‘Ethnic cleansing!’ Videos show Syrian government-aligned forces reveling in massacre of minorities in coastal town

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CNN

<https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/17/middleeast/syria-massacre-alawite-minority-intl-invs/index.html>

A mother and her daughter hunch down by the windows of their attic as armed men gather outside the gate. They try not to make a sound. But in the video that they furtively recorded of this fraught moment, it’s clear they can barely control their panicked breathing.

Earlier that day, on March 7, the patriarch of the Khalil family had assured them that they were not in danger. The forces aligned with Syria’s new Islamist government who had descended on their village of al-Sanobar were only going after people affiliated with the recently toppled dictator [Bashar al-Assad](https://www.cnn.com/2012/12/06/middleeast/bashar-al-assad-fast-facts/index.html), he reasoned.

“We haven’t done anything wrong,” his relative recalled him saying as they watched fighters storming their neighbors’ home from their windows. Hours later, she said the patriarch was dead, his lifeless body splayed out on the patio next to his son’s corpse.

A masked fighter filmed himself parading around the ransacked home, singing “ethnic cleansing, ethnic cleansing” and posted the video to his Facebook page for 28,000 followers to see. Family members hiding in the upper floor told CNN they heard the raid, including the executions, unfold.

The killings at the Khalils’ home, recounted through video and survivor testimonies, was one of many similar incidents that played out across Alawite communities in [Syria’s coastal region](https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/10/middleeast/syria-violence-explainer-intl-latam/index.html)earlier this month.

A CNN investigation zeroes in on the events in Sanobar, or the “Pine village” in English, a town of several thousand members of Syria’s minority Alawite community in Latakia governorate. The attacks on the village, where swathes of farmland surround small clusters of buildings, reveal fresh details about the intensity of some of the [sectarian violence](https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/12/middleeast/syria-sectarian-violence-un-ohcr-intl-hnk/index.html) that swept Syria’s coast.

Drawing on interviews with seven survivors, satellite imagery and verified footage from the ground, CNN was able to shed light on the scale of the carnage in the town, where government-aligned forces subjected largely unarmed villagers to summary executions, looting, arson and sectarian slurs, and bodies were piled up in two mass graves.

CNN tallied at least 84 bodies in videos geolocated to the Pine village, which has a population of a few thousand. Locals said they counted over 200 dead – the vast majority of whom were male. The eyewitnesses spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

The attacks against Alawites raise questions about whether [interim president Ahmad al-Sharaa](https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/13/middleeast/syria-constitution-ap-intl/index.html) can fulfill his promise to rule Syria in an inclusive way, ensuring the protection of minorities, and stop any insurgent factions from becoming a serious threat to the country’s prospects for peace.

The latest cycle of violence began when Assad loyalists staged a bloody ambush on forces aligned with Syria’s new Sunni Islamist government on March 6 in what appeared to be a coordinated attack. It was Syria’s worst violence since Assad was toppled last December and it prompted a deadly reprisal in the Latakia and Tartus provinces that the new government described as an effort to contain remnants of the former autocratic regime.

The state blamed the mass killings on rogue elements. Al-Sharaa set up a fact-finding committee to investigate the killings and has vowed to hold the culprits to account.

The attacks targeted the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam that the Assad family are members of, and which dominated their regime for over half a century until they were ousted. Videos reviewed by CNN posted by Sunni Islamist militants loyal to Sharaa’s government called for the “ethnic cleansing” of Alawites.

CNN has reached out to the government for comment on the bloodshed in Pine village.

**‘They called us Alawite dogs’**

Human rights watchdog, the [Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)](https://snhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/R250305E-1.pdf), said more than 800 people were killed in attacks following the ambush. Other rights groups say the number is even higher.

Assad loyalists have staged several smaller attacks on government forces since then, according to authorities.

Survivors said the attacks in Pine village began in the early hours of Friday, March 7, a day after the initial ambush by Assadist loyalists was reported.

CNN identified the armed man who filmed himself at the home of the Khalil family by matching his facial details, clothing and build with other photographs and video on his Facebook profile. A cached version of his account shows the video was later deleted. Two survivors, who viewed the footage of him shared on social media, also said he was the same man who was rampaging through their town.

CNN reached out to the man on Facebook but has not received a reply.

In the days that followed, another video surfaced on social media showing him singing, with bodies littered behind him. “We’ve come to you. We’ve come to you with the taste of death.”

CNN was able to verify the location in the video as the entrance to the village using a line of pine trees, utility poles and a curving road, which corresponded to satellite imagery. Residents also identified the bodies of the men pictured in the video.

“The sword of the people of Idlib wants only you,” he sings, referring to the territory in northern Syria that was ruled by al-Sharaa’s now dissolved Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), before the forces wrested control from the old regime and became the de-facto government. HTS fighters now compose most of the country’s General Security forces.

In his Facebook profile picture, the fighter is seen in fatigues embroidered with what appears to be HTS insignia. Three military experts said the patch on his shoulder was consistent with several HTS units, but the photograph was too blurry to determine the specific brigade.

Another fighter is identifiable in two videos that CNN geolocated to Pine village and are believed to have been filmed over the course of the attack. The bearded man with red hair is seen in the footage taken in the Khalil home and at the entrance of Pine village.

Another clip verified by CNN shows a militant dragging a middle-aged man – identified by local sources as villager Yazan Mostafa – out to his execution, carried by other unidentified fighters.

Eyewitnesses who spoke to CNN detailed the hours leading up to the executions. “They came in (to our home) saying they were looking for remnants of the (Assad) regime, or any armed people,” one woman told CNN on Tuesday, three days after she said her father and two brothers were executed. Images that she shared of the aftermath at the household helped CNN corroborate her account.

“At first, they went to homes and confiscated mobile phones they were able to find… and then they left the village. Then they returned and ransacked our home. Then they left,” she added between tears. “And then a third time, they entered the house and demanded that all the men step outside.”

“My father and my two brothers. My father was a 75-year-old retired teacher… they shot my father in the head… they shot my brother in the heart.”

She said another brother, who was injured by a bullet to the right side of his body, pretended to be dead while he bled out. As night fell, he attempted to escape. According to the woman, the fighters shot him six times as he limped through the fields.

Her mother was sitting in shock and grief between her dead male relatives when, she said, one armed fighter pulled a gun to her head and called her an “‘Alawite dog.’”

Another local woman also told CNN that fighters had entered her home several times before they dragged her husband outside and shot him and several other men in a ditch.

Locals said only a handful of men survived. One man told CNN that he tried to reason with the fighters, ultimately saving his own life, but was unable to stop them from killing his brother who he said they executed.

“I did not run away. I confronted them wisely, and they shot the ground beneath us to intimidate me and my family,” he told CNN. “I opened my house to every faction that asked, and they pointed their guns at my chest more than once.”

“God’s will saved me,” he added. “I begged them to release my brother, but no one listened.”

One woman told CNN she was rescued by a fighter, who she said was from Idlib, who granted her safe passage. “The man who killed my family was from Idlib. The man who saved my life was also from Idlib,” she said.

**Collecting the bodies**

For nearly three days, corpses littered the streets of Pine village, after villagers said fighters forbade them from collecting their dead, according to three of the locals CNN spoke to. On March 10, armed men oversaw the retrieval of bodies that took place over two days, according to residents.

Locals said the bodies were piled into mass graves near the village’s Alawite shrine. Some of this was captured in videos and imagery that CNN geolocated to the area, matching it against satellite imagery to verify the date.

A photograph, which CNN determined was taken at the cemetery of the village shrine, captured at least 10 bodies wrapped in shrouds, laid in two narrow graves.

In one video, CNN counted at least 42 shrouded bodies dumped along a roadside, with three more in a shallow grave. Nearby mounds of earth suggested additional burials.

Another verified video showed at least 29 bodies in two shallow graves, where an excavator appeared to be refilling one of them with soil.

CNN could not confirm whether the bodies in the two videos and photograph depict different individuals or the same.

The bodies and graves can also be seen in satellite imagery reviewed and verified by CNN.

Aerial images provided by Airbus from March 11 show ground disturbances near the shrine, where CNN identified graves. The imagery also appears to capture bodies covered in shrouds and the excavator seen in one of the videos geolocated to the same site.

Maxar imagery from March 14 also shows evidence of the soil being displaced. Maxar told CNN the approximate dimensions of the excavated and then smoothed-over grave site were 26 meters by 16 meters (about 85 feet by 52 feet).

The villagers said they were still trying to give their loved ones a burial in accordance with Islamic rites.

“Without a doubt, we will give our dead a proper religious burial,” said the survivor whose father and brothers were killed. “But for that we will need to return to the village, and we are too afraid to return.”