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4.1.1. Criminality, lawlessness and sectarian violence

Insecurity and volatility of the security situation due to criminality and lawlessness were reported to be prevalent in various regions.595 The coastal areas have been affected by incidents of assault, targeted attacks596 and killings of civilians,597 attacks at checkpoints, robberies, looting and kidnapping.598 Instances of killings by unidentified men/armed groups, 599 kidnappings and looting were similarly reported in Rural Damascus.600 Deadly attacks on civilians were further recorded in Idlib,601 Hama, and Yarmouk camp in Damascus.602 According to Civil Peace Group in Syria, a civil society organisation, Homs city witnessed 64 kidnappings between 9 December 2024 and mid-February 2025, including at least 13 civilians. These kidnappings gradually increased over December 2024, peaking on 27 December until they declined to zero in January before surging again. 19 of these abductees were killed.603

As Gregory Waters assessed, most of these crimes were committed by civilians and gangs not linked to the transitional administration, although some local commanders and rank-and-file soldiers have been involved in kidnappings of Alawite civilians on sectarian grounds.604 Areas such as Damascus, Latakia and Tartous further remained prone to sectarian tensions amid an absence of formalised security mechanisms.605

According to the SOHR, in January 2025, assassinations and retaliatory attacks, including on sectarian and politically grounds, increased significantly in the areas controlled by the transitional administration, with the highest rates recorded in Homs (91 fatalities, including 59 sectarian killings), Hama (46 fatalities, including 28 sectarian killings) and Latakia (15 fatalities, including 13 sectarian killings).606 In January, ACLED recorded that over 176 civilians, including some former fighters of the Assad government, had been killed by unidentified gunmen.607

In Homs city and the rural areas of Homs and Hama, security forces have reportedly been overstretched and relied on minimally trained recruits, allowing unrest to persist since Assad's fall.608 In Homs and some parts of Hama, cases of local sectarian retribution by Sunnis against Alawites have been reported to be a serious issue.609 There was a proliferation of unverified reports of punitive raids, disappearances and murders on social media, allegedly showing HTS fighters beating610 or inciting violence against Alawites.611 As Gregory Waters noted, the more serious attacks against Assad remnants tended to occur in rural areas characterised by high concentrations of former '*shabiha*'612 (armed gangs that supported Assad)613 and limited presence of security forces.615 However, such targeting of former Assad loyalism has also been

reported in Damascus.616 In some of these cases, which continued to February 2025, the perpetrators remained unidentified.617

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