

PROBLEMS OF STUDYING CHRISTIAN MINORITIES IN THE ISLAMIC MIDDLE EAST

Artur BOHÁČ

Abstract: *This article is focused on the problems and barriers in studying Middle Eastern Christian minorities especially in social sciences. The article targets Christian minorities living in the Islamic heartland of the Middle East – in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (with slight interferences). The treatment of minority populations is the main reason of the frequent conflicts in the region. Furthermore, the theme of Middle Eastern Christian minorities is highly politicized and controversial, because Middle Eastern states often consider the treatment of minorities their inner question. Studied minorities are not a monolith and their voice is still not unified, although their position in Muslim societies is not generally satisfactory, because they have opposite interests in some affairs and they are also limited by a long hostility. The main goal of submitted article is to describe the heterogeneity of Middle Eastern Christians and to bring several divisions of studied groups based on various factors – religion, language, history, geography, demography, loyalty to the government etc.*

Key words: *Middle East, Christianity, Islam, minorities, typology*

INTRODUCTION

In spite of wide-spread geographical imaginations of the Middle East as the Arabic and Islamic monolith settled by patriotic inhabitants supported by Western mass media and some Middle Eastern states' high politicians, strategically important Middle Eastern region is quite heterogeneous land. The Middle Eastern region comprises of relatively numerous ethnic, national, religious, linguistic or peculiar ethno-religious groups. The relation between majority and minorities, especially minority mistreatment, is the major source of various conflicts in the Middle Eastern area. The Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, as is known, are the most troubled world macro regions suffering from the wars, criminality, malnutrition etc. Most of recent armed conflicts in the Middle East had roots in unsolved minority problems. Most of post-Ottoman states did not evolve yet a national identity which could encompass their multi-ethnic society. Recently, we were witnesses of intra-state conflicts as Lebanese civil war and chronic Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or international conflicts as the war between Iraq and Iran or Israel and Lebanese Hezbollah. These conflicts were narrowly described and analyzed, but there are also many hidden conflicts which are not often promoted in the media.

Anyway, it is not easy to define the Middle East exactly. We know similar cases from Europe i.e. difficulties with delimitation of Balkan region or Central European region. There are plenty of opinions and not only geographers fumble with this problem. For example,

Mgr. Artur Boháč

*University of Ostrava, Faculty of Science, Department of Human Geography and Regional Development, Kranichova 8, 710 00 Ostrava – Slezská Ostrava, Czech Republic
Tel. +420 732 109 869; e-mail: artur.bohac@osu.cz*

the Anglo-American paradigm, concretely *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, consider these countries Middle Eastern: Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Yemen (Esposito ed. 2003). However, this article targets Christian minorities living in the Arabic Islamic heartland of the Middle East. In reference to my long-term research, this text is centred on Christian minorities in states with consignable Christian presence – Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (with slight interferences).

Middle Eastern Christian minorities face many problems nowadays. The biggest problem is presumably the massive emigration caused by unsatisfactory social status in Middle Eastern countries. Christian minorities are often target of the discrimination or oppression. Nevertheless, even Western liberal societies are not immune to xenophobic tendencies against minorities. Especially when a crisis occurs minorities become an immediate target of hatefulness.

The theme of Middle Eastern Christians is highly politicized and controversial, because Middle Eastern states usually consider the treatment of minorities as their inner question, deny any discrimination or even deny the existence of any type of minorities in their lands. Middle Eastern states' attitude is understandable, because the question of discriminated minorities is misused as the instrument of foreign policy made by Western powers (Kumaraswamy 2003).

This text is focused on the problems and barriers in studying Middle Eastern Christian minorities especially in social sciences such as human geography, history, political science, sociology, cultural anthropology etc. This article also attempts to organize obtainable informations and to bring several divisions of heterogeneous Middle Eastern Christian minorities.

DEFINING A MINORITY

The term minority, which was abused many times in recent times, is still evolving. The term minority was stabilized as the name for less important social group during the 20th century. Until the 20th century it was used in connection to the distribution of political power in the legislative organs. Major world religions classify people into two distinct categories, believers and non-believers. The believer is obviously superior to the non-believer and he has better social status. Islam is no exception to this kind of segregation of people. However, modernization, liberalization, idea of human rights and revolution in communication strongly undermined the religious discrimination in the Western countries. Religious dogmas towards non-believers became problematic. Nevertheless, traditional Islamic world still does not respect and use the term minority and this is probably one of the major reasons of minority mistreatment in most Islamic countries, where minority question is raising despite the stubborn resolve of governments to remove this issue from public agenda (Kumaraswamy 2007).

A minority is a sociological group which does not constitute a dominant majority of a given society. A minority is not necessarily a numerical minority, although there are predominantly described typical numerical minorities in this article. A minority at state level could be simultaneously a majority at regional or local level. The term minority also indicates an qualitative inferiority of given group. In South Africa under the regime of apartheid, white South Africans were according to contemporary perception of the terms

mentioned above a majority, although there were many more black South Africans. We could find a little similar case in the Middle Eastern region in recent history. In Lebanon before reaching Taef agreement, Maronites (Christians) constituted numerical minority, but in fact they were ruling majority and Muslim demographical majority was in subordinated position. That is why nowadays some scholars use alternative terms *subordinate group* and *dominant group*. The term minority group often occurs alongside civil rights, which gained prominence in 20th century. Studying of minority groups includes the research of the whole society which they live within.

The United Nations adopted in 1992 the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National, Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. This document extended the Charter of Human Rights from 1948 (Nisan 2002). This amendment, as whole Charter of Human Rights, was not recieved by Islamic countries, which consider these documents unfitting to traditional Islamic values. Islamic countries, members of OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference), prefer their own document concerning human rights – The Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, which was adopted in 1990 and which contains some contradictory passages.

BASIC FACTS ABOUT MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIAN MINORITIES

Studied region is home to numerous groups that are distinct from the majority because of their religion, ethnicity, cultural identity and territorial nationalism. In this article is the main factor which I deal with distinct religion, concretely Christianity. Nevertheless, the religion in the Middle East influences another aspects of social life.

The vast majority of Middle Eastern Christians have deep historical roots in the Middle East and they were majority population in this area fifteen centuries ago, although they were almost always in subordinated position to Rome, Constantinople, Damascus, Baghdad and Istanbul. Other Christian communities arose later through the migration or religious conversions between various Christian sects. After Arabic and Islamic expansion in the 7th century, the distinct religion became the reason of conflicts with Islamic rulers, although Christians shared the same history and the large part of cultural heritage with Muslims. Islam classifies society into two basic religious entities, Muslims and non-Muslims.

Non-Muslims are divided into non-believers, who should become Muslims or should be slayed, and *al-Kitab*, people who could live within Caliphate if they respect some regulations. Christians and Jews and members of several other monotheist religious sects (the classification as *al-Kitab* was changeable) were called *al-Kitab* (People of the Book). People of the book share many prophets with Islamic religion, which is according to Muslims final message from God. People of the Book were marked also as *dhimmi*, protected people who could live and practise their religion within Islamic state and who had to pay special tax, *jizya*. Islamic tolerance to these people was limited, they cannot organize missionary activities, they were forbidden to have any weapon, to hold political and military power in the state (but especially in Umayyad Caliphate Christians were present in government). Muslim superiority was granted in family matters too, non-Muslim man cannot marry Muslim woman without converting to Islam (Lewis 2000). This system played crucial role in the replacement of Christians with Muslims during a few centuries. Members of Middle Eastern Christian sects survived to these days despite

their chronic vulnerability, but we should realize that the relationships of this minorities to the majority undergone some changes over the generations.

After the turbulent centuries of Crusades and other invasions, when many Middle Eastern Christians were killed, the situation of Christians was improved in Ottoman Empire and the population of Middle Eastern Christians was even increasing. Ottoman Turks were religiously more tolerant than Arabic conquestors and they established the unique system of *millets*, which includes main religious denominations of the whole Empire, Muslim, Jewish, Greek Orthodox and Armenian. Muslim *millet* obviously played a dominant role. The representative authorities of the *millets* were religious leaders. The *millet* system institutionalized legal statuses of Christians in Ottoman Empire and brought the clear identification of the nation with the religion in the Middle East. The number of millets was increasing during the centuries, especially because of the pressure of European Christian powers during the years of gradual decline of Ottoman Empire. You could see the division of Middle Eastern Christians, which is almost identical to the *millet* system, in the chapter called Religious Division of Middle Eastern Christianity. Another consequence of European dominance was the presence of Roman Catholic or Protestant missionaries in Ottoman Empire. Christian minorities in Ottoman Empire enjoyed the protection of European colonial powers, which led to the equality conceded to non-Muslims which often provoked violent reactions of Muslim majority (Nisan 2002).

There appear revolutionary and nationalist ideas in the Middle East in the 19th century. These ideas imported from Europe were successful firstly among Ottoman Christian minorities. Middle Eastern Christians discovered the Enlightenment culture, studied modern European languages and improved their economic status in the empire. Successful Ottoman Christians became active in emancipation efforts. Christian groups which collaborated with the armies of Triple Entente urged for the establishment of their own states in the times of World War I and after it. However, international conferences held in the 20s of the 20th century did not ratify Christians interests. Maronites in fact got the state from European colonial powers, but Assyrian efforts of political emancipation were not fulfilled. Egyptian Copts were loyal to the Egyptian anti-British nationalism.

During European colonial presence Middle Eastern Christians hoped that European powers will grant their autonomy and safety, but after World War II. all European mandates ended and European troops left Middle East and left Middle Eastern Christians to the mercy of their rulers. Then, Middle Eastern Christians were victims of ideologies of nationalism, socialism (however, Christians were active nationalists or socialists) and islamism, which was connected with implementing elements of *sharia* law after the decolonization (Maoz 1999). Second class citizenship for Christians has been renewed in the Middle East, especially in fragmented Iraq and Egypt, where strong Islamic political opposition exists. Generally speaking, authoritarian regimes are more positive for Christians than relatively democratic regimes which could lead to the implementation of political Islam which is the biggest threat for various minorities in Muslim countries.

TYPES OF MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIAN MINORITIES

We can observe interesting general rule about the relation between the nation and religion in the Middle Ages in Europe and the Middle East, which strongly influenced current situation. There was national disunity and religious unity (Roman Catholic

Church) in the world of Western Christianity, where the famous principle "*cuius regio, eius religio*" was applied, and national unity (Byzantine Empire, Caliphates) and religious disunity in the world of Eastern Christianity. However, the dominant nation in the Eastern Mediterranean wanted, but could not enforce subordinated groups to leave their ancestral religious sects (Bailey – Bailey 2003). Nevertheless, the ideas of the nationalism and the Enlightenment, which came from Europe, also emerged in the Middle East in the 19th century especially among subordinated groups.

The church in the Middle Eastern region is often narrowly connected with a nation or ethnic group and the religion is in fact the anchor of their national existence. This principle proved when Middle Eastern nations lost their political power after Byzantine and especially Islamic expansion. The churches, despite of massive Islamization and Arabization, preserved national identity, religion and in some cases mother tongue. This continuing identity show independence of the churches on the state apparatus. These national/religious identities are still preserved even in Western diaspora.

Finally, we can divide Middle Eastern Christian minorities on the base of various factors:

1. According to creating national structures:

- Religious minorities – created by members of missionary oriented churches, which want to gain believers all around the world uncared for their ethnicity (members of Roman Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Protestant churches, partly Syriac Orthodox Church and Syriac Catholic Church)
- Ethno-religious minorities - religious groups narrowly connected with some ethnic structure (it is complicated or impossible to become a member of their churches, if you have different ethnicity), but they usually do not attempt to distinguish linguallly from majority (sometimes Copts and Maronites are classified as ethno-religious minority, but typical examples are Druzes or Sikhs)
- Minority nations – groups which are ethnically, religiously and linguallly different from majority (Assyrians, Armenians), their religion is narrowly connected with ethnicity
- Copts and Maronites – in my opinion specific cases of the nations with diminishing or diminished language, ancient nations religiously and partly ethnically different from their Muslim neighbours

2. According to the origin:

- Autochthonous minorities (more than 100 years of permanent settlement) – the vast majority of Middle Eastern Christians who live in Middle Eastern region for fifteen centuries
- Allochthonous minorities – Assyrians and Armenians who came during Ottoman genocide from Anatolia, foreign missionaries and workers, refugees (Iraqi Christian runners in Jordan and Syria, Sudanese runners in Egypt)

3. According to the dislocation:

- Concentrated minorities
- Dispersed minorities
- The combination of concentrated and dispersed settlement – Egyptian Christians (concentrated in Upper Egypt around Asyut and in major cities), Iraqi Christians (concentrated in Niniveh Plains on the north and in large cities), Jordanian Chris-

tians (concentrated on the northwest and in large cities), Lebanese Christians (concentrated near Beirut, Byblos), Syrian Christians (concentrated in Al-Jazeera area and in large cities) – Christians could make a majority in some of above mentioned areas and they have Christian quarters in large cities

RELIGIOUS DIVISION OF MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIANITY

The religious history of Middle Eastern Christianity is very complicated, but I try to outline the facts important for the better understanding of this article.

The united Christian Church was markedly affected by the disconnection of Nestorians and Monophysites in the 5th century. Heretical doctrine of Nestorianism was succesful especially among Assyrian nation (Assyrian Church of the East, Nestorians), Monophysitism took roots among Copts (Coptic Orthodox Church), Armenians (Armenian Apostolic Church) and Western Assyrians (Syriac Orthodox Church, Jacobites). Another religious sect set in the 7th century was monotheletism which found its followers among Maronites (Maronite Church), people settled in Lebanese mountains. Melkites (Melkite Church) were the Jacobites who convert to the Greek Orthodoxy. All these churches were rivals and dogmatic clashes often led into bloody incidents.

Following changes of Middle Eastern Christianity were connected with the proselytistic activities of Roman Catholic missionaries who were more succesful than their Protestant colleagues. Maronite Church and Melkite Church signed union with Rome and became completely Catholic. Other Oriental churches also were not immune to Roman Catholic doctrine and they were divided into old Oriental Orthodox churches and new Oriental Catholic Churches (Armenian Catholic Church, Coptic Catholic Church, Chaldean Catholic Church, Syriac Catholic Church). Orthodox believers hated Catholic deseters, but nowadays the relations between these groups are improving (Filipi 1998).

After more than fifteen centuries of the diversification, we can distinguish four Church families. This typology is identical to the structure of MECC (Middle East Council of Churches) which is based on Ottoman *millet* system:

The Oriental Orthodox family

- Coptic Orthodox Church
- Assyrian Church of the East
- Syriac Orthodox Church
- Armenian Apostolic Church

The Orthodox family

- Greek Orthodox Church

The Catholic family

- Roman Catholic Church
- Coptic Catholic Church
- Chaldean Catholic Church
- Syriac Catholic Church
- Armenian Catholic Church
- Melkite Church
- Maronite Church

The Reformed family

- Evangelical Episcopal churches

- Lutheran churches
- Evangelical churches etc.

BASIC CHURCH ADMINISTRATION

The Middle Eastern church administration is based especially on the existence of ancient patriarchates. The patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Constantinople and Rome constituted so called Church pentarchy. However, some churches which splited from the orthodoxy founded another patriarchates (Filipi 1998). Nowadays, many patriarchal sees are not located in the traditional places because of various reasons. You can see the current location of the patriarchates in parentheses behind the official name of the church.

The ancient Eastern Patriarchates in the pattern of their multiple correspondencies to the different churches of today:

Patriarchate of Antioch

- Greek Orthodox Church (Damascus)
- Syriac Orthodox Church (Damascus)
- Syriac Catholic Church (Beirut)
- Melkite Church (Damascus)
- Maronite Church (Bkerke – Lebanon)

Patriarchate of Alexandria

- Greek Orthodox Church (Alexandria)
- Coptic Orthodox Church (Cairo)
- Coptic Catholic Church (Cairo)

Patriarchate of Jerusalem

- Greek Orthodox Church (Jerusalem)
- Roman Catholic Church (Jerusalem)
- Armenian Apostolic Church (Jerusalem)

Patriarchate of Constantinople

- Greek Orthodox Church (Istanbul)
- Armenian Apostolic Church (Istanbul)

Patriarchate of the Ancient Church of the East

- Assyrian Church of the East (Chicago and Baghdad)
- Chaldean Catholic Church (Baghdad)

Armenian Apostolic Church recognizes also specific patriarchates, Catholicosate of Echmiadzin in Armenia and Catholicosate of Cilicia based in Antellias in Lebanon. Armenian Catholic Church has its patriarchate in Beirut and it is named Patriarchate of Cilicia of the Armenians.

The Middle Eastern patriarchates have two types of jurisdiction:

- Regional jurisdiction (the churches which have more than one patriarchate) – Greek Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic Church, Armenian Apostolic Church
- World jurisdiction (one patriarchate for one church) – Assyrian Church of the East, Syriac Orthodox Church, Coptic Orthodox Church, Armenian Catholic Church, Coptic Catholic Church, Chaldean Catholic Church, Maronite Church, Melkite Church, Syriac Catholic Church

The churches maintain the system of geographical parishes organized into dioceses and archdioceses.

IDENTITY PROBLEMS

Long-term Islamization, Arabization and inter-Christian quarrels strongly influenced the identity of Middle Eastern Christian groups. The identity is very important instrument to the differentiation from majority populations. Middle Eastern Christians are often wrongly marked as Arab Christians, although only few percents of Middle Eastern Christians (especially from Jordan and Syria) are people of Arab origin. Middle Eastern Christian majority has pre-Arab origin. National myths filled by legends about cruel fate are extremely popular among Middle Eastern Christians and have some real base (Fargues 1997). Maronites steadily consider themselves as descendants of Phoenicians and Copts declare pharaonic heritage of their nation. Assyrians have not unified identity because of their religious fragmentation. Nestorian Assyrians consider themselves as descendants of ancient Assyrians and include non-Nestorian groups under Assyrian ethnicity. Assyrian sub-group Chaldeans oppose Nestorian Assyrian nationalism and declare Chaldean heritage or Chaldeans describe themselves as Arab Christians. Third Assyrian sub-group Syriacs (Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholics) is partly loyal to Assyrian nationalism, but there are some supporters of Arab nationalism or even Aramean nationalism. There are many tempestuous academic debates and doubts about the identity of Assyrian people. The majority of Syrian and Jordanian Christians consider themselves to be Arab Christians.

PROBLEMS IN DEMOGRAPHY

Christians in the Middle East number between ten and thirteen million (see tab. 1) compared to 150 mil. Muslims. These numbers are changeable, because Christians are leaving their homelands or in less cases they are coming back. Generally, the number of Christians living in Middle Eastern states is undoubtedly declining, although we usually do not have accurate and fully reliable data. Christian families are usually smaller than Muslim families, there are some mixed marriages and conversions to Islam, but the most obvious reason for the decline of Middle Eastern Christian is massive emigration to non-Arab states. The emigration is the biggest problem of Christian communities not only because of decreasing size of the communities, but because of diminishing quality of them. For once community falls below a certain size, it loses its cultural and social importance.

The Middle Eastern states often pretend to be religiously and ethnically homogenous and sometimes, as I mentioned, deny the existence of minorities, which are considered as potential enemies linked to foreign powers. Denying of the existence or the importance of Middle Eastern minorities is connected with falsifying history and the negation of regional multiethnic mosaic. However, non-Muslims and non-Arabs played quite important role in the development of Islamic/Arabic states in last two centuries. For example, Michel Aflaq, Greek Orthodox Christian from Damascus was the main founder and thinker of pan Arab nationalist party Baath. Makram Ebeid, Coptic Orthodox Christian from Egypt, was the leader of Egyptian nationalist party al-Wafd (Nisan 2002).

There were organized censuses considering the religious affiliation in the Ottoman era. Nowadays, none of studied states provides actual statistics on the religion (in recent history, all Middle Eastern states provided these statistics). However, in Jordan and Egypt every

citizen should choose one belief from religions recognized by the state and his religion is written down in his ID card. The record of religious affiliation in ID card could ease a discrimination ie. identifying the foes during the civil war in Lebanon. In Egypt there are another sources for informations about number of believers provide the registration of births, marriages and deaths. These informations could be more accurate than numbers from censuses, because non-Muslim people could hide their religion in censuses, but births or deaths are very important rites (Fargues 1997). There is one general rule that churches usually exaggerate numbers of believers and the governments do the opposite. There are informations about governmental manipulations or about Christians who declared themselves as Muslims due to the pressure of their environment. For some scholars is typical untrue premise, that whole Middle Eastern population belongs to some religion. There are atheist and agnostic persons in the Middle East, but they do not officially declare their non-belief, especially if they are from Muslim community. There is another problem with the classification of ethno-religious or national minorities as entirely religious groups (for example Copts in Egypt or Assyrians in Iraq) in censuses.

Tab. 1: Estimated number of Christians in observed countries

Country	Absolute number of Christians	Relative number of Christians (%)	Confessional affiliation (the most popular churches - descending in accordance to the number of believers)
Egypt	8 000 000	10	Coptic Orthodox Church, Coptic Catholic Church, Protestant churches, Armenian Apostolic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Melkite Church
Iraq	800 000	3	Chaldean Catholic Church, Assyrian Church of the East, Syriac Catholic Church, Syriac Orthodox Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Armenian Orthodox Church
Jordan	300 000	5	Greek Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic Church, Melkite Church, Protestant churches, Amenian Apostolic Church, Syriac Orthodox Church
Lebanon	1 500 000	40	Maronite Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Melkite Church, Syriac Catholic Church, Syriac Orthodox Church
Syria	1 700 000	9	Greek Orthodox Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Syriac Orthodox Church, Maronite Church, Syriac Catholic Church, Armenian Catholic Church
Total	12 300 000	9	

Source: Own analysis made in 2008

STAGE OF ARABIZATION

Most of existing Christian groups resisted Islamization, but they cannot resist Arabization and their ancestral languages vanished or they are present only in liturgy, where Arabic also expanded. Only Armenians and Assyrians kept their authentic languages alive. Assyrian Nestorians use *sureth* language (Assyrian or neo-Aramean), Syriacs use *turoyo* language (Syriac) and Chaldeans use Chaldean language (Chaldean neo-Aramean). Armenians and Assyrians usually speak Arabic or Kurdish as a second language. You could still hear old Aramaic in Syriac Orthodox Christian village Maloula in Southeastern Syria. Maronites speak often French instead of Arabic because of their historical ties with France. Maronites' French speaking is also the emphasis of their non-Arabic identity. The Coptic language is used in daily communication by a few enthusiasts. There exists a religious educational system in the Middle East. In Assyrian and Armenian Christian schools pupils are taught Assyrian languages or Armenian language (Nisan 2002).

LOYALTY TO THE GOVERNMENT

Generally, we can find people loyal and disloyal to their governments in every Middle Eastern Christian group. On the one hand there are Christians satisfied with relatively safe living in authoritarian states, which protect them partly from the Islamists, on the other hand there are relative liberal Christians calling for democratic changes, but these changes could strengthen Islamists whose popularity among Muslim people is rising. Christian diaspora living in Western states systematically criticise central governments. Nevertheless, majority of Middle Eastern Christians is mostly loyal to the governments which attempt to prevent Islamic radicalism (Egypt – Hosni Mubarak, Iraq – Jalal Talabani, Jordan – Abdullah II., Syria – Bashar Assad) and to governments with Christian perceptible presence (Lebanon – Michel Suleiman). The government usually fiscally support loyal Christian clergy. When you travel around the Middle Eastern countries, you could meet extremely loyal Christians that praise a central government overmuch. Probably, they are afraid of secret services, especially in Syria or Egypt.

AUTONOMOUS TENDENCIES

The emergence of the modern Middle East indeed worked against the minorities. Different ethnic groups were put together and homogenous ethnic groups were divided by the territorial boundaries. These changes were the cause of massive emigration of afflicted groups. Nevertheless, these emigrants were the biggest supporters of demands for minorities' special protection, which outgrew into autonomous tendencies (Phares 2001).

Nowadays, we can find autonomous tendencies especially among Iraqi Assyrians – they attempt to establish Assyrian region in northern Iraq due to Article 125 of Iraqi Constitution and some viable proposal exist. Another Christian groups who dealt with autonomous tendencies in recent times were Maronites (during Lebanese civil war – so-called Republic of Jouniya), Copts (intended autonomous region in Upper Egypt), but these wishes were not fulfilled (Nisan 2002). Autonomous tendencies are usually supported by the diaspora organizations (Middle Eastern Christian diaspora is really numerous worldwide), but they have not strong external patronage of the states. Sometimes, political activities of diasporic organizations, which highlight the plight of Middle Eastern Christians, complicate the position of Christians living in Muslim lands. Another problem of achieving autonomy is the lack of power of mostly dispersed Christians in the Middle Eastern region.

CONCLUSIONS

None of Middle Eastern state is ethnically or religiously homogenous, although central governments tend to ignore various minorities. Most of these minorities pre-date the state formation in the Middle East. Middle Eastern Christian minorities are quite heterogenous social groups endangered not only by their Muslim rulers and growing Muslim population, but by their disunity too. They have too often opposite interests in specific affairs and they are limited by a long hostility too. The immigration of Christians is another serious problem.

In many cases Christians are the only non-Muslim autochthonous population which represents valuable force for the pluralism within Arab societies. If they were able to play significant role in cultural and political life, they could support the development of predominantly Muslim societies, as they did in Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. The future of Christian minorities is narrowly connected not only with the solution of political issues, such as Iraqi and Lebanese questions and next, but with the modernization of Arab societies too. Middle Eastern politicians should not perceive Christian minorities as the potential traitors, but as the natural part of Middle Eastern society. They should try to evolve a national identity that would incorporate various minorities. This article proved that there are many barriers in studying present-day Middle Eastern Christians and there is a need for connection various social sciences findings about them.

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Summary

This article shows that none of Middle Eastern state is ethnically or religiously homogenous, although central governments tend to pretend a homogeneity and ignore various minorities. Most of these minorities pre-date the modern state formation in the Middle East and many of them pre-date Arab/Islamic conquests. Middle Eastern Christian minorities are quite heterogenous social groups endangered not only by their Muslim rulers and growing Muslim population, but by their disunity too. They have too often opposite interests in specific affairs and they are limited by a long hostility too. The immigration of Christians is another serious problem. The future of Middle Eastern Christian is uncertain.

In many cases Christians are the only non-Muslim autochthonous population which represents valuable force for the pluralism within Arab societies. If they were able to play significant role in cultural and political life, they could support the development of predominantly Muslim societies, as they did in Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. The future of Christian minorities is narrowly connected not only with the solution of political issues, such as Iraqi and Lebanese questions and next, but with the modernization of Arab societies too. Middle Eastern politicians should not perceive Christian minorities as the potential traitors, but as the natural part of Middle Eastern society. They should try to evolve a national identity that would incorporate various minorities. This article proved that there are many barriers in studying present-day Middle Eastern Christians and there is a need for connection various social sciences findings about them.