

Laura Robson, ed. *Minorities and the Modern Arab World: New Perspectives*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2016. Pp. vii+318.

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The Arab World continues to be too often gazed upon as though it were a monolith, despite decades of knowledge production aiming for the subversion of such reductive yet tenacious views. The very phrase “*The Arab World*,” which remains the proper expression used to refer to the region, suggests a singular world of its own, separate and insular, but also consistent in its peculiar features. The implication is not only that it is distinct from other “Worlds” (including, presumably, the “Western World”), but also that its inhabitants are the same wherever they are found across a remarkably vast geography, and of whatever walk of life they may be, while attributes such as complexity, diversity, and heterogeneity are the monopoly of The West.

This is the sort of outlook that this book of essays edited by Laura Robson challenges by contributing new perspectives on the various manners in which “minority,” as an identity, functions in an Arab context. Explicitly building on Albert Hourani’s seven-decades-old book *Minorities in the Arab World*, Robson updates the understanding of Arab minorities from one that essentially means “either non-Sunni Muslim or non-Arabic-speaking or both” (1), to one that accounts for the processes through which these minorities have been formed and constructed since the late nineteenth century. Therein lies the second constructive contribution of the book, in that it not only shuns reductive characterizations of this so-called Arab World as an essentially uniform place (basically inhabited by Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims, with a few exceptions here and there), but it also claims for Arab societies a place in modernity. If Orientalist outlooks frequently reduce Arab societies to single attributes (Islam, more often than not, or the Arabic language for instance), they are also problematic when they paint these societies as relics of the past. Robson’s volume challenges such standpoints as well by examining the concept of Arab minority within a dynamic contemporary social context.

Ultimately, Robson and the contributors to this book show how the notion of minority in the region took its current meaning in a historical context marked by nationalism and the rise of Arab nation-states, yet also became defined beyond these nation-states with contributions from diaspora communities. Rooted in the discipline of history but also including multidisciplinary approaches, the book consists of an introduction and three parts, each containing four chapters. The chapters in the first part, “Conceptualizing Minorities,” collectively

provide a useful theoretical framework by building a nuanced definition of “minority,” as a concept, in the wake of the Ottoman Empire. The second part of the book examines various instances of ways in which minorities have defined themselves in a context of rising nationalism. The chapters in this section address cases in Iraq, Egypt, and Yemen, and include religious (Jewish, Coptic Christian), ethnic (Assyrian), and linguistic (Mahri) minorities. Finally, the third part shows the role of transnationalism in the processes that create minority identities.

“Conceptualizing Minorities” focuses on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, namely the decline of the Ottoman Empire, in order to show how the concept of “minority,” as defined by States in the Levant and Egypt in that historical context, served political purposes but did not necessarily reflect actual experiences and senses of identity. The communities studied in this part are religiously-defined, and illustrate how the popular view of non-Muslims in Arab societies as minorities came to be constructed. The second part, “Minorities, Nationalism, and Cultural ‘Authenticity,’” builds on the preceding part by analyzing ways in which given communities responded to their new minority statuses in the twentieth century. The cases addressed in the four chapters in this section suggest that minorities in Egypt, Iraq, and Tunisia have tended to resist the imposition of this label, and championed alternative nationalist discourses. The final part, “Minorities in the Transnational Sphere,” takes a more global approach, and brings diaspora communities into the analysis. The chapters in this section suggest that the identities of minority communities have not been shaped by local factors only, but that international factors have often been equally important in their formations.

One striking and most welcome aspect of this book is the vast geographic spread that it covers. Part of the issue of overgeneralizing attributes of Arab societies is precisely that these societies differ quite a bit from one another in many respects. Consequently, any scholarly endeavor focusing on one corner of this vast geography will be problematic if it claims to further our understanding about Arabs at large. Rather than provide the reader with a set list of minorities and a specific description of their defining attributes, Robson focuses instead on the processes whereby they came to be defined. As a result, the essays in this volume better theorize the formation of minority identities by finding commonalities in a wide range of contexts. Particularly commendable are the book’s forays into North Africa when the bulk of research on Arab societies focuses on Egypt and the Levant (a fact reflected by the other titles in the series on Middle East Studies at Syracuse University Press, where the present work appeared).

One aspect of *Minorities and the Modern Arab World: New Perspectives* that may leave the reader wanting is the absence of a conclusion. While it is not uncommon for edited volumes not to have a conclusion, in this case a word of closing might have helped distill the overarching arguments to better

show their broader implications, as well as suggest avenues for further research on minorities not covered in this book. Overall, however, such avenues are inevitably opened by the publication of this volume, and one only hopes that it will not be as long a wait before more research is conducted on this subject as it has been since Hourani's aforementioned book upon which the present one builds.