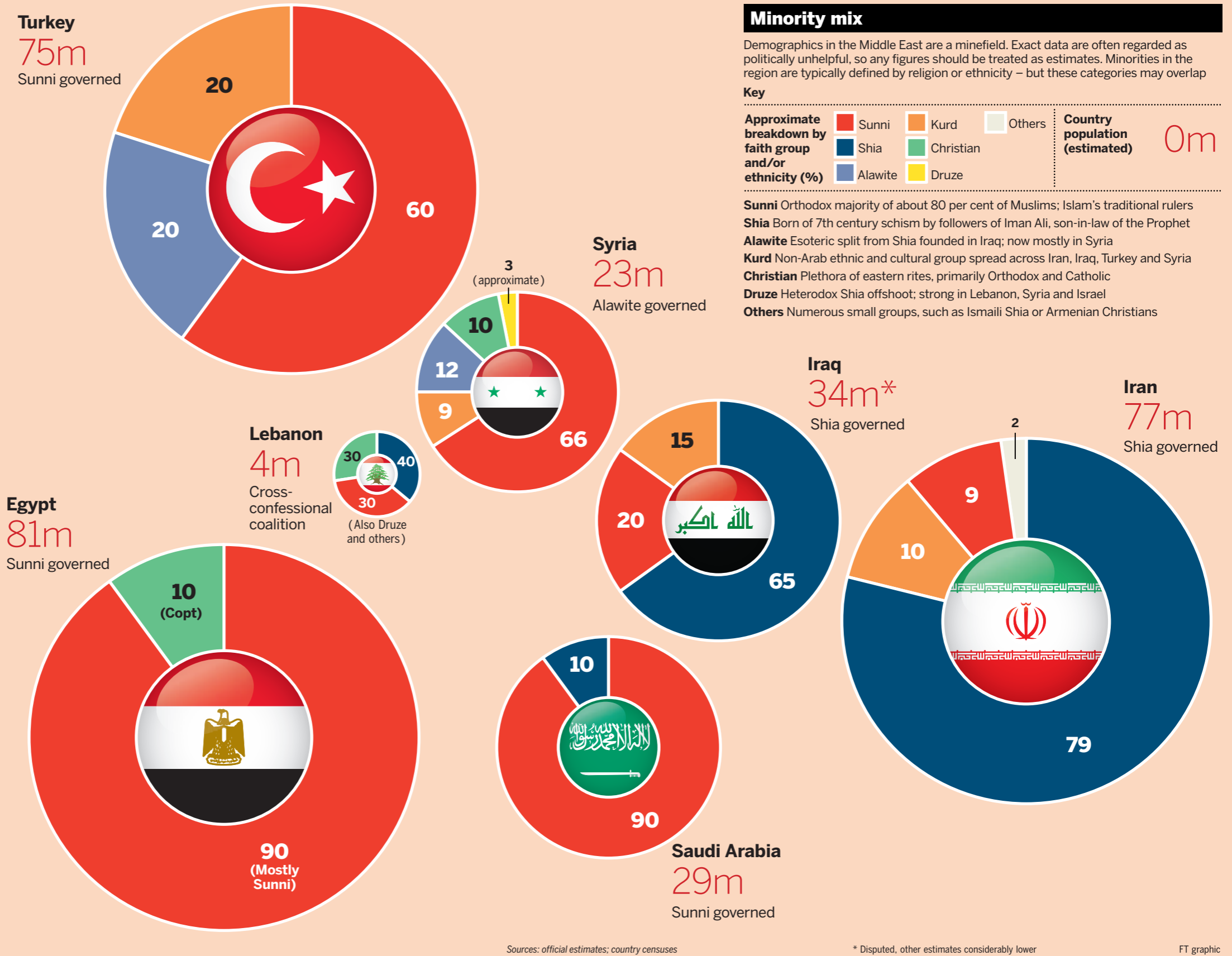


ANALYSIS

Middle East

# Febrile and fragmented

Treatment of the region's minorities – and the ability to curb sectarianism within and among diverse and increasingly divided nations – poses a crucial test for the emerging order.  
By David Gardner



When Beshara al-Rai, patriarch of Lebanon's Maronite church, this year described Syria as "the closest thing to democracy" in the Arab world, and Ignatius IV Hazim, patriarch of Antioch and the Greek Orthodox Christians in Syria, commended the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad for "reforms undertaken", this was not some other-worldly clerical eccentricity. However inaccurately, they were conveying the unease among Arab Christians about Syria's year-long revolt against tyranny.

Of all the revolutions that have upended the old order, none worries leaders of the plethora of religious minorities in the Middle East more than Syria's, the most blood-drenched chapter in the Arab awakening. Their fear is that the overthrow of one minority – the Alawites through whom the Assad family has ruled Syria for more than four decades – will unchain sectarian demons that threaten all minorities.

Memories of Iraq, where the US-led invasion of 2003 unleashed ethno-sectarian carnage and scattered minority Sunnis and Christians into exile, and of the inter-communal bloodletting that shattered Lebanon into sectarian pieces in the 1975-90 civil war, hang like spectres over the region.

For all that these revolutions will need to develop everything from the rule of law to a pluralist political culture to succeed, the ultimate test of the Arab awakening will be how sensitively and equitably the emerging order handles minorities, especially in those countries such as Syria that are home to a fragile mosaic of sects and ethnic groups. If sectarianism gains

real purchase, then the region could face a new Balkans-in-the-sands, with outside powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran fighting through local proxies in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

For even as these upheavals unfold, minorities such as Christians, Alawites and Druze, or ethnically distinct Kurds, risk being caught in the crossfire of the overarching regional struggle within Islam between the region's Sunni majority and the Shia – bitterly intensified after the occupation of Iraq replaced the Sunni minority dictatorship of Saddam Hussein with government by the Shia, who in Iraq are the majority.

A marginalised minority of Muslims worldwide for six centuries, the Shia have amassed real power in the past three decades, not just in Iraq. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Shia (and Persian) Iran, their regional reach extended into Syria, where the Alawites are an esoteric splinter of Shiism, and Lebanon, where Hizbollah, the paramilitary Islamist movement is solidly entrenched. This has triggered a backlash from Sunni-ruled countries led by Saudi Arabia, which last year sent troops into Bahrain to shore up a Sunni monarchy facing a revolt by its Shia majority people.

To rattle the minorities further, the demise last year of tyrants in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya engendered the rise of political Islam, principally in the guise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest and best organised Sunni Islamist group in the Arab world. The Brothers are also at the heart of the Syrian opposition, even if the demonstrators who have braved the Assad regime's guns make up a cross-section of a very diverse society.

For Christians, Islamism is a leap into the unknown. "When the Islamists come to power, are they bringing with them medieval attitudes or a new mentality of equality?" asks Monsignor Paul Matar, Archbishop of Beirut for the Maronites, an eastern rite of the Catholic Church. The scepticism is not confined to Christians.

Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Druze, a Levantine sect descended a millennium ago from the heterodox Shiism of the Fatimid dynasty, fears the Sunni-Shia conflict will grind the minorities between two stones. "The Druze [political] role is finished, and so are the Christians. Consideration of minorities will from now on be about the Shia," especially in Lebanon, where Hizbollah "controls most of the country".

Falah Mustafa, foreign minister of the autonomous Kurdistan regional government in northern Iraq, says Iraq could again be plunged into the abyss by the stand-off between the government of the increasingly autocratic Nouri al-Maliki, the Islamist prime minister heading a Shia coalition, and the Sunni minority. Mr Maliki has in effect purged Tariq al-Hashimi, the Sunni vice-president, and sidelined Saleh al-Mutlaq, his

Sunni deputy prime minister, dissolving the fragile confederal compact holding the country together. "Iraq can only stand on three pillars," Mr Mustafa says. "[Kurds] will not be part of a power-sharing government that excludes the Sunnis," he insists, because "we do not want to be part of the Sunni-Shia struggle".

The realpolitik of that struggle has led Mr Maliki, who until last year accused Damascus of harbouring former Iraqi Ba'athists intent on his overthrow, to swing behind the Assad regime, preferring its survival to the possibility the Muslim Brotherhood might come to power in Syria.

The choice for minorities more vulnerable than the Shia appears starker: to cling to regimes offering an umbrella of security or risk the rise of Islamists they fear will do away with religious freedoms. Yet, in light of the seismic shifts cracking up the architecture of power in the region, this looks more like *ancien régime* blackmail than a choice.

In Egypt, for example, tensions between Muslims and Coptic Christians seem in part to have been stirred up by members of the security apparatus of toppled president Hosni Mubarak, seemingly aimed at forcing citizens to choose between the old order and chaos.

In Syria, the Assad regime is ruthlessly wielding the sectarian knife. It is targeting minorities such as the Christians and the Druze with a subliminal narrative: stand with us because, if we fall, you will be put up against the same wall – by a Sunni majority it paints as fundamentalist. This is a regime that, for its own

ends, has enforced religious tolerance at home but shown few scruples in using sectarianism as a weapon abroad, notably in Lebanon and Iraq.

Mohammed Mattar, a prominent Lebanese lawyer and a Shia, says "all the Arab regimes base themselves on an equation: you can either have stability with us or you can have *fitna* [chaos and societal dissolution]. If you want us out you have to pay the price of civil war." Paul Salem of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut argues that "the fact of instability will affect smaller groups disproportionately. The rise of political Islam has not translated into the persecution of Christians and other minorities, not yet anyway. The Muslim Brotherhood is not al-Qaeda." In Syria, he believes, "the Christians are not directly threatened; it's a Sunni-Alawite fight."

The nub of the question, according to Samir Franjeh, a centre-left intellectual from a prominent Maronite dynasty in Lebanon, is that "for the first time there is now a real attempt to define an Islamic path to democracy and the Christians are choosing to stand with the dictators of the Arab world. The Muslims are speaking an ostensibly Christian language and the Christians are saying No; it's a paradox and a very dangerous one. We [Christians] cannot say we want civil states in the Arab world and maintain a sectarian state here".

If Syria is the laboratory for the minorities question now, Lebanon was the crucible before. Although the agreement that ended the civil war rebalanced power-sharing between Christians, Sunni and Shia, it failed to find a balance between individual rights and religious pluralism, recon-

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secrating the confessional system rather than, as Mr Franjeh puts it, giving them "a way to live together. In Lebanon we failed to solve the problem of how to create a state based on citizenship and on diversity."

Instead of the state being based on rights for its citizens and guarantees for its communities, in Lebanon all rights are vested in the communities but usurped by their dynastic leaders, whose interests may lead to shifting combinations of sectarian coalitions but tend to preclude cross-confessional, national democratic alliances. As the Sunni-Shia conflict has intensified across the region, Lebanese Christians have split, with one faction allied with the Sunni and another with the Shia Hizbollah.

As Archbishop Matar explains it, this is not just backing different horses. "Many times the minorities are divided because one section is emphasising identity and the other is thinking more about how to live with the majority," but "you need to take both into consideration. We are facing a new era as Arabs. We have a second chance and Christians have the duty to take it, but at the same time you have to offer your people security."

Yet, in the flux of revolution, not to mention the bloody precedents in the region, the idea of minorities banding together looks inadequate and even anachronistic, a residue of French and British colonialism that used minorities to disempower the majority. These revolts, moreover, are not just against this or that despotic ruler. "This is an entire order that is expiring rather than a regime changing – it's the whole thing, all the captains have to go down with the ship," says Mr Salem at the Carnegie.

"Look at the experience of the Ba'ath parties that ruled Iraq under Saddam and rule Syria under the Assads, Mr Mattar says. "These were two minority dictatorships, that built a buffer round themselves of other minorities while hiding behind pan-Arab banners, and then devastated the political and social fabric of two traditional societies."

"The ultimate guarantee for minorities is the rule of law, which is about due process, minority and civil rights and that you are citizens within a state that upholds these liberties. The idea of a coalition of minorities is self-defeating unless it embraces the just causes of the majority. If the Shia want to survive they have to embrace the just causes, not, like Hizbollah, embrace power politics."

Beyond that calculus, Mr Mattar adds, lies the vista of hope opened up by this new Arab awakening. "You cannot be blind to the grandeur of these revolts by the Arab people. This is a huge moment of empowerment," he says. "You have to join it, as a point of principle, irrespective of the numbers" of your sect or community.

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Druze leader

## An ominous Lebanese warning for Syria

Walid Jumblatt, leader of Lebanon's Druze minority, has had a trying Sunday, the day he normally receives petitioners at Mukhtara, his heavily guarded ancestral palace in the Chouf mountains. Instead, he has been settling a row between Druze and Shia taxi drivers. The parish pump of Lebanese politics is ever primed, because it is the country's 17 sects and their overlords, not the state or its servants, who rule the roost.

Mr Jumblatt knows what happens when inter-communal disputes get out of hand. "We have to live with the Shia," he says wearily. The last serious clash between the Druze and Hizbollah, in May 2008 when the Shia Islamist state-within-the-state overran West Beirut, was a hallucinatory flashback to the 1975-90 civil war that shredded Lebanon's fragile cohesion –

and turned this cerebral man into a warlord by default.

Mr Jumblatt's father, Kamal, led the Muslim-Left alliance against the Christians in the early stages of that war until he was assassinated by Syria in 1977. The realpolitik of survival sucked Mr Jumblatt into Syria's orbit, where he has oscillated between uncomfortable alliance with and full-throated opposition to Bashar al-Assad.

For a leader of the Druze, or of any other minority in the Levant, the survival of the community demands political elasticity stretching far beyond triangulation. He has often been the hinge upon which viable cross-confessional alliances turn. Mr Jumblatt's hostility to the Assads is now at its most strident, as he tries to rally the leaderless Syrian Druze behind the year-long uprising against the

regime. On the 35th anniversary of his father's murder, he placed a Syrian opposition flag on his grave.

In Syria, he says, the regime, built around the Alawite sect in alliance with other minorities, has eliminated nearly all plausible Druze leaders and many Druze "have stupidly been siding with the regime". But "I'm starting to feel that my appeal to the [Syrian] Druze has begun to have some influence. They well understand that in the event of [regime] collapse they will have to live among the Sunni majority".

No such collapse is imminent, Mr Jumblatt believes. "I'm afraid he's going to survive for quite a long time, and it will cost a lot of lives" and harden sectarian hatred. It "will carry on like Lebanon: we know how that started and we know how it ended".