Religious Institutions and Authoritarian States: Church-State Relations in the Middle East

Abstract

The churches in the Middle East are generally perceived to be supportive of the authoritarian states in the region. The motivations for this strategy and its successes and limitations in the context of the authoritarian environment and the religious heritage of the region are explored. This paper argues that the approaches pursued are determined by the structure of the community in relation to the majority and other Christian communities as well as state policies towards the community. The overriding aim of church leaders of protecting their communities has led to a modern variation of the historical *millet* system which provides them public status in exchange for their acquiescence for regime policies. This security guarantee combined with wariness towards other potential political actors and the desire to protect their privileged position from communal challengers has resulted in the hierarchies' preference for the authoritarian status quo rather than encouraging democracy promotion.

Introduction

Religious institutions have a chequered history regarding their approach towards authoritarian states, presenting examples of both supporting regimes and involvement in campaigns promoting greater freedom. The contemporary Middle East with its concentration of authoritarian states, offers examples not only from Islam the dominant religion in the region but also Eastern Christianity. Religious institutions have been affected by the measures used by these states to maintain control and resist moves towards full democratisation. The uprisings which started in Tunisia in early 2011 and spread to several states in the region have reopened debates concerning democracy in the Arab world. The stance of Christians has been varied with some participating in protests, others defending the authoritarian regimes and most remaining on the sidelines. By examining church-state relations prior to 2011, this study explores why indigenous Christian churches in the Middle East are likely to be wary of the changes taking place in the region given their past preference for stability over democratisation. In order to provide a comparative perspective, three case studies will be examined representing different structural contexts and outcomes from the 2011 uprisings. Firstly, Egypt has

one dominant Christian community in a majority-minority situation which is now readjusting in the post-Mubarak era.   Secondly, Jordan has multiple Christian communities but still in a majority-minority framework.   The Hashemite monarchy has experienced protests demanding reform but these rarely extend to regime change allowing the king to offer various concessions such as a new cabinet. Thirdly, Syria too has multiple Christian communities but also has several other ethnic and religious groups.   This diversity has been used by the regime to warn against sectarian strife in its struggle against uprisings which have taken place in several parts of the country.   The paper will firstly address the role of religious institutions in authoritarian states and then extend this debate to the Middle Eastern context.   After introducing Christianity in the Middle East, the remainder of the discussion will centre upon the three case studies.   By focusing upon church-state relations, this study aims to demonstrate why the indigenous churches in the Middle East appear to be more likely to accept the confines of civil society under authoritarian rule rather than agitate for democratisation.

Religious Institutions and Authoritarian States

The approach of religious institutions towards authoritarian states can generally be divided into two categories – support or resistance.   Certain conditions can be identified which encourage a supportive stance.   Firstly, the religious institution should share core values with the state.   As religion is often utilised as a founding component of national identity, both actors perceive benefits in co-operating with the other.   These values can include a shared narrative on belonging as well as a consensus on moral issues.   Examples include the Catholic Church in Latin American military-corporatist regimes and the state sanctioned Islamic leadership positions in the Middle East such as *al-Azhar* in Egypt.[1] Secondly, the political environment may persuade religious institutions to support authoritarian states. From the 1950s to 1970s, the main alternative to ruling regimes in regions such as Latin America and the Middle East were communist or leftist elements.   Their calls for secularism and in some cases, anti-clericalism were interpreted by religious hierarchies as challenging their privileged position in society.   Thus, they found common cause with conservative authoritarian regimes in preserving the status quo.

The second category of resistance also includes religious actors. In contrast to the above use of conservative values, other key elements common to many world faiths are emphasised such as social justice and human dignity. When states are perceived as using repression against their own people, religious actors can mobilise in defence of human rights. This has usually been as part of a wider movement within civil society, but in some cases can have an impact upon church activism. For example, the liberation theology movement in Latin America saw lower ranked clergy perceive opposition to state oppression as part of their pastoral duties. According to Kamrava and O'Mora, many priests were 'agents of social awakening and vocal proponents of demands for political representation and social justice'.[2] Gradually, the national councils began to acknowledge that popular opinion had turned against the authoritarian state and came to accept the transition to democracy and a change in church-state relations.[3] The teachings of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) also began to filter down to the wider church. Eastern Europe provides another illustration of Catholic resistance as church leaders supported the struggle against communism. Poland provides an illuminating example of both the appeal of the Catholic Church to civic responsibility in the 1970s under the leadership of Cardinals Stefan Wyszynski and Karol Wojtyla (the future Pope John Paul II) and also, the importance of international support for political freedom from the Vatican. Thus, Christian religious institutions provide examples of the two categories though recently, the trend has been significantly in the 'resistance to authoritarianism' camp. Existing research on this subject has concentrated on regions which have a Christian heritage. These areas are where the dominant culture and laws come from the churches and where they are likely to have leverage within society and therefore be able to have a significant impact on the political environment. The examination of Christian churches in a non-Christian setting challenges the conditions described in relation to the support of authoritarian states. Shared values would need to be limited to cultural and societal ones rather than religious. It would also be expected that there would be a common enemy which threatened the security and survival of both the state and the churches.

It is also important to note the role of religious institutions of the other faith relevant to this region i.e. Islam. Traditionally, Islam does not have a monolithic hierarchical structure. Instead, the main

concept is the *umma* – the community of Muslims – to which all believers belong to and are equal in their relationship to God.   Unlike Christianity which has several transnational actors such as the Vatican and the Anglican Communion, Islam does not have a global institution which enjoys authority and legitimacy amongst a significant proportion of believers.   Instead, individuals align themselves with one of the main legal schools and follow the teachings of particular individuals.[4] Throughout various Islamic empires, religious leaders served mostly to legitimise policies of the ruler. This aspect has been continued by independent Muslim states.   Most of these countries have a state-sponsored and funded religious establishment which rarely goes against government policy.   Within this system, there is an attempt to create a hierarchical structure commencing with the *Grand Mufti* (religious leader) of the state, then several *mufti* of leading cities or areas who are responsible for supervising the quality of the *imams* (mosque leaders) under them.   It can be argued that religious and political leaders enjoy a symbiotic relationship.   The state authorities recognise the potential for Islam to be used as a mobilising tool against the regime and try to counteract this by implementing their own Islamisation policy from above.[5]   The clerics benefit from state patronage (mosque building, financing of activities, access to government officials and enhanced status) and autonomy in some areas, usually social and moral issues as part of an official Islamisation process.   In exchange, they are expected to legitimise government policies or at least refrain from criticism in the case of controversial foreign policy decisions.   It is also assumed that state appointees will clampdown on any preachers who breach these conditions.[6]   The only institution in Sunni Islam comparable to the Vatican – *al-Azhar* – is located in Egypt.   *Al-Azhar* is the oldest university in the Islamic world and continues to educate many of the faith's preachers and scholars.   The Egyptian regime has tried to integrate this revered institution into the state structure in order to further legitimise the state and minimise the potential for dissent from organised religion.[7]   An *al-Azhar* committee scrutinises new publications and can ban releases of work deemed blasphemous or unIslamic.[8]   In return, the Sheikh of *al-Azhar* follows the government line on domestic and foreign policy and tries to limit the impact of populist religious preachers.   These rivals position themselves in opposition to both the religious establishment and the state, claiming that the strength of their grassroots support testifies to popular disillusionment with the status quo.   The perception amongst the official *ulama* that they would

struggle to compete with these populist preachers has meant that they have drawn closer to the regimes in the knowledge that they provide protection and patronage. Therefore, the dominant trend of religious institutions in Muslim states has been to support the regime, including those categorised as authoritarian. It is in this context that the role of Christian religions institutions in the Middle East must be examined.

Authoritarianism in the Middle East

Recognition of the authoritarian environment prevalent in the Middle East is crucial to understanding both the dominance of Christian religious institutions and their strategies towards the regimes. Until the Arab Spring erupted in early 2011, the region was usually depicted as retaining immunity from the apparent global trend of democratisation. This appeared to challenge the early democratisation literature which suggested that liberalisation and civil society would lead to a transition from authoritarianism. Although changes occurred, regimes appeared able to adapt successfully to both domestic and international pressures by creating and maintaining institutions which at surface level would suggest political opening but in reality, ensured that decision making and significant power bases remained concentrated within the executive. O'Donnell suggests that one can distinguish between 'political democratic freedoms' which are provided by regular elections and 'basic liberal freedoms' which encompass much more than voting on election day.[9] Middle Eastern states tended to allow political openings as a short-term response to economic pressures e.g. Jordan and Algeria in the late 1980s. Regimes compensated for their inability to sustain their part of the welfare bargain (state provision of social and economic needs of its citizens in exchange for minimal political participation) by breathing new life into state parliaments and allowing increased involvement in national affairs. Once the immediate economic crises were over, regimes were able to return to a mixture of patronage and repression in order to control society. Brumberg argues that these measures should be seen as 'tactical political openings whose goal was to sustain rather than transform autocracies'.[10] This stalled process has been given numerous terms including 'pseudo-democracy' and 'liberal autocracy'[11]. Clearly, the events of 2011 have posed a significant challenge to the authoritarian model in the region. The short-term strategies of fulfilling the social contract backed up

by repression were found inadequate in dealing with corruption, inequality, economic issues and the lack of freedom. All institutions and actors are now adjusting to the developments in the region. With regard to the Christian churches which are the case studies used in this paper, their significance is also linked to the traditional weak condition of organised civil society in the region.

Until 2011, states have been adept at controlling civil society through a combination of cooperation and coercion. Strict conditions had to be fulfilled in order to acquire legal recognition. These often included restrictions on 'political' activities and foreign funding. Organisations were also weakened through the founding of rival groups associated with regime supporters. According to Yom, states create 'shadow organizations mimicking the function of independent civil society organizations, but which actually serve as surveillance mechanisms that silence discord through patronage'.[12] Open harassment, arrest and detention have also been used against specific activists regarded as undermining the regime. Therefore, the close involvement of the state in managing civil society decreases the ability of these actors to challenge the political role of the state. It is unsurprising that many organisations have chosen to concentrate on economic, social and cultural activities. This is true of both secular and religious actors. It can be argued that the general weakness of civil society as described above has allowed religious institutions which enjoy recognition from the state to benefit from their privileged position. Regarding Islam, this can be at the expense of popular legitimacy as discussed earlier. Indeed, the government response to Islamic-oriented civil society actors varies depending on the message being promoted, the extent of activities which can be interpreted as having political implications and the relationship to the regime of the founders and financial backers. However, the relative independence of Christian institutions means that churches are in a position to play a dominant role within their communities. At the social and welfare levels, this can be supplemented by non-governmental organisations but at the political level, they tend to exercise their authority at the expense of other actors.   Before examining the role of these institutions, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the Christian presence in the Middle East.

Christianity in the Middle East

The Middle East has often been perceived as homogenous, Muslim and Arab. Yet such a description ignores the widespread ethnic and religious diversity found in the region. Indeed, the Middle East is the birthplace of the three monotheistic religions. While the Christian communities vary in terms of size, doctrine, theology and identity, they are all indigenous to the region and trace their origins to the spread of the gospel from what was then the Roman province of Palestine. Almost all branches of Christianity can be found in the contemporary Middle East. Corbon provides a useful categorization to give a brief overview of the different groups.[13] The Chalcedon Orthodox represents the churches which upheld the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon (451). As a consequence of their loyalty to the Byzantine Empire, they perceived themselves as being the 'official' church throughout the centuries of Muslim rule. Known as the Greek Orthodox, they have four patriarchates in the Middle East and are spread throughout the region. It is not coincidental that they are strong supporters of ideological currents which emphasise a shared Arab identity. The second group can be termed the Oriental Orthodox in reference to their rejection of the christological definition agreed at Chalcedon. Their de facto independence from the universal church led to the practice of the duplication of patriarchates as each church desired its own religious hierarchy. The four churches retain these distinctions through language (Syriac - Syrian Orthodox and Assyrian Church of the East, Coptic – Coptic Orthodox and Armenian – Armenian Apostolic), heritage and culture. They have also developed the notion of constituting a 'nation' which can sit uneasily with other identities especially Arabism. The third category refers to churches in communication with Rome. The split in the Roman Empire followed by the Arab Conquest meant that the Vatican lost direct contact with most of the churches in the Middle East. There are three different types of Catholic communities in the region. Firstly, the Maronite Church refers to a community in historic Syria which migrated to Mount Lebanon in the eighth century to escape persecution from other Christian groups. The Maronites reaffirmed their subordination to Rome in 1439 and have become synonymous with the Lebanese state. The second type represents Catholic missionary attempts to reunite the church in the Middle East. A now discredited policy led to the establishment of breakaway churches by the nineteenth century. Only the Chaldean Church (formed from some Assyrian communities) became more prominent than the Orthodox branch. Thirdly, Latin churches can be found throughout the

region.   Therefore, some Catholic churches have a strong connection to a homeland while others have more affiliation with a wider version of Arab nationalism.   Lastly, the Reformed churches were formed again as a consequence of missionary efforts in the mid-nineteenth century.   These congregations tend to be formed on a national basis and stress their allegiance to each state.   The rich variety of denominations has been more of a burden to the Christian community as a whole in the region as bitterness over historical splits has proved difficult to heal though in recent years, there has been a gradual move towards ecumenicalism.   The main issues affecting Christians in the Middle East are constant emigration and its impact on the remaining communities as well as political, economic and security concerns which are of course not unique to Christians.   Throughout the region, the number of Christians has decreased significantly since the mid-twentieth century with Christians estimated to make up around 5-6 per cent of the population in Egypt (four-five million), under 4 per cent in Jordan (around 240,000) and around 8 per cent in Syria (slightly under two million).[14]

The church as an institution has retained its relevance in the community throughout the centuries. The combination of several factors helps to explain this situation.   Firstly, the churches provide and maintain the identity of the specific group and are often the only organizations which include all members of the community.   Secondly, the patriarchal system of governance inherent in the traditional churches endorses church involvement in political and societal matters especially through the church figurehead – the patriarch.[15]   The fact that these churches underwent a different historical experience from their Western counterparts allowed them to escape calls for the separation of church from state.   The acceptance of a close relationship between Islam and the state has also had a cultural impact on the Christian communities.   Therefore, the leadership role of the church and its leaders is accentuated by the traditional method used by Muslim authorities to deal with non-Muslims living in *dar al-Islam* (the house of Islam).   Jews and Christians were acknowledged as *ahl al-kitab* (people of the book) and if they chose to retain their faith but recognize the rule of the Islamic empire, they became known as *dhimmi* (covenanted people).   In return for paying a *jizya* (tribute) and accepting the regime, they were given freedom of worship and accorded protection by Muslim rulers.[16]   By defining non-Muslims as a group rather than individuals, Islamic rule allowed religious leaders to

dominate the group as their religious identity was the main and in many cases, only distinguishing feature. Masters argues that these groups were initially regarded as *taifa* (collective group) defined by religion.[17] This system became institutionalised as the *millet* system under the Ottomans in the mid-fifteenth century. Pacini suggests that 'the religious authorities of each *millet* acted both as representatives of the members of their *millet* and as intermediaries between the latter and central power in administrative matters'.[18] With time, each denomination attained its own *millet* with most of the Eastern Catholic churches gaining recognition in the mid-nineteenth century. The principal aspects of this system (autonomy for the religious group under church leadership) still appear to be followed on an informal basis in many Arab states today, often in conjunction with a secular system which theoretically ensures equality for all citizens regardless of religious affiliation. According to Rowe, this situation can be described as a *neo-millet* system.[19] This refers to both the abolition of the original *millet* system as a consequence of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the more informal nature of the modernised version. While the term still has connotations of historical discrimination especially to Christians, this de facto system has been portrayed more as an organisational structure than representing a hierarchical order.

Using this framework, church-state relations can be examined by identifying several variables. Firstly, the structure of the communities within one country would appear to be significant. Regarding the Christian communities, if there is one dominant group, the religious leader could potentially be regarded as a rival to the state. This is heightened when the denomination regards the modern state as overlapping with their historical homeland e.g. Copts and Egypt, Maronites and Lebanon and Chaldeans and Iraq. While the government will be wary of the hierarchies' activities, it will also be more difficult for them to challenge church leadership. In contrast, if different denominations (and without a recognised dominant group) are found within one state, the regime is less likely to perceive them as a threat. Similarly, the church leaders will not have much individual leverage due to the small size of their communities and are also likely to be as concerned with interdenominational issues as they are with issues affecting church-state relations. The structure of the Christian community as a whole in relation to the rest of society is also important. In some states,

there is a clear majority-minority situation where Christians may be inclined to perceive that they are vulnerable to changes within the majority community. However, if there are other minority groups, whether ethnic or religious, this can serve to dilute the strength of the dominant group and offer the Christian community some space to articulate their concerns. Secondly, church-state relations are affected by both regime policies towards the presence of Christian communities and the perceptions held by Christians regarding the impact of these policies on their security. This relates to the discussion regarding the role of religious institutions in authoritarian states which suggested that the existence of a common enemy which threatens the security and survival of both the state and church are prerequisites for churches to support the state. In the following case studies, the rising influence of Islamists is perceived by Christians as a threat to their way of life. In public, Islamists have countered these concerns by acknowledging that Christians have equal rights and duties as citizens. Yet this discourse can be ambiguous with certain government positions seen as off-limits to non-Muslims. Furthermore, Christians (and secular Muslims) remain suspicious of vague claims of tolerance and fear that regime change which favoured Islamists would lead to increased public restrictions and have a negative impact on public opinion towards Christians.[20] Therefore, acceptance and support of the authoritarian system which identifies radical Islam as a threat to the state and its citizens can be seen as Christians pursuing a safe option rather than risking navigating their place in a fledging democratic state. This primarily relates to the unsettled question over the role of Islam in a democratic Muslim-majority state. However, Christians are also aware that regimes have traditionally turned to Islam to bolster their legitimacy. Most Arab states have witnessed a public Islamic revival which has been tolerated and sometimes promoted by authoritarian rulers. When dealing with insecurity, churches are faced with a dilemma, whether to defend communal rights at all costs or to exercise some self-censorship in the knowledge that the government is the ultimate provider of their security. Correspondingly, if this guarantee of protection is not fulfilled, it would be more likely that church leaders would be outspoken on particular issues. Finally, an additional factor is also the existence of competitors within the community which can influence the activities of the church in civil society, often resulting in a desire for a close relationship

with the state in order to secure patronage.   The case studies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria provide an opportunity to examine the above variables.

Egypt

Egypt offers an example of a dominant Christian community in a majority-minority situation.   Over 90 per cent of the Egyptian Christian population belong to the Coptic Orthodox although this is only around 5 per cent of the overall Egyptian population.   The term Copt comes from the Greek *aigyptos* meaning Egypt which highlights the close relationship between Copts and the land of Egypt.[21]   The Coptic Orthodox Church has a strong patriarchal structure and the patriarch has historically exercised a temporal dimension to his authority.   The current patriarch Shenouda III enjoys both a spiritual and political role and is generally recognised by the government and adherents as the spokesman and representative for the community.   He is granted significant autonomy over the community on the condition that this powerbase will not be used to challenge the state.   The Egyptian government has tended to adopt a laissez-faire policy towards Copts.   Its rhetoric emphasises national unity and the historical involvement of Copts in state and society.   However, the state is accused by the community of only reacting to problems rather than adopting proactive policies.   Recurring issues include the lack of political representation and participation, inequality in certain legislation (church building, conversion) and sporadic outbursts of violence which are often related to the inequalities mentioned above.[22]

There have been attempts to find alternatives to this de facto *millet* system.   Firstly, the Egyptian political system theoretically offers all citizens an opportunity to participate in the political life of the country through standing for election or voting for a representative.   In reality, the authoritarian nature of the Mubarak state meant that power was concentrated in the executive and parliament has been regarded as an arena where the main objective is to benefit from patronage networks.[23]   While ordinary Egyptians generally feel excluded from political life, this is heightened within the Coptic community.   Coptic candidates rarely succeed in elections and instead, Coptic representation is usually ensured through presidential appointees.   Secondly, Patriarch Shenouda in his early years as

head of the church, tried to reinvent his position to incorporate a more activist role. This move was influenced by regime policies under President Sadat in the 1970s. The Islamisation process supported by Sadat had an adverse impact on the Coptic community, leading to attacks on individuals, churches and Coptic-owned businesses. As the government was not perceived as fulfilling its duty to protect the community, Shenouda drew attention to this neglect by arguing against constitutional changes to increase the role of Islamic law in Egyptian public life as well as cancelling religious celebrations as a protest against government policies.[24] Sadat interpreted these actions as a political challenge and eventually in 1980 as part of a general crackdown on all religious actors, he banished the patriarch to a desert monastery. Shenouda's assertive approach did not result in significant (if indeed any) gains for the community. In fact, some regarded it as counterproductive as Christian-Muslim relations deteriorated significantly during this period. Since his public return from the desert in 1985, Shenouda has operated within a revised version of the *millet* system. He consolidated his position as leader of the church and also sought to ensure that it is the most significant communal organisation for Copts.[25] The activities of the church have increased to encompass all aspects of life. This has served to accentuate communal identity but at the expense of growing alienation from wider Egyptian society. The patriarch is able to portray himself as the spokesman of the community and under Mubarak, the government was willing to credit Shenouda with this position. The Coptic Orthodox Church now resembles Islamic religious institutions in the sense that it sometimes legitimises government policies. In 2005, the church hierarchy openly supported the candidacy of Mubarak in the presidential elections.[26] Having experienced the brunt of Islamic radicalism and government acquiescence, the church had little doubt that the Mubarak regime, while not perfect, provided a stable environment for Copts to maintain their faith. Indeed, the patriarch publicly supported Mubarak until the resignation of the president in February 2011 and was critical of the participation of Copts in the Tahrir Square protests. Yet, Shenouda has shown that he is willing to use his political capital to contest specific events such as the alleged conversion to Islam of the wife of a Coptic priest in 2004. The return of the woman was seen as an indication that the government wanted to avoid further escalation of the incident.[27] This arrangement apparently works as long as

the patriarch limits this type of intervention. Thus, not all communal incidents receive patriarchal attention.

It would appear that Shenouda is aware of the tightrope that he must walk in order to maintain his privileged position. He must satisfy two constituents – the government and his own community. Protecting his position at the expense of the community would allow other actors to take on the role of defending them. There is an increase in grassroots activists publicly championing their faith which has been particularly notable from 2010 onwards. His still significant powerbase in the community means that he can periodically challenge the state but having tested the limits during the Sadat years, this pro-active intervention is taken carefully and selectively. The key objective of the Coptic Orthodox Church would appear to be to secure the future of the community. While this could theoretically be achieved under a democratic state, concern that other actors would be less tolerant of this religious community and perhaps the desire to protect the privileged position of the church, led Shenouda to accept this *neo-millet* system and support the authoritarian Mubarak state.

Jordan

In Jordan, the informal *millet* system is also in evidence in a clear majority-minority situation (Sunni Muslim-Christian). However, there is not one dominant Christian group. Most denominations are represented including Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Latin and Protestants. The Jordanian Christian communities are also much smaller than their Egyptian counterparts, 240,000 maximum although this is around 4 per cent of the population. As they operate at the denominational level, this means that each leader has the allegiance of a very small number. Furthermore, there is no 'ethnic' connection between a church and the specific homeland of Jordan. Instead, Christians tend to identify as Arab and are proud of their tribal origins. Christians are split further by the Transjordanian Palestinian divide within Jordanian society.[28] During the Ottoman period, the *millet* system operated at a local level in each province. With the establishment of Hashemite rule in what is now termed Jordan, a more informal structure was devised to deal with the Christian communities. Firstly as Chatelard demonstrates, the existence of Christian tribes meant that the monarchy was able

to liaise with tribal notables in a similar manner as it dealt with Muslim tribes.[29]   Secondly, an alternative liaison was kept through the religious representatives.   In this variation of the *millet* system, Islam is still recognised as the official state religion but the state is expected to ensure freedom of worship and protection of religious minorities.   The system is generally not viewed as discriminatory as in the past due to the Jordanian state's policies towards its Christian communities. Christians have been appointed to important government and diplomatic positions and are active in economic and societal life.   Christian pilgrimage sites have been promoted by the monarchy as an illustration of the religious heritage of Jordan.   This was particularly notable during the papal visit of Benedict XVI in June 2009.   While there are restrictions associated with the recognition of Islam as the official religion of the state e.g. conversion, there are no issues regarding church building or the security environment.

The dual system of dealing with the Christian communities appears to have been retained in the modern Jordanian state.   Through the political system, Christians are allocated nine parliamentary seats in order to secure their representation which is actually higher than their proportion of the population.[30]   As is common throughout the region, Christians are also appointed to the cabinet and other influential positions.   Although Jordanians (both Muslim and Christian) stress that Christians participate as Jordanians not exclusively as Christians, it is clear that religious identity has remained important in public life.   This helps to ensure that the *millet* approach to communal relations still appears acceptable to most Jordanians.   Thus, the church representatives have access to palace officials and occasional meetings with the King and his advisers.   Issues still tend to be addressed through this personal patronage system rather than the more institutionalised parliamentary one. While church leaders are able to voice their concerns relating to their church, it is less evident if they articulate views from the community which stray from their own perspective or criticise the regime. They also recognise that the Jordanian monarchy allows religious pluralism within the limitations of a Muslim-majority state.   Again, there is wariness that commitment given by Islamist political factions towards maintaining the political rights exercised by the Christian community may not be fully implemented if they enjoyed more political power.   While the state acknowledges the status of the

religious representatives, they are not perceived as having significant political influence and are certainly not regarded as a challenge to the regime. This also relates to the fact that the church representatives resident in Jordan tend to be restricted to bishopric level. Controversial issues are usually addressed by the patriarch in the traditional churches. As they reside in neighbouring countries, this decreases the likelihood of church leaders intervening in overtly political matters. The privileges associated with the *millet* system would appear to be used by the church representatives as a means to maintain their status within their own community rather than agitating for changes in conditions for Christians in Jordan. In other words, they appear to be mostly apolitical. Any political activism tends to be related to the Palestinian issue especially from the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem whose current incumbent Fuad Twal is Jordanian. While some lay actors and individual clerics raise issues through civil society organizations, these too suffer from the same fragmentation and lack of co-ordination which afflicts the churches themselves. Consequently, the weak situation of the churches in Jordan combined with their fear of regime change in the kingdom, has led to a situation where they support the system favoured by the monarchy and therefore the political status quo, in order to safeguard both their own position within the community and the relative freedom of Jordanian Christians.

Syria

Syria also has multiple Christian communities but unlike Egypt and Jordan, there is not a clear majority-minority divide in the country. Instead, Syria is characterised by a Sunni Arab majority of around 60 per cent with the remainder of the population coming from other ethnic and religious groups such as the 'Alawi, Druze, Christians and Kurds.[31] The existence of other groups decreases the sense of vulnerability that one distinct group can have when faced by a large homogenous 'other'. Almost all Christian denominations can be found in Syria with the most prominent being the Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic and Armenian communities. Together, the Christian communities are estimated to make up around 8 per cent of the population, a little under two million in total.[32] Syrian Christians have historically participated in the national life of the country including during the anti-colonial struggle and in formulating the ideology of the Ba'th ruling

party.   Although the traditional *millet* system was in existence during the Ottoman years, independent Syria especially since Ba'th rule in 1963 has focused more on the role of the individual rather than communal representation.   This overt use of secular nationalism would be expected to have an adverse effect on the involvement of church leaders and prevent any revival of the *millet* approach to communal relations.   The secular nationalist approach promotes loyalty to the state over any other identity or attachment and is commonly used in a state with multiple ethnic and religious groups.   In Syria, the Ba'th state has used its political party as a vehicle to achieve this aim.[33]   Accentuating that the integration of each group constructs the entire Syrian nation is also an attempt to avoid accusations of minority rule given that the ruling elite come predominantly from the 'Alawi sect. The political role of religion has been perceived as a threat to the Ba'th regime as demonstrated by the crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood-led uprising in Hama in 1982.   Thus, Islam is not used as a legitimising tool to the same extent as other countries although Pierret argues that the regime has not remained immune from this trend and has promoted its own version of 'official Islam'.[34]   While the constitution states that Islam must be the faith of the president, it is not the state religion.[35]   All these factors facilitate the involvement of Christians in national life.

On the surface, it would appear that church-state relations would be minimal in Syria given that there is an official secular political system.   Yet in reality, it is apparent that Christian religious institutions still function through a reinterpretation of the *millet* system.   Again, this tends to be devoid of discriminatory associations.   Members of the Christian communities still perceive their church leaders to have influence on both religious and temporal matters.   Religion has retained its social significance in Syria in general and the Christian communities are no different.   While many Christians may not be outwardly religious e.g. frequent church attendance, they still tend to turn to the church for assistance.   This relates both to personal status matters which are resolved through religious courts and also when dealing with the state regarding a variety of issues.   This perception of church authority can be attributed to the high level of church officials resident in Syria (Damascus is home to three patriarchates) and also the not insignificant numbers in each community.   The absence of a competitive electoral system and open civil society also encourages the communities to revert to

the traditional method of dealing with the state.   This authority is recognised by the ruling elite. Church representatives are in regular contact with state officials from various branches of government.   Under President Bashar al-Asad, annual meetings have been instigated on festive occasions.

This goodwill is due to several factors.   Firstly, the regime has positioned itself as a 'secular state' in an attempt to appeal to minority groups that the predominantly 'Alawi ruling elite are the best candidates for government because they share their fear of Sunni dominance and the threat of militancy.   This discourse has been prevalent in the regime response to the uprising which started in March 2011.   Secondly, the church leaders have shown little desire to campaign for a change to the political status quo.   Instead, they have generally been supportive of the regime, are mostly seen as exemplary leaders and any requests pertaining to security matters tend to be related to particular individuals and regarded as the granting of a favour rather than an unconditional responsibility of the state.   This has generally remained the case during the Arab Spring protests.   Thirdly, the regime is aware that its political opponents encompass individuals from all communities including Christians such as Michel Kilo and Anwar al-Bunni.   Thus, a decline in the influence and standing of the church could encourage and embolden calls for reform and possibly regime change from a larger section of the community.   Therefore, maintaining this adaptation of the *millet* approach is seen as to the advantage of both the church leaders and the regime.   However, it could also be argued that there is an additional reason why the church and community is willing to persist with this system.   While the Ba'th party has maintained its commitment to accommodating different groups into its vision of the Syrian nation, a different ideologically oriented government in the future may not have similar views. By keeping the *millet* system with its heritage in the centuries of Islamic rule, the Christian communities in Syria are perhaps ensuring that they are institutionally prepared to deal with a change in the political environment.   To summarise, the Christian religious institutions appear to have prioritised the preservation of their status over challenging the Syrian authoritarian state.

Conclusion

This examination of the role of Christian churches under authoritarian rule in the Middle East has demonstrated that shared values which lead religious institutions to support authoritarian states do not need to be restricted to religious ones. The churches and regimes share some common cultural and societal values, in particular, their perceptions of and concerns about an Islamist threat. It appears to have proven beneficial to both the regimes and the church leaders to reinvent the historical *millet* system which stressed religious identity and accentuated the role of the spiritual head of the community. This familiar system ensures that both actors understand their duties and responsibilities and provides a channel to discuss any issues. As long as the state is perceived as promoting tolerant policies towards the Christian communities, recognising their contribution to society and not condoning rhetorical or physical attacks against their presence, the churches are willing to accept limitations on societal freedom. The belief that Christians would be vulnerable to any regime change in the region whether achieved through violent revolution or peaceful democratisation has been an underlying factor for institutional backing of the status quo, even when in the case of Egypt, the willingness and ability of the state to guarantee protection was increasingly challenged in the latter years of Mubarak's presidency. In light of the challenge to the authoritarian model which has erupted throughout the region in 2011, church hierarchy support for the regimes reflects this assumption that the authoritarian status quo was preferable to democratic uncertainties. However, it is important to note that this strategy also reinforces the temporal position of the church especially the hierarchy, through access to state patronage. The weakness of organised civil society in authoritarian states assists them in resisting challenges from other actors within their communities. In the three case studies, it is clear that all of the churches have learned to adapt to changing situations, although those who have higher officials tend to be able to utilise their authority more effectively. The structure of both the internal Christian community and wider societal groups is also influential on their ability to liaise with the state. The Egyptian case demonstrates that only when there is a strong, united community identifying specifically with one homeland, can the religious leader consider challenging inadequate state policies towards the community. Yet even in this case, the desire to speak out as requested by elements within the community is tempered by the knowledge that the state is still the ultimate guarantor of their security. This factor is likely to remain crucial regardless of the

identity of the ruling regime.   In conclusion, the overriding objective of the churches in the Middle

East will continue to be to secure the survival and prosperity of their communities.   Democracy

promotion will persist to be regarded as a luxury they cannot afford (or even wish to consider) unless

the church leaders can be convinced that it would serve the interests of not only their communities but

also themselves.

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