



A rebel fighter guards the street in front of Lady of Damascus Church in Syria Dec. 11, 2024, after rebels seized the capital and ousted Syria's Bashar al-Assad. (OSV News/Reuters/Amr Abdallah Dalsh)

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"No one knows the end" of recent deadly violence in Syria, said Maronite Archbishop Antoine Chbair of Latakia and Tartus.

Hundreds of civilians have been killed since March 6 as Syria's security forces battled armed supporters of former Syria president Bashar Assad.

Assad — whose family ruled Syria for five decades, with brutal crackdowns on dissent and violent repression — fled to Moscow in December after his regime fell to a lightning rebel offensive. That campaign followed 13 years of civil war in which more than 600,000 were killed.

Now, Syria is grappling with what Chbair has called "sectarian strife."

State-run media reported that violence broke out March 6 in Syria's Latakia province, home to Alawite Muslims, members of the same minority sect as Assad and his regime's elite. Some 70% of Syrians are Sunni Muslims.

At least 800 were killed in the violence, according to various human rights groups, although the total is feared to be higher. On March 9, United Nations human rights chief Volker Türk said his office had received "extremely disturbing reports of entire families, including women, children and hors de combat (injured or inactive) fighters, being killed."

Türk added, "There are reports of summary executions on a sectarian basis by unidentified perpetrators, by members of the caretaker authorities' security forces, as well as by elements associated with the former government."

More than three quarters of those killed in the clashes were civilians, according to the Beirut office of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association.

Founded by Pope Pius XI in 1926, CNEWA — an initiative of the Holy See — works through and with the Eastern churches to provide humanitarian and spiritual support in the Middle East, Northeast Africa, India and Eastern Europe.

Among CNEWA's activities are providing aid to displaced families; ensuring health care for the most vulnerable; assisting in efforts to care for the marginalized, especially children, elderly and those with special needs; funding church-run initiatives preventing trafficking and programs that rehabilitate, counsel and heal survivors; and supporting the education and formation of priests, religious sisters and lay leaders.

CNEWA noted that "reports indicate the targeting of Alawites in some 30 'massacres'" in the Tartus and Latakia governorates March 7 and 8.

"The government said its forces, many of whom are non-Syrian, were responding to attacks from residues of Assad's military and blamed 'individual actions' for the violence," said CNEWA.

Chbair told CNEWA that "around 80 Christians were killed throughout these clashes."

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He noted that the archeparchy had opened its "parish in Baniyas for Alawites and Christians to hide from military factions."

CNEWA also said that "in other villages, Alawite families were hiding in Christians houses while others along the coast were seeking refuge in churches."

The agency also spoke with Sacred Heart Sr. Fadia Odisho in Tartus, who said that fighters "outrageously killed hundreds of innocent people in the streets, universities, houses" and "did not differentiate between men, women, elderly or even children.

"Several governorates stood with the persecuted people through demonstrations ... but afterward they were attacked and shot," Fadia told CNEWA. "They killed doctors, pharmacists and engineers. ... People are staying at home, and businesses and markets are closed until further notice."

CNEWA also quoted Melkite Greek Catholic Archbishop Georges Khawam of Latakia and Tartus, who said that "people were running in the streets hoping to reach their houses safely."

He described the number of fighters as "very significant," and the attacks as "quick and vicious."

"There are no words to describe what happened on the streets, especially the 'field courts' used as a pretext to kill people according to their law," Khawam told CNEWA. "These actions prove that the government is not present nor responsible, and that the culture of killing wins over the culture of peace."

The archbishop lamented that "there is no safety" in Syria, and that the nation is "heading toward chaos and security breakdown."

"People have lost their jobs and incomes, the supermarkets are empty, and the banks have frozen depositors' funds," said Khawam. "People want to leave the country at any cost."

In a March 10 interview with Reuters, Syria's interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa pledged that all responsible for violence would be held accountable as the nation seeks unity.

"Syria is a state of law. The law will take its course on all," he told Reuters. "We fought to defend the oppressed, and we won't accept that any blood be shed unjustly, or goes without punishment or accountability, even among those closest to us."

On March 10, al-Sharaa signed a ceasefire with the Kurdish-led U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, looking to end one axis of hostilities in the nation, while reclaiming a portion of contested Syrian territory and consolidating the SDF into a newly created unified Syrian force.