



Christian in Middle East at risk

By: Dr. Anan Wahabi

June 2016

“In this third world war, waged piecemeal, which we are now experiencing, a form of genocide is taking place, and it must end.”

Pope Francis

Introduction

Christian communities have been gradually shrinking in the Middle East. Post-Arab Spring trends have put Middle Eastern minorities in risk. The internal Islamic religious war over sovereignty, hegemony and dominance between Sunna and Shia, is taking the Islamic system to a further of radicalism and extremism.

Direct threat and even death have become something banal, in the case of religious minorities in the Middle East. Radical Jihadism is threatening the birthplace of Christianity that should be the natural area for Christian communities to survive. The Christianity's impressive history in this region, was not enough to guarantee it's security and future. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Christians are exposed to aggression, hostility and non-acceptance.

The main hypothesis of this paper is that Nationalism was the only firm common ground for the Christian Arab minority to evolve in local political Muslim society. Christian intellectuals lead Pan-Arab movements. Now, with the **retreat of Nationalism**, and the rise of radical Islamism as a firm alternative, Christians witness harsh persecutions, exile and murder, especially in the new failed-states.

Two models of minorities:

For their safety and identity, minorities need to be legitimate as part of the general public in their states. The notion of "tolerance" to minorities defined some states. Toleration to religious minorities often where subject to discrimination. Building the "Nation State" means sharing culture, one language and one ethnic

origin.¹ Two approaches of Christians' integrations in the Roman Empire: **Vertical integration**, as a spiritual context of worship, and could never create the personal relationship that always define Christian living; and **Horizontal integration**, as a large institutional plan and material living. These two models scattered across several political borders.²

The Middle East is a multi-religions and multi-ethnicity region. There are **two major models** of interaction of a religious, ethnic or political minority within the majority. First, the **Primordial Model**, that claims that the minority group will be first loyal to its origin, and then it gets involved in the country of the majority. Secondly, **instrumental discipline**, which claims the opposite – minority prefer to become integrated in the majority than keeping their identity. Needless to say, that Middle Eastern minorities felt more secure under secular national regime like Baath¹ in Syria and Iraq, or in the Jordanian Hashemite kingdom. Large Christian communities, like the Lebanese Maronites (about 40% of the population) or the Egyptian Copts (around 10% of the population), felt strong enough to adopt the Primordial Model, claim their communal rights and raised loudly their voices. But in smaller Christian communities that had population thinning and fleeing, like the case under ISIS rule in Iraq that has been decimated from two million in 2003 to just 180,000 today, and 100,000 Christians fled the Iraqi city of Mosul in one night, chose the instrumental discipline of hiding their identity, and lowering their Christian valume.³

Baubock discusses the political community beyond the sovereign state, and decides that a cosmopolitan perspective needs not only a conception of global identities and global governance, but also of forms of political community beyond the state borders. He presents three types of groups: transborder national minorities; indigenous minorities; and immigrant minorities.⁴ The majority of Christian population of the Middle East fell under Muslim rule. Those three types of Christian communities existed in Islamic lands. The Christians living under Muslim domination either emigrated or converted to Islam, or remained in the religion with other members of the community.⁵

¹ Susanne Lachenicht (ed.) (2007), *Religious Refugees in Europe, Asia and North America (6 th -21 st century)*, Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2007, pp. 15-16.

² IBID.

Nick Gutteridge (2015), A PRIEST who was captured and tortured by Islamist terrorists has today lifted the lid on Islamic State's ³ (ISIS) horrific persecution of Christians, Oct 20, 2015 <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/613149/ISIS-barbarity-100000-Christians-fled-Mosul-one-night>

⁴ Rainer Baubock (2000), *political community beyond the Sovereign State*, ICE- Working Paper Series no. 7, Vienna, May 2000, p.3.

⁵ Michael Gervers and Ramzi J. Bikhazi (ed.) (1990), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, **Papers in Mediaeval Studies** 9. 1990; xvi, 559 pp.

Facts

In the wake of the Arab Spring, radical Islamism seems to be homogenizing a once-eclectic region; oppressing, persecuting, and even ethnically cleansing numerous minority groups. Have aroused more vocal expressions of minority identities and spawned budding relationships between marginalized groups.⁶

The Christian tragedy in the Middle East did not begin with ISIS, claims Robert Fisk, and reminds us of hundred years of suffering, starting with the Armenian genocide till the latest Yazidi nightmare of massacre and enslavement.⁷

The Middle Eastern Christians population, have decreased from 20% in the early 20th century to only 5%!⁸ The Middle East's 12 million Christians would likely to drop to 6 million by the year 2020.⁹ There are only 250,000, which means that **1.25 million have migrated**, killed or been forced to become Muslims, says Guy Bechor.

Christians are facing growing persecution around the world, fuelled mainly by Islamic extremism and repressive governments, leading the pope to warn of "a form of genocide" and for campaigners to speak of "religio-ethnic cleansing".¹⁰ Pope Francis also said:

"to see how in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world many of our brothers and sisters are persecuted, tortured and killed for their faith in Jesus".¹¹

Consequently, this discrimination and abuse against Christianity had led to frustration. The Symptoms of this trouble were: a combination of low birth rates, extensive emigration and growing persecution has contributed to the decline in both the size and visibility of Middle Eastern Christian communities.¹²

Father Douglas al Bazi, an Iraqi Catholic parish priest in Erbil, that are suffering under the Islamic states, was kidnapped and tortured by jihadists. He doesn't accept any differentiation between Moderate and Radical Islam:

"Please, if there's anyone who still thinks ISIS doesn't represent Islam, know that they are wrong. ISIS represents Islam one hundred percent.".¹³

Christians are enforced to hide their Christianity. Because of the dangers of facing persecution and even death, many of the contributors' faces are pixelated. Included in the images is a picture of a woman who smuggled a Christmas tree into Saudi Arabia, children dressed in Santa hats and a family who fled from Pakistan, gathered together in their new home in Malaysia, decorating a tree, perhaps for the first time. Another couple posted a picture of themselves in front of a Christmas tree in Brunei, where The Sultan of Brunei banned public celebrations.¹⁴

⁶ <http://www.thetower.org/article/the-minority-strategy-a-new-path-for-american-interests-in-the-middle-east/>

⁷ <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-christian-tragedy-in-the-middle-east-did-not-begin-with-isis-10157239.html#gallery>

⁸ Willey, David (10 October 2010). "Rome 'crisis' talks on Middle East Christians". BBC. Retrieved 1 November 2010.

⁹ Daniel Pipes. "Disappearing Christians in the Middle East". Daniel Pipes. Retrieved 22 October 2011.

¹⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/27/dying-for-christianity-millions-at-risk-amid-rise-in-persecution-across-the-globe>

¹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/10/poor-must-change-new-colonialism-of-economic-order-says-pope-francis>

¹² <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-future-middle-eastern-christians-6920?page=show>

¹³ <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2015/08/theres-no-such-thing-as-moderate-islam.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/christians-middle-east-risk-lives-by-posting-images-christmas-festivities-social-media-1534259>

Crimes committed by IS in northern Iraq have included the taking of hostages, summary executions, and attacks against religious buildings, enslavement, forced conversion, torture and rape. This systematic brutality led to big disasters. A lot have been forced to become Muslims, especially under the radical control of Salafism. This trend has been developing since the break of the third millennium. Even the Islamic State seeks to undo the old borders. After sweeping across Syria and Iraq in 2014, Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced:

“This blessed advance will not stop until we hit the last nail in the coffin of the Sykes-Picot conspiracy.”

Christians in Syria are involved in the current crisis. Not unlike other minorities in Syria, also Christian minority found itself torn between their loyalty to Assad regime and joining the opposition. Samir Sattouf, for example, is an active writer that expresses anti Assad directive, claiming that Christians should never accept a dictator that murders his people.¹⁵ But the vast majority of Christians in Syria consider Assad as their protector. The Bishop seeks out in support of Assad and criticizes those who aspire for democracy in Syria.¹⁶

"The concept of ethnic minority is a Western one. We in Syria are Syrian. We are 100 per cent Sunni, 100 per cent Christians, 100 per cent Druze and 100 per cent Allawites. We stand as Syrians."

Christians in Islamic world was and still conceded as a rival that belongs to the colonial occupation of the past of the "New Colonialism" of today. Sidney, describes the rise of Islam within its largely Christian Near Eastern context¹⁷.

But there are some **signs of hope**. What binds Muslims and Christians together, if anything binds them together. Sometimes theological discourse is the key for hope! Miroslav Volf, Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale University, sets out in *Allah: A Christian Response* to establish what he admits is a controversial claim: **Muslims and Christians worship the same God**, pointing out six similarities between Christianity and Islam.¹⁸ Many Christians do not agree with Volf, but the reality of co-existence needs this kind of discourse to find a common ground of understandings.

Despite the great challenges of Christian minority in the Holy Land, Israeli government is trying to do a lot for its minorities, including Christian community. Father Gabriel Naddaf, a Greek Orthodox priest, supports the integration of Aramean-Arab Christians in all Israeli institutions including serving in IDF and other security services. He has issued a call for Christian Arab citizens of Israel to reassess their Arab identity and to consider themselves indigenous non-Arab Christians, of Greek and Aramaic origin.

¹⁵ <http://all4syria.info/Archive/107040>

¹⁶ <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/syrian.christian.leaders.assad.is.our.protector/80490.htm>

¹⁷ Wolf, K. (2009). Sidney H. griffith. the church in the shadow of the mosque: Christians and Muslims in the world of islam. The American Historical Review, 114(1), 251-252. DOI: 10.1086/ahr.114.1.251

¹⁸ Mirslav Volf. (2011).*Allah: A Christian Response*. New York: HarperOne.

Conclusion

- The massive Western military actions in the Middle East had destabilized the region by breaking the political order since Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916. The political order that was imposed on the region raised reactive Pan-Arab national movements like Nasserism in Egypt and Baathism in Iraq and Syria. This type of regimes, which was contradictory to the western colonialism and dominance, had adopted a transnational Pan-Arab approach. Consequently, all minorities enjoyed a convenient ideological common ground to integrate, even though a lot felt as second-class citizens in their countries.
- Sunnis are not of one piece. Not all the Sunnis are radical. But they are inexperienced of governability practice, and the only government model is the Islamic one, that doesn't separate between religion and state.
- The Arab Spring wave showed that the only realistic alternative to Arab Secular moderate regimes is Islam. Watching that threat of religious extremism and suspending a person as a non believer – *takfir*, the minorities of the region. And the Christians in particular banded together out of necessity and against their political roots.
- The Middle East is lead by minorities, with a very little democratic roots and liberalism. Each place of retreat of the state, a failed "no man land" was captured by radical Islam that wanted to: implement ethnic cleaning against other religious communities, enforce Shari'a ruled state or forcedly exile them. "failed states" or "Weak states", rough terrain, and large-scale ethnic violence
- Islamism is the realistic alternative to Arab Nationalism. Minorities face an imminent Threat from radical Islam.
- Living in strong and secure collective communities, with keeping their dignity, heritage and worship rights, Christians of the Middle East can be achieved only under Secular strong centralistic and protecting regimes.
- Cooperation among minorities in the region. The existence of ethnic and religious minorities in the Middle East contributes a lot to liberalism, modernity and openness. Daily frictions, co-existence de-facto with Muslim communities, contribute a lot to a diverse civil society, pluralism and accepting "the other".
- The choice of keeping natural in the Third World Muslim states conflicts, as a non-Western Christianity may not be enough to secure their lives. Without taking action, keeping safety of religious minorities in Middle East, stopping Christian migration from the region and doing everything needed to return them to their villages, results may worsen.
- Only a democratic nation-state system, that respects human rights values, can keep political multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Traditionally, the Christian minority in the Middle East where seeking to live as indigenous groups together with the majority in their countries, without claiming special status under international law. The Maronite Christians case in Lebanon, which desired for self-government, is a very exceptional one.