

THE REGIME'S REACH: ANALYZING DAMASCUS' APPROACH TO SUWAYDA AFTER 2011

By Mazen Ezzi
December 2023

About the author:

Mazen Ezzi is a Syrian journalist and researcher specialized in post-conflict social and economic dynamics in Syria. His work focuses on the rise of the new local actors, social order, as well as the emerging governmental and security structures in the reconciled areas of Damascus countryside and the outskirts of Damascus. He writes regularly about the developments in the Druze majority Sweida governorate, the local dynamics behind the emergence of the new local actors, armed groups and gangs, in addition to the changes that traditional religious clerics and social dignitaries have been going through. He is also the Editor of the "Housing, Land and Property" section of "The Syria Report", focusing on governmental urban planning politics and the effects of their implementation on HLP rights of the Syrians, especially the inhabitants of informal settlements.

Edited by: Dr. Salam Said and Hussam Baravi

Translated by: DocStream Team

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
P.O. Box 116107 Riad El Solh
Beirut 1107 2210
Lebanon

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are solely those of the original authors. They do not necessarily represent those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be printed, reproduced or utilised in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the publisher.

Introduction

In the Druze-majority region of Suwayda in southern Syria, a significant non-violent movement against the Syrian regime has emerged since August 2023. This development prompts an examination of the relationship between Suwayda and the Damascus regime over the past decade, particularly how this relationship has evolved to allow such a large-scale, peaceful movement without aggressive retaliation from the regime.

Despite remaining under regime control since 2011, Suwayda experienced periods of relatively lax governance, punctuated by civilian resistance. The region grappled with the hardships of a revolution turned civil war and the complexities of the post-conflict era. At several junctures, the regime depended on the Druze as part of a minority coalition in its war against the predominantly Sunni Muslim opposition. During these periods, the regime offered incentives and certain freedoms to the Druze for managing their affairs.

However, the relationship was strained when the Druze opposed mandatory military conscription, asserted their neutrality, or demanded better living conditions. In response, the regime employed varying tactics, which included force. Despite these tensions, the linkages between Suwayda and Damascus were not completely severed, leading to a dynamic and evolving relationship involving different mediators and actors. Recently, the peaceful opposition movement in Suwayda has marked a new phase in this relationship. The region has openly opposed the Damascus regime, which, in turn, has adopted a stance of apparent indifference and neglect.

This paper seeks to examine the strategies and policies employed by the Syrian regime in its dealing with the Suwayda region after 2011. It categorizes the regime's approach into distinct phases: initial rapprochement with the Druze community (2011-2014), a shift to a harsh security-oriented policy (2014-2018), the era dominated by security thugs (2018-2022), and the period of deceptive calm (2022 to mid-2023). The focus then shifts to the current stage of peaceful protests against the regime, particularly centering around Karama Square in Suwayda city.

The paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the local community's reaction to the regime's policies and their methods of resistance. It delves into the functionality and impact of state institutions, the nature of governance in Suwayda with respect to security and public services, and identifies key local stakeholders throughout these stages. Lastly, the paper speculates on potential future developments in this unfolding situation.

This paper draws insights from a diverse range of sources, including interviews with local activists, journalists, dignitaries, religious leaders, and members of local militias in Suwayda. Additionally, it incorporates findings from a substantial body of published papers and research focused on this region. The primary audience for this paper includes decision-makers, experts in Syrian affairs, Syrians living in the diaspora, and the general Syrian public.

Policy of Courting the Druze (2011-2014)

On March 12, 2011, President Bashar al-Assad and his family visited the drought-stricken eastern villages of Suwayda Governorate, a region that had been severely affected by a prolonged drought since 2004. This visit, a first of its kind, received significant attention from the official media, which portrayed it as a testament to the regime's support for minorities in Syria. This visit seemed to be a strategic move, anticipating the spread of the Arab Spring, which had started in Tunisia months earlier.

On March 14, 2011, just days after Assad's visit, Syria witnessed its first cross-sectarian popular protests calling for democracy. The regime initially adopted a strategy of containment and rapprochement with the Druze and other religious and ethnic minorities. This approach involved reducing direct security interventions in daily life and avoiding actions that could escalate tensions. In contrast, the approach in the neighboring Daraa Governorate, predominantly Sunni, was markedly different. There, the Military Intelligence branch arrested and tortured children for writing pro-Arab Spring slogans, and insulted their families, leading to widespread protests on March 18, 2011. The harsh response in Daraa, coupled with

the escalating violence against protesters, led the majority of the Druze to adopt a neutral and silent stance. However, smaller groups within the Druze community began to express their loyalty or opposition to the regime more openly, highlighting the emerging political divide.

Between 2011 and 2014, as part of its containment strategy in Suwayda, the Syrian regime deliberately reduced the jurisdiction of various law enforcement agencies, including traffic and municipal police. This reduction in official policing led to a surge in various types of violations, ranging from minor infractions like improper parking to more significant issues such as unlicensed construction¹. In parallel, the regime implemented measures to mitigate unemployment, particularly among university graduates, by creating job opportunities in public sector institutions. Public banks were also instructed to ease restrictions on issuing small loans, further supporting the local population.²

The first organized local armed militias also appeared at this stage, most of which were linked to the regime's security services and military, and tasked with confronting anti-regime demonstrations and protests in Suwayda. These groups included the Baath Brigades, Nosour Al Zawba'a (in English: Eagles of the Whirlwind), and Humat al-Diyar.³ Some members of these militias have criminal records and are wanted by the courts, which in turn led to the disruption of the judicial police and prevented it from prosecuting them.⁴ By delegating security responsibilities to local militias, the regime avoided direct clashes with Druze dissidents, effectively transferring political conflict to the civic domain. This shift was complemented by a policy of civilian containment, and the reinstatement of some traditional authorities as mediators, including Druze dignitaries and religious leaders,

who intervened to resolve disputes through tribal reconciliation methods.⁵

Harsh Security Policy (2014-2018)

During the period of 2014-2018, opposition groups gained control over large portions of the Daraa, Quneitra, and Rural Damascus governorates, all neighboring Suwayda. This shift in power dynamics led to the ascendancy of Brigadier General Wafiq Nasser, head of the Military Intelligence Directorate Branch, who effectively became the military governor of southern Syria.⁶ Initially, General Nasser sought to engage the Druze sheikhdom,⁷ traditional leaders and notables in Suwayda, excluding those who voiced some opposition to the regime.⁸ However, the ongoing war had diminished the regime's capacity to attract and polarize support, and its ability to dispense favors and benefits through its loyalist networks waned. In response, the regime adapted its approach. Instead of direct funding and services typically provided through state institutions, it allowed loyalist militias to engage in illegal activities linked to the war economy. These activities included smuggling food, fuel, and weapons between Suwayda and the besieged opposition-held areas. Such practices also fueled the emergence and growth of gangs

¹ Interview with a supervising engineer at the Engineers Syndicate in Suwayda, March 2023.

² Interview with the director of a public institution in Suwayda, March 2023.

³ The Baath Brigades is an armed militia affiliated with the ruling Baath Party in Syria and has local affiliate groups in all areas under regime control. "Eagles of the Whirlwind" is an armed militia loyal to the regime affiliated with the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, which also has local groups in some areas of Syria. Humat al-Diyar is a local Druze militia loyal to the regime in the city of Suwayda, founded and led by Sheikh Nazih Jarbou. It is funded, armed and trained by the security services.

⁴ Hammam Al-Khatib, "Suwayda: The Crime Regime" (Arabic), Al-Modon, 13 August 2016, link: <https://shorturl.at/jvEX3>

⁵ Mazen Ezzi, "A Static Revolution: The Druze Community", a chapter in a book titled "Playing the Sectarian Card: Identities and Affiliations of Local Communities in Syria" edited by Friederike Stolleis, published by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2015: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/12320.pdf>

⁶ The Military Intelligence branch in the southern region is responsible for the governorates of Daraa, Quneitra, and Suwayda, and its headquarters is in the city of Suwayda. Brigadier General Wafiq Nasser headed Military Intelligence in the Southern Region between 2011-2018, during which he rose to the rank of Major General. He was then transferred to become the head of the Military Intelligence in Hama, then in Aleppo, before being referred for retirement in 2023. For more on Brigadier General Nasser's policy in Suwayda, see: Hammam Al-Khatib, "Wafiq Nasser Demolishes Statements About the 'Stupid Regime'" (Arabic), Al-Modon, 11 September 2016: <https://shorturl.at/gnrww>

⁷ In Suwayda, there are three Aql Sheikhs, each of whom has a sphere of social influence, in a process of sharing that has developed historically since the beginning of the 18th century. The Druze sheikhdom is hereditary, passed down through three families. Al-Hijri in Qanawat, Jarbou in Suwayda and Al-Hinnawi in Sahwat Balata. These three sheikhs are organized into two official Druze religious institutions: The first is the spiritual leadership of the unitarian Druze, which is currently headed by Sheikh Al-Aql Hikmat Al-Hijri in the town of Qanawat, and the second is the House of the Druze sect in the city of Suwayda, which currently includes Aql Sheikhs Youssef Jarbou and Hammoud Al-Hinnawi.

⁸ The most prominent notables who expressed opposition to the regime in 2011 were the Emir of Darat Ura, Shibli al-Atrash, and the Pasha Atef Heneidi in the town of al-Majdal.

and disorganized armed groups in various parts of Suwayda. The unconventional and illicit methods of financing and service provision drew in new local actors with ties to the criminal underworld, a shift that alienated the traditional Druze notables, straining their relationship with the regime and placing an additional burden on them.⁹

On the other hand, in Suwayda, popular opposition to compulsory military conscription in the Syrian army grew due to the rising casualties among the Druze community on various fronts across Syria. This sentiment was further fueled by a mysterious Druze religious edict that forbade praying for Druze soldiers killed outside Suwayda's borders. In 2014, there were several instances where military police and checkpoints attempted to arrest Druze individuals for evading military service. The local community actively resisted these efforts, often by attacking police stations or security centers to free the detainees. Interestingly, these actions did not provoke violent responses from the security forces, indicating the regime's reluctance to escalate tensions in the region.

At the same time, extremist Islamic groups associated with the opposition in Daraa attacked villages in Suwayda's western countryside.¹⁰ A notable incident was the 2014 Battle of Dama town, where many Druze fighters from newly formed armed civilian groups were killed. The most prominent of these groups was the Rijal Al-Karama (Men of Dignity) movement led by Sheikh Wahid Al-Balous.¹¹ This movement, perceiving that the regime had abandoned the Druze in facing extremist organizations and failed to adequately

arm them, took it upon itself to defend the sect. As an armed militia force with a religious dimension, Rijal Al-Karama publicly maintained a neutral stance in the Syrian war, yet aligned with the widespread opposition to forced conscription. In a significant event in 2015, coinciding with an opposition attack on the Al-Thaala military airport in Daraa, west of Suwayda, the Men of Dignity Movement facilitated the defection of numerous Druze recruits from a regime forces' camp in the governorate.¹²

The emergence of the Rijal Al-Karama movement marked a significant shift in Druze leadership dynamics in Suwayda, challenging the traditional authority of the Druze religious hierarchy, known as the Al-Aql (intellect) sheikhdom, which was divided into three contrasting factions.¹³ Tensions escalated in early 2015 when Sheikh Wahid Al-Balous, the leader of the Rijal Al-Karama, made scathing public remarks about the Syrian President. In response, under pressure from General Wafiq Nasser, head of the Military Intelligence Branch, the three Aql Sheikhs issued a statement excommunicating Al-Balous and his followers.¹⁴ Following this religious banishment, the head of the Military Intelligence Branch adopted a more aggressive security and military stance in Suwayda. In September 2015, a significant turning point occurred with the assassination of Sheikh Al-Balous and several leaders of the Rijal Al-Karama in two bombings. The first bombing targeted Al-Balous's convoy, and the second occurred at the National Hospital in Suwayda, targeting those injured in the first attack. The Rijal Al-Karama movement accused the head of the branch of orchestrating these bombings. These events, seen as unprecedented and unjustified violence against the Druze, especially during a time of attacks by Islamic extremists, significantly strained the

⁹ Interview with the director of Suwayda 24 network, Rayan Marouf, via WhatsApp, March 2023.

¹⁰ Military service in Syria is compulsory for males who have reached the age of eighteen, and lasts for a year and a half under normal circumstances. Since the beginning of the conflict, regime forces have kept their conscripts, and prevented them from being discharged. It also called in reserve forces to compensate for the severe manpower loss that the armed forces suffered during battles, the high rates of evasion of service, and the large-scale defections within its ranks. The regime tried to compensate for its human loss of Sunni fighters by increasing the recruitment of minorities. By 2015, the number of Druze deaths in the regime's army exceeded 1,500 fighters. For more, see: Mazen Ezzi, "The Druze of Sweida: The Embers of Dissent," *Al-Jumhuriya*, 22 September 2015, <https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2015/09/22/the-druze-of-suwayda-the-embers-of-dissent/>

¹¹ Sheikh Wahid Al-Balous, a retired officer, founded the Men of Dignity movement to defend the Druze community through neutrality, under the slogan "We forbid aggression against us, and aggression from us." For more, see: Mazen Ezzi, "The Druze of Sweida: The Embers of Dissent," *ibid*.

¹² The camp was in the Ain Dam area, south of the city of Suwayda. Source: interview with a human rights activist from Suwayda, April 2023.

¹³ The relationship between the three Aql Sheikh has not always been good. During the past years, a rift occurred between the two poles of the sheikhdom, and Sheikh Hikmat Al-Hijri began signing his statements alone as the first Sheikh Al-Aql, while Sheikhs Al-Hinnawi and Jarbou allied themselves under the House of the Druze sect in the shrine of Ain Al-Zaman in the city of Suwayda.

¹⁴ Religious banishment is a punitive method used by the official Druze establishment against those it considers to be outside its consensus among the Druze sheikhs. It includes keeping the punished person away from participating in religious events and rituals, and not allowing people to pray over them after death.

relationship between many Druze notables and Brigadier-General Nasser, whom people privately referred to as General Carbillet due to fear of his power.¹⁵

In May 2017, a notable reconciliation took place. The Aql Sheikhs Jarbou and Al-Hinnawi reached an agreement with the then-leader of the Rijal Al-Karama movement, Sheikh Raafat Al-Balous, causing further rifts with the head of the branch. This conflict continued until early 2018, when the two sheikhs persuaded the regime to change the leadership of the military intelligence in Suwayda.¹⁶

To the east of Suwayda, ISIS continued its attacks, culminating in a horrific massacre in July 2018, leaving 260 civilians dead and 30 women and children taken hostage.¹⁷ Regime forces in Suwayda did not engage in repelling these attacks. Instead, local armed civil groups, mobilizing under the "Fazaa" principle,¹⁸ took up the defense. These groups engaged in a complex military operation, employing guerrilla warfare and combing vast desert areas, hampered by limited communications and weapons.¹⁹ Syrian officials, including President Bashar al-Assad, later suggested that the non-intervention of regime forces was due to the reluctance of Suwayda's population to join the regime's military. This stance was reiterated when ISIS released the Druze hostages two months later.²⁰

¹⁵ During the period of the French mandate over Syria from 1920-1946, the rule of Suwayda was changed by more than one French officer, one of whom was Captain Carbillet, who was infamous for his cruel treatment of the Druze notables. Source: interview with Rayan Maarouf, mentioned previously.

¹⁶ The two sheikhs made visits to senior officials in Damascus, accompanied by the leader of Darat Ura, Prince Jihad al-Atrash, to pressure the regime to replace Brigadier General Nasser. For more, see: Mahmoud Al-Lababidi, "The Druze of Sweida: The Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts," technical report, European University Institute, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) project Florence, Italy, August 2019: <https://tinyurl.com/lac4wwjps>

¹⁷ Yamen Al-Shoufi, "Suwayda: ISIS mobile massacres...and betrayal of the regime" (Arabic), Al-Modon, 25 July 2018: <https://shorturl.at/dquyl>

¹⁸ "Fazaa" is a tribal custom that involves providing assistance to members of the same clan.

¹⁹ The local factions bought weapons from the opposition factions in Daraa, with self-financing, or donations from immigrants from Suwayda in the diaspora, as well as donations from the Druze in Lebanon and the occupied Golan.

²⁰ The Syrian President said at the time, "I say with all frankness (...) Every person who evades the service of the army is evading the service of the nation, and every one who evades the service of the nation bears the same guilt as every person kidnapped and martyred." For more, see: Sky News Arabia, "Assad to the Druze: 'If you had joined the army, the tragedy would not have happened'" (Arabic), 14 November, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/l2af3cy>

This situation intensified the perception among the Druze community that they were left to confront Salafist organizations alone, and that the regime was using these attacks as leverage against them.²¹ This sentiment, primarily spread through informal channels, did not immediately translate into direct political action. However, it contributed to a growing belief that the regime bore responsibility for the massacre. This belief was grounded in the fact that the core group of ISIS fighters who attacked Suwayda had previously left the Yarmouk camp in Damascus under a reconciliation agreement with regime forces and Russian sponsorship, relocating to the eastern countryside of Suwayda.²² While the ISIS attack did not significantly alter the deteriorating service and governance conditions in Suwayda, it did solidify a widespread conviction among civilians that future protection against similar attacks would require reliance on self-arming and civil organization for self-defense.

Rule of Criminal Gangs (2018-2022)

The unique situation in Suwayda Governorate created fertile ground for the emergence of various groups, including loyalist militias, armed civil groups, security factions, and gangs. Some of these groups had ties to the security services and engaged in smuggling operations between Suwayda and adjacent opposition-held areas. However, with the decline of the opposition in Daraa following the mid-2018 reconciliation agreement under Russian auspices,²³ the profitability of smuggling between Suwayda and Daraa diminished. This led some gangs in Suwayda to diversify their income sources, venturing into activities like arms trade, kidnapping for ransom, drug trafficking, car theft, illegal logging, and smuggling drugs into Jordan.

Between 2018 and 2022, the presence of gangs in

²¹ Al-Modon, "Suwayda Massacre: More Than Collusion between ISIS and the Regime" (Arabic), 28 July 2018: <https://shorturl.at/lopSX9>

²² Marwan Kayali, "Suwayda Asks: Who Opened the Gates of the Governorate to ISIS?" (Arabic), Daraj Media, 25 July 2018: <https://bit.ly/3rrk0Q6>

²³ Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria," Research Project Report, European University Institute, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) project, Florence, Italy, 14 May 2019: <http://bit.ly/2J9hx5z>

Suwayda increased, with some cities and villages becoming known for specific gangs. These groups evolved into complex criminal networks, often operating covertly and aligning their activities with security agendas, sometimes even coordinating openly with security forces.²⁴

In response to the growing civil unrest following the 2018 ISIS massacre, the regime altered its security strategy in Suwayda. At the end of 2018, Major General Kifah al-Melhem was appointed as the head of the Military Intelligence Branch in the southern region.²⁵ Al-Melhem led a policy of rapprochement and containment with various Druze armed groups, including the Rijal Al-Karama, as well as the armed criminal gangs. The security services carried out several reconciliation processes for individuals wanted by the law, including members of armed civil groups and gangs. However, these agreements did not involve dismantling the gangs, allowing them to continue their activities and granting them more freedom of movement, including issuing security IDs for passing through checkpoints.²⁶

Major General Al-Melhem reportedly engaged directly with leaders of these groups, taking them on extensive drives through the city to discuss ideas, solutions, and challenges. Al-Melhem seemed to emphasize the “national character of the Military Intelligence service,” and would talk at length about the existential threats to the Druze and to Syrians at large. His strategy appears to involve building local Druze groups linked to the Military Intelligence branch, providing them with funding and missions. These groups, while carrying out state objectives, also retained some autonomy in implementing their local agendas.²⁷

²⁴ Nizar Ahmad, “Kidnapping for Ransom: Gangs Threaten Civil Peace in Sweida,” Policy Brief, European University Institute, *Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) project*, Florence, Italy, 7 March 2022: <https://tinyurl.com/msvhtzam>.

²⁵ Major General Kifah al-Melhem is considered one of the old guard regime officers, an affiliate of Bassel al-Assad, the son of the late President Hafez al-Assad, who was killed in a car accident in 1994, after he was being prepared to assume the presidency after his father. In 2019, Major General Kifah al-Melhem became head of the Military Intelligence Directorate in Syria, and maintained his interest in Suwayda, which became one of the Military Intelligence's main areas of influence.

²⁶ The security card is given to members of the militias loyal to the regime, and includes an authorization to carry out security tasks, and a request not to be stopped at checkpoints. Source: Interview with a leader in an armed militia, March 2023.

²⁷ Mazen Ezzi, “Raji Falhout and the Story of Confusion of the Syrian Druze” (Arabic), Daraj Media, 28 July 2022: <https://shorturl.at/nplUX>

In December 2018, several armed groups that refused the settlement with Military Intelligence formed the so-called “Single Artery Alliance.” This alliance included youth armed groups that had either left or been expelled from the Rijal Al-Karama movement, with some factions having links to gangs. While part of the Alliance saw the regime as their primary adversary, rejecting the Rijal Al-Karama's conciliatory approaches and accusing them of betraying Sheikh Al-Balous's legacy,²⁸ their involvement in the murky world of organized crime quickly eroded their social capital, pushing them into illegal activities to fund themselves. These non-conformist armed groups faced a targeted liquidation campaign by other local gangs affiliated with the security services. The campaign led to their dismantlement and the killing of key figures, as seen with the Salkhad city gang in May and June 2019, whose collapse also led to the disintegration of the Single Artery Alliance.²⁹ Meanwhile, some armed groups and gangs that had settled with the regime moved under its umbrella. They began amassing wealth and influence in their communities while continuing their illicit activities, in exchange for carrying out certain security tasks.

These tasks included arresting targets designated by the regime, controlling and monopolizing the drug market, and engaging in military clashes with the opposition. A notable incident occurred in June 2022 when groups from the paramilitary group National Defense Forces, loyal to the regime, along with gangs affiliated with Military Intelligence, attacked the Counter-Terrorism Force of the opposition Syrian Liwaa Party which were fortified in the town Khazma, east of Suwayda, leading to the death of its leader and the capture of its members.³⁰ The Liwaa Party is a political organization opposed to the regime and active in Suwayda. Its followers are known for their inclination towards the idea of self-administration

²⁸ Zain Al-Halabi, “The Artery of Dignity: Military Factions Seek to Prevent the Regime's Return to Suwayda” (Arabic), Al-Modon, 27 January 2019: <https://shorturl.at/cprz3>. Also see: Zain Al-Halabi, “Suwayda: Unification with the Artery of Dignity: and Air Force Gangs Reveal Themselves” (Arabic), Al-Modon, 26 December 2018: <https://shorturl.at/rwtwz5>.

²⁹ Zain Al-Halabi, “Suwayda: Who assassinated Wissam Al-Eid?” (Arabic), Al-Modon, 3 May 2019: <https://shorturl.at/kszZ1>

³⁰ Al-Akhbar, “Damascus anticipates the tension scenario: a lightning operation in Suwayda” (Arabic), 11 June 2022: <https://shorturl.at/hJKS2>.

in Suwayda, and the regime accuses them of collaborating with foreign powers.³¹

However, these security-backed gangs became a significant burden on their local communities and even on the Military Intelligence Branch, as their criminal activities often led to violent incidents threatening civil peace.³² Traditional notables and clerics found themselves unable to control the chaos using societal means such as religious dictates, social ostracization, family ties, and tribal judiciary.³³ During this period, the Rijal Al-Karama movement faced significant setbacks that diminished its activities and influence. The complexities of civil and familial conflicts in the region made decision-making difficult for the movement, which was also reluctant to engage in bloodshed, despite its commitment to protecting the Druze sect. This reluctance had a particularly notable impact during the 2020 conflicts in Al-Qurayya, located southwest of Suwayda. The town was embroiled in battles with the Russian-backed Eighth Brigade, based in Busra al-Sham in Daraa, which escalated from a kidnapping incident to the Brigade seizing large areas of land in Al-Qurayya. Despite the escalating situation, the leader of the Rijal Al-Karama movement opted not to actively intervene in the conflict. This decision followed a promise from a senior Syrian official to intervene and halt the Eighth Brigade's offensive, a promise that was ultimately unfulfilled. As a result, the Druze fighters, lacking sufficient support, lost the battle.³⁴

In the midst of the chaos and the state's absence, the people of Suwayda increasingly resisted the actions of the gangs. A significant example was the popular uprising against the Shahba town-gang in July 2021. This revolt was triggered by the gang's assassination of a well-known city activist, leading

to the gang's dismantlement and the expulsion of its members from the city.

Meanwhile, a gang in the town of Ariqa, despite undergoing security settlements, escalated its criminal activities. It intensified kidnappings along parts of the Damascus-Suwayda road and targeted army and security service officers. In September 2021, a security operation involving Syrian army forces successfully dismantled this gang. With the fall of these two gangs, power and resources in the Suwayda governorate became concentrated in the hands of the Atil gang, led by Raji Falhout, and the Suwayda city gang. They emerged as the de facto controlling forces in the region.

Gang leaders, particularly Raji Falhout, leveraged their security connections and profits from illegal activities to amass wealth. This wealth enabled them to assume roles akin to social leaders and notables. They provided social services and donations, expanding their networks among communities grappling with poverty, hunger, and unemployment.³⁵ This scenario unfolded in a region characterized by total chaos, where state institutions were largely absent or incapable of providing basic services. Despite their societal contributions, these gangs continued to antagonize the local community. They set up checkpoints, arrested and tortured opponents, and, in some cases, handed over wanted individuals to security services.³⁶ At this stage, Suwayda also became a major hub for drug smuggling into Jordan and a local drug market, especially among youth and teenagers.³⁷ In July 2022, the Falhout gang kidnapped residents of Shahba city, accusing them of plotting an assassination attempt against its leader. This incident sparked another local uprising against the gang. Armed groups from various regions of Suwayda, including factions from the Rijal Al-Karama movement, attacked Falhout's

³¹ Ahmed Jamal, "The Syrian Liwaa Party: A Political Entity Sees the Light in Suwayda, and This Is Its Agenda" (Arabic), *Orient News*, 11 July 2021: <https://tinyurl.com/mw27wyxj>

³² Zein Al-Halabi, "Suwayda and Salkhad on the Brink of Conflict?" (Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 16 April 2019: <https://shorturl.at/acoEP>.

³³ Zein Al-Halabi, "Suwayda: Between Al-Khal and the Melhem Brigade: National Defense Forces Were Lost" (Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 28 December 2019: <https://shorturl.at/evyCU>.

³⁴ Abdullah Al-Jabassini and Mazen Ezzi, "Tribal 'Sulh' and the Politics of Persuasion in Volatile Southern Syria," *Research Project Report, European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project, Florence, Italy, March 2021*: <https://shorturl.at/cPX38>

³⁵ According to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, 9 out of 10 Syrians live below the poverty line. He also stated that more than 15 million Syrians, or 70% of the total population, are in need of humanitarian aid. See: United Nations website, "Suffering Beyond Description After 12 Years of Conflict in Syria," (Arabic), 15 June 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/4um7efxn>.

³⁶ Nizar Ahmed, "Kidnapping for Ransom," *ibid*.

³⁷ Joseph Daher, Nizar Ahmed, and Salwan Taha, "Smuggling between Syria and Lebanon, and from Syria to Jordan: the evolution and delegation of a practice," *Policy Brief, European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) project, Florence, Italy, 19 April 2022*: <https://tinyurl.com/284yd7cw>

headquarters in Attil town, effectively ending his gang's reign. This uprising was supported by Sheikh Al-Aql Hikmat Al-Hijri, marking a significant shift in the power dynamics within the region.³⁸

Deceptive Calm (2022-2023)

The armed civil uprising that toppled Raji Falhout's gang led to a temporary unification among the remaining gangs in Suwayda, leaving the regime in a difficult position as its strategy of relying on gangs for regional control faltered. In response, the regime sought to reforge alliances with traditional Druze forces loyal to it, aiming to re-establish their influence within the Druze community and facilitate mediation between the local community and Damascus authorities.

Suwayda's governance structure is traditionally dual, encompassing both spiritual and temporal leaderships. The spiritual leadership includes the Druze clergy, organized into two main institutions: the "spiritual leadership" of the Druze in Qanawat, currently headed by Sheikh Al-Aql Hikmat Al-Hijri, and the house of the Druze Muslim sect in Suwayda, led by Sheikh Al-Aql Youssef Jarbou and Sheikh Al-Aql Hamoud Al-Hinnawi. The second form of leadership is referred to by locals as "temporal" as opposed to spiritual, and covers the non-religious civil sphere and consists of two emirates, several notable families, and community leaders.³⁹ The regime's renewed approach focused on engaging certain notables and clerics, notably Sheikh Al-Aql Youssef Jarbou in Suwayda, Prince Louay Al-Atrash in Darat Ura, and Hassan Al-Atrash, head of the economic office in the Baath Party branch in Suwayda.⁴⁰ However, this strategy

did not endow these figures with new powers but rather used them as communication conduits between Damascus and Suwayda's civil society. This role was seen as a privilege for these notables, especially in assisting families with detained members and having limited authority to pursue some gang members. The regime's new approach was, then, to navigate the complex social and political landscape in Suwayda by leveraging traditional structures and figures to maintain its influence and control.⁴¹

In an effort to stabilize the situation in Suwayda, the Syrian regime allowed more leeway to the Rijal Al-Karama movement. This group, which regained its status as the primary and most significant organized vigilante force in the region, took steps to control smaller gangs under a civil guise. This shift was marked by a reduction in the influence of military security, with the State Security Apparatus, led by Major General Hossam Louqa, becoming more prominent. Major General Louqa introduced a new settlement process aimed at those who had evaded military service and those wanted by security forces in Suwayda. However, this initiative did not yield significant results.⁴²

The local population continued to resist compulsory conscription, with the state struggling to enforce it due to its limited control over the territory, widespread armament, and the presence of armed civil groups. These groups often countered arrest attempts by setting up checkpoints and detaining army officers, using them as leverage to secure the release of their own detained members.

Following the armed civil uprising, the security situation in Suwayda saw a relative improvement.

³⁸ Mazen Ezzi, "Raji Falhout and the Confusion of the Syrian Druze," *ibid.*

³⁹ An emirate for the Al-Atrash family in the town of Darat Ura, an emirate for the Amer family in the town of Amra, and a few pashas, the most prominent of which is the Al-Atrash family in the city of Suwayda, and the Hunaidi family in the town of Majdal.

⁴⁰ The chieftom of the city of Suwayda belongs to Abu Muhammad Ismail al-Atrash, who was imprisoned in 1966, due to his neutral position during the conflicts between the Baathist wings fighting for power, and whose influence persisted in exile until the 1990s. At the same time, the regime established his cousin, Abu Hassan Abdullah al-Atrash, as leader of the city of Suwayda and was given a permanent seat in the People's Assembly. Member of the leadership of the Baath Party branch, Hassan al-Atrash, is the son of Abdullah al-Atrash, whom the regime is trying to establish as the new local leader of the city of Suwayda.

⁴¹ Suwayda 24, "Suwayda: A campaign by the city's factions under cover from Darat Ura" (Arabic), 13 August 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/brucumas>.

⁴² The authorities imposed a security settlement on those evading military service on 5 October 2022, which included granting an administrative deferral of service for a period of 6 months before joining the army units deployed in southern Syria. Because the settlement is similar to that made by those wanted by security forces, many Druze considered themselves unconcerned with it because they had not broken the law. In fact, only 2,500 young men participated in the latest settlement out of 30,000 evading military service, and defectors, in Suwayda. The most prominent motivation for the settlement is obtaining a "settlement card," which allows its holder to move freely without fear of arrest, and to obtain travel documents. For more, see: Mazen Ezzi, "What's New About the Sweida Protests in Southern Syria?", *MEDirections Blog, European University Institute, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) project, Florence, Italy, 8 December 2022*: <https://tinyurl.com/54jtppz8>

The frequency of kidnappings and thefts decreased as gangs became wary of facing a fate similar to that of the Falhout gang. Nonetheless, since the armed civil groups, leaders, and notables lacked sustainable methods of punishment, oversight, and a formal security, judicial, and prison system, chaos eventually resurfaced. This time, however, the gangs operated more covertly, keeping their illegal activities hidden to avoid public provocation.

At this stage, the deteriorating condition of official state institutions in Suwayda became acutely evident to the local population, primarily due to their inability to provide basic services. The severe fuel shortage had a paralyzing effect, disrupting transportation within the governorate and leading to a lack of heating in homes and schools. Prolonged power outages not only affected work in official institutions but also caused widespread communication and internet disruptions. The electricity and fuel scarcity further complicated the situation by causing technical failures in water well pumps, exacerbating the already severe drinking water crisis in the absence of necessary spare parts. Additionally, there was an alarming increase in logging, including fruit trees, as farmers struggled to plow land and cultivate seasonal crops due to these challenges.

In response to these hardships, the pace of protests intensified towards the end of 2022, becoming almost a daily occurrence. Demonstrators blocked main roads, shut down official offices, and seized the limited fuel supplies allocated to the governorate. These actions were taken to operate essential services like wireless communication exchanges and water pumps.

These frequent local protests were part of larger, widespread movements throughout the governorate. Notable among these were the "We Want to Live" campaign initiated in 2020 in reaction to the collapse of the Syrian pound and worsening economic conditions,⁴³ and the "You Suffocated Us" campaign in 2021.⁴⁴ The beginning

of 2022 saw another wave of protests following the decision to lift subsidies on basic materials. These protest movements, often lasting several weeks, saw significant participation from the youth, who expressed their frustrations over the lack of future prospects in terms of employment, security, and a decent standard of living.

The growing frustration with state institutions in Suwayda culminated in a significant event on December 4, 2022, when the governorate building was stormed. This incident saw the participation of small armed civil factions and hundreds of unaffiliated youths. The confrontation with security forces, who resorted to using live ammunition, led to violence, property damage, one fatality, and several injuries. This marked the first such incident in Suwayda since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011.⁴⁵

However, state institutions in Suwayda seem ill-equipped to address the deteriorating living conditions or to effectively respond to the ongoing fuel, electricity, and water crises. Additionally, they appear incapable of mitigating the effects of climate change on the region. Consequently, these institutions have increasingly relied on civilian initiatives to manage these crises.

The local population, driven by necessity, has started to independently raise funds. These donations are used for various purposes, such as installing what are referred to as "golden lines" that deliver uninterrupted electricity supply to water wells, purchasing, repairing and replacing water pump parts, and securing fuel for operating heavy machinery belonging to public service institutions. The community has even resorted to paying bribes to employees and managers of these institutions to ensure the operation and repair of essential services like pumps, communication boosters, and electrical transformers. Even schools have begun requesting donations from students' families for essential supplies like exam papers. Despite these community-led efforts, the regime has not granted any privileges to these civilian initiatives. Instead, it has co-opted them, requiring donors of machinery and equipment to sign over

⁴³ Mazen Ezzi, "Sweida Protests: The Start of a New Syrian Revolution?" *MEDirections Blog*, European University Institute, *Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS)* project, Florence, Italy, 12 June 2020: <https://shorturl.at/kuz46>.

⁴⁴ Facebook page of the "You Suffocated Us" campaign: <https://tinyurl.com/2p98wy7r>.

⁴⁵ Mazen Ezzi, "What's New About the Sweida Protests in Southern Syria?", *ibid*.

ownership to state institutions, which then decide how these resources are utilized. This approach leaves the provision and maintenance of services firmly in the hands of state institutions, despite their ongoing failure to meet needs and the rampant corruption within their ranks.⁴⁶

Karama Square

In late August 2023, Suwayda experienced a significant resurgence of public dissent, marking the beginning of an unparalleled peaceful movement. This new wave of protests was characterized by broad civil participation, including groups that had remained neutral in previous years, and a clear political stance against the regime. Triggered by a government decision to liberalize prices, the movement quickly transitioned from focusing on livelihood issues to directly criticizing the Syrian regime's policies, holding it responsible for the ongoing crises in Syria and alleging that the regime was the sole beneficiary of these problems.

For many participants, this movement was seen as a continuation of the 2011 revolution, primarily due to its political nature. It reflected a growing sentiment that peaceful revolution and political change were being stifled both locally and regionally, with a fading hope in the broader Arab Spring movement itself.⁴⁷ There was a widespread recognition that the regime was no longer capable of addressing the mounting living, service, and political demands of the people.⁴⁸

The protest movement centered around Karama Square in Suwayda city, with demonstrators advocating for a political transition in Syria.⁴⁹ They called for a process led by the United Nations, in line with UN Security Council Resolution No. 2254 of

2015 and other relevant international resolutions.⁵⁰ The movement gained significant symbolic and protective support from the spiritual leadership of the Druze, particularly from Sheikh Al-Aql Hikmat Al-Hijri and Sheikh Al-Aql Hamoud Al-Hinnawi. Another notable aspect of these protests was the active and prominent participation of women, who played key roles in mobilizing, organizing, and leading the demonstrations, marking a distinct departure from previous protest movements in Syria.⁵¹

In response to the escalating protests in Suwayda, the Syrian regime adopted a strategy of deliberate non-engagement, opting to officially ignore the unfolding events. Instead, it attempted to defuse the situation and reduce street tensions without making any political concessions. The regime's reluctance to confront the protests in Suwayda militarily stemmed from a calculation that the costs of suppression would outweigh the benefits. There was speculation that the regime preferred to isolate and smother the protests, aiming to internally divide them and prevent their spread to other Syrian regions.

A military response against the Druze protesters would contradict the regime's narrative of waging a war against extremist Islamic terrorism. The Druze community, known for its tribal alliances and adherence to a closed, mystical faith, is not typically associated with jihad, proselytization, or expansionist tendencies. Furthermore, the current Syrian state structure has become increasingly burdensome for the Druze, with issues like remittances from expatriates being taxed and farmers being pressured to sell their crops at prices that barely cover the cost of production.⁵²

Notably, no Syrian government officials visited Suwayda during this period, nor were any official statements released. The official media completely ignored the protests, which included actions like destroying statues of the late President Hafez al-

⁴⁶ Interview with a social worker, February 2023.

⁴⁷ Maher Masoud, "Suwayda Uprising: The Third Revolution" (Arabic), *Al-Jumhuriya*, 7 September 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/5bc9sv2f>.

⁴⁸ Shawkat Gharz al-Din, "The Syrian General Strike: Challenges, Options, and Prospects" (Arabic), *Maysloun*: <https://tinyurl.com/mtddf8bp>.

⁴⁹ Karam Mansour, "The Story of a Square That Came to Be Called 'Dignity'" (Arabic), *Al-Jumhuriya*, 14 September 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/37mfnwya>.

⁵⁰ United Nations website, Resolution 2254 of 2015 adopted by the Security Council at its session 7588 held on 18 December 2015: <https://tinyurl.com/5dbvce4j>

⁵¹ Lubana Ghazlan, "They Emerged to Chant for Freedom" (Arabic), *Al-Jumhuriya*, 19 September 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/2fz37hy8>.

⁵² Mazen Ezzi, "Syria. In Suwayda the Druze Start their Own Revolution", *Orient XXI*, 27 October 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/4s7m382x>

Assad, removing pictures of President Bashar al-Assad from government buildings, and shutting down the Baath Party headquarters in the governorate.⁵³ The regime's efforts to avoid violent clashes included repositioning military forces and withdrawing some security checkpoints.⁵⁴ The regime's stance and the situation in Suwayda were primarily commented on by regime loyalists on social media. These loyalists produced content accusing the Druze of sectarianism, treason, and collusion with foreign entities. A significant point of focus for these commentators was the protesters in Suwayda raising the five-pointed star flag, a symbol of Druze unity. This act was interpreted as a direct challenge to the Syrian state's centralization and its ideology of national unity.⁵⁵

During the protest period in Suwayda, the Syrian regime employed various tactics to contain the movement, blending economic measures with strategic reliance on loyalist networks. These efforts included a significant increase in the investment budget for Suwayda Governorate for 2024, from 15 to 75 billion Syrian pounds.⁵⁶ Additionally, measures were taken to expedite the purchase of farmers' products and their payment, repair inoperational water wells, and improve the electricity supply to some extent.⁵⁷ Facing a challenge from Sheikh Al-Aql Hikmat Al-Hijri, a prominent leader in the protest movement, the regime strategically bolstered its support among Druze notables and clerics in Suwayda, the Damascus countryside, Quneitra, and Lebanon.

This move was widely interpreted as an effort to undermine Sheikh Al-Hijri's growing influence and stabilize the regime's power base in these regions.⁵⁸

At many junctures, it seemed that this policy was an attempt to provoke civil conflict, pitting the street against itself.⁵⁹ However, the public response to these notables, especially when they made pro-regime statements, was largely one of dissatisfaction and distrust. For instance, on September 12, the Suwayda Governorate Council called on security forces to protect state institutions and condemned the methods of protest taking place, which was met with wide disapproval and accusations that the Governorate Council was illegitimate and that its members had been chosen via acclamation by the Baath Party, in sham elections that took place in 2022.⁶⁰

In the midst of the protests in Suwayda, Hassan al-Atrash, a member of the Baath Party's leadership, convened a meeting of the city's notables at the al-Atrash guesthouse on September 23. This meeting, which included Sheikh al-Aql Youssef Jarbou, aimed to align the notables with a pro-regime stance regarding the ongoing protests. However, the meeting did not go as planned. It was marked by a diversity of opinions and was not fully attended by all the family leaders of Suwayda. The resulting statement from this meeting recognized the legitimacy of the people's demands but criticized the form of the protests.⁶¹

Prince Louay al-Atrash issued a similar statement, vaguely suggesting foreign influence behind the protests, yet urging the government and legislative authorities to ensure a decent living standard for all Syrians and holding them accountable for failing to meet the people's needs.⁶² On November 5, 2023, some protest participants called for a

⁵³ Mazen Ezzi, "Was the Suwayda Revolution Delayed?" (Arabic), *The New Arab*, 1 September 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/2s44ykt6>

⁵⁴ One shooting incident occurred on 13 September, when peaceful protesters attempted to storm the headquarters of the ruling Baath Party branch in Suwayda, resulting in two people being injured.

⁵⁵ The Druze flag, also known as Al-Bayraq, consists of five colors, each with a connotation. For more, see: Omar Al-Asaad, "Arab Days in Suwayda: Will the Mountain Resolve the War of Syrian Flags?" (Arabic), *Hayyez*, 12 September 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/3j74xj4v>. Also see: Majd Al-Ghatrif, "The Flag of Sweden: Embracing Diversity or Manufacturing Difference?" (Arabic), *Awan*, 3 October 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/u3nj9zks>.

⁵⁶ Abeer Saimoua, "A significant increase in the investment budget in Suwayda from 15-75 billion liras in 2024... Member of the Executive Office: We received 710 million last month as a subsidy from the local administration" (Arabic), *Al-Watan* newspaper, 4 October 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/2cf9bkuz>

⁵⁷ For example: SANA, "At a cost of 438 million liras... establishing two electricity transmission centers in Suwayda" (Arabic), 17 October 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/4fuhjrs8>. Also see: SANA, "Transfer of the third batch of juicy grape prices in Suwayda, worth one billion liras" (Arabic), 9 October 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/2w9vm645>.

⁵⁸ Mazen Ezzi, "As-Suwayda Uprising: Catalyst for a New Syria?", *In Depth Politics, Al-Jumhuriya*, 6 October 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/rf65twpr>

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Ziad AWAD, "The 2022 Syrian local elections : a leadership rooted in regime networks", *Technical Report, 2023/01, Middle East Directions (MED), Syrian Trajectories, 2022*, <https://tinyurl.com/3ctccvbw>

⁶¹ Suwayda 24, "Baathist Attempts to Circumvent the Suwayda Movement" (Arabic), 23 September 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/3baxwwp5>.

⁶² Facebook page of Louay al-Atrash, "Darat Ura Declaration" (Arabic), 3 October 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/vuzj7wdx>.

general strike across the governorate.⁶³ However, due to unclear objectives and the inability to mobilize even people already engaged in the protest movement, the strike quickly fell apart. Following these events, representatives of armed factions loyal to the regime met with Sheikh Al-Aql Youssef Jarbou in Suwayda. For the first time, they openly expressed a desire to either stop or control the protests, raising concerns about the potential for civil clashes. While difficult to imagine, the possibility of violent confrontations between these groups remained a looming threat.⁶⁴

During the protest period in Suwayda, there was a notable decrease in organized crime, suicide, kidnapping for ransom, and cross-border drug smuggling and trade. From August to October 2023, the average monthly rate of violent deaths due to criminal or security incidents halved from 10 to 5.⁶⁵ However, this period also saw a significant increase in the illegal logging of forests, particularly in areas evacuated by regime military units as part of a redeployment strategy. This deforestation, occurring in a region already facing the challenges of climate change and desertification, represents a substantial and irreversible environmental loss, and threatens its very survival.⁶⁶

As the regional situation evolved, including the outbreak of war in Gaza, the Syrian regime continued its policy of ignoring the Suwayda protests. The regime's strategy of spatial containment effectively isolated Suwayda from other areas under its control. This approach seemed preferable to the regime, which aimed to minimize escalation amidst the presence of various foreign military forces on Syrian territory and the potential for broad military escalation.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, the protest

movement in Suwayda, despite suffering from reduced media coverage, found an opportunity to grow and establish deeper roots. Organizing the protests internally became a crucial step. Over time, the focus of the demands began to shift, with more emphasis on immediate living and service needs rather than solely high-level political changes or the implementation of International Resolution 2254. Interestingly, in villages distant from the center, there was a civil trend towards self-organization and local administration. People formed popular civil bodies to monitor the performances of municipal councils and exert civil pressure on state institutions. These efforts aimed to secure the implementation of essential services like well repairs, electricity provision for pumps, and fair distribution of heating fuel.

In contrast, the urban centers, particularly the city of Suwayda, maintained a highly political tone in their protests. Nevertheless, the movement in Suwayda underwent a political paradigm shift, evidenced by the formation of new political parties and forces, and professional groups like the Association of Free Engineers, Free Lawyers, and the Association of Political Detainees and those forcibly dismissed from their jobs.⁶⁸

⁶³ The most prominent supporters of the strike were members of armed militias, which took a prominent role in protecting the protests.

⁶⁴ At least one of those present at the meeting is known to lead a gang affiliated with the security services and enjoys the support of the Military Intelligence.

⁶⁵ Suwayda 24, "Investigation: Suwayda 24 monitors violence and violations in the past three months" (Arabic), 10 November 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/4zjx7m3f>.

⁶⁶ Mazen Ezzi, "Does the Suwayda Uprising lead to a new Syria?", *ibid*.

⁶⁷ In fact, Iranian militias operating in Syria entered into limited military clashes with American forces on Syrian territory, and also in less severe clashes on the Golan front with Israel. Tension also escalated between regime forces and Turkish-backed opposition factions in northwestern Syria.

⁶⁸ Laith Abi Nader, "Suwayda demonstrations include new unions on 'Steadfast Friday'" (Arabic), *The New Arab*, 10 November 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/46xw6w34>

Conclusion: Speculating on Future Prospects

The Syrian regime's approach to Suwayda is characterized by a mix of containment, repression, and neglect, shaped by the unique circumstances of the region. The complex and often turbulent relationship between Suwayda and the regime from 2011 to 2023 has deepened the rift between the Druze community and the regime, reinforcing Suwayda's stance of neutrality. The recent decrease in violence has enabled the Druze to more openly express their discontent with the ongoing political instability and worsening living conditions, as evidenced by the recent protests.

However, the high political aspirations of the protesters might pose a challenge to achieving their goals. A significant faction within the movement is steadfast in its demand for the implementation of International Resolution 2254 and a peaceful change of the regime in Syria.⁶⁹ This group is wary of any local solutions that might suggest a move towards self-administration or secession, fearing accusations of separatism. This apprehension potentially impedes the movement's transition to peaceful campaigns focused on pressuring state institutions to address urgent living needs. These needs include resolving the water and electricity crises, adapting to the impacts of climate change, abolishing compulsory military service (which restricts movement and requires prior security approvals for most official transactions), and improving governance models within the governorate.

The financial challenges facing state institutions in Syria significantly impair the regime's ability to reassert control over Suwayda, especially given the prevailing anti-regime sentiment among the local population. Efforts to turn the conflict into a "street against itself" confrontation are likely to exacerbate civil tensions without offering a viable solution to the current deadlock.

Amidst the political stalemate, and the regime's apparent disinterest in a political resolution, the

protest movement in Suwayda is confronted with a myriad of challenges. These include poverty, a scarcity of drinking water and irrigation resources, declining agricultural yields due to climate change, dysfunctional state institutions, a security-centric regime approach, and the proliferation of illegal economic activities, narcotics, and crime.

To address these challenges, the movement could consider advocating for substantial changes to the Local Administration Law No. 107 of 2012. Such amendments could involve ensuring that the governor and the governorate secretary are elected locally and limiting the central government's authority to dissolve and form local administration councils. Expanding the powers of these local administrations to oversee public sector institutions and companies in their areas could also be a crucial step.

A shift towards alternative energy sources could be another strategy for achieving energy independence and reducing reliance on fuel allocations from Damascus. This transformation, potentially supported by international partners, local allies, and the Suwayda diaspora, could lead to the implementation of sustainable development programs. These programs would aim to support local livelihoods, protect the environment, and curb the levels of migration from the region. Despite obstacles, there are some promising signs. Many villages affected by the water crisis in Suwayda have begun to reorganize themselves, electing local bodies tasked with overseeing the rehabilitation of inoperational wells, and conducting water distribution.

The process of self-organization in Suwayda, initiated as a community response to address urgent living needs, provides a powerful model for empowering local communities. For this model to be effective and sustainable, it requires support from international partners, with the aim of developing and democratizing the initiative, providing peaceful and fact-based approaches to address endemic local issues and find the most viable solutions.

Key to this process is security and stability in the governorate, which necessitates open and honest dialogue. This dialogue should involve civil and

⁶⁹ Jamal Al-Shoufi, "Syria's Suwayda protests underscore pressing need for a political solution," *Middle East Institute*, 4 October 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/l3jrmehs3>.

societal authorities, as well as the Syrian state's security and service agencies. It would entail exploring the capacities, demands, and needs of both parties, and seeking common ground. Such an understanding might lead to the security services adopting less aggressive approaches to social and livelihood concerns, and could also alleviate the financial strain on Syrian state institutions.

In initiating and overseeing this dialogue process, international partners committed to sustainable development and conflict mitigation can play a crucial role. Once a period of stability is achieved, socialist, ecological, and green parties from Europe and America could collaborate with local partners to implement projects. These projects would support local producers in adopting sustainable methods to combat climate challenges, shifting the focus from identity and ideology-based politics to pragmatic solutions that enhance dignity and quality of life. This partnership could provide expertise in local organization, administration, and transition to green and sustainable energy. Such efforts must be grounded in fact-based research by local partners, focusing on reviving the region on a sustainable, democratic, and green basis. Such an approach, compared to the provision of unsustainable humanitarian aid, is not only more cost-effective but also holds the potential for long-term, meaningful impact.

