



Religious Pluralism in the Middle East

REPORT 2017 - IV

CENTRE FOR RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST- CRPME

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Executive Summary

The objective of the report is addressing the main developments concerning religious pluralism in the Middle East and highlighting the challenges that religious coexistence faces in the region. Building on the findings of the previous three CRPME reports, the analysis at hand focuses on featuring events and phenomena that have occurred in the past six months. The region covered includes Iraq and Syria, Egypt, Turkey and the Gulf Arab states. Additionally, the analysis of foreign actors' humanitarian and diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis religious minorities in the Middle East is also part of this study. The documentation work carried out by the CRPME and published on the centre's website serves as the basis for the report and is an ongoing endeavour, aiming at providing continuous updates on the state of religious pluralism in the Middle East. The findings presented, therefore, are not exhaustive, but highlight main trends and continuities.

Religious communities in the Middle East face the following three kinds of challenges, among others:

1. The pursuit for reconstruction and rehabilitation in the post-ISIS era, including the return and re-integration of IDPs and refugees
2. The disparity between minority rights guaranteed by the law in their respective states of residence and their actual living conditions
3. Scapegoating in the aftermath of political cataclysms

In post-ISIS Iraq, the challenges faced by religious minorities are manifold, and the prevalent sectarianism pre-dating ISIS – mainly between Sunni, Shia and Kurds – is alarmingly re-emerging. The status of the geographic area of the Nineveh Plain, which hosts a large number of minority populations, is currently under dispute: the call for an autonomous region that will serve as a safe haven for religious minorities is presently not being met with good prospects. The independence referendum carried out by the Kurdistan Regional Government on September 25, 2017, has divided opinion within religious minorities such as Christians and Yazidis, since there has been no universal trust in a Kurdish independent state's readiness to safeguard religious minority rights. Returning IDPs and refugees to the region are confronted with population engineering efforts by the Iraqi authorities; intra-community animosity and the threat of revenge attacks; destroyed buildings, infrastructure and cultural/religious heritage. One major challenge is giving peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives aiming at building a pluralistic Iraq precedence over punitive measures by returnees seeking justice. While it is still too early to tell, the question of the post-ISIS future of religious minorities in Syria presents itself as more optimistic than in

Iraq. Concrete successful measures to bring stability to the region have been undertaken, such as the Plan for Four Cities, a population exchange agreement between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

Egypt's Coptic Christian minority still finds itself in a situation between marginalisation and persecution: the alarming events in North Sinai/Al-Minya, where Copts have been victims of armed attacks and forced displacement have contributed to a "climate of terror" aimed against the Coptic population. Challenges faced by the community include attacks of physical violence, being prevented from practicing their faith, State resistance to the construction of houses of worship, limited freedom of expression and accusations of blasphemy. Despite the efforts of the Al-Sisi government to support the community, and notwithstanding the fact that equal rights for minorities are enshrined in the Egyptian Constitution, Coptic Christians find themselves in a situation of discrimination and sometimes open hostility.

In Turkey, the aftermath of the events of July 2016 and the "state of emergency" climate has rendered the situation for religious minorities more volatile. ISIS-sponsored attacks in Ankara and Istanbul as well as a new Kurdish insurgency in the south of the country have aggravated their circumstances. The Turkish Jews, dwindling in numbers, have seen their cultural heritage and places of worship attacked. The Alevis, lacking formal recognition by the authorities as being a distinct religious community, and thus remaining ill-protected as well as discriminated against, have borne the brunt of post-coup accusations of endangering Turkish domestic security due to a perceived association with the Gülen movement. Christian communities in Turkey have seen a surge of growth, on the one hand, due to the influx of Syriac Orthodox Christian refugees from Syria; and have suffered grave injustices, on the other hand, including having church property seized by the Turkish authorities and being the victim of conspiracy theories aiming at purging Turkish society from perceived Gülenist influence. A development that is especially disconcerting is the conversion of Greek Orthodox Byzantine churches into mosques. The most prominent example, that of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, has seen Turkey disrespect the place's status as a museum by repeatedly carrying out Koranic readings and Friday prayers, which has been repeatedly condemned by the international community.

Describing the situation of religious minorities in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf is a delicate affair. Freedom of religion ranges from near-absence, such as in the case of Saudi Arabia, to being guaranteed by law in religiously more tolerant countries such as Bahrain and Oman. The unique situation in these states of the majority population not actually being citizens of the respective country – and often adhering to a different faith than the Sunni/Wahhabi

religious doctrine prescribes, including Shia, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Bahai, Druze, Sikh, Jew or Ismaili – necessitates a certain dialogue centered on the fostering of religious coexistence. Indeed, a number of interreligious dialogue initiatives have been instigated by various countries of the Gulf, including the King Abdulaziz Centre for National Dialogue (KACND), promoting Sunni-Shia dialogue in Saudi Arabia, the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) in Vienna, or the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) in Qatar.

With regard to the efforts of foreign actors vis-à-vis religious minorities in the Middle East, from providing humanitarian aid to promoting interfaith dialogue and countering violent extremism, states and state-like actors such as Russia, the USA, the Holy See, France and the UK have taken a diverse range of action. France has not abandoned its role as the protector of Christians in the Middle East. For London, humanitarian aid goes hand-in-hand with UK's efforts of establishing a network of NGOs that use multiple tools for the prevention of violent extremism, The Evangelical Christian community within the USA have advocated actively for taking political action benefitting Christians in the Middle East. In 2016, the USA has recognised the genocide of Christians, Yazidis and other religious minorities in (formerly) ISIS-controlled areas in Iraq and Syria. Russia has traditionally had an important stake in protecting Christian Orthodox communities in the Middle East and has encouraged an active role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Kremlin's foreign affairs. The use of religious diplomacy as a soft power tool in the region has been shown to antagonise the USA beyond the military sphere. The role of the Holy See in the Middle East is quite extraordinary since Pope Francis. The Holy See has been active both on a diplomatic and humanitarian level, especially since 2013. Moreover, the Holy See has been vigorously active in advocacy and interfaith dialogue.

The post-ISIS Rubicon

Iraq

On July 9, the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, victoriously announced the completion of the Mosul liberation operation. Pockets of ISIS resistance remain within the city but the focus now shifts to low-intensity operations, with the aim to weed out remaining ISIS militants among the scores of destitute civilians, who start to emerge from their hideouts after 9 months of seizure. Islamic State's self-proclaimed 'Caliphate', as we know it, is a matter of the past.

Yet, celebrations are premature. One should not forget that ISIS was not a 'storm over paradise'; in fact, the post-2003 status quo ante was far from idyllic. Likewise, ISIS did not bring sectarianism into Iraq; instead, it was already festering in the competition between the dominant communities (Sunni, Shia, and Kurd) for power, territory and resources. ISIS has merely put a pause in this competition, yet, these old rifts are on the verge of resurfacing, as the 'battle-lines' (of territorial control) settle between the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Shia forces. For the moment, the unholy alliance of disparate forces that are involved in the anti-ISIS operations in Iraq, has managed to avoid widespread conflict and the intra-alliance territorial antagonism has stayed subdued. As ISIS threat declines, though, the issue of 'disputed areas' in Iraq¹ is expected to dominate Iraqi politics and policy considerations and the occasional skirmishes can easily turn into open conflict. KRG's decision to announce an 'independence' referendum to take place on September 25, including the areas disputed by the Iraqi government (e.g. Kirkuk), renders this question exceptionally pressing.

After the fall of Mosul and the rather swift takeover of Tel Afar in August 2017, the last bastion of the 'Islamic State' in Iraq is a small enclave in the Kirkuk province (Al-Hawija) and some –mostly desert– territories in the Anbar province along the Syrian border. The operation for the liberation of Tel Afar has been an example par excellence of the territorial antagonisms of the main –internal and external– actors, who wish to define the post-ISIS era. Strategically situated halfway between Mosul and the Syrian borders, Tel Afar has many contenders. The Iraqi army, the Shia militias (Hashd al-Shaabi), KRG and Turkey (via Sunni tribal militias) all vie for the control of Tel Afar. In the early months of the anti-ISIS campaign, the rising tensions between the Turkish and the Iraqi government prompted the postponement of the Tel Afar operation until later; when, hopefully, tensions would abate or the involved parties would secure a better standing in the dispute. The main issues of contention were the presence of Turkish

¹ The territorial arc extending from Kirkuk to Nineveh and Sinjar, which is disputed by KRG and the central Iraqi government. Disputed territories include parts of Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salahaddin and Diyala governorates.

troops nearby and the involvement of Hashd al-Shaabi militias, who have been accused of sectarian killings, in the operation. Efforts to gather a Sunni-Shia force that would collectively retake Tel Afar, failed apparently to attract many Sunni Turkmen recruits.² In the end, the operation was conducted by the Iraqi army, while Hashd al-Shaabi forces offered some support in Tel Afar's outskirts, without active participation in the urban battles.

Tel Afar encapsulates all the challenges of the post-ISIS era, particularly in the domain of reconstruction and rehabilitation. More importantly, for this report, it demonstrates the challenges to religious pluralism in post-ISIS Iraq. Home to a largely Turkmen population, Tel Afar has seen the Sunni Turkmen majority in the city side with ISIS against the Shia Turkmen minority. With Hashd al-Shaabi –and its record of alleged human rights abuses– in Tel Afar's outskirts, the danger of revenge attacks against the remaining Sunni population is high. The presence of Turkmen militias in the Hashd al-Shaabi forces makes this danger even higher, bringing intra-community violence into the already explosive mix. There are some unconfirmed reports that claim that Shia Turkmen militiamen affiliated with Hashd al-Shaabi have actually advanced inside Tel Afar, where they have been “engaging in revenge attacks on homes”, ransacking and then demolishing houses.³

Tel Afar represents a model for other cases of non-dominant communities in Iraq, who find themselves entangled in Iraq's ‘great power’ game. Christians in Qaraqosh and Bartella, Yazidis in Sinjar and Bashiqa, the Turkmen –once again– in Tuz Khormato, all replicate Tel Afar's post-ISIS challenges. Again, one should not attribute all ills to the Islamic State. Iraqi non-dominant components (minorities), such as Christians, Yazidi and Shabak, suffered discrimination, violence and dislocation, in Mosul and elsewhere, a long time before the ISIS 2014 blitzkrieg.⁴ It is a painful cliché to say that the region of Nineveh, which is home to these communities, is the –religious equivalent of Balkans– of Mesopotamia, yet we should not forget that ISIS is nothing but an atrocious symptom of an inherently faulty configuration.

² Minority Rights Group, Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS. (6/6/2017), p.41

http://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MRG_Rep_Iraq_ENG_May17_FINAL2.pdf

³ It should be noted that these reports come from pro-Sunni sources. Al Arabiya, “Popular Mobilization forces ransack liberated areas in Tal Afar”, (28/12/2017) <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2017/08/28/Popular-Mobilization-forces-ransack-liberated-areas-in-Tal-Afar.html>

⁴ According to the Iraq Body Count Database, the percentage of civilian deaths occurring in Nineveh more than doubled in the decade 2003-2013. Minorities suffered the most. For a brief overview of the violence against minorities prior to ISIS, see Norwegian Church Aid, *The protection of minorities from Syria and Iraq*, (30/11/2016), p. 14-15 <http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/protection-minorities-syria-and-iraq> Another interesting find is that Mosul and its environs fare worse in terms of minority security. This perception of increased insecurity among Mosul residents, as compared to minority populations in other Nineveh areas, is echoed in another survey that explores IDPs views on prior life, reconciliation and the future. PAX, *After ISIS: Urgent need for post conflict peacebuilding in Iraq*, (16/6/2015) p. 40-53 <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/stay-informed/news/after-isis-urgent-need-for-post-conflict-peacebuilding-in-iraq> These perceptions naturally affect the prospects of return for each community and each place.

The following section will outline the constituent parts of this –faulty– configuration. The purpose is to re-evaluate these ‘old’ problems in light of the ‘new’ challenges brought by the three-year ISIS rule over large swaths of Nineveh region. The report will focus on four interrelated challenges of the post-ISIS era, exploring various scenarios and their ramifications for religious pluralism in Iraq. The first refers to the issue of the status of Nineveh after the ISIS rampage. Different actors envisage a different future for Nineveh, with few points of convergence in their preferred outcomes. The report explores these diverging views and initiatives as possible future scenarios for Iraq. Additionally, it documents the many leverages of coercion in the hands of the main contenders, which bring Iraqi minorities and their views to disadvantage and an easy prey to manipulation. The threat of manipulation and proxy fighting constitutes the second challenge that this report explores.

The third key parameter for Iraq’s post-ISIS *rehabilitation* is the return of IDPs and refugees to their homes and their ability to rebuild their lives and mend relations. The question of the future status of Nineveh will (and partly already does) affect the prospects and numbers of returnees. In the most direct way, the forces in control of a particular area often put intentional hurdles or selectively enforce the policy of return to specific populations. More indirectly, displaced communities face challenges in their effort to return, because the issue of disputed areas largely determines the character of the post-ISIS reconstruction. On the one hand, it relates to the important question who is going to shoulder the bill of the reconstruction, which is estimated to amount to billions, and, likewise, who will oversee the process and ensure that corruption and mismanagement is kept to a minimum. With no infrastructure and service repairs, the already small pool of IDPs willing to return will further dwindle. On the other hand, the question of disputed areas affects the handling of justice and accountability questions, which dominate or come a close second in the concerns of the displaced populations.⁵ It is a challenge that requires much more sophistication in its handling from merely pouring in funds or securing empty declarations.

Iraq is facing major decisions and turning points that will be as defining for its future course as was the 2003 US invasion. These changes might be corrective in nature or they might worsen an already bad situation. Together with Iraq’s future as a state entity, its future as a religiously pluralistic society is also at stake. The proper and effective *rehabilitation* of Iraq and its diverse population is the only antidote to the twofold trends of emigration and segregation that threaten religious pluralism in Iraq.

⁵ Minority Rights Group, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq’s minorities after ISIS*, (6/6/2017), op.cit. p. 26-7

Decentralisation and the future status of Nineveh

The central theme and buzzword of the debate on post-ISIS Iraq is decentralization. All involved parties seem to acknowledge the inevitability of a shift in center-periphery power configurations. However, all envisage a radically different level and scope of decentralization. Different opinions exist not only between but also within communities, creating a complex and rather explosive mix of hopes and aspirations.⁶

The Shia perspective

Broadly speaking, the Shia forces seem to prefer an outcome with the minimum possible changes from the status quo ante, although they vary in their definition of what was the status quo ante.⁷ This preference is foremost echoed in Baghdad's refusal to recognize (or even discuss) the Kurdish referendum, but it is also mirrored in the Shia government's position, or lack thereof, on the future of Nineveh region. Occasionally, the Shia side appears even to renege on pre-ISIS policy decisions and commitments. A case in point is the January 2014 decision to turn Tuz Khormato, Fallujah, Tel Afar and the Nineveh Plains into provinces, just months before this push towards decentralization was made obsolete by the ISIS offensive⁸ However, in September 2016, weeks before the Mosul liberation operation started, the Iraqi parliament voted in favor of restoring the Nineveh's provincial boundaries to its pre-2003 lines.⁹ This not only annulled the 2014 changes in the provincial boundaries, but it also contradicted prime minister Abadi's 2015 commitment to promote reforms that will lead to Iraq's decentralization.¹⁰

In an effort to reassure Nineveh's minorities that were most affected by the change in the provincial borders, the Iraqi government announced the creation of a directorate to address minority issues within the National Reconciliation Commission, while the Iraqi Parliament

⁶ See also previous CRPME reports; e.g. CRPME, *Untying the Knots of Religious Diversity in Iraqi Kurdistan: Deploying Pluralism against Barbarism*, Special Report, no.2, (December 2016) <http://www.crpme.gr/reports/crpme-special-report-no-2-untying-the-knots-of-religious-diversity-in-iraqi-kurdistan-deploying-pluralism-against-barbarism>

⁷ On intra-Shia political divides, see Kassim, Omer and Randa Slim, "Iraq after ISIS: Three Major Flashpoints", *Middle East Institute*, (6/4/2017) <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/iraq-after-isis-three-major-flashpoints> and al-Khoei, Hayder, Ellie Geranmayeh, Mattia Toaldo, "After ISIS: How to Win the Peace in Iraq and Libya", *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, (4/1/2017) http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/after_isis_how_to_win_the_peace_in_iraq_and_libya_7212

⁸ Arguably, the ISIS momentum in the following months built on the frustration of Nineveh's Sunnis over this perceived effort of 'the Shia-led Iraqi government to strip again Sunnis of their power' Norwegian Church Aid, *The protection of minorities from Syria and Iraq*, op.cit. p. 16

⁹ World Watch Monitor, "Iraqi MPs reject 'safe areas' for Christians", (28/9/2016) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/iraqi-mps-reject-safe-areas-for-christians/>

¹⁰ al-Kadhimi, Mustafa, "Is it time to formally decentralize Iraq?", *Al-Monitor*, (16/9/2015) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/iraq-abadi-reform-decentralized-state.html>

introduced a bill to ‘Protect diversity and combat discrimination’.¹¹ Moreover, two prominent Iraqi Shia power-figures, the leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Ammar al-Hakim, and Muqtada al-Sadr, each released a roadmap for the post-ISIS era. The two documents reflect Shia preference for a controlled decentralization.¹² However, both leave the future of Nineveh province vague, pushing on the notion of national unity and in effect failing to put forward actual plans for the future. The secretary-general of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, Yonadan Kanna, commenting on the ‘Historical Settlement’ document presented by al-Hakim, highlighted this lack of reference to the future of Nineveh and its minority communities, adding: “Do Christians and other minorities have a say in drafting or even making suggestions for any national settlement?... All political settlements are always made between major ethnic groups, according to their own interests, while ignoring those of minorities”.¹³ The views of another important Shia figure, Nouri al-Maliki, who is well-known for his sectarian policies when he served as Iraq’s prime minister, are more straightforward and clearly against any type of decentralization. One should not discount al-Maliki’s influence. Even though Maliki is not in charge of the country any more, he still holds significant power within the Da’wa party, which is also the party of the current Prime Minister Abadi, the security forces and Hashd al-Shaabi and might act as a spoiler to decentralization policies.

The Sunni fears and aspirations

The legacy of Maliki’s policies and the revenge-driven violence of Hashd al-Shaabi define the distrust in the Sunni stance, even of those who aspire to reach a compromise with the Shia. For example, Ahmed al-Masari, the head of the (Sunni) Iraqi National Forces Alliance, expressed his surprise and astonishment with the ISCI decision to present the ‘Historical Settlement’ few days before the introduction of the law that would allow the incorporation of Hashd al-Shaabi in the Iraqi security forces.¹⁴

Other Sunnis believe that a reconciliation is impossible and instead envisage a different future, where Sunnis will enjoy as much autonomy as possible. The al-Nujaifi brothers best express these views. Atheel al-Nujaifi, the leader of the Turkey-trained Sunni militia ‘National

¹¹ Minority Rights Group, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq’s minorities after ISIS*, (6/6/2017), op.cit. p.34

¹² For a deep insight into the two documents, see Constantini, Irene, “Planning Post-IS Iraq: Competing Visions Within the Shia Block?”, *Middle East Research Institute*, (12/3/2017) <http://www.meri-k.org/publication/planning-post-is-iraq-competing-visions-within-the-shia-block/>

¹³ Salloum, Saad, “Do minorities have role in Iraqi national reconciliation?”, *Al-Monitor*, (18/12/2016) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/hi/originals/2016/12/minorities-iraq-national-reconciliation.html>

¹⁴ Ibid.

Mobilization’, has advocated for a separate (autonomous) Nineveh region with six to eight smaller governorates.¹⁵ The goal of a separate Sunni-controlled region is key also to the new ‘United Iraqi Party’ headed by Atheel al-Nujaifi’s brother, Osamah.¹⁶ The Kurds, particularly the governing KDP, appear moderately positive to Sunni aspirations, either under Turkish pressure or as a means to reduce the Shia clout in the area and promote its territorial claims.

The Kurdish ‘momentum’: Minorities and the Kurdish referendum

Currently, Kurdish forces control large parts of the disputed territories, significantly increasing their pre-ISIS area of control. Kurdish officials, including KRG’s leader Masoud Barzani, have been adamant and blunt about their refusal to return to the status quo ante stating that “[t]hese areas were retaken by the blood of 11,500 martyrs and wounded from the Peshmerga, It is not possible after all these sacrifices to return them to direct federal control”.¹⁷ Jutyar Adil, a member of KRG’s elections commission, reiterated this assertion in light of the September 25 referendum, saying that ballot boxes will be placed in every place where the Kurdish Peshmerga are.¹⁸ The decision to expedite the –due from 2007– referendum shows that KRG feels comfortable in its territorial gains and feels confident that the current demographic conditions of the disputed areas, before the majority of IDPs return, secure a certain electoral legitimization of these gains.

KRG has tried to present an image of universal approval by bringing along minority representatives in official visits. For example, the Kurdish delegation that visited Baghdad in August to present the central government’s ‘constitutional violations’ involved representatives from the Yazidi, Christian and Turkmen community.¹⁹ Likewise, the Kurdish media have covered extensively the decision of local councils in minority districts to support the referendum, featuring enthusiastic statements from minority representatives.²⁰ However, not all local council

¹⁵ Rudaw, “Sunnis demand autonomous region for Nineveh post-ISIS”, (29/7/2016)

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/290720162>

¹⁶ Rudaw, “Newly established party seeks autonomous Sunni region in Iraq”, (13/5/2017)

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/13052017>

¹⁷ Al Jazeera, “Baghdad, Kurds at odds over control of post-ISIL Mosul”, (18/11/2016)

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/baghdad-kurds-odds-control-post-isil-mosul-161117150810662.html>

¹⁸ Rudaw, “Kurdish election body to open offices in Kirkuk, Mosul for referendum”, (10/8/2017)

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/090820176>

¹⁹ EKurd Daily, “Kurdish referendum delegation in Baghdad, meets with Iraqi PM Abadi”, (15/8/2017)

<http://ekurd.net/kurdish-referendum-delegation-baghdad-2017-08-15>

²⁰ See for example the decision of the Sinjar District Council and the Bashiqa Town Council to support the referendum. Goran, Baxtiyar, “Shingal District Council support Kurdistan’s independence referendum”, *Kurdistan24*, (31/7/2017) <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/8cd54e63-bc25-43d2-b889-6db8b0e2e189> and Rudaw, “Yezidi town of Bashiqa votes: second to join Kurdistan independence referendum” (17/8/2017) <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/17082017>

votes unfolded as smoothly as KRG wanted. In more 'disputed' and mixed areas, the decision to support the referendum was met with protests. In Mandali, in Diyala province, which has a mixed Shia Kurd (Fayli), Arab and Turkmen population, widespread protests forced the local council to reverse its initial decision to support the referendum.²¹ In Kirkuk, the Arab and Turkmen members of the provincial council abstained from the vote to support the referendum.²² Kirkuk, also, witnessed a surge of inter-community violence, after Kurdish gunmen attacked the offices of the Iraqi Turkmen Front in mid-September.²³

Over the past months, KRG officials have embarked on a public relations outreach to win the support of affected minorities to the referendum. In their task, they are assisted by KRG's positive stance on recognizing broad autonomy and self-management to minorities that reside in these areas. That was the message that President Barzani's son, Masrour, wanted to convey in his June meeting with representatives of several Churches, where they discussed the future of the region in light of the referendum.²⁴ In a last-minute bid to win the support of the minorities, one day before the referendum, the Supreme Council for the referendum presented a 16-point political document, which re-assured ethnic and religious components that their rights will be respected in an independent Kurdistan, while promising autonomy in minority areas.²⁵

However, KRG's outreach campaign failed to convince all. Some feel that the rights of the minorities will be safeguarded under a Kurdish independent state, while others see September's referendum as a major threat to their aspirations and KRG's support as attached to too many strings. These diverging views cut through minority communities, bringing intra-communities once again to the fore. On a higher political level, one can see different minority parties standing on opposite sides of the referendum. For example, the Turkmen Development Party²⁶ has largely supported the referendum, while the Iraqi Turkmen Front has expressed its

²¹ Daily Sabah, "Mandali district withdraws from KRG referendum", (11/9/2017)

<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2017/09/12/mandali-district-withdraws-from-krq-referendum>

²² Al Jazeera, "Kirkuk votes to take part in Kurdish independence poll", (30/8/2017)

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/kirkuk-votes-part-kurdish-independence-poll-170829134834287.html>

²³ CBS News, "Violence as Iraq tries to block Kurdish independence vote" (19/9/2017)

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iraq-kurdish-independence-referendum-plan-kirkuk-baghdad-legal-challenge/>

²⁴ Agenzia Fides, "Iraqi Kurdistan, the "separatists" seek Christian support", (16/6/2017)

http://www.fides.org/en/news/62468-ASIA_IRAQ_Iraqi_Kurdistan_the_separatists_seek_Christian_support

²⁵ Agenzia Fides, "Christians divided on the Kurdish independence referendum", (25/9/2017),

http://www.fides.org/en/news/62962-ASIA_IRAQ_Christians_divided_on_the_Kurdish_independence_referendum#.WcqhzhRWM8

²⁶ BasNews, "Turkmens Prefer Kurds to Shi'ite-Dominated Baghdad Govt : Leader", (24/7/2017)

<http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/news/kurdistan/365887>

objections.²⁷ Likewise, the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council has expressed its support for the referendum,²⁸ while the Assyrian Democratic Movement has strongly opposed it.²⁹

It is noteworthy that in the Christian case, the religious leadership has chosen to stay on the sidelines and not take a clear stance. Even the usually vocal and outspoken Patriarch of the Chaldean Church, Louis Raphael Sako, did not go beyond assessments of the precarious situation of Christians, the threat of renewed conflict and calls on the moderate forces to speak up.³⁰ In a communique issued on the day of the referendum, Sako went as far as making clear that the Chaldean Church is not responsible for the statements of various Christian political parties and militias, whose positions do not bind Christians in Iraq.³¹ Lower-level clergy occasionally has been more open about their views. For instance, an evangelical pastor in Kirkuk, interviewed by Christian Today, expressed his support for the referendum and Kurdish rule stating the weakness of Baghdad to offer security as the main reason, while the overall friendliness of Kurds, who are eager to visit churches and congratulate Christians on religious holidays, has been equally important.³²

These arguments appear to resonate among some Christians. Pro-referendum gatherings have taken place in the Ankawa neighborhood in Erbil and in Tel Eskof, both predominantly Christian.³³ However, other Christian towns, such as Al Qosh and Tel Kaif, have staged demonstrations against Kurdish efforts to influence the outcome by replacing elected officials with KDP members.³⁴

The Yazidi community hosts similarly diverging views. On the one hand, Vian Dakhil, a prominent Yazidi MP, was part of the delegation that visited Baghdad to promote the Kurdish referendum and openly advocated in favour of the referendum, expressing her belief that the

²⁷ Ali Mukarrem Garip, "Vote on Kurdish independence 'risky': Turkmen leader", *Anadolu Agency*, (9/6/2017) <http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/vote-on-kurdish-independence-risky-turkmen-leader/838267>

²⁸ Washington Kurdish Institute, "Interview with Loay Mikhael, the Representative of the Christian Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council to Washington", (25/7/2017) <http://dckurd.org/2017/07/25/interview-with-loay-mikhael-the-representative-of-the-christian-chaldean-syriac-assyrian-popular-council-to-washington/>

²⁹ Middle East Monitor, "Iraq's Christians wary of planned Kurdish regional poll", (22/8/2017) <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170822-iraqs-christians-wary-of-planned-kurdish-regional-poll/>

³⁰ AsiaNews.it, "Chaldean Patriarch calls for dialogue and reconciliation with respect to the Kurdistan referendum", (14/9/2017) <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Chaldean-Patriarch-calls-for-dialogue-and-reconciliation-with-respect-to-the-Kurdistan-referendum-41779.html>

³¹ Agenzia Fides, "Christians divided on the Kurdish independence referendum", op. cit.

³² Jackson, Griffin Paul, "Iraqi Christians at Odds with World on Kurdish Independence Referendum", *Christian Today* (22/9/2017) <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/september/iraqi-christians-kurds-independence-referendum-nineveh-plain.html>

³³ Agenzia Fides, "Christians divided on the Kurdish independence referendum. The Chaldean Patriarchate: there is a risk of armed conflict", (14/9/2017) www.fides.org/en/news/62909-ASIA_IRAQ_Christians_divided_on_the_Kurdish_independence_referendum_The_Chaldean_Patriarchate_there_is_a_risk_of_armed_conflict#.WcuRYNhRWM8

³⁴ For more on demonstrations in Al Qosh and Tel Kaif, see below p. 15.

majority of Yazidis will vote 'yes'.³⁵ On the other hand, the spiritual leader of Yazidis, Baba Sheikh, issued a carefully-worded statement, distancing himself (and the Yazidis) from the referendum.³⁶ Ordinary Yazidis, also, hold different views. Some claim that an independent Kurdish state will guarantee the safety of Yazidis,³⁷ while others offer a more sobering understanding of the Yazidi situation, seeing no meaning in voting either way.³⁸

The Turkmen community is even more split along sectarian and geographical lines. Sunni Turkmen and Turkmen living in north Iraqi Kurdistan seem more at ease with the Kurdish rule and the prospect of an independent state. On the contrary, Shia Turkmen and Turkmen in Kirkuk and Tuz Khormato are alarmed by Kurdish intentions and the prospect of fragmentation of Turkmen areas.³⁹

A Nineveh 'safe haven' for the minorities

For some members of Iraq's minorities, the referendum and an independent Kurdish state is the endgame. For others, however, it is a first step towards greater minority autonomy, although there is little agreement on what this greater autonomy will entail. There are a variety of minority visions of the future of Nineveh that include a broad range of proposals for minority autonomy on the level of province or even region. The most 'popular' proposal envisions the 'secession' of Sinjar, Tel Afar and Nineveh Plains from the Nineveh Governorate. The proposed new governorates seek to create a safe home for the Yazidi, Turkmen and Christian communities respectively. The safe haven argument, most recently, has appeared in an autonomy draft paper, called "Building a Framework for Nineveh Plain Autonomy", which was circulated among Christian leaders.⁴⁰ Similar ideas were expressed in a joint statement, released in May 2017, by the leaders of Christian churches, who, though, put more emphasis on the international protection of the proposed safe haven.⁴¹ The Yazidi community has been advocating, also, for a Yazidi safe haven. A draft paper, documenting Yazidi demands, which was submitted to the UN Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), called for the establishment of an autonomous governorate in Sinjar and

³⁵ Rudaw, "Yezidis will vote to join Kurdistan in referendum, says MP" (13/6/2017)

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/13062017>

³⁶ Yazidi Public Information Bureau, "Baba Sheikh: "Kurdish referendum is not for Yezidis", (24/9/2017)

<https://www.ezidikhana.net/baba-sheikh-kurdish-referendum-is-not-for-yezidis/>

³⁷ Rudaw, "Yezidi town of Bashiqa votes: second to join Kurdistan independence referendum"

³⁸ Westcott, Tom, "What do Yazidis make of Kurdish independence?", *IRIN* (19/9/2017) <https://www.irinnews.org/special-report/2017/09/19/what-do-yazidis-make-kurdish-independence>

³⁹ Tastekin, Fehim, "Kurdistan referendum leaves Iraq's Turkmen in quandary" (18/9/2017) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/09/turkey-iraqi-kurdistan-referendum-turkmens-quandary.html>

⁴⁰ Minority Rights Group, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS*, op. cit. p. 39

⁴¹ Rudaw, "Iraq's embattled Christians call for 'safe haven', international protection", (14/5/2017) <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/140520171>

Nineveh Plains.⁴² It is an idea actively promoted by external advocates, such as Western Christian NGOs, and it is a possibility that is explored by the European Parliament⁴³ and the US Congress.⁴⁴

Out of the three proposed administrative entities, the Nineveh Plains bid seems more politically plausible and with ample external support. However, a Nineveh Plains focus entails the danger of excluding certain minorities from the post-ISIS reconstruction and disproportionately benefit the Christians, thus, reaffirming the view that the international community cares about Christians, and not the Yazidi and the Turkmen. To prevent this *injustice* and strengthen their collective bid, members of the three communities has opted for common initiatives. In March 2017, the Yazidi Independent Supreme Council, the Turkmen Rescue Foundation and Al-Rafidain Organization, representing Iraq's Assyrian Christians, issued a statement calling for a semi-autonomous region extending from Sinjar, to Tal Afar and the Nineveh Plains and announced the formation of the "The National Coalition for Al Rafidain Region".⁴⁵

The Coalition has been careful in highlighting the legality of the plan according to the Iraqi constitution, its dedication to the 'unity of Iraq in its lands, people, and heritage' and the Coalition's openness "to all political and societal organizations and formations that belong to the nationalities and societies that live within the map of the new region".⁴⁶ However, this positive sign of minority unity has several black spots. On the one hand, although Shabaks are mentioned once, in the first line, as the original communities of Iraq who deserve protection, there is no Shabak signatory to the statement. In fact, a Shabak politician has described the move as premature, proposing a more gradual approach. The position of other minorities of Nineveh regarding the new initiative, such as Kakais, is equally vague, although some Kakais have shown a cautious interest in it.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the involvement of the Turkmen Rescue Foundation and the active diplomacy of its head Ali Akram Al-Bayati, have obscured a fundamental challenge to the coalition. Not all Christians, and especially Sinjar Yazidis, agree on

⁴² Minority Rights Group, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS*, op. cit. p. 39

⁴³ Lodge, Carey, "EU Parliament Votes To Protect Christians In Iraq After ISIS Is Defeated", *Christian Today*, (27/10/2016)

<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/eu-parliament-votes-to-protect-christians-in-iraq-after-isis-is-defeated/99100.htm>

⁴⁴ Shamon, Ramsen, "The Fate of Iraq's Indigenous Communities", *Fair Observer*, (25/1/2017)

www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/iraq-news-yazidi-assyrian-middle-east-news-43540/

⁴⁵ National Coalition for Al Rafidein Region, (7/3/2017) <https://alrafideincoalition.wordpress.com/2017/03/07/national-coalition-for-al-rafidein-region/>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Salloum, Saad, "Iraqi minorities move forward with autonomy plan", *Al-Monitor*, (16/3/2017) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/rafedin-minorities-iraq-nineveh-plain-autonomy.html>

the inclusion of Tel Afar and its Sunni Turkmen population, who might have sided with ISIS.⁴⁸ A possible exclusion of Tel Afar from autonomy plans will have widespread implications to the viability of this endeavor. First, it will reduce the Turkmen component in the Coalition to the highly-contested territory of Tuz Khormato. Moreover, it will break the region into two non-contiguous cantons. There are voices within the Christian community that raise this threat of canonization. The Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphaël Sako has been one of the most outspoken, but there are, also, others within the community, such as the Syriac Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, Yohanna Moshe, who described a Gaza-like ghetto situation if autonomy is pushed too far, without security guarantees.⁴⁹

Iraq's 'hidden' population engineering race: IDPs and the obstacles of return

The various visions for post-ISIS Iraq, briefly outlined above, rest on relatively sound arguments; yet, they often contradict each other and lack procedural clarity. The Iraqi law is intentionally vague on this matter. Although the Iraqi constitution, indeed, allows decentralization, it lacks a thorough and complete legal framework to support the process and the existing framework is insufficient, despite some advances made in the 2008 Provincial Powers Act (PPA).⁵⁰ What is certain, though, is that, according to the Iraqi Constitution (Article 119) and as reaffirmed in the 2008 Law of the Executive Procedures regarding the Formation of Regions, '[only] governorate/s have the right to form a region'.⁵¹ That means that these territories must pass from several levels of administrative authority, before they can reach autonomy. At the same time, despite its significant minority population, the Nineveh governorate has a Sunni majority, capable of tilting the balance in a referendum or a provincial council. As a 2017 Minority Rights Group report pointedly remarks, this means that the Sunni bid for an autonomous region in the Nineveh is 'the only option that is legally viable under current provincial boundaries'.⁵² However, and here lies the core of the post-ISIS Iraq challenges, the stigmatization of the Sunni Arab community by ISIS atrocities, renders the scenario of a Sunni autonomous region, and in spite of the wholehearted Turkish support, the least politically feasible. Hence, the future of post-ISIS Iraq, and particularly the Nineveh, will be defined more by gerrymandering and active population engineering, than meaningful decentralization.

⁴⁸ Minority Rights Group, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS*, op. cit. p. 40

⁴⁹ Catholic Herald, "Iraqi bishop: a safe corridor for Christians would create a Gaza-style ghetto ", (19/1/2017) <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2017/01/19/iraqi-bishop-a-safe-corridor-for-christians-would-create-a-gaza-style-ghetto/>

⁵⁰ Minority Rights Group, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS*, op. cit. p. 40

⁵¹ Minority Rights Group, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS*, op. cit. p. 39

⁵² Ibid.

The KRG and the central Iraqi government have been accused of putting pressure on minority communities to support their policies and manipulating the region's demographics. This pressure takes two forms. On the one hand, it involves putting pressure on dissent community (political and religious) leaders and organizations, while promoting friendly individuals and organizations. The temporary closure of Yazda organization's offices in Dohuk, in January 2017, is a case in point. A more recent example of this pressure is KRG's decision to depose the Assyrian (Christian) mayors of the predominately-Christian towns of al-Qosh and Tel Kaif.⁵³ In the case of al-Qosh, KRG replaced the mayor with first a Kurdish and later a Christian woman, both members of the ruling KDP party.⁵⁴ This compromise failed to quell the protests of al-Qosh's residents,⁵⁵ who also managed to mobilize the Assyrian diaspora in western capitals.⁵⁶

The protests, although massive and assertive, achieved close to nothing; a clear demonstration of the limited peaceful outlets for –minority– grievances, offered in the wake of the post-ISIS era by KRG in this case and Baghdad in others. With non-violence appearing as an ineffective tool to achieve policy shifts, outlets that are more violent become more appealing. Things might turn even more explosive if one takes into account that al-Qosh is home to a military base operated by NPU, which is the main Christian militia not affiliated with KRG. This brings closer the danger of clashes between NPU and KRG, if no peaceful solution is reached.

Clashes between military forces in the wider anti-ISIS camp have already occurred. The most serious clashes occurred in Tuz Khurmatu, which is a town situated south of Kirkuk that is considered part of the Salah al-Din province but is also claimed by KRG. Home to Kurds and Shia Turkmen, who hold a slight majority, Tuz Khurmatu has been the epicenter of intense fighting between Peshmerga and Hash al-Shaabi. The November 2015 flare-up that continued in the first half of 2016 has largely calmed. However, the price for this lull is the town's religious coexistence, as it is effectively cut in half between the two forces and the two communities.⁵⁷

⁵³ Assyrian International news Agency, "Assyrians Protest Removal of Mayor By Kurdish Government" (21/7/2017) <http://www.aina.org/news/20170721144351.htm> and Assyrian International news Agency, "Second Assyrian Mayor Illegally Removed By Kurdish Authorities" (6/8/2017) <http://www.aina.org/news/20170806135107.htm>

⁵⁴ Assyrian International news Agency, "Assyrians in North Iraq Reject Second Mayor Appointed By Kurds" (28/7/2017) <http://www.aina.org/news/20170728152410.htm>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ For example, Assyrians staged a protest outside the KRG office in Stockholm. World Watch Monitor, "Iraqi Christians fear Kurdish agenda behind removal of mayor", (28/7/2017) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/iraqi-christian-mayors-removal-part-kurdish-plot-gain-influence/>

⁵⁷ Swoshesho, Evon, "An uncertain future for minorities in a post-ISIS Iraq", *OpenCanada*, (30/6/2016) <https://www.opencanada.org/features/uncertain-future-minorities-post-isis-iraq/>

Tensions between Kurds and Turkmen have also occurred in the city of Kirkuk (possibly the most disputed of the territories). In March 2017, the Kirkuk Provincial Council voted in favour of replacing the Iraqi flag with the Kurdish one in public buildings, raising the anger of city's Turkmen community, who responded with widespread protests.

Skirmishes and clashes between militias are not restricted to the dominant communities in Iraq, but minority militias as well. For example, in March 2017, Syrian Kurds from the KRG-supported 'Roj Peshmerga' attempted to cross the Yazidi town Hanesor in Sinjar,⁵⁸ in an effort to reach the Syrian borders. They were stopped by the PKK-affiliated Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), who control the area, and clashes between the two erupted, leading to the death of fighters on both sides. The situation in Sinjar is expected to escalate further in the future, particularly since another significant Yazidi militia, Êzîdxan Protection Force, which is led by Haydar Shesho and used to claim independence from any affiliation, decided to side with KRG and officially join Peshmerga.⁵⁹

The danger of intra-community fighting is in no case restricted to the Yazidis. In mid-July, clashes occurred in Qaraqosh between NPU and the Babylon Brigades. Interestingly, both are considered pro-Baghdad, with NPU operating as a semi-independent militia in coordination with the Iraqi army, while the Babylon Brigades as part of Hashd al-Shaabi. The clashes occurred after the Babylon Brigades together with Shia fighters Hashd al-Shaabi stormed the NPU headquarters, in response to the arrest of six members of the Babylon Brigades, few days ago, by NPU forces, allegedly because they were looting houses and places of archaeological interest.⁶⁰ This demonstration of intra-Christian rife on the politico-military level contrasts efforts on the religious level to create a common front,⁶¹ showcasing the gap that often appears between the religious and the political leadership of the Christian community in Iraq.

Besides the looming threat of a random violent flare-up, politico-military pressure by the dominant forces and the generalized violence and insecurity have a deeper and more persisting effect on the demographics and the future of the region. Both Peshmerga and the Shia forces have been accused of demolishing –mostly Sunni Arab– houses, expelling populations out of

The New Arab, "Iraq parliament votes to remove Kurdish flag in Kirkuk", *Al Arabiy*, (1/4/2017)

<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/4/1/iraq-parliament-votes-to-remove-kurdish-flag-in-kirkuk>

⁵⁸ According to some accounts, they started digging trenches in the road between Hanesor and Sinune. Tastekin,

Fehim, "How deep is Turkey's Sinjar entanglement?", *Al-Monitor*, (7/3/2017) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/turkey-iraqi-kurdistan-ankara-is-getting-entangled-sinjar.html>

⁵⁹ Minority Rights Group, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS*, op. cit. p. 21

⁶⁰ Assyria TV, "Athra Kado, NPU: The incident with Hashd is resolved", (15/7/2017) <http://www.assyriatv.org/2017/07/athra-kado-npu-incident-hashd-solved/>

⁶¹ One example of these unity initiatives is the proposal of the outspoken Chaldean Patriarch, Louis Sako, to form an 'Iraq Council of Churches' that would unite the Catholics, Assyrians, Orthodox and Evangelicals in Iraq and allow better coordination among Christian Churches. Asia News.it, "Chaldean Patriarchate proposes an Iraq's Churches Council based in Baghdad", (13/1/2017) <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Chaldean-Patriarchate-proposes-an-Iraq%E2%80%99s-Churches-Council-based-in-Baghdad-39654.html> Another example of a unity initiative is the agreement of religious (and some political) leaders to promote a process of aggregation of denominational acronyms (Syriac, Chaldean) in favour of the term "Christian people". Agenzia Fides, "Even Assyrian Patriarch Mar Gewargis supports the aggregation process of political and social Christian acronyms", (14/3/2017) http://www.fides.org/en/news/61922-ASIA_IRAQ_Even_Assyrian_Patriarch_Mar_Gewargis_supports_the_aggregation_process_of_political_and_social_Christian_acronyms#.WZsGeuLeM8

their traditional areas and engaging in extralegal executions of suspected ISIS militants. However, there is also another way in which these forces manipulate the demographics of the region, and that is the return of the IDPs. KRG often justifies its expulsion policy by presenting it as a reversal of the decades-long Arabisation policy enforced by Saddam Hussein.⁶² However, besides the question of whether the Arab civilians and their descendants are to blame for Saddam Hussein's policies, KRG seems to apply this policy also to populations that were equally affected by the Arabisation policy, such as Christians and Yazidis.

Minority IDPs are prevented from returning to their homes either directly or indirectly. There have been claims that KRG places restrictions to IDP returns, citing security concerns, and allows only families that are affiliated with KDP to return, forcing, thus, people to join the ranks of the party if they want to go back.⁶³ In a more indirect way, KRG authorities have allegedly enforced a blockade of Sinjar, Tel Kaif and Batnaya, while restricting access to other Christian towns that are controlled by opposing forces, such as Qaraqosh, and often detaining people who try to cross.⁶⁴ Similar restrictions apply to the movement of supplies, which often are confiscated or held until a bribe is paid at the numerous checkpoints that dot the area. Looting of properties has also been recorded,⁶⁵ although it is not clear if this is the result of the lack of discipline within the security forces or a concrete policy to make the return even harder.

A much needed post-ISIS reconstruction

Allowing IDPs to return will have no meaningful effect if this return means going back to towns and villages of destroyed houses and public infrastructure. In towns like Qaraqosh, 80% of the infrastructure and 40% of the houses are destroyed,⁶⁶ while in Batnaya around 80% of the residential buildings are reduced to rubble. Other towns, like Tel Kaif, did not endure much destruction, but there is a grave disruption of services: from electricity to functioning hospitals.⁶⁷ Another important issue that makes return difficult and even dangerous is the large amount of

⁶² For recorded cases see, Amnesty international, "Iraq: Kurdish authorities bulldoze homes and banish hundreds of Arabs from Kirkuk", (7/11/2016) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/11/iraq-kurdish-authorities-bulldoze-homes-and-banish-hundreds-of-arabs-from-kirkuk/> and Human Rights Watch, "Marked With An 'X'", (13/11/2016) <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/11/13/marked-x/iraqi-kurdish-forces-destruction-villages-homes-conflict-isis>

⁶³ Minority Rights Group, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS*, op. cit. p. 23

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 14, 34

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 21-2

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 19-20

⁶⁷ Hoffner, Anne-Bénédicte, "Friendship With Neighbors the Only Way to Go: Patriarch Sako", *Assyrian International News Agency*, (3/4/2017) <http://www.aina.org/news/20170403120453.htm>

mines and IEDs left behind by ISIS on the streets and in booby-trapped houses.⁶⁸ Places of worship and in general the region's heritage have been equally affected by ISIS destruction spree. According to Kurdish estimates, more than one hundred religious sites have been destroyed.⁶⁹ These estimates were made amidst the operation to liberate Mosul, which means that the number will be much higher when all damages are recorded.

Political and religious leaders have been calling for a swift reconstruction of religious sites,⁷⁰ residential buildings and public infrastructure as a prerequisite for the return of IDPs and a restoration of normality.⁷¹ The cost of restoration is estimated in the billions,⁷² but the Iraqi government and KRG seem unwilling or unable to shoulder the cost of the reconstruction. The EU countries, the United States and UN bodies have provided, or pledged to provide, several millions in humanitarian aid, but no actual work has started yet.⁷³ One should also take into account the fact that most of the international funds will have to be funneled through official channels, where a significant part will disappear due to the endemic corruption, while the remaining funds will possibly be allocated according to sectarian criteria. This forces minorities to find community-based solutions. For instance, the ecumenical Bishops' Emergency Committee (BEC) has called for a \$262 million 'Marshall Plan' to help reconstruction in Christian areas, funds it hopes to raise from the EU and the US.⁷⁴ However, this entails the danger of alienating other religious communities, who lack strong community based mechanisms or transnational connections.

The issue of justice and accountability

Reconstruction, however, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the return of the IDPs and the restoration of communal relations. Economic incentives and compensation might help

⁶⁸ Malterre, Thibault, and Safa Majeed, "Slow, tough return for Iraq's Kakai minority", *Daily Star*, (29/10/2016) <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2016/Oct-29/378685-slow-tough-return-for-iraqs-kakai-minority.ashx> and Minority Rights Group, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS*, op. cit. p. 22

⁶⁹ Adel, Loaa, "Islamic State destroys 100 religious shrines in Nineveh Plain", *Iraqi News*, (9/1/2017) <http://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/islamic-state-destroys-100-religious-shrines-nineveh-plain/>

⁷⁰ See for example Bassem, Wassim, "Iraq's Christians demand reconstruction of religious sites", *Al Monitor*, (21/5/2017) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2017/05/iraq-christians-mar-mattai-mar-behnam-monasteries-ninevah.html>

⁷¹ Shams, Alex, "Iraq's Turkmen mobilise for a post-ISIL future", *Al Jazeera*, (13/2/2017) <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/01/iraq-turkmen-mobilise-post-isil-future-170102075837918.html>

⁷² For example, a study estimated that \$200 million will be required for the rebuilding of 12,000 houses in nine Nineveh Plains towns. World Watch Monitor, "Iraq Christians returning home face many hurdles", (14/6/2017) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/06/iraq-christians-returning-home-face-many-hurdles/>

⁷³ Minority Rights Group, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS*, op. cit. p. 23-4

⁷⁴ World Watch Monitor, "Iraqi bishops seek \$262m for post-IS 'Marshall Plan'", (20/5/2017) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/iraqi-bishops-seek-us262m-post-marshall-plan/>

persuade some communities to bury the hatchet, but for the communities that were directly affected by ISIS atrocities, bringing those responsible for these acts to justice is a quid pro quo. According to a survey conducted by PAX peace organisation, there are noticeable variations between and within communities on the question of justice/accountability and the prospect of mending relation with their former neighbors, who collaborated with ISIS. Yazidis (particularly women from Sinjar), are the most concerned about accountability and, at the same time, the most pessimistic about the possibility that justice will be served.⁷⁵ Moreover, according to a previous PAX survey, many from the minority communities foresee a type of segregation and social banishment of Sunni Arabs in the future.⁷⁶

As new mass graves, some containing thousands of bodies, are unearthed, new stories about ISIS atrocities become known and the returnees see, after two years, their damaged properties, frustration and the urge to take revenge become stronger. Revenge attacks have been already recorded, while inflammatory rhetoric is on the rise,⁷⁷ both pointing to a grim future of continued conflict.

Amidst this environment of despair, some positive, yet inadequate, initiatives have appeared, with the aim to bring the perpetrators of ISIS atrocities to justice. In June, Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council announced the creation of a special judicial body that will investigate and document the crimes that were committed against Yazidis.⁷⁸ Similar initiatives have been undertaken by KRG, which has formed committees, such as the 'Commission of Investigation and Gathering Evidence', that are responsible for the documentation of ISIS crimes.⁷⁹ Foreign states, international organisations and NGOs have offered technical support. However, the two power centres in Iraq seem to hold opposite views regarding this assistance. Baghdad has been reluctant, largely due its fear that international initiatives will be bring the Shia forces under

⁷⁵ PAX, *Sinjar after ISIS: returning to disputed territory*, (15/6/2016), p. 22 <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/stay-informed/news/sinjar-after-isis-returning-to-disputed-territory>

⁷⁶ PAX, *After ISIS: Urgent need for post conflict peacebuilding in Iraq*, op. cit. p. 44, 48

⁷⁷ Recent examples of this rhetoric of hate is the threats made against Sunni Arabs by the leader of a Christian militia affiliated with Hashd al-Shaabi. See Middle East Monitor, "Iraq Christian militia threatens to ethnically cleanse Sunni Arabs", (8/2/2017) <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170208-iraq-christian-militia-threatens-toethnically-cleanse-sunni-arabs/> Another example is a video featuring Sheikh Alaa Al-Mousawi, the head of the Shia Endowment, in which he refers to Christians as "infidels" and as such they are required either to convert to Islam, pay the jizya or perish, echoing thus opinions similar to those of ISIS. World Watch Monitor, "Iraqi senior cleric shown calling for Christians to 'convert, pay tax or be killed'", (14/6/2017) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/06/clerics-call-for-jihad-not-putting-off-christians-in-turbulent-baghdad/>

⁷⁸ Rudaw, "Yezidis cautiously welcome Iraq court tasked with prosecuting ISIS", (12/6/2017) <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/12062017>

⁷⁹ Adel, Loaa, "Islamic State destroys 100 religious shrines in Nineveh Plain", op.cit. and Lynch, Hannah and Chris Johannes, "Part IV: Kurdish officials use new technologies to document ISIS crimes", *Rudaw*, (3/5/2017) <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/030520176>

scrutiny, as well.⁸⁰ KRG, on the contrary, is positive towards such assistance. In fact, it has *partnered* with the Yazidi advocate organization Yazda, to involve the International Criminal Court in the persecution of the crimes against Yazidis.⁸¹ However, given that Iraq has not ratified the Rome Statute, the ICC's jurisdiction can be limited only to foreign fighters who are nationals of ICC states parties.

Most of these initiatives focus on the punitive aspect of transitional justice and do not address the issue of reconciliation that will set the stage for future coexistence. Some local, under the radar, initiatives have attempted to spearhead reconciliation and create the conditions that will preclude the repetition of ISIS. The Masarat Institution organized one such initiative for Cultural Development, which brought together representatives from different ethno-religious communities, who met on different occasions and in different places to discuss the necessary steps for a pluralistic Iraq. These meetings culminated in the 'Baghdad Declaration for Supporting Religious Freedom', which presented minorities' common stance on the need to address specific issues, such as the official recognition of communities like Kakais and Zoroastrians and the removal of religion from identity cards.⁸²

Another promising initiative, that draws from the example of the truth and reconciliation commission in South Africa, took place in Tikrit. There, the 'United States Institute of Peace' (USIP) and the Iraqi NGOs 'Network of Iraqi Facilitators' and SANAD for Peacebuilding organized meetings between Sunni and Shia tribal leaders, with the involvement of political and religious representatives. These meetings, which focused on the June 2014 Camp Speicher massacre, during which ISIS fighters killed over 1500 Shia army cadets,⁸³ allowed the families of the victims to express their grievances and the Sunni side to demonstrate that those were the acts of a minority, which the tribes were ready to identify and help bring to justice. The reconciliation process was concluded with a broadcasted public statement of the tribal leaders, who condemned ISIS and expressed their willingness to assist in every possible way.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Minority Rights Group, *Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS*, op. cit. p. 31

⁸¹ See Yazda, *ISIL: Nationals of ICC states parties committing genocide and other crimes against the Yazidis*, (September 2015) <https://www.yazda.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ISIL-committing-genocide-against-the-Yazidis.pdf>

⁸² Kaylor, Brian, "Iraqi Minorities Pen 'Baghdad Declaration for Supporting Religious Freedom'", *Word&Way*, (5/4/2017) <http://www.wordandway.org/news/world/item/3695-iraqi-minorities-pen-baghdad-declaration-for-supporting-religious-freedom>

⁸³ Nordland, Rod and Alissa J. Rubinjune, "Massacre Claim Shakes Iraq", *The New York Times*, (15/6/2014), <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/16/world/middleeast/iraq.html?mcubz=0>

⁸⁴ Peterson, Scott, "Iraq after ISIS: At site of massacre, bridge-building replaces blood feud", *The Christian Science Monitor*, (22/11/2016) <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/1122/Iraq-after-ISIS-At-site-of-massacre-bridge-building-replaces-blood-feud>

Of less magnitude, but equally important in terms of community trust-building has been the decision of Muslim residents in a Mosul neighborhood to help in the reconstruction of a Christian monastery, in answer to a false rumor about the harassment of a Christian family.⁸⁵ In terms of intra-community healing and trust-building, an excellent example of positive policies has occurred in the Yazidi community. In the wake of the Yazidi women abductions, the Yazidi religious leader, Baba Sheikh, had issued an announcement, calling on the community to accept the Yazidi women, who had escaped from ISIS, while rejecting the idea that those who were forced to convert to Islam under the threat of violence can no longer be considered Yazidis. In terms of Yazidi faith, it was a groundbreaking move that helped Yazidi women and men recuperate from the genocidal ISIS persecution. Pursuant to that *ruling*, special ceremonies have been taking place in Lalish, during which Yazidi women are symbolically *re-baptised* into the faith.⁸⁶

The end result

Positive initiatives, like the above, admittedly set a promising precedence; yet, they seem unlikely to stem the downward spiral of Iraq in yet another descent into sectarianism, as the first glimpses of the post-ISIS future, as outlined in the previous pages, suggest. This eventuality will have a two-fold impact on Iraq's religious pluralism. On the one hand, a middle-term result of the return to pre-ISIS rivalries and policies of retribution is the very real possibility of ISIS reemergence. What is often overlooked in the discussion of the link between Sunni grievances and ISIS support is that the loss of land and displacement, equally to the loss of power, determine ISIS appeal to Sunnis in Iraq. If one traces the recent history of several Sunni Arab tribes that sided with ISIS, one can find narratives of expulsion, due to the de-Arabisation and de-Ba'athication policies of KRG and Baghdad⁸⁷ The policies of population engineering that both currently promote, within the wider rivalry of disputed territories, provide the ingredients of a future, updated and more deadly, ISIS.

This reality is not lost on Iraq's minorities, who see this regression to pre-ISIS policies and mentalities a yet another indication that Iraq will not change. This realization fuels a second

⁸⁵ Macintyre, James, "Muslims help restore church in Mosul after it was devastated in battle with ISIS", *Christian Today*, (30/5/2017)

<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/muslims.help.restore.church.in.mosul.after.it.was.devastated.in.battle.with.isis/109593.htm>

⁸⁶ Graham-Harrison, Emma, "'I was sold seven times': the Yazidi women welcomed back into the faith", *The Guardian*, (1/7/2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/01/i-was-sold-seven-times-yazidi-women-welcomed-back-into-the-faith>

⁸⁷ PAX, *After ISIS: Urgent need for post conflict peacebuilding in Iraq*, op. cit. p. 58

blow to religious pluralism in Iraq, in the form of minority migration. The outflow of minorities out of Iraq has been well documented. Besides the sheer numbers of Christians, Yazidis and other Iraqi minorities, who left the country, one should also pay attention to the widespread feeling among them that Iraq is irreparable and that this is an irreversible flight. Minorities in Iraq have been waiting for a promised bright future for more than 14 years. ISIS has merely been the last straw, while the apparent reversal to status quo ante policies is the final push to break the camel's back. As a Norwegian Church Aid report pointedly remarks, "...in Iraq sectarian feelings have become deeply ingrained"⁸⁸, which makes the flight of Iraqi minorities an irreversible fact that requires urgent measures.

⁸⁸ Norwegian Church Aid, *The protection of minorities from Syria and Iraq*, op.cit. p. 5, 31

Syria

As Assad forces continue their advance against the opposition and the array of Kurdish, Arab Sunni and Assyrian forces that compose the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) push against ISIS, the post-ISIS and possibly post-uprising future of Syria is right in front of us. Many of the issues discussed in the previous pages are common to the future of religious pluralism in Iraq and Syria, however, as the aforementioned Norwegian Church Aid survey interestingly shows “the two countries stand at different crossroads”.⁸⁹ In Iraq, sectarian feelings might “have become deeply ingrained... [but] Syria has not yet reached this point”.⁹⁰ Syrian civil war has been exceptionally intense and gruesome; however, despite the carnage it has brought, it is relatively short (if six years can count as short), compared to Iraq. Moreover, the human geography of the “Islamic State” *dominion* in Syria has affected the religious pluralism of Syria in a less direct way. ISIS in Syria did not advance on territories as rich in minorities as Nineveh, since, before its current multi-front retreat, ISIS main hold was in predominantly Sunni areas, such as Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.

In the following pages, the report will explore whether Syria has indeed “not reached that point” of irreversible loss of religious pluralism, as one can observe in Iraq. This will be done across some interrelated lines of inquiry: the (Syrian version of) Sunni-Shia population engineering, the life of minorities under Kurdish and government rule and, last, minority refugees, their condition and views on return.

Sectarian territorial entities: The plan of “four cities” and other stories of population engineering

Syria does not lack the type of mass punishment inflicted on the Sunni population, such as home demolitions and arbitrary arrests, as in Iraq. Several reports have documented cases of demolitions of entire neighborhoods in recaptured opposition-held areas.⁹¹ Many of those demolitions occur under the cover of the Decree 66, which was signed by Bashar al-Assad in 2012, with the declared intention to “redevelop areas of unauthorized housing and informal settlements”.⁹² While some see in this initiative a genuine demonstration of rare foresight for the

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 5

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ See for example Human Rights Watch, “Razed to the Ground: Syria’s Unlawful Neighborhood Demolitions in 2012-2013”, (30/1/2014), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/01/30/razed-ground/syrias-unlawful-neighborhood-demolitions-2012-2013>

⁹² Rollins, Tom, “Decree 66: The blueprint for al-Assad’s reconstruction of Syria?”, *IRIN*, (20/4/2017), <https://www.irinnews.org/investigations/2017/04/20/decreed-66-blueprint-al-assad%E2%80%99s-reconstruction-syria>

reconstruction of Syria after the civil war, others discern more sinister motives, namely the effectuation of a lasting demographic change, equivalent to an “ethnic cleansing”.⁹³

Similar allegations have been directed against the Kurdish power centre in Syria, as PYD has been accused of forcibly displacing Arab Sunni population from areas under its control.⁹⁴ Interestingly, though, a recent report, issued by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, which details human rights abuses in the period July 2016-February 2017, found no evidence of “ethnic cleaning”, considering the cases of displacement as military exigencies.⁹⁵

Population engineering in Syria takes, also, other forms that are absent in the Iraqi case. Of much interest is the so-called plan of “four cities”, which constitutes a type of official agreement on population swaps that is missing in Iraq. The agreement was brokered by Qatar and Iran in March 2017 and stipulated the evacuation of the Shia-populated towns of Fu'ah and Kafriya in Idlib province in exchange for the evacuation of residents and rebels in the Sunni enclaves of Zabadani and Madaya near Damascus. The four towns on both sides of the conflict had been under siege since summer 2015 and their remaining citizens have lived through months of shelling and starvation. The agreement follows the agreed evacuation of east Aleppo in December 2016.

At first sight, the population exchange appears to be a welcome respite for the towns' inhabitants. Several thousand people have reached security, despite a number of attacks against the buses carrying the stranded population, which tried to sabotage the deal.⁹⁶ However, the deal has also been met with a lot of skepticism that echoes the fears expressed in connection to the Decree 66 and the demolition of properties. Some see an Assad population engineering scheme, and particularly his ally Iran, behind the agreement, that aims at changing the country's demographic balance and ultimately creating a Sunni-free belt from Damascus to the Lebanese border.⁹⁷ This line of approach often sees the Iranian insistence to act as a protector of Shias, in

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Amnesty International, “We had nowhere to go’ - Forced Displacement and Demolitions in Northern Syria”, (13/10/2015) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2503/2015/en/>

⁹⁵ UN Human Rights Council, *Human rights abuses and international humanitarian law violations in the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 July 2016- 28 February 2017*, A/HRC/34/CRP.3, (10/3/2017) pp. 20-3 http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/A_HRC_34_CRP.3_E.docx

⁹⁶ BBC, “Huge bomb kills dozens of evacuees in Syria”, (16//2017) <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39609288>

⁹⁷ al-Tamimi, Aymenn, “Why the War in Syria May Not Be About Demographic Change “. *Syria Deeply* (15/3/2017), <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/03/15/analysis-why-the-war-in-syria-may-not-be-about-demographic-change>

the context of a broader Iranian effort to shiify the Syrian population by encouraging conversion.⁹⁸

In any case, as Aymenn al-Tamimi remarks, the population of these towns is too small to realise an actual countrywide demographic change.⁹⁹ Moreover, one should keep in mind that the anti-ISIS fight is merely one of the fronts of the Syrian civil war, which is not over yet. Hence, the true dimensions of population engineering and forced displacement will appear after (and whether) Assad forces defeat the remaining opposition enclaves. In this case, reconciliation examples that go beyond the evacuation of rebels will be essential. The case of Damascus suburb Qudsaya, where religious leaders and activists were part of the negotiations for the “terms of surrender” to the government forces,¹⁰⁰ might not be as elaborate as the reconciliation initiative in Tikrit, but it can act as a starting point.

Who protects the minorities?

Previous CRPME reports have illustrated the precarious situation of minorities in Syria and particularly their tendency to seek protection under either the government or the Kurdish rule. The Assad regime has been trying to portray itself as the sole protector of religious minorities and guarantor of religious freedom. Meetings with religious leaders¹⁰¹ and Assad’s or other high-ranking officials’ participation in Christian and other religious celebrations receive widespread coverage in the official media.¹⁰² Assad is assisted in his quest by the increasing willingness of western Christian leaders to visit Syria and open a dialogue with the regime. A case in point is last year’s visit by a group of British religious leaders to Damascus, which drew a lot of criticism in Britain and elsewhere.¹⁰³ Another asset in Assad’s effort to win the support of minorities and particularly Christians is the regime’s alliance with Russia. Moscow and the Russian Church have

⁹⁸ See for example Picali, E.B. “Together With Its Allies, The Syrian Regime Is Forcing Demographic Change In Areas Of The Country - For Self-Protection And Self-Preservation”, *The Middle East Media research Institute (MEMRI)*, (15/11/2016), <https://www.memri.org/reports/together-its-allies-syrian-regime-forcing-demographic-change-areas-country-self-protection>

⁹⁹ Al-Tamimi, Aymenn, “Why the War in Syria May Not Be About Demographic Change”, op.cit.

¹⁰⁰ Kenyon, Peter, “In A Syrian Suburb Cleared Of Rebels, A Gradual Return To Everyday Life”, *NPR*, (25/12/2017) <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/12/25/505304239/in-a-syrian-suburb-cleared-of-rebels-a-gradual-return-to-everyday-life>

¹⁰¹ Agenzia Fides, “Syrian President Assad meets the new Patriarch and Bishops of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church”, (5/7/2017) http://www.fides.org/en/news/62575-ASIA_SYRIA_Syrian_President_Assad_meets_the_new_Patriarch_and_Bishops_of_the_Melkite_Greek_Catholic_Church#.WaBowOILeM9

¹⁰² See for example Attack, Patrick, “Aleppo celebrates Christmas as Assad visits Damascus convent”, *Euronews*, (26/12/2016) <http://www.euronews.com/2016/12/26/aleppo-celebrates-christmas-as-assad-visits-damascus-convent>

¹⁰³ Byron, Susan, “Catholic peer meets President Assad”, *Catholic Herald*, (9/9/2016), <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2016/09/09/catholic-peer-meets-president-assad/> See also Erasmus, “Aleppo presents a moral dilemma for Christian leaders” *The Economist*, (18/12/2016) <https://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2016/12/syria-and-christianity>

been promoting its claim as protectors of Christians in the Middle East, which dates back to the 19th century. The apparent inactivity of Western powers has allowed Russia to assume the role the West used to have. In the words of the Patriarch of the Syrian Catholic Church, Ignatius Ephrem Joseph III Younan, “[t]he Russian intervention gives [Christians] a bit of hope in this tragic situation... [and support from the Russian Orthodox Church] which we have not received from other parts with the same determination”.¹⁰⁴

The Assad regime is not the only one in Syria to put a claim on the title of protector of religious minorities. The Kurdish de facto mini-state in Hassaka and the dominant Kurdish political power have been bending over backwards to present an image of democratic and egalitarian entity. Indeed, the 2014 constitution has been hailed as a hallmark of inclusiveness. The incorporation of Arab formations and minority (mainly Assyrian, but also Turkmen and Armenian) militias into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was equally significant, although it raises concerns about minority militarization, while there are also doubts about Kurds’ true intentions, as some see in the creation of SDF a Kurdish effort to safeguard the support of the West.

Not everyone is content with the Kurdish “democratic” rule, though. It appears that Kurdish benevolence is restricted to groups that ascribe to its program and worldview, while it treats harshly those who do not. In March 2017, PYD closed several offices of Kurdish opposition parties.¹⁰⁵ The move most probably was connected to the clashes that occurred in March 2017 in Sinjar between pro-KDP Syrian Kurd fighters and PKK-affiliated Yazidis in Sinjar.¹⁰⁶

The clampdown on the opposition affected Assyrian parties, as well. Assyrian groups, such as the Assyrian Democratic Organisation, saw several of their offices closed. Some Assyrian groups are skeptic or overtly hostile to the Kurdish embrace, stating property confiscations, Kurdification of politics and society and intimidation (occasionally assassination) campaigns against Assyrians and others, who express opposing opinions.¹⁰⁷ They often point out that the Kurdish forces are untrustworthy, citing the occupation of the predominantly Christian Khabur region by ISIS and the abduction of 250 of its inhabitants despite Kurdish claims that they would

¹⁰⁴ ANSAméd, “Moscow gives us hope’, says Syrian Catholic patriarch”, (28/1/2017). http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/generalnews/2016/01/28/moscow-gives-us-hope-says-syrian-catholic-patriarch_b1343709-a55c-4907-8e79-c1a8fd4a078d.html

¹⁰⁵ Zaman Alwasl, “PYD militants shut down headquarters of rival Kurdish and Assyrian parties”, (19/3/2017) <https://en.zamanalwasl.net/news/24411.html>

¹⁰⁶ See above p.16

¹⁰⁷ See for example Ulloa, Silvia, “Assyrians Under Kurdish Rule: The Situation in Northeastern Syria”, *Assyrian Confederation of Europe*, (January 2017) <http://www.aina.org/reports/ace201701.pdf>

protect the area. These fears arose again after the recapture of Khabur by YPG and the alleged intention of Kurdish forces to *occupy* the area.¹⁰⁸ This led to a renewal of clashes between Kurdish and Christian militias, although not as widespread and intense as the clashes that took place in January 2016.¹⁰⁹ The tensions appear to have deescalated after Kurdish forces decided to withdraw from positions within the residential areas and left the operation of checkpoints to allied Assyrian militias.¹¹⁰

Trapped between these competitive claims to their protection, the Christian community often finds itself in a peculiar situation, where it is required to perform its citizen obligations for both of its protectors. One of the Christian complaints that deserves special attention is the burden of dual (Kurdish and central government) taxation and military recruitment,¹¹¹ which puts unbearable pressure to an already traumatized community and renders emigration an option that steadily remains on the table.

To leave or to return: the prospect of IDPs and refugees return

In June 2017, UNHCR noted “a notable trend of spontaneous returns to and within Syria”, involving the return of over 440,000 IDPs and over 31,000 refugees residing in neighboring countries, while since 2015, another 260,000 refugees have decided to go back to Syria.¹¹² There is no doubt that the return of half a million IDPs and refugees is a drop in the ocean in Syria’s displacement figures. However, it shows a positive trend that might spearhead a more widespread return of displaced population back to their homes.

There is no available breakdown of the returnees’ data to show the characteristics of this population. Hence, we do not know if minorities are affected by this trend. Some reports do indicate that some Christians seem to return to Hassaka region. Furthermore, it appears that many Christians, who have fled to Lebanon, have returned to Syria.¹¹³ Other news stories have

¹⁰⁸ World Watch Monitor, “Kurdish YPG ‘occupy’ Assyrian villages in NE Syria”, (4/10/2016)

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/kurdish-ypg-occupy-assyrian-villages-in-ne-syria/>

¹⁰⁹ Al Rifai, Diana, “Assyrians and Kurds clash for first time in north Syria”, *Al Jazeera*, (12/1/2016)

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/assyrians-kurds-qamishli-160112165041894.html>

¹¹⁰ Zaman Alwasl, “Assyrians seek self-management in Hasaka over deal with PYD”, (13/4/2017)

<https://en.zamanalwasl.net/news/24411.html>

¹¹¹ Ulloa, Silvia, “Assyrians Under Kurdish Rule: The Situation in Northeastern Syria”, op. cit., p. 7

¹¹² UNHCR, “UNHCR seeing significant returns of internally displaced amid Syria’s continuing conflict”, (30/6/2017)

<http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2017/6/595612454/unhcr-seeing-significant-returns-internally-displaced-amid-syrias-continuing.html>

¹¹³ Open Doors, “Understanding recent movements of Christians from Syria and Iraq to other countries across the Middle East and Europe”, p. 18 <http://www.aina.org/reports/utrmcfsi.pdf>

documented similar individual cases.¹¹⁴ As mentioned above, Syria in comparison to Iraq is *privileged* with a relatively short period of conflict and relatively harmonious inter-community relations before 2011. A survey conducted by the Norwegian Church Aid showed that, although minorities reported higher levels of discrimination, overall the proportion of those who did was relatively small.¹¹⁵ Another interesting finding in the survey is that, contrary to Iraqi Christian refugees, Syrians were significantly more optimistic in their replies, stating that they would like to go back to Syria if the war ends.¹¹⁶

The advance of government forces might increase the number of those who wish to return, especially refugees in neighboring countries. However, the question of whether they will return permanently and whether this trend will encourage refugees –Christian or others – to return from their new homes in Western countries depends on issues beyond security. After years of conflict, much of Syria has been reduced to ruins. Therefore, reconstruction and reconciliation, much like in Iraq, are of paramount importance.¹¹⁷ Efforts by Christian charities to spearhead such a reconstruction in Christian towns and villages can offer some initial help. However, without a solid countrywide plan to heal the material and psychological wounds of the conflict, return will remain a fading longing with diminishing prospects of actual materialization.

¹¹⁴ O’Flaherty, Murchada, “Syria: Christian families are returning home”, (20/6/2017) <https://acnuk.org/news/syria-christian-families-are-returning-home/>

¹¹⁵ Norwegian Church Aid, *The protection of minorities from Syria and Iraq*, op.cit. p. 19

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 31

¹¹⁷ World Watch Monitor, “Security not only concern for Syrians returning home”, (4/7/2017) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/security-not-concern-syrians-returning-home/>

Egypt

Some scholars and analysts are often concerned with the constant but also growing denial from the Muslim side to open a genuine dialogue with the Coptic community and address the problems that the Christians face in the Egypt. Furthermore, it has been claimed that the Egyptian state and the Muslim communities are driven by a religious conservatism that is interfering in state planning and policies, a conservatism that sometimes reaches the limits of extremism. However, one can discern another dimension to this lack of dialogue. This is the making of a separate cultural, religious and even racial identity from the Copts' side that aims at differentiating their community's characteristics from that of the Muslims. The question of political representation kept emerging during the 20th century for the Copts. Pope Kyrillos IV (1854-1861) tried to reform the Church vis-à-vis the Protestant missionaries but it was only with Pope Shenouda III from 1971 that the forging of the Coptic identity took place, framed with the Sunday School Movement.

The “shy” Muslim – Christian Dialogue

This “cultural nationalism”, as it has been described, is rejected by secular Copts. They emphasize the part of the Egyptian cultural identity, stressing that it is impossible to demand a secular Egyptian state as long as Copts themselves are authorizing the Coptic Church to represent their community politically. Yussef Sidhum, editor of the only Coptic newspaper in Egypt, *al-Watani*, has called this process as “political suicide”. Another prominent intellectual Copt, Milad Hanna, emphasizes the inclusiveness of the Egyptian identity, and not its Muslim or Christian nucleus.¹¹⁸

The dialogue and re-interaction between Muslims and Christians in Egypt has been through many different phases. The initiatives begun while Islamist sentiment was growing not only in Egypt but in the Middle East as well, as early as the 1980's. The debate included the discussion between Copts and moderate Islamists that ended up in an important political platform, the centrist Islamist one known in Arabic as *wasatiyya*. This political trend, even if it has not seen important parliamentary representation has, intellectually, played a decisive role in the making of a more inclusive political consciousness in Egypt. In the context of sectarian tensions in the country during the beginning of the 1990's, Copts and members of the Muslim

¹¹⁸ Scott, Rachel, *The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State*. Stanford University Press, 2010, California, p. 78

Brotherhood tried to find common ground for building understanding. Even if the outcome ran dry, these initiatives marked a historical precedent for interreligious dialogue in Egypt.¹¹⁹ During the last years, there has been an endeavour for the growth of a mutual religious understanding, with al-Azhar often joining the dialogue.

The Christians have traditionally sided with the Egyptian regimes in an effort to secure the community's sustainability and interests. The reluctance and the suspicious stance of the Coptic community against the Muslim Brotherhood were ignited especially after the latter's parliamentary gains in 2005. Nonetheless, after 2011 and Morsi's presidency, the dispute heated up again. In the past, the slogan "Islam is the solution", brought confusion, since there was a gap and ambiguity between the Islamic concept of the state and the civil one. One of the key concepts that has returned in the public debate is that of citizenship.¹²⁰ Equal citizenship, according to the Coptic community (with extremely few exceptions such as Rafik Habib) is an anathema for the Muslim Brotherhood. The Copts argue that the Islamists, be them liberal or radical, want to restate the Islamic concept of citizenship that is the *dhimmi* status. In fact, during the public debates of the last period in Egypt, Islamists are not very clear about their intentions regarding this matter. One should bear in mind that *Islamism* is not a robust, easily defined group, and that during these debates Islamists tried to pursue that the Copts' rights will be secured under Islamic governance but without mentioning the means with which to do so. Yet, this ambiguity helps the further demonization of Islamic politics. However, after the fall of Mubarak in 2011 and the formation of more religious parties in Egypt, such as the Freedom and Justice Party or the al-Nour, the Islamists tried to include Copts either as founding members or as simple ones, to promote a more inclusive public image.¹²¹

The legal debate

The legal issue and the position of the Copts on it is one of the most controversial topics in Egypt. The modern Egyptian legal system is a mosaic of western, ottoman and Islamic codes which makes the status of the Copts and of other religious minorities in Egypt, ambiguous and sometimes incomprehensible. Other religions than Christianity or Judaism are not recognized by Egyptian law (such as the Baha'is). Still, there are a number of issues concerning jurisprudence but also a large proportion of the Egyptian population. The accusation of apostasy and its use is

¹¹⁹ Tadros Mariz, *Copts at the Crossroads: The Challenges of Building Inclusive democracy in Egypt*, American Univeristy in Cairo Press, Cairo, 2016, p. 204

¹²⁰ Ibid., 205

¹²¹ Ibid., 210-217

one of them. Many Egyptians confess that the state is using it as a tool to terrorize anyone declaring his personal religious freedom. Administrative and legal barriers are put on by the Egyptian state, for example to those wishing to convert from Islam to Christianity, while the only documents available up to this moment are for the conversion from Christianity or Judaism to Islam¹²². Thus, an apostate is a legal non-entity for the Egyptian state. Even though the Egyptian constitution prohibits the use of religion to harm social or national unity, the Egyptian police has been accused of severely harassing apostates from Islam. However, the al-Sisi presidency is raising the flag of religious rights and pluralism, giving the image of an open and tolerant society fighting religious extremism.

Article 2 of the Egyptian constitution divides, not only the Muslims, but also the Coptic community. This article indicates that the source of the Egyptian legal system is the *shari'a*, which is the Islamic law that derives from the Quran and parts of the prophet's *hadiths*. It is mostly used for personal and family legal matters, the locus of the Egyptian society for a lot of people, which proves that the Egyptian legal system was never fully secularized. A charged public debate was initiated after the uprising of 2011 and in the wake of the rewriting of the constitutional drafts in 2012 and 2014. Especially in 2012, when the constitution was drafted by an Islamist-dominated parliament, concern was growing stronger that the article 2 will be used for a deep islamization of the country, and the subsequent marginalization and persecution of the Coptic and other religious communities. Nevertheless, not all Copts see article 2 with enmity. Many in the Coptic community support the use of article 2 as a legal source, though they evangelize their freedom to use the Bible for the same purpose. This is a clear objection to the secularization processes in Egypt, since the official Coptic position regarding the Coptic identity is that Coptic religion is its stronghold and, thus, Coptic consciousness will be lost. Thus, even if the Copts are suspicious about the Muslim Brotherhood, the al-Wasat trend and the Salafists' intentions concerning civil citizenship, it is obvious that the Coptic Church considers Christianity as central to the question of Coptic citizenship in modern Egypt.

The Coptic Church's involvement in the political sentiment and identity of its adherents has a long and controversial history as briefly noted before. After 2011, its involvement became clearer and articulated through the fear lenses of growing Islamism. Pope Tawadros II and the Coptic community were present during the coup d'état in 2013 and stood by al-Sisi's candidacy and discourse for Egypt's security. A Coptic leader, bishop Pola, acknowledged that the church

¹²² Scott, Rachel. *Ibid.*, p. 88-89

urged the Coptic community to vote for al-Sisi, underlining that the church “is not playing politics, it plays its patriotic role”.¹²³

Violence and displacement

In May 2017, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) published a report called “Declared Dead” regarding the targeting of the Copts in North Sinai and their displacement. The escalating armed attacks against the local Christian population in the region of al-Arish at that period, had raised a concern both to the Copts and the Egyptian state. As the report underlines, one should consider this climate of terror against the Coptic population, in the context “of the widespread deployment of security forces and military troops in the area”, implying either that the security forces are unable to deal with the situation or that for some reason they turn a blind eye to it. The latter accusation comes from the tolerance that sometimes the police and the army show towards the violence against the Copts. Based on the concept of *hisba*¹²⁴, and indeed creating direct action groups, terrorist groups such as *Ansar Beit al-Maqdis* and *Wilayat Sinai*, are physically targeting Copts in the region and force them to flee from their homes. In February, the Islamic State issued a video declaring that the Pact of Umar does no longer exist.¹²⁵ Analysts stress that it was issued specifically to target the Copts of Egypt and underline that their equal citizenship in the Egyptian but also the other Muslim states, is threatened.

When the Islamic State bombed the church in Cairo in December 2016, killing 25 people, the video released afterwards as a manifesto explained that the Christians in Egypt have sided not only with the crusaders but also with president al-Sisi who have both been targeting IS’s fighters. In fact, the Egyptian president has given state money for the renovation of destroyed churches, and furthermore has called for a “religious revolution” with a pioneering position of al-Azhar and its official discourse on the Sunni dogma and the relationship between Sunnis and other religions and dogmas.¹²⁶

The customary and traditional reconciliation processes used to de-escalate or avoid sectarian and religious violence in the Egyptian countryside seem to have largely vanished or

¹²³ World Watch Monitor, “Copts tired of ‘sacrificing willingly’ for Egypt’s unity”, (07/07/2017), <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/copts-tired-sacrificing-willingly-egypts-unity/>

¹²⁴ Hisba: literally means “accountability”. It was first introduced in the Egyptian political language by Jamaat al-Islamiyya during the ‘70s, as a tool of direct action towards atheists, infidels and other non-Muslim persons and practices in order to admonish them for their “unislamic” actions or beliefs.

¹²⁵ The pact of Omar was a 7th century treaty containing rights and restrictions for the non-Muslims living in Muslim lands (dhimmi).

¹²⁶ Nina Shea, “Do Copts Have a Future in Egypt?”, *The Hudson Institute*, (20/06/2017) <https://www.hudson.org/research/13701-do-copts-have-a-future-in-egypt>

been islamized.¹²⁷ The report mentions that physical violence is only one aspect of the violence that the Coptic community is facing. There are also numerous incidents of Copts being prevented from practising their faith, physical and legal resistance to the construction of churches, an even larger limitation (in comparison with the Muslims) to their freedom of expression and large legal campaigns against Copts with the accusations of insulting Islam or the Islamic moral codes.¹²⁸ To a large extent, the displacement of the Copts of north Sinai was displayed in the Egyptian media as a voluntary exodus or even as a state plan to protect Copts from increasing violence. Nevertheless, the Copts have a different opinion, calling the February – March incidents as “forced displacement”. The Church’s members blame the government for the failure of protecting their safety and homes. In some cases, there have been leaks from within the Church, that there was a request for training and arming scouts in order to protect the churches and its people from terrorist acts. The Church denies this assumption, nevertheless the Interior Ministry made an offer to the Church to provide military training to members of the scouts who help monitor the entrances before any service, but the Church turned it down.¹²⁹

Religious reformation wanted

The “religious revolution” that the al-Sisi government declares, brings into the discussion two very basic trends in the Egyptian debate regarding the status of the Copts and the role of the state and religious institutions, such as al-Azhar. Both in the press and the academic circles, there is an ongoing discussion about the status of the Copts in Egyptian society. The main concern and the mutual understanding is that there should be a reformation, or in the word of the Egyptian president, a “revolution”. What is revealing in this statement is that it is not clearly mentioned whether there should be a reform in the state or in the religious establishment, or even both. The Copts and the secular Muslims are calling for an explicit separation of religion and state but do not mention how this is to be done, under which circumstances and purposes. For example, the leftist parties, such as the Tagammu and the Revolutionary Socialists, albeit small, are calling for a French style “laïcité”, while more centrist political organizations, such as al-Wafd, are discussing an English version of citizenship. This always brings into the core of the discussion the meaning of the word *citizenship* in the Arab-Muslim world.

¹²⁷ For more information about solving disputes between Muslims and Christians in the Egyptian countryside see Andrea B. Rugh, *Christians in Egypt: Strategies and Survival*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

¹²⁸ Mada Masr, “EIPR report: Targeting of North Sinai Copts leads to forced displacement, not voluntary departure”, (16/05/2017), <http://www.crpme.gr/el/analyseis/aigyptos/eipr-report-targeting-of-north-sinai-copts-leads-to-forced-displacement-not-voluntary-departure>

¹²⁹ Fouad, Ahmad, “Egypt’s Copts have no plan to arm groups”, *al-Monitor*, (07/07/2017), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/egypt-scouts-christians-military-training-militias-security.html>

In the media, the debate is usually dominated by “moderate” Islamic scholars that are praising Islamic tolerance towards other religions and the need to return to the “texts”. On the other hand, there are the Egyptian nationalists who understand the concept of citizenship as a nationalist driven project. They argue that the only way to fight sectarianism and fundamentalism is to stick to the national idea and the benevolent narration of the Egyptian unity. The phrase “better mutual understanding” keeps on being repeated, although it needs a deeper clarification regarding the context of religious pluralism and tolerance in Egypt.

In addition, the discussion is embroiled with the importance of taking economic initiatives for a fuller integration of the Copts in the Egyptian society. As mentioned earlier, the socio-economic identity of the Copts had changed rapidly since 1952 and especially since 1970 after Sadat took power. Sadat, with his open-door policy, favoured a caste of Muslim businessmen creating a hostile financial environment for Copts. The majority of the Coptic community is living in poverty, the same as Muslims, although their high rate of urbanization and a certain kind of tradition boosts the Copts to engage with professions such as medicine or law, which brings them, at times, to a higher social status.¹³⁰ Thus, discrimination against the Copts has somehow socioeconomic roots, with the Islamists claiming that they take advantage of the Muslim “indigenous” population.

In April 2017, Pope Francis visited Egypt to discuss the ongoing hardships and the relationships between western Christianity and Sunni Islam. He met with both Pope Tawadros II and the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayeb. The government’s and al-Azhar’s position was to further “cement a spirit of tolerance and dialogue”.¹³¹ Given that the relationships between the two institutions were not always smooth, this meeting was very important. Al-Azhar has been in the middle of wide public disagreement for this, sometimes, more so since the Egyptian government, but also many western countries, are counting on it to promote a moderate Islamic discourse.

Al-Azhar has undergone some legislative reforms from SCAF back in 2012 in order to be under a wider governmental control. But, recently there has been a new draft proposed by MP Mohamed Abu Hamed that seems to have some support from the majority of the parliament. This draft proposes for the Grand Sheikh’s term to be limited to six years and that it can only be renewed once. In addition, the Grand Sheikh is proposed to be elected by the two al-Azhar

¹³⁰ Scott, Rachel, *Ibid.*, p. 74-75

¹³¹ Tadros, Mariz, “Copts of Egypt: Pope Francis, Al-Azhar, and the reality of sectarianism on the ground”, *OpenDemocracy*, (26/04/2017), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/mariz-tadros/copts-egypt-pope-al-azhar-sectarianism>

bodies, the Council of Senior Scholars and the Islamic Research Committee.¹³² Given the fact that the way Islam is being taught in Egypt is mostly defined by al-Azhar in its religious schools and university, the Egyptian state wants to prevent the promotion of extremist ideas. Thus, MPs want to reform the institution by taking under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Higher Education all the non-religious colleges of al-Azhar and remove from the curriculum all religious texts that can be misinterpreted and be used as religious pretext for extremist violence. The draft even goes further, claiming the creation of a new university, the University of Muhammad Abduh for International Studies, in an effort to further influence the activities and rationale of the religious establishment.¹³³

Revisiting the law for church construction and restoration

In February 2017, in the village of Kom al-Lofi in al-Minya, around five hundred inhabitants of the village asked for a church to be constructed in order to practice their faith. Until then, local Christians were praying in a building that was unofficially used as a church, though the new law for church construction and restoration explicitly bans the use of such spaces without licence. The two local Muslim leaders, Sheikh Ahmad Mohammad and Sheikh Abdel Gawad fiercely opposed the construction of the church with the excuse that five hundred people do not constitute a community large enough to have their own place of worship.¹³⁴ Furthermore, they claimed that once constructed it will disrupt the village's "social harmony" and it will cause sectarian strife.

The new law regarding church construction, passed in late 2016, has been also the nucleus of a wide debate in Egypt, especially after the beginning of its implementation. As the Coptic Orthodox Church asserts to be the only legitimate representative of the Copts in Egypt, the law has been discussed only between the state and the Church, with activists, institutions and academics being excluded. EIPR has been severely concerned about its constitutionality. It claims that the restriction of the number of inhabitants is a vague postulation, that it can, sometimes, be used to prohibit church constructions. It does, in addition, breach the international conventions for human rights since it also prohibits Christians to pray at home. The

¹³² Farid, Sonia, "The new Azhar law and the battle over religious authority in Egypt", *al-Arabiya*, (18/07/2017).

<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/06/18/The-new-Azhar-law-and-the-battle-over-religious-authority-in-Egypt.html>

¹³³ Nathan Brown & Mariam Ghanem, "The Battle Over Al-Azhar", *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, (31/05/2017), http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/70103?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiTIRWbE5UaGpPV1ZsWmpjMlIsInQiOiJ4dVVGUTZZQ2VaTFc2UkNhNGVuenlaZFwvbEt5aVAxTDBOVXJcL2QyK3MwOSTyNk5GQkN2R3lQa1JWNWRRb1g4UnBkSEntVGhFaXFwa3hoaGdiQ1NKRXdTDDhjQlwwSGRLdmVtdEptXC9DZ2ticXFub29jVThoV0dxZ09tYUtHdXJwRTcifQ%3D%3D

¹³⁴ Tadros, Mariz, "Copts of Egypt...", *Ibid.*

law states that every place of worship should have security provisions for the safety of the worshippers, while it also affects the renovation processes; the present law gives power to the local governors, since their written concession is needed to renovate or expand an already existing church.¹³⁵ In the context of the stricter control over religious functioning, the new law gives the state the right to hire and dismiss imams in mosques in its territory, but it does not put restrictions on mosque constructions.

As a result, the two Sheikhs in Kom al-Lofi rejected the construction of a new church based on the Christians' numbers and security reasons, while at the same time the building they used to pray was shut down since it was unlicensed. The Copts issued a declaration complaining about the situation, and, only in April, did the authorities allow the building to be reopened but not a church to be built.

Post-revolutionary elections and sectarianism

One of the main demands of the 2011 uprising in Egypt was free elections, which Mubarak and its predecessors denied the Egyptian population. The post-revolutionary elections in Egypt have had a characteristic that according to analysts has gone unnoticed, since they focus on whether the elections have been free or not; it is their sectarian and religious cloak. The use of religious symbols and affiliation of the candidates has been mostly what has defined the post-revolutionary vote. While the violations of the electoral law were numerous (the Supreme Court even had to dissolve the elected parliament of 2011-2012 in a historical ruling in June 2012), the political camps from the beginning of the election campaigns had a deep religious aspect. On the one side, the Democratic Coalition, including the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (and initially the Salafist al-Nour), and on the other, the Kotla coalition that included the Karama party and other liberal forces. The Coptic Church officially took the line of supporting the Kotla coalition as it included many Copts as candidates. This raised fierce criticism from the side of the Islamists accusing them of plotting against the unity of Egypt and of being crusaders and unbelievers.¹³⁶

The public discourse became once more sectarian and primed with religious animosity. Political opponents, are still using the word *Christian* as an accusation in order to undermine their

²² Abdelrahman, Eyad, "Why Egypt's new church law has some activists worried", *al-Monitor*, (04/10/2016), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2016/10/egypt-church-construction-law-controversy-civil-society.html>

¹³⁶ Tadros Mariz, *Ibid.*, p. 222-23

reputation, their morals and their targets. The Copts' representation in the first parliament was 1.2 percent, which in numbers meant six Copts: five men and one woman.¹³⁷ The latter clearly shows the underrepresentation of women in Egypt. When the Freedom and Justice Party together with al-Nour dominated the parliament of 2013, many sectarian incidents, such as that of al-Amiryiah, were denied being discussed in the majlis al-Sha'ab.

In general, the voting patterns of the Copts in the first presidential elections after 2011 were to support the more secular politicians, such as Ahmed Shafiq, even if they were accused as "corrupted", in their fear of Islamist politicians such as Mohamed Morsi. Economic stability and the reassurance of their private and public security pushed many Copts, and other religious minorities, to vote for the remnants of the *ancient regime*, even though the Islamists were reassuring that the rights of the Christians in Egypt would be protected. Nevertheless, when Mohamed Morsi became president, stories of religious discrimination and rights abuse were coming out to the surface, such as the separation of Muslim and Christian children at schools in Mu'assasat al-Zakat in Cairo.

In the two post-revolutionary presidential elections, political analysts observed that the Coptic community, even though sometimes underestimated, finally had a crucial role to play in the electoral results. Shafiq's defeat in 2012 was marginal (some say it was just a few thousand votes), while in 2013 and 2014 there was an important mobilization of the Coptic community against the "Islamist threat" against Egypt, leading, in part, to the easier legitimization of the military intervention and al-Sisi's subsequent victory. Thus, Copts are now considered a very important political constituency in Egypt.

The challenges of unity

In Egypt, while the equal rights of the minorities are guaranteed by the constitution, the reality sometimes is quite different. Even the rights of Muslims who dare challenge Islam's omnipotence in the Egyptian society, are severely attacked both by the state and society. In early 2016, writer Famima Naout was sentenced by an Egyptian court to three years of imprisonment for a case of blasphemy against the state's religion, Islam.¹³⁸ The discriminations in the Egyptian courts have caught the attention of several human rights organizations, such as the Human

¹³⁷ Tadros Mariz, *Ibid.*, p. 224

¹³⁸ El-Sayed Gamal el-Din, "Egyptian writer Fatima Naoot sentenced to 3 years in jail for 'contempt of religion'", *Al-Ahram*, (26/01/2016), <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/185963/Egypt/Politics-/Egyptian-writer-Fatima-Naoot-sentenced-to--years-i.aspx>

Rights Watch.¹³⁹ These discriminations do not end in religious motivated decisions, but are expanded to social, economic and, of course, political matters.

President al-Sisi is promoting an image of a pluralistic country that lacks the sectarian violence that other Arab countries indeed have. He has been the first president to attend twice Christmas Eve in churches, gaining, thus, legitimacy and popularity, both among Christian population in Egypt but also in the western countries as well. He tries hard to idealize the unity of the Egyptian population beyond ethnicity, religion, class or political affiliation¹⁴⁰. Nonetheless, the government and most of the Egyptian politicians are often criticized for failing to support the idea of pluralism. The Egyptian media often adopts an attitude of denial regarding incidents of sectarian violence in the country. All Muslim Egyptians have stories of coexistence with Christian Egyptians, refusing the *de facto* discrimination that the Christians are undergoing every day. Thus, assaults against Copts are often seen as mere criminal acts, at best, while there are those that excuse such acts blaming the provocative attitude of the Copts.

Such patterns are met daily in Egypt and, in fact, lead to the need to address an important issue as to whether Copts should be dealt with by the Egyptian State as a special community in need of protection. The adherents of this point of view are usually declaring that the Egyptian state does not recognize the *de facto* discrimination against Copts, which is growing day by day. On the other hand, there are those that claim that treating Christians in a special protective manner, harms the unity and the national cohesion of the country, since the big majority of the Egyptian population is Muslim. According to many Copts, the communal relationships in the micro-level of society have worsened, and they fear that any kind of personal disagreement or dispute can automatically be transformed to a sectarian issue, raising the wrath of the Muslim population. The Copts also claim that they were excluded from the post-revolutionary procedures and talks, regarding the future of the Egyptian political scene. In other words, they tried to build a more inclusive society alongside the Muslims, on every level, and, in the aftermath of the uprising, they were marginalized by the political and religious establishment.

Building a more inclusive society has been the challenge from the beginning of the 2011 uprisings in Egypt and the other Arab countries. Public figures, politicians and activists are discussing whether Islam should be the basis of the legislation, and, all in all, which role Islam should have in the Egyptian political, social but also in the private sphere. Rafik Habib, a Coptic

¹³⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Events of 2016", (5/2016) <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/egypt>

¹⁴⁰ Yerkes, Sarah, "What Egypt under Sisi is really like for Coptic Christians", *Brookings*, (20/06/2016), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/06/20/what-egypt-under-sissi-is-really-like-for-coptic-christians/>

politician that joined the Freedom and Justice party, has argued that there should be an assimilationist approach to the Arab identity. Islam, he argues, is the basic aspect of the Arab civilization, and subsequently of the Coptic identity that belongs to a holistic Arab corpus.¹⁴¹ A similar approach was adopted by one of the founders of the al-Baath party in Syria, the Greek Orthodox Michel Aflaq. This approach, of Copts belonging to an indivisible Islamic civilization, is a thesis that is widely accepted in Egypt and other Arab countries, but mostly by Muslims. The majority of the Copts themselves, do not espouse this theory, but claim for their Coptic Orthodox dogma an equal fundamental role in the making of the Arab-Muslim civilization. A more pluralistic approach could, definitely, bear more fruits regarding religious tolerance in Egypt, otherwise the process of a possible Coptic “radicalization” could harm social peace in Egypt.

¹⁴¹ Tadros Mariz. *Ibid.*, p. 248

Turkey

The following year after the events of July 15th 2016 against the Erdoğan-led government, the religious communities in Turkey have been feeling the reaction to the events of July 15th, alongside politicians, academics, activists, military personnel, and the media. Coupled with Islamic State-sponsored attacks in Ankara and Istanbul, as well as with the renewed Kurdish insurgency in the South of Turkey, the state of emergency still en vigueur – since summer 2016 – has been dominating the everyday life of both Muslim and non-Muslim citizens, to a lesser and greater effect, respectively.

The Jewish community

The Jewish population of Turkey roughly numbers at 23,000 people and is gradually shrinking every year. The relationship between Israel and Turkey, as well as the targeting from Islamic State militants have played an important part to that effect. Despite reassurances from State officials that anti-Semitism is non-existent in Turkey, the Jewish community and its ties with Israel have been used to promote electoral propaganda through conspiracy theories such as the “Sèvres Syndrome” or the “Dönme secret community” as well as a symbol of Israel. Due to these factors, Turkish Jews are leaving the country, while synagogues and other sites of Jewish cultural heritage are left in disarray.¹⁴²

Nonetheless, the Hanukkah and Passover holidays are nowadays celebrated openly in Turkey, along with the commemoration of the Annual Holocaust Remembrance Day and the holding of fast-breaking dinners between Jewish, Muslim and Christian community members. President Erdoğan and State officials either participate or send encouraging messages, attempting to give credence to the statement that in spite of the state of Turkish-Israeli relations, the Jews of Turkey are considered an integral part of the country and that their cultural heritage is respected and preserved. Despite the fact that the relationship between Turkey and Israel seems to have turned a new leaf after the reestablishment of full diplomatic representation, the

¹⁴² Bulut, Uzay, “Turkey Where Are Your Jews?”. *Israel National News*, (12/4/2017)

<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/20389>

Halavy, Dror, “Turkish Ambassador: Turkey misses its Jews”, *Hamodia*, (27/1/2017) <http://hamodia.com/2017/01/27/turkish-ambassador-turkey-misses-its-jews/>

Presidential statements following the referendum of April 2017 could be evidence to the contrary.¹⁴³

Additionally, attacks by radical Muslims and/or nationalists on Jewish sites such as the ones at the Neve Şalom Synagogue and the Ahrida Synagogue, both located in Istanbul, seem to be in vogue, and, at times, either provoked, redirected, condemned or absolved via media coverage and State officials. As a result, tensions often run high, endangering both the livelihood of Jewish citizens as well as their willingness to stay patient and to remain a part of the Turkish religious and cultural mosaic.¹⁴⁴

The Alevi community

The Alevis are estimated to make up around 10 to 15% (about 8-10 million) of a population of approximately 77 million people in Turkey. Despite lacking formal recognition as a different religion from the Sunni and Shia Muslim ones, they represent the country's second largest religious community. Nonetheless, the status concerning their religious rights remains a hot topic of discussion which comes to the forefront before a new election process.

The elections of 2015 were followed by promises and pledges concerning the recognition of Alevi cemevis as official houses of religious worship (i.e. the same as churches, synagogues and mosques as well as distinguishing the Alevi faith as separate from the Shia faith, and not simply as one of its denominations. For the time being, Alevi cemevis are considered by the state and the Religious Affairs Directorate (the Diyanet) as “cultural houses” and not places of worship equal or alternative to mosques. Such a reform would exempt cemevis from energy bills as well as offer a number of tax-related special benefits related to official houses of worship. For instance, recently, the funeral of a police officer of Alevi faith was held at a mosque instead of a cemevi despite his family's belief and will. The officer fell on the line of duty during a terrorist

¹⁴³ Kayaoglou, Barin, “Turkey, Israel in verbal spat over Jerusalem”, *Al-Monitor*, (9/5/2017) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2017/05/turkey-israel-spat-jerusalem.html>

Daily Sabah, “Turkey's Jewish Community marks Passover”, (11/4/2014) <https://www.dailysabah.com/minorities/2017/04/12/turkeys-jewish-community-marks-passover>

Hurriyet Daily News, “Turkey marks Holocaust Remembrance Day”, (27/1/2017) <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-marks-holocaust-remembrance-day.aspx?pageID=238&nID=109039&NewsCatID=510>

Daily Sabah, “Christians, Jews of Istanbul join fast breaking feast”, (23/6/2017)

<https://www.dailysabah.com/minorities/2017/06/24/christians-jews-of-istanbul-join-fast-breaking-feast-1498253388>

¹⁴⁴ Bulut, Uzay, “Jews in Turkey Under Attack Over Temple Mount Crisis”, *The Philos Project*, (2/8/2017)

<https://philosproject.org/turkey-uncensored-jews-in-turkey-under-attack/>

Davenport, Michael, “Turkish Jews stay calm in face of synagogue attacks”, *The Jewish Chronicle*, (10/8/2017)

<https://www.thejc.com/news/world/turkish-jews-stay-calm-in-face-of-synagogue-attacks-1.442689>

Hurriyet Daily News, “Leaders unite in condemning synagogue attack in Istanbul”, (25/7/2017)

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/leaders-unite-in-condemning-synagogue-attack-in-istanbul.aspx?pageID=238&nID=115930&NewsCatID=338>

attack and was considered a martyr from the government. Consequently, political pressure was applied in order to circumvent his funeral being held in an informal place of worship. It should also be pointed out that wherever a cemevi is built, a mosque is often erected nearby. The latter can only be viewed as a way to downplay the cemevi's clout, and, at the same time, emphasize the preference toward the Sunni Muslim identity.¹⁴⁵

Furthermore, by recognizing Alevism as a distinct religion, and essentially strengthening the Alevi identity, mandated Sunni-based religious school courses would become optional for Alevi students. To that effect, efforts from Alevi foundations are underway with lists of suggestions being submitted to the Ministry of Education in order to implement changes to the country's religious curriculum and to move away from an exclusively Sunni-centered religious education.¹⁴⁶

During the past few years, a ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) pressured for a more immediate solution to the problem. Nonetheless, progress on the Alevi issue has yet to gain momentum as Turkey has partially suspended its participation in the European Convention on Human Rights – following the events of July 2016. As a result, any efforts on the matter have been sidetracked by the state of emergency declared after, the wild conspiracy theories connecting Alevis with the Gülen movement, as well as the association of the Alevi faith with the Kurdish ethnic minority in Turkey and the PKK rebels.¹⁴⁷

The strengthening of the President's executive powers through the referendum of April 2017 was viewed negatively by the Alevis. The fear is that it could lead to a crackdown on the Alevi community as fearmongering is connecting it to the Gülen Movement, itself accused of leading the events of July 15th. Despite the fact that the Alevi community was against the July events, its position was ignored and became part of the radical rhetoric placing all non-Sunni religious communities in its favor.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Kingsley, Patrick, "Turkey's Alevis, a Muslim Minority, Fear a Policy of Denying Their Existence", *The New York Times*, (22/7/2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/22/world/europe/alevi-minority-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan.html?mcubz=0>
SOL International, "Alevi policeman's funeral held in mosque against family's consent", (21/1/2017) <http://news.sol.org.tr/alevi-policemans-funeral-held-mosque-against-familys-consent-171488>

¹⁴⁶ Hurriyet Daily News, "Turkish Alevis release list of suggestions for 'pluralistic' religious education in new curriculum", (1/2/2017) <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-alevis-release-list-of-suggestions-for-pluralistic-religious-education-in-new-curriculum.aspx?pageID=238&nid=109205>

¹⁴⁷ Shaheen, Kareem & Bowcott, Owen, "Turkey MPs approve state of emergency bill allowing rule by decree", *The Guardian*, (21/7/2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/21/turkey-parliament-expected-to-pass-erdogan-emergency-measures>
Shabtai, Gold, "Jihad in the classroom: New curriculum unnerves Turkish minority", *Dpa International*, (20/8/2017) <http://www.dpa-international.com/topic/jihad-classroom-new-curriculum-unnerves-turkish-minority-170820-99-709756>

¹⁴⁸ Rudaw, "Kurds and Alevis fear crackdown if Yes camp wins Turkey's referendum, lawmaker", (9/3/2017) <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/08032017>

Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies, "The views of Alevis, Kurds, and secularists on the eve of Turkey's referendum", *Independent Turkey*, (13/4/2017) <http://independentturkey.org/alevis-kurds-secularists-turkeys-referendum/>

The presence of the Islamic State (IS) in Turkey represents an additional issue at hand for the Alevi community. Despite the fact that IS has been mainly targeting Jewish and Christian sites in Turkey, Alevi ones remain on its radar as well. Moreover, foiled attacks on Alevi cemevis have been reported and security meetings with the leaders of the Alevi communities were held. However, it appears that due to their lack of formal recognition as houses of worship, their security is not perceived as imperative as in the case of others. As a result, the Alevis would have to provide their security for themselves.¹⁴⁹

On a slightly brighter note, the Newroz celebrations were held during the month of March in Istanbul and were attended by Alevi faith followers from all over the world. Unity and peace were once more the keywords at play, often repeated ad nauseam by State officials, in an effort to instill a sense of brotherhood between the practitioners of the two faiths. Nevertheless, despite political promises and pledges, concrete results remain to be seen, as the Alevi community remains unrecognized, ill-protected and unable to exercise its religious rights.¹⁵⁰

The Christian communities

Christians are estimated to amount to approximately 150,000 people in Turkey. They are mostly composed of the following Christian denominations: Armenian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Chaldean Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Protestants.

The Syriac Orthodox Christian community grew in numbers as a result of the Syrian civil war and its influx of refugees to Turkey. The latter found shelter in churches, mainly in Istanbul, and total somewhere between 10,000 to 20,000 people. In South-Eastern Turkey, the remaining Syriac Orthodox community as well as their cultural heritage has been caught in the crossfire between the Turkish government forces, the rebel Kurdish forces and, to an extent, the Islamic State. In addition, following July 15th, 2016, the subsequent crackdown on “Gülenists”, and the current general negative view of Christianity as a whole in Turkey, Syriac Orthodox refugees no longer see Turkey as a passageway or even a remotely safe haven away from their misfortunes.

¹⁴⁹ Tremblay, Pinar. “Turkey's Alevi community fears more than just IS”. *Al-Monitor*. (2/6/2017) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/turkey-ankara-governor-urging-alevis-seek-protection.html#ixzz4isfxCVCe>

¹⁵⁰ Kar, Nilay. “People across Turkey mark Newroz celebrations”. *Anadolu Agency*. (21/3/2017) <http://aa.com.tr/en/life/people-across-turkey-mark-newroz-celebrations/776415>

Hurriyet Daily News. “Sunni-Alevi issues must be resolved: Turkish PM”. (21/3/2017) <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/sunni-alevi-issues-must-be-resolved-turkish-pm.aspx?pageID=517&nID=111064&NewsCatID=338>

Furthermore, State decisions have progressively rendered the presence of the Syriac Orthodox community and their cultural and religious heritage as secondary to that of the rest of the Turkish population and the requirements of the state of emergency in effect. In early January 2017, a Syriac Orthodox sculpture was removed from a public square in Diyarbakir, a historical city for the community. Since no explanation was provided from the government, one can only assume that the removal was directly linked to the Kurdish influence in the region. A few months later, Turkish authorities seized 50 properties of the Syriac Orthodox Church, including churches, monasteries, cemeteries and housing facilities. The explanation provided was that due to municipal reforms, their deed was no longer valid, and the properties would have to be transferred to the Turkish authorities, with the Diyanet as one of the recipients. Some of these historic properties are more than a thousand-year-old and constitute an integral part of the Syriac Orthodox cultural heritage. Through this transfer of ownership, their status would become one of public property and erase a millennia's worth of cultural and religious history. Despite reassurances – following appeals being filed and an international backlash – that the decision would be revoked it seems that the ownership of the properties is still in the process of being transferred as originally intended or is – at best – in legal limbo.¹⁵¹

At the same time, Turkey's small Protestant community – estimated at merely 7,000 people – is facing a wide variety of problems, mainly originating from its lack of official recognition from the state as a religious community. The Protestant community has to resort to using unofficial and makeshift houses of worship such as association buildings and offices, with no prospects in the near future of a process towards a resolution to the issue.

Moreover, the events of July 15th triggered a series of events which affect directly the everyday life of the Christian and other communities residing in Turkey to this day. The state of emergency declared, aimed at “purging” Turkish society and Turkish institutions from the “Gülenist influence”, effectively granting free reign to conspiracy theories against religious communities, such as the Protestant one. According to international media, Christian Protestants seem to have borne the brunt of this rhetoric by seeing their churches vandalized, their pastors deported, denied entry to the country, and jailed on account of potential security concerns. The case of American Pastor Andrew Brunson has been the most prolific in this aspect. The former

¹⁵¹ Assyrian International News Agency, “Turkey Removed Assyrian Sculpture From Public Square”, (17/1/2017) <http://www.aina.org/news/20170117074908.htm>

Yackley, Ayla Jean, “Turkey's oldest indigenous culture fears extinction”, *Al-Monitor*, (2/7/2017) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/turkey-syriac-christians-fear-land-dispute.html#ixzz4loSLKJ3>

Assyrian International News Agency, “Turkey Says it Cancelled Decision to Seize Assyrian Churches and Monasteries”, (8/7/2017) <http://www.aina.org/news/20170706122359.htm>

Baker, Barbara G., “Legal limbo of Turkey's Syriac Christian properties still unresolved”, *World Watch Monitor*, (18/7/2017) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/legal-limbo-turkeys-syriac-christian-properties-still-unresolved/>

is imprisoned since late 2016, with no trial in sight, on account of allegedly participating in the July events and has been the subject of a large number of articles, petitions, and letter from the US Senate itself. A common theory seems to be that the Pastor is being held as a pressure point for facilitating the extradition of Fethullah Gülen from the US to Turkey. Although this argument seems, for the moment, to withstand the test of time, it remains to be seen whether it will be a valid one in the near future.¹⁵²

Furthermore, Byzantine churches holding the status of state museums and cultural heritage sites have been slowly but steadily converted into mosques. Such are the cases of the St. John Stoudios in Istanbul and the Hagia Sophia in Nicea. However, the most prominent and alarming instance of this policy, is the one concerning the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, which operates as a museum since 1935. On May 29th 2016, the anniversary celebrations for the conquest of Constantinople took place, along with public prayers and demonstrations for the right to pray inside the Hagia Sophia Museum. Soon after, Koranic readings were broadcast from inside the Hagia Sophia building complex, while, during November 2016, Friday prayers were read, and a full-time Imam was appointed. Both initiatives were met by the immediate response from both the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the US State Department. Despite the prompt reaction of the International and Christian communities, as well as the UNESCO-protected status as a cultural monument of the Hagia Sophia, the events of the months that followed cemented the perception that this offence would not be limited to a one-time occurrence. Feeding fuel to the fire, and, concurrently, giving in to popular Muslim demands, prayers were held again during June 2017 in the presence of State officials.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Baker, Barbara G., "Turkish Prime Minister: we could accelerate US pastor's trial", *World Watch Monitor*, (16/3/2017)

<http://www.crpmc.gr/analysis/turkey/turkish-prime-minister-we-could-accelerate-us-pastor-s-trial>

Hurtas, Sibel, "How two clerics topped agenda of Erdogan-Trump", *Al-Monitor*, (19/5/2017) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/turkey-united-states-clerics-topped-agenda-trump-erdogan.html>

Stockholm Center for Freedom, "United Nations told Christians in Turkey on crackdown", (3/3/2017) <http://stockholmcf.org/united-nations-told-christians-in-turkey-under-crackdown/>

¹⁵³ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Annual Report 2017", (4/2017), pp. 186-190

http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017_USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf

Ekathimerini, "US State Department urges Turkey to respect historic significance of Hagia Sofia", (23/6/2017)

<http://www.ekathimerini.com/219516/article/ekathimerini/news/us-state-department-urges-turkey-to-respect-historic-significance-of-hagia-sofia>

Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry announcement on the Koran reading and holding of prayers in Hagia Sophia", (22/6/2017) <http://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/foreign-ministry-announcement-on-the-koran-reading-and-holding-of-prayers-in-hagia-sophia.html>

Farooq, Umar, "Voices grow louder in Turkey to convert Hagia Sophia from a museum back to mosque", *LA Times*, (24/6/2017) <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-turkey-hagia-sophia-20170615-story.html>

On a related note, The Greek Orthodox Theological School of Halki remains closed since 1971, with no tangible progress on the horizon, and with the Turkish government maintaining a policy that leads to an impasse.¹⁵⁴

The impact on religious communities

The events of July 2016 led to the establishment of a state of emergency within Turkey, which stands to this day. The extraordinary powers and the emergency measures that were put in place provided the State and its officials the means with which to ensure a crackdown on whoever they conclude was an accessory to the July 2016 events. The Gülen Movement was accused of engineering the events of July 15th, with its network allegedly reaching the inner Turkish society, and ranging from any and all opposed to the policies of the AKP.

Although the media and the military bore the publicized brunt of the state of emergency, the religious communities in Turkey were not left without their share of the assault. Despite coming together and immediately denouncing the attempt and its engineers, the leaders of the religious communities were soon embroiled as the orchestrators of conspiracies and traitors to the Turkish domestic harmony, aiming to topple the current government. These unfounded theories were spread through the media frenzy that followed the societal and political chaos in Turkey, and even though debunked, grabbed a hold on the people's mindset, ensuring a strained and unpleasant coexistence in the coming years. What is more, via the state of emergency and the paranoia that was setting in for the long haul in Turkey, a large number of media outlets were shut down or taken over by AKP affiliates. As a result, the large majority of the media in the country is now essentially running by state mandate, while websites further fueling the fire are multiplying and populating social media. One only needs to read the subject matter of Turkish serialized television shows during the past decade to see that attention-grabbing controversies are the order of the day. Kurdish and military conspiracy shows have given way for shows focusing on past Christian enemies, further exacerbating the trend of Muslim nationalism in Turkey.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Kolasa Sikiriadi, Kerry, "Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Says It Is Time to Reopen the Theological School of Halki in Turkey", *Greek Reporter*, (17/1/2017) <http://eu.greekreporter.com/2017/01/17/the-ecumenical-patriarch-vartholomaios-says-it-is-time-to-reopen-the-theological-school-of-halki-in-turkey/>

¹⁵⁵ Stockholm Center for Freedom, "Hate Speech and Christians in Erdogan's Turkey", (08/2017), pp. 25-28

https://stockholmcf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Hate-Speech-Against-Christians-in-Erdog%CC%86an%E2%80%99s-Turkey_21.08.2017.pdf

Bulut, Uzey, "Turkey Uncensored: A War On Journalism", *The Philos Project*, (19/6/2017) <https://philosproject.org/turkey-uncensored-war-journalism/>

In the end, nothing unites more the majority than a common enemy, painted with simplistic broad strokes. Turkey has had its fair share of “shared enemies” during the years following its independence. This mantle has been worn by the Kurds, the foreigners, the Christians and the West, and, during the 2000s, by the military, the Israelis, and even the seculars. And although whoever wears the mantle becomes part of a never-ending vicious circle of mistrust, it seems that some retooling is necessary every once in a while. One “enemy” or traitor to the nation replaces another, repeatedly enabling each government in place to push forward its policies and to ensure its stay in the crux of Turkish politics.

Armstrong, William, “What a TV Series Tells Us About Erdogan’s Turkey”, *The New York Times*, (14/5/2017)
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/14/opinion/erdogan-tv-show-turkey.html?mcubz=0>
Gilbert, Lela, “Erdogan’s Turkey Increasingly Dangerous for Christians”, *The Hudson Institute*, (10/8/2017)
<https://www.hudson.org/research/13820-erdogan-s-turkey-increasingly-dangerous-for-christians>

Unfolding Islam in the Gulf

The Gulf countries have many things in common: they are all Muslim, with Islam as the official state religion; all except from Yemen are under monarchical rule; they have a significant amount of foreign population, belonging to different religions; they are all part of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The Arabian Peninsula is the birthplace of Islam, and as a result religion is an important tenet in the region. Nevertheless, Islam is far from monolithic in this area. The place of the religion in each country, and the state's attitude towards freedom of religion, apostasy, and the promotion of tolerant values, vary significantly. The rising tensions in the Muslim World between Sunnis and Shi'as have definitely affected intra-Muslim relations in these countries. Even if they are considered to be part of the Sunni alliance, it is important to remember that Shi'as are a significant minority in the area, while the majority of the population in Oman are Ibadi Muslims.

The official legal school of Islam in each country is important; however, it is not the sole factor in deciding governmental policies towards freedom of religion or religious tolerance. For example, while both Saudi Arabia and Qatar fall between the Hanbali Sunni and Wahhabi traditions, the reflection of Islam in each country's laws is very different: In Qatar, blasphemy against Abrahamic religions is considered a criminal offence, and Christians and other religious communities are allowed to worship freely within government-approved spaces; by contrast, in Saudi Arabia religious gatherings of any religion rather than Islam are not allowed, and the participants could be arrested or even deported. Similarly, while Kuwait, UAE and Bahrain all follow the Maliki legal school, in the case of Kuwait and UAE the Shi'as are much more integrated into the social fabric and the economic elite, and there are many more tensions between Sunnis and Shi'as in Bahrain. In most countries, Shi'as have, to various extents, religious freedom to perform their rituals. With the exception of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf countries are promoting tolerant values to their society, trying to facilitate the lives of non-Muslim expats by allowing them to have designated places of worship or registered associations. At the same time, all countries have taken some steps to counter extremist ideology.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's connection with Islam is particularly strong, as it is the birthplace of Islam and the host of two of three holy cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina. The majority of the population is Sunni, adhering mainly to the Hanbali School of thought, which rejects analogy, personal

interpretation or innovations of laws; some are following the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, although estimations vary from 20 to 40 percent. About 15 percent of the population are Shi'a; most of them, about 80 percent, are Twelvers, primarily located in the Eastern Province, in the oases of Qatif and Al-Ahsa; a small branch of Twelvers, Nakhwala or "Medina Shia" reside in small numbers in western Hejaz. In the provinces of Jizan and Najran there are approximately 20,000 Zaydi Shi'as, along the Yemeni border. Most of the remaining Shi'a are Suleimani Ismailis, estimated around 700,000 people, primarily residing in Najran province.¹⁵⁶ Like in other Gulf countries, there is a big number of expatriate workers, including Christians (Eastern Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants), Hindus, Buddhists and others.

Wahhabism is a very influential Islamic doctrine in Saudi Arabia, founded in the Nejd region by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the 18th century. It derives from the Sunni Hanbali School of jurisprudence and the teachings of the 14th century theologian Ibn Taymiyyah, and is considered a revivalist movement. Wahhabism aims to "purify" Islam by returning to its original teaching, as incorporated in the Quran and the Hadith, while rejecting of any element or concept introduced into Islam after the time of the Prophet. At the same time it decries practices such as visiting tombs or venerating saints, as they are considered to imply polytheism. In general Wahhabis view Shi'as and other non-Wahhabi Muslims as protestors and unbelievers. Many believe that Wahhabism is part of Sunni Islam, since Ibn Taymiyyah used to belong to the Hanbali school of thought; this idea is also promoted by the state of Saudi Arabia, who aspires to be the leader of the Sunni world. It is also fueled by the fact that they do not call themselves "Wahhabis", as it is considered a derogatory term to them. However, the differences between Sunnis and Wahhabis in practices and beliefs, more specifically, because of believing that the only accepted version of Islam is their own, decriing most Muslim practices, even turning against other Muslims at times, add up to a different interpretation of Islam than Sunni. It should be noted that Wahhabism is not represented by some formal institution, as it is a theological orientation and not a structured school of thought.¹⁵⁷

Religion in Saudi Arabia is deeply embedded into the political establishment. There is a deep connection between Wahhabism and the royal family, and by extension, the state. The views of al-Wahhab gradually gained ground in the Arabian Peninsula when in 1744 the Amir of Diriyya, Muhammad ibn Saud, took al-Wahhab under his protection and adhered to the Wahhabi doctrine. Therefore, the rise of the Saudi dynasty into power was interlinked with the rise of

¹⁵⁶ Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Saudi Arabia 2016 International, Religious Freedom Report", (15/8/2017), 3 <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269156.pdf>

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

Wahhabism, as they are safeguarding each other. Wahhabism gradually developed unofficially into state religion; the state is using Wahhabi rhetoric to hush any opposition by naming it un-Islamic, and in their turn Saudi religious scholars and muftis enjoy a privileged position in the state's political and social hierarchy, unparalleled to other Muslim countries.

Islam's importance in the country is evident by the fact that Saudi Arabia is established as a sovereign Arab Islamic state. The Basic Law of Governance states that the country's constitution is the Quran and the Sunna, and Sharia is the "foundation of the Kingdom". All citizens are required to be Muslims, and apostasy is illegal; blasphemy against Islam is a crime punishable by imprisonment and lashing, even by death, and criticism of Islam is also a crime. The government regularly imprisons individuals accused of apostasy, blasphemy or violation of Islamic values and morals. The Basic Law does not offer any legal recognition or protection of freedom of religion; non-Muslim foreign residents worship privately, however people participating in religious gatherings are under the risk of being arrested, detained or even deported. Fatwas, or the legal opinions or interpretations, are issued by the Council of Senior Scholars, which reports to the king. It is headed by the Grand Mufti and it is composed by Sunni religious scholars, directly chosen by the king; 18 of them are from the Hanbali School, and one from each of the other Sunni schools (Hanafi, Shafi'i and Maliki). It is noteworthy that Shi'a scholars are absent from this political structure despite the number of Shi'a worshipers.

In the recent decades the state has made efforts to cultivate Wahhabism as both a state religion and as an essential part of the Saudi national identity, and it has been applied to defend the state's resources and interests.¹⁵⁸ In addition, Wahhabism has become increasingly influential worldwide, as Saudi charities started founding and funding Wahhabi schools and mosques across the world, in an attempt to secure Saudi Arabia's position as leader of Sunni Islam; Within the state itself, this ideology marginalizes segments of the population that are not affiliated with Wahhabism, particularly the Shi'as of the kingdom. Sunni clerics occasionally use anti-Shi'a language in their sermons, using derogatory terms and stigmatizing their beliefs, condemned mixing and intermarriage between Sunnis and Shi'as, thus inciting sectarian tensions. In the ministry-produced religion textbooks, there is harsh criticism on Shi'a and Sufi practices, but also on other religions.¹⁵⁹ Attacks against Shi'a places of worship have been taken place, even if the government has condemned them.

¹⁵⁸ Joseph Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (1998), 34-53, 40 www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4283951.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A0292634afcb502ea202488a555d45f91

¹⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Religion Textbooks Promote Intolerance", (13/9/2017) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/13/saudi-arabia-religion-textbooks-promote-intolerance>

While Shi'as are a sizable minority in the kingdom, they are underrepresented in government institutions; For example, in the Majlis al-Shoura, the Consultative Council, there are five Shi'a members out of the 150, and in the Human Right Commission there are no Shi'as at all. What is more, the electoral system used for the municipal council elections is structured in such a way as to undercut localized bases of support and therefore making it unlikely for Shi'a candidates to succeed outside their areas. Yet in the Eastern Province Shi'as are able to go to Shi'a courts staffed with six Shi'a judges, who use the Ja'fari school of Islamic jurisprudence for cases in family law, inheritance and endowment management; however Shi'as who are located in remote parts of the Eastern province or the kingdom have no access to local, regional or national Shi'a courts.¹⁶⁰

There are also some restraints regarding the Shi'a places for worship. Contrary to the Sunni mosques, the process of acquiring a government-required license for a Shi'a mosque has been characterized as unclear, and some mosques have not been approved for construction or face lengthy delays. What is more, the government does not finance their construction or maintenance. In the city of Qatif, Shi'as enjoy greater freedom in religious practices, including a public commemoration of Ashura with minimal government interference, although in other cities with large Shi'a populations, authorities restricted their religious activities. In general, Shi'as are required to use the Sunni call to prayer instead of their own.

Nevertheless, the attitude of the state towards its Shi'a population is not influenced solely by the Wahhabi doctrine. Shi'as are considered a threat to national cohesion and state security, due to their religious affiliation with Iran, Saudi Arabia's arch enemy, but also due to their activist tendencies in the kingdom. Authorities regularly arrest Shi'a clerics and activists who advocated for equal treatment of Shi'a Muslims. The case of the execution of Sheikh Al Nimr in 2016, who was convicted on grounds of inciting terrorism and sedition, highlighted these issues. Many other Shi'as under arrest face the possibility of execution for their roles in the protest in Qatif in 2011 and 2012. What is more, in August 2017, the government demolished the historic Shi'a town Awamiya, on the pretext of fighting against terrorism, resulting in deadly clashes with the population. Many human rights organizations have accused Saudi Arabia to be motivated by sectarian hostility towards Shi'as, and have been monitoring the systematic discrimination against Shi'a citizens.

¹⁶⁰ Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Saudi Arabia 2016 International, Religious Freedom Report", op. cit., 3

On the other hand, Saudi authorities are working to promote tolerance and counter extremism. The government launched a new campaign in August 2017 to crack down on online religious hate speech,¹⁶¹ adding to their previous efforts to counter hate speech and extremism. Saudi authorities also continue to work in initiatives to promote tolerance, more prominently through the King Abdul Aziz Centre for National Dialogue (KACND), trying to promote mutual understanding between Shi'as and Sunnis, and on an international level through the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), along with Austria and Spain as well as the Holy See, as observing member.

The situation in Saudi Arabia is not likely to change drastically in the near future, even with the ambitious reform program, the Saudi Vision 2030. The relation of the state with its clerics is far too important for the kingdom to jeopardize, therefore they are more likely to keep the Shi'a political and religious rights limited. Nevertheless, the rise of Sunni Extremism in the country is also alarming for the state, and the government could work more actively to find a working solution with the Shi'a population, to keep sectarian tensions in check. The fact that Saudi Arabia is committed to some sort of reform for the kingdom, and is involved in local and international initiatives to counter extremism, is a very important step forward.

Qatar

Qatar's population is estimated at 2.3 million, with Qatari citizens being between 10 and 15 percent. Islam is the official religion of the state, and its citizens are Muslim; a percentage between 5 and 15 percent of these citizens follow Shi'a Islam. Qatari Shi'as have been assimilated into the society, being dispersed throughout the country, and occupying prominent roles in businesses and government.¹⁶² The non-citizen population includes Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists. Muslims are by far the larger religious group, however there are no reliable data towards the breakdown of non-citizen Muslims between Sunni, Shi'a or other groups.

Qatar is a very conservative society, and the Wahhabi doctrine is favored among the citizens, including the ruling al-Thani family. Sharia is the fundamental source of legislation, and the country is adhering to the Hanbali School of jurisprudence. Proselytizing in any religion other than Islam, as well as apostasy, is also illegal, punishable with up to 10 years in prison.

¹⁶¹ Vivian Nereim. "Saudi Arabia Takes Steps to Crack Down on Religious Hate Speech". *Bloomberg Politics*. (14/8/2017) <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-08-14/saudi-arabia-takes-steps-to-crack-down-on-religious-hate-speech>

¹⁶² Stratfor. "A Different Outlook for Reform Elsewhere in the Gulf". (27/1/017) <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/different-outlook-reform-elsewhere-gulf>

Nevertheless, the country has adopted a different, more tolerant approach to other religions than its neighboring Wahhabi country, in order to host its foreign population. According to the law, blasphemy against Abrahamic religions, (Islam, Christianity and Judaism), is a criminal offence. In addition, the government has allowed a designated space in Doha for registered Christian denominations to build churches, named “Religious Complex” but widely known as “Church City”, where Christian worship freely. The government has permitted unregistered religious groups, such as Hindus, Buddhists, and Baha’is, to worship privately in enclosed spaces.¹⁶³ The Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID), a government-funded organization, promotes tolerance by hosting discussions seminars and issuing publications on different issues that could affect religious coexistence.

As Qatar has been caught up in diplomatic and political tensions, it is difficult to predict what the future will hold for the country. It is likely that it will open up even more, promoting its tolerant values, in order to prove that it is an inclusive, tolerant and not radical society, to differentiate itself from some of its neighboring countries. On the other hand, if the economic situation deteriorates, there is also the possibility that it will turn against its Shi’a population, to prove to its Sunni allies that they are on the same page. Yet this seems unlikely now that Qatar fully restored its diplomatic relations with Iran.¹⁶⁴ In any case, the Qatar case proves that the political relations between the Gulf countries are not solely influenced by the religious affiliations, and that the same doctrines could be translated into different realities for the minorities in each country.

United Arab Emirates

In United Arab Emirates, approximately 11 percent of the population are Emirati citizens, and their religion is Islam. Although there are no official statistics, it is estimated that less than 20 percent of the population are Shi’a Muslims, mainly concentrated in the emirate of Dubai. Most of the citizens adhere to the Maliki legal tradition, including the ruling families Al Nahayan (Abu Dhabi) and Al Maktoum (Dubai). However, in the emirates of Sharjah, Umm al-Quwain, Ras al-Khaimah and Ajman, reside mainly Hanbali followers. Some Wahhabis live in the Al Buraymi

¹⁶³ Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Qatar 2016 International Religious Freedom Report", (15/8/2017), 6 <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269154.pdf>

¹⁶⁴ Declan Walsh, "Qatar Restores Full Relations with Iran. Deepening Gulf Feud", *New York Times*, (24/8/2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/world/middleeast/qatar-iran-boycott-saudi-arabia.html>

Oasis, and some Shafi'i followers live along the Al Batinah coast.¹⁶⁵ Of the total population, 76 percent are Muslims, 9 percent Christians, and the rest are Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'is, Druze, Sikhs and Jews, as well as other Muslim groups such as Ismailis, who are not counted as Muslims by the state.¹⁶⁶

The UAE laws derive mainly from the Maliki Sunni School, a legal tradition dominant among Sunnis in the UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain, which underlines the importance of the consensus of legal scholars and the analogy to the times of the Prophet. The law also does not directly prohibit apostasy, but refers to Sharia on matters defined as crimes in Islamic doctrine. Proselytization in any other religion apart from Islam is not allowed either. In addition, in order to prevent radicalization, the government closely monitors the issuance of all fatwas at both the national and emirate levels.

The degree of religious freedom varies from emirate to emirate, however in general people of non-Islamic faiths were allowed to worship and practice without government interference within designated places. Christian churches and Hindu and Sikh temples are operating on land donated by the ruling families, although their capacity is insufficient for the number of worshipers. Worshiping in public spaces is not allowed, and temples and churches cannot display religious symbols outside their premises. Shi'as are assimilated into the social fabric and occupy prominent economic and political positions. What is more, in contrast to other Gulf countries, Shi'as are allowed to have their own call for prayer from their minarets.¹⁶⁷ At the same time, the government closely monitors its Shi'a population, and regularly deports Shi'a immigrants, on the grounds of being affiliated with Hezbollah or Iran.

It seems that the government is eager to instill the values of a tolerant community, in order to make a pleasant environment for its resident population and at the same time to turn their citizens away from fanaticism and extremism. For this, the government established a new federal Ministry of Tolerance last year, and has organized various events to promote religious tolerance, such as hosting the World Interfaith Harmony Week on February, a UN resolution, in Dubai in 2016.¹⁶⁸ The UAE is working actively in this direction, so as to promote an image of an open and tolerant society. In addition, many cases of promoting religious tolerance and

¹⁶⁵ Helem Chapin Metz, ed. *Persian Gulf States: A Country Study*, Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993
<http://countrystudies.us/persian-gulf-states/82.htm>

¹⁶⁶ Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "United Arab Emirates 2016 International Religious Freedom Report", (15/8/2017), 2 <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269162.pdf>

¹⁶⁷ Ibid

¹⁶⁸ Madin Academy, "World Interfaith Harmony Week Concludes at Dubai," (20/2/2016) <https://www.madin.edu.in/world-interfaith-harmony-week-concludes-at-dubai/>

coexistence have been documented, such as the renaming of a mosque in Abu Dhabi into “Mary, Mother of Jesus” this summer,¹⁶⁹ or the hosting of an Iftar dinner in a Coptic church.¹⁷⁰

It seems that the United Arab Emirates are setting an example for the Gulf region on religious tolerance, and are actively working towards creating a religious pluralistic society by countering extremism. Yet the real challenge is to accommodate the needs of all the expats, coming from different religious and cultural backgrounds, without triggering reactions from the more conservative parts of the population.

Kuwait

Kuwait is another example of a tolerant society in the Gulf. Kuwaiti citizens make up around 30 percent of the country’s 4 million population. The national census does not distinguish between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims; however it is estimated that approximately 70 percent, including the ruling family, are Sunnis, and the Shi’as account for a strong minority of 30 percent. A few hundred citizens are Christians and some are Baha’is. Amongst non-citizens, most are Sunni Muslims, although the exact number is unknown; there are about 28 percent Christians, about 5 percent Shi’a Muslims, as well as smaller numbers of Hindus, Buddhists Sikhs and Baha’is.¹⁷¹

Kuwait’s official religion is Islam, and its legal system follows the Maliki School of Islamic jurisprudence, such as Bahrain and the UAE. The state guaranteed the freedom to practice all religions as long as they do not conflict with public policy or morals. In addition, the law prohibits the defamation of Abrahamic religion, and prescribes a punishment of up to 10 years in prison. What is more, the law does not criminalize apostasy, but states that the apostate will lose certain rights, such as inheritance from Muslim relatives; however the government does not issue new official documents for recording a change in religion.

Shi’a Muslims are considered well integrated into public life, and a key component of the country’s merchant class, enjoying far better economic opportunities relative to the other Shi’as

¹⁶⁹ Khaleej Times, "UAE mosque renamed 'Mary, Jesus mother'", (15/6/2017) <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/UAE-mosque-renamed-Mary-Jesus-mother->

¹⁷⁰ WAM, "Coptic Church in Abu Dhabi hosts iftar banquet, hails tolerance in UAE", (6/6/2017) <http://wam.ae/en/details/1395302617892>

¹⁷¹ Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Kuwait 2016 International Religious Freedom Report", (15/8/2017), 2 <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269144.pdf>

in the region.¹⁷² They also have a voice in the parliament, and secure their political position by enjoying the support of the ruling family and the government in order to balance the power of the Sunni merchant class. However, in the recent elections in November 2016, the Shi'as saw their seats reduced from nine to six, while the anti-government bloc, made up from tribal Sunni, Islamist and Salafist groups won 24 of the 50 parliament seats.

Nonetheless, there are claims that Shi'as are facing some restrictions. It is hard for them to obtain leadership positions in the state apparatus, and they are also prevented from obtaining religious training, as the College of Islamic Law at Kuwait University, the only institution to train Imams, does not permit Shi'a professors on its faculty.¹⁷³ In addition, the government did not permit any outdoor religious observances for security reasons, following the bombing of a Shi'a mosque in 2015, and all Ashura activities for the Shia community were required to be conducted in closed spaces, and at the same time offers security forces outside all religious venues during times of worship throughout the year to deter further attacks. Several Shi'a citizens have been convicted of being "Iranian Spies" in the last months, and some of them have fled to Iran.¹⁷⁴

It is evident in Kuwait as well that sectarian tensions are rising, due to the general climax of the Sunni – Shi'a tensions in the Gulf. The rise of a more conservative Sunni element in power is also worrisome. However, the relation between Shi'as and Sunnis in Kuwait is not likely to change drastically in the near future, as the government seems to keep sectarian divisions in check.

Bahrain

Bahrain, the small island in the Gulf, has an estimated population of 1.4 million, with Bahraini citizens amounting to 585,000 people. 70 percent are Muslims, but there are also Christians (14.5 percent), Hindus (9.8 percent), Buddhists, Jews and Baha'is.¹⁷⁵ The government does not publish the breakdown of the population between Muslims; however it is estimated that the majority of the citizens are Shi'a Twelvers, from 55 to 70 percent, and the rest are Sunnis, mainly following the Maliki school. The ruling family is also Sunni.

¹⁷² Stratfor, "Kuwait's Advantages May Be a Double-Edged Sword," (26/1/2017) <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/kuwait-advantages-may-be-double-edged-sword>

¹⁷³ Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Kuwait 2016 International Religious Freedom Report", op.cit., 7

¹⁷⁴ Arab News, "14 Kuwaiti Shiite fugitives flee to Iran: report", (17/7/2017) <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1130856/middle-east>

¹⁷⁵ Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Bahrain 2016 International, Religious Freedom Report", (15/8/2017), 2 <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269130.pdf>

The official religion of the state is Islam. Nevertheless, freedom of religion is secured by the country's constitution, as well as the freedom to perform religious rites, hold religious parades and gatherings, as long as they are in accordance with the local customs. In addition, the law prohibits discrimination based on religion or creed. The government requires all religious groups to be registered in the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs so as to operate.

In general, there is a dual system to serve both the Shi'as and the Sunnis in the country. Both Shi'a and Sunni groups have their own endowments (waqf), to supervise and fund mosques and issue licenses to the clerics. In addition, contrary to other countries in the Gulf, Shi'as are allowed to hold public processions for Ashura and Arbaeen, and Ashura is considered a public holiday. There are courts for both Shi'as and Sunnis, and mixed families can choose which court to appeal. However, the law is codified according to the Sunni interpretation, only applicable to Sunnis, and Shi'a judges rely on their own interpretations of the Islamic tradition, as there is no codified Shi'a law.

However, there are issues that imply a disadvantage position for the country's majority population. For example, there is only one public school offering religious instruction in Shi'a Islam, while all other public schools are based on the Maliki School for both Sunnis and Shi'as. In the Shura Council, there are only 15 Shi'a members compared to the 23 Sunni members, and they only hold 5 of the 23 cabinet positions. The armed forces and the police are also overwhelmingly Sunni, with Shi'as largely being excluded. In general, Bahraini Shi'as belong to a lower socio-economic class than the Sunnis, and they face disproportionate unemployment, from both the private and government sector. What is more, the government has been accused of tampering with the naturalization process in favor of Sunni applicants, in order to change the demographic balance to their advantage.¹⁷⁶ In general, human rights organizations and activists are accusing the government of systematic discrimination against Shi'a citizens at all levels.

Ever since 2011, there have been many clashes between the regime and protestors calling for reforms, which can also be described within sectarian lines, as the majority of the protestors were Shi'as, even if their protests were driven by political motives. Numerous attacks against security personnel is often accompanied by Shi'a religious terminology to justify the attacks on the authorities.¹⁷⁷ In response, the state has dissolved the main Shi'a opposition party,

¹⁷⁶ Alex MacDonald, "Bahrainis allege a plot to change country's sectarian balance", *Middle East Eye*, (16/9/2014) www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/bahrainis-allege-government-scheme-change-countrys-sectarian-balance-1789604145

¹⁷⁷ Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Bahrain 2016 International, Religious Freedom Report", op.cit., 7

al-Wefaq, claiming that it fosters violence in the kingdom.¹⁷⁸ In general, individuals imprisoned for riot-related crimes are overwhelmingly Shi'a, and the government has also detained and arrested Shi'a clerics, community leaders and opposition politicians, including the leading Shi'a cleric Sheikh Issa Qassim, who had his citizenship revoked on the ground of forming an organization supported by foreign religious leaders. In addition, Diraz, the home village of the Sheikh, is inaccessible to non-residents, and the town has been in turmoil and continuous monitoring for over a year. Government officials, including from the Ministry of Interior, have presented these protestors as "tempted" by Iran. What is more, Shi'a prisoners are vulnerable to mistreatment by prison guards because of their religion, and there have been reports from the Jaw prison that Shi'as are now allowed to practice their faith freely. However, it is difficult to determine the lines between political and sectarian in these cases. Yet it is a fact that this situation is affecting the intra-Muslim relation within the country.

Nevertheless, Bahrain has taken steps towards religious tolerance and countering sectarian tensions. More recently, Prince Nasser bin Hamad al Khalifa proclaimed the "Bahrain Declaration", calling for worldwide religious tolerance. This could be an important step towards national reconciliation in Bahrain. Nevertheless, the tension between Shi'as and Sunnis is ongoing for years, and it is also affected by the wider Shi'a-Sunni divisive politics.

Oman

Oman has a population of 3.6 million people, the second largest in the region. The percentage of Omani citizens is estimated between 30 and 55 percent of the population.¹⁷⁹ The majority of its citizens are Ibadi Muslims, somewhere between 45 percent and 75 percent according to government sources. Approximately 25 percent are Sunni Muslims, living mainly in Sur and Dhofar, and they form the largest non-Ibadi minority. Shi'as are a minority of 5 percent, primarily living in the northern coastal area and the capital. There are also small percentages of Hindus and Christians, naturalized citizens from South Asia. Non-citizens are mainly Muslim, but there are also Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Baha'is and Christians (Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and Protestants).

¹⁷⁸ Al Jazeera, "Bahrain dissolves main Shia opposition Al-Wefaq party", (17/7/2016) www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/bahrain-dissolves-main-opposition-party-160717132556468.html

¹⁷⁹Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, "Oman 2016 International, Religious Freedom Report", (15/8/2017), 2 <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269152.pdf>

Ibadi Islam, the country's official and dominant branch of Islam, which mainly exists in Oman, is distinct from both Sunni and Shi'a Islam. The name of this branch comes from the 8th century Islamic jurist Abed-Allah bin Ibadh, and it was developed out of the seventh-century Islamic sect known as the Khawarij or the Kharijite, Islam's first subgroup, but has denounced its violent and aggressive character. Ibadis are conservative yet tolerant; they usually pray in mosques along with other Muslims, even though they believe that true Muslims are only to be found within their own sect. They also differentiate between non-Ibadi Muslims or other monotheists and unbelievers or idolaters, though their dissociation from these groups does not imply enmity.¹⁸⁰ Violence against other religious groups is not permitted. However, it should be noted that they are considered heretics from most other Muslims.

One of the most important tenets of Ibadī ideology and legal literature is the establishment of a righteous Imamate; The Leader of this society should be chosen by the elders of the community, based on his knowledge and piety, without any regard on race or lineage. The elders are also obliged to depose him if he acts unjustly. In the Ibadī worldview, people are allowed to take violent actions only against an unjust leader. For Omani Ibadis, the last true "Imam" was Ahmad ibn Sa'īd (ruled 1754-1783 CE), founder of the Bu Sa'īdi dynasty; however his descendants declined the title of Imam and used the term "Sultan" instead, thus abdicating all powers of a purely religious leader.

Islam is an important component of Oman, and the government encourages the dissemination of Ibadī literature and scholarship, while having under its control all Islamic institutions. The basic law claims Islam to be the official religion of the state, and the sultan must be Muslim. On the other hand, apostasy from Islam is not criminal, and there is no law provision against conversion or renunciation of religious belief; the only thing stated by the law is that a Muslim father loses his paternal rights should he be converted from Islam. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by law; individuals have the right to practice other religions as long as they do not disturb public order. What is more, the law prohibits discrimination against any religion; inciting sectarian strife or defaming any religion is considered a criminal offence, punishable with a maximum of 10 years' imprisonment.

Intra-Muslim coexistence in Oman is considered peaceful. Shi'as are considered successfully integrated community; there are many high-ranking Shi'a figures in the government, while they also hold prominent roles in the country's economy.¹⁸¹ Compared to the other states

¹⁸⁰ Valerie J. Hoffman, "Ibadi Islam: An Introduction," *Islam and Islamic Studies Resources* islam.uga.edu/ibadis.html

¹⁸¹ Ibid

in the region, Omani Shi'as do not seem to be affected by transnational Shi'a movements, and their royalty to their nation is not under question. As for the Sunnis, they don't seem prone to radicalization, and not a single Omani has joined the ranks of ISIS.¹⁸²

It is noteworthy that the government is actively promoting interfaith dialogue, by bringing together scholars of different faiths. It also run a campaign entitled "Islam in Oman", which promoted the peaceful, inclusive and tolerant Islamic practices. Therefore, we can see that it is not just the nature of the country's religion dominant religion, Ibadism, but it is also the state who has cultivated an anti-sectarian and tolerant environment.

However, there is a big deal of confusion over what the future of Oman will be. Oman's stability and unique position in world affairs, maintaining good relations with its diverse neighbors, both Shi'as and Sunnis, as well as the West, has been secured by its current Sultan, Qaboos bin Said. He has been in power since 1970, when he deposed his father and set Oman on track for modernization without triggering Islamic reactionism. Yet the Sultan was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2014, and, as he has no heir, the question of his succession is important for Oman's future.¹⁸³ In any case, experts fear that there is a great risk of instability in the transition of power after the sultan dies; and this is likely to create a power vacuum that extremists could exploit, particularly since many Muslims consider Ibadis to be heretics.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Giorgio Cafiero, "What the Arab World Can Learn from Oman", *The Huffington Post* www.huffingtonpost.com/giorgio-cafiero/what-the-arab-world-can-learn-from-oman_b_8074584.html

¹⁸³ Simon Henderson, "The Omani Succession Envelope, Please", *Foreign Policy*, (3/4/2017) <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/03/the-omani-succession-envelope-please/>

¹⁸⁴ Mirren Gidda, "How Much Longer can Oman be an Oasis of Peace in the Middle East?", *Newsweek*, (28/1/2017) www.newsweek.com/2017/02/10/oman-sultan-qaboos-terrorism-isis-al-qaeda-548682.html

The Role of Foreign Actors and the Religious Mosaic of the Middle East

Since the Islamic State, the religious minorities in the region have been witnessing unprecedented persecution and violence. This reality led for the first time in the history of the United Nations of Human Rights to the adoption of a joint statement in Geneva on March 2015 for “Supporting the Human Rights of Christians and other Communities”, particularly in the Middle East conference,¹⁸⁵ and especially for the plight of Christians and other religious communities in the region. As the Christians and religious communities in the Middle East are on the verge of extinction, it is important to review the stance and efforts of the important foreign actors vis-à-vis these minorities either directly by providing humanitarian aid, promoting inter-faith dialogues and supporting these communities in the region, or indirectly by countering violent extremism or even preventing violent extremism. In turn, this brings *religion* as a “platform” of foreign and international policy.

The importance of religion is evident in the discourse of the main foreign actors in their foreign and international policy in the region. Among the most active foreign actors are the US, Russia, the Holy See, the United Kingdom and France, who, on the one hand, have had a bond, in one way or another, with the minorities in the region, and on the other hand, have been vigorously advocating for the protection of Christians and other minorities in the region, amidst geopolitical chaos. Despite the fact that the US has had a more reserved role in the protection of the minorities in the past years, there seems to be a growing interest in the foreign policy of the US regarding the Christians.

¹⁸⁵ For the joint statement see the Holy See’s Press Office official website, “Joint Statement on “Supporting the Human Rights of Christians and Other Communities, particularly in the Middle East” at the 28th Session of the Human Rights Council (Geneva, 13 March 2015)”, (13/3/2015) <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2015/03/13/0186/00415.html>

The US and the Evangelicals

The US has had a leading role in condemning the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East. As early as August 2014, the then Secretary of State John Kerry had pinpointed that the actions of the Islamist militants in Iraq were demonstrating “all the warning signs of genocide”.¹⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the condemnation of the violence against religious and ethnic minorities was not crystalized until March 14, 2016, when the “Congress passed, by a historic, unanimous 393–0 vote, House Continuing Resolution 75, recognizing the ongoing genocide of Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities”¹⁸⁷ under ISIS-controlled areas in Iraq and Syria. A week later, John Kerry made a similar declaration on behalf of the US government, stating that ISIS “is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control, including Yazidis, Christians and Shia Muslims, [...] [and] is genocidal by self-proclamation, by ideology and by actions — in what it says, what it believes and what it does”.¹⁸⁸ Within this context, the US has assisted the Iraqi government and had a prominent role in the Mosul operation, a significant military campaign against ISIS, which started in October 2016. Yet, the recapture of Mosul will not mark the end of the threat posed by extremism, be it ISIS or other terrorist organizations, be it in Syria or Iraq, nor will it end the oppression of Christians and other religious minorities across the region.

Today, the Trump administration has simultaneously raised hopes, but also concerns among those who advocate for the protection of the religious minorities in the region. On the one hand, figures like Daniel Mark, chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), has voiced doubts whether the US will be taking concrete steps on the matter. As he puts it, ‘there is now backtracking from Obama holdovers in the State Department’.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Evans, Kristen, "Genocide: The Weight Of A Word", *National Review*, (19/3/2016)

<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/432993/isis-genocide-christians-recognized-john-kerry-congress>.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid; Keyrouz, Ninar, "Genocide Coalition Recommended Actions For The Trump Administration And Congress On The Anniversary Of The U.S. Government'S Recognition Of The ISIS Genocide", *In Defense of Christians*, (16/3/2017) <https://indefenseofchristians.org/genocide-coalition-recommended-actions-trump-administration-congress-anniversary-u-s-governments-recognition-isis-genocide/>

¹⁸⁹ USCIRF is implementing its primary responsibilities, as set forth in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, separate from the State Department, that monitors religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress ; Bumpas, Bill, "Middle East Carnage Gives State Dept. Amnesia", *Onenewsnow.Com*, (20/7/2017) <https://www.onenewsnow.com/persecution/2017/07/20/middle-east-carnage-gives-state-dept-amnesia> ; Erasmus, "America's point-man on religious liberty is contentious", *The Economist*, (30/7/2017) <https://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2017/07/freedom-s-many-meanings>

On the other hand, the Evangelicals, of whom, according to election exit polls, more than 80 per cent voted for Trump,¹⁹⁰ are very supportive of Brownback, the new Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom nominated by the White House. On various occasions, they have stated that they strongly believe that the new administration will take more concrete steps towards the protection of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East.¹⁹¹ Franklin Graham, President of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, an influential Evangelist, who is close to the Trump administration, organized the World Summit of Christian Leaders in Defense of Persecuted Christians in Washington, USA, on 10 May 2017. Representatives of various Christian confessions from over 135 countries came together to “provide a platform for a thorough discussion of this problem with the view of changing the situation for the better”.¹⁹² It is worth noting that, according to Religion News Service, Franklin Graham is also a controversial figure who ‘has been criticized by some Evangelicals for calling Islam “evil” and for portraying President Trump as aligned with the Christian church’.¹⁹³ Reciprocally, the role of Evangelicals in the US policy on religious minorities in the Middle East is undisputedly significant. US Christian organizations, such as, Samaritan’s Purse, whose president is Graham, In Defense of Christians (IDC) and The Knights of Columbus and, to name a few, have been advocating for the rights of religious communities in the region.

One of the main advocacies of the Evangelicals is the reallocation of US administration financial assistance and its limitation to Christians and other victims of extremism in the region, in contrast to previous practices of the Obama administration, which resisted attempts to limit US aid to religious communities in the region.¹⁹⁴ In fact, according to Knox Thames – the US Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia, “since 2008 the United States has also provided more than \$100 million in assistance for religious and ethnic minority communities in Iraq – including Christians, Shi’a, and Yazidi;”¹⁹⁵ to promote the respect for human rights vis-à-vis members of minority groups, interfaith tolerance, community

¹⁹⁰ Lawton, Kim, “US Commission Urges Trump Administration To Prioritise International Religious Freedom - World Watch Monitor”, *World Watch Monitor*, (18/5/2017) <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/us-commission-urges-trump-administration-to-prioritize-international-religious-freedom/>

¹⁹¹ Smith, Peter Jesserer, “The US Declaration of Genocide: One Year Later”, *National Catholic Register*, (17/3/2017) <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/the-us-declaration-of-genocide-one-year-later>

¹⁹² “World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians begins its work in Washington”, *The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations*, (11/5/2017) <https://mospat.ru/en/2017/05/11/news145772/>

¹⁹³ Markoe, Lauren, “Franklin Graham Calls Persecution Of Christians ‘Genocide’”, *Religion News Service*, (10/5/2017) <http://religionnews.com/2017/05/10/franklin-graham-calls-persecution-of-christians-genocide/>

¹⁹⁴ Crabtree, Susan, “Lawmakers Press Trump Administration To Accelerate Aid To Religious Minorities In Iraq - Washington Free Beacon”, *Washington Free Beacon*, (13/8/2017) <http://freebeacon.com/issues/lawmakers-press-trump-administration-to-accelerate-aid-to-religious-minorities-in-iraq/>

¹⁹⁵ “Statement By Knox Thames, Special Advisor For Religious Minorities In The Near East And South/Central”, *U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Spain and Andorra*, (24/5/2017) <https://es.usembassy.gov/news-events/statement-knox-thames-special-advvisor-religious-minorities-near-east-southcentral-asia/>

stabilization, conflict mitigation, and cultural preservation. Yet, many have criticized this distribution of US aid. For instance, Nina Shea, Director of the Center for Religious Freedom, Hudson Institute, stated in 2016 that “UN America has sent over half of \$5.6 billion in humanitarian aid earmarked for Syrians to the UN, which has been materialized in the programs such as refugee housing in the region and Syrian refugee-resettlement abroad”; instead, she urged for a more direct aid to the Christians and other minorities.¹⁹⁶

Under this prism, the House was introduced to *The Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act* (H.R. 390), which was approved in June 2017. This Act authorizes the ‘Department of Defense and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to provide support to organizations, groups and entities, including faith-based ones, that are assisting religious minority groups who were forced to flee from their homes because of the rise of the Islamic State three years ago’.¹⁹⁷ This is innovative because the Obama administration amended the *Rule for Participation by Religious Organizations*, which applicants were forbidden “to use financial assistance from USAID (or any other Federal agency) to support explicitly religious activities”.¹⁹⁸ Thus, if the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act passes the Senate and is signed into law by President Trump, it would allow and direct the administration to fund entities, including faith-based ones. By allowing these organizations to have a direct access to the US government funds, the Evangelical’s role and influence would be further crystalized, beyond advocacy.

Indicative of how US policy can have either negative or positive implications on coexistence between the different religious communities in the region, is the Refugee and Migrant Ban in early 2017. The reaction of Christian leaders in the region and beyond to the Ban, whose logic was to prevent extremists from entering the US¹⁹⁹ and as President Trump²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Shea, Nina, "The U.S. And U.N. Have Abandoned Christian Refugees", *Hudson Institute*, (7/10/2016) <https://www.hudson.org/research/12903-the-u-s-and-u-n-have-abandoned-christian-refugees>.

¹⁹⁷ Smith, Samuel, "Smith, Samuel. 2017. "House Passes Bill That Would Fund Christian Relief Efforts For ISIS Genocide Victims", *The Christian Post*, (7/6/2017) <http://www.christianpost.com/news/house-passes-bill-that-would-fund-christian-relief-efforts-for-isis-genocide-victims-186872/> also see "H.R.390 - Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act of 2017", *Congress.gov*, <https://www.congress.gov/bills/115th-congress/house-bill/390>; the Bill https://chrissmith.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hr_390.pdf

¹⁹⁸ "US Denies Removing 'Genocide' Designation For Iraq's Yezidis, Christians", *Rudaw*, (28/7/2017) <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/28072017>

¹⁹⁹ It is noteworthy to mention that Graham had already proposed such a ban since 2015 and consequently, he was supportive of the Travel Ban. As he put it: “[the US] should stop all immigration of Muslims to the U.S. until this threat with Islam has been settled. Every Muslim that comes into this country has the potential to be radicalized—and they do their killing to honor their religion and Muhammad”. For more see: Kuruvilla, Carol, "Here's How Franklin Graham Justifies Trump's Expected Refugee Ban", *The Huffington Post*, (25/1/2017) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/frankling-graham-refugees_us_5889049ce4b061cf898c6c42 ; Green, Emma. 2017. "Christian Leaders Are Appalled By Trump's Order On Refugees, But Maybe Regular Christians Aren't", *The Atlantic*, (27/1/2017) <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/christians-refugees-trump/514820/>

clarified it would give a priority status to Christian refugees, highlights the precariousness of aiding and supporting one group over the other.

Namely, the Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo, Antoine Audo, said that any policy appearing to prefer Christians over Muslims “feeds fanaticism and extremism”.²⁰¹ Also Louis Raphael Sako, Archbishop of the Chaldean Church in Iraq and the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, leader of Catholics in England and Wales, described such actions as harmful to the Christians in the Middle East, as these notions feed the extremist ideologies that view Christians in the Middle East as foreign bodies, and as groups protected and supported by Western powers, countering efforts of cooperation, coexistence, dialogue, shared lives, solidarity, empathy, and a coming together rather than an isolationist view of a Christian Church that sees Muslims as the *other*.²⁰² Interestingly, the Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil in Iraq, took a slightly different stance by underlining that the prioritization status should be offered to all minority communities, “not just to the Christians”, *but, also*, “called on the American media to stop referring to the order as a Muslim ban, saying that such rhetoric poses a threat to Christians on the ground”.²⁰³ These reactions show the delicate balance of the fabric of the society in the Middle East among those who have endured violence and are victims of extremism, either between the Christian and Muslims or between the religious minorities, be it Yazidi, Christians, Kakai, Bahai and so forth.

²⁰⁰ Brody, David, "Brody File Exclusive: President Trump Says Persecuted Christians Will Be Given Priority As Refugees", *CBN News*, (27/1/2017) <http://www1.cbn.com/thebrodyfile/archive/2017/01/27/brody-file-exclusive-president-trump-says-persecuted-christians-will-be-given-priority-as-refugees>

²⁰¹ Allen Jr., John L., "How Middle East Christians Think About Trump's Refugee Order", (2/2/2017) <https://cruxnow.com/analysis/2017/02/02/middle-east-christians-think-trumps-refugee-order/>

²⁰² Many religious leaders had also reacted on the Ban, underlining the importance of maintaining a pluralistic rhetoric that fostered religious coexistence, more than 5,000 religious leaders sign letter supporting refugee resettlement. For more on the letter see: "More than 5,000 Religious Leaders Sign Letter Supporting Refugee Resettlement", *Interfaith Immigration Coalition* <http://www.interfaithimmigration.org/5000religiousleaderletter/> For more on various quotes regarding the Ban, see: Shebaya, Halim, "Is Trump a saviour for Middle Eastern Christians?", *Al-Jazeera*, (11/2/2017) <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/02/trump-saviour-middle-eastern-christians-170211101826245.html>; James, Aaron, "Archbishop: Trump Travel Ban Puts Middle East Christians More At Risk", *Premier Christian Radio*, (6/2/2017) <https://www.premierchristianradio.com/News/World/Archbishop-Trump-travel-ban-puts-Middle-East-Christians-more-at-risk>; Green, Emma. 2017. "Christian Leaders Are Appalled By Trump's Order On Refugees, But Maybe Regular Christians Aren't", *The Atlantic*, (27/1/2017) <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/christians-refugees-trump/514820/>

²⁰³ Allen Jr., John L., "How Middle East Christians Think About Trump's Refugee Order", (2/2/2017) <https://cruxnow.com/analysis/2017/02/02/middle-east-christians-think-trumps-refugee-order/>

Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church

Putin's foreign policy discourse vis-a-vis the Middle East has a strong emphasis on the prevention of the persecution of Christians in the Middle East. Russia has cultivated a religious political discourse, which is supported and reinforced by the discourse and role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia's policy. At the same time, Putin has been encouraging an active role of the Russian Orthodox Church in both domestic and foreign affairs of Moscow, a role that can be described as that of a spiritual institution aligned with important politics, resurging and reassuring a strong presence of the Church more than ever in the post-communist era.²⁰⁴ The Russian Orthodox Church has been active in pursuing both interfaith dialogue and advocacy,²⁰⁵ not only within the Russian political realm, but also within the international community.

The Russian Orthodox Church has strong links with Middle Eastern Churches, especially the ones that are not Rome-related communions and are often isolated by the West, via fellowships with ecumenical partners and institutional relations with regional Orthodox Churches. Due to the vigorous presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the region, it was able to mobilize fast and more efficiently aid for Christian and non-Christian communities in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon via humanitarian missions, such as the "Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society" (IOPS), an old and strong institution that blurs the lines between military and religious alignments in Russia's foreign policy in the region since the 19th century.²⁰⁶

The Russian policy in the region and the aspiration of the Russian Orthodox Church lay in an interesting mutual soft power alliance, very evident in the religious political discourse of Moscow. This concrete alliance expressed by the religious political discourse engages two main features: first is that the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East is a result of Western and US policy of regime change in the region under the banner of "Arab Spring". The second main feature, and more important, is the dissociation of Islam from extreme Islamists and jihadists. This discourse which is comprised of both strong, but, at the

²⁰⁴ In fact, this is demonstrated from Patriarch Kirill was granted residency in the Kremlin, a largely symbolic act that served to underline the power of the resurgent church. Putin also encouraged the church to build a relationship with the armed forces. For more see: Bennetts, Marc, "The Kremlin's Holy Warrior", *Foreign Policy*, (24/11/2015), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/24/the-kremlins-holy-warrior-chaplin-putin-russia-turkey-syria/>

²⁰⁵ "Russia Will Protect Christian Minorities In The Middle East", *The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations*, (9/2/2012) <https://mospat.ru/en/2012/02/09/news57990/>

²⁰⁶ Yakovenko, Alexander, "Save Christians in the Middle East!", *Russia Today*, (24/11/2017) <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/208823-middle-east-christians-russia/>; for more on IOPS see Eibner, John, "The Moscow Patriarchate and the Persecuted Church in the Middle East", *Christian Solidarity International*, (April 2017), pp. 18-19 <http://csi-schweiz.ch/app/uploads/sites/2/2017/05/Keston-Papers-Moscow-Patriarchate.pdf>

same time, prudent language was evident from the early onset of the crisis in the Middle East. In the meetings between Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church the issue of the Christian minorities in the Middle East has been central and it is viewed that it is directly related to the national identity of Russia with a strong Orthodox Christian element and by extension, its duty to Christianity. Consequently, this religious political discourse, has allowed Russia to view itself as a mediator between East and West.

For instance, the Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations pointed out, in 2012, that “[s]trong Russia is the country which protects Christian minorities in these countries and insists on providing guarantees for the rights of Christians being observed in exchange for political support or economic aid”.²⁰⁷ As early as 2011, on the onset of the so-called Arab Spring, the Russian Orthodox Church gave statements on the on-growing manifestations of christianophobia in the Middle East and urged for a war against radical Islam.²⁰⁸ More specifically, the Russian Orthodox Church’s, and by extension Moscow’s, views on the Christians in the Middle East were clearly highlighted in an interview²⁰⁹ of the Patriarch where he spoke of Christian genocide, mass exodus of Christians, referring to Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Libya.

In turn, the sense of Russia’s duty towards the Christians in the region is cultivated by the perception of many Orthodox Christians in the region view Russia as the protector, especially after the setback of the US to do so. Even though, it is difficult to conclude a consensus among all the Orthodox Christians in the region, many Christian clergies in the region have clearly stated a positive opinion of the role of Russia in the Middle East, and specifically in Syria. Indicative of such is that in 2014, approximately 50,000 Syrian Christians applied for Russian citizenship made in a letter which described Russia as a “powerful factor for global peace and stability”; while accusing the West for supporting terrorists whose aim is “to eliminate our presence in our homeland”.²¹⁰ This soon was pointed out by Archpriest Nikolaj Balashov, number two at the Patriarchate’s Department for External Church Relations, to demonstrate that Russia has strong links in the region, which, as he put it, “no other country would look after their

²⁰⁷ "Russia Will Protect Christian Minorities In The Middle East", *The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations*, (9/2/2012) <https://mospat.ru/en/2012/02/09/news57990/>

²⁰⁸ "Russian Orthodox Church Holy Synod’s Statement On Growing Manifestations Of Christianophobia In The World", *The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations*, (30/5/2011) <https://mospat.ru/en/2011/05/30/news42347/>

²⁰⁹ "Metropolitan Hilarion: Persecutions Against Christians Are Unprecedented", *The Russian Orthodox Church: Department for External Church Relations*, (29/4/2014) <https://mospat.ru/en/2014/04/29/news101927/>

²¹⁰ Pentin, Edward, "Russia's Interest in Protecting Christians in the Middle East", Terra Santa.net, (19/11/2013) http://www.terrasanta.net/tsx/articolo.jsp?wi_number=5553&wi_codseq=+++++&language=en

interests in the same way Russia would”.²¹¹ In 2015, the Melkite Greek Catholic Archbishop of Aleppo, Jean-Clement Jeanbart, openly supported Russia’s military intervention; while also the Syrian Catholic Church patriarch Ignatius Ephrem Joseph III Younan was supportive of Russia’s intervention in Syria and stating in 2016 that ‘Syrian Christians are grateful to Russia’.²¹²

Nevertheless, this is not to say that Russia, and by extension the Russian Orthodox Church, is not viewed with criticism by some Christian members of the clergy, who argue that in many instances there have been extreme statements from the Russian Orthodox Church insinuating a “Christian” Holy War against radical Islam. As the Beirut Metropolitan—an abbot of the Greek Orthodox Church—Elias Audi, put it as Russia announced its military intervention, “[t]hose who kill will not be blessed! The Russian Church publically condemned the US war in Iraq in 2003. Today, she uses ‘holy war’ to support Putin in Syria’.²¹³ Russia’s military intervention generated a petition on Facebook entitled "Petition against Religious Wars", mainly composed by Orthodox Christians in Lebanon - amongst them was Tarek Mitri, a respected scholar and former Lebanese culture minister -, which stated that "[w]e unreservedly condemn the idea that the "protection of Christians" can serve as an excuse in the service of ideological or political objectives, as some have tried to do in support of the Russian military intervention in Syria".²¹⁴ Indeed, the support of the Russian Orthodox Church of Russian military intervention has engendered compelling arguments regarding the effectiveness of the Church in regards to the protection of Christians in the region.

All the same, the protection of Christians in the Middle East is on the top priorities on Moscow’s agenda. Whether this religious political discourse comprises a genuine importance for Russia or simply a launching pad to increase the Kremlin’s influence in the region, the Russian Orthodox Church advocacy for Christians and other minorities in the region in the international community and its participation in interfaith dialogue, renders the Russian Orthodox Church a vital and influential actor in the efforts to protect religious minorities in the Middle East.

²¹¹ Ibid

²¹² "Moscow gives us hope', says Syrian Catholic patriarch". *Pravoslavie*, (28/1/2016) <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/90144.htm>

²¹³ Issaev, Leonid M, Yuriev, Serafim, "The Christian Dimension of Russia’s Middle East Policy". *Alsharq Forum*, (2/3/2017) <http://sharqforum.org/2017/03/02/the-christian-dimension-of-russias-middle-east-policy/>

²¹⁴ Erasmus, "Russia, Syria and holy war: Some Middle Eastern Christians are speaking up against “holy war” in Syria". *The Economist*, (21/10/2015) <https://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2015/10/russia-syria-and-holy-war>

The Holy See

The role of the Holy See in the Middle East is quite extraordinary since Pope Francis. The Holy See has been active both on a diplomatic and humanitarian level, especially since 2013 when it appeared that Assad might have used chemical weapons.²¹⁵ At the time, the Holy See opposed any military response to the atrocities happening in Syria as it would exacerbate the situation and possibly put at risk thousands of Christians' lives. Nevertheless, by 2015, the Holy See's top diplomat at the United Nations in Geneva has called for a coordinated international force to stop the "so-called Islamic State" in Syria and Iraq from further assaults on Christians and other minority groups,²¹⁶ a rather unusual change given its traditional stance of non-military intervention.

In May 2017, in an international Conference organized by the 'Centesimus Annus pro Pontifice' Foundation, the Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See accentuated the role of the Holy See in protecting the Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East rests on its advocacy within the international community.²¹⁷ The humanitarian aid in 2016, the Holy See and the Catholic Church, via various agencies such as Caritas and other charitable agencies, 'contributed to providing USD 200 million of humanitarian assistance of direct benefit to more than 4.6 million people in Syria and the region', to all religious and ethnic components to the region, as the Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, Secretary for the Holy See's Relations with States, entitled "The Holy See's Action to protect Christians and other religious minorities in different parts of the world".²¹⁸ Furthermore, the papal envoy to war-torn Syria, Cardinal Mario Zenari, launched the "Open hospitals" project,²¹⁹ which funded Catholic hospitals in Aleppo and Damascus, making them fully operative for the estimated 3 million people without healthcare.

On a diplomatic level, the Holy See has been vigorously active in advocacy and interfaith dialogue and in the participation at various international conferences that bring together Muslim, Christian and other religious leaders. Just to name few of the Holy See's participations: via the United Nations, the Holy See organized a high-level parallel event on the occasion of the 34th

²¹⁵ Gaetan, Victor, "The Vatican's Middle East Politics", *Foreign Affairs*, (9/12/2015)

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2015-12-09/vaticans-middle-east-politics>

²¹⁶ Allen Jr., John L., "How Middle East Christians Think About Trump's Refugee Order", (2/2/2017)

<https://cruxnow.com/church/2015/03/13/vatican-backs-military-force-to-stop-isis-genocide/>

²¹⁷ Vatican Radio, "AB Gallagher on Holy See's action to protect Christians and other minorities", (22/5/2017)

http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/05/22/ab_gallagher_on_protection_of_christians_and_minorities/1314068

²¹⁸ Ibid

²¹⁹ Gagliarducci, Andrea, "How Catholic hospitals can help heal Syria – literally", Catholic News Agency, (20/2/2017)
<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/how-catholic-hospitals-can-help-heal-syria-literally-56301/>

Session of the Council for Human Rights. The event, entitled “Mutual Respect and Peaceful Coexistence as a Condition of Interreligious Peace and Stability: Supporting Christians and other Communities” in Geneva, March 2017.²²⁰ A month later, in Brussels, it participated in the “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region” Conference took place with its twofold aim to reconfirm the humanitarian commitments that the international community made in London in 2016 and to look at the best ways to support a lasting political solution to the Syrian crisis. Madrid, 24 May 2017: Follow-up Conference to Paris Conference on the Victims of ethnic and religious violence in the Middle East: “Protecting and promoting pluralism and diversity”.

In fact, the Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, Secretary for the Holy See’s Relations with States, stated at the International Conference on "Religious And Cultural Pluralism And Peaceful Coexistence In The Middle East" in Athens, 18-20 October 2015,²²¹ that emphasis should be put on the need to bring Muslims and Christians together against extremism. Even before the International Conference, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the KAICIID International Dialogue Centre brought together high level Christian and Muslim religious leaders from the Middle East and endorsed the “Athens Declaration: United Against Violence in the Name of Religion – Supporting the Citizenship Rights of Christians, Muslims and Other Religious and Ethnic Groups in the Middle East”,²²² at which the Holy See’s Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue participated. This demonstrates that the main line of the Holy See is engaging with interfaith dialogue, both in its discourse and practice, as the sole way to secure religious pluralism without being exclusive of other communities whether dominant or not.

Aside from the active participation of the Holy See at international conferences on religious pluralism and dialogue, Pope Francis has been successful in establishing a dialogue with Islam. Given the dialogue with Sunni and specifically with Al-Azhar in Egypt, which was paused in 2011 after a rough exchange of statements between the former Grand Mufti and the former Pope, following the extremist attacks on Copts, Pope Francis seems to be taking initiatives to reignite relations. More specifically, right after the attacks in Egypt of Coptic Churches earlier in

²²⁰ The Holy See Mission to the United Nations in Geneva was organized by the Holy See Mission, together with the Missions of the Russian Federation, Lebanon and Armenia and was co-sponsored by many countries including Greece.

²²¹ International Conference on "Religious And Cultural Pluralism And Peaceful Coexistence In The Middle East", Athens, 18-20 October 2015, at the official site of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Greece, (20/10/2015) <http://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/statement-of-the-presidium-of-the-athens-international-conference-on-religious-and-cultural-pluralism-and-peaceful-coexistence-in-the-middle-east-18-20-october-2015.html>

²²² For more on the declaration see official site of KAIDIIC <http://religionsunite.org/athens-september-2015/>; also more on the Intervention By The Holy See at the International Conference on "Religious And Cultural Pluralism And Peaceful Coexistence In The Middle East", Athens, 18-20 October 2015, see the statement uploaded on the official site of the Vatican http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/2015/documents/rc-seg-st-20151019_gallagher-atene_en.html

2017, Pope Francis visited the churches and met with Al-Azhar leaders.²²³ At the same time, the Holy See is embracing the dialogue with the Shia, particularly with Iran. The Catholic-Shia dialogue, which has been fostered by both Catholics and Shias, is probably the most concrete one and it is based on theological foundations and the spiritual vicinity between Catholicism and Shiism.²²⁴ The Islamic Republic of Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani, historic visit to the Vatican, in the beginning of 2016,²²⁵ marked the turn of a new chapter in the Shia-Catholic relations. In that context, the Catholic – Shia dialogue has become more vigorous mainly via the participation of members from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Iranian Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation and the Center for Interreligious Dialogue (CID).

²²³ BBC, "Pope Francis visits bombed Coptic church during Egypt visit", (28/4/2017) <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39743162>

²²⁴ Allen, Jr, John L., "The bond between the Vatican and Iran is a partnership destined to endure", *Criux Now*, (26/1/2016) <https://cruxnow.com/church/2016/01/26/the-bond-between-the-vatican-and-iran-is-a-partnership-destined-to-endure/>

²²⁵ Vatican Radio, "Pope Francis meets President Rouhani", (26/1/2016) http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/01/26/pope_francis_meets_iranian_president_rouhani/1203813

France

Traditionally, France was always seen as the protector of Christians and minorities in the Middle East since the 13th century, and sees such duty as part of its history and identity. On a rhetorical level, France has not abandoned its role as the protector of Christians in the Middle East. Following on from the conference of 8 September 2015, chaired by France and Jordan, on the victims of ethnic and religious violence in the Middle East,²²⁶ France has undertaken several coordinated actions to assist the victims of ethnic and religious violence in the Middle East.

In terms of humanitarian aid, “the support fund for the victims of ethnic and religious violence, which is endowed by the Territorial Communities External Action Fund (FACECO), funded a total of 36 projects in 2015-2016 to the sum of €10.74 million. Four-fifths of this money was dedicated to humanitarian efforts, while the rest was spent on stabilization efforts. All regional countries were concerned, with a strong focus on northern Iraq.” Moreover, the Agence Française de Développement (AFD, French Development Agency) has conducted several projects, including some in support of members of ethnic and religious minorities. In November 2015, €5 million in funding was granted for efforts in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. This enabled three projects to be funded: an initial €3 million regional project (in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq) addressing health, education and psychosocial support, and two other projects worth €1 million each for actions in Lebanon in the areas of health and vocational training.

Yet, the very extremism from which the Middle East has been suffering, has also affected France more than any other foreign actor; thus, it is heavily investing in the war against terror and a leading contributor to the International Coalition against Daesh (air strikes; deployment of an artillery battle group; training, advice and assistance actions for Iraqi forces). The new French President’s first priority in the Middle East, according to Macron’s adviser, remains the fight against ISIS and radical Islam and to strengthen civil society in Iraq and Syria.²²⁷ Despite Macron’s eurocentric policies, it seems that he shall continue, and perhaps more assertively, to seek its traditional role in the Middle East. Contrary to his predecessor, he has “rejected the argument that the permanence in power of Syrian President Bashar Assad would represent a

²²⁶ France Diplomatie, "What Is France Doing For The Victims Of Ethnic And Religious Persecution In The Middle East?", (May 2017) <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/north-africa-and-middle-east/france-s-action-to-help-the-victims-of-ethnic-and-religious-persecution-in-the/article/what-is-france-doing-for-the-victims-of-ethnic-and-religious-persecution-in-the>

²²⁷ Savir, Uri, "Europe, France Plan Active Middle East Policy", *Al-Monitor*, (28/5/2017) <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/israel-palestinians-france-us-middle-east-emmanuel-macron.html>

"guarantee" for the survival of Christian communities in Syria”; claiming that among the roles of France is to "ensure that the Eastern Christians interests are defended".²²⁸ In this sense, the French policy on protection of Christians is directly linked with the extermination of radicalism and extremism in the Middle East.

²²⁸ Official Vatican Network, "Controversial Debate On Christians In The Middle East", (2017), <http://www.news.va/en/news/asiainmiddle-east-controversial-debate-on-christians>

UK

Similarly, to France, the UK has also suffered from the violent extremism of the Middle East, which leads London to put all its efforts primarily on counterterrorism. It is noteworthy that in contrast to other foreign actors, the UK has not focused its discourse around “protection” of Christians or other religious minorities in the Middle East in the past years. It was not until recently that the House of Lords called for a more active participation of the UK in regards to religious minorities. The 2017 report of the House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations stated the need for the UK to establish some principles and actions in protecting – in more practical terms - the Christians and other minorities in the region.²²⁹ But while the UK has not focused on religious minorities in the region per se, it has granted large amounts of humanitarian aid for the Syrian crisis. As of mid-2017, the UK funding for Syria stood at £2.46 billion, with a commitment of £1bn in aid money for Syrian refugees and host countries.

More specifically, the UK has been allocating its aid mainly to refugee hosting countries, such as Lebanon and Jordan, to assist the vulnerable refugee communities, regardless of religion. The aid is not only for the basic needs but expands on educational programs schooling and educational programs creating thousands of new jobs.²³⁰ This type of humanitarian aid goes hand-in-hand with the UK’s efforts of establishing a network of NGOs that use multiple tools for the prevention of violent extremism (PVE), which in turn may contribute on the best practices for religious pluralism. More specifically, PVE focuses on modifying the elements that contribute to religious illiteracy, which renders people, and especially the youth, vulnerable to violent extremism, such as education on respecting other religions and coexistence, economic development so as to avoid marginalization of the youth and freedom of speech.

This PVE-type NGO networks, which may link the regional and international concerns on violence extremism, may serve as a launching pad for genuine religious pluralism in the Middle East, as it will strengthen the bonds among the indigenous communities.

²²⁹ House of Lords, “The Middle East: Time for New Realism”, Select Committee on International Relations, 2nd Report on Session 2016-2017, (May 2017) <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldintrel/159/159.pdf>

²³⁰ Press Release, “PM dedicates £1bn in aid money for Syrian refugees and host countries”, *gov.uk*, (4/4/2017) <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-dedicates-1bn-in-aid-money-for-syrian-refugees-and-host-countries>



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