

ARTICLE

Minorities or citizens in the Middle East? Locating the 'minority question' in the intersecting histories of collective national belonging and state-building

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Abstract

This article contributes to the growing scholarship on minority politics in the Middle East by arguing that if minorities are socially or politically constructed then the meaning and implications of minority terminology requires greater historical contextualisation. Focusing on the experience of minority-ness rather than the deployment of the terminology, which only became prevalent after World War I, this article offers additional insights into the historical roots of contemporary minority politics, as well as the (un)making of national minorities. It explores how debates and reforms pertaining to inclusion/exclusion in the period preceding and during the shift from empire to nation-state directly contributed to the reception and understanding of who is a minority in the modern Middle East. This is particularly examined through the cases of Chaldean Christians in Iraq and Coptic Christians in Egypt. Many of the leaders of these communities publicly reject minority identification and instead favour locating their communities in the nation-state through the notion of inclusive citizenship (*al-Mowāṭana*). According to this narrative, belonging as citizens erases the meaning of minority. The article suggests that the framing of citizen and minority as mutually exclusive notions is one contemporary

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expression of an enduring tension around constructing belonging in political communities.

KEYWORDS

citizenship, collective identity, inclusion, inequality, middle eastern studies, minorities, nationalism

1 | INTRODUCTION

The motivation for investigating the notion of minority in the Middle East grew from a series of semi-structured and open-ended interviews undertaken over a period of years, mainly with prominent figures from the religious leaderships of different Christian denominations. In discussing the concerns of these communities, their relations with the state and status in society, the 'minority question' is a common theme. Identification as a minority was acknowledged as a reality of everyday life but perceived negatively to varying degrees and was frequently countered by the concept of citizenship as the preferable discourse of identity and inclusion.¹ This narrative often dominates the official line of Christian communities voiced by their religious leaders, who often play a role in representing the community publicly and politically (McCallum, 2007; Rowe, 2009). The same response was also repeatedly noted in interviews conducted by the author with lay activists involved in advocacy or the media and known for speaking about the status of non-Muslim citizens.² While this rejection of minority identification is certainly not a unanimous position, and is particularly contested in the diaspora, it is frequently voiced in public statements and media articles issued by many prominent community representatives.

For example, in 2013, the leaders of both the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt and the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq (the largest Christian denominations in their respective countries) made similar statements that objected to being identified as a minority community:

You are not a minority in this country, you have been here for two thousand years and are at the origin of this country.³

We are a part of the soil of this nation and an extension of the pharaohs and their age before Christ.

Yes, we are a minority in the numerical sense, but we are not a minority when it comes to value, history, interaction and love for our nation.⁴

Instead, the leaders of both the communities mentioned focus on inclusive citizenship (*al-muwāṭana*), not only as a set of legal rights and duties but also as an expression of the belonging, indigeneity and contribution that, they argue, the notion of minority undermines (Iskander, 2012, pp. 34–35). According to Kristian Girling (2018, p. 428), 'few Christians would consider themselves minorities, outside of the numerical sense of the term. The consistent Christian contributions to societies in the region and to civilisational development more widely prohibit them from being considered a minor influence'. According to the community figures interviewed by the author, while the reality of being a numerical minority is acknowledged, they argue the term does not apply because they are not a cultural or national minority.⁵

Although this tension around the meaning of minority and its political consequences have been noted in scholarship on Eastern Christians, particularly Chaldean Christians in Iraq and Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt (Tadros, 2013, pp. 105–109; Monier, 2020; Girling, 2017), there is a gap in the exploration of the historical roots of the apparent tension between notions of citizenship and minority status exhibited today. This article sets out to explore this dialectic and particularly to excavate the historical roots and processes of conceptualising the minority term and why it matters for analysing the challenges facing Christians in Iraq and Egypt and the Middle East more

broadly. To support this aim, I examined archival documents for discussions on the identity and status of non-Muslims during this period of focus held in the British National Archives, the League of Nations Archives, Qatar Digital Archive, Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt and national archives of Egypt and Iraq. I also used digital archives of Egyptian and Iraqi newspapers and the records of debates undertaken by the constitution drafting committees in Egypt and Iraq in the years shortly after World War I. The article locates this material and the evolution of the minority question within broader intellectual and political trends pertaining to Muslim–non-Muslim relations and notions of minorities and belonging that have been identified in secondary literature on the period of the late 19th century and early 20th century. Therefore, the main focus is to historicise the implicit assumptions visible in the post-war constitutional debates within the identity politics that existed prior to the war.

The analysis demonstrates how a divide between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens has formed a significant aspect of conceptualisations of minorities and the ‘minority question’; a finding that will be unpacked and explored in the article concentrating on the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq and the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt as the largest and most influential churches in their respective states. The Chaldean Church is an Eastern Catholic rite in communion with Rome and led by Cardinal Louis Raphael I Sako since 2013. It represents over 70% of Iraqi Christians and the Chaldean patriarch has tended to have the most influence of the Christians religious figures since the foundation of the modern state of Iraq until the present (Kruczek, 2021; Monier, 2020). In Egypt, the Coptic Orthodox Church is an apostolic church in the oriental orthodox tradition. Pope Tawadros II has been the patriarch since 2012. The Coptic church is widely perceived to be a national church. Representing over 90% of Egyptian Christians, it has consistently played a significant role in Egyptian national political life (Guirguis, 2016; Tadros, 2013).

Through these cases, this article suggests that the contemporary framing of citizen and minority as mutually antagonistic notions is one expression of an enduring tension around conceptions of belonging in political communities formed from religiously plural societies. Specifically, it locates the construction of the modern experience of minoritisation first and foremost in the process of reconfigurations of collective identity. This process often accompanied state-building but was not limited to it. In this way, the question of who is a minority and what, if anything, are the socio-political consequences of this status, is a pre-existing challenge facing state-building rather than one produced by states *ex nihilo*. Indeed, the minority debate was one thread in the ‘transfers and entanglements’ (Pernau, 2012, p. 1) that contributed to constituting and defining post-war states and societies. This discussion thereby adds to scholarship exploring minorities as a socially constructed notion (Burguière & Grew, 2001) and argues that the pivotal process in the trajectory of the minority notion in society is the interaction between the pre-existing construction of collective identity and national communities with the state-building process of formalising a polity. In other words, the crux of the minority question is the point at which ideas of collective identity meet the institutionalising process of state-building.

The first part of this article focuses on the way that the reconfiguration of notions of collective belonging was approached in the late 19th century. A specific concern was how to represent non-Muslims in an Islamic empire because it was recognised that they experienced various forms of marginalisation and inequalities. It is this context, I argue, that is instrumental in shaping the identification of national minorities. To view the minority question only a western importation of the terminology or a colonial policy is insufficient to explain the contemporary conceptualisation of minority and its connection to notions of belonging. The term minority is almost always perceived to imply the experience of a form of marginalisation or disempowerment (Wilkinson, 2000), and some scholars note that forms of marginalisation normally associated with a minority can actually be experienced by a majority (Dajani, 2015). For this article, I coin the term minority-ness to refer to the experience of exclusion or disempowerment as a product of minoritisation in society, which can be felt regardless of the (non)application of the term minority and even among a numerical majority that experiences marginalisation from power. Employing a concept of minority-ness privileges a focus on the everyday experiences of minority status over terminology and is important for further comparative work between communities that have adopted, or at least accepted, a minority framing of their status with those who have not.

The second part of the article explores how tensions between inclusion and exclusion inherent in the process of nationalising collective identities and belonging pre-World War I formed a dynamic shaping the meanings and implications of minority post-war. This is explored here through the constitution drafting discussions in Egypt and Iraq. The section on the late Ottoman Empire suggests that unmaking non-Muslims as minoritised communities without disrupting existing power relations was central to bolstering the security and stability of the empire. It was also unsuccessful. The section on the nation-state period examines how this dynamic was translated into a concern for securing state sovereignty (Heiskanen, 2019). Although this article focuses particularly on the 'minority or citizen' binary of communities that reject minority framing with the goal of redrawing boundaries of minority-ness, it finds that both the acceptance and rejection of minority framing are used to highlight the consequences of invisibilising communities and their heritage within the nation-state (Benjamin, 2022, pp. 200–202; Donabed, 2015, pp. 3–5). It is the experience of inclusion/exclusion in national life and identity that is pivotal, rather than the minority terminology itself. Crucially, this is part of an ongoing process that follows on from the pre-World War I context. Consequently, the article concludes that to understand the contemporary form of the minority question and how it is experienced in the everyday, it is necessary to reorient perspectives on understanding how socio-political identities were reconfigured as national communities and in nationalist thought, first under empire and, only then, in the post-war nation-states.

2 | MINORITY-NESS AND THE POLITICS OF BELONGING UNDER EMPIRE

In this section, the article discusses how political and intellectual developments during the late Ottoman period placed emphasis on the need to reformulate Ottoman collective identity by incorporating non-Muslims on a more equal basis. This approach to reframing unity in the imperial framework set the stage for the invisibilisation of minority framing or representation in subsequent nation-state projects, without resolving the experience of minority-ness. This contrasts with the trend in the study of minorities in the Middle East that has focused on analysing minorities in the Middle East as emerging as meaningful only after the process of forming the modern nation-state system in the Middle East, often as a western import or colonial policy (Kedourie, 1984; Robson, 2016, pp. 2–3; White, 2007, 2012). From this perspective, certain communities in the Middle East became minorities as a result of the establishment of nation-states under European rule. Ideas about these minorities and guaranteeing minority protection were subsequently manipulated by colonial powers as part of their policies in the region.

A key text to emerge in this field is Benjamin White's (2012) book on French mandate Syria. He shows that the term minority emerged in the context of the mandate and from French discourse and policies in the country and is based on a legacy of colonial attempts to divide and rule. In general, the post-war period witnessed a significant increase in the terminology of minorities and minority protection in international politics and law (Jackson-Preece, 1998). This had an inevitable impact on the Middle Eastern context, where many of the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire came under various guises of European rule and influence. However, while it is clear that the terminology of minorities as we recognise it today was shaped and solidified in this milieu and that this colonial context impacted significantly on the minority question, this should not obfuscate other aspects of the issue, particularly the lived experiences that operate behind it. Michael Provence (2017, p. 4) argues that the study of the making of the modern Middle East should start with the last Ottoman generation and I also contend that research on the construction of minorities should ask 'how did the old things, patterns, habits, cultures, ways of thinking, and possibilities affect what came after'.

A number of neologisms were introduced into the Arabic language during the *sattelzeit* (saddle period) of the 19th and 20th centuries as part of the Arab *Nahḍa* (renaissance or revival) movement. These contributed to and were part of the socio-political debates of the period (Abu-Uksa, 2016, p. 2), including ideas about reformulating notions of collective identity and consciousness. While some of these neologisms denoted new concepts, or new iterations of them, others were terms introduced to describe existing or related ideas within a modern terminological framework during the *Sattelzeit* (Zemmin, 2018, pp. 40–42). Research into the history of the minority categorisation shed light on how its development interacted with the social and political legacy of the late Ottoman millet system

(Sharkey, 2018, pp. 763–764) and the politics of the everyday. This is especially relevant for untangling overlapping structures of Muslim–non-Muslim and minority–majority relations. As Quentin Skinner (2002, p. 4) suggests, in the study of conceptual change and development, concepts are elucidated not only ‘by focusing on the supposed “meanings” of the terms we use to express them, but rather by asking what can be done with them and by examining their relationship to each other and to broader networks of beliefs’. I contend that thinking about the making of minorities through the lens of minority-ness as a lived experience that pre-dated the minority terminology later adopted by or applied to certain communities reorients and contextualises the elucidation of the minority concept in the Middle East today.

Before locating the politics of minority-ness in this intellectual and political context, a brief reflection on the notion of minority itself is instructive for exploring the relationship between concepts and experiences. Inequalities, disempowerment and marginalisation are characteristics that scholarship suggests are integral to applying minority as a social analytical category (e.g., Nibert, 1996; Ramaga, 1992; Smith, 1987). What seems consistent in this literature on the relationship between minorities and the nation-state is the idea that minorities are an ‘other’ that differ from the dominant group in society (Nibert, 1996, p. 126). While minority/majority categories always produce difference, they do not necessarily produce inequality (Guibernau, 1999, p. 134). Similarly, a minority is not necessarily disempowered and there are cases where a minority is dominant. One example is the Sunni ruling elite in Bahrain. However, a minority/majority framework has a tendency to produce inequalities in power relations or a hierarchy of national identities because in modern liberal democracies a majority tends to dominate the political culture of a state (Spinner, 1994, p. 10). In this way, ‘othering’ is achieved through embedding a hierarchy within the narrative of the national culture and community in which some groups are privileged or valued above others.

Although the Ottoman Empire was diverse in its composition, the ruling elite and hegemonic culture was Islamic (Rahme, 1999, p. 161) and religious difference was managed under the *millet* system (Zurcher, 1993, pp. 12–13). This categorisation of society into recognised religious communities afforded a measure of autonomy over communal affairs within the limits of the socio-political hierarchy (Masters, 2006, pp. 273–275). However, this form of coexistence did not equate to equality between the different religious communities (Joseph, 2000, p. 151). The impact of religious identification was particularly deeply woven into society and this framing of socio-political relations both pre-dated the institution of the formal millet system and found expression in it. As Abraham Marcus (1989, p. 40) notes in his description of 18th-century Aleppo, ‘In this scene of religious pluralism one formal distinction overrode all others—that between Muslims and non-Muslims’. Baskin Oran (2021, p. 13) also makes this broad distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims and the uneven power relations between them, which he frames as the division between the ruled millet (*Millet-i Mahkume*) and the ruling millet (*Millet-i Hakime*). The asymmetric power relations expressed in this division pre-dated the 20th century minority/majority terminology (Ghalioun, 2012, p. 23). Yet this set of relations shares many of the characteristic that modern scholars use to describe the minority category.

This broad religious categorisation and organisation of Ottoman subjects did not remain static. Although it was problematised, it was not fully resolved in the Ottoman context. In the 19th century the process of change accelerated alongside the process of modernisation led to substantial change in thought about coexistence (Makdisi, 2019). The Ottoman elite recognised the need to reformulate relations between citizens and between citizens and government and consequently initiated a series of reforms, initiating the *Tanzimat* (reorganising) period of 1839–1876. The two main rescripts issued during this period, the Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane in 1839 and Hatt-ı Hümayun in 1856, appeared to introduce notions of the equal application of law to Muslims and non-Muslims. This was more explicit in the latter rescript (Anscombe, 2010, p. 187). However, this text was also received more negatively because it was perceived as granting concessions to Christian Ottomans, such as guarantees of equal treatment and opportunity in education and appointments to administrative posts, only under pressure from European powers (Davison, 1954, pp. 847–863). In this respect, the rescripts objective of securing Ottoman cultural and territorial sovereignty and unity through promoting and Ottoman solidarity among Muslim and non-Muslim subjects was undermined rather than advanced. Mardin (2000, p. 18) cites Ahmed Cevdet Pasha, a *Tanzimat* figure, as stating that after the proclamation of the Hatt-ı Hümayun of 1856, ‘we lost our sacred national rights which our ancestors gained with their blood. While the Islamic

nation used to be the ruling nation, it is now bereft of this sacred right. This is a day of tears and mourning for the Moslem brethren.'

Such negative reactions to the Hatt-ı Hümayun did not lead to the end of intellectual debates on the reconfiguration of collective identity and solidarity under the Ottoman banner. Instead, it was refreshed in the wake of the 1856 decree, largely by a group of Ottoman intellectuals and bureaucrats known collectively as the Young Ottomans. It was argued that the unity of the empire depended on creating a sense of universal Ottoman identification (Kayali, 1997, p. 24) that incorporated all subjects to resist movements towards secessionist ethnonationalism. At the same time, this should not undermine the cultural identity of the empire. Namik Kemal, one of the key figures in the Young Ottoman movement wrote in the journal *İbret* in 1872 that 'The Ottoman state is based on religious principles, and if these principles are violated the political existence of the state will be in danger' (cited in Rahme, 1999, p. 32). The failure to attract the loyalty of the non-Muslims and persuade them to assimilate into this collective Ottoman identity thereby represented a threat to the viability and unity of the empire. Non-Muslims were then at once central to building a successful Ottomanist polity and a threat to it. One way that the tension was illustrated was through the central question of representation. Ali Pasha, a key figure in the drafting of the 1856 rescript, was wary of the impact of introducing greater inclusion and representation on Ottoman governance. He is noted as stating, 'The Ottoman Empire numbers twelve or fourteen nationalities If the representatives which they would nominate by way of elections were to be brought together today, such a national assembly would instantly give rise to all scandals imaginable' (cited in Mardin, 2000, p. 19).

Indeed, issues of representation soon emerged as problematic. The 1864 Provincial Reform Law obliged governors to consult with local councils that incorporated 'representation for all recognized religious communities of a certain size' (Rogan, 1999, p. 182). Such reforms embedded the practice of electoral quotas to ensure the different communities were able to participate in Ottoman life in a way that was proportionate to their demographic size and distribution. This institutionalised the practice of fixing the extent of recognition and therefore influence based on each identity community's size. Hartmann's study of Armenian participation in the first Ottoman parliament in 1877 gives a further example of the challenge related to mobilising representation in the spirit of reducing barriers to power among 'minoritised' elements of the empire. She concludes that 'religious affiliation played a role in their [non-Muslim] nomination and election because quotas for Muslims and non-Muslims were established' (Hartmann, 2010, p. 187) as a result of a lack of faith in Ottomanism among the elite and the Ottoman government. She further notes that the regulations distinguished only between Muslims and non-Muslims, ignoring differences within each group and also ethnic or linguistic communities.

The generalised and entrenched nature of this Muslim/non-Muslim boundary is crucial to note for its role in later perceptions of minorities and majorities, which will be explored in the next section as part of the backdrop to nation-state building post-war (Kasbarian, 2016). I agree with John Joseph (2000, p. 166) and Oran (2021) that the historical subordination of non-Muslim communities often became enmeshed in the new vocabulary of minorities. In this sense, the political history of minority-ness as the everyday experience of marginalisation or subordination, as well as its association with threats to collective identity and political power, begins prior to World War I. It is the potential continuation of such marginalisation and insecurity, as well as the loss of any progress made towards recognising marginalised groups under the Ottoman reforms, that was rejected rather than being a minority per se. For some, marginalisation was an inevitable consequence of becoming a numerical minority in the nation-state framework. For others it was hoped that engagement in the state-building process would support developing discursive and institutional spaces for equal inclusion in a nationalised community as citizens, particularly in the wake of the upheaval brought by the First World War. The tension between notions of minority and citizen is rooted here.

3 | MINORITIES AND NATIONALISM AND STATE-BUILDING IN EGYPT AND IRAQ

The rupture caused by the outbreak of World War I, the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the scramble to establish new nation-states meant that a shift in the framing of belonging and political authority was inevitable. But this did

not take place in a vacuum and the pre-war context intersected with the new reality and its priorities. The rapid rise of the international nation-state system and the entrenchment of European colonial rule refocused the cause of creating a unified polity upon a territorially bounded state rather than a culturally defined community, regardless of the artificiality in the drawing of their boundaries. The structures of inclusion/exclusion or communal subordination that existed pre-war became entangled in the reconfiguration of identity and sovereignty, a process through which the dominant communities were privileged in imagining the national (Kymlicka, 1999, p. 231; Wimmer, 2002). This national then became the *raison d'être* for, and hegemonic expression of, the state (cf. Smith, 1981). Therefore, this section argues that minority-ness was not just a product of these developments in the post-War state-(re)building process nor marginal to them. Rather, it was a central to the broader process of recasting 'the mosaic of diverse peoples within the boundaries of the state (or polity) into a uniform and unified national whole' (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 537). This is at least partially due to the residual impact of the Ottoman approach to the management of religious difference and collective identity (Bryant, 2016, pp. 4–5) and the ways this was both problematised and addressed.

Communities that had a history of autonomy were particularly concerned with the redrawing of borders and the new power structures that would undermine their traditional independence, as White (2012, p. 55) has shown regarding the Druze and Alawi communities, who utilised minority terminology to support continued autonomy in subregions where they formed local majorities. Other more 'scattered' minorities (Hourani, 1947), who did not form a significant local majority in subregions of new states looked at other ways to claim an integral role in the meaning-making of the national community in the new states. Given this context, the minority question had to be addressed by the new states of the Middle East. Christian and Jewish communities had already contributed substantially to the debates about collective identity, building on the ideas of Ottomanism, Arabism and Patriotism that emerged in the 19th century in order to develop agency and participate in formulating new forms of inclusion and collective identity. Much has been written on the pioneering role of non-Muslim writers and intellectuals in the Arabism of the *Nahda* (renaissance) (Hourani, 2011; Philipp, 2014; Zachs, 2012). Non-Muslims were often at the forefront of publishing and of reformist thought on the revival of culture and society in the Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire. A full discussion of the *Nahda* is outside the scope of this article though it is crucial to note it in order to form a full picture of the narratives and spaces that non-Muslims increasingly made use of through the 19th century to participate in the reconfiguration of civic status and belonging. Drawing on this historical and intellectual context, it is clear to see why the issue of representation and quotas that had challenged the Ottoman efforts at reformulating socio-political communities, became a central debate in the discussions on constitutional and electoral provisions in Egypt and Iraq. This section will highlight the key outcomes of discussions pertaining to minority/majority framing, first in Iraq and then Egypt.

3.1 | Iraq

The state of Iraq was established in 1921 and defining a united national community within the new state borders was both crucial and contested. Some communities resisted their incorporation, while others claimed the right to shape its meaning. Among Christians in Iraq there were positions vis-à-vis the Iraqi state that shifted across chronological, geographical and denominational terrain. However, one can argue that the 'minority question' and avoiding minority-ness was central regardless of whether the solution pursued was secession or integration. One example was the formation of an inter-denominational alliance known as the Assyro-Chaldean delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and which included members from the four main denominations in Iraq; the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Syriac Catholic Church. The delegates also represented the different geographical locations of the community (Donef, 2018, pp. 218–220). It was established to present the case for an independent Assyrian nation in a region now straddling northern Iraq, eastern Syria, southern Turkey and eastern Iran at the post-war peace negotiations discussing the future of the former Ottoman

territories. The union between Assyrians and Chaldeans was formed out of a feared loss of autonomy and invisibilisation through their incorporation into a centralised national Iraqi polity as a nondominant party.

I use the term Assyrian here to refer to an ethno-national designation as much as, or more than, a religious one. Sargon Donabed divides Assyrians into two groups on a social and geographical basis which is largely but not always congruent with an ecclesiastical division between the Church of the East and the Chaldean Catholics who broke away from the Church of the East to come into communion with Rome. Although Assyrians and Chaldeans have 'a notion of shared ancestry' (Donabed, 2015, p. 54), the Chaldeans, which today represents the largest Christian denomination among Iraqis, tended to be more urbanised and assimilated into the Arabic language and society by virtue of their geo-spatial location. Whereas the dynamics of the relationship between Assyrian Christians, many of whom had been displaced from the Hakkari mountains region into Iraq by World War I, and the central Iraqi government were different for historical, political and geographical reasons (Benjamen, 2018). Those Christians, mainly drawn from the Assyrian Christians, who sought to establish a state separate to Iraq submitted a series of petitions to the great powers at the post-war negotiations, which are held in collections at the British National Archives and League of Nations Archive. The petitions cited concerns that being appended to either an Arab Iraqi state or to a Turkish state was to recreate the Assyrians as a minority in their ancestral homelands. In a 1922 letter signed by the secretary general of the committee of Assyro-Chaldean delegates to the post-war peace conferences and held in the British National Archives, it is argued that neither the Turks nor the Arabs have a claim to this territory because 'the majority of inhabitants are Assyrian'.⁶

The demand for an Assyrian state was denied, even though representatives of the community continued to petition the international community throughout the post-War peace negotiations and beyond. After the end of the British mandate in Iraq in 1932, the Assyrian leadership made multiple appeals to the League of Nations for resettlement outside of Iraq thereby demonstrating the ongoing fear of minoritisation and insecurity more than a decade after the establishment of Iraq. These are held in multiple files in the League of Nations Archive in Geneva.⁷ However, resisting expected minoritisation in a new national community by petitioning for a separate nation-state was not the only approach taken by non-Muslims in Iraq. An alternative approach taken by a number of prominent Christian and Jewish figures was to encourage engagement with the idea of the Iraqi nation. For example, the Chaldean patriarch Emmanuel Thomas sought to leverage Chaldean status as an historic community in the Mesopotamia region with the right to form an integral aspect of any Iraqi state and its national identity. A letter held in the British National Archives dated 6 March 1920 written to British Foreign Minister Lord Curzon by the Chaldean patriarch⁸ called for Chaldean inclusion in the constitution drafting committee and other institutions of state because the Chaldeans are one of the largest and significant 'nations' in the makeup of the national community of Iraq. The Chaldean Patriarch was offered a seat in the Iraqi senate in 1926 and apparently played an active role in this forum, according to the memoirs of his assistant (Haddad, 2006).

In fact, for those non-Muslims residing in the urban areas of Mesopotamia, the sense of belonging to a wider cosmopolitan society had become means for renegotiation marginalisation in the decades preceding the war and establishment of Iraq. Jews and Christians had participated in local political structures under the Ottoman system (Naji, 2015) and contributed to cultural and intellectual life (Afas, 2010). They had also contributed to the Arabism movement pre-war in similar ways to their counterparts in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. Territory-focused patriotisms, such as notions of Egyptian and Syrian patriotisms, alongside the growing salience of Arab identity as a basis for solidarity, were expressed alongside Ottomanism. However, they were seen as broadly compatible with the Ottoman framework and complementary to the development of a nationalised type of Ottoman identity (Khalidi et al., 1991). Nonetheless, engagement in this Arabist discourse facilitated an increasing ability to contribute to the formulation of collective identity and society, particularly through Arabic language and publishing leading to an established intellectual elite among the non-Muslims of Mesopotamia who were then in place to contribute to the early state-building process. For example, the first Arabic language political newspaper in Mosul was published by Dawoud Sliwa in 1909. He sought to use the growing space of the press to push back against the Turkification policies of the Ottoman authorities (Batti, 2012, pp. 11–12). The Carmelite monk Anastas al-Karmali is also considered a pioneering figure in

the renaissance of the Arabic language, for example through his journal *Lughat al-'Arab* (the Language of the Arabs) first published in 1911. Iraqi Jews also actively promoted engagement in Arabic language and patriotic narratives through the founding of Arabic journals. This Arabism trend seized on the potential inclusiveness of the *Nahda* spirit (Schlaepfer, 2011) and contributed to developing an Arab and later Iraqi Jewish identity (Levy, 2008, p. 467).

These non-Muslims subsequently became invested in the idea of the Iraqi state and the potential for de-marginalisation through formulating a new collective national identity. Many Jewish and Christian figures went on to play significant roles in the establishment of modern Iraqi politics and culture as a result (Salloum, 2013, p. 59). Building on this pre-existing public and intellectual engagement, Jews and Christians were the most visible non-Muslim presence in the constituent assembly formed in 1924. The assembly was an indirectly elected body of 100 members that gave four guaranteed seats to Jews and four to Christians. According to my examination of the original minutes of the sessions in 1924,⁹ the debates on the constitution draft show that there is no question about the right of belonging of minorities in the Iraqi state. In accordance with the Lausanne Treaty, normal residents of the former Ottoman lands that then came under Iraqi jurisdiction were to be considered Iraqi subjects, without discrimination on the basis of religion or race. However, the minutes do contain a dispute about minority terminology and its applicability in the Iraqi context. The first and overriding sentiment is that minority is a European term. Abdul Razzak Monir, member for Baghdad, states that, 'I find it strange that we use the term minorities while civilised states no longer use it because it creates controversies'.¹⁰ Similarly, Dawud al-Jalabi, member for Mosul argued that there is no place for the term minorities in the political dictionary and that is a product of European imperialism.¹¹

At the same time, there is a discussion about who is meant by the term minority and the discussion reveals that the term is understood as applicable only to non-Muslims. Amjad al-Omri states that, 'Muslims are the majority and Jews, Christians Mandeans and Yezidis are indeed minorities'.¹² Yussef Ghanima, who was the most prominent Christian member of the drafting committee and well known in political and press circles, submitted a report in which he agrees that there is no minority and majority in Iraq but he has noticed in other countries that minorities do not get elected, leading to exclusion from power.¹³ Echoing the circumstances and debates of the pre-war Ottoman era, concerns over the term minority relate to the potentially divisive nature of such framing for the national project. Discomfort with dividing society into Muslim majority and non-Muslim minority and recognition of the potential weakness that this could impose on the national project, alongside the acknowledgement of the potential for transposing marginalisation into the nation-state along Muslim/non-Muslim lines, is clear. There is the acknowledgement of what minority implies, which is the potential for marginalisation of certain non-Muslim communities. This acknowledgement leads to an attempt to balance the dilemma by including an article in the constitution that guarantees that 'non-Islamic minorities' will be accorded a quota to ensure representation.¹⁴ In a series of votes, the suggestion to remove term non-Muslim minorities in relation to electoral laws from Article 37 was rejected by majority vote. During the debate on Article 37, the complexity regarding forms of equal inclusion of non-Muslims extends from the pre-war thought on nationalism and collective identity under empire into the post-war nation-state period.

3.2 | Egypt

Egypt had a different religious makeup and political history to Iraq that shaped its national consciousness and impacted on the way the minority question developed. However, there are many similarities in perceptions of minority terminology and in the growing participation and agency of non-Muslims in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Given Egypt's unique political status as an autonomous region of the Ottoman Empire under the ruling dynasty established by Mohamed Ali at the start of the 19th century, the question of Coptic status in the nation had been engaged with for decades as part of a modernisation process and imagining of national community (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 15). In addition to its largely autonomous status, Egypt had been an official British Protectorate since 1882. Consequently, the construction of a national patriotic framing had taken an earlier and different trajectory than that of Mesopotamia. According to Article 7 of the party manifesto of Kamel's (1907, p. 30) nationalist independence move-

ment announced in Alexandria in 1907, Copts and Muslims were invited to form a societal partnership and understanding that would support the spread of the nationalist spirit in Egypt. Yet, despite growing Coptic inclusion in public life and recognition of their fundamental role in formulating claims to an independent nation at this time, Copts remained largely aloof from Kamel's nationalist movement. This lack of Coptic involvement is generally interpreted as signaling unease about Kamel's conceptualisation of Egypt as part of the Islamic Caliphate under the ultimate authority of the Sultan (El Feki, 2018, p. 37).

Moreover, issues regarding what the extent of Coptic influence should be and how far Copts could be recognised and represented within the Egyptian national movement and its imagining of the Egyptian nation were unresolved. This dilemma is illustrated by examining the responses to a so-called Coptic Christian congress held in Assiut by the Coptic lay elite in 1911. While documents in the British National Archives show that the British critiqued the congress as unrepresentative and reported that around 500 delegates attended,¹⁵ Kyriakos Mikhail's (1913, p. 62) contemporary account mentions 1152. The congress came at the climax of a period of tension regarding Coptic political participation and influence that was sparked by the assassination of the first Coptic prime minister, Boutros Ghali, in 1910 (Vatikiotis, 1985, p. 208). The issue was debated in the press with some journals dismissing Coptic claims of discrimination and accusing Copts of betraying Egypt by such assertions of marginalisation. Sheikh 'Abd al-'Aziz Jawish was particularly identified for his anti-Coptic writing and speeches, describing Copts as traitors.¹⁶

According to Bishop Macarius of Assiut, under whose auspices the congress was held, the objective of the Congress was 'the forging of stronger ties among all Egyptians through the safeguarding of the legitimate rights of Copts' (cited in Bahr, 1991). The content of the speeches given by the delegates, who formed the lay Coptic elite in this period, active in politics and the press as well as debates over internal Coptic communal authority (Bahr, 1991), are detailed in a programme held in the British National Archives.¹⁷ The content of these speeches framed the overall objective of the congress as claiming their place in the Egyptian nation rather than, as some feared, seeking to establish a separate Coptic state. The question of representation was also addressed. Murqus Hanna, a prominent member of the Coptic landowning elite that had become active in nationalist politics (Sedra, 2014), called for changes to the electoral process to a proportional representation system. He argued in his speech that the system would lead to equality between all 'members of our great family-the nation'.¹⁸ He argued that transference of power from absolute monarch to absolute majority does not serve nation, suggesting that Copts feared the continuation of minority-ness in Egypt despite modernisation reforms. This concern is underlined in the speech given by Coptic lawyer Mikhail Effendi Fanous on Copt-Muslim relations. He states that, 'We want to have votes for our representative institutions, so that our fellow countrymen may know we exist'.¹⁹

A second congress was held in response. It was known as the *Egyptian* congress, with the subtext that the Coptic congress was not an Egyptian one. It was organised mainly by Muslim intellectuals and politicians and rejected the grievances aired at the Coptic congress as a threat to Egyptian unity and national independence. A comprehensive discussion about the congresses was published in the prominent Islamic scholar Rashid Rida's periodical *Al-Manār* as an eight-part series of articles entitled 'Muslims and Copts'. Rida described Copts as *al-aghyār*, a term which not only means others but also different or alien. In the articles in this series, he also described Copts as the lesser group (*al-fi'a al-qalīla*) that nonetheless takes a larger than proportional share in civil service roles and in the economic and political life of the nation.²⁰ The summary of the Egyptian congress's final report reflected a similar perspective and suggests that the dominant position was that 'the religious minority ... should not have specific political demands'.²¹ As in the Ottoman debates, non-Muslims are included in constructions of national communities but only insofar as this inclusion supports the political order, as it is imagined by the elites of the dominant (majority) party. The discussions at these congresses and responses to them seem to represent an extension of this 19th century debate about representation and power. Therefore, it is unsurprising that, despite the differences between Egypt and Iraq, similar dynamics can be noted in the reactions of the Iraqi and Egyptian political elite to the use of minority terminology.

In common with Iraq, the resistance to institutionalising an official category of national minority in Egypt was explicit in the Egyptian press and in the discussion of the constitutional drafting committee between 1922 and

1993 (Mahmood, 2016, p. 78). My reading of the minutes of the constitution committee collected in a commentary by Mohammed al-Sharif (1938) indicates that the main point of contention over minorities was not what minority means, as it was implicitly understood to mean non-Muslim. The contentious question was whether minorities should receive rights that guarantee their representation in elected bodies. The proposal of a quota system for the election of minorities raised significant opposition. The objection was partly framed around fears that such a system would lead to the British to interfere in political affairs on the behalf of minority rights and that it would re-entrench divisions along the line of religion in the polity. In both instances, the recognition of non-Muslims as minorities was viewed as detrimental to the integrity of the nation-state. Tawfik Doss, one of the most active Coptic members of the committee, a member of the Liberal Constitutionalist Party and the secretary of the 1911 Coptic Congress, argued that a system of guarantees to ensure the representation of minorities was needed to both prevent British interference. He argued it would also counter any sense among Christians that their rights were being undermined and so avoid creating societal tensions. However, these concerns were rejected. Abdul Hamid Bedawy Bey (a judge and member of the drafting committee) is recorded in the minutes as stating: 'I hope that we do not establish a system that divides the nations into components, which would split it into minority and majority. This can only lead to tension between them. How would you then hope to be able to stop the foreigner from interfering in our affairs, using the excuse of protecting minorities?' (al-Sharif 1938, p. 24). The eventual outcome was that no mention of minorities or provision for guaranteed representation was included in the Egyptian constitutional text.

Despite this divergence with Iraq, several common points emerge. Christians and Jews were visibly active in the cultural and political life of the post-war states and were visible in their support for Iraqi and Egyptian patriotism. Rejection of minority framing was then at least partly to do with strengthening an inclusive national identity, which was generally desired by the communities studied here. Additionally, the rejection was also partly to do with proving a case for state sovereignty to both the non-Muslims and to the world powers, as James Gelvin (1998, pp. 181–185) argues was similarly the case in Syria. Nevertheless, there was an understanding that some communities, particularly non-Muslims, represented groups that had been and could again be minoritised in the new polities. Historically, non-Muslims have been recognised and accorded rights on the basis of their religious identity. However, it was not equal status, but a subordinate one (Marcus, 1989, p. 37; Sharkey, 2017, p. 27). To officially institutionalise such a system was a controversial idea, especially in terms of establishing a united and stable polity that could support the integrity and sovereignty of the national political order. The Ottoman Empire faced challenges in implementing these reforms to defend and bolster the Ottoman order through redefining inclusion in the Ottoman 'nation' (cf. Chalcraft, 2016, pp. 96–98). These challenges were latterly taken up by the nation-states. In this sense, the question of Muslim/non-Muslim relations and inclusion in the state under the late Ottoman period was carried over into the process of framing the polities of the nation-states of the Middle East. Disempowerment existed before the proliferation of minority terminology and persisted after the rejection of it through becoming entwined with the process of imagining national belonging and identity.

4 | CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the context in which the term minority has been problematised in the Middle East. It locates the emergence of a 'minority or citizen' binary at the intersection of a historical process of reformulating collective belonging in the late Ottoman period with the start of the post-war process of building modern nation-states in the Middle East. I contend that this is a productive lens for thinking about contemporary minority politics in the Middle East, a subject that has received increasing attention since the Arab Spring due to the seemingly enduring inequalities, issues of exclusion and insecurity experienced by some. The article began with the late Ottoman period to highlight the ideas dominating the intellectual debates about collective identity and political communities went on to shape the initial state-building process in the Arabic-speaking former Ottoman territories. The question of the incorporation of non-Muslims into a polity shaped by a Muslim majority to bolster the empire was of central importance and was

carried over into the post-war nation-state building process. In Egypt and Iraq, this challenge was compounded by the belief that officially recognising non-Muslims as minorities would undermine national independence movements.

However, rejecting the principle of minority framing is not congruous with accepting and/or implementing the right of marginalised groups or numerical minorities to influence the discursive and symbolic articulation of the national community. In light of continued experiences of inequality or insecurity, the 'minority question' evidently endures, despite persistent rejections of the terminology. Notwithstanding the apparent secularity of the Egyptian constitutional drafting committee's decision to reject the division of society in minority and majority in 1923, the dilemma identified by Saba Mahmood (2016, p. 68) of 'how to banish religion from politics while at the same time devise laws to ameliorate religious inequality' continues. The article therefore argues that the contemporary tension between conceptions of minorities and citizens is an iteration of the same question posed in the 19th century; how to construct a national community from diversity that supports and legitimises the sovereignty of a political order that is largely defined by a single dominant national group. This historical context contributes to illuminating the roots and meanings of contemporary discourses pertaining to minorities and inclusion/exclusion in both Egypt and Iraq.

This article also points to the need for further research to understand the notion of *al-muwāṭana* as an integral aspect of the minority question today. Because the terminology of minority is perceived as highly charged and excluding due to its history, the notion of *al-muwāṭana* (inclusive citizenship) is gaining traction in the Middle East as a way to engage in broader debate on collective national identity, equality and inclusion (Adyan Foundation, 2021; Monier, 2020). Part of the narrative of *al-muwāṭana* is a rejection of minority framing. According to Cardinal Sako, 'belonging to the homeland erases religious or ethnic minorities, in fact it removes the concept of minority altogether'.²² This contemporary articulation of identity and belonging has emerged from and been shaped by the way the notion of minorities has evolved historically in relation to the process of imagining the nation, compounded later by the post-war process of state-building. The findings of this article therefore suggest that contemporary debates about the status of non-Muslims as minorities or citizens operate as a continuation of negotiations of their status in the wider national political community and of the question pertaining to the influence of religion on the constitution of the public national space (Asad, 2003, p. 185). This complexity demonstrates the ongoing centrality of the question of minority identity and politics to state-society relations. It also illustrates the need to place the minority question in the historical and intellectual context of ongoing negotiations of national identity, belonging and nation-building in the Middle East.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Author interview with Bishop Angaelos, Coptic Orthodox Bishop of London, December 2013; Author interview with Cardinal Louis Raphael I Sako, Patriarch of Chaldean Catholic Church, December 2019; see also the speech given by Cardinal Sako on the meaning of citizenship to a conference in Paris in 2017 Saint Adday, S. 2018a. 'Al-Batriyark Sākū yushārik fi mutamar ḥawl al-muwāṭana wa-al-'adāla nazzamahu Majlis al-Shuyūkh al-Faransi bi-Bāris'. April 12. <https://saint-adday.com/?p=23233>; also an interview with Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Tawadros, YouTube. 19 September 2021, Akhbār al-Yawm. Na'ish muwāṭana ḥaqīqiyya fī al-Jumhūriyya al-Thālitha. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJc7_1t-KHS8. Author interview with Fr Faiz Bashir, Anglican priest in Baghdad, Iraq July 2020.
- ² Author interview Pascale Warda, Iraqi human rights activist, June 2019; Author interview with Yusef Sidhom, editor of Egyptian newspaper Watani, March 2008. Author interview with Ibrahim Habib, head of Copts United of Great Britain, October 2013. Author interview with Ishak Ibrahim, researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, Cairo, November 2013.

- ³ Cited in Agenzia Fides. 7 March 2013. New Chaldean Patriarch Sako takes Possession of the See of Baghdad. Online: http://www.fides.org/en/news/33341-ASIA_IRAQ_New_Chaldean_Patriarch_Sako_takes_possession_of_the_See_of_Baghdad_The_storm_will_have_to_pass.
- ⁴ al-Ahram (2013) 'Coptic Pope Tawadros II criticises Egypt's Islamist leadership, New Constitution', 5 February, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/64135/Egypt/Politics-/Coptic-Pope-Tawadros-II-criticises-Egypt's-Islamist.aspx> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- ⁵ Author interview Fr Faiz Bashir, Anglican priest in Baghdad, Iraq July 2020; Author interview with Cardinal Louis Sako I, Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic church in Iraq, December 2019. Author interview with Archbishop Angaelos Coptic Orthodox Archbishop of London, December 2013; author interview with Chaldean parish priest 'G', February 2017.
- ⁶ British National Archives, FO 839/23. Autonomy for Assyrian Christians (claims of Assyro-Chaldeans).
- ⁷ See League Of Nations Archives R3924/4/3314 Assyrian Minorities-General 1933–1946.
- ⁸ British National Archives FO 800/151 pp. 194–195.
- ⁹ Mudhakkirāt al-Majlis al-Ta'sisī al-'Irāqī. 1924. Parts 1 and 2. Baghdad.
- ¹⁰ Mudhakkirāt. Part 2. p. 646. Author's translation.
- ¹¹ Mudhakkirāt Part 2. p. 648.
- ¹² Mudhakkirāt. Part 2. p. 649. Author's translation.
- ¹³ Mudhakkirāt. Part 2. p. 651.
- ¹⁴ Constitution of Iraq 1925. Article 37: 'The method of election to the Chamber of Deputies shall be prescribed by a special law based on the principle of the secret ballot and the necessity for the representation of non-Islamic minorities'.
- ¹⁵ British National Archives, FO 407/176, Affairs of Egypt and Sudan. Further Correspondence Part LXXIII, Letter from Sir E. Gorst to Sir E. Grey dated 18 March 1911.
- ¹⁶ British National Archives FO 407/175 Affairs of Egypt and Sudan. Further Correspondence Part LXXII, 1910. Enclosure 1 in No. 66. A Note from the Advisor to the Ministry of the Interior to Sir E. Gorst.
- ¹⁷ British National Archives FO371/1113, The Coptic Congress held at Assiout, The Speeches. March 1911.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.* Speech of Murqus Hanna, Electoral System for Securing Fair Representation to [sic] all Egyptian Elements. pp. 33–35.
- ¹⁹ British National Archives FO371/1113, The Coptic Congress held at Assiout, The Speeches. March 1911. p. 10
- ²⁰ See Al-Manār, al-Muslimūn wa-al-Qibṭ, volume 14, part 3, March 30, 1911. pp. 201–205.
- ²¹ British National Archives, FO 407/176 Affairs of Egypt and Sudan. Further Correspondence Part LXXIII 1911 January–June, p.152. Enclosure in No.46. 'Compte Rendu' of Report of Organising Committee of Egyptian Congress (author's translation).
- ²² Author's own translation: Fa al-Intima' li al-Waṭan Yil'ghi An Yakūn Hunāk A'ghlabiyya Dīniyya ow 'Arqiyya ow ḥata Mafhūm al-Aqaliyya. Cited on the Chaldean Church's official website, Saint Adday. 12 April 2018. Online: <http://saint-adday.com/?p=23233>.

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