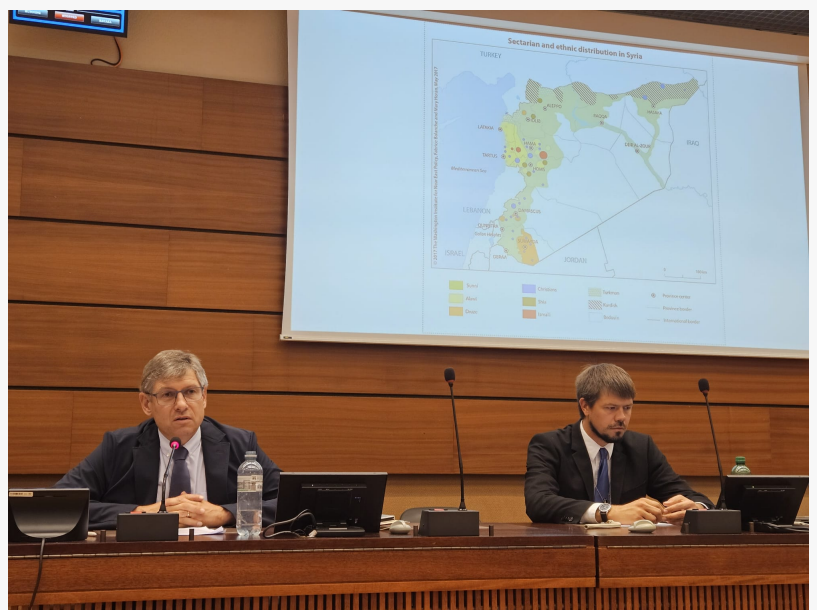


CSI Event at the UN Highlights Looming Crisis for Syrian Religious Minorities

Experts Describe Violence Against Alawites, Druze, and Christians Which Has Been Ongoing for Months

GENEVA, GE, SWITZERLAND, July 2, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- "Despite some happy words at the beginning of this new interim constitution, it in fact establishes an authoritarian presidential system," said Joshua Landis, a leading scholar on Syria, at a UN side event on Tuesday. And the followers of Syria's new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, "share an ideology of Sunni supremacism" that declares Shi'ite Muslim minorities – 15% of the Syrian population – to be apostates.



Syria expert Fabrice Balanche (left) highlights the concentration of Alawites living along the coast, where the massacres took place in March.

In Syria today, explained Landis and Syria expert Fabrice Balanche, this means the lives of religious minorities are at imminent risk under the new regime.

EVENT DETAILS



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Joel Veldkamp

On July 1, 2025, Christian Solidarity International (CSI) held a side event about the situation for religious minorities in the "new Syria" at the UN Human Rights Council. The European Centre for Law and Justice co-sponsored the hybrid event. About 50 people attended the event in person, with more tuning into the recorded [live stream](#) video.

In addition to Professor Joshua Landis from the University of Oklahoma (appearing remotely) and Professor Fabrice

Balanche from the University of Lyon-2 in France, CSI's director of advocacy, Joel Veldkamp, presented the case of the arbitrary detention of Suleiman Khalil. Abi McDougal, CSI's UN representative, moderated the conversation.

SYRIANS' GROWING RELUCTANCE TO SPEAK OPENLY

McDougal opened by addressing the absence of Syrian voices among the featured experts.

The various Syrian minorities who had been invited to speak at the side event repeatedly responded that "it simply felt too unsafe to speak on the record – either because they themselves are based in Syria or they have family still in Syria," said McDougal.

For CSI, McDougal said, the rapid decline observed in Syrian minorities' willingness to speak publicly about the new regime underscored the need for a side event outlining the situation.

THE MARCH MASSACRES OF ALAWITES ON THE SYRIAN COAST

The Alawites, a sect of Islam to which Syria's deposed dictator Bashar al-Assad belonged, comprise about 10% of Syria's population, and have borne the brunt of the post-Assad violence, the speakers explained. In March, the Alawite community was subjected to large massacres along Syria's coast.

The violence on the coast started with an attack by government forces on Alawites in Datour in Latakia on March 4, Balanche said, not with an Alawite uprising on March 6, as the government and much of the media reported. Already on March 5, the village of Dalyeh, an Alawite holy place, "was targeted by helicopter," Balanche said. "This was a direct targeting of the Alawite religion. Of course, the Alawites resisted, and their resistance became the justification for this horrible massacre."

The violence carried out by the new Islamist authorities was "indiscriminate," Balanche said. "They killed women, children, elderly. Young men were the main targets." While the exact reported number of casualties varies by source, between 1,500 and 5,000 Alawites are estimated to have been killed during the March massacres.

Landis cited an investigative [report by Reuters](#) published this week, which demonstrated that the massacres were authorized by "very top government officials." The report noted that a spokesperson for the ministry of defense said, "May God reward you," when informed of the attacks.

Landis pointed out that the fatwas of the 14th century Syrian cleric Ibn Taymiyya, which explicitly permit the blood of Alawites to be shed, have been republished and distributed by the new al-Sharaa government, after being banned under Assad.

PERSONAL STORIES OF RELATIVES IN SYRIA

Landis, who is married to a Syrian Alawite woman, shared stories of how his wife's family experienced the massacres. One of her young cousins was shot dead in front of his mother. Another relative was forced to hide in the forest for two days after government troops armed with drones attacked his village.

Landis highlighted another recent [Reuters report](#) on how Alawite girls have been kidnapped and trafficked, but their parents are threatened that the girls will be killed if someone talks to the press.

Some of Landis' relatives are among the over 100,000 Syrians who have fled the country in the last six months, he said.

ENCODED RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION

Meanwhile, explained Landis, Syria's five-year interim constitution effectively grants full control of the government to the president. "There is no division of powers," he said.

Moreover, Article III of Syria's new constitution claims that the state respects "all divine religions" – a term that excludes the Alawites, Ismailis, and Druze from protection. This framing is part of the standard education for all Syrian Muslim students in secondary school, with the admonition that the options for people who do not follow divine religions are conversion or death.

THE SITUATION FOR SYRIAN CHRISTIANS

For the moment, "the new regime is sparing Christians," Balanche said.

"However, they are subject to increasing Islamization," he said. "Christians in Damascus' Duweila district recently drove out a preacher who was trying to convert them to Islam. It was in this area that you had the [church] bombing on June 22."

For Balanche, the Duweila church bombing recalls the massacre at Sayidat al-Najat church in Baghdad in 2010, which "was the signal for the departure for most of the Christian community from Baghdad and from Iraq."

ARBITRARY DETENTION: SULEIMAN KHALIL

CSI's director for advocacy, Joel Veldkamp, highlighted growing concerns about arbitrary detention in Syria, sharing the case of a former mayor arrested on February 8 of this year.

Suleiman Khalil was mayor of Sadad from 2011 to 2016. During his tenure, jihadist groups – one of which was founded by Syria's current president – attacked Sadad twice. Khalil became a local

hero after organizing the successful resistance to the second attack, a status that drew the ire of the Assad regime. When CSI sent Khalil a message in December to ask how he was doing after Assad's fall, he sent a voice message "laughing with joy" and inviting CSI to visit him again in Syria.

Veldkamp also shared a video message from Natalie Khalil, Suleiman's daughter, reading a letter to Geir Pedersen, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, asking him to intervene for her father's immediate release. "My father hasn't been charged with any crime," she said. "He hasn't been allowed to see any lawyer. We haven't been allowed to visit him or communicate with him in any way."

"It is difficult for many Syrian Christians to avoid the conclusion that he is being punished for having had the temerity to organize the defense of a Christian village against the Islamic State in 2015," remarked Veldkamp. "By releasing Suleiman, the Syrian government would show that its promises of protection and equal rights for Christians and political inclusivity for all Syrians, are more than just words. By the same token, the longer he is held, the harder it is to believe in the many promises of the new Syria."

ABOUT CSI

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