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A SPECIAL REPORT

THE DRUZE MINORITY IN ISRAEL IN THE MID-1990S

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A Minority Within a Minority

The Druze are a minority within a minority in the State of Israel, an Arab-speaking community loyal to the state that has suffered hundreds of casualties in its defense, and whose men serve today in high-ranking and sensitive positions within the Israeli military and security forces. Their willingness to accept the burdens of compulsory military service have led to parallel demands for equal rights within Israeli society.

In their struggle to obtain those rights, various problems and conflicts have surfaced from within the community. Some have called for identification with Arab nationalism, partly in reaction to a perception that the Israeli government takes them for granted and now prefers to court the Palestinian Arabs. Most, however, seek full integration within the Jewish state.

The Druze in Israel comprise approximately 85,000 people, about 1.8 percent of the total Israeli population and about 10 percent of the country's minority population. The Druze are centered in Israel, Syria and Lebanon, but also have sizeable expatriate communities in France and the United States, centered in Detroit. They are an extremely tight-knit community; no one leaves and no one joins.

An Offshoot of Islam

The Druze religion and community were born in eleventh century Egypt where a local ruler founded the new sect which was considered an offshoot of Islam. One of its first prophets was al-Darazi and from him came the name "Druze."

From the very beginning, the Druze were subject to intense persecution, causing them to leave Egypt and settle in southern Lebanon, in the area where present-day Lebanon, Syria, and Israel meet. Many later moved north, where the present-day Mount Lebanon came to be called the Druze Mountain, and to the Houran region in southwestern Syria, where the Druze arrived in the eighteenth century due to fratricidal civil wars in Lebanon.

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The Druze religion is a monotheistic faith which emphasizes inner and hidden layers of meaning, in the spirit of the neo-Platonic philosophy that was very influential at the time when the Druze religion was born. The Druze believe in the reincarnation and transmigration of souls, and are great believers in secrecy. Their religion, like that of the Shi'ite Muslims, allows for *takiya*, to pretend to be what one is not in order to escape persecution. The Druze religion is based on secret documents, and Druze who are not religious are referred to as the ignorant ones (*juhhal*) in order to emphasize the fact that they are not allowed access to the secret holy books of the sect. On the other hand, the religious ones (who may be identified by their shaven heads and moustaches) are allowed such access and are called the initiated or knowledgeable ones (*ukkal*). However, knowledge is not everything, and the religious ones must also prove their piety and moral character before they are even allowed access to the secrets of religion. Indeed, the Druze religion emphasizes moral and ethical virtues quite heavily.

The Druze have never exceeded a few hundred thousand in either Lebanon or Syria, yet the endless civil wars in Lebanon have made the Druze very influential in that country. There they live in territorial contiguity in the mountains and are known for their general willingness to fight. Their well-developed and proven military skills stem from the need to defend themselves against endless persecution by their neighbors as well as by the authorities. These skills have allowed many Druze to reach high military rank, including two who became Chief of Staff in Syria before the military establishment there came to be dominated almost totally by the Alawis, who purged much of the Druze officer corps in Syria after the Six-Day War.

A Special Relationship with the Jews

Druze have lived in Eretz Israel since the sixteenth century, apparently coming from Lebanon. They live in two large and well-established villages on Mount Carmel, as well as three blocs totalling sixteen villages in Western, Central and Upper Galilee. Some of these villages are purely Druze, some are mixed with Christians, and others are mixed with Christians and Muslims. However, in no case do Druze live together with Muslims only, due to historical animosities and the unwillingness of the ruling Muslims in the past to recognize the Druze as an independent community in their own right. In Israel, too, the Druze live in the mountains due to historical concerns for security. They have subsisted on a rural economy, but land in the mountains is scarce, making it difficult to support their large families, a problem that has become especially acute as they seek to acquire the modern amenities of life.

Since the cash deriving from agriculture proved to be insufficient, the next marketable item in the community is the military skills of its men who serve in very large numbers in the army, police, border police, and prison service. Today the number of Druze army officers has increased substantially and a Druze has reached the rank of brigadier-general. Practically all military units that used to be closed to the Druze for security reasons are now open to them, and some serve in very sensitive posts. Yet many officers find discharge from military service traumatic because the civilian economy and society in the Druze sector do not offer any occupations commensurate with their record.

While the tendency of the Druze to seek military careers is partly a result of economic necessity, it also has to do with traditional pride in military skills and accomplishments, as well as the special relationship between the Druze and Jews in the Land of Israel. This relationship has been in evidence on a modest scale for centuries, when Jews in the region often found refuge among the Druze when attacked by others. The relationship strengthened during the 1936-1939 disturbances when Jews in danger such as Abba Khoushi, later Mayor of Haifa and then an important member of the Haganah, found refuge among the Druze of Mount Carmel.

During Israel's War of Independence, the Druze showed little enthusiasm for fighting the Jews. Although there was a Druze battalion in the Arab armies in the Galilee, it disintegrated after the battle at Ramat Yochanan in April 1948. From then on, the Druze clearly understood that the State of Israel would be a fact of life, and it has always been their custom to accept the facts of life and deal with them in a practical and flexible manner. Although the Druze look primarily after their own interests, they also encourage loyalty to the state where they live and for that reason are often considered a factor of stability in the various countries in which they live. In this respect, the Druze have never demanded a nation-state of their own, and accept the status of a minority in other nation-states.

In the mid-1950s, when Israel was under heavy Arab pressure, the Druze leadership appealed to David Ben-Gurion, then Minister of Defense, to draft Druze men into the Israeli Army on the same basis as Jews, which was possible under the State Defense Act of

1949. That Act called for drafting all individuals in the country, but also allowed the Minister to exempt individuals as well as entire groups. The Druze asked that their exemption be cancelled. There is still considerable controversy among Druze as to why this appeal was made, to what extent it really represented what the members of the community wanted, and whether there might have been some kind of manipulation on the part of the Jewish leadership. Yet the change was made, and the draft of the Druze has been in existence and has been reasonably well accepted throughout the decades. There are not a great many exemptions made on religious and conscientious grounds, and not much more than among the Jews. However, as the equal duties part of the social contract was indeed achieved, so came demands for equal rights as well.

The Druze say simply that they are citizens of the country in which they live, loyal to it and hence willing to fight for its survival and defense. In theory, there cannot be a question of divided loyalties because there is only one supreme loyalty, to the defense of the homeland. In practice, however, when contradictions arose between official Israeli policy in Lebanon and particularistic Druze ethnic interests there, the Druze in Israel started a vigorous lobbying campaign in order to influence the policy of the Israeli government. This activity demonstrated how well the Druze of the new generation have internalized and assimilated the norms and ways of Israeli society and politics.

Many Druze believe today that the government of Israel prefers to court the goodwill of the Arabs rather than the Druze, and feel that they are taken for granted by the authorities of the state. Looking at this from the perspective of the individual, a young Druze man goes into military service at the age of 18 and spends three years in the army without earning money or improving his earning capacity, whereas at the same time his Christian or Muslim neighbor may nearly complete a full B.A. program at university, or make several tens of thousands of dollars in some occupation, hence acquiring a huge competitive advantage. Of course, this is true of young Jews as well, but Jews do not live in mixed neighborhoods as do the Druze, nor do they consider having a choice.

While equal rights for equal duties sounds quite simple and sensible, it is very difficult to implement in practice. For one thing, it is not so easy to practice positive discrimination in favor of the Druze in villages and towns where Druze live together with Muslims and Christians. For another, Druze as a rule do not live in Jewish areas where they could simply follow the standards and modes of living of their neighbors. Nor do they wish to abandon their traditional modes of living based on land, even though many practice modern cash-oriented occupations in addition to agriculture. Finally, many practical benefits enjoyed by Jews are distributed via non-governmental channels, primarily the Jewish Agency, which does not deal with non-Jews in Israel. Even though there have been some well-publicized cases of the Jewish Agency making an extra effort to include and involve some Druze areas in some of its recent programs, they have been the exception.

Yet the Druze community is in need of much real assistance. The Druze are the least educated ethnic group in Israel, with a painfully small number of university students, despite impressive growth in recent years. The Druze intelligentsia that could lead the process of modernization is still very small. The number of economic entrepreneurs who represent the new capitalism is also small, despite its growth.

Problems of Integration

While the integration of Druze into the military has been eminently successful, integration into Israeli society at large is still something of a practical and ideological problem. There have been some unfortunate incidents during periods of tension in the wake of Arab terrorist attacks, when Druze have been mistaken for Arabs and then insulted and even assaulted. There have also been strains resulting from periodic confrontations between Israel and largely pro-Syrian Druze of the Golan Heights (who number some 17,000, the only inhabitants who remained there when Israel took the area in 1967).

While Druze are by and large not strongly affected by the culture associated with Arab nationalism, the Jewish symbols and Zionist vocabulary of the Israeli state are still alien and difficult to identify with. They are not authentically Druze, and hence are difficult to transmit via the education system. An Israeli super-identity, incorporating Druze history and tradition as well as citizenship in a modern nation-state, is still elusive, and Jews do not always appreciate the difficulties involved.

In 1991 this writer chaired a commission advising the Israeli government on policy changes in Druze education. In the past, most Druze schools, where the language of instruction is in Arabic, used the modes and materials of the Arab sector, which obviously did not contribute to the integration of the Druze into the mainstream of Israeli culture. The only difference as

compared with the Arab system used to be a small weekly course of instruction in Druze cultural and religious heritage, which was quite insufficient. If the recommendations of the commission, which have been accepted by the Minister of Education, are truly implemented, the newly reformed system will feature a set of ideas and materials which are basically identical to the Jewish system, only with differences in language. However, the main idea is to follow the pattern of education in the mainstream of Israeli society as closely as possible, hence creating a standard of being Israeli, while allowing for a different language and cultural-religious background.

It is difficult to assess whether this reform will work. It is based on the idea that it is possible to bring about a substantial equality in the two educational systems, and that it is also possible to bring about some sense of being Israeli that should be able to accommodate the Jewish and Druze (and, ultimately, Arab) subidentities, while not equating Israeliness exclusively with any particular one. However, such an identity does not now exist. Jews in Israel as a rule feel closer to Jews around the world, who are thousands of miles away, than to their immediate Druze or Arab neighbors. Likewise, the latter feel much closer to their own brethren in the Middle East than to their Jewish neighbors. It has not been possible to establish a superidentity accommodating all these subidentities by political design or intellectual engineering. However, the present educational effort is a modest attempt to create a situation where in practice Jews and Druze will learn more or less the same things, hence not only preparing them for life to a more equal extent, but also equipping them with more similar pieces of knowledge and heritage than ever in the past (and all this without destroying the unique heritage of each). If this particular effort is successful, perhaps the ideas of equality and integration will receive a substantial boost because they will finally be proven feasible in practice.

The challenge of the Druze may indeed be an important test for the integrative limits of the Jewish state. The more the Druze are able to prove their loyalty and bring their leadership unequivocally to the adoption of slogans of integration, the more they will be able to see to what extent Israel is truly able to absorb non-Jews into its mainstream. Likewise, the more Israel offers equal opportunities to the Druze in more and more important walks of life, the more it will test the ability of the Druze to adapt to a modern society based on the cultural and historical heritage of another people.

The Problem of Land

While a growing number of Druze urban professionals now live in various Jewish cities and the Druze villages on Mount Carmel are rapidly becoming virtual suburbs of the city of Haifa, the overwhelming majority of Druze live in villages where agriculture is still the most important source of subsistence. However, Druze villages are located in the mountains in areas where land is in short supply and is difficult to develop and cultivate. They live in detached houses and do not care for high rise apartments or other forms of urban housing. In addition, their rapid population increase and large family size means a rapid decrease in the size of the average family's land holdings, due to inheritance among numerous offspring.

There has not been a single new Druze settlement established since the state was born. In the mid-1970s, when this author chaired the first commission which dealt with the need to introduce reforms to facilitate the integration of the Druze into the Israeli state and Israeli society, that commission recommended the establishment of a new Druze settlement in the Galilee, perhaps along the vulnerable Lebanese border. Such a settlement could contribute to the stability and the security of the entire northern area. The beginning of the settlement could be within the framework of Nahal, the branch of the military that allows soldiers to spend part of their time in agricultural work in new settlements, hence also making a contribution to the development of new forms of social organization among the Druze. The entire project would not require a particularly heavy investment of resources, and would also answer some of the psychological needs and complaints of the Druze by offering a conspicuous Israeli response to their quest for recognition.

The Issue of Formal Equality

The issue of formal equality between Druze and Jewish institutions remains a chronic problem, with state appropriations per capita to Jewish municipalities being significantly higher. The suffocation of the Druze villages in terms of infrastructure is so blatant that municipal development must be given immediate priority. In practical terms, the right thing to do is to make sure that the state responds to the historical Druze demand to bring the subsidies given to their municipal authorities to the level of the subsidies given to Jewish municipalities. Because the municipal arena is where most responsible Druze politics takes place, the strengthening of this arena with resources to be distributed by the Druze themselves should also make a con-

tribution to the evolution of strong, elected leadership where it counts and can make a difference.

Questions of Arabness

There are those inside the Druze community who oppose identity with the Jewish state and who argue in favor of an Arab super-identity. These ideologues would make Arab nationalism palatable to the Druze and would have them behave toward Israel as do the Arabs: to *not* serve in the military and to root for the Arab side in the Arab-Israel conflict. They are a small minority, but do exist and are at times vocal. They include quite a few of the younger Druze who see themselves as Arabs who follow the Druze religion, just as Muslim Arabs follow Islam or Christian Arabs follow Christianity. Their motivation is partly ideological, inspired by Arab nationalism; partly cultural, attracted by the cultural market of two hundred million Arabs; and partly political, resulting from alienation from the State of Israel and dissatisfaction with the opportunities it offers for equality and identity.

One recent example highlighting these tensions is the case of the Druze inhabitants of the Golan Heights, most of whom have for a long time been convinced that sooner or later the Heights would be returned to Syria, and that their Syrian connections and identity therefore were more important than any alternative Israeli orientation. Now that the Golan issue is again prominent and the leaders of Israel speak openly of the prospect of returning the Golan to Syria, with the Druze villages to be returned in the very first stage of an Israeli withdrawal, the anti-Israel and pro-Syrian forces among the Druze villagers on the Heights have been vindicated, while the few pro-Israeli forces have been proven wrong, are increasingly isolated, and are subject to very harsh social pressures. This state of affairs has introduced a very tense relationship between the local leadership and the State of Israel, and Israeli Druze are embarrassed by the Golan problem. At times, they explain the situation away by arguing that the State of Israel is to blame, both because it failed to deal correctly with the local leadership, and also because it never made up its mind clearly as to the future of the Heights.

Among most Israeli Druze, however, there prevails the view of the older generation and the mainstream of the leadership that would like to continue their special relationship with the State of Israel, without getting into a detailed argument as to the Arabness of the Druze. In effect, the young rebels think of integrating the Druze community into the Arab world at the expense of their direct Israeli connections, while the older generation thinks of integration into Israel at the expense of ties with the Arab world. The "benign" neglect of the Druze question by Israeli officials who are obsessed with the idea that only the Palestinians count, and that the Druze are either an insignificant minority or at best a community that has no choice but to continue the policies of the past, is a very superficial approach that is bound to boomerang sooner or later. The Druze cannot and should not be taken for granted by Israel because their identity is malleable and may well shift according to political circumstances and conditions.

The Challenges of Modernization

The Druze recognize that they must catch up with the mores of the modern world and they would like to do so, yet they are ambivalent about the more profound difficulties of social change usually entailed in the process of modernization. One such difficulty involves the changing role of women. While the status of women in monogamous Druze society has been traditionally higher than among the Muslim Arabs, women have been expected to refrain from public activity or work among men, a tradition observed not only by religious Druze but also those for whom Druze tradition is appealing and important. On the other hand, the modern market economy in Israel attracts women to work outside the home, just as its norms in general encourage women to take a more active part in social and public life.

For Druze women, modernization has been very uneven. In many cases, it passed them by and was strictly the affair of men. In other cases, the role models of women from both Israel and the Western world (as depicted on freely available television) have raised expectations that have only been frustrated so far. Some Israeli institutions, such as the women's division of the Histadrut (Naamat) and others, have made important contributions to the opportunities and access to public activities for Druze women, but by and large Israeli society has shied away from the issue, and understandably so. After all, it is not for the State of Israel or its Jewish citizens and organizations to revolutionize Druze society, or even modernize it by deliberate social engineering. Yet Israel does bear a responsibility for all its citizens, and clearly the Israeli legal system is designed to assure formal equality between men and women. On the other hand, the correct balance between the needs of modernization and the sensitivities of Druze communal autonomy is very difficult to find. Some of the younger generation says

that it expects allies from among the Jews, both on an individual and an organizational-institutional basis. The older generation would like to tackle the question of modernization on a controlled and selective basis, and considers it very much an internal Druze question.

Another important facet of modernization is institutionalization, the existence of formal organizations and procedures that transcend the family or the clan, and that introduce an increasingly universal basis to political and social behavior. This has not been easy for the Druze due to the very strong domination of Druze political activity by the extended family (*hamula*). Many argue that the real revolution of modernization will triumph among the Druze only with the weakening of the extended family and the breaking of its stranglehold over Druze politics and public activity in general. Such a weakening, however, has not been very much in evidence.

Economic Development

Questions of economic development in the Druze community must take into account the vast differences between the various Druze settlements. As suburbs of Haifa, the two large villages on Mount Carmel enjoy not only greater possibilities for education and cultural activities, but also numerous economic opportunities. For example, tourism has been a very important lever of economic progress in these villages, restaurants and small artifact shops are booming, and even weekend shopping for the residents of Haifa has created considerable extra income. In addition, despite problems of unemployment in the region, the relatively large labor market of Haifa has allowed Druze laborers, artisans, small entrepreneurs, and businessmen to find employment and business with relative ease, without the need to travel long distances or to leave their homes for extended periods. The relative prosperity of these two villages is easy to discern, and one can see the huge difference between them and the Druze communities in the Galilee (many Druze call the inhabitants of the Carmel villages the "Ashkenazis of the Druze"). One of the villages, Daliyat al Karmel, is almost solely Druze, whereas the other, Usfiya, has a large Druze majority (85-90 percent), so these villages are relatively homogeneous ethnically and religiously.

In Western, Central, and Upper Galilee, the situation is very different and much less encouraging. There are many different kinds of ethnic mix, including some "pure" Druze villages, as well as Druze-Christian and Druze-Christian-Muslim combinations that create ethnic tension and rivalry, while the level of economic activity in general is much lower than on Mount Carmel. In the Galilee, too, there are major differences among the Druze villages. In the Western Galilee, the proximity to Acre and Nahariya as well as to the coastal road has generated greater economic opportunity. This means employment outside the village as well as recent examples of regional entrepreneurship, such as establishing a supermarket for weekend shopping for Jewish shoppers from the area. Also, the entrepreneurial spirit of the industrialist Kadamani family that resides in the village of Yirka has inspired several economic projects in the region.

On the other hand, the villages of Central and Upper Galilee are in generally poor shape. Access is difficult, roads are poor as a rule, and until a few years ago even electricity was not always reliably available. In addition, the school system is below standard (with the exception of the well-known regional high school in Rameh), so that the general level of economic development has been traditionally low. Poverty is widespread. Dependence on local agriculture has been mitigated mainly by the cash income derived from service in the military and the security forces, but this has not always supplied the necessary capital for local economic development. Once the men complete their service, they often find the return to the village economy unsatisfactory and frustrating in the extreme. Assistance rendered to military veterans has been inadequate, and investment in the infrastructure of these villages has been insufficient.

Jewish officials often refer to the inability of the local forces to develop a spirit of initiative and ingenuity needed for economic development, while the Druze complain about inadequate capital, the lack of regional cooperation, and the endless difficulty of bureaucratic red tape when local people seek to undertake some new economic enterprise. The Druze community around the country now has considerable economic resources, but it lacks central organizations that could channel funds to the parts of the community that need them the most, while the government of Israel does not have a focus for planning economic development for the Druze sector. In sum, communications between the Druze and the State of Israel on problems of economic development are poor.

There is an interesting paradox inherent in this situation. On the one hand, the Druze have argued consistently over time that they do not want special treatment, and that they would like to be treated like other citizens of the state. On the other hand, they do have special problems and do require special attention

when it comes to policy planning. However, they find it difficult to find the appropriate address for these special problems.

Seeking Their Place in Society

The Druze compare themselves and their lot at times to the majority in Israel, at times to the other minorities, and at times to their fellow Druze in Lebanon and Syria. Yet such comparisons often leave them with a sense of dissatisfaction and even frustration. The Jews in Israel are not only incomparably better off, but they are the center of gravity of the state and everything revolves around their wishes, heritage, symbols, needs, and ambitions. The other minorities in Israel are not only better off in the sense of not having to do compulsory military service, but they are in fact more advanced in terms of modernization and education, despite their perceived smaller contribution to the existence and security of the State of Israel. In addition, their sense of identity is much stronger, as they are part of the Arab world at large and, more immediately, part of the Palestinian political community which is gaining increasing recognition in Israel as well as around the world. The Druze lack this strong sense of a large hinterland.

The Israeli Druze do take great pride in the common heritage they share with the Druze in Syria and Lebanon. Yet this commonality is, in fact, very problematic. The Druze in Syria find it difficult to communicate with their co-religionists in Israel due to the closed nature of the Syrian state and the active policy of hostility of the Syrian regime against Israel for a good many years. In addition, the ideological line of the regime in Damascus has discouraged Druze identity in terms of a political community, encouraging instead the secular notion of the Arab nation in which the Druze are Arabs who happen to follow their own religion. This is not an easy focus of identity for the Druze in Israel.

In Lebanon, the Druze have been important and powerful in both the military and political fields. They are far more advanced and better educated than the Druze in Israel and they serve, in many ways, as models of modernity and enlightenment for the Israeli Druze. Also, the Israeli Druze community has learned a great deal from religious legislation in Lebanon, which is the inspiration for Druze religious practices in Israel as well. All in all, the comparison is much more flattering to the Druze in Lebanon than to those in Israel, and it merely reinforces the sense of inferiority and uncertainty frequently felt by Israeli Druze.

As a result, the Druze in Israel suffer from a sense of psychological uncertainty and often express a need to be understood and appreciated. It is necessary to know a good deal about their concrete problems and specific difficulties in order to understand and appreciate this need. Feelings of neglect and uncertainty are bound to generate foci of political dissatisfaction that will give rise, sooner or later, to political opposition to the state and what it represents. Therefore, it is necessary for the State of Israel to take drastic action in order to emphasize the importance it attributes to the contributions of the Druze. Simply neglecting the Druze and hoping that they will find their own way to security and confidence will not do, and the Jewish people dare not remain passive to their problems.

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