

ROUNDTABLE

Minoritization and Pluralism in the Modern Middle East

Introduction

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doi:10.1017/S0020743818000934

Over the past decade, the study of the various religious and linguistic communities, many indigenous to the Middle East, whose members during the modern period were defined as “minority communities,” has blossomed. A sophisticated scholarship has emerged that challenges previously held notions about these communities, undoing national, colonial, and imperial narratives, while examining how these narratives were formed and popularized. Once studied almost exclusively through theological, classical, and linguistic lenses, increasingly minority communities are broadly incorporated into Middle Eastern studies and examined as imperial subjects, members of nation-states, exiles, transregional actors, and, most importantly, active agents shaping their own destinies.

Scholarship on these Middle Eastern communities now generally contends with two interconnected concepts that have inspired both new analytical approaches and patterns in the selection of sources. *Minoritization* describes the process leading to the creation of minority communities, whether these take Ottoman understandings as their original point of departure or are newly formed within nation-states in the 20th century. Minoritization has been deeply connected to sectarianism; it appeared—and in fact was designed—to favor certain communities, but it often had devastating consequences. It thus signifies past and contemporary practices of discrimination that marginalize communities and relegate them to an inferior status within the hierarchy of modern citizenship. In a bid to confront these processes in a critical spirit, the essays in this roundtable evoke the concept of pluralism. In contrast to nationalist language that represents these groups as “problems” or “questions,” pluralism captures the ways in which minorities have enriched the cultures of the region, preserving languages, notions of homeland, and historical memoirs and literatures in the face of various pressures from the state, as well as the trauma of displacement and exile. In this context, then, pluralism can be defined as the integration, even temporarily, of communities within particular spaces. Such integration can be conceptual, linguistic, or ideological; it can be constituted in relation to state agencies or forces opposing them, but also in spaces between them. Regardless of whether such attempts to achieve pluralism are successful, it is still relevant to include them.

The inclusion of Middle Eastern Jews, Copts, Armenians, and more recently Assyrians, *inter alia*, within the study of the Middle East in these ways allows scholars to challenge monolithic understandings of the communities in question, uncovering a variety of political and cultural options that their members have adopted, as well as the shifting approaches that states have used in interacting with them.¹ This approach enables nuanced analysis that can redefine both pluralism and minoritization. This roundtable thus sheds light on networks of people, ideologies, states, and international actors, both locally (within urban and rural spaces) and transnationally.² Heather Sharkey and Orit Bashkin explore the meaning of these identities within the Ottoman imperial context, while Aline Schlaepfer, Tsolin Nalbantian, Maha Nassar, and I focus on their impact in post-Ottoman nation-states.

As Tsolin Nalbantian reminds us, intersectionality is an important tool that allows scholars of the Middle East to examine these communities in terms of categories such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and decolonization, as well as the ways in which these categories interact with one another. In the past, minoritized communities within newly created borders forged relations with other local or transnational actors based on their shared experiences. Maha Nassar's piece, and her broader work, on how the community of indigenous Palestinians became a minority while resisting that status, demonstrates how paradigms of decolonization can affect our understanding of Palestine. An intersectional approach relating class, gender, race, transregionalism, and settlement to one another helps us to think about Palestinians and Palestinian resistance.³

Top-down, structured approaches have been wrongly assumed to be appropriate in studying certain communities, including Middle Eastern Christians. Christians have often been considered through the prism of religion—more specifically that of their particular religious affiliation—ignoring their minoritization and pluralistic involvements. This sectarianized approach, in vogue within political and contemporary analysis of the region since the 2000s, ignores the temporal development of such historical processes and the role of colonial and missionary actors. Within the field of Middle East studies, though not within politicized spaces themselves, such approaches are now being challenged in nuanced scholarly discussions that tend not to be conducted strictly in relation to minority communities.⁴

In order to study these communities, an effort must be made to diversify the range of sources used, as well as to re-examine the archival practices and analytical approaches that have been drawn on in the past. The absence of certain communities from scholarly discussion is largely a function of their omission from national archives and libraries, but also reflects a lack of training among scholars in the modern languages used by such communities (Assyrian Aramaic, Judeo-Arabic, Armenian, Kurdish, and so on). Scholars of displaced communities—such as Arab Jews, Armenians, Assyrians, and Palestinians—have limited local archives to work in; many have been destroyed, relocated, or looted. In certain states, scholars are often denied access to archival sources. Some communities have created alternative archives to collect and preserve sources relating to their own past. The Assyrians are in the process of digitizing their archives, but waves of displacements, starting at the turn of the 20th century, have disrupted these efforts, creating gaps in the record. The lack of historical scholarship on the mostly rural communities that have a primarily oral culture, such as the Yezidis, has likewise had disruptive results. Both the Yezidis and the Assyrians have recently witnessed the destruction of their cultural

sites, while the displacement of their populations has upended their agricultural way of life. Rural traditions have slowly begun to disappear—traditions that had been preserved orally for generations.

Scholars investigating Palestinians, Arab Jews, and, as in my own case, Assyrians, have found ways to revisit existing sources, including the press, poetry collections, and works of literature and art, in order to gain new insights into these communities. There have also been efforts to correct an overreliance on colonial and missionary sources, and on the perspectives of the state and the cultural majority, by turning to provincial history, which has allowed scholars to ascribe agency to minority communities without ignoring their minoritization. Finally, the recognition that many of these communities were bilingual or multilingual has helped to uncover interplays between silenced and official languages, and between languages connoting nostalgia, longing, and indigenous culture, as against the languages of the state.

The six contributions to this roundtable highlight the processes leading to the minoritization of numerous communities, as well as the efforts of these communities and other actors—whether genuine, externally manipulated, or temporary—to pursue their integration in specific pluralistic spaces.

NOTES

¹See Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009); Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012); Vivian Ibrahim, *The Copts of Egypt: Challenges of Modernisation and Identity* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2011); and Heather J. Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²On transnational Christian Media, see Febe Armanios and Andrew Amstutz, “Emerging Christian Media in Egypt: Clerical Authority and the Visualization of Women in Coptic Video Films,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (2013): 513–33; and Febe Armanios’s forthcoming book on Christian television. On Diasporic minority communities, see Akram Fouad Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001); and Yasmeen Hanoosh, “The Politics of Minority: Chaldeans between Iraq and America” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008). On the provincial history of northern Iraq, see Arbella Bet Shlimon, *City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2019).

³On Armenian citizens of Turkey after the genocide, see Lerna Ekmekçiöğlü, *Recovering Armenia: The Limits of Belonging in Post-Genocide Turkey* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2016). On Palestinian citizens of Israel and decolonization, see Maha Nassar, *Brothers Apart: Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Arab World* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2017). On race and indigeneity in Iraq, see Mariam Georgis, “Postwar Iraq (2003–2016): A Postcolonial, Grassroots Approach to the Failure of ‘Democratic Nation Building’” (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2017).

⁴Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000); Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst, 2011).