The History of the Druze and the Shihabi Dynasty

Much of the Middle East is composed of minority religious groups. These groups, such as the Jews, Eastern Rite Christians, and Shiite Muslims, play a pivotal role in the delicate balance that makes up the present day Middle East. In order to understand the political, religious and sectarian conflicts found in the Middle East, it is essential to be familiar with the background of the various groups, in this case, the Druze. The Druze are a small but none the less important group. To be versed in the Druze, one must know about the basis behind Druze theology, their major dynastic family, the Shihabi, and their interactions and conflicts with other groups, specifically the Maronite Christians.

The Druze faith is one of the best-kept secrets in the Middle East, hence non-Druze have a very limited knowledge of the theology behind Druzism. Only a Druze is permitted to read the sacred texts. The Druze deviated from the Shiites after following al-Hakim bi-amr Allah, who they believe to be divine. Al-Hakim lived in the 11th century and is considered a heretic by orthodox Islam. He outright denied many of the basic tenets of Islam. He discontinued public prayer, did not observe the fast of Ramadan, and prohibited the hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca (Nisan 81).

Al-Hakim disappeared in Cairo in 1022 (Nisan 81). Since al-Hakim did not die, this phenomenon is similar to that of the Ismaili’s, who believe that Ismail, the seventh imam, was occulted. Hamza, who promoted al-Hakim’s divinity, instituted a moral code, which strayed from orthodox Islam. He also called for a jihad or holy war. Rather than
waging a holy war against non-Muslims, this *jihad* was a “striving to know God” (Nisan 81).

Another belief of the Druzes is transmigration of the soul. In his book, *Minorities of the Middle East*, Mordechai Nisan gives a brief explanation of this supernatural movement. He writes, “Druze solidarity grew from the idea of metempsychosis, which posited that when a Druze died, his soul reappeared in a new body elsewhere. Thus a universal far-flung Druze community existed, but its exact location and numbers were concealed” (Nisan 81).

The Druzes also give women more freedoms in society than is found in orthodox Islam. Women may remain unveiled, and are known to have held leadership roles. Druze practice monogamy and their divorce laws differ from the traditional Islamic way of divorce, simply verbalizing a request for divorce. The *qadi* or judge handles divorce in the Druze community (Nisan 83).

The name Druze is accredited to a Persian missionary named Muhammed ibn-Ismail al-Darazi. Al-Darazi was a confidant of al-Hakim, and the first to venerate him (Hitti 257-8).

One of the most prominent ruling dynasties of the Druze community was the Shihabi Family. The Shihabs led the Druze soon after the execution of Fakhr al-Din II (of the Ma’n family) in 1635 by order of Murad IV (d. 1640), sultan of the Ottoman Empire. In 1697, the last Ma’nid emir died, and he had no successor. The Druze *shaykh*’s elected Bashir Shihab (d. 1707) to lead the community. The Shihabi were related to the Qurayshi of Mecca through marriage with the Ma’nis; however, the Shihabi were also members of the Qaysis family. As did the Ma’nis, who were also
Qaysi, the Shihabi faced a strong resistance from the Yamani faction. After an overwhelming defeat in 1711, many of the Yamani fled to Syria (Betts 74-5).

The first Shihabi emir, Bashir, left his mark by successfully creating friendly relations with the governor of Sidon. The next emir was Haydar (d. 1732). His major contribution was the defeat of the Yamani at Ayn Darah in 1711. This prompted a re-organization of the aristocracy in Lebanon. Haydar’s son, Mulhim (d. 1754) succeeded his father. Mulhim began the expansion of the Shihabi by capturing the Bekka and eastern mountains in 1748. This had economic as well as protection value for the Shihabi. The Bekka is a valuable economic possession because of its rich soil for agriculture. The mountains offered protection from invading armies from the east. Mulhim also encouraged unrest within Damascus, which resulted in the Turkish governor giving Beirut to the Shihabi (Hitti 389-91).

In 1754, Mulhim left the emirate to pursue his education of Islam in Beirut. His brother, Mansur became the next emir. Mansur’s reign was marked by a period of civil strife. Yusuf (d. 1788), Mansur’s son, became emir and was able to quell the unrest. Historian and relative of mine, Philip Hitti, writes, “Yusuf may be considered the first Christian amir, with undisputed authority over the entire range from Tripoli to Sidon” (Hitti 393). By this time, the Shihabi began to lose some power, which came to be shared with two other figures, Zahir al-Umar of Safad, and Ahmad al-Jazzar of Akka. Despite these two other players, the Shihabi maintained two other rulers: Bashir II (d. 1840), and Bashir Qasim III (d. 1842), with Bashir II being more noteworthy.

Bashir II made some great strides for the Shihabs. Kais Firro writes, “Bashir was appointed governor of Mt. Lebanon, Jabal Amil, and Biqa. He now controlled the region
from Akkar in the north to Acre in the south…” (Firro 54). Bashir also reformed the collection of taxes and attacked the feudal system present in Mt. Lebanon. Bashir, a proclaimed Maronite, also attempted to disrupt the Druze shaykhs (Firro 55).

With new feuds arising between Druze families, the Jumblatt family began to gain increasingly more power within the community. Robert Betts writes, “By the early part of the nineteenth century the Junbalats were more powerful than the Shihabs in men and money, and a serious rivalry developed between the amir Bashir II and the leading Junbalat, also named Bashir” (Betts 77).

The conflict between the two Bashir’s was manifested in 1822 when war broke out between the Ottomans, Damascus, and Acre. Jumblatt supported the Ottomans and the wali (governor) of Damascus. Shihab supported the wali of Acre. Shihab fled to Egypt but returned as emir when the Ottomans restored the wali of Acre (Firro 57-8). This led to Lebanon’s Maronite-Druze conflict.

Bashir Jumblatt rallied all the rival Druze factions, including the Jumblatts, Abu Nakads, and Yazbaks. They all set aside their differences in order to unite against the Christian forces of Bashir II Shihab. Firro writes,

More than fourteen thousand armed Druze eventually enlisted. Mishaqa has in a critical manner described the Druze and Christian religious leaders’ intervention in political affairs, the way they mobilized each camp and their use of religious slogans to arouse them. Shidyaq, who saw the conflict as a revolt (harakat al-mukhtara) against the prince of Lebanon, also wrote that the Lebanese generally viewed it as a war between Druzes and Christians (Firro 58).
Between the years of 1821 to 1825, members of the Druze Banu Hatum and Banu Quntar attacked Christian villages (Firro 60). Finally, in 1825 the army of Bashir II defeated the Jumblatt coalition at al Simqaniya. Bashir Jumblatt was captured and killed (Betts 77). Following Bashir’s death, the Druze lost considerable power in their ancient safe-haven, Mt. Lebanon. The Shihabi were cruel toward the Druze, and the Maronites footed a stronghold in Mt. Lebanon, while the Maronite Church became increasingly powerful (Firro 59).

In 1833, Mt. Lebanon fell to the control of the Egyptians under Mohammed Ali (not the boxer). During the eight-year Egyptian rule, drastic changes took place throughout the region. The Druze became disarmed and lost almost all of their political clout. Simultaneously, the Christians of Mt. Lebanon enjoyed increasing wealth. By 1841, the Ottomans regained control and tensions boiled between the British backed Druze and French supported Maronites. Civil war broke out between the two groups that same year. Fighting continued until 1860 (Nisan 86).

Armed conflicts, scuffles and uprisings continued between the Maronites and the Druze until the present. Such events were a Druze insurrection in 1893, unrest against the French in 1926, a civil war in 1956, and foremost the 1975-1991 Lebanese Civil War.

With the formation of the Lebanese Republic in 1946, the Maronites maintained their power. Under the new republic, the president would be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, the speaker of the house a Shiite Muslim, and traditionally two Druze, a Jumblatt and an Arslan, would be granted portfolios as ministers on the president’s cabinet.
Developments following World War II left the Palestinians unable to return to Palestine. When King Hussein of Jordan expelled the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from Jordan, they were refused entry in most countries, but found refuge in Lebanon. The influx of Palestinians to Lebanon severely upset the Christian-Muslim ratio in Lebanon. The PLO began to launch attacks on Israel from Lebanese soil, and operated offices in Beirut. Increasing pressure from Israel and a weak Lebanese Army prompted the action of sectarian and religious militias formed many years back.

A full-scale civil war erupted in April of 1975 when PLO gunmen shot and killed a Maronite on the steps of a church in Beirut. Phalangist (Maronite) militiamen retaliated by opening machine gunfire on a busload of Palestinians.

The Druze, being a traditionally powerful fighting force, entered the war as an ally with Syria in 1977 after their leader, Kamal Jumblatt, was assassinated by the Syrians. Walid Jumblatt took the ranks vacated by his father, Kamal. Maronite-Druze resentment had never disappeared. In 1983, he led Druze forces to defeat the Phalangists in the Shouf Mountains. The Druze also had the backing of the Sunni Muslims in Lebanon (Nisan 93).

The conclusion of the Lebanese Civil War and the signing of the Taef Agreement in 1989 did not bring about a renewed power to the Druze in their native homeland. The Taef Agreement did, however, bring about greater representation of the Druze in the civil Lebanese Government. It also greatly reduced the Maronites’ power in government. This was an indirect victory for the Druze, who resented the Maronite control of Lebanon.
The Druze have endured much throughout their rich and diverse history. Still headed by Walid Jumblatt, the Druze have been able to put back the pieces of their latest round of bloodshed and return to their age-old mountain life in the tranquility of Mt. Lebanon. Lasting peace is not a realistic future of the Druze, but for now, a lull in the storm seems to be welcomed by this ever-striving minority.
Works Cited


