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Muslim and Druze in Israel: National and Sectarian Identities in Conflict

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In mid-November 2014, violent clashes between Druze and Muslim youth erupted in Abu Snan, a village in Israel's Western Galilee region. The violence peaked on November 15, with participants ultimately using live firearms and hand grenades. Dozens of people were injured and evacuated to area hospitals for treatment.¹

Prior to 1948, Abu Snan had been predominantly inhabited by Druze with a significant Christian minority. Following the establishment of the State of Israel, Muslim refugees from neighboring villages that had been uprooted during the war settled in Abu Snan and gradually constituted the majority of its inhabitants. The resulting tension between the longtime residents and newcomers also turned into a potential source of friction in the newcomers' relationship with the Israeli authorities, largely because the newcomers were refugees and the earlier inhabitants maintained close ties with Israeli authorities.² In fact, the highest-ranking Druze officer who has ever served in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), Major-General (res.) Yusef Mishleb, is a resident of Abu Snan, as are other senior Druze officers. Ultimately, the inter-communal violence is an example of a clash between two local political streams: the pro-Palestinian current, expressed by Muslim students wearing the Palestinian keffiyeh, and, the pro-Zionist one, expressed by Druze students waving Star-of-David necklaces and pictures of their hero, a fallen Druze officer in Israel's border police.³ The events served to highlight the complex encounter between ethno-national and sectarian identities in Israel's Arab society today.

¹ Mahmoud Sweid, "[قتال واطلاق نار يابو سنان و25 مصابا منها خطيرة](#)," *Panet*, November 15, 2014.

² Mustafa Murad al-Dabagh, *Biladuna Filastin* [Our Country Palestine], Beirut 1965, Vol. 8, pp. 362-363.

³ "[قرية أبو سنان](#)" *Al-Amama*; The Israel Border Police, a gendarmerie, is also known as the "Border Guard" (In Hebrew: Magav). The fallen officer, Major Jad'an As'ad, was killed on November 5 when [he was run-down by a Palestinian driver](#) in Jerusalem.

The Village of Abu Snan

Abu Snan has a population of 13,000, of which 7,000 are Sunni Muslims, 2,000 are Christians, and 4,000 Druze. The Druze are an Arabic-speaking, religiously heterodox community that splintered from Shi'ī Isma'īli Islam in the 11th century, and the majority of its 1.5 million members reside primarily in Syria and Lebanon. There are approximately 110,000 Druze living in Israel, constituting one-tenth of its Arabic-speaking citizens. They mostly live in homogenous villages in the northern part of the country, unlike Abu Snan. During the British Mandate period, the Druze had close ties to the Jewish pre-state community, partly due to communal tensions between the Druze and the Muslim majority in Palestine. Following the establishment of Israel in 1948 the Druze community's ties with its Jewish majority expanded further. Unlike in Syria and Lebanon, where the Druze are considered a Muslim sect, the Druze in Israel were recognized by the state as a distinct religious sect, with its own religious judiciary system. According to research and recent polls, most of the Druze in Israel do not identify themselves as Palestinians; some do not even see themselves as Arabs, but rather as a distinct Arabic-speaking ethnic group. Unlike other Arabic-speaking communities in Israel, the Druze have been conscripted for mandatory military service, with some Druze ultimately serving in high ranking positions in the IDF.⁴ Some Druze intellectuals have, however, played important roles in the production of Palestinian-Arab culture in Israel.

The November 2014 Riots

The chain of events leading to the riots in Abu Snan started on November 8, 2014, when 22-year old Khayr al-Din Hamdan was shot to death in the Galilee Arab village of Kafr Qana by an Israeli Police Special Patrol squad. The widespread rage and protest among Israeli Arabs that followed highlighted once again the rift between Israel's Jews and Arabs. Within hours of the incident, the video clip documenting the shooting was posted on the social media networks and was shared and viewed by many, including local news websites. While a large majority of Jews perceived the shooting as an act of self-defense, within the Arab community the event was almost unanimously described as cold-blooded murder. One of the most prominent characteristics of the mass protests following the Kafr Qana shooting was the focus on Palestinian national identity. Palestinian motifs also stood out in demonstrations by hundreds of children and youths in various communities and in student demonstrations – evidence that Palestinian national identity is growing stronger among the younger generation of Arabs in Israel.

⁴ See: Shim'on Avivi, *Tas Nechoshet: Ha-Medinyut Ha-Israelit Klapey ha-'eda ha-Druzit, 1948-1967* [A Copper Platter: Israeli Policies regarding the Druze Community], Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2007.

On November 9, *al-Hirak al-Shababi*, a youth movement that has organized political protests by the Arab minority in Israel over the past two years, used social media to call on Arab high school students to come to school the next day wearing Palestinian keffiyehs,⁵ in response to “Israel’s policy, which aims at distorting the identity of our students... and to all those advocating enlistment in the military and ethnic division. The next generation will finally thwart all the Israelization schemes.”⁶ The youth movement’s call to action was successful throughout the country, including Abu Snan. However, according to the principal of the Abu Snan high school, which is jointly shared by all three communities (Christian, Druze, and Muslim), the clashes between Muslims and Druze began on its premises, as Muslim students who were wearing keffiyehs were confronted by Druze students waving pictures of the Druze police officer who was killed in Jerusalem by a Palestinian, and even “Stars of David” that those Druze youth, who were about to be drafted into the IDF following high school, wore on their necks. Subsequently, social media slanders against local girls further inflamed the situation and led to reciprocal violence between Muslims and Druze, which included the use of live ammunition and wounded dozens. It was ended by a traditional ceasefire arbitration [*sulha*] negotiated by leaders of the communities.⁷

The Local Dimension: Four Political Streams

Israel’s Arabic-speaking minority is marked by four political streams: 1. Palestinian Nationalist, 2. Islamist, 3. Communist (also known as Arab-Jewish, due to its adherence to the principle of mutual cooperation between the two peoples), all of whom share a basic devotion to Palestinian national identity, and 4. pro-Israeli, or pro-Zionist, the smallest of the four in terms of numbers and influence.⁸ In the immediate aftermath of the Abu Snan clashes, accusations that the Israeli authorities had secretly instigated the inter-communal violence quickly appeared in the Arab media in Israel. Writers identified with both the Islamic and Palestinian nationalist political streams fervently denied that the participants in the violence had been motivated by any nationalist agenda.⁹ However, the high school principal’s testimony and other evidence contradicted this denial. Indeed,

it is clear that the Abu Snan events constituted a clash between the pro-Palestinian and pro-Zionist streams. In other words, this was a confrontation

⁵ The black-and-white checkered keffiyeh is identified with the Palestinian national movement .

⁶ Cited in: Itamar Radai, Meir Elran, and Nadia Hilou, “The Disturbances of November 2014 from the Perspective of the Arabs in Israel”, INSS Insight No. 640, December 9, 2014.

⁷ “مصابا في شجار بين دروز ومسلمين في قرية أبو سنان الجليلية 35” *i24 News*, November 15, 2014.

⁸ Elie Rekhess, “The Arabs of Israel after Oslo: Localization of the National Struggle,” *Israel Studies* 7: 3 (2002), 1-44.

⁹ Mahmoud Milhem, “المتابعة تحذر من تداعيات أحداث أبو سنان على المجتمع العرب,” *Arabs* 48, November 15, 2014; Shaker Farid Hasan, “!.. على هامش أحداث العنف في أبو سنان,” *Panet*, November 23, 2014.

that took place within the context of conflicting national loyalties and was further inflamed by local, sectarian-based resentment and animosity.

The Regional Dimension: Two Phenomena in Conflict

Developments in the wider region have also influenced the chain of events that led to the Abu Snan riots. The collapse of the Syrian and the Iraqi nation-states and the rise of the "Islamic State" have had repercussions for the entire region, strengthening religious, ethno-national and sectarian identities at the expense of the once-prevailing Arab national ideas, both pan-Arab and state-centric. Throughout Islamic history up until the end of World War I, Palestine was considered a part of *al-Sham* (Greater Syria), and its northern part had always been under the sphere of influence of Damascus, rather than Jerusalem. In 1920, following the banishment of King Faisal I from Damascus by the French, the Palestinian Arabs realized for the first time that they were alone, and that Palestinian Arab nationalism was their only viable political choice in these circumstances.¹⁰ After 1948 they became increasingly "Pan-Arab," and then shifted back towards Palestinian nationalism again after 1967.

The collapse of the Syrian and Iraqi nation states,¹¹ along with the Gaza war and the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict has further strengthened the Palestinian nationalist sentiment among Israel's Arabs. Concurrently sectarian identities have been reinforced, resulting in increased inter-communal friction.¹² The events in Abu Snan suggest that the divide between sectarian and pro-Israeli sentiments, on the one hand, and Palestinian national affiliation on the other, may become increasingly salient.

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¹⁰ See Yehoshua Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929* (London: Frank Cass, 1974).

¹¹ See: Eyal Zisser, *Syria: Protest, Revolution, and Civil War* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2015) [Hebrew].

¹² Yusri Hazran, "[The Christians in Israel and the Arab Spring: From Arab Identity to Separatism?](#)", *Bayan: the Arabs in Israel*, issue 1, June 2014; Firas Al-Shoufi, "[دروز لبنان: نحن في زمن المحنة](#)," *Al-Akhbar*, June 3, 2013.

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