

Suwayda: Syria's Most Dangerous Security Challenge



Armed men from Bedouin tribes in western Suwayda on July 19. (AFP)

The events that erupted in Suwayda on July 12 were far from a fleeting bout of violence. Rather, the violations committed by both sides from Druze militias to state security forces sparked a dangerous sectarian polarization that threatened Syria's fragile political transition and struck at the core of intercommunal coexistence.

The crisis quickly transcended its social dimensions, revealing the fragility of central authority. Already minimal public trust in the Syrian government's ability to exert control in the province further eroded, especially amid the rise of a faction led by Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, the spiritual leader of the Druze.

Al-Hijri advocates for decentralization and has sought protection from the Israeli occupation, which, under the pretext of "responding to calls for Druze protection," launched missiles toward Damascus.

This blow to state authority was not neutralized by the ceasefire. Despite the relative calm it introduced, Suwayda remains effectively beyond Damascus's control. Militias loyal to al-Hijri have barred government officials from entering and now control key entry and exit points. Displaced Bedouin tribes, meanwhile, have received no guarantees of safe return.

At the heart of this increasingly convoluted landscape, the Syrian government finds itself facing a uniquely complex challenge. The "Suwayda crisis" is not just another entry on a long list of security threats—it is the most dangerous among them, carrying intertwined geopolitical, religious-social, and regional dimensions that make it a mirror reflecting the possible future of the Syrian state. This report examines those dimensions.

A Religious-Social Leadership

What makes the Suwayda file particularly intractable and forces the government to think beyond conventional frameworks is the extraordinary influence of the Druze spiritual leadership.

Over the years of war, as public trust in central authority crumbled, the role of the Druze clergy, especially the position of Sheikh al-'Aql (Chief Druze Cleric), emerged as the de facto decision-making body in the province.

At the forefront stands Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, the spiritual head of the Druze community and a figure with a broad grassroots following. From the outset, al-Hijri has taken an oppositional stance toward the current government, refusing to allow its return to power in the province unless his demands are met regardless of the chaos and proliferation of weapons in the streets.

He rejected the outcomes of the "National Dialogue Conference" held in

Damascus in February and denounced the constitutional declaration that followed, positioning himself in direct confrontation with the state.

With July's bloody clashes, that confrontation turned overt. Druze militias aligned with al-Hijri clashed with Bedouin tribes. When government forces attempted to intervene and de-escalate the situation, they became direct targets of those militias.

Al-Hijri rejected the ceasefire agreement brokered by local notables and escalated matters further by calling for "armed resistance" against any government troop deployment.

When the Suwayda Military Council emerged in February 2025—reportedly with his implicit backing—it became the militant arm of this resistance, claiming responsibility for attacks on public security forces and even on Bedouin civilians.

Al-Hijri has thus moved beyond political opposition toward a project resembling a "parallel authority," calling for "autonomous administration of the mountain." Damascus has deemed this a serious threat to national unity.

Notably, al-Hijri also made public appeals for "Israeli protection," effectively handing Tel Aviv a pretext to intervene deep inside Syria under the guise of "protecting the Druze."

Though al-Hijri does not speak for all of Suwayda's population, his control over the Druze militias and integration with them has enabled his faction to dominate the entire scene.

He has blocked the entry of ministerial and governmental delegations into the city and, according to reports, seized humanitarian convoys destined for civilians allowing access only to select organizations like the Red Crescent.

In effect, Suwayda is now run de facto by al-Hijri and his circle, while the Syrian state is either absent or barred from exerting any meaningful influence.

Israel and the Druze File

Al-Hijri's overt appeals to the Israeli occupation and Tel Aviv's direct involvement—via missile strikes on Damascus and targeting security elements in Suwayda under the pretense of "protection" have significantly complicated the security landscape for the Syrian government.

The issue is no longer merely a local affair; it has become a regional flashpoint within a broader geopolitical chessboard.

By seeking Israeli backing, al-Hijri has handed Tel Aviv what it has long desired: first, the entrenchment of southern Syria as a permanent "buffer zone" along the Golan Heights, either under direct control or via allied local forces.

This would keep the region unstable and prevent Damascus from reasserting sovereignty over its southern frontier—thus paving the way for federalist or even partitionist schemes.

Second, it revitalizes the so-called “David’s Corridor”—a biblical-geopolitical blueprint through which Israel seeks to establish a strategic axis extending from northern Palestine through the Golan, Daraa, and Suwayda, reaching all the way to eastern Syria and the Euphrates River.

This vision of “Greater Israel” is already being partially realized through Israeli influence along the border strip and around Mount Hermon.

In that context, the Israeli finance minister Bezalel Smotrich’s proposal to create a “humanitarian corridor” to deliver food and medicine to the Druze of Suwayda was far from a purely altruistic initiative. Rather, it was part of this strategic design.

According to US-based reports, notably from Axios, Washington—Israel’s chief regional ally—is now lobbying to legitimize this idea, presenting it as a humanitarian aid channel to open Syrian-Israeli communication under international auspices.

To manage the mounting Israeli-American pressure, the Syrian government has reportedly engaged in backchannel diplomacy. Sources indicate two discreet meetings were held in Paris last month between Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani and his Israeli counterpart for strategic affairs, Ron Dermer.

The talks focused on mechanisms for “de-escalation,” preventing deeper Israeli intervention in Syria’s internal affairs, and negotiating ceasefire monitoring and stability measures for southern Syria.

Suwayda: A Geopolitical Knot

Beyond religious leadership and foreign intervention, Suwayda’s geographic positioning makes it an intractable geopolitical puzzle. Located in Syria’s far south, the province borders three highly sensitive zones: the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights to the west, Jordan to the south, and Daraa province to the northwest a region still plagued by security chaos and rampant arms smuggling.

This strategic entanglement is not new. Geography alone has endowed Suwayda with immense importance, especially for Israel, which views southern Syria as vital to its national security.

Since the fall of Syria’s previous regime, Tel Aviv has moved quickly to establish a “safe zone” stretching from the Golan to Suwayda’s outskirts to prevent hostile forces from nearing its borders.

It has occupied parts of Quneitra province and seized the strategic Mount Hermon, which lies less than 35 kilometers from Damascus and straddles the Syria-Lebanon frontier with commanding views over the Golan.

Meanwhile, the Jordanian border represents the southern flank of this strategic knot. Amman watches the situation with increasing unease, wary of lawlessness spilling across its northern border particularly given the surge in weapons and drug trafficking via the southern desert.

Each new flare-up in Suwayda heightens Jordan's alarm over the province becoming a direct threat to its internal security.

This concern prompted direct Jordanian involvement in efforts to contain the crisis. On August 12, Amman hosted a trilateral meeting that brought together US Syria envoy Tom Barrack, Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, and Syria's Asaad al-Shibani to chart a roadmap for de-escalating the situation in Suwayda.

In the final analysis, the Suwayda crisis demonstrates that southern Syria is no longer a peripheral battlefield it has become a pivotal front in determining the country's fate.

The confluence of religious leadership, Israeli interference, Jordanian security anxieties, and the chaos in neighboring Daraa has turned Suwayda into the most dangerous gateway confronting Syria's new state.