

PLURALITY AND TOLERANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE REALITY

Shak Bernard Hanish, Ph.D.

College of Letters and Science, National University
11255 N. Torrey Pines Rd. La Jolla, CA 92037

ABSTRACT

The countries of the Middle East or the Arab World are enormously diverse and within that diversity is a wide range of cultural experience and traditions. These varieties include dimensions of identity, ecological diversity, regional and local ethnic diversity, religion, family, and class. The paper will touch on these diversities where the Middle East includes the Arab world and non-Arab states. The paper will indicate that although majority Muslims adheres to Sunni form of Islam, Shiites are majority in some countries. The paper will discuss other religious minorities. It will argue that Middle Eastern societies are more religious today than 30-40 years ago and that the Middle East is no longer a place of religious tolerance it once was. The paper will point out that some of the oldest communities in the Middle East are disappearing. It will notice that when a more conservative interpretation of Islam becomes widespread and exclusive, minorities are pushed out. The paper will conclude that the Middle East is no longer a place of tolerance but of hate and destruction, for variety of reason.

KEYWORDS: The Middle East. Diversity. Religion. Ethnicity. Tolerance.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is an important part of any society and there are cultural differences among societies as well as similarities. The countries of the Middle East or the Arab World are enormously diverse and within that diversity is a wide range of cultural experience and traditions. These varieties include dimensions of identity, ecological diversity, regional and local ethnic diversity, religion, family, and class.

Culture is the way of life of a given society, passed down from one generation to the next, through learning and experience. It is the shared language, beliefs, values, communication styles, patterns of thinking, norms of behavior, customs and traditions, and material objects (distinctive clothing, buildings, food, artwork, literature, music, dancing, etc.) among members of a group or society.

The Middle East

The Middle East consists of approximately 20 countries, with many different religions and a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups. Given this diversity, we should not be surprised to find a multitude of different cultures coexisting in the region. The Middle East includes the Arab world and non-Arab states, such as Israel, Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan.

The foundations of social diversity where region is as a “mosaic” include six important dimensions shaping much of the life in the Middle East. They are, (1) family and tribe, (2) regional and local ethnic pluralism, (3) religion, (4) occupational groups, (5) class distinctions, and (6) ecological pluralism.

A dimension is cultural diversity that includes ethnic, religious, familial, and social class. The family is a primary institution in the region, economically, socially, and religiously. Common family systems consist of polygyny (one man and many wives) but for most Muslims it is monogamy (one husband and one wife). Traditional nuclear families include husband, wife and children. Extended families, which are still common in Middle East, include grandparents, uncles and aunts, and cousins. Traditionally, the extended family was part of a larger group of related families. Sometimes the lineage further united into a tribe.

Ethnic differences have existed between and within regions and the Middle East is rich with its ethnic groups. It has many languages and cultures, mainly: Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Kurdish. Languages are classified into diverse family groups. Each region or country has diverse music, customs, clothes, languages, religions, food, lifestyle, etc.

Examples of non-Arabs in the Arab world are the Turkmen, the Assyrians, and Jews who mostly fled to Israel after its creation.

In North Africa, the Berber (or Amazigh) occupies most North Africa.

Berber and Arab identity in North Africa is mainly defined by language.

In Morocco, Berber speakers form over 35% of the total population; in Algeria they represent about 20% of the population; and in Libya they form about 4% of the population. Ethnic differences in the Middle East are associated with religious affiliations. Shiite concentration is in certain regions; Christian Copts, Kurds, Assyrians, Berbers are on other areas.

Many Gulf Arab countries have relatively large number of non-Arabs.

Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman has Persian minority. They have also Hindi-Urdu speakers and Filipinos. Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Oman have significant non-Muslim and non-Arab minorities such as Hindus and Christians. Israel has large Arab minorities. In Afghanistan, most people are Pashto, but the country has diverse Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and other groups. Iran is also diverse with many religions and ethnic backgrounds in addition to majority Persians who speak Farsi. The other ethnic groups are Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchi, and Turkmen.

Muslims in the Middle East

Most Muslims are of Sunni sects who are about 80% of Muslims and Shiites constitute about 15%. Although majority Muslims adheres to Sunni form of Islam, Shiites are majority in countries like Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain. Lebanon also has a large Shiite minority. Some provinces of Saudi Arabia

have Shiite majority population. Other Muslim religious minorities are the Alawites, mostly in Syria and some in Lebanon and Turkey (Alevis). Druze and Ismaelites are considered Muslims and offspring of Shiite. They mainly live in Lebanon and Israel. Bahá'í faith was founded in Iran in the 19th Century.

Islam has official status in most countries. Sharia law exists in some Middle Eastern countries especially in the Saudi Arabia, while other states in the region are considered secular. Also, there are large number of Christians living in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Sudan and Palestinian. Today, tiny communities of Jews remain in some Arab countries.

Religion and pluralism today

Middle Eastern societies are more religious today than 30-40 years ago. Here and there, radical Islamist groups continue to threaten governments and civilians. Many plural components of Middle Eastern societies are worried about their status, such as Christians, Yazidis, Alawites, Shiites, Sunnis, Jews, Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, etc. depending on which state they live in. Regarding diversity, there are four schools of Islamic jurisprudence. They are the Hanafy, Shafai, Hanbali and Maliki school of thoughts. Much of today's religious diversity in the Middle East is a result of the pre-Islamic religion, where they are treated as second-class citizens but might enjoy significant accommodation.

The Middle East is no longer a place of religious tolerance it once was.

The preference of state religion at times leads to discrimination against minorities, limitation of freedom of religion, etc. The fall of dictators, which was supposed to bring peace to the region has unleashed religious fundamentalism and extremism. Many people have nostalgia to old regimes of law and order, comparing them to current situation. Discrimination and persecution of minorities is mounting in such time of war and civil disorder. Their existence is threatened.

Some of the oldest communities in the Middle East, such as the Christians, the Yazidis, and the Mandaean are disappearing. Their number in Iraq is decreasing since April 2003. They have been the target of extreme Islamist groups, whether Sunni or Shiite, to eliminate them physically or to destroy their worship places, shops, and even their homes. Their situation is deteriorating greatly despite the Constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and conscience. Losing them through physical elimination, intimidation, and immigration will deprive Iraq of its mosaic composition.

The exodus of many hundreds of thousands of Iraqi minorities since April 2003 could mean the end of many ancient ethnic and religious communities in Iraq.

The Interpretation of Islam

When a more conservative interpretation of Islam becomes widespread and exclusive, minorities are pushed out. Religious sectarianism is eliminating the concept of citizenship, especially at the absence of serious effort to real coexistence of diverse groups. The constitutions in the region, except

Lebanon, specify that "Islam is the official religion of the state" or that "Islam is the basic state religion." Many states' constitutions define sharia (Islamic law) as a source or main source of legislations and laws of the state. This distinction highlights series of suffering of non-Muslims.

People have a sense of alienation in their home countries and lack of freedom of conscience. It is noted that there is a contradiction between what is recognized by some state constitutions of freedom of religious beliefs and the prevalence of religious discourses that eliminates diversity, pluralism, and coexistence in many Middle Eastern societies. It is also noted that religious discourse today stems from the text or past history rather than from current people's reality.

The Arabic Language

The Arabic language forms a unifying feature for the Arab part of the Middle East, though different areas use local dialects of Arabic. Arabs communicate through Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) which is used in TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc.

Each country or within each regions or cities are varies of dialects. There are many languages but within three language families. Semitic includes Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic. The Indo-European includes Kurdish, Persian, and Armenian. The Turkic includes Turkish and Azeri.

Arab Diverse Political Systems

There are several forms of government. Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, Syria and Yemen define themselves as Parliamentary Republics. While Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar define themselves as traditional monarchies. This is in contrast with Jordan and Morocco, which consider themselves as constitutional monarchies.

Lebanon parliamentary representation is divided according to religious affiliation (Sunni Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, Christian Maronites, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholic, Armenian Christians, Druze, etc.).

Saudi Arabia is the most socially religious country compared to the most socially liberal one of Lebanon.

Religious tolerance in everyday life is more common in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, in comparison with all the others. In some countries there is more separation of religion and state and in most Islamic countries, religion affects all aspects of life.

Women in Arab Societies

The status of women varies from one Arab society to another and depends not only on the religion practiced but also on the political system of the country, the socio-cultural environment (urban vs. rural) and the family tradition. The most restrictive conditions exist on the Arabian Peninsula, and the most relaxed conditions exist in the urban areas of Lebanon, Egypt and Syria.

The Middle East Holidays

Shops in different neighborhoods close on Fridays for the Muslim holyday, Saturdays for the Jewish Sabbath, and Sundays for the Christian day of rest.

In Iran, business hours are from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 2 to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. Iraq has Friday and Saturday off. Some other countries it is Thursday and Friday, etc.

Arab cuisine

Originally, the Bedouin roaming the deserts of Saudi Arabia relied heavily on a diet of dates, with little variety; expensive camel or goat, with a heavy emphasis on yogurt products, such as leben. However, Arabia has long been a center of trade and with the merchants' wanderings were a wide array of various imported food items and methods of cooking. Arabic cuisine also includes a mix of Turkish, Persian, and Middle Eastern food.

For Arabic and Middle Eastern food, bread, wheat, rice, bulgur are varieties of staples in the Middle East. Arabic verity dishes. depending on the country or the region are Kushari, Melokhia, Fool Medammas, Falafel in Egypt; Masgoof (grilled fish) in Iraq; "Dolmah, Kibbeh, Quzi (stuffed spring lamb), Klaichah, Tabouleh, Hummus bi Tahina, Baba Ghannouj in Lebanon and nearby countries; couscous in Morocco, and Mjaddara , Kunafa, Msaqa'a, Maqluba, Mansaf, in Jordan and Palestine, etc.

Arab Dress: Male and Female Dresses

Arab male dress ranges from the long robe and traditional headdress to the finest Western suit and blue jeans. Many women in the Arab World dress very modestly, wearing long and covering clothing. They often cover their heads with scarves, which is called "hijab" in Arabic. However, many Arab women dress in very Western clothes.

Political Ideologies and Institutions in the Middle East

Three main broad influenced ideologies are nationalism in different regions of the Middle East (Arab, Kurd, Turk, Jews, ...), socialism with its various brands. Those two ideologies were the product of capitalist industrial development in Europe. Islamic fundamentalism is the most recent ideology with its various types. We could also add liberalism and conservative ideologies.

Secularism in the Middle East was championed by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, establishing the most secular regime in the region where he imposed democracy on Turkey. He wanted to Westernize Turkey to reach Europe.

Zionism is a Jewish nationalist, a political movement that advocated the creation of a homeland for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, as it was before Christ.

The Geographic Diversity of the Middle East

The Geographic diversity of the Middle East depends largely on the relative availability of water. Although the "desert" image is correct in that the region is predominantly arid, there are sharp contrasts. The Nile Valley and the "Fertile Crescent" of the Tigris-Euphrates region and Mediterranean coast were the sites of the first known farming. These geographic contrasts have led to diverse but interlocking ways of life suited to different strategies of survival and adaptation.

Ecological diversity is the relation of people to the land, the wind patterns, rainfall and river courses, combined with the effects of irrigation systems.

The nonagricultural lands that constitute the bulk of the Middle East are by no means uniform in character. Some of these lands are forested mountain slopes. Others are arid steppes capable of supporting nomads with their herds of camels, sheep, or goats. Still other regions, such as the "empty quarter" of Arabia or Egypt's Western Desert, support virtually no human populations at all.

The geographic division between the desert and the arable lands has been accompanied by a threefold social division that also spanned the entire region—the division between peasants, nomads, and townspeople. Peasants were engaged directly in agricultural production and lived in the small, simple villages that dotted the cultivable countryside. Nomads also were engaged in primary economic production based on the husbandry of camels, sheep, goats, or cattle, usually in regions incapable of supporting agricultural production.

Urbanites were engaged not in primary food production but in other, more specialized occupations ranging from government, scholarship, or priestly functions, to crafts, retailing, and begging, and more recently including modern industrial, service, and other business pursuits. Many villagers are still small landholders, sharecroppers, or landless laborers. Each village is divided into families and blocks of related families and is headed by a patriarch of the most influential family, whose authority is shared with other village elders. The traditional cities were, among other things, seats of local and regional government.

The Division of Socioeconomic Classes

Since the origin of the earliest states, Middle Eastern society has been stratified into classes that enjoy varying degrees of privilege and wealth.

These distinctions are relatively quiet in the countryside, but are quite apparent in the cities, where lifestyles span the extremes from poverty to affluence.

Distinctions of class are tied in various complex ways to family background, ethnicity, occupation, and ecological situation.

Concluding Remarks

The ME is no longer a place of tolerance but of hate and destruction, for variety of reason. Some have an interest in eliminating certain religious minorities in the Middle East. Neighbors, who were living together for generations, are turning against each other's. There is recent increase in sectarianism in the Middle East. Governments' policies are marginalizing certain groups. There should be a work to strengthen movements for pluralism and diversity in the Middle East and to preserve ethnic and religious entities in the region. Some are making connection between religious "sacred" texts and intolerance. The failure of nationalism, socialism, and secularism caused the rise of Islamists. Some emphasize the role of the Wahhabi Salafi beliefs in the emergency of extremism. The separation of religion and state is not impossible in the Middle East. The Islamic "state" (ISIL; ISIS; IS) and other similar groups' acts can be considered and documented crimes against humanity or genocide. We cannot discount the role of the West in the emergence of religious extremism but some in the West can play role in fighting extremist religious ideologies.

REFERENCES

- [1] Cultures of the Middle East, n.d.
<https://www.fortbendisid.com> › site › handlers › filedownload › FileName=C.
- [2] PBS, Culture: A rich mosaic, 2002
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/themes/culture/>
- [3] How to tell the difference between Arabic, Persian, and Kurdish, January 6, 2017.
<https://ai.glossika.com/blog/how-to-tell-the-difference-between-arabic-persian-kurdish>
- [4] L. Bernasek, Who are the Berber people? Peabody Museum Press, 2008.
<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/who-are-the-berber-people.html> ;
M. John. August 1, 2017. Who Are the Berber People?
<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/who-are-the-berber-people.html>
- [5] N. S. Albaqawi, unity and diversity within pidginized Arabic as produced by Asian migrant workers in the Arabian gulf, Journal of Second Language Teaching and Research. Volume 5, Special Issue, Wolverhampton University.
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4727/9557bd5d30fc16939172994abb65c08bc5c6.pdf>
- [6] J. Morre, The evolution of Islamic terrorism: an overview.
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/etc/modern.html>
- [7] S. Hanish, Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq: A survival issue, Digest of Middle East Studies, Vol. 18, Issue 1, March 2009.
- [8] C. Violatti, Indo-European languages, May 5, 2014.
https://www.ancient.eu/Indo-European_Languages/
- [9] PBS, Politics from royalty to dotmocracy, n.d.
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/themes/politics/index.html>
- [10] Arab cultural awareness: 58 factsheets
Office of The Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence US Army Training and Doctrine Command Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas January 2006 <https://fas.org/irp/agency/army/arabculture.pdf>