
MINORITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST: INTEGRATION OR AUTONOMY?

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The cultural heritage of minorities in the Middle East has persevered in view of varied and many experiences, ranging from full protection to marginalization. Minorities can be classified into different categories; they are also driven by a wide variety of pragmatic and ideological motivations. Some minorities belong to religious minorities; others are ethnic-linguistic minorities. And still others are a combination of both. While some minorities in the Middle East have aspired for a separate national home—such as the Kurds in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey—others are content with grants of equal rights within a country (as in the case of the Copts in Egypt). The fact that some minorities have been overrepresented in power hierarchies helps explain their support for the maintenance of the status quo. Consider, for example, the case of Sunnis in Iraq prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion.⁽¹⁾

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Exploring the possible linkage between human rights situation of religious minorities in the Middle East and the political and legal contexts merits particular attention. Historically, the status of the “People of the Book” has been secured by contractual obligations to protect non-Muslims (the *dhimmis*). This legal obligation has guaranteed their life, body, property, freedom of movement, and religious practice. Protection had been extended against taxes of various kinds, including a head tax (*jizya*) and a property tax (*kharaj*). The traditional *Shari’a* notions of *dhimmis*, critics note, should evolve into a coherent and humane principle of citizenship in the “territorial state.” To equate citizenship solely with nationality at the expense of other forms of membership, especially ethnic or religious minorities, they argue, is fundamentally wrong.⁽²⁾

The actual situation of the *dhimmis* more often than not has been closely conditioned by the economic and political circumstances prevailing within Muslim countries. Some experts point out that the nationalist question of minorities, such as the Kurds, is one of poverty, misguided government policies, lack of public revenue allocation to the regions where minorities reside, and most importantly a result of rampant inequalities. The Kurds’ support for the Turkey’s AKP (the Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party), they note, “is not a result of its Islamist discourse, but because of the perception their material needs can better be met by the AKP than the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party), the DTP (pro-Kurdish Democratic Social Party), and other Kurdish ethnic parties or by the Kurdish mayors of Kurdish cities in the southeast and east.”⁽³⁾

Most written constitutions of Muslim states now confirm the principle of equality of all citizens irrespective of religion, sex, and race.⁽⁴⁾ Today, in some countries (Lebanon, Jordan, or the Islamic Republic of Iran) non-Muslim and other minority groups are guaranteed a fixed share of seats in representative political bodies.⁽⁵⁾ Some observers have emphasized the possibilities of a struggle for human rights from within a Muslim framework.⁽⁶⁾ Others have attempted to decouple human rights and religion,

arguing that Islamism, as a religious nationalist ideology has had a markedly negative effect on human rights throughout the Muslim world.⁽⁷⁾ They argue against privileging Islam such that human rights must be warranted in Islamic terms in order to be seen as relevant. Islam, Anthony Chase insists, “is neither responsible for rights violations nor the core basis for advancing rights.”⁽⁸⁾

The human rights difficulties facing religious and ethnic minorities in the contemporary Middle East involve a wide variety of rights, including violations of physical integrity and the right to life, denial of civil rights and the right to citizenship, discrimination in social, political, and economic domains, as manifest in employment and educational opportunities, and restrictions on freedom of movement. The human rights challenges relate to community-level affairs, including denial of recognition as a religious community, freedom of worship and religious practice, and the right to enjoy political representation within their communities. This paper focuses on the two minority group—the Copts in Egypt and the Kurds in Iraq—to examine the effectiveness of integration or self-rule.

MINORITIES DEFINED AND CLASSIFIED

The discussion of minorities has always entailed wide-ranging issues, including those of social justice, human rights and dignity, and cultural and political autonomy. There are different understandings and meanings of the term “minority.” The *Encyclopedia of the World's Minorities* defines the term with a view toward its history and complexities:

Traditionally, a minority group has been understood to have an indigenous relationship to an area—what is called an autochthonous relationship—where it is, at a given time, numerically inferior to another group. Such a group is understood to share a cultural characteristic that one member identifies in

another. This shared culture may take the form of ethnicity, race, customs, language, or religion; and it receives larger legitimacy by virtue of its long-standing presence in a region. Although this definition functions within limited contexts and is acknowledged throughout the encyclopedia, it is far from universal, because it fails to account for a surplus of historical issues and influences that we confront today.⁽⁹⁾

Since the post-war period, minorities in the Middle East and North Africa have engaged in an extensive communal protest and rebellion. In the postwar period evidence in some Islamic states points to numerous incidents of mistreatment of minority groups, such as Ahmediyas (Pakistan), Baha'is (Iran and Tunisia), Berbers (Algeria and Libya), Coptic Christians (Egypt and Sudan), Jews (Syria), and Jews and Christians (Yemen). Some experts have found that minority groups in the Middle East are subject to the most severe political discrimination of any region in the world and are second only to Latin America in the severity of economic discrimination.⁽¹⁰⁾

There is, however, less inequality and more accommodation among communal groups in North Africa. The most active communal group in the region—the Berbers of Algeria and Morocco—have enjoyed cultural interests, political incorporation, and economic improvements. North African states have also practiced greater religious tolerance than many other regions. The Coptic Christians in Egypt are a prosperous and influential religious minority, although they are subject to some political restrictions. The Jewish community in Morocco enjoys a similar status.⁽¹¹⁾

THE COPTS IN EGYPT

Known as the Christians of Egypt or native Egyptians in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the Copts were a majority in Egypt from the fourth to the seventh century. Although estimates vary widely, Copts represent

approximately 8 percent of the Egyptian population (6.5 million), and some say 95 percent of them are Christians.⁽¹²⁾ Historically, Copts have not constituted a cohesive political group, even as they have been well-integrated into the fabric of the country's society.⁽¹³⁾ Coptic is the ancient language of Christian Egypt and the Copts are an Arabic speaking minority who only retain the Coptic language in their liturgies.⁽¹⁴⁾

The advent of the Crusades led to a deterioration of the position of the Copts, as the Crusaders scorned them as heretics, forbidding them from making their traditional pilgrimages to Jerusalem.⁽¹⁵⁾ The Copts suffered persecution in Egypt after Chalcedon (Orthodoxy in the 5th and 6th centuries) by Christians—under Byzantine control—until the Islamic-Arab conquest of Egypt (640-642 CE). After that, they found themselves coexisting with their Muslim rulers, sometimes under an uneasy but peaceful armistice, and at others under attack.⁽¹⁶⁾ The Islamic conquerors were interested in the civil and financial, but not religious affairs of the Copts.⁽¹⁷⁾ When Alexandria was conquered by the Arabs in 641, the indigenous Patriarch Benjamin, who was treated sympathetically by Muslims, emerged from hiding. He returned triumphantly from Upper Egypt and was greeted everywhere by the people. Amr ibn al-As (died 661 CE), the renowned Arab conqueror of Egypt, was impressed with him and paid his respects to him in Alexandria. Benjamin functioned as a representative of the church and of the people. The church buildings that had belonged to the Melchites (the Byzantine Christians), were turned over to the Copts.⁽¹⁸⁾

During Jamal Abdul Nasser's tenure (1952-1970), a few Copts were nominated to the parliament, often in consultation with the Coptic patriarch, so as to maintain a formal Coptic representation in the political structure. The upshot was the gradual erosion of the influence of the Copts in political life and the surge in the role of religious institutions and church hierarchy.⁽¹⁹⁾ During the 1970s, Anwar al-Sadat's policies fostered Islamization programs in an attempt to undermine secular leftist opposition. The conversion from Islam to Christianity became illegal under Egypt's penal code when in 1977

the “law of apostasy” was announced. Reacting to this law, thousands of the Copts and church authorities participated in a voluntary “fast of protest.”⁽²⁰⁾ This and similar policies led to the intensification of restrictions on the social and political activities of the Copts. Muslim militants plundered and burned Coptic shops and churches. Despite the guarantee of religious equality before the law contained in article 40 of the Egyptian constitution, Copts continue to suffer discrimination, especially regarding the appointment to key governmental positions such as provincial governors, city managers, police commissions, university presidents, and directors of educational districts.

It should be noted, however, that Copts in Egypt are often so completely integrated into Egyptian society that their religious identity has faded away into the national one. The same may be said of their Muslim compatriots.⁽²¹⁾ President Hosni Mubarak declared January 7—Coptic Christmas—a national holiday. In some respects, the Copts have advanced within Egyptian society and in other spheres of life are subject to restrictions. They are economically advantaged and have engaged in commerce and medicine, law and accountancy. They tend to be better educated than Muslims and are well represented in the bureaucracy and military—albeit not in the upper levels of government and the military.⁽²²⁾ Rarely are any Copts appointed to posts in the judicial system, police ranks, or army. The People’s Assembly or (*Majlis al-Sha'b*) has 454 seats, of which 444 are elected by popular vote and 10 appointed by the president. Parliament deputies serve five-year terms. Copts are not proportionally represented in the People’s Assembly: in 2005, only 2 out of 444 were Copts.⁽²³⁾

Since the 1970s, the growth of Islamist politics and the flow of laborers to and from the conservative Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, where they have absorbed that region's conservative form of Islam, have enhanced the influence of orthodox Islam and made life more difficult for Christians. Violence between Muslims and Christians breaks out sporadically. In the most dramatic confrontation, settled Arab Bedouins on May 31, 2008,

attacked monks who had been reclaiming the 1,700-year-old monastery of Abu Fana from the desert in southern Egypt.⁽²⁴⁾ Some Copts believe that they are treated as second-class citizen in Egypt, as they require governmental approval, for instance, for the construction of any church. Copts point out that state security services have little interest in safeguarding Christians.⁽²⁵⁾

Similarly, Copts are underrepresented in both the teaching and research faculties at universities. There are few or no Copts in the highest-level university administrative positions.⁽²⁶⁾ Despite anti-discrimination laws, Copts are also subject to official and unofficial religious discrimination. This situation has provided an incentive for conversion. Some Copts, however, have done well. Under the British rule, one Copt—the original Boutros Ghali—attained the Prime Ministership in 1908. But he was later denounced as too pro-British and was assassinated in 1910. The Boutros-Ghali family has produced the former Acting Foreign Minister and later United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, as well as the present Minister of the Economy and Foreign Trade, Dr. Youssef Boutros-Ghali. The other Coptic member of the Cabinet was the Minister of State for Environmental Affairs, Dr. Nadia Makram ‘Ebeid.⁽²⁷⁾

The government strictly enforces an 1856 law that renders it illegal to build or repair a church without presidential approval. In January 1998, President Hosni Mubarak delegated authority to provincial governors to approve such permits. Since then, it has become much easier to get permission for building and renovating churches. There is no Coptic political party or movement, however.⁽²⁸⁾ Some analysts have in the past expressed concerns about whether Copts will be truly accepted as equal and legitimate citizens of Egypt.⁽²⁹⁾ One of the current debates is whether the rise of Islamism in Egypt has posed serious challenges to the Coptic communities.

Coptic activists have articulated several demands in recent years. Some of their demands include: more representation in the political system; greater equality in promotions in academia, the public sector, and the state bureaucracy—especially the police and the military; removal of religious

identification from government issued documents where religion is irrelevant; easier licensing procedures for church construction; greater emphasis on the Coptic heritage and history in school curricula; and less interference by the state and security apparatus in issues pertaining to the Christian faith.⁽³⁰⁾

THE KURDS IN IRAQ

The Kurds in northern Iraq, as a minority ethnic group, have stressed an ethnic identity to distinguish themselves from both the Sunni-Arab minority and the Shiite-Arab majority. The Kurds' separate linguistic-cultural identity on the one hand and political identity on the other have overshadowed their religious identity.

Since the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds have intensified their struggle for self-determination. A combination of internal and external factors, including their socioeconomic marginalization and unequal center-periphery relations in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, has dashed their hopes. Unlike Iran and Iraq, where the Kurds received official recognition, in Turkey they were long the subject of officially sanctioned discrimination and neglect.⁽³¹⁾ Clearly, the construction of Kurdish identity has been affected by such factors as socioeconomic and political exclusion. Despite worldwide support for the principle of self-determination, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey have resisted separatist claims and instead supported the territorial state quo.⁽³²⁾

Although most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, they are not generally overly religious. There exists, however, an enormous religious diversity among the Kurds. Sheikhs continue to play a key role in both religious and political domains in rural areas. Like the rest of the Muslim world, Islamist forces have been gaining prominence among a minority of Kurds.⁽³³⁾ Some Kurdish intellectuals have argued that Kurdish ethnicity is a constant factor, which predated Islam and will outlast all religions. Furthermore, they have insisted

that the Islamic religion was imposed on the Kurds by violence and that Arabs used Islam to decimate the Kurds.⁽³⁴⁾

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, public opinion for Kurdish independence has continued to grow throughout northern Iraq, in large part because the order has collapsed in the face of increased armed resistance from Sunni Arabs. In the meantime, U.S. policies have contributed to the processes of state formation among the Kurds, even as the United States has pursued policies to recreate a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state within the “unified” polity.⁽³⁵⁾

THE RISING KURDISH ETHNONATIONALISM

The growing uncertainty over the Kurds’ demand for autonomy has further complicated the outlook of democratic rule in Iraq. Since April 1991, after the first Gulf War, the Kurds’ region in northern Iraq has enjoyed an autonomous status. This situation, however, preserved the territorial integrity of the country.⁽³⁶⁾ The issue of independence became a part of a referendum, as hundreds of Kurds erected tents at official polling places in Iraq’s Kurdish areas and asked voters to take part in an informal referendum on whether Kurdistan should be independent or part of Iraq. According to the referendum’s organizers, the tally turned out to be overwhelmingly (98.76 percent) in favor of independence.⁽³⁷⁾

Although Kurdish leaders have officially spoken of a democratic, federal, pluralistic, and united Iraq, they have long espoused the notion of an independent Kurdistan. Massoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party, has openly expressed his aspiration for an independent Kurdistan. Peter Galbraith, a former American diplomat who had watched the collapse of Yugoslavia and was monitoring the voting in Kurdistan, noted that the breakup of Iraq was inevitable largely “because the Kurds had finally got close to independence and were in no mood to stop now.”⁽³⁸⁾

During constitutional negotiations, the Kurdish leaders settled for a

constitutional draft that preserved their region's de facto independence and financial autonomy, while granting them full control over the disputed province of Kirkuk. More importantly, the Kurds insisted on a fixed amount of Iraq's national budget and full sovereignty over their region's petroleum, including the right to export it.⁽³⁹⁾ The oil fields in Kirkuk represent almost two-fifths of the country's proven petroleum reserves. This fact, among other things, has convinced the Kurds to keep all their options open, especially their attempt to expand into oil-rich territories. The Kurds' uncertain history and future has alerted them to this reality.⁽⁴⁰⁾

The implications of who claims Kirkuk merit particular attention, as this ethnic-sectarian conflict could potentially spread beyond the Iraqi borders. Aside from oil fields, Kirkuk is a setting for all the ethnic-sectarian conflicts characteristic of Iraq. Kirkuk is home to the Turkmens, who have always looked to Turkey as their protector. While Kirkuk is the center of the Turkmen population in Iraq, the city is seen by the Kurds as "a touchstone of their identity."⁽⁴¹⁾ The competition for staking a claim on Kirkuk will likely pit the Turkmens against the Kurds, threatening to convert Iraqi internal politics into a regional conflict.⁽⁴²⁾ Turkey's long-term interest in preventing the formation of an independent, oil-rich Kurdistan is a familiar subject of internal debate within Turkey given its own large and rebellious Kurdish minority. The neighboring countries of Iran and Syria have pursued similar interests.

The question remains: to what extent a future Iraqi polity will have to take account of vertical communal identities. The Kurdish minority is likely to push for some form of autonomy in a federal structure.⁽⁴³⁾ That Iraqi Kurds have been autonomous since 1991 and have operated separately from Baghdad has created structural problems that would make it painful for the Kurds to return to their pre-1991 situation. The dominant language in northern Iraq is now Kurdish, with no pressure on children to learn Arabic. Kurdish national universities advance their own educational system and the Kurdish administrations have established their own standing military forces.

“The Kurds have tasted freedom,” experts argue, “and will want to keep it.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ This accounts for why the Kurds are reluctant to transfer their loyalty and commitment from tribes, villages, ethnic and sectarian groups to the larger central political system. The real danger is that Iraq’s assembly and its interim constitution may serve as a purely strategic instrument of the occupiers. Some Islamist leaders in the Middle East view the U.S. democracy initiative as an attempt to consolidate U.S.-Israeli hegemony in the region, both by promoting pro-U.S. regimes and by spreading Western secular, liberal values to the detriment of Arab-Islamic identity and culture.⁽⁴⁵⁾

CONCLUSION

To fully understand the status of minorities in the Middle East and North Africa requires more than a simple assessment of the national and local rules of governance or the evaluation of the system of taxation and personal family status laws. It is particularly important to understand the broader context in which political power and resources are distributed. Consideration of the way in which states allocate resources and power, as well as the way in which they integrate minorities into the social and economic benefits of the national growth and development, is thus crucial. While the Copts are better integrated into the Egyptian economic and political system, the Iraqi Kurds aspire for further autonomy in a country under occupation since 2003. Minorities that tend to seek further equalities, basic rights, and social justice within the system stand a better chance of improving their lot compared to those who wish to secede or seek further political and cultural autonomy. Those ethno-political minority groups, such as the Kurds, who pursue separation from states in which they reside or the formation of a new, autonomous region, are most prone to either employ or encounter violence while addressing their actual or perceived grievances within local, national, regional, or international communities.

It is evident that the path toward integration of minorities will not be easy. Perhaps the single most important step is to enact a form of legislation that allows the members of a minority group to enjoy equal political, economic, and cultural rights. But this need not and should not mean complete autonomy, which may pose a threat to the host country's national cohesion and stability. Both the political regime and the minority groups should initiate necessary steps to pave the way toward eventual integration—both economically and politically. Ultimately, however, their integration should be pursued not just for its own sake, but as a fundamental step toward social justice and equal rights for all the members of the society irrespective of ethnic, religio-cultural, social, or political status. ❖

NOTES:

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