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## Conflict Research Programme

# Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society

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## 1. Introduction

The province of Sweida (also spelled: as-Suwayda) lies to the south of the capital Damascus, bordered by the province of Rural Damascus to its north, the province of Deraa to its west, the Syrian Desert and As-Safa region to its east, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to its south. It runs at 120km from its north to its south, and from east to west at 66km.

It has a total area of 6550km<sup>2</sup>, and because of its high altitude, with its highest point, Tel Qania, at 1680 metres above sea level, its climate is mountainous and cold in winter and temperate in summer. The province of Sweida is considered the natural extension of Jabal (Mount) Hauran, also known as Jabal al-Druze<sup>1</sup>.

The population of Sweida in 2018 was 547,000<sup>2</sup>, the vast majority of which is made up of those from the Druze sect, who total 91% of the population. Christians, meanwhile, make up 3% and Sunni Muslims make up 6%. The latter have Bedouin roots and mainly work in sheep farming, and they have recently begun to reside in fixed homes within residential settlements on the outskirts of cities and towns, or within independent villages<sup>3</sup>.

Much of the population of the province live in the major cities, with approximately 37% of residents living there. In recent decades, migration to these cities has increased, owing to a combination of factors including reduced rainfall and drought, and the fact that a number of villages were outside the areas deemed suitable for agriculture, particularly in the eastern and south-eastern countryside. There was an almost total absence of economic development, a decline in job opportunities, lack of resources, and poor services.

The Nabateans are considered the original inhabitants of Mount Hauran, and it remained inhabited, and prospered, during the Greek, Roman and Byzantine eras, up until the end of the Abbasid era. It was called, at the time, Jabal al-Rayan, meaning 'fertile earth'.

In the middle ages, the mountain was almost completely uninhabited, with groups of Bedouins residing there only sporadically. Modern colonisation began at the end of the sixteenth century, with successive waves of migration from Aleppo and Antakya, and later from Mount Lebanon and northern Palestine.

The terrain of Jabal Hauran is rough and mountainous, of volcanic rock, with fertile agricultural land, especially to the south and south-west; historically, this has made Jabal Hauran something of a safe haven for the Druze who migrated there from Lebanon at the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Jabal (Mount) Hauran is a Hebrew name denoting caves and grottos, while the name Jabal Druze was used by the French mandate. The French diplomatic service used it officially when giving a humanitarian pretext for their actions before the League of Nations, this pretext being 'the protection of the East's Christians and the protection of minorities'. The state of Jabal Druze declared independence on 5/4/1921, but this was refused outright by Sultan al-Atrash and the leaders of the Syrian Revolt of 1925. This was quickly followed by a refusal, too, of this new name and this demarcation, after the Independence Treaty of 1936 was signed, based on the continuing conviction among the Druze community, which remains to this day, that their interests lie in the collective national identity. This is demonstrated in the saying of Sultan al-Atrash, the Commander General of the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925: 'Religion is for God, the fatherland is for all'. This was a clear message to all Syrians on the rejection of a polarisation of the revolution, and a message that this was a revolt for all Syrians. This was emphasised by Fares el-Khoury in 1938 in a session of the Syrian Parliament, when he said 'This Mount was, and remains to be, a homeland for Arabs, all Arabs, and it is necessary for us to call it Jabal Arab and not Jabal Druze.' It was given this name by Ajaj Nuweihid at the welcoming reception of Sultan al-Atrash and the revolutionaries, returning from exile, at the Petra Cinema in Jordan in 1937.

<sup>2</sup> The source for the numbers and percentages comes from the Decision Support Office in Sweida Province.

<sup>3</sup> Villages such as al-Shaqrania and al-Muqawwis.

seventeenth century, specifically in 1685. This migration took place against the backdrop both of the Yamani-Qaysi conflict<sup>4</sup> and of the end of Ottoman hegemony. The second, and largest, wave of migration took place against the backdrop of the conflict of 1860<sup>5</sup> and the establishment of what is known as the Mount Lebanon Governorate in 1861. It was this large wave of migration that saw Jabal Hauran being referred to as 'Jabal al-Druze' for the first time. The name started to be used in Ottoman correspondence before the French diplomatic service adopted it officially until 1936.

Jabal Hauran became a primary destination for the waves of migration owing to a conviction among the Druze of the need for their sect to remain as one, tightly-bound community. This came to form an essential line of defence, bringing together families in one geographic location amidst an environment crowded with ethnic conflicts, fortified by their deep-rooted instinct for independence which opposed any external hegemony. There began to emerge as what became known as 'the armed farmers', which soon thrust them onto the stage of Syrian politics as a mediating and critical force in forthcoming pivotal periods. This was especially the case following the betrayal by Sami Pasha al-Farouq in 1910<sup>6</sup> and the execution of a number of Druze leaders, leading them to becoming a source of inspiration for the nascent national and pan-Arab movement. This is something we shall be addressing later in the paper.

However, the scarcity of arable land, and the mountainous terrain which made farming immensely difficult, created a different kind of threat to the residents of the area who had fled there in search of a new life. Precarious food security, alongside low rainfall, which was at an annual 350mm, and the scarcity of water resources, led to many decades of fierce battles with the Bedouin tribes who primarily relied on sheep farming. There were Bedouin attacks on the area which continued for around 200 years stirred by the Ottoman authorities<sup>7</sup> and at times financially supported by the Wahabbi movement against a sectarian backdrop<sup>8</sup>.

While a peace settlement in 1912 saw the end of this fighting<sup>9</sup> the tales of these struggles entered into the collective memory of future generations, through anecdotal and oral literature,

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<sup>4</sup> This refers to one of the most significant groupings in Arab tribes after the Muslim conquest, whereby the Arab tribes formed two major alliances: the Qaysis, tribes which had primarily Bedouin roots, and the Yamani, who had urban roots. The Druze, since the sixteenth century, have been both Qaysis, such as the Harmoush and Alamuddin families, and Yamani, such as the Jumblatt and Arslan families. Discord reached its peak in the military clash of the Battle of Ain Dara in 1711, which ended with a resounding victory by the Yamani. This led to the division of the leadership of Mount Lubnan between the Jumblatt family in Moukhtara and the Arslan family in Choueifat.

<sup>5</sup> The Mount Lebanon Civil War, which took place between the Druze and the Maronite Christians, lasted for twenty years between 1840 and 1860. The foreign intervention by France, Britain, Russia and Ottoman states contributed both to the triggering of the conflict and its lengthy protraction, and despite the Druze's eventual military victory, they sustained the greatest political loss and were punished severely (the exile of 1500 Druze leaders, the loss of a large part of their territory in the Mount, and the sectarian persecution they then suffered). What is known as the Mount Lebanon governorate was thereby established, and it was divided into seven districts: six for Christians and one for Druze, represented by the Arslan family, based in Choueifat. It was this which effectively led to the displacement of thousands to Jabal Hauran.

<sup>6</sup> After a long series of battles and in view of the huge loss of lives and property, as well as the depletion of agriculture, the Druze agreed to conclude a peace treaty put forward by the Turkish governor in Damascus Sami Pasha al-Farouq in 1910. It later transpired that it had been a trick, for the Druze leaders were lured in only to be executed en masse in the Midan neighbourhood of Damascus. Among these leaders was the father of Sultan al-Atrash.

<sup>7</sup> The Ottoman state tried to have the Bedouin settle in Hauran and northern Jordan to secure trade lines and the Hijaz train line from repeated gang robberies.

<sup>8</sup> In 1810, Wahhabi groups from Saudi Arabia launched an attack on Jabal Hauran with the participation of some Bedouin tribes from northern Jordan with the expressed aim of stealing wheat, but also with religious motives related to the nature of the expansionist Wahhabi movement.

<sup>9</sup> The reconciliation of 1912 brought an end to the prolonged warring between the Druze and the Bedouin tribes; the reconciliation took place in the home of Abd al-Ghufar al-Atrash in Sweida, in the presence of representative from Bedouin elders from tribes such as al-Sardia, al-Rawla and Beni Sukhr, among others. They agreed on the borders

and became a key, emotional part of the collective unconscious revolving around the importance of the preservation of land and the inspiration of ancestral exploits. At the same time, however, it led to a precarious cohabitation between the Druze and the Bedouin tribes surrounding the mountain, which was a fuse ready to ignite. This happened most prominently with what is known as the Massacre of 2000, or the Bedouin Incidents, where, in the year 2000, 23 young men were killed and 68 injured during an intervention by the Syrian Arab Army to suppress protests that had filled the streets of Sweida after a young Druze man was killed by a Bedouin Sheikh after conflict arose between them over sheep farming in the agricultural lands.

The biggest clash, however, was that which took place with the Ottoman state during the 19th century. This started with the Druze's refusal to be conscripted and hand over their weapons; they fought Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt in 1832 and 1838, who failed to bring them under his control and have them join the battle in his attempt to occupy Syria. Finally, they rebuffed successive Ottoman campaigns starting at the beginning of the nineteenth century and ending in 1910.

After a long series of battles, during which tens of thousands lost their lives, the Druze succeeded in maintaining their presence in their areas without direct submission to any external central authority.

## 1.1 The Economic Situation

Sweida is considered something of a natural museum, owing to the plethora of historical sites and monuments it houses within its borders. According to UN classifications, it holds over 700 archaeological sites; that, along with its rich natural surroundings and a temperate climate, has made the province a haven for touristic investment. There was a steady decline in tourism, however, as the Syrian conflict developed, eventually leading to the stoppage of any touristic or investment activity in the area.

The workforce, i.e. the male and female population over the age of 15, makes up approximately 72% of the population. However, only 34% of this group is actually in work, in the areas laid out in the below table:<sup>10</sup>

Sector	Number of workers	Percentage (%)
Agriculture	9867	11
Manufacturing	7617	8
Building and construction	13510	15
Hotels and restaurants	12162	14
Transportation	6890	8
Finance, insurance and real estate	2598	3
Services	34583	41
<b>Total</b>	<b>87227</b>	<b>100</b>

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for Bedouin farming land, and this was followed by the settlement of residential groups of Bedouin in the Mount in set villages such as al-Shaqrania, al-Muqawwis and others.

<sup>10</sup> Data from 2017 statistics of the Central Bureau Of Statistics: <http://cbssyr.sy/>

The majority of residents of the countryside rely on farming, whether arable or pastoral, for their livelihood, especially those living in rural areas where agricultural activity is considered the most important source of income and means of support. Individual transfers of money from expatriates is the second biggest source of family income, up from the third biggest prior to 2011; this is because of a significant increase in emigration, and because of the sharp drop in the Syrian lira against foreign exchange. Before 2011, the dollar was worth about 50 Syrian lira, but this went up to over 600 Syrian lira in 2016, meaning that it lost around 90% of its purchase power<sup>11</sup>.

The third biggest source of family income, meanwhile, is public sector work (government employment) and in the private sector, with the number of public sector employees at 27,000 and the number in the private sector at 14,000. However, that source of income has virtually vanished, with the actual value of wages having gone down by over 75% compared to 2011, owing to inflation rates which went up to 1200%<sup>12</sup>.

### 1.1.1 After 2011

The on-going Syrian conflict has cast its shadow wide, and Sweida has not been left unscathed, with increased rates of poverty and an economic situation that has been deteriorating since 2011, owing to weak economic development, a scarcity of natural resources, increased graduate unemployment, and limited financial return from education. This was confirmed by data from the Central Bureau of Statistics' labour force survey in all provinces of Syria in the first half of 2010, carried out per province. The data showed that 'Sweida has the highest unemployment of all provinces of Syria, with a workforce of 104,460, among whom 85,284 are in employment at a rate of 81.7%, with 19,159 out of work at a rate of 18.3%'<sup>13</sup>.

As armed opposition factions emerged and weapons flowed into the country in the second half of 2011, Sweida, against the backdrop of deteriorating economic circumstances, became a prospering market for smuggling, and the trade of weapons and drugs. For the first time, organised gangs started to appear with a clear and considerable influence in the province, including control over all areas of economic life; their trade in basic popular goods (diesel oil, gasoline, natural gas, and basic food items); armed robberies and looting; and kidnapping and human trafficking. It was not possible to shut down these sources of income, despite their illegality. Significantly, there are no actual statistics or numbers we can rely on, nor can we make an approximation of this data, but it remains important to describe the impact and the ramifications of these issues, which included a breakdown in safety and security, and a subsequent increase in migration rates to an unprecedented level. This became particularly apparent with the escalation in rates of ransom kidnappings. These began in February 2013 with the kidnapping of Nasser Adel Jammoul, who was found dead after negotiations to get him back fell through, with the gang who had taken him having demanded that his family pay a total of 10 million Syrian lira. This incident led to an outbreak of large protests<sup>14</sup>, which held the security forces responsible for his kidnap and murder, as a result of their neglect. Such operations continued at an increasing rate, which reached 31 kidnappings per month by

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<sup>11</sup> <https://bit.ly/2OUAQDu>

<sup>12</sup> <https://bit.ly/38cdL6S>

<sup>13</sup> <https://bit.ly/33R9NgW>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJNUROXtS2U> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yx8uclK6oFI>

2017<sup>15</sup>. Sources estimate that the value of ransoms paid in Sweida between the start of the kidnappings in 2013 up until 2017 exceeded 1.3 billion Syria lira<sup>16</sup>.

We can here observe a number of phenomena which arose as a result of this new prevailing situation:

- a) The breakdown of values and social norms, the decline of moral values, and the spread of chaos in all areas of life and the inability to bring the situation under control.
- b) The exacerbation of the shadow economy<sup>17</sup>, which began manifestly from 2005 onwards with Syria's transformation into a market economy; weak levels of oversight; the absence of accountability; financial and administrative corruption; and what this led to in terms of the accumulation of illegitimate wealth from smuggling operations, illegal employment, and the exploitation of state resources in illegal businesses. The reports that were published by the previous Deputy Prime Minister of Economic Affairs, Abdullah al-Derderi, indicated that the informal sector made up 40% of the overall Syrian economy<sup>18</sup>. Meanwhile, the Assistant Minister for the Economy and Syrian Trade Ghassan Habash takes the view that this percentage could be much higher, up to 60%<sup>19</sup>. This led to the emergence of an opportunistic, well-off stratum of society which perpetuated existing dishonest and criminal practices in society.
- c) The presence of such groups led to a reticence on the part of local holders of capital, and a slowing of investment, the property market, and buying and selling also dropped because of people's fears of robbery and theft that had become widespread.
- d) The emergence of an ultra-rich class, leading to an increasing gap between rich and poor, the shrinking of the middle class, the backbone of society, and the risk of its breakdown.

## 1.2 Population Changes

There was a significant increase to the population with the waves of displacement that took place from 2011 onwards. The rate of displacement increased steadily with the upsurge of violence and besiegement that was witnessed in across the conflict-ridden areas, in particular in the provinces of Deraa and Rural Damascus. This meant that people were primarily displaced to the two cities of Sweida and Shahba.

Displacement to the province reached its peak in 2013, with the number of internally displaced reaching an approximate 300,000, according to members of relief organisations. Meanwhile, the number of people receiving humanitarian aid reached, at their peak, around 95,000 people, according to Red Crescent lists. People had been displaced from a number of different Syrian provinces, with particularly high numbers coming from the provinces of Deraa and Rural Damascus, and the southern neighbourhoods of the capital Damascus. The chart below shows displacement rates per province, the data coming from a report by the organisation Bayti Ana Baytak ('My House is Your House'), published on 15/7/2013<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://bit.ly/2PeSzos>

<sup>16</sup> <https://bit.ly/2Lq2zdi>

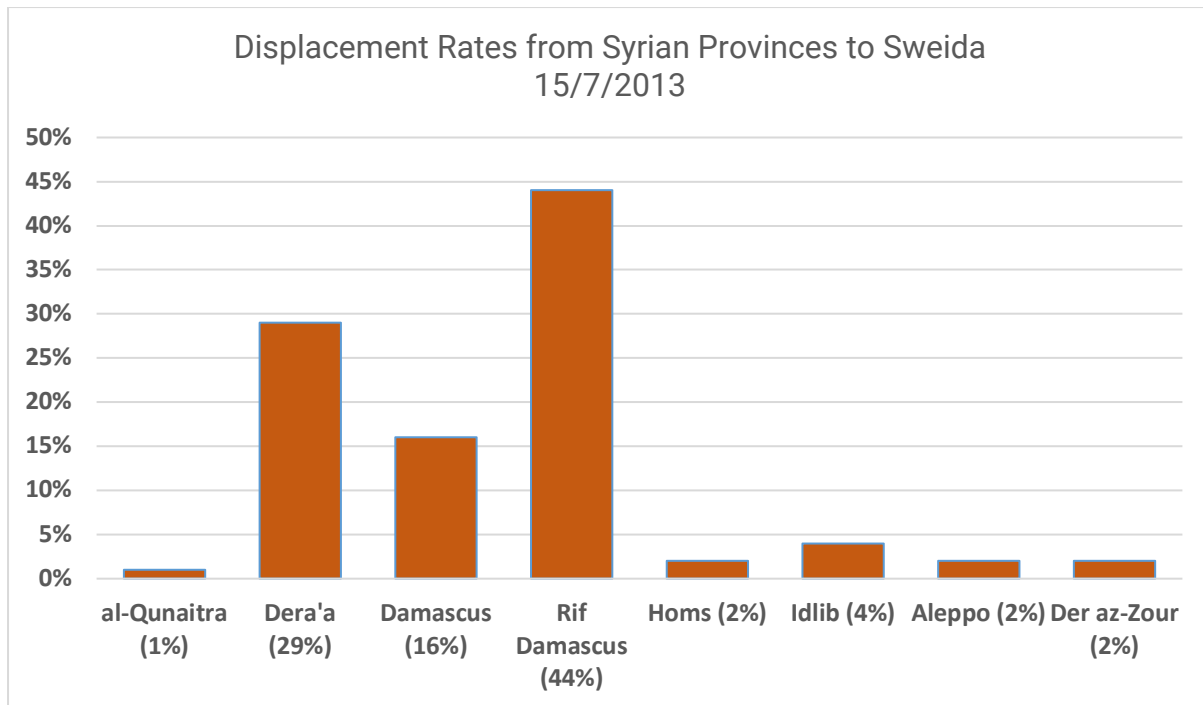
<sup>17</sup> A 'shadow economy' is the sum of all illicit economic activity which takes place outside of the law set by the state, and which does not abide by its standards, regardless of whether this activity is morally or socially legitimate or not.

<sup>18</sup> <https://bit.ly/2LqeDeB>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> <https://bit.ly/2LFZNkr>





This movement took place alongside huge internal displacement within Sweida itself, from the rural areas to the cities. This was a result of a number of factors: a deterioration in economic circumstances; the security risks from the eastern boundaries of the province where ISIS were positioned, leading to displacement from the villages of al-Salmiya and al-Haqaf; and the threats on the western boundaries of the province, bordering Deraa's eastern countryside, which were controlled by armed factions, the most prominent of which was Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Omari Brigades. These factions supported Bedouin armed groups in the battle of Dama<sup>21</sup> and Deir Dama on 16/8/2014, a battle which led to a new wave of internal displacement. This was a clear consequence of the state of chaos that was brought about by this battle, and the resulting increase in incidents of kidnappings and killings, especially in the border villages. It should be noted that rural-urban internal migration had been taking place more generally for many decades, owing to the slow pace of development in the Syrian countryside.

Perhaps the largest waves of internal displacement in the province took place after the ISIS attacks of July 2018 in the villages of Sweida's eastern countryside. ISIS carried out atrocious massacres, killing over 260 people and wounding hundreds, and causing the displacement of approximately 600 families. These numbers come from a social survey team which was formed after the massacre as an initiative set up by organisations, local teams and civil working groups from the province.

## 2 Mapping the Forces in Sweida Province

A plethora of actors and authorities exist in Sweida which can be considered to together make up all the active and influential forces in the province, either in the relationships between

<sup>21</sup> <https://bit.ly/388EKQX>

individuals or in their relationship to the government and the religious authorities. These forces include local authorities (religious and socio-familial authorities), and official governmental and security actors. We will examine these forces below in some detail.

## 2.1 Religious Leadership

The supreme religious authority of the Druze sect, in countries with a large Druze population, is the spiritual leadership known as the 'al-Aql Sheikhdom'. As an institution, it resembles in its functions and duties the Vatican in Christianity, or the institution of *al-Azhar* among Sunni Muslims. However, the position was not occupied until the beginning of the fifteenth century (the first one being Prince Badr al-Din al-Andari) after the clash with Christian rule (the Shihabi dynasty) in Mount Lebanon began, as a political and social necessity of the presence of a Druze religious authority opposite the Christians' Maronite Church. Despite the distancing of the Druze Aql Sheikhdom, in terms of the essence of their creed, from political or social work (i.e. anything temporal rather than freeing oneself to the spiritual), the results of the successive clashes and hostilities in the centuries that followed made it into a religious, political and military authority all at once. It was also forced to enter the fray as one of the key players in the ongoing conflict between the great powers surrounding Lebanon.

In Jabal Hauran in Syria, the first person who called for the appointment of an Aql Sheikh was the then-leader of Jabal Hauran, Hamdan al-Hamdan, in 1803, in order for a trusted person to take charge of the affairs of the sect. The person appointed was Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hijri, owing to his religious distinction, and his town, Qanawat, has been one of the centres of spiritual leadership since that time. Following changes in Jabal Hauran's political map, with new waves of displacement in 1860, and the ascent of the Atrash family, three other Sheikhs were appointed, who worked together and had their centre in Ain al-Zaman.<sup>22</sup> In the city of Sweida, which is the official headquarters of Druze religious affairs, the new sheikhs were given the title of 'spiritual leaders,' before this was changed to 'Aql Sheikhs'. This title has remained as such till this day, and the three current Aql Sheikhs are Sheikh al-Hijri, Sheikh Jarbou' and Sheikh al-Hanawi. The position is often passed down to sons, or within the one family, without considering qualification, religious knowledge or social standing.

Despite the separation that has taken place over modern human history between religious power and political power, and the fall of the theory of theocracy (divine mandate) to give rise to the theory of the social contract, the apparatus of tyranny continued to be based upon the alliance of these two powers and their mutual exchange of interests.

Even though the Aql Sheikhdom does not have direct, effective authority over its community, its presence and the scope of its influence has always been dependent on its close its proximity to a strong ruling power, whether a familial or a central foreign power. It should be noted that there is no absolute authority among the Druze, particularly with regard to major confrontations, which is exemplified by the people's refusal to follow decisions by the Aql Sheikhdom on more than one occasion. Perhaps the most prominent of these is from the time of the French mandate, when the Aql Sheikhdom stood against Sultan al-Atrash in the first revolt of 1923, and even ordered the religious exclusion<sup>23</sup> of anyone who interacted with him;

<sup>22</sup> This is a religious centre, headquarters and a holy place in the province of Sweida.

<sup>23</sup> This is the most severe punishment that can be dealt to members of the Druze sect; it is effectively kind of a social isolation (which will be mentioned later) by the community of the person being punished. Anyone who violates the

this did not stop, however, the participation of thousands in the revolt just days after it was launched.

The Aql Sheikhdom's support of the ruling authorities would not appear odd, therefore, especially once the authorities began to appoint the Aql Sheikhs themselves through their security apparatus; this took place unofficially, with appointments having previously been made through the consensus of the family elders. This alignment/support became evident with the 2011 uprising, and would become the reason behind the 2014 split of the Karama Sheikhs ('Sheikhs of Dignity') Movement, which will be spoken about later in the paper, and its open rejection of the positions of the official Aql Sheikhdom, which set a new precedent set among the Druze religious men.

It is worth noting that the Aql Sheikhdom itself were not all on the same page/in agreement with regards their relationship with the state, or with their stance towards the on-going conflict in Syria; rather there was relative divergence in their positions. This goes back to a number of reasons, at the forefront of which is a specificity related to an internal division which arose in 2014, when Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri named himself 'the first Aql Sheikh', in an attempt to nullify the role of the other two Aql Sheikhs, Jarbou' and al-Hanawi, and take precedence over them. In response to this, Jarbou' and al-Hanawi announced the Ain al-Zaman (the most religiously significant place and their headquarters) as the home of the Druze sect. This pushed Sheikh Hikmat, in turn, to proclaim himself as the spiritual leader of the Druze and attempt to oust his two peers, with his justification being that President Bashar al-Assad wished for this to be so. This conflict had come to the fore after the intervention of the political and security establishment in the appointment of Sheikh Hikmat to succeed his brother, Sheikh Ahmad al-Hijri, who died after a car accident in March 2012. The positions he had taken before his death were characterised by taking several steps back, as an ally to the regime towards the population of the Syrian uprising.

This division was deepened by the continued attempts by the regime to elevate the position of Sheikh Hikmat and propagate his image as the spiritual leader of the Druze. They did this by acquiescing to his demands for the benefit of the Druze community, in order to perpetuate the perception of Sheikh Hikmat as the predominant authority and a singular channel to the ruling establishment.

Meanwhile, in response to the regime's attempts to side-line Jarbou' and al-Hanawi and its several, failed attempts to create other loyalist religious authorities, the two Sheikhs began to approach their community, increasingly, through the provision of humanitarian assistance and medical services to those in need. They launched a women-led social solidarity program; set up student scholarships; established a charitable medical dispensary and centre for free medical consultations; and opened up to signing partnerships with civil society organisations which did not move in the orbit of the regime, giving them social cover/backing, signing partnerships and implementing projects with them. The largest of these partnerships was that with the organisation Bayti Ana Baytak, in the implementation of a livelihoods project entitled 'Small Grants for Families Affected by ISIS Attacks'.

These measures amounted to a historic shift in the management of the Druze Endowment Fund (which had funded these initiatives). This Fund is neither well-organised, institutionalised, nor transparent, and had previously been run by individuals in an unsophisticated manner up till that point. It had, moreover, long engendered resentment and

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isolation will be given the same punishment. If he is a cleric, he is not allowed to go to places of workshop (al-Majles), and if he dies, it is forbidden to pray at his funeral.

been subject to various accusations by the Druze community at large. The new measures were taken after Sheikh Yousef Jarbou' became one of the three leaders of the Aql Sheikhdom, in an attempt to meet long-held societal demands. This marked the start of the institutionalisation of Sweida city's Endowment Fund, through the establishment of several management committees, a financial bureau, and a media bureau, and the publication of annual reports, which were made available to everybody.

We can therefore observe how the spiritual Sheikhdom has been experiencing an acute structural crisis between its three poles/leaders, in the context of insufficient tools with which to unite the Druze community under its banner.

It should be clarified at this point that the Endowments Ministry did not have a clear role in Sweida province, and there was not a directorate as there was in the other Syrian provinces. Rather, there is only an endowments office run by a single person who took on 'the role of Sheikh, Mufti, jurist and investigator,' according to one of the Imams who were dismissed from their posts following their societal positions in keeping civil peace between the Sunni Bedouins and the Druze.

## 2.2 Social Authorities (Traditional Leaders, Elders, Family Leaders)

Jabal al-Arab was under the leadership of the Hamdan clan across two centuries, namely between 1685 and 1869, since the first waves of migration to the area. However, with the shifts in population between 1840 and 1860, new centres of power materialised, and the Atrash clan emerged as an alternative holder of power. Ibrahim al-Atrash, the son of the clan's founder Ismail, was able to drive the Hamdan clan out of the region in 1861.

During the years of Ottoman occupation of the Mount, the leadership of the Hamdan clan ended; this clan had had the upper hand in the settlement of farmers who supported them and those coming from different areas in the Mount, and they had likewise led the resistance against the armies of Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt and repelled Bedouin tribes seeking water and graze land. They also participated in the consolidation of the presence of the Druze and their eventual settlement in the area.

The Hamdan clan withdrew to Basr al-Harir in Deraa. After a period, the Amer clan sheikhs of the north of Jabal al-Arab mediated and a reconciliation was agreed upon in Shahba in the presence of the new leader of the Mount, Ibrahim al-Atrash. It was agreed that the Hamdan family could return to the Mount on the condition that they did not all assemble in one place. The only impact of the shift from the Hamdan clan to the Atrash clan on the social and economic situation was that the Atrash princes took over the collection of taxes for the Ottoman state, while beforehand this had been done by employees from outside the area, appointed by Astana. This led to increased resentment on the part of the farmers towards the Atrash clan, owing to the deepening of feudal tyranny; this paved the way for what was known as the 1889 Ammiya revolt in Jabal Hauran against the Atrash clan, after which the farmers were able to take possession of one quarter of the land on which they worked.

This new distribution led to the emergence of new centres of power, revolving round polarisation of clans and *ben'amiya* agreements<sup>24</sup> (alliances which bring together families related to one another by blood or by marriage) for shared protection between the allied

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<sup>24</sup> This comes from the Arabic word for 'cousin'.

families, laying the foundations for the tribal arrangement which is still in place to this day. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the following leading powers have emerged:

- a. The emirate of the Ura of Ibrahim al-Atrash then Shibli al-Atrash, including the southern part of Mount Salkhad and al-Quraya
- b. The area of al-Riashana in the east under the leadership of the Nassar clan in Sala.
- c. The area of the Huneidi clan in the east whose base is al-Majdal.
- d. The area of the Amer clan in the north with a centre in Shahba.
- e. The area of the Azzam clan on the borders of al-Lajjat in Ariqa.
- f. The area of al-Halabiya in al-Luwa' under the leadership of Ezz al-Deen with its base at Lahitha.

Although the concept of 'the state' began to crystallise during the first third of the twentieth century, familial power and social leadership continued to assert itself and play a role in society. This was far removed from the religious authority, as manifested by the Aql Sheikhs, who did not differ from any other religious authority in considering that people being inward-looking and wrapped up in their teachings was an advantage, and [changing this] should be off limits (they would not give this up easy). Traditional leadership was able to play a crucial social role, in the resolution of conflict, mediation in societal disputes, and the communal exclusion of anyone who disrupts social peace, and those who do not defer to the mediation, which is based on the realisation of rights and renouncing revenge after concluding the peace, something known as 'Aqd al-Raya'<sup>25</sup>. 'Communal exclusion' is effectively a form of social isolation, whereby members of the community must cut off all forms of social relations with the person being disciplined. This involves not greeting him, not sharing food with him, partaking in neither his celebrations nor his commiserations, and not marrying into his family.

Such familial authority continued to play an active and positive role in society, even as the Syrian state took shape and its judicial and executive institutions developed. Nevertheless, Ba'ath rule began to embed itself in the centre of society, with the aim of controlling it; it did this through the creation of alternative, parallel, and competing societal forces, both backed by, and loyal to, the state. This was with the aim of undermining the authority of the family itself, and the Ba'ath rule worked to break down its bases, either through the use of privileges to buy loyalties, or through intimidation, ensuring their hegemony over the familial authority, and the latter's obedience to them, after they calcified the tribal principle and quashed the moral current running through it.

It is this which explains the positioning of the leaders with the regime at the outset of the 2011 uprising, with the exception of the small minority among them who openly declared their rejection of the regime's actions. The most prominent of whom was Sheikh Abu Mu'een Jamal Huneidi (the Huneidi family are leaders of the western area bordering Deraa province) who welcomed large numbers of those displaced from Deraa into his home. He also later headed up the 'Social Committee for National Work,' which was a safety valve for the Mount through its good relations with the leaders of Sahel Hauran in Deraa province, relations which were invested in to quickly bring an end to strife which had flared up between the Sahel and the Mount. However, such positions led Sheikh Huneidi to be subject to several assassination attempts. His stances were shared by the leader of the area of al-Halabiya, Jamal Ezz el-Din.

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<sup>25</sup> This is the name for a social custom denoting reconciliation in cases where somebody is killed, between the family of the perpetrator and the family of the person killed. This is in order to prevent the dragging out of revenge attacks and further bloodshed. A white flag is raised as a sign of peace as it presented to the family of the victim, who in turn make a knot within this as a sign that they have accepted the conclusion of peace and pledged to not to seek revenge. This takes place in front of a large number of people and clan elders, and normally a community or religious dignitary is appointed to act as the guarantor of this agreement.

This position did not help him when he was kidnapped by Jabhat al-Nusra in Deraa province with sixteen other men in the middle of 2012. The fate of these individuals remains unknown to this day.

## 2.3 Governmental (Service) Institutions

Syria's governing system is typified by high levels of corruption, which affected all service institutions to varying degrees prior to 2011, as was reflected in the quality, or lack thereof, of these services. After 2011, however, they exacerbated still further, alongside an unprecedented increase in the level of corruption.

### 2.3.1 The Health Sector

The health sector, like the other service sectors, has suffered from a shrinking budget as a result of the financial cost of the war. This has been reflected in the services provided to citizens in the public sector, with medicine shortages, including emergency medicines, a large quantity of medical machinery falling into disrepair owing to lack of maintenance, and rampant administrative and financial corruption in all sectors of the state.

#### 2.3.1.1 Public Health Sector Before 2011

According to a statement by the health chief of Sweida to the website *Sweida City* on 12/4/2010<sup>26</sup>: 'The Sweida Health Directorate has a number of departments which offer health services to residents, such as:

- The Department of Primary Healthcare: Services are offered to medical dispensaries and medical points. There are approximately 90 medical points and centres, which provide vaccinations, reproductive healthcare, and diabetes medication as part of the national diabetes program, whose patients are approximately 7,000 in the province. These centres also provide medication for chronic illnesses, including Leishmaniasis and Brucellosis), as well as health education services.
- The Department of Medical and Technical Education and Training: This department conducts scientific training courses within the directorate for doctors, nurses and all health sector workers, as well as courses outside the province.

#### 2.3.1.2 Public Health Sector After 2011

Data from Sweida Province's Urban Observatory<sup>27</sup> comparing 2011 to 2018, as shown in the table below<sup>28</sup> illustrates the following:

- 1- No health centres or medical points were set up between 2011 and 2018;
- 2- A staff shortage for both doctors and nurses in Sweida, alongside a population increase as a result of displacement and the return of residents of the province from areas of conflict.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.sweidacity.com/article192.html>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/swaida.mouhafaza/posts/2604478766290771/>

<sup>28</sup> The information in the table was taken from an employee the Da'im Qarar Office in Sweida who preferred to remain anonymous.

Health Centres in Sweida Province				
Year	Centre Level	Number of Health Centres	Number of Nursing Staff	Number of Doctors
2018	A	67	519	41
	B	15	243	46
	C	10	308	45
2011	A	67	539	46
	B	15	276	53
	C	10	394	79

- 3- No hospital was set up, nor foundations for hospitals built, with the exception of Sala Hospital, which has been 'in progress' since 2011. The current delay in completing Shahba Hospital, work on which began sixteen years ago, in 2003, is the plainest example of the dire reality of Sweida's healthcare provision, and the pervasiveness of corruption. The website *Snack Syrian* published the following on 20/3/2019, quoting from Tishreen newspaper: 'The report on the provisional receipt of Shahba Hospital in Sweida Province, which has taken sixteen years to date, demonstrates the poor implementation of construction and the variation from the existing plans in the original contracts.'
- 4- There is an acute shortage of specialised doctors, especially surgeons, as well as a shortage of technical assistants. Increases in certain other indicators are small and do not align with actual changes. This is the result of a number of factors, the most significant being:
  - a. Reduced wages;
  - b. Leaving the area for work with better conditions, or being displaced;
  - c. Dismissals from work because of non-enrolment in conscripted or reserve army or for political reasons

Hospitals in Sweida Province											
Year	# of Hospitals	# of Beds	# of Doctors in Service	# of Surgeons	# of Resident Doctors	# of Nursing Staff	# of Nursing Personnel	# of Technical Assistants	# of Misc. Staff	# of Operating Theatres	# of Ambulances
2011	2	431	212	78	83	875	63	398	95	17	22
2018	3	534	266	46	108	995	89	380	217	21	30

### 2.3.1.3 Private Health Sector

There are three hospitals in the governorate of Sweida– modest both in terms of intake capacity and number of departments – owned by the private sector, namely Anaya Hospital, al-Salam Hospital and al-Mazraa Hospital. These can be characterised by increased treatment costs, in the context of reductions in income and a significant rise in poverty levels among residents.

### 2.3.2 The Education Sector

Sweida's education sector, meanwhile, can be characterised by the following:

- Shortages in teaching staff, as a result of:
  1. Emigration;
  2. Dismissal because of non-enrolment in conscripted or reserve army, or for political reasons<sup>29</sup>;
  3. Reduced wages, with wages falling to 300 Syrian pounds (\$0.50) per class period for specialised teachers and 180 Syrian pounds (\$0.28) per class period for non-specialised teachers<sup>30</sup>;
  4. Administrative corruption (nepotism), resulting in the employment of unqualified teachers;
  5. Lack of safety on the roads leading to certain remote villages, as well as exorbitant transportation costs.
- School infrastructure:
  1. No schools built since 2011, with even renovation projects having been almost entirely stopped;
  2. Increase in class size, up to 45 students per class, partly the result of displacement to the area; this is incompatible with the new curricula which are based on active educational strategies (student group work).
- Facilities:
 

The Education Ministry's budget was cut by half, impacting the facilities providing, most significantly:

  1. Heating: Severe shortages in fuel meant students were forced to use blankets to protect themselves from the cold. The Sweida News Network (S.N.N.) reported on 25/1/2019: 'The students of the Essam Harb School have been forced to rely on [blankets]'<sup>31</sup>. It should be noted that this school is one of the top schools in Sweida city.
  2. Electricity outages: This has prevented educational equipment from being used, especially in female arts schools, where practical lessons have been cancelled owing to a lack of generators with which to power sewing machines.
  3. Increased costs of secondary school textbooks and exam paper shortages: This led a number of local organisations to set up campaigns to make up for this shortage, such as the campaign launched by Bayti Ana Baytak, *Nuskhat Kutubak Min 'Andi* ('your books are on me')<sup>32</sup>.
  4. Corruption in the distribution of educational aid from international organisations, with only a small amount actually reaching the student body.
- Safety:
  1. Prevalence of drugs in schools;
  2. Prevalence of violence; students' possession of 'white arms' (knives); an increase in sexual harassment of girls by groups of men at the school entrances; a lack of protection for girls except for some social initiatives
- Some of the results of this situation are:

<sup>29</sup> The Prime Minister decided to dismiss 185 teachers, 71 of whom were from Sweida, because they did not enlist in the regime's reserve forces <https://bit.ly/2LpamI7>

<sup>30</sup> Data from interviews with a mathematics supervisor in the Department of Education in Sweida.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.swaidasnn.com/2019/01/45534-24.html>

<sup>32</sup> <https://bit.ly/2Pbw03G>



1. A steady increase in drop-out rates at both preparatory and secondary levels, with non-implementation of compulsory education laws as a result of the prevailing state of chaos, and the lack of incentives to commit to school owing to the dearth of job opportunities for graduates, and the obstruction educational horizons.
2. The resistance of a number of families to mixed-sex education, out of concern for girls' safety and a fear that they will be dragged into detrimental behaviours (such as drug use); this has, in some cases, led to girls being prevented from going to school entirely.

### 2.3.3 The Judicial System

Perhaps the clearest example of the breakdown in state sectors is what took place with regards to the judicial establishment. It had already been a target of the regime's apparatus of oppression prior to 2011, after which the situation worsened considerably. The enforcement of judicial rulings in civil law was dependent on the approval of the security services; as for criminal law, judicial rulings cannot be enforced owing to the police's inability to arrest wanted persons. Likewise, the security establishment's extending protection to those who were convicted who had collaborated with them, meant that the judicial rulings against them were unenforceable. This robbed the judiciary of its gravitas/authority/majesty. The judicial decisions were therefore enforced when brought against ordinary citizens, while perpetrators of serious crime, and their associates, would be immune to the legal process and became, effectively, above the law.

These factors have contributed to the diminished trust/perception in the integrity/impartiality of the Syrian judiciary. In addition to this, a large number of people were unable to take part in the official judicial system out of fear of detention, either because they were wanted by the regime's security establishment, or because they were wanted for military service. These elements contributed to a re-emergence of the tribal justice system, despite the regression of tribalism more generally, as opposed to the religious/confessional court system, whose laws and bodies are clearly written out, in reliance on Druze religious laws, and which falls under the authority of the official judicial system. The tribal justice system, however, does not have a fixed body, legal reference, or clear texts, but rather relies on customs and traditions.

Below are some of the most prominent examples of the return of tribal justice:

- A conflict resolution committee operating within the Druze community was set up on the decision of Aql Sheikh Jarbou' at the beginning of 2018, in order to resolve familial and interpersonal disputes arising out of cases of assaults and theft. This is done by bringing together the quarrelling parties in what is known as 'a justice session', whereby dues are paid, either material or immaterial, by mutual consent.
- Temporary/*ad hoc* committees are formed by the mutual agreement of the two conflicting parties – committees which include elders, sheikhs and local faction leaders as the executive party. The committee is disbanded following the completion of its duties.
- A tribal committee was set up in order to issue rulings, especially death sentences. This committee came about as a result of what is known as the *Tarsh al-Dam*

document<sup>33</sup>, issued in May 2016, signed by a number of elders, leaders and families. However, this was not able to be implemented; besides the fact that not all families agreed to it, the diminished role of the tribes in the life of Druze robbed the initiative of its effectiveness. On the contrary, numerous cases of violent, bloody retribution took place outside of the framework of the *Tarsh al-Dam* document, and did not provoke a reaction even from the official state judiciary. [For example], one of the leaders of the security groups in Sweida city killed three people and threw their bodies into the Mashnaqqa roundabout<sup>34</sup> after he accused them of kidnapping his daughter. Likewise, those accused of killing the leader of the Karama Sheikh Forces, Wissam al-Eid, were field-executed without any recourse to tribal justice, and their bodies were found in the street.

## 2.4 Military Forces (Militias and Armed Factions)

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, a number of security forces and military factions, have emerged in the Sweida, in addition to the pre-existing formal military and security forces that were present before 2011. This section highlights these emerging powers and analyses their impact on conflict dynamics in the province.

### 2.4.1 Pro-Regime Militias

The peaceful protest movement's emergence in Sweida can be seen clearly with the Sultan Square protest of 14/4/2011, and the Shaala Square protest of 17/4/2011, which coincided with the anniversary of Syrian independence. Both these protests were suppressed by what are known as *shabiha*, (meaning 'thugs') in the pay of the regime. Organised groups were formed which were able to quickly crack down on protests across the province, especially in the cities of Sweida, Shahba and al-Qariya. This was done by the security forces, which employed the regime narrative of protecting minorities from the Islamist *takfiri* threat, the sectarian card, and using the notion of the war on terrorism. The regime took advantage of people's poverty, ignorance and marginalisation, and the desire of some to exercise power and authority (following them as an example) having long been downtrodden. 'Security cards' were distributed, which effectively gave the hold the green light to do as he pleases without concern for the law; this included cutting in front in queues for bread and gas, damaging public property, and taking up pavements with commercial markets. This group of young men then became a tool of the security establishment in the suppression of protests, and were fuel for the front lines, through the formation of military factions and militias which became reserves for the army. This started with the formation of popular committees but developed into the creation of new militias, as shown in the table below:

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<sup>33</sup> 'Tarash al-Dam' (meaning 'the spilling of blood'): This is a tribal document for holding to account those implicated in kidnappings, murder, and attacks on female relatives and property in Sweida, in order to prevent revenge killings by the families of those executed; this document should be signed by all families in the region.

<sup>34</sup> <https://bit.ly/385llLn>

Name of Militia	Allegiances	Comments
<b>National Defense</b>	The regime, with good relations with the Lebanese Hezbollah	Largest armed group in Sweida, was overcome with chaos and dropout from its ranks.
<b>The Syrian Socialist National Party</b>	The regime, with good relations with the Lebanese Hezbollah	Highly disciplined and organized, enjoys party hierarchy.
<b>Ba'ath Brigades</b>	The regime	Chaotic and suffers from lack of structure and poor leadership
<b>Al-Bustan Association</b>	The regime, with good relations with the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Syrian Socialist National Party	Funded by businessman Rami Makhlof, the cousin of President Bashar al-Assad, was recently disbanded after leaks of conflict between Assad and the Makhlof family.
<b>Home Guards</b>	The regime	Armed local group in Sweida city and most villages of the province, founded by Nazih Jarbou' the son of former Aq/ Sheikh Hussein Jarbou'
<b>Tawhid Party</b>	Former Lebanese deputy Wi'am Wahhab (close to the Syrian regime)	Did not gain societal acceptance (and does not appear except at times of tension).

Alongside these groups and militias, there are also armed clan-based groups, of which the most prominent is that of the Na'im clan, which make up the largest family in Sweida city. The leadership of this group is linked to Sweida's military security branch. There are also security groups contracted with security branches, and regime forces from the Syrian army, namely the Fourth and Fifteenth Divisions, as well as security groups linked to the security office of the Fourth Division, and local cells linked to Hezbollah. More recently, security groups have arisen which are linked to Russian forces, which sought to recruit from existing groups and militias, aiming to bring them over to their most prominent military formation, the Fifth Legion. They were able to recruit people on the basis that they would settle the affairs of those in trouble with the law and those wanted for military service. Iran, meanwhile, through Hezbollah, directly established and funded security groups and militias, making use of Hezbollah's good relations with the Military Intelligence Directorate. The Military Intelligence Directorate controls the drugs smuggling routes across Sweida's borders with Jordan (one of the most important sources of funding), provides logistical and financial support to the National Defence, and seeks to exploit the on-going conflict between the regime's security cells and 'al-

Sharian al-Wahad' groups (which we will touch on later) to offset the obstacle presented by al-Sharian on the drugs route towards Jordan<sup>35</sup>.

### 2.4.2 Civil Protection Factions and Factions under Religious Leaders

In the second half of 2012, the Rijjal al-Karama Movement was set up, under the leadership of Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous. It was established, in part, in reaction to the religious authority's clear siding with the regime, and was also a response to the predominance of chaos, abuses and corruption left behind by militias loyal to the regime, which had started to threaten the breakup of society and of moral values. The Movement developed a series of slogans, most prominently 'the protection of land and women,' 'the protection of the guests to our province,' 'their dignity is from our dignity,' and 'Syrian-on-Syrian violence is wrong'. They stood against the conscription of Druze men in the regime army, and pledged to protect peaceful protests and demonstrations, as shown in their protection of the '*hatamtuna*' campaign (meaning 'you have trampled us'). This campaign was launched at the start of 2016 and took the form of demonstrations and student sit-ins, in protest against the dismissal of two teachers and two employees from their jobs because of their refusal to be enrolled in military service, and others' opposition of Syria's regime.

The Karama Sheikh Movement did not at first take a clear stance in opposition to the regime. However, with the regime's readiness to oppress, kill and arbitrarily detain, it was only a few months before the Movement found itself in confrontation with the regime. It was this which led to the killing their founder, Sheikh Bal'ous, in September 2015, in an explosion of his convoy which also killed 50 other members of the Movement. The finger of blame was pointed at the Syrian regime.

After the murder of their leader, the Movement announced the formation of what was known as 'the Karama Sheikh Forces' with the aim of avenging Bal'ous, protecting Sweida, and continuing the same approach of refusing the association and forced conscription of the people of Sweida.

Since its official declaration in 2014, the Movement has entered into battles with Jabhat al-Nusra in the western countryside of Sweida, namely the two battles of Dama and Deir Dama<sup>36</sup>, as well as battles against ISIS in the eastern countryside, namely in the village of Haqaf<sup>37</sup>. Its most significant battle, however, was its rebuttal of the ISIS advances on the eastern countryside on 25/7/2018; they were joined in this battle by a number of factions, including the Farsan Karama Forces, the Ateel Karama Forces and the Fahad Forces, which later united and announced the formation of the Shariyan Wahed Forces. This group threatened to challenge the regime forces if they attempted to forcibly snare Sweida's people into its war against the Syrian people, making this threat from the grave of Sultan Pasha al-Atrash in the town of al-Qariya. The raised the slogan 'From this day on, no arbitrary or political detentions in Jabal al-Druze,' according to data on the formation of new factions.

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<sup>35</sup> The Sheikh al-Karama Forces, the most prominent of the groups in the Shariyan, went so far as executing Ahmad Ali Jaafar (known as Abu Yasin) one of the strongest party members in Sweida, after he was accused of running the largest drugs network in the province. Abu Yasin was a Shi'a from Basra, who had fled to Sweida in 2013 before settling in the town of al-Qariya.

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.yasour.org/2012/list.php?go=fullnews&newsid=48190>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.aman-dostor.org/12625>

It is important to note that these local factions (the most important being al-Fahad and Sheikh al-Karama), which relied on what is known as the 'Bayrak system'<sup>38</sup>, stressed that they 'have no political agenda,' as evidenced by the fact that they were not engaging in any military activity outside the province borders. They also emphasised that they 'are neither with the loyalists nor with the opposition, but are rather for the dignity of the people of Sweida and the elimination of their oppression.'

Such groups rely on self-funding and donations in order to obtain weapons and equipment, according to their leadership. They claim that they have refused numerous offers of funding from actors whose 'aim is to divert the path of the factions from their self-protection' and to throw it into 'political currents and projects of division.' They also claim they are not an alternative to 'the state' in terms of economic and service sectors or providing necessities to the people. They do not place their trust in any political grouping and they respect 'the aspirations of the Syrian people in all their spectra, with the recognition that Sweida is an indivisible part of Syria'<sup>39</sup>.

However, the popularity of the group Shariyan al-Karama factions has been limited, even in the areas in which they are present in, owing to individuals among them who have been accused of kidnap, murder and smuggling, with some of them committing such crimes openly. Further to this, the actions of these factions has been characterised by chaos, with even its own internal decisions witnessing divisions. They do not, moreover, not have a clear and comprehensive vision about the future of the province.

The Rijjal al-Karama Movement, under the leadership of Yahiya al-Hajjar, is the largest faction in the province. They began to take clear steps towards a normalising of relations with the regime, mediated by Russia, having been its most prominent rival in Sweida since 2015. The Sheikh Karama Forces, meanwhile, issued a statement in the middle of 2018 accusing Russia of being 'an occupying force'. This was after a Russian delegation, during its meeting with Aql sheikhs and elders, stated that the areas under the control of the Sheikh Karama forces were under the control of 'a terrorist group.' This was after they rejected the Russian-backed militia, Al-Nimr Forces, settling in the town of al-Mazraa, during 'the regime's military campaign on the Deraa province' and against the backdrop of the refusal of the Karama Forces to participate in that campaign.

Name of Group	Allegiance	Comments
<b>Haraket Rijjal al-Karama</b>	Local armed group, believes in positive neutrality, i.e. does not ally itself with the regime or the opposition.	Most organised and well-armed faction, has 26 groups or 'Bayraks'

<sup>38</sup> The Bayrak system is a war tradition based on the idea that each village or large family should have its own flag or bayrak, under which it would fight, as determined by the people of Sweida previously during their wars with the Ottomans and the French. The idea of the Bayrak is based on the notion of informing the enemy and announcing an attack, which is considered a value of chivalry, whereby a victory attained by treachery is considered no victory at all.

<sup>39</sup> <https://bit.ly/2rZlbZA>

<b>Al-Shariyan al-Wahed</b>	Some of its groups openly oppose the aggression of the regime.	A loose alliance of local armed groups, mostly defected from Rijjal al-Karama Movement, suffers from mal-coordination and chaos.
<b>Al-Fahad Forces</b>	Close to Russia	Small local armed group in the town of Qanawat, was linked to al-Shariyan al-Wahed.
<b>Sheikh Karama Forces</b>	Against the regime	The most prominent component of 'al-Shariyan al-Wahed'

## 2.5 Political Parties

Since the coup of 1963, the policy of the regime has been based on the abstraction of political life from society in the interests of totalitarian ideals and of the ruling party. This extended to the 1973 Constitution which stipulated, in Article Eight, that the Ba'ath party 'leads in state and society' and that the party would lead the National Progressive Front<sup>40</sup>. Article Eight was the final nail in the coffin of political and pluralistic life in Syria, leading to the persecution of political activists by the security services, detaining them, pushing them to flee the country, or killing them. This meant that political action was pushed into secrecy, while the parties affiliated with the National Progressive Front were reduced, effectively, to nothing more than decoration. In any case, political work had no real effect in public life, with the small exception of 'the Damascus Declaration' which was published at the beginning of the millennium and 'the Damascus-Beirut Declaration'<sup>41</sup>. The regime pursued those who had signed the declaration, dismissing employees and teachers from their jobs, with these arbitrary measures extending to Sweida province.

This status quo remained in place, up until the outset of the popular protest movement which began in March 2011. This movement was effectively a shock to the system for the parties which had long been downtrodden, and which attempted to join in the ranks of the movement, restructure, and join alliances. The most important of these alliances was the National Forces Coalition of Sweida, made up of approximately 22 parties and political movements as well as representatives from revolutionary coordination groups. However, for various reasons, they did not have a substantial role in the movement; they had a weak impact socially owing to owing their distance from society.

## 3 Civil Society and its Emergence

Civil and civic activity in Sweida province prior to 2011 took many different forms, but falls short of including 'civil society organisations' in the modern sense of the term. The organisations and associations which have long existed in the area include charitable

<sup>40</sup> The National Progressive Front is a coalition of six Syrian political parties established in 1972 and led by al-Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party. It was formed in 1972.

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.memri.org/reports/wave-arrests-syrian-intellectuals-following-beirut-damascus-declaration>

associations, which, while they played a significant role in social support, proved lacking in terms of empowerment and development programs.

These associations emerged in large numbers, with a total of 94 in Sweida<sup>42</sup>, which is an indication of the weakness of social security and health programs, and of state failings in terms of development. Perhaps the primary reason for these associations not reaching the level of civil society organisations, goes back to the policy of the Ba'ath party, which, as well as leading state and society, has hegemony over public life, ruling out any possibility for a civil space to emerge. These charitable associations, organisations, parties and unions were transformed, instead, into tools and arms of the state. Examples of these are the Ba'ath Vanguard, the Youth Union, the Women's Union and the Workers' Union, with women's issues, youth issues and workers' issues being the sole reserve of these groups.

However, in 2011, following the start of the Syrian uprising, the civil space in Sweida province began to expand in a number of areas. These included the media, through social networking platforms, the formation and launch of social initiatives, the formation of field teams and organisations and the reactivation of rights-based organisations. This was thanks to a number of factors, most significantly the regime's preoccupation with the war and the reverberations thereof. Further to this, however, was the regime's adoption of a softer approach with regard to Sweida, as a way to bring the people of Sweida over as an ally on the one hand, and on the other out of fear that opening hostilities with a religious minority would do damage to its narrative that it was the minorities' protector.

While the abovementioned factors are important in terms of civil society' emergence in public life, there were also subjective, psychological factors related to the breaking of the barrier of fear among the majority of Sweida's residents. We also see objective factors related to the role of certain social and religious leaders took, by supporting, protecting, and taking on some of these social initiatives, examples of which will be given below. Further to this, it became clear on more than one occasion that the authorities had abandoned the people of Sweida, and they came to realise that the regime was able to harm them, certainly, but not to protect them.

This conviction was strengthened after the regime's desertion of them when ISIS attacked Sweida's eastern countryside in July 2018. A public mood which had been relatively neutral now became one of resentment and anger towards the regime, whom the people held responsible for the ISIS-inflicted massacre.

### 3.1 Religious Backdrop

The Druze sect is not a proselytising sect, meaning that they do not promote or preach their creed; their doctrine, rather, must remain within the confines of their community. There is, unsurprisingly, a clear separation between Druze leadership and the state, since the Druze clerics are unable to interfere with politics or undertake any kind of political work since this would be incompatible their religious duties. Religion within the Druze doctrine is a purely personal matter, and the practice of Druze ceremonies is voluntary and may not imposed upon anyone from the sect. Non-practisers are forbidden to look at the religious texts (Books of Wisdom), and this even extends to those who are practising who have admitted to committing sins before their religious duties, which places them at a lower religious standing. To a large

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<sup>42</sup> <https://zh-cn.facebook.com/swaida.mouhafaza/posts/1097123530359643:0>

extent, these factors have diminished the capacity of the religious establishment to control or interfere in the lives of their sect's members. This has contributed to the members of the Druze sect being more accepting and open to those of other religions or doctrines. It has, too, meant wider freedoms and rights for women compared to their counterparts in the rest of Syrian society, as well as space for a greater role to work and participate in society and the public sphere. To give just one example, the management of the Social Solidarity Program and the medical centre of Ain al-Zaman are both under the full management of women.

The limited nature of the religious establishment's interference in the Druze people's lives has, without doubt, contributed to an environment in which civil society organisations could grow, particularly those related to female empowerment. It was after 2011 that such organisations began to emerge and take their place in society.

### **3.2 Between Tribalism, Confessional Affiliation, and National (Pan-Arab) Affiliation**

Amidst the plethora of 'markers' afforded to the composition of the residential area – religious, doctrinal, tribal – the Druze community found that it was in their interests to put forward the tribal element ahead of the religious or the doctrinal, since it was this which was the least persecuted, and therefore would better enable them to bridge the gulf with the system surrounding them. Their literature, accordingly, affirms the purity of their Arab-ness, their roots going all the way back to the Tanukhids, and asserts that they are a tribal society, which has influenced and been influenced by their neighbours over the course of the preceding centuries. The Druze found solace in the notion of the protective state, which emerged in the first third of the twentieth century, since it kept them from religious persecution and meant they no longer needed to protect themselves as a tribal or religious group. In light of this, a number of people from the community entered early on into the political sphere; this, in turn, encouraged them to strengthen their levels of literacy, seeing education as the key for entering the political process. This development opened up further doors for them with regards to engaging with the surrounding community, and laid the foundations for subsequent generations to enter into education. Results of this can be seen in the declaration by the Minister for Culture on 16/10/2008 that Sweida was now free of illiteracy.

### **3.3 Sweida's Role in Modern Syrian History**

Jabal Hauran was, for a long time, a refuge for the leading actors in the Pro-independence Syrian national movement, in particular after Sami Pasha al-Farouqi betrayed Druze leaders through the Peace Accord of 1910, when he executed them in their entirety in the Damascus neighbourhood of al-Midan. The Druze of Jabal (Hauran) were thereafter perceived as revolutionaries, as students of freedom, contrary to the disobedient and villainous image which had been propagated by the Damascus media for many years, as directed by Astana, in an attempt to vilify the community among the Syrian people.

The execution of the Druze leaders in 1911, among them Zuqan al-Atrash, the father Sultan, can be seen as the first push towards the executions of May 6<sup>th</sup> 1916 by Jamal Pasha al-Saffah in Beirut and Damascus.



With the start of the Arab Revolt of 1916, Jabal (Hauran) was officially within its ranks; the Arab flag was in fact raised above the home of Sultan al-Atrash in al-Qariya from the spring of 1917, a year before it was raised in Damascus. Since that, Jabal Hauran became one of the most important supports for the Syrian National Movement and the main driver behind the subsequent events, following the arrival of the French forces and the imposition of the French mandate as a *fait accompli* after the Battle of Maysalun in 1920. The Druze attempted to take part in this battle, with Sultan al-Atrash sending 500 fighters to help the Minister of War, Yousef al-Uthma, but the battle had already finished before they arrived. A few years later, however, Jabal (Hauran) then ignited the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925, which, despite the enormity of its costs – 10,000 people were killed out of a population of just 60,000 along with massive agricultural and economic losses – the long-term political gains were significant. France was forced to accept the Syrian National Movement's drafting of the 1928 constitution, whose core draws from the demands of the revolt in terms of total reform and political independence.

The 1925 Revolt changed the concept of resistance among the Syrian public; the occupation of land and the confirmation of the Mandate was thus not enough to allow the regime to exercise its authority. France had to overcome this resistance, something which had become an integral part of Syrian society. This was particularly the case after the Revolt had spread to Damascus and other provinces, and even to Lebanon, anchored to its trans-sectarian core and the call for a secular civil state.

Following independence, the military was quick to take control of the country and appropriate its political life, following successive military coups. Sweida's Druze community stayed well away from this, until 1954 when Sultan al-Atrash headed up the Great Conference of Homs, threatening President Adib Shishakli with mass civil disobedience, forcing him to resign, and leading to the resumption of parliamentary life.

At the beginning of the sixties, then, Sweida's second generation played a significant political role in Syria's modern history. There were considerable increases in education rates and in the voluntary recruits to the Syrian army, but the struggle for power – which had become both regional and a sectarian – led to the marginalisation of the people of Sweida and their sidelining from the political arena. This began in the 1970s and has continued to the present day.

### **3.4 Use of Identity Politics to Confront the Civil Movement**

On March 26, 2011, eight days after the peaceful protest movement started in Deraa on March 18, 2011, Sweida witnessed its first protest, in the city of Qariya<sup>43</sup>, the hometown of Sultan al-Atrash, the general commander of the Great Syrian Revolt. This rapid spread of the protests to Sweida from neighbouring Deraa, which was of a different sect, could have given rise to trans-sectarian relationships, which could help form a Syrian society and a national space, as well as give rise to an opportunity for the emergence of the state, civil society, national identity and citizenship, etc. This opportunity was thwarted, however, by the regime's policies, those which destroyed these emerging relationships and called forth identities which conflicted with the generalist, peaceful, democratic national identity.

The starting spark of the protests in the town of Qariya was not, however modest, to no avail. This day, March 26, which coincides with the anniversary of the death of Sultan al-Atrash, has highly significant value in the hearts of the people of the Sweida, carrying with it as it does

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Sendian.Mag/posts/244185129035277/>

symbolism of rebellion against their oppression and marginalisation, which extended to their role and their history. This was strengthened by the fact that the regime forbade any celebration of that day, pursuing anyone who dared to do so, including students who would be expelled from their schools. On 28 March, 1987, protests filled the streets of the city of Shahba after 50 students were expelled thusly, from Zaid Karbaj School for Girls.

This policy of the regime further entrenched the age-old conviction among the Druze that the regime was consistently attempting to side-line their participation in national struggle, of which they had long been proud.

The protests continued in the province throughout 2011, concentrated mainly in the two cities of Sweida and Shahba, and in the town of Qariya. Despite their modesty in size, these protests continued alongside the peaceful movement that was spreading across the majority of the country. Sweida's protests were based on the same moral precepts as those of the country-wide uprising, connected by a collective national discourse through the use of slogans that encapsulated the movement at that time. These included 'the Syrian people are one people' and slogans in solidarity with conflict-afflicted Syrian provinces. This pushed the Syrian regime to use its security forces to suppress the protests, and to pursue policies which were separate from those it had used in Sunni-majority areas, relying on propaganda such as the global conspiracy, the notion of the state as the protector of minorities, and the existence of terrorist gangs. Among the regime's most significant policies in that regard was its pitting of the people of a single community against one another (thereby oppressing on a local scale); they did this by enlisting civilians from the province to suppress the protests in their very same province. The security apparatus did not want to be seen to be involved in the suppression of protests, in fear of what the response to this would be, especially in areas of minorities. It was this that invalidated its sectarian propaganda, for it chose the individuals to suppress the protests from 'the social floor,' exploiting their poverty, unemployment, social marginalisation or ignorance. They even exploited criminal tendencies, selecting ex-convicts who were released from prison under the general amnesty by the Presidential Decree No. 61 of 31/5/2011<sup>44</sup>. One of the ramifications of this decree, as it later emerged, was the rumours that abounded of chaos, and the breakdown of moral and social fabric of society. The number of people included in this decree was around 64,000 people across Syria, according to a report issued by Syrian state television at the time.

These policies drove a wedge through Syrian society, and warning signs of conflict and civil strife began to appear in Sweida on a number of different levels:

- Within the Druze family itself, with political disputes emerging based on the mentality of exclusion and distrust;
- Within Sweida province, among the different denominations that resided there, especially with regard to the Bedouin tribes;
- Between the province and the neighbouring Sunni-majority areas, specifically the province of Deraa, which grew amidst the perpetuation of divisive rhetoric. One the mainstays of this was the speech of a Sheikh from Deraa called Abd al-Salam al-Khalili<sup>45</sup> who publicly, at a mosque pulpit in the birth-city of the uprising, on March 24, 2011, in the first days of the revolution, accused Druze women of being the cause of civil strife in Deraa and attacked their honour. In the same speech, the sheikh also accused Sultan al-Atrash of having stolen the Great Syrian Revolt. The Syrian security forces immediately seized upon this speech, instructing the party and security

<sup>44</sup> <https://bit.ly/353x5BA>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqpiqycBpiQ>

branches in Sweida's villages and towns to broadcast the speech widely, with the critical falsification that the speaker was al-Sheikh al-Siasina<sup>46</sup>. The response of the revolutionaries in Deraa was to expose the truth about the Sheikh, prove that he was in the pay of the regime, and publish a statement by clerics in Hauran in which they disavowed him<sup>47</sup>. But it was already too late.

## 4 Civil Society: Roles and Challenges

### 4.1 Challenges facing civil society in Sweida

The makeup and structure of the securitised state in Syria has been the most significant challenge before the emergence and development of Syrian civil society. The notion of civil work is not, for example, in line with the structure of an unjust, tyrannical authorities, nor with their policies of reinforcing primary/clannish affiliations before national ones. Herein lies the most prominent challenge for a difficult birth of civil society which benefitted from the defect in the pillars and structure of the state and the partial decline of the role of the securitised state. Accordingly, the space for civil action in Sweida was decreasing the more the regime and its allies achieve military victory.

Civil society actors in Sweida could be divided into two categories:

- a) Those which are licensed and which are linked with, or under the supervision of, the regime. These include the following:
  - i. Traditional charitable associations, whose scope is limited to collecting donations and distributing to those in need. The tools they use are basic, and they lack technical tools such as those pertaining to planning, evaluation and needs assessments. Their programs and projects do not touch upon social and economic development or empowerment, and they lack financial policies and procedures, anti-corruption policies and procedures, conflict of interests policies, and codes of conduct. Their management structures reflect the family dynamics in the particular society they work in, with favouritism and nepotism often defining their work. They run the constant risk of being disbanded by a direct order of the Minister for Social Affairs and Labour without recourse to the judiciary or any judicial mechanisms (lodging an appeal). This is in accordance with the Associations Law 39/1958, as amended by legislative decree 224/2012. Despite the fact that, according to the law, the process of getting a license includes lodging a request with the Ministry for Social Affairs and Labour, in practice, such requests are given to three security bodies: state security, political security, and the military intelligence. Such associations exist all over Sweida, but are most prominent in cities and towns, such as the Shahba Charitable Association, the Qanawat Charitable Association, Kafr Charitable Association, Um Zeitoun, and al-Rayyan, among others.

<sup>46</sup> A leading cleric from Deraa who played a prominent role in the opposition movement against the regime in 2011

<sup>47</sup> <https://bit.ly/36oCldS>

In previous years, the Bustan Association (belonging to businessman Rami al-Makhlouf, relative of the Assad family) flourished. It worked across the government-controlled areas, was known to monopolise humanitarian aid from international organisations and exploit this in the buying of loyalties and the support of pro-regime armed militiamen. However, according to leaked reports, the association has recently been disbanded, because of disputes between Rami Makhlouf and Bashar al-Assad<sup>48</sup>.

- ii. Associations specialised in a particular field of humanitarian or societal work such as Wafaa Association for the Disabled; Friends of Cancer Patients; al-Musineen Association, for the elderly; Social Care Association; Friends of the Environment Association; Aadiyat Association, specialised in heritage; Friends of Music Association; and the Baraem Association, which works with children.
- iii. Associations working in community development, such as the Association for Local Community Development in Sweida; Junior Chamber International (JCI); Karameh Association for Social Development (educational scholarships); Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development affiliated with the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East (GOPA-DERD); and the Syria Trust for Development. It is this last association which has the most access to favours, backing and funding owing to its closeness to the regime, with as Asmaa al-Assad as the head of its Board of Directors.

These organisations, unsurprisingly, define themselves as being **civic** organisations, for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the Syrian association licensing law does not include the term 'civil'; it is also out of the fear of being classed among the revival of the civil society affiliated with the Damascus Spring<sup>49</sup> of 2000, which was aborted and suppressed by the Syrian regime; lastly, it was because of what was being circulated by the regime regarding civil society organisations, and the accusation that they were agents to foreign powers.'

- b) Organisations independent from the regime, which began to emerge after 2011 along with the Syrian uprising. These organisations faced a number of challenges, the most significant of which are:

- **Objective challenges:**

1. Placing restrictions on civil society actors, pursuit of these actors by the security services, detention of these actors, and issuing travel bans, which affected over 50 civil society actors in Sweida in 2019. In fact, the travel bans even extended to the negotiations committee pertaining to ISIS kidnappings, which was formed by the Aql Sheikhdome.
2. Turning the community against activists by accusing them of being agents and pursuing foreign agendas.
3. Lack of funding from grant-making organisations for the past seven years – improving slightly during the past two – owing to deficiencies in access, communication and building connections.
4. Stereotyping of civil society work in regime-controlled areas by activists, organisations and political currents located in neighbouring countries and in areas outside the control of the regime. In effect, this stereotype was that all activists in regime-controlled areas are allied to the regime and are perpetuate their ideas.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.syriahr.com/?p=337452>

<sup>49</sup> <https://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=48518>

- **Subjective challenges:**

1. Low capacity, poor experience and lack of planning, which resulted in the building of organisational structures that are not in line with the nature of their work and their goals.
2. Weak participatory culture between organisations owing to subjective, personal or competitive reasons.
3. Difficulties in building societal capital, and monopolisations regarding the relationship with the grant-making organisation.

## 4.2 Civil Society's Role in Sweida Province

Despite the challenges mentioned above, civil society has had a number of roles to play in the province, as laid out below:

### 4.2.1 Position on the Weapons Chaos

Over the course of the conflict, Sweida has not been witness to military confrontations, with the exception of a few incidents which took place on the outskirts of the province. Despite this, the phenomenon of 'weapons chaos' was a daily concern for the people of Sweida; such a phenomenon was a risk to civil peace and threatened to give rise to a significant societal schism. As a result, civil society organisations and some individuals involved in the public sector began to warn of the ramifications, publishing statements such as that issued by the Committee of Sweida Lawyers for Freedom on November 22, 2012<sup>50</sup>. This statement asserted that 'the distribution of weapons in these illegal and illegitimate way is a crime punishable by law, with the severest sentences, for those who carry or distribute weapons or to intend or encourage their possession ... Their aim is not to preserve civil peace but rather to threaten it; it is not to achieve safety or security but rather to impair it; and it is not to defend oneself but rather to attack others.'

### 4.2.2 Protecting Civil Peace

Activists, and some opinion leaders, picked up on early warning signs of conflict and war. As an early preventative measure, they formed a number of organisations and committees concerned with civil peace and conflict resolution. Among the most significant of these entities are the following:

- The Social Committee for National Work in Sweida<sup>51</sup>:  
The Committee was established at the start of 2012, and it states its aims as being pursuing civil peace and the unity of Syrian society across all sectors of society. Despite the attempts to cause internal splits by security elements, which went to extremes in order to inflict strife and damage, it has been committed, from its establishment and up till the present day, to a Syrian, national, collective, cross-affiliation discourse. They followed up closely with the violent incidents taking place and communicated with active individuals and opinion leaders in and outside Sweida, with a particular focus on Deraa, working on bringing together the social fabric and

<sup>50</sup> <https://bit.ly/36oCldS>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Alhay2aAl2jitema3ya>

warding off discord. It acted as a safety valve, slowing down civil strife, monitoring the potential for conflict, mediating between different parties, and issuing statements renouncing discrimination, violence and hate speech.

The Social Committee for National Work in Sweida is made up of over 700 people within a mixed management structure, distributed geographically across the province in the following branches: Sweida, Shahba and its countryside, Salkhad and its countryside, Western branch and Eastern branch. The Committee is currently being led by the social figure Jamal Huneidi.

Every branch elects 10% from its total number as members of the General Secretariat, whose total membership is 55. Each of the five branches elects a president of the branch from the members of the General Secretariat. The President of the Committee is elected by the General Secretariat in a meeting of the General Secretariat. Then ten members of the Committee Council are elected, half of whom are the five presidents from the General Secretariat. The President of the Committee becomes a member of the Council without election, and five members are elected directly by the General Secretariat and the President so that the overall number of members of the Council is eleven.

The voting process is democratic, according to a system of an absolute majority.

- **Citizenship and Civil Peace Committees in Sweida Province**

This body was established on November 22, 2011 with the aim of propagating the culture of dialogue and acceptance of others; protecting civil peace; promoting conflict resolution interventions; dispelling rumours; and denouncing violent hate speech and replacing it with a collective national discourse for all Syrians. The Committee have participated in a number of negotiations in kidnapping and counter-kidnapping cases between Sweida and Deraa provinces. It also published a number of statements calling for the protection of societal and civil peace, and prevented opportunities for those trying to arm civilians and embroil them in the conflict. This happened on more than one occasion, most significantly at the Battle of al-Thaala Airbase on 11/6/2015 and their statement issued on 24/8/2018<sup>52</sup>.

### **4.2.3 Role in the Relief Effort (Displacement and its Impact)**

When mass displacement began, around the middle of 2012, the regime attempted to isolate the displaced persons from the local community in shelters owned by state institutions such as the Baath Vanguard camp in the village of Rasas, among others. However, these attempts failed, since there were not enough places in which to house the numbers of displaced, while relief workers in Shahba city threatened to return the movement to the street if the displaced people were not forced thusly. We cannot overlook, moreover, the value-based and moral considerations in the Sweida community related to honouring guests and protecting outsiders, this being a part of their cultural and moral identity of Sweida, as well as of Syrians and the region more widely. There have been events throughout history that demonstrate as such, one of which goes back to the end of the Ottoman era, when the people of Sweida welcomed approximately twenty thousand people fleeing famine.

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<sup>52</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/baitebaitac/posts/460148087745205>

At the start, the displacement was limited to a few families, because of the fear among those from conflict-afflicted areas of going to Sweida. Reasons for this include the following:

- a) The prevailing preconceived notion that Sweida was in opposition to the popular movement, and that it therefore did not accept people from areas that were part of the movement.
- b) Trepidation of others of a different religion or doctrine, something which betrayed the size of the deep-rooted social schism in Syrian society.
- c) Fear of being pursued by the security forces, given that Sweida was under the control of the Syrian government.

Amidst the increased violence in the provinces surrounding Sweida, the numbers of displaced people began to increase, surpassing tens of thousands. They were welcomed by the majority of people in all their diverse political leanings, despite the picture being painted in the minds of Sweida's people towards other provinces as a result of this same schism, and despite their fear that their livelihood would be challenged by someone or that there would be demographic change which, if it happened would affect their cohesion as a group.

Yet there was a general feeling that they would be able to maintain control over their own affairs, and that their guests would not lessen their independence or take away their source of income, which for the most part either came from agriculture or from transfers from abroad. This made them, to a large extent, welcoming towards the displaced community, particularly as they saw them as coming to them seeking safety. Meanwhile, the disquiet among some towards the new arrivals related to competition over craft-based work and daily construction work, while traders and property owners saw that the new arrivals would increase the demand in the market, which would later contribute to an increase in rent prices, for example.

Before long, as feelings of mutual trepidation eased somewhat, and the displaced community began feel safer, relationships began to develop between the two communities, each impacting in their own way upon the other. The displaced community began to open up to the customs and traditions of the local host community, with some women who had come from conservative or hard-line areas stating that they had greater personal freedoms than those which they had enjoyed in their hometowns. It should be noted, moreover, that the rates of conflict, dispute and attacks that were recorded over that time were within the same range as those which take place among the local community itself.

Contributing to this dissipation of fear were the initiatives that were started by groups of people from Sweida to give assistance to those fleeing for the lives. This was amidst a crackdown by the security forces, including the pursuit and detention of activists, and the attempts to pit the community against the displaced population. The security forces exploited the deaths of soldiers who came originally from Sweida, who had been on the front lines in the very same areas from which the displaced people were now fleeing from. This made relief work harder and more dangerous. A number of revolutionary actors, especially those at the coordination level and civil working groups, sent medical and humanitarian aid, food items, and child provisions, to the besieged areas. This was not limited to the areas surrounding Sweida province, and extended all the way to the provinces of Homs and Hama. Significantly, a field hospital was set up in the city of Homs under the name 'Sweida Field Hospital,' which was shelled by the regime a number of times.

The most prominent and organised aspect of Sweida's relief effort was the relief campaign set up by the Citizenship and Civil Peace Committees, under the name 'Bayti Ana Baytak'. This campaign would turn, in time, transform into a civil society organisation.

**Bayti Ana Baytak:**<sup>53</sup> 'The rights of our guests are the rights of the nation'; this, the slogan of the relief campaign, was the guiding principle/ beating heart behind the campaign. The team of volunteers, which numbered over one hundred, worked for three months without any assistance from aid organisations, with a security crackdown affecting a number of their volunteers.

Financially, Bayti Ana Baytak relied entirely on the local community and people originally from Sweida now living abroad. Alongside relief work, it launched a number of initiatives<sup>54</sup> which worked to bridge the divide between the people of Sweida and the displaced population, which contributed significantly, in turn, to the process of societal integration, and the dissipation of preconceptions and stereotypes between these two communities.

#### 4.2.4 Advocacy and Garnering Support

- c) The voice of the local community was conveyed to decision makers through the representation of a number of Sweida's civil society organisations (Bayti Ana Baytak, Tawlib, Baladi) in the Civil Society Support Room at the Geneva talks, at regional meetings, in the side events that took place on the margins of the Brussels Conference (ministerial meetings), and advocating on issues at a local and national level.
- d) A number of position papers were published, most significantly that entitled 'The Ghost of ISIS Returns to Sweida,' following the massacre of 25/7/2019, and the advocacy done with decision makers during the first process, on a Syrian civil platform<sup>55</sup>.
- e) A campaign<sup>56</sup> against *taf'ish*<sup>57</sup> was launched after the regime took control of Deraa province, and robbery, looting and pillage civilian property began to take place. The campaign had hashtags of *#لا للتعفيش* (meaning 'no to *taf'ish*'), *#لا تعفش شايفنك* ('no *taf'ish*, we can see you') and *#لا تشنريه صاحبه عم بيكي عليه* ('don't buy it, its owner is missing it'). Among the achievements of the campaign was that the Aql Sheikhdome, Karama Movement and the Sweida's major clans represented by their leaders, issued statements in which they prohibited the purchase or sale of stolen goods in Sweida and threatening to cast out anyone who engaged with, advertised, or traded stolen goods.
- f) A campaign against human trafficking was launched<sup>58</sup> with the participation of a number of organisations (Tawlib, Bayti Ana Baytak) and activists, against the backdrop of the exposure of a network trafficking Syrian women in Lebanon.
- g) Media campaigns, open female sit-ins, and civic sit-ins were organised in order to put pressure on the regime to pursue the release of those kidnapped by ISIS. This was amidst a general resentment against the regime regarding their sluggishness in following up with the case. This campaign pushed the regime into redoubling their efforts with the case and their release.
- h) A campaign for the International Youth Day was launched under the name of *#أنا أقف مع الشباب* ('I stand with the youth') in partnership between Bayti Ana Baytak and the organisation Naseej from Rural Damascus.

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/136231493184654/>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpNHRqYPYP4>

<sup>55</sup> <https://bit.ly/2PhAjdR>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100009848946423/videos/648663028805323/>

<sup>57</sup> *Taf'ish* is a term denoting the looting of areas under control of the regime forces and loyalist militias, and the sale of the stolen goods in the areas subject to its control

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/881281325314124/>



- i) Articles, investigations and reports related to field and humanitarian conditions, and observations of changes and violations, were published in online newspapers and in alternative media<sup>59</sup>.

#### 4.2.5 Mediation, Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

After a member of the Bedouin community was murdered in Shahba city, the mass emigration of the Bedouin, the escalation of civil strife and rhetoric of revenge attacks was halted after the Committees for Citizenship and Civil Peace organising an *iftar* meal (breaking the fast at Ramadan). This occasion which brought together societal leaders and clerics from al-Hadar (Druze) and the Bedouin (Sunni), in order to put a rapid end to any civil strife, cast out those who ignited it and stand together in the face of all threats to coexistence. Similar scenes were repeated in events such as this across the province.

On 21/8/2018, the Aql Sheikhdom (Jarbou' and Hanawi) set up a committee for negotiations with ISIS<sup>60</sup> regarding the civil society activists who were kidnapped, [an incident] which is indicative of the trust and role of civil work in society and among the religious leadership.

#### 4.2.6 Livelihoods Projects

This is considered the most important field of work given the poor socioeconomic conditions in Sweida. There is, however, just one project in this field, implemented by a partnership between Bayti Ana Baytak and the Social Solidarity Program of the Ain al-Zaman-Aql Sheikhdom Endowment. Through this program, 50 livelihoods grants<sup>61</sup> were given out to small businesses, targeting families which had lost their source of income either wholly or partially during the ISIS attacks on the eastern countryside of the province.

#### 4.2.7 Education and Children

- Remedial classes for children who had dropped out of school because of the war, run by Bayti Ana Baytak for two years (2014 and 2015).
- Monthly grants to university students (Social Solidarity, Bayti Ana Baytak, 'Help In-Need Students in Sweida' page)
- The Siyar group which works with street children.

#### 4.2.8 Women (Empowerment and Countering Violence)

- Tawlib Organisation for Women and Children is the most prominent actor in this field; they have implemented a number of women-focused projects with the aim of promoting legal, rights-based and political empowerment. They also offered free legal counselling services for female survivors of violence, however the lawyers' union came out strongly against this, and it was met by a crackdown by the security forces.
- There were several campaigns standing up against violence against women. The most prominent of these was the being the *Ta Marbuta* campaign<sup>62</sup> which went on for 16 days

<sup>59</sup> <https://bit.ly/2PIYRm8>

<sup>60</sup> <https://bit.ly/2P8uvEE>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/2022163474565283/videos/427162661313349/?v=427162661313349>

<sup>62</sup> [https://www.orient-news.net/ar/news\\_show/6992](https://www.orient-news.net/ar/news_show/6992)

in line with the international 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence. This campaign was led by Tawlib in partnership with a number of other organisations.

#### 4.2.9 Social Cohesion and Peace-Building

There were a number of social cohesion and peace-building initiatives that were carried out as the country was wrought by war, and these were effectively campaigns to affirm a collective Syrian identity and common co-existence. Below are a few examples of this:

- a) Sweida's union of lawyers was the first union in Syria to take a stance on what was happening in the country. They held a sit-in and released a statement with a number of demands, most significantly: Lifting the security clampdown on Deraa city; holding a serious and transparent investigation into that took place with the opening of live fire on unarmed citizens; allowing all media outlets to perform their role as per the notion of press freedom; lifting the state of emergency, martial law and nullifying exceptional courts; guaranteeing the constitutional right to peaceful protest; issuing an amnesty for all prisoners of conscience; limiting the powers of the security forces and revoking their supervision over appointments to public sector jobs; and establishing legal and professional courts to review laws that violate constitutional principles and customs, in the view to amend or rescind them.
- b) Activists were able to overcome the siege on Deraa, Zabadani and Homs, and were able to get humanitarian relief into these areas.
- c) An initiative was carried out from Sweida to provide 1000 *iftar* meals to those fasting in refugee camps in Lebanon<sup>63</sup>. This was coordinated by Batyi Ana Baytak and the *Sakbat Ramadan* initiative, and the project was given the name of 'Blessed Ramadan and Peace Upon Syria.'<sup>64</sup>

It is important to note that, from 2013 onwards, civil society work started to become more specialised, as well as more professional and institutionalised, than it had been in the preceding years. There began to be a particular focus on psychological support for children, education, young people, female empowerment and social integration, while relief work continued as far as capacities and resources would allow. A number of organisations, teams, and initiatives emerged, some examples of which are listed below:

- Juzour:<sup>65</sup> Culture, awareness raising, capacity building, and youth work. The regime shut down their headquarters on more than one occasion, leading to public resentment towards the regime's inaction on the breakdown of security and the rise in crime, while at the same time it was cracking down on cultural projects.
- Share group: Young people and adolescents, capacity building, community leadership and sustainable development goals.
- Tawlib Organisation for Women and Children:<sup>66</sup> Human rights awareness-raising, the legal, political and cultural empowerment of women, fighting gender-based violence, observing and documenting violations, conflict resolution, disarming, discharge and reintegration programs, and fighting hate speech.
- Lama Mahabbeh: Renouncing discriminatory rhetoric (and replacing it with an inclusive rhetoric), the environment, and community initiatives.
- The Centre for Democracy and Civil Rights: Women's rights.

<sup>63</sup> <https://bit.ly/2YomE8V>

<sup>64</sup> <https://bit.ly/2YnnPFQ>

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/jozoursw/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/tulip.wk>

- The Arab Organisation for Human Rights: Observation and documentation of human rights violations.
- Abna' al-Sinadian: Campaigning against unchecked logging in the context of heating fuel shortages, and tree planting campaigns.
- Baladi Group: Building alliances and peace-building projects.
- The Movement for Independent Technocrats / Al-Thuraya Organisation / Ard Organisation / Al-Ard Al-Sayyida (youth group) / Free Lawyers Union.
- Social Solidarity Program (attached to the Ain al-Zaman Aql Sheikhdom HQ): Helping those in need, offering educational grants to students, and providing job opportunities to impoverished women.

## 5 Conclusion

Conceivably, the state of relative neutrality that has characterised Sweida during Syria's civil war was the result, not of a decision made through societal consensus, but rather the result of divergent, opposing and ultimately equalising forces. Such forces have been active within their specific areas of work and scope of impact, in the face of pivotal stances and transformations in what has taken place since March 2011. This began with stances on the uprising and transformed into stances on the war, its various players, and the changes that affected the equilibrium of the conflict over its different phases.

Accordingly, behind this apparent neutrality lie numerous fluctuations in terms of the centres of power. We can see this with the rise of the role of the confessional leadership, at the expense of political and tribal leadership, as well as through the prominent role played by the Aql Sheikhdom, despite its internal contradictions and limitations. Then again, these internal contradictions and limitations, along with the regression of the role of the executive powers (and the state of chaos and threats from neighbouring areas which this gave rise to), paved the way for the arrival of new powers. Namely, we have seen the emergence of military factions, militias, and armed groups, amidst the exposure of regional interventions, by Russia, Iran and Lebanon. This, moreover, in a context where attempts by local people to produce their own political leaders have largely floundered, despite the area's long history of such leadership.

Sweida is currently living through a period of chaos and anxiety; incomes and standards of living are falling, while the shadow economy is expanding and inflation rates, crime rates, and unemployment rates are on the rise. This is the result of fewer work opportunities, and restrictions on movement for young men who did not enlist in military service, or who were dismissed from work for this or other political reasons.

Education and health sectors, meanwhile, are at an all-time low, while the regime has been incapable of providing social alternatives and economic solutions to an area critically affected by the existence of war on its doorstep.

Along with these huge changes in Sweida, which have brought about new gaps and needs in society while reinforcing existing ones, civil society has begun to emerge. While these huge

changes in Sweida have brought about new gaps and new needs in society – while reinforcing those which had already existed – civil society has begun to develop, and in doing so has worked to address these issues. Its path has not been an easy one. There has been an attempt to establish and activate the role of civil society despite an almost complete absence of the prerequisites required to allow it to flourish, namely freedom, and a state led by citizenship and law. There has also been an overwhelming presence of the forces of warfare, at the expense of civil forces able to overcome the geography of the conflict and offer early solutions. For it is civil work which is most able to effect change, eradicate the outcomes of war, and build peace and social cohesion.



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