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Inside a City Swept by Roving Gunmen, Deadly Grudges and Fear

A sectarian-fueled killing spree exposed how fragile peace is in Syria, where the government's control is limited and tension runs deep after nearly 14 years of civil war.

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Photographs by David Guttenfelder

Reporting from Baniyas in Tartus Province, Syria

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The Syrian city was nearly empty in early March, its streets littered with burned cars. Shops were plundered, their windows shattered and locks shot off. Some buildings were little more than blackened walls and ash.

Emergency workers had turned a looted furniture store into a makeshift morgue. A white pickup truck pulled up, a pair of feet dangling over the back in pink socks with white polka dots. Minutes later, an ambulance arrived with two other bodies, then a blue pickup appeared carrying more.

Nearby, men pleaded with emergency workers to help collect the remains of their killed loved ones.

"There's seven bodies in that building."

"There's another body on the square."

"There are at least 40 bodies on one road."

The city, Baniyas, was the site of some of the worst violence in Syria last month, when thousands of armed men stormed the country's Mediterranean coast and killed more than 1,600 civilians, mostly from the Alawite religious minority.

Over three days, gunmen went house to house, summarily executing civilians and opening fire in the streets, according to dozens of residents who spoke to The New York Times.

My colleagues and I managed to report from the city for nearly a day as the killings unfolded. What we found was evidence of a massacre — and a broad failure by the new, rebel-led government to protect Alawites, the group that dominated Syria's elite circles during the Assad family's decades-long dictatorship.

The rebels overthrew Bashar al-Assad in December, ending a nearly 14-year civil war that had left half a million people dead. In its first three months in power, the new government restored relative calm to the country, largely restraining those who sought revenge for atrocities committed under the Assads.

The explosion of violence along the coast shattered that fragile peace.

It began in early March, when former security forces in the Assad regime launched a coordinated attack on the new government's troops across Latakia and Tartus Provinces. To quell the unrest, the government rushed reinforcements to the region, an Assad stronghold with a large number of Alawites, who practice an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

In the chaos, thousands of other gunmen arrived with a different agenda: targeting Alawites in a rampage of sectarian killings.

Many of those killed in Baniyas were buried in a mass grave under the supervision of government security personnel, according to residents who were at the burials as well as photographs and videos of the site verified by The Times.

The new Syrian authorities effectively sealed off the region to foreign reporters as the violence unfolded, forcing us to leave the city. But we spoke by phone with more than 40 residents and interviewed local leaders, Syrian officials, war monitoring groups, analysts and human rights experts.

We also obtained and verified dozens of videos and photographs taken during the killings and their immediate aftermath, despite a government ban on documenting evidence of the violence.

We found that armed civilians and former rebel groups carried out many of the killings in Baniyas. At least some government soldiers deployed to restore order also participated in the killings, according to a Syrian government official and residents.

Our reporting showed how little control the new government and its leader, the former jihadist and rebel commander Ahmed al-Shara, now exercise over the various armed groups and former rebels that have nominally joined his government.

They include Sunni Muslim extremists and foreign jihadists who consider Alawites to be heretics. Many of them, along with those in Mr. al-Shara's own rebel group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, also want vengeance for brutality committed by the Alawite-dominated Assad regime.

The exact identities of all of the armed groups involved in the killings remain unclear.

Syria's authorities have denied that their security forces committed atrocities but said that they were investigating and holding to account anyone who had harmed civilians. In March, the

government formed two committees, one to investigate those involved in violence against civilians and another to protect Alawite communities on the coast from further violence.

Security forces have arrested at least two people in connection with the violence, officials said, though the investigation remains ongoing. No evidence has surfaced to suggest that senior leaders in the new government directed the killings, according to war monitors and diplomats. Government officials did not respond to a request for comment for this article.

In Baniyas, the government's assurances have meant little to residents who saw the chaos.

Over the past month, around 20,000 Syrians have fled to Lebanon, according to Lebanese officials and rights groups. Thousands more are still hiding at friends' homes and sheltering inside a Russian air base in the region.

"They killed the people, they burned the houses, they broke into the stores," said Siba, 30, a Baniyas resident, who, like most people we interviewed, preferred to go by only her first name for fear of retaliation. "I'm terrified."

The Ambush

The heartland for Syria's Alawite minority lies along a 110-mile stretch of mountainous coastline tucked between Lebanon and Turkey. Baniyas, home to around 40,000 people, sits at its center.

The city is divided along sectarian lines: The south is home mostly to Sunni Muslims, while the northern neighborhoods are mostly Alawite. Though some Alawites in Baniyas served in Mr. al-Assad's military, many others were disenfranchised under his government, according to residents.

When Mr. al-Assad was ousted in December, many feared the coast was a powder keg. Elite forces from Mr. al-Assad's military had retreated to the area, former regime officers told us. Some called for Alawites to mobilize an armed response against Syria's new authorities.

Then, on Thursday, March 6, those fears were realized.

That afternoon, former security forces in the Assad regime launched a series of ambushes on government troops across the coast. The Syrian authorities responded in force, and gunfire and artillery consumed Latakia Province for hours.

The clashes reached Baniyas around 2 a.m. Friday. Assad loyalists laid siege to the main police station, residents and officials said. As wounded police officers flooded into Baniyas's state-run hospital, snipers began picking off government personnel guarding its doors.

By dawn, the coast was imploding.

The Gunmen

On Friday morning, Siba, 30, a kindergarten teacher, was sitting in her living room in al-Qusour, a predominately Alawite neighborhood in Baniyas. She scrolled through the state media's Telegram channel, where the government announced it was sending reinforcements to search for the armed groups that had attacked its troops.

Siba said she and her brother, Ahmad, 36, were relieved. They had barely slept the night before as gunfire rang out, and she hoped government troops would be able to restore calm.

"We thought it's OK, we'll stay inside and all the blasts and gunfire would be over soon," she told us.

A few hours later, around a dozen men who said they were from the government's elite General Security forces — units made up of the rebels who overthrew Mr. al-Assad — arrived at Siba's door, she said.

Her brother and their 70-year-old father walked outside, their hands raised.

Ahmad explained that he had worked as a military officer under the Assad government and handed them a document, issued by Syria's new authorities, proving he had surrendered his weapons. Her father told the soldiers he was retired and had worked for the city's state-owned power plant.

Siba said the security forces inspected the document, searched the house for weapons and, finding none, told the family to remain inside.

"They said it was safer to stay in our home, that they were only going after the remnants of the regime that attacked them," Siba told us. The forces, she said, "were very respectful with us."

Like many other residents, Siba did not realize that other armed groups were also coming with a different motive: hunting down Alawites.

Many residents told us that, at first, they assumed those gunmen were members of the government's elite security forces. Most wore military fatigues and drove trucks outfitted with machine guns, similar to those in photographs on the state media's Telegram channel, according to photographs and videos we verified.

But as the groups tore through the streets, residents said, they realized these were not government reinforcements sent to restore order.

Some of the gunmen shouted in formal or broken Arabic and were dressed in salwar kameez, the long-sleeved tunic and long pants worn in South and Central Asia — a clue to locals that they were probably foreign jihadists. Others appeared to be armed civilians seeking revenge for wrongs committed during the civil war, residents said.

By late Friday morning, those groups far outnumbered government forces in the region, according to two Syrian officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to journalists.

Around 20 minutes after the government forces left Siba's house, one of the soldiers returned with a different group of armed men, she said. They shouted for Siba's father and brother by name and dragged them outside. Siba followed them to their back garden.

The gunmen shot her brother five times, according to Siba and her husband, Muhanad, 40, who was not home when the gunmen arrived but later recovered Ahmad's body.

When her father cried out, "No! No!" the gunmen shot him too, Siba said.

"I was screaming and crying," she said. "I lost my mind at that moment."

Before they left, Siba said one of them paused and stared her down. "What, are you scared now?" he growled. "We'll come back for you."

Siba raced back inside and dropped to the ground, her entire body trembling.

When the gunshots subsided, she ran to a forest line's thicket nearby. She stayed there for two days, unable to shake the image of her father and brother lying bloodied in their yard.

"My father was our love, he was our pillar," she said. "The men were like Satan, they just killed him."

The Killing Spree

Over the next three days, the armed groups rained terror across Baniyas.

The gunmen went door to door, killing Alawites in their homes, residents told us. At one apartment building, a group of men shoved a resident onto his knees, called him an "Alawite dog" and demanded he bark before shooting him, according to two of his neighbors.

Other gunmen drove over the bodies of those killed in the street, videos verified by The Times show.

The overtly sectarian killings sowed panic across Baniyas, where many had started to trust Syria's new authorities. In their first three months in power, the government's security forces in Tartus Province had largely made good on their promises to maintain stability.

Jihan, 30, who worked in a farm supply store, had found those forces professional and respectful. She said that she and her family did not support the Assad government, and that when his regime collapsed, she was relieved.

Then on Saturday morning, Jihan saw a convoy of gunmen set her neighbor's house aflame on the outskirts of al-Qusour neighborhood. She rushed upstairs and hid in a bedroom with her brother, Qusay, and other relatives.

A few minutes later, men forced open their front door. The family heard plates and glasses shatter — and then boots stomping up the stairs.

Two masked men in military fatigues burst in and pointed their rifles at Qusay, Jihan told us. He held up his ID card, showing he was a civilian. The gunmen tossed it aside.

They dragged him downstairs and forced him onto his knees, Jihan and two of her relatives said. As they rifled through the family's belongings, Qusay recognized one of the men. He had been a customer at his grocery store, and a member of the new government's forces, according to Jihan and a store employee sheltering with them.

"You know me, please," Qusay begged. The man told Qusay that he could not help.

Upstairs, an older man with the militia demanded that Jihan hand over all of her cash, gold and phones, or her nieces would be killed. Then the gunmen threw Qusay in their car and sped away, according to Jihan, the employee and another person present.

Moments after the gunmen left, she and her relatives dashed out their back door and ran for the mountains outside the city. When Jihan called her brother's phone a few hours later, a man with a gruff voice picked up. Jihan asked if her brother was still alive.

The man laughed, Jihan recalled. "We killed your brother on the street," he said.

Days later, Jihan's father combed through the bodies on the roads, one by one. After hours of searching, he found Qusay, his chest riddled with bullet wounds and blood staining the pavement.

The Escape

As terror swept through the city, thousands of desperate Alawites fled. Some hid in the forests on the city's outskirts, surviving for days on leaves and river water, according to residents. Others left in their cars, dodging bodies that lay in the streets.

As the massacre dragged on, escaping the city grew difficult. Gunmen had fanned out and set up checkpoints to prevent Alawites from leaving. Some Sunni Muslims tried to help their neighbors who were unable to sneak out.

Ahmad, 38, a businessman in al-Qusour, told us he called a Sunni Muslim friend begging for help. The friend asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals.

He soon arrived at Ahmad's apartment with a plan: He gave Ahmad's sister-in-law and nieces hijabs so they would look like Sunni women, and they set off in his car to another friend's home outside the city.

Within minutes, they saw gunmen in military fatigues swarming a major intersection, according to Ahmad and one of his relatives.

Ahmad's friend swerved onto a back road, but it was blocked with bodies and burning cars. The family doubled back to the intersection, where a gunman stopped them and ripped open the driver's seat door.

"Sunni or Alawite?" he asked.

Ahmad's friend said that he was Sunni and had come to collect other relatives trapped in the neighborhood. The gunman paused, took a photograph of both men, and said if they were lying, they would suffer. Then he waved them through.

Some residents unable to escape hid in orchards and abandoned buildings throughout the city. The armed groups took advantage of the deserted buildings, ransacking homes and shops.

They took everything they could find: solar panels from roofs, furniture from apartments, lithium batteries for generators.

When the three-day rampage ended, at least 368 people, including 13 children, had been killed in Baniyas, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitoring group.

Bodies were everywhere. Sprawled across living room floors. Hunched over in citrus orchards. Lying bloodied on roads. The hospital's morgue was overflowing, as was a refrigerated mortuary truck.

A handful braved the streets, desperate to find and bury their loved ones.

Siba, whose father and brother were killed, was too terrified to return home. But her husband, Muhanad, drove back and found the bodies crumpled on the ground.

With the help of emergency workers, he wrapped them in white tarps and took them to the cemetery on the outskirts of Baniyas. He heard women wailing across the hillside.

Muhanad carried his relatives' remains to a newly dug mass grave. He lowered them into the deep brown earth. Then he recited a short prayer.

"What can I say? We are living in fear," Muhanad said days later. "Death, death is everywhere."