



WHRD Dispatch

Women of Suweida Speak Out About Sectarian Terror, State Violence, and Lack of Protection

Introduction

Since Sunday, July 13, the southern Syrian province of Sweida has witnessed a devastating wave of violence, marking one of the gravest escalations in recent years. Sweida, predominantly home to the Druze community, had long maintained a fragile autonomy, largely spared from the direct control of Damascus and the tumult of the broader Syrian conflict. But this tenuous peace was shattered when heavy clashes erupted between residents and government-aligned Bedouin militias, accompanied by a renewed push from the Syrian interim government to reassert authority over the city. The violence and conflict have escalated further following illegal Israeli strikes in Sweida, and Damascus. Israel's strikes were carried out under the pretext of support for the Druze community, as explained in a statement by Israel's Defense Minister.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least 203 people have been killed, including children, women, and elderly civilians. The toll is thought to be higher as many families are unable to reach hospitals due to ongoing fighting, and bodies reportedly lie in homes and streets, yet to be recovered. In addition to the human casualties, there have been alarming reports of public executions, acts of humiliation, including forced shaving of Druze clergymen's beards, widespread looting of shops, and drone and mortar bombardments that have terrorized entire neighborhoods.

Over the past few days, Femena has spoken to several women human rights defenders and activists from within Sweida and the diaspora. They shared with us how they have been living through this ordeal — stories that reflect not only the brutal impact of the current violence but also deeper patterns of sectarian targeting, gender-based violence, and intense fear among minority communities.

B.H, 39 years old, A Female Activist in Suweida City: “The Fear Came Rushing Back”

I was following the news about the massive wildfires burning in Lattakia, hearts heavy for the people displaced from their homes. We were gathering donations to help families who lost everything when suddenly, I read on Facebook calls from the Syrian government to “liberate” the city of Suweida from its people and bring it back under interim government control.

Suweida had long been outside the direct control of the Damascus government under Assad, and after the regime’s weakening. It was a unique case with its Druze communities maintaining a relatively independent existence—until just two days ago, when clashes erupted between pro-government armed Bedouin groups and the city’s residents.

When I saw the discussions and calls on Facebook for jihad and the liberation of Suweida, I was instantly reminded of similar calls that once aimed to liberate the Syrian coast from regime remnants. That campaign ended with nearly a thousand civilians brutally killed —innocent women, children, and elders—all drowned in blood and terror. That fear came rushing back to my heart.

Then I began seeing videos documenting public killings, human dignity violations, Druze elders having their beards forcibly shaved, and widespread abuse, theft, and looting of property and shops. At night, we heard the sounds of drone and mortar bombardments striking the city.

The situation quickly became very dangerous. I started receiving personal death threats aimed at me and my family because we are Druze. These threats forced us to flee to the countryside to hide, caught in a terrifying silence.

All of this has become an excuse for the interim government to impose its authority by force over Suweida, paid for in the blood and suffering of people who only want to live in peace in their city.



K.A, 35 years old, A Woman Human Rights Defender in Exile: “They Killed My Cousin in His Home”

I am a woman human rights defender originally from Suweida, currently in exile. This week, I received confirmation from my family that my cousin — a civilian — was killed inside his own home by pro-government fighters. According to relatives, he was targeted explicitly because he is Druze.

This incident is part of a broader pattern of sectarian and political violence now unfolding in Suweida, where armed groups aligned with the transitional Syrian authorities have intensified operations under the pretext of “reasserting state control.” Reports from local contacts indicate dozens of homes have been raided, and community members subjected to threats, beatings, and property theft.

Women in particular are bearing heavy burdens — many are now solely responsible for safeguarding children amid raids and forced displacements, while also navigating increased risks of sexual harassment during searches.

I call on feminist and human rights organizations to urgently document these violations, highlight the targeting of minority communities, and advocate for immediate protection measures for women and civilian populations in Suweida.

D.K, 27 years old, A Christian Woman Human Rights Defender in Exile: “My Sisters Are Afraid to Leave the House”

I am a woman human rights defender from Suweida, currently working in another Arab country. My family, who are Christians, remain in Suweida and are now facing serious threats amid the latest wave of violence.

In recent days, pro-government armed groups have intensified their operations in the city under the pretext of restoring state authority. My family reports that Christian households in their neighborhood have been subjected to intimidation and extortion. Armed men have demanded money and threatened to burn down homes if residents refuse to cooperate.

My sisters have been harassed and warned not to speak out about what is happening. They no longer feel safe leaving the house, even for basic necessities. Meanwhile, several families have already fled to nearby villages after receiving direct threats linked to their religious identity.

This situation highlights the compounded risks faced by minority women in Suweida — exposed not only to gender-based violence but also to sectarian targeting. I call on feminist and human rights organizations to closely monitor these developments and to advocate for urgent protections for vulnerable communities in Suweida, including Christian families and women at risk.

A.S, 33, A Female Healthcare Professional in Suweida: “They Killed a Doctor Who Treated the Poor for Free”

With deep sorrow, I report the killing of Dr. Faten Hilal, a young dermatologist from Suweida province, who died from a gunshot wound to the head.

Dr. Hilal was widely respected in her community for her compassion and commitment to treating poor patients free of charge. Local residents describe her as a woman of exceptional character who often went out of her way to help those who could not afford care.

Her death underscores the grave risks facing civilians — including professional women — in Suweida amid escalating violence and lawlessness. At the same time, heavy clashes including gunfire have erupted around and in the main public hospital in Suweida. I urge feminist and human rights organizations to document this case and advocate for accountability for attacks on women who serve as essential pillars of their communities.



A.A, 42 years old, A Writer and Women Human Rights Defender: “This is a Moral Crisis”

In these tragic times, we remember all those who have lost their lives—security personnel and local residents alike—defending their homes and families. They are all part of Syria’s fabric, yet their deaths reveal a deeper, more complex crisis.

The problem extends beyond governments or armed factions; it lies within a fractured society where divisions are magnified, and mistrust is weaponized. What began as small disputes, resolvable through dialogue, has escalated into widespread conflict fueled by fear and sectarian rhetoric.

Instead of seeking to understand and address the underlying causes peacefully, entire communities are painted with broad strokes of suspicion. This deepens rifts, silences voices of reconciliation, and entrenches cycles of hatred.

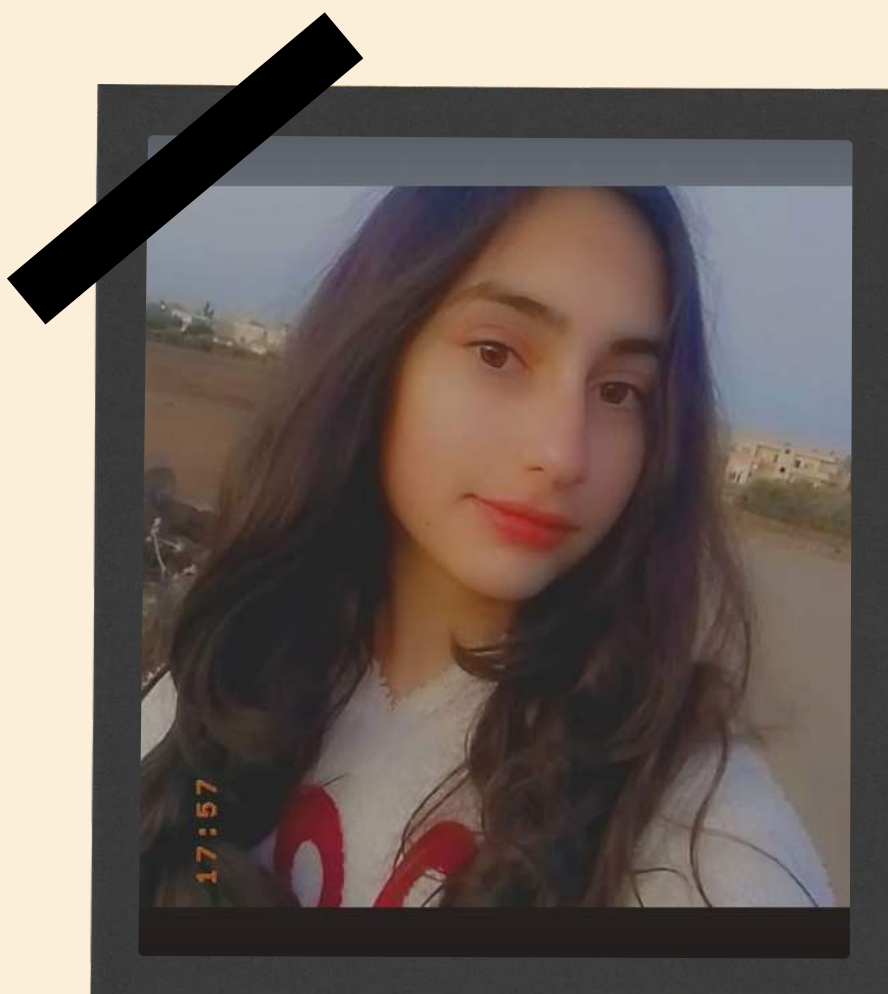
Our society struggles with contradictions—where entire groups are blamed for the actions of a few, while ignoring the internal dynamics that fuel tension. Those marginalized for their identity are often the very people who have opened their homes to displaced Syrians seeking refuge.

Yet, rather than build bridges, some choose division, humiliation, and exclusion. Extremist factions are sometimes celebrated as saviors, even as they bring destruction and fear.

This crisis is more than political or military; it is a profound moral challenge. If we fail to confront it honestly, we risk fracturing the very foundation of our shared humanity and the future of our country.

Conclusion: The Voices of Suweida's Women

The voices of Suweida's women echo urgent demands for protection, accountability, and visibility. As sectarian terror and state violence tear through their communities, they call on feminist and human rights organizations to act swiftly: to document these grave abuses, amplify the stories of women bearing the compounded burdens of identity and gender-based violence, and press for international action to halt the violence. They demand that the world see their suffering not as a distant conflict, but as a moral in need of solidarity, justice, and immediate measures to safeguard vulnerable lives.






Femena supports Women Human Rights Defenders, their organizations and feminist movements in Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) through analysis of trends and policy, documentation, fostering the development of regional communities of practice and advocacy.


Femena's work is primarily focused on contexts of shrinking or closed civic space and contexts complicated by growing extremism and conflict.

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