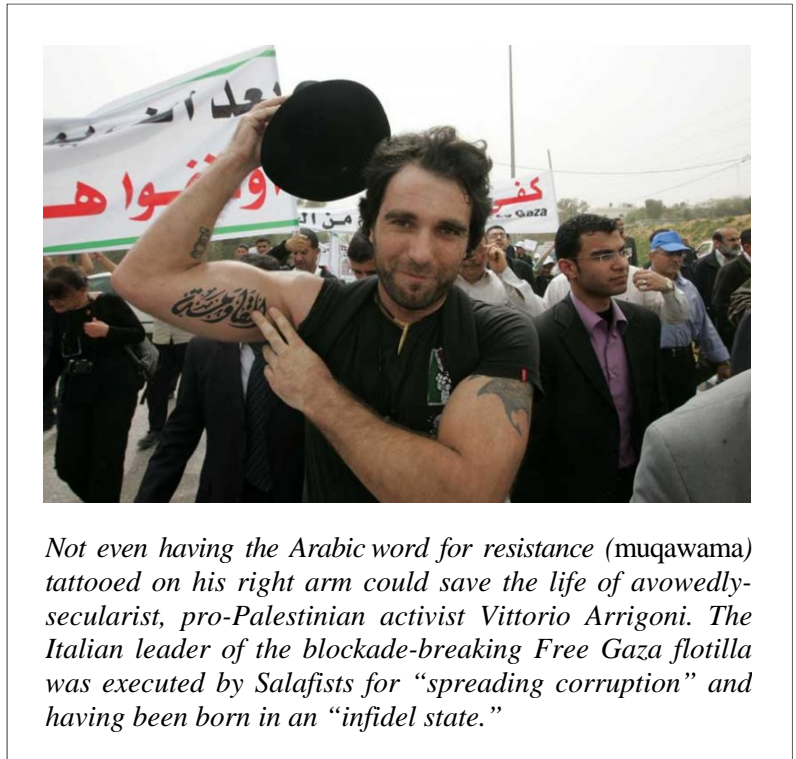


# ***Dateline: Arab Uprisings May Doom Middle East Christians***

by Hilal Khashan

In April 2011, Vittorio Arrigoni, an Italian activist and “journalist” who had spearheaded the blockade-breaking Free Gaza flotilla was kidnapped from Hamas-held territory and shortly thereafter, killed. His captors and executioners were not a branch of the Israeli special services but members of a local Islamist group, Salafists going by the name Jahafil al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad fi Filastin (Armies of Monotheism and Holy War in Palestine). The Salafists released a YouTube video in which they accused Arrigoni, a secularist, of “spreading corruption” stemming in part from his connection to his birthplace, an “infidel state.”<sup>1</sup>

“He came from across the world, left his country and family and his entire life, and came here to break the siege, and we kill him? Why?” cried one of his Gazan friends.<sup>2</sup> The answer is essentially twofold. For one thing, bias against Christians is embedded in a literal interpretation of Qur’anic verses, and apparently a sizable number of Muslims, and certainly Salafists, take the Qur’an literally. For another, a preponderance of Muslims views Middle Eastern Christians as an extension of Europe and thus a constant reminder of past colonial encroachments and supremacy over them. A survey of past examples and those of more recent vintage bears out this assessment unambiguously.



*Not even having the Arabic word for resistance (muqawama) tattooed on his right arm could save the life of avowedly-secularist, pro-Palestinian activist Vittorio Arrigoni. The Italian leader of the blockade-breaking Free Gaza flotilla was executed by Salafists for “spreading corruption” and having been born in an “infidel state.”*

<sup>1</sup> “[Vittorio Arrigoni Murdered, Islamic Execution](#),” You Tube, Apr. 15, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *BBC News*, Apr. 15, 2011.

## Coping with Centuries of Christianity's Decline

Contrary to the conventional Muslim wisdom that the Crusades (1095-1291) ended a mythic period of Muslim-Christian coexistence, the indigenous Christian population of the Middle East had been compelled by its Muslim conquerors, much before the Crusades, to either convert, be slaughtered, or accept a second-class existence (*dhimmitude*). Payback for the “humiliation” of Crusader incursion took many different shapes over an extensive period of time. One of the most horrific bloodbaths was the massive Egyptian Mamluk retribution against local Christians who had had no say in ordering European onslaughts on Muslim lands. The attacks took place in 1320 when churches throughout Egypt were destroyed on the heads of thousands of worshippers and asylum seekers.<sup>3</sup> Christian participation in the Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258 was also deemed a provocation, and when the armies of the khan were defeated in the battle of Ain Jalut (1260), the Muslim victory ushered in a “devastating reversal of Christian hopes... [and] the ... decisive collapse of Christianity in the Middle East and much of Africa.”<sup>4</sup> Over the next few centuries, Christian (and Jewish) scapegoating became enshrined in the thought and mores of most Muslim com-

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<sup>3</sup> Father Joachim Boutros, *The History of Christianity in Egypt: Post Chalcedon and the Islamic Era* (Fort Myers, Fla.: Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States, 2007) p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Colin Chapman, “Christians in the Middle East—Past, Present and Future,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, no. 2, 2012, p. 94.

munities, a debilitating tendency that only worsened as Islamic decline set in. Eventually, a once thriving and widespread Christian community was ground down but it “did not simply fade away through lack of zeal, or theological confusion; it was crushed, in a welter of warfare and persecution.”<sup>5</sup>

Along with restrictions on freedom of worship, Islamic religious fanaticism and sectarian discrimination took numerous forms including the pervasive use of offensive religious slurs and exclusion from political and high-ranking military leadership. Over time, attacks on Christian property, the destruction of churches, and the cold-blooded murder of worshippers became the norm rather than the exception. Systematic and unabashed attacks on churches were seemingly aimed at eradicating Christianity from the region because these places of worship “preserve the traditions of the Apostolic era in ways no other Christian rites or denominations do.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite the early promise of a better future that accompanied the collapse of the religiously-rooted Ottoman Empire and the subsequent establishment of a secular Middle Eastern state system, Christian fortunes as a whole did not improve. At first, Christians found themselves in a privileged economic and educational position because they eagerly embraced Western education and served in the local administration of colonial governments. But the militarization of Arab politics dampened their hopes and contributed to their continued

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East and How It Died in Africa and Asia* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 100.

<sup>6</sup> *The Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 15, 2010.

marginalization. The secularist Arab rulers did not harass their societies' avant-garde and more liberal Christians, but neither did they factor them into their political or economic calculations. As kleptocratic tendencies increased, coupled with reckless governance and poor economics, Christians were hit hardest, especially in Iraq, Egypt, and Syria.

### The Iraq War and Mesopotamian Christians

On the eve of the U.S.-led Operation Iraqi Freedom, Pope John Paul II sought to convince the Bush administration to forgo its invasion plans. The Vatican feared that war would bring about regional destabilization as well as significant casualty figures, but most significantly, open up a “new gulf between Christianity and Islam.” The pope was aware that, in the aftermath of the 1991 Kuwait war, al-Qaeda had begun to operate in the Middle East and North Africa, and he was clearly concerned that with a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, armed Islamists would start converging on the country to fight “Christian infidels.”<sup>7</sup>

These fears came to pass shortly thereafter. A little more than a year after President Bush announced the end of major military operations in May 2003, the first major attacks against Iraqi Christians took place, with five churches in Baghdad and



*The number of Iraqi Christians has dropped from two million in the early twentieth century to less than 450,000 since the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003. Horrific bombings aimed at Christians, like the one at Our Lady of Salvation Catholic cathedral (above) in Baghdad in 2010, have both decimated the community and ignited the exodus.*

Mosul targeted, killing eleven people and wounding more than fifty.<sup>8</sup> Al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadists took the lead in opposing a U.S. military presence in Iraq, perceiving coalition troops as religious predators. But as soldiers are harder to kill and military bases more difficult to penetrate, they found it expedient to target “the Christians of Iraq as an easy option.”<sup>9</sup>

In 2010, al-Qaeda’s Islamic State of Iraq vented its hate at Our Lady of Salvation Catholic cathedral in Baghdad, leaving fifty-eight dead, after more than one hundred people had previously been taken hostage during the evening mass. A dual bomb attack in Baghdad that targeted a Syriac Christian church during the 2013 Christmas mass as well as a nearby outdoor market left thirty-seven Christians dead and many others

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Doran, “How the Iraq war became a war on Christians and why supporting Syria’s rebels may extinguish Christianity in its oldest environs,” *The American Conservative*, May 9, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> *Fox News*, Aug. 2, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> *Western Mail* (Cardiff, U.K.), Dec. 17, 2010.

wounded.<sup>10</sup> Since the U.S.-led coalition offensive, an uncounted number of Christians have been killed by Islamic terrorists, their bloody handiwork including beheaded women, mutilated priests, and a 14-year old Assyrian Christian boy crucified near Mosul.<sup>11</sup> The number of Iraqi Christians has dropped from two million in the early twentieth century to one and a half million during Saddam Hussein's regime to less than 450,000 since the regime's

overthrow in 2003.<sup>12</sup>

Hundreds of thousands of Christians have sought shelter in the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. With its absorptive capacity overburdened, the region's appeals for help from the U.S. government have fallen on deaf ears.<sup>13</sup> Even in that relatively peaceful and religiously tolerant part of Iraq, Christian young men have reported being told by Kurdish policemen that "they should not be in Iraq because it is Muslim territory."<sup>14</sup>

In light of Iraq's protracted conflict and potential slide into chaos, it is hardly likely that a Christian exit from Mesopotamia can be halted. If anything, "Iraq's Christians continue to flee into exile, prompting fears that this community, one of the oldest continuous Christian communities in the world, could be facing extinction in its ancient homeland."<sup>15</sup>



*Leaders of the Coptic Orthodox Church were leery when many young Copts took part in sit-ins to demand Egyptian president Husni Mubarak's ouster—and rightfully so. In the subsequent turmoil, hundreds of Christians were targeted by Egyptian Islamists. In response, when Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi was ousted by Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (left), Coptic pope Tawadros II (right) eagerly embraced a return to secular-leaning, albeit, authoritarian rule.*

### **The Egyptian Uprising and the Copts**

Although the Copts are literally Egypt's indigenous inhabitants, their situation under Muslim rule has always been precarious. Egyptian Muslims are not only very devout, but they widely believe that Christians have no role to play in running the affairs of the country. Thus,

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<sup>10</sup> Al-Mayadeen TV (Beirut), Dec. 25, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> *The Telegraph* (London), Mar. 31, 2007.

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<sup>12</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), Oct. 27, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Doran, "How the Iraq war became a war on Christians."

<sup>14</sup> *World Watch Monitor* (London), Oct. 22, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo), Nov. 26, 2013.

for example, despite their participation in the uprising that forced President Husni Mubarak to abdicate on February 11, 2011, Copts have been excluded from political activities, police departments, security agencies, and the academia.<sup>16</sup> Muslims tend to regard Egypt's Islamization as permanent and consider the Copts a historical nuisance. According to analyst Nabil Abdulmalak, "Islamic movements frequently harass Copts with the aim of proselytizing them into Islam. They use a variety of means, ranging from incentives to outright violence."<sup>17</sup> The Shari'a-based *dhimmitude* system, denying Christians equal rights to Muslims, means that they have no future in the world of Islam. Tensions between the majority and minority populations have been exacerbated due to the "state's lack of regard for the Copts [that] has encouraged anti-Christian feelings among many Muslims in all walks of life."<sup>18</sup> While examples abound, one case illustrates the situation. Describing an incident in July 2013, Amnesty International reported that the security forces "stood by and failed to intervene during a brutal attack on Coptic Christians in Luxor ... [They] left six besieged men—four of whom were killed and one hospitalized—to the mercy of an angry crowd."<sup>19</sup>

The substantial weakening of the

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Nasser regime following Egypt's crushing defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War encouraged the Copts to become vocal, demanding equality. At the same time, their

Muslim compatriots seized upon these protests to charge them with unwarranted accusations of collusion with the Christian West. In this charged atmosphere of growing Coptic demands and persistent Muslim denial, even "al-Azhar, the world's preeminent Sunni Islamic institution, has contributed its share to this widespread hostility by publishing a pamphlet declaring the Bible a corrupted document and Christianity a pagan religion."<sup>20</sup>

Anti-Coptic violence has raged on and off since the 1970s but reached new heights during the turmoil surrounding the uprising that eventually toppled President Husni Mubarak in February 2011. Just as the annual New Year mass was concluding at the Two Saints Church in Alexandria, a massive bomb exploded claiming the lives of twenty-three worshippers.

Many young Copts had taken part in the demonstrations and sit-ins in Cairo's Tahrir Square to demand Mubarak's ouster even though "pro-democracy Copts were not the majority within their community."<sup>21</sup> The leaders of the Coptic Orthodox church did not hide their unease with their followers' participation in the revolution and publicly restated their commitment to a peaceful partnership with the regime whereby the army would ensure keeping militant Islamists

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<sup>16</sup> Menelaos Agaloglou, "[Victims of the Revolution](#)," *Think Africa Press* (London), May 31, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Nabil Abdulmalak, "Aslamat al-Aqbat wa Mas'uliyat al-Kanisa" *ME Transparent*, Dec. 14, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> "[Egypt Security Forces Abandon Coptic Christians during Deadly Attack in Luxor](#)," Amnesty International, London, July 23, 2013.

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<sup>20</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Salma Mousa, "To Protest or Not to Protest? The Christian Predicament in the Syrian and Egyptian Uprisings," *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, no. 1, 2013, pp. 275-92.

away from them and under control. The Copts demonstrated their enduring affinity with the military in the aftermath of the overthrow of Morsi in July 2013, when “the vast majority of Copts ... expressed their support for the army ... [and] the Coptic Orthodox Church ... had once again unreservedly taken the side of the army.”<sup>22</sup> The Coptic Orthodox leadership had good reasons for wishing to maintain the status quo as the fallen regime had given it preeminence in handling Coptic minority affairs.<sup>23</sup>

The uprising brought neither democracy nor stability to Egypt. In fact, the state’s machinery of coercion dealt heavily-handedly and unexpectedly with Coptic protestors. In October 2011, Egyptian army troops opened fire on nonviolent Coptic demonstrators near the Maspero building, the headquarters of the Egyptian radio and television union in Cairo. The Copts were protesting an earlier attack on a church in Aswan; twenty-five demonstrators lost their lives while state television broadcast falsified reports of armed protestors attacking military personnel.<sup>24</sup> The “Maspero massacre” led to a major disillusionment within the Coptic populace with both the uprising and its promise of placing them on par with the Muslim majority. That disillusionment grew into alarm when Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi won the presidency in a democratic election in June 2012. His victory at the polls shocked most Copts, who saw it as a setback to their hopes of constructing a liberal political system. Their concern turned

**The overthrow of Morsi has not provided the Copts with relief from violence and persecution.**

out to be justified as Morsi and his cronies tried cementing Islamist prerogatives into Egyptian law through a new constitution.

As dissatisfaction with the Islamists’ governance escalated to massive protests, Defense Minister Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi overthrew Morsi in a bloodless coup. To legitimize his action, Sisi sought to obtain broad public support, especially from Egyptian spiritual leaders. The head of the Coptic church, Pope Tawadros II, joined the head of al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmad Tayyib, and the head of the Salafi an-Nur party, Sheikh Yunis Makhyun, in endorsing the ouster of Morsi. The general mood among Copts seems to be that only Sisi “can spare Egypt from the horrors and evil of the Muslim Brotherhood ... and spare us from being subject to the attacks of terrorists who wanted to burn down our churches and throw us out of the country.”<sup>25</sup>

In turn, resentful that the vast majority of Coptic voters did not endorse Morsi’s presidency, Egypt’s Islamists feel betrayed by Pope Tawadros’ decision to support the president’s arrest.<sup>26</sup> Anti-Coptic violence has surged, especially in Upper (southern) Egypt. In one particular incident, Morsi supporters killed four Copts, but the Egyptian police took no action to pursue the killers or to offer protection subsequently to the Christians.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the police invariably take the side of Muslim mobs when they torch churches.<sup>28</sup>

The overthrow of Morsi has not

<sup>22</sup> *The Vatican Insider* (Rome), [Aug. 17, 2013](#).

<sup>23</sup> Paul S. Rowe, “Christian-Muslim Relations in Egypt in the Wake of the Arab Spring,” *Digest of Middle East Studies*, no. 2, 2013, p. 262.

<sup>24</sup> *Al-Wafd* (Cairo), Oct. 10, 2011.

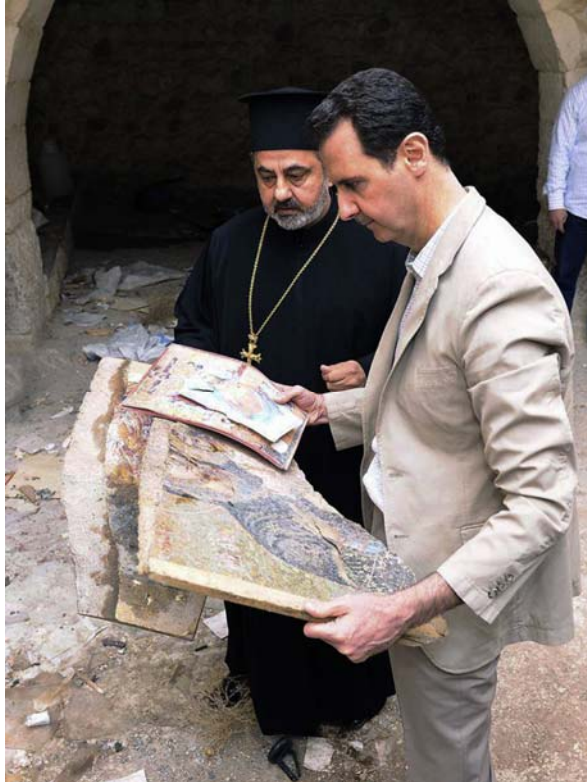
<sup>25</sup> *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Apr. 17, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), Sept. 17, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> *Al-Shrouk* (Cairo), July 15, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> *The Christian Post* (Washington, D.C.), Mar. 26, 2014.

provided the Copts with relief from violence and persecution, especially when they attempt to renovate churches or build new ones, actions deemed to be an affront to Islam. Meanwhile, the number of Copts seeking to leave their homeland has grown exponentially.<sup>29</sup>



*President Bashar al-Assad (right), looks at the damaged interior of a monastery in the ancient Christian town of Ma'lula, April 20, 2014. Anxiety about the Syrian uprising's outcome, rather than any fondness toward Assad, swayed many Christians to side with the regime. Assad's Shiite ally, Hezbollah, whose military intervention in the conflict has helped prevent his downfall, has striven to portray itself as a defender of Christians.*

<sup>29</sup> *The Telegraph*, [Jan. 13, 2013](#).

## The Syrian Uprising

The secularism promoted by both father and son Assad in Syria may not have allowed Christians to thrive politically, but it did enable them to achieve at least a modicum of socioeconomic success. As a result, Christian reactions to the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011 were mixed. Anxiety about the protests' outcome, rather than any fondness toward President Bashar al-Assad, swayed many to side with the regime.

Christian apprehensions were not unfounded. In the early days of the uprising, anti-regime demonstrators in Homs were heard to chant "Alawites<sup>30</sup> to the coffin and Christians to Beirut."<sup>31</sup> Horrific stories soon emerged about abuse of Christians by Syrian Muslims not identifying as militant Islamists. An 18-year old Christian woman fleeing Homs to Zahle in Lebanon recounted her agony:

They wanted to kill us because we were Christians. They were calling us *kaffirs* [infidels], even little children saying these things. Those who were our neighbors turned against us.<sup>32</sup>

Matters soon worsened. A nun who administered the Catholic patriarchate school in Damascus reported that jihadists occupying parts of Syria were giving Christians the option of converting to Islam or paying the *jizya*, the traditional Islamic poll tax demanded of *dhimmi*s who wished to remain alive.<sup>33</sup> In the ancient Christian

<sup>30</sup> A Shiite-inspired sect centered in Syria whose most prominent adherents are the Assad family.

<sup>31</sup> *Al-Jazeera News* (Doha), Oct. 26, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> *The Independent* (London), Nov. 2, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> *Mission Network News* (Grand Rapids), [Mar. 2, 2014](#).

town of Ma'lula, militants from the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front crucified two young Christians because they refused to accept Islam: "Convert to Islam, or you will be crucified like your master [Jesus]." <sup>34</sup> Greek Orthodox archbishop Bulus Yazigi and Syriac Orthodox archbishop Yuhanna Ibrahim were kidnapped in April 2013 outside Aleppo in an area under the control of jihadist rebels. Ironically, several days before he was kidnapped, Ibrahim told the press that "Christians in Syria are not being targeted like their coreligionists in Iraq." <sup>35</sup> In July 2013, another al-Qaeda affiliate, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), kidnapped and then murdered Italian priest Paolo Dall'Oglio in northeastern Syria, despite the full knowledge that he had been previously deported by the Assad regime for his relief work aiding victims of the Syrian military's campaign. <sup>36</sup>

Nor are the Christians of Syria receiving any real relief from the other side in the fighting. The Syrian regime has regularly capitalized on Christian fears in order to win them over but has not protected them and has had no qualms about resorting to terror, using Christians as human shields and shelling opposition forces from Christian areas in order to invite counter-fire so as to increase their sense of vulnerability and dependence. <sup>37</sup> A young woman reported being arrested in Aleppo by regime operatives who subjected her to torture and

**Arab societies cannot hope to modernize without fully integrating Christians and other minorities in their countries' political systems.**

rape when they failed to convince her that, as a Christian targeted by Salafists, she ought to side with the regime. <sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, Assad's Shiite ally, Hezbollah, whose military intervention in the conflict has helped prevent his downfall, has striven to portray itself as a defender of Christians. Upon seizing the Syrian Christian town of Sednaya from Sunni militant rebels, Hezbollah circulated a photo showing one of their fighters, wrapped in the group's iconic yellow flag, saluting a saint's statue. Hezbollah is keen on convincing the international community that, unlike Sunni jihadist groups, it is a benign religious movement committed to religious pluralism.

### **Grim Years Ahead for Christians**

It appears clear that "Arab culture is intrinsically prejudiced against ethnic and religious minorities. Islam cannot be truly permissive unless it allows other religions to exist in its midst. Animosity towards Christians is a by-product of the culture of hate and fear instilled by repressive Arab regimes." <sup>39</sup> It is ironic that Eastern Christians, who launched the nascent Arab renaissance movement in the nineteenth century and the nationalist, pan-Arab Baath party a century later, not to mention the introduction of Western liberal concepts to their Muslim compatriots, felt increasingly compelled to support "the old secular tyrants [who] abused their victims equally, whether

<sup>34</sup> *Al-Anba* (Beirut), Apr. 21, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat*, Apr. 24, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Reuters, Aug. 14, 2013.

<sup>37</sup> *An-Nahar* (Beirut), Mar. 13, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Arabiya TV (Dubai), Mar. 14, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> *Elaph* (London), June 18, 2007.



they wore the cross, hijab or skullcap” in order to secure a modicum of protection.<sup>40</sup>

The plight of Arab Christians is unmistakably bleak. While Western governments have recognized the seriousness of the issue,<sup>41</sup> the modest measures they have taken to address it are incommensurate with its gravity. Some in the international media have addressed the core threat to the vulnerable existence of the region’s Christians,<sup>42</sup> but a chorus of voices from the press protesting the marginalization and the violence is woefully lacking.

Middle East Christians are a casualty of historical processes that do not bode well for their future. Their loyalty to the state is always in question, perhaps because they have difficulty seeing themselves as part of its evolution. In the course of frequent Christian-Muslim dialogue meetings, “the Christian partners have tended self-critically to admit ... the egregious cases of violence that have been justified by religious reasons. ... However, there is no reciprocal self-critical reflection by our Muslim partners of Islamic aggression and conquest of formerly Christian-dominated lands.”<sup>43</sup>

The Arab uprisings demonstrate societal limitations rather than opportunities. Resolution of lingering issues is essential for political success. Arab societies cannot hope to modernize without fully integrating Christians and other minorities in their countries’ political systems. The first step in this direction, which requires moral courage, is to admit their mistakes instead of rationalizing them.

There may be a major role still awaiting Arab Christians to contribute to the transition of their countries from fratricide into civility, but that road is long and currently fraught with danger. Whether they survive this period of turmoil, in order to make that contribution, is very much in doubt.

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<sup>40</sup> *The Telegraph*, Dec. 23, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> “[Wolf: More Must Be Done to Protect Christians in Syria](#),” Rep. Frank Wolf website, Washington, D.C., Mar 5, 2014.

<sup>42</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor*, Sept. 6, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Mojzes, “On Truth-telling in Christian-Muslim Relations,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, June 2012, pp. 1-2.