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Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. xiii + 239 pp. Maps, chronology, bibliography, and index. \$104.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10:0748685405.

Review by Jennifer M. Dueck, University of Manitoba.

The topic of minorities is often fraught territory in the historiography of the modern Middle East. One significant challenge is the number and diversity of minority identities and experiences in twentieth-century Middle Eastern nation states. The “minority” label includes groups in dominant positions, such as the presently-embattled Alawis in Syria or the Maronites in interwar Lebanon; as well as other groups who have endured political marginalization or violence, such as the Kurds in Turkey and the Assyrians in Iraq. The controversial role of minorities in the histories of many modern Middle Eastern states, as either persecuted victims or privileged authoritarian elites, makes the topic an often highly politicized arena for scholarly debate.

Benjamin White’s recent book does a good job of de-politicizing the study of minorities in the Middle East and striking back against the exceptionalism that has frequently coloured the debates on this subject. White’s central premise is that the term “minority,” and its necessary corollary “majority,” became meaningful only with the emergence of the modern nation-state. In the Middle East, the nation-state emerged for the most part after the fall of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. As White acknowledges, this premise is not a wholly original idea; however he brings to it a welcome new analytical rigor and presents a useful conceptual framework which he constructs from his case study of Syria under the French Mandate.^[1] Historians of the French Mandate, White claims, have been too quick to cast in stone their characterization of the politics of the French mandate as “minority politics.” Rather, he argues, “it is anachronistic to understand the communitarian politics of French Mandate Syria in terms of minorities and a majority” (p. 2). His argument runs that during the mandate period, and the attendant establishment of a Syrian nation-state, huge political changes took place. Until these changes had taken root in the structures of the nation and the psyche of its people, “the idea of a single group constituting...a ‘majority’ with a right to dominate ‘Syria’ is questionable” (p. 3).

Following from that argument is the caution White advises to historians and social scientists against using the concept without fully contextualizing its historical development. His book thus aims to unpack the historical development of the concept of the “minority” as a window for understanding the politics of community in Syria under the mandate. More broadly, he aims to show that “minorities are integral to the development of modern nation-states, not awkward groups that do not fit properly into them” (p. 3). Whether or not White’s arguments, generalized from the Syrian case study, are as universal as he suggests, he certainly presents a compelling angle through which to consider minorities in the Middle East, and a useful framework that advances our understanding of Syria under the French mandate.

Divided into three parts with two chapters each, the book is thematic rather than chronological. The first part presents White’s overall conceptualization of the terms minority and majority, and then shows how those terms apply to the French Mandate in Syria. The book’s second and third parts are

thematically organized. Part two highlights the minority role in issues of national integrity and coherence; while the third part discusses the evolution of legal definitions of minority groups, and negotiations about minorities in the post-Ottoman period.

The two chapters that make up part one, while perhaps not as exciting as those in the second and third parts, usefully set the stage for what follows. They carefully recount the previous scholarship on minorities, and relate that scholarship specifically to the French Mandate in Syria. Importantly, chapter one brings out the degree to which scholars have taken for granted the meaning of the term “minority,” without due reference to the specific historical context in which that term emerged. As an antidote to the assumptions adopted by contemporary commentators and historians alike, White sets out the preconditions for a minority to exist. These preconditions, he shows, did not exist in the Middle East before the advent of the twentieth-century nation-state. White examines three specific groups that fell outside the mainstream Sunni majority in Syria: the variety of Christian communities; the non-Arabophone Sunni Muslims, which included Turks, Kurds and Circassians; and the Arabophone non-Sunni Muslims, including Alawis and Druze. What emerges from White’s analysis is that, although all these groups clearly belonged to groups that are understood to be minorities, the classic French “minorities” policy emphasized religion rather than ethno-linguistic background as a basis for minority status. That emphasis resulted in an overwhelming focus on Christian minorities, at the expense of non-Sunni and non-Arabophone minorities. Although few historians of the Mandates would be surprised by this conclusion, most have nevertheless subscribed to the language and concept of a “minorities policy.” White’s work is a nuanced and pertinent corrective.

Where part one essentially points out the challenges of using the term “minority,” parts two and three delve into the details of how that term came into use. White’s arguments come vividly to life with detailed snapshots and anecdotes. Examples of petitions from the Alawites of Masyaf, the Ismailis of Hama, and the Circassians of Qunaytra, for instance, respectively illustrate the varied ways that minority communities responded to the expansion of state authority and the resulting impulses toward communitarian autonomy or separatism. A detailed textual analysis of newspaper articles appearing in *Alif Ba’* and *al-Ayyam* about the unrest in the Jazira in 1932 serves to illustrate the idealism of nationalist rhetoric in contrast to the new reality of the nation-state. The second chapter in part two, concentrates on one specific case, that of the Kurds. White uses the creation of the Syrian-Turkish border, and its attendant security and bureaucratic infrastructure, as an analytical tool in understanding the emergence of the concept of minorities. New guardposts, complete with wicker chairs and typewriters, meant that Kurdish movement across the border area took on great significance, not only for the Kurds but also for politicians in Damascus, Ankara and Paris. The scale of unrest around the border stimulated new infrastructure, and indeed new political and bureaucratic processes to deal with Kurds in Turkey and Syria respectively. White thus shows how the “drawing of Syria’s borders came to ‘minoritise’ all Kurds resident in the country” (p.103).

The final two chapters focus on the how the term “minority” finally came into widespread use. Historians of the French mandates who are accustomed to referring to the French “minorities policy” will be surprised by how late this actually happened. Relying principally though not exclusively on the term’s appearance in *Asie Française* over several decades, White shows that the term “minority” only became consistent in its usage among French colonialists after 1933. The specific shift in that year, White suggests, can be attributed to Iraq joining the League of Nations in 1932 and the tragic example of the massacre of Iraqi Assyrians around the same time. The book’s final chapter examines personal status law and French attempts to reform it in the second half of the 1930s. The reform had implications for all communities in Syria, whether they were minorities or not. Indeed, the fiercest opposition to French reform efforts came from the Sunni Muslim ulama, who represented the majority. Importantly according to White, this reform took place at a time when the nation-state was sufficiently entrenched for the terms majority and minority to resonate among Syrians themselves, something which had not been the case earlier in the Mandate. The Sunni ulama’s opposition to the personal status reform proved

the power of what White calls the “effective ideological fiction” of the majority. As a result of Sunni opposition, the French suspended the application of the reform to Muslims, which “reinforced the minority status of the other communities,” and left “Christians as subordinate minorities” (pp. 197-198).

The book’s scholarly apparatus, including endnotes for each chapter, a bibliography, short index, maps, and a chronology of events, is well-presented and helpful. In the introduction, White provides a detailed road map to the French and Syrian historical sources cited, with a discussion of their relative usefulness as well as their shortcomings. Those who have experienced the adventure of tackling the Syrian archives will agree that the Syrian archives “are more gap than archive” (p. 7).

With this book, White is addressing a scholarly audience of Middle Eastern and minority studies specialists. And he is addressing a particular scholarly issue, namely the way in which scholars have used, and abused, the concept of “minority,” which has broad implications for the study of many different nation-states. White does not contest the sectarian nature of French policy toward the Syrian mandate. He does, however, take issue with the classic characterization of the “minorities policy” given that the term did not come into widespread usage until the 1930s. One might arguably suggest that White is splitting hairs to insist on differentiating between a “minorities” policy and a “sectarian” policy: is it really so problematic for historians to use the phrase “minority policy” in reference to the 1920s? Yet White’s broader point that the term “minority” emerged in a particular historical context, and with much highly-politicized baggage, is important not to forget. Historians and other scholars who study minorities would do well to take heed and remember the need continually to re-contextualize this influential concept.

NOTE

[1] See, for example, Elie Kedourie, “Ethnicity, Majority and Minority in the Middle East,” in Milton J. Esman and Itamar Rabinovitch, eds., *Ethnicity, Pluralism and the State in the Middle East* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 25-31.

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