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Religious Pluralism in the Middle East

the canary in the coal mine

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Living as a religious MINORITY in Erdogan's Turkey

Sunnification and conspiracy theories

Maria Kourpa

The Turkish state under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has promoted Muslim identity and has used religion as a social net and a form of national conciliation. Erdogan's new conservative take on political Islam and the abandonment of state republicanism changed the political balance in Turkey where minorities are struggling to coexist. Although the modern Turkish state was built on secular foundations, it is especially in the latest years under the AKP, where Sunni Islam has been prevalent in Turkish politics and islamization so evident. Meanwhile, conspiracy theories have been linking religious minorities with terrorism in search of an internal scapegoat. In a Turkish state where Muslim identity is more and more prominent and aggressive, how can a religious minority survive?

THE TURKISH CONSTITUTION states that "every citizen of Turkey is a Turk". Indeed, Turkey's biggest city, Istanbul, has traditionally been a crossroad for religious communities, whose rights have been protected since the 1924 Lausanne Treaty. In Turkey, there are approximately 10 to 25 million Alevi, around 120,000 Christians and up to 18,000 Sephardi Jews. Minorities push for recognition and presence in society, politics and education which would be secured by secularism. On the contrary, the Turkish state is forming around Sunni Islam, excluding, if not attacking, the rest of the religions that are being practiced on its soil. Religion is being used as political tool and minorities are targeted as an internal enemy against Turkish identity.

The prosecutions against minorities have been on the spotlight of the US Commission on International religious Freedom.[1] People from religious minorities are reporting of being treated as second-class citizens and of having their rights taken away. Even since 1942, they had been the target of a wealth tax, imposed to cut their economic power, and victims of pogroms, the biggest one taking place in 1955, while they also had the majority of their numbers expelled from the country in 1964. Slowly during the 20th century, non-Muslim minorities accumulated a fear of the new-formed Turkish state which was struggling to find its identity and achieve homogeneity. The situation has not changed under AKP governance.

Institutionalization of Islam

Turkey's deeper Islamic identity is getting more institutionalized as Erdogan stays in power. In the mission for promoting Islamic culture, the AKP islamized Turkey's public space with the further empowerment of the Religious Affairs Directorate, the Diyanet. The Diyanet was founded in 1924, the year that Turkish state abolished Sharia law and is run by the government itself. Through the years, it has become a large bureaucratic machine for the affairs of Islam, especially during the last 40 years after the coup d'état of 1980. Its budget is increasing every year, reaching $2 billion in 2019, a size that surpasses even the budget for National Intelligence Organization.[2] Apparently, funds are being cut from education and research and are being invested in Islamic affairs, showing the importance of the religious control for the state. The Diyanet pays for the salaries of around 110,000 Turkish Imams and is also responsible for the content of Friday sermons all over the country. Turkey focuses on the disestablishment of independent religious authority and the subjection of religious affairs to the control of state power.[3] The Directorate itself is becoming more and more conservative, also an indication of the version of political Islam that the country is promoting. As the country shows its Sunni Muslim face, other religions are being ostracized.

In Alevi territories in central Turkey, there are tensions with Sunni Muslims while both religions share a strong history of animosity. For some, the transformation of Alevi religion from a sporadic, rural faith to an urban massive phenomenon is exactly the reaction against the imposed Hanafi Sunni Islam by the Turkish state. The Alevi are accusing the state of anti-Alevi policies and speech and are reporting attacks on their territories. Although numerous attacks against Alevi communities have indeed been reported, they have not received proper coverage from the national media and no one has faced prosecutions for them. The country has also been the subject of a case of violations of Alevi's rights in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), concerning education and school

practices.[4] As part of the Sunnification of Turkey, the Appeals Court have not recognized cemevis –traditional Alevi gathering places- as official houses of worship for Alevis until recently. Still, Alevis are not very optimistic about whether the Turkish state will proceed with their building, while their minority is considered more a culture than a religion by Turkish law.

Each religious community is been represented by officially recognized foundations that manage their affairs and push their interests, but all of them are under the General Directorate of Foundations Vakıflar. However, religious minorities are still being refused full legal status. The Turkish state is controlling the decision-making of the representatives of minorities, bans them from training clergy and have been confiscating properties from them through the years.[5] The democratic function of the foundations mentioned above is doubtful. Apparently, minorities are free to elect the members of their foundation respectively, but the elections are being held under strict control of the state; government authorities need to approve of them and even interfere openly with them, such as for the case of the election of the Armenian Patriarchate leadership.

Conspiracy theories against the minorities: Gülen collaborators

Religious minorities also have continuously been the face of conspiracy theories for the Turkish state these past few years. The President himself, as well as papers affiliated with the government, commonly accuse Christians of being Western collaborators and traitors.[6] State and state-sponsored propaganda depict them as a threat for the stability of Turkey. Following the leadership, Turkish society has turned to an anti-Christian rhetoric.[7] Especially after the 2016 failed coup d'état, the government linked cleric Fethullah Gülen, the alleged orchestrator of the coup, with every religious minority in the country and went as far as to imprison an American protestant pastor with accusations of collaboration with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the Gülenist movement, as part of a CIA-backed network of Christian missionaries trying to convert PKK militants back in 2014.[8]

As a very common pattern, the accusations are also being held against the religious group that has been traditionally at the center of conspiracy theories. The President and certain newspapers are supporting that Gülen has certain ties with Judaism, if not that he is actually a Jew or Israelite.[9] Anti-Semitism in Turkey is on the rise; especially as the relations between Turkey and the state of Israel are at their lowest point in almost a decade. Jewish people living in Turkey have been targeted by anti-Semites and even from Turkish officials, according to reports.[10] The government has even been talking about the Jewish masterplan to prevent Turkey from becoming a world political power.[11]

Although it is a stretch to say that minorities under previous governments were protected and considered equal or that the state was built upon tolerance as many tend to suggest, the AKP has failed to satisfy its promises for religious equality made in the 2000's. President Erdogan still declares

tolerance, respect and acceptance towards minorities in some of his speeches but the prevalence of Sunni Muslim identity as well as the spread of populist ideology and hate speech even from officials, is further deteriorating the existing circumstances for the non-Muslim citizens. In the coming years, and given the falling popularity of the government, it remains to be seen whether Sunnification and hate speech will be further used or even intensify by the AKP, or whether the ruling party will perhaps look into the minorities for new supporters.

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Christians in Syria and Lebanon

Precarious balances

Charalampos Tsitsopoulos

Amidst the highly-touted end of Syria's conflict, Syria's Christians are faced with a set of challenging questions. The answer to these will greatly depend on the contours of Syria's new state, whose shape is bound to be informed by new considerations. In Lebanon, the resilience of institutions protecting Christians is unlikely to be weakened. Rather, the fortunes of Christians in the country will depend on the evolution of the Syrian conflict, the future outline of Syrian-Lebanese inextricability and the ever-sensitive issue of the demographic balance.

THE DECLINING FORTUNES of Middle Eastern Christians have been no recent phenomena. In what is an increasingly fragmenting and sectarian region, Christians have for long struggled to attain existential and institutional security. In understanding Christian precariousness, Syria and Lebanon are instructive, interlinkage, different degrees of institutionalization and external factors all make for an ever-volatile state of affairs.

Institutional differences and different prospects

Syria's secularism has been widely flouted by both the regime and international pundits. While Bashar al-Assad has pursued some policies and adopted a rhetoric with secular undertones, which have generally succeeded in reassuring Syrian Christians, the secular orientation of the Syrian regime's policies should not be exaggerated. Well-known for his astute flexibility, the Syrian President has not hesitated to play the ethnic card when it served his ends; for example, al-Assad's regime has promoted religious movements and supported religious institutions and Shia mosques which have not been encouraging peaceful co-existence.[1] As has been aptly pointed, Bashar al-Assad has de-emphasized the secular aspects of his father's pact with the Church and has emphasized religious tolerance. The implications of this are clear: tolerance is a more abstract term and has no tangible consequences in terms of institutional politics.

In this vein, on the one hand, Christians have been appointed in political positions, on the other hand, they have enjoyed no formal political representation as Christians. In practice, the religious institutions have been the only collective Christian political vehicle, to the detriment of broader sociopolitical rights. Thus, when the 2011 uprising broke out, Christians were caught in an awkward situation: many Church leaders spoke in the name of all Christians in support of the regime, giving the impression that all Christians shared their views.[2] Individual Christians who supported the rebellion –either youth or experienced political figures- thus did so in an individual capacity. The erroneous impression was hence formed that all Christians support the regime. Reality is more nuanced; not only did the majority of Christians support neither camp,[3] but those who spoke or fought on the regimes side often did so not out of ideological sympathy but to bolster their own security, as was the case with those who took up arms within the National Defense Units.

Lebanese Christians have had much greater institutional access than their Syrian brethren. While nothing is written in stone, the country's National Pact of 1943 serves as minimal guarantee of their collective political representation. The Lebanese Christians' discontent does not stem from the forceful silencing of their political views. Rather, it comes from their inability to influence the country's political processes beyond the limits imposed by their own community. The solidification of Lebanon's consociational power-sharing model has often had the opposite impact of what was initially intended. The hardening correspondence between parties and confessions rather than parties and regions has entailed the transformation of the former into vested blocs that navigate national politics based on short-term elite interest.[4]

At the same time, the country's convoluted identity politics and the pursuit of narrow goals often drive parties to strike alliances whose popular backing is at best tenuous. For example, Christians have traditionally supported Hezbollah's standing as the main resistance force against Israel. This support has become even stronger in the face of growing Sunni radicalization during the Arab Spring. For

Hezbollah, the support of another minority helps it tempers what it perceives as its perennial marginalization. At the same time, however, the Party of God's increasing power —and what many perceive as its rising authoritarianism- and changing demographics mean that wider Christian interests can hardly coincide with Shiite ones.[5] This reality has indeed been voiced by Lebanon's second largest Christian party, the Lebanese Forces, and its leader Samir Geagea as well as Maronite Patriarch Boutros Al-rai.[6]

Indirect encounter via the Syrian conflict

Different institutional statuses have meant that the Syrian conflict could hardly have altered the positioning of Syrian and Lebanese Christians vis-à-vis each other. However, the Syrian uprising —and the Arab Spring more widely- seems to be bringing about a final reckoning for both; Syrian Christians will not only have to deal with their ever-precarious position within their country's political system. They will also have to countenance an increasing Iranian presence and influence within that system. For example, many Christians have been complaining that Iranian hotbeds of corruption and disorder have been established in traditional Christian neighborhoods such as Damascus's Bab Touma, and talk even of an Iranian effort to occupy or even displace them.[7] In Aleppo, Christians have been complaining that during the conflict investments have been focusing in the coastal cities of Tartus and Latakia.[8]

In light of the above, Syrian Christians are largely unable to protect themselves; their only option seems to be to wait out the conflict. Their plight is further compounded by the international community's unwillingness to engage with the issues faced by Syrian Christians precisely because of the former's obdurate blanket refusal to engage with al-Assad regime on any issue. This was illustrated in December when a bipartisan US aid package for Iraqi Christians was signed into law, with no reference to their Syrian counterparts.[9]

Lebanese Christians are likely to continue being both victims of the circumstances and agents of change. It has been no secret that the influx of about 1 million Syrian refugees, overwhelmingly Sunni, has greatly worried the Christian leadership. At the same time, Syria's small neighbor can do very little to influence the course of the conflict apart from mitigating its impact on Lebanon's domestic politics.[10] This, however, is harder than it sounds: Christians are split between the March 8 Alliance, some of whose Christian members have harshly called for forced refugee returns and the March 14,[11] whose Sunni head has repeatedly asserted that there can be no returns without a final, peaceful resolution. When possible, Christians have also been pursuing independent policies: President Michel Aoun recently signed a brazen naturalization decree granting citizenship to 300 individuals from the Syrian President's inner circle, possibly aimed at bypassing anti-Syria sanctions.[12]

To sum up, Syrian and Lebanese Christians seem to be facing a highly uncertain future: on the one hand, as the Syrian

war draws to a close, greater forces seem to be at play with little regard for Christian concerns. On the other hand, Christians can only pursue their goals by teaming up with other groups, something which will always have unpredictable outcomes in an increasingly sectarian region.

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OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN EGYPT

Stavros I. Drakoularakos

Particularly since the military coup of 2013 by current President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi and the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood from power, the Egyptian state has made efforts to promote the values of peaceful religious coexistence. Various state initiatives as well as the work of the al-Azhar University were heavily publicized abroad and strove to convey messages of unity and religious moderation, regarding both the living conditions of religions communities in the country and the rising influence of radical elements in the fringes of society, respectively. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether these initiatives originate from a place of genuine will for political and societal change, and if their implementation lacks the necessary political momentum to drive them forward.

FOLLOWING THE RISE of President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi to power in 2013, the dominant religious leaders in Egypt, the Grand Imam and the Coptic Pope, immediately stated their political support for the new government in place, going so far as to call it a divine act.[1] Given the strenuous political environment of the period following the "Arab Spring" and the short-lived government by the Muslim Brotherhood, the religious leaders saw an opportunity to align themselves with the current government and to ensure that their religious values and rights would be protected against radicalism. The al-Azhar University regained its status in both Egypt and abroad as a prestigious religious institution, and the Christian Copts aimed to gain security and the respect of their religious beliefs.

Following up on the call for "a religious revolution"

The relationship between the al-Sisi government and the al-Azhar University was not always a straightforward one, as political initiatives for religious reform clashed with the religious institution's claim for autonomy. The clashes played out often and publicly, creating, at the same time, a strenuous political atmosphere which fueled further the rise of rogue religious voices refusing to follow the guidelines and the leadership of the al-Azhar University.

The expression "religious revolution" was coined by Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi during his various addresses since 2015. It was part of an initiative targeting radical discourse against non-Muslim communities, and specifically the Coptic Christian one. Its aim was for the radical elements in Egyptian society to refrain from fueling intolerance, violence and hate speech and called for religious reform on different aspects of Egyptian institutions, ranging from the al-Azhar University, to the Egyptian media, and to the judicial institutions.[2]

A major point of contention between government policy and al-Azhar was the Endowments Ministry's decision to unify the weekly Friday sermon throughout Egypt's mosques. A written sermon would be provided which would prevent radical imams from promoting discrimination and intolerance in the furthest corners of the country, where jihadist networks are likely to find fertile ground to build their networks.[3] The problem with this decision was that al-Azhar was not consulted or notified regarding its implementation which effectively downplayed the institution's autonomy and clout as an authority and reference on religious matters.[4] Nevertheless, the weekly Friday sermon initiative was implemented with no mention of any official intra-institutional conflict. Perhaps as a continuation of religious initiatives spearheaded by the al-Sisi led government, a new taskforce was created for the removal of the names of certain political figures and Muslim Brotherhood leaders particularly from streets and mosques, and replacing them with less politically-charged ones. In addition, a new "Egyptian Code" regarding the architectural standards of mosques is being developed in order to present a nationwide and government-approved style of mosque. It certainly

seems as if efforts of streamlining Sunni Muslim rhetoric and image is underway.[5]

Furthermore, the al-Azhar University attempted to strengthen its image as a moderate representative of Islam by promoting its social media presence, by attending international summits on religion, and by reaching out to the youth, through for example, the establishment of "fatwa kiosks" in Cairo. The latter's goal was to educate Muslims on the true meanings and values of the Islamic faith and to replace the unauthorized fatwas in vogue by radical imams. In addition, imam's intensive training camps and courses, as well as Islamic cultural centers were established in the most at-risk regions such as in the North Sinai Peninsula with an aim to renew interfaith discourse, spread moderation and marginalize radical ideologies.[6]

With a view to promote and renew Islamic discourse internationally, the al-Azhar University made waves: first, with the establishment the al-Azhar International Academy, offering courses for imams and preachers from other countries; and, secondly, with the "Document on Human Fraternity" signed by the Grand Imam and by the Roman Catholic Pope, both pledging to work together against those attempting to misuse God's message and to manipulate religion.[7]

Although the above might paint a picture of cooperation between the government and the al-Azhar University, some cracks appear in this otherwise seemingly fruitful partnership. With al-Azhar vying for autonomy and trying to distance its inner workings and international initiatives from the government, the latter attempts at various occasions to reaffirm its hold on the religious priorities of the country. For instance, specific permits need to be issued for the institution's leaders to travel abroad, while calls for the reform of al-Azhar's curriculum have seen the light of day. In other words, the government walks a fine line between retooling al-Azhar's religious influence and turning it into its mouthpiece.[8]

The Christian Copts as a case study for religious coexistence

Since 2013, the publicized friendship between Coptic Pope Tawandros and President al-Sisi is commonly reported as a symbol of the place of the Coptic community within Egyptian society, safeguarding it against radical elements and providing much-needed support against further marginalization. Gestures of good will such as the President's yearly attendance of Coptic Christmas, coupled with the religious holiday wishes from political and religious leaders paint a healthy picture of peaceful coexistence within society. However, in the everyday life of Coptic Christians, things are not as jovial as they might seem from the outside looking in, especially when it comes to remote villages located in the Minya governorate.[9]

One the one hand, positive initiatives such as the Church-building law were met with disagreements and implementation vacuums. The efforts to legalize Christian churches fell into a vicious cycle of identifying illegal places of worship and closing them down, as the needs for sectarian peace were deemed more pressing. As a result, a large number of Christian houses of worship remain in a state of limbo with no near end in sight. On the other hand, sectarian clashes are, more often than not, resolved by the establishment of informal customary reconciliation sessions headed by religious leaders and village elders which favor Muslim residents and close matters in an amicable way, neglecting resolutions via the rule of civic or criminal law. It is of note that the most common resolution

is for the Christian residents to leave the village where the sectarian clash took place. As a result, a sense of impunity looms over the reconciliation sessions, effectively facilitating future similar clashes.[10] Furthermore, in major cities such as Cairo and Alexandria, terrorist attacks against Christian churches and gatherings are not a rare occurrence with heavy duty security measures being implemented during the religious holiday seasons.[11] Nonetheless, the recent referendum saw Pope Tawandros calling the Coptic Christian community to vote for the extension of President al-Sisi's term to power. It seems that despite its shortcomings, the relationship between the Coptic Pope and the President is as healthy as it has ever been.[12]

Ever since his rise to power, President al-Sisi has attempted a balancing act regarding the religious Muslim priorities as represented by the al-Azhar University and fulfilling his promises to the Coptic community for their support. The aim of the "religious revolution" was supposed to target both religious communities and to find a middle ground which would make coexistence viable in the long run. However, the major developments in the wider region and the continuous advent of jihadist radicals in the country has minimized the effects of the "religious revolution", bringing, at the same time, other priorities to the forefront, as exemplified by the attempts at extending his presidential term for the near future.

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Holy Lands of faith, blood and conflicts

Eleni-Panagiota Stoupa

The Holy Land in Jerusalem underpins a symbol of coexistence among different socio-cultural identities and at the same time the apple of discord. Throughout the years, the religious minorities have borne the brunt of a nationalistic political quagmire. The shift of the political scene towards the right-wing of the political spectrum imposes violent endeavours of segregation towards religious minorities in Jerusalem thus creating the feelings of insecurity. The menace that is lurking throughout the Holy Land has strengthened even more its sacred re-enactment than ever before.

BEARING UPON ITS ARMS A VERY LONG PAST, Jerusalem constitutes a place with a significant value around the world, wherein past has a vivid present. Its historical trajectory witnesses a holy ground soaked with faith, blood and conflicts. During the Middle Ages it was the trophy among Crusaders and Muslims and since then Jerusalem has emerged as a crucible of various religions and dogmas. Since people do not only experience God on their spiritual reality but also on the grounds of their existence, three different monotheistic religions identify the source of their beliefs and the locus of their faith to the Holy Land.[1] The Temple Mount is considered from Christians, Muslims and Jews as sacred place for their religions, transforming Jerusalem into a symbol of the divine.

Besides its historical and symbolic dimension, Jerusalem is a city of many contrasts. The citizens of the town are separated into different religious and ethnic groups, defined from their social, national and cultural elements: Arabs, Hebrew, secular Jews, Haredi, and Christians from different dogmas along with different socio-economic strata.[2] The Holy Land, according to Glenn Bowman is not only a city upon the ground, but mainly a place that shares manifold imaginings and a universal transcendence.[3] The accumulation of a row of contradictory and sometimes complementary identities in one place, signifies Jerusalem as a universal symbol of coexistence and multiculturalism.

The Apple of Discord

Given its importance and symbolism, Jerusalem is during the last century the arena of conflict among Israel and Palestine. The city shares an ambiguous notion of belonging among Israelis, Palestinians and the international community. The latter has not recognized Israel's sovereignty, confronting with cautiousness the recognition of the city from the United States as the capital of Israel, as East Jerusalem is believed to be the future capital of Palestinian state.

For the purpose of counteracting this ambiguity, Israeli governments adopted possessive rationale and policies. Controlled by Zionist perceptions, Israel desires to conquer the whole city of Jerusalem, in the name of the re-establishment of a promised Jewish homeland. The argument of Israeli officials that democracy and security will preserve the freedom of all the great faiths of Jerusalem and its holy sites has turned into a millstone around religious minorities' neck. Furthermore, Tel Aviv's machinations – aiming to the Judaization of Jerusalem, is gradually imposing a transformation to the social and demographic fabric of the city.

An illuminating example of a further Judaization and of the unprecedented blow to religious pluralism can be seen at the Nation-State Bill of 2018. The defining moment in the annals of Zionism movement came with the establishment Nation-State Bill in 2018, defined Israel as a Jews state, and declaring that self-determination is a unique privilege of Jews only.[4] Fortifying Israel's religious identity, the law discriminates against all other religious minorities, undermining

thus the rich historicity of the area. Against this framework and responding to the Nation-State Bill strong oppositions were articulated from religious minorities. In joint statements the Catholic, Roman, Syrian, and Greek Melkite Church called Israel to repeal the nation-state law that reduplicates decades of institutionalized discrimination.[5]

Ever since the occupation of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv has slowly demolished parts of the sacred places, has displaced residents and destructed historic neighborhoods, attempting to create "Greater Jerusalem" without churches and mosques.[6] The Judaization of Jerusalem has been forced through residency policies, which discriminate Palestinians, imperil their legal status, and tamper the cultural identity of the city. The plan of Jerusalem's Judaization has found a breeding ground from practices such as the selling or leasing of property from the Greek Orthodox Church.[7] The latter constitutes the largest Church in Israel and the Palestinian territories and the second-biggest landowner of the Holy Land. In recent years, the scandal with the Patriarch Theofilos III and other church leaders has come up to the surface. Several properties of the Greek Orthodox Church and parts of Jerusalem -such as private properties in Jaffa Gate- has been sold to anonymous and shady investors identified latter as Jewish and Israel businessmen.[8]

On the same ground the system of population control that Israel adopted after the Six Days War remains in place five decades later. Through a complex system of military checkpoints, the city of Jerusalem has been divided from the Palestinian hinterland, impeding access to spiritual places and secluding these very communities.[9] Occupation forces are controlling the entrances and compounds of holy areas, transforming sacred centers such as Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron and Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem into poles of control and harassment against Palestinians.[10] Yet, this year Israel crossed the line. The access prohibition to the mosque along with the imposed restrictions to visit Al-Aqsa during Ramadan, constituted a violation of the freedom of worship. In the same manner the various unfair measures of Israel are also targeting to weaken the presence of Christians in the Holy Land. Opposed to the extreme Israeli policies the religious leaders of Christian Churches protested the tax measures and the proposed property law by closing several times the Holy Sepulcher, the holiest site in Christianity.

The whole situation in the last period occurs in the context of the general solidification of Zionistic practices as well as the growing de-legitimization the PLO government and its incapability to reciprocate. Through these practices a new convention has been created, in which the power and influence of religious communities and, of course, their negotiating position are gradually undermined. Nevertheless, an impetus of solidarity between US Jews and Muslims has forged an alliance to fight religious discrimination in the Holy Land, thus causing some optimism for the future.[11]

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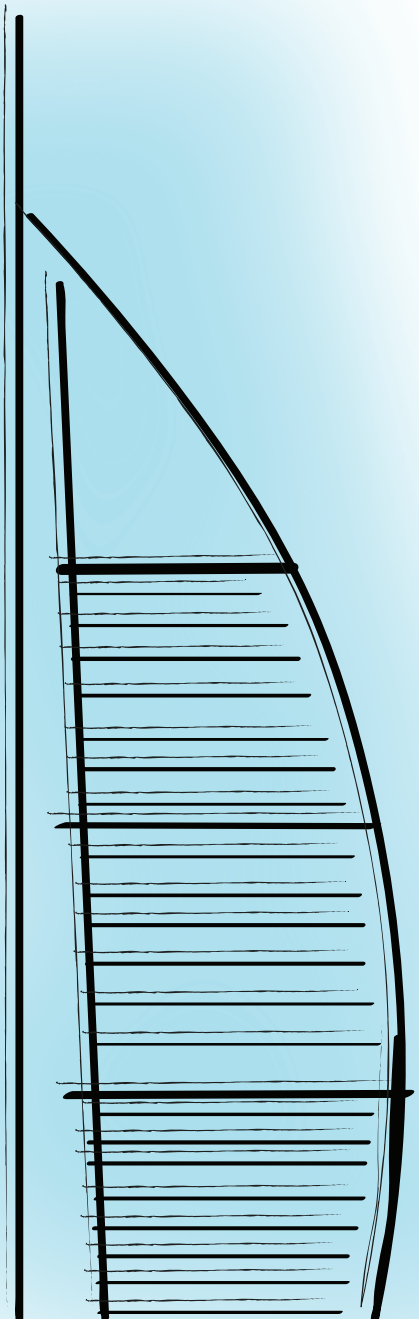
The UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Institutionalizing tolerance

Charitini Petrodaskalaki

The UAE seems to be setting an example of pluralistic society in the Gulf. Apart from being regarded as one of the core values of Emirati society, tolerance is also promoted and institutionalized by the state. At the same time, it seems that tolerance also works as foreign policy tool to enhance the UAE's exercise of soft power. Nevertheless, UAE still faces challenges at home.



DUE TO THE RISING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES in the last decades, the Gulf countries are permanently hosting a large number of foreigners, many of them are non-Muslims. Each state's attitude towards freedom of religion, apostasy, and the promotion of tolerant values vary significantly; however, the United Arab Emirates seems to be the most notable example of actively working towards a tolerant and de-radicalized society. Approximately 80% of Emiratis are Sunni, 9% are Christians and 15% are other religions including Hindu and Buddhist, Parsi Baha'i, Druze, Sikh, Ahmadi, Ismaili, Jews and others. The UAE proudly claim to be the home of over 200 nationalities. It is noteworthy that Emiratis form almost 11% of the 9,400,145 population, as the remaining 88% are immigrants; mainly, located in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.[1]

In general, people are allowed to worship and practice their faith regardless of their religion without interference, within designated places. There are more than 40 churches in the UAE, hosting nearly every branch of Christianity, a Hindu temple –with a second one currently under construction- and a Sikh temple, substantially more centers of worship of other faiths than in the rest of the GCC countries; these places of worship usually operate on land donated by the ruling families, waiving the cost of water and electricity.[2] Even Shi'a Muslims, who are well-integrated into the socio-economic fabric of the Emirati society, are allowed to have their own call for prayer from their minarets, in contrast to some other Gulf countries.[3] However, the capacity of the non-Islamic places of worship is insufficient, compared to the number of worshipers. In addition, they are not allowed to display religious symbols- such as crosses or icons- outside of their premises, or to host public celebrations. This is due to the fact that the UAE is a Muslim country where conversion from Islam is illegal and proselytizing in any religion other than Islam is banned. There is one word that is used in the UAE to describe the coexistence of all these religions, and it is not "religious freedom", but "Tolerance".

According to the Dubai Declaration of 2018, tolerance is "neither indulgence nor indifference", but "respect and appreciation of the rich variety of our world's cultures".[4] Tolerance in not only perceived and promoted as a central component of Emirati culture which is based on the vision of the Emirati founding fathers, but it has gone as far as being institutionalized by the state in various ways. In July 2015, a new anti-discrimination law passed, banning all forms of discrimination based on religion, caste, creed, doctrine, race, color or ethnic origin; Emirati Nationals and expats are equal under this law. A few months later, in February 2016, Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum announced the creation of the Ministry of Tolerance, to promote the virtue "as a fundamental value in UAE society".[5] Since then, the government has hosted various events, such as the World Interfaith Harmony Week, a UN resolution, in February 2016, or the "Alliance of Virtue", gathering representatives from all Abrahamic religions in July 2017. What is more, in June 2017, an Institute for Tolerance was established, aiming to further establish the values of tolerance in the society, while in November 2018, the first World Summit of Tolerance was held in Dubai, with more than 1,000 attendees – including political and religious leaders as well as experts from around the world – and was concluded with the signing of the Dubai Declaration. Soon after, the UAE leadership announced that the year 2019 would be named "Year of Tolerance"; as Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid said upon the announcement, the goal is to make the UAE "the global reference point for a tolerant culture, via its policies, laws and practices".[6] Many symbolic gestures have been made by government officials throughout these years to further stabilize the values of tolerance in the Emirati society; this

includes the renaming of a central mosque to "Mary, mother of Jesus" in 2017, or the creation of a "Tolerance hand sign" in 2016.[7] Still, the people that live and work there have no prospect of attaining citizenship or have the same rights as citizens.

The UAE are also taking actions to combat extremism and fundamentalism at state and at emirate level. First of all, the government closely monitors the issuance of fatwas, and all but the most senior imams must follow official guidance on the content of Friday sermons. In addition, the law requires a permit for distributing any religious materials in mosques and prohibits mosque employees preaching and teaching outside the mosques; in order to hold a Quran memorization circle, an additional permit is required. At the same time, the government has sponsored the Sawab Center and the Hedaya Center, dedicated at monitoring any speeches or acts of violence, or the spread of far-right ideologies, along with initiatives that focus on youth. This is an integral part of the Tolerance campaign; as the President of the Parliament Amal al-Qobeissi has claimed, the "culture of diversity is the best weapon of prevention against radicalism".[8] It is noteworthy that tolerance is a top-down policy, which is not extended to political dissents, as human right groups claim that the broad definition of terrorism in the UAE is also used to silence political opposition.[9]

While the promotion of tolerance is important for the UAE's domestic policy due to its multicultural environment, presenting it as one of the core values of Emirati culture helps the UAE to exercise its soft power abroad. In the most recent years, the UAE have managed to become one of the most important regional players in the Middle East, combining energy revenues, a diversified economy and expanding military capabilities – engaging even in military interventions such as in Yemen since 2015. Yet, at the same time, the UAE wants to present itself as a champion of tolerance and pluralism in the Middle East and establish itself as a central actor in the interfaith dialogue. The pinnacle of this attempt so far was the visit of Pope Francis in February 2019, the first Pontifical visit in the Arabian Peninsula that, along with the participation of the Pope in an interfaith conference, increased the foothold in interfaith dialogue. On numerous occasions, government officials have declared that tolerance is a key value of the society, and they have been openly marketing it abroad. It seems that the notion of tolerance has been instrumentalized into a geopolitical tool to strengthen UAE's soft power and global prestige.[10] Nevertheless, on a regional level, the promotion of tolerance does not minimize the participation of the UAE army in the war in Yemen, nor does it erase culpability in the tension that further destabilize the region, such as the diplomatic conflict with Qatar.

It seems that UAE are trying to set an example in the Gulf region on religious pluralism by working towards creating a more tolerant culture, at home and abroad. Yet this is not an easy task; they still have to accommodate the needs of all, while at the same time, considering the religious conservatives in the country. Non-Muslims might have their places of worship, but they are largely insufficient compared to their numbers. Finally, the opening of the UAE towards pluralism is very important and stands out in the Gulf, even if many of these gestures are mainly symbolic.

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BAHAISM

A peaceful religion under persecution

Alexandra Nikopoulou

The Baha'i faith is one of the newest religions as it was born in 1844 in Shiraz, Persia and counts around 8 million believers in more than 200 countries. It is founded in the unity of God and is a monotheistic, peaceful religion that spread in the Middle East region. Baha'is believe in a unifying vision of universal peace, justice, the elimination of racism and a collaborative relationship between science and religion. They also believe in gender equality and unity. As the Baha'i faith was born in Muslim-majority regions, its believers are considered apostates of Islam, Bahaism is not enlisted amongst recognized religions (Christianity, Judaism). That is why they often face persecution, oppression and marginalization. Those practices are more evident in the case of Iran, which is home to most Baha'i believers. What are the challenges Baha'is face primarily in Iran, but in other Middle East countries as well? What is their role in society and what are the levels of freedom to practice their religion?

BAHA'IS COME FROM SEVERAL ETHNICITIES, tribes and countries, however most of them can be found in Iran. Bahai's in Iran are approximately 300.000 and represent the largest non-Muslim minority in the country. Despite their long presence in Iran, Baha'is have been persecuted as a result of their teachings that were considered inconsistent with the Muslim faith. The persecution of Baha'is intensified after the 1979 Revolution as the regime adopted a hardline religious approach. However, in 1991 there was a shift in national policies as the Iranian government -pressured by international criticism- released "The Baha'i Question". This statement redirected government policies towards hindering the development of the Baha'i community through social, economic and cultural barriers. During the previous years, many Baha'is - even those elected in religious institutions- were facing a silent "genocide" and were often executed or murdered.[1]

During past years, Baha'is in Iran have faced severe economic oppression, discrimination and marginalization. The Ministry of Intelligence, along with other government agencies have repeatedly targeted businesses run by Baha'is and have adopted policies to enhance their financial exclusion. Ever since 1991, the Ministry –with the order of the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution- has created a list of Baha'i companies, to prevent other Iranian companies from cooperating with them. Those Baha'i companies are blacklisted and targeted for closure due to allegedly violating trading rules. At the same time, Baha'is are targeted by religious fatwas labelling them as anti-Islam, infidels and morally corrupt people.[2] Baha'i believers are excluded from participation in the governmental affairs, as they have no right to be employed in government institutions or to be elected.[3] Complete exclusion of Baha'is is also encouraged by an orchestrated and wide campaign across Iranian media. The propaganda against them includes articles in newspapers and online media, seminars and even documentaries, TV series, exhibitions and protests.[4]

Baha'is also face extreme discrimination when it comes to education. The Iranian Ministry of Education, which is responsible for approving the course material taught in private schools does not allow Baha'is to found their own schools, while at the same time bans Baha'i students from access to higher education. According to a report regarding religious freedom in the country, Baha'is are only allowed to attend university if they do not identify themselves according to their faith.[5] A striking example of this government policy occurred in 2007, when 800 Baha'i students who declared their religious identity in their university applications were informed that their files were incomplete and were thus denied access to higher education institutions.[6] Similar situations take place to this day as Baha'i students are unable not only to have access to education but also to make an appeal to governmental institutions regarding their case. At the same time, Baha'is face severe discrimination in a social level as well, as their marriages and divorces are not officially recognized by the Iranian state, while they are also banned from

joining the military, which must be strictly Islamic. Baha'is are also not allowed to bury their dead, while the state still holds Baha'i properties it had seized after 1979.[7] Historic religious monuments have also been affected by these policies, as in April 2014, the Iranian state decided on the demolition of the Baha'i cemetery in the holy city of Baha'i teachings, Shiraz. A year earlier a similar attack was reported in the cemetery in Sanandaj.[8]

In recent years, the attacks and oppression against Baha'is have significantly intensified. Currently, 97 Baha'i believers remain in prison, while there are several attacks and assassinations reported, while since 2005, a striking number of 1,007 Baha'is have been arrested and sentenced based on various allegations.[9] During 2018 there has been a significant increase in the government efforts against Baha'is. According to Human Rights Watch, in August and September 2018, the Iranian authorities arrested more than 20 Baha'i citizens and a city council member that allegedly supported those arrested. This development took place at the same time as the exclusion of 54 Baha'i students that were denied access to universities due to their religious identity.[10] Those policies, adopted by the Iranian regime, sparked international reactions and on 5 November, the Third Committee of the General Assembly of the UN approved a resolution regarding human rights conditions in the country. The resolution expressed the Assembly's concern on Iran's policy to implement the death penalty and practices of torture towards its detainees, while it also called the country to release the people detained for exercising their human rights.[11]

However, Iran is not the only country in the Middle East where Baha'is face such challenges. Members of the Baha'i faith can also be found in Iraq. 2018 was a significant year for Baha'is in Iraq, as it marked the first time in 47 years since they were allowed to publicly celebrate the birth of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of Bahaism. Despite that, later this year the Deputy Justice Minister in a meeting of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination stated that Bahaism cannot be considered a religion or faith.[12] The Baha'i religion is also not recognized by the governments of Egypt, Jordan, U.A.E., Qatar and Lebanon. There are a few Middle East countries where Baha'is are able to practice their faith and the state does not interfere in their affairs. Such are some Maghreb states like Tunisia and Morocco and the small Gulf monarchies of Bahrain and Kuwait.[13]

The challenges Baha'is face not only in Iran, but in other Middle East countries as well, are indicative of the levels of religious pluralism in the region. The small number of Baha'i believers and the fact that their religion was born in a Muslim-majority area has resulted in their oppression and persecution. Despite the fact that assaults on Baha'is and interference in their affairs are known to the world, little is being done to protect this minority in an international level. Baha'is home-countries have no institutional framework to support them and often resort to their persecution as their religious identity is considered a threat to state security. However, Baha'is are only one element in the religious mosaic of the region. Yarsanis, Druze, and other small religious groups face similar challenges receiving less publicity internationally. Thus, it is evident that a solution should be sought in a holistic approach that would enhance pluralism and create a framework where all religious minorities are able to co-exist. However, for that to happen there is a long road that requires dialogue and mutual understanding that are still hard to achieve.

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KAKAIS' EVOLVING DILEMMA

Survival through tested secrecy or claiming more in the open?

Ilias Mitrousis

In recent years, the turmoil and sectarian tensions in the Middle East have triggered a renewed interest in the study of the ethno-religious mosaic in the region. Among many others, Ahl-e Haqq (People of the Truth), a religious minority known in Iraq as Kakais and in Iran as Yarsanis has come to the spotlight.* Their syncretic religion combines elements from Zoroastrianism, Shia Islam and Sufism, consequently, making them not only the recipients of chronic state discrimination but also victims of persecution from Islamic extremist militants. Hence, the utmost concealment of their beliefs for security concerns, has on one hand helped them survive thousands of years but, on the other hand, it may be an obstacle on potential future claims for recognition and minority rights.

KAKAIS ARE AN ETHNO-RELIGIOUS GROUP, mostly ethnic Kurds, located in Iranian Kurdistan, mainly in Lorestan, as well as in Iraqi Kurdistan and around Kirkuk. They predominantly speak "Macho", a dialect of "Hawramic Gorani", which is considered one of the traditional Kurdish literary languages. Etymologically, originating from the Kurdish word for 'brother' – "kaka", the name Kakai is translated into "Brotherhood".[1] In an interesting connotation, the code of secrecy kept about their beliefs is tellingly projected through their name. Not only Kakaism does not accept converts, but non-adherents are not permitted to actively participate in the religious ceremonies.[2] While it shares common elements with Shia Islam and is influenced by Sufism, Kakaism has fundamental differences in rituals and worshiping practices, as well as in certain beliefs such as the soul's reincarnation ("Dūn-ā-Dūn"). Kakais' society is based on a particular 'casts' system whose layers consist of the "Sayyids" (Gentlemen), the "Pir" (Guides) and the "Ikhwan" (Brothers). They do not visit mosques and they do not fast during Ramadan. Moreover, their fundamental "Jam" ceremony differs significantly from typical Muslim mosque prayers. It consists of chanted prayers accompanied by the tambour and votive offerings by a mixed gathering of both men and women. Thus, Kakaism is not recognised as one of the Islamic traditions, and therefore religious practice is by default taking place underground as the authorities do not authorize official worship places.[3] Some Muslim groups even consider Kakais 'devil-worshipers', similar to the Yezidis; a fact that adds to the discrimination, especially in times when Islamic extremism is on the rise.[4]

This reality has caused rifts within the Kakai communities. On the one hand, the perception among some Kakais - known as the 'traditionalists' – believe that secrecy is the only way to safeguard their survival from external threats. On the other hand, the 'reformists', either propagate for a greater openness in order to achieve recognition (in Iraq), or classify their faith as a branch of Shia Islam (in Iran). These two different trends within the community, however, create quite a predicament regarding the Kakais' prospect of potential recognition particularly within state environments where they are considered as 'heretics', as is the case of Iran.

Iran is considered the birthplace of their religion. Yet, the Islamic Republic does not officially recognize the Yarsan religion given that it is not among the religions of the Book.[5] Being often labelled as a 'false cult' ("Fergh e Zaleh") and without official recognition, estimations putting their numbers between one to two million —the largest concentration in the entire region— cannot be considered credible due to extensive dissimulation. Public demonstration of Yarsan religious identity can result in a report to the authorities and subsequently in discrimination within several domains such as in higher education, in the labour market or the army, let alone in the realization of cultural rights.[6] Regardless, not all Yarsanis risk the same level of discrimination. A branch of 'reformists' has developed in line with the teaching of a mystic called Hajj Ne'matollah Jayhunabadi, mostly in urban areas. They consider

their religion as a branch of Shia Islam and engage in an effort to reconcile Yarsanism with Shi'ism. As such, they are classified by the state as Shias practicing Sufism and are comparatively at lesser risk than the majority of traditionalist Yarsanis.[7] This does not mean, however, that even them are not occasionally subjected to harassment by the authorities, similarly to other Sufi orders.[8] The rift between reformist and traditionalists has a twofold effect. First, it directly underlines the particularity of the traditionalists, thus reinforcing any discriminatory behavior against them. Second, it hampers the cohesion of the community, hence inhibiting any recognition prospects in favour of conservative forces standing for homogenization rather that pluralism; and this applies both for Yarsanis in Iran and in Iraq.

The number of Kakais (as Ahl-e Haqq are called locally) in Iraq is estimated to be around 250,000. Yet, exact numbers cannot be confirmed due to their secretive tradition. Contrary to Iran, they are considerably involved in politics especially with Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) main political parties. More interestingly though, what constitutes a rare exception for the region, is the position of women within the Kakai community. This is not only evident by the equality reflected in their matrimonial and divorce traditions,[9] but also by the fact that women occupy positions of influence even within the "Pir" stratum. Notwithstanding, they have been persecuted both on grounds of their Kurdish ethnicity and their religion. Testimonies indicate that despite the devastating effects of the Ba'athist Arabization campaign against the Kurds in the past, in terms of religious freedom the situation worsened in the years following the US invasion in 2003. With the rise of sectarianism in the country, Kakais suffered maltreatment both from the Iraqi Shia government and later on from the rise of ISIS.[10] What is more, ironically, while being internally displaced to areas within the control of the -protective towards religious minorities- KRG, they are still threatened by the existence of a strong wave of Kurdish Jihadists. On a political level, Kakais have been granted the right of representation within the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs in the Kurdistan Region, but the position remains vacant due to their internal rift. In Iraq, the 'traditionalists – reformists' divide differs from Iran in the sense that the latter mainly advocate not for a religious deviation from the former, but rather for a more public demonstration of their identity, which may help to better safeguard their community through recognition. Given that KRG is very prone towards encouraging religious pluralism, two positive developments indicate slow progress. The recent Law No.5 for the protection of the rights of groups, specifically mentions Kakais officially for the first time among others, while a seat was reserved for a Kakai representative in the newly formed Halabja provincial council.[11] In any case, the positive momentum created by these developments, albeit significant, will probably wither away should the intra-communal disagreements continue; and that may as well be in favor of certain conservative political forces that would prefer to deal with Kakais through an ethnic homogenization process.[12]

To conclude, there is no doubt that secretive practices have had the utmost contribution to the Ahl-e Haqq survival through time no matter if deriving from religious or practical reasons. In the aftermath of ISIS military defeat, fear may continue to dictate reluctancy regarding any opening from the underground. Nevertheless, the existing rifts inside the religious community may potentially evolve to a threat for its long-term sustainment, especially when fragmentation prevents a determined and cohesive

pursuit of even spontaneous opportunities for recognition. After all, sticking in the shadows may have worked in the past, but there is no guarantee it will for the future as well.

NOTES

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YAZIDIS

attempts to recover and struggle to survive in post-ISIS era

Katia Zagoritou

Nearly five years after the 2014 Islamic State's (ISIS) assault, Yazidis, deeply traumatized by the genocide against them, are confronted to internal divisions and numerous challenges, crucial to their very existence. The succession of their leader, Prince Tahseen Said, who died in 2018, alongside the efforts to deal with the repercussions of the 2014 ISIS attack have put further strain on the beleaguered community. Moreover, the Turkish incursion in Afrin, in Syria in early 2018 and the US decision to withdraw its troops from Syria has engendered new fears in the community, considering the persecutions and the security vacuum respectively.

Yazidis or Yezidis (Êzîdî), a small ethno-religious community, has attracted world attention due to the genocide perpetrated by ISIS against them following the assault launched on 3 August 2014 in Sinjar (Shingal) mountain. The Kurmanji-speaking community has experienced a long history of discrimination, persecutions and violence, mainly owing to the absence of a 'holy' book and the misinterpretation of their monotheist religion and in particular of their worship of the peacock angel (Melek Taus), considered as evil (Satan) by both Muslims and Christians. The community's heartland has been Northern Iraq, in particular Nineveh province, which constitutes one of the disputed territories between Baghdad and Erbil and was the most affected region during ISIS assault in 2014.[1] However, Yazidis now live mostly in the diaspora, largely in Germany, while some communities still exist in the Caucasus (in Armenia and Georgia) and in Syria, albeit in small numbers.

Indeed, the ISIS attack in Sinjar, in the Nineveh province during the summer of 2014 led to an atrocious genocide and a mass exodus that have traumatized the Yazidi community, which additionally felt betrayed by the failure of the Peshmerga forces of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to protect them. In fact, it was solely the People's and Women's Protection Units (YPG/J) from Rojava, in Northern Syria, alongside the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militias who intervened and managed to rescue many Yazidis. Yazidis currently have to deal with the aftermath of the 2014 genocide. That is to say, the fate of 2,992 still missing people (out of 6,417 Yazidis abducted in 2014 ISIS assault), the exhumation of more than 70 mass graves which have been identified in the Sinjar region, the return to their places - since the majority of Sinjar's Yazidis fled the region and are now in refugee camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Turkey– and the future of the women victims of sexual violence and the children born by Yazidi mothers survivors raped by ISIS members.[2]

Apart from Iraq, the Yazidi community is facing serious challenge also in Syria, where according the numbers given the Yazidi population vary from 3,000 to 50,000 persons, mostly in Afrin and in Cizîrê.[3] Following the Turkish incursion and occupation in Afrin, in Northern Syria, many Yazidis were forced to flee in order to escape persecutions and forced conversions to Islam, while their houses were confiscated and their villages' names (around twenty in the region) were given Arabic ones.[4] Additionally, the imminent US troops' withdrawal from Syria would endanger even more Yazidis who, labeled as 'infidels' by Arab Muslims, would become once again victims of violence.

ISIS's attack and atrocities, apart from the evident deep trauma and the displacement of Yezidis, have also raised serious concerns over their religious identification and highlighted the existing internal divisions between traditionalists and modernizers, driven mainly by the diaspora. Both currents stress the necessity of their stance vis-à-vis their customs in order to ensure the religion's endurance and survival focusing, inter alia, on the honor issue and the exclusive endogamy which constitute practice of central importance to the Yezidis. Thus, following the defeat of ISIS and the subsequent liberation of the captured, the introduction or not of the exception to the endogamy rule with respect to women - victims of sexual violence by ISIS's members - who have managed to escape or were liberated, and their reintegration into the community, has hitherto constituted crucial point of contention between the two currents.[5]

Within this context, the 24 April 2019 decision of the Yezidi Supreme Spiritual Council over the acceptance of rescued women

-implying also the same for their children born of rape by ISIS members –constituted a serious step which was received with great relief by women victims. However, three days later, on 27 April, as an evident result of political pressure, the statement was retracted and another one was reissued clarifying that these children are not finally accepted, driving Yazidi mothers of these children to despair.[6]

Furthermore, internal divisions have been also exacerbated regarding the Prince's succession. Indeed, the death of Prince Tahseen Said -Yazidis' leader worldwide since 1944– in Germany, on 28 January 2018, has raised tension and uncertainty with respect to the choice and the nomination of his successor highlighting at the same time the political dimension and the external influence over the leader's choice. Indeed, the KDP, which traditionally had a strong say concerning the Yazidi political leader, considering its power in the Yazidi regions, appears now rather weak to intervene. Indeed, the inability to prevent the Yazidi genocide alongside the failed 2017 referendum have seriously hurt the relations between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Yazidis. Hence, in order to overcome the current stalemate and to thwart the outside influence, Khalil Jindy, a Yazidi intellectual, suggests a reform of the Yazidi spiritual institution towards a modern method of leader's election.[7]

The reform trend, aligned with the need for modernization, is linked not only to the attempts to preserve Yezidism but also to re-assert the Yazidi religious identity following the 2014 ISIS attack. That does not come though without implications, neither does it imply unanimity. For instance, voices have increased among Yezidis about the sacred texts' collection into a new "holy book" (Yazidism is an oral religion), accessible thus to literate Yazidis; that would have though a great impact on caste system, challenging the caste of the spiritual masters as the sole source of authority. Moreover, the disunity and the fragmentation of the community, which renders its project uncertain, stems from the strict hierarchical caste system, composed by sheikhs, pirs (spiritual masters) and murids (disciples), alongside the different political and religious affiliations among the community.[8]

The impact of the rivalry between the central government and KRG, which have attempted to define Yazidis' identity according to their interests hitherto, has been major on the community. Yet, Yazidis emphasize now their religious identity in order to define themselves as a distinct group and not as component of a larger ethnic one, particularly following the KRG's stance since 2014. That would allow them even to claim their right to self-rule according to the Iraqi Constitution. In this sense, the establishment of military units comes to underline their identity redefinition as well as their objective to defend themselves and to appear as political and military force.[9] However, the militarization does not translate into homogeneity; in contrast, the separate militia's creation reflects the different fractions, backed by different sponsors, within the com-

munity underlining thus its disunity and entailing danger for intra-communal conflict considering the contrasting interests of their patrons. Indeed, two main militias appear to exist: the Protection force of Ezidxan (HPE), formerly backed by the central government and since 2017 part of Peshmerga and the PKK-linked Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) with the distinct Sinjar Women's Units (YJS), while some Yazidis have joined the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), backed by Baghdad. The YBS control currently Sinjar; that has raised tension within the community and the KRG and has already led to confrontation between Iraqi army and YBS forces, despite their alleged coordination.[10]

Lately, on 17th of April, Yazidis celebrated their New Year ("Chwarshana Sur", Red Wednesday) in their holy place, in Lalish, for the second time after four years of non-celebration because of their grieve. Their need to reassert their religious identity and to return to a somewhat normality is evident. Yet, the small community has a series of challenges to address; most importantly, the issue of Yazidi women and their children born of rape appears to put a strain on the community, which has to decide whether to make an exception or not to its strict rules and its longstanding efforts for purity.

Moreover, the return to its homeland is crucial to its very existence, given the importance of the existence of the population in its lands of origin. Otherwise, as Hadi Baba Sheikh, the representative of the chief Yazidi spiritual leader, stresses, the Yazidi community will gradually disappear abroad since the host societies will absorb and assimilate it. Should the Yezidi not return to their places of origin, in Nineveh Provinces and Sinjar, where their holy places are besides, the very survival of this small community is seriously endangered.[11]

Last but not least, the importance of the recognition of the Yazidi genocide, the investigation, the accountability and the prosecution of the responsible are decisive for the future and the recovery of the community.[12]

NOTES

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