

# [***Israel's Druze Arabs, fiercely loyal to the state, feel let down after 'paying with their blood'***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BCP-GTP1-DY7V-G005-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; After more than [*two decades*](http://two%20decadeshttps//cnn.com/2023/12/29/us/us-mexico-border-migration/index.html) of loyal service, Alim Abdallah was about to experience his first taste of [*civilian*](https://cnn.com/videos/world/2023/11/30/lead-civilian-casualities-gaza.cnn) life.

A military discharge ceremony was planned for October 9, and two days later he was due to start a master's degree.

But instead of celebrating, his family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances gathered in their thousands to pay their last respects at his funeral.

Abdallah, 40, a lieutenant colonel in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), was killed on Israel's northern border with Lebanon on October 9, just two days after Hamas attacked southern Israel, killing 1,200 people, kidnapping more than 250 and sending regional tensions soaring.

"We had so many dreams together, we'd planned so much for the future," Abdallah's widow Mona told CNN in an emotional video interview from her home in Yanuh-Jat, a Druze village close to the Lebanese border.

About a million-strong, the global Druze community is largely spread across Israel, Lebanon and Syria. Some 130,000 Israeli Druze live in the Carmel and Galilee in the country's north. A further 20,000 reside in the Golan Heights, territory Israel seized from Syria in the 1967 war. Most Druze there identify as Syrian and have rejected offers of Israeli citizenship.

Originating in Egypt in the 11th century, the religious sect is an offshoot of Islam which permits no converts - either to or from the religion - and no intermarriage.

What sets the tightly knit community, whose mother tongue is Arabic, apart from other minority communities within Israel's borders is their fierce national pride. Druze men over 18 have been conscripted to the IDF since 1957 and often rise to positions of high rank, while many build careers in the police and security forces.

After almost 23 years of service, Abdallah, the deputy commander of the 300th Baram Regional Brigade, was a prime example.

His widow told CNN that they were out running on the morning of October 7, as they planned to do a marathon together. But when news of the Hamas attacks broke, Abdallah hurried to join his brigade.

Back home, Mona cared for their two teenage daughters and 9-year-old son. Both girls were very scared, she said, while the younger one kept waking at night, worried about her father. "She kept crying, saying she was afraid something would happen to dad," Mona said.

Mona, 40, recalled the family's last communication with Abdallah, whom she described as modest and a "perfect father."

"He was on the way to the incident and was calming us down, saying 'you don't have anything to worry about, everything's OK'.

"There was an officer with him sitting in the back who took our last photo together - of him holding the telephone in his hand and we're in the background."

Speaking through tears, she added: "I didn't think that we'd be going to a cemetery on the day after he should have been released (from military service)."

Abdallah had rushed to the border on October 9 after hearing some members of his brigade had been attacked by militants who infiltrated from Lebanon.

When Abdallah arrived, two of his men were dead, but he managed to rescue another and take on the attackers - until he was fatally shot, his widow said.

According to Abdallah's family, it later emerged that the insurgents had been heavily armed, not just with guns and ammunition but grenades, ropes and handcuffs.

CNN hasn't independently confirmed the account, but the day after Abdallah died the IDF [*issued a statement*](https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/idf-press-releases-regarding-the-hamas-israel-war/october-23-pr/idf-announcement-ltc-alim-abdullah-fell-in-combat-during-an-encounter-with-terrorists-in-northern-israel/) saying that he "fell during an encounter with terrorists who infiltrated over the Lebanese border" while trying "to engage and neutralize the terrorists."

Abdallah's wife recalled how he rushed to the scene when he heard that some of his troops were under attack. "He was always first into every operation. He acted out of pure professionalism and for the brothers he grew up with."

Abdallah was buried in the military section of the cemetery in the village. Also buried there is Lt. Col. Salman Habaka, 33, another Druze fighter and one of the first soldiers to arrive at Kibbutz Be'eri on October 7, [*where more than 120 people*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/kibbutz-beeri-israel-war-intl-cmd/index.html), including children, were killed by Hamas, and others were taken hostage. Habaka was killed in Gaza just weeks later.

While many headlines in Israel trumpet Druze heroism and loyalty, this is no utopia. There have been rumblings of discontent since 2018, when tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered in Tel Aviv to protest Israel's controversial [*"nation-state" law*](https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/19/middleeast/israel-nation-state-legislation-intl/index.html). Critics say it focuses almost exclusively on enshrining Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and fails to mention equality or minority rights.

Meanwhile, anger and resentment have grown over planning laws surrounding building on agricultural land. In some cases, this has led to the demolition of Arab property and the imposition of massive fines.

The twin issues have been keenly felt, particularly among the young, according to Gadeer Kamal-Mreeh, a trailblazing Druze journalist and former member of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, for the Blue and White party.

But they are now on the backburner as the community has chosen to "unite and fight," said Kamal-Mreeh, the first non-Jewish Israeli envoy in Washington DC for the Jewish Agency for Israel, a non-profit organization.

Part of her current role is to address university campuses and other audiences about Israel's diversity.

"I teach the public about the complexities and the fact that I exist," she told CNN. "I always open by saying 'I'm an Israeli but not a Jew. I'm an Arab but not a Muslim. I'm a minority within the Arab minority. My mother tongue is Arabic, my religion is Druze and I'm an Israeli citizen - good luck.'"

'Unite and fight'

The bond between Jewish and Druze fighters serving in the IDF is commonly referred to as a "covenant of blood," she said, and, for the time being at least, this connection trumps any political tensions.

"Since October 7 we've all been in survival mode, realizing there is an existential threat (to Israel)," she said of the community, which has spent the last four months in fear of a broader conflict involving Hezbollah, an Iran-backed Islamist movement which has its main base [*on the Israel-Lebanon border*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/middleeast/hezbollah-explainer-intl/index.html).

"Among the Druze sector we have been seeing a shift in public opinion. Leave any discussion, leave any disagreement - just unite and fight."

She highlights "many heroic stories of Druze soldiers who were not waiting for any command from anyone, to go directly to the south" near the border with Gaza.

The Druze are well known for their hospitality, which has been much in evidence since October 7, she said, with families opening their homes to evacuees from the south while others have cooked en masse for soldiers at the front.

Yet while community tensions may have been put aside, they have not disappeared, said Anwar Saab, a former IDF brigadier general and organizer of the 2018 protests.

"The (nation-state) law didn't affect our identity - it affected our sense of belonging," he said in a video call with CNN.

"The Druze community has no dream to have a country - we don't want it, we don't believe in it. It's not part of our culture or religion.

"I believe in Israel and I still have all the commitments: I pay taxes, I serve in the army and do all the things I need to do but it's not my country because the nation-state law differentiates between the communities."

The outbreak of war and the Druze sacrifices have prompted many within government to call for an amendment of the law, but Saab argues that a kneejerk reaction is not the answer. Other areas, including planning laws, education and local government, must also be reformed.

"We need a strong democracy where citizens are equal. And equality is not just about serving in the army," he said.

Omri Eilat, a post-doctoral fellow of the Middle East and Islamic studies at the University of Haifa, agrees that more should be done to ensure the Druze are treated fairly. Though not Druze himself, he is the former director of the research institute at the Druze Heritage Center in Yanuh-Jat, northern Israel.

"The Druze people were as outraged as the rest of Israel by the Hamas attacks," he told CNN. "I lost a relative on October 7. The people I worked with expressed their condolences as colleagues and because they felt it happened to them too.

"The relationship between Druze and Jews, regardless of the level of religion or political opinion or origins, remains very good and I think taking better care of the Druze is one of the only bipartisan issues in Israeli ***politics***."

He added: "They feel that they pay with blood and so they should be taken better care of."

Perhaps no one feels that sense of disillusionment with the government more keenly than Mona. In the days after her husband's death, she was visited by war cabinet minister and chairman of the National Unity party Benny Gantz, who later posted a video on TikTok of himself with the fallen soldier's son, but not by Israeli Prime Minister Bejamin Netanyahu.

"The whole government was here apart from Bibi - he only cares about himself," she said when asked about the visit, referring to the prime minister by his nickname.

"But to my great sorrow, they all came here and said we will do and do and do - but it was all talk.

"It's not just a covenant of blood. It's a covenant of life," she said, explaining that she had asked the politicians to "act for the Druze people" and amend the laws surrounding national identity and building regulations.

"We paid the highest price - losing a person who was about to start his real life but who sacrificed it for the state of Israel.

"The whole nation is with us but not the government. It really hurts."

Correction: An earlier version of this story mis-stated the location of the Druze Heritage Center where Omri Eilat worked. Eilat was research director at the Druze Heritage Center in Yanuh-Jat, northern Israel.

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