The violent suppression of the protests against the Asad regime in Syria as of 2011, and in particular the apparent upsurge of sectarian antagonism, have a severe impact upon communal relations in the country. Indeed, some of the developments described in this chapter may by now have been changed or reversed.

Half a century of secular and socialist – yet primarily military and autocratic – rule in Syria has failed to bring about full equality for all of its citizens. The issue of the accommodation of religious plurality, both within and outside Islam, is still unsettled. Personal status law continues to be rooted in religious legal principles. Earlier attempts by the Ba’th regime to introduce an entirely secular constitution were met with such strong popular protests, particularly in urban centres, that the then president (Hafiz al-Asad, father of the current president Bashar al-Asad) was forced to extend the privileged status of Islamic law in dealing with matters of family and individual life. As a result, non-Sunni Muslims and Christians are being denied full and equal citizenship. This does not, however, mean that these groups are unprotected; as a matter of fact, many of those belonging to a minority support the Asad regime because of its neutral position in religious affairs. Nevertheless, the subsidiary and ambiguous status of minority Muslim and non-Muslim communities is at the heart of the debate on citizenship.

Roughly 75% of the Syrian population adheres to Sunni Islam and, combined with its legacy of state support over many centuries, this particular reading of Islam has preserved its preferred status in the Arab Republic of Syria. Today, the Christian communities account for less than 10% of the

---

1 This paper is based upon ongoing research in which the reading of texts, in particular publications by Alawi authors, is combined with fieldwork focusing on the broader context of these publications. In particular, the focus is on the organization of publishing, readership, and the relation of recent trends in publishing in connection with other developments, particularly, recent trends in shrine culture.
population, while around another 15% adheres to traditions which are often coined as Shiite. However, apart from a tiny minority of Twelver Shiites, this category also includes a number of non-mainstream Shiite rites, such as the Alawite, Druze and Ismaili. In contrast to the Sunni and Twelver Shiite traditions, those of the Alawi, Druze and Ismailis are not sharia based; they are instead esoteric and, by lacking a strong scriptural tradition, mainly rely upon ‘popular’ devotion, in particular shrine culture. Interestingly, all of these communities appear to have rapidly secularized over the last century when compared to the Sunni Muslims and Christians. However, their communities remain close-knit, if not religiously, then perhaps ethnically.

Syria stands out – as did Iraq before the American-led invasion – as a dictatorial, yet secular state in which, for better or worse, the various religious communities, in particular the Christians, are allowed a fair degree of public space. Even so, when comparing the Syrian condition with that of another of its neighbours, namely its ‘historical partner’ Lebanon, it is striking to see the contrast in dealing with a religiously diverse population. Syria and Lebanon, both of which are of Ottoman heritage and have had an interlude of French rule, have developed significantly distinct ways in which to deal with religious diversity.

### Middle Eastern Contrasts

Religious diversity is a key issue in the Middle East. In Lebanon, the acknowledgement of that diversity underpins the political order. The various religious communities – 18 of which are officially recognized and 10 of which have a fixed number of seats in the national parliament – have fixed representations in a wide variety of public institutions, including local state services. A sectarian hierarchy has existed since formal independence, in which Maronite Christian and Sunni Muslim communities have privileges that fail to reflect the current distribution of the population over the faith communities, mainly at the expense of the Twelver Shi’ites. The national code prescribes that the president should be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim and the chair of the parliament a Shi’ite. Many of the officially recognized communities have developed their own personal status laws, thus reproducing sectarian differences through distinctive arrangements concerning marriage, childcare, inheritance, etc. Sectarianism has frustrated the formation of a cohesive polity and sovereign state authority. Moreover, it has nurtured clannish and partisan politics.