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Religious Freedom in the Middle East

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Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

Nostra aetate (1965), no. 3

The present worldwide persecution of Christians

In our times, we are witnesses to a deliberate and targeted persecution of Christians across broad areas of the world. The situation is now so critical that some have spoken, not simply of “persecution” but of an outright “war against religion” in many countries of the world,¹ on a planned and increasingly global scale. It manifests itself in the form of legal oppression, social victimisation, the exclusion of the members of religious minorities from society by treating them as second- or third-class citizens, or indeed not as citizens at all, and direct physical violence. One

¹ OSCE Conference in Astana, Kazakhstan, June 2010, see: http://www.osce.org/event/summit_2010 (retrieved 15.05.2016).

argument for using the term “war” rests on the sheer number of victims involved. The 21st century is already coming to be regarded as a “century of martyrs.” Innumerable Christians are being killed solely for the reason that they are Christians.

One of the most shocking examples can be found in the Me’eter prison camp in the Eritrean desert. In this camp, where Christians are crammed together in containers, helplessly exposed to the searing heat, denied all privacy, and subjected to horrific tortures, the cruelties against them are extreme. Yet there are hundreds of other places in the world where Christians are suffering. For example in the state of Orissa in eastern India a series of anti-Christian pogroms took place between Christmas 2007 and August 2008 which must rank among the most brutal examples of violence against Christians. More than 500 Christians were cruelly murdered, while hundreds of homes, schools, and churches were destroyed and Catholic nuns raped. Worst of all, however, is the fact that the perpetrators have never been brought to book.

One could list numerous countries in which there is outright persecution of Christians, among them North Korea, Burma, and Nigeria.

The Middle East is no exception to this. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life comes to the conclusion that 70% of the world’s population now lives in countries “with serious restrictions on religious freedom” (see the Annex). Sadly, we must note that in those countries Christians are the group most heavily discriminated against. According to the OSCE — the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe — some 200 million of the 2.3 billion Christians (which amounts to 8.7%) in the world are today subjected to some form of hatred, violence, threat, confiscation of property, or other abuse on account of their religion.² In the Arabian Peninsula alone some 2.5 million Christians are oppressed, discriminated against, and persecuted.³ And this persecution is increasing rather than decreasing.

² OPEN DOORS: “Saudi-Arabien, Stand des Länderprofils: Januar 2016,” see <https://www.opendoors.de/verfolgung/laenderprofile/saudiarabien/#inhalt> (retrieved 15.05.2016).

³ Between 1,500 and 1,900 Christians composed approximately 15% of the region’s population. Cf. D. B. BARRETT, T. M. JOHNSON: *World Christian trends AD 30-AD 2200*. William Carey Library 2001, pp. 323, 327.

The present situation of Christians in the Middle East

Introduction

When speaking about the Middle East, it is essential to closely analyse the developments that have taken place here over the past one hundred years. During the 20th century there have been profound changes, which have led to an exodus of Christians from the region. Prior to the First World War, the proportion of Christians in the Middle East was still around 20%; today it is barely 4% — and decreasing. In fact the situation is changing at an alarming rate.⁴ Today geopolitical changes are reshaping the face of the region. New states have been founded and the cards of power have been reshuffled.⁵ Here are some examples of the aforementioned processes:

- The increasing nationalism in Turkey in 1915 led to the genocide of 1.5 million Armenians and between 400,000 and 500,000 Assyrians. Additionally, during the Turkish-Greek war of 1919—1922, Greek Christians were expelled from Turkey and Turkish Muslims were expelled from Greece. This has likewise contributed to a situation in which one can to all intents speak of the extinguishing of Christianity within the territory of Turkey today. Whereas in 1914 Christians still made up some 23% (or 21.7%) of the population of Turkey, today they account for barely 0.2%.⁶
- The founding of the state of Israel in 1948 transformed the situation both for Christians and for Muslims. Approximately 1.5 million Palestinians were expelled, including 50,000 Christians.⁷

⁴ Cf. the Annex.

⁵ T. M. JOHNSON, GINA A. ZURLO: “Ongoing Exodus: Tracking the Emigration of Christians from the Middle East.” *Harvard Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy* III (2013—2014), p. 44.

⁶ It is believed that during the 1948 war in Palestine more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs fled or were forced to leave their homes. It is to say that circa 80% of the Arab inhabitants left the territory which became Israel, that is, 50% of the overall Arab population living in Mandatory Palestine. Cf. N. MASALHA: *Expulsion of the Palestinians*. Institute for Palestine Studies 2001 [1992], p. 175; R. KHALIDI: *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*. Columbia University Press 1998. pp. 21 ff. “In 1948 half of Palestine’s [...] Arabs were uprooted from their homes and became refugees”; P. LEMARCHAND (ed.): *Atlas Géographique Moyen-Orient et du monde Arabe: le croissant des crises*. Éditions Complexe 1994, p. 185.

⁷ D. BYMAN, K. M. POLLACK: *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War*. Brookings Institution Press 2008, p. 139.

- The bloody civil war and subsequent violence in Lebanon lead to 1 million Lebanese leaving the country, among them 700,000 Christians.⁸
- The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 indirectly led to what has sometimes been described as the “greatest persecution of Christians in modern times.”⁹ Since the fall of Saddam Hussein and his government, there have been no fewer than 70 attacks on Christian churches and innumerable Christians have been threatened, abducted and murdered. Those who were able to do it, left the country.
- Within the past decade alone number of Christians has fallen to between 350,000 and 400,000 — little more than half the previous number. And the exodus continues.

For certain power groups related to power in the Middle East today, Christians are occasionally useful for achieving their ends. For example, when it is a matter of gaining votes in an election. Equally, they are sometimes a source of money through blackmail, proving easy victims for abduction, followed by ransom demands (above all in Iraq), since there is no danger of them retaliating.¹⁰ For others, their attacks on Christians can serve as

⁸ M. BOMMES, H. FASSMANN, W. SIEVERS (eds.): *Migration from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe: Past Developments, Current Status and Future Potentials*. Amsterdam University Press 2014, p. 199.

⁹ H. HENDAWI, Q. ABDUL-ZAHRA: “ISIS Is Making Up to \$50 Million a Month from Oil Sales,” see <http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-making-50-million-a-month-from-oil-sales-2015-10?IR=T> (retrieved 23.10.2015); J. PAGLIERY: “Inside the \$2 billion ISIS war machine,” see <http://money.cnn.com/2015/12/06/news/isis-funding> (retrieved 11.12.2015).

¹⁰ OASIS: “The Restless Middle East. Between Political Revolts and Confessional Tensions,” see <http://www.oasiscenter.eu/the-journal/the-restless-middle-east-between-political-revolts-and-confessional-tensions> (retrieved 15.05.2016). In *Communiqué* of the Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land and Justice and Peace Committee “Are Christians being persecuted in the Middle East?” (2.04.2014) we read: “In the name of truth, we must point out that Christians are not the only victims of this violence and savagery. Secular Muslims, all those defined as ‘heretic’, ‘schismatic’ or simply ‘non-conformist’ are being attacked and murdered in the prevailing chaos. In areas where Sunni extremists dominate, Shiites are being slaughtered. In areas where Shiite extremists dominate, Sunnis are being killed. Yes, the Christians are at times targeted precisely because they are Christians, having a different set of beliefs and unprotected. However they fall victim alongside many others who are suffering and dying in these times of death and destruction. They are driven from their homes alongside many others and together they become refugees, in total destitution.”

At the December 10—12, 2015 conference *Under Caesar’s Sword* hosted by the University of Notre Dame’s Center for Civil and Human Rights, Bishop Anba Angaelos, general bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria and head of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK, said that as Christians we are called to “embrace and accept out persecution thankfully,” but all Christians also have a “moral responsibility to be advocates, speaking for those who cannot speak, to be a voice in the wilderness. [...] There is a growing disregard for the sanctity of life, and that must be what offends us. [...] It is not about

a display of power and a way of making their presence noticed in the world media. In this way Christians are merely used as pawns in their regional power play and as other chess figures in a battle of foreign interests.

Yet, in all the contemporary conflicts, the position of Christians has been clearly stated: “Christians do not ask for privileges for some, they ask for rights for everyone.”¹¹ It means simply that — as the representatives of the various Christian communities in the Middle East are constantly stressing — all they are asking for is to enjoy the same rights and duties as every other citizen in their own country.

The conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims

It is a mistake to regard Islam as a religious monolith. Rather it comprises several dozen different splinter groups and factions, all fighting among themselves and all claiming to hold the exclusive vision of eternal salvation, and each of them believing that all the others will eternally merit hell fire.

Particularly crucial here is the conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims, which could well become the major issue determining the fate of the entire Middle East. In Iraq we can already speak of civil war between Sunnis and Shia,¹² but it is Christians who will pay the highest price.

There is a reason to fear the same thing for other countries of the Middle East. Bishop Samir Mazloum of the Maronite patriarch eight of Antioch believes that the conflict between Sunnis and Shia is currently the real great problem in the Middle East. For the whole Arab world is caught up in this division, he says, whether they are Shia or Sunni Muslims. But it is a problem that affects not only the Arab but the entire Muslim world,

Christians or Muslims being killed, but about life and humanity as God’s creation, and that disregard is a violation that we cannot be silent about. In response, we must realize that we have to respond together, collaboratively. [...] It’s not enough to empathize with them (Christians). We must act.” In: LATIN PATRIARCHATE OF JERUSALEM: “Persecution of Christians in the Middle East: Communiqué of the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land, In Communiqué of the Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land and Justice and Peace Committee, ‘Are Christians being persecuted in the Middle East?’” (2.04.2014), <http://en.lpj.org/2014/04/03/persecution-of-christians-in-the-middle-east-communicue-of-the-assembly-of-catholic-ordinaries-in-the-holy-land/> (retrieved 15.05.2016).

¹¹ Cf. L. G. POTTER: *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*. New York: Oxford University Press 2014, p. 83.

¹² KIRCHE IN NOT: “Vom Nachbarland mit Angst beobachtet,” see <http://www.kirche-in-not.de/aktuelle-meldungen/2011/09-29-libanesischer-bischof-angst-vor-umbruch-in-syrien> (retrieved 5.02.2014).

including Iran, which is not Arab, but Islamic, and Turkey as well. The development of this conflict, which could well become an “explosion of the entire region” is being watched with apprehension, he believes.¹³

Among all of this, it is possible that Lebanon might be an exception. Nonetheless, a fragile union between Sunnis and Shia might just tip the political balance in the country to the disadvantage of the Christians, Bishop Mazloum fears. For if the representation in the government of the country were to reflect the actual share of the population, then the Christians would undoubtedly lose out. While in 1975 Christians still made up 53% of the population of Lebanon, today they account for barely 40%. Indeed some sources suggest a proportion of only 34.3%.

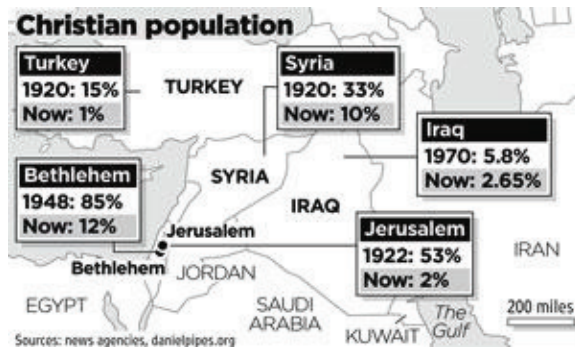


Figure 1. The decreasing proportion of Christians in the Middle East
Source: <http://www.danielpipes.org/>

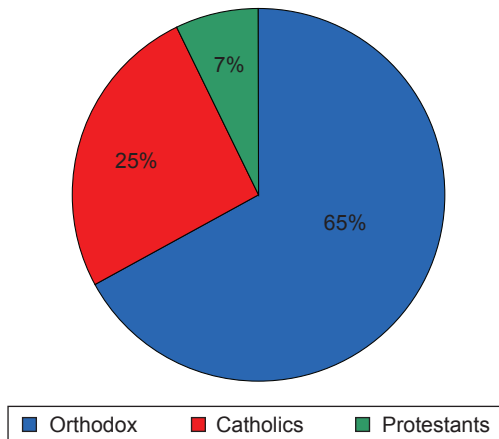


Figure 2. The percentage of the main denominations among Christians in the Middle East (2013)

Source: Pew Research Centre

¹³ T. M. JOHNSON, G. A. ZURLO: “Ongoing Exodus...,” p. 44.

Syria

In March 2011 the situation in Syria escalated, with demonstrations in Homs against the governor. On Good Friday blockades were erected to prevent demonstrators from moving freely through the streets. Shortly afterwards, seven of them were shot dead. Altogether, on this one day, it appears that over 1,000 demonstrators were killed.

The involvement of the Europeans in the ongoing Syrian conflict

In the above described situation of competing military and commercial interests, arms dealing represents an extremely profitable market, with arms being delivered indiscriminately to all parties in the conflict.

The interest and involvement of European politicians in this conflict can be better understood when we note that there are 95 different nationalities involved in fighting for the Syrian opposition, many of whom have European passports and, following an eventual ceasefire, they will in all probability return to Europe, having already committed appalling acts of violence and accordingly psychologically disposed. Such people represent a danger that should not be underestimated.

Some facts about the present situation in Syria

Generally speaking, the Christians in Syria, and in particular the Catholics, are not involved in the fighting. Yet despite that, they are precisely the group in society who suffer most in percentage terms.

Only in 2014 alone, some 55,000 people were killed in the war. Over 13.5 million people in Syrian territory are in need of humanitarian aid.¹⁴ More than 4.5 million Syrians have fled abroad and over 6.5 million people are internally displaced within Syria. These figures mask numerous truly shocking individual tragedies. For example, Maronite Archbishop Samir

¹⁴ THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION: "Syria crisis," see https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria_en.pdf (retrieved 15.05.2016).

Nassar of Damascus told us of a woman who was fleeing the bombing of her village together with her four children. After walking for four hours to the mountains and valleys, she was forced to leave her two smallest children behind on the roadside, because she simply could no longer carry them in her arms. She had to make the tragic choice between all of them dying or at least trying to rescue the two older children.

A father of a family, who had lost everything, compared his situation to that of a beetle trapped in the bottom of a container and unable to escape: "It runs round and round in a circle until it drops down and dies. That is my situation."

The Syrian health system, once the best among Muslim countries, is now virtually in ruins as a result of the bombing of the pharmaceutical industrial plants and the fact that most of the doctors have fled. Around 15,000 doctors have already left the country. Being a doctor in Syria today is one of the most dangerous professions of all, since they can be ordered to the front at any time, not only by the government forces but also by the rebel opposition. On the top of this there has been a rise of an average of 50% in the cost of medications.

Since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011 an estimated 300,000 people have been killed as direct victims of the war, a slaughter that has been condemned around the world and described as "barbaric" and "inhuman." But to this huge number of direct victims we must also add another 350,000 of so frail and sick individuals who have died as a result of the lack of appropriate medical care.

Nor must we forget that the sanctions against the Assad regime have also in some cases included medical supplies, thereby directly impacting the suffering population. In many respects, the sanctions hurt above all the most vulnerable and not those against whom they were originally meted out.

The exodus of Syrians

Again and again, the wave of victims seeking to emigrate from the Middle East has been described as a "tsunami." It was an image also used by Patriarch Gregorios III Laham, the head of the Greek Melkite Catholic Church, in August 2015, in an open letter written to young people. In it he writes that this exodus is so severe that it seriously endangers the future of the Church in Syria. "The general wave of emigration by the young, especially from Syria, but also from Lebanon and Iraq, breaks

my heart and wounds me deeply, like a mortal blow. What future will the Church have in the face of such a tsunami of emigration? What will become of our homeland? What will happen to our parishes and Church-run establishments?"¹⁵

And yet the people of Syria strongly desire to stay on in their home country. The Church seeks to help them, and there is still hope that many will return once the situation improves.

Destruction of Church properties and persecution of Christians

During the course of the year (2016) so far, more than 200 churches have been destroyed, while many Christians have been expelled from their ancient homelands, threatened, and murdered. Among the victims there have also been several bishops and priests. For example, Jesuit Father Frans van Lugt, who lived in Homs, was shot dead on 7 April 2014 in the garden of the parish centre.¹⁶

At least the abduction of two other Catholic priests ended more fortunately, at the end of 2015. The first of them, Father Jacques Mourad, had been abducted in May that year by the rebels of IS. He spent six months in captivity, but was finally able to escape with the help of a Muslim friend, whose family he had been able to help through his programme for the poor and disadvantaged in the country. This friend, who had contacts within IS, told Father Mourad how he had been impressed with the work Father Mourad had done in Qaratayn, providing food, medications, and accommodation with the help of funding from various agencies, including Aid to the Church in Need (ACN). In an exclusive interview with ACN, he later said: "What ACN has done to help us has played a great role in setting me free."¹⁷

¹⁵ C. CREEGAN, J. PONTIFEX: "SYRIA/MIDDLE EAST: Please don't abandon Syria," see <http://www.acnuk.org/news.php/590/syriamiddle-east-please-dont-abandon-syria> (retrieved 15.05.2016).

¹⁶ Hundreds of thousands of Christians have been displaced by fighting or left the country. Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregorios III Laham said that in 2014 more than 1,000 Christians had been killed, entire villages cleared, and dozens of churches and Christian centres damaged or destroyed. Cf. BBC: "Syria's beleaguered Christians," see <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22270455> (retrieved 25.02.2015).

¹⁷ J. PONTIFEX: "SYRIA: 'You helped set me free'," see <http://www.acnuk.org/news.php/600/syria-you-helped-set-me-free> (retrieved 15.05.2016).

The other abducted priest was the Franciscan Dhiya Aziz, who had been abducted for the first time in July 2015 and then released again after a week. He was then abducted again, for a second time on 23 December, and then released again on 4 January 2016.¹⁸

Iraq

Also in Iraq the situation is critical. Since January 2014, around 3.4 million people have been either expelled or become refugees within their own country.¹⁹ Added to this are the 1.13 million internal refugees already present from earlier years. Altogether some 10 million people — constituting one third of the overall population — are now dependent on humanitarian aid, yet even this figure is likely to rise to between 11 and 13 million by the end of 2016, according to information given to the European Commission.²⁰

The situation of the Christians in Iraq

Here too, the situation of the Christians is particularly tragic. In the past, Christians were present in Iraq on every level of society and represented the highest levels of literacy. Prior to 2003, the Christians, although

¹⁸ CUSTODIA TERRAE SANCTAE: “Communique of the Custody of the Holy Land,” see http://www.custodia.org/default.asp?id=779&ricerca=Dhiya&id_n=29645 (retrieved 15.05.2016); CUSTODIA TERRAE SANCTAE: “Communique of the Custody of the Holy Land: Fr. Dhiya Azziz has been liberated,” see http://www.custodia.org/default.asp?id=779&ricerca=Dhiya&id_n=29711 (retrieved 15.05.2016).

¹⁹ There are a least 4.7 million people of concern in Iraq: non-Syrian refugees (55,700); Syrian refugees (246,123); stateless (50,000); Iraqi returnees (983); IDP returnees (557,389); internally displaced (4,344,334); total (4,697,140). UNHCR has been heavily underfunded: by April they received only 12% of what they should have received for 2016 (funds requested amount to USD 558.5 million). Cf. UNITED NATIONS IRAQ: UNHCR — *Fact Sheet April 2016*. See http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=5547:unhcr-fact-sheet-april-2016&Itemid=626&lang=en (retrieved 15.05.2016).

²⁰ UNITED NATIONS IRAQ: “WFP Iraq Situation Report #38 — 27 June 2016,” see http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=itemlist&task=category&id=161:factsheets-reports&Itemid=626&lang=en&limitstart=6 (retrieved 27.06.2016).

making up only around 3% (or 5% according to some sources) of the population, provided 40% of physicians and engineers in the country. They also made up a large percentage of the intellectuals, the writers, and the journalists. The Christians were the motor of modernization in Iraq. In the year 2003 there were still approximately 1.5 million Christians in Iraq. Today, however, there are no more than 300,000. This means that over the past 12 years, on average, 100,000 Christians have left the country each year. Up until 2003 there were 60,000 Christians living in Mosul; following the events of that year there remained no more than 35,000. And today, after the city has been seized by the so-called Islamic State, there is not a single Christian left in the city.

So-called Islamic State — a threat to the country and minorities

Since 2014, the explosive spread of the so-called Islamic State has made this terrorist organization one of the most dangerous, and wealthiest, fanatical religious groups in the region.

Minorities betrayed thrice in 2014

Many Christians and other minorities in the above-mentioned regions are faced with the impossible choice between converting to Islam, paying the jizyah tax, and being killed. In practice this means that they are no longer regarded as equal citizens in the country. Even within the Iraqi government there is a continuing creeping Islamisation. For example, in October 2015 the Iraqi parliament rejected a proposed legal amendment, brought forward by Christian representatives, which sought to modify an earlier proposal whereby underage children were to be regarded as having automatically converted to Islam in the event that one of their parents converted to Islam.

Many Christians no longer see any future for themselves in the country and, still worse, some have the feeling of having been betrayed. Especially since the summer of 2014, the small remnant of Christian community in northern Iraq has a right to feel betrayed on many levels. In the face of the advancing IS troops, they were assured by the Kurdish govern-

ment and the *peshmerga* fighters that they would have been safe and that IS would not have harmed them. Many of those who were subsequently driven from their homes later told us that “the *peshmerga* told us to stay at our homes and that they were there to protect us.” But just half an hour later there was not a single *peshmerga* fighter to be seen and IS had begun to bombard their villages.

The present situation of the Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs)

For these refugees (IDPs) who are very grateful for our support there is one recurring question: “When can we return to our towns and villages?” If there is even the smallest chance that these Christians will be able to return to their former homes (in Homs, and the Niniveh plain), then Aid to the Church in Need will be ready to help rebuild the Christian infrastructure there. Last year the Christian refugees in Kurdistan, registered by the Church, totaled 13,500 families. However, since there is no immediate prospect of them being able to return home, to find work or a safe environment to live, some 3,500 of these families have already left the country.

The tragic situation of the children

All in all, there are 2 million children in Iraq who are unable to attend schools. For another 1.2 million children aged 5—14 there is also a looming danger of not being able to continue doing so. From the total number of 5,300, almost a third of all Iraqi schools have been destroyed, rendered unsafe or turned into emergency accommodation for refugees. Others have been co-opted for military use. Hence another priority is to enable these children, and above all the children of the refugee families to attend some form of schooling.

More recently there have been some positive developments in Iraq. The situation has settled to certain extent, and there is a hope that the “Shia” government and its army will be able to work in cooperation with the

majority Sunni towns and cities to regain the towns that have been taken over by IS. Collaboration of this type between Sunni and Shia forces is something of a novelty, and it could be a source of hope for the future.

The genocide of the minorities

Severe discrimination, lawlessness, and inhuman, unheard-of barbarism perpetrated against Muslim and other minorities, and in particular against Christians, have led to discussions on the international level whether the term “genocide” should be used to describe what is currently being committed in Iraq and Syria. On 4 February 2016 the European Parliament in fact passed a resolution to this effect, following a similar statement by the Council of Europe of 27 January 2016. And in March 2016 the US Foreign Ministry also defined the events in Iraq and Syria using the term “genocide.”

The 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide states the following: “This term has a precise and formal legal meaning in international law and could therefore be the starting point for an initiative to put a stop to those groups seeking to wipe out Christianity in the Middle East. It also holds out the possibility of justice and reparation to the victims.”

In a statement made to ACN, Bishop Antoine Chbeir of Latakia (Syria) observed: “There is no need to create new terms to describe what is happening to us [...]. All acts of genocide are crimes against humanity but not vice versa. And [if a situation is declared to be a genocide] the UN has clearly prescribed actions to follow with its members that do not necessarily include sending soldiers on the ground.”²¹

Meeting between the Pope and the Grand Imam

Another highly significant event was the meeting between Pope Francis and the Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayeb, of the Sunni Al Azhar Univer-

²¹ AID TO THE CHURCH IN NEED: “ACN welcomes US State Department’s charging ISIS with ‘genocide’ of Christians,” see <http://www.churchinneed.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&cid=8911> (retrieved 15.05.2016).

sity which took place on 23 May 2016. This is the most important Islamic institution in Egypt and, at the same time, one of the most renowned institutions and highest authorities of Sunni Islam. However, it broke off the ongoing bilateral talks with the Holy See in 2011, allegedly in response to the call by Pope Benedict XVI for better protection of religious freedom in Egypt, which the Al Azhar University claimed was an unacceptable interference in the internal affairs of Egypt. The Pope had been speaking in response to the bloody attack on a Coptic church in Alexandria on New Year's Day 2011, as a result of which many people were killed and injured. Speaking of the more recent meeting, Father Rafik Greiche, the media spokesman for the Catholic Church in Egypt, told ACN: "We think this has broken the ice in relations between the Vatican and the Al Azhar University [...]. The resumption of the official dialogue, suspended by the University in 2011, has not in fact been explicitly announced, but that is merely a matter of form. I fully expect that the discussions will once more be resumed."²²

Christians killed and missing

Remembering martyrs who died not as result of the war, but expressly on account of their faith, is also practiced in Syria. On 22 April 2013, the two metropolitans, Mar Gregorios Youhanna Ibrahim (Syrian Orthodox) and Boulos Yazigi (Greek Orthodox) were abducted from Aleppo. To this day, there has been no trace of either man. On 28 July of the same year the Italian missionary Father Paolo Dall'Olio was also abducted. Father Francis Murad, a 49-year-old monk, was murdered on 23 June 2013 in Gassanieh, probably by the Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra-Front.

On 7 April 2014, the 75-year-old Jesuit Father Frans van der Lugt was shot in the head in cold blood. He had been working in Syria since 1967 and refused to leave the besieged Old City of Homs, but instead decided to stay on and help the population.²³

²² AID TO THE CHURCH IN NEED: "The ice has been broken," see <http://www.acn-aed-ca.org/category/egypt/> (retrieved 15.05.2016).

²³ AID TO THE CHURCH IN NEED: "Priest killed in Syria," <http://www.churchinneed.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=7805> (retrieved 15.05.2016).

Concluding remarks

In assessing the current events in the countries of the Middle East and Northern Africa there is one thing that should not be forgotten, namely that those states declaring themselves to be “Islamic” neither acknowledge nor allow democracy. Once a country becomes an Islamic state, there will be no peace.

In Libya, for example, the initial hopes for democracy were quickly dashed. Just two days after the death of Gaddafi, the National Transitional Council announced that the sharia would be introduced as the basis of the new legal system in the country. In countries where there is no common basis for society, the sharia serves as a unifying force and as the sole source of law and jurisprudence.

However, despite all the tendencies towards greater extremism and radicalism, Islam, which is divided (with)in itself, is not as powerful as it appears to be. Its divisions make its followers vulnerable to manipulation and more uncertain. The next five years will undoubtedly be a decisive period for the fate of the entire region, in which an increased persecution of Christians is to be expected.

Yet we can also expect to witness a fragmentation and hence a weakening of Islam. We should note what Bishop Antoine Audo has said, namely: “It is clear that, faced with modernity and globalisation, the Arab-Islamic world feels threatened and is losing faith in itself and in others.”

The enormous needs of the people of these regions demand an exceptional degree of solidarity on the part of the rest of the world, in support of the people. And yet Stephen O’Brien, UN Undersecretary of State for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, reported on 17 September 2015 that the governments concerned had so far actually contributed only 30% of the monies pledged for the victims of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

Undoubtedly, the international community has put up a huge amount of money for helping the victims of the wars in Syria and Iraq. Yet, at the same time, it is also true that Christians have in many respects been neglected, partly because they are reluctant to register officially with the agencies out of fear and for other reasons. The situation has deteriorated enormously.

Father Khalil Jaar, one of the leading coordinators of the refugee relief programme in Jordan run by an association Messengers of Peace also laments the fact that the Christians are being overlooked by Western governments and that Christians and other minorities are not given equal opportunities in seeking asylum in Europe. He also points to the fact

that Christians in the refugee camps often experience discrimination and persecution. “Why does the West not do more for Christians and other minorities?” he asks. “They are the ones who are suffering the most. If Christians remain in Syria and Iraq, they risk being wiped out by Islamist extremists. And when they seek protection abroad, in the major refugee camps, they are maltreated by those who are already there.”²⁴

As Christian churches, we currently face a number of challenges:

1. We must help those Christians who are struggling to stay on in their home countries in the Middle East, in very difficult circumstances. Above all we must make every effort to help ensure that their children get a good education. Christians ought not to be more poorly educated than the rest of society but should in fact be given a better education. At the same time, Church schools should continue to be open to Muslim pupils, who will later also play a role in society. In Christian schools they will learn to respect Christian values, and this will help to build bridges for the future and provide a platform for mutual dialogue.
2. We must provide pastoral care for Eastern Christians who have emigrated and now live in Europe, America, or Australia. Here too we unfortunately only have figures regarding the number of Catholics who have emigrated, but undoubtedly the picture will be similar for Orthodox Christians.
3. Representatives of the Christian churches need to be trained to engage in a fruitful dialogue with representatives of Islam.

²⁴ J. PONTIFEX: “Targeted for elimination, Middle East Christians need rescue by the West, priest says,” see http://www.churchinneed.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&cid=8791&news_iv_ctrl=1461 (retrieved 15.05.2016).

Annex

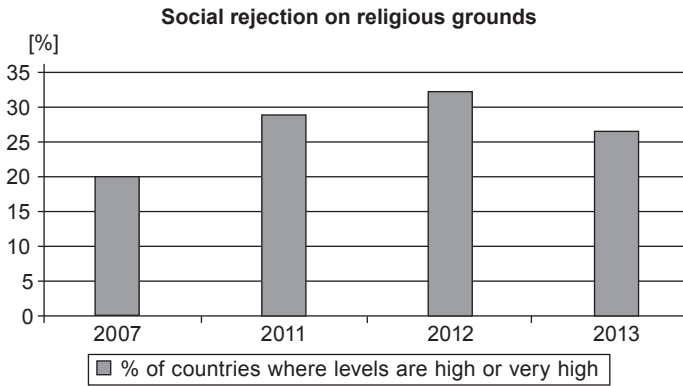


Figure A1. Social exclusion on religious grounds (countries)

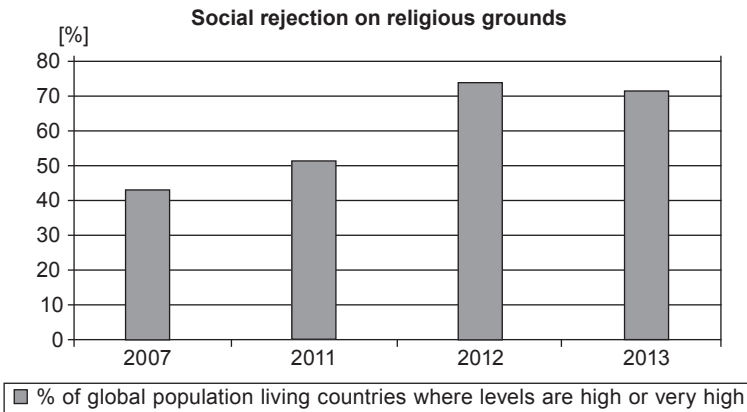


Figure A2. Social exclusion on religious grounds (population)

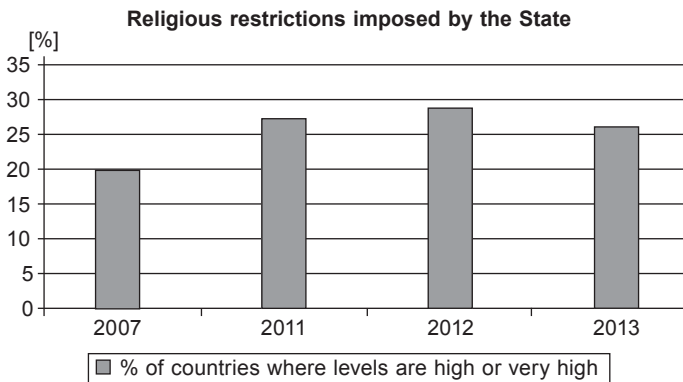


Figure A3. Religious restrictions imposed by the state (countries)

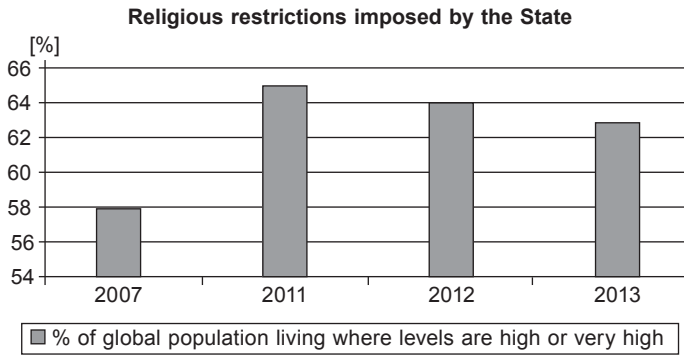


Figure A4. Religious restrictions imposed by the state (population)

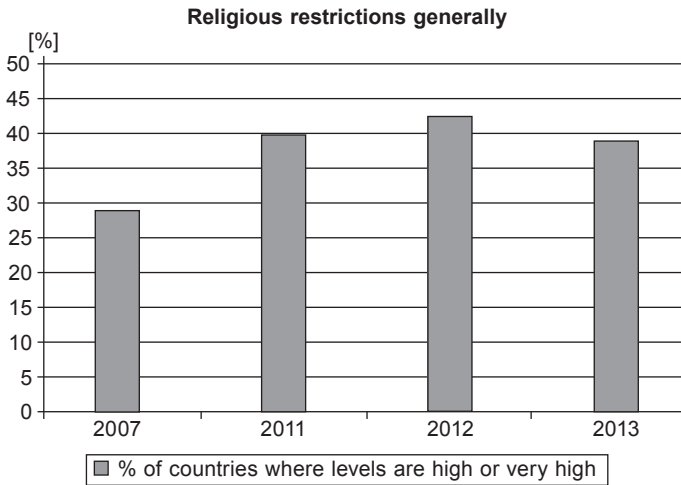


Figure A4. Religious restrictions generally (countries)

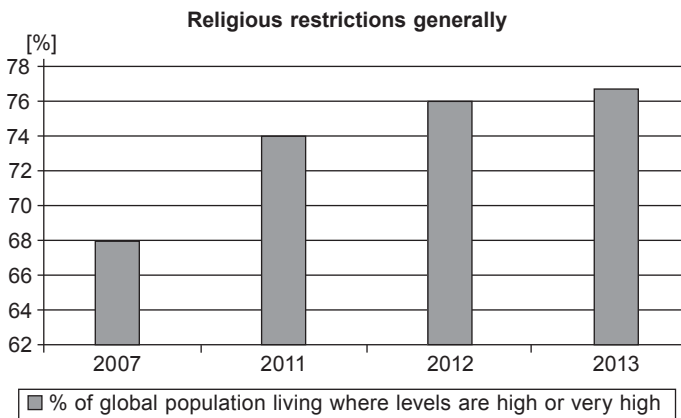


Figure A4. Religious restrictions generally (population)

Table A1. Christians by country in the Middle East (1910—2025)

Country	1910		1970		2010		2025	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Bahrain	220	0.3	8,200	3.9	163,000	13.0	211,000	13.4
Cyprus	214,000	77.9	469,000	76.4	793,000	71.8	905,000	71.5
Egypt	2,263,000	18.7	5,778,000	15.9	7,876,000	10.1	8,208,000	8.5
Iran	130,000	1.2	268,000	0.9	272,000	0.4	317,000	0.4
Iraq	171,000	6.3	369,000	3.7	448,000	1.4	295,000	0.6
Israel	38,000	8.0	79,000	2.8	180,000	2.4	160,000	1.8
Jordan	16,600	5.8	83,400	5.0	172,000	2.7	163,000	1.9
Kuwait	240	0.3	38,600	5.1	264,000	8.8	362,000	8.2
Lebanon	408,000	77.5	1,436,000	62.5	1,487,000	34.3	1,534,000	30.4
Oman	20	0.0	3,900	0.5	121,000	4.3	188,000	3.9
Palestine	39,600	11.6	53,200	4.7	74,600	1.9	60,600	1.0
Qatar	75	0.4	4,900	4.4	168,000	9.6	224,000	8.4
Saudi Arabia	50	0.0	18300	0.3	1,193,000	4.4	1,525,000	4.5
Syria	314,000	15.6	617,000	9.7	1,119,000	5.2	758,000	2.7
Turkey	3,354,000	21.7	290,000	0.8	194,000	0.3	165,000	0.2
United Arab Emirates	80	0.1	13,600	5.9	1,061,000	12.6	1,449,000	12.6
Yemen	5,000	0.2	1,700	0.0	39,200	0.2	54,800	0.2

Source: T.M. JOHNSON, B.J. GRIM: *World Religion Database* (<http://www.worldreligiondatabase.org/>). Many media reports and some academic sources mention that the 1987 Iraq census claimed 1.4 million Christians in the country. This contradicts all other sources, including data from the Catholic and Orthodox churches. See Y. HABBI: “Christians in Iraq.” In: *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: The Challenge of the Future*. Ed. A. PACINI. Clarendon Press 1998, pp. 294—304.

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ANDRZEJ HALEMBA

Religious Freedom in the Middle East

Summary

Nowadays, we are witnesses to a deliberate and targeted persecution of Christians across broad areas of the world. The Middle East is no exception to this. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life informs that 70% of the world’s population now live in countries “with serious restrictions on religious freedom.” According to the OSCE some 200 million Christians (about 8.7%) of the 2.3 billion Christians in the world are today subjected to some form of hatred, violence, threat, confiscation of property, or other

abuse on account of their religion (OSCE Conference in Astana, Kazakhstan, June 2010). In the Arabian Peninsular alone some 2.5 million Christians are oppressed, discriminated against and persecuted. And this persecution is increasing rather than decreasing. In speaking about the Middle East it is essential to closely analyse the developments that have taken place here over the past hundred years. Prior to the First World War, the proportion of Christians in the Middle East was still around 20%; today it is barely 4% — and decreasing. In fact the situation is changing at an alarming rate. According to Father Khalil, the imams play a key role in regard to the problem of the integration of Muslims in the western world, since they often “brand it as a heathen culture.” Young Muslims should in fact be able to develop into personalities and judge according to their own conscience. Islam must renew itself from within and clarify its relationship to violence. And there is likewise a need to clarify the relationship between the various Muslim groupings themselves, since all experts agree that the explosive situation in the Middle East is above all due to the conflicts within Islam (i.e. between Sunnis and Shias, etc.). And Europe too must stop being so very naive. The God of Islam is not identical with the Christian God.

ANDRZEJ HALEMBA

La liberté religieuse au Proche-Orient

Résumé

À notre époque, nous sommes témoins de la persécution délibérée et intentionnelle des chrétiens dans bien des régions du monde. Le Proche-Orient n'est pas une exception. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life constate que 70% de la population mondiale vit dans des pays où la liberté religieuse est considérablement restreinte. Selon OSCE (Organisation pour la sécurité et la coopération en Europe), environ 200 millions de chrétiens (envers 8,7%) de 2,3 milliards de tous les chrétiens dans le monde sont l'objet de différentes formes de haine, de violence, d'intimidation, de confiscation des biens ou d'autres abus motivés par la religion (cf. les données du Colloque d'OSCE à Astana, Kazakhstan, juin 2010). Seulement sur la péninsule arabique, envers 2,5 millions de chrétiens sont opprimés, discriminés et persécutés. Et cette persécution plutôt augmente que diminue. En parlant du Proche-Orient, il est nécessaire d'analyser précisément le développement de la situation qui a lieu au cours du dernier siècle. Avant la Première Guerre mondiale, la proportion des chrétiens au Proche-Orient était de 20% environ ; aujourd'hui, il n'y en a que 4%, et leur nombre continue à diminuer. Effectivement, la situation change rapidement. Selon le père Khalil, les imams jouent un rôle prépondérant dans le problème lié à l'intégration des musulmans dans le monde occidental, parce qu'ils décrivent fort souvent la culture de l'ouest comme celle « des païens ». Cependant, les jeunes musulmans devraient avoir la possibilité de développer leurs propres idées et de juger selon leur propre conscience. Il faut que l'islam se restaure à son intérieur et qu'il définisse son attitude envers la violence. Étant donné que tous les experts constatent unanimement que la situation explosive au Proche-Orient est due avant tout aux conflits situés dans le cadre de l'islam (c'est-à-dire entre sunnites et chiites, etc.), il existe un besoin urgent d'expliquer la relation entre différents regroupements musulmans. Il faut également que l'Europe cesse d'être naïve. Le Dieu de l'islam n'est pas identique à celui du christianisme.

Mots clés: génocide, déplacés internes (IDPs), persécution de chrétiens, réfugiés, liberté religieuse

ANDRZEJ HALEMBA

La libertà religiosa in Medio Oriente

Sommario

Ai giorni nostri siamo testimoni della persecuzione meditata ed intenzionale dei cristiani in varie aree del mondo. Il Medio Oriente non è un'eccezione in questo caso. Il Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life sostiene che il 70% della popolazione mondiale vive in paesi con "gravi limitazioni della libertà religiosa". Secondo l'OSCE circa 200 milioni di cristiani (l'8,7% circa) dei 2,3 miliardi di cristiani nel mondo attualmente sono oggetto di varie forme di odio, violenza, intimidimento, confisca di beni o di altri abusi a sfondo religioso (cfr. i dati della Conferenza OSCE di Astana, Kazakistan, giugno 2010). Solo nella Penisola Araba circa 2,5 milioni di cristiani sono oppressi, discriminati e perseguitati. E tale persecuzione aumenta invece di diminuire. Parlando del Medio Oriente è indispensabile analizzare con precisione lo sviluppo della situazione nel corso dell'ultimo secolo. Prima della I guerra mondiale la proporzione dei cristiani in Medio Oriente ammontava al 20% circa; oggi sono solo il 4%, ed il loro numero continua a diminuire. In effetti la situazione sta cambiando ad un ritmo allarmante. Secondo padre Khalil, gli imam hanno un ruolo chiave nell'ambito del problema dell'integrazione dei musulmani nel mondo occidentale, perché spesso definiscono la cultura occidentale con l'appellativo di "cultura pagana". I giovani musulmani devono invece avere la possibilità di sviluppare i propri intelletti e di giudicare secondo la propria coscienza. L'islam deve rinnovarsi dall'interno e chiarire il suo rapporto con la violenza. Esiste anche la necessità di chiarire le relazioni tra i diversi gruppi musulmani in quanto tutti gli esperti convenono che la situazione esplosiva in Medio Oriente esiste soprattutto a causa dei conflitti nell'ambito dell'islam (ossia tra i sunniti e gli sciiti, ecc.). L'Europa deve anche cessare di essere ingenua. Il Dio dell'islam non è identico al Dio cristiano.

Parole chiave: genocidio, sfollati interni (IDPs), persecuzione dei cristiani, rifugiati, libertà religiosa