

Syrian Violence Threatens Regional Stability

July 19, 2025

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The recent surge of violence in Syria, involving government forces, Bedouin tribes, the Druze minority, and neighbouring Israel, underscores the fragility of the country's post-Assad landscape. Seven months after the fall of the longtime authoritarian leader, Syria remains a tinderbox, with sectarian clashes threatening to unravel delicate regional alliances and destabilise the broader Middle East.

In the southern province of Sweida, deadly clashes erupted last Sunday between Druze militias and local Sunni Muslim Bedouin tribes. Government forces, led by interim President

Ahmed al-Sharaa, formerly affiliated with al-Qaida, intervened, ostensibly to restore order. However, their actions appeared aimed at seizing control from Druze factions, resulting in hundreds of deaths. Reports indicate government fighters executed Druze civilians and looted their homes, further eroding trust in Damascus. Israel, citing security concerns and its ties to the Druze community, responded with airstrikes on Syria's Defence Ministry headquarters and targets near the presidential palace, marking a bold escalation.

By Wednesday, a truce allowed Druze factions to maintain security in Sweida, with government forces withdrawing, though skirmishes between Druze and Bedouin groups persisted. Early Saturday, US envoy Tom Barrack announced a ceasefire between Israel and Syria, offering a reprieve. However, the violence highlights deeper issues. "The interim government's heavy-handed approach sends a clear message: control, not coexistence, is their priority," said Bassam Alahmad, executive director of Syrians for Truth and Justice, in a recent interview. He added, "This echoes Assad's failed tactics."

The unrest in Sweida is not an isolated incident. Months after Assad's ousting, sectarian violence on Syria's coast claimed hundreds of Alawite lives, leaving minorities like the Druze and Kurds wary of the new regime's commitment to inclusivity. Alahmad noted that minorities have been offered only "token representation" in the government, fuelling mistrust. Conversely, some fear that conceding autonomy to the Druze could embolden other groups, such as the Kurds, to demand similar control, risking Syria's fragmentation. "If Sweida gets special treatment, everyone else will want the same," warned Abdel Hakim al-Masri, a former official in Syria's northwest, in a recent statement.

The violence has also strained Syria's tentative engagement with Israel, encouraged by the Trump administration. Before the clashes, indirect talks hinted at potential normalisation. However, Israel's airstrikes have likely derailed these efforts. "Bombing Damascus while expecting dialogue is naive," said Colin Clarke, a senior research fellow at the Soufan Center, in a recent interview. He noted that al-Sharaa must navigate domestic pressures, much like Israeli leaders. Dareen Khalifa, a senior adviser at the International Crisis Group, argued that Israel could have achieved its aims through negotiation, not force.

The US, while distancing itself from Israel's strikes, continues to push for diplomacy. "We are engaging with both Israel and Syria to address this crisis and secure a lasting agreement," said Dorothy Shea, US ambassador to the United Nations, during a recent Security Council meeting. Yet, Syria's new leadership may now lean towards Turkey, a long-time rival of the Kurds, who control a semi-autonomous region in the northeast. Turkish

defence officials, speaking anonymously, have signalled readiness to bolster Syria's military capabilities, potentially shifting regional alignments.

The conflict also complicates efforts to integrate the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the national army. A March agreement to merge the SDF has stalled, with the Kurds increasingly distrustful after the government's actions in Sweida. "The regime looks weak and defeated," Khalifa observed, suggesting the Kurds might seek external support, possibly from Israel, though this risks provoking Turkey, which views the SDF as a terrorist group.

Syria's turmoil reveals a nation at a crossroads. The interim government's missteps, coupled with external interventions, threaten to fracture postwar alliances and deepen regional instability. Without genuine dialogue and inclusivity, Syria risks sliding back into chaos, with consequences that could ripple far beyond its borders.