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## Interview with Klaus Wivel

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*Author of **The Last Supper: The Plight of Christians in Arab Lands** (New Vessel Press, 2016)*

**November 5, 2016**

**Please talk a bit about yourself. Where did you study? (Hebrew University according to your FB page). What spawned your interest in Middle Eastern Christians?**

I'm a Danish journalist writing for the weekly, cultural weekly Weekendavisen where I've been since 1998. Two years prior to that I lived for two years with my wife in Jerusalem studying at the Hebrew University. This was where I became a journalist. Jerusalem is as you know the home of the three great monotheistic religions, but it became apparent for me that among the three religions the Christians were by far the most vulnerable group. But my interest was truly spawned during the so-called Al-Aqsa Intifada which began in the autumn of 2000 and ended in 2005. I covered it as a journalist and it was clear from talking to Christians that they felt trapped between the Israeli military on the one side and militant Islamists on the other. Thousands immigrated. Having been instrumental in the creation of Palestinian nationalism during the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in this conflict they saw to their horror that the country had become Islamicized. They told me they felt like strangers in their own land.

**You are very correct in your assertion that there has been “no empathy or sense of alarm” for the plight of MENA Christians. Academic-wise I can only think of two other books, “Forsaken” by Daniel Williams and “Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms” by Gerald Russell. Why has there been such a lack of interest in the fate of MENA Christians in your view?**

I think there are several reasons. One reason is that if you ask priests in the Arab countries if Christians are being harassed many will answer that they are treated like brothers. Why is this? The Arab world is a closed society. As leaders of minorities priests will understand not to criticize the rulers. They would want to stay out of trouble. As a journalist you need to talk to Christians anonymously if you want truthful information.

A second reason is that the US and many European countries have been engaged in wars the last fifteen years in the Middle East – Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. There has been a conscious decision in the Western foreign ministries not to be too outspoken when it came to the atrocities and persecution Christians especially in Iraq faced. The fear was that the military actions of the Western countries would be perceived as a Crusade if Christians were mentioned and that that would lead to Christians in these countries

being targeted as Western stooges and as a fifth column. However, that happened anyway in Iraq despite the Western silence.

I also think that there has been a fear of criticizing Islam for many years in some circles. Talking about the plight of the Christians in the Middle East is perceived as yet another attack on Muslims. I think that's a very bad reason for not spreading light on a devastating crisis like this.

**Why didn't you include non-Arab countries like Iran and Turkey in your research? (I realize the book is about 'Arab lands', but why did you confine it to those, given their ideological/geopolitical proximity and interconnectedness to non-Arab ones?). Turkey is a particularly attractive case, where Greek and Armenian Christians are relatively free but still face significant existential and psychological anxieties.**

I could've done that. But I wanted to portray countries close to the origin of Christianity – which explains The Palestinian Territories. I wanted to deal with the effects of the Arab Spring on Christians – thus Egypt. I wanted to write about the only Arab country where Christians had been a (recent) majority – Lebanon. And I wanted to describe Iraq because of the horrors Christians had faced there after the Iraqi war began. There are many good books on the Armenian Genocide. I didn't think I could really contribute with anything new in that connection.

**What were your reasons for leaving out Syria? I realize the situation there has been horrid since early 2011, but why not conduct research based on interviews/archives/Syrian experts outside the country?**

I do deal with Syria a little bit at the end of the chapter on Lebanon – I spoke with a Syrian Christian who had gone to Lebanon. But you are right; writing about the Christians in Syria would have been obvious and important. However, I didn't feel safe going to Syria. Journalists in scores were being either kidnapped or killed at the time I did my research.

**Also, do you think that Lebanon's consociational model offers a decent model for the region?**

Not really. Lebanon is a country where every religious group has its own laws. It's not really a state at all. The problems are massive. I was told that the only thing keeping the groups from going at each other's throats was the horrid experiences of the civil war. That's the one thing they all agree on. They don't want to do that again.

**What would be your suggestions towards policy makers in the West? Given the prevalent radicalization in the region, is there anything that can be done?**

I don't have any substantial suggestions other than to say that it's important to put pressure on the states to make sure they treat minorities right. The Egyptian government for instance is worried about its standing in the world. I

also think we should begin to talk about this at the highest levels of government. For instance, it was a great help that Secretary of State John Kerry in the Spring declared the Islamic State's persecution of Christians and Yazidis and other groups in Iraq a Genocide. And the press obviously need to deal far more with this issue.

**Is there an overarching reason for the persecution of the region's Christians, or does it depend on the country in question?**

The rise of Islamism.