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The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts

Mahmoud al-Lababidi

Wartime and Post-Conflict in
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The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts

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Executive Summary

Since 2011, the Druze of Sweida have witnessed a state of chaos and anxiety, a decline in the role of the middle class and their traditional and political leaders, and serious exposure to regional interference.

The historical composition of the Druze, an ethnicity that exists as both a tribe and a religious sect, has recently begun shifting more towards the sectarian and away from the tribal. Despite their problems, internal contradictions and general weaknesses, the clergy (or spiritual sheikhdom) appear to be the most cohesive Druze leadership, with so-called secular political leadership almost fading away entirely.

Given the shifts in the production relations amidst an unprecedented state of decline in local income sources and increased regional interventions, the Druze of Sweida today appear a politically headless community. Despite their rich history of producing notable leaders, the group has proved unable to do so effectively in recent years.

Sweida's neutrality during the Syrian war remains in place, but it is increasingly subject to external interference and internal dispersion. Forms of foreign intervention have ranged from Iranian funding to the creation of a wide range of pro-Iranian militias, Russian attempts to attract certain neutral factions and the Druze communities of Israel and Lebanon struggling to win over the Druze of Sweida and instrumentalise them in their own local conflicts.

While this state of insecurity is seen as serving the regime in the short term as it allows it to regain control over security in Sweida, the regime remains incapable of providing social alternatives and economic solutions to a region worn down by a war in its immediate vicinity. Sweida has now become a drug smuggling route towards the Jordanian border, where Lebanon's Hezbollah is striving to take control, and kidnappings for ransom are among the most important sources of income for gangs and militias.

Introduction

Located southeast of Damascus, the governorate of Sweida is the most significant home region of the Druze minority in Syria. It has maintained a state of neutrality during the revolution and the ensuing multi-layered conflict. Despite this neutrality, it is internally highly fragmented and disintegrated today, being dominated by the dynamics of war in their local and regional dimensions.

With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, the Druze split into three main blocs: regime loyalists, opposition supporters, and neutrals who constituted the vast majority. It was a split that did not correspond to any of the traditional dividing lines, and no one group succeeded in dominating the community's discourse, which resulted in a stalemate in the local power balance. As the opposition was unable to produce a local leadership on the ground, a group of new leaders associated with the security services emerged from the ranks of the loyalists and was tasked with running the area following the gradual withdrawal of the regime after 2011. Rather than confronting the Druze demonstrations calling for the overthrow of the regime with brute force, as it did in Sunni areas, the regime tried to win the Druze over as part of its 'minority protection' policy. Over time, the security services reduced their presence in Sweida to local contractors,¹ preferring to manage the security situation from behind the scenes.

This was accompanied by an economic collapse that affected most segments of society, especially the middle class. However, from the early years of the revolution until mid-2013, Sweida witnessed a short-lived economic boom, in which the displacement of more than 300,000 persons from Eastern Ghouta and Daraa contributed to an increase in demand for rented property. This in turn increased investment by Sweida's expatriates in the real estate market. With the continued decline in the value of the Syrian pound and the outflow of the displaced from Sweida after 2015, it became evident that the boom was temporary, and it was soon followed by a recession due to the economic effects of the war on low-income people. This affected all productive activities, including agriculture. It was accompanied by a decline in the activities of the state's executive, judicial and service institutions to their lowest levels in eight years, given the chronic inability to secure fuel, continual electricity cuts, an accumulation of litter and a deterioration of the healthcare services.

The neutrality of the Druze contributed to a cessation of compulsory and reserve recruitment into the regime's armed forces. In fact, forced conscription – which had once been the main bone of contention in the Druze's relationship with the Ottoman Empire and the Egyptian rule of the Levant – has now become the largest crisis in the Druze's relationship with the Syrian state. Since mid-2018, the regime, along with its Russian and Iranian allies, has increased pressure on Sweida to resolve the issue of the tens of thousands of Druze youths who have absconded from military service, which means in effect ending the 'special' status afforded to the Druze of Sweida since 2011. However, the horrific massacres perpetrated by the Islamic State organisation (IS) on 25 July 2018 caused the regime to temporarily reduce this pressure.

In early 2019, the regime resumed its pressure on Sweida's Druze to join its armed forces amid resistance from some local armed forces, raising the questions of the possibility of the regime directly ruling Sweida through its security and military institutions once again, the conditions in which this would take place and the local factors that might impede it. In an attempt to answer these questions, this paper first examines the factors that changed the ethnic nature of the Druze in terms of the relationship between their local political and religious leaderships and the reasons for the continuity of spiritual leadership and the erosion of its secular counterpart. The paper also maps out the forms of interventions by Iran, Russia and the Druze of Lebanon and Israel and their interrelationships with

¹ Civil contractors with the security services, which means they work on the basis of an external contract rather than permanent employment and affiliation with the security apparatus.

local forces and impact on the rearrangement of the local social order in Sweida. Finally, the study presents possible future scenarios for the region.

The study is based on 23 extensive interviews with various observers, activists, journalists, clerics and members of armed factions conducted by the researcher between April and June 2019. It also relies on published articles and open sources available on social media and the researcher's personal archive.

1. Local Power Crises and Contradictions

Apparently, a loyalist vs. opposition binary classification does not explain the large fragmentation of the Druze community seen since 2011 with its diverse views and goals in the semi-isolated governorate of Sweida with a population of only 350,000. The decline in the state's presence allowed for the restoration of politics, but this remained governed in part by inherited civil strife. The spiritual leadership is mired in internal contradictions, while secular leaders have receded and new movements and blocs have emerged – some of them family-based, some security-based – under Russian or Iranian sway.

1.1. Old Leaders Fade Away, New Ones Flounder

The Druze of Sweida constitute an ethnicity² with two components, tribal and sectarian,³ both of which played a historic role in the preservation of the community. The Druze's historical formation as a tribal alliance before their embrace of the *tawhid* (monotheism) doctrine was what characterised them as an ethnicity. These clans travelled much before they settled in Mount Lebanon and embraced the Druze doctrine in the twelfth century.⁴ From Mount Lebanon, the Yamani section of the Druze migrated to Mount Horan after inter-factional fighting with the Qaysi Druze in Ain Dara in 1711.⁵ In Jabal al-Druze (Druze Mountain), the social order was founded on a quasi-feudal tribal-clerical basis, which allowed some measure of equality among all the clan members and at the same time gave the chiefs of powerful families the right to contend for political influence and arable land in return for protecting the peasants.⁶

The ability of the Druze to remain a unified bloc was shaped by a confluence of tribal and sectarian factors and was embodied in the relationship between the secular and spiritual leaderships, or the intermingling of the so-called *juhhal* (ignorant, i.e. non-religious) and *uqqal* (knowledgeable, i.e. religious) communities and their social strata. The traditional secular sheikhs ruled Jabal al-Druze from the start of its inhabitation at the end of the seventeenth century, providing it with protection and continuity. As for the spiritual sheikhs, they often played a supporting role in clan affairs and the divisions of their spheres of influence and political stances almost matched those of the clan leaders. This simple political composition of the Druze in Mount Horan, as a headless tribal group with no central leadership, enabled them to rebel against the Ottomans, the Egyptians and the French, but has not helped them thus far in the face of the post-independence 'national' state.

The formation of the Druze social order was accompanied by a peasant-warrior lifestyle, which was embodied in several continual defensive wars⁷ and resulted in the consolidation of a political system based on family-tribal leadership, which was gradually stripped of its economic privileges. In fact,

² Birgit Schäbler, *The Uprisings of Mount Druze-Horan from the Ottoman Era to the State of Independence*, (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar Publishing, 2004), 13.

³ The Druze Islamic doctrine developed out of Ismailism and was called for under the Fatimid caliph in Egypt, al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, in the early 11th century.

⁴ Abbas Abu Saleh and Sami Makarem, *Political History of the Druze Monotheists* (in Arabic), (Beirut: Druze Council for Research and Development, no date), 15.

⁵ The Druze have historically been divided into two political camps: the Qaysis and the Yamanis, which engaged in several political and military battles. The Yamanis or the Yemenis are Druze from Yemen, while the Qaysis are from Northern Arabia. It is very difficult to find the ethnic or historical reason behind the division, which remains primarily a political one as is evidenced by Christians and Muslims being allied with both sides of the intra-Druze conflict. Abu Saleh and Makarem, *Political History of the Druze*.

⁶ Schäbler, *The Uprisings of Mount Druze-Horan*, 71.

⁷ These defensive wars were against repeated Bedouin raids, then against attempts by the Ottoman rule to subdue the Mountain throughout the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, against Egyptian campaigns led by Ibrahim Pasha (1840-1831) and finally for independence against the French mandate (1923-1925).

nineteenth-century peasant revolts weakened the economic role of prominent landowners amongst the village elders but preserved their political role as family leaders who controlled the *maqarin* (i.e. regions).⁸ This socio-political order has long been stabilised around a tribal hierarchy, with village elders tied to family chiefdoms in the *maqarin* centres.⁹

Secular Leaders Receding

The decline in the role of secular leaders, which became more apparent after 2011, is in fact the result of a long historical process. It was deepened with the arrival in power of the Baath Party in 1963, and especially after the consolidation of Hafez al-Assad's rule in 1970. Sweida's Druze considered themselves the godfathers of independence in 1946, but then found themselves facing centralised rule from Damascus, which tried to end their privileges and reduce their political weight to something more commensurate with their population size and economic position. In 1947, the government of Shukri al-Quwatli supported the Popular Movement led by families from Sweida city and the countryside to its south and east in its confrontation the powerful al-Atrash leadership,¹⁰ which was losing its political primacy. In 1954, an armed confrontation between the regime of President Adib al-Shishakli and the Druze of Sweida resulted in Shishakli's political defeat but paved the way for the state to move to subjugate the Druze. With the implementation of agrarian reform by the Syrian-Egyptian union in 1958, the economic role of tribal leaders and the associated networks of patronage were weakened in a community built on a base of a quasi-feudal peasantry.¹¹

Some Druze military personnel and partisans participated in the March 1963 coup which brought the Baath party to power, but soon became victims of internal purges among the rival Baathist wings. After an unsuccessful coup attempt led by Major Salim Hatoum in 1966, Druze representatives were expelled from the army, security agencies and party. Since 1970, the totalitarian state based on Alawite tribalism and family ties, the ostensible authority of the Baath Party and the absolute power of the security services and elite military units have been the biggest challenges to the Druze. Indeed, the lists of the 'country and national leadership' of the Baath Party included almost no representatives of the Druze from 1966 until the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000.¹²

The marginalisation of Sweida's Druze since the 1960s led them to an uprising in 2001 following the murder of a Druze youth by Bedouin shepherds during the first year of Bashar al-Assad's rule. The regime's storming and cutting off of Sweida from the rest of the world and its confrontation of peaceful demonstrations with live bullets¹³ were early indications of how it would act against Syrians later in 2011. This short confrontation in 2001, which the regime easily won after a rapid bloodbath, cemented Sweida's marginalisation and isolation from its surroundings.

Since 2011, the secular tribal leaderships have entered a phase of clinical death, finding their influence in society marginalised and their presence at social events and tribal reconciliations insignificant.

⁸ Sweida is divided into the old town and four surrounding areas called *maqarin*: eastern, southern, western and northern. It is a traditional rather than administrative division.

⁹ The history of Sweida has seen a central Sheikh of Sheikhs leadership led by the al-Hamdans (1685-1869), whose al-Atrash successors attempted to scale up the power hierarchy and form a central emirate. See Schäbler, *The Uprisings of Mount Druze-Horan*, 61.

¹⁰ After independence, the al-Atrash leadership was transferred to Sultan Pasha al-Atrash in the House of al-Qrayya, with the rest of the al-Atrash leaders in Sweida city and the southern *maqran* villages continuing to enjoy influence.

¹¹ Syrian People's Assembly website, "Agrarian Reform Law, No. 161 of 1958," no date, <https://bit.ly/2XnrYHS>.

¹² Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry* (in Arabic), (Beirut: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2014), 320.

¹³ Clashes between unarmed Druze and armed Bedouins over grazing rights soon escalated into an unequal confrontation between the regime forces and the Druze demonstrators, causing dozens of deaths among the demonstrators. Sa'do Rafi', "The Reality of the Druze in the Syrian Revolution" (in Arabic), *Jawlan*, 23 October 2011, <https://bit.ly/2R39TNI>

The case of the chief of the al-Halabi clan,¹⁴ Jamal Ezzedine Halabi, was one of the main indicators of the end of the role of this segment of the Druze community. In December 2011, an extremist armed group from Daraa kidnapped sixteen Druze on the road between Sweida and al-Thaala, among them Sheikh Jamal, the most prominent chieftain of the town of al-Thaala and the western *maqran*. Tribal fanaticism, however, did not mobilise to rescue the abductees and their case remained pending until 2015, when Wahid al-Bal'ous kidnapped several individuals from the Daraa town of al-Karak to exchange for them. It was then revealed that the jihadist al-Nusra Front had purchased the kidnapped Druze along with two Druze military officers in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and executed them.¹⁵ In the past, incidents of this sort would have met with violent responses.

However, recent years have only contributed to ending what the Baath Party began half a century ago: destroying the status of the secular Druze leaders and their role in the clans in favour of the spiritual leadership and other newly emerging figures loyal to the Baath. These Baath-made leaders quickly fell with the Syrian revolution, while the spiritual chieftain underwent a severe structural crisis among its three poles, lacking the tools needed to re-gather the Druze under its banner.

Internal Contradictions Among the Spiritual Leadership

Today, there seem to be no active social forces in Sweida apart from the senior Druze clergy (*mashyakh al-aql*, i.e. Sheikhdom of Mind), who have seen sharp divisions among their three heads.¹⁶ Inner conflict within the clergymen over who should occupy their highest rank has led to its division into the Supreme Spiritual Body of the Druze Monotheists,¹⁷ headed by Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajari in Qanawat, and Sheikhs Yousef Jarbou and Hamoud al-Hinnawi, who joined forces to establish the House of the Community in the Ain al-Zaman shrine in Sweida as the centre of gravity of the Druze community.¹⁸

Despite endorsement by the regime, the clergy have not been able to contain the explosive situation in Sweida during the past eight years and neither have they formed a unified leadership for the community, nor even a prevailing current or movement. In part, this is due to their many internal contradictions. With the death of the senior Sheikh al-Aql, Ahmad al-Hajari, in March 2012, his nephew Hikmat, heir to the first sheikhdom, began moving away from the second and third ones, adopting a position and discourse fully in line with the regime. Jarbou, by contrast, maintained room for manoeuvre, while al-Hinnawi stayed neutral. Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajari called on Sweida's military absconders to join the regime's armed forces. In April 2017, al-Hajari, along with security and party officials but without the other senior sheikhs, attended the 'Bab al-Shams' meeting to demand "the cover to be lifted off those wanted by the security services, each according to their family."¹⁹

¹⁴ As of the 17th century, the Druze moving to Sweida were from various regions. Some families still bear the names of their areas of origin, such as the Safadis from Safad, the Halabis from Aleppo and the Shoufis from Chouf.

¹⁵ Skype interview with a human rights activist working with the Sweida Network 24, Sweida, 30 May 2019.

¹⁶ In fact, the 'first' Sheikhdom of Mind does not indicate a higher rank than the second or the third, but the chronological order of its establishment. The first Sheikhdom of Mind belonged to the al-Hajaris in Qanawat, the second to the Jarbous in Sweida city and the third to the al-Hinnawis in Sahwet Blatah. At the end of the 19th century, a fourth Sheikhdom of Mind belonging to the Abu Fakhrs appeared, but it soon faded away. See Hassan al-Ba'ini, *Sheikhdom of Mind of the Monotheists* (in Arabic), (Buq'ata: Dar Maan, 2015), 167.

¹⁷ The Supreme Spiritual Body of the Druze Monotheists was just a new name given by Sheikh al-Aql Hikmat al-Hajari to the first Sheikhdom of Mind belonging to the House of Qanawat.

¹⁸ The Ain al-Zaman shrine in Sweida, an unofficial institution, is considered the House of the Druze Monotheist community. In the past few years it has witnessed the formation of several divisions and committees, including a committee for conflict resolution, a finance committee, a bureau of the House of the Community, a committee for provision of work to women, a voluntary aid distribution group, a cultural library and a free health centre. Sheikh Yusuf Jarbou has the responsibility for the Ain al-Zaman shrine. Skype interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 26 May 2019.

¹⁹ Humam al-Khatib, "Bloodshed: Self-Management, or Sweida's Return to the Pre-State?" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 28 May 2012, <https://bit.ly/2X09sFe>

However, the dispute within the tripartite sheikhdom actually dates back to 2014, after attempts by al-Hajari to monopolise the sect's decision-making and control the Ain al-Zaman shrine. This shrine has historically been under the aegis of the Jarbou clan's sheikhdom, and money from the Druze Endowment, internal and external donations and part of the relief funds provided by the United Nations bodies and international organisations are channelled through it. Al-Hajari then refused to receive donations from the Druze of Israel,²⁰ and took retreat in the House of Qanawat, where he began issuing his statements independently, initially as first Sheikh al-Aql and then in the name of the head of the Supreme Spiritual Body, refusing to recognise the title of Sheikh al-Aql, deeming it an "instrument of the French mandate." Al-Hajari failed to restore the position of fourth Sheikh al-Aql for the Abu Fakhr family, which he had hoped would assist him in facing off Jarbou and al-Hinnawi.²¹

Since 2014, there has been no unified position among the three Sheikhs al-Aql, except for the jointly-adopted religious *hurum* (excommunication)²² of Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous, the founder of the Men of Dignity Movement (*Rijal al-Karama*),²³ in early 2015 after he hardened his stance against the regime. There exists a rare photo showing the three sheikhs with Brig. Gen. Wafiq Nasser, the head of the Military Intelligence branch in the southern region and the most powerful man in southern Syria. Al-Bal'ous' excommunication was seen as a religious assent given to the security establishment in order to facilitate his disposal. Sure enough, only a few months after the excommunication, al-Bal'ous was killed by an improvised explosive device.²⁴

Men of Dignity Movement

Since 2012, the rise of the Men of Dignity Movement led by Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous has paved the way for a secular leadership, albeit within a religious framework. The movement also established the neutrality of Sweida's Druze vis-a-vis the Syrian conflict within a formula of "we attack no one, and permit no attacks against us."²⁵ The conflicting tri-polar clergy saw a threat in al-Bal'ous' movement since he managed to combine secular leadership as commander of an armed faction with religious leadership. The movement attracted a large number of Druze clerics into its ranks from when it emerged as an armed force at the end of 2013 up until Bal'ous's assassination in 2015. Seen as a desire to restore the honour squandered by the Sheikhdom of Mind and other leaders due to their subordination to the regime, the 'Karama' (Dignity) slogan adopted by al-Bal'ous' movement represented a challenge to the official religious establishment.

The movement was not completely without religious foundation, and indeed had the support of religious Druze centres of power such as the Al-Khater Sheikhdoms, which is a religious group closer to Sufi mysticism that does not recognise the Sheikhdom of Mind and does not intervene in politics. Although their impact today is weak, these sheikhs are still considered the true founders of Druze neutrality with their 'neither with nor against' formulation, which was based on the religious principle of overcoming 'zero-sum dichotomies' and had the purpose of securing self-protection for the Druze.²⁶

²⁰ The paper uses the term "Druze of Israel" except in quotations.

²¹ Zain al-Halabi, "Sweida: Beyond the Case of Sheikh al-Gharib" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 5 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2KE1W0s>.

²² Similar to Christian excommunication, Druze *hurum* mandates a boycott of the excommunicated person by the Druze religious community.

²³ Sheikh al-Bal'ous founded the Men of Dignity Movement in 2011. It upheld Druze neutrality in the Syrian war and discontinued forced recruitment of Druze youths into the regime's forces.

²⁴ Skype interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 5 June 2019.

²⁵ Mazen Ezzi, "Druze of Sweida: Embers of Confrontation" (in Arabic), *al-Jumhuriya*, 22 July 2015, <https://bit.ly/2XwKcvq>.

²⁶ Skype interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Beirut, May 21, 2019.

By the end of 2015, the killing of al-Bal'ous had fragmented the map of local forces to the point of chaos and hostility, which still dominate the scene to this day. Due to their contradictory agendas and weak economic instruments, the regime and its Iranian and Russian allies have not been able to form a *de facto* force in Sweida. For their part, the feuding heirs of al-Bal'ous' movement have also been unable to revive a comprehensive project.

Three main factors have weakened the Men of Dignity Movement. First, al-Bal'ous' successors lacked his charisma and 'fatalistic' personality, and so failed to inspire support in the same way that he did. Second, the large Druze families were put off by al-Bal'ous' initial reliance on smaller or less significant families in the villages and towns to form the movement's legions. This became clearer after his assassination when the movement was unable to attract influential families and indeed was barely able to stem the loss of its existing supporters. Third, and most importantly, the movement was divided immediately after al-Bal'ous' assassination into two conflicting age groups, with the younger members later leaving to form the Single Artery (*al-Shiryān al-Wahed*) factions.²⁷

In May 2017, Sheikhs al-Aql Jarbou and al-Hinnawi held a reconciliation with Sheikh Raafat al-Bal'ous, leader of the Men of Dignity Movement at that time. The dispute between the House of the Community and the Military Intelligence escalated and continued until the beginning of 2018, when Brig. Gen. Nasser was moved to Hama²⁸ after personal appeals by Sheikhs Jarbou and al-Hinnawi and the 'Emir (Prince) of the Druze Mountain,' Jihad al-Atrash,²⁹ to senior officials in Damascus to convince them to transfer Nasser from the governorate "in order to mollify popular anger over his practices."³⁰

Sheikh Yahya al-Hajjar, who led the Men of Dignity Movement after an interim transitional period headed by Raafat al-Bal'ous, was accused by the youth of the movement of handing over one of the activists to a local militia, which in turn passed him on to the Military Intelligence. The activist later appeared on state TV, where he 'confessed' to having killed al-Bal'ous. Although this 'confession' was widely disbelieved, it nonetheless led to more withdrawals from the movement and the formation of other groups, notably the Cleric of Dignity Forces (*Quwwat Sheikh al-Karama*) led by the son of the founder, Laith al-Bal'ous. However, Sheikh Yahya al-Hajjar took a calmer approach than the late al-Bal'ous, preferring not to confront the regime and to protect the movement, which was severely eroding. While retaining most of the movement's clergy and with a relatively high average age of its fighters (around 35 years), he secured a core bloc on which to rebuild and establish new alliances, especially with Russia.³¹

²⁷ Skype interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 26 May 2019.

²⁸ Brig. Gen. Nasser acted the *de facto* ruler of Sweida from 2011 until his transfer in 2018. He was accused of assassinating al-Bal'ous, fomenting strife between Sweida and Daraa governorates and between the Druze and the Bedouins. He was accused of repeatedly bombing Sweida with mortar shells following every round of fighting between the regime and the opposition forces in Daraa, thereby pitting the Druze against the population of Daraa. Nasser was also accused of forming and financing security gangs in Sweida, as well as acquiring ill-gotten wealth, leveraging both the war economy and the smuggling lines between Daraa and the IS-controlled eastern desert of Sweida. Enab Baladi, "Wafiq Nasser Has Subjugated Sweida" (in Arabic), 23 January 2018, <https://bit.ly/2LtZc6V>

²⁹ An emir without an actual emirate; just an inherited title.

³⁰ Zain al-Halabi, "How Did al-Hajari Dominate the Spiritual Leadership of the Druze?" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 10 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/2xckc8V>

³¹ Skype interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 26 May 2019.

1.2. Militias and Gangs

The neutrality of the Druze has helped stop the compulsory and reserve conscription of Sweida's people into the regime's forces, so that the number of young men wanted for military service is now around 50,000.³² Since mid-2018, the regime and its Russian and Iranian allies have stepped up pressure on Sweida to put an end to this issue, amid competing offers by the Fifth Corps and the Fourth Division, which would be a major boost to the regime's dilapidated forces. This project, however, was put on hold after the massacres committed by IS in July 2018 in the villages of eastern Sweida.

Many of those wanted for military service have joined a broad range of militias and gangs in exchange for salaries and protection. Today, the scene in Sweida is dominated by armed family groups, militias and gangs,³³ the most significant common feature of which is that they do not represent the economic and political interests of any social class. Most of these groups are funded externally or domestically from the local war economy. However, these funds do not suffice for anything more than keeping the armed groups operational. They leave no sustainable impact on local production. As such, the groups appear isolated from the interests of the people and pose a real danger of transforming into executive instruments of regional powers in their local conflicts.

Table 1. Militias and Armed Family Factions in Control of Sweida Governorate in 2019

Group	Affiliation	Notes
National Defence Forces (NDF)	Pro-regime, on good terms with Lebanese Hezbollah.	The largest armed group in Sweida, overcome by chaos and full of absconded soldiers.
Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP)	Pro-regime, on good terms with Hezbollah.	Highly disciplined and organised, with partisan hierarchical leadership.
Baath Brigades	Pro-regime.	Chaotic, disintegrated, poor leadership.
Al-Bustan Association	Pro-regime, on good terms with Hezbollah and the SSNP.	Funded by businessman Rami Makhoul, President Bashar al-Assad's cousin.
Protectors of the Homeland (or <i>Humat al-Diyar</i>)	Pro-regime.	Local armed group operating in Sweida city.
Men of Dignity Movement (or <i>Rijal al-Karama</i>)	Local armed faction that believes in positive neutrality, considering itself to be neither opposition nor pro-regime.	The most organised and well-armed local factions, comprising 26 groups or legions.
Single Artery (or <i>al-Shiryah al-Wahed</i>)	Some subgroups are expressly anti-regime.	Loose alliance of armed groups, mostly Men of Dignity Movement defectors, suffering from poor coordination and chaos.
Al-Fahd Forces	Close to Russia.	Small armed group in the town of Qanawat, formerly affiliated with Single Artery.
Cleric of Dignity Forces (or <i>Quwwat Sheikh al-Karama</i>)	Anti-regime.	The main component of Single Artery.

Source: The researcher, based on interviews.

³² Skype interview with a human rights activist working with the Sweida Network 24, Sweida, 30 May 2019.

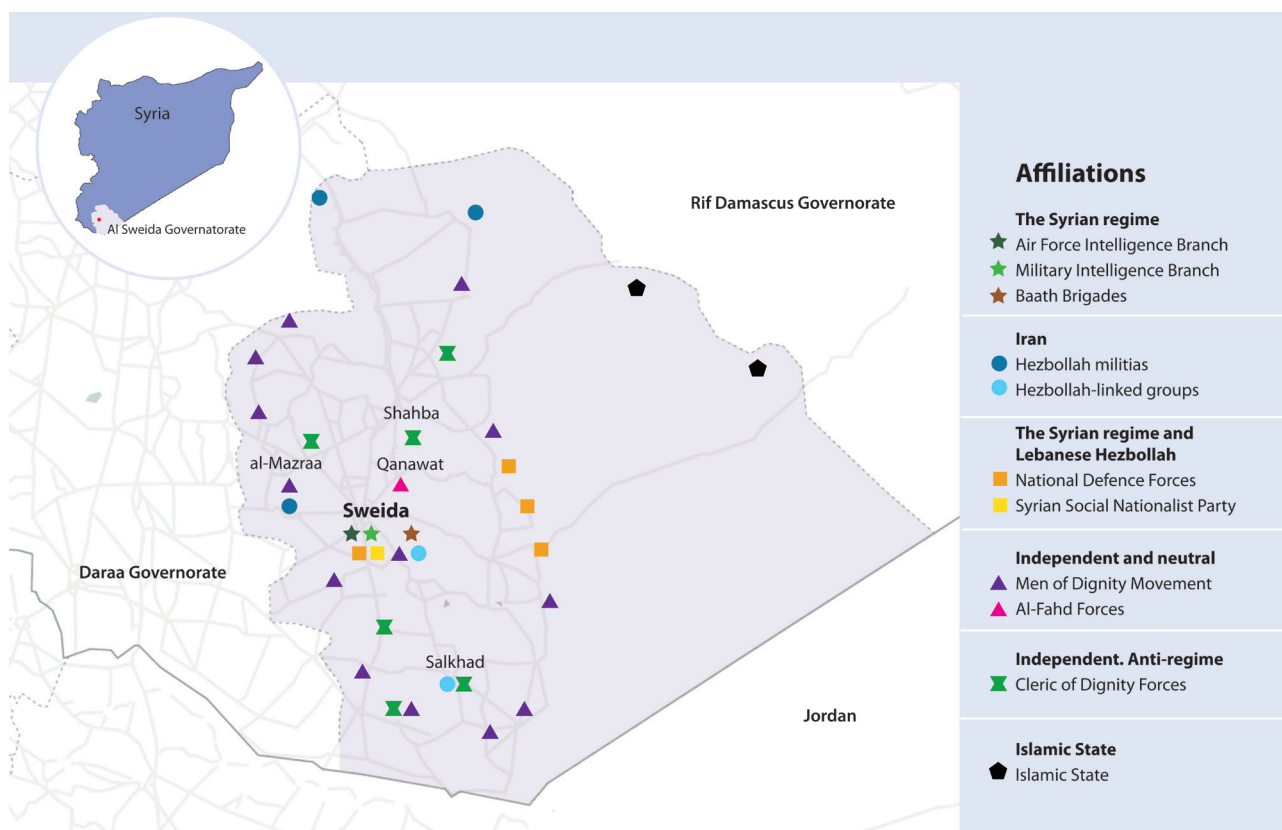
³³ A family-based armed group mainly protects the family members and often has a few men armed with light weapons. A militia or faction is larger and includes members from different families, and it may have an ideology, financiers and heavy weaponry. A gang consists of a group of individuals engaged in illegal acts, often with light individual weapons.

In addition to these militias and armed family groups, there are security groups contracted to branches of the security services and to regular forces of the Fifteenth Division and Fourth Division. Some other security groups are linked to the Security Bureau of the Fourth Division. In addition, local cells are affiliated with Hezbollah and one group is affiliated with the Lebanese Unification Party (or *Hizb al-Tawhid*).³⁴ Recently, security groups linked to Russian forces have also begun to appear.³⁵

Many armed family groups are linked to the security services, especially the Military Intelligence, which had previously provided them with weapons and missions since 2011. Some of these groups emerged to secure their self-protection and protect business interests. Among the armed groups in Sweida city is Protectors of the Homeland (*Humat al-Diyar*), founded by the son of a former Sheikh al-Aql in 2012.

Three branches of the security services are located in Sweida city: the Military Intelligence branch which is the *de facto* ruler, the Air Force Intelligence and the Political Security. With the decline in civilian contractors with the Air Force Intelligence, security groups associated with the Military Intelligence appear to be the most widely deployed and present on the ground.³⁶ Each security branch has established security groups of civilian contractors, equipping them with weapons, support and authority, and relies on people from the “social rock bottom, who have not been known to have stable occupations or reputable social statuses.”³⁷

Map 1. Deployment of Security Branches, Militias and Armed Family Factions in Sweida Governorate



Source: The Author. Graphic designer: Laura Pigneri. July 2019.

³⁴ This is a party branch associated with the former Lebanese minister Wiam Wahhab, who enjoys good relations with Iran.

³⁵ Skype interview with a journalist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 22 May 2019.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

Among the various militias, the National Defence Forces (NDF) is the largest armed group in the governorate. It has checkpoints and military points in the eastern countryside of Sweida. It contributed to the battles against IS at the end of 2018 in Tuloul al-Safa after other NDF groups joined from Salamiya, Qalamoun and Homs under the leadership of Hezbollah.³⁸

The Men of Dignity Movement is considered one of the most powerful, organised and well-armed communal factions.³⁹ It includes 26 legions, comprising armed groups deployed across Sweida, the largest of which is the Pyramid Legion (*al-Haram*) headed by Sheikh Yahya al-Hajjar and headquartered in the village of Shannireh.

In December 2018, the Single Artery factions (also called the Dignity Artery or *Shiryān al-Karama*) were formed. This is a fragile alliance of deserters and defectors from the Men of Dignity Movement, the largest faction of which are the Cleric of Dignity Forces established in March 2018 under the leadership of Laith Wahid al-Bal'ous. The Single Artery groups are small legions deployed in most areas of Sweida, with influence concentrated in the city of Salkhad and the towns of al-Mazraa, Atil and Qanawat.⁴⁰

Small gangs which conduct kidnapping, extortion and smuggling activities are also widespread and overlap with almost all the deployed military forces, creating a grey area to which everyone resorts to carry out dirty work. Most of these gang members have already moved between the different factions and have security ties. They play a central role in perpetuating the present disorder and occasionally provide a strike force on demand.

The main absentee from this scene is the 'state' in the institutional sense. While the security services are present, running things behind the scenes, state institutions in general suffer from deterioration and an interruption of services, leading to resorting to alternative institutions in some sectors, such as the judiciary.

1.3. The Alternative Judiciary

Self-administration, independence or even decentralisation do not appear to be widely considered in Sweida. Unlike the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration in north-eastern Syria, the *de facto* forces of the Druze have not sought to establish alternatives to Syrian state institutions, despite their poor performance and frequent interruptions of their services.

Given the weak presence of state institutions, civil society organisations have taken on a strong role, especially in the northern city of Shahba. The Committees for Citizenship and Civil Peace have managed to become a *de facto* force after including representatives from all sectors of the community, and they meet the necessary needs for assistance and communal mediation. By contrast, the Community Commission for National Action in Sweida city still struggles outside the original circle of its founding traditional dissidents.⁴¹

Apart from some relief organisations and social solidarity projects, it appears that only tribal justice has re-emerged over the past years, despite the overall decline in the importance of tribes. The tribal judiciary has been a feature of Druze life ever since the Mountain was first settled, but it was mostly concerned with reconciliations in murder cases. The current growing role of the tribal judiciary is due to the large numbers of people wanted by the security services or for military conscription who

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Skype interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Salkhad (Syria), 14 May 2019.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Messenger interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Beirut (Lebanon), 12 June 2019.

cannot enter the official courts for fear of arrest, and also to a decline in trust in the integrity of the Syrian judiciary.⁴²

Unlike the doctrinal court, whose laws and bodies are provided for on the basis of Druze religious law and which is affiliated with the official judiciary, the tribal judiciary has no fixed body, legal authority or clear texts, merely relying on customs and traditions.⁴³

The Dispute Resolution Committee belonging to the House of the Community works to resolve personal and family disputes, particularly quarrels and thefts, gathering opponents within the so-called *qa' det haqq* (rightness assembly).⁴⁴ The committee, established by a decision by Sheikh al-Aql Jarbou, “solved approximately 225 cases under the supervision of its secretariat by mutual consent among the conflicting parties, with the fulfilment of all rights, whether physical or moral”⁴⁵ between June 2018 and May 2019. The committee often focuses on Sweida city and its environs.

Outside the city, Solution Committees (or Tribal Judiciary Committees) are formed by consensus among the disputing parties. They include elders, sheikhs and leaders of local factions as an executive body and are dissolved after they have served their purpose. In March 2019, a dispute over grazing between the people of the village of al-Mashqouq and the city of Salkhad developed into an armed clash. The al-Mashqouq people asked the leader of the Men of Dignity Movement to intervene to resolve the issue. “The solution was found quickly, while it would have taken years within the regime institutions. Now any dispute is resolved within this tribal judicial structure.”⁴⁶

In May 2017, elders and tribal leaders signed a tribal document entitled *Tarsh al-Dam* (Bloodshed) which aimed at holding accountable those involved in kidnappings, killings and assaults on honour and properties in Sweida. From this document emerged a tribal commission mandated with issuing sentences, especially death sentences. In order to prevent reprisals by relatives of those sentenced to death, the commissioners sought to collect the signatures of all the families in the mountain.⁴⁷ The document, however, did not find its way into implementation. In addition to a lack of consensus on the part of families, the decline in the role of tribes in the life of the Druze left the initiative empty. The sudden revival of the House of the village of Era along with the introduction of the Bloodshed document soon receded in conjunction with the end of the battles for Daraa, as the regime only invested in the Era House’s tribal role in an opportune political moment⁴⁸ “after undermining the tribal principle and eliminating the moral trend within it.”⁴⁹

⁴² WhatsApp interview with a human rights activist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 27 May 2019.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The House of the Druze Muslim Community in Syria. “His Eminence Sheikh al-Aql of the Druze Muslim Monotheists met Yusuf Jarbou as part of the periodic steering meetings within the House of the Community’s committee for resolving social disputes,” Facebook, 29 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/2LkCI7k>

⁴⁶ Skype interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 30 May 2019.

⁴⁷ The revival of the Bloodshed document took place at a meeting held in the ‘Emirate House’ in the town of Era and in the presence of Sheikhs al-Aql al-Hinnawi and Jarbou. Emir Jihad al-Atrash said that after the authorisation by the Sheikhs al-Aql and the dignitaries of the Mountain “urgent people’s trials will be held for those charged before an audience, and the death penalty will befall them in the ‘Emirate House’ in the town of Era.”

⁴⁸ Given the historically good relationship between Era and the eastern villages of Daraa, the House of Era was revived in conjunction with the battle of Daraa in 2018. The regime expected that the House would help arrange reconciliations with dignitaries from Daraa, but this did not happen.

⁴⁹ What is referred to here are the moral characteristics held dear by the Druze as a clan, such as aiding the grieved, generosity, fairness, protection of the vulnerable and the realisation of rights. Botim interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Dubai (UAE), 2 June 2019.

On the contrary, numerous instances of violent retaliation have emerged outside the framework of the Bloodshed document, sparking no reaction even from the official judiciary. One security group leader in Sweida city killed three people and threw their bodies onto the al-Mashnaqa roundabout after accusing them of kidnapping his daughter. Those accused of killing the leader of the Cleric of Dignity Forces, Wissam Eid, were summarily executed without recourse to the tribal judiciary and their bodies were thrown into the street.

2. Exposure to the Outside

The Druze of Sweida have never before been as exposed to the outside world as they are today. For the first time in Sweida history, regional actors appear to be the deciding and driving force of civil strife at home. The collapse of the tribal hierarchy over the recent decades has made Sweida incapable of producing local power centres based solely on social order. At the same time, religious communalism has not been able to form an internal equilibrium but instead has also been subject to externally-driven polarisation and regional interventions from Iran, Israel and Lebanon.

The Russian, Iranian and Israeli approaches in Sweida are also evidently based on the view that the area is geopolitically contained within a wider territory that includes Daraa and Quneitra, previously called a ‘de-escalation zone.’ The Russian-American agreement of July 2017 and the Tripartite Jordanian-Russian-American Commission in October 2017 both considered the Syrian south an area of mixed Russian-Iranian influence, where Israel enjoys deterrence to ‘protect its vital security interests.’ With Russia re-taking Daraa and Quneitra in mid-2018 by military force and with so-called ‘reconciliations,’ its guarantees of alienating Iran from the region are yet to pay off. As a result, all parties seek to support and fund their local allies in the area.

2.1. Iran’s Allies: Security and Drugs

Iran funds dozens of armed groups, security cells and militias in Sweida, in addition to having established a centre for studies and its support for religious bodies. Moreover, it courts the Druze both doctrinally, given that they are close in the tree of intra-Islamic divisions, and tribally, while fuelling tensions among them. Hezbollah, on the other hand, seems to have a relatively distinct agenda from Iran in terms of Sweida, as it considers it to be a drug smuggling route to Jordan and the Gulf.⁵⁰

To support its confessional courting of the Druze, Iran founded the Centre for Monotheistic Studies in March 2014. This is based in Damascus with an office in Sweida city and headed by an adviser to the State Security Court and the secretary of a Baath Party division. The centre works in the social field, strengthening the Druze’s sectarian solidarity and promoting the notion that their only option is to align with Iran, which “has embraced them and their creed.”⁵¹ Apart from the distribution of aid and the holding of conferences, the centre is not known for any research activity. Iran has also tried to penetrate the Druze as a tribe through the Arab Tribal Council,⁵² which reinstated an ‘Emir of Jabal al-Arab’ from the Abu Assaf family without any popular weight or historical clout.⁵³

⁵⁰ WhatsApp interview with a journalist who asked to remain anonymous, Toronto (Canada), 19 May 2019. Messenger interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Beirut (Lebanon), 12 June 2019. Skype interview with a journalist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 3 June 2019.

⁵¹ Majd al-Khatib, “‘Centre for Monotheistic Studies’ an Iranian Interface for the Druze” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 21 January 2017, <https://bit.ly/2X9Bbbd>

⁵² Founded by the Iraqi Abbas Al-Sa’di, 2012, in Damascus.

⁵³ Majd al-Khatib, “Hidden Iranian Organisations in Syria” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 1 April 2017, <https://bit.ly/2QtO35v>

In 2013, Iran tried to establish a Druze militia through which it could spread Shiism in Sweida. It attracted dozens of Druze fighters and worked to establish doctrinal and military courses for them in Iran. The militia, which was part of the Syrian Hezbollah and was at an early stage given the name ‘*Labbayka Ya Sulaiman*’ (We Answer Your Call, O Sulaiman), quickly broke up in 2015 despite the high financial incentives. It seems that ‘Druze aversion to Shiism’ was the reason for the dissolution of the militia and that “a number of its members took over arms and sold them, and today they are wanted by Hezbollah.”⁵⁴ One of the Druze fighters trained in Iran broke away from the Iranian ranks, established the Freeman of al-Qurayya Legion and is now the spokesman for Single Artery, the most prominent anti-Iran force in Sweida.⁵⁵

Iran’s most significant presence is manifested in supporting militias and security groups through Hezbollah. “Iran does not have a visible presence through *hussainiyas* (religious congregation halls) or Shia converts, but there are cells affiliated with it in a sort of mercenary connection.”⁵⁶ That said, groups affiliated with Hezbollah have grown in size, and at least sixty percent of the militia armed forces in Sweida are run directly by it so that it has become the strongest force in the south of Syria, including in Sweida. In addition, Hezbollah has a close relationship with Military Intelligence, giving it additional leverage over its security groups.⁵⁷ Hezbollah also controls a large group of pro-regime militias, such as the NDF, which it supports financially and logistically.⁵⁸ In addition to its military points in the eastern desert of Sweida, Hezbollah now has military points at al-Thaala and Khalkhalah airports, and in al-Saqiya and Shanwan villages north-east of Sweida. It also dominates the largest group of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP).

Furthermore, Sweida had witnessed a boom in the arms market after the reconciliation agreement in Daraa in mid-2018 and the subsequent sale of factions’ arms to Sweida merchants.⁵⁹ Hezbollah monopolised the heavy weapons market by mass buying at high prices through smugglers and traders from the Bedouins of Lajat in rural Daraa, later moving these arms to the party’s militias in Lajat, eastern rural Daraa and Quneitra.

Hezbollah also controls the drug trafficking routes along the Jordanian border with Sweida, which are “essential for its own funding,” relying on “more than 300 Druze and Bedouin groups in southern rural Sweida, whose mission is to transport drugs and secure roads.”⁶⁰

Hezbollah is investing in the current conflict between the security cells of the regime and the Single Artery groups to get rid of the obstacle that the latter represent on the drug smuggling route towards Jordan. The Cleric of Dignity Forces, the most prominent component of Single Artery, executed Ahmed Ali Jaafar, a.k.a. ‘Abu Yasin,’ one of Hezbollah’s strongest figures in Sweida, after accusing him of managing the largest drug network in Sweida. Abu Yasin, a Shiite from Busra al-Sham, was displaced to Sweida in 2013 to settle in the town of al-Qurayya.

Currently, Iran is supporting a group of Druze men over the age of 40 who enjoy elevated social status, some of them leading armed groups, with a view to establishing sleeper cells that are yet to be active. One of the most notable Iran-backed groups in Sweida is the National Religious Commission,

⁵⁴ Skype interview with a researcher who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 15 May 2019.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ WhatsApp interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Toronto (Canada), 19 May 2019.

⁵⁸ Zain al-Halabi, “Sweida: Will Daesh’s Forthcoming Attack be Sponsored by Hezbollah?” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 25 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2TYfZn6>

⁵⁹ Zain al-Halabi, “Sweida: Hezbollah is Stationed at al-Thaala Airport” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 13 February 2019, <https://bit.ly/2NbFQVF>

⁶⁰ WhatsApp interview with a journalist who asked to remain anonymous, Toronto (Canada), 19 May 2019.

which also receives funding from Israel's Druze. The group was originally formed as a religious body following a visit by a former leader of the Republican Guard to a Druze cleric in 2017, but it now includes several armed groups, one of which is affiliated with the Security Bureau of the Fourth Division.⁶¹

While Iran has directly founded and funded security groups and militias, the regime's Russian ally has instead relied on existing militias, trying to attract them to its most prominent military formation, the Fifth Corps. Russia is not known to have funded any faction outside this framework anywhere in the Syrian arena.

2.2. Russia's Allies: Joining the Fifth Corps?

The first gesture by Russia, in early 2016, was to take an interest in internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Sweida, to whom it distributed aid through the Russian coordination centre in the southern region, which is linked to the Russian Reconciliation Centre at the Hmeimim military base. In September 2016 in Sweida, a 'settlement' was reached under the direction of Hmeimim to control the loyalist militiamen rebelling against the regime, especially civil contractors with branches of the security services. The 'settlement' also encompassed "criminals and peaceful civilian dissidents." In April 2017, the Russians held their first public meeting in Sweida on the Druze absconders from military service, a topic that would become the focus of Russian interventions in Sweida. The Russians' attempts have persisted, especially after the announcement of new military formations in the governorate, with offers of financial 'privileges,' health insurance and years of service being counted for those avoiding military conscription. None of these offers have materialised in reality.⁶²

Russian insistence on prioritising the issue of forced conscription quickly triggered clashes with some local forces. In June 2018, the Cleric of Dignity Forces issued a statement accusing Russia of being an 'occupying force' after a Russian delegation stated during a meeting with elders and Sheikhs al-Aql that the areas controlled by the Cleric of Dignity Forces were under the control of a 'terrorist organisation.' The Cleric of Dignity Forces had rejected the deployment of the pro-Russian Tiger Forces in the town of al-Mazraa during the last Daraa battles.⁶³ Russia soon reopened the 'settlement' door for those who failed to serve in the Fifth Corps, provided that they served in the broader southern region and not only in Sweida. An electronics merchant who was a Military Intelligence contractor was appointed as coordinator between the Druze and the Russians.⁶⁴

The escalating Russian rhetoric against the absconded Druze subsided after an IS attack on 25 July 2018 which killed hundreds. Russia had a major role in negotiating the transfer of hundreds of IS fighters from the Yarmouk camp in Damascus to the eastern desert of Sweida in order to fully control southern Damascus. Since then, Russia's treatment of the Druze in Sweida has changed, although the issue of the absconded recruits remains a fundamental one for the Russians. The latter have begun to show greater understanding of the local community and are beginning to play the role of mediators between the regime and Iran on the one hand and the local community on the other, with frequent visits by Russian military officials to the elders and Sheikhs al-Aql. After the regime's operation against IS east of Sweida failed, Russia brought groups of 'settled' rebel factions in Daraa into the

⁶¹ Skype interview with a journalist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 3 June 2019.

⁶² Humam Khatib, "Russia in Sweida: The Struggle for Influence with Iran" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 26 June 2017, <https://bit.ly/2xonc2h>

⁶³ Al-Modon, "Sweida: 'Clerics of Dignity' Consider Russia Occupying Force ... After it Listed Them as 'Terrorist Organisation'" (in Arabic), 24 June 2018, <https://bit.ly/2lvqJXT>

⁶⁴ Skype interview with a journalist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 3 June 2019.

Fifth Corps and paved the way for them with firepower.⁶⁵ It also mediated with the Sheikdom of Mind to pressurise the Men of Dignity Movement to release sixty detainees from the Bedouin tribes of the eastern Sweida countryside, and to allow tribes to relocate to Daraa in exchange for speeding up the resolution of the issue of the Druze women kidnapped by IS.⁶⁶

In October 2018, Russia offered the al-Fahd Forces – a group that defected from the Men of Dignity Movement in late 2017 and operated in Qanawat – the chance to join the Fifth Corps in a bid to win over some of the anti-regime forces in Sweida and get to know their leaders and coordinate with them. The Russians pointed out that the al-Fahd Forces and Cleric of Dignity Forces were classified as ‘terrorists’ by the regime, but the picture changed after the meeting with Russia, which offered to “settle their status and that of any local faction that wishes to do so.”⁶⁷ After consultations with the Cleric of Dignity Forces, the al-Fahd Forces turned down the Russian offer to fight outside Sweida and hand over their medium-sized and heavy weapons, but still maintain good relations with Russia. The al-Fahd Forces have more than once requested the Russians to release Druze persons detained by the regime, to which they have responded positively. The same applies to the relationship between the Men of Dignity Movement and the Russians.⁶⁸

2.3. Relations with the Druze of Israel and Lebanon

External funding and sometimes political tutelage from the Israeli and Lebanese Druze have contributed to sustaining the internal schism in Sweida due to their support for discordant groups. Since 2011, the division and rivalry between the Israeli and Lebanese Druze communities appears to have shifted to Sweida, with financiers and those with political agendas transferring their disputes to Sweida.

In fact, the conflict between the Druze in Lebanon and Israel has been reflected in various events and has turned into an open clash where it becomes difficult to know allies from enemies. Sheikh al-Bal‘ous more than once distributed weapons to his supporters saying they were purchased with “donations from Palestine’s Druze.” Al-Bal‘ous preferred to cooperate with Israel’s Druze and receive funding from them, as this was politically unconditional, unlike the funding coming from the Druze of Lebanon. Moreover, the relationship between al-Bal‘ous and the Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt was deeply strained, despite them being in broad agreement at the political level.⁶⁹

In March 2019, the regime restricted the exchange of visits by Druze sheikhs between Lebanon and Syria to the Lebanese Druze Sheikh Nasreddine al-Gharib, who is allied with the pro-regime Lebanese Emir Talal Arslan. This restriction was in part due to the alliance of the Sheikh al-Aql Jarbou with Arslan, first to confront Sheikh al-Hajari and second to exclude from the circle of influence the Lebanese Druze leader Jumblatt,⁷⁰ who is strongly opposed to the Syrian regime. Despite the considerable political differences between Jumblatt and al-Hajari, the latter continued to ally with the Lebanese Sheikh al-Aql Naim Hassan, an ally of Jumblatt. It seems that the financial donations made

⁶⁵ Abdullah al-Jabassini, “From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria,” Research Project Report (Florence, Italy: European University Institute, 14 May 2019, <http://bit.ly/2J9hx5z>

⁶⁶ Yamen Al-Shoufi, “Men of Dignity Release the Bedouin Abductees” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 1 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Fx8Hgl>

⁶⁷ Al-Modon, “Russia Seeks to Include Al-Fahd Forces in the Fifth Corps” (in Arabic), 12 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/31U1C3B>

⁶⁸ Skype interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 30 May 2019.

⁶⁹ Ezzi, “Druze of Sweida: Embers of Confrontation,” *ibid*.

⁷⁰ Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution the Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt has urged the Druze of Sweida to disengage from the regime’s fight against the opposition and to not get involved in shedding Syrian blood. Jumblatt has been the loudest Druze voice against the Syrian regime and its ‘minority alliance’ propaganda.

by Sheikh Hassan to Sheikh al-Hajari for distribution to the victims of the IS massacre in the eastern villages of Sweida triggered the crisis with Jarbou, as they were not channelled through the Druze endowment supervised by the House of the Community.⁷¹

On the other hand, the tense relationship between the regime and the Sheikh al-Aql of Israel's Druze, Muwaffaq Tarif,⁷² has prompted a rise by the pro-regime head of the Druze Liaison Committee in Israel, Ali Mu'di, since 2014. While the Druze Liaison Committee collects donations from Israel's Druze, it uses them to fund conflicting local communities in Sweida, such as the National Religious Commission, which is close to the Fourth Division's Security Bureau militia. The Commission has sought to support the nomination of Ali Mu'di as a Sheikh al-Aql of Israel's Druze. During his visit to Sweida accompanied by an Israeli Druze delegation formed by the Druze Liaison Committee in September 2018, the Lebanese sheikh Nasreddine al-Gharib unilaterally declared that "the Sheikhdome of Mind of the Druze of Palestine belonged to Ali Mu'di, not Muwaffaq Tarif."⁷³ The Israeli authorities in turn prevented Mu'di from accompanying the delegation to Syria.

After the bloody offensive by IS, the two Druze factions in Lebanon and Israel competed over raising funds for Sweida and communicating with the Russians to launch negotiations for the release of the kidnapped Druze women. In September 2018, Muwaffaq Tarif visited Russia and met President Putin's special envoy for Middle East affairs, demanding that Russia protect Syria's Druze and release those kidnapped by IS. Meanwhile, Lebanese Minister Wael Abu Faour, who is close to Walid Jumblatt, in November 2018 prior to the release of the kidnapped women stated in Moscow that the regime had nothing to do with their release and that MP Taymor Jumblatt (Walid's son) and his Progressive Socialist Party were in daily contact with the Russian leadership to secure the release.⁷⁴

To understand the entanglement and complexity of the various local and regional Druze parties, the case of Laith Murad, a Jordanian Druze detainee with the Syrian regime, serves as a good example. In May 2019, the Men of Dignity Movement succeeded in pressing the regime to release him five months after his arrest on charges of "spying for the Zionist Entity." National Security had refused to extradite Murad to an 'outlaw' group, referring to the Men of Dignity Movement, while the Military Intelligence Directorate insisted on handing him over to the movement "in order to maintain stability in Sweida." After the decision to release him, the Lebanese Democratic Party intervened with Syrian National Security to show the release was an achievement of Lebanon's Talal Arslan, in Sweida widely considered to be aligned with Iran. This aroused the resentment of the Men of Dignity Movement and pushed it to give the regime an ultimatum of 48 hours and to threaten to escalate and besiege the security branches in Sweida, prompting Murad's release and handover to the movement. The latter then issued a statement in which it described Arslan's actions as "provoking a rift among the Druze in all of the Levant," citing "the appointment of Arslan as a second Sheikh al-Aql of the sect in both Lebanon and Palestine."⁷⁵

In conclusion, as the opposing Druze forces in Lebanon and Israel see their support for local groups in Sweida as an opportunity to extend their influence and utilise it in local conflicts, the Druze forces in Sweida also use this external support in the context of their own internal conflicts. At a time when a semblance of transnational Druze alliances is beginning to emerge, rivalries have also begun to take on a regional dimension.

⁷¹ Al-Halabi, "Sweida: Beyond the Case of Sheikh Al-Gharib," *ibid*.

⁷² Sheikh Mowaffaq Tarif lit the official torch at Israel's 70th anniversary.

⁷³ Skype interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 30 May 2019.

⁷⁴ Al-Modon, "Sweida: The Return of Those Kidnapped by Daesh. Under Russia's Auspices and with Lebanese Mediation" (in Arabic), 8 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2X9w62L>.

⁷⁵ Zain al-Halabi, "Sweida: Why did Talal Arslan Halt the Release of a Jordanian-Druze Detainee?" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 25 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/2J6aOce>.

Not far removed from this Druze-Druze conflict, Iran's clear role in funding and militarily supporting Druze armed groups and militias in Sweida for the purpose of security control is offset by a more conservative Russian role. The Russians are pushing for restoration of the regime, even if only formally, for the inclusion of some local factions within the Fifth Corps and for the enrolment of the absconded conscripts in the regime's armed forces. For its part, the regime seems incapable of imposing a clear vision or plan for what will happen in Sweida. It appears to be divided between the Russian and Iranian sides and governed by their contradictions. The regime is also involved in the process of drawing on regional Druze alliances and rivalries imposed by *de facto* forces on the ground, supporting certain actors at sometimes and antagonising others at other times.

3. The Struggle for Sweida

Since the IS terrorist attack of July 2018 and the reversal of the popular neutral mood into resentment and anger at the regime, holding it responsible for the massacre, events in Sweida have taken a different turn. Local factions have armed themselves more and the proportion of non-partisan civilian arms has increased due to fears of new attacks amid the conviction that no one can defend the Druze except themselves. Refusing to join the ranks of regime forces outside Sweida is once again a popular demand.

With the future seemingly obscure today, the current situation suggests matters can develop in one of two directions: an intensification of disorder to a point where the return of direct security and military control by the regime becomes acceptable to the public; or an evolution of the conflict between some of the Single Artery groups and their pro-Iran rivals to an advanced stage, at which point the remaining local parties become obliged to take a clear position in favour of one side or the other.

3.1. How the Regime is Returning: By Letting Things Deteriorate

Should the regime decide to use direct military force, it would not take it long to impose total authority over Sweida. It does not appear to be in a hurry to use violence, however, as it would end up losing the 'protecting minorities' card it often claims. Instead, it prefers to spread chaos in the governorate and manage it from behind the scenes through its Iran-allied security networks and groups.

Tension among the various armed groups in Sweida has been rising since May 2019, with the Russians preoccupied with the battle of Idlib and withdrawing most of their militias from the south of Syria. An open confrontation between the fragile Single Artery alliance, which has suffered various schisms, and the loose coalition of security groups seems to be the crux of the present phase in Sweida, while the Men of Dignity Movement opts for neutrality. Meanwhile, the organised crime gangs operating in the grey zone between Single Artery and the security groups are leveraging the current chaos to profit from the war economy and feed into both sides.

For the foreseeable future, the local community lacks the ability to control by itself the chaos, which is manifested mainly in kidnappings for ransom, a random proliferation of arms, the securing of drug trafficking routes and the domestic trade in drugs. The unprecedented economic stagnation of the recent years along with the lack of income sources and the deterioration of all productive sectors have made kidnapping for ransom a recurring practice and one of the most lucrative businesses. As the number of kidnappers, including security groups and some local factions, has increased significantly, the stereotype of the armed militant has become "a gang member looking for nothing except personal glory; a mercenary who sells himself to whoever pays."⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Skype interview with a friend who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 12 June 2019.

Meanwhile, the regime is keen to use the state of insecurity to regain control of the governorate by taking advantage of local discontent and the clergy's demands for 'state' intervention. At the same time, insecurity, the proliferation of arms and the wide use of counter-kidnapping create a deterrence that is utilised by local factions to prevent the regime from achieving its goals. It seems that the pro-Russia camp within the Syrian regime supports this fragile non-peace situation to avoid tension and clashes while intending to resolve the crisis of the absconders and contain local factions. By contrast, the regime's pro-Iran camp pushes for a military subjugation of Sweida so as to secure a base to protect the drug trafficking route and the rear lines in the event of a military confrontation with Israel. In both cases, the regime seems unable to regain full authority as a result of the objective circumstances, not the least of which is its inability to solve the local population's livelihood crises.

In September 2018, kidnappings took a serious turn when a gang cut off a Bedouin's head and threw it into the courtyard of the al-Maqwas Mosque after his family was unable to pay a ransom for him. The gang was exploiting Druze anger against IS after it turned out that the perpetrators of the 25 July attack were mostly Bedouins. The leader of the gang was an Air Force Intelligence contractor who was expelled from the Cleric of Dignity Forces for "abandoning the group's principles."⁷⁷ It is believed the Air Force Intelligence Directorate's cancellation of several contracts with civilian volunteers created a funding crisis for some gangs, prompting them to multiply their own operations. The gang in question, which numbers no more than fifteen gunmen and whose members belong to the 'social rock bottom,' had attacked the Bedouin-inhabited al-Maqwas neighbourhood in Sweida with the aim of stirring up sectarian strife with the Druze.⁷⁸ In February 2019, another gang, whose leader was also a former contractor with the Air Force Intelligence Directorate, attacked regime checkpoints in Sweida and kidnapped their personnel to use them in a swap for one of its members detained by the regime.⁷⁹

The regime began exploiting these incidents to enhance its military and security presence. Its strategy is based on "pacification, spreading chaos and shirking responsibility, implicitly calling on the Druze to solve their own problems, all to strengthen civil strife and discredit the local factions."⁸⁰

Instructions have been given to the regime's new security and military reinforcements to respond to all "aggression" so as to "restore the prestige of the state." The Single Artery factions consider the regime's actions an escalation and have sent warnings to officials to "abide by their boundaries and not carry out any arrests or raids against members of factions, young men wanted for military service or political dissidents."⁸¹ For its part, the Men of Dignity Movement is committed to neutrality, as the clergy gave "tacit consent" to the deployment of the regime's forces "provided that citizens be dealt with leniently and that those wanted for military service are not prosecuted at the present time."⁸²

In February 2019, the regime leaked a list of "most dangerous criminals" among the organised crime gangs, distributing it to checkpoints and branches of the security services with the declared aim of "arresting them as soon as possible, by force if necessary."⁸³ Although the people named on this list

⁷⁷ Yamen al-Shoufi, "Regime Militias Execute Another Bedouin: Pursuit of Druze/Bedouin Strife," (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 14 September 2018, <https://bit.ly/2ZHxtTc>

⁷⁸ Humam al-Khatib, "Sweida: 'Evil' Gangs' Coup Against Their Overlords?" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 19 February 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Necaah>

⁷⁹ Zain al-Halabi, "Sweida: Unity Under 'Artery of Dignity' and Air Force Gangs Expose Themselves" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 26 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/2YaRGAw>

⁸⁰ WhatsApp interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Paris (France), 24 May 2019.

⁸¹ Skype interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 30 May 2019.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Al-Modon, "Regime Circulates List of Most Dangerous Criminals" (in Arabic), 27 February 2019, <https://bit.ly/31UsZdW>

were not arrested, the mere existence of the list in itself eased tensions in Sweida. For their part, the Cleric of Dignity Forces and the al-Fahd Forces welcomed the presence of the regime's forces "if their real objective is to hold accountable the gangs sponsored by corrupt security bodies."⁸⁴ It quickly became apparent that the regime's forces were not interested in pursuing gangs. A new wave of kidnappings by criminal gangs broke out in April 2019. The leader of one gang who survived an assassination attempt was transferred to a private hospital in the city centre in close proximity to the regime's major security centres, none of which lifted a finger despite him being one of their most wanted men.⁸⁵

One significant dilemma for the Single Artery groups is that they include certain undisciplined elements, some of whom kidnap for personal gain, which leaves matters in a murky grey zone. While Single Artery deters the return of the regime's practices of arrest and military conscription, some of its own members are accused of pursuing war economy practices, from drug trafficking and arms smuggling to kidnappings in some cases. Some of the Single Artery sub-groups, in other words, have become attractive to criminals wanted by the regime as they provide them with a means of self-protection.⁸⁶

A second dilemma relates to the regime's inability to control chaos and insecurity, even if it has ostensible security control. Gang money obtained from illegal practices has been invested in the purchase of real estate at a time when demand for rent is high. After the governorate became almost free of IDPs, who had fled for fear of kidnappings for ransom,⁸⁷ the properties gangs had purchased were offered for sale at half the value. Externally financed funds and those resulting from illegal practices have not been invested in productive operations of a sustainable nature. Therefore, breaking the law and joining a gang or armed group seems to be an attractive route for a segment of the unemployed youth because of the lack of prospects and jobs. "If you are wanted, you will be arrested today, and after a liaison with the Russians, the Military Intelligence or the [Baath] Party branch you will have reconciliation and a settlement of your situation. Then you'll get back to illegal work."⁸⁸

3.2. Confrontation Between Security Gangs and Single Artery: An Iranian Plan?

Against the backdrop of kidnapping and organised crime, the regime has re-deployed in the governorate and continues to bring in military and security reinforcements. This security and military deployment has not stopped the kidnapping and has even coincided with Sweida entering a new phase of insecurity which is manifested in assassinations and liquidations of field commanders within the Single Artery groups.

In April 2019, security groups in Sweida accused the Cleric of Dignity Forces in the town of Salkhad of abducting a member of the reconciliation committee led by a leader of a security gang and kidnapping group. The escalation took on a dimension of geographical rivalry between the two cities of Salkhad and Sweida. Sheikh al-Hinnawi failed to find a way out of the issue, while Sheikh Jarbou lined up with certain Sweida families against the Cleric of Dignity Forces. The escalation developed into an armed clash and the road between the two cities was cut, preventing Salkhad's people from entering Sweida. After a meeting in the House of the Community, Sheikh Jarbou, leaders of city factions and security groups, and representatives of some families issued a statement expressing their support for

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Skype interview with a human rights activist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 13 May 2019.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ The peak in internal displacements was in 2013, when 350,000 IDPs were living in the governorate. Currently the total number of IDPs in Sweida does not exceed 15,000. Skype interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Shahba, 27 May 2019.

⁸⁸ Skype interview with an activist who asked to remain anonymous, Beirut (Lebanon), 12 June 2019.

the Syrian army and its security services “holding criminals accountable.” The term ‘bloodshed’ was used once again at the meeting, to disavow the blood of the dead.⁸⁹

At this point, the conflict suddenly moved into a taking of sides: pro-regime and opposition. Security groups and local factions from Sweida aligned with the regime, presenting themselves as fighting ‘rampant insecurity,’ despite their deep involvement in the abductions. It became clear that “the only way for the regime to get rid of its opponents in the Mountain lies in pitting them against each other and fuelling the disputes between them.”⁹⁰

The escalating dispute with the Single Artery factions contributed to the formation of a loose alliance of factions, security groups and gangs under the sway of Iran. This became clear with the assassination of the leader of the Cleric of Dignity Forces, Wissam Eid, on 2 May 2019 in Salkhad. The assassination was claimed by an unknown entity calling itself the Lions of *Tawhid* (Monotheism). It is believed that the Lions of Tawhid or the groups they represent are responsible for the assassination of another of Single Artery’s leaders⁹¹ and for the kidnapping of a political dissident.⁹²

Wissam Eid was a close associate of Wahid al-Bal’ous, who in 2018 broke away from the Men of Dignity Movement to establish the Cleric of Dignity Forces with Laith al-Bal’ous. Eid was one of the regime’s opponents in the governorate and was involved in the abduction of officers and members of its forces in various incidents to exchange them for detainees from Sweida. He was also accused of other illegal practices.⁹³ After his assassination, the Cleric of Dignity Forces arrested three of its own members and summarily executed them after they ‘confessed during investigations’ to the killing of Eid.

The assassination of Eid was an important turning point in Sweida, as it appeared to be the climax of the conflict between certain Iranian groups and the Cleric of Dignity Forces. Wissam was directly responsible for the killing of the Shiite drug dealer Abu Jaafar, who was close to Hezbollah. Eid had also hindered the activities of Iranian groups in Salkhad, which serves as a drug distribution centre between Sweida, the desert and Jordan. His assassination appeared to be “a predetermined operation in which funds, security groups and Hezbollah cells were used to penetrate the Artery.”⁹⁴

In early June 2019 after the kidnapping of Muhannad Shihabeddine, the Single Artery coalition launched a kidnapping campaign against members of the security forces and the regime for the purpose of an exchange. However, the regime did not recognise the kidnapping of Shihabeddine, the Russians refused to mediate and so did the head of the Military Intelligence Directorate. After days of tension, the Single Artery factions released the abductees and handed them to Sheikh Jarbou with the fate of Shihabeddine still unknown. The fragile Single Artery coalition was soon dealt a huge blow after the al-Fahd Forces, which are close to the Russians, announced their withdrawal from it.

The disintegration of Single Artery was predictable as it had failed to produce a balance between the community and the regime. Its members in turn became ‘socially disorderly’ and some sought their personal interests above all other considerations. Although they had previously been acceptable and had managed to prevent arbitrary detention, the chaos, disorganisation, hasty reactions in general and members’ involvement in illegal practices all increased the apprehension of the Druze public.

⁸⁹ Zain al-Halabi, “Sweida and Salkhad on a Scrimmage Line” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 16 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ZKqmJJ>

⁹⁰ Skype interview with a journalist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 5 June 2019.

⁹¹ Al-Modon, “Bashar Assad Does not Want Blood in Sweida” (in Arabic), 10 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/31Wrp9>

⁹² Al-Modon, “Sweida:” The ‘Kifah Ship’ Abducted Shihabeddine?” (in Arabic), 20 June 2019, <https://bit.ly/2N9i8sX>

⁹³ Skype interview with a journalist who asked to remain anonymous, Sweida, 8 June 2019.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion

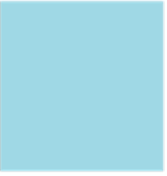
The Druze clergy have never been able to lead the Druze alone in historical crises but have always been affiliated with secular leaderships. With the decline of the role of tribal leadership in conjunction with the transformation of the spiritual institution into an official position in the Syrian state, the sheikhdom has not taken any notable stances contrary to the regime, which is reminiscent of the [Sunni] principle prohibiting revolt against the ruler.

Over the years, all attempts to produce new secular political leaders have stalled, given the objective conditions and external interventions. The Men of Dignity Movement has been trying to guard its position on this interlocking map, at least as a bridge over the secular and spiritual divide.

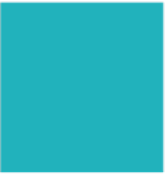
The young dissident groups of the movement are overcome by disorder, haste and random activity. Hostility to the regime and uniting under the banner of the late Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous have failed to create a clear compass for them. On the other hand, the security groups in the orbit of the regime and its Iranian ally appear to be those most powerful and organised, capable of changing the situation in Sweida in the direction of their choice. However, the dependence of these groups on the regime and their involvement in illegal practices within the war economy will make them unable to produce any credible parallel leadership.

At the same time, the regional alliances and rivalries of the Druze, which are increasingly evident in Sweida, not only contribute to maintaining the current internal dispersion but also to directing the support received from local communities in Sweida towards regional political axes. Similarly, local forces in Sweida have become dependent on these axes to confront their local rivals.

Finally, the regime is attempting to focus on insecurity as an entry point to regain control of Sweida, while the Russians prefer to avoid direct confrontation with the Druze and Iran is escalating the local conflict to ensure security control over the area. In all cases, the regime is unable to contain Sweida as a result of its objective inability to provide solutions to the local livelihood and economic crises.



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