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2.4.4. Druze

The Druze have constituted 3 % of Syria's pre-war population,361 accounting for a population of approximately 700 000.362 Historically, they have been concentrated in the southern governorate of Sweida,363 with smaller communities near Damascus.364 The Druze call themselves muwahhidun (Arabic: 'unitarians')365 and they are adherents of the monotheistic Druze faith, generally regarded as part of Islam.366 The Druze faith does not allow any type of conversion, and many of its practices are kept secret.367 Ethnically the Druze are Arab and they speak Arabic.368

Druze communities are also present in Lebanon and Israel.369 In mid-March 2025, two groups of Druze clerics made pilgrimages to visit Druze religious sites370 in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights for the first time since the 1974 ceasefire agreement between the two countries.371 Since the HTS assumed control in Syria, Israel has expressed support for the Druze, including provision of humanitarian aid packages to the community372 and pledging military protection to the Druze community,373 rejected by the Druze.374

Traditionally, the Druze in Syria have maintained a level of autonomy, including the formation of local militias,375 consisting of 'tens of thousands of fighters.'376 In March 2025, the Syrian government and 'the residents and elders of Sweida'377 agreed that the largest Druze militia, the Men of Dignity, would be transferred under the authority of the MoI.378 Additionally, it was agreed that the governor of Sweida and a police chief would be appointed by the central government.379 Negotiations between the central government, represented by Laith al-Balous, and the Druze leader Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri were reportedly ongoing as of end of May 2025, with 'little meaningful progress' toward integrating Druze factions into MoD.380 Further information on the integration of Druze armed groups is available in section 1.3.2.(c).

○ (a) Security incidents involving the Druze

At the end of February 2025, clashes between Druze militia and the forces of the new government were reported in Jaramana neighbourhood,381 three kilometres southeast of Damascus.382 The clashes began on 28 February 2025, when a Syrian security officer was killed and another injured at a checkpoint in Jaramana,383 reportedly by an armed militia linked to the former regime.384 Fighting continued the following day, resulting in one person killed and nine injured385 In response, the new government deployed its forces to the area and pledged to arrest those involved in the attacks and to dismantle illegal checkpoints.386

On 29 April 2025, violent clashes broke out in Jaramana387 and Sahnaya involving Islamist armed groups, government security forces, and Druze fighters.388 The unrest was reportedly sparked by an audio recording circulated on social media, allegedly featuring a Druze cleric389 insulting the Prophet Muhammad.390 The cleric rejected the allegations, with the MoI stating that preliminary findings revealed that he was not the person in the video.391

The violence quickly spread to the nearby Sahnaya town392 and Sweida governorate. 393 A Salafi-Jihadi group affiliated with ISIL reportedly claimed responsibility for attacks on Druze civilians in Sahnaya, while Druze militia leaders accused newly integrated 'extremist individuals' within the MoD and MoI of targeting their community.394 According to Etana Syria,395 local Sunni factions involved in the fighting with the Druze militia were from Mleiha, Eastern Ghouta, and Dar'a and received 'tacit support' from the new government.396

In response to the clashes, MoD and the General Security Forces deployed their forces to Sahnaya and Ashrafiyah Sahnaya, while Druze militias also mobilised their fighters. According to ISW, government efforts to contain the violence helped to restrain retaliatory killings. It was also reported that some Druze fighters joined the government forces in fighting against Sunni extremists, which, as noted by ISW, reflects 'the complexity of the situation and diversity of the actors involved.' The government made several arrests on 30 April 2025.397 In the clashes, 134 people were reportedly killed, including 88 Druze fighters, 14 civilians, and 32 members of MoI and MoD and affiliated paramilitary units.398 Moreover, hundreds of people were displaced from the affected suburbs of Damascus.399

On 30 April 2025, under the pretext of protecting of Druze civilians,400 Israel conducted airstrikes 'in and around Asrafiyat Sahnaya'.401 Despite a ceasefire agreement had been already reached between the new government and local leaders

in Jaramana and Sahnaya, further Israeli strikes were launched on 2 May 2025[402] near the presidential palace in Damascus[403] and on 3 May 2025 across multiple locations, including Rural Damascus, Dar'a, Latakia, and western Hama.[404]

The new government denied responsibility for the violence attributing it to 'outlaws.' [405] Simultaneously, anti-Druze sentiment surged on social media,[406] with widespread accusations of their support of Israel and the Assad regime[407] and the 'calls to massacre them.'[408] The government and media 'either remained silent or issued weak statements' against anti-Druze hate speech.[409] Anti-Druze hostility reportedly spread across the country. In Hama, protestors reportedly chanted anti-Druze slogans, while in Homs, a university protest included calls for violence against the Druze, prompting many students to return to Druze-majority areas.[410] Syria Direct reported that Druze students were evacuated from universities in Homs, Damascus, Latakia, and Hama, with thousands returning to Sweida amid fears of further reprisals.[411] In response, Minister of Higher Education Marwan Jamil al-Halabi issued a directive prohibiting 'sectarian rhetoric' on university campuses.[412] In mid-May 2025, members of a local armed group linked to Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri-affiliated Joint Operations Room reportedly intercepted a bus carrying students returning from Sweida to their universities, citing security concerns.[413]

As noted by ISW, the outbreak of anti-Druze violence at the end of April 2025 could deter the Druze – and other minority groups – from disarming and integrating into state institutions, while delayed governmental response to violence might deepen 'Druze fears about the new government.'[414] According to researcher Rabeh Ghadban, many Druze perceive the clashes not as 'isolated incidents', but as a part of broader pattern of sectarian hostilities and 'a continuation of extremist ideologies' of Syrian president. He also noted that in the absence of effective state protection, the Druze continued to rely on local militias to patrol streets, resolve disputes, and repel attacks.[415] At the beginning of May 2025, Etana Syria noted that, Druze factions remained 'on high alert' in Sweida.[416]

At the beginning of May 2025, clashes between the Druze and Bedouin groups were reported in the western countryside of Sweida,[417] as well as in neighbouring Dara'a governorate. Mortar strikes on Haran, Al-Thaala, Rasas, and Ara villages left one civilian dead and eight injured, causing dozens of families, mostly women and children, to flee to safer areas.[418]

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