

The Syrian Druze: Between the Hammer of Integration and the Anvil of Separation

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The Druze population in the Middle East, estimated at about one million, is concentrated primarily in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. A small community migrated to northern Jordan at the end of the twentieth century, while today even smaller diaspora communities are scattered across the Americas, Australia, and West Africa. Syria is home to the largest Druze population—numbering around 700,000 people, or roughly three percent of the national total. Druze homelands are overwhelmingly rural, clustered in the hilly regions of southern Mount Lebanon, Mount Hermon, Idlib, the Galilean Hills, and Mount Carmel. Some argue that rural settlement has shielded the Druze from persecution by both Muslim neighbors and the state. However, geography alone does not explain these patterns. Equally important is the Druze preference for isolation and distance from central authorities to maximize their autonomy.¹



Unlike other minority groups in the Middle East, such as Arab Christians or Shiites, the Druze have no urban centers of their own. This absence has, on the one hand, significantly contributed to the durability and coherence of their traditional social order. On the other hand, it has hindered their ability to adapt economically and structurally to the demands of modernity. Across Syria, Lebanon, or Israel, the Druze have also maintained a long-standing tradition of endogamous marriage.² This custom has played a direct role in preserving the group's communal norms, values, and kinship-based social relations.

¹ Salman Falah, *The Druze in the Middle East* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2000), 13–15 (in Hebrew).

² Fuad Khuri, "Aspects of Druze Social Structure: There Are No Free-Floating Druze," in *The Druze: Realities and Perceptions*, ed. Kamal Salibi (London: Druze Heritage Foundation, 2006), 62, hereafter cited as Khuri, "Aspects of Druze Social Structure."

Druze society is often described as a model of internal social cohesion, anchored in a strong attachment to ethnic identity. Fuad Khuri observes four interconnected factors contributing to this cohesion: 1) the belief in reincarnation, which fosters amicable relationships between families; 2) the authority of religious male leaders (*Shaykh-‘Aqls*); 3) the influence of territorial contiguity among Druze-populated areas; and 4) a sense of brotherhood (*hifz al-Ikhwān*).³ The community is also founded upon clanism—a system of social differentiation rooted in shared ancestry. Although its economic base has weakened over time, clanism continues to serve important social and political functions. Familial solidarity further reinforces Druze unity, embodying what Kamal Junblat famously termed “le Monolithisme Druse.”⁴

For centuries, Lebanon was the primary stronghold of the Druze in the Arab Middle East. The Syrian uprising and ensuing civil war, however, have shifted attention to the precarious situation of Syria’s Druze minority.

This article explores the consequences of the civil war for the Druze in Syria and, more broadly, for Druze communities across the Middle East.

The Druze in Modern Syria

Since 1918, the Druze have played an outsized role in Syria’s modern history despite comprising only three percent of the population. From 1925 to 1927, Druze leader Sultan al-Atrash spearheaded the Great Syrian Revolt in Jabal al-Druze (the Druze mountain region). This event, deeply embedded in Druze collective memory, was a landmark episode in modern Syrian history. As Philip Khoury observes, “The great revolt was a popular and widespread anti-imperialist uprising with a pronounced nationalist orientation.”⁵ Beyond its political dimensions, the revolt reflected deeper struggles in post-independence Syria between absentee landowning classes aligned with the colonial elite—who had secured positions within the ruling system—and emerging classes of more modest origins.⁶ The revolt ultimately secured Jabal al-Druze’s inclusion in

³ Khuri, “Aspects of Druze Social Structure,” 62–63.

⁴ Kamal Junblat, *Ḥaqīqat al-thawrah al-Lubnānīyah*, 4th ed. (al-Mukhtārah: al-Dār al-Taḥaddumīyah, 1987), 84; Samir Khalaf, “Family Associations in Lebanon,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 2 (1971): 243; Thomas Scheffler, “Survival and Leadership at an Interface Periphery: The Druzes in Lebanon,” in *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, ed. Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, Barbara Kellber-Heinkele, and Anke Otter-Beaujean (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 234.

⁵ Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate* (Princeton University Press, 1987), 205.

⁶ Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (University of Texas Press, 2005), 105.

the Syrian state after independence, but the region retained a degree of autonomy until Adib al-Shishakli's military regime (1951–1954) imposed direct control from Damascus.

The political rise of Syria's Baath Party was a decisive turning point, creating new opportunities for minority groups—particularly Alawites and Druze—to occupy influential positions in the military and state apparatus. Following the 1963 Baathist coup d'état, Druze participation in Syrian politics expanded, with several Druze securing high-ranking positions in the army and the Baathist party. Notable figures to hold senior positions included Salim Hatum, Hammud al-Shufi, Mansur al-Atrash, and Shibli al-Ayssami. A founding father of the Baath Party, al-Ayssami reached the highest political office ever held by a Syrian Druze, serving as vice president under Amin al-Hafiz (1965–1966).⁷ However, a failed coup in September 1966, led by Salim Hatum and other Druze officers, brought this period of Druze prominence to an abrupt end. In its aftermath, the Druze were widely

purged from both the army and the Baath Party.⁸

The purge of 1966 bolstered the position of Alawite officers who orchestrated it.⁹ After Hafez Assad seized power in 1970 and tightened his grip over the army and security apparatus, Druze influence declined even further. Yet the Druze continued to back the regime, drawn to its secularist and socioeconomic policies. As Hinnebusch observes, “A land-poor impoverished community possessing nothing but its drive for education and careers, had everything to gain from a state-dominated economy which would divert the control of opportunities from the private bourgeoisie.”¹⁰

Prior to the 1963 coup, the urban Sunni elite had largely excluded the traditionally marginalized Alawis, Druze, and members of other rural communities from political power. This history of marginalization incentivized the Druze to support the Baathist regime, which quickly enacted discriminatory measures against groups that the Druze and rural minorities viewed as former

⁷ Said al-Ghamidi, *al-Inhiraf al-Aqdi fi Adb al-Hadatha wa Fikriha* (Jaddah: Dar al-Andalus al-Khadra, 2003), 700.

⁸ Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (I.B. Tauris, 1996), 53–58, hereafter cited as van Dam, *Struggle for Power*.

⁹ Van Dam, *Struggle for Power*, 59–60.

¹⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (Routledge, 2001), 63.

oppressors.¹¹ Nevertheless, once in power, the Baathists progressively stripped traditional feudal Druze landholding families of their authority. By contrast, in Israel and Lebanon the state preserved—and, in some cases, even reinforced—the Druze community's traditional leadership. In present-day Syria, the collapse of state authority has severely weakened these old power structures, including the role of Druze spiritual leaders as the community's chief representatives.

The Druze in the Shadow of the Syrian Uprising

The Arab Spring uprisings undoubtedly rank among the most consequential events in the modern history of the Arab Middle East, with profound implications for the well-being of ethnic and religious minorities in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. In Syria, as in other parts of the region, the uprising that erupted in March 2011 presented the Druze with unprecedented challenges. Led primarily by Sunni activists, many with Islamist leanings, the rebellion stirred deep anxieties about the survival of Syria's secular order. The Druze increasingly felt caught between the anvil of anarchy and the hammer of Islamism.

Bashar Assad's accession to power in 2000 brought little change to the Druze community's relationship with the regime. When the popular uprising began in Dara'a, in southern Syria, in March 2011, it failed to spread to the Druze stronghold of Hauran. Although a handful of intellectuals and elite figures, such as Rima Flehan, Muntaha al-Atrash, and Jaber al-Shufi, publicly supported the uprising, the vast majority of Druze remained loyal to the regime.¹² Rebel leaders struggled to recruit Druze, while most Druze soldiers in the Syrian army continued to back the regime. This loyalty was not an act of *taqiyya* (a term referring to the practice of concealing one's religious beliefs to avoid persecution or potential harm) as claimed by the classical Orientalist school but rather a product of Syria's sociopolitical structures and the uprising itself.

The growing Islamization of the opposition, the rise of jihadist organizations, and the disintegration of state authority drove many Druze closer to the regime. Their fears of jihadist Islam were grimly confirmed in June 2015, when Islamic jihadist militants from al-Nusrah's organization massacred dozens of Druze in a small village near Idlib in northern Syria. The Druze's loyalty to the regime,

¹¹ Van Dam, *Struggle for Power*, 139.

¹² Gary Gambill, "Syrian Druze: Toward Defiant Neutrality," Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 11, 2013, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2013/03/syrian-druze-toward-defiant-neutrality/> (accessed Aug. 21, 2025).

coupled with their status as a heterodox sect—akin to Ismailis and Alawites and considered infidel by orthodox Sunnis—made their position doubly precarious amid the rise of Islamic jihadist challengers.¹³

While Druze spiritual leaders, collectively known as the *Mashyakhat al-'Aql* (Council of Three), remained loyal to the regime, Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'us—a popular religious figure—launched a protest movement against it. His goal was to defend Jabal al-Druze from jihadist threats while avoiding entanglement in the broader civil war consuming Syria. In September 2015, al-Bal'us was assassinated, apparently by regime agents. However, his death did not produce any major shift in the Druze community's stance toward the regime. In the aftermath of the uprising and ensuing civil war, many Druze concluded that the regime represented the lesser evil, as its collapse threatened the dissolution of the state.¹⁴

The victory of the regime's army—supported by Hezbollah fighters, pro-Iranian Shiite militias, and the Russian

air force—relieved the Druze of the immediate threat from jihadist organizations. Even so, in July 2018, Islamic State launched a raid on all Druze villages in the region, killing around 260 civilians and kidnapping 30 women and children. The regime made no effort to prevent these attacks, further eroding its credibility.¹⁵

The year 2015 marked a critical turning point in the relationship between the regime and the majority of Druze in Jabal al-Druze, following heavy community losses. At that time, the Druze generally sought to maintain neutrality in the ongoing civil war. As noted earlier, Wahid al-Bal'us, who led the Druze refusal to enlist in the Syrian military, founded the local Rijal al-Karama militia to protect the population. Later that year, Al-Bal'us was killed in an attack widely believed to have been orchestrated by regime agents.¹⁶

The Druze refusal to enlist in the army persisted after 2014 and eventually prompted the regime to take punitive measures. By 2018, signs of regime neglect toward Druze regions became

¹³ Ibrahim Al-Assil and Randa Slim, "The Syrian Druze at Crossroads" Middle East Institute, July 13, 2015, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/syrian-druze-crossroads>, hereafter cited as Al-Assil and Slim, "Syrian Druze."

¹⁴ Al-Assil and Slim, "Syrian Druze."

¹⁵ Yaron Friedman, "The Druze's Trouble in Syria," Feb. 3, 2021, <https://www.news1.co.il/Archive/0026-D-146249-00.html> (Hebrew), hereafter cited as Friedman, "Druze Trouble."

¹⁶ Jack Khoury, "Prominent Druze Leader Sheikh Wahid al-Balous Killed in Syria," *Haaretz*, Sept. 5, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/2015-09-05/ty-article/prominent-druze-leader-killed-in-syria/0000017f-dbb2-d3ff-a7ff-fbb2397d0000>

evident. Opposition groups, integrated into the regime through Russian officer-brokered reconciliation agreements, took control of Druze territory. These groups carried out most of the kidnappings that targeted Druze civilians. Local media reported 238 kidnappings in 2020 alone, highlighting the severity of the situation. These actions were most likely part of the regime's broader strategy to pressure the Druze into military conscription.¹⁷

In Jabal-al-Druze, government services deteriorated as security worsened and crime surged. Like other Syrian populations, the Druze endured social and economic hardships that made daily life unbearable. Poverty, unemployment, and the collapse of educational facilities affected Druze regions just as elsewhere in Syria. Moreover, the coronavirus pandemic further exacerbated conditions in Hauran. The fate of Druze in Idlib was no better. These hardships triggered an unprecedented emigration of Druze youth—a trend that continues today, although accurate data remain unavailable. Between 2018 and 2024, conditions for Druze who remained in rural areas became intolerable. Living

in constant fear of jihadist groups, they were forced to comply with extremist dictates regarding dress and behavior. The scale of the crisis, affecting the economy, healthcare, food, and water, was staggering. The hold of jihadist organizations on the region compelled many Druze to depart, mainly to southern of Syria.¹⁸

The Syria that existed before 2011 is gone. The war that ravaged the country for the better part of a decade shattered its state and society, precipitating an almost total economic collapse. As with other sectors of Syrian society, the Druze suffered profoundly from the death, destruction, and disintegration that tore apart the country's social fabric. Throughout the conflict, the Druze came to realize that their status as a legitimate minority was not universally recognized, an insight that in their eyes deepened the Syrian tragedy. The war's end revealed how dependent their survival had become on the Syrian regime, even as it plunged them further into poverty.¹⁹

The years 2014–2015 saw a fundamental change in the relationship between the Druze and the Baathist regime. Many Druze refused to enlist

¹⁷ According to other reports, 220 were reported killed in the attack. See Hannah Lucinda Smith, "More than 220 Syrian Druze Killed by ISIS Suicide Attacks," *The Times*, July 26, 2018, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/middle-east/article/more-than-220-syrian-druze-killed-by-isis-suicide-attacks-fvrd03j69?region=global>

¹⁸ Yaron Friedman, "The Forgotten Druze Are in Danger: A Threatened Community in Northern Syria," *News1*, 29 Aug. 2022 (Hebrew).

¹⁹ Friedman, "Druze Trouble."

in the Syrian army unless the regime agreed to station them in their native regions. In the two years leading up to the regime's downfall, the Druze were brought to the brink of famine. They increasingly staged demonstrations to protest worsening economic and social conditions. However, they refrained from rebelling outright.²⁰ Their protests, nonetheless, contributed to the weakening of the regime.

In December 2024, the Druze welcomed the collapse of the Baathist regime. However, they did not greet the arrival of Ahmad al-Sharaa with enthusiasm. The Druze refused to permit the new regime's militias to operate in their territory and rejected demands to disarm. Through their spiritual leader, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajari, the community voiced its distrust of the new regime, citing its jihadist background.²¹ The months following the transition only heightened Druze anxiety, fueled by several alarming developments: the establishment of an army led entirely by former jihadist commanders; the exclusion of minorities from government representation; a declared

five-year transition period; and massacres targeting Alawites, which stoked fears that the Druze could be next. Nevertheless, the new regime has refrained from interfering in Druze areas. The Druze refusal to surrender their weapons and Israel's warnings of possible intervention if the Druze are targeted explain the regime's hesitation to act.²²

The Druze and the New Regime

Although the Druze welcomed the fall of the Assad regime, they voiced apprehension over Ahmed al-Sharaa's rise to power. Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajri, the foremost representative of Jabal al-Druze, quickly outlined several conditions for normalizing relations with Syria's new leadership: establishing a democratic state that guarantees fair representation for all segments of Syrian society; forming a national Syrian army committed to defending the country; and transferring security responsibilities in Druze regions to local control. Al-Hajri emphasized that until these demands were met, the Druze would neither

²⁰ Fabrice Balanche, "The Druze and Assad: Strategic Bedfellows," Oct. 20, 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/druze-and-assad-strategic-bedfellows>.

²¹ A statement by al-Shaykh Hikmat al-Hajari, issued on April 29, 2025 (held by author).

²² Amal Jamal, "Al-Duruz Bayan al-Intima al-Watani wa al-Walaat al-Taifiyya fi Zaman al-Taifiyya," *Dirasat Falastiniyya*, no. 143 (Summer 2025): 12, hereafter cited as Jamal, "Al-Duruz Bayan."

surrender their weapons nor permit regime security forces into the mountains.²³

Al-Hajri's demands reflected broader Druze concerns. The mere rise of the new regime—heavily reliant on jihadist militias—sparked anxiety even before it took concrete steps to consolidate power. All commanders in the newly formed army were jihadists, and some were not even Syrian nationals. This was accompanied by additional measures the Druze interpreted as ominous: the adoption of a provisional constitution granting al-Sharaa sweeping executive powers; the announcement of a five-year transitional period; and the formation of a new government dominated by al-Sharaa's inner circle, including the appointment of Shaykh Osama al-Rifai as Syria's new mufti. These policies clearly signaled the new government's effort to cement jihadist control over Syria. As Sheikh al-Hajri noted, the Druze—remembering the 2015 massacre, the 2018 attack, and the horrific recent massacres of Alawites in the coastal region—could not place their trust in the new regime.²⁴ Druze communities in both Syria and Israel largely shared these concerns. Israel clearly favors keeping Syrian Druze

territories under local militia control, particularly given the Israeli Druze's exemplary role as a moderating, sometimes conciliatory, force within Israel's diverse communities.

The Druze's worries about the new regime were confirmed in late April and early May 2025. An anonymous voice message, attributed to a Druze cleric and containing offensive remarks about the Prophet Muhammad, was used to justify an attack on Druze populations, primarily in the Damascus suburbs. Tens of thousands of Druze were either killed or arrested. Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajari, leader of the activist faction opposing the new regime, accused the government of orchestrating the killings and described al-Sharaa's approach as twofold: on the one hand, he appeared to have deployed jihadist militias to target Druze civilians; on the other, he claimed these militias were uncontrollable rogue elements, acting independently of the regime. In response, al-Hajari called on the international community to protect the Druze and other minority groups in Syria.²⁵

Following these events in Damascus's Druze neighborhoods, the Druze

²³ A statement issued by al-Shaykh Hikmat al-Hajjari on Feb. 15, 2025, held by author. See also the report, "Al-Shaykh Hikmat al-Hajari Declares the Rejection of the Constitutional Declaration," <https://www.syria.tv/الشيخ-حكمت-الهجري-يعلن-رفض-الإعلان-الدستوري-السوري-ويطالب-بتصحيح-المسارات>

²⁴ A statement issued by al-Shaykh Hikmat al-Hajari on March 7, 2025 (held by author).

²⁵ Statement by al-Shaykh Hikmat al-Hajari, issued on May 1, 2025 (held by author).

leadership and the regime reached an understanding on May 2, 2025. The agreement included several provisions, foremost among them: the reinstatement of the governor, as the regime's official representative, to his office in Sweida; the formation of local security forces composed exclusively of Druze from Sweida; and the safeguarding of the main road connecting Damascus to the district's mountain. This agreement effectively closed a chapter in the conflict between the regime and the Druze of Sweida. It was welcomed throughout the province by all factions.

Between 2015 and 2025, the Druze in Syria endured four rounds of horrific massacres. The first occurred in 2015, when jihadist militias from the Al-Nusra Front attacked a Druze settlement, murdering dozens in cold blood. The second took place in 2018, when the Islamic State organization assaulted villages in the Druze mountains, killing nearly four hundred. The third unfolded in April–May 2025, following the release of an offensive recording of the Prophet Muhammad, as regime forces attacked Druze neighborhoods in the suburbs of Damascus, killing hundreds.

The most violent event in Druze areas since the outbreak of the uprising in 2011, however, was recorded recently on July 13, 2025. Local clashes broke

out between Druze and Bedouins, triggered by mutual kidnappings. The regime seized on these clashes as a pretext to intervene and exert control over the area. It appears that some local Druze forces even assisted regime forces.

Currently, regime forces are imposing a siege on Druze regions, ostensibly to separate Bedouin and Druze militias. In reality, the regime continues a longstanding policy of revenge and attempts to subjugate the Druze. Since the founding of modern Syria in 1920, the Druze have never faced massacres on the scale witnessed in July 2025. According to a list provided by local activists, approximately 1,428 Druze were killed in al-Swayda between July 13 and July 30, 2025.²⁶

Unlike the Kurds, the Druze have been unable to adopt a fully unified stance toward the new regime. In the wake of the April–May 2025 massacres, a conference was held in the first week of May 2025, bringing together Druze spiritual leaders, local notables, and militia commanders from the Sweida province. Following the conference, the leaders issued an official statement outlining three core demands: (1) that security forces in Sweida province be composed of Druze residents; (2) that the Sweida-Damascus highway be secured; and (3) that the government guarantee personal and public security

²⁶ Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA), "American Fault Line: The Suwayda Crisis and Its Implications for Syria's Future," Aug. 2025, 10-16.

across Syrian territory.²⁷ Additionally, Druze militias sought to establish a unified military and security apparatus to maintain order in Sweida and prevent anarchy and unrest.²⁸

The Druze have unanimously agreed that they should neither lay down their weapons nor allow regime forces to operate within Druze regions. Despite this shared stance, two distinct camps have emerged. The activist camp, led by Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajri, rejects any engagement with the new regime due to its jihadist radicalism and perceived exclusion of minorities. In contrast, a more pragmatic camp—headed by spiritual leaders Sheikh Hamud al-Hanawi and Sheikh Youssef Jarboa, along with the leader of the Al-Karama militia—advocates negotiating a *modus vivendi* with the regime. This internal division weakens the Druze's standing before Damascus where the government, under the pretext of maintaining political stability, continues to pursue exclusionary policies against all opponents and minority groups.

The Israeli Perspective

This is not the first time Israel's protection of the Druze in Syria has become a contentious issue. A similar

situation occurred in 1954, when the Shishakli regime launched an assault on the Druze in the Hauran region. Tensions between the Druze and President Adib al-Shishakli had simmered since his rise to power in 1949 and continued until his ouster in February 1954. Like his predecessors, Shishakli viewed the Atrash family's influence over Jabal al-Druze as an obstacle to his efforts to centralize authority, a goal he was determined to achieve. He considered the Druze the most defiant of Syria's minority groups, and his push for centralized rule directly conflicted with the Druze tradition of maintaining autonomy.²⁹

At that time, the Israeli government was cautious about providing direct support to Syria's Druze population. Instead, both the government and the media used Syria's instability to underscore the vulnerability of minority groups under Sunni-dominated Arab regimes throughout the Middle East. Despite this cautious stance, political parties across the spectrum—from Herut on the far right to Mapam on the far left—expressed support for aiding the Syrian Druze during their hardship. The press gave extensive coverage to Shishakli's attacks, further provoking the Syrian government. An editorial

²⁷ Statement issued by three Druze spiritual leaders on May 3, 2025 (held by author).

²⁸ Statement issued by the Military Council in Suweida on May 2, 2025 (held by author).

²⁹ Randall Geller, "The Shishakli Assault on the Syrian-Druze and the Israeli Response, January-February 1954," *Journal of Israeli History* 34, no. 2 (2015): 207, hereafter cited as Geller, "Shishakli Assault."

in *Davar* (February 1954) urged Israel to “raise awareness and alert the world” about Shishakli’s harsh repression. These developments occurred against the broader backdrop of widespread minority persecution in countries where Arab nationalist regimes had consolidated power. *Ha-Boker* argued that Israel “cannot and must not” remain indifferent to events in Syria, emphasizing that it had become unmistakably clear that national and religious minorities lacked genuine protection.³⁰

Israel’s Prime Minister, Moshe Sharett, broke sharply with traditional views by expressing skepticism about Druze loyalty. Rather than regarding them as powerful and independent, Sharett attributed a range of traits to the Druze: they were politically unstable, disloyal, fickle, small, scattered, disunited, and motivated primarily by self-preservation. Moreover, the Israeli government interpreted Sultan al-Atrash’s apparent reluctance to engage with Israel as a signal that the risks of an alliance—such as ostracism within the Arab world—outweighed any potential benefits. As a result, Israel

concluded that its efforts to build alliances with Middle Eastern minorities would likely have limited success given the dominant influence of the Sunni Arab world.³¹

Since the fall of the Assad regime, speculation has intensified over Israel’s strategy toward Syria in general and the Druze in particular. Many Arabs are convinced that Israel seeks to divide Syria and establish a Druze state,³² an idea that has circulated in Israeli policy circles for decades. It is most closely associated with Labor Party leader Yigal Allon, who reportedly became interested in it as early as 1942. That year, he served in Syria and Lebanon as the commander of an undercover unit tasked with building a network of intelligence operatives and local collaborators in anticipation of a possible German occupation.³³ From that point on, the dream of a “Druze state” as a buffer between Israel and Syria obsessed Allon. In his diaries, he recounted telling an Israeli journalist: “I visited Al-Suwayda on several occasions and came up with the dream of the Druze Republic, which will cover southern Syria, including the

³⁰ Geller, “Shishakli Assault,” 208.

³¹ Geller, “Shishakli Assault,” 211.

See the following YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dId0bQRGqlw> (accessed Aug. 18, 2025).

³³ Ehud Manor, “Yigal Allon’s Druze ‘Obsession’: A New Look,” *The New East* 56 (2017): 93–100 (Hebrew).

Golan Heights. A military treaty will tie it with Israel.”³⁴

The country’s elites viewed Israel’s military victory in 1967 as a golden opportunity to advance Allon’s vision.³⁵ Some Israeli leaders sought to leverage the victory as a means of weakening the Arab side. Accordingly, when Israeli forces captured the Golan Heights, the entire Syrian population fled toward Damascus, except for the Druze, who were permitted to remain. This decision appears to have been deliberate, reflecting broader strategic calculations.³⁶ A narrative recounted by Thaer Kanj Abu Saleh, son of the Golan Druze leader Kamal Kanj Abu Saleh, revealed a detailed Israeli plan to establish a Druze micro-state in the mountainous regions of southern Syria and Lebanon.

Aware of Kanj’s Pan-Arab and partisan loyalties, Yigal Allon prioritized establishing contact with him. The 1967 defeat convinced Allon that the war had weakened the Druze community’s commitment to Pan-Arabism. He quickly moved forward

with his plan to create an independent Druze state. However, the influential Druze leadership in the Golan Heights firmly rejected the proposal. In response, Israel shifted by moving from cooperation to issuing a veiled threat: if the Druze did not comply, Israel threatened to end its “good treatment” of the Druze, exposing them to the same dangers faced by other Syrians under occupation.³⁷

Ne’eman reveals that during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, some Israeli officers proposed advancing into Syrian territory to occupy Hauran, the traditional Druze stronghold.³⁸

Israeli journalist Amir Oren, a specialist in military affairs at *Haaretz*, issued a report corroborating this narrative. According to Oren, during the war Yigal Allon advocated for Israeli forces to advance toward the Jabal al-Druze and occupy Al-Suwayda, the capital of the Jabal governorate.³⁹

³⁴ Amir Oren, “And Once Again, I gave Up! But Rather What,” *Haaretz*, July 27, 2007.

³⁵ Israel State Archives (Jerusalem), Prime Minister’s Office, 6405/4219 II/C Yigal Alon to Levi Ashkul, “The Druze Mountain–Syria,” Aug. 20, 1967.

³⁶ Jean Lartéguy, *Les Murailles d’Israël* (Paris: Editions et Publications Premières, 1968), 92–93, hereafter cited as Lartéguy, *Murailles*

³⁷ Lartéguy, *Murailles*, 56.

³⁸ Interview by the author with Professor Yuval Ne’eman, June 12, 2000.

³⁹ Oren, “Once Again I Gave Up.”

Allon was fully convinced that Israel's Druze population could play a crucial role in fulfilling his plan. As he explained, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had already conscripted Druze soldiers who could serve as an essential link with Druze communities in Syria and Lebanon. During the war, he repeatedly urged Prime Minister Eshkol, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, and Northern Command Chief David Elazar to advance toward Al-Suwayda and establish a Druze state along the borders of Syria, Jordan, and Israel. Even after the war ended, Allon admitted that he remained fixated on the idea of a Druze state, regarding himself as the "Lawrence of Israel."⁴⁰ In his diaries, Allon recounts pressuring General David Elazar at his command headquarters, along with Haim Bar-Lev and Minister Yisrael Galili, to push forces into Hauran to realize his dream of a Druze state. According to Allon, the Israeli army would need only one day—or at most a day and a half—to reach Jabal al-Druze and secure Druze cooperation, an action he believed would awaken

their national consciousness both in word and deed.⁴¹

Although various Druze representatives in Syria continue to assert that their people's future lies within a unified Syrian state, such a state has effectively ceased to exist since the outbreak of the uprising. Recently, both old and new proposals have surfaced calling for the creation of a Druze state or an autonomous Druze government. Israel could potentially support some of these proposals, especially given its constructive policy of forging alliances with regional minorities. Moreover, the Druze, like other minority groups, are not perceived as harboring hostile intentions toward the State of Israel. Consequently, Israeli policy toward the Syrian Druze aligns with its own strategic and security interests, and the unique bond it shares with its own Druze community.

Israel has already made clear that it will not tolerate the military presence of the new jihadist regime in southern Syria.⁴² Israeli leaders—particularly

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Yossi Melman, "The Sectarian Giant," *Ma'ariv*, June 6, 2015.

⁴² Netanyahu Says Israel Won't Allow Syrian Forces South of Damascus, *Seattle Times*, Febr. 23, 2025, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/netanyahu-says-israel-wont-allow-syrian-forces-south-of-damascus/>

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—have warned that any attacks by jihadist organizations on the Druze will prompt military intervention. Likewise, Defense Minister Israel Katz and Netanyahu have instructed the IDF to defend Druze neighborhoods around Damascus.⁴³ The Israeli government also recently allocated three million shekels in aid to the Druze community, channeling the funds through Sheikh Mufak Tarif, the community's spiritual leader in Israel.⁴⁴

For the first time since 1974, clerics from the village of Khadr have visited Druze holy sites in Israel. These developments indicate that Israel, which has consistently supported its Druze community, views Israeli Druze as potential intermediaries with the Druze in Syria. It is reasonable to conclude that Israel's military actions to date—including the destruction of Syrian army bases and weapons stockpiles, as well as the takeover of the buffer zone—have bolstered Druze resistance to the new regime's forces entry into Druze-majority areas. Following an attack on Druze neighborhoods in the Damascus

suburbs, both Netanyahu and Katz swiftly issued an unprecedented warning to the Syrian regime not to harm the Druze. This statement was soon followed by an Israeli airstrike on regime targets, including the presidential palace.⁴⁵

July 2025 witnessed the most violent clashes between the Druze and the central government in Damascus since 1954. Long-standing tensions between the Druze and Bedouins in southern Syria escalated in mid-July, when a wave of mutual kidnappings occurred between the two communities. The regime used these incidents as a pretext to assert control over Druze areas. The deployment of regime security forces into Druze localities sparked heavy fighting, accompanied by reports of looting, robbery, rape, and the abduction of Druze women.

The clashes between the Druze and the regime prompted Israeli military intervention, including airstrikes on government buildings in Damascus. While this intervention temporarily forced regime troops to withdraw, Bedouin tribes—encouraged by the

⁴³ Emanuel Fabian, "Netanyahu and Katz Direct IDF to Prepare to Defend Syrian Druze Suburb of Damascus," *Times of Israel*, March 1, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-and-katz-direct-idf-to-prepare-to-defend-syrian-druze-suburb-of-damascus/>. See also the report by Liar Ben Ari et al., "In Israel, They Marked a Town next to Damascus: If the Regime Harms the Druze, It Will Be Harmed by Us," *Ynet*, March 1, 2025, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/sjqo5txike>.

⁴⁴ See the formal statement issued by the Israeli Foreign Ministry about providing 10,000 humanitarian packages to the Syrian Druze, <https://www.gov.il/he/pages/humanitarian-aid-for-the-druze-in-syria>.

⁴⁵ Jamal, "Al-Duruz Bayan," 15. See also the report by Yaniv Kovovich et al., "The IDF Attacked next to the Presidential Palace" *Haaretz*, May 2, 2025.

regime—soon entered the area. The latest confrontation proved particularly violent and devastating: over 1,423 Druze were killed, 35 villages burned, and more than 100,000 people displaced. The escalating conflict highlights the profound challenges facing the Druze in a regime dominated by jihadist militias. The killings, the humiliation of Druze clerics, the execution of innocent civilians, and the abduction of women have convinced many Druze that their future in Ahmed al-Sharaa's Syria is untenable.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The once-sovereign Syrian state—a centralized political system built by Hafez Assad and governed from Damascus—no longer exists. Its destruction stems less from the fall of the regime than from the civil war that tore the country apart, leaving the state fractured and stripped of effective sovereignty. Between late 2024 and early 2025, Syria entered a new and precarious phase shaped by several critical developments. First, the Islamist organizations that have seized power are fragmented and internally divided. President Ahmed al-Sharaa, who heads the new government, exercises only nominal control over the militias. With the regime's collapse,

Syria has also lost whatever remained of its national army.

Secondly, the new government faces a significant challenge from Turkey, determined to dismantle northern Syria's autonomous Kurdish region. The government finds itself caught between the Turkish hammer and the Kurdish anvil: beholden to Turkey, its chief patron, yet compelled for strategic reasons to enter into negotiations with the Kurds in northeastern Syria. The urgency of this balancing act is heightened by the fact that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Kurd's military arm, control the country's vital oil fields. Turkey is determined to dismantle the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria, arguing that the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which dominates the SDF, poses a threat to Syria's stability. Turkey maintains full control over the Syrian National Army, a paramilitary force established in 2017. With tens of thousands of fighters, this force has been empowered by Turkey to wage war against Kurdish forces.

Finally, Syria confronts immense challenges related to reconstruction and national reconciliation. Its civil war—arguably the deadliest conflict in the Arab Middle East in the past century—has left a trail of devastation:

⁴⁶ Asher Kaufman, "Amid Fragile Ceasefire, Violence in Southern Syria Brings Druze Communities' Complex Cross-Border Ties to the Fore," *The Conversation*, July 21, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/amid-fragile-ceasefire-violence-in-southern-syria-brings-druze-communities-complex-cross-border-ties-to-the-fore-261337>.

nearly half a million dead, including civilians, soldiers, and opposition fighters; a shattered social fabric; the region's most severe refugee crisis; a collapsed infrastructure; and a broken economy.

Given these realities, the prospect of restoring Syria as a sovereign state under a centralized regime appears increasingly doubtful. The most optimistic outcome envisions a system of federal government operating under Turkish patronage. Since the fall of the Baathist regime, the question of the future of Syria's minorities has grown even more urgent, driven by two key developments: the emergence of a jihadist-led government backed by Turkey and the continued autonomy of two minority groups, the Kurds and the Druze, in their respective regions. Taken together, these trends do not bode well for post-Baathist Syria's long-term stability.

This paper has demonstrated that Syria's minorities—primarily Alawites, Christians, and Druze—have historically wielded influence far beyond their demographic size. Their political activism and integration reached their zenith under President Hafez Assad. While the Baathist regime never explicitly promoted minority dominance over the Sunni majority, its commitment to secularism provided minority communities with a sense of security. The rise of the current regime, however, has left

Syria's minorities anxious about their safety. It remains uncertain whether the new leadership's policies—particularly in the aftermath of the coastal massacres of Alawites—have eased their fears about the future. While Syria has historically incorporated minorities into public and political life, it remains unclear whether the current leadership will continue this practice.

During his 30-year rule, Hafez Assad dismantled all Druze power centers within the army and the Baath Party, owing to the Druze's prominent role in earlier coups. Nevertheless, like other minorities, the Druze supported the regime because of its commitment to peripheral groups and its officially secular character. When the uprising began, they sided with the regime, fearing state collapse and the potential rise of Islamist forces. However, as Syria descended into a bloody civil war and the Druze endured heavy losses, their stance began to shift, particularly after 2014. While they did not openly oppose the regime, the Druze chose not to participate in the broader conflict. Their relationship with the government gradually deteriorated, especially as the war ended and the economic crisis deepened. In the year preceding the regime's fall, Druze areas became centers of largely nonviolent protest.

For the first time since 1970, the regime's collapse created an opening for the Druze to assert a measure of autonomy in the mountains. At the

same time, it revealed the community's profound dependence on the modern Syrian state. With Syrian sovereignty disintegrating and the Druze forming a geographically concentrated minority, the question of self-rule has gained urgency. The Druze case—like that of the Kurds—also highlights that building a stable Syria will require addressing the aspirations of its various minority groups. Whether the new regime is willing to pursue such a solution, however, remains uncertain.

Never before in modern Syrian history have minorities, including the Druze, faced a dual challenge: the disintegration of state authority and sovereignty and the rise to power of a jihadist-led regime. The massacres in

Alawite regions in March 2025, followed by killings in Druze neighborhoods on the outskirts of Damascus two months later, confirmed the Druze's deepest fears. Although Druze leaders have expressed a willingness to remain part of Syria, for the first time since independence, the community's bond with the homeland can no longer be taken for granted. The survival of the Druze in Syria now depends above all on the new regime's actions, particularly its policies regarding ethnic diversity and the protection of minority populations.

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