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Editorial

Disturbing truths

The tragedy of Middle East Christians is first of all the tragedy into which their home countries are too often driven. In fact, it is impossible to dissociate their fate from that of the rest of the population in Irak, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine or Egypt. The Christians who are now targeted by fanatic Islamism are victims no different from their brother Muslims, Shi'ites or Sunnis, assassinated in numbers in different attacks, each bloodier than the other. On top of that, blasting oneself near a church or shooting the faithful present certainly reveals a deliberate type of religious cleansing. An Orient rid of the "unfaithful" is undoubtedly what the nebulous Al-Qaeda desires. But, how can we not relate this outbreak of anti-Christian violence with the very tragedy of the Iraqi or Palestinian people?

Extremism and terrorism always feed on chaos, on discrimination, on people's repression and abuse. This is now so in Baghdad where the overthrow of the dictator Saddam Hussein (who defended the Christians for a long time before courting the Islamists to circumvent the embargo and stay in power) opened the Pandora's box of settling of scores and sectarianism in society. It is so in Egypt where the authoritarianism of an ending regime fans the worst instincts. It is the reality in Palestine where the Israeli steamroller and colonization tightens the worst of the nooses on Palestinian Christians.

Boutros Labaki explains this very well: the fate of Middle East Christians cannot be dissociated from the land that saw the birth and spread of Christianity. They are the salt of the land, just like the other communities. Whoever seeks to destroy them will only succeed in further impoverishing their societies. The Middle East without the Christians is socially, culturally, economically a decapitated Middle East.

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Christians confronted to the Arab world's fractures

by Boutros Labaki*

Societies in the Arab world in general and its Christian communities in particular are threatened by the rise of a backward and extremist conception of Islam. Several tragic terrorist attacks have proven this recently. But, the fate of these communities cannot be dissociated from the conflicts and sociopolitical fractures which are tearing up the region, often due to the West's blindness. Ignoring it means denying history and reality.

The term "Middle East" is a term coined by Westerners to designate the region covering Egypt, Asian Arab countries, Turkey and Iran ... In all these countries, indigenous Christian communities exist, except in the countries of the Gulf and the Arabian peninsula where the resident Christian communities are emigrants from other Middle East countries, from Europe, Asia, Africa and America.

Christianity was born in Palestine and first spread out to countries which are now: Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Turkey, then Irak, Iran and Arabia. It has therefore been long implanted in these lands. Six centuries later, Islam, in the course of its expansion, eliminated Christianity from the Arabian peninsula, but coexisted with Christian communities which had initially welcomed it favorably, thinking that it was a new Christian sect.

The Christian populations remained a majority in the Arab and Byzantine East up to the "Crusades" which Muslims called "War of the Franks". The Muslim "reconquista" of the Crusade-states had negative consequences on these communities, whose percentage in the total population declined from 50% at the eve of the Crusades to 20-25% at the end of the 19th century, on the eve

of the second European expansion in the Middle East.

A "Protection" Contract

The Christian communities, like the Jewish communities, were governed in their relations with those in power by a contract of "protection/submission", the *Dhimma* (which, in Arab, signifies "moral conscience"). In virtue of this contract, the Christians were free to practice their religion and therefore had their churches, their schools, their convents, their religious hierarchies and their ecclesiastic tribunals treating questions of family law. They had to pay a specific tax, the *jizya*, and were exempted from military service.

Quite often, particularly in cities, they were subjected to discriminatory treatment: with distinctive clothing, forbidden to ride a horse and carry arms, obliged to give precedence to Muslims. This status varied according to the period and was applied mostly in cities. In the rural and especially the mountainous areas, the desert fringes and other regions far from the central power, where many Christian communities tended to settle, their real status was clearly better and they benefited from a relatively great

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autonomy. The European colonial expansion of the 19th and 20th centuries, the wars which characterized it and the rise of nationalism led to the dismantling of the multinational Ottoman Empire, to the exodus of the Anatolian Greeks towards European Greece and towards other continents, and to the massacre of the Armenians and their exodus out of their land. The same happened to the Assyrians. This dealt a big blow to Christianity in the Middle East, eliminating almost all Christian presence in Anatolia (present Asian Turkey).

Islam against the West

Thirty years later, the Western-Israeli reaction to the Arab movement for political and economic independence became manifest in several conflicts: the Suez war of 1956, the Israeli wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, 1982 and 2006 against surrounding Arab countries, the invasion of Iraq in 2003. This resulted in an anti-West counter-reaction, animated by a backward, and intolerant Islamist ideology (the Jihadist Salafism), incarnated by the nebulous Al-Qaeda, which admitted having instigated attacks against the churches in Iraq since several years and in Egypt since some months now.

What to think of all that? How to interpret these barbarian acts? The Christian communities in the Middle East count less than 15 million inhabitants, that is 5% of the total population in the region. And yet, in certain countries Christians are more present: in Egypt they represent 7 million persons, that is 10% of the population; in Lebanon they are 1.8 million, that is 45% of the resident population; in Syria, 2 million inhabitants are Christians, that is 10% of the resident population; in Iraq there are less than 1 million Christians left, that is 3 to 4% of the resident population. Finally, in historical Palestine (the territory under Israeli control, the West Bank and Gaza Strip), only less than 200,000 Christians are left over 4 million inhabitants.

Communities heavy with history

These Christians belong to all branches of Christianity.

- The Catholic Church: Maronites, especially in Lebanon; Chaldeans, mainly in Iraq; Syriac Catholics in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey; Greek Catholics in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan. But also Armenian Catholics, Coptic Catholics of Egypt and finally the Latins (Roman Catholic) especially in Palestine and in Jordan.

-The Oriental Orthodox churches [monophysites¹): they include mainly the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox who are by far the biggest Christian community in the Middle East with nearly 7 million believers. The other communities are: the Syriac Orthodox in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Iran, and the Armenian Orthodox in Turkey, Iran, Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon.

- The Church of the East (Assyrian): still has followers in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, but has practically disappeared in Turkey.

- The different Churches born of the Reformation are present here and there in all countries of the region.

- Finally the Greek Orthodox Church (Chalcedonian) has followers in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Egypt.

These Christian communities, situated both in the rural areas and in the cities, have historically played an important role, in the cultural and economic spheres. During the first centuries of Islam, the Syriacs transmitted the elements of Greek culture to the Arab Umayyad and Abbasid empires, in Damascus and Baghdad respectively. The Christian elite played an important role in administration, the intellectual

life, medicine and other sciences in these empires. Likewise, and as early as the 17th and 18th centuries, the expansion of European religious orders in the East on the wake of the Catholic Counter-reformation could be seen through the founding of many schools.

The Eastern Christian communities experienced an important cultural renaissance, established their schools, their printing presses and modernized the Arab language. This renaissance was also favored by the expansion of Churches born of the Reformation, coming from Great Britain and the United States. Printing presses, publishing houses, magazines, books, dictionaries flourished.

Christians constituted an important base of the Arab cultural renaissance (the *Nahda*) at the end of the 19th century. This was accompanied by a political renaissance: the birth of Arab nationalism, of diverse forms of patriotism (Egyptian, Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian), of emancipation movements during time of the Ottoman Empire before 1918, of the struggle against British and French domination between the two World Wars, and finally the struggle against the colonization of Palestine by the Zionist

movement. In all these struggles, the Christian elite played a primary role, whether it be in Syria, Palestine, Lebanon or Egypt, throughout the 20th century. Christians co-founded the Wafd Party in Egypt (Makram Ebeid and Salama Moussa), the Arab Socialist Renaissance Party (the Syrian Michel Aflak of the Baath Party), the Movement of Arab Nationalists (the Palestinian George Habache), the Syrian Nationalist party (the Lebanese Antoun Saadé) as well as different Communist movements (Fouad Chemaly and Youssef Yazbeck in Lebanon, Antoun Maroun in Egypt, Fahd in Iraq).

Christian peasants were at the forefront of movements that revolted against the notables and against abuses of the Ottoman tax officials in Lebanon and Syria. Many Christians founded and led Palestinian armed resistance movements against Israeli expansion (Georges Habash and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – PFLP, Nayef Hawatmeh of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine – DFLP, Kamal Nasser and others in the Fatah...).

Elites in the service of their countries of origin

These intellectual and political Christian elites adopted liberal, nationalist, socialist and secular ideologies coming from Europe, partly because these modern ideologies allowed them to get out of their inferior status of *dhimmi*² and to contribute to the construction of an egalitarian society based on citizenship, where belonging to the nation is more important than any other form of membership.

On the economic level, the Christian elites played a great role in all modern sectors of the economy, advantaged by their level of education due to the number of schools built by Western religious orders and their Arab counterparts, and from there on, by their easier contacts with Western enterprises expanding in the region.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Christians played an innovative role in agriculture in full modernization, in the emerging manufacturing industry, in foreign and domestic trade, in the banking sectors, insurance, transport, tourism... Also, they had a significant role in the trade union movements of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq. Finally, Arab Christians stood out in the fields of Arabic literature, music, song, dance, performing arts, publishing and the Arab press, where they established the first great titles in

Colonization dealt a big blow to Christianity in the Middle East

Egypt, in Lebanon, in Syria and in Palestine. They are actually playing a remarkable role in the audiovisual field, especially in Lebanon and the Gulf countries.

This favorable period continued with the independence of Arab countries from the 1940s to the end of the 1950s, with the rise of Arab nationalism aiming at the political and economic independence of the Arabs.

Islamism, between repression and instrumentalization

Islamist movements considered as retrograde were repressed by existing regimes in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. These movements were covertly assisted by Western countries and their Arab allies (especially Saudi Arabia and Jordan), in the context of the Cold War. The Arab defeat (of the front led by Egypt, Syria and Jordan) by Israel, was a decisive blow to Arab political and economic independence. It favored the rise of Islamist movements, which were inspired by a rigid, backward-looking conception of Islam as its political credo. These movements were favored by the Western countries (principally the U.S. and Great Britain), certain conservative Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other Gulf countries) and the regime of Anouar el-Sadat in Egypt, after 1970.

These Western policies aimed at weakening nationalist and left-leaning Arab political regimes and movements allied to the USSR. In Egypt and especially in Syria, the extreme poverty of the people and their political despair after the 1967 defeat also favored these movements. The invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet troops in 1979 pushed the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to arm, finance and support armed Islamist movements to fight the Soviets. It was in its wake that Osama Bin Laden was recruited and supported. We know the consequences that have ensued from that.

This invasion had been preceded by the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1978 and 1979, which at the start, was welcomed by the West (Neufle-le-Château, in France, was the refuge and base of Khomeini who was expelled by the Baathist and secular Iraq.) In Palestine, the Israeli favored the Islamist Hamas movement to better fight against the Fatah and the secular resistance movements.

The end of the Cold War in 1990, the Kuwait war and the U.S. military

Commentary

The fake friends of Eastern Christians

The Baghdad tragedy, then that of Alexandria, had to happen for the audiovisual media, long after the written press, to get a large audience interested in the Middle-East Christians. They would have at least contributed then from their side to winning a bit over the ignorance of millions of Westerners who continue to confuse Arabs with Muslims. Still, the legitimate emotion thus created is not enough. It could even, through inappropriate words used to express it such as persecution or martyr, focus attention on simply naming a scapegoat.

More than shared emotions, our reflection must focus on a multi-faceted phenomenon: historical of course, but also geopolitical and cultural. Boutros Labaki's article is interesting in that it leads us there. It is also the fervent obligation for each of us, in our different structures, to bring together the necessary analyses and make them known to as many as possible. This is the only way that we can combat abusive and dangerous simplifications inherited from the Iraqi war of "Good against evil" and the clash of civilizations.

For a true citizenship

Many of those who want to obstruct the exile of Christians from the Arab world do so in the name of Western security, still keeping them imprisoned even more in their image of "sons of crusaders" to which they're stuck. Others, with their number increasing, have made themselves knights in a Christianity of conquest, calling for a new Crusade or, like the Christian

fundamentalists, multiplying, dollars in hand, Muslim conversions.

Finally, the others, Arab regimes and Israeli government, kowtow before the Pope but care nothing about religious freedom in their country or in the occupied territories. Lucidity demands: Christians of the Arab world are surrounded by fake friends from whom they should expect nothing. Far from going through a corporatist defense, their sole future in the Middle East, like that of Muslims or non-believers, is linked to the acquisition of true citizenship in which first place is given to equality of rights and the exercise of fundamental liberties.

An observatory of pluralism

With this perspective, a "Network for cultural and religious pluralism" saw the day after the solidarity actions with the Christians of Iraq in spring of 2009. Launched at the initiative of Pax Christi, "L'Oeuvre d'Orient", the "Institut Catholique de la Méditerranée" and the "Chrétiens de la Méditerranée" network, with the support of various personalities of different religions and of opinions, this network has just officially created an "Observatory of cultural and religious pluralism", to be operational in the coming months. To the long citizens' combat which is opening to our brothers in the Middle-East, it is time to bring our own citizens' support.

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installation in the Gulf and the Arabian peninsula, as well as the weakening of left-leaning nationalist regimes after 1967, resulted in these Islamist movements changing enemies.

The Soviet enemy and its local allies were replaced with the new American occupant and its local and Western allies, despite the assistance all these offered, first to the Mujahidin, then to the Taliban in Afghanistan during the 1990s. The attacks against American targets in East Africa, the U.S. bombing of Taliban bases in Afghanistan and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in New York illustrate this reversal. For the neo-conservative administration of

George W. Bush, this situation facilitated the invasion of Iraq in 2003, under the pretext of weapons of mass destruction that, furthermore, proved nonexistent.

The Palestinian and Iraqi Focal Points

The Salafist Jihadist movements forming the Al-Qaeda network increased in size and proclaimed the holy war against "non-believer" regimes in Muslim countries and the "unfaithful".

Two focal points were particularly targeted: Palestine and Iraq. In Palestine, the Hamas and Islamic Jihad developed and succeeded in

gaining the elections, considering the corruption of the Palestinian Authority. The Christian Arabs of Palestine, caught between the hammer of Israeli occupation since 1967 and the anvil of Islamist movements, tended to take the road to exile, reducing to a strict minimum the Christian presence on the land where Jesus Christ was born and lived.

In Iraq, the Christians who were not persecuted by Saddam Hussein's regime are the target of terrorist attacks claimed by the nebulous Al-Qaeda organizations and are subjected to massacres and abuse. Many take the route to exile. We must also point out the impressive number of mosques and religious processions of Muslims, Shi'ites and Sunnis, and churches that are subjected to terrorist attacks and massacres in Iraq.

Reliable sources indicate that some of these terrorist movements may be infiltrated by Arab and especially Israeli secret services. This is not at all surprising, with the "divide and rule" strategy practiced by Israel in the Middle East, from Iraq to Sudan, through Lebanon, and which is facilitated by retrograde social and mental structures in many Arab societies.

A great reprobation is being manifested in Iraq and in other parts of the Arab East against these acts. But in Egypt, on a background of re-islamisation of the society since 1970, radical and often violent Islamist movements are flourishing. The Copts of Egypt are among their favorite targets, as shown by the attack against a Coptic church in Alexandria on New Year's day, 2011. It must be said that the Copts in Egypt are particularly discriminated upon:

All branches of Christianity are represented in the Middle East

excluded from certain professions, deprived access to high positions in the police, the army and public administration, unable to freely construct or repair their churches, under- or badly represented in the parliament and in the government. The terrorist attacks against churches have only succeeded in exasperating this Christian community which is already suffering sufficiently otherwise. This explains the reactions among Copts.³ There are some suspicions of Israeli involvement in these operations, as in Iraq...

Faced with this, large enlightened sectors of Egyptian society have shown their solidarity with the victims: religious and civil officials, intellectuals, academes, artists, journalists, writers and ordinary persons.

On Christmas Eve 2010, thousands of Muslim Egyptians surrounded Coptic churches as they celebrated religious offices, and have often participated in this, showing their solidarity to their Christian brethren. A true solidarity, since they risked becoming themselves victims of the terrorist attacks against these churches.

In other Arab countries, in Syria, in Lebanon, Jordan, a quasi-unanimous disapproval of these attacks spring as much from political and religious authorities as in civil society. It is necessary to underline here that in Syria, in Jordan and in Lebanon, Christians from the different Churches live free of discrimination, practice their religion, their educational, cultural, economic, social and political activities like their Muslim compatriots belonging to different communities.

This "Middle East" which has been the

cradle as much of Christianity as of Islam and which has known long periods of cohabitation among followers of these religions, is torn by political and social conflicts.

This internal strife, the cause of all the suffering

The Arab-Israeli conflict is due to the fact that the Palestinian people have been uprooted from their ancestral land since 1948 and that Israel has been continuing this process since 1967, despite the UN resolutions which this state completely ignores. The conflicts around the oil and gas resources of the Arab and Iranian East has resulted in the control of the region by Western military bases and by the invasion of one of the richest countries in oil resources, Iraq, in 2003, under the pretext of finding there nonexistent weapons of mass destruction.

The extreme poverty among Arab populations and the corruption of several existing regimes lead to social and political tensions which often divert toward interethnic tensions, at the source of which is the grabbing of wealth by a minority while the majority live in growing poverty.

It is in this context that, in the Middle-East, the cohabitation between Christians and Muslims is now undergoing major difficulties which could only be overcome by a just and equitable resolution of these conflicts, the pulling out of foreign intervention, highlighting the wealth of this region to benefit its population in general and the most underprivileged sectors in particular, and finally by generalizing a culture which values diversity and citizenship.

Boutros Labaki

¹ Monophysism: the Christological position that Christ has only one nature, his humanity being absorbed by his Deity. (Source: Wikipedia)

² A dhimmi is a non-Muslim subject of a state governed in accordance with sharia law. (Source: Wikipedia)

³ This article was written before the recent popular revolution in Egypt that overthrew the Egyptian government. Adli, the Minister of the Interior of Mubarak, accused to have organized the attack on the churches on Christmas Eve, is in jail and will be judged under this accusation.

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