



[What Druze Protests Mean for Assad](#)

By Loretta Wolchko

“We want to topple you ... even if planes shower Al-Suwayda province with gold from the sky,” says a Syrian man as his fellow protesters shout behind him in opposition to their government. In southern Syria lies the province of Al-Suwayda, where protests against President Bashar Al-Assad have entered their fourth week. The province of Sweida is mainly populated by the minority Druze ethnoreligious group, which makes up roughly three percent of the total Syrian population. Protests erupted in August in response to a spike in gasoline prices and the overall cost of living. The momentum has yet to cease, but the cause the protesters are championing has shifted: in a rather unprecedented turn of events, the Druze people are demanding the total removal of Assad from power. Such an outburst has the potential for the conflict in Syria. There are multiple ways Assad’s government might respond.

Although protests have taken place in the province since the onset of the conflict, few (if any) have come close to mirroring the breadth of the ongoing dissent. Roughly two thousand Syrians in the center square of Sweida City gathered in a demonstration against Assad and his regime. Banners featuring his likeness were torn apart as the people chanted various anti-government slogans, wishing for his fall from power and literally exclaiming “We don’t want you.” The living conditions in Syria have been lamentable since the onset of the conflict, exacerbated by Assad’s economic failings as of late which has prompted the recent anti-Assad movement. The people are also calling for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which was adopted in 2015 and gives a guideline for peaceful political transition in the country. No legislation has been passed or even discussed since its adoption.

The anti-Assad sentiments in Sweida have spread to the nearby governorate of Dara’a. In contrast to the Druze in Sweida waving their own flag, protestors in Dara’a raised the flag of the opposition - the three-starred banner used by protesters at the onset of the conflict in 2011. Even though the two provinces are waving separate flags, the message is the same: the people want political change and a new era for Syria.

Throughout the conflict that has now spanned over a decade, the Druze sect has mainly remained neutral. This has undoubtedly protected the Druze from military force or suppression that other provinces under government control have experienced. In fact, an Alawite man living along the coast of the nation began protesting upon hearing about the movement in the southern province and began to make his way to Sweida for protection because it is known that the region is protected under Assad’s minority protection policy. He was arrested on his journey before he could get to Sweida. Assad’s policy has also granted the province semi-autonomy, a rare phenomenon in twenty-first-century Syria. They have worked to maintain a balance of impartiality for their own safety while intermittently speaking out in support of democracy and a unified Syria. It should be noted, though, that the flags the Druze are waving are that of their sect, not the flag of the opposition. Direct support for the opposition has not been announced, implying that this is not necessarily in tandem with the opposition. Despite this, protestors on the ground, women in particular, are hoping for the fall of Assad and one Syria. This protest is still a momentous event in the history of the conflict.

One of the only exceptions to the policy of Assad to refrain from force against the Druze was the assassination of Sheikh Wahid al-Balous, a prominent leader of the sect, in 2015. His murder sparked protests, but not near the scale of what can be seen in Sweida now. The anniversary of his death was just last week, propelling the unrest of the Druze.

This level of outrage from the sect could signify a turning point in the nature of the conflict in Syria. A historically neutral group taking to the streets for weeks on end is a development that Assad likely did not see coming. According to experts actively reporting on the conflict, this development is likely troubling to the Assad regime. If no action is taken or statement is made from the government, it may embolden the Druze further in their vocal dissent. It has already given Syrians in government strongholds the strength and motivation they needed to begin voicing their own dissent toward the regime. For the first time in years, some Syrians say, they have hope.

It is possible that Assad could also shift his strategies. For the duration of the conflict, the president has refrained from using violence against minority groups, the Druze being a prominent example of those who have thus far escaped some of the atrocities of the war. The magnitude of the protests in Sweida may convince Assad to assert his military power over the adamant Druze protesters. This could put a firm halt to any present or future defiance from the Druze and other neutral sects and force these historically neutral groups into submission. There is also the risk of Assad making an example of the Druze and simply wiping them out. It would not be out of character for the tyrant.

Contrarily, it is theorized by experts on the conflict that such strong pushback from Assad could risk driving the Druze away from their neutrality entirely, creating another “enemy” and consequently growing the opposition. Sweida has already been called an incubator of further protests and anti-regime sentiment, so it is possible the momentum will spur greater anti-Assad movements.

Regardless of whichever path Assad takes in his response (or lack thereof), it is possible that parties traditionally neutral or loyal to Assad may be shifting towards dissent. It still remains unlikely at this time that Assad will finally concede and implement Resolution 2254, but not impossible. It will likely still be some time before Assad is removed from power, if it happens at all. Whatever the outcome, it will certainly be an important event in the timeline of the civil war.