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The Politics of Identity: Minority Discourse in the MENA Region

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The territorial ambit of the so-called 'Middle East' is both contested and dynamic.¹ It comprises not one, but multiple geographies and, at state level, not one but multiple sites of power, and both informal and formal legal systems. It is not a fixed, immovable space, but one that, through its historical social formation, has been continually transformed. That transformation is ongoing. Captured in the political mobilization of significant parts of civil society in the Middle East, the so-called 'Arab Spring' was also "an exercise of political-community making that entails a reimagining of the nation."² Yet the sectarian complexion of the movements (religious, ethno-political) unfolding across these new socio-political landscapes also reflects a rootedness in the identity politics of the region; a ready-made framework within which divisions are articulated. Against this backdrop, examining the shifting constructions and challenges to religious and ethnic minorities in the construct we refer to as the 'Middle East' presents a number of challenges.

To begin, the term 'minority' itself, when used in Muslim majority contexts, is contested making it difficult to create an accepted and relevant discourse

around minorities. It is sometimes conflated with its theological underpinnings of *fitna*³ and often read within the Qur'anic verse that says there are no differences among believers and therefore no discrimination in Muslim majority societies. Therefore, a starting point in thinking about the concept of 'minorities' is to understand that this term emerged as the Middle East itself emerged: a construct borne of 'a traumatic epistemological transformation.'⁴ Nations were carved from communities, sometimes dividing groupings between these newly formed states. Understanding how to engage the minorities' discourse within this context demands that we do not graft a conceptual concept onto a society or we risk "losing sight of how the social and political groups these categories describe appeared and developed."⁵ Against this, I argue that the status of socio-political-religious groups is not fixed but best understood by examining how communities engage (or are excluded from) various sites of power.

Capturing Identities

A second challenge when addressing the question of minorities in the region is how to develop this analytical framework within which we can interrogate how state practice, with regard to minorities (and ostensibly based on Islamic authority), intersects

¹ In an earlier work, this territorial 'roof' includes the oil producing countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen; the Fertile Crescent region of Israel/Occupied Territories, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria; the North African countries of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia; the sub-Saharan members of the League of Arab States, namely, Sudan, Mauritania, Djibouti, Somalia and the Comoros Islands, and, finally, the non-Arab states of Iran and Afghanistan. See Joshua CASTELLINO & Kathleen CAVANAUGH, *Minority Rights in the Middle East: A Comparative Legal Analysis*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, introduction.

² ISMAIL, Salwa "The Syrian Uprising: Imagining and Performing the Nation" 11(3) *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 547, 2011.

³ There are a number of meanings to this term, one of which is a 'form of disbelief' TAYOB, Abdulkader "Fitnah: The Ideology of Conservative Islam," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, December 1989.

⁴ WHITE, Benjamin "The Nation-State Form and the Emergence of 'Minorities' in Syria" 7(1) *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*,(2007, 64-85, 64.

⁵ WHITE (n 4) 81.

and informs modern constitutionalism and international law without posing how 'old' or 'traditional' Islamic law exists side-by-side with 'new' or 'modern' constitutional law. Reflecting on the nature of in-group/out-group relationships within a state[s] is key to addressing this second challenge. In a number of cases, the minority in question may either numerically, or politically, have a different relationship depending on individual states; dominant in one, subservient or 'at risk' in another.

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Whilst two primary categories emerge when grouping together minority communities in the Middle East – religious minorities and Muslim ethnic groups – these classifications may not be sufficient to explain a particular group's minority status within a society. As Rose demonstrates in his 2001 summary of minority studies, variables such as political and cultural factors were significant in determining minority status.⁶ That political and cultural factors play visible roles in determining minority status is perhaps most clearly illustrated in cases where the relative size of a particular community is not determinant of its status. As well, disrupting the notion that Islam is an actor that occupies a primary role in determining the minority status of groups has the effect of exposing a far more complex set of variables that 'cause the differentiation and social fact of minority status.'⁷ Despite the difficulties, there are categories that are useful when assessing 'minority' status of communities in the MENA region. Under the primary category

of religious minorities are Jews, Copts, Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Latins and Protestants and, divided further, are Islamic minorities, such as the Alawites, Druze, Babism the Baha'is, Ismailis, and Ahmadis. Ethnic and National minorities include Bedouins, Berbers, Turkoman, and Ahwazi Arabs. To these groupings, there are majoritarian minorities, political minorities, and trapped minorities. Under the category of Majoritarian majorities are those who are numerically larger but excluded from sites of power, a category that includes the Shia in Bahrain for instance. Political minorities, like 'majoritarian' groups, are excluded from power but are also minorities in terms of relative numbers; these include Shia in Saudi Arabia and Sunnis in Iran. Distinct from ethnic/national minorities, a 'trapped minority'⁸ is part of a larger group spread across two or more states. Trapped minorities are marginalized, (or in the case of Palestinian-Israelis, doubly marginalized⁹) and subject to hegemonic control by others within these states. Israeli Arabs, Palestinians, Baluchis and Kurds are included in this group. Whilst these examples are far from exhaustive, thinking about minorities in this way is a useful starting point in rethinking how 'minority' status ought to be determined.

Shaping Identity

As the relationships between these communities (majority and minority) within states in the Middle East and North Africa are recalibrated and competition for access to political and economic decision making institutions intensifies, a starting point in understanding the identity politics in the region is to examine the historical social formation of regional identities. Much has been written about the *millet* system which, on the one hand, was a system which legally defined and protected religious minorities during Ottoman rule but, on the other, contributed to inter-community antagonisms and suspicion of

⁶ ROSE, A 'Minorities' in NJ Melzer and PW Baltés (eds.), *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences* vol 14 (2001) 901.

⁷ Id 13.

⁸ This term was first introduced by an Israeli sociologist when examining the effects of 're-territorialization' on the identity and consciousness of Palestinian citizens living within Israel. See RABINOWITZ, Dan. 'The Palestinian Citizens of Israel, the Concept of Trapped Minority and the Discourse of Transnationalism in Anthropology' 24(1) *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 64-85 (2001).

⁹ Id 73-74, 76-77.

competing *millets*. Although the system is often attributed to the Ottoman Empire, historians suggest that the Ottomans merely attempted to formalize a pre-existing system through a series of Imperial edicts recognising formal autonomy for the communities.¹⁰ In areas where Ottoman rule applied¹¹ this, [...] demarcation of religious communities... translated into social practice.... In the process of reproduction, the members of each community acquired a cognitive sense of their difference in relation to the other communities and to the Muslims (thus perceiving themselves, and being perceived, as a minority group).¹²

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The issue of communitarian identity and some of the modern fissures in group identity in the region would later be encouraged through European colonial policy during the time of the waning of the Ottoman Empire:¹³ through the early negotiations concerning the territorial dimensions of the emerging colonially-governed states;¹⁴ throughout the discussion on independence;¹⁵ in the manner in which Middle Eastern boundaries were subsequently drawn and maintained;¹⁶ and within the contemporary history of the various states. It follows, then, that in framing questions related to governance, democracy, and social structures in the region, the historical social

formation of states and the legacy of the colonial 'divide and rule' policies (particularly by the French and British) must be factored.

In fact, it is precisely in examining the historical social formation of states that we can see the seeds of divisions planted. There is ample evidence to suggest that British and French governments intentionally pursued policies that preserved or even magnified the legal and political authority of religious leaders. Colonial legal policy seems to have generally followed a practice of ruling through religious and ethnic communities, and not in spite of them. By example, it was standard British policy in Egypt to channel disputes between Muslims over matters of family law (divorce, custody, etc.) into sharia courts, even when one or both parties in the dispute would have preferred to have their case handled elsewhere. Similarly, whereas prior to the colonial period in Sudan, a non-Muslim litigant (for example, a Syrian Christian) could have had her case handled by a Muslim court if she believed she would receive a more favourable verdict there, the British essentially put a stop to this practice of 'forum shopping' and insisted instead that each member of a confessional community only pursue justice within 'their' legal system. Similar policies existed throughout the Middle East and North Africa which indicates that colonial authorities had little interest in establishing secular legal systems or the sovereignty of a particular rule of law within the colony, but rather pursued policies of divide-and-rule in the MENA region. This suggests that colonial hegemony may very well have depended on the persistence of religious communities and their claims to legal and political authority, so long as those claims were only ever made in a fashion that supported colonial ends. Acknowledging a colonial legacy is not to argue a seamlessness from the colonial past to the colonial present, but to argue that rather than disrupting the millet system (where present) or preferring secular legal

¹⁰ HOURANI, Albert H. *Minorities in the Arab World*. Oxford: OUP, 1947. 63.

¹¹ It is important to note Ottoman rule and the accompanying millet system were only lightly felt in the Gulf region, effectively ended in Egypt as early as the mid-19th century, and completely absent in Yemen, Oman, Iran, Morocco, and much of Iraq.

¹² GÖÇEK, Fatma Muge. "Ethnic Segregation, Western Education and Political Outcomes: Nineteenth Century Ottoman Society." *Poetics Today* 14(3): 507-538, (1993).

¹³ For more on these issues see BRAUDE, Benjamin and Bernard LEWIS (eds.) *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*. New York: Homes & Meier, 1982.

¹⁴ See GÖÇEK, Fatma Muge, *The Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Demise of Empire: Ottoman Westernization and Social Change*. Oxford: OUP, 1996

¹⁵ WHITE, Benjamin "The Nation-State Form and the Emergence of 'Minorities' in Syria." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 7(1): 64-85 (2007).

¹⁶ HALLIDAY, Fred. *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

systems, colonial rule was rooted and maintained through ethno-religious divisions.

Sectarian entrepreneurship would remain an important technique in the post-colonial era as regimes used (and continue to use) minority communities in order to retain power, serving as both a reliable pool of regime loyalists, as was the case for the Alawite minority in Syria,¹⁷ as well as a convenient scapegoat, as is the case for South Asian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. In each case, fault lines between different ethnic, religious, or national communities were leveraged by regimes to produce favourable political conditions. Other sorts of ethnic and religious cleavages between groups were ruthlessly suppressed or ideologically discouraged, particularly during the height of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 60s.¹⁸ Minority communities, as they were constituted during the colonial period, passed through these powerful ideological and political currents which, in turn, had a profound effect on how they emerged, lending weight to the argument that, historically, a 'minority' status was anything but fixed.

That 'conflicts,' too, have shaped and reshaped states and regional politics in this region, and significantly impacted minority communities, is undeniable. In particular, the Arab Israeli conflicts have left an indelible imprint on both regional and international political landscapes. Its impact on the region has not only shaped intrastate discourse (in some cases as a source of deflection from internal dissent and unrest), but, equally, the displacement of Palestinians and the contested territorial boundaries of Palestine have influenced both the demographics and the politics of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Furthermore, the struggle for the right to self-determination for Kurds, a community that is spread across Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, has brought them into conflict with one or more states in the re-

gion. Finally, the resurgence of more radical elements within Islamist parties is the most visible by-product of the armed interventions in Iraq¹⁹ and Afghanistan, as well as the post 9-11 'war on terror.' In the shadow of these interventions and the sec-

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tarianism that would follow, the political dimensions of the cultural debate that underpinned Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' hypothesis²⁰ and Lewis's readings on the 'role' of Islam²¹ have been dusted off and reinserted into the public domain.

Reimagining Community: The Long Road Ahead

Against this backdrop, the plight of minorities has become the surface over which religion and politics and religion and human rights have played out both in the region and within the international fora. These intersections expose the most contested terrain surrounding the minorities discourse in MENA, making the task of distinguishing between how religious difference is interpreted and narrated (and indeed used) by sites of power (sectarian entrepreneurship), and religious difference as construed and experienced by individuals and communities that are subjected to, and shaped by, sectarian projects, policies, and discourse all the more critical. This is

¹⁷ For the role of Syria's Alawite minority in the Assad government, see SADOWSKI, Yahya M. "Ba'thist Ethics and The Spirit of State Capitalism. Patronage and The Party in Contemporary Syria." In CHELKOWSKI, Peter and R. J. PRANGNER, eds. *Ideology and Power in the Middle East: Studies in Honor of George Lenczowski*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1988. pp. 160-184 and BATATU, Hanna, "Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Cause for Its Dominance" in *Middle East Journal* 35: 331-344 (1982).

¹⁸ On the role of minority communities in the development of Arab national identity, see JANKOWSKI, James and I GERSHONI. *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*. New York: Columbia, 1997 and TROUTT POWELL, Eve, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan*. University of California Press, 2003.

¹⁹ The presence of militant groups in Iraq, one offspring of the intervention, has had immediate and dire effects on the human rights situation in general, but the burden on minority communities has been particularly heavy. See TANEJA, Preti. *Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication: Iraq's Minority Communities since 2003*. London: Minority Rights Group International, 2007.

²⁰ HUNTINGTON, Samuel. 'The Clash of Civilizations' (1993) 72(3) *Foreign Affairs* 22-49.

²¹ LEWIS, Bernard, *Islam and History: Ideas, People and Events in the Middle East*. Chicago: Open Court, 2001. For a more informative read see EMON, Anver, Mark Ellis, and Benjamin Glahn (eds.). *Islamic Law and International Human Rights Law*. Oxford: OUP, 2013.

particularly pressing as dominant readings of what underpins conflict or violence in so many states in the MENA region is so often reduced to explanations that are framed as sectarian or discriminatory. As one scholar has rightly argued: “The discourse of sectarianism is a modern discourse of religion-in-politics authorized by particular authorities in particular times and places. It relies on a fixed and stable representation of the shifting roles played by that which is named as ‘religion’ or ‘sect’ in politics and society. The complex and often conflicting forces that come together in any given episode of violence or discrimination subvert the stable notions of sectarian motivation and causation that form the bedrock in which such accounts rest.”²²

So as the political landscape in the MENA region continues to shift and change, it is important to resist focusing on the ‘failures’ of the Arab revolutions and recognise that, as Jillian Schwedler has rightly argued, in the wake of these events, it may well be difficult for even the most authoritarian of regimes to assume it is business as usual.²³ That there are fissures that have accompanied these protests and

that minority communities throughout the region have been subject to horrific human rights violations is undeniable. Yet the narrative that accompanies these events is often simplistically framed as atavistic with analysis ascribing a ‘role’ to Islam. While Islam, with its origins in the Arab world, does indeed factor at both state and civil society level and, therefore, contains characteristics inextricably linked to these multiple geographies, it is equally true that Islam is not an actor. Limiting our understanding of what is happening locally to a ‘clash of civilizations’ masks a much more complex reading of the way religion and sect are engaged and understood at the local level. As I have detailed, however, the sectarian divisions that have emerged as these processes unfold, have long historical legacies planted and cultivated by old and new members of the repertory company. It should be unsurprising, then, that shedding these historical hangovers and reimagining a political community that “in practices and discourse” will counter and undo these “practices of government and [often sectarian] rule,”²⁴ will be a formidable but necessary task.

²² HURD, Elizabeth Shakman, ‘Politics of Sectarianism: Rethinking Religion and Politics in the Middle East’ *Middle East Law and Governance* 7 (2015) 61-75, 61.

²³ SCHWEDLER, Jillian (2012) Forget the first anniversary of the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera, 28 Feb 2012, Available at: www.aljazeera.com/in-depth/opinion/2012/02/201222774440144769.html; last accessed 29/3/2016.

²⁴ ISMAIL, Salwa “The Syrian Uprising: Imagining and Performing the Nation” 11(3) *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 547, 547 (2011).