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THE DRUZE OF SYRIA AFTER ASSAD: SECURITY, AUTONOMY, AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS IN A POST-AUTHORITARIAN LANDSCAPE

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Preface

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in December 2024 marked the beginning of a new and chaotic chapter for Syria's diverse population. Nowhere has the uncertainty and violence of the transitional period been felt more acutely than in the southern province of Suweyda, heartland of Syria's Druze minority. The hardships of other Syrian ethnic minorities, such as the Kurds and Syrian Christians, must be acknowledged accordingly. This paper focuses on the Druze exclusively. Once a region characterized by cautious neutrality and pragmatic arrangements with the central state, Suweyda and its Druze inhabitants have, in just a few months, been thrust to the epicentre of some of the worst sectarian violence seen since the onset of the Syrian civil war. Fighting between Druze militias, Bedouin Sunni tribes, and the newly established Muslim-dominated interim government has left hundreds dead, displaced nearly 200 000, and prompted high-profile interventions by foreign regional powers, primarily Israel and Turkey.

Demographics and Historical Background of the Syrian Druze

The Druze are a distinct ethno-religious community with roots in Ismaʿili Islam and a closed, esoteric religious tradition. Today, over one million Druze reside primarily in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, with the Syrian Druze constituting approximately 3–4% of Syria's pre-war population with an estimate ranging from 700 to 900 thousand people. Their demographic heartland is the Jabal al-Druze (Suweyda) in southern Syria, a region that retains over 90% Druze inhabitants and encompasses some 120 villages and towns. The community's cohesion has been historically reinforced by distinctive religious practices, strong internal solidarity, and a tradition of charismatic leadership, such as the al-Atrash family's role in anti-colonial resistance during the period of French rule.

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Under the Assad regime, in exchange for loyalty and "armed neutrality," the Druze cultivated relative autonomy in Suweyda, simultaneously developing means of self-protection from jihadist threats, such as the Men of Dignity (Harakat Rijal al-Karama) militia, especially after the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2010-s, even as the developments above led to periodic friction with Damascus.

The Impact of Assad's Downfall on Druze Security and Governance

The end of Assad's rule in December 2024 shattered existing security arrangements and cast the Druze into a volatile struggle for communal survival. In the immediate aftermath, fighting flared between multiple actors: loyalist remnants, jihadist militias associated with the new regime, Bedouin tribal groups, and local Druze armed militias. The resulting security vacuum exposed Suweyda to renewed cycles of violence and retribution, with government security forces often accused of either collusion with hostile militias or direct participation in atrocities.

A pivotal moment came in April and July 2025, when tit-for-tat kidnappings and clashes between Druze and Bedouin factions escalated into large-scale violence. Reports from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and various, including regional and international, media accounted for hundreds of dead, extensive extrajudicial executions, and the systematic targeting of Druze civilians by government-linked militias and their Bedouin allies. The violence culminated in government troops entering Suweyda, followed by Israeli airstrikes and international pressure to halt the atrocities. The response of the interim authorities was uneven: while initially pledging to hold perpetrators accountable and restore local security to community authorities, evidence of abuses by government-aligned fighters and the repeated breakdowns of ceasefires deepened mistrust of the international community regarding the reassurances of interim government.

The collapse of centralized authority in Damascus had created fertile ground for sectarian politics and fuelling further polarization of the Syrian state and directly contributing to the subsequent hostilities against various minority ethnic groups, including the Druze and the Alawites. The United Nations bodies, neighbouring countries, and the Druze leadership itself have sounded alarm over the deepening humanitarian crisis of a massive scale, with about 200 000 displaced persons and basic services in Suweyda at a breaking point.

The Druze and the Syrian Interim Government: From Integration to Distrust

Formal Integration and Negotiated Autonomy

Despite mutual suspicions, both the interim government and leading Druze dignitaries have pursued negotiations to formalize the status of Suweyda within the new Syrian state, which is supposed to take a federative form. In a landmark March 2025 agreement, the Syrian Transitional Government and Druze representatives from Suweyda province signed a deal integrating local police and security into the Ministry

of Interior of the central state with guarantees for cultural autonomy and the recruitment of local personnel provided. The central government retained the authority to appoint the governor and police chief, who would not necessarily belong to the Druze community, signalling a partial compromise between localism and central authority and causing some friction and disappointment within the local population, with some Druze seeing it as an attempt of the interim government to partially decrease the role of the community's self-governance competences.

Furthermore, the formal recognition of localized policing and civil service participation was offset by ongoing armed deployments from outside the province, the recurrent involvement of troops loyal to the interim government in harsh security campaigns and attempts to forcibly disarm and disband Druze militias. The developments above triggered major clashes and led prominent Druze leaders to publicly denounce Damascus's intentions, characterizing these policies as attempts at what they refer to as "systematic genocide" and repeatedly rejecting ceasefires or integration agreements proclaimed by the government without Druze consensus and consent.

The Dilemma of Disarmament and Autonomy

The question of weapons remains central: the interim government has insisted on disbanding all non-state militias as a prerequisite for nationwide security and state sovereignty. For the Druze, the imperative of self-defence and community policing, combined with the failure of the central state in its responsibility to protect the ethnic minorities from threats against them, has trumped calls for disarmament and unconditional integration as a widespread leadership consensus. The Druze demands include a call for broad constitutional guarantees for minority rights, secularism, and decentralized governance, all seen by the Druze as essential safeguards. So, meaningful Druze participation within newly formed Syrian state institutions and durable security guarantees from the central government remain prerequisites for any lasting demobilization and simultaneous integration into the broader Syrian polity.

Israeli Engagement and Security Guarantees for the Druze

Israel has long maintained close, if complicated, relations with the Druze communities both within its own borders and in southern Syria. The Israeli Druze are a highly integrated minority with visible representation in the military and political spheres of the State, and politicians from this group have exerted significant domestic pressure for the protection of the Syrian Druze, presenting them as an important ally which might be of value in the pursuit of Israeli security on its northern borders. With the explosion of violence in Suweyda in July 2025, Israel intervened directly in defence of the Druze, conducting airstrikes on Syrian military convoys and the Defence Ministry in Damascus in response to reported atrocities against this minority. Israeli government, led by Prime Minister Netanyahu, issued statements that any harm to the Druze might trigger further retaliation, calling for a demilitarized southern Syria, sending humanitarian aid and facilitating the transfer of wounded Druze for medical

treatment in Israeli hospitals. The intervention was justified publicly in terms of protection of minority human rights, but broader possible strategic motives might be outlined, namely preventing the consolidation of hostile Islamist groups near the Israeli border, preserving military leverage over the interim government of Syria, as well as preventing potential increase of Iranian or Turkish influence in southern Syria in the short- and medium-term timeframe.

Turkish Policy and Its Impact on the Syrian Druze

Turkey has emerged as a dominant regional actor in post-Assad Syria, filling the vacuum left by Iranian retreat and engaging actively through both military means and diplomatic engagement with the interim Syrian authorities, exercising a high degree of leverage over the interim Syrian authorities. Following years of military and diplomatic backing of the coalition of local militias, who had prevailed over the Assad regime and now occupy the key positions in the transitional government of Syria, Ankara signed a new defence cooperation agreement with Damascus in August 2025, offering weapons, logistical support, and military training to the interim government.

Officially, Turkish authorities have denied allegations of involvement or indirect encouragement of the hostilities against the Druze, insisting on a non-sectarian, humanitarian approach grounded in support for Syria's unity and territorial integrity. At the same time, Turkish officials have explicitly warned the Druze leadership against any moves toward separatism or attempts to fragment the Syrian state that might threaten its southern border and compromise Turkish security interests. The Turkish position creates a dilemma for the Syrian Druze leadership: while some welcome Turkish mediation in ceasefire negotiations, others view Ankara's deep military penetration and support for fundamentalist Islamist elements in the interim government as a direct threat to communal autonomy and security. Furthermore, Turkish government has consistently opposed calls from Druze and other Syrian minorities for a decentralized State, associating such models with the dangers posed by Kurdish separatism and prospects of Israeli influence should such an arrangement come into force.

Leadership, Political Divisions, and Local Actors Among the Druze

The Druze spiritual and political leadership in Syria, historically represented by three main authorities–Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, Hammoud al-Hanawi, and Youssef Jarbou–has become increasingly fractured under the pressures of ongoing civil war and subsequent collapse of the Assad regime. Of these, Sheikh al-Hijri has emerged as the most prominent and polarizing figure: initially supportive of Assad, he pivoted to a clear opposition stance following the massacre of protestors in 2021 and the subsequent cycle of regime violence against his community. Since 2023, al-Hijri has been an uncompromising advocate of communal autonomy, security, and international intervention should the state fail to protect the Druze. He has repeatedly refused to support the caretaker government, denouncing its Islamist orientation,

rejecting demobilization, and openly appealing to the United States, Israel, and international organizations for the protection of Suweyda. In contrast, Hanawi and Jarbou have prioritised dialogue with the interim authorities and endorsed local integration agreements, albeit with reservations.

On the ground, the Suweyda Military Council, as well as local militias continue to wield significant power on the ground. While nominally the local militias are under the authority of spiritual leaders or local dignitaries, these groups frequently operate independently and at their own discretion.

Security Incidents and Humanitarian Consequences in Suweyda

The violence of 2025 has been unprecedented in both intensity and brutality. The July 2025 clashes quickly escalated to full-scale military confrontations between Druze and Bedouin armed factions, the intervention of government in Damascus, and ultimately the imposition of a ceasefire brokered under international pressure. Human rights watchdog organisations and international agencies have documented widespread human rights abuses: field executions, house burnings, and humiliations of religious symbols; summary executions in hospitals and homes; and the forced displacement of approximately 190 thousand people. Eyewitness accounts describe both government-controlled and Druze militias engagement in atrocities and revenge killings in Bedouin-inhabited villages once government forces had withdrawn. The UN and international organizations warn that Suweyda risks evolving into a semi-autonomous ethnically based conflict zone dominated by local armed militias and their commanders. Moreover, the ongoing violence has exacerbated the Druze community's chronic socioeconomic challenges and the humanitarian crisis of 2025–characterized by severe shortages of food, water, and medicine, as well as the destruction of homes and public facilities is a serious issue demanding attention of the international community.

Short- and Medium-Term Prospects: Autonomy, Decentralization, and the Syrian Political Transition

In the immediate future, a tense and contingent status quo is most likely to persist. The July-August 2025 ceasefire, brokered under international auspices and reinforced by both Israeli and Turkish mediation, has limited major fighting but is frequently punctuated by renewed clashes, targeted assassinations, and other violations by both sides, including the Druze militias themselves. The defence of communal autonomy, specifically control over local police and armed groups, has remained non-negotiable for many Druze leaders, who refuse to disarm absent concrete guarantees for minority rights, local administration, and punishment of those responsible for recent atrocities. However, it is worth noting that even the internationally recognized Druze leadership does not exercise full and effective control over the local armed groups, which sometimes refuse to obey the centralized command and act out of their will, therefore contributing to mutual distrust and overall volatility in Suweyda.

Growing numbers of Druze, both leaders and ordinary citizens, are openly advocating for federalism, decentralization, or a special administrative status for Suweyda, drawing inspiration from the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in the northeast and citing the failures of both the prior Assad regime and the new interim government to protect diversity, guarantee inclusion and ensure fair representation and effective participation of their respective minority in the affairs of a newly reestablished state, including the right to have a final say in the affairs of regional administration. Major figures, such as Sheikh al-Hijri, have called for a secular, decentralized Syrian state and suggested to engage international bodies and other regional countries to support their aspirations for a federalization of Syria.

Whereas a more far-reaching prognosis regarding the evolvement of a current situation is concerned, two generic scenarios must be evaluated, nevertheless, it is important to note that the precise content of each of the two scenarios cannot be defined at the present juncture. The first possible path of development revolves around the idea of integration of the Druze into a new, more federal Syrian state. Following the assumption that the Syrian transition moves toward a federal or decentralized system, the Druze could achieve a lasting arrangement for regional autonomy within Suweyda, while participating in national institutions and accessing shared resources. This would require effective security sector reform, international backing to ensure the effective inclusion of all minorities within Syria, and the devolution of powers to local authorities combined with effective mechanisms to ensure a clear and constitutionally defined separation of competences combined with mechanisms for effective legal remedies in case the provisions mentioned above would be violated. The second possible scenario to be evaluated has in its core the assumption of escalation of secessionist trends among the Druze and other Syrian ethnic minorities if the transitional government proves unable, unresponsive and unwilling to deliver meaningful security, protection and inclusion of ethnic minorities, as well as provide impartial justice to all the victims of the recent hostilities. Such a development would almost certainly trigger violent reactions from the interim government, supported externally by Turkey, and risk the fragmentation of Syria into mutually antagonistic ethnic enclaves, perpetuating further instability and leading to the Syria becoming another failed state in the region.

Assessment: Conclusions and Prospects for Syria’s Druze

In the wake of Assad’s dramatic overthrow, the Druze community of Syria stands at a fateful crossroads. The violence, insecurity, and political exclusion experienced in 2025 have laid bare the persistent dangers faced by religious minorities when state power collapses and sectarian demonization flourishes. The cautious experiment in negotiated autonomy with the interim government has been repeatedly put into question amid armed clashes, human rights violations by government-allied forces, inconsistent implementation, and the inability of the central authorities to enforce inclusive policies in practice. At the same time, renewed engagement of external actors–Israel’s direct intervention and Turkey’s deepening entanglement - has

provided both opportunities and new perils for the Druze, heightening fears of instrumentalization of the minority by external actors in the pursuit of their own strategic objectives, exemplified by the division within the Druze leadership between advocates of maximal autonomy and proponents of negotiated integration reflects broader conflicting interests and trends within Syria and the broader region. Ultimately, the prospects for Syria's Druze will depend on the successful establishment of an inclusive, pluralistic political framework, strong transitional justice mechanisms, and the restoration of basic security and livelihoods in Suweyda.

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