

# Christians in the Middle East: Challenges and Prospects

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## Introduction: Christian Demography in the Middle East

With numbers and percentages differing from one country to another, Middle Eastern Christians make up at least 7.1% of the populations of the countries in which they are found, as the following Table shows:

Table 1: Total Population and Estimated Percentages and Christian Population in Selected Arab Countries and Israel 2008\*.

Country	Total Population	Estimated Percentages of Christians	Christian Population
Egypt	81,714,000	16%	12-15 million
Iraq	28,211,000	3 %	846,330
Jordan	6,198,677	3%	185,960
Lebanon	3, 971,941	30%	1,191,582
Palestinian Territories	4,149,173	1.2%	50,000
Sudan	39, 379,000	5%	1,968,950
Syria	19,747,586	5%	987,379
Israel	6, 500,389	1.7%	110,507
Total	189,871,766	7.1%	15,340,708

\*Total Population of countries from US Census Bureau at [www.census.gov/cgi-bin/ipc/idbagg](http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/ipc/idbagg) Estimated percentages of Christians are from various sources. Estimates of percentages vary according to which source and date. The Table shows the lower percentages and estimates rather than the higher ones as these tend to inflate the numbers and there is no concrete proof for adopting them. (1)

\*\*The higher percentage and numbers are those of the Coptic Church. A dispute on the actual numbers has been ongoing between official Egypt and the church. While officially the Copts are said to number 4-5 million, the church estimates that the number of Copts is almost triple that given by officials

\*\*\* The outstanding fact of Christian population within the old Walled city of Jerusalem” the seat of Christianity” is estimated to be only 9000 people.

Percentages and numbers are not the determining factors in assessing relations or understanding history or context of Muslim-Christian relations. It is important to note that the Churches of the Arab Middle East and their faithful have always been part and parcel of their Arab environment. It is also important to note that the contributions of Christian and Church schools and universities, hospitals, printing and publishing enterprises, caritative and other service institutions have touched the lives of millions in this region, without reference to religion, political or any other particularistic characteristic. This was the experience and continues to be in the countries where Christians and their varied institutions are found.

## **Christians in the Middle East: A Complex Experience**

But the lives of the Arab Christians as those of their societies were never easy or simple. The Middle East region has for long been a region of instability, conflict and intermittent heightened intercommunal sensitivities driven both by internal as well as regional and international factors. Yet it has also been a region characterized by what many describe as the context for “a dialogue of life” in which different religious groups live side by side and experience the challenges confronting the society together. As one can point to history to highlight the results of intercommunal conflict, one can also point to the same and antecedent historical periods to speak of common interest in the fields of literary awakening, education, and in other realms of interest to all. and leading religious figures of all persuasions to advance the society and its prospects.

Certainly the early contact of Christians in the Middle East with foreign educational institutions led to intercultural contact and to more openness to developments in the West than was the case with the rest of the population. This was also a reason for accelerating the emigration of Arab and indigenous Christians. But it also led to a movement of emulating some of the educational and other accomplishments as seen in European countries. The acquiring of languages taught at the various foreign institutions led to an advantage for Christians in understanding Western culture and in some cases in identifying with some of its manifestations. The educational and linguistic advantage of Christians came in handy with the development of Arab Nationalism and the strife of Arab Middle East societies for freedom and independence from colonial rule.

The period between the two World Wars saw the emergence of the Arab National Movement and the active participation of Christian Arabs in nationalistic formulations and cultural manifestations. Muslims and Christians joined together in the bitter struggle in Palestine between Arab and Jew to safeguard the Arab identity of the country. In Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq Arab Christians, Armenians, Syriacs, Chaldeans and Jews especially in Iraq played an important part in the struggle for independence and/or in the consolidation of the newly emerging states and their institutions. Because of their advantage in education, Arab Christians were far more present, proportionately to their numbers, in the government Ministries, in the army and in other branches of public service.(2).

## **The Complicating Arab-Israeli Conflict**

One major complicating factor in Muslim and non-Muslim relations especially with Christians relations within the Middle East and in the broader regional and international contexts has been the Arab-Israeli conflict. The 1948 Arab-Israeli war followed by many more wars encouraged not simply Christians but also Muslims to seek stability and better prospects elsewhere. In Palestine, in particular, the 1948 resulted in the exodus of 1.5 million Palestinians of whom 150 to 160 thousands were Christian Palestinians. (3). The conflict, political-national in its origins, increasingly came to be seen in religious terms which readily pitted Israel, a predominantly Jewish State with the Western powers, against the Arab Palestinian people, mostly Muslim.

The ramifications of the Arab-Israeli conflict have been implied in many different contexts of regional and global confrontations: the September 9/11 attacks; the recent war on Iraq; the Hezbollah – Israel confrontations in Southern Lebanon and the Iran – Israel enmity, among others. Specifically, the continuation of the conflict leaves the Christian Palestinian community, as other Palestinians, susceptible to migratory push and pulls factors. The end result could be that the more enterprising and promising young people, like in other Middle Eastern countries, are choosing to leave thus rendering their communities, and in particular the Christian communities, less viable. But an important and less apparent effect of this continuing conflict, as well as other regional conflicts, remains the investment by Middle Eastern countries in arms purchases to the extent that billions of US dollars needed for development and transformation of the society are spent on stockpiling of weapons. With no foreseeable solution to this seemingly interminable problem, there is fear that the future does not promise any better scenarios than those already experienced. If conflagration of more wars between Israel and its Arab neighbors is the expected norm and if Israeli occupation of Palestinian and Arab lands captured in the war of 1967 persist then the prospects not simply for Christians, but also for Jews and Muslims in the Holy Land, would not be encouraging indeed.

While some would prefer to treat the Middle East as one monolithic region, caution should be exercised not to generalize specifically when it comes to Christian – Muslim relations. The context in Egypt and Lebanon is different not simply from other contexts but from each other as well, even though they may have some similar characteristics, being “national” Churches. The context in Iraq with its more recent vicissitudes is different from that of Syria, Jordan, Palestine or Israel. Even among the different Christian denominations, the experiences in the same context vary. Accordingly, involvement and participation in the major issues affecting the society could vary from the faithful of one Church to the other. This variation, nonetheless, indigenous and Arab Christians feel that they belong and that this belongingness is affirmation not simply of loyalty to country but similarly to Church and religious community. One has to admit that religion is an organizing principle in the Middle East.

### **Religion, Nationalism and the Role of Christians**

The Christian Arab, properly integrated into both wider Middle Eastern society and the Christian world, should be one of the great guarantors of lasting mutual comprehension and trust between great religions – and more broadly between Islam and the West. Sadly, neither side seems often to realize that he exists, and when remembered he is increasingly abused, by fundamentalist Christians from abroad as well as fundamentalist Muslims at home.

To Muslims having the best interests of Islam in mind, the Christians of the Muslim world – who are essentially the Christian Arabs – are especially important. In mediaeval times, they provided Islam with its principal means of access to the Greek and Hellenistic heritage, and also enriched Arab and Muslim civilization by original contributions in a wide variety of fields. During the long period of Muslim and Arab decline, they helped preserve the Arab heritage from extinction; and during the nineteenth century and the early twentieth, they played the pioneer role in smoothing

the Arab transition from traditional to modern ways, and subsequently became the leading indigenous interpreters of Arabism and Islam to the external world. For all their contributions, past and present, the Christian Arabs are richly deserving of the sort of Muslim Arab tribute that present situation represents.

The Arab Christian tradition, however, is also deserving of historical understanding and appreciation independently of its importance to Muslims or to Islam. The local roots of this tradition go back to Christianity's earliest days, antedating Islam in the area by more than six centuries. Those were the centuries that witnessed the development of Christian theology, the growth of the universal Christian church and the division of this church into different communions – among them those that survive in the Arab lands to the present day.

It is our belief that Muslim Arabs need to know more about the Christians who have historically lived in their midst, and the different traditions these Christians represent, better to understand the rich heritage they hold with them in common. Just as important to keep in mind, is the need for Arab and other Muslims to know more about Christianity in general, in a world where people of different faiths can no longer afford to ignore one another. In this respect, however, what applies to the Muslims equally applies to the Christians and others.

If Muslims need to gain a better knowledge and appreciation of Christianity, and more particularly of the traditions of the Christians living in their midst, so Christians in Europe and the Western world need to gain a better knowledge and appreciation of Islam, and of the culture of the Muslims now living along them, with its rich and many-sided heritage.

The era of the rising Arab Nationalism which saw Christians of different denominations, Jews, and others work together with their Muslim compatriots to promote the good of the fatherland has been surpassed by rising religious sentiment. Islam has become a rallying call for a majority of Muslims in the Middle East. The failure of Arab Nationalism did consolidate the appeal of religion as a reflection of the Ummah (nation) and its promising potential. For Christians, the religious appeal poses a number of challenging dilemmas: on the one hand, there is the question of inclusivity in the Ummah: if Islam is the point of reference then where do I, as a Christian, stand? What happens to the rich heritage of Arab Nationalism and of joint Muslim-Christians undertakings in all areas of life? Is this all passé? If it is then should Arab Christians search for their identity in their own religion? And if they do what would happen to the ideal of one society and one nation-state for all of its citizens?

For Christians, in spite of assurances from various Islamist politicians and groups, the religious platform gives them the feeling that they are outside the spectrum or the consensus. Accordingly, there is a tendency among Christians to turn themselves to religion and to become exclusivist in their outlook and orientation. Christians, like Muslims, use religion as a basis for group identity and for social organization. Hence the challenge of citizenry as of inclusivity is how to accommodate it with the religious principle of organizing one's own life and community? While some would like for Arab Muslim society to become pluralist and democratic; pluralism and democracy have to consider the traditional and religious precepts and prescriptions for ordering

life and for its management which affect the quality of pluralism and the meaning of democracy in the Arab World. Accordingly, there will never be an easy resolution to the question of religion and nationalism or religion and state in the Middle East as in the case of Europe or the United States. This is a particular challenge to the Christians as these continue to respect Islam on the one hand and to insist on equal citizenry on the other where the traditions of living together and the sharing of the same socio-political and cultural experiences are reinforced.

Some Muslims would argue that Christians and believing non-Muslims in Muslim society are best protected by the application of the principle of Ahl Al Dhimmi. This principle would ensure, according to them, that Christians are treated in as good a way as Muslims, if not better. Christians certainly would not accept this proposition as they would like to see themselves on an equal footing before the law with other citizens. In the lands where Christianity first appeared, Christian faithful take pride that they have been on the land since the early centuries of Christianity and even before Islam. Accordingly, they do not want to be seen as a protected minority but naturally see themselves as the people of the land equally to their Muslim compatriots and neighbors.

Lack of tolerance and even ignorance of one's own religion could lead some among the Muslims to seek the conversion of all non-Muslims in the society to Islam or simply to work for the disappearance of the non-Muslim communities from their midst. The recent events in Iraq raise alarm as the Chaldeans and Syrian Orthodox churches are leaving in their thousands. The slow hemorrhage of emigration from that country that saw 50,000 Christian Iraqis re-settle in the USA and Europe has recently accelerated to proportions that speak of over 50% of the entire Christian community in Iraq having fled the country. Attacks on churches and congregations; killings; kidnappings; intimidations; threats and other phenomena are quite disquieting, even though other communities are experiencing the same phenomena. While Christian communities in Iraq are not targeted as such by attackers, yet some of the attackers are bent on sectarian targeting for motives that are not strictly religious but which use religion as a cover up. This is certainly related to the absence of law and order. Likewise in the Gaza Strip where a number of anti-Christian attacks took place, the most recent of which was the dynamiting in Gaza City of the YMCA building and the complete destruction of its library. Fanaticism by some and the absence of law and order, in particular failure to arrest and persecute those responsible, are contributing to a new culture of intolerance in some parts of the Middle East. This is troubling not simply to the Christian communities but also to a majority of Muslim compatriots with whom a "dialogue of life" has been the norm rather than the exception.

## **Role of Arab Christians in the Middle East: Communal and Societal Affirmation or Flight?**

From the previous expose one can spell out eight interrelated challenges confronting Arab Christians of the Middle East and their societies:

### **1. Inter-Religious Relations**

In particular relations with Islam pose special challenges at this time and age. Islam has been politically strengthened, aided by the mass media and the projection of religious explanations for incidents, events and policies as well as for different styles of life and preferences. Thus the polarity of “us” vs. “them” becomes much more ingrained as lines of demarcation and organizing principles separate “us” from different and often threatening outsiders. It is easy in this environment to see in even little things a questioning of one’s faith that requires mass mobilization to defend and to go on the offensive. Accordingly, the bonds that used to tie Muslims to non-Muslims in Middle East societies become peripheral since a broader loyalty and obligation calls especially on devout Muslims to come to the defense of their religion and the affirmation of its supremacy. It follows then that the traditions of mutual respect and cooperation that existed among all citizens of the society are eventually replaced by more religious traditions exclusive to one’s religion. The common ground that brings together Muslim and non-Muslim slowly disappears and the result is that neighbors no longer appreciate their religious differences but see in them a problematic relationship. When developments occur that have a potential religious and political dimension, some Western Christians provoke the situation of polarization by undertaking proactive activities that further increase the gulf between indigenous Muslims and Christians. For some of the extremist Muslim groups this becomes a justification for attack and for insistence that if you believe in “our” cause then you become like us; i.e., you convert to Islam. It also follows that attacks on non-Muslims become justified as natural revenge whenever Muslims are hurt and their different causes targeted by the Western powers and their allies. Education on tolerance and even the prescriptions and proscriptions of religion on treating others, particularly the believers in the One God of the Abrahamic faith, in a decent and fair manner become insignificant. It is easy in this kind of environment for Christian communities to feel that they are on the defensive and that the prospects for a society of equal rights and obligations are not tenable.

Dwindling numbers of indigenous Christian’s communities become also a factor in inter-religious. These dwindling numbers, due to emigration, low birth rate among Christians as compared to high birth rate among Muslims.

This is a rather pessimistic view of inter religious relations in the Middle East but it addresses itself specifically to situations where there is tension and where relations are characterized by crisis. The examples of excellent Muslim – Christian relations should be highlighted because a majority of Muslims in Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East believe in systems of governance and societal cohesion that are inclusive and not exclusive. But we do need to address the problematic of Muslim – Christian relations in order to avoid a breakdown of the society and the emergence of confessional societies that lose track of overarching concerns and challenges.

Accordingly, Arab Christians and Muslims are called upon to:

- Undertake ongoing dialogue and exchange that is frank and speaks to the religious traditions that unite.
- Open centers for Christian – Muslim encounters and joint academic and intellectual discourses and publications.
- Subscribe to a policy of non provocation that is in keeping with the religious tenets and traditions of mutual respect and acknowledgment.
- Adopt courses of religious education in schools and universities and raise awareness through mass media which introduce the various religious traditions in order to increase understanding and tolerance.
- Develop mechanisms that would monitor infractions of religious nature and would intervene to prevent the conflagration that may result out of these infractions.
- Insist on the application of the legal procedures that would ensure that perpetrators of infractions would be brought to justice, irrespective of their religious background.
- Educate on the contributions of Christians to their Arab societies in various fields such as in the arts, politics, economics, education and a variety of service institutions.
- Project the role of Arab Christians in contributing and enriching Arab and Muslim civilization and culture.

While this proposition for a joint agenda could be encouraging, yet some would see utopian since it necessitates the involvement of all and not simply the Christians. Some among the less accepting Muslims would argue that such a proposition amounts in the end to the weakening of the faith. Hence it should not be adopted and neither should dialogue and exchange, in the first place. This is indeed a problematic perception that not only goes counter to the rich heritage of Muslim-Christian coexistence but is likely to detract from Islam's own rich heritage of tolerance and spiritual wealth. This attitude not simply alienates Western audiences, bent on encouraging exchange with Muslim communities in Western societies, but relegates the ongoing daily experience of living together of Arab Christians and Muslims to simply a mechanical experience of no higher purpose. The greatness of any religion is in its ability to keep to its own at the same time that it opens up to others, respect and accept others: if this is true of all religions how much more it is for Islam considered by its faithful as the fulfillment of the tradition of monotheism?

## **2. Building up Palestinian Society and its Institutions**

Our forefathers and fathers have been loyal to the country and its heritage. They have cemented ties of good relationships with compatriots. Their identification with the Land was both religious and national. Many of Palestinians Christians have been active in politics whether within the Palestinian National Movement during British Mandate time or during the period between 1948 and 1967 or with the PLO, particularly after the 1967 war.

The aftermath of the current Intifada, which started in September 2000, would need the good will and expertise of all citizens, especially those educated and willing to serve, in order to reconstruct the devastated Palestinian society and economy. Palestinian Christians, like other Palestinians, have a role to play in this effort. The kind of society we desire will not result from the wishes of leaders but will eventually be molded by the wishes of people. Accordingly, there is no excuse for Palestinians to refrain from active participation in the process of building the society a new. There may be constraints and restrictions and there may be preferences but, in the final analysis, participation is the determining factor of how the society will look like. It is not excusable to complain about a situation while doing nothing to change it: this is the challenge that confronts all Palestinians, including Christians. There is much work waiting to be done but in order to harvest the fruits of this work, one must be involved in the hard work itself. Palestinians Christians, with their skills, commitment, love for their country and identification with its issues and concerns, are expected to contribute what they can in order to ensure the emergence of the kind of society in which they, their children as well as other Palestinians and their children will like to live. This is one way to achieve not simply the objective of a free and democratic society but also of maintaining Christian presence, witness and viability of community. The alternative is for withdrawal from public and civil life and activities with dire consequences not simply for Palestinian Christians themselves but for the whole society as well.

## **3. Challengers of Peace Making and Eventual Reconciliation**

While polarization has taken the place of the hoped for coming together of religious and national communities, still the task ahead is one of dialogue, peace making and eventual reconciliation. How do we as indigenous Arab Christians work for peace and eventual reconciliation when the prospects for justice remain minimal and when there continues to be a feeling among Palestinians and Arab that the peace process did not answer their basic yearning for justice and dignity? Much work needs to be done and while politicians struggle, waver and negotiate, religious and political leaders need to start working on a vision that can heal hearts and advance the promise of a just and dignified future and eventually lead to comprehensive peace for all the people in the Middle East

It is not possible to construct a new Palestinian society and a new Middle East without engaging in a serious interfaith dialogue between Christians, Muslims and Jews in the society and in the region as a whole. We have all to be motivated by the fact that we share this region, both its blessings and its curses. Religion should be a means to help us neutralize the curses and to benefit jointly from the blessings. Otherwise, if we go our exclusivist ways, the prospects for all of us would be disastrous not simply at the

level of towns and cities, but also in terms of the kind of society we want and desire for future generations.

In this context we need also to heed the words of no other than the late Professor Edward Said who, in one of his later articles, urged that the Palestinians form bridges with those peace force, groups and individuals in Israel who believe in the legitimacy of the Palestinian cause. Professor Said gave the example of the ANC in South Africa and how successful it was in establishing a platform to which all anti-apartheid forces joined. In a very important sense, we all need to heed this advice if we would eventually inherit a region of justice and peace for all.

#### **4. A Challenge of a Practical and Concrete Nature**

The Challenge here is how we, of different religious professions, can find the means to pull religious establishments and faithful into subscribing to more global concerns. Thus our proposed dialogue would become a focused drive towards dealing with the concrete issues and concerns that touch the lives of people rather than remaining on an intellectual plateau and an exercise of protocol niceties, soon to be forgotten. Certainly, each society may have different priorities such as in the Palestinian case ending occupation, reconstruction and redevelopment, or in other parts eradicating extreme poverty or achieving universal primary education, but regardless of priorities the faithful have a responsibility to make sure that these goals altogether become part of the socio-economic development plans of their society. While this may appear far-fetched at first sight, any success would bolster a society more at peace with itself and its neighbors and accepting of each other. It would also become a basis to construct a society where all citizens are treated equally and given opportunities to develop their potentials. Attention to social and economic issues of development reflect the commitment of the Christians and their Churches to work towards a more just and equitable society.

Without a society grappling with issues of equality, poverty reduction and other social issues, there can never be a nation-state capable of harmonizing between religious beliefs, on the one hand and the overarching concerns of the society, on the other. The strength of the nation-state system is through its laws, courts, representative institutions and executive powers that seek to emphasize that shared responsibilities and rewards are equally assumed and given, notwithstanding power and structural relationships in favor of this or that group. Thus the challenge for both Christians and Muslims in Arab society is how to subscribe to the tenets of the modern state and how to refrain from seeking privileges accruing from particularistic characteristics? The model towards a harmonizing nation-state can be seen in states of the Middle East that attempt to combine religious law with secular law. On the one hand these states treat all citizens as equal before the law; on the other, civil and family matters are referred to religious courts. This is the standard followed in countries such as the Palestinian Territories, Jordan and Syria as it has been inherited from the Ottoman millet system. It is a working model that does justice to particular religious groups while at the same time pulling towards a system applicable to all. Some with a Western predisposition may not understand or like the system but we cannot expect that Arab societies would emulate Western systems without reference to their own particularities and traditions.

## **5. Relations with the West**

Especially after September 11, 2001 the issue of religions and conflict has come up again and again. There are some who would like to see the world divided along fighting civilizations and religious domains. To Arab Christians, with their varied and complex experience, civilizations do not fight and certainly religions do not confront one another. It is the misguided minority that uses religion for its ulterior reasons and all suffer as a consequence. Those who argue otherwise have their own narrow agendas that would invite eventual turmoil, destruction and loss to all of us. Using religion as a crusading movement against other religions and cultures whether Christians, Muslims or Jews is wrong. History has proven that crusades, from whatever source they come and for whatever purpose they are launched are doomed to eventual failure and to legacies of mistrust, enmity and negation. Using violence in order to justify selective interpretations of religious guidelines and directives goes counter to what is best in each and every religion. September 11<sup>th</sup> and the events that have taken place since requires all of us to go back to the religious roots that call on common human bonds and that emphasize that mankind is created in the image of God, irrespective of culture, religion, nationality, color or any other identifying characteristic. The “war on terror” should not be seen as a war of the West against the Muslim East. Likewise the war and occupation of Iraq cannot be justified on religious basis. Justification of attacks on Iraqi Christians, assumed to support their Western co-religionists, goes counter to the history and traditions of contribution and Iraqi identity that those Christians have experienced in their native land.

To emphasize that the conflict nowadays is not a religious one there is a great need to engage Muslims and Christians who have lived together for centuries to speak of their experiences, particularly to Western audiences. This is an educational process of the first order as the image that most Westerners carry of Islam is stereotypical and does not rely on facts and experience. The ongoing wars do not help any but highlight the urgency of such an educational process. Arab Christians and Muslims can relay the message as the reality of their living together can reflect. This should not be a media event, as such, but an attempt at winning people to a more realistic assessment of Muslim – Christian relations in the Middle East and a call to understanding Islam in a manner that is closer to its reality rather than to misconceived perceptions.

## **6. The Nature of Society and the Nation-State**

Both Muslim and Christian communities should turn their attention to pressing needs of the society rather than to religionizing (reducing to religious cause) all the annoyances and problems at hand. Christians need to challenge their religious leaders and institutions to the necessity of becoming part of plans to combat poverty and to get to accomplish the overall millennial goals adopted in 2000 by the 189 world leaders. These goals proposed to end extreme poverty world wide by the year 2015. Examining the millennial goals, one can see that they are applicable to most Arab societies where Christians are found. The task is to see how inter-religious dialogue can work out plans to become part of the efforts at achieving the millennium goals by 2015.

1. To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger;
2. To achieve universal primary education;
3. To promote gender equality and empower women;
4. To reduce child mortality;
5. To improve maternal health;
6. To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases;
7. To ensure environmental sustainability;
8. To develop a global partnership for development.

The Challenge here is how we, of different religious professions, can find the means to pull religious establishments and faithful into subscribing to more global concerns. Thus our dialogue would become a focused drive towards dealing with the concrete issues and concerns that touch the lives of people rather than remaining on an intellectual plateau and an exercise of protocol niceties, soon to be forgotten. Certainly, each society may have different priorities such as eradicating extreme poverty or achieving universal primary education but regardless of priorities the faithful have a responsibility to make sure that these goals altogether become part of the development plans of their society. While this may appear far-fetched at first sight, any success would bolster a society more at peace with itself and accepting of each other. It would also become a basis to construct a society where all citizens are treated equally and given opportunities to develop their potentials. Attention to social and economic issues of development reflect the commitment of the Christians and their Churches to work towards a more just and equitable society.

Without a society grappling with issues of equality, poverty reduction and other social issues, there can never be a nation-state capable of harmonizing between religious beliefs, on the one hand and the overarching concerns of the society, on the other. The strength of the nation-state system is through its laws, courts, representative institutions and executive powers that seek to emphasize that shared responsibilities and rewards are equally assumed and given, notwithstanding power and structural relationships in favor of this or that group. Thus the challenge for both Christians and Muslims in Arab society is how to subscribe to the tenets of the modern state and how to refrain from seeking privileges accruing from particularistic characteristics? The model towards a harmonizing nation-state can be seen in states of the Middle East that attempt to combine religious law with secular law. On the one hand these states treat all citizens as equal before the law; on the other, civil and family matters are referred to religious courts. This is the standard followed in countries such as the Palestinian Territories, Jordan and Syria as it has been inherited from the Ottoman millet system. It is a working model that does justice to particular religious groups while at the same time pulling towards a system applicable to all. Some with a Western predisposition may not understand or like the system but we cannot expect that Arab societies would emulate Western systems without reference to their own particularities and traditions.

## **7. Reconciliation and Peace Making**

While polarization of religious and national communities looms across the Middle East, more than ever the task ahead is one of dialogue, peace making and eventual reconciliation. How do we as indigenous Arab Christians work for peace and eventual reconciliation when the prospects for justice remain minimal and when there continues to be a feeling among Palestinians and Arabs that the current developments of war and peace do not answer their basic yearning for justice and dignity? Much work needs to be done and while politicians struggle, waver and negotiate, religious leaders need to start working on a vision that can heal hearts and advance the promise of a just and dignified future.

It is not possible to construct a new Middle East without engaging in a serious interfaith dialogue between Christians and Moslems in the society and in the region as a whole. We have all to be motivated by the fact that we share this region, both its blessings and its curses. Religion should be a means to help us neutralize the curses and to benefit jointly from the blessings. Otherwise, if we go our exclusivist ways, the prospects for all of us would be disastrous not simply at the level of towns and cities, but also in terms of the kind of society we want and desire for future generations.

But while working for harmony and the coming together of Moslems and Christians, we need also to address the perennial Arab-Israeli conflict. Without a resolution to this conflict, many of the ongoing problems and sensitivities in the Middle East would be exacerbated. In this context we need to heed the advice of no other than Professor Edward Said who, in one of his later articles, urged that the Palestinians form bridges with those peace forces, groups and individuals in Israel who believe in the legitimacy of the Palestinian cause and the need to work for an end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. Professor Said gave the example of the ANC in South Africa and how successful it was in establishing a platform to which all anti-apartheid forces joined. (14). Certainly, a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian problem would advance the prospects of reconciliation for the entire Middle East. The establishment of a viable and independent Palestinian state would further advance peace prospects not simply between Palestinians and Israelis but between Israel and the entire Arab world, as stipulated in the Arab Peace Initiative initially launched in 2002 and adopted by the Arab Summit in Riyadh in 2007. .

## **8. Preservation of the Christian Community**

In order to maintain Arab Christian presence and viability in the Middle East, the churches both in the Middle East, Europe, USA and elsewhere are called upon to work closely together. The religious leaders must unite to develop a common agenda that aims at keeping the faithful in the Land and ensuring that centuries' old communities continue to function. The viability of Christian communities cannot be an egoistic and religiocentric undertaking; rather it is an enterprise that would ensure the kaleidoscopic nature of the social and religious makeup of the country, on the one hand. It will also ensure that indigenous Arab Christians will not end up forming expatriate communities in such distant lands as Australia, Chile, USA, Brazil, Europe and Canada, among other lands. It is indeed sad when there are more Chaldean Christians in Detroit than in their previous original towns in Iraq. Likewise for Palestinian and Lebanese Christians two – thirds of whom are found outside their homeland. Not to speak of Armenians, Assyrians,

Copts and other communities whose faithful have left their countries in droves? This break up spells the possible end of community life as has been known and experienced, in the Middle East, for countless generations.

But viability of the Christian community is not the sole responsibility of the universal Churches and their leaders. Lay people are called upon to get engaged in ensuring the continuity of their communities. The approach to commitment and service should emphasize that viability of community is only ensured through work and involvement in the challenges and prerequisites of ensuring the functioning of the society, at large. Christians in the Middle East are not an island unto themselves: they are an integral part of their society and context and hence share with the concerns and preoccupations of their compatriots.

Certainly, churches and other partners in the West can help most of the Arab Christians in ensuring the viability of their communities. But partnership with the Western Churches and Christians should not evolve into a patron-client condescending relationship; rather it should emphasize the shared vision based on Christian compassion and on openness to each other and to all others. The primary consideration in partnership with Western Churches should be how to empower Christians to help build their own societies and to address priorities of development and keep them in their land.

The practical agenda that Christians and their Churches have to develop should deal with how to keep their young people in the region, especially those in the age groups at highest risk of emigration. Activation of young members of Churches and their involvement in the affairs of their community is an approach that must be encouraged. Offering quality education and vocational and professional training even more creating work opportunities should continue to be a priority in the various educational institutions run by the various Churches. Thinking in particular on how to appeal to the whims and wishes of young people, linked to the world through electronic and visual tools, should be a concern for the Church and its membership. Presence and viability can only be ensured if we, as Christians, are willing to accept the challenge of modernity and join efforts to master this challenge and not be overcome by it. We have also to persevere and not be intimidated by the wrong actions of some against us and our communities. The wisdom of a 70-year old Roman Catholic in Gaza City who said that no one would make me or the community of 2,500 Christians leave Gaza because this is my home is a wisdom that should be adopted by all of us. The testimony of the three Christians students in Iraq whose bus was kidnapped traveling from Kirkuk to Baghdad and who refused an invitation to conversion saying that they were prepared to die for their faith illustrates well the strong attachment of young people. Both these examples show well the strength in faith and in homeland. When combined these two definitely point to a role for Christians in the Middle East that is essential at this age and time not simply for the survival of the Christian communities but also for the continuity of the society and its rich heritage of traditions of coexistence, reconciliation and dialogue of life among the Abrahamic faiths.

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May, 2009

## Footnotes

- (1) For estimates dating to the 1990s see: Jean Pierre Valognes, **Vie et mort des Chretiens d'Orient: Des Origines a nos Jours**, Fayard, 1994 p. 106 and also the estimates of the General Assembly of the Middle East Council of Churches held on January 1990 which put the number of Christians in the Middle East at 15 million and those who have migrated abroad at 10 million.
- (2) Haddad, Mohanna, "Detribalizing and 'Retribalizing': The Double role of Churches Among Christian Arabs in Jordan: A Study in the Anthropology of Religion," in **The Muslim World**, Vol. LXXXII, Nos. 1-2, January – April 1992, p. 86.
- (3) Kossaibi, George "Demographic Characteristics of the Arab Palestinian People," in Khalil Nakhleh and Elia Zureik, **The Sociology of the Palestinians**, Croom Helm, London, 1980. p.18.
- (4) Conversation with Gaza Christian on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008 following the bombing of the YMCA library on February 14<sup>th</sup> in early morning hours.
- (5) From an interview of Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk to SIR News Agency on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008.