

18/2015

24th March, 2015

Ignacio Fuente Cobo

Christians of the orient (II):
current situation and prospects

[Visit WEBSITE](#)

[Get NEWSLETTER](#)

This document has been translated by a Translation and Interpreting Degree student doing work experience, MARÍA SANTOS, under the auspices of the Collaboration Agreement between the Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid, and the Spanish Institute of Strategic Studies.

Christians of the orient (II): current situation and prospects

Abstract:

The situation of Christians of the Orient is very difficult today. In Iraq, Ancient Mesopotamia, land of Abraham, Christianity seems doomed to extinction. Same is happening in Syria, with a growing number of Christians moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, being these two countries also very unstable. The recent killing of Coptic Christians on the beaches of Sirte, seems to indicate an uncertain future for the largest Christian community that still exists in the Orient —a region where, the rise of radical Islam, together with low birth rates and emigration, has caused a rapid decline of Christian communities that for centuries had successfully resisted invasions, empires and often bloody processes of decolonisation. If the situation is not remedied, it would be highly possible that Christians, once a flourishing religious group, became a residual phenomenon, unprepared to guarantee a religious diversity necessary to prevent the land where Christian faith arose from religious fanaticism alienation.

Resumen:

Es evidente que la situación de los cristianos en Oriente es hoy en día muy difícil. En Iraq, la antigua Mesopotamia, la tierra de Abraham, el cristianismo parece abocado a extinguirse, mientras que en Siria su situación se parece cada vez más a la de Iraq, con un exilio creciente de cristianos hacia Turquía, Líbano y Jordania, países estos dos últimos también muy inestables. La reciente matanza de cristianos coptos en las playas de Sirte, parece indicar igualmente un futuro incierto para la comunidad cristiana más numerosa que todavía existe en Oriente, una región en la que el auge del islamismo radical, unido a las bajas tasas de natalidad y la emigración, han provocado la disminución acelerada de unas comunidades religiosas que durante siglos habían sido capaces de resistir a las invasiones, a los imperios y a los procesos con frecuencia cruentos de descolonización. De no remediarse la situación actual, es muy posible que en la tierra que vio nacer la fe cristiana, este grupo religioso antaño floreciente, se convierta en un fenómeno residual, carente del tamaño y densidad suficiente para garantizar la diversidad religiosa tan necesaria para evitar que la región de oriente medio se uniformen en el fanatismo.

Keywords:

Coptic, Chaldean, Melkite, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite, Ephesus, Chalcedon, Aramaic.

Palabras clave:

Coptos, caldeos, melquitas, armenios, ortodoxos, maronitas, Éfeso, Calcedonia, arameo.

Introduction

Since the year 2000, tens of thousands of Christians have been forced out of their homes in Iraq and Syria, whose Christian roots were a distinguishing mark and are about to disappear. Christians live under the terror of Islamic jihadists, who see them as unbelievers, polytheists or simply Western spies. Christians are not the only victims in the outbreak of violence and savagery in the Orient, yet they are the most vulnerable social sector. Unlike other religious communities, most Christians have refused to get organised following the line of political activism or forming religious-based militias, which has disabled their self-defence. Except for the Lebanese case, the security of Christians depends on national authorities or the international community in the Arab world —and none of them seems to be enough to guarantee Christians' survival.

Since the end of the 19th century, Christians who felt politically or socially motivated have coordinated their energies and knowledge towards the development of an Arab, laic nationalism¹, like many other Muslims and members of religious minorities. The situation changed when political Islam appeared, threatening the dictatorial and relatively secularised Arab regimes in which Christians had been able to live and progress. The so-called 'Arab Spring' led to a greater tendency, provoking a fear that Christians would be marginalised in the societies they live in, or worse still killed, displaced from their homelands, deprived of their rights or, simply, humiliated. In Egypt, Iraq and Syria, Christians witnessed with mounting anguish how the true, deep wills for democracy, human dignity and religious freedom were violated by radical groups whose aim was to trigger a chaotic, brutal fight for power in which Christians were an easy target to be blamed for all ills affecting the different countries in which transformation processes were taking place.

As a consequence, hundreds of thousands of Christians have been displaced from their homelands in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya or Palestine, taking refuge in the West or

¹ Rev. David Neuhaus SJ, Latin Patriarchal Vicar: "The Future of Christians in the Middle East. A view from the Holy Land", Thinking Faith, (09.02.2015). <http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/future-christians-middle-east-view-holy-land>.

in neighbour countries such as Jordan or the Lebanon. The collapse of Christianity in the Orient can be argued to be the end of political order in the Middle East as we knew it.

That is why, while in the first part of the current work the analysis concentrated on who the Christians of the Orient are (a religious community that has managed to survive from the beginning of Christianity up to today), how many are there and where they come from, the second part (now following) will be focusing on Christians of the Orient current situation and the perspectives they have to stay in the land they were born in and where they have been living for two thousand years.

What situation are christians of the orient facing today?

In general terms, the current situation of Christians in the Orient depends both on their country and the role they play within the predominantly Arab societies they live in. The situation of Christians in the different Orient countries is the following:

Egypt: As in other countries in the Middle East, there is no separation between State and religion in Egypt, and Islam is its official religion. Contradictorily, the number of Christians in Egypt has increased throughout the last century while the total percentage share of the total population has decreased in the same period of time. Christians are present in the whole country, although experiencing a hostile environment due to organised fundamentalism (i.e. Muslim Brotherhood or even more radical Salafist groups). Islamists accuse Christians of being against the Islamic law, as well as of supporting the Egyptian army in the overthrow of former president Muhammad Morsi².

Christians have legal autonomy (in regards to weddings, family, inheritances, adoptions, etc.) as well as some judicial autonomy (they have ecclesiastical courts, whose decisions are matched to the State's) in Egypt, yet Islamic law rules all communities, whether they are Christians, Muslims or Jews. Thus, the Islamic law 'governs' personal laws, especially those concerning the family.

² Assaf Tony y Ramos Díaz de Aleteia Ary Waldir: "Cristianos perseguidos por su fe en Egipto", Aleteia. (04.04.2014). <http://www.aleteia.org/es/internacional/entrevistas/cristianos-perseguidos-por-su-fe-en-egipto-5844123445624832>.

Similarly, Christians have a representation in the Parliament, although misrepresenting their demographic weight. Christians find it difficult to progress into higher positions in politics and university, and are denied access to 'sensitive' jobs, such as Arabic teacher. Thus, there is certain official discrimination towards Christians from the State political and religious wise in comparison to the Muslim population (for instance, Christians cannot run for presidency of the Republic of Egypt).

Religious freedom is respected in general terms. However, in the 1856 Ottoman Act (*Khatt'Humayun*), under which church restoration is permitted but building a new church needs the permission of a competent authority, remains valid in Egypt³. With the rising pressure of Islam, Christians have responded by keeping a low profile, out of fear of reprisals, and have gone into exile.

Lebanon: After gaining independence in 1944 and in comparison to other countries, Lebanese Christians are the only ones who play an important role in politics, being able to elect the president of the Lebanon, half of the ministers and parliamentarians among the diverse rites⁴. After WWI, French colonizers guaranteed the hegemony of Christianity through the distribution of powers among the different Muslim and Christians communities, leaving the presidency of the Republic to the Maronites. The 1975 Civil War brought about the exile of the Lebanese population, especially of Christians (it is estimated that more than half of Lebanese emigrants were Christians). As a consequence, there are more Christian Lebanese living overseas than in the Lebanon, which, together with an unstoppable decline in birth rates, more especially among Christians than among Muslims, have resulted in the end of the Christian power over the country's affairs⁵.

³ de Haro Fernando: "Entrevista a Jumana Trad: Mubarak empeoró la situación de los cristianos. El nuevo Gobierno egipcio no tiene por qué ser islamista". Página Digital.es, (17.03.2015), http://www.paginasdigital.es/v_portal/informacion/informacionver.asp?cod=2156&te=17&idage=4087&vap=0.

⁴ BBC: *Guide: Christians in the Middle East*, News Middle East, 11 October 2011. Available in <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15239529>.

⁵ Orella Martínez José Luis: "Líbano, un nuevo éxodo cristiano", (24.05.2008), Cristianos Libaneses. <http://cristianoslibaneses.blogspot.com.es/>.

The disaster in Syria has not favoured Christians, who are now politically divided, supporting Sunni or Shia. Having more than a million Syrian refugees⁶ in the Lebanon as a consequence of the war, and being many of them Christians, is producing significant changes in the demographic situation of the country, as was the case of Palestinians taking refuge in the Lebanon after the Arab-Israeli conflict.

As former Pope Benedict XVI said too cautiously in 2013: “The celebrated Lebanese equilibrium, which wishes to continue to be a reality, will continue through the good will and commitment of all Lebanese. Only then will it serve as a model to the inhabitants of the whole region and of the entire world.”⁷ The political consequences after the Syrian conflict and the refugees’ possibility of return to their homeland will undeniably shape the future of Christian communities, who still consider the Lebanon one of the least dangerous places in the Middle East for their survival.

Syria: Christians in Syria represent between 4% and 9% out a population of 20 million people (being all part of Greek Orthodox, Syriac, Melkite, Jacobite, Armenian and Latin communities). Some studies argue that there are around 2 million Christians in Syria⁸, settled in Christian-majority villages and big cities such as Aleppo and Damascus.

Before the war, the situation of Christians was quite favourable. Even though they were subject to the power of an Alawite, the protection they were provided with made them an easy target for the opposition movements. The current division of Syria for ethnic and religious reasons has found Christians in a rather uncomfortable position. Radicalism of rebels has led Christians not to confront the official power in spite of the risk of being considered an ally of an authoritarian regime that is disputed by a large part of the population.

⁶ Según la UNOCHA, Líbano acogía en noviembre de 2014 a 1.143.900 refugiados sirios. UNOCHA: ‘Whole-of-Syria’: Humanitarian Needs, Humanitarian Bulletin Lebanon. Issue 6 | 16 Oct - 30 Nov 2014. Available in <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HumanitarianUpdate-Issue6%2816Oct-30Nov2014%29.pdf>.

⁷ Magister Sandro: “Cristianos y musulmanes en el Líbano. Un informe”, Chiesa.expressonline.it. <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1350422?sp=y>.

⁸ Loevre d’orient: « La Syrie et les Chrétiens d’Orient », (20.01.2015). <http://www.oeuvre-orient.fr/2015/01/20/la-syrie-et-les-chretiens-dorient/>.

Consequently, survival has been the strategy of Christians in Syria. They have not taken a clear political stand but rather sought to keep themselves safe in exile and refuge in neighbour countries. Around 450,000 Christians have left Syria to go essentially to Lebanon, a neighbouring country with which Christian relationships are good, as well as to Jordan, Turkey and Egypt⁹. An undeniable consequence is the decrease of Christians in number, having disappeared in cities where they used to be numerous such as Aleppo. There is a high degree of uncertainty about the future of Christians in Syria, with a strong dependence on the end of the war in the country. Their affinity for Al Assad's regime makes them a vulnerable target if radical Islamists end up winning the war. If that happens and the international community does not mediate in order to prevent it, Christians will disappear in Syria.

Palestine: In the 1990s, Christians accounted for around 8% of the West Bank's total population and 0.7% of Gaza's, that is, approximately 180,000 people¹⁰. There has been a significant decline due to pressure from Palestinian Islamic organisations, to the point of almost disappearing in Gaza¹¹. Emblematic places such as Bethlehem where Christians represented 80% of the population a few years ago have ceased to be mainly Christian¹².

Israel: There is religion freedom in Israel and so Christians are relatively free to practice their faith— they are allowed to build churches and run their own schools, which are considered some of the best schools in Israel. Three types of Christians can be distinguished in the country¹³:

- Palestinian Christians Israeli citizens, whose percentage share of the total population (6.5 million) is around 2-4%, being Catholic two thirds of them.

⁹ Gutiérrez Oscar: entrevista a Gregorio III Laham, Patriarca Greco-Católico Melquita, "La mayoría de musulmanes y cristianos sirios está con El Asad", El País Internacional, (07.11.2014). http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2014/11/07/actualidad/1415379876_808300.html.

¹⁰ Belt Don: « Arab Christians », National Geographic Magazine. June 2009. <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2009/06/arab-christians/belt-text>.

¹¹ BBC: "Guide: Christians in the Middle East", (11.10.2011). <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15239529>.

¹² Pipes Daniel: "Disappearing Christians in the Middle East", Middle East Quarterly, Winter 2001. <http://www.danielpipes.org/1050/disappearing-christians-in-the-middle-east>.

¹³ Asamblea de Ordinarios Católicos en Tierra Santa para la visita del Papa Francisco a Tierra Santa, 24 – 26 de Mayo 2014: "Situación de los cristianos en Israel", (01.03.2014). <http://popefrancisholyland2014.lpj.org/es/2014/03/01/situacion-de-los-cristianos-en-israel/>.

They represent 75-80% of Christians in Israel (120,000-130,000) and live in the north of the country, as well as in mixed cities such as Haifa, Jaffa, Ramleh, Lida, etc. They suffer the same discrimination and marginalisation as the rest of the Palestinian population in Israel.

- Hebrew-speaking Christians, who have been coming from the former USSR since 1990. Most of them are Greek Orthodox of Russian and Ukrainian origin. They made up 20-25% of Christians citizens of Israel (between 30,000 and 40,000). Considered the most educated social group in Israel, they do not usually proclaim their Christian identity.
- The third group is made up of approximately 150,000 immigrants who have some kind of residence permit or live in Israel without a residence permit. They generally come from Africa and live under social and economic precariousness. An increasing number of Christians has been witnessed in the last few years due to economic immigration, mainly from Romania and the Philippines¹⁴.

Jordan: Christians in Jordan represent between 2.8% and 6% of a population of 6.5 million, making from 174,000 to 390,000 people¹⁵. It is a significant decline regarding what they used to be at the beginning of the 20th century (18%). Almost half of them are part of Oriental Orthodox Churches, while 45% are said to be Catholic¹⁶. Nevertheless, all of them identify themselves, above all, as Arab Christians. Their situation in terms of politics and security is argued to be one of the most positive in the region.

The Jordan Constitution recognises religious freedom and ensures Christians take up 10% of seats in the Parliament, although they cannot be promoted to higher posts in administration and armed forces. However, Christians are allegedly considered well

¹⁴ Kemp Adriana y Raijman Rebeca: "Christian Zionists in the Holy Land: Evangelical Churches, Labor Migrants, and the Jewish State, Identities: Global Studies in Power and Culture", Routledge 2003. Available in http://www.researchgate.net/publication/248938187_Christian_Zionists_in_the_Holy_Land_Evangelical_Churches_Labor_Migrants_and_the_Jewish_State.

¹⁵ BBC: Guide: "Christians in the Middle East". Ibidem.

¹⁶ Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land for the visit of Pope Francis in the Holy Land, 24 – 26 May 2014: "How many Catholics in the Holy Land?", (08.3.2014). <http://popefrancisholyland2014.lpj.org/blog/2014/03/08/how-many-catholics-in-the-holy-land/>.

integrated into society, being almost all of them part of middle and upper classes. Since the increasing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1990s and, particularly, in recent times, tensions between moderate elements and Islamists have put Christians in the spotlight of radical Islamic threats.

Iraq: In 1980, Christians were a flourishing religious community comprised of 1,400,000 people approximately, that is, 7% of the total population. They were mainly settled in Bagdad and Mosul. After the 2003 Gulf War, around 400,000 fled the country due to prosecutions and sectarian violence¹⁷. The number of Christians in Iraq was then reduced to 400,000 out of a total population of 31 million, representing less than 2% of Iraqi. Two thirds of Iraqi Christians are Catholic and one third Orthodox, Assyrians included. The situation of Iraqi Christians is incomparable, especially in the north of the country, where ISIL prosecution can be described as systematic. Being forced to convert to Islam or to live under discriminatory obligations, over 150,000 Christians have left the country, taking refuge in neighbour countries or in the diaspora¹⁸. As a consequence, the number of Christians in Iraq was significantly reduced to the point of becoming almost symbolic in the north of the country, where the majority of the population is ethnic Arab and professes Sunnism.

Iran: There are around 80,000 Christians in Iran¹⁹, for the most part ethnic Armenians, and up to 40,000 Assyrian Christians for a total population of 74 million²⁰. The Islamic Republic inherited from Shah Pahlavi the political representation of religious minorities previous to the islamisation of the State. Being considered historical communities, Chaldeans take up a seat in the Parliament of Tehran, whereas Armenians take two. During the 1979 Revolution, half of the Christian population had to go into exile. Most of them took refuge in California.

¹⁷ Belt Don: « Arab Christians », ibidem.

¹⁸ Loeuvre d'orient : « Les chrétiens d'Irak ont besoin de nous! », (19.01.2015). <http://www.oeuvre-orient.fr/2015/01/19/lirak-et-les-chretiens-dorient/>.

¹⁹ Loeuvre d'orient : « La Turquie et les Chrétiens d'Orient », (20.01.2015). <http://www.oeuvre-orient.fr/2015/01/20/la-turquie-et-les-chretiens-dorient/>.

²⁰ U.S. State Department: "Iran - International Religious Freedom Report 2009", The Office of Electronic Information, Bureau of Public Affairs. 2009-10-26. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/127347.htm>.

Armenian and Chaldean Christians are not attacked, nor prosecuted, but have been progressively losing social influence. They live under a situation of inequality, even though their survival helps the Iranian Islamic regime to project an image of respect towards Iranians of other religions internationally.

Turkey: In the land of Saint Paul, Ptolemy and Polycarp, where the term ‘Christian’ was coined, only a few tens of thousands Christians survive. The number ranges from 80,000 to 200,000 people out of a population of 81 million²¹. Massacres against Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks during WWI and the expulsion of the Greek afterwards reduced the number of Christians in Turkey. The residual role of Christians in Turkish politics and the creeping islamisation of the State are a raising concern to the religious coexistence that has existed thus far.

What future does the presence of christians have in the orient?

The situation of Christians in the Orient has never been easy. The causes of the problem have deep historical roots, yet Christians are now fleeing their homelands like never before— not even during terrible events at the beginning of the 20th century, such as the 1914 Armenian massacre, Assyrian killings during WWI or the expulsion of Greek Christians afterwards in current Turkey. Christians of the Orient have arguably been one of the main victims of the modern Arab State system created by the West²².

In recent years, the situation of Christians in the Orient has only worsened. In Iraq, Ancient Mesopotamia, land of Abraham, Christianity seems doomed to extinction. Same is happening in Syria, with a growing number of Christians moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, being these two countries also very unstable. The recent killing of Coptic Christians on the beaches of Sirte, seems to indicate an uncertain future for the largest Christian community that still exists in the Orient —a region where, the rise of radical Islam, together with low birth rates and emigration, has caused a rapid

²¹ CIA: The Cia World factbook, Turkey. Religions. Available in <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html>.

²² Khashan Hilal: “Arab Christians as Symbol, Disappearing Christians of the Middle East”, Middle East Quarterly, Winter 2001, Volume 8: Number 1, págs. 5-12.

decline of Christian communities that for centuries had successfully resisted invasions, empires and conflicts caused by processes of decolonisation.

In spite of never having been in a good situation, Christians must now be considered real victims of radical jihadists' cleansing, whose aim is to reach religious unanimity in a region where the three monotheistic religions have coexisted tolerantly for centuries. As occurred before, Christians have now no possibilities of military self-defence, being scapegoats of a conflict whose causes surpass them. Islamists' strategy is clear — make tensions among communities grow so that Christians in the Orient are seen as potential actors of the West, in some kind of an Fifth Column against Islam²³. The aim is instrumentalising a supposed 'clash of civilisations', even though Christians were in the Orient before the arrival of Islam.

Rather than as genocide (crime under international law that consists in the systematic extermination of a particular group of humans for racial, political or religious reasons, that is, a carefully planned act of murder), the current situation can be understood as a civilisation disaster due to internationalist jihadism that aims to destroy all social and religious forms that do not share their rigorous precepts. It is the rising of Islam that is, in general terms, taking place in the Arab world that is provoking the exodus of Christians of the Orient. The more intense the religious pressure, the greater such exodus is. Christianity could be considered lost in Turkey (Ancient Mesopotamia, Patriarch Abraham's land between the rivers), whereas Syria looks more like Iraq, where Christians have been prosecuted for over a decade. It seems difficult for Christians to improve their situation in the Lebanon and Jordan, weak countries, while in Egypt, where Christians remain an important minority, political instability has worsen the formerly-pacific religious and political environment during the last few years.

The problem is that Christians are an uncomfortable minority group for the West too. Prosecutions in recent years have not resulted in a reaction of support from the great powers, neither has provoked any military intervention in order to help Christians'

²³ Colosimo, Jean-François: « Les chrétiens d'Orient sont un peuple errant et persécuté », Le Figaro, (26.9.2005). <http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/monde/2014/09/26/31002-20140926ARTFIG00445-jean-francois-colosimo-les-chretiens-d-orient-sont-un-peuple-errant-et-persecute.php>.

situation nor influenced political decisions regarding the Middle East. This has barely been considered by strongly-secularised Western powers, since any kind of help to the prosecuted Christian minority could be translated into an acknowledgement of their historical culpability on all ills affecting the region, even if that means relinquishing to the Oriental roots of Western civilisation. Christians in the Orient are an uncomfortable minority because they are reminders of the historical nexus between the East and the West, the integral part preventing the consecration of the Manichean view on globalisation.

Thus, without an international defender and generally incapable of advocating for themselves (except for the Lebanon), Christians of the Orient have ended up becoming a wandering group, mainly living in diaspora. The Arab Awakening seem to have made become true the worst auguries for Christians who were generally well integrated in Muslim societies, where they used to live in relative security, guaranteed by dictatorial, secularised political regimes²⁴. When political Islam appeared such weak balance broke, having different consequences in every country. At best, Christians are marginalised by governments who define themselves on a certain religion and identity; at worst, Christians are being killed, displaced from their homes, deprived of their rights or humiliated²⁵.

Such statement does not mean that Christians are doomed to disappear in the Orient, yet, if the situation is not remedied, it would be highly possible that Christians, once a flourishing religious group, became a residual phenomenon, unprepared to guarantee a religious diversity necessary to prevent the land were Christian faith arose from religious fanaticism alienation.

*Ignacio Fuente Cobo
COR.ET.ART.DEM
Analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE)*

²⁴ Dalrympel William: "The end of Christianity in the Middle East could mean the demise of Arab secularism", The Guardian, (24.07.2014). <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/23/arab-christians-secular-arabs-isis-middle-east-minorities>.

²⁵ Neuhaus David M SJ: "The Future of Christians in the Middle East: A view from the Holy Land", Thinking Faith, (09.02.2015). <http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/future-christians-middle-east-view-holy-land>.