

Fault Line: The Suwayda Crisis and Its Implications For Syria's Future





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Table of Contents

I. Executive Summary	1
A. Background	2
B. What Happened	2
C. Why It Matters	3
D. Recommendations	4
II. Background	5
A. The Druze: Who They Are	5
B. The Druze in Modern Syria	6
C. The Druze During the Syrian Civil War	6
D. The Druze in Transitional Syria	8
III. July 2025 Suwayda Crisis.....	10
A. Trigger and Escalation	10
B. Violence and Syrian Government Reaction	11
C. Israeli Intervention and Strategic Calculus	13
D. Ceasefire and Aftermath	14
E. International Reactions to Violence in Suwayda.....	15
F. Entry of Humanitarian Aid to Suwayda.....	16
IV. Why the Druze Matter	17
A. Relevance to U.S. Policy	17
B. Why the Druze Matter to Israel	18
V. Recommendations	20
A. Prioritize U.S. Interests Not Outcomes	20
B. Establish Clear U.S.-Israeli Coordination on Syria Policy	21
C. Implement Ceasefire and Deconfliction Mechanisms.....	21
D. Surge Humanitarian Assistance to Suwayda	22
E. Demand Comprehensive Accountability for Atrocities in Suwayda	22
F. Support Comprehensive Security Sector Reform	23
G. Use Caesar Act Sanctions as Leverage for Compliance	24
Endnotes	25

I. Executive Summary

The July 2025 Suwayda crisis represents a critical test for Syria's transitional government, with direct implications for U.S. interests and Israeli security. What began as an allegedly localized dispute between Bedouin tribal gunmen and a Druze merchant—though Druze and Israeli sources suggest direct coordination from Damascus—rapidly escalated into sectarian clashes that killed at least 1,000 individuals, including an American citizen, displaced 128,000 people, and drew Israeli military intervention.¹ The violence laid bare deep tensions between Syria's new government in Damascus—led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa and rooted in the former jihadist organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—and the country's Druze community, which is wary of the regime due to HTS's history of targeting religious minorities.

Treatment of minorities is an important bellwether of the new regime's intentions—indeed, such intentions are unclear—and ability to transform Syria from the Iranian proxy and jihadist breeding ground it has been into a stable, constructive regional player. This requires threading the needle between creating a strong enough Syrian government to bring myriad armed factions under control, expel foreign jihadists, prevent Iran's resurgence, and conduct counterterrorist operations against ISIS all without being so strong that it tramples on the rights of minorities or threatens Syria's neighbors, particularly Israel.

The United States should act decisively to prevent further bloodshed in Suwayda, surge humanitarian assistance to the area, and demand accountability from those that committed the violence. Statements by U.S. officials stressing centralization of authority in Damascus might have unintentionally emboldened the Sharaa regime, or at least some of its security forces, to subjugate violently the Druze and other minority groups, leading to awful clashes and atrocities. Washington should take this, and other recent regime-connected violence against minorities, as an indication that rather than merely accepting the Sharaa government or pressing for a centralized Syria it must prioritize its interests in a peaceful Syria by working closely with Israel, European, and Arab partners to ensure that any post-Assad political order, whatever it looks like, respects minority rights and avoids descending into the sectarianism of the past.

If the Druze are not safe in the new Syria, it is unlikely that the United States or Israel will be safe from the new highly complex Syria.

A. Background

The Druze are a small, tightly knit Arabic-speaking religious minority native to Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. There are an estimated 700,000 Druze residing in Syria, out of some one million worldwide.² Concentrated in the southern Suwayda Governorate, Syria's Druze constitute roughly three percent of the national population and have historically offered tacit support to successive governments in exchange for local self-rule.

While some Druze factions cooperated with Sharaa's forces during the final battles against the previous regime of Bashar al-Assad, the community has since rejected the new government's Islamist-oriented constitutional framework and demanded stronger protections.³

B. What Happened

The July 2025 Suwayda crisis began when a Druze merchant was ambushed by Bedouin tribal gunmen along the Damascus–Suwayda highway, triggering retaliatory kidnappings by Druze militias.⁴ The violence quickly escalated into widespread sectarian clashes across Suwayda Governorate. Humanitarian conditions collapsed as utilities failed and the Suwayda National Hospital shut down. In response to hostilities, Israel launched strikes on Syrian government convoys and installations in Damascus, citing an urgent need to protect the Druze population from regime aggression.⁵ The violence peaked on July 15–16, with reports of atrocities by all sides—government forces and Bedouin militias targeting Druze civilians in hospitals and churches and Druze militias conducting reprisal killings. At least 1,000 people were killed and 128,000 displaced before a U.S.-mediated ceasefire took effect on July 19 after intensive negotiations with Turkey, Jordan, and other Arab states.

Accounts of the Sharaa government's role diverge sharply. Druze and Israeli sources contend that the crisis began with direct coordination from Damascus in an effort to centralize authority over the historically semi-autonomous governorate. Druze leaders further accuse Damascus of siding with Bedouin militias, pointing to reports of government forces shelling Druze neighborhoods and detaining community activists. As one Suwayda resident concluded, “the government is actually controlling and knows about every plan of the factions.”⁶ Sharaa's government, by contrast, asserts that its forces intervened to restore order and prevent further bloodshed. Independent monitors, such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, report evidence of both government involvement in atrocities and retaliatory attacks by Druze militias, highlighting the murkiness of events on the ground.⁷

The confusion extends to disagreements within the Druze community itself: while the government claims it had permission from all local Druze factions to enter Suwayda,

some Druze leaders accused others of coordinating with Damascus without community consensus, while still others described attacks on regime forces as a tragic miscommunication when residents mistook government troops for hostile militias.⁸

The United States, too, contributed to the confusion. Syrian officials later acknowledged they had misread U.S. support for a centralized Syrian state as tacit approval for the deployment, believing Washington's calls for "one country" without autonomous zones gave them a green light to use force against the Druze.⁹

C. Why It Matters

The Suwayda crisis reveals troubling patterns in Syria's transitional government that directly threaten U.S. goals for a stable Syria that is neither controlled by Iran, a breeding ground for Sunni jihadism, a threat to Israel, a base for Russian or Turkish power projection, nor aligned with China. That requires a durable post-civil war order in which the central government is strong enough to counter Iran and ISIS but inclusive enough to accommodate minorities and make peace with Israel. This outbreak of violence against the Druze indicates that the new regime is getting this tricky mix wrong, possibly taking Syria back into civil war if not worse.

At minimum, Sharaa's government appears to be pressing too aggressively for centralized control, focusing disproportionately on disarming and integrating non-threatening minority groups while lacking either the will or capability to confront more extremist elements. At worst, if the violence in Suwayda was directed from Damascus, it points to the emergence of an Islamist-leaning regime that replicates Assad-era sectarianism under a different banner.

For the United States, the strategic consequences are clear. A regime that excludes minorities and permits sectarian violence would suggest that Sharaa might not have abandoned his previous jihadist allegiances. It would risk enabling the reconstruction of jihadist networks, reigniting civil war, fueling displacement, and open the door to Iranian intervention.

The Druze's strategic importance, however, extends beyond Syria's borders. Israel is home to 150,000 Druze, who are an important part of society, strongly represented in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and maintain strong kinship ties with co-religionists in Syria.¹⁰ As a result, threats to Syria's Druze are not only humanitarian concerns but also domestic political flashpoints. Moreover, Israel views the treatment of Syrian minorities as an indicator of the Damascus government's extremist orientation and potential threat to Israeli security, making protecting the Druze a strategic imperative as well.

D. Recommendations

The United States should:

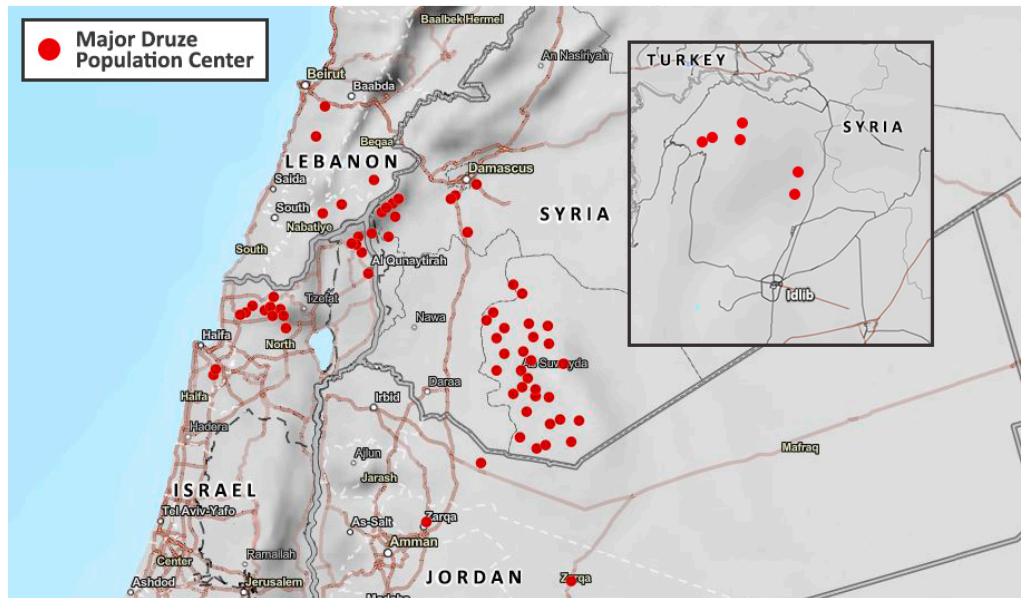
- Prioritize U.S. interests, and not a pre-determined vision of Syria's ultimate political settlement. The United States should not lock itself into a singular vision of centralized Syria at the cost of securing its interests. A strong centralized Syrian government might not be feasible and, even if it is, it might not serve U.S. interests. It will largely depend upon the intentions and capabilities of the Damascus regime.
- Establish clear coordination with Israel on Syria policy to align red lines and evaluation criteria for Damascus's treatment of minorities to prevent the kind of miscommunication that led to the Suwayda crisis.
- Broker a durable ceasefire in Suwayda with regional and UN participation, and backed by a direct Damascus-Jerusalem deconfliction hotline to prevent future escalation.
- Surge humanitarian assistance into Suwayda, which could be delivered from Israel, by Syrian Kurdish regional actors, or via a direct humanitarian corridor from Jordan.
- Demand accountability for atrocities by pressing for a UN-led investigation into the Suwayda violence, requiring Damascus to grant international human rights organizations full access, and conditioning U.S. support on transparent cooperation with independent oversight, and on punishment of the aggressors.
- Support comprehensive security sector reform with European and Arab partners to professionalize Syrian forces, strengthen command structures, remove foreign jihadist fighters, and ensure equal protection for all communities.
- Leverage Caesar Act sanctions by conditioning renewal of the 180-day waiver on measurable Syrian progress across these priorities, with suspension for non-compliance and coordinated international pressure to maximize effectiveness.

II. Background

A. The Druze: Who They Are

The Druze are a small, tightly knit Arabic-speaking religious minority native to Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, with over half of the estimated one million Druze worldwide residing in Syria.¹¹ Their faith originated in the 11th century as an offshoot of Ismaili Shiism but evolved into a distinct, esoteric monotheistic religion that is closed to converts.¹² Though they may accept the Muslim label when facing discrimination, the Druze do not consider themselves Muslim. Historically accused of heresy by neighboring communities, the Druze have long practiced *taqiyya*—concealing their beliefs for protection—and adopted a doctrine of pragmatic loyalty to the state in which they reside.¹³ This survivalist ethos has led to divergent political alignments: Druze serve in the Israeli military; participate in Lebanon’s confessional system; and previously held key posts under the Assad regime. Yet strong kinship ties and a shared ethic of self-defense bind the community across borders, making any threat to Druze in one country a regional concern with implications for Israeli security and broader Levantine stability.

Major Druze Population Centers in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel



Druze Populations in the Middle East (Estimates)			JINSA
Country	Druze Population	Total Population	Druze % of Population
Syria	700,000	23,594,623	3.0%
Lebanon	300,000	5,773,493	5.2%
Israel	152,886	9,256,314	1.7%
Jordan	20,000	11,439,213	0.2%

Sources: World Health Organization, Central Bureau of Statistics, Deutsche Welle, Politico, France24

Syria's estimated 700,000 Druze—roughly three percent of the pre-war population of 22 million—are concentrated primarily in the southern Suwayda province.¹⁴ Suwayda City, the governorate's capital, is home to an estimated 100,000 Druze.¹⁵ Significant populations also live in the greater Damascus metropolitan area, including the suburb of Jaramana with an estimated 50,000 residents.¹⁶ Smaller communities, numbering around 30,000, exist in the Hermon-Golan region along the borders with Jordan and Israel, and another 25,000 live in the Jabal al-Summaq region near the Turkish border in Idlib province.¹⁷

B. The Druze in Modern Syria


The Syrian Druze community has played an essential role in modern Syrian history despite its small size. Concentrated primarily in the southern Suwayda Governorate, known historically as Jabal al-Druze, the Druze maintained semi-autonomous status until the mid-20th century, persistently resisting central authority from the Ottomans through the French mandate until being forcibly integrated under Adib al-Shishakli's dictatorship (1949-1954).¹⁸ The Druze rose to political prominence in the 1960s, when Druze officers, like Captain Salim Hatun, played instrumental roles in bringing the Ba'ath Party to power.¹⁹ However, a failed counter-coup orchestrated by Hatun in 1966 led to extensive purges of Druze from military and political leadership.²⁰ Under Hafez Assad's rule beginning in 1970, the regime systematically excluded Druze from decisive positions of national influence while maintaining cooperative relations with traditional religious leadership.²¹

C. The Druze During the Syrian Civil War

The 2011 Syrian uprising initially found support among some members of the Syrian Druze community, with anti-regime protests occurring in Suwayda City.²² Some Druze groups even joined the opposition Free Syrian Army during 2011-2013. However, this support gradually eroded as sectarian tensions escalated.

Druze villages suffered sporadic attacks by rebel forces from neighboring Daraa governorate. Kidnappings occurred regularly between Druze and Sunni communities. Islamist factions, particularly the al-Qaeda-aligned al-Nusra Front (later HTS) and the Islamic State (ISIS), imposed increasingly severe religious restrictions on Druze communities under their control. ISIS forces forcibly demanded Druze to convert to Islam, imposed Islamic dress codes, and built domes and minarets on places where Druze prayed.²³ Al-Nusra forced the Druze in areas like Jabal al-Summaq in Idlib to issue statements renouncing their religion, agree to allow their shrines to be leveled, and dress according to Sharia law.²⁴

Discontented with Damascus but threatened by Islamists, some among the Druze, like Sheikh Wahid al-Bal’ous and his “Men of Dignity” militia, battled both ISIS and confronted regime security forces.²⁵ In 2015, al-Bal’ous was assassinated just months after al-Nusra’s June 2015 massacre of at least 20 Druze civilians in Qalb Lawzah village.²⁶ In July 2018, ISIS attacked Suwayda, killing more than 200 people in coordinated bombings while abducting dozens of Druze women and children and executing captured men.²⁷ These attacks and encroachment on the Druze way of life convinced many Druze that the opposition was a “Sunni Islamist” movement that, if victorious, would not tolerate their beliefs, leading most to abandon their revolutionary sympathies.²⁸ Instead, many Druze decided to support the regime as the least of all evils.

Druze Spiritual Leaders		 JINSA
Leader	Position on Syria	Position on Israel
Hikmat al-Hijri	Opposes new Syrian government; rejected initial July 2025 ceasefire	Supports Israeli intervention in Syria
Hammoud al-Hanawi	Backs ceasefire with Syrian forces; supports reconciling with Sharaa	Rejects Israeli intervention in Syria
Yousef Jarbou	Backs ceasefire with Syrian forces; supports reconciling with Sharaa	Endorses Syrian Druze/Israeli cooperation; rejects Israeli intervention in Syria

However, this support was largely tactical rather than ideological—the Druze maintained quasi-autonomy in Suwayda province while accepting economic subsidies and avoiding military conscription outside their region.²⁹ This tacit cooperation began breaking down as the regime used Suwayda as a hub for Captagon manufacturing and export, with regime security forces or Hezbollah having direct or indirect involvement in the region’s drug trade—up to 79 percent of the province’s drug network was affiliated with Military Intelligence.³⁰ Iranian-backed militias expanded arms smuggling, human trafficking, and hostage-taking operations.³¹

By August 2023, deteriorating economic conditions—caused by years of war and worsened by the Assad regime’s decision to lift fuel subsidies to cover the doubling of public sector salaries—prompted thousands of Druze to begin sustained protests in Suwayda’s al-Karama Square, calling for the explicit removal of Assad from power.³² These economic measure pushed 90 percent of Syria’s population below the poverty line, nearly tripled fuel prices, and left electricity available for only one hour per day. Furthermore, chronic water shortages—attributed to corruption in the Suwayda Water Corporation and reliance on substandard Iranian and Indian equipment—forced families to pay between \$6.8 to \$10.8 weekly for water from mobile tanks despite the governorate having 17 dams with a maximum capacity of 60 million cubic meters.³³

D. The Druze in Transitional Syria

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 introduced a period of deep uncertainty for Syria’s Druze population. While some Druze factions participated in the late-2024 uprising to overthrow Assad—most notably as part of the “Southern Operations Room,” a coalition of Druze and Sunni organizations from southern Syria that coordinated with opposition forces led by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, as he was then known, while maintaining independent command—the community has remained deeply skeptical of the new transitional government, given its roots in HTS and its past hostility toward religious minorities.³⁴ The memory of the 2015 HTS-led massacre of Druze villagers for being *kafir*—or infidels—as well as past inflammatory rhetoric by Syria’s new president, who dropped his al-Jolani nom de guerre and now is known as Ahmed al-Sharaa, continues to shape Druze perceptions of the new order.³⁵

Syrian Druze Militias			 JINSA
Militia	Leader	Political Positions	
Men of Dignity	Yahya al-Hajjar	Ambivalence towards Assad; initially cooperated with Sharaa’s government/expressed support for Druze integration into new Syrian military in January 2025; clashed with Syrian forces in July 2025	
Sheik al-Karama Forces	Laith al-Balous	Split from Men of Dignity; anti-Assad	
Al-Jabal Brigade/Liwa al-Jabal	Shakib Azzam	Formed community defense; contributed to 2024 Southern Syria offensive; expressed support for Druze integration into new Syrian military in January 2025	
Suwayda Military Council	Tareq Al Shoufi	Denounces foreign influence in Syrian military; opposes Sharaa destabilizing Suwayda; clashed with opposing forces in July 2025	

Despite these concerns, the transitional government has attempted outreach, appointing a Druze agriculture minister and opening negotiations with key Druze figures, including Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri and commanders of the “Men of Dignity” militia.³⁶ Talks have focused on integrating Druze armed groups into the Defense Ministry, but Druze leaders have insisted that any disarmament will depend on the establishment of a legitimate, inclusive national framework.³⁷ Tensions escalated following the March 2025 release of a constitutional declaration that designated Islamic law as the primary source of legislation and omitted guarantees for minority representation or federalism.³⁸ Druze leaders condemned the document as “a new dictatorial

authority,” further eroding confidence in Damascus.³⁹ Just weeks later, clashes between government loyalists and the Druze community in the Damascus suburbs of Jaramana and Ashrafiyat Sahnaya left at least 10 Druze civilians dead.⁴⁰

Nor are the Druze the only minority facing concerns for their rights and threats to their security in the new Syria. In March 2025, loyalists from the new government led attacks against Alawite civilian communities—which comprise 10 percent of Syria’s population—along the country’s Mediterranean coast, killing at least 1,500 people and drawing international concern.⁴¹ Although reports suggest former Assad regime, or even Iran-backed groups, might have instigated the fighting, the response by armed groups aligned with the new government appears to have been indiscriminate.⁴² Despite international pressure the Damascus government has not yet held anyone accountable for the massacres.⁴³ Kurdish communities—also comprising 10 percent of the population—face similar pressures, with Damascus insisting they disarm and abandon the autonomous governance structures established in northeastern Syria and integrate individually into state institutions—a standard not applied to former Sunni jihadist groups.⁴⁴ Statements by U.S. officials supporting a strong, centralized Syria—and discouraging the Kurds from seeking greater political rights—have seemingly encouraged the Sharaa government to push forward with these demands.⁴⁵

Confronted with their own violent history with HTS and the checkered, at best, record of the new government thus far, the Druze community remains internally divided over its political future. While some elements—such as the newly formed Suwayda Military Council—have advocated for separatism or federal autonomy, larger factions have rejected these moves as illegitimate.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, clashes between Druze and transitional government loyalists have occurred, most notably in the Damascus suburbs of Jaramana and Ashrafiyat Sahnaya in late April 2025.⁴⁷ These clashes reportedly led to dozens of deaths, including among the Druze minority and local security personnel, prompting Druze clerics to denounce what they view as a “genocidal” campaign against their community.⁴⁸ Although temporary agreements have de-escalated some tensions, the Druze have not embraced the new regime and continue to demand stronger institutional guarantees and protections.⁴⁹ With the security environment deteriorating and sectarian rivalries flaring, the Druze have positioned themselves as a self-reliant, armed, and politically wary community whose future alignment remains uncertain.

III. July 2025 Suwayda Crisis

A new round of sectarian violence in post-Assad Syria, this time in Suwayda in July 2025, has raised serious questions about the security of Syria's Druze community, the intent and capacity of the new Damascus government, and the potential for broader regional escalation. Although there is general agreement on the immediate cause of the violence—Bedouin tribe members assaulting a Druze merchant in southern Syria leading to Druze community members detaining several armed Bedouin militants—it is less clear how and why these events transpired. In particular, the affiliation, intent, and direction of the Bedouins remains contested. Many accounts suggest that they were unaffiliated with the Syrian regime and acting on their own. The Druze and Israel, however, believe that the targeting of Druze merchants was part of a policy sanctioned, if not actively directed, by Damascus intended to provoke and ultimately bring Suwayda under central government control. Likewise, whether Syrian government forces had permission from the Druze community to enter Suwayda City and, therefore, the reasons that fighting broke out between them and Druze militia are also disputed.

A. Trigger and Escalation

The July 2025 Suwayda crisis began on July 11 when Bedouin tribal gunmen ambushed a Druze vegetable merchant on the Suwayda-Damascus highway, kidnapping the individual and stealing his vehicle.⁵⁰ The following morning, Druze gunmen connected to the merchant set up several checkpoints in rural Suwayda, kidnapping an unspecified number of Bedouins to demand the truck's return.⁵¹ At least five Druze people were kidnapped later that day in retaliation, setting off a cycle of escalating violence.⁵²

While the incident initially appeared to be a localized tribal dispute, Druze and Israeli sources speaking on the matter have suggested the escalation may have been connected to Damascus's broader efforts to assert central control over southern Syria. The Sharaa government's ongoing military centralization campaign has included naming new leaders of regional brigades. In January 2025, Sharaa appointed Colonel Binyan al-Hariri, a former commander of the Sunni Islamist coalition Ahrar al-Sham, as military commander for southern Syria.⁵³ The government also established new divisions designed to integrate local armed groups in Daraa Governorate under central command.⁵⁴ From this perspective, the subsequent government intervention on behalf of Bedouin militias reflected not impartial peacekeeping but a strategic effort to pressure militias in the autonomous Druze community in neighboring Suwayda Governorate into submission.

B. Violence and Syrian Government Reaction

By July 13, the confrontation had exploded into heavy clashes between Bedouin tribal gunmen and local Druze militiamen at multiple locations, including the Barak checkpoint on the Damascus-Suwayda highway, the village of al-Sourah al-Kabirah, and the al-Maqous district of Suwayda city.⁵⁵ At least 30 people were killed and 100 more injured in a single day of fighting.⁵⁶ Bedouin gunmen launched an offensive on Druze areas around Tirah while Druze militiamen counterattacked Arab areas in Suwayda, including al-Maqous, transforming what began as a localized dispute into sectarian clashes across the province.⁵⁷

On July 14, government interior and defense ministry forces moved into Suwayda, deploying security units with the stated intent to prevent clashes between Bedouin and Druze militias from further escalating.⁵⁸ Initially, the Syrian government maintained a “calibrated distance,” publicly characterizing the events as “criminal and unlawful acts.”⁵⁹ As violence intensified, government forces initiated a more significant intervention with military deployments and operations in Suwayda Governorate to take control of roads and villages, with officials stating the goal was to restore order and end the violence.⁶⁰ Shortly after entering the province, a convoy of Syrian Army forces was reportedly ambushed by Druze militiamen, resulting in several government forces killed or kidnapped.⁶¹ In response, the central government’s internal security commander in Suwayda issued a curfew in the city “from 8:00 am until further notice.”⁶² By nightfall, 18 government forces were confirmed dead as negotiations between government representatives and local leaders began.⁶³

The conflict reached its deadliest phase on July 15-16 when government forces, rather than serving as impartial mediators, reportedly joined Bedouin militias in systematic attacks against the local Druze population.⁶⁴ Widespread clashes erupted across Suwayda City and its surrounding areas as government forces advanced deep into the city, taking control of much of the provincial capital by nightfall on July 15. By the morning of July 16, government forces had taken control of Suwayda’s National Hospital, with reports emerging of Islamist fighters desecrating churches and subjecting Druze men to ritualistic humiliation before execution, including the forced shaving of mustaches—a symbol of Druze identity and honor.⁶⁵ Government forces also allegedly killed dozens of patients and medical professionals at the National Hospital before local Druze militant groups retook control of the facility, although a senior U.S. official stated on July 16 that American intelligence initially found no evidence implicating the Syrian government in atrocities committed in Suwayda.⁶⁶

2025 Suwayda Crisis Timeline

Bedouin Community/Tribal Forces
Druze Community/Forces
Syrian Government
Israeli Government
Combined Bedouin/Druze Violence
Intergovernmental Cooperation
Unknown Actor

July 11	Armed Bedouin militants assault and kidnap a Druze vegetable merchant on the Suwayda-Damascus highway.
July 12	Bedouin and Druze militias carry out serial kidnappings.
July 13	Confrontations between Bedouin and Druze militias explode into heavy armed clashes as fighting results in several deaths and over 100 injuries.
July 14	Syrian government forces launch intervention into Suwayda as sectarian violence continues. Israeli military carries out drone strikes on Syrian government forces.
July 15	Syrian government forces take over most of Suwayda's capital and clash with Druze militias. Israeli troops launch ground operations while its air force carries out air and drones strikes in Suwayda and Daraa.
July 16	Syrian government forces capture Suwayda's National Hospital and nearby villages. Israel strikes Syrian Ministry of Defense and Presidential Palace grounds in Damascus. Israeli ground incursions extend into Druze-majority villages. Several Israeli Druze cross into Syria to defend country's Druze community. Syrian transitional government and Druze leaders call for ceasefire; prominent Druze cleric rejects deal. U.S., Turkey, Jordan, and other Arab states call for second ceasefire requiring government forces to leave Suwayda.
July 17	Druze celebrate alleged victory over Syrian government forces. Reports emerge of Druze militias carrying out attacks against Bedouin communities, including murdering civilians. Bedouin groups launch a series of attacks against Druze, taking control of multiple localities. Syrian tribal confederation calls for tribes to fight in Suwayda with unconfirmed reports of foreign fighters joining their ranks. Israeli military carries out airstrikes in Syria. Unknown Syria-based forces kill Syrian-American man.
July 18	Tribal forces execute several Druze and destroy their property. Israeli government pledges two million shekels worth of emergency aid to Syrian Druze. Israeli military launches ground operations. U.S. announces ceasefire.
July 19	Israeli military launches ground operations. Druze cleric Hikmat al-Hijri announces formation of humanitarian corridors connecting Suwayda and Daraa. Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa formally endorses and enacts ceasefire. Ceasefire Phase One begins, enhancing security with plans to remove tribal forces from Suwayda. Syrian government forms emergency humanitarian aid committee.
July 20	Druze militias block Syrian government ministries entering Suwayda, but Syrian permit entry for Arab Red Crescent aid convoy. Israel delivers medical aid to Suwayda. Israeli military conducts drone strikes on tribal forces in western Suwayda.
July 21	Israeli military launches ground incursions. Syrian government evacuates approximately 1,500 Bedouins from Suwayda. Tribal forces reportedly violate ceasefire, but agreement holds.
July 22	Saudi media reports that Israeli and Syrian delegations resumed U.S.-Turkish-mediated security discussions in Azerbaijan.

As the violence escalated, all parties continued to commit atrocities. While government forces were accused of massacring civilians at the National Hospital, Druze militias also conducted systematic reprisal attacks against Bedouin communities, including executions of civilians, and took government soldiers as hostages.⁶⁷ Syria's tribal confederation called for tribal forces throughout the country to fight in Suwayda in support of the Bedouin, with up to 50,000 fighters from 40 clans mobilizing to the governorate.⁶⁸ Unconfirmed reports also emerged of foreign fighters joining their ranks.⁶⁹ This escalation threatened to turn a provincial conflict into a national crisis, as tribal forces captured key positions, including the al-Anqoud roundabout at Suwayda city's entrance.⁷⁰

The circumstances surrounding the government's entry into Suwayda remain contested even among Druze factions themselves. While Damascus claimed it had obtained permission from all local Druze groups to deploy security forces, prominent Druze leaders disputed this account. According to some Druze activists loyal to the Israel-backed al-Hajari faction, one Druze leader, Laith al-Balous, had coordinated with Syrian officials without achieving community consensus. Al-Balous offered a different explanation, stating that Syrian officials had quietly informed Druze religious and community leaders of plans to deploy limited forces to contain tensions with local Arab tribes, but poor communication led residents to mistake the arriving troops for hostile militias, triggering the violent clashes that followed.⁷¹

Adding to the confusion, Damascus reportedly believed it had tacit approval from both the United States and Israel to reassert control in Suwayda. The Syrian leadership's confidence was bolstered by recent pressure on Kurdish forces, including a heated meeting where Sharaa's team demanded that Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) leader Mazloun Abdi hand over the Deir ez-Zor region to Damascus.⁷² U.S. Special Envoy Thomas Barrack had repeatedly stressed that Syria should remain "one country, one nation, one military," rejecting federalism and the notion of autonomous Druze or Kurdish regions. He also publicly affirmed U.S. expectations that the SDF—America's main partner in the counter-ISIS campaign—would eventually integrate under the Syrian Army rather than remain an independent military force.⁷³ Syrian officials interpreted Barrack's push for unified control, combined with his role in mediating Israel-Syria security talks in Baku, as a license to move into Suwayda without risking Israeli pushback.⁷⁴

C. Israeli Intervention and Strategic Calculus

Israel's intervention in Suwayda was the culmination of escalating commitments to protect Syrian Druze. In March 2025, Israel provided humanitarian aid to Druze communities in southern Syria, while Israeli Druze leaders publicly urged their government to defend their Syrian brethren, citing their community's loyalty and military service. In April and May 2025, Israel carried out warning strikes near Damascus against groups allegedly preparing attacks on Druze populations. The

precedent was set in July 2024 when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu personally pledged support after Hezbollah killed 12 Druze children in Majdal Shams, while Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz warned Syria against allowing violence toward Druze communities, declaring Israel “will not permit harm to our Druze brothers.”

The violence against Syrian Druze in Suwayda set off widespread unrest among the Israeli Druze community, who held protests and blocked roads after unverified footage circulated online, appearing to show Islamist fighters humiliating Druze men.⁷⁵ Hundreds of Israeli Druze men later crossed into Syrian territory intending to come to the defense of their co-religionists.⁷⁶ This boiling anger placed significant political pressure on Netanyahu’s government to act, given the community’s traditional loyalty to Israel and military service.

Following failed backchannel diplomatic efforts to pressure Damascus to halt the violence against Druze civilians, Netanyahu authorized the Israeli military to take action against Syrian government forces beginning July 14.⁷⁷ Katz stated that the military “attacked targets in Syria as a message and a clear warning to the Syrian regime—we will not allow harm to the Druze in Syria,” thus framing the intervention explicitly as protection for the Druze minority rather than broader military objectives against Syrian forces.⁷⁸ Israeli operations rapidly escalated beyond initial airstrikes to encompass sustained ground incursions across multiple fronts. Starting July 15, the IDF conducted at least eight air and drone strikes targeting government and tribal forces in Suwayda and eastern Daraa.⁷⁹ The campaign intensified on July 16 with Israel launching airstrikes on the Syrian Ministry of Defense and the Presidential Palace grounds in Damascus.⁸⁰ Concurrent ground incursions extended into Druze-majority villages like Qalat Jandal, where Israeli Druze citizens had crossed during protests before being removed back to Israel.⁸¹ Israeli forces also conducted repeated operations toward strategic locations, including the al-Mantara Dam, through July 21.⁸²

While Netanyahu publicly justified the strikes by stating Israel was “working to save our Druze brothers and to eliminate the regime’s gangs,” the intervention also served broader strategic objectives, including enforcing Israel’s unilaterally declared demilitarization zone south of Damascus and preventing the new “extremist Islamic regime” from rebuilding military capabilities near Israeli borders.⁸³

D. Ceasefire and Aftermath

With at least 1,000 dead and more than 128,000 people displaced following the sectarian clashes, the United States, Turkey, and Arab nations immediately proposed a truce to ease sectarian tensions in southern Syria, and to prevent Israel’s strikes from escalating into a cross-border war.⁸⁴ However, multiple ceasefire attempts were needed before a lasting agreement took hold.

By midday on July 16, the transitional government and Druze religious leaders announced a ceasefire, but Druze cleric Hikmat al-Hijri rejected the deal and called his fighters to continue fighting.⁸⁵ A second ceasefire was negotiated late on July 16 following intense negotiations involving the United States, Turkey, Jordan, and other Arab states, requiring government forces to withdraw from Suwayda.⁸⁶

In a public address on July 19, Sharaa formally announced the ceasefire, gaining support from Bedouin and Druze communities in Syria. He condemned Israel's strikes, accusing its military of threatening Syria's stability, while also vowing to defend all Syrian minorities and claiming, "the Druze constitute a fundamental pillar of the Syrian national fabric." In his speech, Sharaa also praised the Bedouins for their commitment to the new Syrian government but urged them to abide by the ceasefire and avoid violent engagements with nearby groups.⁸⁷ Sharaa's government ultimately evacuated around 1,500 Bedouins from Suwayda, citing safety concerns as Druze leaders reclaimed control over the city.⁸⁸ However, Sharaa's public rhetoric suggested continued bias toward the Bedouin side, as he celebrated the "nationwide mobilization of Bedouin fighters toward Suwayda" while decrying the Israeli-supported Druze militias as "outlaw groups"—language that detractors interpreted as evidence of his partiality in the conflict.⁸⁹

Following the ceasefire in Suwayda, Saudi media reported that Israel and Syria resumed security talks, with the United States and Turkey mediating the discussions. On July 24, the *Times of Israel* reported that the United States had facilitated a meeting between Israeli and Syrian ministers in Paris—the first such dialogue since 2000.⁹⁰ As the countries negotiate for mutually agreed security postures, Israel has reportedly demanded that Israeli troops permanently remain in the buffer zone between the two countries, as well as the removal of all Syrian military personnel from the area.⁹¹

E. International Reactions to Violence in Suwayda

Several foreign governments and international organizations condemned both the sectarian violence in Suwayda and Israel's military intervention, calling for accountability for the multiple attacks on civilians. Following Israeli strikes on Damascus, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and Gulf Cooperation Council members expressed solidarity with Syria's transitional government and condemned Israel's military actions.⁹² Various European states demanded that both Syrian and Israeli governments prioritize civilian safety, while calling on Israel to respect Syria's sovereignty and international borders.⁹³

Most notably, the United States—which had consistently supported Israel's recent offensive actions, particularly strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities—expressed concern over Israel's military intervention in southern Syria. As tensions escalated and Israeli airstrikes hit government

buildings in Damascus, Washington called for both countries to resolve the crisis through diplomatic channels rather than military force.⁹⁴ U.S. State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce told reporters: “Regarding Israel’s intervention and activity is [sic] the United States did not support recent Israeli strikes.”⁹⁵

F. Entry of Humanitarian Aid to Suwayda

During the height of the fighting, the Druze attempted to establish a humanitarian corridor between Suwayda and Kurdish-controlled northeast Syria. Druze spiritual leadership issued an urgent statement demanding the “opening of roads towards our Kurdish brothers,” referring to the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) while also appealing to Jordan to open border crossings for humanitarian access.⁹⁶ DAANES responded with immediate solidarity, announcing plans to send urgent humanitarian aid to Suwayda and declaring the Druze cause “a national issue.”⁹⁷ SDF commander Mazloun Abdi confirmed receiving direct appeals from Suwayda Druze to “secure safe passages for civilians,” while large solidarity demonstrations erupted in the Kurdish city of Qamishli.⁹⁸ In a statement on July 17, the DAANES Social Affairs and Labor Authority formally announced the dispatch of urgent humanitarian aid to Suwayda, stating they were “driven by our moral and humanitarian duty,” marking the first shipment of aid from Kurdish territory.⁹⁹

As the July 19 ceasefire came into effect, Suwayda faced a severe humanitarian crisis, but Druze militias selectively blocked government aid efforts due to deep mistrust of Damascus’s intentions. When approximately 60 trucks from Syrian ministries and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent gathered at the provincial border on July 20, Druze forces initially refused entry to the entire convoy.¹⁰⁰ Fearing that government aid came with strings attached and concerned about regime infiltration under humanitarian cover, the militias ultimately permitted only Syrian Arab Red Crescent vehicles to enter after multiple attempts.¹⁰¹ Key Syrian officials including Ministers of Health, Social Affairs and Labor, and Emergency Response were forced to turn back to Damascus as their convoys remained blocked at checkpoints.¹⁰²

Meanwhile, Israel launched its own humanitarian response, providing two million shekels (\$594,000) worth of aid delivered by Israeli Air Force helicopters in coordination with U.S. authorities, including medical equipment and specialized assistance for victims of sexual violence.¹⁰³ The complex security environment meant that even Israeli aid faced challenges, with activists reporting that Bedouin forces and Syrian government troops intercepted some packages.¹⁰⁴ Despite these challenges, Israel’s Ministry of Health confirmed that it would continue sending additional medical aid batches to the Druze in Suwayda.¹⁰⁵

IV. Why the Druze Matter

Treatment of minorities is an important bellwether of the new regime's ability and willingness to turn Syria from the Iranian proxy and jihadist breeding ground it has been into a stable, constructive regional player. If the Druze are not safe in the new Syria, it is unlikely that Israel or the United States will be safe from the new Syria.

A. Relevance to U.S. Policy

For decades, Syria threatened Israel. For the past decade and a half, Syria simultaneously hosted both forces that threatened Middle Eastern and American security alike: Iran and its proxies as well as Sunni jihadists. Both were able to take hold and grow in Syria by exploiting and inflaming the country's many ethno-sectarian tensions. Now, with the fall of Assad, there is an opportunity to deny Syria to American adversaries, if not move it into the column of American partners. The July 2025 Suwayda crisis has made this challenge more urgent—and more personal for Washington—with the death of U.S. citizen Hossam Soraya, a Syrian-American Druze killed while visiting family during the sectarian violence.¹⁰⁶ Doing so requires threading the needle between creating a strong enough Syrian government to bring myriad armed factions under control, expel foreign jihadists, prevent Iran's resurgence, and conduct counterterrorist operations against ISIS all without being so strong that it tramples on the rights of minorities or threatens Syria's neighbors, particularly Israel.

The July 2025 Suwayda crisis reveals troubling patterns in Syria's transitional government that suggest it is as yet unable, or maybe unwilling, to steer a course toward stability. At minimum, Sharaa's government appears to be pressing too aggressively for centralized control, focusing disproportionately on disarming and integrating non-threatening minority groups while lacking the will or capability to confront more dangerous, extremist elements that remain inside Syria. The regime's intervention—seemingly on behalf of Bedouin militias against Druze defenders and combined with reports of hospital shelling—suggests a troubling prioritization of Sunni tribal interests over the protection of religious minorities. At worst, if these actions were coordinated directly by Damascus, they point to the emergence of an Islamist-leaning governance model that targets Syria's diverse minorities, marking a dangerous continuity with Assad-era sectarianism under new leadership. This could spell not only the renewal of conflict within Syria as the Druze and other minorities take up arms to protect themselves but also the rise of a new jihadist state.

The regime's treatment of the Druze—a politically cohesive and militarily capable minority—serves as a critical test case for the trajectory of post-Assad Syria. Whether the new government pursues a genuinely pluralistic political order or reverts to authoritarian consolidation will likely

be determined by how it handles the current crisis in Suwayda and whether the temporary ceasefire leads to meaningful political compromise or renewed coercion.

For the United States, these developments carry direct strategic implications. A regime unwilling or unable to accommodate minority rights risks reigniting civil war, accelerating displacement, and fueling the very extremist forces the United States and its partners have spent over a decade trying to contain. Sectarian exclusion weakens stabilization efforts, undermines prospects for lasting peace, and invites deeper intervention from external actors like Iran and Russia. Washington has openly backed a unified Syrian state that preserves territorial integrity, but this vision depends on inclusive governance—not coercive homogenization. The violence in Suwayda calls into question Damascus’s intentions and capacity, underscoring the need for sustained U.S. engagement to prevent renewed conflict, mitigate regional spillover, and block the resurgence of terrorist groups like the Islamic State.

B. Why the Druze Matter to Israel

The Druze are a strategically significant minority within Israel, representing roughly 1.6 percent of the national population (approximately 152,000) and playing a uniquely integrated role in civic and security institutions.¹⁰⁷ Druze men have served in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) under mandatory conscription since the 1950s, yielding high enlistment rates of about 80 percent, above the national average.¹⁰⁸ The Druze-Israeli relationship—described as a “blood covenant”—has fostered trust and political influence, positioning the Druze as a key bridge between Israel’s Jewish majority and Arab minorities.¹⁰⁹ According to one researcher of Druze identity, “many of them [Israeli Druze] identify less and less as Arabs.”¹¹⁰ Druze serve as members of the Knesset and participate in the current ruling coalition.¹¹¹ An additional 22,000 Druze live in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, concentrated in the northern tip, where they retain Syrian citizenship while having the option to apply for Israeli citizenship.¹¹²

Israel’s commitment to Druze security was demonstrated in July 2024 when Hezbollah’s rocket attack on a football field in the Druze town of Majdal Shams killed 12 children, prompting Prime Minister Netanyahu to personally call Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Mowafaq Tarif and promise that Hezbollah would “pay a heavy price for this that it has not paid to this point.”¹¹³ Israel subsequently assassinated senior Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukr in retaliation and launched a sustained military campaign from September through November 2024 that left Hezbollah largely militarily defeated, illustrating how attacks on Israeli Druze communities trigger significant military responses and demonstrating the strategic importance Israel places on Druze security.

Beyond its borders, Israel closely monitors the Druze in Syria as part of its broader interest in maintaining stability along its northern frontier. The Suwayda province—home to the largest Druze population in Syria—borders Jordan and lies close to the Israeli-controlled Golan, making Druze alignment a matter of military significance. Jerusalem is also sensitive to intra-Druze solidarity, especially when Syrian Druze come under threat from Islamist militias. Such incidents have sparked protests among Israeli Druze and calls for government action, reinforcing the idea that Druze affairs in Syria can reverberate politically inside Israel.

More strategically, Israel views attacks on Syrian Druze as potential indicators of emerging security threats. Violence against minorities—especially by tribal militias or with regime complicity—may signal the growing influence of extremist actors or a jihadist orientation within Syria’s transitional government. Such developments would pose serious risks to Israel’s northern border, regardless of Damascus’s ongoing diplomatic thaw with Israel. As a result, Israel sees Druze protection not only as a humanitarian imperative or a domestic political issue, but also as a barometer for broader regional instability.

Since the fall of the Assad regime, Israel has sought to position itself as protector of the Druze community in Syria from possible incursions by the transitional government. Israeli officials, including Defense Minister Katz, have publicly warned Damascus against harming Druze civilians and offered employment opportunities in the Golan Heights.¹¹⁴ In March 2025, Israel provided humanitarian aid to Syrian Druze areas, including 10,000 aid packages, saying Israel’s commitment to the Druze community includes all “Druze in the region, in particular in Syria.”¹¹⁵

V. Recommendations

The July 2025 Suwayda crisis represents a critical test case for Syria's transitional government and broader regional stability. With over 1,000 individuals dead, 128,000 more displaced, and basic infrastructure collapsed, the United States faces a looming humanitarian disaster compounded by strategic concerns about ISIS resurgence and regional spillover effects. The current administration should act to stabilize Suwayda, surge humanitarian assistance into the area, and demand accountability for the violence while working to protect its security interests in the region by coordinating closely with Israel and pushing the Syrian regime to take minority rights and security sector reform seriously.

A. Prioritize U.S. Interests Not Outcomes

Given Syria's decades-long history undermining Israeli, regional, and U.S. security, it is strongly in the national security interest of the United States to ensure that the new Syria is a benign, if not friendly, actor in the Middle East. This interest requires ensuring that American adversaries—whether Iran, jihadist groups, Russia, China, or transnational drug smuggling and criminal networks—do not once again take root in Syria and that no anti-American or anti-Israeli government takes power in Damascus. Ideally, it also means minimizing the chances of renewed ethno-sectarian fighting.

Prioritizing these interests is far more important than adhering to some pre-determined vision of Syria's ultimate political settlement. No one outcome in Syria will guarantee that the country is a stable and constructive actor just as there are multiple arrangements under which it could coexist peacefully with the rest of the region and the world. A territorially integral Syria with a government committed to protecting the rights and meeting the needs of all its citizens while building good relations with its neighbors would be a boon for the United States. But a territorially integral Syria controlled by an Islamist government that oppresses minorities, attracts foreign fighters, and spews hatred toward Israel would not. Similarly, pursuing a federal, decentralized political system could defuse many of the ethno-sectarian tensions that have plagued Syria or it could provide new havens for Iran and jihadists while stoking regional tensions.

Rather than locking itself into a pre-determined political outcome in Syria, therefore, U.S. policy and messaging to Damascus should focus on ensuring its interests are met, whatever form that might take. That means making clear to Sharaa that Washington will judge his government based on its ability to keep Iran out and ISIS down, control its security forces, respect minority groups, limit foreign influence, and seek good relations with Israel and other neighbors. But it should also be clear that, if Sharaa is unable or willing to deliver on these goals, the United States, preferably

in coordination with its partners, will seek political arrangements that can deliver on the promise of a new peaceful and stable Syria.

B. Establish Clear U.S.-Israeli Coordination on Syria Policy

The United States and Israel must urgently align their approaches to Syria's transitional government to prevent the kind of miscommunication that contributed to the Suwayda crisis. Despite previous Israeli military action in support of the Druze and ongoing diplomatic contacts between Syrian and Israeli officials—including meetings in Baku mediated by U.S. Special Envoy Thomas Barrack—Damascus fundamentally misread Israel's position. This misunderstanding was due in no small part to American officials sending messages to Damascus in support of centralization that largely diverged from Israel's determination to protect the Druze. The result was a crisis that caught both Washington and Jerusalem off guard, forcing hasty Israeli strikes on Damascus and emergency diplomatic intervention to avert broader escalation.

Going forward, Washington and Jerusalem should hold regular high-level consultations to come to consensus on a shared vision for a secure and stable unified state that recognizes the full citizenship and basic human and political rights and needs of all its minority communities, including having a real say in how they are governed. This should include developing shared criteria for evaluating Damascus's performance on minority rights, setting clear red lines for the regime's treatment of religious and ethnic communities, and, ideally, coordinating responses to violations. This should include explicit understanding that Israel will act to protect Syrian minorities.

Finally, U.S. diplomatic messaging to Damascus—especially regarding centralization and minority autonomy—must be synchronized with Israeli positions to avoid exploitable gaps. Presenting Damascus with a unified U.S.-Israeli vision for Syria's future, one that balances legitimate state authority with protections for minorities, is essential to preventing renewed sectarian violence and maintaining regional stability.

C. Implement Ceasefire and Deconfliction Mechanisms

While a hastily brokered ceasefire was implemented to bring an immediate halt to the bloodshed in Suwayda, a more durable and impactful agreement is needed to prevent continued cycles of violence in an already fractured Syria. The United States should work with Israel, its European and Arab partners, and the United Nations to establish a long-term ceasefire agreement with Damascus. The November 2024 Israel-Lebanon arrangement, with a multilateral monitoring body, could serve as a useful model.

Crucially, Damascus must be a full participant in the monitoring process to ensure accountability. The agreement should also include the establishment of a direct deconfliction mechanism and 24/7 hotline between Damascus and Jerusalem to enable designated officials to address emerging tensions before they escalate into armed confrontation.

To maintain deterrence, Washington should make clear that Israel retains the right to respond proportionally to ceasefire violations that threaten Druze civilians or Israeli security interests, while encouraging disputes to be addressed first through the monitoring mechanism. By combining inclusive participation, real-time communication, and credible deterrence, such an arrangement can prevent future incursions into Suwayda and reduce the risk of wider regional escalation.

D. Surge Humanitarian Assistance to Suwayda

The situation in Suwayda is dire. The Syrian Network for Human Rights reports a complete breakdown of basic services, with electricity, water, and communications networks interrupted since July 16. The Suwayda National Hospital has shut down completely, with decomposing bodies documented inside due to power failures and lack of refrigeration. Most bakeries and shops have ceased operations, creating severe food shortages that force residents to rely on rapidly diminishing household supplies.¹¹⁶ Given the mistrust between Druze militias and Damascus following the July violence, independent humanitarian access is essential to address the crisis effectively.

The United States should work with international partners and aid organizations to surge humanitarian aid into Suwayda. Multiple options can be pursued simultaneously to ensure sufficient assistance arrives as quickly as possible. This could include increasing deliveries by Israel, bringing in supplies from DAANES by the SDF and/or international organizations, and possibly establishing a direct humanitarian corridor to Suwayda from Jordan that operates independently of Syrian government interference. The goal should be restoring basic services and meeting immediate humanitarian needs while supporting longer-term recovery efforts in the region.

E. Demand Comprehensive Accountability for Atrocities in Suwayda

The Syrian transitional government's failure to provide accountability for previous violence against minorities has directly undermined confidence in Damascus and contributed to the violent escalation in Suwayda. Following the March 2025 coastal massacres, Damascus's fact-finding committee dismissed evidence of systematic abuses—findings rejected by the

Supreme Alawite Council as an “impudent play.”¹¹⁷ This lack of credible justice only serves to embolden perpetrators and deepen minority mistrust.

For the July 2025 Suwayda crisis, Washington must insist on a fundamentally different approach. The United States should push for a UN-led investigation with full access to affected areas, including the National Hospital and surrounding communities, to examine both government forces’ alleged participation in attacks on Druze civilians and retaliatory violence by Druze militias. Damascus must also grant immediate access to reputable international human rights organizations to conduct independent investigations and engage directly with survivors.

Any new Syrian fact-finding committee must operate with full transparency and include international observers to ensure credibility. Without legitimate and independent accountability, the Druze and other minority communities will have little incentive to disarm, integrate, or trust Damascus. U.S. support for the transitional government should be explicitly conditioned on its cooperation with these accountability measures.

F. Support Comprehensive Security Sector Reform

The repeated involvement of Syrian government forces and allied militias in atrocities against minority communities underscores fundamental command-and-control failures that threaten Syria’s stability. This only highlights the urgent need for serious reform that Sharaa so far has been unwilling or unable to carry out.

The United States, working with European and regional partners should press Damascus to accept international assistance in undertaking a comprehensive security sector reform program. This effort must focus on integrating armed groups, starting with former Sunni opposition factions, professionalizing the Syrian security forces, creating clear chains of command with real accountability, and removing foreign jihadist fighters from government ranks.

International partners should provide technical assistance, training, and monitoring to ensure that security forces uphold international humanitarian law and protect minority communities. Damascus must demonstrate commitment by allowing international oversight of units operating in minority areas and by prosecuting personnel or militia members implicated in atrocities—regardless of affiliation.

Finally, integration of armed groups into Syria’s national security apparatus must be consistent and equitable. The current practice of demanding individual integration from minority fighters—a standard that has not applied to Syrian jihadist groups like HTS or the Syrian National Army—undermines both national unity and security effectiveness. Without professional, accountable

security forces that serve all Syrians equally, the transitional government risks perpetuating cycles of sectarian violence.

G. Use Caesar Act Sanctions as Leverage for Compliance

The Caesar Act sanctions are among the most restrictive measures imposed on Syria due to their secondary sanctions provisions. Waivers of these sanctions are essential for Syria's reconstruction efforts. On May 23, 2025, the Trump administration issued a 180-day waiver that must be renewed after its expiration on November 19, 2025.¹¹⁸ Renewal of the waiver should be contingent upon Damascus demonstrating measurable progress on the priorities outlined above: full access for international human rights investigations in Suwayda and other affected areas; transparent accountability for atrocities against minority communities; and credible security sector reform. Failure to cooperate on these fronts must carry clear consequences, which includes the suspension of waivers and the re-imposition of full sanctions.

The United States should coordinate closely with European and Arab partners to ensure that any sanctions relief or reconstruction assistance is similarly conditioned. A unified international approach will maximize pressure on Damascus to implement genuine reforms.

By linking sanctions relief directly to performance on minority protection and accountability, Washington can create powerful incentives for the transitional government to move toward an inclusive and stable Syria. The alternative—continued sanctions and deepening isolation—must be clearly understood as the cost of continued sectarian repression.

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