

REVIEW ARTICLE

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SECTARIANISM, MINORITIES, AND THE SECULAR STATE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

MAHDI ‘AMIL, *Fi al-Dawla al-Ta’ifiyya* (On The Sectarian State) (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2015 [1986])

MELANI CAMMETT, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014)

BERNARD HEYBERGER, *Les chrétiens au Proche-Orient: De la compassion à la compréhension* (Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages, 2013)

SABA MAHMOOD, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015)

TOBY MATTHIESEN, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014)

MAX WEISS, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi’ism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010)

BEN WHITE, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012)

Over the last few years there has been much scholarly interest in sectarianism and minorities in the Middle East. New scholarship has appeared against the backdrop of communal violence in Iraq triggered by the US-led invasion, the intensifying Saudi–Iranian rivalry, the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS that have made sectarian violence a centerpiece of their ideology, and the ongoing Syrian Civil War.

This essay looks at a group of notable recent works that contribute to our understanding of sectarianism and minorities in the Middle East. While four of the books include some variation of the term “sectarian” in their title and two use “minority,” all of these engaging and timely texts offer a range of different views on sectarianism and minorities. Broadly speaking, the authors examine the historical circumstances that produced modern political sectarianism and minority status as legal/political categories, as well as the politics that maintain and reproduce them and/or their legacies. There is broad agreement on two fundamental premises: first, that sectarian political identity and the political-juridical idea of minority status have recent origins; second, that their genesis and/or practice are connected to problems of governance in the modern state.

Max Weiss, Melani Cammett, and Mahdi ‘Amil, in their works on sectarianism in Lebanon, shed light on the history, practice, and operation of that country’s

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consociational political arrangement, which allocates political power along sectarian lines. Weiss's study of the French Mandate period explains how and why Lebanese Shi'a became sectarian, and he uses this case to look at Lebanese sectarianism writ large. Cammett and 'Amil explicate the politics of Lebanese sectarianism by focusing on the logics of its operation. Cammett looks at the strategies that inform how sectarian parties decide to whom they make available their social welfare and subsidy programs. She asks why some of these parties offer services exclusively to their own sectarian in-group while others provide generous assistance to out-group communities. 'Amil, using a political economy perspective, concludes that sectarianism obfuscates the reality of class struggle in the country and that, as such, the sectarian state is merely a manifestation of bourgeois rule.

Toby Matthiesen, in his work on the origins and politics of sectarian identity among the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia, also uses the term "sectarianism." Driving the book are questions about how and why sectarian identity becomes salient at certain times. Describing sectarianism as "an instrument for elites trying to maintain their privileges or for strategic groups trying to challenge the existing order," Matthiesen focuses on competition among Saudi Shi'i activists and intellectuals over how the community should imagine and represent itself in a national political context in which it faces open discrimination (p. 15).

Of the two books that focus more explicitly on minorities, Saba Mahmood's looks specifically at the predicament of religious minorities in 20th- and 21st-century Egypt in attempt to critique secularism and the modern secular state. Mahmood describes the political, legal, and ultimately epistemic consequences of secularization on Copts and other religious minorities in Egypt. Meanwhile, Benjamin White's book surveys the emergence of the terms "minority" and "majority" in Mandate Syria. White is interested in how the Mandate state eventually induced a variety of religious and ethnic groups to think of themselves as minorities and a disparate Sunni Arab population to cast itself as a majority.

The only book of the seven without the term "sectarian" or "minority" in its title is Bernard Heyberger's *Les chrétiens au Proche-Orient: De la compassion à la compréhension*. This does not mean that Heyberger is unconcerned with the question of minorities and sectarianism. His book looks at aspects of both as it recounts the history of the churches in the East and their dealings with one another, their connections to Western Christendom, and their relationships with local Muslim-majority polities. In so doing the book offers an account of Christianity in the region that is more nuanced than the simple minority-in-danger-of-extinction narrative that has become so prevalent over the past few years. While Heyberger emphasizes the value in recounting the history, experience, and modern imaginaries of the numerically smaller (compared to Muslims) Christian communities in the Middle East, he also suggests that studying Christians in the region is "key for thinking about the relations between the West and the Near East" because the presence of Middle Eastern Christians upsets the cultural essentialism at the heart of the "clash-of-civilizations" view of East-West relations (p. 12). That Arab Christians did not come to the region as crusaders or colonialists, but rather are indigenous to the East and speak Arabic, undermines narratives of absolute cultural difference between East and West. Heyberger's book shows how representations of cultural difference have been constructed in a particular context where

memories of an idealized past substitute for the complexity of history (hence the book's subtitle).

All of the books are concerned with the elaboration and practice of collective religious political identities in the modern Middle East. Matthiesen argues that in contrast to other cases of sectarian discrimination, "the problems associated with being Shia in Saudi Arabia . . . are also about religious beliefs per se" because the Shi'a are considered "infidels" by many within the state-aligned clergy (pp. 8–9). At the same time, he reminds us that "sectarian identities are only relevant at certain times" and other forms of identification can and do override that of sect (p. 16). At the most basic level religion as such plays only a minor role in these books. In line with Cammett, the authors view sectarianism as a "political phenomenon rather than . . . [an] expression of essential cultural difference" (p. 11). As such, the books focus on identifying the factors involved in the emergence of sectarianism and in the politics of its operation. Mahmood, Matthiesen, White, and Weiss detail the contingent process through which sectarian groups (or minorities) came to be constituted and to constitute themselves as political actors. Cammett and 'Amil are interested in explicating how the political strategies sectarian groups employ align with their aims. Heyberger takes a historical approach to shed light on how Middle Eastern Christians (particularly Arabic-speaking Christians) have represented themselves and have been represented by others, especially in the West.

While the books differ in terms of research questions, argument, and methodology, each in its own way, even if obliquely, considers all of the following questions: Is the Middle East exceptional in terms of sectarianism? To what extent are the problems generated by sectarianism incidental to the nature of modern governance? Or, more simply, are sectarian tension and strife incidental to the nature of modern governance, or the result of the imperfect and/or incomplete application of modern governance in the region? We can divide the authors' views on these topics into two broad categories. White, Weiss, Matthiesen, Heyberger, and, to some extent, Cammett bemoan the fragmentation of public life, the absence of national integration, the majoritarian domination of the social, cultural, and political spheres, and the lack of pluralistic tolerance across the region, all of which they attribute to the persistence of political sectarianism. This group of authors emphasizes the importance of creating a shared political vision to support a new kind of polity that would eschew collective ascriptive identities and integrate all citizens as individuals who are equal before the law. Ultimately, the answer to the problems of sectarianism in the region is to establish a form of governance informed by (liberal) notions of equality and religious freedom within a secular legal framework.

The other group includes 'Amil and Mahmood. While 'Amil also calls for an end to sectarianism, he is critical of "bourgeois" alternatives and dismisses as a sham the liberal sense of equality that undergirds them. 'Amil acknowledges Lebanon's particular history, but ultimately understands Lebanon as part of a broad category of postcolonial states in which a dependent colonial bourgeoisie holds sway. Thus, Lebanon is not exceptional in any fundamental sense; nor is sectarianism in Lebanon a historical aberration—it is just another episode of bourgeois rule. Mahmood is even more explicit and critical of liberal solutions to the minority question. In her view, the precarious condition of religious minorities in Egypt is neither the result of authoritarianism nor due to the absence of liberal politics in that country. On the contrary, the abject condition of religious minorities in Egypt is a direct consequence of liberal governance and its attendant

process of secularization. Both ‘Amil and Mahmood argue that liberalism cannot solve the sectarian problems created by modern liberal/bourgeois governance (in whatever guise it takes).

While the other books are largely written from a historical perspective, the works by ‘Amil and Cammett focus on the general order and functioning of modern sectarianism. Cammett looks at the political logic behind the provisioning of educational, health, and social services by sectarian political parties in contemporary Lebanon. Her book outlines the factors determining how these parties provide services to their in-group supporters and the extent to which they offer them to out-group communities. Emphasizing that the “content and salience of sectarian groups” changes over time, she cautions against assuming that practicing a certain religion translates into a particular political identity (p. 11). Her focus is on political/sectarian parties as institutions and the strategies that they undertake in their quest for national power. Cammett compares these parties in terms of how they distribute social welfare services, subsidy programs, and other kinds of support as a strategy to gain public backing and political power within their own sect, as well as the extent to which they attempt to reach beyond their own sect.

Cammett offers an analytical model that accounts for both intrasectarian competition and the sectarian parties’ varying political strategies vis-à-vis the state (p. 34). When facing in-group competition, she argues, these parties tend to distribute their social services to in-group members so as not to appear as if they are neglecting their sectarian obligations and to discourage their members from defecting to rivals. In addition, sectarian parties that pursue what she calls “state-centric” political strategies (i.e., involving engagement with formal state institutions) are more open to providing charitable services and subsidies to out-group communities on whom they may depend for votes in elections (p. 3). By contrast, political parties following “extrastate” strategies (i.e., not involving engagement with formal state institutions) are more likely to focus narrowly on in-group communities and specifically on their own core supporters within the sect (pp. 3–4). They depend heavily on these core supporters because they may require them to partake in risky activities ranging from street protests to protracted sit-ins to militant actions (p. 24).

Cammett concludes that because the Sunni-dominated Future Movement (established by Rafiq al-Hariri) faces little in-group competition and has followed a strictly state-centric political strategy, it offers benefits to out-group communities. By contrast, the Shi‘i Hizbullah movement, utilizing both extrastate and state-centric strategies and facing in-group competition from its rival, the Amal Movement, undertakes a multifaceted approach to welfare distribution. Historically, as Hizbullah pursued an extrastate political strategy, it favored its core supporters who were asked to make great sacrifices. But as its political calculations shifted gradually toward a state-centric approach, it has tried to establish relationships with out-group communities, evidenced by its distribution of social services. For its part, the Shi‘i Amal Movement has followed an exclusively state-centric strategy since the end of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90). However, due to its rivalry with Hizbullah and history as a patronage party, it focuses its social services on its own in-group supporters. Finally, the mainly Christian parties—the Lebanese Forces, the Kateab, and the Free Patriotic Movement—which have also adopted state-centric political strategies since the Civil War but have faced strong in-group competition from each other, concentrate their services “almost exclusively” on other Christians in an effort to establish themselves as the dominant representative of the community (p. 166).

Like Cammett, 'Amil attempts to decipher the operational politics of Lebanon's sectarian system. At first glance, his book may seem like an outlier among the works reviewed here, having been published originally at the height of the Lebanese Civil War in 1986. 'Amil's work was, in some sense, a response to those who described the war as a sectarian conflict pitting Christians against Muslims. In rejecting this view, he argued that the problem of sectarianism was a product of bourgeois hegemony and the absence of democratic politics. It might be helpful to consider current circumstances in the region with this insight in mind. Indeed, that Lebanon's primary sectarian divide has taken a completely different form—Sunni versus Shi'a—bears out the broad thrust of 'Amil's intervention. At this moment when sectarianism seems to be tearing the region apart it should not come as a surprise that 'Amil's work is enjoying a resurgence in Lebanon and beyond. The book is replete with insights that have general applicability beyond the Lebanese case.

Through an analysis informed by the Civil War and the collapse of the central state, 'Amil suggests that the only solution for Lebanon is to discard sectarianism as the organizing principle of governance. He works through his thesis by engaging with and critiquing a spectrum of views on the sectarian system from a broad range of Lebanese public figures, intellectuals, legal experts, and scholars. In its exhaustive historiographical review of Lebanese history, the book bears a certain resemblance to Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). 'Amil argues that the sectarian state in Lebanon, though often represented as operating according to a form of consensus between sects, is little more than a cloak for the domination of Lebanon's dependent bourgeoisie (p. 255).

'Amil's aims are twofold: to describe how the sectarian state functions in Lebanon, and to analyze its political objectives. He describes sectarian rule as a form of control in which the bourgeoisie represents society as one defined by sects, and then for each sect it presents itself as the guardian of sectarian interests and security. In a society putatively split along narrow sectarian lines, the divided working class is thrust into a dependent relationship with each sect's bourgeoisie, which promotes itself as the natural representative and protector of the group. This has the effect of heading off any political alternatives to bourgeois rule within the sectarian system.

Whereas Cammett and 'Amil provide insight into the strategies of sectarian groups and the distortions that sectarianism affects on the political imagination, Weiss, Matthiesen, White, and Mahmood explore the political, legal, and institutional conditions that produced the ideas and practices of modern sectarian and minority identity. For them, there is little doubt that the state played a major role in generating these conditions, and that the career of the modern state in the region cannot be separated from the pressures brought to bear by the European powers in late Ottoman times. Ottoman rulers undertook massive efforts at restructuring the state (*Tanzimat*), whether because of outside demands that they protect religious minorities or accept commercial treaties and financial practices that opened the way for capitalist penetration, or because they sought to stave off European encroachment. Historians have come to recognize that these efforts strengthened rather than weakened religious identities among its subjects. Ussama Makdisi has shown in his *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000) that the institutions and conceptual legal frameworks adapted by the Ottomans from

European models, which were ostensibly aimed at building a centralized state and creating an overriding single Ottoman national identity in place of a multiplicity of religious identities, were in fact steps toward modern sectarianism. Heyberger adds that as a result of the Ottoman reforms, which continued into the Young Turk era, the “organization of the population on religious grounds was not only maintained but strengthened” because communitarian structures became “impregnated” with nationalist ideas (p. 119).

There is some irony in the fact that French officials argued that the sectarianism they introduced in Mandate Syria and Lebanon was a modified version of the age-old Ottoman millet system (Heyberger, p. 117; White, p. 48; Weiss, p. 99). They claimed that this new system adhered to local tradition in which religion was the primary marker of identity and religious law paramount, with religious functionaries wielding temporal authority over non-Muslim communities on behalf of the state (White, p. 49). As White and Heyberger note, the millet system throughout Ottoman history was largely no more than an ideal and to whatever extent it had existed the Ottomans began to introduce a modern citizenship regime decades earlier. Furthermore, the Ottoman reforms, endorsed by European powers, occurred precisely at the moment when ethnic and national identities—ideas with their own western pedigrees—began to create centrifugal pressures on the Ottoman Empire (Heyberger, p. 117).

Initial Ottoman efforts notwithstanding, the process of modern state building in much of the region was only fully realized with direct European rule after World War I. For some of these authors, the war and the imposition of the Mandate system did not represent a complete rupture with the Ottoman period. White, for instance, remarks that aspects of the millet system remained operative into the Mandate period for immediate political reasons and to distract observers from the fact that “the situation of a minority in a nation-state is riskier than that of a millet” (p. 59).

One point of general consensus among all of the books is that the modern state, “with its unprecedented degree of control over territory and intervention into the lives of the population,” was a necessary condition for the emergence of modern sectarianism and minority status (White, p. 90). The authors mark the presence and effects of the state in a variety of ways. For example, they draw attention to the new legal institutions and structures created during the colonial/Mandate period, the establishment and power of an international legal regime of minority protection norms (supported by the newly established League of Nations), the increasing ideological cogency of sectarian/minority identities, and the idea of political secularism and its attendant notions of the public and private spheres.

Comparing how Weiss, Matthiesen, White, and Mahmood theorize the state raises some interesting questions about agency and structure. None of these authors dispute that some form of imperialism (such as direct colonialism, League of Nation Mandates, direct and indirect pressure on Ottoman authorities, etc.) was the vehicle through which the modern state form, with its secular notions of politics and religion and new legal categories of minority and sect, was imposed. In a variety of ways these books speculate about whether the imposition of this new form of political organization opened up areas for local actors to exercise agency. For Weiss, White, and Matthiesen, the answer is “yes.” The modern state and its new political and legal regimes, with their singular imperatives, created new fields of action. This group of authors sees the newly established states as sites of competition and contestation where local populations, and in particular local

elites, exercised agency in the face of European power. For example, Weiss explains how the Lebanese Shi'a parlayed the Mandate state's establishment of the Ja'fari court into a tool for political bargaining with French authorities. White describes how newly recognized minorities used the Syrian Mandate state's legal structure to advocate for themselves and at times maneuver against their French overlords. Taking a slightly different tack, Matthiesen emphasizes the agency of identity entrepreneurs, or Shi'a identity activists (who "sought to create a unified historical narrative [of the Shi'i community] and through civil society organizations, publishing houses, online journals, discussion forums, sport clubs, private schools and public festivals tried to strengthen the boundaries of the [Shi'i] community" [p. 217]), in their struggles with state-aligned elites within the Shi'i community and with the state itself.

While Heyberger's work has a broader scope than the others (he focuses on the entire region rather than on one country), it too invokes a similar story of the powerful modern state producing a Middle East divided into "ethnicized" religious identities (p. 143). Yet Heyberger also details other factors important to this process, such as complicity between religious figures and colonial/state officials, the challenges of secularism, and the majoritarian tendencies of modern ideologies. By situating this story in a *longue durée*, he teases out nuance that works more narrowly focused on a particular period and a particular country might not. For example, he suggests that demographic shifts and urbanization beginning in the 17th century explain in part the decline of the ecumenical syncretism that was a part of rural religiosity across the region (p. 143). Likewise, he suggests that reform movements (some dating to before the 17th century) within the churches of the East helped lay the groundwork for an emergent sense of self that increasingly drew distinctions between Christians and Muslims (p. 141). Heyberger argues that these movements' emphasis on confessional particularism also came to influence Muslim reform movements later on (p. 142).

Are these Church-based reform movements then an instance where locals exercised agency by participating in the production of now recognizable forms of modern sectarian identities? Heyberger does not seem to think so. He shows how western intervention in the region beginning in the late 19th century transformed the nature of these movements and, in a sense, engendered in them a more nationalist and/or ethnic character. In the end, reformism was fundamentally redirected toward the production of nationalized religious identities that would have been unimaginable to early religious reformers. It is worth considering whether we could, by analogy, extend this argument to other reform currents that emerged in the 19th century. Did those movements, despite their conceit, play some role in generating modern sectarian identities and elaborating a universalizing secular project? In some ways Makram 'Ubayd's (in)famous pronouncement that he was "Muslim by country and a Christian by religion" may give a sense of how the *nahḍa*'s historicist secular vision was eventually harnessed to modern state-building projects (Mahmood, p. 12).

In her book, Saba Mahmood takes a more circumspect approach to the question of agency and is less sanguine on the issue than some of the other authors. Whatever agency locals may have exercised within the new state structure, they were ultimately partners in a "universalizing project that is often cast in civilizational terms" (p. 148). The kind of political equality that newly sectarianized or minoritized populations hoped to achieve—that is, one indifferent to religious affiliation—was a local articulation of that universal

project. Based on her reading of Marx's *On the Jewish Question*, she suggests that even as religion is excluded from the political sphere, the secular modern state "reorganizes it through its legal and political mechanisms" (p. 211). The liberal secular state purports to ignore religion but in fact makes it a more, rather than less, important marker for political subjects. In the process, religion itself is transformed, and this "reordering and remaking of religious life and interconfessional relations" is a characteristic shared by all modern liberal states (p. 21). Mahmood suggests that secular modern state building induces a very different and, in some ways, far more substantial form of intervention. For rather than simply reorganizing the putatively a priori elements of social organization ("public, private, political, religious"), secularization, as "a discursive operation of power," generates these categories (p. 3). In her view, the modern state, through its legal and political mechanisms, reorders religion to produce a new form of religiosity that is rendered perpetually subject to state regulation. Here Mahmood's book builds on her earlier work that critiqued the kinds of emancipatory projects in which agency is an essential component (*Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* [Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004]). She is simply not concerned with agency in the way the other authors are, thus it is difficult to find room for it in her work.

The problem animating Mahmood's book is that the introduction of the modern state in Egypt through British rule made religion a much greater part of communal/individual identity. As a result, religious minorities were thrust into a much more insecure position vis-à-vis the majority religious group than ever before. Mahmood traces the origins of the minority question to late Ottoman times. As the Ottomans took halting steps toward consolidating centralized rule and establishing a regime of universal citizenship, some Christian groups received special status due to pressure brought by their European patrons (p. 41). This European intervention inaugurated questions about collective political subjectivity and religious identity that continued into the period of direct British rule and beyond. In the early 20th century, bristling under foreign domination, Egyptian nationalists came to believe that the idea of political secularism would not only provide Egyptians of different faiths the space to practice their religion and enjoy political equality, but also help them to build a united front against British rule. Her book details some of the early 20th-century political debates that, in her view, show the limits of these aspirations. Mahmood argues that as the 20th century proceeded, "minority identity (bestowed by the state) became paradoxically sutured to a private attribute (religion) towards which the state was neutral" even as the state came to depend on religious identity to regulate and structure social life (p. 25). The postcolonial Egyptian state, for example, created different family law regimes for Muslims, Christians, and Jews so as to protect religious groups from state interference, but in so doing it enshrined private religious identity and empowered religious institutions in civil society. Thus, rather than becoming less important in political secularism, religion was merely subjected "to a new grid of intelligibility" so that majoritarian religious prejudices incorporated in the social and legal norms of the state could not be named as such (p. 25). Compounding the problem was that the state, cast as the neutral arbiter of religious conflict, was then called upon to redress areas of religious discrimination (p. 87). In intervening to defend the rights of a particular religious group (and thus in a sense rehearsing the European intervention in the late Ottoman period that granted exceptional status to some Christians), the state appears to be violating the principle of neutrality towards all religious

groups. This causes resentment among the majority, igniting a dynamic of religious strife present throughout modern Egyptian history that has left Copts and other religious minorities in a more perilous position than ever.

Like Mahmood, who traces the roots of secularization back to the early 20th century, Weiss and White highlight the role played by institutions set up during the Mandate period to induce new kinds of political behavior. However, in a contrast with Mahmood, they see in these ways of acting possibilities for newly created minorities and sectarian groups to exercise agency, both in how to conceive of themselves and how to challenge state authorities. Likewise, for Weiss and White (and Matthiesen), while the modern state has certain objective characteristics, competencies, and power, its enactment in the Middle East was replete with a range of historically contingent and ultimately subjective possibilities. Accordingly, one aim of their books is to elucidate the specific historical experiences of state building in Mandate Lebanon and Syria. While they describe the role of the state in creating minorities and in inducing the performance of sectarianism, they are less concerned with the kinds of transformations enacted on religion—and indeed on society—discussed by Mahmood than with explicating and contextualizing the political calculations and maneuvering of Lebanese and Syrian (and for Matthiesen, Saudi Shi'i) actors. For Weiss and White, the Mandate's legal landscape and political categories gave rise to new areas of contestation that groups of Syrians and Lebanese tried to leverage for advantage. Weiss, for instance, suggests that the colonial encounter might be best understood in contractual terms marked by negotiation and bargaining rather than through a "collaboration and resistance" dialectic (p. 60). White describes the Mandate state as a "new field" for political expression and contestation (p. 86).

In his analysis of the transition from sect to minority as a ruling strategy in Mandate Syria, White details the historical career of the term "minority." He shows not only how the category was formed but also the exclusions that were part of the process. The book describes how the term gained meaning through the development of the modern nation-state form, and ultimately how it came to form an essential part of the conceptual political logic of modern Syria. As the practices and structure of the Mandate state impelled "cultural groups" to make political claims as minorities, they began to conceive of themselves as such. In this way White's book is as much about the process of state formation in the Middle East as it is about the inauguration of the ideas of minority and majority. Drawing on Benedict Anderson and James Scott, he notes the role of such factors as borders and international law in defining the state and in inducing particular ways of being political. With their enormous capacity to control territory and intervene into the lives of people, modern states "create the objective conditions in which people begin to consider themselves as majorities and minorities" (p. 209). In short, White sees minorities as products of the unprecedented power of the modern state that was supported by an international regime of institutions, practices, and law.

However, in White's view the crystallization of minority consciousness in Syria was not simply the application of a single universalizing template. Subjective (i.e., local) factors were equally important. As Syria's borders became increasingly delineated and the presence of the state grew within them, Mandate authorities enacted a political framework in which claims could be made on the basis of cultural identity. This shift had the effect of transforming identity groups into minorities. White argues that all of this was not simply imposed by the French on a population that accepted the decrees from

Paris whole cloth. French administrators and various Syrian constituencies wrestled for control of the Mandate state, and it was through this struggle that the notions of minority and majority came to have meaning.

In his focus on a single episode in the “plural” history of sectarian modernity in Lebanon, Weiss too highlights the role of the Mandate state in producing a new kind of political consciousness. Like White, he is weary of the use of a single analytical framework for viewing these histories (p. 15). The case of Mandate Lebanon is of course different from that of Syria insofar as there was/is no “majority” per se, but rather multiple histories of sectarianization. However, in Weiss’s view these histories have been too often presumed to be “derivative of the Maronite experience” (p. 17). His book is not only a corrective to this view; it is also an elucidation of the “premises, practices, [and] historical processes that have maintained sectarianism as an overdetermined social, political and cultural reality” in Lebanon (p. 7). Weiss narrates how through their encounter with French officialdom over the course of the Mandate, Lebanese Shi‘a came to think of themselves as a political community. The Mandate authority’s recognition of them as an official *madhhab* (“schools of Islamic law” [Weiss, p. 7]), the founding of the Ja‘fari court and a network of associated courts, and the 1936 granting of authority in matters of personal status to the community were pivotal events in this process. The court, set up by French authorities in 1926 and the most important Shi‘i institution in Lebanon until 1969, immediately became a site for the institutionalization of Shi‘i identity. As such it served as a vehicle for sectarianization and for the eventual empowerment of Lebanon’s Shi‘a. The presence of the new court opened up spaces for notables and a diverse range of public figures to partake in sectarian community building through such things as debates over the “form, content and historical legitimacy” of public ‘Ashura’ rituals (p. 75).

Echoing ‘Amil and Cammett, Weiss warns against conflating Lebanese sectarianism with religious nationalism. For him sectarianism is not a single enduring cultural condition but rather a historical phenomenon that can produce a multiplicity of forms (p. 15). Weiss argues that sectarianism is a political relationship mediated by the state where institutional arrangements produce both affective ties and political identities. The “emergence of sectarian solidarities, or modes of identification, or legal jurisdictions” were not destined to take a particular form, he contends, but rather the historical outcome was a result of both the governing logic from above and Shi‘i demands from below (p. 121). This point corresponds with his effort to present an alternative account of Shi‘i empowerment and agency. His book challenges narratives that date the beginning of Lebanese Shi‘i politicization to the founding of the Supreme Islamic Shi‘i Council in 1969 and that emphasize the role of Musa al-Sadr. For Weiss, one cannot understand this later period without taking into consideration the sectarianization of the Shi‘i community during the Mandate period. Even more importantly, he argues that his account shows that Shi‘i politicization could take forms that do not neatly conform to the contemporary “perception of absolute Shi‘i unity and political hegemony” of “‘The Resistance’ and its all-encompassing ‘Resistance Society’” (p. 227).

In *The Other Saudis*, Matthiesen is keen to demonstrate the role of Shi‘i communal politics and agency in the elaboration of collective identity. His aim is to understand the nature of sectarianism among Saudi Arabia’s minority Shi‘i population and to provide historical insight as to why at some moments the Shi‘a embraced sectarianism over other

possible markers of identity. Matthiesen identifies some of the historical, sociological, and ideological components of Saudi Shi'ī sectarian identity formation and how they are activated at certain times due to factors such as state-sanctioned discrimination, activism within the community, and regional and transnational events and developments. Religion is a fundamental component of exclusion and discrimination because the all-important Wahhabi clerical establishment rejects Shi'ism as heretical. As a consequence, the Shi'a are frequent targets of propaganda and incitement from both state and nonstate ideologues and clerics in the media and are nearly completely excluded from domestic political life. While exclusion of Shi'a from Saudi religious nationalism is an important element in his account, Matthiesen is much more interested in the Shi'ī community's internal cultural, social, and political currents. Hence, the book is a political history of the Shi'ī community that outlines complex maneuvering and competition between Shi'ī elites and subaltern identity activists. These activists (Matthiesen refers to them as "identity entrepreneurs") work to delineate Shi'ī difference in part by reinforcing communal boundaries in their efforts to strengthen their particular vision of Saudi Shi'ī sectarian identity and to present themselves as representatives of the collective interest.

Matthiesen's book, similar to those of Weiss and White, can be read as a corrective to accounts that are inattentive to internal communal dynamics of sectarian identity formation. Matthiesen reminds us that categories such as Shi'a and Sunni become salient at certain times due to a range of factors that are not always self-evident. Accordingly, he cautions against simplistic and essentialist "cultural explanations" for sectarianism that substitute "timelessness" for analysis. Such approaches are incapable of explaining the contingent nature of sectarianism and why a particular sectarian identity might be relevant at a specific moment (p. 16). Likewise, they cannot account for internal contestation between identity entrepreneurs and other communal elites and the diverse and often competing sectarian identities that Saudi Shi'a have embraced over the past fifty years. Finally, they are unable to take full measure of the important effects that tensions in the Saudi–Iranian rivalry and Saudi domestic security and welfare policy have had on sectarianism.

The Saudi state exercises the same competencies and powers of any modern state, but as Matthiesen shows, these have been arrayed in an almost unrelentingly repressive way against the Shi'a. Yet despite the apparent estrangement of the Shi'a from Saudi officialdom, Matthiesen shows how the state remains an important component in the calculus of Shi'ī identity entrepreneurs. Saudi rulers have carefully pursued divide and rule policies within Shi'ī communities and "were quite skillful at fostering" differences between different groups of identity activists and elites (p. 216). Such interventions into Shi'ī communal life and the infighting it engendered produced important effects. For example, the 1993 amnesty agreement permitting the return of Shi'ī activists involved in the 1979–80 intifada created a fissure between those Shi'ī Islamists who accepted the conditions set by the Saudi rulers and those who wanted to continue to fight. In the end the Saudi state succeeded in co-opting many activists and effectively splitting the opposition (p. 165). The upshot is that the isolation of the Shi'ī community and anti-Shi'ī discrimination and propaganda are not an invariable condition.

Nevertheless, the Saudi state is certainly not a liberal secular state. There is no commitment to either the idea of equality between all subject/citizens or the principle of religious freedom that (at least in principle) informed the other state-building projects

discussed above. So, in light of Matthiesen's account, what are the implications for Saba Mahmood's claims that the liberal secular project has universal ambitions and has become a "global norm from which no modern society is exempt" (p. 5)? In her view, modern secularism is not necessarily bounded by the state itself, for the idea of religious equality is not "reducible to the actions and policies of the state or its legal edicts." Therefore, the extent of the Saudi state's divergence from liberal norms has little bearing on her argument (p. 211). Mahmood contends that "even in the most repressive states, the variety of social movements fighting for religious equality attests to the global reach of this ideal and its promise" (p. 5). Indeed, in the Saudi case minority Shi'i activists leverage these ideals in making political claims because they understand them as universal (legal) norms applicable to every society (p. 203).

So is the modern state in the Middle East unique with respect to its failure to provide equality to its minorities and sectarian groups? Matthiesen suggests that the state in the region is exceptional insofar as the "prominence of sectarian identities in the Middle East is related to the nature of modern state building in the region, which often relied on cultural groups as key constituencies—be they ethnic, religious or tribal" (p. 215). These works provide vivid accounts of how the imposition of the nation-state obliged people in the region to see themselves or others as these "key constituencies." At the same time, they offer glimpses of how the sectarian and minority questions engendered discrimination and inequality on the part of repressive regimes. In the end one cannot but sense a note of anguish at the heart of some of these works. Several ask plaintive questions about the lessons to be drawn from the history of sectarian violence and the enduring minority questions throughout the region. They seem to be asking whether there is something within the subjective historical conditions of Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or even the Arab Middle East as a whole, that can account for this. While not completely satisfactory as an answer, Saba Mahmood's book perhaps offers us another way to think about this conundrum—to look not at subjective local historical conditions, such as the Ottoman past, but at the "objective circumstances" of the imposition of the modern state through colonialism and the introduction of the project of secularization (p. 63). The principle of religious equality was embodied in the state's putative indifference to religion even as it simultaneously subjected religious life to new forms of regulation and ultimately exacerbated religious difference. This proved to be hazardous to religious minorities and to the aspiration for equality.

This brings us back to the question of agency. Mahmood, drawing on Timothy Mitchell's 1990s critique of the idea of "multiple modernities," reminds us that (even well-intentioned) efforts to challenge or decenter Eurocentric accounts of modernity often left "undisturbed the epistemological hegemony of European forms of life and historical teleology" even as they ultimately accepted that there was indeed a "singular modernity" (p. 10). She sees the same basic contours of this argument at play in more recent discussions about secularism. With this in mind, it may be that the primary question for scholars thinking about minorities, sectarianism, and secularization is not whether or not there was agency in building some local particularistic sectarian forms and minority status or whether locals simply (even inadvertently) helped to further a single homogenizing project. Taken together these books demonstrate the value in investigating local accounts to shed light on the universalizing project. They provide us with invaluable insight into the nature of imperial power and its ability to transform local conditions and ways of life.