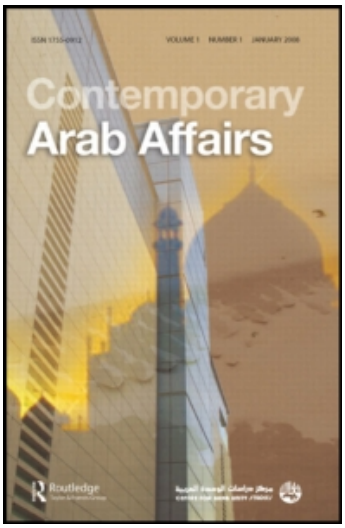

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Iman A. Hamdy [a]
[a] Cairo Papers in Social Science, American University in Cairo, Egypt

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The Druze in Israel: a less persecuted minority?

Iman A. Hamdy

Cairo Papers in Social Science, American University in Cairo, Egypt

Since 1948, Israel has adopted a policy of co-option of the Druze minority among its population. However, despite their partial co-option, the Druze are subjected to the same political, social, and economic discrimination as the rest of the Palestinians. While some Druze elements have sought to resist the policies of the Jewish state, these attempts have so far been marginal. Whether future generations, in light of their growing awareness of discrimination and the ongoing resistance of the Palestinian population, manage to undo the effects of co-option is a question yet to be answered.

Keywords: Druze; Israel; Israeli Palestinians; discrimination; co-optation

Israel: 2000/2001

In October 2000, massive demonstrations broke out among the Palestinian population of Israel against the Israeli government in solidarity with their brethren in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. In the bloodiest confrontations between the two sides since the 1976 Land Day, Israeli police officers, some of whom were Druze, shot at the demonstrators, killing thirteen Palestinians. As a consequence, in an unprecedented action, the vast majority of the Palestinian population boycotted the prime ministerial elections that were held in February 2001 as a punishment for the Labor government responsible for the October massacre. Meanwhile, a tense wave of hostility and physical assault was unleashed by the Jewish majority toward the Palestinian minority, leading to calls for their expulsion from the Jewish state.

After the elections, a national unity government was formed jointly by Likud and Labor under the premiership of Ariel Sharon. For the first time in the history of the Jewish State, the new cabinet included a Palestinian member as minister without portfolio, Druze Labor member Saleh Tarif. Furthermore, a Druze officer was promoted to the rank of major general, and a few others were elevated to brigadier general, colonel, and lieutenant colonel in 'an important innovation by the IDF to recognize the ability, contribution and performance of Druze soldiers and to integrate them equally within the army' (Atashi 2001).

Israel: 2007

In October 2007, a cellular phone antenna installed on a Jewish building in New Peki'in, a Jewish community established in 1955 adjacent to the Druze Buqayʿa (Peki'in) town, was destroyed by Druze youth. As a result, the Israeli police stormed into Buqayʿa, arresting several residents, and clashes broke out between the two sides, leaving more than 40 wounded, including 27 policemen. Following Druze riots in the town, Palestinian members of the Knesset accused the police of 'unrestrained

Corresponding Address: Email: cairopa@aucegypt.edu

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use of violence against civilians', and demanded the formation of a commission of inquiry to investigate the case (*Haaretz* 2007b; 2007c). Two weeks later, right-wing Jewish extremist groups began buying houses in the center of Buqayʿa in order to consolidate the Jewish presence in the town. One of these houses was set on fire after it was sold in protest against these attempts, while Druze local leaders condemned the Jewish move and described it as 'provocations meant to fan the flames in the town' by extremists 'who give us a feeling that they are there to take over the village in the name of historical right' (*Haaretz* 2007c; 2008).

These two scenes provide contradictory images of the Druze community in Israel. In the first, we see the rift between the Druze minority and the rest of the Palestinian population to the extent that the former constitutes part of the Israeli forces acting violently against the latter. In the second, we see confrontations between the Druze community and the state that are identical to those involving other Palestinian groups in Israel. So what does this tell us about the status of the Druze minority in Israel and its relationship with the Jews and the rest of the Palestinian minority? Is it true that there is a 'blood covenant' between them and the Jews that sets them apart from the Palestinians and makes them a 'privileged' non-Jewish minority, as Israel contends? The answer to these questions reveals a successful oppressive policy of separation and co-option of the Druze minority by the Jewish state, demonstrating its racist discrimination toward non-Jews even when they defend it with their own blood. How far this relationship can be sustained in the future, in light of Israel's continuing racism and the growing resistance of Palestinians, is a question that is yet to be answered.

The Druze community in Israel: background

On the eve of 2008, Israel's population was 7.241 million, of whom 75.6% were Jews, 20% Palestinian Muslims and Christians, and 4.4% others, including 1.8% Druze. Numbering 100,000, the Druze constitute less than one-tenth of Israel's Palestinian citizens (Jewish Virtual Library 2008).

The Druze, or *al-muwaḥḥidūn* as they call themselves, are adherents of a religious creed founded in eleventh-century Egypt under the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah as an offshoot of the Shiʿi Ismaʿili brand of Islam. The disappearance of al-Hakim put an end to the state endorsement of this sect and brought about the persecution of the Druze, forcing them to leave Egypt and seek refuge in the Levant, where they began to develop as a closed community and a semi-autonomous political force (Parsons 2000, p. 2).

Throughout the twentieth century, the Druze of Lebanon and Syria continued to enjoy considerable political power out of all proportion to their numerical representation in the population, and managed to play a prominent role in the nationalist movement against foreign occupation, thanks to the existence of large, wealthy families who took on the leadership of the community (e.g. Sultan al-Atrash in Syria and the Jumblatts in Lebanon). In Palestine, though, the situation was different. Lacking the powerful, unifying leadership and the privileged socio-economic status of their brethren in Syria and Lebanon, the Palestinian Druze were a peripheral group, mainly made up of peasants, who retained their particularist heritage and failed to identify with anything beyond their traditional tribal and religious loyalties. In order to secure their interests, they had to rely on either the

central government or the Druze leadership in Lebanon and Syria (Firro 1999, pp. 19–21).

During the Mandate, Britain used a policy of divide and rule to manipulate this situation and some members of the Druze community were enlisted to serve as local mercenaries for the colonial administration. However, these attempts were nothing compared with the Zionist, and later Israeli, endeavors to co-opt the Druze minority (Blatt *et al.* 1975, p. 145).

Before the establishment of the state of Israel, the Druze conspicuously took almost no active part in the Palestinian resistance to Zionism. In the 1929 riots, they refrained from siding with the Palestinians because they believed that this was a religious conflict between Muslims and Jews in which they had no interest. That same neutrality was maintained during the 1936–1939 Arab Revolt, despite the participation of a small Druze group in it. These signals were more than sufficient to induce the Yishuv leadership to seek to win the Druze to their side and create a rift between them and the rest of the Palestinian people. Thus, they approached the Druze community and began cultivating 'friendly' relations with prominent Druze individuals in order to ensure their support for the Zionist project, a policy that yielded its fruit in the 1946–1949 Palestine War (Parsons 2000, pp. 20, 26, 25). During this war, most of the Druze villages refused to attack the Jews and some even extended military assistance to them. As a result, unlike the rest of the Palestinians, they were allowed by the Haganah to harvest their fields and were not expelled from their villages at the end of the war.

A co-opted minority

When the State of Israel was established, it contained within its borders a sizable Palestinian minority of 150,000 people or 20% of the total population (Landau 1993, p. 6). Initially addressing them as 'non-Jewish minorities' and dividing it into Muslims, Christians, Druze, Bedouins, and Circassians, consecutive Israeli governments have been preoccupied with ensuring the submission to and dependence on the state of the Palestinian population and preventing their development into a strong national group. In this context, it has been important to cultivate Jewish–Druze relations in order, first, to use the Druze against the other Palestinian groups and, second, to demonstrate to the outside world the possibility of Jewish–Arab coexistence in the state of Israel. Thus, while the Jewish state has been claiming to treat the Druze as a privileged minority group, it has in fact subjected them to a multi-faceted process of co-option that has prevented them from developing any political or economic power of their own and increased their dependence on the state. This process has three main dimensions: 1) inventing a particular identity for the Druze that has some affinity with the Jews; 2) compulsory military service for the Druze, and 3) encouraging the so-called 'positive' forces at the expense of what Israel defines as 'negative' elements within the Druze community (Firro 2001, pp. 45–46).

Forging a distinct Druze identity

In an illustration of how Israel's political and academic circles perceive the Druze, Jacob Landau's classic book on the Palestinian minority (Landau 1993) speaks of the 'Arabs' and the 'Druze' as two separate sub-groups. According to this categorization, the Druze are perceived as 'non-Arab Arabs', who, though sharing

the language and culture of the latter, have nevertheless preserved a distinct identity molded by their 'closed' religion, geographic isolation, and centuries of Muslim and Christian persecution. This identity has been promoted by Israel since the 1950s in order to undermine its Arab elements and the affinity of the Druze with the rest of the Arab world at large and the Palestinians in particular. On the other hand, Israeli historiography has attempted to invent a centuries-long cordial relationship between the Jews and Druze in the Levant, enhanced by the so-called religious persecution of both minorities in the Arab East (Firro 2001, p. 46).

Focusing on the only element of Druze particularism, religion, the first mechanism in this construction process has been to forge a total official separation between Druzism on one side and Islam and Arabism on the other. Thus, by 1956, Israeli officials recognized the Druze as an independent religious community for the first time in Palestine. In the same year, another rule was enacted whereby the label 'Druze' was used on Israeli identity cards to signify both the religion and nationality of its holder, whereas the nationality of Muslims and Christians was defined as Arab. This arrangement was met with significant opposition from the Druze community, who still believe it to be an artificial imposition by the Israelis (Atashi 2001). Four years later, the right to observe Ramadan and official Muslim holidays was denied to the Druze and replaced by Druze holidays (Blatt *et al.* 1975, p. 121). Finally, in 1962, separate communal courts were established for the Druze with six judges appointed by the Israeli authorities from families that supported conscription in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) (Atashi 2001). In addition to these policies, Israel has gone to great lengths to invent Druze folklore and tradition and to organize Druze exhibitions in order to stress the uniqueness of this group, though most of this folklore is in fact Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese (Firro 1999, p. 241).

Until the mid 1970s, these measures were thought to be sufficient to forge the new Druze identity and contain the 'negative', i.e. anti-Israel currents, within the Druze community. However, the 1973 war and the 1976 Land Day seemed to threaten this scheme and underscore the Palestinian and Arab identity of the Druze, especially among the intellectuals and the younger generations, who sought to challenge the traditional communal leadership. To confront this threat, in 1976, Israel pushed its policy one step further and created a separate Druze school system, different from the 'Arab' system, in which Druze religion, culture and history were taught (Frisch 1997, p. 586). Meanwhile, the history of each Druze village was rewritten with extensive use of popular myths, while descriptions of the various shrines and the ceremonies related to shrine visits revealed a mixture of traditional as well as newly invented elements. Finally, a special publication on Druze 'holy days' was released in 1979 (Firro 1999, 236).

Although this system failed to raise the educational level of the Druze, even in comparison with the rest of the Palestinian minority, it did fulfill its aim of instilling in them a sense of separatenss. By the late 1990s, a new generation of teachers, students, and ordinary people celebrated the Druze holidays without knowing 'whether they belong[ed] to a ''geniune tradition'' or ''an invented one''' (Firro 1999, p. 237).

At another level, Israel has used Nabi Shuʿayb, one of the most prominent Druze prophets, to claim a blood link between the Jews and the Druze, making the annual Druze gathering at his shrine an 'invented tradition' to renew the blood covenant between the two peoples (Firro 1999, p. 77). According to Druze tradition, the shrine

of Nabi Shuʿayb is situated at the Horn of Hittin overlooking the sea of Galilee (Atashi 2001). Before 1949, it attracted Druze visits, like other holy shrines. However, this visit, always in the fourth week of April, neither marked an official feast nor involved massive crowds. In 1949, the shrine was chosen by the Israeli authorities to be the site of the swearing-in ceremony of Druze recruits to the IDF in celebration of the 'newly discovered "historical connection" between the sons of Shuʿayb (the Druze) and the sons of Israel (the Jews)' since Shuʿayb was thought to be Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses. Since that year, the government has invested large sums of money to renovate the site, erect new buildings around it, and provide it with basic services (Firro 2001, p. 43). The annual visit to the shrine became an official festival, attended by top Israeli government and military officials, where political speeches are delivered by both sides to 'praise the so called renewal of the covenant between… "the Druze leadership" and the Israeli government' (Blatt *et al.* 1975, p. 121).

Rather than serving the aim of integrating the Druze nationally, these policies, which were implemented with the collaboration of segments of the traditional Druze leadership, were a form of 'ethnic manipulation', which denotes '…an appeal and use of ethnic symbols by political agents—elites—for their benefit, which is not necessarily to the benefit of the rest of those affiliated with this identity' (Kaufman 2004, p. 54).

Compulsory military service

The 1948 war was the first real chance for the Zionists to separate the Druze from the rest of the Palestinians. During the war, Zionist recruiters appealed to Druze villages to send their sons to serve in the newly created 'minorities unit' of the Israeli army in return for allowing them free access to their fields. According to an Israeli official, that unit 'contributed little or nothing to the Israeli army—its true purpose was to use the Druzes as "the sharp blade of knife to stab the back of Arab unity"' (Firro 2001, pp. 41–42), and create in the Arab countries a sense of betrayal and mistrust towards the Druze. A year later, the Druze were allowed to join the Border Police Force (Firro 2001, p. 42). However, it was not until 1956 that this policy took an irreversible turn with Israel's imposition of compulsory military service for Druze youth, again in collaboration with the Druze leadership cultivated by the regime. According to Israeli officials, 83% of eligible Druze males currently serve in the army, of whom half enlist in combat units—compared to 75% of Jewish males, due to the exemption of yeshiva students (Kaufman 2004, p. 76). Moreover, the Druze, though still a minority of a few thousand men in the IDF (*Arab News*, 2001), have 'increasingly become the militarized minority in Israel that specializes in policing another and increasingly troublesome Palestinian minority' in what HillelVFrisch describes as the 'Gurkha syndrome' or 'the use of small and peripheral groups by colonial and despotic regimes for policing and military purposes' (Frisch 1993).

Because it is realized that Druze conscripts may experience an identity crisis, the new Druze recruits are placed for the first month and a half in exclusively Druze units, where they receive, in addition to their military training, 'ideological indoctrination to intensify… their self-image as loyal Israeli citizens who share a common destiny and obligation with Jews to preserve the security of the state against the threats posed by its enemies, namely Arabs' (Hajjar 2000, p. 310).

After this they are assigned to their units, which are mainly at the forefront of Israel–Arab confrontations. As part of the Border Police and Minorities Unit, they were charged with preventing the return of refugees to their land in the 1950s and 1960s, and actively participated in the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and in the 1978 invasion of Lebanon, and finally in repressing the two intifadas. In all these cases, they were notorious for their brutality against their Palestinian compatriots, especially in the Gaza Strip which has often witnessed fierce resistance to the Israeli occupation since the 1970s. Indeed, in 1989, Palestinian leaders from the Strip sought to appeal to the Israelis to withdraw the Druze from the Border Police force in that region because 'the behavior of the Druze towards the local population was harsher than that of their Jewish counterparts' (Frisch 1993). Meanwhile, from 1948 till the early 1990s, 242 Druze were killed in these confrontations, a casualty rate that far exceeds that of the Jews (Frisch 1993). In Daliat al-Carmel, the biggest Druze town in Israel, Israeli officials make visits to a memorial built for the Druze soldiers who died defending the Jewish state.

Despite this, for a long time the Druze remained second-class soldiers in the army, appointed only to the lower ranks and assigned only to the two units mentioned above. However, due to their 'loyalty' and 'competence', they now serve in all military units except the intelligence (Frisch 1993), and have been promoted to top military positions. The unprecedented appointment of a Druze as major general in 2001 meant that he joined the IDF general staff, i.e. became part of the decision-making body regarding the national security of the state (Atashi 2001).

Rewarding Israel's allies

Finally, in order to discourage Druze resistance to its policies, Israel has adopted a carrot and stick policy since 1948, whereby it rewarded the 'positive forces' by making them close to decision-making circles and favoring their villages and clans in the allocation of economic and political benefits, while denying what it sees as 'negative elements' any social standing or access to top authorities (Firro 2001, p. 46). For example, one of the reasons why Israel made an elaborate political and religious festival at the site of Nabi Shuʿayb is that the shrine is controlled by the Tarif family, which Israel has sought to win to its side and make the undisputed leaders of the Druze community. In return, Shaykh Amin Tarif was a very strong pro-Israel element and 'did his utmost to evince loyalty to the state' till his death in the early 1990s (Frisch 1997, p. 584). Later, his son, Saleh Tarif, was appointed as the first Palestinian minister in Sharon's 2001 government, as mentioned before. This appointment was propagated by Israel and its Druze allies as an indication of its policy to reward those who fulfill their duty towards Israel and a major step towards acknowledging the role of the Druze in the state. Three months after taking office, Minister Tarif was reported to have praised Sharon's 'objectivity', 'restraint' and 'wisdom' in dealing with the al-Aqsa intifada, and to have blamed Arafat for 'continued terror attacks against Israel' (*Jerusalem Post* 2001).

The worst of both worlds

While Israel claims that military service is the key to political and social equality in society, it defines itself as a Jewish state and its Basic Laws practically exclude any such equality between Jews and non-Jews. In this setting, the Druze get the worst of

both worlds. They send their sons to die for the state but, as non-Jews, are subject to the same injustices that the rest of the Palestinian population suffers, despite Israel's claims to the contrary.

The worst scenario facing the Palestinians in Israel is to be uprooted from their land and expelled to other countries, an idea that goes back to the founding of Zionism itself, with the aim of making Israel a purely Jewish state. The Druze are no exception to the rule. Transferring them to Jebel al-Druze was proposed by Labor Zionism in the late 1930s, and ironically by right-wing Israeli groups during the al-Aqsa intifada, despite the fact that some Druze were killed on the Israeli side (*Arab News* 2002).

Meanwhile, again like the rest of the Palestinian minority, Druze villages, with the exception of two localities, were placed under military rule until 1966; Druze affairs were handled by the Minorities Department until 1970; and their representation in the Knesset was through the Minorities Lists of the major Zionist parties until 1977 (Kaufman 2004, p. 71). More importantly, they were also victims of Israel's land expropriation policy. Out of 141,000 dunams owned by Druze villages in 1948, only 13,000 are left in their hands, while the rest have been taken by Israel (*Al-Wasaṭ* 2001, p. 25). Some of these villages lost more than 60% of their land holdings in the first decade of statehood in Israel's attempt to Judaize the Galilee (Yiftachel and Segal 1998). These measures have had serious repercussions for the Druze economy, which revolved around agricultural activities. Until 1948, three-quarters of the Druze workforce were peasants. Due to the loss of their land, this number dropped to less than 2% (*Focus* 1999). With Israel depriving these villages of industrial development, and the poor educational level of the Druze, the best viable means to guarantee stable jobs for this group lies in the defense sector. Thus, between 30% and 40% of the Druze earn their living from working in security or security related jobs, most of them low ranking, compared to 15% of the Jewish population (Frisch 1997, p. 587), which makes them all the more dependent on the state for their livelihood, a problem which Muslims and Christians are spared. In this sense, economic need may be one of the factors behind the willingness of some Druze to serve in the army. Finally, in terms of resource allocation, Druze villages lag considerably behind Jewish villages in terms of services and infrastructure. In response to Druze protests in 1987 and 1991, the Israeli government promised to give equal allocations for Druze and Jewish local councils, but this promise was not fulfilled, which drove the Druze to hold a month-long series of extensive protests in 1994 (Frisch 1997, p. 588).

Finally, despite their services to the state, the Druze have failed to escape the stigma of being 'Arabs' in Israel. In October 2000, a Druze soldier died while 'defending' Joseph's tomb in Nablus, after being left to bleed for five hours. Lamenting his death, his compatriots commented bitterly that the IDF left him to die because he was not a Jew; had he been one they would have definitely found a way to get him to hospital and save his life (*Al-Wasaṭ* 2001, p. 25). Worse still, in early 2005, prior to the implementation of the disengagement from Gaza decided by Sharon, a Druze combat soldier serving in Gaza claimed that right-wing extremist rabbis issued a religious ruling to the settlers permitting them to shoot live bullets at Druze and Bedouin soldiers and officers who took part in the evacuation of Jewish settlements (*Haaretz* 2005). In addition, Druze army officers tell numerous stories of their mistreatment in public places when they are not in uniform. Emad Fares, chief

of the Givati Brigade, was arrested by the police in Nahariya because he was having a cell phone conversation in Arabic (Naʿīmī 2004, p. 59). In another instance, an off-duty officer and his wife were verbally and physically assaulted in Haifa by Jews who 'mistook them for Arabs' following a Palestinian attack in the city (Rosenthal 2003, p. 298). Even the co-opted elements, such as Saleh Tarif, complain of this discrimination. Recalling his experience as head of Julis village council after leaving the army, he said: 'I tried to fight discrimination in funding Druze councils, but I was met with cold wind. In uniform, no one cared about my Arabic name. But now suddenly my name mattered' (Halevi 2001).

This discriminatory treatment by the Jewish state has intensified the sense of alienation felt by the younger generation of Druze and made them more aware of their identity crisis. One of them is Walid, who 'now calls himself a Palestinian citizen of Israel and urges young Druze to identify with Arab Israelis and join their protests' in seeking equal treatment by the state (Halevi 2001).

Druze resistance

It is worth mentioning here that the co-option of the Druze minority was not without resistance. As early as 1948, nationalist elements within the Druze community saw themselves as Palestinian and Arab, and fought against this policy. Thus, they have been an integral part of the Palestinian resistance movement in Israel, which is fighting for the national rights of the Palestinian people in Israel and the occupied territories. In 1972, this led to the formation of the Druze Initiative Committee. While its first aim was to oppose military conscription, it developed with time into a political organization resisting the co-option of the Druze and emphasizing their Arab Palestinian identity (Frisch 1993). In fact, it was the presence of this committee and the Druze participation in the 1976 Land Day that induced the Israeli government to introduce the separate Druze schooling system as a means of widening the rift between them and the rest of the Palestinian minority. However, this committee has survived till the present and is working to annul Druze compulsory military service, resist the confiscation of Druze land, and secure equal rights for the Palestinian minority (*The broken rifle* 2003).

The most prominent item on the agenda of Druze resistance concerns military service. When conscription became compulsory in law, public protests spread throughout Druze villages and petitions were sent to Israeli officials by opposers of this law, calling for the the Druze to be exempt from this service like their Muslim and Christian compatriots, but neither the co-opted Druze leaders nor the Israeli administration gave them ear. Figures for Druze refusniks are, however, significant whether we accept the findings of Israeli sources, which put them at around 20%, or of the Druze Initiative Committee, which claims they are as many as 40% (*Al-Wasaṭ* 2001, p. 25; *The broken rifle* 2003). In all cases, these refusniks risk harassment and jail, and suffer much harsher punishment than Jewish refusniks (Hajjar 2000, pp. 308–309).

Finally, during the al-Aqsa intifada, a new movement, *al-Maʿrūfiyyūn al-Aḥrār*, was founded, also with the aim of abolishing the Druze military service law. In summer 2001, the movement took part in a meeting held in Amman with the participation of Walid Jumblatt and 100 Israeli Druze, calling for this law to be repealed. While there is nothing new in this call, the issue of significance here is the

identification of a number of Israeli Druze leaders with their Arab anti-Israel co-religionists. A few months later, a conference, the first of its kind, was held on the same subject in the Druze village of Yarka and was attended by a thousand supporters (Arab Association for Human Rights 2001; Naʿīmī 2004, p. 61). Although, according to some accounts, the number of Druze refusniks may have increased recently, resistance to the Israeli state is still limited in scope and effect among the Druze community. The state and its Druze allies have managed to contain these attempts and deny them publicity so as to avoid their escalation.

Conclusion

Describing the existential dilemma of the Druze in Israel, former head of Yarka council, Rafik Salameh, laments:

> We are screwed, we are losing our identity. The Arabs in Israel have a pillow to rest on at night because they feel they are Palestinians. We don't know who we are. I'm jealous of the Druze in Lebanon and Syria. They know who they are. In the end, we'll be like the SLA [South Lebanese Army]. They'll use us and throw us away. (*Haaretz*, 2007a)

The Druze are thus caught in a quagmire. On the one hand, the Jewish state has managed through its political, economic and educational policies to draw the majority of them into identify with it. On the other, they are fully aware that, being non-Jews, they have no real place in this state. The only way to get out of this situation and have 'a pillow to rest on at night' is to resist the state and reclaim their Palestinian identity. Whether future generations, in light of their growing awareness of discrimination and the ongoing Palestinian resistance to Israel's racism, manage to undo the effects of co-option is a question yet to be answered.

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