

The Churches Facing Extremism in the Middle East

H.E. Dr. Tarek Mitri, Director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut

Uncertainty and fear are widely shared in the Arab world. They are dramatically shaping the lives of Christians. Armed conflicts, insecurity and the mounting influence of radicalized Islamist groups exacerbate social problems. Achieving the rule of law, respects for human rights, greater political participation remain an unfulfilled hope, a distant goal or a darkened horizon. Emigration from the region, that of Christians in particular, and retreat from public life reveal a sense of abandonment and disempowerment. Fear is aggravated by the propagation and sometimes the reinvention of hatred. It is generalized through ostentatious criminal acts, threats and grim predictions.

Seven years ago, radical and unanticipated transformations seemed to augur a transition to democracy. Failures and disappointments warn against an acceleration of history and obscure the future. Realists apprehend instability. Cynics predict a continuing descent into chaos. Be that as it may, today's worries cut across ethnic groups and religious communities. However, they could be differentiated even if not separated. More specifically, Christians' projection of their immediate future is clouded by their perception of Islamism, seen as irresistible. Some are tempted to view radical Islamism as an authentic expression, even if excessive, of Islam itself. Any resurgence of Islam, they say, is retrogression and will entail the subduing of Christians. They are not attentive enough to the diversity within the Muslim community nor do they recognize the depth of contradictions that divide it. They realize that radical movements are capable of great harm, though not strong enough to shape, radically and rapidly, social and political transformations. Yet, they question the silence of many moderate Muslims or their inability to confront those among coreligionist they condemn for their cruelty and anachronistic understanding of Islam.

In addition, a number of Christians listened to their rulers' warning: the alternative to dictator regimes is Islamic radicalism. Receptive to this alarmist discourse or succumbing to pressures they were inclined to think that stability ensured their survival as "minorities" while the popular uprising carried the risks of open-ended instability. Fearing the threat of their

marginalization, some of them retreated into self-marginalization. Conversely, we find Christians whose own concerns and apprehensions did not overshadow their commitment to freedom from all, indivisible human rights and democratic political participation, no matter how difficult to reach it seems to be.

To some extent, both attitudes polarized Christians throughout recent history, since the demise of the ottoman political and juridical order. There were times where the minority-centered consciousness was confronted by those who tried to shake loose their minority status and advocate inclusive causes transcending communal barriers. But there were also times where these two views could be exchanged and even reconciled, and their proponents dialogued within individual churches or in ecumenical bodies.

Yet, many Christians, including those whose injured history exacerbated their communalism, claimed and acclaimed the great role of their forefathers in the Arab awakening of the early twentieth century and the uninterrupted search for inclusive identities. The Christian role in the making of a new social and political order outweighed by far what the numerical importance of Christians could normally allow. The disproportionately influential contribution of Christians in the past might explain, although partially, why the promises of earlier times, were, in hindsight, more far-reaching than what was possible in subsequent history. Furthermore, the often justified disappointment of many paved the way, for some, to a bitter withdrawal into preservationist conservatism.

At the end of the twentieth century, the disillusionment of Arab peoples, provoked by the failures of both national governments and movements, was quasi-general. For Christians in particular, such feeling was permeated with anxiety, arising from the effects of their dwindling numbers, accumulated economic difficulties, thinning political participation and anguish in the face of mounting Islamism. However, the community-specific anxiety of Christians is lived and expressed by a considerable number of Muslims who acknowledge that, while Christians have their own reasons to be disquiet, their difficulties reflect problems within the society as a whole. For most often, it is not the relationship between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority that is at stake but justice, political participation, human rights and public liberties.

But fearful Christians are not immune to amalgamation. Any resurgence of Islam is retrogression and will entail the subduing of Christians into a dhimmi status. They are aware, that the self-assertion movements in the name of

Islam, before and after the Arab uprisings, nurtured anti-Christian feelings, not only motivated by their Manichean view of the belief and disbelief (kufir) or their understanding of an Islamic state, but also because they guilt them by association. No matter how questionable these perceptions are, there will always be people yesterday, who cannot, or dare not, oppose those who make them angry. They look for substitutes and often find them in their Christian neighbors.

It looks therefore more difficult than before to avoid the pitfall of perceiving, and apprehending, Islamism as an undifferentiated whole. Understandably, victims of fanaticism and those who defensively retreat into a minority-entered attitude have little appetite for differentiation, distinction or subtlety.

However, Christian leaders and learned personalities have a moral obligation and possess the intellectual tools to discern and acknowledge the resistance of many of their Muslims compatriots to the hegemonic tendency of what is often called “political Islam”. For many years, and more particularly since the late 1970’s after the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the emergence of comparable phenomena of self-assertion in the name of religion, the category Islamic fundamentalism, was indiscriminately used to characterize a variety of political and religious movements. In western eyes, there was a measure of universalization of a protestant notion primarily defined by a literalist reading of the scriptures and firm belief in their inerrancy. The realities of the Muslim world invited greater attention to necessary distinctions. Traditional Muslims, the conservative religious majority as often depicted, accept, often passively, a literal interpretation of Qur’an, the uncreated word of God as affirmed by Islamic orthodoxy. A self-styled Islamic awakening or Islamic revival was brought forth by two different groups of Muslims: the militants of the Muslim Brotherhood and the salafi quietists. The former were preoccupied with state power and legitimacy deriving from the implementation of God-given law, al Shari’ a. The latter were politically quietist and advocates of returning to pristine Islam through the imitation of the benevolent forefathers. Dissent within both groups gave birth to radical groups, jihadi organizations as they are often called, whose primary drive is waging a holy war, jihad, against infidels, non-Muslim and Muslims alike.

In this light, the term fundamentalism, proudly self-applied by a group of American Protestants in the 1920’s, could not be lightly carried over to religious and political forces in other regions and countries. However, one has to admit that the term eludes a precise definition while becoming

somewhat difficult to set aside. Rather than washing the term away, it makes good sense to give it a variety of definitions that would help us seek greater clarity in explaining different religious and social realities. Be that as it may, it remains true that there are many features, common to different groups in different societies, that are associated with fundamentalism. Fundamentalist movements are always reactive or reactionary. They act upon perceived, and often exaggerated, threats as a beleaguered community. They are selective in reclaiming and acclaiming a number of defining periods and events of the past, in ways that foster the formation of mass-movement formation and mobilization. They are preoccupied with setting boundaries in order to attract people and satisfy their search for distinction while nurturing their suspicion or hostility toward those whom they see as different. Their enemies everywhere are relativism and pluralism. They react upon their conservative impulses in response to what is thought to be eroding or molding their identity. Most fundamentalists, in the Arab world, associate themselves with selective forms of conservatism and traditionalism. At the same time, they are modern movements, no matter if they are portrayed as pathologies of modernity.

Seven years ago, Arab uprisings initiated, in an unanticipated manner, transformations in a region that seemed resistant to change. For some time, expectations and hopes energized a large number of people, whether young or not-so-young. Today's disappointment, though understandable, is often rushed and at times engineered. It serves the purpose of justifying attempts to reverse transition, divert its course, and withdraw into defensive and regressive identity politics. Precarious national structures and the related fragility of national cohesion and identity, exacerbated further by the rapid and unanticipated collapse of the old order, favored a tendency to over-emphasize the strength of primordial ties in comparison with civic ties that are constitutive of a modern democratic society. One could not ignore the resurgence or reinvention of sub-national identities and the centrifugal forces at work in many Arab countries. Many members of communities, not only religious minorities, seem to have lost their aspiration to a state for all. Some beg for a power structure that can protect them from another community. Weakened states and political and electoral strategies of mobilization accentuate communalism and encourage the surfacing of narratives of victimhood, often emotional and aggressive. Throughout the twentieth century, Christians struggled to assert themselves, and be recognized, as citizens. But many retreated into minority centered communities. Many leaders across the region do little more than tap into the use of persecution

felt by communities without offering them alternatives to fear and uncertainty. Many are victims but ethnic and religious minorities, Christians included, claim extraordinary victimhood.

Church leaders tried to accompany their faithful along an arduous road. Throughout their recent history, they refrained from overplaying minority militancy and identity politics. The notion of Christian presence was their antidote to both aggressive communalism and withdrawal from public life. In the same vein, the role of Church institutions was defined not only in terms of their functions of preservation but by the gospel-rooted imperative of witness and service to the neighbor. Churches never perceived Christians and Muslims as two monolithic blocks facing each other, nor did they oppose rights of the minority to aspirations of the majority.

It is needless to say, however, that the future of Christians in the Arab world does not only depend on them but also on their fellow Muslims and the ability of all to rebuild states based on citizenship and the rule of law, while recognizing the wealth of religious and cultural plurality that could spare the Arab world the sad face of uniformity.

My concluding and brief statement is about being called and calling oneself minorities. The notion is loaded with historical overtones. For some it evokes conspiracies, manipulation by foreign powers and subversion of majority role. For others, it is associated with religious or cultural rights and protection. In modern times, Christians learned to affirm their self-understanding as citizens rather than minorities. Reversing the process, in words and deeds, is surrender to the forces of retrogression. To be sure, we live in times of suffering, fear and uncertainty. But they are also times of change. Christians are not only victims crying out their plight, they are still called to be actors.

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