

Jerusalem Forum: The Battle of Survival for the Druze in Syria

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Haifa, Israel—On September 17, 2015, the Jerusalem Peace and Security Forum met at the University of Haifa to discuss the situation of the Druze in Syria and to learn about their battle for survival. Representatives of the Druze community in Israel, as well as scholars specializing in Middle East affairs, were among the participants.

Prof. Eliezer Glaubach, president of the forum, warmly welcomed the participants, and was the first speaker. He said he greatly respects the Druze community in Israel, who has bonded itself to the fate of Israel by serving in the Israeli army. Their sons are putting their lives at risk protecting the country, he said. As an act of deep friendship to the Druze community, Prof. Glaubach recommended Israel support reuniting the Druze in Syria with their families in Israel.

Sheikh Mukhsein Abu-Salekh, who has been a leader of the Druze community in Israel for the last 50 years, spoke about the sensitive situation of the Druze nation. According to the Druze religion, the Druze must be loyal to the state in which they settle. In effect, the Druze living in Israel would be considered Israeli patriots, and their cousins in Syria, Syrians patriots. This religious law creates a unique situation where, out of patriotism to Syria, the Druze in that country have chosen to stay there, on their land and home, and not be immigrants or refugees in another country.

Mr. Salekh Sa'ad, a member of the labor party as well as a representative of the Druze community in the party, spoke of the Druze's high commitment to Israel. The Druze appreciate the democracy they can enjoy in Israel, and have seen progress in their lives since the founding of the country. Mr. Sa'ad said that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that Israel will not allow a massacre to occur in the Druze community in Syria, effectively protecting the Druze living in the country. Mr. Sa'ad also responded positively to Prof. Glaubach's idea of reuniting the Druze people in Syria with their families in Israel.

Several scholars also spoke:

Dr. Joel Parker of Tel Aviv University talked about the conflict of loyalty in which the Druze find themselves. While their religion asks them to be loyal to the country in which they live, it is no longer clear where the borders of Syria are and who the official leader of the country is. Dr. Parker said he believes Druze representatives in the country are probably negotiating with the opposition forces, trying to prepare themselves for any scenario. The shaky, violent and unstable situation in Syria makes it hard to predict the decision the Druze will make, and the situation in which they might find themselves.

Dr. Parker mentioned that in an area in northern Syria, the Druze are forced to pray in a mosque five times a day and women are forced to wear a burka, a covering worn by Muslim women. They were also

forced to fast during Ramadan. He added that in southern Syria, the Druze can keep their autonomy; however, they do not think this will be true in the future.

Mr. Moran Levanoni, a scholar from Tel Aviv University, noted that Israel is helping refugees from Syria at several points along its border with the country. He said that by supporting the refugees, Israel can ask the opposition forces not to attack the Druze territory in Syria (the Druze, who support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, are considered enemies of the forces). Mr. Levanoni said this is an example of a way in which Israel is protecting the Druze community—not by the power of guns, but by the power of helping people in need.

Dr. Ronen Zaidel of Haifa University, who is an expert on Iran, was asked about ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in southern Syria. Dr. Zaidel said the ISIS flag is being placed in different locations in the area by local terrorist groups. ISIS neither supplies them with weapons nor a salary; the only thing they gain from ISIS is publicity from the world.



Participants:

Prof. Eliezer Glaubach, president of the Jerusalem Peace and Security Forum

Sheikh Mukhsein Abu-Salekh, Majdel Shams

Mr. Salekh Sa'ad, member of Israel's labor party

Mr. Ali Birani, president of the Jerusalem Forum for Understanding and Cooperation Among Religions

Joel Parker, Ph.D., Tel Aviv University; he is a scholar of 20th century Syria, international relations, refugees and youth movements, and secular and dissident politics in the Arab world

Dr. Ronen Zaidel, chairman of the Center for Iraq Studies at the University of Haifa; he is a scholar of modern Iraq, the geopolitics of the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli conflict

Mr. Moran Levanoni, Ph.D. student at Tel Aviv University; he is a scholar of modern Lebanese history, the Shi'a in Lebanon, and the history and politics of Syria and Lebanon

Dr. Nurit Hirschfeld, secretary general of UPF-Israel

Mr. Takahiro Morita, journalist at Sekai Nippo

Mrs. Haruko Morita, journalist at Sekai Nippo

Mrs. Adi Sasaki, director of the Jerusalem Peace and Security Forum