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**The Druze Minority in The Middle East: A Case study of
the Druze in Israel**

PhD Thesis

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Summary

The Druze minority in the Middle East has preserved its religious and social character for more than a thousand years. The reasons for this is that the Druze religion, which began in 1043, was closed to new converts besides the fact that it did not allow mixed marriages, and the harsh geographical conditions of the areas of Druze settlement made it difficult in the past for strangers to reach them, and thus increased their isolation.

The social structure of the Druze gradually changed over time, and today it is not uniform. However, there is a difference between the development of Druze society in Israel in comparison with Arab countries or in the diaspora. Modernization did not extend to all the settlements areas of the Druze to an equal degree, and did not gain an equal response from them. Thus a situation was created of traditionalism in one area in contrast with development in another one.

A review of the literature that deals with the Druze community shows that studies on the subject of minorities focus mostly upon the history and characteristics of the Druze community in the areas of employment and religion. This research is conducted on the basis of a combined model. The present research makes use of a number of methods for gathering data, and centers on interviews and a comprehensive survey in order to allow for the maximum utilization of information, of the factual aspects and positions of the Druze in the State of Israel regarding matters that have an influence on the relations between the Druze and the system of government in Israel.

Moreover, in order to allow for the optimal representation of the Druze population in Israel, the research made use of the 'targeted sampling' method, and a questionnaire distributed among the Druze in the State of Israel who belong to different population groups. The response was very high, with the receipt of 80% of the questionnaires. This is an innovative research both in its range and in the subjects that were under examination. The conversations and interviews with many of the members of the Druze community in Israel, with notable personalities, with those in senior positions in the government, in the IDF, and in public administration, as well as

the wide-ranging model that represents the Druze population in Israel in all its variety, make it possible to become familiar with the positions of the Druze in Israel in various spheres of significance.

All Druze spoke Arabic and dressed like Sunni Muslims, although they did live mainly in separate towns or areas of towns.¹ Not only were the Druze culturally similar to the Local Arabs Muslims, they were also similar in terms of political structure. Both societies were composed of family factions headed by esteemed religious leaders. The Israeli Druze were heavily influenced by religious leaders living in Syria and Lebanon, notably the Syrian Druze al-Atrash family. The Sultan al-Atrash was famous for his revolt against Syrian leadership in 1925, for which he was exiled to Transjordan.² Most Druze villages were clustered in the Northern Galilee, with some in the Southern Galilee and Dalyat-el-Carmel areas.³

Druze remained neutral in the early Arab riots for religious reasons, and this led a Jewish official named Ben Tzvi to initiate contacts that led to increased trust between Druze and Jews. Druze leaders in 1929 sent a letter to the British proclaiming their neutrality on the grounds that the riot was a religious conflict between Jews and Muslims and so it did not concern the Druze.⁴ Ben-Tzvi thought that since the Druze in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine are relatives, the Druze in Palestine would help the Jews influence Syrian and Lebanese politics through the Druze that lived there, which was a Jewish policy goal.⁵ Ben Tzvi created contacts mainly among the secondary elite and continued to increase Jewish Agency trust in them. The elite maintained neutrality, but individuals however joined the Arabs. Some local leaders come into contact with Jewish authorities.

Benjamin of Tudela, the Jewish traveler who passed through Lebanon in or around 1165, was one of the first European writers to refer to the Druze by name who learned of them probably from Christians and Jews. he writes: 'And near to them, and to the inhabitants of Sidon-about ten miles distant-is a nation which fights the

¹ Brenton Betts, *The Druze*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988, pp. 35-36.

² Ibidem, p. 88.

³ Laila Parsons, *The Druze between Palestine and Israel*, 1947-1949. Great Britain: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000, p.18.

⁴ Kais Firro, *The Druzes in the Jewish State: A Brief History*. Leiden: Brill, 1999, p.23.

⁵ Laila Parsons, *op.cit.*, pp. 21-22.

Sidonians; this is the nation called Durzian. They dwell on high mountains and in rock hollows.⁶

The Druze is a secretive religion, are reluctant to share information about their religion with outsiders because of the fear of persecution. "The Druze, who can be traced back to eleventh-century Levant, have long intrigued scholars of the Middle East. Their obscure origins and blending of beliefs from Ismaili Shi'ism, animism, Greek philosophy, Jewish and Christian mysticism, Iranian Gnosticism, and Buddhism have set them apart from their neighbors."⁷

Also Hitti mentioned the Druze of Syria and the Samaritans of Palestine, "they are two unique communities not to be found elsewhere in the whole world. Like social fossils in an alien environment, these two peoples have survived for hundreds of years in that land rightly described as a "Babel of tongues" and a "museum of nationalities."⁸ It is hardly surprising that over the course of nearly a millennium of living apart a community as closed and tightly knit as the Druze should have developed a number of unique social patterns and characteristic.⁹

The dissertation is divided into 6 chapters. In the first, I introduce the history of the Druze, the first promulgated of the Druze religion in 1017, during the reign of the sixth Fatimid caliph al-Hakim bi-Amir Allah, who ruled over Egypt (r. 969–1021). Also focuses on the status of the Druze in the Middle East and the need to preserve the existence of this community and to maintain their survival and their religious independence under the government of the British Mandate and of the French Mandate, and later of the government of the new states (Israel, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan). In this chapter I also focus on the major role that the Druze played in the history of the Middle East. I will focus on the development of relations between the Druze in Arab states and the government, and how this relationship influences the development of relations between the Druze minority and the government institutions in those countries.

In the second chapter, I try to examine the major components which affected Druze identity in the past, and presently focus mainly on the issue, the ethnic source

⁶ Yitshak Ben-Zvi. *The Jews among the Druze in Lebanon*, Tarbis, 3, 1931-32, Jerusalem, pp.436-451 (Hebrew).

⁷ Philip Hitti, *The Origins of the Druze People & Religion: with extracts from their sacred writings*, New York: Ams press, 1966, p. 89.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 90.

⁹ Robert Betts, *op.cit.* p. 35.

of the Druze and its effect on the Druze identity. Druze identity is in the usually 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 irreligious person. Also, I analyze the concept of Druze Minority in Israeli historiography Post 1948. Understanding Druze National Identity in the State of Israel Since 1948 According to Historiographical Approaches: Modern-Rationalistic Historiography, Ideological Approach, the Nation Building Approach, the Marxist Approach.

Chapter 3 focuses on the minorities in general and their characteristics, as well as the problems they face in a majority society; expand the discussion over the minorities in the State of Israel: the Muslim, Christian and Druze minorities; and present the characteristics of all the minorities and the development of relations between each minority and the governing authorities in the State of Israel.

In the 4th chapter, I analyze the status of Druze minority among the Democracy in Israel State, in the declaration of independence of the state of Israel, the status of the minorities in Israel in the educational system, the status of the minorities in the religious sphere and institutions founded for minorities in the state of Israel

Development of the relation between the Druze community and the authorities in the state of Israel is discussed in chapter 5. In order to understand the process in which the relationship between the State of Israel and its Druze citizens was formed, it is necessary to return to its foundations during the Mandate period and the first two decades of the State of Israel during which this relationship was formed at many levels, as well as the relations with various other minorities. I analyze the government policies toward the Druze population: their conceptual framework and their implementation in most important fields of lives:

Serving in the Army: The decision to include Druze to compulsory military service was made in 1956 at the inventiveness of Druze leaders seeking to gain influence and support from the country's Jewish leadership, and who expected to strengthen the relationship between the Druze community and the Israeli authorities.

Economic development: Structural Changes in Druze Settlement Employment in the State of Israel. During the course of modernization, the Druze population underwent a process of significant changes in the period after the establishment of the State of Israel. In general, one may distinguish an increasing assimilation of the Druze minority in the labor market and in changes in the structure of its branches of employment.

Integration of the Druze in the Israeli Political System: At the beginning of Druze involvement in Israeli politics, representatives were chosen from their society as Knesset member for the Zionist political parties. The Druze community did not constitute a political unit but voted directly for Zionist parties. This phenomenon is the natural outcome of their deep integration within the life of the state of Israel. The growth in political activism of the Druze population, its increasing assertiveness and willingness to defend its civil rights and education system.

The Education System: The Israeli educational system consists of sectors divided according to nationality and religiosity. The Arab population is taught in an Arabic speaking educational system which includes both formal and informal schools supervised by the Ministry of Education. The Arab sector is divided by the Ministry of Education into four groups -Arab, Druze- Circassian and Bedouin, with each sector having its own unique program.

Chapter 6 deals with the Druze minority in the Diaspora. For about a thousand years of their history, the Druze experienced many migrations. At first these were to the Arab countries of the Middle East, and in the twentieth century they began migrating to countries beyond it as well. The Druze today number about 2 million, the vast majority living in the Middle East. A few thousands live in the United States of America, Canada, South America, Australia and various African countries. It seems that in the past there was a larger Druze population in the Middle East, but because of wars their numbers were reduced. In this chapter I focus on Druze minority in Australia, Canada, United States, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Venezuela.

Throughout this dissertation, I adopted Smooha's model of "ethnic democracy" as the most effective explanatory framework for the Israeli policy toward the Druze, its modification, and the Druze' response. The transformation of this model from a hard line to a lenient form resulted in significant improvements in the lives of the Druze citizens of Israel, and political liberalization created a variety of new means to protect their identity in democratic forms. Also, to analyze the behavior of the minorities and their characteristics, integration – combining with the ruling majority system of relations between the minority and dominant majority.

In this research I intend to present, historical, social, cultural and political issues of the Druze, and try to be objective. The Druze minority in the Middle East has pre-

served its religious and social character for more than a thousand years. The reasons for this is that the Druze religion, which began in 1043, was closed to new converts besides the fact that it did not allow mixed marriages, and the harsh geographical conditions of the areas of Druze settlement made it difficult in the past for strangers to reach them, and thus increased their isolation.

On one hand, the Druze in Israel succeeded in preserving their unique identity due to the combination of wise leadership, their relatively small numbers, and their residence in outlying areas. Besides this, Israel has adopted the principle of religious pluralism and has tried to create Druze identity on a national-religious basis and has granted the Druze the right to have their own institutions. The Druze in Israel comprise a national minority and view themselves as an integral part of the state of Israel, and undergoing a process of integration into the country and into Israeli society.

Within the multi-cultural Israeli society, the Druze are able to conduct a dialogue with the rest of the population without endangering their identity as a minority. In the State of Israel the Druze have found for the first time a willing ear for their distinct religious-national aspirations, and for that reason they no longer need to adapt themselves to the surroundings.

The religious identity of the Druze is, in my opinion, a historical fact that cannot be disputed. The Druze are citizens of the State of Israel, even if not all their aspirations have been fulfilled. They serve in the army and are integrated in the social and political system. Apparently the question of the origin and national identity of the Druze will remain controversial as long as the Druze remain a minority in the Middle East. All those who support the claim that they are Arabs usually do so for political reasons, and those who support their national particularity do so for the desire to preserve their existence.

The Druze in Israel are immersed in a process of integration with the state and with Israeli society. It is important to note that their integration is partial, and that the Jews, like the Druze, are doubtful of the realization of full integration in the future. In spite of the increasing awareness and acknowledgment of the right to exist of different societies of a particular cultural and social nature, the fact is that these differences are not necessarily a reason to regard them as of inferior value.

The State of Israel relates to Druze society pluralistically through preservation of the cultural differences of this society, their social and institutional separation from

the surrounding community, and the maintenance of the Druze identity. This relationship, which serves as a true test of Israeli democracy, testifies to an attitude of acceptance towards the cultural difference of the Druze minority. The State of Israel is committed to a democratic regime for all its citizens, without regard for their national origins. It grants individual rights and certain group rights to minorities in general and to the Druze minority in particular.

The population of the minorities is not uniform, and it had various attitudes towards the State of Israel, even within the same population group. According to surveys, most of the Israeli Arabs are interested in keeping their Israeli citizenship, even if a Palestinian state was established. On the other hand, severe anti-Israeli attitudes are expressed by the leaders of this population and by some of the Arab members of the Knesset.

The stance taken by the minorities towards the State of Israel sometimes contains internal contradictions. For example, the Arab citizens of Israel are very closely connected with Israeli society, as in their mastery of the Hebrew language. But on the other hand, the percentage of voters among this population in Knesset elections is gradually decreasing, which indicates some kind of alienation from the State of Israel.

In contrast to the evidence of alienation, we also witness other forms of identification with the state among some of the minority populations. The most prominent example for this is army service in the IDF among the Druze, Circassian and Bedouin minorities.

In a democratic state, the relationship between the majority and the minority is more prominent when the majority is Jewish and the minority is mainly comprised of Arabs. The network of relations between the majority and the minority obliges the Jewish majority to show real concern for the needs of the minority, while the minority for its part must show loyalty and feel itself a partner with equal rights in his state. The success of the pluralistic model, which means two different nations living side by side, depends on the mutual will to show understanding for the other nation, a readiness for compromise and for offering assistance, mutual trust and full equality.

The minority is faced with a variety of possibilities to act against the tyranny of the majority. The laws of the State of Israel are meant to protect all of its citizens. The minority must accept the rule of the majority, to reconcile itself to being a minority and to show full loyalty which is expressed in respecting the flag and symbols of the state, and in identification with the institutions of the state and its laws. The minority population in the State of Israel can live in honor and full equality of rights as long as it

feels identified with the values of the state and as long as their rights as citizens and human beings are respected.

The Druze have never had any aspiration for national independence, and over the years they have recognized the rights of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel and have given their full loyalty to the State of Israel. This recognition by the Druze minority in Israel of the exclusive rights of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel brings it closer to the ethnic Jewish people.

The State of Israel has invested in promoting national identity and has recognized the Druze community as an independent religious community. It has set up a system of Druze religious courts of law, established a Druze religious council, and built a separate educational system for the Druze with the aim of preserving the particularity of the Druze minority.

Leaders of the State have not discussed basic questions regarding Jewish-Druze relations in Israel and policies towards the Druze sector in an orderly manner, but they marked out for themselves certain goals in these spheres such as preference for the Druze over other minorities in the State and expansion of the lines of separation between the Druze and the Muslims, and promotion of Druze particularity.

These goals were not translated into organized working plans that include aims, working methods, time schedule, milestones, executive factors, budget, supervision and control over execution. The policy towards the Druze was consolidated gradually through dependence upon the principles of Ben-Gurion and on position papers that were prepared by advisers on Arab affairs. The General Security Agency ¹⁰ had a significant influence on the determination of policies towards minorities, including the Druze.

The most important mechanism for the formation of policies was the Central Committee which comprises the Advisor to the Prime Minister on Arab Affairs, representatives of the General Security Agency, the Israel Police, and the Military Government. Documents and proposals for discussion prepared by the advisors and/or

¹⁰ The General Security Agency (Shabak) is an intelligence organization which constitutes an important part of the Israeli intelligence community. It is subordinate to the Office of the Prime Minister and is intended to protect the State from spying, internal subversion and terror that endangers the security of the State of Israel.

the General Security Agency concerning policies towards the Arab minority in Israel, included only a brief and partial reference to the policies towards the Druze sector.

However, during its discussion of the various issues relating to the Druze sector, the Central Committee determined the principles according to which the various bodies treating this community had functioned. An analysis of these principles that were formed over a period of twenty years, allows us to summarize the policies as being composed of five levels in the following order of importance: preservation of Jewish interests, preference of Druze over other minorities, control over the mechanism of Druze leadership, support of the community leadership, and inculcation of democratic values.

The Druze population today lives in two large and well-established villages on Mount Carmel, and in sixteen villages scattered throughout the Galilee, in addition to a concentration of three Druze villages in the Golan Heights. The Druze villages in the State of Israel have expanded into the city level on the basis of its modern urban systems, post offices, educational infrastructure and employment. The traditional agrarian character of the community is gradually disappearing and instead a modern generation is being built which is aware of Western social values. In 1995, the government adopted a multi-year plan for the development of Druze and Circassian settlements. The government decided, in an unprecedented move, that the budget for the development of these settlements for the years 1995-1999 would amount to 1,190 million new shekels. The plan was carried out in full.

The main investment was made in the system of roads, in the sewage system, in general development, and in education. The results are visible until today in the Druze settlements, but budgetary difficulties have damaged the maintenance of the projects that were established. Besides this, the Zionist parties have opened their gates to members of the Druze community, and the distribution of their votes among the various political parties in the Knesset elections is similar to that of the Jews.

In the year 2000 a certain improvement occurred in the integration of the Druze in various positions of influence in the State. For the first time a Druze was appointed as a government minister; Druze were appointed as Chief Executive Officers of government ministries; the IDF promoted a Druze officer to the rank of General; the Israel Police adopted a similar step when it promoted a Druze to the rank of Commander, and the Israel Prison Service promoted a Druze to the rank of Gondar. In

2008, a Druze was appointed to the position of Military Secretary to the President of the State.

In spite of a certain improvement in the situation of the Druze, many problems have not been solved, and some of them have even become more serious. The Druze aspire to their integration within the governing systems and in senior positions in public administration; to the allocation of resources and the raising of the level of municipal services in their settlements; to the solution of the problem of insufficient land for building; to the completion of outline plans in the settlements; to the development of industries in their villages.

A correct policy that will prove to the community that its problems are being given suitable attention is important in order to preserve the positive trend in the relations of the community with the State of Israel, and to increase the sense of equality for the continued loyalty of the Druze towards the State.

The Druze community was shaped for many years by religion, while the traditional social framework and the conditions of living in the mountains helped to obscure the limitations of religion and determined the ties of the individual to his community. Therefore, the weakening of this framework in modern times can endanger the continuation of the existence and future of this community. Exposure to new places of livelihood with a fixed income, the long period of service in the IDF, the broadening of education, and the daily contact with the Jewish society which differs from that of the village, has led to changes in the way of life and outlook of the younger Druze generation which are raising many doubts in the sphere of religion and are weakening the ties with the community elders.

Against the background of the shifts and changes in Druze society, and the rise in the position of Druze community members in a variety of spheres, mainly in the education system, in military service, in employment and in politics, gives us an interesting insight into the development of relations between the Druze and the system of government in the State of Israel.

The Druze helped in establishing the State of Israel and are continuing to do so today. A high percentage of Druze youth in Israel enlist in the IDF, which proves the absolute loyalty of the community to the state. The Druze in Israel constitute an integral part of the national security of the state and are integrated in all spheres of life. For them it was merely self-understood that whoever lives in the state, benefits from its laws and its products, and believes in its aims, must be its willing partner and

defender. Mandatory military service of the Druze in the IDF expresses the desire of the Druze to bear the full burden of duties on the shoulders of every citizen in the state. This service will have deeper significance if more stress is laid on the connection between equal duties and equal rights.

Although there is a small minority of Druze who are dissatisfied with mandatory military service, the decisive majority of Druze in Israel recognizes the importance of this service and wish to continue with it. In Druze society in Israel, high estimation is given to those of the community who are serving in the army and those who are working in government institutions, mainly because they are perceived as having succeeded in overcoming the difficulties and also for the fact that members of the community are assisted through them. Serving in the IDF and in government institutions creates a new social rank which includes mainly the senior officers and holders of senior positions in the government system and in public management. They are usually well established economically, have had an academic education, and stand out as being personally successful.

Regarding the ruling authorities of the Druze in their communities and in the affairs concerning them, they enjoy local administration under a council head elected by the residents of the village. But because the regime in Israel is a centralist one, local rule is weak. The various institutions and public bodies responsible for their affairs are dependent upon government budgets.

In Israel, Druze citizens persist in demanding equality in the distribution of resources between the Jewish majority and the Druze minority. The difference between the two sectors is parallel to the difference between a developing and a modern society (equipped with larger means). The Jewish public benefits from a great influx of capital through fundraising, compensations, and personal reparations from Germany, grants, and loans from foreign bodies, and investments from abroad. This capital allows for a boost in development from which the Druze minority, like other minorities in Israel, enjoys as well.

As part of its strategy to achieve political stability amongst the Arab minority, the Israeli government applied a policy of accommodation to the Druze community after the Israeli state was established. This policy was implemented when the Israeli government decided to grant the Druze community independent status and, in 1957, status of an independent religious community. The Israeli government's decision was welcomed by most of the Druze community from the religious leaders.

The latter perceived the Israeli government's decision and the arrangements for recognition as a way to preserve the community as a cultural religious community in the new state.

Serious discussion on the subject of the Druze was not held in the Knesset until the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s. Until then, the three Druze Knesset members who served in the Second, Third, and Fourth Knesset appeared as representatives of the Arab sector, and were therefore active in promoting the development of Arab villages in general, including those of the Druze.

In recent years, the Druze education system is marked by significant changes and alterations. The Druze in the Diaspora defined themselves from the religious viewpoint as Druze who are part of the Muslim Arab nation just as their brothers in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. This identity allows them to maintain ties with the members of their community in their homeland and with the Arab world.

Even among the Druze in the diaspora, there were attempts in every concentration of them to promote their affinity with the values of their heritage and religion, and the ties with their community and their homeland. For this purpose, organizations and clubs for the Druze were established in Australia, Brazil and Argentine. In the United States, the American Druze Society holds a meeting every year which has turned into the World Druze Conference in which even Druze from Israel participate. The organization also publishes a journal called *Our Heritage*, and a series of books, *The Tawhid Faith*, which deals with explaining the principles of the Druze faith.

Therefore, the government of Israel as well as the relevant institutions should initiate projects among the Druze for the advancement of academic education, society, infrastructure, industry, and the like, within the framework of affirmative action, for a period of ten years. Such a policy is necessary in order to develop the Druze villages and the young Druze leadership who will bear the burden of the Druze community and the nation. Of course this would include employment of Druze in key positions throughout public service, since the Druze have expertise not only in matters of security and the army.

Stress should be given to the strong cohesion of the Druze community, the solidarity between its members, the religious ethos of brotherhood and group unity which are the most well preserved values in the Druze heritage. The Druze do not wish to an independent national state, but they live within the state in perfect loyalty

and cooperation with the Jews. The Druze in the State of Israel constitute a national minority, and regard themselves as an integral part of the State of Israel. The State of Israel is perceived as a model of ethnic democracy, in which the minority receives all the civil and political rights that enable it to preserve its culture and identity, and does not deny him any effort to improve his status. On the other hand, the ethnic majority rules in the state.

For the Druze minority, the ethnic democracy model preserves their identity and particularity and responds to their aspirations. among the Druze exiles, there were attempts in every concentration of them to promote their affinity with the values of their heritage and religion. For this purpose, organizations and clubs for the Druze were established in Australia, Brazil and Argentine.

In the United States, the American Druze Society holds a meeting every year which has turned into the World Druze Conference in which even Druze from Israel participate. The organization also publishes a journal called *Our Heritage*. The Druze community managed to maintain their religion, identity and her tradition for a thousand and two years.

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