Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change

Edited by Heidi Moksnes and Mia Melin
Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change
Perspectives on gender and citizenship in Syria before the ‘Arab spring’

Annika Rabo

The co-existence of diverse populations is a highly debated and urgent issue in the contemporary world. In these debates, the Middle East can be used either as a model to emulate or as a warning example. Both the historical and present day Middle East can be – and are – utilised in such discussions. Developments in the country in the last decades demonstrate that ‘majority-minority’ relations in Syria today are both complex and contested.1

Syria is, and has been, an area of great ethnic, religious and linguistic heterogeneity. The ethnic and religious composition of Syria is in many ways guesswork, because official statistics on such issues are not available. In 1949, all reference to religious affiliation was taken away from Syrian identity, and this principle has been upheld until today. However, an educated guess is that Christians constitute about 12 percent, divided into at least fourteen sects with the Greek Orthodox as the largest. Most Christians describe themselves as ‘Arab,’ but there are also Armenians. Besides, many Syrian Orthodox Christians regard themselves as both an ethnic and a linguistic group. Most Muslims are Sunni, perhaps 60-65 percent. Many of the Sunni Muslims are Kurds, but Kurds are also Yezidi and some are Shi’a Muslim. The Druzes consider themselves as ‘Arab,’ as do the Alawis, both of whom are Muslim splinter sects, regarded by many Syrians as special ‘ethnic’ groups. There are also various kinds of Shi’a Muslims. Finally there are small ethnic/linguistic minorities like Turkmen and Circassians.

Many minorities have clustered in specific regions, but most towns and cities today have attracted migrants from all kinds of ethnic and religious
backgrounds. The ‘ethnic-religious mix,’ however, differs from one region to another and from one city to another. There are no rural Kurdish or Alawite clusters in the south of Syria, and no rural Druze clusters in the north. The variety of Christian sects is greater in the north than in the south. The Druzes are concentrated in the southwest mountain region of Syria. Many have become refugees following the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights in 1967. The Alawites’ ‘original’ area is the northwest mountain region (Rabo 2011 a).

Questions of ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity are highly complex in Syria, and the use of terms like majority or minority are both sensitive and imprecise. ‘Minority’ – aqalliyya – is not used in official Syrian discourse. Both power holders and citizens-at-large tend to stress that ‘we are all Syrians.’ In Syria, the Ba’th party which has been in power since 1963 embraces an ideology of pan-Arab secularism, whereby all ethnic and religious differences are publicly under-communicated. The very concept minority is often said to be a Western colonial device to divide people of the Middle East into a myriad of competing groups. All Syrian citizens are said to be equal and – very importantly – all are supposed to be equally Arab (Rabo 2012). Yet, the Ba’th party was originally more successful among Syrian (rural) minorities like the Druzes, the Alawis, and the Christians, partly because it aimed to overthrow the mainly Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslim urban elite with vast interests as landowners in the countryside. Since the Ba’th takeover in 1963, the ethnic composition of party members has both broadened and narrowed. More and more public employees have been obliged to join the party for career purposes, broadening the membership. But at the same time, putsches have narrowed the ‘membership’ of the behind-the-scene’s power holders. Analysts and popular opinion, both inside and outside Syria, have for decades claimed that the Ba’th party, the army, and the secret services are under the control of the Alawis.

In the eyes of many Sunni Muslims, the regime itself has come to be regarded as anti-religious, despite the fact that the Syrian constitution requires the president to be Muslim. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, Syria was racked by great political strife – euphemistically called ‘the Events’ (al hawaadeth) – and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood (and
some radicals on the left) attacked military personnel and political figure heads. The army retaliated with great force, and many Muslim Brotherhood supporters (and innocent bystanders) were killed or imprisoned. Yet, after the brutal eradication of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic aura of the regime increased. Female employees, students and pupils who earlier had been greatly discouraged from, or even forbidden to, covering their hair in public offices, universities and schools, were now allowed to do so. The state supported the building of new mosques and encouraged Muslims to follow a non-political religious path. Many Syrians of all faiths were highly critical of this change of policy, which was commonly considered as insincere and shaped by political expediency. Today, there is still a strong prejudice among urban Sunni Muslims against Alawis. At the same time Sunni Muslims have enjoyed the increased public religious opportunities.

Before ‘the Events,’ religious affiliation was downplayed in the public sector, and there was a strong ideological drive to forge all Syrians into a mould of similarity. The public sector was expanding, and more young people had the opportunity to study at university. The share of women in public workplaces increased dramatically. But after ‘the Events,’ public life and public space in many larger cities have taken on more Islamic veneer. The increased female veiling and emphasis on gender differences has heightened the fears of many Christians, who have come to regard the ‘minority’ character of the regime as a safeguard against increased Islamic public dominance. On Christian feasts, the President will visit, or be visited by, major Christian patriarchs and bishops, and church ceremonies are broadcast to the public on radio and television, underlining the equal value of all Syrian citizens, regardless of faith. The sectarian composition of the regime, and its possible ‘ethnic interests,’ is thus a highly complex issue (Rabo 2011 b).

But it is obvious that the ruling party, and the regime, have not been successful in their goal of eradicating religious and ethnic differences in Syria. On the contrary. People in Syria, especially in the cities, are exceedingly aware of such differences. They also produce and reproduce such differences through talk in their daily lives. Official policies in which
Gendering the Arab spring

religious differences are ignored or negated have contributed to turning religious sensitivities into vehicles for the presentation of selves and others. In such presentations, gender plays a central role, since religious identities are not a matter of choice but legally shaped (Rabo 2011c). Although Christians and Muslims in Syria are constitutionally equal, the way the state organises ‘family law’ (personal status law) privileges Muslims over Christians. It is legally possible for a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman but not the other way around, unless the man first converts to Islam (Rabo 2005). Muslim men thus have legal privileges that Christians do not. Although a Christian woman who marries a Muslim man does not have to change her religion, the laws followed in such a marriage are those for Syrian Muslims, and the children automatically inherit the religious affiliation of their father. The law thus privileges men over women. Religious affiliation, like citizenship, can never be inherited from one’s mother. For many Christians, this lack of legal equity is at the core of concerns over possible future changes in ‘majority– minority’ relations.

Note
This text is based on material collected through interviews and participant observation in Syria in various periods since the late 1970s, and especially between 2003 and 2009, in connection with a project on family and family law among transnational Syrians, funded by the Swedish Research Council and a project on family law debates in Syria funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.

References


Rabo, Annika, 2011b. Legal pluralism and family law in Syria, in Werner Zips and Markus Weilenmann (eds), The Governance of Legal Pluralism. Empirical Studies from Africa and Beyond, Münster: Lit-Verlag, pp 213-234.

Rabo, Annika, 2012. We are Christians and we are equal citizens: Perspectives on particularity and pluralism in contemporary Syria, *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations*, pp 79-93.

**Author affiliation**

Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University