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Causes, Consequences and Repercussions of the Conflict with Syria's Druze Minority

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YAKUB HALABI, AUG 22 2025

On February 23, 2025, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared: "We demand the complete demilitarization of southern Syria from the forces of the new regime. Likewise, we will not tolerate any threat to the Druze community in southern Syria". In this regard, on March 1, 2025, there were minor sectarian clashes between Sunni and Druze locals in the Syrian Druze town of Jarmana, located about eight kilometers south of Damascus, and Netanyahu and his Defense Minister, Yisrael Katz, issued a public threat to the new Syrian, Al-Sharaa regime that Israel would be prepared to intervene in Syrian internal affairs in the event of an attack against Druze in the town of Jarmana. This article analyzes the motives behind Netanyahu's statement and its repercussions on the fate of the Druze minority, and whether Israel's involvement in Syrian internal affairs has a direct effect on the deadly massacres against members of the Druze minority in late April and mid-July in Syria.

After the fall of the Assad regime in early December 2024, notwithstanding, the new regime led by Ahmed al-Sharaa expressed its willingness to engage in a reconciliation process between all Syrian ethnic groups in order to form a united Syria. The willingness to become part of this new national reconciliation project was driven by the general fervor that culminated in a broad national sentiment and euphoria of building a new and democratic Syria, free from dictatorship. This fervor did not escape the Druze community, in the hope of opening a new page in the country's history after the departure of the Assad regime. Indeed, several Druze delegations from Lebanon and Swaida (the capital of the Druze province) visited and congratulated the new Syrian president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, while the integration of minorities, including the Druze minority, was, at least formally, on the agenda of the new regime.

Furthermore, Druze fighters from Swaida even launched an attack against the forces of the Assad regime on December 8, thereby participated in overthrowing the former regime and were seen as part of the forces that took part in building the new Syria. Similarly, the replacement of the old regime raised hopes among the Druze, as well as among the majority of the Syrian population, that the events of December 8, 2024, would herald a new and glorious era that would bring security and prosperity, given that the Syrian population under the Assad regime was not only lacking in security, but also basic subsistence needs, such as electricity, fuel, and food.

Indeed, at the end of December 2024, the al-Sharaa regime sent troops to Swaida to expand his rule over the district, but the Druze militia "Rejal al-Karama" or "Men of Honor" prevented them from entering the province, not because the province did not recognize the legitimacy of the new regime, but because the militia leaders wanted an agreement that would legalize the integration of their militia into the formal forces of the new regime, and that the security forces in the Swaida district would be composed of people from the province in addition to a small percentage of the new regime's forces. Consequently, the forces Al-Sharaa returned to Damascus on their heels and without any clashes.

Hence, Netanyahu's statement from February is controversial, especially since there was no public appeal from any senior figure in the Syrian Druze community at this time to Israel to provide any assistance for the community against the Sharaa regime and the Druze even hoped to integrate into the ranks of new regime. Finally, how did Israel intend to protect the Druze in Syria if it had no intention of deploying forces in undefendable Druze localities, such as the Jarmana area, which included surrounding Druze villages such as Sahnaiya and Ashrafiyat-Sahnaiya? Furthermore,

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for several months before the fall of the Assad regime, the Druze province of Swaida organized daily demonstrations against the Assad regime, in which the demonstrators called for democratization and political reforms, in light of the chronic economic and security situation in the province, while Israel did not issue any warning to the Assad regime to refrain from suppressing the demonstrations at the time.

Netanyahu and Katz's statements raise a number of significant questions: What was the purpose or intention behind their statement? Why was the message about Israel's willingness to protect the Druze not secretly conveyed to the regime? Was this statement about intervening in Syrian internal affairs in order to protect the Druze in fact a camouflage and an instrumental device for Israel's desire to realize its strategic interests in Syria, which included: demilitarizing the entire area south of Damascus, and keeping Syria internally divided along sectarian lines and externally weak militarily.

It is important to note that one of the strategies of the Druze and religious minorities in the region is the principle of "Takiyya", that is, dissimulation or maintaining a low profile and even creating external visibility that the minority is not actually different from the surrounding Sunni majority amidst which it lives, in order to prevent a situation in which the minority would be perceived as non-Muslim and hence as a group that is perceived as heretic by Islamists (Dana, 2009). In short, based on the Takiyya, the Druze community sought to remain under the radar of Middle East politics (Halabi, 2020), while Netanyahu's statement put the community in the spotlight.

Here it is worth mentioning that Israel occupied the Syrian Mount Hermon immediately after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Israel wanted to occupy Syrian lands adjacent to its border in order to prevent any future attack on its cities, similar to the one carried out by Hamas on October 7, 2023. Furthermore, Israel wanted to keep Syria divided and weak, and therefore Netanyahu thought that first, a sectarian conflict between the Druze and Sunnis in Syria would provide Israel with a pretext to attack the regime and leave Syria divided. Second, any massacre of the Druze would highlight the jihadist sectarian foundations of al-Sharaa regime, which would not hesitate slaughtering minorities and violate their collective rights.

Such atrocities would make it difficult for any Western country to establish diplomatic relations with this regime, while Israel tried to convince Western countries to refrain from lifting sanctions that were imposed on Syria during Assad's reign. Israel feared that the Sharaa regime would manage to unite Syrian society and succeed in forming a strong army under an Islamist regime that could threaten Israel in the future to the same extent as Hamas. In other words, Netanyahu did not really intend to protect the Druze, but rather to exploit their vulnerability to ignite a sectarian conflict between them and the Sunnis and use them as a pretext to intervene in Syria's internal affairs. The late April events in Syria surrounding the Druze minority in and around the city of Jaramana illustrate that minorities in Syria are almost powerless and cannot defend themselves against Islamist movements in a failed state that has neither the will nor the capacity to protect minorities from any sectarian violence.

Unfortunately for the Syrian Druze, on April 27, 2025, a fabricated audio recording was circulated on social media that allegedly showed a Druze sheikh uttering insults against the Prophet Muhammad. The recording sparked mass attacks on three isolated Druze towns, Jarmana, Sahnayyah, and Ashrafiyat-Sahnayyah, located on the southern outskirts of Damascus. Angry Sunni-jihadi mobs broke into these Druze towns and murdered in cold blood peaceful civilians including women and children. In addition to the deadly massacre in these towns, Druze fighters who rushed from Swaida to protect their brethren in the three besieged towns were ambushed by Bedouins who slaughtered them and even abused the bodies of the murdered (videos of this abuse were circulated on social media). The attacks resulted in the killing of over 100 Druzes, in addition to hundreds of refugees and dozens of Druzes, who were arrested, tortured, and some were even tortured to death by regime forces in the prisons of the new regime.

These events and one that followed in July in Swaida raise three questions about the statements of Israeli officials. Why did Netanyahu make such a statement, while he understands that Israel cannot and is not willing to provide security for isolated Druze towns located on the outskirts of Damascus, especially in light of the fact that the IDF was involved in a long and exhausting war in the Gaza Strip and when Israel was in the midst of peak preparations for the upcoming war that was on Israel's agenda against Iran? Furthermore, why did he issue the statement while the IDF was perceived among Arab public opinion as an army that committed genocide against innocent Palestinians in the

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Gaza Strip, and therefore the level of hatred against Israel among the Arabs was at its zenith, while this hatred could have been directed against the vulnerable Druze minority, and therefore did the Netanyahu government think about the implications of his statement? And finally, what was the intention of those who fabricated, forged and distributed the audio recording that incriminated an entire community in the eyes of the Sunni masses.

Regarding the last question, it appears that an opposition group to the Sharaa regime fabricated and distributed the audio recording in order to test Netanyahu's intentions and see if he was serious in his statement regarding Israel's commitment to protecting the Druze. The organized opposition groups aspired to overthrow the Sharaa regime included ISIS and groups affiliated with the old Assad regime, while these groups wanted to ignite a sectarian war between the Sunnis and the Druze that would lead to the massacre of the latter in order to draw Israel into a war against the newly established regime, hoping on their part that Israel would fulfill its promise to the Druze and also hoping that these attacks would lead to the toppling of the regime. According to this version, the Druze were nothing more than a lure to undermine the foundations or even topple the new regime. In other words, Netanyahu's statement turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy that ultimately endangered the entire Syrian Druze community and led to their massacre.

Hence, these attacks against the Druze in Syria created a vicious circle in which the largest Druze militia in Swaida, the "Karama" men, refused to hand over their weapons to the forces of the new regime out of distrust and fear, given that disarming themselves would render the entire community defenseless and more vulnerable to further attacks, while the regime forces insisted on a monopoly on the means of violence. Israel sensed the vulnerability of the Druze and opened fire from the air near the presidential palace in Damascus in early May 2025 and even landed weapons and ammunition in the Druze, Swaida district. All of these actions increased hatred among the Sunni community in Syria in particular and among Arab peoples in general against the Druze, creating an impression that presented the Druze as a fifth column, that the Druze were supposedly acting on behalf of Israel, as if they were seeking to destabilize the new regime.

It should be emphasized that minorities in general and the Druze community in Syria in particular are led by traditional clerics, who have no experience in foreign relations and international diplomacy, and therefore these clerics have low diplomatic skills, while the community as a whole is powerless in the internal balance of power in Syria, given that the Druze in Syria constitute only 5 percent of the entire population. Furthermore, social media networks, including Facebook and Instagram, were filled with an unprecedented attack against the Druze, presenting the entire community as if they were putting sticks in the wheels of the consolidating Syrian unity. In this anti-Druze atmosphere, Druze were kidnapped on a daily basis, young Druze men were murdered wherever they were found, especially on the streets of Damascus, all Druze students were expelled in masses from Syrian universities in a shameful and outrageous spectacle, Druze women were kidnapped and raped, while fewer and fewer supplies of food, fuel and medicine reached the Swaida province starting in May 2025.

Between the massacre in May in the Jarmana area and the grand massacre in Swaida in mid-July, there were attempts to reach an agreement on the deployment of the new regime's forces in the Swaida area. The Druze in the Swaida province realized that they were in a catch-22. On the one hand, they understood that the entry of the Al-Sharaa regime forces could lead to a bloodbath similar to those that occurred in the Alawite area in March and the massacre in Jarmana in early May. On the other hand, they also understood that the lack of an agreement could lead to an invasion by the regime forces, the results of which would be even more devastating. Three political/spiritual leaders of the Druze (Al-Hajri, Hennawi, and Jarboa) operated in the Druze Mountains, as well as two additional militias, alongside the large Druze militia of the "Karama" men. At the end of May, the parties reached an agreement that would allow the entry of the regime forces, contingent on the condition that the local forces would integrate into the official internal security apparatuses in the Druze Mountain, so that the local security militias would constitute the lion's share of these regime forces. It is important to note that the Druze militias are not directly subordinate to any of the spiritual/political Druze leaders. However, after the agreement was signed at the end of May, Al-Hajri backed down and even expressed opposition to the entry of the regime forces into the Druze Mountain. In the absence of consensus among the Druze factions, the agreement proposal collapsed.

There is no reliable information as to why Al-Hajri backed down and expressed strong opposition to an orderly entry

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of regime forces. It is believed that the Netanyahu government, through the head of the Druze community in Israel, Mwafak Tarif, urged Al-Hajri to oppose such a deployment, especially in light of the fact that Israel aimed to preserve the area south of Damascus as a demilitarized zone. At the same time, a few days before the deadly attack on Swaida, there was an attempt by the Al-Sharaa regime to reach an agreement with the leaders of the Kurdish region regarding the expansion of the regime's control to the Kurdish region, and the Al-Sharaa regime wanted to subdue the Swaida region before it turned to the Kurdish region.

The deadly attack against the Swaida region began on July 13, 2025 and lasted about a week. Before the attack, the head of the Israeli National Security Council, Tzahi Hanegbi, met with senior officials of the Al-Sharaa regime in Azerbaijan, when Al-Sharaa himself visited this country on July 12, 2025, that is, two days before the attack on Swaida. Hence is the assertion that Israel knew and even gave the green light for the entry of Sharaa forces equipped with light weapons into the Swaida district, which stands in contradiction with Israel's commitment to the autonomy of the mountain.

In fact, the regime forces were joined by forces of Bedouin tribes from all corners of the country, especially from the Deir ez-Zor region, as well as ISIS forces whose members are not Syrians, some of whom do not even speak Arabic. In other words, both the regime and other Sunni militias participated in the incursion against Swaida. These forces had one clear goal: mass slaughter and total extermination of the Druze in the Swaida district and that is based on testimonies of prisoners who were captured by the Druze militias. In addition to the approximately 725 Druze fighters and civilians killed in the battles, over 554 innocent Druze civilians were executed in cold blood, including patients who were slaughtered in their beds and medical staff at the Swaida hospital, where videos circulated on social media networks demonstrate the atrocities. All in all, 1279 Druzes were killed out of community of 650,000, or 2 out of 1000 Druze residents. Entire families were wiped out, unarmed young men were murdered by a firing squad in the squares of Swaida. Yet, the plight of the Druze did not stop once the ceasefire agreement was reached; the sectarian killing of Druzes persisted on daily basis, where Jihadi squads have targeted members of the Druze and other minorities, especially Alawis, on a daily basis in every major Syrian city. These squads exploit the security chaos in Syria, and they carry out sectarian-based execution of men and kidnap women with impunity.

One of the motives of these forces was the Jihadist element, as Islamist movements see the Druze including Alawis as sect of infidels whose blood is permitted and even encouraged by a divine decree. Druze women were kidnapped and many of them were raped. And here the question arises, why did not Israel oppose the entry of al-Sharaa forces into the Swaida district at the Azerbaijan meeting on July 12? Did Israel inform the Druze leaders in Swaida about this upcoming attack? The fact that Israel did not attack the forces that invaded Swaida on July 14 indicates that Israel agreed in principle to the entry of these forces into the Druze Mountain. Israel attacked these of the Sharaa forces in Swaida and Damascus only after the extent of the massacres began to leak through social media networks, and it is important to note that the regime cut off the connection to the Internet networks in Swaida during the days of the attack.

The Druze community is led by traditional clerics (sheikhs) who, by virtue of their religious status, have become the de facto political leaders of the community. These sheikhs, including Mwafak Tarif in Israel, Al-Hajri, Hennawi and Jarboa in Swaida, are inexperienced in international relations and they (perhaps) naively trusted Netanyahu's false promise and thereby put the fate of entire community in Syria under an existential threat. These traditional leaders do not understand the balance of power on the ground, some acted out of emotions and others out of personal interest. Indeed, Al-Hajri adopted a hardline position vis-à-vis the Sharaa regime and foiled any entry of the new regime forces even before the massacres in Jaraman and Swaida took place, while Hennawi and Jarboa recognized the legitimacy of the Sharaa regime. It should be noted however that apparently, Netanyahu transferred messages or even instructions to al-Hajri through Tarif, the official spiritual head of the Druze community in Israel and the head of the Druze religious court in Israel.

Following the July massacre, however, a consensus has been formed among all three Syrian-Druze spiritual leaders that Al-Sharaa regime orchestrated the atrocities against the Druze civilians, and that the regime gave orders to its forces and the Jihadi militias that accompanied them to carry out an extermination plan against the Druze. Consequently, all Syrian-Druze leaders rejected any contact with the Sharaa regime and started contemplating the

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idea of secession from Syria as the only strategy for the community's survival. Yet it should be noted that while these traditional leaders act out emotions after being outraged by the massacre, they have no military or diplomatic power to realize their goals. They mainly rely on Israel and hope that Israel's support is sufficient to realize their aspiration for independence or autonomy. It is also possible that some of these leaders, especially Al-Hajri, act out of self-interest of aspiring to become the head of the future Druze state. Yet, these wishful thinking may exacerbate the conflict with Damascus and bring another mass atrocities or even genocide against the community. Finally, if Israel is earnest about helping out the Druze minority, it should do so through covert, secretive channels, without turning this minority into its collaborator, otherwise, such public statement illustrates the minority as a fifth column in eyes of the Syrian society.

At the regional level, we are witnessing the bankruptcy of the nation-state in multi-ethnic Middle Eastern states, such as Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The sectarian violence combined with the rise of Jihadi regimes weaken the national sentiment and the sense of belonging to these states, while the return to tribalism and sectarianism creates a political and security vacuum, where Jihadi groups carry out atrocities against minorities with impunity. The rise of Islamist forces to power combined with the political vacuum in them has ultimately ushered in the elimination of "infidel" religious minorities in these countries, such as the Druze, Christians, Baha'is, Alawites, and Yazidis, etc. Israel and the West should have both a moral and security interest in preserving the existence of these minorities, who demand Western humanitarian intervention, given that the West showed sensitivity and expressed major concern to the violation of minority rights. Netanyahu's false or empty promises not only do not lead to the building mutual trust between Israel and ethnic minorities in the Middle East, but may even invite major calamity against a minority that is misled by empty slogans.

The massacres in the Jaraman and Swaida districts in April and July, 2025, respectively, are not inevitable. Before the massacre in Jaramana and even after it, the majority of the Druze population in Syria together with its two moderate spiritual leaders, Hennawi and Jarboa, leaned towards coming to terms with the Sharaa regime. Unfortunately, the Druze minority in Syria was caught between Netanyahu's Machiavellianism, where he sought to use the Druze minority in order to weaken the Sharaa regime domestically and internationally, and the Sharaa regime's Islamist and Jihadist ideology, who are convinced that killing members of an "infidel" minority is sanctioned by Islam and constitutes a divine decree. As a small powerless minority, the attack by the Jihadi forces against the Druze deepened the community's dependence on Israel, as their only savior and indeed Israel's attacks against the regime militias forced the latter to withdraw from Swaida. Yet, the more the Syrian Druze minority formed close connection with, and deepened their dependency on Israel and the Netanyahu government, the more they were perceived as infidels and traitors in the eyes of Sunni Muslims.

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