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## Not a local conflict, but geopolitics in disguise

**Sectarianism in Syria is a longstanding political project. Institutionalised under colonial rule and exploited by Assad, it's now being weaponised by the new regime and Israel, as the massacres in Suwayda make brutally clear.**

By [Maria Kastrinou](#), [Salam Said](#)

In July 2025, Suwayda province witnessed one of the most brutal massacres in Syria's recent history. According to the [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights \(SOHR\)](#) ↗, 1,448 people have been killed, including 258 individuals executed by gunmen affiliated with the Ministries of Defence and Interior. Most of the victims were civilians and Druze. Entire families were wiped out. National symbols—including images of the Syrian Druze hero Sultan Basha al-Atrash—were destroyed. Children were shot as they tried to flee. Villages and neighbourhoods were shelled, looted and burned.

This recent cycle of violence erupted on 12 July, when a Druze merchant was attacked and robbed at a checkpoint between Damascus and Suwayda, manned by a non-state armed group affiliated with southern Bedouin tribes. In retaliation, a local Druze faction abducted a member of the tribe, sparking a cycle of kidnappings and clashes between the two groups. Seizing the opportunity, the Syrian government intervened—not to de-escalate tensions, as it claimed, but to reassert control over the prov-

ince. Instead of acting as a neutral force, government troops aligned with the Bedouin faction and launched a brutal campaign against Druze communities.

Civilians were massacred, homes looted, and houses and olive groves deliberately set on fire. Bashar, a survivor and journalist from the city, recounted: "The military burned my parents' homes in the village before their eyes. Rocket launchers were used to flatten entire villages to clear the way for advancing troops."

"This is not a local conflict," said Nadeem, a photographer and survivor from the village of Al-Dour. "It began with staged clashes—amplified by regime-controlled media. As elders from both sides negotiated peace, the Ministry of Defence sent in troops. They didn't de-escalate; they reignited the violence."

When Ministry of Defence forces entered Al-Dour village from Daraa on 15 July, snipers opened fire on civilians, and mortar shells rained down on farm roads. "Those who couldn't flee were slaughtered—many by beheading," Nadeem said. "I lost my home, most of my relatives and the entire photographic archive of the Syrian Revolution I'd built over 14 years."

## **Sectarianism is a political project**

The Suwayda massacre is not an isolated event but part of a broader state policy to consolidate power and suppress dissent. In March 2025, sectarian massacres in Syria's coastal regions left [over 1,500 dead](#) ↗. A month later, [violence erupted in Druze-populated](#) ↗ suburbs of Damascus, including Jaramana and Sahnaya, after a fabricated video falsely showing a Druze sheikh insulting the Prophet was circulated. The state used the unrest as a pretext to reassert control, leaving dozens dead and hundreds displaced.

It has repeatedly fuelled sectarian strife. As [Manahel Alsahoui](#) ↗ noted after the church bombing in Damascus in June, the government even "re-

fused to label the victims as martyrs... treating non-Muslims as second-class citizens."

Meanwhile, Syria's new leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has concentrated authority to an unprecedented degree. He is president, [quasi-prime minister ↗](#), head of the ["Sovereign Fund" ↗](#) and the Development Fund. There is no functioning parliament. No roadmap for justice. Only militarised power, economic collapse, and the crushing of dissent. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continues to operate as a militia rather than a unified national force, while control of the military increasingly mirrors Assad-era dynamics, with key positions held by loyalists of al-Sharaa.

Sectarianism in Syria is not some ancient, ingrained identity. It is a political project. These divisions were institutionalised during colonial rule and weaponised during the war that followed Syria's 2011 uprising. Terms like "Druze militia" or "Bedouin tribe", widely used by government media, are [products of broader power struggles in the region, violence and wartime reordering ↗](#).

In addition, [Israel's settler colonialism](#) has long manipulated sectarian identities—especially among the Druze, who are often portrayed as a monolithic community. Israel is playing a familiar double game by presenting itself as a protector of the Druze while seeking to reframe the occupied Golan Heights as official Israeli territory. The tension between the Druze and Al-Sharaa's government offers Israel an opportunity to push for more "comfortable" borders on [Syrian soil ↗](#).

Inside Syria, Druze now live in fear, targeted by a growing wave of hate speech and sectarian violence. In the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, stateless Druze Syrians feel they are being erased from the only homeland they have ever belonged to. Both inside and outside the country, many Druze feel caught in a dangerous crossfire—used as pawns in Israel's geopolitical designs on one side, and in the Islamist ambitions of HTS on the other.

What makes the deadly massacres in Suwayda even more brutal is the tragedy of betrayal. From Sultan Al-Atrash to Kamal Kanj, the Syrian Druze have long resisted partition, insisting that "religion is for God and homeland is for all."

## Misread signals?

Since taking power in December 2024, Al-Sharaa has faced serious challenges in asserting control over different parts of Syria, including southern Syria. The most significant of these is the deep-rooted mistrust toward the leadership in Damascus, where [official speeches](#) ↗ promising inclusivity and national participation sharply contradict the authoritarian behaviour observed on the ground.

At the same time, Al-Sharaa has pursued a de-escalation policy with Israel and agreed to begin peace talks, despite ongoing Israeli military attacks on Syrian territories and Israel's continued genocide in Gaza. Israel has not only destroyed much of the remaining Syrian military, but has also established [ten military checkpoints on Syrian soil](#) ↗ and deployed ground troops—violating international law without protest from the Syrian government.

These actions have taken place amid international silence. With the tacit tolerance of Western countries, Israeli airstrikes continue to [target Syrian military positions](#) ↗, often resulting in [civilian casualties](#) ↗—as during recent attacks on the Ministry of Defence and the Presidential Palace.

Reports suggest that the Syrian government's control over southern Syria had been discussed just a week earlier during Syrian-Israeli negotiations in the UAE and Baku. Even officials in Damascus have acknowledged that they may have [misread signals](#) ↗ from the US and Israel as tacit encouragement to seize control over the entire country. Israel's call not only for the "protection" of the Druze, but—in December 2024—for a demilitarised southern Syria, made Al-Sharaa hesitant to act in the region without Israeli

coordination. Now, the regime in Damascus is relying on foreign alliances to legitimise domestic repression.

The use of sectarianism as a geopolitical tactic in Suwayda—one shared by the governments of both Israel and Syria—can perhaps be understood as the result of a convergence of interests that enabled both sides to consolidate their power through violence, at the cost of civilian lives and the destruction of Syrian society. If this tactic persists, the lingering question remains: who will be next?

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