Collateral Damage?!
The Impact of the 19th and 20th wars on Middle Eastern Christianity

Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb

There is no way to write the history of the churches in the Middle East without writing about the wars the devastated the region at large. It all was triggered by the destabilization of the Ottoman Empire, by western interest and influence in the region, by the creation of the state of Israel, in addition to poor national leadership. This was felt clearly by mid nineteenth century when Muhammad Ali Pasha, an Ottoman Albanian commander, was able to seize power over Egypt after Napoleon's withdrawal. By 1811 he was able to end the reign of the Mamelukes in Egypt, occupying the Hijaz region in 1812, and the Sudan in 1821. His dream was to create a modern mega state after European Model that covers the area between the Nile and the Euphrates. In 1831 his son Ibrahim went to occupy Palestine and parts of Syria. Yet this move presented a threat not only to the Ottoman rulers but also to other European empires for whose interest the Middle East was crucial: England and Austria. In order to ensure their control of the trade routes, resources, and Middle Eastern region that was still under Ottoman rule, they forced in 1839 Ibrahim Pasha to withdraw from Syria to Egypt. In return for pushing Muhammad Ali and his son Ibrahim Pasha back from Syria and Palestine and to better stabilize their internal rule, the Ottomans had to adopt changes and reforms.

These Ottoman reforms, an increasing European influence in the empire, and a greater Christian visibility in the society were perceived by the Muslim establishment as a threat to the status quo and to their economic and political clout. The growing fear among this establishment led to a series of violent outbursts directed by Muslims against their Christian neighbors in Aleppo in 1850, Mosul in 1854, Nablus in 1856, and Jeddah in 1858.

In 1860, a conflict between the Maronites and the Druze as proxy to France and England led to the massacring of thousands of Christians in Mt. Lebanon. The same year a massacre was perpetrated against Christians in Damascus under the watching eye of the Ottoman military forces. The imported ideas of Nationalism into the Ottoman Empire had fatal consequences for two important Christian communities. By the early twentieth century nationalism was spread not only among the Arabs, but also among other ethnic groups. By 1887 the first Armenian nationalist party, the Hnchags, was founded in Geneva by Armenian Russian secular intellectuals. Growing ethnic identities led to clashes between Turkish and Armenian Christians in minor Asia starting in 1892 and leading to the first massacre in 1894. Between 6-1894, an estimated 100,000 Armenians were killed. During WWI an Armenian genocide in Turkey (16-1915), and a Syrian genocide in East Anatolia (1915) took place. The Syrian orthodox lost a third of their population in the area, and as a result eight out of the twenty dioceses at that time were completely wiped out and ceased to exist. On the Armenian side, between 800,000 to 1.5 million Armenians were massacred, hundred thousand fled to neighboring countries like Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.

The end of WWI brought major change to the Middle East. On the one hand, four hundred years of imperial Ottoman rule over the region came to an end and the Ottoman Empire shrank to become the Republic of Turkey, no longer a multinational, multi-confessional empire. On the other hand, the promise made to the Arabs of an independent Arab State stretching almost "from the Nile to the Euphrates," by the European powers, was not kept and instead the region was divided by the Sykes-Picot

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Agreement into a series of artificial states whose boundaries were drawn to suit the interests of the two victorious western empires. France took mandatory control over what became Syria and Lebanon while Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan came under the British Mandate, in addition to Egypt which was still under British rule. The British not only failed to keep their promises but the Balfour Declaration gave Palestine to the Zionist movement, thus paving the way for Palestine's colonization. The mandate in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon was to "prepare" those countries for independence, the mandate for Palestine, however, aimed at establishing a national home for the Jewish people as promised by Balfour.

During WWI the Christian community in Palestine lost %13 of its total population due to migration. Bethlehem, a Christian town lost %50 of its populace while the neighboring Christian town of Beit Jala lost %30 of its inhabitants. Most of those Christians migrated to Latin and South America. The same is true for the Christians of Lebanon where the annual rate of migration between 1914 - 1900 was 15,000 persons %85 of whom were Christians.

The era between the two world wars brought major changes to the Assyrian community in Iraq, who were unhappy with the British handing the country in 1932 to a Sunni dominated government. Their call to an autonomy within a United Kingdom of Iraq led to the Mosul massacre in 1933, and to the emigration of large numbers of Assyrians, including the Catholicos himself to Chicago.

The Arab-Israel War of 1948, that resulted in an organized ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, also had catastrophic consequences for the 700,000 Palestinians who were driven out of their homes and instantly became refugees. Among them were more than 50,000 Christians. In the War of %35 ,1948 of all Christians living in Palestine lost their possessions, their work, their land and their houses. Several Christian villages, like Igrit and Bi'rim, were bombed to the ground by Israeli planes. The decline of the Christian population was quick and striking in Christian cities like West Jerusalem (about %88), Haifa (some %52) Jaffa (about %73), Ramlah (about %40), and Lydda (approximately %70). Almost half of the Palestinian Christian refugees fled to Lebanon. The other half settled in the West Bank and Jordan. The percentage of Christians dropped from around %8 to %2.8 within just a few months.

The Suez Canal crisis between Britain, France, and Israel on the one hand and Egypt on the other led in 1956 to the nationalization of the Suez Canal by 'Abd al-Nasir. This concept of nationalization spread quickly across the region triggering a process whereby governments began spreading their wings beyond their traditional state areas of influence into the private sector, nationalizing banks, railways, telephone, gas, electricity, and water. This conformed to what was happening worldwide. In many Middle Eastern counties these utilities were owned by foreign companies. Nationalization meant moving the utilities from foreign hands into national hands and from private into public control. Nationalization not only affected private foreign companies, but also numerous local companies owned by Christians. Many Middle Eastern Christians in Syria and Iraq had benefited considerably from the economic growth of the first half of the twentieth century and due to their Western education had become natural intermediaries for foreign companies and brands. Many of them were consequently substantially affected by the policy of nationalization. Nationalization programs were implemented in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The newly formed independent governments in those countries feared these growing private centers of power. The policy of nationalization also restricted land ownership with land being redistributed and given to small farmers. A considerable number of Christians, especially in Egypt, were among those large landowners. Both private persons and also monasteries lost much of their properties at this time.

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The impact of Coptic Orthodox education in turn also diminished since almost all schools, out of financial necessity had to be given to the state becoming so-called "subventional schools." In 1974, the Baath government in Iraq nationalized religious schools across the country including all Christian schools. Consequently, many in the Middle East in the 1960s lost much of their land, capital, livelihood, and influence forcing large numbers of them to emigrate.

The 1967, the Israeli waged war and its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and parts of Egypt (Sinai) and Syria (Golan Height), was akin to a political earthquake resulting in several severe aftershocks. These aftershocks took their toll on the Christian communities in the Middle East on many different levels.

The 1970s and 1980s were characterized not only by great affluence but also by conflicts and wars that exerted a heavy toll on the Christian communities of the region. From 1975 to 1990 Lebanon was wracked by civil war and the harsh Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon (2000-1982) that proved to be devastating for the country in general and for the Christian community in particular. The seventeen-year war destroyed Lebanon's economy and infrastructure, resulted in thousands being disabled, and produced a quarter of a million fatalities. One million people (%40 of the total population) migrated during the war. While about half of those migrants went to the oil-producing countries of the Gulf, the other half went to Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Australia. While all religious groups were affected by this migration, Christian migrants constituted some %75 of the total. Approximately %47 of the emigrants belonged to the professional and skilled labor categories. This time the migration waves were not just comprised of individuals but of whole families who left everything behind and began looking for another permanent home.

Iraq was yet another country devastated by war. The Iran-Iraq war from 1988-1980, followed by the invasion of Kuwait in 1991, and the war to liberate Kuwait, the sanctions imposed on Iraq after that, and then the invasion of Iraq by the U.S in 2003 took a major toll on the country in general and on Christians particularly. Many Christians fled Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war often to avoid being drafted into that deadly conflict. Christian migration accelerated after the 1991, mainly to the U.S but also to Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Sanctions in the 1990s led %30 of the population to emigrate. It is estimated that of the two million Iraqis who emigrated between 2003-1980 an eighth (250,000) were Christians. Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 over a million additional Christians fled Iraq to neighboring countries like Jordan, while many migrated to North America and Australia. Additionally, there was a substantial migration of Christians within Iraq from the north to the south and later to Irbil.

Another country that has suffered with seemingly endless civil war is Sudan. Indeed, the history of Sudan from its independence has been marked by division and war. The conflict between the North and the South resulted in two painful civil wars (;1972-1955 2005-1983) while other wars in neighboring countries produced large migrations from the South Sudan to the North, especially to greater Khartoum. Many migrants were Christians. Under Omar al-Bashir's rule, the National Islamic Front of Hassan al-Turabi introduced a top-down Islamization policy based on Sharia Law which was geared mainly towards the Africans in the south, but led many Christians in the North to emigrate escaping sanctions and the deteriorating economic situation.

And last but not least, the so-called Arab spring was devastating for Syria in general and for Syrian Christianity in particular. It is estimated that the percentage of Christians there had dropped from 10 to %3.

Wars and de-development bring with them major challenges to the people of the Middle East today.

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First, the region has the highest number of unemployed young people (between %21 to %25 and %30 among university graduates) and the lowest proportion of women in the labor force (less than %20). At the same time the Middle East has the highest rate of illiteracy worldwide, %36, compared to %18 globally.

A second challenge is the widening gap between rich and poor in the region. Income inequality is extreme in the Middle East and there is almost no middle class left in the region, a class that in the past was largely comprised of Christians.

A third challenge facing us in the Middle East is militarization. Five of the top ten most militarized countries globally are found in the Middle East. Israel is the most militarized country in the region. Based on military expenditure in relation to GDP, the number of military personnel per capita, and the amount of military hardware, the region, as a whole, is the most heavily militarized on the planet. In 2015, four countries in the Middle East spent over 100 billion USD on defense: fifty-six billion by Saudi Arabia (third only after the U.S. and China), eighteen billion by Turkey, fifteen billion by Israel, and fourteen billion by the UAE. Our region is also the receipt of over half of all weapons deliveries to developing countries and over one fourth of all arms shipments worldwide. When states are ranked by military spending per capita, six of the seven top countries are found in the Middle East. Natural resources, like oil, are exploited to pay for these weapons which are either not used at all or are used against the citizens of the region themselves.

A fourth challenge has to do with the prevailing political realities in the aftermath of the civil wars resulting from the so-called "Arab Spring", the rise of political Islam, and the ongoing Israeli Occupation and colonization of Palestinian land.

The survival of the Christian communities in the Middle East was affected by all of those political and socio-economic challenges that impacted the region at large. The wars of the last two centuries might had their toll on Middle Eastern Christianity. It's not possible to look at the situation of Christians away from the General context which is marked by the absence of democracy, modernity, economic and political stability. Throughout the twentieth centuries Christian communities in the Middle East were facing several waves of displacement, leading them often to emigration. With a low birth rate, it is foreseeable that several Christian communities may not survive in certain areas of the Middle East.

The collateral damage done by regional wars might cause Christianity to cease to exist in certain areas of its origins, but middle eastern Christianity is certainly surviving and thriving in the diaspora.

Maronite diaspora in the U.S. France, Latin America and some African countries is estimated from four-five million. Over half a million Latin Americans with Palestinian roots live as fourth and fifth generation Palestinians in Latin America alone, with over half of them just in Chile where they comprise %3 of the population.

The Syrian Orthodox community which was almost eradicated from Turkey has survived today in several major cities with high Syriac populations in Sweden. While there is only a remnant Assyrian Christian community in Iraq, immigrants have found new homes in Chicago, California, and Michigan. Today the Coptic Church has several dioceses and centers in Western Europe, the U.S, Canada and Australia serving over half a million Copts, while the Armenians who lost their homes in eastern Turkey, have a population of around three million in Armenia with seven millions scattered all over the world, with large concentrations in Russia, the U.S, France and other countries, constituting a transnational vibrant community. Diasporic and hybrid identities may, therefore, become an important feature for Christians with Middle Eastern roots.