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**Article:**

# "Keynote: Rebellions, Mandates, and Margins: Placing Druze Studies in the Historiography of the Modern Middle East."

**Michael Provence**[a]
*University of California, San Diego*

**Marie Grace Brown**[b]
*University of Kansas*

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[a] Dr. Michael Provence: mprovence@ucsd.edu
[b] Dr. Marie Grace Brown: mgbrown@ku.edu

**Abstract**

This article summarizes the keynote session of the 2025 Druze Studies Conference held at the University of Kansas on October 16–17, 2025. The session included opening remarks, a keynote speech by Professor Michael Provence, and a discussion with Professor Marie Brown on the historiographical positioning of Druze Studies within broader Middle Eastern narratives, the centennial of the 1925 Syrian Revolt, and the implications of sectarianism, colonial legacies, and transnational identities. Provence's keynote revisits his earlier work to argue that the Syrian Patriotic Revolution was not a localized Druze uprising but a sophisticated, non-sectarian movement for Syrian unity and independence, challenging colonial partition plans and mandate-era narratives. He emphasizes the significance of underused Arabic memoirs and League of Nations archives in reshaping our understanding of anti-colonial resistance. The discussion with Brown builds on these insights to address contemporary historiography and teaching, emphasizing the need to move beyond nation-state frameworks, to embrace complex identities, and to incorporate diverse sources beyond traditional archives to better capture marginalized voices and transnational ties.

**Keywords**: Druze Studies, Syrian Revolt, Sultan al-Atrash, Middle Eastern Historiography, Sectarianism, Transnational Identity, Colonialism and Resistance.

**ملخص**

تقدّم هذه المقالة ملخص الجلسة الرئيسية لمؤتمر الدراسات الدرزية لعام 2025، الذي عُقد في جامعة كانساس يومي 16 و 17 أكتوبر/تشرين الأول 2025. تضمنت الجلسة كلمات افتتاحية، وكلمة رئيسية ألقاها \ البروفيسور مايكل بروفانس، ونقاشًا مع البروفيسورة ماري براون حول موقع الدراسات الدرزية في السرديات التاريخية الأوسع للشرق الأوسط، والذكرى المئوية للثورة السورية عام 1925، وتداعيات الطائفية، وإرث الاستعمار، والهويات العابرة للحدود الوطنية. ركّزت الكلمة الرئيسية على إعادة تقييم الثورة السورية الوطنية باعتبارها حركة غير طائفية ذات رؤية واضحة لوحدة سوريا واستقلالها، رافضةً خطط التقسيم الاستعماري ومنطق الانتداب، ومؤكدةً على أهمية المصادر العربية والمذكرات والأرشيفات الدولية في إعادة صياغة فهمنا للمقاومة ضد الاستعمار. أما النقاش مع براون فقد وسّع هذه الرؤى ليشمل التحديات المعاصرة في كتابة التاريخ وتدريسه، داعيًا إلى تجاوز إطار الدولة القومية، واعتماد مقاربات متعددة الهويات، والانفتاح على مصادر غير تقليدية لتوثيق الأصوات المهمشة والروابط العابرة للحدود.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الدراسات الدرزية، الثورة السورية، سلطان الأطرش، تأريخ الشرق الأوسط، الطائفية، الهوية العابرة للحدود الوطنية، الاستعمار والمعارضة.

**Introduction**

The keynote session of the 2025 Druze Studies Conference started with opening remarks from the conference organizer, Dr. Rami Zeedan, an Associate Professor at the University of Kansas (KU) and founding Editor-in-Chief of the Druze Studies Journal. Dr. Zeedan expressed appreciation to the organizing committee and attendees, highlighting the conference's dedication to open-access scholarship and its role in fostering global academic exchange. He emphasized the journal's diamond open-access model and its alignment with the conference's inclusive, community-focused mission.

Following Dr. Zeedan, Professor Arash Mafi, the Executive Dean of the KU College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, welcomed participants both in person and online. He highlighted the conference as a significant milestone for KU and the broader international scholarly community involved in Druze Studies. Professor Mafi pointed out the interdisciplinary and global nature of the event, which includes contributions from scholars from 14 countries across four continents, representing fields such as history, political science, religious studies, and Middle Eastern studies. The conference's bilingual format, offering presentations in Arabic and English with live interpretation by KU graduate students, demonstrates KU's commitment to global engagement and student involvement. Undergraduate and graduate students have played important roles in organizing and presenting, showing how research and learning are integrated across all academic levels. Professor Mafi also recognized the sensitive topics discussed, especially considering recent events affecting Druze communities in southern Syria. He urged scholars to approach these discussions with rigor, empathy, and respect.

The final introductory segment, before the keynote and discussion, featured a presentation by Mr. Charles H. Johnson. Mr. Johnson discussed his project titled "Bibliography of Periodical Literature on the Druze in 2024 - A Scoping Review," which he conducted with Dr. Rami Zeedan and Mr. Michael Peper. He provided background on the project, which originated from the Druze Studies Project at the University of Kansas, launched in 2019 to involve undergraduate students in research about the Druze community and the broader Middle East. Since then, the project has produced literature reviews, conference presentations, and peer-reviewed publications. Building on this foundation, the team aimed to unify three major initiatives—the Druze Studies Journal, the Druze Studies Reference Portal, and the Druze Studies Conference—through an annual meta-analysis of Druze-related scholarship. The goal was to systematically track developments

in the field and enhance the Reference Portal by adding curated, open-access resources.

The 2024 study is the first formal scoping review of Druze literature, building on a 2023 survey published in the Druze Studies Journal (Johnson and Zeedan, 2024). With support from Mr. Peper, whose expertise in library sciences strengthened the study's rigor, they expanded their eligibility criteria to include not only peer-reviewed books, chapters, and articles but also master's theses and doctoral dissertations published in English in 2024. The review analyzed over 2,600 entries from nine databases and ultimately selected 93 works for inclusion. Johnson noted that the increase in literature compared to the previous year was not necessarily a sign of growth in the field, but more a result of improved methodology and broader criteria. This underscores the importance of systematic tracking in a rapidly evolving area of study.

The subject analysis revealed a strong interdisciplinary character, with political science and history projects on Druze communities that are leading the literature. The updated methodology also identified more entries than prior years in education and pedagogical studies, indicating broader thematic involvement. Geographically, the review continued to show an overrepresentation of Israeli Druze communities, particularly in fields like biology, health, and education. This imbalance is partly due to limited access to Druze populations in Syria and Lebanon, but also highlights notable gaps and opportunities for future research.

Johnson concluded by reflecting on the importance of academic involvement during recent regional upheavals. The Druze communities have been deeply affected by events after October 7th, 2023, including military mobilization in Israel, violence in southern Lebanon and the Golan Heights, and renewed sectarian conflict in Syria. These developments have increased attention to the Druze, often through media rather than academic outlets. Johnson stressed that this makes the work of Druze Studies scholars even more crucial, as the community often finds itself at the intersection of conflict and peace. He thanked the conference organizers and participants for their ongoing dedication to advancing the field and encouraged further reflection and inquiry into the complex realities facing Druze communities today.

**Keynote: "Rebellions, Mandates, and Margins: Placing Druze Studies in the Historiography of the Modern Middle East" by Dr. Michael Provence**

It is a great honor to participate in the 2025 Druze Studies Conference. I sincerely thank Professor Marie Brown for the kind introduction and Professor Rami Zeedan for the invitation. This is my first visit to Lawrence, Kansas, and I am enamored by the town and the university and impressed by the outstanding work being carried out here. The conference and the Druze Studies Project have convinced me of the significance and energy of Druze Studies as an academic discipline.

As we gather in October 2025, we commemorate the centennial of the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925. This event, often called the "Druze Revolt" by its opponents, was known to its participants as the Syrian Patriotic Revolution (al-Thawra al-Wataniyya al-Suriyya). This prompts us to ask: What vision of Syria did the revolutionaries have? What were their goals?

Reflecting on my earlier work—especially my book published twenty years ago based on research in Syria and the Druze region—I now see that I underestimated the clarity and sophistication of the revolutionaries' goals. Their main aim was clearly Syrian unity and independence, and they opposed the post-World War I mandate system that sought to divide the Arab provinces of the former Ottoman Empire (Provence, 2005a).

One source I recently revisited was the serialized memoirs of Sultan al-Atrash, the revolt's leader, published in the early 1970s in a now-defunct Beirut newspaper. These memoirs, shared with me by Shaykh Muhammad Tarabeyh in Suwayda in 2000, offer invaluable insights.[1] The Druze region, Jabal Hawran (Jabal al-Druze), located in southern Syria, had become the cultural and religious center of the Druze community in the 19th century. My time there, visiting villages and engaging with the people of the region, revealed a place of beauty, resilience, and historical importance. That research was based on about 30 months of residence in Syria, and on Syrian published and unpublished materials. I spent a lot of wonderful time among the people of Hawran and Jabal Hawran and have many cherished memories of the kindness and generosity I received.

The book came out in 2005, and since about 2010, I have spent long periods in the French, British, and League of Nations archives. League of Nations perma-

[1] Mudhakkirat Sultan," serialized in *Bayrut al-masa'* 97-120 (1975-76). There are other memoirs, including the comprehensive, multi-volume edition recently compiled and published by Dr. Rim Mansour Al-Atrash.

nent commission files contain many petitions, including those from Sultan al-Atrash, submitted via Shakib Arslan, demanding full independence for all of Greater Syria and denouncing the French mandate and its sectarian separatism.[2] These documents indicate that Sultan al-Atrash and other Druze were not responding to localized French oppression in the 1920s, but possessed, like their non-Druze allies, a clear, non-sectarian program of Syrian independence. For them, "free Syria" meant from the Red Sea to the mountains of Anatolia.

The revolt of 1925 was thus a direct response to colonial efforts to divide the region, and the revolt united the region. The architects of the mandate systems, the French and British, refused to recognize the possibility of a unified Syrian political community. Mandate Secretary General Robert de Caix had arranged the sectarian system of Lebanon, devised the Syrian micro-states of Jabal Druze and the Alawite territory, and produced a Franco-Druze autonomy agreement, which a few Druze shaykhs embraced. By contrast, Sultan al-Atrash and his allies envisioned a non-sectarian Syrian state, extending from the Taurus Mountains to the Red Sea, covering modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and parts of Turkey.

This vision sharply contrasted with the aims of colonial powers. Sultan al-Atrash's leadership united various Syrian groups, starting with the Druze, not for sectarian independence, but for national unity. His political partner in the movement was Dr. Abd al-Rahman al-Shabandar, the Syrian Protestant College-educated physician, founder of the People's Party, and an important Ottoman- and post-Ottoman-era political figure (al-Shahbandar, 1993). In fact, the Druze Studies Project's transnational and global approach aligns with this historical vision, crossing borders to examine a community that itself challenges national boundaries — still defined by colonial borders.

Three episodes illustrate the broader context of the revolt. First, the Ottoman Repression Campaign (1910–1911): An Ottoman general, Sami Pasha al-Faruqi, led a campaign against the Druze following a conflict between Druze shaykhs and the Hawranis (residents of the plains). Sultan al-Atrash's uncle was among those targeted. Sultan himself was conscripted into the Ottoman army, where he learned to read and write and was exposed to modern military practice. His father was executed after the end of the campaign, which fueled Sultan's anti-Ottoman stance.

Second, the Correspondence Between Sultan and Salim al-Atrash: During the

[2] League of Nations, Permanent Mandates Commission, carton R22, "Events in Syria," Sultan al-Atrash to League of Nations, 22 Sept 1922.

last month of the Great War (1914-1918), Sultan supported Amir Faysal and participated in the final march on Damascus. His cousin Salim, however, opposed this stance, preferring loyalty to the Ottoman state. Their letters reveal deep divisions within the Druze leadership and highlight the lack of a unified Druze political position. Sultan's response emphasized modernity, British support, and a broader vision for Syria (Provence, 2005b). Salim emphasized caution and tradition.

Third, the Robert de Caix Plan (1921): French mandate secretary-general Robert de Caix proposed a sectarian division of Syria, creating separate states for each religious group, including an autonomous Druze state. This plan resembled his earlier effort to establish a sectarian Greater Lebanon. Sultan al-Atrash and many, but not all, Hawran Druze rejected the sectarian fragmentation of their region, leading to the 1925 revolt. His slogan, "Religion is for God, the nation is for all," captured their commitment to unity.

The revolt rejected sectarian division, partition, and colonial occupation. Although the human toll was large—French forces bombed villages and cities, including Hama and Damascus—the revolution ultimately led to the failure of the partition plan. Sultan al-Atrash's vision succeeded, and the Druze played a key role in shaping modern Syria, until after independence, when a series of would-be military dictators attempted to marginalize their community.

Professor Zeedan invited me to address this history, and I took the opportunity to reconsider my earlier scholarship on the 1925 revolution. I think my earlier scholarship underplayed the revolutionaries' political awareness and sophistication. Furthermore, I now think that Atrash Mudafas (guesthouses) were the places where political ideas of post-Ottoman free Syrian unity were probably first discussed and born, starting even before the Great War. Sultan al-Atrash's mudafa was a refuge from the reign of terror of the Ottoman military governor, Cemal Pasha, in Damascus, and all the fugitive nationalist intellectuals who escaped his noose passed through it (Salibi 2005, 131).

The Syrian Patriotic Revolution had deeper roots and wider spread than many scholars, including me, realized as a strong assertion of national identity and modern political ideals. Its legacy urges us to reevaluate the stories of colonialism and resistance in the Middle East.

**Discussion and Q&A – Dr. Marie Brown and Dr. Michael Provence**

Professor Marie Brown opened the discussion by thanking Professor Provence for his keynote and for his intellectual humility in revisiting his earlier

conclusions. She posed a series of questions that framed the conversation, and the audience then provided additional questions.

**Marie Brown:** I am currently teaching a Modern Middle East survey course, and we finished the Mandate Period a week ago. I wish I had had your presentation to inform my lecture! I have gathered a few comments and questions for you to respond to, however you would like.

First, thank you for saying that you changed your mind—that your scholarship had not gone far enough or been bold enough. It is refreshing to hear someone say, "I would like to rethink this," or "I wish I had done a little bit more." Many of my comments come from both my role as a fellow Middle East historian and as an instructor. (I have several students in the audience here.) Question one: Your research, and indeed this entire conference, highlights a triangle of competing impulses: 1) To make Middle East history understandable to students, communities, and policymakers through an accessible narrative; 2) To accommodate the diversity of experiences and priorities among minority groups; 3) To prevent marginalizing these groups as perpetual "others." How do you reconcile these tensions between communal identity and national or regional narratives?

Your distinction between unity and independence also caught my attention. You proposed that unity can be a political goal separate from independence, and that unity is now an outdated political category. Because we have prioritized independence, we are left with colonial legacies and trapped within the nation-state framework. Imperial logic insisted on dividing the world into clear categories—religions, races, and nations. We lack the intellectual imagination to identify identities that do not fit within the boundaries of a map.

Relatedly, I have been considering how we prioritize land over water as a framework for organization. There are too few courses on the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, or the Mediterranean. We remain constrained by this landmass called the Middle East. I would appreciate your thoughts on challenging this limiting perspective. How can we, as scholars and teachers, shift from the boundaries of the nation-state to a sense of unity?

And finally, a broader question. A student once asked me for "good news." She said everything in our class was depressing. So, where in your research do we find celebration, joy, or beauty?

**Michael Provence:** Thank you for those insightful questions and thoughtful responses. Essentially, the answer to your first two questions is: the archives. What sparked my thinking was revisiting the sources I had collected—some I read, some

I did not, because I had a dissertation to write. Nevertheless, the voices—the things people said—are the guide.

There is a vast collection of Arabic-language memoirs and primary sources that are seldom read. Libraries in this country are filled with them. We keep repeating the same stories because we overlook these sources. Engaging with human sources—not government or official records—is essential. Sultan's memoir is remarkable. Some people did not want me to read it because some parts are politically sensitive, especially about the Ottomans.

That is also where we discover transcendent transnationalism. A hundred years ago, people in Damascus would say, "We used to take the train to Haifa to go swimming." That trip has not been possible for 75 years. These voices matter. Now, the good news—for me—is that I returned to Syria last year after 19 years. It was difficult and emotional, but I am glad I went. I go to Lebanon every year, and I find it uplifting. People I love are managing, sometimes thriving, despite the challenges. Close, ongoing human connection is the antidote. Moreover, when students ask how I handle the depression, I tell them, "I have three hours of talk therapy a week with you!"

**Marie Brown:** We have a question from the audience: "What are your thoughts on the al-Sharaa interim government this year, especially concerning the conflict with the Druze community over the summer? And how would you compare the Druze community during Sultan al-Atrash's revolt to today?"

**Michael Provence:** Those are tough questions. I did not go to southern Syria when I visited. I promised my wife I would not go, but she had house guests, and my friends in Beirut said, "You have got to go!" I was still afraid of being kidnapped, but things are better—no Russian soldiers, Wagner Group, or Iranians around anymore. Walid Jumblatt had gone to Damascus and visited Ahmad al-Shara. Mrs. Jumblatt had attended my lectures in Beirut, so I thought if I disappeared, Walid Bey might make some calls and try to find me. My wife was not impressed with my DIY "insurance policy."

It seems to me the community in Suwayda is just as divided as it was in the 1920s. The central government has no appeal. The Hawranis were slaughtered in the hundreds of thousands between 2011 and 2025. Their villages were destroyed. In contrast, the Druze were not targeted by the Asad government for complex reasons. The recent suffering makes reconciliation more complicated. The interim government is unstable, unsupported, and lacks legitimacy. It is a very tough situation. I hope for the best. I love Syria deeply and do not want anyone to suffer anymore.

**Marie Brown:** Another question from the audience. "Did we learn anything in the last hundred years? Has anything changed in how Western countries deal with the region?"

**Michael Provence:** That is a big question. The breathtaking arrogance of someone like Robert de Caix was evident in Washington 20 years ago—and six months ago, and even now. When you look into the archives, you see they did not understand much, but they also never questioned themselves—that took much longer, if it came at all. The people making major decisions were deeply uninformed. De Caix became extremely wealthy by acquiring resources from Syria and Lebanon—mostly shares in what would become BP. The Middle Eastern empire works for some people, even if it is a disaster for most—both there and here. We should not forget that.

**Marie Brown:** I believe one approach is to move beyond the idea that identity is singular. One of my graduate advisors said, "Identities are not like hats. You can wear more than one." If we deemphasize *independence* as a primary political goal and move beyond viewing the nation-state as the primary sociopolitical framework, then we open up new ways of imagining community. That is the beauty of the humanities and liberal arts: inspiring conversations about different kinds of imaginative worlds.

**Michael Provence:** I agree with that. Our classrooms should prepare students to embrace and understand others' complex identities. Robert de Caix never accepted the idea that anyone could be more than what they claimed to be. It is a pervasive problem of Orientalism and colonialism; Euro-Americans allow themselves fully nuanced, multi-faceted identities, but justify ruling the world by denying the same consideration to others.

**Audience Member:** How do you go about collecting stories in hard-to-reach places like Sudan or Greater Syria?

**Marie Brown:** I am shifting scholarly focus away from the traditional archive. My first book (2017), *Khartoum at Night*, treats the body as historical text and examines changing Sudanese women's fashion and movements under British imperial rule. The Empire left us with cataloged archives, but they miss so much. Queer stories, Black stories, disabled stories—these are not in the archive. We need to open ourselves to other kinds of sources.

**Michael Provence:** Absolutely. Imperial ethnographers were extremely eager to acquire knowledge. I enjoy exploring—I visit the strangest archives and museums I can find.

**Audience Member:** Can we hear more about the Druze role in promoting unity and anti-sectarianism, from al-Atrash to Kamal Jumblatt?

**Michael Provence:** It is an inspiring tradition of the Druze. Many in Lebanon still consider Kamal Jumblatt—and even Walid Jumblatt—an inspirational figure. Some call Walid the last honest Lebanese politician. He is still around.

**Resources**

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