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A review of the

American Druze Website

By Julia Mullin Makarem

(Designed by Assad Saleh)

www.americandruze.com

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www.americandruzeheritage.com

www.americandruzehistory.com

Kenneth P. Scheffel

Archivist Emeritus

Bentley Historical Library

University of Michigan

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The American Druze website by Julia Mullin Makarem provides a gold mine of information on the Druze, adherents of a thousand year old offshoot of Shia Islam. The Druze have played prominent roles in the Middle East and in the many countries throughout the world to which they have immigrated, including the United States. This website concentrates on the United States where a good number of the Druze have settled. It focuses on the American Druze while providing valuable information on Druze history, culture, and beliefs in general. The website, designed by Assad Saleh from Kfarkatra, Lebanon, provides easy to use links between summaries and more detailed accounts. The website proves to be a rich source both for those within the Druze Community, particularly members of the younger generation unfamiliar with their own heritage, and outsiders interested in learning more about the Druze. Assad Saleh's vast knowledge about the Druze contributed greatly to the ease in which one could find material on the website.

In 1009 C.E., the founder of the Druze religion, al Hakim bi Amah Allah, announced in Egypt that he was the earthly incarnation of God. His apostle, Hamzah ibn Ali ibn Ahmad, gave form and content to the religion by codifying it. A persecuted sect within Islam, its adherents fled to the mountainous areas of present day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine/Israel, and in 1043 C.E. as a further protection from persecution, stopped accepting converts. To this day, marriage to a non-Druze leads to exclusion from the Druze Community. Access to the holy texts is restricted to a select few; the enlightened (uqqal) are the only ones permitted to read from the holy books while the great mass (jahhal) follows a strict code of moral and ethical behavior, which serves as the basis of the Faith (Tawhid). Believers are freed from traditional Islamic obligations, such as mosque attendance, ritual prayers, Ramadan fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca; although, they are free to practice them if they choose. Polygamy is prohibited, and women enjoy considerable independence. Belief in reincarnation constitutes a key tenet, which contributed to

the Druze reputation as fierce warriors since those killed in battle are believed to be reborn immediately within the Druze Community.

A little over one hundred years ago, as the Ottoman Empire declined and economic changes beset the Middle East, many Druze began to emigrate from their homelands. Their ability to adapt to alien cultures enabled them to take advantage of economic and educational opportunities afforded by contact with the West (including with Christian missionaries). Today, of an estimated one million Druze world-wide, nearly 900,000 remain in their ancestral homelands: 420,000 in Syria, 390,000 in Lebanon (where they play an important role in the government), 75,000 in Palestine/Israel (mainly in Israel, where they are governed by their own religious laws and serve in the Israel Defense Force), and 15,000 in Jordan. Some 80,000 are scattered elsewhere throughout the world, including Europe, Africa, South America, Australia, and Canada, with some 15,000 to 20,000 residing in the United States. While loyal to, and often occupying leading positions in, their new countries, the Druze retain strong ties to their homelands.

Dispersed across America, the Druze organized to maintain contact within their new communities and with their homelands, which was vital to preserving their identity since marriage to a non-Druze was prohibited. In 1908, the first chapter of El Bakaurat Ed-Dirziyat was formed in Seattle, Washington, and other chapters soon followed throughout the United States. The El Bakaurat Ed-Dirziyat members and an Arabic Druze newspaper (Al Bayyan, founded 1910 ;in Washington, D.C.) helped maintain contact among the American Druze. In 1946-47, a group of young, American-born Druze from Michigan helped launch a new organization, the American Druze Society (ADS), which quickly superseded the old El Bakaurat Ed-Dirziyat. It brought together Druze from throughout the United States at an annual convention, whose sessions were in English, and its English language newsletter soon displaced the older Arabic publication. More recently the ADS formed a Committee on Religious Reform (CORR) to consider modifications in the practice of the Druze Faith. In 2006, a study advocating lifting the nearly one thousand year old ban against accepting converts aroused controversy within the Druze Community which continues until today.

Julia Mullin Makarem is uniquely equipped to present the story of the Druze, both in America and in the world. Born in the United States to Druze immigrant parents (her father, and an American army veteran of World War I, *returned to Lebanon to find his wife*), *Julia is married to Dr. Sami Makarem , who was a student from a prominent Lebanese Druze family; she learned Arabic, and she has lived and worked both in the United States and the Middle East (mainly in Lebanon). Twice, in the 1960's and 1990's, she was elected the National President of the American Druze Society, reflecting the important role of women within the Druze Community. Julia Mullin Makarem was awarded the first "Life Member" in the American Druze Society in 1962 for her dedication and contributions to the Society which exists to present day.*

Julia's website, to which she adds periodically, offers encyclopedic coverage of the Druze in the United States and in the world (particularly in the Middle East). Designed by Assad Saleh, the website is easy to use, providing summary information, as well as detailed accounts on a variety of subjects. It focuses on Druze history (in the United States and in the Middle East), the Druze religion (especially, the ban on converts and the belief in reincarnation), and Druze social values and customs (including the role of women).

In the introduction to her homepage, Makarem describes the website as "a work on the history and culture of the Druze," including "different viewpoints." Dedicated to Uncle Henry Flehan, an early historian of the American Druze, it currently offers connections to thirty-five main articles, as well as providing overhead links to Home (return), About (the author), Contact Us, Site Map, and Recommend Us. The Site Map is particularly useful because it provides a subject arrangement to the articles, whose main headings link to more detailed accounts.

Makarem offers good biographical information on herself and her family. She has also included a link to her "Druze Profile" articles on social values. Her written responses to questions by University of Michigan historian Dr. Sally Howell, cover her leadership in the American Druze Society, as well as her 1967 experiences during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the racial riots in the United States. Several articles with photographs describe the work of her father-in-law, the distinguished Lebanese calligrapher, Sheik Nasib Makarem (1889-1971). Makarem herself is considered a distinguished Druze historian.

The origins and history of the Druze in the Middle East are covered in many articles, including overviews by Makarem and Pam Rohland and a study on the Druze relationship to Arabism. The Lebanese Druze Community, particularly, the important role they play in government is detailed in three articles (including a doctoral dissertation) on Kamal Jumblat, father of the current Druze leader, Walid Bek Jumblat. Kamal Jumblat was assassinated in 1977 because of his opposition to the Syrian occupation. The calligraphic work on Sheik Nasib Makarem supplements the Lebanese accounts while a Jewish National Library article by Dr. Naim Aridi describes the unique situation of the Druze in Israel. The Druze in Israel are governed by their own religious law and serve in the Israeli military and police forces.

The Druze migration from the Middle East, including to the United States, is detailed with population estimates by country and lists of Druze organizations and cultural centers throughout the world. Makarem focuses on the American Druze, particularly, the history of the American Druze Society and its predecessor organization, El Bakaraut ed-Duzeyat, in which Makarem and her family have been active. She provides a detailed year-by-year analysis of the organizations (1908-2009), as well as lists of their chapters and convention sites; corrections to their historical memory (based on documentation), and biographical sketches of prominent American Druze. Makarem's written responses to the questions of Dr. Sally Howell on the fiftieth anniversary of the American Druze Society (1996) provide further information on the

Druze Community and her leadership in it while the recent work of the ADS Committee on Religious Reform is detailed in several links, including on the controversial proposal to lift the ban on accepting converts.

Druze religion, the basis of the community, receives extensive treatment. Survey articles describe its origins and history, basic tenets, and relationship to Islam and other religions (including Christianity). Belief in reincarnation (both among Druze and others) is covered thoroughly with articles by Druze and non-Druze (sometimes via external links). Included are a scientific study of past-life experiences and a remembrance of a previous life by Makarem's daughter, Rand. The work of the ADS Committee on Religious Reform highlights recent discussions within the Druze Community, including the controversial work by Dr. Anis Obeid, which advocates removal of the barrier against converts. Access to the sites of the latter requires assent to copyright restrictions.

Several articles detail Druze social values and customs, including the role of women. Makarem provides a valuable resource with her edited translation of the comprehensive "Druze Law of Domestic Relations," a key document on the rights of women within the Druze Community. According to one of the articles, women constitute a majority of the uqqal. The uqqal are the elite of the Druze religion; they are the only ones permitted to read from the holy books.

For those interested in doing research on the Druze, Makarem offers a guide to both published and unpublished sources, as well as links to related websites. Most of the unique materials on the American Druze, including Makarem's own papers, are located at the University of Michigan, where they are available for research.

For anyone interested in the Druze, this website is a must. It provides basic information for the novice, as well as, additional studies and links for those seeking a more thorough knowledge of the Druze. I recommend it most highly

*Kenneth P. Scheffel
Archivist Emeritus
Bentley Historical Library
University of Michigan.*