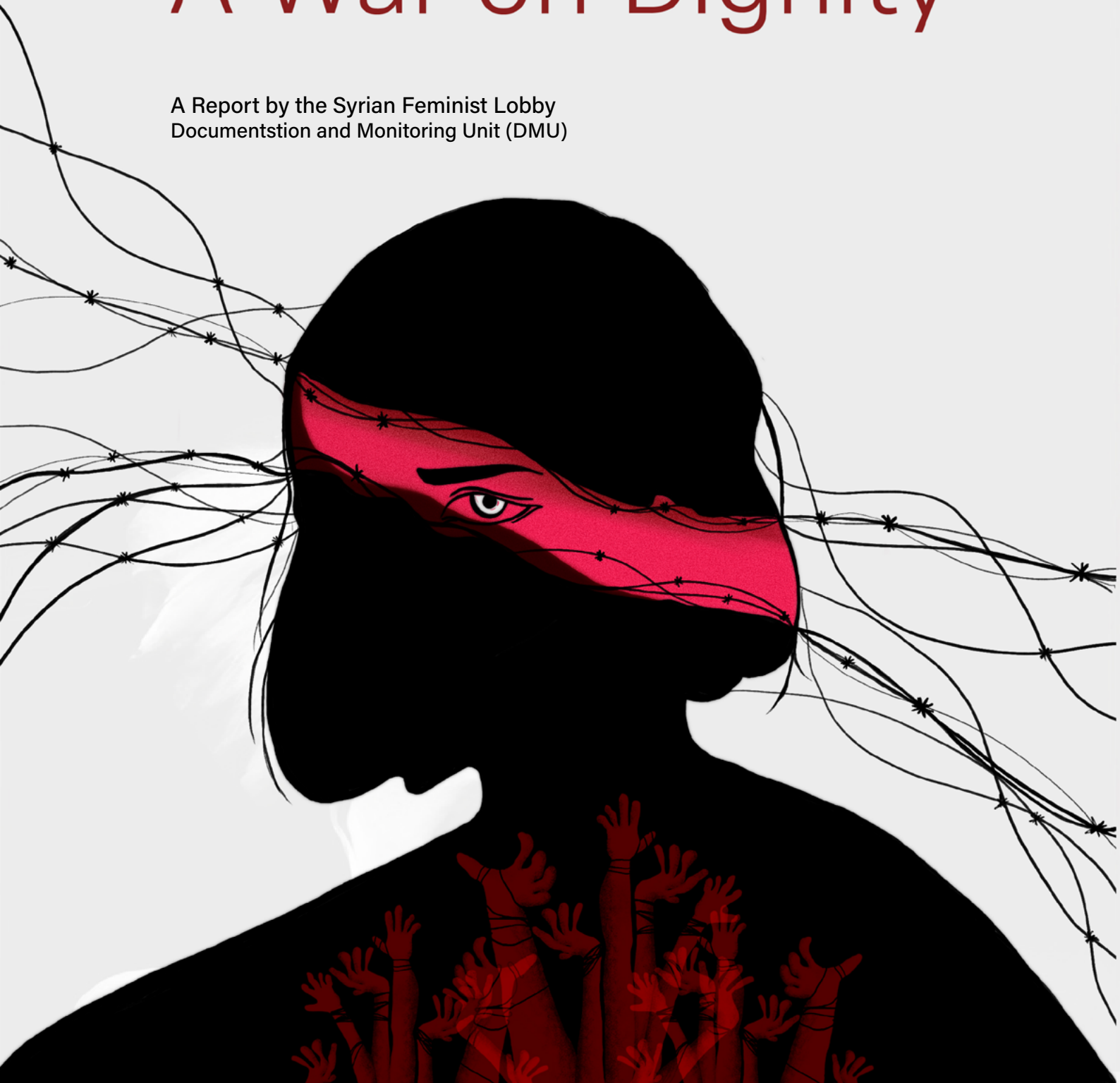




# The Abduction of Syrian Women A War on Dignity

A Report by the Syrian Feminist Lobby  
Documentstion and Monitoring Unit (DMU)



*The Syrian Feminist Lobby* extends its sincere gratitude and appreciation to the courageous women witnesses, survivors, and victims, as well as to all witnesses and family members who shared their testimonies and voices despite the risks and pressures. Their contributions have been essential to uncovering and conveying the truth.

*The Lobby* also extends its thanks to documentation groups, women and men activists, and human rights defenders who have worked under complex and challenging conditions and contributed to gathering information and documenting violations.

*The Syrian Feminist Lobby* further commends the role of civil society organisations that, despite limited resources and ongoing challenges, have continued to provide care, psychological support, and legal assistance to victims, survivors, and their families.

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# Introduction

**P**rior to 2011, women in Syria faced deep-rooted forms of discrimination in both law and practice, particularly in personal status and penal laws. Legal provisions that weakened protection against domestic and sexual violence remained in force, including those related to so-called “*honour*” crimes. United Nations and human rights reports have indicated that gender-based violence had persisted for decades in a context marked by the absence of effective response and accountability, creating a fragile environment that the state failed to address through serious reforms before the outbreak of the conflict<sup>1</sup>. With the onset of protests in March 2011, **women played an active role in the civil movement, participating in demonstrations, documenting violations, and engaging in media and community work.**

However, as the conflict evolved into a large-scale armed conflict, women’s position within the dynamics of violence was reshaped. Women were no longer only civil actors; they also became direct targets of grave violations. Within the context of the conflict, patterns of violence against women did not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, they intensified in an environment characterised by the collapse of state institutions, the weakening of the rule of law, and widespread impunity.

United Nations bodies have documented the use of sexual violence and other forms of abuse by government forces and affiliated actors in contexts such as raids, detention, and checkpoints, which may amount—according to UN characterisation—to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

**Gender-based violence has thus been identified as a persistent and devastating feature of the conflict, rather than merely a by-product of it<sup>2</sup>.**

In addition, conditions of displacement, poverty, and reduced access to essential services have compounded the vulnerability of women and girls, increasing their exposure to risks such as forced marriage, exploitation, human trafficking, and violence beyond direct conflict settings.

As such, the impact of the conflict has not been limited to direct violence, but has extended to the breakdown of everyday protection mechanisms that had—albeit to a limited extent—constrained the spread of such violations.

Reports by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights indicate that violations against women were not incidental consequences of war. **In many cases, they were linked to systematic patterns of violence used within broader contexts of control and collective punishment.**

**This report documents cases of abduction and enforced disappearance targeting Syrian women, particularly those from the Alawite community, since February 2025, as well as violations that occurred in the context of the attacks on Swayda in July 2025.** It analyses the patterns of these violations, the circumstances in which they occurred, and their psychological, social, and economic impacts on survivors and their families. The report also reviews local and international responses and offers recommendations grounded in international human rights standards.

<sup>1</sup>ICRC, Q&A: Sexual violence in armed conflict

<sup>2</sup>ICC, Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Articles 8-7

# Overview of Cases and Geographical Distribution of the Abduction or Enforced Disappearance of Alawite Women

In 2025, the Syrian Feminist Lobby documented 82 cases of abduction in the Syrian coastal region, western rural Hama, and Homs:

**82 cases**, mostly involving women (%90) and girls (%10), most commonly aged between 15 and 40.

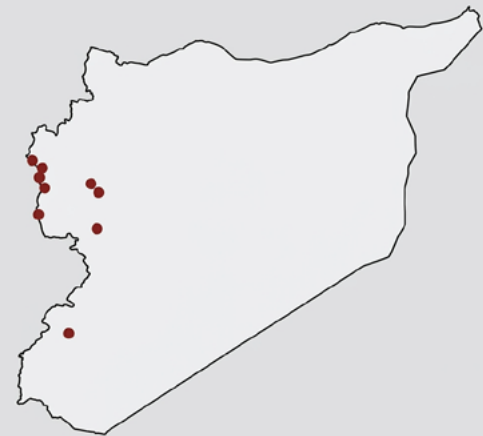
**Areas:** Cases are concentrated in the coastal region, including Latakia, Tartous, Jableh, and Safita, as well as in Homs, Hama, including Masyaf and al-Ghab Plain, and Damascus.

**Status:** Approximately %60 remain missing, while around %40 have been released, some after weeks or months, with indications of violence and/or extortion.

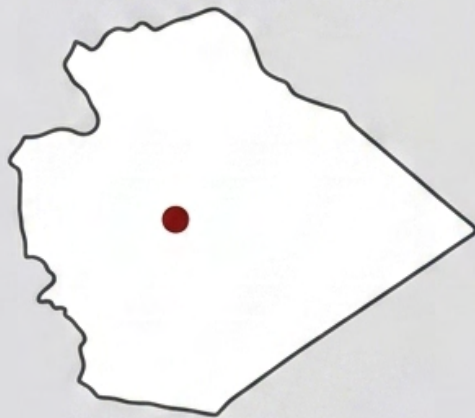
**Documentation:** Cases have been documented through multiple sources, including

testimonies from relatives, videos, CCTV footage, and survivors' testimonies. However, official procedures remain weak, with police reports filed in some cases but no effective follow-up.

**Intersectional factors:** Many victims are married women or mothers with children, which compounds the impact on their families. Most affected areas are rural and predominantly Alawite. Abductions have occurred in public spaces, such as roads and bus stations, or in connection with military operations, as seen during the coastal incursion in March 2025.



# Abductions and Violations in Suwayda



This report documents cases of abduction of women and girls from the Druze community in Suwayda Governorate during the events of July 2025, as well as gender-based sexual violations. It analyses these violations within the broader context of conflict-related violence and violations of a gendered and sectarian nature in Syria. The report is based on a remote cross-verification methodology, which included the analysis of open-source material; the documentation of photographs, videos, and testimonies from women and men witnesses, survivors, and individuals close to them; and the review of reports by international and local human rights organisations. It also draws on close cooperation with local documentation groups and activists, including the exchange of case files. The report further takes into account the constraints affecting access to information on these violations, given the limited data available in some cases and the sensitivity of the subject matter.

Verified information indicates that the events in Suwayda unfolded against a backdrop of tension and escalation that preceded the attacks. The attacks were preceded and accompanied by sectarian hate speech in the media and on social media platforms, including, according to human rights sources, incitement to violence against

Druze communities, including calls targeting women. These dynamics coincided with military operations that escalated in **mid-July 2025**.

The attacks occurred in two main phases. **On 13 July 2025**, raids were carried out in Suwayda city and its countryside, during which cases of abduction of women and girls were reported. According to local testimonies and multiple sources, these incidents were attributed to government forces and affiliated actors. **On 18 July 2025**, wider attacks took place in the western and northern countryside, carried out by armed groups of a tribal character. These included mass abductions and were reportedly accompanied by sectarian incitement, including degrading rhetoric targeting women.

**According to verified information, approximately 190 cases of missing women and girls were reported in the early**

## Abductions and Violations in Suwayda

**days. Subsequent verification revealed that some of these cases were linked to a temporary loss of contact.**

As documentation continued over the following months, the fate of a number of women whose names had appeared on documented lists became clearer: some had been abducted and transferred to other governorates; others were located in shelters in Daraa Governorate; and some had been moved to Damascus. Contact was also re-established with the families of some women, who confirmed that a number of cases had remained in villages with relatives but had previously been unreachable. Women whose abduction had been documented and whose presence in other governorates had been confirmed were later released through local or international mediation, exchange arrangements, or unconditional release. Confirmed deaths were also recorded in some cases, although the circumstances remain unclear.

It is important to note that the subsequent release of abducted women does not negate the crime or its long-term consequences. Legal responsibility remains with the perpetrators, while the psychological and social repercussions continue to affect survivors, their families, and society at large.

**Documented patterns indicate that the abductions occurred within a framework of targeting based on sectarian identity, with women in some cases used as instruments of pressure on local communities for political purposes. This targeting was preceded by waves of sectarian incitement and hate speech in the media and on social media platforms. These patterns reflect the intersection of gender-based violence and sectarian targeting, whereby women's bodies are instrumentalised to convey collective messages that extend beyond the individual victim to her community.**

*The Syrian Feminist Lobby*, in cooperation with local activists and documentation groups in Suwayda, documented grave human rights violations and crimes that may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity committed against civilians, including women and children. It also documented testimonies regarding multiple forms of sexual violence and identity-based sexual violence, including violations targeting women on the basis of their sectarian identity. The Lobby obtained photographic evidence confirming grave human rights violations and acts of sexual violence, including

killings, mutilation of bodies, forced stripping, and abuse of intimate parts of the body, in a flagrant violation of victims' dignity prohibited under international humanitarian law. Additional forms of sexual violence were documented in several cases during raids carried out by government forces and affiliated tribal armed groups. Comprehensive documentation of all violations remains limited due to social stigma and difficulties in accessing survivors. Nevertheless, *the Syrian Feminist Lobby* has documented the available evidence and testimonies and shared case files with relevant United Nations and international human rights bodies<sup>3</sup>.

A report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, issued in March 2026, clearly identified government responsibility. It found that the widespread and systematic attack against civilians in Suwayda occurred within the framework of an organised official government actor, with government and political actors aware of the nature and scale of the attack and the crimes committed. The report stated that Syrian government forces and affiliated tribal armed groups committed, particularly **between 14 and 19 July**, grave and overlapping violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

<sup>3</sup> [What is International Humanitarian Law?](#)

## Abductions and Violations in Suwayda

**These violations largely targeted Druze civilians on a sectarian basis and followed a clear gendered pattern.**

The violations included extrajudicial executions during house raids and on roads, where men and boys were often separated from women, stripped of their belongings, subjected to religiously charged humiliation, and then shot at close range. Killings of women and girls were also recorded, including cases in which women were forced to strip before being killed. The report further documented the desecration of bodies, including burning, mutilation, and the circulation of images online.

Violations also included arbitrary detention and widespread abduction, particularly of Druze men, accompanied by cruel and degrading treatment amounting to torture under the Convention against Torture. This included severe beatings, religious humiliation, the forced shaving of moustaches and beards, ransom demands and extortion, and detention in locations including Daraa and later Adra Central Prison. The report also documented incidents of sexual and gender-based violence, including a confirmed case of rape of a girl in front of her mother, alongside other reports under investigation. Women were also subjected to threats of sexual violence, degrading searches, and forced stripping<sup>4</sup>.

The report further confirms the continuation of the humanitarian crisis in Suwayda, marked by widespread displacement, lack of trust, and the inability of residents to return due to fear and security restrictions. Ongoing inter-communal tensions, combined with the absence of a reliable security framework and safe civic space, make accountability, clarification of the fate of the missing, and the release of arbitrarily detained persons essential preconditions for any reconciliation or stability.

*The Syrian Feminist Lobby* was unable to document violations against the Bedouin community in Suwayda due to lack of access to the relevant areas and the difficulty of field verification. However, the Commission of Inquiry report concludes that armed groups in Suwayda Governorate committed grave violations of international humanitarian law during July and continuing into August, in the context of a non-international armed conflict. These violations particularly targeted the Bedouin community on the basis of communal affiliation and were accompanied by hate speech and

discriminatory insults targeting victims on the basis of their religious and cultural identity.

These violations included extrajudicial killings of civilian men, boys, women, and girls; attacks on civilians while they were fleeing; desecration of bodies; mass arbitrary detention of Bedouins in religious sites and private property; and abductions, including the abduction of women and girls. The latest Commission of Inquiry report further documented that abductions affected Bedouin women in Suwayda and stated that all such abductions took place during the armed conflict in July. At the time of the Commission's report, three Bedouin women and one girl remained detained by armed groups.

The report highlights the far-reaching consequences of these violations against Syrian women, including Alawite and Druze women. Survivors face severe psychological, social, and economic challenges, including trauma, social stigma, and barriers to accessing justice, within an unstable environment lacking effective protection mechanisms. The report also emphasises that the findings were at times constrained by limited access, in a context shaped by information suppression, fear of reporting, the absence of witness protection mechanisms, and fragmented information.

<sup>4</sup>[Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment | OHCHR](#)

# Methodology

This report adopts the highest possible standards of accuracy and reliability, while taking into account the complex security environment in Syria. The methodology includes the following components:

- 1 Syrian Feminist Lobby documentation files:** These included the analysis of open-source information, including the review and assessment of social media content and media networks, alongside the analysis of video footage and audio recordings.
- 2 Witness testimonies:** Direct and indirect testimonies were collected and analysed from survivors and their family members, based on informed consent, in addition to testimonies from women and men who witnessed the events within the local community.
- 3 Verification of information:** Data and documentation were cross-checked against multiple sources to ensure accuracy.
- 4 Reports by international and local organisations:** The analysis drew on reports issued by international human rights organisations, including Amnesty International and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as reports by local Syrian organisations.
- 5 Reconstruction of the chronology of events:** Incidents of abduction and enforced disappearance were analysed and sequenced with precision.
- 6 Gender and human rights analysis:** A gender and human rights analytical lens was applied to understand the motives behind the targeting of women, to contextualise the violations within the frameworks of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and to assess their impacts at both individual and community levels.

A trauma-informed approach was also adopted during interviews to minimise the risk of re-traumatisation. The identities of all providers of testimony, both direct and indirect, have been protected in this report to ensure their safety.

# Limitations

Experience in documenting gender-based violations in armed conflicts confirms that most cases of violence against women go unreported, due to fear of social stigma or community reactions, including blame or rejection of survivors. This reality applies to the current context covered by this report, where such fears and trauma have limited access to comprehensive and detailed testimonies. Figures presented in the report also vary due to differences in methodologies and timeframes among monitoring actors.

Accordingly, the findings presented in this report should be understood as a partial account of events, rather than a comprehensive documentation of all violations experienced by women and girls during this period. This should be considered alongside the psychological and social impact on victims and their families, which affects their ability to provide testimony. **In addition:**

**Security constraints, politicisation, and secrecy:** Local authorities in Suwayda Governorate have treated the issue of abducted women and sexual violations with a high degree of sensitivity and confidentiality, including by restricting which actors are permitted to document cases. This has limited the scope of comprehensive documentation. Despite this, the Syrian Feminist Lobby was able to carry out partial documentation in cooperation with documentation groups, activists, and the families of victims and survivors.

**Absence of effective protection mechanisms for witnesses and survivors:** The local context lacks reliable systems for the protection of witnesses and survivors, particularly in cases involving abduction and sexual violence. This gap reinforces silence and hinders access to justice.

**Social stigma and fear:** Social stigma associated with abduction and sexual violence continues to pose a significant

barrier to survivors speaking about their experiences. This has led some families to refrain from documenting cases or pursuing them publicly.

**Fragmentation of information and lack of coordination among actors:** The documentation process revealed inconsistencies in how local actors manage information, resulting in the absence of a unified database and difficulties in tracking certain cases.

**Challenges related to the accuracy and updating of figures:** It is not possible to rely on precise figures or fully updated case lists, given the absence of a clear mechanism for tracking remaining cases or verifying their status.

**Limited information on post-release conditions:** Available data lacks sufficient documentation regarding the conditions of some women's return or their subsequent circumstances.

# Analytical Framework

**This report adopts an intersectional human rights approach, situating violations within the frameworks of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, and drawing on a gendered feminist lens to analyse the dynamics of targeting and its individual and collective impacts.**

The following concepts and analytical frameworks guide the interpretation of the data presented in this report. Within this context, the phenomenon of the abduction and enforced disappearance of women emerges as particularly significant, especially when carried out on the basis of identity, including the intersection of sectarian affiliation and gender. The targeting of women is therefore not only linked to their being women, but also to their perceived role, in the eyes of perpetrators, as representatives of a collective identity to be punished, humiliated, or subjected to pressure.

**The violations witnessed in Suwayda in July 2025 cannot be understood in isolation from this broader context.** Rather, they form part of a continuum of patterns of violence documented throughout the years of the conflict, in which women have been used as direct targets of abduction, sexual violence, and community-level intimidation. These events are further distinguished by a pronounced sectarian dimension, involving the targeting of women from specific religious communities in the context of large-scale attacks.

Recent evidence indicates that certain armed actors, including groups affiliated with the de facto authorities, **perceive women from Alawite and Druze backgrounds as instruments of pressure and symbolic representations of collective identity.** This reinforces the use of violence against them as a means of conveying political and social messages that extend beyond the immediate victims.

**Within this framework, targeting takes on a dual character: sectarian, in terms of the selection of victims based on actual or perceived affiliation; and gendered, in terms of the broader social impact of violence against women, which extends to families and communities through fear, stigma, and the erosion of a sense of safety.**

# Women's Experiences During Abduction and Enforced Disappearance

Coastal Region, Homs,  
and Western Rural Hama

## Context and Patterns of Cases

**A**vailable evidence indicates that most cases carry a **sectarian dimension**. In a limited number of documented cases, there were indications of **ransom demands**; however, these were not accompanied by proof of life, information on the place of detention, or clear details regarding how the ransom was to be paid. In one case, a ransom was paid, yet the woman's fate remains unknown to date. In a small number of cases, victims were released following payment. However, some survivors later refused to engage with media or documentation teams due to fear of security repercussions, raising concerns about the possible direct or indirect involvement of official actors.

Some families also received messages urging them to **"forget"** their missing daughters, or were contacted with the aim of initiating forced divorce procedures, most of which are believed to have taken place under coercion. At least one case of the forced marriage of a minor girl was documented.

**The youngest victim was an -11month-old** infant abducted with his mother, while another documented case involved **a three-year-old girl abducted alongside her mother**. The ages of other victims ranged from **15 to their early forties**.

In some instances, families received calls from local or international numbers, during which abductors threatened to kill the abducted women and return their bodies if the families continued searching for them.

## Women's Experiences During Abduction and Enforced Disappearance

Coastal Region, Homs,  
and Western Rural Hama

# Survivor Testimonies on Detention and Transfers

Some survivors who escaped or were released reported being held in dark rooms, sedated, and transferred between multiple locations. Other testimonies also described detention in dark spaces before release, sometimes reportedly following media pressure.

In one account, survivors described the night of their release: masked men entered the room carrying firearms and long knives. Around midnight, the abducted women were forced to wear black niqabs covering their entire bodies and faces before being transported in a vehicle to an unknown location.

Due to the darkness and the face coverings, survivors were unable to identify the location or route. They were later left at the same site where the abduction had taken place. Before leaving, the abductors issued a clear warning against contacting the media, saying:

***“We know where to find you and where to find your families.”***

This threat reflects the extension of violence beyond detention, where fear is used as **a tool to enforce silence and maintain control over survivors and their families.**

**One survivor reported** being taken to an unknown

location and held for two days in a dark room with a door opening directly onto the street. On the third day, she was transported again in the same vehicle to another location. The new detention room contained chairs, shoes, and a table, and did not resemble a residential space. The survivor reported hearing another girl screaming while being beaten, although she never saw her.

Approximately two hours later, they were transported again, accompanied by four armed men. At one checkpoint, a guard exchanged words with another officer in a manner suggesting prior familiarity. The vehicle later stopped on a bridge, where a man received them saying, ***“The goods have been delivered,”*** before the journey continued for more than three hours. The vehicle eventually reached a remote area, after which she was taken across the border.

## Women's Experiences During Abduction and Enforced Disappearance

Coastal Region, Homs,  
and Western Rural Hama

These accounts suggest that the transfers were not isolated incidents, but occurred within an environment that allowed movement through security checkpoints, raising serious concerns regarding the level of knowledge or complicity.

Another survivor, a married woman and mother, reported being abducted under threats to kill male members of her family. She was transported through several security checkpoints from the coastal region to the north, and stated that the abductor appeared to be familiar with some checkpoint personnel. Cross-verified reports received by the Syrian Feminist Lobby indicate that the abductor was implicated in massacres in the coastal region.

The survivor was subjected to sexual violence by her abductor before being arbitrarily detained in solitary confinement for one week. During this time, she was pressured to record a video statement claiming that she had left voluntarily with a lover. She also reported that a man referred to as a "sheikh" oversaw the coerced recording and pressured her to accept divorce from her husband and forced marriage to her abductor in exchange for her release.

This pattern reflects the use of coercion to produce forced narratives that deny the violation, turning the survivor into a tool for concealing the crime rather than documenting it. The survivor's access to legal support was also obstructed during her arbitrary detention by a police authority, which is not identified here to protect her identity.

*The Syrian Feminist Lobby* verified that the abductor had access to security information from the official report of the survivor's disappearance, suggesting links to official agencies. The police treated the survivor as a suspect, and a religious ruling was issued against her without any legal basis under Syrian law prior to her release.

*“The use of coercion to produce forced narratives that deny the violation, turning the survivor into a tool for concealing the crime rather than documenting it.”*

## Women's Experiences During Abduction and Enforced Disappearance

Coastal Region, Homs,  
and Western Rural Hama

# Physical and Psychological Violations During Detention

In cases where survivors provided direct testimony, consistent accounts emerged regarding the use of violence, deception, entrapment, and sedation.

*The Syrian Feminist Lobby* also verified cases of rape and pregnancies resulting from detention.

Most of these cases were concentrated in the coastal region, western rural Hama, and Homs Governorate. Available data further indicates the use of coercion and torture, as well as the recording of videos for purposes of extortion during abduction or forced detention. **Women and girls were subjected to sectarian verbal abuse and threats of collective extermination targeting their community.** In some cases, abductors framed the abduction as a

"rescue," while threatening to kill "*infidel Nusayris*," and forced victims or survivors to convert to the perpetrators' sect and marry individuals imposed upon them.

Some testimonies also point to cases of forced **cross-border transfer of victims, with financial payments made upon their handover to other parties, suggesting links to patterns of human trafficking.**

These patterns indicate the use of violence not only to control the victim physically, but also to reshape her religious and social identity through coercion. They further suggest the possible existence of organised networks **extending beyond local actors and linking certain cases to broader systems of exploitation and trafficking.**

## Coercion to Perform Religious Practices

**Detained women were forced to wear the niqab and perform religious rituals during captivity.**

**These practices were used as tools to impose a religious identity, violate personal and religious freedoms, and reinforce control during detention.**

## Women's Experiences During Abduction and Enforced Disappearance

Coastal Region, Homs,  
and Western Rural Hama



OMAR HAJ KADOUR / AFP

## Perpetrating Actors

Survivor testimonies indicate the involvement of multiple perpetrating actors, with clear intersections between them, particularly through their links to security structures overseeing checkpoints and police facilities.

Survivors reported hearing non-Syrian Arabic dialects, dialects from various Syrian regions, Arabic spoken with foreign accents, and foreign languages.

They also described seeing uniforms resembling those of public security forces, as well as military attire marked by red headbands.

These indicators point to the involvement of auxiliary or pro-government armed forces, alongside complicity by official institutions in abduction and enforced disappearance operations.

# Women's Experiences During Abduction and Enforced Disappearance in Suwayda

As noted above, *the Syrian Feminist Lobby*, in cooperation with local documentation groups, documented grave violations, including sexual and gender-based violence.

Documented accounts from the attacks in Suwayda Governorate indicate **an extreme level of violence targeting women and girls**. Testimonies describe acts of humiliation inflicted on some women, including forced stripping, as well as the discovery of women's bodies in conditions suggesting severe abuse prior to death. In other cases, local testimonies reported that women were killed while attempting to seek refuge in religious sites, spaces that are expected to provide safety for civilians during periods of violence.

Although the number of documented cases remains limited, the nature of these violations reveals a deeply concerning level of violence accompanying the events. The evidence indicates that women were subjected to severe forms of physical and sexual violence, as well as degrading treatment, with some cases reflecting extreme brutality.

Given the surrounding conditions, marked by ongoing fear, social pressure, and the absence of a safe environment for disclosure, it is likely that many women's experiences remain unreported or confined within family circles. As such, the documented cases cannot be considered a comprehensive account of what women experienced during this period.

From this perspective, the patterns observed during the attacks help contextualise cases of abduction. The violence experienced by women during the attacks illustrates the nature of the risks surrounding them at the time and provides important indications of the types of violations that some abducted women may have endured during detention, even where many survivors have been unable to speak about their experiences.

Understanding these patterns requires examining the mechanisms of abduction and enforced disappearance associated with these events.

# Mechanisms of Abduction and Enforced Disappearance in Suwayda

## First Wave: 13 July 2025

**Perpetrating actors:** Local testimonies and witness accounts indicate that raids carried out by government forces and security personnel in Suwayda city and villages in the northern and western countryside were accompanied by the abduction of women and girls. The actors involved reportedly adopted extremist religious rhetoric.

**Modus operandi:** Direct abductions from homes during raids, often under the pretext of searching for weapons or wanted individuals.

**Motives and use:** Evidence points to sectarian motives aimed at humiliating the community, weakening its social cohesion, and using the abduction of women as a means of exerting pressure on local factions to achieve political and security objectives.

**Targeting:** Victims included a wide range of individuals, from young girls and university students to homemakers and employees, with no clear selective pattern. This indicates a broad and indiscriminate scope affecting multiple social groups.

**Perpetrating actors:** Survivor testimonies indicate the involvement of armed groups of a tribal character arriving from various regions of Syria, adopting extremist religious rhetoric during the attacks.

**Modus operandi:** Large-scale attacks targeting public roads and villages in the western and northern countryside, involving mass abductions, including from inside homes.

**Motives and use:** Testimonies suggest a symbolic dimension in

the targeting of women, whereby such acts were used as a means of exerting pressure on families and the local community. Given women's central role within the social fabric, this targeting produced psychological and social repercussions that extended beyond the immediate victims and their families.

**Targeting:** The second wave was broader in scope than the first, with a particular focus on less protected and more vulnerable rural areas.

## Second Wave: From 18 July 2025 Onwards — Collective Attacks “Tribal Mobilisation”

**Women's Experiences  
During Abduction and  
Enforced Disappearance**

**in Suwayda**

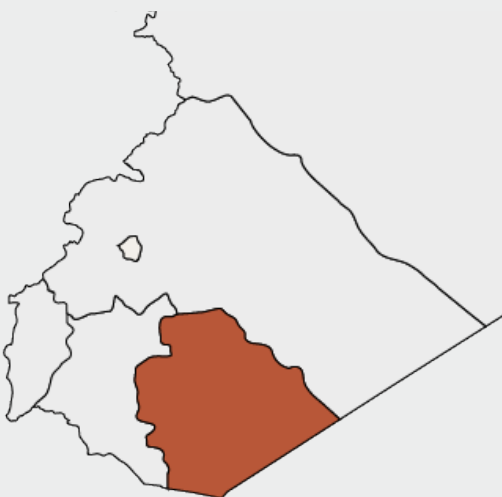
# Who Were the Targeted Women?

The ages of abducted women ranged from young girls and adolescents to adult women, including women up to 80 years old. This indicates that the targeting was not limited to a specific age group, but rather reflected a broad and inclusive pattern affecting women across different stages of life.

The social backgrounds of victims were also diverse, including university students, teachers, agricultural workers, and homemakers. This suggests that the primary motivation was not financial, such as obtaining ransom, but rather linked to the deliberate production of collective trauma within the Druze social fabric, using women themselves as a means of targeting the community.

*“The objective was not to obtain ransom, but to use women as a tool to target the community as a whole.”*

## Geographical Distribution of Documented Incidents



Area	Type of Attack	Perpetrating Actors	Timeframe
Suwayda city and western countryside	Organised abductions from homes	Government forces and affiliated armed groups	13 July 2025
Western countryside: <i>Ta'arah, al-Dour, al-Dweirah, Najran</i> Northern countryside: <i>Radhimat al-Liwa, Dhakir, Lahtha</i>	Collective attacks on villages	Armed groups of a tribal character aligned with the authorities	From 18 July 2025 onwards

# Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria<sup>5</sup>

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic documented cases targeting women, including elderly women and girls, **particularly in the context of the events referred to as “tribal mobilisation” on 18 and 19 July**, in which various groups of tribal fighters participated. Available information indicates that **women and children, including girls and boys, were abducted in some cases following the killing of their adult male relatives, while other women were forcibly taken from their homes while they were alone and under threat of weapons.**

**Some abducted women were released on the same day, while others were held as hostages**, with the apparent purpose of using them in exchanges for detainees held by other parties in Suwayda. This constitutes a violation of international humanitarian law. **Some were later released through operations carried out by internal security forces.** Most abducted women were transferred to areas in Daraa and Rural Damascus, while at least one case reported the transfer of a group to Hama before an agreement was reached for their release.

Such practices amount to hostage-taking, which constitutes a grave violation of international humanitarian law. The Commission also noted the circulation of several lists containing the names of abducted women and girls following the July events. It reviewed these lists and sought to clarify the fate of those reported missing. It was established that many women were released safely after a short period of loss of contact with their families, while others were released in the weeks and months that followed. In some cases, women were found deceased after their bodies were identified. **At the time of drafting the Commission's report, three Druze women remained missing.**

*“Women  
were taken  
by force  
from their  
homes while  
alone and  
under threat  
of weapons.”*

## Mechanisms for the Release of Abducted Women

Some women were released through limited exchange arrangements, local and international mediation, and, in certain cases, unconditional release. Individual cases were also secured through ransom payments. There is no evidence to suggest that all cases were addressed through a single mechanism.

In the period following the release of abducted women, additional shifts emerged in their experiences, particularly in relation to identity and appearance.

## Implications of Changes in Appearance and Identity After Release in the Context of Suwayda

In several instances, women whose release from abduction had been announced appeared in official meetings with governmental actors<sup>5</sup>. Notably, **some of these women were observed wearing the hijab, despite not being known to wear it in their daily lives prior to the incident<sup>6</sup>**. This change in appearance, occurring in a formal setting and under the visibility of state authorities, carries implications that extend beyond clothing itself.

For many observers and local activists, this raised concerns regarding the extent of pressure that **women may have faced during or after their abduction, as well as the need to conceal aspects of personal identity as a means of avoiding risk.**

In conflict contexts where violence intersects with religious or sectarian identity, victims are often compelled to alter their appearance or conceal markers of social or religious



## Women's Experiences During Abduction and Enforced Disappearance

in Suwayda

affiliation as a survival strategy. From this perspective, the public appearance of women in this manner may reflect a reality in which identity itself constituted a source of risk.

These observations suggest, in their broader significance, that the experience of abduction extended beyond physical detention and may have involved attempts to reshape victims' identities or influence how they present themselves in the public sphere. This reinforces the understanding that the targeting was not random, but linked to factors of identity and belonging.

*“Identity itself was an element of threat that exposed them to danger.”*

## Initial Social Impacts Following Release

Reliable and comprehensive data on longer-term social impacts, such as divorce rates or pregnancy, remains unavailable. Testimonies from a limited number of survivors indicate varying degrees of community support; however, this does not exclude the existence of survivors facing social challenges or forms of violence. *The Syrian Feminist Lobby* was unable to access documented cases of women experiencing post-release violence or social challenges. **Many women appear to remain silent about their experiences, including violence from husbands, brothers, or the wider community, due to fear of social stigma or the potential exposure of their stories if they come forward.**

## Documentation Challenges

The documentation process faced several key challenges, including:

- 1** Reliance on decentralised individual efforts, which affected the consistency of data and limited the scope of coverage.
- 2** Difficulty in accessing victims, due to fear as well as security and social constraints.
- 3** The high sensitivity of the subject matter, and associated risks affecting the willingness of victims and survivors to provide testimony.

# Law Enforcement and the Response of the Syrian Interim Authorities

## Response of Authorities in the Coastal Region, Homs, and Western Rural Hama

All testimonies verified by the Syrian Feminist Lobby indicate that families did not feel their reports concerning the disappearance of their female relatives were taken seriously by the authorities. Some families reported being subjected to degrading and dismissive remarks, such as: *"your daughters are immoral,"* *"they left of their own accord,"* or *"you are unable to control your women."*

Such rhetoric undermines families' trust in justice institutions and effectively limits survivors' and their families' access to redress and legal protection.

The security-oriented approach adopted in dealing with survivors raises serious concerns. In one case, a young woman was detained by the General Security Service for more than five hours after her release, without being provided with medical care or psychological support. Her father was then detained for several additional hours before being allowed to see her.

Practices regarding the treatment of some survivors following their release were also documented, including the recording of coerced testimonies within security facilities affiliated with the authorities.

**Some of these testimonies were filmed and publicly broadcast, while others were retained without publication. In one case, a survivor was forced to provide a filmed statement inside her home despite her fragile physical and psychological condition, in the presence of security personnel and accompanying individuals, without any regard for protection standards or free consent.**

Some survivors were also threatened with solitary confinement if they refused to provide statements. This constitutes explicit coercion and a violation of the victim's right to remain silent, to legal representation, and to freedom from coercion. Verified information indicates that survivors were instructed to repeat specific narratives, including thanking security forces and stating that they had left voluntarily and had not been abducted. They were prevented from mentioning any details regarding the perpetrators, their descriptions, the routes of abduction, or places of detention.

## Law Enforcement and the Response of the Syrian Interim Authorities

These practices constitute clear violations of survivors' rights, as guaranteed under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights<sup>6</sup>. They also undermine any possibility of conducting serious and independent investigations, contribute to obscuring the truth, and deprive victims of justice and redress<sup>7</sup>.

Furthermore, current security institutions lack female investigators and experts, raising serious concerns regarding the quality and integrity of investigations and testimonies in cases of this sensitivity.

**The Syrian Feminist Lobby** has also obtained information indicating that the Syrian interim authorities are conducting security assessments related to individuals and actors engaged in this issue, including women human rights defenders working on abduction cases. This has been accompanied by public incitement against some of them and against human rights actors through official or semi-official media platforms, using systematic narratives aimed at casting doubt on them and damaging their reputations.

In addition, existing national laws concerning the protection of women are not being enforced, despite remaining formally in force under the Interim Constitutional Declaration.

“Your  
daughters  
are immoral.”  
“They left  
of their  
own free  
will.”  
“You are  
incapable  
of controlling  
your women.”

<sup>6</sup>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights | OHCHR

## Analysis of the Official Response and Discourse of Denial

The official position and response of the Syrian interim authorities are characterised by inadequacy, inconsistency, and a tendency towards denial, in stark contrast to the scale of the documented phenomenon.

**In relation to abducted Alawite women,** the Ministry of the Interior announced that it had reviewed 43 cases and concluded that 41 did not constitute genuine abduction cases. This position reflects clear and explicit denial of a phenomenon documented in reports issued by the United Nations and human rights organisations.

Official discourse, as reflected in the Ministry's statements, tends to minimise the scale of the phenomenon rather than investigate it and address it through serious judicial measures. Instead of adopting a unified legal classification that would enable criminal accountability and protection, the official narrative focuses on disputing the number of cases and categorising many as voluntary departures or situations linked to personal or family circumstances, thereby denying their classification as abduction.

This approach undermines victims' and families' trust in the security apparatus and **delays recognition that the documented cases may constitute enforced disappearance and the use of sexual violence as a tool of intimidation, humiliation, and social control.**

The absence of a clear and public position from the national body responsible for enforced disappearance represents a significant gap. Enforced disappearance should not be treated merely as a "humanitarian issue," but as a continuing crime that imposes obligations on the state to search, investigate, and ensure protection. Under international law, states cannot invoke emergency or instability to justify enforced disappearance, and remain obligated to investigate, ensure accountability, and determine the fate of missing persons.

**Accordingly, the institutional silence of this body undermines and erodes the broader framework of transitional justice, particularly given that the interim authorities themselves established an official mechanism for missing persons under Decree No. 19 of 2025. The failure to address the issue of abducted women therefore constitutes an unacceptable institutional contradiction.**

“The official narrative focused on questioning the cases rather than investigating them.”

## Response of the Syrian Interim Authorities in Suwayda

**The authorities are considered implicated in the violations committed in Suwayda, rendering them non-neutral and directly involved. This raises serious concerns regarding their capacity or willingness to ensure accountability.**

Findings of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic indicate that the events of **July in Suwayda were marked by grave and systematic violations, including extrajudicial killings and summary executions targeting civilians, particularly from the Druze community, in the context of house raids and clashes in residential areas**<sup>8</sup>.

The Commission noted that Syrian government forces, including members of the Syrian Arab Army and internal security forces, participated in these operations alongside fighters from tribal armed groups.

These actors operated in a coordinated and simultaneous manner between 14 and 16 July 2025, as part of broader operations that took place in the governorate prior to the withdrawal of government forces<sup>9</sup>.

Documented findings demonstrate that these violations were not isolated incidents, but reflected repeated and systematic patterns.

The violence was directed on the basis of communal and sectarian identity, constituting grave violations of international humanitarian law and potentially amounting to a pattern of persecution against a protected population.

The Commission further indicated that these violations occurred within a context in which government forces were aware of the operations, whether through direct presence at the sites of incidents or through coordination with other armed groups. This suggests a degree of control or oversight, or at minimum prior or subsequent knowledge of the violations, without effective measures being taken to prevent or halt them. The use of fighters affiliated with tribal armed groups as part of military operations raises issues of command responsibility under Article 28 of the Rome Statute, as well as questions regarding the possible attribution of conduct to the state where effective control or direction can be established<sup>10</sup>.

Despite the gravity and scale of the documented violations, the Commission highlighted the absence of independent, transparent, and effective investigations, indicating the continuation of a climate of impunity.

**Taken together, these findings underscore the responsibility of the interim authorities not only for acts committed by their forces or in coordination with them, but also for their failure to take the necessary measures to prevent, halt, investigate, and ensure accountability for these violations. This amounts to a breach of their obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law.**

<sup>8</sup>Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions | OHCHR

<sup>9</sup>Amnesty International Syria: New investigation reveals evidence government and affiliated forces extrajudicially executed dozens of Druze people in Suwayda

<sup>10</sup>Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court

# Legal Framework and Gaps in Law Enforcement

## Domestic Legal Framework

A number of core provisions of Syrian law apply to the documented cases, including:

- 1 The prohibition of unlawful detention and abduction;
- 2 The criminalisation of coercion, threats, and assault.
- 3 The obligation to respect physical and psychological integrity.
- 4 The duty of the Public Prosecution and judicial police authorities to initiate serious investigations upon receipt of credible complaints.

**In addition, forced marriage, where established, constitutes a violation of freedom of choice and consent and is considered legally void.**

## International Legal Framework

At the international level, although Syria has not acceded to the Rome Statute, the treaty establishing the International Criminal Court, it ratified the Palermo Protocol in 2009. However, its effective implementation requires national legislation that explicitly criminalises trafficking in women<sup>11</sup>.

Syria is also bound by obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the prohibition of torture, and obligations related to gender-based violence.

In addition, rules recognising enforced disappearance as a continuing crime impose an obligation to conduct prompt and effective investigations.

The United Nations' call for gender-sensitive approaches further implies that any response that fails to integrate a gender perspective and women's lived experiences remains legally and practically inadequate.

<sup>11</sup>[Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime | OHCHR](#)

## Shortcomings in Law Enforcement at the National Level

Law enforcement in cases of abduction and enforced disappearance suffers from three main deficiencies:

### 1 Failure to Take Reports and Investigations Seriously

Human rights reports indicate that complaints submitted by families of abducted women often do not lead to concrete action or to the opening of serious and independent investigations. These complaints also lack consistent institutional follow-up, as families do not receive clear updates on the progress or outcomes of investigations. This undermines trust in the relevant authorities and limits the effectiveness of formal reporting mechanisms.

The lack of safe, confidential, and gender-sensitive reporting channels makes reporting abduction cases fraught with risk, whether due to fear of social stigma or retaliation. Immediate and effective protection mechanisms for survivors and their families are largely absent, leading many to refrain from reporting or to withdraw complaints, leaving victims in a state of ongoing vulnerability.

### Absence of Immediate Protection for Victims and Their Families

## 2

### 3 Lack of Accountability

Available evidence does not indicate the existence of arrests or prosecutions proportionate to the scale and gravity of the violations committed.

This reflects a significant gap between existing legal provisions and their actual implementation, contributing to a climate of impunity and undermining the prospects for justice for victims and survivors.

In practice, measures taken at the national level, including the establishment of committees or the issuance of statements, do not appear sufficient in themselves to ensure effective compliance with legal obligations.

This requires robust legal enforcement that criminalises abduction, unlawful detention, and sexual violence; provides protection for victims and witnesses; and enables the effective prosecution of perpetrators.

In light of this legal framework, available evidence indicates that weak official recognition, the absence of independent investigations, and the fragmentation of institutional responsibility collectively contribute to inadequate law enforcement in relation to the state's obligations under both domestic and international law.

# Weakness of the Judicial System

The judicial system in Syria, in its current form, is unable to fulfil its role in delivering justice and ensuring accountability for perpetrators of grave violations, particularly in cases involving crimes such as extrajudicial killings, abductions, and sexual violence, as documented by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic in relation to the events in Suwayda.

The legal framework also suffers from deficiencies in its core legislative provisions. Syrian law does not explicitly and comprehensively criminalise international crimes such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. This limits the capacity of domestic courts to address such crimes in line with international criminal justice standards. This is compounded by the absence of genuine judicial independence from executive and security authorities. This lack of independence is reflected

in diminished trust among civil society actors and victims in domestic investigative mechanisms, including national inquiry bodies. These concerns are reinforced by documented evidence: the Commission of Inquiry's March 2026 report indicates the involvement of individuals linked to the Ministry of Defence in violations committed in Suwayda.

More broadly, verified information points to the involvement of fighters, including foreign elements, in the abduction of Alawite women, alongside documented threats against families to deter them from pursuing cases. These findings further indicate that authorities have refrained from conducting serious investigations and, in some instances, have denied the occurrence of such crimes, thereby undermining the credibility of any domestic investigative processes.

# Impunity

In practice, despite the existence of certain provisions within Syrian criminal law that criminalise acts such as abduction, sexual violence, and unlawful killing, these provisions are not effectively enforced when those implicated are members of government forces or affiliated militias. Human rights reports indicate that domestic judicial processes have not resulted in independent and transparent investigations or genuine prosecutions in such cases, nor in accountability for those in positions of command responsibility.

The absence of independent and transparent judicial investigations contributes to the entrenchment of a climate of impunity, as documented by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. No serious judicial proceedings have been initiated to address crimes committed by central authorities or affiliated militias, including summary executions, abductions, and sexual violence.

This institutional failure to investigate and ensure accountability constitutes a violation of the state's obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law, which require states to investigate grave violations and apply the law without discrimination.

In the absence of effective national accountability mechanisms, the conduct of the current security and judicial systems in Syria is widely viewed as reinforcing impunity rather than advancing justice. This deepens the suffering of victims and obstructs efforts towards national reconciliation and the establishment of the rule of law in a transitional context.

## Role of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour in Syria should have fulfilled its central responsibilities, particularly in cases of identity-based abduction. However, the Ministry has been entirely absent from this issue, neither acknowledging nor responding to it, despite the urgent needs of survivors and their families and despite its legal obligations.

“*Institutional absence places survivors within a dual cycle of violence.*”

No measures have been taken to ensure protection for survivors from perpetrators who remain at large, nor to guarantee safe access to healthcare services, particularly specialised care for survivors of sexual violence and its physical and psychological consequences. The issue has not been addressed as a multi-sectoral matter of social protection and human rights. There has been no clear or transparent coordination with relevant actors such as the police, prosecution authorities, mental health service providers, or shelters.

The Ministry has also failed to issue a firm public position condemning abduction as a grave violation of women’s rights, despite international statements by human rights organisations emphasising the responsibility

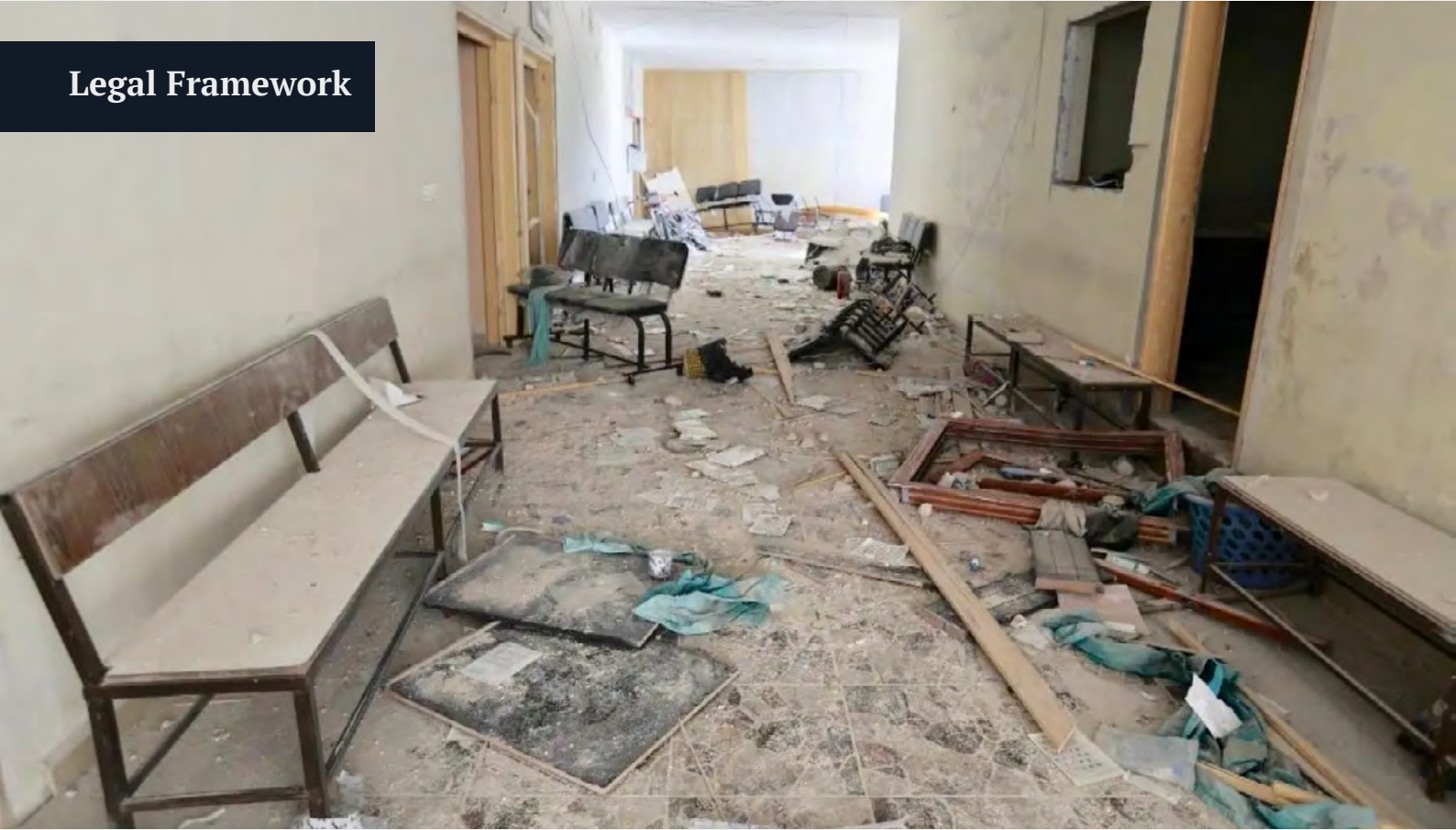
of Syrian authorities to investigate, prevent, and ensure accountability as both a legal and ethical obligation.

This shortcoming is not limited to administrative failure; rather, it reflects broader political and social priorities that marginalise women’s safety and exclude it from institutional focus.

When such cases are reduced to “individual incidents” or disregarded, women are effectively left responsible for their own protection, while institutions are absolved of their duty to protect. More critically, this institutional absence places survivors and their families within a dual cycle of violence: violence perpetrated by armed actors and abductors, and violence stemming from stigma, fear, and the absence of institutional recognition.

In international best practice, the governmental body responsible for social protection plays a central role within a national referral system linking police, prosecution services, healthcare providers, shelters, and civil society organisations, often supported by specialised centres or multi-sectoral teams. United Nations standards recommend the provision of:

- **Safe shelter.**
- **Medical and psychological care.**
- **Legal information.**
- **Legal representation or support.**
- **Protection of privacy and prevention of re-traumatisation.**



## Absence of Formal Institutional Response

In Suwayda, despite the gravity of reported violations against women, official and media sources do not reflect any clear positions or reports issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour directly addressing this issue. Available evidence further indicates that the Ministry has not taken any public stance opposing the violations committed against women, including cases of abduction linked to the events of July 2025.

Statements attributed to the Minister of Social Affairs have been limited to general remarks unrelated to the issue of abducted women, such as describing the events as “*some mistakes*” during the Munich Security Conference in Germany in February 2026. These were accompanied by broad assertions regarding the interim government’s representation of all segments of the Syrian population, without any reference to protective measures, follow-up actions for victims, or accountability for those responsible for the violations. Such framing minimises the severity of the violations and reflects a near-complete disregard for the Ministry’s responsibilities towards the most vulnerable groups.

This complete absence of a formal position or direct response constitutes a clear indicator of serious institutional inadequacy and reflects a failure by the Ministry to fulfil its fundamental duties towards civilians and society.

“*The ministry was entirely absent from this issue.*”

# Extended Psychological and Social Impact

## Impact on Survivors and Local Communities

**S**urvivors face ongoing threats from abductors or risks of sectarian retaliation, in the absence of effective institutional protection mechanisms. In the coastal region, Homs, and western rural Hama, survivors and their communities describe a condition akin to "*domestic confinement*," where women and girls fear leaving their homes alone.

The impact of abduction, as a socio-political tool, extends beyond individual survivors to affect the wider community. It contributes to the fragmentation of the social fabric, reinforces collective fear, and reproduces sectarian divisions.

Survivors' suffering is not limited to physical and psychological burdens, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, loss of self-confidence, and feelings of guilt and shame. It also includes exposure to suspicion and blame rather than empathy and care. In some cases, survivors are stigmatised as a "*source of shame*," placing them under pressure that may lead to isolation, anxiety, and fear. In extreme cases, this pressure can result in forced marriage as a means of "*protecting honour*" and avoiding social stigma.



## Psychological and Physical Effects of Abduction, Torture, and Sexual Violence

Abduction, torture, and rape are among the most severe forms of violence and violations of human dignity, leaving deep psychological trauma that can persist for years after survivors are released. The psychological burden is exacerbated by the absence of mental health support, social support, and access to justice, often resulting in post-traumatic stress disorder, emotional disturbances, depression, and social isolation.

These effects are further intensified by social stigma, media and community pressures, denial, and pressures placed on families, including coercion to alter their accounts in order to secure the release of abducted women or avoid further harm.

The harm extends beyond survivors to the broader community, affecting women's daily lives and limiting their ability to carry out basic activities, including education, employment, access to healthcare, and even routine tasks such as shopping. This creates a broader condition of social isolation and restricts women's participation in both public and private life.

Feminist and human rights research indicates that targeting women in armed conflict serves not only to inflict direct harm, but also functions as a tool to impose domination, instill collective fear, dismantle social bonds, undermine belonging, and threaten the continuity and identity of communities.

*“Many survivors are denied recognition, care, and justice.”*

Social stigma and silence further perpetuate this harm, as many survivors are denied recognition, care, and justice, while perpetrators benefit from a culture of shame, fear, and impunity (Hirsi, 2025).<sup>12</sup>

Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder include intrusive recollections, nightmares, hypervigilance, panic attacks, and avoidance of reminders of the traumatic event.

Survivors may also experience chronic anxiety, depression, loss of trust in others, fear of specific places or individuals, as well as sleep and concentration disorders.

<sup>12</sup>Hirsi, M. [Silent Scars: The Psychological and Physical Effects of Mass Atrocities on Women](#) | Human Writes

## Extended Psychological and Social Impact

Additional psychological effects may include emotional numbness, dissociation, feelings of shame or guilt, and difficulty regaining a sense of safety even after release. Among children and adolescents, these effects may manifest as academic decline, excessive attachment to caregivers, fear of leaving home, and noticeable behavioural changes.

Trauma resulting from abduction and torture can also produce long-term physical effects, including chronic pain, fatigue, sleep disturbances, headaches, musculoskeletal pain, and gastrointestinal issues. Persistent somatic symptoms may also arise, such as ongoing bodily tension, general weakness, and recurring unexplained physical complaints, often exacerbated by chronic stress and heightened arousal.

In cases involving restraint, threats with weapons, forced transfers, or harsh detention conditions, physical and psychological impacts are deeply intertwined.

Sexual violence, including rape and sexual torture, produces complex and interrelated psychological and physical consequences. Psychologically, it is associated with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, shame, guilt, humiliation, social isolation, and difficulties with trust and relationships, often accompanied by silence or denial as coping mechanisms.

Physically, it may result in chronic pain, fatigue, insomnia, scarring, and health complications, including sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies.

Research shows that the severity of these impacts is shaped not only by the assault itself, but also by social and cultural factors such as stigma, honour norms, and gender perceptions, making this form of violence an attack on identity and dignity, not only on the body (Dehghan & Osella, 2022)<sup>13</sup>

“his form  
of violence  
targets  
identity  
and dignity,  
not the  
body  
alone.”

<sup>13</sup>Dehghan, R., & Osella, C. [The psychological impact of sexual torture: A gender-critical study of the perspective of UK-based clinicians and survivors - PubMed](#)

## Silence and Stigma as Extensions of Harm

**Gendered social structures influence not only experiences of sexual violence, but also patterns of silence, disclosure, help-seeking, and responses to treatment.** Survivors' silence should therefore not be interpreted as an absence of harm; rather, it often constitutes an additional layer of harm imposed by social structures. Addressing these cases requires a trauma-informed approach that situates psychological impact within its broader

cultural, social, and power contexts.

These violations use the body as a means of producing submission, shame, and psychological fragmentation.

Accordingly, both therapeutic and rights-based responses must be trauma-informed and sensitive to gender, culture, and stigma, rather than limited to symptom-based diagnosis (Dehghan & Osella, 2022).

## Testimonies from Survivors

Survivor testimonies reflect the profound and multidimensional impact of these violations on their lives, not only at the individual psychological level, but also in terms of trust in society, their surroundings, and others. Political violence fractures a sense of belonging and destabilises perceptions of the future.

One survivor from the Suwayda massacres stated:

*"My feelings? Disappointment – loss of control over my emotions – a sense of helplessness, a sense of nothingness."*

Another survivor said:

*"I have lost trust in people. For many years, I was very enthusiastic. When we took part in demonstrations or gatherings, we felt a sense of belonging to Syrians and to Syria."*

*Today, I no longer feel that. I also feel a loss of trust in the future—what future awaits us? I have no trust in politics or in the world. We have all been let down. Politics seeks interests without considering people and what they are going through. The world is not fair, and all that is said about human rights or global solidarity has no value."*

These testimonies should be understood not merely as expressions of suffering, but as lived knowledge that interrogates the systems producing such violence, offering insight into how relationships between individuals, society, and the state are reshaped under conditions of violence.

## Impact on Men within the Social Environment

The abduction of women destabilises prevailing gender roles, challenges societal notions of masculinity, and disrupts perceived authority and status within the family. Men, including fathers, brothers, and husbands, may experience a sense of failure and humiliation due to their perceived inability to protect women, an expectation deeply rooted in social norms, particularly in conservative communities such as those in the coastal mountains or Suwayda.

This can affect family cohesion and may be associated with increased risks of domestic violence, reduced self-confidence, and higher rates of depression and social withdrawal. Some men also experience direct psychological impacts, including symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression.

## Psychological Impact on Children

**Children who have lost their mothers due to abduction or whose fate remains unknown experience ambiguous loss and unresolved grief.** The absence of clarity regarding their mother's fate places them in a state of chronic anxiety and preoccupation, often accompanied by sleep disturbances, nightmares, and episodes of distress.

They may develop excessive attachment to remaining caregivers, alongside persistent fear of losing other family members. Trauma-related symptoms, including emotional dysregulation, may emerge, affecting their sense of safety and belonging, their educational performance, and potentially leading to social isolation, particularly in families already experiencing stress, fear, and instability.

In identity-based abduction contexts, additional layers of impact may arise, including fear of identity-based targeting, stigma, and fear of self-expression. Some children may also experience feelings of abandonment due to their inability to understand what has occurred, with potential long-term effects on their social and emotional relationships, as well as their cognitive and psychological development.

Such experiences may also have intergenerational consequences, as trauma can be transmitted across generations, shaping perceptions of self, others, and the surrounding environment.

## Specialised Mental Health Services

Access to specialised mental health services remains extremely limited. Survivors of abduction and sexual violence commonly experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, including nightmares, loss of trust, guilt, depression, and anxiety.

Available mental health services are often insufficient or inaccessible in many areas, compounded by social stigma associated with seeking such support. This leads many survivors to withdraw and deprives them of their right to

recovery. Survivors may also fear breaches of confidentiality, while others refrain from seeking care due to financial barriers or geographical distance.

In many cases, seeking psychological support is itself stigmatised, with women receiving such care being labelled as “unstable,” adding further pressure and limiting access to services. The limited capacity of voluntary and free organisations further restricts the availability of support relative to the scale of need.

## Livelihoods

Abduction and enforced disappearance undermine women’s economic independence. Many women lose their employment or avoid work due to fear, in the context of limited economic support.

In Homs, western rural Hama, and the coastal region, fear prevents women from accessing agricultural fields or markets for selling home-produced goods. As a result, many turn to informal home-based economic activities, such as food production.

Suwayda continues to experience the effects of the attacks on basic services, including access to essential goods and healthcare.

**One survivor from the Suwayda massacres stated:**

*“Our battle is on all fronts: at home, in society, and on the economic and environmental levels.”*

**Another said:**

*“I have lost my sense of safety. I am a university graduate, but I have no job, and I do not know where I can work with my degree. The future is uncertain.”*

“Many  
female  
students  
stopped  
pursuing  
their  
education  
out of fear  
of abduction.”



## Education

**In the field of education, many female students in the coastal region, Homs, western rural Hama, and Suwayda have discontinued their studies.** Documented cases indicate that fear of abduction, particularly during daytime travel to schools and universities, has led to educational disruption. This disruption is not always temporary; in some cases, it results in permanent withdrawal from education due to ongoing insecurity and the absence of protection guarantees.

This reality restricts future educational and employment opportunities and contributes to the reproduction of cycles of poverty and dependency, particularly in the absence of alternative educational pathways or institutional support for affected students.

# Local and International Responses

## Local Response

Several local actors issued statements condemning the abduction of women in Syria, including the [Syrian Feminist Lobby](#), the [Syrian Women's Political Movement](#)<sup>14</sup>, the "Stop Abduction" campaign, and [Syrians for Truth and Justice](#)<sup>15</sup>.

Local coordination efforts also emerged to provide limited psychosocial and legal support services, often through direct referrals from documentation teams. However, these efforts are largely volunteer-based and operate with limited capacity, falling short of meeting the scale of needs.

## Response of the Syrian Feminist Lobby

The Syrian Feminist Lobby has called for independent and transparent judicial investigations into these violations and for perpetrators to be held accountable, while ensuring the provision of psychological, legal, and medical support to survivors and preventing victims from being left without protection. The Lobby has coordinated a number of meetings with United Nations, international, and human rights actors, involving women from affected areas, as well as feminist organisations and activists from regions impacted by abductions and violations, including the coastal region and Suwayda.

This was followed by the submission of documentation files prepared by *the Lobby* through official international channels to relevant United Nations bodies. The Lobby

also participated in advocacy meetings with international and human rights actors and delivered a briefing on Suwayda at the United Nations Human Rights Council as part of a side event.

At the local level, the Lobby has worked closely with activists, documentation groups, and human rights organisations, maintaining continuous engagement with affected communities.

It has also issued several statements condemning the abduction of women<sup>16</sup> and its societal impact<sup>17</sup>, affirming its rejection of all forms of abduction and violence against women and girls wherever they occur. *The Lobby* emphasised that the targeting of women from religious minorities<sup>18</sup>, such as Alawite and Druze women, occurs within a broader pattern of human rights violations targeting individuals on the basis of their religious identity or gender.

<sup>14</sup> [The Syrian Women's Political Movement Statement on the Abduction of Syrian Women in the Syrian Coast "A Woman's Dignity Is the Nation's Dignity"](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Abduction in Syria: Alawite Women Most Targeted Amidst Transitional Government Inaction - Syrians for Truth and Justice](#)

<sup>16</sup> [The Syrian Feminist Lobby Condemns Violations and Calls for the Release of All Abducted Women](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Joint Statement on the Report Issued by the Ministry of Interior's Committee Regarding the Crimes of Abduction](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Urgent Call to Action for the Abducted Women from the Syrian Coast](#)

## Role of Local Civil Society Organisations

Despite limited resources and a highly insecure environment, local organisations in Suwayda have made significant efforts to document cases and provide initial psychosocial support and legal assistance to survivors and their families.

Notably, women in Suwayda have played a central role in relief efforts, as well as in providing psychological, medical, and social support, in addition to documentation activities.

## International Response

### Independent International Commission of Inquiry

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic issued a report in March 2026 highlighting limited progress in governance and the rule of law, and emphasising serious challenges related to accountability. The report documented violations during the previous year, including 21 cases of abduction involving four minor girls and 17 young women, the majority of whom were Alawite women and girls, along with one Sunni Muslim girl<sup>20-19</sup>.

Most abductions occurred during daylight hours in streets and markets across Latakia, Tartous, Hama, Damascus, Rural Damascus, and Homs. The Commission reported that a number of victims were subjected to ill-treatment during detention, including sexual violence.

The report also documented two cases in which victims were arrested and prosecuted after their release, while investigations into dozens of other cases remain ongoing.

Evidence indicates that these incidents occurred within a broader context of violence and instability, including identity-based targeting, particularly against members of the Alawite community. Women and girls were subjected to sectarian insults, interrogation, and coercion to wear the niqab or perform religious

practices during detention.

In one case, a victim reported being abducted by foreign fighters and detained in Idlib, where she was severely beaten, forced to wear the niqab, and told that she had been abducted “because she was Alawite.”

In some cases, large sums of money were demanded for release, while in others motives appeared mixed or unclear. Opportunistic ransom demands were also reported by actors not directly linked to the abductions. Although perpetrators remain unidentified in most cases, the Commission documented at least one case in which perpetrators were identified as foreign fighters affiliated with units nominally integrated into the Ministry of Defence structure.

Some abducted women were reportedly transferred to Idlib, while others were smuggled across international borders, including to Lebanon. According to family testimonies, authorities failed to conduct effective investigations, and some families were pressured not to pursue cases. In three instances, victims faced moral accusations and were detained after being freed from abduction, before later being released from custody, raising serious concerns regarding the treatment of victims within the judicial system.

<sup>19</sup>[UN Syria Commission calls for justice, reform, and international support as Syria's fragile transition remains undermined by ongoing violations | OHCHR](#)

<sup>20</sup>[UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/62/61 – Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic:](#)

## Suwayda Events – July 2025

In a special report issued in March 2026, the Commission examined the events in Suwayda between 14 and 19 July 2025, which resulted in at least 1,707 deaths and the displacement of approximately 155,000 people, with total displacement exceeding 200,000 Druze and Bedouin individuals<sup>21</sup>.

The report concluded that all parties to the conflict, including government forces and local and tribal armed groups, committed violations that may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

These included attacks against civilians, extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, looting, and destruction of property, carried out across three successive phases of attacks<sup>22</sup>.

The Commission stressed that accountability and justice are non-negotiable conditions and called for effective structural measures to prevent the recurrence of such violations.

## Briefings by the Office of the UN Special Envoy

The Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria has delivered repeated briefings to the UN Security Council addressing cases of abduction of women, particularly Alawite women, as well as developments in Suwayda. These briefings warned of deteriorating humanitarian and security conditions and highlighted the risks of using women's bodies as instruments to fuel sectarian conflict.

## UN Experts

On 23 July 2025, UN experts expressed grave concern regarding reports of targeted abductions, enforced disappearance, and gender-based violence against women and girls, particularly from the Alawite community, across multiple regions in Syria since February 2025<sup>23</sup>.

They cited reports of at least 38 women and girls aged between 3 and 40 abducted in Latakia, Tartous, Hama, Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo. Many abductions reportedly occurred in broad daylight, while victims were travelling to school, visiting relatives, or inside their homes.

Families of some victims were reportedly threatened and instructed not to pursue complaints or speak publicly. Experts noted that the pattern of violations,

including gender-based violence, threats, forced marriage of minors, and the absence of an effective government response, indicates systematic targeting of Alawite women and girls on intersecting grounds.

On 21 August 2025, nine UN experts issued a warning regarding a wave of armed attacks against Druze communities in Suwayda and surrounding areas since 13 July 2025. These included reports of killings, enforced disappearance, abduction, looting, property destruction, and sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls<sup>24</sup>.

They also reported that at least 105 Druze women and girls had been abducted by armed groups linked to the Syrian interim authorities.

<sup>21</sup> [UN Syria Commission releases report on July massacres and other grave violations committed in Suwayda and calls for expanded accountability measures | OHCHR](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Syria: UN experts alarmed by targeted abductions and disappearances of Alawite women and girls | OHCHR](#)

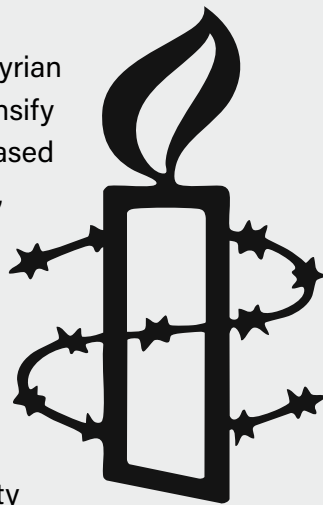
<sup>23</sup> [Syria: UN experts alarmed by attacks on Druze communities, including sexual violence against women and girls | OHCHR](#)

<sup>24</sup> [Syria: UN experts alarmed by attacks on Druze communities, including sexual violence against women and girls | OHCHR](#)

## Amnesty International

On 28 July 2025, Amnesty International issued a report titled *"Syria: Authorities must investigate abductions of Alawite women and girls"<sup>25</sup>.*

The organisation called on the Syrian authorities to urgently intensify efforts to prevent gender-based violence, conduct prompt, thorough, and impartial investigations into cases of abduction of Alawite women and girls, and hold those responsible accountable.



Since February 2025, Amnesty International reported receiving credible information on the abduction of at least 36 Alawite women and girls aged between 3 and 40 in Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Hama.

Among these cases, Amnesty International documented eight abductions that occurred in broad daylight, targeting five women and three girls under the age of 18.

In all documented cases, except one, police and security forces failed to conduct effective investigations into the fate or whereabouts of the abducted individuals.

“Women and girls were abducted in broad daylight.”

“Authorities failed to conduct prompt, comprehensive, and impartial investigations.”

“Their ages ranged from 3 to 40 years old.”

<sup>25</sup>Amnesty International, *Syria: Authorities must investigate abductions of Alawite women and girls*

# Recommendations and Proposed Policies

## Within the Framework of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda<sup>26</sup>

### Prevention

#### **Community-based early warning:**

Establish early warning mechanisms, including mobile applications and hotlines dedicated to women, linking families and residents with response teams, and providing maps of high-risk areas, including roads, transport routes, and other locations.

#### **Awareness-raising campaigns:**

Launch multimedia awareness campaigns through television, mosques, churches, and other platforms to combat social stigma and promote supportive narratives towards survivors.

#### **Security training and accountability:**

Implement mandatory training programmes for security personnel, including police and military personnel, on the Women, Peace and Security agenda, with a focus on preventing sexual violence. Training should be linked to clear codes of conduct and effective accountability and disciplinary mechanisms.

#### **Protection:**

National plan for protection from sexual violence linked to sectarian targeting develop a national plan requiring relevant authorities, including the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Social Affairs, to take immediate action.

#### **Safe shelters:**

Establish emergency shelters in affected areas, including Latakia, Tartous, Homs, Hama, and Suwayda, ensuring confidentiality and protection of identity, and managing them in cooperation with civil society organisations.

#### **Specialised investigation units:**

Create specialised police units with a high proportion of women officers, operating around the clock and adhering to protocols for evidence preservation and immediate judicial referral.

#### **Prohibition of sectarian targeting:**

Adopt clear legal measures criminalising the use of abduction as a sectarian tool, restricting incitement, and imposing sanctions on implicated actors.

<sup>26</sup>[Women, Peace and Security Agenda, UN Security Council Resolution 2000\) 1325\)](#)



The New York Times

## Participation

### **National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security:**

Develop a national action plan within a defined timeframe, with the participation of women from affected communities, including survivors and victims' families.

### **Local women-led councils:**

Establish participatory local mechanisms led by women in affected areas to monitor responses and document violations.

### **International representation:**

Support the participation of Syrian women, including survivors, in international forums, including the Security Council and the Human Rights Council.

## Recovery and Reconstruction

### **Psychological and economic support:**

Provide free mental health care services, alongside economic support programmes, including grants and vocational training opportunities.

Integration into transitional

### **justice:**

Include the issue of abducted and forcibly disappeared women within transitional justice processes, including truth-seeking and accountability.

### **Social reconstruction:**

Implement educational programmes and support services for children, alongside initiatives to combat sectarian hatred and strengthen social cohesion.

## **Legal Framework – Enforced Disappearance**

Although Syria has not ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the prohibition of enforced disappearance is considered a binding rule of customary international law<sup>27</sup>.

### **Building a Legal and Human Rights Basis for Action**

- Strengthen the engagement of civil society organisations specialised in enforced disappearance and ensure that the issue of abducted women is systematically integrated into their work.
- Develop an internal operational guide clarifying the definition of enforced disappearance in accordance with international standards, outlining state obligations regarding criminalisation and investigation, and setting out victims' rights, including the right to truth and reparation.
- Train local documentation teams and lawyers on the use of this guide, adopting it as a key reference for legal reporting, case documentation, and the drafting of submissions.
- Analyse each documented abduction case, particularly cases showing an organised pattern or the involvement of armed actors or militias close to the authorities, with a view to legally qualifying them as cases of enforced disappearance under Article 2 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. This should include documenting the absence of official records or instances where relevant authorities conceal information.

### **Engagement with International Mechanisms and Advocacy**

- Prepare periodic reports on a quarterly basis on cases of women's abduction, particularly in the coastal region. These reports should include detailed documentation of key cases, analysis of patterns of violations, and legal grounding in the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, with the aim of activating urgent action procedures and protecting victims at risk.
- Use relevant Human Rights Council resolutions on Syria, and follow the renewal of the mandates of its mechanisms, including the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, to legally connect the issue of women's abduction to enforced disappearance and strengthen its inclusion within international accountability discussions.
- Develop partnerships with international bodies concerned with missing persons, including engagement and coordination with:
  - The International Commission on Missing Persons.
  - The Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic.
  - The International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism.
- Organise joint work with these mechanisms to ensure that cases of women's abduction are integrated into broader efforts to clarify the fate of missing persons and linked to international documentation, investigation, and evidence-gathering processes.

## Urgent Priorities for Action

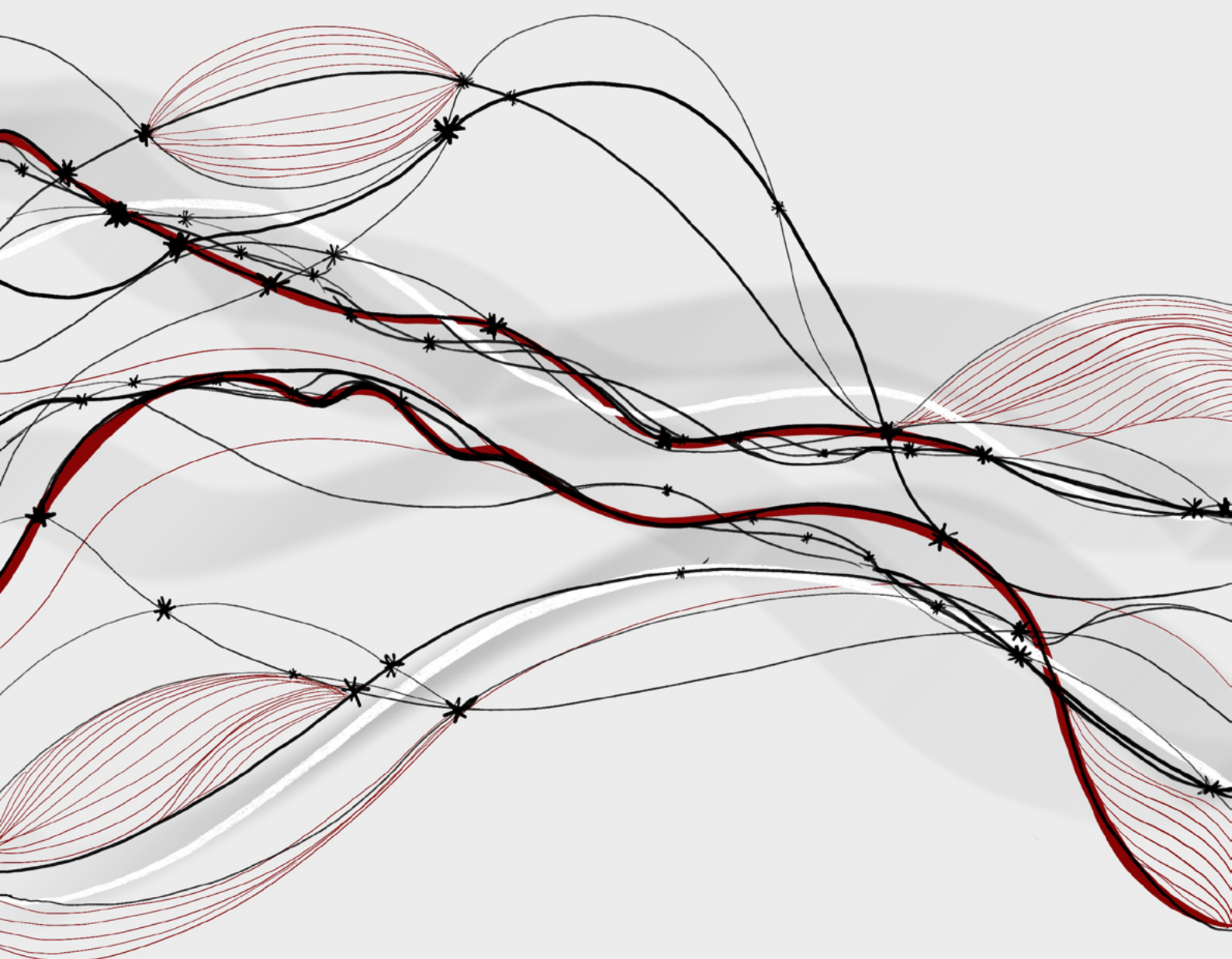
### Six Critical Recommendations for Decision-Makers and Humanitarian Leaders

In light of the Syrian Feminist Lobby's documentation, and the findings of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic in March 2026 that violations in Syria may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, the following urgent priorities for action are presented:

	Timeframe	Recommendation
1	Immediate	<p><b>Continue international investigations and activate international legal pathways</b></p> <p>Given the implication of the Syrian interim authorities in the violations, as identified by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, domestic investigations are insufficient to ensure accountability.</p> <p><b>Required action:</b> Continue independent international investigations, with the participation of women experts on sexual violence, and activate international legal pathways, including efforts to establish a special international tribunal for Syria and the use of universal jurisdiction.</p>
2	Immediate	<p><b>Revoke the general amnesty for abductors and adopt legislation criminalising sectarian abduction</b></p> <p>General Amnesty Decree No. 39, issued in February 2026, included abduction crimes, sending a clear signal of impunity.</p> <p><b>Required action:</b> Immediately revoke the inclusion of abduction crimes in the amnesty and adopt a legal provision explicitly criminalising identity-based abduction, including on the basis of sectarian affiliation, as a serious crime not subject to limitation periods.</p>
3	Within 3 months	<p><b>Establish five emergency shelters and create specialised women-led investigation teams</b></p> <p>Affected areas, including Latakia, Tartous, Homs, Hama, and Suwayda, lack protection infrastructure for survivors.</p> <p><b>Required action:</b> Establish five safe shelters, managed in cooperation with civil society organisations, and create specialised investigation teams with a high proportion of women, operating around the clock in accordance with evidence-preservation protocols and immediate referral to the Public Prosecution.</p>

## Recommendations and Proposed Policies

	Timeframe	Recommendation
4	Within 3 months	<p><b>Launch a comprehensive psychological and economic recovery programme for survivors and their families</b></p> <p>Survivors face an almost complete absence of psychological care, alongside loss of income and social isolation.</p> <p><b>Required action:</b> Launch an integrated programme including free mental health services, including for children, financial compensation, vocational rehabilitation programmes, and educational support for girls and young women who have dropped out of education.</p>
5	Within 6 months	<p><b>The Syrian Interim Government accedes to and ratifies relevant conventions, statutes and treaties.</b></p> <p>Accession to international legal frameworks is an essential step towards accountability and trust-building, particularly given the need to address the legacy of violations committed under the Assad regime and ensure non-repetition, including by breaking with patterns of impunity that prevailed during that period.</p> <p><b>Required action:</b> The Syrian interim government should accede to relevant international instruments, including the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; accept the individual complaints mechanism under Article 22 of the Convention against Torture; and withdraw reservations to CEDAW, particularly Articles 16 ,15 ,2, and 29.</p>
6	Within 6 months	<p><b>Classify organised abduction cases as enforced disappearance and activate UN mechanisms</b></p> <p>Classifying organised abduction cases as enforced disappearance under Article 2 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance enables the activation of state obligations to investigate and clarify the fate of victims.</p> <p><b>Required action:</b> Prepare periodic quarterly reports documenting cases of women's abduction, legally qualifying them as enforced disappearance where conditions are met, including the absence of official records or concealment of information, and submit urgent action requests through relevant UN mechanisms.</p>



# The Abduction of Syrian Women **A War on Dignity**