



EXPLAINER: Navigating Syria's Chaos

Just months after the fall of Bashar al-Assad, Syria is spiraling back into chaos. Instead of ushering in a new era of peace, the interim government is presiding over massacres of ethnic minorities by former al-Qaeda fighters, jihadist militias, and elements of its own government.

One of the victims was an American citizen and his entire Druze family. Hosam Saraya—a U.S. national from Oklahoma and graduate of Oklahoma Christian University—was executed alongside his brother, father, uncles, and cousins on the streets of Suwayda. Below, we explain the latest from Syria and what's at stake for U.S. national security.

What Happened on the Ground?

- On July 13, groups of jihadist militants joined with Bedouin tribes in an attack on the southern Syrian province of Suwayda. The most recent round of clashes [began](#) after members of a Bedouin tribe in Suwayda province set up an unauthorized checkpoint where they attacked and robbed a Druze man.
- This incident triggered a wave of tit-for-tat kidnappings and reprisals between Bedouin tribes and Druze groups. While initially a local dispute, the situation escalated when Syrian government forces deployed to the area—ostensibly to restore order—but instead [sided](#) with the Bedouin militias.
- **Government forces deployed to quell the violence [joined in waves of attacks](#)** against local inhabitants, predominantly made up of Druze and some Christians. Mortar attacks, field executions, and the burning of homes and churches killed over 594 people in just a few days. According to [reports](#), more than 93,000 people have been displaced.
- **Islamist fighters [burned churches](#) and publicly [humiliated Druze men](#)**—shaving their mustaches before killing them (the mustache is a core symbol of Druze identity and dignity). Many government forces have violent pasts, including [running torture chambers](#) and [murdering civilian activists](#).
- Rogue Druze fighters participated in some violent attacks and temporarily detained a number of Arab Bedouin militants. These individuals were [released along with Druze hostages](#) pursuant to a ceasefire agreement after the immediate threat subsided.
- Bedouin gunmen and foreign jihadist fighters aligned with the regime carried out summary executions, [home invasions](#), and mass killings. In some instances, residents were [forced off rooftops](#), and entire families—including women and children—were slaughtered in their homes.

Who Are the Druze?

- The Druze are a small, Abrahamic religious community native to the Levant, with an estimated global population of 1.2 million. Roughly 700,000 live in Syria, concentrated between Damascus and the southern city of Suwayda. 300,000 reside in Lebanon and around 150,000 in Israel, where they are full citizens and often serve in the IDF.
- While most of the global Druze population lives in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. An estimated 50,000 Druze live in the United States.

Why Were The Druze Targeted?

- Radical Sunni ideology followed by groups like HTS and ISIS considers the Druze (along with Christians, Alawites, and Shiites) to be apostates and infidels, meaning their killing is considered religiously permissible.
- The Druze are also being targeted for representing a pluralistic, moderate, indigenous alternative to jihadist rule. In Syria, the Druze resisted both Assad's tyranny and jihadist occupation for over a decade.

What Did Syria's Transitional Government Do?

- Government forces and Islamist militias—including ISIS-linked fighters— enabled the military campaign. Top regime officials wanting to assert their authority on Suwayda [planned and ordered](#) the attacks on the Druze of Suwayda.
- The same factions responsible for the [massacre](#) of minorities on Syria's coast in March 2025 converged on Suwayda. Video evidence [shows](#) thousands of jihadist and tribal fighters poured into the region to encircle the Druze community.
- Several ceasefire agreements between Druze leaders and government intermediaries were violated. The most high-profile ceasefire attempt came on July 15–16, 2025, when the Ministry of Interior brokered a truce with a Suwayda leader led by Sheikh Yousef Jarbou, known to be friendly to authorities in Damascus. That truce collapsed almost instantly.
- Government forces continued advancing, prompting Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri to reject the agreement and call for outside intervention. As the Syrian army moved to take over most of Suwayda, Israeli drones struck in a show of support for the Druze. The violence escalated further on July 17, when pro-Hijri militias retaliated against Bedouin civilians, igniting a new wave of sectarian bloodshed.
- The Syrian regime embraced a narrative that blames Druze “separatists” for the violence waged against them. In [public remarks](#) following the Suwayda massacres, President Ahmed al-Sharaa accused the Druze of provoking the violence and praised the Arab Bedouin tribes—many of whom participated in the assault— as patriotic defenders of Syrian unity. This rhetorical inversion legitimized sectarian cleansing and signaled impunity to the perpetrators.

How Has Israel Responded?

- Israel [moved](#) quickly to protect the Druze, launching limited, targeted airstrikes beginning on July 14, 2025, against jihadist and government-aligned forces in southern Syria. The Israeli Air Force struck vehicles, rocket teams, and mortar positions threatening Druze villages in Al-Mazraa, Al-Sumay, and near Suwayda city.
- On July 15, Israel expanded its strikes to include key Syrian military positions in Damascus and Daraa province—hitting command centers, artillery units, and a tank column advancing on civilian areas. These operations aimed at neutralizing immediate threats and preventing more mass killings in southern Syria.
- On July 16, facing continued Israeli pressure and Druze resistance, Syrian government forces withdrew from key positions and requested a ceasefire through backchannels. **Rather than escalating the conflict, Israel's actions imposed consequences for jihadist aggression and created the conditions for a pause in violence.**

- At a time when Israel is accused of committing “genocide” in Gaza, it’s notable that **Israel is not only not committing any genocide—but is in fact trying to prevent one.** Their actions helped defend Druze minorities from extermination.

Why Should Americans Care?

- **Christians and other religious minorities will be the next target.** If successful, the campaign against the Druze will provide a playbook for future jihadist attacks. If jihadist groups consolidate power, they will be positioned to purge religious communities that refuse to submit, including Christians, the Kurds, and others.
- **Syria’s chaos could create a terrorist sanctuary for attacks on Americans.** As with the emergence of ISIS and our experiences in Afghanistan, Syria’s permissive environment for terrorism can easily metastasize. Much like ISIS used Raqqa and Mosul to plan the Bataclan attack in Paris and bombings in Brussels, Manchester, and Orlando—jihadists could do the same from Syria if they are not contained. That would put more American lives in danger, both at home and abroad.

What Should Washington Do?

- **Seek long-term de-escalation.** The Trump Administration deserves credit for mediating the latest ceasefire, but achieving long-term stability will require a buffer zone on Israel’s border to keep terrorists away and potentially a buffer zone to ensure the security of southern Syria. Washington needs to reach an understanding with Israel on what its self-defense will require.
- **Hold perpetrators accountable.** As U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack [stated](#), the Syrian government must face consequences for abetting these atrocities. The Treasury Department should issue new designations under [EO 13894](#) (addressing human rights abuses in Syria), and publicize the names of attack participants—including commanders within formerly HTS-dominated “Public Security” forces, tribal leaders linked to the [Al-Tayrah assault](#), and relevant Interior Ministry officials.
- **Pressure the Syrian government.** President Trump generously lifted sanctions to give Syria a chance to achieve greatness—an opportunity they are sadly squandering. The Trump administration should push Al-Sharaa to change course, and pause further sanctions relief for the government until it ensures security for all minority groups and removes extremist elements from its command.
- **Collect evidence.** The U.S. should back an evidence collection mechanism—similar to the IIIM (International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism) used in prior Syria cases—to gather testimonies, satellite imagery, and forensic data from Suwayda, preserve a record of atrocities for future legal action, and pressure the Syrian government to hold actors accountable, as the government will not investigate or hold accountable its own security officials, as it recently showed by [refusing to do](#) so for those who committed the coastal massacres.