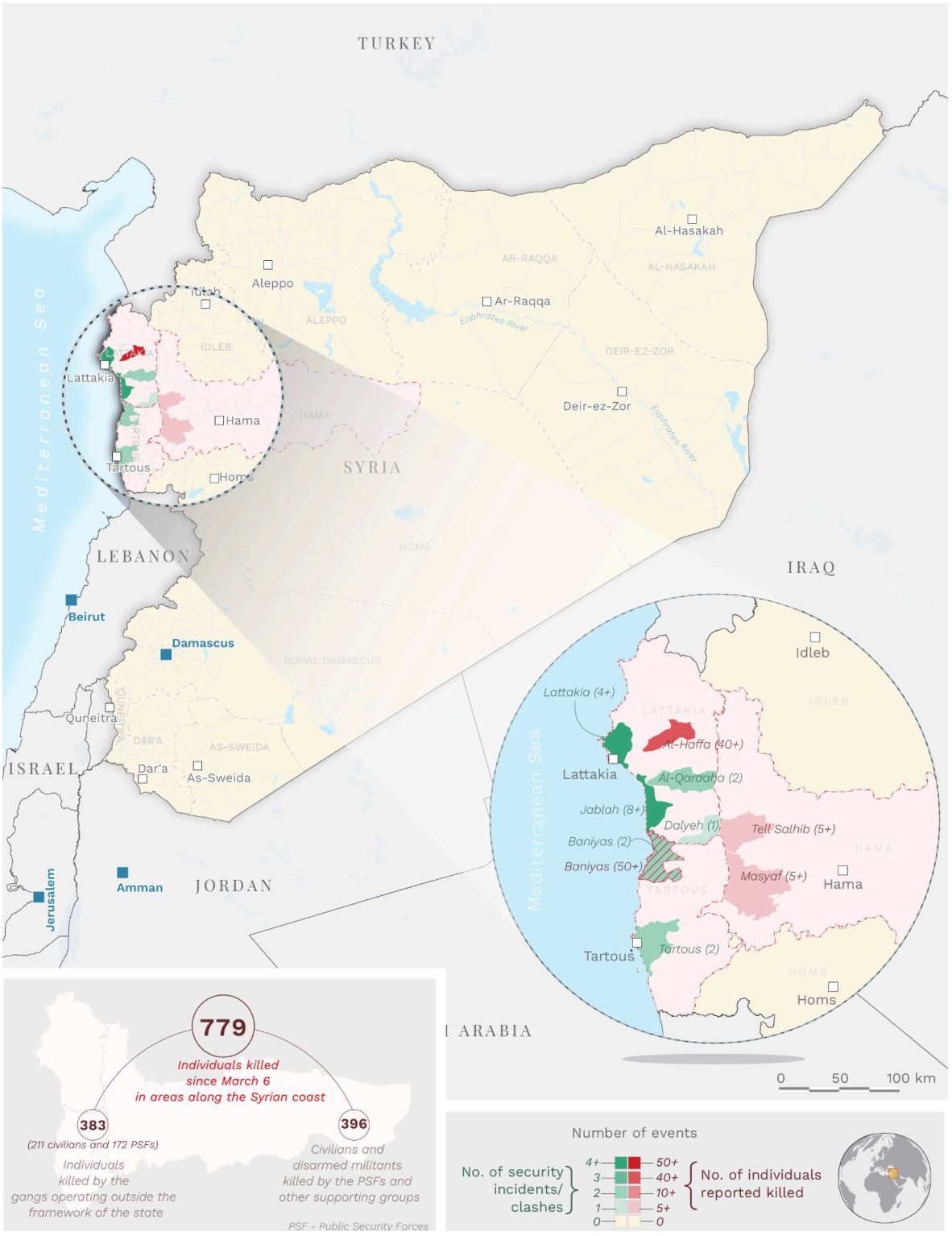
Situation Update

Situation Report - 11 March 2025

Instability in Syria: Clashes on the Coast

On 6 March, the security situation in the coastal governorates deteriorated significantly as clashes erupted following an ambush of Caretaker Government (CG) security forces during a security operation in Jableh, Latakia Governorate, killing 16. More than 70 people were reportedly killed in subsequent clashes, including at least four civilians. Over the next few days, reports of gunfights and revenge killings and massacres of predominantly Alawite civilians by a mixture of Sunni groups were near unabating. The number of fatalities caused has not been confirmed, yet it has likely grown since initial reports claimed that between 779 (Syrian Network for Human Rights) and 973 (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights) people had been killed in Latakia, Tartous, Hama, and Homs governorates between March 6 and March 10. Were either estimate accurate — and the true numbers are very likely higher — the events of this weekend would represent not only the most violent period since December 2024, but perhaps the most brutal period of concentrated open violence since the height of the Syrian conflict.

The significance of this latest episode cannot be understated and realises some of the worst fears of sectarian violence that followed the collapse of the Assad regime. It suggests that a range of actors — from high-ranking officers of the former regime, to radical Sunni groups, and perhaps even their international supporters — are pressing their case for recognition throughout Syria's transition, creating conditions which could indefinitely aggravate the latent nationwide instability and fragmentation over which the CG presides. In such a context, any attempt to deliver post-conflict transitional justice in response to popular (and international) demand may prove hollow, even if the present burst of violence is brought to a near-term halt. Having delivered on the key aspiration of the Syrian uprisings to remove President Assad when few thought it possible, Syria's new power holders must now confront the even more substantial task of dealing with a legacy of confessional, historical, and political divides which threaten to sabotage the country's first opportunity for post-Assad stability and unity.



Note that verified information about the locations of clashes, massacres, and fatalities is presently unavailable. Data presented in the above graphic is derived from COAR research (6-10 March) and highlights only major reported incidents. The figure of 779 individuals killed comes from the [Syrian Network for Human Rights](). Unofficial and not for reproduction.

Timeline of Events

On 6 March, several security points and patrols were reportedly attacked by what the CG referred to as “loyalists of the Assad regime”, allegedly linked to Suheil al-Hassan, the former commander of the “Tiger Forces”. SOHR reported artillery and rocket fire on the villages of Harf Al-Sari, Ba’badah, Duwayr Ba’badah, Al-Daliyah, Wadi Al-Qal’a, and Beit Ana (al-Hassan’s home village), as the CG sent military reinforcements to the area. Overnight curfews were declared in Latakia and Tartous cities as protests erupted over the harsh crackdown in Jableh. A curfew was also declared in Homs city following an attack by “remnants of the Assad regime” on groups demonstrating in support of the CG.

While clashes were ongoing, a statement signed by General Ghaith Dalla — a former commander in the Fourth Division and a well-known associate of Maher al-Assad — announced the formation of the Military Council for the Liberation of Syria and called for the overthrow of the CG. A second statement was issued by the Supreme Alawite Council in Syria and the Diaspora calling for protests against the CG, and subsequently a third calling for international intervention. These statements have been interpreted by the CG as a declaration of insurrection.

On 7 March, CG security forces undertook a series of military operations and security sweeps across dozens of villages in rural Latakia, Tartous, and Hama governorates. These operations reportedly featured indiscriminate raids, mass executions, and direct attacks on residents, with reports indicating that young men and adult males were executed at several locations. Numerous videos documenting the executions circulated on social media; however, the authenticity of these accounts is uncertain. Adding to the freneticism of events, reports suggest that many of the violations were carried out by a mixture of variously CG-aligned groups including foreign militants, factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA), internal security forces, and the Ministry of Defense, as well as civilians who mobilised to "support" security and defense forces in the coastal areas.

On 8 March, CG security forces implemented roadblocks to cut access to the coast from Idleb, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs and sought to stabilise these cities before launching security sweeps targeting armed groups in rural and mountainous areas. Clashes continued in Latakia and Homs governorate, particularly along key roads. Despite the subsidence of armed clashes, widespread looting, arson, and random shootings in Alawite villages were ongoing, with reports implicating security forces, SNA factions (notably Sultan Suleiman Shah Division and Hamza Division, operating under the Ministry of Defense as the 62nd Brigade, led by Mohammad Al-Jassim “Abu Amsha”), and foreign militants.

Background: Dealing With The Regime’s Legacy

The Assad regime’s strategy for "coup-proofing" Syria involved restructuring governance to solidify Alawite dominance in key state institutions, particularly within the military and security

sectors. This approach fostered a clientelist system that linked state power to sectarian identity, making the Alawite community's survival heavily dependent on Assad's continued rule. Many Alawites, who were historically marginalised, saw the regime as their only safeguard, even as they suffered heavy wartime losses. While some received public sector jobs as compensation for their families' sacrifices, others benefited from corrupt "ghost jobs" under the regime's patronage system.

Following the establishment of the CG under Ahmad al-Sharaa, efforts to reform state institutions have actually and perceptibly marginalised Alawite communities, particularly following the widespread dismissal of often Alawite absentee public sector employees. Relations between Alawites and the transitional authorities have been further strained by security operations targeting former regime loyalists, concentrated in Homs, Hama, Tartous, and Lattakia, which have previously led to sporadic armed clashes, deteriorating security, and increased incidents of kidnappings and violence.

Alawite communities have naturally feared for their safety in what has been a heavy-handed and cumbersome response by the new authorities. Meanwhile, the slow pace of the CG's actions on pursuing former regime elements and its relatively permissive approach to reconciliation has angered many within its core Sunni support base. Among Sunni communities in particular, there have been calls for swift action in pursuing members of the former regime and bringing about transitional justice, yet little of substance has been achieved to date, exacerbating growing tensions.

The Caretaker Government's Response

In reports reminiscent of the outright civil war in Syria over the past 14 years, the immediate CG Ministry of Defence and internal security response was heavy, and reportedly featured shelling of multiple villages, and reportedly the use of barrel bombs in some locations. A call for reinforcements was met by numerous second- and third-tier CG-linked groups, with armed factions converging on the coast in a relatively chaotic fashion and, if emerging reports are to be believed, acting in a manner which is strongly at odds with the government rhetoric. Discussion on the reorganisation of the state security apparatus has been an ongoing matter of concern both within and outside of Syria since December 2024, yet any reported progress on the issue would appear to be hyperbole given the apparently limited central command demonstrated by the CG in response to the initial attacks by the insurrectionists.

Interim President Ahmad al-Shara'a gave a televised speech on the evening of 7 March insisting that the CG would pursue "remnants of the Assad regime" and that it would ensure that weapons are restricted to the state, while also calling for an end to "violations" against civilians. On 9 March, he gave another speech in which he cast blame for the events on the "remnants" for "[breaking] the wall that maintains civil peace", while also announcing the formation of two

committees: an independent judicial fact-finding committee, formed in coordination with Syrian civil society groups to investigate the events, and the "High Committee for Civil Peace", consisting of two Sunni and one Alawite members tasked with facilitating civil peace in the coastal region. In the speech, he insisted that the Government would hold those responsible for attacks against civilians accountable. The fact-finding committee's report is expected within 30 days.

Next Steps and Risks

The risk of sectarian conflict poses perhaps the greatest threat to the stability of Syria's political transition. Minority groups fearing exclusion by the new (Sunni-led) authorities and revenge or reprisals from Sunni communities that suffered under the Alawite-dominated former regime are amongst the most visceral abstractions of Syria's wartime legacy and the enduring peacebuilding challenge that stand before the new authorities. Moreover, such sectarian tensions sit alongside, and are often intertwined with, the continued demands for power and autonomy from local armed groups and other minority groups — as seen in both the northeast and the south of the country (in Dara'a and as-Swedia governorates in particular).

Navigation of these challenges is extremely treacherous. While the CG is seeking to present itself as the guardian of a united Syria, it is under pressure from its core Sunni constituencies for justice with regards to the conduct of the officers and actors of the former regime — the lack of which fuels sectarian grievances on the part of Sunni groups, not to mention associated wanton violence and criminality from those who would capitalise on a broader state of national unsurety. Addressing this reality through security sweeps and arrests risks provoking a backlash however, as brutally demonstrated in Latakia Governorate this week, and risks further inflaming tensions both locally and nationwide.

Events over the past week also highlight - and will also likely imperil - the CG's efforts to disarm non-state armed groups and ensure that the state holds the monopoly on violence. So far, it has sought to encourage groups and individuals to hand over weapons voluntarily, but the outbreak of this recent violence and the CG's failure to prevent it means that minority groups will fear that such disarmament means handing over their only means of defence and autonomy. Should it seek to disarm these groups forcefully, it will likely have greater difficulty doing so with many, particularly Sunni armed groups (such as SNA factions), who its fighters would be less willing to confront and which are in receipt of international sponsorship.

Looking ahead, it is likely the CG will attempt to strike a balance between the protection of affected communities and demands for transitional justice in a combined effort to assure its supporters, appease its detractors, and stand against local (and potentially international) elements that would seek to undermine it. The events of the past week make both even more essential, and have further added a need to pursue justice for civilians killed in massacres

committed by its own supporters if it is to retain any hope of legitimacy among Syria's minority populations. Importantly, and notwithstanding the already insurmountable challenge of national reconstruction, it faces these challenges at the same time as a lack of cooperation from factions in the south limits its room for manoeuvre towards national consolidation, presenting it with crises on several fronts. Indeed, when one further considers unresolved questions over the northeast and the intransigence from other minorities concerned over their stake in a post-Assad Syria, the CG may very soon appear assailed on all sides after riding an initial wave of optimism. Whatever one thinks of the CG and its President however, they remain the only parties positioned to quell the present unrest, put a stop to cycles of confessional violence, deliver accountability, subdue potential spoilers, and prevent Syria from again falling into civil war. If they fail to do so, larger questions about Syria's future could well give way to more immediate concerns of nationwide stability.