

Syrian Sunnis fear Assad regime wants to 'ethnically cleanse' Alawite heartland
Homs land registry fire and handing out of arms to villagers fuel concerns that an Alawite-Shia enclave is being formed in Syria
By Martin Chulov and Mona Mahmood
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Sunni residents in the heartland of [Bashar al-Assad](#)'s Alawite sect say they are being repeatedly threatened and forced to flee their homes, amid fears that the likely fall of the nearby city of Homs will lead to widespread sectarian cleansing in parts of [Syria](#).

Communities of Sunnis that live in the country's coastal stretch and along the so-called Alawite spine that runs south-east towards Damascus claim evidence has emerged of attempts by the Assad regime to reshape the area's fragile ethnic mix – moves that go far beyond consolidating security in loyalist areas.

Concerns are particularly focused on Homs, Syria's third city, which western observers believe is likely to fall to the regime military and [Hezbollah](#) by the end of the summer, in what would be the most striking gain yet by resurgent pro-Assad forces during the civil war.

All property records for Homs were destroyed in a fire earlier this month at the office of the city's land registry and residents fear they can no longer enforce a claim to their land and homes.

"What else could be going on?" asked one resident who refused to be identified. "This is the most secure area of the city and it is the only building that has been burned. A conspiracy is underway."

Former staff at the office say the records existed only on paper and had not yet been digitalised. Eyewitnesses in the Bab al-Hood district where the building is located, and several employees, reported seeing flames on the higher floors of the building on 5 July, where the files were archived, while regime forces were positioned on lower floors.

Homs and the surrounding province is seen as essential to the war in Syria and to any plan to create a safe haven for Alawites if the Syrian state collapses, as it geographically links largely Alawite areas on the Syrian coast and Shia areas in [Lebanon](#)'s Bekaa Valley. Both Hezbollah and [Iran](#) are strongly linked to the Assad regime, and by proxy the Alawites, and have played an increasingly direct role in the war in recent months – a push that coincides with a turnaround in the fortunes of the battle-worn Syrian military.

Homs, long a place where a Sunni majority lived in co-existence co-existed with minority Christian and Alawite communities, has now been a city of cantonments for almost 18 months: Alawite areas are surrounded by security walls that are off-limits to opposition areas. The countryside to the north and east, where Sunni and Alawite communities live nearby each other, has been volatile for much of the past year, with massacres documented in Sunni communities in Houla, Banias and Hoswaie.

The apparent cleansing is not all one way though. North of Latakia, Alawites have been chased out of their villages near the Turkish border by opposition groups, which in that area are dominated by jihadists.

In Homs city, Sunni districts of Ashere, al-Khoder, Karm al-Zaitoun and Bab al-Sebaa have largely been emptied and replaced by Alawite families, numerous local leaders claim.

"There have been obvious examples of denominational cleansing in different areas in Homs," said local activist, Abu Rami. "It is denominational cleansing; part of a major Iranian Shia plan, which is obvious through the involvement of Hezbollah and Iranian militias. And it's also part of Assad's personal Alawite state project."

Over the past six months, diplomats in the region have claimed that contingency planning for a rump state to protect Syrian Alawites has involved diplomatic contact being made by senior Syrian officials with enemy states.

A mediator – a well-known diplomatic figure – is understood to have been asked by Assad to approach the former Israeli foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, late last year with a request that [Israel](#) not stand in the way of attempts to form an Alawite state, which could have meant moving some displaced communities into the Golan Heights area.

A source aware of the talks said that Lieberman had not rebuffed the approach but had first sought information on the whereabouts of a missing Israeli airman shot down over Lebanon, Ron Arad, as well as three Israeli soldiers captured in the Lebanese village of Sultan Yacoub in 1982, and the remains of Eli Cohen, an Israeli spy intelligence officer who was caught and executed in Damascus.

The Syrian military's recent advances on the battlefield appear to have reduced the urgency in preparations for the collapse of the Syrian state. But nonetheless, some Alawites fear the war has already irreversibly changed Syria – and that some communities can no longer co-exist.

'Struggle of existence'

"To strangers, Alawites would condemn the idea of an Alawite state," one regime supporter said. "And tell you that this is a national Syrian cause. But deep in the community there are fears of identity and people are starting to discuss the fact that they might have to retreat into a denominational Alawite state. They believe that this is a struggle of existence."

Walid Jumblatt, the leader of Lebanon's Druze community, said: "The crucial point was when the battle of Homs started and it quickly became clear that the regime wanted to clear the whole route to Damascus and beyond. The religious cleansing started soon after. There was a massacre in Baniyas and others elsewhere. I had heard that the Sunnis had been told to move and that this whole area might end up as an enclave."

Residents of Alawite strongholds in Tartus and Latakia confirmed that arms had been offered to them three times since the uprising began in March 2011.

"There was one [supply run] in 2012 and two months ago," one Alawite said. "Now every household in the Alawite villages across the coast receives a government-sponsored package of an AK-47, two hand grenades and ammunition. If you joined a 'public resistance movement' you'd receive a lot more."

"In certain strategic villages ... weapons are placed in the village square, as public property," the Alawite figure added. "It is a community that is so morally lacerated that it has commonised evil."

All around the strategically crucial north-east of Syria, Alawites and Sunnis alike are talking of a rush to arm communities amid sharply rising fear and intimidation.

An Alawite student at Damascus University said: "Seven months ago, most of my relatives were volunteering with the air force intelligence or military intelligence."

"They would go on night raids or roadblocking around Baniyas or al-Saha [a Sunni area in Tartous] or Mintar [south of Tartus]."

"My cousin told me that if you get really involved then the amount of weapons they're willing to give you is enormous. My [other cousin] has got everything other than tanks at his farm," he said.

A lawyer in Tartus, which is still home to large numbers of Sunnis, said: "In Tartus City there haven't been actual ethnic-cleansing incidents, but there are tens of thousands of refugees and the wide spread of arms among Alawites gives an eerie feeling of an approaching massacre."

Despite the fact that they are completely unarmed, Sunni districts are seeing heavier security, he said.



Syrians in Homs above a banner of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, left, and Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah. Photograph: Joseph Eid/AFP/Getty

"The general mood among pro-Assad people started to include the possibility of the fall of Damascus, which leaves them under the rule of the FSA [Free Syrian Army rebels] and the Sunnis ... and for the majority of people here it is better to live in an Alawite state, which they feel should include Homs."

Captain Juma, a former Syrian military officer who defected seven months ago after helping build walls around Alawite communities in Homs, said: "The Syrian regime is using a few military men who served during the civil war in Lebanon as military advisers and they came up with this plan of isolating Alawite villages and Sunni districts. A plan they executed in Lebanon is now history repeating itself."

In Homs city, Abu Ahmed, a commander of the FSA-aligned al-Farouq brigade, said: "The regime is encouraging Alawite families in the Homs countryside who have friction with Sunnis to head to Alawite districts in the city. We are pretty sure that the regime wants to take Homs city and countryside and make it just for Alawites."

"Nine months ago, the regime created the [National Defence Army](#), which is Shabiha [loyalist militia of Shia and Alawite] volunteers," he said. "They are the most bloody killers, even more brutal than the army."

Additional reporting by Mowaffaq Safadi

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