

## **Christianity in the Middle East**

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There is no doubt that the dramatic situation the Christians of the Middle East are witnessing today, particularly the Christians of Mosul in Iraq, preceded by the Christians of Syria and probably succeeded by the Christians of Lebanon, is what prompted the organizers of this conference to address this serious issue in a central section of one of its principal sessions. So, it gives me pleasure to have been chosen to present this topic in front of an audience concerned about public affairs all over the Globe.

Yet, the purpose of my intervention is not merely to deliver a lecture of a historical nature on the Christian presence in the Middle East. Actually, there is a good number of books and respectable academic publications that talk elaborately about the history of this presence as well as its origin, characteristics and the leading role the Christians have played, not only in the courts of the caliphs, princes and sultans, but also in the Islamic culture itself.

Nevertheless, the Christian presence in the Middle East has created, throughout centuries, a unique phenomenon which grew on the margins of non-Christian States and among them. It is worth mentioning that the Christian presence was neither incidental nor recent, for its roots date back to the time before Islam had appeared as a religion which later became a vastly expanded State.

The Christian presence had witnessed under the successive Islamic authorities – since the Caliphate until the modern era, passing through the Mameluke State and the Ottoman Sultanate – critical phases of development which led to conflicts between the Christian component and the Islamic authority. The result was that the Christians had to pay the price through oppression, dislodging and emigration. However, these conflicts used to always ensue during the major social, economic and political transformations, and during the weak periods of the State.



This presence passed through five phases:

1. Phase of the Integral Islamic Authority – from the Caliphate to the Ottoman Sultanate;
2. Phase of the Ottoman Sultanate Disintegration and the Beginning of the Nahda in the 19<sup>th</sup> century;
3. Phase of Independence and the Development of Nationalist Thought (1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century);
4. Phase of Authorities of Military nature (2nd half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century);
5. Phase of the collapse of Sykes-Picot States.

### **1. Phase of the Integral Islamic Authority (Caliphate and Sultanate)**

Despite the outbreak of some sporadic disputes between the Integral Islamic Authority and groups that were unaffiliated with the official religion, that Authority knew how to deal with those minorities, mainly the Christians among them, and embrace them through setting rules for coexistence which acknowledged their specificities, their religions, and the related customs and traditions, on condition that practicing those specificities did not conflict with the interests, particularly the political ones, of the Supreme State. That system was known as the system of “Ahl ad dimma”.

Many regard the system of “Ahl ad dimma” as a negative phenomenon, for its rules were unfair to the minorities who had been deprived of their rights to participate in political life and excluded from decision-making positions, so they ended up as unequal to other Muslim citizens. Yet, the truth is not as simple as that; it is more complicated than we might think. Even if the dimmi status were inferior to that of the religious ruling group, and this is true due to the oppressive, and sometimes humiliating, social and financial restrictions, it could, at least, secure a legal system of a recognized relative “citizenship”. Thus, the “dimma” relationships were governed by a contractual framework derived from the laws of Islam and consequently the Muslims had to respect and maintain them.

Hence, in a world that, in the West, knew fierce religious conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, and in the East, especially in the Byzantine Empire, a bloody conflict over the phenomenon of religious icons, a fighting



that lasted about 120 years (from 723 to 843), the Islamic regime had witnessed some kind of stability and security. Its social laws had constituted the first serious attempt to establish a system that recognized the difference and provided reassurance and stability to the peoples of its empire, though with a certain degree of inferiority.

Under the Islamic reign, from the Caliphate until the Ottoman Empire, Christians had a role in the administration, especially in culture. They ascended to sensitive, high rank ministerial positions, and they were pioneers in the transfer of the Greek philosophy into the Arabic culture. In the Ottoman Empire, Christians had the *lion share* in the Greatest Minister post. Rulers had great confidence in Christians because they did not constitute their rivals. This fact provided Christians with a distinguished position in a society where the dominant component was Islamic. It is worth mentioning that even in the difficult phase of the Crusades, Christians were not considered as a fifth column nor an army of traitors.

## **2- The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the Nahda (Arab Renaissance) and the emergence of the concept of “Arabism”.**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ending stages of the Ottoman Empire fall coincided with the emergence of the phenomenon of nationalism in Europe. The Sultanate began to decline gradually despite adopted reforms. In the meantime, calls for nationalism with contradictory goals started to rise. On the one hand, Turanism ideology known as Tatric (*aiming at converting people under Ottoman authority into Turks*) began to gain momentum; on the other hand, calls for nationalism among the people of the region and its ethnicities: Armenians, Greeks, Kurds, and Arabs were made.

As for the Arab peoples, especially the Christians, “Arabism” formed a positive factor for them. They felt that the language that brought them together was not only a means for communication, but it also carried an important cultural heritage that distinguished them from the rest of the peoples especially from the Ottomans, the power holders in this region.



Then came the Nahda during which the Christians played a major role side by side with their fellow Muslims. It was a political, cultural and linguistic movement which aimed to revive the Arab space, its language, literature and civilization. It also aimed to recredit the Arabs as the legitimate and natural heir of a cultural heritage accumulated over the centuries, yet neutralized with this civilization except for the religion element.

The Nahda was an elitist movement, but it also was a true expression of the ordinary class status. For, in addition to the intellectuals and the great writers who made fundamental contributions in the areas of the revival of language, literature, thought and science, popular literatures spread (folktales), which aroused the feeling of pan-Arab nationalism among the audience.

The “Arabism” of the Nahda was diverse, open, cultural, civilized, and humane. Christians and Muslims alike participated in its creation. The region was then abound with an amazing diversity forming an harmonic sight embodied with colorful assortments of different ethnicities and cultures with a yearning for building a society and a country where the individual would occupy the principal and fundamental place. Despite the predominance of the Arab and Muslim element, the presence of Jews and Arab Christians with their diversified spectrums of Syriacs, Chaldeans, Orthodox, Assyrians, Maronites and Copts, along with ethnic groups such as Armenians, Greeks and Kurds, used to give a rare vitality to the Arab region and an extremely humane flavor to Arabism. It was not surprising then, and after the massacres the Armenians and the Christians had suffered from in Anatolia, that the Christians of Turkey, whether Armenians or others, left Turkey in large numbers seeking refuge first in Arab regions in search for a safe place and welcoming peoples.

During that period, the “Arabism” trend was an incubator of difference and diversity. It was able to integrate everyone in a national melting pot that promised tolerance, equality in citizenship, acceptance of ethnic and sectarian minorities’ privacies without distinction or discrimination. It vowed to respect the rites, rituals, cultures and language of those who were not followers of the dominant majority without any suppressive or authoritarian tendency. Christians, Jews, Armenians, Greeks and Kurds lived side by side in total harmony with their fellow Arabs and Muslims in all the Arab countries – Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt and Lebanon.



### **3- The Phase of Independence and the Growing of the Nationalist Ideology of Pan-Arabism (The First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century)**

This enlightened phase of “Arabism” lasted until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I. Henceforth, the region entered into a strenuous ordeal amidst contradictory colonial ambitions that wanted to reshape the region according to their interests and vision which was most often not in line with that of peoples of the region. Nevertheless, those same peoples did not have then a clear and final vision for their political, social, and geographical reality at that time. The idea of nationalism that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and took “Arabism” as a slogan did not go beyond the cultural *problematic* that had paved the way for a cultural specificity as opposed to the Ottoman and Turkish idea afterwards.

Between the two World Wars, “Arabism” had started gaining, in the context of the conflict with colonial projects, a political dimension that was not originally clear. With that dimension, there appeared a fundamental shift in the structure of the national idea from a “cultural” cause to an “authority” scheme. Then came the fifty years of the last century, with the phenomenon of military coups d’Etat which had taken from “Arab nationalism” an ideological justification in order to imprison “Arabism” within a national lineage concept, even ethnic (Arab ethnicity) and religious (Islam).

### **4- The Phase of Authorities of Military Nature (The Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) - Coups d’Etat of the fifties and the Establishment of Oppressive Regimes**

Those coups d’Etat ended the dream of building a state and a society. One of the consequences of that shift was that “Arabism” had been transformed from embracing difference and diversity, and from being open to the other, to an ideology tightly closed on itself with the aim of abolishing and classifying people in terms of lineages without being able to unite individuals in one cultural space. Consequently, strangers multiplied and broke away from what could be deemed “Arabism” as a cultural and civilization asset. Christians thus departed from it despite their being the



pioneers of the majority of its nationalist movements, if not the actual proclaimers.

“Arabism”, as practised in the second half of the last century through military regimes and authoritarian nationalist parties, became a nationalist and ethnic state in its narrow and negative dimension. Thus, it did not live up to the level of cultural and civilized scope which could be reached by every one without having to have native grandparents in terms of Arabism and Islam. The idea of “Arabism” has lost, since the middle of the last century, its ability to integrate minorities into one cultural Arabic melting pot.

During the three decades that followed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Sykes-Picot systems, imposed by the mandate states, provided an acceptable framework to countries that allowed their minorities to contribute at different levels – economic, social and cultural – in building a society where citizens enjoyed relative equality. For instance, Iraq - during the rule of the two Faisals, Egypt - under the Khedive, Syria and Lebanon – in the two phases of the mandate and independence, were models for countries moving with confidence towards modernity. Cities such as Beirut, Alexandria, Baghdad and Damascus emerged as the hub for spreading thought and culture, as well as publication centers. Thus, the social scene was remarkable in terms of embracing forms of modernity that had led to shedding the veil and the joining of *woman* in workaday life, the flourishing of performing arts, music, cinema, along with the growth of academic life through the founding of the University of Cairo in Egypt, Saint Joseph University and the American University in Beirut, which attracted senior professors and foreign intellectuals. Finally, the growth of political life with the establishment of political parties and public gatherings brought about the production of political elite and prominent figures in the public sector domains.

The adoption of the Soviet Union’s guided economic pattern had led to annihilating individual initiatives in the sectors of industry and commerce. As the Christians were senior shareholders in those fields, they became victims of a random nationalization which had led them to leave their countries and come to Lebanon where there was economic freedom, or to



migrate to Europe and America. Those were the first signs of the Christians' dislodging and emigration on economic bases with obvious sectarian results.

### **5- The Collapse of the Sykes-Picot States – The Ambiguous Future**

The collapse of the successive authorities in the region had led to the breaking up of the social contract, the outbreak of conflicts, and the exorbitance of the tribal instincts on the basis of different religious affiliations. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire resulted in the aggravation of problems with Christian minorities. Today, the collapse of the Arab countries and the failure of the political ideologies of secular or semi-secular nature (Arab or Syrian nationalism, socialism, communism) resulted in chaos and alienation in the Arab real world, which resulted in splitting the peoples of the region into groups, even clans and tribes subject to the most retarded orientations and instincts. Thus, the terrorist "Islamic" groups were the result of the absence of authority, the disintegration of social structures, and the absence of civil life atmosphere.

In spite of all that has been said about the Sykes-Picot agreement, it established the early foundations of states in areas that were under the authority of the Ottoman Empire. However, a century after the end of the Ottoman regime, the people of the region had not been able to invest in that phenomenon and to move ahead towards building states and communities worthy of their history and heritage.

What is needed from the world today is not supporting the Christians of the region and backing them; rather, what is required is assisting the peoples of the entire region with its different religions, sects and ethnicities in order to build states, and an authority that respects the rights of all individuals and groups in cohesive, not belligerent; corporate, not antagonistic communities dreaming of a bright future, not of dark nightmares.

For centuries, the peoples of this region had lived under the tyranny of Empires. They never knew Independence and Identity, and they never knew the state nor its concept. When given independence, they failed to build a structure of an authority that portrays the picture of the world and its states. Instead, they squandered the preliminary pillars established by the Mandate for a modern civil social system.



## Conclusion

### For a Diversified Cultural Arab Civilization

The present scene of some of the Arab countries – if not most of them – is very gloomy in terms of its social structure. The decline in Christians' numbers from one quarter to 10%, not to mention absence of some minorities such as the Jews, the Greeks and others, as well as acceleration in the migration of Armenians, indicates that the Arab societies are moving towards the specter of one color, while the rest of the nations, in the era of globalization, are heading towards the mixing of nationalities, harmony among ethnicities, and coherence among cultures.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that this decline had started to appear with the emergence of systems that had a nationalist tendency linked with central policies that abolished individual initiative, thus encouraging the migration of many of their citizens, namely the Christians among them (in Egypt and Syria during the unity and the random decisions for nationalization – and in Iraq in the sixties as well as recently).

“Arabism” is greater than to be summarized in a political or ideological project, and much deeper than to be curtailed within a national identity. It is a cultural and civilizational state par excellence. Fulfilling this quality, it does not address a particular group of people who would consider themselves the sole ethnic heir of this civilization. Instead, it is the property of all people, namely those who live in this region and speak the language of this outstanding and unique civilization. “Arabism” is a cultural heritage for Man and humanity; it is not exclusive to one specific sect, group, or religion.

In this context, the different components of the Arab society with all its diversity have contributed in shaping the radiant Arabic cultural scene. Writers, poets and intellectuals from various backgrounds have enriched the Arabic stock with an input that has made it attain the international level (Najib Mahfouz, Adonis, Saïid Akl, Mahmoud Darwish, Nassif Nassar, etc...). Moreover, if we added to the written culture the set of performing art - painting, music, acting, singing, and other non- written art, we could





figure out the magnitude of the leading role those “communities” belonging to the Arab region and its different countries had played in promoting the Arab civilization and culture until they reached prominent international levels.

The Arab society, with all its diversification, is vital and fertile, for the legacy of its intellectuals did not stop at the limits of its language, but many Arabs, regardless of the country, group or sect they belonged to, had mastered the languages of the world and produced works in those languages that interested the cultural centers of the world. For example, Edward Said (a Palestinian Christian) contributed in shaking the old traditional concept of Orientalism. After him, it was impossible to ruminate over the former Oriental rhetoric. Amin Maalouf (a Lebanese Christian) succeeded after his first novel “the Crusades through Arab Eyes” in placing back the Crusade adventure on the table for a fresh reconsideration. Maalouf could prove himself, amidst the French cultural realm, as a great novelist after his novel “The Rock of Tanios” had won the most important French award – The Goncourt Prize. On his part, Georges Shehadeh (a Lebanese Christian, too) earned a prominent position among French poets, which was acknowledged by the French poets themselves. As for Salah Stétié, his literary works secured him a distinguished place in literature. He is the *Beirut* Muslim who had chosen Moliere’s language to convey to the international cultures the heritage of the Islamic-Arab culture depicted through the philosophy of the poet’s relation with the universe, in the abstract inherent form, through the perception of the world and the universe.

