

The Security Scene in Sweida: Context and Expected Outcomes

Policy Brief ⁽¹⁾

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After being accused of kidnappings, the regime-backed Fajer militia experienced wide-scale hostility from local Sweida groups and had their headquarters seized. This may signal growing discontent with the Syrian regime's role in Sweida's deterioration.

Background

Located in southwest Syria and home to over half a million people, Sweida province has become a refuge for internally displaced persons and its host population. Sweida is predominately composed of those who identify as Druze. Their religious and ethnic identity fueled their strong inter-community tie and unified front prior to 2011. In 2011, a visible divide surfaced in Sweida between those who remained loyal to the regime, those who supported the protest, and those who wished to keep the province neutral. The Syrian regime capitalized on the growing fear, proclaiming that only the Syrian regime could protect the Druze community from the majority takeover. Although a divide in political perspective exists, the tensions between the community in Sweida subsided.

Although the formal administrative governance structures are affiliated with the Syrian regime, the community has maintained partial independence. Unwilling and unable to open another battlefield, the Syrian regime has mitigated incidents to prevent growing opposition in the Druze community. Most Druze religious leaders guided the community towards a more neutral position to maintain ties and stability. Although some in Sweida prefer to remain in opposition to the regime or neutral, there are also those that actively proclaimed their loyalty to the Syrian regime, such as the notorious colonel Issam Zaher Eddin⁽²⁾ or in establishing an independent militia, such as "Fajer"⁽³⁾.

Sweida's demographic composition has allowed it to retain partial independence from the Syrian regime. Given Sweida's unique ethnic, religious and political dynamics, the Syrian regime has granted it partial independence. Among the oral agreements with the Syrian regime, is the halt to military conscription. Although unannounced and not formally publicized, young men in Sweida are not forcefully detained and conscripted. This compulsory military service requirement is implemented diligently in all other regime-controlled regions. This means that men in Sweida, as long as they are confined to the province's borders, will not be actively

⁽¹⁾ This policy brief was based on an analysis paper by Yaman Zabad entitled "The Security Landscape in Sweida: Context and Trajectory" published by Omran Center for Strategic Studies on Aug 8, 2022, link:<https://bit.ly/3wtvLaD>

⁽²⁾ Issam Zaher Eddin, originally Druze from Sweida, was appointed as a major general in the Syria Republic Guard. He played a major role leading many regime offensives.

⁽³⁾ A regime loyalist militia group that is backed by Iran and is accused of abducting and sparking clashes with local groups.

hunted and forced to battle fronts. This does not mean the regime has not tried to pressured men from Sweida to join the military.

Sweida's History with Military Conscription since 2012

In 2012, a substantial number of young men in Sweida avoided military conscription. For many the avoidance was to not be involved in a war that was not related to them. "This war is not ours," was a widely accepted and publicized phrase at the time, which deterred even those neutral from joining military forces. The regime purposefully did not target men within that region, in an effort to keep peace south of Damascus, and although unannounced was followed. However, after the Syrian regime regained large parts of the country, this agreement was shaken multiple times.

In 2019, the Syrian regime passed the 39th resolution, which allowed the regime to confiscate any territory that belonged to men who had turned 42 without completing the compulsory military services. The Syrian regime also fired hundreds of government employees from the Sweida province for not completing the mandatory military services.

In negotiations with Sweida leaders, Russia, on multiple occasions, has presented the Dara'a scenario⁽⁴⁾ to support regime military operations in the south, but the people of Sweida have been able to refuse with little repercussions. The hesitation by the Syrian regime to act directly and aggressively in the province, has also allowed citizens in opposition some freedom to express dissent. This includes protests, establishing civil society organizations, and relief non-profits.

February 2022 Protests in Sweida

Since 2011, protests in opposition with the regime have occurred in Sweida. Although it lessened over the years, protests have re-emerged due to the deteriorating security and economic condition. The most recent protests were in February 2022 after the regime decreased subsidies in all areas, including Sweida. Despite anti-regime slogans were used during the protest, the Syrian regime did not use security forces to repress. Instead, the representatives of the regime met with the leaders of Sweida to promise future reforms and calm the tensions.

Although Sweida is a unique situation with partial independence, Syrian regime security remains widely present. The regime supported several loyal but independent militias and fueled the intelligence apparatus, and its leader Kifah Millhem⁽⁵⁾, to continue surveillance of the region.

Recent widespread anti-regime sentiment in Sweida province has begun to unravel. The most recent revolt occurred in July 2022, the Druze leaders called for unity and attempted to expel the regime loyal, and Iran-backed, Fajer militia after suspicion of kidnapping civilians. Several

⁽⁴⁾ In the Dara'a scenario, after regime invaded and conquered the territory from the opposition in 2018, Russia proposed an alternative to the security structure. Instead of forcefully conscripting the young men in the region to join regime military and battle fronts, Dara'a created its own military group "5th Falaq group" to support regime security.

⁽⁵⁾ Appointed in March 2019, Kifah Millhem was appointed by the Bashar Al-Assad as the new chief of the Military Intelligence Directorate. He is suspected to be responsible for the deaths of thousands and a war criminal.

of Sweida's local military groups united in 2018 under the name "Asharayan Alawhad" to maintain security. Iran-backed forces targeted this group through assassinations.

The Fajer Militia

The Fajer militia, which is led by Raji Falhout and composed of local fighters, was recently endured wide-spread resistance in the province. The Fajer militia is loyal to the Syrian regime and had previously held a military headquarter in the town of Ateel. The same facility is affiliated with the Syrian regime security apparatus. The militia is suspected to be supported by Iran, in addition to the Syrian regime. The militia was affiliated with arbitrary arrest, kidnapping, drug-trading, and profiteering.

Residents of Sweida were already facing increased pressure due to the deteriorating economic and security situation, and local armed groups decided to react to Fajer militias' latest violation. After clashes and multiple deaths, the local groups that opposed Fajer surrounded their headquarters. Although Russia attempted to intervene, local groups claimed it was an internal issue and proceeded to its intensive response to Fajer militia's actions. Such resistance by local groups in Sweida may escalate, as tensions continue to rise from the economic and security deterioration.

Negotiations are expected with Russia's help to subside the recent tensions. It is expected that the Syrian regime and Russia will intervene to decrease tensions from rising in south Syria. Similar interventions occurred during a prisoner exchange with ISIS in July 2018. Tensions rose in Sweida, as they believed the regime was purposefully exposing them to ISIS attacks. To maintain the peace, the regime completed a prisoner exchange with ISIS to release civilian hostages from Sweida.

Syrian Regime Exchange with ISIS for Sweida Hostages

In July 2018, the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) attacked Sweida city and towns in the northeast. Many civilians were killed, and more than 25 civilians were taken hostage by ISIS. Through Russia, the Syrian regime negotiated the release of the civilian hostages. In return, ISIS demanded the release of prisoners from Damascus. The exchange was executed and the civilian hostages from Sweida were released.

Drug trafficking in Sweida is a noteworthy contributor to rising resident opposition to Iran and regime-backed groups. Sweida has become a central region for Hezbollah and Iran to grow and trade drugs, with an intricate network internationally. According to in-depth reports completed by COAR Global ⁽⁶⁾, captagon⁽⁷⁾ exports from reached a market value of 3.46 billion USD. Multiple local news outlets ⁽⁸⁾ in Sweida have reported on the drug crisis in the province, highlighting the many drug workshops present to produce captagon. Civilians from Sweida are recruited to work in the drug workshops, and a portion of the profits go to the Iran and regime

⁽⁶⁾ <https://coar-global.org/2021/04/27/the-syrian-economy-at-war-captagon-hashish-and-the-syrian-narco-state/>

⁽⁷⁾ Captagon is a manufactured drug that acts as an alternative to amphetamine and methamphetamine

⁽⁸⁾ الجيش الأردني يقتل 4 أشخاص ويحبط تهريب كميات مخدرات كبيرة أتية من سوريا , 2022 May 22, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/> الجيش - الأردني - يقتل -4 أشخاص

backed militias to fund arms and vehicles. The Government of Jordan recently released a statement declaring war on drugs, showcasing the growing problem in the region.

Jordan War on Drugs

On May 24, 2022, the senior spokesman of the Jordanian army stated in a press release “We are facing a war along the borders, a drugs war and led by organizations supported by foreign parties. These Iranian militias are the most dangerous because they target Jordan's national security.” This statement was released after multiple initiatives by the Government of Jordan to stop the smuggling of drugs across the Syrian border. Jordan is a centra point to smuggling drugs internationally.

Appendix A:

