

# POLICY BRIEF

## Kidnapping for Ransom: Gangs Threaten Civil Peace in Sweida

### Abstract

In the Druze-majority governorate of Sweida, kidnap gangs have evolved from their first unorganised forms in 2012 to sophisticated criminal networks with highly clandestine activities and elaborate prison systems. While substantial resources are required to survey, lure and detain victims for long periods, this organised criminal activity has become highly profitable for gangs. It poses a serious threat to civil peace in Sweida, with clashes threatening to go out of control and exposing the limits of local community interventions.

### Author

Nizar Ahmad

Nizar Ahmad is a Syrian researcher in the 'Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria' project in the Middle East Directions Programme hosted by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence. His work focuses on post-conflict social dynamics in regime-controlled areas.

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## Introduction

Kidnapping for ransom is a serious threat facing all Syrians living in Syria, both in regime-held areas and elsewhere. While tight security control makes kidnapping in the coastal region and the capital Damascus occur less frequently, it is regions where this control is weakened that suffer the most. In Sweida, kidnapping is so widespread that there are gangs named after the towns and villages in which they operate.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, most gangs in Sweida have engaged in kidnapping for ransom as at least a secondary criminal activity. Since 2018, however, for many of them it has become the primary activity.

It is estimated that around 500 people were kidnapped for ransom between 2018 and 2021, a rate of ten incidents a month.<sup>2</sup> While kidnap gangs have kept their activities highly clandestine, survivors were physically and psychologically abused and have refrained from testifying for fear of retaliation. Kidnapping for ransom is a threat not only to the direct victims but also to the broader community, especially as it lays bare the traditional social structures that ought to protect the population. Against this background, this study investigates the structure and modus operandi of kidnap gangs in the Sweida governorate and their impact on civil peace.

This policy brief uses data collected on kidnapping for ransom as practised by the largest gangs in the Sweida governorate, including the gangs in Shahba, Ariqa, Salkhad and Sweida and some lesser-known gangs. The data come from 12 interviews with journalists, human rights activists, reporters, notables and survivors.

## 1. The Evolution of Kidnapping Businesses

The 2011 uprising created exceptional circumstances in the Sweida governorate. These facilitated the emergence of both local armed groups and security groups, together with criminal gangs, many of which have engaged in kidnapping for ransom.<sup>3</sup> These gangs followed similar trajectories. Their genesis can be divided in three phases: emergence; organisation and stability; centralisation and chaos. Some kidnap gangs have been dissolved following increased animosity among local communities or security forces. Others have managed to carefully navigate the security and political situation.

Since 2012, the Sweida governorate has become a hub for smuggling arms, food and fuel between the eastern parts of Daraa governorate and the al-Hammad Desert east of Sweida, both of which had fallen out of regime control by that time. Many local gangs were formed, some linked to security forces, in efforts to dominate the smuggling routes. Most gang members came from either pro-regime militias or local armed groups formed to protect the region or the Druze sect. Keen to neutralise the Druze in its war against the opposition, the Syrian regime tolerated the spread of gang activity, opting for a distant security-oriented approach to the growing crisis in Sweida. However, in 2014 due to competition between gangs and new routes to Daraa bypassing Sweida, smuggling revenue began to fall. This led many gangsters to rely on kidnapping as a new alternative source of income.

Kidnapping for ransom grew between 2015 and 2018, mainly targeting affluent internally displaced persons (IDPs). In addition, the frequency of

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- 1 In this paper, the term 'gang' refers to an armed group, sometimes composed of members of the same family, with a central leadership, clear organisation and an operating territory. Gangs carry out violent criminal activities for financial gain. Some gangs are linked to security forces but they work mainly for their own interests.
  - 2 Accurate statistics on kidnappings for ransom are hard to obtain. It is estimated, however, that half the kidnappings in Sweida in 2018-2021 were for ransom. The challenge is to distinguish between multiple motives for kidnappings (security, personal...). In any case, this paper resorts to qualitative narratives rather than quantitative data.
  - 3 Mahmoud al-Lababidi, "The Druze of Sweida: The Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts," Research Project Report, (Florence, Italy: Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, European University Institute), 28 August 2019, <https://bit.ly/3CpMVYt>

'counter-kidnappings' also increased between gangs in Sweida and Daraa,<sup>4</sup> threatening to create wider sectarian conflicts more than once.<sup>5</sup> Under the pretext of counter-kidnapping, Sweida gangs targeted random IDPs, mostly from the governorates of Rural Damascus and Daraa. Most of these incidents took place at temporary checkpoints run by the gangsters themselves on the road between Damascus and Sweida (Road 110).<sup>6</sup> This gradually forced most of Sweida's IDPs out. They often returned to their towns of origin, where 'reconciliation' agreements between the regime and opposition forces were arrived at between 2016-2018.

Since 2018, kidnapping in Sweida has become a profitable and increasingly well-organised enterprise run by specialised gangs with elaborate structures. This was bolstered by two major shifts following the far-reaching attack by the Islamic State (IS) in the eastern parts of Sweida governorate on 25 July 2018. Hundreds of civilians were killed and dozens of women and children kidnapped on that day. First, xenophobia within the Druze community grew in intensity since some of the attackers were Bedouin tribesmen from the governorate. Gangs took advantage of this furious and fearful public mood, attacked Bedouins and IDPs, kidnapped some and committed serious atrocities against others.<sup>7</sup> This escalation was fuelled by an unprecedented proliferation of arms, which local armed groups and criminal gangs were ready

to buy, particularly using donations flowing from Lebanese and Palestinian Druze.<sup>8</sup> Second, the Syrian regime's approach to Sweida and its local armed groups changed from indifference to containment. After it was revealed that some of the jihadist attackers had been evacuated from Yarmouk Camp to the eastern desert of Sweida, the disposition of the Druze towards the regime turned into hostility.<sup>9</sup> In response, in late 2018 Major-General Kifah Melhem was appointed head of the Military Intelligence branch in the southern region. Ushering in rapprochement with the Druze armed groups,<sup>10</sup> Melhem sought to end the policy of animosity adopted by his predecessor Wafiq Nasser, the regime figure locally accused of assassinating the Men of Dignity Movement's founder and leader Wahid al-Bal'ous in 2015.<sup>11</sup> The rapprochement helped contain the largest gangs by striking deals with their members, including giving them security passes to facilitate their movement through checkpoints.<sup>12</sup> However, the kidnapping did not stop. It only became more sophisticated, from then onwards targeting wealthy persons and businessmen, whether Druze or from other governorates. Crime rates increased. In some cases, if the family of a non-Druze victim failed to pay the victim was killed. Furthermore, all the victims were systematically tortured.<sup>13</sup>

The year 2021 saw centralisation of the criminal networks in the hands of the Sweida city gang. This process followed the disintegration of two

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4 The first kidnapping between the two governorates was recorded in December 2012. An armed group in Daraa affiliated with the al-Nusra Front kidnapped 17 Druze from al-Thaala town to the west of Sweida. Their whereabouts remained unknown until 2015, when a group from the Men of Dignity Movement carried out a counter-kidnapping operation to pressure the opposition in Daraa into revealing their fate. It was revealed that al-Nusra had executed some of them, while the destiny of the rest is still unknown.

5 After the 2018 reconciliation agreement in Daraa, kidnapping and counter-kidnapping were restricted to the frontline regions and often contained by notables from both governorates.

6 Some kidnapping was facilitated by security officers for a share in the ransom. WhatsApp interview with a human rights activist, 15 January 2022.

7 Yaman al-Shoufi, "Sweida: Beheaded Bedouin in a Mosque" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 10 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/3HqOfMB>

8 After their reconciliation agreement with the regime, opposition fighters from Daraa sold their arms cheaply in Sweida. Yamen al-Shoufi, "Sweida: A Market for Arms ... and Conflict" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 24 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/3J8y5YM>

9 Under Russian patronage, IS and the regime made a deal to evacuate Yarmouk Camp in May 2018. Marwan Kayali, "Sweida Asks: 'Who Opens the Governorate's Gates to IS?'" (in Arabic), *Daraj*, 25 July 2018, <https://bit.ly/3rrk0Q6>

10 By 2019, Major General Kifah Melhem had become head of Military Intelligence in all of Syria. He paid special attention to Sweida, turning it into one of the main spheres of influence for the Military Intelligence.

11 Al-Lababidi, *ibid*.

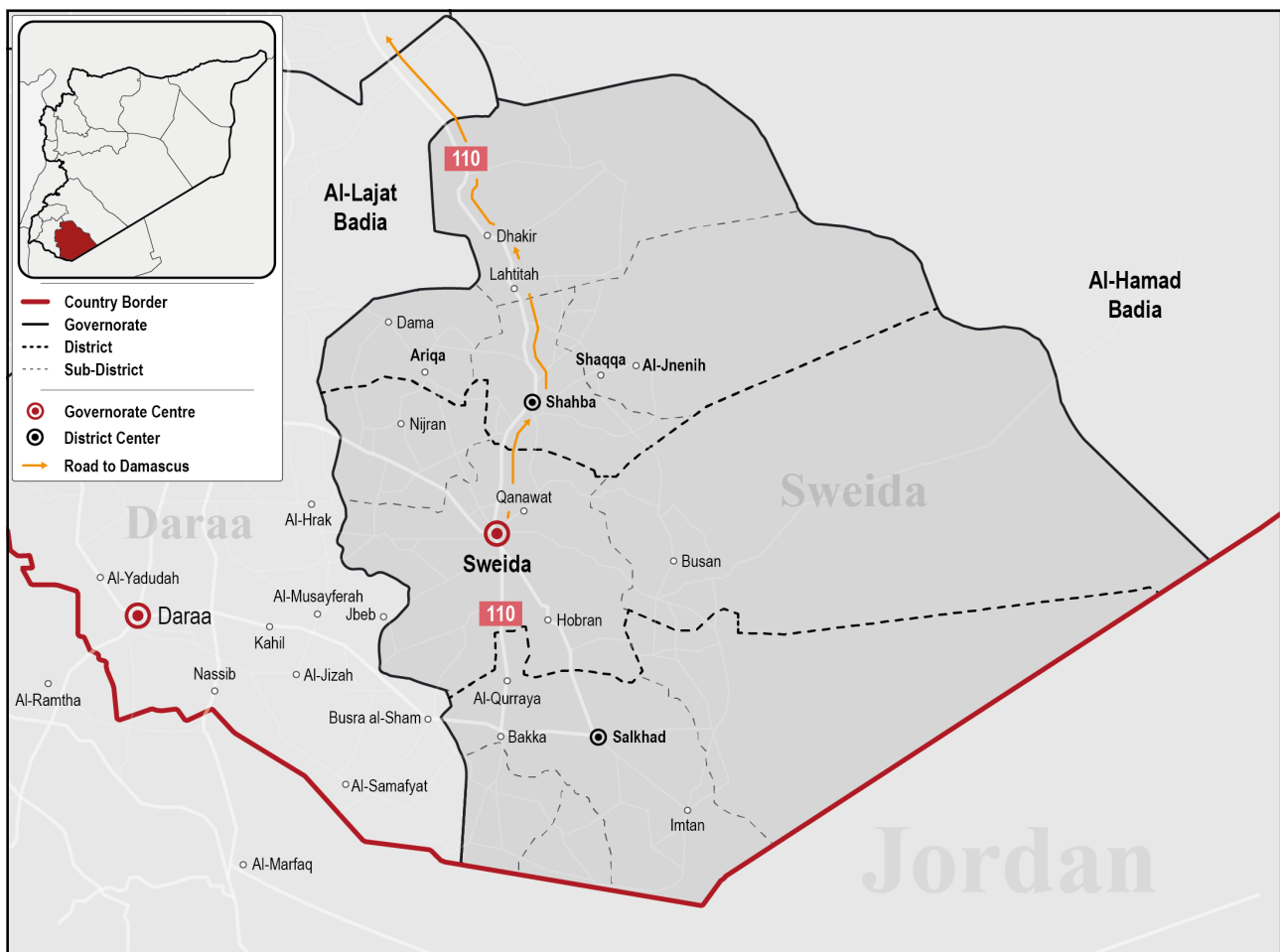
12 A security deal is a formal investigation conducted by a committee from Syrian intelligence. It consists of filling out a document answering routine questions with which to. The committee then investigates the person's file and issues him a security pass, allowing him to cross checkpoints and postpone his mandatory military service.

13 Skype interview with a human rights activist, 28 December 2021.

large well-established gangs, those of Ariqa and Shahba, which had held sway over the Damascus-Sweida road. In September 2021, a campaign led by the regime security and military forces dissolved the Ariqa gang, which had struck several deals yet continued to kidnap strangers.<sup>14</sup> Shortly before this the Shahba gangsters were driven out of town by the local community in July 2021 following their assassination of a well-known activist.<sup>15</sup> In the ensuing vacuum, the Sweida city gang inherited the networks of the two gangs and became the regime's *de facto* law enforcement partner, thereby emerging as the strongest gang in the governorate.

This centralisation also coincided with continued kidnappings perpetrated by new gangs, worryingly consisting of drug-addicts and teenagers. Since late 2021 these new gangs organised by local drug dealers have engaged in multiple criminal activities, kidnapping being only one of them. Some of them are leaderless, formed and organised spontaneously amid insecurity and a lack of communal deterrence.<sup>16</sup> In any case, these new gangs behave violently and criminally, kidnapping people randomly and with no scruples about killing victims.

**Map 1: Sweida Governorate**



Source: The author

14 The security operation was carried out only after the gang kidnapped a brother of a high-ranking security officer and refused to release him after several warnings. Skype interview with an activist living in France, 14 January 2022.

15 Suwayda 24, "The Local Community Rises Against Criminal Gangs in Shahba ... Details of the Story from the Beginning" (in Arabic), 18 July 2021, <https://bit.ly/3rtXcPy>

16 A gang of drug addicts kidnapped Youssef Nawfal, a young man from the governorate, and killed him after a dispute over the price of a car. Jisr, "Two Days After Being Kidnapped, Youssef Nawfal Found Killed in the Countryside of Sweida" (in Arabic), 23 January 2022, <https://bit.ly/3AYTjW8>

## 2. The Modus Operandi of Kidnap Gangs

Kidnapping has become such an important source of income that it has become a competitive economic sector with specialised groups and attempts at monopoly. Carrying out a successful kidnapping requires complex operations, from surveying to tracking, then luring and finally detention. This usually goes beyond the resources of a small individual gang, which is why gangs have developed large criminal networks that pool their different resources and strengths.

Some leaders and members of prominent kidnapping gangs come from large Druze families, such as Azzam in Ariqa and Taweel in Shahba. These gangsters operate in the areas where their families live, which provides them with indirect protection from potential retaliation by other families.<sup>17</sup> Most gang leaders have not received higher education. Before 2011, they were unemployed or small trade workers and craftsmen. Furthermore, most of them at different times had joined a local armed group, a pro-regime militia or the regular army, where they received some military training. Many gang members have struck deals with security forces. Alongside kidnapping, their other activities include drug smuggling and dealing and car theft.

Before 2018, most kidnappings were carried out by single gangs operating in their areas of influence. A gang would choose, lure, trap, kidnap and detain its target before negotiating a ransom with his family. Starting from 2018, however, these operations became the business of a network of multiple gangs, each with specified specialties and tasks assigned to them.

Multiple techniques are used to lure targets. One is having a woman contact the target and seduce him. Other techniques include offering sales of cars, gold or antiques, and also blackmailing. When the time and location are agreed, a trap is prepared, often on the Damascus-Sweida road or in Sweida city itself. An armed group will intercept and kidnap the victim, who is then

transferred to a predetermined often guarded place in the gang's area, called a 'detention centre.' Once there, another specialised group tortures him, films him suffering and then sends the video to his family. At this point, mediators take over and run the negotiation process before delivering the ransom to the gang and sending the victim back home.

The detention centre is of chief importance. It depends on the victim's status, the level of security needed and whether the kidnappers need to remain anonymous. In many cases, kidnappers detain victims with the outsourced help of third parties. Some detention centres are shared and used by anyone for a share of the ransom. Shared detention centres have a system resembling prisons, with jailors, guards and meal schedules all paid for by the kidnappers. The Ariqa gang used to turn the houses of forcefully displaced Bedouins into detention centres.

Each gang has its own mediator, often hailing from marginal groups and aiming to play a recognised social role. Kidnappers either connect the victim's family with the mediator or have a third party contact the family and direct it to him. Most mediators are either gang members or collaborators working for a share of the ransom. In both cases, they receive their share from the gang, not the victim's family. A mediator needs to maintain the pretence of voluntarily assisting the victim's family through acquaintances and contacts, invoking the dignity of the family and of the Druze sect. Some gangs, however, negotiate directly. Before it was dissolved, the Ariqa gang had acquired so much power and influence that it did not need mediation. The Sweida gang uses a well-known mediator, who leads all the negotiations and personally takes victims back to their families.

Ransoms, the chief reason for kidnapping, range from SYP 2 million (USD 600) to SYP 70 million (USD 20,000), depending on the status of the victim and the resources available to the kidnappers. Smaller gangs which lack detention centres tend to rid themselves of victims quickly for smaller ransoms. Bigger gangs, on the other hand, choose their victims more carefully

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17 Some Druze families are concentrated in specific areas, including several towns and villages in the governorate. Such areas are considered their zones of influence.

and demand higher ransoms from families they deem capable of paying or fundraising. A survivor's testimony can be useful to estimate kidnapping revenue. The survivor eavesdropped on a conversation between two jailors in mid-2021, when he had been detained with eight other victims on a private farm. Complaining about receiving only SYP 1.5 million (around USD 400) a month, one jailor calculated that at least SYP 200 million (USD 66,000) had been paid in ransoms for victims detained on the farm during the same month. In late 2021, a survivor's family paid USD 17,000, which had been partly raised through donations.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Kidnapping and Civil Peace

Kidnapping for ransom has posed a serious threat to civil peace in Sweida, nearly triggering wide-ranging conflicts more than once. Meanwhile, gangs have learned how to cover their tracks, thus escaping social pressure, neutralising civil and religious mediation, and avoiding counter-kidnapping. Their success exposes the limits of traditional notables, clerics and family leaders in combating crimes and protecting their communities.

While keeping the identity of kidnapers anonymous is vital for success, so is hiding in a small community where people know one another. If the kidnapper of a local Druze victim were exposed, his family would face severe social pressure. Notables would have to either disown the criminal, find a customary tribal settlement or report him to law enforcement – especially if he belongs to a marginal gang or is a drug addict.<sup>19</sup> This is why larger gangs have had to become proficient at leaving no traces. Occasionally, they will spread false information – that the victim has been sold to a gang from Daraa or the al-Badia, for example – in order to stoke fears and accelerate the negotiation and ransom payment. Survivors know little about their personal jailors, and they are often too

scared to reveal anything for fear of retaliation. The Sweida, Shahba and Ariqa gangs have kidnapped hundreds of Druze victims, although no kidnapers have been identified since 2018. All the kidnapers exposed, whose victims were freed through social pressure or brute force, belonged to smaller or inexperienced gangs which made revealing mistakes.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, by restricting their operations to areas where their families are concentrated in large numbers, gang leaders indirectly protect themselves from other gangs and even other families seeking revenge. At the same time, large gangs have refrained from kidnapping members of influential Druze families to avoid adverse consequences. For example, no members of the well-known Radwan family (in the city of Sweida) or of the Atrash family (across the governorate) have been kidnapped. Gangs have also developed a precautionary approach to their composition, choosing members of different families that hail from various towns and villages. Therefore, if an operation fails the target's family is not able to exact revenge since the kidnapers belong to no specific family.<sup>21</sup> This approach was quickly adopted by both well-established gangs and smaller groups that have emerged more recently, albeit for different reasons. While it is a valuable strategy for larger gangs, a precautionary composition is natural for nascent gangs already consisting of members of various small Druze families which have moved from the countryside to Sweida city.

Kidnapping for ransom is a threat to civil peace even within families.<sup>22</sup> For example, in mid-2019 a gang in Jenina town, near Shahba in north-eastern Sweida, kidnapped two Bedouins and hid them in a cemetery. Jenina and its neighbouring villages are all populated by the Sahnawi Druze family, some of the young members of which are active in a local armed group affiliated with the Men of Dignity Movement. The incident escalated when members of the Men of Dignity Movement raided the houses of suspects, most

18 WhatsApp interview with a kidnap survivor, 23 December 2021.

19 Interview with an activist residing in Sweida, 9 January 2022.

20 Skype interview with a human rights activist residing in Syria, 12 January 2022.

21 Signal interview with a journalist from Sweida, 3 January 2022.

22 Kidnapping displaced persons and those lured into the governorate has been less consequential since their relatives have no choice but to pay the ransom.

of whom hail from the same Sahnawi family. Armed clashes occurred and the Sahnawi family was divided between the two parties. The victims were eventually freed through brute force.

Kidnappings may also occur between rival gangs. For instance, a gang might kidnap members of another gang for failing to pay a debt or refusing to cooperate in deals related to arms, drug or antiquity smuggling. This may turn into civil strife between neighbouring towns. In June 2016, a gang from Shaqqa town ambushed a member of a gang in the neighbouring city of Shahba and demanded that it paid the full share of a previously struck arms smuggling deal. The kidnapped gang member was later killed, and the dispute escalated into armed clashes and multiple incidents of kidnapping and counter-kidnapping. Local notables intervened and settled the dispute by handing the killer over to the police. The killer, however, having served a four-year manslaughter sentence, was released in October 2020, which the victim's family and the Shahba gang resented. More revenge kidnapping followed, and each gang targeted members of the other gang and then random civilians from both towns. Machine guns were used in the clashes and several casualties and injuries were reported.<sup>23</sup>

The largest peace-threatening incident, however, took place in April 2019. The Salkhad gang kidnapped a member of the Conflict Resolution Committee in Sweida city, a lawyer from a Bedouin tribe.<sup>24</sup> Considering Sweida Bedouins under its protection, the Sweida gang responded by attacking Druze passengers in the Sweida and Salkhad bus stations. The Salkhad gang tried to attack the Sweida gang's strongholds in the city, but it was ambushed and lost one member.<sup>25</sup> The conflict grew in intensity. The roads between the governorate's two largest cities were blocked. Each gang kidnapped members of the other gang. As the armed clashes divided the community and threatened an outbreak of war between Sweida

and Salkhad, notables and clerics intervened and reached a settlement. All the kidnapped gang members were released.<sup>26</sup> However, the incident marked the end of the Salkhad gang. After it rejected a deal with the security forces, it was soon subjected to a crackdown co-led by drug smuggling gangs and security-affiliated groups, leading to its dissolution and the killing of its prominent leaders.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

As the Sweida governorate is abandoned by the government and left alone in insecurity and organised crime, kidnapping for ransom exposes the limits and fragility of traditional social structures. The Druze community appears unable to control its lawless sons, while kidnapping gangs hone their skills as highly organised criminal networks. This constitutes a huge challenge for the local community, which additionally suffers from rampant poverty and a lack of services, which lure more and more unemployed young men into the gang business.

Moreover, the current state of chaos both exacerbates and is exacerbated by the prevalence of cheap drugs and the extent to which drug smuggling routes to Jordan are available. Calls to control the borders and stop the flow of drugs from Sweida are drowned out by the levels of chaos and uncontrollable gang activity.

For its part, the Syrian regime sends security reinforcements under the pretext of restoring law and order, but it is unlikely that it has the will or the ability to put an end to kidnapping or to arrest gang leaders. This is not a priority, at least for now. More disputes and armed clashes between local armed groups and gangs are expected in the near future. In such scenarios, internal competition between branches of the security forces will prove highly influential.

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23 Suwayda 24, "One Dead, Several Injured, and Roads Blocked in Sweida: Releasing the Killer Sparked the Crisis" (in Arabic), Facebook, 24 December 2020, <https://bit.ly/3orQoQB>

24 A few days previously, the Tayba gang had kidnapped four businessmen from Damascus who came to buy apples. Two days later, an assassination attempt targeted the Tayba gang's leader and the Salkhad gang was accused.

25 Suwayda 24, "All Sides Lose if an Internal Fight Erupts" (in Arabic), Facebook, 15 April 2019. <https://bit.ly/3uIPU2m>

26 Zein al-Halabi, "Sweida and Salkhad in Armed Conflict?" (in Arabic) *al-Modon*, 16 April 2019. <https://bit.ly/3J8QVIt>

27 Baladi News, "Deaths in Clashes Between Two Local Factions in Sweida" (in Arabic), 23 April 2020. <https://bit.ly/3B2Shsa>

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