Introduction: Some Background on the Druze

The Druze are a religious sect comprising about one million people. Approximately 390,000 live in the Lebanon, 400,000 in Syria, 20,000 in Jordan and 75,000 in Israel and the Golan Heights, with the remainder scattered across the world. They live mainly in mountainous regions and have preserved, since their beginnings in the eleventh century, a cultural and political identity distinct from their Muslim and Christian neighbours.

Druzism as a political and religious movement has its origins in Isma'ilism. The Isma'ilis were themselves an offshoot of Shi’ism who differed from the mainstream Shi‘ite movement over the question of who was the rightful Imam, or leader of the community. During the period of Fatimid rule in Egypt, Isma'ilism was the official religion of the dynasty and the period saw the spread of the Isma’ili da’wa (mission) throughout the Fatimid kingdom and beyond. It was during the reign of the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, between 996 and 1021, that Druzism first evolved. Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim felt bound to carry on the proselytizing legacy of his predecessors; this he did with zeal until the last part of his reign when certain prominent figures active in the da’wa began to believe in the divinity of al-Hakim himself. The official proclamation of al-Hakim’s divinity in 1017 is seen by the Druze as marking the first year of the Druze faith.

The new religion distinguished itself from mainstream Isma’ilism by stressing the essential and overriding importance of the doctrine of *tawhid* (Unitarianism). The followers of the new religion called themselves the true *muwahhidun* (Unitarians) and their claim was that al-Hakim ‘represented the locus (*maqam*) of the Deity’s manifestation...
which completed the cycles of the unitarian message’. In spite of this break from the established Fatimid faith Druzism still bore a great number of similarities to Isma‘ilism, particularly in its adherence to certain Neoplatonic theories about the creation of the world.

Al-Hakim was instrumental in propagating the Druze da‘wa along with his supporters, the most prominent of whom was Hamza ibn ‘Ali, who is credited with having written much of the Druze canon. In 1021 al-Hakim ‘disappeared’. The historical circumstances of his disappearance are disputed by scholars but for the purposes of Druze doctrine al-Hakim went into ‘occultation’ (ghaybat), in the tradition of other Shi‘ite Imams. The issue of al-Hakim and his early followers as historical figures is not particularly important in Druze belief.

The period following the disappearance of al-Hakim marked the end of Druzism as a new religious movement sanctioned by the state and supported by the traditional structures of the Isma‘ili da‘wa. With the succession of al-Zahir to the Fatimid caliphate a mass persecution (known by the Druze as the period of the mihna) of the muwahhidun was instigated. Most of the leaders of the da‘wa, including Hamza, left Egypt for Syria. According to Druze tradition it was during this period that the Druze Canon, ‘Rasa’il al-Hikma’ (The Epistles of Wisdom) was collected. It contains 111 epistles arranged into six books, the earliest epistle dating from 1017 and the last from 1042. In that year the da‘wa was officially closed, proselytization came to an end, and according to Druze belief there have been no converts to Druzism since this date.

The closing of the da‘wa had tremendous significance for the future of Druzism; it enabled the Druze who had fled to the Levant to develop as a distinct community with strong particularistic tendencies, something which has been of political importance throughout nearly a thousand years of Druze history. What exactly is meant by Druze ‘particularism’ will be addressed in greater depth later in the book.

From the closing of the da‘wa to the Ottoman Empire, 1042–1516

With the migration of the Druze from Egypt to Syria and the closing of the da‘wa the Druze community began to develop as a coherent political force in the medieval Levant. The leaders of the various