Excerpt from the Introduction

In 1947, the British-Lebanese scholar Albert Hourani - later to be famous as the author of Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age and A History of the Arab Peoples - published a slender volume entitled Minorities in the Arab World, in which he attempted to outline the histories and characteristics of the religious, linguistic, and ethnic minorities in the Ottoman Empire’s former Arab provinces. He defined “minority” quite simply, as a community that was either non-Sunni Muslim or non-Arabic-speaking or both, existing within a Sunni Arab majority, and with a longstanding presence in the region (thereby excluding Ashkenazi Jewish settlers in Palestine). There were, he explained, “a number of communities which have long resided in these countries, or in other parts of the Middle East before they came to these countries, and most of whose members possess their legal nationality, but which are not Sunni Moslem by faith, although they are Arabic-speaking; there are others which are Sunni Moslem but not Arabic-speaking, and others again which are neither Sunni nor Arab. It is to these communities that the term ‘minorities’ refers.”

This idea that minorities in the Middle East are clearly identifiable, separate, longstanding communities persisted for many decades, even as scholars began to acknowledge the flexible nature of such communal categorizations. As Gabriel Ben-Dor put it in 1999, “The authentic ethnic approach … emphasizes both the dynamics of change in ethnic identity and consciousness and the more or less objective variables that define majorities and minorities, which tend to endure over time.” Equally long-lived has been Hourani’s approach to defining the primary characteristics of these “minorities,” who are described by their theological systems first and their linguistic-national attributes second. His Christian minorities are characterized by their theological points of origin: the Eastern patriarchates’ split from Rome in the eleventh century, the Nestorian controversies over the nature of the Trinity in the fifth century, the Monophysite doctrines about the oneness of Christ and Jesus. Muslim minorities appear as defined by the Sunni-Shi’a split over the Caliphate in the seventh century, by the Alawi belief in a “Divine Triad,” by the Druze theology of transmigration of souls. Similarly, Hourani’s linguistic minorities are sorted by the strengths of their claims to nationality; the Armenians “have a continuous history as a national entity in this homeland since ancient times,” while the Kurds have a “group of dialects” spoken by “a number of Moslem tribes, scarcely united enough to be called a nation.” This approach to the question of minorities in the Arab world dominated the public perception of non-Muslim and non-Arab communities in the region for decades, and sometimes entered into a public realm already primed to view Sunni Islam as a monolithic entity engaged in various forms of institutionalized discrimination against non-Muslim or non-Arab communities.

But over the past twenty years, a new picture of minorities in the Arab world has begun to emerge in the scholarly literature – one that eschews the picture of static, clearly defined, predetermined

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1 Albert Hourani, Minorities in the Arab World (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 1.
2 Gabriel Ben-Dor, “Minorities in the Middle East: Theory and Practice,” in Minorities and the State in the Arab World, ed. Ofra Bengio and Gabriel Ben-Dor (Boulder: Lynne Riener, 1999), 6.
3 Hourani, Minorities in the Arab World, 2.
minorities in a permanent state of tense relations with an equally predetermined Sunni Arab majority. Increasingly, scholars have begun to think about the modern phenomenon of “minorities” as the consequence of a process of minoritization, beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing to unfold through the present day. Rather than offering a definition of “minority,” then, the essays in this volume seek to examine the processes by which minority identities in the Arab world have been constantly formed, practiced, and altered. They challenge the idea that ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities stand permanently outside majoritarian states across the Arab world. Collectively, these essays make three central arguments: that the category of “minority” became meaningful only with the rise of the modern nation-state; that in this new political landscape, groups labeled minorities often sought simultaneously to project an essential cultural “authenticity” and a nationalist commitment through specific and focused types of political engagement; and that Middle Eastern and North African minority identities owe much of their modern self-definition to developments within diaspora populations and other transnational frameworks.

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