PROBLEMATIZING «MINORITIES» IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Using a case study of the Palestinian Christians, this article explores the relationship of Middle Eastern Christian communities to “minority status” in light of the realities of citizenship, state building and nationalism in the Middle East.

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In the history of Christian-Muslim relations you will find Christians were defined at one time as dhimmi people. During the Ottoman period they were defined as millet. And as a dhimmi – the main definition of relating to a person in the community is religion. As a millet, ethno-religious community becomes the main defining factor. So the Armenians will be a millet, the Greek Orthodox will be another millet – not Christians in general. So the ethno-religious identity becomes how you identify “the other”. Then comes the Palestinian Authority and nationalism if you wish and then citizenship becomes the defining factor. But millet and dhimmi did not disappear. And now you have citizenship, but citizenship is not citizenship as defined in the US or in England – it is citizenship for a state that is based on Islamic law and developed into a political system whose roots are dependent on Islamic shari’a.¹

Palestinian Christian, mid-40s, Bethlehem 2014

The ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq have drawn considerable academic and media attention to the vulnerable minorities of the Middle East. The groups have been broadly defined as non-Muslim (Christian, Yazidi, Jewish, among many others), but also include Shi’a Muslims, moderate Muslims, atheists, women, children, LGBTQ communities and any other groups who do not fit into the rigid religio-cultural paradigm of the Islamic State. However, despite the diversity of these groups, they are discussed within a similar intellectual framework structured by our preconceived notions of what being a minority entails. Our understanding of minority status in the Middle East, therefore, becomes amorphous, raising questions as to its usefulness and accuracy.

In our broader usage of the term minority, we typically refer to groups that are small in number, namely demographic minorities. In this sense, it is a term used to quantify difference from a demographic majority. However, minority also describes the power dynamics between groups, while

at the same time reflecting the hierarchical structure of societies. In the context of the modern Middle East, “minority” is used primarily to characterize groups that are in some way subordinate or vulnerable within their specific cultural or political contexts. It is this understanding of minority that has led to the development of international protections for these groups and the enshrining of minority rights within the legislative frameworks of developing states, for example, devolved parliamentary powers and reserved parliamentary seats. A fundamental flaw in this understanding is that it does not provide the necessary background to understand how a given minority community has interacted within society over time. Thus, we consider both the tragically besieged Iraqi Yazidis and Egyptian Copts to be minorities, independent of their vastly different social and political realities.

This suggests that the language we use to describe and understand these communities suffers from a lack of precision, resulting from our failure to consider the perspectives of the communities themselves, who may reject their characterization as unequal, subordinate or vulnerable. At best this mislabeling may result in bruised egos; at worst it may undermine or discredit the enormous contributions that these communities have made to their national cultures by assuming that they are irreconcilably different from their countrymen. This has wide ranging implications, not only for the ways in which these groups are perceived within their evolving national contexts, but also for the ways in which the international community engages with development, state building, and aid.

Using a case study of the Palestinian Christian communities, this article explores the historic relationship of Middle Eastern Christians to minority status, as well as how the Palestinian Christian community’s rejection of the term

minority is reflected in their views on citizenship, national identity, and state attachment.² It argues that the broad usage of the term minority, while appropriate in some contexts, must be discussed critically to address the highly particularistic relationships of non-Muslims to their social and political contexts. This discussion is informed by data obtained from semi-structured interviews with Palestinian Christian community leaders, politicians, and community members conducted in the West Bank in 2014. This first section briefly explores the demographic realities of the Palestinian Christian community followed by a discussion of the historic and contemporary uses of the term minority in the Middle Eastern context. The second section explores how notions of citizenship, political participation, and nationalism contradict the usefulness of the term minority when applied to Middle Eastern Christians.

THE PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN POPULATION

The Palestinian Christian communities currently make up less than 1 per cent of the total population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. However, this was not always the case. In the late Ottoman period and continuing into the British Mandate of Palestine beginning in 1920, Christians made up anywhere from 12-30% of the population in their given regions, and around 7 per cent of the total population in Palestine.³ By 1946 there were approximately 148,910 Christians in Palestine, with around 57,950 inhabiting what is now the West Bank and Gaza Strip.⁴ However, unlike the rest of the Palestinian population, which, apart from the massive exodus following the 1948 War with Israel, has grown at a fairly steady rate of around 2.5 per cent annually, the Christians living within the modern borders of Israel/Palestine have experienced a slow but consistent decline in numbers since at least the late 19th century. This decline in numbers has been attributed to the in-

stability of both the political and economic conditions in Palestine, which have exacerbated the already prevalent trend of emigration.⁵

If we were to approximate what the Palestinian Christian population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip would have been under normal growth, excluding emigration, we would have expected the 2007 population to be approximately 192,400 or approximately 400,000 in both Israel and Palestine.⁶ However, the last available Palestinian Authority (PA) census in 2007 indicated that the Christian population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip was around 42,565, which suggests that tens of thousands of Palestinian Christians have emigrated over the course of the 20th century.⁷ Indeed, the 2006 Sabeel Survey of Palestinian Christians estimates that roughly 240,000 Palestinian Christians or 60 per cent of the total global population of Palestinian Christians currently reside outside of Israel and Palestine.⁸ Despite their declining numbers and the ongoing crisis of emigration, Palestinian Christians have rejected the label 'minority'. But, as the next section will discuss, this sensitivity towards minority status needs to be understood within a much broader historical context.

WHO IS A MINORITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

Middle Eastern Christians have a complex history with minority status. In the early Islamic period, non-Muslims from Abrahamic faiths were categorized as *dhimmi* or "protected peoples", who paid the *jizya* (poll tax) in exchange for protection, in a military sense, and limited religious freedoms. Although *dhimmi* were undoubtedly considered subordinates within this context, *dhimmi* regulations were, as Emon notes, the "legal expression of the way in which the Muslim polity contended with the fact of diversity" in a society that revolved around faith.⁹ In practice, these rules were applied unevenly across the early

Islamic world and were, at times, abandoned entirely.¹⁰ However, they did represent a semi-institutional form of discrimination in which the limited physical, spiritual, and intellectual freedom of non-Muslims was contingent upon their complete surrender of sovereignty and the levying of an often unpredictable tax burden.

Although *dhimmi* regulations continued to influence the treatment and legal status of non-Muslim communities in the Middle East until the early 20th century, the establishment and expansion of the Ottoman Empire beginning in the 14th century changed the nature of the relationship between non-Muslims and the government. This was particularly true as ethno-religious communities were increasingly organized, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, into broad administrative units known as *millets*.¹¹ Each *millet* was headed by its own "highest ecclesiastical authority" (most often a Patriarch) and was granted some degree of legal and administrative autonomy under the patronage of the Ottoman government.¹² Despite the expanded autonomy and freedoms of non-Muslims in the late Ottoman period, they were largely barred from holding high political and social positions within the imperial bureaucracy because of their faith. However, neither the *millet* communities nor the Ottomans considered non-Muslims to be "minorities" in this period.

Indeed, as White argues, the term minority, as we understand it today, did not exist prior to the mid-19th century in either the European or the Middle Eastern context.¹³ Rather, it only began to take on significance in the Middle East with the imposition of the French and British Mandates, which, for the first time, introduced the "philosophical and geographical preconditions associated with modern states", which included the Western conceptions of national identity, citizenship, and representative government.¹⁴ As Middle Eastern states began to define themselves in the

interwar period, groups that held power, either because of numerical superiority, the patronage of the colonial authorities, or wealth, unsurprisingly had the strongest influence on the definition of these national identities – thus becoming *de facto* “majorities”, whilst groups that did not fit into these new categories became “minorities”, often regardless of their size.¹⁵ In the Middle Eastern

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context, this process of “minoritisation” was aided in large part by the British and French Mandate authorities through religious demarcation in census taking, granting of reserved seats to demographic minority groups, and divide and rule tactics.

In the early colonial period, many Middle Eastern Christian communities embraced their categorization as minorities by the British and French simply because it allowed them to share power in places where their small number would have otherwise made this difficult. However, as the momentum of Arab nationalism grew towards the end of the French and British Mandates, and in particular after the 1948 War, a majority of Christians began to reject the term in favour of secular pan-Arabism. As Tarek Mitri suggests, this change of heart was also due to the fact that Christians were gaining increased access to education through the numerous missionary schools that had been established in the Levant from the mid-19th century.¹⁶ It was through these schools that Christians were exposed to secular nationalism and liberal ideas of governance and citizenship. As a result, the Christian influence on the Arab and Palestinian nationalist movements has

been characterized by its calls for “modern nationalist and universal ideologies”, as well as by its emphasis on the “common ethno-cultural identity with Muslims as the basis for independence and modern nation building”, rather than religious affiliation.¹⁷ In the case of Palestine, the impact of Zionism in the region had a tremendous nationalizing and unifying effect on the Palestinian population.¹⁸ In the aftermath of the 1948 War with Israel, both Christians and Muslims suffered and were dispossessed. Palestinian nationalism, therefore, reflected the collective struggle of both the Christians and Muslims of Palestine, with traditionally strong support for a secular-oriented national identity.

In the contemporary context, the declining number of Palestinian Christians, increased popularity of Hamas, and looming threat of Daesh (IS) have had an effect on how Palestinian Christians frame their identities and position in society. This is because many fear that the traditionally secular-oriented Palestinian nationalism, which is largely upheld by the PA, could increasingly be defined in sectarian terms. Regardless of this growing tension, Palestinian Christians are hesitant to publically frame their relationship with the Muslim community in a negative light.¹⁹ This is primarily because of the feeling that it may diminish Palestinian solidarity, but also because Christian leaders are well aware of the dangers of unnecessarily inflaming sectarian divisions – divisions that quite frankly are not very apparent in Palestinian society. However, there is a clear concern that defining oneself as a minority or highlighting the demographic decline of one’s community may also exacerbate feelings of isolation and communalism – both from the perspective of the Christian communities themselves and from that of the Muslim community. And indeed many respondents indicated that when the term minority is applied to their community, even when it is used

as a means to ensure equal treatment at the government level – such as reserved parliamentary seats – it singles out the community in a way that they feel has the opposite effect of providing equal rights. This has a tremendous impact on how the community views itself and its place within the state and society.

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Christian communities themselves, not only because it can potentially lead to what they view as unnecessary special treatment, but also because it can in some ways degrade the significant contribution that this community has made to Palestinian society. As the leader of the Bethlehem-based Diyar Consortium Mitri Raheb described it, “Arab Christians²⁰ are a minority, but only a quantitative, not a qualitative minority.”²¹ And indeed this highlights the struggle that many Palestinian Christians face in preserving their uniquely Christian heritage and culture while being considered fully committed Palestinian nationalists. As the next section will discuss, this is reflected in the ways in which Palestinian Christians view notions of citizenship, equal rights, and the future of the Palestinian state.

NOTIONS OF CITIZENSHIP AND THE NATION

As suggested in the previous section, Christian-Muslim relations in Palestine have historically been relatively stable. With both communities experiencing the same daily realities of life under Israeli occupation, solidarity between the two

communities has been the norm. However, perpetual statelessness, a decreasing confidence in the Palestinian Authority, and the growing popularity of Islamism have produced two parallel streams of nationalism within the Palestinian context: secular and Islamist.²² Within this context, ideas of citizenship, equal rights, and the future shape of the Palestinian state are contested, with a variety of actors competing for ideological supremacy. This section explores these themes in more depth, relying on fieldwork conducted in the West Bank in 2014. I argue that Palestinian Christians reject “minority status” because it contradicts their secular-nationalist views on citizenship and national identity, emphasizing instead the historic hegemony of Islam and the subordinate position of non-Muslims in society.

PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF CITIZENSHIP

As the previous sections suggest, the relationship of Palestinian Christians to notions of citizenship, national identity, and equal rights must be understood within the historical context of the Middle East, in which faith had been a primary mode of social differentiation since the 7th century. Within this context, as discussed above, *dhimmi* status, *millet*, and the historic hegemony of Islam are subtle but salient social and political forces. However, the Palestinian Authority, led by the secular-nationalist Fatah party, defines Palestinian citizens as “equal before the law and the judiciary, without distinction based upon race, sex, colour, religion, political views or disability”.²³ In this view, Palestinian Christians are, in theory, equal to their Muslim compatriots both in rights of citizenship and duties. However, the same document, the 2003 Basic Law, suggests that legislation is based upon the principles of Islamic *shari'a*.²⁴ In practice, this has only a marginal effect on the Palestinian legal system,²⁵ and almost no effect on the ways in which Christians are

treated by the government, but it does suggest a hierarchy of citizenship – if only indirectly. As one respondent noted:

There isn't equality in every aspect of the law. Now you want to say, ok doesn't that make you a second-class citizen? But it's not like a second-class citizen. Let's say if I was applying for university, we will both be accepted regardless of our faith. But let's say – I'll give the example of religious conversion – Muslims cannot convert to Christianity – then it's not equal. So there are aspects that need to be challenged in the law.²⁶

Despite this disconnect between various aspects of the Basic Law, respondents did not typically frame their position in society as unequal, but rather as part of an ongoing and evolving dialogue in Palestinian society between the secular-nationalists and Islamists. In the secular-nationalist view all citizens have equal rights and duties regardless of their faith; in the Islamist view, non-Muslims are viewed as subordinate minorities. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Christians reject minority status in this context simply because it perpetuates older power dynamics, which undermine their decades-long attempt to be treated equally.

On a social level, being labelled a 'minority' impacts the subtle ways in which the Christian community interacts with the Muslim community. In Palestine, this has not led to widespread discrimination or violence as it has in many other neighbouring states, but it has affected the psychology of national identity and belonging. As one respondent noted:

I was in a lecture at an-Najah University in Nablus. And a very nice young man said to me: 'we know that we are brothers and sisters and for us Muslims we should care about Christians – this is our duty, we should protect them.' And I said: 'protect them from

whom?' Why should we be protected? Does he want to make me the weak part? No, I don't want to be protected. I want to share and to protect each other – to be equal. He was in good faith you know; he wanted to show you know that it's our duty as Muslims, etc. But this is the view of Hamas – that we should protect the Christians.²⁷

And this rejection of special "protected" status is also reflected in government. The Palestinian Basic Law and subsequent presidential decrees guarantee Christians six reserved seats on the now defunct Palestinian Legislative Council, as well as requiring the appointment of a Christian to the post of mayor in 12 traditionally Christian municipalities. These measures were created in order to give Christian communities a voice in government where their small number would have made this difficult. However, a majority of respondents were ultimately against the quota system because they felt that it set them apart from broader Palestinian society. Therefore, despite the best intentions of the law, respondents indicated that it was not democratic, particularly in relation to the size of their communities.

There are positives and negatives to the quota system. If we didn't have the quota we wouldn't have anybody in parliament – nobody would be elected of course because of our number. But from the other side, look at Bethlehem city for example; we are 20–22% of the community, why should the mayor be a Christian? Is this democracy? No. But Arafat wanted this to happen in 12 municipalities and village councils in the West Bank.²⁸

Respondents also indicated that they felt the quota system provided a short-term fix for the problem of an evolving government, as well as an evolution in the way that the public conceptualizes citizenship. That is to say that they felt that

within the current social context, issues like tribalism and religion often play a more significant role in electoral decisions than, for example, the actual platform on which a candidate runs. Therefore, some felt that a Christian candidate would be defined primarily by his or her being Christian rather than by their electoral platform. As one respondent suggested, “the quota is important until really perceptions of people are changed.”²⁹

A more mundane yet illustrative example of changing public opinions was the March 2014 PA decision to remove religious affiliation from the Palestinian ID cards. Although this move was criticized by Hamas, which claimed that it would pave the way for “civil marriage” and allow for Muslim women to marry Christian men, it was widely supported by secular-nationalist parties and the Christian community.³⁰ As one respondent noted:

*This is very important. And I don't think that they mean something bad with this, but they mean that we are one people – you are a Palestinian, you are a citizen, which means that you share equal rights with others – you have equal rights and equal duties with others. I don't need to know your religion.*³¹

Therefore, the overall perception of citizenship and equal rights was tied quite closely to notions of civic universalism and secular politics. Respondents felt strongly that minority status negatively impacted upon the public perception of their community and was not a path forward for securing equal rights.

DISCUSSION

As this paper has shown, our usage of the term minority is largely unable to convey the depth of experience and history that each community has in relation to its wider society. Although it may be applicable in contexts in which groups are

small in number or subjected to systematic discrimination, the widespread rejection of the term by Middle Eastern Christian communities suggests that we must be cautious and particular in our use of the term. This is because, in the Middle Eastern context, “minority status” often reflects the historic subordination of non-Muslims in Islamic society, thus undermining attempts by these communities to build upon equal rights and civic universalism.

In the broader scope of international relations and state building, “minority status” can have a tremendous impact on the experience of national identity and integration. Previous state building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have attempted to include ethnic and religious minorities in the political system through federalism, proportional representation, and devolved parliamentary powers. While this may provide a short-term fix in the wake of national reconciliation, in the long term it may have the opposite effect in terms of inducing a unified sense of nationalism. This is because, rather than integrating minority groups, these methods emphasize that the differences between sub-national groups are irreconcilable. They also clearly demarcate which groups are in the national majority and minority. The end result is a rather fractured sense of the nation, which has proven unsustainable in the long term.

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- 6 This figure comes from the 2006 Sabeel Survey and is their estimate of the Palestinian Christian growth rate (2.0%) before emigration is taken into account; i.e. the natural growth rate. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
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