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The Cradle's Syria Correspondent

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## ***Syria's stolen daughters:***

### ***The HTS campaign to enslave Alawite women***

In post-Assad Syria, the mass abduction and sexual enslavement of Alawite women under Sharaa's rule mirrors the darkest atrocities of ISIS – yet is met with global silence.

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Since December, when the former Al-Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), toppled the government of Bashar al-Assad, Syria has witnessed a chilling wave of mysterious [kidnappings](#) of [young women](#), predominantly from the Alawite community.

Evidence continues to emerge that these women, primarily from the Alawite religious sect, have been abducted and taken to live as [sex slaves](#) in Idlib governorate, the traditional HTS stronghold, by armed factions affiliated with the new Syrian government.

Shockingly, the mass kidnapping and enslavement of Alawite women now being carried out by HTS-affiliated factions mirrors the enslavement of the thousands of Yazidi women by ISIS during the [2014 genocide](#) in Sinjar, Iraq.

#### **The activist who spoke out**

In a now [deleted](#) Facebook post, Hiba Ezzedeen, a Syrian activist from Idlib, described her encounter with a woman she believes was captured and taken to the governorate as a sex slave during the wave of [massacres](#) carried out by government-affiliated factions and security forces against Alawites in the country's coastal areas on 7 March.

“During my last visit to Idlib, I was at a place with my brother when I saw a man I knew with a woman I had never met before,” Hiba explained.

**“This man had been married multiple times before and is believed to currently have three wives. What caught my attention was the woman’s appearance – specifically, it was clear she didn’t know how to wear a hijab properly, and her scarf was draped haphazardly.”**

After inquiring further, Ezzedeen learned that the woman was from the coastal areas where the 7 March massacres, in which over 1,600 Alawite civilians were killed, took place.

“This man had brought her to the village and married her, with no further details available. No one knew what had happened to her or how she got there, and naturally, the young woman was too afraid to speak,” Ezzedeen added.

Because the situation was so strange and alarming to her, she began asking everyone she knew, “rebels, factions, human rights activists,” about the abduction of Alawite women from the coast.

“Unfortunately, many confirmed that this had indeed happened, and not just by one faction. Based on what friends said, accusations point to factions of the National Army and some foreign fighters, with varying motives,” she reported.

Syria's new HTS-led security forces have incorporated armed extremist groups, including Uyghurs from the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) and Syrian Turkmen from factions of the Turkish-intelligence-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), into their ranks since coming to power in Damascus.

Various SNA commanders and [foreign extremists](#) have been appointed to top positions in the Syrian Ministry of Defense.

While the HTS-dominated General Security units participated in the 7 March massacres in many areas, former SNA and foreign fighter factions are believed to have led the campaign. Militants went door to door in Alawite villages and neighborhoods, executing all military-aged men they could find, looting homes, and at times killing women, children, and the elderly.

Ezzedeen concluded her post by stating, “This is a serious issue that cannot be ignored. The government must immediately reveal the fate of these women and release them.”

Rather than investigate the issue and seek to rescue the captive women, the HTS-appointed governor of Idlib [issued](#) an order for Ezzedeen's arrest, claiming she had “insulted the hijab.”

Ezzedeen's courageous revelation shed light on the fate of many young women from minority communities who had mysteriously disappeared in recent months, after self-appointed Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa and HTS toppled Assad and took power in Damascus.

### **A pattern of abductions**

In one of the earliest cases, a young Druze woman from the Damascus suburb of Jaramana, Karolis Nahla, [disappeared](#) on the morning of 2 February 2024, while on her way to university in the Mezzeh area. The case was strange because no ransom was demanded, and nothing was heard of her again.

Over time, information began to trickle out that young women like Karolis were being kidnapped and taken to Idlib as slaves, as Hiba Ezzedein finally confirmed.

كاروليس نحلي مفقودة من مبارح هي طالبة جامعة  
ادب فرنسي بكلية الآداب سنة ثانية كان عندها  
مادة ع ساعة 9 ساعة 12 تفقد الاتصال معها  
لو سمحتوا اي حدا بيعرف عنها شي او مستشبهه  
عليها يخبرنا



Screenshot of a Facebook post inquiring about the whereabouts of the missing Karolis Nahla. The caption reads:

“Karolis Nahla has been missing since yesterday. She is a second year university student studying French Literature. She had class at 9:00 am. At 12:00 pm we lost contact with her. Please, if anybody knows anything about her or has seen her, inform us.”

On 21 March, Bushra Yassin Mufarraaj, an Alawite mother of two, went missing from the bus station in Jableh. Her husband later posted a video appeal stating she had been abducted and taken to Idlib.

“My wife was taken captive in Idlib. Is there anything more cruel that could happen to a man in the world? That his wife and the mother of his children be in such circumstances,” he stated in a video appeal for help [published](#) on social media 10 days later.

Bushra's disappearance was followed by a wave of kidnappings in the following days and weeks. The Kurdish *Jinha Agency* [reported](#) on 25 March, citing local reports, that more than 100 people were kidnapped by armed groups in Syria's coastal regions over the previous 48 hours, including many women.

On 5 April, 21-year-old Katia Jihad Qarqat went [missing](#). The last contact with her was at 9:20 am near a shop at the Bahra circle in Jdeidat Artouz in the Damascus countryside. Her

family pleaded that anyone who had seen or had any information about her should contact them.



A screenshot of a social media post inquiring about the whereabouts of the missing Katia Jihad Qarqat. The caption reads: "A girl has gone missing in the Damascus countryside. The young woman, Katia, was last seen yesterday Friday, at 9:20 AM near a shop at the Bahra circle in Jdeidat Artouz. She is from the village of Hina and is a third-year university student. Anyone who has seen her or has any information is kindly asked to contact the following number 0994479206."

On 8 April, 17-year-old Sima Suleiman Hasno went [missing](#) at 11:00 am after leaving her school in the village of Qardaha in the Latakia countryside. Sima was released four days later in Damascus, where she was handed over to her aunt by members of the HTS-led Syrian government.

Surveillance footage from shops near the abduction site circulated widely on social media, sparking widespread outrage.

On 11 April, at 4:00 pm, contact was lost with 22-year-old Raneem Ghazi Zarifa in the Hama countryside, in the city of Masyaf.

"We are extremely worried about her. We ask that anyone with information about her, no matter how small, please contact us immediately," her family [said](#) in a social media post.

On 14 April, Batoul Arif Hassan, a young married woman with a three-year-old child from Safita, [disappeared](#) after visiting family in the village of Bahouzi. Contact was lost with her

around 4:00 pm as she was traveling in a public minibus on the Homs–Safita Road. Her family asked in a social media post for anyone with information about her whereabouts to contact her brother by phone.

On the morning of 16 April, Aya Talal Qassem, 23, was [kidnapped](#) after leaving her home in the coastal city of Tartous. Three days later, Aya's kidnapper freed her and sent her to Tartous on the Homs highway, only for the HTS-led General Prosecution Service to detain her.

Aya's mother [posted](#) a video to social media explaining that her family was not allowed to be with her in detention and that her father was arrested when he insisted on seeing her. The mother said that the General Prosecution Service tried to force Aya to give testimony, saying that she was not kidnapped but had instead run away with a lover. The mother added that she was pressured to tell such a story despite the presence of bleeding cuts and wounds on her body.

A video was [posted](#) online of the moment of her emotional return home to eagerly awaiting family and relatives.

On 21 April, 26-year-old Nour Kamal Khodr was [abducted](#) with her two daughters, 5-year-old Naya Maher Qaidban and 3-year-old Masa Maher Qaidban.

Nour and her daughters left their home in the village of Al-Mashrafa in rural Homs at noon, heading toward a neighbor's house. Witnesses saw a masked group affiliated with the HTS-led General Security abduct them, placing them in a vehicle marked with the group's emblem before fleeing.



A photo of the kidnapped 26-year-old Nour Kamal Khodr



A photo of Nour Kamal Khodr's daughters:

Naya Maher Qaidban, 5 years old

Masa Maher Qaidban, 3 years old

### **Echoes of Sinjar**

By 17 April, Iraqi media outlet [Al-Daraj](#) reported on 10 confirmed kidnappings of Alawite women from the coastal regions. According to one survivor, pseudonym Rahab, she was abducted in broad daylight and held in a locked room with another woman.

One woman who spoke to *Al-Daraj* under the pseudonym Rahab was released after the kidnappers allegedly feared a raid by General Security. She said she was kidnapped in broad daylight and held in a room with another woman, stating:

**“They tortured and beat us. We weren’t allowed to speak to each other, but I heard the kidnappers’ accents. One had a foreign accent and the other a local Idlib accent. I knew this because they were cursing us because we were Alawites.”**

The other woman, held with her, pseudonym Basma, remains in captivity. She was forced to call her family to tell them she was “fine” and to assure them that “they should not publish anything” about her abduction.

*Al-Daraj* also documented the case of an 18-year-old girl who was also kidnapped in broad daylight, from the countryside of a coastal city in Syria.



Her family later received a text message warning them to remain silent about her abduction or else she would be sent back dead. The girl later sent the family a voice recording from a phone number registered in the Ivory Coast, saying she was fine and unsure where she had been taken.

The Iraqi media outlet compared these cases to the ISIS genocide of Yazidis in Sinjar. Over 6,400 Yazidis were enslaved by ISIS in 2014. Thousands were trafficked into Syria and Turkiye, sold as domestic or sex slaves, or trained for battle. Many remain missing.

### **HTS: The ideological continuity of ISIS**

That Alawite women are now appearing in Idlib is unsurprising given HTS's ideological lineage. HTS, which seized Idlib in 2015 with [CIA-supplied](#) TOW missiles, shares the same genocidal worldview as ISIS. It was founded by ISIS and led by Sharaa – then known as [Abu Mohammad al-Julani](#), who was dispatched to Syria in 2011 by the late “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to establish the Nusra Front, forerunner to HTS.

In 2014, Syria analyst Sam Heller therefore [described](#) Nusra's clerics as promoting “toxic – even genocidal – sectarianism,” towards Alawites, based on the teachings of the medieval Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyyah.

Though HTS and ISIS clashed in 2014, their ties endured. When Baghdadi was killed in 2019, he was hiding in Barisha, just outside HTS-held Sarmada. At the time, numerous enslaved Yazidis were also in Idlib.

*The Guardian* [confirmed](#) this, quoting Abdullah Shrem, a Yazidi rescuer, and Alexander Hug of the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), who said missing persons were often held “in areas beyond government control.”

In 2019, Ali Hussein, a Yazidi from Dohuk, [told](#) *NPR* journalist Jane Arraf of his attempt to purchase the freedom of an 11-year-old Yazidi girl who had been abducted by ISIS but was “sold to an emir of an Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria – Jabhat al-Nusra [Nusra Front] – [and] that she's no longer a virgin.”

“I told you \$45,000 from the beginning. I know what they pay in Raqqa. I told you, in Turkiye, they would pay \$60,000 or \$70,000 and take out the girl's organs. But I don't want to do that,” the ISIS contact threatened during the negotiation.

*Reuters* [reported](#) the rescue of a young Yazidi boy, Rojin, who had been captured and enslaved by ISIS along with his brother in 2014. At 13 years old, Rojin was taken to the Kurdish-run Al-Hol camp in eastern Syria. He was held there alongside thousands of ISIS families and supporters after the organization's final defeat in the Syrian border town of Baghouz in 2019.

The Saudi ISIS fighter who had purchased Rojin then arranged for him to be smuggled from Al-Hol to Idlib. He was freed five years later, in November 2024, as HTS was preparing its lightning assault on Aleppo.

*Reuters* reported that in another case, a 21-year-old Yezidi named Adnan Zandenan received a Facebook message from a younger brother he presumed was dead, but who also had been trafficked to Idlib.

“My hands were trembling. I thought one of my friends was messing with me,” Zandenan recalled. However, Zandenan's euphoria quickly turned to despair when his brother, now 18 years old and thoroughly brainwashed by extremist Salafi ideology, refused to leave Idlib and return to the Yezidi community in Sinjar.

### **The repackaged caliphate**

In December 2024, just one day after Julani's HTS entered Damascus to topple Assad, *Rudaw* [reported](#) that a 29-year-old Yezidi woman had been rescued from slavery in Idlib.

The Iraqi Kurdish outlet stated that many Yezidi women have been rescued from the Kurdish-run Al-Hol camp.

However, others “have been found in areas of Syria controlled by rebels [HTS] or Turkish-backed armed groups [SNA], and some have been located in third countries,” it added.

In the days following Assad’s fall, jubilant crowds took to city squares, chanting in support of Julani, now rebranded as Ahmad al-Sharaa.

Yet as western diplomats scrambled to meet the new ruler, the meaning of his “freedom” quickly became clear. The abductions of Alawite women – mirroring the Yezidi tragedy – signaled that Julani had simply repackaged the ISIS model.

Under the guise of liberation, a brutal system of [sectarian violence](#), enslavement, and rape was unleashed upon those now under his rule.

In response to growing denial, genocide expert Matthew Barber [warned](#) of the same pattern that surrounded the initial days of the Yezidi genocide: disbelief, dismissal, and derision – until the truth proved far worse.

**“No one believed it could be happening ... Even Western analysts and journalists did not believe our claims,” Barber said. “The reality was even worse than what we were claiming.”**

The victims’ silence is not voluntary – it is coerced. And as this campaign of gendered terror continues, the question remains: How long will the world avert its gaze?