

The Nation-State Form and the Emergence of 'Minorities' in Syria

Benjamin White*

St Antony's College, Oxford University

Abstract

Minorities are specifically modern political groupings: they belong to the era of nation-states. This article explores the emergence of minorities in Syria under the French mandate. It examines the contradictions caused by French attempts to impose a religious political order within the secular form of the nation-state, showing how that form created minorities, most of whom cannot simply be mapped onto the *millets*, or religious communities, of the Ottoman Empire.

Using French and Syrian sources from the archives of the French High Commission, the article examines various religious and ethnolinguistic minorities to show how their emergence was governed by the nation-state form. French colonial policy influenced their development, but not their existence. The article draws on publications from the nationalist press of the period to show how the formation of minority and majority consciousness constitutes a larger process that is intimately linked to the nation-state form. The Syrian case is presented for comparative study and warns against an unreflective use of 'minority' as an analytical category.

The 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published in 1910-1911, contains no entry for 'minorities'. In the 14th edition of 1929 the entry on minorities runs to eleven pages, mostly discussing the post-World War One peace settlements and the League of Nations. The evolution of political thought leading to the establishment of the League coincided with the evolution of the Ottoman communities into nations and minorities, a traumatic epistemological transformation which likewise afflicted much of Europe during that period.

*The author would like to gratefully acknowledge the support given by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for funding this research.

This article charts the emergence of ‘minorities’ both as a concept and as real socio-political groupings within the context of that transformation, with particular reference to Syria under the French mandate, to illuminate the process of nation-state formation. It first considers the concept of ‘minorities’ and the preconditions for their emergence, contrasting the modern concept of ‘minority’ with the pre-modern Ottoman concept of *millet*, or religious community. The main part of the article addresses the emergence of minorities, as well as a ‘majority’, in the post-Ottoman nation-state form of Syria. The analysis is based on French and Syrian sources held in the archives of the French High Commission and on publications in the Arabic press of the French mandate period. It demonstrates the contradictions created by French attempts to maintain a religious political order within the secular nation-state context.

The question of whether Syria in this period can correctly be termed a nation-state is as valid as it is for any nation-state: the nationalist ideal of the nation-state (one nation in one state) exists nowhere. What is less questionable is that the state *form* present in Syria under the French mandate, and recognized internationally by the League of Nations, was that of a nation-state. Its structures and institutions — e.g. a common external frontier and a common nationality within it — tended towards the ‘norm’ of a unitary state, partly under pressure from nationalist-minded Syrians. It was the nation-state form that provided the framework for the development of Syrian identities in this period. This is the standard state form of our time, making the Syrian case useful for comparative study.

The use of the word ‘minority’ to describe a group ‘distinguished by common ties of descent, physical appearance, language, culture or religion, in virtue of which they feel or are regarded as different from the majority of the population in a society’ (Bullock 1988:‘minorities’), a distinction understood to have political significance, is relatively recent. Restricted to religious groups, this use of the word ‘minority’ emerged in the mid-1800s. The Oxford English Dictionary’s first citations for ‘national’ and ‘ethnic’ minorities appear in the 1918 and 1945 editions respectively. In French, Le Robert cites the equivalent terms in its 1908 and 1931 editions¹. The concept only emerged as the existence of numerically inferior, culturally defined groups became politically meaningful. It is not surprising that *religious* minorities were identified first: before the emergence of secular nationalism, the most politically salient form of identity was religious. Nor is it surprising that religious minorities were not identified as *minorities* until quite recently (c.1850). Previously, it was their status as subordinate *religious* groups that was important. Only when modern states appeared did the numerical

inferiority of these groups become more salient than the religious cleavages separating them from the majority. In a sense, there was no articulated concept of ‘minority’ because minorities did not exist. The concept only acquires meaning once certain philosophical and geographical preconditions associated with modern states have been fulfilled.

Philosophically, the most important precondition for the emergence of minorities is the concept of representative government. Under what Niyazi Berkes calls the medieval view of society, the ruler does not represent the ruled, but rather the will of God (Berkes 1964:8-10). Whether he shares the language or ‘ethnicity’ of the ruled is irrelevant (*cf.* Anderson on the ‘dynastic realm’; Anderson 1991:19-22). Nor need he share their religious beliefs: he draws his right to rule from his *own* religion. Religious differences between ruler and ruled are not incompatible with stable government: the Arab caliphates ruled over a majority of non-Muslims for centuries, as did the Ottomans in their Balkan provinces. Muslim law provided a place in the social and political order for non-Muslims that, although structurally subordinate, was nevertheless guaranteed by the state. Moreover, non-Muslims were not subordinated because they were a *minority* (often they were not), but because they were non-Muslims. Under this system, ethnic identity too had limited political salience—the Ottoman state required that its servants *speak* Ottoman Turkish, not that they *be* ‘Turks’ — although this began to change in the nineteenth century.

Representative government alters this system fundamentally. Once rule by divine right is no longer satisfactory, the state must find a stronger and more direct link between itself and society. This most often becomes manifest in a concept of representative government, whereby the ruler represents not God but the people ruled. Such representation need not be democratic: many modern dictators have based their legitimacy on the claim to represent the people². However, for the concept to be effective, the ‘people’ represented must be defined. First of all, this has to happen geographically by the establishment of territorial states within fixed borders. But in an era when the demands they make on their populations have increased enormously, few states have found mere residence within their territory a strong enough tie to command the loyalty of their populations. It has thus become necessary to establish a *cultural* link, usually through some form of nationalism. This is because populations are rarely homogeneous so that territories of any size may contain culturally diverse populations. In the pre-modern era it was sometimes problematic for religiously-legitimated states to rule over populations belonging to a different faith. In modern times, potential flashpoints are multiplied since states intrude more on their

populations and national identity (a combination of multiple elements) is more complex, and thus exclusive, than religious identity. States generally assume a cultural identity acceptable to a majority of their population; culturally-defined groups falling outside this definition of national identity, but inside the state's geographical borders, become minorities. Numerous factors then influence their relations with the state and the majority community. Perhaps the most relevant factors for Syria's emergent minorities under the French mandate are the extent to which the minority group is identified with an external actor—a foreign power or other members of the group outside the state's borders, perhaps in a state of their own—and how far the cultural cleavages dividing minorities from the majority acquire political salience.

In addition to these philosophical preconditions to the emergence of minorities are geographical preconditions. The spread of modern communications and the related extension of state authority over the whole territory and population brings previously semi-autonomous communities into direct contact with the state, fixing them within a state structure in which they constitute a minority. The Druzes of Mount Lebanon and the Hawran are an obvious example. Less obviously, the Balkan Christians, as a larger and more diverse community, probably did not consider themselves a minority before the nineteenth century at the earliest, if they ever did. Muslims may have been a majority, though not an overwhelming one, in the Ottoman Empire as a whole, but before the spread of modern communications the Empire did not *act* as a whole, and in the Balkans the Christians were a numerical majority.

The establishment of fixed borders with a state's authority on either side is a process closely related to the spread of the state's physical presence. This process restricts the field of political action open to subordinate communities within each state *to* that state. If a subordinate community under threat can simply pack its bags and leave, as it were, it has a freedom of action that a minority group within a modern state only has to a limited extent or does not have at all. Among countless examples for this freedom of action are the Boers in southern Africa during the British occupation of the Cape, or Caucasian Muslims fleeing Russian imperial expansion in the nineteenth century. Modern minorities under threat have fewer options: flight, individually or en masse, can only take them to another nation-state where they may be assimilated to the majority (at best), become an immigrant minority, or remain as stateless refugees (at worst).

Thus, by definition, the modern nation-state form creates the conditions for minorities to emerge. Minorities are not 'foreign' to the nation-state, but

integral to it — hence the fact that many nationalist state-building projects forge a coherent national ‘majority’ by identifying and excluding minorities. And as Benedict Anderson puts it, ‘When the forty-two founding members of the League of Nations assembled in 1920, they inaugurated an era in which the nation became the only internationally legitimate state form’ (Anderson 2001:‘Nationalism’).³ As the example of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* shows, the concept of the ‘minority’ only became fully developed in political thought and international law with the advent of the era of nation-states. The fact that ‘nations’ and ‘peoples’ are intermingled while states cannot be is perhaps the major problem of that era: the existence of some thirty million ‘minority’ citizens in Europe was at the root of the disturbed politics leading to the Second World War (Arendt 1973:Chapter 9). The same historical processes that created minorities (defined as such) in inter-war Europe also created them in the inter-war Levant. Colonial rule in Levantine states was largely irrelevant to the emergence of minorities — all were defined as nation-states — but certainly influenced their development. The remainder of this article traces the continuities and ruptures between the Ottoman and French mandate periods in Syria, demonstrating that the mandate period’s minorities could not simply be mapped onto Ottoman *millets*. Some religious minorities emerge from *millets*, though the nation-state form had transformed their political circumstances. Others had not previously been recognised as *millets*: the *millet* system is relevant to them only insofar as the French understanding of that system led the mandatory authorities to adopt a religiously-based political order. It is *irrelevant* to the emergence of ethnolinguistic minorities. The next section considers the French imperialist understanding of the *millet* system.

In the classical European understanding of the *millet* system, the non-Muslim communities of the Ottoman Empire were divided up according to their religion: Greek Orthodox Christian, Armenian Christian, and Jewish. Each community (*millet*) had political autonomy under the authority of the Patriarch in the first two cases and of the Chief Rabbi in the last. The head of each community was a senior official of the Ottoman administration, resident in Constantinople; the first holders of these posts had been appointed by Mehmet the Conqueror after he took the city in 1453. The *millets* were discrete units that interacted with the state (for example by paying tax) through their religious hierarchies; each had its own communal legal system. There was little interaction between the non-Muslim *millets*, or between them and the Muslim population⁴.

This highly idealised understanding of the system developed at the apogee and under the influence of nineteenth-century European involvement in the Empire and has undergone substantive revision in the last twenty-five years (see *inter alia* Braude and Lewis 1982; Göcek 1993; Valensi 1997; *Encyclopedia of Islam* 1999: ‘Millet’; Makdisi 2000; Masters 2001). Under the ideal of the *millet* system, religion was the main marker of identity, religious law was paramount, and religious hierarchies wielded temporal authority over the non-Muslim communities on the Sultan’s behalf. These three phenomena were probably never as prevalent in practice as in theory, but the ideal crystallised just as they began to wane in favour of ethnic/national identities, secular law, and the secularisation of political authority.

For the purposes of this article, however, the important point about the classical ideal of the *millet* system outlined above is the (hardly neutral) understanding that French officials under the mandate brought to Syria: that religion divided society into mutually suspicious communities and that religious identities trumped all others. ‘Each community is a little people, jealous of its personality, which has its chief, national and religious at the same time; they are so many nations, and in effect they carry that name⁵’ (Haut Commissariat de la République Française 1922:53). Therefore, the political order they imposed followed religious lines. The French authorities followed Ottoman precedent in breaking down the population by religion in censuses, but they also imposed new divisions. Syrian society reacted in unexpected ways.

The emergence of minorities in Syria took place within the framework of a new nation-state form created by the Allied powers after the First World War. This state and France’s role in it derived legally from article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant, which enshrined the principle of ‘mandates’. Clause 4 states that:

Certain communities formerly belonging to the Turkish Empire have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognised subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone.⁶

The mandate thus simultaneously justified French occupation *and* legitimated Syrian nationalism, which, developing from pre-war Arabism, was already a rising force. James Gelvin has shown how the Emir Faysal’s short-lived regime attempted to mobilise the population using a nationalism defined from above, while in Syria’s larger cities a popular nationalism with rather

different priorities emerged (Gelvin 1997:1998). This national feeling was not universal, but was sufficiently dynamic to represent the main challenge to French rule. Colonial rule provided a rallying-point for nationalism even as colonial policies undermined it, and the nation-state form in itself encouraged nationalism even if Syrian nationalism felt cramped by the borders imposed in the post-World War I peace settlements. Within those borders, the emergence of minorities (as opposed to *millets*) was inevitable. But even without the Sykes-Picot agreement and the French mandate, a Syrian nation-state of some form would still have appeared with its own borders, nationalism, and 'minorities', to seek the recognition of the League of Nations, as the example of Republican Turkey suggests.

To secure its position in Syria, France is usually said to have employed a policy of 'divide and rule' where the divisions exploited followed communal lines. Specifically, France cultivated links with *minority groups* in order to offset the opposition of the *majority* (Khoury 1987:58; Provence 2005:50).⁷ Although partially correct, this analysis is unsatisfactory. 'Minorities' were not just lying around waiting for the French to pick them up, so to speak. Rather, they emerged through the agency of their members as much as anything else. Nor did French officials apply the term 'minority' to every community that claimed it. Describing French policy as 'divide and rule' obscures sharp differences in how the French authorities sought to instrumentalise different communities and how those communities mobilised themselves.

For reasons that will become clear in the course of this analysis, the French emphasised religious divisions, exploiting Syria's ethnolinguistic divisions in a less extensive, less formalised way. Despite the new, explicitly national framework of the Syrian state, the French attempted to concretise religious divisions. This was achieved by distributing seats to representative bodies on religious communal grounds, extending legal autonomy in matters of personal status to communities which had not previously been autonomous, and granting administrative autonomy to certain religiously-defined groups. What remained of the Ottoman *millet* system was extended, as the French understood it. This policy adhered to the colonial theories of Marshal Lyautey whose principle of *association* as opposed to *assimilation* had been developed in Morocco (Khoury 1987:55-57; Scham 1970). Rather than attempting to assimilate Syrian society to French norms, the mandatory authorities would rule by *association* with that society, through native governments and laws. Ottoman legal reforms since the mid-nineteenth century had reduced legal distinctions between Muslim and non-Muslim subjects, but in the area of personal status law religious distinctions still remained (Yapp 1987:112-114). The continued competence of communal

religious courts in this area was ensured by Article 6 of the mandate charter, including the line ‘Respect for the personal status of the various peoples and their religious interests shall be fully guaranteed’. On this basis, personal status law was crucial to French efforts to divide Syria’s communities religiously.

Examples are numerous. Before the French mandate officially began, the High Commission established separate ‘Alawi religious courts on the basis of a judgment from an amenable Muslim legal scholar which maintained that the ‘Alawis were not heretical Muslims but a distinct religious community (al-Hakim 1983:53). In 1936, a later High Commissioner, Damien de Martel, issued a decree on religious law requiring the communities to submit their own communal statute for governmental approval, based on their religious texts and traditions (*Arrêté no. 60/L.R.*, 13 March 1936). This remained in abeyance due to Sunni Muslim opposition. Nevertheless, French efforts to formalise the position of religious communities continued even when the community was so small that it had no religious authorities competent enough to draw up its own communal law, as was the case with the Isma‘ilis.⁸

This policy of extending, rather than reducing, the religious divisions of Ottoman law derived from the French authorities’ religious understanding of Syrian society, which was itself influenced by France’s historical links with the Christian communities. Maintaining these communities as client groups and justifying the separation of a Lebanese state dominated by Maronite Christians from the rest of the mandate territories required a system of political organisation that kept them distinct from the rest of the population. Since the main Christian communities were Arabic-speakers, this implied choosing a religiously-ordered organisation. But when the French tried to order Syrian society along religious lines, the various Syrian ‘minorities’ — religious and other — did not react as planned. Their reactions were governed by the transformation to a nation-state form. I will group these communities into four main categories: non-arabophone Sunni Muslim communities; Arabic-speakers belonging to (broadly) Muslim, but not Sunni, religious communities; arabophone Christians; and non-arabophone Christian refugees. I will refer to the Syrian nationalist press of the period to give ‘minorities’ the necessary context of a ‘majority’, showing how a majority in formation both reacted to and acted on the formation of minorities.

Within the Syrian Arab nation-state, Syria’s Sunni Muslim community split along ethnolinguistic lines. The Sunni Muslim Arabs who dominated Syria’s cities and towns were the mainstream of the nationalist movement: the national ‘majority’. While this majority may have taken *itself* for granted, it

should not be taken as such by historians, as Sunni Muslim Arabs were not an overwhelming majority in the mandate territories as a whole. Despite the French conception of religion as the main marker of identity, it was probably easier for arabophone religious minorities to join that majority than it was for non-arabophone Sunni Muslim groups such as the Circassians, Kurds, and Turks to do so. In an editorial written early in the mandate period, the (Christian) newspaper editor Yusuf al-‘Issa proposes the adoption of the Prophet’s birthday — the *Arab* Prophet’s birthday — as a national holiday which would rally the entire nation, that is, ‘all the arabophone communities’. Moreover, Syria should follow Republican Turkey’s example by inculcating a national identity through state education. The barriers to unity are regarded as not too serious in Syria, because ‘our country contains only one, Arab, stock’ (*Alif Bâ’*:27 October 1923).⁹ To find a national identity capable of overcoming religious divisions, al-‘Issa adopted an ethnolinguistic definition of nationality that excludes non-Arabic-speakers and in fact denies their existence on Syrian soil.

But such communities did exist, and having been transformed into ‘minorities’ within a nation-state form, they had to negotiate their relationship with the national ‘majority’, even if the identity of that majority was still uncertain. One factor governing this relationship was the extent to which minorities were identified with external actors. For the small and dispersed Circassian community, as with Syria’s Christians, the relevant external actor was France. Other external actors mattered more to the larger Sunni Muslim ethnolinguistic minorities: for the Kurds, the Kurdish minorities of neighbouring states; for the Turkish-speakers of Alexandretta, the Turkish Republic.

Some members of these new ethnolinguistic minorities took the language of the League of Nations seriously. Having understood their changed position, within a decade of the French occupation they began pushing for political representation and international guarantees of their rights as national minorities analogous to those of Central and Eastern Europe. But ‘the High Commission has always refused to consent to the organisation of a Kurdish minority as elsewhere to the organisation of any other ethnic minority¹⁰’. Some Circassians had requested the recognition of their political rights as a ‘minority’ by 1928, if not earlier.¹¹ Such demands troubled the French, who were unwilling to acknowledge ethnolinguistic minorities within the *religious* majority. The High Commissioner’s Delegate to the *Contrôle Général des Wakfs* clarified France’s position:

Under the name ‘communities’ are generally designated groupings of individuals of the same religion and the same rite... This definition of communities evidently excludes any other grouping whose individuals are united by links other than confessional links (community of religion and of rite).

The Tcherkess [Circassians] are of Sunni Muslim religion (Hanafite rite) and cannot, from the confessional point of view, form a distinct community.¹²

The Circassians *could*, he wrote, be considered as an ‘ethnic minority’ *if* international law gave them this status and they had specific common interests to defend. However, he preferred to adopt ‘in the political order’ a religious classification, as ‘resolving without difficulty the problem of representation of the minorities or the distribution of seats in the representative assemblies’.

Such a religious distribution of political power, with a guaranteed proportion of representation reserved for the *religious* minorities, favoured France’s Christian clients. Allowing Circassian representation as an ethnic minority would have invalidated that religious distribution of power. Syrian identities were in flux at this time, and many French and Christian writers asserted or assumed that religious boundaries implied ethnic, or even ‘racial’, boundaries, stating for example that the administrative division of Syria had been ‘imposed...by the populations concerned, who are separated by rivalries of race as well as their religious beliefs.’¹³ But such assertions were made to *reinforce* the religious division of society, not for their own sake. An ethnolinguistic division of society would subsume the mainly Arabic-speaking Christians within a group dominated by Sunni Muslim Arabs, the most ‘nationalist’ community, imperilling the religious conception of Syrian society that justified both the French presence and the separate status of Lebanon, where France’s interests and clients were concentrated. When Kurds — members of a much larger, less dispersed community than the Circassians — requested autonomy for the regions they inhabited, the threat was greater: their claim to a state menaced not only the religious order France had imposed, but also Syrian Arab nationalism and the nationalisms of neighbouring states. Turkey, particularly, put constant pressure on the High Commissioner to ensure that no such autonomy be granted.¹⁴

The French reluctance to recognise ethnolinguistic minorities officially did not preclude the exploitation of ethnolinguistic divisions, for example by recruiting Circassian squadrons for the *Troupes du Levant*.¹⁵ This policy,

which extended also to Armenians from the refugee community, had a (deliberately) damaging effect on communal relations. In Ulfat al-Idilbi's semi-autobiographical novel *Dimashq ya basmat al-huzn*, such recruits are described as 'mercenaries, who had lived by the goodness of this nation then turned against its people and joined the enemy' (al-Idilbi 1989:190). The character speaking these words, like the author, belongs to the Damascene Sunni Muslim community that saw itself as the mainstream of Syrian nationalism.

The Ottoman Empire did not recognise divisions within Islam, so the other Muslim communities of Syria, notably the Druzes and the 'Alawis, had never been officially recognized as *millets*. But living in areas relatively remote from the urban centres of political life in Syria, they were accustomed to running their own affairs subject to fluctuating levels of state interference. They can therefore be regarded as 'unofficial' *millets*: religiously-demarcated communities exercising a large measure of autonomy, sometimes with official toleration (Schaebler 1998:336-339 for the Druzes). These groups are often described as 'compact minorities' (Rabinovich 1979; Khoury 1987:Chapter 20) because their geographical concentration enabled the French to set them apart in statelets of their own. Because this was done along religious lines, it reinforced rather than threatened the religious conception of Syrian society. But calling these communities 'minorities' prior to Syria's independence is problematic. In the French mandate period they are rarely identified as such by themselves or the French, and the term does not fully explain their relationship with either the French authorities or Syrian Arab nationalism.

At the time of the 1936 treaty negotiations, the High Commission received and forwarded to Paris and the League of Nations numerous telegrams and statements from inhabitants of the 'Alawi statelet both for and against its reversion to Syria. These separatist petitions generally avoid the terminology of minorities, instead simply requesting autonomy, sometimes as a community and often without further specifications. One of the rare petitions that *does* use the term 'minority' came from 'Alawi and Christian members of the region's representative council. It states that

the populations of this government belong to different Communities, each one having its beliefs, traditions, and distinct customs. *Relative to Syria as a whole*, they constitute minorities that cannot and do not wish to be incorporated into Syrian Unity in any way.¹⁶

Rather than considering themselves as minorities, they are trying to avoid *becoming* minorities by their incorporation into a larger Syrian state.

This stands in marked contrast to the Christian communities, who by this time had wholeheartedly adopted the language of minorities (see below). The difference, I propose, lies in the geography. The *millet* system had never had territorial implications and for the Christian communities of Syria (Lebanon apart), it never would. But the Druzes and the 'Alawis, while considering themselves as separate communities for religious reasons similar to *millets*, were also attached to territorial units. Their geographical concentration had obtained for them separate statelets: an institutional framework within which they could mobilise as a majority, with no more reason to consider themselves a 'minority' than Scots in Scotland. The Syrian judge and politician Yusuf al-Hakim, who was from the 'Alawi region and was involved in attempts to re-incorporate it into Syria, frequently refers to the 'Alawis as a majority, '*akthariyya*', in his memoirs (al-Hakim 1983). The French, preoccupied with the Christians, also preferred not to consider Muslim but non-Sunni communities as 'minorities', though they might consider them as separate communities (i.e. as *millets*). And obviously, nationalist Druzes and 'Alawis considered themselves to be not 'minorities' but part of the Syrian Arab *majority*. Whether they were motivated by a desire to maintain majority status in an autonomous state (albeit aware of the prospect of *becoming* a minority in a unified Syria), or to assert membership of a wider national majority, simply describing these communities as 'minorities' is unsatisfactory. It also occludes diverse political opinions within them, and risks implying either that a Syrian nation-state with a coherent majority already existed at the beginning of the French mandate or that the incorporation of these communities into a Syrian nation-state as minorities was inevitable. These are both somewhat shaky propositions.

When Druzes, 'Alawis and other members of other Arabic-speaking communities outside the Sunni Muslim mainstream of Syrian Arab nationalism adopted that nationalism themselves, French imperialism did not necessarily respond by asserting that these communities were 'minorities'. The 1925-27 nationalist revolt saw many Druzes take up arms under the banner of Syrian nationalism, provoking two distinct responses in imperialist writing. The first targeted nationalism as a whole by subsuming the Druzes into a Muslim majority motivated by sectarian hatred (de Beauplan 1929:53), itself sometimes subsumed to the global Muslim community (Froidevaux 1925). In both cases, they were not authentically nationalist. The second *did* assert the primordial separateness of the Druzes: their nationalism was again inauthentic, created by a few feudal chiefs with outside (British and/or Sharifian) encouragement (Andréa 1937:51-56; Provence 2005:Chapters 2 and 3). Yet, even this strand did not necessarily claim that

the Druzes were a ‘minority’ as this term continued to be used sparingly by French imperialist writers.

When Druzes or ‘Alawis adopted anti-nationalist, separatist, and thus pro-French goals (for their own reasons, or under French pressure), there was no question of subsuming them in a Muslim majority. Separatism among these communities was supported, even if the word ‘minority’ was not often used to justify it. *Opposing* that separatism therefore became crucial for Syrian Arab nationalists. Their responses reflect the transition to the nation-state form.

Nationalists might counter separatism by explaining it, and by arguing for unity. In 1923, *Alif Bâ*’s correspondent in the ‘Alawi statelet ascribed ‘Alawi separatism to government ‘interference’ among their ‘simple’ leaders; less patronisingly, Christians were ‘justified’ in their separatism, fearing they would lose their privileged access to bureaucratic jobs in a unified Syria. But they were mistaken in their desire for separatism, according to the correspondent: ‘they do not look to the long term’ and see how unity would benefit everyone, for example, through the development of Lattakia as a port serving all of Syria (*Alif Bâ*:19 April 1923).

More frequently, the benefits of unity to local populations are not explained; their wishes are simply overridden. In 1933, an editorial in *al-Qabas* demanded the reincorporation of the Druzes and ‘Alawi statelets and the reversion of the port of Tripoli (Lebanon) and of the railway leading there to Syria. This demand occurred not because local residents wanted unity, which many in fact *did*, but because the Syrian nation demanded it: ‘We will not accept that they [the French] enclose us between the desert and the sea’ (reprinted in al-Rayyis 1994 vol 2:539–543). Still, at least some reason is given for unification here, albeit a *raison de nation*. At other times, nationalist writings simply declare the territory in question to be part of Syria, eternally and non-negotiably, an approach epitomised by the incantatory phrase ‘the return of [the region] to its mother Syria.’ With variations, this is a commonplace of nationalist writings about administratively separated regions. Yusuf al-Hakim uses it dozens of times in his memoirs, referring to the ‘Alawi statelet and Alexandretta (al-Hakim 1983). He was not alone with his statement. Such language works to efface the population of the regions concerned. By making no argument, it is unarguable.

The question of separatism reveals much about the transition to the nation-state form. Nationalist responses to separatism are not really aimed at separatists: they intend, rather, to promote a sense of territorial nationalism

among the mainstream, *assuming* the existence of a majority and its right to impose its authority. The emergence of such a ‘majority’ consciousness might easily stimulate a ‘minority’ consciousness in communities outside the mainstream, which, in a circular process, would create its own impression on majority attitudes. But ‘minority’ is not the only category that explains separatism. The supposedly minoritarian demands of ‘Alawis and Druzes for autonomy, against paying taxes to Damascus and for posts in the local bureaucracy are echoed in regionalist mobilisations with no minoritarian aspect, as exemplified in Hawran. They reveal more about the expansion of state power within the nation-state form than about primordial identities. ‘Minority’ is important not because minorities as political groupings have particular demands *a priori*, but rather because the category lends itself to political mobilisation and, once adopted, is unusually resilient.

The next section considers those communities that, unlike the Kurds or Circassians, *were* wholeheartedly claimed by the French as minorities and, unlike the Druzes and the ‘Alawis, *did* apply that term to themselves: the Christian communities that had already possessed communal legal status as *millets* in the Ottoman period.

Although this article contends that ‘minorities’ are *not* equivalent to ‘millets’, French officials were most comfortable when that equivalence could be made. The same applied to many Syrian Christians, especially the religious hierarchies, who accepted the continuation and rigidification of the *millet* system. Indeed, they acted perhaps more than ever before according to the ideal of the system: the clergy provided almost the only political leadership of these communities to leave a trace in the French archival sources I have so far read. While this may reveal more about which correspondence the High Commission took seriously enough to keep than about the realities of political organisation among Syria’s Christians, it is obvious enough that the French preferred to use religion to structure their relationship with these communities. Of course, this also permitted them and their Christian allies to marginalise the (many) Christians who were *not* hostile to nationalism.

This policy suited the historic justification for French involvement in the Ottoman Empire: the protection of the Christian communities. This, however, sat uneasily with the secular nation-state form and the philosophy of the League of Nations. In line with that philosophy, the French therefore came to recast their present purpose *and* past involvement in Syria as being for the protection of ‘minorities’. Pro-French Christians did the same. But behind this terminological shift lay the same preoccupation with Christians, as the term ‘minorities’ is frequently a synonym for ‘Christian [and sometimes

Jewish] communities.' This is clear in the 1930s, when attempts were made to negotiate a Franco-Syrian treaty granting Syrian independence but securing French interests. At this time, the debate about 'minorities' reached its height. The issue was a crucial and sticky one in the negotiations. France and some of the new minoritarians had an interest in emphasising minority divisions to justify continuing French involvement. Christian clergymen such as Monsignor Ignace Nouri wrote to the High Commissioner de Martel to demand continued French protection of the minorities, 'that is to say, of the Christians and Jews.'¹⁷ His letter also gives an extremely partial account of the treatment of Syria's (Christian) 'minorities' in history, a typical projection into the past of this modern category. De Martel's comment to the New York Times, meanwhile, that France was in Syria to protect its 'Christian elements' elicited protests from Christian nationalists in Aleppo.¹⁸

Externally guaranteed 'protection' for minorities was no more welcome to Syrian nationalists than to the new states of Europe whose recognition by the League of Nations was conditional on their signing of 'minorities treaties'. It represented an infringement of national sovereignty, and, in the Syrian case, an obvious excuse for permanent French interference. In a 1932 editorial discussing the pretexts for British and French involvement in the Middle East, Najib al-Rayyis summed it up in a few words: 'As for Syria, always minorities' (reprinted in al-Rayyis 1994 vol 1:225-229). But nationalists too preferred to restrict the term to former *millets*. Extending it to other communities (the Kurds, say), even to deny its applicability, was not in their interest.

The question remains as to why the Christian hierarchies, having adopted a new term ('minorities') that suited the times and qualified them for international protection, continued to act as *millets*. The following suggestions are speculative, but I hope plausible. First, as well as legitimating France's presence in the Levant, the religious conception of society strengthened the Christian communities as privileged clients of France in the eyes of some Christians at least. Second, the political significance of the religious hierarchies would likely dwindle in a national (as opposed to religious) state. Many clergymen disliked the transition to secular authority within their communities, a process that had begun long before, and now sought to arrest it (Masters 2001). Not all Christians, not even all clergymen, were hostile to nationalism: the Greek Orthodox, especially, seem to have asserted their place within a Syrian Arab nation (Khoury 1987:425). Perhaps because of this, mandate officials often called them 'cousins of Islam'¹⁹. At the height of the minorities controversy, in 1936, a senior French official in Damascus complained that the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Alexandros III Tahan had visited nationalist

leaders and ‘allowed himself to say that he “didn’t understand all the noise being made over the question of minorities; we’re all Arabs and we don’t need any special protection except that of the common laws in an Arab country.”’²⁰ But Tahan was untypical. Many Christian clergymen held onto a religious political order that preserved their own influence, adopting the new term ‘minority’ to help do so at the risk of excluding their communities from the ‘majority’ in formation.

High Commissioner Damien de Martel understood that risk. In July 1937, he related to Paris his recent meeting with the apostolic delegate, Monsignor Leprêtre, and the Syrian Catholic Monsignor Tappouni. They had discussed the relatively light-handed protection of minorities guaranteed by the 1936 treaty:

[T]hese intelligent prelates willingly recognise that the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire has put the question of minorities onto quite new bases. Within an empire composed of heterogeneous nationalities, the Christian communities were able to constitute themselves as ‘nations’ and benefit from a foreign protection the principle of which was not contested. But on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire states with a national basis have created themselves, whose patriotism risks being all the stormier for being younger ... The traditional mission of protector of minorities [*sic*] that France has assumed for centuries has become, because of this fact, much more complex. By protecting them too assertively or too strictly, or by seeming to take their presence as a pretext for hindering the development of national sentiment, France would have risked making its protégés into foreign bodies condemned to exodus or massacre on the day when international complications prevented her from defending the threatened minorities effectively.²¹

But even de Martel still refers only to *religious* minorities despite understanding the ‘national’ root of the problem. He lets France off lightly: the French had already placed the minorities at risk, not by ‘protecting them too assertively’, but by using them as a justification for occupation and exploiting them as a political (and military) tool against the majority.

Lest it appear from the above that the French in Syria were only interested in ‘minorities’ as a political tool, it should be noted that humanitarian

concern was genuine. The refugee communities — Armenians, and later Assyro-Chaldeans fleeing Iraq — were a worrying reminder of the fate of national minorities in an era of nation-states: settling them in Syria was not a purely self-interested attempt to create loyal clients and undermine nationalism. To illustrate the link between the formation of minorities and the formation of a majority, the final part of this article considers the treatment in the nationalist press of refugee communities and ‘minorities’ generally. This treatment ranges from outright hostility to seeming accommodation.

Articles warning of the threat posed by Armenian refugees are easy to find. One such article was published in *al-Yawm* under the title ‘The Armenian national home. Is it a fantasy or a reality?’ ominously echoing the Balfour declaration’s support for a ‘Jewish national home’ in Palestine and perhaps demonstrating why nationalists had reason to be fearful. The article’s purpose, however, is more than merely xenophobic. When the writer lists the ‘thick line’ of villages along the Syrian-Turkish border being taken over by Armenians, he implants a notion of their ‘Syrianness’ in the reader’s mind, propagating a geographical definition of the nation at a time when the delineation of that border was only just being completed. The Armenians’ success, he argues, derives from their ‘solidarity and hard work’, which he contrasts with the ‘laziness, lack of solidarity, and ignorance’ of Syrian Arabs. He explicitly uses the real or imagined threat posed by a minority community as a tool for raising national consciousness among the ‘majority’ (*al-Yawm*: 14 October 1931).

Non-refugee minorities could also be victims of hostility. But nationalists often spoke more reassuringly of these minorities, by which, as noted above, they usually meant Christian communities. One article, under the subheading ‘Syria protects minorities and deserves independence’, highlighted the double standards of the mandatory powers that denied independence to Syria, which had ‘demonstrated in all circumstances her protection of minorities’, while working to grant membership of the League of Nations (i.e. full recognition as an independent nation-state) to Turkey, ‘the state which exterminated the Armenians, who are “minorities”’ (*al-Ayyâm*: 26 January 1933). Such claims, however, are not primarily intended to reassure the minorities that an independent Syria will protect them. As the subheading of the article indicates, their main purpose is to defend the nationalist project. Syria’s independence, not the protection of minorities, is the endpoint. The article addresses an indignant nationalist public more than it addresses ‘minorities’. Sometimes nationalists preferred not to give minorities even this much recognition, subsuming them instead into the majority. This is an approach

summed up by the headline ‘There are no *peoples* in Syria: there is one Arab people’, though the article that follows is rather more ambiguous. But again, this claim is most often made by a representative of the self-declared ‘majority’; the minorities are not necessarily asked their opinion. The same article states that “‘Majority rule’ is a self-evident and incontrovertible matter’ (*al-Muqtasas*:24 February 1927).

In all these cases, we see how nationalist responses to the question of minorities have as much to do with the construction of a majority as with minorities *per se*. Equally, writings about the majority by members of minorities often have a political content aimed at the minority: a clergyman like Mgr Nouri who warned of Muslim hostility to Christians, was trying to mobilise political support among Christians, not persuade Muslims to be nice.

This article has attempted to show how the formation of ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ consciousness in post-Ottoman Syria was one larger process, intimately linked with the development of the nation-state form through issues including separatism, borders, language, national holidays, and education in an international system ordered by the League of Nations. It has also attempted to outline some of the complexities inherent in the study of ‘minorities’. The Syrian case is not unique in either respect, offering rich material for comparison with other states within and beyond the formerly colonised world: the nation-state form is today the standard state form everywhere. Nor were minorities particularly mistreated in Syria after independence despite anti-nationalist (and some nationalist) propaganda during the French mandate. There was no equivalent, for example, of the deportation and extermination of French Jews.

Understanding how nation-states create minorities is necessary to understand that form, not least because it is the key to understanding how a *majority* is created. The viability of a ‘nation-state’ rests on the state’s ability to persuade (or force) enough of its population to *act* as if it is a nation-state. This process is often fraught, not only in Syria’s case but in most if not all ‘nation-states’ (Zisser 2006). It depends on the shifting relationship between minorities and majorities, categories that cannot be taken for granted. By imposing a conceptual category such as ‘minority’ on a society, we may obscure more than we reveal, losing sight of how the social and political groups these categories describe appeared and developed. In doing so, we grant the ‘nation’ a power, in retrospect, that it did not have at the time and gained only through long and painful effort.

Notes

¹ Oxford English Dictionary online; *Le Robert dictionnaire historique de la langue française*.

² On representative government in the era of nationalism, see Kedourie 1988.

³ The reference work containing this entry by Anderson also contains the following baffling entry: 'MINORITIES'. See 'RACE AND RACISM'—which shows how confused the categories of 'minority' and 'race' are.

⁴ The term *millet* can also refer to Muslims, but by the nineteenth century this was not normal usage.

⁵ 'Nation' here is likely a translation of *millet*.

⁶ *De facto* the Mandates pre-dated the League, having been granted to Britain and France at San Remo in 1920 by the chief Allied powers—i.e., Britain and France.

⁷ For reasons of space I use the shorthand terms 'France', 'the French'—acknowledging the risk of implying a (non-existent) unity of opinion and action among mandate officials and/or the French 'nation'.

⁸ de Martel to MAE, 19 April 1938. MAE-N/SL box 494. Dossier 'Traité Franco-Syrien – Application – Question des minorités'.

⁹ To avoid repetition, multiple quotations from one newspaper article have one reference. All emphasis is added.

¹⁰ MAE-N/SL box 571, dossier *La question des Kurdes en Syrie. Correspondance. Les Comités Kurdes*. HC's assistant delegate for Aleppo vilayet to HC, 16 May 1930.

¹¹ MAE-N/SL, box 568, dossier *Tcherkess*, subdossier *Armement des villages tcherkess de Boueidan, Blei, Bourak*. HC's delegate to State of Syria (Veber) to HC's delegate to Contrôle Général des Wakfs, 23 February 1928 (*très secret*).

¹² This and following quotations are taken from *Note* (2 March 1928) by HC's delegate to Contrôle Général des Wakfs are in the same location as the above letter. The use here of 'ethnic minority' precedes *Le Robert*'s first cited instance.

¹³ *Note sur la situation politique dans le Levant* [1924], SHAT, box 4 H 122, dossier 1.

¹⁴ Much evidence of this can be found in MAE-N/SL, boxes 571, 1054, 1055.

¹⁵ SHAT 4H box 261: Dossier 1: *Historique du Groupement d'escadrons légers du Levant, 1922-1926*

¹⁶ MAE-N/SL box 410, untitled folder. Schœffler (Governor of Lattakia) to Meyrier (Delegate General of HC), 4 April 1936—copy of statement accompanying letter. Emphasis added.

¹⁷ MAE-N/SL box 493, dossier 'Traité Franco-Syrien. Minorités. Sous-dossiers.' Nouri to HC, 7 August 1936. Nouri was Patriarchal Vicar of the Syrian Catholics.

¹⁸ MAE-N/SL box 494, dossier: *La question des minorités à la suite de l'évolution du problème syrien*. Enclosed with *Information n° 214*, Sûreté Générale, Aleppo 3 March 1936.

¹⁹ Private papers of Albert Zurayq, kindly made available to me by Souheil Chebat.

²⁰ MAE-N/SL box 493, dossier *Traité Franco-Syrien. Minorités. Sous-dossiers*. Meyrier to MAE, 8 May 1936.

²¹ De Martel to MAE (7 July 1937). MAE-N/SL box 494, dossier *Traité Franco-Syrien – Application – Question des Minorités*.

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Benjamin White is a doctoral student in modern history at St Antony's College, Oxford, and is currently an associate researcher at the Institut Français du Proche-Orient (IFPO), Damascus. He is working on the relationship between Syrian society and the ideologies of French imperialism and Syrian Arab nationalism at the time of the French mandate.