On Wednesday, Israeli airstrikes shook Damascus, striking the headquarters of Syria's Defense Ministry in one of the boldest attacks in years. Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz justified the strikes, declaring, "The warnings in Damascus have ended—now painful blows will come."

The strikes followed several days of violent clashes in Sweida, a predominantly Druze region in southern Syria. Although a tentative cease-fire between Syrian security forces and Druze militias was announced later that day, Israeli strikes continued, signaling that the conflict is far from over.

What lies behind this crisis? And what does it mean for Syria, Israel, and the wider Middle East? Here's what you need to know.

Who Are the Druze—and Why Are They at the Center of This Conflict?

The Druze are a religious and ethnic minority concentrated in southern Syria, particularly around Sweida. They have long maintained a sense of communal autonomy, often resisting central authority, whether under colonial rule or the Assad family's regime.

During the Syrian civil war, the Druze largely stayed neutral, focusing on protecting their communities rather than siding with the government or opposition forces. This independent streak frustrated Damascus then, and it continues to do so under Syria's new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa.

Following the fall of the Assad regime, influential Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri called for international protection of the Druze, marking a historic break from Damascus. But Druze opinion is divided—some leaders fear outside protection, especially from Israel, could

deepen their isolation and make future reconciliation with other Syrians harder.

Adding to the complexity, the Druze have deep ties to communities in Lebanon and Israel, raising the stakes for regional involvement.

Why Is Sweida Boiling Over?

The recent violence in Sweida stems from long-standing tensions between Druze militias and neighboring Sunni Bedouin tribes, exacerbated by economic decline and weak governance.

When fighting erupted, Syrian security forces stepped in—ostensibly to restore order, but also to reassert state control over a region that has resisted Damascus for decades. The government began selectively disarming Druze militias, deepening mistrust.

Though the tentative cease-fire may temporarily calm tensions, experts warn that without a negotiated settlement, renewed violence is almost certain. And this time, it could drag in other regions and regional powers.

Why Did Israel Strike Damascus?

Israel has positioned itself as a protector of the Druze, a community with significant representation in Israel's own military and society. Hundreds of Israeli Druze reportedly crossed into Syria to defend their Syrian counterparts, putting additional pressure on Jerusalem to act.

On a deeper level, Israel sees two possible—and alarming—scenarios in Syria:

1. Damascus is complicit in attacks on Druze, revealing al-Sharaa's government as hostile

and unreliable.
2. Damascus has lost control of southern Syria, raising fears of extremist or Iranian influence near Israel's borders.

For Israel, neither option allows it to stand aside. By striking Damascus directly, Israel is signaling that it is willing to escalate to protect the Druze—and to prevent a broader security collapse on its northern frontier.

What Is the Syrian Government's Strategy?

For President Ahmed al-Sharaa, Sweida is both a threat and an opportunity. Reasserting control over the south is crucial for consolidating Syria's fragile post-Assad state. But Israel's intervention has thrown his strategy off balance.

While Damascus hopes to wear down Druze resistance through local cease-fires and negotiations, its selective targeting of Druze militias (while avoiding Bedouin tribes) is fueling mistrust. Worse, Israeli strikes on Damascus itself highlight just how vulnerable al-Sharaa's government remains.

If al-Sharaa relies too heavily on coercion, experts warn, he risks provoking a broader regional escalation—one that could involve Turkey, Iran, and other actors.

What Should Washington Do?

The United States, which recently lifted sanctions on Syria in a bid to stabilize the country, is now scrambling to prevent the Sweida crisis from spiraling.

Washington is pressuring Damascus to stop attacks on Druze and has called on regional

partners—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—to send a clear message: continued violence will jeopardize Syria's economic recovery.

At the same time, U.S. officials are urging Israel to limit its strikes. Defending Druze communities is one thing, they argue; hitting government targets in Damascus risks destabilizing Syria further and derailing fragile backchannel talks on Israeli-Syrian deescalation.

What Does This Mean for Syrian-Israeli Relations?

While full normalization between Syria and Israel remains unlikely, there is still a narrow window for a nonaggression agreement. The fact that Damascus rushed to announce a cease-fire with Druze militias after Israeli strikes suggests al-Sharaa is eager to avoid a direct confrontation.

But Israel's hardline stance could undermine this opportunity. If the conflict deepens, Syria risks further fragmentation—exactly the kind of instability that would empower extremists and Iranian-backed militias, increasing security threats to Israel.

For now, both sides remain at a crossroads: de-escalation through dialogue, or a slide into a wider regional conflict.