**Between Inclusion and Stagnation: Military Manpower Policy Towards Druze in Israel and Jews in Turkey**

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**Abstract**

The Druze in Israel and the Jews in Turkey are two small ethnoreligious minority groups that share certain features. Nonetheless, the two groups have encountered very different policies from their respective governments concerning their integration into the military. While Israel has integrated the Druze, who have managed to reach senior and sensitive positions in the Israel Defense Force (IDF), Turkey has barely changed its recruitment policies regarding the Jewish minority since the early days of the Republic, and continues to refrain from placing Jews in command and officer functions. This paper presents four main reasons that explain the discrepancy between these two case studies: a historical factor; a cultural-religious factor; an ethnic-stereotypical factor; and a socioeconomic factor.

**Keywords:** civil-military relations, minorities, Turkey, Israel, Jews, Druze

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**Introduction**

Comparative studies examining the position of minorities in ethnic militaries have been the focus of considerable scholarship.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, no previous study has offered a comparison between minorities in the militaries of Turkey and Israel.

In both Turkey and Israel, the military still plays a central role in all strata of life. In contrast to Western and European countries that have adopted the professional military model over recent decades, both countries still adhere to a “People’s Army” model that imposes compulsory conscription on all or most of their populations. Both countries have a strong republican tradition, as part of which rights and rewards are allocated in return for military sacrifice. Moreover, in both countries the military penetrates the civilian domain and is involved in administrative and educational tasks that are conventionally the responsibility of the civilian authorities (“role expansion”).

This paper will present a comparison between the integration of the Druze minority in Israel and the Jewish minority in Turkey into the respective militaries of the two countries. Although both groups are small minorities with certain basic demographic similarities, Israel and Turkey have adopted very different approaches to their integration into the military. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, the aspiration to integrate the Arab minority into the military has been the subject of discussion. However, this prospect has remained almost entirely theoretical. No Israeli government has been willing to recruit such a large population considered by some to be a potential threat and fifth column.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Instead, Israel has pursued a “divide and rule” strategy, encouraging the integration of the Druze and Circassian communities, who account for a very small fraction of the total minority population, while excluding the remainder of the Arab population, particularly Sunni Muslims.[[3]](#footnote-3) From the state’s perspective, there was significant evidence to indicate the possibility of a partnership with the Druze: clear signs received by the Zionist leadership in the 1920s and 1930s that the Druze communities were willing to strengthen their ties with the pre-state Yishuv,[[4]](#footnote-4) as well as cooperation with certain elements within the Druze minority during the War of Independence.[[5]](#footnote-5) Over the years, Israel has been careful to integrate the Druze in a judicious and gradual manner. Despite challenges along the way, the Druze are now intensely involved in the state’s security sector.

In Turkey, by contrast, the Republic decided from its inception to draft all non-Muslim minorities, without exception. The inclusion of minorities in compulsory service was in part a continuation of the republican tradition of the 1908 Revolution, which served as the platform for the emergence of the founding elite of the new Republic. However, the conscription of minorities – primarily Christians, Greeks, and Armenians – was always implemented by the authorities with caution, not to say suspicion. In practice, the extent to which non-Muslim citizens are integrated, both in the senior echelons of the state apparatus and in the various security forces, has remained virtually unchanged since the early days of the Republic. In senior political and military circles, the traditional assumption persists regarding the sensitive security status of non-Muslim soldiers. As has been the case since the founding of the Republic, with very rare exceptions, members of minority groups are not allowed to serve as officers in the armed forces and are excluded from promotion through the ranks.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Ostensibly, the Jewish minority in Turkey might have been expected to enjoy a higher status in the military after the establishment of the Republic in 1923 than the Christian minorities. Unlike the Greek or Armenian communities, the Jews were not associated with nationalist separatism or irredentist claims in Anatolia at the expense of the Turkish homeland.[[7]](#footnote-7) Moreover, the Jews in Turkey did not share a common ethnic identity with a demographically significant population in adjacent countries, a factor that could raise doubts about their ability to fight the militaries of these countries. Jewish subjects had been willing to fight and even risk their lives for the Ottoman Empire,[[8]](#footnote-8) and the leaders of the Republic mentioned them as a model of a loyal minority that had not been tempted to encourage foreign interference against the state.[[9]](#footnote-9) Lastly, the Jews were a tiny minority – around 0.6 percent of the total population of Turkey, according to the 1927 census.[[10]](#footnote-10) Given these factors, it is reasonable to ask why Turkey did not choose to encourage the closer integration of the Jewish minority into the military.

**The Gradual Integration of the Druze Minority into the IDF**

1. **The Historical Factor**

Israel emerged from the 1948 War as a Jewish state with a firm Jewish majority alongside several non-Jewish minority groups, including the Druze, Circassians, Christian Arabs, Muslim Arabs, and Bedouin. The state faced a dilemma concerning which groups to integrate into its military apparatus and how this integration should be conducted.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Since Israel remained in a state of war with all of its Arab neighbors, senior Israeli military figures were concerned that the Muslim Arabs who had remained within the country’s borders – who had ties of blood, religion, language, and culture with the regimes in these hostile neighboring countries – would be liable to identify with them. Accordingly, this group was regarded as a security threat and a potential fifth column.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The political elite of the Jewish state at the time doubted the loyalty of all the non-Jewish groups. Additionally, they expressed concerns that these groups’ presence in the military would disrupt the important task of nation-building allotted to the IDF. Although a number of high-ranking officials, including David Ben-Gurion, were inclined to show preference for the Druze in crafting Israel’s policies toward minority groups, this did not carry over much into practice during the early years of the state. When Israeli decision makers spoke of Arabs, they usually meant the Druze as well. Moreover, with the exception of the two villages on Mt. Carmel, the Druze were subject to the same restrictions on movement as other Arabs until the late 1950s.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Policy regarding the conscription of minorities in Israel was shaped gradually over the first decade following independence. By the late 1950s, Israel had decided to include only two small minorities in compulsory conscription: the Druze, starting in 1956, and the Circassians, starting in 1958. Accordingly, the vast majority of the minority population remained outside the normative boundaries of Israeli society. Although the idea of imposing compulsory conscription on the Arab population was raised several times following independence, it was ultimately doomed to failure and has never been implemented.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The Druze, who over time have achieved the highest level of integration into the Israeli security establishment, have always accounted for a very small proportion of the minority population and of the overall population in Israel. Just before the War of Independence, the Druze population numbered around 13,000, accounting for 1 percent of the Arab population in Mandate Palestine.[[15]](#footnote-15) After the establishment of Israel, the Druze made up only 1.2 percent of the total population.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is plausible that the small size of the Druze community has played a role in their successful integration into the IDF, but given that other miniscule communities like the Christians or Bedouins have not enjoyed the same policy, the size factor must be taken with a grain of salt.

Several significant historical dynamics aided in facilitating the integration of the Druze into the IDF ranks. First, there was no history of Druze persecution of Jews or vice versa, and there was no religious animosity between Jews and Druze. There was no “historical baggage,” as Randall Geller put it, between Jews and Druze, as there was between Jews and Sunni Muslims or Christians.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Second, the Druze were a small heterodox sect who suffered heavily throughout history under a serious of different Sunni-Muslim rulers. This created a feeling of antipathy towards Islam among the Druze and contributed greatly to their present-day political alliance with the Jewish state against the Sunni Arab states.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Third is what Kais Firro has described as “traditional particularism”: an attitude held by the Druze minority in Palestine that preserved neutrality in the Palestinian-Zionist conflict.[[19]](#footnote-19) Before the establishment of Israel, the Druze community was largely detached from developments in national Palestinian politics. They had very little presence within the urban Palestinian elite, which underwent processes of politicization.[[20]](#footnote-20) The Druze maintained a position of indifference toward the conflict; numerous Palestinian uprisings throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s failed to recruit the Druze community to the Palestinian cause. According to Laila Parsons, it was the religious nature of the conflict that made it easier for the Druze to remain uninvolved. During the 1920s, the Muslim majority in Palestine was gaining strength as a political force, and the Druze were not attracted to a nationalist movement which had strong Muslim overtones.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Fourth, the Druze differed from other Arab communities in their valuable contribution to the IDF during the War of Independence. In fact, special ties between Jews and some elements of the Druze leadership began to develop even before the war. There was a general understanding among the leaders of the Yishuv and experts on Arab affairs concerning the strategic importance of creating positive relations with the Druze. During the 1930s and 1940s, extensive intelligence ties were established between the Yishuv and the Druze that would go on to play a critical role in the achievements of the young state during the war.[[22]](#footnote-22) The Israeli intelligence elite was well aware of the ethnic rivalry and hostility between the Muslims on the one hand and the Christians and Druze on the other, and exploited this rift for its own benefit. During the war, intelligence efforts were made inside Israel and beyond to destabilize the relations between Druze and Muslims and to encourage rapprochement between Druze and Jews.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Fifth is the way in which the War of Independence ended for the Druze in Palestine. Druze villagers were not involved in resistance during the war; according to Druze and Christian eyewitnesses, this led Druze to receive better treatment from the Israeli authorities than other Arab villagers. Unlike other Arab minorities, almost no Druze faced the grim consequences of leaving their homeland and becoming refugees.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Another historical dynamic that contributed to the integration of the Druze was the acute manpower crisis in the IDF during the early years of the state.[[25]](#footnote-25) The establishment of the Minorities Unit during the War of Independence reflected an attempt to respond to this challenge. In October 1948, a new Minorities Unit was sworn in, comprised of volunteers from the Druze, Circassian, and Bedouin communities.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Despite the prevailing narrative in Israel that the Druze community was a natural ally of the state from the outset, documents revealed in recent years show that this was not the case. Contrary to the assumption that it was the Druze themselves who voluntarily approached the state and asked to be included in the compulsory draft, as they eventually did in 1956, declassified archive material reveals that many Druze leaders and citizens unequivocally opposed the idea. It was the state that moved forward with plans to include the Druze in military service.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In the early years of the state, opposition to the compulsory draft was prevalent among young Druze citizens. Of the 197 young men in the Druze villages liable for service in 1956, only 51 reported to the draft offices; when the military and police pursued those evading service, they often encountered hostile and violent reactions from residents.[[28]](#footnote-28) Despite the inclusion of Druze citizens in compulsory conscription, Israel has not always made a clear distinction between Druze and Arabs. By way of example, with the exception of two Druze villages close to Haifa, ‘Isafiya and Daliyat al-Carmel, the entire Druze population was placed under the military rule imposed on most Arabs until 1966.[[29]](#footnote-29)

In the first few decades after independence, Israel was concerned that Druze soldiers would be unable to fight their coreligionists across the borders in Lebanon and Syria; accordingly, it refrained from placing them along the northern frontiers, instead using them for routine security operations on the southern border.[[30]](#footnote-30) In addition to this preventative action, various restrictions were also imposed on Druze soldiers in terms of service in different military units. From the beginning of Druze conscription in 1956 until 1972, Druze conscripts were only allowed to serve in the Minorities Unit, which was overwhelmingly identified with the community.

David Ben-Gurion visited the Minorities Unit in 1960 and recorded his impressions in his personal journal. His report mentions that the battalion had some 320 soldiers at the time, 80 percent of whom were Druze, while the remainder were Circassians and Christian Arabs; all the officers in the battalion were Druze.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Liberalization in attitudes toward Druze conscripts to the IDF was a slow and gradual process. However, from the mid-1970s, the pace of this shift increased somewhat. During the 1967 War, the Minorities Unit participated in the IDF’s successful invasion of the West Bank, and during the War of Attrition (1968–1970), Druze soldiers fell in direct combat with PLO operatives.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Spurred on by the heavy sacrifice by Druze citizens in the military sector, young members of the community began to become involved in politics in the late 1960s and 1970s, demanding equal citizenship under the slogan “equal obligations deserve equal rights.” Two commissions of inquiry established in the 1970s to examine the Druze claims eventually recommended that their demands be accepted, including the possibility for Druze conscripts to serve throughout the IDF and not solely in the Minorities Unit.[[33]](#footnote-33) From this point, the IDF indeed allowed Druze soldiers to serve in other units, though this policy was applied cautiously and gradually. Druze conscripts were not allowed, for example, to enter sensitive units such as the Israel Air Force or the Intelligence Corps.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Alongside this horizontal liberalization and the opening of additional units to Druze conscripts, in the late 1970s Druze soldiers also began to break though vertically, rising through the ranks of the IDF. The first Druze officer joined the IDF’s Command Staff College in 1978, and Druze officers began to serve as the commanders of various military units soon thereafter.[[35]](#footnote-35) During the Litani Operation in Lebanon (1978), the Minorities Unit operated independently for the first time. After the operation ended, Druze conscripts gained access to new units and positions.

Following the unit’s participation in the First Lebanon War (1982), this trend further strengthened, and an increasing number of Druze conscripts were gradually dispersed around diverse IDF units.[[36]](#footnote-36) A key figure responsible for the liberalization of the attitude toward Druze conscripts was Moshe Arens, who served as defense minister from 1990 to 1992. Arens was an enthusiastic advocate of the greater integration of minorities in general into the IDF, and hoped the gradual integration of Druze conscripts would serve as an example for the other minority populations in Israel. In 1991, Arens decided that all IDF units would be open to Druze soldiers, including the Israel Air Force and the Intelligence Corps.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The high level of integration of the Druze in the IDF was manifested in 2001, when the first Druze officer reached the rank of major-general, the highest possible rank under the Chief of Staff. The next Druze major-general was appointed in 2018,[[38]](#footnote-38) and in October 2020, Defense Minister Benny Gantz announced that Ghassan Alian would be the third member of the community to reach this rank.[[39]](#footnote-39) In May 2015, then-Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot announced the historic decision to close the Druze Sword Unit. The Druze soldiers from the unit were integrated organically into other infantry divisions, effectively eliminating the last remnant of the old Minorities Unit.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Today, thousands of Druze men serve in the IDF in combat and elite units, including as air force pilots, intelligence officers, and members of the military cyber and medical systems. According to official IDF statistics, conscription rates among the Druze are high and stable, at around 80 percent. Alongside the high level of motivation to assume combat roles, in recent years there has been a trend for Druze conscripts to choose service in various technological and intelligence units.[[41]](#footnote-41)

1. **The Cultural-Religious Factor**

Soon after the establishment of the state, the political elite in Israel concluded that it was essential to separate the Druze from Islam and disconnect them altogether from the Arabs or “Arabness.” The Druze conscription into the IDF, beginning in 1956, formed the linchpin of this process of manipulation of Druze identity by the Israeli authorities.[[42]](#footnote-42) The attempt to distinguish the Druze from the other Arab and Muslim minorities in Israel was eventually successful. Rabah Halabi has shown the extent to which the Druze identify themselves as Israelis much more than other Arab respondents. According to his research, conscription in the military is the factor that has had the most significant impact on Druze identity in Israel.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The developing status of Israeli Druze was the outcome of negotiations between two parties with complementary interests. The traditional Druze notables, such as village leaders, petty landowners, and religious sheikhs, were interested in the establishment of an institutional framework that would provide them with benefits and resources for the broadening and legitimation of their influence. The Israeli administration, namely the ruling Mapai party, was interested in the subdivision of the minority population and the cooperation of more marginal sections within that population, such as Bedouins, Circassians, and especially the more numerous Druze.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The integration of the Druze into the IDF has reinforced their imagined communal identity, and their identification with the Jewish state has undercut a larger Arab unity. Israel has told the Druze that they are not Arabs; in fact, however, there is no significant difference, if any, between the Druze and Arab society insofar as language, dress, food, literature, popular art, or any other aspects of culture are concerned.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Among the tactics used by the Israeli authorities to separate the Druze from their fellow Arabs was the replacement of the term “Arab” with “Druze” on the identity cards and birth certificates of every Israeli Druze. In 1962, the Israeli Ministry of Interior added the Druze nationality/religion without distinguishing between the two. This led to an official Israeli stance that that the Druze were no longer Arabs; since then, they have not been permitted to classify themselves as Arabs.[[46]](#footnote-46)

In parallel to its attempt to distinguish the Druze from Arabs, Israel has acted to distance the Druze from Islam. Despite recurrent tensions between the Druze and other Muslims throughout history, the Islamic roots of the Druze religion were generally not disputed. During the Ottoman period, the Druze in the Middle East were recognized as part of Muslim society. Some of the requests made by Druze leaders to be known as a separate *millet*, or people, were not approved by the Ottoman administration.[[47]](#footnote-47)

In order to deepen the separation of the Druze from Islam, Israel granted the Druze religious autonomy in 1957, a move that was followed by the establishment of a Druze religious council and religious courts under the supervision of a special department of the Ministry of Religions.[[48]](#footnote-48) Over the years, Israeli authorities have encouraged the Druze to celebrate “purely” Druze holidays at the expense of Muslim celebrations. In implementing this policy, Israeli authorities decided to utilize the Nabi Shu‘ayb shrine in Galilee, transforming it into a Druze pilgrimage site. The IDF used the site for its first swearing-in ceremony in 1949, when new Druze recruits were asked to solemnly pledge their allegiance to the Jewish state.[[49]](#footnote-49) By 1954, the pilgrimage for Nabi Shu‘ayb had become an official holiday, soon to be followed by other officially recognized Druze festivals such as Id al-Kadir and Id Sablan. In the same year, Israeli officials stopped recognizing Id al-Fitr as a Druze festival.[[50]](#footnote-50)

1. **The Ethnic-Stereotypical Factor**

In her seminal work about the relationships between the military and ethnic groups, Cynthia Enloe defines “martial race” as a concept applied to “flag certain ethnic groups in a society as somehow inherently inclined towards military occupations, possessing some characteristics so embedded in its physical make-up – its ‘blood’ – that it passes beyond being simply a cultural – that is, an ethnic – precondition.”[[51]](#footnote-51)

The designation of the Druze in Israel as martial race soldiers was part and parcel of the inclusion and integrative narrative of the community into the IDF. In the Israeli society, there is a wide consensus on the notion of a “blood pact” between the Druze citizens and the Jewish state. The enduring iconization of the Druze as “brave” and “loyal soldiers” remains very much present among the Israeli public, political elite, and academia.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who visited the Druze communities of Julis and Daliyat al-Karmel on the occasion of the 2013 Nabi Shu‘ayb holiday, referred to the unique characteristics of the Druze:

I would like to express the appreciation of the people of Israel for the fallen among the Druze for the defense of the State of Israel. They are brave and dedicated warriors, and I speak from personal experience. I fought shoulder to shoulder with Druze fighters and commanders, and my brother, may he rest in peace, fought alongside Druze fighters who brought honor and security to the State of Israel.[[52]](#footnote-52)

In his book “The Druze: Between Sector, Nation and State,” ex-IDF officer and academic Shuki Amrani presents historical representations of the bravery and loyalty of the Druze: “The victory of the Mamluks over the Tatars in battle in 1260, in which a Druze force participated, strongly strengthened their status. Their courage in battle and the loyalty they displayed earned them a reputation as brave warriors.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

Another Israeli scholar, Mordechai Nissan, has noted that “the military domain provided an opportunity for demonstrating the martial sinews in Druze culture and the patriotic spirit animating the community’s contribution to the state.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

1. **The Socioeconomic Factor**

In the wake of the War of Independence and the establishment of Israel, the Druze were among the most disadvantaged minority groups in the country. The Druze population lived in villages situated in peripheral areas in the Galilee and on Mt. Carmel near Haifa. They were mostly farmers that resided in poor, mountainous areas, and were the least educated ethnic group in Israel, with no intelligentsia that could lead modernization and economic development.[[55]](#footnote-55) Since the mid-1950s, a critical change has taken place in the structure of the Druze labor force. During the first decade after its establishment, the Israeli government pursued a policy of land expropriation from Druze villagers in the same manner as it did with other Arab minorities. Hundreds of *dunams* were expropriated from Druze farmers during that period, which dramatically reduced potential income from agriculture.[[56]](#footnote-56)

By the early 1960s, the Druze had lost more than two-thirds of their land, and the water allocation for agriculture in their villages was less than 0.05 percent of Israel’s total water supply for agriculture. Israel’s policy of land confiscation caused enormous damage to the Druze farmers; they began abandoning agriculture in large numbers, instead seeking employment in other areas. One of the major economic sectors to replace agriculture was the security services.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Conscription into the IDF and regular military service was a prerequisite for the Druze to secure careers within one of Israel’s security apparatuses, such as the IDF, the Israel Border Police, or the Israeli prison service.[[58]](#footnote-58) Military conscription has indeed had significant economic ramifications for the Druze in Israel. It has become economically central for many young Druze men. According to statistics, during the 1990s more than 40 percent of male breadwinners from the Druze community earned their living as members of the various Israeli security apparatuses.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Over the years, educational attainment in the Druze sector has increased, both in terms of the number of children in school and the ratio of matriculation certificates earned by boys and girls.[[60]](#footnote-60) However, despite efforts by the Israeli government to narrow the gap, the Druze community is still poorer, less educated, and less developed than the Jewish majority.[[61]](#footnote-61)

**“If You Tell Them You’re Jewish, It Won’t End Well”: Jews in the Turkish Military**

1. **The Historical Factor**

In order to understand the attitude of the Turkish state toward the conscription of the Jewish minority into the military, it is necessary to begin with the historical background of Jewish participation in military service during the Ottoman era.

The Jews of the Ottoman Empire, like the rest of the non-Muslim communities, were generally excluded from military affairs, and traditionally paid the *jizyah* tax in return for exemption from the contribution to the war effort that was expected of every faithful Muslim. Although the *jizyah* was formally abolished in 1855 under pressure from the European powers, non-Muslim subjects continued to pay an exemption tax, which was given various names over the years.[[62]](#footnote-62)

In the early nineteenth century, the idea of universal conscription began to spread across Europe and reached the upper echelons of the Ottoman bureaucracy. During the final years of the reign of Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1808–1839), senior officials in the Ottoman government began to discuss the application of this innovative model to the Ottoman military. The territorial defeats suffered by the Ottomans at the hands of the standing army of Muhammad ‘Ali in Syria from 1831–1833 further fueled the calls for reform and the adoption of the “People’s Army” model.[[63]](#footnote-63)

One of the central issues raised in the transition from a professional military to one based on compulsory conscription was the conscription of non-Muslim subjects.[[64]](#footnote-64) Although certain elements in the senior command echelon of the Ottoman military were inclined to accept the limited conscription of some non-Muslim minorities, particularly Armenians and Greeks, the lively debates on the issue did not ultimately lead to any real change in policy.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Following the 1908 Young Turk Revolution and the reinstatement of the Ottoman constitution and parliament, the question of the conscription of non-Muslims figured prominently in the platforms of the political parties competing for parliamentary seats.[[66]](#footnote-66) After the Ottoman parliament adopted a law introducing compulsory conscription for non-Muslim subjects in July 1909, non-Muslim youths – both Christian and Jewish – fled from the Ottoman Empire in large numbers. Those who had financial means were able to pay the exemption tax, which was not abolished.[[67]](#footnote-67)

The integration of non-Muslims in the Ottoman military ultimately appears to have been an unpopular idea both among young non-Muslims themselves and in the ranks of the military. British consular reports suggest that the actual number of non-Muslim conscripts was purely symbolic. In 1912, for example, the reports suggest that only 5 percent of non-Muslims intended for conscription actually joined the army.[[68]](#footnote-68) During the Balkans War, many non-Muslim soldiers, particularly Christians, deserted and joined the ranks of the enemy armies and militias in the Balkan countries.[[69]](#footnote-69)

The recent and painful memory of the poor performance of non-Muslim soldiers during the Balkan Wars played an important role in the formation of Ottoman policy with regard to military personnel during the First World War. Throughout the war, most non-Muslim subjects served in unarmed labor battalions. On August 11, 1914, only a few days after the announcement of a general draft in the empire, the Ministry of War sent a telegram to the governors of districts where non-Muslim subjects lived. The ministry ordered the governors to act promptly to ensure that non-Muslim subjects were stationed in unarmed labor battalions.[[70]](#footnote-70)

During the war, the non-Muslim labor battalions were also involved in such tasks as installing and repairing railroad tracks, farming, felling trees, construction, and work in mines and factories.[[71]](#footnote-71) Throughout the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1922), non-Muslim citizens were recruited to the labor battalions, just as they had been in the First World War. They did not carry firearms or wear uniforms, and their primary work was the building of roads.[[72]](#footnote-72)

Following the establishment of the Republic, the ruling elite regarded the presence of non-Muslim citizens as a threat to the stability and security of the state. In his memoirs, the former cabinet minister Rıza Nur explained that the presence of non-Muslims constituted an obstacle to the homogenization of the Turkish population. He added that the Turks hoped that the removal of these minorities would lead to an end to European interference in the country’s domestic affairs: “The most important thing was to make Turkey homogeneously Turkish and to save it from elements who for centuries had organized revolts, served as tools in foreign hands, and been the cause of its weakness… [This was] a task of unparalleled importance.”[[73]](#footnote-73)

One of the clearest and most immediate indications of the mistrust of non-Muslim minorities was the military law imposed on them, curtailing their freedom of movement. Laws restricting the movement of non-Muslims in the state began to appear as early as June 1923. Following the Sheikh Said Rebellion, which destabilized internal security in the state, the Interior Ministry decided in February 1925 to delineate the area within which non-Muslim residents of Istanbul could move. The zone extended from the province of Gebze, east of the city, to Çatalça, at the western edge of the province of Istanbul.[[74]](#footnote-74) The travel restrictions imposed on non-Muslim citizens were only removed in February 1932.[[75]](#footnote-75)

Despite the profound mistrust shown by the nation’s leaders toward its non-Muslim citizens, the latter were drafted to the military along with their Muslim compatriots. During the period of one-party rule (1923–1946), non-Muslim soldiers served without weapons.[[76]](#footnote-76) Non-Muslim soldiers were not allowed to serve in any command positions – including the position of reserve duty officer, the lowest-ranking officer position in the Turkish military.[[77]](#footnote-77) The Jews of Turkey were initially optimistic following the creation of the Republic, hoping that the modern state would allow them to assume the status of equal citizens. One major historical feature that distinguished the Jews of the Ottoman Empire from other minorities, such as the Greeks, Armenians, Serbs, or Bulgarians, was their lack of separatist aspirations that threatened the territorial integrity of the state.[[78]](#footnote-78) However, reality proved the opposite. In just a few years, the Jews were completely excluded from state mechanisms, along with the other non-Muslim minorities.[[79]](#footnote-79)

A particularly traumatic episode that left its mark on the collective memory of the Jewish community was known as the Twenty Classes (Yirmi Kur’a Nafıa Askerleri). After the outbreak of the Second World War, the Turkish leadership became increasingly concerned about the possible involvement of the country’s minorities in espionage and sabotage operations. As the Axis forces neared the country’s western borders toward the end of 1940, suspicion toward the minorities reached new heights. Over several days at the end of April 1941, all the non-Muslim men who had been stationed in work battalions were suddenly taken from their homes, in an operation that was carefully planned by the state and implemented secretly.[[80]](#footnote-80) A key feature of the campaign was that it was applied solely to non-Muslim citizens.[[81]](#footnote-81) According to some testimonies, even non-Muslim candidates for enlistment who were hospitalized at the time in psychiatric institutions were taken to the military.[[82]](#footnote-82) The conscripts seized in the Twenty Classes campaign were released in July 1942. This was a period of great anxiety for the Jews of Turkey, who feared that the state would send them to a similar fate to that experienced by the Jews of Europe under the Nazis during the same period.[[83]](#footnote-83)

After the end of the Second World War, the single-party system that had dominated Turkey since 1923 began to change. Turkey aligned itself with the United States and the Western bloc, embarking on a new, multi-party political order. The process of democratization during this period included a measure of liberalization in Turkish policy toward minorities.[[84]](#footnote-84) In a speech broadcast live on radio in the spring of 1947, Prime Minister İsmet İnönü declared that members of minority groups would henceforth be able to serve as reserve officers and be permitted to hold weapons.[[85]](#footnote-85)

The businessman İshak Alaton, a member of the Jewish community of Istanbul who later became one of the wealthiest individuals in Turkey, was one of the first minority conscripts to hold a weapon and ultimately serve as a reserve officer. In his autobiography, Alaton attributed the relative liberalization to American pressure:

In September 1947, I was 20 years old. I needed to do my military service. I wanted this obstacle to be out of the way so I could start building a future for myself. Something very important took place that summer. Under pressure from the Americans, the parliament in Ankara introduced an important law, which said: “All citizens will be treated equally.” This provision was, in fact, already stated in the Treaty of Lausanne, but it wasn’t being implemented. From this time onward, non-Muslims had the right to become reserve officers... After the law had been adopted, my father urged me to take action. “Look, this is your chance, now you, too, can become an officer.”[[86]](#footnote-86)

After the Democratic Party came to power in Turkey in 1950, the Jewish community in Turkey began to feel more relaxed, as did the country’s other minority groups. The ruling party adopted a populist approach and sought to institute a greater measure of freedom in all areas of life.[[87]](#footnote-87) With regard to policy on the role of non-Muslims in the military, however, the pace of liberalization was slow and cautious. A report sent by the British embassy in Ankara to the Foreign Office on June 3, 1952 described the Turkish attitude toward minorities in the military in the following terms:

This more liberal policy is also designed to impress western opinion. The improvement has, however, been very gradual. More minoritarians are now allowed to become reserve officers, but they are exclusively used as doctors, interpreters, or, in some cases, as engineers. They do not command combatant troops. There are no minoritarian reserve officers or even other ranks at the Turkish General Staff, or at any other place where important military secrets could be available to them.[[88]](#footnote-88)

As of today, all Turkish citizens have the legal right to apply for officer status in the Turkish Military. However, non-Muslim citizens are eliminated during the entrance exams for national security reasons.[[89]](#footnote-89)

1. **The Cultural-Religious Factor**

The *millet* system, which regulated the relations between the Ottoman state and its non-Muslim citizens for hundreds of years, was based on structural inequality between Muslims and non-Muslims. Karen Barkey has noted that the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims can be summed up in three words: separate, unequal, and protected.[[90]](#footnote-90)

Under this system, non-Muslim minorities enjoyed a measure of autonomy in managing their own affairs, as well as physical protection from the state.[[91]](#footnote-91) However, their political status was inherently inferior to that of their Muslim fellow subjects; they were not equal in either rights or obligations. Muslims as a whole were considered the *millet-i hakime*, the ruling people, in relation to the Christians and Jews, who were *millet-i mahkume*, dominated peoples born to be governed.[[92]](#footnote-92)

Traditionally, non-Muslims could not hold senior political posts unless they converted to Islam.[[93]](#footnote-93) Writing on July 20, 1860, the British consul in Thessaloniki, Charles Calvert, described the mutual enmity between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as the superiority complex held by Muslims in the Ottoman Empire:

…The Mussulman and Christian population live peaceably towards each other, not from motives of affection or sympathy, but, because of their mutual dislike, they avoid each other as much as possible. The Mussulman always considers himself the Christian’s superior, and whenever he acts with kindness towards the Christian it is with a species of condescension and forbearance which converts a right into a favor.[[94]](#footnote-94)

The idea of separation and hierarchy on the basis of religion, which had persisted for centuries under Ottoman rule, did not disappear with the inauguration of modern Turkey. The cultural and religious heritage of that hierarchy was always vivid in the minds of the Muslim population of Turkey.[[95]](#footnote-95) Policies of “Turkification” implemented by the single party in power from 1925 to 1945 had clear discriminatory and anti-minority characteristics.[[96]](#footnote-96) These measures, orchestrated by the government during the formative years of the Republic, included various laws that barred non-Muslim minorities from employment in the civil and military services of the state.[[97]](#footnote-97)

In a personal interview with Yosef Farash, a Turkish Jew who emigrated to Israel in 1963, Farash recounted the discrimination he encountered in the Turkish military. Farash joined the Turkish military in 1953 and served for two years as a combat soldier in the Artillery Corps. He underwent basic training in Bornova in Western Turkey, then spent the remainder of his service in an artillery brigade in Bursa:

They could see that I was a good soldier, so they promoted me to the rank of lieutenant, and they wanted to send me on a course for lieutenants. I was ready with my gun and all my equipment. I waited by our command center for about four hours. Eventually, after waiting there for hours, a senior officer came along and told my platoon commander: “You’re sending me a Jew to become a lieutenant?!” So I remained on my base. Eventually they sent someone else, a Muslim, on the course instead of me.[[98]](#footnote-98)

Another example of the understanding of religious hierarchy, both popular and official, embedded in Turkish culture can be found on the military name tags. Traditionally, non-Muslim soldiers in the Turkish military bear the mark GM (an acronym for *Gayrimüslim* – “non-Muslim”) on their name tags. Theoretically, this provides an indication of the kind of burial to give to the soldiers in case of death. Nevertheless, the writing on the nametags emphasizes not the soldier’s religion (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, etc.), but rather the fact that the soldier is not a Muslim.[[99]](#footnote-99)

1. **The Ethnic-Stereotypical Factor**

Official correspondence on the conscription of non-Muslim subjects during the late Ottoman period reveals a negative and stereotypical outlook with regard to the conscription of Jewish soldiers. Unlike the possibility of a Christian draft, the idea of mass recruitment of Jews does not seem to have been considered seriously by the Ottoman elite. The Jews, like the Gypsies of the Ottoman Empire, were not considered “soldier material.” A memorandum on the issue issued by the Supreme Council in 1838 noted that Jews should continue to be exempted from military service for three reasons: their small numbers; their cowardly character; and the assumption that they would not get along well with other nationalities in the military.[[100]](#footnote-100)

Scholars have long noted that the Ottoman policy towards religious minorities was primarily based on Islamic tradition, that is, the Koran, the Hadith (the sayings and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad), and the precedents and practices inherited from earlier Muslim states. As a result of the negative portrayal of the Jews in Islamic sources, Jews were alienated and treated with suspicion and contempt. Among the numerous derogatory descriptions of Jews in Islamic tradition and culture is the notion that they are weak, cowardly, and treacherous.[[101]](#footnote-101)

While reporting to parliament on the developments at the Lausanne Conference on March 2, 1923, Rıza Nur was asked about the fate of the Jewish citizens of the state. He replied: “There are around 30,000 Jews in Istanbul. Until now they have not been people who make problems. The Jews are known for going where they are taken. Of course, I would say that it would be better if they were not there at all.”[[102]](#footnote-102)

In personal interviews conducted with Jews who served in the Turkish military over recent decades, a recurrent theme is the desire to maintain as low a profile as possible concerning their Jewish identity, and sometimes even to conceal this identity from their Muslim comrades. As is the case with the rest of the non-Muslim minority groups, Jewish soldiers are usually placed in support roles or serve as assistants to officers of various ranks. The military authorities secure two goals through this policy. Firstly, non-Muslim soldiers are under the direct supervision of officers, and their activities can be monitored. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this practice ensures that non-Muslim soldiers are protected and less exposed to harassment from Muslim soldiers. Sami Madem, who performed his military service in 2004–2005,[[103]](#footnote-103) served as a clerk for a junior officer at an Armored Corps base near Izmir. Madem told me that his commander advised him not to reveal his identity:

He told me: “Listen, Sami, it really hurts me to ask this of you, but don’t tell the other soldiers that you’re Jewish. We don’t only have educated soldiers here – there are also soldiers who have come from the villages, and they’ve never seen a Jew in their life. If you tell them you’re Jewish, it won’t end well.”[[104]](#footnote-104)

Yakup Gezer, who also served in 2004–2005 as a tank driver at the Armored Corps base in Izmir, told me that he did not encounter any problems due to his identity, since he did not tell anyone that he was Jewish.[[105]](#footnote-105)

I heard the same comment from Ezer Bihar, who performed his military service in 2003 as a clerk at the School of Electronic Signals and Information Systems in Ankara: “I never told them that I was Jewish – I hid it. I was the only minority soldier and I didn’t tell anyone. I had some very good friends, but I never told them. I only told one guy when I was about to complete my service.”[[106]](#footnote-106)

Bihar told me that he heard his roommates mentioning anti-Semitic ideas as they chatted. “I heard these dumb conspiracies, like ‘the Jews rule the world,’ or ‘don’t drink Coca-Cola,’ and ‘don't let them make money out of it.’”[[107]](#footnote-107)

1. **The Socioeconomic Factor**

The exclusive reliance on Muslims for the draft during the late Ottoman period eventually led to serious socioeconomic consequences. A constant shortage of manpower, as well as the challenging security situation facing the Ottoman state at the time, meant that in practice Muslim soldiers served much longer periods than those stipulated in the 1843 conscription law. Reports suggest that some soldiers spent ten years or more in regular service.[[108]](#footnote-108)

One of the consequences of that policy was a decline in the proportion of Muslim subjects and a concomitant increase in the non-Muslim populations. The relative decline in the Muslim population of the Ottoman state is mentioned in a wide range of contemporary sources. A document published in 1840 by the population registry of the province of Haskovo (in modern-day Bulgaria) shows that the average Christian family had one to two more members than the average Muslim family.[[109]](#footnote-109)

The demographic devastation of the Muslim population was accompanied by disastrous economic ramifications. Charles Calvert noted that “the greater part of the floating capital, and almost all the trade of the country is in their hands, whilst, on the other hand, the Turks have been decimated by the conscription, and Mussulman artificers and tradesmen return after their period of military service to find their places occupied by Christians.”[[110]](#footnote-110)

The socioeconomic and demographic consequences of exclusive Muslim conscription during the Ottoman period were behind the insistence of the Turkish delegation to the Lausanne Conference (1922–1923) on including the non-Muslim citizens of the Republic in the draft. During the conference, enormous pressure was placed on Turkey to exempt non-Muslim minorities from military service. The Turkish delegation firmly repelled these attempts, and insisted that these citizens be conscripted along with other Turks as required by law. During a parliamentary session, Rıza Nur, who was responsible for minority affairs in Lausanne on behalf of the Turkish delegation, objected to the prospect that non-Muslims, who did not go to the military, “should continue their commerce undisturbed,” remaining with their families, having children, and becoming wealthier than the Muslim Turks.[[111]](#footnote-111)

The Jewish citizens of Turkey, who were urban and highly educated, recognized in advance that they had no chance of securing public positions in the military or civilian spheres. Some turned elsewhere, particularly to commerce, engineering, and the life sciences. The inability of Jewish conscripts to advance through the ranks of the military, or to gain access to other governmental systems, was not related to any educational or socioeconomic factor preventing such progress.[[112]](#footnote-112)

Discriminatory citizenship practices, as well as traumas such as the 1934 Thrace Pogrom, the 1941 incident of the Twenty Classes, and the 1942 Wealth Tax, exacerbated the trend and created a Jewish exodus from Turkey to Palestine.[[113]](#footnote-113) Between the Second World War and the establishment of the State of Israel, 40 percent of Turkey’s Jewish population immigrated to Israel.[[114]](#footnote-114)

**Conclusions**

A comparison between the patterns of integration of the Druze minority in the IDF and the Jewish minority in the Turkish military reveals significant differences between the two cases of study.

From its establishment as a nation-state, Israel maintained a “divide and rule” policy toward its minority populations. The Arab citizens of Israel, who accounted for the vast majority of the minority population and were identified with the hostile surrounding Arab world, were perceived as an immediate and clear threat to national security. They were excluded from the boundaries of the Israeli collective and exempted from conscription. Conversely, Israel sought to encourage closer ties with peripheral minority groups, the Druze and the Circassians, who were included in the draft and within the confines of the collective.

By contrast, from the outset, the Republic of Turkey regarded all non-Muslim citizens as a single entity, seeing them as equally unfit to serve as “true” citizens and share in the nation’s destiny. The difference between Turkey’s policy of integration for its Jewish minority and Israel’s for its Druze minority can be attributed to several factors.

The first factor is historical. While Israel is a young country, modern-day Turkey in many ways constitutes a direct continuation of the Ottoman Empire, which lasted for more than six centuries. The empire was explicitly defined as a Muslim state; it was inherently inegalitarian, imposing a strict dichotomy between its Muslim and non-Muslim subjects. The heavy historical legacy inherited by the Republic included a reflexive assumption among Turks that non-Muslim citizens were untrustworthy and could never be their equals.

The second factor is cultural and religious, which in the Turkish case refers to the sense of Muslim pride and even superiority among Muslim Turks. The Turkish leadership has always been concerned that Turkish soldiers would find it difficult to take orders from non-Muslim officers or NCOs. For some Turks, even the mere presence of Jews in the same unit causes profound discomfort. By contrast, the integration of the Druze into the IDF was one of the most important tools in Israel’s longstanding policy to separate the Druze from the other Arab and Muslim minorities.

The third factor concerns ethnic stereotypes and the traditional perception of Jews as unfit for military life. Jews were never associated with military characteristics, and accordingly were not considered strong candidates for integration in the military. The stereotype regarding the Druze is the opposite; the community has an image of bravery and military prowess.

The fourth factor is socioeconomic. The Druze in Israel are a rural minority, most of whom are relatively uneducated and have a low socioeconomic status. For many Israeli Druze, a career within one of Israel’s security apparatuses was a highly appealing prospect. The Jews of Turkey, meanwhile, usually have had a strong socioeconomic status. Many come from educated homes, and they are overwhelmingly urban. A career in the military was not only unfeasible for Turkish Jews as a result of external circumstances; it was also not particularly attractive, as they could find more lucrative and comfortable options in other fields.

In conclusion, a comparison between the integration of the Druze into the IDF and that of Jews into the Turkish military shows that despite some apparent similarities in terms of their basic profile, the two populations have followed a different course in terms of military service in their respective countries. While Israel chose to adopt a strategy of inclusion toward Druze conscripts, Turkey’s approach to its Jewish minority constitutes a model for stagnation in the integration of ethnic minorities into military service.

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