

Druze - Minority Rights Group

Profile

There are now more than 138,000 Druze located in eighteen villages, some exclusively Druze, others mixed, in the Galilee and Mt. Carmel in the occupied Golan Heights. Druze are ethnically Arab and Arabic speaking, but many do not consider themselves Palestinian. Their monotheistic religion incorporates many beliefs from Islam, Judaism and Christianity, and is also influenced by Greek philosophy and Hinduism. Druze have not proselytized since the 11th century, and the religion remains closed to outsiders.

Historical context

The Druze religion developed in the Middle Ages, and the first Druze settled in what is today southern Lebanon and northern Israel. The community enjoyed semi-autonomy during the Ottoman Empire and in 1921 France tried and failed to establish a Druze state within the French Mandate of Syria.

Druze have traditionally adopted a practice of cooperating with national authorities, and Druze fought voluntarily alongside Jews in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that accompanied Israel's birth. Israeli authorities were able to exploit differences between Druze and Palestinians. In 1956 Druze were included in military conscription and were allowed to establish Druze religious courts in 1961. In 1970 special government departments were established solely for Druze. None of this protected them from the land confiscations and discriminatory budgets suffered by Palestinians, though not on quite the same scale. Within the Israeli military, Druze have played a key role in operations within the occupied territories due to their Arabic language skills. However, continuing discrimination against Druze and growing sympathy with Palestinians in the occupied territories has led some to question the community's strategy of cooperation with the state.

Current issues

Leaders of Israel's Druze community, who in past years have faced annexation of significant village land for nature reserves, met in November 2016 with officials to request retroactive approval for village zoning plans that include homes built without permits in the Galilee and Mount Carmel area. This followed the demolition of a building in Hurfeish which preceded orders issued by the state to demolish nearly 20 homes in Druze villages including Maghar, Yarka, and Isfiya. Druze leaders have warned the government, police and security officials that violent clashes could break out if further home demolitions take place.