Minorities in West Asia and North Africa

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This series seeks to provide a unique and dedicated outlet for the publication of theoretically informed, historically grounded and empirically governed research on minorities and ‘minoritization’ processes in the regions of West Asia and North Africa (WANA). In WANA, from Morocco to Afghanistan and from Turkey to the Sudan almost every country has substantial religious, ethnic or linguistic minorities. Their changing character and dynamic evolution notwithstanding, minorities have played key roles in social, economic, political and cultural life of WANA societies from the antiquity and been at the center of the modern history of the region. WANA’s experience of modernity, processes of state formation and economic development, the problems of domestic and interstate conflict and security, and instances of state failure, civil war, and secession are all closely intertwined with the history and politics of minorities, and with how different socio-political categories related to the idea of minority have informed or underpinned historical processes unfolding in the region. WANA minorities have also played a decisive role in the rapid and crisis-ridden transformation of the geopolitics of WANA in the aftermath of the Cold War and the commencement of globalization. Past and contemporary histories, and the future shape and trajectory of WANA countries are therefore intrinsically tied to the dynamics of minorities. Intellectual, political, and practical significance of minorities in WANA therefore cannot be overstated. The overarching rationale for this series is the absence of specialized series devoted to minorities in WANA. Books on this topic are often included in area, country or theme-specific series that are not amenable to theoretically more rigorous and empirically wider and multi-dimensional approaches and therefore impose certain intellectual constraints on the books especially in terms of geographical scope, theoretical depth, and disciplinary orientation. This series addresses this problem by providing a dedicated space for books on minorities in WANA. It encourages inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches to minorities in WANA with a view to promote the combination of analytical rigor with empirical richness. As such the series is intended to bridge a significant gap on the subject in the academic books market, increase the visibility of research on minorities in WANA, and meets the demand of academics, students, and policy makers working on, or interested in, the region alike. The editorial team of the series will adopt a proactive and supportive approach through soliciting original and innovative works, closer engagement with the authors, providing feedback on draft monographs prior to publication, and ensuring the high quality of the output.

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Kail C. Ellis
Editor

Secular Nationalism and Citizenship in Muslim Countries

Arab Christians in the Levant
To all Christians in the Middle East, to all who labor for justice and equality in the region, and in appreciation for the work of the Sacred Congregation for the Oriental Churches and the Pontifical Oriental Institute.
This volume was inspired by the current plight of Christians and other vulnerable communities in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the disappointments of the Arab Spring of 2011, Islamist religious radicalism gained strength, particularly in the formation of militant groups such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), and its offshoot, the Islamic Caliphate. In January 2014, ISIS fighters spread throughout western Iraq, adding new territory to their impressive territorial conquests in neighboring Syria. Their conquests in Iraq included the historically Christian villages and towns in the Nineveh Plains near Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city and one of the historic centers for the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. ISIS’s advances were extensively reported by numerous international news agencies with headlines such as *End of Christianity in Iraq?; Christianity Is Being Driven Out of the Middle East; Is This the End of Christianity in the Middle East?*; *Christians in Iraq: Should They Stay or Should They Go?* Extensive analyses of this situation appeared in newspapers, opinion pieces, academic journals, and think tank publications. Accounts also appeared about the persecution of other religious and ethnic groups such as Turkmen, Yazidis, Shabaks, and Shia Muslims, who were expelled or killed by ISIS. Human Rights Watch reported that the Islamic State seemed intent on wiping out all traces of minority groups from the area it controlled in Iraq.

Although religious persecution has been perpetrated by a variety of regimes and more recently by independent Islamist actors, notably in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, it was ISIS’s sudden capture of Mosul on 4–10 June 2014
that stunned the world. Mosul had a population of 1.5 million. Although much of this population had already fled, there were still an estimated 65,000 Christians (whose presence in Mosul dates to the second century) in the city when ISIS seized control. One of ISIS’s first acts was to execute an estimated 4000 Iraqi Security Force prisoners. Then, after consolidating its hold over dozens of cities and towns in western and northern Iraq, the group formally declared itself the “Islamic Caliphate,” dropping all mention of Iraq and Syria, and turned its attention to the destruction and defacement of Christian churches and monasteries. Christian properties were daubed with the Arabic letter for “N” (نا, the first letter for the Arabic word, Nasarrah, “Christian”) to indicate that they now belonged to the Islamic state. Christians were given the choice to either convert to Islam, pay a jizya (a tax levied on non-believers), or to leave. The Islamic Caliphate robbed at gunpoint some of those who fled via the road leaving the city. The ultimatum was widely reported and triggered an international wave of criticism; among the critics were Muslim scholars.

The brutal tragedy of the fall of Mosul and its surrounding areas, along with the difficult situation of Christians in Syria and in the region in general, spurred Villanova University and its Center for Arab and Islamic Studies to sponsor an academic examination of the historic presence of Christians in the Middle East. Included in this examination would be the Christian contributions to Islamic society as well as an examination of possible strategies that might improve their current situation as well as that of other vulnerable communities in the region. The initial title for this study, “Religious Minorities and the Struggle for Secular Nationalism and Citizenship in the Middle East,” envisioned a comprehensive approach designed to acquaint the participants and the general public with the full range of the 2000-year presence of Christians in the Middle East. An international team of academics, diplomats, journalists, and members of the military—resident in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States—was consulted and asked to comment on the initial outline for the conference. Over 50 individuals were contacted, many of whom were gracious in their comments and suggestions. Fourteen of these individuals were selected to present talks. As a result of this consultation, the conference evolved to reflect current scholarship and to refine the topics under discussion. The term minorities was discarded in favor of “Christian communities in the Middle East and the Struggle for Secular Nationalism and Citizenship,” and then, to better describe the subject matter, “The Struggle for Secular Nationalism and Citizenship in Muslim Countries:
Arab Christians in the Levant.” The conference was held on 5–6 December 2016 at Villanova University with over 150 people in attendance.

The authors of the chapters in this volume use the current status of Christians as a lens to focus their analyses on three broad topics. The first, “Christian Cultural and Intellectual Life in the Islamic Middle East: A Shared History,” deals with Christianity’s historic roots in the Middle East and the modern history of Christianity in the wider Levant. Christian contributions to art, culture, and literature in the Arab world are given extensive coverage, as are the contributions of Christians to Arab politics. Finally yet importantly, this topic covers the essential role of education in the Arab world and Christian involvement in establishing schools, universities, hospitals, and other social services.

The second topic, “Human Rights, Combating Persecution and the Responsibility to Protect,” focuses on the predicament of Arab Christians who supported authoritarian regimes in the belief that these regimes would better safeguard their rights, a view with which the author of one chapter disagrees. This shortsighted disregard of democratic principles, elections, parliamentary law, and constitutions had severe consequences. The other authors who address this topic advocate human rights as the best approach to protect Christians and other citizens. The last chapter in this section discusses strategies to protect Christians and other vulnerable groups from persecution. The discussion of the limits of current proposals to intervene militarily on the behalf of these groups or to establish safe areas for them is timely. According to reports at the time, aid groups were very concerned about the transfer of Syrian militants, their relatives, and other refugees from Lebanon into Syria bound for Idlib province in northern Syria, an area largely controlled by jihadists. The transfer involved more than 100 buses and was the largest formal repatriation of refugees to Syria since the war began in 2011. However, the lack of oversight by international aid groups raised concern about the refugees’ welfare.

The third topic addresses “The Arab Spring, the Shia/Sunni Divide, and Their Impact on Regional and Geopolitical Tensions.” The authors exploring this topic stress the importance of not oversimplifying the Shia/Sunni divide, as these groups are not monolithic. Rather, the emphasis should be on the rule of law and on economic development as the most effective measures to safeguard Christians and other vulnerable communities. The authors also stress the need for a strategic assessment of the security and political issues reshaping the Middle East today, and their impact on the Christian communities across the region. Particularly
useful is the analysis of the impact of U.S. foreign policy on the political dynamics in the region under the Obama administration, as well as a preliminary analysis of President Trump’s impact on regional security.

In my view as the editor of this volume, the topics and discussions of the conference presented provide three important insights. First is that despite widespread perception, persecution is not a major source for the numeric decline of Christians in the Middle East. Although persecution of Christians and other religious and ethnic communities who have suffered for their beliefs, been forced to flee their homes, and now are refugees must in no way be minimized, emigration and the higher birth rate of Muslims, not persecution, is the major cause for the numeric decline of Christians in the Middle East. Despite the current dire situation, church leaders such as the Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako I are encouraging Christians to stay in their homelands. Pope Francis, speaking of Iraq and Syria, said, “We cannot resign ourselves to thinking about the Middle East without Christians, who for 2000 years have confessed the name of Jesus [there].”

It is critical to understand the dynamics of Christian emigration from the Middle East, the first phase of which began in the later part of the nineteenth century and continued until World War I. During that time, thousands of indigenous Christians left the Ottoman Empire in search of economic opportunities. After World War II, socio-economic factors continued to influence the emigration of Christians and to a lesser extent, of non-Christians. In the post-independence period, from the late 1940s to the present time, Christian emigration continued to rise, primarily due to economic insecurity but also due to political instability and military conflicts: the 1948 Palestinian–Israeli conflict, the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), and the series of wars in the Persian Gulf—the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1989), the First Gulf War (1990–1991), and the American invasion of Iraq, which began in 2003. Therefore, to focus on emigration and persecution in isolation from the demographic and socioeconomic factors, regional conflicts, the lack of human rights, and the rule of law is to risk viewing Christians solely as victims of persecution and mere relics of a fading past. Such a narrow focus robs Christians of agency as significant actors in their own societies.

Second, the reference to Christians as *minorities*, which aside from a numeric description, categorizes them as marginal and second class, is equally problematic. Arab Christians do not consider themselves minorities; they regard themselves as members of a pluralist society, albeit one in which they have suffered discrimination. Recent scholarship is changing the view that Arab Christians constituted segregated and victimized com-
munities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and rightfully positions Christians and Jewish communities as integral parts of the larger societies to which they belong—culturally, politically, and demographically. This emphasis was addressed powerfully by Cardinal Leonardo Sandri in his letter greeting the participants in the Villanova conference of 5–6 December 2016 that is cited in this volume.

Third, there are longstanding developmental issues at the heart of the instability in the Middle East: stagnant economic development, lack of education, authoritarianism, and state repression. As several authors emphasize, the most fundamental concepts that define states and the lives of their citizens must be defined and validated, including the core issues of statehood, nationhood, sovereignty, religiosity and secularism, communal and national identity, and citizenship.

The recommendations represented by the authors and their topics are essential in clarifying the causes of the current malaise in the region and in securing equality, human rights, citizen participation, and the security of all Middle Eastern communities. My hope is that this book will contribute to a better understanding of Christians in the Middle East, as well as of the fundamental principles that will help to improve the life of all citizens in the region. Only by illuminating the historical context of the Arab Christians’ predicament, the many ways in which their environment changed, and by developing strategies to address their situation in the future will there be hope for all the vulnerable communities in the Middle East.

This volume is dedicated to the Vatican’s Congregation for the Oriental Church and the Pontifical Oriental Institute, which for the last hundred years (1917–2017) have endured great changes in the Christian East. As noted by contributor Anthony O’Mahony, these changes have included the collapse of Ottoman Empire, the genocide and massacre of Armenian and Syriac Christians, the Bolshevik Revolution, the destruction of the Russian Orthodox Church, efforts to rebuild the churches in the interwar period, World War II, the imposition of Communist rule in the Eastern European states, the Cold War, the Second Vatican Council, and renewed conflict in the Middle East. From the Arab–Israeli conflict to the current conflict in Syria, the effects of war have challenged Christianity in the Middle East to the point that many are concerned for its survival. Throughout a century of turbulent events, the two institutions mentioned above have protected the rights of the Christian churches of the East, maintaining the liturgical, disciplinary, and spiritual patrimony of their heritage, and making known to the Latin West their rich history of cultural, social, and political contributions to the region.
I would like to thank the many people who helped to make this volume possible. In particular, I would like to thank Father Peter M. Donohue, O.S.A., president of Villanova University, for his support of the conference and of the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies. My appreciation also goes to Mr. Antoine Frem and Mr. Masoud Altirs, who provided generous financial support, and to Most Reverend Paul Nabil Sayah, former Archbishop of Haifa and the Holy Land of the Maronite Church and Curial Bishop of the Maronite Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch, who reviewed the draft program and provided valuable advice. I am also indebted to Father Richard G. Cannuli, O.S.A., who created the beautiful icon, “Mary Queen of Peace,” specifically for the conference. I would be remiss not to thank Ms. Lorraine McCorkel, the graphic designer of the attractive conference brochure, as well as all the staff in University Communications for their excellent assistance.

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As it was important to have the support of universities in the Middle East for this conference, I would like to thank Dr. Nabeel Haidar, provost of the American University of Science and Technology in Beirut, Lebanon, and Brother Peter Bray, FSC, vice chancellor of Bethlehem University, Bethlehem, Palestinian Authority, for co-sponsoring the conference on behalf of their respective universities.

Special thanks are due Nadia Barsoum, my administrative assistant, who gave tremendous assistance in handling the travel and accommodation arrangements, proofreading the manuscripts, collating the conference and book materials, and much more that made this endeavor a success, and to Angele Ellis, who provided indispensable editing support. To these individuals and many more too numerous to name, I offer my sincere thanks and appreciation.

Villanova, PA

Kail C. Ellis
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Kail C. Ellis

The chapters in this volume are by an international team of academics, diplomats, journalists, policy institute scholars, NGO members, and the military from the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. The authors examine the importance of Christian history and presence in the Mashreq counties of the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt), from the rise of Islam to their contributions to Arab politics. Using the current status of Christians to focus their scholarship, the authors analyze the origins of the crises facing not only Christians and other vulnerable groups, but of all the peoples in the region, regardless of religion or belief. They also propose recommendations and strategies to foster religious freedom, human rights, and an inclusive political system that ensures equality of citizenship for all communities to participate fully in their societies.

The struggle for secular nationalism in the title stands in contrast to religious nationalism, which is the relationship of nationalism to a particular religious belief, dogma, or affiliation that can lead to the politicization of religion. Secular nationalism asserts the right of citizens to be free from religious rule and of governments that impose religion or religious practices upon their people. The Arab Christians of the subtitle are the volume’s focus and reflects the volume’s emphasis on full citizenship as a circular...
remedy for the problems facing Christians and other communities in the Middle East.

Christians have been an integral part of the Middle East for over two millennia. Eastern Christians made formative contributions to the theological development and richness of early Christianity. With the arrival of Islam they came under Muslim rule, but demographically they were the majority in many places until well into the eleventh century. They contributed to the development of the arts, sciences, philosophy, and literature of what has come to be known as the Islamic Golden Age of the mid-seventh to mid-thirteenth centuries. They share the same history and a large part of the cultural heritage of the Muslim majority population. The only important difference, which has had numerous social and cultural consequences, is their adherence to the Christian religion. As Christians gradually diminished in number, Christian history, presence, and witness, as if frozen in time, was largely forgotten or neglected, both in the cultures they had a large part in shaping and in the West. Numerical decline is only a partial reason for the disappearance of Christians from serious scholarship on the Middle East. According to Paul S. Rowe, “Christians have long been viewed as the object of other actors. For some, they were products of Muslim societies that imposed upon them the debatably restricted or protected status of \textit{ahl al-dhimmah}. For others, they were the appendages of external forces determined to use them as devices of their interests. The concerns of such external forces only contributed to Christians’ portrayal as vehicles of imperialism.”

In an insightful article, “Recent Perspectives on Christians in the Modern Arab World,” L.C. Robson cites several reasons why scholars of the modern Arab world largely avoided the topic of Christians. Among these reasons is that Islam was traditionally viewed as central to the definition of the region; therefore, secular scholars in the West and Arab historians in the Middle East were reluctant to engage in research on Arab Christian communities out of concern that the topic would inevitably raise questions about sectarianism and communal politics that they wished to avoid. Consequently, most scholars presented Arab Christians “as essentially marginal, appearing either as hapless victims of Muslim domination or as agents of the Western powers with which they had religious and political connections.” Robson cites Ussama Makdisi’s conclusion that the reluctance of scholars to research the religiously sensitive topic of Christians, “perhaps in the interests of putative national unity, has allow[ed] the void to be filled with scholarship obsessed with the idea of
perpetual hostility between Christians and Jewish minorities and an oppressive monolithic Muslim majority.” Only in the last several years have scholars sought to rectify this scholarly gap by exploring the ways in which Middle Eastern Christians function in their societies. Anthony O’Mahony, a well-known scholar of Christianity in the Middle East, objects to the conventional characterization of the Middle East as “the Muslim World.” Using this concept and phrase, he contends, automatically renders the ancient Christian community as “alien.”

Referring to Christians and other vulnerable communities as “minorities” poses another challenge. In common usage, the term “minority” is associated with inferiority, weakness, and subordination. The term serves to emphasize the marginal status of these communities, despite numerous instances of dominant and powerful minorities ruling over nations, such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and the Assads of Baathist Syria.

Nevertheless, the term “minority” can have multiple meanings. Besides its reference to a group’s relative size, in the context of the Arab Middle East it also connotes an identity that is “ascribed” (i.e., assigned by others). When it refers to a group’s religious identity, ipso facto it establishes the group’s relationship to the state through confessional criteria, and reinforces sectarian behavior and interactions that can lead to political expectations and demands for privileges or, alternatively, to frustration or alienation. The anthropologist Seteney Shami maintains that “minority,” with its connotations of inferiority and exclusion from the body politic, leads to constructing a “majority” that is alleged to represent the nation. He cautions, “Even if the debate focuses on positive aspects such as minority rights, tolerance or diversity, or the privileging of a certain social group, the minority-majority pairing is a dichotomy that asserts the (often unwelcome) interruption of the allegedly homogenous or harmonious national community by a group that it is ‘out of place.’”

Another example of the use of the term “minority” to dominate a population is given by Benjamin T. White in his study *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*. During the French Mandate, “minority” was used to solidify French control of Syria, by “reinforcing religious divisions by distributing seats to representative bodies on religious communal grounds; by extending legal autonomy in matters of personal status to communities which had not previously been autonomous; and by granting territorial autonomy to certain religiously defined groups.” According to White, “This policy adhered to the colonial theories of Marshal [Hubert] Lyautey, whose principle of association as
opposed to assimilation had been developed in Morocco. Personal status law was crucial to French efforts to divide Syria’s communities religiously.”

White argues that the contemporary use of the term is not useful in describing the place of “minorities” in relation to the wider society. He claims, “there was no articulated concept of ‘minority’ prior to the modern period because minorities did not exist.” Rather, Islamic law placed all non-Muslims in a subordinate place, not because they were minorities but because they were non-Muslims, with no reference to number or ethnic identity. Since the term carries too much ideological baggage, White says it should be discarded as an analytical category.

**Developing the Concept of “Minority” and Ottoman Reforms**

The concept of “minority” developed from the *ahl al-dhimmah* status or “protected” status of the Christian and Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire. It had its origin in the Islamic tenet that the prophetic tradition culminated from Judaism and Christianity and that the adherents of those religions, people with revealed books (*ahl al-kitāb*), had their place in Islamic society as “protected” communities (*ahl al-dhimmah*). In return—and as a mark of their submission—these communities were expected to pay the *jizya* (the root meaning of which is compensation, whereby they ratify the compact that assures them protection). It was a *per capita yearly tax* on able-bodied males of military age as a substitute for military service. However, *dhimmis* who chose to join military service were exempted from payment, as were those who could not afford to pay. Gradually, *dhimmi* protection was extended to other select religious communities.

After the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottomans developed the *millet* system to deal with their newly acquired sizable Christian communities that allowed them to choose their religious leaders, collect taxes, use their language, and have their personal laws and own courts. Although the system was built upon the foundation of the *ahl al-dhimmah*, by creating a structure of limited autonomous communities under their own religious leaders as a way to deal with religious diversity and coexistence, the *millet* system de facto separated these communities from their societies, paved the way for the introduction of the political ideology of European nationalism into the empire, and designated them as “minorities.” As noted by White, the personal status laws of the Ottoman *millet* system were ready-made for adoption by the French Mandate to differen-
tiate Syria’s religious and ethnic communities, and were critical to maintain-
ing French control of that country.

Although the *millet* system granted limited autonomy to non-Muslim communities, its primary function was to enable the Ottomans to rule a diverse population. The empire remained intensely Muslim. According to Ussama Makdisi, the “*millet* system reinforced the emphasis on religion in a profoundly unequal political and social order. At the top of this ‘empire of difference’ sat the ‘shadow of God on earth,’ the Sultan, whose rule was legitimated by his supposed upholding of Islam, his defense of the realm against infidels, and his stamping out of heresy within it.”¹² Although Ottoman Muslim supremacy was deeply imbued within the ideological, political, and legal terrain of the empire, for Makdisi, the issue “is not that it [the empire] was ‘tolerant’ or ‘intolerant’… Rather, the point that needs to be made is that the empire witnessed centuries of coexistence in which different Muslim and Christian and Jewish communities, and the ecclesiastical leaderships of different communities, accepted the fact that they were bound to live side by side—to literally coexist—for the foreseeable future.”¹³

The French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars that spread the revolutionary principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity were the first powerful manifestations of European nationalism, which found its expression in the rational faith in a common humanity and liberal progress. As an ideology based on the premise that the individual’s loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpasses individual or group interests, European nationalism implicitly identified the state or nation with the people. Whereas previously for the different nationalities of Christendom as well as for those of Islam there was but one civilization—Christian or Muslim, and one language of culture, Latin (or Greek) or Arabic (or Persian), the principles of European nationalism were that each nationality should form an autonomous state.¹⁴

When European nationalism was introduced into the Ottoman Empire in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, it met a diverse population that had no previous experience of the separation of politics from religion. Although nationalism was a new concept, Albert Hourani has noted that “Christians could support such ideas without the hesitation of Muslims, whether Arab or Turkish, because they did not possess that deep and final loyalty to the empire, as the shield of Sunni Islam, which almost all Muslims had, and which was indeed the cause of their hesitations.”¹⁵ Thus the concept of nationalism was readily received in the religiously heterogeneous *millet* communities and provided the basis for numerous and competing nationalist movements. Nationalism also enabled the European powers to posi-