

Why the Eastern Christians are fleeing the Middle East?

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Abstract

Christians in the Middle East are facing critical conditions due to several factors. Large numbers of them are fleeing the area in search for safety and stability. Although they belong to different sects, they are simply called Eastern Christians. The paper discusses the current situation of the Eastern Christians in the Middle East, due to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and extremism in the region, especially with the phenomenon of “the Arab Spring” and the events that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In my paper, I will discuss the phenomenon of Christians fleeing the region especially in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt where a large number of them are forced to leave their land of origin. They are becoming a target of extremism and they fear Islamists taking over some governments in the region. I will discuss the reasons behind such exile, who force them to leave, who facilitate their migration, and what are the implications of such an escape on Christianity in the East and the culture that survived nearly two thousand years. I will present possible solutions to the problem to keep Christians of the East in the region to save their culture and pluralism.

Keywords: The Middle East, Eastern Christians, Islamic Fundamentalism, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt

Introduction

Christians in the Middle East are facing critical circumstances due to several factors. Their numbers are reducing, especially following “the Arab Spring” and the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Large numbers of them are fleeing the area in search for safety and stability in Europe, the United States, Australia, and elsewhere. Because of their global location in the Middle East, they are called the Eastern Christians, where Christianity originally originated and spread to Europe and elsewhere in the globe. Although they belong to different sects, such as the Orthodox, the Catholic, the Coptic Orthodox, the Protestants, and so on, they are simply called Eastern Christians. If the phenomenon of fleeing the region continues, there is a possibility that the Middle East will be evacuated from its indigenous Christians, just as it happened to many Jews in the Arab and Islamic worlds.

In my paper, I will discuss the current situation of the Eastern Christians in the Middle East, due to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and extremism in the region and possibility of them taking over some governments in the region. I will discuss this phenomenon for Christians in four Middle Eastern countries with relatively large Christian population, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, where a large number of them are strained to leave their land of origin. In my paper, I will also discuss the reasons for such exile, who force them to leave, who facilitate emigration, and what are the implications of such an escape on Christianity in the East and the culture that survived nearly two thousand years. At the end, I will present some possible solutions to this problem to keep Christians of the East in the region, their culture, and pluralism.

There are about 15 million Christians in the Middle East. The largest Christian group in the Middle East is in Egypt. They are called the Copts, who constitute about 10% of Egyptians, with about 10 million Christians (CIA: the World Factbook, 2012). Lebanese Christians are about 1.5 million, the largest Christian percentage of any Middle Eastern country with about 40% of the population, majority of them are called Christian Maronite. In Syria, there are about 1.8 million Christians who constitute 10 percent of the population (CIA: the World Factbook, 2014). They mostly speak Arabic, but a large number of them speak Syriac (dialect of Aramaic), and some of them speak Armenians.

The Armenian Christians are about half a million, half of them in Lebanon and the rest in Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. In Iraq, Christians' number is less than half of what it was before the American invasion of Iraq. They are less than a half million today. Great majority of them are Chaldo-Assyrians who speak Aramaic language, the language spoken by Jesus at the time. There are also Christians in Jordan, Israel including the Palestinian occupied land, Sudan, and elsewhere in the region.

There is no doubt that the number of Christians in the East in modern time is in its largest drop. For example, Turkey that had millions of Christians at the turn of the 20th century became now almost empty of Christians, and similar is in Palestine, the birthplace of Christ (1). After the America's invasion of Iraq in 2003, Christians decreased by two thirds. Lebanon also saw a significant decline in the number of Christians after the mid-1970s civil war. Christianity in the Middle East has existed since its inception, due to the fact that the Middle East is the cradle of Christianity. It was the main religion in the region from the fourth century until the Islamic conquests in the seventh century. Today, Christians in the Near East account for less than 5% of the population compared to 20% in the early twentieth century (Willey,2010).

After more than three years of the beginning of “the Arab Spring” in the Arab world, it has become clear that the Middle East is strengthening the role of Islamists' movements as it happened in Egypt before military takeover, Tunisia, Syria, Libya, and Iraq. Radical political Islamists continue to grow in the Middle East, which is a disturbing phenomenon for Christians and other minorities. Radical Islamists reject modernity and globalization and consider them the exporters of the “Christian” West. They reject secular, multicultural society, and other modern values, and follow the strategy of establishing an Islamic sectarian state. Their opposition to democracy in Iraq, Egypt, Libya, or Lebanon, is supported by arms, men, and funding from different sources and countries, disturbing the interests of Middle Eastern public and governments.

Current Situation in 4 Countries

Iraq

The early indigenous people of Mesopotamia to convert to Christianity dates back to the time between the first and the third century. Iraq was the cradle of Eastern rites (the Church of the East) and a missionary expansion that extended Christianity as far as India, Central Asia, and China. Until the 14th century, Christians made up the majority of the population in Iraq.

Christians in Iraq played an important role and participated in the Islamic civilization and excelled in science, astronomy, medicine, and have distinguished themselves in the Abbasid Empire where they were involved in medicine, science, mathematics, and physics.

Today, Christianity is the second religion in Iraq in term of the numbers following Islam, as recognized by the Constitution. Christians in Iraq speaks mostly Arabic language but majority speak Syriac, the modern Armenian language. The percentage of Christians in Iraq in the 1947 census was 3.1% (2) (Batatu, 2000).

Christians in Iraq used to exist in almost all provinces, but they were concentrated mainly in the capital Baghdad. The largest populations of them are in the Nineveh plain near Mosul city in northern Iraq. They still exist in the Dohuk, Irbil, Mosul, Basra, and Kirkuk. In the 1980s, there were an estimated 1-1.6 million Christians in Iraq. This percentage has declined due to migration during the 1990s because of the economic and political consequences of Gulf War. The migration accelerated after the occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the sectarian violence that plagued Iraq and led to the displacement of a large number of Christians in outside Iraq or to the Kurdistan region of Iraq that is relatively safe. Iraqi Christians suffer mainly from lack of security, which resulted in their population reduction to less than a half million today (CIA: The World Factbook, 2014)

Since 2003, more than 1,000 Christians were killed in Iraq, and others were kidnapped, tortured, or released for ransom at the hands of terrorists and lawless armed gangs, where religion is used to justify such criminal acts. Extremist fundamentalists have also attacked 62 churches and monasteries. Thus, the number of Christians is decreasing day by day. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recently reported that 850,000 Iraqi Christians have left the country since 2003 (Patriarch Saco, 2013).

The attacks on the Christians and Yazidis religious minority in December 2011 in the Kurdistan region (3) by Kurdish extremists disappointed Christians who thought that the region is a safe haven for them. Thinking of migration from home, although it is a bitter choice, remains the best alternative to most compared to threat of terrorism and the loss of life.

The worse attack against Christians in Baghdad occurred on October 31, 2010 in the Lady of Deliverance Church by the Organization of the Islamic State of Iraq, al-Qaeda affiliated organization, when gunmen stormed it during the performance of the mass ceremony, blowing themselves killing and wounding hundreds of people. It should be noted that Christians in Iraq are occasionally identified with the American invasion and occupation of Iraq by extreme Islamists.

It should be noted that the Iraqi Christians before 2003 were not living in peace and prosperity. The successive regimes since the modern state of Iraq was created in 1932 carried out various chauvinistic policies against Christians and other minorities. Christian Assyrians were the first groups subjected to killing after the founding of the modern Iraq. In 1933, in the town of Simele, the Royal army massacred nearly 3,000 Christians, including women, elders and children. Another massacre took place in Soria village in northern Iraq 1969 under the Baath party. The Baath rule policies and practices towards Christians led to demographic changes, forced assimilation, destruction of more than 200 villages, displacement of populations, and the demolition and destruction of dozens of churches dating to the early CE centuries, using its Arabization policy. The notorious Anfal campaign against the Kurds caused the missing of hundreds of Christians and destroying more than 120 Christian villages (Hanish, 2009).

When the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) took over Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, the Christians faced dire consequences. It gave the Christians of Mosul 24 hours to convert to Islam, pay special tax of at least \$250 a month, which is very high in Iraqi currency, or face the sword. The letter "N" for Nazarene (Christians called by some Muslims) was marked on all Christian homes and properties that were later considered waqf (religious endowments of Muslim community). Mass exodus of the Christians of Mosul followed (Salameh, 2014). Those who left the city heading toward the Kurdish region were deprived from all their belongings. The United Nation declared on July 22, 2014 that prosecuting the Christians of Mosul might be considered a crime against humanity. Other Christians in nearby areas also fled their homes fearing ISIs advances. If such crimes are committed against Iraqi Christians, then soon Christian presence in Iraq will become symbolic; most will flee Iraq.

Syria

Christians in Syria are about 10% of the population. The Sunni Muslims are 74% of total population and other Muslims, including Alawites of President Bashar al-Assad and Druze are 16 % of the population (CIA: The World Factbook, 2014). Christians live mainly in big cities of Damascus, Aleppo, and a number of towns in Latakia, Homs, Deraa, and al-Hasakah governorate in northeastern Syria. Christians in Syria are largely ethnic Assyrians in the northeast, with the majority speaking Arabic, but speaking Armenian in other places. Syria is known to be a secular state where various religions and sects coexist. Christians enjoy religious freedoms and participate in public work without state discrimination. Since the turmoil in Syria, Christians became a target of bombings in their neighborhoods in Damascus, Aleppo, and other areas, which sparked panic in the Christian minority. The ongoing violence and bombing is carried out by a pro-al-Qaeda organization and similar terrorist organizations like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (4) and al-Nusra Front (Qaraone, 2012).

Since the turmoil in Syria that started in 2012, Christians tried to be neutral in the conflict but militant jihadis targeted them accusing them of supporting the Syrian regime. Christian minority are accused of supporting President Bashar al-Assad and his regime especially him coming from the Alawites minority, which put him in position to protect all minorities. There is a decrease in the number of Christians in Syria because of high rates of out-migration compared to Muslims and the low birth rates of Christians. Christians historically resided in the cities, which allowed them economic opportunities, reflected in the high proportion of educated and academics Christians compared with Muslims, as well as the high standard of living as most Christians belong to the middle and upper classes (BBC, 2011). Their migration out of Syria have increased in the last three decades of the twentieth century, seeking better conditions in Europe and America, as well as fear of the rise of fundamentalist Islamic groups especially after the clash between the government and the Islamic Brotherhood in Syria in 1982 (AKI Italian News, 2008). The recent terrorist attacks on Christians caused a wave of Christian exodus from many areas, especially in northeast where about one-third of them fled the area (CNN, 2013). Today, the extremists are still holding two archbishops captive. The abduction of important religious symbols such as the archbishops John Abraham and Paul Yazigi are issues that affect Christians negatively and push many of them to migration as a result of the growing sense of fear and uncertainty (Ibid).

The Syrian Christians are afraid of who will take power if al-Assad is toppled. Therefore, it is hard for Christians to oppose him when the extremist Islamist groups are seen as alternative. Islamists in power would undermine their positions and security in the society as it is seen in areas controlled by extremists. One of the officials of al-Qaeda-linked groups such as "the Islamic State in Iraq and the Syria" (ISIS), nicknamed "Abu Abdullah," had said that the group "seeks to prevent the building of churches and crosses, and plan to use churches for other purposes." Most of the Syrian Churches in areas controlled by the Islamists are sabotaged and occupied and thus preventing religious observance.

Acts of vandalism were monitored in the tenderness of many churches and some were converted to military headquarters for ISIS. Al-Qaeda elements deliberately take churches and monasteries as military headquarters, especially in areas along the confrontation lines or those subjected to intense aerial bombardment. In their controlled areas, they ordered to stop the church bells tolled simultaneously with the voices of Islamic call for prayer, which are usually very old people's tenderness as a sign of coexistence between Muslims and Christians. The attacks are also on churches and monasteries that have archaeological and historic meaning. Many churches and monasteries in Syria were ruined, dating back to early Christian centuries, notably the Cathedral of St. Simon dating to the fourth century A.D., in addition to well-known religious buildings in Maaloula and specially Mar Takla monetary. These are abnormal behavior by extremists whereas great majority of Muslims consider Christians "the people of the book" and call for relationship of affection with them (Abu al-Khair, 2014). There are daily attacks, murder, and kidnapping of bishops, priests, and nuns. More than 67 Church were attacked and more than 45,000 Christians were forced to escape the country in 2003 (Patriarch Saco, 2013).

Hundreds of thousands of Syrian Christians fled Syria in the last three years of conflict (Shafaq news, 2014).

Lebanon

About 40% of the adult population in Lebanon belongs to the Christian religion. Lebanon is the only country in the Arab world that is chaired by a Christian. The Lebanese people are distributed among 18 recognized sects. The Lebanese are spread around the world as immigrants and expatriates or descendants of Lebanese descent. The exact number of Christians is uncertain because there has not been an official population census in Lebanon since 1932. Lebanon has a population of about by 4.1 million in 2008. The CIA factbook put Christians at 39% of population (CIA: The World Factbook, 2014). Christians before the 1975 Lebanese civil war were over half of the population but because of migration and displacement they are less than 40% today, still the highest percentage of Christians in the Arab world (Al-Jazeera, 2007).

Lebanese Christians, mostly Maronites, have important political role in the country. The President of the Republic, according to custom, is from the Maronite sect, and the numbers of parliamentary seats are equally distributed between Muslims and Christians, in addition to ministerial and important posts. Lebanese Christians are concerned with the events that took place in Syria, and the Maronite Patriarch Bashara al-Raae warned of Western support for the extremists, stressing the role of Syria in caring for Christian presence in the East.

Christians in Lebanon contributed to the Arabic Renaissance movement during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and played an important role in the cultural and political renewal in opening schools, caring for Arabic language, newspapers, associations, and the establishment of political associations that include also Arabic Muslims. They called for decentralization and to make Arabic an official language in the state administration and courts (AKI Italian News, 2008)

Emigration from Lebanon escalated because of the civil war in 1975 and has not finished yet, causing decline of Christians from 55% in 1930 to less than 40% today. The number is even expected to decline over fears that Lebanon lost its importance as a safe haven for the Christians of the Orient. There is no doubt that the wars that shook the region during the last 50 years, particularly sectarian war in Lebanon, had a direct effect on the migration of Christians from their homelands. In light of this, the obvious risk faced by Arab Christians draw questions marks about their fate. All of what Christians are facing warns of the possible extinction of Christians on a map of Arabic world (Fargo, 2014).

Egypt

Most statistics put Christians in Egypt over the 10% of population, or about 8 million people, the largest Christian community in the Arab world.

Statistic announced by the Coptic Pope Shenouda III, according to Church records, put them more than 12.7 million, in addition to 2 million out of Egypt. According CIA Fact book, Muslims are 90%, Coptic Christians, 9%, and other Christian 1% (CIA: The World Factbook, 2014).

Christians in Egypt suffer from discrimination in several areas, such as building churches, having a very small percentage of important state positions such as army officers, and strained and sectarian relationships with some Muslims (Ezzat, 2011). However, a number of Christians emerged in economic and cultural areas. Although the majority of Copts are Arabic speakers, they consider themselves as part of Coptic nationalism and Coptic people. There are over 810,000 non-Coptic Arab Christians living in Egypt, mainly immigrants from Syria and belong to the Orthodox and the Eastern Catholic churches who played a leading role in modernization Egyptian society. They established newspapers, modernized printing and publishing, as well as working in the various professions and banks. They became part of the wealthy and the educated class (D Press, 2010).

Although tensions between Muslims and Christians in Egypt are not new, but since the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak, a clear deterioration of the situation occurred. For example, in October 2011, at least 20 Christians were killed in clashes with the army, which pushed about 100,000 Egyptian Christians to leave the country that year (CNN, 2013).

In 2011 New Year eve, a blast targeted the Church of “St. Peter the Apostle and Pope Potrus” in Alexandria. It was claimed by al-Qaida of Mesopotamia organization that had previously targeted a Church in Baghdad killing and wounding 100s of worshippers. Al-Qaida threatened the Coptic Church in Egypt with the same fate if they do not release two Coptic women who it claimed that they were converted to Islam but the Copts were detaining them.

Christian Egyptians suffered from political and social marginalization, especially with the rise of Islamists during President Mohamed Mors before July 3, 1913 when the Islamists were moved from power following mass demonstrations. Egyptian Coptic fear about their future has intensified after the “Arab Spring” and the departure of their charismatic leader Pope Shenouda III who served as a safety valve for the Copts and who was able to strengthen their partnership in public life through his advocacy for Palestinian rights and his famous opposition to the Camp David agreement, which earned him great popularity among Egyptians and Arabs generally (Qaraone, 2012). In a year and half that preceded the ousting of the Islamists from power, daily attacks, explosions, kidnapping, and murder were occurrence in Egypt. In the last 18 months more than 100 churches were attacked in Egypt (Patriarch Saco, 2013).

In July 2013, Islamic protesters attacked dozens of churches and burned many others in days that followed the Egyptian military taking over some public squares from Muslim Brotherhood’s protesters. The Coptic Pope Theodoros supported actions taken by the army in the wake of its decision to overthrow President Morsi. Christians complained, along with other minorities, that the Constitution adopted by Morsi diminished their rights. According to a report, 52 Churches across Egypt were attacked in 24 hours of one day following Morsi’s removal. Shortly after the overthrow of Morsi, angry protesters attacked and killed a Christian businessman near Luxor, south of Egypt and continued their riots burning dozens of Christian homes, killing three Copts. The State Department recent July 2014 report attested to such atrocities against the Christians in Egypt (Abdul Hafeez, 2014). All these events are pushing many Copts to leave the country to escape turmoil and discrimination against Christians.

Why Eastern Christian Numbers are declining?

The number of Eastern Christians is dropping due to several reasons and factors. Here are some of the main reasons for the decline of the Eastern Christians population in the Middle East.

1. Religious and Ethnic Persecution

Religious extremism is making Christian minorities in Levantine lose their sense of security and stability, which is pushing them to migrate in search of security and safety for a better future. The latest Jihadi and Salafi ideology, which is foreign to the tolerance values of local community in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere is worrying minorities who have been living in relative peace for centuries.

The failure of Arab nationalism, the disappearance of the attractiveness to socialist ideas, globalization, and the conceived threat to Islamic culture and beliefs contributed to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and extremism in the region.

It is unfortunate that fundamentalists associate Christians of the East with the West and its imperialist policy because of sharing the same religion. Some others who do not believe in pluralism consider them agents of the West. They want to impose their Islamic ideology on them.

The openness of the Christians to the West is targeted by extremists who link Westernization, globalization, and Zionism, and the perception of the West as infidels and enemy of Muslim beliefs. This made link is damaging to Eastern Christians and occasionally sparks violent reactions against them.

When a more conservative interpretation of Islam becomes widespread and exclusive, Christians are pushed out to leave bitterly for alternative places to live. Religious sectarianism is eliminating the concept of citizenship, especially at the absence of serious effort to real coexistence of diverse groups. So, Christians started looking for alternative homelands that promise them a safe living and decent conditions to develop. Christians of the East are known by their peaceful non-aggressive nature and some have chosen to leave their homelands for safety. Extensive migration outside of the Middle East is the main cause of the decline of the number of Christians in the region. The religious and ethnic persecutions have caused the death of thousands of Christians in Iraq and Syria alone.

2. Christians Low Birth Rates

Another reason for the decreased number of the Christians in the Middle East is the birth control practices comparing to their Muslims counterparts. Many factors contribute to this phenomena including urbanization of Christians and joining more the rank of the middle class comparing to lower Muslim's social classes. In addition, Muslims are more religiously strict about the use of birth control. For example, one reason for the growth of the percentage of Arab population in Israel in 1948 territories comparing to Jewish is the high birth rates of the Arab born babies segment of the society.

3. The Arab-Israeli Conflict

Some writers cite the long years of the Arab-Israelis conflict as reason of instability in the Middle East, which was a direct or indirect cause of migration and the rise of the frustrated Islamic fundamentalism who blame the West for the rise of Israel and the misery of the Palestinian people.

The prevailing doubts about the West and its policy in the Middle East have turned more often to express hatred towards Christians and the Christian West. Sometimes Christians of the East are described as "Crusaders" or "fifth column of "Western colonialism." In Palestine, most Palestinian Christians left the holy land because of the turmoil, wars, oppression, racism and intolerance of Islamists in Palestine and beyond.

4. The Nature of the Arab Regimes

Many authors blame the migration on the nature of the repressive Arab regimes, lack of freedom and democracy, in addition to corruption and severe economic conditions in many parts of the Arab world.

Civil wars that are raging in countries like Syria and Iraq, which are direct cause of the Arab regimes policies, and the socio-political tensions in many Arab societies caused by governments' policies, are also factors for forcing Eastern Christians to seek refuge elsewhere in the globe.

5. No Pluralist of Inclusive Message

Arab countries are a mixture of peoples of different nationalities, languages , religions, and doctrines. These countries do not yet incorporate or integrate its citizens in a single project of citizenship that equalizes between individuals on the basis of rights and duties, and the preserve of freedom and privacy of each individual and community. The failure of this project contributed to weakening national sentiment among the citizens, making the fundamentalists raise the sign of "Islam is the solution," which is pushing into dissociation and divisions. What people hear in the many messages of the Islamic militants is dividing the world into two: "you are either with me or against me." This is a disregard to the fine mix of religions, cultures, and nationalities that coexis in the region (PBS, 2012).

6. Marginalization of the Eastern Christians by the Arab Ruling Elites

Politically, Christians are not included in governments or power structure in most Arab countries except Lebanon where the president has to be Christian by custom. Christians are suffering from discrimination in states' constitutions and in laws. The constitutions in the region, except Lebanon, specify that "Islam is the official religion of the state" or that "Islam is the basic state religion."

These constitutions define that sharia (Islamic law) is a source or main source of legislation and laws of the state. This distinction highlights series of persecution and suffering of non-Muslims. Some constitutions require that the president be a Muslim. In many Arab countries, Christians are not allowed to teach their children about Christianity, even in the private schools but it is mandatory for them to learn Islam in schools. Muslim men are allowed to marry Christian women but Muslim women cannot marry Christian men unless they convert to Islam (Aziz, 2013).

Minority areas suffer marginalization and lack of fairness in appointments. For example, most Christians in Nineveh plain in Iraq are of low-income status and under the poverty line, due to unemployment and the lack of justice in appointments, as well as negligence in the municipal areas and services in their home regions (Domly, 2014).

Many of the governments in the region suffer from lack of democracy and human rights. People have a sense of alienation in their home countries and lack of religious freedom in their practices. Therefore, many of them think of practicing such freedom in other countries that have the same Christian religion. They feel that many Middle Eastern governments finance, back up, sympathize with, or are weak to face Islamic extremism.

In Iraq, emigration from certain areas, especially in Mosul city was caused by religious extremism and sectarian hatred speech and racist language. For instance, there was a call not to participate in Christians' joy and grief, not to greet them, or purchase from their properties. Christian girls and women were harassed at work, schools, or streets if they were not veiling. A report indicates that these conditions led to Christians' gradual and targeted segregation, which led to isolating them from the Iraqi society as if they were strangers in their homeland. They have been targeted by terrorists and militias groups through killings, kidnappings and extortion. In the city of Mosul, terrorist groups put marks on the homes of Christians and claim a share of the sale value of 30% of the real property value (Domly, 2014).

It is noted that there is a contradiction between what is recognized by the state constitutions of freedom of religious beliefs and the prevalence of religious discourses that eliminates diversity, pluralism, and coexistence in many Middle Eastern societies (PBS, 2012)

7. Organized Crime Role

The Eastern Christians are also a target of organized criminal acts to obtain cash. Christians are an easy target for these operations because they do not have militias or tribes to defend them. Christians suffered much because of these practices and the lack of governments in provide in security, law, and order. This is causing many Christians and especially the youth to seek refuge elsewhere in the world.

8. Western Countries Encouraging Emigration

Some countries in the West are encouraging migration of the Eastern Christians (Patriarch Saco, 2013). They are welcoming specifically Christians in the name of protecting minorities. By doing so, they are evacuating Christians who lived in their homelands for almost two millenniums. The Germans welcomed Syrian Christians and after ISIS taking over Mosul in June 2014, France offered sanctuary to Iraqi Christians. Christians who emigrate to the West will soon lose their ethnic identity by third generation and assimilate in their new societies. This was the fate of generations of immigrants who immigrated to the New World.

The Christian population are living between pressures, deteriorating living conditions, poor services, religious harassment, and pressing temptations to emigrate. Apparently, there is a tendency for Islamic religious parties to empty the area of its indigenous population. The West is becoming attractive because it provides food, shelter, educations, and better living conditions (Aljazeera, 2013).

Some Possible Solutions to the Issue

The existence and survival of the Christians in the Middle depends on consolidating important principles of rule of law, justice, and equal opportunities as well as to establish the concept of citizenship. The churches themselves also must emphasize their culture and encourage their members to stay there, and to work uniformly in the face of challenges that threaten their existence and common destiny. They must contribute positively inputting good ideas and perceptions for the development of their societies (News of the Patriarchate, 2013). In addition to the participation in state institutions, the future of the Christians is not to isolate them, seek foreign protection, or to identify with authoritarian regimes, but to promote moderation and openness (Aljazeera, 2013). They should unite to strengthen their roles influencing their societies.

To ensure freedom of religions and equal rights in every country, state constitutions should be amended to establish real citizenship that allows all to have place in their societies regardless of religion or nationality, and to build on the idea that all humans are created equal. There should be a positive secularism that respects religion and cooperation between religious and political leaders. The West should help these countries to establish the concept of respecting human rights as they are established in their countries. There should be separation between politics and religion and for all to work together to establish a civil society where only criterion of citizenship is to be based on full equality before the law (Patriarch Saco, 2013)

The educational system should focus on national unity and elimination of expressions of hatred, violence, and marginalization by particular religious group against other groups. Today, there are many Muslims who know nothing about the history of Eastern Christians. It is becoming necessary to shed light on the positive historical relations between Christians and Muslims and the Christians of the East contribution to the development of the Arabic and the Persian civilizations (Ibid).

Religious authorities have a unique and irreplaceable role in society. It is necessary for them to work with religious groups together to develop a culture of dialogue and recognition of "the others" in that "God created us different." We should reach a broad consensus and respect for human dignity and the values of citizenship and coexistence between different segments of the society (Ibid).

For their part, the Christians in the Middle East are to remain in their country of origin and maintain the historic presence, no flee to the West. They have to be motivated enough to stay in their ancestors' land and to do their utmost even if they are threatened or facing difficulties (Ibid). The governments in the region must have plans to keep and encourage Eastern Christians to stay in their lands and to have an affirmative action like plan for them.

The moderate voices of Islam must rise off to say "no" to violence against Christians. It is time for moderate Muslims, who make up the majority, to strengthen civil coexistence and religious freedom in their societies. They should highlight to the world that Islam is not a religion of terrorism and killing of innocent civilians. The majority of Muslim people are non-violent and they disagree with extremism (Ibid).

In countries like Iraq, the phenomenon of demographic change in the Christian's minority areas must be addressed, and those responsible for it must be held accountable. The local police must treat Christian people with dignity and professionalism. Public services should be provided to the Christian areas to tackle the lack of hospitals and health centers, schools buildings, and the scarcity of safe drinking water, sanitation, electricity and garbage collection. State employment and appointments should be fairly provided to combat the discrimination against Christians. On the legal side, the family law must be amended to guarantee the rights of minorities. The item in the national identification card specifying religion of a person should be negated because it is a base for discrimination. Islamic religious rituals should not be imposed on every person, such as the Shiite Ashura rituals, or fasting in the month of Ramadan, or any similar practice. In addition, the exercise of Christian religious practices and ethnic national events should be respected (Domly, 2014).

Most of Arab constitutions obscure Arabic Christian history and Christian landmarks, as they are not indigenous people and their heritage is not part of the national heritage. They and their heritage are rarely mentioned in the educational programs. This deepened their sense of injustice, as there are two policies, one absolute towards Muslims, and the other towards Christians as they are the followers. It is noted that there is a conflict between what is recognized by the Constitution of freedom of religious belief and reality. There must be effective government policies to embrace everyone without differentiation or exclusion. There is a need for wise administrations that are open to religious and national pluralism and diversity, not to wipe them out (Recommendations, 2012).

It is noted that religious discourse today stems from the text or past history rather than from current people's reality. It does not take into account that the world is different today, as well as the culture, mentality, and feeling of people. The clergy and its religious scholars should have their responsibility in the search for the real meanings in the text, to implement its spirit for the sake of modern people's conversion (Ibid).

In sum, there must be a state that remains at the same distance from everyone to unfold the fear and the majority and minority barrier. Everyone should feel that it is her/his country, and not a minority or majority, Muslim or "dhimmi,"(5) but a citizen that enjoys equal rights and responsibilities.

Conclusion

Eastern Christians are relatively well educated, open minded, tolerant, and modern. Their migration will deprive the Middle East from a moderating force and will strengthen more Islamic fundamentalism. National economies will be deprived from their professional is and their capital investment. They have adynamic role in numerous social, economic, and political features in the Middle East and forcing them to leave will put the Middle East in disadvantage.

Migration of Eastern Christians will be a great historical loss to diversity in the Middle East. If Eastern Christians flee the Middle East, they will take with them their openness and intellectual culture, skills, and efforts towards religious freedom.

Christians are important in the Middle East due to their high levels of culture and education, their spirit of cooperation, and their institutions such as schools, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly and the poor, as well as their economic, small projects that they manage. Many Muslims do appreciate their contribution, and many of them understand that Christians are to ensure a better future for the Muslims.

Christian migration from the East will strongly affects the Christian presence, due to their low population density. Their migration will mean demolishing the impact that was built during the last 2000 years. The East first and foremost is the cradle of Christianity and it is necessary for secular governments, civic societies, and international bodies to work together to ensure that the Christians of the East remain in their indigenous lands.

End Notes

1. Only about 40,000 Christian Palestinians remain in Palestine. In Gaza, where Sharia has dominated, there are only 1,300 Christians. In Jerusalem, the foundations of Christianity, there are less than 4,000 Christians today (Aziz, Jean).
2. In 1947, 3.1% portion of population who were Christians was 149,000 people out of 4.5 million people.
3. The 2011 attack in Iraqi Kurdistan included the burning of Christians' owned shops, hotels and casinos, lounges for physical therapy, and women's hair salons.
4. ISIS is the acronym of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (greater Syria=al-Sham). Occasionally the acronym is written ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). In July 2014, it changed its name to simply the Islamic State. The Arabic acronym was Daesh.
5. *Dhimmi* is a non-Muslim person living in an area that was taken by Muslim conquest. It is a status of a supposedly of a protected person to keep her or his belief in return for a special tax (*jizyah*). The word *dhimma* means protected in Arabic.

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