



The Fragments Imagine the Nation? Minorities in the Modern Middle East and North Africa

Jordi Tejel Gorgas & Benjamin Thomas White

To cite this article: Jordi Tejel Gorgas & Benjamin Thomas White (2016) The Fragments Imagine the Nation? Minorities in the Modern Middle East and North Africa, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 43:2, 135-139, DOI: [10.1080/13530194.2016.1138646](https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2016.1138646)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2016.1138646>



Published online: 01 Feb 2016.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 1109



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 1 [View citing articles](#)

INTRODUCTION

The Fragments Imagine the Nation? Minorities in the Modern Middle East and North Africa

Jordi Tejel Gorgas^a and Benjamin Thomas White^b

^aGraduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland; ^bSchool of Humanities, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

Minorities in the Middle East¹ have been a perennial object of scholarly attention.² Minority politics have traditionally been considered as a problem: indeed, as one of the main reasons for the ‘unsuccessful’ consolidation of the nation-state in the region. In recent years, with the events of the Arab Spring and its aftermath, minorities have been figured at times as an obstacle to broader processes of democratization and liberalization, or at others as being threatened by those same processes—and the violence that has ensued as they stalled.

This special issue of *BJMES* attempts to develop more nuanced approaches to minority politics in the Middle East and North Africa, taking our inspiration from the title of Sami Zubaida’s article on minorities in modern Iraq, ‘The fragments imagine the nation’. In a collection of articles from a range of disciplines—history, comparative literature, religious studies, and politics, but all with a strong historical sense—we look at the different ways in which groups now defined as ‘minorities’ have understood themselves not in opposition to but as part of larger political identities. Although the questions of identity that the articles raise are inescapably political, they play out not just in strictly political arenas (within an anti-colonial nationalist party; in the parliaments of independent states) but across other contexts that include debates about religious law and language education. The authors are alert to how issues of identity—national, religious, linguistic—*became* politicized, and when. The articles also take care not to essentialize identity, but rather show how notions of identity have shifted and evolved, specify individual or collective actors who built political claims on them, and explore the local, state, and international contexts which shaped the way they made those claims.

CONTACT Benjamin Thomas White ✉ BenjaminThomas.White@glasgow.ac.uk

¹This special issue has its origins in a workshop organized in November 2013 at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Geneva), where drafts of most of the articles were first presented, as well as in a larger research project entitled *States, Minorities and Conflicts in the Middle East: A Comparative Study of the Durability of States and Regimes and Dissident Movements in Egypt, Iraq, and Turkey, 1948–2003*. We are grateful to the Swiss National Science Foundation, which provided the grant to support this research project launched in 2010, and the Levant Foundation and Pierre Dubois Foundation, which provided additional support for the workshop. We would like to thank Sami Zubaida for allowing us to borrow the title of his inspiring article ‘The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34(2) (2002), pp. 205–15.

²Among other works, see Ofra Bengio and Gabriel Ben-Dor (eds.), *Minorities and the State in the Arab World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999); Habib Malik, *Islamism and the Future of the Christians of the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2010); David MacDowall and Nicholas Van Hear, *Minorities in the Middle East* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1992); Mordechai Nisan, *Minorities in the Middle East: A History of Struggle and Self-Expression* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland and Company, 2002); Maya Shatzmiller, *Nationalism and Minority Identities in Islamic Societies* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005).

In the face of the huge challenges of recent years, the Middle East is once more widely portrayed as a region doomed to endless ethnic and religious turmoil, its elites unable or unwilling to overcome this destiny. And yet perceptions like these assume that such turmoil is primordial: a cause, rather than a symptom, of troubled times. They also, perhaps deliberately, elide the role of any external actors in fostering division and conflict. We hope that these articles will map the contours of a more complicated history.

Overview of the Articles in This Special Issue

In his article, Djene Rhys Bajalan explores the origins of the Kurdish nationalist movement in the late Ottoman era. He underlines the diversity of views among Kurdish intellectuals (based mainly in Istanbul) as to the aims of the nascent movement. Investigating their different stances and social backgrounds, he argues that it is a mistake to assume their individual or collective opposition to the imperial state—an argument relevant not just to the Kurdish national movement but to the study of the early stages of many other modern nationalist movements that emerged in dynastic empires. Kurdish intellectuals sought to secure the political advancement of the Kurdish community within the Ottoman Empire. For the majority of the Westernized intellectuals discussed here, the cause of Kurdish advancement was not only in complete harmony with their desire to maintain and defend the Ottoman polity, but an integral part of it. Against this backdrop, and avoiding a teleological approach to the rise of Kurdish nationalism, he concludes that Kurdish intellectuals embraced self-determination as a political goal as a result of international developments (the collapse of the Ottoman Empire) rather than as the ‘logical and necessary culmination of Kurdish activism and enlightenment’. In that sense, Bajalan’s article departs from traditional accounts that analyse the evolution of the Kurdish issue in Ottoman and post-Ottoman contexts in terms of a dichotomy of accommodation versus resistance, and neglect a wide range of individual and collective strategies that warrant further attention.

Jessica Marglin’s article also covers the later nineteenth century, but takes us beyond the Ottoman Empire, and to a group defined by religion: the Jews of Morocco. Marglin confronts a similar set of assumptions, around accommodation versus resistance, in a different body of literature. Moroccan nationalist historiography has often characterized the relationship between the Makhzan (the Moroccan state) and its Jewish subjects as being benign and frictionless until it was disrupted by European diplomats, whose interventions, nominally on behalf of Jews, actually sought to instrumentalize them. Historians focusing on Morocco’s Jews have tended to see them as oppressed by Islamic law until European pressure forced a necessary, but insufficient, improvement in their position. Both interpretations tend to assume the same set of dichotomies at work: modern/traditional, West/East, secular/Islamic. Marglin provides a nuanced view of the place of Jews as *dhimmi*s in Morocco, then investigates the new discourses of equality that emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the one hand, European pressure led the Makhzan not only to enact institutional reforms but also to adopt, within the Islamic legal framework, a new language of equality. This insisted—to Moroccans as well as foreign diplomats—that Jews had an equal right to seek justice from their sovereign, even if the law itself remained unequal. Moroccan Jews appealed to foreigners as they sought to expand the rights allotted to them as non-Muslims; but they also continued to invoke the justice of the sultan, and his obligation to protect them

as *dhimmis*. Makhzan and Jews alike adopted a more complex set of positions, and a more original and hybrid self-understanding, than the existing literature allows.

Heleen Murre-van den Berg's article also deals with communities defined by religion, but it focuses on language and identity rather than on law. Murre-van den Berg revisits George Antonius' seminal book *The Arab Awakening*, using it as an anchor for a study that is comparative both geographically (covering Palestine and Iraq) and across communities (discussing Christians and Jews). She explores how, in the period following the First World War, non-Muslim communities participated in the establishment of modern standard Arabic as the foremost symbol of the new states that replaced the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. In particular, she argues that the increased use of Arabic by those who also had other languages at their disposal resulted from the combination of pragmatism with commitment to both societal modernization and an inclusive nationalism. Murre-van den Berg's article underlines that religious and linguistic practices across the Middle East have not remained unchanged since the nineteenth century, in the face of mass literacy, mass media, urbanization, or globalization, as well as more narrowly political developments. Any dynamic understanding of minority–majority relations in this changing context must recognize the possibilities for hybridity and fluidity of religion and language. Similarly, Murre-van den Berg underscores the necessity of recognizing the importance of liminal positions, and how political or other changes may *make* individuals or groups liminal, where previously they had little reason to consider themselves so.

Karène Sanchez Summerer explores the linguistic choices made by the Catholic community in Palestine, via its educational system, by observing the process through which a complex local reality came to be simplified by colonial powers. Sanchez Summerer reminds us that recognizing legal frameworks and how they mediated the attitudes and positions of individuals and groups, with regard to each other and to state institutions, is indeed important. Yet, at the same time, it is also necessary to underline that despite the increasing pretensions of states (be they colonial or independent) to codify every aspect of the lives of their citizens, more often than not individuals and groups were also embedded in a series of local, regional and even global networks that escaped from state control and, more importantly, followed their own dynamics. The presence in Palestine of a number of denominational churches with their own schools, in many cases related to different Western foreign powers, complicated processes of individual and collective identification even further. Thus, for the purpose of a comprehensive understanding of those processes, she notes that the dynamics between personal and institutional interactions, on the one hand, and between official rhetoric and actual practices, on the other, need to be put at the centre stage of research. The persistence of multilingual values in the Christian communities of Palestine shows that many indigenous Christians negotiated larger questions of language and identity through the arena of language education.

Language and identity figure in Marisa Fois's article about a very different case: the 'Berberist crisis' within the Algerian nationalist party, the *Mouvement pour le triomphe des libertés démocratiques* (MTLD), that played out in both Algeria and France in 1949. Without neglecting the role of French colonialism in promoting a distinctly 'Berber' identity in Kabylia, Fois shows that for the so-called Berberists, stressing that identity was not just compatible with but a necessary component of both anti-colonial activism and Algerian nationalism: indeed, their movement emerged *through*, and not in opposition to, the MTLD. (Once again, we move beyond an understanding of 'minority' political mobilizations as representing either

accommodation or resistance to 'majority' nationalisms.) Kabyles made up a significant proportion of the MTLD's membership but a small proportion of its executive, and the 'crisis' was provoked by the executive's unwillingness to countenance Berberist activism, or a definition of Algerian identity that accepted (rather than occluded) a Berber component. Fois argues that the episode was a significant one. It marked the beginning of Kabyle political and cultural activism, initially among emigrants in France and later in Algeria. More broadly, the MTLD's insistence on an 'Arabic-Islamic' definition of the Algerian nation, and rejection of the Berberists' more capacious definition of an *Algerian* Algeria, would have lasting implications for independent Algeria's Europeans and Jews. By focusing on the tensions within a specific political party, Fois identifies a key moment of definition—or redefinition—of both 'minority' and 'majority' identities, in a dialectical relationship. She performs an important service by showing that such redefinitions are the work of individual actors operating within institutional frameworks: neither minority nor majority mobilizations are the foreordained product of primordial identities.

The final two articles, by Elizabeth Marcus and Claire Beaugrand, bring us into the period of independent nation-states. Returning to a theme addressed in the articles by Heleen Murre-van den Berg and Karène Sanchez Summerer, Elizabeth Marcus's article takes as its focus a 1961 book by Sélim Abou on Arab–French bilingualism in Lebanon, an important contribution to a controversial debate about language and the nation. Marcus argues that while Abou downplayed the role of colonialism in both establishing the French language in Lebanon and making it a key part of a confessional cultural politics, his book is not simply—as his critics argued—a fig leaf for the continued political dominance of Maronite Catholics. Teasing out the tensions and contradictions within Abou's thought, Marcus shows that his book made a real effort to conceive of bilingualism as a positive good for Lebanon, and a means of overcoming confessional divisions. Abou argued that Arabic tended to privilege another (Muslim) sectarian definition of the nation: Arabic–French bilingualism would work a 'deconfessionalisation' of the nation, to the benefit of *all* Lebanon's communities. Abou, who went on to a long and distinguished career as an anthropologist, 'was committed to finding an alternative conceptual framework for Lebanon outside of a politicization of religious affiliation'. Even if he failed, his work reminds us that language has played an important part in the cultural politics of the region's independent states, and in a way that is not simply reducible to sectarian or ethnic identity.

Claire Beaugrand, meanwhile, turns our attention to two small Gulf states in the very recent past, and invites us to rethink Bahraini and Kuwaiti political crises in the post-2011 regional context beyond the lenses of the minority/majority dialectic. More precisely, she contends that while the ethno-religious understanding of 'minority' makes little heuristic sense in Bahrain and Kuwait, the minority/majority dialectic is part of a political praxis used to garner support for the regime, either by manufacturing 'minorities' to evade the parliamentary principle of majority rule, or in the face of the overwhelming presence of foreigners. In so doing, Beaugrand asks us to pay attention to political frameworks—parliamentary dynamics in this case—which are important for establishing (though not entirely *determining*) possibilities for both action and self-understanding. As she reminds us, although these two countries have a longer experience of parliamentary democracy than their neighbours, what seems to have happened, broadly speaking, is that the parliamentary experiments in Bahrain and Kuwait have ended up producing legislatures and/or general publics where the majority, whether inside or outside parliament, does not support the status quo. However,

the regimes' responses to this challenge vary. In Kuwait, the emphasis is placed on the nation's unity and the discrediting of the political claims of the Bedouin; in Bahrain, the authorities stress the nation's multicultural character in order to undermine the representativity of the dominant Shiite political movement. Both strategies, though, are designed to deflect the threat of power sharing, and are a reminder that state elites retain a power to shape and constrain definitions of both minority and majority identity.