



# INSECURITY IN SOUTHERN SYRIA: THE CASE OF QUNEITRA AND SUWAYDA (APRIL – JUNE 2021)

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## INTRODUCTION

**S**ince the summer of 2018, the security situation in southern Syria has continued to deteriorate, which threatens to cause severe repercussions on the ground by undermining the fragile peace and the reconciliation agreement between the people of Daraa and Quneitra

governorates, and the Assad regime. The escalations and security chaos are due to several reasons, most notably the regime forces' attempts to enter new areas or weaken the local leaders refusing to hold the presidential elections. The neighboring As-Suwayda governorate is also witnessing a similar security deterioration. High crime rates and tension between various armed

Quneitra province is witnessing a deteriorating security situation due to IRGC-backed forces' attempts to enter new areas in the province, which is still not accepted by the locals, especially in the face of a difficult economic situation.

groups, stemming from difficult economic conditions and service crises prompted many local residents to join Russian mercenary companies to fight in other countries. This report highlights the most prominent security events that occurred on the ground in Quneitra and As-Suwayda governorates.

## 1. QUNEITRA

One of the most notable events in the Quneitra governorate was the displacement of families from Umm Batnah, a central village in the governorate, in mid-May. Earlier, unidentified armed men had launched an attack on a military site in the town of Jabba held by Hezbollah, which includes members of the Quneitra Martyrs Brigade, one of the armed opposition groups that joined the regime forces after the reconciliation agreement.

This attack prompted the Hezbollah militias stationed around Tal al-Shaar to target the village of Umm Batnah with machine guns and heavy artillery without causing any reported casualties. Once the shelling stopped, a committee consisting of the village's local figures and the Central Committee of Quneitra Governorate met with the Military Security Branch officers, who de-

manded the notables to hand over the militants or evacuate them to the country's north. The meeting was inconclusive, causing the tension and intermittent bombardments to continue until the Central Committee of Daraa Governorate offered to relocate the wanted persons to the countryside of Daraa. The regime rejected this offer, insisting instead on the displacement of the wanted persons and their families.

On 14 May, the two parties reached an agreement to displace 160 people from the village to the north of Syria in exchange for easing tension and the regime's approval of a new reconciliation deal for all locals. The regime also agreed to issue new reconciliation cards for the governorate's youth. Following the agreement, the families were rounded up in buses heading to the north of Syria. However, they had to wait for about 36 hours at the Abu Zandin crossing in the countryside of al-Bab, before the National Army forces allowed them to enter.

This displacement is a new step in the Fourth Division and the Iran-backed militias' plan to enter new areas and set up military posts in the governorates of Quneitra and Daraa. The events that occurred in



Assad Regime displaces 30 families in Quneitra

Umm Batnah village and Tafas in the countryside of Daraa governorate at the beginning of this year seem to follow a pattern. The plan puts local leaders and residents in a difficult situation as they cannot do much against it. In addition, local cells linked to the regime assassinate local notables that had previously opposed the regime and the Iranian militias.

During this period, the Quneitra governorate witnessed several Israeli raids targeting sites belonging to Iran-backed militias. On 5 May, an Israeli helicopter targeted regime-held sites near Jubata al-Khashab in the countryside west of Quneitra, without reports of casualties. On 10 May, an Israeli helicopter hit a site near the town of Hader in the Quneitra countryside, wounding Tahrir Mahmoud, a Hezbollah affiliate, while he was trying to plant an explosive device near the border fence. Tahrir is the brother of Nazih and Thaer, who were killed in a similar

attack while also trying to plant an explosive device near the Israeli border in 2015. According to loyalist pages, Tahrir died on 17 May after being wounded in the raid. Israeli helicopters also dropped leaflets near the border bearing pictures of Hezbollah leader Jawad Hisham and regime officers from the 90th Brigade, warning regime officers and residents not to cooperate with Hezbollah in order not to become targets of Israeli raids. On 17 June, Israeli artillery targeted a reconnaissance point belonging to the 90th Brigade in the town of al-Qahtaniyah in Quneitra without causing any casualties.

### Assassinations

The Quneitra governorate witnessed nine operations targeting people associated with the regime and Hezbollah in the past three months, where 12 people, including four civilians and two children (whose fathers were the targets), were killed.

On 17 April, an explosive device struck a military vehicle near the town of Nabe' al-Sakhr, killing Hadi Khuza and Hisham al-Khubi, both members of the Military Security Branch. Two children, Muhammad and Saada Bakkar, were also killed on 23 April, during the bombing attack targeting their father, Abdullah Bakkar, a former armed opposition leader who had joined the Military Security. On 3 May, unknown armed men shot dead Theeb Khalifa, a retired brigadier general in the Air Force Intelligence. On 4 June, an explosive device blew up the car of Shadi al-Haji, a member of the Hezbollah militia, near his house in the town of al-Mualqa, killing him and wounding his wife. In mid-June, the former head of the Quneitra Provincial Council of the opposition, Dirar al-Bashir, was injured in a car explosion in the southern countryside of the governorate. Locals know Al-Bashir as the leading figure promoting reconciliation in the Quneitra governorate and one of the notables who sided with the regime after the reconciliation agreement.

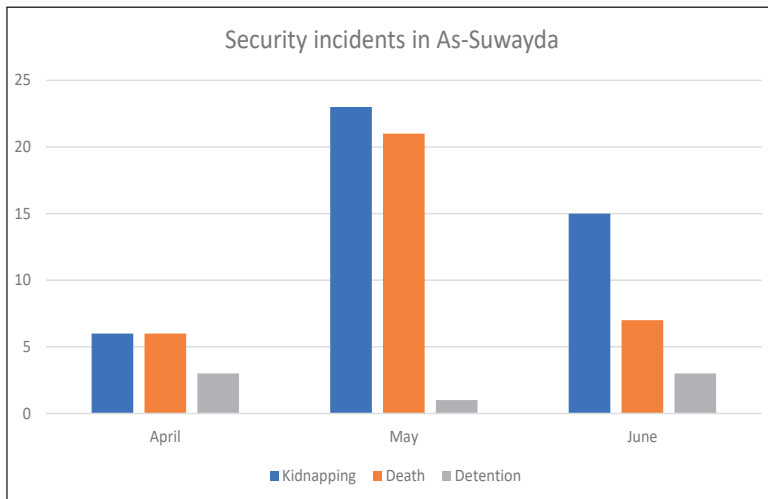
On 20 April, ISIS claimed responsibility for killing two soldiers from the 112th Brigade with machine guns in the town of Ghadir al-Bustan. On 27 June, Hussein Kaid, the mayor of Ghadir al-Bustan village, was killed in his car by unknown shooters. On 25 June, a young man named Mudhi al-Shamali died when an explosive device blew up Judge Muhammad al-Shamali's car, who was his father. On 6 July, shooters attacked First Lieutenant Muhammad Ibrahim in Nabe al-Sakhr.

## 2. AS-SUWAYDA

The security and living conditions continue to deteriorate in the As-Suwayda gov-

ernorate as new armed groups emerge and local gangs continue their kidnappings for ransom. Suwayda Network reported a total of 24 kidnappings on 24 April, in May, and on 18 June. The kidnappings also included the regime's arrest of several people from the province for various reasons and kidnappings of officers and members of the regime army by local factions for detainee exchange. The exchange of kidnappings between Daraa and As-Suwayda also increased. A gang from As-Suwayda kidnapped a young man from the Hariri family in Busr al-Harir in Daraa for ransom. In June, the victim's relatives responded by kidnapping several citizens from As-Suwayda due to a delay in his release. The notables tried to have the extorted people released, but only some were released, and the issue persisted. Without the regime or Russia's intervention, the abductions may further escalate the tension between the people of Daraa and As-Suwayda. Despite the mediation of As-Suwayda's notables, Hariri's ongoing detention shows that the kidnapping could be aimed at provocation instead of merely ransom.

The areas between the eastern countryside of Daraa and As-Suwayda governorate are witnessing increasing tension due to land disputes and mutual kidnappings. Locals from As-Suwayda blame the Eighth Brigade of the Fifth Corps, under Ahmed al-Awda, for the incidents. Ahmed al-Awda, on the other hand, defends himself by withdrawing his forces around al-Qrayya, in the east of Busra. The tension is rooted in the battles between the opposition and regime forces between 2013 and 2017. It continued even after the opposition factions in Daraa signed the reconciliation agreement with the regime in



2018. When most of Daraa was under the regime's control, the Eighth Brigade forces held agricultural lands belonging to the As-Suwayda governorate. They prevented the displaced residents from returning to their villages. Despite several meetings between village notables from the governorates of As-Suwayda and Daraa, no agreement was reached for several reasons. The primary reason was Ahmed al-Awda's desire to retain a vital pressure card that may prevent the regime from trying to get rid of him and use it to gain the support of the people in Daraa, especially its eastern countryside. On the other hand, the local factions and the Druze leadership of As-Suwayda cannot pressure the regime or Russia to resolve this issue. Indeed, the regime is refusing to act before achieving its objec-

tives. It wants the extradition of the young men wanted for compulsory service and the opening of all the towns and cities of the governorate to its security personnel.

Like Daraa, the regime could not effectively mobilize its supporters to participate in the elections and the electoral rallies in the As-Suwayda governorate. Many local activists made calls for non-participation in the elections and even tried to prevent the elections from being held. In social media, they circulated footage showing anti-regime slogans written on the walls in the cities of As-Suwayda and called for boycotting the elections. On the other hand, Druze sheiks' participation in the elections was much below the regime's expectations because they were utterly dissatisfied with

As Russian private security companies recruit more men from As-Suwayda to fight in foreign countries by benefiting from the dire living conditions, civil peace is threatened by the emergence of new foreign-backed political and armed formations, which the locals are skeptical about.

the regime and the practices of its security forces. They were also unwilling to anger the opponents of the regime. Only Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri participated in one electoral rally with a brief statement. He did not participate in the celebrations nor appeared later during Bashar al-Assad's swearing-in ceremony in Damascus.

The economic situation in Syria is already dire. In As-Suwayda, this is further exacerbated by drought, poor agricultural practices, and security chaos, with more than 20,000 young men wanted for compulsory service who cannot leave for fear of arrest. Thus, As-Suwayda has become a significant hub for Russian security companies seeking recruits to fight in Syria or other countries like Libya, Armenia, and Central Africa. According to a detailed report by Suwayda 24 Network, the Russian Wagner Company, through local recruiters, has drafted thousands of young men to fight in Libya alongside Khalifa Haftar's forces since 2019. The report mentions that the militia group ISIS Hunters, affiliated with Al-Sayyad Security Company, deploys about 4-5 batches of fighters per month to Libya, despite the decrease in hostilities there, paying each soldier 1200 dollars a month. The report also notes that many young men were sent to the Central African Republic once their contracts expired in Libya. Some local contractors inquired about young people sent to Nigeria, and more than 150 people were already deployed in Armenia. Wagner also uses the Military Intelligence branch in southern Syria to carry out a security check for the recruits and organize their transfer to the Hmeimim base. The report is based on a list of about 20,000 young men who had registered to obtain security approvals to travel and fight

outside Syria. The recruitment process is publicly announced on contractors' offices or social media sites without interference from the regime or local and religious leaders. There seems to be no official statement on the issue, despite the widespread opposition to the recruitment of mercenaries. On the other hand, the head of the Druze community in occupied Palestine/Israel, Sheikh Marafiq Tarif, expressed his concern about the recruitment of As-Suwayda youths in Libya to Russia's ambassador to Israel Anatoly Viktorov during a meeting in May. He demanded that Russia take steps to cease this practice and find a solution to the issue.

A new anti-regime political formation in As-Suwayda Governorate, called the Syrian Brigade Party, has recently emerged with its affiliated armed faction, the Anti-Terror Force. According to a report by the local Al-Rassed network, an activist from As-Suwayda, named Malik Abu al-Khair, currently residing in France, founded the party. Malik is one of the well-known anti-regime activists and runs the "I am Human" organization, which defines itself as an organization that delivers the voice of peace against tyranny and extremism. Al-Rassed's report states that Abu al-Khair asked people inside the As-Suwayda governorate to join the party and the armed faction, promising them as much as \$300 per person. In a statement on social media, Abu al-Khair says the party's goal is to deliver the voice of the Syrian population in As-Suwayda and Daraa in order for them to participate in the future of Syria. He adds that the armed faction is not affiliated with the party but coordinates with it.

According to the Facebook pages of the party and the armed faction, it appears that the party focuses on opposing the regime



Assad Regime continues to hit Daraa

and countering the Iran-backed militias, especially Hezbollah, and promises to fight their presence inside the province. However, its stance toward other factions, especially the YPG/SDF, the Syrian branch of the PKK, remains unclear. In a statement, Abu al-Khair mentions that the idea of self-administration might be the best solution for the As-Suwayda governorate. Abu al-Khair also appeared on the al-Yaum channel, which broadcasts from YPG/SDF-held Qamishli, raising doubts about the party's association or coordination with the SDF.

According to local sources, the Anti-Terror Force currently includes people known to have previously committed crimes and had connections with security services. The number of people who joined the faction from Araiqa and Kafr al-Lahf is estimated at 40. They are led by Azam Azzam, a person known for his involvement in robbery and theft in the past years. The name Samer al-Hakim, who

emerged as one of the faction leaders, was also formerly used by the Military Intelligence branch in the As-Suwayda governorate. On the other hand, the son of Waheed al-Balou, Laith Waheed al-Balou, the founder of the Men of Dignity movement (a local militia formed to protect the province), partially supported this new faction after it recruited several young men from Mazraa. The town is the stronghold of the Sheikh al-Karama faction, which Basem Al-Hamoud now leads. Samer al-Hakim joined the faction after his visit to Laith al-Balou. The latter said that Samer was not suspected of assassinating Waheed's father but that the main suspect was the former Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani. These developments come after a recent split between the Sheikh al-Karama faction and a local faction formerly a part of the Men of Dignity Movement, after one of the faction's leaders, Raji Falhout, announced his affiliation with the Military Intelligence and Laith al-Balou publicly denounced him.

The Anti-Terror Force does not seem to receive support from the local people, notables, and religious leaders. Prince Louay al-Atrash, the leader of the al-Atrash family known to be close to the regime, issued a statement in which he warns that attempts to form armed groups to impose a political vision only cause more division. He adds that he refused to exploit the difficult economic conditions suffered by the population, especially the youth. Prince Louay's position reflects how cautious the governorate's traditional leadership is against any opposition political formation that may lead to more tension among the population, especially if it is associated with an armed faction. Indeed, the local leaders have tried to avoid the establishment of any armed faction in their governorate since the militarization of the Syrian conflict. Indeed, the Men of Dignity faction was transformed from an opposition to a neutral faction aimed at protecting civilians after the assassination of al-Balous. By the end of July, the National Defence Forces, a local regime militia connected to the IRGC, announced it would not accept the Anti-Terror Force to set up checkpoints inside Shahba and towns in the eastern countryside of As-Suwayda. The Anti-Terror Force announced on its official Facebook page that it aims to defend the locals in As-Suwayda against ISIS and criminal gangs, protect the state institutions, and tackle drug trafficking in the province.

At the end of July, the city of Shahba witnessed an organized military campaign by local factions against local gangs. The events began after the killing of three civilians in Shahba by a gang leader named William al-Khatib. Several clans and families in the city announced in a joint statement that they would fight all the criminal gangs in the city. Pictures and videos spread on social media showing the clashes and findings of drugs, weapons, and documents proving that these gangs had links with the security services. After the campaign, families and clans in other areas in the governorate made supporting statements. Some also called for a more extensive campaign to expel all criminal gangs from the governorate.

This campaign was significant because most families approved lifting immunity or ending support for gang members without direct interference from religious leaders, unlike other cases where religious leaders imposed religious rulings on gang members. It also showed that families and clans could unite to solve local crises without the regime's intervention or other parties in the future. This campaign also constitutes an opportunity for other regions in As-Suwayda to reach a similar agreement that prevents gang support, which will improve the security situation inside As-Suwayda and outside, especially in terms of solving the issue of mutual kidnappings with Daraa.



## CONCLUSION

The security situation in south Syria is still fragile as the Iran-backed militias are expanding to other areas. This recent expansion threatens local cohesion under unprecedented pressure due to the severe economic crisis and successive assassinations targeting former opposition fighters. In As-Suwayda, the locals face criminal gangs with no support from the state, and this can

be counted among the reasons why locals may favor the emergence of the Syrian Brigade Party. However, the religious leaders and local notables may not be open to the new party as they tend to keep the province neutral and safe from descending further to civil war. On the other hand, most local notables remain silent against the recruiting activities of Russian PMC Wagner in As-Suwayda and Daraa, which will have severe repercussions for stability in the future.

## About the Author

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Suhail al-Ghazi holds a Bachelor of History degree holder from Damascus University. He is a research assistant at ORSAM and non-resident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. He's specialized in security, economy and governance in regime-held areas.



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