Christianity in the Middle East: An Ancient Past, an Uncertain Future

by

Matthew Hassaine

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The continued presence of Christian communities in the Middle East evidences a nuanced reality of a religious pluralism in the Middle East often overlooked by political elites and media outlets. The Middle East, so often depicted as a homogenous, categorically Muslim region, is, in reality, a centuries-old bastion of religious diversity. Christianity has its roots in the Middle East, the very land upon which Jesus Christ himself trod. The first Christians were from this region that would eventually come to be called the Middle East, and the Middle East is home to some of the most ancient Churches in the world[1]. Christianity belongs to the Middle East, and more importantly, to the peoples of the Middle East, as much as it does to Rome and to the peoples of the traditional "Christendom". The binary assumption that the West is categorically Christian, and that the Middle East is categorically Muslim, allows political struggle between East and West to be cast in a religious light, capitalizing on religious fervor. This idea that Christianity belongs to the West and not to the East, while dating back as far as the Crusades, becomes intensely problematic in the late and post-colonial periods. In some situations, colonizing powers afforded opportunities to Christian communities in the Middle East that they withheld from the Muslim majority, creating a conflation of Christians with the colonizers and occupiers. The eventual colonization and control of much of the Middle East by Western powers and the subsequent conflation of Christian identity with the Western identity meant that Christianity had almost lost its anchor in the Middle East. The constant presentation of the East-West dichotomy had made Christianity seem like it didn't belong, as if it was some sort of foreign implant to the region, as if it was entirely complicit in the subjugation of the Middle East to Western

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[1] The largest incarnations of Christianity in the Middle East, the Coptic, Armenian, and various Assyrian Churches all date their founding within the first few centuries of the common era.

interests. Christianity was removed from the context of the Middle East, and associated with the West. This question on the belonging of Christianity to the Middle East was perpetuated by varied reasons, from a lack of historical understanding about the formation of the modern Middle East, to a willful usurpation of religious belief and difference to achieve open-ended political goals. As colonial powers withdrew from the area, handing over control to native populations, the Christian communities were faced with the task of re-inserting themselves into national life, of finding relevance in a region full of national movements, in a region full of questions about what shape the future would take. The colonization of much of the Middle East, while lasting a relatively short period[2], represented an interruption of the traditional fabric of life in the Middle East, specifically with respect to the way in which people viewed national identity. Prior to the entry of the Western powers in the region, the various peoples and confessions of the Middle East had spent several centuries living under the Ottoman Empire, and the sudden transition from rule by a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional empire, to rule by European states, then to self-rule, organized on the principle of the nation-state, represented a fundamental break from much of the history of the Middle East[3]. How were the new states to be organized? Which ethnic or religious group would rule the new territory? The borders demarcated by the Europeans created countries with ethnic and religious diversity far greater than those found in Europe at the time. Countries like Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, did not have a great deal of commonality with countries like France, Germany, or Britain (all founded on the principle of a specific unifying ethnic and linguistic identity)

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[2] Here referring to the mandatory period following the fall of the Ottoman Empire.
[3] Indeed, the region had traditionally been organized on the basis of expansive, multi-ethnic empires. The geographical area that composes the modern Middle East, has spent most of its existence in this manner.

yet were expected to operate similarly to these countries in the postcolonial period. European countries themselves experienced similar questions on identity as they moved towards the idea of the nation-state, but over a much longer period, and more naturally[4]. The Christian communities of the Middle East, already endangered by competing ideas about the very place of the religion itself in the Middle East, risk falling victim to the same homogenizing processes that took place in Europe and in the Ottoman Empire. To dispel this myth of Christianity belonging only to the West, and not to the East, we need only look to the well-documented vestiges of the ancient Christian past in the Middle East, to those societies irrevocably transformed by Christianity, and how they coalesced and interacted with Arab-Islamic culture to form the cohesive whole that is today's Middle East.

Christianity: An Integral Part of the Middle East

Christianity began in the geographical area of the Middle East, and radiated outwards from what is today Palestine in several principal directions; to the West, that is, Greece, Rome, and North Africa, and to the East; Mesopotamia and eventually beyond. These two principal directions represent the most ancient division of Christian churches and practice. The westward path of the Gospel would eventually form the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, while progress in the East would eventually form the various "Churches of the East". Christianity spread among the various peoples of the ancient Middle East, becoming geographically widespread rather quickly. However, power

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[4] Linguistic homogenization occurred over the course of several centuries in Germany and France, facilitated by the consolidation of power in both Paris and Berlin. Regional languages and even dialects were sacrificed to create a cohesive national identity. The greatest unit of diversity, linguistic difference, had to be overcome to enforce a type of similarity on the population; a similarity of vision regarding national identity and belonging.

struggles between empires would eventually politicize the infant religion of Christianity.

Institution of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire would begin a

codependent relationship between the religious establishment, i.e., the Church in Rome,

and the political structure of the Roman Empire[5]. The status of Christianity as the state

religion of the Roman Empire would continue with its successor state, the Byzantine

Empire. The Persian (Sasanian) Empire, however, never instituted Christianity as its state

religion, espousing Zoroastrianism instead. Despite the privileged status of

Zoroastrianism, the Sasanian Empire largely tolerated other faiths, so long as they

conformed to the official policy. So, in just the first few centuries after its inception, the

Christian religion is being rendered relevant and even subservient to the political

establishment. The Sasanian Empire tolerated Christianity as long as the Churches

operating on its territory disavowed any connection with the Church of Rome. This

policy is largely responsible for the first division of Christian belief between East and

West, centuries before the Great Schism of 1054. The official church of the Sasanian

Empire, the Nestorian Church, or the "Church of the East"[6] was directed to have no

contact with Roman bishops if it wished to keep the approval of the state[7]. The Church of

the East continued to expand, continuing to grow long after the Arab conquest. In its

heyday (about 800-1200 CE[8] [9]), the Church of the East could be found over an area far

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[5] Forster, 41

[6] Difficulty naming this entity stems from its sheltering of the monk Nestorius, deemed heretical by Rome, who inspired some of the theology of the Church of the East. The Church itself, however, rejects the label "Nestorian". Further difficulty is encountered in the modern period due to division among the descendants of the Church of the East. The Church of the East is the ancestor of today's Syriac, Chaldean, and Assyrian Churches. As the followers of these churches are ethnic Assyrians, the term "Assyrian Churches" is often used to address them collectively.

[7] Jugie, 6

[8] "Nestorian". *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved 14. February 2017

[9] Jenkins, 22

greater than that of the Roman Church. From as far afield as China and India to Mesopotamia, Persia, and Central Asia, the Patriarchs of Selucia (later Baghdad) claimed parishes, bishoprics, and monastic communities. The removal of the Abbasid Caliphate by the Mongols would represent would challenge the ability of the Church of the East to continue ministering to its faithful. Re-organization of the area into the Mongol Empire would however afford the Church of the East new opportunities for growth. Many Mongol leaders accepted Christianity; religious tolerance among the Mongols was high, so long as it did not challenge their political mastery[10]. Mongol occupation of China would allow the Church to re-establish a presence there. However, as the Mongol Empire fell into infighting, the Church of the East reached a low from which it would never return. The conversion of large portions of the Mongol ruling class to Islam by the 14th century would further limit opportunity for expansion. As the region's political unity largely disintegrated in the face of Mongol infighting and Turkic migrations, the Church of the East found it increasingly difficult to maintain its authority over such a wide geographical area, and the churches in volatile parts of Central Asia largely disappeared by the mid-14th century. The Church of the East maintained a significant body of believers in its heartland, Northern Mesopotamia, and India. For the Church of the East to exist, it required a unified political authority to guarantee its freedom to operate. In the absence of order that followed the Mongol invasions of the Middle East and Turkic migrations, the Church of the East couldn't continue existing as geographically disparate communities, retreating to the area where it was able to retain a majority. As the Church of the East retreated to Mesopotamia, it lost its unique aspect of universality. It became

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[10] Jackson, 97

the vehicle through which to preserve the Assyrian heritage, and it transformed from a multi-ethnic powerhouse that, at its height, rivalled Rome, to effectively a national Church, that is, to the national religion of the Assyrian people. Like the Armenian and Coptic Churches, the Assyrian Church became an expression of an Assyrian cultural identity, a phenomenon local to largely just that culture. This at times awkward and tenuous relationship between religious and ethnic identity is common in indigenous expressions of Christianity in the Middle East.

A similar relationship between religious and ethnic identity would occur eventually in what is today Egypt. The initial introduction of Christianity to Egypt represented just one more facet of an incredibly diverse society. Indeed, Egypt was comparatively quick to adopt Christianity (historians generally agree that a Christian majority was established by 200-300 CE[11]), and became of critical importance to the developing Christian faith. The persecution of Christians under Emperor Diocletian forced all inhabitants of Egypt, native or Greek, to band together and become one people, creating a uniquely Coptic identity[12]. Christianity influenced the region to such an extent as to create a new national identity. Naturally, once formed, this newly unified people clung to Christianity, and thought of it as a defining element of their ethnic identity. Indeed, a great deal of early theology came from Egypt. Difference in belief on the nature of Christ would drive the bishop of Alexandria to officially split with the Church in Rome[13], intensifying the specifically Coptic element of the Church of Alexandria.

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[11] Bishai, 145

[12] Bishai, 146

[13] The Council of Chalcedon in 451 concluded that Christ possessed two natures, and was thus both fully human and fully divine. The Coptic Church disagreed, along with the Armenian and what would become

Christianity remained the dominant religion in Egypt even generations after the Arab conquest, but was eventually supplanted by Islam, largely due to economic difficulty among Christians, a result of heavy taxation by the Muslim rulers[14]. Despite difficulty in the modern era, the survival of Egyptian Coptic Christianity for centuries after the Islamic conquest challenges the common perception and understanding of the relationship between the conquered and the conqueror. The establishment of Islam was, especially immediately following the conquest, largely due to Arab immigration to Egypt, driven partially by the desire to control the newly conquered territory, but also by a population surplus in Arabia[15]. Initially, the Arab conquerors were content to keep to themselves, leaving the native Copts largely alone (assuming tax payments were on time), but as Arabs began to comprise a greater and greater segment of Egypt's population, Copts and Arabs became dependent on one another economically, bringing the two groups into close contact. Eventually, taxes on Christians got higher and higher, driving many to convert. Interestingly enough, the relatively low level of Coptic loanwords into Arabic suggests that assimilation of Coptic converts took place very quickly and in relatively small numbers[16]. This allows us to draw the conclusion that those Copts who did convert to Islam spent little time in limbo between the Coptic-Christian and Arab-Muslim identities. Islam was seen initially, at least in the context of post-conquest Egypt, as an Arab phenomenon, and Christianity as a Coptic phenomenon. This intersection of ethnicity and religious belief, while seemingly foreign to Europe and

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the Syriac Church. These churches are referred to as non-Chalcedonian/monophysite, as opposed to dyophysite (belief in the dual nature of Christ (Gaddis and Price, 1-5)

[14] Chaillot, p. 200

[15] Bishai, 147

[16] Bishai, 150

the United States, is a hallmark of indigenous Christianity in the Middle East. Today, the Coptic identity survives only in the Coptic language, in use today as the liturgical language of the Coptic Church. Recent efforts to bring back the language have been championed by the Church, even giving consciousness to a movement to disassociate from an exclusively Arab identity. The Coptic language is an integral part of what it means to be Christian in modern Egypt, and serves to reinforce notions of ethnic diversity within that context.

The Coptic Church is not alone in its use of an ancient language in its liturgy. The various modern incarnations of the ancient Church of the East hold fast to Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ himself. The Arab conquest of Syria and the Levant found the region already Hellenized due to Byzantine domination, and thus susceptible to further linguistic change. The use of Arabic, another Semitic language with similarity to Aramaic, spread quickly throughout the region, much quicker than it did initially in Egypt[17]. With the notable exception of a few towns in central Syria[18], the Aramaic language has largely ceased to be a spoken language, and is now reserved to liturgical use. Aramaic-speaking communities within modern Syria provide primarily the Syriac Church, but also the various other Christian denominations, with a focal point, a geographical location for the expression of their faith, and with a reminder of their links to the ancient past.

While the Oriental Orthodox Churches (the Coptic, Syriac, and Armenian Churches) largely belong to or profess an ethnic identity separate from that of the Arab

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[17] Kennedy, Hugh. *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*.
[18] *Sly, Liz (2003-03-12).* "Language of Jesus clings to life". *Chicago Tribune.*

majority, the most common manifestation of Eastern Orthodoxy in the region, the

Antiochian Orthodox Church, uses literary Arabic as its liturgical language[19]. This is to

be expected in the Orthodox Church, which has a precedent of using the vernacular

language (albeit in often archaic or unwieldy forms), and expresses a spirit of universality

and orthodox belief as the one, single, universal church. The Antiochian Orthodox

Church makes no assumption about the ethnic identity of its believers, leaving the

believers free to pursue interests within the framework of the Arab national state (and

leaving the church free to pursue its own agenda, as opposed to acting as guardian of an

ethnic or national identity, as the Armenian and Assyrian Churches do).

Naturally the Catholic Church also claims to be universal, however the Catholic

Church in the Middle East presents itself in a very different way from that of the

Orthodox Church. The Catholic Church in the Middle East tends to operate on the "rite"

system. Many of the older, Oriental Orthodox (non-Chalcedonian) churches have a

Catholic variant, which, while generally retaining the same liturgy and practice as their

non-Catholic counterparts, are unified doctrinally with Rome, and accept the authority of

the Pope. Examples include the Armenian Catholic Rite, the Coptic Catholic Rite, the

Chaldean Catholic Church, and the Maronite Church[20].

The Armenian community, and with it the Armenian Church, unlike the Coptic

and Syriac/Assyrian Churches, does retain the its own language, and furthermore exists

as a political entity. The Armenian Church is tied close to the heart of Armenian-ness by

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[19] Kattan, 350-363

[20] "Catholic Rites and Churches." *Catholic Rites and Churches*. EWTN Catholic Ministries, 2007. Web. 16 Nov. 2016.

its relationship with the Armenian language. Armenia's conversion to Christianity necessitated the translation of the Bible into the Armenian language. However, up until that point, the Armenian language lacked a written alphabet, therefore, in the first few decades after 301[21], the Bible and other religious and liturgical texts were in Koine Greek and Syriac. The Church leaders commissioned a learned monk with a passion for languages named Mesrop Mashtotz to create an Armenian alphabet[22]. So, the Armenian language itself was shaped by the country's Christian identity, and the creation of the alphabet for the express purpose of translating the Bible gave the alphabet an almost sacred nature[23]. Language acts, in each of these cases, as an important reinforcement, as a visible and audible expression of a religious and ethnic diversity stretching back centuries.

The Armenians of the Middle East exemplify this intersection of religious identity, linguistic identity, ethnic identity, and even geographic identity. This ethno-religious Armenian identity can be found across the Levant, with large communities in Lebanon and in Syria. The area of Cilicia traditionally had Armenian villages, at least since the 14th century, however much of the Armenian population in Syria and Lebanon is composed of the survivors of the Armenian genocide[24]. In this era, the Armenians of the Middle East (including the historical heartlands of Eastern Anatolia) largely spoke the dialect of Western Armenian, while their Caucasian counterparts spoke the Eastern dialect. This was due to the geopolitical situation of the preceding centuries; the

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[21] 301 is the traditional date given for Armenis's conversion to Christianity, after the King's conversion.
[22] Hacikyan, 91
[23] Mashtotz was sainted by the Armenian Church.
[24] Hovannisian, 425

Armenians of the Caucasus, ruled over by Russia and Persia, were isolated from those living under Ottoman domination. This degree of separation has endured even until today. For today's Armenians of the Middle East, the Republic of Armenia is a focal point, an anchor of their cultural identity, however, it is yet too foreign. Political conditions during the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union dictated that those who ended up in Lebanon or Syria stay put; immigration to the Armenian SSR was difficult, and living conditions were initially abysmal, as the Turkish Army took advantage of Russia's disunity to grab even more land from Armenia. Conditions in Aleppo ended up being, a few years after the genocide, far better than those in Yerevan. So, the presence of the Armenian communities of the Middle East, and their general unwillingness[25] to immigrate to the Republic of Armenia, is due not only to their attachment to the space and climate of that region (for those Armenians originally from Cilicia or Southeastern Anatolia, the climate and landscape of the Levant is far closer to that of home than that of the Republic of Armenia) but also to the slight linguistic difference between Eastern and Western Armenian. Most those forcibly removed were speakers of Western Armenian, and found it easier to remain with other speakers of Western Armenian (survivors of the genocide and those Armenian communities located in majority Arab areas), than to become immigrants to a country not only under a different sphere of influence, but also with a different dialect. Return to Turkey being out of the question, and the Republic of Armenia being too unfamiliar, Armenians took to life in the Levant. The French mandate over Syria and Lebanon also gave many people the opportunity to immigrate to Europe or the United States[26]. While Armenians are tied to their communities in the Middle East,

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[25] Not to mention a general lack of resources/opportunity in the Republic of Armenia.
[26] Waldinger, 352

the overarching goal is safety and security. During the Lebanese Civil War, many

Armenian families immigrated to the United States, specifically California, and the

Islamic Revolution in Iran sparked a similar flight. Ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq

makes the collection of definitive data impossible, but general trends indicate that the

Armenian communities of these countries are being displaced, either internally or

externally[27].

The historic churches of the Middle East, specifically the Coptic, Armenian, and

Assyrian churches, all share a centuries-old role; that of guardians of a culture largely

different from that of their neighbors.

This role as the preserver of an often ancient culture or language is one that was

required for centuries of the churches of the Middle East by the political systems of the

various Muslim rulers of the Middle East, specifically the Ottoman Empire. The "millet"

system of the Ottoman Empire left the hierarchy of the churches largely responsible for

the day-to-day operation of Christian communities. This situation was most evident

among the Armenians. The Armenian Church had already positioned itself as the

preserver and guardian of the Armenian identity in previous periods of political turmoil,

and this naturally continued into the Ottoman period, with official sanction. This

arrangement, while responsible for the survival of a distinct Armenian culture and

language into the modern period, has led to an even deeper conflation of ethnic and

religious identity, even to the point that there are questions within the Armenian

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[27] Close to 20, 000 ethnic Armenians have fled to the Republic of Armenia (UNHCR).

community if religious and ethnic identities are separable[28] [29]. By giving political autonomy and authority to the Churches of the minorities, the Ottoman Empire lent a new facet to the intersection of faith and ethnicity among specifically Armenian Christians; political authority. This system, while practical for maintaining control over a large and potentially restive minority, accustomed Armenians and the other Christians of the Empire to the sight of a close affiliation between religious and political authority. The idea that the Churches were responsible for keeping alive the collective identity, memory, and culture, of their respective peoples became further entrenched under this system, making the Middle Eastern Churches even more fiercely nationalistic.

With the exception of the Antiochian Orthodox Church and the Latin Catholic Church[30], Middle Eastern Christianity is heavily tied to ideas of ethnic identity in almost every instance, intensified by the continued (if sometimes sporadic) use of the related language. This reality then presents us with a far more complete depiction of the Middle East; one that accurately displays just how diverse the area is, to what extent it is composed of and formed by its many parts. Therefore, a simple binary distinction of the Christian West and the Muslim East is simply inaccurate and insufficient.

While inaccurate, this idea has nonetheless itself shaped the way the West interacts and dialogues with the Middle East in the current period and even reaching as far back as the Crusades. From early on, Christianity in the West was united with

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[28] For an excellent analysis of the national or ethnic church and its subsequent inability to retain relevance in the modern period, see; Guroian, Vigen. "Church And Nationhood: A Reflection On The 'National Church'." *Union*

[29] The existence of a community of tens of thousands of Armenian -speaking Muslims in Anatolia, the "Hemshin" Armenians, has brought this question of ethnic and religious identity to the forefront.

[30] Small numbers of Latin Catholics are found in the Middle East, largely in Lebanon and Palestine.

political authority, and the state often enforced religious practices. Europe perceived itself for centuries as "Christendom", as the guardian of Christianity, and as the home of the definitive interpretation of Christianity; the Roman Catholic Church, while simultaneously ignoring the validity of the Churches of the Middle East. In this period of about 800 to 1200 (the cusp of the Mongol invasions of the Middle East and Central Asia), the Church of the East had just as much, if not more legitimacy, in comparison to the Roman Church[31]. The Western Crusades came at a time when Christianity in the Middle East was still very much a huge part of the local landscape almost all over the Middle East. Actually, the Church of the East benefited from the Arab conquest of much of Mesopotamia, Persia, and Central Asia. The stability of the region, ensured by the Caliphate, allowed the Church to grow in the period immediately following the Arab conquest. In Egypt, the Copts initially welcomed the Arab conquerors, glad to be finally free of their Byzantine overlords, who considered the Coptic Church heretical, and had often exerted great pressure on the Copts to accept the authority of Orthodox bishops[32]. Living under Muslim political authority, while admittedly not ideal, was not something undoable, unusual, or unheard of for the Churches of the Middle East. While being subject to the caprices of whichever individual or group held power was often dangerous, there is not much to suggest that living under the rule of the Christian Europeans would have been better. Indeed, the Church in Rome considered the Church of the East, the Coptic Church, and the Armenian Church heretical, and pressured bishops in areas controlled by Crusaders to submit to Roman authority. Even the Orthodox Church, far more closely tied to Rome in doctrine than any of the Middle Eastern Churches were,

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[31] Jenkins, 22
[32] Bishai, 146

became the target of a Crusader army. The Fourth Crusade, disruption of the Byzantine

political establishment, and subsequent installation of a Latin Empire in Constantinople

certainly did nothing to advance the cause of Christianity itself, weakening the Byzantine

Empire such that it was no longer fully capable of defending itself against various Turkic

invaders. The Crusaders, while claiming to defend the faith, concretely achieved things

that made the situation for Christians in the Middle East difficult. The Crusades began a

long process of taking Christianity out of the context of the Middle East, and placing it

within a European context. In the eyes of the Arab political establishment, the native

Christians were associated with the Crusaders, especially with respect to those who threw

in their lot with the Crusaders[33]. European adventures in the Middle East consistently

disrupted the fragile homeostasis of the region, endangering, rather than assisting the

Christians of the Middle East.

Christian Communities and National Movements

The historic Christian communities of the Middle East, the Assyrian churches, the

Armenian Church, the Orthodox churches, among others, are emblematic of a long

history of religious diversity in the Middle East, and evidence a reality far more nuanced

than that so often presented; a centuries-old ethno-religious diversity in the greater

Middle East. This diversity, this ancient Christian presence, however, is endangered; not

by the simple fact that Christianity is a minority religion in a majority Muslim region[34],

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[33] The case of Armenian Cilicia, which supported the Crusading armies and submitted to the Roman Church was an excellent example of this.

[34] Indeed, one could argue, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer does, that the phenomenon of the "national church", made possible in nations with a Christian majority, actually detracts from the theological and doctrinal substance of the Church.

but rather by the machinations of political powers (including colonial overlords), who so often use religion as political capital.

This diversity is endangered by the very ideals that were supposed to guarantee its safety, and advance the national struggle; the modern nation-state. One of the most studied examples of nation-state building can be found in the Middle East; the Republic of Turkey. After seeing the unifications of Germany and Italy and the astonishing advances made by Britain and France, Turkish nationalists began to discuss a similar national program, and their project, later the project of the Ottoman government itself, became a "Turkey for the Turks". Turkish people in the Russian Empire and Persia wanted to form a single nation, however their plan was obstructed by the fact that large populations of non-Turks laid in between the large Turkish population centers in Anatolia and Central Asia, namely the Armenians, the Greeks, and the Assyrians.

The ethnic divides of the Ottoman Empire were not as simple as in Europe however, and nationalists realized how impossible it would be to have a Turkish national state with large minority populations. The main difficulty was the geographic proximity between several different ethnic groups. Some villages were Armenian, some were Greek, some were Turkish, some were Assyrian, and some were Kurdish. Several of these ethnic groups were often present in a small area. Tensions mounted, and the Armenians themselves were not immune to the desire for their own homogenous state; Armenian Nationalist parties began agitating for an Armenian state[35], and the decision to remove the Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian populations, under the pretext that largely

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[35] Hovannisian, Richard G. "Russian Armenia. A Century of Tsarist Rule." pp. 31–48.

Armenian nationalist movements were committing treason against the Empire and could become a potential "fifth column" for Christian Russia, was taken to achieve the homogeneity of the eventual Turkish state, to carve out a Turkish homeland from the remains of the failing Ottoman Empire. The Arab-majority portions of the Empire were largely spared this cleansing of Christianity, evidencing the Turkish desire to homogenize specifically Anatolia, with the creation of a Turkish national state on its territory as the goal. However, the narrative of an Anatolia for the Turks has never been a reality; Anatolia was always split between many different ethnic and religious groups. However, the removal of the Christian communities, specifically Armenians, ended up allowing the creation of the modern Turkish state. Turks living outside of Anatolia, generally the Balkans, were often resettled in houses or areas seized from non-Turks[36], and the seizure of significant monetary assets from namely the Armenian and Greek communities facilitated economic growth in those regions[37]. The creation of the modern Turkish state, in its current form, was made possible through the Genocide of 1915, and the subsequent "resettlement" of large numbers of its minorities.

It's important to note that while the Ottoman Empire and the later Turkish Republic had little direct experience with European colonialism, both entities would be entranced by the Western ideal of modernity. The Turkish National Movement under Kemal Ataturk, while led by the Turks themselves, and often standing in opposition to Western action in the region, had nonetheless fully espoused the European ideal of creating a nation-state, founded on the unifying basis of a single ethnicity. The Armenian

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[36] Morgenthau, Henry., p 311

[37] Assets were parceled out among Turks in the area, and real estate was often given to internally displaced Muslims within the Empire, alleviating to some extent economic hardship.

Question[38] was not so much an issue based solely on the religious belief of a large minority, rather it was linked to the fact that an entirely separate ethnicity existed, with its own national aspirations that jeopardized those of the Turkish nationalists.

This idea of a distinct national identity based on ethnic affiliation seemed attractive to Ottoman reformers, who saw it primarily as a way to save a Turkish state from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. However, these same reformers failed to consider the development of this same idea. The "modern nation state" was the result of hundreds of years of development, largely through bloodshed and repression, on the European continent. In France, for example, the central government of the monarchy spent long centuries consolidating its authority, repressing regional identities in favor of allegiance to the monarchy. Europe, so quick to criticize the Middle East for religious discord, is certainly no stranger to religious unrest and even the removal of religious minorities deemed potentially subversive. The Kingdom of France used religious warfare as a way to consolidate power in the hands of the King in Paris[39]. The Arab world, specifically the Arabic-speaking areas of the Ottoman Empire, did not experience these "growing pains" associated with this system of government, nor did it come to this system organically. In my estimation, the attempted institution of this system and of the idea of a distinct national identity is partially responsible for the ethnic cleansing of the former Ottoman Empire. Naturally, this ethnic cleansing served a fatal blow to Christianity in the territory of the Ottoman Empire, which had been there since the time of Christ himself.

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[38] To say nothing of the difficulty of the Turkish Question, that is, the idea of a Turkish national belonging in Anatolia. The treatment of Armenian monuments in the period immediately following the Genocide evidences another of the principle motivations of the Turkish nationalists; erasing the evidence of the existence of people other than the Turks from Anatolia.

[39] Rae, 83

Furthermore, the Ottoman "millet" system itself was an inherently problematic way of co-existing with religious and ethnic minorities. By separating the Christian inhabitants of the Empire from the Muslim citizens of the Empire, the Ottoman leadership furthered this false perception of Christians as second-class citizens, or as a religious minority inherently inferior to Islam[40]. This classification of Christianity by Ottoman leadership, while not entirely unexpected, left Christians in the Empire in a vulnerable position. Having been considered legally inferior by their government for centuries made people question the validity of Christians as citizens of the Empire, which eventually made it easier to simply violently remove a huge portion of this community from the Empire. The previous centuries of legalized segregation legitimized violence against the Christian community. Attempts at reform did not meet much success, especially with respect to minority rights. Wars and subsequent peace treaties between the Ottoman Empire and various European powers over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries established a fairly predictable pattern of territorial concessions to European states. Coupled with these territorial concessions were often almost forcibly extracted promises on the part of the Ottoman hierarchy to improve the situation of minorities within the Empire, mainly Christians, who lacked effective representation outside of the various churches. The European powers imposed reforms such as the establishment of a representative chamber, and the guarantee of minority rights in a new constitution[41]. While the imagined result of these reforms was certainly not one dangerous to the Empire, the way in which they the reforms were imposed and "implemented" would come to be detrimental not only to the survival of the Empire's

[40] Rae, 136
[41] "*Tanzimat"*, Encyclopedia Brittanica

Christian minority, but also to the very survival of the Empire itself. By forcing reforms

concerning minorities on the Ottoman Empire, the European states were enforcing the

idea that the Christians of the Empire were under the protection and patronage of Europe

and greater Western society. This would not have been that great of an issue if the

Europeans had been prepared to focus on and actually commit to the cause of the

Empire's minority communities, however this wasn't the case. Attention was diverted

from the plight of Christians in the Middle East as Europe plunged itself headfirst into the

carnage of the Great War. A similar pattern can be witnessed right after the Crusades.

The European powers were very eager to bring Middle Eastern Christianity under the

authority of the Pope, however they failed to consider what would become of those same

people (who were essentially forced to throw in their lot with the European Christians)

after their departure. The French, British, and Russians entered a state of active warfare

against the Empire, while the German Empire officially dropped the issue to gain

Ottoman support, even going so far as requesting the proclamation of a Jihad against the

French, British, and Russians by the Ottoman Sultan, who also filled the ceremonial role

of Caliph[42]. The sudden presence of Russian troops on the Empire's Caucasian frontier,

coupled with French and British attempts to force the Strait of Gallipoli lent credibility to

the Ottoman desire to remove Christian populations, lest they become fifth columns for

their Christian "brethren". The chaos of the war itself also afforded the "Pasha

triumvirate" the perfect cover under which to execute this removal of the "other".

European attempts at the forcible institution of legal reform in the Empire, while guided

by a desire to afford largely Christian minorities a way to protect themselves within the

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[42] Karpat, 21

Empire, exacerbated anti-European sentiment in the Empire, which was subsequently

conflated with anti-Christian sentiment. Questions on the possibility of the existence of

Christian minorities as full citizens of the Empire, coupled with a desire to remake the

Empire as a Turkish national state, made the purging of Christian minorities possible.

Christianity and the Modern Period

By the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, and the subsequent institution of European

mandates over much of its Arabic-speaking territory, Europeans no longer considered

Middle Eastern Christianity inherently heretical, largely due to the fact that religious

belief or even the appearance thereof had become of secondary importance to European

society. However, this did mean that they often identified with Middle Eastern Christians

to a greater extent than with Muslims. This is not necessarily related to a specifically

religious zeal on the part of the Europeans, eager to assure the position of their Christian

brothers and sisters. Rather, the similarity Europeans found with Eastern Christians was

largely an ideological one. Because Christians were not subject to the same Islamic laws

regarding commerce and financial conduct, they were favored as bankers and traders in

the Ottoman period, which allowed many within the Christian communities of the former

Ottoman Empire to advance quite substantially. This allowed many the opportunity to

travel outside of the Middle East, generally to Europe, granting them a certain familiarity

with the new colonial overlords. Furthermore, their often high economic standing also

afforded them the possibility of foreign-run education for children. French schools that

had been established across the Middle East were considered especially attractive

options[43]. The proliferation of Western education throughout the Middle East, and its

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[43] Sakin, 59-75

popularity among Christians meant that Christians were uniquely well-placed to succeed under European colonial administration. Christians already had exposure to European thought though schooling, often spoke European languages, and some had even studied or traveled there. Furthermore, Christians were generally amenable to European administration, which they found preferable to their previous status as second-class citizens under the Ottoman Empire. All of this contributed to a sense of shared vision between Europeans and Arab Christians, especially in the Levant. This is likely also the result of their second-class status under the Ottoman Empire; intentionally kept apart from and subordinated to the Muslim majority by the Ottoman system, many Christians were unsure of their place in the Middle East, often pushing them towards a self-identification with the idea of the West[44].

This idea of a European (especially French, as the most powerful Catholic country at the time) patronage of Christians in the Middle East is visible even on our everyday maps of the region. The creation of the state of Lebanon by the French administrators of Greater Syria as a country with a quintessentially Christian identity would prove to what extent Europeans were willing to re-form the Middle East. An autonomous region around Mt. Lebanon itself had existed during the Ottoman Empire, however the creation of Lebanon included a much larger area than the traditional Maronite enclaves[45]. The territory of present-day Lebanon was considered as part of Greater Syria, therefore the disruption of territorial integrity represented by the creation of an independent Lebanon was not warmly received among Muslims within the new state. This inclusion of a

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[44] French names first names are common among Lebanese and Syrian Christians. Examples include Michel Aoun or Michel Aflaq.
[45] Harris, 173-179

substantial number of people largely unexcited at the prospect of living in a state dominated by Christians would put into question the foundation of Lebanon as a Christian country and create a demographic issue in later years.

The creation of new states such as Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, or Jordan by the European powers during the Mandate period would become just as intensely problematic for the society at large as for the Christians. The simple fact of creating states which hadn't previously existed in the region brought with it the critical question of how to create a sense of allegiance to the new state and how to create a new identity based on that state. The Arab world had existed for the previous few centuries as a function of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, with a corresponding Turkish-led administration. Before this, the Arab world had been organized as a quasi-united political unit. Even though parts of North Africa and Egypt floated in and out of this entity, the Middle East itself was generally governed and administered under one authority. The region had always been thought of as a unit, the sum of its parts, rather than the isolation of its components. Indeed, the Arab population of the former Ottoman Empire, from the Hejaz to Damascus, demonstrated the desire to organize itself on this very basis; that of a loose federation of Arab peoples[46]. This vision was shared by neither the British Crown nor the French Republic. The refusal on the part of the European powers to retain a certain territorial unity of the Middle East, and their subsequent imposition of new states would only add to the resentment of the eventual opponents of these same systems.

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[46] Mcmeekin, 288

Not only were these new states created largely without the consideration of their populations or even of the general historical trends of the region, they were to be administered under forms of government chosen by Europeans. The British installed monarchial system in the territories under their mandate. Iraq and Jordan, while the French installed republics in Syria and Lebanon. Installing governments friendly to them was, while not unexpected for a colonial power wishing to retain control, unwise. The association of these early governments in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt with the former colonial overlords ultimately made them illegitimate in the eyes of an increasingly educated elite within their respective countries. The 1952 overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy would signal the beginning of the end for the governments established by the Europeans. The French and British, wary of rising national sentiment among their own colonies, opposed this change, threatening the new Egyptian Republic, which served only to galvanize support in the Arab world for Nasser and revolution. For example, the 1958 revolution in Iraq saw the deposition of the unpopular King Faisal II, who had been closely associated with the British (who installed him as King). In an era where pan-Arab sentiment would sweep through the Arab world, Faisal was ill-equipped to effectively retain control over a population increasingly seduced by the idea of an eventual Arab unity. Being drawn into conflict with Nasser's Egypt due to its ties to Britain, the Iraqi monarchy lost much of its credibility with its own subjects, and, increasingly perceived as a way for Britain to retain control over Iraq, the monarchy was abolished, and the King executed. Political instability in Syria, with the end result of the 1963 Ba'athist coup after the failure of the United Arab Republic would also represent a fundamental reassertion of indigenous political activity and a distancing of the region from the West in general. Numerous

factors including failure to prevent the establishment of the State of Israel, subservience to foreign (European) governments, and inability to provide their populations with necessary services and economic opportunity would cause the majority of Arab society to lose confidence in their governments, making the idea of the pan-Arab endeavor increasingly attractive.

This loss of confidence with and rejection of European inspired governments in the region left the Christians of the Middle East confronted by yet another ideological shift. Revolutions and coups brought the pan-Arab ideal to the forefront of the political landscape in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, which all possessed sizable minorities of Christians. As previously mentioned, many of the indigenous expressions of Christianity found in the Middle East are not simply expressions of purely religious beliefs; several of the Churches are closely associated with a separate ethnic identity. The Armenian, Coptic, and various Chaldean, Syriac, and Assyrian Churches all carried inherent assumptions of ethnic difference, often promulgated by the Churches themselves. The question for Christians in the Middle East was now one of ethnic affiliation and belonging, as the pan-Arab movement brought with it a renewed consciousness of Arab ethnicity and sense of belonging to a wider Arab culture. Could these "ethnic" Christians find a way to integrate themselves into this national vision seemingly at odds with their own perceptions of themselves? Fortunately, this ideological conflict would not present great difficulty. Pan-Arabism was, after all, a movement vehemently committed to secularism, therefore religious identity was unimportant. Even specific ethnic identity was of a lesser importance; the whole pan-Arab idea functioned on the valorization of what united the Arab world, not what divided it. The Arabic

language was one of those uniting factors that helped to create a sense of belonging to an Arab identity. Christian communities, largely arabophone, or at the very least bilingual, experienced relatively little difficulty integrating into this new paradigm. The pan-Arab worldview, as a secular movement, was also seen as a viable alternative to overtly Islamic forms of government, and was thus welcome in Christian circles. One of the principal ideological proponents of pan-Arabism, Michel Aflaq, was himself an Orthodox Christian. His devotion to the pan-Arab ideal and its relationship to his religious identity are of particular interest with respect to the illustration of the convergence of ethnic and religious identity among Middle Eastern Christians. It is, in my estimation, unlikely that a Chaldean, Syriac, or even perhaps a Coptic Christian could have contributed so heavily to this political movement. Aflaq's religious affiliation helped, rather than hindered him, for primarily two reasons. His status as a Christian made him opposed and skeptical of overtly Islamic movements, predisposing him to embrace secularism, which became one of the major components of the pan-Arab movement. Furthermore, the Orthodox Church is the least ethnically affiliated of the Christian Churches of the Middle East, and Aflaq's status as a specifically Orthodox Christian, as a member of a religious expression that promotes universality, and not an insular ethnic identity, certainly guided his thought.

Naturally, pan-Arabism was not a panacea for the Middle East. Not everyone espoused its lofty, quasi-utopian ideal, and meaningful dialogue on the perception of Christianity in the Middle East had yet to take place. Simply declaring the start of a new, secular, society did not erase religious difference and centuries of mistrust. In simply advocating a secular society, devoid of important religious difference, the issue of integration of religious minorities was swept under the rug, subordinated to the ulterior

goal of the proliferation of the pan-Arab ideal. In failing to acknowledge that there were indeed numerous salient religious differences dividing the Arab population, in suppressing difference, an opportunity to reconcile religious, ethnic, and national identity was lost. Instead of discussing what made Arabs (and the many "ethnic" Christians) different and why that difference should be valued and how that difference could be better understood and appreciated, difference was suppressed in favor of the promotion of an umbrella-like ethnic identity. This suppression merely delayed the resolution of this question for the foreseeable future. Hindsight is indeed, as they say, 20/20.

Nor was this idea, as the effective replacement of their own vision for the region, entirely amenable to the Western leaders, who made frequent attempts to frustrate the goals of the pan-Arab leaders, often with the justification of stopping potential collusion with the Soviet Union. Indeed, the power struggle between the "West" and the Soviet Union and its client states would fundamentally alter not only the political landscape of the Middle East, but also the situation of the Christian communities of the Middle East. As aforementioned, pan-Arab style governments replaced governments put in place by the colonial system, which certainly did not predispose European leaders to co-operate with them. The reigning political ideology in the Arab World was furthermore one which disposed of a largely socialist vocabulary and worldview, leading Western leaders to conflate it with Communism and therefore with the Soviet Union, despite the fact that pan-Arabism was presented as a separate path in between these two flawed ideologies, conceived specifically for the Arab World, specifically for the region that spent so many centuries as a single political unit[47]. The Soviets, not wanting to miss out on the

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[47] Citino, 98

opportunity to leverage Western rejection of this re-organization of political thought into increased regional authority, quickly formed alliances with states like Egypt and Syria, with the stated goal of countering Western imperialism, aggression, and interference. The rejection of colonial impositions on the Arab population was already a tenet at the core of this pan-Arab movement, making these governments especially receptive to Soviet language on Western aggression. This competition between the West and the Soviet Union furthered the ideological divide between the West and the Middle East by forcing Middle Eastern governments into these boxes of "communist supporter" or "Western ally". As was so often the case, the definitions of the mighty (Communist/ Capitalist) were considered of greater importance than the very definitions the Arab World used to define itself. It is possible that this same ideological confusion sparked by the competing vision between the West and Soviet Union is partially responsible for the abject failure of pan-Arabism. As what were supposed to be democratic forms of government turned increasingly autocratic, as presidential terms began to resemble university tenures, as basic needs of the population often went unmet, and as economic instability reigned supreme, the populations of these countries increasingly lost confidence in their governments, provoking the abandonment of a great deal of Arab socialist ideals by the 1970's.

The failure of pan-Arabism would ultimately push the Middle East towards another expression of transnational identity; Islam[48]. An increase in Islamic consciousness throughout the Middle East did not inherently represent an existential threat to the region's Christians; Christians had lived as minorities in Muslim majority

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[48] Hanafi, 87-88

countries for centuries. What made finding a place for Christians within this ideology difficult was the insistence on the role of Islam as a core component of national identity, the insistence on Islam as the unique source of law within the given country, a source of law that would make Christians effectively second-class citizens. Furthermore, this persistent ideological conflict would force Christians to take a side, something generally unadvisable for a minority already unsure of its place within the wider society. Christians in the Middle East, understandably worried by the increasing relevance of Islamic political movements, react by supporting the largely secular government. As governments across the Middle East became aware of this rise in popularity of Islamic expressions of government, they reacted accordingly, imprisoning and suppressing nascent Islamic movements in their countries[49]. This suppression and subsequent failure to acknowledge the validity and concerns of Islamic movements only served to entrench both camps in their mutual distrust. Governments in Iraq, Egypt, and Syria failed to actually address these movements and attempt to co-operate with them, which did nothing but justify these movements; the government refused to accept something that was not itself, it attacked everything that did not resemble it, leaving the country's political system in a straitjacket. This caused these movements to often directly oppose the state, seeking its ultimate abolishment.

Uncertainty over the ideological future of Middle Eastern governments would manifest itself most clearly in the latest transformation of Middle Eastern politics; the "Arab Spring". Driven by a desire to reform or replace oppressive dictatorships with which a majority of the populace had lost confidence, the energy of this movement

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[49] Kepel, 83

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toppled the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and created a formidable challenge to

Ba'athist Syria. The ideas of the Arab Spring were not inspired by any one religious

creed, and began as a secular movement. It was at the removal of Hosni Mubarak that the

Muslim Brotherhood (which had existed since the 30's, but grew in popularity in direct

correlation to the loss of confidence in the Mubarak government) would come to play an

official role in Egyptian politics for the first time in decades. The Muslim brotherhood,

officially banned by the former Egyptian government, represented something entirely

unrelated to the old Egypt, a radical shift away from the autocratic government of

Mubarak. This made the Muslim Brotherhood was uniquely well placed to gain

influence, as an organized movement with no ties to the previous government. The

Muslim Brotherhood candidate for the Egyptian presidency, Mohammed Morsi, would

win a majority of votes in the first elections after the revolution[50]. The inherently Islamic

nature of his movement, and, most importantly, its translation into a political ideology,

posed a serious problem for Coptic Christians in Egypt, already the subject of a great deal

of misunderstanding. How could Copts expect to take part in the communal life of a state

organized around exclusive principles? The election of Morsi to the presidency caused

the place of Christians within an overtly politically Islamic society to be questioned.

What exactly was the place of Christianity in an Islamic society? This continued

to raise questions about the place of the Coptic minority within the larger Egyptian

society. As fundamentalist Islamic political parties gained support, and religious

fundamentalists fed their supporters a diet of misinformation about the Copts, violence

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[50] Kirkpatrick, David. "Named Egypt's Winner, Islamist Makes History." *New York Times,* 24. June 2012.

was and still is today the inevitable result. The accession of Mohammed Morsi to the presidency was naturally unsettling to those in the Coptic community, as the Egyptian Constitution was to be amended under the new president. The military coup and subsequent installation and election of Abd-el Fattah al-Sisi, supported by the Coptic Patriarch Tawadros, was welcomed among the Copts. Unfortunately, Tawadros' support of the military coup, and with it, the implicit support of the Church, backfired, as many supporters of the now ousted president took Tawadros' support of the coup as support for a secular government generally perceived as un-Islamic. This is despite the support of the Imam of Al-Azhar for the coup as well.

Further complicating the situation of the Coptic Church in the period immediately following the Egyptian Revolution was the very simple fact that the Coptic Church had quickly articulated its support of the government, and encouraged Copts to avoid demonstrations[51]. As mentioned, the Coptic Church was deeply unsettled by the prospect of a change to the status quo, in which it had already carved out a clear place and a role; it was therefore uncertain at best over this new development and disruption in the political system. The Coptic Church was part of the Egyptian elite, part of the ruling class, and was therefore increasingly seen as, at best, subservient to the Mubarak government, and at worst, complicit with the government. At the fall of this government, the Church was confronted with a new system that had been opposed to the old one; it had to find a way to work within the context of a new political landscape, one that appeared increasingly hostile. This hostility, while partially due to the increasingly Salafist dialogue and ideology within Egypt also had another cause; Coptic insistence of

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[51] Guirguis, 512

creating a sense of "other"[52]. Pushing ideas such as a separate Coptic ethno-linguistic

group within Egypt, while not entirely inaccurate, did nothing useful for average Copts.

The Coptic Church had cultivated a culture of submission an irreproachability among

everyday Copts, pairing a sense of duty to the Church with religious belief; to

successfully live out one's faith in the Coptic Church meant submission to the will of the

Church leadership[53]. As the Church continued to advocate different ways of life for

Coptic Christians, continued to create Coptic organizations, the everyday Egyptian Copt

separated from his Muslim counterpart. In short, the insistence of the Coptic Church on a

separate identity for Coptic Christians, coupled with rising anti-Christian sentiment, as a

result of extra-conservative movements among the country's Muslim population, helped

create this idea of the Copts as un-Egyptian, and therefore undesirables.

An increase in conservative exclusionist religious dialogue in Egypt over the last

few decades has left the Coptic Christians out of important national dialogue regarding

what it means to be Egyptian. Is there room for other religions? Other ethnicities? Islam

itself has fallen victim to the need to homogenize; conservative strains such as Salafism

seek to unify the body of Muslim believers in what they term to be "proper" practice[54].

The recent attempts to homogenize Islam, generally after an ultra-conservative model,

has called into question the mere possibility of co-existence with non-Muslims. Salafist

preachers, often spreading the perception that Christians are "agents of the West", or

beholden to interests antithetical to those of the national society, question even the

possibility of minority religions within their view of the state. These developments are in

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[52] Scott, 66
[53] Guirguis, 525
[54] Lauziere, 164

the process of reshaping the way the Middle East sees its own majority religion, Islam, not to mention its relationship with the Christian minorities of the region. Adding to questions about the Christian place in the national life of majority Muslim nations is the sometimes-unfavorable perception of pre-Islamic history[55]. The presence of Christian minorities, so often tied to the remnants of ancient societies, becomes problematic for those who believe everything that came before Islam was inherently flawed. This negative perception of the ancient past contributed to confusion on the place of Christianity in Egypt. The Coptic ethno-linguistic identity, as the intermediary between Ancient Egypt and the introduction of Arab identity to Egypt, was a constant reminder of something that uniquely separated Egypt from not only the Arab World, but also the Islamic World.

Thankfully, the Copts, by far the most numerous of the Christian denominations of the Middle East, numbering almost ten million[56], are in a far better situation to ensure the continuation of their presence than the Christians of Iraq and Syria are. Their numbers, while declining, largely due to a low birth rate, ensure they are at the very least noticed by their government and Egyptian society in general. Furthermore, the (relatively) stable state of the Egyptian government ensures order; while it has failed to prevent bombing attacks against Coptic Churches, the country is not embroiled in open warfare on its own territory, as are Syria and Iraq. Egypt has the advantage of being far

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[55] Even the term in Arabic for the period before the revelation of the Quran, "Al-Jahiliyah", implies that the period was one bereft of divine guidance, a period of ignorance. While the term refers specifically to the Arab people before Islam, it presents the perception of the religious establishment towards the pre-Islamic past.

[56] Abdel Rahman Youssef (30 September 2012). "Egyptian Copts: It's All in the Number". Al-Akhbar English.

more ethnically and religiously homogenous than Iraq or Syria; the vast majority of Muslims are Sunni, and the vast majority of Christians are Copts. This greater coherence in society meant that Copts saw themselves are were seen as Egyptians. Further bringing Copts and Muslims closer together as Egyptians was a general similarity in the often poor economic situation of Egypt; living through difficult economic conditions as one group brings people together, irrespective of religion. This coherence is endangered by religious fundamentalist attempting to merge political and religious systems.

In Syria, discontent with the autocratic rule of Bashar Al-Assad would manifest itself in large-scale protests in 2011, in a manner at first largely similar to Egypt. However, the situation in Syria was colored by an additional factor of complexity that the Egyptian Revolution largely lacked; an ethnic and religious diversity comprising several different expressions of Islam[57]. Progressive repression of the Sunni majority (and continued imposition of a political ideology with which it disagreed) by the governing Alawite minority would spark the resentment of a sizable portion of the largest single religious group in Syria. Here, as in Egypt, the movement to overthrow the government was initially led by the educated, and was devoid of goals or political vision overtly tied to any one religion. However, as the government cracked down, and civil war spread across the country, the conflict began to take on a religious and ethnic nature[58]. The government had for many decades sought to be the only force in national communal life. To do this, it suppressed any other organism that didn't submit itself to the government. This meant that, when the government was directly challenged, when efforts were made

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[57] Abboud, 17
[58] Abboud, 18

to change the system, and when the situation became a military conflict, citizens uncertain of the government's ability to maintain relevance with all Syrians, fell back on the next greatest unit of affiliation; religious and ethnic groups, rendering the conflict more and more sectarian. In a sectarian conflict, the Christians of Syria, as in Iraq, simply did not possess the resources to do anything more than occasionally man checkpoints on roads leading to Christian villages; the support of another group became necessary to guarantee the safety of Christians. This approach, while unfortunately necessary, renders the situation even more precarious; it allows Christians to be cast as a sect complicit with the government, and therefore potentially deserving of punishment as such. Those who began the revolution, perhaps in the expectation that Assad would give into their demands as Mubarak had, were ill-equipped to fight the government on the battlefield. Defections from the Army would give necessary support to the rebels[59]. The failure on the part of either side to quickly resolve the conflict and avoid a prolonged civil war was largely responsible for the infiltration of foreign elements into Syria. The arrival of Hezbollah, ostensibly to protect the Lebanese frontier, deepened the sectarian nature of the conflict, feeding Sunni fears about Shia/Alawi domination. Sunni-majority states, largely in the Gulf, found the continuance of Alawi and Shi'ite domination of the Sunni population unacceptable, supporting rebel factions such as the Free Syrian Army and various other Sunni militias (some with highly questionable affiliations)[60]. What began as a movement to free the country of an autocratic system became essentially a proxy war, with the largely Sunni opposition fighting for the chance to determine the future of the country, and the Government fighting to preserve itself. At this point in the conflict, so

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[59] Abboud, 65
[60] Abboud, 88

many abuses have been committed by the government and its allies that retribution against the Alawi and the Shi'a is a possibility, rendering the government even more unflinching in its devotion to seeing this war through to the bitter end. Unfortunately, Syrian Christians are caught in between the warring parties in Syria. Syrian Christians are also looking to maintain their place in Syrian society, their place as part of a sort of coalition of minorities, and support the government to maintain this place. Syrian Christians are furthermore pushed towards, at the least, a tacit support of the government due to the religiously conservative nature of much of the opposition. The capture of Christian villages by Al-Qaeda affiliates illustrated the danger the opposition movement posed to Syrian Christians, as Christians were expelled, taken prisoner, or murdered. The capture of the town of Ma'aloula by Daesh in brought the difficult situation for Syria's Christians into the global conscience[61].

The appearance of groups such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda affiliates like is not linked to any real, concretely religious expression or interpretation of Islam. Rather, the terrain was made ripe for the appearance of violent ideology due primarily to both the lack of an effective, unified, political ideology, and to chaos instigated by Western intervention. While religious difference has often been used (across the globe) to legitimize violence, it is my opinion that the spread of groups like Daesh and al-Qaeda is linked not to the religion of Islam itself, but to exclusionary practice by certain governments, fostering a sense of disenfranchisement and discontent with the status quo across sometimes large segments of the population. To take the example of both Syria and Iraq, terrorist groups

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[61] Bowen, Jeremy "Battle for Syria Christian town of Maaloula continues." *BBC News,* 11 September, 2013,

grew in relevance in correlation with political instability and repression. The outbreak of war in Syria, and the often brutal repression of rebellion by the government succeeded in further alienating the majority of the Syrian population from its government, resulting in increased support for rebel groups, even those affiliated with al-Qaeda. Quite expectedly, the breakdown of law and order in Syria allowed Daech to capitalize on the disunity of rebel factions and seize large swathes of Syrian territory. In Iraq, the absence of effective government in the wake of the American invasion and subsequent occupation left the country extremely vulnerable to the proliferation of terrorist groups. The installation of a democracy by the Americans, similar to their own, was not an effective solution for Iraq; while aimed at providing Iraqis with democratic rights, the result became a sort of tyranny of the majority[62]. This inherent flaw in democracy, while not so problematic in largely homogenous European countries or even America, posed an immense problem for the nascent "free" Iraq. Furthermore, the fact remains that, in Middle Eastern societies, specifically in Iraq, religious affiliation plays a far more important role than it does it European or American society. For the American government to think that democracy wouldn't organize itself around religious fault lines was incredibly naïve. The Shia of Iraq had themselves been subject to brutal oppression under the previous government, and were understandably slow to forget. A democratic government which awarded the Shi'a far greater rule than in the previous system increased the sense of exclusion and disenfranchisement among the country's Sunnis. When any one group is excluded from political discourse, that group loses confidence in the government. The American Army and military administration was poorly equipped to stop sectarian violence, and

[62] Beehner, Lionel. "Iraq's Tyranny of the Majority." *Council on Foreign Relations,* 11 May 2007,

retribution was carried out by both sides for past injustices, and a vicious cycle of attacks and reprisals was established. It's therefore in this chaotic system that Iraqi Christians were expected to survive and be able to maintain their traditions. This would be impossible. For Christians to live safely as minorities, for them to be integrated into a national vision, a certain order must exist. The Christian communities of Iraq and Syria are simply too small to effectively defend their own interests in time of national upheaval as Sunnis, Shias, Alawis, and Kurds have and continue to do, almost requiring them to seek the protection of one of the other communities. The reason for the difficult situation of all minorities, not just the Christians, is the failure of successive political systems and organizations to provide and encourage meaningful discourse on national identity and belonging.

Christians from northern Iraq, having fled the advance of Daesh across their traditional homeland, the plains of Ninevah, are already established in refugee camps or cities in the Kurdish-controlled area to their northeast[63]. Many of their number no longer wish to remain in their ancestral homeland, looking to places like Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States as safer, more attractive, options. Will this latest violent conflict in Iraq and Syria spur Christians to permanently abandon the lands that the Apostles personally evangelized? A high rate of emigration and a lower birth rate were already serious problems faced by Christian communities in the Middle East in the years before the American invasion of Iraq and the Syria Revolution, and the number of Christians in those countries was declining accordingly. This exodus of Christians from their homes, making them either internally displaced persons or refugees in foreign

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[63] Caldwell, Simon. "Iraqi Christians 'dying in crowded refugee camps'" *Catholic Herald,* 12 August 2014.

countries, calls into question the possibility of sustaining a Christian presence in Iraq and Syria. Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syriac Christians, found in eastern Syria and Northern Iraq, often already removed from their homes and towns, have the highest propensity to leave. Failure on the part of the Iraqi and Syrian governments to recapture and restore order to areas once inhabited by Christians will increase the emigration rate; prolongation of conflict only divides the society further, making it even more difficult to return home and re-establish communities. There is a conscious will among the Assyrians to remain in their ancestral homeland, however it becomes difficult to maintain this will in face of the possibility of continued persecution. Existence in diaspora would present several problems for those hoping to see the Christian traditions of the Middle East survive. While living as a minority is an age-old paradigm for Assyrian Christians, living as a minority in the context of a diaspora presents further challenge. Prior to the outbreak of war, traditionally Christian villages, towns, and regions could be found in parts of Syria and Iraq. Leaving those areas permanently, in favor of emigration, would no longer afford them the opportunity to live in constant contact with other members of their community. The existence of these villages, in often geographically isolated areas, allowed Christians to retain and preserve their faith, traditions, and sometimes their own languages, an opportunity they would not have in the United States or another Western country. Nor would they be able to take advantage of the importance of religious affiliation and belief that exists in the Middle East. This idea of having a set religious affiliation, and rarely marrying outside of it, allowed Christians to live as distinct communities within large cities and avoid being subsumed into the majority. Furthermore, ethnic and religious identity are often unified; the expression of ethnic

identity within the expression of religious identity is the only remaining relevance of the ethnic identity. Loss of that specific religious identity would signify the entire loss of whatever remained of a separate ethnic identity. Instilling a sense of religious and ethnic identity in later generations of an Assyrian diaspora would be especially difficult in Western societies which place far less importance on religious affiliation. Diaspora communities would have to be sufficiently large and sufficiently dense in concentration for Assyrian Christians to even attempt to retain tangible elements of their previous culture and religious practices past the first few generations. Other diaspora communities in the West, like the Armenians in the United States, only retained a distinctly Armenian identity in areas with a relatively high saturation of Armenians, which was refreshed by successive waves of Armenian immigration[64]. It is doubtful that Assyrians, whose numbers are far smaller than the Armenians, would be able to benefit from successive waves of immigration. It's likely that little of the Assyrian Christian identity would survive more than a few generations in diaspora.

Perhaps one of the most striking consequences of persecution of Christians in the Middle East is a corresponding increase in church attendance (when possible). This persecution acts almost as a rite of intensification within the community, drawing it closer together, strengthening its identity. One could perhaps argue that the message of Christianity is at its most appealing, its most powerful, in time of oppression and violence. Observant Christians are called to forgive those who have wronged them. Such a sentiment is of critical importance in today's Middle East. To break the cycle of

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[64] Initial numbers of Armenians fleeing the Ottoman Empire from 1890-1920 were joined by Lebanese Armenians fleeing the Lebanese Civil War from 1975-1990, Iranian Armenians fleeing following the Iranian Revolution and resulting political uncertainty in 1979-1980, and by Soviet Armenians finally allowed to leave the Soviet Union as its dissolution in 1991.

sectarian violence that engulfed Iraq and Syria, this ability to forgive will be a necessary reaction; a chain of violence is only broken when one party refuses to respond.

If Christianity is to survive in Iraq and Syria, it is imperative that the rule of law be re-established as soon as possible and that an inclusive political dialogue be established. Furthermore, we should work to change the very perception towards Christianity itself in the Middle East. The religion of Christianity as a collective was just as much defined by its development in the East as it was by its Western branches; instilling this idea, that Christianity is indeed native to the Middle East, and not some Western importation, not some potentially subversive ideology is of critical importance to the continued existence of Christians in the Middle East.

In conclusion, the experience of Christians in the Middle East is defined by the shared experience of an ancient past and an uncertain future. Middle Eastern Christianity was instrumental in shaping and forming what would eventually become the modern Middle East. Christian communities acted as a bridge between this ancient past and the new reality; that of the Arab conquest, affording this new power structure the opportunity to situate itself within the historical context of the region and dialogue with the greater world. Contrary to the popular opinion that the presence of Islam is simply the sole reason for the difficult situation of Christianity in the Middle East, the reality is far more complex. While its certainly true that living under the religious law of another religion is never an attractive prospect, and that a legalized second-class status of Christians in the Ottoman Empire legitimized violence against them, the situation is far more complicated, often in relation to European efforts to brings Christianity in the Middle East under their theological and later political control. These attempts at Europeanizing something that

was for a long time an integral part of the East removed Christianity from the context of the East, making this common conflation between Christian and Western identity in the Middle East possible. Furthermore, the misguided attempts of European powers to institute forms of government similar to their own created a legacy of ineffective political systems, making the unrest currently seen in the region a possibility. I see this unrest largely as a function of political dissatisfaction, and not as a function of a single over-arching religious identity. Even the rise in popularity of political manifestations of Islam themselves can be tied to general dissatisfaction with forms of government in which citizens had lost confidence. In the absence of an effective political system, discontent has turned oftentimes to violence and the support of radical changements to the society. It is then this idea of breaking not only the cycle of political instability, but also the cycle of violent retribution and sectarianism, which is the vehicle through which to preserve the presence of Christianity in the Middle East.

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