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ENDANGERED MINORITIES: CHRISTIANS IN ARAB COUNTRIES

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As the Lebanese Civil War enters its sixth year, and the Arab-Israel conflict its sixth decade, it has become increasingly necessary to take note of the fundamental similarity between these two crises. Both are, at base, religious conflicts, stemming from Islam's traditional attitudes towards Christianity and Judaism, respectively. Many Muslims remain unwilling to accept what they perceived as the continuing humiliation of Jewish rule (imposed by a Christian power) in Palestine; nor are they likely to reconcile themselves to enduring Christian dominance (perpetuated, allegedly, by the Jews) in Lebanon. Certainly, an understanding of such attitudes, their origins and manifestations, is essential for interpreting the controversies of the Middle East today. While relatively much is known of the plight of Jews in Arab countries, that of the Christians in these lands has been hidden from the West.

The Middle East today is the world's only region --with the exception of Northern Ireland--where religion forms a basis for violent conflicts. The Lebanese and Arab-Israel struggles constitute only two of a number of inter-religious wars currently disrupting the area. The continuing war between Iraq and Iran, although initially revolving around control of the Tigris-Euphrates delta outlet to the Persian Gulf, is also a manifestation of the ancient enmity between Shi'ite Iran and Sunni Iraq.* Moreover, the configuration of Arab alliances in the struggle are also dictated by religion: the Sunni governments of Jordan and Saudi Arabia allied with Baghdad, the non-Sunni Alawi regime of Syria sided with Teheran. The brutality of these inter-Muslim conflicts has increased proportionally to the recent rise of fundamentalist Islam, which is now playing a larger role in Arab politics than at any time since the early days of Nasser.[1]

If the resurgence of extremist Islam has heightened animosities between the various Muslim sects, then a sharp increase in Muslim antipathy toward the non-Muslims in their midst is only to be expected. It is no accident, therefore, that the same radical religious group, the Muslim Brotherhood, most notorious for its assassination of Alawis in Syria, is also involved with the bombing of Coptic churches in Egypt. Such incidents seem less enigmatic when viewed against the

*To be exact, while Iraq's government is Sunni, the majority of its population is Shi'ite, giving the regime ample fear of native sedition and providing another *casus belli* in the conflict.

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the background of a region where the constitution of every Arab country, except that of Lebanon, lists Islam as the state religion or the sole source of national law.[2] As such, the status of their non-Muslim inhabitants, even under the best of circumstances, cannot be better than second class. In Iran, for example, a fundamentalist state which officially recognizes its Christian minority, the then Minister for Revolutionary Affairs, Dr. Ibrahim Yazdi, declared in 1979:

> We are Muslims, and we have a monotheistic view of the world. In such a movement there is no room for non-Islamic or anti-Islamic creeds.[3]

Even in Saudi Arabia, a country with no indigenous non-Muslim population, the state's leading clergyman, Sheikh Abdel 'Aziz ben Baz, recently banned the celebration of Christmas as a "symbol of evil in the world observed by the enemies of God."[4]

The Christians of Islamic countries in general, and of Arab countries in particular, have never been more than tolerated--and quite often in history, considerably less than that. As the renowned French Arabist, Pierre Rondot, noted at the beginning of Nasser's rule:

> . . . there are few places (in the Arab world) where they (Christians) are really safe and not subject to maltreatment if the occasion arises; few, too, are the places where they do not suffer, occasionally or permanently, from discrimination.[5]

Muslim malevolence toward Christianity is rooted in both Islamic religion and history. Its origins are primarily scriptural, from the Qur'an, which depicts Christians as unbelievers and effacers of God (Sura V:15), polytheists and concealers of the Truth (II:130, V:15, IX:20). The Qur'an also claims Jesus' crucifixion was a Christian fabrication (IV:155), and warns Muslims against making Christian friends (V:55).[6] The Islamic division of humanity into believers and unbelievers, and the invocation of the former to wage unremitting Holy War--*jihad*--against the latter, has caused Christians to suffer even when not the direct targets of Muslim hostility, such as when churches were destroyed by anti-British rioters in Egypt in 1945 and 1952.[7]

Theologically linked with the Jews as "the sole representatives of infidelity," the Christians who first came under Arab-Muslim rule suffered far more than their Jewish counterparts.[8] While Jewish communities generally flourished during the first centuries of Islam, entire Christian populations, specifically in North Africa and Yemen, disappeared.[9] Muslims particularly abhorred Christianity's "sin of association," i.e., its equating of Jesus, a man, with God, and His artistic representation. Also, while the Qur'an recognized the validity of Christian faith and Jesus as a prophet, mutual recognition was not forthcoming from Christian doctrine.

Equally important to its theological origins, early Arab antagonism toward Christianity stemmed from a profound strategic reality: war with the Byzantine Empire, to which most Christians owed allegiance. This xenophobia of the Arab Christians' real or imagined connections with European powers has become so ingrained in Muslim mentality that it still forms a major factor in modern Muslim-Christian controversy. More odious, however, than the notion of disloyal Christians resident within *Dar al-Islam*--the territorial domain of Islam--was that of Muslims having to

endure Christian rule, an intolerable insult.* For Islam, a religion which does not differentiate between politics and faith, and whose veracity is confirmed through power and conquest, the situation of Muslims subject to Christian governance is a total anathema. As Rondot explained:

> Thus, in Islam's classical outlook, two things seemed possible: one, the rule--Muslims dominates Christian; and the other, the painful necessity, temporarily accepted --Christian rules Muslim.[10]

Or, as Robert Brenton Bretts, a leading apologist for the Arab treatment of Christians, more recently observed:

> To the conservative Muslim President of Libya, Mu'ammar Qaddafi, a Christian-dominated state in the midst of the Arab world is an embarrassment as acute as that of Israel and certainly one more vulnerable to the kinds of threats and pressures he is able to wield.

This repugnance is no doubt exacerbated by the fact that the settlement of most Christian communities in Arab countries significantly pre-dates the Islamic era, and that these often claim descent from the original inhabitants of the land.

The Christian communities of the Near East were initially optimistic about their treatment under the conquering Arab armies; Islam, after all, afforded them some measure of respect as *Ahl al-Kitab* , People of the Book, and as *dhimmis*, a protected minority. This optimism was gradually extinguished by the legal consolidation of the Empire which, by the eighth century, relegated these communities to a distinctly second-class status. First they were forced to pay the *jizya*, a tax for unbelievers (based on Sura IX:29), and later, under Caliph 'Umar II, Christians were forbidden to hold public office or give testimony against a Muslim in court. No new churches were to be built, nor could a Christian erect a house higher than a Muslim's. Most invidiously, Christians were ordered to wear distinctive clothing; Christian proselytizing was punishable by death.[11] This edict, the so-called Covenant of 'Umar, codified the anti-Christian sentiment inherent in the Qur'an, and set the legal precedent for Muslim-Christian relations for centuries to come. Again, as Bretts must admit:

> By the middle of the Eighth Century, the Christian communities and their leaders had come to recognize that the official Muslim toleration which had seemed so attractive a century earlier was in fact a rigid prison from which there was no escape other than apostasy or flight.[12]

The Covenant of 'Umar remained *de facto* in force through most of the Ottoman period (Christians had to convert to obtain Ottoman citizenship), and only in the mid-nineteenth century did the European powers compel the Sublime Porte to grant its Christian subjects some civil rights--further fanning Muslim resentment. Even today, vestiges of the Covenant can be found in several Arab countries, such as Egypt, where Copts still brand their wrists with the sign of the Cross.[13]

Somewhat emancipated and influenced by the nationalist ideologies of European missionaries, Arab Christians began, in the second half of the last century, to

* Professor Bernard Lewis traced this concept to that in Islam which forbids a non-Muslim man from marrying a Muslim woman; the reverse, a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman, is perfectly permissible.

lead the struggle for a pan-Arab society based on common language and culture, as opposed to religion. Their superior education and desire to achieve equal status in their native lands made them a natural vanguard for this movement, and Christian Arabs such as Yasif Yajezi and Butros Bustani became the founding fathers of modern Arab nationalism. Nevertheless, Christian and Muslim Arab nationalists rarely joined together, even under the pressure of Ottoman persecution, and Christian communities remained strictly apart from the Muslim population according to the Turkish millet system.

This myth--that Christians and Muslims have forgotten religious differences in the fight for Arab independence--is still perpetuated today by Arab liberation movements, especially the PLO. An umbrella organization for many and diverse factions, the PLO is, in fact, sharply divided along sectarian lines, with the majority of its Christian members belonging to either the PFLP of Dr. George Habash or the PDF of Nayif Hawatmeh, both of which profess radically Marxist, secular ideologies. And if Arab Christians feel compelled to abandon their religion in order to join this movement then the exact opposite holds true for its Muslim members. In contrast, *Al-Fatah*, the PLO's largest and controlling group, is overwhelmingly Muslim in membership, and unabashed about its ties with the Khomeini regime, Saudi Arabia, and the Muslim Brotherhood. Its leader, as well as that of the entire PLO, Yasser Arafat, employs the *nom de guerre* Abu 'Ammar, one of Muhammad's most ruthless generals; its divisions are named after Muslim victories over non-Muslim armies. Even the name *Al Fatah* carries the connotation of land conquered in *jihad*.[14]

Despite this rather obvious segregation, some Arab Christians continue to participate in these factions in the hope that Marxism will give them the equality pan-Arabism never realized. Significantly, the number of Christians active in Arab politics dwindles every year, and this for reasons best described by Abdul Rahman al-Bazaa, former Premier of Iraq:

> The non-Muslim Arab used to enjoy all his rights under the Islamic state. The loyal Nationalists among the Arab Christians realize this and know that Islam and the civilization that accompanies it are an indivisible part of our national heritage, and they must, as nationalists, cherish it as their brother Muslims cherish it.[15]

For the vast majority of Middle Eastern Christians, those who realize that Islam provides a far stronger bond than nationality, life in an Arab country necessitates the keeping of a low profile. Following the massacre of nearly two million Christians by the Turks in World War I, Christian communities openly appealed for European protectorates in the liberated territories; some paid dearly for this stand immediately after the Arabs gained independence.[16] While it is impossible here to give a detailed account of the difficulties experienced by every Christian group in each Arab country, a summary examination of three--the Armenian, Assyrian, and Coptic communities--should present an adequate impression of Christian life in this region.

The Case of the Armenians

Among the oldest peoples of Asia Minor, the Armenians converted to Christianity from Zoroastrianism in the year 301, and were later, together with the Jews and Copts, one of the few pre-Muslim religious groups to survive the Islamic conquest. Fleeing genocide at the hands of the Turks in 1915, thousands of Armenians escaped into Syria and Iraq. There, the Armenians lived in relative security until the late 1960's, when the nominally secular Ba'ath regimes in both countries launched major crackdowns on non-Muslim communities. This began with the banning of the Armenian Dashnaktsutium Party, and the arrest of Armenian leaders for alleged seditious activity and espionage. In 1967, the regimes brought all denominational schools under state control; Arabic was imposed as the language of instruction in place of Armenian, and courses on Armenian religion and culture were eliminated.[17] In recent years, the regimes have forbidden students to attend schools outside their designated districts, forcing the closure of numerous Armenian schools because of insufficient enrollment. In the few remaining schools, the majority of students are now Arabic-speaking Muslims which, according to the new laws, mandates the teaching of Islamic subjects. In all cases, Armenian schools must be closed on Fridays and Muslims holidays, and must remain open Sundays.[18]

These repressive measures have led to the emigration of thousands of Armenians, first to Lebanon, and then to points West. It was estimated that by 1969 alone, the Armenian population of the Patriarchate of Baghdad and al-Qamishli, i.e. Iraq and Syria, was reduced by half.[19] And in January 1982, the U.S. State Department acceded to the request of the American Armenian community and issued 2,500 emergency immigration certificates to Armenian refugees from the Middle East.[20] Emigration has become the only means by which this people can preserve their heritage, or as one Armenian scholar commented:

> The Armenians have suffered encroachments upon their institutions and heightened external regulation of essential community functions . . . . the alternative available to these minorities is either an accelerated rate of absorption into the Arab-Muslim mainstream, or else a new exodus in quest of more accommodating lands.[21]

The Case of the Assyrians

Aramaic-speaking descendants of the Sassanids, the Assyrians also suffered heavily under the Turks, the survivors escaping to Iraq, where they voiced open support for the British occupation. The Iraqi government avenged this support in 1933, a year after the country gained independence, with the machinegun massacre of hundreds of Assyrians by the Iraqi army. This caused the flight of some 50,000 Assyrians to Syria--the first wave, while the second arrived in 1963, following the suppression of the Kurdish Revolt and the overthrow of the Kassem government, both of which had been championed by Assyrians in Iraq.

Like the Armenians, the Assyrians have been the victims of governmental legislation in education which forbids the use of Aramaic in instruction, and requires teachers in Assyrian schools to be appointees of the Ba'ath.[22] The Iraqi government also refuses to recognize the diplomas awarded by these schools, and graduates who wish to attend a university must take a special examination.[23] Bowing to such

intense pressure, 138 Assyrian schools in Iraq closed during the decade 1969-79. Also like the Armenians, the Assyrians are a merchant community, the financial foundation of which has been hard-hit by governmental nationalization-sequestration programs, which are often presented in Islamic frameworks.

Politically, the Assyrians are often portrayed in the Ba'ath press as "American-British-Zionist" agents, and are regularly accused of maintaining illicit contacts with "foreign," i.e. Christian, countries.[24] In 1978, for example, some 600 Assyrians were arrested and jailed for holding Bible sessions with a Norwegian minister, a French priest, and a number of European businessmen.[25] Since that year, Assyrian organizations in the United States have charged the Iraqi regime with perpetrating a policy of cultural genocide against Assyrians, including the forced sale of contiguous Assyrian lands, the imposed integration of Assyrian villages, and the demolition of seven ancient Assyrian churches.[26]

The Case of the Copts

The Copts are descended from the ancient Egyptians (the word *copt* in Greek means Egypt) and their language is related to that spoken by the Pharoahs. This heritage, coupled with their advanced levels of education and business skills, earned the Copts added persecution by the newly-arrived Arab and Mameluke warriors. Nowhere in the Empire was the Covenant of 'Umar more rigorously applied, reaching a climax of cruelty under the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakkim (996-1021). The Copts, nevertheless, resisted forced conversion, resisting also attempts by Western churches to extend protection over them, and after a respite under the British (1882-1926), suffered anew with the advent of Arab Socialism.

As noted, the Copts, like so many Christian communities in Arab countries, filled the ranks of the white collar class--bankers, businessmen, professionals--which became the prime target of Nasser's nationalization schemes. These social programs, couched in Islamic phraseology and conspicuously devoid of any reference to the Copts, were designed for exclusive implementation in Muslim neighborhoods.[27] Consequently, the Coptic population of seven million--12 percent of Egypt's total--was reduced from a position of affluence and security in the early 1950's, to one of poverty and uncertainty today.

Over the past five years, Muslim-Coptic relations have deteriorated dramatically mostly as a result of the fanaticism generated by the Muslim Brotherhood. Serious clashes broke out in September 1977 in the Coptic cities of Fayum and Asyut, where Muslim rioters attacked several churches then under construction. Operating under pressure from the Brotherhood, the government also passed a law making the renunciation of Islam by a Muslim a capital offense, greatly affecting those Copts who had converted temporarily in order to obtain a divorce.[28]

In March-April 1980, the Copts in Asyut staged violent demonstrations protesting government inaction in the bombing of two Alexandrian churches. Several Copts died in the disturbances. Later, the Brotherhood launched a counter-demonstration which forced the Coptic Pope, Shenouda III, to seek refuge in the desert. A month afterward, the government again succumbed to fundamentalist pressure, this time passing a constitutional amendment making Islamic law the basis for all Egyptian jurisprudence. Fierce Coptic protests over the bill met with indifference, and on May 14, President Sadat publicly accused the Copts of trying to establish a separate state in Asyut.[29]

Virulent clashes between Copts and Muslims continued (most often sparked by church construction), and protests by American Copts during Sadat's Washington visit in April 1981 incited him to shut down several Christian societies upon his return. Finally, in September, Sadat initiated a large-scale crackdown on Coptic dissidents, arresting 150, including eight bishops and sixteen priests, and charged them with "sectarian sedition." In accordance with presidential prerogative, Pope Shenouda was dismissed from his post.[30]

In the wake of Sadat's assassination, little has been heard of the Copts. However, as a result of these disturbances their political power in the government has been drastically reduced--from twenty-five seats in Parliament to one.* Egypt's internationally-renowned Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Butros Ghali, has not been promoted to the superior office of Foreign Minister, even though that position remains empty.

These cases, of the Copts, Assyrians and Armenians, are typical of the hardships endured by localized, highly ethnic Christian communities under Arab regimes. Such difficulties become far more pronounced and greatly amplified in Arab societies where Christians represent a larger proportion of the population and/or leadership, and are geographically more widespread. Such situations approach the anomalous condition--from the Islamic perspective--of Christian-over-Muslim rule, where, as Rondot explains:

> It is no paradox to say that precisely in those countries where Christians and Muslims live side by side, it is most difficult to induce the Muslim masses to accept any measures of real democratization.[31]

Such was the situation which existed in the West Bank during the nineteen years of Jordanian rule. Motivated by a wave of fundamentalism in the early 1950's, the Jordanian government enacted a series of laws designed to limit the influence of the country's Christian population, particularly in the vicinity of the Holy Places, where they formed a clear majority. The Law of Maintaining Properties by Religious Personalities (No. 61, April 1953) placed severe restrictions on Christian institutions wishing to buy land, and later legislation, in 1965, prohibited Christians from purchasing land in Jerusalem altogether. Other bills created strict governmental supervision over Christian charities (No. 36, February 1950), and mandated the sole use of government textbooks and Arabic as the language of instruction in Christian schools, school closings on Fridays, the holding of regular classes on Sundays, etc.--adumbrating subsequent laws in Syria and Iraq. These laws were enforced, sometimes zealously, until the Six Day War of 1967.[32]

Elsewhere in the Middle East, the conflict between Muslim majorities and sizeable Christian minorities is not confined to legalities. In Sudan, for example, recent reports point to a likely rekindling of the Muslim-Christian civil war which took the lives of a half-million Christians between the years 1956 and 1972. Through the initiative of Attorney General Hassan Tourabi, a celebrated member of the Muslim Brotherhood, the mostly-Christian Southern Assembly has been dissolved and its Christian leader replaced by a Muslim general; numerous other Christian activists had been arrested after charging Tourabi with planning the total Islamization of the Sudan. Some 18,000 Muslim troops have also been moved into the southern Christian region of the country, in direct violation of the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972.[33]

* Currently held by Halim Jaris Bishay

The most poignant example of this type of Muslim-Christian conflict continues to be the civil war in Lebanon. The Lebanese historian, Kamal Salibi, once described the Maronites as the only politically successful Christians in the Arab world, and it should be added that this success was gained only through their military prowess in intermittent battles with their Muslim neighbors since the days of the Crusades. Today it is hard to imagine the Lebanese Maronites maintaining their political success for very long in the face of the onslaught of Arab arms pitted against them.

The Maronites' status as Lebanon's largest single religious group was jeopardized by the arrival, in 1970, of thousands of Palestinians fleeing the Jordanian army. This sudden increment in the Muslim population undermined the proportionality established by the 1943 National Pact giving the Maronites a six-to-five edge over the Muslims in Parliament, and guaranteeing that the post of President be filled by a Christian. In their maneuvers to secure autonomous power in the state, the Palestinians clashed with the Christian-led Lebanese Army in 1973, and three years later, triggered the civil war with an assassination attempt against Phalangist leader Pierre Gemayel. A 30,000-man Syrian contingent invaded the country in 1976, ostensibl to protect the Christians, but in reality to quash efforts to effect the partition of an independent Christian state--as noted, an intolerable development in Since then, the Christians of Lebanon have been fighting a war of survival against a seemingly insurmountable alliance of Syrians, Palestinians and Muslim leftists, a war in which there are no prisoners and no surrendering.

Muslim persecution of Christians in Arab countries has inevitably resulted in what has become a familiar trend in the Middle East: Christian emigration. While exact figures are unavailable, the flight of Christians to Lebanon before 1976 and subsequently, to various Western countries, has been both continuous and massive. In Syria alone, for example, a quarter-million Christians left in the early 1960's; the non-Coptic Christian communities of Egypt emigrated virtually *in toto* during the same period.[34] In some Arab countries, such as Syria and Iraq, Christians are forbidden to emigrate, and must escape illegally, usually through Turkey. Elsewhere, as in Libya, Christians have been expelled.[35]

Perhaps the best means of gauging Christian emigration from Arab countries is by noting the immense growth of their respective communities in the United States. In the case of many of these groups, the number of adherents now resident in the U.S. greatly exceeds that of their co-religionists remaining in Arab lands. Once outspoken advocates of Arab nationalism, these communities, through their official publications as well as their Congressmen, are now leading the fight against Muslim persecution of Christians. They have reached an awareness of the fact that the promises of pan-Arabism were chimerical, and that the ascendency of Islamic fundamentalism as the dominant force in the Arab world endangers the very existence of these ancient communities. They realize also that it may be already too late for most Arab Christians, that there may be no choice remaining but to leave. One Christian scholar, writing in A.J. Arberry's classic volumes on religion in the Middle East, expressed the attitude of many Arab Christians:

> Christians have no future in a country which is becoming all the time more socialist and totalitarian. Their children are intoctrinated in the schools where the syllabus is devoted more and more to Islam and their faith is in danger. Debarred increasingly from public office and from nationalized societies, robbed of their property and unable to engage in profitable business in a society where almost everything is under state control, how can they survive? To remain is to condemn oneself to suffocation.[36]

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