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COI QUERY

Country of Origin	Syria
Main subject	The Druze religion
Question(s)	The Druze religion, including beliefs and practices; treatment by the government and armed groups, including in Suwaia and Damascus (January 2019-August 2020)
Date of completion	24 August 2020
Query Code	Q20-2020
Contributing EU+ COI units (if applicable)	---

Disclaimer

This response to a COI query has been elaborated according to the [EASO COI Report Methodology](#) and [EASO Writing and Referencing Guide](#).

The information provided in this response has been researched, evaluated and processed with utmost care within a limited time frame. All sources used are referenced. A quality review has been performed in line with the above-mentioned methodology. This document does not claim to be exhaustive neither conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to international protection. If a certain event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

The information in the response does not necessarily reflect the opinion of EASO and makes no political statement whatsoever.

The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision-making authorities. The answer was finalised on the 24 August 2020. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.



COI QUERY RESPONSE

1. The Druze

John Cappucci, professor of religion and conflict studies at the University of Windsor, indicated that the Druze religion was founded by Hamza ibn Ali in 1017 during the Fatimid Caliphate (909-1171), which extended from Egypt to North Africa and Yemen, when Hamza declared that al-Hakim bi Amr Allah, then Fatimid caliph, was a 'divine incarnation'.¹

The term 'Druze' originates from the name of one of its earliest apostates, Nashtakin ad-Darazi; however, the Druzes prefer to be called *muhwahhidun* ('unitarians'), rather than a name from an apostate of their religion. Currently, it is estimated that there are about one million Druze, the majority of them living in Jordan², Syria, Lebanon, and Israel.³ In Syria, they are predominantly located in Suwayda [also spelled out as Sweidaa, Sweida, Suweida]⁴, with about 700 000 Druze.⁵

According to Cappucci, 'the Druze religion combines elements of Shia Ismailism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and other philosophies to produce a syncretic faith'.⁶ The Conversation similarly indicated that the known practices of the religion incorporate other religions such as Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism.⁷ The spiritual elements of their religion are only known to the elders⁸, and the 'atmosphere of secrecy that pervades the religion' allows them to 'engage in the controversial practice of *taqiyya* (dissimulation), whereby members are permitted to conceal their religious affiliation in order to protect themselves'.⁹ Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted within the time constraints of this query.

The same source provided the following regarding their beliefs and practices:

- The 'central concept' in the Druze faith is the 'belief in the monotheistic nature of God' or '*tawhid*';
- Three levels of spiritual development: the exoteric or legalistic; the esoteric or allegorical; and the highest, *al-haqiqqa*, for the 'ultimate unity with and intimate knowledge of the divine';

¹ Cappucci, John, Druze, in Islam, A World Encyclopedia, Cenap Çakmak (ed.), Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2017, p. 387

² Cappucci, John, Druze, in Islam, A World Encyclopedia, Cenap Çakmak (ed.), Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2017, p. 387

³ Cappucci, John, Druze, in Islam, A World Encyclopedia, Cenap Çakmak (ed.), Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2017, p. 387; FT, Syria protests erupt in rare show of dissent against Assad, 8 June 2020, [url](#)

⁴ FT, Syria protests erupt in rare show of dissent against Assad, 8 June 2020, [url](#); The Arab Weekly, Rising discontent in Syria's Daraa, Sweida reflects simmering woes, 16 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵ The Arab Weekly, Rising discontent in Syria's Daraa, Sweida reflects simmering woes, 16 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶ Cappucci, John, Druze, in Islam, A World Encyclopedia, Cenap Çakmak (ed.), Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2017, p. 387

⁷ Conversation (The), Solving the 1,000-year-old mystery of Druze origin with a genetic sat nav, 29 November 2016, [url](#)

⁸ Conversation (The), Solving the 1,000-year-old mystery of Druze origin with a genetic sat nav, 29 November 2016, [url](#); Cappucci, John, Druze, in Islam, A World Encyclopedia, Cenap Çakmak (ed.), Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2017, p. 387

⁹ Cappucci, John, Druze, in Islam, A World Encyclopedia, Cenap Çakmak (ed.), Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2017, p. 389

- The sacred text of the Druze religion is called *Epistles of Wisdom*, and was written by the founders of the Druze religion.¹⁰

Sources indicated that the Druze recognise the Seven Principles of Islam¹¹, including truthful speech, communal camaraderie, eschewing idolatry, avoiding evil, *tawhid*, accepting divine will, and a fatalist outlook.¹²

Sources indicated that the Druze religions does not accept converts¹³, forbids marriage outside the community¹⁴, and children born to a non-Druze parent is not a Druze.¹⁵ Marriages outside the community still take place.¹⁶ The Druze believe in reincarnation, as they considered that living humans are the reincarnation of previous generations.¹⁷

Cappucci further indicated that the Druze community is divided based on the knowledge its members possess on the sacred texts, the *Juhhal* ('unenlightened masses'), and the *uqqal* ('enlightened spiritual minority'). Both divisions meet every Thursday in their place of worship called the khalwa, where they discuss issues about the community.¹⁸

2. Relationship with the Syrian state

The Druze have largely remained neutral in the Syrian conflict, 'forming their own militias to defend Suweida from outside attack and limit the reach of the state within'.¹⁹ The Middle East Institute similarly indicated that 'the Druze of Suwayda Province have a unique relationship with the Syrian regime characterized by relative limited autonomy, and the regime has long balked at direct clashes with Suwayda's powerful local authorities'.²⁰

The New Arab indicated that 'while the Druze are a religious minority that have experienced persecution and some difficulties with neighbouring Sunni Bedouin tribes, their relationship with the current regime is a complicated one'.²¹

Thomas Pierret, senior researcher at the Institute of Research and Study on the Arab and Muslim Worlds (IREMAM), quoted by the New Arab stated that the Druze are divided between those who support the government and those who are 'third-way elements'.²²

The 'third-way' was represented in the Rijal Al-Karama ('Men of Dignity'), 'a Druze religious and civil movement that was led by charismatic cleric Sheikh Wahid Al-Balous'. The Rijal Al-Karama reportedly clashed with Assad forces during the war in order to seek independence for the Druze. Balous also opposed conscription in Suwayda and promoted enlistment among Druze men to defend Suwayda

¹⁰ Cappucci, John, Druze, in Islam, A World Encyclopedia, Cenap Çakmak (ed.), Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2017, pp. 388-389

¹¹ Cappucci, John, Druze, in Islam, A World Encyclopedia, Cenap Çakmak (ed.), Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2017, p. 388; IFCJ, Druze Religion, n.d., [url](#)

¹² Cappucci, John, Druze, in Islam, A World Encyclopedia, Cenap Çakmak (ed.), Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2017, p. 388;

¹³ IFCJ, Druze Religion, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁴ Conversation (The), Solving the 1,000-year-old mystery of Druze origin with a genetic sat nav, 29 November 2016, [url](#); Atlantic (The), Looking for Love in One of the World's Tiniest Religions, [url](#)

¹⁵ Atlantic (The), Looking for Love in One of the World's Tiniest Religions, [url](#)

¹⁶ Atlantic (The), Looking for Love in One of the World's Tiniest Religions, [url](#)

¹⁷ IFCJ, Druze Religion, n.d., [url](#); Atlantic (The), Looking for Love in One of the World's Tiniest Religions, [url](#)

¹⁸ Cappucci, John, Druze, in Islam, A World Encyclopedia, Cenap Çakmak (ed.), Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2017, pp. 388-389

¹⁹ New Arab (The), Syria Insight: Suweida's autonomy threatened by new economic uncertainties, 21 June 2020, [url](#)

²⁰ Middle East Institute, Manufacturing Division: The Assad Regime and Minorities in South-west Syria, 11 March 2020, [url](#)

²¹ New Arab (The), Syria Insight: Suweida's autonomy threatened by new economic uncertainties, 21 June 2020, [url](#)

²² New Arab (The), Syria Insight: Suweida's autonomy threatened by new economic uncertainties, 21 June 2020, [url](#)

from extremist groups. However, after Balous was killed in 2015 and the neighbouring province of Daraa was recaptured by the regime, the 'third-way' has reportedly been weakened and 'Russia has sought to bring the autonomous Druze militias back under centralised government control'.²³

Additional and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted within the time constraints for this query.

2.1 Presence of security forces and armed groups in Suwayda

Several sources report that since the war in Syria began in 2011, Suwayda remained under government control, however with the local civil authorities and armed groups enjoying a certain degree of autonomy.²⁴ According to a report on the Suwayda and conflict dynamics by Taim Zaidan, a Syrian researcher and human rights activist based in Suwayda, security forces present in Suwayda include the Syrian army's Fourth and Fifteenth Divisions, as well as 'security groups linked to the security office of the Fourth Division'.²⁵

According to Zaidan, pro-regime militias are also present in Suwayda, and include the National Defense, The Syrian Socialist National Party, Ba'ath Brigades, Al-Bustan Association, Home Guards, Tawhid Party. These groups were formed with the help of the government security services and 'were able to quickly crack down on protests across the province, especially in the cities of Sweida, Shahba and al-Qariya'.²⁶ The same source also indicated that, in addition, 'there are also armed clan-based groups, of which the most prominent is that of the Na'im clan, which make up the largest family in Sweida city. The leadership of this group is linked to Sweida's military security branch'.²⁷

The Middle East Institute also reported the presence of Hezbollah in the region. According to Middle East Institute,

'Hezbollah's push to create inter-sect strife has extended from Beirut to the occupied Golan Heights to Suwayda, placing the region's Druze in a greatly weakened position. This risk is particularly pronounced in Suwayda province, where attempts by Hezbollah and the regime to change the military and political reality on the ground have led to a major shift in power dynamics there, with Hezbollah now affiliated with 60% of armed groups in the province'.²⁸

The same source noted that 'in recent months Suwayda's Druze have come under direct threat from Hezbollah and regime intelligence, both of which are recruiting local armed groups to carry out assassinations and attacks on Druze officials and leaders. Hezbollah controls most of these armed groups, composed of local Bedouins, who traffic drugs and weapons in addition to carrying out security operations'.²⁹

Other groups present in the region, according to Zaidan, include the Haraket Rijjal al-Karama, Al-Shariyan al-Wahed, Al-Fahad Forces, and Sheikh Karama Forces. The Haraket Rijjal al-Karama, under the leadership of Yahiya al-Hajjar, is the largest faction in the province.³⁰

²³ New Arab (The), Syria Insight: Suweida's autonomy threatened by new economic uncertainties, 21 June 2020, [url](#)

²⁴ Syria Direct, Suweida governorate terrorized by increased gang activity, kidnappings, 31 July 2019, [url](#); Middle East Institute, Manufacturing Division: The Assad Regime and Minorities in South-west Syria, 11 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁵ Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, 6 January 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁶ Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, 6 January 2020, [url](#), p. 18-19

²⁷ Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, 6 January 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁸ Middle East Institute, Divide and Conquer: The Growing Hezbollah Threat to the Druze, 21 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁹ Middle East Institute, Manufacturing Division: The Assad Regime and Minorities in South-west Syria, 11 March 2020, [url](#)

³⁰ Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, 6 January 2020, [url](#), p. 20-22

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted within the time constraints for this query.

3. Treatment by authorities and armed groups

3.1 Arbitrary arrests

According to the Syrian Network for Human rights, the Syrian regime forces (which, according to the source, includes the army, security, local militias and Shiite foreign militias) remain the major actor of arbitrary arrests in Suwayda.³¹ Without providing information about the victims, the same source provided the following information on 'arbitrary detentions' in Suwayda since 2018:

- In 2018, there were 92 arbitrary arrests by the Syrian forces out of a total of 103 (89 %), and 11 cases attributed to extremist Islamist groups.³²
- In 2019, there were 46 arbitrary arrests by the Syrian forces out of a total of 57 (80 %), and 11 cases attributed to the Islamic State.³³
- Between Jan-Jun 2020, there were 16 arbitrary arrests attributed to the Syrian forces.³⁴

3.2 Military conscription

Several sources report on the relatively recent fears of men (young men in particular) of being conscripted in the Syrian Armed Forces of the government.³⁵ According to the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), the Syrian law regarding conscription stipulates that males between 18 and 42 years of age are required to perform military service, and although the upper age limit for conscription is 42 years, people up to their 50s were reportedly forced to sign up.³⁶

According to The New Arab, 'after the anti-government protests that sparked Syria's war in 2011, the Druze obtained a *de facto* exemption from military service'.³⁷ However, since the defeat of ISIS in Suwayda in 2018, there has been an increasing pressure on local men to enlist. This has reportedly led to large numbers of men leaving the country.³⁸

The US Commission on International religious Freedom indicated that Assad's efforts to recruit Druze men from Suwayda forced an estimated 30 000 men to go into hiding or flee to other countries, including Lebanon.³⁹ According to the Middle East Institute, 40 000 young men have fled Suwayda since 2012 to avoid military service, and in early December 2019, 'the regime added 20,000 additional names to their registry of wanted individuals — most of them young and middle-aged men — to be detained at checkpoints'.⁴⁰

According to a report by Mahmoud al-Lababidi, a Syrian researcher working on the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project (WPCS) at European University Institute (EUI),

³¹ SNHR, At least 7,706 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests Documented in Syria in 2018, 3 January 2019, [url](#), p. 6

³² SNHR, At least 7,706 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests Documented in Syria in 2018, 3 January 2019, [url](#), p. 8

³³ SNHR, At least 4,671 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests Documented in Syria in 2019, 2 January 2020, [url](#), p. 8

³⁴ SNHR, At least 947 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests/Detention Documented in Syria in first Half of 2020, 2 July 2020, [url](#), p. 18

³⁵ Middle East Institute, Manufacturing Division: The Assad Regime and Minorities in South-west Syria, 11 March 2020, [url](#)
The New Arab, 'The army is your grave': Syria's Druze reject Assad's call to join the military, 21 November 2018, [url](#)

³⁶ TIMEP, Brief: Legislative Decree No.18 – Military Service Amnesty, 6 December 2018, [url](#)

Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 6

³⁷ The New Arab, 'The army is your grave': Syria's Druze reject Assad's call to join the military, 21 November 2018, [url](#)

³⁸ Middle East Institute, Manufacturing Division: The Assad Regime and Minorities in South-west Syria, 11 March 2020, [url](#)

³⁹ US, Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, 2019, [url](#), pp. 106-107

⁴⁰ Middle East Institute, Manufacturing Division: The Assad Regime and Minorities in South-west Syria, 11 March 2020, [url](#)

'[...] forced conscription [...] has now become the largest crisis in the Druze's relationship with the Syrian state. Since mid-2018, the regime, along with its Russian and Iranian allies, has increased pressure on Sweida to resolve the issue of the tens of thousands of Druze youths who have absconded from military service, which means in effect ending the "special" status afforded to the Druze of Sweida since 2011. However, the horrific massacres perpetrated by the Islamic State organisation (IS) on 25 July 2018 caused the regime to temporarily reduce this pressure. In early 2019, the regime resumed its pressure on Sweida's Druze to join its armed forces'.⁴¹

According to Kheder Khaddour, non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, interviewed by the Financial Times (FT), 'attacking a Druze community would have serious diplomatic consequences for Damascus, ... affording residents in Sweida more space to express grievances than in other parts of the country'.⁴²

3.3 Judicial system

According to researcher Taim Zaidan on the Syrian judiciary:

'the security establishment's extending protection to those who were convicted who had collaborated with them, meant that the judicial rulings against them were unenforceable [...]. The judicial decisions were therefore enforced when brought against ordinary citizens, while perpetrators of serious crime, and their associates, would be immune to the legal process and became, effectively, above the law.

These factors have contributed to the diminished trust/perception in the integrity/impartiality of the Syrian judiciary. In addition to this, a large number of people were unable to take part in the official judicial system out of fear of detention, either because they were wanted by the regime's security establishment, or because they were wanted for military service'.⁴³

Additional and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted within the time constraints of this query.

3.4 Security incidents

Without providing information on the victims, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), a research organisation that collects information regarding armed conflict and violence-related incidents, provided the following statistics on security incidents in Suwayda:

- In 2018, 172 incidents resulting in 575 deaths. 67 of the incidents involved the Islamic State.
- In 2019, 79 incidents resulting in 72 deaths. 6 of the incidents involved the Islamic State.
- Between 1 Jan-16 Aug 2020, 57 incidents resulting in 43 deaths.⁴⁴

⁴¹ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁴² FT, Syria protests erupt in rare show of dissent against Assad, 8 June 2020, [url](#)

⁴³ Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, 6 January 2020, [url](#), p. 17

⁴⁴ ACLED Data Export Tool, [url](#), accessed 17 August 2020

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, in Suwayda in 2018 occurred 167 civilian deaths,⁴⁵ 11 in 2019,⁴⁶ and 3 between 1 January and 30 June 2020.⁴⁷

4. Protests

Several sources reported protests taking place in June 2020 in Suwayda, as people demonstrated against worsening economic conditions, corruption, the presence of foreign troops, and forced conscription.⁴⁸

According to Reuters:

‘Hundreds of Syrians in the mainly Druze city of Sweida took to the streets for a fourth day [...], protesting worsening economic conditions and demanding the downfall of Syrian President Bashar al Assad. Residents said demonstrators near a main square of the southwestern city called for Assad’s overthrow. [...] Protests since Sunday have also called for an end to rampant corruption and the pull-out of Iranian militias and Russian troops’.⁴⁹

According to a Middle East Eye, ‘Sweida has seen seven days of protests calling for the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, nine years into a devastating civil war. [...] Though Sweida has been in government control throughout the war, the Druze-majority city has seen increasing protests in recent months which are now focusing on corruption and an economic crisis’.⁵⁰

According to Amnesty international:

‘11 men were detained following peaceful protests in the predominantly-Druze city of Sweida. Anti-government protests began on 7 June, initially due to concerns regarding Syria’s collapsing economy. However, they quickly escalated to include calls for “regime change”, the withdrawal of Russian and Iranian forces from Syria, and the release of detainees[...] The majority of protesters are young men frustrated by the lack of employment opportunities. They are also unable to leave Sweida, where they are protected through an agreement with the government from forced conscription, out of fear of being otherwise forcibly conscripted.’⁵¹

⁴⁵ SNHR, Documenting the Death of 6,964 Civilians in Syria in 2018, 1 January 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁴⁶ SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, [url](#), p. 10

⁴⁷ SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including Three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, [url](#), p. 13

⁴⁸ Reuters, Protests hit Druze city in Syria for fourth day, 11 June 2020, [url](#)

Middle East Eye, In occupied Golan, Druze join protests against Syria's Assad 14 June 2020, [url](#)

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⁴⁹ Reuters, Protests hit Druze city in Syria for fourth day, 11 June 2020, [url](#)

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