



Volume 9, Number 8

April 26, 2015

A Druze Conundrum: Suwayda, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Syrian Civil War

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Since the summer of 2014, the Druze city of Al-Suwayda, which is located directly east of the regime-controlled city of Dar'a, has been shaken by a protest movement that has continued to grow.¹ In November, locals attacked an SAF (Syrian Armed Forces) recruitment center in order to extract a young man who had been forcibly conscripted a few days earlier. On January 8, 2015, another recruitment center was attacked, and the demonstrators dismantled a checkpoint as a warning.² A number of soldiers were injured. On February 11, 2015, a truck loaded with flour was stopped by the regime's security services on the pretext that it did not have all the necessary authorizations. The truck, which was en route to the Druze town of Shahba, never arrived. In reprisal, residents of Shahba blocked the Damascus–Suwayda highway. The regime's inspection of the truck was apparently the Army's response to the Druze's refusal to enlist in the regime's military. A Syrian officer has reportedly said of the people of Shahba: "Implement the policy of starvation and deprivation with them so that they learn that the state is sovereign and so that they remain subservient."³

The city of Suwayda played a prominent role in the construction of the Ba'athist system (*nizam*),⁴ especially in the mid-1960s, when some officers from the community managed to secure high-level position in the military establishment. From that period forward, it was commonly accepted that the loyalty of Syria's Druze belongs to the regime. While the public's attention is focused on the

¹ *Al-Jazirah*, "دروز السويداء يجددون رفضهم الالتحاق بقوات الأسد" [The Druze of Suwayda reiterate their refusal to join Asad's forces], February 13, 2015, <http://www.al-jazirahonline.com/news/2015/20150213/41101>

² *All4Syria*, "شبان السويداء ينتفضون ضد الخدمة العسكرية" [The Youth of Suwayda are rising up against military service], January 8, 2015, <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/187398>.

³ *Syria Direct*, News Update, January 29, 2015, <http://syriadirect.org/rss/1819-syria-direct-news-update-1-29-15>.

⁴ Alastair Drysdale, "The Syrian Political Elite, 1966-1976: A Spatial and Social Analysis", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 1981), p 12.

Islamic State's actions in northern Syria and on Syria's Kurdish and Christian minorities, the Druze remain an important actor in Syria and the true barometer of the regime's state of health.

Forced Conscription

The protest movement that began in Suwayda is a response to the regime's massive recruitment campaign launched in 2014.⁵ In large towns and cities, the government has declared the mobilization of all reservists born after 1984. In the city of Hama alone, 1,500 young people were detained at checkpoints and conscripted into various brigades over just four days.⁶

The government's campaign is a product of the desperate state of the Syrian Army; since the beginning of the conflict, the armed forces have been wracked by desertions, defections, and combat attrition. Regime forces were estimated at 350,000 men in 2011, but reportedly amount to no more than 100,000 today. Without the considerable support of Iranian, Iraqi, and Lebanese fighters, the regime would have collapsed long ago. However, even the Assad regime's foreign allies can be unpredictable. In June 2014, after Mosul was seized by the Islamic State, several thousand Shi'i Iraqi militiamen were recalled to fight in Iraq at Iran's behest.

As the "sacred duty" of Syrian citizens, military service is compulsory and lasts 18 months. Upon completion, all Syrians must be ready for mobilization up to the age of 40. However, many young people have managed to avoid mobilization. Therefore, in the "loyalist" areas, the government has launched roundups, sometimes searching every home, cafe, and bus stop where men of fighting age may be found. Military operations have also multiplied at checkpoints in order to prevent people from escaping to liberated areas or abroad. Moreover, in October 2014, the conditions for obtaining travel documents were tightened considerably: for the 16-45 age group, obtaining a passport is now tantamount to running the gauntlet. Only the well-off manage to open the doors necessary to leave the country by paying ever more expensive bribes.⁷

The city of Suwayda has not been spared by this campaign. In the summer of 2014, the regime announced that 7,000 reservists would be mobilized and that, on the basis of demographic statistics, the region had a pool of 8,000 young men obligated to do compulsory service. However, out of these 15,000 potential

⁵ Christopher Kozak, "The Assad Regime Under Stress: Conscription and Protest among Alawite and Minority Populations in Syria," *Institute for the Study of War - Syria Updates*, December 15, 2015, <http://iswsyria.blogspot.co.il/2014/12/the-assad-regime-under-stress.html>.

⁶ *Radio Rozana*, "Syrian regime recruiting minors," February 8, 2015, <http://rozana.fm/en/node/8147>.

⁷ Christopher Kozak, "The Assad Regime Under Stress."

combatants, reportedly only 700 (4.5 percent) have actually been recruited or mobilized. These numbers indicate that there is little enthusiasm on the part of the Druze community for joining the regime's army, which has a very bad reputation among the youth. For example, Na'im, originally from Suwayda, told *Radio Rozana*: "In the past, a young man would go to [perform] his military service, and endure the oppressive conditions—considering it as merely a two-year prison term that will eventually come to an end. Nowadays, no one knows if and when it will end; that is, if one is lucky enough to come back home in one piece, and not carried [home] in a coffin."⁸

In fact, since 2011, dozens of Suwayda draftees have been killed in combat. Life in the Syrian military is said to be appalling: bullying by non-commissioned officers, non-existent leave, and a total lack of care in the event of injury or disease. This is how Na'im epitomizes the experience: "We are prisoners in our own village." Therefore, going into hiding has become a national sport.

Suwayda and Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN)

The military situation in Suwayda is quite complex. Between 2011 and 2013, the city was kept away from the confrontations led by the FSA (Free Syrian Army) against the Syrian Army. Even though the Druze are (incorrectly) perceived as being "pro-regime," Suwayda is still split between supporters and opponents of the revolution. Nevertheless, in order to avoid trouble, the community's notables decided to officially condemn all military operations conducted by the anti-regime rebels. Like the regime, the municipality calls for social reforms, condemning the militarization of the revolution. In a much more ambiguous manner, the municipality also condemns the military operations carried out by the regime. In parallel, due to the deterioration of the situation on the ground, Suwayda is being emptied of its inhabitants: of the 450,000 permanent residents, more than 75 percent have left the region for Lebanon, Canada, or the United States.

Only in 2013 did the situation change with the emergence of Salafi-jihadist groups, in particular JAN, which hitherto had been absent from the southern Dar'a-Suwayda region. In contrast to the northern regions, reaching the Dar'a and Suwayda governorates is difficult; it is impossible to get there from Israel, too risky to set off from Jordan, and logistically very awkward from northern Syria. Iraqi Shi'i militias hostile to the Sunni Salafis control the routes across the Syrian desert (*Badiyah ash-Sham*). Moreover, the Syrian resistance was in essence organized in the Dar'a governorate by former soldiers. Prior to the 2011 uprising, the majority of Syrian army regiments were based in the Dar'a region in

⁸ *Radio Rozana*, "In Al-Suwayda: Hiding until the end of the War!," January 18, 2015, <http://rozana.fm/en/node/9789>.

order to face the Israeli "enemy." When the uprising began, deserters started fighting in Dar'a, and for two years, they constituted a bulwark against jihadists. However, beginning in 2013, they were progressively overrun and, like the country's northern governorates before it, the Dar'a governorate was confronted first with the radicalization of the uprising and then its metamorphosis into a full-blown civil war.

During the summer of 2013, JAN established its headquarters east of the Damascus-Dar'a highway. Gradually, the Salafi-jihadist movement grew and cannibalized several groups from the FSA, as it was better funded, better equipped, and better trained. JAN appeared to be more effective in combat – in particular with respect to high-profile suicide attacks – and, above all, less corrupt than the new military leaders hailing from the revolutionary committees. Within the space of a few months, JAN took over the symbolic and actual leadership of the anti-regime guerrilla forces.

The Druze "Self-defense"

Faced with the establishment of JAN in the region, several local sheikhs encouraged the Suwayda youth to join the National Defence Force (NDF), or to establish their own self-defense militias. The NDF, also called "people's committees" (*lijan al-sha'biya*), were created to allow pro-regime "volunteers" to ensure the defense of their own territory without joining the Army, and thus avoid being dispatched to the other side of the country.

In 2013, two militias – the Army of Monotheists (*Jaysh al-Muwahiddin*) and the Abu Ibrahim forces – emerged to fight against JAN in the region and to guarantee the security of the Druze community.⁹ In practice, these militias have links with the Syrian Army: their symbolism is a subtle combination of references to Bashar al-Asad and to "secular" Syria, while borrowing from the canon of Druze identity. Their flags consist of local place names or historical references to Druze resistance figures from the mandate era.¹⁰

These militias present their actions as essentially "defensive," aimed against whoever might seek to harm the interests of the community. This politically neutral stance is typical of the Druze survival strategy: they establish ties to the most powerful actor while ensuring there is a way out in the event that the situation changes radically. While in practice the Druze self-defense militias fight JAN, they do not refrain from negotiating with it either, just as they do in Idlib.¹¹

⁹ Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Druze Militias of Southern Syria," *Syria Comment*, November 13, 2013, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/14038/the-druze-militias-of-southern-syria>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ In Idlib, the Druze community is already experiencing life under the control of JAN. Idlib is located in the Jebel al-Summaq region, where 20,000 Druze were offered a "choice": conversion

There are also rumors that arms are being sold by JAN to the Druze in exchange for facilitating transit across the Druze region.

Conclusion

In recent months, Hizballah, Iran, and the regime are actively trying to reconquer the city of Dar'á and ensure that it is linked with Suwayda. Furthermore, in March 2015, Tehran announced the creation of a new Druze militia called "Lebayk Ya Salman"¹² that is trained by Hizballah. This element could be perceived as a part of a broader strategy for Hizballah's settlement in the Golan region.

The relationship between Asad's regime and Syria's minorities is Mafia-like, as French scholar, Jean-Pierre Filiu points out.¹³ In the Suwayda region, the Syrian regime uses the same strategy as it uses in other regions with a large concentration of religious minorities, emphasizing the jihadist threat or resorting to violence or threats if need be. Damascus does not hesitate to regularly shell the areas it "defends," blaming the shelling on the opposition, in order to remind the inhabitants what the future would be like if the regime were to collapse. For now, the Druze have not explicitly distanced themselves from the regime, implicitly demonstrating their confidence in Asad — or rather in his Iranian and Lebanese backers.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

to Islam or fight against the regime. According to *YaLibnan*, they chose to convert, at least officially. Although the community perceives the situation as temporary, they still had to destroy some of their shrines, abandon their traditional clothing, and submit their women to wearing the veil. Even if the situation is quite different in Dar'á, the Idlib example provides the Druze with a glimpse of what life would be under the authority of JAN ; see YALIBNAN, "Al Qaeda force Druze of Idlib Syria to destroy their shrines and convert," March 19, 2015, <http://yalibnan.com/2015/03/19/al-qaeda-forces-druze-of-idlib-syria-to-destroy-their-shrines-and-convert/>.

¹² Which means "For you, Salman." Salman al-Farsî ("Salman the Persian") was a follower of the prophet Mohammed, and a symbolic figure for the Druze; see *Now Lebanon*, "Syria's Druze clerics request regime armament," March 28, 2015, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/565045-syrias-druze-clerics-request-regime-armament>.

¹³ Caroline Donati, "Syrie : La société tient bon face à l'État de barbarie," *Mediapart*, August 19, 2012, <http://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/180812/syrie-la-societe-tient-bon-face-l-etat-de-barbarie>.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

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