

Druze and Jews

Adi Greif

How do ethnic groups construct their identity in terms of conflicts such as Civil Wars? Does the construction of identity shape conflicts? To help address these questions, the paper looks at the case study of the Druze heretical sect of Islam in Israel/Palestine before and during the 1948 War. The Druze over time cooperated more with the Jews and less with Muslim/native Christian factions. By what process did Druze choose to cooperate with Jews? My argument is that there were two simultaneous and interdependent processes: Druze were driven into an alliance with the Jews because of the downward-spiraling security dilemma between the Druze and Arabs, which was due to negative Arab reactions to Druze neutrality. Also, the Druze who collaborated with the Jews earned Jewish trust. Pro-Jewish Druze leaders and neutral Druze leaders first worked to ensure Druze neutrality, which engendered Arab hostility and the security dilemma.

When most people think about the “conflict” in Israel, they imagine fighting between two groups who have hated each other for decades: the Jews and the Arabs. This bipolar perception of the current fighting illustrates the victory of nationalist propaganda that has convinced the world that all the Arabs are one people, and all the Jews are one people¹. A quick summary from the Jewish nationalist perspective of how Israel was created runs as follows: Jews, persecuted by everyone, fled to Palestine. The British, who controlled Palestine at the time, supported Jewish control of the area. When the British left, on May 15, 1948, the surrounding Arab countries attacked Israel. The Jews won this “War of Independence” and now control their state. The Arab nationalist story runs: Jews moved in, stealing land from Arabs. When the British left the Jews declared themselves a state and “ethnically cleansed” over a million Arabs,

around six hundred thousand of whom were forced to leave Palestine (Smith 2004, 200).

The problem with nationalist accounts is that they assume the past existence of present nationalist identities, in this case that of two rigid identities: “Arabs” and “Jews” (Swedenburg, 1995). Yet these identities became more rigid over time; before 1948 it was not clear which communities would want to be considered “Arabs”, nor which communities the “Jews” would consider “Arabs.”² When Israel became a state, an array of different communities existed, comprised of Sunni Muslims, Circassians, Ahmedans, Beduins, Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Latins, Maronites, various Protestant sects, Armenians and Druze (Stendel 1973). According to a 1942 census, the Sunni Muslims were in the majority with 61.44% of the population, the Jews 29.90%, the Christians 7.85%. The remaining

1% were mostly Druze (Nissim 1980, 144). Of the minority groups who lived through the 1948 War, the Druze were unique in that they did not flee, and were not expelled (Parsons 2001, 68). This evidence suggests that by the 1948 War the Jews did not consider the Druze “Arabs” but instead viewed the Druze as allies of a unique status. In contrast to all the other communities, how did the Druze earn the trust of the Jews, and why did they choose to do so?

My argument is that there were two simultaneous and interdependent processes that eventually credibly committed the Druze to working with the Jews. One was that middle-level Druze leaders, after being contacted by Zionists who were interested in the potential strategic advantages of cooperation, earned the increasing trust of the Zionists through successfully accomplishing missions of tactical importance for them. Simultaneously, Druze

were driven into an alliance with the Jews because of the downward-spiraling security dilemma between the Druze and Arabs, which was due to negative Arab reactions to Druze neutrality. These two processes were interdependent because the Druze who collaborated with the Jews ("Druze collaborators"), along with neutral Druze leaders, worked to ensure Druze neutrality, which engendered Arab hostility and the security dilemma.

General Background to the 1948 War and Druze Involvement

Jewish immigrants began moving to Palestine in the 1880s, mostly fleeing intense Russian persecution. These early settlers arrived with a hodgepodge of motivations for what they wanted out of life in Palestine; over time, a nationalist Zionism that advocated a democratic and Jewish state became the dominant ideology (Prof. Zipperstein, class lecture 2004). For the land to be controlled by the Jews in a democracy, the Jews had to become the demographic majority. Thus, settlers adopted less inclusive policies toward locals (Shafir 1996, 235). Locals complained to the Ottoman government, which tried to set conditions on Jewish immigration. It, however, could not enforce its policy due to British influence and local corruption (Lesch 1979, 31-32).

After WWI, the British gained control of Palestine and (intentionally or unintentionally) furthered the Jewish cause through their policies. The first important articulated British policy was the Balfour Declaration, which Jews and Arabs interpreted as promising a homeland for the Jews, although the British intended for its

vague wording to promise nothing (Lesch 1979, 35-36). The British also decided to establish autonomous organizations for the Jews, Muslims, and Christians. The Jews most successfully took advantage of this policy to create administrative bodies, which they later used to run Israel (Lesch 1979, 79-80).

The perceived British focus on helping the Jews failed to resolve tensions between Jewish immigrants and Arab locals. Instead, British measures incited Arab rioting and Jewish terrorism. Notably, a large riot broke out in 1929, and the British responded with the 'White Paper' that limited Jewish immigration and land purchases. The British might have mollified the Arabs, but in doing so angered the Zionists. The Zionist-controlled Jewish Agency responded by creating the Joint Bureau for Arab Affairs to arrange contacts with Arabs and non-Jews such as the Druze (Parsons 2000, 20) and also formed the Haganah defense force. (Lesch 1979, 200-205). The last major revolt, from 1936-1939 by Arabs against the British, resulted in the destruction of any viable Arab leadership. Meanwhile, Jewish terrorist gangs attacked the British, worried that immigration restrictions would hinder the goal of a Jewish demographic majority (Smith 2004, 170).

The British asked the United Nations to propose a solution for the ongoing fighting, but when the U.N. proposed the "Partition Plan" to create one state for the Jews and one state for Arabs, the Arabs rejected the plan and started a "civil war" in 1947 (Smith 2004, 185). The surrounding Arab countries were only willing to help Arabs in Palestine if doing so suited their own purposes; Syria and Transjordan wanted control of the

Arab Palestine as demarcated by the Partition Plan. The day the British withdrew, the first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, declared the existence of the state of Israel under the U.N. Partition Plan (Morris 2004 p 15). Syrian, Iraqi, Transjordanian and Egyptian forces immediately attacked Israeli forces, starting the "1948 War/War of Independence" (Smith 2004, 196).

Druze Background

The Druze were ostensibly good candidates for joining movements that resisted the Jews because of the Druze's cultural similarity to Muslims. The Druze are a heretical offshoot of Shiite Islam, founded in the 11th century. The Shiites soon forbade anyone to convert to the Druze religion so its practices and rituals became secretive. Only certain elite Druze even knew what the rituals were and so there are not necessarily salient religious differences between most Druze and the Muslims today (Betts 1998, 16). All Druze spoke Arabic and dressed like Sunni Muslims, although they did live mainly in separate towns or areas of towns (Betts 1998, 35-36).

Not only were the Druze culturally similar to the Local Arabs/Muslims, they were also similar in terms of political structure. Both societies were composed of family factions headed by esteemed religious leaders. The Palestinian Druze were heavily influenced by religious leaders living in Syria and Lebanon, notably the Syrian Druze al-Atrash family. The Sultan al-Atrash was famous for his revolt against Syrian leadership in 1925, for which he was exiled to Transjordan (Betts 1998, 88). Within Palestine, most Druze villages were clustered in the Northern Galilee,

with some in the Southern Galilee and Dalyat-el-Carmel areas (Parsons 2000, 18). It is important to note that the al-Tarif family dominated politics throughout all regions (Parsons 2000, 88). Other families that headed loyal factions tried to rival the Tarifs, notably, the Khayr family in the North and the Khunayfis family in the South Galilee (Parsons 2000, 18). For the sake of clarity, the dominant leaders such as the Tarifs will be called the 'elite' while the rival leaders will be called the 'secondary elite'.

The potential for a Druze-Arab alliance was never realized, and instead the Druze allied themselves with the Jews. The following case study will detail how this process occurred, providing empirical evidence for my argument.

Ussufiya: an Illustrative Example

Druze remained neutral in the early Arab riots for religious reasons, and this led a Jewish official named Ben Tzvi to initiate contacts that led to increased trust between Druze and Jews, as shown by Ben-Tzvi's shift from strategic to tactical justifications for an alliance. Druze leaders in 1929 sent a letter to the British proclaiming their neutrality on the grounds that the riot was a religious conflict between Jews and Muslims and so it did not concern the Druze (Firro 1999, 23). This action caught Ben Tzvi's attention because his job as co-director of the Joint Bureau for Arab Affairs was to create as many allies as possible, or at least minimize enemies. Ben-Tzvi, against the beliefs of his co-director, placed value on the strategic utility of the Druze. He thought that since the Druze in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine all shared close bonds, befriending the Druze in Palestine would help the Jews influence Syrian and Lebanese

politics through the Druze that lived there, which was a Jewish policy goal (Parsons 2000, 21-22).

Ben Tzvi created contacts mainly among the secondary elite and continued to increase Jewish Agency trust in them through beneficial tactical exchanges. After failing to budge the neutral Tarifs, Ben-Tzvi approached the competing Khayr family, who befriended Tzvi in the hopes it would gain them power relative to the Tarifs. The Khayr lost the following political battle to the Tarifs and did not continue to play a political role until much later. After inter-family feuding, other rivals of the Tarifs³ decided to help the Zionists (Firro 1999, 52-56). These Druze collaborators were also paid well for their services, not an insignificant factor in a then-stagnant economy. Tactical advantages included enforcing neutrality by convincing pro-Arab Druze not to aid the Arabs. For example, one secondary elite collaborator, Abu Ruqun, visited Lebanon to ask Druze not to help the Arabs, and to tell Beirut authorities to arrest Druze trying to enlist with the Arabs at the border (Atashe 1995, 41-43). Other Druze collaborators would meet with those trying to enlist from Lebanon and Syria and use various means such as bribery to convince them to return home (Atashe 1995, 57).

The actions of both the Druze collaborators and the neutral family leaders helped to rein in pro-Arab forces. The neutral Tarif maintained ties with the Islamic Supreme Council, and along with other neutral Druze leaders worked to convince the Pan-Arab leader, Mufti Hajj Hamin al Husayni to put less pressure on the Druze to join resistance groups. Their argument was that the Druze in Palestine were weak, and thus the

Jews would crush them in retaliation if Druze joined Arab fighters (Firro 1999, 41). Druze collaborators used exactly the same argument to help convince the influential Sultan al-Atrash in Syria to keep Syrian Druze neutral (Parsons 2000, 31).

That neutral and pro-Jewish forces reined in the pro-Arab Druze forces angered Arab leaders who, in response, initiated a downward-spiraling security dilemma. During the 1936-39 Revolt, Palestinian Druze did not respond as a unit. The elite maintained neutrality and struggled to enforce it, but individuals nevertheless joined the Arabs. Some local leaders struck neutrality deals with Jewish authorities, and some were forced into organizing armed help for the Arabs. An illustrative example situation is that of the Druze town of Ussufiya. Ussufiya's villagers initially supported the Arab Abu Durra gang. After the gang severely mistreated villagers, murdering or abducting some of the leaders, the local elders decided to complain to the British. The British intervened and destroyed the gang, committing Ussufiya to help the British/Jews, as the Arabs would no longer trust them (Atashe 1995, 35-37). Only the previous year notables of Ussufiya had declined a British offer to collaborate, showing that Arab provocations had significant effect in Druze choice of action.

After the Druze betrayed the Abu Durra gang, more instances of Arabs targeting Druze occurred in Ussufiya and nearby towns, which convinced many Druze around Mt. Carmel that they must rely on local help, driving them into cooperating with the British and Jews, which in turn shut off alternative options. In 1938 Ussufiya residents sent a delegation to ask for compensation

and security from other Druze, the British consul, the nationalist Supreme Arab Committee, and the moderate Arab Nashashibi family faction, but despite promises of help the delegation received no aid. Sultan al Atrash, embittered that despite promises Arabs did not send aid during his rebellion against Syria, advised the delegation to depend solely on themselves for security (Atashe 1995, 49-52). Druze in the area organized local Druze self-defense forces that received arms from the British and sometimes coordinated with local Jewish forces also fighting Arabs (Atashe 1995, 55-57).

The case of Ussufiya illustrates the security dilemma as neatly defined by Posen: "This is the security dilemma: What one does to enhance one's own security causes reactions, that, in the end, can make one less secure (Posen 1993, 2)". The elite Druze chose to encourage neutrality in the 1929 riots due to security concerns and religious indifference; they felt they had no reason to endanger themselves by fighting and had no religious stake in the issue anyway. The actions taken by the neutral elite and the Druze-Jew collaborators to ensure neutrality led to an Arab view of the Druze as obstinately unhelpful, which led the Druze to decreased Druze security because Arabs such as the Abu Durra gang targeted them for attacks. The security dilemma situation at Ussufiya describes the start of what I term "downward-spiraling," because as a result of the situation just described, the security dilemma situation repeated and led to even more severe repercussions. Druze leaders in Ussufiya, to protect their town's security, betrayed Abu Durra to the British, but this led to increased Arab hatred of the Druze, which in turn

held further security repercussions, which in turn led to more Druze-British/Jewish cooperation.

Synthesizing the Security Dilemma and Self-Interest Arguments

The Security Dilemma Argument explains that Druze-Arab relations constantly worsened through Arab hostility to Druze neutrality until the Druze had to befriend the British/Jews purely out of self-defense (Atashe 1995). The prime example of the security dilemma situation was the case of Ussufiya. The main problem with this argument is that it posits low Druze agency.

The Self-Interest Argument has a more activist focus than the Security Dilemma Theory; it posits that self-interested Druze leaders (secondary elite) collaborated with the Jews, and during the 1947 fighting these ties incrementally evolved into a Druze-Jewish relationship. It also shows that the Jews shifted from a strategy-based policy of contacting all minorities because of their connections in the surrounding countries to a tactical based policy of ensuring Druze neutrality or friendliness because of the military benefits (Parsons, 2000). The Khayr secondary elite family provides proof of self-interested Druze that adopted a pro-Jewish stance as a bid to gain supremacy over the Tarifs without resort to defense-oriented excuses. As already seen, Ben Tzvi shifted the Jewish Agency from a focus on strategic to tactical benefits. This theory is extremely strong. However, it posits that Druze-Jewish ties created out of self-interest lay dormant until the outbreak of civil war at which point the individual relationships evolved into an inter-community alliance; it also does not focus on

security problems.

I synthesize the "Self-interest" and "Security Dilemma" arguments, with some modification. The problem with these two arguments is that, separately, they ignore the actors that the other argument focuses on. Together, they encompass the important actors. Parsons' "Self-interest" argument focuses on secondary elite collaborators but ignores leaders who were involved in promoting Druze security; this oversight ignores important cases such as that of Ussufiya. Atashe's "Security dilemma" argument focuses on leaders reacting defensively to Arab hostility, ignoring more activist, self-interested collaborators such as the Khayr family.

My synthesis includes all of the above actors: I agree with Parsons' argument that Jews, for strategic reasons, contacted Druze secondary elites, and over time and repeated instances of successful cooperation that increased trust saw the tactical advantages of a Druze alliance. My argument slightly modifies that of Parsons because she stresses that contacts became useful incidents only after the outbreak of fighting in 1947, while I posit a more gradual build-up of trust. Examples of these advantages being slowly built over time as seen in the case study were: exchanging favors (1929), convincing Syrian and Lebanese Druze to stay neutral (1936-1947), and even recruiting Druze fighters for the Jews (1948). Meanwhile, neutral Druze were driven away from Arabs and toward Jews because of the security dilemma. Resultant collaboration between Druze and Jews helped Druze prove themselves to the Jews but also shut off exit options with the Arabs such that both they and the Jews knew their only viable remaining choice

was collaboration. This modified Parsons argument can be synthesized with Atashe's argument because the secondary elite's collaborations helped drive the security dilemma. For the Jews, all the tactical benefits of Druze collaboration listed above helped ensure Druze neutrality, which in turn helped ensure Arabic hostility, setting up the security dilemma between Arabs and Druze. Druze collaborators, real or perceived, continued to upset Arabs, which in turn led to increasing the intensity of the security dilemma.

A problem with the two credible arguments and my synthesis is that any attempt to isolate important actors will inevitably lead to exceptions where other actors played important roles. The major example is the Syrian Druze battalion that eventually defected from the Arabs and fought with the Haganah in the 1948 War; the individual soldiers who defected out of self-interest before their commander defected are the important actors in this case. Yet, it is difficult to isolate patterns explaining how interactions led to trust without generalizing about actors; I decided to generalize.

Conclusion

Synthesizing these two theories more fully explains the

processes leading up to increased trust: The Druze managed to convince the Jews to see them as separate from Arabs and credibly committed to the Jews for the same reasons the Druze chose to ally themselves with the Jews: because of 1) the downward spiraling security dilemma with the Arabs that drove them to eventually reliably collaborate with the Jews, and 2) relationships motivated by self interest that led to concrete benefits. From the Jewish perspective, a strategy-based validation for Druze cooperation slowly evolved into trust in terms of tactical operations through a series of credibility-building incidents.

For the Druze, a crucial first step was the neutral elite's role in ensuring neutrality and buffering Druze from Arab leaders, thereby allowing all Druze greater freedom to contemplate political choices. Secondary elite Druze could then help convince towns/Wahab's battalion to defect to the Jews for their own local reasons, including security against local Arab gangs. More collaboration, especially when it intensified the security dilemma with the Arabs, meant the Druze committed themselves more thoroughly to the Jews by shutting off exit options: they could not credibly return to the Arabs after betraying them and so were forced to continually betray them.

Policy Implications

The story of the Druze in Palestine before 1948 shows how the Arab-Israeli divide is historically contingent on the specific actions taken. That the Druze joined the Israelis and not the Arabs resulted from the specific nature of Jewish-Druze and Druze-Arab relationships and how they evolved over time into tactically motivated commitments. Members of other groups such as the Circassians and the Beduins also joined the Minorities Unit, but more of them left their homes during 1948. Presumably, the reasons why the Israelis trusted some of them and not others are as, one could say, banal, as why the Druze as a group were trusted – it depended on the relationships built and the interaction between elites, secondary elites, peasants, and leaders of other groups. The implications of this case study are that nationalist history tends to read history backward and solidify categories of identity, which prevents analyzing how minority groups can successfully avoid becoming labeled as “enemies” by a more powerful military group if they manage to construct their identity as separate from other “enemies” through credible commitments.

Notes

¹ This is a simplification for multiple reasons but still holds a lot of weight with many people and is thus interesting.

² For the sake of simplicity and brevity from now on I use the term I find most appropriate to convey my point: Jew, Zionist, Arab, or Muslim. The difficulty of successfully using non-nationalist terminology illustrates the success of nationalist rhetoric.

³ For simplicity's sake families in this paper are associated with the most prominent and involved figure's political leanings. I also use last names and so ignore changes in actual characters, such as when a father dies and his son takes his place. However, families were not always unified in belief.

Bibliography

- Al-Qattan, Nadja, Private Interview 2004.
- Atashe, Zeidan. *Druze and Jews in Israel – A Shared Destiny?* Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1995.
- Ben-Dor, Gabriel. *The Druzes in Israel: A Political Study*. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1979.
- Betts, Robert Brenton. *The Druze*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
- Dana, Nissim. *The Druze: A religious community in transition*. Jerusalem: Turtledove Publishing, 1980.
- Dana, Nissim. *The Druze in the Middle East: their faith, leadership, identity, and status*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2003.
- Esco Foundation for Palestine. *Palestine: A Study of Jewish, Arab, and British Policies*. London: Kraus Reprint Co., 1947.
- Firro, Kais M. *The Druzes in the Jewish State: A Brief History*. Leiden: Brill, 1999.
- Kalyvas, Stathis. “The Ontology of “Political Violence:” Action and Identity in Civil Wars”. *Perspectives on Politics*, 1:4, 2003, 475-494.
- Khalaf, Issa. *Politics in Palestine: Arab Factionalism and Social Disintegration, 1939-1948*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1991.
- Landau, Jacob M. *The Arabs in Israel: A political study*. London: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Lesch, Anne Mosely. *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939*. London, U.K.: Cornell University Press. 1979.
- Morris, Benny. *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Nisan, Mordechai. *Minorities in the Middle East*, second edition. Jefferson: Mc Farland and Company Inc., 2002.
- Parsons, Laila. *The Druze between Palestine and Israel, 1947-1949*. Great Britain: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000.
- Porath, Y. *The Palestinian Arab National Movement; Volume 2 1929-1939*. New Jersey: Frank Cass, 1977.
- Posen, Barry R. “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict”. 1993.
- Shafir, Gershon. *Zionism and Colonialism: A Comparative Approach*. In *Israel in Comparative Perspective*. Ed. Michael N. Barnett. State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Smith, Charles D. *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004.
- Stendel, Ori. *The Minorities in Israel*. Jerusalem: The Israel Economist, 1973.
- Swedenburg, Ted. *Memories of Revolt: The 1936-1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past*. University of Minnesota Press. 1995
- Parsons, Laila. *The Druze and the birth of Israel*. Cambridge University Press. 2001, 60-79.
- Zipperstein, Steven. Class lecture. 2004.



Adi Greif

Adi Greif is an undergraduate junior majoring in International Relations, with minors in Math and Middle Eastern Languages and Literature. Her research interests have ranged from anthropology to psychology to political science, and currently she is developing an interest in the Middle East and International Relations. This paper originated in a class taught by Professor James Fearon on ethnic violence. Her future research interests include an honors thesis on dialogue processes focused on Israel/Palestine and Ireland. Her research in dialogue groups grew out of her involvement as president of the Middle East Issues Dialogue Group at Stanford, where she leads discussions mainly between Muslims and Jews on campus. Her other activities include FUSION (Social Entrepreneurship), Israeli Folk Dancing. She has also been on the student leadership board of Hillel. Adi would like to thank Professor Fearon and Jesse Driscoll for their help with this paper.