14 Druze women kidnapped in latest ISIS atrocity in Syria

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Photos of 14 terrified young girls and women kidnapped July 25 when ISIS attacked the predominantly Druze city of Suwayda and massacred at least 255 civilians there were sent to their families over the weekend. The pictures, which have gone viral, show the hostages against the backdrop of ISIS’ black and white flag. The Islamic jihadists have threatened to harm the women if the Damascus regime does not halt its offensive against the rebel-held pocket in the [Yarmouk Valley near Jordan](https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Catastrophic-destruction-as-Syrian-regime-pounds-Palestinian-refugee-camp-557901) and the Golan Heights.

Thousands of Druze in the Galilee and the village of Buqata on the Golan Heights gathered over the weekend to discuss the massacre of their co-religionists in Syria. “Our hearts and our prayers today are with the Druze in Syria after the massacre of Da’ash in which more than 260 Druze were killed in cold blood, mostly women and children,” tweeted Reda Mansour, a former Israel ambassador to Brazil, and a well-known Druze poet.

In an interview with Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis research fellow Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, Abbas Abu Shaheen – a leader of the Druze in Suwayda – said that 90% of those who were killed were civilians. According to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 142 civilians and 113 government fighters were killed, in addition to 63 ISIS fighters. More than 200 others were reportedly injured.

ISIS suicide bombers penetrated Suwayda (pop. 170,000) and sent teams of fighters in vehicles to raid Druze villages east of the city. Villagers battled with ISIS for three days. Videos online showed that some villagers rescued families who had been kidnapped.

Druze fighters found, in the villages they liberated from ISIS, evidence of mass murder, similar in scope and to the ISIS attack on Kobani in June 2015 when 100 fighters killed mostly Kurdish women and children in eastern Syria in a raid. In the Suwayda hinterland, ISIS fighters went house to house slaughtering the inhabitants.

The ISIS attack targeting Druze is the first of its kind in the seven-year-long Syrian civil war. ISIS has targeted other minorities, committing genocide against Yazidis in northern Iraq, and driving Christians from their homes in Syria and Iraq. Syria’s Druze minority has been protected, and its communities remained under regime control. Al-Qaeda in Syria, known as the Nusra front in 2015, massacred 20 Druze that year.

While the ISIS attack on Suwayda was ostensibly in response to the regime’s offensive against the ISIS enclave in southern Syria, the attack against the Druze has raised questions. Some pro-regime supporters suggested that the Druze area lacked security because the regime was punishing the Druze for avoiding military service. However, Druze pointed out that many families in Suwayda have men serving in the Syrian Arab Army.

They faulted the government for transferring ISIS militants to the Syrian Desert in May after they surrendered their stronghold in Yarmouk near Damascus. The now destroyed and deserted neighborhood – which was once home to the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Syria with a population of 112,550 registered refugees in 2002 – had been besieged by government forces since 2015.

Another conspiracy claimed that ISIS infiltrated Suwayda by sweeping around 100 km. to the east, to the desert area near the US-run Tanf base on the border with Jordan. Abu Shaheen told al-Tamimi that ISIS “coordinated with the Tanf base, and entered the villages of al-Shabaki, Rami and al-Ghayda.”

The competing theories suggest that the attack on Suwayda will lead to rancor between the Druze community – which demands protection – and the Syrian regime, which is focused on fighting in southern Syria and has not sent enough troops to defeat ISIS. Now both the Druze and the regime are alert to further ISIS attacks.

However, the kidnapping of 14 women, and the broadcasting of their photos, underscores ISIS’ continuing threat. A video posted online at the website Badia24 claimed to show one of the women pleading that Syrian President Bashar Assad halt the attack on the Yarmouk basin.

The main leader of the Druze sect in Lebanon on Friday attacked the Syrian government for failing to stop the massacre.

“No one can tell me that the squadrons of many American, Russian and foreign planes did not see this gathering which suddenly took the regime by surprise and raided Jebel al-Arab,” said Walid Jumblatt.

Jumblatt, who heads the largest Druze political party in Lebanon, is a strong critic of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Other Druze parties are pro-Damascus.

He also accused Assad of wanting to send Druze from the Jebel al-Arab area including Sweida to fight in a future offensive against rebels in Idlib province in northern Syria.