

What Was Syria's Violence About?

In an interview, Muhsen al-Mustafa reveals details about the bloody fighting in the country's coastal areas last week.

By **Michael Young**

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Muhsen al-Mustafa is a research assistant at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies. He previously served as a research assistant at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center and was a nonresident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy from May 2022 to May 2023, where his work focused on security, military affairs, and governance in Syria. He has authored numerous studies and articles examining the structure and evolution of Syria's military establishment, which are available at www.muhsenalmustafa.com. Diwan interviewed Mustafa this week to get his perspective on the recent violence in Syria's coastal areas, and the implications for the country's future.

Michael Young: From your perspective, what is the importance of the events last week in Syria's coastal regions, and reports that forces aligned with the government of Ahmad al-Sharaa engaged in the massacre of hundreds of Alawites, as well as other minorities?

Muhsen al-Mustafa: These events marked a critical turning point in post-Assad Syria. This was not an isolated flare-up, but the first organized and large-scale insurgency launched by remnants of the former regime. Beyond its immediate security implications, the violence laid bare deep-seated sectarian divisions that had remained unresolved since Bashar al-Assad's downfall. By attempting to replicate the models of Suwayda or northeastern Syria, where de facto autonomous areas have emerged, the insurgents were effectively seeking to impose a new reality—or at a minimum, to provoke a sectarian confrontation that could provide the political cover necessary for them to evade justice.

The attacks, which resulted in the death of nearly 300 General Security personnel and hundreds of civilians, underscored how fragile the transition in Syria remains. What complicates the picture further is the pattern of civilians being targeted—both by insurgent factions and undisciplined government-aligned groups. The Alawite and Sunni communities, as well as a smaller number of Christians, found themselves caught up in a dangerous spiral of retaliation. The involvement of rogue actors engaged in revenge attacks against Alawite civilians threatens not only to erode the moral legitimacy of the new government, but also to hand the government's adversaries a potent narrative of resentment, whether domestically or internationally.

In response, the authorities moved quickly to contain the fallout, establishing two parallel bodies—one to investigate the violence, the other tasked with rebuilding civil peace, which notably includes Alawite representatives. These developments are a sobering reminder that transitional justice and institutional accountability are no longer optional. Rather, they are vital pillars necessary to prevent a slide back into civil strife.

MY: You've been cited in a Lebanese newspaper as saying that one of those responsible for organizing the attacks against the Syrian security forces is a former officer in the 4th Armored Division which was led by Maher al-Assad. The officer in question is Ghiath Dalla, who was promoted to the rank of general in 2020. What can you tell us about him, and what was his role in the events last week?

MM: Brigadier General Ghiath Dalla is a name long associated with the inner core of the Assad-era military apparatus. He had previously risen through the ranks of the 42nd Armored Brigade—a key component of the 4th Armored Division—eventually assuming its command himself. In late June 2024, he was appointed chief of staff of the 4th Armored Division. He is known for his battlefield alignment with Iran-backed groups, including Hezbollah and the Imam Hussein Brigade. His tactics—including sieges of urban areas, indiscriminate shelling, and forced displacement—were notorious across Rural Damascus Governorate and southern Syria. Dalla's involvement in mass atrocities in places such as Darayya, Al-Mleiha, Maadamiyat al-Sham, Deraa, and Idlib is well-documented.

After the collapse of the Assad regime, Dalla chose not to retreat from public life. Instead, he emerged as a central architect of the post-Assad insurgency. Working in coordination with former officers—including Miqdad Fatiha of the Republican Guard—he helped establish the so-called Military Council for the Liberation of Syria. This structure brought together various pro-Assad militias, the most active of which—Liwa al-Jabal (Mountain Brigade), Diraa al-Assad (Assad Shield), and the more recently established Diraa al-Sahel (Coastal Shield)—were directly involved in last week's coordinated attacks. By all accounts, Dalla served not merely as a symbolic leader, but as a field commander and strategic planner. His objective appears to have been to reassert the military footprint of the old regime and destabilize the emerging order before it could consolidate.

MY: Do you believe there were foreign actors involved in the attacks against the Syrian security forces, and if so, which ones?

MM: There is considerable reason to believe that foreign actors played a supporting role in the events of last week, albeit in an indirect and often opaque manner. Iran is the most likely external player, given its enduring relationship with Dalla and the network of militias with which he coordinated during the war. While there is no public acknowledgment of Iranian involvement in this particular operation, the tactical coordination, logistical sophistication, and mobilization of loyalist networks suggest at a minimum tacit Iranian support—whether in the form of intelligence sharing, secure communications, or financial backing.

Equally significant are the leaked recordings indicating that the Russian military at the Hmeimim airbase had prior knowledge of the insurgents' movements. Reports of a joint operations room and evidence that wounded pro-Assad fighters were transferred to the base raise questions about Moscow's stance. While Russia may not have played an active operational role, its apparent tolerance of the uprising—if not outright complicity—speaks to a larger ambiguity in its current posture toward the new Syrian authorities.

MY: Sharaa seems to have a growing problem with Syria's minorities, which underlines the importance of his agreement this week with the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). How do you see the future of

relations between Damascus and Syria's minorities, including the Kurds, and what are the risk factors?

MM: I don't see Sharaa's relationship with minorities as inherently problematic. He has rejected the label "minorities," opting instead to speak of Syria's "components." The concerns expressed today—by Kurds, Druze, Alawites, Ismailis, and Christians—are shared across society and reflect the broader trauma of war. Sharaa now faces the delicate task of rebuilding trust with these communities, especially after the violence in the coastal areas. His agreement with the Kurdish-led SDF is both timely and necessary, and similar efforts appear to be underway with the Druze of Suwayda, some elements of which have been deeply concerned about the intentions of the government.

Going forward, two priorities will shape relations between the state and its diverse communities: inclusive governance based on competence, not sectarianism; and a serious commitment to national reconciliation. For Kurds, the agreement signals pragmatic cooperation, though their integration remains unresolved. Other groups will judge the government by its ability to guarantee equal protection and justice. Ultimately, the state-building process must be rooted in citizenship, while recognizing Syria's pluralism. This, along with economic recovery and careful navigation through regional threats, including from Iran and Israel, will come to define Syria's stability.

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