Embrace the Middle East

Submission to the 54th Session of the Universal Periodic Review

SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

Syria in Transition: Ongoing Human Rights Challenges and Emerging Needs

Embrace the Middle East is a UK-based development charity working in partnership with local Christian organisations across the Middle East to support marginalised and vulnerable communities. Through programmes focused on education, healthcare and community development, it seeks to promote dignity, inclusion and improved living conditions, particularly for those affected by conflict, displacement and poverty.

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Methodology

1. This submission draws on desk-based research and consultations with four faith-based organisations delivering social, humanitarian and development programmes in different Syrian governorates, primarily in areas under Government control. These organisations have been operational in Syria for periods ranging from several decades to over a century. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and written responses, focusing on civil society space, human rights, humanitarian access and priority concerns for the UPR. For security reasons, all names are anonymised. Interview findings were triangulated with United Nations reporting and documentation by international and Syrian civil society organisations.

Introduction

Contextual developments since the previous review

2. Since Syria's previous Universal Periodic Review, the country has undergone significant political and security changes which directly affect the assessment of implementation of prior recommendations. In December 2024, President Bashar al-Assad was removed from power and a new transitional government was formed under the leadership of Ahmed Al-Sharaa, head of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), marking the end of a 14-year long civil war. Al-Sharaa currently serves as transitional President. An interim constitutional declaration entered into force in March 2025, followed by indirect election and appointment of a parliament.
3. These developments fundamentally altered the governance context in Syria. The transitional authorities continue to face constraints in exercising effective control across the territory, including limited authority over armed actors. There is no unified national armed force, and different militias continue to control distinct areas, often operating under varying command structures and ideologies. This fragmentation has contributed to insecurity and has had serious consequences for civilian protection.
4. During the transition period, incidents of violence based on identity and sect were reported, including attacks against Alawite and Druze communities in 2025, resulting in deaths, displacement, and heightened tensions. Concerns have also been raised regarding the capacity and willingness of authorities to prevent such violations.
5. In October 2025, a Parliament was established not through nationwide voting but through a process in which the transitional president appointed electoral bodies to select two-thirds of Parliament, while the remaining third was appointed directly by the president. Participation did not include areas outside the control of the interim government, including Kurdish-controlled regions and Druze-majority areas. As a result, representation gaps persist and Parliament's authority remains limited.

6. At the same time, the change in government has been accompanied by increased diplomatic engagement and some easing of sanctions, alongside signs of relative currency stabilisation. Against this backdrop, assessing follow-up to previous UPR recommendations is necessarily limited, as the current authorities are addressing a distinct set of structural and transitional challenges.

Follow up from previous review

7. Assessment of the implementation of recommendations from Syria's third UPR must be considered in light of the political transition since December 2024, which has created new challenges, while human rights concerns from the previous cycle persist.
8. Recommendations to support an inclusive constitutional process remain highly relevant in the current transitional context,[1] as do those aimed at ensuring independent, impartial investigations and accountability for violations during the conflict,[2] and at strengthening the rule of law.[3]
9. At the socio-economic level, the removal of state subsidies and the resulting sharp increases in the cost of electricity, food, fuel and medicines have had severe consequences for the population. Recommendations to enhance poverty reduction and social development programmes,[4] and ensure access to health, education, water and other basic services therefore remain outstanding.[5]
10. Finally, recommendations concerning the rights of women and minorities continue to require urgent attention. These include reform of nationality laws to ensure women's ability to confer citizenship to their children,[6] measures to prevent and respond to gender-based violence,[7] and steps to ensure inclusive governance and meaningful participation of all ethnic and religious groups.[8]
11. While many of these recommendations remain unimplemented and relevant, this report builds on them by providing updated recommendations tailored to the current transitional context and evolving needs.

Constitutional and legislative framework

12. The Constitutional Declaration adopted by the President in March 2025 establishes an interim framework intended to remain in force for five years pending future elections.[9] While the transitional authorities have undertaken efforts to engage with representatives of Syria's diverse religious and ethnic communities, consultations appear to have been limited in scope and duration. Partners described the process as largely "top-down", with fast-tracked consultations that did not allow for meaningful civil society participation. One respondent, who participated in the Conference of National Dialogue in Damascus, reported that the process felt rushed

and that “the final declaration felt like it was already written”, with limited reflection of the views expressed by participants.

13. The Constitutional Declaration is widely perceived by respondents as reflecting the perspectives of dominant political and military actors rather than a broad national consensus.
14. Article 1 of the Constitutional Declaration restricts the presidency to Muslims and designates Islamic jurisprudence as a primary source of legislation. These provisions exclude minorities from public office and threaten the protection of freedom of religion or belief.
15. Further concerns relate to the concentration of powers in the executive. The President retains significant authority over the legislative and judicial branches, including the power to appoint members of the People’s Assembly (Article 24) and the Supreme Constitutional Court (Article 47). This threatens the principle of separation of powers and shows a lack of effective checks and balances.
16. While the establishment of a Transitional Justice Commission (Article 49) represents a positive step, its current mandate – only covering crimes committed by the previous Syrian Government – does not extend to violations committed by all parties during the conflict, hindering its ability to ensure accountability for all victims.

Recommendations:

17. **Ensure that the process for drafting and adopting the permanent constitution is inclusive, transparent and participatory, including through comprehensive and meaningful consultation with civil society and all ethnic and religious groups across all regions of the country.**
18. **Take steps to ensure that the future constitutional and legislative framework guarantees a clear separation of powers and incorporates Syria’s international human rights obligations into domestic law, including through independent legislative and judicial institutions.**
19. **In the interim, revise the mandate of the Transitional Justice Commission to ensure it addresses violations committed by all parties to the conflict, and operates in an inclusive, impartial and accountable manner in line with international standards.**

Administration of justice, including impunity, and the rule of law

20. The rule of law in Syria remains significantly weakened in the current transitional context, largely due to the absence of effective territorial control and a unified monopoly over the use of force. Information gathered indicates that implementation of laws and the level of freedoms vary considerably between locations, depending on local power dynamics and the influence of different armed actors.
21. Even in areas nominally under government control, respondents reported fragmented authority, with militia leaders "still act[ing] as if they lead their own militia, not as if they were part of a government structure," at times disregarding central decisions and imposing their own rules.
22. This contributes to widespread legal uncertainty; as one respondent explained, "rules that apply in Homs will not apply in Aleppo," while another noted that activities permitted in one area may be "quietly blocked" in another.
23. Respondents highlighted that humanitarian and faith organisations often rely on informal arrangements rather than formal legal frameworks, with one respondent stating, "things still work based on informal relationships, not formal ones," and another describing removing their organisation's logo from their offices due to uncertainty over registration and oversight requirements. While large-scale violence has decreased, localised insecurity—including sectarian violence, criminality and kidnappings—remains prevalent.
24. This environment has fostered mistrust in authorities and hesitancy to engage with formal structures, further undermining access to justice and accountability.

Recommendations:

25. **Strengthen the rule of law by enhancing effective oversight of all security actors, and ensuring consistent implementation of laws across all areas under its control.**
26. **Improve transparency and legal certainty for civil society and humanitarian actors, in line with international human rights obligations.**

Right to an adequate standard of living

27. Access to food, energy and fuel remains constrained, with availability of services improving in some areas but affordability sharply deteriorating. Following the 2024 transition, authorities implemented rapid economic reforms involving the removal of

subsidies on fuel, bread and essential services, as part of a broader shift toward market liberalisation. While this has reduced shortages and improved market availability, partners reported that it has resulted in dramatic price increases for essential goods and utilities.[10]

28. Partners interviewed reported mixed perceptions regarding the impact of the lifting of sanctions: some noted no meaningful improvement in living conditions, while others described only limited gains overshadowed by rising costs. Data provided by partners highlights the scale of these increases. For example, the price of subsidised bread bundles rose from approximately 400 SYP to around 4,000 SYP, while electricity tariffs increased from roughly 10 SYP per kWh to between 600 and 1,800 SYP, making access unaffordable for many households. Similarly, the cost of household gas cylinders has increased around fivefold and diesel prices approximately sixfold.
29. While goods and services are now more accessible in physical terms, these sharp price increases mean that affordability has become one of the primary barriers, leaving many households unable to meet basic needs.

Recommendation

30. **Adopt targeted social protection measures to ensure the affordability of essential goods and services, including food, energy and fuel, particularly for low-income and vulnerable households.**

Rights of specific persons or groups

Minorities

Overview

31. The transitional period has been marked by a shift to more localised but persistent violence, including sectarian clashes, reprisals, and criminality. Despite an overall decline in hostilities compared to the civil war period, minority communities report heightened insecurity linked to fragmented control and the absence of a unified security framework.
32. Partners report that transitional authorities have taken some positive steps, including public commitments to equality and efforts to engage religious and ethnic groups, as well as measures recognising Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights.[11] However, these efforts have not fully mitigated growing concerns.
33. Partners and available reporting highlight a deterioration in inter-communal relations, fuelled by political rhetoric, distrust, and perceptions that certain communities are associated with the former regime. This has contributed to increased speech that incites violence, fear of collective punishment, and rising calls

for decentralisation among minority groups. While the authorities have prioritised security consolidation and attempted to respond to incidents, gaps in control and accountability have allowed sectarian violence to persist. As a result, many minority communities describe the transition as uncertain or negative in terms of both security and political inclusion.

Documented incidents

34. Alawite community

- **January 2025 – Homs governorate:** Reports indicate that armed groups and security forces conducting raids and "security sweeps" carried out serious abuses against Alawite civilians. In the Homs countryside, including in the village of Tasnin, such operations reportedly involved the killing of civilians and the burning of homes, alongside arrests and intimidation of residents.[12]
- **March 2025 – Coastal regions (Latakia, Tartous):** Clashes between government forces and pro-Assad armed groups escalated into mass killings of Alawites, with an estimated 1,400–1,700 deaths over several days, many of them civilians.[13]
- **November 2025 – Zaidal and Homs city:** A murder in the town of Zaidal triggered significant sectarian tensions and retaliatory attacks in Alawite-majority neighbourhoods in Homs, including arson, indiscriminate gunfire and destruction of homes and property, resulting in casualties and prompting the imposition of curfews by authorities.[14]
- **26 December 2025 – Homs:** Bombing at the Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib mosque during Friday prayers killed 8 people and injured at least 18, in an attack claimed by extremist group Ansar al-Sunna.[15]
- **Throughout 2025 – Homs and surrounding areas**: There have been ongoing reports of kidnappings, targeted killings and retaliatory violence affecting Alawite civilians, with a marked increase in abductions, killings by unidentified gunmen, and weak or absent accountability mechanisms.[16]

35. These incidents contributed to protests in Alawite-majority areas, increased mistrust in authorities, and recurring security measures such as curfews.

36. Druze community

- **July 2025 – Suwayda governorate:** Escalating clashes between government forces, Druze militias and other actors resulted in over 1,700 deaths and nearly 200,000 displaced persons, with widespread reports of executions, torture and

destruction of property. The violence followed earlier tensions and clashes involving Druze communities, including in Jaramana, near Damascus, in early 2025.[17]

37. The violence, involving multiple actors including government forces, significantly weakened trust and intensified calls for autonomy among Druze communities.

38. Christian communities

- **22 June 2025 – Damascus:** A suicide attack on the Mar Elias Church killed at least 25 people and injured over 60, marking one of the most significant attacks on Christians since the transition.[18]
- **27–28 March 2026 – Hama governorate:** A security incident in the predominantly Christian city of Al-Suqaylabiyah escalated into widespread violence involving assaults, looting, gunfire and destruction of civilian property, following an altercation between local residents and individuals from a neighbouring town. Reports indicate that armed groups entered the city in a coordinated manner, targeting shops, homes and civilians, with witnesses describing sectarian slurs directed at Christian residents and a climate of panic among the population. Testimonies further raise concerns regarding the role of security forces, including alleged failures to intervene or prevent the escalation of violence. Subsequent protests by residents and statements by religious authorities highlighted demands for accountability, effective protection, and safeguards against recurrence, underlining broader fears within Christian communities regarding insecurity and exposure to sectarian violence.[19]

39. These incidents underscore the continued vulnerability of Christian communities and the persistence of destabilising violence.

Overall impact

40. Across all groups, these patterns of violence have led to increased fear and insecurity among minority populations, heightened sectarian tensions and social fragmentation, reduced trust in State institutions and protection mechanisms, and calls from some communities for decentralisation or enhanced local autonomy.

Recommendations

41. Take effective measures to protect all religious and ethnic communities, including by preventing and promptly responding to sectarian violence and ensuring the safety of civilians in all areas under its control.

42. **Ensure prompt, independent and impartial investigations into incidents of sectarian violence, and hold all perpetrators accountable, regardless of affiliation, while providing redress to victims.**

Women

43. While Syria's 2025 interim constitutional framework formally recognises women's rights, including commitments to equality before the law and protection from violence and discrimination,[20] these guarantees remain largely aspirational and have not translated into consistent improvements in practice.
44. Women's political participation remains limited, with only one woman included in the 23-member transitional cabinet, reflecting broader patterns of exclusion from decision-making.
45. At the same time, key discriminatory laws remain in force and legal protection gaps for women still exist:
    - Under Legislative Decree No. 276/1969, nationality is transmitted primarily through the father, preventing most Syrian women from passing citizenship to their children;[21]
    - There is no comprehensive legal framework addressing domestic violence. While rape is criminalised under Article 489 of the 1949 Penal Code, this provision explicitly excludes spousal rape.[22]
    - In addition, under Article 508 marriage with a rape survivor triggers suspension of the prosecution and punishment for the perpetrator.[23]

46. Recent policy developments have also raised concerns about restrictive social regulations targeting women. A directive requiring women to wear "burkini or swimwear that covers more of the body" on public beaches,[24] marked the first official clothing guidance issued since the 2024 transition, while in January 2026 authorities in Latakia banned female public-sector employees from wearing makeup during working hours.[25]
47. These measures have been criticised by partners as indicative of expanding social regulation of women's behaviour and appearance. Anecdotal reports from civil society actors further suggest instances of women being dismissed or marginalised in employment for failure to comply with informal dress expectations, including head covering. Taken together, these trends illustrate a gap between formal legal commitments and lived realities, raising concerns that women's rights in Syria remain constrained by entrenched discriminatory laws, weak enforcement, and emerging conservative policies shaping public life.

Recommendations

48. Amend discriminatory laws, including Legislative Decree No. 276/1969, to ensure equal nationality rights for women, and withdraw all reservations to CEDAW, bringing national legislation into full compliance with international human rights standards.

49. Amend Article 489 of the Penal Code to criminalise spousal rape and repeal Article 508 to remove provisions allowing mitigation or suspension of punishment for rape perpetrators.

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[1] A/HRC/50/6, recommendation 133.88 (Egypt).
[2] A/HRC/50/6, recommendation 133.144 (Botswana), 133.146 (Malta), 133.159 (Costa Rica).
[3] A/HRC/50/6, recommendation 133.65 (Algeria).
[4] A/HRC/50/6, recommendation 133.97, (State of Palestine), 133.99 (Algeria).
[5] A/HRC/50/6, recommendation 133.234 (Indonesia), 133.239 (Norway).
[6] A/HRC/50/6, recommendation 133.248 (Norway).
[7] A/HRC/50/6, recommendation 133.67 (Iceland).
[8] A/HRC/50/6, recommendation 133.93 (Holy See), 133.90 (Lebanon).
[9] Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic, March 2025.
[10] Syria in Transition: What's Happening to Social Protection in Syria?, Better Assistance in Crises, Research Briefing, February 2025, p. 3.
[11] Syria's Sharaa grants Kurdish Syrians citizenship, language rights for first time, SANA says, Al-Monitor, January 16, 2026.
[12] Amid concerns about committing crimes | Gunmen and Military Operations Administration storm villages in Homs countryside, arresting tens of people, The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, January 16, 2025.
[13] Syrian panel: 1,426 killed in March coast violence, Middle East Bulletin, July 23, 2025.
[14] Sectarian tensions rise after Bedouin couple killed in Syria's Homs, AP News, November 23, 2025; Tensions flare in Syria's Homs after double murder, Hürriyet Daily News, November 24, 2025; Homs establishes curfew, heavy security after murder, The Jerusalem Post, November 24, 2025.
[15] Syria mosque bombing kills 8, wounds 18, AP News, December 26, 2025.
[16] The Syrian Government Must Investigate the Targeting of Alawite Civilians in Homs, Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, May 13, 2025; Syria/Homs: Violations Against Civilians Amid Lack of Effective Complaint and Redress Mechanisms, Syrians for Truth and Justice, June 18, 2025.
[17] A/HRC/61/CRP.7, International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law violations committed during the July 2025 violence in Suwayda, Syria Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 27 March, 2026.
[18] Mideast governments condemn suicide bombing of Syrian church as death toll rises to 25, AP News, June 23, 2025; "I Carried My Mother's Remains, Her Limbs Scattered on the Ground": The Bombing of Mar Elias Church in Dweilaa and the Limited Official Response, Syrians for Truth and Justice, August 2025.
[19] Al-Suqaylabiyah/Hama: Mass Violence in March 2026, Violations, and a Reconciliation Process that Ignores Rights, Syrians for Truth and Justice, May 13, 2026; Protests erupt in Syrian Christian city Al-Suqaylabiyah amid security tensions, The Jerusalem Post, March 29, 2026.
[20] Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic, March 2025, Article 21.
[21] Legislative Decree 276 - Nationality Law, November 24, 1969.
[22] General Penal Code, 1949, Article 489.
[23] Ibid., article 508.
[24] Syria asks women to dress modestly on beaches but says bikinis still allowed, The Guardian, June 12, 2025.
[25] From a Lattakia Governor's Circular to a Broader Policy Pattern: Women in the Transitional Phase Under Scrutiny, The Syrian Observer, February 4, 2026.