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The Case for a Druze State

By Yoram Hazony, July 22, 2015

This essay was co-authored with Ofir Haivry. A version of this article appeared in Tablet Magazine on July 7, 2015. You can read it [here](#).

As the Syrian state unravels, the United States and other Western powers are finding it increasingly difficult to see how they can stem the rise of jihadist organizations like al-Qaida and the Islamic State (Isis), while limiting the unfolding humanitarian and security disaster that has left more than 200,000 dead and made refugees of close to 10 million people so far.

The extent of the current U.S. predicament in Syria has been made clear by the Defense Department, which on June 18 reported that attempts to recruit a small rebel force of 5,000 fighters from the largely Sunni Arab population of Syria that would be both “moderate” and willing to devote itself to fighting Isis continue to falter. After months of effort, no more than “100 to 200” such individuals willing to join the U.S. effort have been identified. In Defense Secretary Ashton Carter’s [words](#): “It turns out to be very hard to identify people who meet both of those criteria.”

And for good reason. U.S. policy is asking these Sunni fighters to turn their guns against their own kinsmen in Isis, who are fighting a desperate war to overthrow their longtime oppressor, the brutal Alawite minority regime of Bashar al-Assad. As long as Assad is still massacring the Sunni population in his bid to stay in power, the concept of recruiting Sunnis to fight Isis will remain implausible in the extreme.

In the meantime, just a few kilometers from the failing U.S. recruitment points in southern Syria, a potential fighting force of tens of thousands of Syrian Druze is asking to be armed so that they can fight the Isis and al-Qaida formations that have repeatedly attacked their villages and have attempted to force Druze under their rule to convert to Islam. Since the only prominent successes against jihadists in Syria have been by the self-governing Kurdish region in northern Syria, might the solution in the south be to back the establishment of a self-governing Druze region along the Israeli and Jordanian border? So far, neither American nor Israeli leaders have indicated their support for

what would seem to be the most effective action that could be taken in this area, both tactically and in humanitarian terms.

II.

In the United States, the two most famous Druze are probably the late host of *American Top 40* Casey Kasem, and human rights lawyer Amal Alamuddin, recently married to George Clooney. But in the Middle East, the Druze are legendary as fierce fighters, famous for taking on larger powers that threatened their mountain retreats. In Israel, the Druze community is known and revered for their prominent role in the Israeli armed forces. There are about 140,000 Druze in Israel, and the community has served with distinction in the Israel Defense Forces since the 1950s, some of them rising to top positions like Col. Ghassan Alian, current commander of the Golani infantry brigade; Brig.-Gen. Imad Fares, who commanded the Givati Brigade and later the Galilee Division; and Maj.-Gen. Yusef Mishlay, who became a member of the IDF general staff and head of the Home Front Command. A Druze member of parliament, Ayub Kara, is presently a deputy minister in Israel's Likud government. In November, Israelis from across the political and religious spectrum attended the funeral of a Druze police officer, Zidan Sayif, who lost his life while attempting to save worshipers in a Jerusalem synagogue that had been infiltrated by terrorists.

The Druze are a monotheistic people who trace their lineage back to the biblical Jethro, father-in-law of Moses. Calling themselves "the Unitarians" (al-Muwahidun), they adhere to a secretive religion based on a combination of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Gnostic doctrines. (Traveling through the region in the 1100s, Benjamin of Tudela reported that the Druze are "mountain dwellers, monotheists, who believe in reincarnation and love the Jews.") Druze are regarded as heretics by Islam and have suffered a long history of persecution and attempts to force their conversion. Today there are perhaps 1.5 million Druze, with the overwhelming majority concentrated in the region in which Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan intersect. Approximately 750,000 now live in the area surrounding the Druze capital of Suwayda in southern Syria, constituting the majority population in much of the border region with Israel and Jordan. Under the Ottomans, the Druze enjoyed a high degree of local self-rule under hereditary princes. From 1921 to 1936, a state called the Druze Mountain State (Jabal al-Druze) existed under French tutelage.

In conversation with the authors in recent weeks, Israeli Druze religious and military figures have expressed frustration with the inaction on the part of Western and Israeli policymakers who have the power to arm them against Isis and al-Qaida (called Jabhat al-Nusra, the “Nusra Front” in Syria).

The most important religious figure among the Israeli Druze is Sheikh Muwafak Tarif. Tarif, who is in constant contact with religious Druze leaders from Lebanon and Syria, paints a stark picture of what is approaching for the Syrian Druze. He warns that a jihadist massacre of Druze in Syria is imminent and says that if it materializes, many Israeli Druze, including himself, will cross the border to fight alongside their brothers—just as Jews would have, if a Jewish community abroad was being massacred.

“Druze are not Yazidis,” he said. “They will not flee from the jihadists. They will stay in their villages and fight, even if it means death. Israel has to decide if it wants to watch a bloodbath or do something about it.”

However, he is quick to emphasize that he is not asking for American or Israeli “boots on the ground.” “The Druze in Syria do not want someone else to fight their battles,” he said. “They are asking for only two things from the West: Supplies of military and civilian equipment that would enable them to fight back the jihadist armies attacking them, and air cover that would neutralize the jihadist artillery now regularly bombarding their villages.”

But his voice grew particularly still as he added one more point, perhaps as important to him as the others: “Many Druze who are veterans of the best Israeli units are requesting that they be permitted to go as individuals, to fight alongside their Syrian brethren, to defend their villages, and to train them militarily. This too is something that Israel should consider seriously granting us.”

A high-ranking Druze officer presently serving in the Israel Defense Forces echoed Tarif’s frustration with Western and Israeli responses to the Syrian crisis. “Certainly the hour of decision is fast approaching for the Druze,” he said. “But I believe this is also an hour of decision for Israel. Israeli policy is currently in total denial about the deep changes going on around us in the region. Like the frog sitting in a pot being slowly heated, afraid to jump out and hoping the water will simply cool off by itself, we might soon find ourselves in a pot of boiling water with no possible way of getting out. Do we really believe the new sectarian-jihadist dimension of regional conflict will simply

disappear? Do we want to be left with only a choice between [Iranian-backed] Hezbollah or Isis sitting on our borders? If not, we have to consider other options, including helping the Druze establish an autonomous region on our borders before it is too late.”

III.

For decades, the Syrian Druze community has been loyal to Assad’s Alawite-dominated government, which combined a ruthless reign of terror over the country’s overwhelming Sunni Muslim majority, with a system of distributing the spoils of power to its allied minorities, the Druze among them. Indeed, on June 23, Druze leaders in Suwayda issued a press release once again reaffirming that “we depend only on our Syrian identity for protection, and that Suwayda is an indivisible and inseparable part of Syria, our motherland.”

But relations between the Syrian Druze and the Assad regime are not quite what such protestations of loyalty imply. The Alawite-controlled regime has indeed protected the Druze from the Sunni Muslim majority. But it has also conducted a systematic effort to suppress the traditional leading Druze families, especially the Al-Atrash clan, who come closest to being hereditary leaders of the Druze people. After two generations of political repression by the Assads, the only remaining influential figures among the Syrian Druze are their religious leaders, foremost among them Sheikh al-Aql (“wise elder”) Hamoud al-Hinawi, now generally regarded as the leading figure among Syrian Druze.

When the Syrian civil war began in 2011, most of the Druze religious leadership attempted to remain formally attached to the regime, while at the same time refusing to denounce Druze defectors from Assad’s army. Sheikh al-Hinawi’s position, however, was from early on one of neutrality. Initially it was a dangerous position to embrace in Assad’s Syria, and events have proved him right. In the last year, as Assad’s forces have grown thin in southern Syria and al-Qaida and Isis contingents have begun raiding their villages, growing numbers of Druze have openly distanced themselves from Assad’s regime. Druze sources estimate that 14,000 young Druze are now wanted by the regime for fleeing conscription. Those who are still joining the army do so on condition that they be posted only within the Druze-populated areas.

At the same time, the Druze have been accumulating what weapons they can and forming self-defense militias. In most cases, these are still village militias, but some larger organizations have also been formed. Numbers are hard to come by, but the most prominent of these militias seems to be the “Army of the Unitarians” (Jaysh al-Muwahidun). Much like the Kurdish militias in the north, the Army of the Unitarians was established in early 2013 as a response to attacks on Druze civilians. It has been cooperating with Assad’s forces insofar as they are fighting off rebel attacks in the Druze Mountain area. But like other Druze militias, Jaysh al-Muwahidun mostly eschews the symbols of the Alawite-dominated Syrian state, and instead its insignia features an Iwo-Jima-like raising of a Druze-national flag.



Druze militia logo. (courtesy The Herzl Institute)

The past year has also seen the emergence of a new movement called “Sheikhs of Dignity” headed by the maverick Sheikh Waheed al-Balous. This movement also has a militia, composed primarily of the religiously devout, with peculiarly many sheiks, including Balous himself, taking prominent part in the fighting against jihadist attacks. Think of it as a militia of “fighting rabbis,” and you get the sense of centrality of armed self-defense in the Druze tradition. Balous has made a number of speeches against the regime, including a video posted online in which he declares: “We have ended mandatory conscription.” Indeed, Balous says that it is religiously forbidden for Druze to assist the authorities in drafting young men, “whether they are of conscription age, or wanted for desertion, or for reserve duty.”

Balous has lately withdrawn from view for what he termed a “spiritual” retreat and recuperation—obviously having gone underground to evade Assad’s assassins, who regard him as a thorn in their side that has to be removed.

IV.

One need not look far to find the reasons for the increasingly independent line of the Druze leadership in Syria. The Assad regime has only a tenuous presence on the Druze

Mountain, from which it has been removing its heavy weapons to keep them from falling to the enemy. No one believes that when al-Qaida or Isis finally make their move against the Druze in Suwayda, Assad's loyalists are going to save them.

Al-Qaida and Isis are sharply aware of the Druze vulnerability, and they have been progressively turning up the pressure in the hope of creating a dynamic of despair and surrender. After the Nusra Front wrested the province of Idlib in northern Syria from Assad's forces this spring, it declared what it calls Dar al-Qaida (or "Al-Qaidaland"), in which it enforces its interpretation of Islam on the population. In March, 18 Druze villages—some 20,000 people who are geographically detached from the rest of the Druze population—were forced to accede to a capitulation in which they agreed to their "conversion" to Sunni Islam and the destruction of traditional Druze shrines. Even this, however, did not suffice to dissipate the hatred of the jihadists toward the Druze heretics, and on June 11, a group of Nusra fighters went on a killing spree in the Druze village of Qalb Lawza, leaving 23 dead and many more wounded.

In the south, al-Qaida and forces allied with it have been closing in on the Druze Mountain area from the west, even as Isis has taken control of Bir Qasb on its northeastern side. In both cases, the jihadists control Bedouin Arab villages on the outskirts of the Druze-populated area, from which they launch periodic attacks. Recognizing that the Druze Mountain is for the moment still too big a bite to swallow, al-Qaida has been concentrating its firepower on an isolated cluster of Druze villages situated near the border with Israel on the slopes of Mount Hermon. Since June 16, al-Qaida has repeatedly attacked and shelled the Druze villages of Talal, Beit Jan, Harpa, and Hader.

In the face of this growing threat, the Lebanese Druze's socialist leader, Walid Jumblatt, has been outspoken in arguing that the Syrian Druze have no choice but to seek "reconciliation" with the fanatical Sunni forces closing in on them. The Lebanese media have quoted Jumblatt as denying that al-Qaida is a terrorist organization and calling for talks with Isis—although, as happened in Idlib, such discussions could only be about the Druze disarming and accepting Islam. In pursuit of an agreement to save the Druze, Jumblatt has in recent days reached out to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. But in line with his tilt to al-Qaida, he dismisses support from non-Muslim powers out of hand: "Please let me be far from the empathy of Obama," he says. And in an interview last week: "I don't want at any price the so-called help of the Israelis."

Jumblatt's views are far from representing the Syrian Druze. But in the absence of any opening from the West, the strategy of accommodation and surrender that he proposes has to be regarded as a grim but all-too-real possibility.

V.

For obvious reasons, Israeli officials are quite wary of public declarations about what is to be done in Syria. However not for attribution, several of them have voiced their concerns about what is transpiring across the border. A colonel in the IDF Intelligence Corps confirmed in a background briefing that the IDF has made serious preparations for the eventuality of a mass influx of Druze refugees fleeing from jihadist massacres in the direction of the Golan Heights. Now, he said, there is also the beginning of thinking within the IDF about other, more pro-active options, in keeping with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's statement on June 17 that Israel will "do what is necessary" to prevent a massacre of Druze on its borders.

But the IDF colonel throws cold water on the idea that even a potentially larger role of some kind for the IDF is sufficient to deal with changed circumstances in southern Syria. "It is important to understand that this is a process that cannot be conducted only within the military and security circles," he told us. "Besides tactical and operational military aspects, this is an issue with clear political and moral dimensions, which cannot be decided by the army, but rather has to be decided within the public sphere. Military involvement carries a price. Abstaining from involvement also does. The IDF will carry out successfully whatever goals it is required to achieve, but someone has to set these goals."

In Israeli decision-making circles—both Jewish and Druze—the last two months have seen the first sustained conversations about the possibility that Druze autonomy or even an independent state might be the preferable outcome of this crisis. Some prominent Israeli figures who are not currently serving in official roles have been willing to state publicly what many others are voicing privately: Uzi Dayan, a major-general (res.) and former head of Israel's National Security Council, has recently called for Israel to provide the Syrian Druze weapons, military training, and logistical support, as well as emphasizing that it is in Israel's interest that there be a "friendly entity" controlling Syrian territory bordering on Israel. Similarly, Zvi Hauser, a former cabinet secretary under Netanyahu, has said in an [interview with Ofir Haivry](#) in *Al-Monitor* that an independent Druze state may very well become a component of a larger pro-Western

alignment that could also include the Kurds and other anti-jihadi populations seeking self-definition in the current territory of Syria.

As the majority population along large stretches of the Syrian frontier with both Jordan and Israel, the Druze, like the Kurds in the north, have something significant to offer in exchange for Western assistance in attaining self-government and the capacity to defend their people. Neither Israel nor Jordan have tolerable options at the moment with respect to the future disposition of their northern border. Whether it is Iran and Hezbollah or a Salafist Sunni regime dominated by al-Qaida or Isis that ultimately consolidates control over this frontier, it is clear that these pro-Western governments will eventually face a formidable and determined terrorist enemy to their north.

At the moment, the only realistic alternative to these outcomes would appear to be the creation of an autonomous and perhaps ultimately independent Druze region: one that will have the resources to defend itself, to absorb persecuted Druze from Idlib and elsewhere, and, in collaboration with other elements in the region, to serve as a forward defensive line for Jordan and Israel, and for the West more generally. The Druze appear to have both the potential and the motivation to field a force several times larger than the few thousand fighters that the West has been dreaming about for Southern Syria, so far without success. But Western leaders have for the most part maintained a thunderous silence. As yet another minority people in Syria and Iraq faces destruction, the ball is again in our court.