



## Russian-Druze Relations and the ISIS Attack on Suwayda

**OE Watch Commentary:** On 25 July 2018, at around 0430 local time, ISIS gunmen coming from the Syrian Desert approached several villages in northeastern Suwayda Province. Split into groups of between 20 and 50 men, according to eyewitness accounts, they rampaged through seven villages located at the edge of the desert. Another group made its way into the city of Suwayda and used suicide bombers to inflict as many casualties as possible at that early morning hour, when most people were asleep. Syrian Army units had been active in the desert east of Suwayda until the month before, but had since been redirected to the neighboring provinces of Daraa and Quneitra. Armed local residents and provincial self-defense militias were eventually able to fend off the ISIS attack without help from the Syrian or Russian militaries, though not before ISIS had killed over 250 people and kidnapped 30 women and children from one of the villages.

Suwayda Province is inhabited by the Druze, a religious minority with a population of over half a million in Syria (and smaller communities in Lebanon and Israel). Suwayda has remained neutral in the ongoing Syrian War, though it is nominally on the government side, given the presence of government institutions, employees and security agents in the province. The government's writ is limited, though, and rather than joining the Syrian Army or forming loyalist militias, the province's military aged males have mostly (though not exclusively) armed themselves and established independent communal defense groups, most notably the "Rijal al-Karama" (Men of Dignity).

A Russian delegation met with leaders from Suwayda last June, as Syrian forces were beginning their campaign to retake the neighboring provinces of Daraa and Quneitra. According to the first accompanying excerpt, from the Lebanese news website *al-Modon*, the Russians accused the Rijal al-Karama of being a "terrorist organization" in part due to their refusal to allow the Syrian Army's "Tiger Forces" to establish a base in a town on the outskirts of Suwayda. Following the meeting, the Rijal al-Karama's leadership responded with a "strongly worded statement" that described Russia as "a sponsor and creator of terrorism that is also an occupying country."

Another Russian delegation visited Suwayda in mid-July, shortly before the ISIS attack and on the heels of the Syrian government's recapture of Daraa and Quneitra. The Russian envoy offered a reconciliation agreement to some of the province's more than 50,000 military aged males wanted for compulsory military service by the Syrian government. The reconciliation offer would allow them to join the Syrian Army's Russian-backed "5th Legion" (5th Corps), and specifically, a military force that would hold Daraa and Quneitra for the government. Suwayda's leaders were noncommittal.

Throughout the conflict, the Alawite-controlled Syrian government has been unable to entice the majority of Syria's Druze to fight on its side. Russia, as the second accompanying excerpt from *al-Modon* claims, is now "committed to end the dodging of military service in Suwayda, using both carrots and sticks." They are not the only party seeking to deepen its influence among Syria's Druze. As claimed in the third accompanying article from the Syrian opposition media source *Enab Baladi*, Iran and Hezbollah have also sought to make inroads in the province, though with limited success. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

*"...The Russians seem committed to end the dodging of military service in Suwayda, using both carrots and sticks..."*

### Source:

السويداء مشايخ الكرامة يعتبرون روسيا قوة إحتلال.. بعدما صنفتهم تنظيمياً إرهابياً  
"Suwayda: al-Karama Leaders Consider Russia an Occupation Force after it Described them as a 'Terrorist Organization'," *al-Modon*, 24 June 2018. <https://goo.gl/13miVr>

*The Rijal al-Karama Forces in Suwayda issued a strongly worded statement accusing Russia of being an "occupation force," following a noteworthy meeting between a Russian delegation and Suwayda notables. In it, the Russians described the areas under the control of the Rijal al-Karama Forces as controlled by a "terrorist organization."*

*According to the statement: "Russia's latest statements regarding the presence of terrorist organizations in the Jabal al-Arab area are a very dangerous escalation. How can a sponsor and creator of terrorism that is also an occupying country describe as terrorists those who carry weapons to defend their land?"...*

*The Russian delegation offered the Suwayda notables a reconciliation agreement with the Rijal al-Karama, apparently in response to the group's recent forbidding of massive military reinforcements from the "Tiger Forces" from basing in the village of al-Mazraa, in parallel with the launch of a limited military operation in eastern Daraa Province... [the Suwayda notables] turned down the Russian proposal and the accusation of Rijal al-Karama of being a terrorist group, considering that the armed group had not carried out any terrorist attacks against the state or civilians."*

### Source:

تصنيف فصائل درزية بالإرهاب خطة روسية لتسويق الفيلق الخامس  
"Druze Factions Classified as 'Terrorists': Russian Plan to Market the '5th Legion'," *al-Modon*, 16 July 2018. <https://goo.gl/WR9ecM>

*A source told al-Modon that Russia seeks to create a military formation in the south, including Suwayda, under the banner of the "5th Legion" (5th Corps), overseen by Russian and regime officers, in addition to commanders of loyalist militias from the local community.*

*The "reconciliation mechanisms" extend to those wanted for military and reserve service, as well as deserters, but not those wanted for criminal or political proceedings or those on the terrorist list. Those enlisting would serve in the southern provinces: Daraa, Suwayda and Quneitra, although their contract stipulates service throughout Syrian territory...*

*This is not the first Russian offer in Suwayda. In May 2017 a Russian military envoy accompanied by a delegation of Syrian political and military leaders met in the Suwayda cultural center with religious and civilian leaders from the province. The Russian envoy offered a solution to those behind on their service...*

*The Russians seem committed to end the dodging of military service in Suwayda, using both carrots and sticks.*

(continued)



## Continued: Russian-Druze Relations and the ISIS Attack on Suwayda

**Source:** “‘Black Wednesday’ Heralds New Phase in Sweida Governorate,” *Enab Baladi*, 30 July 2018. <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/07/black-wednesday-announces-new-phase-in-sweida-governorate/>

*Activists from Suwayda accused the Syrian regime of planning the attacks implemented by ISIS, under the many indicators that suggest this, including the military reinforcements that the regime has formerly withdraw from the desert towards the eastern countryside of Daraa, a step that was preceded by transporting ISIS troops from Yarmouk Camp, in southern Damascus, to the eastern desert of Suwayda under an unannounced deal...*

*A civil activist from the city, on the condition of anonymity, told Enab Baladi that the “Islamic State” is the wining card the Syrian regime is utilizing to enter the governorate as a “savior,” after it lost much of its influence within its borders, turning into a mere title, in addition to stressing its role as a “protector of minorities” in front of the international community...*

*Journalist Malek Abu al-Khair... said that Suwayda has, for five years, been having a political war with Iran, under the table; however, today the conflict has been turned into an open military war through the “Islamic State.”*

*According to Abu al-Khair, Iran is seeking to deepen its presence in the governorate, and tried, in the past a few years, to open Hussiniat, Shiite religious centers, “a thing that the people refuse;” they then tried to exploit people’s poverty, buying lands and convincing some of the Druze young people to become Shia and join the Lebanese militia of “Hezbollah”, which they also failed to achieve.*



Suwayda Province with districts on Syria Map.

Source: Berkaynsnlf [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>) or GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>)], via Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:As-Suwayda.png>.