

Should Israel Help the Syrian Druze?

“Well, that’s another fine mess you’ve gotten me into,” said Oliver Hardy to Stan Laurel in many of their comedy films.

Less humorously, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu may be saying that to Sheikh Muafak Tarif, the leader of the Druze community in Israel. Netanyahu’s new dilemma is whether, and to what extent, Israel should intervene to protect the Druze community, directly and indirectly, living in Syria.

Little attention has recently been paid to the Druze community in the Middle East. The Druze religion, a monotheistic one stemming from the eleventh century, is not Muslim, but rather incorporates a mixture of different elements from different faiths. It has a secretive theology concealed from outsiders.

The Druze number about 1.5 million, divided mostly among a number of countries: Lebanon, 215,000 of whom many are in the region of Mount Lebanon; Syria, with an estimated 600,000, three percent of the population, living in about 120 villages; and Israel, with smaller numbers elsewhere.

Israel contains about 130,000 Druze, of whom 20,000 are in the Golan Heights and the rest in Galilee. At the request of their communal leaders, since 1957 they are regarded as a distinct ethnic community. Those Druze speak Arabic and play a significant role in all aspects of Israeli life. They serve in the Israel Defense Forces, in elite units, and at one point in an official Druze battalion. A high proportion of senior commissioned officers are Druze, as are a number of combat pilots in the Israeli Air Force. Druze have served in the Knesset, with one on one occasion in February 2007 serving as acting president. They have been government ministers,

ambassadors and diplomats, and senior members of the police force, and one was even a finalist in the Miss Israel beauty pageant.

The Druze in the Golan Heights still see themselves as Syrians, though Israel controls the area. They are loyal to Syria and have been mainly supportive of the regime of President Assad, fighting against the insurgent rebels, and perhaps believing that the regime is their only real protector.

Though the U.N. Human Rights Council, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Alice Walker appear unaware of it, Israel has been providing medical treatment in a field hospital in the Golan Heights, and sending more serious cases to medical centers in Israel itself, for hundreds of Syrians, now more than 2,000, who have been wounded in the brutal war. Israel has not refused medical treatment to any wounded Syrian approaching its lines. In addition, Israel has been sending food and water across the 1967 armistice dividing line with Syria.

But no good deed goes unpunished. By giving humanitarian aid and medical assistance, Israel stands accused by the Israeli Druze of helping the al-Nusra terrorists who are fighting the Assad regime, and who are hostile to Syrian Druze.

The accusation led to two attacks on Israel Defense Force ambulances carrying wounded Syrians, suspected by the Druze of belonging to al-Nusra, to Israeli hospitals. Early in June 2015, the Israeli Druze expressed concern about the advances of jihadist rebels in southern Syria, especially the massacre on June 10, 2015 of 20 Syrian Druze civilians in a village in northwest Syria by the al-Nusra Front group, an al-Qaeda affiliate. The al-Nusra terrorists threaten the southern Syrian village of Hadar, a few hundred yards from the 1967 ceasefire line, the last Druze town held by the Assad regime.

Druze in Golan protested that Israel had not protected the village, even though the Druze in Hadar remain loyal to the

Assad regime.

On June 22, 2015, a Druze mob, in Horfish in Israel, stopped an Israeli ambulance that was taking wounded Syrians to the medical facility at the field hospital in the Golan Heights and threw rocks at it. Later that day, 150 Druze residents at Majdal Shams in Golan stopped another Israeli ambulance and attacked two Syrians inside who were being taken to hospital, killing one of them. Israeli officials condemned the attacks on the ambulances; the Syrian government praised them. The attacks indeed are counterproductive and may well ignite Syrian extremists to take revenge.

The Druze lobby in Israel has pressured the government to act. Israel's dilemma is that it has remained neutral in the brutal war in Syria, though it has probably given some aid to anti-Assad fighters. Intervention may mean helping not only the Assad regime, but also Hezb'allah, a group that supports Assad. The dilemma is whether Israel should yield to the pleas of Israel Druze who have been loyal to the State of Israel.

It is not an easy choice, but Israel has a moral obligation to help the Syrian Druze and prevent terrorist attacks on them. As the Assad regime weakens, the danger to the Druze grows from the Islamist insurgent forces. Israel may consider responding in four ways. It should maintain a humanitarian safe zone along the Syrian side of the Golan Heights. It should accept into Israel those members of the Syrian Druze who are in or fear danger for their lives. It should keep providing medical assistance for the Syrian wounded even though there is no official peace treaty between Israel and Syria. But above all, even though Israel must remain vigilant in the face of terrorism, it should not become involved in the Syrian war that has already taken so many lives.

First published in the