From Subjects to Agents: Spatializing Security and Reverse Securitization in Sweida's Uprisings

Abstract

This article examines the evolution of securitization in the Druze-majority governorate of Sweida, Syria, through a reverse securitization framework. Traditionally, securitization theory has emphasized state-centric approaches where the state identifies existential threats and justifies extraordinary measures. However, this study explores how marginalized communities, such as those in Sweida, transform from securitized subjects into securitizing agents by actively reframing security narratives. By analyzing key historical phases—vertical (1970-2011), horizontal (2011-2022), and reverse securitization (2022-2024)—and drawing on data from community-based news agencies and public speeches, the article illustrates the dynamic shifts in the relationship between the state, the governed, and space. The findings highlight how spaces and cultural symbols are strategically reclaimed by the community to resist state oppression, redefine power dynamics, and challenge traditional notions of security in authoritarian contexts. This research offers new insights into the evolution of securitization theory, emphasizing its relevance and adaptability in non-Western contexts. Unlike everyday resistance, which operates within the confines of the existing securitization framework, reverse securitization actively repositions the regime as the primary security threat. This research contributes to ongoing debates on securitization theory, highlighting its adaptability in non-Western authoritarian settings where contested spaces and counter-narratives redefine security.

Introduction

On March 15, 2025, a defining moment in Sweida's resistance unfolded as Druze activists removed the Syrian national flag and hoisted the Sweida flag, publicly rejecting the authority of President Ahmad al-Sharaa. This act—an assertion of autonomy and defiance—illustrates the continuation of reverse securitization, a process where once-securitized subjects become securitizing agents, reframing the state as the primary threat to community security and self-governance. It marks not just a rejection of centralized authority, but a transformation of the Druze community's role in shaping security discourse within an authoritarian context. This moment was not an isolated event but the culmination of a longer trajectory of resistance. Since August 2023, Sweida's streets have been filled with protests against the Assad regime's military mobilization, symbolizing the intensifying unrest in Syria (Syria Stream 2024). These protests reflect a broader struggle over security and authority, where the community not only resists repression but actively redefines security itself. This article explores the interplay between state authority and citizen resistance within authoritarian contexts, engaging with securitization theory as resistance (Stritzel & Chang 2015). Building on this, it develops the concept of reverse securitization, wherein securitized groups—like the protesters in Sweida—transition into securitizing agents, framing the regime itself as a danger to community safety and autonomy. By occupying space, they subvert the regime's narrative of threat, constructing a counter-security discourse that challenges state legitimacy. This shift, from being objects of securitization to active securitizing agents, highlights the protesters' role in redefining security terms within authoritarian settings and demonstrates how marginalized groups can contest and reconfigure power.

Reverse securitization differs from other forms of contestation, such as silent resistance or strategic compliance, by actively shifting the referent object of security. Rather than seeking to evade the state's securitization tactics, the Sweida protesters construct a counter-security discourse that positions the regime as the existential threat to local stability. This shift, from being objects of securitization to active securitizing agents, redefines the terms of security discourse within authoritarian settings and fundamentally challenges the regime's legitimacy.

The evolution of Sweida's popular movement—from sporadic protests between 2011 and 2014 to sustained civil opposition by late 2023—highlights a significant transformation in power dynamics. However, securitization is not only about threat construction; it also involves an audience that legitimizes security claims. The protesters in Sweida are not merely reframing the regime as a security threat in isolation but are seeking to convince both local and international actors of this narrative. Understanding the audience of securitization is critical in authoritarian settings, where symbolic acts of neutrality or refusal to participate become deeply political gestures (Hinnebusch 2020; Wedeen 2019;author).

Historically, the Syrian regime securitized the Druze community, framing them as both a protected minority and a potential threat (Ezzi 2022;author). Sweida's strategic neutrality in 2011 emerged as a response to the rise of Islamist groups and ISIS attacks, which heightened local security concerns (Castellino and Cavanaugh 2013). However, the community's refusal of military conscription since 2014 signals a deeper resistance to the regime's instrumentalization of minorities. While existing research attributes Sweida's protests to economic hardship, a power vacuum, and insecurity from warring factions (Imady 2018; Rabah 2023), these analyses often overlook the evolving dynamics of power and security in authoritarian contexts.

This article was initially drafted before the fall of Assad on the 8th of December. At the time of writing, I analyzed the emergence of reverse securitization in the Druze community as a response to the Assad regime. However, the role of the Druze as securitizing agents has only been further asserted in the aftermath of Assad's fall. In particular, they have expanded their securitization efforts to resist even the current president, Ahmad al-Sharaa. On the 16th of March, Suwayda 24 broadcasted an opinion program discussing the constitutional declaration announced by al-Sharaa. The majority of Druze activists and civilians expressed their resistance to it, illustrating the community's ongoing contestation of centralized authority. This further underscores the dynamic nature of reverse securitization, as the Druze continue to challenge state authority, even in the post-Assad era.

By examining Sweida's securitization across three historical phases—vertical (1970-2011), horizontal (2011-2022), and reverse (2022-2024)—this article demonstrates how securitization is neither a static nor exclusively state-driven process. Instead, it operates as a

contested and dynamic mechanism in which previously securitized subjects can become active securitizing agents. The study employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on community-based news reports, speeches, and public statements to illustrate how Sweida's protesters are reclaiming public spaces and narratives to subvert the regime's authority.

This research advances securitization theory by emphasizing its adaptability beyond democratic contexts, particularly in authoritarian regimes where spatial control and symbolic discourse play crucial roles in shaping security narratives. Through the case of Sweida, this article offers new insights into how marginalized communities can redefine security not merely as a right to protection but as a means of resisting authoritarian control. Securitization theory, as developed by the Copenhagen School, frames security as a political speech act that legitimizes extraordinary measures beyond normal politics (Buzan et al. 1998). Traditionally state-centric, this model has been critiqued for silencing marginalized voices, as argued by Bertrand (2018), who highlights mechanisms like illocutionary disablement. Holbraad and Pedersen (2012) extend this framework, arguing that in non-liberal contexts, securitization involves a reordering of political norms, where distinctions between ordinary and emergency politics dissolve.

While securitization has often been used to analyze authoritarian governance, it is not merely a synonym for repression or control. Instead, it is a specific process in which the state constructs and sustains threats to justify extraordinary measures. In the case of Sweida, securitization was not simply about authoritarian rule in general but about how the Assad regime deliberately framed security threats—whether through discourse, legal measures, or spatial control—to enforce loyalty and neutralize opposition. This distinction is crucial to avoid the overgeneralization of securitization as an all-encompassing explanation for authoritarian practices. By refining the scope of securitization in this study, I focus on explicit security narratives and their role in shaping political agency.

Building on this, I explore reverse securitization as a process in which marginalized communities do more than resist securitization—they actively redefine the security discourse to frame the state itself as the principal threat. Unlike the more reactive securitization-as-resistance approach (Han 2021: 165-7), which operates within existing security narratives, reverse securitization fundamentally inverts them. The Druze community in Sweida does not merely reject

the regime's securitization efforts; they reclaim the power to define what constitutes a security threat, turning the discourse of the state against itself. This distinction is key to avoiding the impression that reverse securitization is just another form of opposition or hidden resistance.

Reverse securitization is particularly significant in authoritarian contexts where overt political opposition is heavily repressed. In such settings, the ability to reshape security discourse—especially in public and spatialized forms—becomes a powerful tool for subverting state authority. Unlike previous periods where opposition to the Assad regime remained largely hidden or performative (Wedeen 1999), Sweida's Druze activists move beyond passive defiance to openly redefining security narratives. By reclaiming space and symbols, they transform the landscape of power, shifting from reactive resistance to proactive reconstitution of threat narratives.

This framework is not simply a theoretical exercise but offers concrete insights into how securitization operates in contested spaces. It allows us to analyze not only how the state wields security discourse but also how marginalized actors disrupt and reconfigure these narratives. By moving beyond the traditional binary of securitization and resistance, the concept of reverse securitization provides a deeper understanding of how communities in authoritarian contexts strategically engage with and subvert state power.

This article employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on data from local news sources, speeches, and public statements. The analysis focuses on the transformation of Sweida's population from securitized subjects to securitizing agents, with space playing a crucial role in this process. Through thematic coding, the study identifies patterns that illustrate how space has become a tool for renegotiating power relations in this context. As such, this article proposes a reconceptualization of securitizing agents as former securitized subjects, using space to challenge state authority. By examining Sweida's evolution across three phases of securitization, this analysis highlights the shifting dynamics between state power, community agency, and space in authoritarian regimes.

Reconceptualizing Space and Security: The Complex Dynamics of Reverse Securitization in Sweida's Political Landscape

Reimagining securitization in authoritarian regimes requires more than a shift in discourse—it demands a transformation of space itself. In contexts like Syria, where power is constantly negotiated and reasserted, space becomes an active battleground for both sovereign and subjects. While the navigation of security in democracies has been widely examined both theoretically and empirically, less attention has been given to how securitization operates in authoritarian contexts. This gap prompts the question: what does it mean when I suggest that securitization theory can be reversed? To address this conceptually and theoretically, it is essential to fully explore the mechanisms by which securitization unfolds differently in these contrasting political environments. Traditional security studies have primarily focused on state security, often dismissing threats to human security as secondary issues (Krause & Williams 1997: 37). However, critical security studies challenge this perspective, arguing that security is socially constructed and shaped by power dynamics that may render states as potential threats to their own citizens rather than protectors (Bubandt 2005; Kent 2006). This shift moves beyond a state-centric lens, advocating for a society-centric approach that emphasizes reducing violent conflict, structural violence, and improving human welfare (Latham 1996: 106; Tickner 1995: 87).

Securitization theory, as formulated by Buzan et al. (1998), frames security as the invocation of existential threats that justify extraordinary measures beyond the realm of normal politics. This approach typically centers on liberal democratic contexts, where declaring an issue as a security threat allows the state to transcend ordinary political constraints and employ exceptional actions, such as the use of force or curtailment of civil liberties, to protect the referent object (often the state). However, this 'normal versus exceptional' dichotomy is less applicable in authoritarian contexts, where power dynamics operate differently (Buzan et al. 1998: 21).While some scholars argue that securitization primarily applies to democratic states due to the need for discursive legitimization of force (Wæver 2000: 251), others, like Matti Wiberg (1988), contend that ideological justification plays a critical role in the survival of non-democratic regimes, especially during crises. This suggests that securitization processes are not exclusive to liberal

contexts. In fact, recent applications of securitization theory in Middle Eastern studies, such as Pratt and Rezk's (2019) analysis of Egypt's military regime's actions against the Muslim Brotherhood, reveal how authoritarian regimes also engage in securitizing practices to legitimize their power. Therefore, while securitization theory traditionally emphasizes the shift from 'normal' to 'exceptional' politics (Acharya and Buzan, 2017), in authoritarian contexts, the boundaries are often blurred, with the use of extraordinary measures being integrated into the everyday exercise of power. This insight allows us to explore how securitization theory can be adapted and reversed in non-liberal contexts, where the relationship between sovereign power and subjects is fundamentally different (see Greenwood and Wæver 2013; Wilkinson 2007; Sheikh 2018; Mabon 2018; Malmvig 2014; Wiberg 1988; Pratt and Rezk 2019; Holm 2004, 219).

In recent years, there has been a rethinking of securitization in non-Western contexts, with the theory being revitalized and applied to cases such as Cambodia (Kent 2006), Indonesia (Bubandt 2005), and Cuba (Holbraad and Pedersen 2012). Notably, securitization theory has undergone various extensions by scholars, reflecting its adaptability and evolutionary potential within its ontological framework. Holbraad and Pedersen, in particular, extend the standard model of securitization through what they describe as a 'revolutionary/non-liberal' model. However, it's essential to highlight that their emphasis lies primarily on the revolutionary nature of the state they analyze, rather than merely its non-liberal characteristics. In revolutionary contexts, as they argue, securitization is not simply about moving from ordinary politics to a state of emergency. Instead, it signifies a profound transformation of the political matrix itself, where the boundaries between ordinary and emergency politics become indistinguishable. This dynamic leads to a dissolution of the distinction between rule and exception (see Carl Schmitt 2005; Giorgio Agamben 2005; and Alain Badiou 2009). This conceptual shift, or “ontological transformation” (Holbraad and Pedersen 2012: 168), fundamentally alters and redefines the relationship between sovereign power and subjects, especially in revolutionary contexts. By focusing on this transformation, Holbraad and Pedersen offer a nuanced perspective on how securitization operates, illustrating how revolutionary processes blur the lines between normalcy and exceptionality, thus reshaping the very fabric of political authority.

This leads me to the central question of this article: How do the changing political dynamics in Sweida offer a nuanced perspective on reversing securitization theory? Rather than adhering to

the conventional model's distinction between the 'non-political,' 'political,' and 'extra-political' realms as outlined by Holbraad and Pedersen (2012: 168) and Vuori (2008), I argue that such categorizations do not fully capture the realities of entrenched authoritarian contexts like Syria. In these settings, the relationship between the state and its subjects rarely reflects an orderly balance of autonomy. In authoritarian regimes, the political structures and social interactions of subjects are never purely 'ordinary' or 'non-political.' Instead, they are always political and subject to potential politicization. Here, securitization is predominantly a top-down process where the sovereign power does not operate within a conventional framework of distinguishing 'ordinary' from 'extraordinary.' Rather, it continuously seeks to assert control, often blurring these boundaries entirely. This dynamic in Syria exemplifies how securitization theory needs to be adapted to acknowledge the fluid and constantly politicized nature of subject-sovereign relationships in authoritarian contexts.

I extend this conceptualization of revolutionary securitization by arguing that the initial securitization process in authoritarian contexts, such as Syria, illustrates a dynamic triad involving the government, the governed, and space. In such contexts, securitization is a relational and fluid process not exclusively shaped by the governed. The case of Sweida exemplifies this through three significant shifts in securitization, corresponding to three historical eras: vertical securitization (1970-2011), horizontal securitization (2011-2022), and reverse securitization (2022-2024).

This article adapts three notions of space—physical, symbolic, and emotional—to illustrate how Sweida's community actively challenged state authority (Sack 1980; Harvey 1990; Deleixhe et al. 2019). While Holbraad and Pedersen (2012) argue that securitization in revolutionary states is totalizing, Sweida's case reveals an interactive process where subjects resist and disrupt securitization. Rather than being passively subjected to top-down control, the community engages in reverse securitization, reconfiguring their relationship with sovereign power.

Phase 1(1963–2011): Vertical Securitization

During this period, securitization was imposed hierarchically, integrating Sweida's population into state-controlled institutions. Physical spaces, like President Square**,** symbolized regime authority, serving as sites for mandatory demonstrations that reinforced state dominance.

Phase 2 (2011–2022): Reversing Securitization

The 2011 uprisings marked a turning point, with space becoming a tool for resistance. The renaming of President Square to Karama (Dignity) Square signified this shift, transforming it into a space of autonomy and defiance (Harvey 2004). The square embodied not just a physical transformation but an emotional and symbolic reclaiming of identity, where collective expressions of hope and frustration reinforced Sweida's emergence as securitizing agents (Reed-Danahay 2020).

Phase 3 (2022–2024): Full Reversal of Securitization

By this stage, Sweida's community had fully inverted the securitization dynamic. Continued occupation of Karama Square solidified their agency, using space to reshape political and social power. No longer passive subjects, they reframed the regime as the securitized entity, challenging its control through sustained spatial, symbolic, and emotional resistance.

In line with Bertrand's argument, securitization theory can marginalize certain voices, particularly through mechanisms like illocutionary disablement, where certain actors are unable to perform speech acts effectively due to structural barriers (Bertrand 2018: 284). This dynamic is especially evident in authoritarian contexts where securitization is imposed from the top down, often silencing the subaltern or marginalized groups. As such, the phases of securitization in Sweida are deeply connected to how space is used, both as a physical site and as a symbolic and emotional medium. As the community transitioned through these phases, space acted as the conduit through which the relationship between the governed and the governing was continuously redefined. This analysis of space in Sweida exemplifies how securitization can be reversed even in authoritarian contexts, demonstrating that space can serve as a platform for marginalized subjects to assert agency and alter the political ontology of their environment.

In what follows, I will contextualize the reverse model of securitization using the Sweida case, navigating through three historical phases (1963-2011; 2011-2022; 2022-till now), where various forms of securitization can be traced, leading to transformational coordinates of its defining agents and subjects.

Sweida as a Vantage Point for Reverse Securitization

First Phase (1963 and 2011): Top-Down Securitization

With the rise of the Socialist Ba'ath Party following Hafez al-Assad's 1970 coup, Syria entered a period of consolidation through internal strategies aimed at stabilizing the regime. The party sought to gain the trust of Syria's diverse components by launching a series of reform and welfare promises, using methods such as co-optation and instrumentalization. This period, marked by the rule of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, was shaped by internal conflicts following the end of Syria-Egypt unity and the social tensions that intertwined regional and international influences. While the Ba'ath Party promised to improve the conditions of workers and peasants, its agricultural reform efforts achieved limited success, with only 17% of intended land distributed by 1971 (Abu Fakhr 1999: 162). The regime's efforts were further delayed by internal strife, and although land redistribution reached 85% by 1971, inadequate resources and weak infrastructure prevented meaningful improvements in farmers' conditions.

The escalating conflict with Israel placed significant strain on the state, forcing it to focus on military armament and defense, while also contending with foreign interventions and internal crises (Al-Ba'ini 1993: 290). This allowed the regime to strengthen its security apparatus and suppress dissent, solidifying its rule by aligning with the merchant class (ibid). From the 1970s, the regime sought to maintain balance both domestically and internationally, supporting basic needs like agricultural fuel subsidies and infrastructure development, while also fostering industry and the public sector (ibid: 359). By the 1980s, however, the regime's focus shifted towards merchants and capital accumulators, culminating in the expansion of investment opportunities with Investment Law No. 10 in 1991 (Dib 2012: 314). During this era, the Druze community viewed the rise of the Ba'ath Party as an opportunity for change and the restoration of peasant rights. Many Druze individuals re-engaged with the Syrian army's structure, including participation in the military committee—figures like Mizid Hneidi, Hamad Ubaid, and Salim Hatoum played significant roles in internal conflicts, helping to solidify the regime's direction. Several Druze officers also gained prominence during the 1973 October War, receiving honors for their contributions, marking the peak of the co-optation phase.

During this period, the Syrian regime and Ba'ath Party approached Sweida cautiously—not only due to its Druze identity, which fit the regime's minority-protection narrative, but also because of the Druze's regional ties to Lebanon and Israel, which raised security concerns. This ambivalence positioned the Druze as both securitized subjects and referent objects: the regime framed them as a vulnerable minority needing protection while simultaneously treating their transnational connections as a potential threat requiring surveillance and control.This tension is particularly evident in the regime's vertical securitization process, which sought to maintain control over the Druze community by embedding them into state institutions through the formation of popular organizations. By involving the people of Sweida in structures like Ba'ath Party unions, the regime attempted to assert its authority and monitor the Druze, thereby balancing their dual status as a protected minority and a potential threat. For instance, by 1996, 36,738 members had joined the Farmers Union, and 16,048 had joined the Workers' Unions (Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics 1998; Barout 2012: 85-90), indicating a substantial effort to integrate the Druze into state-sanctioned frameworks. Incorporating speech acts further illustrates how the regime's securitization logic operated. Official rhetoric often emphasized the need to protect the Druze as part of the Syrian national fabric, reinforcing their role as a referent object while simultaneously issuing warnings about external influences and the dangers of sectarianism, framing the Druze as potential sources of instability (see Ezzi 2022). This dual discourse allowed the regime to justify its intrusive presence in Sweida and maintain its control over the Druze community, effectively leveraging both aspects of their identity as subjects needing oversight and objects requiring protection.

Vertical securitization was entrenched through the judiciary by relying on traditional leaders and religious figures to resolve disputes among the people of Sweida, which ultimately weakened the role of the judiciary and the concept of institutionalism. From the 1970s to the 1990s, the regime expanded the authority of these traditional leaders by delegating them judicial powers (Mulhem 1995, 430). This highlighted traditional leaders' roles, reinforcing primordial ties in the Druze community, hindering its development into a civil society that interacts with state institutions, reflecting the co-optation and polarization practiced by the Ba'ath Party on the Druze component. The regime's vertical securitization of the Druze in Sweida intensified after the Muslim Brotherhood events in the 1980s, highlighting the regime's security behavior towards any

component that threatened its survival or legitimacy (ibid). The co-opted traditional religious leaders rejected the Muslim Brotherhood movement, increasing the security grip.

This period saw increased state projects towards Sweida, pushing agricultural reform and infrastructure projects. The people supported state institutions, engaged in educational institutions, joined the army, and the number of those working in the public sector increased, relying on its services and judiciary as much as they were available. The period witnessed stagnation in political activity and popular movement due to security control and international balances, with many adhering to existing unions and federations to manage their affairs.

During this period, space functioned as an extension of state power rather than a site for citizen engagement. The Ba'ath Party's symbolic authority and Hafez al-Assad's personality cult (author) dominated public spaces, where Druze co-optation into state institutions reinforced loyalty. Social spaces became arenas for regime-controlled demonstrations, with students, employees, and union members mobilized in compulsory marches dictated by the state—ranging from anti-Israel protests to responses to U.S. policies. This control persisted until the 2011 uprisings, when demonstrators began reclaiming space as a site of resistance.

Second Phase (2011-2022): Negotiated and Compromised Dynamics in Sweida

During the second phase of securitization, from 2011 to 2022, Sweida entered a period of negotiated securitization where power was defined by a delicate equilibrium—neither side held absolute power, and each was constrained by the other's presence. While the regime maintained control over key institutions, it permitted limited dissent, as protests emerged in symbolic social spaces like Karama Square. These spaces became arenas where the community could express dissent within the boundaries set by the state, representing a form of negotiated agency. During this period, the regime used indirect threats and symbolic control over demonstrations to project power without resorting to full repression. Unlike the subsequent phase, which involved reverse securitization, the community in this phase had not yet reclaimed full agency. Instead, control over the social and political landscape was an ongoing negotiation, differentiating this phase from the later assertion of agency over both space and narrative.

With the outbreak of mass protests and uprisings in 2011 across Syria, the second phase (2011-2022) of securitization in Sweida is characterized by variations of bargaining and boundary-making, as the relationship between the Baath regime and the Druze community entered a complex process of contestation. For example, spaces such as mosques, traditionally religious venues, became focal points for mobilization, especially as the regime could not easily interfere with Friday prayers. These spaces allowed protestors to exercise agency through acts of spatial resistance (Imady 2018; Rabah 2023). Additionally, city squares in other parts of Syria, such as Daraa, Homs, and Idlib, became symbolic sites for reimagining the relationship between the regime and Syrians, often at a high cost. While repression in Sweida was more restrained, the protests still signified a deeper undercurrent of resistance.

Sweida's ongoing protests trace back to early spatial negotiations in 2011, when residents began asserting their political presence (Ezzi 2022;author). Protests and sit-ins, involving students, lawyers, engineers, and drivers, remained small but persistent. On July 19, 2011, a lawyers' sit-in demanding demilitarization and protest rights led to 70 arrests, sparking wider unrest (Statements of Lawyers, 2011). In response, Lieutenant Khaldoun Zain al-Din defected, forming the Sultan Pasha al-Atrash Brigade, which aligned with Daraa's opposition. Student-led demonstrations calling for regime change were swiftly repressed, and by 2012, fear of retaliation and concerns over state collapse silenced the protests.

Despite Sweida's position of "positive neutrality" towards the revolution, in 2014 many young men refused to serve in the regime's army, leading the regime to label them as service evaders. This period marked a significant shift as Sweida saw a rise in armed groups and a corresponding decrease in top-down securitization. The emergence of ISIS in the eastern desert near Sweida prompted Sheikh Wahid al-Balous to establish the Men of Dignity group to counter ISIS and the al-Nusra Front. This phase involved horizontal securitization, with ongoing negotiations and redefinitions of boundaries between the Baath regime and the Druze community. The regime's increased pressure on Druze men to address widespread military abstention effectively ended Sweida's 'special' status, fuelling repression and fear that contributed to the protest movement (Husam 2023). The Men of Dignity Movement further spurred armed resistance, significantly increasing defection rates, with reports of thousands defecting annually, although official statistics are unavailable (*al-Suwayda 24*, 2022).

This was followed by a civic campaign "You Have Suffocated Us" (*Khanaqtūnā*) in 2015, which highlighted deteriorating living conditions and escalated after the assassination of Sheikh al-Balous, allegedly by Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. Protestors dismantled a statue of Hafez al-Assad, demanding better services and the dismissal of corrupt officials (*Elaph Media* 2015). Following al-Balous's assassination, the Men of Dignity Movement adopted a security-focused approach against the regime (al-Balous, *Facebook* 2014). Another example is the campaign of 2016 "You Have Broken Us" (*ḥaṭamtūnā*) that opposed teacher conscription, which had created a teaching vacuum (*Syria Untold* 2016). On Syria's 70th independence anniversary, anti-Assad slogans were chanted, and President Square was renamed Karama Square (Mohammed 2016).

A significant turning point came in 2018, when ISIS attacked Sweida, killing over 258 people. Many locals believed the regime had allowed the attack, undermining trust in its protective role (Al-Assi 2018). Following this, armed factions defended against ISIS, eventually assisting in the release of hostages taken by ISIS (*Suwayda 24*, 2018c). Despite their autonomy, these groups continued engaging with state institutions. As security deteriorated, internal splits emerged among Sweida's factions, with some engaging in criminal activities like kidnapping and drug trafficking. Allegations arose that regime forces were facilitating these activities (*Rozana* 2022). Mistrust in state institutions deepened, and local religious leaders and notables took on judicial and security roles, filling the void left by an ineffective regime. Initiatives like the "Community Initiative to Activate the Law" were launched to promote law enforcement and social cohesion (*Facebook, Mubadara* 2020).

Protests escalated in 2020 with the launch of the **"We Want to Live"** (*biddnā nʿīsh*) campaign, demanding economic reforms and a technocratic government. A silent sit-in called for state action on worsening economic conditions and forest fires (Suwayda 24, 2020b). By June, demonstrations intensified, denouncing Russian and Iranian influence and calling for the regime's removal. The state responded with violence, mass arrests (Al-Jazeera, 2020), and the dismissal of dissident employees (Orient Net, 2020). Clashes erupted between the Fifth Corps in Daraa and an armed faction from al-Qurayya, resulting in casualties (Syrian Net, 2020). By year's end, graffiti demanding Assad's ouster appeared, protests increased (Syria TV, March 11, 2020; Enab Baladi, October 31, 2020), and youth continued evading military service despite Russia's reconciliation efforts (Mohammad, Al-Quds, 2020). By 2021, popular discontent surged, fueled by protests over

the mistreatment of al-Aql Sheikh by security forces. Demonstrators expressed anger at living conditions and political grievances, including opposition to Bashar al-Assad's presidential candidacy. Protesters chanted, "Bashar, you disgrace. The people reject your candidacy," and painted slogans on walls across the governorate, such as "Bashar, we want bread first before you run for office" (*Al-Arabiya,* 2021). The protest wave continued into 2022, responding to economic grievances like fuel rationing (*Baladi News,* 2021) and calling for the implementation of UN Resolution 2254 (Al-Assi 2022). In December 2022, the movement gained momentum when protesters stormed the governorate building, prompting the regime to use live ammunition (*Al Jazeera,* 2022). The Druze spiritual leadership also demanded the Syrian regime disclose the fate of the disappeared and detained (*Al-Araby Al-Jadeed,* 2022).

During this phase, the local population increasingly resisted external state interventions, with many beginning to pursue local solutions and reducing their reliance on the central government. Religious leaders advocated for the restoration of traditional roles within the community, emphasizing the need for local autonomy. Gradually, demands emerged for the development of local governance structures, although the community faced challenges in fully articulating these aspirations after decades of dependency on the centralized state.

Third Phase (2022-2024): Reverse Securitization—From Securitized Subjects to Securitizing Agents

The transformation from securitized subjects to securitizing agents in Sweida is deeply intertwined with the evolution of local dynamics and power structures. Initially, the regime's oppressive tactics and the weight of religious authority subdued the momentum of popular mobilization. However, a significant shift occurred when influential religious figures, previously aligned with the regime's stance, began to openly challenge its authority and support the demands of the local population. On 23 December 2022, Sheikh al-Hijri issued an escalatory statement towards the Assad regime (*Al-Quds Al-Arabi* 2022). It was considered the first such statement from the Druze religious authority since the start of the Syrian revolution, one that escalated against the regime and refrained from paying tribute to the state authority of the law. Al-Hijri demanded revealing the fate of thousands of detainees and forcibly disappeared people from the Sweida governorate, and directly attacked the regime by saying:

> No matter how corrupt people try to humiliate free people who face the most powerful forces of evil, they will not tire in demanding his rights. No matter how many methods they devise to suppress voices, deter the words of truth, quell demands under the fire of their corrupt people, and spread saboteurs among the people, the sun of truth will not set, and demands will not hide from those seeking them, and the goals of the wicked shall fall in the clutches of their grudges (ibid).

In a statement issued on 19 August 2023, al-Hijri supported the popular movement and condemned Bashar al-Assad's corruption and mistreatment of the Syrian people (Al-Rasid 2023). He criticized the regime's narrative of a "global conspiracy" used to justify its brutality and highlighted the unity of the Syrian homeland. His key message emphasized that the people have the right to make demands, and it is the government's responsibility to respond without greed or fear (ibid). A lawyer involved in the protests noted that clerics had aligned with the movement, emphasizing that participants were civically and politically aware, representing various segments of society. While acknowledging the role of armed factions in protecting the movement, she remarked that the clerics began voicing support once they saw the protests would persist. Protests intensified by a sharp rise in fuel prices, Sweida experienced a resurgence of protests. These demonstrations began with a general strike, involving the closure of commercial shops and roadblocks set up by local groups, some with sectarian affiliations. Initially, this action garnered widespread support from locals frustrated by government policies. Over time, it became apparent that the government's usual tactics to garner support were failing, as locals defied these measures, escalating their dissent. For the first time, a general strike closed Ba'ath Party headquarters in Sweida and nearby villages, symbolizing a significant escalation in local resistance against state authority (Al Jazeera 2023).

Various groups participated in the protests, including traditional opponents of the government, young people belonging to local armed factions seeking a solution to their conditions, intellectuals, and a significant number of civil society activists and academics. The protest received support and endorsement from notable religious leaders such as Sheikh al-Aql, Hamoud al-Hanawi, and Sheikh Talib al-Hajri. Sheikh Yusuf Jerboa from his side called for "a government change and the formation of a new government capable of managing the crisis, improving the

situation, finding solutions, and not postponing responsibilities," demanding a "retraction from all recent economic decisions" (*Alsouria Net* 2023).

The movement was also characterized by its political solution proposal according to UN Resolution 2254, alongside demands for the overthrow of the regime and the repetition of some old slogans. The authorities never attempted to suppress it, and it generally maintained a peaceful image despite some of their provocations. They did not label the armed factions as insurgents or threaten them with the use of force if attacked, nor did they refuse others who did. The insistence on the peaceful nature of the movement continued until the end, even among some who leaned toward the factions. However, despite the movement's involvement in some escalation and threats, the rise of tensions was evidenced by a demonstration in front of the settlement center set up by the authorities on April 7, resulting in the firing of bullets into the air to disperse the protesters. Despite this, the movement has maintained its general peaceful stance, although the tension in the rhetoric remains present. The movement was marked by significant female participation and was characterized by diverse political and economic slogans. Banners showed solidarity with Gaza and Idlib and commemorated the victims of the bombing at the military college in Homs. Additionally, there was the emergence of a group known as the "Hizb al-Liwa" (Party of the Banner), advocating for self-governance in Sweida and severing ties with the central government (ibid).

Some groups within the demonstration raised the Druze flag prominently, and members of the "Hizb al-Liwa" (Party of the Banner) carried banners expressing their desire for self-governance. On the following Friday, these groups re-entered the protest square and raised the Druze flag, covering a large portion of the protest area with it. The formation of these groups created a strong presence within the protest for a day, but their continued presence was largely rejected by the majority of participants, leading to internal conflicts about the direction of the movement. This disagreement over political plurality and lack of a unified vision outside the protest space contributed to their decline in influence.

From another perspective, new local media pages contributed to the dissemination of news. These anonymous pages played a role in directing public discourse due to their vision and approach in covering events. They often amplified the role of certain figures whose appearances were

repeated, giving them a platform for their messages. Alongside the repeated focus on the religious activities of the Druze men in Sweida, these pages contributed to a calm discourse, naming the violent escalation towards the outside and internal security disturbances. They highlighted the role of some religious figures who pushed towards peaceful expression and protest while rejecting external intervention.

In a video statement following the shooting at demonstrators in Sweida on 13 September 2023, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri condemned those not participating in the protests as committing "national treason" (Statement from the Guesthouse of His Eminence Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, 2023). He emphasized that the movement would persist until the people's rightful demands were met, repeatedly invoking concepts of "popular will," "dignity," and "brotherhood." Hijri's use of "national treason" aligned with the reverse securitization framework, where the traditionally securitized Druze community becomes the securitizing agent. By framing non-participants and Baathists who shot at protesters as traitors, he appealed to kinship, religious, and national ties to challenge the regime. His message called on Druze Baathists to unite with the protesters, reclaiming agency for the Druze as protectors of the "homeland" (watan) and reshaping the security discourse through emotional and religious bonds.

Al-Hijiri's approach is rooted in the transformation of physical spaces and the mobilization of grassroots leaders like Hijri, who utilize religious rhetoric to challenge state legitimacy and encourage unity within the community. The community's association of national loyalty with participation in the protests underscores a shift in power dynamics, allowing marginalized groups to securitize the state itself, rather than remaining passive subjects of securitization. This reflects the theoretical framework of reverse securitization, where oppressed groups use the language and tools of security to subvert state control.

The support of Druze religious leaders significantly bolstered the protesters' morale. Prominent figures such as Sheikh Hammoud Hanawi, the spiritual leader of the Druze community, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, and Sheikh Muwaffaq Tarif, the spiritual leader of the Druze in Palestine, endorsed the popular movement in Sweida and refused any communication or conciliation with Syrian regime officials. Governor of Sweida, Bassam Parsik, failed to negotiate with Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri to calm the situation, as the sheikh declined any contact with Damascus (*Almodon*,

2023). A new development in the protest landscape in Sweida saw a group of retired officers, including Brigadier General Naif Al-Aqel, issuing a statement after meeting with Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri.

General Naif Al-Aqel, along with other retired officers, issued a statement calling for the establishment of a temporary council to manage the governorate (*North Press Agency* 2023). They proposed this council be responsible for overseeing service agencies in Sweida and ensuring the security of the region. Additionally, they recommended forming a committee led by Naif Al-Aqel to unify the factions and supervise security efforts in the governorate. The statement concluded by suggesting the opening of a border crossing with Jordan to support economic development at the provincial level. However, the media office of Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri clarified that this statement did not represent the official stance of the spiritual leadership of the Druze community (*Al Mayadeen* 2023).

The transition of Sweida's Druze community from securitized subjects to securitizing agents underscores a profound shift in the region's power dynamics. Initially subdued by the regime's oppressive tactics and the influence of religious authority, the community's resistance has evolved into a more assertive and transformative force. The speeches of religious leaders like Sheikh al-Hijri, who shifted from a stance of alignment with the regime to one of open defiance, have been pivotal in catalyzing this change. These speeches not only emboldened the local population but also redefined the role of religious authority in the ongoing struggle. This transformation illustrates the core argument of this article: that in the context of authoritarian regimes, securitization is not a one-way process imposed by the state. Instead, marginalized communities can reclaim agency, using the very mechanisms of securitization to resist and challenge state power. This reverse securitization process reveals the fluidity of power relations and the potential for oppressed groups to become active agents in their own liberation.

Spatializing Security

In both the second phase (2011-2022) and the third phase (2023-present), space emerges not just as a background for conflict but as an active battleground for power and agency. Throughout these phases, the transformation of spaces in Sweida—particularly the renaming of President Square to

Karama (Dignity) Square—illustrates how space plays a pivotal role in the struggle for ontological security. This spatialization of security is central to reversing the regime's securitization logic. More particularly, commemoration and the strategic use of space in Sweida are integral to the community's resistance against state oppression. These practices not only honor past sacrifices but also actively reshape the power dynamics between the state and its citizens. Through these actions, the people of Sweida become securitizing agents, using space to challenge the state's authority and assert their autonomy (see *Suwayda 24*, 2023a). This transformation underscores the innovative and adaptive nature of resistance movements in the face of ongoing conflict and repression. Moreover, the use of space in Sweida's resistance movements exemplifies how spatial practices contribute to the process of reverse securitization. Participants in these protests include a diverse cross-section of the local population, encompassing various age groups and social backgrounds. Both men and women are actively involved, reflecting a unified stand against the regime despite the risks involved.

Public demonstrations, renaming squares, and the physical presence of protesters **spatialize security**, redefining the state-citizen relationship. By strategically using space, Sweida's community asserts its rights and resists oppression. The **annual commemoration of the 2018 ISIS attack**, honoring over 250 victims, serves as an act of resistance and unity, reinforcing Druze identity and resilience (Suwayda 24, 2023b). Spaces like **Karama Square** have become symbolic sites of defiance, where the community transforms from passive subjects into active securitizing agents, demanding political change. Weekly **commemorative protests** further spatialize security, as seen in the **funeral of Abu Gaith Murhaf al-Jarmani**, commander of the Jabal Brigade. The large turnout, including Druze leaders, and anti-regime slogans repurposed mourning rituals into resistance (Sweida Protests Coverage, 2023). Similarly, **celebrations of 100 days of protests in Karama Square** embodied both defiance and unity (Orient News, 2023). Protesters of all ages chanted *"The people want the fall of the regime"* and *"Freedom, freedom,"* transforming the square into a lasting site of resistance. Sweida's resistance has evolved, with **cultural elements**—songs in the Druze dialect and **women's ululations (zaghareet)**—strengthening community identity (Suwayda 24, X 2024). Their resilience is reflected in slogans like *"The treacherous bullets will not scare us"* amid regime attacks. By repurposing public spaces

into arenas of political expression, the people of Sweida actively challenge the Assad regime's authority, demonstrating **reverse securitization** in an authoritarian context.

Conclusion

This article has introduced the concept of "reverse securitization" to understand how communities under authoritarian regimes can challenge and invert state-imposed security narratives. The case of Sweida, Syria, exemplifies how the Druze community strategically reclaimed physical, symbolic, and emotional spaces to resist the Assad regime's dominance, transforming from passive subjects to active securitizing agents.

Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, Syria has experienced significant political shifts under interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa. Despite initial promises of inclusion, recent events have raised concerns about sectarian violence and governance challenges. For instance, clashes between government forces and Assad loyalists have resulted in over 1,000 deaths, predominantly among the Alawite minority . This violence has strained al-Sharaa's administration, highlighting difficulties in controlling various armed factions. In this evolving landscape, the Druze community in Sweida continues to assert its autonomy and resist centralized authority. Their experience in counter-securitization strategies against the Assad regime has equipped them to navigate the complexities of al-Sharaa's rule. The community remains cautious of the new Islamist-led government, striving to maintain their independence and cultural identity amidst ongoing sectarian tensions.

The Sweida case underscores the importance of spatial dynamics in securitization processes. The community's ability to transform state-controlled spaces into arenas of resistance demonstrates how physical spaces can become tools for negotiating power. This spatial dimension enriches our understanding of securitization, revealing how marginalized groups can utilize space to challenge authoritarian control. As Syria's political situation continues to evolve, monitoring how communities like the Druze in Sweida adapt their resistance strategies will be crucial. Their ongoing efforts to assert autonomy and resist centralization offer valuable insights into the resilience and agency of oppressed communities in authoritarian contexts. This case invites further

research into how other marginalized groups might engage in reverse securitization, reshaping our understanding of security, power, and the role of space in the modern world.

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