

Christian Arabs, Muslim Arabs (Part 3)

Perhaps, despite all kinds of opposition from the very people who would benefit, a large-scale transfer of peoples were to create a Christian Preserve in the Middle East?

Following World War I, and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, the first of the twentieth century's large-scale transfers of populations took place. By the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations, which was signed at Lausanne in 1923, the Greek and Turkish governments agreed to the compulsory population exchange of peoples. About 1.5 million Greeks who had been uprooted during the Greek genocide and then by defeat in the Greco-Turkish war were forcibly sent to Greece. Turkey wanted to formalize this exodus, and at the same time to create a new exodus, but from Greece this time, and the people being forced out were Turks, moved to Anatolia where they could repopulate areas from which the Greeks had been moved. And at the same time, the properties left behind by the Turks could be taken over by some of the Greeks expelled from Anatolia.

This exchange of populations was based on religious identity, and not ethnicity or language. And the goal was to create for each of these countries, Greece and Turkey, if not complete ethnic homogeneity, at least to drastically reduce the numbers of Muslims (Turks and Albanians) in Greece and the number of Orthodox Christians in Turkey.

The second great population exchange of the twentieth century is that which took place among the Muslims and Hindus of India at the time of Partition. Out of India itself, a second state was carved; it included part of the Punjab to the west, and part of Bengal to the east, and together West Pakistan and East Pakistan formed the Dominion of Pakistan. In 1971, East

Pakistan rose in revolt and seceded from the Dominion of Pakistan to become an independent state, called Bangladesh.

As many as half a million people died in the communal riots between Muslims and Hindus before the Partition. And as part of the general upheaval in this period, 14 to 15 million people, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh, were uprooted and, as Muslim refugees from India, or as Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan, then resettled in Pakistan or in India. It is impossible to say if the people of India and Pakistan were better off because of the rearranging of populations; it was meant to deal with the effects of communal riots and large-scale homelessness – to put Hindus in mainly-Hindu India, to put Muslims in mainly-Muslim Pakistan.

Still a third example of large-scale population transfer is that which has gone largely unrecognized: the half-million Arabs who left Mandatory Palestine beginning in November 1947 (when they were urged to leave and to return together with triumphant Arab conquerors – that triumph, and that return, never took place) while, at more or less the same time, 900,000 Jews from all over the Arab lands, from Morocco to Iraq, fled local pogroms and made their way to Israel. This population transfer was not, like that of Greeks and Turks in 1923, or the resettlement of Hindus and Muslims in 1947, the result of a formal treaty. It was simply the result of Arabs listening to other Arabs just before and during Israel's war for independence, and Jews reacting to the violence visited upon them before, during, and after that war, all over the Middle East and North Africa.

We have seen that the Christian Arab population all over the Middle East is dwindling. We have reviewed the history of the "West Bank" and its importance for Israel's survival. Is there any way to join these two themes – to give some Christian Arabs a sure refuge, and to strengthen Israel's hold, and Israel's perceived right to hold, on to the "West Bank"?

Let's start with the world of the counterfactual. You know what a counterfactual is. It's that which didn't happen, but you allow yourself to change that history in your mind, and twist it, to make it go as you would have wished it to. Usually these counterfactuals involve something simple – for example, the killing of some dictator, a Hitler or a Stalin, before he could fully do his murderous damage, thus saving tens of millions of lives. Or someone chooses something a little more complicatedly counterfactual. Suppose, for example, we tell ourselves that in their long series of naval battles, Genoa and not Venice had emerged victorious and powerful, and rich. If that had happened, then later in the next century, when a certain Genoan named Cristoforo Colombo sought financial backing for an expedition to find a new western passage to the Indies– the land route now blocked by the Muslims who completed their conquest of Byzantium in 1453 – he did not have to first go to England and Portugal (turned down in both places) or, as he finally and successfully did, to Spain, with the backing of Ferdinand and Isabella and Luis Santangel. No, he could have been backed instead by his very own native city, and would have claimed the New World for Genoa.

What would that New World look like? Oh, north of the Fiume Grande it would look much the same – the French and English would still have settled North America. But south of that river, what would things be like? Spain's conquistadores were hardened by the half-millennium of the Reconquista, and thus were aggressive conquerors who seized booty. The Genoese were traders from a maritime city-state. They set up trading entrepôts on the shores of the Black Sea, and did not go inland, did not attempt to conquer peoples and seize loot. A very different pattern of settlement.

Now imagine another counterfactual scenario that would create a very different pattern of settlement: Muslim Arabs in Gaza and the "West Bank" exchanged for the Christian Arabs

displaced from Iraq, Syria, and other majority-Muslim countries. This would give Christian Arabs a preserve where they would be protected, and where they in turn could (if they chose) help Israel militarily – as the Rev. Gabriel Nadaf is encouraging those who are in Israel to do.

There is something in this also for those Arab leaders who do not want war with Israel. Those leaders actually have a stake in Israel keeping the “West Bank,” which makes it perceptibly more powerful: if you are al-Sisi, for example, you probably want Israel to hold onto the “West Bank.” This population exchange would enable the Israelis to do so. Nonetheless, the opposition of Arab leaders in the area to this plan, were anyone in a position of power to propose it, is virtually assured. Some Israelis, likewise, won’t like the idea of agreeing to let Arabs to live on “West Bank,” even if the Arabs in question are Christian and are traded for Muslim Arabs. There is considerable Christian Arab hostility toward Israel, and that will be hard to change. And there are some Israelis who think they can kick out all the Arabs from the West Bank.

All this opposition makes for an impossible counterfactual – but would that it could actually come true, for the sake of all three groups involved: Israel, the Arab leaders who don’t want war with Israel, and above all, the Christian Arabs themselves.

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