
The Druze in Israel: A Question of Identity

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Historical perspective

The Druze religion, which developed in the Middle East early 11th century, is a relatively new one. The origin of the word “Druze” is “Almwhahidun” which refers to Monotheists who believe in the uniqueness and centrality of God. The name Druze was conferred to those believers after the missionary Nashtkin Al-Daraze’ who spread the principles of the Druze religion in the South of Lebanon, and who attempted to displace the head of the missionary system, Hamzah ibn Ali, assassinated in 1019.(Salach 1981: 65)

The number of Druze in the world amounts to around million. The majority are in the Middle East. In Syria the Druze constitutes 3% of the population, in Lebanon 7.3% and in Israel 1.5%.

The Druze religion was spread in the years 1017-1043. In the year 1021, following the disappearance of the Caliph Fatmi al-Hakim, the founder of the doctrine, the caliphs that roll in Egypt started a cruel and oppressive crusade against the Druze, claiming that their doctrine was far too heterodox. The Druze had to hide their belief and started to use the “Altaqiya” which means defense against Islam and external display of Islam, and on the other hand, hidden loyalty to the principles of the new religion.

Avoiding the persecution, the Druze disappeared from Egypt and moved on to Haleb Mountains in Syria, Lebanon Mountains and Galilee mountains in what is now

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Israel. The persecution of the Druze lasted until 1043, then the gates of missionary activities had been closed, and since then the Druze religion has not acquired new believers. The Druze continued to conceal true religion under “Altaqiya”. Druze who were exposed to persecutions, fled to the mountains and secretly concealed their religious manuscripts. (Salach 1989)

The historical literature written about the Druze does not provide a specific answer to the question of Druze identity. The reason for this may be found in the aims and methods of such researches. Most of them are interested in the religious aspect of the subject. Even when they refer to the ethnic or national aspect, this is done with the aim of understanding the principles of religion and the extreme heterodoxy towards Islam. (Elsheich 1978: 10)

Druze identity is the commonly shared basis for all Druze wherever they may be living. This identity is composed of characteristics that are not conditional upon being a religious or secular person. The first characteristic is biological, and is connected with the identity of the parents. A Druze is the son of a Druze father and a Druze mother. The second characteristic is mental and emotional affiliation. Druze identity consists of a feeling of identity and a profound sense of belonging with the Druze heritage, history, and tradition. Members of the Druze community feel closely connected with their prophets, holy books, Druze values and with their history. Every Druze individual identifies with the special symbols of the community and especially with the Druze flag, while at the same time preserving his citizen loyalty to the state in which he lives. (Fallach 2000)

It is important to note that this collective identity is essential for the solidarity of the entire society especially in times of crisis and when there is no clear agreement about the borderlines of national identity. The Druze community in the Middle East has passed through difficult periods of upheavals and persecutions that forced its members to protect their existence through the principle of “Taqiya”. And even until today, there is no clear and agreed definition of the components of Druze national identity.

The problems of identity emerge mainly in two situations, in a pluralistic society such as the United States, the target state for migrants, and in a state where a minority can exist in it. The State of Israel fulfills these two criteria as a pluralistic country which absorbs immigrants from various places and in which the population also includes minorities. The Druze in the State of Israel are a minority, most of which lives within two concentric circles – the Israeli and the Druze. In the State of Israel, the Druze desire integration and equality in the general society together with the preservation of their religion and tradition.

Objective Factors in Shaping the “Druze National Identity”

a. The Ethnic Origins of the Druze

In the past, the Druze were under the protection of the Islamic people, and in the 11th century they appeared on the map of history as possessors of a religion and a philosophy which differed from Islam, and they lived as an independent monotheistic community. Dana believes that “the ethnic origins of the Druze are obscure, but over the years they have declared their distinction from Islam, and today they do not regard themselves as Muslims”.(Nissim 2003). Ever since their disengagement from Islam the community was forced to sacrifice their blood and to display supreme courage, resourcefulness and sagacity in order to preserve their physical existence and their unique identity, (Fallach 2000) and also to uphold their religious and cultural particularity in the face of a dominant majority group. (Barron 1967) They were compelled, as a group of people who had physical and cultural characteristics that differed from those living with them in the same society, to keep themselves as a group apart. Despite the fact that between the 13th and 15th centuries, the Druze were integrated with the Muslims in the Middle East, about a million Druze living today in this region constitute a discriminated minority in every state where they reside. (Rimer 2007: 29-39)

Philip Hitti, an American historian of Lebanese origin, refers to the Druze by saying that he wondered about the fate of this community and was amazed to see how it had succeeded to exist for all that time as a separate religious minority, and even regarded this as one of the marvels of history.(Hitti 1966: 1-4) Since the Druze were a minority and because of opposition to a new religion, they were persecuted by rulers and other peoples. Many of them were wiped out or were forced to abandon their faith and become assimilated into other societies, mainly among the Sunni Muslims who were the majority in most of the areas in the Middle East where the Druze were living.

Even when the Druze were a dominant power in the Middle East with regard to their control over their areas, a Druze territorial entity was not established in the sense of a national Druze state. Falach thinks that the situation in which there was no desire for a national state was the result of historical circumstances in the various periods, and notes another reason which derives from the Druze nature, which is one of faith that prefers the kingdom of heaven above the kingdom on earth.(Fallach 2000) In my opinion, the third reason is the lack of an important characteristic for nationalism, which is language. The Druze in the Middle East speak Arabic. Yet, although the Druze do not have a national particularity, they have succeeded in preserving

their distinctive way of life and to survive in face of all the persecution they have suffered during the thousand years of their existence through the loyalty to their identity and culture, and by their ability to ensure their place within every society in which they lived. It is important to note that the well-experienced Druze community creates its own independence, and activates a kind of “cultural communication”, in accordance with the sociologist Max Weber who dealt with this issue.

The strength of solidarity in the Druze community, the religious ethos of brotherhood, is one of the noblest values in the Druze heritage. The Druze in general, and especially in the State of Israel, maintain a consciousness of group commitment as they have since the period preceding the establishment of the state, which means loyalty to the traditional values of the communal unity. (Habermas 1984: 3)

During the Ottoman period and the period of the British Mandate, the Druze did not manage to achieve a status comparable to that of the Muslims, Christians and Jews, that is to say, the status of a community of a defined religion, with legislative institutions and courts for civil matters, and they were considered as Muslims in all respects. (Blanc 1952)

With the ascendancy of the Arab national movement, activists in this movement declared that the Druze were Arabs and that they were pure Arab in origin. In contrast to this, many of the Druze in the State of Israel, especially community activists, believe that the Druze are not Arabs. The State of Israel recognizes them as a separate nation, and in their identity cards they are registered as Druze nationals. (Fallach 2000)

b. Travelers and historians as a Main Source for the Origin of the Druze

The first attempt to investigate the origin of the Druze was made by European travelers and research scholars who raised various suppositions. Some thought that the Druze were Arabs of pure Arab stock, while others did not accept this approach. At the beginning the Druze did not give sufficient consideration to the question of their origins, because the government of the state in which they were living treated them as a religious minority without consideration of their ethnic origins. Elsheich (a researcher of the Druze community and a citizen of Israel) thought that the attitude of the government to the religious character and not to the ethnic origin derived from the fact that the Druze did not express doubt of their affiliation with the Arab nation, although they gave this matter little importance and were not conscious of being Arab as were their Muslim neighbors. (Elsheich 1989) Firro distinguished three approaches in the study of Druze origins: The approach based on the Druze religion and the origins of the religious founders and propagators; the approach based on

the study of ancient tribal migrations in the Middle East; and the approach based on anthropometric research that examined skeletons of ancient peoples in Lebanon. (Firro 1992)

“The question of the ethnic affiliation of the Druze is not clear, and historical research has no final and absolute answer in this matter”.(Firro 1982: 44) The most important source in which the Druze are mentioned are the books of travelers who toured Palestine during the Ottoman period. The first among them were two Englishmen, Pococke and Maundrell, who assumed that the Druze were the remnants of the army of French crusaders who had been under the command of De Dreux, and who had disappeared in the Chouf Mountains of Lebanon.(Betts 1988) The 18th century English scholar, Adler, attributed the Druze to the tribe of Derusai, one of the ancient tribes of Midian.(Hitti 1966:14-17; Elsheich 1978:145-149)

Another source of information was received 780 years ago from the Jewish traveler, Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela (Binyamin Metudela). Tudela passed through Lebanon in or around 1165, was one of the first European writers to refer to the Druze by name who learn of them probably from Christian and Jews. he writes: ‘And near to them, and to the inhabitants of Sidon-about ten miles distant-is a nation which fights the Sidonia’s; this is the nation called Durzian. They dwell on high mountains and in rock hollows.’ (Ben-Zvi 1931-32: 436-451) He was impressed by the Druze, by their fighting spirit and the courage of their hearts, and as he describes them in his writings: “They are light of foot in running over the mountains and hills and no one can fight against them”. (Metolda 1907:11)

At the beginning of its existence, the Druze community was subject to harsh persecutions that cause them to migrate from Egypt and to settle in South Lebanon, after which many of them moved to the area of Mount Lebanon. In the 18th century, after the civil war in Lebanon, a large migration of the Druze began to area around the Hauran plateau in the southwestern part of Syria, which was given the name of “the Druze mountain” (Jabal al-Druze).

The persecutions and life in hostile surroundings that were the fate of the Druze ever since the founding of their religion, caused its conversion into a secret religion and the settling of the Druze in distant and isolated places in order to ensure their safety and continued existence. For the duration of a thousand years the Druze managed to preserve their independence, their religion and their heritage, in spite of their dispersal amongst other peoples.

Some of the Arab historians and researchers in the modern period believe that the Druze living today in Israel, Syria and Lebanon were here before they received the Druze religion, (Talea’ 1967:13) that they were Arabs of pure Arab origin, and

are said to be the descendants of the twelve Arab tribes that migrated to Syria before the Islamic period. (Areslan 1931:455; Abu Izzeddin 1984:1-14) That is to say, the Druze and the other inhabitants of Syria and Lebanon belong to the Brachycephalic race and to the Semitic race that spread to Syria in the wake of the migration northwards of Arab tribes from the Arabian Peninsula. From the time of the development of Islam and at a later stage, they went and settled in Lebanon. (Zaher- Eddin 1994: 78) Some of these tribes reached the area of Safed in the northern part of the State of Israel, and the Carmel Mountains in the coastal region of the state.

The historian Hitti claimed that the Druze are a mixture of Persian, Kurd and Arab races. (Hitti 1966:14) Hitti, in his research, came to the conclusion that the Arab origin is connected with the “Taqiya” principle. The Druze reject his theory, but considered themselves as Arabs during the Mameluke period and the Ottoman period, when a non-Arab dynasty ruled Greater Syria. Some researchers claimed that the Druze were descendants of ethnic groups that had once lived in the Middle East: Arabs, Persians, Indians and Kurds. (Abu Husin 1982; Talea’ 1973; Takialdin 1963: 4)

ElSheich adds that there is a feeling of Arab identity because of the language and the culture, but not of nationality, destiny and policy, while with Israel there is identity and identification of destiny and policy. The attitude of the government in the State of Israel towards the Druze, ever since its establishment, was influenced mainly by their religious affiliation and less by their ethnic origin. The reason for this may have been because the Druze did not doubt their affiliation with the Arab nation, but in practice they regarded this as of less importance and they did not have the Arab consciousness which their Muslim neighbors had. (Elsheich 1989: 15-16)

Researchers and anthropologists, who did not find any connection between the origin of the Druze and their Arab neighbors, held the opinion that Druze identity was the result of the policy of Israeli governments. The identity of the Druze in Israel is not static, but has been fashioned and refashioned as a result of establishment policy which acted almost systematically to prevent the development of a collective identity beyond the particular communal identity which has characterized similar religious communities in the Middle East before the emergence of modern national states. (Firro 1998:57-61)

The identity of the Druze in the State of Israel can be viewed in three directions. The first direction is the one that adopted the position of the nationalist Druze in Syrian and Lebanon and regarded the Druze as Arabs and as an Islamic sect. The second direction began at the end of the 1960s and is represented by young educated Druze who come from families that had been associated with Israelis even before 1948, and who refused and are opposed to any connection of the Druze to Arabs

and Muslims. The third direction is represented by integration activists who do not see any contradiction in their being Arabs and also being loyal to the State of Israel. (Firro 1999: 209)

An argument is being conducted among the researchers, and in the community itself, over the exact group identity of the Druze: Are they a religious sect within Islam, a religious community within the Arab nation, or a nation in itself?

In every country in which the Druze live today, they are participants in all that characterizes non-religious Arab culture such as language, customs and secular traditions. The Druze in Lebanon and Syria regard themselves, and are regarded by those surrounding them, as Lebanese and Syrians, which means they are Arab nationals. The question is therefore, whether the Druze in Israel are Arabs. As we shall see below, the answer in Druze society itself is a controversial one.

The State of Israel took an official stance on this question when, in 1962, they began to register the term “Druze” instead of “Arab” in the nationality section of the identity card. Among the Druze, not much protest was aroused against their definition as a nation, although there were voices in opposition, especially among the thin layer of young educated Druze. (Firro 1999: 168-179)

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