STATE OF INJURY: Colonial Sin and the Syrian Age of Persecution

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Oh, bitter shame,
In those who danced while blood was spilled,
In those who saw, yet silence filled.

— Samih Choukeir, "What They Have Done to Me"

In mid-July 2025, a video from southern Syria, less than twenty seconds long, circulated online, showing Munir al-Rajma facing his final moments. Munir, likely in his mid-sixties, sits on the steps of a school. His posture is tense and still. Before him stand armed men in military uniforms, later identified as members of the newly constituted Syrian Ministry of Defense and General Security. These institutions had assumed control following the collapse of the former regime only months earlier. An off-camera voice asks a question: "Are you Muslim or Druze," naming the latter, a small ethnoreligious community, as its target. Munir raises his open hands, half in surrender, half in disbelief. "Brother," he replies, "I am Syrian." Yet his appeal to kinship and national belonging finds no purchase with those who hold him at their mercy. The question is asked

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again, this time with more urgency: "What does that mean? Are you Muslim or Druze?" In the background, other voices shout in exhilaration, "He is a Druze." When Munir finally confirms, he is shot.

The execution of Munir marks a turning point in modern-day Syria, though neither the beginning nor the end of what his family and community members now widely refer to as persecution (*miḥnah*, in Arabic). Taking this moment as its point of departure, this article reads recent episodes of violence across southern Syria following the collapse of the authoritarian Assad regime, which ruled the country from father to son between 1970 and 2024. It begins by tracing the early contours of what might be called the Syrian state of injury: an emerging form of political rule shaped and sustained by the unmended wounds of its recent past. The article then argues that, within this new order, the minoritarian identifying mark *Druze* has come to signify not only religious difference but also a subject position burdened by suspicion and colonial entanglements that extend beyond the Syrian nation-state. This suspicion, liable to crystallize into political accusation and increasingly into lethal retribution, has become a site through which the new Syrian state comes to operate in the same realm as Israeli colonial and aspiring imperial logic. To make this argument, the article turns to one genealogy that has proved critical to sustaining these accusations: the Druze Question as it has taken form across Palestine, Israel, and Syria.

A particular urgency obtains here, if I dare say so, even when everything else around already feels urgent. I began writing this article in late July 2025, while mass killings in southern Syria, particularly in Suwayda Province and its thickly populated countryside, were still unfolding. According to the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (2026), more than 1,700 people were killed, the large majority of them Druze civilians executed by government forces and affiliated militias, a toll that is unlikely to be final.[1] I also began writing under the weight of a voice that continues to haunt me: That of Munir al-Rajma. Even if his name remains unfamiliar to many, I invoke the footage of him that has surfaced online, the recording with which I opened this article and to which I return throughout. I do so to insist on how urgently the torn social fabric in Syria demands attention beyond the abstraction of "the Syrian," and toward more situated and historically contingent subject positions, including those inflected by "the religious" and "the sectarian."

The modern Syrian experience is often told as a story of the nation-state: a polity born from the colonial partition of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, granted formal independence in 1946, and later coming under the

rule of the Baʿth Party, which seized power in 1963 and endured, through tyranny and coercion, until its collapse in late 2024. In this story, the Syrian citizen has often been read as a political subject governed and made through the carful choreography of party aesthetics (Weiss 2022), authoritarian spectacle (Wedeen 1999), and a complex system of arrest, imprisonment, and torture (Üngör 2023). Yet the killing of Munir painfully lays bare the limits of the national, exposing the tragic sectarian terrain that underpins the figure of the Syrian. This terrain is fractured along multiple markers—Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, Kurds, Christians, and others—labels that, as those subjected to them know, have long defined one's place in the Syrian political order and now come to consign some to lethal vulnerability. I address this landscape plainly without suspending critique in the name of avoiding sectarian language.

My moving beyond the figure of "the Syrian" in this article should not be read as a personal lament for the unrealized promise of a national project. I write from the Golan Heights, a place occupied by Israel since 1967 and unilaterally annexed in 1982, long positioned at odds with the very idea of the nation-state. I write, too, as someone who grew up with the paradox of two national sovereignties claiming the Golan Heights, yet I have never held recognized citizenship, a condition that serves as a constant reminder, to me at least, that the modern nation-state, so obsessed with its own survival, guarantees nothing, least of all inclusion. I will return to this point in my conclusion. What follows is a preliminary ethnographic account of the southern margins of Syria, a space of precarious but forceful articulation of political life in the ruins of authoritarian governance. These margins—sometimes within Syria, at other times within Israel, and at yet other moments beyond—also shape how this ethnography proceeds, attending to media, protest, the circulation of violence, and the shifting significance of place.

PERSECUTION AND THE NEW SYRIAN ORDER

Syria today, if one can still speak of it as a national territory in the singular, constitutes not a polity of citizens but a land of marked subjects. It has come to be ruled by a government that claims to represent an ethno-confessional majority—a Sunni one, to be specific—and that has fashioned itself as the sole heir of suffering, the sole survivor of decades of bloodshed at the hands of a criminal regime (the Assads, father and son), and thus the only legitimate bearer of political grievance in the present. The suffering this majority has endured, marked by arbitrary disappearances, sadistic killings, starvation, and chemical attacks (Tarnowski 2024), is today invoked by this government and its sympathizers to justify its own violence

and inaugurate a new age of persecution. The underlying rationale is simple: Any present-day abuse, disorder, or brutality is still seen as preferable—some would say, as the price everyone else must pay—for avoiding a return to the atrocious arbitrariness of the Assad era. In modern-day Syria, a disturbing form of political rule has emerged, one consumed by the wounds of its past.

In this distorted moral order, all others in Syria are reduced to remnants, promised conditional tolerance as religious minorities only insofar as they surrender and accept a life marked by fragility and exposure to humiliation. Those who fail—or worse, refuse—to do so are either accused of political betrayal and blamed for foreclosing the possibility of future national unity, or condemned collectively as past political perpetrators, accused individually of having committed political crimes.

One subject position is evident in the contemporary political life of Druze communities in southern Syria, whose insistence on safety guarantees prior to disarmament the new Syrian government has summarily condemned as a subversive act against national unity. The government has met such insistence, widely shared among Druze military and spiritual leaders and expressed in unmistakably political terms, in a singular way: A persecution against these communities for what they are—Druze. Another form of political subjectivity that emerges under this new government is illustrated by the fate of many Alawite subjects, who, though not engaging in outright refusal—understood here as a direct challenge to the new government—are, by virtue of their collective positioning, made to bear a responsibility that renders them vulnerable to revenge, marking them as targets across Syria, whether or not they committed past crimes, benefited from the machinery of violence under the Assad regime, or were simply innocent civilians. The very subject position of Alawites today has become a site of projected guilt, where political responsibility is no longer anchored in past actions or proof of complicity—what the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (2000) might call "criminal guilt"—but in the mere fact of being an Alawite.

While a host of logics has driven their persecution, what Druze and Alawites have come to share in Syria today is a condition of perpetual yet particular vulnerability, a shared exposure to being rendered killable subjects. What they also share, no less significantly, is their non–Sunni-ness, a sectarian difference that, in the developing political order, has emerged as a lethal marker of disposability. Their persecution is not merely allowed; it is celebrated as justice. What remains is not a state in the political sense, but a machinery of survival for some and persecution for the rest. And yet, to seize too quickly on confessionalism as *the* story risks mistaking the visible for the total. Precisely because a sectarian difference appears so immediate, so self-evident, it must be held in tension with

other, less legible logics, those rooted in relation to political rulership. One need only look at a term that has recently entered the political lexicon in Syria, particularly among officials of the new government, its president, TV channels, and affiliated social media personalities: *fulool al-nidham* (remnants of the [former] regime).[2] Since the fall of the Assad security state, this terminology has evolved in arbitrary ways, conjuring not only images of former personnel known to have been complicit with the regime but also of civilians, particularly those resisting today's transitional government, and even individuals who have simply failed to conform to the new political order.

A prevailing narrative persists within both academic and public discourse on Syria today: That we are observing a government in transition, a moment whose culmination, a coherent and stable state, remains an uncertain horizon. Yet as anthropologists have shown, the rhetoric of "transition" often obscures more than it reveals (Supernant 2024). My starting point in this article, on the contrary, is the following premise: The new Syrian state has already arrived, its assumed form is entrenched and still unfolding in ever more pernicious ways. What confronts us today, therefore, is not a temporary disorder but the consolidation of a new mode of rule, a new political reality. In this reality, the new government has not only reintroduced violence as an ordinary spectacle—filmed, streamed, and circulated online, and thereby normalized as a routine feature of the emerging political order—but has also, as Syrian intellectuals have argued, revealed a form of "fascist violence" grounded in a Sunni identity claim (Aaek 2025).[3] For this reason, this new order must be named plainly, without allowing analytical precision to be dismissed as sectarianism. One is reminded of the timely invitation made not long ago by the historian Ussama Makdisi (2019, 19, 34)—though originally directed at historical accounts of the Ottoman system—to move beyond the clichéd language of toleration and instead attend to forms of rule that distribute privileges across communal lines, and that ultimately celebrate what might be called a Muslim primacy over non-Muslims.

"A roaming annihilation," as the Syrian intellectual Yassin Haj Saleh (2025) recently called it. The mass killings of Alawites in March 2025 by military forces operating under the new government followed a disturbing pattern involving armed gunmen showing up at doors, asking civilians whether they were Alawite or Sunni, and then killing them based solely on their response (Syrian Network for Human Rights 2025). Young Alawite men were filmed being executed in front of their mothers; another Alawite husband was filmed, threatened with death unless his wife surrendered her gold (El Chamaa, Morris, and Cheeseman 2025). In late April 2025, this pattern of extrajudicial killing by government

forces extended inland from the coastal regions, reaching Jaramana and Ashrafiyet Sahnaya, areas in the Damascus suburbs inhabited predominantly by Druze. The immediate trigger was reportedly a fabricated audio recording, falsely attributed to a prominent Druze figure, containing derogatory remarks about Prophet Muhammad. Although the person in question swiftly issued a public denouncement, and the Interior Ministry confirmed the recording's inauthenticity, the damage had already occurred. At Homs University, protesters demanded retribution against the "apostates" and the "Druze pigs," and in the cities of Hama and Homs, masses chanted "exterminate the Druze" (Ezzi 2025, 10).

Videos showing the burning and mutilation of Druze bodies, accompanied by perpetrators chanting anti-Druze slogans, met not with condemnation but with troubling silence from public officials. More critically, these streamed persecutions were openly celebrated on social media, particularly by media personalities aligned with the new government. Enthusiasm and a dismissive rhetoric of comparison marked this celebration. It draws on the perpetrator's own past suffering under the Assad regime while willfully ignoring the suffering inflicted on others in the present. All this offers a glimpse into the emerging character of sovereignty in Syria. I invoke sovereignty (*siyāda*) descriptively to name the performances through which the government seeks to appear sovereign to itself and to those it seeks to rule. This is a government that sacralizes vengeance, conflates transitional justice with retribution, and reduces political power to the public spectacle of punishment. At a time during which many liberal sovereignties launder vengeance through the "rule of law," the emerging Syrian state pursues its revenge with transparency: through its aligned media apparatuses, this logic of retribution becomes explicitly narrated and rationalized. This sustained pattern of mass killings, coupled with the widespread enthusiasm it garners, renders the recent persecution in Suwayda and its thickly populated countryside in southern Syria—where, since July 2025, hundreds of Druze families have lost their loved ones, all while still under siege by the new government—anything but an aberration. These are not tragic missteps of a state in transition, but signals disclosing the logic, intention, and ultimately the character of the state that has already taken shape.

THE SYRIAN STATE OF INJURY

Two overlapping claims orient my argument. First, the new Syrian state, if indeed it has already arrived, may be apprehended, following the political theorist Wendy Brown (1995), as a state of injury: A political formation governed by those who claim singular ownership over historical suffering, cultivate a politics

of wounded entitlement, and auto-legitimate sovereign power through the idiom of grievance and the pursuit of redress as revenge. Second, precisely because today's sovereign and its perpetrators were once yesterday's victims, one among many in Syria, it becomes analytically urgent to address the identity claim now positioned at the heart of the rhetoric through which transitional justice is being delivered. This task requires more than attending to the sovereign's idioms and behaviors, which unmistakably, though historically contingent, call for and presume a Sunni primacy. It also requires analytically reckoning with the local distrust they provoke, both within and beyond communal lines.

Among these local distrusts toward the new transitional government in Syria rank the recent and widely declared demands coming from Druze military and spiritual leadership for temporary self-rule, especially in southern provinces like Suwayda, as well as their resistance to military conscription. These demands, often framed in both Syrian and some Arab and Western media as mere retreats into tribalism—exhausted narratives (Abu-Lughod 1989), to be sure, that more often numb than investigate—are not sudden reactions but, rather, the latest articulation of a political history rooted in both dissent and domination. I am deliberately not framing this approach as simply dissent *or* domination, as the two have become far too entangled. This hold true especially when one allows for a broader historical vision, one in which British and French imperial powers entertained the possibility of a Druze state with a self-rule, alongside Maronite and Jewish ones. If we take the timing of these demands seriously, they may reflect less a descent into tribalism than calculations shaped by political survival, necessity, opportunism, or expediency.

As early as 2011, the defection of Druze officers from the Assad regime—who went on to form armed brigades and align themselves with the Free Syrian Army—signaled a decisive break from authoritarian rule and sent a clear message of solidarity with the Syrian Revolution. The widespread refusal of national conscription that followed, which reemerged between 2022 and 2023 during the waning years of Assad's rule, is not unrelated to the recent insistence by Druze leaders in Suwayda against disarmament: It is a rational response to the emergence of a new government whose exercise of state power has been increasingly defined by absolutism and an ideological obsession with establishing an Islamic state (Jamal 2025)—one that is, perhaps ironically, if not tragically, reputed to maintain contacts with Israel. Such a vision of sovereignty—or rather, non-sovereignty, one might say—has provoked anxiety among many Syrians, including Druze communities who already lost many lives when militias loyal to Jabhat

al-Nusra, whose links to actors now in government remain a source of monstrous speculation and unease, stormed several of their villages in the Idlib region in June 2015, killing at least twenty civilians (Barnard 2015). Today, to surrender arms to this new government, as many have said (Haj Saleh 2025), "would be tantamount to offering one's neck to the blade."

These dire warnings proved prescient. Persecution descended on Suwayda on July 13, 2025. For days after, verified videos surfaced. More than thirty Druze villages were burned, prayer houses reduced to ash. Armed men in uniform recorded themselves forcing young Druze captives to name their faith before executing them (Human Rights Watch 2025). Druze women, abducted with their daughters, appeared on screen begging for mercy. Elders were filmed, humiliated, in the final stillness of their beds. Hundreds of bodies appeared piled in the corridors of the main hospital in Suwayda, soaked in blood and stacked (Atallah 2025). Surveillance cameras recorded government forces, operating under the Syrian Interior and Defense Ministry, moving through homes and shops, their actions masked as "restoring order" but, in truth, stripping bare whatever was left (Cihan-Dozdar Med 2025). The same forces filmed themselves unveiling graffiti declaring one site a place to shave off Druze men's mustaches and remove the beards on their cheeks—an act of desecration aimed at symbolically breaking those whom one perceives as an opponent, conjuring the nightmare of someone being unmanned (Gilsenan 1996, 227)—a chilling signal of the campaign they had been broadcasting for days.

Such footage refuses interpretation. And yet, on July 17, 2025, Syria's interim president, Ahmad al-Sharaa, addressed the nation. The speech proved, by many measures, cunning and smart, but precisely for that reason revealing. Though al-Sharaa repeatedly invoked "the Syrian state" (*al-dawla al-sūriyya*) and appealed to the "sons of the nation" (*abnāʾ al-waṭan*), the figure of the citizen was nowhere to be found (al-Sharaa 2025b). Not once was the word *muwāṭin*, meaning the citizen as the bearer of rights, uttered.[4] In his speech, Syria appeared not as a republic of citizens, but as a state left to its sects and tribes. Clad in an elegant suit—a sign of his rapid rehabilitation from *mujahid* attire in many previous CNN appearances—the president not only praised the armed mercenaries masquerading as "Sunni Bedouin tribes" who stormed Suwayda but also branded Druze locals—hundreds of whom had mobilized with arms to defend their villages—as "outlaws" with "separatist ambitions." The message was subtle: "The absence of the Syrian state," *his state*, "would bring disorder and chaos" (al-Sharaa 2025b). The morning after his speech, a video surfaced online, likely filmed in

the preceding days and already poised to leave its mark on Syria's modern history. It showed Munir al-Rajma, a father and well guard in a Suwayda village.

In a segment less than twenty-seconds, Munir is captured facing his final moments, his hair slightly graying, his body sitting helplessly in front of a set of stairs we later recognize as those of a school. In front of him stand armed men in military uniforms, later identified as belonging to the Syrian Ministry of Defense and General Security. "Are you Muslim or Druze?" one asks off camera. Munir knows his end is coming, yet he does not flinch. He meets their eyes and raises his open hands, half in surrender, half in disbelief. "Brother, I am Syrian," he replies. His utterance was not merely a plea, though it bears the fragile outline of one. It was, more truthfully, the utterance of one already abandoned. "I am Syrian," he says, partly to abstract a concrete claim of belonging, partly to reach for the moral weight of affiliation, but certainly to name what has already been broken, to recall what was promised and never delivered. "What does that mean?" a voice snaps back, recording every word, then repeats the question with urgency: "Are you Muslim or Druze?" Meanwhile, other men in the background shout in what sounds like a moment of ecstasy at having finally found a target, "He is a Druze, he is a Druze." When Munir finally confirms, they shoot him (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2025b). No accusation. No trial. Just a question, an utterance, and an execution.

This marks precisely the logic of a state with no citizens, or more truthfully, the logic of no state and no citizens. As the video makes painfully clear, being Syrian has come to mean nothing; it has become an empty, rather irrelevant, decommissioned, and undecipherable category. The moment one claims to be "Syrian" is precisely the moment of impossible registrability, the moment of something unrecognized. Yet slowing down to listen ethnographically reveals that it is not just the category of citizenship that this crime has rendered obsolete but also the category of brotherhood, the historically mediated bond of mutual obligation that once undergirded social life (Tambar 2019). And if the "figure of the Syrian" was summoned as a last vestige of meaning, as Munir precisely did, it instead signaled the dissolution of the possibility of the political community, the moment when the promise of the right to have rights ceased to exist. To be sure, the figure of the citizen is not only unlocatable on the ground and in the countless videos of persecution one scrolls past online; it equally remains absent from the epistemology of the new government, nowhere to be found in the presidential speeches.

Suddenly, overnight, one is no longer "a brother," prior to any modern notions of belonging, and then no longer a citizen, no longer part of the imagined political community of the nation-state; that reference to citizenry itself becomes a mockery. A Druze doctor or a Druze engineer becomes a nobody as government soldiers—Sunnis, though the fact is as politically awkward as it is precise—instruct them at gunpoint to jump to their death from a balcony (Naime, Uyar, and Grzanka 2025). In Syria's metamorphosing age of persecution, two facts become undeniable: First, that not being Sunni emerges as a place outside the protection of the law; second, that being Druze can and does emerge as a death sentence. To describe this age as metamorphosing means to insist on the longue durée of mass killing in Syria, to recognize that the state-sanctioned violence unfolding today constitutes not a rupture but a transformation. In the modern memory of Syria, this arc of repression extends at least as far back as the 1982 Hama massacre, when the Syrian Arab Army, alongside Alawite militias under the command of Major General Rifaat al-Assad, carried out mass atrocities against Sunni civilians under the pretext of quelling rebellion (Conduit 2016). That massacre lingers still. And today, the figure of the Sunni subject as perpetrator of terror serves, tragically, as a mirror of that same violence, a grim echo of what Hannah Arendt (1998, 240–41) observed: that vengeance binds both the doer and the sufferer in an unending cycle of retribution. What are the political assumptions underlying this new transmuted sectarian ethos that make it so significant?

Among the many godly words employed by state-sponsored perpetrators of violence as they streamed terror in Suwayda was *purging*, a term that cloaked murder in the language of "purification" and turned atrocity into a political ritual. "By God, we will purge Syria of the likes of you," is, for example, one of the many iterations through which vengeful determination has manifested in Suwayda. "Purging" (*tat'hir*), as invoked in the language of state officers and militiamen, means extermination, the wiping out of lives under the guise of cleansing the body politic. It echoes the ancient logic of removing the unclean. Yet the concept of purge, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) reminds us, has a far older, more ambivalent history: It once referred to healing, to ritually cleansing a person or dwelling afflicted by malign spirits or sorcery. Such healing not only neutralizes what is construed as a deadly force (the Other, whether human, spirit, or object) but enhances a sense of self in place and time (Taussig 2003). The "self" here is the wounded Sunni subject, forged through decades of marginalization and state persecution under the Assad regime, which is now emerging not as a survivor but as an injured sovereign at the helm of the state. This is a self

whose injury has not healed but has been transfigured into "sovereign power," or at least the performance of it; for whom power arrives as reversal and revenge opportunities, itself a game, allowed to be played within wider circles of dissolution. Put differently, it is a sovereignty rooted in historical injury, expressed through the contemporary targeting and persecution of primarily non-Sunni subjects and communities, inaugurating a new age of persecution in Syria, one inseparable from its state of injury.

More than once, al-Sharaa (2025a) invoked in his public addresses the phrase, "You have plunged into Syrian blood for decades, and you still follow the same path." The "same path," referring to killing and violence, evoked the former regime's brutal legacy—implicitly linking today's victims (be they Druze or Alawites) with yesterday's perpetrators, and deflecting attention from the violence now carried out by his own, renamed forces. He emphasized this line again in his address following his persecution of Alawites in the coastal region in March 2025, for instance, directing his condemnation at what he calls the "remnants of the former regime" (*fulool al-nidham*). By invoking past atrocities, al-Sharaa recast the victims of current violence as the enduring villains of history. Notably, the pronoun *you*, quietly embedded in his phrasing "you have plunged into Syrian blood for decades," resonated far beyond its official target, directed at every non-Sunni subject in Syria. These words reveal a logic in which pain becomes the organizing principle of power, where past suffering is not transcended but institutionalized, shaping authority through grievance and retribution.

But al-Sharaa does not stand alone in this claim of injury. The same logic saturates the public mood, shaped by an army of media figures, from ministers and television anchors to online influencers, who widely circulate videos of the persecution in Suwayda while eliciting little outrage. It has become routine to read Syrian commentators aligned with the new government justify their indifference by invoking their own unacknowledged suffering: starvation, massacre, and exposure to chemical weapons under the Assad regime. In this reversal, injury no longer grounds empathy, national or human, but becomes converted into political capital, mobilized to cultivate a subjectivity anchored exclusively in a narrow belonging signified as "Sunni."[5] Tellingly, when other voices—whether Sunni themselves or those speaking through Sunni affiliation—express grief over state violence in general or mourn those killed in Suwayda, they are dismissed as "Sunni cute" (*sunnī kyūt*). This mocking yet potent idiom, deployed largely by other Sunnis, signals how the prevailing political language now demands fidelity to historical injury over ethical responsiveness to present injustice.

Such fidelity to past injury is precisely the kind of quality that helps produce a "scaled sense of ordinariness" (Heywood 2023) through which the spectacle of violence comes to be recognized as a character of governance in Syria.[6] We might recall here the recent public assault on the Syrian folk singer Omar Khayri, who was dragged out of a party in Aleppo where he was singing, then bound, shaved, and branded with accusations of having performed for the former Assad regime (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2025a). His humiliation, filmed on July 31, 2025, proffered another grotesque ritual saturated with the banality of political meaning, one in which sub-sovereign forces mobilized remembered pain to publicly mark the consequences of affiliation with the former regime. That he appears to have come from a Sunni background did little to mitigate the hostility the singer faced. The prevailing sentiment was that "we don't have fish memory to forget what [Omar Khayri] has done while Assad was throwing his barrels on us." Here, sovereignty operates with wounded attachment, marking historical pain and privileging memory over the promise of a shared future.

In a classically sovereign move, premised on a unitary form of authority, one that remains dominant in theory and practice despite critique (Elyachar 2025), pain is shaped into a singular political injury claimed by the state, producing a singular victim—Sunni subjects who suffered under the Assad regime—deemed the only one deserving of supposedly transitional justice. Yet this *justice* is largely spectacle, structured into the aesthetics and sensibilities of public life in Syria. Humiliation, violence, and execution at the hands of armed forces become not personal crimes, but, rather, a perverted form of political vengeance. Ironically, it is precisely the wounded character of governance today that most insistently calls into question the very premise of its sovereignty. The new Syrian government is not merely fragile; it takes the stage only to be consumed by its own past injuries.[7] One might find oneself speaking more of an injured non-sovereignty that wears the mask of the sovereign (Mastnak 2009; Neumann 1942).

In the face of all this, some Syrian intellectuals today are understandably absorbed by the question of how to rescue the Syrian nation from the Syrian state. I have in mind primarily the recent genuine intellectual effort by some writers of imagining a future Syrian citizenry grounded in "ethical and political values that help us build a national contract that cares about the rights of individuals" (al-Rayyes 2025). What would constitute such a "national contract"? The question proves undeniably significant. The post-Ottoman Syrian social contract, born out of the crucible of the 1925 Great Revolt, emerged as a direct repudiation of colonial designs—specifically, the attempt by French authorities to excise Suwayda

from the nascent Syrian state and reconstitute it as a Druze enclave (Provence 2005). That revolt affirmed unity against fragmentation imposed from without. And yet it is precisely this southern Syrian region that now stands at the center of a political and moral unmaking. A new contract appears to be forming, but one not untouched by imperial ambition and colonial designs. Still, I must confess: the question of the national or social contract is not my immediate concern, at least not here, and not now, while many remain suspended in a present saturated with humiliation, and while the blood in Suwayda and elsewhere in Syria has yet to dry. More urgent, to me, is the question of what novel language might emerge as capable of recognizing the present political moment.

I say urgent because, since the onset of the ongoing persecution in Suwayda, and even earlier in the coastal regions, many scholars, journalists, and policy experts have largely collapsed these events into the frame of "sectarian violence." Articulations such as "all sides," "sectarian clashes," and "violence among different groups" have become the prevailing scholarly and journalistic idiom through which campaigns of mass killing are narrated in Syria today, suturing violence to a familiar liberal script in which tradition—figured as sectarianism—triumphs over the modern ideals of national belonging (Makdisi 2000, 5–6). Even in critiques that name state-engineered sectarian terror there remains a tendency to presume the neutrality of the nation-state itself, thus "masking" (Mamdani 2001, 2012), or at least leaving unmarked, the government visions of Sunni primacy at work today. This is not only analytically insufficient, in the sense that the category of sectarianism explains very little and itself requires explanation; it also constitutes an act of obfuscation that neither names those actually in power nor attends to the grammar and political imaginary by which these powers rule. Epistemological descriptions like "sectarian violence" become more of a floating signifier in this case, masking state violence by either portraying Syrian Druze subjects, including people like Munir al-Rajma, and their government perpetrators as mutual victims of a failing political order, or blaming them equally for adhering to a form of irrationality.

Another troubling framing by journalists and some scholars of the region is the redirection of attention toward regional geopolitics—not only the emphasis on proxy wars but also, especially, the fixation on the Israeli invasion into Syria and its strike on the Ministry of Defense building in Damascus on July 17, ostensibly carried out in support of persecuted Druze communities in Suwayda. This obsessive framing—obsessive in its compulsion to render Syrian violence intelligible only through the machinations of external powers, and also in its selective

moral clarity—reduces the lived experiences and dangerous political realities to abstract narratives. It deflects attention from the Syrian social fabric that made such persecutions intelligible in the first place. The Israeli colonial invocation of Druze protection in Syria remains a serious question, but we must also recognize the shape of a government now ruling Syria, one no longer oriented toward the promise of a future state in any conventional sense, but one that has recast itself as a perpetual victim: aggrieved and therefore entitled.

The new Syrian government performs its authority through the lens of a Sunni survival, wielding the narrative of past persecution to legitimate its own acts of revenge. This is governance infused with the moral alibi of suffering. But what does this past suffering require to sustain its force in the present? It demands renewal. Here enters the scapegoat: The necessary figure onto whom injury is projected, through whom the state reanimates its wound, and by whom it justifies its violence.

THE DRUZE QUESTION AND THE PROBLEM OF COLONIAL SIN

Let us be clear: Munir al-Rajma, the father and well guard in a small Suwayda village, was executed by government operatives because he was a Druze. When they asked him, "Are you Muslim or Druze," it was less a question than a declaration. Munir was simply killed as a Druze, and I believe it is as such that we must understand his murder, and the persecution that rendered his extrajudicial killing and the killing of more than 1,300 Druze men, women, and children within the span of a few days in July 2025 in southern Syria alone, all but inevitable. At the moment of his killing, "a Druze" in Syria had come to signify both a religious difference—a non-Sunni Other—and a political identity burdened by the suspicion named Israel.

It may be premature to delineate the full spectrum of political imaginaries that have emerged in Suwayda over the past decade. Yet already discernible is an unstable field of power in which persecution, coloniality, and sovereignty are becoming reconfigured. In the void left by the waning of the Assad state apparatus, at least since August 2023, we do not find mere lawlessness, but rather the proliferation of competing orders: criminal economies, narcotic regimes, and experiments in non- or anti-state political pluralism, including a renewed and widespread political refusal to join the Assad military (Aziz 2024).

Nevertheless, alongside these conversations that continued to shape the political landscape in the post-Assad state, there were moments, sometimes tentative, sometimes ill-considered, when Druze local parties entertained the sin of dialogue with Israeli politics, including those echoing Israel's declared interest in "protecting Druze" in Syria, reviving an early Zionist dream of a Druze state (Manor 2019).

Now, of course, for Druze across Syria—who entered neither history nor politics yesterday—it has long been evident that Israel is cynically instrumentalizing the rupture of trust they have with the emergent government (a dynamic it has exhausted throughout the Syrian civil war), converting a lived and layered political estrangement into fodder for its own geopolitical calculus. And yet, whatever their number, content, or intent, these political questions and challenges coming out of Suwayda—call them dissent or something else—were precisely what the new Syrian government, echoed by a new loyalist media apparatus, resolved on portraying as acts of sedition. It seems quite telling that a short video of an Israeli flag raised at a protest allegedly in a Syrian Druze town has intensely circulated as definitive evidence of "collective" betrayal. That a few seconds of grainy footage can so easily stand in for complex political realities speaks less to the event itself and more to the hunger for symbols that confirm prewritten accusations, rendering a whole community suspect and therefore expungable in the national imagination.

Enthralled by its freshly consolidated power, the new regime in Syria remained willfully deaf to the long-standing political wariness coming from Suwayda, including residents' refusal to disarm—a refusal, to emphasize, not born of paranoia, but of historical memory (Aziz 2024). Indeed, it is doubtful whether such a government, drunk on its own seemingly majoritarian certitude, could even begin to comprehend the anxieties coursing through those it labels "minorities," a language it manifestly learned to speak so it could render itself legible and recognizable in the eyes of other international sovereigns. A perilous discursive machinery was already in motion, casting Druze across Syria as suspects, staging their political dissent as betrayal and consciously capitalizing on the confusion of their religious difference with religious deviance—a conflation that demands its own analysis beyond the scope of this article. In the eyes of a wounded sovereignty in Syria, Suwayda became "the scapegoat," to use the words of the historian and philosopher René Girard (1989), not because it was guilty of betrayal, but because it occupied the symbolic space where the state, at least for the time being, could displace its own fragility.

In media narratives, from online pages to Syrian national television, the threat Suwayda appeared to pose over the past few months was neither wholly imagined nor entirely manufactured—it was made real through the amplification of its difference (Annahar 2025). The campaign that vilified all Syrian Druze as traitors reached a crescendo following the unprecedented visits of Druze sheikhs from Syria to their shrines in Israel, pilgrimages permitted only after decades of denied access and better understood within the broader colonial history of a region torn into modern, artificial states and their borders. I am not suggesting that these Druze pilgrimages to sites in Israel were anything but political; on the

contrary, they were unavoidably so. Yet the irony of the campaign lay elsewhere: at the very moment these visits were condemned as treasonous, Muslims in Israel continued to travel to Mecca for Umrah and Hajj (Jamal 2025). Treason, it seems in the eyes of the wounded Syrian state, lay not in the act of crossing borders, but in who crossed them. Politicalness resides precisely in the power to frame such visits as either "religious" or "political."

Taken together, Suwayda and its Druze communities did not symbolize fragmentation; they enacted it, and in that enactment, they became indispensable to the restoration of a supposedly threatened, Sunni-dominated vision of national coherence. The expulsion of Suwayda's political heterodoxy by the new Syrian government, its army, and affiliated fighters—which, again, for those in power, mapped so neatly onto a theological heterodoxy—became a sacrificial necessity. Even with Druze population totaling only about 3 percent of Syria's population, ultimately, "the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society" (Girard 1989, 15). The function of the scapegoat is that "it bridges the gap between the insignificance of the individual and the enormity of the social body" (Girard 1989, 15).

Only hours after militias belonging to the new Syrian government entered Suwayda, thousands of Palestinian Druze in Israel, who had been witnessing the unfolding of the deliberate demonization campaign in Syria, could no longer remain passive as footage circulated of their relatives and kin under assault. They mobilized swiftly through channels long cultivated by their subject positions within the colonial machinery of Israeli power. Two responses, in particular, prove illuminating and deserve attention. First, dozens of central junctions across Israel were blocked by Druze protesters who burned tires, signaling outrage and a refusal to continue with business as usual (Glickman 2025). Second, prominent Druze figures in Israel placed mounting pressure on the Israeli government and military apparatus to intervene—to do something, anything—to halt what many were already calling persecution in Syria. Such efforts by Druze communities across Israel cannot be reduced to mere colonial complicity.

A great body of scholarship carefully traces how Druze in Palestine were incorporated, beginning in the pre-state Yishuv period, into what would emerge as the Israeli military and state apparatus following the Nakba—this scholarship makes for essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the present in Palestine and the broader Levant.[8] The late historian Kais Firro (2001) has meticulously shown how this incorporation into the Israeli body politic cannot be read as a gesture of inclusion or loyalty alone; rather, it must be understood as part of

a broader colonial logic of divide and rule across Palestine, and the Arab-Muslim world, wherein selective assimilation serves to fragment native communities, reconfigure political allegiance, and obscure the colonial violence of the state. The title of Firro's seminal work, *The Druzes in the Jewish State* (1999), stands as a precise reflection of the political logic that governs the condition and consciousness of many of its citizens. One need only listen closely to the language through which Druze figures in Israel appealed to the state for military intervention on behalf of their kin in Syria. It was not the language of equal citizenship within a polity of rights, but one of conditional belonging premised on colonial service, patronage, calculated allegiance, and a state that operates as a broker of favors: I serve your army, I fulfill my duties, now you owe me in return.[9]

In a recent essay, political theorist Amal Jamal (2025) reminds us that the enlistment of Druze youth into the Israeli army—a colonial process systematically cultivated and refined by the state and pre-state forces (i.e., the Haganah) over decades—has enabled some Druze officers to gain critical insights into the inner workings of the Israeli military, particularly in theaters of operations like Syria and Lebanon. This process has also afforded certain Druze figures a degree of influence over Israeli public opinion that far surpasses their limited demographic weight. For Israel to strike the Syrian Ministry of Defense in Damascus on July 17 indeed constituted an act of statecraft under the banner of humanitarian rescue. Yet it also revealed how tragically involved certain Druze figures in the Israeli military were with persecution politics disfiguring their kin across colonial borders in Syria. And yet, regardless of its impact, the Israeli attack on Damascus certainly fueled a retaliatory logic in which the new Syrian government, steeped in its own apparatus of paranoia and sovereign fragility, intensified its persecution of the population Israel claimed to defend. In a striking collapse of logic, some in Syria have even come to believe that persecuting Druze communities in Suwayda and beyond itself makes for a form of resistance against the Israeli occupier.

But there is something more to that: Not only did the self-serving claim by Israel to come to the rescue of Druze in Syria materialize their political accusations but it also elicited a troubling silence—or worse, a withdrawal of sympathy—from many intellectuals and academics who otherwise speak the language of critique. In such moments, the intricacies of modern colonial facts too often become flattened into moral discomfort, dismissed as simply "complicated," a code word that serves less to understand than to disavow and abnegate responsibility. We are, it seems to me, confronting a political tragedy laid bare in real time by some aspects of what might be called the Druze Question: Members of the Druze community whose communal identity was deliberately reshaped

under Israeli colonial architecture and who historically committed and continue to commit the colonial sin—namely, their conscription (and resistance to that conscription) into the Israeli military and their isolation from the broader Palestinian body politic—now find themselves instrumentalized in a war not of their making. Their colonial mandatory participation in the Israeli genocide on Gaza has reverberated beyond borders, offering the new Syrian regime and many of its audiences a convenient narrative of betrayal, legitimating revenge. This toxic circularity between colonial and national orders reduced Druze communities across Syria to killable subjects, not for what they have done, but for what their Druze kin, in Palestine under Israeli rule, have historically been compelled to become (Parsons 2007). The sin of collaboration, itself a symptom of coercive conscription into Israeli colonial sovereignty, is no longer confined to its perpetrators; it has transferred, in classical scapegoat fashion, onto those Druze communities in Syria that neither partook in nor benefited from this colonial drama. It is the deadly burden of their kin's colonial sin in Israel, to put it differently, that members of the Druze community in Syria are made to bear. And while this sin is neither unique to nor confined within the experience of Palestinian Druze citizens of Israel—as many so-called Israeli Arabs might attest—in Syria today, amid the consolidation of an injured Sunni primacy, such historical legacies become unutterable, and what emerges is not a reckoning with colonialism, but the reification of a so-called Druze problem.

When the video of Munir al-Rajma's execution circulated online, alongside another showing three young Druze men being forced to jump to their deaths from a balcony, I happened to be passing through Lyon, France. I was staying not far from the Hôtel de Ville de Lyon when, from my small balcony, I saw a few dozen people gathering in a silent protest beneath a Druze flag. The last thing I expected to encounter was a protest—least of all one beneath a Druze flag. I later learned that Lyon and its suburbs are home to some seventy-five Druze families, many of whom arrived as refugees from Syria. Suwayda itself, worth noting, was home to more than 60,000 individuals wanted by the Assad regime, either for mandatory or reserve military service, or for so-called security-related reasons (al-Naddaf 2024). I joined the protest, and as we stood in silence, a handful of young men formed a counter-protest, raising the new Syrian flag. What struck me, almost immediately, was the affective register of their demonstration: It expressed explicit support for the new government's military actions in Suwayda. Notably, such groups of protesters have recently been joined online by a legion of Muslim influencers across European cities, lending support to the government and stoking the flames of persecution. In this particular counter-protest, they

carried a palpable pride in marking themselves as self-declared Sunni citizens who claim ownership of the state in the presence of unwanted Druze subjects, those whose persecution back home has been justified in the name of a Syrian national unity. That moment unsettled something in my political thinking.

I had never imagined the Druze flag capable of expressing anything about me, nor had I ever needed it to. But at that protest with its wider context, this flag appeared not as a symbol of pride or nationalism, but as the seemingly only language remaining through which to respond to a language of annihilation. One responds, after all, in the language through which one is targeted (Arendt 1994, 12). But here is the paradox: Our lives are rendered killable in Syria because we are Druze, and we are claimed as worthy of rescue by Israel for that very same reason. These two political facts are intimately related. Our death and our supposed salvation are both articulated through the same (or perhaps obverse) grammar in the name of two state projects. I do not say this to elicit sympathy, nor to suggest that the plurality of Druze subject positions today is collapsing into one of victimhood. Rather, I am pointing to familiarly toxic modes of interpellation that many Druze have come to inhabit in the space and time of the modern state, modes that demand contradiction as its cost of survival.

Returning to Suwayda. On Friday, August 15, 2025, this besieged Syrian province became the site of one of its most powerful demonstrations in recent years. In a landscape scarred by state violence, bereaved mothers gave voice to unspeakable loss, while others declared their defiance. Their utterances, far from being reducible to individual grief, articulated a lucid demand: the severance of all political affiliations with the apparatuses of the new Syrian government. This was no ordinary protest; it marked the first public utterances after the storm of persecution, utterances that also articulated a political rupture, a break in historical time, if you will, in which the specter of a tragic future briefly revealed itself. What has now emerged as an unmistakable truth of this moment is the raising of several Israeli flags, no longer the ambiguous symbol caught in grainy footage or whispered rumor, but a deliberate and visible gesture, even if only by some. These were not hand-drawn, furtive emblems waved in haste; they were raised with intention and clarity. And one might pause to ask: What political horizon does such an act, even if by a few individuals, gesture toward? How could anyone seek inclusion in a colonial project that so systematically denies to others the very political recognition they themselves demand in Syria—worse still, a colonial project actively engaged in genocidal violence against Palestinians, kin by both geography and history? And yet perhaps the more difficult question is, how does one come to reasonably prefer one mode of domination over another?

In the persecution roaming Syria, such a display does not, as one might hope, make for a moment of strategic irony. It is rather a symptom of a political condition, perhaps even endgame, in which choices are reduced to forms of domination, and survival becomes the only available reasoning. Let us not forget that scarcely two weeks before the raising of the Israeli flag—a gesture now saturated with visibility and discursive weight—others, like Munir al-Rajma, had cried out with equal conviction, affirming their Syrianness in the face of obliteration. Their scream rescued nothing. It did not save them from being killed. And yet precisely because raising an Israeli flag is not the same as declaring oneself Syrian, what seems to be facing many in Suwayda today is not a politics of affiliation, but a politics of desperation. It is less a question of whether one seeks to become Israeli. Raising a flag is not an embrace of belonging, but a preference for marginalization over subjugation. For to be a colonial subject within one machinery of military violence is, for some, more tolerable than to be another machinery's perpetual victim. This is a preference for the lesser humiliation, a tragic preference to participate in oppression rather than be wholly subjected to it. For now, Suwayda has become the staging ground of a deeper contradiction: a Syrian government, wounded and grasping for the symbolic coherence of a Syrian Leviathan, confronting an Israeli colonial project whose ambitions extend beyond territorial expansion to the production of imperial subjects themselves.

ABSTRACT

This article reads recent episodes of violence across southern Syria following the collapse of the authoritarian Assad regime, which ruled from 1970 to 2024. It traces the emergence of a "state of injury," a form of political order shaped by the unmended wounds of Syria's recent past. Within this order, the minoritarian mark "Druze" has come to signify not only religious difference but also a subject position burdened by the suspicion named "Israel." This suspicion, which fuels political accusation and increasingly escalates into lethal retribution, has become a site through which the new Syrian state comes to operate in the same realm with Israeli colonial and aspiring imperial logics. To make this argument, the article turns to one genealogy that has proved critical to these logics: the so-called Druze Question as it has taken form across Palestine, Israel, and Syria. [injury; persecution; colonial sin; retribution; Syria; Israel; Palestine]

ملخص

تتناول هذه المقالة المجازر الأخيرة في جنوب سوريا، في أعقاب انهيار نظام الأسد الاستبدادي الذي حكم البلاد من عام ١٩٧٠ إلى عام ٢٠٢٤. وتتتبّع المقالة نشوء ما يمكن تسميته بـ«الدولة الجريحة»، وهي شكل من أشكال النظام السياسي الذي تشكّل تحت وطأة جروح الماضي السوري القريب التي لم تلتئم. وفي ظل هذا النظام

الجديد، لم تعد العلامة الأقلوية «الدرزية» تشير إلى الاختلاف الديني فحسب، بل أصبحت أيضًا موقعًا للذات مثقلًا بريبة تتجسّد في اسم «إسرائيل». وقد غدت هذه الريبة، التي تغذّي الاتهامات السياسية وتتصاعد على نحو متزايد إلى أعمال انتقامية قاتلة، حيّزًا تعمل من خلاله الدولة السورية الجديدة في المجال نفسه الذي يعمل فيه المنطق الاستعماري الإسرائيلي ذي النزعة التوسّعية. ولإثبات هذه الحجة، تعود المقالة إلى أحد الأنساب التاريخية التي اكتسبت أهميّة مُتجددة في اللحظة الراهنة: ما يُسمّى «المسألة الدرزية»، وتحديدًا تشكّلها عبر فلسطين وإسرائيل وسوريا.

[الدولة الجريحة — محنة — الخطيئة الاستعمارية — الانتقام — سوريا — إسرائيل — فلسطين]

NOTES

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1. Of those killed in Suwayda in July 2025, 1,342 were Druze, many of them civilians subjected to summary execution, alongside 70 members of the local Bedouin community, and at least 225 members of government forces (Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic 2026, 15).
2. The term predates its use in Syria, appearing earlier in Egypt during the Egyptian Revolution (Abdelbary 2020).
3. While the intellectually rigorous debate in Arabic among Syrian intellectuals surrounding the notion of "Sunni fascism" exceeds the scope of this article, I refer to it here to mark its reemergence following an essay by Maurice Aaek (2025), in which he argues that the phenomenon dominates both the emergent state and broader Sunni public in Syria.
4. For an early reading of al-Sharaa's political lexicon, see Sawah (2025).
5. In cities across Germany and France, small counter-protests confronted Druze vigils mourning their kin in Suwayda. Participants waved the Syrian revolution flag while openly supporting the new government's actions. In one provocation, a Dabke broke out before mourners. These politics of resentment show how deeply remembered pain now shapes even diasporic political life.
6. For a recent and insightful account of the language and visual rhetoric of humiliation in the Arabic-speaking world, see Roxanne Euben (2025), especially what she terms "spectacles of sovereignty."
7. For instance, in denying links to the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Sharaa has publicly asserted that he has been "the most harmed" by ISIS, framing himself as that group's "biggest victim" (*Middle East Monitor* 2025).
8. In addition to the scholarship of Kais Firro and Amal Jamal cited above, see Rami Zeedan's *Bnei Arav Battalion* (2015), a meticulous account that challenges aspects of Israeli historiography by tracing, from 1948 to 1956, the recruitment policies directed at Muslims, Christians, Druze, Bedouins, and Circassians into the Israeli army, with particular attention to the implementation of the conscription law among Druze youth.
9. This message emerged as a key subtext in discussions among Druze public figures, featured on the Hebrew-language podcast *The Druze Voice*, https://1045fm.maariv.co.il/programs/program.aspx?c41t4nzVQ=EHDG

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