



### Carnage in Suwayda and the Future of Syria-Israel Relations

The recent outbreak of violence in Suwayda last week has shed light on Syria's fragile transition and the major challenges posed to the new government. This is especially the case given the nascent nature of the political transition, and as the government in Damascus tries to assert its authority and stability across the country after the ousting of the Assad regime back in December. The circumstances were further complicated as a result of destructive foreign intervention and attacks carried out by Israel, which was understandably condemned for its attempts to exacerbate the violence and undermine the new Syrian government. Even in the midst of ceasefire agreements and efforts to restore order, the humanitarian situation in Suwayda remains critical, with thousands displaced and dealing with shortages of food, water, and medical supplies. Experts have outlined that what unfolded in Suwayda demonstrates the complexities that the new government faces in potentially seeking to establish centralized control due to various local and regional considerations. For many, the vital question that remains to be seen is what this entails for Syria moving forward as it continues to navigate its delicate political transition.

One of the most critical things that is now needed is a sense of accountability in the aftermath of the atrocities that were committed in Suwayda. As such, it is no surprise that the Syrian government recently announced that it had opened investigations into suspected extrajudicial killings, vowing to hold all involved accountable, even members of its own forces. In order to bolster its legitimacy, the new regime needs to conduct a swift, credible, and transparent investigation into the violence which resulted in the killing of an estimated more than 1,400 people. Authorities have expressed commencing an urgent investigation to identify those involved in the violations, and that a committee would determine the affiliation and background of these perpetrators. As some analysts have pointed out, Syrian officials' remarks regarding their commitment to safeguard all citizens is one thing, but it will all come down to how the new government behaves since their actions will speak louder than words for the minority groups in the country.

When clashes in Suwayda between Druze and Bedouin groups erupted, the Syrian government sent troops into the southern province in an effort to restore order, even reportedly notifying Israel in advance so as to emphasize that the move was not intended as a threat. Despite this, Israel – which has long used the guise of “protecting the Druze” as a political tool to try and justify aggression – viewed this as an opening to initiate attacks, even as the very community it claims to protect largely rejects Israeli intervention and stresses that solutions should come from within the internal Syrian state. Exemplifying the scale of the denunciation regarding the Israeli attacks on Syria is the fact that they were even met with displeasure among President Trump and other senior U.S. officials. It was revealed that Israel's actions alarmed and blindsided many in the Trump administration, widening their concerns over its policies across the region. Secretary of State Marco Rubio framed the Israeli attacks as a dangerous hindrance to the prospects of building a peaceful and stable Syria, with some speculating that public criticism such as this is likely meant as a warning to the Netanyahu government that the White House is growing frustrated with its bellicose actions.

As for the future of Syria-Israel relations, much remains unclear, however a meeting between U.S., Israeli, and Syrian officials did take place yesterday in what was described as an effort to reach security understandings

regarding the situation in southern Syria and prevent crises such as the one which transpired last week. While the potential for continued dialogue exists, several key factors are likely to influence the trajectory of this, including Israel's harmful interference in Syria's internal affairs and whether or not the new government in Damascus is able to maintain stability. The Trump administration has been clear about its desire to pursue a normalization of relations between Syria and Israel, employing what some see as a "carrot-and-stick" approach of lifting sanctions on Syria as a means of pressuring the new government to possibly join the Abraham Accords. The U.S. is doing so without any mention of Israel's illegal occupation of the Golan Heights, something that is ultimately not surprising given that during his first term, Trump recognized it as part of Israel despite the rest of the world universally viewing it as Syrian territory. The Trump administration's contradictions in criticizing Israel's destructive actions in Syria yet still pushing for rapprochement under the current circumstances has not been lost on many observers. Normalization at any near point in time is unlikely though, and particularly if Israel persists with its encroachments and violations of Syria's sovereignty – which are the main impediment to peace and stability.