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Faith, Identity, and Survival: A Comparative Study of the Bahá'í, Druze, and Yazidi Communities in the Middle East

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Abstract: This article examines comparatively how the religious beliefs, communal structures, and political environments of the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities have shaped their distinctive strategies of survival in the Middle East. The study is important because existing scholarship has largely treated religious identity, persecution, and minority adaptation as separate issues, without adequately explaining how these dimensions interact in producing different survival trajectories. This research employs a qualitative comparative design with a document-based method, relying on secondary sources such as scholarly books, journal articles, and historical analyses. The data were analysed through qualitative content analysis and cross-case comparison. The findings show that the three communities developed different configurations of belief and communal organisation that shaped distinct forms of survival strategy. Takiyya functioned as a limited form of concealment, the Druze developed positive neutrality grounded in territorial concentration and self-help defense, the Yazidis embodied a more vulnerable form of negative neutrality shaped by mixed settlement and limited defensive capacity, and the Bahais developed a more adaptive form of negative neutrality expressed through political quietism, migration, and transnational relocation. These findings imply that the survival of tiny religious minorities should not be understood through theology alone, but through the interaction between religious worldview, communal capacity, and political vulnerability. The originality of this study lies in its comparative framework, which integrates faith, communal structure, and political context into a single analytical model for explaining minority survival in the Middle East.

Keywords: Bahai; Druze; Yazidi; minority survival; communal structure; Middle East

Abstrak: Artikel ini menelaah secara komparatif bagaimana kepercayaan agama, struktur komunitas, dan lingkungan politik komunitas Bahai, Druze, dan Yazidi membentuk strategi khas mereka untuk bertahan hidup di Timur Tengah. Studi ini penting karena penelitian yang ada sebagian besar memperlakukan identitas agama, penganiayaan, dan adaptasi minoritas sebagai isu terpisah, tanpa menjelaskan secara memadai bagaimana dimensi-dimensi ini berinteraksi dalam menghasilkan trajektori bertahan hidup yang berbeda. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain komparatif kualitatif dengan metode berbasis dokumen, mengandalkan sumber sekunder seperti buku ilmiah, artikel jurnal, dan analisis sejarah. Data dianalisis melalui analisis konten kualitatif dan perbandingan antar kasus. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa ketiga komunitas mengembangkan konfigurasi kepercayaan dan organisasi komunal yang berbeda yang membentuk bentuk strategi bertahan hidup yang berbeda. Takiyya berfungsi sebagai bentuk penyembunyian terbatas, Druze mengembangkan netralitas positif yang didasarkan pada konsentrasi wilayah dan pertahanan swadaya, Yazidi mewujudkan bentuk netralitas negatif yang lebih rentan yang dibentuk oleh pemukiman campuran dan kapasitas pertahanan yang terbatas, dan Bahai mengembangkan bentuk netralitas negatif yang lebih adaptif yang diekspresikan melalui ketenangan politik, migrasi, dan relokasi transnasional. Temuan ini mengimplikasikan bahwa kelangsungan hidup minoritas agama kecil tidak seharusnya dipahami hanya melalui teologi, melainkan melalui interaksi antara pandangan dunia religius,

kapasitas komunal, dan kerentanan politik. Orisinalitas studi ini terletak pada kerangka komparatifnya, yang mengintegrasikan iman, struktur komunal, dan konteks politik ke dalam satu model analitis tunggal untuk menjelaskan kelangsungan hidup minoritas di Timur Tengah.

Kata kunci: Bahai; Druze; kelangsungan hidup minoritas; struktur komunal; Timur Tengah; Yazidi

1. Introduction

The Middle East is widely recognised as a region of profound sectarian diversity, stretching from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf and encompassing states such as Israel, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, all of which are home to numerous religious communities. Yet this diversity also coexists with deep vulnerability, particularly for what may be described as tiny religious minorities (TRMs), namely small religious communities whose populations are limited in size, dispersed across several states, and lacking any sovereign state in which they constitute a majority capable of representing their interests internationally (Halabi, 2020). For such minorities, survival is not merely a matter of maintaining religious identity, but of enduring within environments marked by political instability, sectarian tension, marginalisation, and the risk of violence. Their position is especially precarious because they face distinctive structural disadvantages: small demographic weight, limited external protection, and heightened exposure to both state and non-state threats. For this reason, the survival of TRMs in the Middle East should be understood not only as a religious issue, but also as a broader social and political phenomenon that bears directly on the study of religion, minority politics, and majority–minority relations.

Previous scholarship has approached the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities from three main directions. First, a substantial body of literature examines their religious beliefs, communal boundaries, and internal social organisation, showing important differences in openness and closure, authority, hierarchy, and identity maintenance (Akman, 2021; Brookshaw & Fazel, 2012; Firro, 2011; Swayd, 2015). Second, another studies focuses on minority politics, persecution, and violence, emphasising the effects of sectarian conflict, authoritarian governance, state repression, and episodes of mass violence such as the persecution of Bahais in Iran and the ISIS assault on the Yazidis (Cheterian, 2021; Cook, Kennedy, Chenail, Detullio, & Edmonds, 2022; Zabihi-Moghaddam, 2016). Third, a few research discusses survival strategies more directly, including internal resilience, political adaptation, migration, external alliances, and defensive measures among religious minorities in the region and in comparable settings (Belge & Karakoç, 2015; Levy, 2020; Muliadi, Busro, & Rohman, 2026; Roussos, 2021). These studies provide important insights into minority identity, vulnerability, and adaptation, but they generally treat these dimensions separately rather than explaining them within a single comparative framework.

The main gap in the literature, therefore, lies in the absence of a comparative analysis that brings these strands together to explain why similarly small and vulnerable minorities develop different survival trajectories. Existing studies have not adequately shown how the interaction between religious orientation, communal form, and political environment helps account for the differences between the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi responses to threat. As a result, strategies such as political quietism, positive neutrality, and vulnerable negative neutrality often appear as isolated case outcomes rather than as patterned responses shaped by broader configurations of minority life. This article aims to examine comparatively how the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities developed distinctive strategies of survival in the Middle East. More specifically, it analyses how differences in communal openness and closure, territorial concentration or dispersion, and forms of religious orientation influenced the adoption of Takiyya, positive neutrality, and negative neutrality among these three tiny religious minorities.

This article argues that the survival of tiny religious minorities in the Middle East cannot be understood as a direct or automatic outcome of religious doctrine alone, but rather as the product of an interaction between faith, communal structure, and political context. To clarify this relationship, the article draws on Giddens's structuration theory, particularly the idea of the "duality of structure," to show that minority communities are not merely shaped by external constraints such as state weakness, sectarian

hostility, or political exclusion, but also actively produce strategies of endurance within those constraints (Giddens, 1984). In this perspective, faith provides moral orientation and identity boundaries, while communal structure conditions the practical capacity to respond, and political context determines whether such strategies become viable, fragile, or catastrophic. Accordingly, the Bahai's political quietism and transnational relocation, the Druze's positive neutrality and self-help defense, and the Yazidis' vulnerable negative neutrality should be read not as simple reflections of theology, but as historically produced strategies emerging from the interplay between internal religious commitments and external political conditions. This argument is also consistent with minority-politics scholarship, which shows that minorities such as the Druze act not merely as doctrinal communities, but as political units that respond strategically to insecurity, hierarchy, and unequal protection within the states in which they live (Halabi, 2018).

This article employs a qualitative comparative approach with a document-based method to analyse the relationship between religious belief and survival strategies among the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi minorities in the Middle East. The study relies on secondary data, particularly scholarly books, journal articles, and historical analyses discussing the religious doctrines, social organisation, and political experiences of these three communities. The three cases were selected because they represent small religious minorities that have historically faced varying degrees of persecution, marginalisation, and pressure to conceal or defend their religious identity. At the same time, they differ in important respects, including openness to conversion, geographical concentration, and relations with surrounding political authorities. These similarities and differences make them suitable for structured comparison.

The analysis focuses on three dimensions: religious beliefs and communal characteristics, forms of threat and vulnerability, and survival strategies, particularly Takiyya, positive neutrality, and negative neutrality. Data were analysed through qualitative content analysis, followed by cross-case comparison to identify recurring patterns and distinctive features in each community's response to its sociopolitical environment. Rather than claiming a deterministic relationship between theology and political behavior, this study interprets survival strategies as being shaped by the interaction between religious worldview, communal structure, and historical-political context.

2. Comparative Framework of Religious Minority Characteristics in Middle East

Religious Beliefs and Communal Characteristics of the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi

The analysis shows that although the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities all belong to the category of religious minorities in the Middle East, they differ fundamentally in terms of the openness or closure of their religion, the boundaries of membership, their social patterns, and their areas of residence. In contrast to the Bahai Faith, which is an open religion that accepts new converts and has historically operated in urban centers, both the Druze and Yazidi communities are closed sects that maintain stricter communal boundaries and do not accept conversion into their ranks (Hatcher & Martin, 2002; Smith, 2013). These differences are not merely theological, but are also reflected in the organisation of communal life, the degree of secrecy surrounding religious rituals, and the geographical distribution of each community. While the Druze historically lived in relatively concentrated areas such as Jabal al-Duruz in southern Syria and the Shouf district in Mount Lebanon (Firro, 1992), the Yazidis mainly resided in rural mixed villages, especially alongside Sunni Kurdish populations, whereas the Bahais were more deeply rooted in urban settings and attracted many educated converts (Smith, 2008). These findings indicate that the three minorities cannot be understood as sharing a single model of communal existence, since each developed a distinct religious and social structure that shaped its collective position within the wider Middle Eastern environment.

In contrast to the Druze and Yazidi communities, the Bahai Faith is an open religion whose followers have historically sought to attract new converts into their ranks (Hatcher & Martin, 2002). This openness constitutes one of the most distinctive characteristics of the Bahai community and differentiates it sharply from closed sectarian groups whose membership is determined by birth and endogamy. The Bahai religion was founded on universal principles of fraternity, peace, and the unity

of mankind, and its openness to conversion reflects its broader aspiration to transcend inherited communal boundaries and to promote the gradual unification of humanity under a shared religious vision (Hatcher & Martin, 2002; Smith, 2013). In this sense, the Bahai community did not define itself primarily through secrecy or inherited communal exclusiveness, but through expansion, outreach, and the dissemination of a universal religious message.

This missionary orientation was closely linked to the urban character of Bahai activity since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century. Bahai missionary work took place mainly in large cities in Iran and was directed especially toward minority groups such as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians (Smith, 2013). Operating in urban centers enabled the Bahai community to establish itself in relatively dynamic social environments in which new religious ideas could circulate more easily than in isolated rural settings. Given this urban setting, the Bahais attracted a significant number of educated converts, and the average level of education among Bahais became higher than that of the Muslim-Shiite majority in Iran (Smith, 2008). This pattern further distinguished the Bahai from the Druze and Yazidis, whose communal structures were more closely tied to inherited identity, local solidarity, and rural or semi-rural settings.

The urban and missionary character of the Bahai Faith also made it relatively more compatible with modern urban life than the more closed and endogamous structures of the Druze and Yazidi communities. Processes of modernisation, urbanisation, and social mobility did not pose the same degree of internal threat to the Bahai community, precisely because the religion was open to new members and was not dependent on strict communal closure for its reproduction. Its institutional organisation and transnational orientation also contributed to its capacity to adapt and expand beyond its original setting, especially after large segments of the community emigrated to democratic societies and transferred their religious activity abroad (Christopher Buck, 2020). Thus, the Bahai case shows that openness to conversion, missionary activity, urban rootedness, and a relatively educated social base were central elements in shaping the distinctive communal character of the Bahai minority.

Unlike the Bahai Faith, the Druze community constitutes a closed religious minority whose boundaries of membership are tightly guarded and whose communal continuity depends on internal reproduction rather than conversion. The Druze do not accept new converts into their ranks, and their communal identity is preserved through strict endogamy and inherited membership. This closed character has historically reinforced a strong distinction between insiders and outsiders and has contributed to the formation of a highly cohesive communal structure (Firro, 1992). In addition, the Druze have maintained a relatively secretive religious life, where many rituals and doctrinal matters are kept away from public exposure and external intrusion. Such secrecy did not merely reflect theological preference, but also functioned as a social mechanism for preserving communal boundaries and shielding the group from outside interference (Hazran, 2018).

The Druze community has also been characterised by a relatively concentrated pattern of settlement, especially in areas such as Jabal al-Duruz, also known as Jabal al-Arab, in southern Syria, as well as in parts of Mount Lebanon, particularly the Shouf district (Firro, 1992). This concentrated territorial presence strengthened internal solidarity and enabled the Druze to preserve a relatively autonomous communal life over long historical periods. In such settings, the community was better able to regulate its own affairs, maintain its collective identity, and organise local forms of authority and protection. As Halabi (2018) argues, the Druze developed a strong sensitivity toward external intervention and consistently sought to prevent outside powers from penetrating their internal affairs. Their historical experience taught them that neither imperial nor state authorities could be fully relied upon to guarantee their security, which further reinforced the importance of local cohesion and self-regulation.

These features of closure, secrecy, and territorial concentration contributed to a communal ethos centered on cohesion, autonomy, and the strict protection of internal affairs. The Druze understood themselves as a minority living in a self-help environment in which survival depended heavily on the community's own capacity to preserve unity and defend its social boundaries (Firro, 1992; Halabi, 2018). This helps explain why Druze communal life became strongly organized around solidarity, local leadership, and the maintenance of a protected internal sphere. As Hazran (2018) notes, even under the pressures of modernity and urban transformation, the Druze continued to display a strong commitment to collective identity and communal distinctiveness. Thus, the Druze case demonstrates that concentrated settlement, secretive religious life, and the protection of communal autonomy were central characteristics shaping the social organisation of this tiny religious minority.

Similar to the Druze, the Yazidi community is also characterized by a closed communal identity in which membership is inherited rather than acquired through conversion. A person is born into the Yazidi faith, and the continuity of the community depends on preserving its internal boundaries across generations. This inherited form of belonging has contributed to a strong sense of communal distinctiveness and to the maintenance of a clear separation between Yazidis and surrounding groups. The closed nature of the community also means that religious identity is deeply tied to communal continuity, family lineage, and the reproduction of the group from within, rather than through missionary outreach or the acceptance of outsiders.

At the same time, the Yazidis differed from the Druze in their social and geographical setting. Whereas the Druze historically enjoyed relatively concentrated settlement in specific mountainous districts, the Yazidis lived mainly in rural mixed villages, particularly alongside Sunni Kurdish populations. This mixed-village existence meant that the Yazidis often lacked the same degree of territorial concentration and internal control over their surroundings that the Druze possessed. As a result, although the Yazidis maintained a closed communal identity, they did so in a more exposed social environment in which boundaries had to be preserved amid daily coexistence with surrounding majority populations. This condition made communal continuity more fragile and limited the community's ability to translate internal cohesion into broader collective security.

The vulnerability of this mixed settlement pattern becomes even more significant when viewed against the long continuity of pressure and persecution experienced by the Yazidi community. As Kizilhan (2017) notes, the Yazidis have historically faced repeated coercion, forced conversion, and violent pressure from surrounding powers, which reinforced the need to preserve communal boundaries and inherited membership. Yet this long experience of marginalisation did not produce the same type of territorially consolidated communal autonomy found among the Druze. Instead, the Yazidi case reflects a combination of strong internal closure and structural exposure, where a tightly bounded religious identity existed within a relatively vulnerable rural and mixed social setting. Thus, the Yazidi community illustrates how inherited membership and closed communal identity may preserve religious continuity, while mixed settlement can simultaneously intensify social and political vulnerability.

The advent of modernity introduced a new and differentiating pressure on the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities, particularly through the processes of urbanisation, westernisation, and the expansion of middle-class mobility. Since the early twentieth century, and especially after the First World War, social change in the Middle East gradually transformed patterns of everyday life, dress, education, and occupation, as increasing numbers of people moved away from agrarian settings into urban professions and middle-class lifestyles. These developments did not bypass tiny religious minorities. On the contrary, members of these communities often embraced modern education, urban professions, and westernised lifestyles at a relatively high rate, which in turn obscured some of the visible differences between them and the broader urban middle classes in the region (Hazran, 2018). In this sense, modernity functioned as a partial equaliser in the public sphere, making members of religious minorities appear less socially distinct in terms of outward lifestyle and occupational position.

Yet the pressures of modernity did not affect all three communities in the same way. For the Druze and Yazidis, whose communal continuity depended more heavily on inherited membership, territorial rootedness, and relatively guarded social boundaries, urban migration and middle-class mobility introduced new internal strains, especially through rising intermarriage and the weakening of traditional isolation (Hazran, 2018). The movement of younger generations into metropolitan centers for education and professional advancement made it more difficult to preserve the same degree of communal enclosure that had historically sustained these groups. By contrast, such changes were relatively less disruptive for the Bahai community, since the Bahai Faith was already open to new converts, more firmly rooted in urban environments, and less dependent on endogamous closure for its reproduction (Smith, 2008). Thus, while modernity blurred external differences among tiny religious minorities and their surrounding societies, it simultaneously placed unequal pressures on their internal structures, proving more disruptive for the closed communal formations of the Druze and Yazidis than for the more open and urban-oriented Bahai community.

Taken together, the three cases demonstrate that the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities represent three distinct configurations of the relationship between faith and communal organisation. The Bahai emerged as an open, urban, and missionary-oriented religious community whose structure was relatively compatible with mobility, expansion, and adaptation beyond its original setting (Hatcher & Martin, 2002; Smith, 2008, 2013). The Druze, by contrast, developed as a closed, territorially concentrated, and socially cohesive minority whose communal life depended on internal solidarity, protected boundaries, and a strong degree of autonomy (Firro, 1992; Halabi, 2018; Hazran, 2018). The Yazidis likewise maintained a closed communal identity, yet did so within a more rural and mixed social setting that made their communal boundaries more exposed and their collective position more vulnerable (Kizilhan, 2017). These differences indicate that tiny religious minorities in the Middle East did not share a single social form, but rather embodied different combinations of openness, closure, concentration, and exposure. It is precisely these variations in faith and communal organisation that help explain why the survival strategies of the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidis developed in different directions, as discussed in the following section.

Takiyya, Positive Neutrality, and Negative Neutrality as Survival Strategies

The findings show that the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities all resorted, at different moments and in different forms, to elements of concealment in order to reduce the risks of persecution, most notably through the practice of Takiyya. For the Druze and Yazidis in particular, Takiyya functioned as a form of camouflage meant to spare them persecution and prosecution from hostile groups that regarded non-Sunni minorities as disbelievers or heretics who should either convert or perish (Berry, 2004; Makārim, 1974). Yet the analysis also indicates that concealment alone was not sufficient to guarantee the survival of these tiny religious minorities, precisely because their distinct religious identity was in most cases already known to their surrounding societies. As the draft itself suggests, it is highly difficult to assess how far Takiyya improved the survival chances of these communities when "their true identity as a separate religious entity was well-know[n] to their neighbors." Under such conditions, concealment could only provide limited protection, and each of the three communities was compelled to develop a broader survival strategy shaped by its own faith, communal structure, and capacity to respond to external threats.

Takiyya functioned primarily as a strategy of camouflage through which members of tiny religious minorities sought to conceal their true religious identity in order to avoid persecution. For communities such as the Druze and Yazidis, concealment was expected to reduce suspicion and to minimize exposure to hostile actors who viewed non-Sunni groups established after the advent of Prophet Muhammad as disbelievers or heretics who should either convert to Sunni Islam or perish (Berry, 2004; Makārim, 1974). In this context, Takiyya was not merely a theological or symbolic practice, but a practical social response to environments in which religious difference could trigger coercion, exclusion, or violence. As Hazran (2018) also suggests in relation to broader minority adaptation in the modern Middle East, the ability to obscure visible distinctions from surrounding majorities could serve

as a temporary protective mechanism, especially when communal survival depended on avoiding direct confrontation.

At the same time, the findings indicate that Takiyya had clear limits as a long-term survival strategy. Concealment could blur external differences, but it could not erase the fact that these communities were already recognised by their neighbors as distinct religious entities. This limitation became even more apparent in periods of heightened sectarian mobilisation, when communal identities were scrutinised more closely and symbolic or social assimilation no longer guaranteed protection. In other words, Takiyya could delay exposure, but it could not by itself secure collective survival when the surrounding political and social environment turned openly hostile. For that reason, the Druze, Yazidis, and Bahais could not rely on concealment alone; each community had to combine or replace it with a broader strategy more closely tied to its own communal organisation, territorial position, and capacity to endure external pressure.

In contrast to concealment alone, the Druze developed what may be described as a strategy of positive neutrality, a form of survival that combined political restraint with preparedness for self-defense. This strategy was closely related to the Druze experience of living in relatively concentrated territories, especially in Jabal al-Duruz/Jabal al-Arab in southern Syria and in the Shouf district of Mount Lebanon, where the community was able to preserve a strong internal structure and a measure of local autonomy (Firro, 1992). Under these conditions, the Druze came to understand themselves as living in a self-help environment in which survival could not depend on the goodwill of external authorities. As Halabi (2018) argues, the Druze consistently sought to protect their internal affairs from outside intervention, while at the same time recognising that neither imperial powers nor modern states could be relied upon to defend them in moments of existential danger. Positive neutrality therefore did not mean passivity. Rather, it meant refraining from initiating aggression or from fully aligning with hostile coalitions, while remaining ready to use force as a last resort when the community itself was threatened.

This logic was already evident in the nineteenth century, particularly during the 1860 conflict in Mount Lebanon. In the Shouf district, where the Druze coexisted with the Maronite community, the escalation of sectarian war placed the Druze in a situation where neutrality could no longer be sustained without the capacity to fight back. As Abraham (1981) and Fawaz (1994) show, the conflict became an existential struggle over control and presence in Mount Lebanon, while Talhamy (2012) notes that the Druze faced the prospect of elimination from the district. Under such circumstances, the Druze did not abandon neutrality in the sense of becoming an expansionist force, but they did respond militarily in order to preserve communal survival. As Saleh (1989) emphasizes, the Druze succeeded in fighting back despite being outnumbered. This case illustrates the core meaning of positive neutrality in the Druze experience: neutrality without surrender, restraint without disarmament, and coexistence without abandoning the right of collective self-defense.

The same pattern reappeared in the ISIS attack on Sweida in July 2018, which further demonstrated that Druze neutrality was inseparable from readiness to resist armed assault. ISIS launched a series of suicide bombings and attacks against the Druze district in southern Syria, killing and abducting members of the community, yet the Druze response was not one of pacifist submission (Abdel-Samad, 2016; Halabi, 2020). Rather, local Druze armed groups confronted the attack after realising that the regime forces did not effectively protect them and that the community had once again been left to defend itself. In this sense, Sweida confirmed the long-standing Druze conviction that state protection could not be fully trusted and that communal survival required self-reliance. As Wahab (2023) suggests, the Druze sought to maintain neutrality in relation to the broader Syrian civil war and resisted being fully absorbed into the regime's military agenda, yet this neutrality exposed them to attack by Islamist forces while the state remained unwilling or unable to provide reliable security. The Sweida case therefore reinforces the finding that Druze positive neutrality was not a passive withdrawal from conflict, but a strategy of limited political nonalignment combined with the enduring capacity and willingness to fight back when survival was at stake.

In contrast to the Druze pattern of positive neutrality, the Yazidi case reflects a form of negative neutrality characterized by pacifist non-defense and the absence of an effective collective capacity to fight back when the community came under attack. This strategy was closely linked to the Yazidis' social and geographical condition as a community living mainly in rural mixed villages, especially alongside Sunni Kurdish populations, rather than in territorially concentrated strongholds. Although the Yazidis maintained a closed communal identity and inherited membership, their mixed settlement made them more exposed to surrounding power relations and less able to translate internal cohesion into organized communal protection. As Kizilhan (2017) notes, this vulnerability was reinforced by a long historical continuity of persecution, forced conversion, and repeated violence directed against the Yazidis, which placed the community in a persistently precarious position. Under such conditions, negative neutrality did not signify secure coexistence, but rather a fragile form of survival shaped by limited defensive capacity and prolonged exposure to hostile forces.

The ISIS assault on the Yazidis in August 2014 provides the clearest evidence of the vulnerability embedded in this strategy. As Nicolaus and Yuce (2017) show, the attack revealed the centrality of gendered violence in the persecution of the Yazidis, with sexual enslavement and systematic abuse becoming integral to the violence directed against the community. Kaya (2020) further explains that ISIS justified its actions by portraying the Yazidis as non-believers, devil-worshippers, and a pagan minority, despite their monotheistic faith. In practice, the attack demonstrated the extreme limits of pacifist non-defense: Yazidi villages were rapidly overrun, men who refused conversion were executed, and women and girls were abducted, enslaved, and subjected to severe violence, while the community itself did not mount an effective armed resistance and surrounding actors did not intervene in time to prevent the catastrophe. Thus, the Yazidi case shows that negative neutrality, when combined with mixed settlement, weak external protection, and a long history of persecution, could leave a tiny religious minority exceptionally vulnerable to genocidal violence.

In contrast to the Druze and Yazidi patterns, the Bahai community developed another form of negative neutrality grounded not in helpless exposure, but in political quietism and deliberate non-participation in political struggle. Although the Bahai Faith is an open and missionary religion, its missionary activity was primarily directed toward the promotion of universal fraternity, peace, and the unity of mankind rather than toward political mobilisation or confrontation (Hatcher & Martin, 2002; Smith, 2013). Since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, Bahai activity was concentrated mainly in the urban centers of Iran, where the community attracted converts particularly among minority groups and educated circles (Smith, 2008, 2013). This urban and universalist orientation shaped a survival strategy that did not rely on armed defense or territorial autonomy, but instead on restraint from political participation and on maintaining a non-violent religious presence even under hostile conditions.

At the same time, the Bahai experience in Iran demonstrates that such quietism did not shield the community from persecution. As Berry notes,

> The [Iranian] government allowed persecutions of the Bahá'ís when it served official interests. In most instances, this took the form of non-intervention in anti-Bahá'í riots or persecutions. At times, the government initiated or encouraged violence against the Bahá'ís when it could benefit (Berry, 2004).

While the Bahais had previously benefited to some extent from urban education and from the presence of some members in state and bureaucratic positions, this situation changed dramatically after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the rise of Shiite clerical rule (C Buck, 2003; Smith, 2008). Under these circumstances, the survival of the Bahai community increasingly depended on migration and relocation rather than on political engagement or self-defense. Large segments of the community moved their activities abroad, especially to democratic settings, while their transnational institutional organisation enabled them not only to preserve communal continuity but also to survive and even thrive beyond Iran (Christopher Buck, 2020). Thus, the Bahai case represents a distinct form of negative neutrality in

which non-participation in politics was combined with mobility, diaspora formation, and organisational relocation as key mechanisms of survival.

The findings indicate that Takiyya functioned as a form of concealment that could provide only limited protection, since the distinct identity of these communities remained widely known and concealment alone could not secure long-term survival. Beyond this limited camouflage, the three minorities developed different survival strategies in accordance with their own communal capacities and historical circumstances. The Druze pursued positive neutrality, combining relative political nonalignment with a sustained readiness to defend the community by force when necessary. The Yazidis, by contrast, embodied a more vulnerable form of negative neutrality, marked by pacifist non-defense, mixed settlement, and a high degree of exposure to external violence. The Bahai developed yet another version of negative neutrality, one rooted in political quietism, non-violent endurance, and transnational relocation as a means of preserving the community under persecution. These differences suggest that survival among tiny religious minorities in the Middle East cannot be explained by concealment alone, but must be understood through the interaction between religious outlook, communal organisation, and the broader political environment. It is this relationship between faith, communal structure, and political context that will be examined more directly in the following section.

Faith, Communal Structure, and Political Context in Shaping Minority Survival

The findings of this study show that the survival of the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities cannot be explained by theology alone, nor can it be reduced simply to the external violence they have faced. Rather, minority survival emerges from the interaction between faith, communal structure, and political context. Religious belief provided each community with a moral orientation, a sense of identity, and a framework through which threat and coexistence were understood, yet these beliefs did not operate in a social vacuum. Their practical consequences depended on whether the community was open or closed, territorially concentrated or socially dispersed, cohesive or organisationally mobile, and whether it lived under conditions of relative protection, state failure, or direct ideological hostility. For this reason, similar experiences of concealment, neutrality, and persecution did not produce the same outcomes across the three cases. Instead, the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities reveal that survival among tiny religious minorities is best understood as the result of a dynamic relationship between internal religious orientation, communal capacity, and the wider political environment in which each minority is compelled to endure.

Faith played a crucial role in providing each of the three communities with an ethical orientation and a framework for defining communal identity, yet the findings indicate that it did not by itself determine a single or uniform survival outcome. In the Bahai case, faith encouraged pacifism, universal fraternity, and non-participation in politics, thereby shaping a communal orientation toward quietism and non-violent endurance (Hatcher & Martin, 2002; Smith, 2013). In the Druze case, faith was tied more closely to communal autonomy, internal cohesion, and the protection of collective boundaries, which reinforced a readiness to preserve the community through solidarity and self-defense (Firro, 1992; Halabi, 2018). Among the Yazidis, faith likewise marked a strong inherited identity and a deeply bounded sense of communal continuity, sustained under repeated conditions of exclusion and persecution (Kizilhan, 2017). Yet these different ethical and identity orientations did not automatically produce predictable or identical forms of survival. Instead, the same broad need to endure threat generated different outcomes because religious belief was always mediated by the concrete structure of the community and the political environment in which each minority lived.

Communal structure functioned as the key mediator through which faith was translated into actual survival capacity. In the Druze case, the combination of territorial concentration and strong internal cohesion gave the community a degree of collective capacity that went beyond religious identity alone. The Druze were not only a closed minority, but one that historically resided in relatively concentrated areas such as Jabal al-Duruz and parts of Mount Lebanon, where communal solidarity could be preserved and organized more effectively (Firro, 1992). This concentration strengthened local authority, reinforced mutual obligation, and enabled the community to protect its internal affairs from

external interference. As Halabi (2018) suggests, the Druze experience produced a durable sense that communal survival depended on self-reliance, and this made it possible for their faith-based orientation toward autonomy to become an actionable form of collective defense.

The Yazidi case reveals a different pattern, in which communal closure existed without equivalent territorial protection. Like the Druze, the Yazidis maintained a closed and inherited communal identity, yet their social organisation did not rest on the same kind of territorially concentrated and cohesive defensive environment. Instead, the Yazidis lived largely in rural mixed settlements, which exposed them more directly to surrounding power relations and reduced their ability to transform internal solidarity into effective communal protection. As Kizilhan (2017) indicates, this vulnerability was compounded by the long continuity of persecution experienced by the community, so that closure helped preserve identity but did not generate the same capacity for organised resistance or territorial self-protection. In this sense, the Yazidi case demonstrates that communal cohesion alone is insufficient when it is not supported by a protective social and spatial structure.

The Bahai case points to yet another configuration, in which openness rather than closure became linked to survival through urban and transnational organisation. Unlike the Druze and Yazidis, the Bahai community did not depend on inherited membership or strict communal enclosure, but rather developed through openness to conversion, urban rootedness, and a relatively educated social base (Smith, 2008). These features made the community more adaptable to mobility, migration, and reorganisation beyond its original setting. As Buck (2020) shows, the Bahai institutional structure and transnational orientation enabled the community not only to preserve continuity under persecution, but also to relocate and thrive in democratic contexts outside Iran. Thus, while Druze survival capacity rested on concentration and cohesion, and Yazidi closure remained structurally exposed, Bahai survival was mediated by openness, urban organisation, and the ability to extend communal life across borders.

Political context functioned as a decisive enabling or constraining factor in shaping the survival prospects of tiny religious minorities, because their strategies unfolded not in neutral settings, but within failed states, authoritarian regimes, and environments marked by Islamist threats and uncertain protection. In such settings, the absence or weakness of state protection meant that survival could not be secured simply through concealment or neutrality alone. In Syria, for example, the Druze experience showed that even when the community maintained a position of relative nonalignment, this did not guarantee protection from armed Islamist violence, especially when state institutions were unwilling or unable to defend them (Abdel-Samad, 2016; Halabi, 2020; Wahab, 2023). The same broader regional pattern also affected other minorities living under fragile or coercive political orders, where the line between state neglect, opportunistic tolerance, and direct persecution was often blurred. Thus, political context did not merely surround minority survival from the outside, but directly shaped the risks, limits, and possibilities within which each community had to act.

The differential outcomes of survival become even clearer when comparing Iran, Syria, Iraq, and democratic settings beyond the region. In Iran, the Bahai experience demonstrates that political quietism did not prevent persecution when the state or ruling elites considered the community politically useful as a scapegoat or ideologically unacceptable, as reflected in the pattern of tolerated or encouraged violence against the Bahá'ís noted by Berry (2004) and in the intensified repression that followed the 1979 Revolution (C Buck, 2003). In Iraq, the Yazidis faced a context in which state collapse and the rise of ISIS exposed them to catastrophic violence without effective protection, while in Syria the Druze encountered a setting in which neutrality still left them vulnerable to attack and doubtful of state reliability (Abdel-Samad, 2016; Halabi, 2020; Wahab, 2023). By contrast, democratic societies outside the Middle East offered the Bahai a very different political environment, one in which transnational organisation, relocation, and institutional continuity became viable mechanisms of survival and even growth (Christopher Buck, 2020). These contrasts show that the same minority strategy could produce very different results depending on whether it operated under authoritarian exclusion, state failure, sectarian warfare, or a more protective democratic framework.

Modernity and mobility also emerged as important factors that reshaped the survival conditions of these minorities by obscuring visible differences between them and the surrounding societies, while at the same time introducing new pressures on communal continuity. As Hazran (2018) notes, the spread of urbanisation, westernisation, and middle-class lifestyles since the early twentieth century gradually blurred some of the outward distinctions that had once marked tiny religious minorities in the Middle East. Members of these communities increasingly entered urban professions, adopted modern forms of education and dress, and became part of broader social transformations that affected the region as a whole. In this sense, modernity could reduce the visibility of minority difference in everyday life. Yet this same process also weakened older forms of communal insulation, particularly when migration from rural or mountainous areas to metropolitan centers exposed younger generations to more fluid social environments and to relationships beyond the traditional boundaries of the community.

These transformations did not affect the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities in the same way, because each possessed a different adaptive capacity. For the Druze and Yazidis, whose communal continuity depended more heavily on closure, inherited membership, and the preservation of relatively guarded boundaries, urban migration and rising intermarriage posed more serious challenges to long-term cohesion (Hazran, 2018). Greater mobility opened opportunities for education and social advancement, but it also increased the risk of assimilation and weakened the traditional structures through which communal identity had been maintained. By contrast, the Bahai community was relatively better positioned to adapt to these changes, since it was already rooted in urban life, open to new converts, and less dependent on endogamous closure for its continuity (Smith, 2008). Thus, modernity and mobility did not simply transform minority life in a uniform manner; they produced uneven consequences, strengthening the adaptive possibilities of some communities while placing greater strain on the inherited social boundaries of others.

The findings confirm that minority survival among the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities was shaped by the combined interaction of three interrelated factors. Faith gave each community its moral orientation, its sense of identity, and its basic understanding of how to respond to threat and coexistence. Communal structure gave that orientation a concrete social capacity, whether through territorial cohesion, inherited closure, or urban-transnational organisation. Political context, in turn, provided the opportunity, constraint, or danger within which these capacities were either strengthened, tested, or broken. For this reason, survival outcomes did not emerge from doctrine alone, nor from politics alone, but from the way in which religious worldview, communal organisation, and political vulnerability intersected in each case.

3. Survival Strategies of Minority Religious Community: A Giddens's structuration theory

The findings of this study can be summarised in three main points. First, the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities represent distinct configurations of religious belief and communal structure, differing in terms of openness and closure, territorial concentration or dispersion, and organisational cohesion. Second, these differences are closely related to the survival strategies each community developed: Takiyya functioned as a limited form of concealment, the Druze adopted positive neutrality grounded in self-help and readiness for defense, while the Yazidis and the Bahais developed two different forms of negative neutrality, one marked by structural vulnerability and the other by political quietism and transnational relocation. Third, the study shows that the survival of tiny religious minorities in the Middle East cannot be explained by theology alone, but must be understood through the interaction between faith, communal structure, and political context. Taken together, these findings provide the basis for a more analytical discussion of why these communities responded differently to similar conditions of insecurity and threat.

These different survival strategies emerged because faith did not operate in isolation, but through communal structures that enabled or constrained action under unequal political conditions. This is precisely where the article's argument becomes analytically useful: religious doctrine alone did not automatically produce a fixed outcome, but instead provided a moral orientation and a set of identity boundaries that acquired practical meaning only when mediated by concrete forms of communal life. In the Druze case, a closed religious identity was reinforced by territorial concentration, internal cohesion, and a historically rooted self-help orientation, which made positive neutrality a viable strategy. Their faith supported communal autonomy and the protection of internal boundaries, while their concentrated social structure gave them the capacity to translate that orientation into organized self-defense when necessary. In the Yazidi case, by contrast, a similarly closed and inherited identity did not generate the same strategic capacity, because it was embedded in mixed settlements and a more exposed social environment. As a result, communal closure preserved identity but did not provide the same territorial or organisational basis for defense, making negative neutrality far more fragile and leaving the community vulnerable when external violence escalated.

The Bahai case further clarifies why the outcomes differed, since here an open religious orientation interacted with a very different communal structure and political context. The Bahai faith emphasised universal fraternity, non-participation in politics, and moral restraint, but these principles became a more adaptive form of negative neutrality because the community was urban, relatively educated, and organisationally capable of extending itself beyond its original setting. In Giddens's terms, these minorities were not merely passive recipients of structural pressure; they actively produced strategies of endurance within the constraints imposed by repression, sectarian hostility, and uneven state protection (Giddens, 1984). Thus, the Bahais responded to persecution not through self-defense, but through political quietism, migration, and transnational relocation, whereas the Druze transformed communal autonomy into a self-protective neutrality and the Yazidis remained structurally exposed despite their strong internal identity. This confirms the article's central claim that survival among tiny religious minorities is historically produced through the interplay between faith, communal structure, and political context, rather than being a simple reflection of theology alone.

The findings of this study both confirm and extend the three strands of scholarship mapped in the Introduction. First, they are consistent with studies that emphasise internal communal differences, reaffirming that the Bahai are characterised by openness, missionary expansion, and urban organisation, while the Druze are marked by territorial cohesion, guarded boundaries, and communal autonomy, and the Yazidis by inherited closure, insularity, and greater structural exposure (Akman, 2021; Brookshaw & Fazel, 2012; Firro, 2011; Swayd, 2015). Second, the study also aligns with scholarship on minority politics, persecution, and violence by confirming that all three communities have faced insecurity, unequal protection, sectarian hostility, and varying forms of repression or mass violence (Cheterian, 2021; Cook et al., 2022; Wahdat-Hagh, 2014; Zabihi-Moghaddam, 2016). However, the present study goes beyond these earlier works because it does not stop at describing either internal identity or external persecution; instead, it explains how different communal structures and political settings shape divergent survival outcomes. Third, compared with the more general literature on minority survival strategies, which identifies resilience, adaptation, migration, external alliances, and defense as broad options available to vulnerable groups (Belge & Karakoç, 2015; Levy, 2020; Roussos, 2021), this article offers a more specific comparative account of why one community develops positive neutrality, another vulnerable negative neutrality, and another transnational negative neutrality. The novelty of this study, therefore, lies not simply in showing that tiny religious minorities employ survival strategies, but in demonstrating comparatively how the interaction between faith, communal structure, and political context produces distinct strategic trajectories among the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities.

The findings suggest that religion should not be read merely as a private system of beliefs, doctrines, or rituals, but also as a source of social and political orientation that becomes effective through concrete forms of community organisation. This broader reading helps explain why the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi cases cannot be reduced to theology alone: religious worldviews shaped moral commitments, boundaries of belonging, and understandings of threat, yet these orientations acquired practical force only when embedded in communal structures capable of organising solidarity, authority, mobility, restraint, or defense. In this sense, the study aligns with broader scholarship showing that religious communities do not simply preserve belief, but also cultivate social engagement, organise welfare and collective identity, and shape political behavior and strategic action through institutional and relational forms of organisation (Garlington, 2017; Glazier, 2020; Hancock, 2023; Mohseni & Wilcox, 2016; Ozzano & Fenoglio, 2022). The significance of the present findings, therefore, lies in showing that among tiny religious minorities in the Middle East, religion functioned simultaneously as a moral framework and as an organising logic through which communities interpreted insecurity, structured collective responses, and navigated unequal political environments. This is the interpretive point that anchors the discussion.

The findings also indicate that minority communities should not be understood merely as passive objects of violence, persecution, or political exclusion, but as actors that actively generate strategies of survival within the limits imposed by unequal structures of power. This interpretation is important because it shifts the analysis from victimhood alone to organised endurance, showing that communities such as the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi responded to threat not simply by suffering its consequences, but by mobilising internal solidarity, preserving communal boundaries, cultivating social capital, reorganising collective life, and adopting forms of concealment, neutrality, migration, or self-protection that reflected their specific capacities and constraints. In this respect, the present findings resonate with broader scholarship showing that minority groups often sustain themselves through community-based organisation, local agency, networked resilience, and even forms of nonviolent or defensive collective action under adverse political conditions (Hodge, 2026; Naganuma, Inoue, & Lombe, 2016; Trudell, 2006; Walker & McCarthy, 2010). Read in this way, the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi cases demonstrate that survival is not simply what happens to minorities under pressure, but also what minorities actively do in order to endure, adapt, and reproduce communal life in environments that systematically constrain them. This interpretive point is central to the article's broader contribution.

Viewed through Giddens's structuration theory, the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities were not simply shaped by state weakness, sectarian hostility, or authoritarian power, but also actively reproduced strategies of survival within the limits imposed by those structures. This makes the theory particularly useful for interpreting the present findings, because it allows minority survival to be understood neither as a purely structural effect nor as a purely voluntaristic choice, but as a relational process in which communities act within conditions they do not control while still generating meaningful forms of endurance, adaptation, and self-protection (Giddens, 1984). In the cases examined here, religious worldview did not remain an abstract belief system; it informed practical orientations toward concealment, restraint, mobility, or defense, while communal structure determined how far those orientations could be organised collectively, and political vulnerability shaped whether such strategies became viable, fragile, or catastrophic. The contribution of this study, therefore, lies in showing that the survival of tiny religious minorities is best understood as a relational outcome, produced through the interaction between religious worldview, communal capacity, and political vulnerability rather than as the direct expression of doctrine or the passive consequence of violence alone.

4. Conclusions

This study has shown that the survival of the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities in the Middle East cannot be explained by religious doctrine alone, but must be understood as the outcome of an interaction between faith, communal structure, and political context. The comparative findings demonstrate that the three communities developed distinct configurations of belief and communal

organisation, which in turn shaped different forms of survival strategy. Takiyya functioned as a limited strategy of concealment, but it did not provide sufficient long-term protection once communal identities remained publicly recognisable. Beyond this, the Druze developed positive neutrality grounded in territorial concentration, internal cohesion, and readiness for self-defense; the Yazidis embodied a more vulnerable form of negative neutrality shaped by mixed settlement, limited defensive capacity, and prolonged exposure to violence; while the Bahais developed a more adaptive form of negative neutrality expressed through political quietism, migration, and transnational relocation. The central lesson of the study, therefore, is that minority survival emerges not from theology in isolation, but from the way religious worldview is mediated by communal capacity and tested within unequal political environments.

The main scholarly contribution of this study lies in offering a comparative framework that brings together three dimensions that are often treated separately in previous scholarship: religious orientation, communal structure, and political vulnerability. Rather than discussing belief, persecution, or adaptation in isolation, this article shows how these dimensions interact to produce distinct strategic trajectories among tiny religious minorities. In this sense, the study contributes not only to the study of the Bahai, Druze, and Yazidi communities, but also to broader debates in religious studies, minority politics, and survival studies by showing that religion operates not merely as belief, but also as a practical source of social and political orientation. By drawing on Giddens's structuration theory, the article also contributes a more relational understanding of minority survival, demonstrating that vulnerable communities are neither fully determined by oppressive structures nor entirely free from them, but actively generate strategies of endurance within the limits imposed by those structures.

At the same time, this study has several limitations. As a document-based qualitative comparative study, it relies on secondary sources and historical analyses rather than fieldwork, interviews, or ethnographic observation, which means it cannot fully capture the contemporary lived experiences and internal diversity of each community. The article also focuses on only three cases, so its conclusions should not be generalised automatically to all religious minorities in the Middle East. In addition, the comparative framework privileges broad structural patterns over local variation, which may understate important differences within each community across time and place. Future research could therefore deepen this analysis through field-based studies, comparative work on additional minority groups, or more detailed examination of how gender, generation, diaspora, and changing state formations reshape survival strategies in specific contexts.

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