

Prospects for Religious and Ethnic Conflict in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

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Over the years, religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East have influenced political, social, and economic developments. Yet disputes over minorities have also caused tension. According to Arab scholar Sa'd a-din Ibrahim, more damage and devastation has been inflicted on the Middle East by religious and ethnic conflict than by all of the Arab-Israeli wars combined. Whether accommodation or conflict will occur among Middle Eastern ethnic groups depends on a myriad of factors including: ideology, geography, the regional environment, and the extent of modernization, secularization, and education.

The treatment of religious minorities by the Sunni Muslim Arab majority has alternated between integration and harassment. When foreign powers governed the Arab states, the common struggle against "imperialism" and the expansion of education encouraged the majority to cooperate with minority elites in order to demonstrate national cohesion. Non-Muslim intellectuals sought to influence the Arab national movement to become non-sectarian and secularist. For example, Christians influenced the 1950 Syrian constitution which stipulates that the head of state must be a Muslim, but does not go as far as other Arab constitutions, which declare Islam the official state religion. However, conflict and suspicion still existed within Arab national movements. Fundamentalist Muslim groups helped undermine the equilibrium between non-Muslims and Muslims by claiming that the Arab movement is Islamic in its nature and should not include Christians.

These opposing forces of conflict and conciliation have been further evidenced in the past two generations, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Religious minorities currently control Iraq and Syria through repressive Ba'th regimes. Initially, militant Islamic groups rebelled against the Ba'thists but the governments effectively and brutally suppressed the opposition. Since then, many Sunnis in Syria and Shi'a in Iraq have given up on trying to violently confront the regime and are instead concentrating on adjusting to the system. Additionally, the two regimes have continued to offer inducements to their citizens to accommodate the regime. Ba'th efforts to integrate the various communities into the social, political, and economic system give the opposition a hope for greater pluralism and public institutions. For instance, the majority of representatives in the Syrian parliament are Sunni. The state command over communication, education, and media also creates a common national basis and helps to appease the majority. Therefore, the chances for further violence by religious minorities in Syria and Iraq are slim, while the concept of a nation-state is gaining ground among many Syrians and Iraqis. Of course, the real test of cohesion will come in the succession crises that loom on the horizon.

A religious minority also controlled Lebanon until 1975. The civil war of 1975-1990 was a struggle between the Maronite Christians and the anti-establishment forces, mostly Muslim. The situation stabilized due to the imposed "pax Syriana" and the implementation of a series of reforms which more equitably distributed political power based on actual population. Future cooperation or conflict in Lebanon depends upon the reaction of the Maronites, whose economic and political hegemony has been reduced; the Shi'ite community, who have a political and military impact

through Hizbollah and Amal; the extent of Syrian control; and the impact of Israel and Iran on Syrian behavior. Ethnic conflicts did not surface until after the collapse of the Ottoman empire because Muslim ethnic communities were considered an integral part of the Muslim umma (community). For example, several minority figures assumed power within the empire, such as Muhammad Ali, the Albanian founder of the modern Egyptian dynasty.

Most ethnic minorities, however, have not been able to realize their aspirations for a state or autonomy and these lingering frustrations are likely to spark periodic conflict. Even after the Gulf War, when the infrastructural, military, and governmental conditions were ripe for the Kurdish minority to secure an independent entity, internal struggles between the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurds (PUK) prevented a nationalist victory. Additionally, neighboring states all opposed an independent "Kurdistan" and none of the great powers lobbied for a Kurdish state. In southern Sudan, many of the same problems exist although several regional states are more friendly to the rebels than is the case for the Kurds. Even though both the Kurds and south Sudanese hope to resolve their grievances through federal systems, democracy, and informal negotiation, Sudan's fundamentalist regime and Saddam's militant regime may precipitate violent conflict.

DALE EICKELMAN

According to traditional definitions, ethnicity is the way individuals and groups characterize themselves based on language, race, place of origin, culture, and history. How groups perceive their own identity, however, may be very different from the classifications that outsiders use to describe them. Therefore, scholars have begun to expand the conventional definition of ethnicity to include internal and external observations as defining a group.

Internal perceptions of identity may change based on the situation or over time. Many Muslims believe that Islam is the "firmest tie" and therefore ethnic and religious sub-identities cannot exist within one individual. In reality, identities are not compartmentalized, individuals can choose which characteristics they wish to assert in certain situations. Additionally, groups can recreate their own history to match current political and geographic realities. For example, the Liwatiya, a Shi'a minority in Oman that spoke Indian dialects was given a choice in 1947 between Indian or Omani ethnicity. Most Liwatiyas chose Omani nationality and merely a decade later, Liwatiya scholars were "rediscovering" their Arab identity.

Similarly, external actors may influence identity-formation either by creating a rift between ethnic groups or by influencing a group's cohesion. For instance, France tried to instigate conflict between Berber Muslims and Arabs in Morocco by creating a separate court system for the Berbers. Because this potentially validated two different interpretations of sharia (Islamic law), it galvanized the Arabs into stalling and obfuscating to hinder French goals. On the other hand, tacit accommodation of ethnic differences by the regime often helps to avoid faultlines. The Kurds in Turkey have been associated with many negative images prompting Kurds to downplay their ethnicity. Only when large numbers of Kurds went to Germany as migrant workers after World War Two were they finally exposed to religious instruction and education in Kurdish. (According to German law, all students are entitled to elementary education in their national, not state, language.) This set an ominous precedent for Kurds in Turkey and to avoid confrontation with the Kurds, Ankara was forced to accept money from the Saudis in the 1980s to provide proper religious instructors for the Kurds.

The relationship between identity and the national or state authority has been changing due to the fragmentation of religious and political authority throughout the Middle East. Rising educational levels allow more individuals to effectively communicate with their governments. Additionally, external groups are increasingly able to foment minority unrest by means of arms transfers and the provision of sanctuary for insurgents. Consequently, the faultlines created by ethnic identity will continue to produce volatile conflicts in the foreseeable future. But changing identities do not indicate that the region is falling apart. The fragmentation of authority and the state may be messy in the short term because new networks of trust and authority are developing. In the long term, though, these trends

may open an avenue for civil society to question authority.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rachel Ingber. ❖

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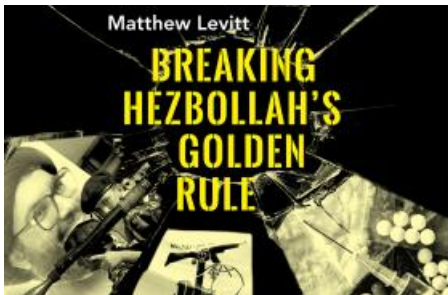
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