

## In the Golan Heights, Anxious Eyes Look East



Rina Castelnuovo for The New York Times

A family reunion at the border between Israel and Syria.

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MAJDAL SHAMS, Golan Heights — Until the Internet came to this Druze village in the Israeli-controlled [Golan Heights](#) in late 1990s, residents used to go to an area known as the shouting hill and use megaphones to communicate with relatives across the fence in the motherland, [Syria](#).

### Multimedia



From the vantage point of Majdal Shams, a Syrian village peeps out from behind a hillside across the valley. Damascus is 40 minutes away by car.

It was at this point a week ago that about 100 [Palestinians](#) living in Syria breached the border fence and crowded into Majdal Shams in a protest to mark the anniversary of [Israel](#)'s creation and the plight of the Palestinian refugees who demand a right to return. Four people were killed here when Israeli troops opened fire in the border area, shattering a calm of more than three decades and putting an international spotlight on this usually sleepy village near Mount Hermon.

But for the roughly 20,000 Arabs of the [Druze](#) religious sect who live in Majdal Shams and in nearby villages, this is Syrian territory — even though Israel has occupied this strategic plateau since the 1967 war and has extended Israeli law here. In the two months since the outbreak of the uprising in Syria, the Druze



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Relatives of Druze students from the Golan Heights who had been studying in Syria waited for them at the border, which is usually sealed.

of the Golan have been preoccupied with, and divided by, events on the other side of the fence.

Modern communications have made contact with relatives much easier, yet have done little to make an already convoluted reality any less complicated.

Here, fierce loyalty to Syria is mixed with fear of the government led by [Bashar al-Assad](#) in Damascus, and residents have conflicted feelings about the relative freedoms they enjoy under the Israeli occupier.

“We cannot talk politics with our relatives on Skype, by phone or on the Net,” said Salman Fakherldeen, 56, a human-rights advocate at [Al-Marsad](#), the Arab Center for Human Rights in the Golan, in Majdal Shams. “You do not need to be too clever to understand why.”

One of a few residents here who is willing to speak openly in support of the uprising in Syria, Shefa Abu Jabal, 25, has been helping disseminate news of the protests and their brutal suppression, working through social networking sites where none of the commenters uses their real names.

A graduate of [Haifa University](#) in northern Israel, where she studied law and communications, Ms. Abu Jabal said that no more than 15 people in the Golan Heights were involved in the effort. Because Israel is an open society, she said, “We have access to all Web sites.” But she added that pro-Assad “stalkers” on Twitter have accused the activists of being Israeli spies.

Residents say that the majority of the Golan Heights’ Druze are split between those who support the government of President Assad and those who do not want to get involved.

The reasons for supporting Mr. Assad include the knowledge that everything that happens in the Golan quickly finds its way to the authorities in Damascus, fear for the hundreds of thousands of Druze inside Syria and worries about what may happen to them if the current leadership is replaced by the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood.

The Druze, who practice a largely secret religion that is often described as an offshoot of [Ismaili Islam](#), have not fared badly under the Assads, who belong to another minority sect, the Alawites. Another incentive for not opposing the regime is that up to 800 students from the Golan Heights are studying in Syrian universities free of charge. About 20 students returned home recently under a special arrangement because of the troubles in Syria.

In many cases, people’s true political positions remain as inscrutable as some of their religious beliefs.

At most, people here say, 10 percent of the Golan Druze openly identify with the protesters in Syria. In this conservative society, they risk being ostracized.

Many here say they are against the violence and bloodshed, but some, echoing the official line in Damascus, say that Islamic extremists from other countries are to blame.

In mid-April, residents held a small, silent gathering in the Majdal Shams square

in solidarity with the protesters. “We did not say anything,” Ms. Abu Jabal said, “but we held signs.”

Supporters of the Assad government held a larger demonstration in Buqata, a village nearby. After a Druze soldier in the Syrian Army was killed in Homs, his relatives in Masada, another Golan village, held a memorial.

Less than 10 percent of the Golan Druze have chosen to take Israeli citizenship. Many say that their sense of belonging to Syria, even after more than 40 years of Israeli rule, is not a question of choice. They say they are Syrian, whichever side they are on.

“Politics do not concern us,” said Nayef al-Din, a shopkeeper in Masada. “We are Syrians, whoever is in charge.”

“We are in Syria now,” said Ata Farahat, 39, who works for a local television production company in Majdal Shams and is a strong supporter of Mr. Assad’s. “We have lived our whole life in Syria.”

The production company provides stories and footage from the Golan mostly for Syrian television stations, but also for some Israeli channels.

Mr. Farahat studied in Damascus from 1995 to 2002. He said he was arrested by the Israeli authorities on his return because of his political activities as a student and was jailed for a year. After working for Syrian television, he said, he spent another three years in an Israeli prison, charged with contact with enemy agents, and was released a few months ago.

His colleague, the journalist Hamad Awidat, 28, another supporter of Mr. Assad’s, studied information technology in Syria, then went to Tel Aviv University to study software engineering. Mr. Awidat has an Israeli travel document that states his place of birth as Israel and his nationality as “undefined.”

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