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Renewed Sectarian Violence in Sweida Undermines Syria's Fragile Peace

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Renewed sectarian violence in Syria's Sweida province has left at least 516 dead and displaced around 3,000 families, as fragile truces unravel and tribal divisions erupt. The fighting, rooted in long-standing ethnic and religious tensions, has raised alarm across the region and poses a serious challenge to Syria's interim government.

Clashes broke out on 13 July following the abduction of a Druze merchant by members of a Bedouin tribe. The incident sparked a rapid escalation, leading to a wave of retaliatory kidnappings and armed confrontations. By 18 July, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

(SOHR) reported at least 321 confirmed deaths, though local health officials and aid agencies suggest the toll may be higher.

At the heart of the unrest is Sweida, a region in southern Syria predominantly inhabited by the Druze, a distinct religious minority with deep historical roots in the Levant. Fighting intensified after government forces, initially deployed to restore order, reportedly sided with Bedouin fighters. This drew sharp criticism from local leaders and activists, who accused the army of committing abuses before it withdrew; Israeli airstrikes targeting Syrian military positions were reported to have pressured the retreat.

As the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) retreated, Bedouin tribal fighters advanced on Sweida city, using heavy weapons including mortars, machine guns, and pickup-mounted artillery. The province's main hospital has been overwhelmed by the surge in casualties, with bodies piling up in hallways and on the streets amid power outages. Local officials reported receiving over 400 bodies in the space of a few days.

The spreadsheet, which included names and contact details, was mistakenly sent outside authorised government channels and ultimately appeared online. The breach only came to light in August 2023 when a Facebook post revealed the identities of nine individuals affected.

SOHR alleges that tribal reinforcements received indirect support from government-affiliated militias, as direct Syrian military operations in Sweida are limited by deconfliction arrangements with Israel. In response to the growing humanitarian crisis, Israel approved an emergency aid package of 2 million shekels (approximately £420,000) for Druze civilians. This followed Israeli airstrikes targeting Syrian military installations near Sweida and Damascus, reportedly aimed at preventing further government crackdowns in Druze-majority areas.

Despite a ceasefire being declared on 16 July, hostilities quickly resumed. Druze militias are accused of launching reprisal attacks on Bedouin villages, triggering further displacement. According to UN agencies, approximately 3,000 families have been displaced since the outbreak of violence, with several hundred fleeing Sweida city in a single day.

In the village of Walgha, control shifted to tribal fighters after homes and businesses were set ablaze. Anas al-Enad, a tribal leader from Hama, told AFP his men responded to calls for

help from fellow Bedouin. A fighter calling himself Abu Mariam said he had travelled from Deir ez-Zor to oppose Druze leader Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, who is known for his opposition to the Damascus regime.

The humanitarian toll is severe. Electricity and water supplies have been cut, communications are down, and hospitals are operating with dwindling resources. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned that medical centres are unable to preserve human remains, while ICRC's Syria director, Stephan Sakalian, described the situation as "critical". UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, has called for independent investigations and stressed the need to prioritise civilian safety.

Syria's transitional government, formed after the departure of Bashar al-Assad, is under increasing pressure. The recent bloodshed is the worst since Druze factions clashed with government-aligned forces in the spring, which resulted in over 100 deaths. Although officials claim military deployments are aimed at restoring peace, reports from the ground allege abuse, including looting and the execution of detainees at close range.

Negotiations are reportedly underway to facilitate the return of government forces to Sweida to stabilise state institutions, but implementation has been delayed. Humanitarian agencies are struggling to deliver aid, as blocked routes and continued fighting have made access to the province nearly impossible. Only the World Health Organisation (WHO) has managed to send trauma kits to the neighbouring Daraa region.

The violence has affected Syria's Civil Defence, known as the White Helmets. Hamza al-Amarin, head of the Sweida branch, was kidnapped during relief operations, and his whereabouts remain unknown. Contact has since been lost.

Tensions between the Druze and Sunni Muslim Bedouin, both with long-standing presence in Sweida, have historically been marred by disputes over land and local influence. The current conflict, however, is a dramatic escalation with wide-reaching consequences.

Globally, the Druze community numbers around one million, with populations in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. While Israeli Druze have called for intervention, religious leaders like Sheikh Sami Abi al-Muna in Lebanon have urged restraint, warning that foreign involvement could exacerbate instability. Speaking in Beirut, al-Muna encouraged all sides to honour the ceasefire and pursue dialogue. Lebanese Druze leader Walid Joumblatt, a central figure in

brokering the truce, has called for the independent investigative body to examine alleged human rights violations.

Despite these efforts, the ceasefire remains fragile. Syria's interim leadership faces one of its most critical challenges since assuming office, as the country teeters further into division, violence, and humanitarian crisis.