Introduction
Religious institutions have a chequered history regarding their approach towards authoritarian states, presenting examples of both regime support and leading campaigns for greater freedom. The contemporary Middle East with its concentration of authoritarian states, remains an area of interest with regard to the above matter. As it is a Muslim-dominated region, the role of indigenous Christian religious institutions can also further understanding of the behaviour of religious institutions in civil society in an authoritarian context. They too have been affected by the measures used in these states to co-opt and coerce civil society which has contributed to their ability to successfully resist moves towards full democratization. This paper argues that the church approach will be determined by the structure of the community in relation to the majority and other Christian communities and also state policies towards the community. The presence of the churches in civil society will be examined using the following definition of civil society, ‘self-organizing and self-regulating groups with corporate identities that are autonomous from the state’.

In particular, the reinvention of the historic millet system used by Muslim leaders to manage non-Muslim subjects into part of modern Arab civil society will provide the framework for this analysis. In order to provide a comparative perspective, three case studies will be examined representing different structural contexts. Firstly, Egypt has one dominant Christian community in a majority-minority situation. Secondly, Jordan has multiple Christian communities but still in a majority-minority framework. Thirdly, Syria too has multiple Christian communities but also has several other ethnic and religious groups. By focusing on church-state relations as part of the interaction between civil society and the state, 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 democratization.

Religious Institutions and Authoritarian States
The approach of religious institutions towards authoritarian states can generally be divided into two categories – support or resistance. Regarding the former, certain conditions can be identified which encourage this 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 Franco’s Spain

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1 M Kamrava and F O’Mora, ‘Civil society and democratization in comparative perspective: Latin America and the Middle East’ Third World Quarterly 19(5) 1998 pp. 895
and Latin American military-corporatist regimes and the state sanctioned Islamic leadership positions in the Middle East such as al-Azhar in Egypt.\(^2\) 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 the religious hierarchy as challenging their privileged position in society. Thus, they found common cause with conservative authoritarian regimes in preventing change to the status quo.

The second category - resistance to the authoritarian state - 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. While this has usually been as part of a wider movement within civil society, there are cases where it has been led by religious leaders e.g. the liberation theology movement in Latin America. In the above example, lower ranked clergy saw 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’\(^3\). As the religious hierarchy had most to lose from a change in the political regime, some of the national councils of bishops initially backed state policies. However, the impact of the Second Vatican Council and the realization that popular opinion had turned against the authoritarian state, meant that they too accepted the transition to democracy and a change in church-state relations.\(^4\) In Eastern Europe, church leaders were also instrumental in supporting the struggle against communism. Poland provides an illuminating example of the Catholic Church calling for civic responsibility in the 1970s under the leadership of Cardinals Stefan Wyszynski and Karol Wojtyla (the future Pope John Paul II) and also during the remainder of the communist regime, the importance of international support from the Vatican for political freedom.\(^5\) Official Christian religious institutions provide examples of the two categories though recently, the trend has been significantly in the ‘resistance to authoritarianism’ camp. As detailed above, research in this subject tends to concentrate on regions which have a Christian heritage. After all, 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 the most impact on the political environment. The examination of Christian churches in a non-

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\(^3\) Kamrava and O’Mora, ‘Civil society and democratization in comparative perspective: Latin America and the Middle East’ pp. 897


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. These elements will be examined in the case study section of this paper.

It is also important to note the role of religious institutions of the other faith relevant to this project 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. There is not a global institution comparable to the examples in Christianity e.g. Vatican, Anglican Communion, 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. Historically, Shia Islam has been more hierarchical through the marja system. Only a small number of experienced clerics are designated marja i.e. a religious authority with a large following and legitimacy to make individual judgements. This order structure was accentuated by the velyat-i faqih style of governance established by Ayatollah Khomeinei in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Known as the Guardianship of the Jurisconsult, the faqih (jurist) was the most qualified individual to lead the Islamic state until the return of the Hidden Imam. In this way, the space between the state and religious institutions became extremely blurred as religious actors were the leading figures in the state. However, this close relationship where religious actors are setting rather than merely influencing policy would appear to be mostly confined to Iran and Shiism.

In Sunni Islam, religious figures have been less directly involved in politics. Throughout the various Islamic empires, the caliphate served mostly to legitimise policies of the ruler. This aspect has continued in the independence era of 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/areas who are responsible for supervising the quality of the imams (mosque leaders) under them. It can be argued that the religious and political leaders enjoy a symbiotic relationship. 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/moral issues as part of an official Islamization process. In exchange, they are expected to legitimise government policies or at least acquiesce in the case of controversial foreign policy decisions. It is also assumed that the state appointees will clampdown on any preachers who breach these conditions. The state authorities recognise the potential for Islam to be used as a mobilizing tool against the regime and try to counteract this by implementing their own Islamization policy from above. The four legal doctrines of law are Hanafi, Hanbali, Shafi‘i and Maliki. For more information, see M Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2008) pp. 25-26


Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* pp. 31-33

Egypt provides an illustrative example of this policy. President Sadat reversed the anti-Islamist policy of his predecessor Nasser in an attempt to counter leftist opposition. However, Islamist activists in the universities began to turn on the religious establishment due to their close ties with the state and in due course, Sadat paid the ultimate price for his policy when he was assassinated in 1981. Under President Mubarak, a distinction has been made between the Islamists (Muslim Brotherhood members and more radical militants) and the return to religion which has swept most Muslim countries since the 1970s. Under state guidance, the role of Islam has become more visible in political and societal life e.g. ruling elite attendance at key religious events, mosque building and television programming.\(^{11}\) Furthermore, the only institution in Sunni Islam comparable to the Vatican – al-Azhar – is located in Egypt. \(^{12}\) Al-Azhar is the oldest university in the Islamic world and continues to educate many of the faith’s preachers and scholars. Again, the Egyptian state 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 organized religion.\(^{13}\) An al-Azhar committee scrutinises new publications and can ban releases of work deemed blasphemous or unIslamic.\(^{14}\) In return, the Grand Imam Sheikh Tantawi 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. Clearly, it would appear that their fate is tied to that of the regimes. Unlike the Christian examples discussed above, the official Islamic religious institutions do not have any incentive to alter their political stance in accordance with views prevalent within society. 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.

**Civil Society and Religious Actors in the Middle East**

The role of civil society in the Middle East has provoked significant debate among scholars. In particular, it has challenged the linear approach to democratization still popular in the early 1990s which argued that the presence of an active civil society was a prerequisite and significant factor towards attaining a transition from authoritarianism to democratization.\(^{15}\) The initial experiences in Latin America and Eastern Europe led academics to suggest that this would also impact on the Middle East.\(^{16}\) The fact that the region appeared to be immune to this apparent global trend
was blamed on cultural factors i.e. the undemocratic nature of the main belief system – Islam. There has been growing awareness that authoritarian states (not solely in the Middle East) which were affected by liberalization processes since the 1980s have not all negotiated the transition to full democratization. Carothers argues that many have remained in a ‘political gray zone’ where there is limited political space but ‘serious democratic deficits’. Instead, regimes appear to have adapted successfully to both domestic and international pressures by creating and maintaining institutions which at surface level would suggest political opening but in reality, ensure that decision making and significant power bases remain concentrated within the executive. In his discussion on the persistence of elections and their connection to the nature of the state, 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. Middle Eastern states in particular appear to have been successful in managing to maintain elite power. In most cases, ‘democratic’ experiments were a short-term response to economic pressures in the mid-1980s e.g. Jordan and Algeria. Regimes compensated for their inability to keep 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. This situation has been more durable in the Middle East due to a variety of factors including dependence on rentier income (oil, foreign aid) and the social contract mentioned above. As Wiktorowicz notes, the political context is important in explaining why the Middle East has not followed the Latin American and Eastern European models. In these two cases, a grassroots challenge to the regimes resulted in a strong civil society and forced the state to accommodate their demands. In contrast, the political changes experienced in the Middle East described above ‘was initiated by regimes without any significant mobilization or pressure from civil society’.

Hinnebusch outlines this transformation with regard to populist authoritarian states, arguing that the short-term impact of economic liberalization actually discourages democratization as the regime secures its survival by incorporating the private business sector. However, as some changes have occurred

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17 T Carothers, ‘The End of the Transition Paradigm’ *Journal of Democracy* 13(1) 2002 pp. 9
18 G O’Donnell, ‘Illusions about Consolidation’ *Journal of Democracy* 7(2) 1996 pp. 45
20 Q Wiktorowicz, ‘Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan’ *Comparative Politics* 33(1) 2000 pp. 46
e.g. more access to the ruling elite, increased media freedom and potential for civil society activism, he proposes that they should now be termed ‘post-populist authoritarian’. Crucially, he warns that such adaptations should not be regarded ‘solely as a survival strategy’ but ‘both a substitute for and obstacle to democratization’. Brumberg concurs that these measures should be seen as ‘tactical political openings whose goal was to sustain rather than transform autocracies’. This stalled process has been given numerous terms including ‘liberal autocracy’ and ‘pseudo-democracy’. Thus, the existence of a constitution, judiciary and regular elections are no longer seen as an indication of progress towards democratization.

Civil society would also appear to fit into this category of pseudo developments. Since the late 1980s, there was a significant expansion in the number of non-state organizations operating in Middle East countries. For example, in Jordan non-governmental organizations grew from 477 to 796 between 1989 and 1994 compared to 391 in 1985 while cultural societies grew from 42 to 156. Egypt also had over 17,000 registered organizations by 2003. While the role of civil society in other democratization processes is now disputed, there would appear to be several factors which help explain why the existence of civil society actors has not had a significant impact on the nature of the regimes. States have proved adept at controlling civil society through a combination of co-optive and coercive measures. Yom argues that Arab states are ‘harnessing civil society as part of a wider strategy of survival, manipulating the rules of the game to keep the prize of political change constantly out of reach’. Firstly, non-governmental organizations are required to legally register with a relevant ministry. Various conditions must be met which can include the submission of a list of founding members, approval of the programme and objectives of the movement and significant registration fees. In many cases, there are restrictions on ‘political’ activities and foreign funding. These strict conditions act as a disincentive to individuals wishing to establish such groups as they are aware not only of the encumbering bureaucracy they will have to negotiate to achieve their goal but also that they could be held personally responsible if the organization was deemed to act unlawfully, a term which is left deliberately ambiguous. Secondly, successful registration does not mean the end of legal restrictions. In some countries, organizers

21 R Hinnebusch, ‘Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the Middle East: An overview and critique’ Democratization 13(3) 2006 pp. 383-4
22 Ibid pp. 386
23 Brumberg, ‘Democratization in the Arab World? The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy’ pp. 56
24 Ibid pp. 56-57
26 Excluding the Gulf States, almost all other Arab states have such institutions. Regardless of whether they have continually been in existence or revived during times of crisis, few seem to be promoting an ongoing development towards full democratization.
28 Kassem, Egyptian Politics: the Dynamics of Authoritarian Rule pp. 104
29 SL Yom, ‘Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World’ Middle East Review of International Affairs 9(4) 2005 pp. 22
must gain legal permission to hold public gatherings and fulfil other requirements.\textsuperscript{31} Thirdly, if there is a strong civil society actor (often unregistered) working on human rights and/or advocacy issues, a rival organization will often be established by figures associated with the ruling regime. 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’.\textsuperscript{32} Such groups are likely to quickly gain legal status and issue reports on controversial issues to counter criticisms levelled at the government. For example, the National Council of Human Rights (NCHR) was formed in Egypt amidst much fanfare in 2004 under the chairmanship of Boutros Boutros Ghali, a long serving diplomat and former United Nations Secretary-General.\textsuperscript{33} In practice, the council is perceived as being mute on many issues and the burden of campaigning against human rights violations remains with other groups e.g. the Egyptian Organization of Human Rights. Fourthly, open harassment, arrest and detention can be used against specific activists who are regarded as undermining the regime. The notorious case of the Egyptian-American sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim demonstrated the extent to which the Egyptian regime was willing to target individuals.\textsuperscript{34} 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. As Wiktorowicz explains, ‘Under such circumstances, civil society institutions are more an instrument of state social control than a mechanism of collective empowerment’.\textsuperscript{35}

While the role of the state is an important determinant in explaining why civil society has not successfully challenged the authoritarian nature of the state, it must also be recognised that not all civil society organizations are active in fields which can be regarded as encouraging democracy promotion e.g. human rights. Instead, many of the registered groups are concerned with economic, social and cultural activities. Despite the difficult circumstances which they operate in as detailed above, civil society organizations can also be held partly responsible for failing to attract widespread support amongst the population. Groups often concentrate on a single issue, attract suspicion regarding funding sources (especially if financial backing originates from outside the region), fail to communicate effectively with supporters and wider society and often have an undemocratic internal structure.\textsuperscript{36} Therefore, the assumption in much of the early literature on democratization that civil society by its very nature would be supportive of democracy must also be questioned. Furthermore, civil society in the Middle East can be divided into secular and religious actors. This has also caused problems as the literature tends to assume that civil society actors by definition will be democrats, thus appearing to exclude Islamist

\textsuperscript{31} Regarding Jordan, see Wiktorowicz, ‘Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan’ pp. 50-51
\textsuperscript{32} Yom, ‘Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World’ pp. 24
\textsuperscript{34} As the founder of the Ibn Khaldun research centre, Ibrahim was deemed to have overstepped the self-regulated lines when he issued reports on sensitive issues including Coptic Christians, the lack of democracy in Egypt and the rehabilitation of militants. His detention, eventual arrest and flawed trial could clearly be construed as a warning to other activists to operate within the limits set by the government. For further information, see Kassem, Egyptian Politics: the Dynamics of Authoritarian Rule pp. 170-174
\textsuperscript{35} Wiktorowicz, ‘Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan’ pp. 43
\textsuperscript{36} Yom, ‘Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World’ pp. 18-19
actors who are not necessarily supporters of Western-style liberal democracy. Yom suggests that this has led to the assumption that ‘civil society organizations must be secular in ideology, civil in their behaviour, legally recognized, and supportive of democratic reform (islah)’. \(^{37}\) Given that religious-oriented movements tend to be the most active and have significant grassroots support, it would appear that the variation in Arab civil society and the acknowledgement that it is not and will not be a carbon copy of the Western model must be recognised.\(^{38}\) In general, religious-identified groups still tend to concentrate on social, economic and welfare issues as well as specific faith-based activities. The vast majority of these are understandably connected to the faith of the majority of the population of the region – Islam. These groups represent the wide variety of Islamic thought and practice encompassing huge associations affiliated to the state/state sponsored religious institutions, branches of transnational organizations linked to different Islamic trends and Muslim states, smaller neighbourhood institutions financed by prominent clerics, elite and businessmen and organizations connected to Islamist groups. Consequently, the government response depends on the message being promoted, the extent of activities which can be interpreted as having political implications and the standing of the individuals and financial backers to the regime. Again, this is not significantly different from the government attitude towards more secular civil society organizations. Regarding Christian institutions, the same variety can be found. There are two main focal points of organizations – faith-based activities which complement or add to those provided by the church and social and welfare services (which cater for Christians and Muslims alike). A well-known actor is the Egyptian Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS) attached to the Coptic Evangelical Church which is a recognized partner of USAID and runs several development programmes in Upper Egypt.\(^{39}\) As has been shown above, the level of state control of Islamic religious institutions raises doubt as to whether they can accurately be termed as part of civil society. This is not the case for churches in the Middle East. Instead, throughout the centuries, the official Christian religious institutions have retained their independence from the state.\(^{40}\) Before analysing 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

\(^{37}\) Ibid pp. 18  
\(^{38}\) Ibid pp. 20-21  
\(^{39}\) PS Rowe, “Building Coptic Civil Society: Christian Groups and the State in Mubarak’s Egypt” *Middle Eastern Studies 45(1) 2009* pp. 120  
\(^{40}\) Most patriarchs (church leaders) received legal recognition of their position from the Sultan which became known as the *berat or firman*. Only the Maronite Patriarch was able to resist this due to French protection but even this failed during World War One. See F McCallum, “The Role of the Maronite Patriarch in Lebanese History: The Patriarch of Lebanon?” *Chronos 15* 2007 pp. 68-69
of Christianity can be found in the contemporary Middle East.\textsuperscript{41} Corbon provides a useful categorization to give a brief overview of the different groups.\textsuperscript{42} The Chalcedon Orthodox represents the churches which upheld the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon (451)\textsuperscript{43} and due to 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 region (Constantinople which is the leading see, Antioch - now situated in Damascus, Alexandria and Jerusalem) and consequently, are spread throughout the region. It is not coincidental that the Greek Orthodox have been strong supporters of ideological currents which emphasise a shared Arab identity e.g. the Arabist movement from the late nineteenth century, Arab nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s and leftist political parties.\textsuperscript{44} 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 wanted its own religious hierarchy. The communities which resisted the imposition of religious beliefs from the empire also tended to be on the periphery and Maila argues that they began to develop their own regional identities as they had a specific homeland e.g. Egypt for the Copts.\textsuperscript{45} The four churches retain these distinctions through language (Syriac - Syrian Orthodox and Assyrian Orthodox, Coptic – Coptic Orthodox and Armenian – Armenian Apostolic), heritage and culture. The latter three 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.\textsuperscript{46} The second type represents Catholic missionary attempts to reunite the church in the Middle East. A now discredited policy led to the establishment of


\textsuperscript{43} For further discussion of the council controversies and their impact on the early church, see Valognes, \textit{Vie et Mort des Chretiens d’Orient} pp. 34-42


breakaway churches by the nineteenth century. In most cases, these have remained much smaller than their original communities (Greek Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Coptic Catholic, Armenian Catholic) with only the Chaldean Church (formed from some Assyrian communities) becoming more prominent. Thirdly, Latin churches can be found throughout the region. Given the different community backgrounds, the Catholic churches represent all the different approaches mentioned above including strong connection to a homeland and affiliation with a wider 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. In recent years, there has been a move towards ecumenicalism both through the Middle East Council of Churches and similar approaches at a national level. The main issues affecting Christians in the Middle East are constant emigration and its impact on the remaining communities and 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% of the population in Egypt (around four-five million), one-third in Lebanon (over one million), around 8% in Syria (a little under two million) and under 5% in Jordan (around 300,000).

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. The fact that these churches underwent a different historical experience from their Western counterparts meant that they escaped 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 in the Middle East. Therefore, the leadership role of the church (and its

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47 B Masters, Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001) provides a helpful overview of this policy.  
49 See the Middle East Council of Churches website, www.mecc.org  
50 For further details of the concerns facing the Christian communities in the Middle East, see F McCallum, ‘The Political Role of the Patriarch in the Contemporary Middle East’ Middle Eastern Studies 43(6) (2007) pp. 923-940  
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.\(^5^3\) 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.\(^5^4\) This system became institutionalized 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’.\(^5^5\) With time, each denomination achieved 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.\(^5^6\) This refers to the fact that the original *millet* system was abolished with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and also the more informal nature of the modernised version. These current systems can also be viewed as less discriminatory as they no longer have the *jizya* criteria and therefore, it can be argued that they are just an organizational structure rather than representing a hierarchical order. It would appear that the space occupied by the *millet* system could now be reinterpreted as part of civil society. After all, it is autonomous from the state and acts as a buffer and liaison between the state and individuals. Furthermore, the churches are not directly co-opted by the state. In this way, it would be expected that the state would attempt to control the extent of this autonomy just as it has tried to do with other sectors within civil society as detailed above. The following variables have been identified in order to compare the behaviour of Christian religious institutions in civil society in the Middle East. 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 with Egypt, Maronites with Lebanon and Chaldeans with 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


\(^{54}\) Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* pp. 63

\(^{55}\) Pacini (ed) *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: The Challenge of the Future* pp. 5

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 are likely to feel that they are vulnerable to any 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 groups 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 these policies and their security. This relates to the discussion regarding the role of religious institutions in authoritarian states which suggested that the existence of shared values and a common enemy which threatens the security and survival of both the state and church are prerequisites for churches to support the state. It would be expected that if a government is seeking legitimacy or needs to retain support from specific sectors, they are generally more positive towards Christian communities in the knowledge that such groups are wary that regime change could have negative repercussions for them. However, the alternative path to shoring legitimacy has historically been to turn to Islamic actors. In this context, Christian institutions are likely to be more critical of the regime as they are unlikely to perceive them as acting in their interests. Consequently, churches are faced with a dilemma, whether to defend communal rights (which often correspond with a wider human rights discourse) at all costs or to exercise some self-censorship regarding communal incidents 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 will 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 provide patronage. The following case studies in Egypt, Jordan and Syria provide an opportunity to examine the above variables.

**Case Study One - Egypt**

The Egyptian case offers an example of a dominant Christian community in a clear majority-minority situation. The Coptic Orthodox Church accounts for over 90% of the Christian population in Egypt, which in itself numbers around four - five million, although this is only around 5% of the overall Egyptian population. Furthermore, the remainder would mostly still identify as Copt although they belong to other branches of the Christian faith (Coptic Catholic or the various Protestant congregations). Indeed, the term Copt comes from the Greek *aigyptos* meaning Egypt which highlights the close relationship between Copts and the land of Egypt. While recent emphasis on Coptic identity is not seen as being incompatible with Egyptian identity, there is uneasiness over the ‘Arab’ component of national

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The Coptic Orthodox Church has a strong patriarchal structure and historically, the patriarch has tended to enjoy a temporal dimension to his authority. In the modern era, the church has been a strong supporter of the nationalist cause, perhaps wary that their ties to the West through a shared religion could leave them open to accusations of disloyalty. Under the leadership of the current patriarch Shenouda III, the modern version of the millet system would appear to be in operation. The patriarch is recognised by both the government and community as the spokesman and representative for the community. Thus, he is granted significant autonomy over the community on the assumption that this powerbase will not be used to challenge the state. The Egyptian government tends to adopt a laissez-faire policy towards the Coptic community. Its rhetoric emphasises national unity and the historical involvement of Copts in state and society. The state coercive powers are rarely used against the community. However, it is accused by the community of only reacting to problems rather than adopting proactive policies. Recurring issues affecting the Coptic community and communal relations 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.

There have been attempts to find alternatives to the 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 state means that power is concentrated in the executive and parliament is regarded as an arena to benefit from patronage networks. 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. Thus, secular actors are seen as representing the traditional elite and tend not to have legitimacy within the wider community. 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 deeply influenced by regime policies under President Sadat in the 1970s. The Islamization 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 tried to

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59 For more on the ethnic discussion, see CD Smith, ‘The Egyptian Copts: Nationalism, Ethnicity and Definition of Identity for a Religious Minority’ in M Shatzmiller (ed), Nationalist and Minority Identities in Islamic Societies (London, McGill-Queens University Press, 2005) pp. 58-84
60 Patriarch Kyrillos V was sympathetic to the nationalist movement, supporting the rebellion led by Ahmed Orabi in 1882 and opposing British policies during the 1919 Revolution which tried to divide the Egyptian opposition on religious lines. C Cannuyer, Coptic Egypt: The Christians of the Nile (London, Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2001) pp. 101
61 On Shenouda, see J Watson, ‘Signposts to a Biography – Pope Shenouda III’ in N van Doorn-Harder and K Vogt (eds), Between Desert and City: The Coptic Orthodox Church Today (Oslo, Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1997) pp. 243-253
draw attention to this neglect through several public initiatives including holding prayers at the site of a burned church, presiding over conferences demanding changes in legislation, arguing against government policy including constitutional changes to increase the role of Islamic law in Egyptian public life and cancelling religious celebrations to go into seclusion in the desert as a protest against government policies. Sadat interpreted such 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. Furthermore, some members of the church hierarchy believed that a return to the traditional role of the church as mediator and liaison rather than activist would greater benefit the community.

Since his public return as head of the Coptic Orthodox Church in 1985, Shenouda has operated within a revised version of the millet system. He has consolidated his position as leader of the church ensuring that bishops in prominent positions are his protégés. Having secured his authority within the church, he has also sought to ensure that the church is the significant organization in the lives of his community. The activities of the church have increased to encompass all aspects of life, serving to accentuate communal identity at the expense of alienation from wider Egyptian society. In terms of civil society activism, the church tries to integrate many Coptic organizations working on social, educational, welfare and cultural issues. Other initiatives include media publications and television ventures. Rowe argues that the willingness of the patriarch to speak out on issues relating to the community has led to the patriarchate becoming the ‘epicentre of protests’. Consequently, the patriarch is certainly able to portray himself as the spokesman of the community. Under Mubarak, the government has been willing to credit Shenouda with this position. The state is used to dealing with one figure as the representative of the community and the patriarch is given an honoured position at many state-sponsored occasions. The authoritarian structure of internal church governance also corresponds with general trends within Egyptian society and perhaps makes it easier for the church leaders to operate within a similar political environment. The Coptic Orthodox Church now resembles the Islamic religious institutions in the sense that it sometimes legitimises government policies. In 2005, the church magazine al-Keraza (edited by the patriarch himself) openly supported the candidacy of Mubarak in the upcoming presidential elections. Having experienced the brunt of Islamic radicalism and government acquiesce, the church has little doubt that the current regime, while not perfect, provides a stable environment for Copts to maintain their faith. This view also conditions the church’s approach to the annual International Religious Freedom Report issued by the US State Department which tends to highlight religious intolerance in Egypt. Aware that this garners a negative reaction in Egypt and can lead to accusations that Copts who have left Egypt sponsor such reports, thus raising

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65 Rowe, ‘Building Coptic Civil Society: Christian Groups and the State in Mubarak’s Egypt’ pp. 117-119
66 Ibid pp. 117
questions over the loyalty of the community; the church hierarchy regularly denounce the findings and the patriarch refuses to meet the visiting commission. Yet, this more moderate approach does not mean that the church no longer defends the community.

Shenouda has shown that he is willing to use his political capital to contest specific events. For example in December 2004, the Coptic community was in uproar over the alleged conversion to Islam of the wife of a Coptic priest. Demonstrations were held at the patriarchate illustrating the central role of the patriarch during any incident. Complaining that the state authorities had not returned the woman to the church in order that a priest could discuss her decision (as is normal when someone wishes to convert), the patriarch cancelled his normal activities and went to a desert monastery – an extremely symbolic act which provoked memories of the Sadat era. This incident was resolved when the woman was returned, stated that she had not converted and was allowed to remain in a convent. However, the government was criticised by many Muslims for caving in to the demands of the church at the expense of someone’s free will to choose their religion. This incident highlights that in Egypt, conversions become a public issue. The government clearly wanted to avoid any escalation and co-operated with the church. This arrangement would appear to work as long as the patriarch limits this type of intervention. Thus, not all communal incidents receive patriarchal attention and Shenouda is always careful to praise the central government especially President Mubarak.

It would appear that Shenouda is aware of the tightrope that he must walk in order to maintain his privileged position as head of the millet. 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. Therefore, Shenouda has avoided the fate of his Islamic counterparts by maintaining some autonomy from the government. His 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 and is closely connected to the community consensus on the performance of the state with regard to its part of the millet bargain i.e. protection of the community. Consequently, the key objective of the Coptic Orthodox Church is to secure and maintain the future of the community. While this could theoretically be achieved under a truly democratic state, the real concerns that alternatives to the existing regimes would be less tolerant of this religious minority, has led the church to operate within a neo-millet system and thus, continue its support for the current regime in Egypt.

Case Study Two – Jordan

In Jordan, the informal millet system is also in evidence in a clear majority-minority situation (Sunni-Christian). However, one significant difference from Egypt is that there is not one dominant Christian group. Most denominations are represented

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69 BBC News, ‘Egyptian Pope goes into seclusion’ 20th December 2004
For a discussion on this controversy, see McCallum, ‘Muslim-Christian Relations in Egypt: Challenges for the Twenty-First Century’ pp. 75-76
including Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Latins and Protestants. The Jordanian Christian communities are also much smaller than their Egyptian counterparts, not necessarily in terms of percentage (5%) but certainly the actual size – 300,000 maximum. 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, the majority of Christians identify as Arab and are proud of their tribal origins. This is replicated in the church hierarchies. Christians are split further by the Transjordanian/Palestinian divide within Jordanian society. 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, the existence of Christian tribes meant that the monarchy was able to liaise with tribal notables in the same way that it did for Muslim tribes. Secondly, an alternative liaison was kept through the religious representatives. In this Jordanian modern 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 neo-millet aspect is also relevant as this system is not viewed as discriminatory as was the case in the past. This is partly due to the Jordanian state’s tolerant policies towards its Christian communities. Christians have been appointed to important government and diplomatic positions and are active in economic and societal life. 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. 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 Christian, 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. Any concerns still tend to be dealt through

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74 Ryan, Jordan in Transition: From Hussein to Abdullah pp. 27
75 This view was repeated continually during interviews with leading political and societal figures in Jordan by author, September-October 2008 and January 2009.
this personal patronage system rather than the more institutionalised parliamentary system. While the church leaders are able to voice issues relating to their church, it is less evident if they articulate concerns from the community which do not correspond to this positive view. The church leaders recognise that the Jordanian monarchy allows religious pluralism within the limitations of a Muslim-majority state. Like most Arab states, the main credible alternative to the existing regime appears to be the political faction of the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, Christian religious leaders are wary of the implications this could have on their religious freedom. Similarly, while the state recognises the status of the religious representatives, it is clear that they are not perceived as having significant political power 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 dealt with by the patriarch (in the traditional churches). As only the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem visits Jordan regularly, this decreases the likelihood of the church leaders getting involved in overtly political matters. Furthermore, the Jordanian monarchy appears relatively secure and in contrast to some of its neighbours, enjoys a certain amount of legitimacy among the population. Therefore, 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. While there are some lay actors and individual clerics raising issues through civil society organizations, these too suffer from the same fragmentation, lack of co-ordination and apathy which afflicts the churches themselves. Therefore, the weak situation of the churches in Jordan (in reference to their size and amount of denominations) combined with their fear of regime change in the kingdom, has led to a situation where they support the neo-millet 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.

Case Study Three – 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% with the remainder of the population coming from other ethnic and religious groups such as the Alawi, Druze, Christians and Kurds. The existence of other groups decreases the sense of vulnerability that one distinct group is likely to 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% of the population, a little under two million in total. 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 Baath ruling party. Although the traditional *millet* system was in existence during the Ottoman years, independent Syria especially since Baath rule in 1963 has focused more on the role of the individual rather than as a communal representative. 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 multiethnic and religious groups. In Syria, the Baath state has used its political party as a vehicle to achieve this aim. In this case, accentuating that the integration of each group makes the entire Syrian nation is also an attempt to avoid accusations of minority rule. The fact that the ruling elite come predominantly from the Alawi sect (which has struggled to be regarded as a branch of Shiism and is still regarded as heretical by conservative Sunnis) helps to alleviate the situation of the Christians. The political role of religion is perceived as a threat to the regime. Thus, Islam is not used as a legitimizing tool to the same extent as other countries. The constitution states that Islam must be the faith of the president but it is not the state religion. The Asad regime has also categorised Islamists as an enemy to the state. Therefore, religion is not seen as relevant to participation in society. 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 any 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, especially regarding the state. 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

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80 Fares Khoury was an influential figure in the independence struggle and became Prime Minister of Syria. Michel Aflaq is regarded as one of the founding ideologues of the Baath Party. G Corm ‘Ou en est la presence chretienne en Orient?’ *Confluences Mediterranee* 66 2008 pp. 165


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 departments and branches of government. Under President Bashar al-Asad, annual meetings have been instigated at festivals. This goodwill is due to several factors. Firstly, the regime is aware of its vulnerability as the ruling elite are predominantly from the Alawi sect and is keen to build alliances with others who share not just a common enemy (Sunni dominance and the threat of militancy) but also similar values. Secondly and related to this point, 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. There is concern that the rise of other actors within the Christian community would be more vocal in promoting democracy. 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 Baath 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 their survival regardless of wider developments in the country. Therefore, the Christian religious institutions have prioritised preserving their status within both the community and society over challenging the Syrian authoritarian state.

Conclusion
This examination of the role of religious institutions under authoritarian rule has demonstrated that they too are affected by conditions inherent in the type of civil society which is allowed to function. 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. The churches and regimes share some common cultural and societal values, in particular, their concern about the Islamist threat. 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 democratization means that they continue to be supportive of the status quo, even if there are ongoing concerns. This is especially true when they are the only significant minority in a specific country. This system also reinforces the temporal position of the church especially the hierarchy, through access to state patronage and allows them to resist any challenges from other civil society actors from their own 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.

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 is tempered by the knowledge that the state is still the ultimate guarantor of their security. In conclusion, the overriding objective of the churches in the Middle East is to secure the survival and prosperity of their communities. Democracy promotion will continue 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.