

COMMENTARY

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Christians of the Middle East: Endangered Communities

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For hundreds of years, members of many religions lived side by side in the Middle East, usually with a spirit of mutual tolerance and acceptance of the Other. Muslims, Christians, Jews, Druze, Alawites, Zoroastrians, Sabais, Mandaeans, Ahmadiyyas and Baha'is minimized the differences between their groups and conducted themselves in the public domain in a reasonable way. Christians, who had connections to European culture were even the harbingers of modern Arab nationalism in the late 19th century, and they contributed greatly to the spread of modern ideologies in the area, principally Socialism, specifically the Ba'ath party, and liberalism. These modern European ideologies were to provide the residents of the Middle East with a modern substitute for the traditional religious, sectarian, ethnic and tribal identity, thereby creating a new egalitarian consciousness, upon which could be built a new, modern society where the members of all religions would be equal to each other, and a modern civil state such as those in Europe, where all of its residents would have equal rights and responsibilities.

The problem with these modern ideologies that were imported from the West is that they are contrary to the spirit of Islam which holds that "Islam is supreme and there is nothing above it", so Jews and Christians can live under its protection, but as *dhimmi*s, with fewer rights than the Muslims. Modern states, mainly those which have undergone revolution in the past (Syria, Iraq, Egypt, South Yemen, Libya), have tried to create a system of law which treats Muslims and Christians equally, and in the process have angered the Islamic zealots, who kept a low profile in the past in order not to give the authoritarian power of the state an excuse to strike them with its iron fist.

Naturally, the egalitarian ideologies attracted the religious minorities, because this gave them the "certificate of *kashrut*" that allowed them to enter - as equals to the Muslims - into the circles of

society, government, management, culture, education and livelihood. Christians became ministers of the government, mayors, ambassadors and managers, as well as officers in the Arab armies. The first minister of the treasury of the modern state of Iraq was a Jew, in Syria Alawites ran the state beginning in 1966, and Druze filled senior positions. During the second half of the twentieth century it seemed that the egalitarian national consciousness had permanently removed the traditional differences from the public consciousness.

However, in parallel, during the last twenty years, the idea of the modern Arab state has been losing its power, while social consciousness is being reinforced, such that the various sectors and their traditional leadership are increasingly the focus of public attention. Two main factors have contributed to this process: one is the discussion about human rights that has penetrated into the public consciousness, and one is the media, mainly the satellite TV channels, which focus on the individual: his difficulties, misery, desires and hopes. The focus of the public has changed from noble ideology to bitter reality, from the dictatorial state to social consciousness, which centres on human rights. The egalitarian ideologies decreased in importance after it became clear to the public that they are no more than hollow slogans that are intended to justify the existence of the dictatorship, which has failed to provide reasonable living conditions, a stable economy, personal security, work, education, welfare and health to a majority of its population.

The rout that the Arab states suffered at the hands of Israel, especially regarding the Six Day War (1967), contributed to the general feeling of disillusionment with Arab nationalism and with the failure to achieve the principal tasks that it had set for itself - to destroy the "Zionist Entity" and to achieve Arab unity. With the decline of the modern ideologies imported from Europe, the traditional, original, ideologies of the Middle East - tribalism and Islam - were restored to their prior importance, and with them the particularistic, separatist concepts, based on images, stereotypes and Islamic Sharia. In keeping with these traditional trends, they sought where to place the blame for the terrible situation in the Middle East, and the tendency to see the different one, the Other, as guilty, immediately caused the Christians to be placed on the defendant's seat.

The "Christian West" is perceived by traditional Islam as responsible for all of the ills of the region: the establishment of the State of Israel, its arming and its reinforcement, are perceived as a "Western" project and therefore also as a "Christian plot" and "modern crusade". During the past twenty years, permissive ideas have increasingly permeated into Middle Eastern societies, mainly by means of satellite TV channels and the Internet, presenting a difficult challenge to the normative Islamic system, family values and accepted standards of modesty in the region. Traditional Islamic circles have placed responsibility for the moral deterioration within their societies on the "West", which is led by Christians. The war that the West conducted against Iraq under the command of the United States in 1991, the war that the West conducted against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan beginning in 2001 ("crusade", as President George Bush called it at first) and the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 all exacerbated the regional rage against the "Christian" West. The traditional support by the "Western Christians" of the smug billionaires from the Gulf countries flush with petrodollars, also arouses the envy of the indigent, unemployed, ignorant and sick Arab masses, and this jealousy is translated into rage directed toward the local Christians, who serve as the scapegoats.

Another reason for the hatred towards Christians is the great difference between the Western "Christian" states and the Islamic states: the West is thriving, flourishing, rich, developed, democratic, honours the rights of the individual and the citizen, even those of children and women, while the Middle Eastern societies lag behind, are poor, stagnant, dictatorial, violent and oppressive. These differences create envy within the peoples of the Middle East and this leads to hatred. This hatred is also directed toward the "Westerner", meaning the local Christian. It can be said in general that the worse and more complex these problems in any specific location in the Middle East have become, the worse the Christians there are treated by the surrounding Muslim environment.

In the days of the First World War, the Turkish Muslims slaughtered more than a million Armenian Christians because of the suspicion that they were cooperating with the Christian European super-powers against the Muslim Turkish Ottoman Empire, which was defeated in the war. The nations of the world did the Turks a favour when they ignored the religious component, because if the slaughter had been called a "massacre of Christians" as indeed was the case, modern Turkey would have carried the extremely problematic "mark of Cain" on its political forehead until today.

Since 2003, there have been a number of severe attacks in churches in Iraq when they were filled with people; other churches have been broken into and looted, Christian women were forced to wear a head covering in the public, Christian homes were broken into and robbed, and businesses of Christians suffered harassment. As of today, only about half of the Christians that were present in Iraq in 2003 remain there.

In Egypt, in recent years, there have been many terror attacks against the Copts as they emerged from their churches, and many of them were killed and wounded. Especially noteworthy is the car bomb that exploded next to the church in Alexandria on New Year's Eve of 2011, that caused the death of about forty people and wounded about two hundred. Egyptians who convert from Islam to Christianity are received among the Christians as heroes, but according to the law, which permits conversion from Christianity to Islam, but not the opposite, they have committed a transgression. Not one day passes without some violent act being reported against Copts in Egypt. As a result of this, the Copts emigrate from Egypt in great numbers; according to the estimate, between one quarter and one third of them have emigrated over the years.

In Sudan, the civil war that was conducted between the Islamic North and the Christian and pagan South (the longest-lasting civil war in the world), caused two million fatalities over more than fifty years. Salafis in Tunisia recently slaughtered a youth who converted to Christianity and recorded it on video. In Lebanon, the whole history of the state during its eighty years is that of an experiment to establish and maintain a state intended for the Maronite Christians, despite the fact that they were a minority and the Muslims were the majority. It is a story about how the Maronites strive to survive in a state ruled by the increasingly powerful Shiite Hezbollah, and how they cling to their historic dwelling place, Mount Lebanon, despite the temptation to emigrate to other states where life is more comfortable and serene. As a result of this never ending struggle for survival, between one quarter and one third of its Christian residents have emigrated from Lebanon over the years.

The situation in Syria in the past year and a half is threatening to the Christian minority in that state as well. The Christians traditionally took part in the government of Assad, because he promised them security, as he promised other minorities. Because they are identified with Assad, they are today targets for harassment, murder, rape, robbery and looting by the Muslim majority. The anarchy that reigns in some areas allows the Muslims to break into churches, businesses of Christians and their private houses, in order to plunder and murder. It is not known how many Christians have fled from Syria, but the estimate is that between one tenth and one fifth of those who resided there until a year and a half ago, no longer do.

In the Palestinian Authority—Gaza and the West Bank—the Christians suffer from built-in discrimination: the Christian library in Gaza was destroyed by fire, pressure is put on the Christian youth to convert to Islam, Muslims have taken over the houses of the residents of the Christian city Beit Jalla, which is south of Jerusalem, in order to turn them into firing positions from where they can shoot into Gilo. All of its residents have fled to South America. Muslim terrorists escaped from the hands of the IDF into the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and desecrated it while taking shelter there. Lands and houses, officially owned by Churches in Bethlehem area, were forcibly confiscated by the Muslims who live in that area. About one quarter of the Christians who lived in the area of the Palestinian Authority in the past have left it.

Since the "Arab Spring" broke out toward the end of 2010, it has become clear that the Arab project of nationalism has failed, and with it, the concept of the modern Arab state is descending into oblivion. Islam, which is increasing in strength, along with growing tribalism, casts a dark, threatening shadow over the Christians in the Middle East, who come to the only possible conclusion and flee in droves from the area. The Pope related to this problem lately and expressed great concern over it.

By the way, the only state in the Middle East where the number of Christians is not decreasing is the State of Israel. Can anyone explain this?

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