Power, Politics, and Community: Resistance Dynamics in the Occupied Golan

MUNIR FAKHER ELDIN

In 1967, Israel occupied the western section of Syria's Golan Heights, expelling some 130,000 of its inhabitants and leaving a few thousand people scattered across five villages. Severed from Syria, this residual and mostly Druze community, known as the Jawlanis, has been subjected to systematic policies of ethno-religious identity reformulation and bureaucratic and economic control by the Israeli regime for half a century. This essay offers an account of the transformation of authority, class, and the politics of representation among what is now the near 25,000-strong Jawlani community, detailing the impact of Israeli occupation both politically and economically. During an initial decade and a half of direct military rule, Israel secured the community's political docility by restoring traditional leaders to power; but following full-on annexation in 1981, new forces emerged from the popular resistance movement that developed in response. Those forces continue to compete for social influence and representation today.

AMID THE POLITICAL THEATRICS that have recently surrounded the topic of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights—first with U.S. president Donald Trump's "proclamation" endorsing Israeli sovereignty over the territory, and then Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu conferring the name "Trump Heights" on a tiny Israeli settlement erected on the ruins of the destroyed Syrian village of Qilaʿ—the 25,000 or so Syrians remaining in the occupied territory have been busy confronting a renewed and acute threat to their land. As of this writing, these Jawlanis (from al-Jawlan, the Arabic word for the Golan) are heavily engaged in a campaign to prevent the projected installation of a wind farm, by the giant corporation Energix, which the Israeli government has been fast-tracking as a national priority project.[1] The project is part of a wider plan to harness wind energy in the occupied Golan Heights and to boost Israel's reliance on renewable energy. In addition to the Jawlanis fighting further land dispossession, Israeli environmentalists and some settlers in the area are also strongly opposed to the project.[2] Were it approved and implemented, the wind farm would have a devastating impact on the Syrian villages of the occupied Golan, colonizing about a quarter of the agricultural land that remains in Jawlani hands, limiting future growth, and potentially exposing them to the environmental harm and health hazards associated with such technology.[3]

The Jawlanis are well acquainted with top-down measures that threaten their life as a community, primary among them being land confiscations post 1967 and the full-on annexation of the territory in 1981. At the time of the annexation, they issued statements and petitions addressed to the Israeli government, the United Nations, and world public opinion stressing their opposition to the Israeli takeover and affirming their attachment to their national (Arab-Syrian) identity. They also launched a series of work stoppages, which culminated in the February 1982 general strike. The strike lasted several months and became a foundational event in the community's collective memory. Concurrently, they continued expanding their fruit groves, investing in every inch of the land left to them after large-scale expropriations by the state, and managed to remain united and solidary in the face of Israel's attempts to manipulate their political identity. The latest challenge to the Jawlanis' existence is unprecedented, however, in that the wind farm project is the first instance of their having to confront both corporate capital and the state apparatus. This conjuncture is worsened by the political crises in Syria and the wider region. Against this backdrop, the Jawlanis feel more vulnerable than ever—socially, economically, and politically—and are especially susceptible to being divided.

Since it acquired rights to this project in 2013, Energix has quietly worked through a handful of Jawlani agents to persuade dozens of small landowners to sign over land that the company covets under long-term leases. By 2018, the project had reached the final stages of procedural government approval through Israel's National Infrastructure Committee (NIC).[4] As a result of a consciousness-raising campaign by local farmers, activists, and a human rights organization, as well as the eventual support of the village *khalwas* (communal congregation houses in the Druze faith), a popular committee was formed to coordinate the community's opposition to the plan, primarily by filing formal objections with the NIC. This specific procedural process came to an end on 9 September 2019, with the NIC recommending that the government approve the plan.[5]

Regardless of the ultimate outcome, the Jawlani mobilization is symptomatic of the complex challenges facing the community under the prolonged Israeli occupation and colonization of the Golan. In June 2019, local campaigners called for a public meeting of all the villages concerned to decide on a number of measures, including a one-day general strike across schools and the blacklisting of a handful of individuals who refused to stop working as Energix agents.[6] As a result of the campaign, the religious head of Majdal Shams, the main town in the occupied Golan, has resigned from his position after allegations that he was in cahoots with Energix and was simply paying lip service to the movement opposing the project.[7] In the Jawlanis' eyes, it is clear that Energix could not have reached dozens of farmers and made such threatening inroads into the community without the complicity of local individuals. Many Jawalnis ascribe this complicity in the erosion of their community's rights and aspirations to recent political and socioeconomic developments.

First, the community has been split over the Syrian crisis, which has also rekindled debates over their position with regard to the Israeli occupation. Second, there is a general sense of a breakdown in social cohesion and of economic egoism. Both factors have given rise to a subculture that has normalized the Israeli occupation. An example of this is encapsulated by Energix's sponsorship of a local soccer team following decades of Jawlani noncooperation and nonparticipation in the regional leagues organized by Israel's soccer association. While the Energix project may not be

part of an elaborate conspiracy, it is surely part of a larger sociopolitical effort to steadily erode the community's local autonomy: the popular groundswell against the wind turbines is as much about environmental preservation as it is about people participating in a historic struggle for meaning, autonomy, and self-representation. In this essay, I argue that to understand the current moment, it is necessary to understand the larger historical processes at work.

Social Transformation

One of the most profound impacts of Israel's occupation of the Golan has been in the demographic sphere. In 1967, the Israel army expelled around 130,000 Syrian citizens from the parts of the Syrian Golan that it occupied, leaving a cluster of Druze villages and a small and isolated Alawi community at the northern edge of the area, comprising a total population of some 6,000 people.[8] During the first two decades of Syria's independence, rural-urban migration was significant, and it impacted the Golan region both demographically and culturally, with population movement driven by aspirations for integration in expanding state apparatuses, most significantly the military and the education system. Israel's 1967 occupation of the Golan stopped that trend in its tracks. Now severed from the rest of Syria, the community was hemmed in by Israeli policies that restricted its use of land resources. The Israeli labor market pulled in men, and later women, as wage laborers—especially in the construction and agricultural sectors, including in mushrooming Israeli settlements. This process of proletarianization both diversified and helped increase incomes during the first decade of the occupation. Money earned from wage labor or subcontracting in Israel helped Jawlanis to build houses, send their children to university, invest in land development, and expand existing fruit groves. But the growing limitation on land and water resources as a result of the occupation, combined with population growth and the neoliberal economic policies of subsequent decades, eventually contributed to reversing that process.[9]

In search of better opportunities, the community turned to higher education. As early as the 1970s, through the help of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the community managed to obtain the right for local students to enroll at Damascus University.[10] While they were relatively few in number, several Jawlani high school graduates made their way to Damascus, where they became the first generation of doctors, dentists, engineers, and liberal arts graduates who would go on to form the core of a nascent middle class of Jawlanis. Just as the new push for higher education was bearing fruit, Israel's Likud government annexed the Golan in 1981. Aware that their sons now risked being conscripted into the Israeli army and fearing an imminent threat to their status in Syria, the community fought hard against the annexation: as a result of that struggle, in which the population flatly rejected Israeli citizenship, the Jawlanis ended up with permanent residency. While this intensified their precarious status—since leaving the territory to go abroad to study or work exposed them to losing their residency rights—it also paradoxically conferred two advantages on them: first, they obtained more civil freedoms than those extended to Palestinians under Israeli military rule, especially economic freedoms and access to Israeli social and health services; and second, they forestalled the Israelization of their identity.

This somewhat conflicted reality set in motion a number of dynamics in terms of political alignments and social change, one of which was the strengthening of ties between leftist activists among the Jawlanis and the Palestinians, both in the occupied West Bank and inside Israel (including in the Israeli Communist Party). As a result of this development, new opportunities for higher education in the former Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries also became available, helping to overcome the many difficulties of accessing Israeli higher education, especially in high-demand sectors such as medicine, law, and engineering. In the wake of the 1991 Madrid Conference,[11] it once again became possible for Jawlanis to pursue higher education in Syria, and on a much larger scale than previously, until the eruption of the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime in 2011.[12] Many hundreds of young men and women were thus able to receive a university education and return to build professional careers both in the occupied Golan Heights and inside Israel itself. In the meantime, higher education opportunities, whether at Israeli state universities or in the expanding market of private professional colleges, also grew over the decades, adding yet more lawyers, engineers, high-tech professionals, and school teachers to the burgeoning Jawlani middle class.

The brief historical arc just described invites several questions: What is the political impact of class stratification under settler-colonial occupation? How does a growing middle class behave politically? How does increasing economic integration with Israel affect a community that has been steeped in traditional forms of social organization and resisted the demands of the state with authority over it? To consider these questions, one needs to take the long view of social and political dynamics in a communal setting.

Community as Political Process: Tradition and Change

How central governments deal with communal authority has been a key question for the modern nation-state, especially in the (post)colonial context. In the classic, tried-and-true manner of Western colonial tradition, Israel both exploited and contained traditional structures of patriarchal and religious authority during the almost two decades of military rule that it imposed on its own Palestinian citizens following the establishment of the state in 1948. Likewise, during the decade and a half of military rule in the occupied Golan (1967–81), Israeli military officials vested a handful of traditional family leaders with functions that effectively turned them into middle-level dispensers of power. The same continues to be true today, although the process is now much more complex. But traditional communities do not stand still, and under certain conditions or at specific junctures of social, cultural, and economic change, the social structures and hierarchies once instrumentalized by the state become tenuous.

In the Golan, the conception of communal leadership, known in Arabic as *za'ama*, has a long tradition that is rooted in the old Ottoman imperial order that extended across the Levant. In the Ottoman historical context, local leaders/notables commanded small armies of men who could be mobilized at times of crisis, especially when there was an issue of contention with the state. In the Jawlanis' collective memory, one such moment relates to the clashes of the 1890s, when the Ottomans brought their wrath to bear on the community over land disputes and local communal autonomy. The same was true at the time of the revolt against the French colonial regime that

succeeded the Ottomans in Syria, following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the conquest of its territories by Western powers after World War I. In this regard, the 1925–26 Syrian revolt, when local fighters under the command of As'ad Kanj Abu Salih (who was the brother of the region's sheikh) confronted the French army in several battles, remains the single most powerful event in Jawlani collective memory. The Jawlanis remember both the heroism evidenced during those battles as well as the misery and hardships that the French colonial army visited upon them. They also remember the uneasy relations with the subsequent nation-state, despite the pride they took in national freedom and independence. In the first years of Syria's independence, the state bureaucracy and prevailing modernist ideology competed with and, to some extent, displaced local power orders. While the Israeli occupation sought to restore what it viewed as a suitable version of the traditional communal order, as a strongly centralized and modernizing force itself, it ultimately worked—both directly and indirectly, deliberately and unintentionally—to undermine its "old-new" invention. The Israeli occupation neither inherited a fixed communal structure nor married itself to one.

Within a decade of the occupation, hitherto accommodationist traditional leaders began shifting their stance: where they had initially welcomed military governors and Israeli ministers and prime ministers, along with their promises of annexation and of Israeli citizenship, they ultimately played a key role in consolidating the community's opposition to annexation. By doing so, they gave up their privileged positions within the hierarchy of the occupation system. Two reasons are commonly invoked for this volte-face: first, that the kind of power traditional leaders derived from the occupation had no meaning without social standing among their people. Communal authority is a sensitive matter that is rooted in the politics of communal control over land access, which requires consensus. In the context of social change and differentiation, especially one involving loss of control over the terms of land access under the settler-colonial state, traditional authority loses much of its clout. Second, the power that traditional leaders derived from the colonial bureaucracy was limited and symbolic. Although Israel uses colonial methods of governance strategically by co-opting local traditional structures (a form of so-called indirect rule), it could be argued that real control over the community is, for the most part, exercised by the channels of direct bureaucracy, both military and civil.[13] Whatever the reasons for the change, the old-new traditional leadership had to cede its power to competing forces, something that continues to shape the dynamics of communal politics in the occupied Golan today. Now, the village khalwas, civil society associations, and Israeli bureaucracy and governmental agencies are all participants in the political arena. Understanding the complex competition and interaction between them provides a gauge of the Jawlanis' current colonial condition and also of the challenges that may lie ahead.

THE KHALWAS

The Druze tradition draws a sharp distinction between the initiated and noninitiated, and that distinction has translated into two forms of za'ama or leadership: one worldly or zamani (temporal), and the second otherworldly or ruhi (spiritual). Zamani leadership derives its power from dealings with the state and involves the outward defense or protection of the community; ruhi leadership derives its moral authority from its role as guardian of the faith. As in other feudal

or semifeudal agrarian orders, these two forms of authority often work hand in hand despite the existence in the Druze tradition of a strong asceticism that views worldly entities such as states and rulers as fundamentally tyrannical. In sharp contrast to its dealings with the Druze of Israel (where Druze religious leaders have by and large been co-opted by successive Israeli governments), in the case of the Jawlanis, Israel was able to co-opt Druze *zamani* leaders but not *ruhi* leaders during the early years of the occupation. Thus, following the collapse of the traditional power structures at the end of military rule in 1981, the khalwas of the various villages filled the vacuum. The khalwas not only managed to secure communal cohesiveness but were also highly receptive to bottom-up mobilization by the young, secular generation.

In 1981–82, the khalwas issued a unanimous social and religious boycott (*hirm*) directed at community members who had accepted Israeli citizenship or crossed picket lines during the general strike.[14] Although the boycott may have weakened over the decades, it remains the official stance of the Jawlanis, creating a lasting stigma regarding Israeli citizenship and thus helping to consolidate communal resistance to Israelization. The power of such communal sanction may be viewed as a by-product of the conservative nature of small, sectarian communities that feel the need to protect themselves against change. However, this would miss the reality of social change, the ways in which traditional social institutions navigate new realities, and their shifting functions and authority. Since 1981, the various khalwas in the occupied Golan have attempted to enforce communal boycotts on a wide range of social issues, including women's driving, female higher education, the staging of wedding parties, and the selling and consuming of alcohol. Yet in all these matters, the religious community has failed to assert its authority. This can only be attributed to the spread of secular middle-class norms and lifestyles.

The fact that the khalwas remain relevant prompts the following observations: first, that a khalwa's moral authority itself relies on an implicit democratic social code, and without broad-based societal support from the community's nonreligious majority and secular elements, a khalwa could only function politically as a partisan faction rather than as a recognized and all-encompassing authority; second, that societal consensus on the role of the khalwa tends to be greater in political struggles writ large, which in this instance is the anti-colonial struggle. Such struggles are not of the normative liberal-democratic kind, that is, issues or problems that social groups demand to be solved by public policy, but rather the opposite. They are struggles against state intervention in the name of communal spaces that are not codified in law or policy. While it is not always easy to draw the lines between these two kinds of politics, making that distinction is important. Many symbolic and material aspects of communal life exist outside the realm of official or legal recognition: political rituals (for example: demonstrations, commemoration days, strikes, and other expressions of Syrian identity, as well as the use of religious and social boycotts), religious sites, community waqf land (endowments), public spaces, communal land, and so on. The khalwas in the Golan have derived legitimacy from their role as protectors of these arenas of autonomy even though they cannot always fulfill popular expectations and thus often find themselves the target of popular criticism.

There has been a lively debate about the khalwas and their purpose on social media networks, with considerable disagreement as to the kind of issues that khalwas should intervene in, because even where they enjoy widespread popular support, they are sometimes perceived as being

unequal to the challenge. The community's plight in trying to protect its communal land against confiscation and in expanding its housing stock is one critical example in this regard. I speak here of the case of Majdal Shams, but similar dynamics may be observed in other villages as well. Approximately two decades ago, the Majdal Shams khalwa responded to a call by individual members of the community who felt impelled by a growing housing problem to seize control of communal land and divide it equitably among those facing housing shortages and lack of access to land. In doing so, the initiators of the idea were working against a handful of individuals who sought to enclose these lands and disregard the needs of the greater community. The khalwa of Majdal Shams called a meeting and adapted the idea by declaring communal land a waqf of Majdal Shams; this was of course a completely informal move which deliberately ignored official Israeli legal and bureaucratic procedures governing land access and waqf property. The khalwa and the special waqf committee that evolved from the grassroots meeting comprised both religious and nonreligious figures, who were consequently placed in a difficult position. They had to confront recalcitrant community members as well as the state, on the one hand, and come up with an equitable allotment of a very limited resource, on the other. Their success was only partial: several individuals were left unmoved by the moral demands of the community and would not give up their privately enclosed areas; the state recognized only a fraction of the allotted area as being within the recognized boundaries of the town (with the rest being designated a national park/natural reserve); and the allotment plan left many disappointed and critical of the performance of the khalwa and the waqf committee, who were accused of weakness, and even corruption and favoritism.

Despite this failure, the khalwas, whether in Majdal Shams or elsewhere, remain highly relevant in the eyes of the community. Their interventions in the past two years in the movement for boycotting municipal elections (a case that I will return to below) and the current struggle against the wind turbines are examples of their persisting relevance as a space of local autonomy. In these campaigns, the khalwas have again proven to be open to bottom-up, popular mobilization, and they are looked upon as representatives of the popular will and consensus—more so than any other pole of power in the community, such as civil society organizations or local municipal councils. The fact that a religious leader is forced to step down as the community's sheikh is a sign of the significance of this kind of politics. More telling yet is the fact that Energix and its local agents are now filing lawsuits against religious figures, waqf committees, and other local groups, alleging defamation and the use of a boycott against Israel, which is now illegal on Israeli-controlled territory.[15] Viewed as representatives of extrajudicial communal authority, waqf committees have also been legally pursued for unregulated functioning and alleged improper handling of waqf property.[16] These developments underline the rising stakes of popular action in what I call communal spaces defying state intervention (see below).

THE EMERGENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

Resistance to Israeli rule came at an early stage of the occupation when dozens of young men who had been exposed to the ideas of Arab nationalism, Nasserism, and Baathism, as well as communist ideologies in the late 1950s and early 1960s formed underground cells to gather information for Syrian intelligence on the Israeli military in the occupied Golan and Sinai.

This early stage of resistance ended in 1974 when the cells were discovered by the Israelis, and their members were imprisoned. Sociologically speaking, this development represented the nascent agency of a secular generation that sought to embrace modern social and cultural norms and led to the establishment of informal civil society initiatives such as sports and cultural clubs that explicitly espoused both Arab/Syrian nationalism and secularism. These organizations were volunteer based, exclusively self-funded, and defiant of the Israeli occupation. Despite their forced separation from the rest of Syria, they imagined themselves as part of the Syrian nation-building project and "motherland." One of the most revealing details in this regard concerns the names that the soccer clubs adopted, borrowing from the national Syrian clubs: Nahda (renaissance), Hurriya (freedom), Tali'a (vanguard), Amal (hope), Qasyun (the name of a hill adjacent to Damascus). Another immensely influential popular initiative of the 1980s, the Golan Academic Association (GAA), arose in the same context. Decidedly secular, GAA focused on extracurricular education, summer camps for children and youth, and the development of the fine and performing arts. Participants in the initiative, who identified as leftists, saw themselves as the vanguard of social and cultural change in their society. From the perspective of the khalwas, many GAA activities represented a threat to the community's more traditional values and moral codes, especially with respect to the customary norms of gender separation, which the organization disregarded.

Throughout the 1980s, GAA worked successfully among the youth, mobilizing them and raising their consciousness. In 1987, it sponsored the creation of the community's first public monument, al-Masira (march or procession in Arabic), which commemorated the bloody revolt of 1925–26, an initiative that signaled clearly the Jawlanis' adherence to the broader, national Syrian narrative. In the early 1990s, GAA decided to take advantage of opportunities pursuant to the 1991 Madrid Conference to establish itself more formally, and it registered with the Israeli Ministry of the Interior as the first formally established nongovernmental organization (NGO) in the occupied Golan under the name Arab Association for Development (AAD). The move was controversial, however, and it split the community along the Baathist-leftist cleavage: in the view of left-leaning Jawlanis, the professionalization of community organizing depoliticized their cause and undermined the solidarity on which volunteer-based collective action relied; for those individuals with strongly Baathist views, the very act of registering what had been a grassroots initiative with an Israeli ministry constituted an act of betrayal, a forsaking of true *wataniyya,* or patriotism, and loyalty to the motherland. One of the things that the Baathists feared most acutely was the competition from their leftist rivals who, as critics of the Baath/Assad regime in power, would naturally command the interest of foreign aid agencies, thereby accruing greater power and influence.

Such a cleavage (and the critique that undergirds it) assumes a sharp distinction between the formal and the informal, between volunteer action and professionalization, and between resistance to Israel and navigating its laws and bureaucracy to one's advantage. AAD provides an early example of the complex relationship between these binaries. Thus, for example, AAD was able to overhaul community health care services, something that could not have taken place without the organization's professionalization. It did so at first by obtaining aid from European NGO funds, but later it benefited from the Israeli National Health Insurance Law of 1995, by subcontracting

services from major Israeli health insurance organizations legally mandated to provide health services to all Israeli residents. While doing this, AAD maintained its outlook as a local initiative defending the cultural and political autonomy of the community by redirecting part of its revenue from its health services delivery to funding cultural activities such as extracurricular education in music, theatre, and the fine arts. This eventually fed into a flourishing cultural scene, which became a hallmark of a modern Jawlani Syrian identity connected to Palestinian and wider Arab cultural production rather than to the Israeli cultural scene.[17]

The current struggle against the Energix project is the most recent example of the complex nature of struggles for local autonomy and the need to pursue action at both the grassroots and official levels. When the popular committee was formed to mobilize against the project, it was clear that they needed the support of local legal professionals and human rights activists. The local human rights NGO Al-Marsad was a key partner in this struggle.[18] While providing legal advice, Al-Marsad was also able to link the committee to Israeli professionals and human rights NGOs, namely the Association for Civil Rights in Israel and Bimkom – Planners for Planning Rights, which joined the campaign. Al-Marsad has also taken the case internationally.[19] It is thanks to those professional organizations and several local lawyers working pro bono that the community was able to pursue the "official track" and file hundreds of private and professional legal petitions to the NIC in Jerusalem. The community has also sent an open public petition signed by over 5,500 people—nearly a third of the adult Jawlani population.[20] When the NIC scheduled hearings for the petitions in mid-July 2019, hundreds of people made the long trip to Jerusalem twice, leaving their homes at dawn to fill the hallways of the NIC building. They made their case very clear. Farmers, lawyers, and doctors all pled with the committee to halt the "impending threat." However, the way the hearings were handled and the frostily polite reception the petitioners got did not augur well for the initiative. Ali Awidat, a young college activist from Majdal Shams who was present at one of the hearings, put it this way in a Facebook post on 18 July 2019:

> "It was clear that the hearing officer was biased in favor of the company, but this did not frustrate the community's representatives. Rather, this egged them on to step up their defense and argue every point without losing their composure. The audience from our community clapped loudly and rapidly with each intervention that they felt spoke their hearts. . . . It is true that we are a small community without the means of self-protection, but we are not weak. For an unarmed people under occupation to stand in the face of a giant company with all the financial resources at its disposal, as well as legal and institutional privileges from the state, the statements at the hearing were an expression of power, of resistance, and of steadfastness. I wish it were not just a statement but also a *solution*. In any case, my takeaway is that we've said everything we could . . . to convince any reasonable person to stop the project."[21]

On 9 September 2019, the NIC submitted its final recommendation for the government to approve the project, disregarding the community's objections. As of this writing, activists were contemplating two remaining legal routes to fight the project: the first, to petition Israel's Supreme Court; the other, to work with individual landowners who have already granted leases to Energix to cancel their contracts and thus face legal action. Neither option seems particularly promising,

as the Supreme Court has already ruled in favor of a similar project, based on Israel's national interest claims, and the other route seems highly unlikely to succeed.[22] Despite the injustice and even harmful nature of these private lease contracts, community activists assume that they will be upheld in Israeli courts.

Still, the conclusions that are being drawn by the community are complex. It would be simplistic to merely conclude that Israeli governmental institutions, including the legal system, are fundamentally biased—that much is obvious; the broader picture, to paraphrase Awidat, is that saying everything they could at the hearing has helped the community to mobilize and may better prepare it for the coming stage, which will be much harder and require personal sacrifices on a greater scale. The struggle will certainly be a factor in how the community sees itself and its future under the occupation regime, and how it wages other struggles.

ISRAELI BUREAUCRACY AND JAWLANI POLITICAL DOCILITY

There are two aspects to the process of Israelization/normalization that the community has had to confront under occupation. The first might be called direct domination, wherein a combination of Israeli police, legal, and bureaucratic powers (both under military rule and post annexation) was used to normalize Israeli governance in all arenas of community life. The second aspect is what might be described as hegemony, wherein people are induced to view their life within the system as normal thanks to ideational and pragmatic calculations. The political culture that the Jawlanis have nurtured over five decades of occupation has developed around a careful distinction between those two aspects of Israeli control. While the community quickly learned the difficulty of resisting domination, it has so far been able to contest and sometimes circumvent Israeli hegemony.

The sports and cultural associations that were launched in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the GAA/AAD initiatives described above, are best understood as an effort to create a public sphere that could better resist the settler-colonial state's hegemonic culture. It was the state's initial neglect of their needs combined with the Jawlanis' widespread defiance of their occupier that allowed for the emergence of this counter-hegemonic space. But the state apparatus eventually woke up to the implications of the flourishing counter-hegemonic culture, and Israel began putting in place local municipal councils that would neutralize grassroots initiatives. And decades of social change combined with the current fragmentation of national identities resulting from the enduring geopolitical crisis in the region have only deepened the challenges to this counter-hegemonic space. Thus, Israeli-appointed municipal councils attempted to offer alternative services which were, at least in outward appearance, depoliticized. In response to the GAA's "nationalist" summer camps, for example, the local council of Majdal Shams offered fun-based, seemingly nonideological counterparts; and to foil the AAD's initiative, the council offered competing health care services. The council's most assiduous and persistent effort has been its attempt to contain, or at least intervene in, the realm of "high" cultural production. In addition to co-opting activists with the lure of jobs, the council is rolling out a modern cultural center and theater that are currently under construction. Controlling infrastructure is expected to drastically change the balance of forces in the cultural domain.

Although the community has refused to recognize the local municipal councils as legitimately representative institutions, it is still unclear how the Jawlanis will face the challenges ahead. The

marketing of initiatives in culture, sports, and education as depoliticized, neutral services, and as apolitical tools of social and cultural development, has been effective among certain segments of the younger generation. One of the most telling examples in this regard has been the establishment of the Energix-sponsored soccer club which, for the first time in the history of the Jawlanis under occupation, has registered in the Israeli soccer association and plays in the lower-ranked Israeli soccer leagues. The organizers of this initiative justify their decision on professional and pragmatic grounds, invoking the community's right to "normalcy" despite the political context. From the point of view of this analysis, however, the problem is not that the new club simply broke with Jawlani political tradition but rather that the move precipitated the wholesale collapse of the local soccer club scene and its hitherto independent operation, suggesting a decline in the local public sphere and a retrenchment of civil society efforts for local autonomy. This may of course turn out to be only a temporary phenomenon that motivates people to create new avenues for securing their sense of cultural and political distinction and self-building as a community.

Nevertheless, the quest for so-called normalcy and for integration with the cultural apparatus of the occupying power is still widely viewed with suspicion. In recent years, attempts have been made to infuse the educational arena with Zionist content—most notably by encouraging Zionist youth movements such as the Druze Scouts and The Working and Studying Youth.[23] The measure failed due to stiff opposition on the part of parents' committees, despite the pushback by a coalition of individuals considered acolytes of the local council. These have accused the parents' committees of "politicizing everything" and thus endangering access to funding opportunities that would contribute to the community's progress. The critics of cultural normalization, however, point to the long-term danger of Israeli hegemony on the future of the community and its youth, and they have so far been successful in raising awareness on the issue. One of the most critical examples of the community's debate over its political self-identification can be found in its renewed stance of nonparticipation in local council elections.

Community and Politics: Rejecting Municipal Elections

In the mid-1970s, the Israeli military regime in the Golan tried to introduce local councils and arrange for local participation in such elections. The community categorically rejected the plan at the time. Since then, and owing to Jawlani resistance to the 1981 annexation, it is the Israeli authorities that have appointed the heads of councils. Sensing a growing trend toward depoliticization within the community and for the first time since 1967, the Israeli authorities ran council elections in the Jawlani villages during the 2018 municipal election cycle in Israel. Judging by social media posts and comments, the move initially garnered some popularity and raised the following question: wouldn't it be better for the community to elect its own representatives rather than have them appointed by the Israeli authorities? The obvious argument was that locally elected representatives would be more responsive to their constituents than Israeli government officials, and that by the same token, this might also reduce corruption. In addition, the argument went on, the community would be able to reject Zionist ideological programs in schools, and the locally elected municipal council would be able to refuse to meet with American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) delegations such as the one that visited in the wake of the Trump

proclamation recognizing the annexation of the Golan.[24] Those arguments notwithstanding, and thanks to mobilization by grassroots as well as religious forces, the community rejected any change in the status quo, resulting in the withdrawal of candidates from two villages and an insignificant turnout of 1.5–3 percent in two other villages.[25]

Why would the community miss such an opportunity to make its voice officially heard? one might ask. There were several good reasons stated for this societal consensus. Activists were quick to point to the *undemocratic* nature of this measure. Israeli law extends the right to vote in municipal elections to all permanent residents and not only to Israeli citizens, but it limits the candidacy of the mayor's post to Israeli citizens. The fact that only 12 percent of the Jawlani population holds Israeli citizenship also makes these elections undemocratic.[26] Furthermore, the Jawlanis' national loyalty was also at stake. Holding municipal elections in an occupied territory is an explicit recognition of Israel's sovereignty. Such recognition would drastically impact the community's internal politics and its ability to resist future political demands such as mandatory Israeli military service (like the Druze community inside Israel). Many Jawlanis are also deeply skeptical of the kind of representation such mechanisms confer, seeing them as marginal and insignificant in relation to the true power to decide on the daily challenges they face, let alone their larger dreams. Democracy of this sort is a ploy, a mask that helps Israel improve its image with no real gains for the people.

Observing these debates and hearing these views in the community, I think one must arrive at a simple conclusion: the consensus that was formed cannot be reduced to one simple and categorical explanation. Whatever the arguments in favor or against municipal elections, the fact of the matter is that the Jawlanis decided not to play the occupying power's game; they chose to fight for whatever autonomy they had managed to carve out and to continue having a say in determining their political outlook as well as the symbols and sentiments that govern their private and public lives. In so doing, they are preserving a deeply rooted sense of identity as a people on their own land that has crystalized and evolved in the very context of adapting to their new condition as an occupied people—exploiting its material contradictions and, above all, refusing its symbols and ideological demands. Despite the ebb and flow of their fortunes, there is no reason to believe that these same dynamics will not continue to play out or that they can easily be reversed.

What I have argued in this essay is that if one wants to understand the rationality of the Jawlanis' political behaviors and of their interaction with the machine of Israeli colonial governance, one needs to take the long view on their political and social formations. The argument is applicable beyond this specific case. Communal/sectarian formations and identities in the current Arab world as well as global discourses on the Middle East are shrouded in obfuscation and essentialism. By the measure of so-called ideal civil-society formation, composed of rational individual actors and free associations and affiliations, ethnic/sectarian communities in the Middle East are deemed profoundly wanting. Much of the rhetoric about national independence, freedom, and democracy is caught in this imaginary of idealized civil society; much of our understanding of human dignity and rights is also tied to it. From that prism, communal formation and sectarian-based communities are viewed with suspicion; they are often blamed for the distortions and agony of the modern, liberal national dream.

While there may be some truth to this viewpoint in specific contexts, it would be a mistake not to question it. The occupied Golan is a perfect case in point. The social and political processes illustrated in the above discussion point to the way in which communities are political subjects with historical depth and a self-awareness of how they wish to be named and seen. Collective identities of this kind are neither fixed nor purely symbolic or rhetorical. They are rooted in sociological realities, and they adapt to change. They are material in as much as they are symbolic. They are reflected in and reproduce the deep divide that sets community/society and state apparatuses apart and in the very friction between them. While this friction node is quite tangible in colonial and settler-colonial contexts, it is also a global condition that calls for rethinking modern and post-colonial politics in general.

Although the Jawlanis may wish to see their homeland—Syria—free, developed, and democratic/progressive, they are learning firsthand how a society is not identical to its governing structures/the state. They are also coming to terms with the fact that regardless of the duration or the fate of the occupation of their land, they will need to draw on their own communal resources and defend their political freedom no matter how narrow their allowed margin of maneuver. This is equally true for the Palestinians facing belligerent occupation and looming annexation in the West Bank. They too wage a double fight—for their freedom from occupation and, concurrently, for social and economic justice and political liberty within the paradigm of their longed-for national freedom.

About the Author

Munir Fakher Eldin teaches philosophy and cultural studies at Birzeit University, where he directs the MA program in Israeli Studies. He is also a research fellow at the Institute for Palestine Studies, Ramallah. This essay is based largely on his direct observation and experience as a social activist and researcher of local history in Majdal Shams in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

ENDNOTES

1   Valued at $500 million, Energix claims to be one of Israel's leading companies in this domain. Its operations extend to Poland and the United States. See "Business Overview," Energix, http://www.energix-group.com/Business-Overview/.

2   On 23 June 2019, the Israeli High Court rejected a petition by the nonprofit Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel opposing the installation of forty-two wind turbines in the southern part of the Golan Heights on the grounds that these would harm wildlife, especially eagles. See "Israeli Environmental Organization Petitions against Wind Turbine Project," National Wind Watch, 12 February 2019, https://wind-watch.org/news/?p=91685; and Ayman Abu Jabal, "Israeli Supreme Court green light: 42 wind turbines to be constructed on the Golan Heights" [in Arabic], Ashtarr News, 24 June 2019, http://ashtarr.net/?p=5762.

3   See Aaron Southlea and Nazeh Brik, *Windfall: The Exploitation of Wind Energy in the Occupied Syrian Golan* (Majdal Shams: Al-Marsad – Arab Human Rights Centre in Golan Heights, January 2019), http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Windfall—The-Exploitation-of-Wind-Energy-in-the-Occupied-Syrian-Golan.pdf.

4   Formally known as the National Committee for the Planning and Construction of National Infrastructure.

5   According to *The Marker*, a daily published by *Haaretz* and specializing in business news, the real obstacle to the project remains the dispute between the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Defense over the latter's approval of similar, future projects. The army is requesting NIS 250 million to upgrade its radars, which are expected to be affected by the wind turbines, along

the border of the occupied Golan. *The Marker* has also reported that, at this stage, only twenty-five are planned, with the option of adding six more—pending the approval of the Israeli Land Authority, which claims ownership of the lands upon which these six turbines sit. The expected cost of the project is NIS 600 million, with projected NIS 120 million of annual income. See Yoram Gavison, "Energix kibla ishor le-proyect energiat roah be-hasjkaa shel 600 million shekel" [Energix receives approval for a wind energy project worth NIS 600 million], *The Marker*, 10 September 2019, https://www.themarker.com/markets/1.7828336.

6   See local websites' coverage at "Idrab 'am fil Jawlan . . . wal mi'at yahtashidoun ihtijajan 'ala mashrou' al-marawih" [General strike in Golan . . . hundreds gather to protest the wind turbines project], Jawlany, 18 June 2019, http://www.jawlany.com; and "Golan: Tomorrow Is the Day of the General Strike against the Wind Turbines Project" [in Arabic], Ashtarr News, 17 June 2019, http://ashtarr. net/?p=5707.

7   "Istiqalat al-sheikh Abu Ahmad Taher Abu Saleh min ra'asat al-hay'a al-diniyya fil Jawlan as-Souri al-muhtall," [Sheikh Abu Ahmad Taher Abu Saleh, head of occupied Syrian Golan religious council, resigns], *Ashtarr News*, 24 May 2019, http://ashtarr.net/?p=5338.

8   This small population lived in the six localities of Majdal Shams, Mas'ada, Buq'atha, 'Ayn Qiniyya, Ghajar, and Sahaita, with the last subsequently destroyed and its inhabitants moved to Mas'ada because the 1974 ceasefire line traversed their lands. Part of the wind farm project is scheduled to be constructed on the remains of this village.

9   See Nizar Ayoub et al., *Forgotten Occupation: Life in the Syrian Golan after 50 Years of Israeli Occupation* (Majdal Shams: Al-Marsad – Arab Human Rights Centre in Golan Heights, March 2018), http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/Al-Marsad-Forgotten-Occupation.pdf.

10   The signing of the 1974 Israel-Syria Disengagement Agreement provided the political context for this development. See United Nations Security Council, "Israel-Syria: Agreement on Disengagement," Geneva, 5 June 1974, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_11302_add_1.pdf.

11   The Madrid Conference of 1991 was a two-day peace conference hosted by Spain and cosponsored by the United States and the Soviet Union. It was an attempt by the international community to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process through multilateral negotiations involving Israel and the Palestinians as well as Arab countries, including Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

12   The ICRC has been instrumental in this development, too. See "Occupied Golan: Nurturing Ties with the Rest of Syria," International Committee of the Red Cross, 15 February 2011, https://www.icrc. org/en/doc/resources/documents/update/2011/golan-update-2011-02-15.htm.

13   One of the best examples of this Israeli perception can be found in the work of Aharon Zebaida, who was education officer for the Israeli Military Governorate of the Occupied Golan Heights between 1971 and 1981 (known as the Israeli Civil Administration since 1982 although still operated by the Israeli army). After the annexation, Zebaida served as the inspector of education with the Israeli Ministry of Education in the region. In 1984, Zebaida wrote his master's thesis on the 1982 general strike at Haifa University's Department of Middle Eastern Studies. He represented the strike as being symptomatic of the "misunderstanding" between the Israeli government and the local community, generated partly by the government's dismissal of local family power balances. For a shorter version of his MA thesis, see Aharon Zebaida, *The Druze in the Golan Heights: A Conflict of Misunderstanding, 1978–1982* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, September 1988).

14   This kind of communal boycott, or *hirm*, is of two kinds: religious, whereby a religious member of the community is punished for transgressions or misconduct by banning them from participation in religious rituals; and social, whereby the community at large withholds social connection with an individual, for instance by not participating in their wedding or funeral or allowing them to attend such events in the community. Both kinds of *hirm* can be permanent or temporary, depending on the case.

15 The company has filed lawsuits against several individuals as well as Al-Marsad for defamation, for taking part in the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, and working to sabotage the project based on anti-Zionist motivations. Israel's BDS Law of 2011 prohibits such actions and holds those found guilty liable for compensation payments to affected Israeli businesses.

16 A local lawyer, who is one of the Energix agents, initiated this lawsuit. Although the company is not directly involved, the action is clearly indicative of a systematic attempt to criminalize popular action and organization.

17 Examples of this are two "alternative" bands that enjoy Arab and international following: TootArd and Hawa Dafi. Also, Jawlani artists like Randa Maddah, Akram Al Halabi, Fahd Halabi, and Shada Safadi are breaking the isolation of their community through their penetration of wider regional and international art networks as Syrian artists from the occupied Golan.

18 Al-Marsad's mission is "to protect and promote human rights and respect for the rule of law in the Occupied Syrian Golan, with a commitment to the overall application of international law, in particular: international humanitarian law and international human rights law. . . . Through its work, Al-Marsad seeks to monitor and document human rights law and humanitarian law violations, and to urge the international community to pressure Israel to respect international law, stop its violations and end its occupation of the Syrian Golan." See "Vision, Mission and Goals," Al-Marsad, https://golan-marsad.org/about/vision/. I would also like to thank the Al-Marsad staff, especially Wael Tarabai and advocate Karama Abu Saleh, for their generous sharing of information about this campaign.

19 Al-Marsad has stepped up its international campaign to counter Energix's attempt to silence human rights work and activism. Together with Al-Haq, the Cornell Law School's International Human Rights: Policy Advocacy Clinic, and twelve other human rights NGOs, it filed an appeal for urgent action on 9 September 2019 with several UN human rights groups and special rapporteurs. See "Appeal for Urgent Action: Syrian Villages and Farms in Occupied Syrian Golan under Threat While Local Human Rights Organization Targeted," Al-Marsad, 9 September 2019, http://golan-marsad. org/wp-content/uploads/Al-Marsad_Urgent-Appeal-to-UN-Experts.pdf.

20 Details of the election data can be found in Alessandro Delforno, *More Shadows than Lights: Local Elections in the Occupied Syrian Golan* (Majdal Shams: Al-Marsad – Arab Human Rights Centre in Golan Heights, n.d.), p. 37, http://golan-marsad.org/wp-content/uploads/More-Shadows-than-Lights-Local-Election-in-the-Occupied-Syrian-Golan-1.pdf.

21 See Ali Awidat, "On the third session of the hearing about the Jawlani community's objections to the wind turbine project: I'm not going to write about the various interventions, I'll leave that to the professionals since they will be reporting in detail" [in Arabic], Facebook, 18 July 2019, https://www.facebook.com/ali.awidat/posts/10157345240096912 (translation and italics are mine).

22 See "HCJ 963/19: Prof. Yossi Leshem vs. the government of Israel" [in Hebrew], Nevo, 23 June 2019, https://www.nevo.co.il/psika_html/elyon/19009630-O07.htm.

23 The Druze Scouts Association in Israel is part of the Israeli Scouts Movement, which prides itself on its goal of "building an Israeli society that is Zionist, ethical and activist and that will benefit and satisfy all its citizens." See "Who We Are," Israeli Scouts Movement, http://www.zofim.org.il/magazin_item.asp?item_id=696909405721&troop_id =103684. The General Federation of Working and Studying Youth – HaNoar HaOved VeHaLomed Youth Movement, also known as The Working and Studying Youth, emphasizes its Labor Zionist heritage and seeks "to fulfill the Zionist vision laid out by the founders of the country and in the Declaration of Independence." See "About Us," HaNoar HaOved VeHaLomed Youth Movement, https://noal.org.il/english/.

24 According to a Facebook post by the appointed head of the municipal council, the AIPAC delegation's visit was "an important step toward putting the Druze settlements on the map" (my translation). Note the use of the term "settlement" that normalizes the fundamental difference between native Syrian villages and Israeli settler colonies on the land. See Dolan Abu Salh, "Today is a very important meeting" [in Hebrew], Facebook, 4 June 2019, https://www.facebook.com/dolan.abusalh/posts/2288172857917303.

25 These facts concern only the four Druze villages of the occupied Golan that rejected Israeli citizenship and so forth. The fifth village, Ghajar, comprises a small Alawite community (of about 2,600 people) and lies at some distance from the other villages. In fear of the Israeli military, they accepted Israeli citizenship and were not thus part of the process I am describing here. The Ghajar community participates in municipal as well as general elections in Israel on a much wider scale. For an analysis of this case, see Delforno, *More Shadows than Light*.

26 This figure excludes Ghajar. See Delforno, *More Shadows than Light*, p. 9.