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Chapter

Tiny Religious Minorities in the Middle East: The Case of the Bahai, Druze and Yazidi Minorities

Yakub Halabi

Abstract

This article seeks to compare the experiences and features of the three post-Islam tiny religious communities in the Middle East: Bahai, Druze and Yazidis. Each one of these communities had encountered an existential threat to its survival or genocide at one point or more throughout its history, and all of them are considered heretic movements by radical Islamist groups. Among these three religions, only the Druze is considered a militaristic community that was always ready to use arms in order to defend itself. In contrast to the Druze and Yazidis, the Bahai community is a proselytizing religion that accepts new believers, while its followers in general live in urban centres and belong to the upper middle class. The article also refers to the international law regarding minority rights and highlights the shortcomings in this set of laws in protecting these minorities.

Keywords: tiny religious minorities, Druze, Yezidis, Bahai, Islamist movements

1. Introduction

There are three forces that affect and threaten the existence of minorities across the Middle East in various democratic and non-democratic countries. First are the forces of globalization. Minorities usually reside in peripheral areas and in order to integrate into the labour market and occupy decent jobs that require high skills, members of minorities have to travel to metropolitan areas. This economic integration is usually followed by social and cultural integration and even assimilation, which leads to sidelining and even elimination of a minority's identity over generations [1]. Second is that minorities are forced to fight in a civil war for the survival of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes, such as the Assad regime of Syria. They are compelled to sacrifice their young men for such regimes, otherwise, they would be attacked and harassed by this same regime. And third is the harassment and indiscriminate assaults by Islamist and fundamentalist regimes as well as movements against religious minorities. This article focuses on post-Islam tiny religious minorities, such as the Druze, Bahai and Yazidis, where in this regard members of these religious minorities in the Middle East are regarded by Islamist movements as heretics, who should be subjugated and forced to convert to Islam. Tiny religious minorities have no mother
state and consequently are unable to conduct transnational relations with such a state. For example, while Jews all over the world can conduct transnational relations with Israel, as their mother state that represents their interests, these tiny religious minorities have no mother state that otherwise can represent them. Thus, tiny religious minorities are found in a self-help situation and have to manipulate the various actors in their arena in order to survive.

These three forces mentioned above are not mutually exclusive as more than one factor can take place simultaneously with others. In addition to the major threats that these minorities encounter, each of them had experienced a ‘Final Solution’ or (an attempted) genocide of its own, as will be explained below. In addition, the article refers to international law regarding minority rights, while despite major progress in this set of laws, it remained ineffective, given that states ignored it out of hand and regarded it as illicit interventions in their internal affairs, while the international community has refrained from taking additional steps to implement, let alone enforce it [2, 3].

It is worth noting that the harassment and persecution of post-Islam minorities are not typical merely to ISIS, where in the past there were attempts of coercive mass conversion into Islam and execution of those, who resisted such conversion. These attempts were vindicated by several verses from the Quran that were interpreted as a call for the execution of those who refuse conversion into Islam and to enslave their women. These verses in the Quran include Muhammad 47:4, Al-Tawba (Repentance) 9:5 & 9:12 and Al-Nissa (Women) 4:24, among others.

The verse in the book of Muhammad (47:4), for instance, instructs the following: ‘So when you meet those who disbelieve, then strike their necks until when you have inflicted slaughter upon them, then secure their bonds, and either favor afterwards or ransom them until the war lays down its burdens’. These verses were interpreted by Islamist followers as instruction from God to fight and execute those who resist surrendering and converting to Islam.

The tiny religious minorities in the Middle East are invisible religious minorities, who are not different in their external appearance from their surrounding society. They could be visible by choice in case members of these minorities decide the dress in their traditional customs. Another feature of these minorities is that they live in the periphery in their own villages and hamlets, where they constitute a majority of these villages, but they have to travel to metropolitan cities in order to seek education and employment. Further, many of the non-Dhimmi, post-Islam, religious minorities follow the practice of Takiyya or Dissimulation. Based on this practice, members of these religious groups seek at the personal level to conceal their true religion and to appear in front of their surrounding communities as if they belong to major religions, mainly Sunni Islam. Concealing one’s true religious affiliation and the pretension of belonging to another major religion is a strategy of survival for members of these minorities.

2. Tiny religious minorities under imminent threat: bahai, Druze and Yezidi

In contrast to the Druze and Yezidi that are non-proselytizing, monolithic and closed religions that do not allow conversion into their own ranks, the Bahai religion is an open religion that accepts new followers, encourages conversion into its ranks and even openly practices proselytizing. This practice jeopardizes the security of the whole community and makes it vulnerable to attacks by fundamentalist forces,
especially in Islamic countries, given that Islam forbids its followers from ditching Islam. The Bahais usually live in major cities and many Bahais in Iran are well-educated and belong to the upper middle class. As a post-Islamic and proselytizing religion, the Bahai community in Iran has encountered a major threat to its survival from the Iranian regime. Given that the Bahai religion was established long after the advent of Islam, they are regarded by Islamists as heretics, simply because they were aware of Islam, refused to accept it as, what Sunnis claim, the true religion and opted to establish a new religion. In short, Islam is very strict against the practice of proselytizing and imposes severe punishment on Muslims who decided to ditch Islam and convert to another religion.

Table 1 provides a comparison of the characteristics of the three religious communities: Bahai, Druze and Yazidis. These characteristics include:

- Proselytizing: whether the religion encourages conversion into its ranks.
- Monolith: Whether the community is closed or it accepts new members through inter-marriage. Both the Druze and Yazidis are considered to be monolithic.
- Post-Islam: whether the religion was established after the advent of Islam, where all three religions were established after Islam, and all of them are monotheistic religions that believe in ‘One God’.
- Militaristic: To what extent the community is ready to defend itself when it is attacked? In contrast to the Bahai and Yazidi communities that reject militarism and practice pacifism, the Druze practices a positive neutrality policy, where they were ready to carry arms and defend themselves when attacked.

According to the Bahai International Community (BIC), Iran under the leadership of Ali Khamenei has drafted a ‘Final Solution’ Plan for the Bahais in Iran [4]. The main clauses of this plan include blocking access to the Iranian education system by Bahai citizens for the sake of curbing their economic base [5, 6]. The BIC published a translation of a document ‘Drafted by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and signed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei... the memo establishes a national policy to promote the gradual eradication of the Baha’i community as a viable entity in Iranian society: The government’s dealings with [Baha’is] must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked,’ says the memo, which was obtained by the UN and released in 1993’ ([4], p. 163).

Likewise, the Druze community also encountered a major threat to its survival in the past. In Lebanon, although the Druze applied the practice of Taqiyya by labeling themselves as Muslims, yet, for outside world, the Druzes were treated once as a separate minority and some other times as a separate Muslim minority. When Ibrahim Pasha invaded Lebanon in 1831, he singled out the Druzes in Mount Lebanon and gave them two ultimatums: disarm themselves and second conscript into his

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army all Druze men aged 15–25 for an indefinite period to fight against the Nussaires (Alawites) ([7], p. 986). The Druze had no choice but to comply, because the alternative was an all-out attack by his forces with the support of the Maronite forces in Mount Lebanon. The Druze had to fight a war that they never wanted against another sect that outnumbers them.

Furthermore, in 1860, when the Maronites started planning to establish a Maronite State in Mount Lebanon, they opted to create a homogeneous Maronite state. Given that Mount Lebanon was composed of Maronites and Druzes, the former opted to eliminate any Druze presence in this region. In other words, the 1860 civil war in Mount Lebanon was a result of the desire of the Maronites to establish a Maronite state that is free of Druzes. The aim of this war from the point of view of the Maronite leadership was the total extermination of any Druze existence in Mount Lebanon [8]. Despite being labeled as Muslims, the Druze in Mount Lebanon never received any support from Muslim communities and had to rely on themselves in the war. The only community that extended military support to the Druzes in Mount Lebanon were the Druzes in the Druze Mount in Southern Syria [9].

The Druze community in Palestine, which numbered a total of around 15,000 residents, was the first community that was susceptible to sheer transfer during the late 1930s. During this period, the Druze as a small minority was reluctant of taking part in the Palestinian great revolt and opted to maintain neutrality. Yet, persistent attacks by Palestinian insurgents against Druze residents raised the possibility of the latter’s transfer to the Druze Mount in Syria ([10], p. 8). In return for purchasing all Druze land in Palestine, the Zionist movement was ready to purchase land for the Druze residents in the Swaida district and help them in their transfer to Syria. This plan was shelved due to the outbreak of WWII and the petering-out of the Palestinian great revolt.

Moreover, during the civil war in Syria, the Druze encountered a major threat not only from ISIS but also from other radical, fundamentalist Islamist movements, such as Jubhat al-Nusra. In Syria, Druze numbered around 800,000 in 2011 or 3% of the total population. Most of them lived in the Swaida district. With the exception of Jabal al-Summaq, most of these Druze areas are points of strategic support for the army. The Swaida district has given the regime a continuing land link to Jordan, as well as an airport for aircrafts that is crucial to the defense against rebels in Daraa and the whole South and South-West Syria.

With the eruption of the civil war in 2011, the Druze found themselves, however, between the hammer of the regime and the hard place of the Islamist, rebellious movements. The regime demanded full conscription of the Druze young men, otherwise, the regime would prosecute and persecute those who refuse conscription and even impose severe collective punishment on the community as a whole, such as blocking the provision of basic essential goods, such as energy supplies and even refusal to provide the community with collective security. The Druze community thus suffered from discrimination (deprivation of negative rights) by the regime. Given the weakness of tiny minorities, due to their small population size and the fact that they have no allies, they are deprived of their negative rights (rights to which they are entitled similar to every other citizen), while members of a majority group enjoy these rights automatically, such as the supply of power, clean water, security and health services. In other words, the entitlement to negative rights could be proportional to the size and political power of a group.

Since the onset of the civil war in Syria, sectarian struggle has been a main factor in protracting the conflict, without bringing it to a swift end. Assad utilized all
available means at his disposal to cling to power, including tactics that aggravated sectarian strife and struggle. Major portions of Syria’s minority supported Assad, whether out of fear of the rise of Islamist movements or fear of threats by the regime itself, while Islamist opposition groups attacked civilian minorities that were perceived to be allying with the regime. At the same time, displaced Sunni residents of Damascus fled to the Druze Swaida district or the Druze of Jaramana town in the suburbs of Damascus. In contrast, rebel areas are mostly Arab Sunnis, where the few minorities who lived in these zones had fled or were forced to convert to Sunni Islam. This was the fate of the whole Druze minority in the district of Idlib, where around 15,000 Druze, who used to reside in about 12 villages, were forced to convert to Islam in 2015. These Druzes were given the ultimatum of converting to Sunni Islam or being eliminated and they reluctantly chose the former [11].

Given the sectarian strife, the Assad regime managed to secure, however, a strip of territory stretching from the Alawi zone around Latakia to the Druze zone around Swaida, with key strategic points in the hands of religious minorities, which enabled Assad to pacify the local Sunni majority within areas under his control. Traditionally, the Assad regime since the 1970s managed to build good relations with the Damascene bourgeois milieu in order to bolster the regime and Bashar al-Assad persisted with this policy of his father. Many Sunni officials are represented within the state apparatus, and powerful Sunni economic elites likewise had little reason to revolt given the benefits they received from Assad’s liberalization policies (apart from a handful of notables who ran afoul of the Assad family’s personal interests). Given this alliance between the regime and the Sunni bourgeois milieu, the regime opted to invest in Sunni districts, at the expense of other districts, in order to pacify the Sunni majority.

The Druze district around Swaida had a few anti-regime demonstrations since the beginning of the war, and most Druze residents did not join the Sunni-led opposition movement that originated in the nearby city of Deraa. The Sunni rebels ignored the few Druze who tried to join them, kidnapped Druze villagers, assassinated certain Druze notables and engaged in full-scale military operations against the Druze district.

However, the Druze relationship with the Assad regime has had a bitter history. They were excluded from power following the 1966 coup led by the Druze officer Salim Hatoum against heads of the Baath Party at the time. Since then, the regime had established several military bases in the Swaida province, whose main function was to monitor anti-regime activities in the province. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Swaida district was deprived of government investments, which caused a high rate of exodus to Damascus, the Gulf states and even Latin America (mainly to Venezuela). The remittances and investments from diaspora Druze helped maintain adequate employment and living standards in the district. During the 1990s, there were improvements in the relations between the Druze minority and the regime, which also contributed to the generation of employment jobs.

At the onset of the civil war in Syria, the Druze kept their neutrality, among other things due to the fact that the Druze as members of a closed religious’ community do not have an open and public worship house that parallels the masque that otherwise would attract the masses and mobilize them. The Druze worship house, the Khilwa, is open and accessible merely to the few who are religious. Thus, most of the Druze in the province of Swaida remained neutral, despite a strong desire to topple the regime and seek democratization. It is possible that many Druze figures were connected to the regime, while the clergy feared that toppling the regime would bring Sunni
fundamentalist forces to power. Despite this passive neutrality, a few demonstrations did take place in Swaida in the summer of 2011, organized by intellectuals, who called for limited demands of respecting human rights by the regime. Hence, prominent Druze figures and clergies refused to take part in the wider uprising, but they also refused to publicly support the regime. As the civil war escalated, the Druze were attacked by opposition groups and consequently had to take measures to defend themselves, given that the regime was either unable or uninterested in protecting them. As mentioned above, the Druze community in Jabal al-Summaq around the city of Idlib were forced to convert to Sunni Islam, while the Druze of Jaramana fled to Swaida. In contrast, internally displaced Syrian Sunnis (IDPs) found refuge in the Swaida district, where this influx of Sunni refugees had altered the demographic sectarian distribution of some minority strongholds, including the Swaida district.

The regime agreed to keep Druze conscripts in the Swaida province rather than deploying them elsewhere as part of the tacit agreement that Assad reached with the community's spiritual head in order to maintain control over the community and to use it to defend against rebels in Daraa. The rebels nonetheless called the Druze heretics and sanctioned attacks against them.

In a climate of growing Islamist incitement, some Druze residents were kidnapped and then ransomed or killed. These included a leading Druze dignitary Jamal Ezzeddien; he and sixteen of his colleagues were kidnapped by Jabhat al-Nusra in December 2012 and executed a few months later. Similarly, Druze residents in Jaramana fell victim to car bomb explosions in the spring of 2012. In response, the Druze abandoned their neutrality and formed a local militia with the regime's help. From this point on, Jabal al-Druze was regularly attacked by Sunni Arab forces. In August 2014, rebels fought a serious battle against the Druze near the village of Thaaly, where the Druze fighters managed to push back the rebels. Such cooperation with the regime, however, was unimaginable in the past. These rebel actions may seem unexplained given the Druze posture at the start of demonstrating against the regime. Yet the opposition refused to meet the Druze's demand for separation of religion from politics. Despite being rejected by the rebels, the Druze were initially hesitant to link their fate to the Assad regime, since its fall would leave them defenseless under an Islamist regime. In mid-2015, at a time when the army was on the verge of being defeated, some Druze began contemplating the option of connecting the Druze district to Jordan and making it an autonomous region under international supervision. This idea was championed by Sheikh Wahid Balous, who established one of the first Druze militias in 2012. Balous also called for political reforms to address living standards, corruption and Druze conscription [12]. Yet when Jabhat al-Nusra led another offensive to seize al-Thaaly military airport in June 2015, his forces refused to defend the regime; instead, he called to seize army positions and government buildings. As a result, the regime determined to get rid of Balous, who was assassinated and his militia was dissolved. It is possible that Balous thought that the regime was on its way to being defeated and he wanted to seek some understanding with the rebels. Yet, Russia's intervention soon after Ballous's death completely changed the balance of power on the ground, so the Druze were unlikely to contemplate further secessionist attempts. As a small minority, the Druze would not put an end to their alliance with the regime unless they come to the conviction that either the regime was on its way to collapsing or that there is a powerful counterbalance to the regime that respects the religious autonomy of the community, and even then, they would need tangible assurances that international forces will protect them from Islamist Takfiri groups and spare them the fate of their co-religionists in Jabal al-Summaq [13].
Similarly, On 25 July 2018 at dawn, ISIS carried out a coordinated attack that included four suicide bombings in the Druze city of Swaida and a simultaneous assault on six other sparsely populated and isolated small villages in the Swaida periphery against its Druze residents [14]. These ISIS terrorists were also assisted by local Sunni Bedouins. The suicide bombings took place in the market square of Swaida at dawn, as the vendors were preparing their carts at the time while another massive attack was carried out in the isolated villages. The aim of ISIS was to exterminate all the residents of these isolated villages and take some children and women as hostages. All in all, around 250 Druze residents were killed and 30 were taken as hostages, while the residents managed to kill around 70 ISIS terrorists [13]. The claim of the residents is that the regime was able to predict this attack by ISIS, given that ISIS established a base not far from Druze villages. Further, once the fighting began, the regime did not send any troops to protect the civilians. The only fighters who rushed to protect these villages were Druze young men, who enthusiastically rose to protect their co-religionists.

Regarding the Yezidi community, much has been written about the plight of the Iraqi Yezidis and the genocide attempt by ISIS to eliminate this minority [15, 16]. This genocide includes the following practices:

- Forcing all of its members to convert to Islam.
- Executing all members of the community who refuse to convert to Islam
- Kidnapping Yezidi young women and turning them into sex slaves.

After the fall of Mosul, the ISIS terrorists launched an attack in 2014 on the Sinjar district, a major centre of the Yezidi community in Iraq [17]. Consequently, over 90 per cent of the community members were forced to flee [18]. Several villages fought back but were overpowered and its male residents were killed and their young women were turned into sex slaves [19]. Some survivors were kept captive and moved to prisons. Males were given the ultimatum to convert to Islam, yet even those who converted became slaves, others were forcibly conscripted into ISIS combat units, whilst the ones who resisted to convert were executed.

Young women were forced to convert to Islam, but even then, they were enslaved regardless of their answer. Further, boys were separated from their family members and were taken into training camps with the aim of instilling in their minds Islamic teaching and transforming them into ISIS combatants. Other Yezidi females were sold as slaves to the local Sunni residents, who used them as slaves.

This is not the first time, however, that the Yezidi community encounters a major threat to its survival. The Ottoman Empire neither recognize the Yezidis nor the Druze nor the Bahai as a separate millet or religion. The Yezidis were subject to forced conversion by the Ottoman authorities, but they also suffered from massacres perpetrated by their Sunni Kurdish neighbors in 1832 and 1844 ([18], p. 10–11). These practices under the Ottoman Empire included imposing conscription on Yezidis men and forcing them to convert to Islam, while forcing Yezidi women to marry off Ottoman Sunni soldiers ([18], p. 11).

Despite the atrocity crimes mentioned above against these tiny religious minorities, the international law regarding minority rights has remained impotent when it comes to protecting such minorities or seeking justice for the victims. Further, the
international community came out with some declaration of expressing solidarity with the victims, but without concrete measures to either protect the victims or penalize the perpetrators. Regarding the International Court of Justice (ICC), given that these tiny religious minorities have no mother state that also happen to be a signatory of the Rome Statute and given that neither Iraq, nor Syria nor Iran is a signatory of the Rome Statute, then the ICC has no jurisdiction within these states [20]. The ICC can exert jurisdiction over crimes committed in a state and/or by nationals of ICC states parties or if the UN Security Council referred the situation to the ICC. Given none of these conditions was met, then the JCC cannot do anything to prosecute ISIS war criminals. In this case, it remains up to the states on which soil the crimes were committed or to states whose nationals committed the crimes to prosecute these terrorists [21].

3. Conclusion

The international order is founded on the principle of state sovereignty, where states have a monopoly over the use of force within their territorial jurisdiction, while any external intervention in the internal affairs of states is prohibited. Further, minorities in the Middle East live within either failed states (Lebanon, Iraq) or predatory states (Iran) or both failed and predatory (Syria). Under this order and circumstances and given that tiny religious minorities have no mother state or close powerful allies, then authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and Islamist movements have persecuted tiny religious minorities, while the international community turned a blind eye to these violations. Protecting these minorities requires greater intervention by the international community, which should convince Muslim states, in particular, to explicitly accept the principle of religious freedom that would allow these minorities to freely practice their traditions.
References


