



RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

By Lev Weitz



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The majority of the Middle East's population today is Muslim, as it has been for centuries. However, as the place of origin of a range of world religions – including Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and many lesser-known faiths – it remains a region of remarkable religious diversity. This article considers the place of religious minorities in the modern Middle East from three angles: their distinctive religious and communal identities, their place in the major transformations of the region's political landscape from the nineteenth century to the post-World War I era, and the challenges of contemporary political conditions.

Who Are the Religious Minorities of the Middle East?

When we label certain religious communities "minorities," we characterize them in terms of demographics: we highlight the fact that they make up only small percentages of the populations of the states in which they live. In some Middle Eastern states, like Bahrain, Iraq, and Iran, Sunni Muslims, who are the majority of the region as a whole, are themselves demographic minorities. Other than these cases, however, it is useful to think of the region's religious minorities in terms of three broad categories: Christian denominations, Shiite Muslim groups, and a variety of smaller, unrelated traditions.

A considerable number of denominations make up the indigenous Christian population of the Middle East. Each of them has a distinct identity rooted in the region's pre-Islamic past (the Middle East was mostly Christian at the time of the Muslim conquests of the seventh century). Today, adherents of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt are likely the Middle East's largest non-Muslim ethno-religious group. Coptic Christians comprise approximately 10% of Egypt's population. Christian Egyptians speak Arabic as a first language like their Muslim fellow citizens, but the Coptic Church is distinctive in that much of its liturgy is performed in Coptic, a Christian version of the ancient Egyptian language. In other words, Egyptian Christians continue to worship in the language that millennia ago was written in hieroglyphics.

Jordan, Palestine/Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq are home to a further variety of Christian communities. Among the larger ones are Arab Orthodox and Catholics who are in communion with the wider Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, but who use their native Arabic for their religious life. Lebanon and northeast Syria, southeast Turkey, and northern Iraq are home to communities of the Syriac Christian traditions. Syriac is an Aramaic dialect that was used widely in the Middle East before Arabic supplanted it. The Maronite, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Assyrian, and Chaldean churches still use Syriac in their ritual life, and many Christians in Turkey and Iraq speak modern dialects of the language in their daily life. The religious identity of these Middle Eastern Christians, in other words, revolves around a language closely related to what Jesus spoke two thousand years ago.

Cities in Syria and Lebanon are also home to communities of Armenian Christians. Many of these came to these regions after being forced out of their homeland in eastern Turkey during the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

In addition to Christians, Shiite Muslims constitute significant minorities in several Middle Eastern states. The Sunni-Shiite divide is a foundational denominational sectarian division within Islam. Historically, it arose from divergent opinions on who the leaders of the Muslim community should have been after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. Some at the time favored a number of his closest companions; others gave priority to Muhammad's family, especially his son-in-law (and cousin) Ali and his children. Those Muslims who assert that special authority lies with Muhammad's descendants through Ali came to be known as Shiites. Generation by generation, the number of Muhammad's descendants increased dramatically, and as a result a variety of distinct Shiite traditions took shape around particular lineages and distinctive beliefs.

The largest Shiite denomination (and the one that we almost always hear about when popular media mention Shiites) are the Twelver Shiites, so called because they recognize twelve individuals from the early centuries of Islam as Imams, or authoritative religious leaders: Ali and eleven of his direct descendants. Twelver Shiites make up the overwhelming majority of the population in Iran, solid majorities in Iraq and Bahrain, a plurality in Lebanon, and much smaller minorities elsewhere. The Zaydis and the Ismailis are two other Shiite groups that formed around different lineages among Muhammad's descendants. Zaydi Shiism is one of the major religious traditions in Yemen, and predominates in the north of the country. Ismaili Shiism has a small presence in Syria and Lebanon.

Several other Middle Eastern religious communities have roots in Shiite Islam and venerate Muhammad's family, but have adopted distinctive theological ideas, rituals, and scriptures in addition to the Quran that make them different from "mainstream" Shiism. These communities include especially the Druze, the Alawites, and the Alevis. The Druze form significant minorities in modern Israel, the Golan Heights, Lebanon, and Syria. The Alawites' historical homeland is northwest Syria, and they have been especially prominent in modern Syrian politics – the Assad family that has ruled Syria since 1970 is Alawite. The Alevis constitute a significant proportion of the population of Turkey.

Finally, it is important to mention several smaller religious communities that maintain a presence in the Middle East. The Yezidis of northeast Iraq form a distinct ethno-religious community with a religious tradition that mixes elements of Islam and ancient Iranian religion. A small number of Zoroastrians, followers of the pre-Islamic religion of Iran, remain in the Islamic Republic (much larger Zoroastrian communities are found today in India). Through the first half of the 20th century, indigenous Jewish communities lived in most states of the Middle East. In the decades following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, however, the vast majority left (often forcibly) for Israel, the United States, or Europe, leaving very small Jewish communities today mainly in Morocco, Turkey, and Iran.

Even this is only a partial picture of the Middle East's varied religious landscape, which should remind us that the region has always been home to a considerably diverse array of peoples.

Religious Minorities from the Ottoman Empire to the Mid-20th Century

From the 19th century to the present day, the political landscape of the Middle East has transformed drastically. The multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire gave way after World War I to the modern system of nation-states; more recently, radical Islamist groups like ISIS have challenged the legitimacy of those national borders and the states that they define. How have these transformations affected religious minorities, and how have they sought new political identities in a transformed region?

A fundamental change in the political status of non-Muslims in the modern Middle East is their transformation from subjects of Muslim empires to citizens of modern nation-states. Until the period of the Ottoman reforms of the 19th century, non-Muslims in the Middle East were protected subjects of the Muslim-ruled states in which they lived. They paid special taxes, owed obedience to the ruler, and were subject to a variety of restrictions related mainly to maintaining the predominance of Islam in the public sphere. In this system, non-Muslims were "protected persons" differentiated from other subjects on the basis of religion; religious belonging defined legal status, and different religious groups had differential rights. Perhaps the most conspicuous was the *jizya*, the special tax required of non-Muslims.

The Ottoman reform movements of the 19th century, the spread of new ideas of popular sovereignty, and the creation of the modern state system after World War I drastically transformed this state of affairs. In schematic terms, religious minorities went from being the protected subjects of Muslim rulers to citizens of modern states, with rights commensurate with those of their fellow citizens of other religions. What new forms of political identity did religious minorities engage with amidst this changing landscape?

We can examine mid-20th century Syria for examples of religious minorities embracing broader political identities that stretched beyond their own religions. One exemplary figure is a Christian native of Damascus who became a highly influential Arab political thinker: Michel Aflaq (1910-1989). Aflaq was one of the principal architects of Ba'athism, an Arab nationalist political movement that stressed the unity of the Arab people and promoted the idea of a pan-Arab national state. Arab nationalism offered a political identity that cut across religious divisions, and in this respect it proved attractive to many members of minority religions like Aflaq as a platform to assert belonging to national communities. Urban, educated Christians like Aflaq were far from the only religious minorities conspicuous in Arab nationalist ranks. In Syria, Ba'athism also attracted many Druze and Alawite military officers who came from poorer, rural backgrounds. In 1963, a cell of Ba'athist officers in the Syrian military espousing a revolutionary program took control of the state. By 1970 one of those officers, Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000), had outmaneuvered his peers and installed himself as the ruler of Syria. His family has ruled the country down to the present-day civil war. Assad hailed from an impoverished Alawite community in the country's mountainous northwest; for someone from that marginal, minority background, the pan-religious character of Arab nationalist politics (combined with the military) provided a path into Syria's political mainstream. Under the Assads' authoritarian rule, however, Arab nationalist ideology did not translate into inclusive, participatory politics for the majority of Syria's population. We will consider some of the consequences of that fact below.

Michel Aflaq and the Assads are examples of religious minorities who embraced broader, Arab nationalist political identities that stretched beyond their own religious affiliations. Other minorities in the post-World War I Middle East opted to eschew the ideal of a transreligious Arab nation and assert more particularist identities. As an example of this trend, we can consider the history of the Maronites in Lebanon. Lebanon owes its status as an independent state separate from its big neighbor Syria to a local, particularist national vision that took shape especially among a large constituency of Maronite Christians from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. This view held that the Christians of Lebanon were different from the Arab and Syrian worlds around them, a difference that should be embodied in a sovereign Lebanese state. Several factors made the development of this view possible. The Maronites had long been concentrated geographically in and near Mount Lebanon. They also had a unique relationship with powers outside the Middle East. The Maronites had recognized the authority of the Catholic Pope as early as the 12th century, and Maronite priests frequently studied at the Vatican. Partly because of their shared Catholicism, France cultivated close relationships with the Maronites in its dealings with the Ottoman Empire, using Maronites as translator diplomatic aides, and considered itself a protector of their interests. These factors contributed to the development of a Maronite particularism distinct from the broader pan-Syrian and pan-Arab identities that were also in the works toward the end of the Ottoman period. In time, that particularism would undergird the foundation of Lebanon as an independent state.

In the aftermath of World War I and the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, France was granted a "mandate" for the Ottomans' Syrian provinces (other than Palestine). Notionally, France was supposed to oversee those territories' preparation for future independence, but it treated them much like any other colonial possession. A basic tool of French imperial rule was to patronize certain religious minorities as governing or military elites. This would keep the indigenous population divided against itself and ensure the loyalty of those favored groups to French interests. In certain parts of Syria, for example, France made a point of recruiting Alawites and Druze into its mandate armies. Mount Lebanon had had a special administrative status under the Ottomans, but France expanded its territory and ultimately created Lebanon as a separate state to serve the interests of its Maronite allies. After achieving full independence in 1943, Lebanon's status as an independent country was founded on the particularist identity embraced by many among its Christian population.

Lebanon and the Maronite constituencies who were the biggest proponents of Lebanese particularism represent another path that religious minorities took to stake a claim in the political landscape of the post-Ottoman Middle East. Rather than a transreligious pan-Arab or Syrian nationalism, they opted for a national identity rooted much more closely in ethno-religious affiliation. In fact, Lebanon institutionalized religious difference as an official legal status in a particularly notable way. Despite the leading role of its Christian communities, Lebanon was and is highly diverse, with a mixed population of Christians, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, and Druze. Ever since its independence, its political system has been confessionally based. This means that all the seats in parliament are allocated to specific confessions – Maronites get a certain number, Shiites get a certain number, Sunnis get a certain number, etc. The highest executive positions in the state are allocated along confessional lines as well. This system was ostensibly meant to ensure equality among citizens: it recognized religious differences, but it allowed proportional representation for each group in the government. In practice, however, it was intended to maintain the continued dominance of France's allies: based on a census of the Lebanese population taken in 1932, Christians were given 6 parliamentary seats for every 5 Muslim ones. (The agreement that ended the Lebanese Civil War in 1990 altered the ratio to 1:1.) In Lebanon, religious difference was enshrined in the institutions of the state.

There are two further broad points to make on the basis of this overview of the different ways that religious minorities in Syria and Lebanon sought new political identities in the mid-20th century. One is that sectarian violence between religious groups is

not the inevitable outcome of ancient hatreds. Rather, it occurs often when religious differences get hardened by their association with the institutions of modern states. Lebanon, for example, was engulfed by a bitter civil war from 1975 to 1990 that broke down largely along sectarian lines, pitting Christian militias and factions against Muslim ones. The immediate causes of conflict, however, were the pitfalls of Lebanese politics rather than immutable religious divisions. The system of confessional government gave Lebanese a stake in politics based primarily on their religious affiliation, and the makeup of the confessional parliament was never altered to reflect demographic changes – which included a shrinking Christian population and the presence of tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees. Confessionalism turned religions into political factions, and so they fought a war along those lines when the balance of power in the state was destabilized and up for grabs. Religious difference had been a feature of the Middle East for centuries, and so had violence between religious groups. But modern sectarian conflict – when religious affiliation becomes the rationale for partisan political goals and the use of violence to achieve them – is a product of the institutionalization of religious difference in modern states. This is evident as well in the current civil war in Syria. Although the Assads promoted an Arab nationalist ideology that downplayed religious difference, their authoritarian rule never allowed for inclusive, popular political participation. Instead, the Assads ruled Syria through allies in the state's political and military institutions who had close ties to the ruling family and were often, though not only, Alawite. It is important to emphasize that there was no Alawite ideological program behind this method of rule. But its effect has been to institutionalize religious difference de facto by slotting members of certain religious communities into certain roles. As a result, after protests against the Assads in 2011 were met with violent repression by the state, it became easy for radical Islamists to portray the conflict as one of Sunnis vs. Alawites rather than the Syrian people vs. an authoritarian government. As in Lebanon, sectarian violence was enabled by the specific way that religious difference had been wedded to politics – in this case, as a result of the Assads' method of rule.

Finally, it is important to emphasize the long-term effects that western imperial interests have had on religious minorities in the modern Middle East. From the time of the Ottomans to the mandate period, western powers frequently pursued their interests in the region by treating religious minorities as favored middlemen, local clients, or recruits for colonial armies. France did this with the Maronites in Lebanon and the Alawites and Druze to a certain extent in Syria; the British had a similar experience with Assyrian Christians and the Sunnis of Iraq. Imperialism is not the whole story; religious minorities had their own interests in seeking autonomy or guarantees of rights from foreign powers. But when western powers granted imperial favor to some religious groups, it hardened lines between them and their fellow citizens of other affiliations. This has been a long-term contributing factor to the sectarian strife that has afflicted former mandate states like Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and Iraq.

Contemporary Conditions

Few would argue with the observation that recent history has been dire for many religious minorities in the Middle East. This holds true especially for the region's Christian populations, whose numbers have been declining through emigration for decades. Many Christians have looked with apprehension on the rise of Islamist politics and parties since the 1970s, wary of the potential danger they pose to minorities' rights of full citizenship. In the midst of political instability or war, moreover, religious minorities have been caught between larger forces, and have tended to emigrate in higher numbers – or, in the worst circumstances, been actively targeted and their cultural heritage destroyed. Civil war and radical jihadi groups in Syria; the American invasion, subsequent civil war, and the rise of ISIS in Iraq; violence between the government and Kurdish separatists in Turkey; life under Israeli occupation in Palestine – these and other factors have continued to squeeze the indigenous religious minorities of the Middle East and encourage emigration to diaspora communities in Europe, North America, and Australia. The Middle East has been a region of remarkable religious diversity for thousands of years, but contemporary political conditions make the future of that diversity highly uncertain.