

Addressing the Challenges of Israel's Druze Community: Urgent Steps for National Security

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Given the widening gap between the strong loyalty of the Druze community toward the State of Israel and the fundamental problems faced by this community across numerous fields, the state should urgently address the issue and work toward a comprehensive solution. This solution should encompass the social and economic levels, as well as national security considerations. The Druze community is in dire social and economic straits due to years of poor policy, which was based on the supervision and control of the traditional leadership. This policy has rewarded the leadership and bought their complicity at the expense of the good of the community. Furthermore, the passage of the Nation-State Law, declaring Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, was seen as a severe blow to the status of the Druze community in Israeli society. The community has also been affected by the Kaminitz Law, which limits construction, at a time when there is a severe housing shortage. These laws are coupled with the community's economic hardship, which the Druze citizens perceive as being caused by discriminatory measures. Moreover, the policy regarding the Druze community as a marginalized group, most of whom live in areas that are under constant security threat, needs to change. If Israel continues to ignore the problems facing the Druze community, its members will feel a sense of abandonment, which could potentially jeopardize their relationship with the state.

The Druze community has been an integral part of the State of Israel ever since its establishment. Its members serve in the security forces, have fought in Israel's wars—including the current conflict in the Gaza Strip—and more than 430 Druze citizens have fallen in service of their country. The Druze community was and remains a national and security asset, and it continues to contribute to national security. Although the Druze community is heterogeneous in its political positions, there is consensus about the community's links to the State of Israel, together with an expectation that the state will treat them like equal citizens.

The wording of Israel's Declaration of Independence and statements by the leaders of the nascent nation, who promised that the Druze would enjoy equal rights as citizens, encouraged the community. Therefore, they viewed the discrimination from which they suffered over the years—from land expropriation to discrimination in the workplace and state-run institutions—as nothing more than circumstantial and held on to the expectation that these injustices would be rectified in time and that they would enjoy the equality they longed for. In practice, the Druze community found itself in a dire social and economic situation because of years of incorrect policy, which was based on the supervision and control of the traditional leadership (cooption). The purpose of this policy of supervision—which, since the establishment of the State of Israel, has been the responsibility of the Central Security

Committee, the body that oversaw the Israeli government's policies toward the Arab population—is to control the Arab minority. The system is complex and multifaceted; it included direct supervision by the Shin Bet, preventing the development of independent industry and alternative sources of income; supervision of the education system and the integration of “biased” teachers; as well as the granting of favors to clan chiefs—at the expense of the community and often to its detriment. All of this has occurred as Israel excludes the Druze community from the public sphere. This creates the appearance of satisfaction, which the community leadership disseminates, while covering up the bitterness and frustration of the entire community at the discrimination and prejudice that they have experienced.

The Problems Facing the Druze Community

The Nation-State Law: The Druze community does not aspire to self-determination within Israel. They have no problem with the Jewish identity or with the Jewish people's right to a homeland. Nonetheless, they oppose the Nation-State Law, which they perceive as a low point in the State of Israel's relations with them. They believe that the law de facto enshrines the ongoing lack of equality they have experienced, as it frames them as subjects subordinate to the laws of the land but not entitled to enjoy full and equal rights as citizens. (“We are Jewish when it comes to duties, but Arabs when it comes to rights.) Thus, according to the Druze, the Nation-State Law grants only Jews the right to expand their communities—which the Druze also desperately need. Moreover, the law relegates the standing of the Arabic language, which is part of their culture, to a low status.

The precarious state of the Druze local authorities: The Druze local authorities are characterized as mismanaging community affairs due to poor organizational culture, rampant corruption, a lack of the requisite internal oversight, and attempts by criminal organizations to take over and loot resources, therefore posing an existential threat to the Druze authorities. Currently a number of Druze local authorities are under the control of criminal organizations.

Due to the lack of industrial zones and income from property tax, the financial situation of Druze local authorities is poor. As a result, their operational capabilities are limited and the level of service they provide to the public is extremely low. The “backyard” policy, which typifies the government's treatment of Druze communities, has exacerbated the problems faced by the local authorities. The multi-year plan that was approved for the Druze community may include significant funding, but the local authority is not capable of implementing it. Meanwhile, the Authority for the Economic Development of the Arab, Druze, and Circassian Sectors has no operative powers since it is merely a supervisory body.

The proliferation of crime and violence: The police and other law-enforcement bodies have been demonstrably ineffective. Over the past three years, 29 members of the Druze community, including four women, have been murdered. In relative terms, this would equate to 2,260 homicides in Israeli society in general. The majority of these crimes remain unsolved, and according to members of the Druze community, the police do not conduct thorough investigations. In addition, dozens of shootings have taken place, causing varying degrees of

injury. Shootings as part of a protection racket are commonplace. Police have not taken action in any of these cases, and they remain unsolved.

Crime is also causing major socioeconomic damage to the Druze community. Protection rackets are forcing newly established companies out of business, making the economic situation among young Druze even worse. According to estimates, crime within the Druze local authorities has reached the level where it makes up at least 10 percent of the local authorities' budgets. Crime also influences the democratic process and creates an atmosphere of terror and anxiety.

Planning and construction: The Druze community is especially worried by the issue of planning and construction, which manifests itself, among other things, in a severe housing shortage. The Druze believe that the state is deliberately limiting construction in their communities and is persecuting them by leveling expensive fines for construction violations and overzealous implementation of the Kaminitz Law, which does not permit regulated construction in the absence of approved masterplans and a shortage of land for the expansion of the communities.

The legal and bureaucratic difficulties surrounding building permits and the plethora of demolition orders make Druze citizens feel discriminated against—and that sense of discrimination is especially acute for those who have served in the Israeli security forces. Moreover, severe infrastructure problems in Druze communities make it almost impossible to redistribute and recategorize land, or to turn privately owned land into public buildings or housing. The housing shortage, in addition to other factors, has led to a marked drop in the natural birthrate and to the shrinking of the Druze community.

Education and higher education: The educational system in the Druze community is in a terrible state. The Education Ministry may brag about the high rate of Druze students who complete their high school matriculation exams, but the reality is different. Only a small number of the Druze community continue to obtain a higher education. Furthermore, many who have acquired higher education are unable to find work. There are around 4,000 Druze women who studied education and are currently unemployed. In general, the employment rate among Druze women is around 40 percent.

Although the percentage of Druze women in academia is significantly higher than the number of men, it has led to a serious social problem, and has caused an increasing number of marriages to end in divorce. Therefore, Israel must urgently work to make higher education more accessible to Druze men, including the removal of barriers, integrating Druze academics into the teaching staff, and academic employment guidance.

Lack of adequate representation in government companies and the civil service: The Druze community lacks adequate representation in the civil service. There are precious few Druze citizens among the highest-ranking government officials, within government companies and organizations such as the National Insurance Institute. One result of this is that the level of service provided to members of the Druze community and interest in their needs is poor and inadequate.

The Urgency of Addressing the Problems of the Druze Community

The abovementioned problems, which have accumulated over the years, weigh very heavily on the Druze community. Both the Nation-State Law and the Kaminitz Law have exacerbated the frustration of the Druze community with the state. These sentiments are getting worse and are a stark warning that the Druze community could become alienated from the State of Israel.

Israeli decision-makers and the Jewish majority in the country should engage in a system-wide rethinking of the position and rights of the Druze community. The time to act is now, especially given the many sacrifices that the Druze community has made defending the country, including in the current conflict in the Gaza Strip. Israel should act to fundamentally change the basis of the relationship between the State of Israel and the Druze, who should be given full civil equality, which will help solve their problems.

What, then, should the State of Israel do?

1. Adopt policies that view the Druze as citizens with equal rights and engage with them in a way that is based on full citizenship, without the clan leaders acting as intermediaries, while also encouraging the emergence of young leaders who are committed to the good of the community.
2. Do away with policies that ignore the needs of the Druze on issues such as the fight against crime, corruption, and inadequate management of local authorities, while ensuring that local government is efficient and progressive.
3. Promote programs to make suitable employment accessible to Druze women and young people, alongside integrating Druze citizens in the workplace, in government offices, and affiliated bodies—including in senior positions—as a catalyst for systemic change.
4. Strengthen the connection with the Jewish population, by advancing Druze academics, studying Druze traditions in various forums, and ensuring their media exposure—all of which would help them integrate into the wider Israeli society.
5. Support the economic potential in various fields, such as tourism, which can contribute to the growth of the Druze economy. The potential is huge and tapping into it could provide the State of Israel with significant income.
6. Engage in an overall change in policies toward the Druze on the Golan Heights and invest in developing Druze communities, including infrastructure projects such as transportation.

Conclusion

The responsibility for creating a positive turning point in the relationship between the State of Israel and the Druze community lies with the state and its institutions. Taking immediate steps regarding the abovementioned measures could kickstart the necessary corrective process, bring the Druze citizens back into the national fold and toward the Jewish majority, strengthen their sense of belonging to the state, improve their integration into Israeli society,

thereby promoting stability and national security. To this end, the Jewish population and the political leadership should undertake a profound change in their conception; they should invest time and resources; they should cooperate with representatives of the Druze community over planning and implementation; they should address the profound problems facing the community; and, most of all, they need to show determination and persistence.

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