

Bayan بیان ביאן

The Arabs in Israel הערבים בישראל

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From the Editor's Desk

The current issue of **Bayan** contains an essay by **Dr. Omri Eilat**, which deals with the characteristics of the protest in the Druze communities in the north of the country that erupted following the Israeli government's intention to establish a turbine farm in the Golan at the beginning of this summer. The essay analyzes the origins of the protest and its possible effects on the relationship between the Druze community and state authorities.

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Omri Eilat* / The Druze Protest in the Summer of 2023

The immediate reason for the Druze protest is the establishment of a wind turbine farm on the land of a deserted Druze village in the Golan Heights; however, the more fundamental reasons are the Nation State Law and the longstanding opposition in Druze society to the enforcement of the Kamenitz Law.

The only flag that was flown in the current protest was that of the Druze community. This reflects the separation of the Druze in the Galilee and the Golan Heights from regional politics and the community's convergence within itself. The leaders of the community expect that the government of Israel will adopt a law to protect the Druze's religious rights and their status in the state.

The Druze are primarily concerned about the enforcement of the Kamenitz Law and the deepening housing crisis in their towns. The crisis is primarily affecting the younger generation: getting married without owning a home is not accepted practice in Druze society and the alternative of moving to Jewish or mixed Jewish-Arab cities threatens Druze identity in the long term.

The consent of the Druze to serve in the army and to risk their lives in combat units for the sake of the country are historical precedents in the Middle East. The Israeli public takes their military service for granted which is viewed by the Druze as highly disrespectful.

The leadership of the Druze community and its powerful elements do not question the relationship with the state; however, the current situation is interpreted by them as a violation of the foundations of the family and the community.

Introduction

The protest by the Druze community began on June 20, 2023, about a week before the Feast of the Sacrifice (Eid el-Adha). It marked the peak of the ongoing violation of the alliance between the Druze community and the State of Israel since its establishment.¹ This is reflected in the fundamental changes in the attitude of Israel's government to the Druze villages and the Druze community in general in recent years, as well as the major changes that have taken place within the Druze community itself. The ostensible reason for the protest was the establishment of a wind turbine farm

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I wish to thank Adv. Mahmoud Shanan, the Director General of the Druze Heritage Center, and the head of the research institute at the same center, Dr. Yusri Khaizran, for their eye-opening comments on the article, and for supporting in the academic procedures related to the study of the Druze community in Israel.

¹ Yoav Gelber, "The beginning of the Jewish-Druze alliance (1930–48)", *Cathedra* 60 (1991), pp. 178–181. [Hebrew].

not far from the Druze village of Mas'ada in the Golan Heights, on the site of the abandoned Druze village of Sehita; however, this was only a pretext.² The construction of the turbines will of course have a negative impact on the village of Mas'ada but the main reasons for the protest are the enforcement of the 2017 Kamenitz Law, the planning and construction crisis experienced by the Druze villages, and the attempts by the government of Israel to adopt regulations that will enforce the Nation State Law passed in 2018. These processes are interpreted by the Druze as a serious threat to their identity and in their eyes even violate the unwritten contract that is the basis of the alliance between them and the State of Israel.

The protest is primarily a pragmatic one and encompasses the entire community, even though it makes use of harsh rhetoric and is couched in terms of an approaching disaster. After a prolonged buildup of pressure, the religious leadership is now officially leading the protest; alongside it are the local governments, and together they have won the support of senior retired military officers, Druze journalists, and the community's business elite.

Characterizing the protest

The term "a just protest" is often used to describe the protest, which is a rare demonstration of unity across the generations, the political factions, the familial and religious factions and different civil statuses (the Golan as opposed to the Galilee and the Carmel). The use of this term is the result of a teaching to watch over one's brother (*Hifz al-Ikhwan*), which is one of the seven commandments that are incumbent on the Druze. According to this doctrine, helping other Druze who are involved in a just struggle against the state is a religious duty. Helping one's brother, like the other parts of the Druze doctrine, applies to all Druze and not just those who choose a religious lifestyle (the '*Uqal*').³

This protest is a manifestation in the public domain of the basic characteristics of the Druze community's self-image, which became more focused following the passage of the Nation State Law. Unlike in the demonstrations against the Nation State Law, there were no Israeli flags in the demonstrations during the Summer of 2023. Nonetheless, the Israeli narrative is not being displaced by a different national narrative. This can be seen in the fact that there were no Syrian flags at the demonstrations in the Golan, nor were there any Palestinian flags in any of the demonstrations or any other Arab flag. The only flag that was flown was the Druze flag, which is an indication of the trend toward separation of the Druze society from regional politics and its convergence within itself. Although the civil war in Syria had some impact on the Arab street in Israel, it had the most impact on the Druze in the Golan, who are becoming more distant from Syria and closer to Israel, at least on the civil level, even if not on the ideological level.⁴

² *Ynet*, "The turbines? They are only an excuse: From the Nation State Law to the cancelation of fines. This is the list of Druze demands", June 22, 2023. [Hebrew].

³ Shadi Halabi, Gabriel Ben-Dor, Peter Silfen & Anan Wahabi, "Principle of Preserving the Brethren among Druze Intergenerational Groups in Israel," *Israel Affairs* (forthcoming, October 2023).

⁴ Fadi Amon, "In the shadow of the turbine crisis: another jump toward accepting citizenship for the Druze in the Golan", *Shomrim*, June 26, 2023. [Hebrew]

The use of violence during the protest was limited to confrontations with the police in the Golan, while in the Galilee and the Carmel, the protests were limited to disruption of daily routine, blocking of roads and burning of tires. These images do not exceed the bounds of protest in Israel as of 2023. Overall, the protest was accepted with relative tolerance by the residents of the North, who did not feel threatened. A serious incident in which a Jewish youth from Nahariya was attacked in Yanuh by Druze youths was immediately condemned by the community and the Yanuh municipality. They quickly distanced themselves from the attackers who were arrested by the police.⁵ Anger was specifically directed at Minister Itamar Ben Gvir—which is itself unprecedented—who after a meeting with Sheikh Mowafak Tarif announced on the steps of the sheikh's home that there would be no compromise on the work schedule prior to the Feast of Sacrifice. This behavior was perceived as disrespect for the sheikh and the community as a whole and led to greater cohesion around the spiritual leadership, which in the end attained what it sought—even if only temporarily—in direct negotiations with the Prime Minister.⁶

The demands of the protest leaders are very clear: immediate stoppage of the development of the wind turbine power station on the Golan and the freezing of all fines and demolition orders for building without a permit on the land of the Druze villages for five years, during which time the zoning plan for all of the villages will be approved. This demand is essentially identical to the law proposed by MK Ghadir Kamal Mareeh of the Yesh Atid party in 2020, while that party was in the Opposition.⁷ The demand to cancel the Nation State Law is primarily symbolic and does not reflect a realistic expectation under the current Israeli government. In contrast, the Druze expect that their demand for legislation that will protect the community's religious rights will be met and that expectation reflects the fear of future threats to the status of the community in Israel. These demands are at the core of the alliance between the Druze and the State of Israel, which primarily involves an independent status for the Druze community in the domain of religious law and military service.

Sources of the protest

The Druze protest surprised the government of Israel for two main reasons. In the short term, the rightwing government did not correctly appraise the intensity of Druze frustration with government policy. As a result of the sharp drop in the percentage of Druze votes going to rightwing parties following the passage of the Nation State Law, the Druze were courted less than in the past due to the small number of votes they awarded to the rightwing bloc in any case.⁸ With respect to the long term, there is a basic lack of understanding with regard to the roots of the alliance between the Druze

⁵ *Ynet*, "The elders of the Druze community criticized the attack on the youth by masked individuals: We did not educate them in that way", June 29, 2023. [Hebrew]

⁶ *Haaretz*, "Ben Gvir: The work on the Golan will be stopped only during the holiday. The leaders of the Druze community: it will be stopped immediately", June 22, 2023. [Hebrew]

⁷ *Haknesset*, "Rejected on pre-reading: Modification of part of the Planning and Building Law (the Kamenitz Law) so that it does not apply to minority settlements", November 11, 2023. [Hebrew]

⁸ Mahmud Shanan and Omri Eilat, "[From a community to a society: Trends in Druze voting patterns in the Knesset elections, 1996–2020](#)", *Bayan: The Arabs in Israel*, Moshe Dayan Center (March 2021), pp. 7–12.

and the State on both sides of the political map in Israel. Therefore, and despite the basic sympathy of Jewish voters toward the Druze and despite the inclusion of many Druze candidates in the party lists over the years, the feeling in Druze society is that its main problems are being ignored.⁹

The increasing dissatisfaction among the Druze in Israel with respect to their low position in the national order of priorities is the result of a gradual process that has taken place over a generation. It is primarily reflected in a continuous decline in the rate of voter participation in the general elections – from about 80 percent in the 1996 and 1999 elections (which exceeded the overall rate) to about 50 percent in the 2021 and 2022 elections.¹⁰ Moreover, the passage of the Nation State Law in 2018 represents a turning point in the relations between the Druze and the State. Almost the entire Druze elite in Israel openly supports the Jewish identity of the State of Israel. The change that the Druze perceived in the Nation State Law is the definition of the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people exclusively, without any explicit commitment to civil equality.¹¹ In other words, the law supports the claim made even prior to that, which states that the Druze in Israel are equal with respect to obligations but not with respect to rights. At the heart of these obligations is, of course, service in the IDF, while the aspiration to equality of rights is reflected in the demand for both equality in the allocation of resources and the commitment of the state to protect the minority rights of the Druze.

The most concerning change for the Druze is the enforcement of the Kamenitz Law in their villages. The imposition of fines of hundreds of thousands of shekels and the issuing of demolition orders in administrative enforcement to accelerate proceedings are untenable for Druze families. In their eyes, building on private agricultural land that is not designated for residential construction does not call for punishment of this sort. The two villages where this problem is the most serious is Kisra in the central Galilee and 'Isfiya in the Carmel. The shortage of new allocated land and the delay in zoning plan approval, which are partly the fault of the local Druze authorities, have led to a crisis among the younger generation, in that they are forced to defer marriage to a later age. Getting married without ownership of a home is not an accepted practice in Druze society, and the alternative of moving to close-by cities, such as Haifa, Nahariya, Maalot, and Kfar Veradim, is not just difficult economically but is also a historical precedent that endangers Druze identity. The Druze are one of the only communities in the Middle East that lives almost entirely outside of urban centers.¹² Indeed, urbanization threatens their unique identity given the change in lifestyle when a couple is distant from their extended family and even more so because of the threat of intermarriage in the future.

Israel's independence created a historic precedent for the Druze. For the first time, the Druze are living in a non-Muslim, non-Arab country. The Jewish majority in the State of Israel also has characteristics of a minority, which is reflected in, among other

⁹ Amal Jamal, "Descriptive Over-Representation, Cliental Accountability, and Minority Politics: The Case of the Druze in Israel," *Democratization* 29/8 (2022), pp. 1483–1484.

¹⁰ Shanan and Eilat (see footnote 8), p. 9.

¹¹ *Haknesset*, "Basic Law: Israel – A nation state of the Jewish People", July 26, 2018. [Hebrew]

¹² Yusri Khaizran, "[The Syrian Popular Uprising and the Decline of the Druze Political Role](#)", *Al-Durziyya*, Moshe Dayan Center (November 2022), p. 8.

things, its low incidence of intermarriage. This situation has, for the first time, released the Druze from the burden of *Taqiyya*, a term that means caution and the concealment of identity that derives from the need to coexist with an orthodox Muslim majority. There is evidence of the disappearance of Druze settlement in the Galilee, whether through displacement by Muslims or by the swallowing up of Druze families within orthodox Muslim communities. A prime example is the shrinking of the living space of the Druze in the Galilee and Carmel, from close to 70 villages in the 17th century to 18 prior to the Partition Plan in November 1947 (to which four Druze villages in the Golan Heights were added after the Six Day War in 1967). The lack of an option to remain in their villages due to construction problems recreates the problems which the Druze hoped to leave behind when they were freed from the burden of *Taqiyya*.¹³

The conscription of the Druze in the State of Israel is also a historical precedent, in that the Druze have consented to it. The attempt to apply the draft to the Druze in the Ottoman Empire was the main reason for their rebellions. Today as well, the attempt by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to impose conscription on the Druze in the Huran constitutes the core of the dispute between the Syrian regime and the Druze and it is extracting a heavy price.¹⁴ The fact that the Israeli public takes for granted the military service of the Druze from a historical point of view and the fact that it ignores the willingness of young Druze to put themselves at great risk by serving in combat units is viewed by Druze society as a slap in the face.

Conclusion

The main emotion that arises from the Druze protest is one of betrayal. The interests of the Druze community rank low in the national order of priorities in any case; however, the collateral damage to the familial fabric of Druze society due to the draconian building laws and the potential threat to their religious status are not acceptable to the Druze. These emotions have not yet generated a rebellion among the Druze in Israel, nor are the Druze moving toward a formal cancelation of the alliance. Moreover, there has not been any organized refusal to serve in the military among Druze youth, and many Druze men continue to serve in the security forces. Nonetheless, the erosion of the Druze motivation over time and their distancing from the State will, in the future, threaten their willingness to serve. The young Druze who blocked the intersections of Highway 85 and Highway 70 are those same cohorts who maintained order at those locations as organized civilians during the Guardian of the Walls events in May 2021. It is doubtful whether that same goodwill will continue in the current situation. Opposite the mass protests publicly led by Sheikh Mowafak Tarif, who called for a relatively moderate line that does not threaten to upend relations with the State of Israel, there is an uncompromising demand to resolve the building crisis. The local councils in the Druze villages will have to do their share to resolve the land zoning in their jurisdictions; however, the Druze do not intend to compromise on the issue of fines and demolition orders on private land. For them,

¹³ Salman Falah, "The Druze in the Middle East: Historical Background", in Salman Falah (ed.), *The Druze in the Middle East* (Tel Aviv: The Ministry of Defense – publishing, 2000), pp 65–66. [Hebrew]

¹⁴ Khaizran (see footnote 12), p. 5; Kais Firro, *A History of the Druzes* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 138–155.

agreeing to these measures means placing the relationship with the state above loyalty to their children's future.