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The Christian Predicament in the Middle East

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Interview with the Ambassador of Palestine in Athens, Marwan Emile Toubassi

Athens, May 27, 2015

Click here for the audio recording and the transcript of the interview.

A protracted dystopia ?
Political Islam and Christianity in the Middle East

Ihab Shabana

The long conflict between political Islam and the Christians in the region has caused more than thousands to flee their homes. Many talk about extinction or even a low-scale genocide of the Christian populations, leading to a dystopia. But have the Christians been mere victims of the Muslims, or have they taken part in a general diffused conservatism that has put them in danger?

The rise of political Islam in various ways in the Middle East after the Arab Uprisings has caused feelings of loathe among most of the Christian and Muslim populations, not only in the West but also within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The growing tensions, which often end up in violence, have pushed many observers and scholars to describe the ongoing process as a planned extinction and expulsion of the historical Christian populations from the Middle East, in fear of their lives. On the other hand, many Muslim communities have adopted a critical stance with regard to the Christians' attitude toward the political reality that has emerged: their support, for instance, for the July 3rd coup of President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi and their affiliation with the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad have made many Muslims wary about their commitment to political change, democracy and popular sovereignty. In this article, we will explore the views of political Islam towards the status of the Christians in the Middle East, with an emphasis on Egypt since it has the majority of Christians in the area, the aspects of these disparities and, last, we will trace the extent to which the Christians instigated the islamization of the MENA societies.

During the last decades, the MENA region has experienced an overt islamization that has had many facets: the islamization of politics, of public discourse, of social relations and that of public sphere. All these facets have been indicative of a general transformation of the cultural identity of the peoples of the Middle East. This islamization process has been taking place

alongside a general change of attitude of the Christians, from a secularist stance to a more religious-based discourse and attitude. For example, the urban space has been rapidly changing, while religious communities and authorities (both Muslim and Christian) have chosen to orchestrate their public space with more distinctive religious symbols, such as with more mosques and churches, louder minarets and bell towers, and neon lights.[1] These changes reflect the identity politics that define the ethnic and religious communities in the Middle East. The status of the Christians in the region has not been bright even prior to the Arab Uprisings, and the struggle for equal rights and political representation has been on the core of Christian politics. Discriminations towards Christians have been part of everyday life. The main aspects of these discriminations concern institutionalized prejudice, growing demographic islamization and the everyday informal practices of discrimination against Christians.[2]

The first aspect has fueled long and intense debates, such as over whether the Christians should have an equal legal status and citizenship, or they should be treated as a "protected religious minority" according to shari'a law. This debate has caused a split among both Muslim and Christian communities. For example, in Egypt, most of the Islamists agree on the rearrangement of the *dhimmi* status. This school of thought penetrates most of Islamic thinking, from moderate Islamists to radicals.[3] Nevertheless, the aforementioned issue has caused some Islamists to balance the interpretation of sharia' law between historical and post-modern contexts. Thus, some, like Abul Ala Maududi, have accepted *ijtihad* (reasoning) and support equal rights for Christians as ahl al-Kitab (People of the Book), as long as they do not hold any high political or military ranks. In fact, in Egypt and Syria, the Christian representation in the political sphere is extremely low. However, the Islamist *wasatiyya* (centrist) trend has backed a national rather than a religious citizenship, rejecting the *dhimmi* status of the Copt community in Egypt. This position was also accepted, at least in theory, by the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt.

The demographic islamization, as it has been described by Philippe Fargues, is another aspect of the growing distresses that Christians face in MENA. The demographic shrinkage of the Christian population has mainly four origins: the conversion to Islam, the difference in birth and death rates, the large scale exodus, or the lower scale migration and intermarriage.[4] The exodus of the Christians, as it is sometimes described, has changed the demographic map of the Middle East. Especially, after the burst of the Syrian civil war and the emergence of Da'esh, the estimated Christian population that fled from Iraq is around one million and the one from Syria approximately half a million. Furthermore, one has to mention other historical moments of Christian persecution and subsequent migration - like the Christians fleeing the Lebanese civil war, the Armenian Genocide and the Greek–Turkish exchange of population in 1922 - to have a clearer image of the shrinking Christian population during the 20th and 21st centuries.[5]

The last aspect of these disparities is the violations and the discrimination that Christians face in their everyday life, deriving from the strengthening of political Islam and the general rise of religiosity. These violations include the threat of physical integrity, the denial of certain civil rights - such as registration of marriages, deaths or divorces - and the exclusion from employment in certain governmental sectors.[6] Islamic authorities in the Middle East have tried several times to reconsider the status quo of the Christian communities in the region by issuing a number of resolutions. For example, in the Arab Char-

ter on Human Rights (1994), there was an extensive reference to the religious minorities of the Muslim countries, stating - though vaguely - that all the religious communities have the right to express and practice their religion, without prejudice to the rights of others.[7] These acknowledgements are consistent with the constitutions of the Arab countries; nevertheless, they are contradictory when it comes to the source of law, which is sharia'. As we shall see, the article 2 of the Egyptian constitution has caused a great debate between the Copts and the Islamists.

The wide spectrum of political Islam has not managed to form a uniform and inflexible stance towards Christians. In the 20th century, the scholars of political Islam have been hostile towards Christian political ideas, since the latter have been seen as commissioners of nationalism, secularism and radical Marxist and leftist ideas. Islamists, even though at times they have made use of these ideologies, in principle they are hostile to them. In an effort to create a secure social and political environment for them, the Christians of the MENA region - especially those of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine - lined up with, and sometimes, shaped Arab nationalism, like in the case of Mishel Aflaq.[8] However, a widely promoted rhetoric, that held the Christians and their ties with the West accountable for a series of social and economic upheavals (for instance that the Copts want to create an independent Christian state in the region or that they receive obscure funding from western countries), gradually gained ground.

These transformations have had a parallel itinerary with the transforming identity of the Christians. First, the Christian communities in the Arab World have long wanted to define themselves as a separate religious minority. Furthermore, western colonialism and its protestant missionaries made, for example, the Copts under the leadership of Pope Kyrillos and especially under late Pope Shenouda, to turn to religious conservatism. The Sunday School Movement, a Coptic cultural establishment, accelerated the formation of a rigid Coptic identity in Egypt.[9] S.S. Hassan has defined this process as Coptic cultural nationalism, as the Coptic Church slowly started to take the place of the political representative for the Copts. This process was cemented, as the relationship between the late Pope Shenouda and Anwar al-Sadat became uneasy, partly because of the Sadat's normalization

of relations with Israel and his support for Islamism. This caused the Pope's exile in an isolated desert monastery. In addition, the tension with Islamist groups, like the Gamaa al-Islamiya, culminated in the '90s with the Islamists organizing plenty of attacks against Christian population in Upper Egypt. In the cases of Iraq and Syria, where there was also the factor of Sunni-Shia' divisions, the Christians were more well-integrated in the political discourse,[10] partly because they held a bigger portion of financial activities and partly because the nationalistic Baathist programme was still alive.

The tensions between the Coptic Church and the Egyptian state have made them both more belligerent. Furthermore, many secular Copts - like the political figure Samir Murqus - and Muslims, doubted whether the Copts really support a secular state. Together with several other Copts, like Munir Fakhri Abd al-Nur and the writer Milad Hanna, they try to distinguish the nature of the Arab societies between the public and the personal/private sphere. The Copts, like many other Christians in the Middle East, are not rejecting the inclusion of religion as a source of law, as mentioned in article 2 in the Egyptian constitution, but they have been trying to add Christianity as an equal source and a contributor to the Arab identity. Nevertheless, there are plenty of Copts - like Amin Iskandar, the leader of the al-Karama party - who support article 2 as it is since, as Iskandar mentions, the majority of Egypt's population is Muslim.[11] Michel Aflaq has also referred to the essence of the Arab nation's identity, which, as he writes, is Islam. The Islamic religion is the Spirit of the nation, he mentions, and the attachment to the Spirit will strengthen the Arab peoples.[12] Shari'a is also widely practised in the majority of the Christian families. They practice the Islamic inheritance law, included in Shari'a, which constitutes a traditionally unwritten pact in the Arab world between Muslims and Christians, even though in the last years it is believed by the Christian Churches to be an encroachment of the Christian faith and rights. Moderate Islamists, like the *wasatiyya* trend, argue that shari'a should not be implemented upon Christian peoples, but the latter should use it as a traditional rightly-guided blueprint of family governance.

Perceived as an enemy of political change and loyal to the corrupted and autocratic Arab regimes, the Christians' response to the growing Islamist popularity should definitely be reconsidered. Democratization in the Arab world is imperatively needed and Christians should definitely be an integral part of it.

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Dissecting Sectarianism:
the political economy of 'Christians'

Zakia Aqra

There is no doubt that the persecution of the Christians in the Middle East by the 'Islamic State' (IS) has a distorted religious undertone. Yet, a political economy of the Christians will present how Christians are imprisoned in false perceptions that have engendered a mutual fear among Muslims and Christians, leading them to 'rubbles' in the dawn of the 21st Century.

There are many conspiracy theorists among the Muslims in the region that view their Christian compatriots as "Western agents" and more affluent than "them". This is very palpable by the Christians themselves; whereas, in the beginning of the Syrian uprising, the Christians were affiliated with the oppressive regime. Conspiracy theory is not an exclusive tendency of Muslims in the region. Christians, such as Joseph Hakim, President of the International Christian Union (ICU), believe that there is a systematic 'genocidal intention' towards the Christians, not only by Jihadi Muslims, but also by other political actors.[1] Even some Western scholars view Arab Christians as exceptional and different from the rest. For instance, Sir Charles Eliot in 1900, has written that 'the Turk and the Christian are not equal; the Christian is superior', while others have the perception that the Christians are constantly and systemically persecuted by non-Christians since forever.[2] Although these perceptions have an element of truth, a political economy approach of sectarianism regarding Christians will deconstruct these perceptions and readdress the Christians' place in the sectarian puzzle of the Middle East.

Even though sectarianism is commonly understood as a conflict between subdivisions within religious or ethnical groups, here - in an attempt to explain the situation of other religious communities such as the Christian one - sectarianism is understood as a form of conflict between different religious groups that are part of a state or have supra-religious bonds. Viewing Christians under the prism of sectarianism allows the Christian communities to claim their part in the mosaic of religious and ethnical groups that constitute the Arab states. The phenomenon of sect is a 'product of the Middle Ages after the collapse of the Arab Islamic empire' with the 'formation of the majority –Sunnis– and religious minorities'.[3] Yet, sectarianism, in general, 'cannot be viewed as a continuation of old hatreds: it has been the result of the delicate interaction of unfavourable

first conditions and of harmful policies and actions',[4] which in turn has produced false perceptions and has engendered an atmosphere of mutual fear among Christians and Muslims in the region. Bassam Yousif's approach on the political economy of sectarianism, based on 'the nascent field of the economics of conflict finds that ethno-sectarian diversity is not generally politically destabilizing', demonstrating that there is a strong political economical element in sectarianism, rather than ethnic or cultural.[5] He poses that ethnically and religiously fragmented societies risk civil conflict and rivalries because of low economic growth and inequality. The same approach may be applied to better understanding the way sectarianism has generated false perceptions –not only religiously but most importantly, culturally, politically, and socio-economically– and offer some insight on the Arab Christians.

From the Ottoman Empire to Arab nation-states

The constructed sectarianism, in the 19th century - as a result of the demographic shifts of Christians, the Ottoman *millet*[6] system and the global market – both benefited and hindered the Christians in the region. On the one hand, the *millet* offered high-ranking Christians many privileges, while on the other hand, their *dhimmis* minority status –as people of the book– put them in a secondary position, excluding them from political participation. Religious geography further segmented the Christians as they were 'concentrated along or emigrated to the coastline and the towns on the major trade routes', pushing the Arab Christians to pursue 'more educational and mercantile goals'.[7] Christians, until nowadays, have in fact 'a proportional qualitative edge in education and greater across-the-board wealth', even though it has minimised during the last decades.[8] Nonetheless, only 15% of the Muslims who constituted 80% of the Ottoman Empire were local merchants, as opposed to the Christians (65%).[9] The Christians in Lebanon and Syria, during the 19th century, prevailed in sectors such as foreign trade, silk growing and finance. An additional important factor that aided the Arab Christians to maintain and to develop financially was not so much the assistance from the Westerners, but instead the remittances that were used to buy land, finance small businesses, and construction from many who had immigrated towards the West, as well as the capital brought back by the returning emigrants.[10] Charles Issawi points out that remittances 'to geographical Syria were put at nearly $8 million in 1914, in 1924 at $19 million [...] and, for Lebanon alone, at $20 million in 1952'.[11] However, the economic "benefits" acquired along the way, and while most of the Christians were politically marginalized, coincided with the European efforts to dismantle both economically and politically the Ottoman Empire.

Even if there are some valid facts to rationalise Christians as "children of the West", there are many more facts that constitute this perception delusional and even ironic. The capitulation regimes established between the Empire and Western powers, which secured privileges for Western nationals including certain commercial concessions, and immunity from taxation among other things, was also extended to the non-Muslims in the Empire. The 'humanitarian intervention' of France during the 1860 massacre of the Christians of Mount Lebanon by the Druze, created the expectation that Christians may also 'count on physical protection from outside'.[12] The European interaction with indigenous Christians allowed the perception that the Christian missionaries were "Western agents". Yet, not only was this false because indigenous Christians often 'worked

independently of imperial designs and sometimes contrary to them', but were also caught in the crossfire of the Great Powers.[13] The implications of these policies were tremendous for the Christians: not only did they fuel "sectarian Christian identity", but soon the West lost interest in protecting them.

The Arab Christians launched the *al-Nahda* movement, spreading the first seeds of Arab nationalism. The numerous Christians that constituted the Ba'ath Party, both in Syria and Iraq, should not be understated. Contrary to the belief that Christians are detached from the region and identify with the West, even in economic orientations, Arab nationalism, which espoused socialism and anti-colonial rhetoric, translated into an "anti-Western" tendency among many Christians. Some may attribute the anti-capitalist tendency to the failure of the colonial era, as opposed to the promotion of 'capitalist-ethos' and 'free enterprise' espoused by Christians such as Ya'qub Sarruf and Jurji Zaydan, earlier in the 19th century.[14] Conversely, whatever the justification one may have, the Christians were an indispensable part of the post-colonial era and the Arab nationalist movement which would also fail them.

As Arab nationalism declined, the wave of sectarian policies and crony-capitalism started to consume the Christian communities. The Syrian and Iraqi Christians as a minority decided to side with the regimes in order to reassure political freedom,

not only for themselves but also for the entire society, even though this did not necessarily translate into civil rights. In Syria, for instance, Assad's regime gave financial benefits to Christian schools, but the Syrian President ought to be Muslim. At the same time, the Christians in Lebanon - not being a minority - pursued self-assertion in a confessional system, creating a distinct identity based on religion. In the dawn of the civil war, Maronite Christians allied with Israel generating rage among the anti-Zionists across the region, offering incitement of further identifying Christians with colonial tendencies. The Christian's political alliances - either local or foreign - stigmatised and dismantled them from the rest of the societies, in an era of rising 'Islamic' rhetoric that brought the secular dream to rubbles. Yet, prior to the Syrian uprisings and the wars in Lebanon and Iraq, the 'Islamic rhetoric' alone does not explain the demography shift of Christians in the Middle East. Even though Christians 'mostly belong to the middle and upper classes', the shrinking of the economy certainly has forced Christians to emigrate, as 'the lack of economic upward mobility' prevented them from 'a reasonable economic future for themselves'.[15]

Post-Arab uprising

The Syrian civil war, just like post-Saddam Iraq, accelerated the Christian migration. Based on anecdotal sources in the beginning of the Syrian uprising and while the country's economy was declining, many Christians migrated to neighbouring countries, such as Lebanon and Turkey or Europe and the U.S. Then, the emigration was different from the drastic and forced migration after the establishment of IS, where many Christians are now unable to reconstitute their lives by reallocating and opening businesses in other countries without seeking asylum and leaving their properties behind. Today, the affluence of Christians only helps them to get on "slightly better boats" than less affluent Syrians to leave the region. An estimation of traveling from Turkey to Greece in a rubber dinghy costs £1,700 per person, a rowing boat £2,500, while in a tourist boat, it amounts to £3,400; whereas a trip to Bulgaria from Beirut, amounts to over £6000.[16] The ones that still remain in Syria are perceived as being either part of the regime or the West. Many disregarded that the Christians to some extent were forced to side with Assad only after the Free Syrian Army opposition - which included many Christians - failed. There is a long list of Christians that have either been terrorized or killed by Assad's regime in the beginning of the protests, but they were soon made an example of, such as the priest Bassilius Nassar who was killed, because he decided to take food to starving people in the besieged area of his residing city of Homs.[17] Evidently, when compared with IS, Assad's regime is the lesser of two evils. The position of Christians in the civil war is both understandable and unreasonable, notwithstanding it clearly illustrates how they have been consumed in the sectarian puzzle in the region.

The persecution of Christians in the Levant before IS was not necessarily based on religious motives but on political and economic misconceptions. The mosaic of the Middle East has been systemically translating diversity into conflict, which usually coincide with wars (either Western or intra-Arab) and economic decline. Despite the fact that the bubble of misconceptions should have erupted as the Christians and Muslims are being persecuted, the Christian status remains misunderstood. The Arab Christians are an indispensable part of the region, in both its highs and lows. And they, just like every other religious group, owe to find a *modus vivendi* where the region and its people could prosper; even though, this may seem too late with the presence of IS. IS not only is a reminder of this failure, but it also further fosters the misconceptions and mutual fear between Christians and Muslims. Yet and at the very least, these misconceptions must be resisted and dismantled so as these societies may start to "imagine" themselves and recapture their diversity devoid of conflict.

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1982 p.12; It is worth mentioning another severe misconception regarding the Christians. Particularly, when referring to the 'disappearance' of the Christians from the region, the scholars fail to differentiate between number of European and indigenous Christians that resided in the region and left after the establishment of the independent Arab States. For more, on demographic data regarding the European and indigenous Christians see: Isawwi (1982)

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Christian militias in Syria and Iraq:

beyond the neutrality/passivity debate

Marina Eleftheriadou

Most reports about the state of Christians in Syria and Iraq centre on their persecution and dwindling numbers. In the rare cases that Christians are granted political agency, they are –simplistically– placed in the pro-Assad camp. Even then, they are relegated to a passive role, abstaining from violence. However, in reality, the Christian communities in Syria and Iraq have assumed a military role, for the first time in the region after decades. In this context, militias fighting on opposite camps, geographical pressures and concerns, competing identities and alliances and even foreign fighters form a complex mosaic of Christian forces that have moved beyond the neutrality threshold.

Historically, at least after the post-colonial retreat of the West as a protector of their interests, Christians in the Middle East have largely identified with secular forces and ideologies, be it Arab-nationalism or communism. Christians, who did not immigrate to the West and were determined to integrate in their local milieu, felt more at ease in political configurations that lessened their religious particularity, in societies dominated by Muslims. This usually brought them under the wings of the established regimes, trading freedom for protection. The only exception to this rule have been Lebanon's Maronites, whose demographic strength allowed them to ascertain a religious group identity, equally distinct from its Muslim and Arab environment (the latter through their identification as Phoenicians, not Arabs). Maronites in Lebanon have been, also, the only Christian community in the region to defend militarily this separate identity. The notorious Maronite militias during the Lebanese civil war proved that Christians in the Middle East are equally capable of violence.

Twenty-five years after the end of the Lebanese civil war, Christians in Syria and Iraq are forced to defend their identity and adapt to the changing *status quo* in far less favourable conditions (demographic and politico-military). In light of the widespread displacement and refugee outflow, an up-to-date estimation of the size of the Christian community in Syria is hard;

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but less than a million Christians are believed to have remained in Syria.[1] Beside their low numbers, Christians in Syria are not a homogeneous group. Antiochian Greek Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, Armenians, Maronites and Chaldean Catholic are only some of the Christian denominations that exist in Syria. The different backgrounds, geographical distribution and aspirations of these sects have drawn a complex map of divergent or even competing stances towards the Syrian civil war that mirrors the multiformity of the Muslim camp. Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Armenians have largely sided with the Assad regime. Mainly located in western Syria, where the Syrian regime exerts firmer control, these communities seem to have been pushed into the Assad camp by mere geography. For Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic, equally important has been the identification with the Arab identity, dating back to the incorporation of Arabic in their liturgies and, subsequently, reinforced by this Arabisation of religious practices.[2] It is no accident that Michel Aflaq, the theoretician of Ba'athism, was a Greek Orthodox. Syriac Orthodox and members of the Assyrian Church, on the contrary, are concentrated in the eastern part of Syria and they do not self-identify or downplay their Arab identity, safeguarding their Syriac and widely neo-Aramaic traditions and language.[3] Largely repressed by the regime in the past and located in rebel-held territory, they have adopted a different stance from their fellow Christians in west Syria.

These intra-Christian differences translate into different military postures. Christians in west Syria have joined in small numbers the Syrian army. Moreover, a number of semi-official defence units and rudimentary militias that often flirt with gang-lordism[4] have been created over the years. Although some defence units have preserved a defensive posture with the sole goal to protect the local communities, a significant number of these local militias were formed as part of the Popular Committees that were armed by the regime, in the early stages of the conflict, to prevent the opposition forces from entrenching in the government-controlled areas. Since the late-2012 'professionalisation' of the Popular Committees under the National Defence Forces (NDF) formation, these local militias have assumed a more direct military role. This type of Christian militias are believed to operate in the predominantly Christian area of Wadi al-Nasara, but also in other Christian towns and regions such as Safita (Tartus), Qusayr (Homs), Saidnaya (Rif Dimashq) and in large cities like Damascus and Aleppo.[5] Beside these government-controlled units, there are also some government-affiliated, yet more independent militias, which, however, are not Christian by default. A case in point is the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), which espouses Pan-Syrianism and, despite its troubled relations with the Assad regime in the past, currently it fights on the government's side (mainly in the Homs governorate). Although SSNP has cross-sectarian membership, most of its supporters are Christian.[6]

The situation is much more complex in the east. Officially, the Syriac Orthodox and the Assyrian Church of the East profess neutrality. However, for their followers, conflict and the threat of radical Islamism render neutrality a luxury of the past. On the top level, the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO), which is closely related to the Iraqi Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), has joined the Syrian National Coalition early in the conflict and it is the only purely Christian group to have done so (individual Christians of course exist in other groupings). Nevertheless, on the ground, the growing irrelevance of the government-in-exile has given pre-eminence to other Christian formations. In 2012, the Syriac Union Party (SUP) set up a militia, called Sutoro, which expanded from al-Qahtaniya to al-Malikiyah and Qamishli (all in the Hasakah governorate

in the northeastern tip of Syria).[7] Another militia in the Hasakah governorate is the Syriac Military Council (MFS), which was formed in January 2013 with the support of SUP. Both militias are anti-government and both collaborate closely with the Kurdish forces operating in the region. In fact, MFS officially joined the Kurdish Democratic Union Party's (PYD) military arm, People's Protection Units (YPG), in January 2014.[8]

The close collaboration with PYD is an indication of the inability of the Christian communities in the region to defend themselves, which renders them dependent on the protection of stronger forces. In effect, this inability constitutes nothing but the other side of the coin that 'forces' the Christians in west Syria to support the Assad regime. Moreover, PYD's secular agenda presents a much more welcoming environment, in the same way that Ba'athism does. In the face of salafi-jihadi entrenchment in Syria, Christians opposing the regime have no choice but to seek protection from the Kurds, even if that means burying old grudges. Although the minority status and past state repression unite the Christians of north-east Syria, who are mostly Assyrian, and the Kurds, however, old massacres and the claim to the same piece of land render this 'dependence' hard to swallow for some. As a result, some Christians oppose the close cooperation with the Kurdish militias on the grounds that Christians cannot -and should not- forget that the Kurds perpetrated the Assyrian genocide during the 19th and 20th century. Respectively, as the line of reasoning goes, they should not undermine the prospect of Greater Kurdistan, which has been already engineered by the increasing 'Kurdification' of the area, through migration and high birth-rate.

This debate, in effect, 'conceals' another dividing line that cuts through the Christian communities in east Syria, particularly the Syriac Orthodox one. This divide centres on the Assyrian ethnic identity. Those Christians that self-identify as Assyrians see their struggle as a national-liberation one. Hence, cooperation with a fellow national-liberation movement is inevitable, if Assyrians are to gain any type of autonomy. In corroboration, Assyrian nationalist cite Rojava's pro-Assyrian measures, such as the recognition of Syriac as official language. On the opposite side, Christians that do not identify as Assyrians or ascribe to the government-supported notion of Aramean nationalism[9] gravitate towards the Syrian government.

These clashing views have generated a split within the SUP-supported Sutoro militia. In late 2013, Sutoro's branch in Qamishli distanced itself from the growing rapprochement with the Kurds and created a separate militia, called Sootoro, which proceeded with a barely concealed shift of allegiance to the government.[10]

Christians in Iraq face similar problems and dilemmas with their brethren in Syria, even though Iraq presents a less complicated denominational map. In post-2003 Iraq, the remaining Christians, who are less than half a million, are predominately Chaldean Catholic, followed by the members of the Assyrian Church of the East. Like some Christian communities in Syria, Chaldean Catholic, traditionally, have been more eager to assimilate into the Arab rather than the Chaldo-Assyrian identity. Nonetheless, in the context of the post-Saddam Iraqi political and military configuration, Christians seem to have no option but to collaborate with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KPG) and seek protection from the Peshmerga. Concentrated in the Nineveh province, in north-west Iraq, Christians are separated from the Iraqi government-controlled areas by a large swath of land controlled by the Islamic State. Although some shady Sunni and Shia groups have made overtures to the Christians,[11] in reality, Christians in Nineveh can expect no protection against the advancing salafi-jihadi forces but from the Kurdish forces, laying to their east.

Some militias like the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU), which was formed by the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), find it hard to accept. After 2003, ADM had whole-heartedly espoused the (central) Iraqi political process and have managed to secure the majority of the Assyrian votes in all the national elections that followed. ADM's trust in the Iraqi government and especially its suspicion towards KPG and its alleged plan to "Kurdify" the Assyrian areas[12] prompted ADM and NPU to keep a distance from the KPG. Under the initiative 'Restore Nineveh Now', ADM has mobilised the Assyrian diaspora, particularly in the United States, which funds the NPU, covering the militia's logistics, including uniforms and some protection gear.[13] Moreover, NPU has made a request to become part of the proposed Iraqi national guard, as a means to acquire funds and much needed weapons. Until then, despite their distrust towards KPG, they are forced to train with weapons borrowed from the Peshmerga.[14] In order to boost its military capacity, NPU has also resorted to assistance from foreigners. Allegedly, part of the assistance offered by the diaspora was the hiring of a large contracting firm to train NPU recruits. In the end, however, a newly-found firm secured the contract in late 2014. Sons of Liberty International, headed by Matthew Van Dyke, who rose to fame after he joined the Libyan opposition and was imprisoned by the Qaddafi regime, claim to have recruited western ex-military to train NPU.[15] However, for the time being, NPU and the Sons of Liberty International have yet to show actual fighting capacity and Peshmerga's clear preference for other pro-Kurdish Christian militias[16] can only partially explain this lack of combat effectiveness.

The other two large Christian militias in the Nineveh, Dwekh Nawsha and Nineveh Plains Forces (NPF), have fully accepted the necessity of collaboration with KPG. NPF is fully under the Kurdish command, operating as a Peshmerga unit.[17] For Dwekh Nawsha, the cooperation with Peshmerga rests on the political collaboration of its mother organization, Assyrian Patriotic Party, with Kurdish-led electoral coalitions in the past. Although Dwekh Nawsha appears to retain some operational autonomy, it remains fully dependent on Peshmerga. Interestingly, Dwekh Nawsha has attracted several foreign fighters, as well.

However, contrary to the NPU, Dwekh Nawsha's foreign regiment is not led by a contracting firm. Instead, it is comprised of individual self-motivated ex-soldiers, who have travelled thousands of miles to join its ranks for religious or patriotic reasons, or even as an escape from PTSD. Some had previous experience with fighting with YPG in Syria but chose to join Dwekh Nawsha because they 'discovered' that Kurds in Syria are "a bunch of damn Reds"; or as a fellow foreign fighter, who stayed with the YPG, said, they got cold feet when they felt the intensity of actual fighting.[18] Their largely cosmetic role in Dwekh Nawsha, which uses them mainly for propaganda purposes, points to the accuracy of this acrid criticism.

It is noteworthy that Christian foreign fighters is an Iraqi phenomenon. There are numerous cases of western fighters, who fight against the Islamic State in Syria, but they join YPG. Very few examples of foreign fighters, who have joined Christian militias, exist in Syria. The most notable is the Swiss-born Johan Cosar, who, nevertheless, is of Syriac origin. Cosar, who used to be an officer in the Swiss army, was one of the founders of MFS. Contrary to the –justified, yet exaggerated- alarmism regarding the foreign fighters, who join the Islamic State, this aspect of the foreign fighter phenomenon is treated surprisingly lightly. Cosar was recently arrested by the Swiss authorities after his return to Switzerland, only to be released on bail. The stance of other western countries have ranged from conscious indifference to implicit approval.[19] Admittedly, the causes that the two groups of foreign fighters fight for, differ. However, the western attitude of "as long as you shoot in the right direction [we] don't care", as the head of the contracting firm that trains NPU in Iraq Matthew Van Dyke put it,[20] has been proved dangerous on numerous occasions in the past. In any case, this policy cannot be a substitute for the lack of a coherent strategy for dealing with the situation in Syria and Iraq, especially since many of the foreign fighters appear to be mentally unstable or guided by dubious motives.

Assad regime, PYD, KPG and foreign fighters, all point to the fact that the Christian communities in Syria and Iraq have thrown in their lot with different forces and actors. The Christian militias that operate in the region demonstrate that Christians in the region have moved beyond the passive victim label, which is usually used to describe their predicament, in order to survive in a radically changing environment. Historical, geographical and identity factors have largely determined their affiliations and allies, revealing that Christian communities are far from monolithic. However, while there are significant differences that intersect the Christian communities, what 'unites' them is their need for protectors. Despite the various militias that advertise their presence in Syria and Iraq, in reality none can operate, survive and more so succeed without the assistance of stronger forces that can protect and, at the same time, condone their Christian particularity.

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The Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Middle East:

A Match Made in Heaven

Costas Faropoulos

With the Syrian crisis worsening and the persecution of Christians in the region escalating, the involvement of some of the major Christian institutions has become ever deeper. Both the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church have been quite active in condemning the suffering of the Christians in the Middle East, and urge the international community to act decisively on it. The Christian presence in the region is fundamental for the Vatican, which tries to dissuade Christian populations from abandoning their homes, via financial and humanitarian aid. The Russian Orthodox Church has also been vocal on this issue and has addressed repeatedly the need for support to the Christians in the region. At the same time, it has worked closely with the government to promote the Russian interests in the Middle East.

The Christian communities in the Middle East are under siege, due to the rise and growth of Islamic extremism. The advancement of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq has allowed for the intensification of the persecution of the Christian populations in the areas controlled by IS, and also across the Middle East by groups affiliated to IS and al-Qaeda. In 2014, Christians were murdered in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya and other countries. In Iraq, the Christian population has been diminished from 1.2 million to 700.000 in the last years, especially after the capture of large Iraqi territories by IS. In Syria, more than 200.000 Christians have also been forced to flee to neighboring countries.[1]

The growing threat to the Christian community in the Middle East, that has put its own survival to question, has been a

central issue for the major western Christian institutions, namely the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church. They have been trying to mobilize the international community to address this urgent matter. Furthermore, the increasing frequency of attacks on the Christian communities, lately, and the rising number of Christian victims across the Middle East, has forced them in the last two years to intensify their diplomatic efforts.

Vatican diplomacy on the Middle East

The Vatican has always showed keen interest in the well-being of Christians in the Middle East. The dangers they are facing right now, though, have caused the Holy See to become even more active on the diplomatic front, trying to bring their plight to the spotlight. Pope Francis has repeatedly addressed the issue of the Christian persecution; he has publicly supported them, and he has called on Christians around the world to pray for them. In December 2014, on the occasion of Christmas, he wrote a letter to the Christian community in the Middle East, expressing his solidarity in their "enormous suffering". In his letter, Pope Francis urged the international community to address their needs and those of other suffering minorities, above all by promoting peace through negotiation and diplomacy.[2]

In 2014, Pope Francis visited the Middle East twice within a period of six months, showing in a very practical manner, his concern over the plight of the Christian community there, and his interest in the region. His first trip took place on May 24-26, when he visited Israel, Palestine and Jordan. In his visit to Israel, where he met with Israeli President Shimon Peres, Pope Francis stated clearly his desire to see a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which he described as "increasingly unacceptable", and called both sides to "intensify efforts and initiatives aimed at creating the conditions for a stable peace".[3] Pope Francis has been very vocal on the matter of the Palestinian people. In 2012, the Vatican officially recognized the State of Palestine,[4] and ever since the Pope has been very supportive of the Palestinian call for statehood. His support towards the Palestinians stems partly from his firm belief that, if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not solved, it may eventually put Christianity itself at risk in the Middle East. The continuing occupation of Palestine by Israel can only work towards the further radicalization of Islamic societies, and endanger even more the livelihood of Christians in the region.

The second papal visit to the Middle East was in November 28-30, 2014. This time the Pope visited Turkey after an official invitation. The Syrian crisis was on the top of his agenda. In a joint press conference with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara, he once more called attention to the suffering of millions due to the Syrian crisis. "Basic humanitarian rules are being violated and mass exiles of minorities are taking place. We must not shut our eyes anymore",[5] he said. While in Turkey, the Pope had the opportunity to meet also with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, head of the Greek Orthodox Church. Relations between the two churches have been very good in the last years, with the two religious leaders meeting for the third time. In a joint statement issued after their meeting, the two religious leaders urged once more the international community to respond appropriately to the suffering of millions in the Middle East.

These trips to the Middle East, not only reflect the Pope's personal interest in the region, but also they are part of a more broad Vatican strategy on the issue. The Vatican sees the preservation of the Christian communities in the Middle East as of

utmost importance, as this is the region where Christianity was born, and, as the Pope has stated, "we cannot resign ourselves to imagining a Middle East without Christians".[6] Vatican diplomacy has been persistent in its efforts to raise awareness on the state of the Christians in the Middle East. It is constantly bringing up the issue of Christian suffering in international organizations like the UN and the EU, calling them to recognize the martyrdom of Christians in the region. In March 13, 2015 a joint statement of the UN Human Rights Council, which was drafted by the Holy See together with Lebanon and Russia, recognized the abuses suffered by persons, solely because of their desire to exercise their religion, and for the first time there was a clear mention of Christians, as a religious community, being abused and persecuted. Moreover, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Holy See's Permanent Observer in the UN, expressed the Vatican's main view in a discussion on Boko Haram held in Geneva, by saying that "we are witnessing the continued development and dissemination of a radical and ruthless type of extremism inspired by an ideology which attempts to justify its cries in the name of religion".[7] In that same meeting Archbishop Tomasi, went on to say that the "use of force can only be the very last choice, according to the principle of the lesser evil". Although the Vatican does not embrace any violent solution to the crisis, and supports a peaceful political solution to the Syrian crisis, given the circumstances, i.e. the ferocity of the Islamic State and other jihadist groups, it did not totally dismiss it as an option.

Simultaneously with its political efforts, the Vatican has been providing constantly the catholic churches in the Middle East with financial aid. In essence, the Holy See is trying to build a support network, which would function on many levels. On the political level, it keeps pushing the international community to acknowledge the Christian persecution that has been taking place, and act more decisively on it. On the humanitarian level, it tries to maintain the flow of aid to displaced Christian communities, and to coordinate the distribution of financial aid.

The Russian Orthodox Church in the Middle East

The Russian Orthodox Church has also been quite active in championing the Christians of the Middle East. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow has continuously addressed the issue, trying on his part to exert influence. In a meeting with Greek Defense minister Panos Kammenos last April, the Patriarch expressed his concern that "if the current situation continues like this, there will be no Christian presence left in the Middle East, which will lead to the radicalization of Islamic society".[8] When, in 2013, world powers were considering the use of military force against the Assad regime in Syria, Patriarch Kirill sent a letter to U.S. President Barack Obama, urging him to oppose any proposal for military intervention. The Russian church has also been supporting the Christian communities, by providing humanitarian and financial aid. In 2013, it donated to the Patriarchate of Antioch the sum of 300.000 dollars, to help those suffering from the conflict.

The diplomatic efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church appear to be in accordance with the policies of the Russian government on the issue of the Christians in the Middle East. Russia is eager to promote a narrative of historical continuity, in which it is the proclaimed protector of Christianity in the region, as it has always been. As Archbishop Nikolaj Balashov, second in hierarchy in the Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations, says, "Middle Eastern Christians have known for centuries that no other country would look after their interests in the same way Russia would".[9] Russia sees the protection of the Christians in the region as a crucial factor in maintaining regional stability, and furthermore in protecting its own interests there. Assuming the historical role of defender of the Christians is essential, and when it is endorsed in such a clear way by the Russian Orthodox Church as well, it gains valuable credibility in the region. What is intriguing is that many Christians in the Middle East do indeed consider Russia as their "natural protector". In 2013, 50.000 Christian Syrians applied for Russian citizenship, in their desperate attempt to escape the war in the country.[10]

Relations between the Russian Church and the Kremlin have been very good, perhaps the best they have been in the post-Soviet era, and the two have been working together work to promote Russia's interests. Such is the case that the fine lines separating the church's diplomatic affairs and the Russian government's foreign policy blur. In November 25, 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin made an official visit to the Vatican, where he met with the Pope. They both stressed the seriousness of the situation in Syria, and discussed the dire conditions of Christians in the region, as well as Church related matters. A few weeks earlier, Metropolitan Hillarion, the Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Russian Church, met with several political and religious officials in Beirut. In these meetings, acting as Russia's foreign minister rather than as a representative of the Church, he reiterated the Russian government's decision to act as the protector of the Christian communities in the region. He called on the Christian population not to abandon their homes, and ensured them that "we will not forsake you. You are not alone".[11]

What is most interesting is that the ongoing persecution of Christians across the Middle East has managed to bring closer the Catholic and Orthodox churches, traditionally divided by theological differences. On the issue of Christian suffering their views are essentially identical and based on common spiritual, humanitarian and moral values. The question is if the alignment of the two Churches' Middle Eastern policies can foster a closer cooperation. If this was to happen, then joint initiatives

could be taken on the issue of the Middle Eastern Christians. And, perhaps, it could even bring about a meeting between a Catholic Pope and a Russian Orthodox Patriarch, a meeting that has not happened since the Great Schism of 1054.[12]

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Evangelists at opposite sides

Stavros I. Drakoularakos

This article aims to put into context the two distinct schools of Evangelical Christian thought that have come to the forefront within the State of Israel and the Palestinian territories. The first is represented by the Christian Zionists, a group which aligns itself with Israeli interests through the prism of the American Evangelical Church, while the second, the Palestinian Christians, surfaced during the Intifada of 1987, and supports a Palestinian nationalist rhetoric akin to the one shared by the Palestinian leadership.

Christians are a minority within the State of Israel, representing approximately 2% of the population – with the Orthodox Church, at 40%, being the largest community. Within the Palestinian territories, they represent merely 8% of the population. Nonetheless, theirs is a presence that cannot be put aside or discarded. The Christian community is divided on account of its followers, their place of residence, as well as their interests. There are Christians belonging to Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Anglicanism, Protestantism, Evangelical Protestantism and many more. Western Christianity was introduced in the Middle East during the 19th century and the colonialist period. Although the numbers of Western Christians had grown significantly until 1947, following Great Britain's withdrawal from the area, they soon diminished and are counted today at about the tens of thousands.

Christian Zionists

Zionism was a national movement aiming at establishing the State of Israel which came to prominence after 1918, and came to fruition in 1948. Christian Zionism is a term often associated with the different Evangelical Christian churches in the United States, as well as through organizations such as "Christians for Israel", "The International Christian Embassy of Jerusalem" and the "Centre for Jewish Christian Understanding and Cooperation". It appeared in American right-wing politics during the 1970s and was used for support to policies of financial and diplomatic aid and solidarity towards Israel. The idea, through various evangelical interpretations of the Bible, is that Israel is the "Holy Land", to which all Jews must return for Armageddon to come to pass, an event that will trigger the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.[1] The restoration of Jews to the land of Palestine is considered a necessary step towards *palingenesis*, i.e. the formation of a perfect theological order based on principles

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that dictate all aspects of life. Hence "supernaturally speaking, Israel is the only nation state in the world that matters".[2] This narrative, although a significant one in American electoral politics, will not be thoroughly analysed during the course of this article. Nevertheless, its association with the Christian Zionists within the State of Israel has, at times, been of great support to their cause, as well as a powerful ally to Israel itself.

One the other side of the Atlantic, there is a vocal community of Christian Zionists within Israel which is not US-based, and which has aligned its national and territorial identity with that of the Israeli Jews.[3] This community's link with the one mentioned above finds its roots in Israeli 1990s history. During the Intifada of 1987, the primary economic Israeli sectors found themselves short in workers, of whom a large majority being Palestinian. In their absence, the Israeli governments turned to immigrant workers from the Balkans, Asia, Africa and Latin America. For the Latin American ones, religion played a non-negligible part in the choice of their country of destination. Aside from making a living there, Israel was attractive to them because of the advent of the new millennium and the expectation of a potential Second Coming of Christ. An institutionalized process was put into motion, with the official recruitment of labour migrants bringing with it an influx of undocumented migrants. Their unofficial status meant that they had no civil or political rights and were afforded no protection by the State. To make matters worse, a deportation policy on undocumented migrant workers was initiated in 1996. Simultaneously, Latin American Evangelical churches started operating in Israel. They benefited from an existing status quo between State and religious institutions, according to which the State is committed to protect other religions, or at least not to interfere with them.[4] These churches effectively became a safe haven for undocumented migrants, through which their presence in the country could be safeguarded. It is at this point that originates the Latin American Evangelical Churches' association with Israeli interests and their political alignment with US-based Christian Zionism. The non-Jewish (and mostly irregular immigrants) Christian Zionists wish to be legitimate Israeli citizens and have, for instance, rallied their support for an Israeli-favourable resolution to the Palestinian issue. As a result, the Evangelical churches' impact is twofold: on the one hand, the migrants can justify their presence as foreigners, while, on the other, they can eventually move forward with a claim for citizenship.

In the end, one can distinguish between two sides of Christian Zionism. The first is found mainly in the United States, and preaches allegiance to Israel due to religious factors, while the second is located within the country, and sides with Israeli interests because of national identity-related factors. While both originate from different agendas, their goals are characterized by the same devotion to pro-Israeli policies.

Palestinian Christians and Liberation Theology

Liberation theology emerged as a political movement in Latin America in the 1960s, engaging with questions of poverty and political activism from a Marxist-influenced perspective.[5] One of its principal founders is considered to be the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez Merino. Similar movements took inspiration from it and grew in Asia, Africa, and Palestine especially. The Latin American movement was one with political action directed against Western imperialism and crippling poverty.

In contrast, The Palestinian Christians – a small but wealthy and highly educated minority – were converted to Christianity during the 19th century. Their appropriation of liberation theology was a means to reposition Palestinian Christianity as an ally of Islam against Zionism, as well as to separate the association between Zionism and Christianity in the West. The Palestinian Christian community identifies itself as first and foremost Palestinian Arabs and aims to be considered an integral part of the Palestinian people and its national movement.[6]

Palestinian liberation theology is represented by its two leaders: the Reverends Naim Ateek and Mitri Raheb, Anglican and Lutheran, respectively. Ateek is widely considered its founder. He established the Sabeel Centre in Jerusalem in 1989, in an effort to repurpose the development and practice of liberation theology within the Palestinian context. As with the Latin American liberation theology, Ateek's interpreted biblical texts in order to support the liberation from political and economic oppression. Ultimately, it focuses on redefining Christianity as an authentic Palestinian Arab religion, one standing on the side of Islam in the fight against political injustice as served by the hands of Israeli oppressors. During the first Intifada of 1987, the Palestinian Christians – although reticent at first – pledged their support to the Palestinian rebellion, following the arrest, interrogation and death of a Christian boy from Gaza, albeit denouncing the use of violence and pushing forward with non-violent means.[7] Whereas violence was viewed as an agent of change for Latin American liberation theologists, that was not the case with their Palestinian counterparts.

The second leading figure of the Palestinian Christians is widely considered to be Mitri Raheb. He argued that Palestinians must refuse to adopt the violent tactics that have been used against them and firmly declared solidarity with the opponents of imperialism. He is one of the authors – alongside Ateek – who signed and released, in 2009, the Kairos Palestine Document "A moment of truth", with which the occupation of Palestine by Israel was characterized as a sin against God and humanity, and as an implementation of apartheid methods by the Israeli administration.[8] The document, calling for a boycott movement against Israel, started making waves within the international community, and especially the United States. For instance the US Presbytarian Chruch, the Friends of Sabeel, and many more, pledged their support to the boycott and to the liberation theologians, effectively placing them into direct conflict with right-wing US politicians.[9] All in all, after its inception, the Palestinian liberation theology was offered and seized the opportunity to recast the relationship between Muslim and Christian Palestinians as one of political unity towards a narrative for liberation from Israeli oppression. Supporters of Israel and of the Palestinians' plight were not unmoved.

Leaving aside different interpretations of the Bible and Christian teachings, Christian Zionists and Liberation Theologians have set themselves on separate paths that have one denominator in common: Israel. The latter is either considered the ally or the enemy. Nevertheless, both schools of thought originate from a place of isolation from which they aim to liberate themselves from. In an area of the world, one defined for the last centuries as the epicentre of the clash of Muslim and Christian religions, religion is appropriated as a political instrument in service of nation-building. Nationalism seems destined to turn into the defining feature of Christian politics in the "Holy Land" for the better part of the 21st century. Both Palestinian Christians and Christian Zionists use Christianity for two distinct purposes: the first is for claiming or reclaiming a national identity, and the second is a means to associate or dissociate themselves from Western (or as some would argue pro-Zionist) influence.

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Persecuted minorities amongst IS's rampage:

the case of the Assyrians

Spyros-Vlad Oikonomou

Whether based on political, religious, cultural or other motives, persecutions seem to form an integral part of humanity's way of 'doing' things. Of course the West has been no stranger to such manifestations of hatred towards difference, as illustrated by a violent history of crusades, inquisitions or genocides. Sadly, more than a decade into the 21st century, and history seems to be repeating itself. This time, the chessboard is the Middle East, the culprits are Islamic extremists, and the victims are, one of the allegedly longest surviving communities, the Assyrians.

Identifying the Assyrians is a difficult task. What is generally acknowledged is that their origin could be tied with the ancient Semitic people who inhabited the region of Northern Mesopotamia; that they speak modern versions of the Aramaic language; and that, at some point during the first century, they started converting to Christianity. These common factors, however, do not necessarily reflect a path of historical unity.

Although the reasons behind the subtle differentiation do not rest solely on religious grounds, it can be argued that the major division took place during the 16th century, when the original Church of the East was divided into the Assyrian Church of the East (Nestorians) and the Chaldean Catholic Church. Furthermore, presently, the once united congregation may be seen as dissolving into at least two additional sub-branches of the Christian dogma, as illustrated by their adherence to the Ancient Church of the East (5% of Nestorians) and the Syriac Orthodox (Jacobites) and Syriac Catholic Churches.[1] In accordance, these sectarian-based divisions are considered to be denominating three differentiated groups of peoples, respectively, the Assyrians, the Chaldeans and the Syriacs.

Throughout their history, though, issues associated with faith have not been the sole dividing factor for the Assyrians. For instance, it is argued that the Chaldean-Assyrians have been more inclined to adopt the Arab identity or that they tended to

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be more cooperative with the Iraqi Ba'athist regime (Tariq Aziz, a Chaldean, was Deputy Prime Minister and a close advisor of Saddam Hussein) than the Assyrians-Nestorians who have been, relatively, more persecuted for their defiance and historical collaboration with the western powers (e.g. the British).[2] As such, it could also be argued that their internal disputes, which have also manifested through different political and identity-related paths, are more deeply rooted, complicating even more the already blurred boundaries of their ethnic commonalities. The multiple controversies surrounding these issues more often than not result in the presentation of conflicting figures and data. Nonetheless, bearing in mind that all the aforementioned religious subgroups form, in essence, part of a distinct ethnic and religious minority living in a mainly Muslim-inhabited Middle East, a selective homogenization may be in order.

For the purposes of this article, then, they shall be all addressed under the rubric of Assyrians belonging to different Christian sects and living, mostly, in parts of modern-day northern Iraq and northeastern Syria (although many can also be found in Turkey and other countries of the Middle East, as well as in the US and other places of the world). As a result, this would provide for the necessary 'grouping' needed to address a much more crucial issue at hand: that of the current wave of persecutions they are suffering at the hands of the Islamic State (IS), which does fulfill the requirements to be considered as an ongoing genocide.

Beforehand, though, it should be mentioned that the Assyrian people have not been strangers to hardships and victimization. The dawn of the 20th century found them being targeted and systematically persecuted with the intent of eradication, much to the extent suffered by the Armenian and Greek communities then living under Ottoman rule. According to some of the more broadly accepted estimates, the genocidal acts, that aimed at purging the 'infidels' and enemies of Islam, resulted in the loss of at least 250,000 Assyrian lives (others place them well above 700,000),[3] even though this tragedy hardly received any recognition during subsequent years and remains unrecognized by official authorities to this day. But that is not all there is to the story.

In subsequent years, following World War I, the Assyrians continued to suffer at the hands of their rulers, sometimes becoming the 'collateral damage' of campaigns aimed primarily against others, such as the Anfal campaign in the 1980s, and

sometimes being targeted for their beliefs alongside other Christian minorities, as was the occasion with the 1970s Arabisation project pursued by the Ba'athist regime. On all occasions, however, the results were identical: many fleeing, being killed or tortured on the sole basis of them being different from what 'ought' to have been the norm. In retrospect, hundreds of thousands were forced to leave their homes, as the smoke of their burned down villages and cultural establishments was 'waving them goodbye'.[4]

Furthermore, the overthrow of the Iraqi regime following the US-led invasion of 2003 and the subsequent re-awakening of sentiments of resentment towards Christians amongst the more extremist elements of the population, led to a further aggravation of the situation. During the span of a decade, between 2003 and 2013, it is estimated that around two thirds to a half of what remained of the dwindling Iraqi-based, Assyrian population (approximately 1.5 million) fled the country or were forced to internal displacements, while many of their religious buildings were once again destroyed. Nowadays, following a century of relentless persecutions, as if to commemorate in the most macabre way the anniversary of the 1920s victims, the Assyrians are once again faced with the threat of extinction.[5]

It is well known that the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) and its spread in Syria and Iraq has come with a great toll for the region's various populations. During its first steps in the early 2000s, albeit undertaken under the rubric of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), few could have predicted this kind of advance from what was then just another armed group fighting in a war-torn region of the world. Nonetheless, it is unquestionable that what has followed since has drawn the world's attention. After merging with other extremist organizations and adopting its current name, in 2006, IS begun consolidating its power rapidly. Not only has it managed to continually increase its military and administrative capabilities, but also, amongst other things, it has been drawing on an ever-increasing pool of soldiers unrestricted to the limited confines of the Middle East. Furthermore, in the summer of 2014, it officially proclaimed the establishment of its Caliphate, effectively announcing to the world that it was here to stay.[6]

In this march, of course, a series of war crimes against humanity, conducted against any who dare oppose its rule, have not been absent. To name just a few, they range from multiple and brutal executions of civilians, rape, and torture, to the indoctrination and recruitment of children to its ranks.[7] And that is without taking into consideration the millions of refugees fleeing the region for their lives. Regarding what this has meant for the Assyrian community, a constantly updating timeline of IS's actions following the occupation of Mosul, in June 2014, as presented by the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA),[8] gives a compact description of the unfolding situation.

The Assyrians may be considered amongst the minority groups being most violently persecuted. Suffice it to say that the fall of Mosul, once a city overflowing with ancient history, has now been depleted of any Christian inhabitants. Many have been killed and more have been forced to flee the Nineveh Plain, a region formerly populated by thousands of Christians, where now only four villages remain unoccupied by IS's forces. Other atrocities include the burning and devastation of cultural monuments or manuscripts and, most importantly, the multiple other violations of human rights, as manifested in the form of abductions, forced conversions and the general state of terror imposed upon a defenseless group of people.[9]

From their part, the Assyrian Christians have responded with public demonstrations and constant appeals towards the West to recognize the genocidal threat they face, while, more recently, there have been attempts sponsored by the Assyrian Democratic Movement - a political group representing the various Christian minorities of the region - to organize a Christian army. This battalion, roughly numbering 2000 volunteers of whom many are believed to be Assyrians, has been perceived as a means of first recapturing and then defending their homeland.[10] Possibly the most important target of their efforts, however, is related to the creation of an autonomous region in the Nineveh Plain, which is considered to be the historical center of the ancient Assyrian civilization.

The first such effort can be traced as far back as World War I, with similar ones following throughout the rest of the 20th century. Even though it is believed that such aspirations may have subsided in more recent years, the growing wave of persecutions may bring them back on the spotlight. Hard as this target may be, it is also believed to be linked with future developments pertaining to the establishment of a Kurdish state, under whose protective wings, the Nineveh Plain would provide a safe haven for the Assyrian and broader Christian populations.[11] However, if history can be a guide of what is to come, then one thing may be said for certain: without the proper initiatives or interventions to ensure their survival, there may be no more Assyrians left fighting for this cause - at least in Iraq.

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The Antiochian Church under threat

Elisavet Paraskeva-Gkizi

One of the oldest churches in the world and third in rank after the churches of Constantinople and Alexandria, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East constitutes the largest Arab Christian church in the Middle East. Until a few years ago, Syria and Lebanon had the largest Christian Orthodox communities in the Middle East. Today, with Syria engulfed in civil war, hundreds of thousands of Orthodox Christians are being persecuted and displaced by fighting.

Last December, Patriarch of Antioch John X and all the East urged the United States and other foreign powers to seek a political settlement to the Syrian crisis, calling them to stop financing and arming Syria's myriad groups of fighters.[1] Few months earlier, on September 11th, 2014, the Patriarch was among the eight Eastern Christian leaders who met with the President of the United States, Barack Obama, to call for solidarity in the face of Christian persecutions under the Islamic State militants. President Obama underlined the importance of protecting Christian communities in the region and emphasized that "the United States will continue to support partners in the region, like the Lebanese Armed Forces, that are working to counter [Islamic State fighters] and promote regional stability".[2]

Even though the American President signed a bill on August, 8, 2014 for the establishment of the Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia, in order to combat acts of religious intolerance and incitement targeted against religious minorities in these countries, no one has been appointed to fill this position until now. All in all, US and European policies have failed to respond to the crises in the Middle East, and especially in that of Syria where the Christian community is facing devastating consequences, including the – massive - Christian waves of forced migration, since the civil war began in 2011.[3]

Before 2011, it was estimated that there were 1.1million Christians living in Syria. Since the civil war began, some 700.000 Christians have fled the country. Today, it is estimated that there are 400.000 Christians in Syria, with the majority of them belonging to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East.[4] Christians have been migrating from the coun-

try in increasing numbers, as a consequence of persecutions and violent attacks from Islamist rebels and jihadist militants, who follow an extreme salafi interpretation of Islam.[5]

Jihadists accuse Christians of supporting President Bashar al-Assad, as, when the uprising began, many of them aligned openly with the government of Assad. Actually, in 2011, Yohanna Ibrahim, the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo, told in an interview, that most Christians supported both Assad and demands for democracy. The late Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, Ignatius IV Hazim, also announced in 2011 that he supported the Assad regime.[6]

Greek Orthodox Christians in Syria, under Assad's secular regime, were protected and free to practice their faith, just like the other religious minorities, including the president's Shia Alawite sect. However, many of them have joined the ranks of the Syrian revolution, especially, when, under ISIS threat, they realized that Assad's regime was not able to protect them. Amongst those who have opposed Assad's regime is George Sabra a Greek Orthodox Christian and President of the Syrian National Council, a powerful organization, within the opposition Syrian National Coalition.[7]

In addition, many Christians took the arms in order to defend themselves and their communities against the jihadist threat, given that violence against Christians has increased and many Greek Orthodox churches have been destroyed. Jihadists warn Christians to convert to Islam or pay aJizya - a minority tax - and they have been abducting individuals, demanding in return, and large amounts of money or captive exchange. For example a group of thirteen Greek Orthodox nuns and three other women was held captive by al Qaeda-linked rebels for nearly three months. They were released after rebels agreed with the Syrian government to set free, in exchange, 150 Syrian female prisoners, including relatives of rebel fighters.[8] Unfortunately, two Syrian Bishops, Boulos Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church and Gregorius Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syrian Orthodox Church, have not had the same fate, as they were kidnapped by gunmen, in Aleppo, on 22 April, 2013 and they are still remaining missing.

Two years after the kidnapping, on April 20, 2015, the "Daily Star of Lebanon" released an article, saying that "the case of two abducted bishops is expected to be resolved soon, through Qatari mediation and Saudi and Turkish involvement". The general director of Lebanon's General Security, Maj. Gen. Abbas Ibrahim, who has been tasked to follow up on the case of the bishops, commented that "Qatar has voiced readiness to pay the cost of any resolution [to the case], regardless of the amount". He also commented that the case of the two Christian bishops is highly important, due to their great repute, and more complicated than the case of the Maaloula nuns, because no one has claimed responsibility for it yet.[9]

Lebanon has been actively involved in the Syrian civil war, as Lebanon's Shi'a Hezbollah fights in Syria aiming to secure the survival of the Assad regime as well as to protect the Lebanese borders, especially the Shia areas near them. However, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has provoked sectarian tension among Lebanon's Sunni and Shiite communities, as there has been a significant rise of terrorist attacks in Hezbollah strongholds, like the Bekaa Valley and the southern suburbs of Beirut. Furthermore, the sectarian tension within Lebanon over Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, has led to the collapse of the government leaving the country for a year without a President, position reserved only for Christians in Lebanon.[10]

Although, the President of Lebanon is reserved traditionally for a Maronite Christian, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch John

X Yazigi warned against those who want to destabilize Lebanon, affirming that the election of a new president would shield the country from the chaos. In the same context, Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Beirut Elias Audeh condemned, on 12 of April, the ongoing vacancy in the presidency, emphasizing that Christians in Lebanon must stay united in order to address the rise of Islamic extremism in the region.[11]

Lebanon's Orthodox Greeks constitute 8% of the population and the second largest Christian denomination in the country, after the Maronites.[12] Living in a state with a sectarian political system, Orthodox Christians in Lebanon are watching anxiously their proportion to be in a continuing decline, especially after the mass influx of 1.1 million Syrian refugees, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims. Notably, amid fears of ISIS crossing border from Syria, Christians' constant worry about their religious coexistence with an augmentable number of Sunnis has been reinforced. These Syrian refugees have been residing mainly in marginalized areas and they are vulnerable to recruitment by jihadi groups.[13]

There is a perception in Lebanon that Greek Orthodox Christians as they watch their co-religionists being persecuted in Syria and Iraq, are becoming more inclined to transcend sects to maintain the Christian identity of Lebanon. In fact, Maximilian Felsch, a Lebanese political scientist, argues that today in Lebanon there is a rise of Christian Nationalism, aiming at a Christian-dominated Lebanese State, with a strong confessional identity among Christian Lebanese. Today, this idea of Christian Nationalism is reinforced, as there is a common belief, amongst Christians that the community's survival depends on a Christian-dominated Lebanon.[14]

In this context, Lebanon's religious leaders (Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim) affirmed the "essential role" of the Christian presence in the Middle East and called for terrorism in the region to be confronted "culturally, educationally and politically." In a joint statement, issued on March 30, 2015, at the conclusion of an inter-faith summit in Bkerke - north of Beirut - they also emphasized that Eastern Christians are the first victims of the waves of violence in the region, and they called for the release of the two Syrian bishops.

At this direction, Greek Orthodox Patriarch John X Yazigi appealed for international support to secure the release of the two bishops. In addition, Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis issued, on November 30, 2014, a rare joint plea against anti-Christian violence, saying that they could not let Christianity be driven out of the region. Also, Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia Kirill the first, at the Russian Orthodox Church Bishops' Conference on February 2, 2015, condemned Christian persecutions in the Middle East, adding that it is a Russia's duty to protect them.

Actually, since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, an Orthodox Christian dimension has strongly returned to Russian policy in the Middle East, as Russia wants to maintain the image of a great power. In this context, the Kremlin wants to act as the protector of Christians in the Levant, and Moscow has been backing President Assad from the start, as the fall of the Syrian regime would inevitably strengthen Islamic radicals even more. Furthermore, Russia is eager to ensure its presence in Lebanon in order to defend its position, strategically, as a natural gas leader in the region. Finally, Russia wants Lebanon to be able to monitor the Islamist groups more strictly, as it is believed that there are Chechen Islamic movements fighting in Syria.[15]

In conclusion, we could say that the ongoing Syrian conflict has resulted in a massive departure of Greek Orthodox Christians from Syria. This massive flow of Christian refugees has had serious implications, mainly, for the regional, but also for the international field. Unless a solution is found for Syria, Greek Orthodox Christians in Lebanon may be found in the same position. Political stability in Lebanon, one that will ensure the interests of all its sectarian groups, is more substantial than ever. This is also essential for religious coexistence to be viable, as Christians in the Middle East and especially Greek Orthodox Christians, who are under the state of fear, see Lebanon as the only "safe haven" in the area, for the time being.

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The Copts and the Egyptian State:
A Love-Hate Relationship

Evangelos Diamantopoulos

The largest and oldest Christian community of the Middle East has managed to survive hard times through the centuries. Ever since their split from the other Churches, the Copts have been treated, more or less, as second class citizens in their own country. In turbulent times, such as the last few years, the Coptic community appears vulnerable, its fate bound to that of Egypt. Indifference during Mubarak's last days in power was followed by a negative Islamist government which was toppled by the armed forces in a downward spiral of events during which the Copts were often treated as scapegoats.

The Copts have managed to sustain their faith over the centuries and nowadays constitute around 10% of the Egyptian population (of a total of 84 million). The overwhelming majority of them are Orthodox Christians. They are spread throughout Egypt and have members in all economic strata, from the richest Sawiris family to the poorest garbage collectors (*zabbaleen*). The Copts have faced difficulties ever since they were separated from the other Churches in the 5th century AD. The Byzantines, the Arabs and the Ottomans discriminated more or less against them. Actually, up to this day, the Copts cannot built or even renovate a church without a governmental permit, while the state tacitly accepts religious conversions from other religions to Islam, but not the other way around. Additional bureaucratic constraints against the Copts preserve their sense of injustice and skepticism towards governmental institutions. Meanwhile, the modern Egyptian state perceived the Coptic Church as the sole representative of the community's interests and most of the time collaborated with it. However, the recent sociopolitical turmoil in Egypt has frequently turned the Copts to an easy target, due to their controversial identification with the former regime and the army.

The Coptic history is rich and tense with strong ties to the developments in the land of the Pharaohs. Christianity was first introduced in Alexandria in the 1st century, and within a few decades, it had already started spreading throughout Egypt. During the 4th century, Constantine I the Great, the first Christian Roman Emperor, legalized Christianity as a faith, boosting

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further the spreading of his religion. However, in 451 AD, the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon marked the first schism of the Church between the Oriental Orthodox and the rest of Christendom. Egyptians, Armenians, Syrians and others rejected the Council's decisions concerning the nature and hypostasis of Christ.[1] Ever since, Alexandria has both had a Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria and all Africa and a Coptic one.The vast majority of Egyptians followed their native Coptic Church. This religious schism affected vastly the position of Copts under the Byzantine Empire since, at many times, the appointed Patriarchs mistreated the non-Chalcedonian locals. Thus, when the Arabs invaded Egypt in 639 AD, the Copts provided little support to the defending Byzantines. Christianity started slowly declining in the country following the introduction of the "jizya" special tax for non-Muslims and with a faster pace when persecutions were intensified by the end of the first millennium. During the last years of the 12th century it became a minority religion, second to Islam, and continued to decline throughout the following Ottoman era. The relative tolerance and stability as well as the abrogation of the "jizya" tax during the Muhammad Ali dynasty triggered an economic resurgence for the Copts which lasted for about a century until the abolition of the Egyptian monarchy in the 1950s.

The lack of democracy in modern Egypt forced the Copts to turn to their Church as the sole institution which could promote their interests in the political arena. The Coptic Church itself used that power to safeguard its relative autonomy from state institutions' control and promote the image of being the voice of the community. During the Mubarak era, these roles were clearly defined since the state treated Pope Shenouda III as the sole representative of all Copts, and the Church provided support for the regime in return.[2] In addition, whenever sectarian violence erupted, especially in Upper Egypt where both hardcore Islamists and significant Coptic communities live, the state used to enforce improvised reconciliations through the local governors and priests without any proper police investigation and legal punishment. However, during the last years of Mubarak's presidency, an important part of the Christian youth was disappointed with the ongoing discrimination against them and became involved in politics despite the negative stance of the Church. They mainly joined newly born movements (e.g. April 6, Kefaya) in order to promote minority rights as well as their demand for democracy. Events such as the deadly bombing of 2011 against a Coptic church in Alexandria, during a New Year service, further alerted the community.

After Mubarak's fall, some prominent Copts got directly involved in politics by forming new political parties (e.g. Naguib Sawiris, Emad Gad, Amin Iskandar and Hanna Greiss) or by joining older ones. They shared a win-win relationship with the Church which had to adapt to the new reality and find fresh political allies in exchange for electoral influence. Nonetheless, a part of the young Coptic activists formed the Maspero Youth Union which questioned the representative role and conservative character of the Church and shared mutual skepticism. They took their name from the "Maspero" state television and radio headquarters where the ruling armed forces (SCAF) responded with extreme violence against peaceful Coptic protests in October 2011 resulting in over 25 deaths.[3] The Copts were protesting against the destruction of a church in Aswan by Salafists and the following attempted cover up by the local governor. A few months earlier, the Salafists had set churches as well as Christian properties on fire in the Imbaba neighborhood of Cairo, and caused 12 deaths, while the army had, again, failed to protect the victims.[4]

The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in power and the election of a new Pope after the death of Shenouda III were significant developments for the Coptic community. The new Pope, Tawadros II, appeared willing to change his predecessor's practices and abstain from politics. However, it was very hard to do so in a highly polarized environment where Coptic political power was weakened, the rights of Christians were trampled and his flock turned back to the Church to represent them.[5] As a symbolic gesture Mohamed Morsi had nominated a distinguished Christian, Samir Morcos, as his assistant for democratic transition but failed his promise to appoint a Christian Vice-President. A few months later Morcos resigned for not taking part in the decision making process and accused the government of being authoritarian.[6] Tawadros II openly criticized the government for violating Christians' rights and opposed Morsi during his confrontation with the judiciary. The Islamist government responded by scapegoating the Copts in order to secure conservative Muslims' support in critical times. Hence, before the 2012 constitutional referendum the Brotherhood accused the Church of mobilizing people to vote against it while it targeted the Copts again in 2013 for joining the protests against the government. The peak of this confrontation was reached in April 2013 when the seat of the Coptic Church in Cairo, Saint Mark's Cathedral, was attacked by both Islamists and the police causing deaths and injuries. Numerous Copts and some Muslims had gone to St. Mark's Cathedral to attend the tense funeral of four Christians who had died in sectarian clashes and chanted anti-regime slogans. Soon after, they were attacked by armed thugs while the police remained apathetic and later fired tear gas into the Cathedral compound against them.[7] The Ministry of Interior put the blame on the mourners for inciting the violence and the Pope responded by publicly accusing the President of negligence and poor judgment.

The Church openly supported the toppling of Mohamed Morsi by the armed forces after the masses took to the streets

against the Brotherhood regime. In a strongly symbolic move, the Coptic Pope and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar appeared beside the Chief General al-Sisi, when he announced Morsi's ouster. Furthermore, the Pope supported the 2014 constitutional referendum, adopted the state rhetoric against terrorism, and urged al-Sisi to run for President. However, support for the military regime did not come without a price since there have been dozens of attacks on churches across Egypt and a sharp increase of sectarian violence after Morsi's fall.[8] On the one hand, the armed forces failed to deter these violent attacks and in many cases they were even absent.[9] On the other hand, when the terrorist group Daesh (ISIL) released a video showing the beheading of 21 Copts in Libya, the Egyptian army acknowledged it as a national threat and responded with airstrikes within Libya the very next day.[10]

The history of Egypt and its developments are inseparably bound with the fate of the Coptic community. Actually, the word Copt originally meant Egyptian, and only later on, was used to describe solely Egyptian Christians. Ever since the separation of the Coptic Church from the rest of Christianity, discriminations and even persecutions have taken place against the Copts. Sectarian clashes were not something new for the modern Egyptian state but the political instability of the last years has significantly boosted such acts of violence. Meanwhile, the state treated the Coptic Pope as the representative of the community in a mutually convenient arrangement. However, on Egypt's rocky road to democracy, the best scenario for the Coptic community would be to form or join political parties and be allowed to undertake political power in order to promote their interests. The Church should then focus on civil society and abstain from politics.

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Dealing with Shadows:
Turkey and its Christian minorities

Spyros Katsoulas

The issue of the treatment of Christian communities still casts a long shadow over the Republic of Turkey. The dominant Justice and Development Party (AKP) may have taken some significant - albeit timid - measures towards democratization and minority rights, but the essential problem is that the matter of religious freedom pertains to some of the most fundamental aspects of the Turkish state.

A hallmark of the Turkish Republic was the establishment of a secular and indivisible state, as it was envisioned by Mustafa Kemal and was reiterated in the 1982 Constitution which remains "loyal to the nationalism of Ataturk." This has always been more like a stated goal than something readily achieved, reflecting, on the one hand, the Kemalist conviction that religion was primarily responsible for the Ottoman Empire's deterioration, and on the other hand, the widespread fear that the Turkish nation was facing the threat of disintegration and fragmentation - or what became known as the 'Sèvres Syndrome'. The Turkish mixture of secularism and nationalism, as implemented through state policies and actions, has been particularly detrimental to the affairs of Christian communities leading to the dramatic decline of Christian presence on lands they have inhibited for centuries. Many problems for the Christian minorities have been stemming from the fact that most are not only religious but also ethnic minorities. The current status of Christian minorities should be seen as part of Turkey's continuing debate about the appropriate role of religion in society, as well as about the Turkish government's hesitant efforts to deal with the shadows of the past.

Christians' persisting problems with basic issues

In today's Turkey, Christian citizens just barely exceed 85,000, comprising a little more than 0.1% of the country's 77 million population, negligible if compared to what used to be a prosperous and culturally significant minority counting in millions in early 20th century. There are no official population statistics based on religious identity, but according to estimates by the

US State Department, Turkey's major Christian minorities include 65,000 Armenian Orthodox Christians, 15,000 Syriac Christians, 3,000 Protestant Christians and 1,700 Greek Orthodox Christians.[1] The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne - that formally established the Turkish Republic - contained specific regulations for non-Muslim minorities, which has since been interpreted by the Turkish state as referring only to Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish communities. As a result, Assyrians, Chaldeans and Nestorians were not taken into account and were denied any distinct minority status. However, as Professor Baskin Oran argues, Turkey has not even abided by its obligations under the Treaty with respect to the 'Lausanne minorities'. On the contrary, non-Muslims were subjected throughout modern Turkey's history to ethno-religious cleansing through forced migration, economic coercion, and armed assaults and murders.[2] This has led to Turkish Christians citizens' number one problem: demographics. As Mihail Vasiliadis –editor of the oldest Greek language newspaper in Turkey, *Apoyevmatini,* and a notable member of the Greek community– told in an interview with CEMMIS, whatever reconciliatory measures are taken by the Turkish government, they cannot compensate for the drain of people.

Turkey's remaining Christians of all denominations have been facing similar problems with respect to religious freedom, societal discrimination, and education in minority schools. A basic problem is that Christian communities have not been recognized as legal entities, resulting in numerous difficulties with regard to property rights, training clergy and selecting leaders for future generations. Since 2002, when a road map for accession negotiations with the EU was laid out and the Islamic-rooted AKP was elected standing for a more liberal form of secularism and presenting itself as a defender of all religions, Turkey has begun to reverse some of these restrictive policies. However, the EU remains highly concerned about Turkey's progress regarding religion freedom. Some of the harshest criticism, though, comes from within. Professors Sule Toktas and Bulent Aras reprimand Turkey for following a "pseudo-conciliatory policy" in responding to EU pressures, arguing that while Turkey presents an image of a responsible state, it still employs restrictive measures and political maneuvers in minority rights, and prevents any significant change in its traditional minority regime prioritizing security considerations instead.[3] Security considerations should also account for the significant religious-freedom issues in the occupied northern part of Cyprus.[4]

According to the 2014 EU progress report, Turkey's non-Muslim communities "continued to face problems as a result of their lack of legal personality, with adverse effects on their property rights, access to justice, fundraising and the ability of foreign clergy to obtain residence and work permits."[5] The lack of legal status creates a number of obstacles for Christian communities. As Vasiliadis characteristically put it during his interview, without legal personality the Greek Patriarchate cannot open a bank account, nor even hire a doorman. Moreover, the Turkish state denies Christian communities the ability to train new clergy and fill vacant positions, as it does not allow the opening of theological seminaries. This is not only a blunt interference in the internal religious affairs of the Christian communities, but also sets the very continuation of their existence at risk. For example, the Halki School of Theology remains closed since 1971, despite promises of support for its reopening by the Turkish government. The Armenian Orthodox community is Turkey's largest non-Muslim religious minority with 38 Armenian churches but only 26 clergy. In 2006, the Armenian Patriarch submitted a proposal to the Minister of Education to

establish a faculty in Armenian at a state university, but to no avail. The lack of a seminary creates an additional problem for the Syriac Church in that their mother tongue is Aramaic.

Another problem for Christian communities is that the Turkish state has expropriated over the years a huge number of religious minority properties. In 1974, the Turkish High Court of Appeals ruled that religious minority foundations have no right to acquire properties other than those listed in declarations made in 1936. As a result, the Turkish state seized hundreds of properties acquired after 1936. Between 1999 and 2005, approximately 75% of Patriarchal properties were confiscated.[6] After EU pressure, more than 1,000 properties –valued at $ 1 billion– have been returned or compensated for by the Turkish government. However, another 1,000 applications were denied, while there were also allegations for bias, slow procedures and meager compensations.[7] David Vergili – member of the Administrative Committee of the European Syriac Union - told in an interview with CEMMIS that the main issue for Syriacs is reclaiming the properties seized by the Turkish state, with the most important case being that of the historical Mor Gabriel Monastery over which there has been a devastating legal struggle. Moreover, according to Vergili, "the Syriac people are suffering from malfunctioning bureaucracy in Turabdin region [the historical homeland of Syriacs]."

More worryingly, Christian communities continue to fall victims of occasional hate crimes and societal attacks. The members of some Christian communities - particularly those of the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant - have fallen victims of violence. These instances take bigger dimensions, given that since 2009, the Turkish authorities have taken actions against an ultra-nationalist, secularist organization –known as *Ergenekon*– which had the aim of fomenting domestic unrest to cause the collapse of the government. Considered as part of the Turkish 'deep state', the Ergenekon network was accused of planning to assassinate the Greek Orthodox and the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchs, and of being implicit in the murders of an Italian Catholic priest in Trabzon in February 2006, three Protestants in Malatya in April 2007, and of Hrant Dink, the founder and editor of the Armenian newspaper *Agos* and a prominent figure of the Armenian community.[8] Regarding Dink's murder, the

European Court of Human Affairs found that the Turkish state failed to investigate the role of state officials in the murder, while recent attempts by AKP to lay the entire blame on its ally-turned-nemesis Gülen movement has caused the frustration of the Armenian community.[9]

Christian Turkish citizens: strangers forever

The prospect of EU membership and the election of AKP in 2002 were welcomed by Christian communities raising expectations that there was sufficient political will in Turkey to face the past and fix the present. After thirteen years in power, the AKP government has been turning into a major disappointment shattering the positive atmosphere of the early days. As Orhan Kemal Cegiz - President of the Turkish NGO Human Rights Agenda Association - argued, the AKP government may have moved away from the hostile and devastating policies of the past, but it could not be immune to the nationalist virus, and as a result "all improvements remained unfinished, uncompleted".[10] For example, AKP allowed non-Muslims to use their historic churches in different parts of the country, but permission was given one single day a year; some churches were restored, but they were recognized as museums instead of being returned to their historic owners; the law was amended to allow non-Muslims to gain new properties, but only limited numbers of the properties that were expropriated from these foundations were returned.

Especially after the Arab Spring, there has been a general belief that the AKP government exposed its sectarian-religious character. It is not just that the centennial anniversary of the Armenian genocide was met with Turkey's denial and anger even towards Pope Francis and the European Parliament who embraced the historic tragedy.[11] Armenians and other Christians are also concerned with AKP's support of fanatical Islamic movements and by indications that AKP supported the targeting of the ancient church of Deir ez-Zor and that it allowed extremist fighters to pass through Turkey and attack the Armenian town of Kassab in western Syria near the Turkish border in March 2014.[12] As Vergili told CEMMIS, while the situation of the Syriac people and other Christian communities remains the same after the Arab Spring and the war against the Islamic State, "we can observe clearly the hard declarations from the officials and especially their silence regarding IS crimes in the region. In Turkey, hate speech from officials and media organizations continue to hit Christian minorities, especially Armenians and Jews. Moreover, among Syriac people in the region of Turabdin there are inquietudes regarding the Middle East situation."

The crux of the matter is that the notion that citizens other than ethnic Turks secretly harbor dreams of secession and are potentially dangerous to dismember the country is still vivid. As the 2007 USCIRF fact-finding mission pointed out "this fear of dismemberment, which has fuelled a strain of virulent nationalism in Turkey, continues to hold sway in some sectors of society, resulting in state policies that actively undermine ethnic and minority religious communities, and in some cases, threaten their very existence...[with] Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox communities [being] focal points for this perception and its resultant policies."[13] Professor Oran points to the fact that 'minority' remains a very pejorative term in Turkey equating only to non-Muslim and thus meaning "second class citizen, foreigner, [and] dangerous element (Fifth Column) to be cleansed."[14] Oran goes on to argue that the marriage of nationalism with the Ottoman *Millet* ideology still persists to this

day, and Turkey now experiences Erdoğan authoritarianism, which is also tainted with nation-state harshness. Compared to Kemalists, Islamists may be more lenient with minorities, but they are closer to the original *Millet* System according to which non-Muslims should be always kept under Muslim tutelage.

Putting all evidence together, the Turkish state's attitude towards its Christian citizens may have changed in appearance, but not in essence. Recent steps in the right direction have been taken slowly, hesitantly and not without reservations, even though the country's Christian populations have plunged to near extinction levels and present no threat to the character or security of the state. Essentially, Christian communities' persisting problems reflect the constraints that were built into the fabric of the country's founding, thus leaving little hope that Turkey will manage to deal with its shadows.

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Greek-Orthodox Arabs in the Holy Land

Raffaele Borreca

The estimated numbers of Christians in the Palestinian territories and Israel range from around 200,000 to 350,000 individuals, almost all of them being of Arab ethnicity. It follows that the main issues that Arab-Christians face are strictly connected with the Palestinian question and what this entails in terms of national identity and citizenship. In this context, the moral authority and the social legitimacy of the Greek Orthodox Church - representing the major denomination of Palestinian Christians - depends on its ability to navigate the troubled waters of identity politics in a highly conflictual environment.

Following the 1948 Palestinian war, the *Nakba* exacted its toll among the local Christian community as well, with some 230,000 individuals leaving the Holy Land since. In Jerusalem, the Christian population dropped from 30,000 in 1948 to 5,000 today.[1] The destiny of those remaining in the region was split along the contested borders that shaped the State of Israel and the State of Palestine. Today, between 144,000 and 196,000 Arab-Christians are Israeli citizens, amounting to 1.8-2.5% of the total population, while the Christians living in the Palestinian territories are estimated to be between 40,000 and 75,000, less than 2% of the total population, with their vast majority concentrated in the West Bank, notably in the areas of Bethlehem, Ramallah and Jerusalem.

Whether they are Israeli citizens or not, Arab Christians share the same stories of dispossession and *de facto* discrimination common to Palestinian people. According to a 2009 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the system of permits, checkpoints, curfews, visas and the Barrier set up by the Israeli authorities to control and restrict Palestinian movement has been a major hindrance for Christians to freely access some of their most holy places, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem or the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the latter located within the Occupied Palestinian Territory.[2] Security measures and limitations are even more restrictive during major religious festivities such as Easter and Christmas, often ending in clashes between local Christians and Israeli security forces.[3]

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This system of control and restrictions is further enforced by the profiling of ethnic Arabs via identity documents referring to a holder's religious affiliation. The ethnic origin of Israeli citizens was removed from identity cards in 2005. Nonetheless, the holder's ethnicity can be easily checked as the birth date of Jews is displayed according to the Jewish calendar, while that of others citizens follows the Gregorian one. In Gaza and the West Bank, the identity cards are issued under the control of the Israeli Population Registry and display the holder's religious affiliation. But Israel's institutionalised discrimination is not the only problem Arab Christians face in their everyday lives. Christians are often victims of intolerance, their properties and holy sites being the target of numerous attacks by Israeli settlers and extremists.[4] If nothing else, this grim picture helps in underscoring how the Palestinian question is structured along the cleavage of an ethno-nationalistic conflict in which traditional identitarian allegiances, such as religious affiliation, are accessory tools of inclusion or discrimination.

As a consequence, local religious institutions are called upon not only to foster the specific needs of their flock, but also to deal with the struggle for self-determination of a larger national community. Aside from the Greek Orthodox Church, other denominations of the Christians of Palestine include: the Oriental Orthodox churches (Syrian, Coptic, and Armenian Orthodox communities); the churches belonging to the Catholic family, including the Eastern Rite Catholic churches (Greek Catholic or Syrian Catholic); and various Protestant churches. The Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem accounts by far for the largest community of Palestinian Christians and its ecclesiastic jurisdiction extends also to Jordan and Qatar.

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem was one of the five primary bishopric seats of early Christianity. Its origins date back to the foundation of the Confraternity of the Holy Sepulchre under Emperor Constantine, who entrusted the monastic institution with the custody of the Holy Sites in Palestine. With the Patriarch of Jerusalem as its leader, today the Confraternity is the custodian of 60% of the Christian Holy Shrines in the Holy Land. The Islamic conquest and the Great Schism - which separated the Church into Eastern and Western brunches - confined the See of Jerusalem to a subordinated role and, as in the case of other patriarchates of the original Pentarchy located in the East - namely those of Antioch and Alexandria - Jerusalem fell under the sphere of influence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and of its Greek-speaking clerical elites. Nonetheless, with the disintegration of the Ottoman order - which basically preserved the supremacy of the Bishop of Constantinople over Eastern Christianity - the Greek upper clergy was challenged by demands for major participation in the Church affairs as well as by the affirmation of the Pan-Arab and Palestinian nationalisms.

The Greek hierarchy failed to acknowledge and support these demands, which were reinforced also by the demographic vigour of the Palestinian Christian population during the XIX century.[5] At the same time, the model pursued by the local clergies in the Balkans - of a Church integrated as an organic component of the fledging nation-states - was simply an unavailable option, as, in any case, no majoritarian Christian state would have resulted from the Palestinian nation-building. Finally, the lack of an external power backing the Greek Orthodox network of influence in the Levant and the difficult adaptation to the political and social developments, which shaped post-1948 Palestine, highly affected the leadership of the Greek Patriarchy over Christianity in the Holy Land. To date, the intra-communal relationship between the Patriarchate and its Arab congregation remains an open one.

Central to the dispute between the Greek clerical elites and Arab laity is the ownership and the management of the vast estates and land holdings administered by the Patriarchate. Since the British Mandatory period, the Patriarchate has used its lands contrary to the congregation's perceived communal and nationalistic interests, often not refraining from selling and leasing land to Jewish companies and the State of Israel.[6] In 2005, former Patriarch Irineos was dethroned following accusations of authorising the sale to Jewish investors of property in East Jerusalem that have housed generations of Palestinians. The controversy required the intervention of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, with the removal of the Patriarch of Jerusalem being decided during a rare Orthodox synod in Istanbul.[7] The allegations of selling church lands to Israel and the dissatisfaction of the local Orthodox community were not mitigated with the accession of Theophilos III to the See of Jerusalem. After public protests erupted in December 2014, the executive committee of the Arab Central Orthodox Council in Palestine and Jordan began a campaign against the Patriarch. Theophilos has been accused of "diverting church lands to Israel and making unfair decisions against Arab monks", the latest being the removal from office of Archimandrite Christophoros and the reduction of the salaries of Archbishop Atallah Hanna and Archimandrite Meletios Basal. Hanna, in particular, is the only Orthodox Christian bishop of Arab origin and an outspoken supporter of the Palestinian national struggle.[8]

Ideology and economic interests underpin the Patriarchate's refusal to undertake any reform in its leadership and administration. The See of Jerusalem perceives its role as not limited to the small local Orthodox community, but as serving the interests of the worldwide Greek Orthodox community. In this sense, control over the large economic potential of its real-estate holdings is fundamental in ensuring the Church's survival and its ability to exert influence and obtain the support of political authorities, even if this means selling properties to Israel.[9] The words of a member of the Central Orthodox Council can well summarize the frustration of Palestinian Orthodoxies as well as the century-old strife between Arab laity and Greek clericals: "*the movement in Palestine and Jordan aims to ultimately and completely restore the Orthodox Church to Arab control, fol-*

lowing Greek hegemony thereon since 1534. We must put an end to the racism practised by the patriarchate against Arabs since the former was taken over by the Greeks 500 years ago, and reform it in a manner that guarantees Arab participation in the management of its affairs and the decision-making process therein."[10]

This call for the Arabization of the Church reveals the double challenge that Christians face in terms of inclusion and representation within the Palestinian society. On the one hand, Greek-Orthodox Palestinians feel unrepresented by the institutions that are supposed to uphold the interests of their religious community. On the other hand, the scandals involving the Patriarchate and its alleged complicity in Israeli land grabbing can possibly have repercussions on the relationship with the Muslim majority, fuelling distrust towards Christians. Looking at this latter aspect, it should be noted that, comparing to other Arab countries - notably neighbouring Lebanon and Syria, where a more complex ethnic and sectarian composition resulted in multi-layered allegiances and frequent civil conflicts - the secular history of the Palestinian movement, the important role played by Christian Arabs within it, and the common struggle against the Israeli occupation have kept inter-sectarian tensions at bay.

However, the success of political Islam and, above all, the jihadist offensive in the Levant raise concerns among Christians. In 2012, the Greek-Orthodox archbishop of Gaza Alexios denounced the alleged kidnapping and forced conversion of five Christians by an unidentified Islamist group, sparking tensions in the otherwise uneventful relationship between Hamas and the small local Christian community, which amounts to 2,000 individuals. Daily rallies in the Greek Orthodox Church of Gaza followed, with protesters denouncing conversions and urging the Hamas government to take action and effectively protect Christians.[11] In fact, radical Salafism is a common enemy for both Christians and Hamas, although for different reasons. Jihadist groups constitute both a security and an ideological threat to Hamas' rule in the Gaza strip. Moreover, in 2009, the Islamic Resistance Movement waged an all-out war to dismantle Jund Ansar Allah, a pro-al-Qaeda group believed to be behind the bombing of a Christian youth organization. Furthermore, Hamas has often accused al-Qaeda and Salafist movements of attempting to graft the Palestinian struggle onto global jihad.

While the spread of radical Islam in the Levant gives rise to fears about the inter-religious relationships within the Palestinian society, the discriminatory policies of Israel against Arabs, be they Israeli citizens or Palestinian nationals, remain the main cause of concern for the Palestinian Orthodox community. As a result, the common struggle against the Israeli occupation still constitutes a strong political and societal bond uniting Palestinians of all creeds, easing the eventual tensions between Muslim and local Christians. Nonetheless, Greek-Orthodox Palestinians remain a shrinking religious minority facing a double problem of representation: on the political level - either as citizens of Israel or as members of a nation still fighting for a state - and on the intra-communal level regarding the relationship between the clerical elites and the community of the faithful. Alleged incidents of misbehaviour involving the Patriarchate have once again raised the century-old question of the Arab laity's major involvement in the affairs of the Church, which stands as a crucial challenge for the future of the first and oldest among the Christian churches.

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Christianity in the Middle East:
terms for an interdisciplinary debate

Sotiris Roussos

In times of over-abundance in academic publications and scientific hyper-interest on Islam and its role in the Middle East a discussion on Christianity seems out of place. As Emma Loosley puts it, "when events in the Middle East dominate world headlines and so much time and effort is spent trying to unravel the religious, ethnic, political, economic and social challenges of the region, one group is consistently absent from debate about the future of the area. This is the native Christian population..."[1] Hence, such discussion could have a twofold purpose: first, to question main presuppositions and perceptions regarding Christianity in the Middle East and second, to cast new light on the living Christian communities in the region and reflect on their future role in Western Asia.

Since the Enlightenment among political and social thinkers and scientists prevailed the view that religion constitutes a relic system of ideas of past pre-modern societies and that technological progress and the development of modern political institutions would minimise the role of religion in the society "as the world of tradition and superstition gives way to the world of modernity and reason".[2] This assumption ought to be questioned since in the end of the 19th century after two industrial revolutions and the most expanding globalisation in human history, the world experienced a re-emergence of "world religions" in an unthinkable until then pace.[3] Likewise, by the end of the 20th century, after great political upheavals, two world wars, and the decolonisation process and political, social and most importantly scientific revolutions, it is hard to miss that the world is in a deep de-secularization process.

The West often failed to understand the multiplicity and the enriching multitude of the Christian communities in the Middle East. However, in the 19th century, as a wave of European investment and trade was to overwhelm the declining Ottoman Empire and integrate the Eastern Mediterranean into the wider nexus of European political, economic and cultural expansion, non-Muslim communities, Christians in particular, became the indispensable agents of this integration with their fluency in foreign languages, their cultural and religious proximity to Europe and their status as protected subjects of the Western powers. According to Adrian E. Tschoegl, "a listing of bankers and bank managers in Constantinople in 1912 shows that 30% were Greeks, and 30% Armenians, none were Turks".[4] At the same time, the encounter of Western Christianity with the in-

digenous Christian communities became the stepping stone for reaching out and understanding Islamic societies and cultures. Catholic and Protestant missions and religious people and intellectuals such as Charles de Foucauld and Louis Massignon shaped Islam's understanding in the West. In the years after the Second World War, as K. Cragg argued, Christians in the Middle East "were and still are adversely affected by their minority status, their ambivalent relations with the West, and the complexity of their inter-religious situation".[5] Many of them resorted to a strategy of secular nationalism or radical Marxist ideologies. In order to secure a position equal to that of Muslims they raised the banner of common fatherland, national history and social revolution shaping landmark changes in Middle Eastern politics such as the founding of the Ba'ath Party in Syria and radical Palestinian organisations of the 1970s and 1980s.

The third point to be studied is the relevance of Christian communities to today's Middle East political and social developments. It is true that the twentieth century, particularly after the Great War, the Armenian Genocide, the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey and the fragmentation of the Eastern Churches was a period of martyrdom and peril. The Arab-Israeli conflict, the civil strife in Lebanon and the conflict in Iraq were the most important moments of tragedy and exodus of the Middle Eastern Christians. Middle Eastern Churches are becoming increasingly diasporic instead of regional Churches. Large numbers of Middle-Eastern migrants and exiles in the Americas, Europe and Australia have been the basis of flourishing Eastern Churches' parishes and bishoprics overseas. As A. McGrath noted, "a faith community, which was once defined in ethnic terms, may well break out of the hitherto restricted role, and become a universal option within the global Christian market."[6] There are also two other important parameters in the analysis of Middle-Eastern Christianity: the new Orthodox immigrant communities in Israel and the re-emergence of Russian Orthodox influence in the region. Last but not least, the fate of Christian Churches and communities will be the real test for the future course the Arab revolts: whether there will be cross-sectarian alliances based on the protection of human and civil rights or the movements of the "Arab Spring" will lead to religious intolerance and fundamentalist regimes.

Last, International Relations and Political Science theories have, for analytical purposes, reduced Religion and particularly Churches to institutions and handily categorised them as non-government or transnational organisations, mere elements of the civil society acting in accordance with rational choice theory.[7] What stays out of scope in such definitions, is the experience of the communion with God, the spiritual life of the Christian communities. The Orthodox spiritual renaissance in Lebanon in the 1950s, the Coptic renewal and revival in the 1980s and the role of the Maronite Church in the Catholic spiritual renewal initiated by the Vatican after the end of the civil war in 1991 were closely linked with the political and social developments of the communities and their respective countries. Most importantly, burning issues such as the preservation of the status quo in the Holy Places can be resolved neither on the basis of a fossilized form of national identity nor on the notion of a postmodern "theme park" of multiple trajectories, particularities and subjectivities. The Churches ought to respond to the local-global dichotomy that has been raised especially with regards to the Holy Places. In other words, are the Holy Places part of the universal heritage requiring international protection and control or they are part of the national church configuration and thus belong to the local congregation? Or, as one could argue concerning Orthodoxy, for example, "the local church epitomises the universal and the universal Church is manifested locally".[8]

NOTES

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