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Clashes in Sweida and the Sectarian Question in Syria

Unit for Political Studies

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Sweida province in southern Syria, home to a majority Druze population, witnessed a bloody bout of sectarian violence from 13 - 17 July in which dozens of civilians, Syrian security personnel, Bedouin tribesmen, and members of local factions and militias were killed. Israel capitalized on the crisis, which was triggered by an ambush on the Damascus-Sweida highway, to present itself as the protector of the Syrian Druze in the region, many of whom had suffered atrocities or been killed, acts sometimes documented by security personnel. Israel launched airstrikes against Syrian government forces that were attempting to retake the provincial capital of Sweida city, some 100 kilometres from Damascus, and forced them to withdraw, following an agreement with local notables. Israel also struck key state institutions in Damascus.

After the withdrawal of government forces, Bedouin civilians faced revenge massacres and displacement by local Druze militias, raising the spectre of a major civil conflict. The crisis is the latest in a series of sectarian clashes that began on the Syrian coast in March¹ and spread to areas with large Druze communities around Damascus (Jaramana and Ashrafiyat Sahnaya) in late April. These repeated episodes, coupled with growing Israeli interference, threaten the country's unity and political and social stability.

The Roots of the Crisis

Sweida had attempted to shelter itself from the violence during the early years of the Syrian revolution. However, the region saw widespread, persistent protests against Bashar al-Assad's regime from early 2023 onwards, and would remain beyond regime control until Assad's fall in December 2024. The forces of the new Syrian government, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), soon attempted to enter the province and impose state control there. However, some of the city's spiritual leaders, including Druze leader Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, along with the armed factions supporting him – such as the Sweida Military Council, a local militia formed after the fall of Assad and believed to have ties to Israel – refused to allow them to enter the governorate.

Later, al-Hijri announced his refusal to recognize or deal with the new government, describing it as a collection of extremist, terrorist organizations.² Despite an agreement to reactivate the institutions of the state, and the government's appointment of a new governor, tensions remained high. The situation escalated further after sectarian clashes flared in April in the Druze-majority districts of Jaramana and Ashrafiyat Sahnaya in Rif Dimashq (rural Damascus) province. Clashes spread to the outskirts of Sweida province after a fake audio recording attributed to a Druze cleric, which included offensive remarks about the Prophet Mohammed, went viral.³ This sparked widespread anger,

1 "Sectarian Violence in Syria's Coast: Background and Implications," Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 13/3/2025, accessed 19/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPL9>

2 "Al-Hijri: Terrorist factions control the administration of Damascus," *Euronews*, 10/4/2025, accessed 19/7/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://short-link.me/13BMN>.

3 "Sectarian Violence in Damascus and Sweida Countryside: Future Implications," Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 14/5/2025, accessed 19/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GP7h>

accompanied by a wave of sectarian incitement, mobilization, and the spread of rumours on social media platforms. Tensions reached their peak on 21 May, when Druze armed groups stormed the governor's palace and detained him, demanding the release of a man held on criminal charges. The governor submitted his resignation in protest. However, he soon returned to work, after reaching an agreement with Sweida dignitaries and certain political and armed factions. The agreement also stipulated that some 2,000 fighters from the province be integrated into the police and Public Security forces, to be used to ensure security in the province.

On 11 July, armed Bedouins attacked a vegetable truck on the Damascus-Sweida highway, assaulting the driver and looting the vehicle. This incident sparked a series of tit-for-tat attacks between Bedouins and Druze, reviving long-standing rivalries between the two. Starting with reciprocal kidnappings, these attacks quickly escalated into armed clashes that left dozens dead and wounded on both sides. At this point, the government decided to intervene to halt the fighting, attempting to impose its authority over the governorate after local factions called on it to end the chaos. However, as government forces entered the city, they were ambushed by opposition militias, resulting in the deaths of several fighters and the capture of others. Opposition from al-Hijri and the military forces supporting him, who were now clearly relying on Israeli support, thwarted several ceasefire attempts before the government forces once again withdrew, amid reports that they had carried out summary executions and atrocities whilst in control of the city centre.

The Israeli Factor

Since the fall of the Assad regime, Israel has been attempting to impose a new status quo in southern Syria.⁴ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has laid out two main goals in this regard.⁵ The first is to transform the region stretching from the Golan Heights to Sweida, via Daraa and Rural Damascus, into a demilitarized zone, off limits to Syrian government forces. The second Israeli goal is to protect the Druze; given the presence of Druze family and sectarian connections between southern Syria, the Golan Heights and northern Israel, this is a tool Netanyahu can use for his own domestic political advantage.

As the violence surged, hundreds of Druze citizens of Israel crossed the border into Syria in an attempt to reach Sweida, as Druze religious leaders within Israel stepped up their pressure on Netanyahu to intervene militarily in the crisis.⁶ He soon obliged: Israel carried out airstrikes against at least 200 targets inside Syria. Some of the strikes targeted Syrian government forces attempting to retake

4 "Israel's Policy in post-Assad Syria," Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 11/3/2025, accessed 19/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPf>

5 "Netanyahu: We will prevent Syrian forces and weapons south of Damascus," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 17/7/2025, accessed 19/7/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://short-link.me/13BXC>.

6 "Netanyahu: Muwaffaq Tarif is the one who requested help for the Druze in Syria," *RT Arabic*, 17/7/2025, accessed 19/7/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://short-link.me/13BYD>.

the province from local armed factions, but most had no connection to the events in Sweida. They included the military General Staff headquarters in Damascus and buildings attached to the presidential palace, strikes intended to undermine the prestige of the Syrian state.

Israel is clearly exploiting sectarian tensions and divisions in Syria to reshape the landscape in the country's south, with the ultimate goal of fragmenting the country into sectarian cantons. Immediately after the fall of the Assad regime, Israel launched one of its largest ever air campaigns against Syria, targeting military sites and equipment across the country in an effort to weaken the state, strip it of its military capabilities, and prevent it from extending its sovereignty over the areas south of Damascus.

Moreover, Israel suspended the 1974 Separation of Forces Agreement (signed after the War of the previous year) and invaded large swathes of Syrian territory, occupying what had been the buffer zone, the summit of Jabal al-Sheikh (Mount Hermon), and parts of Rif Dimashq, in a bid to establish a demilitarized zone and prevent the Syrian state exercising sovereignty over its southern regions. To facilitate this, Israel is making efforts to capitalise on the new Syrian administration's inability to lead a national dialogue or adopt the mentality of a state representing all citizens, allowing Israel to present itself as the protector of the Druze. It has also begun sending relief aid and offering financial incentives and services that the Syrian government is unable to provide.

The latest campaign marked the second time Israel has used force against the new Syrian government's forces on the pretext of protecting Syrian Druze citizens. The Israeli Air Force had previously carried out raids targeting the vicinity of the town of Sahnaya in Rif Dimashq in April, following instructions from the Chief of Staff to target Syrian government sites if what he described as "acts of violence against the Druze community" continued.⁷

Israel did not stop there. It launched a massive air campaign which reach the vicinity of the presidential palace in Damascus, as well as several other parts of Syria.⁸ Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yisrael Katz, in a joint statement, said the campaign was a "warning" to the Damascus government to prevent any harm coming to the Druze.⁹

The current Syrian administration appears not to have fully appreciated the nature and seriousness of the Israeli position. Israel plans to seize control of swathes of Syria south of Damascus and turn it into its own sphere of influence – or to partition the country. The United States does not oppose the first option, and Israel has refused to withdraw to the 1974 armistice lines unless the Syrian

⁷ "Israeli strikes on Sahnaya and Public Security announces the end of 'security operation' in the area," *Al-Jazeera*, 30/4/2025, accessed 19/7/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GQ09>.

⁸ "Katz warns Al-Sharaa after the bombing of the presidential palace in Damascus," *Al-Jazeera*, 2/5/2025, accessed 19/7/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPiX>.

⁹ "Netanyahu: We have carried out a warning strike against 'extremists' who were preparing to attack Syria's Druze," *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 30/4/3025, accessed 19/7/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPWs>.

administration accepts it. Damascus has adopted a cautious stance, perhaps in response to Arab and Western advice, to the point of avoiding even condemning Israeli bombings and occupation in certain cases, and even avoiding repeating Syrian national principles regarding the Golan Heights and other issues, as if this were the discourse of the former regime rather than that of the Syrian nation state that unites the Syrian people.

This strategy has not yielded the desired results, to say the least. Israel has gone as far as bombing the buildings of sovereign Syrian institutions. Miscalculating Israeli intentions is one thing, but it is quite another to entertain the illusion that it is possible to neutralize the occupying state, which, if its first option fails, will seek to partition Syria. Both these options must be confronted. This cannot be achieved by relying on countries allied with Israel, which believe they are doing the Syrian administration a favour simply by recognizing it. Rather, it will require unity among the Syrian people and the building of institutions that represent them and are capable of thwarting Israel's plans, reducing reliance on the goodwill of its allies, and isolating the forces on which it relies in Syria.

A Political Crisis with Sectarian and Security Manifestations

Syria's latest bout of sectarian clashes, this time in the Sweida governorate, reflect a deep political crisis that manifests as sectarian violence, which has spread from one region to another since the fall of the Assad regime. The state has meanwhile failed to criminalize sectarian incitement and mobilization, or to adopt an official discourse that unequivocally and firmly condemns them. Clashes of a confessional hue have thus become a real threat to Syria's territorial and societal unity. This danger is growing, due to the proliferation of weapons in the hands of individuals and local groups, along with the fact the authorities have refrained from building a domestic security apparatus and army with the official ideology of a state – rather than that of a group controlling the state – or law enforcement agencies that treat Syrians as citizens, without discrimination based on sectarian or religious affiliation or gender. This is compounded by the Syrian administration's inability to control the behaviour of armed factions acting in its name or affiliated with it.

These factors explain the lack of trust between the state apparatus and segments of the Syrian public, who see Syrian security services not as representing a state that encompasses all its citizens, but as representing – in form, discourse, and practice – an ideological group with preconceived attitudes toward certain groups of citizens, based on their identity. Furthermore, a significant proportion of Syrians feel marginalized and excluded as a result of the monopolization of power by the single group that seized control of the state after the fall of the regime.

This has been reflected in every step the government has taken since, including: the so-called National Dialogue Conference, hastily arranged so it would be seen as having been held in response to demands by outside powers; the Constitutional Declaration, which banned political party life and

concentrated all powers in the hands of the president;¹⁰ the formation of an administration that appears to be composed of technocrats, but is in fact dominated by HTS with some non-aligned members; the absence of a bare minimum of genuine political representation for the various strands and segments of the Syrian population, given the state's inability to organize elections; and the delay in launching the transitional justice process and announcing the findings of the investigation into the previous sectarian clashes in the coastal region. None of those who committed crimes on the Syrian coast have been held accountable – even those who ostentatiously filmed and documented their crimes and could thus be held accountable without waiting for the conclusion of the investigation. In this context, the atrocities in Sweida are hardly surprising.

Diving into questions such as who started the violence and who committed the most horrific crimes would be a futile pursuit and a diversion from the main issue that has been awaiting resolution since the fall of the regime: the task of building a modern state and its institutions, a state for all its citizens. The new Syrian administration has moved in the opposite direction, with one group controlling the levers of state power in an imitation of one-party rule, marginalizing the majority of citizens and qualified individuals, refraining from representing all segments of the Syrian people under the pretext of rejecting any system of quotas, and adopting an ideological discourse that is inconsistent with the diversity of Syrian society.

The Syrian administration needs to start from within if it is to become robust and block any pretext for foreign interference. It must deal with the events in Sweida as part of this political crisis, which demands a review of all every step taken since the fall of the regime. This includes launching a truly representative national dialogue conference, to which Syrian political and societal forces and independent figures are invited, to agree on a roadmap for the transitional period, the formation of a national unity government headed by interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa, and the election of a constitution-drafting committee, within the framework of the national dialogue conference, composed of political figures and legal experts, leading to the writing of a new law on political parties and a new electoral law.¹¹ Unless a Syrian national consensus is reached on the form of the state and its political system, with the participation of all Syrians, the country will not be able to transition smoothly and peacefully, marginalize and hold legally accountable those within any segment of the population who seek foreign support, or put an end to interference by Israel, which aims at undermining Syria's territorial and societal unity.

¹⁰ "The Constitutional Declaration and Challenges of the Syrian Transition," Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 22/5/2025, accessed 19/7/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPDS>.

¹¹ "New Syria: A roadmap for the transitional phase," Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 23/12/2025, accessed 19/7/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://short-link.me/17Sij>.