

## U.S. Messaging at Center of Syria-Israel Crisis Over Sweida Deployment

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A diplomatic misstep by Syria has placed the United States at the center of a rapidly escalating crisis in southern Syria, where a misunderstood message from Washington led Damascus to believe it had approval to deploy troops into the Druze-majority city of Sweida. That misjudgment triggered Israeli airstrikes and reignited tensions in a region long marked by sectarian fragility and foreign intervention.

According to eight sources familiar with the matter, including diplomats and regional officials, Syria interpreted public and private remarks from U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Thomas Barrack as a green light to restore central government control over Sweida. Barrack has consistently advocated for Syria to remain a unified state, rejecting the idea of autonomous regions. Syrian officials took this as tacit U.S. support for military action to reintegrate restive provinces, particularly those home to minority groups like the Druze and Kurds.

However, the U.S. Department of State quickly pushed back on that interpretation. A spokesperson stated that while the United States supports the territorial integrity of Syria and urges protection for all citizens, including minority populations, it did not endorse the deployment of Syrian troops to Sweida. Moreover, the State Department made clear that the United States had no role in coordinating or supporting the subsequent Israeli military response.

Israel launched targeted strikes on Syrian military assets and infrastructure following reports that Syrian forces committed abuses, including field executions, against Druze civilians. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu defended the strikes, citing the nation's long-standing policy to safeguard the Druze community and prevent militarization near its northern border. Washington, while emphasizing its alliance with Israel, stated it did not support the timing or scope of Israel's response.

A senior official in Syria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied U.S. messaging had influenced Damascus's decision, claiming the troop movement was a sovereign effort to restore order and prevent further bloodshed between local factions. Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa blamed "outlaw elements" for the civilian casualties and vowed to hold violators accountable.

U.S. officials played a key role in securing a ceasefire by midweek, aiming to defuse the confrontation before it spiraled further. Yet the situation has already exposed dangerous miscommunications. One Syrian military official said that when Damascus informed American contacts of its intention to move troops, Washington remained silent, leading Syrian leadership to believe there was no objection.

Joshua Landis, Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, noted that Syria may have overinterpreted Barack's comments. "Sharaa seems to have

taken the U.S. stance on national unity as a license to use military force against the Druze,” Landis said.

The fallout has been deadly. The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported at least 321 fatalities in Sweida, including children and medical workers. The violence, coupled with Syria’s reliance on irregular militias rather than a cohesive national army, has raised fears that the country is edging toward fragmentation.

Despite the U.S. not engaging militarily, its diplomatic role remains central. The episode underscores the critical importance of clear and deliberate messaging from Washington in regions where U.S. words are often interpreted as policy even when no official backing is given. As Syria’s leadership recalibrates and Israel remains alert to further threats near its border, the United States faces renewed pressure to manage its influence more carefully in the Middle East’s fragile balance.