

Israel between loyalty toward the Druze and detente in Syria

written by Prof. Kobi Michael | 20.07.2025

Syria brought back many to the horrors of the Islamic State in 2014-2017, and some Israelis and Druze among them to the horrors of October 7. The rivalry and hostility between the Sunni Bedouin tribes in the region and the Druze date back to the days of the Assad regime.

The Druze, who by virtue of their religious faith show absolute loyalty to the government in the country in which they live and impose a ban on their own independent state, were also loyal to the Assad regime in Syria. Many Druze served in senior positions in the army and security apparatuses of the Assad regime, which showed great hostility towards the Sunni majority in Syria.

During the long civil war, the Syrian regime massacred religious and ethnic groups that were not Alawites or Shiites, especially the Sunni majority. Its actions led to a huge wave of refugees, about six million Syrians who fled their country, the vast majority of whom are Sunni. Many others became displaced in their homeland, and many were brutally murdered by the Syrian army and its security forces.

The Druze, even if they did not take an active part in the atrocities, are identified by most Sunnis, who were oppressed by the regime, as part of the Assad regime and as accomplices in the regime's atrocities against the Sunni majority.

With the collapse of the Syrian regime and the takeover of Syria by HTS, led by Ahmed al-Sharra (al-Julani), the wounds of the past were reopened and acts of revenge began against anyone identified as part of the Assad regime or its supporters. This is, in fact, the background to the attacks by Sunni Bedouin tribes in southern Syria on the Druze in the Druze Mountain and Sweida, as well as other Druze communities near Damascus.

Horrific massacres occurred both in the Latakia region, where the majority of the Alawite population lives, and in Damascus itself, against a Christian population also identified as having supported and collaborated with the Assad regime. The massacres were carried out by former ISIS members and other jihadists who had

gathered in Syria over the years, whether in spontaneous organisations or as part of the new Syrian army.

Ahmed al-Sha'ar, the leader of Syria, who was once one of the senior operatives of al-Qaeda, left the organisation and later founded the coalition of Sunni jihadist organisations (the Front for the Liberation of al-Sham), HTS. He was previously arrested by the Americans for his murderous terrorist activities and was even imprisoned for several years. His hands are certainly stained with a great deal of blood, and it is not entirely clear whether the fact that he carefully shaved his beard and replaced his galabeya with a suit indeed symbolises the abandonment of his jihadist beliefs and methods.

This reality of murderous acts of revenge in the wake of a change in minority rule is not new or unique to Syria, where the Alawite minority ruled. We also saw it in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, which relied on the Sunni minority and suppressed the Shi'ite majority. Israel is encountering this reality after a traumatic event that was burned into the consciousness of the Jewish collective on October 7 and a difficult multi-front regional war in which it has been engaged ever since.

The Israeli strategic compass, which was recalibrated after October 7, led to the design of a strategy whose purpose is to change the entire regional system by collapsing or significantly weakening its most significant and problematic centre of gravity – Iran. The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria is a consequence of the Israeli strategy and came after a severe blow to Hezbollah and Iran.

The demise of the Assad regime opened up the possibility for Israel to significantly reshape the arena and remove a major threat from Syria. Indeed, Israel took advantage of the historical and strategic opportunity to destroy the Syrian army's infrastructure in order to prevent these capabilities from falling into the hands of hostile jihadist elements, and to ensure an open land and, especially, air corridor on the way to Iran. In addition, Israel took control of the buffer zone established in the 1974 disengagement agreements in order to prevent the penetration of jihadist forces into the zone and to thwart terrorist attacks against Israel from the Golan Heights border.

Israel has no territorial interests in Syria, and the takeover of the buffer zone is based on a security need at this time and given the reality of governmental

instability in Syria. Israel is prepared to negotiate with Syria in order to reach updated and effective security arrangements, and indeed, it has recently been reported on several occasions and by several sources that meetings have taken place between senior Israeli and Syrian officials to formulate agreements on these issues.

Within the buffer zone defined by Israel – larger than the buffer zone in which IDF forces are present and operating – is the Druze Mountain. It also includes the city of Sweida, the largest concentration of the Druze population in Syria. The presence of a large Druze population in this area helps to prevent the activity of Sunni jihadist militias and thus serves Israel's security interests.

At the same time, the Druze population in the area has extensive family ties to Druze citizens of Israel. The Druze communities are known for maintaining close ties with each other, and their sense of persecution in the region (the Druze minority numbers only about a million people, scattered across four countries: Israel, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan) intensifies their sense of solidarity and mutual commitment. This is the main reason why the Druze population in Israel is demanding that Israel take action and come to the defence of their brothers in Sweida.

The roots of the historical alliance between the Druze population in Israel and the Jews date back to the days before the establishment of the State of Israel. The Druze minority in Israel numbers only about 150,000 people, but it is a deeply embedded and highly integrated minority within Israeli society. Their sons serve in the IDF and the Israeli security services, and many have reached senior positions and ranks.

The State of Israel is deeply grateful to its Druze citizens for their commitment to the national security effort and is highly sensitive to their feelings and concerns regarding their family members across the border. Since many Druze have sacrificed their lives for the Jewish state – and continue to be willing to do so – while demonstrating absolute loyalty to the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and considering themselves an integral part of it, the State of Israel cannot ignore their call to protect their brothers in distress, who are being massacred by the Sunnis with the backing of the Syrian regime.

Furthermore, Israel has a historical, strategic and moral obligation to protect

minorities in the region by virtue of the Jews being a minority in the region. In this sense, there is a shared fate among religious and ethnic minorities. This was the case with the Kurds in Iraq, with the Christians in Lebanon, and with the Druze in Syria. This alliance of minorities, even if not formalised, is important to Israel as a religious and national minority state in the region, and in the case of Syria, it also serves clear security interests. Israel, as the state of the Jews who were persecuted and massacred throughout the generations, also feels a historical and moral obligation to protect those minorities.

At the same time, Israel and the Syrian regime led by al-Sharra have common strategic interests. The Syrian regime is working to push Iran out of Syria, is acting against Hezbollah, and does not permit Palestinian terrorist activity from Syrian territory. The possibility of establishing security agreements with the current regime – which in turn could lead to cooperation in the fields of energy, water, infrastructure, and later perhaps to normalisation and Syria's accession to the Abraham Accords— is highly important to Israel (and also to President Trump's vision). It serves not only Israel's security interests but also its broader interest in regional integration through the design of a new regional architecture in which Israel is an important and influential component.

Therefore, the Israeli dilemma boils down to the tension between the necessity of protecting the Druze minority in Syria and its security interests in the buffer zone on the one hand, and the need to preserve and advance the interests common to Israel and the Syrian regime on the other.

Israel must find a way to manoeuvre and balance its actions – ensuring that any blow it chooses to inflict on the Syrian regime, for its support of jihadist murderers slaughtering the Druze or for violating Israel's demand to keep military forces out of the buffer zone, does not break the regime's neck. Such blows must be proportionate: sufficient to convey the message and preserve deterrence, but not so severe as to sever channels of strategic dialogue and potential future cooperation.

Alongside Israeli determination, more creative thinking is required about the use of force in renewing and preserving deterrence. It is crucial to break free from the mindset that, because we have a big hammer in our hands, every problem

must look like a nail.

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