

A Great Sorting Out: The Future of Minorities in the Middle East

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSHUA LANDIS

Al Noor Staff

Joshua Landis is widely recognized as one of the English-speaking world's foremost experts on Syria and the Levant. Raised in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, he has also lived in Egypt, Turkey and Syria, and speaks Arabic and French fluently. Professor Landis is currently the head of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma; he taught previously at Sarah Lawrence College, Wake Forest University, and Princeton University. He is a regular analyst on television and radio and is regularly quoted in publications such as the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, and Time Magazine. His expertise is regularly sought in Washington DC, where he advises government agencies and has spoken at think tanks such as Brookings Institute, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Woodrow Wilson Institute. Since 2004, Professor Landis has published the blog Syria Comment, one of the primary online forums for news, commentary and analysis on Syria and its neighbors.

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erhaps no American analyst knows Syria more intimately or personally than Joshua Landis. Fluent in many dialects of Arabic, Landis spent parts of his childhood in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, and has spent over 14 years living in the Middle East. Four of those years were in Syria, where he met his wife and built relationships with government officials and occupation activists alike. His blog *Syria Comment*, published since 2004, is one of the primary online forums for news, commentary and analysis on Syria and its neighbors. Landis is married to Manar Kachour, who—like President Assad—belongs to the Alawite sect. Her father, Shabaan Kachour, once served as the second highest-ranking admiral in the Syrian Navy. Unsurprisingly, Landis is well-connected with Alawites in Syria, and his analysis is rooted in a deep understanding of the sect's concerns and motivations. However, these family connections have not prevented

Landis from associating with critics of the regime. As early as 2005, his blog was well-known for interviewing Syrian opposition activists, providing them with a rare outlet for free expression in pre-revolution Syria.

On April 8, Professor Landis visited Boston College to deliver a lecture entitled “ISIS, Christians and National Identity.” Following his talk, which is excerpted below, he met with members of the Al Noor staff to answer our questions.

ISIS, Christians, and National Identity: An Excerpt

Joshua Landis: Let me make a comparison between what happened in Central Europe during World War II and what’s happening in the Levant states today. If you go from Poland to Palestine, all of these nation-states were created in 1919 at the Paris Peace conference, out of multiethnic, multireligious empires that had been destroyed. These were lands that did not lend themselves to neat national borders. After World War II, right down through Central Europe, you saw what I call a “Great Sorting Out.” Poland was 36% minorities before the war; afterward, it was 100% Polish. Czechoslovakia was 32% minorities; by the end of the war, all those minorities were gone. The borders didn’t change so much as the people were changed to fit the borders, with great movements of refugees. We know about the 6 million Jews who were exterminated. After the war, millions of Germans were also ethnically cleansed from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia, and even Crimea. In Yugoslavia a sorting out didn’t happen until 1990, but when it did, it exploded into ethno-religious civil war. You could even argue that what’s happening between Ukraine and Russia is—hopefully—the end of this process.

The Great Sorting Out in Europe was long and bloody, and a zero-sum game for minorities.

Let’s look at the Ottoman Empire and see how this “great sorting out” took place. Turkey—Anatolia—was 20% Christian in 1914. By the end of the Turkish

revolution in 1923 there are no more Christians in Anatolia. The three million Christians were either exterminated or ethnically cleansed. We know about the Armenians—the Turks exterminated them. They marched them out to Syria, and some of them survived, but most died. The Greek Orthodox who lived in Anatolia for over 2,000 years were also driven out.

Let’s look at Cyprus. Before 1973 Cyprus was a little mosaic, with Muslims and Christians living side-by-side. After the Turkish invasion, you saw another “great sorting out”—all the Muslims moved to the north, all the Christians moved to the south, and today there isn’t any mixing whatsoever.

Lebanon, of course, is the Noah’s Arc of the Levant. In 1932, the Christians were a slight majority, and after independence the Maronite Christians had the lion’s share of power. The Civil War (1975-1990) was long and bloody, and the Ta’if Accord ensured an even distribution between Muslims and Christians. Today the country is evenly split between Christians, Sunnis and Shiites. But there are over a million Syrian refugees in the country, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims. They’re not going home. It will completely upend the balance of power, in the same way Palestinian refugees helped kindle the civil war in 1975. The Lebanese story isn’t over.

Let me shoehorn Israel-Palestine into this discussion. The Jews are our minority. Of course today they’re a majority, but they were only 5% in 1840 and 33% in 1948. When the British left, the Palestinians thought they would be able to dominate. But the war was a terrible disaster for them, and two-thirds fled or were driven out. The Jews were able to turn themselves into a majority, the only minority in the Middle East that succeeded in doing so. But that’s of course because the Jews had been sorted out themselves—not only in Europe, where six million were killed, but throughout the Middle East. It’s a zero-sum game for minorities.

Where are the Christians in this “Great Sorting Out”? In Egypt, the Copts were more than 15% in 1910; today, we believe they’re less than 10%. In

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Syria they were 15% in 1945; today, they're probably less than 5%. In Palestine, Christians have gone. In Iraq, the Christian population has declined from 1.5 million in 2003 to less than 400,000 today. When ISIS took Mosul, more than 60,000 Christians left in one day. So Christians have been leaving, driven out, just like the Middle Eastern Jews did before them.

Let us go to Syria. The minority that's important here is the Alawites, who since 1970 have held power. They have helped the Christians, the Kurds, the Ismailis and the Druze. And today, the minorities tend to support Assad. The Syrian rebel militias are Sunni Arab, and they're largely Sunni Arab from the countryside. There's an urban aspect to this; wealthier upper-middle class Sunnis have stayed with Assad. They're worried about losing their money, their possessions, and their privilege.

As of the February 2016 ceasefire, the government controls about 65-70 percent of Syria's population; they have the Alawite heartland and the coastal cities. Other than the Kurdish areas, the rest of the country is under Sunni control. If you want to add in the bigger map and include Iraq, you can see what's happened. The Sunni regions have opened their doors to ISIS.

Almost all the rebel groups call the Alawites arfad, (rejecters of Islam), or majoosi (pagan magi). The Alawites are associated with non-Arab, non-Islamic, Zoroastrian Persians. Under Ottoman rule they were not considered Muslims, because they added a book and a prophet [to the Islamic canon]. If we were to put this in a US context—which doesn't work—the Alawites would be Mormons.

Early on, many of the militia leaders called for a Sunni state, for expelling the Alawites and the Christians. For example, Zahran Alloush (brother of Mohammed Alloush, the chief rebel negotiator in Geneva), made a video two years ago promising to resurrect the caliphate and to ethnically cleanse the majoosi, arfad killers. He said "the Ummayyads failed to do it in their day, but we'll finish the job."

It didn't happen—the Alawites smashed the Sunnis and drove millions of them out. The minorities have devastated Sunni power. In a sense you have this big Sunni population stuck between Baghdad and Aleppo, two bookends of Shiites that are getting international support. The end product is that Sunnis are getting smashed.

The Alawites don't want to keep fighting. They don't have enough Alawites to take back all of Syria. The trouble is, if they fall back, if they give up Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, they'll be overrun. At the same time, you can't ethnically cleanse the Sunnis—there are simply too many of them. Where are they going to go? And you can't just beat them down and put them under your foot.

I don't know how this all works out. The "Great Sorting Out" has certain policy implications. If I were giving this talk in Washington, I would ask, what can American power really do? We've seen American power save Yazidis, we've seen it drive back ISIS. We can tweak around the edges, but we've failed in our major effort, which was to create democracy in Iraq. Regime change to promote democracy has not worked. Think Libya or Yemen. We've tried it in a hundred different ways now—we negotiated the leader out in Yemen, we bombed and left in Libya, we occupied and tried to rebuild in Iraq. We've done the same thing in Afghanistan, but we haven't had success. And this is in part because we've launched this "Great Sorting Out" process, which we don't control and we can't understand.

Can you put this back together? That's the real question that weighs on everybody's minds. America presumes that it can. That there will be a unitary Syria, a political solution, that Assad will leave but the Alawites will stay, that they will embrace the Sunni rebels who call them majoosi, arfad and somehow live together, with the rebels wanting an Islamic state and the minorities saying no, you've got to have secularism. It's not clear how we're going to do that. And in that sense, Obama has been wise to keep us out of this swinging door. Once it became clear that only America would be able to turn Assad out, he got cold feet. He didn't want to own Syria. There are 1,500 rebel militias according to the CIA. You have to unify all those different tribes and militias who are fighting each other and don't like each other. We did that in Iraq. It was very expensive, and Obama didn't want to. It's a bad deal, as Trump would say. It's too expensive, so we're going to stay at home and build the middle class, not the Middle East.

America has spent \$5 billion on Syria. That's about equal to the spending of one week in Iraq. That tells you all you need to know about America's interest in Syria.

ISIS, Christians, and National Identity: A Discussion

During your talk, you said religion is driving the “Great Sorting Out” in the Middle East, as opposed to ethnicity, which drove it in Europe. How did this happen?

Joshua Landis: After the Second World War, Arab nationalism was the prevailing ideology. You look at Arafat, at Sadaam Hussein, at Nasser—who was of course the apotheosis of this. You look right across the entire Arab world all secular nationalist regimes. Now they became dictatorships, they oppressed their people, they were brutal, they were of course confused about local nationalism versus pan-Arabism. And ultimately, they couldn’t deliver to their people. And Islamism has grown up, progressively, as the alternative. Liberalism and its other alternatives were smashed, because they were much more vulnerable. The Islamists were more hardy, they had the space of the mosque, they had a hierarchy, zakat, they could get independent funding. There were a lot of reasons why the clerics and this establishment could provide an alternative ideology, and why that ideology won.

So you think that Arabism might not have been the right secular nationalism for the region? That if local nationalism had won out, things might have ended differently?

Joshua Landis: Yes, I do think so. The trouble was, it was very hard to get people to embrace these national identities, because they hadn’t known them before. They were totally new—Syria, Iraq, and the rest. People had lived in an Islamic, dynastic empire. They had local allegiances to their city, their region, but they didn’t have national identity. So to get them to switch to that was a real challenge, and some leaders tried to do it, but they failed. Pan-Arabism had a very big appeal.

Earlier, you mentioned that Syrians love their country, and that 76 percent of Syrians would like to maintain a unified nation. Where do you think this love of Syria

comes from, and do you think it has any viability moving forward?

Joshua Landis: I think a lot of Syrians look back at their pre-revolutionary lives, and they want to have that back. They want the old Syria back; the Sunni Arabs just don’t want to have Assad rule it. They want to rule it themselves. They want their life back, but without Assad’s soldiers, and the Baath Party and all of that. It’s very idealistic. But they miscalculated; they thought they could overthrow Assad. So Syrians don’t want to be divided up—the whole idea of Arab nationalism is that Sykes-Picot was bad, and dividing-up is a foreign conspiracy. Islamism is much the same thing—they want a caliphate and a unified Muslim world, and they don’t want to be divided up. Both Arabism and Islamism share this common notion that external conspiracies divided them, and are evil, and that they need to be united together.

But if the rationale for unity is Arabist or Islamist, is there any room left for minorities? Is there any way for Syria to forge a pluralist future?

Joshua Landis: It’s ultimately very hard to see how they’re going to put it back together again. I can’t see a way out. The Sunni rebels say you’ve got to get rid of this nizam, this regime, Assad, the whole Baath party, the whole Alawite hierarchy, all the soldiers and the officers. And of course it will be over the Alawites’ dead bodies, because they won’t give up. They know they’ll be killed if they give up power. And the regime has mobilized communities behind them. Alawites are sympathetic with the Assads today, because they think they’ll all be driven into the sea if they give up. And they very well might be.

What do you think is the best-case scenario for the Christian minority in Syria? Is it Assad staying in power for the long term?

Joshua Landis: I don’t think that Assad really can stay in power for the long term. I think if you were a Christian, or an Alawite, I think you would hope for Russia to impose a partition of Syria. And in a sense Russia would stay in that coastal region and in the

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urban areas where the Christians live, and America would take over the other parts, where ISIS is and where the rebels are. That would leave Assad and minoritarian rule in the coastal region. Many Alawites today would like an ethnic enclave, and they would like to include the Christians with them. They would keep Homs, Wadi al-Nasara, Damascus, the Armenian regions up near Kessab and so forth. Many don’t want the rest of Syria, because they don’t know how they can rule it—Der Zor and all those tribal regions. But they don’t really have an answer. This is the trouble. I think they would like to have an ethnic enclave, but they would like to have somebody to protect them in it.

You mentioned earlier that there is simply no political appetite for an expensive intervention in Syria. But if you forget domestic constraints altogether, could an outside adjudicator play a constructive role?

Joshua Landis: It depends on how much money you want to spend, and how many people you’re willing to send in.

Imagine a commitment of the size we had in Iraq.

Joshua Landis: If the United States were to occupy Syria, there would be jihadists blowing themselves up at roadblocks, the way they did in response to the Israelis in Lebanon, in the way they did in Iraq. It would be difficult to launch a unilateral occupation today, because the mobilization against it would be tremendous. On the other hand, in Syria today, people might be willing to accept an international peacekeeping force, with the Americans and Russians cooperating, for example. I think many Syrians would embrace it. They want to end the fighting, they’re desperate and they can’t see an end. So I think they would

accept such a solution. Of course there would be those Islamists who would come out to fight, and so forth, but I think that you could do it like in Yugoslavia.

Speaking of outside adjudicators, the United States originally hoped that Turkey might be able to fill this role. What is your comment on the role of Turkey in Syria, and especially whether or not it has been a reliable partner to the United States?

Joshua Landis: I understand how Erdogan got dragged into this, each step of the way. He made a lot of miscalculations, but so did Obama and everybody else. They all thought that Assad was going to fall. And of course Erdogan once had very good relations with the Assads, and America forced him to withdraw. Once he made the calculation that Assad was going to fall, he started to organize the opposition. He thought he could get a Muslim Brotherhood that would be just like his AK party to take over Syria and rule. And therefore he would have a mini-Turkey to himself, with an Islamist party ruling in a civilized way. And that’s what he put his mind to, and it just wasn’t going to work out. He didn’t understand the Arab world any more than America understood Iraq. Once he got his horns down, he started supporting Nusra and al-Qaeda, and ISIS—and he made all the same mistakes that America has made. Thinking they could use the Islamists to their own ends, beefing them up only to find they’re blowing up parks in Istanbul. So Turkey has made some terrible mistakes. But to some extent they’re stuck with Syria because they’ve got a 500-mile border and the Kurdish question. Erdogan had done all the right things for the Kurds and built the economy, and now it’s in a shambles. Now a war has started again with Kurds and how he’s going to stop that is very difficult to know. ♦