

KAIS M. FIRRO

The Druzes in the Jewish state

A Brief History

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BY

KAIS M. FIRRO



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'Isfiya, 15 May 1998

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NOTE ON TANSLITERATION

Throughout the text the use of diacritical marks in the English transliteration of Arabic and Hebrew names and terms has been kept to a minimum. Full transliteration can be found in the Index.

INTRODUCTION

In 1994 I was asked by the editor of *Teva' ha-Dvarim* ("The Nature of Things"), a Hebrew periodical modeled on *National Geographic*, to contribute an article on the Druzes tailored to the general interest of his mainly Jewish Israeli readership. I responded with an article on Druze history and customs entitled "The Druzes in Israel and the Middle East." A few weeks later, still waiting to see the proofs I had been promised, I learned that not only had the article meanwhile come out in print, its title had been changed to "Covenant of Life, Covenant of Blood," with illustrations chosen to highlight the "contribution" the Druzes had made to the State of Israel through their service in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). My initial reaction of astonishment turned into outright disbelief when I found that not just the title but my entire text had been tampered with, to the extent that on a number of points it ran counter to my original meaning—the Druzes were now described, for example, as one "nation" among the mosaic of Middle Eastern nations, Dahir al-Umar, the Sunni sheikh who ruled northern Palestine in the eighteenth century, had become a "convert" to Druzism, and much else. Strong protestations on my part led the editor to publish an apology in his next issue whereby he explained that among other things he had thought it important to "praise the Druze nation" for the "loyalty" it had shown to the state of Israel even though the equality it had been promised had never come through. In my own text, of course, there had been no mention of any of this.

The incident shows in a nutshell how the Israeli media continue to cultivate a "self-image" of the Druzes in Israel that has little to do with reality but is, rather, an "image" the Israeli authorities and the Jewish majority have formed of them *in their own minds*: when what I had written deviated from or contradicted that "self-image," it was "only natural" for the editor to intervene and "revise," i.e., take on authorship of, my text.¹ It is an attitude that has been typical throughout of Israeli officials and so-called gov-

¹ *Teva' ha-Dvarim* 8 (February/March 1995), pp. 64-95, and the Editor's "Apology," *Teva' ha-Dvarim* 9 (April/May 1995), p. 2.

ernment advisers who purport to “know what is good and what is bad for the Druze community,” living as it does

in a region that has known many prophets and loonies, struggles and wars, hopes and frustrations, minorities set against majorities. (...) A god-foreordained nation (...) a nation/community/religion which was revealed to the world as an independent entity in the eleventh century.²

One only has to change the time frame and to substitute Jews for Druzes to see how this description fits to a T the “Jewish nation” as perceived by the Zionist movement. In other words, the Druzes are portrayed as the mirror image of the Jewish “nation/community/religion,” an image in place already in the early 1930s when the Zionists set out to establish their first contacts with the Druzes:

In fact, this nation—the Druzes—has special features and a special destiny that set it apart from other nations. In certain ways, it is similar to the Jewish nation because of a fundamental characteristic. Here, too, religion and nationalism are so united that it is difficult to separate between them. This nation is similar also to our Jewish nation in its diaspora ... and it is astonishing how the Druzes have succeeded in preserving their authenticity and independence. ... But there is another side which highlights the similarity between the Jews and the Druzes, and that is the destiny of the two nations—a destiny of minorities. The Druzes too suffered persecutions at the hands of the majority. ... All these [factors] have brought the Druzes closer to the destiny of the Jewish minority and made it possible for them to understand the psychology of the persecuted Jewish minority.³

This “image” has exerted, and still exerts, a near inescapable hold on the way Israeli scholars and journalists write about the Druzes. Through it, Israeli historians of the Druze ethnic community have been busy projecting the present into the past, all the way back in fact to the twelfth century. Following Ben-Zvi, Israeli scholars often quote Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela: “There come among [the Druzes] Jewish artisans and they trade with them in goods and

² Quoted from the additions *Teva' ha-Dvarim*'s editor made to the text of my article.

³ Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, *Eretz Isra'el Yishuva Tahat ha-Shilton ha-'Utmani* (repr. Jerusalem 1956). Part of Ben-Zvi's writings on the Druzes were translated into Arabic in 1954 under the title *al-Qura al-Durziyya fi Isra'il* (“The Druze Villages in Israel,” selected pages from the writings of Ben-Tzvi, translated by Kamal al-Qasim, Rama [Israel] 1954), but compare al-Qasim, pp. 6 and 12, with Hebrew original, pp. 17-19, 41-42, 191-192.