

Syria's Druze Under Threat

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Brief Analysis

Recent attacks on the Syrian Druze community threaten to further roil sectarian tensions, radicalize Druze elements, and potentially draw Israel into the civil war.

On June 10, al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) killed at least twenty Druze in Qalb Loze, a village in Syria's northwestern Idlib province. Six days later, two Assad regime soldiers serving at the Druze town of Khadr on the border with Israel killed their Druze commander before defecting to JN. The next day, Islamist militants and other rebel forces seized a strategic hilltop north of Khadr and surrounded the village after fierce fighting with regime forces.

These events underscore the vulnerability of Druze communities straddling the borders of Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. The roughly 800,000 Druze in Syria no longer receive sufficient protection from what is left of the regime and are considered heretics by JN and other Islamist groups. Moreover, further escalation could spur Israel to intervene, among other perils.

MIXED DRUZE RESPONSE IN LEBANON

After the Qalb Loze incident, Lebanese Druze politician Walid Jumblatt, who does not recognize JN as a terrorist organization, rushed to condemn the killings and calm his enraged constituents. On June 12, he described the attack as an "individual" incident, adding that it took place at a time when the Assad regime is "killing hundreds of civilians on a daily basis." He noted that he would resolve the incident "via politics," leveraging his local connections to contain the situation.

On June 13, JN announced that the attack had been carried out by group members who "violated" the leadership's orders. Calling the incident "an unjustifiable mistake," the statement added, "the village and its people are still safe... (and) under our protection."

Jumblatt, a vociferous critic of Assad, has previously called on Druze in Syria, particularly in the southwestern Suwayda province, to abandon the regime and "reconcile" with rebels in the Sunni-dominated Deraa province. On June 11, the "Southern Front" rebel group declared that "the people of Suwayda are our people and we did not and will not fight them," adding, "We will join hands with [the Druze] to confront all dangers threatening Suwayda province if they ask us to do so."

Druze in Suwayda are currently divided into three camps: those who side with the regime, those who refused army service and chose to defend the province by themselves, and those who are still neutral. On June 16, Sheikh Wahid al-Balous, a Druze critic of the regime, stated that he and his supporters, known as "Mashayekh [clerics] of dignity," favor a ceasefire between Deraa and Suwayda. More important, he reportedly said that his group is indirectly coordinating with rebels from the Free Syrian Army, which enjoys an influential role in Deraa.

Meanwhile, pro-Assad Druze politician Wiam Wahab, who heads the Tawhid Party, criticized Jumblatt's restrained position on Qalb Loze and called on Druze in Lebanon to aid their Syrian co-religionists. Some of his supporters have urged local Druze to take up arms, and during a recent press conference he noted that "Druze in Lebanon and around the world are able to form an army comprising 200,000 members to defend Suwayda."

ISRAELI DRUZE CONCERNS

Israeli Druze are nervous about two developments: the threat to Syrian Druze, and the recruitment of Druze youths into terrorist cells operating at the behest of Iran and Hezbollah. This week, thousands of Israeli Druze demonstrated in the northern towns of Isfiya and Majdal Shams, calling attention to the immediate threat their Syrian counterparts face from JN. They have also sent more than \$2.6 million to Syrian Druze via Jordan for the purchase of weapons and other items.

Meanwhile, the Israeli government has asked the United States to increase aid to Syrian Druze, and urged the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN to create a humanitarian safe zone for Druze on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights. Yet it has so far declined to intervene militarily on behalf of Druze deeper in Syria for fear of being seen as directly involving itself in the war.

The June 16 killing of the Druze Syrian army commander by two JN defectors came just a day after the Israeli demonstrations, and the murder was followed by a JN offensive that injured several members of Khadr's 25,000-strong Druze community. Beyond the human toll, the latter attack was particularly ominous because of its geopolitical significance. Khadr is the last Druze village on the Syrian Golan that is not controlled by rebel forces. According to Israeli officials, several of the villages under rebel control (e.g., Breikeh and Bir Ajm) are effectively under JN's control even though other rebel elements are present (typically, each faction controls a neighborhood, but JN is the most powerful). For some time, threats to Syrian Druze villages came from the area of Jubata al-Khashab, a village just five miles to the south controlled by JN and other rebel groups. As a result, Israeli soldiers sometimes refer to the Quneitra crossing as "Nusra Crossing," only partly in jest.

Meanwhile, Israel is also contending with terrorist threats from locals -- including Druze -- recruited by Hezbollah to place roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs) near the Golan security barrier. Israeli military officials pointed to at least fifteen such attacks from March to December 2014. As one general told the *New York Times* last November, using locals provides plausible deniability; "Hezbollah gives them the IEDs and the Iranians give them the inspiration," he noted. In January, an Israeli airstrike killed Jihad Mughniyah, son of the late Hezbollah terrorist chief Imad Mughniyah, as he took a "commanders' tour" of the area; an Iranian general and several other operatives

were killed as well. Since then, Jihad's brother Mustafa has taken on a more prominent role in this part of Syria.

Although neither Hezbollah nor Iran wants to draw Israel into Syria at the moment, both feel compelled to maintain their credentials as pillars of the "resistance" against Israel. Accordingly, Hezbollah has used Samir Kuntar -- a Lebanese Druze convicted for murdering an Israeli family in 1979 and released in a 2008 prisoner swap -- to actively recruit Druze youths for terrorist attacks. Kuntar reportedly started off recruiting local militias to defend Druze villages from JN and other rebels. He then privately approached a few trusted recruits from Khadr to attack Israel, including two youths who originally came from Majdal Shams across the border.

Recruiting Druze, let alone Israeli Druze, put the entire community in a precarious position. Making matters worse, Kuntar's cell carried out an IED attack on April 27, which fell during the major Druze holiday of Ziyarat al-Nabi Shuayb. Furious over the incident, one Druze leader reportedly made a youth publicly disavow his involvement in Kuntar's group while standing in front of his whole village.

IMPLICATIONS

The Qalb Loze attack revealed an untimely schism within the Druze community in Lebanon, where the political scene is split between pro- and anti-Assad alliances. For now, Jumblatt's call for restraint seeks to preserve the delicate sectarian balance between Druze and Sunnis, who live together throughout the country. He is walking a tightrope, however -- his statement that JN is part of the Syrian opposition and not a terrorist organization was an attempt to keep communication lines open with the group, which is still holding several Lebanese soldiers and policemen hostage, seven of whom are Druze.

For Druze in Israel, a humanitarian safe zone to protect their kin and co-religionists across the border will become a much more difficult prospect if JN and other groups complete their takeover of the Syrian Golan. Israeli officials are watching the situation carefully, fearing that without an international haven in Syria, they could suddenly find themselves contending with a massive flow of Druze refugees streaming toward the border. The Israel Defense Forces have reportedly warned JN not to target the Druze, a message communicated through the Free Syrian Army. Moreover, the IDF chief of staff made a veiled reference to the Druze predicament while testifying before the Knesset on June 16, noting that the army would "act to prevent the slaughter of Syrian refugees." In the meantime, Israeli Druze will no doubt dramatically increase their humanitarian and financial support to Syrian Druze.

Finally, Lebanese and Israeli Druze may feel compelled to join the fight themselves if the situation worsens, with potentially destabilizing consequences. In the former case, Lebanese Druze could face accusations of following in Hezbollah's footsteps if they intervene next door. Many Lebanese have criticized Hezbollah for devoting so much attention and energy to Syria, thereby stoking sectarian tension at home. Meanwhile, Israeli Knesset member and Druze leader Ayoob Kara summed up the concerns of his constituency: "Israel is not a part of this fighting and doesn't want to be, because if we say we're going to be part of the fighting it makes it worse for our [Druze] people in Syria. But me, as a Druze guy, I'm going to do what I can to support my nation. I'm very loyal to my nation."

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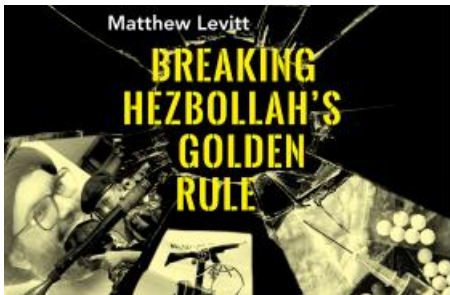
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