



## Jerusalem Letter / Viewpoints

No. 464 28 Tishrei 5762 / 15 October 2001

### THE DRUZE IN ISRAEL AND THE QUESTION OF COMPULSORY MILITARY SERVICE

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#### **The Amman Conference**

The Israeli Druze community is the only major non-Jewish group in the state whose sons are required to serve in the IDF. Over the past 50 years the community has forged a covenant of blood with the Jewish state, suffering hundreds of casualties while loyally defending the State of Israel.

The question of compulsory military service for Druze in the IDF has been hotly debated at various times within the Druze community in Israel. For years there has been a minority that objects to compulsory service, as against the majority who support conscription.

This debate was heightened in the wake of a conference on this issue held in Amman in the summer of 2001, sponsored by Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Lebanese Druze, and other top Lebanese political and religious leaders, with the participation of a delegation of some one hundred Israeli Druze who object to compulsory IDF service.

At the conference, Jumblatt called on Israeli Druze not to serve in the IDF and face their Palestinian "brothers" in the territories -- and if they must serve, Jumblatt advised them not to serve in the front lines against the Palestinians who were conducting a "struggle against Israel's occupation."

Israeli Druze opponents of conscription claim that service in the IDF contradicts their Arab national affiliation and that Druze should not be singled out and called upon to serve in an army that fights against their co-nationalists (Arabs). This approach is an ideological one, encouraged by leftist Druze and those affiliated

with the Israel Communist party.

Yet a clear majority in the community supports Druze military conscription, believing that Druze in the Middle East have always expressed unconditional loyalty to their land and, consequently, to their respective states. Accordingly, the 100,000 Druze in Israel see themselves as behaving no differently than their Druze co-religionists in Syria (800,000) and in Lebanon (450,000).

The prevailing view also argues that as Israeli citizens, Druze must respect and obey the laws of the state. The Compulsory Military Service Law of 1951 states that every Israeli citizen who reaches the age of 18 must be mobilized into the IDF. The defense minister is authorized under this law to exempt certain individuals or groups for religious and national reasons.

### **Origins of Druze Political Loyalty**

The Druze in Syria and Lebanon played a key role in the building of their respective countries and had an important part in the Arab struggles against French colonialism that began in the 1920s. Thus, they are part of the past glory, present reality, and future destiny of their countries, and never had nationalist aspirations to establish an independent Druze state. They preferred to be loyal to their respective countries and partners in developing its strength, security, prosperity, and power.

The situation of the Druze in Israel was different because they lacked organized institutions, an educated class, economic means, and an agreed-upon leadership. The Druze in Mandatory Palestine were primarily peasants, residents of mountaintop villages distant from the major cities and centers of decision-making. They played no central role in the struggle over Eretz Israel and remained outside of Arab and Muslim political activity during the period 1920-1940. There were attempts by a few to organize the affairs of the Druze in Mandatory Palestine and to improve their standing, but their efforts failed, especially due to struggles over leadership between the Tarif and Khyr clans.

As a result of these struggles, the Druze community was divided in the contest for Mandatory Palestine. Some were politically active in the Arab national movement and others joined the armed struggle, but the majority remained passive. Until 1948 most of the Druze villages were open to the Arab nationalist movement. However, the leaders of local Arab militias related to the Druze with scorn, acting with violence and extortion within their villages. Other Druze were kidnapped and murdered by Arab nationalists, sowing threats and fear. At a time when many Druze sought a solution to their plight, the Jewish leadership in the country, who realized what was occurring, capitalized on the anger in the Druze villages and began to develop relations with the Druze, primarily in Ussifiya, Daliat al-Carmel, and Shfaram. Thus, some Druze began to help and defend the Jews, while others continued to identify with the Arab nationalist leaders.

The key reason for the break in relations between the Druze and the Arab nationalists was the demand by the Muslim Wakf in 1942 to take over control of Jethro's Tomb, the holiest site of the Druze, located in Kfar Hittin west of Tiberias. This demand was supported by the Arab Higher Committee headed by Haj Amin el-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem. The demand triggered waves of

protest and anger and a protracted legal struggle. The issue united the heads of the Druze in Syria, Lebanon, and Mandatory Palestine, who petitioned Muslim and Arab leaders as well as British officials. Only in 1945 did the court decide that the site was to remain under Druze control.

It was the accumulation of all of these provocations toward the Druze that caused the break in their relations with the Arab nationalists, which only increased as the British and the Jews stood at the side of the Druze in their struggle for survival, honor, and security.

### **The First Military Nucleus**

During the 1948 war there were some Druze, largely from the three above-mentioned towns, who cooperated with the Jewish Haganah forces. Based on these contacts and the assistance extended by a few Druze activists, Jewish military commanders and political leaders decided not to attack these towns, in an attempt to win Druze trust and eventual support.

As the war progressed, Druze and Jewish leaders decided to form the Minorities Unit in the IDF and launched a campaign to recruit Druze volunteers to serve in the unit, with most of the volunteers coming from these three towns and from clans whose leaders cooperated with the Jewish leadership.

Also among the first volunteers were several soldiers who had been part of the Syrian Druze battalion that had come to fight against the Haganah as part of the Arab Salvation Army. Following the defeat and withdrawal of their unit after it had sustained serious losses, these soldiers then defected and remained in Israel.

This trend continued and increasing numbers of Druze voluntarily joined the Minorities Unit of the IDF between May 1948 and 1956.

### **Compulsory Service Since 1956**

The original decision to subject Druze to compulsory military service was made in 1956 at the initiative of Druze leaders seeking to gain influence and support from the country's Jewish leadership, and who expected to be rewarded by government leaders and military officers, which would then strengthen their status in inter-clan rivalries.

The average Druze was never asked whether he or she supported this move. No plebiscite was conducted among the villagers to weigh their attitude. The co-opted Israeli Druze leadership believed that since many Druze had already served voluntarily in the IDF following the declaration of the State of Israel, the new measure would be welcomed by most Druze. Thus, beginning in May 1956, tens of Druze began to be conscripted into military service, in two groups each year, while those who avoided or refused service were very few in number. (The measure applied only to young men; Druze women are totally exempt from military service.)

In addition to the vested interests of the Druze leaders who sought to enhance

their own position in the eyes of the Israeli authorities, the leadership also sought to achieve certain collective objectives:

1. To improve the situation of the Druze through army service.
2. To secure economic opportunities for many Druze families who were very poor.
3. To help the Druze achieve equality with the Jews.
4. To serve as an example to other Arab minority groups in Israel and to encourage them to join the IDF.
5. To improve the social and political status of Arab minority groups and to encourage the first steps toward integration within the broader spheres of Israeli life.

After compulsory IDF service for Druze was initiated in May 1956, opponents began to organize public protests that spread throughout the Druze villages, and petitions of protest were sent to institutions and individuals in the Israeli government requesting the cancellation of this move. Their principal complaint was based on the relationship of the Druze to the Arab people, that the Druze should be treated like their Arab Muslim and Christian brothers who were exempt from compulsory service. At the same time, the Arab world did not hide its surprise at the conduct of the chiefs of the Druze community in Israel who had agreed to the service of their sons in the IDF.

In order to weaken the wave of opposition to the compulsory conscription law, the two Druze serving in the Knesset at the time refused to meet with representatives of the opponents, and so the official institutions of the state would not listen to them, especially since the Knesset members and the rest of the leadership of the clans and the villages had been behind the adoption of compulsory military service.

Thus, the authority of the law and the power of the leaders of the most influential clans overrode the opposition, which at the time comprised a few student activists and educated people who came mainly from smaller clans whose connection with the Israeli authorities was almost nonexistent. Consequently, compulsory military service for Israeli Druze became a reality and all attempts to thwart it have failed.

### **Building a Separate Identity**

At the same time, the Israeli government, in coordination with the same Druze chiefs, took a number of significant steps to diffuse the opposition. The Druze had never achieved recognition as an independent religious community under the Ottoman or English governments. However, at the end of 1956 and the beginning of 1957, the government of Israel recognized the Druze as an independent religious community according to law.

In 1962, Druze communal courts were established according to a law passed by the Knesset, for the first time in the history of Druze in the Land of Israel. Three judges were appointed for initial proceedings and three more for an appeals court. It is interesting to note that all six judges were appointed from among the heads of the largest clans that had supported the compulsory conscription law, and that the two Knesset members were also part of the same leadership.

These two innovations -- recognition of the Druze as an independent religious community and the establishment of Druze courts -- were pathbreaking for the status of the Druze in Israel and were welcomed by most Druze with gratitude toward the Israeli governmental establishment.

An additional step taken in 1956, whose purpose was to relate to the Druze in a special and separate manner, was the adoption of the designation of "Druze" on Israeli identity cards not only under the "Religion" heading but also under the "Nationality" heading, instead of "Arab," in an attempt to recognize the Druze as a nation separate from the Arabs. In this case, as well, there was significant, though minority, opposition which diminished over time. Yet most Druze still object to this measure and believe the arrangement to be an imposition.

Finally, other symbolic actions were taken by those Jews responsible for Druze affairs who sought to relate a special importance and status to the Druze (unlike the rest of the Arab communities), as demonstrated in numerous visits by Israeli officials at receptions and special events, particularly the annual gathering of the Druze at Jethro's Tomb.

In light of these innovations in the status of the Druze, the belief began to deepen among many Druze that military service was a positive privilege that was bestowed only on those in whom the government of Israel believed and trusted.

## **Obligations and Rights**

There is no doubt that national service by a state's citizens is one of the basic elements of the principle of equality, especially when speaking of a democratic state and a pluralistic society. In Israel this is not just a theoretical issue if the residents of the state feel a sense of belonging and accept their obligations, and the heads of the state see in them an inseparable part of those who "perform obligations and receive rights." Most Druze believed in the propriety of the new steps, but their status did not change as they had expected in terms of becoming first-class citizens. Their economic situation, which was not good, continued to resemble that of the rest of the Arab citizens of Israel who did not serve in the army.

In addition, at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, organizations arose and voices were heard in most of the villages that demanded civil equality between Druze and Jewish discharged soldiers. Criticism was also voiced by certain of the young intelligentsia against the transformation of the Druze into a special nation, a situation that was unprecedented for Druze in the Middle East. The cooperation of the Druze leadership with the state institutions was also questioned, with charges of a "conspiracy" and corruption at the expense of the masses of Druze, in relation to the narrow political benefits paid to a small group of clan leaders.

In response, the Druze establishment recruited the newspapers, especially the government newspaper *Al Yom*, as a counterweight to the critics. Calls by Druze students at Hebrew University to establish an elected council to lead the Druze community were not accepted by the Druze majority. The two Druze Knesset members continued to represent the interests of the clan leadership, while at the same time representing the interests of the establishment and the ruling Mapai

party, with the intention of preserving their own positions and assuring their reelection.

## **Forging a New Reality**

After May 1956, the overwhelming majority of Druze accepted the obligation of compulsory military service and did not try to escape it. Indeed, most of the Druze youth who were conscripted performed their military service in an outstanding manner.

As they gathered greater experience in defending the security of the state, the numbers increased of those who sought to advance into command positions. The slogan "a covenant of blood" became a fact and a source of pride and honor among many. With time (and rather quickly), celebrations and ceremonies were organized in Druze villages that reflected the transformation of the community from the solitary life of villagers to people who shared joint responsibility for defending the national security of Israel.

More than that, the successful performance of many soldiers began to be reflected in the promotion of certain individuals to officers rank, and their appearance in uniform and participation in military marches and parades contributed to the deepening of the feeling of belonging to the greater society and the greater Israeli citizenry.

Since 1948, the state authorities have undertaken positive steps for certain non-Jewish communities, including the introduction of free compulsory education, medical services in a number of villages, protection of holy places and religious practices, and instruction in Arab language and literature, including in Druze schools. A number of local councils were also established, roads were paved within villages, and some of the villages were connected to the national water system, though some villages did not receive all of these services until the 1960s.

The average per-capita income began to rise as Druze ascended the ranks of the standing army, police, border patrol, and prisons service. The gates of a number of factories were opened to Druze, especially to those who had served in the army. Among the first were the port of Haifa, the potash works in Sdom, the Timna copper works near Eilat, and petrochemical factories.

Today, hundreds of discharged Druze soldiers or their families have entered a wide variety of sensitive positions, including at Israel Railways, the Electric Company, the Bezek telephone company, and the oil refineries, although the percentage of Druze employed in these firms is still much below their percentage in the population. At the same time, many continued to serve in the security branches. In a study conducted in the 1990s, Dr. Yosef Abu Hassan found that in three villages in the Galilee, 41 percent of the breadwinners among the population depended on the security services for their income. In 1995 it was found that 33 percent of the Druze population lived on income from these sources. This research did not include retired or disabled soldiers, and if those who received a pension from the defense branches of the state were included, the figure would reach 38 percent.

The widespread employment of Druze has greatly improved their economic situation. As a result, this has strengthened the understanding of the Druze regarding the importance of military service as a means to claim the right to equality, together with a growing sense that the Druze community could serve as an example for the vital principle of coexistence for all the communities in Israel. Military service, therefore, not only opened up equal opportunities for hundreds of Druze, but increased their status and influence, and many understood that the Druze stood at the forefront of a new era that could strengthen the connection between the rest of Israel's Arab citizens and the Jews and the state institutions.

In a country classified as a Jewish state, according to the leaders of the state, citizens serve in the army who are Arabs -- Druze, Circassians, Muslims, Bedouin, and tens of Christians from different villages. Other than the Druze and the small Circassian Islamic community, numbering 4,000, which accepted compulsory military service at the end of the 1950s, all of the others serve in a voluntary framework.

### **Remaining Problems**

As employment opportunities for Druze improved, there were unforeseen consequences as many left primitive farming and even sold their land in order to use the money to improve the quality of life for their families. In this way hundreds of Druze families in various villages "lost" their land. Ironically, this same land is being provided today by the state at very high cost to young Druze who served in the IDF in order to allow them to build homes.

Another problem arose in the matter of education, as some Druze realized that military service was a factor that delayed the continuation of studies for youth called for compulsory military service immediately after high school. Beginning in 1977, Druze youth were finally permitted to continue their studies prior to army service in the framework of the academic military reserves program.

Still another problem was the fact that after the discharge of young Druze from the army, they were not motivated to learn and to invest time and money in continuing their education. Their principal concern was to build a home and establish a family. Therefore, most Druze became blue collar workers, in tasks connected to the army and the other security services. As a result, the academic level of Druze was lowest in comparison with other segments of Israeli society, with a negative impact on the standing of Druze in the high-tech era.

### **Confidence-Building Measures**

Beginning in the early 1970s the Israeli army began to speed up the integration of Druze into command positions in the IDF, and the number of officers in all branches of service increased significantly. Many were sent to officer's courses and some reached high ranks. Various military units were opened to Druze, offering new opportunities for advancement to many. In the 1990s this trend was expanded with the promotion of additional young Druze in both the army and the police, border police and prisons service.

In August 2001, a Druze was promoted to the rank of major general for the first

time in 50 years of Druze service in the IDF. Two Druze officers were promoted to brigadier general, in addition to a third who retired. A number were promoted to colonel and lieutenant colonel, all serving in positions of national importance. These high-ranking promotions represent an important innovation by the IDF to recognize the ability, contribution, and performance of Druze soldiers and to integrate them equally within the army system. Furthermore, most of the top Druze officers have been sent to continue their studies at institutions of higher learning in the framework of their military service.

Also in civilian life, in 2001 a Druze was chosen to be a minister in the government of Israel for the first time, although not because of his Druze identity but rather due to political considerations and maneuvering within his party -- the Labor party. An additional Druze, a former IDF officer, was appointed as director-general of a government ministry for the first time, and two Druze ambassadors serve in the Foreign Ministry.

All of this leads to the conclusion that even if the economic and academic achievements of the Druze in Israel are still lower than other groups in the population, most Druze believe that because of their military service, the economic situation of the Druze community and its standing in the eyes of the Jewish majority has clearly improved, especially in recent years.

## **A Bridge to Other Arab Communities**

Due to the connections of a number of Druze leaders with the Jewish establishment in the 1940s, and thanks to their military service, the Druze succeeded in becoming a force to help their Arab neighbors and acted as a go-between on their behalf with the institutions of the state. The Druze became a key element in the application of the principle of balance between the two peoples in the state and served as an example of loyalty. From this position they believed in and worked to advance the principles of equality and co-existence.

The Arab citizens of the State of Israel, especially in the villages neighboring those of the Druze, also have not forgotten the stand of the Druze at their side over the years, and especially during 1948-49 when Druze villages opened their gates to masses of Arab refugees. During a later stage, Druze leaders intervened with the government to return thousands to the villages they had left, while additional thousands settled permanently in Druze villages.

The Druze themselves remained in their villages and on their land and did not become refugees or leave the state or were forced to leave. Thus, they represented a national value of the first rank in loyalty to their land and their homes, and they did not forsake their historic tradition of belonging to the land that their fathers had worked so long to develop and own.

## **Responding to the Critics**

After the Amman conference, a wide range of Druze leaders publicly criticized the fact that the conference had been held at all, and many also called on Walid Jumblatt not to interfere in the internal affairs of the Druze community in the State of Israel.



The views of outside interests regarding compulsory military service are not acceptable to most Druze in the State of Israel, and the meetings held in Amman were largely considered unnecessary and not useful. The Druze in Israel accept the existence of a discussion or dialogue on the subject, but not in Amman, the capital of Jordan, and not with the participation of Druze leaders from neighboring countries. The issue is an internal one to the Druze within the State of Israel, and any dialogues should take place in Israel and between Israeli Druze.

The opponents of Druze military service should be aware of a number of basic facts:

1. The percentage of Druze serving in the IDF is proportional to their percentage in the general population -- about 1.7 percent. So how many Druze are truly called to serve in the territories and conflict with the Palestinians? The percentage is negligible.
2. It is possible to believe that the Druze are sent to serve purposely in the territories or on the front line in every conflict, yet this has no basis in reality and the accusation is only made to taint the Druze image.
3. Why did Walid Jumblatt appeal only to the Druze when there are hundreds of Arab Muslims and Christians serving in the army, all on a voluntary basis?
4. As opposed to civilian service, army service is based on orders from the army chain of command, who carry out the policies of the government, and therefore there is almost no freedom of choice for any soldier about where he will serve.
5. The Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip know and well remember that the Druze officers who served as commanders or military governors of cities or coordinators during the Oslo process performed their tasks well and with great understanding and assistance for the population under their authority.

Finally, the Druze in Israel have deep roots in their land and have never forsaken or left their homes. Therefore, connection to the land is one of the central foundations of belief among the Druze in Israel, who honor Walid Jumblatt and revere his late father Kamal Jumblatt in Lebanon, and the late Sultan Al-Atrash, leader of the Druze in Syria, who were always considered by the Druze in Eretz Israel as the defenders of their national land and who fought for its liberation from foreign rule. The Israeli Druze have always admired the leading role of Walid Jumblatt in Lebanon and in the Arab world. He is well respected especially following his successful performance in preserving Druze dignity and presence during the Lebanese civil war.

## **Druze Solidarity**

On September 5, 2000, a ceremony was held in the village of Abu Snaan in western Galilee in honor of the first Druze general in the IDF, Home Front Commander Yosef Mishlab. More than 3,000 guests were present from all of the

Druze villages in the Galilee and Mt. Carmel, as well as IDF Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz, Minister of Interior Eli Yishai and his deputy, and other high-ranking Druze and Jewish IDF officers, police officials, and commanders. The large number of participants was a demonstration of solidarity by the Druze with the highest ranking officer in the history of their community. According to the remarks of Chief of Staff Mofaz, Mishlab is a full participant in the decisions of the general staff of the Israel Defense Forces, meaning that he participates in the process of *daily decision-making concerning the national security of the State of Israel*.

The ceremony in honor of General Mishlab was attended by representatives from the entire political and clan spectrum, all of the Druze mayors and religious leaders, public personalities, judges, officials, and senior officers, all of whom came to honor his achievement and to emphasize the important standing of the Druze community.

The ceremony also sharpened Druze honor and respect and perhaps also the power (and not just symbolically) that the Druze community now enjoyed in the state, especially as a result of their army service.

An additional symbol of Druze solidarity is expressed during the funerals of Druze soldiers who fell in the performance of their military duties. Usually the number of participants in the funeral of a Druze who fell in the line of duty is double that of the participants in the funeral of a citizen who was not a soldier.

Yet another example of this solidarity may be seen in the memorial ceremonies for fallen soldiers at Druze military cemeteries, which are held every year on the eve of Independence Day. At these ceremonies as well, the number of participants is especially great and usually includes many hundreds of Druze of all ages. These ceremonies are part of the nationwide remembrance of the actions and bravery of the fallen soldiers.

Thus in light of these events, it is the clear consensus among most Druze in Israel to continue to serve in the Israel Defense Forces, and that there will be no digression from the record of the past fifty years. The Israeli Druze have interests, connections, loyalty to their land, and a clearly recognized standing within Israel society, all things that the average Druze in Israel is not prepared to give up.

## **Summing Up**

1. Today, compulsory military service for Druze is an accepted fact according to law and any questioning of this is not part of the Druze consensus.
2. The principle of equality between Druze and their Jewish companions has also not been achieved in practice. The continuation of military service and political pressures in all the ranks are liable to improve the condition of Druze, and to advance their participation in academic education and the development of infrastructure in their places of settlement.
3. The contribution of the Druze to the security of the state has its own clear value. The government of Israel, together with Jewish institutions and organizations in the country and throughout the world, can be mobilized, if

there is initiative, on behalf of the advancement of important Druze issues.

4. The Druze will continue to protect their Druze identity and traditions, as well as preserving their relationship to Israeli Arabs and Arab nationality, as expressed in language, culture, events, and the like. None of this contradicts their loyalty to their land, which is seen as an inseparable part of the State of Israel.
5. There is no connection between the Arab identity of the Druze and their military service. The Arab states and their armies are not made of a single piece. The reality is that, unfortunately, Arabs have fought and continue to fight with other Arabs, and sometimes there are bloody conflicts between Muslims within states and between states. However, this has no connection to the Druze in Israel. As much as it is painful to say, there is no reason to point to the Druze as an exception and as a scapegoat in this matter.

The extent of the contribution of the Druze to the state in the framework of their relation to the military is much greater than the rights they receive. A Druze individual said once: "The whole world, including diaspora Jewry, contributes money and resources to Israel," but only one other group in the world contributes to the State of Israel with its blood, and that is the Druze community in Israel.

## **Suggestions for the Future**

In order to organize this overview, let me offer two concrete proposals:

1. The disagreement between opponents and supporters of compulsory military service will continue to occasionally arise. We must honor the freedom of speech and thought of those who hold opinions we oppose. However, in order to conclude the disagreement, we do not need conferences in foreign capitals. We should hold a referendum among the Druze population in Israel. If the number of opponents of compulsory service is greater than the number of supporters, then we need to begin to think about its cancellation. And if the opposite is true, we need to end the disagreement and the minority should accept the will of the majority. This is the way that a democratic, pluralistic, and liberal society should act.
2. The Druze in the state lack resources. They do not have capital or media. Their percentage in the overall population is small and thus their electoral influence is practically not felt. In addition, the one or two Druze Knesset members are not necessarily Druze representatives but rather representatives of a certain political party. Often they are not devoted to Druze concerns but rather to their own, and the Druze are left without representation.

Therefore, the government of Israel as well as the relevant institutions should initiate projects among the Druze for the advancement of academic education, society, infrastructure, industry, and the like, within the framework of affirmative action, for a period of ten years. Such a policy is necessary in order to develop the Druze villages and the young Druze leadership who will bear the burden of the Druze community and the

nation. Of course this would include employment of Druze in key positions throughout public service, since the Druze have expertise not only in matters of security and the army.

On the other hand, Jewish organizations, especially in the United States and in the Western world, should adopt the Druze community in Israel. The diaspora Jewish agenda should include all Israeli citizens in their annual agenda, and especially those who give their blood for their state and who contribute to the stability of relations between the Arab minority and the Jewish majority in Israel. In this way, the obligation is not just on the government of Israel but also on world Jewry.

The government of Israel and diaspora Jewry are requested to reward the Druze for their contribution and to initiate an improvement in their situation and standing. Whoever serves in the security services and fulfills his military obligations should receive full rights and rewards, especially if he is numbered among the minorities within the state.

If these steps are not taken, many Druze are liable to be influenced by the antagonistic surroundings both in Israel and the Middle East. Such a situation could bring about a retreat from historic obligations, and become a cause of concern for many, and with time would result in strengthened calls for the cancellation of compulsory service for Druze, a situation that both the Jewish majority and the Druze minority hope will never happen.

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The *Jerusalem Letter* and *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* are published by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 972-2-5619281, Fax. 972-2-5619112, Internet: [jcpa@netvision.net.il](mailto:jcpa@netvision.net.il). In U.S.A.: Center for Jewish Community Studies, 1515 Locust St., Suite 703, Philadelphia, PA 19102; Tel. (215) 772-0564, Fax. (215) 772-0566. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0792-7304.

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