

# Insight into As-Suwayda's Position in the Syrian Situation

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Oct 12, 2022

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Brief Analysis

**As-Suwayda has been unstable since the onset of the Syrian revolution. The increasingly fractured political leadership in this majority-Druze region reflects how Syria's ongoing conflict has warped and splintered local governance.**

**T**he As-Suwayda governorate and its surrounding countryside is located in the southernmost corner of Syria, consisting of the mountainous Hawran region—including the *Jabal al-Arab*, or *Jabal al-Druze*—and interspersed with Syria's southern plains. A direct neighbor of the Daraa governorate, in which the first anti-Assad demonstrations were launched on March 18, 2011, As-Suwayda has long been an important player in the Syrian conflict, a reality aided by As-Suwayda's unique demographic makeup and the corresponding symbolism of *Jabal al-Arab*.

Indeed, *Jabal al-Arab* and the As-Suwayda area is inhabited by a majority Syrian Druze population, with a small Christian presence and a few nomadic Sunni Arab Bedouin tribes, although the latter have mostly settled in small villages closer to Daraa and Palmyra. According to several [studies \(https://go.shr.lc/3Cy61gT\)](https://go.shr.lc/3Cy61gT), the Druze inhabitants in As-Suwayda made up approximately 90% of the population prior to 2011, while the Christians constituted only 7%, and the Bedouins 3%.

The Druze are an ethno-religious sect spread throughout Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, with the community in Lebanon wielding most of the religious authority. According to the sect's hierarchy, a "Sheikh-Aql" is elected in each country to lead the local Druze community. Sheikh Mowafaq Tarif leads the sect's sheikhdom in Israel, while the Druze community in As-Suwayda and the surrounding area is led by three Sheikhs: Hikmat al-Hajri—the Prime Sheikh-Aql in *Jabal al-Arab*—Yusuf al-Jarboa, and Hamoud al-Hinawi.

Today, each of Syria's Druze Sheikhs has attempted to occupy a different political niche, a fact that clearly reflects the growing complexity of the Syrian conflict. While al-Hajiri is considered relatively neutral by Syrian political standards—promoting a balanced relationship with the regime and Russia while also supporting the local community against the regime and the Iranian militias—al-Jarboa is considered a close ally of Assad, and al-Hinawi occupies a middle space between the existing local powers, the regime, and Iran. These local divisions are far from unexpected.

## The Evolution of As-Suwayda's Leadership

The first organized movement in As-Suwayda was formed in 2013 by the cleric Sheikh Wahid al-Balous, who became the de facto leader of the Men of Dignity Movement in 2014, also known as the Sheikhs of Dignity. At the time, al-Balous publicly supported his people when they refused to send their sons to the Syrian fronts, as ordered by the regime, and his stance gained him significant local popularity.

Importantly, al-Balous was not initially in total opposition to the Assad regime. Instead, he publicly emphasized the desire for

consistency and status quo in As-Suwayda—including the continued presence of the regime—as long as it served the interests of the people. However, al-Balous went on to oppose the regime clearly and publicly in 2015, even going so far as to threaten Assad and his security officers with revolution in As-Suwayda. Al-Balous’ bold statements resulted in two assassination attempts against him by the regime, the second of which succeeded in killing him.

After al-Balous’ death, the once-united factions in As-Suwayda quickly divided and multiplied into numerous offshoots. One such offshoot is the **Sheikhs of Dignity Forces**, led by al-Balous’ son Laith al-Balous. Classified as an opposition faction, Laith al-Balous and his **Sheikhs of Dignity** have openly accused the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and Iran of assassinating Laith’s father. On the opposite side of the split, the **Men of Dignity Movement** (<https://go.shr.lc/3Cy61gT>) was briefly led by Sheikh Ra’fat al-Balous, and now by Abu Hassan Yahya al-Hajjar since 2017.

Beyond this main split, there are several other, less active factions now operating in As-Suwayda, most of them based on sectarian foundations and increasingly aligned with a multitude of players involved in the conflict.

Most significant active local forces in As-Suwayda

Movement	Origin and Political Stance	Activists' Description
Men of Dignity Movement	Founded in 2014 by Wahid al-Balous	Largely considered "closest" to the people of As-Suwayda looking for a neutral goal of representing the community. Few violations of human rights noted.
Sheikhs of Dignity Forces	Founded in 2015 by Laith al-Balous	A regime opposition faction linked to some violations of human rights.
National Defense Forces	Founded in 2012 by the Syrian Government; Pro-regime	A faction strongly linked to Iran and the Military Intelligence Directorate, with many violations.
Ahrar Jabal al-Arab Gathering	Opposition	Appeared in force during the demonstrations that erupted as a result of the high cost of living.
As-Suwayda Popular Resistance	Pro-regime	The faction closest to Iran and most closely coordinated with groups affiliated with the Military Intelligence Division, with numerous violations.
Al-Fahd Forces	Neutral	The first faction to advance settlements with Russia in 2015.
Al-Fajr Forces	Led by Raji Falhout; Pro-regime	Close to Iran and Military Intelligence, notorious for drug smuggling and responsible for 24 deaths in the region.

For its part, Iran’s factions guarantee the Iranian regime a strong presence in As-Suwayda through a number of means. While Russia is largely considered the guarantor and controller of the Military Intelligence Division in Syria, for example, the Military Security branch in As-Suwayda—although affiliated with the General Military Intelligence Division—is under Iran’s influence. Iran-backed factions are also heavily involved in the smuggling of captagon across the Syrian-Jordanian border, exploiting the growing divisions and occasional upheavals in As-Suwayda, and in the process causing a major border control crisis for Jordanian authorities.

In addition to Iran, As-Suwayda is socially and religiously linked to the Syrian Golan, which is controlled by Israel. As a result, there have been attempts by the Israeli Druze Sheikh, Mowafaq Tarif, to bring the Syrian Druze Sheikhs under his influence. For instance, Tarif championed the Syrian Druze community’s demand to be clearly mentioned in the Syrian constitution, advocating strongly for it during his visit (<https://npasyria.com/en/72901/>) to Moscow in February 2022. Although Tarif has not yet achieved clear results in reframing the configuration of the Israeli-Syrian Druze relationship, local sources have confirmed that several meetings have taken place in As-Suwayda and Daraa to discuss the unification of local factions—a move encouraged by Tarif, yet opposed by the Assad regime.

According to the same sources, a figure called Ahmed al-Awda—commander of the Eighth Brigade in the Russian Fifth Corps—seems to be the stumbling block preventing any mutual understanding. More specifically, locals seem to believe that the UAE is currently playing the role of mediator alongside Israel, with the two countries insisting on having Ahmed al-Awda take over the security leadership in both Daraa and As-Suwayda in the event of unification between the governorates’ factions for the purpose of expelling the Assad regime and Iran. In turn, the people of As-Suwayda have apparently rejected al-Awda, blaming him for military clashes between the local Daraa and As-Suwayda factions in 2020.

### As-Suwayda’s Current Reality

As the Assad regime continues to employ a policy of violence against its own citizens under regime control, As-Suwayda and the Druze community is facing a real crisis regarding their place in the conflict. Indeed, the governorate seems to be stuck between the hammer of the regime’s violence and the anvil of growing sectarianism and worsening living conditions—especially in view of the influx of internal refugees from other parts of Syria, doubling the demographic size of the province. Meanwhile, the Druze

community has been unable to form clear relationships with other opposition factions, especially Islamist ones, whose presence has grown across Syria.

The active local forces that have formed in the As-Suwayda region have hence developed numerous affiliations, some linked to the regime and others decidedly anti-regime. Making matters more complicated, these forces have often clashed with each other even as they try to safeguard the province against the return of ISIS, which still has cells in the area. They are simultaneously working to ward off the regime's repeated attempts to reassert its authority. The most recent clash occurred about a month ago, when opposition factions **eliminated** (<https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2022/08/as-suwayda-local-fighters-eliminate-second-pro-regime-faction/>) the Fajr Forces Movement led by Raji Falhout, a group linked to the Military Intelligence Division and Iran. Reports **indicate** (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%25D9%2581%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1-%25D9%2581%25D9%2584%25D8%25AD%25D9%2588%25D8%25B7-%25D9%2588%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B3%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585-%25D8%25A3%25D8%25BA%25D9%2584%25D8%25A8-%25D8%25A3%25D9%2581%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF-%25D9%2585%25D8%25AC%25D9%2585%25D9%2588%25D8%25B9%25D8%25AA%25D9%2587-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25B9%25D8%25AF-%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B4%25D8%25AA%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D9%2583%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA-%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B3%25D9%2588%25D9%258A%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A1>) that Falhout was forced to flee.

Today, the local community in As-Suwayda seems overwhelmingly exhausted by the major conflicts, growing violence—including incidents of kidnapping, theft, looting, and murder—and the constant interferences of the regime and other outside forces in their region. Many in the local population still refuse to send their sons into the regime's military service, especially as their grievances against Assad grow.

One notable local observer from As-Suwayda characterized opinions there as “currently rooted in despair, after the mounting economic hardship reached the point of threatening their lives, or at least their dignified lives. Therefore, the aspirations of the public have declined precipitously—from ideas about rebuilding the country or aspirations to participate in political and public life, to concerns about making ends meet.”

The interviewee noted that the opinions of local elites no longer make much of an impact on general opinion, though locals likewise lack any expectations from the Assad regime, as they “realize that the regime is completely bankrupt and no longer able to achieve anything for the benefit of the people.”

These people blame the regime for leaving As-Suwayda to fend for itself against ISIS for years, and they now resent the regime for moving most of ISIS's members from the Yarmouk camp to the Badiya As-Suwayda area. Such a move has allowed the regime to use the threat of ISIS prisoners breaking out, bolstered by the memory of devastating attacks in the area in 2018, as a tool against As-Suwayda whenever anti-regime protests erupt—a regular occurrence.

According to an As-Suwayda woman from a prominent family who now lives abroad, the people of As-Suwayda have “no positive expectations” that the regime will serve their interests. Aware that “the Assad regime is the one directing, promoting, and financing” violence in the governorate, As-Suwayda's residents have taken up the fight—both literally, and through civil means such as the “local civilian peace movement.” Still, the regime will be hard to counter through local efforts alone.

In the absence of an internal Syrian solution and amid worsening economic and living conditions, the best option for the people of As-Suwayda today may be to engage with their neighbors, Jordan and Israel. The influential Druze community in Israel, for example, could be the gateway for As-Suwayda to open a relationship with the Israelis that provides more stability for this area.

Already, local residents in As-Suwayda stress that, as it stands, the region is practically outside the scope of Syria. Case in point, a barrier in the al-Adiliya area near the Jourat al-Sheyyab intersection, while initially established as a military faction checkpoint, now essentially functions as a border crossing between one country and another—between lands securely under regime control and the unstable As-Suwayda region. Those who cross are subject to inspections, interrogations, disclosures of their identification and family background, and vehicle checks—with the end result usually being bribes or blackmail.

An activist living outside of the country likewise reflected on the responsibilities of those living abroad to those who remain in As-

Suwayda: “Their goal is to convey the voice of those inside who believe in the slogan “if no restructuring, then no reform,” that is, no reform is possible without serious change. They believe the whole world has abandoned Syrians. There is enough legal justification to justify a push for regime change, but the international community has never been serious about that.”

Indeed, international outreach is not a solution accepted by all. According to a local observer in the As-Suwayda community, some “fear [they] will be left to beg at the doors of the major countries.” Referencing the United States’ support for Israel in the face of Palestine’s “right to self-determination,” the observer expressed concern about false promises and ulterior motives from world powers attempting to get involved in Syria, while noting that much of the general public, in his opinion, looks mainly for a removal of Caesar sanctions from the United States, which they see as contributing to their economic plight. Similarly, the As-Suwayda native now abroad explained that “the people of Jabal are frustrated with all those who call themselves ‘friends of the Syrian people.’”

Nevertheless, as the situation gets more critical—both in terms of security and human rights—the people of As-Suwayda will soon find themselves facing tough questions about who to trust, as there are few signs that the area’s prospects will improve with its current fractured state. ❖

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