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## **Christian Presence in the Arab Middle East From Leadership and Partnership to Decadence**

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This presentation raises the questions: Do the Christians enjoy civil rights, or are they outside of the socio-political system? Do they suffer from repression by the state and the Islamic society? Why are they victims of Islamic fanaticism that does not distinguish between them and the West and its policies? Finally, will the "Arab spring" unite the Arab societies on a national basis, or will it worsen the situation of Christians in the context of the growing radical Islamic fundamentalism?

### **Coexistence and problematics**

With the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, talks focus on the suffering of Christians with regard to two issues:

**First**, "Islamic terrorism" against the Western societies which led to confusion in the West between terrorist Islam and moderate Islam.

**Second**, the feeling of many Muslims that their religion is the target of foreign attacks, so that they could not distinguish between the Christian West and the local (Arab) Christians. Accordingly, Oriental Christians are being marginalized and terrorized.

### **The Christians of Lebanon**

Historically the Christians, especially the Maronites, played a prominent role in Lebanon. For them, the Lebanon was founded by France as a cultural stronghold of the West. The Christians dominated Lebanon by a particular identity that distinguished it from its Arab-Islamic environment. The Muslims of the former Syrian-incorporated districts rejected the new Lebanon and felt discriminated. They looked toward their Arab – Moslems surroundings. The confessional compromise of 1943 allowed a coexistence between the two religious groups. Political power was since under Christian control. The question of identity in the period of Nasserism and the Arab-Israeli conflict and the dispute over the distribution of power led to civil war in 1975. The conflict lasted until the Ta'if Agreement 1989. The agreement and its aftermath caused despair and frustration among the Christians, and consequently their emigration. The reasons are:

- 1 - The Taif Agreement deprived the Christians of many privileges.
- 2 - The Christians feared that the abolition of confessionalism could enable the Muslims to declare a majority democracy.
- 3 - The Christian rejection of Syrian occupation of Lebanon was associated with a sharp Syrian pressure and persecution.

- 4 - The distribution of power 50 to 50 according to the Tai'f accord was violated in favour of the Syrians and their Lebanese allies with regard to the distribution of electoral districts. This made the distribution of power 50 to 50 in Parliament nonsense. Muslims were able to determine the Christian representation in parliament.
- 6 - The division among the Maronites themselves weakened the Christian camp, which caused frustration among the community.
- 7 – Since 2006, Hezbollah has dominated political life. Many Christians and Muslims felt threatened by its extreme ideology, foreign policy and armament.
- 8 - In 2007, Lebanon suffered fighting against the extreme fundamentalist Fath – al Islam. Christians fear that Lebanon will be transferred into a Muslim (state) entity.
- 9 - After the Arab spring spread to Syria, the Christians feared a coalition between the Syrian and Lebanese Sunnites, which means a further marginalization of their presence.

### **The Christians of Syria**

Although the regime raises secular slogans, the political life is dominated by the Alawite minority. Before the independence and after, Christians played a significant role. With the nationalization in 1963, many members of the Christian bourgeoisie fled to foreign countries. Hafez al-Assad and his son Bashar nominated some Christians as consultants, but this was just a propaganda. Neither Sunnites nor Christians could play a role in policymaking.

The reasons for Christian emigration were primarily due to the totalitarian regime and the lack of democracy, in addition to the growing Islamic trends in the country. Most Christians were afraid after the American invasion of Iraq that they would be victims of terrorism according to Iraqi model. They were inclined to tolerate the regime, fearing a possible takeover by Islamists. They believed that the regime would protect them. The nomination of a Christian, Daoud Rajiha, as minister of defence was not an indication of the role of Christians. The regime tries to incite minorities against the Sunnites.

### **The Copts in Egypt**

After the First World War, the Copts engaged effectively in the political and administrative life. The policy of the Muslim Brotherhood for the islamization of State and Society since 1928 changed the position of the Copts.

The restriction of public freedoms as well of the spiritual courts, the policy of nationalization, the unity between Egypt and Syria, touched the Copts very much. From here, they had either to emigrate or to enhance their own economic and cultural position.

While President Nasser declared Islam as state religion, his successor Sadat considered the Sharia as the main source of legislation. This was an attack on the civil state which was requested by the Copts. In order to weaken his

opponents, Sadat allied himself with the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, he sowed the seeds of confessionalism in Egypt. During his era, and his successor Mubarak, discrimination against the Copts reached its zenith. Nasser and Sadat nominated a very few Copts to the parliament.

At the time of Mubarak, the Islamists raised the slogan "Egypt for Muslims". In contrast, some Copts believe rightly, that they had inhabited Egypt before Islam, so that Egypt then was for the Copts. One can not just eradicate 14 centuries of Islamic presence with a stroke of pen. Likewise, one cannot eliminate the civilized Christian presence in Egypt before and during Islam.

Before the revolution in Egypt, religious differences led to riots due to the following reasons:

- 1 - Both communities claimed that Egypt was their own.
- 2 – Rapid transformation of civil disputes into religious conflicts.
- 3 - No official approval for the restoration of churches or building new ones. The fanatical Islamic street had a brutal attitude towards this.
- 4- No serious policy was taken by the authorities with regard to the question of Islamic-Christian coexistence.
- 5 – Marriages between Muslims and underage Copt girls were tolerated, even protected by society and state. On the other hand, state and Islamic society showed intolerance towards the marriage between a Copt and a Muslim girl.
- 6 - The court judgments between Copts and Muslims in civilian matters were often in favour of the Muslims.
- 7 - Copts feel discriminated in the public life. They cannot hold influential public positions. Their presence in government, parliament and administration was, and continues to be, very weak. When, for instance, the swine flu spread in Egypt, the pigs of Coptic farmers were slaughtered provocatively on the basis of religious but not medical-scientific reasoning.

### **Effects of Jan. revolution on the Copts**

Although some Copts and Coptic priests were involved in the revolution of January 2011, the official Coptic Church took a neutral position like al-Azhar. Among the Copts fears existed that Islamists may come to power. As a result, many Copts thought that the corrupt Mubarak regime was more merciful than the coming Islamists. Before and during the revolution, there were incidents that shook the belief of the Copts who joined the revolution caused by the developing Muslim fanaticism. The rejection of a civil state by the Islamists and the rejection to amend paragraph II of the Constitution worried the Egyptian Copts about a revolution, which would not bring along any favorable social transformation. After the victory of the Islamists in the last elections, general guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammad Nadim, announced that the goal of his organization was to create a caliphate. Although this project seemed unrealistic, it increased the fears of the Copts as well liberal Muslims of the Islamization of society and the state. Khayrat al-Shater, the presidential candidate declared the full implementation of the Sharia.

## **Christians in Iraq**

Iraqi Christians were in the second half of the 19th Century and during the First World War the target of Kurdish attacks. Under the British Mandate, they were accused of trying to establish an independent Christian state. Thousands of them were forced therefore to flee to Syria. After the Iraqi revolution of 1958, their situation even worsened. Under Saddam Hussein their status stabilized in social terms, not because the Muslims accepted the "other" Christians, but because of the brutal system. Some Christians were close to the regime.

The American occupation of Iraq in 2003 aggravated the situation of the Christians. They were the target of Islamic terrorist attacks and extermination although they were not responsible for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Therefore, emigration seemed the only way out. Due to the sectarian-ethnic conflict in Iraq, the "Arab Spring" had no effect, nor a civil state could possibly be established.

## **Jordan and Palestine**

The Christians in Jordan enjoy a special status. However, they are also concerned about the growth of Islamic movements as well as the emergence of a distinctive Islamic identity. With regard to their attitude towards the events in the region, they rejected the American invasion of Iraq and the misrepresentation of Islam in the West.

In Palestine, the Israeli policy forces Christians and Muslims to emigrate. The Israeli propaganda claims that Christianity and Judaism are affected by Islamic fundamentalism. This should make the cooperation between them necessary. The opposite is true. The Christians cling to their patriotism. They were at the forefront of the national movement against Zionism and against the British Mandate. Some of them led an armed struggle against Israel. Finally, seats of Christianity as well as the Muslim Wakf suffer of Israeli attacks, violation and confiscation.

## **Conclusion**

The number of Christians in the Arab Middle East is steadily decreasing, although one should ignore the figures and consider the presence of Christians with regard to their contribution to civilization, economy and culture. The Christians act as a bridge between the West and the East. Their position in the Arab world today is the result of socio-historical development and **state's ill-policy**. Arab regimes and Muslim societies are responsible for the weakness of the Christians integration. Corrupt Arab regimes have benefited from the social division to ensure that no national front may arise against them. Arab governments had neither a national education program to enhance national integration, nor a goal to set up a civil state. The toleration of the Christians towards authoritarian Arab regimes is a reflection of their fears of extreme Islamists which made the Christians take the wrong stand. Such corrupted regimes play them a card against the Muslims, but do not

protect them.

To sum up, we can say that the "Arab spring" has not brought along any social transformation. The situation of the Christians, at least in Egypt, has deteriorated. A revolution without social change, in my opinion, is not a revolution. The declarations and statements of the Muslim brotherhood as well the Muslim fundamentalists in Syria should not deceive us that their aim is to establish a civil state, or create a pluralistic society as well as ensure the rights of citizenship.

### **Proposals**

The decline of Islamic fundamentalism on the one side, and the enhancement of the Christian integration in their Arab societies on the other, are linked to:

- 1 - Decline of the hatred and attacks against Islam in the West.
- 2 – National education of the Arab peoples, Muslims and Christians, to citizenship and recognition of others.
- 3 – A transition to a civil state, justice and equality rather than the move to a religious state model.
- 4 – Christians should be aware that the West will not defend them, but will defend its own interests. This is very important for their Integration. They should be aware that not all Moslems are extreme fundamentalist or terrorists.
- 5 - The emigration of Arab Christians should be, in the sense of the word, an Islamic issue. The Christians are a vital and essential component of Arab societies. Without them the Arab World becomes a barren desert.