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Tradition and Protest: The Druze Community in Lebanese Politics

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Introduction – The Druze in Lebanon

Presently, approximately a quarter of a million Druze reside in Lebanon.¹ They live mainly in the Shuf mountains and Wadi al-Taym at the foot of Mount Hermon. The Druze in Lebanon are few compared with other communities, as they amount to only 3-4% of the Lebanese population. Due to this, senior political positions were not assigned to the Druze, unlike other communities as stipulated in the Lebanese National Pact. Nevertheless, community members have always been involved in critical political developments and have had essential roles in politics, administration, and security. This article will examine the Druze in Lebanese politics and present the prevailing trends within the community.

The Shuf mountain range in south Lebanon has been the Druze's primary stronghold almost since the doctrine's inception. Over the course of hundreds of years, the Shuf mountain range was identified as the Mountain of the Druze (Arabic: Jabal al-Duruz), over which the

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¹ Salman Fallah, *Ha-Druzim Ba-Mizrach Ha-Tikhon*. Published by the Israeli Department of Defense, 14.

local rulers were Druze lineages under the sovereignties of the Mamluk Sultanate and of the Ottoman Empire. During the early period of Ottoman rule, the Tanukh lineage governed the Druze, followed by the Ma'an lineage, which expanded Druze political influence beyond the Shuf mountain range to other Druze communities in the Galilee, Wadi al-Taym, and the foot of Mount Hermon.

Druze hegemony reached its peak during the reign of Emir Fakhr al-Din II of the Ma'an lineage, who ruled between the years 1590-1634 and extended his hegemony to a territory that at its peak stretched from Aleppo nearly until the Egyptian-influenced areas in the south. This predominance ended when the Ottomans executed Fakhr al-Din II in Istanbul, leading to the Druze's descent. The Druze began to emigrate from Mount Lebanon after the Battle of Ain Dara in 1711; the most significant conflict in the area related to the age-old rivalry of the Qays and Yaman tribes, in which Druze in-fighting took place.

The Druze-Christian minority alliance grew increasingly unsteady over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries due to profound demographic changes. The Maronite population of Mount Lebanon experienced significant growth both comparatively and in absolute terms, surpassing the Druze landowning elites. In a series of harsh conflicts in Mount Lebanon in 1842-1860, currently viewed as a civil war, the Druze defeated the Maronites. Still, they were defeated politically after French intervention forced the weakening of the Druze and brought an increase in Druze emigration from Mount Lebanon (mainly to Hauran, but also to North and South America). The origins of present-day Lebanon's politics are rooted in the Mutastarfiya Accords that established that the Mount Lebanon government would be determined according to sectarian affiliation.

After the establishment of present-day Lebanon, the Druze, under the leadership of Kamal Jumblatt, became a force that challenged the sectarian model that favored the Christians and became the de facto leader of the political left. For this reason, the Druze were in the radical

camp in the Civil War in Lebanon (1975-1991). Together with the PLO and the Shi'a and Sunni forces, they opposed the Christian Phalanges who led the conservative camp.² In 1976, upon request of the Lebanese government, Syrian forces entered Lebanon to form a deterring party to stabilize the country. However, they soon became a policing force in service of the radical camp. The most brutal blow that the Druze and the radical base suffered was the assassination of Kamal Jumblatt in 1976 by pro-Syrians in Lebanon due to his vocal opposition to Syrian forces staying in Lebanon.³ In 1982, Israel invaded southern Lebanon and joined the Phalange's allies. Since Israel's objective was to eliminate the PLO, the IDF raided the Druze-Christian stronghold in the Shuf mountain range on its way to the invasion of Beirut.

Following the banishing of the PLO from Beirut, the IDF retreated from the Shuf mountain range in September 1983, leading to a governmental vacuum. The two rival forces, the Christian Phalanges that invaded the Druze villages with the help of the IDF and with Israeli support, and the Druze forces, struggled to take control of the Shuf mountains. As a result of the fighting, the Druze succeeded in overpowering the Christians. The battles between the Druze and the Christians in the Lebanon mountains included extreme massacre and destruction executed by the Phalanges in the 'Abai and Kafr Matta villages.⁴

At the end of the battles in 1984, the Christians were expelled from the Shuf mountains; sixty villages were destroyed; according to differing estimates, by the end of the battles, as many as 160 thousand Christians were expelled from the Shuf. The grand Druze leader, Sheikh Abu-Shakra, was quoted stating that the Christians took an ultimate blow and would never

² Itamar Rabinovich and Hannah Zamir, *Milkhama u-Mashber b-Levanon 1975-1981*. (Tel Aviv: ha-Kibbutz ha-Meukhad, 1982), 11.

³ More on Lebanon-Syria relations during the Civil War: Karim Bakradouni, *Hashalom ha-Ayud, Nesi'uto shel Alias Sarkhis (1976-1982)* published by Ma'arakhot, 1986, (trans.) Avital Inbar, pp. 169-178.

⁴ Al-Modon Facebook page, "Israel opens "the mountain war" file", <https://shorturl.at/aoBH6>.

return to “the mountain of the Druze,” purposely using the term that was commonly used up to the nineteenth century.⁵

The Lebanese Civil War ended in 1991 with the Taif Agreement. While the agreement signified the political weakening of the Christian minority in Lebanon, the radical camp kept holding on to its sweeping aspirations. Lebanon remained a sectorial state, and the Druze, being a small community, continued to have limited influence in state politics, seeing as the seats in parliament were divided in favor of the bigger communities and key positions in the state remained in the hands of members of the Maronite, Sunni, and Shi‘a communities.

The Central Forces in Druze Politics in Lebanon

Despite the historical failure to change the Lebanese sectarian model that was inherently disadvantageous to the Druze, the political involvement of the Druze is significant, and within it, like the rest of Lebanese politics, family rule politics dominates. Both main political parties: the Progressive Socialist Party and the Lebanese Democratic Party, are controlled by two long-standing families from the elite – Jumblatt and Arslan. The political and ideological orientations of these two parties, as well as the coalitions they form, hold significant importance. Additionally, other factors and political alliances influence political activity on the ground of the two main blocks.

Overall, it is apparent that the long-standing forces, the well-established families of the elite, remain in the center of the Druze political sphere. This phenomenon is like that in the rest of Lebanon, apart from the Shi‘a, who are led by the Hezbollah and Amal parties. Notably, young politicians emerged alongside this trend, a group comprised of protest leaders in

⁵ Lara Moenes Mikhail, *The Druze-Marionite sectarian clash in the War of the Mountain (1983-1984): The resilience of mid-nineteenth century Maronite Druze enmities in the Druze collective memory and its impact on the dynamics and consequences of Harb Al Jabal*, dissertation at the American University in Cairo, January 2, 2019, P-26-27.

Lebanon who subsequently were elected to parliament. Some have even successfully defeated representatives of the established political forces.

The Jumblatt Family – The Progressive Socialist Party

The most prominent Druze force in Lebanon is the Jumblatt camp and the Progressive Socialist Party it controls. The origin of the Jumblatt family is in the Kurdish Jumblatt tribe that emerged in the south of Aleppo. The influence of the family in Mount Lebanon began to increase in the eighteenth century under the rule of the Shihab emirate. During the nineteenth century, the Jumblatt family played a crucial role in integrating the Druze community into Ottoman administration and politics while actively participating in emerging Arab nationalism.

One of the most notable politicians of the family is Kamal Jumblatt, who founded the Progressive Socialist Party and led the camp that challenged the sectorial model in Lebanon that favored the Maronites and marginalized the Druze. He led the radical party in the Civil War until his assassination on behalf of Assad's regime. His son, Waleed, has carried on his path and led the party until his recent retirement and probably will pass his role to his son Taymur.⁶

The Arslan Family – The Lebanese Democratic Party

The second leading Druze force in Lebanon is the long-established Arslan family that resides in Choueifat within the Shuf mountains. During the Ottoman period, the Arslans were granted lands in the Shuf and even expanded to the area's southeast. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman administration began to grant emirs from the Arslan family official roles. The most senior politician of the family in the twentieth century was Emir Shakib Arslan, who was involved in politics, mainly in the pan-Arab movement in the Middle East. In 1902 he was

⁶ Qayis Ghoush, *Kamal Jumblatt Wa-al-Yoga wa-al-Hikama al-Hindyia*, Jrus Press, Tripoly Lebanon, 1995; Mahsan Deloul, *al-Tariq ila al-Watn*, ruba qurn birafiqa Kamal Jumblatt, al-Dar al-Arabyia lil-Ulum Nashirun, 2010.

appointed as governor of Choueifat, served as the representative of the Hauran district in the Ottoman House of Representatives in 1909, was involved in the Libyan War of Independence against Italy, and served as the Egyptian envoy of the Red Cross in Istanbul. In 1922, he was chosen as a delegation member to represent Palestine in the League of Nations, and in 1926 he headed a commission that represented the Palestinian issue at the Vatican.⁷ The current Arslan family representative in Lebanese politics is Talal Arslan, appointed in 1991 to replace his late father in parliament and has since been elected in 1992, 1996, and 2000. He founded the Lebanese Democratic Party in 2001 and has been leading it to this day.

The parliamentary elections are the primary arena where the Druze political involvement can be examined. Lebanon is a state of many minorities, and its political system reflects and perpetuates the minority politics in the state. The elections to the Lebanese parliament are regional (based on voting constituencies), and in each constituency, there is a relative composition based on sectorial distribution. The constituencies and the number of parliamentary delegates have changed with time in accordance with population growth. However, a dramatic change in the composition of sectarian representation occurred following the signing of the Taif Agreement in 1989, which marked the end of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1991).

The Druze politics after the Taif Agreement

The Taif Agreement, signed in Saudi Arabia and resulting from collaboration between Syria and Saudi Arabia, redefined the composition of sectarian representation in parliament based on different constituencies. Out of the 128 delegates elected from fifteen principal constituencies, eight Druze delegates are elected to the Lebanese parliament from six constituencies. The 2017

⁷ Najib al-Ba'ini, *Amir al-Bian Shakib Arslan Wa-Mu'atsratihi*, al-Dar al-Jama'ia, 1992. Najib al-Ba'ini, *Amir al-Bian Shakib Arslan ila Kbar Hajal al-'atsar*, Dar al-Manhal 1998.

Election Law, which reflects the Taif agreement, determines the representation of the Druze from the following constituencies:

1. The second constituency of **Beirut** elects one Druze representative.
2. The third constituency of **South Lebanon** (Hasabaya and Marj 'Ayyun) elects one Druze representative.
3. The second constituency of **Baqaa** (Reshaya western Baqqa) elects one Druze representative.
4. The third constituency of **Mount Lebanon** (Choueifat) elects one Druze representative.
5. The fourth constituency of **Mount Lebanon** (The Shuf Range and Aley) elects four Druze representatives.

Druze – Shi'a Relations in Present-Day Lebanese Politics

Druze attitude towards the increasing power of the Shi'a community and their organizations, Hezbollah and Amal, has varied over time, primarily based on the perceived threat to the Druze. During the Civil War, Jumblatt's party aligned with Nabih Beri's Amal and the Palestinians on the left side as they fought against the Phalanges and the American-Saudi plan to maintain the existing order. Waleed Jumblatt founded the Lebanese National Movement together with Nabih Berri and Suleiman Frangieh to oppose the May 17th agreement between Amine Gemayel and the Israeli government.

Since 1992, when Hezbollah started participating in the elections, the Druze, under the leadership of Waleed Jumblatt, reassessed their relationship with the Shi'a community and its political representation through Amal and Hezbollah. In 2005, following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri and the onset of the 'Cedar Revolution,' Waleed Jumblatt aligned with the March 14th bloc, which aimed to eliminate Syrian interference in Lebanon,

while Hezbollah participated in the March 8th bloc that supported Syria's continued presence in Lebanon.

The most intense conflict between the forces associated with Jumblatt's party and Hezbollah occurred in 2008 when Hezbollah fighters entered the Aley municipality to safeguard the organization's communication system. The Druze militia strongly resisted Hezbollah, resulting in a conflict that led to 49 deaths and 140 injuries. The shooting ceased only when Talal Arslan interfered.⁸

Currently, the Shia and Jumblatt parties cooperate on specific issues within the framework of political parties (including the matter of the Syrian Golani village Khadr, involving Wiam Wahhab).⁹ However, significant suspicion remains regarding Hezbollah's efforts to infiltrate distinct Druze regions like the Shuf mountains or Hasbaiyya.¹⁰

The 2022 Elections

On May 15th, 2022, parliamentary elections were perceived as momentous in Lebanon. The elections took place three years into a growing economic crisis that was accompanied by a social-political crisis and raging demonstrations that began in October 2019 and nearly paralyzed the state.

Withal, the defining event that likely influenced the 2022 elections was the explosion in the Beirut port on August 8th, 2020, that resulting the death of 190 citizens, injuring over 4,000 people, causing significant damage to the Beirut commercial center, and led to the resignation of the prime minister Hassan Diab. The investigation into the cause of the destructive explosion continues under tremendous pressure from the Hezbollah organization

⁸ Reuters, "A war between Hizballah and the Druze in the Lebanese mountain", May 11, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/oegtp-leban-clashes-at2-idARAOLR15454820080511>

⁹ Al Basma TV, "Wiam Wahhab is visiting Al Hader village", June 26, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cp6u-xFrLMw>

¹⁰ Araa Media, "The Druze confronted Hizballah and its allays", August 7, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lK7G18CjXYU>

and the Lebanese public sentiment that the organization is hiding things related to its people's involvement in the event.

The significance of the 2022 elections is that the elected delegates will choose the next Lebanese president. As of December 2022, despite six sessions on the matter, the parliament has failed to reach a consensus on the president's election.

The 2022 election¹¹ results revealed the following findings:

1. A decrease in the number of delegates representing the Hezbollah-Amal bloc resulted in a decline in the bloc's parliamentary power.
2. A rise in the number of independent representatives and representatives of parties calling for change as a result of the protests.
3. An increase in the influence of the Christian Lebanese Forces party, led by Samir Geagea, served as a counterweight to Hezbollah and came at the expense of Hezbollah and Amal representatives.
4. An increase in the power of the 'Free Patriotic Movement,' the Christian allies of Hezbollah, led by Gebran Bassil.

The Druze in the 2022 Elections

Over the years, Druze representation in the Lebanese parliament was reserved for members of the esteemed Druze families according to distribution between two of the primary affiliations in the community – the Jumblatt family and the Progressive Socialist Party led by Waleed, and the Arslan family, recently through the Lebanese Democratic Party led by Talal Arslan.

In the recent elections, following the protests that accused veteran politicians of corruption and nepotism, it is evident that the traditionally conservative Druze community has also elected fresh faces – young intellectuals involved in the protests. According to the election

¹¹ *Al Nashra*, The 2022b Election site, <https://www.elnashra.com/elections/2022/>

results, six members of the old guard have been elected – five affiliated with the Jumblatts (Taymur Jumblatt, Marwan Hamadeh, Akram Chehayeb, Wail Abu-Faur, and Hadi abu al-Hassan), and one representative of the Arslans (Faisal al-Sayer). The fresh faces are the two representatives of the protests (Firas Hamdan and Mark Daou). Including two protest representatives in parliament and women running as candidates for Druze seats could signify the onset of change in traditional Druze representation and contribute to broader attempts to reform Lebanese politics.

Two representatives of the protests were elected: Firas Hamdan as the representative of Hasabaya, and Mark Daou, who ran in the elections of the fourth constituency of Mount Lebanon, the community's stronghold. Firas Hamdan defeated Marwan Kheir al-Din, the experienced Druze representative who ran as part of the Amal-Hezbollah party. Hamdan was a protest political branch member, the "Together for Change" party. Hamdan is 36 years old, has a Master of Laws degree from the law school of Beirut, has been engaged in politics from a young age, and offered legal aid to protesters within the Professional Association of Lawyers framework.

Another representative among the "fresh faces" is Mark Daou, an alumnus and sociology lecturer at the American University of Beirut, who has been actively involved in politics since his university days. He is possibly the most prominent representative of the new politicians that the protests in Lebanon produced. By his being elected, the seasoned Talal Arslan was bypassed.¹² In the second constituency of Baqaa, the second constituency of Beirut, and the third constituency of Mount Lebanon, members of the old guard were elected: Wael Abu Faour (from the Arslan branch) and Hadi Abual-Hassan. Currently, Hadi Abu al-Hassan also serves as secretary of parliament. Furthermore, in the second constituency of Beirut, Druze

¹² Al Modon Facebook page, "The face of the election Change and Challenge, The candidate Mark Dhou", <https://m.facebook.com/almodononline/posts/3092291097702912/>

women who actively participated in the protests presented their candidacies for parliament—Rima abu-Shakra and, in another party, Zaina Kamal Munzir.

The main issue that the parliament elected in 2022 must deal with is electing the next president instead of Michel ‘Aoun, whose term ended in the autumn of 2022. In the past, when Hezbollah and Amal dominated the parliament, the choice of a president their bloc approved of was guaranteed. However, the current weakening of the previously glaring Shi‘a majority, alongside the strengthening of the Phalanges and the independents in parliament, threw parliament into a turbulent era in which it cannot decide on the next president. This development brought Lebanon to a dangerous standstill, adding to the current economic crisis that stemmed from the Covid-19 pandemic and the explosion in the Port of Beirut. The Druze community, particularly the Jumblatt leadership, plays a significant role in potential compromises between the opposing blocs in parliament by presenting candidates that allow for settlement and encourage the blocs to consider such candidates.

Conclusion

The structure of Lebanese politics is an extension of the sectarian that has been a recurring theme from the Mutasarrifiya Accords of 1861, through the national pact and the state’s constitution, all the way to the Taif Agreement that marked the end of the civil war in 1991. The Lebanese Druze community’s politics is a case study of Lebanese politics. An analysis of the recent elections’ outcome shows that while the old guard remains the central power in Lebanese politics, the 2019 protests’ effects are apparent, and alumni of said protests have entered parliament. Druze representatives in parliament can be categorized into two main groups: party veterans and protest participants. The former represents the established political entities and appears to be favored by the majority of the Druze, as evidenced by six representatives from traditional political blocs, compared to only two from the protest leaders.

While predicting how Lebanon will overcome the current crisis is challenging, it is evident that the Druze community will continue to be a significant force within Lebanon. It could be crucial to the country's recovery by facilitating cooperation among diverse communities and engaging with external powers. The political landscape in Lebanon reflects a decline in the Druze community's influence, with their political role now primarily focused on safeguarding their own political and social interests rather than actively pursuing political change within the country.

The presidential crisis in Lebanon is currently regarded as the country's worst political crisis. After seven parliamentary sessions and dozens of meetings between and within the blocs on the subject with the participation of representatives from the entire Middle East and outside of it, a resolution that would bring to the appointment of a president has yet to arise. Currently, Jumblatt is attempting to propose yet another compromise candidate – the Lebanese military Chief of Staff Joseph 'Aoun – a figure who has managed so far to gain the public image of a man of deeds without antagonizing the Hezbollah-Amal bloc.¹³

The Druze community in Lebanon is integral to Lebanese society, and as demonstrated in this article, the crises and protests in Lebanon influence it as well. During the previous crises, community members have proven their ability to mediate between the forces in Lebanon in the way Talal Arslan overcame the crisis with Hezbollah in the airport and Mount Lebanon. Predicting the community's role in current Lebanese politics is challenging; however, the Druze community is an integral part of Lebanese society and is exposed to crises in the country and popular protests. It must be interesting to perceive its handling of the new challenges in the country and the region.

The opinions expressed in MDC publications are the authors' alone.

¹³ *Al Nashra*, The 2022 Election site, <https://www.elnashra.com/news/show/1609449>

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