



SYRIAN DRUZE: TOWARD DEFIANT NEUTRALITY

By Gary C. Gambill



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Syria's Druze community once played a major role in shaping the country's modern history, despite comprising a mere three percent of the population. Today, however, this enigmatic highland minority that seldom met an anti-government revolt it didn't like finds itself precariously accommodating a dying regime as a gathering rebel alliance slowly moves in for the kill. Though a handful of Druze can be found fighting (and dying) with the rebels, the large majority of the few who have taken up arms in this conflict have done so for the other side.

While some journalists close to the rebels have reported that the Druze community is on the verge of switching sides,¹ this is wishful thinking. Opposition to Syrian President Bashar Assad has clearly increased in the past two years, but so too has apprehension about the increasingly Islamist character of the predominantly Sunni Muslim revolt. With traditional authority structures long co-opted by the state, intellectuals divided in sympathies, and a professional class fearful of provoking the kind of regime reprisals that have devastated much of Syria, the growing buzzword among Syrian Druze is neutrality, not rebellion.

BACKGROUND

The Druze sect was born in the eleventh century when the caliph of the Ismaili Shiite Muslim Fatimid dynasty in Egypt, Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, was ostensibly revealed to be a divine incarnation. The new faith rapidly dissipated after Hakim's death, except in a few pockets along the frontier of his empire—the largest in the rugged terrain of central and southern Mount Lebanon, with a scattering of smaller communities in the Syrian interior (notably Jabal al-Aala, a hilly region southwest of Aleppo). In these remote enclaves, believers calling themselves *muwahhidun* (roughly “monotheists”), and called by others *duruz*,² carved out an uneasy existence among the multitude of other heterodox religious groups fleeing oppression from the surrounding Sunni Arab world.

An eclectic admixture of Abrahamic, gnostic, and neoplatonic conceptions of the divine, Druze religious doctrine is highly esoteric. Only a small minority of the faithful, known as *uqqal* (the enlightened), are allowed to directly access scriptures, and they have a long tradition of concealing the tenets of their faith from outsiders.³ They also have a long history of protective dissimulation (*taqiyya*), outwardly adopting many Sunni religious practices (e.g., fasting during Ramadan) to defuse outside suspicion.

¹ See Babak Dehghanpisheh, "[Syria's Druze minority is shifting its support to the opposition](#)," *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2012; Mona Alami, "Druze take up the fight," *Nowlebanon* (Beirut), August 13, 2012.

² This was an originally pejorative derivation of the name Muhammad bin Ismael *ad-Darazi*, a subordinate of Hakim executed as a heretic in 1018.

³ The rest, known as *juhhal* (the ignorant, or uninitiated) receive only oral religious instruction.

Of particular political importance are the religion's requirement of endogamous marriage, the impermissibility of conversion into (or out of) the faith, and the belief that all Druze are linked to one another through transmigration of souls. Because one must, in principle (though historically not in practice), be born Druze to be a Druze, ethnic and sectarian identifications are seamlessly intertwined. Protection of other Druze (*hifz al-ikhwan*) is an explicit religious obligation, giving the community a greater degree of communal solidarity (*assabiya*) than is typical of other sectarian minorities. Druze-on-Druze political violence has been uncommon by regional standards. During the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war, Druze were largely spared the kind of intra-sect bloodletting that decimated the Christian, Shiite, and predominantly Sunni Palestinian communities.

Druze religious practice accommodated preexisting tribal structures and norms. Most Druze claim descent from Arabian tribes that immigrated to the Levant in the pre-Islamic era, particularly the Qaysi and Yamani. Eleventh century clan chiefs simply adopted the new religion and continued to rule over their flocks much as before. In principle, Druze clerics (*masha'ikh al-din*) restrict themselves to strictly religious affairs, leaving temporal leaders (*masha'ikh al-zaman*) to contend with the material world.⁴

Both of the two great Sunni empires that ruled over Mount Lebanon in the centuries to come—the Mamlukes in Egypt until 1516, then the Ottoman Empire until the end of World War I—found it expedient to grant some form of hereditary feudal tenure to powerful Druze emirs. Periodic Ottoman efforts to roll back this autonomy almost invariably sparked armed revolts, and the Druze developed a reputation for extraordinary military prowess.

THE RISE OF JABAL DRUZE

In 1711, a fierce battle erupted between the Qaysi and Yamani Druze clan federations in Mount Lebanon, resulting in the defeat of the latter. Afterwards many Yamani Druze migrated east to a budding Druze community in Hawran, a semi-fertile volcanic plateau in the southwest of present-day Syria, that since came to be known as *Jabal Druze* (mountain of the Druze). A second major influx to the Jabal came after the bloody 1860 Druze-Christian civil war in Mount Lebanon.

While maintaining strong communal ties to the Druze of Mount Lebanon, the Jabal developed distinct modern socio-political traditions. In Syria, the *masha'ikh al-zaman*—dominated by the Atrash family since the 1870s—were less fragmented by centuries-old clan divisions than their counterparts in Lebanon, where the Jumblatt and Arslan families competed vigorously for power, often cultivating rival domestic and regional support.⁵

Whereas the Jumblatt and Arslan families have long intervened directly in the process of choosing the community's top religious figure, known as *sheikh al-aql* (often backing two rival claimants, as is the case today), political and religious spheres of authority have been more neatly separated in the Syrian Druze community. There has been a triumvirate of sheikh al-aqls for the past two centuries, the positions passing by succession within a fixed set of three families (the Jarbua, Hinawi, and Hajari) with relatively little outside interference in the process.

The Jabal is much more homogenous and isolated from non-Druze than Mount Lebanon. There is little history of violent conflict between Syrian Druze and the small Christian minority living in the Jabal (though Ismael al-Atrash sent an expedition to Mount Lebanon in 1860 that committed horrendous atrocities against Christians).⁶ The Druze clashed fiercely at times with Sunni villagers and Bedouin who encroached on their lands, but these disputes never devolved into the scale of sectarian conflict that repeatedly embroiled the Druze community in Lebanon.

The Ottomans were another story. Nineteenth century efforts by Istanbul to extend its administrative grip over remote areas of the empire repeatedly sparked violent Syrian Druze resistance. It was therefore no surprise that Sultan Pasha al-Atrash led the Druze to join the Arab revolt that helped defeat the Ottoman Empire in World War I.

The French, who came to control what is now Syria and Lebanon under a League of Nations mandate after the Ottoman defeat, worked to undercut majority Sunni Arab opposition to their mandate by offering Syria's Alawite,

⁴ Robert Brenton Betts, *The Druze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p.22-24.

⁵ While the Arslan family aligned itself with right-wing Maronite Christians and Sunni notables in Lebanon's First Republic (1943-1991), the Jumblatt family allied with leftist Muslims – alignments that are today almost perfectly reversed.

⁶ Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *Occasion for War: Civil Conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 55, 56, 63, 64, 67, 185.

(non-Arab) Kurdish, and Druze minorities autonomy and political privileges. An accommodationist branch of the Atrash family and its allies were given control over the Jabal's administration and security. Rudimentary public education and utilities were introduced.

Sultan al-Atrash remained deeply skeptical of French ambitions, however, and led revolts against the occupation in 1923 and 1925-27, the latter in conjunction with Sunni Arab nationalists in Damascus. His cousin, Amir Hasan al-Atrash, played a major role in the fight for Syria's independence in 1945-46. While these campaigns were launched under the banners of Arab and Syrian nationalism, they also served to consolidate the Atrash family's supremacy in the Jabal (which it guarded fiercely in a bloody intra-Druze power struggle in 1947).

After Syria's independence, a succession of Sunni-dominated governments strove to centralize political authority in Damascus and erode the Jabal's autonomy, an assault that peaked during the reign of President Adib Shishakli from 1949 to 1954.⁷ The overwhelmingly Druze province of Suwaida, comprising the Jabal and its environs, was starved of development funds, while vast irrigation projects in other regions boosted agricultural production, driving down prices and impoverishing Druze farmers still further. The Atrash family was forced to rely on illicit drug cultivation to maintain its patronage networks.⁸

While the Atrash family's formidable fighters enabled it to fend off government encroachments for a time, the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and its aftermath saw a massive increase in the size and effectiveness of the Syrian army. In 1954, Shishakli brought this advantage to bear in brutally crushing a Druze revolt. In retaliation, Druze military officers played a major role in the coup that ousted him weeks later.⁹ Not for the last time, Druze *assabiya* served to shield conspirators from outside detection and infiltration.

In the period of brief parliamentary democracy that followed, the Atrash family and its allies temporarily regained supremacy in the Jabal. By this time, however, younger generation Druze intellectuals in Syria (and Lebanon) were gravitating toward secular nationalist organizations.¹⁰ Sultan Atrash's son, Mansour, was a founding member of the Baath party, and many rising Druze officers were among its military wing. Though the Baath party was ideologically opposed to representational rights for subnational groups, its staunch secularism and avowed socio-economic egalitarianism were appealing to minorities fearful of Sunni Arab domination after independence.

In 1963, Druze military officers joined Alawite and Ismaili Shiite counterparts in launching a coup that brought the Baath party to power for the first time, with Capt. Salim Hatum in particular playing a lead role. They were also instrumental in the 1966 coup that ousted President Amin Hafez and consolidated power in the hands of Lt. Salah Jadid and Capt. Hafez Assad (both Alawites). When the new government acted to marginalize Druze in the military and civilian Baath party apparatus, Hatum and Maj. Gen. Fahd Sha'ir (the highest ranking Druze in the army) began plotting a counter-coup, which failed.

Afterwards, leading Druze military officers and civilian Baathists were arrested, exiled, or sidelined.¹¹ Hafez Assad, whose ascension to the presidency in 1970 inaugurated more than four decades of uninterrupted authoritarian rule, eventually released many of the Druze detainees and even reinstated some officers. But he and the narrow clique of mostly Alawite officers around him were determined to prevent any independent aggregation of Druze power, particularly in the military. Though Sultan al-Atrash was allowed to retire comfortably and treated with great symbolic deference as a hero of Syrian independence, his family—and the Druze traditional notability in general—lost much of its privileged economic status.

Like other long-neglected corners of the country, the Jabal enjoyed a degree of economic advancement under

⁷ See Joshua Landis, "Shishakli and the Druzes: Integration and Intransigence," in Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schaebler, eds., *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), pp. 369-396.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Shishakli was later assassinated in exile by a Syrian Druze.

¹⁰ Kais M. Firro, "Nationalism and Confessionalism: Shi'is, Druzes and Alawis in Syria and Lebanon," in Anh Nga Longva and Anne Sofie Roald, eds., *Religious minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011), p. 257.

¹¹ Druze officers made one final, brief appearance on the Syrian stage on the eve of the 1967 Six Day War. For reasons that can only be attributed to genuine patriotism, Hatum and Sha'ir flew home from Amman, expecting to be sent forthwith to the front. Instead, Sha'ir was imprisoned, while Hatum was brutally tortured and later executed.

Baathist rule. While excluded from most sensitive security posts, Druze eventually came to be equitably represented (or slightly overrepresented) in many branches of the civil service, the army's midlevel officer corps, and state-owned industries. The town of Suwaida, provincial capital and center of Druze political life, grew into a bustling city of 150,000 people. Aside from periodic armed clashes over land ownership between Druze farmers and local Bedouins,¹² the Jabal experienced a period of security and relative social tranquility.

The regime developed cooperative relations with the Druze community's three sheikh al-aqls, without interfering inordinately in their affairs. At the time of the 2011 uprising, this triumvirate consisted of Hussein Jarbua of Suwaida, Hamoud al-Hinawi of Sahwat al-Balata, and Ahmad al-Hajari of Qanawat, with Jarbua regarded as *primus inter pares*.¹³

Although Druze intellectuals were well represented in various secular opposition fronts that challenged Baathist supremacy and some were jailed for political activity, the overwhelming majority avoided overt dissent. Many embraced the regime, which isn't surprising given their secular leftist ideological center of gravity. The government's heavy-handed suppression of civil liberties and domination by members of Syria's long oppressed Alawite sect were seen as lesser evils to be fought via reform, not revolution.

The strength of Syrian Druze communal identity after four decades of Baathist rule is unclear, as the strong tribal and patriarchal norms underpinning it have eroded substantially under the twin weights of modernization and authoritarianism. Although kinship ties are still important, they are much less a determinant of socio-economic status than in the past (or in present-day Lebanon). Many educated Druze consider this an achievement of Baathist rule.

Druze in Lebanon also came under the dominion of Assad, who sent Syrian troops to occupy much of the country in 1976. After assassinating the leading Lebanese Druze political leader, Kamal Jumblatt, the Syrian regime forced his son and successor, Walid, into a patron-client relationship that lasted for a quarter century. Walid Jumblatt eventually turned against the Assad regime after the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

THE UPRISING

The late Hafez Assad's son and successor, Bashar, had good reason to expect continued Druze quietism as flickers of protest began to proliferate in early 2011. But just to be sure he paid a rare visit to Suwaida on March 12 and was photographed by the state-run media with beaming Druze elders.

When mass demonstrations erupted in the nearby Sunni city of Deraa days later and began spreading to other areas of the country, the Jabal remained relatively calm. On March 27, several dozen members of the lawyers syndicate in Suwaida held a sit-in to demand government reforms. In April, several small demonstrations took place in Suwaida and Qraya. But there was nothing approaching the kind of mass mobilization that rippled through remote Sunni-dominated areas in the early months of the uprising.

Druze disaffection with the regime simply didn't approach the level of acute hostility commonly felt by Sunnis, many of whom view secularism as anathema and consider Alawites (and Druze) heretics. Economic conditions were better in the Jabal than in Deraa. Higher emigration rates and lower birth rates in the Druze community reduced the relative size of its youth demographic,¹⁴ a critical driver of popular uprisings elsewhere in Syria and the Arab world.

Moreover, the Druze clergy remained broadly supportive of the regime. All three sheikh al-aqls at the time of the uprising denounced the protest movement (especially Jarbua) and strongly discouraged dissidents from taking part.

¹² The worst outbreak came in November 2000, when weeks of clashes left a few dozen (mostly Druze) fatalities and hundreds of injured, despite the massive deployment of security forces. See "[Sectarian Violence Erupts in Suweida](#)," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, December 2000.

¹³ Jarbua became sheikh al-aql in 1965. After the death of Sultan al-Atrash in 1982, Jarbua became the leading figure in the Druze community.

¹⁴ Phil Sands, "[Syria's Druze community: A silent minority in no rush to take sides](#)," *The National* (UAE), February 22, 2012.

This support was not unlimited (they refused to denounce Druze army defectors, for example)¹⁵ and grew considerably less emphatic as the civil war escalated, but it was critical in defusing opposition to the regime. There are no secular Syrian Druze leaders of comparable stature.

Consequently, the regime found it easy to contain opposition activity in Suwaida province without resorting to the kinds of horrific atrocities that backfired in Deraa. The security forces avoided killing or egregiously mistreating Druze protestors, so there were few early martyrs to inflame public antipathy to the regime.

Outside of the Jabal, some notable Druze intellectuals joined the protest movement. Rima Fleihan, a prominent playwright and activist, was arrested for demonstrating against regime abuses.¹⁶ Outside Syria, many others expressed solidarity with the protestors. Montaha al-Atrash, a daughter of Sultan al-Atrash, was particularly vocal.¹⁷ Paris-based singer-songwriter Samih Shuqair wrote one of the most famous opposition anthems, "Ya Haif" (How Shameful), during the first month of the uprising.¹⁸

However, most Druze public figures inside Syria drew the line at endorsing armed struggle against the government, which left them marginalized as the Sunni Arab uprising transformed into an insurgency in the summer of 2011. This reticence was partly due to personal safety concerns. Fleihan, now a member of the Syrian National Council, had a change of heart only after fleeing to Jordan in September 2011.

Threats and intimidation have surely been employed behind the scenes to secure the quiescence of Druze notables, though details are sketchy. The regime may have been responsible for the May 2011 disappearance of exiled Syrian Druze dissident Shibli al-Ayssami while in Lebanon visiting relatives.¹⁹ When sheikh al-aql Hajari was killed in a March 2012 car crash, pro-opposition news outlets were quick to accuse the regime of involvement.²⁰ Two Druze political activists previously jailed for many years, Fadlallah Hijaz and Kamal Amoush, also died in mysterious car crashes.²¹ Whether or not foul play was involved in these cases, the cloud of suspicion surrounding them underscores that few in the Jabal have felt free to openly articulate their feelings.

Not so in Lebanon, where the Druze community's political leaders split into different camps. Talal Arslan and longstanding Syrian ally Wiam Wahhab (as well as their self-appointed sheikh al-aql, Nasreddine al-Gharib) have worked to persuade Syrian Druze to fight for the regime.²² Walid Jumblatt, who had just reconciled with the Assad regime prior to the revolt,²³ also remained loyal initially.²⁴ However, the mercurial ex-warlord changed his tune as it became clear that Assad could not stamp out the uprising, first urging Syrian Druze not to participate in government atrocities, then vocally endorsing the rebel cause²⁵ and denouncing Druze collaborators.²⁶

Nevertheless, rebel leaders have had great difficulty recruiting Druze into their ranks, even in the Jabal al-Aala

¹⁵ Tony Badran, "[A Thorn in the Lion's Paw](#)," Nowlebanon (Beirut), January 19, 2012.

¹⁶ After escaping to Jordan in September 2011, Fleihan joined the Syrian National Council and its successor, the Syrian National Coalition.

¹⁷ "[Fear barrier crumbles in Syrian 'kingdom of silence'](#)," Reuters, March 22, 2011.

¹⁸ Samih Shuqair, "[How Shameful- Ya Haif- Arabic Song with Translation](#)," Youtube, May 31, 2011.

¹⁹ Lebanese media outlets cited eyewitness accounts of Ayssami being kidnapped and quoted security officials in Beirut as casting suspicion on henchmen of Wiam Wahhab, a sycophantic Lebanese Druze ally of Assad. See "[Where is Shibli al-Ayssami?](#)" Nowlebanon (Beirut), August 16, 2011. Although the 86-year-old Ayssami had not played a role in the current uprising, the fact that he was living in the United States would have cast suspicion on him in the eyes of the Assad regime.

²⁰ Some sought to re-christen the deceased sheikh al-aql as an "anti-regime Druze spiritual leader." See "[Anti-regime Druze spiritual leader killed in Syria](#)," yalibnan.com, March 25, 2012.

²¹ "[The Killing of Druze Sheikh al-Aql Ahmad al-Hajari: Accident or Assassination?](#)" (Arabic), Metransparent.net, March 24, 2012.

²² In February 2013, Arslan met with Assad in Damascus and urged residents of the Jabal "to confront Western Israeli plots aimed at targeting the Syrian state and people." "[Arslan Holds Talks with Assad in Damascus](#)," Naharnet (Beirut), February 17, 2013.

²³ "[Druze chief Walid Jumblatt apologises to Syrian president for insults](#)," The National (UAE), March 17, 2010.

²⁴ In April 2011, Jumblatt described the uprising as a U.S.-Israeli plot to divide Syria. "[A new sultan for the Syrian Druze](#)," Nowlebanon (Beirut), January 22, 2012.

²⁵ For an overview of his evolution, see Tony Badran, "[A Thorn in the Lion's Paw](#)," Nowlebanon (Beirut), January 19, 2012.

²⁶ When the long-ailing Jarbua died of cancer in December 2012, Jumblatt said he would "not shed even one tear for a man who supported until the end a regime that massacres its people." "[Syrian pro-regime Druze leader Jarbua dies](#)," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), December 21, 2012.

pocket near Aleppo, where Jumblatt's influence is strong and Druze villages have sheltered and aided insurgents.²⁷ The most notable exception was First Lt. Khaldoun Zeineddine, who defected from the army in August 2011 and formed the Sultan Pasha al-Atrash Battalion of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Another prominent defector, Air Force Lt. Col. Hafez Jad Al-Kareem Faraj, joined the FSA in June 2012 amid much fanfare²⁸ and was subsequently named commander of the FSA Military Council for Suwaida.

Dozens of Druze reportedly joined Zeineddine's battalion, mainly from neighborhoods and villages outside of the Jabal that came under rebel control. In mid-January 2013, however, Zeineddine and many of his men were wiped out while taking part in a rebel assault on regime forces in Suwaida. This appears to be the extent of organized Druze participation in the armed struggle against Assad (though some others have fought in an individual capacity). There have been Youtube videos of other purportedly Druze rebel units, such as the so-called Bani Maarouf Battalion in the mixed Jaramana suburb of Damascus,²⁹ but little verifiable evidence of their participation on the battlefield.

In contrast, thousands of Druze have been helping prosecute Assad's war against the rebels in some capacity or another. The most notorious is Issam Zahreddine, a Republican Guard brigade commander who has played a major role fighting rebels on several fronts. Close to 300 Druze soldiers have reportedly died in the fighting.³⁰ There have been few defections among Druze conscripts, but some have been jailed for refusing to fight and it's rumored there have been quite a few desertions by soldiers returning to the Jabal.³¹

In addition, many Druze villages have established militias, ostensibly to ward off rebel incursions into Suwaida province. The late Jarbua's son Nazih is rumored to have played a major role in arming them with regime support.³² These militia forces have frequently assisted Syrian soldiers in thwarting rebel operations in the Jabal, which contains numerous assets that directly support the regime's operational strength against the rebels, such as Thaala military airport and the Syrian army base at Mjeimar, which has been used repeatedly to shell nearby Sunni villages in Deraa province. The growth in these militias has also freed up more soldiers to fight the rebels on other fronts. The involvement of so many Druze in defense of the regime is an impediment to rebel recruitment in the Jabal, as even the staunchest opposition sympathizers blanch at the thought of fighting other Druze.

In late 2012, rebels in Deraa, including the notorious salafi-jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra, resolved to bring the war to the Jabal, whether its inhabitants welcome the intrusion or not. In the largest rebel attack to date, Jabhat al-Nusra led nearly 300 insurgents in a desperate, failed bid to seize the Mjeimar base on December 19.³³ In January 2013, the rebels struck numerous checkpoints along the road from Suwaida to Deraa, ambushed several security vehicles, and struck Thaala airport. The strategy is reminiscent of the battle for Aleppo, which remained largely supportive of the regime until rebel infiltration forced the government into heavy-handed, indiscriminate bombardments of the city in the spring of 2012.

However, it's unlikely that major rebel advances into the Jabal will win many hearts and minds. Aside from untested promises to govern democratically after the smoke clears, the Islamist fighters leading the charge haven't offered a vision of Syria's future that specifically appeals to Druze and other minorities, and they certainly haven't behaved as liberators. They have kidnapped hundreds of Druze civil servants, policemen, and ordinary civilians to barter for the release of their own fighters from regime prisons,³⁴ including a grandson of the late Amir Hasan al-Atrash.³⁵ In

²⁷ ["Syria Druze back Sunnis' revolt with words but not arms,"](#) Agence France Presse, September 8, 2012.

²⁸ [Nowlebanon](#) (Beirut, Arabic), June 26, 2012.

²⁹ ["Formation of the Bani Maarouf battalion in Damascus and its countryside,"](#) Youtube, December 31, 2012.

³⁰ In February 2013, sheikh al-aql Hinawi estimated that 300 soldiers from Suwaida province (90 percent Druze) had died. [Azzaman](#) (Arabic, Baghdad), February 26, 2013. At the end of 2011, around 100 Druze soldiers had been killed in the fighting. ["Jumblatt and the Druze of Syria,"](#) *Al-Akhbar English* (Beirut), January 26, 2012.

³¹ [Interview with Rima Fleihan](#) (Arabic), Al-Arabiya, February 24, 2012.

³² ["Syrian pro-regime Druze leader Jarbua dies,"](#) *The Daily Star* (Beirut), December 21, 2012. According to Fleihan, these fighters receive 1,500 Syrian pounds (around \$21) a day from the regime. [Interview with Rima Fleihan](#) (Arabic), Al-Arabiya, February 24, 2012.

³³ ["Loyalist Sweida, rebel Deraa wage war in Syria,"](#) Agence France Presse, January 25, 2013.

³⁴ According to sheikh al-aql Hinawi, hundreds of Suwaida residents have been abducted by rebels. [Azzaman](#) (Baghdad), February 26, 2013. In December 2012, rebels attacked a government checkpoint in Suwaida, killing and kidnapping several Druze. Druze residents counterattacked and kidnapped several rebels, who were then exchanged. ["Syrian rebels say will target Aleppo airport,"](#)

February 2013, they seized an entire bus of mostly Druze passengers. Although there have not been any major terror attacks in Suwaida province, four suicide bombings in the Jaramana suburb of Damascus over the past year may be a harbinger of things to come if security in the Jabal breaks down.

CONCLUSION

Claims that the Syrian Druze community “is shifting its support to the opposition”³⁶ are off the mark. No more than a trickle are joining the rebellion. The belief of many outsiders that this will change derives largely from an erroneous tendency to attribute Druze collective behavior to a kind of political *taqiyya*, aligning with the strongest party to a dispute.³⁷ However, while Israeli and Lebanese Druze leaders have arguably exhibited this tendency, it doesn't have a close analog in Syria.

That said, more and more Druze are growing deeply apprehensive about the role some of their brethren are playing in the regime's war. On February 16, a group of midlevel Druze clerics issued a statement calling on all Druze to cut ties with those bearing arms in the conflict, and for soldiers in particular to “leave the army and return immediately” to the Jabal.³⁸ The regime is so concerned about such calls that it has cracked down on Druze dissidents who emphatically preach non-violence.³⁹

Although activists have continued to stage sporadic anti-government demonstrations in the Jabal, they lack the resources, organization, and protected public space to effect a major change in the community's disposition. It's unlikely that even non-violent defiance of the regime will gain further traction unless senior clergy take the lead.

This may yet happen. With the deaths of sheikh al-aql Jarbua (of cancer) and Hajari last year and their replacement by lesser known relatives, sheikh al-aql Hinawi—unquestionably the least pro-regime of the triumvirate—is today the most influential Syrian Druze public figure. There are signs that he is gravitating toward a more neutral position, notably his response to the bus hijacking last month. Rather than denounce the “terrorists,” he declared that the Druze “do not want to be party to the fighting” and will “never take up arms against [even] one of the sons of the Syrian people.”⁴⁰ While dissidents are hopeful that Hinawi will eventually go further and explicitly call on *soldiers* to put down their weapons, it's very difficult to tell if that's where things are heading in the inner sanctums of the Druze clergy. Chances are, Assad is wondering the same thing.

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Reuters, December 21, 2012. An earlier wave of kidnappings occurred in May and June 2012.

³⁵ ["Loyalist Sweida, rebel Daraa wage war in Syria,"](#) Agence France Presse, January 25, 2013.

³⁶ ["Syria's Druze minority is shifting its support to the opposition,"](#) *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2012.

³⁷ For an overview and critique of this view, see Kais Firro, *A History of the Druzes* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), pp. 22-23.

³⁸ [Elaph](#) (Arabic), February 18, 2013.

³⁹ In August 2012, Druze nonviolent activist Rami al-Hinawi was arrested (along with an Alawite associate, Kifah Ali Deeb) and has not yet been released. Phil Sands, ["Syria's youth found peaceful protest 'became irrelevant',"](#) *The National* (UAE), August 16, 2012; ["Syria steps up assault on Homs while asking refugees to return,"](#) *The National* (UAE), January 26, 2013.

⁴⁰ [Al-Sharq al-Awsat](#) (Arabic), February 28, 2013.