

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues; the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; the Special Rapporteur on the right to education; the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons; the Independent expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order; the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons; the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence; the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences; the Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls

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(Please use this reference in your reply)

27 March 2025

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacity as Special Rapporteur on minority issues; Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Special Rapporteur on the right to education; Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons; Independent expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order; Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons; Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism; Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence; Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences; Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation and Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 52/5, 54/14, 53/7, 53/4, 52/9, 50/6, 57/7, 51/4, 49/5, 49/10, 54/8, 50/7, 51/19 and 50/18.

In this connection, we would like to bring to your attention information we have received concerning alleged violations of human rights against individuals belonging to religion or belief minorities, particularly Alawites, in the coastal region of the Syrian Arab Republic since 6 March 2025. These violations include large-scale and systematic summary executions of civilians and individuals hors de combat belonging to religious minorities; enforced disappearances; forced displacement of minority communities; looting and destruction of their homes and infrastructures; the obstruction of humanitarian aid and journalists' access; as well as the imminent risk of further deaths of civilians from ongoing violence.

According to the information received:

The Alawites are a religious minority in the Syrian Arab Republic making up 10-15% of the Syrian population and historically concentrated along the Western Coast. The region is home to various other religion or belief minorities. As former Presidents Bashar al-Assad and Hafez al-Assad belonged to the

Alawite minority, the community has reportedly been victim of hate speech and violence based on its members' suspected political affiliation with the former regime, with such targeting being based on their religious identity. Since 6 March 2025, violence escalated dramatically with reportedly at least 1,557 estimated civilian deaths recorded, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, including in particular women, children, and older persons.

Since January 2025, the caretaker authorities deployed security forces in the coastal area of Latakia and Tartus, an area predominantly inhabited by Alawite people and a stronghold of the remnants of the Assad regime. In the course of military operations, several clashes with gunmen led to the killing of 35 members of the security forces, 32 gunmen reportedly affiliated to the former regime, and 4 civilians.

On 6 March 2025, armed individuals belonging to the so-called "Military Council for the Liberation of Syria", composed of remnants of former President Bashar al-Assad forces, attacked security forces' checkpoints in Tartus and Latakia, marking a significant escalation of violence in this region. The clashes reportedly resulted in deaths among the Syrian security forces and the Assad-loyalist militants. The ambushes by Assad-loyalists were largely denounced across the country, including among the Alawite community. Yet, disinformation and incitement to hatred and violence against the Alawites allegedly spread on social media and in the streets following these attacks, with reports of religious leaders inciting to kill persons belonging to religious minorities in public speeches.

On 6-7 March 2025, the caretaker authorities deployed military forces and called for reinforcements from armed groups stationed in Idlib and Hama to help control the situation and restore peace in the Syrian coastal area. However, these armed groups reportedly did not only support the fight against combatants but also targeted civilians belonging to religious minorities, particularly Alawites but also Shia Muslims, among others. Armed groups allegedly perpetrated large-scale and systematic summary executions in Latakia, Baniyas, Jableh, Tartus, Hama, al-Qurdaha, and surrounding villages. Some incidents have also been reported in Homs and Damascus. According to the information received, armed groups went door to door, killing entire families in their homes or in public executions. Unarmed civilians, including women, children, and older persons, were reportedly brutally executed by being shot in the head or the chest, burnt alive, or beheaded. The information received also refers to looting and burning of Alawite homes, as well as widespread destruction of property belonging to the Alawite population and other religious minorities. Survivors either fled on foot or were forcibly displaced under direct threat of execution.

On 8-9 March 2025, violence escalated as widespread and systematic summary executions of Alawites and other religious minorities allegedly continued and expanded into new villages in the whole coastal region. Some accounts report that heavy guns and tanks were circulating in the coastal region of Syria, as well as indiscriminate shelling of residential areas. Available information refers to bodies lying in the streets and multiple mass graves. In some instances, Alawite communities allegedly remained stranded in areas under the control of armed

groups, without a safe corridor to flee and to access life-saving services such as health care and food.

In the following days, targeted executions of civilians belonging to the Alawite and other religion or belief minorities reportedly continued to take place. Reports highlight cases of torture, kidnapping, and enforced disappearance. Women and children were particularly targeted. Furthermore, hundreds of persons have fled their homes and are either internally displaced or have crossed the border to Lebanon. Internally displaced persons have not received any humanitarian assistance or effective protection. The population in the coastal areas reportedly lacked access to basic and lifesaving services and care, as the highway between Latakia and Homs were blocked for several days, restricting humanitarian access and people's movements. Multiple hospitals and ambulances are inoperable, with many medical personnel allegedly killed or displaced, severely restricting medical help for those injured and access to healthcare services. In Latakia, widespread power outages disrupted access to water, while schools were suspended in many cities and villages.

The victims were allegedly identified as belonging to a religious minority based on their surname, origin, and accent, and were arbitrarily identified as "remnants" or "sympathizers" of the former al-Assad regime based solely on their Alawite or other religious identity.

According to the information received, the executions and destruction of properties were perpetrated by armed groups, allegedly called in by the caretaker authorities as reinforcements. However, many survivors reported that their aggressors were wearing Syrian army uniforms or uniforms of allied factions, raising questions about the involvement of the Syrian armed forces in the violations.

On 11 March 2025 the caretaker authorities appointed a fact-finding committee to investigate the events that took place since 6 March 2025 and to hold the perpetrators accountable. The committee publicly stated that "no one is above the law" and that the country was determined to "prevent unlawful revenge". At the time of writing, based on available information, no arrests were reported.

The caretaker authorities failed to prevent these violations from taking place, and allegedly initially stated that it was not able to control militant "terrorist groups" operating in the area. However, the armed groups involved in the violations have reportedly agreed to unite under the caretaker authorities' command, suggesting a certain degree of State control. Members of the Syrian security forces have also allegedly taken part in the exactions. Furthermore, the caretaker authorities could not show that they immediately investigated and held the perpetrators accountable, raising concerns about a climate of impunity for perpetrators.

Sectarian tensions have been fueled by hate speech and misinformation from all parties, both online and offline. Video footage taken out of context allegedly circulated on social media, further exacerbating fear and spreading terror among the population. While the situation has attracted attention from international

media, foreign journalists have reportedly been denied access to some affected areas of the coastal region.

Without prejudging the accuracy of the above-mentioned allegations, we express our most serious concern about the grave violations and abuses of human rights committed against the Alawites and other religious minorities. We urge the caretaker authorities to design institutions which respect and guarantee protection of minorities during the transition period, build a legal system promoting the rights of all minorities in the Syrian Arab Republic, and pursue independent investigations and prosecutions to hold perpetrators to account.

Obligation to respect and protect the right to life

We are extremely concerned by reports of widespread and systematic summary executions of civilians. We recall that the right not to be arbitrarily deprived of life, the right not to be subjected to torture and the prohibition of enforced disappearance are *jus cogens* norms, also enshrined in international customary law, from which no derogation is permitted, regardless of contexts of internal political instability or any other public emergency (Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 36, para. 2). The right to life is protected under article 6 of the ICCPR, ratified by the Syrian Arab Republic on 21 April 1969, requiring the State to undertake all necessary measures to prevent arbitrary deprivation of life by law enforcement officials.

Additionally, we would like to highlight that States are obliged to take adequate preventive measures in order to protect individuals against reasonably foreseeable threats of being killed or murdered by private actors, including criminals, organized crime or armed groups; and to take special measures of protection towards persons in vulnerable situations whose lives have been placed at particular risk because of specific threats or pre-existing patterns of violence, including members of religious, racial or ethnic minorities (Human Rights Committee, general comment 36). Women and girls are often disproportionately affected by such violence, especially in conflict settings, and require targeted protection measures to address gender-based violence, sexual violence, and femicide (Human Rights Committee, general comment 36, para. 61).

We note further that under international humanitarian law applicable in non-international armed conflict, the parties must at all times distinguish between civilians and combatants; attacks may only be directed against combatants; and attacks must not be directed against civilians (International Committee of the Red Cross, Customary International Humanitarian Law, rule 1). Murder is a war crime (rule 156).

Obligation to investigate violations of the right to life

We recall the duty of States to investigate alleged or suspected violations of article 6 of the ICCPR in a prompt, effective, thorough, independent, impartial and transparent manner, and that all persons identified by the investigation as having participated in crimes of extra-legal or arbitrary killings, should be brought to justice and punished with sentences commensurate with the gravity of the crimes committed (Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 36). Failure to properly, independently and reliably investigate a killing or a disappearance, with a view to holding accountable those responsible, would in itself constitute a grave violation

under international human rights law. In this respect, we refer to the United Nations Revised Manual for the Effective Investigation of Extra-Legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions also known as the Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016) (“The Minnesota Protocol”), which provides detailed guidelines on the duty to investigate potential unlawful deaths “promptly, effectively and thoroughly, with independence, impartiality and transparency. Effective remedies must also be provided to the victims (ICCPR article 2(3) in conjunction with article 6).

We note further that under international humanitarian law applicable in non-international armed conflict, States must investigate war crimes and if appropriate prosecute the suspects (ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, rule 158). There is also increasing practice to the effect that States must provide reparation to victims of violations of international humanitarian law (rule 150).

Enforced disappearance

We recall that enforced disappearance constitutes a unique and integrated series of acts and omissions representing a grave threat to life, and States parties must take adequate measures to prevent the enforced disappearance of individuals and conduct an effective prompt, independent, impartial and thorough inquiry to establish the fate and whereabouts of persons who may have been subject to enforced disappearance (Human Rights Committee, general comment 36, para. 58). We also draw your attention to the General comment of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances on women affected by enforced disappearances (A/HRC/WGEID/98/2) and the United Nations Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, which establishes that no State shall practice, permit or tolerate enforced disappearances, in particular articles 1.2, 7, 9 to 12 and 13 of the Declaration. In this regard, we recall the 2019 Guiding Principles for the Search for Disappeared Persons, which stresses the obligation to search for disappeared persons. Enforced disappearance is also prohibited in armed conflict (ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, rule 98).

Gender-based violence against women

The use of gender-based violence against women is prohibited during times or peace and conflict. We are particularly concerned at the apparent targeting of women because of their ethnicity or religion. According to information received, Alawite, Christian and Druze women were forcefully disappeared, extrajudicially executed and attacked. We wish to emphasize the obligation, under article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, to protect women against gender-based discrimination and violence as a manifestation of such discrimination, namely, “violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or violence that affects women disproportionately”. Gender-based violence includes “acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty. There, particular attention should be paid to the investigation of gender-based violence, including killings targeting women and girls.

Regarding the addressing the acts of violence against women and girls in Syria, we recall that the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women adopted by the General Assembly resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993, which defines

violence against women in article 2 as encompassing, but not limited to, physical, sexual and psychological violence. The Declaration states that women are entitled to equal enjoyment and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other fields. These rights include, inter alia, (a) the right to life; (b) the right to equality; (c) the right to liberty and security; and (d) the right to equal protection under the law (article 3). In article 4(g), the Declaration notes the importance of ensuring that women subjected to violence receive specialized assistance, such as rehabilitation, assistance in childcare, treatment, counselling, and health and social services, facilities and programmes, as well as support structures, and should take all other appropriate measures to promote their safety and physical and psychological rehabilitation.

Forced displacement

We would like to refer to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement of 1998 (E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2), which establishes that internally displaced persons have the right to request and to receive protection and humanitarian assistance from these authorities. They shall not be persecuted or punished for making such a request (principle 3(2)). all authorities shall respect their obligations under international law, including human rights and humanitarian law, to prevent and avoid conditions that might lead to displacement (principle 5). Displacement shall not be carried out in a manner that violates the rights to life, dignity, liberty and security of those affected (Principle 8) States are under a particular obligation to protect against the displacement of indigenous peoples, minorities, peasants, pastoralists and other groups with a special dependency on and attachment to their lands (principle 9). Every human being has the inherent right to life, and internally displaced persons shall be protected in particular against genocide, murder, summary or arbitrary executions, and enforced disappearances including abduction or unacknowledged detention, threatening or resulting in death; threat and incitement to commit any of the foregoing acts are also prohibited (principle 10(1)). Attacks or other acts of violence against internally displaced persons who do not or no longer participate in hostilities are prohibited in all circumstances (principle 10(2)). Every human being has the right to dignity and physical, mental, and moral integrity, and shall be protected in particular against inter alia rape, mutilation, torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other outrages upon personal dignity, such as acts of gender-specific violence, forced prostitution, and any form of indecent violence, acts of violence intended to spread terror among internally displaced persons, and threats and incitement to commit any of the foregoing acts shall be prohibited (principle 11). All internally displaced persons have the right to an adequate standard of living, which at a minimum should include essential food and potable water, basic shelter and housing, appropriate clothing, and essential medical services and sanitation (principle 18).

Special attention should be paid to the health needs of women, including access to female health care providers and services, such as reproductive health care, as well as appropriate counselling for victims of sexual and other abuses (principle 19(2)). Primary duty and responsibility for providing humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons lie with national authorities (principle 25(1)). International humanitarian organizations and other appropriate actors have the right to offer their services in support of the internally displaced. Such an offer shall not be regarded as an unfriendly act or an interference in a State's internal affairs and shall be considered in

good faith. Consent thereto shall not be arbitrarily withheld, particularly when authorities concerned are unable or unwilling to provide the required humanitarian assistance (principle 25(2)). All authorities concerned shall grant and facilitate the free passage of humanitarian assistance and grant persons engaged in the provision of such assistance rapid and unimpeded access to the internally displaced. (principle 25(3)). All authorities concerned shall grant and facilitate for international humanitarian organizations and other appropriate actors, in the exercise of their respective mandates, rapid and unimpeded access to internally displaced persons to assist in their return or resettlement and reintegration (principle 30).

Under the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, all authorities shall respect their obligations under international law, including human rights and humanitarian law, to prevent and avoid conditions that might lead to displacement (principle 5). Competent authorities should endeavor to establish the fate and whereabouts of internally displaced persons reported missing and cooperate with relevant international organizations engaged in this task, as well as inform the next of kin on the progress of the investigation and notify them of any result (principle 26(2)). They should also collect and identify the mortal remains of those deceased, prevent their despoilation or mutilation, and facilitate the return of those remains to the next of kin or dispose of them respectfully (principle 16(3)). Grave sites of internally displaced persons should be protected and respected in all circumstances and internally displaced persons should have the right of access to the grave sites of their deceased relatives (principle 16(4)).

Under the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, all authorities shall respect their obligations under international law, including human rights and humanitarian law, to prevent and avoid conditions that might lead to displacement (principle 5). Women and children are often among those most at risk during displacement, facing heightened risks of exploitation, violence, and trafficking.

Countering incitement to hatred

Syria should counter disinformation and prohibit advocacy of religious and ethnic hatred that amounts to incitement of violence against minorities, both online and offline, in line with the human rights law standards on freedom of expression.

Article 20 (2) of the ICCPR provides that any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law. Article 20 must be understood and read in conjunction with article 19 ICCPR which protects the freedom of expression, and only permits for limited restrictions of freedom of expression in line with the requirements under article 19 (3) ICCPR, that is, they must be provided by law, pursue a legitimate aim, and be necessary and proportionate: (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others or (b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals. The Rabat Plan of Action ([A/HRC/22/17/Add.4](#)) provides further guidance to defining incitement to hatred and the application of article 20 ICCPR. More specifically it outlines a six-part threshold test taking into account (1) the social and political context, (2) status of the speaker, (3) intent to incite the audience against a target group, (4) content and form of the speech, (5) extent of its dissemination and (6) likelihood of harm, including imminence.

Older persons

We would also like to refer to the 2002 Madrid Political Declaration and International Plan of Action on Ageing, which urges governments to protect older persons from violence and assist them during displacement. The Plan of Action calls for eliminating violence against older persons (art. 5), including by minimizing the risks to older women of all forms of neglect, abuse and violence, especially in emergency situations (para. 110.f). The Plan of Action addresses older persons' vulnerabilities in crises like armed conflicts and natural disasters and urges governments (para. 54) to protect and assist them during conflict situations, ensuring equal access to essentials like food and shelter (para. 52). It also highlights the need to provide mental and physical rehabilitation for older persons disabled by such events, acknowledging their long-term impact (para. 55). The 1991 UN Principles for Older Persons also recall that older persons should have access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing and health care through the provision of income, family and community support and self-help (principle 1).

Institutional designs protecting the rights of minorities

Persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language (article 27 of the ICCPR). The Special Rapporteur on minority issues highlighted that peacebuilding processes and transitional periods are both a time for major institutional changes and an opportunity to alleviate potential tensions between different groups co-existing within a single but diverse, peaceful, stable and inclusive society. It is essential to build strong, inclusive and resilient institutions to ensure that the conditions for a lasting peace are met, and that the fate of minorities does not become or remain a destabilizing factor (A/79/169, paras. 21 and 44). Women belonging to minority groups face unique challenges and must be empowered to participate meaningfully in peacebuilding processes and decision-making roles. Such institutional designs should be centred around the effective participation of persons belonging to minorities in decision-making processes (A/79/169, para. 15).

Transitional justice

We underscore that a comprehensive transitional justice process – combining truth-seeking, justice, reparations, and institutional reforms – is critical to address past and ongoing gross human rights violations, bring perpetrators to justice and reparations to victims and their families, and ensure sustainable peace. As stressed in the communication SYR 1/2025 sent by Special Procedures' mandate holders, we reiterate that all alleged perpetrators of gross human rights violations should be prosecuted and sanctioned in line with international human rights law requirements, with adequate and effective reparations brought to victims, including measures in the areas of restitution, compensation, rehabilitation and satisfaction.

The full texts of the human rights instruments and standards recalled above are available on www.ohchr.org or can be provided upon request.

In view of the urgency of the matter, we would appreciate a response as soon as possible on the initial steps taken to safeguard the rights of the above-mentioned persons in compliance with international instruments.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would also be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and any comment you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide information on the alleged unlawful killings of Alawite individuals and individuals belonging to other religious minorities including casualties of women and girls and older persons, which took place since 6 March 2025.
3. Please provide information on the steps taken to ensure the remains of the deceased are treated in a respectful manner and properly documented to help ensure their identification and death investigation as required by international law, and bodies returned to families for burial according to religious and cultural traditions.
4. Please provide information on the steps taken by the relevant authorities to investigate the allegations of enforced disappearances, identify those responsible for the crimes concerned, prosecute and sanction them, and the search activities to determine the fate and whereabouts of disappeared persons.
5. Please provide information on the steps taken to investigate all acts of gender-based violence against women and the assistance and support provided to victims of such violence.
6. Please provide information on the steps taken to identify the perpetrators and ensure that all allegations of potentially unlawful killings are investigated as required under international law and in line with applicable standards, including the Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016). Please provide information on the guarantees of independence of the fact-finding committee appointed to investigate those crimes and how it conducts investigation according to international legal standards.
7. Please provide information on the measures in place to prevent displacement caused by and to provide assistance to internally displaced persons, as well as measures envisaged to foster durable solutions for displaced persons.
8. Please provide information on measures in place to ensure unrestricted access to areas where alleged unlawful killings have taken place to national and international journalists.

9. Please provide information on the steps taken to protect the rights of minorities in the constitutional declaration covering a five-year transitional period signed by President Ahmed al-Sharaa on 14 March 2025. Please indicate what measures are in place to ensure the effective participation of all minorities, especially minority women, in the transition process and design of new institutions in the Syrian Arab Republic.
10. Please provide information on protection guarantees offered to victims/survivors, while facilitating safe outreach of them and their families to the fact-finding committee established by the caretaker authorities.

This communication and any response received will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) within 60 days. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures to prevent any irreparable damage to the life and personal integrity of persons belonging to the Alawite and other minorities and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person responsible of the alleged violations.

We would like to bring to your attention that should sources submit the allegations concerning individual cases of enforced disappearances for the consideration of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances under its humanitarian procedure, the case will be examined by the Working Group according to its methods of work, in which case you will be informed by separate correspondence.

We may publicly express our concerns in the near future as, in our view, the information upon which the press release will be based is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. We also believe that the wider public should be alerted to the potential implications of the above-mentioned allegations. The press release will indicate that we have been in contact with you to clarify the issue/s in question.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

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Special Rapporteur on minority issues

Gabriella Citroni
Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

Farida Shaheed
Special Rapporteur on the right to education

Morris Tidball-Binz
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Paula Gaviria
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Nazila Ghanea
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