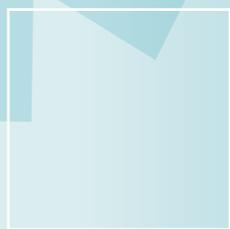


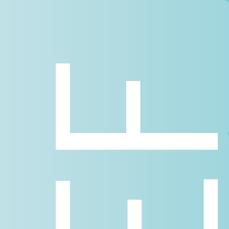


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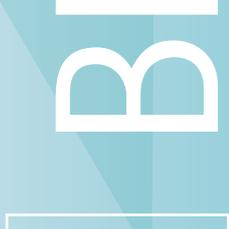
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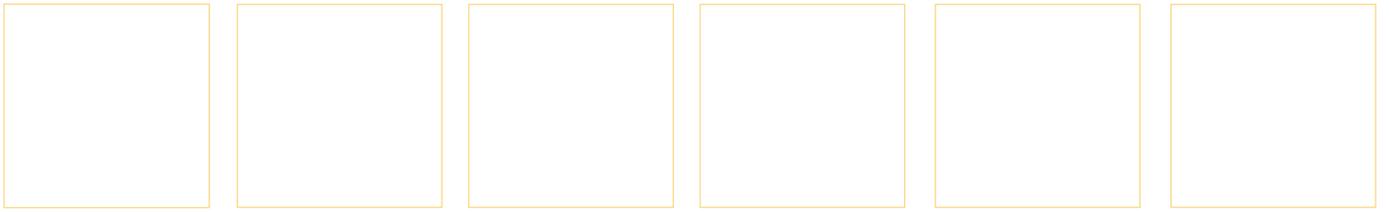
## *What is the Future of Christians in the Middle East?*

*Georges Fahmi* \*

The wave of Arab uprisings that started in 2011 had offered religious and ethnic minorities an opportunity to obtain full rights in a new democratic political regime, but a violent turn of events in many Arab countries has put religious and ethnic communities under unprecedented threats. In particular, this is the case of Christian communities in Egypt, Iraq and Syria who have found themselves caught between the rise of radical Islamist groups and the inability of political regimes to offer them protection.

This policy paper seeks to understand how the wave of political transitions in the Middle East has influenced the status of Christian communities in Egypt, Syria and Iraq; it argues that the weakness of state institutions constitutes the imminent challenge that Christian communities face at this time. The paper explores possible responses to deal with this challenge.

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## 1) The different Christian responses to the Arab uprisings

Christian communities in the Middle East reacted differently towards the wave of Arab uprisings. While some Christian groups, mainly politically active youth and Christian political figures saw it as an opportunity to renegotiate the Christians' status from second-class citizens to full citizenship, other actors, mainly the various Churches' leadership, perceived it as a threat to their authority and to the powers they had gained through longstanding relationships with the autocratic regimes.

Both in Syria and in Egypt, leaders of the different Churches rejected the call for regime change. In Egypt, the Coptic Church asked its followers not to participate in the protests against the Mubarak regime, while in March 2011 in Syria, the Council of Bishops in Damascus issued a statement describing the Syrian uprising as "a foreign conspiracy".<sup>1</sup>

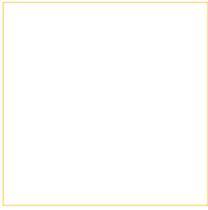
Part of the Christian youth in both countries rejected the Church's position and has supported the uprisings with the aim of building new democratic regimes in which all citizens enjoy the same rights regardless of their religious affiliation. In Egypt, a segment of the Coptic youth established a youth movement to defend Copts' rights, known as the Maspero Youth Union (named after the Maspero area of Cairo, where Coptic youth organised sit-ins to protest against religious discrimination). In Syria, during the first year of the uprising, a group of Christians met regularly in Damascus to discuss how Christians could support the revolution. They rejected the Church leadership's support for the regime and drafted a letter insisting on freedom and dignity for all Syrians and delivered it to religious leaders. Another group of Christian activists worked to raise awareness of the revolution and its goals within Christian neighbourhoods. Among this group was Bassel Shehadeh, a young film director who went to Homs to make videos on the revolution and lost his life there in May 2012 when the regime bombed the city.<sup>2</sup>

1. To read the full statement on the website of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate (in Arabic): <http://www.syrian-orthodox.com/readnews.php?id=888> (accessed on 23 March 2017).
2. Sabbagh, Rand. Attitudes of Christians in the Syrian Capital. In *Playing the sectarian card*, edited by Friederike Stolleis, 84-86. Beirut Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015.

Not only did the youth remain politically active, but many Syrian and Egyptian Christian figures played an important political role after 2011. In Egypt, Coptic figures established or joined political parties: Egyptian businessman Naguib Sawiris started the Free Egyptians Party, and Christian intellectuals such as Hanna Greiss were among the founders of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party. In Syria, several Christian figures played an important role in the opposition, such as George Sabra, former president of the Syrian National Council and current member of the High Negotiation Committee, and Abdelahad Steifo, vice president of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces.

In Iraq, the removal of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003 led to different views among Christians. Some Iraqi Christians believed that the regime change would offer them a chance to ameliorate their status, while others feared the rise of the Islamic forces, both Sunni and Shia, on the political scene. As was the case in Egypt and Syria, the Christian involvement in politics under the old regime of Saddam Hussein had been limited and it was mainly the responsibility of the religious leaders to mediate between their communities and the political regime. However, since 2003 the situation has changed due to the involvement of Christian political parties in the new political regime, such as the United Chaldean Democratic Party, the Assyrian Democratic Movement, and the Syrian Independent Gathering Movement. The Christian political scene has remained deeply divided though due to the lack of coordination between these different Christian parties.

The rise of religious forces after the removal of the old regimes in Egypt and Iraq, and within the revolutionary scene in Syria, has increased Christian concerns over their security, which has been reinforced by the tragic experience of the Christians in Iraq after 2003. In Egypt, the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections increased fear among the Copts and led many of them to support the military intervention against the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013. In Syria and Iraq, the situation became alarming when the Islamic Caliphate was established in 2014 by the self-proclaimed Islamic State.



## 2) The main challenge facing Christians in the Middle East

As shown in the earlier section, the main challenges facing the Christians in the Middle East before and during the Arab uprisings derive from the discrimination policies of the old regimes and from the rise of Islamist movements. However, recent developments in the region have placed Christian communities in front of an even more serious challenge, which emerges from the growing weakness of state institutions.

In this case, the weakness of state institutions refers to state institutions' inability to enforce order, to maintain security and to provide public services.

If state institutions are unable to enforce law, the lives and properties of many Christians are endangered. In Iraq, religious militias, both Sunni and Shia, have often tried to impose their rules in the territories that they control. Some of these militias have targeted Christian properties, as is the case in Baghdad where religious militias have occupied Christian properties and used their networks within state institutions to manipulate ownership contracts. According to the Iraqi Christian MP, Yonadam Kanna, mafias and militias claiming affiliation to the Popular Mobilisation Units and religious parties have forcibly seized many Christian properties.<sup>3</sup> In Mosul, Sunni Jihadi groups were active long before the establishment of the so-called Islamic Caliphate. Christian women in particular have suffered from these conservative groups. Many of them had to wear the headscarf to protect themselves.<sup>4</sup> According to findings from a 2016 survey led by the Norwegian Church Aid on the perceptions and experiences of religious minorities displaced in the Kurdistan Region, residents of Mosul were the most likely to report experiences of insults before the IS occupation (74%), compared with about 25% in other areas.<sup>5</sup>

3. *Itiham al-Hashd al-Sha'bi bi el-istilaa a'la amlak al-masihien fi Baghdad* (The popular mobilisation accused of taking over Christian properties in Baghdad), Al-Hayat newspaper, 6 February 2016. Available in Arabic at <http://www.alhayat.com/m/story/13832716#sthash.jcuoK3gJ.dpbs>

4. Interview with Mosul-based journalist Suha Ouda, 26 March 2017.

5. The protection needs of minorities from Syria and Iraq, World Council of Churches and Norwegian Church Aid, 2016, p 15.

Christians in Syria fear a similar scenario. In Damascus, some Christians who used to support the Syrian regime now complain about the heavy presence of Shia militias in Christian areas, which is the situation, for instance, in the Christian neighbourhood of Bab Tuma. This presence has put social pressure on Christian families and, in many cases, obliged them to change their way of living. When asked why the Syrian regime allows this strong Shia presence in Christian areas that have supported the regime, the answer given by a Christian activist was "do you think the regime can stop them?"<sup>6</sup>

The Syrian state's inability to enforce security and order, and to delegate this authority to other Lebanese or Iraq militias, represents a serious concern for the Christians of Damascus.

In addition to the issue of security, the lack of basic public services raises another concern for the Christians. In Aleppo, some Christians have shown discontent with the poor public services provided by the state and accuse the regime of focusing investment on the coastal region only. Because of the deterioration of public services, a few months ago a Syrian bishop warned the regime not to test the patience of the Christians in his area.

Although Egyptian state institutions are more stable than those in Iraq and Syria, in recent years state capacities have also been weakened in Egypt, so much so that Egypt's President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi himself recently called it a pseudo-state. In North Sinai for example, Christian families have been facing assassinations and forced displacement due to the lack of security control. In February 2017, more than 70 Christian families left the city of Al-Arish in Northern Sinai after receiving threats from the Sinai branch of so-called Islamic State. State institutions were also slow in dealing with the arrival of these families in the city of Ismailiyah and it was mainly the church who offered shelters to them. The inability of state institutions to act fast and efficiently in cases of sectarian tensions between Muslims and Christians has put many Christians in danger.

This challenge has led many Christians to migrate from the Middle East. This migratory phenomenon has been taking place over the last five decades, but it has accelerated in the past few years, particularly in Iraq and Syria. While there are no official statistics, estimated numbers of Syrian Christians fell from 15% of the total population in

6. Interview with a Syrian activist, 23 March 2017.



the early 1980s, to 4.8% in 2008.<sup>7</sup> After the 2011 uprisings, the figure is estimated at no more than 2%. The situation was similar in Iraq where the number of Christians was estimated at 1.4 million in 2003, and now they constitute less than 400 thousand.<sup>8</sup> While many Christians could still deal with state discrimination and the rise of the Islamic groups, the weakness of state institutions and its inability to provide basic public services, including security, has led many of them to believe that their children have no future in these countries.

### 3) How can the Christians in the Middle East be protected?

In a meeting between a Syrian bishop and a German official, the latter asked how the international community could protect Christians in Syria. The bishop answered that they should work to protect all Syrians, not only the Christians. This reaction is idealistic, but also rational. The bishop knows very well that the future of the Christian minority in Syria is linked to the future of the Muslim majority. Addressing the challenges facing the Christians in the Middle East cannot be done independently from addressing the challenges facing the region as a whole. The future of the Christians in the Middle East is strongly connected to the future of other religious and ethnic communities and it would be naïve to think that the solution to the current crisis of the Christians invokes the adoption of measures that would protect only the Christians.

What is needed is a wider approach that goes beyond sectarian solutions, with structural reforms to the state aimed at rendering it efficient, democratic and secular, i.e. with the same rights for all religious and ethnic communities. Within this frame several recommendations can be made: state institutions and particularly the security forces need to be reformed to increase efficiency and lower corruption; a democratic and transparent decision-making process should be consolidated and all

forms of religious discrimination should be terminated' by revising the legal framework at all levels.

In countries that have experienced an armed conflict, such as in Syria and Iraq, there is also a need to promote inter-community peace-building to overcome the experience of the conflict. Given their legitimacy within their own communities, religious leaders can play an important role in this process. Dialogue between Christian actors and non-violent Islamic groups should also be encouraged.

From the Christian actors' side, the churches should stop playing a political role, as it reinforces the perception that Christians are one homogenous actor. This leads to a situation in which Church decisions can put the lives and property of any individual Christian at risk, even if he or she did not actually participate in making a political choice. There is no need for the Christians to speak with one voice. In fact, it would be productive for Christians to participate in different groups and movements according to their own political preferences.

Finally, the discourse of certain political voices in the US or Europe, such as the American President Donald Trump or the French presidential candidate Marine LePen, concerning the protection of the Christians in the Middle East can only worsen the situation for Christian communities. Such discourse reinforces some Islamist propaganda that presents Christians as agents of the West. Western political voices need to frame a discourse that addresses the problems of all religious and ethnic communities, not only those of Christians.

7. Salam Kawabibi, The migration of Syrian Christians, Middle East Institute, 19 April 2010 (Available online: <http://www.mei.edu/content/migration-syrian-christians>)

8. Al-A'nf wel Tashadoud yehadedan al-A'irak bikhousara masihieih (violence and extremism threaten the loss of Christians in Iraq), Al-Hayat newspaper, 12 August 2013. Available in Arabic at: <http://www.alhayat.com/Details/541169>

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