

## National Constructs

## Arab Nationalism and the Struggle against Communitarianism

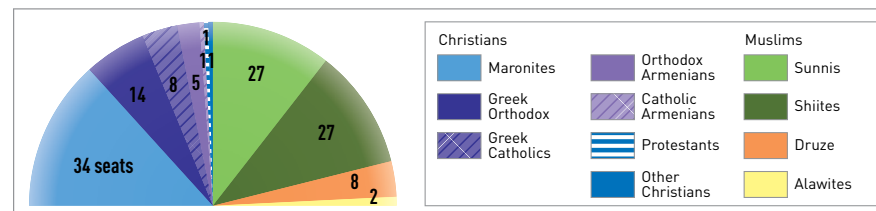
Once independence had been gained, the states of the Near East sought to maintain the territorial cohesion that resulted from the colonial partitioning, and achieve national unity. The task for the new states was to dissolve community-based identities in favour of a national identity. This proved difficult in Lebanon because the unity between Christians and Muslims, through the national pact of 1943, was based on maintaining institutional multiculturalism, or “communitarianism”. In Syria, political communitarianism was abolished in 1950, but it endured in Jordan: Christians, Chechens, Circassians, and Bedouins still had seats allocated to them in parliament. In the legal systems of all three countries, religious affiliation was taken into consideration in matters of marriage and inheritance. The absence of civil marriage thus contributed to maintaining a strong communitarian endogamy that states normally try to reduce as part of an effective policy of national integration.

Arabism was used by the states as a factor of national unity against religious divisions. Nevertheless, we must remember that Arab nationalism aimed to unite Arab countries into one political entity, which eventually called into question their individual existence. In 1958 Syria agreed to join Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (UAR). Following this example, the Lebanese unionist movement, dominated by Kamal Jumblatt’s Progressive Socialist Party, demanded that Lebanon also join the UAR. Kamal Jumblatt took up arms against the legitimate government of Camille Chamoun, who was only saved through the intervention of the United States. Finally, Syria regained its independence in 1961 when the UAR became more a synonym of annexation than unity. The myth of an Arab national unity continued to mobilise populations until recent times. For example, Hashemite Jordan experienced regular outbreaks of Arab nationalism spurred by domestic opposition and encouraged by neighbours aiming to weaken the regime.

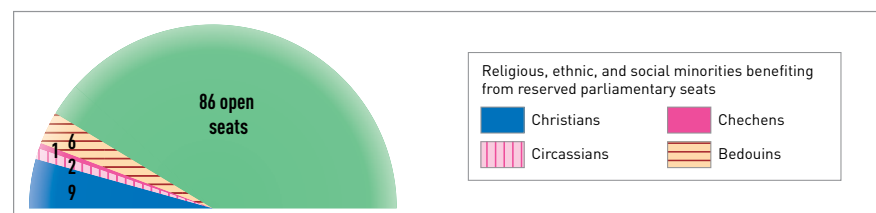
Arab nationalism, in its Syrian version, contributed to discriminate the Kurds (more than 2 million people) and the Turkmen (approximately 200,000 people) who inhabited vast territories near the Turkish border; these groups could call into question the territorial integrity of the country, unlike other non-Arab minorities such as the Armenians and Circassians, who did not constitute any such threat. The political Arabisation launched in the 1950s was

## COMMUNITARIANISM IN PARLIAMENT

### IN LEBANON



### IN JORDAN

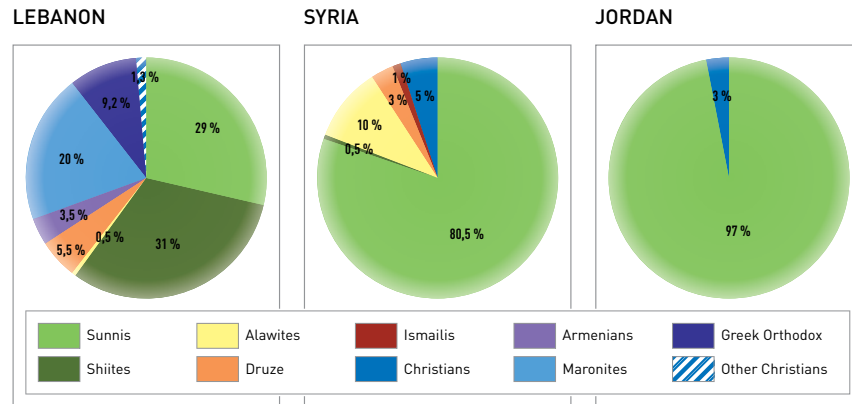


Sources: Lebanese and Jordanian parliaments.

intensified by the Ba’athist regime in 1963. It involved the creation of a string of Arab towns along the Turkish border, the prohibition of the Turkish and Kurdish languages, the revocation of Syrian nationality from part of the Kurdish population (the “*bidun*”, or “*sans papiers*,” i.e., those without documentation), and especially the regime’s abandonment of regions populated by the Kurds and Turkmen; this led to an exodus of the population toward the cities, where it was thought that they would Arabise more readily. This situation caused a revolt of the Kurdish population in 2004 and resulted in more than a hundred deaths. Promises of economic development and the regularisation of undocumented immigrants were not kept.

The Bedouins were also victims of the national constructs since their lifestyle—transhumance between the winter grazing lands in Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and the summer grazing lands in Syria and Jordan—had already been constrained by the new borders from the period of the mandate. The reclaiming of land by sedentary groups initiated in the middle of the nineteenth century, and instigated by the Ottoman authorities, intensified with the large agricultural projects of the Euphrates Valley. Blocked by state borders, and deprived of the best grazing lands by agriculture in the summer, the Bedouins gradually became more sedentary. The approximately 400,000 Bedouins of

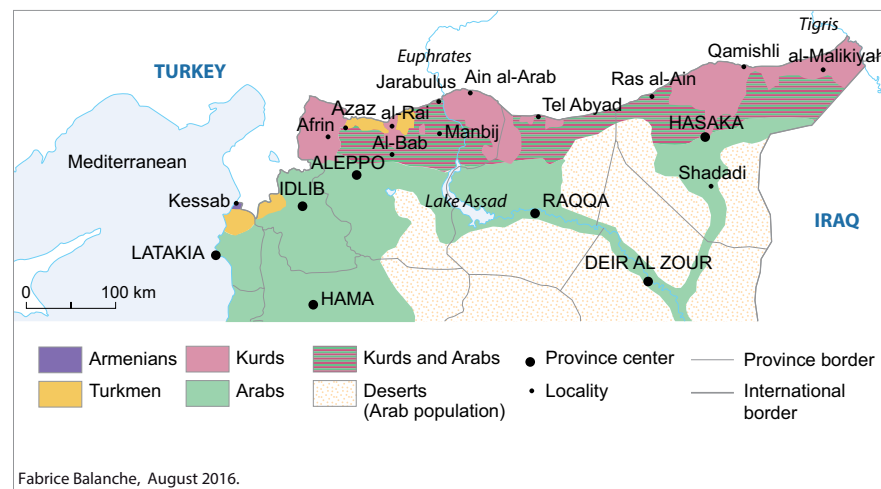
RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST, EARLY 21ST CENTURY



Source: Youssef Courbage.

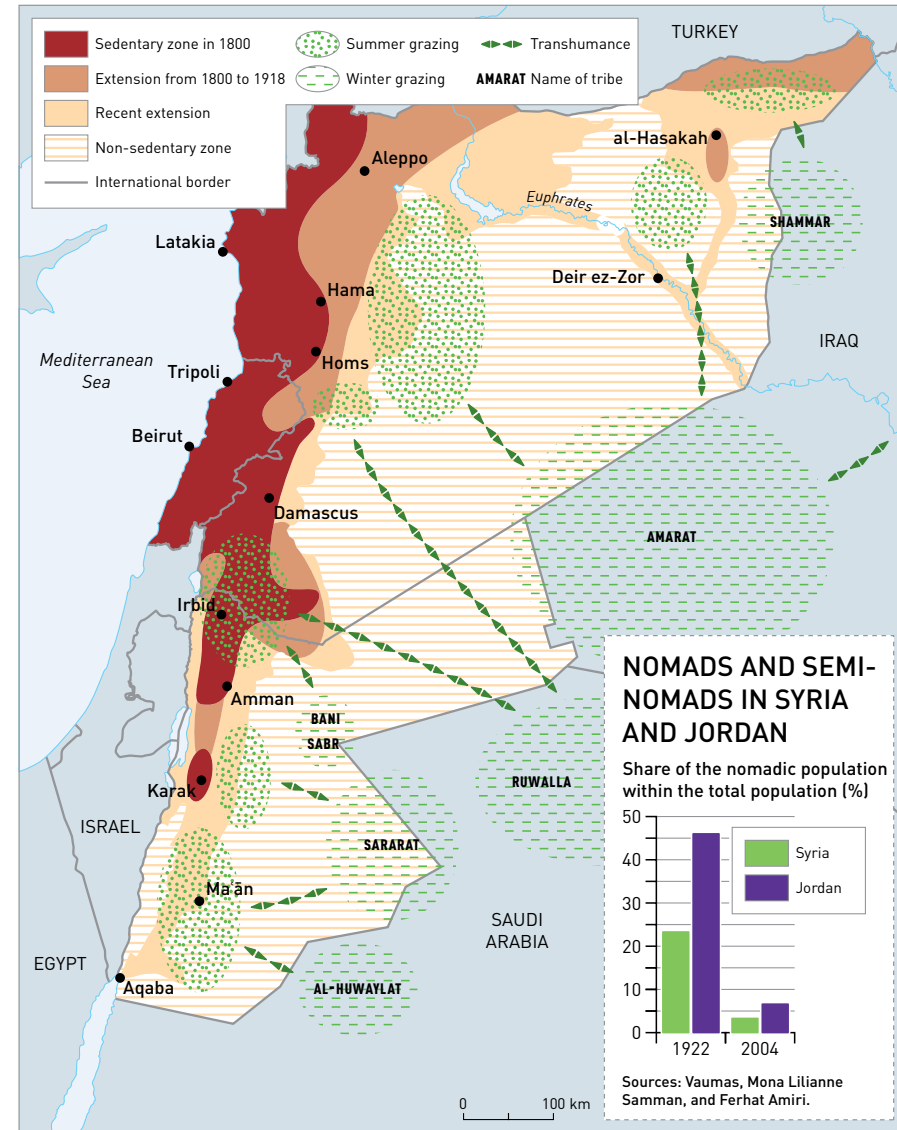
Jordan and the 600,000 of Syria became, for the most part, only semi-nomadic. The authorities tried to condition their sedentarisation by granting them farm land and offering them enhancements: water points, schools, roads, etc. As a migrant population, and consequently one that was difficult to control, their sedentarisation became a natural consequence of the construction of state entities.

KURDS AND TURKMEN IN THE NORTH OF SYRIA



Fabrice Balanche, August 2016.

STAGES OF BEDOUIN SEDENTARISATION



Fabrice Balanche, based on the *Tübingen Atlas des Vorderen Orients*.