

Caught between two worlds, Druze in Israel fight for their rights

by [Ben Hartman](#) in the [January 7, 2015](#) issue

Bullet holes pepper the front windows of the old city council office and paramilitary police in armored jeeps patrol the main street in the mixed Muslim and Druze village of Abu Snan in the Galilee region.

In November, more than 40 people were injured in a brawl between the two communities, most of them by a grenade thrown into a group of Muslims.

Abu Snan, which is about half Muslim and a third Druze (the remainder Christian), has seen rising tension between Muslim Arab citizens of Israel and their Druze neighbors—adherents of a monotheistic religion whose roots lie in Islam but which today forms a distinct faith.

In 1956, the state of Israel passed a law mandating military service for the Druze, and ever since they have served on the front lines of Israel's wars. More than 83 percent of eligible Druze enlist in the Israeli army, higher than the 75 percent enlistment rate for Jews. The Druze say they have a sense of duty to the state, and they also want to maximize their job prospects and ensure themselves a better future.

The Druze are a small sect almost entirely based in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. They range from 1 million to 2 million people, with several hundred thousand in Syria, the largest Druze community. In Israel the population numbered around 130,000 as of 2011, according to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics. Most are in northern Israel, including some 20,000 in four villages in the Golan Heights, which was annexed by Israel in 1981. More than 90 percent of the Golan Heights Druze have refused Israeli citizenship out of loyalty to Syria, where most have family ties.

The Druze broke off from the Shi'ite sect of Islam in tenth-century Egypt. Arab in culture and language, they are for the most part not considered Muslims by the wider Muslim world, and they do not follow the Five Pillars of Islam.

Druze service in the Israeli army has been a point of contention with their Arab Muslim neighbors, who for the most part identify with the Palestinians and see the

Druze as fellow Arabs.

Locals in the village were reluctant to speak on the record or acknowledge that there is rising tension between the two communities. Local council head Nuhad Mishlav, a Druze, said relations are fine and the brawl was simply a personal dispute between two local men—one Druze and one Muslim—that spiraled out of control after one stabbed the other at a local café. When asked about Druze-Muslim fights in the local high school, which have reportedly broken out for political reasons, he blamed Facebook and other social media, which he said students use to spread gossip and insults among their classmates.

“For generations we’ve had great relations with each other here, but this younger generation is violent,” he said. “There is real fear here and more so at night.”

The fear was palpable at the home of Bilal Taha, a Muslim man whose son Najib was badly wounded by shrapnel in his legs, groin, and back after a grenade was thrown into a crowd of Muslims. Neither Bilal nor Najib said that there are frayed ties between Druze and Muslims. One of Bilal’s relatives was the Muslim man stabbed in the café fight that sparked the brawl, and Bilal also said he saw it as personal.

But he added that if police did not arrest the man who threw the grenade and if the Muslim man still hospitalized in critical condition dies, things would again become violent, possibly worse than before.

“Every day it calms down here more, but our great fear is that one person dies and it could all start up again,” he said.

Meanwhile, ongoing violence and “lone wolf” terror attacks have hit mainly in Jerusalem. In two of these attacks, one on the Jerusalem light rail and the other at a synagogue, Druze policemen were killed in action.

One of the Druze policemen, Zidan Saif, was first on the scene when two Palestinians killed four worshipers in a West Jerusalem synagogue. Saif was shot by one of the assailants as they exited the synagogue; he died later that night.

His heroism inspired Israelis across the country, but a couple of days later the government led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu began pushing forward a law that would officially recognize Israel as the nation-state of the Jews, drawing the ire of non-Jewish Israelis, including the Druze.

“I feel that now I have to encourage [Druze] youths not to enlist in the army,” said Murad Saif, Zidan’s brother, to Channel 10. “Either way, they’re going to treat us as Arabs, so why enlist and fight?”

The spiritual leader of the Druze in Israel, Sheikh Muwaffak Tarif, said the Druze are proud to serve as long as they are assured equal rights.

“We love and respect the Jews and serve alongside them,” Tariff said. “We have a blood alliance with the Jews, but we also need an alliance in life. Our young people are angry and frustrated. We are giving a great deal to the state, and we’re not getting it back. We’re neglected, there aren’t jobs, our young men can’t get building permits for a house.”

Amal Nasereldeen is a former member of the Israeli parliament who founded a memorial to the 405 Druze soldiers and police who have fallen in the service of the state of Israel. The complex also includes a military preparatory academy with 38 cadets and sits on a hill atop the Druze town of Daliyat al-Karmel.

Gunmen who infiltrated from Jordan in 1969 murdered one of Nasereldeen’s sons; a second was kidnapped in the Palestinian city of Jenin in the 1990s and has never been found. A grandson was killed in 2008 in the Israeli Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip.

Nasereldeen said he constantly sends letters to the government about the unemployment, poverty, and housing shortage faced by discharged Druze soldiers, and he said he views the state’s treatment of the community as a failure.

“The Druze are an inseparable part of the country, but they want their rights and rightfully so,” he said. “The Jews don’t have any friends in the Middle East or the world like the Druze.” —Religion News Service

*This article was edited on December 22, 2014.*