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Rowe, P. S. (Ed.). Routledge Handbook of Minorities in the Middle East. London and New York: Routledge, 2019.

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Rowe's edited book on minorities in the Middle East focuses on the events that happened in the wake of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent wars and uprisings. These events shed light on the complexities of Middle Eastern societies as multi-layered and dynamic and in which different religious and ethnic groups live their everyday life close to the Arab and Muslim majority in close proximity.

The establishment of Da'esh, the militant group that espouses a fundamentalist Salafi doctrine of Sunni Islam—also identified as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State (IS)—represented a turning point in Arab majority-minority relations. The group, identified by the UN as a terrorist organization, gained global prominence in 2014 and has claimed responsibility for numerous beheadings, executions, and violent attacks in Iraq and Syria. The Syrian refugee crisis that resulted from the waves of violence carried out by Da'esh between 2014 and 2016 brought to light (for Westerners) some of the complex histories and relations among majority and minority communities within the Middle East. This crisis shed light on the web of majority-minority relations among religious and ethnic groups in the region and the plight of those minority groups targeted for extermination or besieged by ethnic violence. The aim of this book, according to Rowe, is to introduce “the reader to the various communities in the Middle East that form minority populations, either in terms of their dispersion across many different states in the region, or as a proportion of the population in their own societies” (p. 2).

The common theme underpinning all chapters in the book is the idea of minorities' agency, or their ability to act “in their own right” (p. 7). The idea that minorities possess agency stands in contrast with the previous studies on minorities in the Middle East, which tended to stress nostalgic “references to forgotten kingdoms and lost histories [thus suggesting] that there is little more than historic interest in considering such minority communities. Their present agency is little more than a fading vestige of past glories” (p. 7). As Rowe puts it, “This book is aimed at addressing and emphasizing how minority communities have responded and acted in order to protect and safeguard their own past, present and future “in spite of crisis, persecution, or marginalization” (p. 7). The book is divided into four sections. Section one provides a discussion of majority-minority relations in the Middle East from a socio-political perspective. Section two focuses on the religious and ethno-religious minorities in the region and on discussing their evolution and relations in some Middle Eastern states. Section three focuses on ethnic minorities and their demands and relation with the majority, and section four is devoted to discussing some contemporary issues, such as sexual minorities and minorities in diaspora.

The introduction of the book focuses on the context and concepts aimed at helping the reader to clearly understand the different sections of the book. One of the main points discussed in the introduction relates to the concept of minority. It has come under scrutiny over the years and, in relation to the Middle Eastern societies, has been defined in different ways depending on the historical period. During the Ottoman Empire, for example, non-Muslim communities were not recognized as minorities, but “status differentiation between officially recognized Muslim and non-Muslim subjects” (p. 4) was pursued. Later, imperial powers, during the phase of colonization, “preyed on internal divisions within colonial states in order to ‘divide and rule’” (p. 3). In other words, colonial powers “patronize[d] specific religious or ethnic groups as trusted client elites” (p. 3). The current notion of minorities resulted from the establishment of nation-states, in particular during the period of ‘mandates’ in the 1920s. It was at this time that “modern states began to employ the term minority for these populations, [and] the label acquired a more pernicious implication, resembling our use

of the term in refer to a juvenile who has not yet achieved full right as the adult majority” (p. 4). As Rowe argues, the use of the term ‘minority’ “is meant to convey the numerical distinction between Muslim, Arab, straight, and other “majority” populations and those of smaller cultural, religious, ethnic, or gendered communities. It is not intended to imply the subordinate status of any of these groups or the derivative nature of their activities” (p. 5).

Section one focuses on the notion of the ‘minority’ in Islamic thought and its evolution in light of the concept of nation-states and citizenship. In particular, classical Islamic theory considers some minority communities to be protected or *dhimmi*, meaning that they have protection and that some rights and responsibilities are granted. However, being a member of *dhimma* also entails having limitations imposed on the group’s political or social status. The presence and role of minorities during the formative stage of Arab nationalism is discussed in chapter three, in which Haiduc-Dale notes that “Arab nationalism provided all Arabs, be they Muslim, Jews, or Christian, with a potentially shared sense of belonging within a single cultural group” (p. 43). Tadros, in chapter four, deals with the concept of Islamic citizenship in the post Arab revolts of 2010. In particular, the author focuses on new variations in the institutionalization of Islamic citizenship since 2011. Islamic citizenship is not a new phenomenon in the region (for example, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Sudan have long defined citizenship in this way). However, the enactment of different forms of citizenship in territories ruled by various Islamist factions has had a pronounced impact on religious minorities and religious pluralism at an unprecedented scale in the Arab world, contributing to major reconfigurations of their societies. (p. 55)

In chapter five, Kingston focuses on cultural minorities “who seek to entrench their rights as equal members of a national political community rather than as subordinate members of a political system that enforces differential rights based upon an individual’s membership in a particular ethnic and/or religious community” (p. 60).

Sections two, three, and four are devoted to discussing pre-Muslim and post-Muslim minorities, ethnic minorities, and emerging issues, respectively. The notion of “pre-Muslim minorities” relates to the idea that the birth and expansion of Islam in the seventh century disrupted the social, religious, and cultural fabric of Middle Eastern societies, thus “promoting the immediate eclipse of pre-Muslim religions in favor of the dominant new order” (p. 8), but this understanding does not reflect the intermingling of religions and religious practices that actually occurred. One such an example is that of Yezidis, whose religion is a mixture “of indigenous practices and Islamic Sufism” (p. 8). They obtained worldwide visibility as the target of genocide of 2014. In Iraq, where Yezidis are concentrated, the Yezidis, “not having military or political power to engage in an insurgency to protect themselves and demand their rights to live in their own lands and participate the political life of the region, have been forced to leave the region amid a range of massacres” (p. 146). In chapter 11, Açıkyıldız-Şengül argues the need to protect and safeguard this ethnic-religious minority because their extinction “will not only imply the end of the Mesopotamian culture, but will also mean that of the most important parts of the world’s heritage will be erased from the surface of the Earth” (p. 155).

Post-Muslim minorities refers to the current divisions within the Islamic religion, where different religious groups have reclaimed their own existence and rights. One such a group is that of Bahá’í, who became very popular in Persia during the mid-eighteenth century. They are now present in most Arab countries. They consider themselves to be a numerical minority, but, as Cameron and Ghanea argue, in chapter 13, “they do not consider themselves a ‘minority’ in the sense of feeling separate from the rest of the population, seeking to establish a separate existence, or being entitled to special treatment” (p. 172).

Section three is devoted to discussing the issues of ethnic minorities “for whom linguistic and cultural distinctiveness is the primary marker” (p. 15). One such a minority

group is that of the Kurds, who number about 35 million and live in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. In chapter 19, Romano argues that the Kurds have engaged “the political systems of their respective states and take advantage of moments of weakened central government power” (p. 255) in order to have their rights and identity recognized by the states. Section four focuses on “the rising significance of sexual minorities, the influence of diaspora movements, the media, and of minorities in the midst of conflict, concluding with a chapter dealing with contemporary advocacy for Middle Eastern minorities in Western states” (p. 15).

This handbook represents not only a guide but also a detailed discussion of minorities in the Middle East from theoretical, sociological, and political perspectives, thus providing the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the minorities in the region. The handbook has benefited “by the fact that in many cases [the] contributors are members of the minority community that they profile, either by descent or adherence” (p. 15), making it an invaluable resource for a Western audience.

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