



SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH CENTER

International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research
Vol. 6, No. 3, 2018, pp. 1-7.

ISSN 2348-2990

International
Journal of
Social Science
and
Humanities Research

www.scientificrc.com

Religious Diversity and Conflict in the Middle East

Adib Abdulmajid

University of Leuven, Belgium

Abstract

The main goal of this paper is to look into the possibilities of managing religious diversity in the Middle East, where the different religious groups constitute key elements of the social fabric. The religious diversity in the region, primarily in countries like Iraq and Syria, has encountered mounting challenges over the recent years, especially with the rise of extremist groups amidst devastating crises and a remarkable security vacuum. Given the rise of religious beliefs as alleged incentives behind the escalation of violence in the region, one may ask whether religion actually contributes to the emergence of extremist groups that target the perceived others, or if such a rise is merely a result of ideological differences. This paper provides an outline to the study of religious diversity in the Middle East and discusses the possibility of its management. It examines whether the long-standing strife is caused by lack of efficient management of religious diversity, or a mere result of conflicting political agendas.

Keywords: Religion, religious diversity, conflict, Middle East, extremism, cultural diversity, diversity management

1. Introduction

The discussion about religious diversity necessarily involves concepts of majority-minority, inclusion-exclusion, participation-marginalization, and coexistence-conflict.

The world's three major religions –Judaism, Christianity, and Islam– have originated in the Middle East, a fact that reflects the significant role this region has played in the historical development of human civilization (Gunderson, 2004: 5). However, the religious diversity of the Middle East goes beyond these three religions and finds its origins deep in history. Zoroastrianism, founded around 3400 years ago, is considered one of the oldest monotheistic religions, including two deities: Ahura Mazda and Ahriman and the Avesta is the Zoroastrians' sacred text (Kia, 2016: 185). Today's Middle Eastern Zoroastrian community includes approximately 20,000 members who are mainly concentrated in central Iran. The Yezidis also represent one of the oldest Middle Eastern religious communities with some Zoroastrian elements, worshipping a main divinity known as Tāwsê Malak or "Peacock Angel" (Asatrian and

Arakelova, 2014: 10).¹ The Yezidis today number around 100,000 and are mainly found in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Shabakism is another Middle Eastern religion and it shares certain traditions and beliefs with the Yezidis. The Shabaks now number approximately 60,000 and are concentrated in northern Iraq. There are several other religious groups to be found in the region, including Mandaeans, Baha'is, Druze, Ishikis, Samaritans, among others, beside a scattered number of unbelievers.

The religious diversity that once enriched the Middle East on various levels and constituted a social mosaic, and the historic coexistence among the region's various communities, were threatened and jeopardized with the rise of some radical groups whose atrocities reached every single social component with different religious, doctrinal or ideological tenets.² Amid these developments one may ask whether managing religious diversity in such a complex region falls within the attainable or is it a mere unreachable aspiration, no matter the strategies employed. This paper explores this possibility through a literature review of relevant cases of management of religious diversity in other parts of the world, with the goal of projecting the same methods on the case of the Middle East and testing its efficiency.

2. Religious Diversity and its Different Facets in the Middle East

In many several Middle Eastern Countries such as Iraq and Syria, the diverse religious groups have for long formed the basis of the social fabric. However, with the rise of extremist groups,³ this fabric appeared to be quite fragile, as illustrated by the deep-rooted sectarian sentimentalism among the various groups, which caused unfinished conflicts. The sense of belonging to a specific religious group demarcated the degree of socialization within the society in some cases, like the situation of the Yezidi Kurds in northern Iraq who were for decades marginalized by the majority of Sunni Kurds in what is known today as the Kurdistan Region. This marginalization used to have different aspects such as exclusion from power centers, constraints on businesses and trade relations, and the lack of basic services in most of Yezidi areas in comparison to the prosperous cities of Iraqi Kurdistan. The strictness of the Yezidi community, on the other hand, played a main role in nurturing the gap between both Kurdish communities who share the same ethnic and linguistic identity (Agoston and Masters, 2009: 603). Many cases of honor crime took place over the last two decades, as the Yezidis strictly prevent any marriages between the group members and Muslims, even if Kurds, which reflected a violent aspect of the religious difference within the Kurdish society.

In the same context, the Shiite Muslims were for decades excluded and suppressed by the former Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein, as they have been constantly accused of loyalty to Iran, the largest

¹ The Tāwsê Malak or Malak-Tāwūs (Peacock Angel) is deemed to be the most important character of the Yezidi triad in terms of significance and holiness. Tāwsê Malak is considered the essence of the Yezidi religion. In the Yezidi Statement of Faith, Tāwsê Malak is featured directly after God. “*Min ša’datīya īmānā xwa, Bi nāvê xwadê û Tāwūsê Malak dāya – I attest that my faith is given, In the names of god and Tāwsê Malak.*”

² Ethnic and religious minorities became a target to radical groups, and sedition was ignited and reinforced by the extremist discourse of sectarian organizations in the region. In addition, people from different social components were suppressed for their critical position towards radical groups –whose oppressive practices and atrocities undermined public liberties and deprived people of their basic civil rights.

³ For an insight into the rise of extremism in the region, see Hashemi, N. (2016). ‘The ISIS Crisis and the Broken Politics of the Middle East’, *Institute on Culture, Religion & World Affairs*, Henry Luce Foundation.

Shiite power in the region and one of the main enemies to Hussein's regime (Menon, 2005: 146). Obviously, the oppression practiced against the Shiite sect in Iraq was based on some deep-rooted sectarian difference and hostility which existed for centuries among Muslims, and survived to dominate the political agenda of a tyrant regime like the one of Saddam Hussein, which continued for nearly thirty years until the U.S. invasion in 2003. However, during the post-invasion era, the Shiites, who gained power for the first time after decades of marginalization, weren't less discriminative (Kilroy, 2018: 246); the government of the Iraqi Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki showed no mercy to the Sunni political forces, constantly excluding them from the decision-making process until the recent crisis in Iraq and the fall of the third largest city, Mosul, in the hands of radical members of the Islamic State (I.S.), an al-Qaeda offshoot, before its expulsion nearly three years later.

In Syria, on the other hand, the Alawite family of Assad has been in power since 1971, when the former President Hafiz al-Assad took over by eliminating his opponents, mainly from the Sunni sect, followed by his son, Bashar al-Assad, in 2000. The Alawite minority, deemed a branch of the Shiite sect, run the country and dominated power centers through security and secret service institutions, known as *Mukhabarat* (Kerr and Larkin, 2015: 262), excluding the majority of the Syrian population, represented by Sunnis with approximately 74%.⁴ The Alawite-led oppression against the Sunni Muslims in Syria led to an armed conflict in 1980-1982, where proponents of the Muslim Brotherhood⁵ took up arms and rebelled against the Assad regime, mainly in the city of Hama, where the group gained a popular support. The conflict led to the death of nearly 40,000 people and the destruction of approximately 70% of the city of Hama in western Syria.⁶ Afterwards, the Sunni Muslims were enormously suppressed in Syria (Ma'oz and Yaniv, 2013: 32). However, the rise of several extremist Sunni groups over the recent years in the region gave this sect a reputation of tendency to violence more than other sects or religions. Yet, the Islamic groups, regardless of their sectarian affiliations, are seen as representatives of a conflict-originating religion.

3. Civilizational Conflict

The matter of the role of Islam in generating conflict has become controversial in the last two decades. This view about Islam emerged since Samuel Huntington stressed the description of this religion as having "bloody borders", asserting that the civilizational conflict in the post-Cold War phase would intensify and reinforce this phenomenon (Huntington, 1993). Huntington's analysis is deemed a part of the concept that conflicts are generally occurring within the framework of a clash of civilizations.

According to Huntington, there are three main points to consider concerning the civilizational conflicts which involve Islam. First of all, he emphasizes that the post-Cold War conflict basically includes clashes between the world civilizations as defined by religion. Secondly, all conflicts involving the Islamic culture and civilization will prevail in terms of violence and brutality. As a third point, he considers the Islamic civilization to constitute the greatest threat to the Western civilization. Although his theory seems quite controversial, Huntington's arguments and hypotheses received large acceptance

⁴ This percentage is an approximation primarily based on Haboush, K.L. (2005: 471): "Lebanese and Syrian Families", in eds. McGoldrick, M., Giordano, J. and Garcia-Preto, N., *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, 3rd Edition. New York and London: The Guilford Press.

⁵ One of the main political groups representing what is known as political Islam, established in 1929 in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna.

⁶ For more on the background and consequences of the Hama crisis, see Wiedl, K.N. (2006). *The Hama Massacre – reasons, supporters of the rebellion, consequences*. GRIN Verlag.

among a relatively considerable circle of policymakers. This way, Huntington's theory, although to some extent, has influenced the Western thought as well as policy in certain Western countries during the last two decades, and became a starting point for the emergence of some radical right wing movements calling, in some cases, for imposing extra restrictions on the Muslim communities in these countries in order to deter any potential threat that might arise in terms of civilizational conflict involving Islam and the violence that could accompany such a potential strife.

Such arguments and theories had also an impact, to a certain extent, amongst scholars, affecting the general understanding of the topic and creating some preconceptions before conducting researches in the field of religious diversity, especially when these involve Islam. According to Karl Deutch (1981), comparative methodology, as a tool of analysis which basically consists of analyzing specific cases by use of introspection, insight and intuition, is limited by our preconceived notions. Thus, any researcher using the method of familiarizing himself/herself with the facts and the insights provided by previous scholars can be influenced, in a way or another, by his/her preconceptions. The question remains whether this applies to the studies done and arguments made about the nature of conflicts in the Middle East, whose influence could reach other parts of the world, especially in our largely globalized world.

4. Religion and Conflict

Religious differences make the occurrence of conflict more likely and in most of the cases more intense (Rummel, 1997). The degree of religious diversity in a region predicts the level of violence in its domestic conflicts. The involvement of religious issues in conflicts lead to more cultural, political and economic conflicts (Fox, 2000). The religious differences could also make international wars more likely (Henderson, 1998).

Religion-related matters largely influence the dynamics of conflicts (Fox, 1999). Religion institutions usually facilitate unrest when a conflict is religiously driven, and avoid to do so when religion is not important in a specific conflict (ibid). In countries where religion prevails over the political discourse, religious matters take over other political, cultural and economic issues. Religion-related conflicts are most likely to lead to intervention by foreign forces, each to support one side of the conflict. As long as the Middle-Eastern conflicts are concerned in this paper, it's worth mentioning here the intervention of Saudi Arabia, as a Sunni power, in Bahrain on behalf of the Sunni government, while Iran, as a Shiite power, showed support to the Shiite forces which protested against the government in Bahrain. Similar to this is the case of Yemen, where the conflict between the Shiite rebels against the Sunni government saw intervention by Gulf countries on behalf of the Sunni government while Iran emphasized its support to the Shiite rebels.⁷

Religion facilitates discrimination and exclusion against ethnic minority groups (Midlarsky, 1998). In countries where religious differences are key distinguishing markers within the society, and where the religious discourse dominates politics, issues of inclusion-exclusion and participation-marginalization occur between the majority and minority groups, and even ethnic conflicts are more likely to be associated with religious considerations. Thus is the case of the Kurdish Yezidi minority group which has suffered a longstanding exclusion within the larger Kurdish community in northern Iraq, followed by an

⁷ An in-depth analysis and an extensive insight into the background of the involvement of Iran and Saudi Arabia in Bahrain is to be found in: Mabon, S. (2013: 70-78). *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East*. London and New York: I.B.Tauris.

existential crisis when Sunni insurgents took over their areas in Mount Sinjar in 2014.⁸ The Yezidis then endured a double suppression at the hands of ISIS militants: for their ethnic-linguistic identity as Kurds on the one hand, and for their religious identity on the other hand.

Autocratic and totalitarian regimes are more likely to discriminate religious minorities than non-autocratic ones (Fox, 2000). According to Midlarsky (1998), Muslim states are basically ruled by autocratic regimes. On the basis of measures of the extent to which a country dedicates itself to institutional democracy and is characterized by liberal democracy, the Muslim countries are described as the most totalitarian states in the world (ibid). In their study about tracking democracy, Jagers and Gurr (1995) point out, on basis of measuring institutional democracy, that autocracy at its top levels could be found in the Middle East. This could also explain the discrimination practices against religious minorities in several countries throughout the Middle East, causing continuous conflicts which, in most of the cases, involve violence.

5. Manageability Quest

While the religious or sectarian identity emerges as a primary identifier of any fanatic group or individual whose actions are perceived as a threat to civil peace, the consequences seem severe for the concerned community as a whole, causing the rise of defense mechanisms. Lack of knowledge and understanding with regard to potential cultural diversity within a single religious community may result in the emergence of generalization-based viewpoints and stereotyping thoughts towards all members of that community. Therefore, awareness and well-founded knowledge are deemed crucial in any approach to such a complex and multifaceted issue as religious diversity. Nonetheless, its complex nature, which involve fundamental beliefs, norms, (sacred)principles and values, triggers numerous questions about the manageability of religious diversity. Although certain shared values among different religious groups inhabiting a particular geographical spot might help to maintain peaceful coexistence, the differences could sometimes manifest themselves in such a way that makes prevention of conflict nearly impossible. Hence, it is fair to say that the management of religious diversity remains a challenge and its success depends on multiple factors, including the surrounding circumstances, the level of belongingness, and the degree of awareness regarding the potential consequences of any form of confrontation.

In their article about religious diversity, Bouma and Singleton (2014) provide successful examples of managing this diversity, though on the basis of different factors. Among the reasons behind the success of managing cultural diversity in the city of Hong Kong, the authors argue that the majority of Christians and Muslims are Chinese, so they share ethnic and cultural ties, which are considered, in the course of the research, stronger than religious affiliation. However, comparing this case to the situation in the Arab-majority countries, as the case of Iraq, we find that the shared ethnic identity didn't prevent the occurrence of conflicts, involving violence, due to inter-religious or intra-religious diversity among the same population.

Furthermore, the ethnic diversity within the religious groups in Melbourne has played, according to Bouma and Singleton (2014), a main role in minimizing the chance for religion-based conflicts.

⁸ The Yezidi community has encountered multiple existential crises throughout history, the last and most documented of which was the ISIS invasion of their villages in Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq in the summer of 2014. Massacres, mass displacements and sex slavery were among the brutal practices perpetrated by ISIS against the Yezidis. For a more comprehensive acquaintance with this community and its woes, see *Yezidi Sunset: The Genocide by ISIS in Iraq*, by Kingery, P. (2017).

Projecting this back to our case in the Middle East, the ethnic diversity among the same religious group didn't prevent the occurrence of conflicts driven by religious, as well as sectarian, differences. An example of this to be mentioned is the strife between Muslim Kurds and other ethnic communities of the same religion in the region, including Arabs, Turks and Persians. According to Natali (2005: xvii), Kurds are Kurds "because they are not Arabs, Persians, or Turks". Although Muslim Kurds considered themselves throughout history as a part of the larger Muslim community in the region, "the nationalist tendencies that stimulated Arabs, Persians, and Turks also affected the Kurds" (ibid, xviii) Such tendencies are believed to have caused widespread confrontations between ethnic groups for the sake of defending or accomplishing nationalist sovereignty regardless of supposedly shared religious beliefs and traditions.

Thus, although the factors of successful management of religious diversity could differ from one area to another, like the examples of the cities of Melbourne and Hong Kong, still none of these factors contributed to the minimization of the chance of religion-related conflicts, especially those involving violence, in the Middle East.

6. Conclusion

Taking the previous findings into account, we find that religious incentives are, to a large extent, in the core of conflict in the Middle Eastern region. Religion, as an important factor for alliances and prevalent over political discourse, is enormously incorporated into the decision-making processes and policies by the major powers in the Middle East. The political behavior of many countries in that region is remarkably influenced by the religious differences between the groups, leading to constant unrest and violent conflicts. Considering the literature findings as well as the examples provided in the course of this paper, we come to a conclusion that religious discrimination is considerably high in the Middle East, leading to the exclusion and marginalization of minority groups, increasing the chance of conflict in the region, and confirming to a large extent the involvement of religion in the conflicts in the region. While management attempts made some success in other parts of the world, the complex religious-sectarian fabric of the populations in the Middle East might render many managerial strategies ineffective. Nevertheless, emphasizing shared cultural values and social norms could contribute to the maintenance of coexistence and the prevention of crisis outbreak, and could lead to social unity against extremism of any kind.

References

- Agoston, G. and Masters, B. (2009). *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*. New York: Facts On File, Inc.
- Asatrian, G. and Arakelova, V. (2014). *The Religion of the Peacock Angel: The Yezidis and their Spirit World*. New York: Routledge.
- Bouma, G.D. and Singleton, A. (2004). 'A Comparative Study of the Successful Management of Religious Diversity: Melbourne and Hong Kong', *International Sociology*, 19(1): 5-24.
- Deutsch, K.W. (1981). 'On Nationalism, World Regions, and the Nature of the West', *Mobilization, Center-Periphery Structures, and Nation Building*, ed. Per Torsvik. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Fox, J. (2000). 'The Effects of Religious Discrimination on Ethnic Protest and Rebellion', *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 2(2): 16-42.

- Fox, J. (1999). 'Do Religious Institutions Support Violence or the Status Quo?', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 22(2): 119-139.
- Fox, J. (1999). 'The Influence of Religious Legitimacy on Grievance Formation by Ethnoreligious Minorities', *Journal of Peace Research*, 36(3): 289-307.
- Fox, J. (1997). 'The Salience of Religious Issues in Ethnic Conflicts: A Large-N Study', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 3(3): 1-19.
- Gunderson, C. (2004). *Religions of the Middle East*. Minnesota: ABDO & Daughters.
- Henderson, E.A. (1998). 'The Democratic Peace through the Lens of Culture', *International Studies Quarterly*, 42(3): 461-484.
- Huntington, S.P. (1996). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Jagers, K. and Gurr, T.R. (1995). 'Tracking Democracy's Third Wave with the Polity III Data', *Journal of Peace Research*, 32(4): 469-482.
- Kerr, M. and Larkin, C. (2015). *The Alawis of Syria: War Faith and Politics in the Levant*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kia, M. (2006). *Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates and Philosophical Perspectives*. New York, Toronto and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publications Inc.
- Kilroy, R. (2018). *Threats to Homeland Security: Passing the All Hazards Perspective (2nd ed.)*. Conway: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Ma'oz, M. and Yaniv, A. (2013). *Syria Under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*. London and Sydney: Groom Helm, Routledge.
- Menon, U. (2005). 'Forecasting Iraq's Future: Democracy À La Islam or Is It Déjà Vu All Over Again', in ed. Shostak, A.B., *America: Moving Ahead (Tackling Tomorrow Today)*, Vol.2. Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Midlarsky, M.I. (1998). 'Democracy and Islam: Implications for Civilizational Conflict and the Democratic Peace', *International Studies Quarterly*, 42(3): 485-511.
- Natali, D. (2005). *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Rummel, R.J. (1997). 'Is Collective Violence Correlated with Social Pluralism?' *Journal of Peace Research*, 34(2): 163-175.