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Suwayda at the Heart of Change:

*A New Central Authority in Damascus,
Local Resilience, and Regional Rivalry
over the Druze Community*

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Executive Summary

This paper examines the political and social shifts in the Druze-majority province of Suwayda in light of the complete fall of the Bashar Al-Assad regime and the rise of a new authority led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). These shifts mark a turning point in the reconfiguration of the Syrian State, not only in terms of its administrative and security structure, but also in its relationship with local components which were long kept at the margin of central decision-making. As one of the areas that has preserved a degree of autonomy throughout the years of conflict, Suwayda now finds itself confronting a new ruling project—an exclusionary one based on the concentration of power in the hands of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, a group with a hardliner Salafi background.

The paper analyses the different pathways of this escalating tension between Suwayda and the new authority, from the Druze community's lack of enthusiasm to engage in Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's exclusionary top-down government formation, to the reconfiguration of power dynamics between local authorities in Suwayda. The paper also examines the escalation of armed tensions between Suwayda and the transitional administration in Damascus, which reached its peak since late April 2025, following a military campaign accompanied by a wave of incitement and accusations of treason against the Druze community, triggered by a fabricated audio recording attributed to a Druze cleric.

At the heart of these changes, the position of the Druze community within the Syrian and regional scene revives crucial questions on the meaning of patriotism, the boundaries of belonging, and means of protection in light of a new political structure leaning towards unilateral religious centralization. The paper discusses how the armed escalation against the Druze has strengthened internal cohesion in Suwayda and cemented the notion of military confrontation as a means of negotiating with Damascus, with whom the gap has widened.

The paper concludes with a set of strategic recommendations to European and German decision-makers on the potential of effective engagement with local actors, overcoming the government/civil society binarism, and understanding the intertwined opportunities and risks emerging from the dynamics in Southern Syria.

Introduction

Since the end of 2024, unprecedented changes have taken place in Syria's political and security structure in light of the fall of the regime that governed the country for decades, the rise of a new authority led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and based in Damascus with the aim of rebuilding the State. This change was not, however, a mere swap of the governing elite, but rather a complete redefinition of the relationship between State and society, between the authority and local components, within a governance project combining security hegemony and religious doctrine, and recreating exclusionary centralization under a new religious Salafist banner.

In view of this transformation, the Druze-majority province of Suwayda became a sensitive testing zone for this emerging State. Suwayda was not a marginal player, but rather swiftly became a subject of dispute, between the new authority's attempts to impose its integration into the emerging State on one hand, and the local Druze community's resistance to such attempts to maintain a distance from Damascus, allowing Suwayda a margin of negotiation which would ensure independent local decision-making on the other hand. This tension was evident immediately when local actors refused to engage in the new authority's pathways, as they believed that the political project on which this State was based did not recognize their existence as an active component in the first place.

These transformations overlapped with a complex internal scene in Suwayda, where the local community rearranged its representation and authorities in response to political pressure from Damascus. A swift rise in religious leadership represented by Sheikh al-Aql Hikmat al-Hijri was seen in the province. Local armed groups also played an active political role in this context alongside an increase in protest movements at Al-Karama Square. This reality dictated an internal restructuring of local powers in view of polarization with the emerging State.

This tension was not confined within the Syrian territory, but swiftly expanded to the regional sphere in which Israel's interest in leveraging its regional gains post-October 7th 2023 was evident, aiming to reconfigure its relationship with the Druze community in Syria, whether through symbolic support channels, controversial political statements, or attempts to open communications with local actors, and exploiting the exclusionary approach in building the emerging State. As such, the Druze community appears to be trapped between extremely complicated choices; either the symbolic banishment from the emerging Syrian State, or Israel's attempt to impose foreign custody.

In this complicated context, the most urgent questions to be asked are the following: how is HTS, in its authoritarian position as the leader of the Syrian State, reshaping its relationship with the Druze community? How is Israel responding to this transformation? Can Europe and Germany, as external actors concerned with stability, develop more flexible and realistic engagement tools to navigate this new reality? This paper aims to answer these questions through a deep-dive into the following themes: first, the nature of the new authority and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's hegemony over the Syrian State; second, shifts within the Druze community and the positioning of Suwayda; and third, the new regional relationship between the Druze community and Israel. Finally, the paper offers an analytical view as well as practical recommendations to European and German decision-makers to better understand the new dynamics in Syria's South.

I. Top-down Government Reconfiguration – A Look into the New State through the Lens of Suwayda

Since the fall of the Syrian regime on December 8th 2024, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) started to lay down the structures of the new State from Damascus in a supremacist and centralized approach which did not reflect any desire for partnership with local components. For local actors in Suwayda, this process seemed to be an extension of the exclusionary approach under which they were long marginalized, although the discourse had shifted. These measures were therefore not seen as steps towards building a national State, but rather as a reproduction of a centralized power imposing its view on everyone without any real representation or acknowledgement of the diversity of the Syrian society.

From the first hours following the fall of the regime, HTS began to impose its power on the ground, fuelled by a centralized discourse aiming to rebuild the State based on a new political and security perception. The issue with this project lies, however, in its top-down implementation, by which the new authority fills vacant positions in the State without actually engaging the local community or different community components. With this hegemony also came a sequence of symbolic and institutional measures, starting with the announced formation of a "transitional government" and the appointment of Mohammed al-Bashir as Prime Minister on December 9th,¹ after heading Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in Idlib. This appointment was not the result of any dialogue or exchange of opinions with local powers, neither in Suwayda nor in other Syrian regions, thereby reaffirming the slogan "He who frees, decides". As such, it was intended that the new State be restructured from a single centre which reinstates hegemony over all parties under the umbrella of a military victory represented as a foundational moment for a new entity, completely ignoring the diversity and fragmentation of the Syrian people. Al-Bashir's appointment, as well as all those that followed in sovereign government roles, reflected the nature of the new authority and HTS's desire to expand its experience in governing Idlib in the past years across Syria.

A few days later, suspension of the previous Syrian Constitution was announced, the parliament was dissolved, and a committee was formed and tasked with drafting a temporary Constitutional Declaration. The problem here, according to an observer from Suwayda, lies in the fact that all these lively political announcements

were made in an ambiguous manner without any coordination with other actors. These steps were the first indicators of a centralized non-participatory authority which does not intend to adopt any inclusive policy towards remaining forces in Syria, some of which have contributed to the overthrow of the regime or at least freed their regions themselves, as is the case in Suwayda, and consider themselves concerned with post-Assad Syria. These forces, however, were excluded from this process.

Then came the announcement of the integration of armed factions into the new national army which was reconfigured under the umbrella of the Defence Ministry in the transitional government. On December 29th 2024, the General Directorate of the Army and Armed Forces issued Resolution No. 8 granting a number of military leaders engaged in Operation "Deterrence of Aggression" high-rank positions in the new army leadership,^{2,3} and filling the vacuum resulting from the fall of the Syrian Army. Some of these new officers are in fact leaders of Salafist Jihadist factions, while others have non-Syrian backgrounds. A number of said officers were granted official roles as colonels and generals in the army, which indicates an attempted cross-border integration of Jihadist forces into the new army structure. This measure raised questions on the nature of the new military institution and the political identity it is intended to represent, as no officers from Syrian minorities were appointed. It also exacerbated the fear of non-Sunni Syrian components that the new army was not as patriotic as it was portrayed and did not represent remaining components, but was rather formed merely to serve the new authority.

The end of January 2025 was marked by a turning point when Ahmad al-Sharaa was named President for the transitional phase during the Victory Conference of the Syrian Revolution, held in Damascus.⁴ His appointment was no surprise given his position at the core of the new authority. It did, however, open a broader discus-

1 Mohammed, Hiba, "These are the key figures governing Syria after the fall of the Assad regime", Al-Quds Al-Araby, December 17th 2024 (Arabic source), <https://tinyurl.com/mr3u62uk>

2 The "Deterrence of Aggression" operation began in November 2024, with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham forces advancing from their strongholds in Idlib toward Aleppo, then Hama and Homs, joined by allied Salafi factions. The operation lasted for about three weeks, marked by fierce battles, the use of drones and inghimasi fighters, and concluded on December 8, 2024, with the escape of Bashar al-Assad and the collapse of his regime.

3 Rostom, Hussam, "Syria: Military promotions primarily to HTS leaders", The New Arab, December 29th 2024 (Arabic source), <https://tinyurl.com/2pst2w2m>

4 "Appointment of Al-Sharaa as the transitional President of Syria", Al-Quds Al-Araby, January 29th 2025 (Arabic source), <https://tinyurl.com/35bnxusf>

sion on the symbolic and actual role granted to a previous military faction leader to lead a State attempting to reinvent itself with an institutional facade. The eighteen armed factions that took part in the conference were all from a Sunni background; some were Salafist Jihadist factions, and others affiliated with the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army. During the conference, the dissolution of the Syrian Army and all security bodies of the Assad regime, as well as the integration of armed factions attending the conference into the new army were announced. Meanwhile, all armed factions and militias of other ethnic backgrounds were absent. Among those notably missing were the Suwayda factions, which declined to participate due to the lack of clarity regarding the conference's vision and objectives. The Druze Religious Leadership (Mashyakhat al-Aql), represented by Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, was particularly concerned that Suwayda's participation would be interpreted as an endorsement of the authority—prior to reaching consensus on key issues such as the structure of the state and the nature of the political system.

On February 12th 2025, Syria's interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa announced the formation of a preparatory committee to plan the Syrian National Dialogue Conference. The committee included seven members, most of whom were supporters of the Salafist movement, while none were from Suwayda. The committee was tasked with laying out the necessary foundations and standards to ensure a successful national dialogue.⁵ It never, however, published the selection mechanism it would adopt to choose its invitees. The committee soon declared that groups refusing to surrender their arms and join the national army would not take part in the national dialogue, thus immediately excluding the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration and sparking questions about the status of Suwayda's representatives—whom insist on retaining arms until an agreement is reached on the structure of the future state. The conference took place on February 25th in Damascus after urgent invitations were sent only two days prior to said date, and the discussions held therein revolved around offering non-binding recommendations to fill the constitutional vacuum and build a national army. The conference then issued a closing statement in which it highlighted the need to place all weapons under State control, to swiftly issue a temporary Constitutional Declaration, and to form an interim legislative council and constitutional committee to develop a draft permanent Constitution.⁶ In spite of these efforts, the conference was criticized for its swift organization, its failure to truly represent certain compo-

nents, and its selective invitations, raising concerns over its ability to achieve a comprehensive national consensus. Perhaps the most prominent criticism was for its non-binding outcomes. Instead of being a constituent assembly in which all Syrians are represented, the conference was a mere presentation of quickly drafted key ideas to which task forces were assigned to discuss highly sensitive topics regarding the Syrian State's form and future within a few hours. These outcomes were not translated into executive mechanisms and remained a declaration of intent to be used as an information sheet rather than an actual political product.

In the same authoritarian context, President Al-Sharaa announced in the Victory Conference his intention to form a committee tasked with drafting a temporary Constitutional Declaration that would govern the interim phase. On March 2nd 2025, it was announced that the committee was formed. The committee included legal figures with traditional backgrounds and significantly lacked representation of minorities or non-Islamic forces. Without any clarification of its work mechanism, the committee drafted the Constitutional Declaration which was later signed by President Al-Sharaa on March 13th 2025.⁷ The interim Constitutional Declaration granted the President broad powers exceeding those of the executive authority. These powers included appointing the Supreme Judicial Council and appointing one third of the members of the People's Assembly, while another committee, appointed by the President himself, selects the remaining two thirds. This broad concentration of power in the hands of the president sparked significant criticism in Suwayda, where it was viewed as exceeding even the powers once held by former President Bashar al-Assad. It raised fears of the re-creation of an authoritarian regime under a new guise. The declaration centralized authority in Damascus, offering no space for political proposals that would introduce decentralization or federalism as potential systems of governance. Restricting the President's religion to Islam and adopting Islamic Fiqh (jurisprudence) was received in Suwayda as a form of discrimination—dividing Syrians based on religion and creating a hierarchy of citizenship.

Another step in the growing rift between Suwayda and Damascus came with the announcement of the Syrian Transitional Government on March 29, 2025, by President Ahmad Al-Sharaa during a press conference held in the capital.⁸ The transitional government aims to manage the country's affairs during the transitional phase, until the elections scheduled to take place within five years.

5 Shikay, Janbulat, "Syrian Presidency announces a preparatory committee for the National Dialogue Conference", Al-Quds Al-Araby, March 2nd 2025 (Arabic source), <https://tinyurl.com/5ywapakz>

6 "With vast attendance... the Syrian National Dialogue Conference is held in Damascus", Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), April 25th 2025 (Arabic source), <https://tinyurl.com/3b6k4bsj>

7 Kerkes, Mohamed, "Al-Sharaa signs the interim draft Constitutional Declaration: Key highlights", The New Arab, March 13th 2025 (Arabic source), <https://tinyurl.com/2uj287n2>

8 **Swiss Info**, "Al-Sharaa Announces Formation of New Transitional Government in Syria," March 29, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2uj287n2>

The government included Amjad Badr, a Druze from Suwayda, as Minister of Agriculture — a move Damascus portrayed as a sign of its openness to the participation of Syria's various components.⁹ However, this appointment sparked considerable controversy in Suwayda, where the new government was widely perceived as a continuation of a centralized, authoritarian approach that disregards genuine local representation.

Mr. Badr's appointment did not result from consultations with local Druze leaders or notables, nor is he affiliated with any political movement or force with actual local legitimacy. As such, the appointment appeared to be more of a symbolic gesture to display diversity within the cabinet, rather than a genuine step toward power-sharing and meaningful inclusion of community components in governance.

The top-down nature of Badr's appointment also generated local resentment. Many perceived it as an attempt by the transitional administration to replicate the Assad regime's approach of appointing government figures from various communities in order to manufacture new local leaderships who would act as intermediaries between the state and society — without holding any real power. Compounding this sentiment was the fact that most of the sovereign ministries in the transitional government were awarded to individuals with Salafi backgrounds affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), further fuelling concerns among the Druze and other religious and ethnic communities in Syria about the potential dominance of HTS over key state institutions.

Although the appointment was framed as an effort to include Suwayda in the new government, it did little to change the prevailing perception in Suwayda that the government merely reproduces the same exclusionary logic — one that fails to recognize the need for genuine participation and fair representation.

Meanwhile, the transitional government has also sought to reshape the military-security landscape in Suwayda by boosting the influence of several leaders of small, local Druze factions — an apparent effort to counterbalance the role of traditional religious authorities.¹⁰ Damascus has repeatedly received leaders of these minor factions, showcased them in state media as Druze notables, and relied on them to mediate in times of tension between Damascus and Druze communities in both Suwayda and the Damascus countryside. This collaboration, including security and military coordination, has provoked backlash from more prom-

inent and influential factions, as well as from traditional Druze leaders.

The latter have objected to the state's alliance with groups accused of engaging in illicit activities — such as kidnapping for ransom and smuggling — during the years of war in Syria.¹¹ Nonetheless, the Ministry of Interior in the transitional government, through its General Security Directorate, has continued to treat these groups as partners in Suwayda, tasking them with opening security offices, recruiting personnel, and it undertook to pay their salaries.

This unilateral move, undertaken without coordination with other armed groups in the governorate, has raised fears of potential intra-Druze conflict between these emerging forces and the larger, established local factions. These developments underscore Damascus's continued refusal to engage with legitimate Druze political, social, and religious authorities — instead opting to build alliances with marginal groups in an effort to divide and undermine internal unity.

All of this demonstrates that the new Syrian state is taking shape under the dominance of a single religious-political centre, which is attempting to reengineer the relationship between State and society without actual democratic tools or balanced political partnerships. While the interim phase was supposed to create a space for Syrians to catch a breath, it gradually turned more into a new authoritarian regime rather than an inclusive national State. Through the lens of Suwayda, this authoritarian structure seems not only to reproduce political hegemony, but to embody a position that reshapes the State based on an exclusionary logic which fails to recognize the principle of partnership and the position of minorities. The events in Damascus were not seen as a founding moment in Suwayda, but rather another chapter of discrimination, consolidating power and denying diversity.

9 Al Jazeera, "Key Ministers in the New Syrian Government," March 30, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2uj287n2>

10 Al Jazeera, "Removal of Syrian Flag and Hints from Netanyahu," March 7, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2uj287n2>

11 Nizar Ahmad, "Kidnapping for Ransom: Gangs Threaten Civil Peace in Suwayda," *Policy Brief* (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, March 2022). <https://tinyurl.com/3y8npxbv>

II. Suwayda in Light of the New State – Strained Relationship with Damascus and Rise of Competing Local Authorities

When Damascus fell on December 8th 2024, Suwayda was already one step ahead after its local factions managed to force the last signs of the regime out of the city and overthrow security and military authority locations. Having faced this challenge independently without any direct support from HTS, the province of Suwayda immediately considered itself an outsider in the new State system emerging in the capital. As a result, the local population soon became aware of a distinct path away from the one set forth by HTS in Damascus. This path was not the result of geographic distance or sectarian difference alone, but also of the field experience acquired by Suwayda and the actual contribution of some of its armed groups to the infiltration of Damascus alongside Daraa factions, as part of the Southern Operations Room, preceding Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's arrival to Damascus from the north. This distinction would therefore become the core of the tense relationship with the new regime.

Suwayda had experienced a form of self-organization since 2014, when it adopted a neutral stance towards the Syrian war, and its young men abstained from joining the compulsory and reserve military service in the regime's forces. This caused the regime to abandon the governorate to its own devices and turn it into a large prison for those wanted for military conscription who were thus unable to leave the governorate's border, and who were protected by a number of local armed factions. With the State's growing failure to provide the necessary services to its people, the regime decreased its presence in Suwayda to avoid potential clashes with its residents, preferring instead to manage the area through a network of security gangs, sometimes violently and sometimes leniently.¹² As of August 2023, a peaceful anti-regime movement emerged in Suwayda, took over its city centre, and continued unabated despite all attempts at interference and sabotage, until the regime's fall. This protest movement gained the support and cover of Sheikh al-Aql Hikmat al-Hijri who categorically rejected any harm to the protesters and supported their demands to overthrow the regime and bring about political change in the country.¹³ The overthrow of the regime in Suwayda by local factions, days before its fall in Damascus, was therefore the result of

a cumulative experience of local rejection and gradual disengagement from the central government. It was not the fruit of a sudden moment, but rather the culmination of a long-strained relationship with the Assad regime. This chronology is of paramount importance to the consciousness of local actors, as it instilled in the people of Suwayda a feeling that they were not part of a new regime that triumphed over them, but rather a key actor in a moment of major transformation, and that they had the right to determine their future, choose their representation, and fight for their place within the new Syrian equation.

In light of the fall of the Assad regime, Damascus attempted to contain the situation by sending different political and security delegations to Suwayda, ranging from representatives of the interim government to religious figures supporting HTS, and individuals associated with the office of the new President Ahmad al-Sharaa. These visits were part of a declared attempt to re-establish links between Suwayda and Damascus under the slogan of restoring State unity. However, despite the enthusiasm of many of those who took part in the Al-Karama Square protests, as well as some local armed factions, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, the most prominent religious and social authority, pressured all parties in Suwayda to maintain a distance from the new authorities, pending clarification of the nature of the new political system and its stance on pluralism and citizenship.

In contrast, traditional social and notable figures, some armed group leaders, businessmen and activists from Al-Karama Square started visiting Damascus. They held meetings with members of the interim administration, including Ahmad al-Sharaa himself, in an attempt to convey mutual reassurance. These efforts remained a formality and did not, however, lead to a real consensus, especially in the absence of any formal initiative that would guarantee the effective engagement of all Syrians in shaping the transitional phase.

Meanwhile, Lebanese politician and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's visit to Damascus triggered negative reactions in Suwayda. The visit was considered an attempt to impose a foreign custody over Suwayda and recreate a relationship of transborder sponsorship; an attempt which was rejected by most local parties. This step was seen as an effort to revive the model of transregional Druze leadership in a time when Suwayda is aiming to redefine its standing with its own means.

12 Ezzi, Mazen, "The Syrian regime approaches in As-Sweida post 2011", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, January 2023 (Arabic source), <https://tinyurl.com/336a9v86>

13 Ezzi, Mazen, "A year of protests in Suwayda: continued movement and varying demands", Alpheratz Magazine, August 16th 2024 (Arabic source), <https://tinyurl.com/mvpmjkhf>

Amidst these tensions, Sheikh al-Hijri nominated Ms. Muhsina al-Mahithawi for the role of Governor of Suwayda, in a symbolic gesture reflecting an evident local desire to restore independent administrative decision-making and reaffirm Suwayda's particularity. HTS did not, however, support the suggestion and dismissed it through procrastination, then proceeded to appoint Mustafa al-Bakkour as Envoy of the Interim Administration and Acting Governor of Suwayda. This appointment was considered an attempt to evade the call for true local representation, further exacerbating the division and lack of trust between Suwayda and Damascus.

Later, HTS then tried to win over a number of small armed groups in Suwayda, offering logistical support and facilitating their field mobility. This raised questions about the possibility of their integration into the new authority's project. However, locally, these developments were met with significant caution—especially given that broad segments of the province's population continue to firmly uphold a clear stance of independence.

The tension reached peak levels on New Year's Eve 2024-2025 when new Ministry of Defence forces attempted to enter the province under the pretext of security cooperation and the establishment of shared observation points. Local factions rejected the entry and blocked the military convoy from reaching the city—an act that reflected a rare moment of field unity within the province. This was considered a clear refusal of any direct military intervention from the central government without consent of, or genuine partnership with, local actors.

Nevertheless, the transitional administration's envoy to Suwayda — and the de facto acting governor — Mustafa al-Bakkour, continued to carry out his activities within the governorate, visiting symbolic sites, namely Dar Ira to meet Prince Loay al-Atrash. This visit was, nonetheless, a turning point in the relationship between Al-Bakkour and the local community. He faced a large-scale media attack, especially that Prince Loay is one of the most prominent collaborators with the previous regime. Al-Bakkour soon suspended his cooperation with Al-Atrash, while the latter announced that he would be stepping down for Prince Hassan, in an attempt to absorb public outrage.

Meanwhile, the relationship between Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri and the interim administration began to gradually deteriorate. His statements became more heated and political, as he called for a civil State, refused what he called a "mono-colour regime" and demanded that the local communities' desire to choose their representatives be respected. This shift in discourse unveiled the rise of Al-Hijri as an unannounced political representative of the Druze community, much to the discontent of decision-makers in Damascus.

Administrative roles in the province were soon assigned in partial coordination with Al-Hijri, but this partial alignment was soon rejected by parties within Al-Karama Square who started questioning the competence of religious authorities in matters of public administration. Some parties suggested ideas calling for the disarmament of local factions and their integration into the national army, as well as compliance with State institutions. They also called for leveraging the symbolism of Law and Constitution to counter what was considered a monopolization of local decision-making by Sheikh al-Hijri. The issue with this approach, however, is that it considered its political rivalry with Al-Hijri as greater than the exclusionary state project being established in Damascus, with its Salafi-jihadist background.¹⁴ These groups, perhaps with good intentions, deliberately conflated the concept of a state monopolizing violence with the reality unfolding on the ground in Damascus. This stance has eroded some of the popular solidarity with this group in Karama Square.

Damascus continued, through its envoys to Suwayda, to exercise central custody over the Governorate and its service and functional institutions, as if nothing had changed with the overthrow of the Assad regime. The appointment of directors of State institution remained exclusively under the control of Damascus, including the issuance of financial disbursement permits, by individuals who do not hold any official administrative role, other than being simply affiliated with HTS. Meanwhile, layoffs increased in State institutions under the pretence of putting an end to 'disguised unemployment' in the public sector. Hundreds of employees were laid off across Suwayda, without any form of social protection or alternatives in a governorate devoid of any private sector or investment projects job opportunities. This policy, implemented across Syria, became a tool for revenge in Suwayda and a way to chase ex-regime supporters. It was also enforced in an arbitrary manner and became a new topic of social tension with Damascus and its policies.

Concurrently, the Damascus-Suwayda highway became an instrument of political pressure. The road has been blocked repeatedly, amidst sniper fire that has resulted in fatalities, ID checks, and sectarian insults, whenever tensions escalate between the Druze and some of the surrounding tribes in the province. The using this road for political ends revealed the magnitude of tensions between Damascus and Suwayda in the absence of clear communication channels.

These events coincided with the rise of an accusatory discourse in Damascus towards Suwayda, and an increase in distrust towards the province's citizens, as they were accused of separatism and collusion, in a

14 Saimoua, Tamam, "Who will raise the last flag?", Al Jumhuriya, March 17th 2025 (Arabic source), <https://tinyurl.com/yc5tkm22>

tone that was evident in the discourse of media figures affiliated with the new authority and became widespread on Social Media platforms.

In early March 2025, the Syrian coast, known to be of Alawite majority and a social hub for the Assad regime, witnessed a sharp rise in violence after bloody clashes between pro-Assad armed factions and Ministry of Defence and General Security forces.¹⁵ While suppressing what Damascus considered an armed rebellion on the coast, Ministry of Defence forces, launched a military campaign against local communities with the support of armed militias that responded to sectarian calls against Alawites by Salafist sheikhs in many Syrian mosques. These attacks resulted in massacres, killing hundreds of Alawite civilians.¹⁶ This further deepened sectarian divisions and raised concerns over Syria falling into a new whirlpool of sectarian violence.

The coastal massacres were a significant shock in Suwayda, pushing Sheikh al-Hijri to harden his stance. Al-Hijri thus refused any call for local disarmament, considering that the new authority did not hold any real national legitimacy. This led to mounting pressure on local factions in Suwayda aligned with HTS, and attempts to curb its influence. Al-Karama Square parties also began to adopt a more rational interpretation of the scene in Damascus.

On March 10th 2025, and in light of the coastal massacres, interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Leader Mazloum Abdi signed an agreement to integrate SDF-affiliated military and civil institutions into Syrian State institutions, reaffirming the unity of the Syrian territory and refusing its division. The agreement came as a surprise move just days after the coastal massacres, amid deep doubts about its timing and true objectives. While the agreement was portrayed as a historic moment for unifying the Syrian state and guaranteeing the rights of its components, it was viewed as a propaganda effort to circumvent the coastal atrocities and alleviate international pressure. It did not provide clear answers regarding the future of the Kurdish cause or guarantees for transitional justice.¹⁷

Amidst this confusion, and in an attempt to cover up the massacres and demonstrate that the new Government does not target minorities, local media outlets reported an agreement with Suwayda similar to the one signed with SDF. The document circulated as an

"agreement" was handwritten and included simple service demands, such as facilitating the operation of a few facilities, removing street vendors stands, and turning the Ba'ath Party building into a university. For example, the removal of street vendors is a demand voiced by shop owners in the city of Suwayda, as these vendors compete with them for business, sell goods at lower prices, and do not pay municipal taxes. Including such a point in the document reflects the modest nature of the demands being put forward and the absence of any genuine political substance. It focuses on marginal service-related issues rather than addressing matters of sovereignty, representation, or the relationship with the new ruling authority. This document was indeed drafted in Sheikh al-Hijri's guest house, but was not an agreement sponsored by him. It was rather a first draft developed by some opposition parties in Suwayda and the Acting Governor of Suwayda to initiate the discussion of a potential bilateral agreement. Sheikh al-Hijri himself disavowed the contents of the document, stressing that he was not a party to any such understanding.

All these tensions were revealed to the public with the issuance of the Constitutional Declaration, when Sheikh al-Hijri took a clearer stance by refusing the Declaration, describing it as discriminatory against Syrians, refusing to agree with the authorities in Damascus.

In this context, voices from Damascus have begun accusing the Druze of Suwayda of collaborating with Israel, citing their refusal to recognize the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference, the constitutional declaration, the interim government line-up, as well as their refusal to surrender their weapons. This accusatory discourse has drawn on several incidents, including a visit on February 10, 2025, by Druze clerics from the town of Hader in the Quneitra countryside to Druze areas in the occupied territories. Despite the organizers' insistence on its religious nature and the fact that it was not framed as an official political initiative nor openly coordinated with any authority in Suwayda, the event nonetheless carried highly significant political implications in both its content and timing.¹⁸

At the same time, Israel has shown increasing interest in the situation in Suwayda—not only across the occupied Golan border, but also through public statements and indirect support via unofficial channels linking the Druze of Syria with the Druze of the Golan and Palestinian Druze. On March 14, 2025, Israel received a delegation of Druze clerics from Quneitra, Rural Damascus,

15 Baresh, Manhal, "Syria: Organized attacks led by unit 4 officers and regime remnants", Al-Quds Al-Araby, March 8th 2025 (Arabic source), <https://tinyurl.com/2t769hnf>

16 Jabbour, Nawar, "Massacres on the Syrian coast: perpetrators and victims", Al Majalla Magazine, March 17th 2025 (Arabic source), <https://tinyurl.com/529t5bdv>

17 Sweha, Yassin, "The day after the massacre", Al-Jumhuriya website, March 11th 2025 (Arabic source), <https://tinyurl.com/45nhd9h2>

18 **Suwayda 24**, "Visit of Druze Clerics from the Town of Hader to Druze Areas in the Occupied Territories," February 10, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3y8npxbv>

and Suwayda for a visit to the shrine of Prophet Shu'ayb (Jethro) — the first such visit in five decades.¹⁹

The visit triggered a wave of accusations against the Druze of Suwayda, labelling them as collaborators with Israel, despite the absence of any official representation from the Druze religious leadership (Mashyakhat al-'Aql) in the delegation. This does not negate the fact that relations between the Druze of Suwayda and those in Israel have been warming, with growing coordination in light of the threat faced by Suwayda's Druze. However, this rapprochement is not the result of a clear, deliberate Druze strategy, but rather a consequence of the exclusionary policies pursued by the transitional administration in Damascus, amid threats that have begun to extend beyond political marginalization to armed conflict.

As pressures mount on the Druze from Damascus and as accusations of treason intensify, the relationship between Druze and Israel began to increasingly resemble a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more the discourse highlights alleged ties between the Druze and Israel, the more normalized and socially acceptable such ties become. In the absence of political and security protection and amid escalating violence and incitement, some in Suwayda started viewing this rapprochement as a legitimate form of self-defence. Thus, the very accusation of collaboration becomes a driver of a coerced relationship — one shaped by circumstances rather than convictions.

19 **Suwayda 24**, "Visit of a Delegation of Druze Clerics from Quneitra, Rural Damascus, and Suwayda to the Shrine of Prophet Shu'ayb," March 14, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3y8npxbv>

III. Suwayda and Damascus on the Brink of Armed Confrontation

Since late April 2025, sectarian tensions against the Druze in Syria have escalated, following the circulation of a fabricated audio recording attributed to a Druze cleric, in which he allegedly insulted the Prophet Muhammad. Although the accused individual denied the authenticity of the recording and Druze religious authorities condemned its content, the recording was used as a pretext to launch a widespread incitement campaign. This was accompanied by a rise in takfiri (ex-communication) rhetoric against Druze across social media platforms.²⁰

At the University of Homs, a protest erupted calling for retribution against “apostates” and “Druze pigs,” while similar demonstrations took place in Homs and Hama, where HTS flags were raised, and chants such as “We want to exterminate the Druze” were heard. Events quickly escalated into armed clashes in several Druze-populated areas, most notably in the Damascus suburbs of Jaramana and Sahnaya. Armed groups from the Ministries of Defence and Interior, accompanied by Salafi-jihadi factions, attempted to storm these areas, only to be met by resistance from local Druze factions and General Security forces native to the towns.²¹

In response to the escalating violence, a delegation from Suwayda — including Druze religious leaders Hammoud al-Hannawi and Yousef Jarbou’, along with other local notables, travelled to Sahnaya in Rural Damascus. However, they were only able to enter the area in UN armoured vehicles.²² The delegation reached an agreement with the transitional administration, represented by the governors of Suwayda and Rural Damascus and senior security officials. The agreement called for halting the attacks, launching an investigation, and holding those responsible accountable. Nevertheless, the agreement was never implemented.²³

The clashes resulted in dozens of Druze casualties and the destruction of Druze-owned property. Militarily, both Jaramana and Sahnaya effectively fell to the attacking forces. Government troops carried out summary executions and arbitrary arrests, especially in

Sahnaya.²⁴ The military operation also led to the confiscation of medium-sized weapons in Jaramana and complete disarmament in Sahnaya.²⁵ In numerous video clips posted by fighters from the Ministries and their allied militias after entering Sahnaya, HTS flags and Salafi-jihadi banners were clearly visible, along with footage of fighters parading through the streets chanting takfiri and derogatory slogans against the Druze.

In attempting to justify these unexpected clashes on the outskirts of the capital, the transitional administration blamed “undisciplined factions,” referring to the local Druze groups, and argued that the disarmament of these factions was necessary. This explanation appeared contradictory, given that some government ministry units participated under their original factional banners, and allied jihadi groups — with no clear military affiliation — came from Rural Damascus in response to calls for “jihad” against the Druze. No attempts were made to stop them.

Meanwhile, on May 2, a unit from Suwayda’s local factions tried to reach Sahnaya but fell into an ambush set by forces from the Ministries of Defence and Interior and their allied jihadi militias in the town of Burraq, north of Suwayda. The ambush resulted in dozens of fatalities. Clashes then broke out across multiple fronts between the two sides along the administrative borders between Suwayda and the neighbouring governorates of Rural Damascus and Daraa.²⁶

Within hours, the village of al-Surah al-Kubra in northern Suwayda fell to the attacking forces. One person was executed on the spot.²⁷ Homes were looted and burned, including a local Druze shrine.²⁸ The Ministries and their allied militias continued to send reinforcements to Suwayda’s outskirts, accompanied by heavy mortar shelling of civilian areas and armed clashes involving heavy machine guns, with breaches occurring on several fronts. Despite the intensity and scale of the

20 **BBC Arabic**, “Dozens of Druze Killed in Clashes in Jaramana and Sahnaya,” April 30, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3y8npxbv>

21 **BBC Arabic**, “Heavy Clashes in Jaramana and Sahnaya: Background and Implications,” May 2, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3y8npxbv>

22 **France 24**, “Clashes Calm in Jaramana and Erupt in Ashrafiyat Sahnaya near Damascus,” April 30, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3y8npxbv>

23 **Suwayda 24**, “Coverage of the Jaramana and Sahnaya Events: Field Developments and Casualties,” April 30, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3y8npxbv>

24 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “Days After Their Detention... The Killing of Two Young Men in Ashrafiyat Sahnaya Raises the Death Toll to 101,” May 1, 2025, www.syriahr.com/?p=760708

25 Anadolu Agency, “As Part of an Agreement with the Syrian Government, Residents of Sahnaya and Ashrafiya Hand Over Their Weapons,” May 4, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/49v43545>

26 **Erem News**, “Jaramana and Sahnaya Clashes: Background of the Escalation and Its Implications,” May 2, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3y8npxbv>

27 Suwayda 24, “Documenting the Killing of 164 People in April 2025,” May 1, 2025, <https://suwayda24.com/?p=23411>

28 **The Syria Report**, “Militant Attacks on Rural Suwayda Leave Consequences for Housing, Land, and Property Rights,” April 15, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3y8npxbv>

attacks — stretching over 50 kilometres of Suwayda's borders — local factions managed to repel the offensives.

Following a warning statement by Israeli Defence Minister Yisrael Katz on May 2 — declaring that “if the attacks on the Druze resume and the Syrian regime fails to stop them, Israel will respond with great force” — the Israeli military launched an airstrike on an area near the Presidential Palace in Damascus.²⁹ The transitional administration described the strike as “a dangerous escalation against the institutions and sovereignty of the state,” which coincided with a renewed wave of incitement and takfiri rhetoric targeting the Druze.

On May 3, Druze religious authorities and the transitional administration, represented by the governor of Suwayda, reached a truce agreement. The terms included: ensuring that internal security forces and law enforcement personnel in Suwayda would be exclusively from the province's own residents; lifting the siege on Suwayda, Jaramana, Sahnaya, and Ashrafiyat-Sahnaya; immediately restoring normal life in those areas; securing the Damascus–Suwayda road and guaranteeing its safety by the state; and enforcing a comprehensive ceasefire across all affected areas.³⁰

Despite the partial withdrawal of Ministry forces from frontlines, jihadi groups — most of them drawn from Bedouin tribes in Suwayda and Daraa — continued mortar shelling of populated areas, launch surprise attacks, and frequently blocking roads on both the Damascus–Suwayda and Daraa–Suwayda highways. These disruptions caused severe shortages in fuel and food supplies within the governorate. The same groups also sabotaged electrical towers between Daraa and Suwayda, plunging the entire governorate into complete blackouts — including hospitals and water wells.

29 **France 24**, “Syria: Authorities Describe Israeli Strike Near Presidential Palace in Damascus as a Serious Escalation,” May 2, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3y8npxbv>

30 **Suwayda 24**, “The Spiritual Leadership of the Druze Community,” May 3, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3y8npxbv>

IV. International Intervention Outlook and Recommendations – from Analyses to Realistic Engagement Policies

The situation in Suwayda cannot be considered a local issue within the Syrian territory. Current developments in the province are a direct reflection of deep structural shifts in the emerging Syrian State that create political and security vacuums, through which local communities are reshaping their relationship with the centre, and regional powers are redefining the boundaries of their influence. In this context, Suwayda becomes a central pivotal point not only to understand what is left of the Syrian State, but also to reflect on future intervention tools and policies that could instil stability and prevent Syria from drifting into more disintegration and violence.

As of the end of 2024, Suwayda is no longer part of an existing central State or integrated into the new authoritarian project proposed by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Damascus. It became an alienated province, searching for local forms of governance and organization, without, on the one hand, possessing the tools of the state, and without, on the other hand, abandoning its vision of its connection to Syria as a homeland. This conflicted position exposes Suwayda to four types of threats: first, internal polarization within the local community itself; second, growing tension with the central authority in Damascus; third, regional use of the Druze card in the equations of the battle for influence; and finally, the recent military escalation against the Druze, which has fuelled the conflict and further widened the gap between Suwayda and Damascus.

For European and German decision-makers, the danger does not lie in HTS rise to power alone, but in its approach towards non-Sunni identities, at the forefront of which is the Druze community. The new emerging regime in Damascus excludes the Druze from the national equation, and produces an exclusionary discourse turning the community into a potential and imminent political and symbolic target. This exclusion revives narratives of banishment, rebellion and treason, and compromises the chances of integrating domestic components under a joint national project.

With Suwayda remaining outside the equation, without a serious approach to protect its position, extremely dangerous scenarios become possible: chaos, repression, or drifting into circumstantial regional alliances, namely the growing intersection with Israel. In this context, the European political approach cannot be limited to monitoring or to general ethical condemnation. The development of a realistic, gradual and multi-level policy is therefore needed, one that:

Recognizes the uniqueness of Suwayda: Suwayda is not a case of separatism, but rather a case of rejection of an emerging exclusionary authority in Damascus. Any approach that associated the Druze community with a discourse of separatism or sectarianism therefore serves the regime in Damascus, and not the interest of an inclusive Syrian State. The local community's right to be represented and to participate in shaping the future of Syria must be recognized.

Supports local governance initiatives: Suwayda needs local alternative institutional structures that are efficiently managed by its residents and offer minimum services and social safety. European actors can support these initiatives through non-governmental channels, develop local monitoring tools, and create coordination mechanisms between local and political organizations, local councils, and some government institutions.

Protects civil and religious actors: many local actors, including influential religious figures are facing pressures and threats. These figures should be treated as potential allies in ensuring stability, and their efforts to protect the community and dismantle the extremist discourse must be supported.

Encourages domestic community dialogue: Suwayda is witnessing a growing polarization of its different authorities. In this regard, international actors can facilitate, through local organizations and civil initiatives, pathways to domestic dialogue, in which a common foundation is built regarding resident priorities, conflicts are resolved peacefully, and democratic rules of representation are followed.

Prevents the militarization of the relationship with the central authority: any military intervention carried out by Damascus in Suwayda, be it direct or through local instruments, would lead to a large-scale explosion. European States must therefore exercise political pressure through their instruments in the Syrian file to prevent turning Suwayda into a new arena for military confrontation.

Understands Israel's position in the equation: the symbolic rapprochement between certain Druze parties and Israel reflects a domestic deadlock, not a conscious strategic choice. The Druze community should not be reprimanded for this positioning, but offered more serious and safer alternatives within Syria that would allow its integration into a just national project.

Finally, European policies must mitigate the government-civil society binarism, and pay attention to local actors outside these categories, such as political parties, professional associations, traditional powers, and religious leaders. In Suwayda, religious authorities intersect with armed factions, and protesting elites, in a complex reality that can only be dismantled through flexible political instruments based on a deep understanding of domestic identities, affiliations and divisions. In light of the recent escalation against the Druze since late April 2025, and the growing military and takfiri pressure, it has become essential to reassess Europe's engagement with Suwayda — to ensure support that safeguards the community, promotes regional stability, and avoids falling into the trap of reinforcing sectarian narratives. The failure of previous policies in Syria should push us towards adopting new approaches that do not deepen this division or recreate a top-down authority, but rather build from the ground up with local communities and rely on their strengths, networks, and vision of future Syria.

