



Syria leader calls for peace after hundreds of civilians killed



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Syria's leader Ahmed Sharaa has called for peace after days of clashes where Syrian security forces allegedly killed hundreds of civilians from the Alawite religious minority. The number of fighters killed in the past four days brings the total death toll to more than 1,000 people, says the Syrian Observatory. This included about 125 fighters linked to the new Islamist-led government and 148 pro-Assad fighters. Reuters news agency reported sources in the new Syrian government saying at least 200 of the fighters had been killed.

Speaking from a mosque in Damascus on Sunday, the interim president said "what is currently happening in Syria is within the expected challenges". He did not comment directly on accusations that atrocities were being committed by his supporters in the coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartus. On Sunday, Syrian media reported that fighting between government forces and Assad loyalists had also broken at a gas power plant in Baniyas, a city about halfway between Latakia and Tartus. The violence of recent days has been sparked after ambushes on government forces on Thursday. A Syrian defence ministry spokesman described it to the Sana state news agency as "treacherous attacks" against security personnel.

It has since escalated into a wave of clashes between Assad loyalists and government. Amid the fighting, hundreds of civilians living along the Mediterranean coast have fled their homes. The provinces of Latakia and Tartus were former heartlands of deposed president Bashar al-Assad, who also belongs to the Alawite minority. Alawites, whose sect is an offshoot of Shia Islam, make up around 10% of Syria's population, which is majority Sunni Muslim. He called on all sides to refrain from actions which could "destabilise" the country and jeopardise a "credible and inclusive political transition".

Iran's ambassador to Lebanon, Mojtaba Amani, described the killings of Alawites in Latakia and Tartous as "systematic" and "extremely dangerous", and accused Syria's interim government of failing to control the crisis. "It was expected that after the fall of the Assad government, Syria would face a difficult transition," Amani said. "But the scale of violence now unfolding is unprecedented and deeply troubling."

Iran's government was aligned with Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, which was toppled last December. Assad was ousted after decades of repressive and brutal