

The Chameleon's Jinking. The Druze Political Adaptation in Lebanon

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Abstract

The paper examines the Druze political adaptation and its allegiances on the Lebanese as well as international scene. It focuses on the two paramount leaders of the Jumblatt clan who are the key representatives of the Lebanese Left.

Keywords: Jumblatt, Druze, Lebanon

*Here on these mountains, sun and wind commingle.
Everything becomes silence and color.
The Shuf is a noble solitary bird
with white veils and the gestures of death.*
[Shuf, abbreviated, Tuéni Nadia Lebanon Poems of Love and War]

Hereby, in order to establish a common national identity during the roaring inferno of the Lebanese civil war, Nadia Tuéni poetically describes the mountainous region of Shuf, a Druze territory and a piece of the Lebanese multisectionarian mosaic imaginatively shaped in a white, yellow, blue, red and green coloured symbol of the Druze star. Allegorically, the noble solitaires could symbolize the two representatives of the Jumblatts, white veils could symbolize the ambiguity of the Druze policy and allegiances, and the gestures of death point out the ubiquitous reflections of the everyday reality. The following paper focuses on the Druze ethnoreligious minority and its role in the Lebanese political circles.

The Druze represent about 7% of the Lebanese population and thus form the fourth largest community (Shatzmiller 2005). Their syncretic religion, an offshot of the Ismailiyya branch of Islam, encompasses elements of Zoroastrianism, Pythagoreanism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. It was established in the 11th century when the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim proclaimed his divinity and considered himself an incarnation of God. The fear of persecution forced his adherents to seek a refuge in remote areas. The mountains of Lebanon were geographically determined to serve as a religious haven, although migration to Lebanon can be seen as a long process caused by various reasons. The idea of depicting Lebanon as a refuge and a haven for freedom traces its roots back to the early years of the French Mandate when the Jesuit Orientalist Lammens constructed the image of *l'asile du Liban* (Lammens in Salibi 1971, 85). As an alternative to Phoenicianism supported only by Lebanese Christians this justification of Lebanese identity was accepted by the Druzes as well as Shiites who fled from persecution also. Whereas it presumed the Sunnites as persecutors, later when Sunni Muslims from Iraq, Syria and other countries sought refuge in Lebanon this bitter sensation of being guilty has successively evaporated. Nevertheless, Sunnis still maintain a reserved attitude (Salibi 1971). The Druze are often considered as a Shi'a sect and often counted as Muslims despite their own non-Muslim identity, considering themselves Arabs especially for political reasons or of Arabic and Kurdish stock (Von Oppenheim in Abu Izzeddin 1993, 10) or Arabs grafted on mountain Arameic population (Hogarth, Bell in Abu Izzeddin 1993, 10). As Landfeld

Ostrovitz points out, various dubious theories of Druzes' origin, regardless of their significance, connecting Druzes with the Chinese, the Druids, and a lost Crusader army, together with their esoteric religion have often made their status in the Arab world somewhat controversial and sensitive (Lanfeld Ostrovitz 1983, 273). Unity, mutual security, endogamy and family clans were always pillars of survival in a threatening environment. Solidarity is based on the concept of the metempsychosis. If a Druze dies his soul appears in another body. Social mechanism of taqiyya or dissimulation teaches that telling the truth is politeness, not obligation. Thus, a white lie, what is understood to be a sign of caution, is not unethical. (Nisan 2002, 97) The concept of taqiyya, endogamy and ban on proselytizing have made them a close cohesive group loyal to their amirs and shayks and they have often opposed the regimes under which they lived. (Lazarus-Yafe in Lanfeld Ostrovitz 1983, 272-273)

The southern Lebanon mountains inhabited by the Druze population used to enjoy relative security during the medieval and modern eras. The Druze population at that time was comprised of two groups, the Qaysi and the Yemenis. In comparison with other areas the Mamluk rulers of Egypt and Syria exceptionally recognized hereditary feudal tenure in the Druze mountains to secure the loyalty of the Druze warlike chieftains. In the beginning of the 16th century when the Ottomans conquered the former Mamluk possession, the Druze were permitted to maintain their privileges under a paramount emir who was charged with the maintenance of order, dispensation of justice, and the collection and transmission of the revenue. Stability and security in southern Lebanon under the Druze emir attracted Maronite Christians from northern Lebanon to live under the emirs' protection. (Salibi 1971, 76) Fakhr ad-Din II (1585-1635), a paramount Druze historical leader from the Qaysi group, opposed the Ottoman Turks, established an emirate in Lebanon and is remembered as an enlightened ruler who brought prosperity, security, religious tolerance to Lebanon and, furthermore, maintained close links with the European aristocracy. In the 18th century the Shihabi emirs were continually trespassing on the traditional privileges of the mainly Druze chiefs. When emir Bashir II got involved in the struggle between the Egyptian Mohammad Ali Pasha who attempted to conscript them and the Ottomans, it brought about his downfall in 1840. A conflict between the Druzes and Christians brought the Lebanese emirate to its knees. The vacuum that was left brought twenty years of sectarian massacres among Druzes and Christians. The European engagement helped to establish the mutasarifiyah where governors were appointed in a rotating fashion on the basis of religious or ethnic group membership (Lanfeld Ostrovitz 1983, 273-274).

The Druzes are an important unsubstitutable element of the Lebanese history. The 1943 National Pact designed in favor of the Maronites diminished their role and bounded them by the constitution and parliamentary elections. Soon after, the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) was founded in 1949 and, indeed, has served as a Druze platform in political arena. The PSP is socialist by doctrine in order to gain wider voter support but founded on religious grounds with a remarkable position of the Jumblatt family. The Jumblatts have been counted among prominent Druze families, in a society where family links are almost the most important portfolio element for any political engagement. Its roots trace back to Ali Janbalad, a Kurdish governor of Aleppo, who wanted political autonomy from the Ottoman rule. He maintained links with Fakhr al-Din II from the Druze Ma'n dynasty. Both sustained connections to Western Europe. Janbalad was backed by Tuscany and Fakhr al-Din II by the Papacy. After overthrowing the Tripoli administrator and proclaiming independence Janbalad was forced to seek a refuge in Mount Lebanon where he joined Fakhr al-Din II and married into the Druze community (Harris 2003, 106). Apart from the Jumblatts there was another traditional clan representing the Druzes on the political level - the Arslans, a land-based clan which took the anti-reformist political line and was threatened by Kamal's revolutionary attempts. (Richani 1990b, 27)

Kamal Jumblatt (1917-1977) was a socialist idealist influenced by the European left movement. Jill Crystal (Crystal 1990, 283) characterized him as a dialectician who perceived politics as a game and revolution as a calculated adventure and played a maverick role in the political circles. Furthermore, his socialist devotion not only materialized in his socialist experiments in his home village of Moukhtara, where he introduced socially fair employment conditions in his private bookshops, but brought him to the forefront of Druze community support in the 1940s. His political claims not only opposed president El-Khoury but, moreover, took anti-system position and thus brought him closer to Palestinian interests. He built on the pillars of Arab nationalism to secure Lebanese *raison d'être* after gaining its independence, he attempted to introduce secularization by abolishing sectarian representation in public offices, and he promoted political freedoms, economic planning and the Gandhian philosophy of direct action. Finally, due to corruption and sectarian divisions caused by the 1943 National Pact Kamal became convinced that the system could not be reformed from inside.

Kamal, known as a feudal socialist lord (Crystal 1990, 283) was apparently dedicated to be a paramount critic of the regime. Thus, in spite of El-Khoury resignation and his replacement by Camille Chamoun, a former socialist candidate, who soon became pro-western oriented in the international ambience of superpower competition, Kamal changed sides and joined the opposition. After the 1957 election loss he played a leading role in public disturbances and militia fights of the presidential opposition which led to the intervention of the American Marines at the presidential request. As a political compromise the army general Chehab was appointed to the presidential post where he promoted particular changes in favor of Kamal, especially curtailing traditional bosses from the government-employment process. After spending three years as a Minister of Education he failed to introduce his reform plan to put an end to the class hegemony of the capitalists over masses and sought his position in the opposition again. (Crystal 1990) The 1960s were influenced by a regional allegiance shift. The breakdown of the Syrian – Egyptian common socialistic venture and the 1967 Arab defeat produced a power imbalance which promoted Palestinian resistance used by Kamal to strengthen socialist positions. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and their activities from the Lebanese soil brought the Lebanese relative political stability (Rubin B., Rubin J.C. 2005). Kamal was appointed the minister of the interior which empowered him later to legalize several leftist political parties. Since 1970s he devoted himself to work for the PSP as a result of voter support decline. Not surprisingly, his last years were his most remarkable career period and he became a prominent leader of the Lebanese left. The PLO activities are considered as a major accelerator of the Lebanese civil war (Rubin B., Rubin J.C. 2005, 95) which was considered by Kamal as a historic opportunity to transform the Lebanese confessional system. (Jumblatt in Crystal 1990, 289)

Not surprisingly, Walid Jumblatt replaced Kamal after his assassination allegedly by Syrians who had prevented him to form the Left-PLO platform. Richani (1990, 289-290) distinguishes between two categories of critics of Kamal Jumblatt. The first group saw him as a utopian thinker, the second one warned that he wanted to blur the sectarian division and furthermore he aspired to the presidency, a post which was constitutionally performed by Christian Maronites. Druze politics can be judged as a pragmatic outcome of a culturally and religiously fragmented political system. Crow (1980) tried to identify the main features of the Lebanese political behavior. Primary, he pointed out the identification with their religious community where the religious community serves also as a social reference group. Thus, a religious community represents a nation for many Lebanese. In fact, the Druze religious community was *de facto* autonomous for the long period during the Ottoman rule and religious communalism characterized the Constitution of 1926 and the 1943 National Pact.

Walid eventually succeeded his father as the head of the PSP. As a prominent figure of the Lebanese National Movement Walid Jumblatt struck a coalition with the PLO and Syrians, their former foes, in reaction to regional and international conditions. (Richani 1990) Before the Israeli invasion to Lebanon in 1982 he had already consolidated his leadership within the Druze community. The Israeli invasion led to the occupation of Shuf and introduced a carrot-and-stick policy. The Israelis tried to persuade Druzes to collaborate and deployed the Christian right-wing militia in Shuf. Consequently, Jumblatt kept collaborating with Syria from which he received weapons. One year later Jumblatt launched a campaign against Gemayel's peace treaty with Israel. The Christian militia had been defeated in Shuf. Moreover, within the Druze community certain power shifts occurred which strengthened Walid's position. In 1983 Majid Arslan, his political adversary, died without leaving any strong successor. Furthermore, Walid could consolidate some of the Druze economic elites to play a more supportive role and linked them with the PSP (Richani 1990b, 27). In 1983, just six years after Kamal's burial, Landfield Ostrovitz prophesized that Walid *is presently seen as a pivotal figure in the future of the country* (Landfield Ostrovitz 1983, 278). Thenceforth, he has confirmed his paramount status among Lebanese politicians.

After the civil war he tactically chose to be an ally of the Damascus dictator. This was a step that allowed him to maintain his influence and increase legitimacy in Lebanese politics (Moubayed 2000), rather than follow his father's fate. Whilst his father elegantly balanced between idealism and realism, Walid seemed to be a very realistic pragmatic in both regional and international political circles. Voicing strong opinions on pan-arabism, socialism and Israel, Walid occupied various ministerial seats during the post-war period while keeping silent about his father's death. Staying on the Damascene side during the Israeli invasion in 1982 strengthened his prominent leadership among the Druzes in Assad's eyes. Being backed by Hafez Assad thenceforth Jumblatt achieved a secure unshakable position even when the relations with the president Lahoud got worse. (Moubayed 2000) The Ta'if Accords implicating political reforms were signed in 1990 and, thus, put an end to the Lebanese civil war, changing the 1943 sectarian representations and reestablishing control of the Lebanese government over its territory through dismantling and disarming sectarian militias and redeployment of Syrian forces in Beka'a Valley. Ultimately, the Lebanese administration approved Syrian guarantees of the Taif Accords by virtue of its participation in the Gulf war coalition against Iraq. The disarming of the Druze militia was not welcomed by Druze leaders but, in contrast to the Maronite General Aoun, they did not resist with arms. In the reconciliation ambience, former militia leaders, including Jumblatt, were offered ministerial portfolios in the newly established Second Republic under Syrian supervision (Atlas, Licklider 1999)

Shortly before the start of the new millennium, two significant events occurred that challenged the previous status quo. The Israeli government had withdrawn its army from southern Lebanon and, thus, the only foreign deployed military forces, that continued their presence, was the Syrian army. The redeployment of non-Lebanese troops was also a subject of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 520 in 1982. In June the only army persisting on the Lebanese soil was the Syrian one making its presence more targeted and continuously losing its populist *raison d'être*. Furthermore, the strongly ruling authoritarian Syrian president Hafez Assad died and was replaced by his son Bashar. At first glance a new moderate regime encouraged new challenges to Syrian occupation of Lebanon and questioned the continuation of Syrian military presence. Anti-Syrian voices had an economic dimension also. Syrian workers without work permits and paying no taxes significantly worsened the situation on the domestic labour market and the policy of dumping prices harmed local production (Gambill 2001). Although Walid declared his support for the Hafez Assad's successor, empowered by his victory in the September election, Jumblatt shifted the sides

pragmatically to enter into the emerging anti-Syrian coalition alongside the Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and the Maronite Patriarch Boutros Sfeir in November 2000. The pressure on the reappraisal of Lebanese-Syrian relation was felt throughout the political spectrum, of course, without the support of the Syrian based parties. Thus, after more than 20 years spent in the pro-Syrian camp, he returned to tread in his assassinated father's steps of critics of the Syrian occupation. Moreover, Jumblatt started to support Syrian Druzes in their uprising against Bedouins which was classified as an interference into the Syrian internal affairs and Damascus put an end to his VIP position. (Moubayed 2000)

Furthermore there was a stalemate on the international scene. The failure of Syrian-Israeli negotiations brokered by the U.S. administration diminished any potential changes for Lebanon. In the ambience of frustration and anger Gibran Tueni, the Lebanese journalist, wrote an open letter for the Damascene ruler, a sharp criticism of the Syrian hegemony over Lebanon which had broken a taboo and triggered a public challenge to the regime. (Gambill 2001) The assassination of the Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, together with the other initiatives, stimulated the subsequent Cedar Revolution (Moshoah 2009 online). Internal pressure from the newly emerged March 14 Movement backed by the U.N. Resolution called for the Syrian withdrawal. After a series of murders of Syrian critics, shortly after Gibran Tueni was killed, Walid Jumblatt demanded regime change in Syria publicly. Although he continued on criticising Syria and Hezbollah, which the U.S. wanted to neutralize, Jumblatt knew he was skating on a thin ice when he denounced Hezbollah for the abduction of two Israeli soldiers. Thus, being threatened by Hassan Nasrallah he tried to be a middleman and get Hezbollah out from its isolation. After the May 2008 clashes in Beirut and Shuf and, above all, after signing the Doha Accords Jumblatt's criticism of Hezbollah has become more tacit. A few months ago one of the loudest supporters of the U.S. administration turned into an ally of the anti-American March 8 Coalition. While his discourse has started to stress Arab nationalism, before the May 2008 events he had opted for the primacy of the Lebanese entity. Such extreme repolarization shifts were neither rare nor surprising. In summer 2009 he announced his withdrawal from the March 14 coalition. His rapprochement with Hezbollah supported by Syria and Iran was justified by getting Syria out of Lebanon and, nowadays, he argues that the Socialist Party must be returned to its leftist platform. His turnabout could be considered as very logical in view of the international situation. After the Damascus involvement in the American counter-terrorist operation, the U.S. were no longer interested in Syrian-U.S. confrontations. As al-Jazeera commented on him, [Jumblatt is] a political animal who knows how to get off a ship before it sinks.

Conclusions

The paper deals with the Jumblatts represented by Kamal Jumblatt and his son Walid. Kamal was a socialist idealist influenced by the European left. The more legible Kamal used to collaborate with the Syrians and his distancing from the Damascene dictator probably passed a death sentence on him. Walid has learned from his father's mistake and performed an alliance with Syria. Although he commented on his collaborative strategy as an adaptation, this collaboration has brought him a remarkable political career. In contrast to Kamal, Walid is a socialist-realist who abandons his socialist program in need. Being a weathervane of the Lebanese politics, his political success could be explained by the taqiyya's mechanism of allegiances that maintain his political importance.

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