

# Re-branding Extremism: A Data-Driven Case Study of HTS and Risks Implications for Religious Minorities in Syria

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## Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this strategic policy brief, the author utilized generative artificial intelligence and AI-assisted technologies to support various aspects of the manuscript preparation process. Specifically, AI tools were employed for the following purposes:

1. AI algorithms were used to assist in data sorting and analysis, specifically in quantifying the prevalence of hate speech across 9 designated Telegram Channels (text and voice). All factual claims, data points, and evidentiary materials cited in this brief have been independently, electronically, and then *manually* verified by the author and his data analysis team.
2. Image processing.
3. Translation services from Arabic to English, minimizing the manual effort needed to ensure accuracy.
4. Language editing and readability improvement: AI-assisted tools were used to enhance the clarity, coherence, and readability of the text, including grammar checking, sentence restructuring, and stylistic refinement.

All substantive intellectual content, including the research design, data collection methodology, analytical framework, argumentation, interpretation of evidence, policy recommendations, and conclusions presented in this brief, represents the original work and critical judgment of the author. The author exercised continuous human oversight and control throughout the writing process, carefully reviewing, verifying, and editing all AI-generated or AI-assisted output to ensure accuracy, completeness, and freedom from bias. While these AI tools significantly enhanced the efficiency and scope of the research, all interpretations, conclusions, and contextual analyses presented herein remain the author's sole responsibility.

## Abstract

This strategic policy brief examines the complex and perilous landscape of post-Assad Syria, focusing on the significant disconnect between the Syrian Interim Government's official rhetoric of national unity and the systematic sectarian violence perpetrated by its forces and their proxies on the ground. Following the revocation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) terrorist designation and subsequent international engagement, a dangerous dynamic has emerged. While the government presents a narrative of stabilization and unity, its actions in the Sweida governorate in the South of Syria reveal a premeditated campaign of violence against minority Druze and Christian populations. This strategic policy brief argues that the Syrian interim government, or dominant extremist factions within it, has instrumentalized Bedouin tribes and religious hatred to achieve political objectives, namely the subjugation of the historically autonomous Druze stronghold, while maintaining a facade of plausible deniability. Through a detailed analysis of the events in Sweida and based on data collected and meticulously sorted, and examined, this strategic policy brief highlights a number of core arguments that collectively debunk the government's narrative. These include: the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, the vast scale of economic destruction, the use of a coordinated online religious hate campaign to incite violence, and the stark contradiction of attacking key pro-government supporters and allies in the Druze community in addition to attacking the Christian community in Sweida, previously branded as "model minorities." From March 2025 to the present, the Syrian government has consistently evaded accountability through deliberate linguistic manipulation, characterizing mass atrocities against the Druze as mere "breaches" while simultaneously demonizing Druze factions as "outlaws." Throughout this crisis, there has been no meaningful effort to hold perpetrators accountable, acknowledge the scale of suffering, or provide reparations to destroyed communities. Instead, an entrenched mentality of political gamesmanship has prevailed, in which the Druze have been treated not as citizens deserving state protection, but as political adversaries to be managed, contained, and blamed for their own victimization. The analysis concludes that whether these atrocities are the result of a deliberate government "long game" or an extremist takeover of the state apparatus, the result is the same: the empowerment of radical ideologies, the reversal of decades of counter-radicalization efforts, and a grave threat to regional and international security. The strategic policy brief recommends that the international community adopt a strategy of profound skepticism and directly support and protect Syria's moderate voices to prevent the legitimization of a regime that employs terror as a tool of governance. Finally, among many other suggestions, this brief concludes that while calls for Druze independence from a significant portion of the Druze community are understandable and have gained popular traction, such separation would ultimately work against the very interests it seeks to protect, serving the strategic objectives of their oppressors rather than ensuring Druze safety and security.

## Disclaimer

The author does not assert any standing to define the core truth of the principles and orientations whose passionate strivings by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) are shaping the conflict in Syria. It is demonstrably clear that the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Syria and beyond have adopted more accommodating interpretations of their faith than the ones studied in this strategic policy brief. Yet, HTS has decisively influenced the outcome of the political movements sparked by the Arab uprisings and successfully challenged the existing institutions of power in Syria. While actors from both Sunni and Shia groups have contributed to the sectarian tension in Syria, our analysis will focus solely on HTS.

## Part One: A Chasm Between Rhetoric and Reality

The international community has borne witness to the profound and unjust suffering endured by the Syrian people over more than fifteen years of devastating conflict. In the wake of the Assad regime's collapse, the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations have taken important and well-founded steps to foster stability and create pathways for Syrian-led reconstruction. Central to this effort has been the diplomatic engagement with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), including the revocation of its Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation in July 2025, a pragmatic gesture intended to empower a new Syrian-led governance structure.<sup>1</sup>

However, these well-intentioned policies are predicated on a dangerous assumption: that the ruling entity in Syria (HTS) is a cohesive and rational actor committed to national unity. As this strategic policy brief will demonstrate, the reality on the ground is starkly different. While the Syrian Interim Government projects an image of moderation and control, its actions, particularly in the Sweida governorate, expose a deep and violent chasm between its public pronouncements and its operational conduct. This chasm is not a sign of incompetence but rather evidence of a deliberate strategy of political consolidation through sectarian violence, or, alternatively, a sign that extremist factions within HTS now control the state's levers of power, irrespective of the government's official decrees.

This strategic policy brief puts forward a central thesis: the Syrian government and its security forces have systematically employed sectarian incitement, proxy militias, and indiscriminate violence against civilian populations to achieve the political goal of subjugating the Druze minority in Sweida, all while publicly claiming to be a peacemaker fighting a limited insurgency. This argument is substantiated through a critical examination of seven interconnected realities on the ground, which stand in stark contrast to the official state narrative. These are: A fundamental gap between state rhetoric and action, driven by an internal power struggle between moderate and extremist factions within HTS ranks (i); the systematic targeting of the civilian population, which goes far beyond the government's stated aim of neutralizing a single "outlaw" group, in the case of Sweida, Al-Hijri Groups from the Druze Community (ii); the indiscriminate violence against the Christian minority, despite a public narrative praising them, proves the sectarian nature of the campaign and possibly a grand deception strategy (iii); the brutal targeting of non-combatants, including students, doctors, and the elderly, who have no connection to military or political activities (iv); an unimaginable scale of economic destruction and looting, inconsistent with a targeted law-and-order operation(v); the use of a premeditated, coordinated online hate campaign to foment the religious hatred necessary for such atrocities (vi); the cynical use of Bedouin tribes as intermediaries to commit these crimes, allowing the state to claim innocence and avoid responsibility, a claim we critically examined in part 6. (vii).

By analyzing these seven points, this strategic policy brief will deconstruct the government's narrative and reveal the risks or gaps associated with the current international approach. The legitimization of a government that uses terror as statecraft not only betrays the Syrian people but also gives an incentive and sets a catastrophic precedent for extremist groups worldwide, threatening to unravel decades of counterterrorism and counter-radicalization efforts. This analysis is not a call to abandon Syria or to keep crippling sanctions against the civilian population. Rather, it is a demand for a more vigilant, skeptical, and principled

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of State, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations>

engagement that empowers the nation's true moderate Sunni voices while holding its new rulers accountable for their actions.

Critically, the fate and ultimate success of all international efforts rest squarely on enabling, strengthening, and providing meaningful opportunities to moderate Syrian Sunnis who are currently being besieged, harassed, and in many cases actively intimidated by the extremist factions within HTS. These moderate voices represent Syria's minorities best hope for genuine democratic governance and peaceful coexistence among the country's diverse communities. However, they face mounting pressure from radical elements who view any deviation from their extremist ideology as betrayal worthy of punishment.

The urgency of this situation is underscored by a fundamental principle established by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project* (2010).<sup>2</sup> In this landmark decision, the Court recognized that extremist organizations inherently lack the capacity to compartmentalize their activities, ruling that "there is reason to believe that foreign terrorist organizations do not maintain legitimate financial firewalls between those funds raised for civil, nonviolent activities, and those ultimately used to support violent, terrorist operations." This judicial precedent establishes that any assistance provided to extremist groups—regardless of its intended purpose—can and will be redirected to advance their violent agenda.

Applied to the Syrian context, this principle means that international engagement with HTS, while intended to support moderate governance and humanitarian objectives, risks being exploited by the organization's extremist factions to consolidate power and advance radical goals. The international community must recognize that without robust protection and empowerment of these moderate Syrian Sunni leaders, scholars, and civil society activists, any engagement with HTS will inevitably strengthen the very extremist factions that pose the greatest threat to Syrian stability and international security. The window for supporting these moderate voices is rapidly closing, as extremist intimidation campaigns intensify and the space for dissent within HTS-controlled territories continues to shrink.

The stakes could not be higher: the future of Syrian minorities, democracy, regional stability, and the global counter-terrorism framework all hang in the balance of how the international community navigates this critical juncture.

Based on strong empirical grounding, this strategic policy brief examines the gap between rhetoric and reality in post-Assad Syria through seven interconnected parts. Part 1 analyzes the factors explaining the spread of Salafi-Jihadist ideology in Syria, with particular focus on Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Parts 2 and 3 examine HTS's attempts to rebrand itself as moderate, including its ideological revisions during the descent into Damascus and Fatwa 25, which appeared to reject violence against minorities. Through extensive data evidence, Parts 4 and 5 test the sincerity of these revisions by examining the recent campaign against Druze and Christian communities in Sweida. Part 6 re-examines the Syrian Interim Government's claims in light of evidence presented in parts 4 and 5 and concludes with a few strategic policy recommendations (part 7).

## 1. The Framework of Jujitsu Politics

Jujitsu Politics is a strategic framework developed by Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko that describes how extremist groups deliberately provoke emotional reactions from their targets to advance their political

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<sup>2</sup> *Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project*, 561 U.S. 1 (2010).

cause.<sup>3</sup> The term draws from the martial art of jujitsu, where practitioners use their opponent's strength and momentum against them. In this model, a weaker actor can provoke a stronger actor into a disproportionate response, which then serves to radicalize its own constituency, alienate moderates, and garner sympathy.<sup>4</sup>

However, the events in Sweida, Syria, present a terrifying inversion of this model. Here, it is the state actor itself, or the dominant extremist faction within it, that is employing Jujitsu Politics against its own population. The campaign against the Druze in Sweida was conducted with a level of ruthlessness, humiliation, and public visibility that seems calculated to inflict deep and lasting emotional scars. The public nature of these atrocities, combined with the deafening silence and lack of remorse from the broader Sunni community and government officials, created a profound sense of abandonment and existential threat within the Druze community. This deliberately inflicted trauma is designed to push the victimized group toward extreme reactions, such as calls for separation or independence. By provoking this reaction, the state can then frame the Druze as a separatist threat, thereby justifying its initial aggression and further consolidating its own power. The state creates the very problem it claims to be solving, using the predictable reactions of a terrorized minority to advance its own strategic goals, even if the outcome—a fragmented Syria—is ultimately not in the long-term interest of the Druze people themselves. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective counter-strategies that break the cycle rather than perpetuate it; highlighting the importance of measured, thoughtful responses to extremist provocations and the need for comprehensive approaches that address both immediate security concerns and long-term radicalization prevention.

## 2. Data Collection, Analysis, and Methodology

The analysis presented in this strategic policy brief is based on cross-platform social media data collection (open-source intelligence) from 2013 to 2025. However, for this brief, which focuses on the military campaign that impacted the Druze and Christian communities in Sweida, our data are limited to materials collected between January and September 2025. This dataset contains graphic images, physical violence, foul and incendiary language, fatalities, and other extreme content unsuitable for public dissemination. For this reason, we do not reproduce the materials we used in their entirety. Where necessary, we provide still-image screenshots to identify the source material (such as videos) and, when relevant, translate excerpts of spoken content. Full, unredacted video files are retained in our secure research archive and are available to qualified researchers for verification under controlled access and ethical review procedures.

In addition to this dataset, we conducted a systematic analysis of incendiary speech, incitement of violence, and religious hate speech incidents specifically for the purpose of examining the military campaign against Druze and Christian communities in southern Syria (Sweida). This analysis was based on a random sample of nine Telegram channels concerned with Syrian political and military affairs. The data underwent a rigorous three-tier quality control process: Tier 1 involved automated AI-assisted Screening to identify potentially relevant content containing hate speech, incendiary language, or incitement to violence against minorities;

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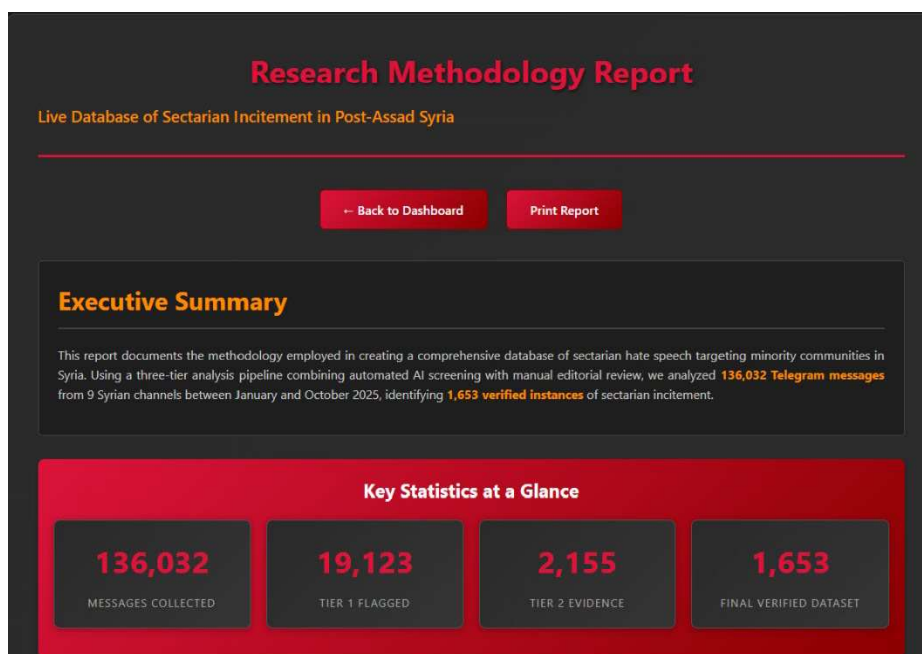
<sup>3</sup> McCauley, C. (2006). Jujitsu Politics: Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. In P. R. Kimmel & C. E. Stout (Eds.), *Collateral damage: The psychological consequences of America's war on terrorism* (pp. 45–65). Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group. See also, McCauley, C. 2017. "Constructing terrorism: From fear and coercion to anger and jujitsu politics." In M. Stohl, R. Burchill, and S. Englund (Eds.), *Constructions of terrorism: An interdisciplinary approach to research and policy* 79-90. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. McCauley, C., & Moskalenko, S. (2008). Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20(3), 415–433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550802073367>.

<sup>4</sup> Examples include September 11, *ibid*.

Tier 2 applied more refined algorithmic analysis to categorize content by target group and severity. This included a justification for the analysis (a.k.a. threat analysis), whilst the screening process was only flagged yes/no with no justification; and Tier 3 consisted of a comprehensive manual review and verification. Critically, all data related specifically to the Druze and Christian communities-the focus of this study-underwent meticulous manual quality control, with researchers individually reviewing, sorting, and analyzing each and every report to ensure accuracy and contextual understanding, ( For further info on the methodology (Data Collection, - Categorization, - Analysis, and the Manual Review Process), check Appendix A).

It is important to note that while the comprehensive database documents hate speech targeting all Syrian minorities (including Jewish, Alawite, and other communities), this policy brief focuses exclusively on content targeting Druze and Christians during the Sweida campaign. The broader database includes content that may initially appear tangential, such as posts related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Gaza war. However, this material is relevant because many online users systematically exploit anti-Israel sentiment and the fact that some Druze in Israel serve in the Israeli army to elevate and legitimize hate speech against Syrian Druze. By deliberately conflating Syrian Druze with Israeli military actions, these users weaponized the Palestinian cause to construct a hate narrative justifying violence against an entirely distinct Druze population in Syria. This type of indirect incitement falls under the "other minorities" category in the database and was not included in the specific dataset analyzed for this study, which focuses exclusively on direct hate speech targeting Druze and Christians in Syria.

Readers are encouraged to access the live, interactive database [<https://syria-live-sectarian-database.netlify.app/>], which provides real-time documentation and analysis of incendiary speech, incitement of violence, and religious hate speech incidents directed against Jewish, Christian, Druze, and Alawite communities during this period. Readers can independently verify the accuracy of the data and examine the evidence firsthand. For a comprehensive explanation of the data collection process, AI-assisted filtering methodology, and quality control procedures, readers may access the full methodology report by clicking the "Methodology" button on the database platform (See screenshot below, image 1).



### 3. Syria: The Flourishing of Al-Salafiyya Al-Jihadiyya

While numerous excellent sources provide comprehensive historical analyses of extremist groups in the Middle East generally, and Syria specifically, this strategic policy brief focuses exclusively on the essential details necessary for understanding its conclusions and recommendations. The following discussion of Salafism, jihadism, and extremist organizations is therefore deliberately selective, emphasizing only those elements that directly inform the reader's comprehension of the policy implications rather than offering an encyclopedic review of their historical development. For centuries, Salafi-Jihadism remained a marginal ideology within the Islamic world, especially in Syria. Its followers, a small fraction of the global Muslim population, were often embroiled in internal disputes. This begs the question: If the Salafi-Jihadist movement represents an unpopular interpretation of Islam in Syria, why is it currently thriving, and how has HTS successfully ousted the Assad regime? To this we turn our attention.

#### 3.1 The Foundation of Extremist Success in Syria

This analysis examines seven critical factors that created the conditions enabling extremist groups to flourish in Syria, with particular emphasis on how these factors were systematically exploited by groups like HTS to advance their strategic rebranding and positioning as legitimate societal organizations.

##### *3.1.1: Assad Regime's Systematic Human Rights Violations*

The most fundamental factor enabling the rise of extremist groups in Syria has been the Assad regime's well-documented and systematic campaign of human rights violations against its own population.<sup>5</sup> The scale and brutality of these violations created conditions that extremist groups exploited to gain legitimacy and support among desperate populations.<sup>6</sup> According to the UN Human Rights Office's comprehensive statistical analysis published in June 2022, an estimated 306,887 civilians were killed between March 1, 2011, and March 31, 2021 due to the Syrian conflict.<sup>7</sup> This represents approximately 1.5% of Syria's entire population at the beginning of the conflict, with an average of 83 civilians suffering violent deaths every single day for ten consecutive years.<sup>8</sup> The UN emphasized that these figures represent only direct conflict-related deaths and do not include the countless additional civilians who died due to loss of access to healthcare, food, clean water, and other essential human rights.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The United Nations, Syria: Rights probe reveals systematic torture and detention of Assad regime (27 January 2025), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/01/1159466>. Amnesty International Report ( Syria-2024),

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east/syria/report-syria/>. European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), Torture Under the Assad Regime, <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/case/torture-under-the-assad-regime/>. Human Rights Watch, Syria 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/syria>.

<sup>6</sup> Jamil Ammar, and Songhua Xu, *When Jihadi Ideology Meets Social Media* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2018), <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-60116-8#accessibility-information>

<sup>7</sup> UN Human Rights Office. "UN Human Rights Office estimates more than 306,000 civilians were killed over 10 years in Syria conflict." June 28, 2022. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/un-human-rights-office-estimates-more-306000-civilians-were-killed-over-10>

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State. "2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Syria." Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2025. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/syria>

<sup>9</sup> UN International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM). "The Syrian Government Detention System as a Tool of Violent Repression." December 6, 2024. Available at: <https://iiim.un.org/the-syrian-government-detention-system-as-a-tool-of-violent-repression/>

The 2024 U.S. State Department Country Report on Human Rights Practices documented that the Assad regime was responsible for 356 documented civilian killings between January and September 2024 alone, including 92 children and 40 women.<sup>10</sup> The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported that at least 1,264 civilians, including 242 children and 118 women, were killed by all conflict parties during this same period.<sup>11</sup>

### *3.1.2: Systematic Torture and Detention Infrastructure*

The UN International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism released a comprehensive report in December 2024 analyzing the Assad regime's detention system as "a tool of violent repression."<sup>12</sup> This detailed analysis, based on over 300 witness interviews, medical forensic evidence, and the Syrian Government's own documentation, documented the widespread and systematic commission of torture, ill treatment, and related violations across more than 100 Government detention facilities throughout Syria.<sup>13</sup> The IIIM report revealed that the Assad regime's detention system functioned as an integral component of state policy, designed to terrorize the population into submission through systematic torture across government facilities nationwide; enforced disappearances on a massive scale; sexual violence as a tool of repression, and inhumane detention conditions designed to cause maximum suffering ( to mention only a few factors).<sup>14</sup> The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented that at least 86 individuals, including four children and one woman, died from torture in 2024, with the Assad regime responsible for 52 of these torture deaths.<sup>15</sup> The SNHR reported in February 2024 that the regime systematically refused to return bodies of those who died in custody to their families, instead disposing of bodies through "deliberate burning operations."<sup>16</sup>

### *3.1.3: Economic Warfare Against Civilians*

Beyond direct violence, the Assad regime employed economic warfare tactics that devastated civilian populations, including but not limited to siege warfare targeting civilian areas, cutting off food, medical supplies, and humanitarian aid, destruction of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and markets, and forced displacement of over 13 million Syrians (more than half the pre-war population)<sup>17</sup> and the weaponization of humanitarian aid to control and punish opposition areas.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of State, *supra* note 4. Syrian Network for Human Rights. "The Death of 70 Civilians, Including Seven Children and Three Women, and Three Deaths due to Torture Recorded in September 2025 in Syria." October 1, 2025. Available at: <https://snhr.org/blog/2025/10/01/the-death-of-70-civilians-including-seven-children-and-three-women-and-three-deaths-due-to-torture-recorded-in-september-2025-in-syria/>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> UN International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM). "The Syrian Government Detention System as a Tool of Violent Repression." December 6, 2024. Available at: <https://iiim.un.org/the-syrian-government-detention-system-as-a-tool-of-violent-repression/>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of State, *supra* note 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "Syria Regional Refugee Response." Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3.1 4: *The Corruption of Religious Authority*

The Assad regime systematically appointed corrupt clerics who legitimized its reign by portraying Assad as "faithful" and attempting to justify the regime's crimes and violations, thereby compelling Syrians to obey him. This collaboration between Assad's autocracy and compliant Muslim clerics ensured the submission of an otherwise rebellious population through religious manipulation.<sup>19</sup> This system created a profound crisis of religious legitimacy that extremist groups like HTS exploited by positioning themselves as the authentic voice of Islam against a regime that had corrupted religious institutions for political purposes.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.1.5: *The Weaponization of Sectarianism and Information Campaigns*

The Assad regime deliberately inflamed sectarian tensions to maintain power, creating conditions that extremist groups systematically exploited. This weaponization of sectarianism operated through multiple interconnected mechanisms:

1. **Demographic Engineering:** The Assad regime promoted Alawite minority rule over a Sunni majority population, justified through carefully constructed sectarian narratives that portrayed the conflict as an existential threat to minority communities.<sup>21</sup>
2. **Systematic Targeting of Religious Leadership:** The regime conducted systematic targeting of Sunni religious leaders who refused to collaborate, eliminating moderate voices that could have provided alternative religious authority.<sup>22</sup>
3. **Sectarian Militia Deployment:** The regime promoted sectarian militias to terrorize Sunni populations, including Iranian-backed Shia militias and Alawite paramilitaries that conducted operations designed to inflame sectarian hatred.<sup>23</sup>

## 4. HTS Sophisticated Information Warfare

As early as 2013, both al-Qaeda and ISIS demonstrated very high awareness of the importance of disinformation and used all means of communication to debunk any story that contradicted their narrative, going to great lengths to explain and justify their actions while sowing distrust in official accounts. By systematically and consistently describing, discrediting, and, to some extent, undermining official state narratives across platforms, both ISIS and al-Qaeda successfully managed to damage the credibility of already weak and corrupt political elites in Iraq and Syria and to spread and justify their violence more convincingly.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jamil Ammar and Songhua Xu, *Yesterday's Ideology Meets Today's Technology: A Strategic Prevention Framework for Curbing the Use of Social Media by Radical Jihadists*, 26 *Alb. L.J. Sci. & Tech.* 235, v (2016).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Phillips, Christopher. "Sectarianism and conflict in Syria." *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2015): 357-376.

<sup>22</sup> Rabi, Uzi, and Benedetta Friedman. "Weaponizing sectarianism in Iraq and Syria." *Orbis* 61, no. 3 (2017): 423-438.

<sup>23</sup> Leenders, Reinoud. "How the Syrian regime outsmarted its enemies." *Current History* 112, no. 758 (2013): 331-337.

<sup>24</sup> Ammar, Jamil. *Disinformation: The Jihadists' New Religion*. Chapter 8, July 2023. Appeared in Arcos, R., Chiru, I., & Ivan, C. (Eds.). (2023). *Routledge Handbook of Disinformation and National Security* (1st ed.). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003190363>

Both groups used a lethally effective combination of fact-checking, ideological literacy, and audience engagement to create a culture of ideological and propaganda loyalty. Capitalizing on the economic interest of social media companies to promote emotional hyper-partisan stories that generate great disinformation, the politicization of human rights and counter-terrorism regulations, and finally, the lack of effectively functioning governments, especially in Syria and Iraq, where both authorities are involved in disinformation campaigns, al-Qaeda and ISIS managed to muddy the water. So much so that, for many people in Syria and Iraq, it is often hard to agree on a basic set of facts.<sup>25</sup>

As we have discussed elsewhere,<sup>26</sup> HTS learned from and refined these information warfare techniques, developing sophisticated rebranding strategies that positioned the group as a legitimate societal organization rather than an extremist faction.<sup>27</sup> The Wilson Center's analysis documented how HTS's multiple rebranding efforts—from Nusra Front to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham—represented "a strategy to broaden its local appeal and deepen its control of the rebel campaign" while attempting "to disassociate itself from al Qaeda, which is seen as toxic by other rebel groups as well as the local civilian population."<sup>28</sup>

The sophisticated rebranding and repositioning strategies demonstrated by HTS represent a broader evolution in extremist communication tactics that deserve comprehensive analysis. These techniques have been refined and adapted across multiple jihadist organizations, creating new challenges for national security and counterterrorism efforts. The following section examines these disinformation strategies in detail, drawing from extensive empirical research to understand how extremist groups have transformed their approach to public engagement and legitimacy-building.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4.1 From Extremist to Statesman: HTS's Calculated Transformation Strategy for International Recognition

HTS has evolved considerably over the past decade.<sup>30</sup> Facing intense scrutiny from local populations and stiff rivalry in the form of ISIS, the group has demonstrated impressive flexibility and strategic maturation. HTS and its affiliates began their initial deliberations about modifying their media strategy just under a decade ago.<sup>31</sup> Two prominent jihadi scholars, Mohammad Al-Maqdisi and Abdulmonem Mustafa Halimah (often referred to as Altartousi), initiated discussions around this new media strategy. Both scholars overtly criticize al-Qaeda for publicly showcasing atrocities and for its links to international jihadi groups.<sup>32</sup> Both scholars have also advocated for what might be called a new, more publicly acceptable media theory. Understanding

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Jamil Ammar, Cyber Gremlin: social networking, machine learning and the global war on Al-Qaida-and IS-inspired terrorism, *International Journal of Law and Information Technology*, Volume 27, Issue 3, Autumn 2019, Pages 238–265, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijlit/eaz006>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Rowan, Mattisan. "Al Qaeda's Latest Rebranding: Hay'at Tahrir al Sham." Wilson Center, April 24, 2017. Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/al-qaedas-latest-rebranding-hayat-tahrir-al-sham>

<sup>29</sup> Jamil, *supra* note 26.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Id.

<sup>32</sup> Jamil, *supra* note 26. See also Jamil, *supra* note 23.

how this HTS media strategy in Syria has recently changed elucidates the role-and formidable challenges-of future disinformation campaigns.<sup>33</sup>

## 4.2 HTS New Media Strategy

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham has been systematically working to re-position itself as a moderate entity, developing a newly orchestrated media strategy for public socialization.<sup>34</sup> According to Al-Maqdisi and Altartousi, the essence of this new media strategy is twofold: Jihad and all other fundamental Islamic principles are and will remain the cause that unifies committed and devout jihadi groups; however, the way to communicate these principles to the public should be more public and media-friendly. To this end, among many others, Al-Maqdisi makes three major proposals.<sup>35</sup>

First, a cornerstone of this new approach is to cease showcasing atrocities; that is, the Mujahideen should not record or publish the killing of civilians or the "killing or torturing of hostages." According to Al-Maqdisi, such activities enable the enemies of the Mujahideen to rally support against them. The results of over eight years of examination of HTS's media activities online in Syria suggest that HTS is following this new media approach. The overwhelming majority of channels run by HTS or its supporters in Syria, followed publish mainly daily news and other conventional religious content.<sup>36</sup> However, some groups loyal to the HTS did not follow this advice during the recent campaign on the Druze in Syria.

Second, the Mujahideen ought not to embrace or adopt "names of jihadi groups" to advance the "tactical and political" interests of jihad, such as "al-Qaeda." As long as jihad is maintained, it matters less under which flag or organization a Mujahid fights. While maintaining its jihadist agenda, HTS publicly severed its alliance with al-Qaeda in 2016. However, HTS retains an austere local Salafi-jihadist ideology. For example, in March 2017, two HTS suicide bombers attacked Damascus, Syria, killing at least seventy-four people, including eight children.<sup>37</sup>

Third, the Mujahideen ought to develop a more "realistic" and workable plan to establish a Caliphate. Outlandish statements and policies that could unify the international community against this objective ought to be avoided, Maqdisi argues. Striking a softer tone with the West and its allies is key. In the case of Syria, for example, for the time being, Al-Maqdisi suggests that jihadi groups not make their real intention toward Israel public. "Even if we [the Mujahideen] consider Jews our worst enemies, still we currently have a lot on our plate [busy fighting the Syrian regime] ... this is not the right time ... if we try too hard [fighting Jews and the Syrian regime simultaneously] we might fail." This new propaganda theory, at least in Syria, departs from al-Qaeda's global four-part narrative frame, described by Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko.<sup>38</sup>

Al-Maqdisi's suggestions seem to be working. HTS has first established a strong foothold in north Syria and has been providing essential services to the local community for quite some time, and on December 8, 2024, HTS managed to oust the Syrian regime and take control of Syria.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Jamil, *supra note 26*.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Jamil, *supra note 23*.

<sup>36</sup> Jamil, *supra note 26*.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Id. See also, McCauley, C., & Moskalenko, S. (2008). Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20(3), 415–433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550802073367>

It is important to recognize that the deception, rebranding, and repositioning strategies employed by HTS are not unique to this organization alone. These sophisticated disinformation techniques have been adopted by various extremist groups, including ISIS, demonstrating the widespread nature of such tactical adaptations in contemporary jihadist movements.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> The Islamic State in Iraq has adopted a similar but much more sophisticated multi-tiered disinformation strategy. ISIS disinformation focuses on the deliberate mischaracterization of real events in coordinated social media campaigns that are intended to shape public perception and interpretation of these events. For more information, see Jamil, *supra* note 24. See also, Martin Innes, 'Fogging' and 'Flooding': Countering Extremist Mis/Disinformation After Terror Attacks (8th November 2021), Global Network on Extremism and Technology Report, <https://gnet-research.org/2021/11/08/fogging-and-flooding-countering-extremist-mis-disinformation-after-terror-attacks/>

## Part Two: The Violent Ideology of Extreme Groups

This part seeks to dissect the intellectual and theological currents that justify physical violence or actions against minorities and others. The goal is to demonstrate that such violent actions are not random acts of savagery but the grimly logical outcomes of a specific, highly influential, and exclusionary ideology. To this end, this analysis will establish the foundational principles of modern Salafi-jihadism by examining the contributions of its most influential thinkers. Particular emphasis is placed on the 14th-century scholar Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah, who is widely regarded as the intellectual progenitor of this movement. We will then trace the evolution of his ideas through subsequent figures like Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Hassan al-Banna, and Sayyid Qutb. By understanding this traditional extremist framework, particularly its rulings on minorities and the use of violence, we can establish a baseline against which the purported ideological revisions of contemporary groups can be critically assessed.<sup>40</sup>

### 1. The Fountainhead of Salafi-Jihadism: Ibn Taymiyyah

The origins of the al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya (Jihadi Salafism) movement are inextricably linked to the prolific and controversial Hanbali scholar, Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328).<sup>41</sup> His teachings provide the core theological corpus for nearly all modern extremist groups. His influence stems from a rigid and uncompromising theological framework built on three core pillars: literalism, the purification of faith, and the elevation of jihad.<sup>42</sup>

1. Theological Literalism: Ibn Taymiyyah championed the idea that the Quran and the Sunni (the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad) must be interpreted in their most literal and ordinary sense. He argued that the early Muslim community (al-Salaf al-Salih) held the only pure understanding of the faith, and any deviation from their practice or belief was a corruption. This principle strictly forbids any figurative, metaphorical, or contextual re-interpretation of scripture, deeming such attempts as blasphemy (kufr) or apostasy (rida)-crimes punishable by death.<sup>43</sup>
2. Purification and Takfir (Excommunication): Central to Ibn Taymiyyah's project was the purification of Islam from what he viewed as heretical innovations (bid'ah) and polytheism (shirk). This was not merely a theological exercise; it had violent, real-world consequences. He famously issued fatwas declaring entire groups of Muslims, including all Shia and other sects who engaged in practices like visiting tombs or venerating saints, to be apostates. This practice of takfir, or declaring a fellow Muslim an unbeliever, became a powerful tool that provided theological license to kill those who did not adhere to his strict interpretation of monotheism.<sup>44</sup>
3. The Elevation of Jihad: Ibn Taymiyyah's work elevated armed struggle (jihad) to the status of a primary religious duty, arguing it was more significant than the Hajj (the grand pilgrimage to Mecca),

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<sup>40</sup> Jamil and Songhua, *supra note* 19.

<sup>41</sup> See generally, Ibn Taymiyyah, the Oxford Dictionary of Islam, edited by John L. Esposito, Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e959>.

<sup>42</sup> Jamil and Songhua, *supra note* 19.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

one of the five official pillars of Islam. This re-prioritization provided a divine mandate for perpetual warfare against those he designated as unbelievers, both outside and within the Muslim world.<sup>45</sup>

## 2. The Fatwas of Ibn Taymiyyah

Taymiyyah's teaching represents the template or blueprint for the overwhelming majority of extremist groups. These groups use his teaching to justify barbaric atrocities against the different others.<sup>46</sup> The enduring and lethal legacy of Ibn Taymiyyah is most evident in his specific legal rulings (fatwas), which are frequently cited by modern jihadists to justify their atrocities.<sup>47</sup> The following are a few examples of his fatwas presented here to illustrate the severity of his doctrine: According to Taymiyyah, *“unless they repent, Muslims who do not pray are to be put to death”*.<sup>48</sup> In another fatwa, he pointed out that Muslims who shave their beards are *“unbelievers”*. Unless they repent, *“they must be killed... Muslims who shave their beards are in fact more infidel than Jews and Christians”*.<sup>49</sup> On Shia Muslims, he had this to say: *“In both their beliefs and behaviors, Shia is the most ignorant of all Islamic sects and the farthest from Islam.”*<sup>50</sup> In fact, in their hatred of Islam, *they are worse than Jews and Christians ...”*. On Alnyseria, another Islamic sect, Taymiyyah issued this fatwa: *“Alnyseria are more infidels than Jews and Christians... Their bloods and positions are to be taken.”*<sup>51</sup> *“Muslims are to expose them, reveal their secrets, and to apply God’s orders against them. Jihad against them is one of the most important religious duties...”*

Finally, on Druze, Taymiyyah issued this fatwa: *“Druze are unbelievers by the consensus of all Muslims... anyone who doubts that they are unbelievers is an unbeliever like them. Their women are to be enslaved, and their fortunes are to be taken; they are to be killed wherever they are found; cursed as they are described... And their scholars and clerics must be killed so that they do not lead others astray...”*<sup>52</sup>

These rulings form a theological toolkit for extremist groups, providing pre-packaged justifications for the persecution, enslavement, and mass killing of religious minorities and dissenting Sunni Muslims. Groups from al-Qaeda to ISIS have consistently invoked Ibn Taymiyyah's name and work to legitimize their

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<sup>45</sup> Id.

<sup>46</sup> Among many other examples, Taymiyyah's name was invoked by Osama Bin Laden when issued his infamous fatwa against the US. Full version of this fatwa can be read here: <https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>. ISIS's followers relied on a fatwa issued by Taymiyyah to suggest an execution method for the condemned Jordanian pilot which can be accessed here: (online Arabic publication): Mouhamad Almakdesi, Jihad in The Hanbali Doctrine (Books world publication 1985), at 25, [https://www.islamweb.net/ar/library/index.php?page=bookcontents&ID=961&idfrom=4986&idto=5061&flag=0&bk\\_no=28&ayano=0&surano=0&bookhad=0](https://www.islamweb.net/ar/library/index.php?page=bookcontents&ID=961&idfrom=4986&idto=5061&flag=0&bk_no=28&ayano=0&surano=0&bookhad=0). See also, Andrew Griffin, 'Isis militants 'using Twitter to ask for suggestions on how to kill Jordanian pilot' (December 30, 2014), available at, <https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/isis-polls-twitter-for-gruesome-suggestions-of-how-to-kill-jordanian-pilot-9949550.html>.

<sup>47</sup> For more information about Taymiyyah's ideology, see generally Abdur-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Qasim, Majmu Fatawa Sheikh Al-Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah (The Ministry of Islamic Affairs Publications, Saudi Arabia, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> Jamil and Songhua, *supra note* 19.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Id.

<sup>51</sup> Jamil and Songhua, *supra note* 19.

<sup>52</sup> Abdur-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Qasim, Majmu Fatawa Sheikh Al-Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah (The Ministry of Islamic Affairs Publications, Saudi Arabia, 2004), at 89-106, 163, 136-141, 149-160 and 161-162. Generally speaking, blasphemy includes the insulting or showing lack of respect for Allah or his Messenger. According to Taymiyyah, cursing the Prophet Mouhamad, in particular, is a crime punishable by death. Abd A Ebraheam, Moghnee Al-Moreed, (Albaz Publication 2000), at 2771. See in general Ron Hassner, 'Blasphemy and Violence', 55 International Studies Quarterly(2011), at 23-54.

campaigns of violence. As we will see in this brief, due to these fatwas, both the Druze and Christian Communities will pay heavy price during the violent campaign on Sweida.

### 3. The Evolution and Politicization of Extremist Thought

While Ibn Taymiyyah laid the ideological groundwork, his ideas were adapted and politicized by subsequent thinkers who molded them into a modern revolutionary ideology. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1791): The founder of Wahhabism, a particularly austere subset of Salafism, Abd al-Wahhab operationalized Ibn Taymiyyah's puritanical zeal. His crucial alliance with the House of Saud in the 18th century gave this ideology the power of a state, leading to the establishment of Saudi Arabia. This partnership allowed for the global financing and propagation of Wahhabi doctrine through religious schools (madrasas), wedging a rigid, takfiri-based theology to a political entity and spreading its influence far beyond the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>53</sup>

#### 3.1 *Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949)*

The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Banna advocated for the creation of a unified Islamic state as the only legitimate alternative to the secular, post-colonial nation-state. While he spoke of treating non-Muslim minorities with "peacefulness and sympathy," this tolerance was explicitly conditional. Minorities were required to accept the supremacy of Islamic law and the Islamic character of the state. This concept of conditional citizenship has been interpreted by more extreme groups as a justification for subjugating or eliminating any minority group that does not fully submit to their rule.<sup>54</sup>

#### 3.2 *Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966)*

Perhaps the most influential modern jihadist theorist, Qutb radicalized al-Banna's political Islam into a call for all-out war. In his seminal work, *Milestones*, Qutb argued that the entire world, including modern Muslim societies, was living in a state of pre-Islamic ignorance (jahiliyyah). He divided the world into two mutually exclusive camps: the "party of Allah" and the "party of Satan." For Qutb, there was no room for coexistence. He argued that true Muslims were obligated to wage violent jihad to destroy this global state of jahiliyyah and establish the absolute sovereignty of God on Earth. This binary, confrontational worldview has become a cornerstone of the ideology of groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, providing the ultimate justification for total war against all who oppose them.<sup>55</sup> The ideology underpinning modern Salafi-jihadist groups is not a recent invention but a coherent and developed doctrine with deep historical roots. It begins with Ibn Taymiyyah's foundational principles of scriptural literalism, the aggressive purification of the faith through the excommunication (takfir) of all dissenters, and the elevation of jihad as a supreme religious duty. His specific fatwas against minorities like the Shia, Alawites, and Druze have served as a direct blueprint for the atrocities committed by groups like ISIS.<sup>56</sup> This theological framework was later politicized by figures like Hassan al-Banna, who rejected the secular state, and radicalized into a call for global revolution by Sayyid Qutb, who envisioned a total war against a world steeped in ignorance. The result is a comprehensive ideology that provides a divine mandate for intolerance, exclusion, and extreme violence against both non-Muslims and

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<sup>53</sup> Jamil and Songhua, *supra* note 19.

<sup>54</sup> Jamil, and Songhua, *supra* note 6.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

any Muslims who deviate from its rigid dogma. This review establishes the traditional ideological baseline against which the purported revisions of groups like HTS can be measured and their significance assessed.

## Part Three: A New Fatwa for a New Front? HTS and the Politics of Moderation

In a striking departure from the hardline doctrines outlined above, recent fatwas issued by the religious leadership of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) suggest a significant ideological recalibration. This analysis examines one particularly significant new ruling, specifically focusing on its implications for the treatment of minorities and non-combatants, and assesses whether it represents a genuine ideological shift or a pragmatic, strategic repositioning.

### 1. Revised Analysis: The Evidence from HTS's Fatwas

While its fighters were descending on the Capital, Damascus, in December 2024, the HTS opened a Telegram Channel to communicate with its fighters and to reaffirm the military rules of engagement. To this end, HTS's "Scientific Committee of the General Directorate of Religious Guidance" issues a collection of fatwas providing crucial insights into HTS's apparent moderation. One fatwa (Fatwa Number 25) fundamentally transforms our understanding of the scope and significance of HTS's ideological revision.



When asked about how to deal with "numerous non-Muslim sects in the liberated areas," HTS's religious committee issued what can only be described as a revolutionary fatwa that explicitly contradicts centuries of takfiri doctrine. The fatwa starts as follow: "Syria is a country diverse in religions and sects, and these sects have lived under Islamic rule with complete dignity and justice since the Umarite Covenant, which allowed them to practice their religious rituals... The rulings on these sects [minorities] are clarified through the following points". Then, the religious committee pointed out that while minorities are considered infidels ... "the ruling of their disbelief does not necessitate killing them or fighting them as long as they do not fight us". "As long as these sects have not fought us, we treat them according to Islamic rulings of righteousness and justice, as Allah said: 'Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes - from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly.'" Then, the religious committee added:

1. "The enemy of the mujahideen in Syria is Assad's regime and those who support it, regardless of their sect or denomination. We fight those who fight us and refrain from those who refrain from us".

2. "Those who refrain from fighting us, we deal with them with justice and fairness. Sharia has warned against betraying the people of dhimma and covenant holders... The Prophet said: 'Whoever kills a person under covenant will not smell the fragrance of Paradise, and its fragrance can be found from a distance of forty years' journey'".
3. "The religious obligation includes adhering to Sharia rulings, as well as the recommendations of Operations Management to secure the people of these sects, protect them, not attack them, and allow them to practice their rituals according to what they believe and practice".

At face value, as we see next, Fatwa 25 appears to have the potential to significantly reduce the level of ideological extremism adhered to by religious extremist groups. The genuineness of its validity, however, remains uncertain at this point.

## 2. Analysis and Comparison: A Fundamental Theological Revolution

This fatwa represents not merely a departure from traditional Salafi-jihadist ideology, but a complete theological revolution that directly contradicts the core premises of takfiri doctrine. The contrast with Ibn Taymiyyah's fatwas is absolute:

Issue	Ibn Taymiyyah's Traditional Doctrine	HTS Fatwa 25
Theological Status of Non-Muslims	Declared apostates (takfir), with killing and enslavement explicitly mandated	Acknowledges their disbelief but explicitly states: "The ruling of their disbelief does not necessitate killing them."
Treatment of Religious Minorities	"Their women are to be enslaved, and their fortunes are to be taken; they are to be killed wherever they are found." [this applies to the Druze]	"We treat them according to Islamic rulings of righteousness and justice," and "allow them to practice their rituals according to what they believe."
Scope of Legitimate Targets	All who deviate from Taymiyyah's interpretation of Islam	Only "Assad's regime and those who support it, regardless of their sect or denomination"
Religious Practice	Visiting tombs or saints constitutes shirk, punishable by death	Explicit protection for minorities to "practice their rituals according to what they believe"

## 3. The Significance of the Shift: Beyond Strategy to Doctrinal Revolution

The central question of whether this ideological revision represents a genuine transformation or strategic rebranding must be fundamentally reconsidered in light of Fatwa 25. This is not merely tactical moderation—it is a comprehensive doctrinal revolution that explicitly rejects the theological foundations of takfiri ideology. The significance of this fatwa cannot be overstated. HTS has not simply avoided mentioning minorities or spoken in general terms about justice. Instead, they have issued a direct, unambiguous ruling explicitly

separating theological judgment from political action ("The ruling of their disbelief does not necessitate killing them or fighting them"). Secondly, this fatwa provides specific protection for religious practice: Minorities can "practice their rituals according to what they believe." Thirdly, this fatwa cites prophetic traditions that threaten divine punishment for those who harm covenant holders. Finally, it makes protection of minorities an institutional obligation: Operations Management must "secure" and "protect" them.

This represents a complete inversion of Ibn Taymiyyah's doctrine. Where he declared that Druze "women are to be enslaved" and they "are to be killed wherever they are found," HTS explicitly protects their right to practice their religion. Where traditional takfiri ideology sees theological difference as grounds for violence, HTS creates an absolute separation between belief and political action.

This fatwa was perfectly timed for two main reasons. The first is related to the demographic age of HTS fighters. It is worth mentioning that between 2011-2024, thousands of Syrian young men and women were born or raised in refugee camps in the North of Syria, Turkey, or neighboring countries. For those thousands of young people, life has been extremely harsh. For them, fighting for their life, bearing witness to aggression and atrocities committed against the Sunni in Syria was the norm. The only counsel or comfort they got was some religious emotional support provided by religious scholars who explained to them that struggle is the best way to get closer to God.<sup>57</sup> These deprived generations have been preyed upon by controversial religious clerics who use them to advance their ideological agenda.<sup>58</sup> Some as young as 2 years old were indoctrinated to become young jihadists or Jeel Al Tamkeen- The empowerment Generations.<sup>59</sup> Most of those young generations, who spent their young life with little to no connection with the outside world, are now in their twenties, and they represent the cornerstone of the current Syrian security forces and Syrian army.

The second reason is that for those deprived generations of fighters, the December 8th victory or the ousting of the Syrian regime is not simply a gift, a good gesture, or an international agreement by key international players to stabilize Syria. For those thousands of young fighters, the United States' open-door policy for the Syrian interim government is nothing more than a submission to the will of God. The victory of December 8th and the ousting of the Syrian regime is nothing less than a miracle; it's a reward for their struggle that has lasted for almost 15 years. Those jihadists have been rewarded for their commitment to God, to their religion, and to their people, and therefore God has rewarded them for their hardship and enabled them to have strong dominion over their enemies. After all, they are called the Empowerment Generations. For those young hard fighters, distinguishing humanitarian engagement from religious reward is almost impossible. For thousands of young fighters, it is even an insult to God to see it that way.

For this reason, whatever the international community does in teams of diplomacy trying to help the Syrian people, enable them to have their life back, having electricity, water, schools, university, lifting sanctions all of this is not a kind gesture but rather it's a right, it is something that they have earned with their blood, sweat and hard work. Now, for those, the only possible path is to carry on is to thank God by practicing the most austere interpretation of faith; otherwise, they will not be grateful for God who has rewarded them as jihadist.

From counter terrorism and counter radicalization perspectives, these extreme views need to be changed. Any misunderstanding or misinterpretation of why the international community has welcomed the HTS with

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<sup>57</sup> Jamil and Songhua, *supra note* 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*

open arms will be seen by thousands of extreme individuals and groups around the world as an incentive to fight harder and to hold longer, in the hope that one day they will be victorious, and they will take control and achieve their goals. If extreme groups see what happened in Syria as a victory from God or as a reward from God, this will encourage extreme groups and their supporters around the world to dig deeper into their beliefs and to feel that it doesn't matter how long it takes; if you fight harder for a long time, you will be victorious. Such a misguided interpretation is fatal. It could roll back all the successes achieved by the international community, the United Nations, the United States Europe in terms of counterterrorism.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks: The Jury's Still Out

The evidence from Fatwa 25 presents a compelling case for what appears to be a comprehensive theological revolution within Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The explicit protection of religious minorities, the separation of theological judgment from political action, and the direct contradiction of core takfiri premises suggest a fundamental ideological transformation that goes far beyond mere strategic positioning.

However, the ultimate test of any ideological revision lies not in the fatwas issued by religious committees or the statements released by media offices, but in the actions taken on the ground when those principles are put to the test. To truly understand whether what Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has undergone represents genuine ideological transformation or sophisticated ideological laundering-whether it constitutes authentic reform or an elaborate disinformation campaign designed for international consumption, we must examine how these proclaimed principles hold up when confronted with real-world challenges.

To this end, we must look beyond the carefully crafted religious rulings and examine the practical implementation of these policies in the territories under HTS control. The most revealing test case for HTS's claimed ideological moderation comes from recent events in southern Syria, specifically the violent campaign committed against Druze and Christian communities in al-Suwayda and surrounding areas. This case study provides a crucial opportunity to measure the gap between HTS's theological pronouncements and their operational reality.

This practical examination will be conducted through phases. First, we will analysis the actions taken by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and more specifically by extreme factions within the organization and their affiliates, in the period leading up to the violent campaign. Then, we will conduct a detailed examination of the military campaign itself, documenting the nature, scope, and targets of the violence committed against Druze and Christian communities. This phase will provide concrete evidence of how HTS's proclaimed protection of minorities translates into practice when operational pressures mount. Finally, we will examine the justification and state official narrative to explain, justify, or resolve the contradiction between their stated principles and their actions. This phase will reveal whether the HTS will acknowledge the violation of its stated principles, attempted to rationalize the violence within its theological framework, or employed alternative narratives for different audiences.

Through this three-phase analysis, we will be able to determine whether HTS's ideological revision represents a genuine transformation that occasionally falters under pressure, or a sophisticated public relations strategy designed to mask continued adherence to extremist principles. Only by examining this practical test case can we definitively answer whether the jury should remain out on HTS's ideological evolution, or whether the evidence points conclusively toward either authentic reform or calculated deception.

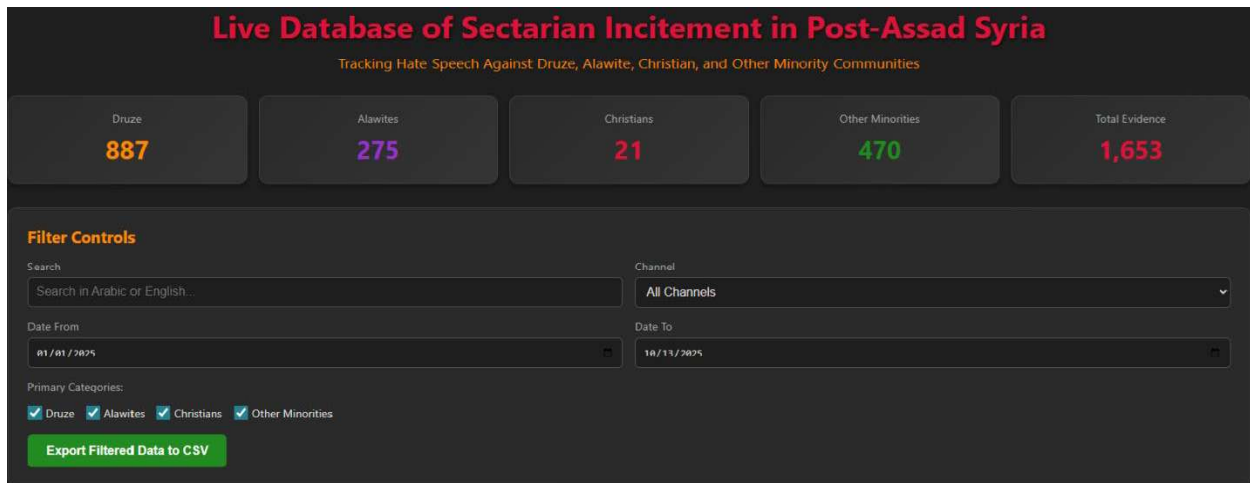
The stakes of this determination extend far beyond academic analysis. The international community's approach to HTS, the future of Syria's religious minorities, and the broader question of whether extremist organizations can genuinely moderate their ideologies all depend on accurately assessing the sincerity of these proclaimed changes. The al-Suwayda case study provides the crucial evidence needed to make this determination.

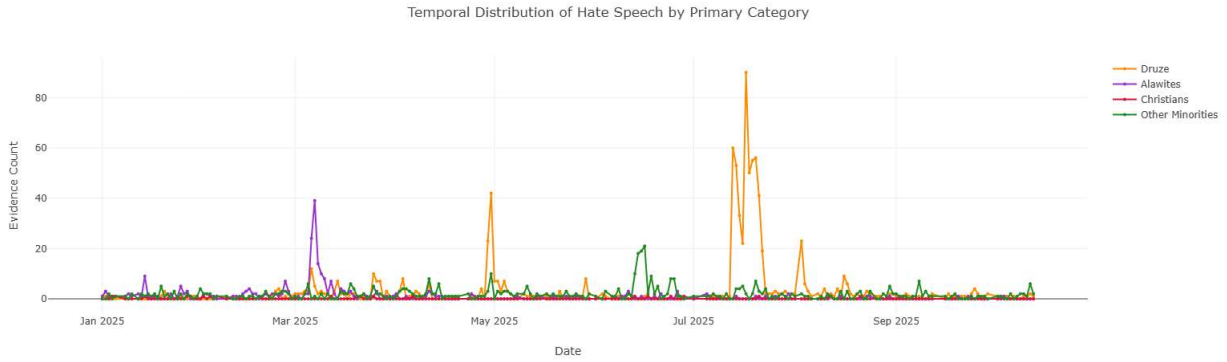
## Part Four: From Propaganda to Warfare: HTS’s Strategic Assault on Ethnic Minorities in Syria

The Syrian Interim Government has presented a carefully constructed narrative to the international community, one of a nascent state striving to establish order and unite a fractured nation. However, a granular analysis of its actions, particularly in the Sweida governorate, reveals a stark and disturbing reality that fundamentally contradicts this official discourse. The following sections deconstruct this narrative by systematically presenting evidence that supports the core arguments of this brief, proving that the events in Sweida were not a limited police action but a premeditated campaign of sectarian terror.

The government’s official narrative targeted a specific separatist group, identified as the "Al-Hijri group." This group was systematically vilified in state-leaning media as early as March 2025, accusing the Druze of being outlaws and Israeli proxies. However, the evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that the ensuing military campaign was not a surgical strike but a campaign of collective punishment against a sizable proportion of the Druze community.

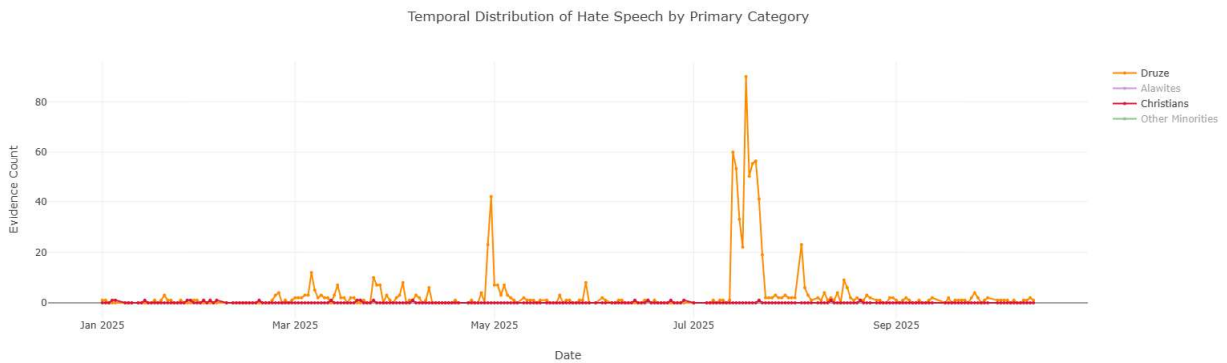
To substantiate the arguments presented in this policy brief, we have systematically collected and documented instances of religious hate speech targeting minority communities in Syria from January 2025 through September 2025. Readers are encouraged to access the live, interactive database [<https://syria-live-sectarian-database.netlify.app/>]. (see images 2 and 3 below).





This publicly accessible database allows independent verification of the patterns and scale of sectarian incitement documented in this brief.

Based on data collected, it would appear that March 25, 2025, marks the beginning of the campaign of hate and incitement of violence against the Druze in Syria. Before this date, from January to March, there were hardly any religious hate speech-related incidents (see the line graph below, image 4).

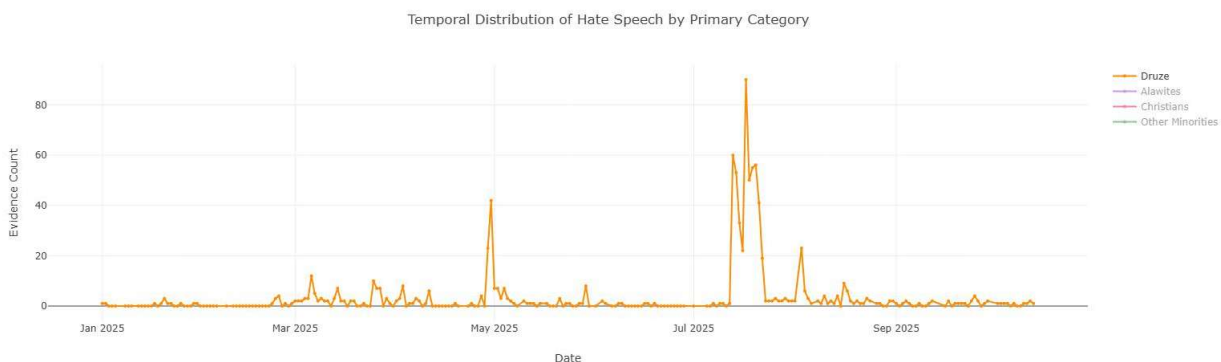


However, on March 25, 2025, an aggressive and very active Telegram Channel operating from Turkey officially started an incendiary religious hate campaign against the Druze (see image 5 below).



This campaign of hate against the Druze community initially started with about 30 main TikTok accounts and hundreds of smurfs. The recordings posted on this channel on March 25 set a clear roadmap. According to the post cited above, two WhatsApp groups had already been established, both host 100 carefully selected individuals with strong backgrounds in technology and the use of algorithms to spread content online. According to the admin of this page (image 5), the goal was to prepare strong and effective videos with evidence to incite people against the Druze and to hold them accountable. Further instructions were given via two audio recordings posted on the same channel at the same time.

On April 29, 2025, a fabricated voice recording insulting the Prophet Muhammad was disseminated on social media, which was attributed to a controversial figure in the Druze community. As a result, religious hate speech against the Druze online increased significantly. It is critical to emphasize that the data presented here is drawn from a random sample of only nine Telegram channels out of hundreds, if not thousands, of Syrian-focused Telegram channels, in addition to content on YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms. This fabricated video incited mass outrage among Sunni populations in Syria and subsequently led to acts of violence against members of the Druze community (see the line graph below, image 6).



In response to the escalating violence against the Druze minority, the interim Syrian Government issued a formal statement confirming that the recording was fabricated. The Syrian Interim government, however, neither launched a credible investigation into its origins nor did anything to contain the incitement of violence against the Druze. At this stage, a group of social media activists utilized the video to enrage populations against the Druze, inciting religious feelings and calling on the so-called "real faithful" not only to punish the Druze but to exclude them entirely from society. As time went by, the campaign expanded to include calls for comprehensive boycotts, urging people not to buy from or sell to Druze businesses, and later escalated to demands for their expulsion from public life, including calls to remove Druze students from universities, as will be addressed below.

As a result, Syrian social Media was flooded with videos using extremely derogatory language common among extreme religious groups against minorities, using the most incendiary and violent language, calling for revenge, and promising the Druze that they are going to pay a hefty price for this insult against the Prophet Mohammed while ignoring all condemnations issued by the Druze religious figures and the confirmation from the interim government that the alleged recording to insult the prophet was fabricated.

It is important to note the deliberately dehumanizing language employed in these hate speech incidents. While the Druze community is properly referred to as "Druze" or "Bani Ma'ruf" (Sons of Ma'ruf), the documented videos and social media content discussed in this section systematically replace these

respectful terms with racist and derogatory epithets, including "Jews" (used as a slur), "pigs," "animals," and "cow worshippers." This linguistic strategy of dehumanization is a hallmark of genocidal rhetoric and reflects the depth of sectarian hatred being propagated against the Druze population. Below is a small sample of the hundreds of videos attacking and cursing the Druze Community in Syria. Below are a few examples.

Sample One: When it comes to the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, and the one whom Allah, the Almighty, created in the best form, I say, God willing, you, pig, will be punished, and by God's will, your tongue will be restrained, you dog, and by God's will, it will happen (see image 7 below).



Sample two: All praise is due to Allah. We ask Allah's blessings upon the Prophet, and all praise is due to Allah, who has honored the nation of Muhammad and has disgraced the nation of Bani Ma'ruf. Today, we are confronting you, and we have brought forth our troops to protect and defend the honor of our land, you pigs. And from our headquarters in Damascus, we say to you: your defeat is certain... God willing. (see image 8 below).



Sample four: In the name of God...We are heading towards Jaramana city (Druze city) to fight cow worshippers, the grandsons of Bani Ma'ruf. By Allah, we have come to you with men who swear to die in sacrifice for Allah and His Messenger. Allah is the Greatest! (see image 9 below).



Sample five: Demonstration in Hamah (a Syrian City) calling for the extermination of the Druze, chanting: This is Hamah, a Sunni City, we will exterminate the Druze. (see image 10 below).



Sample six: Thanks God who empowers Islam with victory and humiliates infidelity with defeat and anguish. We speak to you, the enemy of God, the cursed Druze; we have nothing for you but a sharp sword. We are those who swore to Mohammed that jihad will always remain our path. (see image 11 below).



In a separate video, a Syrian Army training leader, speaking on an official army training ground and surrounded by hundreds of young recruits, issued a stark warning. While never explicitly naming the Druze community, the leader delivered thinly veiled threats against those who "insult our prophet." Repeatedly raising his finger, he declared, 'You should never test us; we are very strong. We love death more than you love life,' evoking the historical Umayyad dynasty, a common reference point for the Sunni majority, to further emphasize his warning. This thinly veiled threat heightened the tension and the potential for religiously motivated violence, regardless of any potential provocation. (see image 12 below).



Sample eight: In the name of God. All praise is due to God. May the peace and blessings of God be upon those who were sent with the sword as a mercy to the worlds. O soldiers of God on earth, O leaders of Tawhīd, and O Ahsad Abdullah bin Unaib. Your prophet, insulted, was cursed by an infidel, a disbeliever, and a tyrant. So he rose up and turned away from adultery, and said to his soul, "Be quiet, O Messenger of God." And to you, O son of the infidel, the matter is what you see and not what you hear. For we are the army of Muḥammad, and we will not be prevented from doing what is right at all. (see image 13 below).



Sample nine: This video appears to be issued by the so-called Ashbal Al Kelafah, or cups of the Khalifa, promising the slaughter of the Druze and other minorities. The video starts as follows: *With slaughter, we are coming to you...Thanks God who sent his Messenger Mohammad with his sword as mercy for people, the laughing killer, the prophet of the battlefield. To the apostates, the Druze... you must know that in Al-sham (Syria), lions of battles and lone wolves who defend the Prophet... Bani Ma'ruf , I swear by my soil, we will slaughter you. We will fight you with men who love to drink your blood as you drink water. We are the cups of the Khalifa will remain loyal to our oath.* (see image 14 below).



Sample ten: Peace be upon you and the mercy and blessings of God, my brothers and sisters. From here, Al Jazeera (North East of Syria), I say in this clip, I am all sectarianism and racism, I am all sectarianism and racism, to all sects in general, and to the Druze disbelievers in particular, do whatever you wish, do whatever you wish, for this world is yours, but the Hereafter is for us. Unless you come closer to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. (see image 15 below).



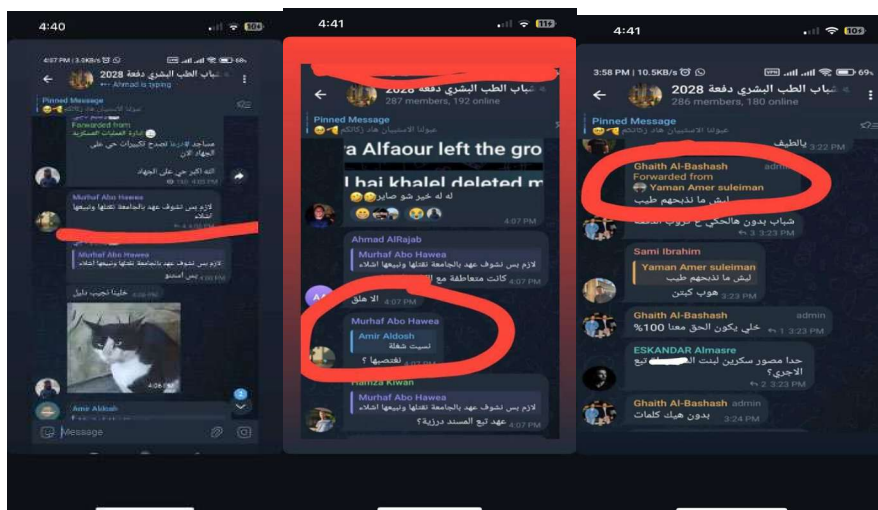
In the image cited below, a popular YouTuber used the same fabricated audio insulting the Prophet Mohammad to advertise and popularize a movement to kick all Druze students from Syrian universities. (see image 16 below).



In this particular troubling video cited below, from the premises of Homes University in Syria, another student calls for the slaughter of all Druze students anywhere found on Campus: ... We will slaughter every Druze we will see in the student dormitory. Those who are present should inform absentees... We will slaughter every Druze.... while the crowd chants: Allahu Akbar (see image 17 below).



Things went downhill from there. The Telegram screenshots shown below capture a disturbing exchange among medical students (expected graduation in the year 2028) in which several participants discuss the prospects of abducting, mutilating, rapping, and killing a fellow female student from the Druze Community after identifying her by name. The messages include explicit references to dismemberment and degrading acts prior to killing. This content reflects expressed intent and violent fantasizing that pose serious ethical and safety concerns; it has been retained in the secure research archive and is presented here only as redacted screenshots for verification by qualified reviewers under controlled access. (see image 18 below).



Humiliating Druze men from the cities of Ashrafiyet Sahnaya and Jaramana, by shaving their mustaches publicly on Camera. (see image 19 below).



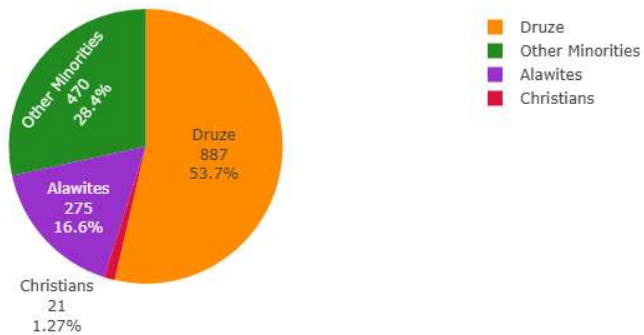
Writing on Stores owned by Druze reads: Druze/Jews- meaning Druze are Jews- Do not open your store, your blood will be spilt. (see image 20 below).



Simultaneously, other videos were circulated online informing extremist groups about the location of the Druze community around the Capital, Damascus. As a result, clashes erupt in Ashrafiyet Sahnaya and Jaramana, both Druze-majority towns in the Damascus countryside.

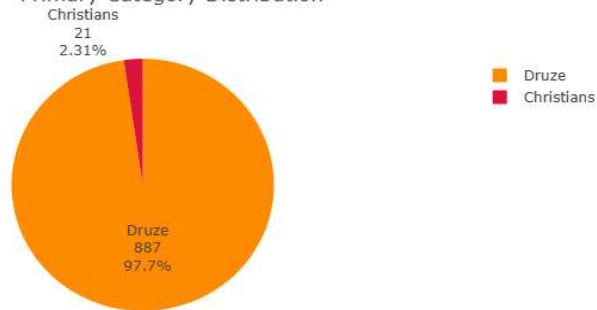
Between January and September 2025, 53% of hate speech-related incidents documented by our sample were related to the Druze. While this sample is relatively small, the documented surge in hate speech even within this limited dataset reveals the scale and intensity of the coordinated campaign against the Druze community. (See the pie chart below. Image 21 below)

Primary Category Distribution



Interestingly, during this same period, Syrian Christians were not targeted by the online hate campaign. The data reveals that 97% of documented hate speech was directed against the Druze, while only 2.31% targeted Christians. However, this stark contrast in the digital sphere would prove tragically irrelevant when the actual military campaign commenced. The fate of Christian communities and their churches would be no different from that of the Druze. Both suffered indiscriminate violence, destruction, and desecration at the hands of the invading forces, demonstrating that the sectarian violence on the ground made no distinction where the propaganda had. (See the pie chart below. Image 22 below)

Primary Category Distribution



The official narrative was a clash between local Druze militia fighting with the enraged Muslim population over the insult of the Prophet Mohamad while totally ignoring the campaign of hate and sectarianism being systematically waged on social media.

While this is going on, a consistent message of hate against a particular religious Druze figure was building up steadily, namely Hikmat Salman al-Hijri. Al-Hijri has been an outspoken figure calling for political demands, such as for an inclusive constitution that enables all Syrians to participate in governance. Al-Hijri demands were met with rage and suspicion and deemed by government officials as unreasonable. Further, he and his

group have been accused of using Israel (the hated Jews) as a shield. All concerns by the Druze community that extreme elements of the Interim government could target them, as some extreme groups did before, were not taken seriously under the guise that HTS is not a radical group. Most of the Druze were not convinced, and some remain skeptical. For this reason, the Syrian security forces, many of whom used to be considered radical fighters, were not allowed to enter the Sweida city.

The Druze, however, were not united. Many technocrats maintain a very good connection with the interim government. The spiritual leadership (the religious authorities are referred to as the *'uqqal* (the wise or knowledgeable) of the Druze Unitarian community consists of three important figures, which can be split into two main bodies. (see image 23 below). The first is led by Sheikh Hikmat Salman al-Hijri (the first on the left- which is the subject of most hate speech campaigns), who is known for his opposition to the Syrian interim government. The second is jointly led by Sheikh Youssef Jarbou (in the middle), and Sheikh Hammoud Al-Hennawi (the one on the right). Both Jarbou and Al-Hennawi were in regular talks with the Syrian government, and both supported the efforts to unite Syria under one government.



The Christian clergy in Syria, in general, and in Sweida in particular, were also in cautious but good terms with the government. Despite a few differences, the fact that most technocrats and religious authorities in Sweida were working closely with the government is important for the discussion that follows. (see image 24 below)



However, a constant tension and boiling point was the road between Damascus and Sweida, which was the main and almost only lifeline that connects both cities. (see image 25 below)

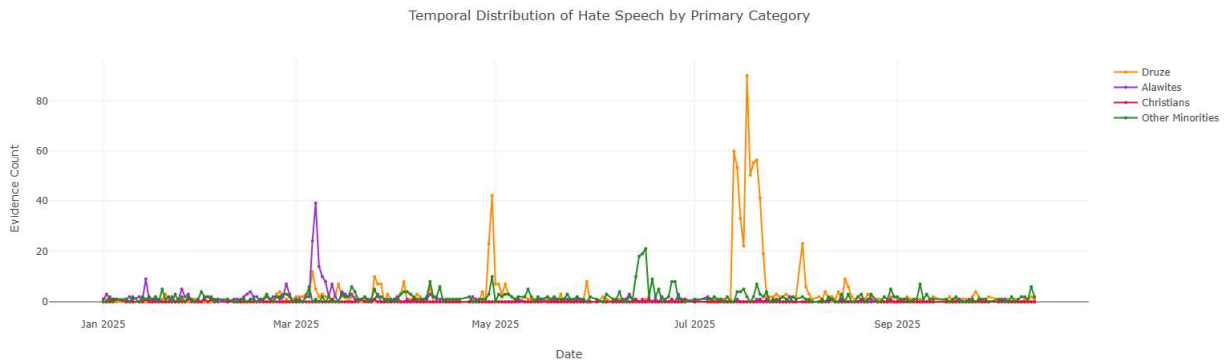


This road was under constant attack and was used effectively by forces loyal to the Syrian government (directly and indirectly) to pressure the Druze to allow security forces to enter their city. The events were repetitive and predictable. At the Al-Masmiyah checkpoint, a notoriously dangerous government and Bedouin-controlled checkpoint between Damascus and Sweida highlighted in red arrows, civilians would be stopped and searched and then free to carry on their journey. A few km later, they will be stopped by a tribal fighter and either kidnapped or robbed. The government's response to these events was the same: The government cannot ensure the security of the road while our forces are not allowed to enter Sweida.

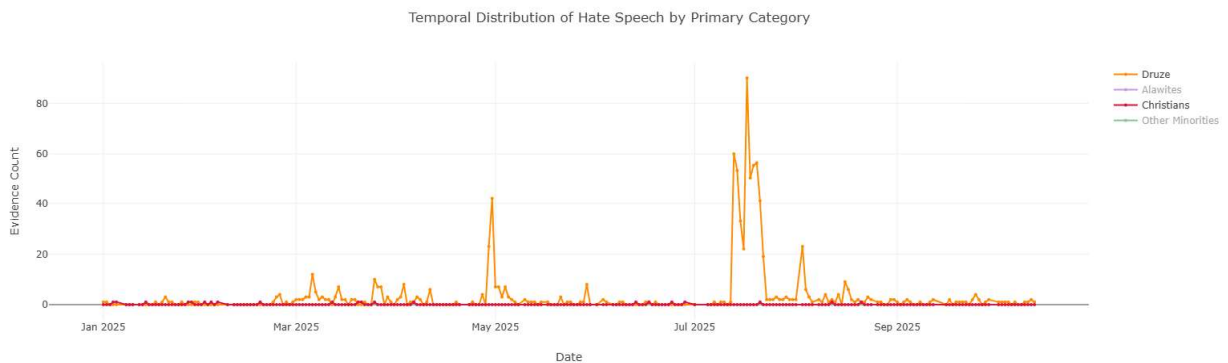
On July 1, a Druze man transporting vegetables was robbed, assaulted, and subjected to humiliating treatment by tribal fighters. His vehicle, phone, money, and produce are confiscated. This incident is indicative of a recurring pattern of abuse at this location. A tit for tat kidnapping and counter-kidnapping followed. On July 13, 2025, a local dispute between Druze and Bedouin communities escalated into widespread conflict. As usual, elders from both the Druze and the Bedouin tried to solve the issue. Before the release of all hostages from both parties, on July 14, 2025, the Syrian state media announced the initiation of "Military Operation" purportedly for the de-escalation of atrocities between the Druze, the Bedouin, and to protect civilians.

# 1. Justification for the Slaughter




To justify this military campaign, between July 12 to July 24, there was a huge surge of disinformation and incitement of violence against the Druze. Most propaganda material was based on the idea that the Druze had committed grave atrocities against the Bedouins and that they had raped women from the Sunni tribes. (see the line graph below, image 26 below).



Absent of any credible evidence, dozens of testimonials appeared on governmental TVs and were posted on social media confirming this imaginary massacre, which led to the killing of around 200 from the Sunni tribes. Again, this point warrants continued emphasis: the line graph below reveals that Christians were not part of online hate speech targeting the Druze, in particular the Hijri groups, yet this disparity proved meaningless in practice, as Christian communities suffered comparable devastation. (see the line graph below, image 27 below).



To date, the claims of a massacre committed by Druze fighters against civilians remain unverified and lack supporting evidence. Our analysis specifically focuses on civilian casualties, noting that the number of deaths among fighters from both sides varies. Verify media websites ("تأكد"), which is an independent, non-partisan platform dedicated to combating misinformation by fact-checking news and other content shared on the internet and social media, has effectively debunked the overwhelming majority of these claims and proved they are false. The following 4 images represent a tiny sample of this lethal disinformation strategy

<a href="https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/">https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/</a>	Fales Claim	Reality	Verifying body
	<p>A woman was killed by the al-Hijri group in Sweida</p>	<p>One of the victims of the international coalition in Al-Baghouz camp in 2019 (Al-Baghouz was the final territorial stronghold of ISIS in Syria)</p>	<p><a href="https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/">https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/</a></p>
	<p>A video showing al-Hijri (Druze group) throwing a civilian from a building.</p>	<p>A TikTok video that was circulated 4 days before the event</p>	<p><a href="https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/">https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/</a></p>
	<p>The Druze attack the Bedouin tribes of Sweida</p>	<p>Conflict between the Israeli army and Palestinians in Al-Breej camp</p>	<p><a href="https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/">https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/</a></p>

	<p>A child was killed by the al-Hijri group</p>	<p>These claims are not verified</p>	<p><a href="https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/">https://www.verify-sy.com/ar/</a></p>
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Still, the unverified claims that the Druze have massacred the Bedouin tribes and have raped their women were elevated and promoted by Syrian TV channels in addition to the strongest Arabic Media in the Middle East (Al Jazeera TV), which repeatedly hosted controversial Bedouin figures claiming crimes have been committed against the Sunni tribes without providing any actual evidence.

Al Jazeera Arabic News	English Translation of Arabic Text
	<p>Headline: "Head of the Tribal Gathering Speaks of Massacres and Beheadings and Rapes in Sweida, Accusing the Government of Negligence"</p> <p>Image Caption: "Tribal forces in the Al-Mazra'a area near Sweida (French Press)"</p> <p>18/7/2025   Last Updated: 13:55 (Mecca Time)</p>
	<p>"The head of the Gathering of Southern Syrian Tribes, Sheikh Rakan al-Khudair, said that there are massacres being committed in Sweida that "shame humanity." He accused the group loyal to Hikmat al-Hijri, one of the Druze Sheikhs of Aql, of involvement in crimes of beheading children and raping women, in addition to detaining hundreds of tribesmen.</p> <p>Al-Khudair, in an interview with Al Jazeera, described the situation in Sweida as "extremely difficult," and that what the Al-Hijri group is doing is "very regrettable." He pointed out that the withdrawal of government forces from the city opened the way for that group to "kill and abuse our people," and that they are detaining more than 2,000 tribesmen."</p>




Through a large-scale disinformation campaign, the Druze have been falsely cast as perpetrators; meanwhile, Syrian government forces and allied tribal actors are being portrayed as the victims, a narrative later echoed by Interim President Ahmed Ashara (Part Six). Consequently, sympathy for the Druze community has been suppressed, creating a chilling silence where the prevailing sentiment seems to justify the crimes committed against them, suggesting the Druze somehow deserved their fate. This successful manipulation of the narrative has stifled sympathy for the Druze not only inside Syria but also among Syrians all over the world, resulting in a disturbing silence where the atrocities committed against them are, for many, implicitly justified. Shockingly, these massacres and atrocities have become fodder for cruel amusement, with YouTubers and TikTokers gaining popularity by mocking the Druze's suffering, often while operating within the boundaries of free speech in Europe and the United States.

## 2. The Military Campaign Against the Druze-July 15, 2025




In the following sections, I will highlight specific instances of military actions in Sweida, with a clear emphasis on their impact on civilian populations. It is crucial to understand that the objective here is not to provide an exhaustive, event-by-event documentation of every military atrocity. Rather, our focus is on analyzing the methods by which civilians, in particular, were specifically targeted, assaulted, and had their property destroyed. Therefore, while we will touch upon the military campaign itself, we will prioritize listing incidents directly related to the victimization of non-combatants. To clarify, this analysis will not delve into military operations solely between combatant forces. Instead, the primary focus will be on the conduct of the invading forces – those of the Syrian government and their affiliated militias, particularly those with tribal backgrounds, and how they carried out indiscriminate, shameful, and humiliating acts of killing and arson. In the subsequent analysis, we will investigate and present a number of documented incidents to illustrate these points. This focus is essential, as it will enable us to later assess whether these events constitute, in whole or in part, a religiously motivated hate crime.



## 3. Beyond Atrocities: The Deliberate Humiliation of Druze Identity in the Syrian Conflict

A deeply disturbing element of the military campaign conducted by the Syrian government and its allied militias was a deliberate and systematic attempt to insult and humiliate the Druze as a group, targeting their religious and cultural traditions. A particularly egregious example of this was the practice of forcibly shaving the mustaches of Druze men. This act carried significant symbolic weight, as Islamic tradition generally discourages the growing of mustaches, emphasizing the beard instead. Conversely, within Druze communities, the mustache is a powerful symbol of culture, manhood, and resistance; influential Druze figures are traditionally recognized by their prominent mustaches. During the military campaign, forces made a point of publicly humiliating Druze men, including civilians and elders, taking great care to record these acts of degradation and disseminate them widely on social media, amplifying the intended message of subjugation.

No	Video	Part of the Transcript
1		<p>The man wearing military form speaking to the victim: <i>Face the camera and do not talk. Now, you are shaving according to the Sunnah of the Prophet Mohammed.</i></p>
2		<p>In this particularly disturbing video, a civilian is seized by a combined force of tribal militia members and Syrian Army soldiers. As dozens watch, one uses a large, unwieldy shear, typically used for sheep shearing, to hack away at the man's mustache. The individual wielding the shears even uses the same phrase farmers use when preparing to shear a sheep's wool, yelling, <i>'just shear him,'</i> underscoring the shocking disparity between the tool and the act, and the complete disregard for the man's dignity. In a particularly chilling detail, a representative still from this very video shows another militant present, brandishing the flag of the so-called Islamic State. Image cited below</p>
2.1		<p>The same video above</p>

3		<p>In a further display of chilling cruelty, another video surfaces showing men forcibly shaving the mustache of an elderly Druze man. As they commit this act of aggression, they invoke religious justification, stating they are doing so "based on the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad." The victim is visibly frail. The sheer vulnerability of the victim, obviously aged and defenseless, underscores the cruelty and injustice of the act.</p>
4		<p>The previous incidents were not isolated occurrences. The pattern of humiliation and assault against elderly members of the Druze community was far more widespread, with numerous other incidents documented. As a further example, consider the case of an 81-year-old man who was subjected to torment. The attackers, demanding the old man give them his weapons, taunted the elderly man. Despite his age, the victim swore by the life of his grandchildren that he possessed no weapons. Ignoring his pleas, the men proceeded to shave his mustache in a grave act of degradation, showing utter disregard for his age and religious and cultural dignity.</p>
5		<p>A video depicts the forced shaving of a young Druze man's mustache, as a group of men restrain him. In a disturbing twist, they announce that, as a result of this shaving, based on the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, <i>he is now to be considered a Muslim</i>. This highlights the dehumanizing logic driving the assault: the mustache, a cherished symbol of Druze identity and heritage, is twisted into a supposed sign of non-belief, justifying a brutal act of forced assimilation.</p>

6		<p>In a chilling display of both humiliation and coordinated military action, a video captures the forced shaving of the mustaches of three men. The perpetrators, clearly eager to document their actions, instruct the shaver to step aside so they can get a better shot, ensuring the subjugation is fully recorded. What makes this incident particularly damning is the audio: the man filming can be heard communicating on what undeniably sounds like a Syrian Army military radio, making frequent references to 'Shaheen,' the established code name for drones used by Syrian government forces. This audio evidence strongly suggests a direct operational link between this act of humiliation and a coordinated Syrian military operation, pointing to the perpetrators' affiliation with the Syrian Army.</p>
7		<p>In another horrifying incident, a young man, seemingly a Syrian military member, is filmed desecrating the body of a dead Druze militia fighter. In the video, he cuts off the deceased man's mustache and, coming close to the camera, proclaims, <i>'I have cut the mustache of this 'pig' [a religiously derogatory term for Druze, implying a large animal].</i> He then holds the severed mustache up to the camera, stating, <i>'I'm going to bring you the hair of this 'pig' to Idlib.'</i> This act combines battlefield mutilation with clear expressions of religious hatred, referencing Idlib, a stronghold of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Syrian government collaboration.</p>
7.1		

8		<p>In a further incident raising concerns of religious persecution, another video surfaces of forced mustache shaving, perpetrated by what appears to be members of the Syrian Army. As the humiliation unfolds, the shaver is heard, while addressing his comrade, Abu Suleiman, complaining bitterly about the scissors: <i>'Abu Suleiman, you cheated me! These scissors are garbage – they're full of blood and barely working!'</i> The most alarming detail, however, is the clear presence of a Syrian Military Police officer, identifiable by their official badge, standing by with arms crossed, seemingly enjoying the act of religious subjugation. This complete abdication of duty by law enforcement personnel, combined with the overt religious undertones of the act, suggests these actions are not simply isolated incidents of abuse, but rather, potentially constitute a systematic campaign of religious persecution, enabled and condoned by those charged with upholding the law.</p>
9		<p>Another appalling video surfaces, showing militia fighters aggressively arresting and beating a group of young men. While one victim is subjected to the humiliation of forced mustache shaving, the perpetrators, careful to hide their identities, unleash a torrent of abuse, cursing his parents and calling him a <i>'son of a pig'</i> [a religiously derogatory term for Druze, likening them to livestock]. Following the shaving, the victim is violently thrown to the ground, where one of the attackers presses his foot onto the man's neck and head, unleashing a prolonged and vicious beating.</p>

#### 4. The Unforgivable Innocence: Religiously Motivated Atrocities against Syrian Civilians Through the Killers' Eyes

Having examined the campaign of humiliation and degradation, we now turn our attention to the documented targeting and killing of civilians. What is particularly troubling about such events is the overwhelming sense of joy, happiness, and relaxation exhibited by the perpetrators while committing their atrocities. In many cases, they are seen eating, singing, smiling, and joking, as if they were engaged in some honorable endeavor. In this section, we will analyze a selected number of especially troubling cases related to attacks

specifically targeting civilians and the methods employed in those attacks. Our focus will remain on the conduct of the attackers themselves, what their behavior reveals about the nature of the conflict, and whether their actions were motivated, as a whole or in part, by religious hatred, potentially constituting a hate crime under applicable legal definitions.

In the next video, we will document something exceptionally troubling. In that grotesque act of playing music over the still-warm body of a slain musician. The screenshot cited below shows a man engaging in a horrific act of violence and murder against a Druze civilian. After killing his victim, who was reportedly a musician, the perpetrator grabs the man's instrument and begins to play a tune over the corpse. He then directs his companions to record him in this macabre performance. This act is not only a brutal taking of a life, but also a deeply dehumanizing display of gloating disrespect, showcasing the perpetrator's complete lack of empathy and profound moral depravity.

Where life ends and mockery begins: Music turned into a weapon of humiliation (see image 28 below)



In this grim context, it is worth noting that in the extremist ideologies embraced by the perpetrators, music is often viewed as a frivolous and unholy distraction, and listening to it is considered a sin. This act of desecration is therefore not only a brutal act of violence, but also a deliberate rejection of the victim's lifestyle and religious beliefs.

In this next incident, the BBC Channel Four News<sup>60</sup> details the massacre of a Druze family, with only one daughter, Rita, surviving. Rita, who was shot in the legs and left among the bodies of her family, recounts that the attackers spoke with an accent characteristic of Idlib, a Syrian city where HTS maintains a strong presence. According to Rita, the intruders first commented critically on the women's clothing, particularly Rita's, telling her she was dressed inappropriately. They then reportedly laughed and declared, 'We are the Sunnis, we have come for you,' implying a religiously motivated threat. Afterward, the attackers separated the men from the women and opened fire on everyone, killing all but Rita. Rita lay among the dead, unaware that the attackers later withdrew due to the threat of an Israeli government attack on a Syrian security ministry building in Damascus. (see image 29 below)

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<sup>60</sup> BBC, Channel Four News Inside: Sweida with Druze militia group, [https://youtu.be/\\_rt08iybn-Q](https://youtu.be/_rt08iybn-Q)



Image Source: Courtesy of Channel Four News. All the people in this picture, plus one additional individual, were killed

The account of this massacre exposes a profound and disturbing moral disparity. The attackers, motivated by what appears to be a rigid and extremist interpretation of religious norms, condemned the women's clothing as immodest and enforced a strict separation of men and women. Yet, simultaneously, they demonstrated a complete disregard for the sanctity of human life, as evidenced by their ruthless killing of the family. According to Rita, these same individuals were later heard laughing and eating in the kitchen – as if celebrating their atrocity. Such behavior raises serious questions about the mental state and potential criminal liability of the perpetrators, suggesting a level of depravity that demands full legal scrutiny and accountability.

The following video is among the most gruesome we have documented. Three individuals, heavily armed, forcibly remove an elderly civilian and his son-in-law from their home, line them up against a wall, and execute them with AK-47s in a horrific bloodbath. Afterward, two of the gunmen stand over the still-bleeding corpses and pose for a photograph, each raising a pointer finger to the sky. Most notably, the flag of the so-called Islamic State is clearly visible, emblazoned on the chest of one of the fighters standing on the right side of the image. This gesture, while not universally representative, is often used by extremist groups to signal their unwavering religious commitment and belief that their actions are divinely sanctioned, serving as a visual affirmation of their religious conviction and the perceived legitimacy of their violence in the eyes of their God. (see image 30 below)



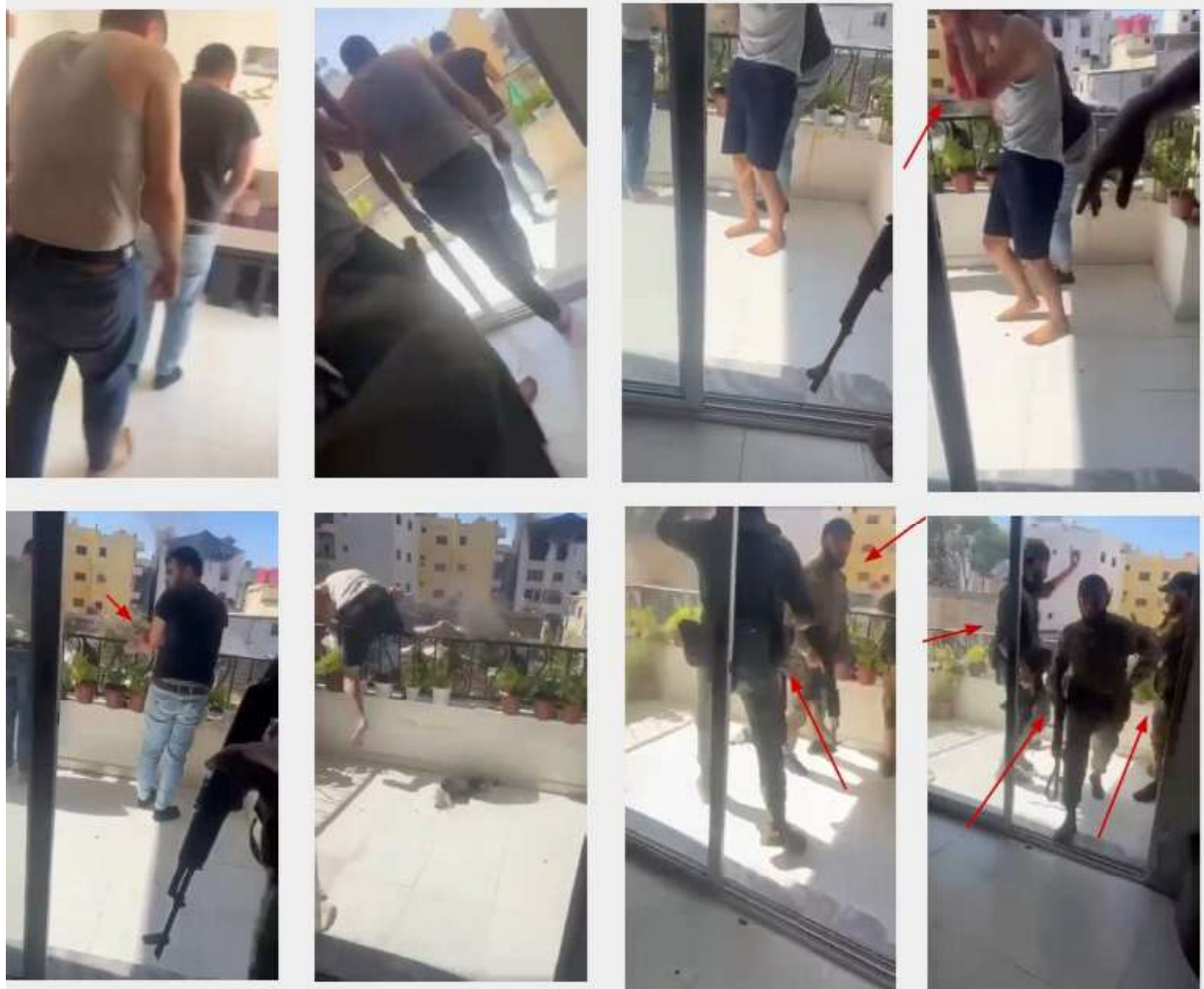
On July 15, 2025, armed militants stormed the Al-Radwan family guesthouse, resulting in the Al-Radwan Family Massacre. In an exceptionally violent and gruesome scene, the militants executed at least 15 unarmed Druze civilians who had gathered for a social gathering of their extended family. The video documenting the event is exceptionally graphic, and even still images taken from it are extremely disturbing to view, given the scale of violence and the number of civilian victims. (see image 31 below)



This spray of indiscriminate killing was not limited to a family or two. It was very widespread. The Arnous family massacre is another example of this senseless killing. In this case, the Ministry of Defense armed forces raided the Arnous family residence. During the raid, Engineer Bashar Arnous (father) was shot and killed. The assailants then forced his two sons, Baraa and Moaz, along with his nephew Modad, to climb to the upper floor of the building and jump from the balcony under coercion. As the victims fell, the armed forces opened fire, fatally shooting them in mid-descent to ensure their deaths.

It is important to note that all of this occurred while the soldiers were recording and taking their time to ensure everything was documented, and then to brag about it publicly on social media. This is an extremely troubling case: Bashar Arnous was a doctor, Baraa Arnous was an engineer, and Modad Arnous was a doctor. The oldest of the three young men was only 26 years old. The senselessness of wasting the lives of such

individuals – who clearly had absolutely nothing to do with military activities – underscores the utter depravity of this act. (see image 32 below)



As a final example of the systematic termination of entire civilian families, and with full awareness that numerous other such cases have been documented, we turn to the harrowing story of the Saraya family. According to multiple eyewitness accounts, armed militants affiliated with the Syrian government stormed the home of the Saraya family in Sweida, forcibly detaining eight men. Among them were relatives and a 35-year-old Syrian-American, Hosam Saraya.

This incident, like so many others, is characterized by its utter brutality and disregard for human life. Public video recordings, reportedly captured on the perpetrators' own mobile phones, offer a chilling glimpse into their actions. These recordings show the captives being marched into Tishreen Square, forced to kneel at gunpoint, and then executed in what appears to be a summary execution. At least eight members of the Saraya family were killed. The U.S. State Department has since confirmed the death of Hosam Saraya, while eyewitnesses claim that several of the assailants were wearing official government or militia uniforms. This underscores the impunity with which these groups operate and the extent to which they are willing to flaunt

their crimes, even documenting them for posterity – until, perhaps, the weight of international scrutiny forces them to erase the evidence of their barbarity. (see image 34 below)



In a further example of religiously motivated violence, armed men surround a civilian. One of them shouts, demanding his religious affiliation: *'Who are you?'* The man attempts to appeal to their shared identity, saying, *'I am Syrian, my brother.'* The armed man refuses this, insisting, *'What do you mean, Syrian? Are you Muslim or Druze?'* When the civilian identifies as Druze, saying, *'My brother, I am Druze,'* he is instantly shot and killed. The video concludes with one of the killers shouting, *'Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar! This is the fate of every pig among you!'*, illustrating the dehumanization and religious justification that underpins such acts. (see image 35 below)



On July 16, 2025, government forces raided Sweida National Hospital. Security footage shows a tank positioned outside the hospital as armed personnel entered, intimidating and verbally abusing the medical staff. Evidence from a security camera in the hospital documents the killing of Mohammad Bohsas inside the hospital. The footage shows a physical altercation between Bohsas (unarmed) and one of the armed men, after which the armed man, enraged, drew his weapon and shot Bohsas at point-blank range. At the time of his death, Bohsas was wearing his medical scrubs, clearly identifying him as a member of the hospital's medical staff. (see image 36 below)



Prior to the raid on Sweida National Hospital, Dr. Talaat Amer and Dr. Faten Hussein Hilal were murdered – shot in the head while on route to the hospital to perform their medical duties, and while clearly identifiable in their medical uniforms. (see image 37 below)



Faten Hilal



Talaat Amer

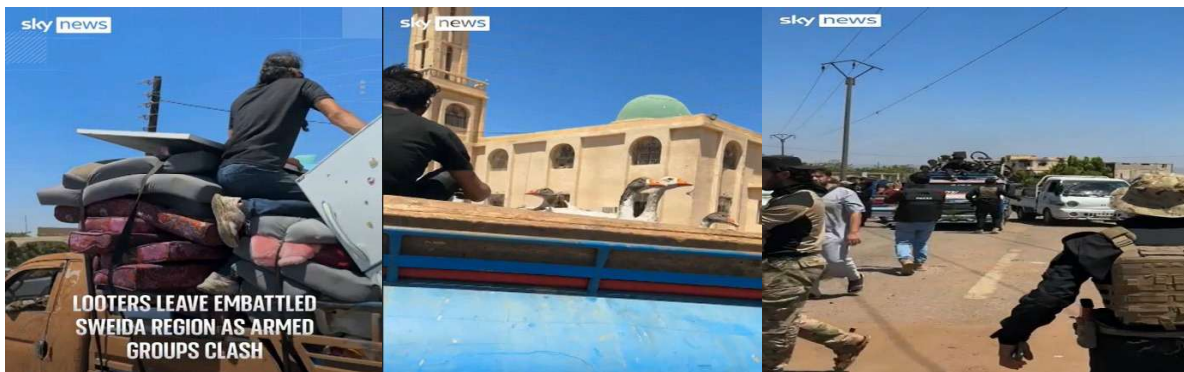
Further compounding this horror is the very real possibility that these actions were not only acts of senseless violence, but were, in the minds of the perpetrators, acts of religious devotion. The evidence suggests that the invading forces may have genuinely believed they were performing a service to their God by eliminating what they perceived as infidels. This chilling certainty, often fueled by dehumanizing rhetoric that paints the Druze community as subhuman or deserving of death, offers a glimpse into the twisted logic that allows for such barbarity. It is precisely this intersection of religious fanaticism and dehumanization that makes these acts so particularly heinous and indicative of potential genocidal intent. These actions – the widespread campaign of forced mustache shaving as religious humiliation, the defilement of cultural symbols, the mockery of music over corpses, the murder of medical staff inside hospitals, the calculated targeting of entire families, the roadside executions of doctors and university students solely for being Druze, and even the summary killings of civilians after demanding their religious affiliation – are not isolated events. They are interconnected components of a systematic campaign of dehumanization, designed to strip the Druze people of their dignity, their culture, their very humanity, and their right to exist as equals, if at all.

It is essential to contextualize this violence within the broader propaganda campaign that preceded it. Beginning in March 2025, Syrian state media and pro-government social media accounts launched a sustained demonization campaign against the Al-Hijri group, a Druze faction portrayed as separatist and criminal, thereby establishing the ostensible justification for military intervention in Sweida. However, a critical examination of the documented atrocities reveals a stark disconnect between this official narrative and the reality on the ground. The overwhelming majority of civilian victims—including those whose homes were destroyed, whose families were executed, and whose bodies were desecrated no documented or verifiable affiliation with the Al-Hijri group, nor were they engaged in any political or military activities. Crucially, at no point during these attacks were civilians afforded the opportunity to demonstrate or deny any connection to the Al-Hijiri faction. The indiscriminate nature of the violence, which targeted Druze individuals solely on the basis of their religious and ethnic identity, exposes the Al-Hijiri narrative as a cynical pretext designed to legitimize what was, in substance, a sectarian campaign against the entire Druze community.

## 5. From Houses to Ashes: Indiscriminate Destruction and Religious Arson of Property and Human Remains

One of the most pervasive and devastating features of the sectarian attacks perpetrated by extremist militias in Druze and Christian areas has been the near-total destruction of civilian property. Hardly a house has been left untouched, with countless homes looted, vandalized, and, in a few cases, razed to the ground. The scale of this destruction is almost unbelievable: current estimates suggest that across 35 villages, approximately 30% of the entire geographic area of the Sweida Governorate has been completely devastated.

This destruction extends far beyond the mere burning of houses. In many cases, attackers targeted every aspect of civilian life: trees were chopped, water wells were destroyed, and even farms were not spared. In addition to cutting down trees, they stole everything of value – solar panels, engines, cars, livestock, and even small, seemingly insignificant items. As Sky News reported in one absurd incident, even a group of geese was robbed and stolen.(see image 38 below)



Source: Courtesy of SKey News<sup>61</sup>

This systematic destruction extended even to the infrastructure of these villages, with repeated attacks on hydroelectric power facilities and other essential services. The video below captures the theft and destruction of power cables. During the recording, one individual asks the cameraman to stop filming, but the cameraman declines, stating that stealing the cable is '*very normal*' and that it belongs to the thief. This casual acceptance of theft, coupled with the underlying extremist ideology that views the Druze as infidels whose possessions can be seized, suggests that this crime is part of a larger pattern of religiously motivated looting and violence. (see image 39 below)

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<sup>61</sup> Alex Crawford, Special Correspondent, Sky News, UK, Valuables and livestock looted as fighters leave embattled Sweida province. Animals, bikes and other goods were filmed being taken from Syria's Sweida region as armed groups clashed (Saturday 19 July 2025 17:06). <https://news.sky.com/video/valuables-and-livestock-looted-as-fighters-leave-embattled-sweida-province-13398873>



The cumulative effect of this deliberate campaign of destruction has been to render these areas uninhabitable, displacing entire communities and leaving a legacy of ruin that will take generations to overcome.

The next video documents a chilling act of arson, meticulously recorded by the perpetrators. Upon entering a Druze home, the attackers systematically set fire to the entire structure, carefully filming each step of the process. Before igniting the flames, however, they are seen taking their time to consume the homeowner's food, eating fruit, vegetables, and even chocolate, as if to savor their violation of space before its destruction. (see image 40 below)



It would appear that the perpetrators were intentionally seeking to inflict maximum emotional pain on the owners of the house, not only by destroying their property in a deliberate and methodical manner but also by documenting their actions and enjoying themselves while doing so. The act of consuming the homeowner's food, while filming the destruction, suggests a desire to humiliate and degrade the victims further, as if to demonstrate their complete power and the utter helplessness of the Druze community. This behavior, coupled with the targeting of a religious minority and the destruction of their homes, raises serious questions about

the role of religious hatred in motivating these crimes. It would seem that, in the minds of the perpetrators, their religious beliefs justified the theft and destruction of property belonging to those they considered infidels, and the gloating display of their actions was a way to publicly proclaim their dominance and religious righteousness.

In the next video below, a man and his friend record a house engulfed in flames. The man shouts, '*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar!*' with a wide, smirking smile that conveys a disturbing sense of pride and satisfaction, before identifying his location as being in al-Mazra'a, a small village in Sweida. He then points to the burning house, declaring, '*This is the house of the Druze, the 'pigs.'*' He repeats '*Allahu Akbar,*' expressing his religious justification for burning the house and the dehumanization he feels against the Druze. (see image 41 below)



The following video shows a fighter recording himself in front of a burning house. He states, '*And here we are, burning the houses of the Druze, in the same way you...*' implying revenge. He then specifies the justification for the act: '*In the same way you have killed our sisters...*', a clear reference to false claims that Druze fighters had raped and murdered women from the Bedouin community, claims that have been widely discredited. With religious zeal, he concludes, '*...we are burning your houses, and with God's help, we're going to burn you yourselves!*' This video demonstrates how misinformation and a desire for revenge, couched in religious rhetoric, can be used to justify acts of violence and terror. (see image 42 below)



In the next gruesome video, the violence escalates to an even more depraved level, with the burning of human bodies. The perpetrator begins by thanking God for enabling him to kill four Druze men, whom he refers to as 'pigs'. The perpetrator explicitly states that this act is revenge for the alleged slaughter of children and the rape of women from the Bedouin tribes – accusations that have been widely circulated by HTS and its followers, but which remain unverified. This video demonstrates how extremist groups use dehumanizing language and unconfirmed claims to justify acts of unspeakable barbarity. This incident also illustrates how misinformation, propagated by groups like HTS and its followers, can be used to incite and justify acts of extreme violence, leading to a cycle of retribution and dehumanization. (see image 43 below)



The video described above is not an isolated incident. Countless other documented and verified videos depict the burning of people and corpses, often accompanied by the same religious slogans. In these videos, the perpetrators frequently refer to the Druze as 'pigs', declaring that they are destined for hell. In a particularly chilling detail, they often joke that the act of burning their bodies is a form of *'training'* to prepare them for the eternal fires that await them in hell. This repeated pattern of violence and dehumanization underscores the deep-seated religious hatred that fuels these atrocities. (see image 44 below)



In the next video, the perpetrator begins by thanking God, all the while smiling smugly as the camera reveals a scene of houses and property engulfed in flames. He then turns to the camera, asking, 'Where are the mustaches?' This is a clear reference to the humiliating act of forcibly shaving the mustaches of Druze men, documented previously in this article, and implies that the men of the Druze community have either been killed or have disappeared. He then turns to his friend, saying, 'It's almost done, it's almost done,' indicating that the complete destruction of the area is imminent, capturing various scenes of burning on camera. (see image 45 below)



In this video, the speaker begins by declaring, 'Hey, Sweida!' He then continues, 'Sweida is the city... the new city that they have been burning!' Boasting about the scale of destruction, he proclaims, 'All of Sweida is completely burning!' The speaker then cries out, 'Ya Allah, Ya Allah!' before repeating his claim that the entire city has been completely destroyed. (see image 46 below)



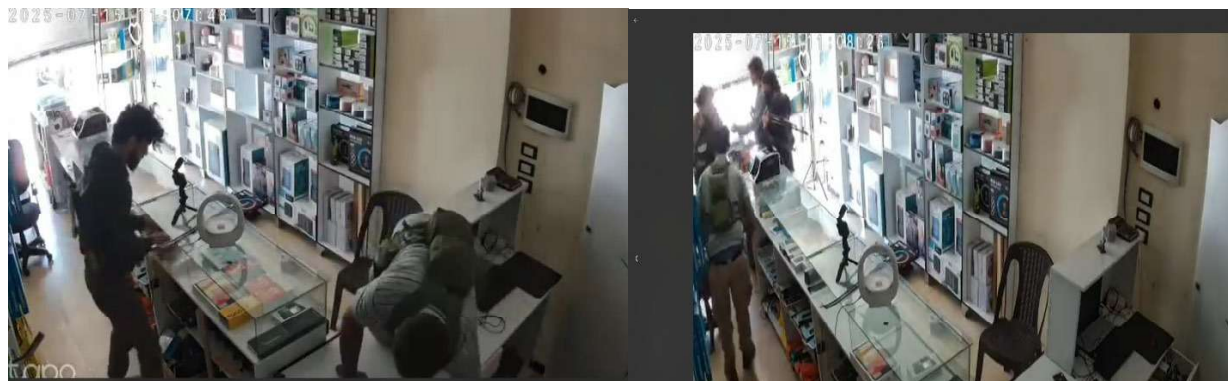
It is essential to emphasize that the videos and images described here represent but a fraction of the total devastation. There are, quite literally, thousands of images and videos documenting the complete destruction and burning of civilian houses in this area. The examples we have cited here are merely illustrative, intended to provide a sense of the scale of the destruction and the manner in which it was carried out. To further underscore this point, we have included below a selection of still images documenting the devastating use of high explosives, which are capable of destroying the concrete foundations of houses. see image 47 below)



As to looting, these still images reveal the shocking participation of Syrian official forces, including members of the Military Police (the image on the left), in the systematic looting of civilian shops, highlighting the abuse of power and the breakdown of law and order. (see image 48 below)



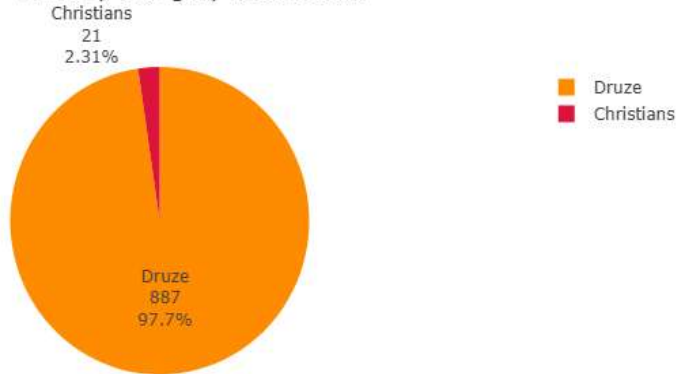
In the next video, at the 48-second mark, a group of Syrian Army fighters can be seen engaged in a dispute over the looting of a mobile phone shop. The footage shows the fighters arguing as one attempts to divide the stolen goods, while another urges him to go and loot yet another store. (see image 49 below)



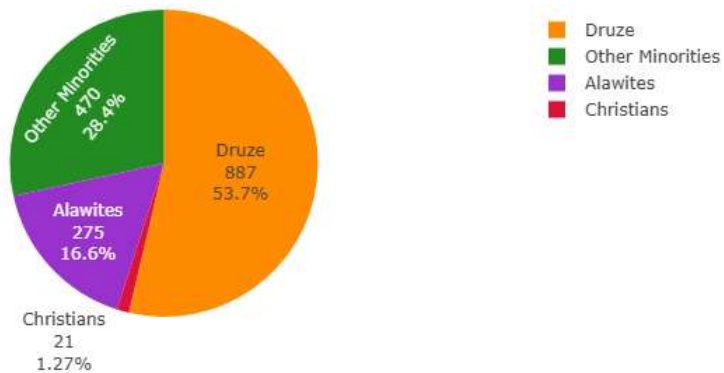
## Part Five: A Chronicle of Silenced Victims: The Foretold Fate of Christians in Sweida

Unlike the Druze community, which has been subjected to a systematic and well-documented campaign of online hate since March 2025, culminating in the atrocities of July, the Christian community in Sweida enjoyed a comparatively positive relationship with the Syrian government. In fact, they were often publicly praised by the government itself as a model minority, one that posed no threat to the regime. Moreover, studies of online hate speech reveal little incitement against Christians, suggesting a deliberate, if tacit, directive to spare them from the digital onslaught. (see pie charts below, image 50)

Primary Category Distribution



Primary Category Distribution



Despite these differences, the fate of Christians in Sweida, within areas controlled by the invading forces - whether tribal militias or Syrian government forces – ultimately mirrored that of the Druze. The same level of aggression was witnessed where houses were being burned, families dispossessed, and one complete family was terminated. The stark contrast between the pre-existing narrative and the reality of Christina's suffering in Sweida makes the silence surrounding these attacks all the more deafening real life "Chronicle of a Death Foretold," where the impending tragedy was known, yet remained unspoken. In a powerful statement, Father Peter of Shahba Church expresses concern over the lack of attention given to the suffering of Christians in Sweida. While acknowledging the displacement and hardship faced by the Druze community, he notes that the Christian community has been largely ignored by media outlets, analysts, and politicians. Father Peter emphasizes that Christians in Sweida have also been displaced, their homes burned, and they have yet to return. He points out that his 'flock' has suffered deeply, and he feels compelled to speak for them, because they deserve recognition for their struggle and for their close relations as a local.

Father Tony Boutrus, the priest of Shahba Church in Sweida(see image 51 below)



In an emotional video, Father Boutrus pointed out the following, which is worth citing verbatim:

I wanted to record this video today, fifty days after the brutal attack that targeted Sweida Governorate- an attack that spared neither our Druze brothers nor us, the Christians. After fifty days, I have spoken many times, recorded many videos, talked about the six churches that were burned, and about our Christian brothers and sisters and families who were displaced from their villages. All those villages whose people were displaced from the western part of Sweida. At the western entrance of Sweida, where our Christian families had a large community, they were attacked - children were terrified, women were terrified, cars and mobile phones were stolen, and people's dignity was violated right inside their homes. We've spoken about all this in many videos, but until today- fifty days after this aggression, after this cruel and disgraceful war that struck Sweida Governorate- we still feel forgotten.

Father Tony adds, I am a priest serving in the city of Shahba for 37 years, laments the silence that has met the suffering of Christians in Sweida, expressing a deep yearning for recognition and solidarity. He states, *'I had hoped that the world would speak out-that at least someone would condemn what happened. There are billions of Christians around the world- I was hoping that even ten people would stand somewhere...to say something about this.'* Father Tony recounts the burning of six churches, the displacement of over 250 Christian families, and the martyrdom of seven, eight, or perhaps even nine Christian sons. Despite a Christian population of around 25 to 30 thousand in the governorate, he asks, *'I don't know why no one has*

asked about us, and concludes with a plea to fellow Christians abroad: 'We don't need money or charity-we only ask for a stand of dignity and honor.'

One of the most significant, yet often overlooked, components of the violence against the Druze and Christian communities was the systematic and severe siege of the entire Governorate. While the Syrian government outwardly maintained the appearance of normalcy and abundant resources, in reality ( up to October 25), the entire area was effectively cut off, with only a trickle of basic food and supplies allowed to enter at the expense of the people themselves or international humanitarian groups, not the Syrian interim government. This tactic of starvation played a crucial role in subjugating the population, creating a climate of desperation and vulnerability. With this context in mind, we turn to the words of Metropolitan Antonios Saad, of the Archdiocese of Bosra, Hauran, and Jabal Al-Arab, who delivers a desperate plea for humanitarian assistance, reporting that *'We have been under siege for more than six or seven days now. No water, no food supplies, no electricity - nothing at all... There is no bread, no flour, nothing left in the entire governorate.'* Describing a situation of utter deprivation, he makes a *'humanitarian call, to all people of conscience around the world, to look toward your brothers and sisters in Sweida, to look toward your brothers and sisters in humanity.'* He urgently calls for the creation of open humanitarian corridors and passages to bring desperately needed *'medicine, flour, bread, food supplies, and all the essentials of life'* into Sweida, emphasizing, *'We need everything. Sweida needs everything.'* The Metropolitan concludes with a heartfelt appeal for compassion, urging the world to *'Look upon us with an eye of humanity and brotherhood to the people who remained here, who never left their land, never left their homes, and who are struggling to preserve their existence here in Sweida, and in Syria.'* (see image 52 below)



After initial reports of attacks against Christians emerged, a counter-narrative began to circulate, falsely claiming that the Christian community was actually attacked or abused by the Druze community and was forced to flee Sweida. In response to this disinformation campaign, Father Nicholas Waqas publicly refuted these claims, affirming the historical harmony between Druze and Christians and stating that there has never been a case of conflict with their communities. (see image 53 below)

Father Nicholas Waqas from the Metropolitan of Basra and Horan For the Roman Orthodox



Although Christians were spared the systematic online hate campaign directed against the Druze, the physical destruction inflicted by the invading forces was indiscriminate. As previously documented, all areas reached by the attacking forces were devastated regardless of religious identity. The following screenshots document the burning, vandalization, and destruction of churches by the invading forces, providing visual evidence of the scale of sectarian violence against Christian communities in Sweida.

St. Michael's Church: *As-Sawra al-Kabira* July 2025. Looted, vandalized, and burned by security forces and armed Bedouin groups during the wave of attacks on religious sites in Sweida. (see image 54 below)



The Church of the Angel Mikael in Al-Sauara Al Kabira, Sweida, suffered significant damage after being burned and vandalized. (see image 55 below)



كنيسة "الملاك ميخائيل" في قرية الصورة الكبرى شمال السويداء - السويداء 24

These photographs cited below document a deeply sacrilegious act of desecration, revealing a profound disregard for both the sanctity of death and the religious beliefs of the Christian community in Al-Sauara Al Kabira, Sweida. Vandals desecrated the graves of the Christian community. (see image 56 below)



While the scale of destruction might appear less extensive than that suffered by the Druze, this is largely due to the smaller size of the Christian population.

## Part Six: Thank You for Your "Mistakes": The Syrian Government's Sanitized View of the Sweida Atrocities

In a formal televised speech on Saturday, July 19, 2025, the Syrian Interim President Ahmad Al Sharah attempted to deflect blame for the Sweida atrocities by accusing a small fraction of Druze leaders of inviting foreign intervention and undermining national security, namely, Hikmat Salman al-Hijri group.<sup>62</sup> (see image 57 below)



He claimed the violence stemmed from a feud between the Druze and Bedouin tribes, portraying the latter as loyal patriots defending themselves against human rights violations committed by the Druze. This narrative ignores the premeditated nature of the attacks and the systematic nature of the killings. The Interim President points out that the Syrian government has consistently stood alongside Al-Sweida, committed to providing for its needs. However, certain forces seeking chaos (al-Hijri groups) have exploited this city and its role against the stability of Syria. According to the President, the use of foreign forces and local proxies to advance external political agendas is not in the interests of Syria. The following is a verbatim translation of the relevant parts of the President's televised speech:

The conflicts between the *illegal armed groups* (al-Hijri groups) and the Bedouin on the other side escalated the situation to an unprecedented degree. These events led to an increase in violent clashes between these groups, which would have spiraled out of control if not for the intervention of the Syrian state, which managed to calm things down despite the challenging circumstances....As the state withdrew from certain regions, armed groups from Sweida began launching violent retaliatory attacks against the Bedouin and their families, leading to mass displacement and a state of fear and chaos. *These retaliatory actions, accompanied by human rights violations, prompted other Arab tribes to mobilize and break the siege on the Bedouin in Sweida, which in turn escalated tensions and brought significant changes to the*

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<sup>62</sup> The Syrian Interim President Ahmad Al Sharah Speech on Syrian TV (July 19, 2025), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULAdkrZTqxA>

security landscape in Syria...In this context, it must be noted that the narrow interests of certain individuals in Sweida contributed to this chaos, as *some separatist* ambitions emerged among certain figures who gained strength from outside influences and led armed groups that *carried out rapid killings and abuses*...To confront the challenges that our country has faced, the *tribes have often been a bulwark against both external and internal threats*, playing an effective role in maintaining the country's *unity and stability*. Despite the honorable stance of the tribes, some of these groups have *attempted to defend themselves independently* when facing challenges and threats...While *we appreciate the tribes for their heroic stances*, we call on them to fully commit to a ceasefire and to comply with the orders of the state. Emphasis added.<sup>63</sup>

In this excerpt, the Syrian president presents a carefully crafted narrative designed to absolve the government of responsibility for the violence in Sweida. He describes al-Hijri groups as illegal, separatist, ambitious armed groups. Then the president praises the tribes as a 'bulwark' against threats and commends their 'honorable stance' in defending the country's unity and stability. However, he then subtly criticizes them for acting independently while defending themselves against human rights violations committed by the Druze, stating that such actions (defending themselves and breaking the siege against their tribe members) cannot replace the role of the state.' Put differently, the president vaguely acknowledges that the tribes were 'facing challenges and threats,' framing their violence as acts of self-defense rather than aggression.

This rhetoric is deeply dangerous. By validating the tribes' actions as stemming from 'humanitarian motives' and acknowledging their 'heroic stances,' the president implicitly justifies their violence and minimizes the atrocities they committed. He then reinforces the government's authority by stating that only the 'Syrian state' is capable of ensuring security, implying that the tribes' actions were understandable. The call for a 'ceasefire' and compliance with state orders further reinforces the narrative of the government as a benevolent force restoring order.

In effect, this speech is a carefully constructed attempt to whitewash the actions of the tribal militias, shift blame to the victims, and reaffirm the government's authority, all while ignoring the documented evidence of systematic violence and religious persecution. By validating the tribes' actions as stemming from 'humanitarian motives' and acknowledging their 'heroic stances,' the president implicitly justifies a wide range of actions-the killings, burnings, destruction, forced mustache shavings, looting of homes, attacks on Christians, and destruction of churches are minimized.

## 1. Political Control Through Sectarian Violence: State Instruments and the Targeting of Religious Minorities

Mr. Al Shara's speech can be understood as a key element in the Syrian Interim Government's strategy of *plausible deniability*. It perfectly fits the hate narrative that has been circulated online as early as March 2025. By praising the Sunni tribes as legitimate groups, the Syrian president can claim that these crimes against the Druze and the Christians were not meant. To this end, the President has labeled one set of actors (the Druze) as "illegal armed groups" and contrasts them with "Bedouin", effectively delegitimizing actors from the Druze, justifying the criminal atrocities against them, while denying political status or protections. In this context, when atrocities were committed by tribal units operating indirectly with government forces, the "illegal" label permits the state to disown those acts while criminalizing rival actors.<sup>64</sup> The President asserts that violence "would have spiraled out of control if not for the intervention of the Syrian state," presenting the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Id.

state as a stabilizer, while portraying prior tribal violence as a consequence of state absence rather than a result of state policy, enabling the state to claim a corrective, not causal, role. Then the President has externalized the blame, reframing escalation as foreign-provoked (attributing renewed escalation primarily to “Israeli intervention” and external actors), effectively reducing domestic scrutiny of state policies or complicity; practically deflecting international and domestic calls for accountability by shifting the causal narrative to foreign interference. By this mischaracterization, the President has effectively emphasized the legitimacy of renewed state presence and frames subsequent operations as internationally endorsed stabilization.

While acknowledging “human rights violations” committed by the Druze, the President situates them as consequences of the absence of state authority and foreign manipulation.<sup>65</sup> In this context, the simultaneity of praise and command of Bedoin by the president creates political cover for the state to have used tribes as proxies and later punish or absorb them, avoiding scrutiny of the prior instructions it gave. Then the President has framed unity and submission to state authority as the only legitimate remedy to external interventions or internal strife.

Under this frame, independent investigations, international monitoring, or alternative transitional justice mechanisms can be portrayed as threats to sovereignty-hindering accountability for state-linked atrocities. From a legal standpoint, the speech systematically (a) delegitimizes select actors (in this context, the Druze), (b) externalizes blame, (c) affirms the state’s monopoly on force, and (d) prescribes legal remedies (ceasefires, compliance, security reassertion). Together, these moves create political/legal space for the state to deny responsibility for atrocities committed by tribal actors while enabling repressive measures against perceived opponents.

## 2. Evidence to Rebut State Plausible Deniability

The Druze community was fractured: while some local leaders opposed the interim government, in particular the Hijri groups, the overwhelming majority of Druze autocrats and other key religious authorities, namely Youssef Jarbou and Hammoud Al-Hennawi, all maintained regular dialogue with and supported efforts to preserve a unified Syrian state. Many Druze academics and known politicians likewise kept constructive ties with the interim authorities. Christian clergy in Syria, especially in Sweida, also held cautious but cooperative relationships with the government.

The invading forces, comprised of Syrian government troops and allied Bedouin tribes, however, made no distinction between government opponents and supporters. As data tragically indicates, the violence was meted out equally against those who opposed Damascus and the very same team that supports the Syrian Interim government and was in direct contact and negotiation with it. This indiscriminate violence serves to debunk the official narrative. If the goal was simply to neutralize the Al-Hijri group, the widespread attacks on pro-government figures and entire villages make no strategic sense. The only logical conclusion is that the Al-Hijri group was a pretext for a much broader objective: the violent subjugation of the entire Druze population and the dismantling of their historical autonomy.

Further dismantling the government's narrative is the profile of the victims. The overwhelming majority of those targeted in the Sweida offensive were civilians with no discernible connection to military or political activities. This was not collateral damage; it was the deliberate and brutal targeting of the very fabric of civilian

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<sup>65</sup> Id.

society. Our data provides a harrowing catalog of these victims: students thrown from balconies while being shot, doctors executed, and the elderly publicly humiliated and murdered. Hospitals were not spared. This systematic war on non-combatants serves a strategic purpose within a campaign of terror. By attacking the most vulnerable and non-political elements of a society, a regime can create a pervasive climate of fear, crush morale, and demonstrate that no one is safe. It sends a clear message that allegiance, neutrality, or even active support for the government provides no guarantee of protection. The goal is not to defeat the Al-Hijri group but to break the will of the Druze people.

Particularly tragic aspect of the events in Sweida is the stark contrast in outcomes between those who trusted the Syrian Interim government and those who did not. The overwhelming majority of civilian casualties in the Druze community were reportedly individuals who placed their faith in the government, believing they had nothing to fear. Because of this trust, they chose not to flee, assuming that government forces would enter their homes, conduct checks, and, finding no wrongdoing, leave them to live in peace. Tragically, many of these individuals paid for their trust with their lives.

Conversely, those who were skeptical of the government's assurances and allegations – those who anticipated potential religious violence and that they would be targeted based on their religious identity chose to flee. These individuals, by prioritizing self-preservation and distrusting the government's promises of protection, ultimately survived the atrocities. Put differently, it would appear that the interim government has done everything in its power to enhance the interests of what President Al Sharah described as outlaw groups or certain individuals with separatist ambitions.

The government's claims of a limited operation against Al-Hijri group are also belied by the sheer scale of economic destruction. The evidence points to a scorched-earth policy designed to cripple the Sweida governorate. The data shows an unimaginable scale of economic destruction, burning, and looting of significant parts of the city, almost 30% of the entire city. This includes the widespread destruction of homes, businesses, and critical infrastructure. The use of high explosives capable of destroying entire houses, including their concrete foundations, indicates a premeditated intent to inflict long-term, irreparable damage.

This level of destruction is fundamentally inconsistent with an action against an "outlaw" groups, namely Al-Hijri groups. It aligns perfectly, however, with a strategy of collective punishment designed to make the region uninhabitable and economically dependent, thereby breaking its political autonomy. The targeting of the elderly, students, doctors, and Christians, individuals with no connection to the Al-Hijri groups, is directly linked to this economic warfare. By destroying their homes, businesses, and livelihoods, the regime ensures that the entire community, not just a specific faction, bears the cost of resistance.

The most damning evidence against the government's narrative of a non-sectarian, targeted operation is the fate of Sweida's Christian community. Unlike the Druze, who were the subject of a massive and coordinated online hate campaign, the Christian minority was consistently praised by the state as a "patriotic" and "ideal" minority. They were deliberately spared from the incitement that preceded the attacks, creating the impression that they were safe under the government's protection.

Yet, when the invasion came, this narrative proved meaningless. The attacking forces did not differentiate between Druze and Christians. As documented in the brief and confirmed by the powerful testimony of local priests like Father Tony Boutrus and Father Peter, Christian communities suffered the same fate as their Druze neighbors. Six churches were looted and burned, over 250 Christian families were displaced, and their homes and property were destroyed. Father Boutrus lamented:

"I have spoken many times, recorded many videos, talked about the six churches that were burned, and about our Christian brothers and sisters and families who were displaced... we still feel forgotten."

This indiscriminate violence against a community publicly lauded by the state is irrefutable proof that the operation was not about targeting a specific "outlaw" faction in the Druze Community. It was a sectarian campaign of terror directed at all minorities in Sweida. The public praise for Christians appears to have been a cynical disinformation tactic, designed to fragment minority solidarity and reinforce a facade of tolerance that was violently shattered by the government's own forces.

The widespread violence in Sweida was not a spontaneous eruption of ancient tribal animosities; it was the carefully cultivated result of a modern, sophisticated, and state-sanctioned incitement campaign. This leads to the perhaps most damning argument against the government's narrative: the violence was premeditated and predicated on religious hatred, which was deliberately weaponized to achieve a political goal.

Beginning in March 2025, months before the invasion, a well-organized and coordinated online hate campaign specifically targeting the Druze community emerged. This was not a fringe phenomenon but a mainstream media effort designed to dehumanize the Druze population and paint them as heretical, separatist enemies of the state or Jewish lovers. This campaign provided the ideological justification for the subsequent atrocities. By saturating the information space with religious hatred, the state and its extremist allies manufactured consent for violence among their foot soldiers and the broader population. The strategic nature of this campaign is evident in its timing and focus. It began just as the government was publicly accusing the Al-Hijri group of sedition, creating a two-pronged assault: a political accusation of treason and a religious accusation of heresy. This allowed the state to mobilize both nationalist and extremist sentiments against a single target. The goal was clear: to enter and subjugate the Druze stronghold of Sweida, a feat made politically palatable by first branding its inhabitants as dangerous, subhuman heretics.

To conclude, based on our discussion in Part Five, it is evident that HTS Fatwa 25 lacked substantive impact. Moreover, those who propagate it, including their affiliates, actively contravened every aspect of it, thereby nullifying any potential positive impact that could have minimized sectarian violence.

### 3. The State as Intermediary of Terror

The final argument synthesizes all the preceding points and exposes the core of the Syrian government's strategy: the use of proxies and intermediaries to commit acts of terror while maintaining a facade of plausible deniability. This section will analyze the government's official response to the atrocities and the ideological underpinnings of its extremist allies, revealing a state apparatus that is, at best, complicit in crimes and, at worst, fully captured by a radical jihadist ideology.

The Syrian government was keen to portray the conflict as a "normal routine fight between Bedouin tribes and the Druze," a local dispute that necessitated state intervention to "hold peace." The evidence, however, demonstrates that the state did not intervene to stop the violence; it orchestrated it. The Bedouin tribes were not independent actors but were used as instruments of state policy, with religious hatred serving as the fuel. This argument is supported by four key observations that expose the government's culpability.

The most damning evidence of state complicity comes from the highest level, a formal televised speech by the president, which we examined in full detail in the preceding sections. The Syrian Interim President, Ahmad Al-Sharah, provided top-level political cover for the atrocities. He did not condemn the perpetrators; he praised them, officially thanking the Bedouin tribes and calling them "patriotic and law-abiding people." This was not a neutral statement. It was a 100% one-sided defense that aligned perfectly with the online hate campaign that had dehumanized the Druze for months. Most chillingly, the President dismissed the documented massacres—the public humiliation of the elderly, the throwing of students from balconies, the execution of doctors. This presidential absolution is not the language of a neutral arbiter of peace; it is the language of an accomplice providing a public alibi for mass murder and ethnic cleansing.

The actions of the invading forces, which the President excused as "self-defense," reveal a motivation that goes far beyond a tribal feud. The indiscriminate slaughter of all Druze, including those who supported the government, demonstrates that the political dispute with the Al-Hijri group was merely a smokescreen. The reality is that the invading forces, steeped in a radical ideology, view the Druze as infidels and apostates who, according to the fatwas of the controversial scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, deserve to be killed, their women raped, and their possessions taken. For these fighters, the Druze are not political opponents; they are sub-human, and their extermination is a religious duty. The President's framing of these theologically-driven atrocities as a mere tribal squabble is a deliberate and cynical act of disinformation.

The publicly announced and widely disseminated campaigns of humiliation against the Druze, particularly the forced shaving of elders' mustaches, were not random acts of cruelty. They were calculated acts of religious and xenophobic hatred designed to inflict deep and lasting psychological trauma. This public degradation, combined with the utter lack of remorse from government officials or the broader Sunni community, created a profound sense of existential threat. As explained by the framework of Jujitsu Politics, this was a deliberate provocation designed to push the Druze community toward an extreme reaction, such as calling for independence, which the state could then use to justify its violence.

The final piece of evidence reveals that this extremist ideology is not a fringe element but is becoming official state policy. The books of Ibn Taymiyyah are now being offered for free at schools, universities, mosques, and public libraries across Syria. This is significant because his literature provides the theological foundation for the worldview of groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and it is now being used to indoctrinate a new generation of Syrians. His teachings reinforce the core belief of the extremist fighters: that their victory in Syria was a "God's victory," not a result of political circumstance. They believe the international community's engagement is meaningless, a mere footnote to the divine reward they received for their jihad. This belief, rooted in Ibn Taymiyyah's teachings, justifies their arrogance, their dehumanization of minorities, and their drive to reward God by adopting even more hostile interpretations of their faith. This is state-sponsored radicalization on a massive scale. If it continues unchecked, in five years the world will not be dealing with a few thousand foreign fighters, but with hundreds of thousands of homegrown Syrian extremists.

## Part Seven: Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

To effectively address the multifaceted challenges of radicalization leading to violence, and to safeguard national and international security while promoting international stability, the following policy recommendations are addressed to the United States government and relevant agencies.

The evidence from Sweida is a stark warning. Despite its diplomatic overtures, the Syrian Interim Government is either unwilling or unable to prevent its own forces and proxies from committing large-scale atrocities against minority populations. The official narrative of a targeted, limited law-and-order operation is a fiction, designed to mask a brutal campaign of sectarian subjugation. Whether this campaign is a deliberate policy of a duplicitous state or the result of a state captured by its most extreme elements, the implications are dire. Based on the evidence presented in this brief, it appears more likely that extremist factions within Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham have seized effective control over, or at the very least, exercise disproportionate influence within, the Syrian interim government, thereby creating a dangerous internal fracture. On one side stands the interim President and his immediate team, who may possess the pragmatism, shrewdness, and political intelligence necessary to depart from Syria's violent past and pursue a more inclusive governance model. On the other side are the extremist factions of HTS, whose ideological rigidity, sectarian worldview, and commitment to takfiri principles may render them fundamentally incapable of such a departure. This internal power struggle has profound implications: the moderate voices within the government may articulate conciliatory rhetoric, but if they lack the authority to restrain or override the extremist factions, their words become meaningless, and the extremists' actions define Syria's reality. Either way, these unfortunate events present a terrifying inversion and effective use of Jujitsu Politics against the civilian population.

As mentioned before, the campaign against the Druze in Sweida was conducted with a level of ruthlessness, humiliation, and public visibility that seems calculated to inflict deep and lasting emotional scars. The public nature of these atrocities, combined with the deafening silence and lack of remorse from the broader Sunni community and government officials, created a profound sense of abandonment and existential threat within the Druze community.

What makes the Sweida atrocities particularly chilling is not merely their scale or brutality, but the documented psychological and moral state of the perpetrators during their commission. A significant proportion of the attackers committed these crimes while displaying visible signs of joy, jubilation, and laughter. Video evidence and eyewitness testimony reveal perpetrators smiling and attempting to laugh while humiliating elderly victims, burning homes, looting property, and desecrating churches. This is not the behavior of reluctant soldiers following orders under duress, nor is it the cold calculation of professional combatants. Rather, it is the behavior of individuals who have been so thoroughly indoctrinated into an extremist worldview that they experience profound psychological and moral satisfaction while inflicting suffering on those they have been taught to view as sub-human. The perpetrators exhibited a state of religious euphoria, as if they were performing a sacred duty or earning divine merit through their actions. This indicates an overwhelming conviction that the Druze do not deserve to live, that their property is religiously permissible to seize, and that their humiliation is not only justified but morally praiseworthy. Such behavior is entirely consistent with the most extreme interpretations of takfiri ideology. The fact that many such individuals are now operating under the banner of the Syrian state, with apparent impunity, represents a catastrophic failure of governance and a profound threat to any prospect of national reconciliation.

Equally alarming is the Syrian government's response, or lack thereof, in the aftermath of these documented atrocities. Rather than demonstrating genuine remorse, accountability, or a serious commitment to rebuilding trust with the Druze and Christian communities in Sweida, government officials responsible for the Sweida file have adopted a posture of political maneuvering, blame-shifting, and exclusionary rhetoric. In the case of the Christian community, the government's response has been one of deliberate erasure and willful ignorance. Despite the documented burning of six churches, the destruction of Christian homes, and the desecration of Christian cemeteries, government officials have made no acknowledgment whatsoever of Christian suffering. The state has systematically ignored the fact that Christians were victims in Sweida, refusing to address the attacks on their sacred sites or the displacement of their families. This conspicuous silence was so profound that it compelled Father Boutrus to speak out repeatedly, demanding recognition of what had been done to his community. The government's desperate attempt to frame the entire campaign as a targeted operation against the Al-Hijri groups required the complete erasure of Christian victimhood from the official narrative. This raises a deeply troubling question: why were Christian cemeteries desecrated, Christian churches burned, and Christian homes looted when the Christian community had no involvement whatsoever in any political or military activities?

The government's refusal to answer this question reveals the fundamentally sectarian nature of the violence and the state's complicity in covering it up. There has been no meaningful effort to hold perpetrators accountable, no public acknowledgment of the scale of suffering inflicted, and no concrete steps taken to provide reparations or rebuild destroyed communities. Instead, an entrenched mentality of political gamesmanship prevails, in which the Druze are treated not as citizens deserving protection and support, but as political adversaries to be managed, contained, and blamed for their own victimization. This is starkly illustrated by the government's failure to fulfill even the most basic responsibilities of a functioning state. As of the date of this report, the vast majority of food supplies and humanitarian aid entering Sweida have been paid for entirely by donors from within the Sweida community itself, by external supporters in the diaspora, or by international humanitarian organizations, not by the Syrian government. This is not an oversight; it is a deliberate abdication of state responsibility that sends a clear message: the government views the provision of basic necessities not as a duty owed to all citizens, but as a political tool to be withheld or granted based on loyalty and compliance. The officials managing the Sweida portfolio have demonstrated through their actions that they do not operate with the mindset of state-builders seeking to integrate a diverse population, but rather as political operatives engaged in a zero-sum struggle for dominance. This pattern of behavior reveals that extremist elements within the government have either captured key decision-making positions or that the government as a whole has adopted an extremist logic in its approach to minority populations. Either scenario is incompatible with the international community's stated goal of supporting a stable, inclusive, and pluralistic Syria.

Engaging with this regime without robust safeguards and verification mechanisms is not a pragmatic path to stability; it is a path to legitimizing a government that uses terror as a tool of statecraft. This will not only betray the Syrian people but will also create a dangerous new precedent for extremist groups globally, signaling that violence and rebranding can lead to international acceptance. Therefore, the international community ought to re-evaluate its approach to Syria. A policy of hope must be replaced by a policy of profound skepticism. The following recommendations are proposed

## 1. The Illusion of Safety: Why Complete Druze Separation Would Undermine, Not Advance, Their Future

Perhaps the most tragic manifestation of the jujitsu politics framework is the growing call among segments of the Druze community, particularly from groups such as the Al-Hjri faction, for complete autonomy and independence from Syria. This represents a heartbreaking example of victims inadvertently working in the interest of their aggressors. The level of severe emotional trauma inflicted through public humiliation, combined with the deafening silence from the broader Syrian Sunni community and the absolute lack of remorse or empathy from Syrian government officials, has pushed a significant portion of the Druze community toward a clear divorce from their natural Syrian and Arabic heritage. While this response is entirely understandable given the scale of atrocities and the profound sense of abandonment, it is ultimately not in the interest of the Druze people themselves, nor is it in the interest of a stable, pluralistic Syria. At the same time, maintaining the current *status quo* of centralized governance under a government that has demonstrated either unwillingness or inability to protect its minority citizens is equally untenable. The most viable path forward may lie in governance arrangements that allow Sweida to remain an integral part of Syria while enjoying meaningful local authority and guaranteed protections that enable its people to feel genuinely secure—a middle ground between the extremes of complete separation and unchecked central control.

What appears on the surface to be a call for independence is, at its core, a desperate call for safety and survival. The extremist factions within HTS have deliberately engineered this outcome. By subjecting the Druze to systematic violence and humiliation, they have pushed them into a corner where separation seems like the only viable path to security. The extremists can then point to these calls for independence as validation of their longstanding narrative that minorities cannot be trusted and do not belong in the Syrian national project. Put differently, the state first creates the separatist threat it claims to be combating, then uses the predictable reactions of a terrorized population to justify its own aggression and to fuel further sectarianism. Allowing the Druze minority to pursue complete independence under these circumstances would hand extremist factions a strategic victory, demonstrating that violence and intimidation are effective tools for reshaping the political landscape.

The implications extend far beyond Syria's borders. Known historically as Al-Sham, Syria holds profound religious and cultural significance for the broader Muslim world. If the fragmentation of Syria along sectarian lines is permitted to succeed, it will set a dangerous precedent that is likely to destabilize neighboring countries, particularly Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt. Extremist factions in these nations, observing the success of their Syrian counterparts in using violence to fragment a multi-confessional state, will be emboldened to pursue similar strategies. The international community must recognize that the calls for Druze independence, while born of genuine suffering, represent the successful weaponization of trauma by extremist actors. Preventing this outcome requires not only protecting minorities from violence but also addressing the root cause: the empowerment and legitimization of the very extremist factions that engineered this crisis, which leads us to our next suggestion.

## 2. Beyond Tokenism: Empowering Syrian Moderate Sunnis Is the Only Path to Minority Protection

The international community ought to fundamentally rethink its approach to protecting Syria's religious and ethnic minorities. Until now, the prevailing strategy has been to pressure the Syrian Interim Government to

appoint representatives from minority communities (Druze, Christians, Alawites, women, etc.) to symbolic positions within the government structure. This approach is not only ineffective but also counterproductive. In practice, the government appoints individuals who do not genuinely represent their communities and who serve the government's interests far more than they advocate for their own people. This allows the Syrian government to claim to the international community that it has fulfilled its obligations and achieved minority representation, while simultaneously widening the chasm between minority communities and the state. The minority communities themselves recognize-as they did under the Assad regime-that these government-appointed figures possess little to no credibility or legitimacy within their own societies. These symbolic appointments provide the government with a facade of inclusivity while doing nothing to address the actual threats facing vulnerable populations.

The only effective path to securing the future of Syria's minorities is to ensure that actual moderate Syrian Sunnis who believe in the state as the protector of all citizens in the modern sense have real, meaningful power and decision-making authority within the current Syrian government. This is emphatically not the case today. The fundamental problem facing the Druze, Christians, Alawites, and other minorities is not with the broader Syrian Sunni population. Historically, there has been no inherent conflict between Syria's minorities and moderate Sunni Muslims who embrace a pluralistic vision of the Syrian state. The problem lies exclusively with the extremist factions within the Syrian Sunni community that have seized control of the levers of state power and are using that power to advance a sectarian, exclusionary agenda rooted in takfiri ideology. By ensuring that the Syrian government is meaningfully governed by a significant number of credible, moderate Syrian Sunnis who genuinely believe in the state's duty to protect all citizens equally, the overwhelming majority of concerns and demands from minority communities will naturally dissolve. This is the only sustainable solution. Appointing symbolic minority figures who lack the respect of their own communities is a distraction that serves the interests of extremists. Empowering moderate Sunni voices to reclaim their state from extremist capture is the only strategy that can provide genuine, long-term security for all Syrians, regardless of their religious or ethnic identity.

### 3. Beyond Performative Justice

Accountability must be genuine, transparent, and systematic, rather than the performative theater that has characterized the Syrian Interim Government's approach to justice over the past year. The government has demonstrated a consistent and troubling pattern in its handling of documented crimes. Throughout the past year of atrocities against minorities, the Syrian government consistently relied on narratives of "unknown factors" or "individual mistakes" to maintain plausible deniability. The Sweida invasion, however, forced a strategic pivot. Faced with overwhelming video evidence that rendered denial untenable, the government shifted to a new formulation: minimizing the systematic violence as "breaches" or "violations". This was not an acknowledgment of state responsibility but a calculated rhetorical retreat- conceding that incidents occurred while still deflecting institutional accountability and reframing organized terror as aberrational misconduct. The government has proven highly effective at controlling this deception game, creating the illusion of responsiveness while ensuring that no meaningful consequences follow. Indeed, while this acknowledgment represents a tactical shift-an implicit admission that the scale of evidence makes outright denial impossible-it must not be mistaken for genuine accountability. The government's track record suggests that these investigations are designed primarily to manage international perception rather than deliver justice. The selective prosecution of a handful of highly visible perpetrators, accompanied by carefully curated clips of public trials, will convince no one who has been paying attention. On the contrary, such performative gestures will only deepen suspicions that the government is manufacturing its own narrative of accountability

to deflect international pressure while protecting the broader network of perpetrators and, most critically, the commanders and officials who authorized or enabled these crimes.

True accountability requires a fundamentally different approach. It ought to be transparent, with investigations conducted by independent bodies that include international observers and representatives trusted by the affected communities. It should be comprehensive, targeting not only foot soldiers but the entire chain of command, including government officials and military leaders who bear command responsibility. It needs to be public, with trials that are open to scrutiny and verdicts that are explained and justified. And it must begin with an honest acknowledgment of what occurred: these were not "mistakes," or "breaches," terms that imply accidents or errors in judgment. What happened in Sweida was crimes, deliberate, systematic, and horrific violations of human rights. The use of euphemistic language to describe mass atrocities is itself a form of denial that undermines any claim to genuine accountability. The international community must insist on nothing less than full, transparent, and meaningful justice, delivered through mechanisms that cannot be controlled or manipulated by the very government whose forces and proxies stand accused.

#### 4. From Clerical Monopolies to Inclusive Governance

None of the preceding recommendations can succeed unless the interim government decisively abandons clerical gatekeeping and the undue influence of spiritual entities, thereby loosening their tight grip on state governance, and critically, counteracts the pervasive influence of the 'religious and political acronym' – the entrenched establishment that manipulates both religious and political levers. This fundamental imperative for genuine civilian-led, pluralistic governance, which applies to diverse contexts from Syria (including its government in Damascus and communities like Sweida) to nations like the United States, Canada, or Sweden, is essential for reflecting the authentic diversity of society.

Achieving this requires a multi-faceted approach: institutionalizing truly transparent, genuinely merit-based advisory structures that elevate technocrats, elected local councils, women, youth, professionals, and independent civic leaders. Crucially, their selection must be predicated on demonstrable competence, authentic community representation, and a commitment to public service, rather than political loyalty to the existing power structures or mere tokenism. This distinction is vital to prevent the perpetuation of the 'religious and political acronym' through ostensibly inclusive but ultimately loyalist appointments. Furthermore, it demands guaranteeing non-clerical voices equal access to public consultations and state media; codifying clear boundaries that confine religious figures to cultural and spiritual counsel while reserving policy prerogatives exclusively for elected or merit-based civilian bodies; enforcing robust anti-monopoly safeguards such as rotation, term limits, conflict-of-interest rules, and independent oversight. Only by supplanting such performative inclusion—which often serves to entrench rather than diminish the power of the 'religious and political acronym', and clerical monopolization with truly structured, pluralistic, and independent civilian channels can the state genuinely rebuild trust, protect its diverse minorities, and enable all constituencies, including moderate Sunnis.

The future of Syria hangs in the balance. The window to support the country's moderate voices and prevent the consolidation of a radicalized state is rapidly closing. A passive, hopeful approach will only ensure that the sacrifices of the Syrian people have been in vain and that the mask of the new regime slips to reveal a familiar face of tyranny and terror.

## 5. The Long War: Curriculum, Ideology, and the Battle for Syria's Next Generation

The international community's focus on Syria has understandably centered on immediate security concerns: ceasefires, territorial control, the presence of foreign fighters, and the threat of cross-border terrorism. These are urgent matters. But they are not the most dangerous. The most dangerous threat to Syria's future-and to regional and international security- is being written in textbooks, preached in mosques, and taught in classrooms across the country right now.

There is currently an unprecedented demand for, and proliferation of, the literature of some of the most extreme Islamic scholars in history, figures whose works have been used for centuries to justify violence against civilians, mass killings of religious minorities, and the most brutal interpretations of jihad. This is not fringing material circulating in underground networks. This is mainstream content being distributed in schools, universities, and religious institutions under the watch, and in many cases, the active promotion of extremist factions within HTS that are systematically hijacking Syria's education system.

This is ideological infrastructure. If left unchecked, it will produce a generation of Syrians indoctrinated into extremist worldviews that make today's security challenges look manageable by comparison. If we do not pay urgent attention to what schoolchildren and university students are being taught in Syria today, then in five years, dealing with a few thousand cross-border jihadist fighters will be the least of our concerns. At that stage, we will be confronting a country where a significant proportion of its youth population believes in, adheres to, and is willing to act upon extreme ideologies that justify sectarian violence, religious persecution, and the systematic elimination of pluralism.

This is not hypothetical. The process has already begun. Reports from inside Syria document the removal of secular and pluralistic content from curricula and the introduction of extremist religious texts. Mosques are being stocked with the writings of scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah-not his mainstream theological works, but his most extreme fatwas, the very texts that have historically been weaponized to justify atrocities against minorities.

None of the political improvements, the diplomatic engagement, or reconstruction funding will matter if we allow an entire generation to be radicalized through state-sponsored education. It is critical to emphasize that this is not an indictment of the Syrian people. The vast majority of Syrians, across all sects and regions, want peace, stability, and a future for their children. But the extreme factions within HTS, if left unchecked, have both the intent and the capacity to monopolize the education system and use it as a tool of long-term ideological control. They understand what many international actors have failed to grasp: whoever controls the curriculum controls the future.

The stakes could not be higher. If we fail to act now, we will not simply be dealing with the continuation of Syria's civil war. Rather, we will be dealing with young Syrian generations who have been raised in a system that taught them that violence in the name of ideology is not just permissible, but also obligatory.