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al Jaber, Bakj

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Story of a minority that avoided taking sides in a war, and ended up with an internal struggle.

Name: Bakr Al Jaber

Student number: s2070839

Supervisor: Dr. Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl

Table of content

Introduction

Following protests in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, which led to the fall of some very old regimes and was labelled as 'the Arab spring', hopes for democracy and freedom hit Syria too. In March 2011, teenagers from Dara'a painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall. The government immediately arrested the boys and tortured them, which led people to start demonstrating. In order to shut these protests down, security forces opened fire on demonstrators (Eddin, 2013, p.27). This was the first spark of what became to be known as the Syrian revolution.

The Syrian government disapproved of all forms of protest and responded in three ways. First, as the government-controlled all media outlets in the country, and according to many speeches present president al-Assad delivered, they presented the protestors as criminals, terrorists, and traitors that people should be afraid of (Athamneh & Sayej, 2013, p.174). They furthermore presented president Bashar al-Assad as the only person that could keep the country together and protect all citizens, including the many minority groups living in Syria (Salama, 2012, p. 518). This influenced the dynamics of minorities and how they responded to the whole situation. After many years the situation became known as the Syrian war. The intensity and complexity of this war influenced minorities differently.

A snapshot of the nature of the regime is needed to understand ethnic minorities in Syria. In order to sustain control over all governmental institutions and the Syrian coercive apparatus, the Assad regime has historically depended on measures of co-optation along with repression to maintain its power. A strategy that was used to ensure the disproportionate access to privileges

and power to minorities such as the Druze, Ismailis, and mostly Alawites (Berti & Pari, 2014, p. 23).

<u>The position of Druze in Syria</u>

Throughout the last few decades, and especially after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, the Syrian regime's discourse towards minorities evolved to focus on the regime as the only guarantee for the minorities' safety. In the case of the Druze, the regime succeeded in exploiting their fears. This led to an alliance between minority spiritual and traditional leaders who are known as Sheikhs of Mind "Shyoukh al-Akel" and the Syrian regime, The regime relied on them to control the Druze population (Balanche, 2016). However, this alliance came with social opposition toward the religious and social figures that pushed for such cooperation with the Syrian regime. One of the most prominent opposition movements was the Men of Dignity "Rijal al-Karama" movement and its charismatic leader Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous (al-Lababidi, 2019, p.7). The position of Druze regarding the Syrian war has wavered between accepting the de facto power of the Islamic groups in the suburbs of Idlib, where many thousands of Druze existed, to strong support for the Syrian regime in the area of Mount Hermon, where some Druze settle. The majority of Druze in Syria, estimated to be around half a million people, settle in Sweida. This group of people did not take a clear stand with any side, keeping the ground open for many parties to contest and strive to win their support (Ezzi, 2015).

Taking the aforementioned contextual and historical factors into account, this paper will focus on the positions that the Druze community took in the conflict as well as the subsequent disagreement within the community captured by the dynamics between Sheikhdom of Mind and Men of Dignity movement. The purpose of analysing this case study is to evaluate whether an

internal social rift was formed within the minority community of Druze. Furthermore, this paper focuses on the area of Sweida, since it forms the biggest Druze presence and power in Syria.

RQ: Was there a rift within the Druze community over members' position on the Syrian civil war?

Conceptualization and literature review

The term intra-conflict refers to conflicts within an ethnic minority, whereas what is meant by inter-conflict is the dynamics and conflicts between two minorities of a community.

This paper focuses on the stance of what I would frame as social (nonviolent) intra-conflict within a minority or ethnic group. In general, many scholars have written about the dynamics of inter-conflict, however, the dynamics of intra-conflicts have been understudied academically. The little work that has been done on intra-conflict, mainly touches upon the violent aspects of it, disregarding the social dynamics within a minority.

Understanding the social and geographical context of the city of Sweida is key for this paper to achieve its purpose in studying the social intra-conflict I mention above. It is important to note that in the context of the Syrian uprising and its aftermath, the Druze community differentiates itself from other parties and minorities, which are included in the power dynamics in the Syrian sphere, as they are primarily concerned with their safety and the prosperity of their community as opposed to the fight for power. To make this clearer, one can see the difference between the neutrality of people of Sweida and compare it to the Palestinian intra-conflict captured by the dispute between Hamas and Fatah which is characterised by power struggles to take over the political life (Warren & Troy, 2014, p.485).

With social rift, the paper aims to check disagreements regarding specific issues such as sending Druze to the military service, the geographical place of their service, the attitude regarding state officials in Sweida specifically and the attitude of president al-Assad in general, the position regarding Syrian opposition, the position regarding the radical Islamic groups, and the direct and indirect messages between Sheikhs of Mind and al-Bal'ous.

Syria is known historically by the multi-sectarian and religious fabric of its people. Besides the majority population made up of Sunni Muslims, many minorities such as the Shiite, Alawite, Druze, Ismaili, Yazidi and Christians form this diverse fabric (Horany, 2018). Excluding the Kurdish minority and their struggle for recognition which is counted as a nationalistic struggle, the aforementioned groups used to live together with ease and minimal conflict. This peaceful fabric was challenged in the aftermath of the Syrian revolution and the transformation of this revolution into a war, eventually leading to tensions between different groups as well as within these different groups to an extent.

Gurr (2000) defines an ethnopolitical group as an "identity group who share a distinctive and enduring collective identity based on a belief in common descent and on shared experiences and cultural traits. At the same time, it has political consequences for its ethnicity" (p.5). The word "minority" is used to describe a "distinguished group by common ties of descent, physical appearance, language, culture or religion, in virtue of which they feel or are regarded as different from the majority of the population in a society" (Bullock 1988: 'minorities' as cited in White, 2007, p. 65)

According to Barth (1998), one of the things that identify a stranger from an ethnic group

is the absence of a common judgment within the group (p.15). Before starting the process of conceptualization and operationalization, we have to note that despite the rich literature on the violence between ethnic groups, there has been little work done about violence within an ethnic group (Warren & Troy, 2014, p.485). But this turns into somehow an absence when we talk about non-violent conflict within ethnic groups as a possible introduction for violent intra-conflict. This forms a good reason to choose and highlight the importance of this particular case.

Ethnic groups are generally not homogeneous and members differ in their political preferences, so we cannot expect them to form a unity in a political sense (Warren & Troy, 2014, p.487). Our study will focus on the context of Syria. This paper, based on the literature studied, proposes areas to test and capture the possible social rift within the Druze ethnic group. Through the literature review as well, we aim to check if there was a social rift before within the Druze community.

The literature shows a big tendency towards capturing the Druze community as a homogenous group of people that has unified preferences and is very cohesive. This assumption is based on their religious identity, but in fact not supported by any concrete evidence. After the Syrian revolution, some articles show the gap between Druze students who accuse religious Sheikhs of being secularly ignorant (Hinnebusch & Imady, 2018, p. 279).

Historically, we witness a big value within Druze communities attached to their land (Hinnebusch & Imady, 2018, p. 279). This can be connected to the idea of autonomy, and it will be taken into consideration during the study. As an ethnicity that existed as both a tribe and a religious sect, there has been a shift towards the sectarian part, and despite the internal

disagreement, the clergy leaders (spiritual sheikhdom) seem to play the biggest role in the community (al-Lababidi, 2019, p.1).

According to Ajami (2012), when the Syrian revolution broke out there were two choices for minorities in general; either the protection of secular dictatorship, or the risk and rewards of democratic politics (p.115). The small community of Druze tried avoiding any involvement in the Syrian war, although they form a significant player which influences who will take control in the future over Syria as a whole due to their strategic geographical position in the mountainous southern region of Jabal al-Druze. This desire to avoid any involvement was challenged by the intensity of the clashes and the distance of it, which reached the region of Sweida in 2014 (Balanche, 2016).

As a result of Druze neutrality that has been chosen, there was a non-official exception for Druze individuals for military conscription (al-Lababidi, 2019, p.2) which was sometimes challenged depending on the need for new soldiers serving the army, that led to a tension in many cases, and was reflected on differences in the discourse of the Sheikhs of Mind and the discourse of the Men of Dignity movement.

After the military coup period in the 1960's in Syria, with Al-Ba'ath party rising to power, there has been a strategic goal to marginalize the secular Druze leaders (al-Lababidi, 2019, p.6). Since the Syrian revolution, the spiritual sheikhdom entered a structural crisis regarding its three Sheikhs of Mind, that happened despite the endorsement of the regime to their social power (al-Lababidi, 2019, p.6). Our study will focus mainly on the contradictions between Sheikhs of Mind with the Men of Dignity leader, rather than the contradiction between the three Sheikhs of Mind internally, which was significant. The literature shows that they rarely

agreed on a position, except for the jointly adopted religious "hurm" (ex-communication) of Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous, the founder of the Men of Dignity movement, in early 2015 after he declared his stand against the regime. After circulation of a photo showing the three sheikhs with General Wafiq Nasser, the head of the Military Intelligence branch in the southern region and the most powerful man in southern Syria (al-Lababidi, 2019, p.7).

From 2012, with the rise of Men of Dignity movement and its charismatic leader Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous, there was a challenge to the clergy, al-Bal'ous formed a combination of secular leadership with a religious background, the movement transformed into an armed group with a very clear slogan striving for neutrality "we attack no one, and permit no attacks against us" (al-Lababidi, 2019, p.7) The movement became popular after a few victories in battles in the surroundings of Sweida in 2014, protecting it from some radical Islamic groups attacks (Al-Asaad, 2017). This movement which was considered one of the most powerful and well-armed communal factions has been very much weakened and fragmented with the assassination of its leader Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous in the end of 2015.

In general, Sweida witnessed a weak presence for state institutions. This led to alternative judiciary committees such as The Dispute Resolution Committee which is connected to the Sheikhdom of Mind (al-Lababidi, 2019, p.12). On another note, donations made by Druze in the region played a role in the internal tension in Sweida, where al-Bal'ous accepted donations from Druze in Palestine since it was politically unconditioned, he faced many accusations that he was receiving money from Israel. Meanwhile, the three Sheikhs of Mind accepted donations from Druze in Lebanon and that came with a lot of tension, since the two main Druze political leaders in Lebanon were on two different sides; Talal Arslan who adapted a pro-regime discourse, and

Walid Jumblat who was totally opposing the Syrian regime, this led to tension between the three Sheikhs of Mind regarding the sources of the donations and the ties connected to it (al-Lababidi, 2019, p.16).

After losing large areas in Dara'a and the south, the Syrian regime started using some areas in the Mountain of Druze to bomb Dara'a, which was accompanied by the withdrawal of heavy military equipment from Sweida towards the suburbs of Damascus. In June 2015, the tension reached a significant level when the Free Syrian Army groups in the south region battled for Tha'aleh Military Airbase. Mortar bombs fell on areas in Sweida and the Free Syrian Army accused the regime of drawing up plans to create chaos and disorder in between the Druze and Bedouin tribes around Sweida. This accusation was based on the word of al-Bal'ous against General Wafiq Nasser, the head of the Military Intelligence branch in the southern region. Subsequently, al-Bal'ous announced an order for Nasser's arrest if he was to be found anywhere in Sweida. At the same time, Sheikh of Mind Hikmat al-Hajri announced a statement requesting Druze men to join the Syrian army forces to fight with the regime within Sweida. A few hours before the rebels in southern Syria were preparing to liberate the Tha'aleh Military Airbase there was an incident in Qalb Lozeh where a few Druze people in Idlib province were killed by Jabhat al-Nusra (Abou-Chakra, 2015). Nusra issued an investigation of the incident afterwards and described it as an "unjustified mistake" (Al-Assil & Slim, 2015) However, this caused extra pressure for the Druze community in Sweida and caused more tension.

There is a historical topic of contention between Druze and the military conscription that goes back to relation with Mohammad Ali Basha, and with the Ottoman empire afterwards, where they fought many battles refusing the conscription of Druze people in the army. In early

2015 two police centres were attacked in Sweida by Men of Dignity movement in order to free Druze men who were arrested regarding military service. A few days later, a checkpoint tried arresting a Druze guy to be sent to the military which lead to further tensions, and a few hours later, Men of Dignity forces attacked the checkpoint and kicked the soldiers out of Sweida before handing the checkpoint to another military branch after a few days (Ezzi, 2015). Given the importance of military conscription, our study will focus on the attitudes regarding this issue between the two sides this paper is studying.

Harik (1994) explains how the leadership of Sheikhs of Mind captured the historical continuity for the idea of the Imamat (p.462). Following the development of the Sheikhs of Mind's concept and practice, Harik (1994) mentions that "early sect leaders originally combined communal, administrational, and judiciary roles beside their religious role. By carrying out these roles those leaders became known as community directors, administrators and judges while attending to the holy rituals required by the faith". Later on they became known as the Sheikhs of Mind who controlled the everyday administration of the sect (p.465). In the case of Syria the regime tried to manipulate this power by capturing it as an official office connected to the state when al-Baath party came to power.

There is a lack of capturing the dynamics within the Druze community in Syria. This paper aims to provide an analysis of the discourse of the two rivals in order to grasp and outline the attitudes regarding important issues and how each side responded to the war. Through such an analysis it can be seen whether there has been a rift within society or not.

The neutrality that the Druze community chose, in general, brings back to mind the position of Armenian political parties in Lebanon during the civil war between 1975-1990. In

order to "avoid a potential conflict and violence affecting the Armenian community" (Geukjian, 2007, p.66). Despite the differences between the two cases and the two states, what is similar is that the Armenian community was armed to defend itself and to defend its neutrality (Geukjian, 2007, p.68), which we see in the Druze case in Syria. Secondly, both states, Lebanon and Syria failed to provide security for the various groups. One could argue that this concept of positive neutrality is inherently related to the Druze faith, for its connection with the concept of "Taqiyya", which means dissimulation, where it justifies persecuted believers to hide their religion and even profess another faith for their own safety (Ostrovitz,1983, p. 272). Reflecting this belief on the political sphere and context of the time will serve as a theory that plays a significant role in the research, since connecting these two concepts was the closest theoretical related subjects, to the case of our research. At the same time, it highlights a gap in the literature for theories that can explain how the dynamics of ethnopolitical minorities that decide to be neutral, get influenced by civil war and how nonviolent intra ethnic conflict develop during chaotic times. Interesting to note that before that time, there was no apparent rift in the literature review in Sweida before 2011. The disagreements were more individualistic and not polarized, and there was an absence for areas we use to test for an existing social rift.

Hypothesis and Research Design

This paper suggests the following hypothesis: The Druze community entered an internal conflict which caused a social rift within the community during the Syrian war.

In order to answer the research question, the formal discourse of the Druze council (Sheikhs of Mind) will be analyzed and compared to the discourse of the Men of Dignity

movement through speeches of al-Bal'ous. The social context, as well as events on the ground, will be taken into consideration to check its influence on the minority cohesion. The purpose is to weigh the change that the outbreak of the war caused within the Druze community and whether it represents an internal social rift, or whether the events passed without causing long term harm for the cohesion of the ethnic minority.

This paper is qualitative in nature, following a descriptive design, to describe the internal position and dynamics of Druze in Sweida regarding the Syrian war, and compare it to the concept of positive neutrality which serves as a theoretical framework for our paper beside the concept of "Taqiyya" (dissimulation). The paper follows a case study research method which allows the chance to provide a thick description and literature review for the issue of Druze minority in Syria specifically, and neutral minorities in places and times of political unrest and wars in general . This thick description will be reached by analyzing the evidence provided for our research in addition to the literature review and reading the events on the ground. Discourse analysis techniques will be followed in this paper, since the context of the evidence plays a big role in the analysis, especially if we take in consideration the timing of each statement or speech, and the nature of Sweida as a Druze city. The analysis will be for data that is gathered for our case. The literature review showed that al-Bal'ous was a powerful leader on the ground which formed a challenge for the traditional spiritual official Sheikhs, or what is known to be called Sheikhs of Mind. The evidence that will be analyzed is videos of al-Bal'ous speaking to crowds in the years 2014 and 2015 since they form the most tense and controversial moments. For the Sheikhs of Mind discourse (who are three officially), I will analyse statements made by them in the same period. Worth noting that there is no single official website or archive that provides all

the statements. The official websites provide few statements, and the rest were tracked through different official Facebook pages. These Facebook resources were still stamped and signed by either one Sheikh of Mind or all three. I excluded any statement that is not provided with an official stamp and signatures. There are few statements that were signed by all three Sheikhs of Mind which were prioritized, and there are a few that are made by only one Sheikh, which will be taken into consideration during the analysis.

Operationalization

With social rift, I aim to focus on five areas since they form the main contested areas that developed tension between the two sides we are studying. 1) The attitude regarding state officials in Sweida. 2) Military conscription and its geographical assigning for those who go to the military from the Druze community. 3) The attitude regarding the opposition. 4) The attitude regarding radical Islamic groups. 5) Direct and indirect messages between Sheikhs of Mind and the leader al-Bal'ous, the leader of Men of Dignity movement. Based on these areas the evidence was gathered. The paper does not aim to find explanations for the intra-conflict but aims to provide evidence from the different discourses for its presence or otherwise, and provide a description of it. In each of the aforementioned areas the paper will show where each side stands from the issue based on a simple measurement that categorizes each side's stand from the issue as negative, positive, or neutral. Furthermore, based on a simple calculation, the intensity of direct messages in addition to some events on the ground, these three factors will form the basis to test our hypothesis upon. It is important to mention that all the evidence is originally in Arabic, and when a translation is provided the translation takes into consideration the cultural

context and the spirit of the speech and does not only translate the text or speech word by word.

Analysis

<u>Stance Towards the State</u>

Regarding the stances of state officials, the analysis shows very different positions for the two sides we are analysing, even though for a period of time their stances and position was similar at the very beginning. For al-Bal'ous, in one of his appearances in a video uploaded in November 2014, while he is sharing the main rules of Men of Dignity movement in what appears to be a social event, he mentions clearly and directly that "Syria and its president, Sheikhs of Mind, and the land of Jabal al Druz, is a red line for us", then he elaborated on that by saying "as long as the president works for the benefit of citizens" (Azzam, 2014, 1:23). Furthermore, he elaborated on the importance of maintaining the institutions of the country since they are for the people. He also noted the importance of fighting corruption in these institutions. We see rational support for state officials at this stage. This rational support did not last long. After the Dama battle in August 2014 against Jabhat al-Nusra, which was fought between Men of Dignity movement with the support of the Syrian army, al-Bal'ous accused the Syrian army of betraying them and shooting at them from behind (Ayyoub, 2015). This formed a turning point in the discourse regarding state officials. In a video speech of al-Bal'ous visiting a spiritual leader who is known as a prominent figure of Druze, Sheikh Rakan al-Atrash, who is related to Sultan Basha Al-Atrash the Commander General of the Great [Syrian Revolution](#) in 1925 against the Ottoman and French (Bailony, 2015,209), in that speech al-Bal'ous stated that the Men of Dignity movement was not against anyone, they attack no one and prevent any attack on themselves. He

continued by saying that Syria has been destroyed by the two sides, he means the regime and the opposition (Fursan Alhaq movement, 2015). This halfway change in the position towards state officials later turned to a clear rejection. In a famous video uploaded after his assassination, al-Bal'ous accused the state of withdrawing the heavy military equipment from the area in order to leave them weak, besides taking the wheat away, then he says "if the state is selling us out, we sell them as well" (Men of Abu Fahed al-Bal'ous in Palestine, 2015, 15:10). He accused state officials of cooperating with ISIS against the interests of the Druze people, then he said, "if this is confirmed, it means that the regime has fallen down for us" (Men of Abu Fahed al-Bal'ous in Palestine, 2015, 16:00). Men of Dignity's position towards state officials in the last days of al-Bal'ous became more critical and radical. Videos, where al-Bal'ous is humiliating officials of the regime were circulated. In one of them he follows-up on his humiliating of state officials by saying "Listen, oh President. We do not have any country other than Syria. You have Iran, the opposition has Saudi Arabia. But as for us, we don't have anything other than Syria" (Zaman Alwsl, 2016, 8:56). Al-Bal'ous directly threatened state officials in Sweida, saying that "we know that the presidential palace took a decision to assassinate me, but this is all behind us. I am telling all the officials in Sweida, and I know that this will reach them, this is your last chance, either you do the work that you should do as officials serving the people, or we have an intention that will not please you" (Otman, 2016, 0:17). This direct threat was supported by the crowd gathered around al-Bal'ous and was followed by a comment from a military leader from the al-Naiem family who is leading one of the biggest brigades in the movement. Al-Naiem directly threatened Nasser, he personally said that if anything happened to al-Bal'ous they would take substantial revenge, so he is threatening by highlighting what might happen. He says: "If you

allow me to interrupt, Sheikh, you are saying that they have names they want to kill, I would like

them to know that we have names, and we are under your command. Everyone should know, if

our Sheikh al-Bal'ous gets even a small wound, you will be in the past (you will face dire

consequences), oh Wafiq Nasser" (Naif Otman, 2016, 2:15). Nasser is the head of the Military

Intelligence branch in the southern region.

For Sheikhs of Mind, the analysis shows that they totally go in line with the state and

they support state officials and the Syrian army. This is seen in all related statements issued by

Sheikhdom of Mind. In statement number 91 issued on 30/1/2015 after al-Bal'ous' video

speaking about al-Assad and challenging his power, the statement says "Recently, many

violations have been made, which go against our principles, religiously, socially, and nationally.

Sheikhdom of Mind condemns such videos shared on social media, which express the views of

only the individuals who say it, and do not reflect the opinion of Sweida. Such acts are far from

our morals, and we remind everyone that there are fundamental pillars that no one can talk about

negatively, the homeland and its leader (which means here Bashar al-Assad), the state and its

institutions, the Syrian Arab Army, and the civil peace)" (Sheikhdom of Mind, 2015). This

statement was signed by all three Sheikhs of Mind. Worth noting that the language used is very

formal and very similar in terms to the language of official Syrian media.

In another statement issued on 7/2/2015 one week after the first mentioned statement,

Sheikh of Mind Hikmat al-Hajri invited everyone to support the Syrian state and its army, which

will "maintain our dignity" as he says. Then he invited those who took another position, to

reevaluate that and come back to the big family which will forgive them (Spiritual leadership,

2015). This shows a clear full support for state officials, generally from the three Sheikhs of

Mind, and specifically from Sheikh al-Hajri. In conclusion, our analysis showed that the two sides, the Sheikhdom of Mind and the Men of Dignity movement were very different in their position from the state officials.

Military Conscription

Our second area is military conscription. The Men of Dignity movement, make a clear stand on the issue. They refuse the obligatory conscription, but if anyone wants to join the army voluntarily they can. However, the movement with a speech of al-Bal'ous made it clear that they won't allow the military police to arrest any person in Sweida in order to send him to the military. He said "we are not sending our sons to the military, it is not obligatory. Whoever wants to go can go, but from now on there is no obligatory conscription. Before now, we said it is forbidden for military police to enter any house in order to arrest those who did not go to the military. Now I say that we won't allow them to arrest anyone anywhere in Sweida, neither in their house nor in the streets" (Orient TV, 2015, 1:46). The literature review showed as well how the Men of Dignity attacked a police station in order to free arrested guys regarding military service. The Men of Dignity have a clear negative stand regarding this issue.

For Sheikhs of Mind, out of the three Sheikhs, only Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajri issued a statement on 9/6/2015, number 18 "inviting the people who did not join to serve their military service to do their national and religious duty, and head towards the military police centres, and their service will be only in the borders of Sweida". There has been some news saying that the promise of only being deployed to the borders of Sweida was not true as some of the men who turned themselves in were sent to Brigade 52 in Dara'a, another city next to Sweida (Orient,

2015). Since only one Sheikh out of the three made such statements, while the other two Sheikhs of Mind did not, we will position their stance as neutral, but this, in fact, highlights the internal conflict within the Sheikhdom of Mind, which the paper highlights as an important result. Here it is important to highlight the historical issue of military conscription for Druze, during the Ottoman and French rule of the area and how sensitive the issue is as mentioned in our literature review.

The analysis shows an absence for an attitude regarding the Syrian opposition in the discourse of Sheikhs of Mind, meanwhile in the discourse of Men of Dignity, the stand appears to be neutral, which is mainly around their slogan "we attack no one, and we allow no one to attack us". For this absence, we will exclude this area from our analysis in capturing if there is a social rift within the Druze community in Sweida.

Position on radical Islamist group

For attitudes regarding radical Islamic groups, the analysis showed that both sides go inline in their position. Al-Bal'ous clearly mentions that in many videos. In (Fursan al-Haqq movement, 2015, 4:24) he appears to say that neither ISIS nor Nusra will set foot in Jabal al-Druze. This is repeated in another video when he is talking about arming people in Sweida after receiving some aid from Druze of Palestine (Abu Sada Kamal, 2015). In fact, the Men of Dignity movement fought many battles against Jabhat al-Nusra, famously the one in Dama 2014 which was mentioned earlier.

Sheikhs of Mind definitely share the same negative position from radical Islamic groups,

that can be explained through using the same discourse of the Syrian regime, in a statement issued 4/4/2014 we witness an ultimate negative position, the statement says "the spiritual leadership sends its condolences for the families of martyrs who passed away in Jabal al-Sheikh defending our home country against the terrorism and the radicals. We hereby insist that people in Jabal al-Sheikh stand with the Syrian Arab army against those terrorist/Takfiri gangs which are supported by Israel" (Sheikhdom of Mind, 2014). This statement was signed by all three Sheikhs of Mind. In general, we see a negative position which goes in line with the position of the Men of Dignity movement.

Back and forth

The analysis becomes more tricky when looking at the final area of our analysis and the direct and indirect messages between al-Bal'ous and Sheikhs of Mind. In one of his speeches uploaded to YouTube after al-Bal'ous' death, while talking about the wheat that has been taken away from Sweida to Damascus and the heavy weapons withdrawal from Jabal al-Druz, he says "this belongs to us, and if there is a state being built inside the state we need to know, and if our head figures accept this we do not accept, and if I open my mouth and talk, they consider me as an enemy. Why are the wheat, the weapons, and the ruins taken away from our mountain? Where are our head figures from all of this?" (Men of Abu Fahed al-Bal'ous in Palestine, 2015, 13:52). Here he talks about "the head figures" without mentioning directly Sheikhdom of Mind. In another video, when he talks about a few kidnapped Druze people one of whom was Jamal Izzedine, a Druze public figure, al-Bal'ous says that "after a very long period where no one did

anything to free them, measures were taken to do so and suddenly all our spiritual and traditional leaders turn against us"(Zaman Alwsl, 2016, 7:22). Here he mentions Sheikhs of Mind directly for the first time, then he says "except Sheikh Hammoud al-Hinnawi" who is one of the three Sheikhs of Mind (Zaman Alwsl, 2016, 7:25). In a video in Shaqqa which is a town in Sweida where al-Bal'ous was giving the people of Shaqqa a machine gun that was bought with money that was sent from Druze in Palestine, the crowd started to cheer and react to his words. Al-Bal'ous responded to a man who was expressing the support of Sheikh (Abu wa'el) Hammoud al-Hinnawi for al-Bal'ous by saying "about Sheikh al-Hinnawi, his stand is honoured and he did not let us down, that is for Sheikh al-Hinnawi, but about the other Sheikhs of Mind, they (here he is more likely talking about the Syrian regime officials) divided them internally, and they made a division between us and them in order to divide our mountain. But, as God wills we will stay united. We have three Sheikhs of Mind, maybe now each one has his own circumstances, but in the end, when the right day comes we will all be on one side. We will carry on what we are doing, and they will come to their senses. We are not political, and they are not either" (Fursan al-Sheikh Abu Faheed Waheed al-Bal'ous, 2015, 4:39). In January 2015 after the religious "hurm" (ex-communication) against al-Bal'ous, he appears in a video talking to an armed group of men about the importance of protecting the borders of Sweida, then talking about the "hurm", he says "spiritual leaders (he is not referring here to Sheikhs of Mind, but he is referring to two religious Sheikhs that he usually consulted, one of whom is Sheikh Raqan al-Atrash) advised me to accept the decision of Sheikhdom of Mind and I follow the orders of our religious Sheikhs" (Fursan al-Druze, 2015, 0:56). The analysis of the discourse of al-Bal'ous shows indirect negative messages to the Sheikhs of Mind, and even though he criticizes them, he

still shows a lot of respect to them in his speeches. Meanwhile this did not lead to a change in his actions or decisions on the ground.

The Sheikhs of Mind took a harsh clear stand from al-Bal'ous and his movement. The first statement was issued by Sheikh of Mind Hikmat al-Hajr in 2/12/2014, talking about the issue of armed groups that appeared recently without any legal frame and which does not belong to the Syrian state. This was clearly against al-Bal'ous since it was the biggest armed group at the time that challenged the state power and the traditional spiritual leaders' power. Al-Hijri follows that by saying "this will lead to chaos, therefore, I ask our citizens to not follow such groups, and I invite state institutions to take measures against this and see by whom they are supported" (Spiritual leadership, 2014). This attitude cannot be considered as a single act of only one Sheikh of Mind since in 30/1/2015, statement number 92 was issued and signed by all three Sheikhs of Mind, which states the following: "Since acts that go against our religious traditions have been repeatedly done, Sheikhdom of Mind decides the following: applying religious "hurm" (ex-communication) against al-Bal'ous and his followers" (Sheikhdom of Mind, 2015). The statement shows the very different stances of the two parties here, and using the term "followers" highlights the challenge that al-Bal'ous formed against the Sheikhs of Mind, the analysis clearly shows negative messages and stands from Sheikhdom of Mind against al-Bal'ous, which means not giving him any social or religious cover for his movement.

Summary

After excluding the attitude regarding the Syrian opposition since there was not enough evidence to analyse, the analysis shows that the positioning between Men of Dignity and Sheikhdom of Mind go in line with each other fully in the area of the attitude regarding radical Islamic groups. Meanwhile, the areas of their position towards the regime officials, and the direct and indirect messages, show very different and negative stances from each other. The issue of military conscription shows a semi agreement, but at the same time it showed an internal division between the three Sheikhs of Mind.

Conclusion

Based on the discourse analysis comparison that was done and testing the results to our hypothesis, we can conclude that our analysis confirms the suggested hypothesis that a social rift within the Druze community occurred due to an internal conflict regarding the individual position from the civil war. This shows to an extent a significant division within the Druze community in Sweida. The rift caused disagreements on areas of conflict which appeared during the Syrian civil war. This conclusion is supported further by the events and incidents on the ground that are mentioned throughout the paper. Some would argue that focusing on the discourse within a minority does not capture whether there is a rift or not and the focus should be on incidents and conflicts that are more tangible. That might be true, but our study can highlight the seeds and the starting point of how a social rift might start. It is important to see how this social rift that was captured in the discourses developed afterwards, and how it might develop in the future into a violent conflict. Another response regarding Druze in Sweida specifically,

shows that the Sheikhdom of Mind is very respected religiously, while in contrast, Men of Dignity were mostly dealing with non-religious issues. Considering this, a direct violent conflict would be a suicide mission for both parties as it does not come to the benefit of the community that is of high importance for both parties. That is why the rift was social rather than violent.

Future work can be done to see how this rift was translated to actions on the ground and check if it is confirmed or not, and if it played any role in the assassination of al-Bal'ous in September 2015. An important area to study is how a non-violent intra-conflict can be transformed into a violent intra-conflict by finding such a case and comparing it to our case, whereby we can examine and expect if social intra-conflict in the Druze case can escalate to become a violent one. In order to examine the relationship between neutrality and the social rift within minorities in war times, we can draw a comparison between our case and that of the Armenian minority and its neutral stand from the Lebanese civil war. Weighing out the similarities, one could come up with a set of generalizations that characterizes the mechanisms through which these minorities deal with civil unrest. Through this, we can make a further statement about the relationship between neutrality and the social rift within minorities in times of war that can be applied and tested in other cases.

The area of Levant is full of ethnic minorities, and given the political situation in the region and the political unrest in the last decade, more work needs to be done to understand the internal dynamics of these minorities, in order to create a better understanding of the situation, and see the political implications of that on the political and social scene in the area.

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