Al-Durziyya
Druze and other Minorities in the Middle East
الدرزية
אל-דרזיה
דרוזים ומיעוטים אחרים במזרח התיכון

Editor: Omri Eilat

Vol. 1, No. 2, November 2022

The Syrian Popular Uprising and the Decline of the Druze Political Role

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Minority groups have long formed an important component of the social and cultural fabric of the Arab Middle East, their existence contributing to the pluralistic character of Arab society. Although the issue of numbers remains central to the distinction between majorities and minorities across the globe, the Arab Middle East is home to various minority groups.[1] The eruption of the popular uprising in the Arab World, called "The Arab Spring," raised the challenge of ethnic and religious minorities in the Arab World, particularly in Syria and Iraq. After decades of being integrated within their state, minorities have realized that their very existence was put in jeopardy. Consequently, the following paper will examine the implications of the Syrian Uprising on the Druze in the Arab Middle East. The uprising in Syria revealed the organic weakness of minorities

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[1] Gabriel Ben-Dor, "Minorities in the Middle East: Theory and Practice," Ofra Bengio and Gabriel Ben-Dor, *Minorities and the State in the Arab World* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1999), p. 19.

within the territorial-nation state, including the Druze. By the same token, the collapse of state sovereignty demonstrates how far minorities are loyal to the notion of statehood in the Middle East.

Minority as a political category has been connected with the transformation of the state in the modern era and the emergence of the territorial, national "state, which gives meaning to the twin concepts of majority and minority, understood as groups within a population: terms which emerged in a specific, contemporary context." Therefore, the term "minority" derives mainly from the numerical political meaning.[2] Furthermore, the penetration of Western civilization and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire created a new social and political order in the Middle East that, *inter alia*, paved the way for a reshaping of the dynamics of Arab society, introducing new values and institutions. This inevitably affected majority-minority relations.

The Druze in the Region: A Prelude

The number of Druze in the Middle East is estimated today at around a million, scattered primarily throughout Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. A small community also migrated to northern Jordan at the end of the twentieth century, and diminutive diaspora communities currently exist in the Americas, Australia, and West Africa. Today, the largest Druze community is in Syria, estimated at around 700,000 (about 3 percent of the country's population). As the Druze geographic distribution demonstrates, the Druze community is overwhelmingly rural and mountainous, with most of its members living in the hilly areas of southern Mount Lebanon, Mount Hauran, Mount Hermon, the Idlib area, the Galilean hills, and Mount Carmel. While it has been argued that this terrain has served to protect them against persecution at the hands of the Muslim majority or state, this

[2] Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 36-37.

rationale does not fully explain Druze patterns of settlement. The Druze community's tendency to isolate itself from its surroundings in order to distance itself from the central power in order to preserve as much autonomy as possible undoubtedly played no less a role.[3]

The fact that unlike other minority groups in the Middle East—such as Arab Christians or the Shiites—the Druze communities lack urban centers largely accounts for the durability and coherence of their traditional social order on the one hand and economic and structural weakness on the fact of modernity on the other. Whether in Syria, Lebanon, or Israel, Druze society has always been based on endogamous marriage[4], this circumstance directly contributing to the preservation of communal norms, values, and social relations within the kinship system.

Druze society has been described as a model of internal social cohesion and a strong attachment to ethnic identity. Fuad Khuri observes four interconnected factors that have contributed to this internal social cohesion: the belief in reincarnation, which establishes amicable relationships between families, the influence of religious men (*Sheikh-'Aqls*), the territorial continuum within the areas populated by the Druze communities, and brotherhood (*hifz al-Ikhwan*).[5]

The Druze community is also founded upon clannism—a system of social differentiation in which membership is determined through shared ancestors. Even when it lost its economic basis, Druze clannism maintained its social and political function, familial solidarity reinforcing internal Druze unity—"le Monolithisme Druse" in Kamal Junblat's phrase.[6]

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[3] Salman Falah, *The Druze in the Middle East* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2000), 13-15 (in Hebrew).
[4] Fuad Khuri, "Aspects of Druze Social Structure: There Are No Free-Floating Druze," in *The Druze: Realities and Perceptions*, ed. Kamal Salibi (London: Druze Heritage Foundation, 2006), 62.
[5] *Ibid*, pp. 62-63.
[6] Kamal Junblat, *Ḥaqīqat al-thawrah al-Lubnānīyah*, 4th ed. (al-Mukhtārah: al-Dār al-Taqaddumīyah, 1987), 84; Samir Khalaf, "Family Associations in Lebanon," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 2 (1971), 243; Thomas Scheffler, "Survival and Leadership at an Interface Periphery: The Druzes in Lebanon," in *Syncretistic Religious*

The Druze in Modern Syria

Despite only forming approximately three percent of the population in Syria, the Druze have played a significant role in its modern history since 1918. The Great Syrian Revolt that broke out in the Druze Mountain was led by the Druze leader Sultan al-Atrash between 1925 and 1927. This event constituted the principal Druze contribution to modern Syrian history, and it has been imprinted on the Druze collective memory as an anti-imperialist and nationalist revolt. As Philip Khoury observes: "The great revolt was a popular and widespread anti-imperialist uprising with a pronounced nationalist orientation."[7] Rather than being confined to the political sphere, the Great Revolt epitomized the struggle in post-independence Syria between absent land elites who found positions within the colonial ruling system and new classes of more modest origin.[8]

Although the Great Syrian Revolt determined the future of Jabal al-Druze as part of the Syrian entity, the region retained its autonomous status vis-à-vis the central government in Damascus after Syria gained its independence, the first to subject it to rule in Damascus being Adib al-Shishakli and his military regime (1951-1954). The Ba'ath Party's rise to power in Syria constituted a decisive watershed in the country's internal politics, paving the way for minority groups—particularly the Alawites and Druze—to play a formative role in governing the country and army echelons. Following the Ba'ath *coup d'état* in 1963, the Druze became far more involved in internal Syrian politics, holding high posts in both the army and the Party.

The most prominent of these who came to senior positions in the Ba'ath regime were Salim Hatum, Hammud al-Shufi, Mansur al-Atrash, and Shibli al-Ayssami. The latter was one of the

Communities in the Near East, ed. Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, Barbara Kellber-Heinkele, and Anke Otter-Beaujean (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 234.

[7] Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 205.

[8] Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 105.

founding fathers of the Ba'ath party and reached the highest political position a Syrian-Druze had ever attained, becoming vice president under Amin al-Hafiz in 1965-1966.[9] The Druze officers' attempt to take hold of the reins of power during the 1960s failed, however, effectively putting an end to Druze prominence in the Syrian military and political field. Salim Hatum's abortive coup in September 1966 led to an extensive purge of many Druze from the army and Party alike.[10]

The removal of prominent Druze officers strengthened the position of the Alawite officers entrusted with executing the purge.[11] Although the community's influence began to wane when Hafez al-Assad took power in 1970, tightening his grip over the army and security establishments, it continued to support the regime and its secularist and socio-economic policies. As Hinnebusch notes: "A land-poor impoverished community possessing nothing but its drive for education and careers had everything to gain from a state-dominated economy which would divert the control of opportunities from the private bourgeoisie."[12] The fact that the pre-1963-coup urban Sunni elite had traditionally discriminated against or excluded the Alawis, Druze, and other rural communities was a further incentive for the Druze to support the Ba'ath regime, which quickly began a policy of discrimination against those whom the Druze and other rural minorities perceived to have been their oppressors.[13] It should be noted here that while the state politics in Syria, following the Ba'ath rise to power, have increasingly diminished feudal and traditional families' power, in Israel and Lebanon, the state political structure has actually retained and even stabilized the traditional leadership of the Druze communities in both countries. The collapse of the state authority in Syria exposed this reality and left the religious leadership as the main representative of the community.

[9] Said al-Ghamidi, *Al-Inhiraf al-Aqdi fi Adb al-Hadatha wa Fikriha* (Jaddah: Dar al-Andalus al-Khadra, 2003), 700.
[10] Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 53-58.
[11] *Ibid*., 59-60.
[12] Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London: Routledge, 2001), 63.
[13] Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 139.

The Druze in the shadow of the Syrian uprising

The recent popular uprisings, known as the Arab Spring, undoubtedly constitute one of the most significant events in the modern history of the Arab Middle East, affecting ethnic and religious minorities in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. Like other minority groups in the Arab Middle East, the popular uprising that erupted in Syria in March 2011 confronted the Druze community with new and unprecedented challenges. The uprising, being largely limited to the Sunni majority and led by Islamic activists, created great fears amongst the Druze regarding Syria's future as a secular state, the community feeling itself to be caught between the anvil of anarchy and the hammer of Islamism.

Bashar al-Assad's rise to power had no significant effect on the Druze relationship with the regime. The popular uprising that erupted in Dara'a in southern Syria in March 2011 did not extend to their stronghold in the Hauran. The vast majority of the Druze remained loyal to the regime despite the support some intellectuals and elite figures—Rima Flehan, Muntaha al-Atrash, Jaber al-Shufi, and others—gave to the Syrian uprising. The rebellion leaders found it very difficult to recruit Druze into their ranks, as the vast majority of Druze soldiers in the Syrian army remained loyal to the state.[14] Rather than representing a form of *taqiyya*, as *per* the classical Orientalist school, Druze loyalty to the Ba'ath regime is primarily a function of the political and social structure of Syrian society and how the uprising has developed.

The increasing Islamization of the opposition, the rise of jihadist organizations, and the disintegration of state authority have driven many Druze into the arms of the regime. The community's fear of jihadist Islam was validated in June 2015 when dozens of Druze were

[14] Gary Gambill, "Syrian Druze: Toward Defiant Neutrality," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 4-5: (accessed 17 June 2017).

massacred in a small village close to Idlib in northern Syria by Islamic jihadist militants from al-Nusra's organization. Their loyalty to the regime and status as a heterodox sect on a par with the Ismailis and Alawites—whom the Sunni orthodox regard as infidels—makes their position doubly precarious in light of the emergence of Islamic jihadist challenge.

While the spiritual leadership, known as *Mashyakhat al-'Aql*, remained committed to the regime, Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous—a popular religious leader—established a protest movement against it that also sought to defend Jabal al-Druze from the jihadists. When he was assassinated in September 2015, apparently by agents of the regime, his death failed to trigger any serious shift in the Druze attitude towards the regime. Five years after the eruption of the uprising, which led to a bloody civil war, many Druze concluded that the regime was the least of all evils, and its collapse threatened to lead to the dissolution of the state itself.

The victory of the regime's army, supported by Hezbollah fighters, Shiite pro-Iranian militias, and, naturally, the Russian air force, lifted the threat of the Jihadist organizations from the Druze. Even so, a raid of all of the Druze villages by the Islamic State took place in July 2018, an act that brought to the death of around 260 Druze citizens and the kidnapping of 30 women and children by the organization. The regime's forces did not make any effort to prevent these attacks.

Questions arise on why carrying out these murderous attacks on the Druze villages near the city al-Suwayda by the Islamic State was so logistically accessible. Indeed, the attack took place during a time of a growing Druze refusal to enlist in the Syrian military, which began in 2015. Thus, the regime was punishing the Druze collectively. This year marked a critical juncture in the relationship between the regime and many of the Druze population of *Jabal Druze* due to the defeats that the regime's forces experienced as well as the severe losses among the Druze. The tendency of the Druze at the time was to take a neutral stance in relation to the bloody conflict that

took place in Syria. As mentioned above, the person who led the Druze refusal to enlist in the Syrian military was Wahid al-Bal'us, who founded the local militia *"Rijal al-Karama"* with the goal of protecting the Druze population. Al-Bal'us was killed in an attack that took place in 2015 and was probably carried out by agents of the regime.

The refusal of the Druze to enlist brought a series of punitive measures from the government. By 2018, a trend became apparent in which the regime was neglecting the area and thus leaving it in the hands of opposition elements integrated into the regime during reconciliation agreements signed under the auspices of Russian officers. These elements are responsible for a majority of the kidnappings of Druze citizens. To demonstrate the severity of these events, we can see that in 2020 alone, local media reported 238 kidnappings. These are likely part of the regime's pressure to force the Druze to enlist.

Other than the decline in security and the increase in crime in Jabal Druze, a deterioration of government services in the area is apparent. Like all other populations in Syria, the Druze endure social and economic hardship that makes life unbearable. The poverty, unemployment, and the collapse of education services did not leave out the Druze areas. Moreover, the Corona endemic worsened the state of the Druze in Hauran. The hardships people experience in Hauran are leading to an unprecedented migration of Druze youth, which is taking place, although there is no accurate data on the phenomena at this time.[15] Supporting the Syrian Druze in overcoming this series of hardships is the humanitarian aid sent over by the Israeli Druze, who have been organizing fundraising initiatives for this cause over the past few years. A number of these initiatives have

[15] Yaron Friedman, "The Distress of the Druze in Syria," *News1*, 3 February 2022 (in Hebrew).

been done under the patronage of the spiritual leadership of the Israeli Druze, and Jordan has been serving as an intermediate station for passing aid from Israel to Syria.[16]

The fate of the Idlib Druze was no better. The reality of the rural Druze who stayed there is intolerable as they live in constant fear of acts of aggression by the Jihadist organizations and according to dress and behavior. The dimensions of the healthcare, economic, food, and water crises, among others, are ungraspable. The hold that the Jihadist organizations have on the area brings much Druze migration from there, mainly to the south of Syria.[17] Another concern for the Syrian Druze is Iran and Hezbollah's activity in the south of Syria. Media outlets are reporting on an Iranian attempt to establish a local Druze militia by imitating the model that was used in local Shiite communities – the utilization of central religious symbolism. There is also a recent report of a militia named "*Lbik ya Salman.*"[18] Other reports note that Iran is attempting to take over holy places in Druze areas and to push Shiism in these areas.[19]

In the Syrian part of the Golan Heights, Hezbollah is attempting to enlist the Druze to its ranks as groundwork for future battles against Israel. Consequently, Israel attacked targets in the Druze village Khader and also assassinated the prisoner Samir Kuntar, an assassination that likely took place in 2015 due to his attempts to establish a base for the organization in the Syrian Golan.[20] The weakness of the regime and the abominable conditions of the Druze in the south of Syria allow Iran and Hezbollah to operate among them.

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[16] *Ibid*.
[17] Yaron Friedman, "The forgotten Druze are in Danger: A threatened Community in Northern Syria," *News1*, 29 August 2022 (in Hebrew).
[18] Salman al-Farsi was one of prophet Muhammad's closest friends and is considered a role model for both Shiites and Druze.
[19] *Al-Arabia*, "Iran Tashkal Militia Taafiya Jadida min Druze Surya," (Iran is establishing a new sectorial militia among the Syrian Druze), 24 September 2022.
[20] Jake Khuri, "Syria: Israel Attacked Targets in the Area of the Village Hader in the Quneitra District," *Haaretz*, 11 May 2022; Eyal Zisser, "Operation Good Neighbor- Israel and the Rise and Fall of the Southern Syria Region," *Israel Studies*, Vol. 26.1 (2021), 7.

Syria, as we have known it up to 2011, no longer exists. The war that has plagued Syria for around a decade has wrecked the Syrian state and society and has brought an almost total economic collapse. As in other sectors of the Syrian society, the dimensions of death, destruction, and the disintegration of the social fabric brought on by the war, have not passed over the Druze. During the war, the Druze have come to the realization that their existence as a legitimate minority is an obvious premise to all, which deepened the Syrian tragedy from the Druze perspective, and the end of the war proved just how much their existence is dependent on the same Syrian regime that led them to poverty.

The War in Syria and the Effect on the Druze in Lebanon and Israel

The Syrian uprising has significantly affected the Druze in Lebanon and Israel. While Walid Junblat, the most prominent Lebanese Druze leader, declared his support for the uprising, others—such as Wiam Wahhab and MP Talal Arslan, who identify with Hizballah—kept supporting the regime.[21] The Lebanese-Druze community is first and foremost motivated by the deep fear it shares with its Syrian coreligionists of the jihadist expansion in Greater Syria and the implications of this development for Lebanon. Walid Junblat's support of the Syrian opposition has been consistent and can be explained in the light of two factors—revenge for his father's assassination at the hands of the Syrian intelligence services in 1977 and his strong ties with the Saudi regime and the numbers of Druze living and working in the Arab states in the Persian Gulf. The importance of this economic migration was revealed recently when the Arab states in the Persian Gulf imposed economic sanctions upon Lebanon, expelling migrants associated with Hizballah in retaliation for the latter's military role in Syria.

[21] Gambill, "Syrian Druze," p. 5.

The Druze in Lebanon are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, on the one hand facing the increasing militaristic frenzy of Hizballah and the Shi'ite demographic expansion into Mount Lebanon, and on the other hand, the urgent threat of jihadist expansion into Lebanon from Syria. Serious concerns regarding Hizballah's political orientation and military maturation have led many Lebanese Druze to adopt the Taif agreement and its reinforcement of confessionalism and Sunni hegemony in institutionalized Lebanese politics, emphasizing that their commitment to it derives from fear of a worse alternative—autocratic, theocratic rule in Lebanon either by Hizballah or the jihadist Sunni organizations.

Ironically, a large segment of the Druze community in Israel hopes for the Syrian regime's survival, believing it to be the best guarantee of the safety of their coreligionists in Syria. The Druze spiritual leadership led by Sheikh Muwafaq Tarif and other public personalities have organized solidarity demonstrations on behalf of the Syrian Druze, the monies raised by fundraising campaigns being channeled to Syria through Jordan.[22] The community has also violently protested the treatment of Syrian opposition militia members in Israeli hospitals in the north. While concerned about the fate of their brothers in Syria, they believe their welfare depends on the continuation of the Ba'ath regime, Israel's bitterest enemy.

Over the course of the Syrian conflict, some pundits have expected Israel to intervene in Syria on behalf of the Druze community to help it face the jihadist threat. The Syrian Druze do not appear to wish for an Israeli military intervention on these grounds. However, many in Syria and Israel are convinced that Israel has established a *modus vivendi* with Islamic militant organizations in the Golan Heights. They are also skeptical that Israel would endanger its soldiers on behalf of

[22] Jake Khuri, "The Druze Community raises donations for the Druze in Syria and provokes a debate about aid from Israel," *Haaretz*, 22 February 2022 (in Hebrew).

supporters of the Ba'ath regime. With this in mind, the IDF has prevented the fall of the Druze village Khader to the hands of Islamist rebels; by threatening with military intervention; if the Nusra organization tries to take over the village. This threat should be attributed to the pressure exerted by the Druze lobby in Israel.[23] Nevertheless, the Druze spiritual leadership, headed by Sheikh Muwafaq Tarif, has initiated meetings with high Israeli officials, including the President and the IDF Chief of Staff, and demanded the protection of their brothers in the Syrian Golan. Furthermore, Sheikh Tarif has led intensive diplomatic efforts against Russia to promote humanitarian and political aid to the Syrian Druze. The community is well aware that Israel refrained from military intervention in 1954 when the Druze were under severe military attack by the Shishakli regime—despite the hundreds of civilian causalities and frequent requests and appeals by the Druze leadership in Israel.[24]

While the Druze in Israel have traditionally believed the autonomy of Jabal al-Druze in Syria to be the key to protecting their existence in the Middle East, the recent uprisings have evinced that this stronghold is under serious threat. More importantly, the "Arab Spring" has also revealed the structural weakness of minority groups in the Arab Middle East, the collapse of the state bringing an end to pluralistic Arab society in Syria. Unfortunately, the uprisings have not improved the lives of many ordinary inhabitants in the Middle East—the Druze included.

Conclusion

The "Arab Spring" has brought to the fore several issues, one of the most pressing being the breakdown of the pluralist model of Arab society and the existential threat faced by minority

[23] Amos Harel, "What Israel Wanted to Achieve with Threat of Military Intervention in Syrian-Druze Village," *Haaretz*, 5 November 2017.
[24] Randall Geller, "The Shishakli assault on the Syrian Druze and the Israeli Response, January- February 1954," *Journal of Israeli History*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2015), pp. 205-220.

groups in the Arab Middle East. The popular uprisings, especially in Syria, have revealed the structural weakness and vulnerability of minority groups in the absence of state power and the failure of the social coherence mechanism of Arab society. The lack of regional or international support has reinforced this weakness.

In the wake of a century of modernization and state-building, minority groups now realize their existence is no longer self-evident. The Druze are not exempt from this realization and fear. Since the early twentieth century, the dominant Druze tendency in Syria and Lebanon has been toward integration and adaptation, the Druze in both countries supporting revolutionary processes and political moves toward modernizing and nationalizing the Arab milieu. The socio-religious structure of Druze society was and remained one of the reasons its communal particularism is so easily harnessed to revolutionary and secular-oriented phenomena. This tendency has significantly increased in post-independence Syria and Lebanon. The dominance of these trends demonstrates the anomalous position of the Druze community in Israel. The history of the former since 1956 presents a unique case of the politicizing of Druze communal particularism. The disparity between the Syrian/Lebanese and Israeli Druze in political orientation, behavioral patterns, and identity politics is sufficient to prove that Druze behavior/identity cannot be generalized or simplified.[25]

Since the downfall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the territorial states' order, the Druze have saved no efforts to be an indispensable part of the social and political fabric of their countries. The political developments Syria and Lebanon have witnessed during the last decades brought about the demise of their political role in both countries. Still, the eruption of the popular uprising in Syria and the deterioration into the bloody civil war accompanied by the rise of the

[25] Isabelle Rivoal, "Le Poids de l'histoire: Druzes du Liban, Druzes d'Israel face a l'Etat," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales, 57e Annee* 1 (2002), pp. 67-68.

Jihadist Islamic organization presented the Druze with an unprecedented existential threat. As a minority group, the Druze have realized for the first time in many centuries that their basic existence in the region is no longer an obvious fact.

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