Sectarianism and the Politics of Hate

The Future of Christians in the Middle East after the Defeat of Islamic State (IS)

Georges Fahmi
Research Fellow
Middle East Directions Programme
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies,
European University Institute (EUI), Florence

While the Arab Spring has offered an opportunity for religious and ethnic minorities to obtain their full political rights in new democratic regimes, the rise of violent Islamist groups, as is the case with the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) has put religious and ethnic minorities under unprecedented threat. This is the case in particular with Christian communities in Iraq and Syria after the establishment of the so-called Islamic caliphate in June 2014, and, to a lesser degree, the Coptic community in Egypt, targeted several times by Islamic State's branch in Egypt.

The human rights violations committed by Islamic State against religious minorities has led the international community to act militarily in cooperation with national governments and local militias in Syria and Iraq in order to put an end to its rule. By the beginning of 2018, Islamic State had lost most of its territory, including the cities of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria.

However, despite the military defeat of Islamic State, many Iraqi and Syrian Christians are still unsure about their future in the Middle East. IS seems not to be the main challenge to the presence of Christian communities, but rather one of its symptoms. The quick rise and fall of IS rule has unveiled two alarming defies to the Christian communities in the region. On the one hand, it raises doubts about the efficiency of the Iraqi and Syrian state institutions and their ability to provide their citizens with basic services including security, and on the other, it re-

vealed the fragile nature of the societal ties between the different religious communities in the region, particularly Sunni-Christian relations

Christian Communities and Political Transitions in the Middle East

Arab political regimes have often treated Christians as second-class citizens following the old Ottoman millet system, according to which Christians "are granted certain rights and Churches limited freedom and prerogatives in managing some of their internal affairs, in exchange for total loyalty and acquiescence to the deprivation of their political rights and parts of their civil rights" (Mitri, 2018, p. 117). However, the wave of political transitions in the Middle East, which started first with the US invasion of Iraq leading to the ouster of the Saddam Hussein regime in April 2003 and then the wave of Arab uprisings that began in Tunisia in December 2010, challenged this pact.

In Iraq, Christian communities, like other religious and ethnic groups suffered under the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein (1979-2003) with no political rights and limited religious freedoms (Salloum, 2014, pp.300-313). The removal of the Hussein regime in 2003 led to different views among Christians. Some Iraqi Christians believed that the regime change would offer them a chance to ameliorate their political status, while others feared the rise of the Islamic forces, both Sunni and Shia, on the political scene. In the post-Saddam Hussein era, Christians have been allowed to form their own parties and compete in local and national elections. Christian figures, such as the secretary general of the Assyrian Democratic Movement Yonadam Kanna, have been involved in the political process since

its early stages with the establishment of the Governing Council and the constitutional writing process. However, the growing influence of the Shia religious parties in the post-Hussein era, the deterioration of the security situation due to the near civil war between Sunni and Shia militias, and the attacks against Christian churches and properties by Sunni extremist groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) led many Christians to leave their country. Out of the 1.4 million Christians that used to live in Iraq before 2003, Christians are estimated in recent years to number no more than 300,000.

> Despite the military defeat of Islamic State, many Iraqi and Syrian Christians are still unsure about their future in the Middle East. IS seems not to be the main challenge to the presence of Christian communities, but rather one of its symptoms

The tragic experience of Christians in Iraq has shaped the views of many Syrian and Egyptian Christians with the wave of Arab uprisings that started in December 2010. The Church leadership in Egypt and Syria supported the regimes in place and warned Christians not to participate in these uprisings. In Egypt, the Coptic Church asked its followers not to participate in the protests against the Mubarak regime in January 2011, while in March 2011 in Syria, the Council of Bishops in Damascus issued a statement describing the Syrian uprising as "a foreign conspiracy." However, part of the Christian youth in both countries rejected these positions by their religious leadership and supported the uprisings. In Egypt, a segment of the Coptic youth established a youth movement to defend Copts' rights, known as the Maspero Youth Union (named after the Maspero area of Cairo, where Coptic youth organized sit-ins to protest against religious discrimination). Throughout the transitional period following the ouster of Mubarak the Maspero Youth Union put pressure on the transitional authority through demonstrations and sit-ins in order to

push it to end all forms of discrimination against the Copts. They also cooperated with other political and revolutionary groups to ensure a wider support for their demands. Throughout 2011-2012, the Union participated in many marches and was keen to release political statements clarifying its position towards the various political debates during the transitional period, particularly those that affected the rights of the Coptic community. Similarly in Syria, many Christian youth have supported the revolution from day one, hoping to build a new democratic regime based on freedom, justice and human rights. In cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Qamishli, and Latakia, Christian activists have taken part in demonstrations and sit-ins. In Damascus for example, a group of more than 50 Christians, including three monks, began meeting in 2011 to discuss how Christians could support the revolution. They rejected the church leadership's supportive stance toward the Assad regime and drafted a letter emphasizing the values of freedom and dignity for all Syrians, which they delivered to a number of Christian religious the leaders. Other Christian activists have worked to raise awareness among their Christian communities about the revolution and its goals. Among one such group was Bassel Shehadeh, a young film director from Damascus who went to the city of Homs to document the revolution through his videos and to train other revolutionary activists to make their own videos. He was killed in May 2012 when the regime bombed the city (Sabbagh, 2015, pp. 84-86).

The Rise of Islamist Forces

The rise of religious forces after the removal of the Mubarak regime in Egypt and within the revolutionary scene in Syria has increased Christian concerns over their future in both countries. In Egypt, the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections increased fears among the Coptic community. At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood failed to deal with Copts' concerns about religious freedom and their marginalization in state institutions. As the opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood increased, many Copts joined it as well. Coptic protesters took part in the massive demonstration calling for early presidential elec-

tions on 30 June 2013 and the Coptic Pope Ta-wadros II supported the military intervention to re-move the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated President Mohammed Morsi from power on 3 July 2013.

In Syria, the militarization of the peaceful uprising and the emergence of Islamist groups to dominate the revolutionary scene, such as al-Qaeda-affiliated Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (formerly the Al-Nusra Front), the Army of Islam and the movement of Ahrar al-Sham has fuelled fears among Christians of the al-ternative to Assad's regime, in particular those who live close to these groups' areas of influence.

In Syria and Iraq, the situation became alarmingly precarious with the increasing territorial presence of Islamic State. Islamic State could be traced back to the group al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), established by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2004. After Zarqawi's death in 2006, AQI created a new organization called Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became its leader in 2010. ISI supported the revolt against the Syrian regime and helped es-tablish the al-Nusra Front in Syria. In April 2013, al-Baghdadi decided to merge the two groups operat-ing in Syria and Iraq under the name of "Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham" (ISIS). However, some leaders of the al-Nusra Front rejected this decision leading to a split within the group between those who remained loyal to al-Qaeda and those loyal to al-Baghdadi, who left the group and joined ISIS' branch in Syria.

In Iraq, ISIS launched a military operation during the summer of 2014 and made enormous territorial gains in the four Iraqi regions of Anbar, Nineveh, Salahuddin and Diyala. In Syria too, the group ex-panded its control to include large areas of the provinces of Raqqa, Aleppo, Deir Al-Zour, Idlib and Al-Hasakah to establish an Islamic caliphate (a state governed in accordance with Islamic law) stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq.

Islamic State also tried to consolidate its presence in other countries such as Egypt and Libya. In Egypt, an Islamist group, initially known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem), which has been active in the Sinai Peninsula since 2011, pledged al-legiance to Islamic State in November 2014 and re-named itself the Islamic State-Sinai Province. The group aims to take control over the Sinai Peninsula to turn it into a province of the Islamic caliphate ruled by ISIS. However, the Egyptian military has succeeded in limiting the presence of the group in Sinai.

Religious minorities suffered greatly under the rule of the Islamic caliphate. ISIS offered Christians three choices: to convert to Islam, follow the rules imposed by ISIS in their daily lives, which included paying a protection tax called *Jizya*, or be killed. In Mosul, the group gave Christian families an ultima-tum to either follow ISIS' rules or leave the city. After they left, ISIS confiscated all Christian properties without any compensation.

The situation of other religious minorities such as the Yazidis was even more difficult than that of the Christians as they fall outside the category of *ahl al-kitab* as recognized by the Quran. While 'recog-nized minorities' theoretically face three options: conversion, subjection to the Islamic rules or death, Yazidis were only offered two: conversion or death. Moreover, Yazidi women who refused to convert to Islam were sold as slaves.

In Syria as well, ISIS issued a number of restrictions on the Christian community in the city of Raqqa in-cluding: paying taxes in exchange for their safety, and a ban on making renovations to churches, dis-playing crosses or other religious symbols outside churches, ringing church bells, praying in public or carrying arms.

Although the situation in Egypt is different, Islamic State has also targeted the Coptic Christian com-munity, accusing the Copts of supporting the Egyp-tian regime. Islamic State in Egypt has carried out three major terrorist attacks in recent years against Coptic Orthodox churches in Cairo, Alexandria, and Tanta, which left more than 80 dead. In North Sinai, Christian families have suffered assassinations and forced displacement. In February 2017, more than 70 Christian families left the city of Arish in North Sinai after receiving death threats from the Sinai branch of Islamic State.

The atrocities committed by the militants of Islamic State shocked the international community, leading many countries, including the US and Russia, to act in cooperation with national and local actors to put an end to the rule of the Islamic caliphate. After al-most three years of its rule, Iraqi forces retook the city of Mosul in July 2017. A few months later, a US-backed alliance of Syrian Kurdish and Arab fighters recaptured the city of Raqqa in October 2017. In December 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Aba-

di declared victory over Islamic State in Iraq. In January 2018, the US-led coalition against ISIS declared that 98% of territory once claimed by the jihadist group across Iraq and Syria had been recaptured.

What Is the Future for Christian Minorities after the Defeat of Islamic State?

The military defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq is definitely an important step for both countries and their different religious and ethnic communities. However, it will take more than military action to reassure the different religious minorities, and particularly Christians, about their future in the Middle East. Many Christians do not perceive Islamic State as the main danger, but rather as merely a symptom of a deeper problem. The quick rise of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq was only possible due to the weak and corrupt state institutions in place there, and has led to a deep divide between the Christian and Sunni communities. These two challenges need to be addressed first in order to ensure the future of Christians in the Middle East.

First, the quick victory of ISIS reflects the weakness of state institutions and its inability to enforce order, maintain security and provide public services for its citizens. Many Christians in Syria and Iraq question the ability of the current state institutions to protect them and offer them basic services, even after the defeat of Islamic State. As many of them argue, the military defeat of ISIS itself was only possible due to international support and the presence of local militias, Kurdish and Shia ones, and had little to do with the strength of the State.

Regardless of the presence, or not, of Islamic State, if state institutions are unable to enforce order, the lives and properties of many Christians are endangered. In Iraq, religious militias, both Sunni and Shia, have often tried to impose their rules in the territories they control. Some of these militias have targeted Christian properties, as is the case in Baghdad where Shia militias have occupied Christian properties and used their networks within state institutions to manipulate ownership contracts.

Christians in Syria fear a similar scenario with the steady *militiafication* of the Syrian regime, a process through which the Syrian regime has been subcontracting the regime's critical military efforts to loosely associated loyalist militias (Lister and Nelson, 2017). The lack of security represents an important concern for Christians living in the regime-controlled areas. Many Syrians accuse the regime of being responsible for this situation, as its amnesty in 2011 allowed a number of common criminals to be released and then recruited in the regime's militias (Becker, 2014, p.3). Even in the safe zone of Latakia, the kidnapping of young Christians has become a major concern for Christian families. Latakia is often considered one of the quiet areas, relatively isolated from the armed conflict in the rest of the Syrian territory. Some Christians accuse security officers of being involved in these crimes as a way to make money (G. Fahmi, personal communication, 22 June, 2017). In Damascus as well, some Christians who used to support the Syrian regime now complain about the heavy presence of Shia militias close to Christian areas, such as Bab Tuma. This presence has put social pressure on Christian families and, in many cases, obliged them to change their way of living. The Syrian State's inability to enforce security and order, and to delegate this authority to other Lebanese or Iraqi militias, is as much a cause for serious concern as the Jihadi Sunni groups are for Christians in Syria (G. Fahmi, personal communication, 23 March, 2017).

The military defeat of ISIS is an important step for both countries and their different religious and ethnic communities. However, it will take more than military action to reassure the different religious minorities, about their future in the Middle East

Second, the experience of the last three years reveals the fragile nature of the societal ties between the Christian and Sunni communities, despite the discourse of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians. For many Iraqi and Syrian Christians, Islamic State is not a foreign power that has now been pushed away from their territory; but

rather many of them view it as a group that enjoys local support from some Sunni sectors. In Mosul for example, Sunni jihadi groups were active long before the establishment of the so-called Islamic caliphate. According to findings from a 2016 survey led by Norwegian Church Aid on the perceptions and experiences of religious minorities displaced in the Kurdistan region, residents of Mosul were the most likely to report experiences of insults before the ISIS occupation (74%), compared with about 25% in other areas (The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq, 2016, p.15).

The quick victory of ISIS reflects the weakness of state institutions and its inability to enforce order, maintain security and provide public services for its citizens

In a conversation with an Iraqi priest, he stated clearly that Christians do not feel safe to live in Sunni areas anymore after the experience they went through under the rule of Islamic State (G. Fahmi, personal communication, 7 December, 2016). In another interview with a Syrian Christian, she claims that something has broken between the Christian and Sunni communities in Syria, "We cannot forget that we were left alone when Islamist groups took control of our neighbourhoods. No one stood by our side. Maybe they were afraid rather than being supportive of these groups, but for us the outcome is the same." (G. Fahmi, personal communication, 7 March, 2018).

Although the rule of Islamic State lasted for only three years, it has revealed much deeper challenges facing the Iraqi and Syrian Christians on both society and state levels. The military victory is only the first step; however, ensuring the future of Christian communities in the Middle East, will need more time and effort to be consolidated. On the societal level, rebuilding

trust between the different religious and ethnic communities is an important step to ensure a durable and stable peace in Syria and Iraq. Islamic State rule has left many wounds among the different religious and ethnic communities that need to be addressed. On the state level, state institutions and particularly the security forces need to be reformed to increase their efficiency and lower corruption. In addition, a democratic and transparent decision-making process that involves all ethnic and religious groups should be consolidated and all forms of religious discrimination should be terminated. The future of Christians in the Middle East is strongly connected to the future of their states and other religious communities. Hence, the struggle for a better future for Christians is the same struggle as that of all other citizens who want democracy, rule of law and full citizenship.

Bibliography

BECKER, Petra. "Caught between autocracy and jihadism: Syria's Christians hope for the implementation of Geneva I." *SWP Comments 29/2014.* Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2014.

LISTER, Charles and NELSON, Dominic. *All the President's Militias: Assad's Militiafication of Syria.* Washington: Middle East Institute, 2017.

MITRI, Tarek. "Christians in Arab Politics." In K. ELLIS (ed.) *Secular nationalism and citizenship in Muslim countries. Arab Christians in the Levant* (107-119). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

SABBAGH, Rand. "Attitudes of Christians in the Syrian Capital." In F. STOLLEIS (ed.). *Playing the sectarian card. Identities and affiliations of local communities in Syria* (71-89). Beirut: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015.

SALLOUM, Saad. *Al-Massihioun fi al-Iraq* (Christians in Iraq). Baghdad: Masarat for Cultural and Media Development, 2014.

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AND NORWEGIAN CHURCH AID. *The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq*, 2016.