POLICY OUTLOOK

TRT WORLD research centre

A Pawn on the Geopolitical Chessboard: The Druze Question in Syria

İhsan Faruk KILAVUZ

(Saeed Qaq - Anadolu Agency)

.....

The opinions expressed in this policy outlook represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the TRT World Research Centre.

Introduction

Recent clashes and violent confrontations between the Druze community and Arab Bedouin tribes in southern Syria have drawn renewed attention to this volatile region. These developments have not only highlighted deep-seated tensions within Syria's complex social fabric but have also triggered a new internal crisis in a country already struggling to redefine itself in the aftermath of a prolonged civil war. However, it would be misleading to frame this crisis merely as a sectarian dispute. Instead, it must be understood within a broader regional context, where external actors—most notably Israel—have actively intervened or exploited local unrest to serve their strategic interests.

This transformation of a localised intercommunal conflict into a regional issue is not an entirely new phenomenon. The "Druze question" has long transcended Syria's national borders and evolved into a historically rooted geopolitical concern. As such, interpreting the current Druze–Arab Bedouin conflict merely through the lens of contemporary sectarianism risks obscuring the deeper historical, political, and regional dimensions of the issue.

To properly understand the roots of this conflict, one must examine the legacy of the post-colonial period in the Levant, a time during which the Druze identity and territorial presence became entangled in broader regional rivalries and shifting power dynamics. Throughout history, various foreign powers have sought to manipulate Druze-related tensions as part of a larger strategic calculus, turning the community into a pawn on the regional geopolitical chessboard. Therefore, this study aims to move beyond simplistic sectarian explanations by situating the Druze issue within its historical and geopolitical context, revealing it as a multifaceted problem shaped by both internal dynamics and enduring external interventions.

The Colonial Legacy: Seeds of Sectarianism in Syria

One of the most persistent and contested questions throughout the Syrian civil war—and indeed in its aftermath—is whether Syria can endure as a unified state. This uncertainty surrounding Syria's territorial integrity is not merely a byproduct of the conflict but rather a reflection of deep-rooted historical forces, many of which can be traced back to the colonial period. The seeds of separatism in Syria were not sown spontaneously, nor are they solely the result of internal dynamics; instead, they were cultivated deliberately as part of a broader strategy of colonial engineering. This long-standing legacy of fragmentation continues to shape Syria's socio-political landscape, making separatism one of the most enduring and structurally embedded issues in modern Syrian history.

The Colonial Genesis of Sectarian Division

The post-civil war scenarios frequently invoked during the civil war—including the retreat of Alawite groups to their coastal mountain strongholds, Kurdish aspirations for autonomy in the northeast, or the emergence of a Druze-led polity in the south—consistently hinge on the country's persistent minority and separatist dynamics. The roots of such separatist tendenciesare best understood through a critical examination of the colonial policies that first institutionalised and reinforced sect-based divisions. Indeed, these separatist inclinations are not purely hypothetical; instead, they are deeply embedded in historical reality, most notably in the deliberate strategies adopted by French colonial authorities after World War I, which were instrumental in shaping and entrenching sectarian fragmentation within the state structure.

The colonial period, particularly following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, played a decisive role in shaping Syria's sectarian and territorial fault lines. After the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain and France, which effectively divided the Levant into spheres of influence, Syria and Lebanon were allocated to the French Mandate. Instead of fostering a unified Syrian state, the French opted for a policy of fragmentation. This was primarily the result of the influence of Robert de Caix, the principal architect of French policy in the Levant, who believed that a strong Syrian state would be dominated by Arab nationalist elites, potentially undermining French strategic interests in the region.

Consequently, the French administration carved Syria into a patchwork of smaller statelets, many of them aligned with sectarian or regional identities:

- The States of Damascus and Aleppo
- The autonomous Alawite State (1920)
- The Jabal al-Druze State (1921)
- The Sanjak of Alexandretta (modern Hatay)
- Greater Lebanon

By 1925, the French merged the Damascus and Aleppo states into a unified "State of Syria," but conspicuously excluded the Alawite and Druze territories from this integration. This exclusion was not incidental—it was part of a calculated policy to empower minority groups and weaken Arab nationalist sentiment. In 1936, a Franco-Syrian treaty was signed, ostensibly granting Syria independence and outlining a framework for incorporating the remaining minority statelets into the national fold. However, despite its formal signing, the treaty was never implemented. For Arab nationalists, the promise of unification was thus deferred for nearly another decade. Only after World War II, with pressure from both Britain and the United States, did Syria finally gain formal independence. Even then, the incorporation of

Alawite and Druze regions into the Syrian state remained, in practice, more symbolic than substantive.

French support for minority autonomy continued well beyond Syria's formal independence. Segments within the French military and intelligence establishment—opposed to the 1936 treaty and fearing a loss of influence—actively encouraged local Alawite and Druze notables to resist integration. Petitions signed by leaders from both groups demanded separate status and rejected assimilation into the Arab-dominated state. In support of this strategy, the French established local military formations composed of minority recruits, particularly Alawites and Druze, as a counterweight to the Sunni Arab majority.

This policy of privileging minorities at the expense of the majority had profound and long-lasting implications. By the 1960s, the military institutions of the Syrian state—originally shaped under French oversight—had become a powerful vehicle for minority empowerment. From 1949 onward, the army increasingly became dominated by officers from minority backgrounds, who eventually leveraged their positions to acquire disproportionate political power. This culminated in the 1963 Ba'athist coup, a transformative moment in Syrian history, in which the military—heavily staffed by Alawite and Druze officers—took control of the state. The Ba'ath regime, established through this military coup, was fundamentally shaped by minority influence, particularly that of the Alawites. Over time, this consolidation of power led to the migration of many minority groups, particularly the Alawites, into the political and administrative centres of the state, including Damascus. The result was the entrenchment of a minority-dominated political order, and a growing sense of exclusion and resentment among the Sunni Arab majority. Far from resolving sectarian divisions, the centralisation of power in the hands of a minority elite exacerbated them, laying the groundwork for the deep and violent fissures.

The Druze Experience in the Post-Independence State

In the aftermath of formal independence in 1946, the Syrian state undertook an arduous journey to consolidate national authority and establish a cohesive state apparatus. However, this post-colonial project encountered significant resistance from various segments of society, particularly among minority communities whose historical experiences with the central state had been shaped by both colonial favouritism and localised autonomy. While the Alawites would ultimately become the backbone of the emerging security state, gaining disproportionate influence through their dominance in the military and intelligence sectors, the Druze community's trajectory was far more complex—marked by initial participation, growing suspicion, and eventual marginalisation.

The Druze of southern Syria, particularly concentrated in the Jabal al-Druze region (modern-day Suwayda), had long maintained a strong tradition of local self-rule and resistance to external control. Under the French Mandate, the Druze were granted their own administrative unit and were militarily empowered to balance the Sunni Arab majority. However, in the post-independence period, efforts to integrate the Druze into the national framework often clashed with their historical sense of autonomy and communal identity. The emerging Syrian government aimed to assert centralised control over peripheral regions, but this effort faced significant resistance from Druze leaders who sought a share of power. The Druze had supported the Alawite-led government, which was essentially an alliance of minorities, and expected recognition for their contribution.

Unlike the Alawites, who gradually embedded themselves within the ranks of the military and bureaucracy—eventually using these institutions as vehicles of upward mobility and political ascendance—the Druze did not have similar social mobility. Although some Druze figures participated in national politics and military service and had many generals at the helm of prestigious regiments, their integration was not comparable to that of the Alawites.

The Ba'athist ideology, which gained traction in the 1950s and culminated in the 1963 coup, espoused a radical vision of Arab unity and centralisation that conflicted with the Druze commitment to regional self-governance and cultural particularism. Tensions between the Ba'ath regime and the Druze escalated in the 1960s, as the Druze leadership felt they had not been adequately rewarded for their role in supporting the Ba'athist military coup.

By the late 1960s, the political marginalisation of the Druze had become more pronounced. Their earlier experience of conditional empowerment under the French Mandate had given way to a deep scepticism toward the central state. As the Ba'ath Party consolidated power and prepared for the eventual rise of Hafez al-Assad, the Druze took passenger seats of the post-colonial order they had once helped to shape.

The Assad Era: Co-optation and Quietism

The ascent of Hafez al-Assad to power in 1970 marked a new era in Syria's political development—one characterised by authoritarian consolidation, militarised governance, and a nuanced approach to managing the country's ethno-sectarian diversity. As an Alawite himself, Assad pursued an alliance strategy that brought together all minorities, including the Druze, to secure their political support for imposing his authority over the majority. While the alliance was formed, it was clear to all participants that the Alawite leadership was in control. This strategy effectively

ensured the Druze's political quietism throughout much of the Assad era.

Recognising potential minority grievances, the Assad regime moved swiftly to co-opt Druze leaders and integrate segments of the Druze population into state institutions. Druze officers were given mid-level military and intelligence positions, and Druze notables were offered parliamentary seats, governorships, and bureaucratic roles—measures designed to project an image of inclusivity and national unity. Compulsory military service further tied Druze youth to the state, institutionalising a degree of loyalty and state dependence. Still, true centres of power—especially within the security services and elite military units—remained overwhelmingly dominated by Alawites.

Druze quietism was not without ambivalence. Beneath the surface, many within the Druze community harboured deep reservations about the lack of participation in the regime's unlimited access to wealth. The Druze's lack of loyalty began to appear in the aftermath of the 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon—a key regional setback for the Assad regime. As Syria found itself increasingly isolated and vulnerable to external pressure, minority communities, including the Druze, began to reassess their strategic alignment with the regime.

The regime responded to these pressures not with reform but with intensified surveillance and ideological control. State-appointed religious figures were tasked with promoting obedience and national unity among the Druze, while independent communal leaders were sidelined or co-opted. This approach, though effective in the short term, eroded the legitimacy of traditional Druze institutions and further alienated segments of the population.

The Syrian Civil War: Fracture, Proxy Dynamics, and Israeli Opportunism

After the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Druze-majority areas—especially Suwayda—chose a path of neutrality combined with continuous loyalty to the Assad regime. Unlike regions that quickly descended into open conflict, Suwayda remained stable.

One of the clearest manifestations of this balancing posture was the stance taken by Suwayda's local notables and religious leaders, who, while refraining from joining the armed opposition, also expressed unease with the regime's brutality and resisted forced conscription of Druze youth into battles outside their region. For instance, in 2015, tensions escalated when the regime attempted to enforce wider military conscription, leading to protests in Suwayda and the refusal of local armed groups to comply. At the same time, local Druze militias, such as the Rijal al-Karama (Men of Dignity), emerged not as proxies of the state, but as defenders of local autonomythat guarded its communal interests above all.

(Samir Abdalhade- Anadolu Agency)

Fast forward to present day, there is an important truth. Beneath the surface of the Druze quest for autonomy lies a more troubling reality: Druze groups are benefiting from ongoing international drug smuggling and other illicit activities. While these activities were encouraged by the Assad Regime, militias that claim to protect Druze interests, such as those loyal to Druze leader Hikmet al-Hajari, have become primary beneficiaries of the thriving drug trade, particularly Captagon. This contrast between the push for regional autonomy and the influence of criminal syndicates highlights the paradoxes complicating Syria's Post-Assad reconstruction efforts.

The fall of Assad has reshuffled the deck, reshaping the region's security and political landscape. This new reality has pushed secessionist groups to assert control in areas like Suwayda, where their claimed role as protectors of local interests, while, in fact, they care more about protecting the illegal Captagon trade. It is believed that the new authorities' attempts to curb this trafficking may have sparked the latest round of escalation, concealed under the guise of political demands for autonomy.

In the meantime, Druze localised autonomy is frequently exploited by foreign actors, particularly Israel, which has long attempted to portray itself as a protector of Druze populations in Syria, often to serve broader geopolitical ends. Under the pretext of safeguarding Druze communities—especially in areas near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights—Israel conducted cross-border operations, provided covert support to Druze militias, and allegedly maintained communication channels with local elements. While such actions were framed as humanitarian or security-driven, they also served to fragment the territorial integrity of Syria and create pliable buffer zones along Israel's northern frontier.

Notably, Israeli continuous military provocation in Southern Syria appear to form part of a broader Israeli strategy to prevent the re-centralisation of Syrian state authority, particularly in regions adjacent to the Golan Heights, thereby ensuring a flexible security perimeter that diminishes the risk of a hostile buildup near its borders. Consequently, the Druze regions of southern Syria, and Suwayda in particular, have become arenas of quiet yet consequential geopolitical contestation.

The David's Corridor and the Partition Gambit

Another key issue that must be addressed when discussing the Druze question in Syria is the phenomenon known as the "David's Corridor": an Israeli-backed vision for a Druze-linked buffer zone extending from the Golan Heights into southern Syria. Framed publicly within the long-standing Israeli narrative of being a "protector of minorities," this initiative must be understood not as a benign security measure, but as a contemporary iteration of colonial and Cold War-era tactics aimed at fragmenting adversarial states through the co-optation of minority groups.

While Israeli officials have intermittently expressed concern over the plight of the Syrian Druze, particularly during critical junctures such as the 2015 al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra offensive near Hadar (a Druze town near the Golan), this discourse has been accompanied by less-publicised moves to reshape the strategic landscape. These include discreet overtures to Druze leaders across the border, occasional logistical or intelligence support to anti-Assad Druze factions operating near Druze-majority areas, and targeted military strikes that, while ostensibly directed at Iranian proxies, have facilitated the emergence of pliable security vacuums. The vision behind the David's Corridor was not merely to safeguard border stability, but to create a pliant territorial buffer—one populated by a theoretically sympathetic minority—through which Israel can both pre-empt Iranian-Hezbollah entrenchment and diminish Damascus' sovereign reach.

This strategy echoes historical precedents: from the French Mandate's deployment of minority-based "statelets" in Syria and Lebanon to American Cold War manipulations of ethnic fault lines in the Middle East, the instrumentalisation of minority identities has long served hegemonic designs. What distinguishes the David's Corridor is its veiled operationalisation—rarely articulated officially, yet tacitly advanced through a combination of military interventions, humanitarian posturing, and identity-based diplomacy.

However, this approach entails significant risks and contradictions. Contrary to its purported aim of ensuring the security of the Druze community, the corridor strategy threatens to entangle them in a geopolitical project that undermines their traditional ethos of local autonomy and cautious neutrality. It effectively positions the Druze as collaborators in an externally imposed partition scheme, thereby provoking opposition from Damascus as well as various local communities, particularly Arab Bedouin groups, and further exacerbating intercommunal conflicts. Moreover, by promoting a quasi-separatist identity aligned with Israeli interests, the corridor plan jeopardises the Druze's integration and legitimacy within the framework of a centralised Syrian state order.

In the broader picture, the David's Corridor functions as a tool of "preventive partition," aimed at forestalling the re-centralisation of Syrian state power and preserving Israeli strategic depth. Nevertheless, in doing so, it erodes the prospects for national reconciliation, sustainable minority integration, and regional de-escalation. What appears as a tactical buffer in the short term, in the long term, enshrines permanent fault lines and destabilises an already fractured landscape.

Conclusion

To sum up, the Druze question in Syria is not a recent anomaly born of the 2011 uprising; it is the product of decades—if not centuries—of betrayal, crime, ambiguous loyalties, and external manipulation. While the Druze community's quest for autonomy has often been framed as a defence of local interests, it is increasingly clouded by the influence of criminal enterprises, most notably the Captagon trade, and external interventions, particularly from Israel. As Syria continues its tumultuous path to post-Assad reconstruction, the Druze regions, especially Suwayda, have become focal points of both internal power struggles and external geopolitical manoeuvring.

The involvement of foreign powers—especially Israel—adds a layer of complexity to the situation. Israel's ongoing operations in southern Syria, under the guise of protecting Druze communities, contribute to the fragmentation of Syrian territorial integrity and undermine the prospects for a unified, sovereign state. The concept of a "David's Corridor" further complicates the Druze's position, as it risks co-opting their autonomy for broader strategic purposes, deepening intercommunal tensions, and challenging their integration within Syria's central governance.

To prevent the collapse of Syria as a unified state, several policy priorities should be pursued:

1. Addressing Economic and Social Grievances: The Syrian state must undertake meaningful reforms to rebuild trust with minority communities. This might include addressing economic and security grievances in neglected regions such as Suwayda, and fostering participatory mechanisms.

2. Exposing and Resisting Foreign Interference: Regional actors and international institutions must shine a light on the instrumentalisation of minority identities by foreign powers, particularly those seeking to weaponise communal divisions for strategic gain. This includes rejecting projects like the so-called David's Corridor, which masquerade as humanitarian interventions but serve partitionist ambitions.

3. Encouraging Genuine Political Inclusion: While promoting greater political representation for the Druze, efforts must be taken to ensure such inclusion is not monopolised by criminal groups. Rather, independent Druze civic voices should be empowered to articulate community needs within a broader national dialogue.

All in all, the Druze community stands at a critical juncture. The allure of short-term protection through external alignment must be weighed against the enduring costs of being instrumentalised in regional power games. Only through reintegration—not fragmentation—can the Druze secure both their communal identity and their rightful place in Syria's future. The time has come to move beyond survival politics and toward a shared national project built on inclusion, dignity, and sovereignty.

(Mostafa Alkharouf - Anadolu Agency)