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Druze

Profile

There are about 234,000 Druze in Lebanon, located mainly in the Matn, Gharb and Shuf, and smaller communities in Wadi al-Taym in southern Lebanon and in Beirut. Druze are ethnically Arab and Arabic speaking. 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 faith emerged from the batini or esoteric tradition of the Isma'ili faith in the early eleventh century, when a small group of Isma'ilis hailed the Fatimid Caliph, al-Hakim (996-1021), as the mahdi (or Guided One) and manifestation of God in his unity; hence they call themselves al-muwahhidun (Unitarians). Persecuted in Egypt, they gained footholds in the Shuf and Wadi al-Taym.

Politically, Druze enjoyed supremacy in the Gharb and neighbouring areas from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, when certain Druze clans gained ascendancy in Mount Lebanon and the Ma'an dynasty was acknowledged by the Ottomans as the family through which to control an unruly region.

Druze hegemony over Mount Lebanon declined in the eighteenth and disintegrated in the nineteenth century, the result of internal conflict between ascriptive kinship groups, later exploited by external rulers, who sought to introduce taxation. Decline also reflected progressive demographic and economic ascendancy by the Maronite and Greek Catholic communities, mainly from inland Syria, and the failure of the religious leadership to provide cohesive direction to the community. Many Druze left Mount Lebanon for the Hawran (see Syria) in the nineteenth century and benefited from British support in the same way that the Maronites benefited from French support.

Druze resented the French creation of Greater Lebanon in 1920, with its institutionalized Catholic ascendancy and the formal political separation of Lebanese and Syrian Druze. Several leading Druze had strongly supported the short-lived kingdom of Syria. However, they accepted the inevitable, playing a fuller part in Lebanese political life than their community size might have suggested.

Under Kemal Junblat, the Druze community espoused Arab nationalism and the Palestinian cause in the 1960s, though they were careful not to allow Palestinians a foothold in the Druze Shuf. Junblat's Druze-dominated Progressive Socialist Party advocated the deconfessionalization of Lebanese political life, since he could thereby acquire greater influence for himself and the community. Given the socio-economic pressures in Lebanon and the psychology these engendered, Junblat's vision remained an ideal for which the leftists fought with declining credibility during the civil war. Druze supported Junblat's non-confessional ideas, primarily because he was their leader, and acted with greater communal solidarity than any other group. After his assassination by Syria, his son Walid succeeded as community leader. Until 1982 the Druze managed to keep the civil war almost entirely outside the Shuf, but that year the Israeli invaders introduced the Maronite Lebanese Forces militia into the area. The moment Israel withdrew, the Druze rose and expelled not only the Lebanese Forces but also the Christian inhabitants of the Shuf. During the 1980s they created a virtually independent state in the Gharb, Shuf and southern Matn. They also displaced the Sunni militia in West Beirut. They reluctantly accepted the 1989 Taif agreement and encouraged the return of expelled Christians, but

on the strict understanding of Druze hegemony in the Shuf. They disliked the Syrian presence and quietly buried their enthusiasm for Arab nationalism.

Current issues

Druze political unity has come under challenge in recent years, with pro and anti-Syrian factions developing. In April and July 2006, shooting incidents between rival Druze factions, divided over the Syria issue, killed one and injured seven. Druze are allocated eight seats in Lebanon's 128-seat parliament, roughly commensurate with the Druze percentage of the country's population.

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