

SUWAYDA AND THE FUTURE OF SYRIA

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Original draft for Green Left (The published version is much shorter)

On 9 July, following negotiations between Ahmed al-Sharaa's Syrian Government and the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, an interview with Tom Barrack caused widespread consternation. The American Ambassador to Turkey and Special Envoy for Syria [pronounced](#) – in line with al-Sharaa and al-Sharaa's Turkish backers - that "federalism doesn't work" and "There's only one way, and that way is Damascus".

By Saturday 19 July, the United States had supported an agreement that recognised that the Syrian army presence in the Druze majority governorate of Suwayda in southwest Syria would be strictly limited; and had agreed that the Druze would be left to police their own internal security. By Sunday 20th it had become clear that government forces would remain outside the governorate completely.

In between these dates, hundreds of people were killed, Arab tribal fighters demonstrated their strength and violent sectarianism, disparate Druze factions united in their opposition to the Syrian government, Israel further consolidated its hegemony over southern Syria, and Western-backed Al-Sharaa was left looking distinctly wobbly - unable to maintain peace and with his plans for centralisation in tatters.

Sectarian violence and humanitarian disaster

The Druze of Suwayda have suffered a week of widespread and brutal sectarian violence, and by Saturday they were struggling to survive siege conditions. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) has [counted](#) 1017 deaths, including 194 people "executed by gunmen affiliated with the Ministries of Defence and Interior". The internet is full of videos of fighters linked to Ahmed al-Sharaa's Syrian Government brandishing weapons to demonstrate their bloodlust, and some of these men have shared footage of themselves committing horrendous atrocities against the Druze, who they decry as heretics. In one widely shared video, three young men are forced to jump off a balcony while being shot at. The journalist Jenan Moussa has [identified them](#) as two student brothers and their dentist cousin.

Druze militias, created for protection during the civil war, have been defending their region, and over a third of the dead were government fighters. SOHR also counted three victims of extrajudicial killing by Druze gunmen.

SOHR [described](#) a humanitarian disaster with no drinking water or electricity, scarce food, hospital rooms filled with decomposing bodies, and a health service unable to function. Homes have been destroyed and looted, and, on Friday, the [United Nations estimated](#) that nearly 80,000 people had already been displaced.

It wasn't until Sunday, when the region had regained an uneasy calm, that the first humanitarian aid was able to get through.

A background of sectarianism

The catalyst for this week's violence was the [robbing and torture](#) of a young Druze truck driver on 12 July. This prompted the [abduction](#) of Bedouin vehicles and drivers in response, which was met with the [abduction](#) of Druze civilians. The next day, the abductions [escalated](#) to deadly armed sectarian clashes, and [fighters from other areas](#) arrived in Suwayda to support the fight against the Druze.

Violent incidents between the Druze and the Bedouin who live among them go back decades, but the Syrian civil war – and especially the interventions by the United States and by Turkey, have nurtured the growth of intolerant Islamist gangs and generated an environment where sectarian attacks have become normalised. At the same time, economic hardship, exacerbated by US and European sanctions, has created a situation where people easily take out their frustrations on other groups.

We have seen religious-inspired violence in the areas that are occupied by Turkey and controlled by Turkey's mercenaries; and we saw it in March when an uprising by Alawites loyal to the ousted regime of Bashar al-Assad was met by sectarian attacks that murdered an estimated 1500 of their co-religionists and drove thousands of others out of their villages. Like now in Suwayda, the perpetrators of the March attacks were militias under overall government control – especially militias nurtured by Turkey - and also members of the government forces, aided by irregular tribal fighters. Al-Sharaa expressed appropriate outrage, but the Syrian Government [has still not published](#) their promised investigation or done anything to bring the perpetrators to justice. (The completion of the investigation report was announced on Sunday, which seems unlikely to be coincidental.) Murders and kidnappings of Alawites continue, and some of the [same men](#) who took part in the March killings were also in Suwayda.

Sectarian violence flared up in Druze areas, including Suwayda, [in May](#), after the publication of an audio tape that claimed to be of a Druze sheikh insulting Muhammad. The sheikh denied any connection to the tape, and Druze authorities condemned the insult, but the provocation had done its work. 79 Druze were killed in the ensuing attacks on their community, along with thirty government-aligned fighters. The May violence was brought to an end with an agreement that the region's internal security forces would all be recruited locally, while government forces were supposed to secure the road to Damascus.

The recent violence escalated into a major threat to the Druze community and region on the evening of 13 July, when government forces, claiming to be imposing peace, intervened against the Druze. The next day, the most prominent Druze Spiritual leader, Hikmat Salman al-Hijri , [made public his rejection](#) of these forces that “did not act as protectors but instead bombed our people in the border villages and provided support to extremist gangs using heavy weapons and drones;” and he called for “international protection”.

The Israeli factor

Over 15 and 16 July, Israel entered the fray with a series of airstrikes aimed at Syrian military targets. These included vehicles, and military convoys , and even the Defence Ministry in Damascus. The Israelis claimed to be saviours coming to the aid of the Druze in Syria and to be responding to the call of the Druze in Israel, but, as has been widely recognised, the situation provided Israel with a perfect opportunity to further their own aims. Benjamin

Netanyahu has [insisted](#) that the area of Syria south of Damascus must be demilitarised, and that they will not allow the presence of Syrian troops there. This is not just about creating a protective buffer zone. Israel has shown themselves determined to prevent Syria from ever achieving independent military strength, and they have already systematically destroyed all the country's significant military resources. Some members of the Israeli government have ambitions to incorporate more of Syria into a "Greater Israel", but even without this, Israel wants to maintain and enforce their dominance, and to weaken the power of their Turkish rivals. Their attacks appear to have unravelled the links that were being established between Israel and al-Sharaa, who has dropped his West-pleasing rhetoric, but Israel gives greater importance to military might.

As Mouin Rabbani [points out](#), Israel's treatment of the Druze of the occupied Golan heights makes a mockery of Israel's claim to be protectors of the Druze community. Most Golan Druze were ethnically cleansed, and most of those who remained had their land confiscated. When they protested at being made to have Israeli identity documents they were given collective punishment. In addition, many members of Syria's Druze community want nothing to do with Israel, and no connection with a state that would make them into even more of a target for their Arab neighbours. However, the Israeli attacks did prompt the withdrawal of Syrian government forces, as Israel demanded. And al-Sharaa [accepted](#) that, in order to avoid war, the Druze would be left to control their own internal security, as per the May agreement.

After the government forces left, the Druze returned to find bodies in the street and destroyed buildings. And their reprieve was short lived. With the departure of official state forces, tribal militias and Islamist mobsters from across the country began to descend on Suwayda. These men had been fired up by videos that purported to show Druze murdering Arab families and were out for divine revenge; but [SOHR found](#) only one video showing a Druze perpetrator, others were of Arab violence against Druze or from different situations entirely.

In the middle of Friday night, US Ambassador Barrack [announced on Twitter](#) that Israel and Syria, supported by the United States, had agreed a ceasefire, and that everyone should put down their weapons. Israel had agreed to allow the Syrian army [limited access](#) to the region for two days, with the expectation that they would control its borders and ensure removal of irregular fighters.

Of course, it didn't work quite like that. Saturday was another day of fierce fighting, and the Druze insisted that no government troops enter their region, even temporarily, but that night Druze [celebrated](#) their regained control of Suwayda City. By Sunday, most of the assorted Arab fighters had left, and the Governorate was described as calm with just a few clashes in the villages - especially after the Druze had [failed to turn up](#) to an agreed prisoner exchange. Government forces guarded the roads into the governorate and built earth barriers to hold back the irregular Arab fighters. Israeli aircraft and drones provided a menacing presence.

The attack on their homeland has [united the Druze](#) against the government, and even groups that once urged dialogue and concession fought against the government forces, describing them as accomplices of their sectarian attackers. Al-Hijra's domination is assured, and he [demands](#) that government forces keep out of Suwayda, and calls on the United States and Israel to guarantee security. For his part, al-Sharaa, who is being criticised from all sides, has tried to put the blame for what has happened [onto the Druze fighters](#).

The battered city and governorate – which had previously survived the civil war relatively unscathed – finally began to receive humanitarian aid on Sunday, with the Druze refusing to accept any accompanying government security escort and even [preventing the entry](#) of government ministers.

Centralisation versus local autonomy

The United States has been pushing for a strong centralised Syria, and Barrack's words [seem to have encouraged al-Sharaa](#) – who Barrack has praised with comparisons to George Washington – to believe that his attempt to control Suwayda would have US support. But a strong centralised Syria is not acceptable to Israel. To them, al-Sharaa is tolerable only because he is weak.

The events of the last few days have set back al-Sharaa's centralising plans, though not, it seems, his ultimate ambition. The raw display of sectarian violence, and the government's complicity in it, has ensured that minority groups are even more determined to pursue an autonomous future and maintain the means for their own self defence: to look to the model established by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

North and East Syria is home to many ethnicities, and its local governance is organised by geographical area rather than ethnicity. Within each area, positive discrimination ensures that all ethnicities are represented. The Autonomous Administration insists that they are not looking for separation from Syria, but for a Syria united through recognising diversity; however, this is a message that the centrists in Damascus, Ankara and Washington do not want to hear.

Suwayda had already looked to North and East Syria for inspiration during the civil war. They kept their distance from the Islamicist opposition, and especially from Al-Nusra Front, Al-Sharaa's former group, which was responsible for [massacring](#) twenty Druze and forcing hundreds of others to convert to Islam. But they established their own defence militias, and anti-government protests, begun in 2022, made links with the autonomous project at the other end of the country. For now, the Druze of Suwayda have retained their autonomy, but Suwayda's Arab minority are not party to their celebrations and Bedouin families are being bussed out with the help of the government. This is very different from the North and East Syrian model. On top of this, the Israeli link promises major problems for the future.

Meanwhile, with the Arab tribal militias retaining their autonomous existence, it has become increasingly difficult for al-Sharaa to argue that the Druze militias, or North and East Syria's Syrian Democratic forces, must dissolve completely into the Syrian army.

However, any permanent recognition of local autonomies still seems a long way off.

This has been underlined by the Syrian Government's treatment of the autonomous Kurdish districts of Aleppo – Sheikh Maqsood and Ashrafiyeh. Early in the year, these came to a temporary arrangement with the central authorities in Damascus whereby the districts would continue to administer their own local affairs and local security, while services would become better integrated with the rest of the city, and external security would be taken over by Syrian government forces. Now, though, just as in the time of Assad, the two districts have been put [under an embargo](#). No fuel has been allowed in for a month. Electricity generators work just three hours a day, and fuel stocks are running out.

On Saturday, the people of North and East Syria [celebrated](#) the 13th anniversary of the Rojava revolution and the beginning of their autonomy. They argue that this could provide a model for a future decentralised Syrian, and two days earlier, the women of the North and East Syrian city of Qamishlo marched in [support of the people of Suwayda](#) and their historic resistance.

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