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Syria stirs beneath a hesitant dawn, six months after Assad's fall

Leila Al Shami

9 June 2025

In December, Syrians breathed a collective sigh of relief as the Assad regime was finally deposed. The following weeks were filled with celebration: the green flag of the revolution flew at gatherings across the country, and family chat groups buzzed with news of long-exiled relatives planning their return to Syria. Six months on, cautious optimism remains, but so do immense challenges.

The violence that erupted along the coast in March exposed the country's fragility. Sparked by remnants of the Assad regime, including senior military and intelligence officials, targeted attacks were launched against transitional government security forces. In response, several militias and Islamist groups went on a rampage, carrying out indiscriminate sectarian reprisals, primarily against Alawites.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), 1,334 people were massacred in Latakia, Tartous, and Hama, including 60 children. Of these, 889 were killed by armed forces nominally

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Retrieved on 15th June 2025 from www.newarab.com

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aligned with the transitional authorities; the rest by regime loyalists. Reports emerged of sectarian incitement, kidnappings, forced displacement, and videos of Alawite civilians being humiliated.

The transitional government condemned the violence and set up a fact-finding committee, pledging to prosecute those responsible, but no results have yet materialised. Armed clashes with Druze factions in Jaramana, Sahnaya, and Sweida have deepened fears among minority communities. A campaign of disinformation, including AI-generated videos of massacres and recycled footage of past atrocities, is fueling this anxiety.

The open-source platform *Verify Syria* has traced much of the content to Iranian networks. Many Syrians have taken to social media to debunk false reports of their own deaths. Fabricated claims of Christian massacres, amplified by high-profile Western figures like Elon Musk, have been publicly refuted by religious leaders. Both Iran and Israel are exploiting communal fears for geopolitical leverage.

The transitional government has sought to reassure minorities by appointing ministers from the Alawite, Christian, Druze, and Kurdish communities. It is also in dialogue with Kurdish and Druze representatives, who seek greater community autonomy within a decentralised Syria.

While these are encouraging signs, many remain sceptical that a leader who began his career in Al Qaeda will deliver on promises of a democratic transition or meaningfully address minority concerns.

The National Dialogue Conference on February 25 drew criticism for being unrepresentative and rushed. Invitations were issued just two days prior, excluding many potential attendees, and notably, there was no participation from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

Still, a genuine democratic space has opened. Across the country, citizen initiatives are emerging, and public debates are widely attended.

After years of revolutionary struggle, Syrians are not likely to relinquish hard-won freedoms. Returnees from exile bring fresh political ideas and civic cultures shaped abroad, enriching the evolving landscape.

Ahmad al-Sharaa remains widely popular, seen as responsive to public pressure. Yet the transitional government's failure to arrest key figures from the Assad regime is a major source of public anger. This lack of accountability is eroding trust and threatening civil peace, as some victims may seek revenge on their own.

In April, outrage erupted after a photo went viral of Justice Minister Mazhar al-Wais shaking hands with Judge Ammar Bilal, the former chief prosecutor of Assad's Counter Terrorism Court — infamous for jailing dissidents and overseeing mass torture.

As mass graves continue to be uncovered, such moments deepen public fury.

High-profile war criminals like Fadi Saqr, former leader of the regime's National Defence Militia and a key figure in the Tadamon massacre, have been granted amnesty and remain free. Saqr even visited the massacre site, sparking protests from victims' families.

Despite his record, he has taken part in national dialogue efforts and serves on civil peace committees liaising with coastal communities.

Justice for the victims of Assad-era crimes is essential. Families cannot be asked to forgive or forget in the name of national unity or moving on.

Transitional justice is the first step toward reconciliation, and crucial to ensuring that minority communities, especially Alawites, are not collectively blamed for the regime's crimes.

Accountability must apply to all perpetrators, regardless of sect or allegiance. Without justice, there can be no true reconciliation

or healing in a society scarred by decades of trauma and sectarian manipulation.

Rebuilding Syria is an immense challenge. My visit in April made the scale of destruction painfully clear — miles of bombed-out suburbs around Damascus speak to the enormity of what's been lost.

Reconstruction is estimated to cost between \$250 and \$400 billion. Without homes or jobs, millions of Syrians abroad cannot return, while those inside the country face daily hardship, with 90 percent living below the poverty line.

News that the US, EU, and UK have lifted most sanctions has opened new opportunities for trade and investment. Syria has already signed a \$7 billion energy deal with Qatari, Turkish, and US companies to revive its energy sector. In Damascus, where residents currently receive just two hours of electricity a day, such developments are a welcome relief. Celebrations erupted across the country in response.

But to ensure this progress benefits the broader population, not just a handful of crony capitalists, strong civil society and popular oversight are essential. Cronyism was a hallmark of the old regime and a root cause of the 2011 uprising. Syria's national wealth must not fall into foreign hands.

Nowhere is foreign interference more blatant than in Israel's escalating military campaign. Since Assad's fall, Israel has intensified strikes on Syrian military infrastructure, carried out incursions in the south, seized territory, and even kidnapped Syrian farmers. It views the new government as a threat and is using this moment to pursue its regional ambitions.

The transitional government, weak and fragmented, with no air force and limited capacity, is unable to respond. Ahmad al-Sharaa has tried to reassure Israel that Syria poses no threat and now relies on the protection of Turkey, the Gulf, and the US. Meanwhile, Syrians have taken to the streets in protest against the occupation, and in solidarity with Gaza.

Building a free and just Syria after five decades of totalitarian rule, in a region rife with instability and foreign meddling, was never going to be easy. The challenges are immense. But so too are the reasons for hope. We can wait and see what unfolds, or we can engage, support, and help shape the movements working for a democratic and just Syria for all its people.