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Identity, Power and Piety The Druzes in Syria

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Middle East
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Last November, the Syrian province of al-Suwaïda was again in the news – Arab and European news, that is. The Syrian media remained silent on the matter. The province, better known as ‘Druze Mountain’, is also called ‘Hawran Mountain’ and ‘Arab Mountain’, the name confusion already hinting at the complicated identity of its inhabitants. It was, once again, surrounded by army troops. What had happened?

The Druze Mountain has historically been a frontier region, a major contact zone between steppe and agricultural lands. In November, in incidents reminiscent of a century ago, local Bedouins, hard pressed by three years of drought, had led their herds of sheep and goats into the small-scale fruit plantations (*bustans*) for which the province of al-Suwaïda, primary wine producing region of Syria, is known. The Druze inhabitants, outraged by the imminent destruction of their plantations, drove out the flocks and attacked the Bedouins. The ensuing skirmishes cost the lives of 5 to 10 people, all Druzes, and injured 150 to 200 persons, mostly Druzes. The fatalities and injuries can be ascribed to the great number of illegal firearms in the hands of the Bedouins. As always, when conflict arose in the area, the main road linking al-Suwaïda, capital of the province, with Damascus was closed. The province sent a petition to Bashar al-Asad, the young president of Syria, ensuring him of their support and asking for protection. Druze university students demonstrated in Damascus, demanding government support for their people. President Bashar al-Asad personally called *shaykhal-aql* (highest Druze religious office holder), Husain al-Jarbu’a, on the phone.

Discourse on the Druzes

This is the gist of the incident, as reported in a number of news articles and by word of mouth in Syria, an obvious conflict between ‘desert and sown’. The stories woven into the incident are of major interest. The first articles, for example, reported that Bedouins had seized Druze land and tried to build a mosque there; other stories purported that it all began with Christians, who had been living for a long time in the mountain. The latter stories held that that the Druzes only came to defend the Christians against the Bedouins. Virtually all observers were awaiting a new ‘Druze revolt’ against the Syrian government (only six months after the death of Hafiz al-Asad). One news report stated that the governor’s office was burnt down (the fact is that it was invaded by Druze youths and some windows were broken).

These stories hint at the discourse on the Druzes, both by others and by the Druzes themselves. First, virtually any event involving the province is automatically given a touch of sectarianism, hence the story of a mosque amidst a conflict over land use. Then, on the part of the Druzes, an apolo-

getic discourse evolved early on, which represented them as protectors of the Christian minority in their territory. Sultan al-Atrash, the Druze leader of the anti-colonial ‘Great Revolt’ against the French in the 1920s, for example, chose as his constant companion and signer of international petitions a Christian from his territory – a political strategy to defuse European sectarian suspicion. Governments, starting with the Ottomans, and including the French Mandate and Syrian president Shishakli in the 1950s, had to deal with Druze revolts, all of which constitute a ‘history of rebellion’ from which the Druzes continue to derive political capital and which they evoke whenever a crisis erupts. In particular, the revolt against the French under Druze hero Sultan al-Atrash has been skilfully utilized by the Druzes to construct an image of selfless patriotism for themselves.¹

The difference of the Druzes translates itself into the many names of their territory. Jabal Druze is the oldest designation. Yet, the sectarian content of the name is an issue in present-day Syria, where *ta’ifiyya* (sectarianism) is one of the greatest taboos, and so the more geographical term ‘Mountain of the Hawran’ is preferred. The politically correct term is ‘province of al-Suwaïda’, and the term Jabal al-‘Arab (i.e. mountain of the Arabs, stressing the Arabism of the Druzes) was bestowed upon the area by urban nationalists for Druze achievements against French colonialism. The Druzes have clout in Syria. Not all provinces receive personal phone calls from the president in times of crisis.

The role of Sultan al-Atrash

The Syrian Druzes can be seen as the most ‘secular’ of the Druze groupings in the Middle East. Unlike Lebanon, where sectarianism is built into the political system and where the Druzes are a party-turned-militia-turned-party, and Israel, where the state put them into the position of a special and non-Arab minority, in Syria the Druzes are represented in the political system as a *muhafaza*, a province. As such, al-Suwaïda sends six deputies to parliament, and provides one minister and one member of the Ba’th party’s Regional Command. The long periods of virtual autonomy that the Druzes enjoyed in Syria, the powerful role as a nationalist symbol assumed by Druze hero Sultan al-Atrash, and the secular political discourse of the present state with its taboo on sectarianism, have encouraged the traditional separation of religious and secular spheres within Druzedom.

Yet it was their religious leader, the *shaykh al-aql*, with whom Bashar al-Asad reportedly spoke, not the (non-Druze) governor of the province, nor the local secretary of the Ba’th party. Until the death of Sultan al-Atrash in 1982, the president’s phone call, to be understood as a symbol for who is representing the Druze community, would doubtlessly have been to the latter, a worldly leader. Underneath the official representation as a province lurks the unofficial representation as a religious/ethnic community. This raises the question of power sharing within the Druze community itself, and the

relation between religious and secular spheres within Druzedom.

The separation of the spheres

The separation of the religious and the secular has traditionally been expressed in the terms denoting elites. The worldly sheikh was called *shaykh judhmani* (corporeal sheikh), the religious sheikh was being called *shaykhruhi* (spiritual sheikh). While all older men (traditionally above the age of 40) are expected to ‘enter the religion’ by shaving their heads, donning religious garb and attending prayers, only a select group of religious sheikhs maintain a reputation within the community. A religious sheikh, also called *juwwayyid* (noble, high-minded) establishes himself either by the path of piety and holiness, without this requiring him to know much about the mysteries of the religion, or through expert knowledge of the holy scriptures. The highest rank is held by those able to combine both holiness and knowledge. They lead an ascetic life, nourishing themselves exclusively from the pure products of nature, which they cultivate themselves. Their task is to channel divine blessings to the community through their rituals and meditation, undertaken in the *khalwa*, a sacred place of congregation outside the village and thus removed from the political factionalism of the secular sphere. The spiritual sheikhs are absolutely forbidden to become involved in politics.

The office of the shaykh al-caql

In view of the rejection of worldly power in the sphere of spirituality, the nature of the office of *shaykh al-aql* is somewhat ambiguous. The *shaykh al-aqls* among the Syrian Druzes have historically been derived from three families: the Hajari, the Jarbu’a, and the Hannawi. The candidates have been chosen from among these families ‘following Druze traditions and religious rites’, a privilege they defended vigorously against critics from within and the state from without. In Syria, the *shaykh al-aqls* have been much less dependent on powerful families than in Lebanon, where the families of the Junblat and the Arslan nominate their own candidates. The office of the *shaykh al-aql* was in all probability invented by the state, i.e. the Ottomans, who wanted a religious spokesman for the Druze community. The first recorded incident of a Syrian *shaykh al-aql*, al-Hajari, representing the community *vis-à-vis* the state occurred in the sectarian crisis of 1860.

Today’s *shaykh al-aql*, Husain Jarbu’a, was flown back from Venezuela, which is home to a large Druze emigrant community, when the previous office holder in his family died. Since he had been out of the country for years, the family’s choice created a stir in the community and gave rise to rumours about his moral and spiritual qualities. He turned out to be politically savvy, profiting from the power vacuum left by the death of Sultan al-Atrash and monopolizing power within the community. This he achieved by reviving and expanding an old Druze ‘convent’, Ain al-Zaman, into a religious centre.

When in 1991 the Egyptian paper *al-Ahram al-Masa’i* published a fatwa that denied the Druze faith its place within Islam, the confident *shaykh al-aql* Jarbu’a dispatched a letter to Egyptian president Husni Mubarak, expressing his hope that ‘the mufti of Egypt did not know what he was doing by issuing this fatwa. For, if he knew what he was doing, it would be a catastrophe for Islam.’ The president’s and the mufti’s offices looked into the matter. Egypt’s president wrote back to the Druzes, stating that the mufti, Dr Tantawi, denied ever having issued such a fatwa. The newspaper printed the explanation that the fatwa in question stemmed from 1936, and that the current mufti of Egypt had nothing to do with it.

Outlook

Since the separation of spheres has been upheld longer in Syria than in the other Druze communities, arguably until the death of Sultan al-Atrash in 1982, the arcane discipline has been strong and reform movements within the religious sphere have been weak. In conversations, a handful of young men are sometimes mentioned who reportedly ‘wanted to write’, but were discouraged in the end. The Syrian Druzes learned about Lebanese Abdallah Najjar’s controversial revelations of the faith largely through Sami Makarim’s more moderate ‘counter-book’, and through his lecture visits.²

There are signs, however, of a new debate on the Druze faith in Syria. One book in five volumes about the Unitarians, a term the Druzes prefer, has already been published. Another Syrian book project, treating the Unitarians as Gnostics, was presented at a recent meeting of the American Druze Society. The Syrian Druzes are beginning to debate their faith, further breaking down the separation of the spheres which, for better or worse, likens them to the other Druze communities in the Middle East. ◆

Notes

1. See my *Rebellions in the Druze Mountain. Ethnicity and Integration of a Rural Community in Syria from the Ottoman Empire to Syrian Independence*, Gotha: Justus Perthes, 1996 (German), and ‘Coming to Terms with Failed Revolutions: Historiography in Syria, Germany and France’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1999, pp. 17-44
2. Najjar, Abdallah (1973), *The Druze. Millennium Scrolls Revealed*, and Makarim, Sami (1974), *The Druze Faith*.

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Sultan al-Atrash, leader of the anti-colonial revolt and President Nasser in 1960.



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