

INTERVIEW

Syrian Alawite speaks out about massacres world ignores

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Following the massacres of civilians in Syria in recent weeks by pro-government militias linked to Hayat Tahrir al Sham, the *Daily Compass* reached Dr A., a teacher, translator and interpreter in Arabic and French, by telephone in Latakia, the capital of the region

most affected by the massacres. Sixty years old, Syrian of Alawite faith, he lived in Italy from 2016 to 2021; he returned to Latakia for family reasons and spoke to us on the serious events that have just taken place.

Dr A., first of all, how are you? What's the atmosphere like in Latakia?

The atmosphere is heavy, 'isolated' killings are still on-going including banditry by the 'forces of law and order' after the mass killings of recent weeks. People are terrified, there is a widespread fear of being killed if they are arrested. Today (23 March) the bus and minibus station in Latakia was deserted, nobody goes out for fear of being arrested or kidnapped at the 'law enforcement' checkpoints. Personally, I rarely leave my house.

What has happened in your area? Do you have direct evidence of civilian casualties?

What happened in the Alawite regions, mainly in the coastal area of Syria, in Latakia, Tartous, Banyes, Shir, Snobar, Sharifa, al Qabu Jable and many other villages, is a real genocide: more than 60 massacres, at least 1700 victims documented by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an independent and reliable source. The real figures are higher, the official figures are lower, because it is impossible to document everything, given the extremely limited conditions and means, and because of the obstacles put in place by the regime (even the Western press has been prevented from travelling to the sites of the massacres). I personally know some of the victims of the government militias: for example, my intellectual friend and poet Abdullatif Ali, who had always opposed the Assad regime, was killed in his home with his two children and a grandchild. One of hundreds, thousands of such atrocities. My niece's husband had a small mobile phone repair shop, which the HTS militia destroyed after stealing everything. My sister told me that they entered her house in Jable, south of Latakia, in their cars, shot at everyone and destroyed everything. Hundreds of people were killed in Jable and Banyes, and bodies lay in the streets for days. But the worst was in the countryside, in hundreds of villages, large and small, where the population was wiped out. Those who could fled to the forests. Can you imagine that these poor people, hunted down, naked, defenceless, scared, hungry, without telephones or chargers, were asked to document the facts because nobody believed them. Even the Western diplomats now in Damascus believed the propaganda fairy tale of the 'pro-Assad rebellion'.

There is a lot of confusion in the West about how events unfolded: would you reconstruct the dynamics of events for us?

According to the official government line, the armed militias intervened to quell an

attempted coup organised by former Alawite soldiers and Assad sympathisers and directed from abroad, particularly from Iran. In fact, in early March, two policemen were killed here in Latakia, near a densely populated Alawite neighbourhood, and a few hundred rebels then took control of the Jable military academy. Following these events, the authorities sent between 200 and 600 thousand armed extremists from Idlib to the region. These militiamen, all volunteers, both Syrian and foreign, were called in the mosques to wage a holy war against the Alawites and to cleanse Syria of infidels. When they arrived in the region, they swept through the provinces of Latakia and Tartous, towns and villages, killing thousands of innocent people, including many children, old people and women: a real genocide.

And that's not all: abductions, disappearances, killings, torture, tens of thousands of arrests without trial of Alawites were recorded even before these massacres. More than six hundred Alawites have been killed "one by one" after the fall of Assad, accused by the authorities of being sympathisers of the former regime and forced to hand over their weapons. The government has done everything it can to impoverish them, sacking hundreds of thousands of military and state employees whose salaries were their only source of income. Dozens of videos show Alawite men being beaten and abused, forced to kiss the shoes of militiamen, made to bark like dogs and finally killed in cold blood, simply because they are Alawites. One of the bloodiest episodes, before the intensive phase of the massacres, took place on 23 January: the massacre of the Alawite village of Fahel, in the countryside of Hama. The 'law enforcement' forces, accompanied by hundreds of armed men from Sunni villages near Fahel, raided the village and arrested 54 people, 17 of whom were executed without trial. No one knows what happened to the other detainees.

The massacres seem to be motivated by religious hatred against the Alawite sect. What are the characteristics of this particular faith that arouses the hatred of the HTS men?

The Alawite faith is a Shiite offshoot of Islam, but it is very different from that branch of Islam: the Alawites, to whom I belong as a non-believer, are basically secular, they believe in a kind of divine incarnation and have an esoteric interpretation of the Koran. Alawite doctrine is secret, based on Gnostic and Neoplatonic concepts, and has never been made known or published. One can only be an Alawite by birth: we do not proselytise and we do not accept converts. As Muslims, we Alawites recognise the five pillars of Islam, but consider them to be symbolic duties rather than rules of conduct to be applied in everyday life, which is why most Sunnis consider Alawites to be heretics.

How is it possible that events of such magnitude have taken place with the world barely noticing?

The government has carried out a huge propaganda operation, or rather a campaign of misinformation and the spreading of false news. The victims have no one to speak on their behalf; all the media are at the service of official propaganda. The only voice talking about the massacres is the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. No one else is talking about it, except individual citizens on social media, especially Facebook; or more correctly, the perpetrators themselves are talking about it, Syrian or foreign militiamen, who post photos and videos of themselves with their victims, often with their feet on their corpses.

What is the situation now?

Despite the government's false promises and the ongoing investigations by UN agencies, the massacres have not stopped. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, pro-government militias killed 72 people on 20 March, 41 of whom were executed: 38 in Shabatlie, 3 in Shrashir, 4 (an entire family) in Homs, and many other 'isolated cases' scattered around the country. In my opinion, a plan is being implemented to dismember Syria, to divide the people by inciting religious hatred and committing massacres.

What do you think of the fact that the whole of Europe have so much confidence in the new HTS rulers?

I find the tone with which European politicians talk about a new Syria incomprehensible and offensive, while a fundamentalist regime is in power, establishing a theocratic dictatorship. I am disappointed by the words of Minister Tajani, according to whom Al Shaibani 'assured him that his priority was to fight ISIS and that the perpetrators of the crimes would be brought to justice'. Doesn't Tajani know that Al Sharaa, the self-proclaimed president, was the commander of Al Qaeda's Al Nusra Front in Syria? I have to admit that the Alawites welcomed the HTS forces with open arms immediately after the fall of Assad; they seriously hoped (as did I) for a very different situation from the one that actually occurred. Being essentially secular, like the Druze and Christians, the Alawites turned to the authorities asking only for peace and security; they were waiting for the promised establishment of the rule of law. I, a Syrian Alawite, am a witness to the massacres that the world does not want to see Alawites slaughtered in western Syria for religious reasons alone. There is no uprising by those nostalgic for the old regime, only a massacre of civilians by the new regime.