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Syria

Suweida Under Fire: The Consolidation of Power in Damascus, and Sectarianism

- IV Online magazine - 2025 - IVP607 - August 2025 -

Publication date: Friday 1 August 2025

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The situation in the province of Suweida, southern Syria, was still not stable at the time of writing, despite an official ceasefire and the arrival of a first humanitarian aid convoy on 20 July in the provincial capital, the city of Suweida, which has a population of approximately 150,000. The devastated city continues to suffer from a siege by the central government in Damascus and pro-government armed groups, depriving its population of water and electricity and lacking essential food supplies. [Attacks were ongoing](#) in some villages in the province by armed groups supportive of the central authorities.

Following the conclusion of a ceasefire, Bedouin fighters and pro-government tribes withdrew from part of the city of Suweida. Local armed Druze factions have regained control. At the same time, US officials claimed to have brokered a truce between Damascus and Tel Aviv. This agreement allowed the deployment of Syrian government forces in Suweida province, with the exception of the city of Suweida, which Israel initially rejected.

After more than a week of fighting, several thousand deaths have been recorded, both civilians and combatants, and more than 140,000 people have been displaced, according to the UN. The Suwayda 24 news website recorded 36 destroyed and damaged villages, most of which are currently emptied of their inhabitants, while looting continues.

These latest events follow previous attacks by armed groups linked to or supporting the Damascus government in Suwayda province and near Damascus in April and May, which left more than 100 dead. Damascus is seeking to achieve political objectives through these actions: consolidating its power over a fragmented Syria, undermining Suwayda's autonomy, and disrupting democratic dynamics from below.

Suweida, Attacks from All Sides and suffering Under Deadly Siege

Suweida province, with a majority Druze population, gained a degree of political autonomy during the Syrian popular uprising. After the fall of the Assad regime, many local armed forces and leading Druze religious leaders maintained contact with the new authorities in Damascus but refused to lay down their arms, lacking a democratic and inclusive political transition and guarantees for Suweida province. However, the region has become a war zone since 13 July, following the arrest and torture of a Druze merchant at a checkpoint manned by Bedouin armed groups, which was established following the April and May violence against the Druze population in Damascus and Suweida. This [checkpoint on the Damascus-Suweida road](#) is under the responsibility of Bedouin tribes from Al-Mutallah in the Al-Kiswah region of rural Damascus, affiliated with the General Security of the Ministry of Interior. In addition to committing repeated violations against Druze individuals between Suweida and the capital, Damascus, the central authorities used it as a tool of political pressure against Suweida.

The Bedouin population represents [approximately 5% of the population](#) in the Suweida region and is primarily based in rural areas. Their military organization is limited and less centralized than that of the local Druze factions. Several Bedouin tribes exist in the south. The armed Druze factions, for their part, are divided into [three major military entities](#) (the Suweida Military Council, the Men of Dignity, and the Forces of Dignity), and they did not necessarily adopt the same attitude towards the new government in Damascus following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. The Suweida Military Council, for example, has a more hostile stance towards the central authorities, while the Forces of Dignity have collaborated more closely with the presidency of Ahmed al-Shareh.

Following initial clashes between Bedouin and Druze armed factions, the Syrian interim government then sent columns of armored vehicles from Damascus to Suweida in an attempt to assert control over the province, claiming to want to end the violence while fighting alongside Bedouin armed forces affiliated with the central government.

During the first days of military operations in Suweida province, the actions of armed forces affiliated to or supportive of the Damascus government in Suweida alongside it recalled images of the March massacre against Alawite populations in coastal areas, resulting in the deaths of more than [1,000 civilians](#). Murdered civilians, sectarian and hateful speeches and behaviors, such as scenes of humiliation of local residents, mustaches cut or shaved by fighters, circulate on social media, scenes of destruction and looting of infrastructure and civilian homes... As of July 18, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) recorded [more than 200 deaths](#), and several hundred wounded. At the same time, many civilians in Suweida have left their homes close to the military clashes and fear the actions of pro-government fighters to seek refuge in safer areas of the province.

Despite their military superiority, government armed forces and pro-government militias were forced to withdraw from the captured areas due to resistance from local armed factions in Suwayda, and especially to Israeli airstrikes against military headquarters in Damascus and convoys of the forces affiliated with or supportive of the government (see below).

Following this, self-proclaimed Syrian President Ahmad al-Shareh announced on July 17 the transfer of responsibility for maintaining security in Suwayda to local armed factions and Druze religious dignitaries. Attacks by Druze fighters against Bedouin civilians in Suwayda province occurred.

Following these actions, a number of Sunni Arab tribes, often with ties to central government figures, from different regions of the country published appeals and statements on social media to help their Bedouin “brothers” in Suweida. This mobilization was further reinforced by media propaganda encouraged by the government and its allies, amplifying the violence against Bedouin civilians. A new offensive by tribal armed groups then took place Thursday evening, 18 July, in Suweida province, while hateful and sectarian calls against the Druze population multiplied through social media in different regions of the country.

Images then began to appear on social media of vehicles and armed men from different tribes mobilizing and heading towards Suweida province. Some of the tribal armed groups entered the western part of the city of Suweida, unopposed by government forces, and looted and burned dozens of houses, shops and cars. Following their passage, the walls of these neighborhoods were covered with graffiti such as “[Druze pigs](#)” or “We are coming to slit your throats”...

Ahmed al-Shareh condemned the perpetrators of abuses against the Druze population in Suweida and affirmed that they “will be held accountable”. However, he made the same promise after the massacre on the Syrian coast against Alawite civilians, with no consequences for these perpetrators to date. The commission of inquiry established for these massacres was initially supposed to submit its report within 30 days of its creation; its mandate was then extended for three months on 10 April. The report was finally submitted to President al-Shareh only after more than 90 days, on 20 July. Moreover, the commission of inquiry stated during its press conference on 22 July that no evidence existed to demonstrate the responsibility of senior state and military officials in the March massacres, contrary to a Reuters investigation conducted a few weeks earlier. Similarly, the committee announced that it had no information on the numerous cases of [targeted kidnappings, disappearances, and gender-based violence against women and girls](#) that occurred during the massacres, which have been ongoing since February 2025, particularly against Alawite women.

Furthermore, Al-Shareh primarily accused “outlaw groups”—the term used by the ruling authorities to refer to the local Druze armed factions in Suweida—of being primarily responsible for the violence in the province and of violating

the ceasefire agreement by engaging in “horrific violence” against civilians, threatening civil peace by pushing the country towards chaos and a collapse of security. At the same time, it praised the mobilizations of the Arab tribes and celebrated their “heroism”, while calling on them to respect the ceasefire... A contradictory message, to say the least.

In fact, in the political strategy of the HTS central authorities, the mobilization of Sunni Arab tribes appeared to be a useful tool to compensate for the military weakness of the government armed forces in their offensives against Suweida and to obtain political concessions.

At the same time, the dominant media coverage in the country, particularly on the Syrian national television station “al-Ikhbariya”, echoed official state propaganda by encouraging a reading of the events in which Sheikh al-Hijri, a senior Druze religious dignitary, and armed Druze factions were primarily responsible for the violence, accusing them of being simultaneously “separatists”, “armed gangs”, “allies of the Zionists”, and so on.

These general attacks, both military and media-driven, against the province of Suweida have considerably reduced the differences that existed between the various armed Druze groups, but also within the local Druze population. Faced with these threats, perceived as an offensive against the Druze population as a whole, the need for unity is felt on all sides.

Reflecting this dynamic, [several trade unions and professional associations in Suweida](#) have notably severed all contact with the trade union centers in Damascus in protest against the massacres perpetrated and hold the central government fully responsible for these human rights violations. The Council of the Bar of Suweida, for example, announced its resignation in its entirety, condemning “the terrorist acts, war crimes, sectarian cleansing, genocide, and crimes against humanity committed in the governorate of Suweida by the government through its military and auxiliary forces.” The Suweida Engineers Association issued a statement mourning its murdered members and calling for the creation of a genuine national authority representing the people, and announced the cessation of coordination with the trade union centre in Damascus. The Agricultural Engineers Union expressed its mourning for three of its members, “who died following the barbaric attack supported by the terrorist regime.” It stated that it would “suspend its contacts with the trade union centre in Damascus until the situation changes and an authority representing the Syrian people is established, protecting their dignity and preserving their rights.” The Veterinarians Union called these events a “crime against humanity” targeting civilians on sectarian grounds and denounced the role of the central authorities in inciting and directly supporting the violations. The union announced the suspension of its relations with the trade union centre until “the de facto authority is removed and an authority representing the Syrian people is established,” in its words. The teachers’ union in Suweida, for its part, accused the authorities of being directly responsible for the massacres. The union reiterated its commitment to the message of education and democracy, affirming its rejection of the mobilization and calls for takfirism. It announced the cessation of its cooperation with the Damascus trade union centre “until the elimination of the extremist ideology that monopolizes it.”

[On 28 July, massive demonstrations occurred](#) throughout Suweida Governorate demanding the lifting of the siege the province, condemning the massacres committed by the armed forces affiliated and supportive of the Syrian Interim government, requesting an international intervention to open humanitarian corridors, and called for an independent international investigation into the recent events. In addition to this, they also denounced the security forces’ prevention of foreign media from entering the province and documenting the atrocities that occurred.

In many ways, the actions of the armed forces belonging to or supporting the Damascus government and their behavior towards the local population in Suweida recalled the dark memories of the entry of the former Assad regime into eastern Aleppo in late 2016 and into Ghouta, in the Damascus countryside, in the spring of 2018, or of the Turkish army and its Syrian proxies into Afrin, in the northwest of the country, the same year. In other words, a form of armed occupation rejected by the local population.

Sectarianism: a political tool of domination and control

These armed operations against Suweida province are part of a broader strategy by the Syrian government, led by HTS, to consolidate its power over a fragmented country.

To achieve this, it has primarily implemented a strategy based on external recognition and legitimization to consolidate its dominance within the country. Syrian President al-Shareh and his affiliates demonstrate a clear desire to anchor their country within a regional axis led by the United States and its regional allies such as Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, in order to consolidate their hold over Syria. In this context, the new government is also seeking a form of normalization with the Israeli state (see below).

Building on this initial momentum, the [new HTS-led government consolidated its dominance over state institutions](#), the army, security services, and social actors in the country. In the case of Suwayda, after the fall of the Assad regime, it was local networks and groups that elected longtime activist Muhsina al-Mahithawi to be governor of Suweida province, but this was rejected by Damascus, which appointed its own governor. More generally, Al-Shareh has, for example, appointed ministers, security officials, and regional governors affiliated with HTS or armed groups within the Syrian National Army (SNA), an alliance of Syrian armed opposition groups that has acted for years as a proxy for the Turkish government. For example, the new authorities have appointed some of the highest-ranking HTS commanders to the new Syrian army, including the new defense minister and longtime HTS commander, Mourhaf Abu Qasra, who was promoted to general. The reorganization of the Syrian army has been carried out by integrating only armed groups loyal to the new authorities in Damascus (HTS and the SNA) and by recruiting new soldiers with similar loyalty-based dynamics.

At the same time, the new authorities in Damascus accuse armed groups opposed to the central government of being “outlaw groups”, such as the local Druze armed factions, while other armed groups more favorable to the government are not worried by these accusations, such as the Sunni Arab tribes fighting in Suweida. While the unification of all armed groups into a new Syrian army does not raise opposition in itself, large sectors of the Druze population in Suweida and the Kurds in the northeast still oppose it, in the absence of certain guarantees, such as decentralization and a genuine democratic transition process. The actions and violence of pro-government armed groups have not calmed these fears, quite the contrary.

Similarly, key positions in the new transitional government are held by figures close to al-Shareh. In addition, parallel institutions composed of the Syrian presidency and figures affiliated with HTS have been established, such as the Syrian National Security Council, headed by al-Shareh and composed of his close associates (the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Interior, and the Director of General Intelligence), which was created at the same time as the interim government to manage security and politics. The new Syrian authorities have also taken steps to consolidate their power over economic and social actors. For example, they have restructured the country's chambers of commerce and industry by replacing the majority of their members with individuals appointed by Damascus. Several new board members are known for their close ties to HTS, such as the new president of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, Alaa Al-Ali, formerly president of the Idlib Chamber of Commerce and Industry, affiliated with HTS. Other members are prominent figures in the pre-2011 business world, such as Issam Ghreiwati, who now chairs the board. Issam Ghreiwati is the son of Zuhair Ghreiwati, founder of the Ghreiwati Group, one of Syria's largest business conglomerates.

Furthermore, in mid-April, Ahmad Al-Sharaa's brother, Maher Al-Sharaa, was appointed Secretary-General of the Presidency, responsible for managing the presidential administration and liaising between the presidency and state bodies. A recent Reuters investigation also revealed that Hazem al-Sharaa, along with others, is responsible for reshaping the Syrian economy through secret acquisitions of Assad-era companies.

At the same time, the authorities also appointed new leaders to unions and professional associations. In particular, they selected a union council for the Syrian Bar Association, composed of members of the Idlib Council of Free Bars. Syrian lawyers responded by launching a petition calling for democratic elections within the Bar Association.

Finally, the new ruling authorities led by HTS have been using sectarianism as a tool of domination and control over the population. Clearly, sectarian tensions and hatred are not due to ancient religious divisions, nor are they “rooted” in the region's populations, nor are they supposedly dynamics rooted in the “revenge” of minorities against the Sunni Arab majority. Sectarianism and sectarian tensions are a product of modernity and have political roots and dynamics.

More generally, the rise in sectarian rhetoric, tensions, and attacks by the ruling authorities, led by HTS and the armed forces supportive of the government, first against the Alawite populations, as demonstrated by the coastal massacres in March, and then against the Druze communities, aims to achieve three main objectives.

First, the exploitation of sectarian tensions and the discourse of “Mazlumiya Sunniya” (“Sunni injustice”), seeking to build a sense of popular belonging and unite large sections of the Sunni Arab population, despite the many political, social, regional, and other differences within this community.

Second, these sectarian attacks and tensions aim to disrupt democratic space or dynamics from below. In this perspective, Suweida has been a symbol of popular resistance since the beginning of the popular uprising in 2011, including against the former Assad regime, with ongoing democratic actions, a vibrant local civil society, and attempts to create alternative unions and professional associations. For example, popular demonstrations and continuous strikes took place in the Suweida governorate, particularly after the outbreak of a relatively large protest movement since mid-August 2023, which highlighted the importance of Syrian unity, the release of political prisoners and social justice. Some local armed Druze factions also participated in the military offensive with other military groups in southern Syria against the Syrian Assad regime in its final days before its fall. This is without forgetting the support of local armed Druze factions for tens of thousands of young men from Suweida who refused to join the Syrian army loyal to the Assad regime and fight in its ranks since 2014.

In March, sectarian massacres in coastal areas had virtually put an end to the protests organized in January and February 2025 in various provinces by civil servants dismissed by the new government. Since December 2024, the Syrian authorities have laid off tens of thousands, if not more, of public sector employees. Following this decision, demonstrations by dismissed or suspended civil servants erupted across the country, including in Suweida. These protests were promising, as were attempts to create alternative unions or, at the very least, coordination structures. These new entities, in addition to opposing the mass layoffs, also demanded wage increases and rejected the government's plans to privatize public assets. However, the consolidation of the protest movement was considerably weakened due to fears that armed groups close to the regime would respond with violence.

Finally, sectarian rhetoric and attacks have allowed the new authorities in Damascus to attempt to impose their total control over regions outside their control, such as in Suweida, or to consolidate their power, as in the coastal areas in March, by mobilizing segments of the population along sectarian lines.

Sectarianism acts as a powerful mechanism of social control, shaping the course of class struggle by fostering dependency between the popular classes and their ruling elites. As a result, the popular classes are deprived of any political independence and define themselves—and engage politically—through their sectarian identity. In this respect, the new government follows in the footsteps of the former Assad regime, continuing to use sectarian policies and practices as a means of governance, control, and social division.

In this context, the armed abuses committed by affiliated and pro-government armed forces are not “simply” the

result of “individual actions” or a “lack of professionalism” on the part of the army, whether during the March massacres against the Alawite population or today in Suweida. Indeed, the Reuters investigation has demonstrated that pro-government armed groups were directly involved in the violence perpetrated against Alawite civilians in March, with the knowledge and consent of the highest levels of the state. Moreover, the new authorities created the political conditions that made this violence possible. Indeed, human rights violations against individual Alawites, including kidnappings and assassinations, have increased in recent months, some of which—[such as the Fahil massacre in late December 2024 and the Arzah massacre in early February 2025](#)—resembled dress rehearsals for the coastal massacres in March. Moreover, Syrian officials have repeatedly portrayed the Alawite community as an instrument of the old regime against the Syrian people. For example, during his speech at the 9th Syria Donors’ Conference in Brussels, Belgium, Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani stated, “[54 years of minority rule have led to the displacement of 15 million Syrians](#)...”—implicitly suggesting that the Alawite community as a whole had ruled the country for decades, rather than a dictatorship controlled by the Assad family. While it is undeniable that Alawite figures held key positions within the former regime, particularly within its military and security apparatus, reducing the nature of the state and its dominant institutions to an “Alawite identity” or portraying the regime as favoring religious minorities while systematically discriminating against the Sunni Arab majority is both misleading and far removed from reality.

The authorities have also failed to establish a mechanism to promote a comprehensive transitional justice process aimed at punishing all individuals and groups involved in war crimes during the Syrian conflict. This could have played a crucial role in preventing acts of revenge and easing growing sectarian tensions. However, Ahmad al-Shareh and his allies have no interest in transitional justice, most likely fearing being tried for their own crimes and abuses committed against civilians. Moreover, on 17 May, the Syrian transitional authorities announced presidential decrees establishing two new government bodies: the Transitional Justice Commission and the National Commission for the Missing. However, the mandate of the Transitional Justice Commission, as defined in the decree, is narrow and excludes many victims, including those of HTS and its allied armed groups such as the SNA. This selective justice is therefore highly problematic and risks provoking new political and sectarian tensions in the country. This is without forgetting that certain figures affiliated with the Assad regime and guilty of committing crimes, or contributing to them, have been granted de facto immunity by the new authorities, such as Fadi Saqr, former commander of the National Defense Forces (NDF) affiliated with the previous Assad regime, or Muhammad Hamsho, a well-known businessman affiliated with Maher al-Assad.

Therefore, returning to Suweida province and recent events, the strategy and actions of the Syrian government forces in Suweida province are part of these attempts to centralize power in the hands of the new ruling authority and consolidate their domination over society.

The risk of exclusive power with a central authority with limited capabilities can only lead to further political tensions in the country. This situation also further weakens the country's sovereignty.

Israel’s Exploitation of Sectarian Tensions

At the same time, the Israeli government has sought to exploit recent human rights violations committed by pro-Damascus armed forces against the Druze population to fuel sectarian tensions in the country, presenting itself as the defender of the Druze population of southern Syria and threatening military intervention for their “protection”. Despite appeals to the Israeli government by Druze religious dignitary Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri and greater openness among some segments of the Druze population towards Israel, particularly after the recent violence against them, there is a widespread rejection of any Israeli intervention by large segments of the Druze population in Suweida and other regions. They have also repeatedly reaffirmed their belonging to Syria and their support for the country's unity.

But the defense of the Druze population is not, and never has been, the State of Israel's priority. On the contrary, Tel Aviv is sending a clear message to Damascus: it will not tolerate any military presence in southern Syria, including in the provinces of Qunaytra, Deraa and Suweida, and aims for the demilitarization of these areas.

In this context, the Israeli occupation army launched new strikes in Damascus, near the Syrian army headquarters and the Ministry of Defense, as well as in other areas of the country on 16 and 17 July, following previous attacks.

In doing so, the colonial and racist Israeli state seeks to further weaken the Syrian state and obtain more political concessions from Damascus, which has demonstrated its willingness to normalize, directly or indirectly, its relations with Tel Aviv. The Syrian government, led by HTS, has confirmed the existence of negotiations and discussions with Israeli officials aimed at easing tensions between the two countries and finding forms of understanding. This is despite the Israeli occupation army's incessant attacks on Syrian territories, particularly those occupied following the fall of the Assad regime in December, and the destruction of agricultural land and civilian infrastructure. Al-Shareh has repeatedly reiterated that his regime does not pose a threat to Israel and has also apparently told President Trump that it is willing to rejoin the Abraham Accords if the "appropriate conditions" are met.

This is also why Damascus has not condemned the massive Israeli strikes against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Rather, it views Iran's weakening positively, just as it does with Hezbollah in Lebanon. This position is not only linked to Iran's role during the Syrian popular uprising and the hostility towards it among large sectors of the population, but also reflects, as explained above, the political orientation of the new ruling elite in Syria, which seeks to root the country within a US-led axis in order to consolidate its power internally.

This orientation has not changed despite recent events, and the United States is well aware of this. Washington does not want to see this new power in Damascus, which seeks to satisfy these regional political interests and ensure a degree of authoritarian stability there, further weakened. It was in this context that US leaders called on Tel Aviv to cease its bombing of Syrian government targets and to conclude a truce with Damascus. This truce agreement also allowed the deployment of Syrian government forces in the province of Suweida, with the exception of the city of Suweida, which Israel initially rejected.

Moreover, the military escalation in Suweida followed discussions in Baku, Azerbaijan, between Syrian and Israeli officials, according to the Syria in Transition website. During these discussions, Syrian authorities, led by HTS, reportedly sought Tel Aviv's approval for the reintegration of Suweida. While Israeli officials expressed openness to limited reintegration—that is, the restoration of public services and the deployment of a limited local security force—Damascus misinterpreted this decision as authorization for a large-scale military operation. Despite this misunderstanding, this decision by the Syrian authorities reveals a persistent tendency to rely on external validation and support to justify certain policies, including coercive measures against local populations, as in the case of Sweida, rather than encouraging political dialogue.

According to various sources, senior officials from the United States, Israel, and Syria met on Thursday, 24 July, to reach a security agreement in southern Syria and prevent further crises.

In other words, international recognition, the pursuit of good relations with the United States and its regional allies, and the promotion of a possible normalization process with Israel are all aimed at consolidating HTS's power over the country. The interests of the Syrian working class and their democratic aspirations are being ignored in this process.

In this context, the recent events in Suweida demonstrate, once again, that Syria is not experiencing a democratic and inclusive political transition. Rather, it is a process of establishing a new authoritarian regime, structured and led by HTS, under the guise of institutional and international legitimacy.

However, this process remains incomplete due to the weak political, economic, and military capabilities of the new authorities in power led by HTS, as demonstrated by the failure of its total control over Suweida. Despite this failure, the ruling authorities are unlikely to change their policies or make real concessions in favor of the political and socio-economic interests of the Syrian working classes in all their diversity without a shift in the balance of power and, above all, without the (re)construction and development of a counter power within society, bringing together democratic and progressive political and social networks and actors.

New political, social, and community groups and organizations have nevertheless emerged and are organizing, but have yet to develop into social forces rooted in the population capable of broader mobilizations in society. At the same time, collaboration between the different regions of Syria, including with Kurdish organizations present in northeast Syria, must be intensified.

However, 14 years of war and destruction, and more than 50 years of dictatorship, weigh heavily on this reconstruction...

30 July 2025

Published in collaboration with [Spectre](#)

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