

# Nonviolent Protest Movement in Suweida Continues to Resurrect Calls from the Syrian Revolution

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Dec 18, 2023

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Brief Analysis

**With each day of nonviolent protest, the people of Suweida province have solidified themselves as a symbol that resonates with Syrians everywhere, whether abroad or within a country that remains split between regime, Iranian, Russian, Turkish, and local faction control.**

On December 8, residents of Suweida city and the surrounding areas came out to protest (<https://x.com/suwayda24/status/1733175724662460699?s=20>) the Assad regime yet again. Days later, as the movement entered its sixteenth week, a long line of protesters appeared in the town of Salkhad ([https://x.com/alrasd\\_sy/status/1734564637859889592?s=20](https://x.com/alrasd_sy/status/1734564637859889592?s=20)) in the south of Suweida province. On these streets, waves of protesters chant “the people want the downfall of the regime,” echoing cries of the Arab Spring that has in the past sparked swift military backlash from the Syrian Regime. Syrian opposition flags are common, along with the Druze flag—the community to which the large majority of Suweida’s inhabitants belong.

Meanwhile, several residents of Salkhad and nearby Shahbaa city broke into their local Baath party offices to either close down or take documents from an already closed building. These offices joined the fate of other Baath party offices throughout the province (<https://suwayda24.com/?p=22051>) that have been shut down in towns including Melh, Arman, al-Qurayya, and Sama al-Bardan. In videos posted to social media, these protesters tore up pictures of Bashar al-Assad in a clear challenge and explicit rejection of the regime’s legitimacy, demanding its departure. In the events of this one week, Syrians following the protests could see a microcosm of the larger Suweida protest movement, now over a hundred days in and with no signs of stopping.

Although the peaceful demonstrations in Suweida are no longer in the international spotlight since the outbreak of the Gaza war, the movement is remarkable for its longevity and continued open articulation of so many of the ideas that initially motivated Syrians to take to the streets in 2011, and that the Syrian regime has tried so desperately to repress in the intervening years.

These protests are the means through which the demonstrators communicate with the world, and have become a symbol for many Syrians both within the country and outside of it. When they began in mid-August 2023, their unprecedented scope meant that they were almost immediately hailed as a second wave of the Syrian revolution. At the time, many wondered: Will Suweida be the turning point? Will this movement be able to oust the Assad regime and usher in a democratic political process that could make reconstruction possible, allowing the return of refugees and the displaced?

While protesters in Suweida have not yet accomplished these admittedly audacious goals, neither have they been silenced or forced into submission in the intervening months. This in itself should be seen as a victory; the Suweida movement has become the longest, most organized, widespread, and participatory movement since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, a mixed-gender civilian movement with broad and influential participation from all segments of Suweida's society.

### **Economic Turmoil and Political Frustration**

Suweida's protests, like many political demonstrations, initially began in response to the heavy economic difficulties its residents face. Prolonged power outages and fuel scarcity have made it even more difficult to secure necessities during the winter months. As a result, Syrians inside the country are growing angrier, and they increasingly have literally nothing left to lose.

The Governorate of Suweida came back under full regime control in 2017 as the result of an internationally brokered truce (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/10/world/middleeast/syria-truce-jordan-golan-trump-russia-united-nations.html>). But residents of Suweida have lived under crippling poverty, food shortages, and a fragile security situation in the years since. Residents also express concern for their physical safety, describing the continued influence of Assad's drug trade in their areas as a threat to the fragile security that the local people of the region are trying to maintain.

In response, Suweida city residents have used the city's central Karama (Dignity) square to protest before; including in June 2020 (<https://www.syriahr.com/en/169467/>), April 2021 (<https://www.syriahr.com/en/213434/>), February 2022 (<https://www.syriahr.com/en/239009/>), December 2022 (<https://youtu.be/dhpiM3zAzKo>), and January 2023 (<https://www.syriahr.com/en/284937/>). Each time, these protests have focused mainly on living conditions, although chants occasionally drifted towards political—including calls to end the regime (<https://www.syriahr.com/en/169467/>) and for the implementation of Resolution 2254. As one protester stated presciently (<https://www.syriahr.com/en/279425/>) last December, Suweida “might calm down for a while, but unless there is meaningful change, things will explode later on.”

Over the past year, both economic and security conditions have instead continued to deteriorate. Anti-smuggling operations from neighboring countries have alarmed residents of Suweida, which lies near the southern border with Jordan; in August, the Jordanian military conducted an airstrike in May (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/jordan-strikes-iran-linked-drugs-factory-southern-syria-sources-2023-05-08/>) resulting in the death of a major drug dealer in the eastern countryside of Suweida and a second airstrike (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2023/08/31/air-strike-targets-syrian-farm-on-border-with-jordan/>) in August.

Israel's war in Gaza—and the possibility of a spillover into Syrian territory—weighs heavy on the minds of Syrians. But for many, their eyes and hearts remain focused on the popular movement in Suweida even as the movement has faded from international attention. For the protestors themselves, this movement represents everything the Syrian people want and aspire to achieve with the support of global powers.

### **Articulating Demands and Emphasizing Nonviolence**

Since the start of peaceful protests, there have been repeated calls on the international community to activate UN Resolution 2254, which requires an internationally supervised political transition and the removal of the Assad regime. The protesters have also demanded the disclosure of the fate of detainees and forced disappearances, in addition to the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syrian territory.

These protests have constituted a qualitative leap in expressing a rejection of Assad's continued rule, and the vehemence of these demands appears to have caught the regime off-guard. Suweida province is considered the main city for the Muwahhidun sect of Syria's Druze community. Because the protests emerge from a major Druze center, these calls for an end to the regime are particularly powerful in the face of the regime's repeated efforts to validate its rule by claiming to be the protector of minorities, an assertion it has made since the beginning of the events in 2011.

But Suweida has not forgotten the regime's use of terrorist forces and thugs against the locals in order to pressure the local community or exact retribution against dissidents. For the regime's part, it has not forgotten the Druze community's refusal to comply with orders to enter the Syrian conflict on the side of Damascus; Suweida's youth have rejected mandatory service in Assad's army for years.

The popular movement in Suweida has benefited from the bitter Syrian experience and learned from its mistakes. Opposition to the Assad government cannot be based on armed resistance, as noted by the intellectual leaders at the beginning of the protests when they mentioned having weapons but decided internally not to resort to their use. They insisted on the peaceful nature of the demonstrations and the civil nature of the movement.

Organizers of the protest movement have also avoided falling into the trap of religious extremism, which would allow the Assad regime to paint the movement as terrorism, as happened repeatedly in other areas of Syria during the last decade. Demonstrators do not fear being accused of betraying the homeland because they demand their freedom and a decent life within Syria. According to their statements, the homeland is the citizens, not the head of the regime that brought occupation and destruction to the country.

The protesters likewise insist on using national slogans that resonate and address the conscience of all segments of the Syrian people. The slogans repeat the calls of the earlier Syrian revolution and have echoed throughout the country, reaffirming the Syrian people's hope for a tangible political solution to free them from the ongoing destruction of what remains of the social and state infrastructure under the continued rule of the Assad regime. This position crystalized after it became clear that this regime has no desire for any proposed solution and after its failure to seize the opportunity following its return to the Arab League with a step-by-step political project, in addition to its continued trade in drugs across borders.

An influential civil society member in Suweida's movement likewise emphasized the internal Syrian nature of their security concerns: "We did not come to Al-Karama Square to protect the borders of Jordan or the Gulf. We know that drug smuggling tunnels cannot be an agreement agreed upon by all parties. We will not accept being victims of these complex agreements imposed by the reality of war and our geographical location. We are not border guards; we are guardians of the dignity, freedom, and democracy of Syrians."

### **Defining Characteristics: Broad Participation and Support of Local Leadership**

The Suweida protests are notable for the large swath of society that has come out in support—this is not just a youth or male movement. The participation of women is especially visible; numerous pictures and videos show Syrian women raising banners with their demands—and end to the betrayal of the Syrian people and the lies that have covered up their suffering—directed at Western society and Syrians everywhere.

An Arabic language teacher from the heart of the demonstrations in Al-Karama Square in Suweida explains her reason for participating: "I went to the square to express my desire to secure a safe future for my daughter. If she goes to school tomorrow, she must be safe as if she were in her second home, not in danger of violence or drugs. When

she chooses to travel abroad for her studies, it should be possible for her to have her opportunity, be welcomed, and not be hated or suspected just because she is from Syria. This is what the Assad regime did; it made Syrians hated worldwide, strangers in their own land, without a port, airport, or decision. Our voice here in the square is the voice of all Syrians, those who speak and those who cannot speak due to fear. What we say here is what we want, and we will not back down."

From the very beginning, the active participation of local Druze religious leaders has also been notable, and their presence is often visible in al-Karama square. Their involvement has signaled implicit support for the movement's demands, along with an implicit warning to the Assad regime against any foolish actions targeting the protesters.

Sheikh Hikmat Al-Hajri, the spiritual leader of the Druze Muwahhidun sect addressed the youth in the early days of the protest, saying, "We are behind you, supporting your national stances. However, we are not politicians; you, the youth, understand politics better."

According to activists on the ground, the Druze religious leadership joined the youth in their direction towards protest squares, even though they had previously maintained a mediating position between the people and the regime, attempting to preserve balance and calm.

They add that the international community should engage with the popular movement and its civilian leadership, not just religious leaders. The Suweida popular movement is seen as an extension of the 2011 revolution, not a Druze-specific movement as the regime portrays it, nor a separatist movement. The demand is for a comprehensive solution for all of Syria based on UN resolutions, ensuring justice and a decent life for all Syrians.

### **The Southern Connection: Daraa and Suweida**

On the western border of Suweida province is Daraa, the birthplace of the original protests that sparked the Syrian revolution. While different provinces, both are considered part of the Hawran region (<https://www.britannica.com/place/Hawran>). The security grip on Daraa province in southern Syria has made any movement against the Assad regime effectively impossible, especially after the so-called "reconciliations" imposed by Russian forces in 2018. The people of Daraa live in a brutal security situation, with sweeping arrests and assassinations of former rebels, in addition to a number of military checkpoints throughout the area. It's noteworthy that Daraa is one of the prominent Syrian regions that broke away from Assad's control, fully engaging in the revolution against him until 2018.

Although armed opposition to Assad has died down, Daraa has not ceased to demand the freedom of Syria, including through sporadic protests (<https://www.syriahr.com/en/148168/>). When protests demanding Assad's departure in Suweida erupted, Daraa did not hesitate to join its sister in the mountain. Regular gatherings supporting the ongoing popular movement in Suweida began, with dozens of people from Daraa participating in massive nighttime demonstrations. Some gathered in front of the symbolic Omari Mosque, considered by many to be the birthplace of the Syrian revolution, demanding the overthrow of Assad and the implementation of UN Resolution 2254. A statement (<https://jusoor.co/en/details/local-initiatives-to-organize-daraas-military-and-civil-affairs>) from the Supreme Council of Daraa Province/Advisory Board on November 2, 2023 announced support for Suweida province and its peaceful movement towards achieving a state of justice and citizenship for all Syrians.

Delegations from Daraa also participated directly in the demonstrations in Al-Karama Square. For their part, protesters in Suweida have sought and found solidarity with their fellow Syrians, rather than looking to neighboring countries for support. An activist, responding to the question of whether they expect land crossings for food and medical supplies from Jordan to Suweida if the Assad regime besieges the region, stated: "We rely only on Syrians, our brothers and our people. We have been together in facing the aggression and violence that Syria has endured since the beginning of the revolution. The depth we depend on to continue our movement is the Syrian depth close

to Daraa and no other."

### **Rejecting Assad's Threats and Propaganda**

In the past, the Assad regime has responded swiftly and brutally to any signs of dissent, while attempting to coopt frustrations with the country's deplorable standard of living towards the U.S. Caesar sanctions. And yet, the Assad regime has shown little reaction to the Suweida protests thus far, a departure from the brutal crackdown seen in other cities in the past.

While this attitude may appear to be a form of neglect to the popular movement in Suweida, there is evidence that the regime is instead attempting to influence local influential figures through social and security backchannels in the region. These efforts to create a "counter-street" have not had success so far. The Assad regime has also attempted to smear the protests through propaganda, including claims that the movement is in fact a separatist project to join Israel—despite the clear nationalist language used by the protesters.

However, there are also signs that the regime may be adjusting its attitude to the protests. Reports emerged in early December that a protester Murad al-Matni had been **killed (<https://suwayda24.com/?p=20349>)** by live fire against protesters in Suweida, a worrying sign of what may be to come.

### **Current Goals of the Suweida Popular Movement:**

Concerned about potential retaliation by the Assad regime, the Suweida movement urges renewed international attention to the Syrian issue. While conflicts elsewhere in the region are currently capturing the international community's attention, they believe that providing a real solution to the crisis in Syria is integral to regional stability.

In lieu of a comprehensive national solution, protestors are hoping to achieve some degree of administrative autonomy outside of the regime's control and institutions. They argue—assisted by **documents (<https://suwayda24.com/?p=22051>)** reportedly taken from the Baath party headquarters archives—that current institutions are corrupt and suppressive, failing in their duties for years.

Therefore, the local community is looking to establish a civil body to fill the void, forming committees to manage service matters. Nevertheless, activists emphasize the unity of Syrian territory, proposing temporary decentralized administration to meet the community's needs and address the drug problem resulting from government corruption and involvement in drug trafficking.

Nor is there unanimous understanding about the way forward. The people of Suweida are weighing their desire for independence with the pitfalls of self-administration. For one, identification papers will be deemed void unless issued by the official circles of the Syrian regime. Many locals fear that any indication of self-administration at this time will trap the region in an administrative limbo, similar to what happened in northern Syria.

A female activist from Suweida shares her perspective on local discussions about self-administration: "I am one of those who fear self-administration, although I support decentralization in state administration. If self-administration is not in line with a comprehensive constitution for the entire Syrian geography, we will face a new reality with power, authority, and weapons without a constitution or laws to guide citizens. At the same time, there are fears that the region will become isolated. Suweida is resource-poor, and if it isolates itself from Damascus, it will lead to a humanitarian catastrophe."

Nevertheless, the call remains for all occupying forces to leave Syrian territory. And ultimately, for many Syrians it appears that the people of Suweida are in the process of creating a new chapter of the Syrian revolution, one that balances their intense desire for freedom, human rights, and dignity with a commitment to avoiding further violence and bloodshed in a country wracked by years of civil war. ❖

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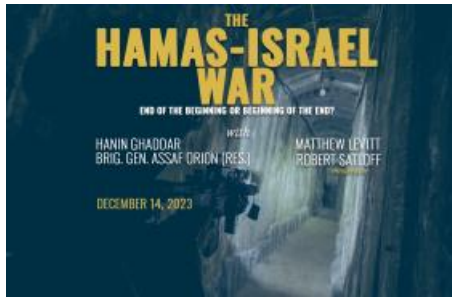
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