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Final Essay #1

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Islamist Organizations and Middle Eastern States

In “What is Political Islam?”, Charles Hirschkind shows how Islamists compete with the states in the Middle East for their ability and range of social influence. Typically, people would think of Islamists as subversive and disruptive, while the states are treated with acceptance and understanding. Both Charles Hirschkind and Darryl Li challenges this description. In this paper, I will argue that the emergence of ISIS is quite similar to that of a nation state, and that the Middle Eastern governments are controlling the lives of people just like Islamist organizations do, including ISIS and Muslim Brotherhood.

In “A Jihadism Anti-Primer,” Li examines how ISIS have risen and grown, especially the underlying political conditions. Li claims that the emergence of ISIS is facilitated by “the wake of not one but two adjacent and prolonged processes of partial state collapse” (16). He is referring to the disintegration of Iraq and Syria, where Iraq is yet to recover from the 2003 US occupation, and Syria government is forced to focus on the extended civil war. Since both have recently been intervened by Western forces, their power to control the peripheral regions is also on the decline. ISIS takes advantage of their infrastructural administration to quickly establish itself, and then skillfully maneuvers to transfer foreign soldiers and supplies between Iraq and Syria. Through this effort, ISIS develops into the conjuncture and becomes a state-like Islamist organization.

The typical narrative for Islamists like ISIS and Muslim Brotherhood is that they compete for political power under the cover of Islam, and that they are groups that employ militant violence to achieve their traditional, religious objectives. Hirschkind investigates and challenges this idea. He argues that though the Islamists’ attempt to gain acknowledgement and influence has been regarded as disruptions to the states, it is inaccurate to view the governments just as protectors of peace either; states have utilized forceful coercion and extensive tortures to accomplish their goals. For example, schools in Egypt have their curriculum determined by the state, and that most activities have to “subject to restrictions imposed by the state” (Hirschkind 14). In other words, Hirschkind claims that people’s personal lives are controlled and governed by the state, and those requirements are no less restricting than that of the Islamists. He asserts that whenever a religious action – like refusing to accept vaccination – violates the state regulation – on public health, in this case – it is considered as a political act. Islamist organizations’ attempts are not different since they are also attempting to challenge the state authority with religious appeals. The Islamists are trying to mold people’s lives into another way – a traditional, religious lifestyle – that is not inferior to the state-determined way of life. To do so, they have to vie for political power and control. Hirschkind reminds his audience that it is careless to just accept the restrictions imposed by the state, judging Islamists as disruptive and intolerant to their lives on that basis. The two are similar in the perspective that they’re just competing for social influence.

Moreover, Darryl Li’s argument supports and extends Hirschkind’s challenge to the typical narrative of Islamists. Specifically, he holds the Middle Eastern states responsible for their violence, critiquing that such state violence has led to the emergence of groups that claim to be jihadists. For instance, he contends that Taliban in Afghanistan and the Islamic Counts Union in Somalia have “emerged in situations where prolonged civil war led to a near-collapse of state institutions” (Li 15). These examples show that the loss of state control over certain areas has resulted in the rising of jihadism groups, and that it is important to notice, the civil wars weren’t caused by jihadists; instead, it’s the state should be responsible – at least partly – for such violence and chaos in the region. As a result, it is inaccurate to accuse jihadists as disruptive.

Both Li and Hirschkind challenge the common perspective of treating Islamists as terrorists using militant violence. They inspect the similarity between the state and the Islamists, since the two parties are essentially competing for control over people’s lives in the social and religious aspects. Hirschkind has shown the rivalry, and Li furthers the discussion by critiquing the state violence and explaining the political conditions by which ISIS have surfaced and established itself.

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Various Narratives of Christianity in the Middle East

There are three types of analytical framing that focus on the different aspects of the lives of Middle Eastern Christianity, which are national unity and coexistence, sectarian divide, as well as persecution due to Western influence. In this essay, I will argue that the these narratives are in juxtaposition for people from various backgrounds and political conditions.

It is important to first distinguish between the three narratives. The national unity theme describes the peaceful coexistence between Christianity and Islam, where Christians emphasize on establishing a sense of belonging to their country. The account on sectarianism provides an opposing view as it focuses on the clash between the Christian minority and Muslim majority groups in Middle East, and that Christians demand equality in both rights and respect. Last but not least, the persecution of Christians stem from their perceived connection with Europe and the United States, which have been colonializing the Middle East as well as providing aid to Christians in the region. Muslims are jealous of such Western support, so some Islamist organizations condemn and persecute Middle Eastern Christians, even though they are indigenous to the land. These three accounts are not separate; instead, they are demonstrated under different circumstances and believed by different groups of people.

In *The Baghdad Eucharist*, Sinan Antoon depicts how the three themes interact with each other, and that people who believe in different narratives have distinct views on the society. Maha and her uncle, Youssef, argue over the status of Christianity in Iraq, and they have divided opinions that symbolize the three narratives aforementioned. Youssef, who has grown up in the era during which Iraq declared a republic and nationalized all its resource – and thus, greatly boosted its economy – believes in the national unity. He has also been friends with Nasim, a Jew, and Salem, a Muslim, since his teenage years. This interfaith friendship helps explain Youssef’s optimism and his conviction of national unity. Thus, when Tariq Aziz, the Christian former foreign minister, was sentenced to death after the 2003 US occupation of Iraq, Youssef doesn't treats the event as a persecution of Christians; he tells Maha that people of all religions are being killed, and they should believe in “the cycle of history,” waiting for the situation to go back to normal in the near future (Antoon 16). Maha, however, was born in the era of war and sanctions, so she views the incidents as a result of the sectarian divide between Christians and Muslims. Moreover, Maha and her husband, Luay, are seeking the chance to depart Iraq for Canada as soon as she finishes her medical degree. The only reason for her to stay in Iraq is to earn her degree so that she doesn't need to start over, and she concludes that her “halcyon days were yet to come… in Canada, far from death, far from car bombs, far from all the hatred coursing through people’s veins” (Antoon, 115). She is certainly not the only Christian who are planning to leave; in fact, her family has already departed from Iraq. Those who have emigrated avoid the trouble of being perceived as being related to the West, and thus, being persecuted by the Islamist organizations. It is obvious that characters like Youssef and Maha represent the distinct framings of Iraqi Christians and Middle Eastern Christians as a whole. Youssef, reminiscing about the enjoyable past, trusts that the perils are temporary, and that all Iraqis, regardless of faith, would stay united under nationalism. Nonetheless, Maha regards the danger and conflicts as symbols of Christians being unwelcome in Iraq. Furthermore, Maha’s experience represents the third narrative. Her fellow Muslim students made rude comments assuming that her life as a Christian follows the Western model and is very different from the Muslim Iraqis. She also argues against posts on Facebook that accuse “Christians of collaborating and helping the occupation forces” (Bandak 89). From her perspective, people make those false assertions just because Christians work with the American army, neglecting the fact that there are also a number of Muslims who worked with – even supported – the American intervention, which directly leads to the occupation. Maha find the Muslims negligent and cynical, so she doesn't believe in the possibility of resolving the sectarian strife. She views the persecution and discrimination as a result of sectarianism – potentially due to the perceived connection between Christians and the West – and plans for the migration to Canada for she feels targeted by Muslims as a Christian due to the US occupation in 2003.

Even family members like Youssef and Maha have drastically different views on Christianity in Iraq; the three narratives definitely coexist, and they are negotiated through a claim of territory and legitimacy.

In “Of Refrains and Rhythms in Contemporary Damascus,” Andreas Bandak depicts how Syrian Christians reinforce the sense of national unity for their own sake. Since the Syrian civil war that began in 2011, Christians and Muslims have been in conflict due to their perceived support for the opposing sides as well as the involvement of foreign forces, particularly the West, which the Christians have seen to be related to.

In addition, the competition for land between Christianity and Islam has led to friction between the two groups. Compared to the majority Muslims, Christians, as a minority, are more susceptible to such sectarian conflicts. Thus, Christians focus on demonstrating that they believe in being citizens of Syria first and then Christians to uphold their claim of existence. For example, they would carry out a huge Syrian flag at the front of the processions for their major celebrations. Bandak depicts that Christians stress on their declaration of “Syria as the home for all,” and it is the country where Muslims and Christians “live together like brothers and sisters” (Bandak 257). These signs of loyalty reveal their desire to be treated equally and recognized as being indigenous to the country, rather than a group that tries to steal the land away. Christians highlight the peaceful coexistence in a unified nation – because doing so would help them strengthen the claim of their place in Syria. Yet, the sectarian strife is still evident. Christians pay particular attention to the invasion of Islamic culture, and try to mark their territory with refrains and rhythms. For example, the two Christians who are interviewed by Bandak, George and Tony, make sharp comments regarding a mosque built nearby; they complain that a mosque also serves as a school and a sign for territorial competition. They deem the mosque as unnecessary in a Christian area, and this demonstrates the sectarianism in Syria. Christians respond by shutting all windows and even “put their fingers in their ears” when minarets call Muslims to prayer (Bandak 255). They view the sounds of prayers as a threat to their legitimate place in Syria, so they try their best to avoid it and strengthen themselves through their refrains. During holidays like Christmas and Easter, they decorate their neighborhoods with posters and Christmas trees; they also wear distributed stickers and badges. These symbols help Christians identify their areas in the city so that they could counter the sectarian strife they faced.

Through the argument between Maha and Youssef in *The Baghdad Eucharist*, it is apparent that their conflicting narratives – nationalism, sectarianism, as well as persecution – of Middle Eastern Christianity are in juxtaposition with one another. Bandak, by describing the competition for territory between Muslims and Christians, shows that Christians might pretend to show national unity even though they feel the sectarian strife. These two stories in combination show that Christians in the Middle East from different areas and different backgrounds would frame their lives in the three different facets.

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The Fall of Arab Jews

Both Joel Beinin and Aomar Boum depicts the unwillingness of Arab Jews to leave their country at first. Nonetheless, due to the negligence of these government – sometimes even the cooperation of the Zionists and the state – Jews in Arab nations are gradually pushed out from the nation, and they leave for the state of Israel. In this paper, I will argue that the creation of the state of Israel in their Promised Land is not the only reason why Arab Jews emigrate from their homeland; in fact, their lives have been much worse since they decided, or were forced, to go to Israel.

In “From ‘Little Jerusalems’ to the Promised Land,” Boum interviews Ibrahim, who claims that Jews left because after Morocco gained independence from France, the Moroccans failed to incorporate the Jews. On the other hand, Zionists succeeded in including the Moroccan Jews in the future plans of Israel. Ibrahim regrets losing this group, and he was indignant that the government has failed to acknowledge Jewish contributions during the independence. In addition, Bandak argues for another cause of the emigration. Despite the American aid to the Jewish communities, many rural Jews are living in poverty and have limited access to trading activities, and the economy is a major factor for their journey to Israel. He claims that poor Moroccan Jews believe in being free from economic struggles there. This account gains credit from the fact that Jews who are better off, like Masoud’s family, has stayed. Masoud explains that even though they would frequently celebrate religious festivals in Jerusalem, and that it is “in every Jewish heart,” their family didn't leave to the Promised Land because they didn't want to “leave a place where [they] are kings to another place where [they] will be slaves” (Boum 53). Masoud’s account discredits the fanciful hypothesis that migrating to the state of Israel is the dream of all Jews since it is a place where they’ll be treated equally. It draws out the problem of discrimination between European Jews and Arab Jews. Arab Jews, having merged into the society in the Middle East, has less desire for a Jewish nation than the European Zionists, who view their Arab brethren as filthy but necessary to fight their battles.

In the documentary *Forget Baghdad*, the five Iraqi Jews complain that they have been degraded since the founding of Israel, especially after they are forced to be transported from Iraq into Israel. As Samir Naqqash puts it, the Jews were put on a truck like cows, and when they arrive at the state of Israel, the European Jews who were waiting there sprayed DDT – a toxic pesticide – on them as if these Iraqi Jews have carried bugs and viruses with them. It was an immense humiliation. Moreover, the Arab Jews were treated poorly and unfairly in the allocation of jobs; they were assigned physical labor like forestation even though many of them were thought as intellectuals back in Iraq. Sami Michael, another Jewish interviewee from *Forget Baghdad*, claims that he has known that Zionist isn’t a solution for the Jews, but rather, it would ignite more problems. The narrator and director, Samir, explains that Iraqi Jews has completely integrated into Iraq. Compared to the persecution of Jews in Europe by the European countries, Arab Jews are treated equally and live a rather good life previous to the establishment of Israel. Since then, however, due to the 1948 Arab-Israeli War as well as the assumed connection between Jews and United Nation – which made a decision that was viewed as another colonial attack by the Arab Jews – Middle Eastern Jews start to have a hard time in their homeland. Furthermore, as the Jewish interviewees claim, the bombings of their synagogue have scared them; they felt unwelcome and unsafe in the country, which is another cause for their immigration to the state of Israel.

In addition to *Forget Baghdad*, Boum and Beinin both expand on the idea of Jews fearing for their future and safety as a major reason of leaving their own country. In *The dispersion of Egyptian Jewry*, Beinin reinforces the idea by depicting the suspicion Jews face in Egypt. Since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, Egyptian Jews have been regarded as potential enemies and foreigners to the land. In “From ‘Little Jerusalems’ to the Promised Land,” Boum supports this claim as he states that “the expansion of foreign protection to local Jews was negatively perceived” (63). Just like how Middle Eastern Christians are thought to be connected to the West, Moroccan Jews are perceived as foreigners because the Western forces are more inclined to provide aid to them, compared to the Muslims. This partisanship causes skepticism and resent, which leads to action that disturb the Jews. For instance, Beinin records that within days after the war has begun, around 600 Jews – including Zionists and communists – have been sent to internment camps. He argues that Egyptians Jews as a whole “were held hostage pending the outcome of the Arab-Israeli conflict” in effect (Beinin 63). Due to the restrictions imposed on them and the implications of the conflict, Egyptians Jews struggled to negotiate their connections with Egypt with their religious identity. They didn’t wish to establish a new home at the state of Israel. In fact, they were not the ones who vie for the founding of Israel; Zionists built Israel and start fighting against other Arab countries. Nonetheless, Beinin explains that Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood and Young Egypt organization are unwilling to distinguish the two groups, so they treat the Egyptians Jews as inferior occupiers who intruded the country. Supporters of Young Egypt were even arrested for an attempt to bomb Jewish neighborhoods; Prime Minister al-Nuqrashi imposed martial law upon Egypt, and that exacerbates the situation. Jews are confused whether the country welcomes them or not, and they are losing faith in staying independent from the Zionists and being the arbitrator between the two groups. Their Jewish identity has clashed with their national identity, and they couldn’t find a solution to balance both facets. Due to the fear for their unknown future, a lot of the Egyptian Jews depart for Israel.

The status of Arab Jews have been completely changed since the founding of Israel and the Arab-Israeli War in 1948. Some of them who are living in poverty migrate voluntarily in search for a better life, but most emigrants leave because of the hostility of Islamists and an extended perception of exclusion. Unable to negotiate their national and religious identities as well as being worried about their future and safety, Arab Jews immigrate to the state Israel. Yet, regardless of their reason for departure, they live a worse life in Israel since the European Jews who have founded Israel discriminate against them.