

Politique et minorités au Proche-Orient: Les raisons d'une explosion by Laurent Chabry and Annie Chabry. Paris: *Maisonneuve & Larose*, 1984. Pp.359 FF125 (paper).

As the subtitle indicates, the authors of this book contend that an 'explosion of minorities' (p.323) has taken place in the Middle East. They see it beginning with the Kurdish revolt in Iraq in the 1960s, increasing with civil disturbances in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen through the 1970s, and reaching a climax after 1979, when the ideals of the Islamic revolution in Iran spread contagiously among Shi'is in Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

Unfortunately, Laurent and Annie Chabry explain what they mean by the 'explosion of minorities' in the conclusion to their study – and there only in the compass of one sentence; the reader therefore has no idea through most of the book what purposes the authors have.

Even more problematic is the authors' idiosyncratic use of the term 'Proche-Orient'. This refers not to the entirety of the Middle East (as it normally does in French), but only to the countries of the Fertile Crescent: Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Israel. Although nowhere made explicit, this geographical restriction is critical to the notions of minority and majority as conceived in this study.

For the Chabrys, Sunni Muslim Arabs constitute the majority; all other peoples are minorities. Whoever is not Muslim, not Sunni, not Arabic-speaking belongs to a minority; this category includes not just Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslims, but also Turks and Shi'is. Though suspect on demographic grounds (Sunni Arabs are a decided minority in the five countries of the Fertile Crescent), the Chabrys' definition has the virtue of highlighting common political traits among otherwise disparate peoples.

Three of their conclusions bear note. First, despite their numbers and discontent, the minorities in the Fertile Crescent are unlikely to bring down existing states; Balkanization remains a distant prospect. Many factors account for this stability. Governments dispose of immense military might with which they can repress minority insurrections. Populations are so mingled ethnically that one community's separatist efforts invariably provoke countervailing efforts by their neighbors and rivals. Members of the same community disagree among themselves on political goals, with only some committed to a separate state and others intent on assimilation within existing structures. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, many minorities have come to see existing states as their best protection against Sunni efforts to unify themselves.

Paradoxically, the ethno-religious minorities are among the steadiest supporters of the Arab states built on the ruins of their dreams [of the 1910s and 1920s], for they see in these once-rejected structures the strongest bulwarks against the pan-Arabist waves that, from the interior or the exterior, press for the creation of larger Arab unions. (325)

Second, the authors argue that modernization, far from eradicating the minority status, 'is likely to result in an increase of ethno-religious antagonisms', (329) The unequal rates of progress experienced by different minorities and the tensions these create exacerbate rather than diminish allegiance to the community.

Finally, Laurent and Annie Chabry observe that minorities are prone to protecting themselves by espousing ideologies that radically challenge the views of the Sunni Arab majority. Thus do Christian Arabs, for example, turn to Communism and Shi'is take up fundamentalist Islam. The authors contend that the specific contents of these ideologies matter less than the fact that they provide the minorities with an instrument for rejecting the system dominated by Sunni Arabs.

The bulk of *Politique et minorités au Proche-Orient* consists of informed and useful modern histories of the principal minorities of the Fertile Crescent. Considerable space is devoted to the Twelver Shi'is, 'Alawis, Druze, Yazidis, Armenians, Kurds, Assyrians. Rather less is given to the Kharijis and Copts, who live in areas mostly outside the survey, and to the Jews and Maronites, who live inside it but receive surprisingly little attention. The Greek Orthodox are virtually ignored.

Topics of particular interest include: a convincing explanation for the unlikely convergence of the Ba'th and the Parti populaire syrien, two organizations originally espousing contrary ideals; an excellent portrayal of the challenges faced by Iraqi Shi'is in the Iraq-Iran war; and a concise but full appraisal of the position of Armenians throughout the Fertile Crescent.

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