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## Druze

### Profile

The Druze constitute around three per cent of the population and are the third largest religious minority in Syria. They are located primarily in Jabal Druze (also known as Jabal al-Arab or Jabal Hawran) on the south-western border abutting Jordan, but with significant communities on the Golan (Jawlan), seventeen villages in Jabal al-A'la, roughly midway between Aleppo and Antioch in the north-west, and four villages just south of Damascus.

Druze are ethnically Arab and Arabic speaking. Their monotheistic religion incorporates many beliefs from Islam, Judaism and Christianity, and is also influenced by Greek philosophy and Hinduism. Druze have not proselytized since the 11th century, and the religion remains closed to outsiders.

In spite of the purges of Druze in the 1960s, like other communities, they share in government though the reins of real power remain in Alawi hands. Like the Alawis, the Druze have supported secular nationalism but remain anxious to be considered within the fold of Islam, even if some feel their beliefs barely merit it, and fear being disavowed by the Sunni majority, especially at a time of Sunni revivalism.

### Historical context

The first Druze settlers probably arrived in the Jabal Druze from Mount Lebanon and Aleppo at the end of the seventeenth century. Their chief concerns were to establish communities where they would not be molested by Ottoman authorities or the Sunni population, and that were defensible against Bedouin raids. Jabal Druze was ideal. As a result of the events of 1860 in Mount Lebanon, the Jabal experienced a massive influx of Druze migrants from Lebanon and the population rocketed, as the south and eastern slopes of the Jabal were colonized. Throughout the nineteenth century the Ottomans unsuccessfully attempted to subdue the Druze into submission to taxation and conscription like the rest of the province of Syria. They only succeeded in 1910.

Alongside a religious leadership based on heredity within three clans, the real leaders of the Jabal were the various clan leaders who mediated the outside world for their followers, who were composed both of kin and dependent families who settled in the clan's villages.

The Druze responded ambivalently to the short-lived Arab kingdom of 1919-20, and welcomed the establishment of an independent Druze territory by France. But certain leaders were profoundly suspicious of French intentions and in 1925 a major revolt, in unison with Arab nationalists in Damascus, nearly ejected France from the country. After the revolt's suppression in 1927, two trends were discernible in Druze society. The old established notable class clung to separate status, trusting France to uphold it, while the younger generation and those of lower status favoured Arab nationalism. Many of these joined the army and in due course the Ba'ath party, and helped defeat the separatists.

During the 1960s the Druze were purged from power within the army, the Ba'ath and security services after an unsuccessful coup attempt by a Druze officer.

About 15,000 Druze have lived under Israeli military occupation on the Golan since 1967. The Druze have resisted attempts to seduce them into Israeli citizenship. As one Golani Druze remarked, 'Israel may be a Jewish democracy and Syria a dictatorship, but I shall always be part of the body politic in Arab Syria, something I can never be in

Jewish Israel.' In fact, Druze in the Golan from the Israeli side can often be seen standing by the security fence and speaking to their relatives and friends on the Syrian side.

## **Current issues**

A growing influx of Jewish settlers among Druze communities in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights led to tensions in 2007. Druze complain bitterly of right-wing settlers bent on dominance of the local villages. In October, over 30 Druze and Israeli police officers were wounded in riots in the Golan Heights village of Peki'in.

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