

Politics



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Syria SITUATION UPDATE: Syrian state visit to Moscow on July 31 reiterates continued relations, Damascus' pragmatic approach to diplomacy

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Executive Summary:

- FM al-Shabani's visit to Moscow on July 31 highlights the desire for further cooperation. This reflects Damascus' pragmatic approach to diplomacy, and specifically its intent to leverage Russia's desire to retain its strategic bases in Latakia and Tartus.
- Recent IS activity highlights its dual-pronged approach to conduct attacks and capitalize upon discontent among radical factions under the HTS-led forces to undermine the government.
- The thwarted IED attack at a Church in Tartus on August 6 likely constituted a false flag act by al-Assad loyalists that aimed to portray the government as failing to protect minorities.
- The confined resurgence of clashes in as-Suweida on August 2-4 reiterates persistent sectarian tensions and mistrust among the Druze toward the government. Further violence is likely.
- Clashes between the SDF and HTS-led forces around Dayr Hafir in Aleppo province on August 2-4 reflect ongoing mistrust that will hinder the SDF's integration into Syrian government forces and increase Turkey's threat perception.

Current Situation:

Russia, Syria diplomatic developments:

- On July 31, Syrian Foreign Minister (FM) Asaad al-Shaibani met with Russian FM Sergey Lavrov in Moscow.
- In a statement released by Syria's state news agency, Damascus noted that the meeting outlined "a new phase of political and military understanding between the two countries".
- Moscow reiterated its "absolute rejection" of Israeli intervention in Syria and affirmed its commitment to "support Syria in its reconstruction and restoration of stability".
- FM al-Shaibani affirmed Syria's commitment to "repositioning relations with Russia on new foundations."
- An official Russian statement noted that both countries agreed to "continue engagement" on bilateral and international issues.
- At an ensuing press conference, Lavrov publicly thanked Damascus for the "measures they are taking to ensure the security of Russian facilities" in Syria. Lavrov also asserted that the Syrian government had voiced interest in cooperation on civilian and military security personnel training.
- Lavrov confirmed Russia's acknowledgement that past bilateral agreements were signed under "different conditions" and stated that Moscow is ready to "review all existing agreements."
- He highlighted Russia's desire in advancing bilateral cooperation in trade and the economy, through an Intergovernmental Commission for Trade and Economic Cooperation which would review all existing contracts to formulate mutually beneficial agreements. Lavrov also expressed Russian corporations' interest in Syria's reconstruction.
- Media reports indicated that Lavrov reiterated Putin's invitation to President al-Sharaa to attend the upcoming Russia-Arab League conference in Moscow on October 15.

Islamic State (IS)-related developments:

- The US Central Command (CENTCOM) announced the elimination of a senior IS operative in **Aleppo's al-Bab** on [July 25](#). Turkish and Syrian government forces reportedly carried out the raid with US aerial support.
- In its weekly "al-Naba" editorial published on July 31, IS discussed several issues:
 - It described HTS-led forces' participation in the joint CENTCOM-led raid on July 25 as an "explicit allegiance to the polytheists against Muslims" which demonstrated its submission to the US and "enlistment under its [the US'] banner."
 - It criticized the participation of Syrian officials in talks with Israel in Paris on July 24 as a "contemptible" acceptance of Israel's red lines in southern Syria.
 - It described the Druze community as "infidels" that share "the Jews' hostility and hatred toward Muslims."
 - It described the IS project as "pure" and "unpolluted" compared to the "revolutionaries who have become soldiers in the army of the crusader coalition [referring to the US]."
- IS stated that they had conducted 22 attacks against the SDF between June 26 and August 6, claiming that at least 43 were killed and wounded during this period.
- This includes four claimed attacks targeting the SDF in **Deir Ezzor's al-Bahra, Dhiban, al-Shahil**, and in **Bahira**, located east of al-Khair on August 6 alone.
- On the same day, the SDF stated that two of its members were killed in an IS attack in al-Bahira.
- On August 7, the MoI announced that the **Idlib** ISF had detained an IS cell in the Haram area, confiscating explosives, weapons, and ammunition.

ISSUE 506 OF IS 'AL-NABA' WEEKLY EDITORIAL ON JULY 31



KEY THEMES DISCUSSED



**Druze community,
clashes in as-Suweida**



**Israel-Syria
deconfliction talks**

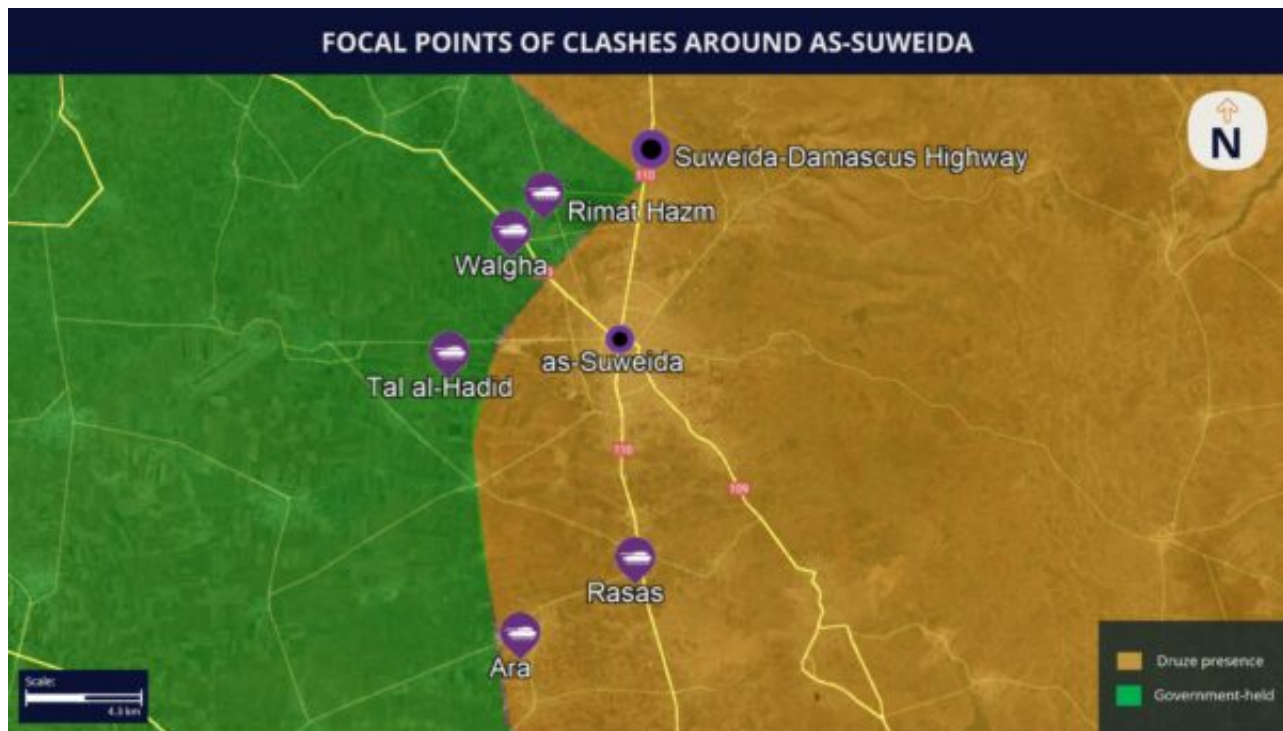


**Government
cooperation with US**

As for the Islamic State, its project remained **pure, unpolluted, or defiled...** while the revolutionaries [HTS fighters] became soldiers in this **Crusader coalition army**.

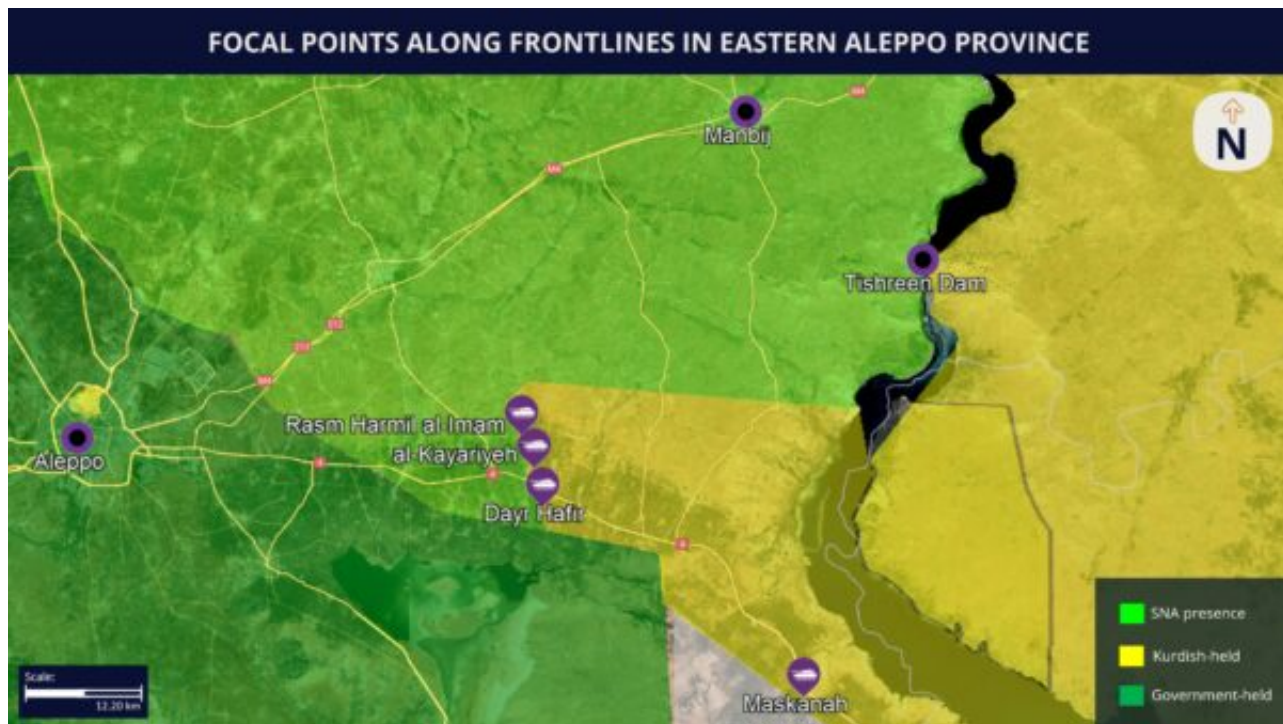
Clashes in as-Suweida:

- August 3 reports quoting the “Joint Operations Room in as-Suweida” accused government-affiliated forces of violating the ceasefire agreement on August 2 by attacking **as-Suweida, Rasas, and Ara**. The Druze “Men of Dignity Movement” stated that they were “repelling the treacherous attack by hostile forces on the city of as-Suweida.”
- An August 3 Ministry of Interior statement accused “rebel gangs” of violating the ceasefire by attacking the ISF and shelling villages, killing an ISF member and wounding others. It added that rebel groups were “driven by the personal motives of their leaders” and that “media and sectarian mobilization campaigns led by the rebel gangs” have consistently undermined government efforts to restabilize as-Suweida.
- On August 3, Syrian state media stated that the Internal Security Forces (ISF) regained control of **Tal al-Hadid, Rimat Hazm, and Walgha**, and halted clashes in the area to preserve the truce.
- August 3 reports stated that Druze leader Hikmat al-Hijri released a circular calling for the “orderly withdrawal to previously designated defensive positions,” strengthening defensive fortification, and the coordination of movement with the Joint Operations Room.
- An August 4 video portraying two militia men, who reportedly kidnapped two Druze women and two children, circulated online and sparked criticism within the Druze community.
- Internet and telecommunications services in as-Suweida reportedly experienced significant disruptions on August 4.
- August 7 reports stated that the “Supreme Legal Committee”, formed by Hikmat al-Hijri, announced the establishment of a temporary executive office in as-Suweida to manage affairs in the city.
- Unconfirmed reports state that the “Internal Security Forces” in as-Suweida will be headed by Shakeeb Ajud Nasr, who formerly oversaw the Political Security Branch in Tartus under Bashar al-Assad.
- Syria’s state news agency announced on August 7 that it had referred the judges within the “Supreme Legal Committee” for investigation after they allegedly violated the Judicial Authority Law by acting out of political interests.



Clashes along government forces, SDF frontlines:

- On August 2, the Syrian state news agency reported that government forces thwarted an infiltration attempt by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) near **al-Kayariyeh** in the Manbij countryside. It added that four civilians and three soldiers were wounded due to rocket attacks targeting residential areas. It subsequently struck rocket launchers allegedly used in the attack in **Maskanah**.
- On August 3, the SDF rejected the government's statement and accused "undisciplined elements" within the HTS-led forces of conducting repeated attacks in the **Dayr Hafir area** with shells, which prompted its response.
- On [August 4](#), the SDF stated that HTS-led forces launched attacks against four of its positions in the **Rasm Harmil al-Imam** area in **Dayr Hafir**, triggering clashes between the two sides that lasted for 20 minutes.
- On August 4, US Ambassador to Turkey and Special Envoy to Syria Tom Barrack condemned the violence in Manbij and stated that the US and France will be "co-mediating the reintegration of the northeast into unified Syria."
- On August 5, US State Department Spokesperson Tammy Bruce reiterated Washington's support for any "productive meetings" between Syria and the SDF aimed at the reintegration of the latter into the Syrian army.
- On August 7, an unconfirmed report citing a source from the Turkish Ministry of Defense stated that the SDF is not complying with the March 10 agreement stipulating the SDF's integration into government forces. It added that "the SDF's voice has become louder following clashes in as-Suweida" and its actions "damage Syria's political unity and territorial integrity."



Other developments:

- On [August 6](#), the MoI announced the thwarting of a bomb attack plot against al-Khraybat's Saint Elias Maronite Church in **Tartus Province**. They confiscated an explosive, leaflets threatening residents, and an IS flag.

Assessments & Forecast:

FM al-Shaibani's notable state visit to Russia highlights pragmatic approach to diplomacy

- Syrian FM al-Shaibani's meeting marks the first state visit of a high-ranking representative of the new Syrian government to Russia following the fall of former President Bashar al-Assad who fled to Moscow in December 2024, thus rendering it notable.
- Despite strong relations between al-Assad and Russia, President Ahmad al-Sharaa never formally cut ties with Moscow following the HTS-led takeover, and contacts have continued since. For example, a Russian delegation traveled to Damascus in [January](#), while President Vladimir Putin expressed Moscow's desire for [bilateral cooperation](#) with Syria in a February phone call with President al-Sharaa. Additionally, the Russian Embassy in Damascus and the Syrian Embassy in Moscow continued to operate following the overthrow, underscoring both sides' early preference to maintain ties.
- For Russia, a key interest is to [maintain its long-standing military foothold](#) in Syria at the Khmeimim Air Base and Tartus Naval Base. While Russia has reportedly [withdrawn a significant number of troops and military hardware](#) in the aftermath of its ally al-Assad's collapse, Russian soldiers reportedly remain present at these two strategic bases. This is because they constitute logistical hubs, granting access to the eastern Mediterranean and Africa for Russia's naval and aerial fleets, respectively. Therefore, despite increasing its presence [elsewhere](#) to compensate for its overall reduction in Syria, Moscow likely seeks to retain its presence at the Tartus and Khmeimim bases. This likely remains a driving factor in its foreign policy approach to the HTS-led government.

4. **FORECAST:** These bases will therefore likely remain a central point of negotiations that are expected to continue, with Syria seeking to leverage the strategic value of these assets to acquire Russian support in a variety of sectors. This is likely to include the participation of Russian enterprises in reconstruction efforts and development projects in Syria, in addition to securing Moscow's support for Syria's territorial integrity against perceived violations such as Israeli strikes. Damascus' reported interest in military cooperation and training with Russian forces also suggests that the government will predicate Moscow's prolonged deployment in the country on tangible concessions that will benefit Damascus' nascent armed forces.
5. Overall, the talks highlight the pragmatic diplomacy pursued by President al-Sharaa's government, which will continue to explore cooperation with multiple, and at times conflicting, global powers as part of its objective to secure his administration's legitimacy internationally.

IS, al-Assad loyalists aim to compound security challenges for HTS-led government

1. Several incidents in recent weeks underscore efforts by non-state actors to undermine the nascent government, capitalizing upon security challenges to fuel instability. The primary threat in this regard is IS, amid mounting indications of the group's resurgence. Recently, this has included a spate of claimed attacks, primarily in Deir Ezzor, reflecting gaps in the security environment likely arising from the split territorial control between the HTS-led government and SDF, in addition to the US withdrawal from MSS Green Village. Additionally, the dismantlement of IS cells in Aleppo and Idlib underscores the geographical scope of the group's resurgence, which will continue to challenge the HTS-led government.
2. Alongside the physical threat posed by IS, its weekly "al-Naba" editorial on July 31 sheds light on its tactic of exacerbating volatility in other arenas. By describing the Druze as "apostates" and aligned with Israel, this aims to motivate more radical Sunni factions, some of whom operate within the HTS-led forces, to attack the community. This aims to perpetuate sectarian tensions, Druze mistrust of the government, and resistance to integration with the HTS-led Ministry of Defense, and international scrutiny of the government's ability to protect minorities.
3. Concurrently, the editorial reflects a [continuation](#) of its campaign to capitalize upon disillusionment among Sunni-jihadist groups who previously joined HTS and have become frustrated with President al-Sharaa's outreach to the West, which IS brands as "un-Islamic." This particularly relates to the US, as underscored by the photo depicting US Envoy Barrack and President al-Sharaa's meeting on the issue, and ongoing deconfliction talks between Syrian and Israeli officials. By contrasting President al-Sharaa's policies on these fronts with IS' "pure" agenda, it likely aims to encourage the defection of HTS-led fighters to its ranks, as part of its broader efforts to reconstitute.
4. Meanwhile, the thwarted IED attack at the Saint Elias Maronite Church in Tartus indicates that al-Assad loyalists are seeking to capitalize upon this growing jihadist threat to sow further instability. In what appeared to be an attempted false flag attack, al-Assad loyalists likely aimed to orchestrate an apparent Islamist attack on a Christian site to antagonize both domestic and international concerns regarding the government's ability to protect minorities. This is especially following a previous attack on the Mar Elias Church in Damascus on [June 22](#).
5. **FORECAST:** Collectively, these dynamics will undergird continued security volatility across Syria and reiterate the significant challenges that remain for the HTS-led government, despite the notable gains it has made on the diplomatic front in recent months.

As-Suweida to remain volatile amid persistent sectarian tensions

1. The recurrence of violent clashes highlights persistent sectarian tensions between the Druze community and the Islamist HTS-led forces, suggesting that such confrontations will likely continue. This is underpinned by continued and deep-seated mistrust, as exemplified by conflicting narratives regarding culpability for the latest hostilities surfacing, and the role of social media in proliferating such accounts which inflames tensions further.
2. The Mol's denunciation of Druze leaders' alleged personal agendas in catalyzing the violence likely

references al-Hijri, who remains the most prominent Druze figure resisting integration with HTS-led forces. This is particularly given reports of [al-Hijri affiliated factions' participation](#) in the latest clashes and the establishment of a temporary executive office by the “Supreme Legal Committee” formed by al-Hijri. The Mol’s remarks likely aim to erode al-Hijri’s influence and popularity among the Druze community by branding him as personally responsible for continued volatility in the region. This seeks to compound the emerging [intra-Druze divide](#) between al-Hijri on the one hand, and Sheikh Yousef Jarbou and Sheikh Laith al-Balous who previously advocated for a truce and broader integration of Druze militias with government forces.

- 3. FORECAST:** The HTS-led government will likely continue its efforts to paint al-Hijri as responsible for regional volatility and undermining Druze unity, to facilitate its efforts to establish a foothold of influence in the area. However, the continued dissemination of sectarian narratives of government oppression against the Druze, service failures during clashes such as power outages, and recurring violence will likely fuel anti-government grievances held by the Druze community. This will contribute to persistent volatility within as-Suweida, with cycles of intermittent clashes in the region likely to recur in the coming weeks.

Clashes along Aleppo frontlines between SDF, HTS-led forces to undermine implementation of integration deal

1. The latest clashes in the Dayr Hafir area are notable. They disrupt a period of relative calm along frontlines between SDF and government-held territory in Aleppo province since the March 10 agreement stipulating a ceasefire and the SDF’s integration into government forces, and the [April 11 deal](#) to jointly manage the strategic Tishreen Dam.
2. It marks a spillover of mounting tensions between Damascus and the SDF, amid slow progress in the enforcement of the March 10 deal, and apparent resistance from the SDF to its implementation in July. This was most pertinently underscored by [SDF Spokesman Abjar Daoud’s](#) assertion on July 22 that the threats of sectarian violence and IS render disarmament in the SDF “impossible.”
3. In this context, the latest clashes reflect the ongoing mistrust between both sides, as underscored by the disputed cause of the latest violence. The SDF’s allegation that “undisciplined factions” launched the attacks may reflect genuine concerns regarding the government’s ability to control radical factions operating under its military. However, Damascus is likely to perceive this as an attempt to capitalize upon recent bouts of sectarian violence and the involvement of radical groups in perpetrating atrocities, to resist integration and leverage the situation to gain greater autonomy.
- 4. FORECAST:** This cycle of mistrust and ambiguity is likely to exacerbate suspicion on both sides, increasing the likelihood of further clashes along frontlines in both Aleppo and eastern Syria’s Deir Ezzor in the short term. Such a scenario is likely to further delay integration talks that were reportedly set to be held in Paris at an unspecified date in the near future.
- 5. FORECAST:** Further delays to implementation of the deal will also increase tensions between the SDF, Turkey, and the Ankara-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), as underscored by the reported Turkish Ministry of Defense official’s statement. A further escalation of violence between HTS-led forces and the SDF could prompt Turkey to increase its support to government forces, encourage SNA attacks on the SDF, or directly intervene itself through airstrikes. This would further undermine the security environment in northern Syria.
- 6. FORECAST:** Despite the ongoing tensions, a full breakdown of the [March 10 integration agreement](#) appears less likely at this stage. Key international actors, notably the US and France, are expected to intensify diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions between both sides, as underscored by the latest statements from US officials. Nonetheless, while international de-escalation efforts continue, tensions along the Aleppo frontlines and those in [Deir Ezzor](#) are likely to remain elevated in the coming days, with the risk of further violent flare-ups persisting.

Recommendations:

1. Avoid all travel to Syria at the current juncture due to the volatile security environment, including the elevated risks of militancy and armed conflict.
2. Remain cognizant of the elevated risk of sectarian violence in the country, particularly in and around as-Suweida, Latakia, and Tartus provinces, and Kurdish-dominated northeastern parts of the country. Avoid discussing sectarian issues in public due to heightened sensitivities.
3. Continue to avoid all travel to as-Suweida province due to recurring clashes and remain cognizant of the potential for violence to spillover along major highways connecting as-Suweida and Damascus.
4. Remain cognizant of the extreme risk posed by jihadist militant groups in the country, including the Islamic State (IS).
5. Western nationals are advised to maintain a low profile throughout Syria in light of the elevated risk of crime and militancy.