

Druze militias ready to battle Syria's new leaders : NPR

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By

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Three days after a spate of killings targeting another minority in Latakia, Druze leaders evacuated more than 1,200 students from universities along the Mediterranean. They arrived to safety late at night on March 10 and were greeted by the Druze militia fighters at border checkpoints.

Emily Garthwaite for NPR

SWEIDA, Syria — The road from Damascus to Sweida winds through outcrops of black volcanic rock, past rainfed vineyards and olive groves and up to the Mountain of the Druze — a natural fortress where the small indigenous group is preparing for battle.

The Druze are a key [religious minority](#) in Syria. They comprise only 3% of the country's population, which is predominantly Sunni Muslim, but their fierce independence and militia control of their region give them disproportionate power.

Syria's new president pledged to disband all militias in this multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian country after the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime last December. So far, with the Druze, those efforts have been unsuccessful. The lack of agreement, along with rising sectarian violence, is undermining efforts to build a new, united Syria.

"There is no consensus between us and the Damascus government," Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, the Druze spiritual leader in Syria, told NPR from his village home in Sweida, a predominantly Druze province in the country's south.

He said talks continue — but his characterization of the new interim government made clear that agreement would be difficult: "Armed terrorist factions now consider themselves in charge of the administration in Damascus. This is neither acceptable on the Syrian level nor internationally," Hijri said.



The road from Damascus to Sweida winds through outcrops of black volcanic rock.

Emily Garthwaite for NPR



Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri stands in his village home in Sweida on March 12.

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Hijri, the chief Druze authority on political and security matters, was referring to the Islamist militant group [Hayat Tahrir al Sham \(HTS\)](#), which led the coalition of opposition fighters that toppled Assad. HTS is designated [as a terrorist organization](#) by the U.S. and the United Nations.

President Ahmed al-Sharaa, a former member of [al-Qaida](#), has struggled to convince the West and many Syrians that he no longer adheres to that group's ideology of fighting for an Islamic caliphate. He has said minority rights will be fully respected in the new Syria.

Hijri insisted the Druze militias that have maintained security in Sweida, Syria's southernmost province, would remain intact and continue to control the province's borders with Syrian government-controlled territory. In the absence of an agreement with Damascus, Druze militias in Sweida, most of which defer to Hijri, say they are gathering fighters and making plans to repel government forces if needed.

"We do not want anyone to enter from outside because this is a transitional phase and a dangerous phase," Hijri said.

On most days, Hijri holds court from a stone house in the village of Qanawat. On a recent day, village elders, the province's Roman Catholic bishop and political figures filled the benches of a reception hall, waiting to meet with the man who will likely chart the future of Syrian Druze.

Who are the Druze?

The Druze have a long history of taking up arms from their mountain stronghold. A century ago, [Sultan al-Atrash led the Great Syrian Revolt against French colonial rule](#), which eventually led to the establishment of a central Syrian government. The country won independence 11 years later.

Dozens of Druze militias, grouped into four main coalitions, now secure Sweida, including manning checkpoints that keep government security forces from entering the province.

They are bound by their faith, a monotheistic offshoot of Shia Islam which developed in the 10th and 11th centuries. Spiritual leaders say while the Muslim holy book, the Quran, is a main reference, their faith incorporates certain beliefs found in other religions, such as reincarnation.



Supporters of Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, the Druze spiritual leader, are welcomed at a reception in his village home in Sweida on March 12.

Emily Garthwaite for NPR



Outside Hijri's reception hall, a stone plaque depicts St. George slaying a dragon. The Druze widely believe St. George to be a reincarnation of St. John the Baptist.

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Outside Hijri's reception hall, a stone plaque depicts St. George slaying a dragon; Druze officials say the saint is widely believed by members of their faith to be a reincarnation of St. John the Baptist.

The Druze are [also known as al-Muwahhidun](#) — a term that comes from the Arabic word "union," reflecting a mystical oneness with God. Persecution over the centuries by Muslim empires left much of the population in mountain strongholds in Syria and Lebanon, with smaller populations in Israel and Jordan.

The religion does not accept converts or allow marriage outside the faith. Druze assume a constant closeness to God that does not require specific prayers or houses of worship. It values philosophy and reasoning over rote worship.

"As long as you have reached mental maturity, I am not responsible for you and you are not responsible for me," Sheikh Yasser Abu Fakhr, a senior spiritual leader, explained in an interview with NPR. "You cannot take me to heaven, and I cannot take you to hell."



Sheikh Yasser Abu Fakhr, a senior Druze spiritual leader, at home in Sweida, Syria, on March 8.

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Neglect by the Syrian regime

After anti-Assad protests in Sweida in 2023, the regime consolidated an economic blockade.

In one of the most fertile regions in the country, famous for its apples and other produce, farmers could no longer sell their goods to other regions. Factories shut down. Smuggling across the Jordanian border boomed.

Protesters, many of them women, [called for](#) al-Assad to step down and implement reforms, including releasing Druze detainees, combating corruption and revitalizing the economy.

Sectarian dangers

In March, hundreds of members of Syria's Alawite minority — another offshoot from Shia Islam — were killed in a spate of revenge attacks by Sunni Arab fighters in Latakia, on the country's Mediterranean coast. Syria's deposed president was Alawite.

President Sharaa said the Sunni Arab attackers were not under his government's control. But the government's failure to protect minorities sent shock waves through the Druze community.



Three days after the killings in Latakia, as soon as a curfew was lifted, Druze leaders evacuated every Druze student from universities on the coast — more than 1,200 of them. Some were just months away from obtaining their degrees.

Arriving late at night at the checkpoint to Sweida in a convoy of more than 30 buses, many of the students danced in the aisles in celebration at finally reaching safety.



Evacuated students arrived late at night on March 10 and were greeted by the Sweida Military Council at border checkpoints.

Emily Garthwaite for NPR



Evacuated Druze students celebrated their evacuation to safety on buses after Alawites were targeted in revenge attacks by Sunni Arab militants, March 10.

Emily Garthwaite for NPR

The young people, including future engineers and physicians, spoke of their fears in three days of being confined to dorms after the government cut electricity, running water and phone signals to try to quell the anti-Alawite violence.

In one of the increasing alliances between minority groups distrustful of the central government, Druze leaders said they also evacuated dozens of Alawite families from the area and brought them to Sweida for refuge.

"Bloodshed always results in more bloodshed," said Hijri. "We reject this sectarianism. We want to build a civil state."

"We can't kid ourselves," said Bassim Abu Fakhr, a commander and spokesman for the Men of Dignity movement, the most powerful Druze militia. "After what happened on the coast, we have reached the conclusion that if the situation continues like this, we are not capable of living together" with other sects, he said — especially Islamist Sunni Arabs.

Israeli protection, Druze suspicion

Approximately 150,000 Druze live in neighboring Israel and the occupied Golan Heights, which Israel seized from Syria in 1967. Unlike other Arabs, Israeli Druze are required to serve in the Israeli Army.

"We are always loyal to the land where we are," said Hijri, the spiritual leader in Syria.

Israel has [been working to shore up support](#) in Syria's Druze community, though some Druze see its efforts as divisive. In March it allowed Druze clerics from the Syrian side of the Golan Heights to enter Israel for the first time since the creation of the Jewish state in

1948. The group's visit to a major shrine, overseen by the Israeli military, was opposed by Druze leaders in the rest of Syria.



Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, the Druze spiritual leader, in his village home in Sweida, March 10.

Emily Garthwaite for NPR



Israel has increased airstrikes against government military installations in southern Syria and has warned the new Syrian government not to deploy forces south of Damascus — a significant threat to Syrian sovereignty. In March, after a clash in the Damascus suburb of Jaramana between a Druze militia and Syrian government forces, the Israeli defense ministry [said Israel would intervene militarily to protect the Druze.](#)

"We will not allow the extreme Islamic regime in Syria to harm the Druze. If the regime harms the Druze, it will be struck by us," said Israeli defense minister Israel Katz.

Druze in Sweida and Jaramana said they neither asked for nor wanted that protection.

"When Netanyahu says he wants to protect the Druze, it is to achieve his own interests," said Bassim Abu Fakhr, referring to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The 35-year-old said his movement had men in 100 villages, armed with rifles, machine guns, rockets and mortars, but declined to give the number of fighters.



A grave of a military fighter in Sweida, March 12.

Emily Garthwaite for NPR



Bassim Abu Fakhr, spokesman for the Men of Dignity movement, March 10.

Emily Garthwaite for NPR

"Of course we have concerns" about the new Syrian government, he said, [citing the 2015 massacre](#) of more than 20 Druze villagers in northwest Idlib province by an al-Qaida affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra.



Sharaa, the new Syrian president — who [then led Jabhat al-Nusra](#) and went by the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Jolani — [dissolved Jabhat al-Nusra](#) in 2016, eventually to create HTS.

Although now, as Syria's leader, he has advocated for full protection and rights for the country's minorities, the Druze are not convinced.

"They consider us infidels, that they must kill us and rape our women and steal our money," said Bassim Abu Fakhr. "So yes, there is concern. But we are ready, we have weapons and refuse to let them in and out of the mountain."

Abu Fakhr later said his group was negotiating with the ministries of defense and interior to incorporate fighters from the Men of Dignity into government forces

"We are not interested in fighting this government," he added.

He said the Druze are not seeking independence: "We are not loyal to the government but we are keen to unite Syria, with Damascus as our capital. Because a person has no dignity unless he is in his country."

New Druze militias

In the face of perceived threats, new Druze militias are forming. The latest, the Sweida Military Council, has a seemingly softer view on accepting help from other countries, including Israel and the United States.

"We are ready to cooperate with anyone who preserves the dignity of the land and the mountains, while preserving the integrity of our land," said Tariq al-Shoufi, an officer who defected from the Assad regime's military forces and now commands the paramilitary group. "We ask the free world, led by the United States, and we ask Israel to defend the entire Druze region against any extremist attack."



At a historic stone house in one of Sweida's southern villages, Tariq al-Shoufi and other commanders held a recruitment rally for new Sweida Military Council on March 8.

Emily Garthwaite for NPR



Members of the the Sweida Military Council, a paramilitary group in Sweida, March 8.

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Shoufi said he had not held talks with U.S. officials and said the militia was in the beginning stages of recruitment, relying on weapons seized from regime army bases abandoned in December.

At a historic stone house in one of Sweida's southern villages, Shoufi and other commanders held a recruitment rally, gathering men and older teenagers to ask them to fight with them.

Some of the villagers raised concerns about where weapons will come from. One said people are having trouble feeding their families.

In the end, the several dozen men gathered in the centuries-old house to pledge their allegiance to Shoufi's militia, whooping and singing while performing a battle version of a celebratory dance.

Several launched into a song about the thrill of blood flowing and swords on their enemies' necks.

"If you are a man," they sang, "come to the Druze Mountain and we will see what you are made of."



Men gathered to pledge their allegiance to the new militia, whooping and singing while performing a battle version of a celebratory dance, March 8.

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Sangar Khaleel contributed reporting from Sweida.

[Syria](#)

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