**A racist state**

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The passing of the ‘nation-state’ bill last month, affirming the Israeli state’s Jewish character and downgrading the Arabic language, has reignited a conversation among the Palestinian citizens of Israel especially with regards to their precarious position within the state.

In particular, it has sparked intense conversations among the Palestinian Druze community in Israel. In addition to several resignations from Druze officers currently serving in the Israeli military. On August 4, 50,000 Druze rallied against the bill in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv waving both the Israeli and Druze flags. The image of the square flooded with the multicoloured Druze flag and the Israeli one side by side highlights the different relationship the Palestinian Druze community has with Israel to that of the other Palestinian citizens.

Following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Zionist leadership sought to divide the surviving Palestinian community through notions of particularism – in other words, highlighting religious and traditional differences among them. The Zionists turned their attention to the Arabic speaking Druze community (the Druze religion developed out of Ismaili Islam with adherents concentrated in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine).

By 1948, some Druze had already been recruited to the Haganah under the promise of being able to harvest their lands – something denied to other Palestinians at the time. In 1956, Druze leaders agreed to a deal of compulsory conscription into the Israeli military in return for protection of the community as a minority.

Far from acquiescing, many Druze villages protested against the conscription and their leaders’ collaboration with the Zionist regime. However, over time, the majority of the community were coopted and coerced into the Zionist regime, helping to maintain the façade of the Israeli cultural mosaic. Yet ironically, they would continue to be dispossessed of their lands and denied the same level of infrastructure and services as their Jewish counterparts. Indeed, since the establishment of Israel, the Druze have lost over three-quarters of their land to the state and are simultaneously denied building permits rendering a similar situation of overcrowding and strangulation to that of other Palestinians in Israel.

This story of continued discrimination and the history of Druze refusal or resistance has often been marginalised from the hegemonic narrative. More recently, a Druze youth group was established in 2013 called ‘Urfod’ (refuse in Arabic) which promotes refusal to serve in the Israeli military and campaigns to abolish the compulsory conscription. Established in the Galilean village of Rameh, Urfod is beginning to challenge the hegemonic narrative of Druze collaboration with the Zionist regime by highlighting present and past Druze resistance.

The village of Rameh was also home to one of Palestine’s most famous and prolific poets, Samih al-Qassim, a Palestinian Druze. His poetry focused on resistance and love for Palestine. Both the activists in Urfod and al-Qassim serve as a reminder that there is nothing natural or inherent about Druze collaboration with Israel – rather it was and still is one of the many tactics used to disintegrate Palestinian society.

This renewed and widespread outrage within the Druze community over the last few weeks towards this bill, however, is not necessarily reflective of increasing Druze refusal. The bill is being viewed as a slap in the face to a ‘loyal’ community rather than enshrining an already existing situation of Jewish supremacy. The fears of a ‘new’ reality of an era of second-class citizenship lead to Druze leaders, including spiritual leader Sheikh Muwafaq Tarif, meeting Netanyahu to discuss continued protection of the Druze as a minority community.

In the meeting, Netanyahu also expressed his hope that the Druze rally that had been organised in response to the bill would be cancelled. While Tarif and Netanyahu reached an agreement, the rally took place nonetheless. Far from being critical of Israel or questioning Druze collaboration with the state, the rally hosted speakers from the military who insisted on Druze loyalty to Zionism and described the bill as an insult rather than a piece of legislation that lays to bear the state’s true racist colours.

This attempt to coopt minorities has long been a strategy to disrupt and fragment Palestinian society. Promises of integration and economic and social opportunities have been empty, as demonstrated by the fact that the Palestinian Druze continue to suffer from discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion. Indeed, one of the greatest tragedies is how Israel has been able to divide the Palestinian people and has created minority groups who fight for scraps from the master’s table. If anything, this bill demonstrates that no matter how much you cooperate or collaborate – if you are not Jewish, this state is not for you.

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