

Druze Communities Face a Regional Decline in Influence

by [Mona Alami \(/experts/mona-alami\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Mona Alami \(/experts/mona-alami\)](#)

Mona Alami is a French Lebanese journalist focusing on political and economic issues in the Arab world. She has conducted extensive research on radical Islamist movements in Palestinian refugee camps, Salafi movements in Lebanon and Jordan, al-Qaeda's reach to the West, as well as Hezbollah. Alami is also a fellow at the Atlantic Council and senior associate at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies and TRENDS Research and Advisory.



Brief Analysis

August 26, 2018 — Regional turmoil has forced the generally secretive Druze minority into the limelight. With its leaders losing the influence that has so far protected the community, the Druze must take seriously the threat of disappearing altogether.

Regional turmoil has forced the generally secretive Druze minority into the limelight. In the last two months, the state of Israel passed a new Nation State Law denounced by the community, which coincided with an attack by the so-called Islamic State (IS) on the Syrian Druze. In nearby Lebanon, the sect's leaders are engaged in an unprecedented political feud that has contributed to the community's diminishing political role over the last few years. These events underline the community's growing vulnerability and erosion of power, a shift tied both to changing regional dynamics and a demographic slump.

The Druze are ethnic Arab members of a religious group that grew out of a millennialist movement in Cairo, and are considered an off-shoot of the Muslim Isma'ilis who spread throughout Syria after facing suppression in Egypt. Experts believe the Druze community currently amounts to some one million members total spread over three countries, with over 125,000 (<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/137178>) Druze located in Israel, around 250,000 (<http://minorityrights.org/minorities/druze-2/>) in Lebanon and some 600,000 (<http://www.refworld.org/docid/568e2c944.html>) in Syria. The current state of affairs for Druze across the Levant is a clear break with the community's recent past, where communities benefited from relatively significant political influence and autonomy.

Indeed, the Levant's Druze minority appear to be facing unprecedented challenges due to the regional shifts of the past few years. In July, the Israeli Knesset passed a highly controversial law known as the Nation State Bill. The law stripped Arabic of its former status as an official language, emphasized Israel's character as a home for the Jewish people, and cemented in many citizens' minds a differentiation between Jewish and non-Jewish citizens. Israeli

Druze were particularly outraged by the bill, which they considered discriminatory, and **[top Druze IDF officers \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-walks-out-as-druze-leader-accuses-him-of-leading-israel-to-apartheid/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-walks-out-as-druze-leader-accuses-him-of-leading-israel-to-apartheid/)** led a campaign against it.

This new reality stands in sharp contrast to the status-quo, where Druze were widely integrated to the State apparatus. According to a **[Pew Research Center survey \(http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/21/5-facts-about-israeli-druze-a-unique-religious-and-ethnic-group/\)](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/21/5-facts-about-israeli-druze-a-unique-religious-and-ethnic-group/)**, approximately 60 percent of Druze men in Israel are either serving or have served in the Israeli military as the only non-Jews conscripted into the Israeli Defense Forces. The Israeli state and the Jewish majority often characterize the Druze as a “favored minority,” and **[budgets \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/druze-revolt-why-a-tiny-loyal-community-is-so-infuriated-by-nation-state-law/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/druze-revolt-why-a-tiny-loyal-community-is-so-infuriated-by-nation-state-law/)** for salaries and education in Druze municipalities are currently on par with Jewish communities. Nevertheless, even as in early August thousands of Druze **[protested \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-politics-law-protest/israeli-druze-rally-against-new-nation-state-law-idUSKBN1KP0PU\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-politics-law-protest/israeli-druze-rally-against-new-nation-state-law-idUSKBN1KP0PU)** in Tel Aviv against the new law, it remains in force, suggesting a potential change in the Israeli Druze’s previous status.

Druze communities experienced another severe blow in nearby Syria, when IS conducted a **[terrorist attack \(https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5319610,00.html\)](https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5319610,00.html)** on the Sweida province, which resulted in the killing of over 250 people and the kidnapping of at least 36, including a large number of women and children. The attack came against the backdrop of a deal between the regime of president Bashar Assad and IS, which allowed for the evacuation of several hundred of its fighters from Damascus to the Badia stretching into the Syrian Druze stronghold, which raised the number of fighters in the area to around **[2500 \(https://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/khalid-bin-walid-army-jaysh-khalid-bin-al-waleed-islamic-state-isis\)](https://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/khalid-bin-walid-army-jaysh-khalid-bin-al-waleed-islamic-state-isis)**.

Whereas Syrian Druze have a long history of military contributions to Syria, the Druze have now been stripped of their ability to defend their communities. The 20th century rebellion of Druze forces under the command of Sultan Pasha al-Atrash against the local French mandatory authorities in the Hawran region of Syria, which led to a nationwide revolt against French rule, is still a feature in communal memory.

Nevertheless, Syrian political activist Jabr Shoufi informed the author that prior to the attack, the regime had accused anti-regime Druze factions, such as sheikh Blahous, of terrorism in an apparent attempt to delegitimize Druze communal leaders. Moreover, a Russian delegation had notified Druze communities that its local defense forces must disarm and that over 54,000 young Druze must report for military duty. These actions left the communities by and large defenseless to the attack as well as future attacks in the area.

The upheaval involving the Druze in Syria and Israel is dovetailed by an internecine fight between Druze leaders in Lebanon, namely between MP Talal Arslan and MP Walid Joumblat over their respective shares of positions in the still-forming Lebanese cabinet. The powerful Arslan and Joumblat families have traditionally played an important role in Lebanese political history. The **[Arslans \(https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/druze-dynasty-a-family-history-worth-telling-1.97569\)](https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/druze-dynasty-a-family-history-worth-telling-1.97569)**, whose ancestors were third-century southern Iraqi Lakhmid kings, included Prince Toufic Arslan as one of the major figures behind the creation of Greater Lebanon in 1920 and his son, Prince Majid, one of the country’s independence leaders in 1943. Kamal Joumblat, an Arab nationalist and stout supporter of the Palestinian cause, led a powerful leftist movement in Lebanon critical of the Lebanese sectarian system and opposed the Westernized outlook of the Christian political class. For over four decades, his son Walid played a pivotal role in the Lebanese political arena and was widely considered a **[kingmaker \(https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/druze-dynasty-a-family-history-worth-telling-1.97569\)](https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/druze-dynasty-a-family-history-worth-telling-1.97569)** in Lebanese politics.

However, the rift between these two families underlines a deeper erosion of Druze political influence in Lebanon.

The rift appears to have extended to other political groups with sources in the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, funded by incumbent President Michel Aoun informing the Lebanese Daily *L'Orient Le Jour* that **government formation (<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1129756/les-noeuds-chretien-et-druze-nen-finissent-pas-de-se-compliquer.html>)** will be blocked as long as necessary in order to strip Jomblat of his monopoly over the community's political representation.

Though these regional events each represent a challenge to a different facet of Druze community life, they all demonstrate how Druze are facing increasing pressure in their home countries. The drivers behind this decline are twofold: larger regional pressures and internal challenges. This minority is faced with the reality of a polarized region in the midst a sectarian and political struggle, which pits Iran against Israel on the one hand and Gulf countries on the other.

In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has relied on the Israeli concern for security to engineer what some have classified as the **most right-wing coalitio (<https://www.thenation.com/article/benjamin-netanyahu-just-formed-the-most-right-wing-government-in-israeli-history/>)** in the state's history, which has justified the use of unprecedented force against Arab Israelis, a major increase in settlements, and a number of controversial decisions including U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the Nation State Law.

In Syria and Lebanon, Druze are similarly suffering from the consequences of the Iran-Saudi rivalry that is currently splitting along the Sunni-Shiite religious divide. In Lebanon, Jomblat's extremist positions and spectacular political flip-flops, alleged Hezbollah assassination campaigns targeting anti-Iran and Syrian groups, and clashes between Jomblat's Progressive Socialist Party and Hezbollah in 2008 have all significantly weakened the community.

In Syria, the Druze attempts to remain neutral as the conflict raged on do not appear to be a viable option in the wake of the most recent IS onslaught. While the attacks bear all the markers of IS traditional modus operandi, the regime's passivity during the initial attack and its prior stripping of Druze weaponry demonstrate how regime calculations contributed to the Druze massacre. This escalation of pressure from the regime appears to be an attempt to force the community to heed, as the Druze province had previously managed to gain a large level of autonomy and avoid the targeting of their youth for a compulsory military draft. It was this autonomy that had allowed the community to avoid the conflict and its increasingly religious undertones.

However, the damage to Druze communal interests is not solely due to outside forces. Rather, the Druze community's loss of political influence will only be exacerbated by the community's demographic realities. The Druze have operated as a closed community since the 11th century—the community does not share their religious beliefs with those outside of the community, nor do they accept new members or converts. Druze traditions that force members marry within the community, more enforceable in the protective isolation of the mountains, are increasingly losing hold over their younger members as the community urbanizes—with numbers reaching 88 percent in Lebanon. The realities of new living patterns, combined with low natality rates, has led to the Druze population is shrinking to low single percentage points in their countries of residence.

By refusing to revise traditions that hinder the survival of Druze identity, allowing inner divisions to supersede long-term interests, and failing to strengthen cross-regional ties, the Druze appear doomed to follow the path of continuous decline. With its leaders losing the influence that has so far protected the community, the Druze must take seriously the threat of disappearing altogether. ❖

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