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# Can Syria's Christians survive under al-Sharaa?





## John Pontifex

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“There is no Christian I know in Syria who wouldn’t leave the country if they had the chance.’ My friend in northern Syria, normally so ebullient and full of life, suddenly sounded tired and flat.

“Everywhere you go,” he added, “the Islamisation of the country is noticeable.”

More than 18 months on from former Islamist leader Ahmed al-Sharaa’s dramatic ousting of the Assad regime, a picture is at last emerging of what the sudden change of regime means in practice for Syria’s ancient, yet increasingly fragile, Christian community.

For those like me who have travelled to Syria many times and who have followed the situation for Christians closely for many years, the question is as follows: is the al-Sharaa regime ultimately committed to a hardline Islamist agenda witnessed in its former stronghold in Idlib, north-west

Syria, or is it truly embracing a vision open to religious minorities?

Whatever might be said of the transitional government itself, a recent incident in Damascus demonstrates the increasing threat of militants at a societal level.

In spring 2026, a video suddenly started circulating online showing individuals gathering near a church in Qatana, a suburb of the capital.

The footage purportedly shows individuals gathering outside the church and chanting a Koranic phrase contemptuous of Christians as they prepared for Easter: “But they neither killed nor crucified him, it was only made to appear so.”

Although no physical attack was reported, clergy and lay people described the incident as typical of a pattern of intimidation which they say has become more pronounced in recent months.

Dominating the outlook for Christians is the inescapable fact that the constant hammer blows of oppression, persecution,

economic crises and political upheaval have caused numbers of faithful to haemorrhage.

In the decade 2011-2022, Christians in Syria plummeted from more than 2 million (10 per cent of the population) to barely 300,000 (less than two per cent).

The exodus began in earnest in 2012 when the Arab Spring arrived in Syria and sped up during the genocidal violence of Daesh (ISIS) and other militant Islamist groups.

What Christians and other minorities suffered at that time of brutal violence and constant bombardment cannot be overstated. This I have witnessed for myself when, at the height of the civil war, I made multiple visits to the country as part of my work with the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN). The impact of this decline is eye-watering in terms of the decimation of the Christian community.

My contacts in Aleppo, formerly home to one of the largest concentrations of Christians, now report that numbers have fallen from more than 200,000 before the war to barely 20,000 – and that a disproportionate number of those who

remain are elderly or infirm and would leave if they could.

While insisting that Christians still have a future in Syria, Cardinal Mario Zenari gave an interview in February at the close of 17 years as the country's Apostolic Nuncio in which he described the collapse in numbers of faithful as "frightening".

Such concerns for the future reached fever pitch last June when a suicide bomber struck at St Elias Church, Damascus, targeting a packed congregation attending Sunday liturgy.

At this church in the Dweila neighbourhood, at least 25 Christians died and more than 60 were injured.

The incident suggested the country was on the verge of descending into the nightmare of militant extremism from which it had only just emerged after more than a decade of civil war.

As international concern grew rapidly, a European Parliament resolution that same month – June 2025 – called for new frameworks to protect religious minorities.

Amid complaints from Church leaders and faithful alike that the regime was not doing enough to stop extremism in its tracks, critics pointed to a faultline in the transitional government's early 2025 constitutional declaration which recognised religious minority rights while asserting the primacy of Islam and Islamic jurisprudence. Soon after taking power in late 2024, President al-Sharaa moved quickly to assure Christian leaders of the Church's status in society. Establishing a five-year transitional regime, the persona he presented suggested he was a changed man, very different from the days when he commanded the notorious Islamist militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Announcing a commitment to putting in place an administration reflective of Syria's diversity, the new President announced the dawn of "a new era far removed from sectarianism" and went as far as appointing a Christian as a government minister.

However, in March 2025, when armed groups including militants allegedly affiliated to the regime carried out strikes

against religious minorities in Syria's western coastal region, it seemed the new government was not sincere in its apparent sympathy towards Christians.

It subsequently emerged that the vast majority of those killed were Alawites and that Christians had escaped largely unscathed.

Reportage of the al-Sharaa regime began to portray a regime with no obvious violent intent against the Church.

Quoting a saying in Arabic popular in his neighbourhood, my contact in northern Syria said the regime had no agenda to silence dissent, saying: "We are told we can bark to our heart's content."

But against a backdrop of Islamic inculturation, a widespread prohibition on the sale of alcohol and even reports of a ban on musical instruments entering the country, concerns are growing that al-Sharaa's Syria is increasingly intolerant of anyone not in sympathy with hardline Islamism.

There are reports of a growing backlash against so-called “cute Muslims” – Sunnis included – who are accused of betraying “pure” Islamic ideals by being pro-democracy, women’s empowerment and minority rights.

Matters came to a head earlier this year in Al-Suqaylabiyah, a predominantly Christian city in Hama governorate. Footage and other evidence emerged showing acts of violence and theft, and the targeting of cars, shops and property. Those responsible were accused of singing Islamic chants and shouting insults. Residents reacted by holding a protest, rejecting what was described as a “single-colour arm” – ie a force dominated by a single religious or ethnic group.

Church leaders in different parts of the country responded by scaling back Easter celebrations. Churches condemned the incident, saying attacks against the Christian community should not be dismissed as “individual incidents”.

To what extent the regime is ambivalent in the face of such attacks and a growing

climate of Islamism intolerant of Christianity – or offers some degree of implicit support – is an open question.

Certainly, the problems Christians have faced are as nothing compared to those of Alawites, who have suffered deliberate and widespread attacks.

My contacts in Syria have asserted that the regime is determined to show the West a positive approach to Christians as part of its overtures to President Trump and other world leaders. Such is the price to be paid to end the sanctions against Syria and meet the urgent need to rebuild the country's shattered economy.

Amid reports that 90 per cent of the country is below the poverty line, for the time being at least, the regime seems intent on tempering any Islamist instincts and yielding to the need to woo the West in a bid to rebuild the country after 15 years of chaos and destruction.

So long as the regime needs the West, the evidence suggests the government will at least refrain from any blatant oppression of Christians. Which means that, in the

meantime, at the very least, Syria's much reduced Christian community can dare to hope. Hence it is not unreasonable for them to cling tenaciously to the vision set out by Cardinal Zenari, who said: "For those [Christians] who have remained, there is a mission to be a glue, guarantors and promoters of internal unity, to act as a bridge... I continue to see a future for Christians in Syria. Even if they are only a small group, their role as a bridge will be essential."

*John Pontifex is head of press and public affairs for Aid to the Church in Need (UK)*

#### IMAGES BELOW

A liturgy under way at a church in the Valley of the Christians, near Homs (© Aid to the Church in Need)

A Syriac Orthodox priest outside a Syriac Orthodox church desecrated by Da'esh (ISIS) in al-Qaryatayn (© Aid to the Church in Need)

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A Times investigation found that abductions of women and girls from Syria's Alawite minority were more common, and more brutal, than the government has acknowledged.



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**By Ben Hubbard** Photographs by **Laura Boushnak**

Ben Hubbard and Laura Boushnak met with and spoke to dozens of people with direct knowledge of kidnapping cases, including women and girls who had returned home.

April 3, 2026

A 16-year-old girl left her home in northwest Syria last May to visit a shop and disappeared.

Weeks later, an anonymous stranger phoned her distraught family and said that he had the teenager and would let her go if they paid thousands of dollars in ransom, according to four people involved in her case.

The family paid the ransom and the girl returned in August, more than 100 days after she had been kidnapped. She told confidants that she had been held in a dank basement and was regularly drugged and raped by strangers, the four people said.

A medical exam turned up yet another shock: She came home pregnant.

Since rebels ousted the dictator Bashar al-Assad in late 2024, panicked families and activists trying to help have regularly sounded the alarm on social media that women and girls from Syria's Alawite minority have mysteriously disappeared or been kidnapped. Many fear that their sect is being targeted as retribution for the brutality of Mr. al-Assad, who also belongs to the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

The government has denied that Alawite women and girls are being targeted by kidnappers, saying that it has confirmed only one such case.

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But a New York Times investigation based on dozens of interviews with Alawites who say they were kidnapped, their relatives and others involved in their cases found that these abductions have been common and often brutal.

The Times verified the kidnappings of 13 Alawite women and girls, in addition to one man and one boy. Five said they had been raped. Two came home pregnant.

The family of one woman said it sent \$17,000 to kidnappers who never released her, and provided screenshots of ransom demands and the money transfers. A 24-year-old said she had been held for three weeks in a filthy room where men raped her, beat her, shaved her head and eyebrows and cut her with razor blades. Her relatives also paid the kidnappers and in this case secured her release, according to four people involved in her case.

Syrian activists say they know of scores of such kidnappings but details are difficult to confirm because victims and their families are too scared to talk.

Most people who spoke with the Times did so on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals from the government or the kidnappers. The Times is not identifying most of those who were kidnapped for the same reason.

The Times corroborated accounts from people who had been kidnapped and their relatives, as well as through social media posts announcing when they were taken and returned, ransom messages sent by kidnappers and interviews with medical and aid workers who spoke with the abductees after their release.

The kidnappings took place against a backdrop of deep distrust between the Alawites, who make up about one-tenth of Syria's population, and the new government. Mr. al-Assad relied heavily on his sect in his military and security services while in power.



Jableh countryside, northwest Syria, site of some of the sectarian violence that killed about 1,400 people, most of them Alawite civilians.

That led many of the Sunni Muslim former rebels who now run Syria to associate the Alawites with the ousted regime.

Last March, that anger fueled days of sectarian violence in northwestern Syria that left about 1,400 people dead, according to a U.N. investigation. The inquiry found that some government security forces had participated in the killing, leaving many Alawites afraid of them.

Many of the kidnapped women and girls, along with their relatives, said the government had failed to take their cases seriously.

Nour al-Din Baba, the Interior Ministry spokesman, said in an interview that he could not respond to The Times' findings unless it provided the names for the cases it had verified, which The Times declined to do. He said that pregnancies did not prove kidnappings and that ransom messages could be fabricated.

“For all of those ransoms, where is the proof?” he said.

He added that he stood by a government investigation released in November that examined 42 reported kidnappings and found that only one of them was “real.”

In the other cases, he said, the women were involved in prostitution or other crimes, ran away with lovers or fled domestic troubles. They and their families, he said, then claimed they had been kidnapped to avoid social stigma.

The kidnap victims and their relatives painted a very different picture, one of women and girls grabbed off the street by armed men near their homes or while running errands.

They reported being taken by fellow Syrians or by foreign jihadists who had come to Syria during the country's 13-year civil war, hoping to establish an Islamic state. Many women and girls reported that their captors had insulted Alawites, saying they deemed them permissible to rob and rape — a view propagated by Islamist extremists.

One 33-year-old was kidnapped by four armed men last summer, according to the woman and two others involved in her case said. Like other abductees, she recalled her captors asking whether she was Alawite. She said yes and they replied that they were “going to have a good time,” she recalled.

“They wanted to humiliate the Alawites,” she said.



“They wanted to humiliate the Alawites,” a woman who said she was kidnapped last summer recalled.

Rima Flihan, the executive director of the Syrian Feminist Lobby, a nonprofit organization that has tracked kidnapping cases, said sectarian revenge drove the abductions.

“It is systematic and it is targeting this community,” she said. “They are trying to make the community vulnerable.”

The Times also documented five cases of Alawite women who had disappeared and remain missing, although it was not possible to determine whether they had been abducted.

One of them, Etab Jadid, 41, disappeared in May after buying ice cream near Syria's Mediterranean coast, according to her mother, Rabiha Shabbah. The family had reported her disappearance to the police but had received no updates and have not been contacted by any kidnappers.



The spot where Etab Jadid, 41, disappeared in May after buying ice cream.



Etab Jadid's mother, Rabiha Shabbah.



Ms. Shabbah showing pictures of her missing daughter.

The Times could not independently confirm all the details of the cases. But they overlapped with or bore striking similarities to others documented by rights groups. Amnesty International said in July that it had credible reports of 36 similar kidnappings and had documented eight cases.

In August, a U.N. commission said it had documented six such cases and received “credible reports” of dozens more that it was still investigating.

The Syrian Feminist Lobby has counted 80 Alawite women and girls who have disappeared since early 2025, Ms. Flihan said. Twenty-six of the cases were confirmed kidnappings, including of women who suffered physical or psychological abuse, she said.

Ten have returned home, three are still missing and the status of the other 13 remains unclear, she said, adding that the government had not supported those who had returned.

“They are more shaming the women than seeing them as survivors,” she said.

All of the families that spoke to The Times said they had reported their cases to the security forces. While some dealt with sympathetic officers, many said the security personnel had been dismissive or accused the missing women and girls, without evidence, of using drugs or running away with their boyfriends.

Some security officers told the families of those who had returned to lie about what had happened.

Walaa Ismael, 24, said she was abducted near the university where she was studying in the central city of Homs in May. Her captors demanded a ransom of \$15,000 but let her go after activists spread news of her disappearance online and her widowed mother told her captors that she could not pay.



Walaa Ismael, 24, in her family's orchard in northwest Syria.

Ms. Ismael described her kidnappers as criminals motivated by money, not sectarianism. After she returned, she said, security officers told her family to say that she had been visiting a friend.

“I said no,” her mother, Iktimal Salameh, recalled. “I put out a video to tell everyone what happened.”

In an interview, a police investigator who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to journalists, said he had worked on 10 reported kidnappings and that nine of them had been “fake.” One was real, and the woman had come home pregnant.

“It destroyed her life,” he said.

Many of the women and girls who have returned said they suffer from trauma that has disrupted their educations, careers and sleep. Some have separated from their husbands and a few have fled Syria, fearing their kidnappers could come for them again.

One 19-year-old was held for a few days last summer by a foreign jihadist, she and three others with knowledge of her case said. Since then, she said, she had been depressed, lost her love of sports and abandoned her plans to go to university.

“I used to go out with my friends, but now I don’t want to leave the room,” she said. “I’m scared of the people around me.”



A 19-year-old who said she had been depressed, lost her love of sports and abandoned her plans to go to university after she was held for a few days last summer by a foreign jihadist.

The pregnant 16-year-old told confidants that her captors had given her sleeping pills and allowed strangers to rape her. She was released for a ransom of about \$2,500 and returned to her family, poor farm laborers.

Abortion is illegal in Syria, even in cases of rape. She wanted to keep the baby anyway.

“It is my child,” she said. “What did it do wrong?”

In February, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl.

**Ben Hubbard** is the Istanbul bureau chief, covering Turkey and the surrounding region.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 7 of the New York edition with the headline: Fears Over Abductions From Syria's Alawite Minority