

Christian Arabs, Muslim Arabs (Part 1)

Sometimes it seems that almost all the news these days deemed fit to print has something to do with Islam and Muslims. Much of it is about internecine warfare: we receive reports of Sunnis fighting Shi'a in Iraq, of Shi'a fighting Sunnis in Syria, of Shi'a ruled fighting Sunni ruler in Bahrain, of Sunni tribesmen fighting Shi'a tribesmen in Yemen, of one city's militia fighting another city's militia, as in Libya with fighters from Tripoli, Misrata, Benghazi, Zintan squaring off, or Muslims of different ethnicities fighting one another—Arabs against Kurds in Iraq and Syria, Arabs against Berbers in North Africa, and so on and so confusingly forth, and don't forget the Turkmen and the Tuareg.

But with all these permutations and combinations, two things remain constant. The first is the Muslim Arab attitude toward, and attacks on, the ancient Christian communities of the Middle East: the Chaldeans and Assyrians of Iraq, the Orthodox and Catholics in Syria, the Maronites in Lebanon, the Copts in Egypt. The Christian position depends on the regime. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein had his own reasons for protecting the Christians, whom he knew were no threat to him and, indeed, were employed by him as his household staff, but he is long gone, and Muslims have been attacking Christians and more than half of Iraq's Christians have left the country. In Syria, the Alawite regime, a regime that amazingly treats Christmas and Good Friday as official holidays and closes government offices, teeter-totters, and Muslim attacks on Christians have led to many of them leaving that country, too. In Egypt, attacks on the Copts went way up under Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood, tens of thousands left the country, and under Al-Sisi conditions for Copts have returned to their unpleasant normal. Copts still leave, but not at the rate they did under

Morsi. And the steady Maronite outflow, the relative and absolute decline in their numbers and in their power, means that Lebanon, once thought of as a Christian haven, has become another Muslim-dominated country where the Christians are just managing to hang on.

When they leave Syria or Iraq or Egypt or Lebanon, where do these Middle Eastern Christians go? They go to Europe, to Australia, Canada, America. Who can blame them? And thus the Middle East is being emptied of its Christians. Does it matter to you? If you are a Christian, or even a "post-Christian" (someone who may no longer be a Believer in Christianity, but who recognizes that he belongs to the civilization of the West, and that civilization was fashioned by Christianity) don't you want a Living Christian Presence in the Middle East? Would you not regret what at this point seems inevitable – the disappearance of Christianity from that region?

The Western powers have not done what they might have to secure the Christians in the Middle East. In Lebanon, the last American intervention on the side of the Christians was the sending of troops in 1958 by Eisenhower. And France, which always regarded itself as the historic protector of the Maronites, did nothing to help them during the Christian-Muslim civil war. The Maronites found themselves formulaically described in the French (leftist) press as the "right-wing Christians," though there was nothing "right-wing" about them, unless being Christian was to be taken as synonymous with "right-wing." Eugene Ionesco wittily noted the use of that Homeric epithet in "the newspaper everyone reads" (he was referring to *Le Monde*, the permanent paper of the French leftist elite).

The American record of defending imperiled Christians in the Middle East has been dismal. In Iraq, where hundreds of thousands of American troops were stationed, and a gigantic military machine present for a decade, nothing was done to help the Christians. They were not given arms, they were not

trained to defend themselves, and the American military has done nothing special to defend them. They seemed not to want to recognize the peculiar plight of the Christians, to pretend that the danger and misery were spread equally.

And if the Western world has offered so little military support to the Middle Eastern Christians, what about moral support? Has the Vatican, has the World Council of Churches, has any official body of Christians started to worry aloud about what Muslims have done, and are doing with a vengeance right now, to the ancient Christian communities of the Middle East? And why do we not hear of possible places, right in the Middle East, where Christians could live in security if only certain arrangements could be made?

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