

When Minorities Rule in the Middle East (Part II):

Historical Realities

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Brief Analysis

On December 15, 2004, Ammar Abdulhamid and Martin Kramer addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Dr. Kramer, the Wexler-Fromer Fellow at The Washington Institute, is senior research fellow and former director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University. The following is a summary of his remarks. [Read a summary \(templateC05.php?CID=2210\)](#) of Mr. Abdulhamid's remarks.

The usual Western assumption is that "minority rule" is illegitimate and an inversion of natural order. This is, however, a very modern and European idea. Minority rule has a long tradition in the Middle East, where it has never had the same stigma that the modern West attaches to it.

The Historic Model

In the most dynamic Islamic empires in history, Muslim minorities ruled over non-Muslim majorities. The early Arab empires ruled over largely non-Muslim populations, as did the Ottoman Empire, for as long as it held the Balkans. The tradition of this region was imperial rule by elites who spoke different languages and sometimes professed different religions than the people they ruled. The sovereignty and legitimacy of the government was not based on popular consent; it had its source in Islamic law.

The Middle East, even after its gradual conversion over the centuries to Islamic majority, allowed for the continued existence of autonomous minorities that enjoyed social and religious autonomy. The result is the social mosaic seen today -- a consequence of a centuries-long social contract.

There is a debate about the nature of that system. The historian Bat-Ye'or depicts it as a thousand-year "apartheid" that left non-Muslims in a permanent state of insecurity (she calls this dhimmitude). A more balanced view is that of Bernard Lewis, who notes that persecution was very rare compared to Europe, and that minorities flourished within the limits of their status. The late Elie Kedourie celebrated Ottoman rule for achieving a nearly perfect equilibrium among social groups. He regarded European ideas of exclusive nationalism as a virus that replaced a tolerant if ramshackle system with a "wilderness of tigers."

The irony is that minorities articulated the most prevalent form of nationalism, Arabism, in order to legitimize their own minority rule. This is particularly true of Alawi rule in Syria (where Sunnis are a majority), Sunni rule in Iraq (where Shiites are the largest group), Hashemite rule in Jordan (imported from Arabia, over a Palestinian majority), and dynastic rule throughout the Persian Gulf (where foreigners outnumber natives).

Effects of Democratization

The message of democratization is that minority rule is a vestige of the past, one that should be replaced by full-blown democracy. This is precisely why democracy promotion is so feared in the Middle East. Americans see democratization as a process that will loosen the grip of tyrannical rule. Middle Easterners see it as a lever to shift power among different ethnic and sectarian groups, overturning social hierarchies established by a thousand years of internal struggles. Majority rule has frightening implications for conservative societies that fear chaos.

In particular, the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime has brought the Shiites to the fore of Arab politics. The democratizing messages of the United States would reverse a long-established sectarian social order in Iraq, and perhaps elsewhere. It is, however, by no means certain that empowered Shiites would prove to be tolerant of the pluralistic values that democracy celebrates. Were the principle of one man, one vote to spread, it could enhance the power of Shiites in Lebanon, Palestinians in Jordan, and Sunnis in Syria. It is not a foregone conclusion that eroding the positions of minorities in these countries would make for more open and tolerant regimes; it might have the opposite effect.

In practice, minority rule has sometimes been more enlightened than majority rule, and its nature very much depends on specific circumstances. Some states owe their very existence to the disproportionate cultural and political role of minorities, e.g. Lebanon (whose creation was prompted by Maronites), and Iraq (whose establishment was the work of Sunnis). The removal of these minorities from their position of preeminence led to civil war in Lebanon, and may do the same in Iraq.

The Alternative

More important than democracy is the principle of self-determination for sub-national groups, majorities and minorities, the guarantee of autonomous control of their daily lives. More than the Middle East suffers from a dearth of political parties and elections, it is plagued by the cancerous growth of the state, which has achieved efficiency only by depriving its citizen-victims of the right to worship as they please, speak their own languages, and preserve their own traditions.

In the Sunni triangle people like their tribes, and instead of democracy might prefer the rule of a sheikh at the head of a tribal-style confederation. In other parts of Iraq, there might be preference for remote-control rule by a reclusive Shiite cleric in beard and turban. What these sub-national communities crave is not democracy but the right to collective freedom, associated with the retreat of the state.

To what point should the state retreat? The Ottoman empire perhaps provides a model. As Elie Kedourie once emphasized, its "contraptions" allowed it to "mediate and meander" among social groups, without undo imposition. If democracy proves to be difficult or impossible to implant, the United States should look to such indigenous traditions of tolerance and build on them. All of them were predicated on the reduced role of the intrusive state, and the recognition of the autonomy of social, religious, and sectarian groups. ❖

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