Book Review:


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This book makes a general argument and it uses Mandate-era Syria as a case study. The general argument is that the political concepts of majorities and minorities make sense only in the context of the modern state, especially the nation-state. Projecting these concepts backward, as if there were coherent majorities and minorities prior to the consolidation of modern (nation-) states, is anachronistic. Until the emergence of modern nation-states, government power did not claim to represent people or populations (invoking, instead, variations on the concept of divine and/or aristocratic legitimacy). But once claims to state legitimacy began to derive from (or to depend on) concepts of popular sovereignty, differentiation of cultural and communal groups into “majorities” and “minorities” followed. These theoretical propositions were given specific form by the ways in which modernizing elites inserted the state’s bureaucratic and military authority into their subjects’ lives, making new demands on people (now citizens) for whom “the state” had previously been distant or intermittent, or both.

Readers interested in Syria will recognize here the contours of an argument that offers one entry point into a comparative study of the Ottoman, Hapsburg, and Romanoff empires. Dynasties that previously had anchored themselves ideologically on variations of divine and aristocratic arguments sought now to retain their hold in the new circumstances of the 19th century. Thus they began to “nationalize” themselves through the assertion of renovated and increasingly uniform bureaucratic and military authority among their religiously and/or linguistically diverse populations. Sultans, emperors and tsars made claims and demanded loyalties that created or required new relationships between rulers and ruled in an era of growing literacy, mass communication and mass politics. The door was opened for communities that previously had been religiously or linguistically distinct to define and understand themselves as “minorities,” with a concomitant implication that other groups constituted “majorities.” To the extent that the “majority/minority” classification was written into law or institutionalized, it became further reified. Political entrepreneurs of various backgrounds used these categorizations to make demands of the modern state, entrenching distinctions that in an earlier period may not have been as watertight or impermeable as the new dispensation (and as primordialist thinking) assumed.

Which brings us to Mandate-era Syria. The bulk of Benjamin White’s book is an explanation and analysis of how the concepts of “majority” and “minority/minorities” entered French imperial and Syrian national political discourse. Basing his work largely on French state archives, the Syrian press, and scattered Syrian archival sources, White argues that use of majority-minority vocabulary was largely absent in the first decade of the French Mandate. While the French had a communitarian understanding of Syrian society, this understanding did not immediately lead to French authorities’ use of the political concepts majority and minority. However, by the end of the 1920s, French officials understood and portrayed Syria’s Christian communities in this light, with the support of Syrian Christian clerics who sought to wrest back representation of their communities from laypeople who had emerged out of the millet system during the Ottoman Tanzimat.

The language of “minorities” became increasingly salient in the 1930s. Seeking a treaty relationship with France under the rubric of “honorable cooperation,” the socially conservative National Bloc took up the “minorities” discourse out of necessity, given the post-World War I international environment where newly recognized or aspiring nations (formed out of the wreckage of the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires)
were obliged to acknowledge international safeguards for groups designated as minorities. Who were minorities, and what defined a “majority,” became part of the political tug-of-war in Syria among and between French officials; political actors who sought to speak for Syrian Arab nationalists; and political actors who sought to achieve recognition of “their” communities as minorities. White demonstrates that these arguments were not merely (or even mainly) ideological or hypothetical, but they had concrete implications for the locus and exercise of state authority, and even for the final boundaries or borders of the Syrian state. He ably looks at the dimensions of these debates, focusing on their geographical implications in the Jazira, and on their legal dimensions as demonstrated in the arguments over French administrators’ stillborn effort to bring all religious communities under civil authority (potentially at the expense of Sunni Muslim, Christian and Jewish clerical authority).

At the present time, when the language of majority-minority is very much at the forefront of political discourse in and about Syria, and when the future contours of the Syrian state are in flux, White’s study helps readers to understand how “the politics of community” developed in early 20th-century Syria. The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East is an antidote to interpretations of the Syrian present that depend on an uncritically primordialist reading of the country’s past.

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