

# 1 Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East

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## Overview

When the twentieth century opened, Muslims, Christians, and Jews inhabited shared worlds in the region that stretches across North Africa and through western Asia. They held in common daily experiences, attitudes, and languages – even foods that they cooked and ate.<sup>1</sup> They rubbed shoulders in villages, city neighborhoods, and apartment buildings, and crossed paths in shops and markets.<sup>2</sup> In the history that this book examines – a history that goes roughly up to the start of World War I in 1914 – these contacts were on wide display.

The richness and depth of this shared history was no longer apparent as the twentieth century ended and the twenty-first century began. Indigenous or permanent resident communities of Jews and Christians had dwindled, following the impact of wars, decolonization movements, and the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict, all of which propelled waves of migration. The Islamic societies of the Middle East were more solidly Muslim than ever before in history.

During the twentieth century, Jews dispersed almost completely from Arabic-speaking domains. By 2014, for example, the Jewish population of Egypt numbered just forty or so people<sup>3</sup> – a steep drop for a community that, at its peak during the 1920s and 1930s, had included some 75,000–85,000 members, many with deep roots in the land of the Nile.<sup>4</sup> In Libya, not a single Jew remained by 2000.<sup>5</sup> In Turkey, whose territory was once a haven for Jews fleeing the Iberian peninsula in the wake of the Reconquista, just eighteen thousand remained in 2012.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the largest Jewish population living within an Islamic polity may have been in Iran, a theocratic republic that justified its official tolerance for non-Muslims on readings of the Qur'an. Iranian government census data from 2012 only counted about nine thousand Jews, but outside observers estimated that Iran may have actually hosted a Jewish population that was closer to twenty-five thousand.<sup>7</sup> The striking exception to this pattern of Jewish diminution

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was Israel, whose mid-twentieth-century creation provided a haven for Jews around the world but at the same time uprooted several hundred thousands of Arabic-speaking Muslims, together with a proportionally smaller number of Christians, who became known as Palestinians.<sup>8</sup>

During the twentieth century, Middle Eastern Christian populations also diminished. In Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria, historic Christian communities persisted but dwindled as a proportion of the population.<sup>9</sup> A dramatic version of this shrinkage occurred in the territory that became the British mandate of Palestine, where in 1900 Christians had comprised perhaps 16 percent of the population. A century later they accounted for less than 2 percent in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza – a demographic shift that resulted from voluntary migration, displacement, and probably also lower birthrates.<sup>10</sup> Twentieth-century change was even more extreme in Anatolia, a territory that belonged to the Ottoman Empire until the empire's demise after World War I, but then became the heart of the Republic of Turkey. Approximately two million Christian Armenians were living in Anatolia in 1915, when Muslim Turks, Kurds, and *muhajirs* (the latter Muslim refugees from Russian imperial expansion in the Caucasus) carried out a series of massacres and forced marches that nearly annihilated them.<sup>11</sup> Today, only about sixty thousand Armenians remain in Turkey as citizens, while the Turkish population as a whole is 99 percent Muslim.<sup>12</sup>

As the twenty-first century opened, many Christian churches, monasteries, and other landmarks – in Israel, the West Bank of Palestine, Turkey, and parts of Jordan – had lost the local Christian populations that once sustained them. One scholar remarked that these Christian sites ran the risk of becoming theme parks for Western tourists, and thereby cash cows for Middle Eastern governments eager to boost their tourist revenues.<sup>13</sup> In Syria and Iraq, meanwhile, civil wars prompted Christians to flee abroad disproportionately even as one-third of Syrians – Muslims and Christians alike – became refugees by 2016.<sup>14</sup> And while economically motivated migration from Asia and Africa added diversity to Middle Eastern populations (with workers from Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and other backgrounds arriving in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel), migrants tended to be short-term guest workers.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the Middle East, permanent resident and citizen populations had become more homogeneous in religion.

Locally rooted Jewish populations have vanished throughout most of the Middle East, vast numbers of Muslim Palestinians have lost their place in the “Holy Land,” and Christians in the region have experienced an attrition that one observer called a “never-ending exodus.”<sup>16</sup> So then

why bother to tell a history of contact among Muslims, Christians, and Jews as this book does, by studying the Middle East before World War I? Why focus on community – even comity – rather than on conflict, rupture, and trauma?

Looking back on the expanse of Islamic history, many historians have argued that Islamic states, with few exceptions across the centuries, tolerated cultural diversity and promoted stability so that Muslims, Christians, and Jews were able to persist, coexist, and often flourish together. Islamic civilization, thus understood, was a collaborative and amicable enterprise. Other historians, however, have emphasized violence and tyranny as leitmotifs of Islamic statehood, arguing that non-Muslims fared especially badly during long periods of political decline, however one dates them. In interpretations of the twentieth century, an emphasis on repression persisted, with critics pointing to cases such as the Armenian massacres (1915), the Arab-Israeli conflict (1948–present), and the Lebanese Civil War (1975–c. 1990) to emphasize a Middle Eastern propensity for a kind of political violence that drew on religious antipathies.

The long history of intercommunal relations in the Islamic Middle East may never have seen a “golden age,” but neither was it a saga of perpetual crisis. A sober look at history suggests that, in most times and places, relations between communities were, as one might say in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, *kwayyis* (“pretty good” or “okay”); Muslims, Christians, and Jews simply persisted in proximity. Daily lives were the sum of getting by – the quotidian with an admixture of tension and rapport. When the twenty-first century started, this picture of the unsensational in Middle Eastern intercommunal relations did not prevail in Europe and North America. Instead, the more common notion was that the history of intercommunal relations in the Middle East reflected what one may call a “banality of violence,” with routine, even absentminded, religious conflict assumed as the normal way of life.<sup>17</sup>

In an essay collection titled *Imaginary Homelands*, the novelist Salman Rushdie (b. 1947) suggested not only that “description is itself a political act” but also that “redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it.”<sup>18</sup> Certainly redescribing a lapsed world may offer a way of living with the past, in the sense of putting up with it, recovering from it, and coming to terms through a *modus vivendi*. This redescribing involves choice and selection – what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur characterized as an active searching for the past, a going out and doing something, in the perpetual sifting of history for meaning.<sup>19</sup>

In sifting through the past, this book offers an alternative to the “banal violence” interpretation of the Middle East by reclaiming the history of

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the mundane in social contacts that wove the fabric of everyday life. It analyzes the complex roles of religion within Middle Eastern societies. And it studies the tension between individuals and collectives vis-à-vis religious identity. There are two reasons for focusing on this tension. First, people are quirky, so that what one Muslim, Christian, or Jewish person did in a particular place or time may not have typified Muslim, Christian, or Jewish behavior collectively. Second, and increasingly in the modern era, Islamic states in the region struggled to classify and treat people as members of religious collectives, in accordance with Islamic law and tradition, while respecting the needs, responsibilities, and aspirations of people when they were thinking, speaking, and acting on their own, as individuals.

I will now elaborate on the idea of the history of the mundane and consider the spatial scope and timescale for this study. After explaining the book's approaches and assumptions, I will present the book's arguments in a nutshell.

### **Picturing the Mundane**

Sometime around 1900, a chocolate company called D'Aiguebelle, operated by Trappist monks in Drôme (southern France), published a series of chromolithographic cards with explanatory texts on their backs. These purported to show and tell the story of Turkish, Kurdish, and Circassian atrocities perpetrated against Greeks and Armenians in the 1890s.<sup>20</sup> If the images alone failed to convey the story of Muslim-Christian conflict, then the captions on the reverse were explicit. One card shows the "Pillage of the Monastery of Hassankale and the Murder of the Patriarch": there in the picture rests the patriarch, at that moment still living but fallen and bloodied near the altar, as Muslims carry off loot. The caption on the reverse explains that on November 28, 1895, "Musulman" marauders burned, pillaged, and murdered their way through the district where the monastery was located; the marauders spared only three villages out of forty, and forced survivors to convert to Islam. Equally evocative from D'Aiguebelle's chocolate cards are those illustrating the decapitation of Greek insurgents in Crete, the dragging of Armenian corpses through the streets of Galata in Istanbul, and the sale of Armenian captives as slaves. The last two cards presented atrocities against Armenians twenty years before the events of 1915, which survivors and their heirs later remembered as the Armenian Genocide.

How did these particular images shape public opinion among French chocolate lovers in the late 1890s – people who came to possess chocolate cards depicting bucolic scenes, masterpieces of medieval Christian



Image 1 *Massacres d'Arménie: Arméniens égorgés à Ak-Hissar*, c. 1895–96, by Chocolaterie d'Aiguebelle (Drôme, France). Chromolithographic chocolate card. Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania Libraries. Caption on the reverse states that the image depicts Armenians massacred by Circassians in the market at Ak-Hissar, in the Vilayet of Ismid, on October 3, 1895.

art, French monarchs and their castles, maps of the French Empire, and so forth<sup>21</sup> For the person nibbling on chocolate, and considering the cards that came in its wrappers, the images may have reinforced the notion that in the Ottoman Islamic world, outrageous sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians was common to the point of mundane. These cards, which as a “democratic art” were items that many schoolchildren collected and traded,<sup>22</sup> broadcast news in western Europe about grim conditions for Christian Greeks and Armenians farther east. (Certainly the D’Aiguebelle monks regarded them as vehicles for promoting a “Christian conscience” and social “catechism,” particularly among children, who were their target audience.<sup>23</sup>) Like the French picture postcards of the same period, which presented studio-staged fantasy portraits of seminaked (but still head-veiled) Algerian Muslim women, these D’Aiguebelle chocolate cards advanced fantasies and stereotypes about the peoples of the “Orient.”<sup>24</sup> As humble as they were, the chocolate cards wielded power and contributed to the waging

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of discursive wars that recall the social critic Susan Sontag's famous essay on photography, the "ethics of seeing," and the role of the shooting camera as a weapon.<sup>25</sup>

If anything, popular European and North American associations of the Middle East with banal religious violence have become stronger than they were a century ago, as a quick survey can show. In 1993, the political scientist Samuel T. Huntington (1927–2008) published an article in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, in which he speculated on global trends in the post–Cold War era. "World politics is entering a new phase," he claimed. Henceforth, among humankind, "the dominating source of conflict will be cultural ... [and] will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations." Huntington foresaw a "clash of civilizations" in which some would be more prone to violence than others. He predicted special problems "along the boundaries of the crescent-shaped Islamic bloc of nations from the bulge of Africa to central Asia," and concluded, "Islam has bloody borders."<sup>26</sup> Huntington was not the first to describe a "clash of civilizations" between a "Christian West" and "Islamic East."<sup>27</sup> Certainly his portrayal of Islam's "bloody borders" tapped into a deep discursive history that stretched at least as far back as 1095, when the Roman Catholic pope, Urban II (1042–99), issued his call for a crusade. Nevertheless, the "clash of civilizations" became Huntington's trademark, while ensuing events led many observers in news outlets and blogs to describe his prognosis as "prophetic" (as even the most casual internet search makes abundantly clear).

In the 1990s, around the time that Huntington published his article, Sunni Muslim extremist groups were becoming increasingly strident in their endorsement and pursuit of violent jihad. Some of these groups, consisting of Bosnian Muslim fighters and Arab Muslim volunteers, had begun to prove their mettle in the Balkan or Yugoslav Wars (1991–c. 2001), which sharpened regional, ethnic, and religious lines of distinction.<sup>28</sup> In 1998, Osama bin Laden (1957–2011) tried to stake out a leadership position at the forefront of international jihadists, by declaring a "World Islamic Front" dedicated to "jihad against Jews and Crusaders." It was the duty of every Muslim everywhere, bin Laden asserted, "to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – ... in any country in which it is possible to do it."<sup>29</sup> The goal, he declared, was to liberate Jerusalem's al-Aqsa mosque (and by extension, the land of Palestine from Israeli Jewish control) and the Great Mosque of Mecca. The latter goal contained an oblique reference either to American troops, who had arrived in Saudi territory in the wake of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, or to the ruling house of Sa'ud, which controlled the holy sites of early Islam in western Arabia.

The subsequent terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, exceeded the worst expectations of the most pessimistic political analysts. In the wake of this tragedy, American scholars produced a vast literature on the themes of “what we did wrong” (entailing a critique of Western imperialism and cultural hegemony in the Middle East), “where they went wrong” (suggesting a generalized Muslim failure to construct stable and progressive Islamic societies in the modern age), and “what Islam really is” (attempting to dismantle popular stereotypes among non-Muslims that have associated Islam with terrorism and violence).<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, bin Laden’s “world front” expanded but atomized, and developed “franchises,” to use the commonly invoked marketing term that made Al-Qaeda sound like a fast-food chain. Al-Qaeda’s ostensible affiliates went on to stage attacks on civilians in a variety of places and venues: a synagogue in Tunisia (2002), a nightclub in Bali (2002), subways in Madrid (2004), and London (2005), and more.

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the US government and some of its allies launched wars in Afghanistan (Al-Qaeda’s training ground) and Iraq (where 9/11 offered a pretext for unseating a brutal dictator who had played no role in the attacks). The US invasion of Iraq triggered, in turn, an Iraqi civil war, as ethnic and sectarian groups and factions jockeyed for power. In the seven years following the US invasion, many Iraqi civilians died amidst violence – perhaps one hundred thousand people<sup>31</sup> – the vast majority of them Muslims (representing both the Sunni and Shi’i sects of Islam). Unknown numbers died or led diminished lives as a result of the auxiliary phenomena of war, such as damaged medical infrastructures and psychological traumas.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, western Europe witnessed a rising tide of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim-immigrant sentiment as some politicians and pundits questioned the ability of immigrants to assimilate into liberal host societies. Among questions asked were these: Could a woman wear a *burka* or *niqab*, thus covering her face, and still be French? What about a girl in a French government school? And if such a female was not French-born, was she worthy of receiving citizenship in France? (In a case that received considerable attention in 2008, the French government answered this last question with a “*non*.”<sup>32</sup>) An even more sensational episode occurred in Denmark in 2005, when a newspaper published a set of editorial cartoons lampooning the Prophet Muhammad. Many Muslims around the world took grave offense and staged protests. But many Danes, non-Muslims, and liberal Muslims took offense, too, resenting efforts to curb free expression, and viewing protests as another iteration of banal violence by Muslim conservatives.<sup>33</sup> In early 2015, local militants claiming an affiliation with a Yemeni

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branch of Al-Qaeda staged an attack in Paris on the French newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, which had also published satirical portrayals of the Prophet Muhammad and Islam, and in a coordinated attack, slaughtered shoppers at a kosher grocery in the city. These events confirmed popular fears in the West about Muslim anti-Jewish sentiment and suppression of free speech, while seeding anti-Muslim xenophobia.

Other crises that appeared to have some religious dimension – for example, between the Israeli government and the Palestinians, between the Russian government and Chechens in Chechnya – persisted in the background, riveting Muslim viewers throughout the world via satellite television.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, amidst the Syrian Civil War which erupted in 2011, a jihadist insurgency group, which had already established a foothold in Iraq after the US invasion of 2003, seized control over parts of Syria after that country's descent into chaos. Outsiders tended to call this entity by various acronyms, such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and *Da'ish* (based on the acronym of the group's name in Arabic). Claiming to lead a revived caliphate in the parts of Syria and Iraq that it controlled, supporters of this group engaged in egregious acts of violence against Muslim opponents, Christians, Jews, Yezidis, and others, and spawned copycat affiliates in places like Libya. Meanwhile, *Da'ish* sympathizers in western Europe perpetrated outrageous acts of mass murder, killing scores in Paris and Brussels during attacks in 2015 and 2016 that targeted people in cafés, a music hall, an airport and metro station, and other venues of everyday life.

New violence, meanwhile, begat memories of old violence. In 2013, as one of his first deeds as pope of the Roman Catholic Church, Francis (born 1936 as Jorge Mario Bergoglio) canonized the 813 “martyrs of Otranto” who had reportedly died at the hands of Ottoman forces in 1480 when they refused to convert to Islam. In doing so, he completed the canonization process that his immediate predecessor, Benedict XIV, had started, building, in turn, upon an initiative that Pope Clement XIV had opened in 1771.<sup>35</sup> The canonization of the Otranto martyrs suggested the importance of persistent memories of jihads, crusades, and mutual martyrdom in imagined, and continually reconfigured, histories of Muslim-Christian relations.

Conflict between communities in the Middle East is easy to imagine when stories and images of animosity abound in books, on the news, and in other popular media. But what does it look like for communities to share history, and to spend decades in a state of proximity characterized by relative quiet? What method can one use to gain access to the un-sensational, the un-newsworthy, and the day-to-day familiar, before capturing it in words?





Image 2 “Guard turc à la porte de St. Sepulchre” (Turkish Guard at the Gate of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem), c. 1885–1901, Bonfils Collection, Image Number 165914. Courtesy of the Penn Museum.

The method used here is to draw not only on history books, but also memoirs, cookbooks, novels, anthologies, ethnographies, films, and musical recordings, which can offer insights into cultures of contact. However impressionistically, such sources can yield insights into the history and anthropology of the senses – the sounds, tastes, touches, and smells that have added up to shared experience.<sup>36</sup> One can find evidence for contact and affinity, for example, in shared Arabic songs and stories, sung or recounted by Muslims, Christians, and Jews;<sup>37</sup> in the remembered smell of jasmine blossoms, threaded and sold on strings after dusk; in “recollections of food” that “have been wedged into the emotional landscape,”<sup>38</sup> like a particular bread sold on street carts during

Ramadan;<sup>39</sup> even affection for the same bumps in the road (a sentiment that one young Jewish woman expressed to a documentary filmmaker, as she moved through Tehran in a car).<sup>40</sup> Then, too, there are common sights, spaces, and places – rivers, monuments, landmarks, humble abodes, cafés. From the nineteenth century, photographs and film media appear as well to “thicken the environment we recognize as modern.”<sup>41</sup> Photographs can remind us of what we may otherwise forget: for example, the long history of Muslim custodianship in caring for and protecting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (built on the site in Jerusalem where Jesus was reportedly crucified). Indeed, a photograph from the well-known, late nineteenth-century French firm, Maison Bonfils, captured such an image for posterity, by showing three Muslim men and a dog resting in a niche at this church’s entrance.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Middle East: Pinning Down a Slippery “Where”**

This book seeks to tell the history of intercommunal relations in the Middle East during the modern period up to World War I. But in fact, the terms “Middle East” and “modern” are both very slippery, so that scholars over the years have been debating – and changing their minds about – what they mean.

Among English speakers, the “Middle East” has been more of an idea than a fixed place, and the region associated with the term has shifted. In 1902, an American naval historian and evangelical Christian named Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) – a man who believed in the “divinely imposed duties of governments”<sup>43</sup> – coined the term “Middle East” to suggest the area stretching from the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf eastward to the fringes of Pakistan. Mahan intended the “Middle East” to complement rather than replace the extant term “Near East,” which in his day suggested the region from the Balkans and Asia Minor to the eastern Mediterranean. After World War I, however, the term “Middle East” gained momentum, until by World War II it was displacing “Near East” for current affairs.<sup>44</sup>

Reflecting larger geopolitical trends, some places that English speakers had once deemed “Near Eastern” did not make the transition to “Middle Eastern” in the mid-twentieth century. Thus during the Cold War era of the early 1950s, the US government’s Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reclassified Greece and Turkey (which had joined the Council of Europe a few years earlier) as “European” rather than “Near Eastern” for purposes of its analysis.<sup>45</sup> (Their reclassification points, of course, to the fact that “Europe” has also been notoriously slippery as an idea.<sup>46</sup>) At the same time, other areas – notably the Arabic-speaking countries of North Africa as far west as Morocco – became more closely associated