The Middle East's Forgotten Minority

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May 16, 2014

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Articles & Testimony

The Syrian conflict is rattling the world of the Druze, an ethnic group that straddles national lines.

During Lebanon's Civil War (1975-1990), Israel took sides with the Christian Phalange Party. This had the Israeli Druze community, normally among the Jewish State's most faithful soldiers, particularly worried. What would happen to their Lebanese Druze brethren, who, at the time, were arch enemies of Israel's Phalangist allies?

Former Knesset MK Zeidan Atashi took action by spearheading a task force to "save, support, sympathize [with] and rescue" his coreligionists in Lebanon. Today the Druze once again find themselves in a precarious situation -- this time in Syria. Will the Druze follow in Atashi's footsteps by taking action to assist their coreligionists in war-torn Syria, or will they choose to remain on the sidelines?

In October 2013, Israeli Druze spiritual leader Muwafaq Tarif expressed his concern about the fate of his Syrian coreligionists during a meeting with President Shimon Peres. Earlier that year, some leaders from the community in the Golan Heights sent a letter to PM Benjamin Netanyahu requesting that their family members in Syria be offered a safe haven in Israel. These events echo Atashi's attempts to assist Lebanese Druze during the country's civil war. Now, more than ever before, the Druze may see that their fate in the Middle East is interconnected across national lines.

Israel so far has gone to great lengths to stay out of the Syrian conflict, restricting its intervention to a mere handful of airstrikes. But underneath the cloak of limited involvement lie deep personal connections between Israeli and Syrian Druze nationals. What becomes of these ties may challenge Israel to take a larger humanitarian stake in the conflict than before -- especially if the situation of Syrian Druze takes a turn for the worse.

Although former Druze Likud Knesset MK Amal Nasser Eldeen believes that "every Druze community needs to decide [its affairs] for itself," this is proving to be increasingly difficult against the backdrop of the Syrian crisis. Late

last year, reports of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) forcibly converting Druze in Idlib province riled up Israeli Druze youth. Several even expressed their readiness to fight to protect their Syrian coreligionists.

The final say on how the Israeli community would respond was left for leading Druze clerics, including Tarif, who called for restraint. However, Tarif's choice to remain on the sidelines for the time being does not mean that he rules out the possibly of taking serious action in the future. He explained: "If various [foreign fighters] keep flowing into Syria, such as Jabhat al-Nusra [an al-Qaeda affiliate] and others, and if we feel that the Druze are in real danger, then we'll reassess."

The Israeli and Lebanese Druze responses to the forced conversions have one thing in common: both aimed to protect their coreligionists in Syria. In December 2013, leader of the Lebanese Druze Arab Democratic Party Talal Arslan said, "[the Druze] are Muslim like all other sects [of Islam]." Arslan could have very well outright condemned the conversions, but he chose not to fan the flames of the already delicate situation facing the Syrian Druze. Instead, he opted to describe the Druze in Idlib province, where Sunni extremists are on the ascent, as part of the Syrian societal fabric -- not as intruders. Arslan and Tarif both saw responsibility towards their coreligionists, and they responded in ways that would not bring them further harm.

Control over the provinces that border the Syrian Druze heartland of Suwayda is very much up for grabs. Although areas of Daraa and Quneitra provinces vacillate between regime and opposition hands, according to Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, one thing is certain: "The future of Druze in Syria is with the Arab Sunni majority," he said in an interview earlier this year. "I call on them to keep themselves away [from conflict] if they can." Jumblatt had the foresight to anticipate a future in which the Syrian Druze live in the middle of an ocean of Sunnis. And, in response, he has adopted positions that will not yield negative repercussions for his coreligionists in Syria.

On the domestic front, Jumblatt has gone to great lengths to mend ties with Hezbollah, especially after the "Party of God" attacked various Druze villages in Lebanon in May 2008. However, with regard to Syria, Jumblatt believes that Hezbollah committed an "historic mistake" by dragging itself into the conflict. He even went so far as to call on Syrian Druze to defect from the regime's army early on in the uprising. Jumblatt sees that his responsibility for the survival of the community transcends national lines. An understanding that the fate of the Druze is intertwined underlies Jumblatt's positions towards Hezbollah. His stances neither endanger the Druze in Lebanon, where Hezbollah is a growing de-facto mini-state, nor the Druze in Syria, where radical Islamists are gaining ground.

With flows of refugees, foreign fighters, and weapons across national lines, it has been clear for a while now that the Syrian crisis is not exclusively a "Syrian problem." The story of the Druze is yet another example of how the region at large is connected to this conflict. During the Lebanese Civil War, Atashi insisted that fraternal ties among Druze are stronger than their political differences. "The Druze are like a copper tray," he told the *Christian Science Monitor*. "If you hit it on one side, the whole tray resounds."

Nowadays, the Syrian crisis is causing that copper tray to ring once again. When the Lebanese discuss how the war is affecting them, they tend to focus on refugees, Hezbollah's involvement, and the infiltration of foreign fighters. The Druze bring attention to yet another layer of interconnectedness that is rarely discussed: how the crisis is very likely to affect minority communities straddled between different countries.

Noam Raydan and Adam Heffez are research assistants at The Washington Institute. ❖

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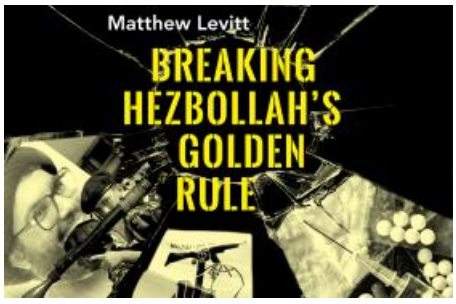

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