

From the Golan to Gaza: Ethnic cleansing and the colonial logic of Israeli occupation

Maria Kastrinou (Brunel University London)
maria.kastrinou@brunel.ac.uk

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Introduction

The unfolding genocide in Palestine today is a continuation of Israel's 75-year-old occupation and ethnic cleansing. This article provides a perspective on the ongoing tragedy from the vantage point of the Golan Heights – often referred to as Israel's "forgotten occupation." How are the stateless Syrians experiencing this war? And why do ethnic cleansing and genocide reverberate as strongly here as in the rest of Palestine and Israel? By threading the current genocide to the story of occupation and ethnic cleansing in the Golan Heights, this article discusses the underlying settler-colonial assumptions about religious purity and

war that have fueled imperialist projects in occupied Syria and Palestine, and in the wider region.²

Fear and messages on WhatsApp

On Sunday, 8 October 2023, my friend Kamel.³ wrote to me on WhatsApp: "the kids are worried so much... I bought food and water for them... we are preparing ourselves for a big war in the area..." For over a month after the war began, Kamel and his family stayed inside with his wife

¹ "Looking at ethnic cleansing in Palestine from the occupied Syrian Golan," *Focaal Blog*, November 16, 2023. <https://www.focaalblog.com/2023/11/16/maria-kastrinou-looking-at-ethnic-cleansing-in-palestine-from-the-occupied-syrian-golan/>

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³ All names are pseudonyms and some details have been altered in order to ensure my interlocutors' anonymity.

and three young children, working and going to school on Zoom.

Kamel and I became friends in Damascus in 2009. Kamel had just finished his degree in English Literature at Damascus University, while I was doing fieldwork for my PhD. We kept in touch and I visited him and his family in the Golan Heights, pronounced *Jawlan* in the local Arabic dialect. The last time I visited them, in May 2023, I promised Salam, his wife, that I'd bring my own young children to Majdal Shams, the biggest of the occupied villages in the *Jawlan*, the next time I came to visit. Our kids are of similar ages, our families in similar stages. If we lived closer, we'd have playdates and family dinners.

In November, a month into the war, Kamel told me that people were still afraid to go outside their houses. Out of fear of arrests and, even more, out of fear of pogroms against Arabs, most dared not leave their villages to travel into Israel. For friends from the Golan Heights that lived and worked in Israel and in the West Bank, the situation was sheer terror. "We are afraid to go to work, we are afraid to speak Arabic in public," Kamel said. People had been arrested by Israeli police for writing pro-Palestinian posts on social media. Throughout Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories people had been arrested and held without charges - university students and workers, Palestinian and Jewish Israelis. Sara, one of the stateless Syrians in the *Jawlan*, had stopped going to work in the Israeli eco-project that she was working with before the war on Gaza: "Israeli society has become, overnight, so extreme, so racist," she told me.

Others, especially from the older generation, were not surprised by the state of Israel's genocidal attack on Palestinians. "The tree of occupation never bears good fruit," Salman told me on the phone. The "tree of occupation" is the 75 years of killing, dispossession, and apartheid that Palestinians have endured at the hands of the state of Israel. This is the "root cause" of violence.

Salman is one of the community's leaders and revolutionaries, and a former political prisoner in Israel. He is a friend whose field research and hospitality have shaped my own field visits in the *Jawlan* over the years. We spoke on the phone often during the war's first days. He was worried by Israeli Defense Minister [Yoav Gallant's](#) order for a "complete siege on Gaza," and his claim that Israel was fighting "human animals." Throughout the war, Palestinians have been constantly dehumanized by Israeli government leaders and in the Israeli press. "They don't show any pictures from Gaza, nothing!" Salman exclaims. The Israeli public media focuses on Hamas' massacre and Israel's "right of self-defense," agitating for Gaza to be "flattened." Like many others, Salman was afraid that Netanyahu, Gallant and others sensed that their time is up, and wanted to cause as much destruction as possible.

Eight months of war later, and this genocidal devastation has become a new reality – one that the whole world has watched unfolding with chilling precision on screens in real time. In Gaza at least 37,718 people, including more than 15,000 children, have been killed; more than 86,377 people have been injured,

and more than 10,000 people are missing according to the [Palestinian Ministry of Health](#). More than half of all residential buildings, 80% of all commercial buildings, and 88% of all schools have been destroyed, while as of May 2024, according to the [World Health Organisation](#), “only 4 (27%) out of 15 governmental hospitals evaluated are partially functional.”

Back to Kamel – today, almost nine months into the war, schools and nurseries have resumed in-person teaching, despite the intensification of crossfire between Israel and Hizbollah that has become a constant feature of the sky, along with the sirens and the humming of the drones, a background to an everyday life that must, somehow, go on. “Everyday I am exposed to the danger of missiles on my way to work, and on my return I face the same danger when I arrive home,” writes Kamel on June 20, 2024.

He and I send each other video messages and tell each other about the funny things that our kids do. I keep thinking: how do you keep young kids busy amidst a war? What stories do you use to translate your fears? Do you speak to them about the killing of so many children? How do you contextualize the sound of rockets across the border, and the constant humming of drones over your head? Do you tell them that the Israeli soldiers in their streets are using them as human shields when they fire at Syria and Lebanon from the military bases within the Golan? Can you make the rockets that get intercepted by the Iron Dome seem like fireworks in the sky?

The world is watching live the purposeful and vengeful collective punishment of the Palestinian people, the indiscriminate bombing of refugee camps, hospitals, schools, residential buildings, mosques and churches. We see different measures of value being applied to human beings, with Palestinian children being cast “[outside of humanity](#).” We bear witness to [state terrorism](#) and murder, to starvation and siege, to war crimes, and to the genocide of a people by the machinery of one of the most highly armed nuclear states in the world. How can we make sense of this brutality?

This piece is an attempt to use my years of ethnographic fieldwork in the region to interpret the pain, fear, and defiant hope produced by the most recent genocidal war. For, although the Israeli occupation has been less violent in the Golan than in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), we can see that, from ethnic cleansing to the religious engineering of a compliant minority, many of the same techniques have been used, and towards the same ends.

The weaponization of religious difference in the *Jawlan*

“If you live, live free or die like the trees, standing up.” This verse from a song by Samih Choukeir, a Syrian Druze musician, is carved onto the tombstone of Hayel Abu Zeid (1968-2005), who gave his life, the epitaph continues, “for the resistance and hope.” As a teenager, Hayel joined an underground resistance group. Caught by the Israeli army in an ambush at the border, he spent twenty years in prison

and was released only when he was about to die from cancer.

In the cemetery in Majdal Shams, the largest remaining occupied village in the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights, there are a number of tombstones commemorating resistance, heroism, and the unjust loss of life. Moreover, the plaques and tombstones of those considered martyrs, many of them carved in line with Islamic aesthetics, could not differ more from the windowless ossuaries in which the bodies of the community's dead are ordinarily placed. For the bodies of the dead are but the clothes, "shirts" (*qamis* in Arabic), that temporarily wrap around an immortal soul.

Being Druze, as the majority of the stateless Syrians in the Jawlan are, means believing in reincarnation, in Arabic, *taqammus*: the eternal transmigration of Druze souls into Druze bodies. Believing in the eternal return of Druze souls into Druze communities coexists with the practice of burial in collective ossuaries, rather than having individual graves. But in the Jawlan, those Druze regarded by their communities as martyrs in the struggle against the Israeli occupation are honored with separate tombs. This practice of commemoration evokes and embodies the aesthetics of a broader pan-Arab resistance to Israeli occupation, connecting the deaths in the peripheries of a "forgotten occupation" to the bigger Palestinian struggles of liberation.

In front of Hayel's tomb is a commemorative plaque for Amir Abu Jobal, a boy of 5 years who was killed by an Israeli mine near his home. Salman tells

me that he remembers vividly that he was tasked with retrieving Amir's body. He shows me by making his arms the shape of a cradle. "I kept looking at his nose and mouth, he looked like my son," Salman says. "That night, I did not sleep. I kept looking at my own son."

From the very start of Israel's invasion of the Jawlan during the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, ethnic cleansing was an important strategy of war and occupation. 95% of the Syrian indigenous population was forcibly displaced and only five villages, out of [340 villages and farms](#), remained. Four of these villages - Majdal Shams, Mas'ada, Buq'atha and 'Ain Qiniya - were predominantly Druze. Ghajar is an Alawi village; the village of Sahita was later destroyed by Israel. Out of a population of 142,000, only 6,011 people were left, in what the newest survey on the destroyed Syrian residential communities after the Israeli occupation of 1967 describes as "measured by geographical area – the largest ethnic cleansing in history since the end of World War II" (Brik, 2022: 3).

Israeli army officials appear to have deliberately allowed the Druze to stay because they believed that the Druze, a religious community with historical links to Isma'ili Islam, would inflict a "stab in the back" to Arabism. Mara'i and Halabi write that "the Israelis clearly assumed that the Syrian Druze as a community would be like their kinsmen in the Galilee" and that the occupying forces tried to manipulate the local traditional leader, Shaykh Kamal Kanj Abu Salih, by promising a future Druze buffer state (1992: 80). The Kamal Kanj passed this information onto the Syrian authorities, resulting in his conviction by

Israel in 1971 – he was subsequently released back to Syria in 1974 (Mara'i & Tarabi 1992; Mason et al 2023).

The belief that the “Druze” would be compliant in maintaining a state founded upon religious and ethnic difference was not unfounded. Israel had already by 1949 achieved an alliance with the religious Druze elites in the regions of Carmel and Galilee, in what became Northern Israel (Firro 1999). This alliance with the state of Israel isolated the Druze community in Israel from their co-religionists in Syria and Lebanon. In exchange for becoming political representatives of a new religious ethnicity, these elites allowed their community to be sectarianized in the greater context of Israeli ethnocracy (Yiftachel 2006), and the category of “Israeli Druze,” was thus created. The creation of the “Israeli Druze” identity became henceforth an ongoing project of producing “ethnic difference,” which included “inventing religious traditions” (Firro 2005).

As a result, the “Israeli Druze” were the only Arabs “trusted” to serve in the Israeli military, and along with Circassian men, the men of the community are expected to be conscripted (Kanaaneh 2008). Their loyalty to the state of Israel turned “Druze identity” into a laboratory for the manufacturing of sectarian difference, as the Israeli state and military worked hand-in-hand with local elites to produce and fund new traditions, as well as a comprehensive and specifically “Druze” curriculum to educate the new generations (Tarabieh 1995). While this project was successful in funding the architecture of religious politics, it has not

done much to address the chronic poverty and impoverishment of this region.

Indeed, the Druze in Israel continue to be second-class citizens living under a settler colonial apartheid state. As such, all state policies are essentially discriminatory, as shown during the [2018 Druze protests](#) against the Jewish Nation-State Law.

The sectarian logic of the Israeli occupation from the start, thus, was clear: displace the indigenous population, render them prostrate, or engineer them so that they cannot unite with Palestinian resistance and no longer pose a threat. Sectarianism is the more insidious continuation of ethnic cleansing outside of war.

The Druze in the occupied villages of the Golan Heights are Syrians and distinguish themselves from the “Israeli Druze” counterparts described above. As the tombs in the cemetery proclaim, this mountain community has turned peasants into revolutionaries who have resisted Israeli occupation, despite being killed by its bullets, mines or incarceration. Although individuals can be killed, memories of such resistance, here as in Palestine (see Swedenburg 2003), are not easy to kill.

What is being Jawlani? The complexity of citizenship, belonging and resistance

“Israel wants us to be Druze – Israeli Druze,” explained Fahed, the president of a local autonomous organisation, during an interview in May 2023. Here, being “Israeli Druze” means being compliant to Israeli authority. For deeply pious shaykhly

families in the Jawlan, being somehow connected, or dependent upon the worldly authority of an occupying power is a religious anathema, and the most religious among them have abided by strict regimes of independence and autonomy (see Kastrinou et al 2021).

Nevertheless, Israeli propaganda posits that the Druze of the Jawlan do not take Israeli citizenship because they are afraid of repercussions from the Syrian regime, should the Golan return to Syria (Firro 2001: 47-48). Israeli officials, scholars and journalists often deploy the Islamic concept of *taqiyya* – translated as “dissimulation” – which they understand as siding with powerful partners or even hiding one’s faith as a survival strategy. This concept, according to Kais Firro, the historian of the Druze in Israel, “has become a reliable tool not for gauging behavioral patterns of the Druzes, but for gaining an insight into the behavioral patterns Israeli officials have been displaying through the years vis-à-vis the Druzes” (2001:48; also see: Aboultaif 2015; Hazran 2020; Kauffman 2004).

Needless to say, none of my interlocutors has ever mentioned *taqiyya* as a ground for their political or religious reasoning. However, many have mentioned resistance, even in apparent futility, as the ground for their belonging. “We will still be Syrians, even if Syria ceases to exist!” I was emphatically told during the height of the Syrian war in 2015. Like other communities inside Syria, the stateless Jawlanis underwent a process of anti- and pro-regime protests during the early days of the Syrian uprising in 2011 (Kastrinou et. al. 2021), while more recently from

August 2023, some have been protesting in solidarity with the protests ongoing in the Druze-majority Syrian province of Suwayda.

According to estimates from local representatives and academics, between 10 and 25% of the stateless population has accepted Israeli citizenship. The vast majority of Syrians in the Golan Heights remain stateless. Getting Israeli citizenship is a contentious subject for a community that is known for its resistance to Israeli occupation (Mason et al. 2022). When I asked Nidaa, a founding member of the women’s committee in the Golan, whether she’d still want to be part of Syria while there is a war, she adamantly said: “I’m part of the Syrian body, I’ll go through what the people go through.”

Taking Israeli citizenship has increased after the Syrian war, but it happens for complex, and sometimes contradictory, reasons – out of losing hope at the aftermath of the Syrian revolution (Al-Khalili 2023), or to be able to work within the Israeli job market and advance one’s career, rather than because people “feel Israeli.” Rabiah, a young man in his late 20s, for example, took Israeli citizenship so that he would not lose his land after living outside the country for three years. “I did it so that Israel does not confiscate my land,” he told me.

In the 1980s and 90s it was the norm that people who took Israeli citizenship suffered social “death.” Branded as being “traitors” and “collaborators,” they were excommunicated from social and religious affairs. Jawad’s father was one of the first people in Majdal Shams to publicly declare

his support for Israel, and also one of the first to get Israeli citizenship. He lost most of his business and social capital in doing so. Jawad mentioned bitterly that, when his father died, the local religious shaykhs refused to carry out the expected mortuary prayers and rituals; the family had to bring in Israeli Druze shaykhs from the Galilee. Yet, when I asked him where he feels his identity lies, to my surprise he replied that he feels “Syrian” even though he has Israeli citizenship. And, like most people who have acquired Israeli citizenship from the Golan Heights, Jawad was exempt from serving in the IDF: “I don’t like the army,” he says. “I’m a pacifist.”

Settler-colonial assumptions, imperialist projects

A simple assumption underpins the process of ethnic cleansing and sectarianization that Israel undertook in the Jawlan: namely that religious groups are, essentially, homogeneous. The assumption is that there is *one unchanging homogenous* Druze community running through the occupied Golan Heights and the Druze villages in northern Israel.

This assumption is as simplistic as it is ahistorical and a-contextual. It is also deeply Orientalist and colonialist in depicting “Others” as archaic and therefore uncivilized, unchanging, and undifferentiated – these are usually the opposite characteristics from those ascribed to “modern” and “progress-driven” individual citizens living in equally “modern” and “civilized” nation-states. Such Orientalist and colonial assumptions

underpin Israeli policy and propaganda, which has absorbed the colonial logic: similarity in religion equates to similarity in political belonging, the driving assumption behind Islamophobia.

This logic has driven Israel’s sectarian engineering in northern Israel and the Golan. According to this logic, irrespective of their national identity or social context, the Druze of the Jawlan should behave like the Druze in Northern Israel. Druze religion, rather than political belonging, kinship or the desire for independence from occupation, was expected by the occupying forces to define political behavior, “as if members of this eleventh-century offshoot of Islam constituted a nation rather than a religious sect” (Mara’i & Halabi 1992). A similar colonial logic underpinned the United States’ “tribal” policies during the invasion of Iraq (González 2009).

It is this colonialist and Orientalist logic, extended, that we see used by Israel to explain the large-scale genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. In the words of Israeli President, Isaac Herzog, “it is an entire nation out there that is responsible.” The Israeli ex-defense minister Avigdor Liberman said that “there are no innocents in Gaza.” This is also the logic that was used from the very start of the Zionist project, with ethnic cleansing ongoing since its inception (Pappé 2007). The murder in Gaza is blatantly obvious while the occupation of the Jawlan is, in comparison, less bloody. But the underlying assumption of homogeneity within religious and ethnic groups is the same. The settler colonial state, then,

either engineers homogeneity or works to expel or exterminate it.

But “religion is precisely the recognition of man in a roundabout way,” wrote Marx, while exploring how capitalist states, in general, pretend but essentially fail to keep their secular, emancipatory promises. And creating a homogenous, religiously pure social entity is a risky, unstable business.

The French already tried it in Syria. During their colonial mandate, they divided Syria into territorial chunks based on religious identity, following the colonial assumption that religiously homogenous groups could be more easily controlled (White 2011). It was at the end of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of Western colonialism and imperialism in the Middle East that what Ussama Makdisi (2000) calls the “culture of sectarianism” was born, as a thoroughly new and modern phenomenon. And, as it was born, it was also resisted: the Syrian revolt against French colonial rule was started in the Druze province by a Druze, Sultan Basha al-Atrash, one of the greatest Syrian national heroes. The French collectively punished the Druze for their disobedience by burning down the village of Majdal Shams and collectively punishing its inhabitants. Indeed, it was this memory that was cited as a deterrent for villagers in leaving their village during the 1967 invasion (Kastrinou et al 2021). No one wants to be uprooted twice. The Israeli plan to move more than a million Palestinians from North Gaza to the south, along with the possibility of a further displacement in Egypt’s Sinai, could be a

history repeated thrice: as tragedy, farce and genocide.

As with French colonialism and U.S. imperialism, the Israeli operation to ethnically cleanse the Golan Heights and to homogenize Druze identity to obtain Druze obedience, did not go to plan. When Israel decided to unilaterally and illegally annex the Golan Heights in 1981, the occupied people responded by going on a six-month strike (Mara’i & Halabi 1992; Kennedy 1984; Kastrinou et. al 2021). In their vast majority, the Syrian people of the four occupied villages, some 26,600 people, are stateless because they have not accepted Israeli citizenship. Their status is legally the same as that of Palestinians in East Jerusalem (see [al-Marsad 2011](#), and Delforno 2019): they are “permanent residents” in Israel and as such they do not serve in the IDF. Legally stateless, they don’t have passports but *laissez-passer* documents where their nationality is “undefined.” They have trouble travelling inside and outside of Israel, trouble getting jobs, and trouble accessing basic services. They are constantly under the threat of the military occupation that steals their land (the ongoing conflict with the wind turbines is an example of green colonialism) and creates a host of other problems.

This experience of colonial taxonomical imposition, violence and ethnic cleansing resonates from French colonialism in Syria to Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza today.

Sowing resistance, sowing hope

A different heritage, that of resistance, is knitted into Madjal Shams's urban landscape. The most emblematic example of this is Hassan Khater's statue "The March" (1987), which depicts Sultan Basha al-Atrash, the Druze leader of the Syrian revolt against the French in 1925, surrounded by contemporary figures such as a man of letters, a traditionally dressed man, and a mother holding her dying son - a new martyr of the resistance. On the back of the statue there are three children, representing the future, holding books and wheat. Instead of religious homogeneity, the unifying theme is resistance to outside occupiers. The French missed that, and so did the Israelis.

History teaches that colonial assumptions of religious purity lead to imperialist projects, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, like the televised genocide in Gaza and the occupation of the Golan Heights. Look closer, though, in the continuities of everyday practices and the threads of another history become visible: the history of ordinary resistance, what the Palestinians have exemplified and gifted to struggles far and wide: "*sumud*" - steadfastness. In combating the "bad fruit" of occupation, the occupied people of the Golan Heights, and the occupied Palestinians, continue to sow resistance and hope, what the poet Mahmoud Darwish described in his poem "A state of siege":

*Here, where the hills slope before the
sunset and the chasm of time*

*near gardens whose shades have been
cast aside*

we do what prisoners do

we do what the jobless do

we sow hope

Maria Kastrinou is a senior lecturer in social anthropology at Brunel University London. Her research critically interrogates the politics of sect, state and statelessness in Syria, in the occupied Golan Heights and in the broader MENA region. She is the author of Power, Sect and State in Syria (2016).

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