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Croft Thesis Prospectus

Research Question

Who are the Israeli Druze? : an examination of Druze identity through the lens of Israelis' and Palestinians' perception of the Israeli Druze community based on Druze service in the IDF

I spent the summer immersed in a community with which I was completely unfamiliar prior to my summer experience. This community is the Israeli Druze of Daliyat al-Carmel, a village on Carmel Mountain a few miles southeast of Haifa. My interest in the Druze community developed over the summer, as I observed the peculiarities of the minority group. The Druze people, by ethnicity, are Arabs, yet their allegiance lies with the state of Israel. Since 1956, the Druze men in Israel have been required to serve in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as a part of Israel's mandatory conscription law, giving them a common experience with non-Arab Israelis who are required to serve in the IDF for two to three years (depending on one's sex) after high school graduation. Through their inclusion in the mandatory conscription law, Israel's Druze population is placed in a unique position in which they are able to share in majority Israeli culture without actually being a part of that majority, a position scholar Rabah Halabi of Daliyat al-Carmel calls "neither here nor there," (Halabi, 279).

Many Israeli Druze self-identify as Israelis (Halabi, 270). However, the Druze are not Jewish but are a part of a religious minority with early roots in Islam, which leaves one wondering how the Druze fit into the narrative of a military created to defend the Jewish people. Israel lacks an official constitution, but its Proclamation of Independence declares that the "Jewish State" is a place for "Jewish people to be masters of their own fate... in their own sovereign nation," (Knesset online). Though the Proclamation makes mention of minority groups and their equal right to citizenship, the nation's intentions are clear: Israel aims to provide a safe community in which the Jewish people will thrive. Many questions arise from the unique paradox of Druze service to a Jewish state, and I seek to examine the place of the Druze community in Israel as part of my thesis. The Druze are not a popular topic for academic studies, so I intend to grow this field of study by examining the identity of Israeli Druze as perceived by Israelis and Palestinians through their service in the Israel Defense Forces.

Framework

I will begin my thesis with a brief history of the Druze people in general and the Druze Israelis in specific. I plan to use existing literature regarding the identity of Israeli Druze to establish a framework of their identity before diving into Israeli Druze identity as perceived by their surrounding populations. As Baumeister and Muraven write, “identity is a set of meaningful definitions that are ascribed or attached to the self,” formed through “adaptation” for population groups to succeed in their environment (Baumeister, Muraven, 405-406). This sink-or-swim mentality is demonstrated in the Israeli Druze community by its compliance with the mandatory conscription law and their willingness to adopt the Hebrew language in addition to their mother tongue Arabic. Next, I will focus on the background and mission of the IDF. This is vital information to understanding where the Druze fall within Israel’s military institution, and leads into my next main topic, in which I will explore where the Druze people fit into the IDF and conscription and why they are required to serve. This will be followed by a brief discussion about Arabs’ role in the IDF. Finally, I will address my main research question through a case study of the recent killings of two Druze men outside al-Aqsa mosque in the heavily politicized Old City in Jerusalem during their service in Israel’s security forces.

The Druze people are a part of a religious minority and are originally from Syria and what is now Northern Israel. The religion emerged from Islam in the early 11th century and welcomed anyone to join until they stopped accepting converts in about 1050 AD (Aridi). Though the Palestinian Druze’s participation in the Arab-Israeli conflict in the years leading up to 1948 is disputed, it appears the Druze were neutral until they made an agreement to ally with the Jews shortly before 1948 (Aboulatif, 535; Halabi, 269). Rabah Halabi is not alone in his belief that this decision sealed their fate and was the foundation for the development of Israeli Druze’s peculiar identity (Halabi, 279). Israel systematically separated the Druze from the other Arabs in the area by including them in mandatory conscription and developing a separate education system for Druze children in which the government sought to inspire national pride and allegiance to the Jews by teaching the similarities between the Druze and Jewish people of Israel and dissimilarities between them and, to quote Halabi, the “other Arabs” (Halabi, 269). Israel even changed the legal description of Druzes’ nationality, presented on their birth certificates and identification cards, from “Arab” to “Druze,” essentially creating a Druze nation (Halabi, 269).

My next step is answering the question: *What is the IDF?* Though Israel's military has earlier roots in the paramilitary group known as Haganah, the Israel Defense Forces was founded in 1948, and the Defense Service Law of 1949 initiated Israel's conscription law (Hofnung, 314). The Druze population was added to the mandatory conscription law in 1956, for disputed reasons. Some sources claim that the decision was an effort to include the Druze community in the practice of the majority, while others believe Israel seeks to manipulate the Druze by forcing them to risk their lives in the military without adjusting its stance on the purpose of the State of Israel. These competing narratives will be discussed further below. The IDF aims to protect the "State of Israel" and "thwart all enemy efforts to disrupt the normal way of life in Israel," which indicates no intention to care for the needs of the Druze. As a minority group that makes up just 2% of Israel's population and occupies secluded villages on Mt Carmel and in the occupied Golan Heights, the Druze have no part in "the normal way of life in Israel." The IDF is an entity created to protect Jewish people and Jewish life by preserving Israel as a "home for the Jewish people," (IDFonline).

The IDF claims that one of its main goals is to protect the Jewish state, so the logical question is: *Where do Druze Israelis fit into this narrative?* This question can be split into two questions: 1) *Why were Druze Israelis first included in mandatory conscription?* and 2) *What part do they play in the IDF and why?* Hofnung argues that Israel decided to include the Druze in mandatory conscription because they wanted to prevent discrimination against the Druze for not having served in the army (Hofnung, 312). Others say that the Israelis see the Druze as expendable labor to be dispensed against the Palestinians (Aboulatif, 539). Regarding the second question, the Druze soldiers served only in their own special units until 1972 when they were allowed to disperse among all of the other soldiers (Hofnung, 318). Service in the IDF is seen as a right of passage for Israeli youth and a necessary sacrifice if one wishes to reap the full benefits of Israeli citizenship (Halabi, 274). Participation in the IDF opens the door to numerous military benefits and has had a huge impact on the economy and unemployment rate in Druze villages in Israel. Other Arabs, though, can join the IDF through voluntary service only.

Finally, I plan to address my primary research question and examine the ways in which IDF service shapes Israeli Druze's identity from the perspective of Israelis and Arab-Israelis/Palestinians. Some Druze Israelis report that they have been called "traitors" by Palestinians and Arabs in Israel, but is this an accurate representation of the Arab majority

opinion? Israelis supposedly treat Druze and other Israeli soldiers equally, so where do the Druze fit into society in their eyes? I intend to compare and contrast newspaper articles from Israeli and Arab-Israeli/Palestinian sources to develop a general consensus of the two sides' opinions on the Druze in Israel through their reactions to the four recently fallen Druze soldiers. The preliminary findings of my case study are presented later.

Methodology

The question of identity is theoretical and, therefore, is not quantifiable, so I am using qualitative measures to develop my conclusions about Israeli Druze identity. I will explore three theoretical frameworks: military conscription, nationalism and identity politics. I will use these frames to discuss A) why the Druze were included in Israel's mandatory conscription law and what impact that has had on their social status, B) how and why the Druze nationality was formed under the Israeli government and C) how the majority groups of Israel impact the Druze's identity.

Mandatory conscription is a tool for developing unity, loyalty and nationalism, and it plays a powerful role in the development of identity, both personal and externally perceived (Hofnung, 311). Conscription laws have been implemented throughout history for a number of reasons as direct as quickly building up a strong military. Other, more complex purposes include strategically selecting specific groups of people to include (and exclude) in the development of national identity and nationalism, which is the case in Israel (Aboulatif, 540). I am still developing the other two frameworks.

Preliminary Findings of Case Study

In July of 2017 two Druze police officers stationed near al-Aqsa mosque located within the walls of Jerusalem's Old City were killed in the line of duty by three Arab-Israeli shooters aiming from inside the mosque (Kershner). Not surprisingly, the responses from Arabs and Israelis differed greatly. My case study analyzes the responses of these two communities in an attempt to explain the opinions of each side about Druze soldiers and the Druze community in general. Here I will present only my preliminary findings, using three sources from each side. The conclusions I present below are not intended to be representative of the collective opinion of any group.

The overarching theme found Arab-Israeli/Palestinian media is that Israeli Druze are traitors, but, at the same time, Israel is taking advantage of them to serve a larger political

purpose. Two of the three Arab-Israeli/Palestinian news articles discuss the three shooters who killed the Druze soldiers as if they were martyrs, praising them for sacrificing their lives (Al-Jazeera and Al-Ansari). One article claims that Israeli Druze were forced into conscription by the Israeli government despite protests made by Druze leaders (Akasha). This same article also argues that Israel intentionally assigns Druze soldiers to border zones and areas of high tension to increase the number of interactions between Druze security forces and Arab-Israeli/Palestinian citizens. This further divides the people and heightens tension between the two minority groups, giving more power to Israel. The other Arabs recognize the financial and civil privileges afforded to the Druze soldiers and resent them for having access to those luxuries (Al-Ansari). This supports the idea that IDF service elevates the status of the soldier and, therefore, gives Israeli Druze access to societal benefits that Israeli-Arabs do not have.

Israeli press, on the other hand, refers to the deceased officers as “victims of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” (Shpigel and Kubovich). This same article fails to mention that the fallen soldiers belonged to the Druze community. Preliminary examinations of Israeli news sources revealed that they are not focused on the fallen soldiers’ belonging to Israel’s Druze community; rather, they are focused on the “terrorist” attacks and the supposed victimization of Israelis by Arabs (Forsher and Yalon). This presentation is paradoxical for more than one reason: some Israelis are in fact Arab, and the actual victims of this attack were, themselves, Arabs. These two articles lead the reader to believe that the deceased policemen are just like all other Israeli security service members, implying that Israelis either view the Druze as equals or do not appreciate or acknowledge the sacrifice they make to protect their Jewish homeland. The article that does mention the fallen policemen’s Druze identity was published by *Keren Karemeth Lelsrael Jewish National Fund (KKL-JNF)*, which aims to increase resources dedicated to the Druze minority as a demonstration of Israel’s commitment to minority groups. The article focuses on Israel’s commitment to their Druze “brothers” and their appreciation of the Druze security officers’ allegiance to the state, essentially paying lip service to a political narrative that maintains the Druze marginal status in Israeli society by praising them just enough to imitate inclusion.

Overall, the Arab-Israeli/Palestinian articles focus on two main points: the Druze being forced into service in the IDF and the betrayal that they have experienced when the Druze fight their Arab “brothers” in honor of that service. This leaves us with two distinctly different groups

claiming fraternity with the Druze people. Neither group actually accepts the Druze people as family, but each claims kinship with the minority group. Israeli articles focus on the so-called “war on terror” that they say defines the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, using the tragic deaths to further the popular political narrative that claims that the normal way of life in Israel is under threat from Palestinian aggression, which ignores that the attackers were Arab-Israelis and the victims were Druze soldiers rather than members of Israel’s majority group. While Druze service is appreciated, Israelis largely ignore the marginalization of the Druze population.

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