

ISIS Resurgence in Suweida

July 25, 2018

Syrians still carry the recent memory of ISIS actions from 2015 in the village of Mabawja, in the countryside of Hama, which has an Ismaili majority. A similar tragic scenario has been repeated in the province of Suweida, which has a Druze majority. The difference this time is that the entry of the extremist militant organization came in conjunction with victories in southern Syria by the Syrian regime and its Russian ally against ISIS.

ISIS started several operations at dawn on Wednesday, 25 July 2018 in the province of Suweida, including the following:

- The first operation took place in the eastern villages of Suweida governorate. A group of ISIS militants infiltrated the villages of Shbiki, al-Rashidi, Shrihi, Ghaydat Hamayel, Duma, Tarba, and Rami and committed massacres against the civilian population. The residents defended themselves with their individual weapons, forcing ISIS members to retreat. However, they took a number of civilian hostages, including women and children from Shbiki and Shrihi villages while withdrawing eastward toward their bases.
- Concurrently, other ISIS sleeper cells in the Al-Lajat area (along the eastern border of Al-Suweida governorate) infiltrated Al-Matouna and Swaimra villages on the Damascus-Suweida road and east of the Al-Lajat area. ISIS committed massacres in these villages, and one displaced family fell victim as well.
- These operations were accompanied by three suicide bombings in residential and commercial areas in Suweida city. Two other suicide bombers attempted to detonate their weapons but were thwarted by civilians.
- There have also been reports of thwarted suicide bombing attacks in which three suicide bombers who attempted to detonate their weapons in the national hospital were killed by civilians.
- Sources indicated that the fighting continued in Shbiki village until 8pm on July 25, 2018 between ISIS militants and local residents.
- **The initial reports from these incidents included 221 victims; 176 wounded, including mostly civilians; and 40 civilian hostages from Shbiki taken to ISIS locations in the Eastern Desert.**
- These operations have led to a large movement of IDPs, mostly women, children, and the elderly from these villages to safer areas, including movement to relatively far locations within the province.

Incident Location	Group	Hostages	Wounded	Killed
Shbiki	Women and children	40	0	70
Shrihi	Civilians	0	25	30
Rami	Civilians	0	18	21
Duma	Civilians	0	10	18
Ghaydat Hamayel	Civilians	0	2	3
Al-Matouna	Civilians/4 women	0	6	9
Swaimra	Civilians/ 2 IDP women	0	1	4
Sweida	From suicide bombings (the vegetable market, Al-Mashnaka square, the main road)	0	68	60
Suweida province	Fighters	0	41	7
Total		40	176	221

Local residents' reactions:

- Many residents of the province are accusing the Syrian government of failing to protect the province from ISIS. After the agreement between the Syrian regime and ISIS in Al-Hajar al-Aswad south of Damascus to transfer ISIS members, 1220 armed members were transferred to the eastern desert of Suweida between April 19th and May 3rd 2018. This plan concerned the local residents who repeatedly asserted the need to strengthen the army points in the area to repel any ISIS attack. Residents did not receive any response from the Syrian government; on the contrary, local militias allied with the government three days ago withdrew the individual weapons that had been distributed to the people for their protection since the start of events.
- Also significant Russian actions were in Suweida province about a month ago, which reached out to key people and religious leaders to pressure them to recruit young people not currently participating in military service in tracking the Russians as the Fifth Corps, and to withdraw individual weapons from homes.

Without action thus far, the danger remains for civilians that:

- Similar operations could be repeated by ISIS members more widely and violently, given threatens to commit other massacres against the population of this region.
- This could prompt sectarian fighting between the Druze community, and the Bedouin clans resident in the region and IDPs from other provinces in Suweida.