

Lebanon's Druze, unhappily, are being dragged into Syria's war

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Deadly clashes pitting Syrian Sunni jihadis against Druze militiamen loyal to President Bashar al-Assad have exposed divisions within this small community that spans the Syria-Lebanon border.

The bloody wars roiling the Middle East from Lebanon to Iraq's border with Iran are essentially political struggles for power and control. But the two main protagonists are adherents of the Sunni and Shi'ite branches of Islam. That leaves the region's religious minorities, like the Druze who only number around 1 million in the Middle East, facing the agonizing—and potentially existential—decision of who to support in order to ensure communal survival. But siding with one risks turning the other into an enemy.

“We want to be left alone, but what do we do if neither side wants to leave us alone?” asks Kamal Naji, the mukhtar, or mayor, of Rashaya, a picturesque Druze town of old red-tiled stone houses nestled at the foot of the western slopes of Mount Hermon. The Lebanon-Syria border bisects Mount Hermon's summit, which at 9,200 feet is already dusted with the first of the winter snows.

On the eastern, Syrian, side of Mount Hermon, recent clashes near the village of Arneh between Druze fighters serving with the pro-Assad National Defense Force militia and Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's Al-Qaeda franchise, left more than two dozen Druze dead, a high number for this close-knit community.

According to residents of Rashaya and leading Druze figures in Lebanon, the fighting was provoked by the Syrian army. The army launched an attack on Jabhat al-Nusra which controls the village of Beit Jinn, four miles to the south of Arneh. But when the fighting began the Syrian troops withdrew, leaving the Druze militiamen to face the Sunni militants.

The move was seen as a cynical attempt to stoke Sunni-Druze hostilities to force the latter group to remain loyal to the Assad regime. It is a suspected ploy that Walid Jumblatt, the paramount leader of Lebanon's Druze and an arch critic of Mr Assad, hopes will backfire on Damascus.

Fear and sectarianism

"I have been trying to convince the Druze to reconcile with their natural environment [in Syria] which is Sunni," Jumblatt said. "They [the Druze of Arneh] were used as part of this Machiavellian propaganda put out by the regime, this so-called alliance of minorities [against the majority Sunnis]. Hopefully, they will see what the regime is trying to do to them and will reject it."

Jumblatt inherited the mantle of Druze leader in 1977 after his father, Kamal, was assassinated, purportedly on the orders of Assad's father and predecessor as president, Hafez al-Assad. Since then, Jumblatt has become a master of navigating the treacherous waters of sectarian minority politics, earning the nickname "the weathervane" for his ability to make and break alliances to suit the interests of his community, which forms about seven percent of Lebanon's 4.5 million population. Today, he maintains a typically paradoxical stance of overt criticism of the Assad regime while enjoying warm ties with Lebanon's powerful Shi'ite group Hezbollah, a key ally of Damascus.

The backbone of the Assad regime is composed of Alawites, members of a Shi'ite splinter sect. Other minorities in Syria, the Christians, Druze, Shi'ites and some Kurds, have generally sided with the Assad regime out of fear of the Sunni majority.

"Alawites to the grave and the Christians to Beirut," was a battle cry of some extremist Sunnis in the early stages of the conflict in 2011, a sentiment that fueled the worries of Syria's minorities of massacres and expulsion.

Those fears have hardened with the emergence in the past two years of radical Sunni jihadi groups, especially the Islamic State, which has carved out a fiefdom across parts of Syria and Iraq and controls it with an iron fist. In northern Iraq, IS has carried out large-scale massacres of Shi'ites and persecution campaigns against a kaleidoscope of minorities inhabiting the area, including Yazidis, Shabaks, Assyrians, and Turkmens.

“The Yazidis are leaving Iraq ... the Christians in Iraq are already finished, the Christians in Syria will leave too,” Jumblatt said. “The only Christians remaining in the region will be in Lebanon and the Copts [of Egypt]. . . . We are seeing the end of the post First World War Arab states and it will last many years.”

Support for Syria

But some Lebanese Druze disagree with Jumblatt’s call on Syria’s Druze to abandon the Assad regime, believing that minorities must unite in the face of the extremists of the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra.

“The situation is very serious, dangerous and sensitive,” said Faisal Daoud, a former lawmaker, head of a pro-Syrian political faction and resident of Rashaya.

He says that the fighting in Arneh was the result of the village coming under attack from Jabhat al-Nusra.

“As a minority we have to defend our villages when they [Sunni extremists] commit crimes [against us] ... Walid Jumblatt has no choice but to join us when we face an existential threat,” Daoud said.

The deadly clashes in Arneh have cast a pall over the Druze villages set among the steep stony hills of the Rashaya district. There is a lingering fear that Jabhat al-Nusra could infiltrate across Mount Hermon to attack Lebanese Druze villages or attempt to build a stronghold on the Lebanese side of the border, replicating a situation found in Lebanon’s northern Bekaa Valley, where several hundred Sunni militants are holed up along the mountainous frontier.

Those fears are probably unfounded: Mount Hermon is an imposing physical obstacle for Syria-based militants to traverse, especially given the lack of road-worthy routes across the mountain. Furthermore, Sunnis living in the area, who are sympathetic to the Syrian opposition, have warned against any major rebel incursion into Lebanon.

Still, the Druze are closely watching the rugged border.

“We are not sleeping comfortably at night. We are keeping an eye on everything,” said a middle-aged Druze sheikh, one of two dressed in traditional black baggy trousers and white knitted skullcaps sitting on a wall enjoying the morning sun. “If a bird crosses the border, we will know about it here.”