

Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt today

Local dynamics and foreign influences

Workshop: *Power and Powerlessness: Religious Minorities in the Middle East*

Topic: *Majority-Minority relations, foreign intervention and global politics*

Gregoire Delhaye

Even though they represent less than 6% of the Egyptian population, with some 4.5 millions members, Copts are by far the most important Christian community in the Middle-East. Ninety-five percent of them belong to the Coptic Orthodox church. While overall well integrated in society they nevertheless face some legal but mostly social discrimination. They are also punctually the victims of sectarian violence.

In 1981, Shenouda III, the Coptic Orthodox patriarch, was deposed and placed under house arrest by Sadat for criticizing the Islamizing of the Egyptian state. He has, since his release in 1985 by Mubarak, adopted a much more conciliatory stance and has even endorsed Mubarak in the latest presidential election. On the other hand, Coptic activists abroad - the most vocal being in the United States - and their supporters regularly lambaste Egypt's leadership for its poor treatment of the Copts. They lobby for greater scrutiny of the country when it comes to religious freedom and for the withholding of U.S. aid to Egypt, its largest recipient after Israel, as a means of exerting pressure.

The past few years have seen the occurrence of some positive moves from the government such as the declaration of Coptic Christmas as a national holiday, the easing of the building and repairing of churches and greater urgency in dealing with sectarian violence. But the same period has also seen an increase in the number of episodes of such violence. If it has been suggested that the dire economic situation in Egypt plays a role in the rising tension, there are signs of mounting hostility.

In this paper I will argue that Coptic diasporic activism is a double edged sword. On one hand, it has forced an Egyptian government protective of its international image to address long standing issues and has legitimized the Pope as the legitimate and moderate representative of the community, a phenomenon known in social movement literature as the radical flank effect. On the other hand, the underlying islamophobia of some activists and their call for sanctions against Egypt have further alienated segments of the Egyptian society already hostile to the Copts by providing them with an excuse to question their loyalty.

I will also argue that this double process takes place in the context of both a Coptic and an Islamic revival whose beginnings can both be traced to the late 19th century and that accelerated with the failure of Arab socialist ideology of Nasser in the 60's. By emphasizing religious belonging, it has alienated both communities from each other. Keeping to themselves both Copts and Muslims know little about each others and this proves a breeding ground for stereotypes and intolerance. Numerically inferior, Copts always end up the victims of the rising tension.

Abstract

Minorities in the Middle East: Experience of Power and Powerlessness in Politics."

Professor Kais M. Ferro

My paper deals with three main topics:

1-The impact of the national ideology and discourse developed by intellectuals and politicians before and after 1920 on the minority groups in the Middle East. To assess this impact, the paper will attempt to depict and analyze the arguments by which intellectuals from four minority groups in Syria and Lebanon attempt to build new self image fit to the new era of nationalism and nation-state. To do so the paper tries to place the case of these four groups within the whole framework of ethno-politics in the Middle East, comparing between them and other ethnic groups in the Middle Eastern states.

2- The independence of the Arab territorial states still poses a great challenge on their elites who employ varied tactics of "nationalisms" through which they attempts to overcome obstacles for "nation building." For the purpose of the paper, it may be enough to analyze these obstacles that are associated with three factors: pan-Arab nationalism, pan-Islamic fundamentalism and the solidarities of ethnic groups. While the first two factors operate as delegitimizing force against the territorial state, the third factor endangers the internal cohesion of it. In each state, the political elite use its specific tactics to establish the "national credentials" in order to galvanize the citizenry into one nation. The lack of congruence between common loyalties and polity retains the gap between the ideal of civic model of the state and the reality of "states without nations." This makes it inevitable that political elites in the Arab states look for alternative models of nation, and different modes of national integration. Because *umma* (nation) has different cloths, political elites employ the tactics for patching from these cloths their states' national cloth. While they use repressive measure to depoliticize ethnicity, they declare the loyalty of their territorial state to the Arab and Muslim values. Consequently, the usage of *al-umma* in their political discourse remains with its ambivalent feature that would be Islamist, pan-nationalist or patriotic related to their territorial state. Instead of stabilizing the national credentials, the ambivalent feature adds obscurity to the notion of *al-umma* articulated by the intellectuals of period under discussion.

3-Adapting to the political field of the modern states, intellectuals and elites among minority groups continue to regard their respective communities as ethnic fragments in wider *umma*. While the non-Sunnls would regard themselves belong to the Arab, Islamic *ummas* or both

and stressing their loyalty to their respective state, Christians have only two choices either to regard themselves as part of the Arab *umma* or of that of their state. In general, most of non-Sunni elites have no intention of crystallizing separate nations based on their communal '*a.Sabiyyas*. While they use their ethnicity to enter the political arena of the state, they declare their loyalty to the state and *al-umma* as it grasped by the dominant elite of the state. Although non-Sunni elites and intellectuals continue to play an important role in the politics of their respective states, they still unable to homogenize the self image of their religious communities for producing one national identity that substitute their particularist identities. Due to its elitist features, the national discourse had great difficulties to compete with the Islamist discourse of *al-umma* and to supersede the sectarian and parochial identities. Since the emergence of modern nationalism in Arab-speaking countries intellectuals and political elites are caught between the supremacy of *al-umma al-Islamiyya* (the nation of Islam) and the requirements of the modern secular *nation*.

ABSTRACT

Reassessing the nation state model and promoting universal human rights: Their effect on state-minority relation in the Middle East

Professor Elizabeth Picard

Twenty-first century Middle East minorities are currently experiencing growing political tensions. They are confronted with new security threats, remindful of the communal strife and rapid constitutional change in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. From Algeria to Iraq, including Palestine and Lebanon, their relationship to the state as well as with other segments of the nation deteriorates and they are torn between silence and exit.

Several contextual elements concur in plunging Middle East minorities into such an existential crisis (Shatzmiller 2005): The conflicting dynamics of Islam, the globalized clash between religious fundamentalisms, embodied in the Bush-al-Qa'ida confrontation, the irreversible domination of the Jewish state over its Palestinian partner and recently the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

These elements combine with the flaws and failures of the territorial states that were set throughout the Middle East in the twentieth century according to the Western European nation state model. As a result, authoritarianisms are more and more entrenched while the gap widens between dominated masses and monopolistic regimes.

This presentation is organized in two parts.

Firstly, it offers a comparative assessment of the two different modes of political integration adopted by Middle East modern regimes in order to reflect upon the limits of their achievement. The first mode consisted in adopting sectarianism as a political ideology (Masters 2001) and a base for power-sharing at the risk of essentializing the primordial dimension of group identity and neglecting others. The second amounted to denying political legitimacy to communal identities and instead, stressing equality between individuals in the eye of the state. This strategy allowed power incumbents to promote their own identity group free from democratic accountability (Ghaliun 1990).

In view of the flaws of both modes of dealing with cultural pluralism social scientists might question the very notion of “minority” instrumentalized in Middle East political systems (Martin 2005). They might explore new thinking on political rights in the framework of a

globalized debate between “communitarian” and “civic republican” notions of citizenship (Kymlicka, Norman 2000).

Secondly, the presentation stresses the growing importance of trans-boundary social and political dynamics as well as the development of humanitarian law and the promotion of cultures in relation to the growing influence of international NGOs on these matters. Such a trend offers new resources for local dominated minority groups who may overcome their enclosure by extending trans-boundary networks. In order to avoid to essentialize these networks, a sociological approach should be adopted by taking account of the material and financial flows which support their symbolic and normative flows (Koslowski 2005 ; Leenders 2007).

Such a trans-national dynamic goes hand in hand with the weakening of the local state and the partial lost of its international and domestic sovereignty (Fearon, Laitin 2004). The risk is growing of a rigid inclusion/exclusion process in Middle East state that translates into religious ethnic “cleansing”. It is therefore urgent to re-negotiate national identities in several Middle Eastern states (Smith 2003) by means of opening public spaces to pluralistic political expression

Abstract

Minorities in Iran

Eliz Sanasarian, Professor of Political Science

The non-Muslim population of Iran used to be a small but significant minority. The policies of the Iranian regime have led to a steep plummeting of their numbers and significance throughout the country. Their schools have been reduced or confiscated and legally they remain inferiors. Today much of the attention of the regime is focused on Muslim ethnic minorities, particularly the Sunnis. There has been widespread uprisings by Kurds, the Baluch, and the Arabs.

This paper places these developments in their historical perspective, analyzes the minority situation, and offers both conventional and non-conventional ways of viewing today's events.

Abstract

The Expression of Self-images Through Prejudices and Persecutions: Shi'ites versus Baha'is of Iran

Margit Warburg, Professor, dr. phil.

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University of Copenhagen

The study of persecutions of a minority reveal, among other things, self-images and prevailing norms among the persecuting groups of the majority. Typically, the minority is seen to incarnate negative projections of virtues esteemed by the majority, and the perceived violation of majority norms is one of the justifications for persecutions. Negative images of a particular group often prevail also among those who do not in their everyday life have contact with the persecuted group. An illustrative example is that anti-Semitism in Poland prevailed long after the Jewish group in Poland had been eradicated in World War II.

Among Muslims, and in particular among Shi'ites, anti-Baha'i sentiments and reactions constitute an analogy to European anti-Semitism, albeit less widespread and less known. The Baha'i religion arose from a schism in Islam in the 1840s and the Baha'is are considered heretics, both in a Shi'ite and a Sunni perspective. The Baha'is have repeatedly been persecuted in several Muslim countries and persecutions were intensified in Iran after the Iranian revolution of 1979. Popular prejudices against the Baha'is both nourish and are nourished by organised persecutions, and although the most comprehensive persecutions take place in Iran, Baha'is are unpopular and discriminated against in most Middle-East countries with a majority Muslim population.

Abstract

Identity Politics among the Shias in Saudi Arabia

Laurence Louër

Saudi Arabia hosts a Shia minority whose demographic weight we only have estimates varying between 6% and 20%. Most of them reside in the oil rich Eastern province of the kingdom where they represent roughly a third of the population. Historically, the Shias have been among the first segments of the Saudi population to be concerned with modern forms of political mobilization. This was thanks to their involvement in the oil industry, where they got in touch with militants from the Europe and the Middle East professing either leftist or Arab nationalist ideologies. In the mid-1970s, the emergence of the Shia Islamic movements marginalized the secular groups. They also rendered difficult the possibility of transcommunal mobilization.

My presentation will address the issue of the transformation of these movements. It will first explain how they emerged in response both to specific local grievances and to regional impetuses, most notably the politicization of the Iraqi religious seminars and the revolution in Iran. The presentation will hence address the issue of the deep transformation of the Shia Islamic movements. In the 1990s and 2000s indeed, they carried out a marked rapprochement with the Saudi regime. This was accompanied by a marked ideological shift from revolution to politics of religious and cultural recognition. The aim is not anymore to overthrow the regime but to have the Shias recognized as a legitimate component of Saudi society entitled to express freely its specificity. This will lead me to discuss the modification of the Saudi regime's own language on national and religious identity. In what respect does the mutation of the Saudi Shia movements reflect more general socio-political transformations within Saudi society at large?

Abstract

Land, law and family-protection

- the impact of migration among Christian Palestinians on the West Bank

Bård Kårtveit, PhD Candidate Univ. of Bergen

In the last 15 years, theft of private property and manipulation of land documents has raised concern in the Palestinian territories, and the Bethlehem district in particular. This phenomenon is seen in relation to wider processes of land sale and demographic changes within the Bethlehem-area. Within the local community, the theft of land is widely interpreted in sectarian terms, as Christian families have been disproportionately targeted. However, as this paper will illustrate, these crimes may be motivated by other factors and social circumstances that have little to do with sectarian relations.

In this paper, I will look at the problem of land-theft and property disputes within the Bethlehem area in relation to long-term developments of Palestinian emigration, sectarian relations, corruption and the rule of law within the Palestinian Authority. Bethlehem has seen some sweeping changes in its social and demographic profile throughout the 1900s. Christians and middle-class Muslims have emigrated in large numbers, being replaced by internal migrants from the more conservative rural areas around Bethlehem and other parts of the West Bank. These changes, along with institutional reforms have continued since 1994 when the Bethlehem governorate was turned over to the Palestinian Authority. Tensions between different systems of land-ownership, and between family-based systems of protection and an official legal system under PA-rule, points to some of the challenges posed by transitions from traditional to more modern forms of social order, transitions that have been imposed on the area by different regimes since the late Ottoman period. I will try to demonstrate how some of these tensions, in combination with high rates of emigration, leaves the Christians on the West Bank vulnerable to theft of land as well as other violations against their rights and properties, without effective means of protection. Finally, I will look at how the issue of land theft is interpreted and dealt with by Christian Palestinians in relation to sectarian relations and social boundaries in a local setting.

Abstract

Alevis in Turkish Politics

Professor Ali Carkoglu, Sabanci University

This presentation will be based on survey evidence from two panel surveys in 2002 and 2007 general elections. I will first delve into measurement problems for diagnosis of Alevi background in the Sunni community of Turkey. After developing a diagnosis framework I will analyse political cultural traits of Alevis in comparison to the larger Sunni community. Lastly these results will be contextualised for policy relevance and further analysis.

Abstract

Divide and Rule?

Approaching Non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries

Maurits van den Boogert, Brill.

It was under Ottoman rule that the indigenous non-Muslims of the Middle East were defined as separate administrative communities for the first time, the Ottomans developing and adjusting classical ideas about *ahl al-dhimma* for their own, principally fiscal, purposes. Since taxation was levied partly on the basis of religious affiliation, the Ottoman government devised a bureaucratic system which confirmed the Christian and Jewish ecclesiastical hierarchies and made the religious leaders responsible for the collection of taxes at the same time. By the end of the seventeenth century this so-called *millet* system had become fixed, and the Ottoman authorities did not revise it significantly until the early nineteenth century.

The bureaucratic divisions of Ottoman society continue to reverberate today, both in political landscape of the Middle East and in the scholarly debate about its history. Historians of the Middle East tend to adopt the official Ottoman view of society, which consisted of a Muslim majority on the one hand, and Christian, Jewish and other minorities on the other. These communities are believed to have been separated by boundaries which were not only religious and fiscal, but also cultural and even ‘psychological’, as the non-Muslims are believed to have had a more European mindset than the Muslims. Even modern scholarship reflects these divisions. For example, there has been an extensive debate about notables (*ayān*) in the Middle East, but it focused entirely on Muslims. Implicitly, non-Muslims are relegated to a different discourse. These notions have led to a number of assumptions about the dynamics of Ottoman society which are seldom spelt out in the literature. For example, a state ruled by Muslims is assumed in principle to favour its Muslim subjects. It is the same with the Islamic legal system, which, in theory, disadvantaged non-Muslims in the *qāḍī* courts. Assumptions like these are partly based on the Western sources on the Ottoman Empire, and they are continually reinforced because these sources remain important for historical research.

This paper aims to challenge several received wisdoms about the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims; the ties among the Ottoman Christian communities; and the

connections between the non-Muslims and “the West” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For this purpose selected case studies from both Ottoman and European sources will be examined, arguing against vertical divisions in Middle Eastern societies, which artificially separate Muslims from non-Muslims, and proposing a more integrated approach.

Abstract

”We have no minorities in Syria”...but some people feel like second-class citizens.

Annika Rabo, University of Stockholm

Syria is a country of great religious and ethnic/linguistic heterogeneity. It is also a country where – officially – there are no minorities. The term ‘minority’ (*aqaliyye*) is shunned by Syrian power-holders. All Syrian citizens, it is stressed, are equal before the law; all have equal rights and obligations. These power-holders, however, also recognize that Syria is a ‘plural society’ and they support the arrangement whereby there are different legal arrangements in ‘family law’ depending on the religious affiliation of the citizen. Citizens are thus mainly ‘similar’ in their relationship towards the state but also ‘different’ in certain aspects.

This presentation is based on anthropological fieldwork in various parts of Syria. Material has been continuously gathered from the late 1970s. The focus of my presentation will be on the tension between the official ideology of equality, similarity and sameness and the production and interpretation of ethnic and religious differences in everyday life whereby some Syrians claim they feel like second-class citizens.

Abstract:

Egyptian Jews: Industry, identity, homeland.

Nefissa Naguib, University of Bergen.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the history of local minorities and their role in the construction of industries in Egypt. Local foreign minorities were those who immigrated to Egypt during the nineteenth and early twentieth Century. Some of them assimilated with the local Egyptian culture while others did not. Attention to Egypt's pluralistic past is more than a historical curiosity. It comes at a time when Egyptian judiciaries are adjudicating cases regarding Jewish families who are claiming properties sequestered between the years 1956 - 1961. Recurring arguments concern the claimants' presentations of themselves as Egyptian Jews and Egypt as the homeland. This essay will trace economic and industrial contributions made by Egyptian Jews. It is an attempt to get at how current property claims presented in Egyptian courts open up discussions on Egypt's multi-cultural experiences, Egyptian Jewish identities and their representations of Egypt.

Abstract

Colonialism, Nationalism, and Modernization: The Changing Worlds of Modern Iranian Zoroastrianism

Michael Stausberg, Bergen University

Zoroastrianism is an ethnic religion of pre-Islamic Iran. The religion was increasingly marginalized in Islamic times. It faced severe repressions and discriminatory practice by the Islamic majority religion. However, the situation began to change in the late 19th Century, first through the intervention of the Indian Zoroastrians (the Parsis) on behalf of their Iranian co-religionists, backed up by British colonial power (ruling in India). Important legal changes included the abolishment of the poll-tax and the reforms brought about by the Constitutional Revolution, to which some Zoroastrians actively contributed. Modern nationalist discourses brought Zoroastrianism into the limelight as the religion of the pre-Islamic civilizations of Iran. In nationalist discourses, ‘heathens’ turned into a national icon of pride. Besides legal and ideological changes, the increasing neglect of ritual mechanisms of boundary maintenance both among Shiites and Zoroastrians allowed for an integration of Zoroastrians in Iranian mainstream, middle-class life-worlds. The Zoroastrian elites, in turn, embraced a program of modernization of the communities. Apart from providing educational infrastructures, the modernizing Zoroastrian elites actively promoted religious reform, including radical changes in the publically visible ritual practices and infrastructures—the funeral structures and the fire-temples. In the more recent period of the Islamic Republic, Zoroastrian war-martyrs are publically featured in ritual and iconography; the martyrs have replaced the splendour of pre-Islamic civilization as a medium of nationalist self-affirmation.

Abstract

From the *dhimma* to the capitulations: Experience and memories of protection among Christians in Lebanon

Professor Anh Nga Longva, University of Bergen.

Ever since the Islamic conquest in the 7th century until the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 the Christians of the Middle East have been looked upon and treated as protected people (*ahl al dhimma*). The literature on Christian minorities rightly emphasizes the impact of this 1300 year old practice on Muslim-Christian relations. The Islamic protection regime known as *dhimma* builds on a series of unambiguous rules and regulations which have remained unchanged over the centuries. Yet research in Lebanon reveals intriguing differences in the collective memory of the *dhimma* among two of the country's largest Christian communities, the Maronites and the Greek Orthodox. Neither the history of these communities nor the history of their Churches can quite account for these differences. It is suggested in this paper that the study of the politics of protection among Middle Eastern Christian minorities will remain incomplete as long as another type of protection, extended by the European Powers in the 18th and 19th centuries through the Capitulations, is not granted the analytical attention it deserves.

Abstract

Muslim-Christian relations in Khartoum

Anne Sofie Roald, CMI

This paper deals with the relation between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority in Khartoum, Sudan. In February 2007 I conducted a fieldwork in Khartoum and interviewed Christian and Muslims political leaders and member of various governmental and non-governmental organisations. The focus of the study is on the period after the Comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in 2005 and the main topic is the rights of women and non-Muslims in the Islamist state of Sudan. The discussion is on Muslim-Christian relations in general, and on Personal Status Law within the various religious groups.