

Conference held at Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Berlin, 17 April 2012

## **Christian Minorities in the Islamic World. No Arab Spring for Christians.**



Christianity first emerged in the Orient. But today, Christians living in the Islamic world are marginalised and threatened with persecution. A problematic issue addressed at a conference organised by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Berlin, Germany. Report by Bettina Marx

Christians in the Islamic world – at best tolerated, more often than not discriminated against and in the worst cases even persecuted. In Arab nations above all their numbers are shrinking at a worrying rate.

Iraq, for example: Before the US invasion in 2003, Iraq was home to 1.5 million Christians. Now their population is estimated at 400,000.

In the Palestinian territories, it is estimated that 49,000 Christians still live in the cradle of Christianity, amounting to around 1.2 percent of the population. Around half of these live in the district of Bethlehem. There are only around 6,500 Christians still living in the birthplace of Christ itself.

### **The dominance of Hezbollah**

In Lebanon too, where a century ago Christians still represented the majority, they are now in the minority due to emigration and the high Muslim birth rate. Only between 30 and 35 percent of the population are Christians.

In the view of historian Abdel Raouf Sinno from Beirut, this is first and foremost due to the economic and political situation since the end of the civil war. Addressing a conference held by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Berlin, Germany, Sinno said that the Taif Agreement that ended the civil war in year 1989 withdrew many privileges from the Christians.

The emergence of Hezbollah, the movement that has dominated political life in Lebanon since 2006, triggered fears among Christians in Lebanon of a burgeoning Shiite fundamentalism, said Sinno.

"Many Christians and also Sunnis feel threatened by the extreme ideology of Hezbollah," he continued. The "Party of God" perceives the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, as the religious and political leader of the Islamic world.

Sinno went on to say that it is not only Lebanon's Shiite majority population that represents a danger. He explained that the Christian community is also unsettled by an escalation of violence triggered by the uprising in neighbouring Syria. "Following the prolongation of the Syrian revolution Christians fear that Lebanon will be transformed into an Islamic state. They fear a coalition between Syrian and Lebanese Sunnis, which would mean a further marginalization of Christian presence," he said.

*Bettina Marx*

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*Translated from the German by Nina Coon*

*Qantara.de editor: Lewis Gropp*

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