

Islamophobia and the Plight of Christian Arabs

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Suddenly, the U. S. – European alliance is acting to protect the “existence” of the Christian Arab minority against the Muslim Arab majority whose very existence is besieged and threatened by this same alliance, drawing on a wide spread Islamophobia while at the same time exacerbating Islamophobia among western audiences whom the international financial crisis is now crushing to the extent that it does not spare them time or resources to question the real political motives of their governments, which have been preoccupied for decades now with restructuring the Arab world geographically, demographically, politically and culturally against the will of its peoples with a pronounced aim of creating a “new Middle East.”

Ironically this sudden western awakening to the plight of Christian Arabs comes at a time when all Arabs, both Muslims and Christians, are crushed by U.S. and Israeli military occupation or foreign political hegemony, but worse still when they are in the grip of a social upheaval in the very states that are by will or by coercion loyal to this alliance, where unbalanced development and an unemployment rate more than double the world average are pushing masses onto the streets to challenge the legitimacy of their own pro – west governments. Exactly at this time, when Arab masses need their “social” unity for national liberation, sovereignty, liberty and freedom, a European campaign is being waged to divide them along religious and sectarian lines.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy — who on Dec. 9, 2009 wrote in *Le Monde* defending a Switzerland vote banning Muslim mosques from building minarets and made a national fuss on banning less than two thousand French citizens from wearing Niqab — said on Jan. 6 that he “cannot accept” what he described as “religious cleansing” of Arab Christians. His Foreign Minister, Michele Alliot-Marie, wrote to the EU’s foreign affairs baroness, Catherine Ashton, asking for the union to draw up a plan of action in response. France took the initiative to call a meeting of the UN Security Council last Nov. 9 to discuss international protection of Iraqi Christians. On Dec. 22, Italy’s foreign Minister Franco Frattini said his country was presenting a resolution to the UN to condemn their “persecution.” Together with his French, Polish and Hungarian counterparts, Frattini wrote a joint letter to Ashton asking her to table the issue at the foreign ministers meeting on January 31 and to consider taking “concrete measures” to protect them. On Dec. 17, the German Bundestag passed a resolution defending the freedom of religion around the world, but viewed with “great concern” the resolution of the UN Human Rights Council on March 25 last year against the “defamation of religions” because it “undermines the existing human rights understanding.”

The European political reaction sounds excessively selective in its concern over an allegedly missing right of the freedom of religion of the Christian minority in a region where civil and human rights for the Muslim majority are missing thanks in the first place for the support the regional governing regimes, which confiscate these same rights, receive from the U.S. –

European alliance, and the European selectivity allegedly in defense of the “threatened” existence of the Christian Arab minorities speaks louder when it is compared with the deafening European silence over the threatened existence of the Arab and Islamic cultural identities of the majority, let alone the European incitement against both identities, a double standard that explicitly invokes suspicious questions about the credibility and sincerity of the European “rights” concerns and about the real political goals behind these pronounced concerns. For example, more than 300 mosques were attacked, some of them of a UNESCO World Heritage Center standards, hundreds of Muslim clerics were murdered, millions of Muslims were forced either to migrate internally or immigrate externally in the U.S. – occupied Iraq, and the plight of Iraqi Christians has been and still is merely a side show of the overall destruction of the whole state there, but the European rights consciousness did not and still does not find it worth a similar call for defense and protection.

Unfortunately, this traditional European divide – and – rule policy in the Arab world, as it was the case for centuries, is today finding ample papal blessing from the Vatican to justify itself, not in the eyes of Arabs, but in the eyes of its own audiences. President Sarkozy’s whistle blower cry this January 6 that Christians in the Arab – Islamic world are victims of a planned ‘religious cleansing,’ came on the backdrop of the Vatican’s Pope Benedict XVI repeated call on the world leaders to rise up for the protection and “defense of the Christians in the Middle East.” It is a cry fraught with the connotations of the historical precedent of the Vatican – blessed Fourth Crusade, which consisted mainly of a crusading army originating from areas within France and which was diverted from invading Egypt by sea to the sacking of Constantinople, the capital of the political and spiritual rival, the Orthodox Church, to which the overwhelming majority of Christians in the Arab – Muslim world belong, instead of “liberating” Jerusalem from Muslims.

Pope Benedict XVI’s wilful or careless indifference towards exploiting his church concerns by “secular” politicians like Sarkozy to serve their down to earth goals, or towards exacerbating Islamophobia, which in turn fuels Christianphobia, is reminiscent of how the older Sarkozy –type “Christ – abiding” and non – secular politicians concealed from the bulk of the crusading army a letter from Pope Innocent III, who made the new Fourth Crusade the goal of his pontificate, warning against the diversion of the crusade, forbidding any atrocities against “Christian neighbors” and threatening excommunication. In as much as the indifference of the crusader pope to carry out his threat had led to the demise of the Byzantine Empire, the fall of Constantinople in the hands of the Muslims less than three hundred years later and turning the crusades into a war against the rival church more than against the Muslims, the indifference of the present day Pope Benedict XVI is threatening to counterproductively achieve the demise of Christian existence in the “East,” which he has made, it seems, the goal of his pontificate.

Ever since the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople in 1204, Arab Christians in the Muslim world have been wary of the messages and emissaries of Rome as a cultural spearhead of foreign invasion and hegemony. Even a Catholic loyal to the Vatican like the incumbent Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal, had this to tell the Israeli Haaretz exclusively four days before Benedict XVI’s “pilgrimage” to the Holy Land in September 2009: *“The thing that worries me most is the speech that the pope will deliver here. One word for the Muslims and I’m in trouble; one word for the Jews and I’m in trouble. At the end of the visit the pope goes back to Rome and I stay here with the consequences.”* Patriarch Twal’s fears were vindicated last week when Egypt recalled its Vatican envoy for consultations over the Pope’s remarks on Egyptian Copts: The “new statements from the Vatican” are “unacceptable

interference" in Egypt's "internal affairs," the Egyptian foreign ministry said in a statement. Syrian analyst Sami Moubayed recently wrote that similar papal remarks were to the "fundamentalists .. a blessing in disguise."

Pope Benedict XVI since he occupied the papacy seat seems totally insensitive to the worries of his representative in Jerusalem; he doesn't seem short of words and seems careful not to miss an opportunity to utter provocative anti-Muslim pronouncements that place both his church clergy and followers on the defensive among both their Christian as well as Muslim compatriots. However, he places them in a more critical position by his helplessness to find any words or an opportunity in his latest torrential rhetoric about the protection of Christians and their plight in Holy Land itself, where they have been victims of actual ethnic and religious cleansing for more than sixty years now since the Palestinian Nakba in 1948, when the state of Israel was declared independent on the ruins of their homes.

From a regional perspective, both Christian and Muslim, the very existence of Christians is threatened, besieged and gradually cleansed by the Israeli military occupation in the Palestinian cradle of Christianity - - where Christ was born, spread the word of God, love and peace and crucified. The papal silence on this simple fact of life is much louder in the region than Pope's pronounced appeals for the defense and protection of Christians on the peripheries of the birthplace of Christianity, in Iraq, Egypt or Lebanon for example, because when the center of Christian gravity crumbles in Jerusalem, the periphery supports would not hold for long and even the important St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican would be a pale substitute, and the center of Christian gravity in Jerusalem is almost totally Judaized, and is off limits to the Christians both in the Palestinian cradle of Christianity as well as to their brethren on the Arab and Muslim periphery, unless they are granted an Israeli military permit to visit, which is rare and very tightly selective.

Viewed from Christian regional perspective, the papal appeals for their protection could hardly be described other than contradictory, if not hypocrite, particularly in view of a Vatican's document in July 2007, approved by Benedict XVI, which declared Catholicism as "the only true church of Christ" and "other Christian communities are either defective or not true churches." So, "what" Christians Pope Benedict is appealing to defend and protect? A year earlier, Coptic Pope Shenouda III denied there was any dialogue or contacts with the Vatican although thirty three years before both sides agreed to form joint committees for bilateral dialogue. With the exception of Armenian church as a late newcomer but nonetheless an independent church, the Coptic, Orthodox, Chaldean, Assyrian, Syriac, Melkite and other Eastern communions have existed and coexisted among and with Arabs since the earliest days of Christianity, because they are Arabs either by ethnicity or by culture and they are the overwhelming majority of Christians in the Middle East and an integral part of the Arab society.

Islamophobia is warning that Muslims are "returning" to Islam, but is it not top on the agenda of Pope Benedict XVI to return Europe to Christianity? "We must reject both secularism and fundamentalism," the Pope said in his annual address on Christmas Day, but is it not secularism that the Pope, Europe and the U.S. are preaching now to de-Arabise and de-Islamise Arabs? This double standard ironical western contradiction deprives their calls for the protection of Arab Christians of whatever credibility it might still have in the Arab eyes. Their "protection" will prove counterproductive sooner or later. Christianphobia that fuels anti - Christian blind terror is an already active byproduct.

The 'Church of Islam'

Commenting on the Synod of Middle East Christian leaders that convened in the Vatican last October, the spiritual leader of the Melkite "Catholics," Patriarch of the Church of Antioch, Gregorios III, had this to say, quoted by the Lebanese Daily Star last December: "The Synod for the Middle East is a Synod for Arab countries, for Arabs, a Synod for Arab Christians in symbiosis with their Arab society. It is a Synod for the 'Church of the Arabs' and 'Church of Islam'." The adviser to the Muslim Sunni Mufti of Lebanon, Dr. Mohammad Al - Sammak, who was invited to the Synod, recognized the Arab identity of Christians in the Middle East: "I cannot live my being Arabic without the Middle Eastern Christian Arab .. They are an integral part of the .. formation of Islamic civilization," he told the Synod.

Politically and religiously these Christians have been on the other side of the Vatican - blessed old or modern western conquests, and politically and religiously they have been all along protected by Arabs and Muslims, otherwise they would not have survived. Their existence is now under threat because the existence of their Arab - Islamic incubator is on the line, besieged either by direct military occupation in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan or by economic sanctions and political hegemony; their existence was not threatened when the Arab - Islamic state was an empire and a world power, nor was it threatened during the crusades despite the atrocities committed by their western co-religious crusaders, which would have invited a reprisal had it not been for the teachings of Islam itself.

The U.S. - led world war on terror targeting mainly Arabs and Muslims is perplexing western pro - law, peace and human rights audiences by smoke -screening their governments' military adventures and modern crusades, which is the real action that created terrorism as the only possible reaction expected by the overpowered nations. However the invading creator and the created terrorists in their bloody divide are smoke - screening also any possible resurface of the forgotten Islamic covenants that protected the indigenous two thousand - year old Arab Christians since the advent of Islam in the seventh century. In the year 628 AD, a Christian delegation from St. Catherine's Monastery, in Egypt's Sinai, met Prophet Mohammad and requested his protection. The Prophet granted them a protection charter.

Dr. Muqtedar Khan, Director of Islamic Studies at the University of Delaware and a fellow of the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, wrote this about the charter: "*The document is not a modern human rights treaty but even though it was penned in 628 A.D., it clearly protects the right to property, freedom of religion, freedom of work, and security of the person. A remarkable aspect of the charter is that it imposes no conditions on Christians for enjoying its privileges. It is enough that they are Christians. They are not required to alter their beliefs, they do not have to make any payments and they do not have any obligations. This is a charter of rights without any duties! The first and the final sentence of the charter are critical. They make the promise eternal and universal. By ordering Muslims to obey it until the Day of Judgment the charter again undermines any future attempts to revoke the privileges. These rights are inalienable.*" In the year 631, Prophet Muhammad received a delegation of sixty Christians from Najran in the Prophet's mosque in Medinah, allowed them to pray in the mosque, and concluded the "covenant to the Christians of Najran" treaty which granted them religious and administrative autonomy as citizens of the Islamic State. In 637, Islamic Caliph Omar ibn al - Khattab granted the similar "Covenant of Omar" to the Patriarch of Jerusalem Sophronius.

However, neither Islamophobians nor their terrorist Islamists have any interest but to dump

these Islamic ideological covenants for the protection of Arab Christians. No Arab Christian fears for his life from his Muslim neighbor or his government, but he or she definitely fears these two protagonists, who are both foreign to his history and culture. No foreign protection of Arab Christians could match the protection and solidarity they received from their Muslim compatriots both in Iraq and Egypt following the bombings of a church in Baghdad on October 31 and a church in Alexandria on New Year Eve. In the latter case there were reports of Muslim human shields to protect the Christmas religious celebrations of Egyptian Christians, let alone the solidarity statements by both outlawed Al-Jamaa Al-Islamiya and the Muslim Brotherhood and the thousands of police deployed for the same purpose, in a remarkable show of national unity and historic coexistence.

The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), scheduled to meet in the UAE on January 19, will discuss the situation of Christians in member states, according to Lebanon parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri. On this background, there are also reports that Egypt will ask the Arab League economic summit this month, to discuss foreign, and in particular western, interference in Arab Affairs. European offers of protection are already backlashing.

The only real threat to the existence of Arab Christians showed for the first time when the European colonialism first, then the U.S. imperialism, self-appointed western powers as their protectors. It is noteworthy that in both the Iraqi and Egyptian cases the native Christian Arabs are now paying the heavy price of the U.S. anti-Pan-Arabism of both late Jamal Abdul Nasser and Saddam Hussein. Their plight started with the forcing of pro-U.S. regimes in both countries.

To describe the latest attacks against Christians as a plan of “religious cleansing,” as President Sarkozy has done, suggests a persecution that doesn’t exist; this is “not the case in the Middle East at the moment,” it is “not supported by the wider community,” said Fiona McCallum of the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, who is a specialist on the Christian communities in the Middle East, adding: “It’s important to also note that immigration takes place from the region from both Christians and Muslims as well.”

Nicola Nasser is a veteran Arab journalist based in Bir Zeit, West Bank of the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories.

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