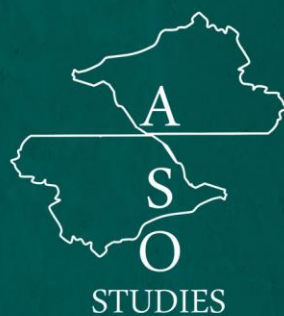




# The Druze of Syria and the Hidden Conflict with the Assads



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## Journalist and Documentary Film Maker

Some media platforms close to the Syrian regime have promoted propaganda, claiming that this regime has protected ethnic and religious minorities since the outbreak of popular protests in Syria in March 2011. It was marketed among them that the Assads had taken upon themselves to protect the Druze community in Syria as part of its strategy to shield minorities. How believable is this hypothesis?

### **First of All, Who Are the Druze?**

The Druze component is one of the major ones in Syria, and their origins are from the Arab tribes in Yemen, the most famous of which are Al-Tanukhiya, Al-Ma'anun, Al-Manathira, Banu Hilal, Kalb and Frazah tribes. They are known by Al-Maaroufia family or Bani Ma'ruf. They have their own doctrine, called the Doctrine of Monotheism, which is one of the Islamic Schools of Thought.

During the Ottoman Empire, some Druze inhabited in the countryside of Aleppo, however, their main status was in Mount Lebanon, where Fakhr Eddin Al-Ma'ani II was famous among their princes.

Their first arrival to Jabel Al-Arab in Syria, which is known today as As-Suwayda Governorate, was at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The mountain back then was almost empty area, where life was confined to some Bedouin shepherds who were taking advantage of the spring period to feed their livestock from nearby areas. Despite the succession of several civilizations on that geographical region, the mountain remained deserted as a result of its harsh winter and rugged topography.

Migration towards the mountain reached its peak after the civil war in Lebanon between the Druze and the Maronites, which continued intermittently from 1840 until 1860 after the massacres that took place between the two sides and claimed tens of thousands.



Jabel Al-Arab in its Early Days

Jabal Al-Arab also experienced the arrival of a number of Druze from the countryside of Aleppo in Northeastern Syria. In addition, several Christians and Sunni Muslims came to Jabal Al-Arab and coexisted side by side for hundreds of years with the Druze.

Jabal Al-Arab was not the only place that the Druze inhabited in Syria. We also find their gatherings in the countryside of Damascus in Jaramana and Sahnaya, as well as in Quneitra governorate, specifically in various mountain villages in Jabal Al-Sheikh, such as Baqasim and Arnah. While a number of Druze families live in the capital, Damascus, Jabal Al-Summaq in Idlib Governorate is considered the largest of their communities in Northeastern Syria, where they live in some villages, the most prominent of which are Kaftin and Qalb Loze.

After their arrival to Jabal Al-Arab, the power was in the hands of Al-Hamdan family. The Druze then entered into confrontations with the Ottomans, as well as faced the Egyptian campaign of Muhammad Ali in 1838. To win their battles despite their small number, they took advantage of the intensity of their shares as fighters and from the rugged nature of the mountain, in particular, Al-Lajat region.



**An Old Picture of the Inhabitants of Jabal Al Arab**

After taking control of 18 villages and cities in the mountain, the power was passed to Al-Atrash family, starting in 1880. Then the Druze fought dozens of battles against the Ottomans and some Bedouin clans. They participated in the Great Arab Revolt in 1916 and raised the Arab flag in the capital, Damascus. Their most notable representative was Sultan Pasha Al-Atrash, who returned and led the Syrian Revolution against the French in 1925, after which he was exiled with his fellow revolutionaries and settled in the desert between Jordan and Saudi Arabia for 7 years after a decision was issued to execute them.



### Sultan Al-Atrash and his fellow rebels

The Druze managed to prove themselves within the joints of the Syrian state, and many of their men were able to reach sensitive positions, where As-Suwayda witnessed at that time a large number of leftists and experienced politicians, as well as qualified officers in the army.

### The Relationship of the Druze with The New Syrian Regime After Hafez Al-Assad Came to Power ?

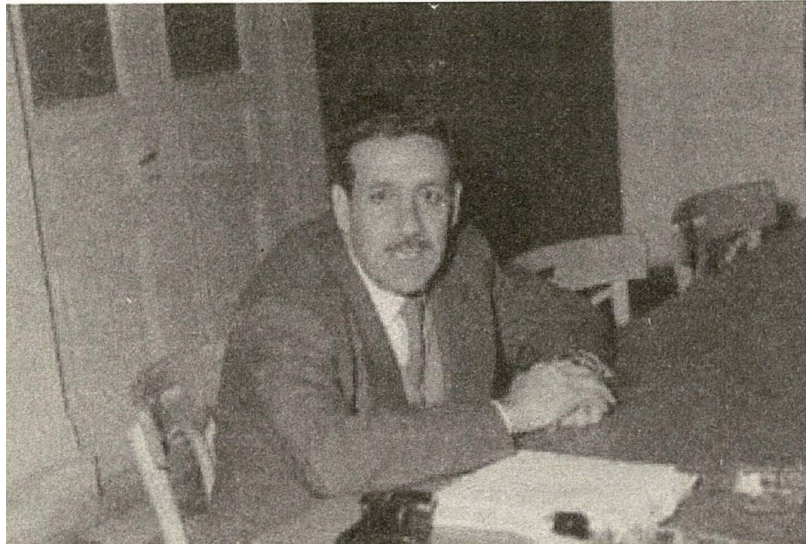
In order to learn the truth about the relationship between the regime and the Syrian Druze component, we need to return to the beginnings of the coup of Hafez Al- Assad and Salah Jadeed with the participation of Captain Salim Hatoum against President Amin Al- Hafiz on February 23, 1966.

In 1965, a year before the (Assad- Jadeed- Hatoum) coup took place, two wings clearly appeared within the ranks of Al-Ba'ath leaders. The first wing (the National Command/Leadership) included Amin Al-Hafiz, President of the Republic, Muhammad Omran, Minister of Defense, in addition to party founders Michel Aflaq, Salah Al-Bitar, Munif Al-Razzaz and politicians, most notably From As-Suwayda, Hammoud Al-Shoufi, Shibli Al-Aysami, Mansour Al-Atrash and others. On the other hand, there was a dangerous wing (the Qatari leadership) plotting to overthrow the national leadership, and most of them aspired to take power, headed by Hafez Al- Assad, Salah Jadeed, Abdel Karim Al- Jundi, Salim Hatoum and Mustafa Tlas.

On February 23, 1966, the coup forces overthrew the (National Command) team, and the military wing took control of the joints of government, after a large number of the first wing fled and others were arrested.



Salim Hatoum



Mansour Al-Atrash

Among the detainees was Vice-President of the Republic, Shibli Al-Aysami, from As-Suwayda, in addition to Mansour Al-Atrash, who was formerly a member of the Presidential Council.

Following the coup, Hafez Al-Assad was appointed Minister of Defense, replacing Major General Hamad Obaid (the Druze minister), and most of the Druze figures were excluded from sensitive positions. The pro-coup Druze officers were delirious and very upset when Salim Hatoum was marginalized and expelled from military positions.

Salim Hatoum later planned in cooperation with the Major General, Fahd Al-Shaer, the Attorney General of the Army Staff before the coup, who was coordinating with Munif Al-Razzaz to form a civilian organization with a military wing to circumvent the coup leaders. In September 1966, Hatoum's plan was uncovered before it was implemented due to a mistake made by some officers in the house of the officer, Talal Abu Asli, while they were drinking alcoholic drinks, and they argued with the officers suspected of the coup. This later led to the arrest of hundreds of officers involved in Hatoum's scheme. Among them, Major General Fahd Al-Shaer, who was imprisoned and sentenced to death. However, the mediation of President Gamal Abdel Nasser helped in releasing him after he was subjected to the most heinous torture.

Salim Hatoum headed As-Suwayda in conjunction with the removal of the largest bloc of Druze officers and politicians from political and military positions from the joints of the state. This as a result caused a great protest in As-Suwayda, and the people of the mountain threatened to boycott the elections and civil disobedience.

After this threat, the Syrian President Nour Eddine Al-Atassi, Salah Jadeed and Jamil Shea, the only Druze who remained in the Qatari leadership, went to As-Suwayda in order to explain the party's crisis to the leaders in As-Suwayda. Hatoum used this to hold them hostage and negotiate with the Defense Minister Hafez Al-Assad and Prime Minister Youssef Zain. He also demanded the release of the Druze officers and the rest of his supporters and return them to their previous positions, the removal of many supporters of Salah Jadeed from power, as well as the dissolution of the Qatari leadership and the appointment of a new leadership comprising of 5 members of the Druze leaders.

Hafez Al-Assad and the army leadership rejected the requests, and missile battalions were sent to As-Suwayda. Moreover, the planes flew over the city, and Al-Assad threatened to break into the city and destroy it. Hatum was forced to flee to Jordan, so that the province would not be destroyed, and he was sentenced to death in absentia.

## Year 1967

subsequently, general amnesty was issued for the officers following battles with Israel. Hatum returned to Syria to be arrested and sent to a field court, headed by Mustafa Talas and to be urgently liquidated in the firing range of the Mazzah Military Prison.

The relationship between the Assad regime and the Druze has been shaped since 1966. The Assad regime attempted to distort the image of the Druze and dwarf them in front of the rest of the Syrian components. For example: Hafez Al-Assad and Salah Jadeed, after losing the battles with Israel in 1967, spread a rumor that the Druze were the ones providing the coordinates to the Israeli army, resulting in the Syrian army losing the battles. This rumor caused a negative reaction among the Syrian people, culminating in the deportation of Druze families living in Damascus to As-Suwayda after murdering a man from As-Suwayda who went to check on his son in one of the military units. When the guard of the military unit learned that the man was a Druzite, he shot and killed him.

Hafez Al-Assad marginalized the men and thinkers of As-Suwayda, as many of them were exiled and issued death sentences in absentia, among them Shibli Al-Aysami. Mansour Al-Atrash, son of the commander-in-chief of the great Syrian revolution Sultan Al-Atrash was also denied.

Furthermore, he ordered that the Druze not be handed over any influential ministerial portfolio. The representation of the Druze in successive governments during the reigns of Assad, father and son, was therefore limited to the Ministry of Minor Affairs, a secondary portfolio that had no effectiveness or influence, in addition to handing them over the portfolio of local administration on a few times.





### One of the *Biraqs*/Banners that Was Formed in As- Suwayda after 2011 Revolution

Returning to the first hypothesis: Did the Assads protect the Druze of Syria within the framework of what has been marketed as minorities protection since 2011?!

## After the popular protests of 2011

With the outbreak of the 2011 revolution against the rule of Al-Assad family, leftists in As-Suwayda organized demonstrations and sit-ins and came out in support of the rest of the Syrian people. As-Suwayda witnessed then the first union sit-in in Syria in 2011, days after the outbreak of the revolution, where this sit-in was represented by the Bar Association.

The Assad regime pressed the keys of the sect, adopting the approach of his father, who had seized the spiritual authority in As-Suwayda, represented by the Sheikhdome of Reason, making it the stepdaughter of the authority. He released hundreds of Druze prisoners and gave them security cards, armed them, financed them, and used them in suppressing all kinds of movements in As-Suwayda. As well as he floated Major General Issam Zaher Edfine who was marginalized before the events, despite his leadership qualities, making him a military leader and sent him to Sunni areas and turned him into a Druzite killer who kills (Ahl Al-Sunnah).

In 2014, the movement of Men of Dignity emerged in As-Suwayda, which took a positive neutral stance, and gained wide popularity. Hundreds of young men joined it. Its popularity increased by its decision to prevent the withdrawal of wanted As-Suwayda youths to the army, in refusal to kill other Syrians. The movement adopted a comprehensive national discourse, and it became clear through the speeches of its leader and founder, Sheikh Abu Fahd Waheed Al-Balous, who stressed that the people of As-Suwayda (Syrian Arabs) want to move to a national situation far from sectarian bloc.

The movement succeeded in preventing the security services from arresting political opponents inside As-Suwayda, and it called several times to hold a national rescue conference for Syria in the edifice of Sultan Pasha Al-Atrash, the commander-in-chief of the Great Syrian Revolution of 1925.

The movement included more than 35 fighting biraqs. Al-Biraq is a Druze war organization consisted of a special banner/ flag for each family or village, under which the fighters of these families or villages include their light or hunting weapons.



## The Leader of the Men of Dignity Movement and His Companions

The Assad regime has fallen into a real paradox towards As-Suwayda and the Druze component, given that it claims in front of the international community its protection of minorities, while these minorities, including the Druze sect, oppose it. After 2014, As-Suwayda was almost out of his control. In addition, the local factions became very powerful, so he had to find a solution without involving direct military intervention, which would drop his claim to protect minorities. Therefore, the regime took several steps to marginalize the movement and the rejected political attitude in As-Suwayda, including:

He supported the chaos of weapon's spread, and he turned As-Suwayda into a fertile ground for the spread of drugs and smuggling them towards Jordan, through Hezbollah's management of the drug file in the south. He supported then the kidnapping and robbery gangs and provided them security cards and refused to hold them accountable or stop them. Moreover, he worked through these gangs to tear up As-Suwayda community. It is well known that the Druze community is a semi-clan family based on customs, traditions and family ties.

The Assad regime also set off massive explosions in September 2015, following which the leader of the Men of Dignity Movement, Sheikh Abu Fahd Waheed Al-Balous, a group of his comrades and other civilians were assassinated. One of As-Suwayda opposition's son was charged and the file of the deaths of more than 58 civilians was closed.



**The Aftermath of Bombing The Leader of Men of Dignity Movement**

Following this assassination, and starting in 2016, the regime succeeded in dismembering the components of the Men of Dignity Movement, taking advantage of the defects and schisms left by the killing of the movement's leader and other leaders. The regime supported a number of dissident factions, with the blessing of the Military Security Service, led by Brigadier General "Wafeeq Nasser" at the time, who was accused by most of the residents of As-Suwayda of being behind the bombing of Sheikh Al-Karamah in September 2015.

Starting from 2016, the local As-Suwayda factions witnessed significant schism from the Men of Dignity Movement, the most prominent of which :

- Sheikh Al-Karama Forces. Its main center is in the city of Salkhad, and its leader, Wissam Al-Eid, was assassinated later while other members were pursued by some groups supported by military security. Mehran Abid is among the notable leaders of these groups.
- *Al-Fahad Forces* (Cheetah Forces), centered in Qanawat. The Russians tried to co-opt them and recruit them into the Fifth Corps.
- The *One Artery* was later established as a gathering of a number of small factions in several villages.
- There are many small factions of unknown funding or loyalty affiliated with security bodies such as Al- Guerre Forces and others, as well as some family militias under the wing of Military Security.
- In 2021, a new group called Counter-Terrorism Forces was formed, the military wing of Syrian Brigade Party, which announced itself in line with the launch of the forces. It was fought by many of the province's residents and intellectuals, against the accusation of its founder, the journalist activist Malik Abu Al-Khair, of receiving funding from America and other parties, where the goals of the party and the forces were characterized by *empty* slogans, including fighting Iran and ISIS and its opposition to the regime. However, it did not implement any real work to support its slogans, except for creating several problems with the National Defense Forces led by Rashid Salloum, which usually ended with the intervention of notables from the governorate and resolving the dispute. After more than a thousand young men from As-Suwayda joined those forces, which paid salaries between \$80 and \$150 per member or faction leader, most of those who joined these forces defected after less than a year, and their popularity declined dramatically, especially after the killing of two Bedouins under torture at the hands of the Counter-Terrorism Forces.

Since 2014, the regime has played a series of dealings with the events taking place in the governorate, ensuring that society is fragmented and brought into a state of hidden conflict between its various factions. In 2017, it submitted reports to the Russian forces that the Men of Dignity Movement is a terrorist, where the Russians came for the first time at the time to the governorate. They met with the Sheikdom of the Reason, the leaders of the regime in As-Suwayda and some notables, and they concluded that the submitted reports are incorrect. They also visited Sheikh Yahya Al-Hajjar after he took over the leadership of the movement following Sheikh Abu Youssef Al-Balous, brother of Sheikh Waheed, who gave up the leadership of the movement.

The regime, through the Russians and other security agencies, tried to entice the leadership of the Men of Dignity Movement, and succeeded, from 2019, in neutralizing the movement and its active role and shortening its work by releasing some political detainees from As-Suwayda.

### **The Relationship Between the Governorates of Daraa and As-Suwayda:**

The Assad regime tried to provoke old conflicts between the two neighbors, Daraa and As-Suwayda, and worked to ignite a civil war between them on many occasions, taking advantage of an old

sensitivity between the two governorates based on the difference in sect and some conflicts dating back to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose brief revolves around accusations of controlling some villages on both sides are old looting and looting in which each side accuses the other. Although the two neighbors succeeded in overcoming many sensitivities, and for more than 100 years, good neighborliness prevailed between them. However, the Assad regime tried to detonate this strife that was put out by the wise people in the two governorates, the last of which was the problem that occurred between the forces of the Eighth Brigade within the Russian Fifth Corps led by Ahmed Al-Awda and the residents of Al-Qurayya village, west of As-Suwayda, after Al-Awda forces advanced about 5 km into the territory of the town. This caused great inconvenience to the farmers, and their excuse was to cut off the kidnapping gangs and thwart the Iranian expansion between As-Suwayda and Daraa, specifically Busra Al-Sham region. After that, an agreement was achieved between the notables of the two governorates on the retreat of returning the neighborhood ties to their previous era.

## The Relationship Between the Druze and the Bedouin

The Assad regime worked to rip apart the components of the As-Suwayda through the relationship of the Druze and Bedouin and intended to ignite local strife between them several times without achieving anything that he sought. He depended on the strained relationship between the Bedouin and the Druze rooted in more than 300 years. Some Bedouin clans accuse the Druze that they occupied their land while the Druze assert that the mountain was deserted, and movement in it was limited in spring only and to some nomadic Bedouins who have been coming to the mountain to graze their sheep, with several disputes over many years, most notably in 2000. What happened then is that a random uprising erupted in As-Suwayda against some Bedouin clans, on the background of the murderer of a young man from the Al-Ruha town by the daughter of a Bedouin sheikh in the town, the main reason for which was the clash of the young man previously with a number of shepherds, who later, according to the circulated version, placed the body of a dead donkey in the grave of the young man's grandfather. As a result of this incident, the young man went to the house of Sheikh Saud Al-Saeed and there he was killed. Widespread clashes erupted throughout the governorate between the Druze and Bedouins, therefore there were dead and wounded and the regime forces opened fire on relatives of the wounded in front of the National Hospital, resulting in the murderer of number of them. At that time, the people took control of the governorate building and threatened to revolt after accusing the regime of arming some Bedouin elements and recruiting them as intelligence agents in his favor. They found dozens of light and medium weapons in a mosque in Al-Shaqrawiya village. After that, the regime settled despite its direct and indirect threat to the governorate to storm and bombard it.

The regime took advantage of this sensitivity and tried on several occasions to carry out crimes and implicate the Bedouins in them, most notably the mortar shelling of As-Suwayda in 2015 and accusing the Bedouins of being behind it. Later on, it became clear that those who fired the mortar shells were a military barracks in Al-Dhama area in the city's countryside.

The Assad regime brought ISIS to Eastern As-Suwayda, after transferring more than a thousand fighters from the organization with their weapons to the Badia and Al-Safa Hills. He withdrew the weapons from the hands of his supporters in the eastern region of As-Suwayda. On 25 July 2018, ISIS entered the eastern villages of the mountain, killing more than 263 people in a gruesome manner. The Assad regime refused to send its army there, and its participation was limited to engaging a warplane that had no effect on the ground. Therefore, the people of As-Suwayda were forced to panic, defeating ISIS within 6 hours.

The Assad regime exploited the abduction of women and children by ISIS, promoting itself by attempting to retrieve them, which happened in mysterious circumstances months after the kidnapping. Assad did not miss the occasion of meeting with the kidnappers and their relatives at his palace in Damascus at the end of 2018 to pass local messages to the residents of As-Suwayda that the wanted file of the army was the cause, as well as to pass international messages that he had worked to protect the Druze and returned the kidnapped after the case took on an international dimension, which was then internationalized by a group of Druze from different countries.

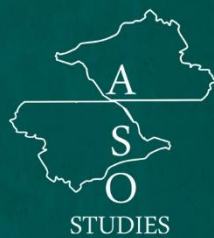
Moreover, the Assad regime facilitated the recruitment of mercenaries for the Russians and the General Intelligence Division, by wooing As-Suwayda's youth in exchange for monthly sums of money, distorting a fundamental principle in As-Suwayda: *"We forbid transgression from us and aggression against us."*

## Summary :

We can summarize that the Syrian regime has succeeded to some extent in distorting many of the deep-rooted ties and customs of the Druze society in Syria, a community of only half a million people in Syria. This regime has managed not to involve itself - so far - in open military combat against the Druze, similar to other Syrian cities. However, it ultimately failed to expel this group from its land and was unable to disengage the Druze from their beliefs, which contributed to burying the regime's strife that ignited between As-Suwayda and Daraa, as well as between the Druze and the Bedouins. The regime did not find support for his rule in the Druze, and the demonstrations that have engulfed city of As-Suwayda since the end of January 2022 come to refute the allegations promoted by the Syrian regime. It emphasizes the clear position of the Druze component on freedom and dignity.



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