



Massacres, Displacement, and Humanitarian Crisis in Sweida

The Druze, an ethno-religious group present primarily in southern Syria, have been targeted in two major attacks this year, resulting in thousands of deaths and around one hundred thousand people displaced. The violence involved extrajudicial killings, religious persecution, and systematic abuses against women. The perpetrators are linked to the Damascus interim government forces and allied militias. This fact-sheet details the massacres, their sectarian motivations, the humanitarian impact, and the urgent need for humanitarian access and protection.

Who Are the Druze?

The Druze are a religious and ethnic group numbering between 800,000 and 2 million worldwide, with most living in the Levant. Approximately 730,000 Druze live in Syria, mainly in the southern province of Sweida. Their faith blends Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and philosophy, characterized by deep esotericism and beliefs such as reincarnation.

Historically, the Druze have faced persecution and were often labeled "unbelievers" by surrounding Muslim communities. In Sweida, the Druze maintain some autonomy through a military council and three main religious authorities. The most prominent leader is Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, the community's spiritual leader.

On July 25th, 2018, Sweida Governorate was subjected to a violent attack by ISIS. The assault resulted in a horrific massacre that claimed the lives of more than 250 civilians—most of them Druze—including women and children; dozens of women and children were also kidnapped. The attack involved suicide bombings and simultaneous armed assaults on the city and its eastern countryside.

Overview of the recent massacres

This year, the Druze community suffered two waves of attacks. The first, in April and May, resulted in around 100 deaths amid sectarian violence, including acts intending to humiliate the victims.

The second, more intense wave occurred between July 13th and 19th. Human right organizations' reports indicate that at least 637 people from Sweida were killed, including 298 civilians (with 194 of them summarily executed). The true number of the victims in Sweida could be higher, but due to ongoing displacement and unidentified bodies, ascertaining the real figure is difficult. Many were executed extrajudicially—shot in the head or beheaded—using tactics reminiscent of ISIS. Witnesses report that numerous corpses remain in the streets, creating serious public health risks.

Hospitals were besieged, and essential services like water and electricity were cut off, severely hampering medical care. Executions occurred even inside hospitals. One case is Dr. Faten Hussein Hilal, a women shot while seeking services in the hospital. Dr. Lujain Alarbeed posted a message on her Facebook: *"We are trapped in the emergency department, me and the medical staff. We are being shot at inside the hospital. If you can help us, please do."*

Another example is Fawziya al-Shaarani, a 77-year-old women who resisted jihadist forces in her village of Al-Dewr until she was killed and became a martyr. She is just one instance of the strong resistance put up by the people of Sweida, within which women also played an important role.

Although the violence was initially presented within the framework of clashes between Bedouin tribes and Druze communities, the evidence indicates that the majority of massacres were perpetrated by fighters or security forces of the Damascus interim government, often with the support of foreign and non-state fighters.

Units of the Syrian Ministry of Defense, including army divisions and the General Security Force, came to the area claiming to be seeking to restore calm between the Bedouin tribes and local communities. In reality, they have been directly implicated in facilitating, endorsing, and actively participating in acts of violence, mass killings, and



widespread destruction. Jihadist groups from Homs, Idlib, and other governorates, also took part in the assaults, reportedly receiving logistical assistance – such as transportation – via government-provided buses. Video footage has surfaced showing some of these fighters wearing clothing bearing ISIS insignia.

A ceasefire began on July 19th, the agreement including the establishment of checkpoints to prevent jihadists from entering, a 48-hour security period before village entry, and the safe withdrawal of jihadist fighters responsible for the killings.

Religious and Sectarian Motivations

At the onset of the first wave of violence, a fake audio had surfaced in which a Druze cleric appeared to insult the Prophet Muhammad. Before the second wave, the Imams of several mosques called for Jihad. During the attacks, Druze men were forcibly shaved, with fighters violently removing their mustaches that symbolize Druze identity. Christian and Druze religious symbols were deliberately destroyed. Jihadists chanting "Allahu Akbar" accompanied many massacres.

Similar tactics were previously used against the Alawites in coastal Syria. Government religious incitement and failure to restrain fundamentalist forces fueled these violent attacks, including the assault on Mar Elias Church, which killed at least 30 people.

Targeted Violence Against Women

Among the atrocities, women were specifically targeted. There are testimonies of rape and nearly 100 reported kidnappings. Kongra Star has been informed of the names of 74 abducted women so far.

This pattern mirrors the violence perpetrated against Alawite women in coastal Syria and echoes ISIS's trafficking of Yazidi women. These crimes violate human rights, women's rights, and the Geneva Conventions.

This violence reflects the misogynistic policies of the Damascus interim government, which appointed men who committed femicides in positions of responsibility within the government and army. The constitution they wrote, based on Sharia law, is used to undermine women's rights.

Humanitarian Situation and Request for a Corridor

The affected areas face critical shortages of food—including flour for bread—water, medical supplies, and fuel. Water scarcity severely impacts hygiene. Combined with electricity outages and medicine shortages, hospitals and health centers are mostly non-functional.

Displacement is extensive: 51,300 people are displaced within Sweida governorate, 40,350 to Dar'a Governorate, and 950 to rural Damascus Governorate. In Salkhad District alone, 25,750 displaced people have arrived. This influx worsens the humanitarian crisis, increasing demand for essential goods and shelter.

On July 17th, the Druze spiritual leadership called for a humanitarian corridor between the Druze area and Jordan, and between the Druze area and the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES). This appeal is endorsed by DAANES, Kongra Star, and the Women's Advisory Board for Syria.

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