

Book Review: Multiculturalism and Minority Rights in the Arab World

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Review of: *Multiculturalism and Minority Rights in the Arab World*, by Will Kymlicka and Eva Pförtl (Eds.). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

This volume provides a compilation of 11 chapters by 13 authors, covering contemporary debates on minority policies in the Arab world within the context of the historical legacy as well as recent transformative movements of the region. It aims at filling the knowledge gap concerning the appropriateness of the international discourse on minority rights and its basic norms for the Arab world. The absence of Arab voices from the international discourse, duly noted in the introduction by Will Kymlicka, is understood to be a result of the historical legacy of minority issues in the region paired with the specific vocabulary applied in the international arena and is extensively discussed throughout the chapters of the book.

The chapters of this volume are arranged in two parts; the first dealing with the theoretical and historical perspectives on minority issues in the Arab world, and the second providing more contemporary insights through case studies. In chapter 2 Janet Klein opens the debate by giving a historical overview of the development of the discourse on minority issues in the Arab world with a special focus on the Kurds. She argues that the terminology applied today by the international community is closely connected to both the millet system of the Ottoman Empire and the heritage of colonialist and post-colonialist power structures, linking it to notions of inferiority and challenges of legitimacy. By outlining these issues, Klein aims to help create a more supportive discourse in which a new framework for the understanding

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and debating of minority issues can be built. Joshua Castellino and Kathleen Cavanaugh take a similar approach in chapter 3, providing a view on the historical legacy of the minorities discourse in the Arab world that emphasises the lessons that can be learned for the development of the discourse today, and with it the transitions currently taking place in the region. They conclude that these transitions are nuances of democratic processes and therefore need to be appreciated by those who interfered in the first instance of nation-making in the region. The recent and current social unrests in the Arab world are also part of the considerations of Zaid Eyadat in chapter 4, who examines the prevalent paradigms of the minority discourse in the region both historically and currently, and points out how their inadequacies foster social unrest. He proposes an alternative model, combining the positive elements of Islamic, consociational and multicultural systems in order to advance the rights of minorities without challenging the legitimacy of the states in the Arab world. In the last chapter of this theoretical section, Francesca Maria Corrao and Sebastiano Maffetone examine the differences in discourses of minority rights and liberal multiculturalism between the western powers and the Arab world. They argue that liberal democracy is a precondition for multiculturalism, and therefore propose an approach of multicultural liberalism rather than liberal multiculturalism in order to make multiculturalism acceptable in both the western and the Arab context.

In Chapter 6 Jacob Mundy analyses the way in which minority-majority conflicts are framed and problematised in the Arab world by analysing the Western Sahara conflict in local, regional and international frames. He argues that a culturally legitimate power-sharing solution to the conflict within the limits of the international models is based on the construction of a common narrative and therefore untenable. Instead, only a re-imagination of both the understanding of sovereignty of the conflicting parties as well as the international system can offer a perspective to solve the conflict. A similar argument is provided in chapter 7 by Eva Pföstl, analysing the situation of the Amazigh movement of Algeria and its potential to be an example of transformation for the Arab spring. She proposes a process of transitional justice that includes the Amazigh movement and the adoption of a model of federalism based on multinational and multilingual identities, and argues that this would require a re-thinking of strategies both from the Amazigh movement as well as Algerian state authorities.

Nicholas McGeehan's chapter 8 is concerned with the legal framework for migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates and its exploitative effect, arguing that the framework in

place results in great inequality between the migrant workers and their national or expatriate employers which effectively facilitates slavery. He concludes that the United Arab Emirates not only entirely disregard their responsibility towards migrant workers residing on their territory, but also human rights and minority group rights in general. In the following chapter Hassan Jabareen examines the history of the Palestinians as a minority in their own motherland, and finds the source of the ongoing tensions between Palestinians and Israelis in the way in which the Israeli state came to be, paired with the way in which Palestinians began their rights discourse. Jabareen argues that a lack of common ground on issues of equality and a constant perception of threat through the Palestinians keep the tensions between the two peoples high, and concludes that a reconciliation process is needed in which equal rights are at the core.

Brendan O’Leary deals with the federalisation processes in Sudan and Iraq from a comparative perspective in chapter 10 and argues that the outcome of both processes – the secession of South Sudan and the federalisation of Iraq – are rooted in the strategic decisions of the respective minority leaders, paired with the dynamic of regional and global interests, as well as the reactions of the respective central government. He concludes that multicultural federal systems are indeed possible in Arab states if they are in the interest of the affected parties and the regional and global orders are supportive of them in the individual case. Joseph Yacoub paints a less positive picture in the final chapter of the book, in which he examines the changing perceptions of multiculturalism in the Arab world, analysing the Arab Charter on Human Rights and the situation of the Assyro-Chaldeans in Iraq. He argues that while both the Arab Charter and the Iraqi constitution recognise minority rights and allow for a multicultural approach in theory, in reality these are far from being implemented.

Overall the book provides an interesting and insightful selection of cases of minority issues across the Arab world in which the causes for ethnic tensions are analysed and solutions are proposed for individual cases. The main theme of the book and recurring question throughout the chapters is that of the adequacy of the international minority discourse for minority issues in the Arab world. In several chapters it is pointed out that strategic decisions of both minority leaders and state actors are influenced by the regional and international orders in place and that alternative models are restrained by the global discourse, as they usually do not find the necessary political support. However, the examples provided display more or less failed traditional western models rather than real alternatives. While this

might demonstrate that the western models are not necessarily applicable in the Arab world, it does not prove the international discourse to be unsupportive of alternative approaches. Nevertheless, it becomes clear throughout the book that the western-shaped global discourse is largely ignorant to Arab voices and that input from this side is urgently needed in order to be acceptable in the region. From the assessment of various chapters of this book it seems that minority issues are entering the mainstream debates in the Arab world slowly but steadily, giving hope that Arab voices will not be absent from the global minority discourse much longer.