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# **SECURITY TRANSFORMATIONS IN SOUTHERN SYRIA: AUTHORITY, ARMED NETWORKS, AND FOREIGN INTERVENTION**

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Cover photo: Israeli tanks are seen at Al Hamadyeh region near the Golan Heights in Quneitra, Syria on 16 January 2025.

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## Abstract

Southern Syria—comprising Quneitra, Daraa, and Sweida Governorates—has long been a volatile border region. The collapse of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024 initially inspired optimism and hopes for stability. Yet the region quickly entered a period of profound political and security transformation. Viewed in a broader historical context, many of the security challenges observed today in the southern region are not entirely new. They have deep roots in the wartime period and in the coercive and manipulative policies implemented by the Assad regime after its return to the region in July 2018, albeit in forms and patterns that have been reshaped, reconfigured, and reproduced after its collapse. Foreign intervention, too, is far from recent: regional and international actors have long influenced and exacerbated instability in the south.

Situated within this historical and geopolitical context and drawing on a mixed-methods approach—including in-depth interviews with a diverse range of local actors and two original datasets documenting armed groups and violent incidents—this research paper provides a nuanced, context-specific analysis of the complex security dynamics in Daraa, Quneitra, and Sweida Governorates. The paper pursues three main objectives. First, it offers a historical overview of the security environment under the Assad regime, from its return to the region in 2018 until its collapse in December 2024. Second, it examines the current security challenges across the three governorates during Syria’s political transition, with particular focus on the modalities and impacts of Israeli intervention, the underlying causes and patterns of violence, and the conditions facilitating persistent drug trafficking into Jordan. Third, this paper probes the incentives, constraints, and strategic preferences of relevant domestic, regional, and international actors in relation to two externally driven approaches to stabilization: a potential Russian redeployment to the south and the prospects for a U.S.-mediated Syrian-Israeli security arrangement.

Findings reveal that domestic and external factors shape security outcomes as much as state authority in Daraa, Quneitra, and Sweida. Israeli intervention reshapes the security environment, constrains state authority, and empowers local actors. Within this fragmented landscape, the resurgence of violence reflects an interplay of wartime legacies, unresolved rivalries, resilient armed networks, and widespread proliferation of weapons. State efforts to dismantle armed networks and assert control face significant challenges; in some instances, interventions are modest, generate grievances, or provoke local resistance. At the same time, militarized drug-trafficking networks exploit weak state presence, drug stockpiles, and adaptive smuggling methods to maintain operations across the border into Jordan. Foreign intervention continues to be a central factor, simultaneously generating instability while shaping any proposed approach to stabilization. U.S.-backed Israeli-Syrian talks and potential Russian redeployment each offer opportunities to reduce volatility, but both create dependencies on external mediation and influence the exercise of state authority. These overlapping dynamics produce a deeply unstable environment, where each factor reinforces the others, and persistent challenges for stabilization endure throughout the transitional period.

# Introduction

Southern Syria—corresponding to Quneitra, Daraa, and Sweida Governorates—has long been a volatile border region. Following the onset of the Syrian revolution in March 2011 and its subsequent militarization, the Assad regime sustained significant territorial losses in Daraa and Quneitra, where armed opposition groups captured large swathes of the two regions. In Sweida, the predominantly Druze population maintained a largely neutral stance that constrained the regime's ability to reassert full control and allowed a degree of autonomy to emerge, albeit occasionally disrupted by periods of heightened tensions with the regime. The return of the regime in July 2018, backed by Russia and Iran, ushered in a new phase in which the three governorates increasingly converged around a common set of features: tenuous regime control, foreign interventions—primarily by Iran, Russia, and Israel—, widespread availability of weapons and proliferation of armed groups, sporadic outbreaks of violence, expansion of criminal activities, and intermittent patterns of anti-regime civil resistance movements. In many respects, the border region reflected both a symptom and a microcosm of the country's broader fragmentation, with chaos, violence, and uncertainty defining daily life. By the final years of Assad's rule, southern Syria featured a patchwork of contested spaces, where coercion, resistance, negotiation, and semi-autonomous spheres coexisted.

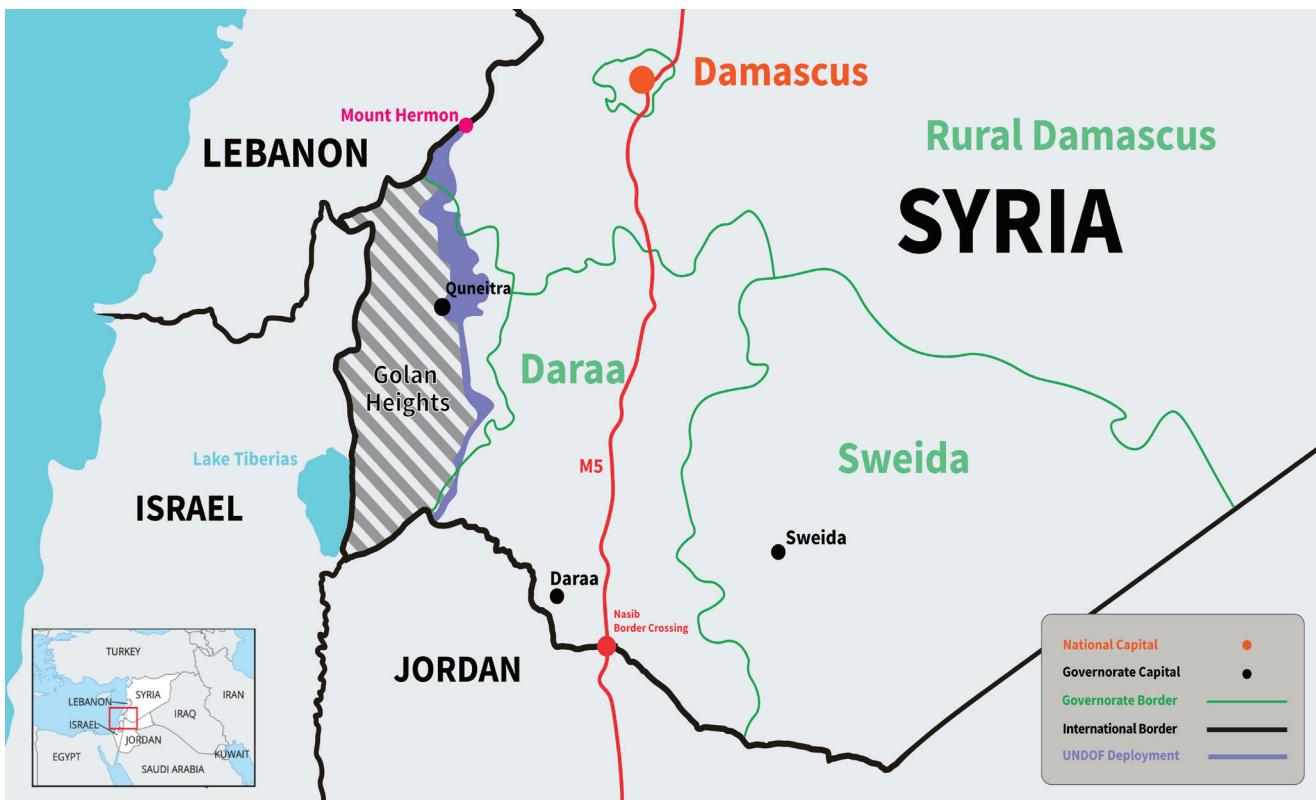
When Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched a decisive military offensive against the regime in late November 2024, many local armed groups across Daraa, Sweida, and Quneitra came together under the umbrella of the Southern Operations Room (SOR) and dismantled what remained of regime control in the region. The subsequent collapse of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024 marked a new chapter for southern Syria. While the end of authoritarian rule inspired hopes for stability, southern Syria soon confronted a range of political and security challenges.

In Quneitra, Israel's sustained military presence at multiple strategic positions, combined with regular ground incursions and patrols, produces uneven state control. In Daraa, uncollected weapons and resilient armed networks continue to fuel episodic violence, while Israel's limited forward presence and the threat of targeted air strikes to enforce demilitarization leave state authority neither fully established nor uncontested. In Sweida, attempts by the state to consolidate control triggered outright resistance by Druze armed groups and a calibrated deterrent intervention by Israel. The ensuing July 2025 clashes—marked by lethal confrontations, extrajudicial killings, and civilian displacement—left the state with only limited effective authority across much of the governorate. The weak state control in parts of the south enabled decentralized and militarized criminal networks, which briefly went dormant following the fall of the former regime, to resume smuggling drugs into Jordan. As such, the southern landscape demonstrates the fragmented and volatile environment that the new authorities must now contend with—one that has historical roots and requires nuanced, careful, context-specific analysis to understand and navigate.

When placed in a broader, historical context, many of the security challenges observed today in the south are not nascent *per se*, but have deep roots in the wartime period and in the coercive and manipulative policies adopted by the Assad regime after its return to the region, albeit in forms and patterns that have been reshaped and reconfigured since its collapse. Foreign intervention is likewise far from a recent phenomenon. Regional and international actors have long influenced and, at times, exacerbated instability in the south. This generates a structural dilemma insofar as external involvement—despite its destabilizing potential—continues to figure centrally in any proposed approach to stabilization in post-Assad southern Syria.

Situated within this historical and geopolitical

**Map 1: Southern Syria**



context, this research paper illustrates the security landscape that prevailed in the region from the Assad regime's return in 2018 through its eventual collapse in December 2024. Accounting for temporal and spatial variations across Quneitra, Daraa, and Sweida Governorates, the paper then seeks to examine current security challenges, with a particular focus on the modalities and impacts of Israeli intervention, the underlying causes and patterns of observed violence, and the conditions enabling persistent drug trafficking. The paradox of foreign intervention in the south constitutes another central dimension of the analysis. The research paper aims to probe the incentives, constraints, and strategic preferences of relevant domestic, regional, and international actors, particularly in relation to a potential Russian redeployment to the south and the prospects for a U.S.-mediated Syrian-Israeli security arrangement.

This research paper draws on extensive prior research conducted by the author on the micro- and regional-level security dynamics of wartime and postwar southern Syria. It employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence. The qualitative analysis draws on in-depth interviews conducted with a diverse range of local actors since 2018—including

civilians, activists, and leaders of armed groups. It also draws on prior research by specialists on the region, as well as coverage from prominent Syrian, regional, and international media outlets. The quantitative analysis is based on two original datasets compiled by the author: the first documents the structure, manpower, affiliations, and areas of operation of over 200 armed groups in Daraa Governorate between 2018 and 2024; the second dataset systematically tracks over 5,000 violent incidents in Daraa (from July 2018) and Quneitra (from December 2024), capturing the actors involved, when identifiable, as well as the spatio-temporal distribution, intensity, scale, and fatalities and injuries associated with each violent incident.

Findings reveal that domestic and external factors shape security outcomes as much as state authority in Daraa, Quneitra, and Sweida. Israeli intervention influences the security environment, constrains state authority, and empowers local actors. Within this fragmented landscape, the resurgence of violence reflects an interplay of wartime legacies, unresolved rivalries, resilient armed networks, and widespread proliferation of weapons. State efforts to dismantle armed networks and assert control face significant challenges; in some instances, interventions are

modest, generate grievances, or provoke local resistance. At the same time, militarized drug-trafficking networks exploit weak state presence, drug stockpiles, and adaptive smuggling methods to maintain operations across the border into Jordan. Foreign intervention continues to be a central factor, simultaneously generating instability while shaping any proposed approach to stabilization. U.S.-backed Israeli-Syrian talks and potential Russian redeployment each offer opportunities to reduce volatility, but both create dependencies on external actors and influence the exercise of state authority. These overlapping dynamics produce a deeply unstable environment, where each factor reinforces the others, and persistent challenges for stabilization endure throughout the transitional period.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section provides a historical overview of southern Syria's security landscape from 2018 to 2024. The second examines the security challenges that characterize the region since December 2024. The third analyzes the paradox of foreign intervention, focusing on U.S.-backed Syrian-Israeli security talks and the potential Russian redeployment. The conclusion synthesizes the findings and evaluates prospects for stabilization.

## 1. The Tenuous Return of the Assad Regime (2018–2024)

Since the return of the Assad regime to southern Syria in July 2018, the region has been characterized by chronic chaos and instability. Quneitra, Daraa, and Sweida have experienced a complex interplay of weak regime control, foreign interventions, the proliferation of local armed groups, and emergent criminal networks. This has produced a layered landscape in which authority, negotiation, and resistance coexisted.

### 1.1. Fragmented Control and Local Power Structures

In July 2018, the Assad regime, with support from Iran and Russia, recaptured parts of southern Syria lost to the opposition after 2011 through a combination of a military force and Russian-mediated negotiations.<sup>1</sup> In Quneitra, armed opposition groups were either coerced into reconciliation deals or forced to evacuate to Idlib in northwest Syria.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the territory east of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF)-monitored demilitarized zone was reclaimed entirely by the regime.<sup>3</sup> However, regime control remained contested. Small but active remnants of armed opposition continued to covertly operate in the region, carrying out sporadic attacks, undermining the regime's efforts to reaffirm its authority and consolidate its security control.<sup>4</sup>

A similar but more complex process unfolded in Daraa Governorate. When the regime was advancing militarily, recapturing territory, Russia intervened to broker negotiated settlements. This dialogue-based approach was forged by Russia in response to concerns voiced by both Israel and Jordan over the possible influx of Iranian and Iranian-backed forces into the border region. The parallel yet disjointed process of regime return has resulted in uneven regime control. In areas recaptured directly through military force, the regime was able to reassert its security control. By contrast, in areas where reconciliation agreements were reached, the regime's authority remained limited, as the accords restored state institutions but restricted the presence of military and security services.<sup>5</sup> This deliberate limitation, designed by Russia to address Israeli

1. Abdullah Al-Jabassini, From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations, European University Institute, January 2019, available at <https://tinyurl.com/23b63dr7>

2. Enab Baladi, "Quneitra Governorate Deal Enhances the 'Protection' of Israeli Borders", 25 July 2018, available at <https://tinyurl.com/5n97j6vf>

3. Interview, local activist, Quneitra, September 2018.

4. Syria TV, "Unknown Assailants Assassinate a Hezbollah-affiliated Group Leader in Quneitra", 10 July 2022, available at <https://tinyurl.com/43f38v34>; Enab Baladi, "Quneitra... Umm Batna Faces Two Options and Efforts to Find an Alternative", 29 May 2021, available at <https://tinyurl.com/544cwvbw>

5. Abdullah Al-Jabassini, From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria.

and Jordanian concerns, aimed to curb the regime's reach and, by extension, restrain Iran's influence in the border region. The uneven projection of regime control created space for new local power centers to emerge, contesting the regime through both violent and non-violent means.

In Tafas city in western Daraa and Daraa al-Balad area in Daraa city, two distinct bodies known as the Central Negotiation Committee (CNC) emerged. The CNC was composed of opposition civilian figures and leaders of armed factions who spontaneously assembled based on their local prominence and social capital to serve as the primary representative body of the area and its population vis-à-vis the regime and Russia.<sup>6</sup> In the eastern region of Daraa, a different power broker emerged and dominated the landscape. In October 2018, Russia established the Eighth Brigade in Busra al-Sham city and entrusted Ahmad al-Oda, a former leader of the Sunni Youth Forces armed opposition group, with its command. The Eighth Brigade enjoyed a wide margin of maneuver to manage local security affairs and conduct monitored, small-scale episodes of violence aimed at limiting the regime's authority.<sup>7</sup> Russian patronage, however, began to deteriorate, first in 2021 when the Eighth Brigade refused to fight alongside Iranian-backed groups against the Islamic State in the Badia, prompting Russia to transfer its registries and affiliation to the Military Security Intelligence,<sup>8</sup> and again in 2022, when it rejected a request by Russian officers to participate in the war in Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike Daraa and Quneitra Governorates, Sweida Governorate initially followed a distinct path. When the revolution erupted in 2011, the Druze population, which constitutes the majority in the region, maintained a largely neutral stance.<sup>10</sup> The result was

a deep fault line with the Assad regime, as thousands of Druze men refused military conscription.<sup>11</sup> From this environment emerged the Men of Dignity Movement in 2012, which was founded by Sheikh Wahid al-Balous mainly to protect draft evaders and defend the region from external threats.<sup>12</sup> Gradually, the regime's control over Sweida weakened, and, therefore, its approach toward the region shifted from containment and repression, settling after 2018 into a strategy of neglect.<sup>13</sup> Yet this neglect sowed the seeds of renewed civil mobilization against the regime. Protests, which had previously surfaced in 2022 and subsided,<sup>14</sup> re-emerged on a much larger scale in August 2023.<sup>15</sup> What began as protests over the government's decision to raise fuel prices and general economic discontent soon transformed into open political defiance,<sup>16</sup> with Druze and Bedouin protesters chanting anti-Assad slogans and demanding a political transition consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.<sup>17</sup>

## 1.2. Foreign Intervention

Following the recapture of southern Syria by the Assad regime, foreign intervention emerged as a defining feature contributing to instability in the region. In Quneitra, Iran sought to leverage its pre-existing networks, the region's rugged geography, and its proximity to both Lebanon and the Golan

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the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, European University Institute, 2019, available at <https://tinyurl.com/5aja382b>

11. Ibid.

12. Mazen Ezzi, "Al-Balous: The Story of a Public Assassination", al-Modon, 7 September 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/58mtfc7s>

13. Mazen Ezzi, "The Regime's Reach: Analyzing Damascus' Approach to Suwayda After 2011", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, December 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2z64uhnr>

14. Suwayda 24, "As-Suwayda: Protests End with 18 Injured and Two Dead", 12 April 2022, available at <https://bit.ly/4i13zTf>

15. Al-Modon, "Sweida: The Dignity Square is Overflowing with Protesters Against Assad", 22 August 2023, available at <https://tinyurl.com/39uxkerj>

16. Ashraq Al-Awsat, "Demonstrations and Civil Disobedience in Sweida in Protest Against High Prices", 18 August 2023, available at <https://tinyurl.com/562zwr2n>

17. Ashraq Al-Awsat, "The Circle of Protests in Sweida Widens With the Joining of Bedouin Tribes", 24 August 2023, available at <https://tinyurl.com/yc5jpvrz>; Syria Untold, "Sweida Protests: From Bread to Freedom", 29 September 2023, available at <https://tinyurl.com/yrh7jwbd>; Jesr Press, "The Protests in Sweida Continue, Emphasizing the Need to Implement UN Security Council Resolution 2254", 3 October 2023, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4pudnzb>

6. Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Leaders to Post-War Intermediaries: Evidence from Southern Syria", *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 35, no. 4 (February 2024): 656–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2024.2312626>

7. Abdullah Al-Jabassini, *The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria*, European University Institute & Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/nfp5n2tr>

8. Interview with a commander in the Eighth Brigade, March 2022.

9. Al-Modon, "The Eighth Brigade Refuses to Participate in the Ukrainian War, Despite Russian Intimidation," 25 March 2022, available at <https://tinyurl.com/msxy2tx6>; Interview with a local activist in Busra al-Sham city, March 2022.

10. Mahmoud Al-Lababidi, *The Druze of Sweida: The Return of*

Heights to establish a foothold.<sup>18</sup> The region's small population—and intercommunal tensions between Druze and Christian minorities and a Sunni majority opposed to the regime—further enabled Iranian proxy militias to establish a persistent influence.<sup>19</sup>

To limit Iranian overreach and reassure Israel, Russia installed monitoring posts staffed by military police.<sup>20</sup> Yet, Russia's ability to constrain Iran's return to Quneitra was limited. In response, Israel pursued a sustained campaign of deterrence, ranging from leaflets cautioning locals against collaboration with Iranian proxies to direct precision strikes aimed at neutralizing border threats.<sup>21</sup> For Iran, consolidating its presence near the Golan Heights remained a strategic necessity in anticipation of a potential confrontation with Israel. Indeed, following the 2023 Gaza war, Iranian proxies used the region to launch missile attacks into the Golan Heights.<sup>22</sup> To prevent further escalations, Russia, whose influence in the south had waned after its 2022 war in Ukraine, increased its military police presence to prevent escalation,<sup>23</sup> while Israel continued to carry out direct strikes,<sup>24</sup> conduct ground incursions,<sup>25</sup> and establish defensive fortifications.<sup>26</sup>

18. Shaam Network, "Netanyahu Acknowledges Israeli Strike Targeting Iranian Sites in Quneitra, Southern Syria", 13 February 2019, available at <https://tinyurl.com/yffty79>

19. Armenak Tokmajyan and Kheder Khaddour, "Why Iranian Entrenchment in Southern Syria Worries Neighboring Countries", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 March 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4kwueers>

20. Alaraby, "Russia Begins Deploying Its Military Police in the Golan Heights", 10 August 2018, available at <https://tinyurl.com/365733f6>

21. Enab Blaadi, "Israel Drops Leaflets in Quneitra Against Hezbollah and Officers of the 90th Brigade", 27 May 2021, available at <https://bit.ly/4oEEH66>; Sham News, "Israeli Airstrike Targets Hezbollah Terrorist Operative in Quneitra", 6 July 2022, available at <https://bit.ly/4pbph9h>

22. Horan Free League, "Iran Is Dragging Southern Syria into Destruction... Israel Warns, and the Regime Is Absent from the Scene", 14 December 2023, available at <https://bit.ly/3LGNOVt>

23. Enab Baladi, "Russia in Syria: Monitoring the South and Attacking the North", 28 October 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/eh7nudw9>

24. Anadolu Agency, "Israeli Army Says It Killed Hezbollah Fighter in Southwestern Syria", 10 October 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/yttk6fze>

25. Enab Baladi, "Israel Moves in Quneitra, Damascus Turns a Blind Eye", 28 October 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/eh7nudw9>

26. Reuters, "Israel's Demining Near Golan Signals Wider Front Against Hezbollah", 15 October 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/eh7nudw9>

In Daraa, Iran's presence and influence were constrained by a multitude of factors. The predominantly Sunni population expressed strong opposition to Iran and Hezbollah through protests and graffiti.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, pre-existing armed networks carried out persistent targeting and assassination of Iranian proxies and local collaborators, creating a sustained campaign of attrition that limited Iran's freedom of movement and weakened its networks.<sup>28</sup> The Russian influence, exercised through the Eighth Brigade, presented yet another barrier against expanding Iranian influence in the region. Faced with a hostile environment, Iranian proxies operated under the cover of the regime's military and security structure and sought to recruit local collaborators by offering incentives, such as salaries, a security badge, protection from regime arrest, and exemptions from conscription.<sup>29</sup>

The predominantly neutral stance of Sweida did not shield it from foreign intervention. When the revolution erupted in 2011, both regime loyalists and opposition supporters sought to influence local sentiment, a polarization reflected not only within the Druze clergy but also across the wider region.<sup>30</sup> Walid Junblat, leader of Lebanon's Druze, urged Sweida's Druze to side with the Arab Sunni opposition and confront the Assad regime, while the Druze of the Golan Heights, fearing the rise of Sunni Islamist factions, adopted an opposing posture.<sup>31</sup> Competing streams of financial and political support from Lebanese and Israeli Druze networks have further deepened divisions and complicated efforts to maintain a unified position within Sweida.<sup>32</sup>

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[com/y2tczkc3](https://tinyurl.com/y2tczkc3)

27. For example, in the months of November and December 2019, at least 15 protests took place in which protesters demanded the expulsion of Hezbollah and Iran from Daraa.

28. Abdullah Al-Jabassini, *Festerling Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria*, European University Institute, April 2020, available at <https://tinyurl.com/yc3myeu2>

29. Ibid.

30. Shaykhs Hikmat al-Hajari, Mohammed Jarbou, and Hammoud al-Hinnawi adopted positions ranging from pro-regime to cautiously flexible to neutral, respectively. See: Mahmoud Al-Lababidi, *The Druze of Sweida: The Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts*.

31. Mazen Ezzi, "Druze of Sweida: Embers of Confrontation", al-Jumhuriya, 22 July 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4bd8sfyh>

32. Mahmoud Al-Lababidi, *The Druze of Sweida: The Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts*.

Iran, via Hezbollah, pursued a security-focused strategy in Sweida, exploiting economic hardship to recruit proxies.<sup>33</sup> In other times, it sought to exacerbate tensions between Sweida and Daraa, as in the 2020 al-Qurayya clashes when Hezbollah sought to support Druze armed factions in their clashes with the Eighth Brigade.<sup>34</sup> In so doing, Iran aimed to prolong local clashes to create instability that justified expanded regime presence, while weakening the Eighth Brigade to secure a foothold in eastern Daraa and access Busra al-Sham, the main Shia hub in southern Syria—from which Shia residents had been barred by the Eighth Brigade.<sup>35</sup> Russia's approach, by contrast, was state-centric and aimed at consolidating the Assad regime's weak authority in Sweida. From 2016 onward, it focused mainly on resolving the status of draft evaders and incorporating local armed groups into the Fifth Corps of the Syrian military.<sup>36</sup>

### **1.3. Violence, Criminal Activity, and HTS Resurgence**

The interplay of territorial fragmentation, rival power centers, and foreign interventions created a violent environment in the south, where insecurity, uncertainty, and chaos defined daily life. In Quneitra, local armed groups—mainly remnants of armed opposition factions—retained leverage to contest regime authority.<sup>37</sup> Targeted assassinations of former opposition leaders,<sup>38</sup> regime military and security

33. Alarabiya, “Iran is Forming a New Sectarian Militia from the Druze of Syria”, 24 March 2015, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3rpnu3se>

34. Abdullah Al-Jabassini and Mazen Ezzi, *Tribal ‘Sulh’ and the Politics of Persuasion in Volatile Southern Syria*, European University Institute, March 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2ty2hr9m>

35. Abdullah Al-Jabassini, The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria.

36. al-Modon, “As-Suwayda: Russia seeks to incorporate the Cheetah Forces into the Fifth Corps”, 12 October 2018, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3rkhpzkb>; Alaraby, “A new Russian delegation is in Sweida to resolve the issue of those who have evaded military service”, 17 December 2020, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2yurb6ps>

37. Nabaa Media Foundation, “A Militant Group Gives the Regime Hours to Release a Young Man in Jabata Al-Khashab, Quneitra”, 18 May 2020, available at <https://tinyurl.com/yfcufw7d>

38. Enab Baladi, “Quneitra: First Assassination of a Former Leader in the Free Army”, 19 August 2020, available at <https://tinyurl.com/m5t76yjb>

personnel,<sup>39</sup> and militia members have occurred.<sup>40</sup> By contrast, assassinations, kidnappings, roadside attacks, and drive-by shootings were more prevalent in Daraa. The range of victims was extensive, leaving no actor or group untouched. Ordinary civilians, collaborators with Iran, members of the regime's security and military apparatus, Ba'ath Party officials, CNC members, Eighth Brigade personnel, former opposition leaders, and combatants have found themselves in the crosshairs of assailants. Between July 2018 and early December 2024, at least 2,500 people were killed,<sup>41</sup> making Daraa one of Syria's most volatile and insecure governorates. In most cases, the anonymity of assailants blurred the lines between political, criminal, and personal motivations, making it difficult to discern the true drivers of many violent incidents.<sup>42</sup> The security situation was further undermined by multiple, often interconnected drivers. Key among them were the regime's small-scale, and often Iran-backed, military operations to dismantle vital networks of resistance;<sup>43</sup> the proliferation of local armed groups and inter-group rivalries; tribal clashes; and vigilante operations targeting drug trafficking and Islamic State sleeper cells.<sup>44</sup>

In Sweida, loyalist militias and criminal gangs had emerged after 2011, taking advantage of the instability to engage in smuggling operations into opposition-held areas of Daraa.<sup>45</sup> Following the Assad regime's return to southern Syria, many of

39. Al-Modon, “Quneitra: An Officer Killed and Others Injured in a Bomb Blast”, 14 April 2023, available at <https://tinyurl.com/mrj7t625>; Enab Baladi, “Two Regime Soldiers Were Killed in Quneitra by Unknown Assailants”, 23 December 2020, available at <https://tinyurl.com/32jm5cpv>

40. Enab Baladi, “A Member of the National Defense Forces was Killed in an Attack in Quneitra”, 11 January 2021, available at <https://tinyurl.com/yrezt2xz>

41. Private dataset on violence in Daraa Governorate constructed by the author since July 2018.

42. Abdullah Al-Jabassini, *Understanding Violence in Postwar Southern Syria*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024, available at <https://bit.ly/3UA1Gm3>

43. Abdullah Al-Jabassini, *Dismantling Networks of Resistance and the Reconfiguration of Order in Southern Syria*, European University Institute, October 2021, available at <https://bit.ly/3BX1SzH>

44. Abdullah Al-Jabassini, *Understanding Violence in Postwar Southern Syria*.

45. Nizar Ahmad, “Kidnapping for Ransom: Gangs Threaten Civil Peace in Sweida”, European University Institute, March 2022, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3cz3v6xb>; Mahmoud Al-Lababidi, *The Druze of Sweida: The Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts*.

these groups leveraged ties to the regime's security branches to expand their criminal activities, including kidnapping for ransom and drug trade.<sup>46</sup> Abductions often became mutual or quid pro quo, spilling across administrative boundaries, fueling feuds between armed groups from Daraa and Sweida, and pushing the south to the brink of intercommunity violence.<sup>47</sup> Over time, security fragmentation, abundance of weapons, and proliferation of armed groups and gangs became defining features of Sweida. The deteriorating security situation prompted local armed factions to assume a more assertive role in confronting criminal actors.<sup>48</sup>

The chaos and proliferation of armed groups created fertile ground for a thriving illicit economy. Daraa and Sweida, in particular, emerged as key transit corridors for narcotics smuggling into Jordan and onward to the Gulf. The Assad regime, constrained by weak control, outsourced smuggling operations to local actors, including Bedouin smuggling cells with cross-border tribal and family ties, as well as groups linked to Hezbollah, the Fourth Division of the Syrian army, and Military Security Intelligence.<sup>49</sup> For Jordan, drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, and sporadic cross-border infiltration posed a growing security threat. Although Amman renewed ties with the Assad regime in 2021—culminating in the reopening of the Nasib-Jaber border crossing and modest improvements in bilateral trade—these measures did little to alleviate its security concerns.<sup>50</sup> In response, Jordan adopted a more

46. Joseph Daher, Nizar Ahmad, and Salwan Taha, *Smuggling between Syria and Lebanon, and from Syria to Jordan: The Evolution and Delegation of a Practice*, European University Institute, April 2022, available at <https://tinyurl.com/bdzecybx>

47. Abdullah Al-Jabassini and Mazen Ezzi, *Tribal 'Sulh' and the Politics of Persuasion in Volatile Southern Syria*.

48. Tamam Saymoua, "Raji Falhout and His End: Elements that Shaped the Final Scene", al-Jumhuriya, 8 August 2022, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3ywfwm5v>; Abdullah Al-Jabassini and Mazen Ezzi, *Tribal 'Sulh' and the Politics of Persuasion in Volatile Southern Syria*.

49. Joseph Daher, Nizar Ahmad, and Salwan Taha, *Smuggling between Syria and Lebanon, and from Syria to Jordan*".

50. Reuters, "Arabs Ease Assad's Isolation as U.S. Looks Elsewhere", 11 October 2021, available at <https://tinyurl.com/5axcfb9x>; Reuters, "Jordan fully Reopens Border Crossing with Syria, Seeks Trade Boost", 29 September 2021, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3t28nu28>; Armenak Tokmajyan, "Jordan's Experiences Highlight the Limitations of Renewed Ties With Syria", Carnegie Endowment, 11 January 2023, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4sewkwyy>

assertive posture, collaborating with local factions in southern Syria, deploying military forces along its northern frontier, and conducting targeted cross-border operations to counter illicit trafficking and infiltration.<sup>51</sup>

In this climate of contested control, HTS, whose substantial contingent of leaders and fighters was displaced to Idlib in the wake of the regime's 2018 return, sought to reassert influence in the south, maintaining a covert presence in Quneitra and Daraa while establishing indirect networks in Sweida. In Quneitra, many HTS members quietly made their way back to the region where they reactivated dormant networks and carried out limited, targeted actions against regime elements.<sup>52</sup>

Daraa also witnessed renewed activity by HTS, as small numbers of fighters—some who had remained in their towns and others who returned from Idlib—reorganized into discreet, local cells. These groups recruited fighters and operated covertly, carrying out low-profile attacks that undermined the regime's authority without attracting widespread attention.<sup>53</sup> Aware of this re-emergence, the Eighth Brigade had reportedly coordinated with HTS members, facilitating their movement, providing protection, and helping them relocate ahead of regime security raids.<sup>54</sup> Unlike in Quneitra and Daraa, where its members had a low-profile and on-the-ground presence, HTS opted for an entirely indirect approach in Sweida. While it had no presence, HTS reportedly established links to local actors through intermediaries and security operatives since mid-2024, mainly involving Layth al-Bal'ous, the leader of the Forces of Sheikh al-Karama, a small armed group that formed in 2018.<sup>55</sup>

By the time HTS launched its offensive against the Assad regime in late November 2024, southern

<https://tinyurl.com/4sewkwyy>

51. Shaam News, "Jordan's Most-Wanted Individual: Who is 'Mar' al-Ramthan,' the Man Targeted by Jordanian Airstrikes in Southern Syria?", 8 May 2023, available at <https://tinyurl.com/yu9fmcc2>

52. Interview with a local activist in Quneitra, 2021; Interview with former member of the armed opposition in Daraa, 2021.

53. Interview, a local activist in Daraa, 2022-2023; Interviews with former members of the armed opposition in Daraa, 2022-2023.

54. Walid Nawfal, "Resurrection": HTS Returns to Southern Syria", Syria Direct, 27 May 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/9fcwey58>

55. Mazen Ezzi, "The Hidden Pathways to Breach Suwayda", Daraj, 12 August 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/mrvvnmed>

Syria had long ceased to be a stable and orderly region. Its instability both stemmed from and fueled deep fragmentation, as local power brokers, external patrons, and illicit networks operated alongside a state veneer and remnants of its official structures. Southern Syria, in short, had become both a symptom and a microcosm of the country's fragmentation, illustrating how coercion, resistance, and negotiation coexisted in a contested space and foreshadowing the complex security challenges that were bound to resurface in the aftermath of regime change.

## 2. Navigating Present Security Challenges

In late November 2024, HTS launched a rapid offensive against the Assad regime, initiating a decisive shift in the balance of power across southern Syria. By 6 December, local armed groups from Daraa, Sweida, and Quneitra established the Southern Operations Room (SOR),<sup>56</sup> led primarily by the Eighth Brigade. This command structure facilitated operations across the southern region while coordinating with HTS forces advancing from the north, effectively pressuring the regime on multiple fronts and straining its capacity to retain control over contested territories.

In Daraa, SOR factions conducted a series of targeted attacks on regime checkpoints and military installations, with a coordinated campaign to encourage regime conscripts to defect. In numerous instances, regime personnel surrendered or withdrew without resistance; in others, they engaged in combat but were overpowered. On 6 December, the SOR seized the Nasib-Jaber border crossing with Jordan,<sup>57</sup> and the following day, it declared Daraa liberated from regime control.<sup>58</sup> In Quneitra, as

local factions compelled regime forces to evacuate the region, Russia withdrew its military police personnel from the area to the Hmeimim Airbase in Lattakia Governorate.<sup>59</sup> Simultaneously, Druze and Bedouin armed factions in Sweida demanded that regime officials and security forces vacate their positions,<sup>60</sup> then formed a joint operations room to coordinate the takeover of checkpoints and police stations after their full withdrawal.<sup>61</sup> As the SOR factions advanced toward the southern outskirts of Damascus, they announced the formation of the "Conquest of Damascus" Operations Room in preparation to enter the capital.<sup>62</sup> On 8 December 2024, the Assad regime collapsed, and SOR forces entered Damascus, later retreating south to allow HTS-led forces advancing from the north to assume control.

The collapse of the Assad regime marked a new chapter for southern Syria. The end of authoritarian control inspired hopes for stability. However, the region quickly entered a period of profound political and security transformation. The current landscape remains fluid and volatile, shaped by multiple local and external actors with competing agendas. This section examines the main security challenges prevailing in the south and the variation in their causes, patterns, and impacts across Daraa, Sweida, and Quneitra. These include modalities of Israeli intervention, violence and resilient armed networks, and resumption of drug trafficking. While not exhaustive and often interconnected, these challenges constitute principal drivers of systemic instability during Syria's political transition, posing significant obstacles to the state's efforts to consolidate authority and restore order in the south.

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56. Shaam Network, "Daraa Revolutionaries Announce the Formation of the Southern Operations Room Amid Attacks Targeting Assad's Headquarters", 6 December 2024, available at <http://bit.ly/4pccPq6>

57. Sham News Network, "After Daraa's revolutionaries Seized Control of the Nasib Border Crossing, Jordan Closed the Jaber Crossing with Syria", 6 December 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/y8sxymnr>

58. Enab Baladi, "The Syrian opposition controls the entire city of Daraa: the south is completely free of regime presence", 7 December 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/mfz4hayv>

59. Interview with a local activist in Quneitra, December 2024.

60. Enab Baladi, "Dignity Forces' Give the Regime a Deadline to Evacuate its Positions in Sweida", 6 December 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/nhzn7zz8>

61. Alaraby, "The Syrian opposition controls the entire city of Daraa: the south is completely free of regime presence", 7 December 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/mfz4hayv>

62. Syrian Memory, "Statement No.1 'Damascus Conquest Operations Room'", 6 December 2024, available on <https://tinyurl.com/y6pr252j>

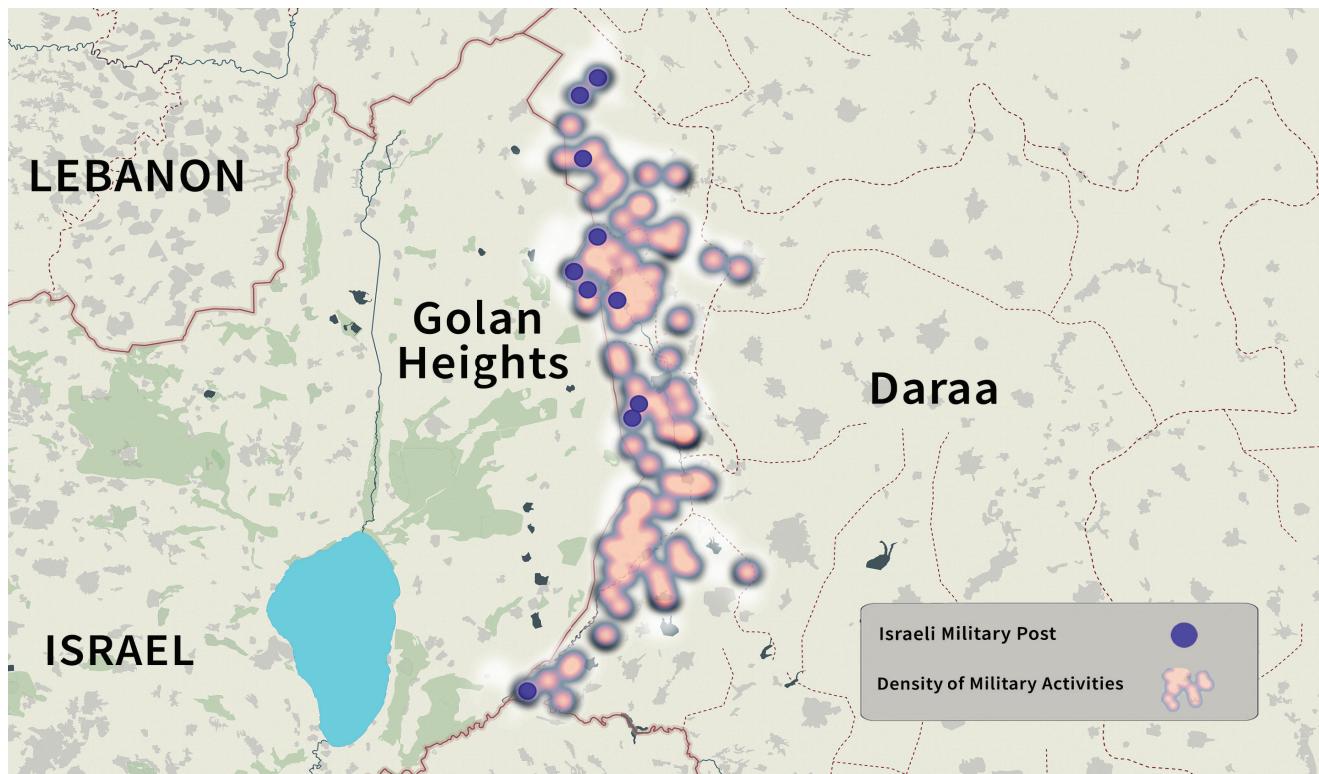
56. Shaam Network, "Daraa Revolutionaries Announce the Formation of the Southern Operations Room Amid Attacks Targeting Assad's Headquarters", 6 December 2024, available at <http://bit.ly/4pccPq6>

57. Sham News Network, "After Daraa's revolutionaries Seized Control of the Nasib Border Crossing, Jordan Closed the Jaber Crossing with Syria", 6 December 2024, available at <https://tinyurl.com/y8sxymnr>

58. Enab Baladi, "The Opposition Announces its Control Over

**Map 2: Israeli Military Posts and Activities in Syria's Southwest, 8 December 2024 – 15 November 2025**

Source: Author's dataset



## 2.1. Sustained Israeli Intervention

Since December 2024, Israel's intervention has been shaping the security environment in southern Syria. Across Quneitra, Daraa, and Sweida, Israel employed a combination of tactics, including a continuous occupation and ground incursions, limited forward deployments, and precision air strikes, or the threat thereof. Although the form, intensity, and scale of intervention differ across the three governorates, the broader effect is consistent: Israel dominates and influences the security landscape, constrains state authority, and maintains a strategic foothold in the south.

In Quneitra, Israeli intervention is the most direct, sustained, and operationally comprehensive. Soon after the Assad regime's collapse, Israeli forces violated the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement by seizing control of the UNDOF-monitored demilitarized zone between the Golan Heights and Syrian-controlled Quneitra, an area stretching over 75 km in length and ranging from 0.5 to 10 km in

width.<sup>63</sup> From its military posts in Quneitra, Israeli forces conduct regular patrols and incursions up to 20 km southwest, projecting military influence and operational reach deep into Syrian territory. According to data collected by the author, Israeli military forces conducted at least 294 ground incursions into Quneitra in the period between 8 December 2024 and mid-November 2025 (Map. 2).

These incursions encompassed a broad spectrum of operations, including the establishment of temporary checkpoints to search and interrogate vehicles and passersby, searching for and seizing weapons, demolition of military installations, bulldozing, excavation, and deforestation, scorching of agricultural lands, issuance of evacuation orders and demolition of houses, raids and searches of homes, and arrests of local residents.<sup>64</sup> Some

63. Sky News Arabia, "Israel establishes 9 military bases and outposts in Syria", 11 September 2025, available on <https://tinyurl.com/49eddf8>; The Israeli military advanced further and occupied the Syrian side of Mount Hermon, a key strategic position overlooking Damascus and the border with Lebanon. See: Reuters, "Defence minister orders Israeli troops to prepare to spend winter on Mount Hermon", 15 December 2024, available on <https://tinyurl.com/4zjnktjt>

64. Interviews with civilians in Quneitra, October and November

operations incorporated soft-power measures to sway the local population, such as selective humanitarian engagement, although reported instances of civilian rejection and resistance highlight the limits of such tactics.<sup>65</sup>

By contrast, in Daraa, Israel combines a limited on-the-ground presence with targeted air strikes, or the threat thereof. Between 8 December 2024 and 15 November 2025, Israel has carried out at least 55 air strikes and shelling operations across the governorate, primarily targeting military installations and weapons stockpiles. Ground presence is concentrated in the far southwest near the Golan Heights, where Israel established a forward site near Ma'raya village in the al-Yarmouk Basin, known as al-Jazira barrack.<sup>66</sup> This military post serves as both a surveillance and operational platform, consolidating strategic presence along the Golan frontier. From this military post, Israeli forces conducted at least 70 ground incursions into localities in the al-Yarmouk during the same period. These incursions were often accompanied by house raids, weapons searches, arrests, and, in some instances, retaliatory shelling in response to local resistance.<sup>67</sup>

In Sweida, Israeli intervention represents a third, high-impact model. Unlike Quneitra, where sustained occupation enables continuous operational control, or Daraa, where limited presence is combined with occasional air strikes, in Sweida, Israel relies almost entirely on deterrent signaling and the threat of force directed at Syrian security and military forces, under the declared pretext of protecting the Druze community.<sup>68</sup> In July 2025, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior's General

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2025.

65. Al-Modon, "The Occupation Forces Raid the Quneitra Countryside; Residents Reject Israeli Aid", 12 March 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/56u5b8v4>; Syria TV, "Residents of Sayda in Quneitra Expel an Israeli Patrol... and the Occupation Responds with Gunfire", 1 November 2011, available at <https://tinyurl.com/eny2a4uu>

66. Daraa 24, "Israel Continues to Reinforce its Presence in the Al-Jazira Barrack West of Daraa", 25 January 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4kcd26x2>

67. Daraa 24, "Developments in the Israeli Bombing of the Town of Koya in the Western Daraa Countryside", 25 March 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4rbvbx8r>

68. The Guardian, "Israel Says Airstrikes in Syria Are 'Message' to Protect Druze Minority", 3 May 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/54bpb63h>

Security Service (GSS) deployed forces and directly clashed with Druze armed factions, despite earlier statements that their deployment aimed to quell fighting between Druze and Bedouin fighters.<sup>69</sup> In response, Israel carried out air strikes on military and GSS forces in Sweida, as well as on the General Staff headquarters in Damascus, prompting the authorities to withdraw their troops.<sup>70</sup>

The implications of Israeli intervention for state authority in the south are nowhere more visible than in Quneitra, where state control is uneven. In interior localities, such as al-Salam city (formerly al-Ba'ath), the state maintains a presence and its institutions exercise near-absolute authority. An exception within the interior is the Druze town of Hadar, where state control is absent and local affairs are managed by community actors.<sup>71</sup> The situation changes dramatically closer to the Golan Heights, where Israel maintains a continuous presence and conducts routine patrols that severely restrict the reach of state authority. This uneven distribution of authority produces a fragmented landscape, where state presence is strong in some areas but weak or non-existent in others, leaving residents caught between foreign actors and local power struggles.

In Daraa, the impact on state authority is less pronounced than in Quneitra but remains notable. The state's authority and security posture in the region exists but is neither uncontested nor fully projectable. The GSS maintains a presence on the roads connecting localities and major urban centers, which, for many locals, gives the impression of strong security control.<sup>72</sup> Yet this control becomes notably shallower in the al-Yarmouk Basin. The Israeli military post and routine patrols in the far southwest corner of Daraa have effectively carved out a zone where the GSS's presence and operational freedom are constrained.<sup>73</sup> Simultaneously, the threat and occasional execution of Israeli air strikes,

69. Alikhbariah, "Ministry of Defence to Alikhbariah: Army Suffered Martyrs and Wounded While Trying to Break Up Clashes in Sweida", 14 July 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/frxedmr4>

70. Al Jazeera, "Israeli Airstrikes on Sweida and Damascus Call for Not Supporting Any Separatist Movement", 14 July 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4jwu24cj>; Reuters, "Israel Launches Heavy Airstrikes in Damascus, Vowing to Protect Druze", 17 July 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/m8hs7b8t>

71. Interview with a local activist in Quneitra, November 2025.

72. Series of interviews with civilians in Daraa, October-November 2025.

73. Interview with a civilian in al-Yarmouk Basin, November 2025.

aimed at enforcing its demand for a demilitarized southern frontier,<sup>74</sup> constrain the state's ability to deploy heavy weaponry and hinder the restructuring and armament of the emerging 40th Division, the unit assigned to Daraa within the new military institution.

In Sweida, the persistent threat of further Israeli intervention has eroded state authority. State institutions, including the Ministries of Defense and Interior, retain no effective foothold in large parts of the governorate. Consequently, governance and security affairs are assumed by emergent local actors, notably the Supreme Legal Committee,<sup>75</sup> the *de facto* administrative authority, and the National Guards,<sup>76</sup> a new military structure composed of local factions. The posture of Israel as a deterrent protector of the Druze granted local stakeholders a greater bargaining leverage. The outright rejection by the Supreme Legal Committee of the September 2025 roadmap—reached by Syria, Jordan, and the U.S. to resolve the crisis in Sweida—<sup>77</sup> demonstrates how external intervention can transform local actors into quasi-sovereign entities capable of vetoing national and international initiatives. This external security umbrella, however, remains inherently fragile. Any shift in Israel's strategic orientation could remove the leverage that local actors gained through foreign backing, turning short-term security advantages into long-term vulnerability.

## 2.2. Violence and the Limits of Demobilization

Wartime legacies, related militarization, resilience of armed networks, weapon proliferation, and Israeli military intervention are but some of the main factors that produce often interconnected patterns of violence in southern Syria. A comparative examination of the landscape in Quneitra, Daraa, and Sweida shows that violence in the region cannot be understood through a generalized, region-wide lens. Each governorate presents a distinct constellation of actors and factors that interact to produce manifestations of violence varying in scale, intensity, and impact. This variation reflects the uneven ways in which the state seeks to regain monopoly on violence across the south, as well as the shortcomings of its approaches in certain cases, setting the stage for the governorate-level differences explored below.

Quneitra presents an exceptional case in which the state monopoly on the use of violence is reduced. In areas adjacent to the Golan Heights, its capacity to monopolize the use of violence is severely constrained by the sustained Israeli military presence, which dominates the security landscape and dictates the use of violence. However, moving farther from the borderline into the interior of Quneitra, the state monopoly on the use of violence and its ability to enforce order becomes more apparent, with the notable exception of the Druze town of Hadar, as discussed earlier. The footprint of the GSS mirrors this gradient: it is extensive in some interior localities, limited to checkpoints between others, and absent in localities along the Golan Heights border.<sup>78</sup> Notably, the Ministry of Defense plays virtually no operational role in the entire region; it has no meaningful administrative presence and has withdrawn all heavy weaponry from Quneitra, mainly to avoid potential confrontation with Israeli forces.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, the sustained Israeli military presence and activities have eliminated space for the emergence or operation of local armed factions. Although there are reports of attempts by remnants of the Assad regime and Iran-allied groups to reorganize,<sup>80</sup> evidence of sustained

74. BBC News, “Israel Demands Complete Demilitarisation of Southern Syria”, 14 November 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2facjfx4>

75. Alaraby, “The “Legal Committee” in Sweida Is Framing the ‘Self-Administration’ by Appointing Military and Civilian Leaders”, 7 August 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2s63eeb8>

76. Jesr Press, “Announcement of the formation of the ‘National Guard’ in Sweida to Unify Local Factions”, 23 August 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4tupx7hd>

77. Syrian Arab News Agency, “Full Roadmap Script: Syria, U.S., Jordan Outline Sweida Deal to End Conflict”, 16 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2dyamxb8>; Sky News Arabia, “As-Suwayda: The Legal Committee Rejects the Government’s Roadmap”, 17 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3ukvh7mf>

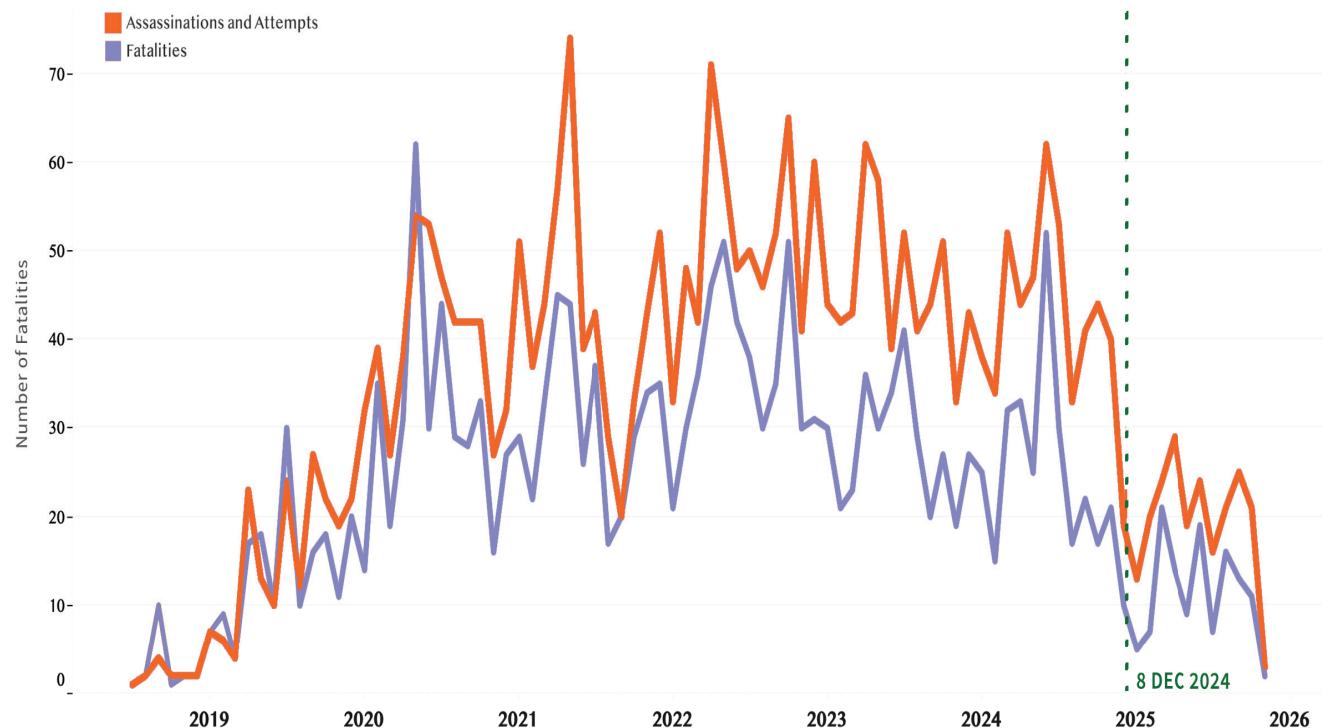
78. Interviews with civilians in Quneitra, November 2025.

79. Interview with a local activist in Quneitra, November 2025.

80. Noon Post, “‘Uli al-Ba’s’: A New Iranian Arm in Southern Syria”, 21 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/229py6en>

**Figure 1: Violence in Daraa Governorate , July 2018 – 15 November 2025**

Source: Author's dataset



operational activity remains scarce, casting doubt on the existence of such groups beyond online claims.<sup>81</sup> The sustained Israeli military presence and surveillance, combined with a lack of local support to facilitate covert operations,<sup>82</sup> render the emergence and operations of such groups highly challenging and resource-intensive.

Daraa presents a different configuration in which the state formally preserves the monopoly on violence, yet this control is periodically undermined. Although violence has remarkably declined since the fall of the Assad regime, assassinations, kidnappings, and localized armed confrontations have occurred sporadically (see Figure 1). According to data collected by the author, at least 120 individuals, including ordinary civilians, ex-opposition fighters, and members of the GSS and the 40th Division, have been assassinated between December 2024 and mid-November 2025. The unknown identity of the assailants in the majority of assassination events complicates efforts to determine whether an incident was driven by political objectives, personal grievances, or criminal intent.

Despite multiple GSS campaigns to collect

weapons,<sup>83</sup> the widespread proliferation and easy accessibility of firearms not only enable targeted killings but also increase the lethal risk of weapon misuse and incidents of indiscriminate gunfire. At least 75 such incidents were recorded during the same period, claiming nearly 50 lives, including those of women and children. The normalization of firearms in everyday life contributes to the escalation of interpersonal and community disputes into lethal encounters. In at least 35 cases, quarrels that began as interpersonal disputes escalated into armed brawls with fatal consequences, while 49 localized clashes—including tribal confrontations and skirmishes sometimes involving the GSS—resulted in more than 50 deaths.

The resilience of armed networks represents a significant driver of violence in a region that witnessed a wide diffusion of armed groups, with at least 200 such groups emerging and operating between 2018 and 2024. Although the fate of most armed groups remains unclear—whether they were integrated, demobilized, or returned to civilian life—available evidence suggests that the state pursued a dual strategy in Daraa: selective integration, on one hand, and coercive dismantling, on the other. Yet

81. Sary Mumayiz and Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Uli al-Baas", 21 July 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/cm6etdb>

82. Interview with a local activist in Quneitra, November 2025.

83. North Press Agency, "Public Security Launches Campaign to Collect Ammunition and Weapons in Daraa", 19 April 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/y236rjt>

both approaches have exhibited shortcomings and, at times, enabled the perpetuation of violence.

At times, state structures absorbed members of pre-existing armed groups that had voluntarily disbanded. Yet even after integration, many retained ties to their former networks, occasionally exploiting their new positions within state institutions to settle old scores and rivalries through violence. This dynamic was evident in Tafas in June 2025, when unresolved vendettas resurfaced and escalated into clashes, with members of formerly dissolved armed factions, now integrated into the GSS, fighting on opposing sides.<sup>84</sup>

In other instances, the state pursued direct, suppressive measures to dismantle armed networks, as exemplified by the local faction led by Muhsen al-Haymad in al-Sanamayn city.<sup>85</sup> In March 2025, GSS and military forces launched an offensive against the group, resulting in the death or arrest of several members, although al-Haymad and many of his followers managed to evade capture.<sup>86</sup> While the operation temporarily disrupted the faction, its members later re-emerged and were involved in further violence. This was illustrated by the assassination of Maher al-Labbad, a leader of another armed group in al-Sanamayn, for which the al-Haymad faction was accused, subsequently sparking renewed clashes.<sup>87</sup>

In other cases, the state applied direct pressure on prominent armed actors—particularly those who saw themselves as collaborators with the state but were perceived as competitors, exemplified by the Eighth Brigade, which formally dissolved itself in April 2025.<sup>88</sup>

84. Syria Direct, “Controversial Security Personnel in Daraa Through the ‘Behind the Lines’ Gate”, 30 June 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3w3nah8u>

85. Muhsen al-Haymad had led an armed group which maintained ties with the former regime’s Military Security Intelligence and connections to the Islamic State. See: Horan Free League, “Under the Regime’s Patronage, Southern Syria is a Hotbed for Assassination and Drug Militias”, 5 November 2023, available at <https://tinyurl.com/38sb4u26>

86. Horan Free League, “The Security Operation in al-Sanamayn Ended with the Killing and Arrest of Dozens of Members of Al-Haymad Group”, 6 March 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/mt7vu4y3>

87. Alaraby, “Four Killed in Daraa as a Result of Clashes that Erupted Following the Assassination of a Former Leader”, 2 June 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4v9tp8cx>

88. Sham News Network, “The Eighth Brigade Announces Its Dissolution”, 13 April 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/25crch26>

This fostered a perception that opposition figures who were displaced to Idlib in 2018 and returned after the regime’s collapse were entrusted with senior positions in local security structures, while those who remained and continued to challenge the regime’s authority were marginalized.<sup>89</sup> While such patterns of perceived exclusion and inclusion could exacerbate polarization and create conditions conducive to localized outbreaks of violence, there is, as yet, no definitive evidence that this sense of marginalization has directly contributed to recent incidents of violence.

Unlike Daraa, where violence is often localized and episodic, Sweida exhibits a distinct pattern marked by sudden, large-scale confrontations and heavy casualties. The primary driver of this violence has been the state’s attempts to assert control and enforce disarmament. The resistance to such demands, led by Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajri,<sup>90</sup> intensified after two major events: sectarian violence in the coastal region in March 2025 and intercommunal clashes in late April across northern and western Sweida.<sup>91</sup> These events reinforced deep mistrust toward the new authorities and strengthened the perception that local armed groups were essential for community protection and survival. Any attempt at disarmament of Druze factions was widely portrayed as a direct threat to the community’s survival.<sup>92</sup>

Subsequent state maneuvers to reassert control—first through an agreement in May 2025 to activate local security forces under state supervision, and later through deployments of military, GSS, and tribal forces in July 2025—triggered resistance and hostilities.<sup>93</sup> Violence during this period included

89. Walid Nawfal, “Daraa Security Forces Plagued by Vendettas, Abuse and Controversial Recruits”, Syria Direct, 2 July 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/hx4zewkx>

90. Sky News, “Sheikh al-Hajri: It Is Far Too Early to Talk About Surrendering Weapons in Syria”, 1 January 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/86bnjrue>

91. Nawar Jabbour, “Massacres in the Syrian Coast: Perpetrators and Victims”, 17 March 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2b6h6j2t>; Suwayda 24, “Documentation of 164 Deaths in April 2025”, 31 May 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/yj7fwxaz>

92. Al-Hadath, “‘Men of Dignity’ in Suwayda: Handing Over Weapons to the State Now Is Suicide”, 5 May 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/bddz5zbp>

93. Enab Baladi, “Suwayda Governor: The Agreement Remains in Force with ‘Minor Amendments’”, 3 May 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2yu77pf4>; Mazen Ezzi, “The Tribes’ Raid”:

widespread confrontations, checkpoint skirmishes, and extrajudicial killings. Israeli intervention forced the withdrawal of military and security forces across much of the region, effectively thwarting the state's efforts to impose a monopoly on the use of violence. The July 2025 hostilities claimed over 1,000 lives, including victims of house-to-house executions, and displaced approximately 150,000 Druze and 70,000 Bedouins.<sup>94</sup> Even after a ceasefire that month, sporadic clashes, drone strikes, and limited shelling along contested frontlines continue to occur.<sup>95</sup>

## 2.3. Resilient Drug-Trafficking Networks

Following the fall of the Assad regime, the new authorities swiftly declared war on Captagon, launching high-profile raids that dismantled the country's major production facilities.<sup>96</sup> In southern Syria, the Ministry of Interior's GSS and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) implemented security measures to thwart smuggling operations, particularly through the Nasib border crossing with Jordan.<sup>97</sup> This was complemented by targeted security operations across Daraa, which resulted in the arrests of drug smugglers and substantial seizures.<sup>98</sup> These efforts extended to Quneitra, where GSS units have monitored and captured individuals

involved in the drug trade.<sup>99</sup> These operations represent a departure from previous regime-enabled patterns and signal the new authorities' commitment to dismantling the structures and networks that have positioned Syria as a hub for drug production and regional trafficking.

Despite these efforts, smuggling operations from southern Syria to Jordan, which entered a brief period of dormancy following the fall of the former regime, have resumed and increasingly rely on unconventional methods to evade interdiction. The use of drones, thermal balloons, and aerial projectiles indicates that traffickers are investing more resources per shipment to increase the likelihood of operational success.<sup>100</sup> These consignments primarily consist of leftover stockpiles or caches, including those removed from areas previously under the Assad regime control during the immediate post-collapse instability and hidden in remote locations in borderlands, rather than representing a large-scale resumption or expansion of production activities.<sup>101</sup> It is, however, possible that limited production continues. Captagon factories in southern Syria have been generally small-scale, mobile, and rudimentary, making them easy to transport, conceal, and disassemble. Such mobility allows traffickers to continue producing while minimizing the risk of detection, even as enforcement pressures have increased.<sup>102</sup>

Structure, Mobilization, and the Relationship with "Hay'at" in the Suwayda Attack", Daraj, 19 July 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4xcze64r>

94. Reuters, "In Syria's South, Bedouins Uprooted by Sectarian Clashes See Little Hope of Return", 8 November 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/bdcwcn8>

95. Alaraby, "Civilian Killings and Armed Clashes Deepen Suwayda Crisis", 30 October 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/a83x3vwf>

96. Enab Baladi, "Syrian Interior Ministry Seizes Drugs from Former Regime Facilities", 19 January 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3dvspdec>; Alaraby, "Syrian Interior Minister Announces Seizure of 'All' Captagon Production Facilities", 4 June 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/8t56ve8k>

97. Sham News Network, "The Ministry of Interior Announces the Thwarting of a Drug Smuggling Operation Through the Nassib Border Crossing," 3 November 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4r25vtd3>; Daraa 24, "Smuggling Attempt of Quantities of Captagon Foiled at Nasib Border Crossing", 27 October 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3x7a2ud7>

98. Daraa 24, "Daraa Internal Security Seizes Large Quantities of Drugs and Weapons", 30 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/yxneemnw>; Daraa 24, "Raid on Two Farms between Umm al-Mayadin and Nasib in the Eastern Daraa Countryside," 13 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4b3cnmmz>

99. Syria TV, "Syrian Security Forces Seize Drugs and Weapons Intended for Smuggling in Quneitra", 9 February 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4y3dkh7a>

100. Interview with a local activist in Daraa, October 2025.

101. Interview with a local activist in Daraa, October 2025.

102. Interview with a local activist in Daraa, November 2025.

103. Al-Mamlaka TV, "Army Seizes 11.6 Million Drug Pills in 593 Smuggling Attempts Since Early 2025", 12 October 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/ycy6mxa>

104. Moaab, "The Army Seized 11.6 Million Narcotic Pills During 593 Smuggling Attempts Since the Beginning of 2025", 12 October

28% drop in intercepted operations in 2025 could reflect several factors: fewer smuggling attempts, greater evasion by traffickers, changes in Jordanian military deployments or operational capacity, or seasonal and random variation in smuggling flows. At the same time, the size of the Captagon shipment seizures—nearly a 280% increase—suggests that the operations intercepted in 2025 were larger on average. From a cost-benefit perspective, smuggling remains financially viable and profitable enough for networks to maintain operations. This is because, even when some shipments are seized or lost, the profits from successful high-value shipments are greater than the expected losses, making the overall operation viable for traffickers.<sup>105</sup>

This pattern reflects both the resilience of these criminal networks and their capacity to adapt to domestic and external border protection measures by focusing on maximizing profit per operation. Smugglers exploit the state's weak presence in parts of the region, detailed knowledge of the terrain, and sophisticated diversion tactics. Armed escorts accompanying shipments reflect readiness to engage Jordanian forces, despite some fatal outcomes.<sup>106</sup> Such adaptability points not only to a largely decentralized but also a militarized criminal ecosystem that continues to operate in southern Syria. Much of this resilience is a legacy of the Assad regime, which, due to its weak presence in the south, had long delegated smuggling operations to local actors who were largely apolitical and motivated by profit rather than political ideology.<sup>107</sup> This strategy created a resilient and self-sustaining system in which the fall of the patron did little to disrupt or impair the broader operation by the protégés or the independent small groups that emerged and operated beyond its oversight.<sup>108</sup>

The combination of decentralized organization, existing drug stocks, adaptive smuggling tactics, and enduring financial incentives—exacerbated by the absence of alternative economic opportunities—ensures that, despite the new leadership's aggressive anti-narcotics strategy and headline-grabbing raids,

2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2jvr6jvb>

105. Joseph Daher, Nizar Ahmad, and Salwan Taha, Smuggling between Syria and Lebanon, and from Syria to Jordan”.

106. Syria TV, “Jordan Hands Over to Syria the Bodies of Three Young Men Killed During a Smuggling Operation Across the Border, 16 November 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/578rc53a>

107. Ibid.

108. Interview, local activist, Daraa, 2023.

quelling cross-border Captagon trafficking remains a complex challenge. A joint statement issued in October 2025 by the Syrian and Jordanian DEAs outlined frameworks for operational and intelligence cooperation aimed at dismantling drug-trafficking and smuggling networks along the shared border.<sup>109</sup> According to the statement, seven smuggling operations were thwarted, more than one million Captagon pills were confiscated, and organized criminal networks were disrupted.<sup>110</sup> This initiative represents a significant move toward coordinated cross-border enforcement, signaling both states' recognition that the persistence of trafficking is not merely a local issue, but a transnational challenge requiring sustained collaboration and coordinated security initiatives.

### **3. The Paradox of Foreign Intervention**

Foreign intervention in southern Syria is far from a recent phenomenon; regional and international actors have long shaped and, at times, exacerbated instability in the region. This generates a structural dilemma insofar as external involvement—despite its destabilizing potential—continues to dominate any proposed approach to stabilization. In Syria's transitional context, two primary trajectories have emerged, each centered on a key external actor and presents the potential to reduce instability and restore a degree of order in the south: a potential Russian redeployment and the prospects for a U.S.-mediated Syrian-Israeli security arrangement. Each path carries inherent limitations for the Syrian authorities and reflects incentives, constraints, and strategic preferences of relevant domestic, regional, and international actors.

109. Public Security Directorate, “The Anti-Narcotics Departments in Jordan and Syria Issue Joint Statement Affirming Commitment to Coordinated Action Against Drug Trafficking”, 5 October 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/35x4sca4>

110. Public Security Directorate, “The Anti-Narcotics Departments in Jordan and Syria Issue Joint Statement Affirming Commitment to Coordinated Action Against Drug Trafficking”, 5 October 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/35x4sca4>

### **3.1. U.S.-Mediated Syria-Israel Talks**

In June 2025, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly informed U.S. envoy Tom Barrack of his interest in negotiating an updated security arrangement that builds on the 1974 Disengagement Agreement, with the long-term goal of a peace treaty.<sup>111</sup> Under U.S. pressure, Damascus accelerated talks with Tel Aviv for a security pact.<sup>112</sup> By mid-September, Israel presented Syria with a detailed proposal for a new agreement, including a map delineating proposed demilitarized zones extending from the southwestern outskirts of Damascus to the Israeli border. Although the full terms have not yet been disclosed, media reports indicate that the proposal envisages dividing the area southwest of Damascus into three zones, each allowing Syria to maintain varying levels of military presence and types of weaponry. The plan also stipulates the creation of a no-fly zone for Syrian aircraft across the entire area from southwest of Damascus to the Israeli frontier. In exchange, Israel proposed a gradual withdrawal from all Syrian territories it has occupied in recent months, except for an outpost on Mount Hermon.<sup>113</sup>

Multiple back-channel discussions between Syrian and Israeli officials have ensued, including a trilateral meeting held in Paris on 19 August 2025 between Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad-al-Shaibani,<sup>114</sup> Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, and U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack, followed by another in London on 17 September.<sup>115</sup> A U.S.-mediated security deal, if realized, could reduce Israeli military activity in the south and signal Damascus's willingness to engage constructively

111. Barak Ravid, "A Scoop: Netanyahu Asks U.S. to Broker Israel-Syria Negotiations", Axios, 11 June 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2s9h8ryr>

112. Reuters, "Under US Pressure, Syria and Israel Inch Toward Security Deal", 16 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4r4dmx98>

113. Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Israel Presented Syria with Proposal for New Security Agreement", Axios, 16 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/y7tbsde>

114. Reuters, "Syrian Minister Met Israel's Dermer for Talks on Regional Stability", 20 August 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/mvzmxks8>

115. North Press Agency, "Al-Shaibani and Dermer Discuss the Syrian-Israeli Agreement in London," 16 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/re55v5fj>

with its neighbors. Its impact would be particularly significant if the U.S. were to act as a monitor, as reports have suggested the potential establishment of a U.S. military presence at a base in Damascus, strategically located at the gateway to parts of southern Syria.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, a security deal between Syria and Israel would likely be welcomed by the U.S. and could, in turn, influence Washington's policy on other fronts, particularly with regard to sanctions and reconstruction.

However, the negotiations have reportedly encountered setbacks after Syria rejected an Israeli request to establish a humanitarian corridor to Sweida, arguing that it would infringe upon its sovereignty.<sup>117</sup> Nonetheless, on 20 September, Syrian Interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa stated that an agreement similar to that of 1974 could soon be concluded, emphasizing that this would not constitute normalization with Israel.<sup>118</sup> Reflecting a similar tone, on 24 September, U.S. envoy Barrack confirmed that Syria and Israel were nearing the conclusion of a de-escalation agreement.<sup>119</sup> After his November 2025 meeting with President Trump at the White House, President al-Sharaa stated that the U.S. president supports Syria's position on Israel withdrawing from all territories occupied after the fall of the Assad regime.<sup>120</sup> While this endorsement enhances Syria's diplomatic leverage and signals strong international backing, reports indicate that Syrian-Israeli talks have stalled, as Israel remains reluctant to go beyond limited withdrawals in the absence of a full peace deal.<sup>121</sup> This fundamental impasse between Syria's U.S.-supported demands and Israel's limited willingness to compromise

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116. Reuters, "Exclusive: US Military to Establish Presence at Damascus Airbase, Sources Say", 6 November 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/5n77zehu>

117. Times of Israel, "Israel-Syria Talks Said to Hit Snag over Israeli Demand for Humanitarian Corridor to Druze", 17 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/y9dj9zfe>

118. Al Arabiya, "Al-Shara: Agreement with Israel Mediated by the U.S. Could Be Signed Within Days", 20 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3h74df3z>

119. Haaretz, "Syria and Israel Close to 'Deescalation' Agreement, U.S. Envoy Says", 24 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3ppzc5h2>

120. The Washington Post, "Syrian President Details Plans to Work with Americans He Once Fought", 11 November 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3ctevpwx>

121. Times of Israel, "Report: Israel-Syria Talks at Dead End, with Jerusalem Only Willing to Withdraw Troops for Full Peace Deal", 17 November 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/juden7kk>

suggests that a comprehensive security agreement between Israel and Syria is unlikely to be reached in the near future.<sup>122</sup>

### 3.2. Prospects for Russia's Return to the South

The stalled U.S.-backed Israeli-Syrian talks coincided with a gradual opening of a parallel path, which runs through Russia. Since the fall of the Assad regime and Moscow's subsequent withdrawal from the southwest, the new Syrian authorities have cautiously sought to restore ties with Russia. Following Foreign Minister al-Shaibani's visit to Moscow in July 2025,<sup>123</sup> Russian sources reported Damascus's interest in having Russian military police resume patrols in the south.<sup>124</sup> Interim President al-Sharaa's October meeting with President Vladimir Putin in Moscow further fueled speculation about a potential Russian redeployment and its prospective role.<sup>125</sup> For Syrian authorities, a renewed Russian presence in the south could provide leverage to reduce Israeli military activity, particularly amid stalled Syria-Israel negotiations. This intent was underscored by a field tour conducted by a Russian military delegation in southern Syria on 17 November 2025, following their visit to Damascus and a meeting with the Syrian Ministry of Defense,<sup>126</sup> suggesting preliminary discussions about a renewed Russian role in the south.

Syria's potential pursuit of Russian redeployment in the south intersects with the interests and calculations of other regional and international actors. For Israel, a renewed Russian presence in southern Syria serves multiple strategic purposes. First, it provides an alternative avenue and increases Israel's maneuverability in responding to external

pressure—primarily under the U.S.-mediated track—to withdraw from areas it has occupied since December 2024. Second, Russia offers a manageable and predictable interlocutor capable of maintaining calm along the Golan Heights, grounded in historical precedent: coordination with Russia on southern Syria's security affairs dates back to at least 2018, when Moscow brokered arrangements allowing Assad regime forces to return near the border, provided Iranian forces remained excluded.<sup>127</sup> This broad framework could potentially be adapted and revived. Third, a Russian role in Syria helps Israel counter Turkish influence—<sup>128</sup> a strategic objective that has prompted Israel to lobby the U.S. for a continued Russian presence since early 2025.<sup>129</sup> While a Russian role could help curb Israeli military activities, it is unlikely to grant Damascus unrestricted control or a full return of its military forces, as Israel is expected to insist on maintaining a demilitarized south.<sup>130</sup> This involvement, however, comes at a cost: in return, Russia is expected to maintain pre-existing military footholds in the coastal region and demand access to economic advantages in Syria.

Despite its past rivalry with Russia in Syria, Türkiye has found room for negotiation and coordination based on mutual recognition of security interests.<sup>131</sup> Today, both emphasize Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>132</sup> Although Türkiye's influence

127. DW, "Israel, Russia Team Up to Keep Iran Out of Syria Border Region", 29 May 2018, available at <https://tinyurl.com/mutu3axb>

128. Emadeddin Badi and Abdullah al-Jabassini, "Turkey's Syria and Libya Strategies Add Up to a Mediterranean Power Play", Atlantic Council, 13 January 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/35c7chaf>

129. Reuters, "Exclusive: Israel Lobbies US to Keep Russian Bases in a 'Weak' Syria", 28 February 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/5mdxawj9>

130. BBC News, "Israel Demands Complete Demilitarisation of Southern Syria", 14 November 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2facjfx4>

131. Abdullah Al-Jabassini and Emadeddin Badi, "The Making of Rivals and Strange Bedfellows: Patterns of Turkish and Russian Security Assistance in the Syrian and Libyan Civil Wars," *Mediterranean Politics* 4, no. 4 (2023): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2183663>

132. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic Asaad al-Shaibani", 25 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/5aan2abv>; Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Statement on Recent Developments in Syria", 17 July 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/mpu5x5s2>

122. Times of Israel, "Israel and Syria Won't Sign Security Agreement Any Time Soon, Israeli official says", 19 November 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/42bp2ujm>

123. Majalla, "High-Level Syrian Delegation in Russia: Visit's Outlook and Messages", 2 August 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/5bpdtadw>

124. Kommersant, "Syria is Missing Russian Troops", 11 August 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2rbch6rr>

125. Basil al-Mohamed, "Will Russian Military Patrols Return to Southern Syria?", Al Jazeera, 29 October 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3ktehrdy>

126. Asharq Al-Awsat, "A Russian Military Delegation Conducts a Reconnaissance Tour in Quneitra, Syria.", 17 November 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/37pxftnu>

in southern Syria is minimal, it may nevertheless endorse a Russian role to deter Israeli military activities in the region. For its part, Jordan has long viewed the Russian presence as a stabilizing factor. Amman's coordination with Moscow dates to 2015,<sup>133</sup> when they established a joint monitoring center to share intelligence and deconflict military activities in southern Syria. After the Assad regime returned to the region in 2018, King Abdullah II once described Russia's role as "a source of calm".<sup>134</sup> The U.S. too, has previously worked with Russia in brokering a 2017 ceasefire and Memorandum of Principles, which sought to exclude Iranian and extremist forces from the southern region.<sup>135</sup> From the U.S. perspective, Russia's return to southern Syria may serve as a temporary stabilizing mechanism and could support its efforts to stabilize the south,<sup>136</sup> particularly as a comprehensive Israeli-Syrian agreement remains out of reach.

### **3.3. Domestic Constraints and Pathways to Stability**

Each of the two tracks carries inherent constraints. The terms of the Israeli proposal reflect an asymmetrical dynamic in which Israel's security agenda defines the scope of state sovereignty and restricts its military presence in southern Syria. Moreover, without a comprehensive peace agreement, any security deal would likely result in only limited Israeli withdrawals from areas occupied since December 2024, as noted earlier.<sup>137</sup> This asymmetry is perhaps unsurprising, as Syria's

current military weakness and its unwillingness to engage in military confrontation limit its options and bargaining power. If accepted without modifications, the proposed agreement might reduce Israeli air and ground incursions; however, state control in the south would remain constrained. It is therefore incumbent on the U.S. to push for more favorable terms that enhance Syrian sovereignty and ensure a more balanced security arrangement.

The reliance on Russia, on the other hand, could reduce Israeli military activity in the south, but it would create a new status quo in the region, while leaving underlying fragmentation of authority and the state's limited institutional reach unresolved. In effect, this path exchanges authority for a degree of mediated stability without guaranteeing full Syrian control over military and security operations, making the equilibrium fragile and potentially unsustainable. Moreover, Russia's broader regional and international agenda means its commitment to Syria's security priorities may remain secondary, and its reduced presence and influence in southern Syria since the outbreak of the Ukraine war in 2022 underscores the fragility of this reliance.

In either path, domestic pushback is likely. Large segments of the Syrian population, already skeptical of foreign influence, are likely to view a proposed security agreement with Israel—if accepted without changes—not as a reciprocal arrangement but as a capitulation. Similarly, reliance on Russia may provoke resentment among parts of the population, particularly in the south, where memories of its previous military interventions, support for the deposed regime, and protection of the ousted Bashar al-Assad and his family remain sensitive. The two paths are not mutually exclusive, however. Syrian authorities may pursue both simultaneously, relying temporarily on Russian involvement to reduce Israeli military activities in the south, while continuing to engage in U.S.-backed talks with Israel to negotiate more favorable security arrangements. A calibrated blend of both may offer a pragmatic, if fragile, route toward reasserting a degree of stability in the south, provided domestic concerns and regional dynamics are carefully managed.

At the same time, reliance on external mediation alone cannot resolve the deeper, structural security challenges that afflict southern Syria. Durable stability requires engagement with local actors to negotiate credible and context-sensitive security

133. Jordan Times, "Jordan, Russia Set Up Mechanism of Military Coordination Concerning South Syria," 24 October 2015, available at <https://tinyurl.com/5e8rubma>

134. The Royal Hashemite Court, "King in Interview with Hoover Institution: Relationship with US Institutional, Based on Trust," 18 May 2022, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4pnht3b4>

135. Reuters, "U.S.-Russian Ceasefire Deal Holding in Southwest Syria," 10 July 2017, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4c73tnc3>; U.S. Department of State, "Background Briefing on the Joint Statement by the President of the United States and the President of the Russian Federation on Syria," 11 November 2017, available at <https://tinyurl.com/46f482ys>

136. Syrian Arab News Agency, "Full Roadmap Script: Syria, U.S., Jordan Outline Sweida Deal to End Conflict," 16 September 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2dyamxb8>

137. Times of Israel, "Report: Israel-Syria Talks at Dead End, with Jerusalem Only Willing to Withdraw Troops for Full Peace Deal," 17 November 2025, available at <https://tinyurl.com/juden7kk>

arrangements, rebuild trust in state institutions, and address grievances that have fueled resistance to the new authorities. Without such inclusive and locally grounded mechanisms, externally imposed solutions risk being perceived as illegitimate, reinforcing skepticism toward both the state and foreign patrons and creating openings for spoilers. Whatever path is ultimately pursued, the south will remain emblematic of a persistent paradox: foreign intervention is at once a driver of instability and an unavoidable factor for any meaningful stabilization.

## Conclusion

Years of war, fragmentation, and entrenched local networks of power have left southern Syria with persistent and complex security challenges. Much of this instability stems from the legacy of the Assad regime, which managed the region through coercion, manipulation, and neglect. The fall of the regime did not automatically bring stability; instead, it transformed existing challenges, let some persist, and even generated new ones. In Quneitra, Israeli dominance constrains the state's ability to exercise authority. In Daraa, localized violence—fueled primarily by uncollected weapons and fragmented armed networks—continues to flare intermittently. In Sweida, coercive disarmament efforts have backfired following Israeli intervention, reinforcing local autonomy and the influence of local armed actors. These variations demonstrate that stability cannot rely solely on centralized control or coercive measures, given the diverse nature of challenges and the difficulty of applying uniform solutions.

Foreign intervention plays a paradoxical role in southern Syria. Israel's actions constrain the state's authority; Russia's potential redeployment offers avenues for mitigating instability while risking dependency; and U.S.-backed Syrian-Israeli talks could limit conflict but embed asymmetrical power relations. In all cases, the south remains a space shaped by external influence. Effective management requires leveraging foreign support to reduce immediate threats while simultaneously rebuilding locally grounded authority through negotiation, accommodation, and integration of local actors. The new authorities' engagement with external powers should complement, not replace, trust-building processes with local communities. Any sustainable approach must reconcile state authority with local

agency, particularly where foreign involvement has created new dependencies or asymmetries, combining mediation to de-escalate tensions with the restoration of state capacity. Success in southern Syria depends on pragmatic, flexible strategies that balance coercion with dialogue and integrate both external and local capacities to establish a durable order.







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### **About the Arab Reform Initiative**

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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