

Foreword

Twenty years ago, the Western invasion of Iraq unsettled the regional balance in the Middle East. A decade later, Syria fell into a devastating civil war that drew major powers and extremist fighters. In recent months, beyond the enormous human cost endured by the Palestinians, the devastating repercussions of the current war in Gaza are probably of the same order, although of unknown scope. This conflict leads us to reflect on the ongoing and complex intercultural contribution, due to the long history of this area and its changing processes from a *longue durée* perspective, as stated by the historian of the Mediterranean Fernand Braudel. Therefore, we have devoted issue 36 of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* to “Minority Cultural Roots in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean”. This is a necessary undertaking in order to recall that the Mediterranean mosaic contains a great variety of cultures arising from the three monotheistic religions in their infinite varieties and from the empires that have amalgamated local cultures. Colonialism, in its territorial distribution and whose map the new states have inherited, has contributed to complicating the settlement and rights of the region’s communities.

In the Middle East, local solidarities have long prevailed. The differences in language, religious practice, tribal affiliation or ways of life between the neighbours could be seen very clearly. On a broader level, however, the feeling of belonging to a group was more abstract. Yet Muslims and non-Muslims knew that they were part of a primordial community, and thereafter of empires to which they owed loyalty to a greater or lesser extent. Until the 20th-century, few saw themselves as part of a people capable of forming a nation, and even less so a state in its current form, categories established more recently.

The dossier “Minority Cultural Roots in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean” focuses on some examples presented by specialised university scholars who belong to these cultures, most from the diaspora. Due to limitations of space, it would be impossible in this dossier to talk about all religious or ethnic minorities, given the breadth of the Mediterranean mosaic. Therefore, we have focused on a few representative communities, which we hear about in the media without always clearly recognising their origin or their complicated history until the present.

Not all the cultures we feature are minorities but they are often minoritised, as they have millions of people, as in the case of the Amazighs, the Berbers from North Africa, the Kurds, divided between different states, or the Copts in Egypt. We have included reflections on the Balkan Peninsula, a border and demarcation line between different traditions – Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity and Islam – as well as an area of difficult interrelations between different ethnic and religious groups. We have also included gypsies, currently

spread all over Europe, reflecting on their origins and adaptation processes. In the Middle East, apart from the aforementioned Kurds and Copts, we look at the Sephardic Jews, the Alawites of Syria, the Alevis, mainly in Turkey, or the Druze, who are also present in various states, such as the Christian communities of the Middle East. Although very much a minority, some have survived since the beginning of the Christian era.

This issue seeks recognition between cultures and, with it, a more reflective and fluid Mediterranean dialogue, needed to overcome conflicts, sometimes arising from ethnic or religious extremisms and on other occasions from the selfishness of the different powers. Let us hope that knowledge helps to overcome the malaise that sometimes arises from a Mediterranean steeped in history and culture, and that deserves a better future.

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