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THE ARAB CHRISTIANS : OUTLOOK AND ANXIETY

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The tolerance of Islam and the civilization that thrived under its wings made room in the Islamic state for minorities: ethnic and religious; these minorities were not merely allowed to exist but took part in the formation of Islamic civilization. ¹

The Arab Christians are a religious minority co-existing with other minorities amongst an Arab Muslim majority. The presence of a minority is a phenomena neither restricted nor novel to the Arab world. Much focus and attention has been given to this aspect with regards to the Middle East probably due to its strategic importance and the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the absence of a durable solution to the Palestinian problem.

The basic Christian sects comprising the Arab Christians in the Arab Orient i. e. in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and that of the Palestinian Arab Christian community are:

The Greek Orthodox, Maronites, Greek Catholic, Protestants and Latin. ² Following is a table of their numerical strength.

- 1) A. J. Arberry, *Religion in the Middle East* (Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1969), Vol. II, p. 546.
- 2) Note: Excluded from the list are the ethnic Christian minorities and the smaller Arab Christian Sects.

NUMERICAL STRENGTH OF THE ARAB CHRISTIAN SECTS
IN THE ARAB ORIENT, 1964. a)

	Jordan	Lebanon b)	Syria	Iraq
Greek Orthodox	57,300	201,100	246,000	1,000
Maronite	500	574,600	25,000	250
Greek Catholics	21,500	122,600	80,000	800
Protestants	4,500	18,100	11,000	2,500
Latin	31,600	5,800	10,000	1,000
Total Arab Christians	115,400	168,520	37,200	5,550
Total Muslims (including Druse)	1,652,928	846,600	c) 4,666,425	d) 7,221,200
Ratio of Arab Christians / Muslims	.08 : 1	1.28 : 1	.08 : 1	.0008 : 1

- a) Figures for the different sects are from Robert Benton Betts, *The Indigenous Arabic-Speaking Christian Communities of Greater Syria and Mesopotamia* (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis at the John Hopkins University, 1968), pp.323, 348, 359, 412, 488. Figures for the Arab Palestinians Christians are referred to in a later section.
- b) There is contention as to the numerical strength of Maronites versus Muslims in Lebanon for political reasons since Lebanon is a sectarian state.
- c) 1960 Census of Muslims in Syria was 4,198,464 growth rate of 2.6 was used to calculate 1964 tabulation.
- d) 1957 census of Muslims in Iraq was 6,0001,967, growth rate of 2.6 was used to calculate 1964 tabulation.

1. A REVIEW OF THE ARAB CHRISTIAN SECTS : THEIR
OUTLOOK AND ROLE IN THE ARAB NATIONAL MOVEMENT
AND THE PALESTINIAN ISSUE

1. 1. THE GREEK ORTHODOX

The Arab Greek Orthodox are the most ancient of the Christian communities of Greater Syria.³ They trace their origin to the Christian tribes existing on the fringes of Byzantine Syria.⁴ Being scattered and more widespread than any of the other Christian Arab Sects, their political outlook tended to embrace Geographic Syria.⁵ Hence the Greek Orthodox have identified with the Near East as their home, unlike the Maronites and the Greek Catholics they did not look to the west for protection.⁶ On the contrary, they might have looked at times with reverence upon the west but have always been conscious that they were victims as well as beneficiaries of western influence.⁷ As well, they have always contained an urban element which lived alongside a majority of Muslims.⁸ Accordingly the Greek Orthodox have acquired a certain nationalistic image in the Arab world accentuated by their role in both propagating and actively participating in the Arab national movement and the Palestinian movement.

1. 2. THE MARONITES

Of all the religious minorities they are the only ones confined to a major geographical concentration and religiously and politically united i. e. in Lebanon.⁹ The Maronites played a vital role in the revival of Arab culture and the

3) R. B. Betts, *The Indigenous Arabic Speaking Christian Population of Greater Syria and Mesopotamia*, An Unpublished Ph. d. Thesis (The John Hopkins University, 1968), p. 138.

4) R. Betts, op. cit., p. 138.

5) R. Haddad, *Syrian Christians in Muslim Society* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 82.

6) R. Haddad, op. cit., p. 80.

7) R. Haddad, op. cit., p. 80.

8) R. Betts, op. cit., p. 152.

9) R. Betts, op. cit., p. 162.

literary development of the area, for as R. Haddad remarks that there is a twinge of paradox and tragedy for it was both the Maronites and the Uniates (Greek Catholics) who were the first to be responsible for an Arabic literary revival in mid-eighteenth century.¹⁰ Among that remarkable group was the Maronite Germanos Farahat.¹¹ However it was later that the Maronites claimed for Lebanon a separate independent state and had been careful to include within its borders as many Maronites as possible.¹² To dissociate themselves from Arabism they claimed that their Lebanon is the heir to the Phoenician tradition.¹³ These ideas are propagated by writers as Charles Corm and Said Aqlé, the latter exaggerated by asking for disregarding the Arabic Script and Classical Arabic for a Latin script and local Lebanese vernacular.¹⁴ The Sunni Lebanese strongly reject this concept of the "Phoenicianist", and insist that Lebanon in its history and culture is inseparable from the main current of Arabism.¹⁵ To them, the modern Lebanese can legitimately pride himself of his Phoenician ancestors yet the latter were originally Canaanites of the Arabian Peninsula, hence, could be claimed as Arabs.¹⁶ According to Saliby, this last claim by the Sunni is untenable but he agrees that one cannot deny that Lebanon is undoubtedly Arabic in speech and traditional culture but that does not mean that Arab nationalism is accepted by the Maronites for it has a "distinct" Islamic flavour.¹⁷

1.3. THE GREEK CATHOLICS

Alongside the Greek Orthodox stood its Uniate counter-part, the Greek Catholic church consisting of those Greek Orthodox families who converted to Catholicism during the past four centuries by the efforts of the Roman missionary.¹⁸ The Greek Catholic clergy are renowned for an education acquired in Rome and were among the first Christians since the Umayyad

10) R. Haddad, op. cit., p. 52.

11) R. Haddad, op. cit., p. 52.

12) R. Betts, op. cit., p. 85.

13) K. Saliby, "The Lebanese Identify", in Michael Curtis (Ed.), *Religion & Politics in the Arab World* (Westview Press, Colorado, 1982), p. 223.

14) K. Saliby, op. cit., p. 223.

15) K. Saliby, op. cit., p. 223.

16) K. Saliby, op. cit., p. 223.

17) K. Saliby, op. cit., pp. 223–224.

18) R. Betts, op. cit., p. 155.

period to be able to contribute to literary revival. ¹⁹ In the eighteenth century they played a considerable role in the Arab literary development. ²⁰ However up till mid-twentieth century, the Catholics did not play a role in the Arab National movement and even actually supported with the Maronites an independent Lebanon against a Pan-Arab idea. ²¹ It was till later that they showed concern for national and political affairs because their education and the Greek Orthodox dimension that was added to them due to the latter conversion to Catholicism. ²² Their concern for the political problems of the area was clearly manifested when their Archbishop Cappucci was arrested in 1974 in Jerusalem by the Israeli occupation authorities with charges of smuggling arms to the Arab Palestinians struggling against occupation.

1.4. THE LATIN RITE

The Great majority of the Latin Rite are from converts of the Greek Orthodox or Greek Catholics who converted due to material and social reasons; this rite attracted a certain following especially in Palestine from the more educated and Europeanized element in the Arab Christian Society. ²³

1.5. THE PROTESTANTS

They are a western oriented Splinter group of Eastern Christianity (Orthodox and Schismatic churches) who converted for reasons of intellectual freedom, attraction of western ideas and culture. ²⁴ In Jordan and Palestine the Anglican missionaries (British influence) schools were active while in Lebanon the Presbyterians (American missions) were active. The role of their educational institutions as the Syrian Protestant College later to be known as the American University of Beirut, played a role other than in education but in transmitting western secular concepts in the different spheres of life.

19) M. Dumbar, "Greek Catholic Church", *Middle East International* (Oct. 1974), p. 32.

20) R. Haddad, op. cit., p. 52.

21) R. Betts, op. cit., p. 158.

22) R. Betts, op. cit., p. 161.

23) R. Betts, op. cit., p. 202.

24) R. Betts, op. cit., p. 204.

It is worthwhile to note that the Arab countries, embracing these religious Sects, are undergoing a process of development and modernization at varying degrees. Such a process causes strains and tensions in the different spheres of life promoting chauvinistic, religious and ethnic discord, which is taken advantage of in order to balkanize the area. Regardless of any discord, the Arab Christians have played a vital role in enriching the culture of the area, actively participating in the Arab National movement and in supporting the Arab cause in Palestine against Zionism.

2. THE ARAB NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Current political scientists might argue that after the 1967 June War, the term Pan-Arabism is lofty and metaphysical.²⁵ Nevertheless if Pan-Arabism is in decline it does not negate the fact that at one time it was alive and a unifying force and the possibility exists for its revival.

In the background of Arabic literary and scientific revival and the spread of education by foreign missions, the Arab Christians ascended a front for an Arab national movement. The movement dates back to 1875 when five Christian Arab graduates formed a secret society in Beirut, its aim was to spread ideas of Arab nationalism and independence from the Ottoman reign, its conception of Arab Unity has taken forefront of Arab aspirations.²⁶ Other enlightened young men of other creeds joined and later established branches elsewhere. An appeal issued by one society in 1911 said: "The Arabs must break away by violence if necessary, and all Arabs must help in this: Muslim Arabs this despotic state is not a Muslim state. Arab Christians and Jews unite with your Muslim Brothers."²⁷ Antonius talks of how the Arab Christians as well as Muslims suffered under the Ottomans. The Aley trial of 1916 witnessed executions, the first victim to be executed was a well recognized Arab Christian by the name of Joseph Hani from Beirut.²⁸

25) F. Ajami, "The End of Pan-Arabism", *Foreign Affairs* (Winter 78/79), p. 357.

26) G. Antonius, *The Arab awakening*, (Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 79. This book is used primarily, in this paper, as a reference on the Arab national movement.

27) A. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the liberal age 1798-1939* (Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 285.

28) G. Antonius, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

By 1913, the secret societies were associated with Sherif Hussein of Mecca who assumed leadership of the Arab national movement.²⁹ Meanwhile the British government, in an exchange of correspondence with Sherif Hussein, agreed to recognize Arab independence should the Arabs rise in revolt against the Ottoman Empire, the ally of Germany.

In June 1916 Sherif Hussein proclaimed the Arab Revolt. With the termination of World War 1 Britain had not only managed to break its pledges but had proclaimed in 1917, the Balfour declaration promising a National Homeland, for the Jews, in Palestine.³⁰

After World War 1, the idea of Arab nationalism was threatened, not merely by the different political divisions but also by the creation of different systems of administration, law and education.³¹ Attempts were made to keep this idea alive by writings, ephemeral groups, in help and sympathy, given by one Arab country to another and in periodical conferences; of the latter most important the one held in Bludan in Syria in 1937 with an Iraqi president and an Egyptian senator and the Orthodox Bishop of Hama among its vice-presidents.³² Amongst the Christian writers was Qustantin Zuraaq, a Christian Orthodox from Aleppo. The latter in talking about nationalism says: "nationalism is the conviction we need . . . the will to create and maintain a community which draws its inspiration and principles from a religion and from our own religion. For Arabs this religion can only be Islam."³³

Political parties were also created in order to realize Arab unity. The Parti Populaire Syrian was founded in 1932 by Antun Saa'de, a Christian Orthodox from Lebanon.³⁴ The Arab Baa'th party was founded in 1940 with Micheal Aflag, a Syrian Orthodox, as its prime ideologist. Aflaq laid emphasis on the Islamic content of Arab nationalism.³⁵ As Hourani concludes

29) Sherif Hussein of the House of Bani Hashem, descendent of the prophet and Custodian of the Holy Places, had spent sixteen years as captive in Canstantinopole for making open his view for Arab independence, for more, see G. Antonius, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

30) For the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the division of the Arab world, see G. Antonius, *op. cit.*, pp. 243-349.

31) A. Hourani, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

32) A. Hourani, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

33) A. Hourani, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

34) A. Hourani, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

35) A. Hourani, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

that Arab nationalism, though secular as a concept, yet the theme of Islam was recurrent in Arab political thought concerning nationalism.³⁶ The Arab Christians in writing on nationalism were aware not only of Islam as a driving force but of the Islamic heritage, and civilization and of the common destiny they share with the Arab Muslims.³⁷ There is no contradiction between Arabism and Islam, the Christian Arab is a Christian in faith but Islamic in aspiration, heritage and civilization.³⁸

3. THE PALESTINE ISSUE

The Balfour Declaration in 1917 promising a Jewish national home in Palestine caused alarm amongst the indigeneous Arab Palestinian population, Christians and Muslims alike.³⁹ The Arab Christians in Palestine took part in the attempts at combating Zionism; their numerical strength, according to the last census in 1931 was as follows:⁴⁰

The Greek Orthodox:	39,727
The Latin:	18,895
The Catholics:	12,645
The Protestants:	11,383
The Maronites:	3,431

- 36) S. Husari, a Muslim, was the one not to name Islam as the essential element of Arab nationalism. See Arberry, *op. cit.*, p. 604.
- 37) One must note that Catholic and Maronite voices in Lebanon called for a separate Lebanon linked with the Latin powers of Europe.
- 38) Sheikh Ibrahim Qattan, "Al-Ma'na Al-Islami L'Al-Ourobah" (The Islamic meaning of Arabism), *Al-Oufq Al-Orabi* (Feb. 1982), pp. 5-18.
- 39) The Balfour Declaration is claimed by the Zionists to be the judicial authority for the state of Israel. See William Mallison and Sally Mallison, "Basic Distinctions between Zionist Nationalism and the Jewish Religion", *Middle East International* (April/May 1972), p. 26 and Antonius, *op. cit.*, pp. 258-271, Appendix.
- 40) R. Betts, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

Both the Catholic and the Orthodox participated in many of the anti-zionist, Arab nationalist organizations among them Alfred Roch, a Catholic, Khalil Sakakini, an Orthodox, Yacqub Faraj, George Antonius, Essa al Essa, editor of the newspaper "al-Filistine". The Arab congress in Palestine in 1928 formed to speak on behalf of all Palestinians on the issue of Jewish immigration had twelve Christians amongst its forty eight executive members. The plight of the Arab Palestinians in 1948 witnessed the plight of 55,000 Christians. ⁴¹

After 1948, the Arab Christian Palestinians continued their strife against Zionism with the only tool available to them, i. e. writings and researches clarifying the Palestine issue and the Arab Palestinian legitimate rights. Henry Cattan and the Sayigh brothers are but two names in a long list. When in 1964 the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was formed Christians took part in that Organization. The late Kamal Nasir, a Christian Protestant from Beir Zeit, was at one time its official spokesman. Arab Christians were also deported from the West Bank by the Israeli Occupation forces, of these Hanna Nasir, head of Beir Zeit University, Antun Attallah and others. To sum it, the above indicates that the Arab Christians of Palestine identify with the area in all its connotations of Arabism and Islam.

4. THE ARAB CHRISTIANS : ANXIETY

The anxiety of the Arab Christian is but part of the anxiety of the contemporary Arab who is, at present, involved in a search for his identity, loyalty and heritage. ⁴² The Arab, at large, suffers from an anxiety which could be alluded, partially, to the process of development and modernisation, with all the strains and tension created due to the new economic and social relations, and the continuous Zionist challenges that the Arabs have not managed to cope adequately with. Such an anxiety can propagate certain mistrust among individuals or groups as accentuated by certain perceptions thus creating

41) R. Betts, op. cit., p. 273.

42) J. Rubeiz, "Madkhal" (Introduction), in *Al-Masseehiyoun Al-Arab*; (E. Khou-ry, Ed.) (Beirut: Mou'ssat Al-Bahth Al-Arabieh, 1981), p. 11.

an image of a subjective version of reality.⁴³ Of the events leading to such perceptions one can refer to the historical dimension, the Lebanese civil war and the Islamic revival.

4. 1. THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION

Historically the Crusader invasion of the East, being essentially a Christian one, left a legacy of bad feelings between Europe, with all the Christian connotations, and the Islamic East.⁴⁴ Also during the Ottoman Empire the Christian powers intrigued through their diplomats to gain as much influence in the area and used the local churches for that end.⁴⁵

Adding, the growth of European trade and privileges acquired in the area, the passing of trade, during mid-eighteenth century into the hands of oriental Christians with consular protection granted to them and the Christian missionaries who created or strengthened Christian communities using religion for their own end.⁴⁶ This historical background fed into creating the image of the Arab Christian as an agent to the west.

4. 2. THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR

The internal political violence that erupted in Lebanon since 1975, with the Palestinian dimension added to it, left much room for ambivalence as to the loyalty and identity of particularly the Christian Maronite. Light was shed on this ambivalence with the outright cooperation of Israel with the phalangists (prime military and political organization of the Maronites) when

43) For images see S. Sloan, *A study in political violence* (Rand McNally and company, Chicago, 1970), p. 48.

44) C. H. Waddams, "The Voice of protest from the Church of England", (*Middle East International*, Oct. 71), p. 10.

45) C. Waddams, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

46) W. Kawtharani, "Al-Masseehiyun, Min Nitham Millal Ela Al-Dawla Al-Hade-thah", (*The Christians, from the Millet system to the modern state*), (Houry, Ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 71 and Hourani, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

occupation of southern Lebanon took place by the former in Summer of 1982. Such a cooperation meant the harm and discord, that can befall the area by an organized minority, and vulnerability of the whole area to intervention. It is unrealistic to require from the Arab Muslim a comprehension of such an act, for it is uncomprehensible and unacceptable to the Arab Christian with an eastern consciousness.

4. 3. ISLAMIC REVIVALISM

Religious revivals come in cycles, and currently the world is witnessing an Islamic one. ⁴⁷ This revivalism varies from Khumayni's Islamic Republic to Libya's Qadafie Green Book; for many of the 40 existing Muslim countries with their population of 700 million have been affected by this revivalism, some have adopted less extreme programmes than others. Amongst the different versions of Islamic revivalism the Arab Christian is faced with a dilemma. The Arab Christian views with apprehension lest the more extreme and fanatic version might touch at his very being and be directed against him and not against Zionism and or the West. It is a subjective version for an interpretation of Islamic revivalism and in this respect it is important that visions should be clarified.

All resources, human and otherwise are needed for nation-building. Cooperation of the peoples in the area is required, for there is dependence on each other and what they possess in common calls for harmony rather than discord.

47) M. Curtis, op. cit., p. 1.

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