ISRAEL'S DRUSE COMMUNITY AT TURNING POINT

GIDEON WEIGERT

"The Druse community, though not large in numbers, is great in spirit. The best of its youth stand on our borders, defending the independence of Israel with their lives."

Moshe Dayan [1]

"Unity of destiny means equality of rights: we owe the Druse a debt which must be repaid by giving them more rights."

Yitzhak Rabin [2]

THE DRUSE ARE an offspring of Islam (in Egypt), in the 11th century. There are today about half-a-million Druse, mainly in Syria, Lebanon and Israel, and some in the U.S. The Druse are known primarily as a mountainous peasant people, who over the centuries learned to adapt themselves so as to maintain their beliefs in the face of an overwhelming, hostile, Moslem majority.

In January 1977 the first Druse ex-serviceman to enter Israel's Parliament was sworn in as a Likud faction member.

Today (1978), in Israel's ninth Knesset, there are three Druse MKs, the first time such a number figures in the House. All three are former members of the Israel Defense Forces, one of them being Israel's first non-Jewish diplomat abroad, Zeidan Attashe.

MK Nasser e Din was the only Druse of Israel to address President Anwar Sadat during the latter's historic visit to the Knesset when he told Egypt's leader: "... Here in Israel we have no more poor people ... we, the minority in the Jewish State, have reached a high degree of equality and peaceful co-existence ..."

Israel's 46,000-strong Druse community —or, as they are known, *Bnei ma'rouf* ("the sons of mercy")—residing in 18 villages on Mt. Carmel and in Galilee, is undergoing the most fundamental transition in its centuries-long history in the Holy Land.

Since the mid-fifties, Druse began serving in the Israel Defense Forces at their own behest on an equal footing with young Jews. They were subsequently given official recognition as a minority community with its own religious institutions and laws. Their affairs have been in the hands of a traditional leadership composed of sheikhs and village elders. However, despite all the efforts of the authorities—through various long-term development projects for Druse villages—the community's full so-

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[1] *The Jerusalem Post*, 18 August 1969.

[2] *El Anba* (Arabic daily), 29 August 1976.

cial, economic and political integration lagged deplorably behind growing needs. For two decades, Druse affairs were under the control of "minorities departments" in the various Ministries, political parties and the *Histadrut* (General Federation of Labor)—bureaux headed by Arab-speaking Jews. Hence little regard was paid to such distinct factors (which differentiate Druse from Moslems or Christians) as their compulsory army service (three full years), the fact that over one hundred of their sons have fallen in action against Israel's enemies, and that scores have been decorated for their outstanding courage. The Minority Brigade as a whole (composed primarily of Druse soldiers) has been awarded the highest award of valour for its role in defending the country's northern borders.

Virtually nothing had been achieved as regards preserving and promoting the Druse heritage and traditions, and movements for Jewish-Druse friendship and rapprochement, remained largely on paper.

All these reasons underlay the fact that, over the past decade, a feeling of "mistrust, disappointment and dissatisfaction over their unequal treatment, grew among the younger generation of Druse," [3] the bulk of whom were born after the establishment of the State of Israel. (Today, 80% of all Druse in Israel are 45 years of age or less.) More and more young Druse came to realize, in the course of their long years of military service, and afterwards, when they joined other security services—the Border Police or civilian police, or the Prisons' Service—that they had grown closer to, and had more in common with the Jews than with their Arab neighbors. But these trends did not bring about the required reassessments within the establishment, and the years of neglect went on. As one knowledgeable Druse source put it:

"Young Druse, at this turn of events, openly contemplated taking matters into their own hands. They began rebelling against previously accepted principles, refusing to 'toe the line' blindly. They began boycotting the minorities departments, and stopped seeking solutions to their problems through those channels. Ever-growing formerly 'constructive' circles among them, came to believe that a common language with the establishment was no longer feasible, and began considering the possibility of a real struggle. For the first time, voices were heard calling for an end to Druse conscription, as equal rights with their Jewish comrades-in-arms were denied them." [4]

It was not until 1974, however, that, in the wake of increasing pressure from within the Druse community, the Prime Minister's Office decided to appoint a commission to investigate the community's grievances. Headed by a Haifa University professor of Middle Eastern studies, the commission studied the situation thoroughly. Its recommendations in many instances were sharply critical of the serious neglect which had been shown in handling Druse affairs. To cite only one example, in the area of land problems: The commission found that the subject of land registration, transfer and acquisition was one of the deepest causes of resentment, and that actions connected with expropriation were never preceded by

[3] Falah Salman, interview with the author, Jerusalem, 6 September 1976.

[4] Ibid.

properly conducted campaigns of explanation. The report cited the instance of one Druse village, from which land was expropriated for "security reasons," only to be handed over to a Jewish settlement. Approval of town building plans, submitted by Druse local councils, was in some cases delayed for periods of up to 15 years.[5]

Early in 1975, the Knesset became aware of the intensified feelings among Israel's Druse, and the House appointed a new body—composed of members of the Interior and Education Committee—to look into the situation. Upon submission of this, second, report, the Government began to take action. With two sets of recommendations before it, the Cabinet decided to remove Druse affairs from "minorities departments," and have the Druse given service within the regular frameworks which deal with Jewish citizens (decision No. 792, of 1 June 1975), and to set up a committee composed of the Directors-General of all the relevant ministries—to be headed by the Director-General of the Prime Minister's Office and coordinated by Mr. Salman Falah, a Druse intellectual —so as to deal effectively and efficiently with the problems of this community (decision No. 128, of 27 October 1975).[6]

From this time, things began to take a turn for the better. The Minister of Defence announced that, henceforth, all Druse ex-servicemen would be eligible for employment in the various plants of Israel's military industry; the first Druse officer, Said Abdul Haq, was promoted to the rank of full colonel; and it was announced that all branches and units of the Israel Defense Forces—including the Air Force—were open to qualified Druse soldiers.[7]

The Ministry of Education was the first to introduce substantial innovations into its programs concerning the Druse: a special pedagogical framework was established, with the aim of emphasizing the Druse community's identity, preparing a special Druse-oriented curriculum to stress the community's heritage and tradition, and generally inculcating Druse youngsters with values that would underline their ethnic uniqueness.

In its first bi-annual report, covering the period of December 1975–June 1976, the newly formed committee of Directors-General noted—in addition to the steps mentioned above—the following concrete measures, already decided upon and in process of implementation:[8]

— The Ministry of Housing had increased its allocation for Druse, eight-fold, to IL 50 million, so as to finance new housing for Druse ex-servicemen and young couples.
— That same Ministry, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education, had allocated IL 12 million for building new schools and renovating existing ones, in the Druse sector.
— The National Nature Reserves Authority erected a memorial for fallen Druse soldiers at the Ein Gedi nature reserve.
— The northern Druse village of Khurfeish was to be considered a border "confrontation" village, and would accord-

[5] *Al Huda* (Druse bi-monthly), No. 36, June 1976.

[6] See official Cabinet communiqués of 1 June and 26 October 1975.

[7] *The Jerusalem Post*, 17 January 1976.

[8] "Information Sheet" on the activity of the Directors-General Committee for Druse Affairs, Jerusalem, June 1976 (in Hebrew and Arabic).

ingly be granted the same privileges as Jewish settlements in the same category. Its pupils were exempted from school fees.

— The village of Ain el As'ad was connected to the national electricity grid.

The framework of deferments from military service, as part of the army's "academic trend" scheme, was broadened for Druse. To date, 100 young men had already benefited from the program, and at present it covered 57 others, of whom 40 were in education studies, and 11 were studying medicine. A preparatory pre-academic course is shortly to be opened at Haifa University. Also the Ministry of Defence has established a three-million-pound fund to provide Druse ex-servicemen with assistance in the form of loans of IL 10,000 per soldier (this in addition to regular assistance loans given to Jewish ex-servicemen). The Ministry of Commerce & Industry plans to construct industrial zones in two Druse villages in Galilee.

We shall now glance at the makeup of the Druse sector in Israel as of autumn 1976, and briefly analyze the community's various groupings. The traditional leaders are, of course, still a factor to be taken into account. This leadership is composed of the officially recognized "spiritual leadership." Among these is one of the Druse M.K. (members of Knesset) *Kadis* (religious court judges), sheikhs, clan-heads and elderly chairmen of Druse local councils. However, in the wake of the "critical years of ferment," a whole gamut of previously unknown groups and circles emerged, their common denominator being their mostly young, intellectual membership. A brief list of them would include the following:

— The best-known is undoubtedly "the ideological circle of academic Druse," composed of the President's adviser on Druse affairs; the Druse affairs advisers to the Ministers of Commerce & Industry and of Tourism; Israel's first Druse diplomat, the former Israel consul in New York and member of Israel's U.N. delegation; and a number of young chairmen of Druse local councils.

— The organization of Druse academics, headed by the Druse adviser to the Minister of Communications.

— Local Druse ex-servicemen's committees, active in seven villages, which plan to establish a roof organization. The veteran among these groups is that set up at Pek'in village in early 1972, with scores of young Druse. The aim of these groups is to see that Druse ex-servicemen get decent housing, to see to the realization of their rights, and to ensure their smooth integration after their demoblization into the country's economy.[9]

— A network of independent youth clubs, operating outside the framework of Histadrut-affiliated clubs and of the Education Ministry's "youth houses." The best-known of these is *El Achuwah* ("Brotherhood"), in Rama village.

— The "Zionist-Druse Circle," established in February 1976 at Dalyat al Carmel, and presently active in seven villages. The framework, a direct reply to the growing challenge represented by the anti-establishment trend among young Druse, calls for "the creation of a modern element in the Druse community, to explain to the Jewish masses the

[9] See *Al Huda*, December 1975.

nature and character of the Druse ... to function as a pressure group vis-à-vis the establishment so as to obtain full rights for the Druse." For this circle, "being Zionist is a human value not a party affiliation." [10]

— The "Druse initiative committee," which enjoys Communist backing, centers mainly on Rama village, where its members conduct parlor-meetings and circulate anonymous leaflets opposing Druse military conscription.

There has been much activity, recently, in the literary-cultural sphere. Education Ministry panels of experts are now preparing new textbooks, in Arabic and Hebrew, on Druse history and culture. The Druse bi-monthly magazine *El Huda*, published in Arabic, has put out its first issue in Hebrew. This periodical, launched in 1972 and published by a number of Druse intellectuals in Haifa, reflects serious trends of thought among Israel's Druse.

The past few years have seen the publication of some 20 books and booklets by young Druse, in both Hebrew and Arabic. They include two works by the Dalyat al Carmel journalist Musbah el Halabi: *The Druse in Israel*, a richly illustrated festive book published on the occasion of Israel's 25th anniversary, and *Brit Damim* ("Blood Pact," 1970), dedicated to the memory of the scores of young Druse who in the period 1948–1969 gave their lives in the defence of the Jewish State. *The History of the Druse in Israel*, a factual survey—the first of its kind— by Salman Falah (chief Druse school inspector in addition to his role as coordinator of the Directors-General Committee) appeared in 1974. That same year saw publication of the work of Israel's first Druse poetess, Miss Hiyam Kiblan, of Isfiyah village. An unique work in this gallery is the collection of Hebrew poems, *On the Slopes of the Bitter Fate*,[11] by As'ad Azeh, a Druse soldier serving in the regular army; he illustrates his own poems, and dedicates his small *diwan* to the memory of his father, whom he never knew, as he was killed in action while serving in the Border Police, in 1961. Two purely political books published in this period are *Druse Reality*, by Nabieh el Kassem, of Rama, and *You Are the Killer, O Sheikh*, by Salman Natur, of Dalyat al Carmel, an ex-serviceman opposed to the mobilization of his fellow Druse into the army.

One vital aspect of Druse grievances has, however, not yet been dealt with at all: the need for information campaigns. The Directors-General Committee is expected to take up the matter in one of its forthcoming sessions, from the Jewish as well as the Druse angle.

Summing up, it may be said that, as a result of the recent developments described above along with the visit by former Prime Minister Rabin to Galilee Druse,[12] it appeares, that the height of the crisis in Israel's Druse community had passed. Bitterness against the establishment had waned considerably, and the Druse had found the means to bring their grievances to the attention of the highest authorities via the Directors-General Committee. Unrest among the Druse now seemed to focus mainly on specific, practical local prob-

[10] Ibid.

[11] Published by "Renaissance." Haifa, 1976, under the title *I Never Knew My Father* (Hebrew); illustrated by the author.

[12] *The Jerusalem Post*, 29 August 1976.

lems, such as land settlement issues. On another plane, the internal generation clash went on, as did the search for a new leadership to replace the traditional elders and sheikhs.

In this struggle, the old generation appeared to be clearly losing ground to the younger. A number of examples might be cited to illustrate this trend, with that of the Druse lawyer Kamal el Kassem being a prominent one. The first Druse to graduate from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (in 1950), he was the moving spirit behind the founding of the ideological circle in his native village of Rama, the first publisher of independent Druse newspapers and editor of *A-Druze* (an Arabic-language monthly which appeared in the 1972–73 period), and one of the Druse intellectuals seriously preparing themselves to run in the elections to the Ninth Knesset, "even on an independent list, if need be." [13]

In a lengthy reader's letter to a leading Hebrew daily, Kassem wrote, *inter alia*: "It is time that we, Israel's minorities, think not only in terms of what we should obtain from the authorities, but of what we can and must give, and do, to improve our relations with the Jews on the basis of complete equality of rights and a firm, honorable co-existence in peace and brotherhood."

Today, then, one may reasonably look forward optimistically to a new era in Druse-Jewish relations in Israel. There is renewed hope that the "new deal" recently introduced for this pround people, will bring about solutions for their justified complaints, and enable them to feel that they are equal citizens in the Jewish State —to serve, in fact, as a living example of the brotherhood and understanding the people of Israel can attain with a minority living in their midst.

[13] Interview with Kassem, Jerusalem, May 1976.

[14] *Ha'aretz*, 28 June 1976.