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Druze Women—Political and Religious Leaders Throughout History

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Abstract: The Druze community has survived for a thousand years, during which it witnessed the emergence of female political and religious leaders. However, the Isma'ili foundations of the Druze religion favored women without offering them considerable rights. This study describes the political actions of women leaders who are considered unique and outstanding leaders in the history of Druze society. The women discussed in this article share some features: all came from an elite social background; all were endowed with outstanding leadership qualities, which gave them status and prestige in the community; and, in keeping with Druze female leadership, all were identified with female sanctity and spirituality. Additionally, these women were portrayed in folk stories and biographies as women characterized by boldness, courage, leadership, and especially charisma to lead in the public sphere and not just the private one, in contrast to what is expected of Druze women as belonging to the private sphere, the family. This article argues that the combination of the level of positive consciousness toward women in the Druze religion and the elite status of these women, in addition to being unique charismatic personalities in Druze society and in their era, explains how they acquired their leadership role in the Druze community. Furthermore, while engaging in social and political activism, these women never employed their privileged status to promote gender equality in their societies.

Keywords: Druze community; women; religion leaders; political leaders

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1. Introduction

There is an esoteric dimension to the Druze religion that in theory requires legal and social equality between men and women, yet the latter's social and moral status is greatly determined by patrilineal and patriarchal heritage, which establishes the superiority of men and discriminates against women. Although it contravenes the tenets of the Druze religion, men of the religious class support the patriarchal structure without reservation, believing that modernization and Westernization would undermine the existence of the community and corrupt its value system.

The number of Druze in the Middle East is estimated today as around a million; they are scattered primarily throughout Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, with a small community in the north of the kingdom of Jordan. Syria contains the largest community, estimated at around half a million, about three percent of the country's population. The vast majority of Druze in the Middle East is made up of rural peoples living in the mountainous areas of southern Mount Lebanon, Mount Huran, Mount Hermon, the Idlib area, the Galilean

hills, and Mount Carmel (Khuri 2006). The Druze sect was founded in Fatimid Egypt in the eleventh century under the patronage of the sixth Fatimid caliph, al-Manṣūr, known as al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (r. 996–1021 CE). From the perspective of orthodox Sunni Islam, the adherents of the Druze religion—which the Druze refer to as *al-Tawhid* (Monotheism)—are an unquestionably heterodox sect. The religion is a prominent example of syncretism, combining elements and concepts from other religions and philosophical sources, such as Shi'ism, Isma'ilism, Greek philosophy (particularly the Neoplatonic and Gnostic streams), Hinduism, and Islamic Sufism (Firro 1992, pp. 3–7).

Druze society has traditionally been patriarchal, patrilinear, and patrilocal (i.e., a wife moves to live with her husband's family, which is in line with the surrounding Arab culture) (Joseph 1993). Over the years, however, this traditional structure has been weakened, as fewer families have come to depend on agriculture as their chief livelihood, and consequently, they have broadened their horizons beyond the village. In this regard, Druze society, like various other Middle Eastern societies, has undergone a profound transformation, consisting of what Moghadam characterizes as a decline in the patriarchal family structure (Moghadam 2004).[1] This development obviously predominates among the Druze in Lebanon, where Intisar Azzam observed that the proportion of Druze women working outside the home in the last few decades of the 20th century was greater than the proportion in other Lebanese communities (Azzam 2007, pp. 190–91).

Two main factors account for the tensions faced by the Druze family unit in modern times. One is the virtually unbridgeable gap between "progressive" legal norms and the conservative behavioral norms of the Druze, based on tribal values and patriarchal heritage. The other is the community's abrupt exposure, after centuries of hermetic isolation, to the processes of modernization and Westernization.

Since the beginning of the post-colonial era, Druze society has undergone tremendous social transformations as a function of two processes. The first is socio-demographic; it involves a decline in natural fertility rates; a shortage of agricultural land and downgrading of the status of agriculture, leading to fewer sources of income and a need to search for work outside the village; a rise in higher education levels and exposure to means of mass communication; higher income levels and better living conditions, and so forth. Based on data provided by Chamie (1981, p. 85), the rate of natural increase among the Druze Lebanese has been low—1.8 percent, compared to 3.8 percent among the Shi'ites and 2.8 percent among the Sunnis. In addition, the growth rate of the Druze population in Israel decreased gradually over the past decade; in 2022 it was 1.1%, and the total fertility rate of Druze women was 1.85 children on average, compared to 2.00 in the previous year, continuing a decline that started in the mid-1960s. The peak of fertility—7.92 children per woman—was measured in 1964 (Central Bureau of Statistics 2024). The second process of transformation is structural–cultural, exemplified by cultural changes in Druze villages, increasing differentiation, and the emergence of a new collective identity based on economics, politics, and culture (Azzam 2007; Layish 1982, pp. 16–17). The Druze family, nonetheless, remains patriarchal and patrilocal, preserving strong and binding norms that compel women to stay emotionally tied and physically close to home under the watchful eyes of their male family members.

Nevertheless, according to some scholars, the social status enjoyed by Druze women is better than that of their Sunni-Muslim counterparts, due to the Druze religion's attitude towards women, who are highly respected and honored in the home and who hold a central position in the nuclear and extended family. In contrast to Sunni and Shi'ite Islam, the Druze religion prohibits polygamy. It is also the only monotheistic faith that allows women to serve as spiritual heads and occupy all religious posts (Dana 2003, p. 24). Although, one cannot ignore the women who converted to Islam and stood out during

the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the era of al-Sahaba (the Companions), women like Prophet Muhammad's daughter Zaynab and Umm Ḥakīm bt. ʿUqba influenced their husbands' conversions to Islam, reshaping household dynamics and gender hierarchies (Simonoshn 2023).

Already, during the Druze *daʿwa*—the spreading of the new religion—women were empowered to perform secret missions related to the dissemination of the religion. The most important among these women was al-Sitt Sārra, who was sent to southern Lebanon to re-organize the community there (ʿAbbās and Makārim 1981, pp. 71–72).

Since that period and up to our time, women have played a prominent role in Druze history. They have not only attained the highest spiritual status, but have also played leading roles in politics and society.

A substantial disparity exists between the religious laws governing the status of Druze women and the behavioral norms practiced by the community's sheikhs. The work of Afifa Saib, a Druze Lebanese writer and public activist, illustrates this. In 1962 she wrote that the seclusion of Druze society was of little to no sociocultural benefit. It severely constrained women, forcing them to wear headscarves (symbolizing envelopment) without any real religious justification and led them to sink backwards (Saib 1962, pp. 125–26). Driven by the fear of change and of the disintegration of the social fabric, male religious leaders still exert their religious authority over Druze society by means of excommunication and condemnation. It can be assumed that they exploit the fact that the Druze faith is an esoteric religion, not known to all in the community, to impose conservative social values and norms, even when these emanate from tribal codes and contravene religious law. Educated Druze women, especially in Lebanon, have tried to institute modern education as an agent of social change and to challenge the traditional authority of the Ajawīd ("the religious people"). Most prominent among these was Nadhīra Zayn al-Dīn, who was described by miriam cooke as a "pioneer of Islamic Feminism" (Cooke 2010). Her feminist activism went beyond the Druze community, focusing on the debate over veiling in Muslim society as a practice that patronized women (Zain Al Din 1998, pp. 113–15).[2]

Alongside these, as early as the 16th century, and in the 19th and 20th centuries, Druze women played formal political roles.

In this article, we will review the activities of women who played formal religious and political roles and argue that they were endowed with qualities of leadership and charisma that made them stand out in the public sphere as the wives, daughters, or mothers of leaders. Most of them also benefited from belonging to families among the socio-religious, political, and economic elites and from their position as the mothers of male boys, who worked to transfer leadership positions to their sons in due course.

This article proceeds in four parts: The first part ("Theoretical framework: Women's political participation in the Middle East") presents examples of women leaders in the Middle East and for the most part discusses factors that promote female leadership. The second part describes the research method, which was based on the analysis of historical documents. The third part ("Findings") presents in detail the life stories of eight Druze women, three who were leaders in the religious public sphere (al-Sitt Sāra, al-Sitt Nāʾifa Junbalāṭ and Umm Nasīb Falāḥ) and four who were leaders in the political public sphere (al-Sitt Nasab al-Tanūkhiyya, al-Sitt Ḥabūs Arsalān, al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ, and al-Sitt Khawla Arsalān Junbalāṭ). The last part discusses the findings and draws conclusions.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Women's Political Participation in the Middle East

Among the factors which enable women in general to attain leadership positions are elite status, high levels of female participation in independence movements, and,

crucially important, associations with politically prominent male relatives, often linked to the relatives' martyrdom (e.g., their assassination) (Richter 1990). Unlike their male counterparts, women leaders suffer from certain important disadvantages: they generally do not have an institutional base, a regional constituency, an administrative track record, or a military niche, and are often seen as temporary leaders, making them vulnerable to coup attempts (ibid.). Critical feminist theory asserts that universal narratives of patriarchy and women's oppression fail to address the experiences of women from different communities and cultures, especially women from the Global South. Therefore, there is a need to develop new frameworks investigating the roles of various groups of women in both conventional and unconventional political activities. These frameworks should emphasize specificity, diversity, and heterogeneity. This means an approach should be sought that can look at the complexity of women in the Third World from the perspective of a multiplicity of differences rather than one of "otherness" (Mohanty 1984; Waylen 1997).

In the context of the strategies adopted by women to participate in politics in the Middle East and North Africa, Kandiyoti (1988) has supplied a potentially more useful way of explaining and analyzing the apparent reasons for, and strategies behind, women's political activities in defense of the status quo, in the form of the "patriarchal bargain". According to Kandiyoti, different systems may represent distinct kinds of patriarchal bargains for women, with different rules of the game and different strategies for maximizing security and optimizing their life options (Kandiyoti 1988, p. 277). She believes that this concept helps to explain why women act in ways that may superficially seem to conflict with their long-term interests. Women pay the price of a particular bargain, and in return, receive a degree of protection. If a particular bargain looks as if it might be breaking down, women may mobilize to hold on to rules which appear to worsen their situation, because it is part of a strategy of maximizing security by gaining and keeping the protection of men. This is likely to occur in the absence of other, more empowering, alternatives for women (Waylen 1997).

It is important to note that when women engaged in politics in the Middle East, they often refrained from explicitly identifying with feminist discourse and instead adopted traits traditionally associated with masculinity in order to obscure their gender identities. This phenomenon reflects the fact that definitions of "feminist" and "masculine" attributes are not static; rather, they are fluid and continuously redefined. Women play an active role in reshaping these categories in response to the specific social, political, national, and religious contexts in which they are embedded at a given historical moment. Examples of this are the Iraqi women who struggled to end the British occupation and the Palestinian women who fought (and still fight) to end the Israeli occupation (Joseph 1986; Peteet 1999). Palestinian women in the refugee camps in southern Lebanon wore male military uniforms along with a veil, and even the mothers among them carried weapons (Peteet 1999). At the same time, in some Middle Eastern countries, women were explicitly prevented from participating in politics, such as Algerian women during the war of liberation from French colonialism, and women in Lebanon during the 1975 civil war. That was because the male leadership did not permit women to be politically involved (Joseph 1986). However, the subversive activity of Algerian and Lebanese women against colonialism and against male patriarchy cannot be ignored.

Since the 20th century, with the rise of nationalism and the nation–state as the dominant form of sovereign political organization, women in the Middle East have largely been politically active in support of national causes, as seen in Egypt and Palestine, rather than focusing primarily on women's liberation. But it is important to note in this context that women in Iraq in the 1980s opposed the state to moderate the influence of the Islamic *shari'a* in women's affairs. Their protest was directed against a "tribal regulation" in general,

which constructed women as tribal property. They demanded that the state intervene in the matter of their personal status and ban strict interpretations of Islamic law that view women as the property of men, and they demanded the right to be involved in political leadership. Women in Iraq even managed to establish a women's association called the "General Federation of Iraqi Women", thanks mainly to their personal connections with the dominant male leadership (Joseph 1986). Other studies have found a connection between women's family/clan/tribal status and their participation in political activity in the public sphere. In most cases, politically active women gain legitimacy from socially or politically significant men in their lives, from the clergy, and from men in leadership positions (Peteet 1999; Tucker 1985).

It seems that historical, cultural, economic, and colonial connections affect the nature of women's participation in Middle Eastern politics (Afshar 1996). Various studies (Efrati 2012; Joseph 1986; Peteet 1999; Tucker 1985) indicate that they participate in politics within the boundaries of nationality, *shari'a*, class, and culture. Yet, despite the difficulties many women face in becoming formally involved in politics, one cannot ignore several women who reached senior religious–political status in the Middle East. In 1920s Egypt, Huda Shaarawi led a landmark protest uniting women from all social backgrounds to oppose British occupation and demand the release of nationalist leaders. This movement led to the formation of the Wafdist Women's Central Committee, with Shaarawi as president and Safia Zaghloul, wife of Saad Zaghloul, as a key figure. Decades later, Tansu Çiller became Turkey's first female Prime Minister in 1993. Following in her politically active father's footsteps, she studied in the U.S. before returning to Turkey, where she rose through the ranks of the True Path Party and led major economic reforms.

This study contends that Druze women leaders have strategically navigated the religious–political landscape to establish and reinforce their authority in both political and religious spheres. Their ascent to leadership is not solely a result of their noble lineage and the socio-religious status it confers, but also of their personal charisma, which enables them to command influence within patriarchal structures. The following subsection will explore comparative models of religious women leaders across the Middle East, with a particular emphasis on those whose leadership is rooted in charismatic authority.

2.2. Archetypes of Female Religious Leadership

The concept of charisma, as articulated by Max Weber and contextualized in the realm of women's religious leadership by Hutch (1984), provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of female religious authority. Charismatic leadership—emerging from personal, transformative religious experiences and legitimized through followers' recognition—has played a particularly significant role in women's religious leadership. In such contexts, women's charisma often arises from deeply internalized sacred experiences that transcend conventional social roles and expectations.

Hutch (1984) categorizes women's religious leadership into three archetypes: the self-encountering leader, the group-containing leader, and the tradition-maintaining leader. The self-encountering leader, exemplified by figures such as Mary Baker Eddy, emphasizes personal religious revelation and a direct connection to the sacred. Eddy, founder of Christian Science, established her theological contributions following a period of social withdrawal after the death of her husband in 1882. In contrast, the group-containing leader, such as Jemima Wilkinson, focused on cultivating strong interpersonal relationships with followers. Expelled from the Quakers in 1776 for her involvement with New Light Baptists, Wilkinson experienced a visionary transformation and subsequently established her own community—Jerusalem Township, anchored in direct charismatic engagement. The tradition-maintaining leader, represented by Rose Philippine Duchesne, retained a

deep alignment with established religious norms. Raised in an aristocratic French family on the eve of the French Revolution, Duchesne's influence within the Catholic Church illustrates the capacity of women to assert religious authority while upholding traditional frameworks (Hutch 1984).

Within Islamic contexts, particularly among women who converted or gained empowerment through religious experience, many demonstrated characteristics aligned with the self-encountering leader. These women succeeded in attracting both male and female followers, thereby asserting charismatic religious authority. Women played a crucial role in the Islamization of the Near East, not merely as converts but as agents of religious transformation. Their actions impacted family dynamics, community structures, and broader religious practices—challenging normative perceptions of female agency (Simonoshn 2023). Conversion narratives, involving figures such as *Umm Kulthūm*[3] during the time of Prophet Muhammad, illustrate how women, even within patriarchal frameworks, exercised significant religious autonomy. Conversions often catalyzed broader changes within their familial or communal spheres, reinforcing the profound social implications of their religious choices.

Furthermore, women actively engaged in proselytization, influencing religious conversions within their immediate circles. For instance, Prophet Muḥammad's daughter *Zaynab* and Umm *Ḥakīm bt. ʿUqba* are known to have impacted their husbands' conversions to Islam, thereby altering household religious affiliations and gendered power relations (ibid.). These cases, in which women's religious convictions preceded and shaped their husbands' conversions, function as subtle yet potent forms of resistance within male-dominated societies. Their influence is not only commemorated in historical narratives but is also enshrined in Islamic jurisprudential texts, affirming their legal and moral significance.

The self-encountering leadership model is further exemplified by historical figures such as *Āsiya, Khawla bt. al-Azwar, and al-Khansāʾ*. These women's religious actions had far-reaching impacts on the development of early Islamic communities, affirming their centrality in the formation of Islamic religious identity (Simonoshn 2023). Their stories underscore how gender, kinship, and religion intersected to effect profound religious and social change.

The study of female religious authority in Shiʿi Islam, particularly as presented in *Female Religious Authority in Shiʿi Islam—Past and Present* (Künkler and Stewart 2021), further highlights the multifaceted nature of women's leadership. Despite the traditional predominance of male religious scholars, women have significantly contributed to Islamic education and jurisprudence, especially at the lower and middle levels. These contributions have been central to contemporary debates on women's rights, many of which are rooted in interpretations of Islamic doctrine (ibid.). Most of these female figures exhibit characteristics of the tradition-maintaining leader. A notable example is *Amina bint al-Ḥusayn al-Mahamili*, a 10th-century *Shāfiʿī* jurist who issued legal opinions (*fatwās*) in scholarly circles that included male jurists such as *Abū Hurayrah*, despite lacking formal judicial status (Künkler 2021). Her case illustrates the long-standing and often underrecognized presence of women in the Islamic legal tradition.

Similarly, *Umm Salama*, one of the Prophet's wives, played a significant advisory role during the Battle of the Camel. Though she did not occupy a formal religious office, her counsel to ʿĀʾisha served to legitimize the authority of the Imams (Amin 2021). Her influence reflects the nuanced and often informal modes through which women have historically exercised religious leadership within male-dominated structures. Likewise, Fāṭima bint Muḥammad, initially portrayed primarily as a mourner, gradually came to symbolize resistance and strength. Her evolution aligns with the self-encountering

leadership model and offers a powerful lens through which to understand how women's religious authority may evolve into political influence over time (Gabbay 2021).

Künkler and Fazaeli (2021) explore the contributions of influential modern Shiʿi figures such as *Nuṣrat al-Sādāt Amīn and Zohreh Ṣefatī*, who navigated complex intersections of religious tradition, gender roles, and political engagement in Iran. *Amīn's* support for women's religious education—despite her overall conservative stance—was instrumental in safeguarding religious knowledge while subtly challenging existing gender norms. Conversely, Ṣefatī promoted greater female agency in religious scholarship, urging women to pursue theological study independent of male validation or state support (ibid.). Both women exemplify the tradition-maintaining leadership model while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of acceptable female religious activity.

In summary, charismatic leadership among female religious figures is often grounded in transformative personal experiences that challenge and transcend traditional gender roles. Women have taken on diverse leadership roles—from self-encountering to tradition-maintaining figures—substantially influencing religious communities from early Islam to the present day. These women have not only reshaped gender norms within religious contexts but also contributed to broader theological and political discourses.

In light of the above, we argue that the emergence of Druze women as leaders in both religious and political spheres reflects the interplay of several critical factors. These include their affiliation with elite, aristocratic families, which afforded them social capital and authority, as well as specific political and religious circumstances that facilitated their rise. Most notably, their charismatic authority played a decisive role in enabling them to navigate and challenge patriarchal structures. As noted in the introduction, *Al-Sitt Sāra* emerged as a charismatic female leader who garnered the support of numerous Druze adherents. Her leadership represents a paradigmatic model of Druze female authority, one that continues to influence contemporary perceptions of Druze leadership and gender roles.

To clarify the theological foundations relevant to this discussion, the following section offers a concise overview of Druze religious doctrine.

2.3. Druze Religious Doctrine

The Druze community has attracted the attention of Orientalist scholars since the nineteenth century. As one of the region's heterodox minorities, its origins, religious beliefs, and historical trajectory have been examined in numerous studies. A considerable body of scholarship has focused on modern Druze history, particularly in Lebanon, where the Druze have played a more prominent political role compared to their counterparts in Syria and Israel during the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, most scholars have approached the Druze as a monolithic group, often overlooking the political, cultural, and social distinctions unique to each community. Other, more general studies have provided synoptic or cursory theoretical overviews of Druze history (Hitti 1966).

Druzism—known to its adherents as *al-Tawḥīd*—was established in Fatimid Egypt in the eleventh century under the patronage of the sixth Fatimid Caliph, al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (996–1021), and is regarded by mainstream Islam as a heterodox sect (Silvestre de Sacy 1838). It formally broke from Ismaʿili Shiʿism in 1017 and initially operated from Cairo before spreading into Bilād al-Shām. Like its Ismaʿili predecessors, however, the Druze movement failed to gain traction among the broader Egyptian population, which remained loyal to Sunni Islam (Makarem 2006).

Druzism introduced two key innovations to Ismaʿili doctrine: the divinity of al-Ḥākim and the rejection of the abstract conservatism of mainstream Ismaʿili thought (A. Bryer 1971). The Druze prefer the term *Muwaḥḥidūn* (unitarians), emphasizing their core belief in divine unity. Paradoxically, however, the religion came to be named after its second

propagator, Nashtakīn al-Darāzī, who was later denounced and executed for deviating from accepted teachings and challenging the authority of the movement's principal founder, Ḥamza ibn ʿAlī (Makarem 2006).

The central doctrine of Druzism is belief in the divinity of al-Ḥākim, as articulated by Ḥamza. According to this theology, since human beings cannot transcend their physical nature, knowledge of God's essence (*lāhūt*) is limited by time and space. Therefore, God must manifest in *nāsūt* (human form), not as a literal incarnation but as a symbolic reflection that accommodates divine essence to human understanding (Firro 2011).

Early in the movement, a theological and political conflict emerged between Ḥamza and Nashtakīn al-Darāzī, centered on differing interpretations of al-Ḥākim's divinity. While scholars such as De Sacy and Hodgson suggest that al-Darāzī remained within the broader spectrum of Ismaʿili heterodoxy (Hazran 2012), personal rivalry likely played a role. Ḥamza's elevation of himself as *al-ʿAql al-Kullī* (the Universal Intellect) positioned him as the supreme leader, a claim reinforced by his accusations against al-Darāzī (A. Bryer 1971).

Druzism asserts that all previous religions are superseded by its teachings. Ḥamza argued that earlier faiths were necessary but ultimately incomplete, and that the Druze doctrine clarifies and transcends them (A. Bryer 1971). The religion also emphasizes the eternity of the soul, advocating a belief in reincarnation whereby souls transmigrate from one body to another (Bennett 2006). Rejecting the Islamic narrative of creation, Druzism adopts a theory of emanation.

Although *taqiyya* (dissimulation) is often cited by Orientalists as a political strategy, it is primarily a religious principle rooted in the *Rasāʾil al-Ḥikma* (Epistles of Wisdom) (Firro 2011). Ḥamza instructed followers to conceal the *ḥikma* (divine wisdom) from those deemed unworthy. Only after his disappearance—likely under the direction of the fifth propagator, Bahāʾ al-Dīn—did *taqiyya* become widely practiced. This entailed concealing the doctrine from outsiders and even from some Druze themselves, who often publicly identified with other religions (Firro 2011).

Influenced by the mystical and esoteric elements of Ismaʿilism, Druzism rejected the five physical pillars of Islam in favor of seven spiritual principles: truthfulness in speech, mutual aid among the faithful, renunciation of previous religious practices, rejection of evil, affirmation of divine unity, acceptance of divine will, and total submission to God (Makarem 2006). According to Bryer, these principles replaced the seven duties of Ismaʿili Islam (A. Bryer 1971).

As a syncretic religion, Druzism draws from Shiʿism, Greek philosophy (particularly Neoplatonism and Gnosticism), and Sufi mysticism (Thompson 1930; D. Bryer 1975, 1976). Like other heterodox movements, its legal status within Sunni orthodoxy has been contentious. It is therefore misleading to refer to a single "Islamic perspective" on the Druze. Sunni *ʿulamāʾ* typically classify them among the *al-Bāṭiniyya*—extremist sects with hidden doctrines (Firro 2011). While the Druze have existed since the eleventh century, they have not faced consistent or systematic persecution as a religious group. The Ottoman Empire, for instance, treated them as part of the broader Muslim society. Yet, from a theological and legal standpoint, their status remained ambiguous.

Zeynep Turkyilmaz notes: "In theory, members of these communities were to be declared heretics (*zindīqs*, *rāfiḍa*, *ḍilla*), unbelievers (*kuffār*), or apostates (*murtaddūn*), stripped of legal protections, their men condemned to death, and their wives, children, and property considered legitimate spoils for Muslims. In practice, however, Ottoman authorities adhered selectively to Sharia, targeting heterodox groups primarily in times of rebellion and political unrest" (Turkyilmaz 2009).

The Legal Status of Druze Women

The legal status accorded by the Druze religion to women is much more progressive than that accorded by either Sunni or Shi'ite Islam. The law of the Druze courts includes a complete prohibition of polygamy. Furthermore, it endorses a principle of parity between husband and wife (in accordance with the law of the Druze Lebanese community with respect to personal status), prohibits nonconsensual divorce, regulates the distribution of property between the divorcing parties, and renders the validity of the *talaq*—the ability to unilaterally divorce one's wife—dependent upon the ruling of a *qadi* rather than solely on the husband's wishes (Falāḥ 2000, pp. 128–30). It states that if the *qadi* believes the divorce lacks valid legal grounds, he shall rule that compensation and damages be paid in addition to the dowry, taking into consideration both material and moral damages to the wife, the effect on her reputation, and her reduced chances of remarrying due to her age or number of children (pp. 135–37).

A comparison of Druze religious and family law with actual practice reveals that although the family laws applied in Druze courts are consistent with several central principles when it comes to the model of the nuclear family—where women enjoy a relatively high level of equality with male members—in practice the Druze family pattern of an extended "clan" overrides their observance. This preservation of the traditional family and the inferior status of women contravenes state law in general—Lebanese or Israeli—and runs contrary to Druze law itself. Yet social reality is stronger than any law, secular or religious. Thus, despite the family status of Druze women appearing to be better than that of Muslim women, their social status remains inferior to men and is still far below their legal status. In sum, according to the law of the Druze courts, women are largely equal to their husbands, but in several important aspects, the patriarchal, patrilinear, and patrilocal extended family remains the ideal in daily reality (p. 368).

An explanation for the gap between Druze religious and family law and daily patriarchal social practices is that the radical Isma'iliyya faction of Shi'ite Islam, out of which the Druze religion appears to have originated, has impacted Druze theology and religion and their attitude towards the status of women. Isma'ilism arose amongst an urban intellectual elite at the Fatimid court in Cairo, whose family structure was almost certainly nuclear. Since the principal propagandists of the Druze religion emerged from this court, family law commensurate with patriarchal and patrilinear society became prevalent as the Druze religion spread through Greater Syria (Layish 1982, pp. 366–67). As mentioned, women have played leading roles throughout Druze history in the areas of politics, religion, and society, from al-Sitt Nasab, the mother of Emir Fakhr al-Dīn al-Maʿnī II, who led the emirate during the second half of the 16th century, to al-Ḥabūs Arsalān and al-Sitt Nāʾifa Junbalāṭ in the 19th century. This tendency continued into the 20th century with women such as al-Sitt Nādhira Junbalāṭ, al-Sitt Khawla Arsalān, and Nādhira Zayn al-Din (who was an important symbol of Arab feminism and an important political leader of the Druze community in Lebanon). What all these women leaders have in common is that they were the descendants of prestigious and feudal families, so that their social backgrounds were of great significance in promoting their status (Taqi al-Din 2007, pp. 98–114), in addition to their personal characteristics, particularly the charisma of these women.

3. Methodology: Historical Analysis of Biographies

"Everyone has stories to tell . . . and life history helps to remind us of this, as it also shows how individual lives are affected by when, where, how and by whom (in social positioning terms) they are lived" (Goodson and Sikes 2001, p. 4).

Historical research confirms the importance of time, sequencing, and process, and highlights the roles of individuals and the consequences of their decisions (Buckley 2016).

These elements are especially important in examining the decision-making processes of women leaders, from the stage of their decision to become a political and/or religious leader to the stage of their transferring leadership to another leader. Life histories provide evidence about how individuals negotiate their identities and experiences and make sense of their roles and the rules of the social worlds in which they live (Goodson and Sikes 2001).

Life historians also shed light on the subjects of their research, on one hand, as "links in a chain of social transmission" and, on the other, as part of a "cultural legacy" (comparing collective tradition and expectations with individuals' unique histories and their capacity for interpretation) (Goodson and Sikes 2001). Here, we find strong support for our own field of research on the biographies of religious and/or political Druze women leaders from a sociohistorical point of view.

With an interest in the biographies of leading Druze women in the Middle East throughout history, the primary research question here is: "What are the social, political, and historical factors in women leaders' lives that helped them to rise to become political and/or religious leaders?" In addition, how did their family and personal characteristics promote them in their roles as women leaders? What motivated them to undertake the role of political and/or religious leader?

This study is based on the theoretical assumption that colonial, political, national, socio-religious, economic, and personal contexts are critical in shaping the action strategies of women in general (Abu-Lughod 2001) and women leaders in particular. Therefore, the biographies of these Druze women are examined in broad contexts, with reference to the positions that intersect to form their identities (gender, religion, class, etc.). Intersectionality theory addresses the heterogeneity of social and gender categories, focusing on the interactions among different oppressive mechanisms of inequality, including class, gender, and race. Thus, this theory acknowledges the varied experiences of women from different groups, particularly minorities (Collins 1990).

4. The Biography of Eight Druze Women Leaders

This section presents in detail the life stories of eight Druze women leaders, three who were leaders in the religious public sphere (al-Sitt Sāra, al-Sitt Nāʾifa Junbalāṭ, and Umm Nasīb Falāḥ,) and four who were leaders in the political public sphere (al-Sitt Nasab al-Tanūkhiyya, al-Sitt Ḥabūs Arsalān, al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ, and al-Sitt Khawla Arsalān Junbalāṭ); the biographies document the factors that helped them become political leaders and the strategies they adopted as political leaders in conservative religious societies.

4.1. Women Religious Leaders in Druze History

Throughout the history of Druze society in the Middle East, quite a few women were religiously active and held leadership positions in the male religious space. Based on several biographies of women political leaders, we argue that women religious leaders received support from their families, often from their fathers or husbands. In addition, most of the religiously active women who received public recognition for their high religious status were single. This membership in high-status religious families, together with their status as single women, enabled these women to focus on religiosity and acquire the sacred knowledge that elevated their social status to women with religious power. Below, we review the biographies of four female religious leaders who were unique in the scope of their religious knowledge and religious leadership.

Already, during the spread of the Druze religion, which began in Egypt in the 11th century CE, the activity of al-Sitt Sāra stood out. She was the niece of the fifth propagandist, Bahāʾ al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad (d. 1043). She was mentioned in two of the *Epistles of Wisdom (rasāʾil al-ḥikma*, the Druze holy books), and by first name only, which

was a sign of the renown she had gained in the community at that time. She was sent on two propaganda missions—one to Wādī al-Taym in southern Lebanon and the other to the al-Aḥsāʾ region in the Arabian Peninsula, the stronghold of the Qarmatians. She is described in the holy texts and chronicles of the Druze religion as a symbol of purity, due to her devotion to the spread of the religion (*daʿwa*) and, of course, to her abstinence from married life. In her activities, she carefully observed the community's moral norms and never went abroad without the accompaniment of a *maḥram* (father, brother, nephew, or uncle). Al-Sitt Sāra was trusted and admired by the central propagandist Bahāʾ al-Dīn, and one source (Al-Ashrafani n.d.) states that she is the only woman who was included among the spiritual elite of the community of propagandists. It is important to note that a factor that helped her to achieve her senior position among the propagandists of the Druze religion was her family lineage (Al-Ashrafani n.d.). It is important to note that Al-Sitt Sāra has emerged as a religious leader and a role model among Druze women in general, and among religious Druze women in particular. Accordingly, we propose that her leadership style aligns with the model of a *group-containing leader.*

Al-Sitt Nāʾifa Junbalāṭ was characterized by a combination of two models of religious leadership: the self-encountering leader and the group-containing leader. This unique blend distinguished her and earned her a prominent religious status among the Druze across the Middle East. Born and raised in Lebanon in the 19th century, she was a prominent female political leader in the Middle East and an educated woman who knew the ins and outs of religion. Her house became a site of pilgrimage for clergy who wanted to learn from her and consult with her on religious matters. She grew up in a religious home, and her father, Shaykh Bashīr Junbalāṭ, was a religious leader of high status. Her husband, Shaykh Khalīl Shams, also had high religious status in the Ḥasabiyya. Al-Sitt Nāʾifa Junbalāṭ was the only woman who built a *khalwa* in her name among the most important *khilwa*s among the Druze in the Middle East—the *khilwa*s of Bayādāt in Ḥasabiyya. She allocated to these *khilwa*s many assets, mainly land, so that they could survive economically independent of the central government. These *khilwa*s were, and are still now, considered spiritual centers for Druze men from all over the world to come and study the Druze religion. Al-Sitt Nāʾifa Junbalāṭ was also politically active. She negotiated tenaciously with the French occupiers and the leaders above her to advance the rights of people of all ethnicities in her region. Moreover, she combined religious leadership with political leadership—a combination that is hardly evident in religious Druze men and is even less so in religious Druze women.

Similar to Al-Sitt Nāʾifa Junbalāṭ, Amm-Nasīb Fāṭima al-Falaḥ exemplified a combination of two religious leadership models: the self-encountering leader and the group-containing leader. However, in contrast to Junbalāṭ, this leadership model granted al-Falaḥ recognition and status primarily within the Druze community in Israel, rather than across the broader Middle East. This more limited sphere of influence can be attributed to the geographically constrained nature of her religious activities, which were largely centered in the rural regions of Galilee. Umm-Nasīb Fāṭima al-Falaḥ was born in 1889 to a well-respected religious family; her father was one of the prominent leaders of the Druze religion in the 19th century—Shaykh Khalīl (Falāḥ 2007). Not only was she the scion of a prestigious religious family, but she also married ʿAlī al-Falaḥ, a member of an elite family in Kafr Samīʿ in Galilee. After the couple's divorce, Umm-Nasīb devoted herself to rearing her only son and to her religion, her family being responsible for sacred properties and the *khilwa* (prayer house). In the wake of her brother's death and on the strength of her religious status and family lineage, she was put in charge of the sacred properties in the village, becoming the first Druze woman to serve as a *sāʾis*—part of whose job was to preserve public morality through the delivery of brief sermons on Thursday evenings, which were designed to instruct the community as a whole (Nāṭūr 2011). She continued to act in this

role until her death. When she moved into a *khilwa* to live, her residence quickly became a pilgrimage site for religious men and women, who came to hear her homilies. In 1979, she was buried alongside her father in the *khilwa* courtyard (Taqi al-Din 2007).

4.2. Druze Women in a Man's World

Historically, there is no record of a leading Druze female figure in politics or religion until the 15th century. The historical record (Isti 2015; Nasr Allah 2001; Saib 1962) reveals that Druze women, mainly in Lebanon, were political leaders largely in the 16th to 19th centuries and the early 20th century. During this time, a significant number of Lebanese and Syrian Druze women held very important political positions. In Lebanon, women leaders stood out in politics. Al-Sitt Nasab Fakhr al-Dīn, for example, was prominent at the end of the 16th century, and was best known as a political advisor to her son, Prince Fakhr al-Dīn al-Maʿnī, called al-Kabīr ("the Great"). The high socio-economic status of these women gave them a position to start from which was significantly better than that of ordinary women. At the same time, it seems that these women were endowed with leadership qualities and charismatic personalities that made them stand out in the public and social spheres. Despite the patriarchal nature of the society, men did not challenge their leadership, and it seems that they led in ways that did not violate the patriarchal order nor their communities' moral and sexual codes. Men's willingness to accept female leadership is related to the fact that the religious texts of the Druze religion grant women rights within the framework of patriarchal paternalism. Accordingly, we argue that it was the combination of a doctrinal foundation, elite status, and the personal qualities of charisma and leadership ability that shaped the prominence and leadership of these women.

The ability to become a female leader in a conservative male society is not to be taken for granted. As will be argued in detail below, the women leaders in these societies followed a strategy of "bargaining with the patriarchy" (Kandiyoti 1988) in various areas (in clothing, meetings with men, and relations with the Ottoman sultan and with the representatives of the French Mandate in Lebanon). This is what enabled them to survive as leaders and convince the spiritual leadership to support them. In addition to their personal characteristics, particularly their charisma, they acted as leaders based on a combination of two models: the tradition-maintaining leader model and the group-containing leader model.

In this section, we will analyze parts of the biographies of five of these women from a critical feminist perspective, focusing on the triangle of relations among colonialism, patriarchal culture, and women's agency and on these women's actions as political leaders in societies where men—natives and conquerors alike—promoted policies of divide-and-rule, oppression, and exploitation, where gender was intertwined with power mechanisms such as the gender–religious order.

We have chosen to present four women who are historically considered to have extensive political and religious influence. Below we will present and analyze the actions they took. Also, we will try to repeat as few details between this material and the descriptions above as seems reasonable.

Princess Nasab Fakhr al-Dīn (1546–1633) was known as al-Sitt Nasab al-Tanūkhiyya. She acquired the nickname *al-sitt al-kabīra*, that is, "The Great Lady", because she belonged to a 16th-century family of princes and princesses. After she married Prince Qurqumaz, the son of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Maʿnī I, who was the leader of the Lebanese kingdom, al-Sitt Nasab rose to prominence. She was a partner in the leadership and worked resolutely to unite the princes responsible for every region, without distinguishing between different denominations. During Ibrāhīm Pasha's attack on Lebanon in 1584, her husband was murdered, and she was left with two sons, aged 10 and 12. To keep her sons safe, she sent them to be educated under the auspices of a Christian family named al-Ḥāzin in the

Antalias area in Mount Lebanon, until her son Prince Fakhr al-Dīn al-Maʿnī II reached the age of eighteen (Isti 2015). Until then, for six years she ruled the Lebanese kingdom, ensuring internal unity and solidarity and working to maintain a good relationship with the Ottomans through the strategy of *musāʾira*, which was a strategy of survival in the face of the tyranny of the Ottoman sultan. She sent gifts to the Ottoman sultans but did not rely on them in the management of Lebanon's affairs, neither from a budgetary nor an internal political point of view. Dwairy (1998, pp. 83–84) describes the *musāʾira* strategy as a means of operating by behaving according to societal expectations while hiding one's true intentions. In Arab society, the term *musāʾira* refers to positive, mature, and "diplomatic" behavior, rooted in cultural norms. It can be assumed that al-Sitt Nasab acted in accordance with the *musāʾira* strategy, with an understanding of the power relations between the Ottoman sultan and the princes in the various provinces. She made sure to send gifts to the Sultan as a covering maneuver that allowed her to take care of the people and preserve "political peace" and her position as a leader (for more on the musāʾira strategy, see Barakat 2021). Malinowski in (Young 1979) claims that the transfer of gifts between rulers was part of a strategy to maintain good relations and even prevent wars, especially in light of the power differentials among rulers.

When Prince Fakhr Al-Din reached the age of eighteen, he became the leader, *al-zaʿīm*, and the official ruler of the emirate of Lebanon, but his mother Nasab did not disappear from politics. On the contrary, she accompanied her son, and helped him overcome very difficult political challenges, including enemy plots. In addition, she was a figure beloved of all denominations of the Lebanese people, and she was even treated as a transcendent being and a prophetess. She was also recognized by the envoys and representatives of the Ottoman Empire (Isti 2015, p. 130). Clerics, too, recognized her as the political leader of the Druze (*zaʿīma*), and she, for her part, consulted with them and treated them with respect and was careful to observe religious customs, religious dress, and religious practices. In fact, Nasab adopted a strategy of bargaining with the patriarchy vis-à-vis the Druze clerics to gain their recognition of her leadership and to mobilize them to support her and cooperate with her as a leader.

One of the most important events involving al-Sitt Nasab was the accusation of treason against her son, Prince Fakhr al-Dīn II. The sultan of the Ottoman Empire at the time accused Prince Fakhr of conspiring with the prince of Tuscany against him. Prince Fakhr al-Dīn fled to Italy to escape imprisonment, and his mother, Nasab, took on the role of *zaʿīma* and became the leader of Greater Lebanon. In Isti's biography (Isti 2015) of al-Sitt Nasab, it is said that when Aḥmad Pasha al-Khāfid attacked Greater Lebanon, killing people and destroying houses and infrastructure, she negotiated with him, offering a large sum of money and convincing him to desist. It seems that throughout her tenure, al-Sitt Nasab acted wisely on behalf of all the people of Greater Lebanon without distinction of religion, which enhanced her status and their support for her as a leader.

From the time of al-Sitt al-Nasab in the 16th century until the 19th century, no Druze woman stood out in the political sphere. In the 19th century, during the time of Aḥmad Pasha al-Jazzār, Lebanon was ruled by male leaders (Prince Bashīr al-Shihāb, and Shaykh Bashīr Junbalāṭ), alongside whom a female leader emerged, Princess Ḥabūs Arsalān (1768–1822). She came to prominence and ascended to leadership (*al-zuʿāma*) after the death of her husband, Amīn Arsalān. She had to deal with internal rivals, especially with al-Shihāb, and with the French occupation. Like her predecessor, Nasab, she made sure to keep *al-zuʿāma* within the nuclear family, so that it would pass to her sons once they became old enough to lead (Ziriklī 2005). In addition, she made sure to keep her children safe and moved their place of residence several times during her tenure, fearing that Prince Bashīr al-Shihāb would kill them to put an end to the Arsalān family's rule. She remained

in power until her son Aḥmad reached his majority. As soon as he assumed the position of ruler, Princess Ḥabūs Arsalān disappeared from political life. Only in her mid-thirties, she decided to retire to the Druze village of Bashmūn, which is where she died, although some claim she was murdered (Ziriklī 2005). Unlike al-Sitt Nasab Fakhr al-Dīn, Ḥabūs Arsalān worked resolutely to retain *al-zuʿāma* and pass it on to her sons, but she did not stay by her son's side when he became leader and, instead, retired from politics.

There is controversy surrounding the personality of Princess Ḥabūs Arsalān, especially concerning her roles as a devout religious woman and a social and political leader (Saib 1962). By virtue of her religious position, the clergy consulted her on religious and social issues, and her home became a focal point of pilgrimage for people of all religions, who solicited her counsel on social problems or asked her to act as a mediator or arbitrator on various issues. At the same time, as a political and military leader, she led battles against the Shihāb family, who were attempting to undermine her, expelled them from the area of al-Shuwayfāt, and added the area to the region under Arsalān control. She also fought the Bedouins on her way to the Ḥurān when she immigrated there. This combination of religious and military activity was not acceptable from a religious point of view, given the tenet that religious people should avoid military activity. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Princess Ḥabūs Arsalān made sure to observe religious rules and laws. For example, she wore modest religious clothing and practiced gender segregation in her public activities—she spoke, gave speeches, and arbitrated between families from behind a curtain that separated the men's section from the women's section in the guest room of her house (Saib 1962).

One of Princess Ḥabūs Arsalān's most important activities during her term of office was her sophisticated undertaking to secure the release of Prince Bashīr al-Shihābī and his brother, and Shaykh Bashīr Junbalāṭ, from their imprisonment in Acre by the Ottoman governor of northern Palestine, Aḥmad Pasha al-Jazzār (r. 1775–1804). She traveled to meet with Aḥmad Pasha followed by a very large entourage, consisting mainly of clerics and men of high social and political status. She convinced him to release the prisoners in exchange for a ransom, and this even though they were her enemies. This strategic step was designed to improve the shaky relations among the various factions in the area under her rule, and at the same time convey to her enemies that she was not working against them.

Throughout her reign, Princess Ḥabūs Arsalān made certain to act in accordance with religious and social codes. She maintained her bodily modesty, observed religious practices, held consultations with the clergy, showed respect to persons of every political class and status she came across, and for the most part did not expose herself to men. This behavior was received with great satisfaction by the clergy. It is interesting to note that there is no evidence in the historical records of women who worked alongside or supported her.

Accordingly, it can be argued that Alsit Ḥabūs Arsalān leadership style is notable for integrating the three models outlined by Hutch (1984): the self-encountering leader, the group-containing leader, and the tradition-maintaining leader. This combination reflects a complex and unique leadership approach, contrasting with historical female figures who often focused on a single domain. For example, Alsit Shara embodied religious leadership (which took place during the period of the dissemination of the Druze faith), while Saʿda Malāʿib, who led Druze forces to victory against a 4000-strong Ottoman army in the 1895 Battle of ʿAyūn, Ḥawrān region of Syria, exemplified military leadership. Such cases highlight the distinctiveness of Arslan's multifaceted model.

However, unlike Alsit Ḥabūs Arsalān, Nadhīra Junbalāṭ's leadership was characterized by the tradition-maintaining leader model. Her primary goal was to secure the support of the various political factions of her time, particularly the backing of religious figures who endorsed her to preserve the status quo among the Druze community during that period.

The biography of al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ shows that she rose to political leadership after the murder of her husband, Fūʾad, in 1921, and held it until her death in 1951. After Fūʾad's death, *al-zuʿāma* was supposed to be inherited by his son, Kamāl Junbalāṭ, but because of his youth (twelve years of age), it passed to Fūʾad's brother, ʿAlī Junbalāṭ, who was known to be a secular man and who opposed the French occupier. These two characteristics barred him from *al-zuʿāma* as far as the conservative Druze society in Mount Lebanon was concerned, and also as far as the French were concerned, who did not see him as an appropriate partner. Hence, he gave up the political turmoil of the Mount Lebanon region in favor of a modern secular existence and spent the rest of his life in Europe and the U.S. That left al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ and her only competitor, Nasīb Junbalāṭ, Fūʾad Junbalāṭ's uncle, but he, too, was not acceptable to the French; moreover, the spiritual leadership saw him as a figure who divided Druze society in the Lebanese Shūf mountains, so they did not support him. In this way, the two competitors from the Junbalāṭ family for the *zuʿāma* were removed from consideration, but at the same time people from rival families threatened the Junbalāṭs' status as leaders. To prevent the *zuʿāma* from moving to another family, al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ strove to keep it within hers. The clerics saw her as a unique personality who could unite the Druze community in the mountains, and they decided to transfer the *zuʿāma* to her until the legitimate leader, Kamāl Junbalāṭ, would reach the age of eighteen. However, the clerics did not dress al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ in the robe of the *zuʿāma*, as was customary in the ceremony of transferring *al-zuʿāma* from father to son in Mount Lebanon, but they publicly supported her through frequent visits to her in the palace. The French also saw her as a relatively acceptable figure, preferring her to the other candidates, and they worked to promote the idea of a female *zaʿīma* in Mount Lebanon. Support for her was rooted in her religious conservatism, her ability to negotiate, and her political flexibility in relations with the French and the military leaders in the region.

The circumstances of al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ's *mubâya'a* (allegiance to and support for a leader) were no different from the circumstances of the transfer of leadership to the two leaders we discussed above (Nasab al-Tanūkhiyya and Ḥabūs Arsalān). What these three women also have in common is that they were charismatic and showed leadership skills, along with being the mothers and wives of leaders who had been assassinated for political reasons. Their membership in noble feudal families also contributed to their promotion to the position of *zuʿāma*.

Nevertheless, al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ's leadership was particularly complex, since she was caught up in a very difficult political reality following the Syrian rebellion against the French occupation (led by Sulṭān Pasha al-ʿAṭrash). These circumstances placed her between a rock and a hard place. She was required to act prudently so as not to drag the people of Mount Lebanon into the Syrian rebellion, while maintaining good relations with the French, but it was also important to her not to be accused of treason by the Lebanese and Syrians. She understood the French occupier's co-optation policy as a colonial power, which was aimed at empowering traditional leadership to prevent a popular uprising. The French especially sought to ameliorate their strained relations with the Druze in view of the "historical conflict" created by the rebellion against them in the Syrian mountains. They initially tried politically to create a balance among the feudal families and to bring quietude to Mount Lebanon, and to the Druze community in particular, through a policy of distributing roles among the families (Isti 2015, p. 101). One of the practices of the co-optation policy was "patriarchal connectivity". Suad Joseph explains that the goal of this policy was to institutionalize the patriarchal clan structure through family connectivity, i.e., kinship. She refers to this policy in the context of governments in the Middle East; it is likely that it was a relic from the time of the Ottoman Empire (Joseph 2000, pp. 17–18). Men who had accumulated social capital in their clans by belonging to a particular clan/family/tribe

had political and economic status, and they took on the role of the *zuʿāma* as political and social leaders. The position has a deep historical connection in a patriarchal society, where the leader draws strength from patriarchal connectivity. This status is inherited, passed down mainly from father to son, while loyalty to the leader is also passed on to sons and entails obedience, solidarity, and acceptance of *al-zuʿāma*'s leadership without debate (Joseph 2000, p. 12). In this way, the leaders in the feudal families gained a lot of political, economic, social, and administrative power. The smarter, more cunning, and more charismatic the leader, the greater his chances of succeeding not only in his administrative role, but also as a political and social leader. Al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ's personality contributed greatly to her position as a leader (*zaʿīma*) who managed the economic, political, and social life of the Druze as the *mukhtāra* and served as a political link between the people and the French occupier (Isti 2015, p. 102).

From the 1920s to the 1980s, no female Druze figure was prominent in the political sphere in the Middle East. In the mid-1980s, Princess Khawla Junbalāṭ Arsalān, born in 1937 in the village of al-Baramiyya in Mount Lebanon, appeared. She was among the few Druze women to graduate from high school, and at the age of nineteen married Prince Mājid Arsalān, the leader of the Yazbak faction of the Druze community in Lebanon. She was very active in the public sphere and from 1963 headed the women's committee that managed the Druze orphanage. When civil war broke out in Lebanon in 1975, she established a medical center in the town of Shuwayfāt. After her husband's death in 1983, Princess Khawla, by then a prominent figure, replaced him as the head of the Yazbakī camp, pending the return of her son, Amīr Ṭalāl Arsalān, to Lebanon, after an extended stay in England and the U.S. for studies. After he was elected to the Lebanese Parliament in 1992, Princess Khawla disappeared from the political scene, a circumstance we have seen in the cases of other Druze women leaders like Nasab al-Tanūkhiyya, Princess Ḥabūs Arsalān, and al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ. For all these women, their roles as important and legitimate leaders came to an end when their sons became old enough to succeed them (Al-Jurdi 1986).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Al-Sitt Sāra, al-Sitt Nāʾifa Junbalāṭ, and al-Sitt Umm Nasīb Falaḥ were three female religious and spiritual leaders of importance in the Druze societies of their time. Al-Sitt Sāra and Al-Sitt Nāʾifa Junbalāṭ exemplified a complex and significant model of religious leadership. Their profound knowledge of esoteric religious teachings, combined with their noble lineage and substantial family capital, enabled them to embody a synthesis of the three leadership models identified by Hutch (1984): the self-encountering leader, the group-containing leader, and the tradition-maintaining leader. Their personal capital—manifested through religious expertise and charismatic authority—positioned them as influential figures who gained recognition and respect from both men and women across the Middle East, during a period in which women were largely relegated to the private sphere. By contrast, Al-Sitt Umm Nasīb Falaḥ drew upon her personal capital (her deep religious knowledge), her family capital (as the daughter of a prominent local religious leader), and her internal commitment to maintaining religious authority within her village. These elements contributed to her recognition as a religious leader by the Druze community in the rural areas of Galilee, primarily within the context of Israeli society. Therefore, a behavioral pattern can be identified that characterizes her, combining the models of the self-encountering leader and the tradition-maintaining leader.[4]

In addition to the female religious leaders, there were Druze women who functioned as political leaders, such as al-Sitt Nasab al-Tanūkhiyya, Princess Ḥabūs Arsalān, al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ, and Princess Khawla Junbalāṭ. They took over the *zuʿāma* (leadership) following the assassinations of their husbands, who had been leading politicians. They

came from feudal families and were endowed with leadership abilities and charisma. It was important for the four of them to keep the *zuʿāma* within their nuclear families until they could transfer it to their eldest sons in due course. To this end, they ensured that their sons received a proper education and protection from their enemies (Saib 1962, p. 122). Furthermore, the four women refused to remarry, so that they could remain the sole guardians of their children.

These women also managed to preserve the well-being of their peoples, maintain unity among the factions in the Druze community, ameliorate relations with the Maronite Christians in the area under their control, and observe religious practices as devout women. They resorted to the strategy of bargaining with the patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988), in that they made sure to appear modest, wore head coverings, and practiced gender segregation in public spaces, as well as in private spaces when receiving guests. All of this was part of a strategy, namely, "patriarchal bargaining", which is a response to the concrete social and religious constraints that set the rules of the game for women in traditional societies, rules that differ from those that apply to men. These women were forced to employ sophisticated strategies to obtain security and opportunities, and they demonstrated, depending on their abilities, different levels of active or passive resistance to oppression. At the same time, the elements inspired by Isma'ilism in the Druze religion that assigned value to women (without making them equals) gave these women an advantageous starting point in their communities and the patriarchal male world.

Al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ, for example, at the beginning of her career as *zaʿīma*, wore a black burqa—a garment worn by Muslim women in Iran, not Druze women. It is claimed that she was especially strict with herself religiously, so that the clergy would accept her. However, with the strengthening of her political position, she replaced the burqa with the white head-covering characteristic of Druze religious women, and revealed her face in meetings with men, both from the community and from outside it, especially in her meetings with representatives of the French colonial power. It is important to note that the change in the shape and color of her head-covering received almost full support from the clergy, and they recognized her as *zaʿīma* and supported her policy towards the people and towards the French mandate (Isti 2015, pp. 117–18). In addition to the head-covering, al-Sitt Nādhira wore black gloves whenever she met with the representatives of the French occupier and thus solved the problem of touching.

All these women adhered to the moral codes and values expected of women by the community. This commitment became an element of their power, due to the connection between their upper-class status and a socio-religious consciousness that favored conservative women.

A second strategy salient in al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ's activity was related to her dealings with the French occupier during the Syrian rebellion. Under those circumstances, she operated in a "gray area" behind the scenes (Goffman 1956), opposing the French and simultaneously maintaining good relations with them. For example, she asked the Syrian leader al-ʿAṭrash not to expand the rebellion to the mountains of Lebanon, while at the same time she sent fighters to join the rebels in the mountains of Syria. Scott (1990) calls this strategy a "hidden transcript" of resistance, and it reflects a covert stance of resistance which is the only one possible for groups that are subjugated by a hegemony (Scott 1985, p. 281). This is how al-Sitt Nadhīra Junbalāṭ managed to maintain her good relations with the French occupier, thereby protecting the people from destruction and at the same time supporting the rebels in Jabal Druze in Syria.

It is noteworthy that the biographies of these four female leaders do not mention other women who worked alongside them. The four women held discussions and consulted only with men, mainly with clerics, and their companions in political meetings outside their

geographical area were also men, some of them with *maḥram* status (an uncle or brother). In fact, the *zaʿīmāt*, the female leaders, used the tools of the patriarchy to keep the *zuʿāma* within their nuclear families, so they could eventually transfer leadership to their sons. Audre Lorde claims that those who use the master's tools will not be able to dismantle the master's house (Lorde 1983). However, it seems that these religious and political women were able to attain the status of regional leaders and lead the people while using accepted patriarchal tools, and thus they maintained the patriarchal social structure and did not promote feminist ideas about the advancement of women in local and national politics. Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored that these women leaders inspired other women, and it is possible that the change in the status of women in a conservative society like the Druze community is not revolutionary but rather a gradual shift.

The success of these women at rising to leadership positions in the Druze community would not have been possible without the combination of three elements of female power that they had at their disposal: an adherence to religious doctrine, their elite status, and their personal charisma. These elements contributed to female leadership but did not lead to the development of a feminist movement in the community. Perhaps it can be said these female leaders inhibited feminism as much as they elevated female leadership.

Building on the above analysis and drawing on Hutch's (1984) typology, it may be argued that Druze women leaders strategically adopted a hybrid model of religious–political leadership—namely, the group-containing leader and the tradition-maintaining leader—within a sociocultural context and historical period traditionally dominated by male leadership.

It is important to note that most of the Druze women who stood out in the fields of political and religious leadership came from Lebanon, and this was no accident. The explanation lies in three historical processes related to the history of the Druze in Lebanon. First, for hundreds of years the Druze in Lebanon were the most important political and intellectual community of Druze in the Middle East, and most of the religious texts were written by Druze Lebanese scholars. Therefore, a consciousness was formed that allowed the presence of the religious text among all the Druze and not only among the religious group, which benefited women more than the patriarchal texts. Second, the Druze in Lebanon were for centuries the ruling elite in Mount Lebanon. The Druze political leadership was not only the leadership of the community, but also of the whole milieu of Mount Lebanon. The powerful leading position of these families enabled them to establish a significant governing norm, even if it conflicted in some senses with the patriarchal norms. Maintaining the continuity of leadership within the elite families, even through the leadership of women, had more force than the patriarchal structure of the society. Third, the political leadership of the Druze in Lebanon preceded the emergence of religious leadership, and a model of separation between political and religious leadership was established. The effects of these processes, which differentiated the Druze in Lebanon from those of Syria and Palestine, perhaps explain why prominence in leadership was the share of Druze women in Lebanon (Abū Zakī 2021).

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Notes

[1] According to Moghadam (2004), various Middle Eastern countries are now witnessing a decline in the patriarchal family structure in the wake of the growth of the capitalist middle class, which maintains links with the political bureaucracy—a phenomenon she defines as a "crisis of Middle Eastern patriarchy". See: (Moghadam 2004, pp. 137–62).

[2] Her book, titled *Veiling and Unveiling*, was first published in 1928 in Cairo.

[3] Umm Kulthūm's intention was to become a Muslim, an objective which she accomplished by leaving her pagan family, moving to a new location, soliciting the companionship of a male escort from the Banū Khuzāʿa, and pleading for the Prophet's patronage. Yet whereas the risks and hardships that Umm Kulthūm endured constituted sufficient reason for her acceptance and sheltering within the early Muslim community in Medina, the absorption of future female converts was conditioned upon the Qurʾanic test. The purpose of the test was to verify the sincere intentions of these women by subjecting their belief to scrutiny. According to the Kufan traditionist ʿAṭiyya al-Awfī (d. 110/729), women who wished to join the Muslim fold were to be asked to proclaim the *shahāda*. To this, al-Māwardī added his interpretation of "God knows very well their belief", as reference "to what is in their heart" (Simonoshn 2023, p. 156).

[4] It important to note, the Book of the Druze as a Text "swallowed" by the group. Given its status as a "source of life" (*sirr*), it inspires an alliance to maintain a "sense of secrecy" (*kitmân əs-sirr*) within the group, both from Druze laypeople (*juhhâl*) and from foreigners (Armanet 2018).It is important to see "the Book of the Druze as a Text 'swallowed' by the group".

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