Religious Pluralism in the Middle East

REPORT III -2017

CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST- CRPME

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Contents:

Executive Summary

The CRPME report is addressing main features and challenges regarding religious pluralism in the Middle East during the second half of 2016. The region of focus includes the countries of Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Morocco. The aim of the report is, on the one hand, to pinpoint the challenges related to religious pluralism faces in the region. On the other hand, it strives to highlight positive state and community initiatives that promote religious co-existence and pluralism. The documentation work leading to the report reflects the research already published on the CRPME site, which is being constantly updated with the developments regarding the religious communities in the region. It is, thus, neither exhaustive nor discursive in covering all the relevant events but it focuses on the events that could reveal certain issues, trends, continuities and discontinuities.

There are four kind of challenges confronting religious communities in the region:

1. The longevity of the Syrian civil war has pushed the sectarian identity aspects of the conflict further to the forefront, effectively hindering each player's capacity for dialogue.

2. Jordan has been striving for a more open society, politically, religiously, and culturally. In spite of these efforts, religious radicalism can still be found within the societal fringes.

3. The religious communities in Turkey have borne the brunt of the ramifications of the failed July coup. With tough security measures in play, their religious rights have been neglected, and even disputed.

4. The well-publicized developments in the al-Minya region of Egypt during the past summer have brought sectarian-based issues to the fore, while the parliament – approved law on building Coptic houses of worship is limited in its reach by its exclusion of all other non-Abrahamic religions.

In Syria, the high degree of political and geographical fragmentation during the civil war makes the documentation of the religious and ethnic communities more difficult. The different actors involved are gradually seeing each other with a more reluctant and suspicious eye, making a future reconciliation for solving the conflict seem even more demanding. The war in Iraq perplexes the situation even further since the border politics between the two countries is fluid. The politics of ethnic cleansing, in a lesser or a larger degree, is changing the demographic character of certain areas, such as the north of Syria where the Kurds prevail, or the south of the country were mostly rebel Islamist groups are dominant. Nevertheless, amidst this rising level of sectarianisation and in between a real danger of brutal persecution, some examples of interreligious and interethnic endeavours of coexistence are found, such as the ones between Kurds and Arabs. Furthermore, there is a growing trend in community – based militarization that mainly aims to the armed protection of the community members and their geographical space.

The Jordanian government has been struggling to underline the need for a growth in mutual understanding and for a more open and genuine dialogue between Muslims and Christians. There are several institutions in the country working on the subject, such as the Catholic Centre for Studies and Media, while there are also schools promoting coexistence between Jordanian, Syrian and Iraqi children, either of Muslim or of Christian faith. The Jordanian leadership is constantly vigilant regarding religious extremism, since there have been incidents of attacks by religious zealots, such as in the case of the murder of Naher Hattar, or by Islamist groups such as during the Karak castle attack. Generally, Jordan has been trying to work in the direction of a more tolerant society, paying much attention to the education realm but also on social and political culture issues.

Following the failed coup of July 15th, the current Turkish administration has issued a number of directives that have hindered the ability of non – Sunni Muslim communities to feel safe in practicing their faith. Conspiracy theories roam freely regarding the communities' involvement, while, in the meantime, ad hoc security measures are summoned as the "weapon of choice" for disregarding the religious rights of mainly the Alevi, Orthodox Christian,

Protestant, and Jewish communities. Effectively, the scapegoating of the religious communities has been used as a stepping stone for the strengthening of the Sunni Muslim identity within Turkish society, and for optimizing the prospects, domestically and abroad, of certain political players.

The Egyptian government seems to be on the verge of losing the support of its Coptic Christian population. The events of the past summer, coupled with the passing of the law on building churches concerning the Coptic Christian community, have gradually created a rift between the Coptic community and President al-Sisi. Additionally, the fact remains that non-Abrahamic religions are not recognized in Egyptian society, and that their religious rights are neither ensured nor protected, as evidenced by the developments regarding the Ashura celebrations of the Shia community, as well as by the lacking efforts in protecting and preserving the religious and cultural history of the now nearly defunct Jewish community.

On the other side of the spectrum, Morocco is promoting its peaceful coexistence of different religious communities as an example for the rest of the Muslim world. Nevertheless, the Kingdom continues its efforts to affirm and institutionalize the value of a pluralistic society, by offering religious training focused on tolerance and openness, launching programs to de-radicalize the extremist elements within the Salafi movement, and to include Salafists in the political life. At the same time, it continues to promote the values of the Marrakesh Declaration abroad as a way to tackle extremism.

Syria

Hundreds of thousands of tragic stories, single or family ones, have been coming on the surface of the news, narrating incidents, journeys and thoughts of people that have become refugees, such as that of Batool's,[1] or stories of people that for various reasons have decided to remain in Syria and endure the war, as that of Rev. Harout.[2] Despite the fact that everyone has a unique story to tell, there is one thread that connects and intertwines their stories: violence and fear.

The data available at this time from UNHCR regarding the Syrian refugees is not the most indicative one since there are many refugees that for several reasons refuse to register officially. Some fear that they might be taken back to Syria and be the subject of persecution there due to religious or ethnic affiliation, while some see no point in registering and getting financial support because they do not really need it. In addition, after the March Agreement between the European Union and Turkey, a large number of Syrians feel endangered, fearing repatriation if they originate from towns and Syrian quarters not considered of "high risk" for their physical safety. The latest figures show that the Syrian refugees that have crossed the borders are 4.810,216 in number.[3] Nevertheless, the percentage of the Syrians that refuse to register is estimated to add 20% to this number.[4]

In Aleppo, for instance, the number of refugees, either Muslims or Christians, is increasing day by day, while the city has been highly affected by the fighting between the Syrian Army and the rebels. The involvement of the Russian forces, even if it has created hope for several of the religious denominations, has certainly perplexed the situation even more and has gradually caused very serious concerns about the humanitarian situation on the one hand, and about the real intentions of every part involved in the warfare, on the other. Furthermore, the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is estimated to be around 6.5 to 7 million

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[1] Alexandra Hudson, "Assyrian Christians Live In War-Torn Limbo, Praying Against Genocide" *The federalist*, (28/09/2016) http://thefederalist.com/2016/09/28/assyrian-christians-live-war-torn-limbo-praying-genocide/

[2] Robertson, Abigail (Interviewed by), "'This Is Not the Time to Leave.' Why This Pastor Won't Abandon His Country", CBN, (7/2/2006) http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2016/February/This-Is-Not-the-Time-to-Leave-Why-This

[3] UNHCR, Syrian Regional Refugee Response, (7/11/2016) http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php

[4] Fabrice Balanche, "Ethnic Cleansing Threatens Syria's Unity", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, (3/12/2015) http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/ethnic-cleansing-threatens-syrias-unity

including those that have moved to the regime-controlled areas, which are supposed to be safer havens.[5]

The geographical division in the Syrian civil war is complicated for mainly two reasons: the war in Iraq has made the politics of the borders more fluid and the population movement is constant; the second reason is that the political and ethnic entities that have occurred from the Syrian civil war are not compound. For example, the self-declared Islamic State is receiving heavy military pressure in order to be eliminated, while the Kurdish region, even if it seems safer and more stable, has very fragile borders, but also internal divisions. Nevertheless, for one to schematize the territorial division, one should keep in mind that the areas in the northwest and some areas in the south are held by the rebels, namely, the Islamic State, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (the ex al-Nusra Front), and other smaller armed Islamist organizations as well. These areas consider Raqqa and Deir al-Zour (since January 2016) as their political hearths. Most of the main urban centres, such as the capital Damascus, are controlled by the government forces, while the north of the country, bordering with Turkey and Iraq, is controlled by the Kurds. The remaining areas, which are not of minor interest, such as Aleppo, are controlled by rebels that are neither affiliated to the Kurds nor to the Islamic State.

The sectarian character of the Syrian civil war has attracted many analysts to focus on strategies of ethnic and religious politicization, but also strategies of ethnic cleansing. The latter has been widely described as a "cultural genocide" process. In their endeavour for ethno-religious homogenization, the Sunnis, the Shias, the Alawites and the Kurds are trying either to expand acculturation, often by violent means, or to preserve their ethnic and religious identity. During the last year of the civil war, the ethno-religious demographic transformation of the country has not deviated from the path taken in the past. The Christian population is being drastically decreased; according to some, more than half of the Christian population has fled, while other minorities the Kurds or the Alawites have taken an incremental direction with a small augmentation in their numbers (1% and 3%, respectively).[6] On the other hand, the

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[5] Fabrice Balanche, Ibid.
[6] Holliday, Joseph. "The Struggle for Syria in 2011". *Middle East Security Report*, no. 2, Institute for the Study of War, (December 2011) http://www.understandingwar.org/report/struggle-syria-2011

information about the Druze population has been more fragmented, since some of them are hiding their creed in Syria.

Christians

Minorities, either ethnic or religious, usually are underlined by some basic characteristics that help them to be distinguished from other minorities and help them to survive during hardships. These characteristics may include ethnicity, culture, religion, historical continuity, common geographical concentration, and common aspirations.[7] The case of Syrian Christians, while including many denominations (Syriac, Assyrians or Chaldean Catholic or Nestorians, Armenians, Greek Orthodox Christians) intertwines many of these characteristics.

The Assyrians, claiming to be the "true Syrians", are once more in a serious predicament, recalling the massacres of 1915 or 1933 in Mosul. Nonetheless, the civil war has disrupted the interaction some of these characteristics, such as the geographical concentration one. For example, an important part of the Christian minorities has been dispersed in neighbouring countries, like Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, while many of them have fled to Europe. According to a survey by the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, many Assyrians or Chaldeans have left their homes in Syria, migrating either to the Kurdish region of Rojava or towards Iraq. Besides, the Assyrians, have a history of cooperation with the Kurds, for instance when the bishop of Zakho called for partnership with the Kurdish people in the face of the growing persecution by the Arab Baathists. [8] In August 2016, a long awaited project was launched, called the Ourhi Centre. This centre is located in al-Qamirshli and its objective is to revive the Syriac-Aramaic language in order to strengthen the Assyrian identity and to boost the community's ethno-religious sentiment.[9] The Ourhi centre operates in the context of the enrichment of educational pluralism in the Kurdish areas, though there are several accusations towards the Kurds regarding their persecution towards other ethnic and religious communities and their "kurdification" project.

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[7] Mordechai, Nisan, *Minorities in the Middle East: A History of Struggle and Self-Expression.* McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, North Carolina, 2002, pp. 24-27
[8] Ibid. p 180
[9] Arab News, "Syriac Christians revive ancient language despite war", (17/08/2016) http://aranews.net/2016/08/syriac-christians-revive-ancient-language-despite-war-2/

The Christians, however, do not have a common strategy. For instance, not all of them leave the country by themselves or with their families. From the beginning of the war, but also after last year's intensification (because of Assad's gains), the Christians also choose to move internally towards government controlled areas, where they feel relatively safer. What mostly make these communities decide their fate are the geographical particularities and the religious and political affiliations that may affect the result of the war and the future of their communities. For example, the Armenians, who largely come from the merchant city of Aleppo and are viewed to be supporters of the regime, have mostly not chosen to abandon their hearths, but to stay and endure the war contributing the way they can for the maintenance of their historical community.

Thus, Eastern Christianity, amidst the Syrian civil war, is under great pressure. The Islamic State's tactics of terror, such as mass killings, kidnappings, confiscation of properties and conversions, have largely affected the multi-dimensional Christian community in Syria but still have not managed to eliminate it. The decision to stay, is a tough one, but, once taken, can lead to a twofold threshold: one road leads to a second – class citizenship which, for some, is more or less, a similar status to the one they enjoyed in the past, but with a particular difference in the present: the direct terror and the barbaric methods that the Islamic State uses to rule over the population in its territories. The other road leads to self-defence and to militarization, either by self-organizing military units or by accessing other more dominant – currently – communities, such as the Kurdish one. For instance, many Christians in Syria have been accessing the PYD and the YPG units in the Rojava area in order to protect their communities but also to strengthen the resistance against the spread of the self-proclaimed Islamic State.[10] Some also claim that the accession to the Kurdish units is being made by the Kurds under compulsion.[11]

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Mardean, Isaac, "The Assyrians of Syria: History and Prospects", Syria Comment, (20/12/ 2015) http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-assyrians-of-syria-history-and-prospets- by-mardean-isaac/

The self-militarization of the Christian communities is almost non-existent and falls into their various denominations and their wide fragmentation. The divisions are important, and are coupled with the failure of a unifying political platform, the fact that Christians lack military skills,[12] training and experience of other respective Muslim denominations, such as the Druze or the Alawite ones.[13] Due to the urbanization processes that the Christians followed in the early 20th century but also due to the option of migrating to the West, the Christians have sometimes, to a lesser or a greater degree, depended on western help on military and financial auxiliary help.

Nonetheless, during the last months, Christians have been attempting to make their presence more noticeable. This includes the initiative to hold a meeting with the Kurdish National Council in Syria to discuss the framework of a political solution in Syria. The quest for a future political solution was an answer to the formation of the High Negotiation Committee, which proposed a three-phase plan that envisaged the following steps: firstly, to include a six-month phase for an agreement on a ceasefire; secondly, to begin negotiations for a period of a year and a half for establishing the Transitional Governing Body; while the third phase would be to write a revised constitution and hold elections. Nevertheless, as minority ethno-religious groups claim, this plan does not respect the rights of smaller minority groups and gives an advantage to Arab and Muslims. This is the reason why the Christian and Kurdish forces strongly oppose this plan, since, as they claim, it disregards the minority rights and sticks to the pathology that created the current civil war.[14]

At the same time, there is the endeavour to strengthen already existing facilities, which usually provide social services through churches and faith-based organizations (FBO's). These services include food, material assistance and vocational training to cope with the hardships of the civil war. Given the fact that the crisis in Syria is escalating, some areas are not very easily accessible. These FBO's have, in some cases, access to more isolated areas, since they

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[12] However, one Christian denomination that has a good military experience and training, mostly in guerrilla tactics, is the Armenians, who in after 1975 formed the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, and fought alongside the PLO and PFLP. See Mordechai Nisan, op. cit.

[13] Gerard Russell, "There's a good reason Christians rarely take up arms in the Middle East", *Catholic Herald*, (15/09/2016) http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/issues/september-16th-2016/theres-a-good-reason-christians-rarely-take-up-arms-in-the-middle-east/

[14] Kurds, Assyrians join forces to protect minority rights in Syrian peace talks, *Rudaw*, (13/09/2016) http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/120920162?keyword=kurds,%20assyrians

take advantage of their locality. The churches and the hospitals run by the Christian communities are also a very important aspect of the humanitarian aid that the Christians also provide sometimes to non-Christians. Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that the capacity and the potential that these charities have, is limited. The limit concerns the potential aid that they can provide amid the humanitarian crises, but also the geographical potential, since, as it was mentioned earlier, a strong majority of the Christians remaining in Syria has moved to some of the regime controlled areas.[15]

Druze

While the Druze constitute an important part of the Lebanese political scene, in the Syrian or Israeli politics, they do not enjoy the same recognition. This is mostly due to different fields of historical experiences that the Druze have had in these three countries. Strong kinship characterizes this minority, with linear family continuity being an example (al-Atrash or Joumblatt families i.e.), as well as a good militant reputation. Their denomination, even if it sometimes is characterized by lineage to Shiism, is not directly subscribed neither to the Shias nor to the Sunnis and has a well undisclosed religious creed.

In the Syrian civil war, the Druze have been accused for siding with the al-Assad regime. One could assume that it happens for existential but also for identity reasons, since the Druzes feel closer to the Shia Alawi minority than to the Sunni one. Nevertheless, in the beginning of the armed conflict, some of the Druze joined the Free Syrian Army (FSA) but soon the growing Islamic radicalization of the FSA led them to redefine their political affiliation. Even though there is the notion that the Druze have largely stayed out of the battle, the majority of them have joined government forces. Most of the Druze have been fighting the rebel forces in the battlefields of Aleppo, Homs, Damascus and Raqqa. Nevertheless, the Druze claim that a forced "shiification" process by government forces is taking place in the south-western area of Swaida during the last two years, where there have been reports of relocating the non-Druze population.

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[15] Open Doors Report, Hope for the Middle East: The impact and significance of the Christian presence in Syria and Iraq: past, present and future, October 2016 http://www.opendoorsuk.org/campaign/documents/H4ME-report.pdf

Furthermore, the militarization of the Druze community seems inevitable because the attacks against them are constant. The military unit "Sultan el-Atrache Brigade" that was formed in 2011, was dissolved in 2014 because of ex-al-Nusra repression in the region of Swaida and the capture of its leaders, Khaled Rizk and Bassel Trad, who were later freed and forced to exile to Jordan. However, growing paramilitary Druze units, such as Harakat al-Hawiya al-Arabiya al-Druziya (The Arab Druze Identity Movement), are being formed in order to protect themselves but also to take part in the fight against Islamic fundamentalism.[16] Good examples are the attacks in the southern Syrian borders, which are mostly under the government's alliance forces, as for instance the southern provinces of Qunaitra and Deraa.[17]

Druze are often trapped in the perplexing and multi-allianced Syrian civil war. Their aspirations do not include a sovereign national state, such as other minorities, but rather an instinctive brotherhood organization. Thus, apart from staying neutral, they sometimes side with one part or another in order to, first, ensure their survival, and then, if possible, promote some of their interests. This is the case of the Druze's occasional partnership with the Alawis, the Sunnis and the Christians.[18]

Shia

The Shia minority consists of one to two per cent of the total Syrian population. The Shia minority has been repeatedly persecuted and threatened not only by the Sunnis but also by the Alawites. Nevertheless, in an attempt to liberate the Aleppo areas, in early 2016, the Kurdish forces gave significant help to save the Shiite population, but, unluckily, without great success. The indifference that the small Shiite population is treated with, the attacks and the accusations as "traitors" for their linkage with the Iranians, has made them an easy prey for Sunnis jihadists. The villages of Kefraya and Foua have been on the media's forefront during the past few weeks because of the suffered plight of its Shia population from Sunni rebels. The villages have an

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[16] Talal El Atrache, "The Druze in the Syrian Conflict", *Syria Comment,* (05/09/2016) http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/druze-syrian-conflict-talal-el-atrache/
[17] Ibid.
[18] Mordechai, Nisan, op. cit.

important shortage of basic needs, such as food, medicine and fuel, but both were included in the evacuation process in Aleppo in order to alleviate the suffering.[19]

In the context of self – defence and additional territorial or communal identity cohesion, further militarization is mushrooming in the Syrian territories. The Iraqi battlefield has made the Shia communities of both Iraq and Syria, interconnected in the fight against the Islamic State. The newly formed Jaish al – Mukhtar (Mukhtar's Army) active in Iraq, has sent numerous forces in Syria to help the Shiites. In addition, the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous People) – a Shiite para-military group – has been reportedly been active in the Syrian battles, especially outside Damascus, while its leader, Akram Kaabi, is believed to have formed another paramilitary organization called Haidar al-Karrar Brigade, which is operating around the Shia shrine in Sayyda Zeinab district, in the outskirts of Damascus.[20]

[19] Layla, Maghribi, "Residents of Syria's Shia villages tell of pain and abandonment", *CNN*, (21/12/2016) http://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/21/middleeast/syria-shia-villages/index.html
[20] Smyth, Philip, "The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its effects", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2015 http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus138-v3.pdf

Jordan

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has a variety of reasons for being considered as the most progressive Arab – Muslim country in terms of religious freedoms and pluralism. Amman has been receiving thousands of refugees in its territory, with a large number of Christian refugees, originating especially from Mosul. The endeavours that are being promoted by King Abdullah II, despite the problems caused by prejudice and religious intolerance are considered to be for better mutual understanding. During the past period, the Hashemite kingdom is aiming to underline its environment of peaceful coexistence of the ethno-religious communities in its territory, the designation of the country's religious and cultural heritage, the promotion of religious tourism and basically the exchange of ideas concerning justice and tolerance not only within Jordan but also regarding other Arab countries. The path for achieving these ideas is, of course, challenging, demanding and problematic.

Jordan is a country of about 10 million population where 98% percent is of Arab descent. There are also some very minor ethnic groups such as the Circassians (1%) and the Armenians (1%). Sunni Islam is the main religion of the country, which constitutes around 95-96% of the population's religion, while there is a 1-2% on top of it that are Shia, Druze and Baha'i. The Christian community in Jordan is one of the oldest in the region, with a great manifestation of heritage and culture particularity. Nonetheless, its population has been drastically decreased in the last decades, falling from 30% of the Jordanian citizens to 3-4%. Nevertheless, the number of the Christians has increased with the influx of the Iraqi and the Syrian refugees, since many of them are Christians. The total number of the refugees in the country, according to the latest update from UNHCR, amounts to 655.833, while among them there are around 27.000 to 30.000 Christians. All the refugees are scattered almost equally in refugee camps across the country.[21]

The Amman government seems to have achieved a decent degree of social, religious and political cohesion, even if sometimes there are incidents of religious prejudice and discrimination. Of course, this compact communal achievement has been, indeed, reached

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[21] Syria Regional Refugee Response, (07/11/2016) http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107

through a high level of social surveillance and discipline, since Jordan has a long history of refugee influxes (i.e. the Palestinians) and refugee management.

In previous months, Jordan has made further steps for maintaining and even moving beyond its achievements in the field of pluralism and religious coexistence. At the same time, its institutions, which are trying to safeguard these values, even if they sometimes seem inadequate and still prejudiced against different ethno-religious groups, seem to function sufficiently. The Catholic Church, through the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, is very active in the country, operating the Catholic Centre for Studies and Media, a centre that tries to initiate interreligious dialogue and stand by the refugees that arrive in the country. The "motto" of the Catholic Church seems to "be evangelizing with deeds, not words". The missionary work in this context is wide-reaching, such as the Italian Hospital in Karak that is functioning close to the western borders of the country, receiving refugees from Syria and Iraq. The sisters and the nuns working there, say that 97% of the people they receive are Muslims.[22]

Education

One of the biggest obstacles for mutual understanding and the promotion of dialogue in the Middle East is education. Educational processes are strictly based on promoting nationalist sentiment, the idea of linear historical continuity, and creating distorted and fallacious national myths and religious "ankyloses". Thus, the educational matters are, apparently, an important subject for the Jordanian government. During the last months, Amman is adherent to creating a more just and balanced educational curriculum that will be based more on promoting tolerance and rational thinking rather than religious hatred. The public dialogue that was initiated focused on the need to revise the educational system, in the globalized context, and with an axis of ecumenical humanitarian values, in order to promote every aspect of tolerance. This conference, held in November 2016, was organized by the United Nations Development Program and the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue and stressed, additionally the need to educate the teachers in this post-

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[22] Missionary in Jordan: God's mercy for refugees fleeing Syria and Iraq, *Asian News*, (4/11/2016) http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Missionary-in-Jordan:-God%E2%80%99s-mercy-for-refugees-fleeing-Syria-and-Iraq-39045.html

modern era before the children are educated themselves. Father Rif'at Bader, director of the Catholic Centre for Studies, added that changing the curriculum is crucial to safeguarding Christian presence in the region.[23] In one of the new school textbooks, a church is appearing next to a mosque, symbolizing the coexistence between the two religions.

Nevertheless, the education reform did not meet a wide consensus in the country. The Teachers' Union, the parent organizations and Islamist groups have vehemently protested, since they view this reform as an attempt to alienate students from their cultural and Islamic values. For example, the Islamic Action Front, the Muslim Brotherhood's offset in Jordan, has strongly condemned the reforms and, in protests held outside the ministry of education, burned the new books. The modifications aimed at reducing religious references in the books, as well as deconstructing the stereotypical image of the headscarved Muslim women. For instance, the pictures of women wearing the Islamic scarf were reduced, in an attempt to balance the societal transformations in the Jordanian society. Nevertheless, this move was characterized by women's associations as misleading because it reenacted women without headscarves only in a domestic environment. These reforms are part of a wider strategy of the Ministry of Education, as Minister Mohammad Thneibat claims, to fight prejudice and the expansion of Islamic radicalization in Jordan.[24]

Focusing on the refugees, and especially on the refugee education, the Jordanian government, in cooperation with missionary groups, is trying to cover an undoubtedly gap present in the Jordanian educational system. The Caritas sponsored Latin Catholic Patriarchate School of Naour, receives a large number of refugee children stranded in Jordan, helping them to have access to educational knowledge, skills and cooperating with each other. Another indicative example is the Saint Joseph vocational school, located in the city of Zarqa, 40 kilometres north-east from the capital Amman. Six percent of the inhabitants of the city are Christians and the school is located close to the biggest refugee camp in Jordan and in the Middle East, Zaatari. The school has focused, during the last months, in cultivating further the

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[23] Rula Samain, "Education reform requires training educators to promote tolerance, dialogue — panelists", *The Jordan Times,* (3/11/2016) http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/education-reform-requires-training-educators-promote-tolerance-dialogue-%E2%80%94-panellists
[24] Ibid.

social bonds and the respect necessary for building an equal society. The majority of the students are Muslims, 550 out of 650, and the ethnicities are various: Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis. Some initiatives from the teachers, as that of teacher Hani, excited the children of the school: he chose some topics in order for the children to analyze them, from both an Islamic and a Christian point of view. The teachers have been also active outside of the school, feeling that the issue of coexistence exceeds the educational limits. They prepared a project so that they could get assistance from the Italian Episcopal Conference to collect coupons for the refugees that have been gathering in Zarqa. Those are the refugees that left the Zaatari refugee camp mainly because of the over-crowded and bad conditions that exist inside the refugee camp, or because they want to continue their journey to Europe.[25]

Freedom of speech

The Hashemite Kingdom has been hesitantly trying to deradicalize its political culture and build a more inclusive society, as its moves reveals. In another historical move, decided in July this year, Amman removed from the national ID's the indication of one's religious affiliation. Nevertheless, the government decided that the religious affiliation will not be visible in the identity cards, but that it will be stored in each one's identity chip so that the government employees can always have access to this information. This detail makes this reform incomplete; the government appears trying to hold a neutral stance between the more liberal and progressive political powers in the country and the more conservative, i.e. the Islamists. The latter protested by a number of means: they tried to block the vote for the law while they launched a whole media campaign to propagate their views about this move, which was mostly that the king and his government are trying to strip the country of its Islamic identity.[26] The Islamists fear that the government moves towards a more secular direction and they complain about their political marginalization.

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[25] Christina Uguccioni, "Zarqa: where Christians and Muslims learn a vocation together", *La Stampa,* (13/07/2016) http://www.lastampa.it/2016/07/13/vaticaninsider/eng/inquiries-and-interviews/zarqa-where-christians-and-muslims-learn-a-vocation-together-dyzy8EUItCUaCdZaN29xoK/pagina.html
[26] Jordan loses religion from identity cards, *Al-Bawaba*, (05/07/2016) http://www.albawaba.com/loop/jordan-loses-religion-identity-cards-859618

In fact, political Islam in Jordan does not have deep roots, even if the last elections show a rise in the electoral strength of the Islamic Action Front. Terrorism remains a thorn in internal affairs, since the country has borders with embattled countries and, furthermore, the Islamic State has repeatedly infiltrated refugees groups. The Jordanian government follows the crackdown doctrine on the revelation of Islamist cells but, until now, no impressive terrorist acts have taken place in Jordan. Nonetheless, in late September, the Christian writer and philosopher Nahed Hattar was murdered by an Islamic extremist (Imam Riad Abdallah) in the steps of the court where he was going to be tried for a very common accusation in the Middle East: insulting Islam. Hattar represented some things that many Islamists (and not only) in the Arab world detest: secularism, nationalism, and fierce criticism on reactionary ideological approaches, such as political Islam. Hattar often also criticized the conservatization of Jordanian society, a facet of which was the takeover of many Jordanian professional associations by the Islamists. Hattar was accused for a cartoon that he did not even create; he had just republished it on his facebook account.[27] With a mainly conservative population, the limits of the freedom of speech in Jordan need certainly to be reconsidered. The Kingdom, while giving some space for expressing publicly a variety of opinions on a wide spectrum of issues, has, at the same time, very often an atavistic attitude for what is to be viewed in the Middle East as politically correct.

Political culture

The elections that took place in Jordan on September 20 marked, for some analysts, a new era of stability for the country in the midst of general turmoil. The rise of the Islamists was a surprise for some, though there is a growing trend in the Middle East of the Islamists gaining political momentum when they take part in parliamentary elections. The other groundbreaking element, according to other analysts, was that the Islamic Action Front included in its lists four Christians, and also Circassians, in a bid to have a more inclusive ideological profile.[28] Analyses focused on the reformation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and the new political shift

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[27] Yasmine Bahrani, "With the murder of Nahed Hattar, the Middle East's fury comes to Jordan", *The Washington Post,* (29/09/2016) https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2016/09/29/with-the-murder-of-nahed-hattar-the-middle-easts-fury-comes-to-jordan/?utm_term=.ca12d2458823
[28] Islamists ally with other forces, including Christians, in election race, *The Jordan Times,* (17/08/2016) http://jordantimes.com/news/local/islamists-ally-other-forces-including-christians-election-race

that the organization is taking in order to survive. "Now is the time for us to evolve from an Islamist movement to a national, inclusive movement that speaks for the aspirations of all Jordanians," said Zaki Bani Rsheid, deputy leader of the Jordanian Brotherhood. "We needed to change in order to survive."[29]

Nevertheless, the idea of incommensurability between nationalist, liberal and Islamic forces is not something that has no past. In fact, the lack of convergence of political culture in the Arab region has been the subject of research by many scholars studying history and political ideology in the Middle East. The lines between different political platforms, ideas and parties have been so thick sometimes, that even armed conflict have occurred. But cross-ideological exchanges have taken place in the past in Jordan, as well as in other countries of the Arab world. In the 1950's King Husayn of Jordan viewed the Islamists as an integral ally against his liberal and socialist critics. Furthermore, in 1993, the Arab Islamic Democratic Movement was formed, also known as *al-du'a*, a party that had cross-ideological references. It called for a "modern Islamic alternative", and adopted five ostensibly contradictory principles: Islamism-Arabism, democracy as *shura,* the correspondence of reason and spirituality, Islamic economic policies, and Muslim and Christian.[30] This trend marked the "wasatiya" (the centrist) political parties in the Arab world that adopted an Islamist and liberal discourse at the same time.

Whether the liberal parties have moved in a more religious direction or if there has been a liberization of the Islamic parties, this is something that has caused a lot of debate in the Arab world. In the case of the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, certainly the government's pressure for dissolution and delegitimization of the party has forced its leaders to reconsider its strategy, its political stance and its ideological stain. In addition, the name of the party was retitledas the Islah (reform) coalition, trying to remove any negative connotations that the previous name and its history could bring.[31] Apart from corruption issues that boldly concern Jordanian citizens, the religious coexistence and the human rights of ethno-religious groups and of

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[29] Taylor Luck, "Reinvention of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood involves women — and Christians", *The Washington Post,* (20/09/2016) https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/a-rebranded-muslim-brotherhood-attempts-a-comeback-in-jordan/2016/09/19/b9be80a6-7deb-11e6-ad0e-ab0d12c779b1_story.html
[30] Michaelle Browers, *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation,* CUP, 2009, Cambridge, pp.3-5
[31] Taylor Luck, Ibid.

women seemed to occupy a remarkable space in public political discourse. The party's strategy attempts to focus more on some of the minorities' problems, although a lot of people are sceptical about the Brotherhood's intentions, that is whether they are genuine or not. Most of the observers are underlining that if the Brotherhood's shift is genuine then it will mark a historical transformation not only in Jordanian political history but also in the Arab world in general.

Given the fact that extremist political discourse, whether Islamist or secular, leads to a stalemate, the deradicalization of politics is a sine qua non for viable political institutions in Jordan. Thus, Jordan seems to move to a direction that acknowledges that maintaining memory and historical consciousness creates opportunities for a better mutual understanding between ethno-religious communities.

Turkey

The Jewish community

The Jewish community roughly numbers 23,000 people in Turkey, and is formally considered a separate entity from Israel, as well as an important part of the Turkish historical and cultural heritage. Some efforts are underway in regard to the preservation of the cultural and religious identity of the Jewish community. To that effect, a 400 year-old Jewish cemetery located in the city of Milas, in South-western Turkey, will be restored, and a museum will be built to commemorate the city's past Jewish heritage.[32]

Nonetheless, tensions can run high within the general population where the community is concerned. Despite the assurances of local governments, Turkish Jews are not disassociated from Israel. This remains an important issue that stems from the rebirth of the "Sèvres Syndrome" in Turkey, as well as the use of anti-Semitism in the months leading up to electoral and other confrontations. More often than not, political party leaders refer to their opponents as pro-Israeli or pro-Jewish, essentially fuelling a divide within Turkey. In addition, the attacks in Istanbul, in recent months, have targeted and produced victims, both from the Christian and the Jewish communities. As a result, on one hand, Jewish tourism was deterred from visiting Turkey, and the Jewish community was living in a state of fear and anguish. According to some reports, when taking into account the mortality rate and emigration, the Jewish community diminished numbers-wise.[33] On the other hand, the recent emergency security measures in the aftermath of the coup of July 15th exacerbated feelings of marginalization and discrimination, despite reassurances from the leading figures of the Jewish community on the good relations with the government and local authorities.[34]

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[32] Speyer, Lea, "400-Year-Old Jewish Cemetery in Turkey to Be Restored in Effort to Commemorate Once-Vibrant Jewish Community in Milas", *The Algemeiner*, (5/7/2016) https://www.algemeiner.com/2016/07/05/400-year-old-jewish-cemetery-in-turkey-to-be-restored-in-effort-to-commemorate-once-vibrant-jewish-community-in-milas/

[33] Jones, Robert, "Why Turkey's Jewish Population Continues to Decline", *The Algemeiner*, (30/10/2016) https://www.algemeiner.com/2016/10/30/why-turkeys-jewish-population-continues-to-decline/

[34] Dolsten, Josefin, "Will Turkish Jews Find Themselves in Crosshairs After Bloody Coup Attempt?", *Forward*, (20/7/2016) http://forward.com/news/345367/will-turkish-jews-find-themselves-in-crosshairs-after-bloody-coup-attempt/

The Alevi community

The Alevis are estimated – due to the lack of official empirical data – to make up around 10-15% (about 8-10 million) of a population of approximately 77 million people in Turkey. Notwithstanding that concrete data is unavailable due to the Alevis' lack of formal recognition, they are considered to be the country's second largest religious community. As a result, the situation regarding their religious rights has been a hot topic of discussion at many occasions in recent years. Especially after the AKP's rise to power, talks and initiatives, nicknamed "Alevi openings", were promoted for making progress on the Alevi rights front.

The November elections of 2015 led to election pledges and promises by former Prime Minister Ahmed Davutoglu that would be fulfilled by the end of March 2016. The issue at hand was twofold: firstly, the Alevi cemevis would be recognized as official houses of religious worship, a status that is already granted for churches, synagogues and mosques. Secondly, the Alevi religion would have to be officially recognized as separate from the Shia one, and not only as one of its denominations. For the time being, Alevi cemevis are considered by the state and the Religious Affairs Directorate (the Diyanet) as "cultural houses" and not places of worship equal or alternative to mosques. The considered reform would exempt cemevis from energy bills as well as offer a number of tax-related special benefits. Furthermore, by recognizing Alevism as a distinct religion, and essentially strengthening the Alevi identity, mandated Sunni-based religious school courses would become optional for Alevi students.

During the month of June, the National Education Minister declared that his Ministry would "remove all the anti-Alevi rhetoric from taught or suggested school publications".[35] However, in contrast to the previous statement, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared the opening of the third bridge on the Bosporus. The Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge's name was a controversial in regard to the Alevi community as it was in reference to the rule of Ottoman Emperor Selim, which, to put it mildly, was tumultuous for the Alevi population.[36] As stated

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[35] Samatyali, Elif Petek, "Education Minister: Controversial school books criticizing Alevism to be re-examined", *Daily Sabah*, (28/6/2016) http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2016/06/29/education-minister-controversial-school-books-criticizing-alevism-to-be-re-examined

[36] Tharoor, Ishaan, "Istanbul's new $3 billion bridge has a very divisive name". *The Washington Post*, (27/8/2016) https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/08/27/istanbuls-new-3-billion-bridge-has-a-very-divisive-name/

above, this is a hot topic but not a new one. The Alevi issue has been brought up in the past, and, more recently in 2014, by a ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) that effectively pressured for a more immediate solution to the problem. The fact that Turkey has partially suspended its participation in the European Convention on Human Rights, effectively put efforts on the Alevi front on the backburner.[37] The turbulent events, in the months that followed, shadowed the lack of development on the matter, and replaced the aspirations for a successful resolution of the issues with a sense of dread and alienation stemming from the state of emergency declared after the coup, the wild conspiracy theories connecting Alevis with the Gülen movement, as well as the association of the Alevi faith with the Kurdish ethnic minority in Turkey.[38] Consequently, statements declaring that Alevis would leave Turkey for the European Union if travel restrictions were to be lifted, should come as no surprise.[39]

The Christian communities

Christians officially amount to approximately 100,000 people in Turkey. They are mostly composed of the following Christian denominations: Armenian Orthodox, Aramean Orthodox, Chaldean Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Protestants.

The Aramean Christian community, specifically grew in numbers as a result of the Syrian civil war and its influx of refugees to Turkey. Finding shelter in churches – mainly in Istanbul – they total somewhere between 10,000 to 20,000 people. In South-Eastern Turkey, the remaining Aramean community as well as their cultural heritage has been caught in the crossfire between the Turkish government forces, the rebel Kurdish forces and, to an extent, the Islamic State.[40] Lately, the Aramean community has been haemorrhaging in numbers due to two distinct factors: the first is the above-mentioned extension of Islamic State activities within Turkey and the conflict between Kurdish and Turkish forces; the second is the realization, following the failed coup of July 15th, 2016, and the subsequent crackdown on

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[37] Shaheen, Kareem & Bowcott, Owen, "Turkey MPs approve state of emergency bill allowing rule by decree", *The Guardian*, (21/7/2016) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/21/turkey-parliament-expected-to-pass-erdogan-emergency-measures
[38] Tremblay, Pinar, "How will Turkey's Alevis react to Syrian gambit?", *Al-Monitor*, (9/9/2016) http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/turkey-syria-alevis-react-intervention.html
[39] Rudaw, "Alevi Kurds will likely leave Turkey if EU lifts visa limits, lawmaker says", (10/7/2016) http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/10072016
[40] Marsh, Alex, "The war on Christians is extending into Turkey", *The Spectator*, (19/7/2016) http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2016/07/war-christians-extending-turkey/

"Gülenists", of the current general negative view of Christianity as a whole in Turkey.[41] Syrian Aramean refugees no longer see Turkey as a passageway or even a remotely safe haven away from their misfortunes. At the same time, Turkey's small Protestant community – estimated at 7,000 people – is facing a wide variety of problems, mainly originating from the lack of official recognition from the state as a religious community. Nevertheless, they use unofficial and makeshift houses of worship such as association buildings and offices, with no prospects of the start of a dialogue with the state regarding the issue looking likely in the near future. Viewed in retrospect, the Greek Orthodox community has been more fortunate in seeing its religious rights respected to greater, albeit restrained, effect, mostly due to their official recognition (along with the Jewish community's ones) by the Turkish state in its early beginnings.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the Turkish domestic political scene, the aspect of Christian religious identity can, during turbulent times especially, exacerbate already strained relations between the different communities and the majority of the population. The failed military coup against the AKP government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, on July 15th, 2016, triggered a series of events which affect directly the everyday life of the Christian and other communities residing in Turkey to this day. Moreover, the state of emergency which was declared following the coup, and aimed at "purging" Turkish society and Turkish institutions from the "Gülenist influence", effectively granted free reign to conspiracy theories against religious communities, and freed officials from resisting the urge to apply controversial and sometimes xenophobic-fuelled rhetoric to their discourse as a tool for political propaganda. The results were felt by the Christian communities on both a societal as well as an institutional level.[42] Media-wise, Christian Protestants seem to have borne the brunt of this rhetoric by seeing their pastors deported, denied entry to the country, and jailed on account of potential security concerns. Furthermore, attempts to vandalize Protestant churches, soon after the events of the coup, in Eastern Turkey, in Trabzon, and in Malatya, to name a few, were reported.[43]

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[41] Mackreath, Helen, "From Place to Place: Syrian Christians in Istanbul", *LA Review of Books*, (10/6/2016) https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/place-place-syrian-christians-istanbul/
[42] Hurtas, Sibel, "What state of emergency means for Turkey's Protestants", *Al-Monitor*, (19/10/2016) http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/10/turkey-state-of-emergency-for-protestants.html
[43] World Watch Monitor, "Turkey: churches targeted during attempted coup", (19/7/2016) https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/07/4558489/
Gledhill, Ruth, "
Concern grows for Christians in Turkey after failed coup", *Christian Times*, (20/7/2016) http://www.christiantoday.com/article/concern.grows.for.christians.in.turkey.after.failed.coup/91058.htm

The leaders of the religious communities – alongside Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew – hoped to deescalate the rising tensions, by joining together to condemn the military coup and by calling for the end of terror and violence. For the time being, it certainly seems that their efforts have been for naught. Turkish domestic and social media seem to have adopted a regressive attitude against Christian minorities which, associated with a growing anti-European and anti-American stance, enables an ever-growing conspiratory narrative highlighting scapegoating and promoting marginalization.[44] It is of note that Turkish society is familiar with the use of conspiracy theories such as the "Sèvres Syndrome" or the behind the scenes secretive activities of the "Dönmeh", which are implied to redirect Turkish interests in favour of foreign ones. Especially since the 1970s, the use of conspiracy theories in Turkish politics has been in vogue, has served a wide variety of agendas, and has remained a mainstay in the arsenal of Turkish interest groups on all sides of the political spectrum. Moreover, the application of conspiracy theory has not shied away from including all and any religious or national communities according, each time, to its endgame. Adding credence to the above, during the month of November 2016, emergency measures, justified as improving state security, were applied, turning prospects for the worse concerning the deportation of Christian residents regarded as potential security threats.[45]

On a different note, the five Turkish men charged with the premeditated murder of three Christians in Malatya, during April 2007, were found guilty and sentenced to three consecutive life sentences, during a heavily publicized trial, regardless they remain out on bail pending appeal.[46] This alarming turn of events failed to calm the growing fear of the domestic and international Christian communities concerning the shift in preponderance of the Sunni Muslim identity in Turkish politics and society.[47]

[44] The National Herald, "Turkey's Christians, Jews Fear Rising Islamic Extremism", (28/9/2016) http://www.thenationalherald.com/136893/turkeys-christians-jews-fear-rising-islamic-extremism/
[45] Mitchell, Andre, "Christians Feel More Threatened in Turkey With New Order Making Deportations Easier", *Christian Today*, (4/11/2016) http://www.christiantoday.com/article/christians.feel.more.threatened.in.turkey.with.new.order.making.deportations.easier/99726.htm
[46] Baker, Barbara G., "Five Turks convicted of killing Christians in Malatya sentenced for life – but remain free", *World Watch Monitor*, (29/9/2016) https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/09/4652523/
[47] Cogan, Killian, "As failed coup sets Turkey on a new path, minorities fear for their future", *Your Middle East*, (31/7/2016) http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/as-failed-coup-sets-turkey-on-a-new-path-minorities-fear-for-their-future_42049

At the same time, Byzantine churches long holding the status of state museums and cultural heritage sites, such as St. John Stoudios in Istanbul and Hagia Sophia in Nicea, are in the process of or have been converted into mosques in recent years. This effort has been gaining momentum ever since the rise to power of the AKP party in the early 2000's, and came to prominence with the demands for the conversion process of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Despite reassurances by the Turkish government, the developments regarding the Hagia Sophia, during the summer of 2016, constitute evidence to the contrary.

Case in point, the anniversary celebrations for the conquest of Constantinople on May 29th 2016, were joined by public prayers and demonstrations in favour of the right to pray inside the ancient Christian Basilica and for it to be converted into a mosque.[48] It is worth pointing out that although these anniversary celebrations were discontinued after the 1960s, the AKP governments following the early 2000s revived them via the use of party slogans, swiftly and effectively bridging neo-Ottoman aspirations with political ambitions. It seems that the demonstrations were a sign of the developments that would soon follow. A few days later, during the month of Ramadan in June, Koranic readings were broadcast from inside the Hagia Sophia building complex, and were met by the immediate response from both the Hellenic Ministry on Foreign Affairs and the US State Department.[49] Furthermore, in early November 2016, Friday prayers were read, for the first time in eighty years, inside the Hagia Sophia building complex. Onder Soy, the imam for the Hunkar Kasri – a part of the Hagia Sophia building complex but not a part of the Hagia Sophia Museum – was appointed during October 2016. Nevertheless, the appointment marks a change of the tide due to its formal and permanent nature. It is of note that the domestic media heavily promoted the charming image of the Onder Soy, soon dubbing him the "boxing imam", due to his past foray into kickboxing.[50] Moreover, this previous figurative image is particularly effective and can be applied to the "battle for Hagia Sophia" between the secularist and the Sunni Muslim religion-driven

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[48] Tremblay, Pinar, "The Battle for Haghia Sophia in Istanbul escalates", *Al-Monitor*, (15/6/2016) http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/06/turkey-greece-haghia-sophia-battle-escalates.html
[49] Erasmus, "As Christians squabble, the religious status quo in their heartland is shifting", *The Economist*, (7/6/2016) http://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2016/06/eastern-christians-councils-and-ramadan
Chrysopoulos, Philip, "Turkey Should Respect Hagia Sophia Tradition, Says State Dept. Spokesperson", *Greek Reporter*, (10/6/2016) http://www.crpme.gr/news/turkey-should-respect-hagia-sophia-tradition-says-state-dept-spokesperson
[50] Tremblay, Pinar, "Is new imam answered prayer or impending doom for Hagia Sophia?", *Al-Monitor*, (28/10/2016) http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/10/turkey-greece-hagia-sophia-gets-its-own-imam.html

supporters in Turkish society. The image of the "boxing imam" could be translated through the media as the gate-keeper of the rights of Sunni Muslims who wish for the Hagia Sophia Museum to be converted into a mosque and who consider its conversion as one important step for Turkey to return to its roots and to reclaim its former glory.

State, Religion and State Religion?

The fast of Ramadan was commemorated by the Greek Orthodox and the Jewish communities in Turkey, during the month of June 2016. Hence, several iftar dinners[51] were organized by members from both communities, as well as by the Diyanet (the Religious Directorate of Turkey).[52] Although the beginning of summer 2016 had begun with promises of unity and togetherness, as highlighted during the iftar dinners, the developments following the failed military coup of July 15th, changed things for the worse in regard to the social and political integration of the non-Muslim communities within Turkey.

The failed July coup attempt had direct ramifications for Turkey's societal and institutional politics. The Erdogan-led government requested for the Mehmet Gomez-led Diyanet to encourage people to take the streets in favour of the government's survival and stay in power. To that effect, the majority of the imams in Turkey read sala prayers at mosques simultaneously, for the first time since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Consequences are twofold: on the one hand, the Religious Directorate of Turkey sees its status redefined as the President's "right-hand man" under the auspices of the Turkish Democracy; on the other hand, all and any religious figures Muslim or otherwise, see their rights marginalized when they find themselves at odds with the previous development. The "purge" that followed the coup was neither limited to the military, political, religious and institutional personnel, or to time. It is ongoing to this day.[55] For instance, in complete disregard of religious rights, the imams were

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[51] An iftar dinner is a fast-breaking meal during Ramadan.
[52] Jerusalem Post, "Jews and Muslims celebrate Iftar together in ancient Turkish Synagogue", (13/6/2016) http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Jews-and-Muslims-celebrate-Iftar-together-in-ancient-Turkish-Synagogue-456596
Turkish Weekly, "Greek Orthodox Church organizes iftar dinner in Istanbul ", (16/6/2016) http://www.turkishweekly.net/2016/06/16/news/greek-orthodox-church-organizes-iftar-dinner-in-istanbul/
Daily Sabah, "Turkey's religious authority hosts iftar for non-Muslim communities", (23/6/2016) http://www.dailysabah.com/minorities/2016/06/24/turkeys-religious-authority-hosts-iftar-for-non-muslim-communities
[55] Tremblay, Pinar, "How Erdogan used the power of the mosques against coup attempt", *Al-Monitor*, (25/7/2016) http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/turkey-coup-attempt-erdogan-mosques.html

prohibited from holding funeral service for the fallen military personnel reportedly involved in the failed coup.[54] The above situation raises some necessary questions in regard to the clout of the Diyanet and the related AKP government policies, when taking into account the fact that 8,895 mosques were reported to have been built during a ten-year timeframe (2005-2015) in Turkey.[55]

However, on a brighter note, a new bill is being drafted concerning the affairs of non-Muslim communities. Armenian, Jewish and Greek communities could, in the near future, be able to organize independently the election of their community leaders and their financial and other affairs, without any involvement from local governments and authorities.[56] It remains to be seen whether this bill will have its desired effect: namely, calming the fear within the non-Muslim communities that their religious identity will be sacrificed to the altar of the ascent of Sunni Muslim identity as the be-all and end-all of Turkish domestic and foreign policies.

[54] Reuters, "Turkey's main Muslim body prohibits religious funerals of coup supporters", (20/7/2016) https://www.rt.com/news/352285-turkey-muslim-funeral-coup
[55] Hurriyet Daily News, "Turkey builds nearly 9,000 mosques in 10 years", (16/9/2016) http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-builds-nearly-9000-mosques-in-10-years-.aspx?PageID=238&NID=103950&NewsCatID=341
[56] Durmus, Yusuf Ziya, "Landmark bill to boost rights of Greek, Jewish, Armenian communities", *Daily Sabah*, (7/10/2016) http://www.crpme.gr/analysis/turkey/landmark-bill-to-boost-rights-of-greek-jewish-armenian-communities

Egypt

The Jewish Community

Egyptian Jews have seen their numbers decrease for the better part of the 20th century. Before the State of Israel was established, the Jewish community in Egypt numbered around 90,000 members. No longer the vibrant community in Egypt that it used to be, its surviving members are not getting any younger. Officially, they number less than a few dozen citizens and are over the age of 70. Each passing brings the elder community closer to being a vestige of the past.

The size of the membership of the Jewish community makes maintaining their religious needs even more difficult, to say the least. At a few dozen people in Egypt as a whole, this predicament means that their houses of worship are closed or overlooked at best. They bear no evident markings of being synagogues from the outside, since their buildings and their surrounding are neglected and underused both from the government and from the community respectively. For instance, the Sha'ar Hashamayim synagogue in Cairo, one of the few Jewish houses of worship that have been renovated in recent times, has not hosted a religious ceremony since the 1960s. Notwithstanding the lack of funding from the Egyptian government, the community's size plays an important part in this situation: in the few cases of the passing of an Egyptian Jewish citizen, a rabbi must be brought from abroad due to the lack of availability of one in Egypt.[57]

However, while the Egyptian Jews' presence in the country is dwindling, efforts are being made by both non-governmental organizations as well as from the government itself, to preserve Jewish cultural and religious heritage. It is the former that will attest in the near future of the presence or not of a Jewish community in Egypt during the late 20th and the early 21st Centuries. Some initiatives to that effect have been taken on: a number of synagogues in Cairo and Alexandria are slowly being restored, along with efforts to catalogue and register Jewish antiquities and artefacts, in part in order to shield them from theft and neglect.[58] Although this

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[57] Emam, Amr, "Remnants of bygone times, Egypt's synagogues suffer neglect", *The Arab Weekly*, (23/10/2016) http://www.thearabweekly.com/Society/6838/Remnants-of-bygone-times%2C-Egypt%E2%80%99s-synagogues-suffer-neglect

[58] Hassan, Khalid, "Egypt documenting Jewish artifacts", *Al-Monitor*, (4/9/2016) http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/egypt-document-jewish-heritage-synangogues-records.html

process is not moving quickly, its lack of swiftness is argued by the financial turmoil that Egypt is especially dealing with during the past few years and particularly 2016. Despite the prospects of a rise in international cultural tourism, as well as the gain of international recognition in regard to promoting cultural pluralism in the country, the lack of sufficient funds, coupled with organizational issues and the fear of upsetting a part of the Egyptian population that remains adamantly opposed to the upgrading of Jewish cultural history in Egypt, effectively acts as a roadblock to ensuring that this initiative will come to fruition or at least be completed. Nonetheless, in an effort to counter the current financial obstacles, Egyptian officials, such as Saeed Helmy from the Ministry of Antiquities, as well as prominent figures from the Egyptian society, have been calling for assistance from the international community in order to support Egypt in restoring and preserving the Jewish antiquities. Apparently, this call did not fall on deaf ears, as the Israeli Ambassador to Egypt declared that the State of Israel was ready to contribute to restoring the Eliyahu Synagogue in Alexandria which dates back to the 19th Century.[59]

The Shia Community

Due to the lack of a recent and accurate census, the Shia community in Egypt is estimated to amount to 1% of a population of nearly 90 million people. The relationship between the Shia and the Sunni communities is often a strained one in the country. When locating the principal source of tension between the two communities, one would not need to search much further than in the difference in interpretation of the Quran, and specifically what ensues from it. The commemoration of the day of Ashura (which marks the death of al-Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed) is a sacred day for practitioners of Shia Islam, and one that is frowned upon by the majority of the Sunni community in Egypt. In fact, practicing Shiism publicly in Egypt may lead to detention and imprisonment if the blasphemy of religion law comes into play. The basis of the above originates from the fear that Shia Islam could, if left unchecked, supplant Sunni Islam as the official leading Muslim religion of the Egyptian state. As a result, Sunni extremists utilize this misconception as a means to promoting their

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[59] Al-Youm, Al-Masry, "Israeli Embassy ready to contribute to Alexandria synagogue restoration", *Egypt Independent*, (22/9/2016) http://www.egyptindependent.com//news/israeli-embassy-ready-contribute-alexandria-synagogue-restoration

personal aspirations and push for a divide in Egyptian Muslim society that places unneeded strain on a society still on edge from the ramifications of the Arab Spring and the rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Nonetheless, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Shaikh Ahmad al-Tayyeb went on to promote during 2016 a message of tolerance and peaceful coexistence between the different schools of Islam, specifically indicating the Sunni-Shia divide as the root of the problem. He referred to the Sunni and Shia religions as "the two wings of Islam", forbade the killing of Muslims of any denomination, and called for solidarity for moderate Shias. Notwithstanding the fact that these proclamations were made during his visits abroad and not domestically, their importance should not be downplayed, given that if they are channelled appropriately, they could trigger a new era of peaceful religious coexistence between the Egyptian Sunni and Shia communities.

To that effect, the recent diplomatic rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Egypt, has led to a void – in terms of publicity – of the Sunni-Shia divide in Egyptian society. Violations against Shia Egyptian citizens are being toned down in the Egyptian media, in contrast to a report in July 2016 by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights which catalogued 70 incidents of assault against Egyptian Shia from 2011 to 2016. It is of note that the 2016 report effectively pointed at the unbalanced viewpoints of state and private media outlets, calls from radical salafists, as well as a number of officials from Egyptian religious institutions, as the principal instigators of these bursts of violence. In addition, the Shia celebrations of the religious day of Ashura were effectively cancelled by the Egyptian Ministry of Religious Endowments and the Ministry of the Interior, as the al-Hussein mosque was temporarily closed to the public after prayer.[60] Given the fact that the mosque is one of the most popular destinations for Shia practitioners on the day of Ashura, this decision could only be regarded as a blow to the religious rights of this particular Muslim community. Although probably not taken lightly due to the international publicity it would ensue, this decision was made in order to prevent possible demonstrations and/or outbreaks of violence in the vicinity of the al-Hussein mosque.

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[60] Sakr, Taha, "Government temporarily closes Al-Hussein Mosque for Ashura to avoid sectarian tension", *Daily News Egypt*, (12/10/2016) http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2016/10/12/558573/

In other words, when dealing with issues stemming from the Sunni-Shia divide within Egyptian society, the government and its religious institutions seem more concerned and accustomed to preventing potential ramifications from Shia religious activities, rather than ensuring that their right of freedom of religion is fully respected and shielded.

The Coptic Christian community

Christian Copts make up approximately 10% of Egypt's population, i.e. around 9 million people. Although their numbers were dwindling before and during the events of the Arab Spring, the rise to power of current President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi briefly paused their emigration and their seeking safety abroad. It is widely perceived that the Egyptian Copts are the largest Christian community in the countries of the Middle East. The open and strong support by current Coptic Pope Tawandros to then Minister of Defence Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi in 2013 during the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood, briefly renewed hope regarding an improvement of their everyday life as well as the political and social discrimination they faced. It is of note that the repercussions of their public support to the military coup against former President Morsi materialized immediately with violent protests by Muslim Brotherhood partisans that led to the destruction of Christian churches and Christian property, particularly in the al-Minya region. In spite of the latter, Coptic Christian life seemed to be looking up for the years that would follow. However, evidence to the contrary presented itself especially during the summer of 2016.

Nowadays, it is a well-known and well-regarded fact in international Christian circles that President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi – the first in Egyptian history President to do so – attended the Coptic Christmas mass of 2014 and 2015 in Cairo, vowing personally that the Egyptian military would rebuild within 2016 the numerous Christian houses of worship and buildings that were destroyed during and in the aftermath of the Muslim Brotherhood's rise and fall from power. Furthermore, the Egyptian President strongly reaffirmed his belief that the Egyptian Copts represent as much a vital and equal part of Egyptian society as the Egyptian Muslim population. In his own words, he proclaimed "we are all Egyptians, first and foremost". In light

of these promises, the construction of two new Coptic churches was approved by Presidential decree in the cities of New Cairo and Assiut.

Nonetheless, the events that transpired during the second half of 2016 did not succeed in painting a brighter picture for the future of Coptic Christians in Egyptian society. The heavily promoted friendship between Pope Tawandros and President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, failed again to soothe tensions between the Muslim and the Coptic Christian population. In fact, Coptic activists planning to protest at the anniversary of the "Maspero massacre" of October 2011 were not granted a demonstration permit. The incident of 2011 in front of the Maspero television building had amounted to 28 deaths during a protest for the right of Christians to worship in peace. Although the incident was considered a tremendous blow to the rights of the Coptic Christian community, it was conveniently forgotten in the annals of history given the tectonic shifts which followed the Arab Spring uprisings. As a result, and perhaps as a way to leave the past behind, the right to commemorate the victims of the Maspero event was effectively denied.[61] On another note, the perceived discrimination of Coptic athletes being rejected from joining and competing in the Egyptian Olympic teams came to the forefront. Despite the fact that Coptic athletes, for the past few years, were withdrawn from public athletic life, the renewed friendship between President al-Sisi and Pope Tawandros, had given hope of a better inclusion of Copts in Egyptian society. As a result, formal complaints of discrimination in the selection of the Olympic team were filed, with more cases rumoured to come.[62]

Furthermore, during the summer of 2016, sectarian strife afflicting Coptic Christians, Christian churches and Christian property rose exponentially in contrast to previous months.[63] Although accurate data is scarce for the previous years, the work of researchers from The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), and others, has provided a list of religiously motivated acts of violence in Egypt, and especially within the al-Minya region.[64] However,

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[61] Ibrahim, Mina, "Maspero: the rubbish of the Copts", *Daily News Egypt*, (9/10/2016) http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2016/10/09/maspero-rubbish-copts/
[62] Gledhill, Ruth, "Egypt's Coptic Christians protest exclusion from Olympic and other sports", *Christian Today*, (25/8/2016) http://www.christiantoday.com/article/egypts.coptic.christians.protest.exclusion.from.olympic.and.other.sports/93962.htm
[63] World Watch Monitor, "A dozen incidents against Egypt's Copts in 7 weeks", (20/7/2016) https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/07/4559452/
[64] Rahman, Amr Abdel, "The Elephant in the Room (part 1): the state and sectarian violence", *Mada Masr*, (26/9/2016) http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/politics/elephant-room-part-1-state-and-sectarian-violence

religion-related violence was found wherever large portions of the Coptic community are located, namely in the governorates of Alexandria, Cairo, Assiut and Beni Sweif. The al-Minya province is believed to house the highest numbers of Copts in Egypt, sometimes estimated as 50% of the province's population. As a result, according to EIPR, 77 incidents were accounted for in al-Minya since 2011, with 10 occurring just during the past seven months. The origins of these disputes range from the suspicion that Coptic Christians were building or were planning to build a church, from rumours on romantic relations between members of the Muslim and Christian communities, from religious conversions, or from expressing opinions on issues of faith. In many instances, the disputes resulted in the burning of Coptic property, the expulsion of Copts from villages, death and injury, and public humiliation, as was the case of the elderly woman who was forcibly paraded naked in her village (as retaliation on rumours of romantic relations between a Coptic man and a Muslim woman). Despite the atrocity of the latter event, it brought some much needed publicity to the plight of the Coptic Christian population of al-Minya, one which was in dire need of media attention. As it turns out, many of these incidents were downplayed by the domestic media and remained unacknowledged formally by the Egyptian authorities. The informal customary method of "reconciliation hearings" or "mediation sessions" was often elected instead of formal investigations in the disputes. The "reconciliation hearings" are usually comprised of representatives of al-Azhar and the Coptic Church, as well as other Muslim and Coptic personalities. The downside to this procedure is that more often than not the culprits are not brought to justice for their crimes against the victims, and, as a result, sectarian incidents reoccur.[65] In essence, the rule of justice seems to be tipping the scale in favour of the Muslim population. In contrast to the ruling against the four Coptic teenagers who filmed a parody video regarding the atrocities committed by ISIS in Libya, the burning of a person's home is either left unpunished or merely punished with a fine. In other words, the "reconciliation hearings" effectively place the situation into a never-ending sectarian loop and end up relegating the members of the Coptic community to second class

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[65] The Economist, "Crimes and no punishment", (18/8/2016) http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21705365-violence-only-one-problems-faced-christians-egypt-crimes-and-no

citizens whose rights are not considered equal to the ones of the majority of the Egyptian population.[66]

According to the research published by EIPR, the most prevalent reason for sectarian dispute is the rumour or belief that someone is planning to build or is secretly building a church. This cause, in numbers, takes precedence over incidents occurring over interreligious romantic relationships or theological arguments. Up until September of 2016, the building of Coptic Christian churches was governed by a law with origins dating back to the 19th Century and legislation based on Ottoman rulings. Hence, the construction or renovation of Christian churches was deemed a privilege and permitted only at the agreement of the highest authority. In today's modern Egypt, the highest ruler would be President al-Sisi. It should be taken into account that even if the permissions were granted, at times, the resistance by the local community would dampen the momentum of church building.

Due to the restrictions that are required to be abided on and the necessary permissions that have to be given, the number of Christian churches serving Christians is much lower than that of the mosques serving Muslims. Nowadays, according to estimates, there are nearly 3,000 churches against around 110,000 mosques in Egypt. As a result of the difficulty in obtaining permits for church-building, there is a large undocumented number of unofficial churches raised that fail to conform to safety-related guidelines and are often the subject of sectarian strife.[67] Perhaps as a measure in order to deescalate the rise in sectarian tensions of the past summer, the new bill on church building and renovating was fast forwarded and voted on by the Egyptian parliament on the 30th of August.[68] The early versions of the bill were drafted in closed meetings between the government and the Coptic Christian Church. It brought some much needed upgraded guidelines to a situation that was previously regulated by the Ottoman Edict of 1860 and the law of Ten Conditions of 1934. To that effect, the new law brings to the table an adjustment to the highest authority granting permission. As of September (when the

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[66] Raghavan, Sudarsan, "In post-Arab Spring Egypt, Muslim attacks on Christians are rising, *The Washington Post*, (13/11/2016) https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-post-arab-spring-egypt-muslim-attacks-on-christians-are-rising/2016/11/13/f50a18e2-84fc-11e6-b57d-dd49277af02f_story.html?postshare=7661479161411803&tid=ss_tw

[67] Shukry, Nader, "Praying without permit?", *Watani International*, (30/6/2016) http://en.wataninet.com/coptic-affairs-coptic-affairs/sectarian/praying-without-permit/16767/

[68] Hamama, Mohamed, "After 150-year wait, Parliament passes church construction law in 3 days", *Mada Masr*, (31/8/2016) http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/after-150-year-wait-parliament-passes-church-construction-law-3-days

law was ratified by President al-Sisi), the permission of building or renovating a church is granted by the local governor after factoring in – yet undefined – security concerns. The governor retains the right to approve or deny the construction of the church within four months of the request. However, if no answer is provided within 120 days, then the permit is granted automatically. The new law also provides guidelines as to the normalization of unofficial churches built five years prior to the law being in force. One important article of the law concerns the size of the church and its annexed surroundings. More importantly, it states that the size of the building should be in proportion to the local Coptic Christian population and to its growth. Alternatively, this implies that if the local Coptic Christian population is very limited number-wise in contrast to the rest, then a church could not permitted to be built, essentially limiting the needs and the right of freedom of religion of the Copts in the region.[69] This controversial stipulation brings another issue to the fold: namely, the lack of an updated census on the size of the Coptic population as well as the main regions and villages where they are located.

Notwithstanding the criticism aimed at the swiftness with which the law was drafted, as well as the human rights issues some of its articles imply, a number of positive outcomes of the law's passing have recently come to the forefront.[70] During October 2016, Coptic churches were inaugurated and reopened, with building permits being granted in regions such as New Cairo and Qena.[71] Perhaps the new law on building and renovating churches lacks the articles that many sceptic Coptic and human rights activists have been claiming for the past few years, especially since it concerns only the rights of the Coptic population and not the right to build houses of worship of any religious denomination.[72] Nonetheless, it is a law that has been welcomed by the majority of the Coptic population and the Coptic Church, and is certainly a step in the right direction, one that has started a discussion which could lead to better and all-encompassing legislations in the future.

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[69] Fahmy, Heba, "Egypt's law on building churches dashes Christian hopes for equality", *Middle East Eye*, (16/11/2016) http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/egypt-s-law-building-churches-dashes-christians-hope-equality-440271953

[70] Agenzia Fides, "First (positive) effects of the law on the construction of churches", (7/9/2016) http://www.fides.org/en/news/60703-AFRICA_EGYAbdelrahman PT_First_positive_effects_of_the_law_on_the_construction_of_churches#.V9Eay5h97IV

[71] Daily News Egypt, "Pope Tawadros inaugurates new church in Moqattam", (3/10/2016) http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2016/10/03/pope-tawadros-inaugurates-new-church-moqattam/

[72] Eyad, Abdelrahman, "Why Egypt's new church law has some activists worried", *Al-Monitor*, (5/10/2016) http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/10/egypt-church-construction-law-controversy-civil-society.html

The prospects of a "religious revolution"

The expression "religious revolution" was coined by Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi in his various addresses during 2015. It was part of an initiative of his government aiming to supplant radical discourse within Egyptian society against non-Muslim communities, and specifically the Coptic Christian one. Nonetheless, overall, the intended reach was for the radical elements to refrain from fuelling intolerance, violence and hate speech which essentially generate a rift between the Egyptian citizens.[73] The message was a simple one calling for religious reform on different aspects of Egyptian institutions, ranging from the al-Azhar University, to the Egyptian media, and to the judicial institutions.[74]

Nevertheless, it is too early to call whether this initiative was merely a means to promoting a populist agenda or a genuine call for a more diverse and indiscriminate Egypt. It remains to be seen if this opening will truly impact the day to day life of Egyptian citizens. However, some steps have been taken, and a necessary discourse seems to have begun. It is of note that steps taken are part of top-down initiative from the government's side of things and could, in a way, "rattle some feathers". During the past year, the al-Azhar University has publicly attempted to strengthen its image as a moderate representative of Islam by opening channels on social media, by participating in international summits on religion, as well as by promoting and channelling the virtues and the openness of Islam in regards to other Muslim denominations and other religions. Nonetheless, a point of contention that seemed to arise between government policy and the spokespersons of al-Azhar was the one concerning the Endowments Ministry's decision to unify the Friday weekly sermon throughout Egypt's mosques. On paper, this decision's aim was to provide a written sermon that 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. At first, the Ministry's decision was not uniformly met with the consensus of the members of al-

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[73] Daily News Egypt, "Al-Sisi rejects sectarianism, vows accountability", (21/7/2016) http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2016/07/21/al-sisi-rejects-sectarianism-vows-accountability/

[74] Amin, Shahira, "President Sisi's Promise of Religious Revolution Remains Unfulfilled", *Egyptian Streets*, (5/7/2016) http://egyptianstreets.com/2016/07/05/president-sisis-promise-of-religious-revolution-remains-unfulfilled/

Azhar.[75] The reasons behind al-Azhar's objection with the government's decision were threefold. Firstly, the board of al-Azhar was apparently not consulted or notified on a matter of such importance and magnitude. Secondly, this decision was forced upon the al-Azhar University, when, for the past decades, it has generally been considered as one of the most prestigious Sunni religious institutions as well as an authority and a reference on religious issues. And thirdly, the decision reopened a previous al-Sisi proclamation or some might say "Pandora's box" which called for a re-evaluation of al-Azhar's curriculum, more precisely, the sacred texts that are the subject of the university's teachings. In that spirit, President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi had called for al-Azhar to "purge Islam of its flaws". Needless to say that the President's statement was not met with rousing applause. Nevertheless, the weekly Friday sermon initiative was a successful one, with media claims of a rejection by al-Azhar being dismissed officially, with no mention of any intra-institutional conflict.

Another matter directly intertwined with the "religious revolution" that was previously mentioned was the one regarding the mention of a citizen's religion on Egyptian identity cards. Although a topical discussion had already begun for some time, with even a draft bill being submitted to parliament, it was confined to the fringes of the Egyptian political forum. The event that triggered the rise to the forefront of the discussion on the need for a religious section on national identity cards was the joint decision by both the students, the academic and the administrative staff of the University of Cairo to no longer require the mention of religious identity on one's university-related paperwork.[76] The University's consensus on the matter sent ripples through local and social media, prompting responses that were, to say the least, controversial. Although supported by liberals and secularists as a means to strengthen the efforts to build a unique Egyptian citizenship, the conservative political parties of Egyptian society find the University's decision baffling, as one that would challenge and eventually downgrade the Sunni Muslim identity of the majority of the people of Egypt. Despite the additional rift that was created between secularists and religious conservatives in the political

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[75] Marisya Aswat, "Egypt orders Muslim preachers to deliver identical weekly sermons", *Egypt Independent*, (13/7/2016) http://www.egyptindependent.com//news/egypt-orders-muslim-preachers-deliver-identical-weekly-sermons
[76] Egyptian Streets, "Cairo University Abolishes 'Religious Identity' from All Official Paperwork", (12/10/2016) http://egyptianstreets.com/2016/10/12/cairo-university-abolishes-religious-identity-from-all-official-paperwork/

arena, the discourse on the matter of the religion box on national identity cards has effectively began and seems to no longer be taboo or of secondary importance.[77]

Disdain of religion prosecutions or "hisbah lawsuits" (i.e. accountability lawsuits) have been on the rise ever since the Arab uprisings of 2011. It should be pointed out that the disdain of religion law was added to the Egyptian Penal Code in 1981 and does not only apply to the religion of Islam, but to all three officially recognised religions by the Egyptian state: the Islamic, the Christian and Judaic ones. The offenders can be sentenced from six months to five years of prison time. The people that are usually penalized under the disdain of religion law are Coptic Christians, Shia Islam practitioners and atheist citizens. Although the "hisbah lawsuits" pertain to Islam-related acts, Christianity and Judaism are not left out of the loop. Previously, in May 2015, four underage Egyptian Copts and their teacher were arrested for insulting Islam and using words found in Muslim prayers while parodying, in a video that was disseminated online, the atrocities perpetuated by Islamic State militants during the well-publicized beheadings of 21 Egyptian Copts on February 15th, 2015 in Libya. Despite the immediate apology from the Coptic Church, the young Copts were held on remand for 90 days, with sectarian tensions rising in the al-Minya region. After nearly a year of trial postponements, on February 25th, the Egyptian courts charged them for disdain of religion and sentenced them to five years in prison. The international uproar led by Human Rights Watch and other international rights groups which followed, prompted the Egyptian authorities and the government to reassure that a solution to the case would be found. In spite of promises to the contrary, the case did not move along, with the four sentenced Copts being released on bail pending appeal. A few months later, they left Egypt and sought asylum in Switzerland.[78] It is of note that this case is part of a broader issue. Trials on disdain or blasphemy of religion have been on the rise ever since former President Mubarak's oust from power. As a result, the above-mentioned trial is far from being an isolated event with other instances such as the ones regarding journalist Fatima Naaot, television host Islam al-Buhairi and novelist Ahmed Naji making international headlines as well. Recently, a number of draft bills were submitted by MPs to the legislative committee of

[77] Ayoub, Mervat, "Who needs religion on ID card?", *Watani International*, (5/10/2016) http://en.wataninet.com/coptic-affairs-coptic-affairs/sectarian/who-needs-religion-on-id-card/17585/
[78] Sanchez, Luis, "Coptic teenagers accused of insulting religion seek asylum in Switzerland", *Mada Masr*, (6/9/2016) http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/coptic-teenagers-accused-insulting-religion-seek-asylum-switzerland

the Egyptian parliament in an effort to annul or at least amend the disdain of religion law. Unfortunately, in November 2016, the drafts were rejected, leaving matters in flux, the courts to their own devices, and with an obsolete law affecting a wide range of Egyptian citizens and impeding their freedom of speech.[79]

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[79] Mounir, Adel, "Annulment of religious disdain law rejected", *Watani International*, (1/11/2016) http://en.wataninet.com/politics/rights/annulment-of-religious-disdain-law-rejected/17859/

Morocco

Morocco has the reputation of a long tradition of religious pluralism and religious freedom. The peaceful coexistence of different religious communities is promoted as to set an example to the rest of the Muslim world. Nevertheless, the Kingdom continues its efforts to affirm and institutionalize the value of a pluralistic society.

Promoting an inclusive form of Islam

Morocco has placed countering violent extremism at the top of its policy priorities, both domestically and abroad. Its efforts are widely acknowledged; the State Department's 2015 Country Reports on Terrorism recognized the Kingdom's comprehensive strategy for countering violent extremism, by institutionalizing a relatively moderate version of Islam.[80] What is more, Morocco has emerged as an international model in combating extremism, as indicated by the large number of countries wishing to benefit from Rabat's religious training.

Committed to spreading a more moderate form of Islam, based on the Maliki rite and Sunni Sufism, the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidines and Morchidates was inaugurated on March 2015, teaching tolerance and openness. The institute has become a beacon not only for the future of religious tolerance in Morocco, but in the wider region as well, having already enrolled students from Mali, Tunisia, Cote d'Ivoire and France, while having signed agreements to train imams from several other countries. This initiative was followed by the establishment of a Higher Council of the Mohammed VI Foundation for African Ulema on June 2016. By bringing together 120 well-known Ulema from 31 countries in Africa, it aspires to help promote security, stability and development in Africa, within the framework of a tolerant and moderate Islam.

The Kingdom of Morocco is playing a pioneering role in the fight against Islamic fundamentalism, by providing a middle ground alternative to the purist and dogmatic

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[80] US Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, "Middle East and North Africa Overview," *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015* https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257517.htm

approach preached by jihadi groups. The most significant act of the Kingdom towards a tolerant, pluralistic society was the Marrakesh Declaration in January 2016, where the Kingdom committed itself to offer a more inclusive concept of citizenship, while promoting religious education in school to deter extremism. In the last six months, Morocco has participated and sent delegations to conferences in Japan and Jordan in order to actively promote the Marrakesh Declaration, and thus present the model of a pluralistic society as an effective counterbalance to and means of prevention of violent extremism, Islamophobia and xenophobia.

When it comes to dealing with extremism domestically, Morocco has already launched an e-platform, called "Ra'ed" and a book series called "Islam and Contemporary Context", as means to isolate extreme forms of Islam. It appears that the Moroccan state is trying to eliminate extremism within the Salafist movement, not only through religious training, but also by integrating Salafists to political life. Several Salafist leaders who condemn extremism have joined the ranks of some national political parties. Some them (Abdelwahab Rafiki, Hassan al-Usri, Hisham al-Temesmani and Hamza Kettani) left the Party of Renaissance and Virtue before the elections of October, and joined the ranks of the Istiqlal Party. According to Rafiki, they aim at the "Moroccanization of Salafism", in a way that dismisses all forms of extremism, radicalism and intolerance.[81] The Justice and Development Party also attempted to lure Salafists by nominating the prominent Salafist Hammad Kabbaj, however his candidacy was rejected by the regional authorities. Other Salafists have also expressed through public statements their support for the state's official discourse. Even though Salafist candidates were not successful in securing a seat during the elections of October 2016, it seems that many show a readiness to normalize with the official principles of the Moroccan state and turn away from the takfiri ideology. Although many Salafists continue to condemn all forms of involvement in politics, the participation of Salafists in the political life is an important step for a pluralistic religious society which welcomes all elements of the population by de-radicalizing them. In general, even though more than a thousand Moroccans fight within the ranks of the Islamic State, the

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[81] Alaoui, Mohamed, "Morocco carefully integrates Salafists," *The Arab Weekly* (17/11/2016) www.thearabweekly.com/article/7142/Morocco%20carefully%20integrates%20Salafists

group enjoys limited support in Morocco, showing the state's successful approach in combating extremism domestically.

Religious Pluralism

According to the International Religious Freedom Report of 2015, more than 99 per cent of a total population of 33 million are Sunni Muslims, and less than 1 per cent composes of other religions, including Christians, Jews, Shia Muslims, and Baha'is. The number of Jews in Morocco is estimated between 3,000 and 4,000, who live mostly in Casablanca, while the Jewish community have more than 10 functional synagogues in Morocco. Moroccan Christians are estimated between 2,000 and 6,000, although some Christian leaders claim they may be up to 50,000. The foreign resident Christian population includes at least 30,000 Roman Catholics and 10,000 Protestants, with a small Russian Orthodox community in Rabat and a Greek Orthodox community in Casablanca.[82] The foreign resident Christian community has established churches, schools, hospitals and orphanages without interference from the government. While the state acknowledges the existence of a Shia minority, there are no official data about the size of this groups. It is estimated between 3,000 and 10,000 people, who mostly live in the north of Morocco. There are also about 500 Baha'is in Morocco, who seem to practice their faith privately but without interference.

Religious pluralism in Morocco is safeguarded by the country's new constitution. While the constitution of 2011 declares Islam to be the religion of the state, it also guarantees the free exercise of beliefs, freedom of thought, expression and assembly. King Mohammad VI has repeatedly reaffirmed his title as the "Commander of the Faithfull", as proclaimed in the Constitution, and not just as the "Commander of Muslims".[83] This emphasized the Kingdom's commitment to a pluralistic society, and its success in promoting an inclusive national identity, encompassing all religious groups.

[82] US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Morocco 2015 International Religious Freedom Report," 2, http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256493.pdf
[83] Calcuttawala, Zainab, "King is Commander of All Believers, Not Just Muslims: King Mohammed VI," *Morocco World News*, (29/11/2016) https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2016/11/202528/king-is-commander-of-all-believers-not-just-muslims-king-mohammed-vi/

The state tries to maintain and promote positive attitudes regarding religious freedom. By law, impeding or preventing one or more persons from worshipping or from attending worship services of any religion is punishable by six months to three years of imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams. What is more, the constitution also recognizes Sunni Maliki-Ashari Muslims and Jews as native populations, free to practice their religion without any specific requirements from the government. The government continued to fund the study of Jewish culture and heritage at universities, while offering Hebrew and comparative religion were course offerings in the Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Rabat.[84]

However, other religious groups are not recognized as native, including non-Maliki-Ashari Muslims (e.g., Shia), Christians and Baha'is. By not allowing them to be registered as religious organizations, these groups are prevented from legally gathering for religious ceremonies or forming associations under which they could operate legally. According to the constitution, political parties may not be based on religion and may not seek "infringement" of Islam as one of their objectives. This drives people to participate in larger, more inclusive, national parties, but it could also be argued that it also hinders the representation and the public recognition of the religious groups. Adherents of the Moroccan Christian, Baha'i and Shia faiths said fears of government surveillance led them to refrain from public worship and instead to meet discreetly in members' homes. Moroccan Christians rarely attended churches, and church officials do not encourage them to do so, to avoid accusations of proselytizing; it is estimated that between 1,000 to 3,000 regularly attend "house" churches.[85]

In Morocco, as elsewhere in Maghreb, there is the issue of Christian converts. While the Moroccan law allows the conversion of religion, it also penalizes anyone who is found to proselytize anyone to any religion other than Islam, punished by six months to three years in prison. The law seems to criminalize Christian evangelism because the majority of missionaries had offered inducements to poor families and children to convert to Christianity. What is more, non-Muslims must formally convert to Islam and be a permanent resident before they can become guardians of abandoned or orphaned children, otherwise they can be accused of

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[84] US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op.cit., 8
[85] Ibid, 2

proselytization. The minister of Justice has stated in the past that citizens were free to change their religion and no Moroccan law punished anyone for changing his/her religion, mentioning as examples two cases of Muslim citizens converting to Christianity who he said had not been punished, as there was no evidence of proselytization.[86] This is very significant, as it paves the way towards recognition of other converts in the name of freedom of religion. However, because Morocco does not oppose the gradual recognition of the freedom of religion, it faces an opposition to this by the most conservative elements of the society.

Societal Actions

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom in the last months, even though some reports of attacks against Moroccan Christians and Jews have been taken place. In 2015, there were reports from Christians being under pressure from their non-Christian families and friends to convert to Islam or renounce the Christian faith, as many more have kept their conversion secret from their Muslim families. [87] However, the first instance of Christians openly expressing discontent within the Moroccan society was documented in the last months. A group of Moroccan Christian activists created a YouTube channel, called "Moroccan and Christian", in order to make their presence known, and tackle rumors and misunderstandings about Christianity in Morocco. In these series, which includes native Christians such as Amazigh but also Christian converts, they mention the ignorance of most Moroccans of their existence, and emphasize that it is not only the law, but also the society that pushes many of them to hide their religion.

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[86] Allilou, Aziz, "Moroccans are free to convert to another religion: Justice Minister," *Morocco World News* (8/7/2015) https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2015/07/162801/moroccans-are-free-to-convert-to-another-religion-justice-minister/
[87] Elmoudni, Sami, "Freedom of Religion in Morocco: The Silent Minorities", *Morocco World News*, (1/11/2016) https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2016/11/200271/freedom-religion-morocco-silent-minorities , Eddehbi, Ali Hassan, "I, Iman, a Moroccan Christian, love you all," *Morocco World News* (4/6/2016) http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2016/06/188139/i-iman-a-moroccan-christian-love-you-all/

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