

A Year of Suwayda Protests Show That Assad Is No Partner

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The regime’s increasing violence against a once-loyal Druze minority is yet another reminder that “normalizing” relations with Assad will never yield the stability neighboring states crave.

On August 16, Syria’s southwestern province of Suwayda will mark one year of continuous protests against Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Led by the Druze community—which constitutes <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrias-new-protests-highlight-vulnerabilities-assads-minority-base>) 90 percent of Suwayda’s population and around <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria/#people-and-society>) 3 percent of the country as a whole—the movement has poked holes in both the regime’s sectarian mosaic and Assad’s narrative that he is the sole protector of Syrian minorities.

Thus far, the regime has opted against a full-scale crackdown on the province, instead employing intimidation, targeted assassinations, military checkpoints, and kidnappings in a bid to snuff out the movement. Although the protests are unlikely to spur Assad’s ouster, their persistence highlights two glaring facts: the regime is still struggling to exert control over the territory it supposedly holds (approximately 70 percent of the country), and the underlying factors that first spurred the protests (a poor economy, lack of political freedoms, and the proliferation of armed gangs) are all worse a year later.

In that sense, the protests serve as a warning sign to the many regional states that are working to bring Assad back into the regional fold. Given the regime’s failure to meet the needs of its majority and minority populations or even stabilize its areas of control, Assad will likely be unable to deliver on his promises to these neighbors, including their demand that he curb Syria’s massive cross-border trafficking of Captagon, weapons, and other illicit goods.

Protest Origins and Slow-Motion Escalation

When demonstrations first erupted in Suwayda in August 2023, they largely focused on addressing local economic problems and political repression. Two days before the protests began, the Presidential Palace [announced \(https://en.majalla.com/node/298041/opinion/salary-bumps-fail-quell-syria-protests-over-fuel-price-hikes\)](https://en.majalla.com/node/298041/opinion/salary-bumps-fail-quell-syria-protests-over-fuel-price-hikes) that it was doubling public wages and pensions, partly in response to worsening economic conditions (e.g., the Syrian pound lost 80 percent of its value in the previous three months). Yet the regime simultaneously slashed gas subsidies, causing diesel prices to skyrocket 180 percent.

The economic indicators have remained abysmal in 2024: the Syrian pound [sits at \(https://sp-today.com/en/\)](https://sp-today.com/en/) SYP 14,800 to the U.S. dollar (compared to SYP 46 [before the civil war \(https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/us/syria-lets-pound-float-to-save-foreign-reserves-idUSL6N0D90XS/\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/us/syria-lets-pound-float-to-save-foreign-reserves-idUSL6N0D90XS/)), real GDP is [expected \(https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/05/24/syria-growth-contraction-deepens-and-the-welfare-of-syrian-households-deteriorates\)](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/05/24/syria-growth-contraction-deepens-and-the-welfare-of-syrian-households-deteriorates) to contract by 1.5 percent, and [inflation \(https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-syr.pdf\)](https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-syr.pdf) is set to rise to 99.7 percent. Taken together, these problems have kept even basic items out of reach for the average Syrian.

Not long after the Suwayda movement formed, its demands shifted to calling for Assad’s ouster—partly due to the worsening economic outlook, but also because of the violent response from Damascus. In keeping with the regime’s old playbook for maintaining order, security personnel began using live fire to suppress the protests [early on \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4Q6JC9Aaog\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4Q6JC9Aaog) and continued this approach [well into 2024 \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/28/one-person-killed-at-anti-government-protest-in-syrias-sweida-province\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/28/one-person-killed-at-anti-government-protest-in-syrias-sweida-province).

By early summer, Damascus was using a broad range of suppression tactics. Some of these methods signaled the regime’s realization that Suwayda is a minority-dominated area whose residents were traditionally loyal to Assad but could be permanently flipped to the opposition if he orders a full-scale crackdown; others reflected the regime’s desire to keep the protests out of the headlines amid widening [regional normalization \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/year-arab-engagement-assad-has-failed\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/year-arab-engagement-assad-has-failed) efforts:

- New military governor.** On May 12, the regime [announced \(https://sana.sy/?p=2085071\)](https://sana.sy/?p=2085071) the appointment of Maj. Gen. Akram Ali Muhammad as Suwayda’s new governor—a move that many locals [viewed \(https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/05/al-assad-appoints-war-criminal-as-new-governor-of-as-suwayda/\)](https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/05/al-assad-appoints-war-criminal-as-new-governor-of-as-suwayda/) as a threat to the protest movement. Although past governors had security backgrounds as well, General Muhammad was deeply involved in the violent repression of civilians throughout the war. His selection [mirrored \(https://www.sanasyria.org/en/?p=315477\)](https://www.sanasyria.org/en/?p=315477) the August 2023 appointment of Firas Ahmed al-Hamid, another prominent intelligence official who was named governor of Tartus after [protests began to increase \(https://en.majalla.com/node/297431/politics/alawite-protest-movement-emerging-syrias-coastal-areas\)](https://en.majalla.com/node/297431/politics/alawite-protest-movement-emerging-syrias-coastal-areas) in that province and Latakia. Notably, Latakia is the home province of the Assad family’s core Alawite community, another key Syrian minority.
- Checkpoint clashes.** In June, local groups [engaged \(https://syriadirect.org/suwayda-sidesteps-a-spiral-of-violence-following-clashes/#:~:text=A%20new%20security%20checkpoint%20in,peace%20in%20the%20southern%20province.\)](https://syriadirect.org/suwayda-sidesteps-a-spiral-of-violence-following-clashes/#:~:text=A%20new%20security%20checkpoint%20in,peace%20in%20the%20southern%20province.) in armed clashes with regime forces after an intrusive military checkpoint was erected in Suwayda’s capital city. The confrontation lasted for hours and resulted in numerous injuries to both sides. After mediation by local notables, the regime agreed to keep the checkpoint in place but avoid using it to stop and question civilians. At the time, analysts [noted \(https://x.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/1805179580887507284\)](https://x.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/1805179580887507284) that the clashes were Suwayda’s first incident of this magnitude “in years.”
- Kidnappings.** Tit-for-tat security detentions and kidnappings have been on the rise and could spur escalation in the near future. One of the most prominent cases emerged on June 21 after security forces [seized \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B6%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A5%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%8A\)](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B6%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A5%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%8A) Raed al-Matni, a senior protest figure. In response, his associates kidnapped four regime security officers. Matni was [released \(https://x.com/HalabTodayTV/status/1804867504243667379\)](https://x.com/HalabTodayTV/status/1804867504243667379) a day later, and the security personnel [soon thereafter \(https://x.com/daraa_net_2020/status/1804822002290549182\)](https://x.com/daraa_net_2020/status/1804822002290549182). Although Suwayda has a [long history \(https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/10/rise-in](https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/10/rise-in)

- [kidnappings-sparks-fear-among-people-of-as-suwayda/](#)) of kidnappings, this incident highlighted how quickly events could escalate if the regime continues targeting local notables.
- **Divide and conquer.** Earlier this month, a new faction [with links to \(https://x.com/suwayda24/status/1821231588635459947\)](#) Syrian military intelligence was formed in Mafaleh and declared its loyalty to Assad. Protesters reportedly aimed to stage a demonstration in opposition to the group, but other townspeople apparently assembled between the two factions for fear of escalation. The regime has also tried to divide Druze religious leaders in Suwayda, where its top ally [remains \(https://www.alwatanonline.com/%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%B9-%D8%AA%D8%B8%D8%A7/\)](#) Yusuf Jarbou—a sheikh who pledged that the province “will not deviate from the decision of the Syrian state” during an anti-protest [speech \(https://alwatan.sy/archives/358925\)](#) trumpeted by regime-aligned media in August 2023.
 - **Election violence.** When Syria’s July 15 parliamentary elections were first announced, local protests [served as \(https://x.com/ETANA_Syria/status/1811720791945285677?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1811720791945285677%7Ctwgr%5E12b761b828f8cdbc4cdc9e618d629a4c637a1bdd%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=http://www.facebook.com/alraased/posts/pfbid0DHUQa1ZVmXpQjp5phKDGmzp3zXuy6ijM3MXNDKLZrSFbZFxFXvYb9WvWF2vSmDl\)](#) a central meeting place for Suwayda activists to [organize a boycott \(https://www.facebook.com/alraased/posts/pfbid0DHUQa1ZVmXpQjp5phKDGmzp3zXuy6ijM3MXNDKLZrSFbZFxFXvYb9WvWF2vSmDl\)](#). Once voting commenced, some protesters [burned \(https://x.com/suwayda24/status/1812551667545493584\)](#) ballot boxes while security personnel [fired \(https://x.com/alrasd_sy/status/1812761786333941888\)](#) into the crowd. That same month, many locals [participated in a separate vote \(https://x.com/suwayda24/status/1816450824647672064\)](#) to select eleven members for a new protest body called the “Political Committee of the Popular Movement of Suwayda.”
 - **Assassinations.** On July 18, protest leader Murhaj al-Jaramani [was killed \(https://syriadirect.org/murhij-al-jarmani-assassinated-a-turning-point-for-suwaydas-uprising/\)](#) while sleeping in his home, allegedly with a silenced firearm. The hit had all the hallmarks of regime involvement, and locals viewed it as an attempt to stoke fear within the movement. Jaramani led Liwa al-Jabal, a prominent militia involved in countering the rampant drug smuggling operations supported and run by the regime and its local allies, including highly publicized armed clashes in June. The day after his funeral, protesters invoked his memory by [chanting \(https://x.com/suwayda24/status/1814282037492064292\)](#), “The bullets of treachery will not frighten us.” Three weeks later, protest leader Rawad Sadiq escaped another alleged assassination attempt by unidentified gunmen.

Policy Implications

All of these trends indicate that protests are likely to continue in Suwayda. Local armed groups have shown they are willing to fight back against regime forces when they feel a red line has been crossed. Continued kidnappings, especially against high-profile individuals with broad followings, will only heighten the possibility of escalating clashes. Far from killing the movement, regime repression has stoked further anti-Assad sentiment. Damascus likely calculates that it is still too risky to launch a broader crackdown on the Druze. As a result, its policy toward Suwayda increasingly resembles its approach to neighboring Deraa, where kidnappings and assassinations are [even more frequent \(https://www.horanfree.com/archives/16157\)](#).

Ultimately, these protests hold little chance of toppling the regime, since Damascus has proven its willingness to use whatever brutal means are required to maintain control. Yet they still merit close American attention, in part because the United States and its allies have a keen interest in halting the flow of Captagon and weapons from southern Syria into Jordan [and beyond \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jordans-escalating-border-threats-amid-regional-upheaval\)](#).

One way Washington could help is by amplifying its messaging about the regime’s violent tactics, using both English and Arabic media to emphasize that such actions make a final settlement to the war ever more distant. These messages should be reinforced with sanctions against regime officials and individuals involved in suppressing the protests, with the goal of deterring a wider crackdown or, failing that, holding specific perpetrators accountable. In line with the Biden administration’s emphasis on human rights violations in Syria, this approach would also serve as a stark reminder to those states pushing for normalization—namely, that Assad’s rule is still based on extreme violence and repression, and that he is unable to stabilize Syrian territory and deliver on key asks such as curbing the Captagon trade. Ideally, these states should withhold further engagement until the regime begins making visible changes in its domestic and regional behavior.

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