

Editors: Dr. Brandon Friedman & Dr. Ido Yahel
Volume 19, Number 6 August 13, 2025

Syria, the Druze, and the Crisis in Suwayda

Nir Boms and Karim Nassar

In July 2025, violence erupted in Suwayda, a southern Syrian city and stronghold of the Druze minority in Syria. Disturbing images of death, mutilation, and militia clashes shocked Israel and much of the world. To grasp the crisis, one must understand the interplay of local rivalries, national politics, and the struggle for regional power shaping southern Syria today.

Suwayda's Druze community, with a population of approximately 600,000, has historically maintained guarded autonomy by balancing its relations with Syrian government forces, the local Bedouin tribes, militias, and armed extremist groups (independent groups who now operate within the framework of the Syrian security forces).¹ This relative peace relied on pragmatic neutrality and locally controlled militias intertwined with the shadow

¹ Ahmad Sharawi, "[Clashes intensify between Arab Bedouin tribes and Druze militias in Suwayda, Syria,](#)" *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 18, 2025.

economy, including weapons and narcotics smuggling. The broader war fragmented Syria into more than a thousand-armed groups, with the Druze and Bedouin neighbors carving out local spheres of influence and profit, often in fierce competition with one another. It is important to note that the Druze community is divided on the question of their relationship to the state. Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri² leads a Druze camp that seeks a more autonomous political status for the Druze in Syria, while other Druze leaders such as Sheikhs Yousef Jerboa and Hamoud al-Hanawi support a solution that includes the Druze within the framework of the centralized Syrian government.³ Hijri, who in the past pledged his alliance to President Asad, was able to secure his own security force that had worked against the then rival Druze Sheikh, Wahid al-Balous, who called for further neutrality of the Druze Mountain. These internal Druze rivalries continues to play a role in the current conflict.

The crisis erupted on July 11, 2025, when a Druze vegetable vendor on the Damascus–Suwayda highway was kidnapped and assaulted by Bedouin tribesmen, who stole his vehicle and tortured him before releasing him in critical condition. In retaliation, local Druze armed groups detained Bedouins, triggering a cycle of kidnappings that escalated into open armed clashes.

By July 13, violence intensified as Bedouin fighters set up checkpoints and clashed with Druze armed groups in Suwayda city and surrounding villages including al-Maqwas, al-

² “[How Syria’s Vast Militia Network Is Eroding State Sovereignty](#),” *Al Majalla*, February 6, 2024.

³ Mateo Nelson, “[Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri Journey : From Obedience to Opposition?](#)” *Syria Direct*, June 30, 2025.

Tireh, al-Mazraa, and al-Soura al-Kabira. Both sides used mortars and heavy weapons, while highways were blocked and residents displaced. Syrian government forces affiliated with the Ministry of Interior were sent to contain the fighting, but several of their personnel were reportedly abducted. Notably, these developments occurred while Israelis and Syrians were meeting in Baku to discuss a framework for a new security agreement that is meant to replace and expand upon the 1974 armistice agreement.⁴

“We found bodies everywhere. Some of them we knew. It was impossible to understand who had done what. All I could do was help carry the wounded,” recalled one Druze volunteer on the scene, his shirt stained with blood.”⁵

In response to escalating violence and requests from Druze leaders for protection, on July 14 the Syrian government deployed two additional military convoys to Suwayda with the aim of restoring order. However, this intervention sparked further bloodshed. The government forces came in the form of a mob that included foreign fighters. Before entering Suwayda, they entered the Druze Village of al-Mazraa where fighting occurred. The Druze forces responded, and on July 15, Druze militias, reportedly affiliated with spiritual leader Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, ambushed and killed at least 27 soldiers. Disturbing videos circulated online showing mutilated corpses of government troops, shocking observers and inflaming sectarian resentment on all sides.⁶ In the midst of the fighting,

⁴ “[Syrian, Israeli Officials Hold Rare Meeting in Baku](#),” *Dawn.com*, July 14, 2025.

⁵ “[Shocking Testimonies Reveal Execution of American Citizen in Syria’s Suwayda](#),” *North Press Agency*, July 27, 2025.

⁶ “[Syria’s Sweida: A City of Corpses and Ruin as Druze Reel From Bloodshed](#),” *South China Morning Post*, July 18, 2025.

there were reports of extrajudicial killings, destruction of property, and mass displacement,⁷ especially after a ceasefire announced on July 15 failed and government forces withdrew.

The violence revealed the deep fractures in Syria's post-war order. President Ahmed al-Sharaa, who consolidated his power by promising national unity and protection for Syria's minorities, faced resistance from Druze and Bedouin militias reluctant to give up their autonomy and smuggling profits. Weapons and drug smuggling in southern Syria finances both local militias and broader regional conflicts, with control of these routes fiercely contested for decades.

The Syrian government called for renewed intervention and a new ceasefire on July 15, aiming to "save Syrian lives and maintain the integrity of Syrian territory." International organizations, including the United Nations, expressed deep alarm about the humanitarian toll and called for immediate de-escalation and protection of civilians.⁸

Israeli Intervention

While the Syria front was burning, the Israeli front was almost equally active. Following a stated policy of "supporting the Druze and Kurdish minorities,"⁹ and following Israel's military intervention in April that also took place following the attack against the Druze in

⁷ Agence France-Presse, "[Syria Launches Probes Into Extrajudicial Killings in Sweida](#)," *Daily Tribune*, July 23, 2025.

⁸ Alex Crawford, "[Inside Sweida: The Syrian City Ravaged by Sectarian Violence - Where Bodies Line Streets and Homes are Burned](#)," *Sky News*, July 20, 2025.

⁹ Tamara Qiblawi and Eyad Kourdi, "[Syria Condemns Israeli Strikes That Killed Iranian Military Advisers](#)," *CNN*, April 30, 2025.

the Jaramana suburb of Damascus, Israel already indicated its willingness to actively intervene in Syria on behalf of the Druze. The Druze community in Israel had quickly mobilized, demanding firmer action by the IDF. Members of the community shut traffic at a number of key junctions in Israel,¹⁰ demonstrated, and used media and political platforms to pressure the government to act. Its leadership also advocated for independent action and mobilized its members to simply join the fight. By July 16, more than 1,000 Israeli Druze crossed the border into Syria, eager to help their brethren, adding additional pressure on Israel to act. Most of them were stopped by the IDF but some were able to reach some of the Druze communities near the Israeli border.¹¹

On July 14 amid the chaos described above, Israel launched airstrikes on Syrian military installations near Suwayda in an attempt to stop the attack. On July 15 – and following the continuation of atrocities – Israel responded with air-strikes in Damascus, targeting the Syrian Ministry of Defense as well as, symbolically, facilities next to the presidential palace.¹² The Israeli intervention on July 14 and 15 was intended to "defend the Druze minority and prevent hostile military buildup,"¹³ with Israeli jets reportedly flying low over Suwayda and targeting Syrian tanks that were not supposed to enter the region according to the existing Israeli-Syrian understandings. The Israeli government warned Syria against

¹⁰ "[Druze in Israel Protest Sectarian Clashes in Syria, Block Traffic in Northern Israel](#)," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 15, 2025.

¹¹ Lucas Minisini, "[Israeli Druze Anger Mounts Against Syrian Authorities After Clashes With Bedouins](#)," *Le Monde.Fr*, July 17, 2025.

¹² Syrian Network for Human Rights, "[Updated Figures: At Least 321 Syrians Killed and More Than 436 Others Injured in Suwayda Governorate on July 13](#)," *ReliefWeb*, July 16, 2025.

¹³ Bethan McKernan, "[Israel Strikes Syria Defense Ministry in Third Day of Attacks on the Country](#)," *The Guardian*, July 16, 2025.

harming the Druze, while the Syrian foreign ministry accused Israel of inflaming sectarian tensions.¹⁴

Efforts to broker a stable ceasefire have faced serious challenges, with thousands displaced and hundreds reported killed or injured in a single week.¹⁵ The situation remains volatile as regional powers, including Israel, weigh another intervention against the perils of a broader regional conflict, and local actors remain wary of any central government attempts to impose a new order.

What next? Israeli, Syrian, and Druze Dilemmas

Trapped between the Druze, the Syrians, and the regional stakeholders in Syria, the crisis presents a complex challenge for Israel. From its perspective, Israel sees a clear interest in preventing jihadist or Iranian-backed militia infiltration near its border and, it would prefer to see the border area with Syria return to the relative stability and quiet that existed from 1974 until 2011, during the pre-civil war Asad era. But the current Syrian government's track record suggests that only Israeli action will prevent militias and armed groups from operating in this area. Separately, Israel feels obligated to protect the Druze community, which shares cultural and religious ties with Israeli Druze citizens. "An attack on the Druze should be seen as an attack on Israel," argued many in Israel, influenced by the Druze

¹⁴ Yasmeen Serhan, "[Israel Bombed Syria. The Impact Reached the Country's Most Marginalized](#)," *Time*, July 22, 2025.

¹⁵ "[Syria Crisis: Hundreds Killed in Ongoing Violence, Hospitals Overwhelmed](#)," *UN News*, July 19, 2025.

community's appeal to the government and by the pictures and video footage of Jihadist forces operating near the Israeli border.¹⁶

However, Israel's past experience in Lebanon (prior to its withdrawal in 2000), with Major Saad Hadaad's South Lebanon Army counsels caution. Israel's intervention into a Syrian sectarian war— as well as the intra-Druze debate about the future status of the minority's relationship with the central government in Damascus—poses significant dangers. It creates the impression that Israel is using the Druze as a sectarian-proxy in Syria, which ultimately may not serve the Druze interests in the long term, unless Israel is willing to take further measures to protect them and ensure the supply of goods and services that are needed to maintain life in Suwayda. "Protecting the Druze" for the long term would require a broader Israeli intervention and the investment of significant military and non-military resources needed to assist an enclave of over 600,000 people. At this stage, it does not appear that Israel is interested in assuming such a burden.

Israel's position has created the appearance of backing Sheikh Hijri's uncompromising line, and runs the risk of creating a new wedge between Israel and Syria, following a period in which the two countries had made some progress toward a new framework for bilateral relations beginning with a broader framework based on the 1974 armistice agreement. It is possible for Israel to remain committed to the protection of the Druze, while avoiding an operation in Syria that creates the misimpression that Israel is using the Druze as proxy

¹⁶ Dan Diker, "[Understanding Israel's 'Strong Horse' Strikes on Syria: Prevention, Security, Perception in the Shadow of Iran](#)," *Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs*, July 21, 2025.

against the Syrian government or trying to fuel additional sectarian animosity near its border. Israel's primary objective is to stabilize the border area and prevent radical actors from using Syrian territory to attack Israel. Israel will have to walk a fine line if it hopes to convince the Syrian government to assume responsibility for protecting Syria's minorities without igniting an already combustible sectarian dynamic. The recent failure of the Syrian government has led to support in Israel for protecting the Druze community. However, further erosion of Syrian sovereignty along with more Israeli military strikes in support of the Druze runs the risk of empowering the extreme forces on all sides and leads to a slippery slope that demands increasing levels of intervention from Israel.

Syria's transitional government confronts a set of existential dilemmas as well: the state-centric vision championed by President al-Sharaa promises unity and minority protection but risks alienating local power brokers who rely on arms and smuggling profits to sustain their influence. While al-Sharaa calls for unity and tolerance, his Minister of Defense, a former HTS commander, is actively working to recruit militia members¹⁷ into the new Syrian Ministry of Defense forces, while acting to prevent the minority blocs, like the Druze or the Kurds, from retaining their own fighters within the new Syrian military.¹⁸

Without inclusive dialogue and tangible guarantees for minorities like the Druze, Syria risks sliding back into fragmentation, sectarian violence, and proxy wars reminiscent of the darkest years of Syria's civil war. While al-Sharaa received significant international

¹⁷ Lucy Williamson, "[Syrian Security Forces Monitored Armed Civilians Who Killed Alawites, Accused Man Says](#)," *BBC*, May 4, 2025.

¹⁸ "[Syrian Defense Minister Rejects Kurdish Proposal for its Own Military Bloc](#)," *Arab News*, January 19, 2025.

support from stakeholders in the region and the West, these recent events that show a lack of control at best and potentially ill-intentions, risk further isolating Syria and rolling back some of the achievements made in the last seven months.

Al-Sharaa's vision of a new Syria that is inclusive and respectful of all of its people recently suffered a setback following the massacres of 'Alawis in March. Al-Sharaa will need to quickly show that its vision of a unified, non-sectarian security force is still viable, otherwise it will lead Syria further down the road to fragmentation. The President will also need to find a way to implement a stronger power-sharing model that will attempt to heal its society and rebuild trust. An important step would be to bring those responsible for the atrocities in Suwayda to justice and send a strong message to his loyalists. Healing these types of sectarian tensions may take some time — a commodity that Al-Sharaa does not have due to the volatility of the situation in Syria.

The Druze also face a new set of dilemmas of their own. While burying their dead and mourning their losses, they will need to find a way to live in this new reality. Israel is not an immediate neighbor, and giving up its land has never been an option for the Druze. Some of the Druze leadership have already realized that they must open new channels to the Syrian government with the intent to heal the wounds and reestablish their ties to the rest of the country.¹⁹ Many Druze quickly rejected Israel's claims to protect the Druze in Syria. Hundreds took to the streets in Suwayda to protest Netanyahu's comments. "We are

¹⁹ ["Syria's Druze Seek a Place in a Changing Nation, Navigating Pressures From the Government and Israel,"](#) *AP News*, March 10, 2025.

Arabs, whether he or whether the Lord that created him likes it or not. Syria is free,” said Nabih al-Halabi, a 60-year-old resident of Jaramana.²⁰

This more pragmatic view contends that fighting their fellow Syrians cannot be a good long-term solution for the Druze, and that relying on Israel to provide ultimate protection is not a viable choice as well.

Implementing al-Sharaa’s vision for an inclusive Syria is much more difficult than articulating it, as we have tragically seen in the past few weeks. Nevertheless, if Syria is to avoid fragmentation and be truly inclusive, it is incumbent upon all parties involved to work together toward a common path of mutual acceptance that will keep the extremists at bay. This balance between a path of autonomy and power sharing , may serve as a possible path for the Druze and can also serve the interests of Israel who would be wise to help it succeed.

The opinions expressed in MDC publications are the authors’ alone.

All rights reserved to the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel-Aviv University. Materials may be republished for non-commercial use only, with attribution to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel-Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, <http://www.dayan.org>.

²⁰ “[Syria’s Druze Seek a Place in a Changing Nation, Navigating Pressures From the Government and Israel](#),” *AP News*, March 10, 2025.