

Introduction

The Druze population in Israel are part of the country's Arab minority and a distinct ethnic and religious community in their own right. Part of a global Druze population of about 1.5 million people, they are Arabic speakers practicing an 11th century off-shoot of Ismaili Shiite theology. According to the most recent government figures, at the end of 2013, the Druze population in Israel numbered around 136,000 people and constituted 8% of the Arab population, or 1.7% of the total population in Israel.

Druze reside predominantly in mountainous areas in northern Israel in municipalities that are exclusively or predominantly Druze, with 81% living in 19 municipalities in the Northern District and 19% in the Haifa District. The vast majority of Israel's Druze population are citizens of Israel, while approximately 20,000 who live in the Golan Heights hold residential status rather than full citizenship following the 1981 law annexing the region.

The Druze have a distinct relationship with the state compared with the broader Arab citizen population of Israel. The government of Israel officially recognized Druze citizens as a distinct ethnic group and an autonomous religious community in 1957. Thus, Druze have their own religious courts— independent of Muslim and Christian religious courts—with jurisdiction over matters of personal status and spiritual leadership. In addition, whereas other Arab citizens are exempt from compulsory military service, Druze men have been part of Israel's mandatory conscription since 1956.

At the same time, the Druze maintain strong ethnic and religious connections with Druze communities outside of Israel. These include adjacent communities of about 200,000 in Lebanon and 400,000 in Syria¹. Many Druze in Israel express concerns for the safety of Druze in war-torn regions and advocate for the Israeli government to take more proactive measures in protecting their kinsmen across the border.

Identity and State-Minority Relations

The Druze special relationship with the state, including service in Israel's military and other security forces, is referred to as the "blood covenant" (Hebrew: "Brit Ha'damim"). Within the Druze culture and religion there is a tradition dating back to the 11th century of "[political loyalty to the ruling regime](#)"². This is based in a religious emphasis on the afterlife that limits aspirations for national independence in this life, a warrior tradition in which Druze generally serve and protect the state in which they are citizens, and a history of persecution that made these practices part of their own security. A high percentage of Druze men today, beyond serving in the IDF, build careers in security services in Israel.

In the early years of the state, some Druze men volunteered for military service in a special "non-Jewish" unit established under the IDF in 1948. Compulsory military service was extended to Druze men in 1956 by request of few key Druze leaders—and despite the resistance of some. Druze served

¹ Numbers regarding Druze populations vary according to source, ranging from 400,000 in Syria and 196,000 in Lebanon according to the [Hebrew version of Wikipedia](#), through 600,000 in Syria and 200,000 in Lebanon in the [English version of Wikipedia](#), to 800,000 in Syria and 450,000 in Lebanon according to [other sources](#).

² "נאמנותם הפוליטית לשליטי הארץ" The Druze Service in the IDF, *Anashim Israel* <http://www.peopleil.org/details.aspx?itemID=7673>

mostly in a separate unit until all units were formally opened to Druze recruits in 1982. Since, recruitment rates among Druze men have remained high. Today, 83% of Druze men serve in the military, with 60% serving in combat units—rates that are higher than those of the Jewish population. Druze officers have attained high ranks in Israel's security forces including, for example, brigadier generals (i.e. [Ghassan Alian as Chief Officer of the Paratroopers Corps](#), and more recently [Colonel Dr. Badar Tarif as Head of the Medical Corps](#)) and many Druze soldiers have died in Israel's wars.

Despite the longstanding covenant between Druze and the state overall, Druze self-identification varies in the degree to which they see themselves as part of Israel's Arab minority with a distinct religion, or entirely distinct from the Arab community ethnically and nationally. Within this context, some Druze leaders define themselves as [fully Israeli and even Zionist \(Hebrew\)](#), while others consider themselves Arab citizens of the state and reject the notion of a separate "Israeli Druze" identity.

This variance is evident in Druze political participation in Israel. Druze politicians have been elected to the Knesset on Arab and Jewish-Arab party lists, Zionist left-wing lists, and right-wing party lists. In the 20th Knesset, currently seated, there are 5 Druze MKs, one in each of the following parties: the Joint List (the only predominantly Arab party), Zionist Camp, Kulanu, Israel Beitenu and Likud. Since May 2017, [MK Ayoob Kara](#) from the Likud is serving as Minister of Communications.

While polls consistently show that among Israel's Arab citizens, Druze maintain the most positive views by far of their Israeli identity and relationship with the state, frustration is growing in recent years. Among the younger generation especially, more report feeling that their "special relationship" with the state is not adequately reciprocated. Economic underdevelopment in the Druze community is on par with the rest of Israel's Arab society (by far the more economically disadvantaged of Israel's populations), meaning employment options are few and Druze towns and villages have limited resources. For discharged soldiers who are not able to find adequate employment, this adds to a sense that their service is not appreciated or rewarded. Along with various disputes with the state, such as protests around a gas pipeline in 2010 and home demolitions in 2017, more Druze now speak of alienation, resentment, and even a new sense of ambivalence over their military service (more on these changes in a [Social TV series on the Druze community](#)).

Economic Development

According to government data, economic gaps between Druze and the Jewish majority are for the most part the same as those for the Arab minority overall. This means that Druze have weak and relatively poor municipalities, lower educational achievements and access gaps to higher education, high rates of unemployment and under-employment (among women especially, and due in part to their residence in small villages in Israel's northern periphery), and a lack of land for urban development and growth. Overall, despite significant advances over the past decade, especially in education, Druze suffer from high rates of poverty and face barriers to economic development opportunities as individuals and as a community. For example:

- All Druze municipalities are ranked in the lowest 4 socio-economic municipal clusters (from 1 to 10 where 10 is wealthiest), and no new Druze villages have been established since 1948.
- In 2013 overall employment rates for Druze men were 68% and Druze women 33.3%, compared to 81% for men and 79% for women in Jewish society (64.2% of Arab Muslim men and 68.4% of Arab Christian men, and 22.9% Arab Muslim women and 47.9% Arab Christian women.)

- Only 6.7% of Druze society hold higher education degrees, compared with 11.6% of Arab society in general and 26.5% of Jewish society according to data from by the Prime Minister's Office.³
- Among those with academic degrees, employment rates are much higher and nearly comparable to those in the non-Haredi Jewish population: Druze men and women age 25-34 with a degree have employment rates of 98% and 79% respectively, compared to 93% and 89% for non-Haredi Jewish men and women of the same age. Druze men and women age 25-34 without a degree have much lower employment rates: 82% for men and 40% for women, compared to 85% and 78% of non-Haredi Jewish men and women of comparable age.
- Among degree-holders, Druze have income gaps compared with the Jewish majority. Druze men have an average monthly income of 12,009, compared with 12,676 among non-Haredi Jewish men, and Druze women earn an average of 6,617, compared with 9,065 among non-Haredi Jewish women.

Closing these gaps has become a government priority along with national efforts to economically advance Israel's Arab citizens as a whole. Due to the Druze community's unique circumstances, the Government of Israel has issued multiyear economic development plans for the Druze community specifically, while also including Druze citizens in parts of the government's historic 5-year economic development plan for all of Arab society passed in 2015.⁴

The most recent [four-year plan](#) for Druze society (Government Resolution 959 from January 2016)⁵ allocates more than NIS 2 billion (USD 500 million) for the years 2016-2019 to boost formal and informal education (NIS 350 million), construction of childcare facilities and classrooms (NIS 140 million), welfare and community development (over NIS 290 million), employment (NIS 220 million), tourism (NIS 60 million), public building and assistance to local authorities (NIS 900 million), as well as special assistance and housing subsidies for released soldiers and more.⁶

These plans aim to simultaneously address barriers along the entire pipeline to economic opportunity. Within this, several barriers have been prioritized: boosting higher education rates and quality employment for Druze men, access to employment for Druze women, and closing sizable gaps in the availability of informal education frameworks to advance the next generation. The latter is a particular focus area given both the fact that the Druze community is relatively young (the Druze community has a median age of 26 compared to 29.3 in Jewish society). Enhancing access to opportunities for them is seen as key to boosting the Druze community as a whole.

³ [Economic Development Plan for Druze and Circassian Communities for years 2016 through 2010](#) (Hebrew). Government Resolution 59, *Prime Minister's Office*, June 7, 2015.

⁴ Government Resolution 922 ([read an overview here](#)) incorporates the Druze communities in most of its provisions, including employment, transportation, housing and education, with the exception of construction of industrial areas and empowerment of local municipalities, as these are covered by Government Resolution 59.

⁵ [Full Resolution in Hebrew](#).

⁶ An additional government resolution approved in December 2013 ([Government Resolution No. 1052](#)) addresses specifically and for the first time the development of the four Druze villages in the Golan Heights.