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Terror against Iraqi Christians, October

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[Forty-six worshippers were killed in a suicide attack carried on a Catholic Church in Baghdad on 31 October and the attack was widely condemned by the Organization of Islamic Conference, Arab governments and by various Muslim leaders. Commentaries from the Middle Eastern media are reproduced here. **Editor, MEI Media Watch**]

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Jeddah, Editorial, 2 November 2010, Tuesday

1. Fantasy land

It is not known the Iraqi defence minister has recently been to see the latest movie of Alice in Wonderland but he appears to be much influenced by it — at least by one particular character: Humpty Dumpty. Those who remember the story will know his famous dictum: ‘When I use a word,’ he said, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’

The defence minister has called the operation to end the church hostage crisis in Baghdad ‘quick and successful.’ ‘Successful’ evidently has a different meaning for him than it does for rest of humanity.

It may be that this was a botched operation. Or it may be that there was never going to be any other outcome to the siege other than extreme bloodshed. The militants who took over the church were clearly in a murderous state of mind from the start. All the indications are that they started killing before the police attacked. Had the latter not moved in when they did, the militants might have slaughtered all the hostages. The statement from Al-Qaeda in Iraq claiming responsibility for the attack and threatening to exterminate all Iraqi Christians suggests that the church was the principal target, not the stock exchange, the first building they attacked.

In normally accepted parlance, 52 deaths — 46 of them hostages, the rest police — is anything but successful. It is a disaster. For the minister to use such language says he is living in a fantasy world.

This barbaric assault, along with a series of blasts and mortar strikes yesterday (1 November) that claimed 62 lives and last Friday's (29 October) suicide attack at a cafe in a town north of Baghdad in which at least 25 people died, is the direct consequence of the political power vacuum that exists in Iraq. There will be more killings so long as Iraq remains without a viable government or one that does not reflect the ethnic and religious mix of the country.

Saudi Arabia has invited Iraqi parties to talks after Hajj this month to try and set up an all-party government. As Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah made clear in making the offer, it is up to Iraq's rival politicians to unite (November 2010) ‘to put down the fire of ugly sectarianism.’

It is indeed shameful that since the elections, way back in March (2010) no coalition government has yet emerged. It is simply wrong that one Iraqi community should be using its power to block the coming together of all Iraqis in a government of national unity, which in the current circumstances is the only administration that can work successfully. Iraq's new constitution, approved by the people, is designed to create the necessary delicate balances that will deliver peace and prosperity to the country. By failing to honour the spirit of that constitution and the compromises it embodies, Iraqi political leaders are betraying the trust placed in them by the people who voted their ticket.

At the moment the only winners in this standoff are the terrorists, who are busy trying to capitalize on the parlous failures of the country's legitimate leaders. Saudi Arabia's offer should therefore be seized in a spirit of reconciliation and compromise.

Source: <http://arabnews.com/opinion/editorial/article178552.ece>



Dubai, Editorial, 3 November 2010, Wednesday

2. Arab Christians should feel at home

Minorities in Iraq have come under attack and thousands have fled the country. Iraqi Christians have all the reasons to be scared. They have come under attack since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003. Therefore, Sunday's (31 October) church massacre didn't come as a surprise. Terrorist attacks have targeted minority communities in Iraq in the past and thousands of Christians have fled the country in recent years.

In a special synod of Catholic bishops, held in the Vatican City two weeks ago, church leaders complained that the 'difficult conditions' faced by Christians in the region because of discrimination and violence were forcing many to emigrate.

There are around 20 million Christians in the Middle East in a population of around 356 million people.

Arab Christians, despite being a tiny minority, had lived with Muslims for centuries without being discriminated against or having to fear for their safety. A great number of them are leaders in the Arab world in most fields, like the arts, business and politics. Christians were the leading advocates of Arab nationalism and the pioneers of the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

But in recent years, with the rise of religious intolerance in the region, Christians have started to feel the heat. And herein lays the responsibility of political and religious leaders in the Arab world.

Arab Christians are not aliens in this region. They are an integral part of the Arab world and continue to contribute to its cultural richness and religious diversity. But they have to be assured that the majority understands their need to feel safe and for their rights to be respected.

A Lebanese leader once said that Lebanon 'without its Christians and Muslims coexisting together would have no reason to exist at all.' This is true in the rest of the Arab world, particularly in Iraq, which will only fail as a country and a state if we all let its Christians down.

Source: <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/editorials/arab-christians-should-feel-at-home-1.705570>



Beirut, Editorial, 3 November 2010, Wednesday

3. It is up to Lebanese to sound the alarm bell

The sombre news this week of the killing of dozens of Iraqi Christians gathered in a Baghdad church at the hands of Al-Qaeda militants has put the hardships endured by this religious minority under the spotlight once more.

The fate of the Christians of the Middle East has been a paradoxically cruel one. Christianity was born in this very land and its followers have hugely contributed to the communities in which they have lived. Yet, over the last century, Christians have often been treated as outsiders and – as in this last episode – even violently targeted.

Christians are certainly not the only group in the Middle East – religious or other – to have endured intolerance. But its consequences have undoubtedly unfolded on a much wider scale than in other cases.

The continuous, mass exodus of Christian populations, whose tens of thousands of members year after year vanish from their homes in search of one, less hostile to their beliefs and identity is without comparison.

While the ‘Christian drain,’ as it could be called, has not gone unnoticed in Lebanon and elsewhere, one must recognize that with the paranoia of survival running deep in all of the country’s religious communities, most inhabitants of this region have seldom bothered to seriously address the issue, preferring to leave this responsibility to the few individuals directly affected by it. The single-handed efforts deployed by the Catholic Church to bring attention to the issue of the Christians’ emigration during a Synod held last month (October 2010) in Vatican City are a case in point.

Lebanon’s common incapacity to gather sufficient political impetus to find a bona fide solution to this problem is, arguably, symptomatic of a larger truth that should speak to Lebanese on an individual level.

Namely, that the Lebanese people have been, thus far, incapable of fully appreciating the extent to which harmony precariously hinges on keeping each of their communities safe.

Yet, violent attacks by militants against the Lebanese Christian community could potentially tip Lebanon’s precarious sectarian balance, and unleash the violence that has usually been associated with such instability.

Worse even, if Lebanon were to seriously spin out of control, the risks that it become one more Al-Qaeda safe-haven in the region are not to be neglected.

And so, as Al-Qaeda is multiplying threats to repeat its bloody exploits in other parts of the region – addressing them Monday (1 November) to the 8 million-odd Christian population of Egypt, and perhaps tomorrow to that of Lebanon – it is up to each Lebanese, regardless of his or her confession, to sound the alarm bell.

With a single conflagration on Lebanon's powder-keg, it is the entire country which runs the risk of blowing up.

Source: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=17&article_id=121076

TheNational

Abu Dhabi, Editorial, 3 November 2010, Wednesday

4. Violent intolerance is foreign to region

The history of the world's three largest monotheistic faiths is intimately tied to the history of the region where they were born, the Middle East. Until the last century, Islam, Christianity and Judaism co-existed in this region, with certain exceptions, in peace.

Now, violence between religious groups and against religious minorities risks destroying the region's deeper tradition of tolerance. The killing of 52 worshippers inside a Syriac Catholic church in Baghdad this week is just the latest tragedy.

Religious affiliation and political allegiances had largely been kept separate in the Middle East - in many ways, the region has been a model of tolerant coexistence. There have been factors aggravating divisions in recent decades, but the emergence of Israel, a country increasingly defined by a specific religious identity, has done much to encourage the trend. This does not absolve other countries of their responsibilities, but it has had adverse consequences for everyone in the region.

Those who lived in Palestine when it was part of the Ottoman Empire had rights to property regardless of their faith. But today, that right for the majority of Muslims and Christian Arabs in Israel is far from guaranteed. That is why so many non-Jews, even those who have not been forced to, have left Israel since 1948.

But the contagion of sectarianism has spread beyond Israel. Egypt's Coptic minority has been under increasing strain. While sectarian divisions are built into Lebanon's political system, they

appear to present more risk to the country now than at any time since the civil war ended in 1990. The Iraq war has left a vacuum filled by sectarian influences, responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands. And in Iran, members of the Baha'i community have had their lands confiscated and many of their religious leaders have been imprisoned.

The region should not be defined by this recent history - it has a far different past and can have a different future. The UAE's present helps to make this clear. The peaceful co-existence of different faiths in this country points to another way.

Respecting the faiths of others does not mean diminishing our own. Far from it - the way in which this Muslim nation allows the practice of many different sacred traditions testifies to the strength and maturity of its Islamic identity and character. Our religious traditions should help us to affirm the dignity of all, including those who have a different faith from our own.

Source: <http://www.thenational.ae/the-national-conversation/editorial/violent-intolerance-is-foreign-to-region>



Jeddah, Editorial, 4 November 2010, Thursday

5. Attack on Christians

How can anyone hold people in Iraq responsible for what happens in Egypt?

Sunday's (31 October) attack by Al-Qaeda on a Catholic church in Baghdad and the slaughter of 46 worshippers has been condemned by the OIC, by Arab governments, by Iraq's Muslim leaders. We too condemn it. It was an act of unspeakable evil.

Making it infinitely worse is the statement by Al-Qaeda in Iraq claiming responsibility. It has declared war on half a million Iraqi Christians because two Egyptian women, who supposedly converted from Coptic Christianity to Islam, are rumoured to be held prisoner by Coptic monks somewhere in Egypt.

The story may or may not be true. The reality may well be more prosaic and connected to the fact that Coptic women get round their church's ban on divorce by announcing they have converted to Islam and then reconvert (which is legal in Egypt) once they have secured a divorce. Whatever, the rumour is being stirred up by extremists for political gain. But it has nothing to do with Iraqi Catholics. Even if they and Egyptian Copts were one and the same — they are not — the reality is that people in Iraq have no control over what happens in Egypt and cannot be held responsible for it. To insist otherwise is no different from the twisted and bigoted thinking that demonizes all Saudis, all Arabs and Muslims, as terrorists because of the

involvement of 17 of them in 9/11 attacks. That is repugnant and so is what Al-Qaeda claims in Iraq.

It is using the Egyptian rumour for its own deadly purposes. It has taken a leaf out of the Zionist history book, re-enacting it with barbaric enthusiasm. There is no difference between this massacre and that of Palestinians by Zionist storm-troopers at Deir Yassin in 1948. The aim is the same, ethnic cleansing. In 1948, the aim was to terrorize Palestinians into fleeing their homes. Today, Al-Qaeda wants to terrorize Iraqi Christians into flight. This week in Baghdad, St Mary's Church has been Deir Yassin; Al-Qaeda, the Zionists.

The metaphor is not as bizarre as may seem. Al-Qaeda not only acts like the Zionists, it hands them real victories. There are Christians in a number of Arab states. They are Arab as much as the majority Muslims. They are an honoured and cherished part of Arab society. Al-Qaeda is trying to divide Arab against Arab. And who gains the most from that? Israel.

Tragically, Al-Qaeda's tactics may have some effect in Iraq. Around half a million Christians have already fled the country in fear of their lives since the US-led invasion. Others may now well join the exodus as a result of Sunday's (31 October) massacre. They know that without a government to enforce law and order and the Americans on the way out there will probably be more attacks.

Horried Americans will no doubt put the blame for this purely on Al-Qaeda. It is to blame, but so are they. Saddam Hussein's regime was a dictatorship but there was peace and harmony between Muslims and Christians. With the invasion, they opened a Pandora's Box. Sectarianism is one of its terrible results.

Source: <http://arabnews.com/opinion/editorial/article180215.ece>

gulfnews.com

Dubai, Editorial, 4 November 2010, Thursday

6. Stop ethnic and sectarian violence

If the endless spiral of bloodshed continues, Iraq will become another frontline of war.

There is an alarming state of violence that is engulfing Iraq today — one that could certainly lead it into an endless spiral of bloodshed. If this state of affairs remains unchanged, Iraq will become another open frontline of sectarianism and war.

Over the past few days, two major devastating attacks have indicated the start of a new wave of violence. Coordinated bombings and mortar strikes killed scores of people and wounded no less than 180 individuals in Shiite neighbourhoods around Baghdad. The attack came two days after gunmen held a Christian congregation hostage in a siege that ended with 58 people dead.

The death toll and the bombings never seem to stop. The most recent attacks are considered to be one of the bloodiest since the US-led invasion in 2003. Iraq today is at a juncture that will either secure its stability or ensure it bloodshed and chaos. It is no exaggeration to say that the country's future is in jeopardy.

There is a serious power vacuum today — which the country's politicians have simply ignored especially that there is no official government even after eight months following the general elections. And the longer the political scene in Iraq continues as such, in all probability the violence would be endless.

Is Iraq today in danger of falling prey to a civil war? Is it in danger of being broken down and therefore losing its sovereignty? A fragmented, disintegrated, and ethnically and religiously divided Iraq is a danger to Iraq itself, its neighbours, and to the entire Middle East region.

Ethnic and sectarian tensions have to be contained and Iraq's leadership has to step in if the violence is to end. This is the most important factor for the country given the planned pullout of US military forces from Iraq next year (2011).

Source: <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/editorials/stop-ethnic-and-sectarian-violence-1.706018>



Dubai, Editorial, 4 November 2010, Thursday

7. Ripple effects

The attack on the Christian church in Baghdad adds another unpleasant dimension to the sectarian violence that has not been successfully damped down. Now that it has spilled over into a new and bloody ethnic province there must be very real fear that the sort of cleansing we saw in Bosnia might well begin again and the fragility of the minorities again becomes an easy target.

Whatever our personal religious belief it does not transcend it the destruction of innocent lives. The death of 52 people in this attack is unprecedented since the US troops arrived in 2003. There has never been such a violent blow and the Christian community has largely been a silent spectator to the sorrow of a bleeding land these seven years.

While there will be apportioning of blame for a hostage raid that went very wrong the fact is that it was tried and there has to be some credit for that. At least the authorities had the wherewithal to give it their best. Hostage rescue is not an easy exercise and if the death toll had not been so high and another 67 not been wounded, the assault on the militants would have been seen as a triumph of strategy and a reflection of the control the government had on Baghdad. Now, it is all

recriminations and that, in a manner, is further helping the perpetrators because with the loss of life they get the advantage of chaos and indictment.

So, it becomes vital in this sad scenario to not get caught in the trap of mental surrender but to soldier on in adversity and be that much more alert and ready to take on the unseen enemy. Certainly, if there have been errors in tactical deployment these have to be corrected but it would be very wrong to see this as a 'defeat' and not run from it.

The fear lies in the fanning of the rumour that these attacks are designed to turn Christians in Iraq into refugees and intimidate them into leaving the country. This must not be allowed to happen and all people of right mind must put up a solid resistance to the targeting of a community.

Source:

http://www.khaleejtimes.com/displayarticle.asp?xfile=data/editorial/2010/November/editorial_November_7.xml§ion=editorial&col=



Lebanon, Editorial, 6 November 2010, Saturday

8. Snuff out religious persecution

Even though the statement issued Friday (5 November) by Christian leaders could not free itself from this nation's political shackles, heartily endorsed is the core message – which does not reflect the view of any political faction – that Lebanon and the entire Middle East should immediately take significant steps to protect the Christian populace of this region.

The Christians' declaration, read by Phalange Party head and former President Amin Gemayel, condemned the recent wave of attacks against Christians in the Middle East; in particular the threat issued by Al-Qaeda-linked group the Islamic State of Iraq against the Copts of Egypt. The group said it would launch attacks on Christians throughout the region if the Coptic Church did not release two women that the extremists claim are being held by the Church despite their conversion to Islam.

The threat, it should be noted, comes after Al-Qaeda in Iraq brazenly attacked a Christian church in Baghdad Sunday (31 October), resulting in the deaths of about 60 people and wounding another 80.

Back in Lebanon, Friday's (5 October) statement also slammed alleged attempts by the March 8 faction to undermine state institutions, which then become too weak to look after the country's Christian minority.

Of course, the institutions of this state are feeble, but their debilitation is not the work of any one political camp; even a meeting of Lebanon's Cabinet or holding a National Dialogue session appears beyond the powers of the country's version of leadership, and that has eliminated the state's capacity to guard the interests of any constituency.

Regardless of that sad reality, Lebanon and all countries in the Middle East need to adopt measures to protect the dwindling Christian population, because their flight and potential disappearance are a loss for everyone here – and for the Muslim world in particular. Of course, it should not be forgotten that the Jews of Israel are also creating facts on the ground to drive their Christian population away as well.

There are more Lebanese Christians living outside the country than in it. At least half of Iraq's Christians have fled since the war began in 2003. Egypt's Copts number less than 10 percent of the nation's population. In all, Christians used to comprise about 20 percent of the Middle East's residents 100 years ago; today the number has shrunk to about 5 percent.

The peril in the disappearance of Christians is that this region, now dominated by Muslims, would lose a deeply meaningful part of its diversity as well as the beneficial interaction of cultures.

Worse, the persecution of one minority always winds up leading to the hounding of other smaller groups; here in the Middle East, persecution of one religious minority always carries the danger of exploding into sectarian violence, a vicious cycle that needs to be snuffed out.

Source: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=17&article_id=121217

TheNational

Abu Dhabi, Editorial, 9 November 2010, Tuesday

9. Crisis for Iraq's Christians rends fabric of region

Christians and Muslims stood shoulder to shoulder at St Joseph's Cathedral in the capital at the weekend to offer prayers for those killed in a Baghdad church bombing days earlier. It was a picture of unity in a region too often pictured as divided by faith and belief.

The situation in Iraq, where the Christian community is under siege, could not be more different. Archbishop Athanasios Dawood, a leader in the Syrian Orthodox church, made an appeal on Sunday (7 November) from London that his community, and all Christian communities in Iraq, leave the country. While his is not the only voice speaking for Iraq's Christians, his call follows al Qaeda's attack on Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad, which killed 53. That attack was the reason for the multi-faith prayer service in Abu Dhabi.

Christians are a small number of the 4.7 million Iraqis who fled the country after the 2003 invasion, but still half of them have left. Other religious minorities, notably Yazidis and Bahais, have also been targeted. Communities of Christians in Mosul and Ninevah, some of the oldest in the world, may soon cease to exist. Their history and heritage is important to the region; the future of these communities should be important as well.

Iraq's Christian leaders met in June (2010)] to call for constitutional amendments to support minority rights and for a security commitment from the government. It is difficult for these grievances, and for those of many others in Iraq, to be heard when there is still no government in place.

That may be changing. Iraq's leaders are in Erbil to discuss a possible power sharing deal in which Nouri al Maliki would likely remain prime minister. The Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani would likely retain the presidency; Iyad Allawi, the leader of the Iraqiyya bloc which won a plurality in the election, may have to settle for a lesser post.

After eight months of wrangling, a national unity government is sorely needed even if its composition leaves something to be desired. The deteriorating security situation in Iraq should be cause for all sides to consider compromise. It is not just the country's beleaguered Christian community that is at stake, but the millennia-old character of Iraq and the Middle East. Time is running out.

Source:

<http://www.thenational.ae/the-national-conversation/editorial/crisis-for-iraqs-christians-rends-fabric-of-region>

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