

The Suwayda Protests: A Foreign-backed Plot to Fragment Syria?

By [The Cradle](#)

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There are parallels between these Suwayda protests and the 2011 ones that morphed into a countrywide military conflict – namely, the foreign exploitation of sincere grievances strategically aimed at dividing Syria along sectarian and ethnic lines.

Thirteen years after the onset of the war on Syria, a domestic political eruption backed by foreign states has resurfaced, threatening to once again ignite conflict in the country despite years of relative calm.

Economic woes today underpin the public grievances expressed on the street. The much-heralded May 2023 [reinstatement of Syria in the Arab League](#) has thus far failed to deliver any significant political or economic relief for the beleaguered Levantine state.

Instead, Syria's economy continues to deteriorate with the devaluation of the national currency against the dollar. Concurrently, a renewed US initiative to partition and weaken Syria is gaining traction, as Washington strives relentlessly to undermine Damascus' centrality as a pivotal regional state and geopolitical player.

Underpinning all this is stifling western unilateral economic sanctions imposed on Syria, as well as the territorial encroachments of US, Turkish, and Israeli military forces.

The illegal occupation of Syrian lands, coupled with the [loss and theft](#) of vital oil, water resources, and agricultural bounty by foreign occupation troops and their local proxy militias, further compounds the crisis, as does the recurrent Israeli aggression and missile strikes targeting Syrian infrastructure.

Within the context of all this devastation, some tough-love decisions made by the central government in Damascus have unsurprisingly ignited a fresh wave of protests that have now assumed a distinctly "separatist" character.

SDF Backs Suwayda Secession

The initial protests emerged in Syria's [Suwayda governorate](#) following the removal of fuel subsidies, which caused a hike in public transportation costs and raw material prices. These grievances rapidly evolved into political demands, centering on the implementation of [UN Security Council Resolution 2254](#) and policies of decentralization.

The latter concept implies a form of “self-administration” akin to the separatist Kurdish Autonomous Administration that receives support from the US in the northeastern region of the country.

The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), representing the political arm of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – bolstered by the US military occupation and the cover it provides – has overtly endorsed the Suwayda protests and their transformation from socio-economic aspirations into calls for secession.

The SDF openly seeks to attract western assistance to replicate its Kurdish self-governance model – but in Suwayda. Importantly, this isn't the first time the SDF has attempted to exert political influence in Suwayda. In 2019, amidst ISIS assaults on the southern governorate, the SDF pursued relations with Druze leaders, engaging in both public and secret talks to garner support for the self-governance initiative in Suwayda.

The initial protests in Suwayda were modest in scale, and attempts by Syrian government opponents to [portray these as a massive uprising](#) fell short. The numbers involved continue to be small in comparison to Suwayda's total population, and have thus far failed to incite a broader nationwide wave.

Comparisons with the 2011 Uprisings

Others tried to ride the Suwayda momentum. In the north of the country, at the very same time, Al-Qaeda affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) began to organize large-scale demonstrations in various cities and villages under its control in Idlib province – again, drawing parallels to the 2011 events that led to the Syrian war.

In the southern governorate of Daraa, which borders Jordan, armed individuals took to the streets and launched attacks on a number of army positions, but these were rapidly quelled. In Suwayda, security forces monitored the movements without immediate reaction.

Today, the momentum of the protests has dwindled, and the situation across other governorates remains largely unchanged despite a rush of rumors about a potential reenactment of the 2011 events.

A Syrian security source informs *The Cradle* that Druze spiritual leader [Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri](#) played a pivotal role in Suwayda's narrative shift from local demands to separatist aspirations. His discord with the Syrian government has led him to establish ties with parties in the Persian Gulf, while internally fostering support for Suwayda's separation. However, Hijri has since backed off, reiterating the need to preserve the unity of Syria and supporting the legitimacy of the government in Damascus.

According to the source, some local factions in Suwayda support “the process of transforming the protest movement into demands for secession, such as the traditional

opposition close to the coalition, the so-called Ahrar al-Jabal movement, the Karama faction led by Sheikh Laith al-Balous and some smuggling gangs.”

After the protests spread in Suwayda and Daraa, participants demanded decentralization and the implementation of UN Resolution 2254 to end the 12-year war in Syria.

Not a Populist Movement

Some clerics and “local factions” in Suwayda have expressed solidarity with the protesters’ demands, and local news outlets have described the protests as “civil disobedience.” But the clerics do not speak with one voice, as some refuse to turn the demands into political ones, a development which reportedly prompted Sheikh Hijri to tone down his separatist rhetoric.

One website quoted an unnamed source as saying that “the slogans raised in all villages and towns of Suwayda carry political ideas far from economic demands, most notably the overthrow of the regime.”

[Samira Moubayed](#), a member of the Syrian Constitutional Committee representing the civil society bloc, told *North Press* that “the movement will continue until security is achieved in southern Syria. This is part of the process of political change needed and necessary across Syria.”

This narrative introduced a regional aspect, positioning “the security of southern Syria” as distinct from that of Damascus and its surroundings. Riad Drar, co-chair of the SDF, countered this view more explicitly, asserting that Kurdish separatists endorse the popular movement and maintain direct communication with its leadership in the south.

Drar urged protest leaders to safeguard the movement, liaise with Syrian territories outside Damascus’ control, and establish collaborative initiatives with northeastern Syria. He also offered up the US-backed Kurdish administration as a conduit to galvanize international support for a southern secessionist movement.

The HTS-SDF Crossover

The US role in Syria’s southern governorates is still unclear, unlike its overt military and financial roles in the country’s north.

In June, Syrian opposition media outlets aligned with Türkiye [disclosed](#) a US-supported plan to integrate areas controlled by HTS in northwestern Syria with territories directly governed by the Turkish occupation army in the north (northern Aleppo countryside and parts of Raqqah and Hasakah countryside), as well as the Kurdish separatist domains in northeastern Syria, all under a single civilian administration.

HTS has shown that it is willing to establish channels of communication with the SDF when common economic interests emerge. Confidential sources told [Syria TV](#) at the time that HTS had hosted several delegations from al-Hasakah in recent months, including security leaders from the SDF.

The talks touched on the possibility of forming [a joint civilian administration](#) between the two parties, if HTS gains control over areas held by the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) – previously known as the Free Syrian Army. The SDF, for its part, indicated that the

US supports the unification of the northeastern and northwestern regions of Syria.

In a revealing investigation for [The Grayzone](#), journalist Hekmat Aboukhater detailed discussions within the Syrian opposition “lobby” in the US, where a former US official discussed the scenario of Syria’s division. This envisaged creating a “canton” in the northwest of the country under the administration of HTS, albeit with a different name to disassociate the group from its Al Qaeda origins.

Earlier this month, HTS [accused](#) its second-in-command Abu Maria al-Qahtani, of unauthorized communication with the US-led “International coalition.” Qahtani was purportedly attempting to expand into areas controlled by the so-called SNA and the “eastern sector” within the organization.

Rebranding Al Qaeda, Yet Again

A Syrian security source tells *The Cradle* that this raised concerns within a faction of Turkish intelligence linked directly to HTS, which seeks to oversee the group’s activities and avoid involvement in US-led projects.

The actual intention, says the Syrian security source, is to rebrand the organization and reshape its structure, potentially for eventual integration into the Turkish-backed “SNA” confab, followed by discussions with the international coalition or other entities. It is worth noting that HTS has undergone several re-inventions, having previously been known as Jahbat al-Nusra, and, before that, Al Qaeda.

Meanwhile, on Syria’s eastern border, the SDF has denied participating in military campaigns targeting the bordering (with Iraq) city of Albu Kamal in cooperation with US forces, but the [recent visit](#) of former US Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller to its areas suggests otherwise.

Despite himself being illegally in Syria, Miller called for supporting stability in the region, and discussed with the Autonomous Administration the limitations it faces, the threats against it, and the necessity of supporting it economically and politically, according [to a statement by the Department of Foreign Relations](#).

Dogged Pursuit of De Facto Division

On 27 August, a high-level [delegation from the US Congress](#) visited the Turkish-occupied areas in northwestern Syria, particularly the northern countryside of Aleppo. This visit seems to confirm Washington’s intentions to establish a de facto presence in Syrian territory.

Concurrently, the Saudi newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat* published a report detailing a Turkish project aimed at the [Turkification](#) of northern Syria, which involves teaching the Turkish language to approximately 300,000 Syrian children.

These developments collectively raise the possibility of the US administration supporting efforts to “impose a reality” that could lead to the division of Syria. This prospect could gain traction amid the economic challenges faced by Syria, the waning authority of the central state, and Ankara’s determination to remain in Syrian territory while engineering local demographics.

Turkiye has been constructing cities for refugees with [Qatari funding](#), a move that lays the

groundwork for scenarios similar to what's transpiring in Suwayda – and mirroring the model of the US-funded Kurdish Autonomous Administration.

Given the existing security, military, and political landscape in Syria, it becomes evident that returning to the 2011 model of popular protests, which eventually transformed into an armed rebellion, remains an uphill task for the US and its allies.

Despite their inability to overthrow the government through military means, these actors – comprising the US, its European partners, Turkiye, Qatar, and Israel – remain undeterred in pursuing a de facto division of Syria.

Their strategy entails surrounding and economically strangling key areas under the control of the central government in Damascus. Although this may not immediately threaten the government's stability, it poses an existential threat to the integrity of the Syrian state itself.

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