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From Pluralism to Extinction?

Perspectives and Challenges for Christians in the Middle East

Edited by Sotiris Roussos

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ARMENIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST: LOSING THE PAST IN THE FUTURE?

Hratch Tchilingirian

The Armenian presence in the Middle East dates back to ancient times, with the ancestral homeland of Western Armenia being located today in the eastern regions of the Republic of Turkey. While the Armenians are indigenous in some parts of the Middle East, in other parts, they have formed diaspora communities due to a variety of historical circumstances. "Since history has no secret pockets and private laws, things Armenian are also things Near Eastern", writes Seda Dadoyan, a leading scholar of the history of Armenian-Islamic relations. From the first century of the Christian era, there has been an Armenian presence in Jerusalem, when they came to Palestine as Roman legionnaires and administrators. There is a long and extensive history of "Armenian-Islamic *realpolitik* with Arabs, Turks, Persians, Kurds as well as heterodox Islam (such as Ismailism)", according to Dadoyan. Medieval Arab sources provide extensive accounts of Armenians in the Middle East. Indeed, "*Arminyah* and *al arman* were presented [in the Arab sources] as indigenous elements of the Near East and the narrative did not single them out from the regional texture", explains Dadoyan. Since the seventh century, Armenians "have been part of the Islamic world", and part of what is now the Middle East and its peoples.[1] In the late eighth century, heterodox Armenians allied with "the Muslims on the Abbasid frontiers lands". More significantly, medieval Armenian histories put the origin of all treaties regulating Islamic-Armenian relations in the Medinan period of Islam (622-632) and see them through a "so-called 'Prophet's Oath to Armenians' (allegedly given to an Armenian delegation from Jerusalem to Medianh)".[2]

Today, Armenian communities are scattered in over ten countries in the Middle East, being mainly concentrated in Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. In 1975, there were an estimated 625,000 Armenians in the Middle East.[3]

[1] Seta Dadoyan, *The Armenians in the Medieval Islamic World. Volume 1, The Arab Period in Armnyah, Seventh to Eleventh Centuries*, New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2011, pp. 1, 60-61.

[2] Ibid, pp. 60-61, 150-151.

[3] Figures provided by the then Prelate of Lebanon, Archbishop Aram Keshishian (now Catholicos of Cilicia) based on various estimates; see Aram Keshishian, *The Christian Witness at the Crossroads in the Middle East*, Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 1981.

However, over the last five decades, given the wars, conflicts, revolutions and continued political and socio-economic turmoil in the region, the estimated combined figure declined to a little over 200,000 in 2022 (see *Table 1*). The Armenians may be considered to be a minority within the wide spectrum of confessional, religious and ethnic non-Muslim communities living in these respective countries.

In the 11th century, after the fall of the Bagratuni Kingdom, some 10,000 Armenians migrated to Egypt during the Fatimid period. In the early 17th century, Shah Abbas the Great forcibly resettled more than 300,000 Armenians from the Eastern and Western parts of Armenia in Persia, where the community still exists in New Julfa, Isfahan. In 1636, an Armenian priest in Isfahan established the first printing press in the Middle East.[4] Trade and commercial activities have also led to the wide dispersal of the Armenian communities. Between the 15th and 18th centuries, large numbers of Armenians lived on the important trade route that ran between Aleppo and Alexandretta.[5] Armenian craftsmen, especially jewellers, were well-known in Aleppo during the 19th century.[6] In the late 17th century, there were some 800 Armenian families in Basra, who had relocated there from various cities and towns in the Ottoman Empire, as well as from the Safavid territories. Armenian merchants came from New Julfa and the ancient Persian city of Hamadan. The first Armenian Church in Baghdad was built in 1640.[7] Armenians were also mostly involved in trade and craftsmanship.

In the early 19th century, a number of Armenians held significant commercial and political positions in both Egypt and Lebanon, and "distinguished themselves as statesmen and high officials".[8] Boghos Yusufian, an Armenian banker and businessman, who was an advisor to Muhammad Ali, the founder of modern Egypt.[9] Yusufian became head of bureau of commerce in 1819. Another prominent Armenian is Nubar

[4] The first book published in Isfahan was the *Psalter* in 1638. See Goriun Abp. Babyan, "*Khachatur Vardapet Gesaratsi himnatir N. J. Srp. Amenaprgich Vanki Dbarani*" ["Khachatur Vardapet of Caesarea founder of the printing press of New Julfa's Holy Saviour Monastery"], *Hask*, no. 2-3, 2014, p. 160.

[5] For a discussion of Armenians in the Levant between 12th and 13th centuries, see Claude Mutafian, "Les princesses arméniennes et le Liban latin", in Aida Boudjikanian (ed.), *Armenians of Lebanon*: *from past princesses and refugees to present-day community*, Beirut and Belmost, MA: Haigazian University and Armenian Heritage Press, 2009, pp. 3-20; for a historian's perspective on modern times, see Avedis Krikor Sanjian, *The Armenian Communities in Syria under Ottoman Dominion,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965.

[6] Sanjian, *The Armenian Communities*, pp. 53-56.

[7] Seda Mouratyan, *Iraki Hay Hamaynkeh* [The Armenian community of Iraq], Yerevan: Baykar, 1997.

[8] Sanjian, *The Armenian Communities*, p. 157; Hovannisian, "The Ebb and Flow of the Armenian Minority in the Arab Middle East", Middle East Journal, vol. 28, no, 1, 1974, p. 22.

[9] Sona Zeitlian, *Armenians in Egypt. Contribution of Armenians to Medieval and Modern Egypt,* Los Angeles, CA: Hraztan Sarkis Zeitlian Publications, 2006, pp. 98ff.

Nubarian, who became the first Prime Minister of modern Egypt in 1876.[10] In the late 19th-early 20th century, the first and last governors of the autonomous province of Mount Lebanon were Catholic Armenians, Dawuid Pasha (1861-68) and Ohannes Pasha Kuyumjian (1912-15) respectively.[11] The Armenians of Lebanon "formed part of the socially most advanced sections" of society at the time. Many served in official and professional positions, such as the various branches of the Ottoman administration, the Ottoman Public Debt or the Tobacco *Régie*.[12]

Following the Hamidian massacres of 1894-96 in the Ottoman Empire, numerous Armenian refugees from Adana, Sis, Marash, Aintab, Urfa, Dikranagerd and other towns in what is now eastern Turkey came to Beirut and other parts of Lebanon. In 1896, Armenian orphans from Marash and Zeytoun were transferred to Beirut. These relocated Armenians gradually became assimilated into the Maronite community in Lebanon.[13] In the late 1920s a large number of orphanages and refugee camps in the Middle East, especially in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq housed thousands of Armenians, who survived the genocide in the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 20th century.[14] Another wave came when, in the late 1930s, the French Mandate in Syria ceded the province of Alexandretta to Turkey. Some 40,000 Armenians, from the region formerly known as Cilicia, were obliged to take refuge in Syria and Lebanon. The overwhelming majority of Armenians living in the Middle East today are third and fourth generation descendants of the genocide survivors.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Armenian communities in the

[10] Ayman Zohry, "Armenians in Egypt", *International Union for the Scientific Study of Populations*, XXV IUSSP International Population Conference, Tours, France 18-23 July 2005.

[11] Hovannisian, "The Ebb and Flow", p. 29.

[12] Hilmar Kaiser, "The Armenians in Lebanon during the Armenian Genocide", in Aida Boudjikanian (ed.), *Armenians of Lebanon*: *from past princesses and refugees to present-day community*, Beirut and Belmost, MA: Haigazian University and Armenian Heritage Press, 2009, p. 35.

[13] Prior to World War I, Armenians in Syria and Lebanon numbered between 17,000 and 18,000. The communities in these countries swelled after the arrival and settlement of waves of refugees and survivors of the genocide in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Figures published in Soviet Armenia in 1925 give the Armenian population numbers as follows: Aleppo and its environs 90,000; Beirut 18,000; Damascus 8000; Iskenderun 8000; other parts of Lebanon 6000; Tripoli and Zgharta 5000; Beyli 6000; Patros 3000; Zahleh and nearby villages 2000; Saida & Sour 3000; Junieh 2500; Tagher 2500; see *Hayastani Kochnak*, 1925, p. 794, quoted in Ashot K. Abrahamian, *Hamarot Urvagits Hay Gaghtavayreri Batmutyan* (Brief Outline of the History of Armenian Colonies), vol. 2, Yerevan: Hayastan Publication, 1967, pp. 22-23.

[14] In the 1920s, there were 30,000 Armenians in Iraq, 25,000-28,000 in Egypt, some 150,000 in Syria (60,000 in Aleppo), 35,000-40,000 in Lebanon; see entries for relevant countries in *Hay Spiurk*: Hanragitaran (Armenian Diaspora Encyclopaedia*)*, 2003. Hovannisian provides slightly different figures; he writes that "by 1925, well over 200,000 exiles had been received into the Arab lands under French or British mandate: 100,000 in Syria (augmented in 1938-39 when France ceded the sanjaq of Alexandretta to Turkey) 50,000 in the enlarged province of the Lebanon; 25,000 in Mesopotamian towns and refugee camps; 10,000 in Palestine and Transjordan, and 40,000 in Egypt", see Hovannisian, "The Ebb and Flow…", p. 20.

Middle East face a host of critical internal and external issues. Internally, questions of integration, assimilation, preservation and maintenance of community institutions are among the most hotly debated issues in Beirut, Aleppo, Cairo, Tehran and Istanbul. Externally, the existing security situation and ongoing conflicts, as well as the escalation of religious fundamentalism in recent years, and state-tolerated "othering" of minorities –i.e., discrimination sanctioned by constitutions based on the application of Sharia, whereby "non-Muslim minorities within an Islamic State do not enjoy rights equal to those of Muslim majority".[15] These processes are exacerbated by declining socio-economic conditions, which have caused mass migration of Christians in general and the Armenians in particular. As Catholicos Aram of the Cilician See has described the situation in the Middle East: "this region is now characterised by mutual tolerance and tension, mutual understanding and prejudice, rapprochement and polarisation".[16]

This chapter will briefly discuss some of the main institutional internal and external problems facing the Armenian communities in the contemporary Middle East – or what could be called the *imposed realities*. It will then draw some critical conclusions on how these processes affect identity construction and maintenance of a viable community life in what might be designated as the *uncertain future*.

Internal developments

Three main institutions play significant roles in defining and maintaining Armenian identity in the Diaspora and the Middle East in particular: the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church (hereafter termed the Armenian Church), schools and media, i.e., communications in the broader sense.

The Armenian Church

First, it is a historically, politically and sociologically significant fact that the three Hierarchical Sees of the Armenian Church are all located in the Middle East: the Catholicosate of Cilicia has been in Antelias, Lebanon, since 1930, but its roots go back to the 13th century Cilicia; the Patriarchate of Jerusalem which was established at the beginning of the 14th century; and the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Istanbul that was founded in the 15th century. The Patriarchate of the Armenian Catholic Church (otherwise known as the Armenian Rite) is based in Bzommar, Lebanon, as is one of the oldest Armenian Protestant church organisations – the Armenian

[15] Fatih Öztürk, *Ottoman and Turkish Law,* Bloomington: iUniverse LLC, 2014, pp. 5-6.

[16] Catholicos Aram I, "The Armenian Church in the Middle East: Some Facts and Perspectives", in Seta Dadoyan (ed.) *The Contribution of the Armenian Church to the Christian Witness in the Middle East,* Antelias, Lebanon: Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, 2001, p. 14.

Evangelical Union of Near East.

The Armenian Church belongs to the Orthodox family of churches, known as the Oriental Orthodox (or 'Non-Chalcedonian') Churches. Armenia adopted Christianity as a state religion in the early 4th century, following the conversion of King Trdat by St. Gregory the Illuminator.[17] From this integral link, the history of the Armenian Church has run parallel with the history of the Armenian people. Whether in times of political or social upheavals, or during invasions by foreign rulers, the Armenian Church has been at the forefront of national life. As Malachia Ormanian, a renowned church historian and Patriarch of Constantinople (1896–1908), puts it, the Armenian Church has been "the visible expression of the absent fatherland, the one that satisfies the noblest longings of the soul".[18] Since the demise of the last Armenian Kingdom in 1375, the Armenian Church has been a guarding religious, political, educational and cultural institution and has assumed a major role as the preserver of the Armenian religious-cultural heritage. Historically, the Armenian Church and clergy in Islamic states and societies, as Dadoyan explains, "were protected by law and gained political significance and economic prosperity".

Indeed, the church played the role of the "negotiator" in most of "the contacts and resulting agreements" in Islamic-Armenian relations.[19] In recent history, the national role and function assumed by the church were most evident in the Ottoman Empire (as part of the *Millet* system), the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. Indeed, arguably, a "republicanised" version of the Ottoman *Millet* system continues in the modern Middle East, especially as non-Muslim communities are recognized as "religious communities" (*tayifa* in Arabic, *cema'at* in Turkey). The late Jivan Tabibian, a political scientist and one of the rare, Lebanon-born ambassadors of the Republic of Armenia, provides a brief but expensive description of what being a *millet* in the Middle East implied for the Armenians:

> [It meant being] a community within the larger polity but apart, with self-administration, quasi-autonomous structures, socio-cultural in nature, with some form of legitimate representation, a sub-community, apart, in the large cauldron of the larger society, with a very pre-modern notion of the 'political.' The anchor of the

[17] For a history of the advent of Christianity in Armenia and the conversion of King Trdat by St. Gregory the Illuminator, see Malachia Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia: Her History, Doctrine, Rule, Discipline, Liturgy, Literature, and Existing condition*, 3rd edition, New York: St. Vartan Press, 1988, pp. 3-13.

[18] Ibid, p. 225. See also Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, *Armenian Church Historical Studies,* New York: St Vartan Press, 1996, pp. 235-267.

[19] Dadoyan, *The Armenians in the Medieval Islamic World*, p. 9.

> Armenian millet was the church, and the criterion of distinction was religion.[20]

Whereas constitutions in the Middle East give prominence to religion and religious institutions (unlike in Western democracies), churches or religious establishments provide essential spaces for group socialisation and interaction. For instance, the Armenian Church in the Middle East assumes the role of a significant identity marker and preserver of culture in the context of the dominant Islamic society. Besides religious duties, the Church administers schools and charities, as well as promoting cultural production. Moreover, the Armenian Church – and generally Christian churches in the Middle East – has state-recognised authority to issue marriage licences, hear and deliberate on divorce cases, as well as inheritance and other family dispute cases. In many instances, the Church is also the legal guardian and administrator of substantial community assets that have been bequeathed to the church over many decades, such as in Egypt, which includes trusts, real estate, agricultural lands and other income-generating properties.

One of the unique features of the Armenian Church is the involvement –by tradition and design– of laymen in running its affairs.[21] Unlike the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches of the Byzantine tradition, lay people actively participate in the administrative, legislative and financial affairs of the Armenian Church. The laity elects almost all clerical leaders in the Armenian Church, including the Catholicos. Although this functional involvement of the laity has instilled a spirit of democracy, on the other hand, it has contributed to the politicisation of the Armenian Church by various Armenian political parties, especially during the Cold War era.

The three main and transnational political parties which have been active in the Middle East, or have affiliates are: (1) the Social Democratic Hunchakian Party which was founded in 1887, in Geneva and is the oldest political party; (2) the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnak) Party that was founded in 1889, in Tbilisi as a socialist party; and (3) the Ramkavar Democratic Liberal Party founded in 1921. During the Cold War, the Hunchakian and Ramkavar parties maintained a pro-Soviet Armenia stance, whereas the Dashnak party adopted a pro-American position. These differences of political orientation were sources of internal conflicts within the various communities, especially in Lebanon and Syria. Most notably, the internal political rivalries among the political parties developed into

[20] Jivan Tabibian, "The Risk of Democratization", *Armenian International Magazine*, vol. 10, no. 8 & 9, August-September 1999, p. 29.

[21] The Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem forms the exception, since the ordained members (monks) of the St. James Brotherhood elect the Patriarch and administer the affairs of the Patriarchate without any lay involvement.

consequential crises: first, in 1956, namely the administrative and jurisdictional schism in the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church –between the Catholicosate of All Armenians in Etchmiadzin, at the time in Soviet Armenia, and the Catholicosate of Cilicia in Lebanon– and, then, in 1958, the intra-Armenian political struggle –in the background of the controversial Lebanese elections the previous year– when the Dashnak Party supported the pro-American front of President Camille Chamoun (1952-1958) and the other Armenian parties sided with the Lebanese national opposition. The legacy of the Cold War on the diocesan jurisdictional level, which had started in the late 1950s between the two hierarchical Sees, remains unresolved.[22]

In the early 21st century, the life of the Armenian communities in the Middle East continues to be largely organised around the Armenian Church and its institutions. This is particularly so in countries where Islamic laws are dominant. Secular political, cultural and educational organisations are active in the life of the community, but the formal and legal status of the Armenian Church *vis-à-vis* the State gives prominence to the religious head of the community, as is evident in Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, and Iran.

Nevertheless, as Sossie Kasbarian, a scholar of Middle East diasporas, observes, in recent years the role of community institutions and religious leaders are becoming increasingly "irrelevant" for the new generations. The socio-political lives of young people are not necessarily mediated through the traditional community institutions, at least in some countries in the Middle East. For instance, according to the Armenian Diaspora Survey conducted in 2019 in Lebanon, 76 per cent of Armenians in the 25-34 age group and 84 per cent of the 16–24-year-olds said they are not affiliated with any Armenian political party or movement.[23] "Young activists coalesce with fellow non-Armenian citizens around issues that unite them as Egyptians, Lebanese, and so on", writes Kasbarian. At least for the young people she interviewed, "the church and traditional institutions and narratives have done them a disservice in keeping them at a distance from the state and from active belonging, claiming rights and exercising agency as full and equal citizens".[24] Perhaps more than anywhere else, the new generation of

[22] For more on these developments, see Hratch Tchilingirian, "L'Eglise arménienne pendant la guerre froide: la crise Etchmiadzine-Antelias", NH Hebdo, 9 June 2016, pp. 6-9; Nicola Migliorino *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis*, Oxford: Berghahn, 2008, pp. 100-102.

[23] Hratch Tchilingirian (ed.), *Armenian Diaspora Public Opinion (1). Armenian Diaspora Survey 2019*. London: Armenian Institute, 2020, p. 89. Available at http://www.armeniandiasporasurvey.com/2019-survey.

[24] Sosie Kasbarian, "The Armenian Middle East. Boundaries, Pathways and Horizons", in Dalia Abdelhady, Ramy Aly (eds.), *Routledge Handbook on Middle Eastern Diasporas*, London: Routledge, 2023, p. 410.

Armenians in Turkey speak about "integration" into the wider society with equal rights and question as to why in the 21st century the Patriarch or the clergy should continue to represent the entire community. Even as the Armenian community is recognised as a religious community in Turkey, those who advocate integration demand "a civilian delegation, which should be formed within the Armenian society", to represent them.[25] Etyen Mahçupyan, a well-known intellectual and once advisor to former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, calls this process the "civilianisation of the community". Mahçupyan believes, as others advocating integration do, that having a religious head of the community "takes the community farther away from being a democratic community".[26]

Armenian Schools

The Armenian Church and political parties have played pivotal roles in the development of Armenian education and spread of schools in the Middle East. These were essential community institutions that ensured the transmission and maintenance of the language and culture –the key aspects of Armenian identity. In Syria and Lebanon, during the 1930s and 1940s, "Armenian schools were present in virtually all cities and villages that had a sizeable Armenian presence".[27] In the 1980s, there were 38 Armenian day schools in Syria, with 24 being located in Aleppo and its environs. There were 60 schools in Lebanon. Prior to the start of the Civil War in Lebanon in 1975, some 21,000 students were enrolled in Armenian schools.[28] However, the current situation throughout the Middle East has led to a plummeting of the communities, with consequences for schools. In the last decade alone, schools in Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey have seen a drastic decline in enrolment numbers, as well as in the quality of teaching staff and available financial resources. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of Armenian schools in Lebanon fell from 45 to 33 and further down to 16 in 2022. The number of students has declined from about 12,000 in the 1990s to less than 5,000 in 2022 (see *Table 2*).[29] In Iran, the trend has been even more drastic. Before the Islamic Revolution, there were 17,000 students enrolled in Armenian schools, in 2022 the figure stands at less than 2,000. Similar trends are seen in Egypt and Syria. In Aleppo alone, the number of

[25] *Sunday's Zaman*, "Armenian youth complain elders imposing 'chosen trauma' on them", 7 November 2007. Available at: https://armenians-1915.blogspot.com/2007/10/2032-turkish-armenian-youth-complain.html.

[26] Hratch Tchilingirian, "The 'Other' Citizens: Armenians in Turkey between Isolation and (dis)Integration", *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*, vol. 25, 2016, p. 129.

[27] Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria*, p. 71.

[28] See entries for Syria and Lebanon in *Hay Spiurk: Hanragitaran*, 2003.

[29] Op. cit. Migliorino, 2008, p. 202; see also, *Hay Spiurk: Hanragitaran*, 2003.

students has gone down by 75 per cent within a decade (2011-2022). In Jordan, the only Armenian school, which had 88 students in 2011, closed its doors for good in 2018.

Related to the perennial financial difficulties, there is lack of qualified teachers as schools are not able to pay the faculty decent salaries. Consequentially, as one school director in Lebanon worries, "many of the current teachers might abandon the profession completely".[30] Another former school principal in Istanbul laments that the community perceives the teaching profession in an Armenian school as "being idealistic, a sacrifice, without regard to financial conditions". In her experience, contemporary Armenian parents believe that beyond "the emotional and the personal" aspects, the use of the Armenian language "does not have any social-economic benefit".[31] Such attitudes deprive the schools of the vital support needed from parents, both moral and financial. Also, the educators in both countries point out the lack of appropriate textbooks for Armenian schools.[32] The late school principal Manuel Keshishian described the rapid decline of Armenian schools in once-dynamic Armenian community of Aleppo in more dramatic tone: "Our schools are on an unstoppable free fall".[33]

These problems are not just self-inflicted, but are the culmination of the gradual but debilitating effects of socio-economic and political conditions endured by the Armenian communities – and the resulting migration trend. The role of the state is no less insignificant. Catholicos Aram in Lebanon explains that, "due to restrictions imposed by many governments [in the Middle East] on the curriculum", courses related to religious education are becoming marginalised or ignored.[34] Armenian schools in the Middle East – in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Iran and Turkey– the sole exception being Lebanon, are required to implement the state curriculum in its entirety. There are only a limited number of periods set aside for Armenian language and religion classes, all other teaching must be conducted in Arabic, Farsi or Turkish. Since the 1979 Revolution, the Iranian government, first completely banned minority language instructions, including Armenian in Armenian Schools, and then allowed only two hours per week (increased to five hours per week

[30] Personal correspondence on 20 December 2022.

[31] Personal correspondence on 18 December 2022.

[32] For similar problems in Armenian schools in Aleppo, see Manuel Keshishian, "Halebi Haygagan Varzharannere" (The Armenian Schools in Aleppo), *CivilNet*, 26 July 2022. Available at: www.civilnet.am/news/669250.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Catholicos Aram I, "The Armenian Church in the Middle East: Some Facts and Perspectives", in Seta Dadoyan (ed.) *The Contribution of the Armenian Church to the Christian Witness in the Middle East*, Antelias, Lebanon: Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, 2001, pp. 15-16.

in 1995). In 1984, in response to complaints by the Armenian community over the curriculum of the Armenian schools, Hashemi Rafsanjani, the Speaker of the Parliament at the time, admonished that "the Armenians can read their religious books in Armenian outside the state schools".[35] Some 17 Armenian schools were closed in Iran after the Revolution. In 2022, the number of schools in Iran stand at 11 in Tehran, with about 1400 students, and one in Isfahan with about 200 students. In the last decade, the communities in both cities have witnessed a decline of fifty percent in student numbers. In Syria, schools are permitted three additional periods for Armenian religion classes and four periods for instruction in the language of the religion per week.[36] Interestingly, the Syrian Constitution stipulates that the national teaching curriculum should "create an Arab, national, socialist generation with scientific training and one attached to its land, proud of its legacy, animated by a spirit of struggle for the realisation of the goals of the nation in unity, liberty, socialism".[37] The same constitution –as it had been the case in Turkey– imposes non-Armenian principals or vice-principals in Armenian schools.[38] These government-appointed officials serve as the "states' eyes". Referring to this overt state monitoring of minority schools in Turkey, the late Hrant Dink wrote:

> One of the vice-directors of the [Turkish] ministry of national education's Istanbul office –who was later convicted of corruption and bribe-taking– said the following to the 'vice-principals' he appointed [to the Armenian schools] whom the minority schools call 'Turkish vice-principals': 'You are our eyes and ears... You are to inform us of even the minutest mistakes that these people make'. He said this in the presence of the minority school principals, with total disregard for their dignity and common courtesy.[39]

The Media and cultural communication

In the past, when things looked bleak in the diaspora communities of the

[35] *Iran Times,* 22 June 1984, [. 2, quoted in Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 80; on the problems of education in Armenian and other minority schools in Iran, pp. 76-84.

[36] European Parliament, "The Current Situation of the Armenians in Lebanon, Turkey, Iran and the Soviet Union", Session Documents, Series A., Document A 2-33/97, Part A, B and C. Strasbourg, 15 April 1987.

[37] Migliorino, *(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria*, p. 163, quoting Chapter 4, Article 21 of the Syrian Constitution (1973).

[38] The practice goes back to the 1960s; the Armenian schools in Syria, as Hovanissian writes, "were brought under state control, initially through the aegis of inspector-informers and ultimately, in the fall term of 1967, through the imposition of discriminatory curricular re-visions and the appointment of principals responsible in no way to the Armenian school boards but solely to the ministry of education". Hovannisian, "The Ebb and Flow", p. 27.

[39] Hrant Dink, "Kinkel ve Valilik", *Agos*, 21 August 1998 (translated excerpts posted on groong.com).

West, they looked to the Middle East for hope. In Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, for instance, Armenians spoke, read and wrote Armenian guaranteeing the future of the language and the culture. Over the last few decades, there has been a dramatic decline in Armenian cultural production in the Middle East. Starting in the early decades of the 20th century, Cairo, Aleppo and Beirut were significant centres of literary and cultural production, hosting vibrant literary and intellectual activities for generations. Wide cultural production, that included Armenian theatre, music, and generally the arts, complemented the work of religious and educational institutions and in doing so reinforced the identity, language and ethnic traditions of the communities.[40] The bishop of the Armenian Church diocese of Damascus lamented the discontinuation of once vibrant Armenian dance ensemble and community choir because the community lacks young men.[41] Most young Armenian men in Syria have left the country to avoid the mandatory military service. Male citizens in Syria between the age of 18 and 42 are obliged to perform their military service. Since 2011, the 18 to 21 months period of the service has been extended at times for years by the government.

Armenian-language newspapers in the Middle East, that until recently were dominated by publications or official organs of Armenian political parties, have to deal with three major, perennial problems: a lack of readers, shortages of journalists and economic difficulties. The first is relatively new for the Middle East since there is a steady and alarming decline of Armenian language readers. Even in Lebanon, a country that was once considered the 'Mother of Diasporas', Arabic and English have become the preferred languages among the youth over Armenian. In 2010, UNESCO classified the Western Armenian dialect spoken in the Middle East (as well as in the Western diaspora) as a 'definitely endangered' language in its *Atlas of World Languages*.[42] Compounding this problem is a chronic shortage of journalists, writers and contributors who can write in Armenian. An editor at *Aztag* daily (est. in 1927) explained over two decades ago that his paper's "biggest problem is that there are not enough writers. We don't have intellectuals who

[40] For example, see Nora Salmanian, "La conribution des Arméniens libanais à la vie musicale et artistique au Liban de 1920 à nos jour", in Boudjikanian (ed.), *Armenians of Lebanon* and Roubina Artinian,"Armenian Choirs in Lebanon, 1930-1980. A bridge between the past and he present", in ibid. For Armenian artists, see Hratch Tchilingirian "Master of Grand Theater. Gerard Avedissian in the Cultural Landscape of Lebanon", *Armenian International Magazine*, vol. 10, no.6, June 1999, pp.46-48; Hratch Tchilingirian "Looking to the East. Chant Avedissian rediscovers and redefines Egyptian visual art", *Armenian International Magazine*, vol. 10, no. 8 & 9, August-September 1999, pp. 76-77, 79; Hratch Tchilingirian, "Witness of His Time. The Oppressed and the Rejected Find Dignity and Respect in Norikian", *Armenian International Magazine*, vol. 11, no. 3, March 2000, p. 62-64.

[41] Personal communication on 23 December 2022.

[42] *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. Available at: http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas.

are capable of writing, analysing and presenting local, regional and international issues in Armenian", adding that, "sadly, this pertains to all professions, not only to the media".[43] The situation in 2022 for the Armenian media in the Middle East is even more acute. Compounding the economic and administrative implications of the lack of readers and journalists is the fact that none of the newspapers are financially self-sufficient. They are largely financed and sustained as the organs of the established Armenian political parties or religious entities. Nevertheless, electronic media, the internet and social media have opened new sources of information and communications, especially among the youth. This phenomenal expansion of and access to means of communications has encouraged the use of English and Arabic as primary languages of communications –to the detriment of the Armenian mother tongue. Interestingly, a higher number of respondents of the 2019 Armenian Diaspora Survey in Lebanon completed the questionnaire in English (45 per cent) than in Armenian (42 per cent), and much less in Arabic (10 per cent) and French (3 per cent).[44] The open access to technologies have also weakened the traditional methods of communications of community institutions and their hold on information. Most significantly, the internet has opened a wider world to the youth beyond their parochial institutions and encouraged self-expression, broadcasting and publication. Armenian political parties, religious and community organisations have not caught up with the expensive development and rapid expansion of communications technologies. "In these conditions, the conservative, cautious, still unprofessional or semi-professional situation of the Armenian print media has created some distance between itself and the Armenian reader," notes Varoujan Tenbelian, the editor of the Beirut-based *Darperag21.net* online magazine.[45] In the early decades of the 21st century, publishing Armenian newspapers in the Middle East is no more than "a national obligation passed from one generation to another", as the publisher of *Chahagir* bi-weekly in Cairo (est. 1948) lamented.[46]

The Turkish-Armenian weekly newspaper *Agos*, founded by Hrant Dink and a group of intellectuals in Istanbul in 1996, is an exception to the aforementioned trends in publishing. With a readership in the thousands, *Agos* not only caters to the new generation of Armenians in Turkey who no

[43] Tchilingirian, "Crisis Without Borders", 1999.

[44] Tchilingirian (ed.), *Armenian Diaspora Public Opinion (1)*, p. 55.

[45] Varoujan Tenbelian, "Hay Dbakir Mamulin Daknabe" (The crisis of the Armenian print media), *Darperag21.net*, 6 June 2021. Available at: https://darperag21.net/հայ-տպագիր-մամուլին-տագնապը.

[46] Hratch Tchilingirian, "Crisis Without Borders. The Media in the Middle East", Armenian International Magazine, vol. 10, no. 7, July 1999, p. 37.

longer read Armenian but also attempts to shift the focus of the public discourse on Armenians and minorities from 'narrow' parochial issues to the larger issue of democratisation in Turkey. This arduous process saw its outspoken chief editor, Hrant Dink, dragged into Turkish courts and a vicious nationalist backlash. Dink was assassinated in January 2007.[47] Commentators and intellectuals contributing to *Agos* see themselves as agents of democracy and freedom in Turkey. Indeed, *Agos* is viewed in Turkey as a "newspaper promoting democracy, instead of just an Armenian newspaper … 70-80 per cent of the paper [at kiosks] is bought by Muslim Turks".[48] Yet, given the internal complexities and multi-layered ideological and social stratifications in Turkey, it remains to be seen whether the herculean task of carrying out a Democratic Project in Turkey by members of a non-Muslim community will bear fruits in the long run, especially to ease the pressures on the collective life of the minorities.

In sum, as discussed in this section, the institutions that are critical to the preservation of Armenian identity, transmission of culture and cultural production –or in sociological parlance, the *plausibility structures* that provide belief and meanings to a group or individual– have steadily declined in the Middle East over the decades, more rapidly since the 2000s.

External Problems

The internal institutional changes and challenges discussed above take place against the larger background of external problems or *imposed realities*, as I call them. The periodic but persistent interstate and regional crises, long unresolved conflicts, ongoing wars and security operations, but most importantly, dire economic difficulties raise serious questions about the long-term viability and continuity of the Armenian communities in the Middle East.

The Middle East has witnessed numerous wars, political conflicts, inter- and intra-state devastating rivalries, and socio-political transformations in the last century. With the end of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century, the region was divided into French and British spheres of influence in the 1020s-1940s. Subsequent decades saw revolutions –Egypt 1952 and Lebanon 1958– and numerous coup d'états –Iran 1953, Syria 1963, Iraq 1964, 1968, and Turkey 1960, 1971, 1974, 1980, 1997. In more recent decades, the Civil War in Lebanon (1975-1990), the Islamic Revolution in

[47] See Hratch Tchilingirian, "Hrant Dink and Armenians in Turkey", The Open Democracy Quarterly, vol. 1, no. 2, 2007, pp. 117-124.

[48] David Barsamian, "An interview with Etyen Mahcupyan", Armenian Weekly On-line; vol. 73, no. 28, 14 July 2007.

Iran (1979), the wars in Iraq (1991, 2003), the failed popular uprisings against authoritarian or corrupt regimes (Egypt and Syria 2011, Lebanon 2019), and the brutal Islamic State in 2014 have had lasting and consequential impact on especially non-Muslim minorities in the Middle East.

Years of insecurity and continuing military and political conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon have caused major, perhaps irreversible, shifts in the Armenian communities in the entire region. Since the first decade of the 2000s alone, tens of thousands of Armenians have moved from one country to another in the Middle East, and many thousands have migrated to safer places outside the region. While the consequences of regional conflicts have affected all societies in the Middle East in general, the effects and impact on small non-Muslim communities have been more devastating, as the pool of their material and human resources are extremely limited. But the most crucial long-term problem that concerns these communities is the declining economic conditions. Economically, non-Muslim minorities were relatively successful as middle-class communities in their respective countries. Armenians have been active, for instance, in trade, manufacturing and craftsmanship. However, the downward economic spiral and the political, as well as security developments in the last few decades have resulted in increased unemployment, financial decline and loss of socio-economic status.

Socio-Economic factors

The Armenians who settled in the Arab Middle East after World War I, brought with them, as Hovanissian writes, "native skill[s] that had been refined through centuries of adversity" in the homeland. "Craftsmen and merchants pressed into the hearts of the bazaars and markets" and in certain places, such as Lebanon and Syria, created their own shopping districts.[49] In the 1950s-1960s the climb on the socio-economic ladder continued with well-educated and professionally trained second and third-generation Armenians. By the 1970s, the Armenians in the Middle East were predominantly middle class.

However, the disruption of labour markets in the last two decades of the 20th century, as a result of ongoing internal and regional conflicts, especially in Lebanon, Iraq, Israel/Palestine and Syria, has damaged the position of the middle classes particularly in these countries.[50] Traditional roles in industry have undergone changes, for instance the once Armenian dominated production of shoes in Lebanon "is in decline and increasingly taken over

[49] Hovannisian, "The Ebb and Flow", p. 20.

[50] Migliorino, 2008, pp. 198-199.

by Shi'a entrepreneurs".[51] In the past, Armenians also played a significant role in Lebanon's economy. Arthur Nazarian, a former cabinet minister and Member of Parliament in Lebanon, observed that before the civil war in the mid-1970s, "most of the factories in Lebanon used to be owned by Armenians, but that has changed since the war".[52] Hundreds of Armenian businessmen have emigrated or lost their assets in Lebanon since the mid-1970s. Indeed, in a 2019 survey, almost 6 in 10 Lebanese Armenians said it is "very likely/likely" that they would move "out of Lebanon in the coming 5 years".[53] Another example is Jerusalem, where "high rates of unemployment, particularly among the youth, and difficulty in securing adequate housing have all but emptied the city of its Christian community".[54] Likewise, tens of thousands of Armenians in war-torn Syria and Iraq have escaped to or migrated to the Republic of Armenia and other welcoming countries, such as Canada and Scandinavian countries. The economic decline and gradual loss of influence of the middle class has encouraged migration and weakened the overall presence of the Armenians in the Middle East. Indeed, the future remains uncertain, especially as the communities have to contend with the continuing brain drain and scarcity of financial resources caused by emigration.

The increasing migration over the last few decades has also had an impact on finding potential life-partners within the community. It has increased the rate of mixed-marriages, which is another contentious issue in the Middle East. In Lebanon, nearly half of the Armenian respondents in the same survey, considered mixed-marriages as one of the "biggest challenges to the strength of [the] Armenian community".[55] One school teacher in Lebanon notes, based on her experience, that this has also contributed to the decline of the number of speakers of the Armenian language.[56]

Islamic Militancy & State Policies

Catholicos Aram, the highest ranking Armenian religious leader in the Middle East, has spoken bluntly about the situation in the last few decades:

[51] Ibid., pp. 198-199.

[52] Hratch Tchilingirian, "Integration: The Point of No Return", *Armenian International Magazine*, vol. 10, no. 12, December 1999, pp. 46-48. In the early 1970s, as noted by Hovanissian "fully a fourth of the world-renowned gold bazaar of Beirut [was] Armenian-owned". Hovanissian, "The Ebb and Flow", p.30.

[53] Hratch Tchilingirian (ed.), *Armenian Diaspora Public Opinion (1)*. p. 142.

[54] Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA), One, September 2010, p. 27. Available at: http://www.cnewa.org/default.aspx?ID=201&pagetypeID=3&sitecode =HQ&pageno=1. The number of Christians in Palestine/Israel has gone down drastically: "from more than 10% of the Arab population in the first decades of the twentieth century to approximately 2.6%" in 2011; see Robson, Laura, 'Recent Perspectives on Christianity in the Modern Arab World", *History Compass*, vol. 9, no. 4. 2011, p. 313.

[55] Tchilingirian (ed.), *Armenian Diaspora Public Opinion (1)*, p. 87.

[56] Personal correspondence on 14 December 2022.

"Christianity presents a picture of small islands scattered in the huge ocean of Islam".[57] In recent years, senior clergymen and lay leaders in the Armenian community, as well as in other Christian communities, are gravely concerned about growing religious fundamentalism in the Middle East –especially since the rise of ISIS– and its effects on their personal and collective lives. Most leaders exercise care in their public statements, but privately are vocal, expressing hopelessness about future prospects. Targeted violence against Christians in Iraq, Egypt and Syria in the 2010s are but a few of the visible examples of such tensions.[58] A bomb explosion in front of the Armenian Catholic Diocese and Church in Baghdad, on 1 August 2004, wounded tens of Sunday worshippers, burned down part of the diocesan headquarters and caused major damage to the church building. In Turkey, random vandalism of Armenian churches, schools and cemeteries are common occurrences.[59]

While Islamic societies in the Middle East have been generally tolerant and respectful of their fellow Christians, the more vocal, religiously fervent segments of society tend to dominate the discourse on the non-Muslim communities in their midst. "Even if you have the majority who are moderate Muslims", said Egyptian lawyer Wagdi Halfa, "a minority of extremists can make a big impact on them and poison their minds".[60] Halfa made these remarks following an incident in the village of Sheik Fadl in southern Egypt, where a 15-year-old Christian schoolgirl was instructed to put on a headscarf or leave the school.[61] Coptic Christians in Egypt continue to be the target of deadly attacks and violence. The marginalisation of Christian communities in Arab societies and in Turkey has taken place gradually over the last five decades. A 2010 report prepared by the Cambridge Arab Media Project provides the wider context:

[57] Keshishian, *The Christian Witness,* p. 24; written when he was the Prelate of Armenian Church Diocese of Lebanon during the most intense period of the Lebanese civil war.

[58] See Steven Lee Myers, "More Christians Flee Iraq After New Violence", *The New York Times*, 12 December 2010 and Steven Lee Myers, "Al-Azhar condemns violence against Christians", Asia News, 3 March 2010; also, BBC News, "Syria crisis: Fierce battle in Christian town Maaloula", 11 September 2013 and Armenpress, "Aleppo's New Village Armenian neighbourhood is declared disaster zone", 5 June 2014.

[59] See, for example, *BirGün*, "Koronavirüsü bunlar bela etti' diyerek kiliseyi yakmaya çalıştı", 9 May 2022. Available at: https://www.birgun.net/haber/koronavirusu-bunlar-bela-etti-diyerek-kiliseyi-yakmaya-calisti-300256); *BIA News Desk*, "Istanbul Armenian Church Walls Vandalized", 25 February 2019. Available at: https://m.bianet.org/english/minorities/205815-istanbul-armenian-church-walls-vandalized; *Diken*, "Irkçılar 'iş başında': Ermeni lisesinin duvarına 'Azap Ermeni'ye yazdılar", 13 August 2016. Available at: https://www.diken.com.tr/irkcilar-basinda-ermeni-lisesinin-duvarina-azap-ermeniye-yazdilar/; *Cumhuriyet*, "Tarihi kilisede mangal partisi", 14 January 2021. Available at: https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/tarihi-kilisede-mangal-partisi-1806020

[60] Maggie Michael, "Christians fear Islamist pressure in Egypt", Daily News Egypt, 9 October 2011. Available at: https://dailynewsegypt.com/2011/10/09/christians-fear-islamist-pressure-in-egypt/.

[61] Ibid.

> Following independence from foreign occupation in the 1950s and 1960s in Arab countries, Christians had played a noticeable role in public life as politicians, senior public bureaucrats, intellectuals and professionals. Fifty years later, the situation had changed. As large numbers of Christians had migrated to the West, fewer remained to assume top positions in the state apparatuses. Islamic movements sweeping Arab countries had posed further challenges to them, especially concerning identity and citizenship rights. The use of Islamic terminology in media, social interactions, the public sphere, and political life in general had contributed to a sense of alienation among Christian communities.[62]

Christians in general and the Armenians in particular see the threats posed by certain groups in society towards non-Muslims, however marginal they may be, as a cause of significant concern and a serious factor endangering the long-term viability of their communities in the Middle East.

While it remains to be seen as to how the socio-political landscape in the Middle East will transition, in a 2019 study examining Muslim religiosity and democracy, scholars note that "uncertainty regarding Islam and attitudes toward democracy remains". They suggest,

> while we would expect that Muslim states made up of more pluralistic groupings may be more likely to produce or sustain democracy, such a result may depend on beliefs regarding the ability of democracy to produce religious public goods relative to its most likely political competitor.[63]

Even as in the last decade changes are taking place in the region, a five-country survey conducted between 2003 and 2006 by the Arab Barometer found that "56 per cent of respondents agreed that 'men of religion' should have influence over government decisions".[64] Another survey, which was held in 2003 and 2004, found that "half or more of four Arab publics" agreed that nothing but *Shari'a* law should be implemented by the government.[65] Indeed, after cross-tabulating "support for democracy" and "support for some kind of Islamic form of government", the "generic pattern" that

[62] "Christian Broadcasting in Arab Countries", Section 11, in *Religious Broadcasting in the Middle East Conference. Islamic, Christian and Jewish Channels: Programmes and Discourse*, University of Cambridge, April 2010, p. 58. Available at: http://www.cis.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Religious-Broadcasting-in-the-Middle-East.pdf.

[63] Sabri Ciftci, F. Michael Wuthrich and Ammar Shamaileh, "Islam, Religious Outlooks, and Support for Democracy", *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 72, no, 2, 2019, p. 447.

[64] Larry Diamond, "Why are there no Arab democracies?", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 21, no. 1, January 2010, p. 96.

[65] Ibid.

emerges from the study shows that "40 to 45 per cent of each public supports secular democracy while roughly the same proportion backs an Islamic form of democracy; meanwhile 5 to 10 per cent of the public supports secular authoritarianism and the same proportion supports Islamic authoritarianism".[66]

Compounding this socio-religious tension is the role of the state, along with its legal and political relationship with Christians and minorities in general. Virtually all the Arab states in the Middle East have constitutions where the principal source of law is *Shar'ia* law. Discrimination against religious or ethnic groups or minorities is built into these constitutions. As Rev. Robert Stern, the former president of Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA), has observed: "In almost all the countries of the Middle East where native or guest worker Christians exist, they are generally treated as second-class and are subjected to various forms of explicit or implicit discrimination".[67] Moreover, the existence of centralised, authoritarian regimes in the Middle East imposes restrictions on communal activities and autonomy and cultural diversity within the Armenian communities. Even the confessional arrangement that regulates public and political life in Lebanon, an exception in the Arab world, has enormous limitations and consequences.

With the exception of Lebanon and Syria, there are virtually no opportunities for political or civil appointments in high level state administration positions because of ethnic and religious origin.[68] Indeed, the treatment of Christian minorities in the Middle East, rather than promoting "integration" reinforces the idea of difference and "otherness", whereby members of minority groups lead a parallel ethnic or religious life in their respective societies. In this regard, the Armenian community in Turkey have to juggle constantly their national and state loyalties. As the former Patriarch explained, "Every Armenian in Turkey grows up with three elements in his personality: being a Turkish citizen, then his heritage as an Armenian, and then his faith as a Christian in a country which is overwhelmingly –99 per cent– Muslim".[69] In the United Arab Emirates, there are legal, social and cultural reasons for being in a constant state of "transition". By law, a

[66] Ibid.

[67] Robert L., "Perspectives: Caught in the Middle", *One* (CNEWA), September 2010. Available at:

http://www.cnewa.org/default.aspx?ID=3495&pagetypeID=4&sitecode=HQ&pageno=1.

[68] Per the provisions of the 1989 Taif Accord, six of the Lebanese Parliament's 128 seats are reserved for Armenians, who represent about 9 percent of Lebanon's population; see Michael. Bluhm, "Outcome of Metn Polls May Hinge on Armenians", *The Daily Star*, 7 March 2009.

[69] Hratch Tchilingirian, "The People's Choice. Archbishop Mesrob Mutafyan Elected 84th Armenian Patriarchate of Turkey", *Armenian International Magazine,* vol. 9, no. 12, December 1998

foreigner cannot become a citizen of UAE. One Abu Dhabi Armenian explained the overriding uncertainty for Christians: "Whenever the government tells you to leave the country, you have to leave. The only thing that keeps people here is their jobs and businesses. If you lose your job, you have to leave the country, unless you find a new contract".[70] CNEWA reported that in Egypt discrimination against Christians is commonplace, especially in education and employment:

> The government places restrictions on the construction or repair of churches –restrictions that do not apply to mosques. A permit from the regional governor is required before a church may be renovated. Permits to build a church require Presidential approval, which often takes as long as ten years to obtain. Even with this go-ahead, security forces must investigate whether neighbouring Muslim communities object to the construction. If they do, the church may not be built.[71]

Concerned church leaders in Israel have pointed out to restrictions imposed by the Government, such as difficulties or denial of permits for the erection of housing, job creation programs and protection of the rights of Christians in the Holy Land. In 2018, the three Patriarchates (Greek, Armenian, Latin), who are the custodians of the Holy Places, took the dramatic step of closing the Holy Sepulchre church, one of Christianity's holiest sites, in protest against a new tax and a proposed Israeli legislation that would allow the government to confiscate land sold by the churches.[72] Similar draconian restrictions exist in Turkey, on renovation and construction of churches, and a host of administrative aspects of church community life.

Indeed, it seems that the biggest test of the tectonic changes sweeping the Middle East will be the treatment of minorities –whether confessional, religious or ethnic– and changes to their status. States and societies in the region have not dealt with the grievances and legitimate demands of minorities in any meaningful or effective way. The late Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III was outspoken on such matters. Following a bomb attack on a church that killed 25 Copts in January 2011, he reiterated that "the Egyptian government has 'to start addressing Copts' problems', which he believe[d] lay at "the core of the religious

[70] Hratch Tchilingirian, "Instilling the Armenian Spirit. Armenian Education in a Transient Community", *Armenian International Magazine*, vol. 10, no. 7, July 1999, pp. 53-54.

[71] *One* (CNEWA), September 2010, p 11. Available at:

http://www.cnewa.org/default.aspx?ID=3484&pagetypeID=4&sitecode=HQ&pageno=4.

[72] Oliver Holmes, "Jerusalem's Holy Sepulchre church closed in tax protest", *The Guardian*, 25 February 2018. See also Ibid, p. 27.

animosities" in the country.[73]

Security, military conflicts and ISIS

Security concerns and on-going military conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Israel/Palestine –not to mention the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and the first Gulf War in the early 1990s– have also had significant implications and consequences for the Armenian communities in the Middle East. Thousands of Armenians, along with the citizens of Lebanon, Iraq and Iran, have been killed in the conflicts. A particularly poignant, but by no means isolated case, was the loss of more than 130 Armenian soldiers in the Iraqi army, hailing from the town of Zakho who died in the Iran-Iraq war. This was a significant number of men for a small community.[74] Hundreds of Armenian soldiers who had been conscripted into the Iranian army died on the other side of the border. As in the 1970s and 1980s, these conflicts caused a major exodus of long-established communities. In recent years, Christian communities have seen a slow wave of migration to the West with the consequence that, "generally, the churches historically rooted in the Middle East now have more of their faithful living in the Americas, Western Europe and Australia than in their homelands".[75]

The centuries-old Armenian community and the Patriarchate in the Holy Land face enormous challenges. Armenian interests in Jerusalem are not only religious, since the Patriarchate has vast assets and properties throughout the Holy Land. The 28-acre Armenian quarter in Jerusalem represents one-sixth of the Old City. The final status of Jerusalem, one of the most protracted and complex issue in the Middle East for more than 70 years, are very important and relevant to the Armenian community in Israel/Palestine. Additionally, the economic and political effects of the first and second Intifada and the still unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict have caused further migration and hardship within the Armenian community.[76]

By far, the biggest existential threat comes from jihadist groups. In June 2014, when the extremist Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) –renamed Islamic State– entered Mosul, they rampaged, looted and burned government buildings, as well as churches and monasteries. The Armenian Church of Holy Etchmiadzin –which was bombed by terrorists in 2005 and was still under repairs– was bombed and burned, along with other Christian

[73] Amro Hassan, "Egyptian Christians' Christmas celebration clouded by New Year's Day bomb attack", *Los Angeles Times*, 7 January 2011, p. A3.

[74] Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation. The Conquest of the Middle East*, rev. edition, London & New York: Harper Perennial, 2006, p. 842.

[75] Stern, "Perspective", p. 41.

[76] Tchilingirian, "Dividing Jerusalem".

churches.[77] Virtually all communities (except Sunnis) from the Province of Nineve were expelled or had to flee to save their lives, including 250,000 Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac, and Armenian Christians, 200,000 Yazidis, as well as Mandaeans, Shabaks and Turkomen.

The roots of the Armenians in Mosul, the oldest Armenian community in Iraq, go back to at least the 14th century.[78] In 2003, the community was made of 380 families, but by July 2014 no Armenians were left. Along with the other Christians of the region, the Armenians had escaped to various places in the Kurdish north, including Erbil, Dehok City and Zakho.[79] "It is through unspeakable suffering that we were able to come out of the cycle of death and annihilation", said Fr. Arakel Kasparian, the parish priest of Mosul, who had led some 65 remaining families of his congregation to Erbil. "The ruling mad people of ISIS are killing, beheading innocent Christians, Armenians, who refuse to obey their orders; [they are] exploding historical holy places", the pastor said about the horrors they witnessed.[80]

The conflict in Syria, which started as a protest movement in March 2011, turned into a sectarian war among government forces, insurgents and extremist groups. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and millions of Syrians have fled the country. A US State Department report had warned that "in Syria, as in much of the Middle East, the Christian presence is becoming a shadow of its former self".[81] Hundreds of thousands have fled the ongoing violence and daily threats to life. The Christian community in Homs, for instance, numbered about 160,000 before the conflict, but has been reduced to less than 1,000 Christians in the city, which had a population of 650,000 in 2004.

Armenian Churches were vandalised, trashed or burnt in Aleppo, Deir ez-Zour, Raqqa and Kessab (Kasab). The Genocide memorial Church in Deir ez-Zour (Der Zor), where tens of thousands of Armenians marched to

[77] "ISIS Expands Control, Begins Persecuting Christians in Mosul", *AINA News (*Assyrian International News Agency), 12 June 2014. Available at: http://www.aina.org/news/20140612011342.htm.

[78] A manuscript (homelitics) scribed in Mosul in 1352 by a priest Manuel is preserved in the library of the Mother See of Holy Ejmiatsin in Armenia. It attests to the existence of not only an Armenian community in Mosul, but a vibrant church and religious activity. See Vehuni Minasian, "Hayereh Musuli Mech" (Armenians in Mosul), *Aztag Daily* (Beirut), 28 July 2014. Available at: http://www.aztagdaily.com/archives/196613 .

[79] Sako Aroyan, "Musuli Hayutyan Daknabeh" (The Crisis of Armenians in Mosul), *Ararad Daily* (Beirut) 26 July 2014, p. 2.

[80] Hamo Moskofian, "Angitanank Irakahayeri Agherseh" (Should we ignore the plea of Armenians in Iraq?), *Norkhosq.net*, 3 August 2014. Available at: http://www.keghart.com/Moskofian-Mosul-Ankawa-Erbil.

[81] United States State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "International Religious Freedom Report for 2013". Available at: http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religious freedom/index.htm#wrapper.

their death during WWI, was heavily damaged.[82] Community schools, cultural and social centres have seen their share of destruction and damage. Like members of other minority communities, more than one hundred Armenians have been kidnapped in Syria and thousands have fled. In March 2014, the Armenian town of Kessab was overrun by jihadists, causing death, destruction and displacement of some 2,500 Armenians, many of who found shelter in the Armenian Church in the nearby city of Latakia. Most of the blame was placed on Turkey for allowing the jihadists to attack Kessab, which is situated near the Syrian-Turkish border. According to reports, "Turks winked as Reyhanli [town near the Syrian border] and other Turkish towns became way stations for moving foreign fighters and arms across the border".[83] For Kessab Armenians, the "Turkish hand" in the takeover of their town by jihadists was a reminder of the Genocide and continued Turkish hostility towards the Armenians. "All of us perfectly remember the history of Kessab, which was unfortunately full of hellish realities of deportations in the last 100 years", said the President of the Republic of Armenia at the time.[84] Kessab was recaptured by the Syrian military in June and many Armenians returned to their homes.

The genocidal brutality of jihadists against their scores of "enemies" have posed direct existential threat to millions of people. Fawaz Gerges explains that unlike the borderless, transnational al Qaeda movement of Osama bin Laden, "which has never been able to find a social base", the Islamic State and similar groups like the Jabhat (Front) al-Nusra in Syria are "like a social epidemic, feeding on sectarian tensions and the social and ideological faultlines in Arab societies". Indeed, "the phenomenon of the Islamic State", Gerges suggests, "is a manifestation of the weakening and dismantling of the Arab state as we know it".[85] The imposition of strict Sunni Islamic law in towns, villages and territories captured by ISIS and other groups, such as the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra in Syria, pose serious existential danger to

[82] Beyond the physical church building, the Primate of the Diocese of Damascus, Bishop Armash Nalbandian, was concerned about the "destruction of the memory" of the Armenian Genocide from these lands that had been the "open graveyard" of thousands of Armenians; see Robert Fisk, "Nearly a century after the Armenian genocide, these people are still being slaughtered in Syria", *The Independent*, 1 December 2013. Available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/nearly-a-century-after-the-armenian-genocide-these-people-are-still-being-slaughtered-in-syria-8975976.html.

[83] Anthony Faiola and Souad Mekhennet, "In Turkey, a late crackdown on Islamist fighters", *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2014. Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/how-turkey-became-the-shopping-mall-for-the-islamic-state/2014/08/12/5eff70bf-a38a-4334-9aa9-ae3fc1714c4b_story.html.

[84] *Panorama*, "Serzh Sargsyan makes press statement on Kessab in The Hague", 25 March 2014. Available at: http://www.panorama.am/en/politics/2014/03/25/president-kessab-statement.

[85] Samia Makhoul, "Islamic State carves jihadist hub in heart of Middle East", *Reuters*, 12 August 2014. Available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/12/us-iraq-security-mideast-insight-idUSKBN0GC1FB20140812.

Christians in particular and non-Sunni communities in general. Such drastic changes have resulted in ongoing religious persecution, ethnic cleansing, population transfers and genocide in the fullest definition of the term.[86]

The larger context of Muslim-Christian Relations

The future of Armenians and other Christian communities in the Middle East looks bleak in the larger context of the developments since early 2000 in the region and in the extremely challenging prospects of the coming years. The expectation that the "Arab Spring" would usher the "remaking" of the Middle East, has turned into "a dark winter for most Arabs", as Peter Schwartz puts it, and a "large-scale slaughter", especially in Syria and Iraq.[87] The growing anti-Shi'a Sunni extremism, on one hand, and Shi'a groups, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah movement's anti-Takfiri political and military discourse,[88] on the other, add to the long-term concerns.

Open discrimination and growing intolerance of Christians in Islamist-dominated parts of the Middle East are serious future risks. The socio-political danger and existential threat come from multiple sources. A few examples would suffice to draw attention to such socio-political and systemic problems. Even as the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah, condemned the Islamic State and al-Qaeda militants as "enemy number one of Islam" and "not in any way part of the faith",[89] in August 2014, some two years earlier this highest religious law official in Saudi Arabia and the head of the Supreme Council of Islamic Scholars said that "all churches in the Arabian Peninsula must be destroyed".[90] Speaking in

[86] See, for instance, Jean Aziz, "Syria's Christians Threatened by Ideology, Geography", *Al Monitor*, 23 April 2013. Available at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/syria-christians-threatened-ideology-geography.html.

[87] *The Independent*, "Peter Schwartz responds to Brian Eno's open letter on Israel-Gaza crisis", *t*1 August 2014. Available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/peter-schwartz-responds-to-brian-enos-open-letter-on-israelgaza-crisis-9643922.html).

[88] The term *takfiri*, from *kafir* (unbeliever/infidel), is used in this context to denote Muslims (Sunnis) who accuse other Muslims (the Shia) of apostasy and are subject to excommunication. The Sunni-Shi'a tension is exemplified by counter accusations and condemnations among, especially, religious leaders. For instance, in June 2013, the Qatar-based prominent Egyptian Islamic scholar, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, condemned Hezbollah's role in Syria since 2011 in support of the Assad regime. This was in sharp contrast to al-Qaradawi's praise of Hezbollah's resistance of Israeli incursion into Lebanon in July 2006 and the month-long Hezbollah-Israel war. Andrew McGregor, "Muslim Brothers' Spiritual Leader Yusuf Al-Qaradawi Condemns Hezbollah", *Terrorism Monitor* (The Jamestown Foundation), vol. 11, no. 12, 2014. Available at: http://www.jamestown.org/regions/middleeast/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news %5D=41020&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=676&cHash=11a70be15173e5c55c1a6cc5daf3a9b4#.U_8zAvldWSr.

[89] "'ISIS is enemy No. 1 of Islam,' says Saudi grand mufti", *Al Arabiya News*, 19 August 2014. Available at: http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/08/19/Saudi-mufti-ISIS-is-enemy-No-1-of-Islam-.html.

[90] *Russia Today* (RT), "'Destroy all churches in the Arabian Peninsula – Saudi Grand Mufti", 16 March 2014. Available at: http://rt.com/news/peninsula-saudi-grand-mufti-701/; also posted with comments on *The Muslim Times*, 16 March 2012. See also http://www.themuslimtimes.org/2012/03/countries/

March 2012, the Grand Mufti cited a story that at his deathbed Prophet Mohammed had declared: "There are not to be two religions in the [Arabian] Peninsula".[91] He was asked at a conference by a Kuwaiti NGO, called the Society of the Revival of Islamic Heritage, to clarify what Islamic law says about an MP's recent proposal to Parliament calling on "a ban on the construction of new churches" in Kuwait.[92] Christians as far as in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and other parts of the Middle East were deeply concerned with the gravity of such statements. Another example is the new Constitution of Iraq, where Christians have a quota of 5 seats in the 325-member Parliament, but have virtually no political influence. Similarly, in the 290-member Iranian Parliament, the *Majlis*, five seats are reserved for recognised religious minorities: Armenians (2), Assyrians (1), Jews (1), Zoroastrians (1). Nevertheless, discrimination and various forms of repression take place even in states where Christian minorities are ostensibly "protected" by the constitution, such as in Iran and Turkey.[93] In the *2011 Annual Report*, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom notes that Iraq's smallest religious minorities, including Christians, Yazidis and Sabean Mandeans (followers of John the Baptist),

> suffer from targeted violence, threats, and intimidation, against which the government does not provide effective protection. Perpetrators are rarely identified, investigated, or punished, creating a climate of impunity. The smallest minorities also experience a pattern of official discrimination, marginalisation, and neglect, particularly in areas of northern Iraq over which the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) dispute control.[94]

Hundreds of Christians had fled to northern Iraq amid increasing acts of violence against Christians, especially following the siege of Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad that killed 51 worshippers and two priests in October 2010. ISIS (called the Islamic State of Iraq at the time) claimed responsibility for the siege and vowed that they would kill Christians "wherever they can reach them". This existential threat has resulted in disproportionate emigration of Christians from Iraq. The United Nations

saudi-arabia/destroy-all-churches-in-the-arabian-peninsula-saudi-grand-mufti-not-islam.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Cf. *Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom,* May 2011, pp. 11, 29, 30, 79, 317. Available at: http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/resources/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf.

[94] Ibid, p. 88. Available at: http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/resources/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf.

High Commissioner for Refugees reported that Christians and other targeted minorities "account for 20 per cent of the Iraqis who have gone abroad, while they were only 3 per cent of the country's prewar population".[95] The number of Christians in Iraq was estimated at 800,000-1.4 million before 2003, however, ten years later only a few hundred thousand are left in the country.[96]

Commenting on the fate of the Christians in Mosul and referring to centuries of Christian-Muslim relations, Lebanon's Minister of Labour and a member of the Christian Kataeb Party, Sejaan Azzi, was blunt: "We are not embarrassed to raise [our] voice and publicly say: We have tried all forms of common life, common state, region and village; what have we gained from all these experiences since 1400 years [when Islam was established]?". The Minister was expressing the view increasingly shared by other Christian leaders when he said: "What they couldn't get in the era of conquests, they are trying to get it in the era of revolutions".[97]

Conclusion

In the aftermath of WWI and the genocide in the Ottoman Empire, the surviving Armenians succeeded in rebuilding communities, churches, schools, cultural infrastructure and institutions largely in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and other smaller communities in the Middle East. This was possible due to the fact that the mandated Arab states had granted them certain religious and civil rights similar to the *millet* system in the Ottoman Empire and the determination of the survivors and their generations to reconstruct the lost Armenian communal life in dispersed countries. For more than a century, the Armenians have invested billions of dollars in money, labour and community efforts to establish and perpetuate their culture, language, and traditions in the Middle East.

Starting in the 1970s, waves of Armenians in the Middle East have migrated –mostly to North America, Europe and Australia– largely due to the Civil War in Lebanon, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the wars in Iraq

[95] Myers, "More Christians Flee Iraq". Indeed, the displacement and exodus of Christians have been ongoing and increasing after regular violent incidents targeting non-Moslem communities. Some 12,000 Christians left, for instance, when 14 Christians were killed in October 2008. In February 2010, another targeted killing of 10 Christians resulted in over 4,000 Christians fleeing to the Kurdish-controlled north of the country or to Syria.

[96] *Annual Report of the United States Commission*, p. 89.

[97] *The Daily Star*, "Syriac Orthodox bishop: Muslims enemies of Christ", 20 July 2014. Available at: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Jul-30/265488-syriac-orthodox-bishop-muslims-enemies-of-christ.ashx?utm_source=Magnet&utm_medium=Recommended%20Articles%20widget&utm_campaign=Magnet%20tools#axzz3BhQczXJV.

and the continuing economic hardships. If the trend of exodus continues, it could mean the socio-cultural demise of one of the most ancient Christian communities in the region.

Less visible are the roles of the state, society, and the religious establishment in the long-term viable presence of Armenian and generally Christian communities in the Middle East. The burden of being the "other" –a member of a minority Christian group in the Middle East– is heavy. The "othering" plays out on different levels: (a) there is what I would call "soft othering" by the *state*, vis a vis laws, restrictions and in many cases, discrimination against non-Muslim groups; (b) by the social boundaries intentionally or unintentionally set by the larger *society* in Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East; and (c) the "hard othering" by the *Islamist* segments in society that portrays non-Muslims as "infidels", thus by definition second-class citizens.

Fifty years ago, historian Richard Hovannisian observed that the Armenians and other non-Muslim communities in the Middle East "are confronted with factors so adverse that their future may at best be regarded as precarious".[98] Today, the situation is not only precarious but also extremely critical. The realities currently facing the Armenians in the Middle East, and Christians in general, paint an uncertain future –as the ongoing conflicts could continue for many years to come. As the subtitle of this chapter notes, what is at stake is the loss in the future of a rich religious and cultural heritage rooted in the past –in the Middle East.

[98] Hovannisian, "The Ebb and Flow", p. 32.

Table 1. Estimates of Armenian Population in the Middle East*

	1975[1]	% of total Christian population	1985[2]	2003[3]	2008[4]	2014[5]	2020[5]
Iran	200,000	87.5	202,000	80,000	75,000	70,000	55,000
Lebanon	175,000	17.5	176,000	75,000	70,000	65,000	50,000
Syria	150,000	26.8	136,500	70,000	70,000	55,000	35,000
Turkey	60,000	43.0	89,000	80,000	75,000	65,000	50,000
Egypt	10,000	0.5	12,000	6,000	6,000	6,000	4,000
Iraq	20,000	3.4	16,000	10,000	8,000[6]	7,000	5,000
Israel & Palestine	2,500	3.5	5,000	3,000	1,500	1,500	1,500
Kuwait	2,000	76.0	3,000	5,000	4,000	4,000	3,000
Jordan	2,000	1.9	4,000	3,000	4,000	4,000	3,000
UAE	1,000		1,500	2,000	5,000	5,000	5,000
TOTAL	**622,500**		**645,000**	**334,000**	**318,500**	**282,000**	**211,500**

* Precise numbers of Armenians in the Middle East –and in the Diaspora for that matter– are virtually non-existent as there are no official census figures nor methodologically accurate statistics. The figures presented here are based on estimates given by various church representatives and publications over the last few decades.

1. Figures provided by the Prelate of Lebanon; Archbishop Aram Keshishian (now Catholicos of Cilicia) based on various estimates (see Keshishian 1981). Other sources provide different estimates; Courbage and Philippe put Armenian Orthodox and Catholics in Syria at 136,000 and Lebanon at 214,000 in 1995. Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues, *Christians and Jews Under Islam*, London: I.B. Taurus, 1997, p. 209.

2. Except estimates for Egypt, Kuwait and UAE, the figures are from a special issue of *Al Montada* (*The Forum*), Middle East Council of Churches, No. 116-117, April-June 1985, p. 25.

3. As provided in entries for respective communities in the *Hay Spiurk: Hanragitaran (Armenian Diaspora Encyclopaedia)*, Yerevan: Armenian Encyclopaedia Publication, 2003.

4. Estimates from news sources and per the figures provided by the Archbishops of the Armenian Churches in Iraq and Kuwait. Interviews 25 & 27 September 2008.

5. Estimates gathered from various church representatives and community members.

6. Does not include the number of Armenians who have fled Iraq in recent years, primarily to Jordan and Syria. In 2008, the Diocese of Iraq reported the number of the Armenian community at 17,000. *Nor Gyank* (Los Angeles) 6 August 2008.

Table 2. Armenian Schools in the Middle East [1]

		2010-2011 School Year		2021-2022[2] School Year	
COUNTRY	**CITY**	**SCHOOLS**	**STUDENTS**	**SCHOOLS**	**STUDENTS**
Lebanon	Beirut	23	6400[3]	13	4911[3]
	Tripoli	1		1	
	Anjar	3		2	
Syria	Aleppo	12	6393	7	1561[7]
	Kamishli	1	700	1	250[8]
	Kessab	2	350	2	200
	Damascus	3	490	3	150[9]
	Latakia	1	200	1	80
	Raqqa	3	300	n/a	
Turkey	Istanbul	16	2965	16	2828
Iran	Tehran	14	2800	14[4]	1600
	New Julfa	5	400[5]	1	200
	Shahinshahe r	1	200[5]	n/a	
	Tabriz	1	100[5]	n/a	
Kuwait	Kuwait	1	400	1	320
Egypt	Cairo	2	250[6]	1	160
	Alexandria	1	35	n/a	
Iraq	Baghdad	1	220	1	33
Israel/Palestine	Jerusalem	1	110	1	176[10]
Jordan	Amman	1	88	(closed)	
		93	**22,401**	**65**	**12,539**

1. Sources: Hovsep Nalbandian, "Haygagan Amenorya Tbrotsneru Iravijageh Spuirki Daradzkin" [The Status of Armenian Day Schools in the Diaspora], Nor Haratch (Paris) 12 May 2011; interview with former Primate of dioceses of Isfahan and Kuwait, Archbishop Goriun Babyan, 30 September 2011; "Meeting with Primate of the Diocese of Iraq, Archbishop Avak Assadourian", *Nor Gyank*, 36 August 2008; Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Liturgical Calendar, 2011.

2. I am grateful to a number of people who checked or verified the numbers with local school contacts; many thanks to Varoujan Tenbelian and Ara Vassilian for the numbers in Lebanon; Setrag Hovsepian for Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait; Arusyak Monnet for Istanbul; Marie Matian for Iran; and Anush Nakkashian for Jerusalem. For Aleppo, see Manuel Keshishian, "Halebi Haygagan Varzharannere" (The Armenian Schools in Aleppo), *CivilNet*, 26 July 2022. Available at: www.civilnet.am/news/669250.

3. Total number in all of Lebanon.

4. Three are Kindergarten.

5. Estimates provided by former Primate of Isfahan, Archbishop Goriun Babyan, 30 September 2011.

6. Estimate.

7. Includes unspecified percent of non-Armenian students. For instance, in one Armenian school, there were four non-Armenian students among the 28 who succeeded in their Baccalaureate II examinations; in another school, 6 out of 9 successful Baccalaureates were non-Armenians, see op. cit. Keshishian, "Halebi" 2022.

8. Estimates for Kamishli, Kessab, Damascus, Latakia, Raqqa provided by Bishop Armash Nalbandian, Primate of the Diocese of Damascus. Personal communication on 23 December 2022.

9. Number of Armenian students among the 500 or so students in Armenian schools in Damascus.

10. Fifteen percent of the students are non-Armenian.

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ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY THEORY: CHRISTIAN 'EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY' IN EGYPT AND LEBANON

Zakia Aqra, Stavros Drakoularakos & Charitini Petrodaskalaki

Introduction

Christian communities in the Middle East have drawn a great deal of attention, given their precarious status amidst the violent wind that came along with the Arab uprisings that swept the region in the post-2011 era. Even though there is no doubt that they were all affected, each Christian community has its own context within the nation-state it belongs to and, by extension, the angst of the post-2011 dynamics has different implications for each one. In order to better understand these implications, this paper will employ Ontological Security Theory (OST), which provides conceptual tools with which state identity and foundational narratives are cultivated vis-à-vis the Christian community in Egypt and Lebanon. The dialectic relation between state and religious communities allows us to explore in-depth how Christian communities are impacted by political and/or societal changes as well as the extent to which they may drive or inhibit particular state identity formation in times of crisis.

OST introduces the concept of dislocatory events as developments that trigger existential anxiety and ontological insecurity for both the state and society. In turn, the state proceeds through various attempts to decrease the anxiety level and restore security, which may include or exclude some components of society. In the cases of Egyptian and Lebanese Christians, the dislocatory events, which unfold and affect differently the respective communities, occur in different acts. For the former, the Egyptian uprising in 2011 triggered two acts of dislocatory events: the brief stay of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in power and the al-Sisi 2013 coup. For the Lebanese Maronite community, the first act of dislocatory event was the 1975 Lebanese civil war, and the second was the grave implications of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon and its Christian community since 2011. These dislocatory events indicate the peak of anxiety of the communities and a narrative crisis of their respective states. What shall be examined here is the state and/or the community's response to restore ontological security. In essence, examining two Christian communities that have relatively different standings in their respective societies—the Egyptian Copts hold the status of a minority, while the Maronites and Lebanese Christians had a dominant role