

Article:

A Geopolitical Reconfiguration in Suwayda

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Received: 31 August 2025

First Revision Received: 7 June 2026

Second Revision Received: 20 July 2026

Accepted: 15 August 2026

Cite this article (*The Chicago Manual of Style 17th Edition*):

About Diab, Rami, 2026. "A Geopolitical Reconfiguration in Suwayda." *Druze Studies Journal* 3. doi.org/10.17161/druze.3.24372

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Abstract

This study examines the manifestations of Druze particularism in Syria in the context of the centenary of the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925. Unlike the political strategies of Druze communities in Israel and Lebanon, those of the Syrian Druze, who are predominantly concentrated in Suwayda Governorate, remain significantly understudied in the academic literature. This study's originality lies in its geopolitical approach, which examines how collective narratives, territorial attachments, symbols, and historical memory shape contemporary Druze political strategies. It argues that the July 2025 massacres acted as a catalyst for a shift that contributed to the emergence and consolidation of a form of Druze self-determination in Suwayda. The contribution thus explores the geopolitical reconfiguration of Druze particularism in Syria and the changing relationship between Druze identity, territory, and the Syrian state.

Keywords: Druze Particularism, Suwayda, Geopolitics, Syria.

ملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة مظاهر الخصوصية الدرزية في سوريا في سياق الذكرى المئوية للثورة السورية الكبرى عام 1925. وعلى النقيض من الاستراتيجيات السياسية للمجتمعات الدرزية في إسرائيل ولبنان، ظلت استراتيجيات الدروز السوريين -الذين يتركزون بشكل أساسي في محافظة السويداء- تفتقر إلى دراسات كافية في الأدبيات الأكاديمية. وتكمن أصالة هذه الدراسة في اعتمادها مقارنة جيوسياسية تبحث في كيفية تشكيل السرديات الجماعية، والارتباط بالأرض، والرموز، والذاكرة التاريخية للاستراتيجيات السياسية الدرزية المعاصرة. وتجادل الدراسة بأن أحداث ومجازر يوليو 2025 شكلت محفزاً لتحول ساهم في بروز وترسيخ شكل من أشكال تقرير المصير الدرزي الذاتي في السويداء؛ وبذلك، تستكشف الدراسة إعادة التشكيل الجيوسياسي للخصوصية الدرزية في سوريا، وطبيعة العلاقة المتغيرة بين الهوية الدرزية والأرض والدولة السورية

الكلمات المفتاحية: الخصوصية الدروز، السويداء، الجيوسياسية، سوريا

Introduction

The Centenary of the 1925 Great Syrian Revolt was initially expected to be a symbolic occasion to reaffirm the Druze-majority Governorate of Suwayda's place within the Syrian national fabric. Under Sultan al-Atrash's leadership, the Druze played a key role in promoting Syrian nationalism and territorial unity against French mandatory rule. This role has long served as a central reference point for the Druze of Suwayda, governing their relationship with both the Syrian state and the Syrian national identity. However, the geopolitical events of 2025, characterized by sectarian violence during the new government's transitional period and culminating in the July 2025 massacres in Suwayda, provoked a geopolitical reconfiguration. In the wake of these events, local Druze leadership and members of the Druze civil society openly advocated for self-determination and the establishment of a separate Druze entity from Syria. This study examines this contemporary paradigm shift by focusing on the emergence of a new geopolitical orientation within Druze particularism in Suwayda, a transformation whose implications extend beyond the Governorate given its particular demographic and historical significance for the broader Druze communities of *Bilad al-Sham*.

Suwayda Governorate is home to the largest Druze community and is known as Syria's Druze stronghold. According to figures from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), as of June 2026, the Governorate had a population of 461,023 inhabitants, including 139,239 displaced persons, and covered an area of 6,359 km² (UNOCHA, 2026). Suwayda does not border Israel. It borders Jordan to the south and is connected to the Syrian capital, Damascus, to the north and west. In the absence of reliable data from the Syrian state, the literature estimates that between 500,000 and 700,000 Druze live in Syria, with the majority residing in Suwayda (Lang 2021: 183), a number approximately equivalent to the entire Druze population of Israel, Lebanon and Jordan combined. Suwayda distinguishes itself from other Druze strongholds as an ultra-majority region, as highlighted by its symbolic name, *Jabal al-Druze* (Mountain of the Druze). Consequently, the literature characterizes Suwayda as an example of a "compact minority," a concept popularized by Albert Hourani (1947: 14). While the Druze do not exceed 3% of the Syrian population, they constitute an overwhelming majority within this area. Drawing on this historical and geographical reality, and as part of a broader divide-and-rule strategy, the French Mandate reorganized Syria into six administrative entities, including the Jabal al-Druze state, which existed from 1921 to 1936. The 1925 Great Syrian Revolt began as a local revolt

but transformed into an anti-colonial revolt, rejecting France's vision of separating the Druze from the rest of the Syrian national fabric. In a move to consolidate this strategy, the Druze deliberately adopted the name of *Jabal al-Arab* (Mountain of the Arabs) to signal their attachment to Syrian and Arab nationalism and their rejection of being confined to minority status. This narrative gradually unraveled throughout 2025. In October 2025, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajari, one of the three *shayukh al-'aql* of Suwayda and a member of the oldest of the three spiritual houses (Hazran et al. 2024: 19), unilaterally renamed Suwayda as *Jabal Bashan* (Mountain of Bashan) to signal its strategic alliance and alignment with Israel (Enab Baladi 2025a). After July 2025, Sheikh al-Hajari significantly strengthened his position as a dominant political actor in the Governorate. Figures such as *Sheikh al-'aql* Yusuf Jarbu, who had previously advocated for a political alignment with Damascus, became increasingly marginalized. Sheikh al-Hajari sought not only to articulate a discourse of political and territorial rupture but also to translate this orientation into institutional structures. He also obtained *Sheikh al-'aql* Hammoud al-Hinnawi's support for the National Guard, a unified military institution, even though al-Hinnawi does not fully endorse Sheikh al-Hajari on other issues. Civil society actors, which had played a key role in the popular protests against the former Syrian regime, remained active. The Suwayda self-determination movement has been the main civil society actor advocating political rupture. While it shares Sheikh al-Hajari's objective of breaking with Damascus, it advocates for the establishment of democratic institutions.

These contemporary manifestations of Druze particularism in Syria have remained largely unexamined in the literature. Historically, scholars have favored studying Druze communities in Israel and Lebanon. As Professor Birgit Schäbler observed, "The Druzes in Syria are probably the least known of the Druze communities in the Middle East" (2013: 62).

The Lebanese Druze community, under the patronage of the Arslan family and then the Jumblatt family, has maintained a traditional particularism rooted in Arab-Islamic alignment (Abu-Salih and Makarem 1980). The concept of "Druze particularism" was mobilized by Israeli political leaders, such as the second president of the State of Israel, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi (1954), and scholars such as Professor Haim Blanc (1952). The Israeli Druze historian Kais M. Firro deconstructed this concept, demonstrating how the Israeli state reshaped Druze particularism into a "neo-particularism" engineered to dissociate the Druze from their Arab-Islamic environment (Firro 2001: 41).

This study does not adopt Firro's concept of "neo-particularism" to the Syrian case. The distinction is important: unlike the Israeli case, where Druze neo-particularism was mainly state-engineered, the shift in Suwayda has emerged from within the community itself, promoted by key actors such as Sheikh al-Hajari and significant segments of civil society. Yet, by moving away from the traditional particularism, these actors are contributing to the emergence of a new geopolitical orientation. This raises the central question of how 2025 marks a geopolitical paradigm shift in Suwayda and what the emergence of claims for self-governance and self-determination reveals about the transformation of Druze particularism among key political and civil society actors.

This study's primary hypothesis is that the transformation of Druze particularism is rooted in an existential dilemma of collective survival. This transformation remains emergent and is expressed through the institutionalization of political and military structures and the reconfiguration of territorial representations. A secondary hypothesis is that civil society is involved in this transformation but pursues political strategies that differ from those of Sheikh al-Hajari.

Methodologically, this study adopts the framework of the French School of Geopolitics, particularly its emphasis on territorial representations and the multi-scalar approach to analyzing political processes across local, national, and regional scales (Lacoste 2012). Representations reflect how a community or a population perceives itself, its history, and its territory (Encel 2007). They are political constructs that encompass both objective and subjective dimensions, designed by political actors to persuade and mobilize (Douzet 2014). The analysis also draws on Joël Bonnemaison's concept of geosymbol (Bonnemaison 1992) to highlight the immaterial and material markers of territory. Therefore, it traces the emerging trajectory of Druze particularism in Suwayda by examining not only institutional changes but also the repertoire of geosymbols, including the prominent display of the Druze flag¹ in the public sphere. Due to security constraints, direct fieldwork in Suwayda was not feasible. The research therefore relies on a qualitative analysis of open-source secondary data, including political speeches, symbolic deployment, and the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic report on the July 2025 massacres, released on March 27, 2026 (UNCOI 2026).

The article is organized into three main sections. First, it traces the historical formation and trajectory of Druze particularism in Suwayda. Second, it explores

¹ A five-color flag, with each color attributed to a specific religious principle.

its memorial dimensions through the dialectic of integration and exclusion. Third, it analyzes how institutional developments and transformations in territorial symbols and representations produced a geopolitical reconfiguration.

The foundations of Druze Particularism

This section explores the formation of Druze particularism in Suwayda, and its distinctive features compared with those of the Druze communities in Israel and Lebanon, focusing on its “compact minority” condition and geocultural markers.

The Druze in Suwayda represent a typical example of the forging of a “compact minority.” The concept popularized by Albert Hourani (1947: 14) is applied in Syrian studies, such as the foundational work of Nikolaos van Dam, who applies the concept to minorities whose “members are mainly concentrated in particular districts in which they form a local majority” (Van Dam 1978; 201). Historically, Suwayda is not considered among the original Druze settlements, unlike Jabal al-Summaq in Idlib and the Damascus countryside in Syria, or Mount Lebanon and Wadi al-Taym in Lebanon. A first, temporary Druze immigration wave from Lebanon to Suwayda, triggered by the Mamluk campaigns against heterodox communities, is documented as early as the fourteenth century (Lewis 1987: 77). The decisive waves of immigration occurred in the eighteenth century after the Battle of Ain Dara in 1711 between different Druze factions and the sectarian violence of 1860 in Lebanon, which weakened the Druze political power and land tenure (Abu Izzedine 1984). Jean-David Mizrahi, a specialist in the French mandate in Syria, explains that the 1860s witnessed “the formation of a kind of quasi-independent warrior principality, whose dynamism caused considerable concern among the Damascene authorities” (Mizrahi 2002: 35). The term autonomy is more appropriate here than independence or quasi-independence. While Mizrahi notes rightfully that the two Ottoman expeditions in 1896 and 1910 inflicted Suwayda “a severe blow to the de facto independence” (Mizrahi 2002: 53), the concept of autonomy better captures the extent to which the Druze were able to govern their own affairs, with the exception of three main spheres: “taxation, military service, and laws governing the possession of arms” (Miller 1977: 550).

The establishment of Suwayda as a compact minority is not merely related to territorial expansion and demographic concentration. Cultural markers, such as monuments and flags that carry collective identity, accentuate this process, reflecting the term coined by Joël Bonnemaïson: “geosymbol” (Bonnemaïson 1992). The Druze community has developed a dense network of material and immaterial geo-

symbols. In Suwayda, the territory is marked and delimited by two kinds of monuments, as explained by the archaeologist Pauline Piraud-Fournet: The *manqaf* and the *mashbad* (Piraud-Fournet 2015). The *manqaf* functions as an amphitheater in which ceremonies, particularly funerals, take place, while the *mashbad* represents war monuments commemorating fallen soldiers from both the 1925 Great Syrian Revolt and recent events.

Jawffiya is a poetic expression sung and danced, reflecting Suwayda's history, particularly its wars and revolts. It functions as an immaterial cultural geosymbol. *Jawffiya* reinforces Druze unity, crystallized in their social contract centered on defending land, dignity, and religion, which actors widely invoke². The Druze flag, a symbol of this spiritual unity, is also a highly political geosymbol, given its mobilization in political protests and conflicts. According to oral history, the Druze flag became prominent during the Druze battles against the Ottomans in Suwayda. It was later used in other Druze areas. Nowadays, this flag is associated with official Druze religious authorities in Lebanon, Israel, and Syria. Despite this shared spiritual core, political divisions persist within the Druze regarding their particularism and their relationship with the state of Israel.

Historically, in both Lebanon and Syria, the traditional Druze particularism has been shaped by the affirmation of an Arab identity and the adoption of national ideologies in their respective states (Harik 1993). This traditional particularism was clearly reflected in the strategic thought of the Lebanese Druze leader, Kamal Jumblatt, who viewed the Druze as having “always been a minority with no minority feelings” (Jumblatt 1982: 38–39). Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen wrote rightfully about the tensions between two trajectories: the actors who claim a “Druze identity within Islam” and those advocating for “a Druze particularism outside the religion of Islam” (Skovgaard-Petersen 2005: 152).

The Israeli state profoundly reshaped this traditional particularism. According to Kais M. Firro, Israel succeeded in creating a form of Druze neo-particularism through a series of “invented traditions,” such as the instrumentalization of religious markers like Druze shrines, to encourage Druze separatism from their Arab environment (Firro 2005). This process was rooted in the pre-Israeli state era, notably in the activities of Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, then president of the Jewish National

² “Sheikh Haytham Kathab of Jaramana has stepped back from public statements, entrusting his political committee with the task of articulating the community's aspirations. These principles emphasize “land, religion, and dignity” for the Druze people” (The New Arab, 2025)

Council and later president of the State of Israel (1952-1963), who was the first Zionist politician to establish contact with the Druze of Galilee and Carmel (Parsons 2000). The state later consolidated this through institutions such as education and military service (Khaizran, 2023; Hajjar, 1996).

Frédéric Lallier observed that “depending on the political authorities, the Druze community sees itself differently” (Lallier 1999: 13). In Lebanon, the political particularism is shaped by the pivotal role of feudal families such as the houses of Arslan and Jumblatt. In Israel, by contrast, Druze particularism is anchored primarily in religious authority, under the leadership of the Tarif family, which played a key role in achieving the community’s “pact” with the Israeli State. In Syria, Lallier observed that the dominant ideology had long been framed within the Ba’ath party’s ideology. However, this is no longer the case following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Tensions surrounding Druze political identity became increasingly visible in 2025 amid the escalating confrontation between Suwayda Governorate and the Syrian State. In a speech addressed to Suwayda people, Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt urged them not to abandon their Islamic and Arab heritage and to reject the logic of the “alliance of minorities” and the pursuit of a “distinctive nationality”, as opposed to the legacy of Sultan al-Atrash (Saad 2025). This raises the question of how the legacy of the 1925 Great Syrian Revolt is being mobilized.

The Memorial Dimensions of Druze particularism

During the post-2011 Syrian conflict, two competing historical references were mobilized within the collective memory of the Governorate of Suwayda: the national legacy of the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925, brought to prominence during the anti-regime protests that began in the summer of 2023, and the traumatic memory of Adib Shishakli’s presidency (1953-1954), which continues to shape perceptions of threat and discrimination against the Druze community. These two memory anchors reflect a dual geopolitical representation of the Druze community: a traditional particularism oriented toward national integration within a secular framework, and a particularism of rupture fueled by perceptions of existential threat to the minority’s collective survival. The geopolitical transformation of Druze particularism can be understood between these two competing memorial repertoires.

The legacy of the 1925 Great Syrian Revolt was mobilized at key moments during the Syrian conflict, notably through the adoption of military neutrality and, subsequently, through civil society protests against the Assad regime.

Throughout the Syrian conflict, Suwayda Governorate never fell to the armed opposition. Concurrently, the Druze leadership adopted a form of military neutrality: soldiers from Suwayda could not be compelled by the Syrian authorities to fight outside the Governorate. The aim was to reduce friction with armed opposition groups in the neighboring, Sunni-majority Governorate of Daraa and thereby preserve the Syrian national fabric. The militarization of Suwayda secured the Governorate a de facto level of autonomy (Pierret, 2021). This strategy mirrored Sultan al-Atrash's refusal to embroil his community in a civil war during Shishakli's presidency. Sheikh Wahid al-Balhous, founder of the *Rijal al-Karama* (Men of Dignity), an umbrella organization of Druze armed groups, played a key role in promoting Druze military neutrality, a position that ultimately led to his assassination by the Syrian regime on September 5, 2015. He also helped revive the legacy of the 1925 Great Syrian Revolt, embedding it within a broader Syrian national project through the slogan: "Religion for God, Nation for All." Historically, although the slogan emerged in Egypt (Iskander 2012), it was popularized in Syria by Sultan al-Atrash to emphasize his nationalist rhetoric (Provence 2005), and to resist the reduction of the Druze to a minority status under the French mandate (Saul 2015).

This geopolitical orientation was extensively mobilized during the protests at Karama Square in Suwayda City, which began in late August 2023. The protesters explicitly called for the removal of the Assad regime and the implementation of UN Resolution 2254 to achieve a peaceful political transition. Organized by civil society actors, these protests challenged the Assad regime's narrative of itself as the protector of Syria's minority groups. A pivotal development was Sheikh al-Hajari's endorsement of the protests.

Following al-Assad's downfall on 8 December 2024, numerous exiled activists returned to the Governorate. Among them, activist Sawsan Abou Zaineddine described Suwayda as a symbol of the peaceful struggle for the rule of law at a time when many Syrians had lost hope (Syria Television 2024). The demand for an inclusive and pluralistic Syria remained present during the early transitional period. Accordingly, Sheikh al-Hajari proposed that the new Syrian regime appoint Mohsina al-Muhaythawi, a woman activist from Karama Square, as governor of Suwayda. On the same day, people celebrated Christmas at Karama Square, while chanting the slogan of the 1925 Great Syrian Revolt. However, the beginning of 2025 brought echoes of the past: the new Syrian state followed a trajectory reminiscent of the French mandate prior to the Great Syrian Revolt by refusing to appoint a Druze governor in Suwayda. The appointment of Mustafa al-Bakour, a former

military figure from Idlib, as governor deepened the mistrust between Suwayda leadership and the authorities in Damascus, as observed by the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, al-Bakour “entered office amid widespread mistrust, collapsed state structures and damaged infrastructure” (UNCOI 2026: 7). This development revived fears that the experience of Shishakli could be repeated.

In 1953, a critical turning point in relations with the central government occurred when Syrian President Adib Shishakli attempted to forcibly integrate Suwayda into an authoritarian, centralized process (Schäbler 2013). Concurrently, Shishakli was accused of launching a campaign of political defamation, accusing the Druze of alliances with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and Israel, while also accusing them of religiously defaming Islam (Landis 1998). Sultan al-Atrash chose exile in Jordan rather than implicate his community in a civil war.

The Shishakli experience contributed to a perception of the Druze as a targeted and persecuted minority, both politically and religiously. As stated by American academic Joshua Landis:

The Druze community suffered a dramatic decline in its economic and political position in Syria as a result of its opposition to Shishakli. Although Syria’s military dictator succeeded in breaking the back of traditional Druze particularism, his harsh measures exacerbated Druze feelings that they were a persecuted minority and treated unfairly by the state (1998: 4).

According to the researcher Randal S. Geller, this episode became a pivotal factor in the decision of the Druze of Israel to lean towards compulsory conscription for Druze men in the Israeli army (Geller 2015), thereby reinforcing a particularism of rupture grounded in perceptions of the Druze as a historically persecuted minority.

In the collective memory of the Druze in Syria, Jordan, Israel and Lebanon, the Shishakli episode remains a particularly painful historical reference. In Syria, this episode marked a long-term Druze political and military decline that persisted under the Ba’athist rule following the purge of Druze officers from the Syrian army between 1966 and 1968 (Van Dam, 1979). In the *Janffiya* of the poet Ghaleb Halabi, the image of the Druze community confronting an oppressor is vividly evoked:

“After France and the Turks, those wrongdoers
Came Shishakli, an oppressor in our mountain

His military forces were numerous: tanks and planes.
But we stood and faced them.” (Hikayat min Suwayda 2010)

This memory was also reactivated through the symbolic commemoration of Adib Shishakli’s assassination. In 1964, Nawaf Ghazale assassinated Adib Shishakli in Brazil. Following Ghazale’s death in 2005, his remains were repatriated from Brazil to Syria on November 21. As anthropologist Isabelle Rivoal notes, within Druze society, the funeral ceremony operates as a “political activity par excellence” (Rivoal 2000, 269). During Ghazale’s funeral, a *Janaffiya* resonated, and one line was passionately repeated by the crowd: “O Shishakli, what made you mess with the Druze? (Nasr 2012).

At the same time, a call for calm and order was broadcast over the loudspeakers. Several individuals intervened, demanding an end to this *Janaffiya*, but the crowd responded by chanting it once again.

The figure of Shishakli as an oppressor was reactivated during the Syrian conflict. Sheikh Wahid al-Balhous invoked the figure of Shishakli in his speeches. On January 27, 2015, he explained that he was not opposed to a Sunni ruler, but specified certain conditions: “We do not want a Sunni president who is not neutral, and who follows Ibn Taymiyya³ and the steps of Shishakli.” (Zaman Alwsl 2015).

In this speech, he also criticized the Syrian president for failing to protect the Druze of Idlib in northwestern Syria, who were facing exactions at the hands of the Jihadist organization Jabhat al-Nusra. The Druze of Idlib, concentrated in dozens of villages in Jabal al-Summaq near the border with Turkey, are geographically isolated from the other Druze settlements. Unlike other Druze strongholds in Syria, Jabal al-Summaq fell into the hands of the Syrian opposition. The situation under Free Syrian Army rule was not concerning, as Jabal al-Summaq, like Suwayda and Jaramana, had welcomed a significant number of displaced people. The situation quickly shifted due to the conquest of the area by the Islamic State in 2013, followed in November 2014 by Jabhat al-Nusra.

The organization’s leader was then Abu Muhamad al-Jolani, the *nom de guerre* of Ahmad al-Sharaa, who became Syria’s interim president a decade later. In his first TV interview with Al Jazeera, al-Jolani promised the 15,000 Druze in Idlib would not be harmed, yet six days later, a massacre was committed against more than twenty Druze civilians (Samaha 2015). Under existential threat, the

³ Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) an important reference of contemporary Islamism and known for his fatwa against the Druze

inhabitants of the Druze villages underwent forced conversion to Sunni Islam. In 2022, while visiting a Druze village, al-Jolani, who had renamed Jabhat al-Nosra Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to distance himself from his Jihadi past, told a Druze leader that conversion to Islam was not required (Drevon and Haenni 2025).

Consequently, Ahmad al-Sharaa, who became the interim president of Syria, was not perceived by many Druze actors as the ‘liberator’ of Syria from a dictatorship regime, but rather as the leader who had alienated and coerced the Druze of Idlib. Symbolically, just a few hours after the end of the July 2025 battles in Suwayda and in the following weeks, the local population no longer invoked the motto of the 1925 Great Syrian Revolt, but instead sang a rephrased version of the *Janaffiya* that was performed during Ghazale’s funeral: “O al-Jolani, what made you mess with the Druze?” (Suwayda Soul Team 2025)

The geopolitical transformation of Druze particularism in 2025 resulted from a shift in the balance between the memorial repertoires, pushing Druze political and civil society actors toward a new geopolitical orientation.

The Production of a Geopolitical Reconfiguration: Institutions, Identity and Territorial Representations

This section uses a multiscale approach to examine how geopolitical reconfiguration is produced in Suwayda through institutionalization and changing identity and territorial representations across local, national, and regional scales. More specifically, it explores the reception of Sheikh al-Hajari’s political strategies across these scales.

According to the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic report on the July 2025 massacres, the post-Assad transition was fueled by waves of mistrust. Meetings between Druze representatives and Damascus officials held from late 2024 to mid-2025 failed to dispel the concern of Sheikh al-Hajari concerning one specific point, according to the report: the implications of the authorities’ past conduct and background regarding the rights of religious minorities (UNCOI 2026). Sheikh al-Hajari refused to disarm Druze militias in Suwayda, citing fears of experiencing a fate similar to that of the coastal massacres in March 2025 against the Alawite community. The report demonstrated that this latent mistrust escalated into an open conflict following the circulation of an audio wrongly attributed to a Druze Sheikh, which contained an insult directed at the Prophet Mohammad. Under this pretext, pro-regime forces clashed with Druze residents in the Damascus countryside, specifically in Jaramana and Achrafieh-Sahnaya, as well as the village of Sura al-Kabira,

located in the north of Suwayda Governorate on the Damascus-Suwayda highway.

This military escalation was accompanied by a growing sectarian climate that targeted the Druze on social media but also at universities, especially in Homs and Hama, where slogans called Druze “apostates” and called for their extermination (Ezzi 2025).

The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria documented that the July 2025 clashes started on July 13 with the abduction of a Druze merchant on the Damascus-Suwayda highway, which led to sectarian fighting between Sunni Muslim Bedouin tribal groups and Druze militias. The report highlighted that the deployment of government forces in support of Bedouin groups led to the first wave of violence, which was the deadliest. Numerous violations against Druze civilians occurred in western Suwayda and in the city of Suwayda between July 14 and 16. The United Nations Commission also pointed out violations by Druze militias against the Bedouin community. The casualties were highly disproportionate: 1,342 individuals from the Druze community and 70 individuals from the Bedouin community were reportedly killed. In addition, 225 members of the government were killed, largely as a consequence of Israeli airstrikes (UNCOI 2026).

The clashes of July 2025 also witnessed targeted cultural violence against the Druze, specifically aimed at their customs and faith. Human Rights Watch reported on 15 January 2026 what it termed “identity-based outrages upon personal dignity.” A primary example was the forced shaving of mustaches of Druze men, which the organization considered an “abusive language referencing Druze identity” given that “mustaches have historically carried cultural and symbolic significance” (Human Rights Watch 2026). This symbolic desecration was also accompanied by the destruction of geosymbols such as the portraits of Sultan al-Atrash at the entry of the Governorate. These acts reflect an attempt to dismantle key aspects of Druze identity, as highlighted by United Nations experts in a statement released on August 21, 2025⁴.

This local conflict was transformed into a regional conflict with the intervention of Israel. Following the downfall of the al-Assad regime in December 2024, Israel seized the demilitarized zone of Mount Hermon. This mountain is strategic, as it overlooks the Galilee and Damascus countryside. Israel seized control of

⁴ “We are gravely concerned by reported attacks targeting the Druze minority for their faith and other grounds, including the forced shaving of religious men’s moustaches and hateful rhetoric on social media portraying Druze as traitors and infidels to be killed, and calling for the abduction and enslavement of Druze women”

some of the Druze villages in this area of Syria with the aim of “befriending” the community, as highlighted by Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz during a visit to the Syrian side of Mount Hermon. While Israel demanded the complete demilitarization of southern Syria, including the Governorates of Quneitra, Daraa and Suwayda, and the withdrawal of the new regime’s forces from the area, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu proclaimed in late February 2025 that Israel “would not tolerate any threat to the Druze community in southern Syria” (Foundation for Defense of Democracies 2025a). During the clashes in the Damascus countryside and the northern Governorate of Suwayda, Israel conducted airstrikes against the Syrian state, including one close to the presidential palace. Although the climate prior to July 2025 was deeply fraught with mistrust, Syrian Druze leaders refrained from engaging with Israel. As the UN report explains, the violence of July marked a geopolitical turning point for Suwayda leadership’s geopolitical views: “Sheikh al-Hijri’s influence and position was only firmly cemented after the violence in July” (UNCOI 2026: 8).

In July 2025, the deadliest wave of physical and cultural violence happened after Sheikh al-Hajari initially welcomed the entry of government forces. The UN report indicated that due to accounts of massacres, he switched his position, calling for armed resistance and, crucially, for international protection. While no other country replied to his appeals, Israel seized this opportunity to position itself as the ‘protector’ of the community. The subsequent Israeli airstrikes in Suwayda, as well as in the centers of power in Damascus, targeting the Ministry of Defense and areas adjacent to the presidential palace, halted the first wave of violence.

In his study on Shishakli rule, Landis explained that Shishakli adopted a strategy that “struck at the community as a whole” (Landis 1998, 39). In July 2025, a similar strategy appears to have been applied, based on UN assessments. The fear of existential danger pushed al-Hajari to openly engage with Israel. Unlike the Shishakli era, Israel intervened, and as noted in the United Nations Commission report, Israel asserted “its role as protector of Druze communities” (UNCOI 2026: 44). Consequently, the defense of Suwayda Governorate became a proclaimed red line for Israel in its relationship with the Syrian state. On July 17, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that the first red line is “demilitarizing the area south of Damascus, from the Golan Heights to the Druze mountains”, while the second one is “protecting the brothers of our brothers, the Druze in the Druze mountains” (Foundation for Defense of Democracies 2025b). The Israeli State added a new demand to the Syrian authorities: the creation of a humanitarian

corridor from the occupied Golan Heights to Suwayda. Syria refused this demand during the U.S.-brokered talks following the July clashes (Reuters 2025). According to the United Nations Commission, this demand is linked to Sheikh al-Hajari's "broader project seeking self-determination and autonomy" (UNCOI 2026: 31).

On August 25, 2025, under the authority of Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajari, two organizations were established, marking a structural rupture with the Syrian state: the creation of a National Guard, designed to unify the Druze military factions into a cohesive army, and the creation of the Supreme Legal Committee, an administrative body.

At the local scale, this occurred while Sheikh Yusuf Jarbu', *the sheikh al-'aql* most aligned with Damascus, was marginalized in the public sphere; Sheikh al-Hajari became the central reference in Suwayda, drawing the informal support of the third *sheikh al-'aql*, Sheikh Hammoud al-Hinnawi, who aligned with his rupture towards Damascus without calling for separatism. The influence of the al-Hinnawi house is significant, as is that of the Hajari house. Their prestige was established over the *longue durée* through prominent spiritual figures and chiefs, as well as their key roles in battles against the Ottomans. In February 2026, Sheikh al-Hinnawi declared the situation to be a matter of "life or death," highlighting the importance of defending the land, dignity, and religion. Consequently, he stated in an explicit message to Damascus that no one deserves the community's trust and proclaimed his full support for the National Guard (Druze Archive 2026). Sheikh al-Hajari was also able to count on the integration of the armed group *Rijal al-Karama* into the National Guard. The most powerful Druze armed group during the Syrian conflict appointed, after July, a new chief: Sheikh Maziad Khadaj, marking a shift from their initial stance of openness towards Damascus (Enab Baladi 2025b). *Rijal al-Karama* participated actively in the July clashes, showing that the confrontation involved actors beyond al-Hajari's forces. On its Facebook page, the movement regularly published pictures of its members killed in combat in July. In a speech delivered in front of the tomb of Sultan al-Atrash in March 2025, Sheikh Khadaj declared that Sultan al-Atrash remains the ultimate symbol of patriotism and coexistence, but he noted that during his era, Syrians were united, while in the current period the Syrian people entered Suwayda with hostility and humiliation (Al Rased 2025).

Building on a favorable political climate, Sheikh al-Hajari, on September 4, 2025, speaking alongside only the Druze flag, expressed the claim to a "right to self-determination" of Suwayda as "a sacred right guaranteed by all international

conventions” (Enab Baladi 2025b). This discourse introduces a paradox: self-determination applies strictly to peoples under international law, yet the Druze are traditionally categorized as a religious or ethno-religious community. His ambition remains difficult to realize because of several structural vulnerabilities, including Suwayda’s geographic position between Jordan and Damascus, a fragile socio-economic structure, and the absence of a territorial corridor to Israel. Nevertheless, it signals a shift from a narrative of a unified Syria to a narrative of rupture by framing the Druze as a distinct nationality separate from the broader Syrian population. Sheikh al-Hajari presents himself as being backed politically by Israel. He amplified this regional dimension in an interview with the Israeli media outlet Ynet on January 13, 2026. He criticized the Arab countries for not helping the Druze during the July massacres. Jordan has historically maintained cordial relations with the Druze community in Suwayda. These historical links have long pushed Damascus to oppose opening its borders. Yet, the Kingdom denied Sheikh al-Hajari’s request, refraining from opening its borders or sending humanitarian assistance. This strategy reflects Amman’s fear that the conflict between Druze and Bedouin tribes could spill over into its own territory. Focused on securing its northern border, Jordan hosted trilateral meetings with the United States and Syria, which resulted in a roadmap aimed at restoring stability in Suwayda. Representatives of Suwayda and Israeli officials were not present.

Sheikh al-Hajari rejected any negotiations or roadmaps conducted prior to accountability, stating his preference for implementing the July 2025 truce, which focuses on three main domains: the return of abductees, revealing the fate of the victims of enforced disappearance, and liberating villages still under Damascus’s authority (Enab Baladi 2026). In his interview with Ynet, Sheikh al-Hajari articulated his new geopolitical vision of a Druze entity operating under Israeli oversight:

“We see ourselves as an integral part of the State of Israel’s existence, as an arm that has forged an alliance with Israel. The relationship is significant. Israel is the only guarantor and authorized entity for future arrangements” (L’Orient Today 2026)

For the first time, the idea of a Druze state originated from a leading Druze actor rather than an external actor, as was the case with France in the early twentieth century. In the post-independence history of Syria, the question of the creation of a Druze entity in Suwayda has been historically linked to Israel. According to Henry Laurens, professor at the Collège de France and chair of

contemporary history of the Arab world, this project remained in the “Israeli political unconscious.” (Laurens 2019: 2004). The geopolitical reconfiguration is not confined to Sheikh al-Hajari and his followers alone, but also extends to civil society, whose members transcend the traditional political divisions in Suwayda. The “Suwayda self-determination movement,” linked to an international lawyer based in Dubai, Firas al-Choufi, organized 300 signing centers and mobilized more than 2,000 volunteers to collect handwritten signatures from 125,000 adults in Suwayda. In a paper in the Lebanese journal *Annahar*, Firas al-Choufi said the petition was intended for submission to the United Nations to initiate a possible referendum (Al-Choufi 2025). On its Facebook page, the movement also argues that citizenship control over the institution is important through democratic elections and transparent mechanisms of governance, oversight, and financing. While Sheikh al-Hajari has become a symbol of this geopolitical reconfiguration and has framed it almost exclusively in terms of relations with Israel, civil society actors continue to advocate for a coherent political strategy based on institutional frameworks, democratic principles, and representative mechanisms, with the broader objective of securing international recognition. Although their underlying logics differ, they converge around a shared geopolitical representation that conceives of the Druze not merely as a religious community, but as a distinct people.

On the regional scale, Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt fiercely opposed this geopolitical vision, viewing it as contrary to the community’s historic path in Lebanon and Syria. As an ally of Ahmad al-Sharaa, he repeatedly claimed that Sheikh al-Hajari’s post-July 2025 trajectory was a “suicidal project because it harms all the interests of the region’s Arab Muslim Druze” (*L’Orient Today* 2026).

These developments reopened questions about Druze identity and political alliances. In his communiqués, Sheikh al-Hajari deliberately omitted the term Muslim. He also formalized this lexical shift on his Facebook page on August 5, 2025. The page, originally titled “Spiritual President of the Unitarian Muslim Druze”, was renamed “Spiritual President of the Unitarian Druze” on August 5, 2025. This modification reflects an effort to distance the Druze from their broader Islamic milieu.

He subsequently made the symbolic decision to distance the Druze of Suwayda from the Arab environment. In a communiqué released on October 11 to the United Nations, the Arab League, and Amnesty International, he designated Suwayda as the Mountain of Bashan (Enab Baladi 2025c). The adoption of a

Hebrew biblical toponym is a key element of Sheikh al-Hajari's new geopolitical orientation. Bashan appears in the Torah and can be considered a biblical designation for southern Syria and northern Jordan. Consequently, even the name of Suwayda disappeared in his communiqués, replaced by Bashan. In this way, the adoption of this toponym can be analyzed as an attempt to reconfigure Suwayda's territorial representations.

The term Bashan is embedded in the military terminology of the state of Israel, particularly within its post-Assad strategy in Syria. On 10 December 2024, the Israeli media Times of Israel reported that "the name of the operation to destroy the former al-Assad regime army's weapons is dubbed "Bashan Arrow" within the military, after the biblical name for the region in the Golan Heights and southern Syria" (Times of Israel 2024). The choice of the Bashan terminology can therefore be understood as a rhetorical vehicle for Sheikh al-Hajari to demonstrate his geopolitical alignment with Israel. This symbolic alignment materialized in institutional practice with the April 7, 2026, decision to dissolve the Supreme Legal Committee and establish a new administrative body called "Administration Council in Mount Bashan" (Enab Baladi 2026). In Suwayda, however, this renaming appears to remain confined to al-Hajari's discourse.

A binary analysis might suggest that, on one hand, the Druze are divided between the camp of Sheikh Tarif, leader of the Druze community in Israel, and Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajari, and the camp of Walid Jumblatt on the other. This analysis is accurate, as a clear schism is visible. Walid Jumblatt declared to the French newspaper *Le Monde* that the Syrian Druze who chose Israeli protection called him a "traitor," and he argued that they are following the path of "secession" while his own path remained anchored in "Damascus and Arabism." For him, this local situation is inscribed in the Israeli plan aiming at the "Balkanization of the whole region" (Le Monde 2026). The competing positions of Lebanese and Syrian leaders have turned into a confrontation over the geopolitical meaning of Druze identity.

This analytical framework remains incomplete without taking into account a Druze religious figure whose speeches are widely circulated in Suwayda and shared across social media accounts: Sheikh Amin al-Sayegh, who is the current Druze spiritual leader in Lebanon (Abou Zaki 2024). On July 30, 2025, his speech addressed to the Druze of Suwayda qualified the current period as a decisive crossroads in Druze history. He urged the Druze of Suwayda not to lose their "compass", which he defines as the adherence to their "Arab-Islamic identity" over "material security." He also emphasized that the bonds between the Druze should not be altered (MTV 2025). Ultimately, Sheikh Amin al-Sayegh's discourse lever-

ages ethical responsibility and collective identity in an attempt to transcend the deepening political divisions within the Druze community.

Yet, July 2025 events marked a paradigm shift in Suwayda's geopolitical orientation. Although this shift is widely associated with the figure of Sheikh al-Hajari, the important mobilization of civil society in support of self-determination suggests that the transformation extends beyond individual leadership.

Conclusion

Druze particularism in Syria underwent a profound strategic transformation. In 2025, hopes emerged for an inclusive and democratic Syria, marked by efforts to revive the nationalistic and cross-sectarian legacy of the 1925 Great Syrian Revolt on a national scale. These aspirations, however, were progressively overshadowed by growing mistrust toward the new Syrian government. Druze communities in the Damascus countryside and Suwayda were first targeted by social media defamation campaigns and subsequently subjected to abuses and acts of violence. The July 2025 massacres marked a critical turning point. Unlike in 1925, the Suwayda leadership shifted its focus from the national to the local level. In this context, Israel presented itself as a protector of Suwayda vis-à-vis the new Syrian government.

The transformation that began in July 2025 became visible in both institutional changes and the redefinition of Druze identity. Yet this process remains neither homogeneous nor uncontested. Druze civil society actors continue to advocate for democratic institutions and emphasize that the crisis cannot be resolved by relying on individual leaders alone; it requires representative institutions.

Future research should examine how Suwayda's emerging geopolitical orientation affects Druze political representation across the region. One potential indicator is the increase in the number of Druze in the occupied Golan Heights accepting Israeli citizenship following the July 2025 events.

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