Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A Qualitative Study on Communal Belonging and Interfaith Relations among Jordanian Christians

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Author: Leonardo Del Piccolo
Advisor: Maria Småberg
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Abstract

The Jordanian Christian community is, in many aspects, a unique case within the MENA region. Mostly neglected by scholars and the mainstream public alike, it is perceived as unproblematic due to the institutional guarantees granted by the Hashemite regime, and the absence of apparent existential threats. Nonetheless, the copious influx of refugees from neighboring "sectarianized" contexts, the always-looming security threats, and the influence of Islamism among Jordanian society begs the question: how have such challenges been received by Jordanian Christians? And more generally, how do they perceive their role and presence within the country? To answer these questions, I adopted a qualitative research design informed by the symbolic interactionist framework and a thematic analytical approach to data. I collected 15 interviews, with various modalities, with Jordanian Christians from Amman and Fuheis, during a month-long fieldwork in Jordan. Consequently, the analysis highlighted the perceived challenges for religious coexistence in the country and the survival of the Jordanian Christian community, but also the capacity of its members to resist and reclaim their belonging to the land.

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Introduction

A "silent minority" (Valensi, 1986, p.819; Chatelard, 2013, p.19), or, a tranquil social component within the most stable Middle Eastern state. This is how Jordanian Christians could be labeled, and that is how such a group has often been perceived. That is also the reason why it has provoked so little scholarly interest throughout time (Droeber, 2012, p.1; Hager, 2018, p.214). While their coreligionists in neighboring countries have been suffering from civil war, religious divide, and discrimination, if not ethnic cleansing (Amnesty International, 2014), Jordanian Christians have always enjoyed a degree of institutional guarantees and security that is unmatched in the region.

One might wonder, then, about the reason behind this study. What is about Jordanian Christians that is worth investigating?

The values of cohesion and unity apparently held by the population (Wisman, 2019), other than the rhetoric of respect and brotherly cooperation exhibited by the regime (Maggiolini, 2015, p.49), stand out against the grim reality of displacement and persecution of Eastern Christianity (Zabad, 2017, p.39). In particular, scholarly debates on "sectarian" conflict in the region have also regarded Christian minorities, both as actors and victims. Among them, the Syrian civil may be regarded as the main example (Phillips, 2015, p.360). Either way, such epithet has also been attributed to neighboring contexts that share the exacerbation of religious identities as their defining element (Valbjørn, 2018, pp.616-617). In this respect, Jordan seems to have been spared by such a fate. Nevertheless, the copious influx of refugees from those "sectarianized" contexts, the always-looming security threats, and the influence of Islamism among Jordanian society begs the question: how have such challenges been received by Jordanian Christians? And more generally, how do they perceive their role and presence within the country?

As previous research on the topic is rather scarce or historiographical, with this thesis I aim to understand the reality of such a "silent minority" from within. To do so, I strive to avoid conforming to essentialist standpoints that

unfortunately happen to neglect the lived, palpable experience of those to whom such research should benefit the most: the people studied. For this reason, I draw upon Symbolic interactionism as an interpretative framework, while I take the chance to engage with the popular narratives about Eastern Christianity, and the concept of "sectarianism" itself.

Therefore, my research questions are:

How do Jordanian Christians articulate their communal sense of belonging, vis-à-vis the Muslim majority? Beyond the mere statements, how do they translate it into everyday practices affecting religious coexistence?

With my research, I aim to provide an original perspective on an understudied topic within the field (Droeber, 2012, p.1; Hager, 2018, p.214). Nonetheless, I argue that this study is relevant to the field also in other aspects. First, I aim to shed light on the everyday patterns of coexistence within a rather stable context of the region, thus making room for further comparative research. Secondly, by doing so, I hope to validly contribute to the field by helping to problematize essentialist framings of interfaith and majority-minority relations within Arab and Islamic societies. Thirdly, I aim to provide a useful understanding of one part of Eastern Christianity that, despite the challenges, is still neglected in its contemporary form. Therefore, I intend to add my modest contribution to the study of this community.

Background

Jordanian Christianity: some basic facts

Today, Christians roughly make up 2,2% of the Jordanian population. The Christian community includes a variety of church affiliations, among which the Greek Orthodox is the most conspicuous. Nonetheless, it also includes Greek and Roman Catholics, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Protestants (CIA World Factbook, 2023). The main centers of Jordanian Christianity are the towns of Fuheis and al-Husun, respectively located near Amman and Irbid, and the cities of Madaba and Kerak (Wisman, 2019). The Jordanian Christian community as it is today also includes different nationalities, among which the Palestinian one has become the largest one after the 1948 and 1967 exodus (Evans, 2022, p.293). Other nationalities are Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, Iraqi, and Philippine (CNEWA, 2023).

Christianity in Jordan: a brief history

The history of the Christian community in Jordan is rather unusual within the region (Maggiolini, 2015, p.38). Being one of the oldest in the world, as proven by several artifacts (Wisman, 2019, p.83), at the half of the 19th century it was already minoritarian and fragmented (Maggiolini, 2021, p.26). At the same time, Christians were significantly blended with the Muslim population, with whom they formed tribal alliances based on common interests in the largest cities of as-Salt and Karak. In this sense, religious affiliation was crucial insofar as it determined tribal affiliations, which acted as the most relevant intercommunal boundaries at the time (Maggiolini, 2021, pp.26-27). Furthermore, the absolute centrality of tribalism among Jordanian folks testifies to the insubstantiality of the Ottoman rule, hence of the "millet system" (Maggiolini, 2015, p.38). Accordingly, the absence of such institutionalized division explains the surprising contamination not only in terms of social customs but also inhabited spaces. In this regard, the rural centers were averagely mixed, except for Madaba, Fuheis, and al-Husun, which were exclusively Christian (Maggiolini, 2015, p.27). The mingling between Christians and Muslims

was also enhanced by the commonality of ethnicity, habits, and traditions. In this sense, Chatelard (2013, pp.39-69) provides an illuminating account of communal identities in Jordan at the time when the first Western Protestant and Catholic missions reached those territories in the second half of the 1800s. As soon as they arrived, she reports, Christian missionaries were able to witness the degree of religious syncretism that featured the local communities' customs that made Christians almost indistinguishable from Muslims. Regardless of their religious affiliation, the members of those communities refrained from eating pork or drinking alcohol, baptized their children, and worshipped the tombs of local personalities whom they regarded as "saints" (Chatelard, 2013, pp. 39-69). Indeed, this equilibrium was modified through the intervention of catholic missionaries who built churches, schools, and hospitals connected especially to the Holy See, but also to Protestant missions. As a result, many clans started to convert to such affiliations to access their services, at the price of giving up on the syncretic customs that shared with their Muslim neighbors (Chatelard, 2013, pp.73-105). Nonetheless, that did not produce any substantial cleavage at the intercommunal level (Maggiolini, 2021, p.27), and neither did the creation of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, as tribalism maintained its centrality (Maggiolini, 2015, p.43). Yet, what it did change in the latter case, were the official communal boundaries of the Christian community, which began to be framed as a "minority" vis-à-vis the state, while Islam became the state religion. First with the Organic Law of 1928 and the Constitution later in 1952, Christians had equality before the law and the exercise of their religion, guaranteed. Moreover, the Church authorities of each affiliation were granted administrative freedom, with the possibility to open and manage their schools and other social services (Chatelard, 2010, pp.478-481). Such a move has to be framed as part of a wider "social rentier contract" through which the Churches made up for the state's poor service provision, which also served the state to secure their support against opposition forces (Chatelard, 2010, p.501). By doing so, the regime tied its fortunes to the Christian minority (Maggiolini, 2015, p.48), according to a widespread pattern among coeval authoritarian states in the region (Belge &

Karakoç, 2015, pp.280-287). For this reason, the condition of Jordanian Christians seems more of a predicament, especially in light of the increasing influence of political Islam among the Muslim majority.

While Church representatives cherished the "liberal" monarchy for granted freedom and protection, however, the progressive infiltration of Islamist activists among various levels of Jordanian society had been a consistent pattern from the 1950s to the 1990s. When the regime opted for tolerance in respect to contrast the nationalist opposition, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood began to penetrate the state institutions, notably the Ministry of Education, as early as the 1960s (Wagemakers, 2020). Nonetheless, it was in the early 90s that they took the lead of many professional and university student associations (Adams, 1996, pp.517-518; Chatelard, 2013, p.359). As a result, they were able to influence different social strata at once. For example, other than coopting qualified professionals, the Muslim Brotherhood's offshoots became influential within university campuses by providing educational assistance to low-income students, in exchange for attending the mosque and wearing modest clothes (Adams, 1996, p.518). In this respect, they also scored their best result ever at the 1989 parliamentary elections, obtaining 22 parliamentary seats over 88 and becoming the first political force in the House of Representatives (Wagemakers, 2020). Although such achievement has remained unmatched, the government control allowed the Ikhwan to try to enforce Islamic values in society. For example, they incentivized gender segregation among public facilities and aimed to reduce alcohol production and consumption. They also went as far as to attempt to ban co-education, from 5th grade on, both at the state and private level, without succeeding (Adams, 1996, pp.520-521). Still, within the educational sector, they managed to modify school calendars to ignore Christian festivities, with repercussions for both teachers and students (Maggiolini, 2015, p.48). While the Islamist government experience was limited to 1989-1992, such developments bewildered the Christian community and worked as a reminder of their precarious status as a non-Muslim minoritarian group (Maggiolini, 2015, p.48).

Literature review

The question of the Christian "minorities" within the MENA region

It is not possible to frame the current state of the Christian community in Jordan without assessing one of its most striking features: the minority status. Though Christianity has always remained minoritarian after the Islamic conquest of Jordan, scholars in the field stress that the term "minority" is as recent as problematic.

According to Rowe (2018, pp. 3-5), Longva (2012, p.4), Monier (2023, p.298) and Murre-van den Berg (2016, p.6) the "minority" term ("ʿaqaliyya" in Arabic) (Longva, 2012, p.4) is intertwined with European colonialism and the rise of the "nation-state" concept. In fact, the very concept of a minoritarian group was non-existent during the Ottoman Empire, since the millet system did not consider the actual size of the subject communities (Rowe, 2019, p.4). As the Ottoman Empire declined, ethnoreligious groups in the Middle East region began to be called "minorities" as a way to frame their condition as of oppression, and thus in need of salvation from the Western powers. Hence, the "minority" concept was useful to instill and foster the desire for emancipation, following the "divide et impera" principle. Then, colonial powers advanced their connections with to-be-emancipated communities, thus increasing the political and cultural ties with them. As a result, they would become the bridgeheads of their hegemony over the eastern Mediterranean. An apparent example of that is the French patronage of Maronite Christians in Lebanon, which ended up first in the cultural approach between the foreign tutor and the minority, and later in the creation of Greater Lebanon as a predominantly Christian state (Rowe, 2019; p.3).

Indeed, the "minority" concept is strictly related to the idea of a modern nation-state and self-determination of peoples against the old imperial powers. In this respect, the majority principle replaced the one of community official recognition that was the basis of the millet system. Moreover, the term bears a negative connotation of harmlessness and estrangement from the local context, hence belittling the group's social role,

loyalty, and contribution to the wider community (Zabad, 2017, p.7). For this reason, it is often rejected by Middle Eastern Christians (Murre-van den Berg, 2016, p.6), who tend to privilege an "inclusive citizenship" principle, namely the attribution of the same rights and duties of the majority that implies the recognition of the millenary presence, belonging, and contribution of Christianity in the region (Monier, 2023, p.296). Nonetheless, Monier (2023; p. 299) contests the understanding of the "minority" concept as a mere colonialist importation, as it implies an "experience […] of marginalization or disempowerment" that can also be lived by an oppressed majority, as in the case of the Shias of Bahrain (Longva, 2012, p.7). In that sense, she coined the term "minority-ness" to frame that very sentiment experienced by discriminated groups, regardless of their number (Monier, 2023, p.297). This point is also shared by Longva (2012, p.5), who introduces the notion of "sociological minority" to highlight how the power relations between oppressor and oppressed do not automatically correlate to the groups' numerical ratio. Similarly, the concept of "minoritization" as illustrated by Ouahes & Maggiolini (2021, p.11) with direct reference to the Jordanian context, helps us underline the dynamic nature of the process that leads to social minorities. In other words, by "minoritization" they frame the process of "becoming a minority" as a historically contextual phenomenon. Moreover, it is a multifaceted concept that condenses stereotyping, exclusion, and subordination and allows us to go beyond essentialist and primordialist understandings of the region.

The scholarly contributions that I report herein are centered on the minority issue inside the MENA region. Nevertheless, as Sørli et al. (2005, p.160), White (2011, pp.4-5), Kymlicka & Pföstl (2014, p.17), and Castellino & Cavanaugh (2014, p.71) rightly evidence, we should be wary of claims of "Arab exceptionalism". More specifically, such statements reflect orientalist, hence biased understandings of the regional context as intrinsically violent and chaotic. In fact, minority issues are widespread in Asia and Africa and are related both to colonial and pre-colonial heritage. By the same token, Islam should not be framed as "exceptionally" incompatible with religious coexistence, either (Kymlicka & Pföstl, 2017,

pp.17-18). In fact, Heyberger (2010, pp.475-476) highlights how "political, social, and economic factors" have been even more crucial in determining the role of non-Muslim minorities in the region, than Islamic normative frameworks per se. Finally, such essentialist interpretations contribute to consolidating the understanding of Arab Muslim-majority societies as "mosaics", namely fixated intercommunal patchworks featured by primordial cleavages (Chatelard, 2013, pp.15-18).

As Rowe (2018, p.5) points out, religious minorities have often been understood merely within the framework of their relation with the respective majority. Similarly, as he further highlights (Rowe 2018 p.7), scholars illustrate the dwindling Christian communities in the region by contrasting them with their glorious past of thriving and peaceful coexistence, thus promoting narratives of "obscurity, endangerment, and nostalgia" (Rowe, 2018, p.7), where religious minorities are just passive testimonies of their looming extinction (Russell, 2014; Williams, 2016; Rasche, 2020; Di Giovanni, 2021). As a result, such an approach both prevents accurate portrayals of such communities and their relationship with the respective Muslim majorities (Heyberger, 2010, p.475) and negates their agency (Rowe, 2010, p.472). Therefore, as Chatelard (2013, p.33) argues, it would be more appropriate to reject the "mosaic" framing and look at intercommunal boundaries and relations as "waves", thus everchanging and contextual. In the next section, I further elaborate on the necessity to reject essentialist interpretations within the wider debate about the origin and features of "sectarianism" in the MENA region.

Religious communal identities in Middle Eastern contexts: theoretical perspectives

Although popularized especially in the past two decades, "sectarianism" still lacks a precise and shared definition (Valbjørn, 2018; Majed, 2020). In this sense, Valbjørn (2018, pp.616-617) illustrates the array of meanings given to the term. Thus, "sectarianism" may refer either to intra or inter-group relations, may (or may not) include ethnic belongings within its framework, or simply be a synonym for group identity. Furthermore, it is utilized "as a

catch-all concept associated with all kinds of assertions of a sect-centric identity, including the celebrations of religious festivals" (Valbjørn, 2018, p.616). Above all these interpretations, the term has become widely known concerning identity politics. That is the case of Nasr's (2007) discussion of the "Shia crescent" as a geopolitical and sectarian phenomenon that opposes the Shia and Sunni states of the region. Another example is given by Hashemi & Postel's (2017, p.4) theorization of sectarianism as a "process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity markers". I consider the aforementioned works not without a reason, but because they represent two different perspectives, respectively: the "primordialist" and the "constructivist" one. On the one hand, Nasr (2007, p.24) compares the contemporary Middle East with the European continent before the Peace of Westphalia. Hence, like Europe was able to discard religious identities and move towards a future of primacy and development, the Middle Eastern states should give up on millenary sectarian conflicts that limit their "potential" (2007, p.24). On the other, Hashemi & Postel (2017, p.4) rightfully replace "sectarianism" with "sectarianization" to underline its dynamic and contextual nature. Specifically, they do so by pinpointing the historical events that mobilized and reinforced religious belongings within the social sphere and vis-à-vis the state. Against this backdrop, scholars have mostly focused on the macro patterns of identity politics and collective mobilization. Above all, that came as a result of the 2011 Arab uprisings and their consequences on inter-sectarian relations. In much literature, scholars underline the importance of "sectarian entrepreneurs" in fostering social division for political gain (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p.21; Fibiger, 2018; Menshawy, 2022, p.145). Nonetheless, constructivists often try to reconcile the existence of longstanding, religiously defined social belongings with contingent political factors that reactivate them (Bishara, 2022, p.2).

As the aforementioned works suggest, scholars have especially linked the concept of sectarianism to the Sunni/Shia divide. Thus, after I introduced the vast and variegated debate on sectarian belongings in the MENA region,

I must clarify how scholars included the minority discourse within that framework. Castellino & Cavanaugh (2014), for example, assert that debates on sectarianism should frame minority issues, too. Nonetheless, they fail to avoid the pitfall of understanding the situation of the Christian community in the region solely through their historical subjection to Islamic rule (Castellino & Cavanaugh, 2014, pp.70-73). However, other authors that engage with minority issues drawing upon "sectarianization" as a concept (Valbjørn, 2018, pp.619-620) provide some useful insights to frame intercommunal relations as multifaceted, contradictory, and continuously negotiated in everyday life. For instance, Nucho (2016, p.7) introduces the concept of "everyday sectarianism" in her work on the Lebanese Armenian minority. Similarly to Hashemi & Postel (2017) and Ouahes & Maggiolini (2021), Nucho (2016, p.7) frames religious identities as dynamic and shaped by "structures, discourses, and practices of Lebanese state institutions and local municipal governments". Nonetheless, she asserts, they are also produced and re-produced "through the day-to-day exercise of 'being' within the material landscape those institutions produce, even within neighborhoods that are demographically diverse" (Nucho, 2016, p.7). In other words, it is a "dialogic process" (Nucho, 2016, p.7) between individuals and the space they inhabit, which necessarily entails and rests upon the exclusion of others (Nucho, 2016, pp.5-8; Hoffmann, 2018, p.90). Within the Syrian context, Bandak (2014) analyses the interrelation between space and identity among Damascene Christians. Particularly, he frames the urban space as the dimension in which communal belongings are continuously cemented and played out through patterns of space demarcation, notably vis-à-vis the Muslim community (Bandak, 2014, p.250). Furthermore, drawing upon Nucho (2016), Fibiger (2018, p.305) articulates the "everyday" dimension of sectarianism through the notion of "sectarian non-entrepreneurs", namely the people outside the political elite that "experience, accept, and reproduce sectarian dichotomies in their everyday interactions". Moreover, with regard to the Kuwaiti context, he shows that the religious divide among society is not exclusive to failed states and post-civil war contexts. Instead, it can be well applicable to more

stable frameworks (Fibiger, 2018, p.304). And indeed, as Tobin (2018, p.225) and Wagemakers (2022) show, with respect to Jordanian society, that sectarian discourses go beyond the occurrence of a perceived religious divide among society. Instead, they can be played out as a form of compliance with regime narratives (Wagemakers, 2022), or can emerge as a form of "vernacular" political discourse (Tobin, 2018).

Despite such attempts, it is still debatable whether the concept of sectarianism suits the analysis of minority issues, or not. As Fanar Haddad (2017, p.381) argues, it would be perhaps best to discard "sectarianism" as a theoretical tool altogether for it has been often used with sloppiness and as a catch-all concept, with the risk of trivializing the whole field of study of ethnoreligious belongings and conflicts in the region (Haddad, 2017, p.380). By the same token, Valbjørn (2021, p.623) warns against the risk of enhancing sectarian narratives by focusing on them while leaving other, and perhaps more central factors (namely, political, economic, or social) aside. As a consequence, they concentrate on sectarian regime policies and contentions within the political sphere, without actually tackling their actual consequences at the population level (Akdedian, 2019, p.422). In this sense, I add that most scholars in the field frame "sectarianism" as a mainly "macro" political phenomenon (Valbjørn, 2018, pp.612-616). Therefore, it becomes even trickier to look at Jordanian society through such theoretical lenses, as it is not featured by violent conflict or institutionalized divide (Tobin, 2018, p.225).

The deepening religious divide in Jordan

Literature about sectarianism in Jordan is even scarcer, compared to the neighboring contexts. In a way, that was foreseen by Hourani (1947, pp.59-60) through his extremely succinct illustration of the minorities of Transjordan. Perhaps, the main reason is the absence of apparent intercommunal conflicts and the homogeneity of the Jordanian population, overwhelmingly Arab and Sunni (Tobin, 2018, p.225). Nonetheless, in this section, I compare and analyze the few scholarly works addressing religious identities in Jordanian society.

While analyzing the literature on Jordanian Christians, I identify two main approaches: one political and historiographical, and the other, ethnographical.

The politico-historiographical approach is best exemplified by Maggiolini's (2015; 2021) works. Particularly, he analyzes the ways by which the rise of the Hashemite kingdom reverberated on the political, legal, and social boundaries of the Christian community. When discussing them, he argues that the construction of state institutions and a cogent legal framework produced a radical shift from the Ottoman era. Therefore, Jordanian Christians were forced to navigate not only their new role as the king's subjects but also as citizens, equal but distinct from the Muslims (Maggiolini, 2015, p. 40). From his perspective, then, that was the event that transformed the community as it is nowadays. In other words, the contemporary Jordanian Christian minority has been defined by its relationship with the state, especially through the church institutions (Maggiolini, 2015, p.50). This last point is further elaborated by Chatelard (2010, p.501), who highlights the role of the state in conceding large freedom of organization while taking advantage of their service provisions to compensate for their lacking ones. By its (albeit limited) availability of those institutions even to non-Christians (Chatelard, 2010, pp.491-499), the Christian community started to be recognized as of central importance.

Despite being necessary to contextualize the Jordanian Christian community, the aforementioned approach lacks depth insofar as the authors only focus on state-community and intercommunal relations at the institutional, official level. While Maggiolini (2015, pp.47-48) admits that official recognition and protection did not impede Jordanian Christians from feeling uncomfortable at the increasing influence of Islamism in national politics, he does not provide any insight on the actual effect of that on Christian-Muslim relations, nor on the sense of belonging among the Christian community. Nonetheless, Chatelard's (2013) contribution to the study of the Christians of Madaba, albeit predominantly historiographical, analyses some important aspects of their communal identity. Particularly, she engages with the central importance of tribalism both among Christians

and Muslims, and with the process of "spatial segregation" consisting of the clustering of the Christian community in the old city as a means to reclaim the ancestral bond between them and Madaba (Chatelard, 2013, pp.366-367). Similarly, another non-ethnographical, yet compelling contribution regarding collective identities among Jordanian Christians is provided by Hager (2018). In that case, by illustrating the contentions between the local Orthodox community and its non-Arab church representatives, she underlines the intermingling of Arab and Christian belonging (Hager, 2018, p.227).

On the other hand, research on the collective sense of belonging among Jordanian Christians has been more thoroughly conducted with an ethnographical approach. The first example of this kind is Haddad's (1992; 2000) work on church and national affiliations among different Christian communities in Jordan. Succinctly, she illustrates how their collective sense of belonging has been informed by the rural-to-urban migration patterns and the actions of church institutions. Moreover, she pinpoints the cultural differences between the Christian and the Muslim components, but also similarities, thus underlining the Arab character of the Christian Jordanian identity (Haddad, 2000). In that respect, Chatelard (2013) observes that evidence for that is provided by the importance of family and individual honor among Christians and Muslims equally. Nonetheless, she also points out how Christians are reluctant to admit that, given their tendency to publicly approach liberal values more than Muslims (Chatelard, 2013, p.224). The same findings are noted by Droeber (2012) in her research comparing habits and values among middle-high-class Muslim and Christian women. One more time, the author stresses the attempt, from the Christian part, to emphasize the differences from the Muslim side, rather than sameness (Droeber, 2012, p.76).

Nonetheless, not all ethnographical accounts of collective belongings among Jordanian Christians describe narratives of contrast. In fact, Schouten (2020) addresses an alternative standpoint adopted by Anglican priests in Amman. Namely, while witnessing the mass emigration of Middle Eastern Christians outside the region, they make a case for its survival by

asserting the image of a unified, proactive community, and by enhancing coexistence through interreligious dialogue.

Methodology

Approach of inquiry

In this chapter, I illustrate the methodological aspects of my work. More specifically, I clarify what research design I opted for, and how I conducted the research from start to finish.

Nevertheless, I should start by pinpointing that the epistemological underpinning of this thesis is the constructionist one. Adopting a constructionist framework means recognizing that "meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced, rather than inhering within individuals" (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p.85). Therefore, while my inquiry is undoubtedly empirical as it is based on data, I have sought to grasp the investigated reality as multifaceted, rather than to force it within the procrustean bed of specific theoretical boundaries. In this sense, I find it appropriate for understanding communal identities and intergroup relations.

Sampling and access

As to the sampling strategy, I opted for a mix of selected random sampling, snowballing sampling, and convenience sampling (Gerson & Damaske, 2020, pp.60-64). More precisely, I conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with adult Christians residing in Amman and Fuheis, whose ages range from 19 to 73. I aimed for numerical parity between males and females, albeit ending up with a 1:3 ratio. The age composition of the sample, on the other hand, was random and mostly depended on participants' availability. The same goes for the national background. In this sense, I find it important to pinpoint that I interviewed Christians with either a Jordanian background, Palestinian origins, or mixed. One person among the sample also claimed to be Lebanese but had lived in Amman for 35 years. As a rule of thumb, I aimed to include Christians with Jordanian citizenship to narrow the sample down to people born and raised within the country. In this sense, I aimed to exclude any Christian person who was not embedded within that social, political, and cultural context, both on a national and a local level (e.g.: specific parishes, neighborhoods, or towns). Overall, with my sampling approach, I did not aim to obtain a statistically

representative sample. Rather, I adopted a theoretical sampling strategy as an overarching framework, thus aiming for a sample that could help me answer my research question, rather than mirroring the actual composition of the researched population (Gerson & Damaske, 2020, p.46).

The reason behind my sampling strategy is the difficulty in reaching out to potential participants, both due to my position as a foreign student and the sensitivity of the discussed topics. In this regard, I have been suggested several times by my interviewees that members of the local Christian communities likely feel uneasy discussing their views on their community and interreligious coexistence in Jordan. Indeed, this represented one major obstacle for my participants' recruitment. Hence, I prioritized data collection over the composition of the sample, also due to time constraints to complete my fieldwork.

When it comes to the actual implementation of the aforementioned strategy, I sought help from community leaders both in Amman and Fuheis and occasionally, Christian friends of mine. To get to the community leaders, I actively reached out to them to explain who I was and what my research was about. As a result, I only received positive responses from them, albeit most of them were not followed up by concrete help. Nevertheless, I was able to collect most of my data through that combination of convenience and snowball sampling. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I sought to further diversify my sample once I realized that its component from Fuheis was prevalent. Therefore, I visited as many parishes and Christian organizations as possible to recruit any possible participants for the study. Nonetheless, the snowballing technique proved to be the most successful.

Finally, I must pinpoint the shortcomings of such a strategy. Indeed, the aforementioned sampling strategy is not optimal for generalizability, since the collected data originated from a relatively small network of people who are likely to be similar in opinions and background (Gerson & Damaske, 2020, p.62). Moreover, convenience sampling implies a strong degree of bias, given that participants partake entirely voluntarily and for several personal reasons. While I tried to minimize such deficiencies by

diversifying the sample as much as possible in terms of gender, age, and locality, I could not get rid of such flaws. Nonetheless, as I further discuss in the "limitations" section, the obstacles given by the very context and those related to my fieldwork specifically proved to be too binding. As a consequence, I accepted that an imperfect sample, while not ideal, can still suggest new directions for research that go beyond my thesis work (Gerson & Damaske, 2020, p.64).

Data collection

After having gotten in contact with the potential participants and verified their availability to partake in the study, I let them choose the setting for the interview, according to their necessities (Gerson & Damaske, 2020, p.132). Most of them asked to meet in private, either in person (at their place, or their office) or by video call (Skype/Google Meet). Others preferred to meet in public places, namely cafés. Before each interview, I provided the informant with a consent form (Appendix 2) where the aim of the research, my contact information and credentials, and the rights of the participant were clearly stated. Almost all interviews were conducted in English, save for one in Italian and another in both languages. After having collected the signed form, I started each interview by notifying the person that I was about to start recording our discussion. On one occasion, the interview was interrupted by a second person who joined the interview, thus becoming an additional interviewee. Another time, two participants (who are partners) invited me to their place to be interviewed but were adamant in their request of doing so alternately, but one beside the other. That was also because one of them did not speak English at a sufficient level so his partner helped as a translator when it was his turn.

As far as the interview guide (Appendix 1) is concerned, I followed Gerson & Damaske's (2020, pp.66-100) pieces of advice to build one as thorough as flexible. The guide touches upon a wide range of topics, yet not all of them have always been discussed. I understood my interview guide as a reminder of the key topics to cover throughout the interview, to avoid awkward silences and losing the flow of the conversation. That is especially true when the interviewee is available to concede more time for discussion. In

this respect, the average length of the interviews is one hour and twenty minutes, spanning from a minimum of forty minutes to a maximum of three hours and forty.

Throughout each interview, I always made sure that the interviewer felt comfortable and did not feel compelled to answer my questions, especially the most sensitive ones. While most of the participants seemed to be fairly comfortable, it also happened that on one occasion the interviewee asked me to stop the recording twice, because he was not. In fact, despite having thoroughly read and signed the consent form, he seemed to be worried that our conversation focused on "politics". As a result, I tried, in that specific case, to avoid any direct reference to Christian-Muslim relations and to "swim around" them hoping to obtain some relevant information.

Finally, the variety of modalities through which the interviews were conducted allowed me to evaluate the pros and cons of private/public settings, single/group interviews, and in-person/online interaction.

Demographics

Category	Type/Group	N° of Respondents
Gender	Female Male N=	5 10 **15**
Age	0-19 20-29 30-39 40-59 60-79	1 5 5 1 4
Locality	Fuheis Hashmi al-Shamal Irbid al-Jubeiha as-Salt Sweifieh Weibdeh Zarqa	7 2 1 1 1 1 1 1
Church affiliation	Catholic Greek-Orthodox	13 2
Family background	Jordanian Lebanese Palestinian Mixed: Jordanian + Palestinian	10 1 3 1
Employment	Priest Retired Student (university) Worker	2 1 3 9

Coding strategy and thematic analysis

After having collected the interview recordings, I edited them to cut off the silent parts and amplify the voices in case they were not sufficiently understandable. Then, I obtained some preliminary transcriptions of the interviews through two online services: Sonix and RevMax. Before doing so, I verified the terms and conditions relative to the confidentiality of the stored data. After that, the resulting transcripts were still inaccurate, due to the occurrence of Arabic names that the software could not detect. Therefore, I revised them by listening to the original recording, to obtain some workable material that was as accurate as possible. With this aim, I also included, whenever possible, references to changes in voice tone and volume that could be significant, other than physical gestures that the recording did not capture, but that I could well recall. Finally, in cases where the interviewees did not speak proper English, I avoided paraphrasing them, unless necessary to make them immediately comprehensible by myself and the reader. In addition to that, I also pinpoint that the interviews conducted in Italian were carefully translated to not alter their original content, nor how they were delivered.

At that point, I uploaded the files with the transcripts on Nvivo and started the coding process. Since my research question is quite broad, I generated what Braun & Clark (2013, pp.206-214) call "complete coding", consisting of coding any excerpt that could be related to the research question. There, I started to create "data-derived codes", namely codes that succinctly report the content of the related excerpt (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.207). At the end of the process, I obtained more than 700 codes, that I later aggregated into more general ones.

Research ethics

Ensuring the ethical treatment of the collected data is as crucial as tricky (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.64). And indeed, that is especially true for minority groups like the Jordanian Christians. As far as my research is concerned, several questions urge a reflection.

Since the topics touched upon during the interviews were particularly sensitive, I put a lot of effort into guaranteeing confidentiality (Galletta, 2013; pp. 177-178) to the participants. Before getting in touch with a potential interviewee, I always presented a consent form (see Appendix 2), following Gerson's model (Gerson & Damaske, 2021, p.198), that contained the aims of the research, and some of my data such as my university and master's degree program, other than my phone and email contact. Despite being already stated in the document, I always highlighted that the interviews would have been recorded and that the interviewee had the right to stop. Moreover, I made clear that the interviewees' willingness to participate and collaborate was at the core of the project. Hence, I explained that, if they wanted to take their availability back after the interview, I would have consequently discarded the recording. Overall, I usually made an additional copy of the consent form available for the interviewee to keep for their records. On some occasions, the interviewee was not interested or preferred receiving it as a .pdf file. Furthermore, I used copies of my consent form as a sort of "business card" and a factsheet of my research project, to stimulate word-of-mouth within the local Christian communities while preventively clarifying the guarantees given to participants. Finally, I always started my interviews by asking my interviewees to introduce themselves according to their judgment. I just provided them a few examples if they asked for them (e.g.: "where were you born?" or "What schools have you attended, growing up?"), but left them free to share with me as much information as they were comfortable giving.

Once I finished my fieldwork and started the transcription and coding process, I stuck to the guarantees stated in the consent form. Indeed, ensuring confidentiality is always a crucial step in this respect (Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp.62-63). Therefore, I anonymized the transcripts, keeping only the basic information to identify each interviewee and to easily compare the transcripts on Nvivo.

One important issue that arose throughout the transcription process concerns the use of online tools (Sonix and RevMax) to speed up the process. In this respect, confidentiality might be compromised if the recordings are made

available to external people. Nonetheless, that was not the case, as the transcription process was conducted automatically by the software. Moreover, I made sure to utilize services that were popular and reliable, and that guaranteed the privacy of the stored data.

Finally, I reiterate what said in the beginning regarding the trickiness of transparency and consistency with my claims (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.64). Confidentiality is difficult to reach since it requires a particular sensitivity in anonymizing data (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.64). Therefore, being my first experience with managing an original dataset, I could have accidentally kept some sensitive information within the transcripts. Moreover, whatever the claim about the aims of the research, such a process is "quite open-ended and iterative" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.64), and I can testify that by looking at my consent form, in which the reported aims are not the same as my thesis at its final stage. Finally, since qualitative research is about "telling a story", my version of it, and especially my conclusions, can define a very different type of research from what the interviewees thought (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.64). In this sense, I, as a researcher, hold ultimately more power than my interviewees, insofar as I end up processing their discourses through (overt) theoretical assumptions and (implicit) values that determine my positionality. I further elaborate on this point in the next section.

Positionality

"Positionality" refers to the "social locations and positions of the knower" that need to be addressed as a conditioning factor within qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.735). As I previously suggested, I, as a researcher, hold a position of power as soon as the interview starts and data are collected. In fact, the way I was perceived by interviewees could have influenced their answers or their overall attitude toward me and my research.

By doing my fieldwork within an extra-European context, the first question that I can reflect upon is being identified as a European and an Italian. As far as the former layer of identity is concerned, Europeans are generally perceived well among Jordanian Christians, just as other Westerners. The

researched community, as far as my sample is concerned, has a strong and longstanding bond with Western countries, mediated by the related diaspora community and relatively common life experiences abroad. Some have relatives and friends living in Northern Europe and Italy, too. Moreover, their education is predominantly influenced by Western values, compared to most of their Muslim peers. Therefore, I believe that such elements contributed to the syntony with one another since almost all the interviews conducted seemed to be rather enjoyable for both parties. Furthermore, Jordanians, as to my experience, seem to genuinely like Italians, perhaps because we are perceived as culturally more similar to them compared to other Europeans. Similarly, as most of my interviewees are Catholic, the perceived linkage between the Catholic Church and Italy could also have played a role in bridging the interviewee-interviewer gap. Consequently, my Catholic background, which was often known to the participants, also represented an element of connection.

As far as my ethnicity is concerned, I do not exclude that my skin color was relevant, either. As to my direct experience, many Jordanians seem to frame fair-skinned people more positively than their dark-skinned peers. Being a Caucasian man might have influenced the way I was perceived, too, although most of my interviewees are young and/or open-minded enough to not be affected by such racist bias.

Finally, given certain statements uttered by my participants, it seems that my research topic seemed to be relevant to them. In particular, several hoped that their voices on such matters could be heard, and were thrilled to partake in my study. That latter aspect is especially true for the youngest among the sample, as far as I could see.

Limitations

The first major limitation of my research is the language barrier. Since I am not a proficient Arabic speaker, I conducted my interviews in English. I avoided relying upon human or digital translators, as it would have implied further limitations in terms of accuracy and positionality (Williamson et al., 2011; Chiumento et al., 2018). On the other hand, being English proficiently

spoken only by a narrow portion of the Jordanian population, this inevitably translated into a drastically inferior basin of potential participants to draw upon. As a consequence, my sample is highly educated and fairly well-off. Therefore, further problematization regarding the entanglement of communal identity and income is left unexplored.

Theoretical framework

In this section, I address the theoretical tools that helped me make sense of the results. In particular, I address how symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 2012) is suitable for analyzing the sense of belonging among minority group members. Moreover, I clarify how such an approach can be considered appropriate within the wider field of Middle Eastern Studies. Complementarily, I critique the concepts of "sectarian identity" and "sectarianization" to clarify how I position my study within the field.

Definition of symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism has been defined as a "micro-sociological perspective that focuses on small-scale, often face-to-face, encounters between social actors, and the meanings they attach to their behavior" (Scott S., 2015, p.11). More precisely, it entails an anti-positivist, anti-essentialist approach, based on four assumptions: (1) individuals' social behavior is determined by the meanings through which they navigate reality; (2) group dynamics necessarily imply generating indications and interpreting the other components; (3) active interpretation of reality is at the core of the process that generates social acts; (4) social relations are everchanging and never static (Blumer, 2012, p.68).

Thus, the main feature of the approach, according to Blumer (2012, pp.70-77), is recognizing that the individual has a "self", namely that can interact with themselves to reflect, make plans, and so forth. Therefore, their actions are not simply responses to external stimuli, but original and independent efforts guided by their interpretations. This process, which he refers to as "self-indication", testimonies the person's agency even within the group or inter-group interactions.

Ultimately, symbolic interactionism is less concerned with "groups", "organizations", or the like, as its units of analysis, but rather on the people that make them up. Thus, such a framework allows me to escape what Brubaker (2002; p.164) calls "groupism", namely, "the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed". Coherent to the anti-essentialist stances of

symbolic interactionism (Hałas, 2004, p.254), Brubaker (2002, p.166) warns against adopting them as "categories of ethnopolitical practice", rather than "categories of social analysis". With that, he meant that focusing on intergroup division as an analytical framing might just reproduce the sample's discourses, instead of critically engaging with them. Similarly, such tendency can also be influenced by popular, yet essentialist concepts within the field of study. Therefore, I argue that focusing on individual cases to then understand patterns of behavior at the group level is useful, insofar as it helps avoid biases and simplistic understandings. As I further elaborate in the next section, such an important standpoint implies engaging with the concept of "sectarianism", as far as Middle Eastern Studies are concerned.

Symbolic interactionism and Middle Eastern Studies

As far as the field of Middle Eastern Studies is concerned, few scholars applied this framework to their research (Yanay, 1996; Zaiotti, 2006; Shirpak et al., 2007; Lengel & Newsom, 2014). As Lengel & Newsom (2014, p.88) point out, that is especially true for works focusing on social identities in the region. Nonetheless, I argue that such a "processural approach" (Lengel & Newsom, 2014, p.88) is particularly fit for researching them. By adopting it, I aim to understand how the individuals in the sample navigate and make sense of their social reality, without neglecting the patterns at the meso level (Stets, 2021, p.290). Therefore, such an approach is flexible enough to include more nuanced understandings of religious identities and inter-communal relations among the Jordanian society. In this regard, I make particular reference to the concepts of "sectarianism" and "sectarianization", as popular analytical frameworks among scholars in the field (Valbjørn, 2018, p.613). Some key examples of their application are reported in the literature review section. Here, I want to briefly problematize their application to micro-level studies such as the present one.

As Akdedian (2019, pp.422-423) rightfully points out regarding the Syrian context, current literature engaging with sectarianism exaggerates the importance of "sectarian political projects and the structural conditions of sectarianization", while neglecting "the different ways the phenomenon has

been socially experienced, interpreted, and redefined". As a result, scholars end up missing the actual ways in which the religious divide articulates and communal identities evolve within the lived experience of those concerned. On the other hand, whenever questioned, people enduring such phenomena first-hand reveal an overall contradictory entangle of narratives and identities that "sectarianization"-based analysis is unable to capture (Akdedian, 2019, pp.421-422; Deeb, 2020, p.218).

Of course, symbolic interactionism is not devoid of criticism. For example, the fact that it is not a theory, but rather a framework, led some scholars to pinpoint the impossibility of testing a hypothesis, hence nullifying any potential academic value (Stryker & Vryan, 2006, p.9). Other opponents argue that it fails to recognize "social inequality, power and conflict", given its focus on micro-scale interactions (Scott S., 2015, p.14). Some more than others argue that focusing on everyday interactions sacrifices the substance for the banal (Scott S., 2015, p.14). Despite such objections, I still argue that symbolic interactionism can be functional in answering my research questions. Macro social dynamics can still, on a micro-scale, reverberate on and be reflected by "patterns of interaction, normative conventions and dominant, agreed-upon definitions of reality" (Scott S., 2015, p.14). Thus, within the Symbolic Interactionist framework, macro and micro social dynamics are not isolated from one another but interconnected.

Symbolic interactionism: (social) space and social interaction

Since I aim to understand how Jordanian Christians understand the relationship with the Muslim majority, I have to pinpoint how symbolic interactionism may fit the analysis of intergroup relations. In this sense, I find it useful to underline its application to one key dimension of the intergroup encounter: the space (Knipprath et al., 2021, pp.193-194).

Symbolic interactionist theorists have long taken into account the importance of space for the individual's meaning-making process. In this sense, Blumer and McCarthy, as cited by Smith (2011, p.216), highlight the centrality of the interaction with "physical objects", to which the individual attributes their personal meaning. Consequently, the environment is

understood as a "lived space" (Merrifield, 1993, p.523), hence not a mere background for those who inhabit it, but as an entangle of meanings, experiences, and relations that they attach to and perform within it. By doing so, the individual delimits their world as far as they come to understand it. That applies to space at any level, either anthropic (Smith & Bugni, 2011) or natural (Leap, 2015), as long as it is experienced and especially, lived. At the same time, the act of defining the environment and navigating it leads to the creation and maintenance of both personal identities and eventually, group identities.

Since the individual determines the self by framing both "physical" and "social" (namely, individuals in their everyday roles) objects, the same thing happens at a collective level, when groups interact (or not) within that same space. For example, when people of different groups have barely if any, daily encounters with each other, they lack information to define them in-depth. As a result, they would probably rely on meanings that they learned from others in their group: namely, stereotypes (Knipprath et al, 2021, p.193). On the other hand, when they are pushed to share the same spaces continuously, and even cooperate within them, the outcome is the opposite. Namely, it happens that "differences across ethnic, religious, class, and other boundaries are breached and stereotypes are broken", while "interdependence and equal status perceptions" of each other are enforced (Knipprath et al., 2021, p.201). Alternatively, when groups compete to attribute their own shared meanings to the same space, further division may arise. In the case of majority-minority relations, moreover, such competition may be perceived as a threat by the latter (Bandak, 2014, p.255).

Finally, symbolic interactionism provides a useful framework to conceptualize intergroup relations starting from the actual experience of the participants. By doing so, I aim to provide an insightful perspective on the results, without yielding to essentialist or simplistic understandings.

Results

In this chapter, I illustrate the four themes created throughout the analytical process. Within each of them, I highlight some of the subthemes that I find most relevant to clarify its core meaning, or "central organizing concept" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.224).

Theme 1 - We used to be one, before

The theme expresses the idea that Christians and Muslims used to coexist not only peacefully, but almost symbiotically. This was due to a shared Arab culture to which both related to and the scarce relevance of religious identity in everyday life. Some interviewees pointed out that Islamic fundamentalism was introduced to Jordan in the 70s, therefore today's social divide can be ascribed to foreign influence, assisted by internal actors: notably, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Another driving factor for sectarianization was the refugee flows from Palestine first, and Iraq and Syria later, which drastically altered the composition of the Jordanian society. Areas that were once Christian then became Muslim, leading Christians to leave for Christian-majority zones.

Finally, one interviewee argued that sectarian conflict in the neighboring countries somehow influenced social divisions in Jordan, too.

Interfaith relations used to be good, long ago

Several interviewees among the eldest ones recounted how intercommunal relations were better in their young years, compared to the current situation. Overall, they told me about how conservative habits and ideas were less popular. For example, they pinpointed how Muslims used to wear less modest, western clothes, especially at university, while today most female students wear the hijab. Moreover, those who spent their infancy and teenage in the 70s reported that mixed classes between Christians and Muslims were all but unusual:

> And I would say about an example that there is a nearby town which is totally Muslim and Fuheis totally Christian. And at one time the because of the lack of schooling, the young boys from the Muslim

community used to come to town here to for education, high schooling. And our girls used to go there, especially for the scientific stream, because education is divided to… they call it the scientific stream and the literature stream. So we had a school in Jordan for boys, for the literature stream and, and the other time for scientific stream. So we used to exchange because the schooling was not mixed at that time. There are schools for boys and schools for girls only. […] So, you know, I mentioned that just to reflect that… The issue of religion was not widely spoken of. It was not an issue when it deals by the human relation between people. [Man, 63, Fuheis]

More generally, in those years religious identity played a significantly minor role in everyday life. Particularly, Christians and Muslims used to share the same urban spaces and friendly relationships between them were more frequent. For example, they used to invite each other to their respective religious holidays: something that is not usual anymore. That came as a result of traditional bonds between the two religious groups that featured the Jordanian society up to the first half of the 1900s. Consequently, religion was less relevant than established values, habits, and lifestyle, so some interviewees referred to that condition as "one community", together.

Based on his parents' experience before that they were like one community. They were visiting each other between Muslims and Christians. They were like one community. [Man, 37, Fuheis]

The negative impact of Muslim refugees on interfaith relations

Nonetheless, things have changed, and as conservative Islamic values spread across the country, the religious divide has become increasingly apparent. Throughout several interviews, the interviewee pinpointed the arrival of Palestinian refugees following the Nakba and the Six Days War as the starting point of the process. In fact, they argue, that although thousands of Palestinian Christians sought refuge in Jordan, the Muslim majority among them altered the demographic composition of the country. As a result, the Christians of Jordan have been further marginalized both on a national and local scale, as their communities suddenly became minorities.

Several informants referred to Madaba as an example of a Christian-majority city turned into Muslim-majority:

> But again, because of the demographic changes and even the municipality, for instance of Madaba. Very much like those in Fuheis. It used to be totally Christians, all mayor and member of the council are all Christians. Now, nobody have a chance, a Christian, to be elected. [Man, 63, Fuheis]

Other examples given by interviewees are the towns of al-Mafraq, in the north, and Karak, in the south. Another example of this phenomenon is the town of al-Husun at south of Irbid. In this regard, [Man, 37, Irbid] argues through his partner that:

> Back then, Husun City were having the majority of the Christian people. But after the Palestinian refugees start(ed) civilizing and resident and reside... Sorry... Residents in Husun, the majority become to the Muslim people. And that's where they show, let's say, discriminate discrimination against Christians. And when they feel that they are the stronger side, let's say, and we are the majority, we start having this aggressive attitude towards Christians. In Husun at least.

As we can see, one pattern shared by interviewees is to connect the arrival of Muslim Palestinian refugees and the loss of control on their own spaces. Moreover, as [Man, 37, Irbid] commented, some Christians also believe that this phenomenon paved the way for unprecedented hostility towards their group.

Islamic fundamentalism was introduced in Jordan from abroad

Jordanian society drastically changed from a demographic perspective, indeed. Nonetheless, that social phenomenon has been accompanied by the spread of Islamic conservativism across the country. According to several interviewees, that factor severely impacted the intercommunal relations between Christians and Muslims, leading to mutual avoidance and strengthening of the religious sense of belonging. In this regard, they traced

the causes of that back to the Jordanian political governments that have allowed Salafist parties to take root and thrive in the country. The main example of this is the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, installed in 1945 and still present at various strata of the society, other than the parliament. According to several interviewees, one of the actions that impacted religious coexistence the most was the reform of the educational system in an Islamic sense. As mainly guided by the Muslim Brotherhood, it progressively led to the integration of Islamic teachings and worldview in textbooks and curricula, since primary school. Since only a minority can afford private education, many among the sample agreed that the reform had lasting consequences on society and interfaith relations up to date. As [Man, 30, Fuheis] describes it:

> I hate everything they do, but they're definitely a very well organized party and a very functioning. And influential one, for that matter. Even though now they're kind of alienated by the government, but still they have a lot of influence nonetheless.

Another aspect that was mentioned was the role of external actors in promoting Islamic conservatism in Jordan. Particularly, some framed the gulf states as the main sponsors of Salafism in the country, by supporting preachers and religious institutions. Others, suggested that the sectarianization process in neighboring countries (namely, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq) have somehow influenced interfaith relations in Jordanian society.

Christians are indigenous to Jordan

Finally, the last subtheme relates to the sense of belonging that several among the sample expressed towards Jordan as their homeland. In fact, they often stressed the importance of defending the Christian presence in the country and the region, as well. The given reason is the importance of such a community in laying the foundation for the modern Jordanian state and identity, alike. In fact, some also explicitly rejected the "minority" connotation, since they connect it with the idea of foreignness. Instead, they

insisted on the bond between Christianity and Jordan, asserting the right of the community to survive and to be recognized as fundamental.

> You know, if you go around the Jordan thousands of places, you find that there is... There used to be a culture. There used to be a way of life. There used to be a system for society. And that was 1500 or 2000 years ago. How come after 2000 years, societies became backward, not forward? And we can see that visible in so many areas. And sometimes when I think about it personally, you know… all these towns, cities and churches, cathedrals, everywhere in Jordan… this is a reflection that there were hundreds of thousands and maybe millions of people, here. [Man, 63, Fuheis]

Theme 2 - A looming end, a quotidian struggle

This theme expresses the negative views that almost all participants articulated toward the present and future of the Christian community. For the present, many pointed out the increased attacks against the Christian community and the everyday discrimination in public spaces, at school, and so on. Many commented that the rise of Daesh was profoundly unsettling for them, although things got better. Often, people suggested that there was no existential threat, but rather widespread close-mindedness from the Muslim side.

Discrimination in the public and private sphere

Most interviewees expressed the opinion that Christians suffer from recurrent discrimination in the public sphere. This might happen both at school at the workplace, in the street, or on social media.

Regarding discrimination taking place at school, recollections among my sample started from the elementary school years. More precisely, several interviewees happened to attend government schools, where each of them suffered from some kind of discrimination or harassment, both from the school staff and peers. For example, Christian pupils might get called "kafir" (infidel) by their classmates, and bullied. It might even happen, as [Woman, 28, Amman/Fuheis] recounts, that the school principal would

dissuade them from wearing religious symbols, such as crosses, despite allowing the Islamic ones. Sometimes, targeting and discrimination could even result in physical fights, as recounted by [Man, 37, Irbid].

Discrimination seems to be especially present at the university level. In particular, they made explicit reference to the University of Jordan as the framework in which these episodes have notoriously taken place. For example, several interviewees recounted episodes of anti-Christian hate speech, from university professors. These episodes sparked outrage on a national scale, being recorded and posted on social media. Without going as far as committing hate speech, some among the sample referred that some professors simply did not recognize their rights as Christians. For example, they would not exempt them from class attendance on their religious holidays and would even schedule exams on those same days. Moreover, other students reported occasions in which they have been insulted by other students for their religious affiliation. On the other hand, discrimination in the workplace takes place in cases when discussions about religion are allowed. In this sense, both university students and workers confessed their uneasiness when discussing their faith with Muslim colleagues. Particularly, they referred to the hardship of sustaining a religious debate on such occasions, describing it both as challenging and annoying.

When it comes to stereotyping, some interviewees referred to some misconceptions about their faith from the Muslim side. Some stereotypes revolve around alcohol consumption, being permitted in Christianity, or promiscuity between males and females. For instance, interviewees mentioned that some Muslims believe that Christians drink immoderately and that males and females among them kiss each other with much ease. In this case, those who pinpointed such misconceptions framed Western media (such as movies and TV series) as the source of them, namely that Jordanian Muslims would associate the behavior portrayed there with Christianity per se.

> Others thinks that the Christians live in luxury, in big mansions… because they see it in TV. They see masses where people dance… they

think we do the same. They see the spouses kissing at their wedding…
they think boys and girls do the same, during the mass. Ignorance,
ignorance. [Man, 56, Fuheis]

Nevertheless, stereotyping is not exclusively negative, as interviewees also
highlighted that Muslims consider Christians as trustworthy and well-
educated.

Other than everyday forms of discrimination and stereotyping, some among
the sample also referred to events where the Christian and the Muslim
community collided, collectively, around issues of public display of
Christian signs. Two events were especially recalled.

In one case, the Fuheis Youth Club decided to place a statue of Jesus Christ
at one of the city's intersections, in early January 2023 (Roya News, 2023).
The event sparked outrage on social media, with many arguing against the
collocation of a religious statue in such a public position. The statue was
removed by the city municipality after just two days, and after dozens of
young Christians manifested against the decision. As a result, the event left
a remarkable impression on those who illustrated it in the interviews.
Particularly, the interviewees regarded the episode as an act of injustice, and
proof of the lack of religious freedom for non-Muslims in Jordan. In this
sense, they pinpointed the impossibility of decorating their town with
Christian symbols, although its inhabitants are mostly Christians. As a
result, the majority blamed the Muslim majority and their alleged
intolerance.

Another episode that emerged from the interviews is the assassination of
Nahed Hattar, a prominent Jordanian writer and journalist, in 2016. At the
time of his killing, Hattar, who was Christian, was on trial for having shared
a satirical cartoon about ISIS on social media. After the move had sparked
outrage across the country for its irreverence, he was charged with
accusations of blasphemy and inciting sectarianism in the country (Al
Jazeera, 2016). Eventually, he was killed right before the courthouse by a
conservative Muslim preacher. The crime obtained both national and
international attention, also to the government's lack of protection for the

defendant. Hence, the homicide of Hattar, for some among the sample, proved that Christians had to be careful when discussing Islam and that the political and legal systems both failed to guarantee equality between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens. As [Man, 29, Jubeiha] asserts:

> A lot of people started to think that, you know: "we're not actually equal". Because when Muslims do it, nothing, nothing happens to them. They don't go to court. They don't get shot. Nothing happens. But when a Christian did it, then... You know, you had to pay for it.

One particular aspect of the question was, indeed, the role of social media as a platform for voicing the country's opinions. In this sense, one element that shocked some interviewees the most was the constant flow of hate comments directed at Hattar, justifying his killing as a right punishment for insulting Islam. Then, I was interested in the ways social media affect Jordanian society, particularly the relations between Christians and Muslims. My interviewees' main opinion on this was that social media mostly plays a negative role as a platform for misinformation and hate speech towards the Christian minority. Indeed, major controversies like the killing of Nahed Hattar have a polarizing effect on Jordanian society and likely entail hate comments on social networks. Nonetheless, several among the sample reported that Muslim users often negatively receive Christian content on social media. As a result, live broadcasts of the Sunday mass on one major Jordanian news outlet, Roja News, are frequently met with mocking or criticism in the comment section. The discomfort among the Christian community is such that some asked to stop the broadcasting, as a consequence.

Unsafety after the rise of ISIS and the resulting securitization of Christian public places and events in Jordan

As a consequence of the aforementioned discrimination, sentiments of insecurity and unsettlement emerged in the interviews. Although some among the sample denied the occurrence of persecution against the Christians, many reported several difficulties in carrying on Christian public events. The main reason is the risk of terror attacks, especially for the past

ten years. Some among the sample, in this regard, referred to the notorious attack carried on by an ISIS-affiliated commando in 2016, at the crusader castle in al-Karak. On that occasion, 14 people, including three civilians and 11 among the security forces, were killed (The Jordan Times, 2016).

Furthermore, even more interviewees referred to the bomb attack that happened in Fuheis in 2018, right before the start of the Fuheis festival. This time, the attackers, who were not officially connected to ISIS, ambushed and killed three officers on duty (Al Jazeera, 2018). This last event, as far as my interviewees reported, instilled much fear, if not terror, among the Christian community, and led to considerable securitization of masses, processions, and even non-liturgic community events. The bomb attack in Fuheis greatly impressed the townspeople and had lasting consequences. Some recounted episodes of false bomb threats outside the churches after the incident, and feelings of unsettlement when ISIS was yet to decay. In this sense, some interviewees underlined their anxiety towards the possibility of new and worse attacks against the Christian minority, although the situation seems to have improved. Nonetheless, several among the sample reported feelings of sadness and concern regarding the presence of heavy-armored soldiers within a (supposedly) festive context. With the ultimate disbandment of ISIS in the region, interviewees reported that the situation has improved, but security measures are still kept in force. An example of this is the military protection of Jordanian churches during Christian holidays, especially Christmas and Easter. Moreover, another thing that I noticed during my fieldwork was that most churches, as well as private buildings, have now CCTV systems as a security measure. Again, my sample confirmed that even this trend has become widespread since 2018.

In this respect, indeed, religious persecution against Christians never took place in Jordan. Nonetheless, it is also true that they occasionally witnessed terror attacks taking place in a highly securitized country like Jordan. Plus, Karak and Fuheis can hardly be thought of as random targets. Rather, they are both considered strictly connected to Jordanian Christianity, being both traditionally home to significant communities. Finally, the massacres were

carried out by Jordanian nationals, thus confirming the perception that a radicalization process was taking place among the Jordanian Muslim majority. Hence, the sense of threat arose from within the society, and with lasting consequences.

In this regard, another crucial element addressed in many interviews is the overall condition of Christians in the Middle East, especially after the rise of ISIS. Needless to say, those who discussed it were fully aware of the hardship endured by their coreligionists in the neighboring countries.

In fact, at the start of my research, I was particularly interested in the impact of "sectarianized" identities among Christian refugees in Jordan on the host parishioners belonging to the community. Since I asked about their presence to my informants, I was able to verify not only that they were aware of their presence, but also of their personal experience as survivors of persecution and displacement, since they occasionally befriended them. Moreover, they often mentioned that, either among relatives or friends, they discussed the progressive disappearance of Christian communities attacked by ISIS, at the time that it happened.

What is also noteworthy is that, when the interview took place in public spaces (mostly, cafes) most interviewees showed a certain degree of circumspection while mentioning "Muslims" or "Islam". On some occasions, the interviewee came closer to me and spoke softer, in others, they used vaguer expressions, such as "other religions". Apparently, they perceived some kind of risk while discussing such topics in those terms and public spaces. That is also made evident by the (overall) absence of such behavior in private settings, where most interviews took place. Nonetheless, one exception is given by one interviewee who expressed discomfort in talking about anything remotely "political", even in a private setting. By doing that, he asked me two times to stop the recording to make that clear and went as far as to demand to personally check if I actually complied or to know the questions beforehand.

The migration of the Jordanian Christians and the consequent decline of their original communities

Indeed, terror attacks are rare, and the Christian community is safeguarded by the regime. Overall, its condition could not be regarded as a "persecution", by any means. Hence, the most serious threat to its survival is youth migration, as often reported by my sample. Those who discussed it highlighted feelings of sadness and disillusionment.

The core reason for leaving, according to the interviewees, is the state of the economy. Young Jordanian Christians typically discuss among each other the option of moving abroad, especially to Europe, North America, or Australia, to find better employment and project their future. Moreover, the fact that even consistent family branches have already settled in those countries provides further incentive to reach them and not come back.

While some among the sample stressed that the economic factor is the core one for the youth to leave, others suggested that also the cultural and religious divergence from the Muslim majority plays a role. The ideological cleavage is given by the influence of Western customs among the Christians, and more conservative Islamic values among the Muslims. Again, that is reported to come as a result of recent social changes:

> But over here, it's just... The vast difference in the way of life and the way of thinking and the morality between people is just astounding. You cannot even fathom how different it is. So now you just feel that, okay, now I actually relate… To someone probably in the West more than I do with my neighbor here, which is crazy. But this is the way it is nowadays, which was not the case before. […] Because, I mean… it's not easy, leaving your actual homeland, for that matter. […] So it's a very difficult choice to make. But then again, it's a different place than it was before. [Man, 30, Fuheis]

Nonetheless, that was not the case of the majority of the interviewees who expressed deep attachment to their land and, albeit not failing to express their pessimism, explained their projects and dreams in Jordan (e.g.: getting

married and moving in together; continue working; building a new house in a comfortable place).

Theme 3 - We are worlds apart

One common topic among all the interviews is the "otherization" of the Muslim community. The theme expresses the interviewee's awareness of the cultural divide between them and the Muslim majority, and the increasing attachment to their religious/cultural identity, as a response. The basic concept of the theme is the perception of the Muslim community as different from the Christian one in terms of values and lifestyle.

Different mentalities

The collected data highlight how relevant values are in defining the Christian community, especially vis-à-vis the Muslim population.

One predominant tendency among the Jordanian Christians seems to be the acceptance of liberal values. Interviewees reported how secularism features the (private) schools attended by most Christians, compared to the public ones, and defend its importance.

[Man, 63, Fuheis], for instance, says:

> That's why most Christians, they go to Christian schools or to private schools. Which are mixed, girls and boys, Christians and Muslims and so on. And in this schools the issue of religion is not that important to many, I guess.

Furthermore, [Woman, 27, Fuheis/Weibdeh] explains:

> Even though in the Christian school… the National Orthodox School, it doesn't matter if you're Christian, if you're Muslim, we're not putting anything on the radio. You just have the… you can pray with yourself, in silence. Everyone prays in silence.

And she continues:

> The whole educational system to me, I think is… Manipulated, brought to manipulate, and not efficient. I mean, even… again, I've

studied in private schools all my life and the best educational systems available. And I still think we could have learned a lot more instead of wasting our time on trying to force again ideologies.

[Man, 61, Fuheis/Hashmi al-Shamal], further underlines why separation between religion and public sphere should be enacted:

It's a religion. You might agree with it. Yes or not, you might like it or not. That's up to you. Same thing: you might like the church. It's up to you. You might say: "No, I don't like the Church". Up to you. I have to respect you, anyway. <emphatic> But because once you mix the religion in everything in the society, that's a recipe for a good future disaster. There's the that you'll always have problem. You always have problem. The only way for the Arabs to be advanced, to change is to put religion on the side: not because religion again and again and again, not because the religion is bad, but because do not mix religion and politics together. Secularism, just like Europe, like all advanced countries, it's in front of us.

At the same time, many interviewees described secularism as unacceptable by the Muslim majority, at least for most of it. That is portrayed as a consequence of the Islamic conservative values that have become widespread in the past few decades. In that sense, some interviewees use the term "culture" to refer to a fundamental element of incompatibility between Christians and Muslims. [Man, 37, Irbid], reports through his partner:

There's the difference between their families, let's say environments, and the way they speak, the way they dress. Everything there is different than him, that's why he couldn't, let's say, break the ice between him and the Muslim friends. Yeah, that's why he keeps those limits.

Meanwhile, some interviewees alluded to the inherent intolerance towards Christians from the Muslim side. Particularly, they pinpointed the devaluation, if not rejection, of Christian beliefs in Islam. One of the most frequent examples was the Islamic framing of the Bible as a corrupted text,

modified throughout centuries and hence invalid. Moreover, Muslims tend to not comprehend even the core beliefs of Christianity, when explained. As one interviewee put it:

Yeah, it's very confusing for them. Very hard to explain, as well. But I try my best to get it as close as possible. But again, it's hard because them, it specifically mentioned because Islam came after Christianity. It denies lots of things in Christianity and explains it in different ways. So that's how they understand it, even though it's not the truth. [Woman, 27, Fuheis]

More generally, several interviewees described Islam as inherently intolerant, either directly or indirectly:

So I can tell that Muslims can't love us. Yeah... Okay… We are lived in same country. No, no, between us, everything is fine… But they will not accept us in every details in our lives. Also the traditions we have and they have, it's so different. It's not acceptable to them if I go with my head <mimics wearing an hijab>, it is the simple thing. So I think they can't love us or accept us as we accept them. [Woman, 25, Fuheis]

Nonetheless, some interviewers reported that sectarian behavior has recently begone to spread among Christian youth, especially in response to episodes of anti-Christian discrimination. As [Man, 29, Jubeiha], suggests:

I think people are becoming more strict and more attached to their churches. Um, the Orthodox are becoming more extreme with their beliefs, at least from personal experience. Like I've seen my family who are like going to church more. Uh, working with the church more, the fasting, more, you know, doing religious rituals. Um, that they didn't use to do as much. So now they're approaching the church in a certain way, trying to hold on as much as possible because they feel like they're under attack. They feel like something is happening where there are no more Christians anymore. There are no, you know, the life has changed for them and they feel like the best way to go

back to what it used to be is to go back to church and work more with church, surround themselves with other Christians as well. So I feel like that's the thing.

Spatial self-segregation

The perceived divide between the Christian and the Muslim population does not only belong to the immaterial dimension. Actually, it is mirrored by the urban space, that exposes the increasing clustering of the two religious communities in specific neighborhoods. Most interviewees reported that Christian families in recent years have progressively moved to mid or high-income areas of the capital, where the predominant mindset among the residents is liberal/western.

Meanwhile, their original neighborhoods were depicted as low-income and featured by a conservative Muslim population. For some among the sample, this pattern is caused by the religious divide per se. As [Man, 29, Jubeiha] puts it:

> Again, it has to do with the, you know, evolution of way of thinking and the impact of religious thinking, especially extreme Islamism that so many of the Christian communities and other towns beside Fuheis, even in Amman, when they live in a community, which is normally the vast majority is Muslims, but groups that are influenced by Islamism… They tend to leave. And this is an internal migration […] to communities where they can relate to and where they can bring up their children, you know, in a Christian environment.

In his case, he pinpoints that the progressive depopulation of once-thriving Christian communities has become a trend since the 80s onwards. Nonetheless, other interviewees highlighted the role of economic and work-related motives, such as the need to relocate to areas with lower cost of living, or closer to their workplace. Either way, the result is the progressive division of the urban space into two components, featured by different predominant values and degrees of religious diversity. The expressed opinions towards this pattern were mixed. While the youngest interviewees acknowledged it as a fact, the older ones stressed the religious heterogeneity

among Jordanians until the late mid-1900s. In this sense, they portray the social and cultural changes in Jordan from then as an Islamization process, primarily caused by the settlement of Palestinian, Iraqi, and Syrian refugees. From their standpoint, that altered the demographics of the country, thus further marginalizing the Christian minority.

Internal migration does not seem to be the only dimension of self-segregation of the Christian community. Regardless of the place of residence, most families send their children to private schools, not only but mostly Christian. The reason for this is twofold. First, the quality of public education is perceived as low, compared to private institutions. Secondly, the aforementioned ideological cleavage with Islamic conservativism is portrayed by most interviewees as predominant in public education. Some of them reported how public education entails curricula. According to some, this also translates into systematic discrimination towards non-Muslims. Some among the sample, for instance, made explicit reference to episodes of marginalization, unpleasant questioning about their religion, and even verbal harassment, by classmates and teachers alike. On the other side, Christian and non-Christian private schools represent a safeguarded environment, where religious identity is not discussed, the curricula are secularized, and the predominant mindset is open and inclusive. Nevertheless, the flip side suggested by some interviewees is that they prevent young Christians from getting accustomed to the social reality of the country, which is predominantly Islamic and conservative. As [Man, 30, Fuheis] points out:

> Believe it or not, the new generation is definitely more liberal. That's for sure. With that comes like pros and cons. They have more critical thinking. They're not boxed in. A lot. But then again, they're cut off a lot from the Eastern culture at the same time. Which is good sometimes in many… In many times, actually. But then again it's kind of weird to see someone living in Jordan, studying in Jordan, that has nothing to do with Jordan, if you know what I mean. They barely speak the language. They barely act that way.

As a result, most Christian youngsters grow up within social bubbles that prevent them and their Muslim peers from getting accustomed to different values and identities.

Perhaps the most peculiar example of Christian clustering is represented by the town of Fuheis. Residents from there are reported by both interviewees and the authorities as almost exclusively Christians. This is due to its long history of Christian dwelling, indeed, but also for its attractiveness to other fellow worshippers from other towns. Thus, Fuheis has grown up a lot throughout the past decades, while fundamentally maintaining its religious belonging. The reason for this is that the local landowners have always refused to sell their lands to Muslims, according to my interviewees' accounts. Similar cases can be found elsewhere in the country, albeit very limited, as [Woman, 27, Fuheis/Hashmi al-Shamal] explains:

> Another reason why I can never find a mosque here. Yeah, it's the same thing in my village where I'm from in south of Jordan, it's predominantly Christian. There are no Muslims at all. It's just this own tribe within itself. There are two churches, no mosques. You cannot find that.

Yet, all this is made possible only in Christian-majority towns like Fuheis, according to the interviewees living there. In Amman, there are apparently no Christian-majority neighborhoods, or at least not to the same extent as in Fuheis. Rather, Christians live in mixed areas, with different outcomes. In West Amman (Abdoun, Sweifieh, Jubeiha), the prevalence of middle to high socioeconomic strata is often corresponded by interviewees with more education and less conservative lifestyle and values, resulting in more accepting behavior towards the Christian minority. The reason for that, as many states, is to preserve a space to perform acts and, ultimately, affiliations that are deemed unacceptable in Muslim-majority neighborhoods. That includes, for instance, collective Christian rituals like street processions and rosary prayers:

> So I love it because I believe the Fuheis community is.. Like helping
> for a Christian... It's like a little bit less challenging than other areas

because we can pray... For example, when I was a leader in these last ten years, we used to pray the rosary when we were walking in the streets to go to the circle where the Virgin Mary statue is, you know. So it's like we have more freedom. We celebrate Christmas, for example. We celebrate Easter with no restrictions. However, in other areas in Jordan, I believe there is, like, many restrictions. […] if you have been to Zarqa, it is very challenging because most of the community, they are Muslims. Sometimes they are very strict. They have very strict like, they are very religious in a way that they do not maybe accept other opinions, accept difference between us and accept what we are like, what we have faith in. [Woman, 32, Fuheis]

Moreover, the same applies to more mundane actions, such as relaxing at home without concerns of sticking to the Islamic morale that might regulate outdoor spaces:

But when it comes to percentage, I think 2% are Muslim. And I hope they keep it that way. […] I hope to keep that way because here have some things that we do… For example, to have a drink in front of the house, glass of wine, for example, glass of whiskey in the weekend. You cannot do it there. It's critical. I remember we used to have table on the street… the side street, at the house in Amman, drinking beer and showing opening the beer and drinking was acceptable back then… as I told you, all changed. [Man, 61, Fuheis/Hashmi al-Shamal]

On the other hand, East Amman is described as predominantly Muslim and conservative, where deviance from the norm is met with discrimination and harassment. For example, a woman who does not wear the hijab seems to be more vulnerable to verbal and physical aggressions in those public spaces by male part. The oppression felt by Christians in those areas led to their progressive relocation to West Amman or Fuheis. Some women, by the same token, remarked the advantage of wearing a hijab or dressing modestly to not get harassed or being stared at:

> If I'm going a trip from East Amman to West Amman and in my house, I would be wearing a jacket. When I get to wherever I want to go in North Amman, I would take a jacket off wearing a T-shirt, like it's fine. And when I go back home, I put the jacket back on. Because that's how the culture is there. […] So just cover up as much as you can, just to try to make everyone not look at you. [Woman, 27, Fuheis/Hashmi al-Shamal]

In this sense, the process of spatial segregation exemplified by West and East Amman seems to be more rooted and ancient than it might seem. Nonetheless, the already existent pledge to maintain Fuheis Christian has been corroborated by more intense internal immigration of Christian families to the town. According to many in the sample, this was facilitated by its proximity to the capital, lower rents, good air quality, and contact with nature, as frequently recounted across the sample.

Nevertheless, this is not always the case for predominantly Christian towns. As suggested, the profound demographic change that took place in Jordan in the past century, indeed had a negative impact on the Christian communities around the country, with different outcomes. If on one hand, Fuheis maintained its religious identity, on the other, larger towns like Madaba and al-Karak have become predominantly Muslim within a few decades. Hence, their fate sounded like a wake-up call for the remaining Christian towns to not let the guard down. As a result, the perception of the space of Fuheis as inherently "Christian" also implies, apparently, the negative framing of anything "Islamic" that penetrates it. For instance, while recalling a visit to a school in Mahis, a Muslim-majority town near Fuheis, [Man, 63, Fuheis] recounts that:

> When I went there… You know, the outlook of the director of school of the teachers, they are very much like a Muslim Brotherhood community. I found teachers who are wearing, you know, this robe… like Taliban, with the beard and everything. I felt I was a stranger in this school, which I attended maybe 40 years ago. And this is, again, I feel that this school does not belong to Fuheis, although this was our

old school […]. But it's totally not related to the community […]. Which, of course, this is a reflection on how is the situation and other schools in villages and neighborhoods in Amman and Zarqa, and so on.

Self-segregation at school and university level

One of the most frequent matters of discussion during my interviews was school experiences. Namely, school is the arena for socialization since childhood. Some interviewees experienced both Islamic and Christian/secular curricula, while others only attended Christian schools growing up. Education is very much valued in Jordanian society, and parents tend to opt for Christian private schools for their better quality of teaching compared to government schools. Nonetheless, the related fees are expensive, and only Christians are supported while applying for them. On the other hand, as explained by [Man, 56, Fuheis], Muslims are not welcome due to the difficulty of providing them with an appropriate teacher for "religion" as a subject. Moreover, as he further elaborates, whenever a person gets accepted, the level of education of their parents is assessed to guarantee their suitability for the school environment. Finally, if they have siblings of the opposite gender, they also must attend the same school. The reason is to only accept families that agree on the principle that the school must be mixed, hence their children are brought up with the same ideals and are prepared to interact and share spaces with peers of the opposite gender. I must highlight that he particularly stressed that point, which is interesting provided that he is a strongly religious person. Hence, though relating somehow to the secularist and progressive stances of other Christians, he further remarks on the different approaches to education, when it comes to relations between sexes at school, between Muslims and Christians.

Regarding the university level, [Woman, 27, Hashmi al-Shamal] is adamant in underlining that private universities constitute a safe environment for Christian students, while public ones are not, because of the aforementioned discrimination. For this reason, some Christian university students (at least,

those who can afford the related fees) choose the formers to be protected from harassment.

In this sense, [Man, 19, Fuheis] explains that income is connected to education and accepting behavior:

> I have talked with Muslims who are not educated... I told you, people that were with the private school, like people… kind people, rich people, they enjoy life... They don't judge you. That's why when I went to university I have seen <speaks softer> a different type of Muslim… They judge you, they… it's not cool.

In this sense, I find it relevant that the access to private and safe environments is bound to the predominant interaction with middle to high income circles, regardless the religious affiliation.

Theme 4 - (Not) all is lost

This theme expresses the participants' positive opinions regarding their relationship with the Muslim population. Those stances relate to the sense of belonging to a sole community, based on ethnic (Arab) or nationalist values. Moreover, interviewees have often pointed out that they have Muslim friends. Some people also pointed out that they have not faced discrimination in their everyday life, and that interfaith relations are good. Many pointed out that the problem is fundamentalism and not Islam per se.

Christians are doing well in Jordan

Although most interviewees admitted with sadness and pessimism the current hardship of the Christian community in Jordan, several also stressed the bright spots of their condition. For example, they underlined the absence of physical violence or systematic persecution towards them. Inevitably, the frame of reference for this sentiment is the situation of their coreligionists in the neighboring countries. Moreover, almost all interviewees expressed gratitude towards the government for the protection guaranteed to the Jordanian Christians.

Some other interviewees went as far as to say that they have never felt discriminated against in their everyday life. Particularly, few of them denied that the condition of Jordanian Christians is problematic at all. Rather, they asserted that Christians and Muslims get along well, and make one sole community, together.

> It's a kind of being… living in a brotherly atmosphere. We're a society at the end. We live in one country, we want the country to be good one. We want to be believe in living together. We've been living together since see 1400 years at least. [Man, 72, Sweifieh]

Friendship and cooperation between Christians and Muslims in Jordan

While in different occasions the interviewee has recounted episodes of anti-Christian discrimination in their experience, in some others they admitted to not have suffered personally from them.

Although many portrayed intercommunal relations as cold, several interviewees asserted that some of their closest friends are Muslim.

> I think with the new generation, as I said, stepping in and saying that we should not discriminate between us. We are like, let's say we have something in common, let's focus on that. We are all Arab, we have the same tradition, we have the same culture. Let's focus on that, leave the differences aside. That's what helps us in getting, let's say Christians lay the guard down and let's say rent or other Muslims in the neighborhood to get to know them more. Or they just trust, they feel they are safe. […] I really have some very, very good Muslim friends that I have good relationships with them more than my Christian friends. I would prefer to hang out with them rather than to hang out with my Christian friends. [Man, 21, Fuheis]

Optimism towards the future

Although most interviewees foresaw more hardships in the future of the Christian community, some expressed optimism towards intercommunal relations with the Muslim majority. The reason for that, for some, is the positive role of the internet and social media as platforms of awareness and

interaction with different ideas and realities. Moreover, some highlighted how the Jordanian government is making progress in contrasting Islamic fundamentalism, for example, by toning down the current Islamic character of public education.

> No, I do think it's a working, working process. And I do think it's getting better. And I do think people are opening up and being more aware with time. […] but people are working on that. Even the government has been changing that the past 4 or 5 years, I think. I think, so it's work in progress again […]. [Woman, 27, Fuheis/Weibdeh]

Education and dialogue could improve interfaith relations

Perhaps one of the most surprising findings across the interviews is the claim for more education and awareness, among each religious community, about the other ones. Moreover, most interviewees linked religious discrimination and prejudice with a lack of interaction between pupils of different religions. I have to say that all my interviewees attended private schools, more often than not in mixed Christian-Muslim classes. As a result, many did not miss to highlight how at least some of their closest friends were Muslim. The caveat, nonetheless, was that they were well-educated, hence accepting towards their Christian fellows. In this sense, on many other occasions, the interviewee underlined the poor performance of Jordanian public education as the leading cause of stereotyping and discrimination against the Christian minority. Nevertheless, I find it important to point out that some among the sample admitted that the low number of Christians, compared to Muslims, further decreases the chances of encountering in the everyday life.

> Yeah. It's weird for them. They might live 20 years of their life and never encountered a Christian and say a Christian in their life or neighborhood or something. And they might as well to the university and see a Christian for the first time with different backgrounds, different religious beliefs. […] That's where the conflicts mainly reside. [Man, 21, Fuheis]

Moreover and most interestingly, the lack of awareness towards the other does not spare the young Christians. In fact, the youngsters among the sample recounted their shock when leaving high school to attend university, because they stopped sharing their spaces with well-off, educated Muslims. Instead, they started to deal with the social reality of their country, being mostly surrounded by conservative, low to middle-class Muslims. That meant getting accustomed to habits and social cues unheard of before, such as modest behavior between genders (e.g.: avoiding shaking hands), and seeing the hijab as the norm, rather than the exception. As the shock eased with time, it still left a lasting impression.

Analysis

We used to be one, before

In this section, I analyze my interviewees' perceptions of the evolution of intercommunal relations between Christians and Muslims in Jordan throughout the past few decades.

Overall, several among the sample referred to the current situation as the outcome of a gradual cultural change that took place in the '60s. More precisely, they especially pointed out the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in promoting Islamic conservative values in society, hence discouraging friendly interfaith relations. Furthermore, they made explicit reference to the external funding of Islamist religious institutions by the Gulf countries, and chiefly, the demographic change related to Muslim Palestinian immigration, as other contributing factors to the marginalization of the Christian community. On the flip side, they portray the historical context before that as significantly different, namely featuring the scarce importance of religious identities in everyday life. As a result, friendly relations between Muslims and Christians were more frequent and the latter did not feel threatened or alienated. Finally, discourses about the past seem to entail one fundamental claim: Christians are indigenous too, and important for Jordan.

Discussing the past is fundamental for framing the contemporary condition of the Jordanian Christian community. There are many reasons for that. First, it shows that religious commonalities and interfaith relations are understood by those among the sample as everchanging. Second, it clarifies the informants' standpoint regarding the present. Third, it is necessarily connected to how they picture the future. Regarding this last point, tackling the past of the Christian community through my interviewees' recollections is also important as a impacts their sense of belonging to the group. In this respect, according to Smeekes & Verkuyten (2015, p.165), the collocation of one's self within the history of their group is one crucial trait of social identity. The reason lies in the fact that group members make sense of passing time through a "conceptual thread" that connects the past, present,

and future of the community. Smeekes & Verkuyten (2015, p.166) call this modality of self-embedding "collective self-continuity".

Through that mechanism, I suggest, Jordanian Christians contextualize their life experience within the broader history of their group. Within such operations, individual perceptions and experiences are still crucially important in portraying reality, especially the past. While narratives of marginalization and alienation, still, are widely shared, they are evidenced by the contrast with the memories of a lost world of interfaith cohesion and harmony. By reiterating such narratives, my sample articulates spatial division through time and space, memory and present, which continuously overlap. In this regard, Kårtveit (2014, p.60) reports that Bethlehemite Christians express their disappointment for having "lost their town" to the "outsiders", namely Palestinians who settled there after the Nakba. The massive immigration of the time changed the demographic composition of Bethlehem similar to what happened to Jordanian Christian towns, like al-Husun.

A looming end, a quotidian struggle

In this section, I analyze my interviewees' perceptions of the current state of their community and the related hardships as a minority group. More precisely, I aim to explain their impact on their self-identification and differentiation vis-à-vis the Muslim majority.

Indeed, most interviewees underlined the absence of existential menaces for Christians in Jordan, precisely thanks to the state's effort to protect the community. Nonetheless, the occasional discrimination suffered in everyday life, the alienation from the social reality of a conservative (and intolerant) Islamic society, and the awareness of their declining number were extensively reported during the interviews. It is precisely against this backdrop that my sample performs their self-identification along religious lines.

As the results show, many interviewees defined their current situation of religious minorities as both challenging and complex. Indeed, it can be regarded as problematic for the declining number of Christians living in Jordan, fundamentally due to emigration. Nonetheless, the issue at stake is not only their number in absolute terms, but hence their very existence as a community in the country. In fact, the other main question is what would happen throughout this slow waning, but their number relative to the Muslim presence. The sense of threat, then, has a double dimension: the ultimate fate of the community, and what could possibly happen before that.

To clarify how such sword of Damocles influences the individuals belonging to the group, I, again, draw upon Smeekes & Verkuyten (2015, p.165) and, in particular, their concept of "collective continuity threat". In fact, while "history" might implicitly entail the past and the present, "collective self-continuity" critically includes the future. Namely, part of one person's social identity relies on the belief that their group not only existed and still does but also will not cease to. When such conviction wanes before actual or perceived threats to it, that might lead to stronger feelings of commonality among group members, and hostility towards the out-groups (Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2015, p.165). Despite being mainly pessimist regarding the future of their community, my informants have not articulated "hateful" discourses or behaviors. Nonetheless, most of them, though some more than others, stigmatized the Muslim majority as backward and bigot. For example, one recurrent theme across the sample is the "ignorance" of many (low to middle-class) Muslims who hold distorted views on Christianity, informed by mass and social media, other than Islamic teachings. Such discourse is also reported by Lahham (cited by Droeber 2011, pp.116-119, 121) among Palestinian Christians. Either way, most Jordanian Muslims seem to be clueless about not only what Christians believe, but also their very existence due to their scarce number and lack of presence in many areas. As a result, baseless stereotypes often are the sole notion about Christianity for many.

As to the rest of the sample, many expressed feelings of alienation towards the context they live in, namely of "not belonging" to it, due to the

predominance of an Islamic conservative mindset in Jordanian society. Either way, such accounts collide with the popular idea of Jordan as a context-free from challenges for its Christian minority (Wisman, 2019, p.88). Hence, I suggest that the very statements of alienation and criticism, if not disdain, towards the Muslim majority can already be regarded as a reaction motivated by the perceived "looming end" of Jordanian Christianity. As a result, I find it plausible that such a coping mechanism could be the expression of "reinforced" commonalities among them. Furthermore, I pinpoint that what has perhaps not been said is equally important to the transcriptions. While, on the one hand, I cannot exclude that at least some of them hold more extreme views in private, on the other, I pinpoint that it would still be difficult to get any of them during recorded interviews. In fact, as Droeber (2011, p.11) and Kårtveit (2014, p.29) suggest, with respect to Palestinian Christians in Nazareth and Bethlehem, narratives of intercommunal cohesion and difference vary according to Scott's (1990) concept of hidden transcripts. Crucial to this, I argue, is my positionality as a European visitor interviewing people from a targeted minority in the region (see "positionality" in the "methodology" chapter).

When it comes to the fears for what could happen to the community before its ultimate disappearance, the results show that Jordanian Christians are fully aware of the hardship endured by their coreligionists in the neighboring countries. In this sense, I was curious about the presence of Christian refugees in Jordan and their impact on the host parishes and the related communities. Since I asked about that to my informants, I was able to verify not only that they were aware of their presence there, but also of their personal experience as survivors of persecution and displacement, since they occasionally befriended them. Moreover, they often mentioned that, either among relatives or friends, they discussed the progressive disappearance of Christian communities attacked by ISIS, at the time that it happened. In this respect, it is true that religious persecution against Christians never took place in Jordan. Nonetheless, it is also true that they occasionally witnessed terror attacks taking place in a highly securitized country like Jordan. Plus, Karak and Fuheis can hardly be thought of as

random targets. Rather, they are both considered strictly connected to Jordanian Christianity, being both traditionally home to significant communities. Finally, the massacres were carried out by Jordanian nationals, thus confirming the perception that a radicalization process was taking place among the Jordanian Muslim majority (Beaujouan, 2021). Hence, the increasing sense of threat from within the society, and with lasting consequences. Nowadays, religious public events among Christian communities are always guarded by heavily armed security forces. Moreover, the presence of security cameras inside and outside of churches further evidences the securitization of Christian communal life in public spaces. With that, it also reveals the perception of a looming threat.

Indeed, most interviewees underlined the absence of existential menaces for Christians in Jordan, precisely thanks to the state's effort to guarantee the safety of the community. Nonetheless, we also have to consider the occasional discrimination suffered in their everyday life, the alienation from the social reality of a conservative (and intolerant) Islamic society, and the awareness of their declining number. It is precisely against this backdrop that my sample performs their self-identification along religious lines. Nowadays, religious public events among Christian communities are always guarded by heavily armed security forces. Moreover, the presence of security cameras inside and outside of churches further evidences the securitization of Christian communal life in public spaces. Hence, I find it reasonable to argue that actual or perceived threats may have played a role in fostering commonality among the Christian communities in Jordan.

Nonetheless, I find it crucial to make some caveats. First, as Brubaker (2002, p.164) argues, we should be wary of "groupism", namely the tendency to reduce social life as the theater of encounter/clash between "discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogenous and externally bounded groups". In fact, it might be regarded as common sense to understand groups as clearly defined by discourses in politics, media, and everyday life. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that the very fact that the interviewees use them as an interpretative key to frame their social reality makes it the object of our research. Hence, it cannot be used as an

analytical tool, too (Brubaker, 2002, pp.165-166). Instead, Brubaker (2002, p.167) suggests underlining the "relational, dynamic, eventful and disaggregated" nature of group commonalities, so to use terms like "ethnicization, racialization, nationalization" instead of "ethnicity, race, nation". Similarly and with reference to Hashemi & Postel's (2017) concept of "sectarianization", the aforementioned notions of "everyday sectarianism" (Nucho, 2016), "sectarian non-entrepreneur" (Fibiger, 2018), and "vernacular politics" (Tobin, 2018) are further articulations of the same principle. Moreover, and differently from "sectarianization", those concepts attempt to frame "everyday life" as the actual stage where group identities are not just played out, but improvised. Just like any theatrical improvisation, they do not come out of the blue, but they are based on a series of premises and "inputs" that are later creatively interpreted, processed, and then integrated within the individual's social behavior. It is precisely against this background that I argue, then, that the context of occasional, subtle, but widespread discrimination against Jordanian Christians by some among the Muslim majority, and the persistent securitization of their communal public life, have had a severe impact on the way each of them perceive themselves both as citizens and, especially, as a "minority".

We are worlds apart

After having addressed how my interviewees describe and interpret the development of Christian-Muslim relations in Jordan, I finally address what is perhaps the most significant finding of my work. Thus, I discuss how the previously discussed commonalities are articulated not just through private discourses, but through social interaction and behavior in everyday life, and how they reverberate on religious coexistence.

As the results show, the core of the theme is the perception of the Muslim majority as the "other", divided by an unbridgeable gap. This separation has two interrelated levels: immaterial and material. By immaterial divide, I refer to the ideological differences expressed through religious or non-

religious lifestyles and discourses. Namely, they frequently supported liberal values and expressed incompatibility with the Muslim component insofar as it has become unbearably conservative and intolerant. As (Man, 30, Fuheis) tellingly articulates:

> How do I see the future in this country? It's not looking so good, simply because I mean… The way people think. It's very tough to live here. Not because I'm persecuted in any way. No, no, it's not because I feel like I'm in danger, like I would be in Iraq or Syria, for that matter. But over here, it's just... The vast difference in the way of life and the way of thinking and the morality between people is just astounding. You cannot even fathom how different it is. So now you just feel that, okay, now I actually relate… To someone probably in the West more than I do with my neighbor here, which is crazy. But this is the way it is nowadays, which was not the case before. Um, so it's not looking so good for our generation or for a Christian person living in Jordan.

The quote epitomizes the bewilderment and, especially, alienation that seems prevalent among Christians. But it does not stop there. In fact, the aforementioned affinity to the West refers to a widespread pattern of detachment from the local sociocultural context (namely, traditionalist and Islamic) and self-segregation taking place at different levels. From what I could hear from my interviewees, education plays a crucial role in this phenomenon (Chatelard, 2013; Kårtveit, 2014). In this respect, many of them referred to their school/university experience to underline the difference between a Christian/secular education and the one received in public schools, in terms of inclusivity and compatibility with their values and identity. This seems to be particularly apparent among the informants who attended both Christian/secular schools and government ones. By doing that, the interviewees articulate the substantial diversity between private and public education as epitomizing the social divide experienced either first-hand in other settings (e.g.: on the street, at the workplace) and age (e.g.: in adulthood), or vicariously from their close ones' accounts. Moreover, the popularity and praise of private education among the sample further indicate the sense of belonging to an elite social sphere with quite different values

and lifestyles compared to the low-income, Muslim majority (Belge & Karakoç, 2015, p.285). Hence, I suggest that the intersection of socioeconomic and ideological factors in deepening the intercommunal divide interrelates with the aforementioned sense of alienation. Moreover, I pinpoint how such an immaterial divide becomes material as soon as it translates into "social bubbles" that prevent further encounters in everyday life. Finally, it also protracts beyond the school years, up to adulthood, as reported by several interviewees. For example, one admitted to not having any close personal relationship with Muslims in general, whereas another interviewee reported that a common pattern among his relatives and acquaintances is to avoid doing business with them.

The intercommunal "material" divide is further exemplified by the relationship between the sample and the inhabited space. One frequent topic that emerged throughout the interviews is the spatiality of the Christian community. Although I did not dig particularly deep into the spatial features of their neighborhoods, many interviewees explained their perception of shared spaces between Christians and Muslims. Particularly, those living in Fuheis stressed the fact that the town is Christian in its identity, and mosques cannot be found there. Moreover, the presence of several churches in a small area (compared to the rest of the country), together with religious icons and statues located in the streets contributes to the communal marking of the space (Bandak, 2014, p.250). Such operation is crucial for the community members as it allows them to define themselves, situate their presence, and reclaim their belonging to the land (Bandak, 2014, p.251). When such "signified" space becomes contested by the "other", it is immediately perceived as an attack on the community, hence the self. It is exemplary, in this sense, the removal of the Jesus statue in Fuheis, which led to the mobilization of tens of young Christians to impede it. In this sense, it is telling that [Man, 63, Fuheis] labels such behavior as "fundamentalist", but pinpointing that it has nothing to do with religion per se, as most of the protesters were likely not practicing Christians.

According to several among the sample, Christians tend to move to Christian-majority neighborhoods. Some informants also reported having

done so but for various reasons. Some others explain that the reasons are first practical. For example, rents are lower in Fuheis, the air is cleaner and the atmosphere is quieter, other than being convenient to commute from and towards Amman. Others argue that they feel safer and more comfortable being surrounded by fellow Christians. While the "practical" motive does not exclude the "economic" one, the tendency of defending/marking the space against Muslim penetration in Fuheis (no mosques, no Muslim landowners) is usually asserted by the locals among the sample.

Moreover, several interviewees also underlined the strong will of local Christians to prevent Muslims from settling there, by selling land only to their coreligionists. As [Man, 63, Fuheis] points out, East Amman used to have thriving parishes and a considerably bigger Christian community. Today, most of them either migrated or relocated to other areas, as said. Although verifying the accuracy of such reports goes beyond the scope of my research, I must point out that such a phenomenon is not unprecedented in Jordan. In fact, Chatelard (2013, pp.364-393) thoroughly describes an internal relocation pattern happening within Madaba since the 1970s. With the increase of the Muslim presence following the Palestinian exodus, Christians in Madaba reclaimed their belonging to the city by settling in the old city. Meanwhile, the surrounding, populated part of the city has become the "Muslim area". Such patterns, that Chatelard (2013, pp.366 and 390, my translation) labels as "spatial segregation", have also been carried out through spatial markers meant to make the communal boundaries within the city more tangible. For example, while Muslim-majority neighborhoods are distinguished by mosques and minarets diffusing the adhan, Christian areas (such as Taym) began to include mixed swimming pools, church bells, and bars serving alcohol. By consolidating their presence in such areas, Christians also secured public spaces where they could stick to their lifestyle and values (for example, wearing showing clothes, mingling with people of the opposite sex, and drinking alcohol) without worrying about being stigmatized (Chatelard, 2013, pp.366-367, 390-391). Outside Jordan, an equivalent dynamic can be found among the Coptic community in Cairo: while traditionally living in mixed neighborhoods, they recently seem to

cluster more in specific neighborhoods, such as the Shura district (Mayeur-Jaouen, 2012, p.156).

(Not) all is lost

In this section, I finally address how I frame the optimistic/conciliatory statements about Christian-Muslim relations among the sample.

Despite narratives of separation and disillusionment were indeed prevalent, I pinpoint that the interviewees expressed overall nuanced perspectives on coexistence, by taking into account some of their positive, even excellent, relations with Muslim people in their everyday life. For instance, some of them insisted that they have Muslim friends who are as close as relatives to them, while others admitted to being on good terms with several Muslim peers at university or workplace. In other cases, the interviewee reported that they have never faced discrimination from the Muslim side in their everyday life. Moreover, experiencing education within mixed Christian-Muslim classes paves the way for interfaith dialogue and recognition (Knipprath et al., 2021, pp.199-201). Thus, that leads us to further problematize the separation between Christian and Islamic settings.

Since many among the youngest ones stress that they maintain excellent relations with their Muslim peers, sometimes to the point of preferring them to other Christians, I find it difficult to frame the perceived divide with the Muslim majority as religious altogether. Rather, the capacity to accept and befriend non-coreligionists reveals a more nuanced perception of the religious divide. In this regard, some interviewees linked the chance for interfaith friendship with the very attendance of private Christian/secular schools, as a prerequisite for an "open mind" and accepting behavior towards non-Muslims. Indeed, that relates to the possibility of protracted encounters, resulting in the extirpation of mutual stereotyping (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Nonetheless, I also pinpoint that access to private education is bound to a middle to high-income status, given its costs. In fact, some interviewees framed the Muslim "intolerant" component as low-income and poorly educated. Therefore, it seems reasonable to think that interfaith personal relations are also mediated by socioeconomic factors. Against this

background, "sectarianism", even in its "everyday" declination (Nucho, 2016; Fibiger, 2018; Tobin, 2018) seems to be inadequate to frame the overlap of class and communal belongings beyond the "macro" religious divide.

Thus, I suggest that such individual patterns of identity construction and socialization can be better framed within a symbolic interactionist understanding (Blumer, 2012). As been said, by adopting such theoretical lenses, I understand my interviewees' standpoints on interfaith relations as resulting from the meaning-making of their individual experiences, social interaction, and personal interpretation (Scott S., 2015, p.10). In light of that, I suggest that each informant has their own personal view on religious coexistence, based on their personal relations with Muslims. Moreover, I highlight that, while symbolic interactionism is centered on individual agency, adopting it as a framework does not mean considering the social and cultural environment as crucial for the constitution of social identities. Rather, it also allows us to evaluate the importance of the educational background and upbringing in shaping interfaith attitudes. Or, best, to understand how individuals negotiate their "own" communal boundaries and belonging in everyday social interactions.

Having clarified that, it seems easier to comprehend why several interviewees have either expressed or alluded that interfaith dialogue and mutual exposure would benefit Christian-Muslim relations. For them, intercommunal division is not (ideally) an unavoidable path, but a historical contingency provoked by "sectarian entrepreneurs" (chiefly, the Muslim Brotherhood) (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p.21) and "sectarian non-entrepreneurs" (namely, the ordinary Muslim citizen) (Fibiger, 2018, p.305). More practically, they suggest, such a phenomenon could be countered through significant investment into a shared, inclusive educational system, and interfaith dialogue. That should not surprise, provided that such claims are not unheard of: neither in Jordan (Schouten, 2020, pp.352-355) nor in neighboring contexts (Raheb, 1995, p.10; Lahham, 1999, cited by Droeber, 2011, p.117, pp.116-119, 121; Hansen, 2015, pp.231-235). In conclusion, despite being mostly pessimist, my sample demonstrated particularly

nuanced standpoints on the possibilities of interfaith dialogue among the Jordanian Christian community, far from sectarian interpretative paradigms (Nucho, 2016), disempowering narratives of ineluctable extinction (Russell, 2014; Williams, 2016; Rasche, 2020; Di Giovanni, 2021), or conversely, over-optimistic descriptions of idyllic coexistence (Wisman, 2019).

Conclusion

In this thesis, I reported the perceptions of Jordanian Christians about belonging to their religious community and navigating the condition of non-Muslim Jordanians. Findings show that feelings of threat and alienation are recurrent among the sample. In this regard, while Jordanian Christians enjoy far more guarantees and security than other coreligionists within the region, they are still concerned by similar issues. Firstly, the most tangible one seems to be the progressive disappearance of Christianity in Jordan. While standpoints on how that should happen diverge, emigration seems to be an omnipresent discourse among the community. Indeed, the precarious state of the Jordanian economy seems to be the main driver of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, several interviewees underlined the discrepancy between the widespread conservative mindset that features the Muslim majority, and the progressive, westernized values among the Christian community. Secondly, together with "micro-aggressions" (Hopper, 2022) experienced in everyday life, it seems to determine a separation between the two groups that articulate both socially and spatially. Precisely, the town of Fuheis is exemplary in revealing a still-existent "Christian bubble" that is both cherished and guarded by its people. Thirdly, the aforementioned patterns are also enforced by narratives of progressive marginalization due to the demographic imbalance following the Palestinian mass immigration, but also the memories of a lost past of Christian-Muslim harmony and friendship. Fourthly, such positive attitudes towards interfaith coexistence are not always relegated to the past. In fact, most interviewees either alluded or explicated that more effort should be put into interreligious dialogue and avoiding separation since the early school years.

Overall, despite the Jordanian Christian community seems to be an unproblematic, "resourceful" (Kårtveit, 2014), "silent" (Valensi, 1986, p.819; Chatelard, 2013, p.19) group, the interviewees reported a shared sense of disillusion and concern. At the same time, they expressed their deep love for their motherland, and many highlighted the desire to remain. Overall, they demanded their voices to be heard, and their presence to be acknowledged. In this sense, this thesis shed light on an under-researched

group and uncovered shared issues at stake for Christianity in the MENA region. While the overall finding is that Jordan at the present day presents numerous hidden challenges for religious coexistence, what I stress is that my research demonstrates the capacity of such a group of people to resist, navigate, and think of ways to improve dialogue and coexistence, while asserting its bond with the land of Jordan.

Therefore, I hope that this piece of research can benefit the field of Middle Eastern Studies by revendicating a down-to-earth approach that values the individual experience among the target group, rather than yielding to simplistic, essentialist frames. Moreover, the results suggest several possible aspects of contemporary Jordanian Christianity to dig into. First of all, the spatialities of the community, and especially the apparent pattern of internal migration and "spatial segregation" (Chatelard, 2013, pp.366-367) are worth investigating. Moreover, while I predominantly addressed Christians' perceptions of belonging and interfaith relations, it also pinpointed the entanglement of religious and socioeconomic backgrounds in defining the latter on a personal level. Therefore, it would be compelling to have a complementary perspective specifically engaging with that aspect, also on an intracommunal level, to further contribute to a multifaceted, realistic understanding of social relations within Jordanian society.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNAL IDENTITIES AMONG JORDANIAN CHRISTIANS, 2011-2023

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. **Introduction:**
   1. How **old** are you?
   2. From which **neighborhood** are you?
   3. To what **Church** are you affiliated?
   4. What do you do for a **living**?
   5. What is your **background** (Jordanian, Palestinian…)?
   6. Where did you **grow up**? What schools have you attended? Have you moved around or always resided in the same place?

2. **Life in the community:**
   1. What **churches and nationalities** does your local Christian community include?
   2. What kind of **communal activities**/events take place in your parish (gatherings, celebrations etc.)? What activities do you participate in? Would you define yourself as actively engaged in the public life of the community?
   3. Can you name events/traditions/customs that are **specific of your town**/neighborhood? Are they all related to Christianity, or are there some **typically Jordanian/Palestinian/Arab**?
   4. (*For those grown up and residing in the same community*) How was **growing up in your community**? Do you feel attached to it? Do you feel comfortable here? How would you feel if you lived somewhere else, in Jordan or abroad?
   5. What do you **think of your town**? Is a predominantly Christian town/neighborhood in Jordan peculiar, from your standpoint? How does your community feel about that?

3. **Condition of the Christian community in Jordan, nowadays:**
   1. What is the **relationship with your Muslim neighbors**, within your neighborhood, and overall? How do you feel (or have felt) to live and grow up in a Muslim country?
   2. What is your **everyday interaction** with Muslim people? How would you define it?
   3. Do Muslims and Christians share their respective holidays/are they mostly **on good terms**? Why?
   4. How would you define the **situation** of the Christian community **today**?
   5. How would you define the **coexistence** of many religious communities in your community? And in Jordan?
   6. What do you think are the similarities and differences between **Jordan and, say, Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine**, in this regard?

7. Is the **Muslim presence in the area** currently on the rise? What do you think of that? How does it affect your community, from your standpoint?

4. **Evolution in the past 10 years:**

    1. Have you always felt **safe in your community**? Did something happen in the past that made you question that?

    2. If so, what do you recall of **those events**? How did you and your community feel about that? And now?

    3. How did the rise of **DAESH** and Salafism in Jordan affect the Christian community in its everyday life? And now?

    4. How have you perceived the arrival of **Iraqi and Syrian refugees** throughout the past years?

        ▪ <u>Do you know some of them</u>?

        ▪ <u>Do you think they have integrated?</u> If so, do you think it was simple to host and favor their integration?

        ▪ <u>Would you define your community as "mixed" or not (consistent, even…)?</u>

        ▪ <u>Do you think that their arrival and integration are different from the previous ones? (e.g.: pre-2003) If so, in what ways?</u>

    2. How has your family been affected by **economic instability of Jordan** throughout the past years? How do you think your community has been affected by that, overall?

    3. How do you think the presence of **all those concerns/threats** altogether affected your family? And your community?

    5. How do you think the community has **reacted to that uncertainty**? Did it unite?

    6. <u>Do you think that the Christian community needs **protection from the state**, here in Jordan? Why?</u>

    7. <u>What **impact** did **recent events** (2022 protests) have on your community?</u>

    8. <u>How did those events impact your **life and that of your family/friends, today**?</u>

5. **More personal info (relationship with the state, nationality)**

    1. Given all we talked about, what is the overall **relationship of the community with the state**? Cooperation? Criticism?

    2. Do you think that the state does enough to **preserve**/enhance the condition of the Christian community? And the population overall (Muslim included)?

    3. In my research, I find the Jordanian identity a troublesome concept. Could you please help me defining "**being Jordanian**"? How do you relate to that? Is it important/evident in your community?

    4. Do you think that both the Christian and the Muslim community recognize themselves in the **same national identity**?

6. **More personal info (socio-economic background)**

    1. Knowing that this is a private matter and you can refrain from answering, how would you describe **yourself and your family, financially speaking** (medium-low, wealthy, rich)?

    2. How would you describe **your community**, financially speaking (overall and relatively to other Christian communities, and the rest of Jordan)?

    3. Do you think that the **gap** between low-income and rich strata is high in your community? How do you think that affects it in everyday life? How does the community react to it?

    4. Do you think the current situation **can be improved**? If so, how and why would you do that?

7. **Condition of the Christian community in the future:**

    1. What do you think, when you think of the future, **here in your community and Jordan**?

    2. How do you think your **peers and fellow townspeople** think of the future?

    3. What are your **plans** for the future, personally?

    4. What are your hopes for the **future**, for you, your family, your community, and Jordan?

8. **Anything to add?**

Appendix 2

CONSENT TO PARTECIPATE TO THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

"THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNAL IDENTITIES AMONG JORDANIAN CHRISTIANS, 2011-2023"

You have been invited to participate in a research study to learn more about the evolution of community identities among Jordanian Christians from 2011 to 2023. This study will be conducted by Leonardo Del Piccolo, a student of the Master's Degree in Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University, Sweden.

If you agree to help, you will participate in an in-depth interview that asks a series of questions about your life experience as a member of your local Christian community, your point of view on its change throughout the years and its past, present, and future challenges. Ultimately, the aim of the research is to investigate the evolution of social identities and sense of belonging among Jordanian Christians throughout the past decade.

The **interview will be audiotaped** and, if you desire, made available for your review. You may then request that any or all portions of the tape be destroyed.

The interview will take approximately one and a half to two hours, and **participation is entirely voluntary**.

You may **refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty**.

You also have the **right to decline or skip any questions** you prefer not to answer, although every effort will be made to prevent any discomfort.

Confidentiality will be strictly maintained. After the interview is completed, it will be assigned an ID number, and this number will replace your name on all interview documents. Any research findings will be presented only in the form of statistical summaries and anonymous quotes that use pseudonyms. No one else will have access to the interviews.

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may **contact me** by phone at   or by email at leonardo.delpiccolo@outlook.com.

You have received a copy of this consent document to keep for your records.

Agreement to Participate:

Participant's Signature   Date

_____   _____

Researcher's Signature   Date

_____   _____