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As-Suwayda Uprising: Catalyst for a New Syria?

Could As-Suwayda’s uprising pave the way for the creation of a new Syria?

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In recent weeks, residents of As-Suwayda Governorate have risen up against the regime. The situation echoes the 2011 revolution, reigniting hope for many Syrians about the chance for meaningful political change and potential

solutions to the Syrian crisis. While the situation is far from perfect, this uprising has the potential to drive political momentum that could reshape, or even unify, Syria. Unlike past protests in As-Suwayda post-2011, the current movement displays distinct characteristics and incorporates both practical and conceptual elements, suggesting it could have longevity and yield tangible outcomes.

Civil uprising

In contrast to the sporadic protests in As-Suwayda after 2011, the recent uprising stands out for its peaceful nature and its inclusion of a wider demographic, some of whom had previously remained neutral. The early protest movement in As-Suwayda between 2011 and 2014 was typically seen as elitist, predominantly opposing the regime. From 2014 to 2020, protest activity subsided, only to revive in 2020 with more fervent and comprehensive demands, marked by significant youth involvement. A notable event in 2022 mainly targeted gangs and was spearheaded by local armed groups. When protesters targeted the As-Suwayda Governorate headquarters later that year, the ensuing demonstrations against deteriorating living conditions saw limited involvement from unarmed factions but were met with aggressive retaliation from the regime.

The broader participation in the recent uprising, both in terms of numbers and demographics, can be attributed to a clear stance from the spiritual leadership of the Druze, the Mashyakhat al-Aql. The position of one Sheikh al-Aql, Hikmat Al-Hajari, has provided a symbolic endorsement for the movement. The second Sheikh al-Aql, Hamoud Al-Hinnawi, aligns with Sheikh Al-Hajari's views. However, As-

Suwayda city, the heart of the governorate, is more conflicted. It falls under the religious sway of the third Sheikh al-Aql, Yusef Jarbou', who has been more reserved regarding the movement. Sheikh Jarbou's hesitance might not stem from opposing the people's legitimate calls for change, but rather from a fear of change itself. This situation warrants a closer examination of the dynamics within the sheikhdom in As-Suwayda.

In As-Suwayda, there are three prominent sheikhs, each with their distinct social sphere of influence, rooted in a sharing system which has been in place since the early 18th century. The sheikhdom began with the Druze community in Jabal al-Arab in the late 17th century and evolved as they expanded from the northwest to the southeast. As a result, the sheikhdom first emerged in the town of Qanat through the al-Hajari family, followed by As-Suwayda through the Jarbou' family, and then Sahwat Balata via the al-Hinnawi family. By the late 19th century, a fourth sheikhdom, represented by the Abu Fakhr family, established a presence but waned before Syria's independence. Beyond their religious duties, the sheikhs have taken on various political roles throughout history. Many believe their initial shift from religious to political roles was to negotiate with powers like the Ottomans, Egyptians, French and various Syrian governments. Their influence ebbed and flowed due to a combination of local and external factors. Their interactions and sometimes conflicts with secular leaders and other influential figures have significantly shaped the sheikhdom. Moreover, since gaining independence, authorities in Damascus have intermittently meddled in the sheikhdom's affairs, occasionally exacerbating divisions among them.

The current regional setup is fairly straightforward. Sheikh al-Hajari leads the religious front in the northern countryside of As-Suwayda, often referred to as the Northern Maqran. Sheikh al-Hinnawi oversees the Southern Maqran, while Sheikh Jarbou' holds sway in the city of As-Suwayda itself. This is not a hard and fast division, but more of a general overview for clarity's sake. Central to the Druze sect is the city of As-Suwayda, the residence of both Sheikh Jarbou' and Sheikh al-Hinnawi. This central hub, known as Dar Ain al-Zaman, extends its influence to most neighboring towns and villages through the "Holders of Councils." These figures are akin to Muslim imams or Christian priests. Since 2011, the hub known as Dar Ain al-Zaman has taken significant steps to organize itself, and has effectively transitioned into a dynamic civil society entity, offering a range of services like relief aid, medical assistance, and food provisions. Furthermore, it has played a crucial role in managing conflicts and resolving disputes for many across the province.

Dar Qanawat, the hub led by Sheikh al-Hajari, is also known as the Spiritual Presidency of the Druze Unitarians. Since 2018 in particular, Dar Qanawat has been evolving into a political shield, openly opposing the regime's actions in As-Suwayda. During the armed revolt at the close of 2022 against the Raji Falhout gang, who have links to Military Security, Sheikh al-Hajari acted as a guiding light for the rebels, endorsing their actions and providing them with civil legitimacy. Many of those involved in that revolt are now active participants in the ongoing peaceful protests, choosing to demonstrate without weapons. Furthermore, Dar Qanawat now boasts a wide array of supporters across As-Suwayda, including clerics, politicians, and leaders from civil, social, and youth sectors.

As a result, it can be said that the official religious institution of the Druze backs the ongoing movement in As-Suwayda. While Sheikh Youssef Jarbou' has not outrightly opposed the movement, he has adopted a more tentative stance. This caution is not necessarily a reflection of disagreement with the people's legitimate calls for change, but perhaps more from apprehension about the change itself. Some believe, based on rumors from security services and Syrian officials, that the current movement is a strategy to diminish Dar Ain al-Zaman's influence in favor of Dar Qanawat. This might shed light on the shift in Sheikh Jarbou's stance, moving from initial full support of the people's demands to echoing the regime's conspiracy theories regarding potential threats to the region.

The idea of a conspiracy is not entirely baseless. Over the years, the Syrian Brigade Party has waged an aggressive media campaign against Sheikh Jarbou', disseminating questionable information about corruption within the sect's Dar, often for manipulative reasons. In recent years, this party has subtly advocated for a more decentralized governance for As-Suwayda and even set up a military faction named the Counter-Terrorism Force. This force faced an assault by the National Defense Militia and local groups aligned with Military Security in mid-2022, resulting in the death of its leader and the capture of numerous members. Now, the Brigade Party seems to be resurging, keen on actualizing and spreading its ideas. Conversely, Dar Ain al-Zaman has adopted a protective posture, especially given the scarcity of allies and the increase in espionage and hostility. This climate might have swayed Sheikh Jarbou' to believe in alleged schemes by "separatists" aiming to establish autonomous governance with outside backing.

Reclaiming politics: centralized, decentralized, federal, or divided Syria?

In the recent uprising in As-Suwayda, it is remarkable to see how politically engaged the people have become. Years of suppressed emotions, thoughts, and aspirations are now out in the open. People are freely expressing their concealed feelings, anxieties, and wishes. they are coming together— discussing, disagreeing, organizing, and even forming their own committees and representatives. Every day, the governorate buzzes with numerous political and civic gatherings. It is a hive of activity, with a constant flow of ideas, discussions, tensions, negotiations, and listening. No subject is off-limits. Conversations have broadened, and the silence that once prevailed is now broken. Even in social media rooms known for security risks, people discuss their plans candidly. They are direct in their discussions, challenging traditional political monopolies. Politics, once seen as an elite pursuit, has become a day-to-day matter vital for organizing, uniting, and envisioning the best ways to manage daily life.

This is a far cry from the politics of the seventies and eighties, which was defined by elite struggles. Back then, the fight against tyranny was synonymous with the slogans of young leftist parties, mostly composed of Syria's minority middle classes. The "Marxist" era emphasized class over sect and the collective over individual, with little attention to topics like freedom, liberalism and democracy. Today, there is a fresh political approach that deviates from the past, helping people tackle daily challenges amidst the weakening and fragmentation of the state, a politics concerned with people's methods of managing their lives, and a daily practical exploration of theories, shared goals,

and either harmonious or conflicting visions.

Amid this vibrant mix of perspectives and opinions, two main schools of thought emerge. The first viewpoint is that the only way forward for As-Suwayda is a comprehensive Syrian solution in line with International Resolution 2254, leading to a peaceful power transition. The second advocates for establishing self-governance, mirroring the Kurdish self-administration in northeastern Syria. Between these poles lie a variety of moderate, reconciliatory, and pragmatic ideas that might strike a balance. However, the challenge often comes from the hardliners in each camp, whose perceptions are heavily tinted by their ideologies. The first group, seemingly influenced by nationalist and leftist sentiments, prioritizes an all-encompassing Syrian solution over localized resolutions in As-Suwayda. This stance often lacks clear action plans, relying heavily on the regime's response and international stances. On the other hand, the second faction, spearheaded by the Brigade Party, is hedging its bets on a military clash with the regime, hoping such a confrontation would position them as the primary force guiding the movement.

Currently, neither of the main currents holds sway, and both grapple with their internal challenges and divisions among their proponents. This situation paves the way for more moderate factions to emerge, championing a balanced and pragmatic approach. These centrist groups emphasize the value of concrete actions over mere theorizing, aiming to spearhead significant political transformation in As-Suwayda that might serve as a blueprint for change in Syria. This model would steer clear of militaristic approaches and authoritarian ideologies, leaning towards extensive decentralization and actively

involving citizens in determining their destiny and daily lives. Currently, there is a pressing need for this moderate movement to solidify its stance and develop a hands-on roadmap. This plan should prioritize initiating a transitional political process, conducting free elections, maximizing civil engagement within the bounds of Syrian law and the constitution, and capitalizing on the social and political achievements of the grassroots uprising.

Linking political and living demands

The Syrian state is dysfunctional, the regime feeds on its remnants, and its citizens buckle under daily hardships. Presently, As-Suwayda, like much of Syria, grapples with an unprecedented water crisis due to severe drought and a decline in state services. Institutions like As-Suwayda's Water and Sanitation Corporation and the Electricity Company are barely functional, much like other public sectors. Staff shortages, rampant corruption, insufficient funding, and budget delays for administrative bodies are just some of the issues. As a result of frequent power cuts and prolonged outages, vital equipment like submersible pumps have failed, rendering critical water wells — sources of both drinking and irrigation water — useless. This is but a glimpse into the countless challenges people face daily, threatening their survival in a region already grappling with the impacts of climate change. The state is stagnant, and hunger is rampant. In As-Suwayda, the reliance on food aid is growing. Without money sent home by overseas residents, thousands would likely be lining up for assistance. The country's production is virtually non-existent, with corruption and bribery as the only drivers. The recent decision to deregulate prices, especially after last month's wage hike, was the final straw.

Residents of As-Suwayda have taken to the streets demanding their basic human dignity, as their situation has plummeted into severe oppression and poverty, with many resorting to constant pleas for help. In what used to be a traditionally close-knit society, there is now a troubling surge in crime, suicides, prostitution, drug addiction, easy access to firearms, and ransom kidnappings. Furthermore, As-Suwayda has become a hotspot for smuggling Captagon into Jordan and has emerged as a breeding ground for kidnapping gangs demanding ransoms. The very fabric of life in As-Suwayda is under threat.

Today, As-Suwayda insists on solutions rooted in genuine political transformation, particularly in how governance operates and how residents manage their daily lives, free from the heavy hand of security and military agencies. Essentially, this means rejuvenating the state and its institutions and curtailing the overreach of security and military forces. When locals call for the enactment of International Resolution 2254 and related global mandates, while opposing foreign occupations and the segmentation of Syrian land, they are essentially advocating for an end to the power struggle against the community. What the people are clamoring for is a lasting, peaceful resolution that ensures such conflicts will not resurface.

While the aspirations are noble, linking high-level political demands with everyday needs presents a significant challenge for the uprising in As-Suwayda. Implementing Resolution 2254 and facilitating a peaceful political transition in Damascus is a tall order, and one that the As-Suwayda uprising, on its own, cannot achieve. While it is a commendable national agenda, it is a daunting task for a single governorate, especially one that represents a

minority in Syria, holds a peripheral position without major transit routes, and lacks critical resources essential to the Syrian regime. There is a risk that the regime might simply marginalize and isolate the region, maintaining only essential security outposts and fostering instability. Thus, it is crucial to balance the broader visions for Syria's future with a targeted political and civil solution for As-Suwayda that addresses the immediate needs of its residents. Both objectives must be pursued in tandem.

What the movement has achieved to date

In recent weeks, the square, now renamed Karamah (Dignity) Square, has been alive with activity. People gather to celebrate, sing, dance, cry, create art, and voice their beliefs. They have reclaimed this public space from the Syrian regime's grasp, a space once dominated by regime images, statues, and narratives—both its celebrations and its tragedies. That space used to feel inauthentic, oppressive, and distant from the local community's heart. Yet, they once went along with these imposed celebrations, almost to the point of seeming convinced by them. Today, Karama Square has become As-Suwayda's own Hyde Park—a space for everyone to speak their mind, reflect, organize, and take action.

What is truly heart-wrenching about these scenes is the evident exhaustion of As-Suwayda's people. The gauntness of their bodies and the weariness etched on their faces are palpable. Yet, there is resilience. They are making an effort to stand tall, lift their gazes, reconnect with one another, and rebuild trust. These are not naive people; they have witnessed firsthand the brutalities the regime inflicted on previous protesters. But, as they put it, it is their human

dignity on the line now. It compels them to rise, to declare their discontent with a political system which has stifled them for half a century, delivering nothing but hardship, isolation, and a disconnect from modernity and the present world. This is the plight of As-Suwayda's residents, and it mirrors the struggles across Syria. They feel forgotten, sidelined, and pushed out of the public sphere by being denied a political voice.

As-Suwayda's residents are people of the mountain: known historically for their eloquence and mastery of refined speech and rhetoric, they have found their voice again. Traditionally skilled in poetry, oratory and forging a collective opinion, they are embracing the core of politics: coming together to reflect on shared concerns. This rediscovered unity and expression stand as the foremost triumph of the current uprising.

Another significant accomplishment is the ongoing formation of a cohesive political entity representing the popular uprising. Concurrently, efforts are being made to establish a unifying civil political body. This organization aims to bridge differing viewpoints, lending civil legitimacy to the movement and averting any descent into violence or disorder. Ideally, this civil body will encompass representatives from diverse social, regional, religious, and political backgrounds, inclusive of those active in the uprising.

The third notable milestone is breaking free from the longstanding influence of the Baath Party in As-Suwayda, where it has acted as both the state's and society's overseer. From day one, the popular uprising effectively sidelined the Baath Party, shutting down its offices across

the governorate. In essence, As-Suwayda has put into action the repeal of Article Eight of the Constitution. While the Baath Party has a significant footprint in As-Suwayda, it is primarily through individuals benefiting from its network rather than genuine adherents to its principles. The party lost its ideological drive after consolidating political power in Syria following Hafez al-Assad's 1970 coup. Since then, it has acted as an exclusive gateway for state employment, public sector jobs, union positions, and parliamentary membership—often based on personal connections, loyalty, and informants rather than merit. Now, residents can freely and voluntarily organize, managing everything from aid distribution to fuel and agricultural supplies without the party's oversight. The clear distinction being made between the state and the regime showcases the people's commitment to preserving the former while transforming the latter. This aspiration to reestablish the state as a neutral, secular service provider that treats all Syrians equally stands as yet another triumph of the movement.

In recent days and weeks, there has been a remarkable drop in crime rates, suicides, kidnappings for ransom, and cross-border drug smuggling in As-Suwayda. While this positive shift might be short-lived due to ongoing economic and living challenges, it offers a hopeful glimpse into the potential future for the area's inhabitants and showcases the transformative power of their collective determination. However, on a concerning note, there has been a surge in deforestation, as some regime military units clear forests as part of a defensive repositioning strategy. This environmental setback is both massive and irreversible, especially for a region on the desert's edge, facing the dire implications of climate change that jeopardize the very fabric of life.

Courses of action for the Syrian regime

What is notably missing from the events unfolding in As-Suwayda is any significant presence of the regime. It seems to be on the back foot, repositioning its troops within the governorate and reinforcing its security bases. Concurrently, the regime appears to be trying to corner the uprising, wearing it down with local disputes and overwhelming it with manufactured civic issues.

Right now, the regime does not seem to possess the military strength or the means to tackle the uprising in As-Suwayda head-on. The repercussions of suppressing the movement through military means might outweigh the benefits when compared to simply isolating and smothering it, attempting to fragment it from within, and cutting off its ties with other Syrian regions. As part of these maneuvers, the regime has turned to the Druze from the Damascus countryside and Quneitra, hoping they could offer an escape from this tight spot. It rallied its Druze supporters from outside As-Suwayda, going as far as to fabricate a new religious entity named the “Druze Spiritual Authority” in the Damascus countryside. This group, which did not exist before and lacks any substantial religious influence, could be leveraged later on to sow political division among the Druze across Syria. And while the regime seems to be downplaying the As-Suwayda movement, it is actively trying to keep the Druze of rural Damascus and Quneitra aligned with its interests, even if it means resorting to force or intimidation. That said, it is worth noting that the regime still has its loyalists in As-Suwayda, spanning religious, civil and military sectors.

In a related move, the regime sought the support of a Druze

spiritual leader from Lebanon, Sheikh Amin al-Sayegh, who released a video message to the people of As-Suwayda. In it, he subtly criticized Sheikh al-Hajari's stance, urging the people to stand with the Syrian state. Sheikh al-Sayegh is one of 11 equal-ranking Druze sheikhs in Lebanon, identifiable by their distinctive round mukawlasah turbans. Typically, these sheikhs avoid political involvement, but Sheikh al-Sayegh has deviated from this norm, openly discussing politics on social media and television—in stark contrast to his peers, who remain largely absent from the media spotlight. It is important to note that Sheikh al-Sayegh is not seen as a leading figure for Syria's Druze community. His religious influence is limited to a modest group of followers, a number that has likely diminished due to his overt political engagements, which do not seem solely rooted in spiritual motivations.

Additionally, some prominent regime supporters on social media are stirring sectarian tensions against the As-Suwayda movement, leveling various unfounded accusations at them, branding them as separatists, traitors, and agents for Israel, among other labels. Importantly, many of these messages are not genuinely aimed at the Druze community. Instead, they are targeting the Alawite audience, bolstering their resolve and trying to paint the Druze as outliers from the current minority alliance. This portrayal hints at potential retribution from the state and its military forces.

Simultaneously, under the regime's influence, the As-Suwayda Governorate Council released a statement on September 12. While it recognized the legitimacy of the people's demands and blamed the government for the decline in living standards, the statement also called on

security forces to safeguard state institutions and criticized the current mode and methods of political protest. Many viewed this as a veiled approval to forcefully break up protest gatherings. This interpretation seemed to hold true, as on September 13th, at the Baath Party branch in As-Suwayda, armed individuals inside the branch fired at protesters attempting to enter the building, seemingly taking care not to inflict fatal injuries.

Conversely, the Governorate Council's statement provided the grassroots movement and the civic political initiatives in As-Suwayda with a unique chance to experiment with a fresh political approach. For the first time, through civic momentum and pressure, there is a possibility to compel the resignation of all municipal council members. Such a mass resignation would create a void, potentially necessitating new elections. Currently, Local Administration Law No. 107 of 2011 does not allow this scenario. It stipulates that if a council seat becomes vacant, it is filled by the next highest vote-getter from the same sector, unless a new election is deemed necessary by the governing body—either the council's executive office or the Ministry of Local Administration. Should new elections be held, it would be a significant milestone, courtesy of the As-Suwayda model. This could pave the way for forming municipal executive bodies that genuinely represent the populace and possess legal legitimacy. These bodies can then embark on delivering overdue services and tackle corruption and inefficiencies in the public sector. To "restore the state" means reviving and reimagining still-functional structures, running parallel to the establishment of a civic political entity for As-Suwayda. Yet, it is crucial to understand that the regime might not greenlight this course of action, viewing it as ceding political ground to the

people—whom they regard as the real adversaries. However, this step emerges as a litmus test for policy, taking advantage of As-Suwayda's unique circumstances. In this experiment, it is a challenge to the regime on its own turf, fraught with potential repercussions. But it could also set the stage for a comprehensive political resolution that benefits all Syrians.

The movement's crises

There is a purist streak within the current movement that seems to regard the movement itself as both the means and the end. In other words, the movement is seen as self-sufficient, inherently valuable, and resistant to daily, practical politics. This purist view venerates the protest space and upholds it as the sole beacon of legitimacy, setting boundaries that no one should cross. While such a perspective is understandable—especially when masses reclaim their voice after long periods of suppression—it can become a hindrance to more durable political formations over time.

This purist inclination, which seeks to elevate certain symbols and slogans, stands in contrast to the very grassroots spirit that gave birth to it. Reclaiming public spaces is a collective endeavor that translates individual wills into collective action. Therefore, it is essential to infuse the movement with a democratic ethos, emphasizing its role as a breeding ground for diverse ideas and a platform to forge shared visions for the future. The movement should be seen as an open forum, not an exclusive circle reserved for a select few.

Conversely, the movement appears to lean heavily on Dar

Qanawat, steered by Sheikh al-Hajari, drawing much of its legitimacy from it. Moving forward, the movement needs to establish its own organizational and political strategies, not merely depending on Dar Qanawat but also bolstering its position.

Furthermore, the movement has begun to adopt certain political beliefs as its ultimate tenets, almost as if they were the all-encompassing roadmap for the entire community. Beyond a few cautious calls for local resolutions, the movement seems preoccupied with overarching challenges, aiming at achieving partial solutions. This is a vulnerability. The most impactful grassroots initiatives are those that define attainable objectives—essentially, localized concerns that the collective will of the populace can address within their immediate environment.

In conclusion, As-Suwayda’s uprising, despite its intricate dynamics, is paving the way for a potential political solution that could be instrumental in the creation of a new Syria.