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### **The Recession of Arab Christianity**

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A large percentage of Arab, and mostly Lebanese, emigrants can be attributed to an exodus at the turn of the nineteenth century leading to places as far as Australia and the Americas. Prior to colonial rule in the Middle East and North Africa, economic depression governed, famine occasionally struck, and the inability of the “sick man of Europe” to elevate economic hardships drove these mainly Christian Arabs to seemingly more prosperous horizons. While the bulk of those compelled to migrate a century ago were wealthy Christians, relatively poorer Arab Christians today are looking for safe havens, fearing persecution by an emerging Muslim dominance in the Arab world.

#### **Declining Numbers**

According to Lebanese University professor Abdel-Raouf Sinno, though estimates three decades ago marked the Christian population at roughly twenty percent of the overall Arab population in the Middle East, since then, that fraction has “dramatically dwindled.” Even in Lebanon, he told the HPR, where “the largest Christian community exists, [only] 35 percent of the population is Christian.” Although Lebanese Christians are still represented through a power-sharing system that guarantees a Christian Maronite president, Christians in Lebanon have seen some of their privileges reduced in recent decades, including by the Ta’if Accord of 1989 that extended privileges to the growing Muslim Sunni and Shiite majority population.

Ambivalence towards a year of uprisings and anxiety for the future are two sentiments largely reverberating among Christians in the Arab world. Though perhaps less drastically in Lebanon, where Christians have a recognized voice in political matters, a shadow has been cast on Arab Christians who silently await their sentence amid obscure clouds of springs and revolutions in neighboring countries. For those who have sought refuge in Syria, the prospect of yet another delocalization is plausible.

#### **Limited Prospects for Syrian Christians**

The Arab Spring was not as auspicious for Christians as it was for Muslim Sunnis. Until the Arabs, dissatisfied with decades of oppression, dared to confront their leaders, there were upsides to being part of the Christian minority in Syria. Such benefits were not necessarily advantages over the rest of the religious sects. However, in a country where over seventy percent of the population is Muslim Sunni, an Alawiite regime, albeit totalitarian, preserved minorities’ rights to practice faiths free from persecution.

Professor Sinno confirmed that “in Syria, Christians are afraid of the growth of Muslim fundamentalism, particularly after the torment that Christians bore in Iraq.” The situation has not been similarly gruesome in Syria, but following two blasts in Christian neighborhoods in Damascus in March of this year, many Syrian Christians have re-evaluated the rationale behind remaining in the country amid the bloodshed between Muslim Sunnis and Alawiites. Unfortunately, alternatives are few and the Syrian Christians have little option but to endure.

In an interview with the HPR, a middle-class Christian businesswoman living in Damascus voiced her concern over the future of Christians in the region. “Trade has significantly regressed recently,” according to her, “and the number of unemployed is mounting, compounding the problem of already relatively low wages.” This makes the prospect even more distant that the bulk of the Syrian middle-class Christians will be able to seek stability in Lebanon, their most obvious choice for refuge. Even more, the businesswoman told the HPR that, “Not all Syrians want change, and even among the Sunnis only a small fraction is fighting for it.” The overthrow of the Assad regime would likely leave the ten percent Christian minority worse off in the short term, allowing fundamentalist Muslim bodies to surface and seize power. The majority of Christians hope that the current regime will hold on a little longer until reform can be instituted.

Lebanese author and political thinker Suleiman Takieddine believes that minorities in Syria, especially sectarian ones, prefer dictatorial rule over religious dominance. He claims that “the current political marginalization is not as adverse as would be the rise of a fundamentalist authority that eliminates religious, social, and political freedoms.” Over the past year, the presence of Islam has considerably strengthened in Arab countries where political regimes were overthrown, such as Tunisia and Egypt. This proposes the likelihood of an equally growing presence of Islam in Syria, should the current regime be overthrown.

### **Rising Muslim Dominance**

For over a hundred days, an Islamist-led government has held office in Tunisia. Despite the government’s radical-free ideology in not incorporating Salafist Muslims, who demand the imposition of Sharia Law, the major actors on the Tunisian political scene today are different Muslim factions.

In Egypt, Islamists dominate a heated presidential contest. Posters of the Salafist Hazem Abu Ismail are raised high in streets, indicating the people’s approval of a fundamentalist rule that aspires to emancipate Egypt from its submission to the West. As in Tunisia, the opposition to the Salafist candidates comes not from Christians but from other Muslim groups; in Egypt it is the Muslim Brotherhood. Muslim leaders are rapidly created in an election-packed Egypt as Christian leaders fade away.

In the face of rapidly fortifying conservative Islam in Egypt, Christian Copts have seen their hopes of stability in their historic region recently diminish.

They continue to bear against cruelty and discrimination in a country that was once ripe with faith and belief. The recent death of Pope Shenouda III of Alexandria, the Coptic Pope who had fought for the integrity of Christianity in Egyptian society, dimmed yet another light in the otherwise bleak future of the Egyptian Coptic Church.

Former Lebanese minister and current professor at the American University of Beirut Tarek Mitri believes that Syrian Christians perceive drastic changes in the region, especially with the rise of Muslim influence, which increases their sense of insecurity. He claims that “the bulk of Syrian Christians are silent, hesitant, and uncertain about the future. This translates at times into their propensity to emigrate.” Their migration is facilitated by the family they have abroad and the foreign resources they developed a century ago.

### **The Question of Democracy**

The question of democracy asks what is best for everyone, Muslims and Christians alike. In the Arab world, democracies are worth consideration following decades of dictatorships, but the probability that such democracies could be initially based on equality and meritocracy is not guaranteed. “Arab despotism has eliminated fair participation in political affairs” says Takieddine. However, it is only natural that such despotism be opposed; indeed, the recent revolutions of the region were born from the infrastructure of failed states.

Despite a convincing show of support for Islamist political parties in Tunisia and Egypt, and the mounting influence of a Muslim majority in Syria, Mitri believes that a positive aspect of the Arab Spring is that “everyone wants democracy, and this is a good sign.” People want free and fair elections, which at first sight may not seem to be most favorable for Arab Christians. Still, Mitri believes that elections are the initial step in a transition towards sound democracy, and hence constitutionalism, equal participation, and the preservation of civil and religious rights of all citizens.

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