MIDDLE EAST: MINORITIES

The presence of minorities is often perceived as a problem because they are seen to threaten ethnic, religious, and national unity. Another approach recognizes discrimination and persecution as a characteristic experience of minority communities. Both views tend to overlook the diversity and internal heterogeneity of minority groups

throughout history. Minorities in general do not consider themselves to be a problem, and their history encompasses not only persecution but also periods of well-being. The label *minority* is similar to the term *race* in that it should not be considered a natural state but rather a social construct dependent on historical developments and culture. Therefore, minorities should be viewed in terms of their diversity according to the time, place, and social setting in which they live. Minorities in the Middle East provide a good example.

THE LATE OTTOMAN ERA AND NEW STATES AFTER 1918

The Ottoman Empire consisted of dozens of ethnic and religious minorities, of which only Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians were legally recognized as non-Muslim subjects (*dhimmi*) based on the Quranic concept of the *ahl al-kitab* (people of the book). In 1856, after the end of the Crimean War, the Ottoman government promulgated the *hatt-i hümayun* (imperial reform prescript). The *hatt-i hümayun* was influenced by the ideas of the French Enlightenment and formally granted equal civil rights and legal treatment to the Christian and Jewish populations, which were recognized as *millet* (a religiously defined class). After World War I, the delegates at the Paris Peace Conference (1919) decided, among other things, that Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine would become nation-states, to be governed under the international mandate of the League of Nations. This development turned Arab nationalist hopes for political self-determination and Arab unity into disillusionment, and moderation gradually yielded to militancy in the decades that followed.

The protection of ethnic and religious minorities as a principle of international law was achieved at the Paris Peace Conference, and was implemented in the judicial systems of the mandate states. Iraq signed clauses concerning minority protection before becoming a completely sovereign state in 1932. In this religious-political climate, all the religious minorities recognized by the Ottoman Empire as *millet* gained legal status as minority groups, allowing them to maintain their religious customs, jurisdiction, and internal administration. This recognition applied to Armenians, Jews, Copts, Maronites, Catholics, Protestants, and Assyrian Christians, but not to the Baha'i.

Strengthened by their newly achieved minority rights, several of the region's religious minorities, including Jews in Iraq and Copts and Jews in Egypt, became closely associated during the 1920s and 1930s with the entire fabric of social and political life in the countries in which they lived. However, from the end of the 1930s onward, their situation became more and more precarious due to a rise in militant Arab nationalism. Arab nationalists generally perceived the primacy of one race (Arab) and one religion (Islam), and considered non-Arabs and non-Muslims to be a threat to nationhood and the unity of the state. The presence of diverse ethnic and religious minorities in the Middle East frustrated the aspirations of Arab nationalism. Especially after the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 and the disappearance of Arab Palestine, the Middle East's Arab regimes no longer promoted a pluralistic foundation of state and nation, such as existed in Ottoman times and during the 1920s.

ARMENIANS

Armenians experienced opposition in their nation- and state-building process, and paid the high price of genocide. Ottoman persecution against the Armenian civil population began at the end of the nineteenth century, despite their being recognized as a religious class (*millet*). The persecution culminated in systematic massacres and displacement in 1915 to 1916, when Armenians from throughout the Ottoman Empire were officially forced into death marches to the Middle East.

During this period and after, Armenian life became an existential catastrophe, which for the remaining population meant dispersal, great personal losses, and impoverishment. For the clergy, the challenge was managing the reorganization of this old and venerable church despite an estimated loss of about one million believers. The Democratic Republic of Armenia, created in 1918, lasted for only two years, after which the Armenian state joined the Soviet Union. A new beginning in the Middle East was facilitated by their previous recognition as a *millet.* Syria and Lebanon became centers of a prosperous new cultural life among Armenians in the region. After the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, only a small number of Armenians from the Middle East returned to the independent Republic of Armenia.

ASSYRIAN CHRISTIANS

Assyrian Christians, also known as Nestorians, claim to be the descendants of the historical Assyrians from the sixth century BCE. In modern times, they shrank from a transnational population living in the Middle East, China, and India to a very small Christian community in the Kurdistan region. During the World War I, the Assyrian Christians, like the Armenians, experienced dispersal, destruction, massacres, and systematic displacement from their main homelands in northwestern Iran and southeastern Turkey. Most Assyrian Christian refugees fled to Iraq. Because return to their former homes was firmly denied by the Turkish government, they needed a new area for settlement; this effort proved difficult because they refused Iraqi governance. After approximately two decades, at the end of the 1930s, about ten thousand

Assyrian Christian refugees were settled in Syria, while others remained in Iraq. Twenty-first-century parishes of the small Assyrian Christian Church have therefore become widely dispersed in the Middle East. Compared to other Christian communities, the Assyrians' transition into a modern nation-state was the most turbulent.

JEWS

After the new Arab states in the Middle East were founded, most of the indigenous Jewish groups felt themselves to be an integral part of the countries in which they lived. Before 1948, the total number of Jews in the Middle East, excluding Palestine, was estimated at about 390,000. Iraq had around 120,000 Jews, Persia 100,000, Egypt 75,000, Turkey 50,000, Lebanon 6,700, and Syria 6,000. (The remaining 32,300 Jews were divided among Afghanistan, Bahrain, Hadhramaut, Yemen, and Libya.) In 1938, the Jewish population in Palestine is estimated at around 411,000, from a total of 1.435 million inhabitants, of which around 997,000 were Arabs, with 27,000 belonging to other races. After the exodus of Jews to Israel and elsewhere, the various Jewish communities in Arab countries came to an end, and only a small number of Jews live in these countries today. As of 2012, about 11,000 Jews were living in Iran, with around 17,000 in Turkey.

Among Middle Eastern Jews, Zionism was not a primary political or religious aim. However, after the proclamation of the State of Israel in 1948, the situation of Jews living elsewhere in the Middle East deteriorated badly, as anti-Jewish measures and laws that deprived the Jewish population of their civil rights and their property were systematically promulgated. In response, the Israeli government organized the evacuation, not always voluntary, of Jews living in other countries in the Middle East. Beginning with Yemen, approximately 50,000 Jews were airlifted to Israel in 1949 and 1950. Almost the entire Jewish population of Iraq was brought to Israel in 1950 and 1951.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, a substantial number of Jews fled from Egypt, where an estimated 75,000 Jews had lived before 1948, to Europe and other Western countries. The 1956 Suez crisis triggered a major wave of Jewish immigration. By 1957, only around 15,000 Jews remained in Egypt; after the Six-Day War in 1967, their number dwindled to less than 2,500. Today, just a few hundred Jews still live in Egypt.

BAHA'I

The history of the Baha'i begins in the middle of the nineteenth century within Shiite Islam in Iran, from which they had to flee because they were seen as a religious threat to Muslim orthodoxy. Further banishments by Ottoman authorities brought the small Baha'i community to Palestine. The center of the Baha'i religious and administrative world remains in Israel, and comprises the holy shrines of their religious founders in Haifa (on Mount Carmel) and Acre in northern Israel. Thousands of Baha'i from around the world undertake pilgrimages to Israel.

Baha'i have fought throughout the Middle East for legal recognition, which only the Israeli government has granted. Baha'i marriages were accepted in some countries, but their entire religious jurisdiction was not. After the establishment of the nationalistic Baath regimes in Iraq and Syria and the Nasser regime in Egypt, the Baha'i of the Middle East encountered severe state and social persecution. After 2003, some small signs in improvement in their situation were registered in Iraq. In Egypt, the situation of the country's approximately two thousand Baha'i remains precarious.

KURDS

Like the Armenians, the Kurds' nation-building process in the new political world after the First World War was bitter and difficult. Their aspirations for unity and independence gained momentum with the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), which made provisions for their local autonomy in areas that had been predominantly Kurdish since the Ottoman period. This was seen as a first step toward a future sovereign Kurdish state. The military victory of the Kemalist troops over the British army in Turkey led to a fundamental revision of the Treaty of Sèvres, but the revised Treaty of Lausanne (1923) did not even refer to the Kurds, and Kurdish nationalist aspirations were quashed after the political borders between the newly created states were settled. Their claimed territory, Kurdistan, remains today divided between Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and the former Soviet Union.

The Kurdish people continued to fight for political and cultural autonomy throughout the twentieth century. The granted principle of international law to protect ethnic minorities and their cultural rights has found application to Kurds only partially and periodically in Iraq, where they gained varying degrees of political, local, and cultural autonomy. Rebellion against state authorities, as in Ottoman times, is thus a further constant companion of Kurdish history.

As of 2012, the Kurdish population in Turkey is estimated to be around fourteen million, with around five million Kurds in Iran, 4 million in Iraq, and about 1.8 million in Syria. The Kurds are permitted cultural and political expression in Iraq, where the Kurdish region has been politically autonomous since the 1970s. Since 2005, Iraqi Kurdistan has been recognized as a federal entity with its own regional parliamentary assembly. The Kurds' situation is quite different in Turkey, where their struggle for political and cultural representation has

increased since the 1980s but has been met with intransigence from the Turkish government. Turkey has been reluctant to grant the Kurds any degree of political autonomy or cultural expression out of fear that it would lead to fragmentation of the Turkish state and to the founding of a separate Kurdish state.

PALESTINIANS

The precarious situation of the Palestinians within and outside of Israel is one of extreme delicacy. With the founding of the Israeli state in 1948, and the ensuing military clashes with Arab states, more than half of the Palestinian population, the region's major indigenous ethnic group, became refugees, with most being expelled and some leaving voluntarily. Later on, those who remained became Israeli citizens with full civil rights except the ability to serve in the army. The expelled populations were dispersed to Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, and were settled in refugee camps, some of which are still in existence in 2012.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees, which began operation in the 1950s, registered nearly five million Palestinian refugees at the beginning of 2011 in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. The Palestinians' situation differs in Egypt because the UNRWA's relief and assistance projects were prohibited there. Therefore, the Palestinians' plight in Egypt is dire, and since the 1980s they have been burdened by many restrictive laws and regulations. Palestinians represent about half the population in Jordan, which has granted them citizenship and parliamentary representation, making their political position better there than in other countries. About half of the Palestinians in Jordan live outside the refugee camps and have become integrated into Jordanian society.

In Israel, the official policy concerning Palestinians is regarded by many as discriminatory, and has entailed demolishing Palestinian houses and other structures in the West Bank in favor of Jewish settlers. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which embodies a high degree of emotion on both sides, pits the rights of the Jewish population against the rights of the Palestinians. Despite numerous attempts to negotiate peace over many decades, a durable solution has yet to be found.

SEE ALSO *Anti-Semitism: Arab World; Genocide and Crimes against Humanity: Armenia; Genocide and Crimes against Humanity: Assyrian Massacre; Imperialism: Middle East; Muslims and Islam; Nationalism and Ethnicity: Middle East; Nationalism and Ethnicity: Zionism and Israel.*

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