

4

Communal Identities and Ethnic Groups

All contemporary societies of the Middle East have been shaped by long and varied historical processes, of which the people themselves are acutely conscious. Appeals to history often serve to validate the present as well as provide an ideological basis for unity and solidarity. Paradoxically, such historical awareness also serves to differentiate one group from another in an area and therefore contributes to cultural diversity and disunity. This diversity, sometimes visually expressed through distinctive styles of dress, ritual, and public behavior, must be properly appreciated if we are to understand Middle Eastern society. We have already seen in our discussion of Islam some of the historical processes that differentiated groups within the Islamic tradition; these differences themselves parallel, amplify, and even define group boundaries and structure intergroup relations today. In addition, there are indigenous non-Muslim populations in most countries, not to mention the Jewish state of Israel.

This diversity has been likened to a "human mosaic" in which the members of each identifiable group emphasize their common and special identity through some configuration of symbols. These symbols may be material—in the form of dress, dwelling styles, or language or dialect; of even greater significance, however, are the underlying patterns of behavior, values, and systems of belief. The recognition and acceptance of ethnic or communal differences have historically been a fundamental principle of Middle Eastern social organization. The metaphor of a human mosaic, however, has its limits. Although it may describe contemporary patterns, it offers little insight into the many processes that underlie the formation of group identities, how these change over time, and, more important, how people use them to gain access to resources and power.

Until the rise of nationalism, most polities comprised aggregates of bounded social groupings, either tribes or confessional communities, often held together by dynastic tradition. Whether joined for common purpose or held together by threat of force, the distinctive quality of the individual or localized

grouping was maintained through the principle of collective responsibility. It is interesting to note that more than a century of Turkish, Arab, and Iranian nationalistic movements has not succeeded in eroding the significance of more narrowly defined ethnic and tribal identity for the individual. In this chapter we discuss the broad outlines of ethnicity and the sources of individual and group identities.

Each country and region of the Middle East contains local groupings or populations that are distinct from the society as a whole and are recognized as such by themselves and others. That is to say, people recognize themselves as belonging to some unique grouping within a larger population. The elements used to signal the identity of ethnic groups include religious affiliation, language or dialect, tribal membership or shared descent, and regional or local customs.

ETHNICITY: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In considering ethnicity in the Middle East, we should keep in mind a number of points that together make up a framework for the understanding of both the phenomenon of ethnicity and ethnic group relations. *Ethnicity* refers to a social or group identity that an individual ascribes to himself or herself and that is also accepted by others. It is the basis for the formation of categories that are rooted in socially perceived differences in origin, language, and/or religion. In many respects, ethnicity resembles descent ideology: it stresses one's origins, or descent, as part of one's social identity and is usually ascribed at birth. While such an awareness of the past is a source of unity, it also emphasizes that which potentially sets one segment of the population apart from others. The Alevis of Turkey, whom we discussed earlier, are a case in point. Adhering to a mystical form of Shi'ism, they constitute a distinctive and endogamous grouping among Turkish and Kurdish speakers in Anatolia, one defined by religious practice rather than language (Shankland, 1993a and b).

Because ethnic categories are culturally defined, they can be manipulated and changed. In one situation, for example, an individual might identify himself or herself as a Kurd, while in another as a Turk or a Persian or an Arab—the politically dominant identities in the countries with large Kurdish populations. There is a high rate of bilingualism in polyglot regions, and within regional or national minorities, most males, at least, are completely at home in the politically dominant language. People may adopt the language, symbols, and codes of a special grouping to which their ties are quite remote or even nonexistent. In this sense, ethnic identity may be considered a personal strategy, a means to accomplish a desired objective. For example, in Iran, educated and well-to-do members of different non-Persian-speaking groups, such as the Qashqa'i or the Azeri, assimilated into the national elite by using Persian upper-class speech mannerisms and social codes. They, nonetheless, usually maintained their original cultural identification when with their own people. The converse also

occurs; Kurdish intellectuals whose mother tongue may be Turkish, Arabic, or Persian may make of point of using Kurdish even though their fluency is less (Mango, 1995).

Ethnic identity is regularly reformulated or "reinvented" in much the same way that new nationalisms emerge, spread, and, in time, may also fade away. Still, ethnicity or local-level collective organization and identity based on notions of shared kinship, history, culture, and language, while in many respects similar to nationalism, is not simply a scaled-down or primitive representation of nationalism (Smith, 1986, p. 13). Just as nationalism, when enshrined as state ideology, proclaims the eternal unity of a land and a people, as for example, does Zionism, assertion of a distinct ethnicity can be a potent response by those whose perceived interests and identities are threatened by this same formulation of nationalism. Here, again, the Kurds of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq are a good example, as are the Palestinians. While many if not most Kurds today live outside their traditional heartlands of Kurdistan, they respond strongly to appeals phrased in ethnic terms. The most important distinction to be made between nationalism and ethnicity is how boundaries are conceptualized and operationalized. With ethnicity, the boundaries are based on perceptions of heritage and are not limited to territorial expression or claims.

Ethnic politics should not be equated with ancient, intractable animosities simply because such statements are often basic to the rhetoric of both ethnicity and nationalism. Rather, the idiom of ethnicity, like appeals to "nation" or "tribe," becomes operative in specific contexts or environments. What gives shape and continuity to political behavior might be called ideological or moral models, and these often draw on notions that are strikingly similar in tribal,



A Yomut Türkmen family en route to a wedding celebration in north central Iran.

ethnic, and national expressions: they draw upon ties of affect rooted in beliefs about morality, kinship, family, and history; and they are expressed in recognizable codes and symbols, including language and religion. However, ethnic constructions need have no territorial component nor need they be concerned with the perennial problem of nationalism—reconciling who is and who is not included. Ethnic boundaries are rooted in individual self-ascription as well as ascription by others, and so are contextual, malleable, and not based on any particular set of ideas of what distinguishes the community. The usual idioms of ethnic mobilization are "survival" and "justice," perceived collective fears and wrongs effectively creating a "we-they" divide. Thus, in at least one important respect it may be inaccurate to speak of ancient ethnic animosities and primordial ethnic hatreds, as, sadly, is so often the case with respect to the Middle East. Specific conflicts, on examination, have very specific causes however much the rhetoric of kinship, community, and culture are evoked, and a look to the past will almost invariably reveal quite different patterns of alignment and notions of community boundaries.

Even individuals who have no desire to assimilate or "pass," as it were, frequently use the codes and symbols of others to facilitate communication or simply to show respect. Of course, there are both psychological and social limits as to how people can use or manipulate ethnic or other forms of group identity. Individuals are socialized into primary groupings in ways that encourage a psychological commitment to their close relatives and to the symbols and values to which they adhere. Rarely do individuals repudiate these primary ties. Moreover, there are practical constraints on the manipulation of sources of identity. One constraint has to do with the willingness of other people to accept the use of a particular identity.

Although ethnic identity is ultimately an individual strategy, its main social significance emerges in the extent to which it serves as the basis for political or economic organization. Throughout the Middle East there was historically a strong tendency for occupational specialization to be associated with particular ethnic groups. For example, many families of the Jewish community in Isfahan traditionally specialized in fine metalwork and in trading of gold and silver; Kurds in Istanbul and Ankara, moving seasonally into the cities as temporary residents, had a near-monopoly as porters in the bazaars; most hotels and restaurants in Iraq used to be run and staffed by Assyrian Christians; most of the long-distance truck drivers and automotive mechanics of Iran were Azeri Turks, and most of the professional cooks in Egypt were Nubians. Today, this is rapidly changing, even disappearing, due to a number of factors, including mass education, mobility, and the proliferation of new occupations.

Although these days it is not possible to identify particular tasks or occupations exclusively with particular groups, there are still some general associations. For example, Gypsies are closely identified with tasks thought to be polluting or degrading, such as dealing in animal hides and public entertainment. Christians and Jews have long been associated with forms of comm-

and business, which, for religious or other cultural reasons, were felt unsuitable for Muslims. Money lending or money changing and import-export activities that relied on such transactions were dominated by non-Muslims until mid-century. Only 20 percent of business enterprises enumerated in the Ottoman census of 1913–15 were Muslim-owned (Keyder, 1999). The role of non-Muslims in trade, of course, was furthered by their ability to use their contacts with coreligionists outside the area.

What is almost universal is for each region or community to have its locally unique patterns of division of labor along ethnic lines. There are organizational advantages in having skills and trades passed from father to son, and there are advantages in closely related individuals following the same craft or line of trade. Quite apart from facilitating training, relatives are often sources of credit or capital given on the basis of personal trust and reputation. In general, communication is also easier among kin, which probably facilitates the local prominence of one or another group in a particular endeavor. Because lines of patronage and mutual support often reflect primary group ties, it is not surprising that as new jobs or employment opportunities arise, they may be filled by people sharing a social or ethnic identity.

Ethnic group membership can structure access to resources and intergroup relations. In other words, as Fredrik Barth (1969) notes very elegantly, the cultural content of ethnicity—that is, the symbols and codes that define it—can facilitate or impede the access of people to resources. In Barth's view, ethnic groups can be thought of as occupying unique places in the social landscape. The place or niche of any group is determined by what they do for a living, their social and political organization, and their relations to other groups in their environment. Further, this approach draws attention to the fact that occupational or productive specialization on the part of an entire group can be a very effective means of utilizing available resources, including labor and acquired skills.

This model emphasizes the complementarity of the roles and functions served by the different groups who interact with one another. For example, the Yörük of southeastern Turkey (see Chapter 5) have traditionally been nomadic pastoralists. They do not, however, own pastures and must acquire grazing rights from local landlords and villages. Thus, their niche is defined as much by the activities of other groups as it is by the needs of their animals and the grasses that sustain them. The Yörük exploit marginal areas and high pastures that local farmers are not equipped to fully utilize. The close lines of communication and mutual support among the Yörük make it difficult for outsiders to effectively compete with them in getting pastures, in organizing sales of animal products, and in moving flocks. Ethnicity, with its emphasis on shared unique social characteristics, thus facilitates access to certain resources, even the defense of them against others. As a result, particular resources or ways of exploiting them may become identified in many regions with particular peoples.

However, we have to keep in mind that complementarity or mutuality of benefits is only one aspect of intergroup relations. Groups frequently establish

exploitative relationships with others in which ethnic identity may serve to organize and perpetuate inequality. The Shabak of northern Iraq (see Chapter 3), for example, were a caste-like grouping of agricultural sharecroppers who depended on politically and socially dominant urban Arab landlords. Differentiated by language and religious practices, the Shabak long remained a weak and exploited group. As Shabak, they were systematically denied access to better jobs outside their community and found it difficult to find anyone who would sell them land. The ethnic label of Shabak locally connoted poverty, backwardness, and low status. Should a Shabak family acquire wealth or move into town, it would rapidly try to disassociate itself from the rural community, which at times included changing language and customary practices.

Even when a high degree of economic mutuality exists among members of different groups interacting together, there may also be considerable mutual antipathy. For example, the Sulubba, Gypsy-like nomadic peoples of Arabia, formerly specialized in metalwork, music making, and entertainment. They regularly moved from one Bedouin camp to another or between villages, plying their trade. Despite close association with their hosts and clients, they were held in low esteem and were socially ostracized. Although at times the very values and attitudes held by members of a particular ethnic group toward others may engender overt hostility and conflict, this should not be overly stressed as a generalization. Mutual accommodation and tolerance are by far the more common basis for communal interaction. Lebanon, prior to the serious outbreak of interethnic violence in the mid-1970s, was held up as a paradigm of interethnic accommodation and mutual tolerance for at least two generations. Today it is once again largely free from terrorism and intercommunal fighting, having adopted an acceptable arrangement of power sharing.

We should reemphasize that ethnicity is an analytic concept used to describe or understand aspects of individual or group identity. While we speak easily of particular ethnic groups and their cultural boundaries, we have to keep in mind that the effective units of social action implied by ethnic labels are ever-changing. Whether or not a particular ethnic category of people or identifiable collectivity is meaningfully thought of as a "group" depends on a knowledge of the specific circumstances. For example, it is not useful to regard Arabs in the Middle East as an ethnic group. However, a small subpopulation of Arabic speakers within a Persian-speaking community *may* interact as a bounded group in the way that Barth suggests.

In the following sections, we look at important sources for cultural differentiation that may be utilized at any given time to define ethnic-group boundaries. These sources for differentiation constitute the raw materials for ethnic identity and group formation.

RACE

Of all the elements that may be used to define groups or social categories, phenotypic race or biological variation is the least important in the Middle East, where the vast majority of the people from Egypt to Afghanistan tend to fall within the same racial grouping, often referred to as "Mediterranean." Where a markedly differentiated population exists, such as the *'abid* or blacks of Saudi Arabia, the Nubians of Egypt, or the *Türkmen* of Iran (with pronounced Mongoloid features), such phenotypic differences are locally recognized but are not necessarily associated with an ethnic identity. Even though in much of the area light skin is considered a mark of beauty and high status, there is no prevailing ideology of race based on color. For example, many would describe Gypsies as a distinguishable "racial" grouping, but in fact the clues to making such an identification are largely cultural rather than phenotypic—style of dress, occupation, manner of deportment, and the like.

While slavery was historically practiced throughout the Islamic world, it was not exclusively associated with Africans or any other particular population. In the Arabian Peninsula, as might be expected by virtue of geography, most slaves were East African in origin, and their descendants still form fairly distinct groupings within Peninsular Arabian society. One remaining frontier of contention between Muslim and so-called "pagan" or animist populations runs through southern Sudan. For over 40 years there has been a struggle amounting to civil war pitting the Arabs of the north, who dominate all state institutions, against the Nilotic-speaking populations of the southern provinces, most of whom are Christian or animist. While the course of this conflict is too complex to enter into here, one sad by-product of the anarchy it has created is the resurgence of slaving involving both Christians and animists as victims.

The Ottomans recruited slaves from both Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. In general, the descendants of these slaves today do not form either racially or ethnically distinct groups. This is because many of the "slaves" were employed in high-level administrative positions and in the military. In fact, they were not slaves at all in the sense of chattel but rather were part of the sultan's entourage and administrative cadre. Once converted to Islam, such individuals served the government throughout the empire, married, and accumulated property. Slavery in this case meant little more than a "servant of the sultan." Islamic law does not privilege distinctions of race, ethnicity, class, rank, or family, and the descendants of slaves, of whatever origin, are not stigmatized, nor are the descendants of converts to Islam.

Outside of a few towns in southern Arabia, slavery in the Middle East has never been a primary means of organizing menial labor. Perhaps as a consequence, the association of class and race or ethnicity and race is not well developed in the area.¹

¹ Bernard Lewis (1990, 1979).

LANGUAGE

As we have noted, under certain circumstances, linguistic differences can become ethnic markers. But, more important, language serves to establish boundaries on a much larger scale. The three major language groupings in the modern Middle East are the Semitic, Indo-European, and Altaic or Turkic linguistic families. These are broad classifications, and each encompasses a number of major languages and numerous distinctive dialects. Arabic and Hebrew are Semitic languages. Whereas Hebrew is spoken only in Israel, Arabic is the national language of the countries of North Africa, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller states of the Arabian Peninsula. The Indo-European language family is regionally represented by the many dialects of modern Persian, Kurdish, Luri, Baluchi, and smaller groups of Greek and Armenian speakers. The major Turkic languages and dialects are western or standard Turkish of Anatolia, Azeri of Iran, *Türkmen*, and the languages of smaller groups of eastern Turkic speakers of Central Asian origin, such as Tatars and Kazaks. In Northwest Africa, Berber, an Afro-Asiatic language, is spoken by a large number of people, especially in the mountain and desert regions of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and to a lesser extent in Libya. Berber is divided into a number of distinct, and in some cases, mutually unintelligible dialects/languages. However, Arabic is the official language throughout Northwest Africa, and the majority of the Berbers tend to be bilingual. Berber speakers, in general, do not refer to themselves as "Berber" but as "Imazighin."

Language in and of itself usually establishes only the outermost parameters to group membership, although dialect differences may precisely identify a person as to region or even tribe. In Baghdad, for example, Muslims, Jews, and Christians all speak Iraqi Arabic, a dialect distinct from colloquial Egyptian or Syrian. However, the three groups can be distinguished from one another on the basis of distinctive speech mannerisms, syntax, and grammar.

Spoken Arabic represents a number of distinct speech communities that vary regionally; those of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia are quite distinct. Even within countries, there is regional variation, as, for example, between Lower and Upper Egypt. In the extreme southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, a small number of communities speak a highly variant dialect of Arabic identified as Southern Arabian. Nonetheless, the major dialects of Arabic are usually mutually comprehensible and all are written in one form. The rapid development of mass communication and the extension of public education are facilitating the breakdown of dialect barriers and encouraging the spread of a common standardized Arabic used in publications everywhere.

Persian, an Indo-European language, is the national language of Iran and encompasses many closely related dialects spoken as a first language by about 50 million people in Iran and by over 5 million people in neighboring Afghanistan. Persian is written in Arabic characters and, as does Turkish, has a substantial Arabic vocabulary. The infusion of Arabic is due in part to the early

politicoreligious domination of Iran by the Arab Muslims and at least in equal part to the use of Arabic by medieval Persian scholars and men of letters. As with Arabic, dialect variations in Persian serve to differentiate class and regional affiliations.

The third national language in the Middle East is Turkish. Of the over 150 million Turkic-speaking peoples in the world, more than 55 million live in Turkey proper where dialectical differences are relatively minor when compared with other primary language families. Urban-rural differences in speech frequently overshadow regional differences, although certain interregional linguistic differences can be easily distinguished, for example, the Black Sea coast from the Mediterranean. Until the reforms of the Atatürk period, Turkish was written in Arabic script, but since 1928 Turkish has used the Roman alphabet. Variants of the Roman alphabet, as adapted to Turkish, are increasingly used in the Central Asian Turkic republics, marking political and cultural reorientation away from Russia.

In every state, there are important communities that speak languages other than the national languages, as well as a substantial amount of bilingualism. This gives a political dimension to language and constitutes the level at which language is most salient in defining ethnic boundaries. In Turkey, for example, about 10 million to 12 million people are native speakers of Kurdish, and many other smaller groups of people speak Armenian, Greek, Ladino (a Spanish dialect spoken by Sephardic Jews), Tatar, Circassian, or Bulgarian. Perhaps as many as 100,000 people in Turkey speak Arabic. However, only standard Turkish can be used in schools (apart from a small number of designated foreign or religious institutions) and in the courts.

At one time Kurdish newspapers, books, and records were illegal. Today in Turkey there are numerous Kurdish publications, as well as some quasi-legal TV and radio broadcasting. A national organization, the Mesopotamian Cultural Club and Press Centre, has offices throughout the country and often sponsors musical and literary events. The old euphemism "mountain Turk" is no longer used, and Kurdish identity is openly referred to in the media—although it should also be noted that new euphemisms are also employed, such as "an ethnic grouping." It remains illegal to advocate anything that the authorities might interpret as "divisive" or "separatist," which is a powerful and much resented disincentive to free speech and even musical and literary expression. However, in neighboring Iraq, where the 4 million to 5 million Kurds form an even larger minority relative to the national population, Kurdish is the language of education in districts where Kurds predominate. This has not been the case in Iran, where some 5 million Kurds live along the northwestern border. Although an Indo-European language, Kurdish is grammatically and lexically distinct from Persian. Public education is conducted exclusively in Persian, and the use of Kurdish in public media is restricted.

Like Kurdish speakers, the Baluch are also divided among a number of nation-states: Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The Baluch, who number around

3 million, speak highly localized variants of Baluchi, an Indo-European language. Located in one of the most arid mountainous zones of southwest Asia, most of the Baluch eke out a living as nomadic pastoralists, coastal fishermen, and farmers.

The presence of these large, linguistically differentiated minorities, like the Kurds, Baluch, Türkmén, or even the encapsulated Arabic-speaking communities in Turkey and Iran, has serious political implications. It is important to note that in every country there is a strong nationalist movement underwriting the use of particular languages or dialects to promote unity in the face of considerable and deeply rooted cultural diversity. For members of local populations, such as those we have noted, this often presents a major dilemma. To participate fully in the national economy, to educate their children, and to partake fully in the national culture, they have to acquire a second language and dissociate themselves to some extent from their primary communities.

Although the educated elite in most countries of the Middle East is almost always bilingual in a European language, great emphasis is placed on the promotion of a national tongue among the masses. Bilingualism in English and, to a lesser extent, French not only serves as a sign of education and status but is increasingly a necessary tool for employment in the emerging global market.

RELIGION

Although language and local dialects are significant in the differentiation of people and may delineate distinctive communities, religion is the most important single source of personal and group identity—and, by extension, social divisions. The perceived rights and obligations of one person to another are strongly tempered by whether or not the parties involved are coreligionists. The assumption that, in the final analysis, an individual will turn to and favor others of his or her faith is so pervasive as to constitute a basic principle of social interaction. Religion in its many sectarian expressions sets some of the most important limits to interpersonal behavior. Of all injunctions regarding marriage expressed by the religions of the Middle East, the one fundamental to all is that marriage be restricted to coreligionists.

This is not to say that religious ties or bonds inevitably supersede all others. In fact, class differences, tribal and ethnic divisions, and the like often take precedence over any claims of religion as people organize themselves in groups for common action. Religion is more a determinant of maximal boundaries or inclusiveness, less commonly the basis for local organization. For example, a village may be composed of both Sunni and Alevi residents (Shankland, 1993a, 1993b). This distinction is almost inevitably reflected in voluntary residential segregation. However, within each residential quarter, groups organizing for political action or other purposes are most likely to utilize more exclusive criteria for membership. Recruitment for political action is more apt to be along lines

of common descent and tribal affiliation. One has only to look at the persistent conflicts in Iran between the Shi'a Azeri and Shi'a Persians, or in Iraq between the Sunni Kurds and Sunni Arabs for examples of ongoing intrasectarian conflict. Moreover, ties of close friendship, contractual partnerships, and political alliances everywhere join people across sectarian boundaries. Residence within towns and cities, while often expressing some aggregation along sectarian lines, is rarely homogeneous. In virtually every big city, Christians, Jews, and Muslims live in close juxtaposition and share apartment buildings and compounds.

Although religion cannot be evoked to explain all or even most patterns of social interaction, sectarianism continues, nonetheless, to be a factor with important political and social consequences for every country in the region. Nationalistic movements both within countries and those, like pan-Arab nationalism, which transcend state frontiers, have consistently found it difficult to reconcile sectarianism with their more encompassing national and transnational political objectives. Islamist political movements also have to contend with Muslim sectarianism.

NON-MUSLIM CONFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES: JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

Because the nature of religious distinctions in the Middle East and the development of specific confessional communities are rooted in the formative period of Islam, the tenacity of sectarianism in the political and social arenas can only be understood when considered within the historical context. Further, all successor states and governments have, one way or another, perpetuated the idea of the confessional community as part of the structure of society.

From its inception, Islam as a faith was explicitly the basis for political action; even within the lifetime of its founder it became the vehicle for the formation and organization of a new polity. The boundaries of the political community were not simply territorial but coincided with those of the religious one, or *umma*. Both the legitimacy of the ruler and the rights and responsibilities of the members derived from their common membership in the religious community; it followed that to be a full citizen was also to be a Muslim. Although over the centuries there have been many Muslim states, and although many Muslim groups have been encapsulated within non-Muslim polities, recognition of common membership in one *umma*, or Muslim community, remains a potent ideological force.

What, then, of the non-Muslims who were incorporated into the early Islamic empires and their successor states? The Prophet Muhammad regarded the Christians and Jews as "People of the Book," the recipients of a valid but incomplete, and hence imperfect, revelation. Members of both communities were allowed to practice their religion and keep their institutions and property, but on the condition that they pay a special poll tax. They were not allowed to

serve in the army or assume direct authority over Muslims. As a consequence, Christians and Jews assumed a status of *Ahl al-dhimmi*, that is, tolerated clients of the Muslim community—clients who suffered certain sociopolitical liabilities in exchange for protection and the right to retain their distinctive religious identities and communal organization.²

While the significant distinction is between Muslim and non-Muslim, the underlying principle is more widely employed. Religious identity, even as narrowly defined by the sects that rapidly arose within Islam itself, assumes political significance. The systematic merging of social and religious identity persists and has become even further institutionalized with time, as we see, for instance, in the Coptic-Muslim social cleavage in Egypt.

Within the Ottoman Empire, the immediate political predecessor to many of the modern states with which we are concerned here, this system was particularly developed and formed a principle of the organization of the empire. In May 1453, the Ottoman armies, led by Sultan Mehmet II, captured the city of Constantinople from the Byzantines. Even though the Ottomans already ruled vast lands containing Christian subjects in Europe and Anatolia, it was only after the fall of Constantinople that they institutionalized a system of governance that came to be called the *millet*. The sultan sought the support of selected Christian religious leaders and assured the Greek Orthodox clergy that it could retain civil as well as religious authority over Orthodox Christians in the empire. In fact, he used the clergy to bring in Greek settlers to help repopulate the city, which, at the time of conquest, had been in decline.

The practice of delegating considerable authority to community and religious leaders is the basis of the *millet* system, which was later extended to the Armenians, Jews, and others. Quite apart from being an effective way of ruling non-Muslims, it had the effect of reinforcing the political and social significance of sectarian identity. Marriage, divorce, and other aspects of personal status were all regulated through the *millet*. The *millet* was also responsible for resolving many of its own internal conflicts and for paying some taxes collectively. By the nineteenth century, 17 different *millets* were recognized by the Ottoman government.

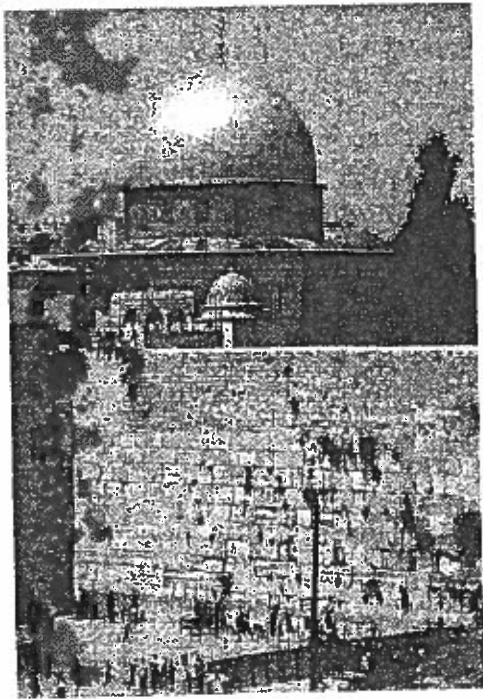
It is apparent that religious or communal divisions are basic to the structure of Middle Eastern political life and are not simply anomalies or the result of imperfect assimilation. The various Christian sects and the Jews have, over the centuries, accommodated themselves to Muslim rule, just as the Muslim majority has recognized their right to persist in a separate communal order. Likewise, within Islam itself, the various sects often maintained a separate communal order resembling that of the non-Muslim minorities.

² For an excellent study of the Christian and Jewish communities in the Middle East, see Y. Courbage and P. Fargues (1998).

Only with the advent of nationalistic ideologies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did this communal and sectarian compartmentalization come to be questioned and tested. The issues of what constitutes nationality and full citizenship and how to accommodate sectarian differences still have to be resolved in most of the states of the area. Interestingly, this is as true of Israel as it is of the other states. To appreciate this new dimension of Middle Eastern society and politics, we will describe briefly the historical evolution of Jewish and Christian communities in the region. We begin our discussion with the Jews, who form some of the oldest continuing ethnoreligious communities in the area.³

Jewish Communities

A review of the place of Jews in the Ottoman Empire is illustrative of the wider structural position of non-Muslims in society, keeping in mind that the political structure itself changed with time and that administrative practices differed regionally.⁴ In 1492, on the eve of Columbus's voyage to the New World,



The Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem towers above the Western Wall, a sacred site to the Jews.

³ See Bernard Lewis (1984).

⁴ The following is taken from Avigdor Levy's edited collection of recent and authoritative essays on the Jews of the Ottoman Empire (1994), as well as from Eleazar Birnbaum's excellent review of the volume (1997).

Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain issued an edict expelling all Jews from their recently unified kingdom. The Sephardim, or Jews of Spain, sought and received haven in the Ottoman Empire. Even before this influx, significant numbers of Yiddish- and Greek-speaking Jews lived in rural and urban communities throughout the empire. Heath Lowry, a historian, looking at tax records for Salonica (Thessalonika), now in northern Greece, found that the taxable Jewish population rose from zero in 1478 to 60 percent of the city in 1530 (cited in Birnbaum, 1997, p. 213). Equally interesting, he discovered a sudden decrease in their numbers in the seventeenth century paralleled by a rise in Muslim households, which, he states, "stemmed from the Jewish followers of Shabbetai Tzevi formally embracing Islam" (p. 213). (Such conversions were rare, however.) Within the Jewish community of Salonica in the sixteenth century, which was the second largest of the empire and of the world, there was a pan-congregational institution known as the *kehillah*, which represented the various congregations to the authorities for purposes of taxation, as well as running a Torah school and operating a hospital, a hospice for travelers, and an insane asylum. In commerce, crafts, the arts, and medicine, the Jews contributed greatly to the prosperity of the empire. Individual communities and congregations enjoyed considerable autonomy under rabbinical leadership. In fact, until the end of the eighteenth century the bulk of the Jewish Ladino (Spanish-speaking) population did not find it necessary to speak or to write Turkish or Greek, and the daily life in the Jewish quarter focused on annual rounds of religious ritual and celebrations

In 1835, the already de facto Jewish *millet* was formalized with the appointment by the sultan of the *haham başı*, or chief rabbi. More or less from this date, beginning with the elite merchant class, secular and reform-minded organizations began promoting the use of written Turkish, as well as education in French and the adoption of European modes of dress and deportment. By the late Ottoman period, 1911, official census registers show 375,000 Jews as citizens, although many Jewish residents of the empire were not counted as they were carrying foreign passports, as was common among non-Muslims of the period (Birnbaum, 1997, p. 450). As the empire collapsed, considerable numbers of Balkan-dwelling Jews, like their Muslim counterparts, migrated into the remaining heartland. Following the establishment of state of Israel in 1948, most Iraqi, Turkish, Syrian, Egyptian, and North African Jews moved there, although in the case of Turkey, there was some reverse migration. Today, there are about 20,000 Jews in Turkey, down from 90,000 in 1948 (de Lange, 1999).

As we have noted, until the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, a number of fairly large Jewish communities were found throughout the Middle East. In fact, the Arab countries of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen alone are estimated to have had a Jewish population of about 400,000 in the mid-1940s.⁵ Now there are only about 300 Jews remaining in Syria, and fewer still in Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Yemen. On the whole, these communities tended to be

⁵ *American Jewish Yearbook* (1985).

urban with a few rural exceptions, such as those in northern Iraq and Yemen. In the former, the Jews spoke a Hebrew dialect, *targum*, and were the clients of powerful Kurdish chiefs in the area. Ranging from very wealthy urban bankers and merchants with international connections to poor, small shopkeepers and artisans, the members of the urban Jewish communities reflected in their lifestyles the different cultural traditions of the areas in which they lived. While displaying great internal diversity both in language and culture, most Jewish people residing in the Middle East before World War I were either dispersed remnants of ancient Jewish communities or members, as described earlier, of mostly Sephardic populations that, fleeing Christian oppression, sought refuge in Ottoman and other Muslim lands. In places the Sephardic Jews preserved their Spanish heritage through the use of Ladino, a Spanish dialect. The Ladino-speaking Sephardim were mostly urban and were concentrated in Istanbul and Izmir in Turkey.

The 1947 Egyptian census listed 65,639 Jews, most of whom lived in Cairo, with a small group in Alexandria. Cairo, like Baghdad, also had a large indigenous Jewish population and still boasts one of the oldest synagogues in continuous existence in the world. Here, again, the Jewish community, while distinguished by class differences, resided primarily in one quarter of the city and engaged in commerce, artisanship, and peddling. The position of the Jews in Egypt, like that of the Jews in Syria and Iraq, became extremely uncomfortable during and after the 1948 War of Independence and the establishment of Israel. Moreover, many Jews were closely associated with the British, French, Italian, Greek, and other foreign communities. When nationalist sentiment became inflamed against Israel and the West, it also rose against the Jewish community, finally bringing about a mass exodus after the British, French, and Israeli invasion in 1956.

There have been Jews in Iran since ancient times, and even though their native tongue is Persian, they maintain a strong sense of separate identity fostered by close intermarriage, residential segregation, and a focus on a number of shrines and pilgrimage centers within Iran, notably in Yazd, Isfahan, and Hamadan; a major shrine is the tomb of Daniel in Shush. Following the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Jewish community in Iran came under considerable pressure, with prominent members accused in the press of ties with Israel. In 1999, 13 prominent individuals were formally indicted and charged with spying for Israel. As a result there has been considerable out-migration both to Israel and North America, although about 30,000 remain (down from 80,000 in 1979) (de Lange, 1999).

While the scope of this book does not permit for a country-by-country treatment, Israel, the world's single Jewish state, needs special attention. Of a total population of 6 million, approximately 1 million Arabs live in Israel, 76 percent of whom are Muslim and the rest Christian. Immigration is the central and unique feature of Jewish nation-building (Goldscheider, 1996). Immigration from Ethiopia and Russia has increased the Jewish population by over half

a million; in contrast, Palestinian population growth is due to higher than replacement birth rates. The various Jewish communities of Middle Eastern origins form a distinctive segment of Israeli society and are collectively known as *mizrachim*, or Oriental Jews. Although they make up a large percentage of the population of Israel, they tend to be underrepresented in the upper echelons of the government, army, and bureaucracy. Furthermore, they feel unfairly disadvantaged in terms of government programs and access to jobs in comparison with the recently arrived Jews from the former Soviet Union.

Christians in the Middle East

The Christian communities in the Middle East have a long and turbulent history.⁶ Originally, all Christians in the region belonged to one or another of the indigenous churches that followed the Eastern rites. Outside the Greek Orthodox church, which was the official church of the Byzantines, the others had their origin in the schismatic "heresies" of the fifth and sixth centuries. Two of the largest Christian communities, the Copts of Egypt and the Assyrian Nestorians, go back to the fifth century and the religious controversies that culminated in the Council of Chalcedon (451). The disagreements ostensibly had to do with dogma, specifically concerned with the nature of Christ. However, these secessionist movements also represented efforts by the local populations to free themselves from the cultural and political domination of the Byzantines. In fact, the oppressiveness of Byzantine rule must have greatly facilitated the early and rapid success of the Muslim armies. This was the case of the Coptic community of Egypt. Persecuted by the Byzantines who regarded their church as schismatic, the Copts welcomed the Muslim armies in the mid-seventh century. After the Muslims defeated the Byzantines, they concluded a peace treaty with the Coptic Patriarch. The Copts today constitute the single largest Christian community in the Middle East.

Rural-dwelling Copts are concentrated in Upper Egypt, where they are found in villages little different from those of their Muslim neighbors except for the presence of a small church. Copts follow their own religious calendar, with its distinctive periods of fasting and holidays. Their clergy, who are allowed to marry, wield considerable power in their communities, where they act as leaders. Like the larger Muslim community, Copts prefer arranged marriages among close relatives—for example, the marriage of a son to his father's brother's daughter. Copts speak Egyptian Arabic and are culturally very much like the Muslim Egyptians of the same social class and education.

The Assyrian Christian communities of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, like the Copts, once constituted a *millet* within the Ottoman Empire. Although today the majority of them are probably to be found in the United States and Canada (with

⁶ Again, see Y. Courbage and P. Fargues (1998) for an overview of the history of Christian communities in the area.

some recent immigrants to Sweden as well), enough remain in these countries to make up distinctive minorities on the Mesopotamian plains and uplands. The largest is in Iraq. In origin, most of the Assyrians were rural dwellers in the northern part of the country; today they are found throughout the cities and towns of Iraq, with the largest concentration in the capital of Baghdad.

The majority of the Assyrians belong to the Nestorian church, with a small group divided between the Catholic and Protestant churches. The Nestorian church was originally centered in southern Iraq, and its communities were scattered over a large area, some as far as Central Asia and even China. Until recently, the Assyrians, who speak an Aramaic dialect, were an agricultural people scattered in villages in the mountains of Hakkâri (on the Iraqi-Turkish border) and in the valleys east of Lake Urmia. Caught in the turbulent politics of the area following World War I, the Assyrian leaders allied themselves with the British, and Assyrians joined the British army in Iraq as special levies. With Britain's help, a group of Assyrians hoped to establish an independent state for the Assyrians in northern Iraq. However, the British shift in policy and their interest in the establishment of an Arab monarchy in Iraq combined with a divided Assyrian leadership to put a cruel end to their hopes. Not only were the Assyrians frustrated in their efforts at independence, but several hundred of them were massacred in 1933 as they tried to flee Iraq into French-held Syria.

Besides the Copts and the Assyrians, there are other Christian sects of importance in the Middle East. One such group is the Uniate churches, of which the Maronites of Lebanon make up the largest community. The term *Uniate* refers to those communities of the Eastern churches that chose to recognize the authority of the Pope and to adopt the Latin rites. They did, however, retain their own patriarchs and internal autonomy. For example, the Chaldean Christians—a group of about 160,000 in Iraq, Syria, and Iran—split from the Nestorian church in 1750 and, urged on by Dominican missionaries, joined the Catholic church and acknowledged the Pope's authority in matters of dogma. Locally recognized as an enterprising and hardworking people, the Chaldeans dominated the service sector in the cities of Iraq, especially the hotel and restaurant business. Following World War II, large numbers of them, like their Assyrian neighbors, began immigrating to the United States and Canada—a process that continues today.

It is impossible to discuss the Maronite Christians without reference to the political scene in Lebanon. The recent history of Lebanon illustrates both the consequences of those historical processes that locate politics in sectarianism and the impact of Western colonialism and international power struggles on local politics.

The Maronites of Lebanon

The Maronite Uniate church is a national one that, in the main, is limited to Lebanon. It makes up the single largest Middle Eastern Christian community outside of Egypt. Syrian in origin, the Maronites are the followers of Saint John

Maroun (d. 410), who lived and preached near Antioch in present-day Turkey. Persecuted by the Byzantines in the fifth century, they sought refuge in the mountains of northern Lebanon and later spread to north-central Lebanon, which still remains their stronghold. Ruled directly or indirectly by the Ottomans from 1516 until the establishment of the French Mandate in the 1920s, the Maronites managed to retain a measure of independence that varied largely in response to the support they received from European powers. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the Maronites were already closely allied with the French and had emerged as the most important local sectarian power. This brought them into conflict not only with the Ottoman authorities but, more immediately, with the Druze and other Muslim groups in their area. In 1843, following a series of uprisings in Lebanon, the Ottomans responded to European pressure to create separate sectarian governorships for the various groups they ruled. After a series of massacres between the Druze, supported by the British, and the Maronites, supported by the French, the Ottomans created, in 1864, yet another governmental apparatus, one that was essentially the basis for the present state of Lebanon. This was the governate of Lebanon, based on a system of sectarian representation with an appointed Maronite governor. The political and economic dominance of the Maronite community, institutionalized at that time, continued until tested and broken in the 1975 civil war in Lebanon.⁷

The Republic of Lebanon was proclaimed in 1926 when the constitution was promulgated, but the real reins of power remained with the French. In 1943, the various Lebanese political leaders and factions closed ranks and demanded independence. When the French ousted the president and his prime minister, the Lebanese formed a resistance government and proclaimed a National Pact, which regulated relations among the different sectarian communities, of which the Maronite was then the largest. Complete independence was not achieved until the end of 1946, when the last French soldier sailed away and Lebanon became a member of the Arab League and the United Nations.

Modern Lebanon was founded on the assumption that the various confessional groups or religious sects would be united in a single polity as corporate units holding equal rights and status in the public domain. Thus citizenship in Lebanon came to necessitate identification with one or another of the 17 recognized religious communities or sects, the 7 main ones being Maronites, Sunni Muslims, Shi'a Muslims (the largest single sect today), Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Druze, and Armenian Orthodox (Gregorian). Lesser sects include the Jacobite Christians, Syrian Catholics, Armenian Catholics, Jews, and Protestants—all this in a population of little more than 3 million.

The different confessional groups in Lebanon share a common language, Arabic, and a recognition of their interdependence. No community could dominate the other without endangering the very existence of the state, which was maintained in a "precarious balance," or perhaps more aptly, "in a balance of

⁷See Samir Khalaf (1993).

fear." Once hailed as the model for a Middle Eastern pluralistic and democratic society, Lebanon served a key function in the area. In the past, it was a refuge for persecuted religious minorities, and in modern times it became a haven for Middle Eastern political refugees of all persuasions.

In the summer of 1975, the "precarious balance" came to an abrupt and violent end. The delicate political fabric of Lebanon began to unravel and civil war broke out. Overtly, Christian was pitted against Muslim, but some clarifying remarks are necessary to correct the oversimplistic interpretation of the "Christian-Muslim" conflict in Lebanon as having been no more than an inevitable ethnic confrontation. As with most ethnic confrontations, the one in Lebanon was symptomatic of profound political and socioeconomic dislocations, greatly exacerbated by outside forces and foreign interests.

It has been accurately noted that the catalyst for the civil war was the presence in Lebanon of a large Palestinian population, both as refugees in camps that stretched from the heart of Beirut to the southern borders and as an armed military group that constituted a state within a state. In the mid-1970s, the Palestinian presence was estimated at about half a million. The presence of the refugees put a serious strain on Lebanon's economy, and the well-armed Palestinian militia complicated the political scene both internally and at the international level. Their presence in and use of southern Lebanon as a base of operations prompted regular and severe retaliatory strikes by Israeli forces. The effect of these strikes reverberated throughout Lebanese society and further added to the strains that already existed among the different groups.

The presence of the Palestinians clearly precipitated the crisis, but there were other underlying factors. One factor had to do with the way that sectarian and ethnic groups are distributed throughout the country. Each of the 17 officially recognized sectarian or ethnic groups in Lebanon has a relatively clear regional base from which its leading families contend for power on the national scene. A second underlying cause of conflict had to do with differential access to resources. The prosperity the country experienced in the 1940s and 1950s as a result of its role as a leading trade and banking center was unequally shared among the different groups; some, like the Shi'a, were substantially excluded from the benefits of the economic growth that favored most of the Christian communities engaged in trade.⁸

Before World War II, it seems that economic disparities among the various sectarian communities were relatively muted and were channeled along well-established and generally acceptable lines. By the mid-1970s, however, the agricultural majority of the population was receiving only 15 percent of the gross national product, while the 14 percent of the population engaged in commerce and related activities received 46 percent of the GNP. The Maronites benefited disproportionately from this development. Also, although no census has been conducted since 1932, the belief was widespread that the Maronites no longer

⁸ See Joseph Suad (1978) and Joseph Suad and Barbara Pillsbury (1978).

constituted the largest sect in the country, about 25 percent of total population, and that their political power, while reflecting their wealth, did not reflect their numbers—still another cause for resentment (Awad, 1991, p. 85).

In earlier years, sectarian identification held little implication for economic class differentiation; by 1975, such was no longer the case. In February 1975, there was a major strike by Shi'a fishermen working for Maronite boat owners; their violent protests were quickly joined by Palestinians and others. With their numbers considerably enhanced by the Palestinian refugees, the various Muslim groupings, who now made up about 65 percent of the total population, demanded a larger share of the economy and a reorganization of the political system, with increased secularization of the state and mass elections. The politically dominant Christians, fearful of losing their advantage and angered by the alien presence of the revolutionary Palestinians—Christian or Muslim—refused a drastic overhaul of the political system, and armed confrontation ensued. But it was quickly apparent that Lebanon was to become the arena for the power plays of several outside interests: American, Syrian, and Israeli, among others. The instability generated by outside intervention and acts of inter-communal violence quickly undermined the already weak central state institutions and initiated a period of civil war.

The alignments produced by the warfare were bewildering, but they are a useful reminder that conflict expressed in the rhetoric of ethnicity or religion is never as clear-cut as it may appear. Even close observers disagreed as to the underlying principles that governed the short-term alliances among the many contending parties: Shi'a allied with Palestinians; right wing Phalangist Christians were supported by the Syrian army; Israel aided (and still does to some extent) certain Christian armed militia in the south. Many who rallied supporters to their cause in terms of religious or political beliefs appeared to have little more than banditry in mind—much as was later to be the case in the breakup of Yugoslavia. It was a conflict whose destruction clearly went beyond the self-interest of any class or sect. If any interest was served in all this, it was certainly not that of the Lebanese.

After 13 years of bloody civil war that left more than 150,000 dead and 300,000 displaced, in addition to the half-million who left the country, a political accord, known as the Ta'if Agreement, was reached in 1988. The Ta'if Agreement, named after the city in which the formal deliberations were held, was drawn up under the patronage of Saudi Arabia and with the approval of Syria (and the blessing, not to mention pressure, of the United States) and put an official end to the Lebanese war but not to political conflict (Kisirwani, 1997). It stripped the Maronite presidency of most of its executive powers, formed a new and powerful council of ministers, and balanced Sunni control of the prime minister's post by making a Shi'a speaker of the parliament—in short the Maronites lost their political dominance but retained a strong confessional presence. Two years later, the massive and difficult process of reconstruction began when the Lebanese government announced a comprehensive recovery plan



Karekin I, the Catholicos of All Armenians, greeting Turkish Armenians in Istanbul

that came to be known as Horizon 2000. Lebanon today continues to deal with the problems of national reconciliation, economic recovery, and reestablishing a credible bureaucracy, among others.

The Armenians

Another Christian community in the region is that of the Armenians, with significant numbers in Turkey and Lebanon. In Lebanon, some 180,000 Armenians live mainly in the Burj Hammoud area of Beirut. Many left during the civil war for North America, Europe, or the newly independent Republic of Armenia, formed at the breakup of the USSR. While the majority belong to the Armenian Orthodox church, small groups are Roman Catholic and Protestant. The Armenians who had sought refuge in Lebanon at the end of World War I were granted citizenship in 1939 under the French mandatory regime. The Armenian population of Lebanon and the approximately 60,000 Armenian citizens of Turkey, of whom 50,000 are residents of Istanbul, are part of a diaspora that includes approximately 3.5 million in the newly independent Republic of Armenia, 1 million in the United States and Canada, and about 400,000 in France.

The Armenian community was formerly the most important and influential *millet* of the Ottoman Empire, and through its long history provided counselors to the Ottoman court and contributed actively to the commercial and

intellectual life of the empire. The total Armenian population in Anatolia at the turn of the century has been estimated at about 1.8 million, with the majority living in villages in the central and eastern regions. In the steppes and mountains of Anatolia, Armenian villages were intermingled with those of Kurdish, Türkmen, and other Muslim and Christian groups. The *millet* itself was traditionally headed by a Patriarch, confirmed by the Ottoman sultan, and generally selected by influential clerics and a number of wealthy urban families.

In the nineteenth century, the Armenian *millet* was subject to the same economic and political changes that buffeted the rest of Ottoman society, including the rise of nationalism, which had sparked the separatist movements of the peninsular Greeks and Balkan Christians. Caught between the British-Russian rivalry and the desire of many Armenians for internal reform, the *millet* became faction-ridden and highly politicized. The traditional leadership was opposed by those who, calling upon the support of one or another European power, attempted to secure further political advantage or even establish an independent Armenia. Influenced by the French Revolution and especially by the 1830 and 1848 revolutionary movements in Europe, young Armenian activists founded two socialist revolutionary parties, the Hunchakian and the Dashnak. The first, founded in 1887 in Geneva, called for complete political independence; the second, founded in Tiflis in 1890, advocated reforms within the framework of the Ottoman Empire.

Reacting violently to the threat of the Armenian revolutionary movements, government-sanctioned militias attacked a number of Armenian communities. The period 1894 through 1916 was marked by much intersectarian strife, repeated attacks on Armenian villages, and anti-Armenian pogroms. European powers consistently intervened in Ottoman domestic affairs, which contributed further to the widening gap that separated Muslim and Christian communities. French, British, and Russian consulates regularly issued passports to Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire, supplied money to dissidents, and encouraged the nationalist aspirations of the Greeks and the Armenians.

During World War I and immediately after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, massive deportations, forced movements of populations, and even the starvation of substantial numbers ultimately resulted in the removal of nearly all Armenians from rural Anatolia. The ill-considered attempt to establish an Armenian republic in southeastern Turkey following World War I resulted in massacres and the forced migration of the last remaining rural concentration of Armenians from Turkey. Thousands fled to Lebanon and Syria. Following World War II, about 40,000 Armenians left Lebanon and Syria and immigrated to Soviet Armenia, but the rest remained in Lebanon, where today they form a strong, internally cohesive ethnic community.

MUSLIM-DERIVED SECTARIAN COMMUNITIES

Although more could be said about the nature of non-Muslim communities and their constituent social groupings, in almost every country of the Middle East we have seen something of a shared pattern. This is one of historical encapsulation rather than assimilation of communities whose outer limits are set by religion. As described in Chapters 2 and 3, there are numerous Muslim-derived communities as well. In a structural sense, they are very similar to the non-Muslim ones, forming as they do inward-looking confessional minorities. Three of the latter, mentioned earlier, are the Druze of Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, the Alawis of Syria and Alevis of Turkey, and the Shabak of northern Iran.

The Druze and the Alawis exemplify the use of distinctive Islamic ideology and practice to announce a separate identity and to maintain what amounts to closed communities within the larger society.⁹ What these and others, like the 'Ibadis of Oman and the Metwali Shi'a communities of Lebanon and Syria, share is a history of political dissidence and persecution. Followers of these movements survived as weak minorities at the periphery of Islamic society; all sought refuge in rural, economically marginal, hard-to-administer areas, or "refuge zones." As a consequence, the political and social life of these communities tends to be highly involuted, inaccessible to outsiders, and hedged with secrecy. Leadership is usually in the hands of an oligarchy of religious leaders or elders. Moreover, because they are textually or scripturally based traditions, there is considerable internal diversity in belief and practice.

The spread of nationalism and the intrusion of state-wide institutions, particularly public education, have eroded some cultural boundaries that separate these sectarian groups. In Turkey, some Alevis actively participate in party politics as they seek a share of political power and economic gain, and are often sought out by secular intellectuals, particularly on the left (see Mango, 1993, 1994). In Syria the once poor and isolated Alawis or Nusairis, through their disproportionate representation in the army, managed to achieve a near-monopoly in the leadership of the country.

One case of religious dissidence, whose outcome is unique within recent Muslim history, is the Baha'i movement. In Juan Cole's masterful analysis (1999), the Baha'i faith can be interpreted as a case study in Middle Eastern modernity. Modernizing movements are almost entirely attributed to Western influences. Not so the Baha'i movement, which underwent a series of major transformations to end up as an established religion with two wings—one, the best-known and fastest-growing, emphasizing tolerance and universality, and the other, also pacific, emphasizing theocracy and scriptural literalism. The movement originated in Shiraz, Iran, in 1844, when a young man proclaimed

⁹ See David Shankland (1993a and b) for an excellent description of Alevi communities in comparative perspective.



Street scene in Damascus with a poster of Hafiz al-Assad, the president of Syria.

himself the *Bab*, or "Gateway to Heaven," and the new manifestation of the Prophet Muhammad. He rapidly gathered a following as he preached against the corruption of the clerical and governmental establishment of the Persia of his day. In this, the movement he founded followed a familiar pattern of expressing political and social protest in the idiom of religious reform. However, once Babism, as it was called, was put down by the execution of its leader in 1850 and the brutal persecution of his followers, the movement itself was radically transformed. Baha'allah, half-brother of the founder, began to interpret Babism as a universalistic faith, trying to reconcile what he perceived to be the best of Judaism and Christianity with Islam. Ultimately, the faith he founded, Baha'ism, broke with Islam. In short, the new religion represents as big a break with its past as does any development in the history of Christianity. Today its followers are found throughout the world. One of their important temples, for example, is in Evanston, Illinois, and their spiritual leader, a descendant of Baha'allah, resides in Haifa, Israel.

Most of the small Baha'i community in the Middle East is found in Iran, where, until recently, they were relatively well-to-do, were involved in business and commerce, and reputedly had close connections to the Shah's family. Following the Islamic revolution, they again suffered persecution and were charged with apostasy and disloyalty; their numbers have continued to dwindle as many seek refuge abroad.

REGIONAL ETHNIC GROUPS

We have stressed dissidence within Islam and non-Muslim sectarianism as important sources of ethnic and cultural diversity. In addition to sectarian-defined groupings, there are important Muslim populations that are distinguished by several overlapping claims to shared identity. Foremost among these are the shared sense of history, language, and cultural heritage associated with a region or place of origin. Such groups may range from large populations with strong territorial bases, like the Baluch, the Kurds, and the Palestinians, to smaller dispersed ones, like the Circassians. The Circassians, Muslims who fled the Caucasus in the nineteenth century, are found today on the Golan Heights, in Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and western Turkey. As a small and widely dispersed people, they appear to aspire to no more of a political future than to participate in the national order of the countries in which they live. Many, perhaps most, do not retain a distinctive language.

The Balkans, too, were a source of Muslim out-migration. With the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria, about 1 million Muslims, some speaking Turkish, others not, moved east to remain in the diminished empire. Many of those who settled in Turkey assimilated, but some village communities persist in retaining a distinct identity (Palaczek, 1993).

Today, the Kurds, Baluch, and Palestinians are divided among a number of different nation-states. Following the collapse of the USSR, the independent republics of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan were established, although sizable numbers of their potential citizens remain outside their frontiers in Iran. The nascent Palestinian state will also be a case where "the state disappoints the nation." Most Palestinians will undoubtedly never be found within the borders of a Palestinian state, nor will most of the territory they historically occupied. Given their numbers and long-established historical presence in their homelands, these people can be thought of as incipient nations without states. Thus it is not surprising that all of these groups have more or less active nationalistic movements seeking political expression either in independent nation-states or as recognized entities in confederated states. We will briefly consider the case of the Kurds, as they constitute the largest single regional or transnational ethnic group and one episodically involved in armed struggles.

The Kurds and Kurdistan

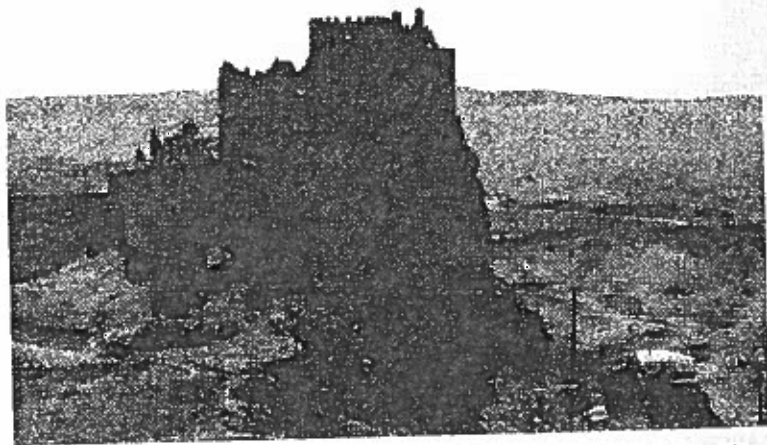
The Kurdish populations of Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Syria, and adjacent areas of Azerbaijan occupy a mostly highland area known historically as Kurdistan. In looking at the Kurdish populations, we see the politics of identity, religious and tribal sources of leadership, and a long history of foreign intervention and manipulation, all contributing to ongoing contention and conflict. But we also see forces at work that are transforming Middle Eastern societies in general, such as national and international labor migration, and economic and social division based on differential access to education and resources.

The Kurds were invited to the company of nation-states at the end of World War I, but never actually got through the door. In the end, the objectives of the Great Powers and the concerns of Turkey and Iran precluded statehood. The only modern Kurdish state was the short-lived Mahabad Republic, established by the Soviets during their brief post-World War II occupation of portions of Iran. While there has never been a unified Kurdish state, Kurdistan itself is also home to often sizable populations of Turks, Arabs, Persians, Lurs, and Türkmén—not to mention Armenians, whose nationalist aspirations would clash territorially with those of the Kurds. Eastern Turkey and the high plateau north of Lake Van were historically densely settled by Armenians, with Kurdish penetration relatively recent. A long history of warfare between the Persian and Ottoman empires established the present Iranian frontiers with Turkey and Iraq, while the post-World War I occupation by British forces in order to control the oil fields of Mosul and Kirkuk created the present-day Turkey-Iraq border. Since 1950, there has been large-scale migration of Kurds in Turkey, in particular to the western provinces and abroad. Approximately 750,000 Kurds live in Europe, particularly in Germany—a number augmented monthly by continued illegal migration as well as by asylum seekers. Today, the largest concentration of urban-dwelling Kurds is in Istanbul.

The region, apart from oil fields firmly under Iraqi control, has few natural resources with which to sustain development, and most outside observers would agree that rather than "exploiting" them, the nation-states in question subsidize their Kurdish regions in order to retain political control and to limit migration (Mango, 1993, p. 736). Population estimates are unreliable, but commonly used extrapolations put 10 million Kurds in Turkey, 5 million in Iran, 4 million in Iraq, 1 million in the successor states of the former USSR, and 500,000 in Syria. Kurdish is a language grouping within the Iranian family of languages and contains three main groups of dialects, Kurmanji, Sorani, and, most close to Persian, Kermanshahi. In addition, there are two smaller dialect groupings, Zaza and Gurani. Iranian Kurds of Kermanshah are mostly Shi'a, those in Turkey are Sunni, with the Zaza speakers being mostly Alevi. This linguistic and religious differentiation has been itself an obstacle to political unity and a common discourse.

While there are no uniquely or inherently Kurdish features of social organization, certain patterns stand out. The best recent anthropological source for understanding Kurdish rural society is Martin van Bruinessen (1992). He describes the tenacious survival of old loyalties, even where they come to carry new social meaning, such as in political parties and factionalism, and enduring traditional patterns of leadership in the form of tribal *aghas* (*aga* in Turkish), usually possessing wealth in land and herds, sheikhs or religious leaders and local saints and mystics, and the families and retainers of these leaders (see Chapter 3). Even the spread of nationalism, van Bruinessen suggests, had as much to do with positions adopted by such traditional tribal leaders as Mulla Mustafa Barzani as with nationalist or Marxist ideology. Often, too, even nontribal rural-dwelling Kurds are closely associated with tribal landowners who act as patrons. Political parties in Turkey, for example, whether or not specifically associated with Kurdish identity, vie for votes in the southeast by negotiating with these traditional leaders.

Van Bruinessen describes how Kurdish national identity developed apace with other nationalisms in the late Ottoman period, and how by the end of World War II there were efforts at national autonomy underway in every country with a Kurdish population, although these populations were by no means speaking with one voice. One very prominent revolt against the Kemalist government of Turkey that still has political echoes is the February 1925 revolt led by a charismatic sheikh of the Naqshbandi order, or *tariqa*, Sheikh Said. He fused a religious appeal with nationalistic sentiment and his followers briefly controlled a number of administrative centers before being suppressed. Also related to the Naqshbandi is the Nurcu Movement founded by another sheikh,



Ruins of a seventeenth-century castle in eastern Turkey. The castle was the stronghold of Sar Sulayman, a powerful local Kurdish chieftain.

Nur Said. His writings, mostly from the 1920s, remain very popular among Kurds and others, even though by the end of his life he had rejected nationalism, *per se*, in favor of a modern or reformist Islamic synthesis. It is said that this was the basis for the Fethullah Gülen Community Movement, which attracts adherents from all ethnic communities, and which we described in Chapter 3.

It is beyond the scope of this book to review the complex history of the rise of Kurdish national identity and the many political forms it has taken in different countries. At the moment, the conflict in Turkey is second only to the Palestinian question as a source of instability and violence. Since 1985, when the PKK, or Kurdish Workers Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*), began a campaign of violence, over 30,000 lives have been lost (20,000 of them Kurdish militants), not to mention a financial drain estimated to be 10 percent of Turkey's annual GNP. Additional costs include lost regional infrastructure and returns on investment, near total stagnation in the livestock industry, and the long-term cost to Turkey of the alienation of an important segment of its citizenry.

While the conflict has many dimensions, including contradictory visions of the future held by different segments of the Kurdish population, its origins lie in the formation of the Turkish republic itself out of the debris of the empire. The last years of empire and the subsequent struggle for independence in the face of an invasion by Greece had resulted in massive population dislocations throughout Anatolia and interconfessional strife, and had pitted competing nationalisms against each other. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that one principle adopted by the emergent state was that Turkey was a monocultural entity, at least insofar as its Muslim populations were concerned. Greeks, Jews, and Armenians were permitted to retain their own schools and other institutions,¹⁰ but Muslims of whatever linguistic, sectarian, or ethnic background were asserted to be of "Turkish nationality."

This national vision was entirely consistent with the prevailing nationalisms of the day and with other successor regimes of the Balkans and Greece. While this may have simplified the task of early nation-building, it has contributed to a sense of resentment and political alienation among the large Kurdish minority that has grown apace with the integration and development of the nation. The cultural diffusion of national emblems, media, and expressive culture has made many aware of what was being suppressed. Also, nationalist efforts by the Kurds of Iraq and Iran have influenced Kurdish intellectuals in Turkey. It is not that Kurds in Turkey face racial or ethnic stigmatizing and consequent social discrimination, as, for example, do Roma or Gypsies, rather their cultural heritage is suppressed or appropriated.

While the PKK, in spite of its claims, never spoke for more than a minority of Kurds, it was successful in tapping into a very widespread font of resentment (Mango, 1993, 1995; Barkey & Fuller, 1999; de Bellaigue, 1999). The often brutal military and administrative moves to suppress it served to amplify its mystique

¹⁰ By the Lausanne Treaty of 1924.

and appeal beyond the relatively localized areas in which it operated. Most of the Kurdish population is now dispersed throughout the country, and the earlier objectives of the PKK for an independent (but impoverished) Kurdistan have little resonance. Since the capture, trial, and conviction of PKK leader and founder Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999, the conflict may be entering a new phase, one that focuses more on cultural and political rights, *per se*. The fact that many prominent Turkish politicians (about 25 percent of the current parliament), business leaders, and entertainers claim Kurdish descent, as well as the fact that territorial secession is a goal of only a tiny minority, give some hope that a transition to a culturally more inclusive society may be possible. But this would entail a significant policy reformulation, one in which Kurdish language media and culture could flourish and political parties directly address issues of Kurdish concern without fear of being banned.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Appeals to religion, tribalism, and ethnicity in situations of conflict must be considered within specific political environments. While we can easily find instances in the Middle East where intergroup conflict occurs in the absence of strong state control, the "genie in the bottle" model, wherein politicized ethnicity or religion suddenly erupts when controls are relaxed, is not particularly helpful for understanding the situation in any country. It is, of course, true that appeals to history and assertions of a community rooted in primordial ties are crucial in forging a sense of shared identity, just as they are vital to "imagining" the nation. Nevertheless this need not imply that the political salience of any particular mode of recruitment need be continual and forceful, lying as many commentators would have it, just below the surface waiting to emerge when a powerful center weakens. Many in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and elsewhere use this argument to justify state policy. In fact, it often obscures the fact that strong, central government control, particularly where accompanied by single-party rule or heavy-handed central administration, very often establishes the preconditions for the emergence of politicized alternatives.

Nation-building, such as experienced throughout the region since World War I, typically involved processes of centralizing power and authority, as well as the creation of modes of political discourse that exclude or marginalize some minorities. But even fairly heavy-handed imposition of limits to linguistic, religious, and cultural expression need not automatically generate communally organized political responses. Quite apart from overt coercion, which may increase the costs of responding, it is not easy for dispersed minorities to come to visualize themselves as a unified community with common interests. However, where assimilation is forced upon individuals, leaving them no realistic hope of participating in the culture of nation-state, even the extreme application of force simply fuels the political importance of identity. Violent efforts at sup-

pressing or denigrating the symbols and codes of national minorities will likely strengthen minority opposition. Often, one suspects, in a highly centralized political environment or in the embrace of a colonial or alien regime, ethnicity (in the absence of alternative political institutions) becomes a vehicle of last resort for expressing local interests—for example, among the Palestinians of Israel. On the other hand, it is not so much that ethnicity (as a political force) is "dormant" or "suppressed"; rather, in some political environments, it is not particularly relevant.