

GREEN LEFT

Suwayda's resistance and the struggle for Syria's future

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Women in the city of Qamishlo march in solidarity with the people of Suwayda, July 17.

Photos: Kongra Star Women's Movement/Facebook

Following negotiations between Ahmed al-Sharaa's Syrian government and the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) on July 9, an interview with United States ambassador to Turkey and Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack caused widespread consternation. In line with al-Sharaa and his Turkish backers, Barrack [pronounced](#) that “federalism doesn't work” and “there's only one way, and that way is Damascus”.

By July 19, the US supported an agreement limiting Syrian army presence in Suwayda, a Druze-majority governorate in southwest Syria, and had accepted that local forces would manage Suwayda's internal security. By July 20, it had become clear that government forces would remain outside the governorate completely.

In between these dates, brutal sectarian violence left more than 1000 people dead, disparate Druze factions united against the Syrian government and Israel further consolidated its grip on southern Syria. Western-backed al-Sharaa was left looking distinctly wobbly — unable to maintain peace, with his plans for centralisation in tatters.

Sectarian violence

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) [recorded](#) 1017 deaths by July 19, including 194 people “executed by gunmen affiliated with the Ministries of Defence and Interior”. Videos circulating online show fighters linked to al-Sharaa's government brandishing weapons and committing horrendous atrocities against the Druze, who they decry as “heretics”. One widely shared [video](#) shows three young men — two student brothers and their cousin — forced to jump off a balcony as they are shot at.

Druze militias, formed for protection during the civil war, have been defending their region. More than a third of the dead were government fighters. SOHR also documented three extrajudicial killings by Druze gunmen.

Suwayda was facing a [humanitarian disaster](#): no electricity or drinking water; scarce food; hospitals overflowing with decomposing bodies; and destroyed and looted homes. The United Nations [estimated](#) on July 18 that 80,000 people had

been displaced. Aid only reached the area on July 20 after an uneasy calm was restored.

Long roots of conflict

The catalyst for the violence was the July 12 [robbing and torture](#) of a Druze truck driver, which triggered retaliatory [kidnappings](#) of Bedouin drivers. This was met by further [abductions](#) of Druze civilians, which [escalated](#) to deadly armed sectarian clashes on July 13. 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 have occurred for decades. However, the Syrian civil war — and especially US and Turkish interventions — has nurtured the rise of intolerant Islamist gangs, deepened economic hardship and consequent frustration (exacerbated by Western sanctions) and generated an environment where sectarian attacks are normalised.

Attacks on religious minorities have become routine in Turkish-occupied areas and areas controlled by Turkey's mercenaries. In March, an uprising by Alawites loyal to ousted Bashar al-Assad was met with sectarian attacks against their co-religionists that killed an estimated 1500 and drove thousands from their villages.

Like last week in Suwayda, the perpetrators were militias under overall government control and also members of the government forces, aided by irregular Arab tribal fighters. Some of the same men have been [attacking](#) the Druze. Despite official promises of an inquiry, the Syrian government [has still not published](#) its investigation or held perpetrators accountable. The completion of the investigation report was finally announced on July 20, which seems unlikely to be coincidental.

Sectarian violence flared up in Druze areas, including in Suwayda, [in May](#) after an audio recording of a Druze sheikh allegedly insulting Muhammad was published. The sheikh denied any connection to the tape, and Druze authorities condemned the insult, but the provocation resulted in 79 Druze and 30 government-aligned fighters being killed in the ensuing attacks.

A temporary deal bringing an end to the violence left locals in charge of internal security, while government forces were to secure the road to Damascus.

The recent violence escalated into a major threat to the Druze community on July 13, when government forces entered Suwayda claiming to be imposing peace. Prominent Druze spiritual leader Hikmat Salman al-Hijri denounced them on July 14, saying that the forces “bombed our people ... and provided support to extremist gangs using heavy weapons and drones”, and he called for “international protection”.

The Israeli factor

On July 15–16, Israel launched airstrikes aimed at Syrian military targets, including the defence ministry in Damascus, claiming to be coming to the aid of Druze communities in Syria at the request of Druze in Israel. In reality, the situation provided Israel with a perfect opportunity to further its own aims.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted that Syria south of Damascus must remain demilitarised and that Israel will not allow the presence of Syrian troops.

Israel is determined to prevent Syria from gaining independent military strength and has already systematically destroyed the country’s military infrastructure. It seeks to cement its regional dominance while undercutting the power of its Turkish rivals. Some members of the Israeli government have ambitions to incorporate more of Syria into a “Greater Israel”.

Indeed, Israel’s treatment of the Druze in the occupied Golan Heights makes a mockery of its claim to be protectors of the Druze: most were ethnically cleansed, and those who remained saw their land confiscated and collective punishment imposed when they resisted the imposition of Israeli identity documents.

Many Syrian Druze want nothing to do with Israel, aware that it would make them even greater targets for their Arab neighbours. However, Israel’s attacks forced the

government's withdrawal, persuading al-Sharaa to [accept](#), in order to avoid a war, Druze control of their own internal security, as per the May agreement.

Suwayda was still exposed to roaming tribal militias and Islamist fighters fired up by disinformation portraying Druze atrocities against Arabs. [SOHR found](#) only one genuine video of Druze-on-Arab violence; others showed Arab violence against Druze or were from different situations entirely.

Barrack announced a US-backed ceasefire [on X](#) on July 18, with Israel agreeing to [give Syrian forces two days](#) to secure borders and remove irregular fighters.

However, July 19 was another day of fierce fighting. Druze fighters rejected any government presence, and that night [celebrated](#) regaining control of Suwayda City.

By July 20, most Arab fighters had left and the governorate was calm, with the exception of a few clashes — especially after the Druze [failed to turn up](#) to an agreed prisoner exchange. Government forces guarded the roads into the governorate and built earthworks to hold back the irregular Arab fighters, and Israeli aircraft and drones maintained a menacing presence.

The attack on their homeland [united the Druze](#) against the government. Groups previously urging dialogue and concession fought against government forces, denouncing them as accomplices of sectarian militias. Al-Hijri's domination is assured, and he [demands](#) the exclusion of government forces and calls on the US and Israel to guarantee security.

Al-Sharaa, under fire from all sides, [blames Druze fighters](#) for the crisis. Suwayda, which had previously survived the civil war relatively unscathed, finally received humanitarian aid on July 20 — with the Druze refusing the entry of accompanying government security escorts or [ministers' visits](#).

Centralisation versus autonomy

The US pushes for a strong, centralised Syria, and Barrack has compared al-Sharaa to George Washington. Believing the [US's backing was assured](#), al-Sharaa tried to

control Suwayda. But Israel prefers a fragile, divided Syria, tolerating al-Sharaa only so long as he remains weak.

Recent events have set back al-Sharaa's centralising plans, although his ultimate ambition remains.

The raw display of sectarian violence, and the government's complicity in it, have strengthened minority groups' determination to secure their own autonomy and self-defence, inspired by the AANES model in North and East Syria.

AANES structures governance geographically, not ethnically, with guaranteed representation for the diverse ethnicities. The AANES does not seek secession from Syria, but a country united through recognising diversity — a message rejected by the centralists in Damascus, Ankara and Washington.

Suwayda drew inspiration from this model during the civil war, rejecting Islamist opposition groups, including al-Sharaa's former group, al-Nusra Front, which [massacred](#) 20 Druze and forcibly converted hundreds. Druze established their own defence militias, and anti-government protests, which began in 2022, built links with AANES.

For now, Druze have retained their autonomy, but Suwayda's Arab minority are not party to the celebrations, with Bedouin families being bussed out with the help of the government — a stark contrast to the AANES model. Israel's growing role promises further tensions.

Meanwhile, al-Sharaa will find it harder to demand that the Druze and AANES's Syrian Democratic Forces dissolve into the national army while Arab tribal militias retain *de facto* autonomy.

Permanent recognition of local autonomies seems a long way off. Damascus has reimposed [embargoes](#) on autonomous Kurdish districts — Sheikh Maqsood and Ashrafieh — in Aleppo, cutting off fuel for a month, which means that electricity generators work just three hours a day and fuel stocks are running out. This is despite a temporary arrangement made with authorities in Damascus that the

districts would administer their own affairs and local security, and external security would be taken over by Syrian government forces.

On July 19, the people of North and East Syria [celebrated](#) 13 years of the Rojava revolution and its democratic, gender-equal, multi-ethnic self-governance — they argue that this could provide a model for a future decentralised Syria. Two days earlier, women in the city of Qamishlo marched [in solidarity with the people of Suwayda](#) and their historic resistance.

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