

## CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

### *The Ongoing Crisis in Southern Syria (2025): Sectarian Tensions, Political Fragmentation, and International Intervention*

CSAG

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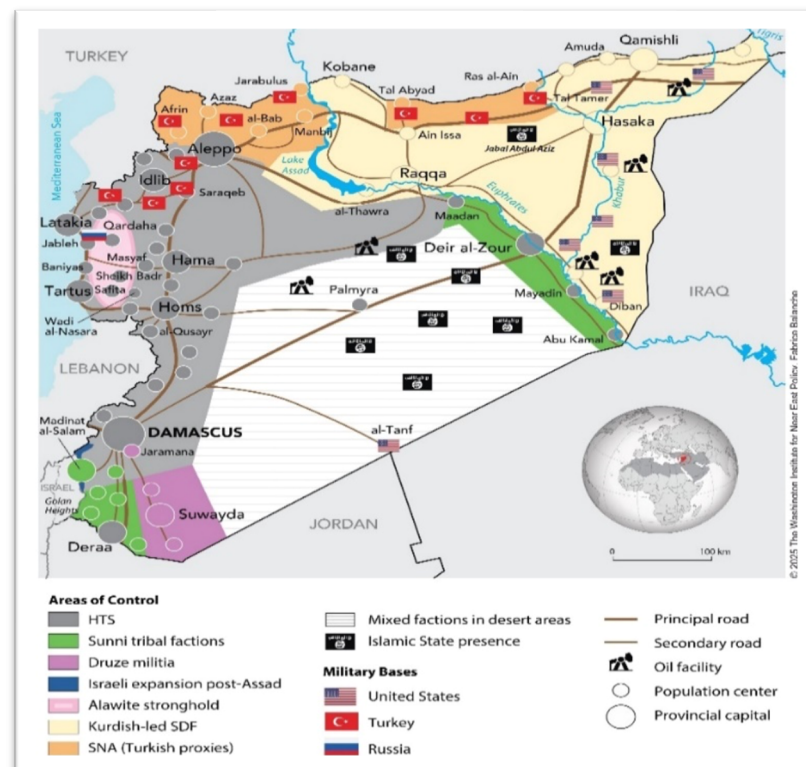
1. **Subject:** The Ongoing Crisis in Southern Syria (2025): Sectarian Tensions, Political Fragmentation, and International Intervention.
2. **Purpose:** The paper provides CSAG's analysis to understand the complex and rapidly evolving crisis in southern Syria mid-2025. It examines the key opposing parties, their ideological roots, causes of the current escalation, and provides a situational analysis with a concluding assessment.
3. **Introduction:** Since Bashar al-Assad's fall in late 2024, Syria has faced ongoing instability, especially in the south, where sectarian clashes between Druze militias and Sunni Bedouin tribes have intensified. External involvement by Israel, the U.S., and regional powers has further fueled tensions.<sup>1</sup>
4. **Opposing Parties:**

#### Druze Armed Groups

Esoteric offshoot of Ismaili Shia Islam since the 11th century, divided into several factions: local militias like Rijal al-Karama fight for autonomy and defend Suwayda from ISIS and Bedouin groups; pro-regime elements back Damascus but are now sidelined; neutral civil actors call for de-escalation and civilian safety; and diaspora Druze vary between supporting militias and advocating diplomacy. Meanwhile, Druze in the occupied Golan Heights largely avoid direct involvement but express strong solidarity with their kin in Suwayda.<sup>2</sup>

#### Bedouin Tribes

Arab Sunni communities historically semi-nomadic. Their clashes often begin over kidnappings, robberies, and land use. Their networks span southern Syria and beyond.



### **Syrian Transitional Government**

Interim authority under President Al-Sharaa. Privileges Sunni Islamist interpretations of governance and seek central control. Backed by U.S. (ceasefire mediation), Türkiye, and the Arab states.<sup>3</sup>

### **ISIS Groups**

Operate mainly in the deserts near Suwayda and Daraa, using ambushes, IEDs, and hit-and-run tactics. Despite setbacks from U.S. and Jordanian drone strikes, they remain a persistent threat to both local militias and civilians.

### **Israel**

Has intervened militarily, claiming defense of Druze minority and establishment of demilitarized southern buffer zones. Druze in Golan heights have called for protective actions.<sup>4</sup>

## **5. Reasons for the Escalation:**

- a. **Local tribal triggers:** The kidnapping of a Druze individual by Bedouin mobilized sectarian retaliation.
- b. **Weak governance:** The transitional government lacks legitimacy among minorities; its deployment of security forces stoked fears of sectarian targeting.
- c. **Strategic Israeli intervention:** Israel's involvement in southern Syria, including airstrikes on Syrian government and alleged Hezbollah-linked targets, has less to do with defending the Druze than furthering their broader strategic aims.<sup>5</sup>
- d. **International power influence:** Conflicting agendas among key international players are fueling the conflict, escalating the recent surge in violence and enabled further fragmentation.

## **6. Short-Term Background:**

### **a. Late 2024: Post-Assad Power Vacuum**

- (1) Since December 2024, a power vacuum has emerged rapidly across Syria. Control of various regions is fragmented between Northwest Syria, Damascus and the Central regions, and Southern Syria.
- (2) The power vacuum in Southern Syria in particular enabled ISIS to capitalize on the opportunity to conduct some small operations, especially near Suwayda and eastern Daraa, marked by car bombings and IED attacks on supply lines, convoys, and civilians.

### **b. February–May 2025: Rising Sectarian and Ethnic Tensions**

- (1) In February–March 2025, clashes erupted in Jaramana, a Druze-majority suburb near Damascus, between Druze militias and remnants of regime-aligned military police. Skirmishes began over detentions and accusations of looting by pro-government elements.
- (2) The month after, tensions escalated further as Bedouin tribal fighters, some suspected of links to ISIS or aligned with rival factions, were involved in gunfights with Druze paramilitaries in Suwayda and eastern Daraa.
- (3) The situation intensified in May when Israel carried out an airstrike near Damascus after warning against attacks on Druze villages in the south. A temporary security deal followed,

integrating some Druze fighters, but mistrust lingered, and violence soon resumed with shootings and kidnappings.<sup>6</sup>

**c. June–July 2025: Escalation in Suwayda and Daraa**

- (1) A major clash ignited between Druze militias and Bedouin tribal groups over disputed land and water access south of Suwayda. Initial battles escalated within days to include mortar fire and drone strikes.
- (2) Syrian Army units attempted to mediate but became directly involved after ambushes on military convoys. Government forces began joint operations with aligned Bedouin groups, sparking further anger from Druze factions who accused Damascus of betrayal.<sup>7</sup>
- (3) Control of over a dozen villages across eastern Daraa and southern Suwayda shifted from the Druze to government and Bedouin-aligned groups. Sectarian massacres were reported in at least four towns with UN observers citing executions, burning of homes, and ethnic cleansing efforts by local militias.
- (4) On July 16<sup>th</sup> Israeli Air Force conducted airstrikes targeting several Syrian government facilities in Damascus, including the Army General Command, the Defense Ministry complex, and areas around the Presidential Palace. The stated objective was to disrupt command centers allegedly directing military action against the Druze in Suwayda during the southern Syria clashes. Government forces briefly entered Suwayda July 14–16, then withdrew, and redeployed again July 19 after renewed fighting.<sup>8</sup>
- (5) Arab nations strongly condemned Israel's airstrikes on Syria as violations of sovereignty and international law. Countries including KSA, Egypt, and Jordan urged urgent international action and warned of destabilization.
- (6) The U.S. called on Damascus to halt the violence and urged all parties to uphold a ceasefire in southern Syria, which so far appears to be holding. Washington also warned Israel against further attacks, emphasizing the need to preserve regional stability.<sup>9</sup>
- (7) Clashes in Suwayda and Daraa caused around 1013 confirmed deaths, with some estimates over 1300, and displaced over 87,000 people. Losses were suffered by all parties involved, especially Druze, and the conflict severely impacted humanitarian efforts in the region.<sup>10</sup>

**7. Analysis:**

- a. Violence reflects deeper fractures, tensions among the Druze minority resisting integration into the new Syrian government, and Sunni Bedouins resisting Druze dominance. The state's weak legitimacy compounds mistrust.
- b. The U.S., Arab countries, and Türkiye are promoting centralization while Israel's partitioning influence makes a comprehensive resolution elusive.
- c. Israel's airstrikes reinforce the Druze but undermine Syria's sovereignty, drawing U.S. pushback. These Israeli actions reflect a long-term objective to weaken what they perceive as hostile forces near their borders and quietly expand their influence—part of a broader vision tied to the

concept of a “Greater Israel.” While cooperation with Druze factions provides tactical advantage, Israel’s primary goal appears to be reshaping regional dynamics in its favor.

- d. The U.S. faces a difficult diplomatic landscape in southern Syria. With a fragile transitional government, competing local factions, and intense regional rivalries. U.S. diplomacy needs to balance support for stability and minority protections without deepening sectarian divides. The U.S. also need to balance relations with Israel; whose involvement may cause further escalation. If Syria becomes more fragmented by external actors getting involved, it may complicate relations with other key partners in the region.
- e. The U.S. promotes messages of peace, stability, protection of minorities, and humanitarian access. These efforts for stability are complicated by different Israeli interests concerning the Syrian regime, which makes diplomatic signaling difficult. Russia portrays the U.S. presence as interference or occupation to maintain control of their remaining interests.
- f. Further regional instability and a divided Syria might mean that the U.S. will have a harder time achieving the goals of reduced troop presence, as they must maintain rapid response capabilities, intelligence operations, and important access. Not least with the risk of ISIS exploiting opportunities for resurgence, and clashes involving various militias pose persistent threats. Strategic messaging to counter misinformation, shape local perceptions, and support moderate governance models, particularly in areas vulnerable to ISIS, will be crucial.
- g. The U.S. is already conducting operations against ISIS in the region, but if the situation evolves, there might be a need to deepen coordination with Jordan and other regional partners to ensure the Syrian Army has effective capabilities to deal with the threat.
- h. The transitional government was already fragile before the conflict. Relief and aid have also been critically hampered. The timing of these events is problematic for Al-Sharaa’s regime as missteps risk alienating Druze and triggering Kurdish separatism, which would further undermine the central authority.
- i. Further sanctions relief could serve as diplomatic leverage and aid stability but depends on better security and governance to avoid the much-needed capital fueling sectarianism. KSA alone has already pledged a \$6 billion investment. Such investments are needed to enable Syria to get back on its feet but become less appealing if violence continues.

## 8. Conclusion:

The ongoing crisis in southern Syria highlights deep sectarian divides, weak governance, and intense international interference following Assad’s fall. The fragile transitional government struggles to unify diverse groups amid persistent violence between Druze militias, Bedouin tribes, ISIS, and Syrian forces. Israeli airstrikes and regional rivalries further complicate the situation, while the humanitarian crisis worsens. Key elements for progress:

- **Ceasefire stability** and the transition of security responsibilities to inclusive local governance, particularly integrating minorities like the Druze.

- **Reduction of external military interventions**, especially Israeli strikes that risk escalating conflict and undermining Syrian sovereignty.
- **Containment of ISIS resurgence** through coordinated military and intelligence efforts.
- **Humanitarian access and aid delivery** to prevent further displacement and suffering.
- **Political progress** toward an inclusive, moderate, transitional government that can stabilize Syria and prevent the country from becoming a permanent zone of instability.

## Sources:

<sup>1</sup> Louiza Loveluck and Zakaria Zakaria, "Israel Strikes Syrian Targets Amid Rising Druze Clashes," *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/04/30/israel-strikes-syria-druze/> (accessed July 22, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Kareem Chehayeb and Abdulrahman Shaheen, "Druze Community in Suweyda Fears Sectarian Clashes," *AP News*, June 18, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/650975a2909a934544a5e86fd5929350%20> (accessed July 25, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Arab news, "Syria's President Al-Sharaa Forms New Transitional Government," March 30, 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2595315/middle-east> (accessed July 22, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> William Christou, "Israel Says Airstrikes in Syria Are a Message to Protect Druze Minority," *The Guardian*, May 2, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/02/israel-says-airstrikes-in-syria-are-message-to-protect-druze-minority> (accessed July 25, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Louiza Loveluck and Zakaria Zakaria, "Israel Strikes Syrian Targets Amid Rising Druze Clashes."

<sup>6</sup> William Christou, "Israel Says Airstrikes in Syria Are a Message to Protect Druze Minority."

<sup>7</sup> Ahmad Sharawi, "Clashes Intensify Between Druze Militias, Bedouin Tribes, and Government Forces in Southern Syria," *Long War Journal*, July 15, 2025, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/07/clashes-intensify-between-druze-militias-bedouin-tribes-and-government-forces-in-southern-syria.php?%20> (accessed July 23, 2025).

<sup>8</sup> Louiza Loveluck and Zakaria Zakaria, "Israel Strikes Syrian Targets Amid Rising Druze Clashes."

<sup>9</sup> Daphne Psalidakis and Gram Slattery, "U.S. Discusses Death of Citizen in Suweyda With Syrian Authorities," *Reuters*, July 24, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-has-talked-with-syria-about-death-us-citizen-state-dept-says-2025-07-24/%20> (accessed July 25, 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Deniz Uyar, Monica Naime and Pola Grzanka, "How Syrian attackers killed: One hand on the gun, another on the camera" *Roeters*, July 29, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/how-syrian-attackers-killed-one-hand-gun-another-camera-2025-07-29/> (accessed July 29, 2025).