

THE MUSLIM WORLD

A JOURNAL DEVOTED TO THE STUDY
OF ISLAM AND OF CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM
RELATIONSHIP IN PAST AND PRESENT

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ISRAELI SECTARIAN PROPAGANDA DURING THE OCTOBER, 1973, WAR *

In the broadcasts of *Radio Israel* in the Arabic language, supposed or real negative aspects of Arab regimes are regularly brought forward in an effort to undermine the positions of Israel's military and political opponents. Instead of the normal use of 'classical' Arabic, *Radio Israel* often makes use of Arabic dialects which are spoken in the states attacked. The intention of this seems to be to draw special attention, in particular of illiterate or semiliterate people, to whom dialects similar to their own are more easily understood than 'classical' Arabic. When dealing, for instance, with the *Iraqi Ba'th* regime that came to power in June, 1968, the supposed tribal character of its political elite is often stressed, just as the phenomenon that a relatively large number of important functions in the Army and the Ba'th Party in that area are occupied by people originating from the predominantly Sunnī town, Tikrit, situated on the west bank of the river Tigris. When dealing with the political situation in *Syria*, *Radio Israel* has, since the takeover of the Ba'th in 1963, often stressed the powerful position of 'Alawī officers in the Syrian Armed Forces, as well as the dissension, supposed to exist, or really existing, among officers from different religious communities.

As to the field of *inter-Arab* relations, Israeli broadcasts have often (over)stressed real or supposed differences amongst various regimes. For instance, during the October, 1973, War Israeli broadcasts paid special attention to dissensions which were alleged to exist between different Arab regimes which had sent armed units to the Syrian-Israeli front at the Golan Heights. Israeli radio commentators ascribed political motives to the way in which non-Syrian armed units had been stationed there. So, the Israeli military radio commentator Major General Chaim Herzog stressed the so-called tension between Syrian and Iraqi armed units involved in the war, explaining that there had already been quarrels between the respective rival Ba'th regimes for some years. For such reasons, Iraqi armed units were, according to Herzog, not stationed close to Damascus, but far away from the Syrian capital in the southern sector of the

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front with Israel. The same applied, still according to Herzog, to the Jordanian armored units, which, during the October War, were sent to Syria by King Ḥusayn, but which had fought the Syrians in September, 1970, when these invaded Jordan in support of the Palestinian commandos. In reality, Iraqi armed units were stationed close to Damascus as well, and were, for instance, involved in battles aimed at the defense of Syrian positions at Mount Hermon, recaptured by the Syrian Army shortly after the beginning of the October War. Nevertheless, pro-Iraqi sources afterwards complained about difficulties having occurred during the fighting there, and elsewhere at the front, because of occasionally poor and faulty communications between the respective cooperating Iraqi and Syrian military units.¹ As to the Jordanian armored units, it was logical that they were to be engaged in battles in the southern sector of the Syrian-Israeli front, since they entered Syria from the south. Herzog also suggested that the Syrian military leaders did not even trust some of their own armed units, declaring that the Israelis at the end of September, 1973, intercepted an order issued by the Syrian Army Command instructing the 47th armored brigade, stationed in Ḥums, to proceed to the front with Israel, but prohibiting it simultaneously to encamp in Damascus.² It has indeed been a long-standing practice to station trusted armed units close to the capital, and those not trusted at the front with Israel or far away to the north.³

It is not exactly known how intensively Israeli broadcasts in Arabic are being listened to in the Arab world. In periods of crises, however, there seems to be a special desire to compare the news content of the Arabic service of *Radio Israel* with the news content of the broadcasting services of Arab states,⁴ which often has been of a rather poor quality.

¹ Cf. Al-Markaz al-‘Arabī lil-Dirāsāt al-Istrāṭījiyya (The Arab Center for Strategic Studies), *Dawr al-Jaysh al-‘Irāqī fī Ḥarb Tishrīn 1973* (The Role of the Iraqi Army in the October, 1973, War) (Beirut: Al-Mu‘assasa al-‘Arabiyya lil-Dirāsāt wa ‘l-Nashr, 1975), pp. 84, 91, 92, 106, 124, 131, 139-146, 157, 212; Jamāl al-Ghayṭānī, *Ḥurrās al-Bawāba al-Sharqiyya* (The Guardians of the Eastern Gate) (Cairo, 1975), pp. 112-113. For a Syrian report of the October War, see Jean Alikṣān and Šābir Falḥūṭ, *Mādhā Ḥadath fī Tishrīn?* (What Happened in October?) (Damascus: Dār al-Ba‘th, n.d.).

² *Radio Israel*, October 14, 1973.

³ Cf. Munif al-Razzāz, *Al-Tajriba al-Murra* (The Bitter Experience) (Beirut: Dār Ghandūr, 1967), p. 159.

⁴ Cf. Donald R. Browne, "The Voices of Palestine: A Broadcasting House Divided," *The Middle East Journal*, XXIX (1975), 149.

It is my intention to deal briefly with the Israeli sectarian propaganda campaign during the October, 1973, War as it was directed, especially, against Syria.⁵ It was clearly aimed at sowing dissension, in a period of crisis, amongst the ranks of the opposing party, by stimulating discord, be it latent or already manifest, between members of different religious communities. Thus, the Israelis in their broadcasts in Arabic claimed that the Syrian Air Force was not able to function properly and had been partly paralyzed in its activities, allegedly as a result of sectarian tensions between its Sunnī commander, Nāji Jamīl, and the 'Alawī Syrian President and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad. To which extent such allegations contained an element of truth or affected the Syrian morale is not known. What is known, however, is that the Syrian Air Force fought relatively well during the October War.

A news item of *Radio Israel*, which, if judged according to subsequent Arab reactions, did indeed produce tensions and suspicions in the Syrian camp, was the one in which it was, probably falsely, alleged that a Druze Lieutenant Colonel, called Rafīq Ḥalāwah, had been executed at the order of the Syrian President because of what was called "neglect of duty." The respective news item, broadcast on October 20, 1973, ran as follows :

Today, the Commander of an infantry brigade in the Syrian Army was executed on the order of the Syrian President, Lieutenant General Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad. The person concerned is Lieutenant Colonel Rafīq Ḥalāwah, Commander of the 68th Infantry Brigade. Lieutenant Colonel Ḥalāwah was stationed in the northern sector of the Syrian front. This is the sector where the Israeli Defence Army has broken through in its progress on the axis al-Qunayṭira-Damascus. *Ḥalāwah is a member of the Druze religious community.*⁶

The Israeli broadcast alleging the execution of Ḥalāwah certainly did not go unnoticed by the Syrians, and, if judged according to the

⁵ For a summary and analysis of the Israeli broadcasts of the October, 1973, War in Arabic, as well as a comparison of these with the Israeli broadcasts in Hebrew, see *Shu'ân Filistīniyya* (Beirut), No. 27, November, 1973, pp. 119-142.

⁶ Cf. Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, Ltd., 1975), p. 132.

reactions in the Syrian mass media, it may well have stimulated distrust among members of the various religious communities living in Syria and, in particular, a distrust directed against the Druzes. One of the first public Syrian reactions came the following day, October 21, 1973, in an editorial of the official Syrian daily *al-Ba'th* :

The enemy has used the cheapest methods, as well as the most despicable propaganda, and the vilest rumors against the march of our people. Concerning the methods of the enemy, this is nothing new or strange. So, the stirring up of sectarianism, which we have buried in the dunghill of history, thanks to the consciousness of our people and their sticking together in order to achieve their national aims; and the stimulation of regionalism, which our people have left behind ever since they carried arms in order to drive away the foreign invaders from their country, and achieved their freedom and national independence, and offered thousands of martyrs on the altar of patriotism; all these methods, on which the enemy concentrates with care, and which it applies today in its mass media, mean to us the assurance that the enemy fails on the battlefield, and is incapable of achieving a victory over our combatants. It assures us also of the enemy's ignorance of the nature of our people, and its incapability to understand the reality of the coherence of our internal front behind our armed forces which beat the enemy in the name of our history and honor, and which achieve for us one victory after another.

That very day, *Radio Israel* reacted on the article in *al-Ba'th* by spreading additional rumors about the supposed sectarian dissensions in Syria :

[The editorial in *al-Ba'th*] seems to be an answer to the news saying that the Ba'th regime has taken vengeance measures against Druze villages situated on the road between Damascus and al-Qunayṭira, or that death sentences have been carried out against Druze officers and members of other minorities.

Accusations of such a nature touched a very sensitive point indeed. It was, moreover, much easier to send them into the world than to bring to an end the circulation of the rumors that had consequently come into being.

Somewhat later on October 21, 1973, *Radio Israel* transmitted the contents of an interview which one of its correspondents was

said to have had with some Druze villagers of the Golan Heights, and who were supposed to have known Ḥalāwah personally. The Druzes interviewed related that Ḥalāwah had been highly respected by his coreligionists, that he had been a prominent member of the Ba'th Party, and that he was originally a protégé of President Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad. The death of Ḥalāwah was, however, ascribed by those interviewed to his being a Druze :

Ḥalāwah has become a victim. If Rafīq Ḥalāwah had been a Muslim [*sic*]⁷ or 'Alawī officer, nobody would have done him any harm. But since he has been executed, the Syrian authorities try to put the responsibility of the military defeat on the neck of the Druzes, who, according to the authorities, have brought the Israeli Defence Army to the outskirts of Damascus.

This kind of news report tried to stimulate a dissension between Druzes and non-Druzes in the Syrian Armed Forces. Weren't the Druzes in Israel the only Arab group whose members were being treated, more or less, as Israeli citizens with almost full rights, and having compulsory military service? So, weren't they potentially suspect since they fought on the Israeli side in the army as well?

As to the Syrian Druzes from the villages on the Golan Heights, which had been occupied by the Israeli Armed Forces during the war of June, 1967, the Israeli Government applied a policy of incorporation and privileging, certainly if compared with the treatment of non-Druze inhabitants of the respective occupied territories.⁸ During the October, 1973, War some Druze villages of the Golan came repeatedly under fire of the Syrian Air Force, reportedly causing some dead and wounded. The Israeli Government, in an effort to strengthen its Druze support, subsequently declared that it would compensate the losses suffered by the inhabitants of the Druze villages

⁷ A Druze would usually not classify religions in terms of Muslims on the one hand and, for instance, Druzes and 'Alawīs on the other, since Druzes, at least outwardly, consider themselves to be Muslims. Cf. the *fatwā* issued by al-Azhar, and published in *Al-Anbā'* (Beirut), December 14, 1968, in which the Druzes are declared to be Muslims. See also Sami Nasib Makarem, *The Druze Faith* (Delmar, New York : Caravan Books, 1974), and Philip K. Hitti, *The Origins of the Druze People and Religion* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1928). For a survey of recent Arabic literature on the Druzes, see Josef van Ess, "Libanesische Miszellen," *Die Welt des Islams*, XII (1969), 111-125.

⁸ Cf. Daniel Dishon (ed.), *Middle East Record*, Vol. 4, 1968 (Jerusalem : Israel Universities Press, 1973), p. 455.

concerned as if they were Israeli citizens. The Druzes of the Golan Heights were also reported by *Radio Israel* to have retained their freedom of movement, despite the continuing state of war.⁹ An Israeli military spokesman even alleged that a great number of Druzes from the Golan "had expressed their allegiance to the State of Israel as well as their readiness to participate in the war efforts."¹⁰ It is understandable that a possible distrust in Syria towards the Syrian Druzes could probably only be enlarged by reports such as these. Hadn't those same Druzes, who were now reported by *Radio Israel* to have expressed their allegiance towards the State of Israel, been Syrian citizens before the war of June, 1967?

It may be useful to deal at this point, be it very briefly, with the rather ambivalent position of the Druzes in Israel itself. Cut off from their coreligionists in the neighboring Arab states, where the Druzes and especially those living in Syria have generally opted for an Arab national identity next to or above their communal identity, the leaders of the original Palestinian Druzes have for some time, following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, clearly chosen the survival of their religious community as a more or less autonomous body. Their attitude might be interpreted as an instance of "a nearly thousand-year-old tradition of artificial assimilation in the defence of a zealously guarded life style and system of religious beliefs."¹¹ Such an assimilation implied for the Palestinian Druzes living under Israeli rule a suppression of Arab nationalist feeling that might arise, at least if they wished to be treated on a more or less equal footing with the Israeli Jews.

Modernization of the Druze community in Israel, as well as its being exposed to influences of Arab mass media, have caused many of its members to become increasingly aware of their relative backwardness and relative inferior position with regard to the majority of Israeli Jews. They are being placed in the dilemma that the Israeli Jews do not really accept them as equals, while Arabs often suspect them as being Israelis. Increasingly, Israeli Druzes are finding a way out of this dilemma by choosing to join the emergent Arab nationalist

⁹ *Radio Israel*, October 12, 15 and 18, 1973.

¹⁰ *Radio Israel*, October 18, 1973.

¹¹ Egon Mayer, "Becoming Modern in Bayt al-Shabāb," *The Middle East Journal*, XXIX (1975), 284.

current, which is combined with socialist ideas and is becoming apparent in their community.¹² So from time to time voices are being heard from within the Israeli Druze community, calling for the rejection and refusal of compulsory military service for the Druzes in the Israeli Army. Also, Israeli Druzes have, reportedly, started joining Palestinian commando movements, as became apparent from Palestinian commando raids carried out in 1974 on the Israeli towns of Kiryat Shemona and Ma'lot, when Druzes were among the attackers.¹³ In the meantime, Israeli Jews (and sometimes Israeli Druzes as well) keep stressing that the Druzes form an entity which should be distinguished from the "Arabs and Muslims" in general.¹⁴ Some have even suggested the establishment of a Druze state on the Golan Heights,¹⁵ or a "Druze Neutral Zone" including the Syrian province of al-Suwaydā', where the majority of the Syrian Druzes lives, as well.¹⁶

To return to the subject of the October, 1973, War, as far as events could be reconstructed, the Syrian Lieutenant Colonel Rafiq Ḥalāwah had not been executed, but had been killed during a battle against the Israeli Army. Probably the Israeli Army had intercepted an internal radio message of the Syrian Army, reporting the killing of Ḥalāwah during a battle, and subsequently exploited his death in an artful way for propaganda purposes.¹⁷

It may have been difficult for the Syrian Army Command to put an end to the rumors spread by *Radio Israel*. In an effort to do so, a notice addressed to all Syrian armed units was reportedly issued by the Syrian Army Command, threatening with heavy punishment all those who circulated rumors broadcast by Israel, or simply spoke

¹² *Ibid.*, 279-294.

¹³ *Al-Safīr* (Beirut), July 15, 1974; cf. *Al-Rāyah* (Beirut), September 4, 1972, p. 14.

¹⁴ Cf. Ori Stendel, *The Minorities in Israel, Trends in the Development of the Arab and Druze Communities, 1948-1973* (Jerusalem: The Israel Economist, 1973); Salman Falah, "Les Druzes d'Israel," *Les Temps Modernes*, 22^e année, 1967, No. 253 bis, pp. 811-822.

¹⁵ Cf. Ori Stendel, *Minorities*, p. 45.

¹⁶ Jon Kimche, *The Second Arab Awakening* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), p. 238.

¹⁷ Cf. *Al-Ba'th*, February 13, 1974; *Al-Ba'th*, July 8, 1974; Fu'ād al-Atrash, *Al-Durūz: Mu'āmarāt, Tārīkh, wa Ḥaqā'iq* (The Druzes: Complots, History, and Truths) (Beirut, 1975), pp. 364-369.

thereof. Doing so, one would, according to the Syrian Army Command, only serve the interests of the enemy. A request was made to report immediately to one's superiors any persons who could be identified as spreading rumors and reports of a "doubtful nature." In the same circular, the Syrian Army Command indirectly commented on the Israeli reports concerning the execution of the Druze officer Rafiq Halāwah and others :

We mention, by way of an example, that the radio of the enemy has broadcast . . . that some of our leading officers have been executed. It has fabricated these big lies in order to arouse doubts and to create confusion in the minds of the people. The truth is, however, without any doubt, that those about whom the radio of the enemy has spoken have sincerely and honorably done their national duty, and deserve the esteem of their people and nation.¹⁸

The Druzes, as a result of the Israeli propaganda, were not only accused in Syria of defeats inflicted upon the Syrian Army during the October War, but elsewhere as well. So, members of the Druze community living in Kuwayt sent a declaration to Druze leaders in Syria and Lebanon, asking them to take effective measures in order to put an end to the rumors spread by *Radio Israel* about the Syrian Druzes. The Druze community in Kuwayt had got into a thorny position because of the Israeli rumors and was constantly being subjected to criticism in which doubts were being cast on its position concerning the Arab Israeli conflict.¹⁹

In an effort to neutralize the Israeli rumors concerning the Syrian Druzes, the Druze leader Sulṭān Pāshā al-Aṭrash was invited to speak on Syrian Radio and Television on November 1, 1973, i.e., shortly following Syria's acceptance of an armistice with Israel. Sulṭān al-Aṭrash was widely respected throughout Syria because of the leading role he played during the Syrian revolt against the French in 1925. He was, therefore, considered to be a national hero for the whole of Syria, and not only in the Druze community. In his speech, Sulṭān al-Aṭrash stressed that the people of Syria formed a strong unity "that could not be smashed by the Zionist and Israeli

¹⁸ Al-Aṭrash, *Al-Durūz*, p. 367.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 364-367.

propaganda.”²⁰ On November 4, 1973, *al-Ba'th* published another interview with him in which he made similar statements:

Israel has tried to spread poisonous propaganda in order to crumble Arab unanimity in an effort to have the bones decay from the inside. But this endeavor is old and obvious. Here in the *Jabal al-'Arab*,²¹ we have surpassed the stage of propaganda, and we have reached the stage of the real image of the Arab creation in general. Our only decisive answer to the fabricated lies of the enemy is to sacrifice a maximum of martyrs, who will never hesitate to raise the head of their nation high.

Some eight months later, on July 7, 1974, the mortal remains of Lieutenant Colonel Rafiq Ḥalāwah were taken away from the Military Hospital in Ḥarastā, and buried in Damascus at the Cemetery of the Martyrs of the October War, at the end of a sober and honorable funeral ceremony, which was attended by the commanders of various Syrian military units, the Syrian Chief of Staff, the Minister of Defense, as well as other ministers, and delegations from Lebanon.²² Rafiq Ḥalāwah had already been honorably mentioned in *al-Ba'th*, where he was “praised by the Minister of Defense in esteem for his efforts, courage and discipline.” It was further stated that “he enjoyed the confidence of his superiors, and responded to the call of his fatherland during the liberating October battles, of which he was one of the prominent heroes. He died as a martyr, while defending the soil and freedom of his fatherland.”²³ Nevertheless, the rumors spread by *Radio Israel* concerning Rafiq Ḥalāwah and others have left their marks on history.

CONCLUSION

Ever since the rise of nationalism in the Arab world, a transformation process has been going on in which the traditional religious, tribal,

²⁰ *Al-Ba'th*, November 2, 1973.

²¹ The *Jabal al-'Arab*, also called the *Jabal al-Durūz* (The Mountain of the Druzes) is another name for the province of al-Suwaydā'. Arab nationalists in Syria usually tend to avoid the use of geographical names which give an indication of the sectarian backgrounds of the inhabitants of an area concerned. Thus, stressing that all Arabs are equal, irrespective of their religions, they prefer the name of *Jabal al-'Arab* to that of *Jabal al-Durūz*.

²² *Al-Ba'th*, July 8, 1974.

²³ *Al-Ba'th*, February 13, 1974.

and regional loyalties are being replaced, completely or partially, by national and/or socioeconomic loyalties. These can contribute to an integration of the Arab world or of different Arab political entities. Religious loyalties, on the other hand, can, especially in those states which contain a considerable number of members from different religious communities, stimulate or maintain national and social dissension and retard social progress.

Israel, in order to maintain its position of power, has taken advantage of differences within the Arab world by concentrating in its mass media on latent or manifest sectarian, tribal, regional, and national differences between, or within, specific Arab states, attempting to hinder, therewith, the above-mentioned transformation process. Moreover, Israel, as a Jewish state, might fit more easily into a Middle East which would be divided in political or administrative units based on religious and ethnic bonds than into a Middle East where boundaries of religious communities count politically for less and less as long as they do not camouflage socioeconomic differences.

While in the Jewish state of Israel the categories of nation and religious community are closely intertwined and hardly separable, a similar relation between nation and religious community does not apply to the Arabs. They might be subdivided into several distinct religious groups, which in their turn are, however, in the majority of cases not restricted to the Arab people alone, but include parts of other national groups, such as, for instance, the Turks, Persians, and Kurds, as well. So in Arab nationalism the role of religious communities or religion, if any, is completely different from that in Jewish nationalism, as is manifested in the case of the State of Israel. Finally, it may be concluded that Israeli sectarian propaganda, as described above, may sometimes affect national integration in the Arab world in a negative way. During the October, 1973, War it was especially the Syrian Druze community that was most negatively affected by the Israeli broadcasts.²⁴

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²⁴ A more recent example of Israeli sectarian propaganda is for instance the false news item, broadcast by *Radio Israel* on May 24, 1975, reporting the resignation of the Mufti of Lebanon in protest against the formation of a Lebanese military government. Since the Lebanese Army at that time was considered to be dominated by Christian officers, a military government was thought to strengthen the position of the Christian

communities to the disadvantage of the Muslim communities. Thus, the news about the resignation of the Mufti might have increased the tensions between Christians and Muslims. On January 26, 1976, *Radio Israel* issued a statement saying that the Israeli Minister of Defense had ordered the Israeli northern border guards to let Lebanese Christians into Israel if they wished to escape the fighting then going on in Lebanon. Such statements may have easily cast doubts on the Christians in Lebanon (and other Arab countries as well) as being (potential) allies of the Israelis against other religious communities.