

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 offshoot of Ismaili Shiite theology. According to the most recent government figures, at the end of 2019, the Druze population in Israel numbered around 143,000 people and constituted 7.6% of the Arab and Druze population, or 1.6% of the total population in Israel.

Druze reside predominantly in mountainous areas in northern Israel, with 81% living in 19 municipalities in the Northern District and 19% in the Haifa District in municipalities that are exclusively or predominantly Druze. The vast majority of Israel's Druze population are citizens of Israel, while approximately 24,000 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 citizens 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 250,000 in Lebanon and 600,000 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.

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, *Anashimn Israel* <http://www.peopleil.org/details.aspx?itemID=7673>

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 mostly in a separate unit until with all units 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 actively elected to the Knesset on Arab and Jewish-Arab party lists, Zionist left-wing lists, and right-wing party lists. In the 23rd Knesset, currently seated, there are 4 Druze MKs, one in each of the following parties: the Joint List (the only predominantly Arab party), Zionist Camp, Kahol Lavon, Yisrael Beitenu and Likud. 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 other 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 the same as those for the Arab minority overall. This means that Druze have weak and relatively poor municipalities, lower educational achievement and access gaps, high rates of unemployment and under-employment (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, Druze suffer from high rates of poverty and face barriers to economic development opportunities as individuals and as a community. For example:

- 6.7% of Druze society completes any level of higher education, compared with 26.5% of Jewish society.
- A total of 5,000 Druze were registered across all higher education institutions in Israel in 2019, which is slightly less than 3.5% of the total Druze population. In 2019, Druze students accounted for 1.7% of all higher education students in Israel.

- The percentage of Druze men participating in the workforce at the end of 2019 was 68.1%, and the percentage of women was 40.2%. 82.6% of Druze households have at least one person employed.
- Most Druze localities are in the lowest 4 socio-economic municipal clusters (out of 10), Peki'in is ranked in the fifth cluster.
- No new Druze villages have been established since 1948.

Closing these gaps has become a government priority alongside national efforts to economically advance Israel's Arab citizens as a whole. Due to unique its 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 2015.³

The most recent [four-year plan](#) for Druze society (Government Resolution 959 from January 2016)⁴ 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.⁵ In 2019, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu approved an additional NIS 200 million to be added to the plan.

These plans aim to simultaneously address barriers along the entire pipeline to economic opportunity. Within this, several barriers have been prioritized: educational achievement and quality employment for Druze men, access to employment for Druze women, and informal education frameworks to advance the next generation. Within this, informal education is seen as an area where significant shortages mean interventions have the potential to make meaningful impact. The Druze community is relatively young, with a median age of 26, (compared to 29.3 in Jewish society), but currently have few available extracurricular frameworks compared with wealthier Jewish communities. Such frameworks are seen as important for developing key socio-economic skills and opportunities in the young generation, while at the same time preventing detrimental behaviors like crime and drug abuse.

As a result, the government of Israel has included "Neurim (youth) Centers" as a specific beneficiary of the economic development plans, allocating NIS 40 million for their operation until the end of 2019. These centers provide enrichment, volunteering and leadership opportunities to youth in 16 Druze municipalities. They were established through partnerships between the Government of Israel, the Maase Association (which operates them) and many international philanthropic bodies.

³ Government Resolution 922 ([read an overview here](#)) incorporates Druze citizens as individuals in its employment and education initiatives.

⁴ [Full Resolution in Hebrew](#).

⁵ 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.