

The Economist, March 12

Syria's sectarian chaos : A horrific killing spree shakes Syria

Fresh atrocities suggest a country spiralling out of control



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

Full text :

Syria is in the throes of its worst bloodshed since the fall of Bashar al-Assad three months ago. Since March 6th Sunni fighters have rampaged through heartlands of the Alawites, the ethnic group which the Assads, and many regime loyalists, came from. The fighters have torched homes and killed indiscriminately: in villages near the city of Latakia, they filmed themselves wearing masks and climbing on the backs of men, making them bark like dogs before shooting them dead. Eyewitnesses describe streets strewn with bodies and rows of burnt-out homes. Hundreds of thousands have fled to the hills and woods along the coast. One Alawite in the city of Jableh says he and others hid in petrified silence as Sunni jihadists went door to door looking for people to execute.

Amid the bloodshed there is a fog of confusion and disinformation. Some claimed insurrectionists captured Latakia city. This was demonstrably false; your correspondent was present in the city at the time. Nonetheless it is beyond dispute that a large number of people have died. Reliable estimates of civilians killed range from hundreds to over a thousand. "It's a disaster zone," says an observer who travelled from Damascus to Latakia. The implications for Syria are grave. The violence shatters the dream that the country might avoid retributive violence and raises more questions about [the appetite and ability of the new regime](#) to hold the country together.



MAP: THE ECONOMIST

Tensions had been building as Alawites complained of their ostracisation from the administration of Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's president, and his officials warned an insurgency was brewing. One official says the violence began with ambushes on security patrols by a new Alawite military council. Insurrectionists under the leadership of one of Mr Assad's former generals, he says, seized control of government buildings and a hospital. Mr Sharaa, [a former jihadist who now styles himself a nation-builder](#), said on March 10th that more than 200 security forces had been killed.

Yet Mr Sharaa and his clerics did not prevent angry government supporters from surging into the Alawite regions. By the time the fighters were pushed off the streets, much blood had already been spilled. Clerics in Idlib, the province previously ruled by Mr Sharaa and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, his Islamist militia, called for a mass mobilisation in defence of the homeland. Some issued appeals for jihad from their mosques. The director of a Damascus radio station appointed by Mr Sharaa encouraged listeners to turn on Syria's Alawites, saying they should be cast into the sea: "Far be it to say that we left the fish in the Mediterranean sea hungry."

Thousands answered the call. Lines of traffic descended upon the largely Alawite coastal areas to attack those living there. Mr Sharaa's commanders declared the region a military zone and for two days ignored appeals to close the roads. Many of the fighters were furious at the *fulul*, or remnants of the Assad regime, both because of the crimes committed when Mr Assad was in power and because of mounting opposition to the new government. Turkish-backed factions, notably those under Muhammad al-Jassem (known as Abu Amsha), who was appointed by Mr Sharaa to lead the battalion based in Hama, a Sunni city repeatedly attacked by the Assads, also took part.

Mr Sharaa's government has restricted media access to the coast since March 6th, when the violence started, also periodically cutting internet and phone connections. Disinformation has abounded. Tucker Carlson, a television host, falsely claimed that Christians were being massacred and implied that they were being specifically targeted. "Do not get carried away with rumours," urged an association of churches in Latakia.

The violence has dealt a severe blow to Mr Sharaa's efforts to stabilise Syria, undermining his claims to rule for all Syrians and his hopes of winning international legitimacy. His tenure has been riddled with mistakes, not least in his dealing with the Alawites. He has fired many of them from government jobs. Mr Sharaa speaks reassuringly in public, but as one Alawite cleric noted, "there is a big gap between what he says, and what his men practice." Many of the most extreme factions have refused to hand over weapons and remain outside his direct control.

Plenty of Syrians are disappointed by the lack of justice for the former regime. Deals have been cut with commanders responsible for massacres under Mr Assad. "It was very clear that there was something boiling which had to do with accountability and transitional justice," says Orwa Ajjoub, a Syrian researcher at Malmö university.

On March 9th Mr Sharaa released a video-statement. "We will hold accountable, with full decisiveness, anyone who is involved in the bloodshed of civilians, mistreats civilians," he said. He announced two committees, one to investigate the atrocities and report back within 30 days, and another to restore "civil peace". The latter included Khalid al-Ahmed, his most senior Alawite appointment to date and a childhood friend who had been Mr Assad's confidant. But many question whether this will suffice to contain the violence. The other two members of the committee are Sunni hardliners. Alawites in Damascus and other minorities fear they will be next.

America has condemned "radical Islamist terrorists". One diplomat says that hopes, already remote, of America lifting sanctions have "vanished". The EU's reaction was more muted. It blamed "pro-Assad elements" for starting the violence. On March 10th it reportedly invited Mr Sharaa to a donor conference in Brussels later this month. Still, as Syrians bury their dead, his rule—already shaky—looks increasingly unstable. ■