Syrians protest after video of attack on Alawite shrine

AFP – Angry protests broke out Wednesday in Syria over a video showing an attack on an Alawite shrine, with a war monitor saying one demonstrator was killed in Homs city.
In an unrelated incident in Tartus province, a stronghold of deposed ruler Bashar al-Assad's Alawite minority, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor reported deadly clashes over the attempted arrest of a former official.

The Observatory said 14 security personnel of Syria's new authorities and three armed men were killed in clashes in Tartus province when forces sought to arrest an Assad-era officer linked to the notorious Saydnaya prison.

In the central city of Homs, where protesters took to the streets earlier over the shrine attack video, the Britain-based Observatory said one demonstrator was killed and five others wounded "after security forces… opened fire to disperse" the crowd.

The Observatory reported thousands-strong demonstrations in the coastal cities of Tartus and Latakia, also an Alawite stronghold, as well as other areas, including Assad's hometown of Qardaha.

Witnesses confirmed to AFP that demonstrations broke out in Tartus and Latakia and nearby Jableh, with some estimating the number of protesters in the thousands.

The protests are the largest by the Alawites since Assad's fall earlier this month, and come a day after hundreds of Syrians protested in the capital Damascus against the torching of a Christmas tree.

Syria's new Islamist rulers have sought to assure religious

and ethnic minorities that their rights would be upheld.

The transitional authorities appointed by Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which led the offensive that toppled Assad, said in a statement that the shrine attack was not recent.

The footage showing “the storming and attack” of the shrine in Aleppo is “old and dates to the time of the liberation” of the northern Syrian city earlier this month, an interior ministry statement said.

It said the attack was carried out by “unknown groups” and that “republishing” the video served to “stir up strife among the Syrian people at this sensitive stage”.

Images from Jableh on Wednesday showed large crowds in the streets, some chanting slogans including “Alawite, Sunni, we want peace”.

“We are calling for those who attacked the shrine to be held to account,” said Ali Daoud, a protester in Jableh.

State news agency SANA said police in central Homs imposed a curfew from 6:00 pm (1500 GMT) until 8:00 am on Thursday, while local authorities in Jableh also announced a nighttime curfew.

– ‘Calls for calm’ –

The Observatory said the protests erupted after a video began circulating Wednesday showing “an attack by fighters” on an important Alawite shrine in the Maysaloon district of Syria’s second city Aleppo.

It said five workers were killed and that the shrine was set ablaze.

Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said the exact date of the video was unknown, but that it was filmed early this month,

after the HTS-led offensive began in late November.

AFP was unable to independently verify the footage or the date of the incident.

The rebel forces launched a lightning offensive and seized control of major cities, among them Aleppo on December 1, before ousting Assad a week later.

Assad long presented himself as a protector of minority groups in Sunni-majority Syria.

In the city of Latakia, protester Ghidak Mayya, 30, decried "violations" against the Alawite community.

"For now… we are listening to calls for calm," he said, warning that too much pressure on the community "risks an explosion".

Fabrice Balanche, a Middle East expert from France's University Lumiere Lyon 2, estimated the Alawite community's numbers at around 1.7 million, or around nine percent of the Syrian population.

"The Alawites were very close to Bashar's regime," he said. "Their association with the regime risks provoking collective revenge against them – even more so as Islamists consider them heretics."

– Drug bust –

The new authorities meanwhile torched a large stockpile of drugs on Wednesday, according to two security officials, including one million pills of captagon whose industrial-scale production flourished under the deposed leader.

Captagon is a banned amphetamine-like stimulant that became Syria's largest export during the country's civil war since 2011.

“We found a large quantity of captagon, around one million pills,” said a balaclava-clad member of the security forces, who asked to be identified only by his first name, Osama.

An AFP journalist saw forces pour fuel over and set fire to a cache of cannabis, the opioid tramadol and around 50 bags of captagon pills in a security compound formerly belonging to Assad’s forces in the capital’s Kafr Sousa district.

“The security forces of the new government discovered a drug warehouse as they were inspecting the security quarter,” said another member of the security forces, who identified himself as Hamza.

Authorities destroyed the stocks of alcohol and narcotics in order to “protect Syrian society” and “cut off smuggling routes used by Assad family businesses”, he added.

Syria’s new Islamist rulers have yet to spell out their policy on alcohol, which has long been widely available in the country.

Since toppling Assad, Syria’s new authorities have said massive quantities of captagon have been found in former government sites around the country, including security branches.

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