

Sad Tidings

Barely two generations ago, more than 80 per cent of Bethlehem's residents celebrated Christmas; now the number is closer to one quarter. For the first time in almost two thousand years, the most renowned Christian town on earth has lost its Christian majority. Another famously Christian town, Nazareth, has gone from a majority of 60 per cent in 1946 to some 20 per cent. In Jerusalem, Christians outnumbered Muslims by a fraction in 1922 (15,000 to 13,000); currently, they account for less than 2 per cent of the city's population. In fact, there are more Christians from Jerusalem living in Paris, Montreal or Sydney than in Jerusalem itself.

These demographic changes have not been limited to historic Palestine; the entire stretch of the ancient Fertile Crescent – from the Tigris and Euphrates to the Upper Nile – has witnessed a major upheaval of Christian Arabs. Christians used to make up one-third of the Syrian population; now they account for less than 10 per cent. In Lebanon's official census of 1932, which was subsequently used to divide the country's top posts along sectarian lines, 55 per cent of the national population was Christian; now the figure is nearer to 30 per cent.

An unholy trinity of armed conflict, economic hardship and persecution has also compelled more than half the Christians of Iraq to flee in the most recent wave. At the present rate, the Middle East's 12 million Christians – almost half of whom are in Egypt – will drop to 6 million by 2020, thereby effectively sealing the demise of Christians from the region as a cultural and political force.

The world needs to pay attention to the exodus of Christians from the Arab region because many of those leaving belong to the educated middle class and tend to be more open to democratic ideals. Aside from raising the level of local Arab talent, encouraging Christians to remain adds to the liberal notion of diversity in which all cultures, races and belief systems are deemed to be of equal value and merit.

In reality, the religions are not seen as equals, which compounds an age-old and chronic sense of distrust. Muslim Arabs have often labelled their Christian counterparts as fifth-columnists in the service of Western powers – or Crusader states, in Islamist parlance. There is some, albeit indirect substance to the charge given that, historically, the plight of the Christians of the Orient habitually dictated the foreign policies of Britain, France and the Vatican, among others.

From the other side of the religious barrier and with just as much jurisprudence, Christian Arabs often accuse the Muslim majorities of stifling their economic and political freedoms. For instance, Christians only began to leave Egypt in significant numbers after the 1952 revolution that brought to power the nationalists, who had almost as much contempt for the Copts as the monarchy.

Feeding this cycle of distrust, historians on both sides rewrite the books to suit their audiences. In an age when Arabic has become so inextricably linked to Islam, some would have us forget that Arabic-speaking Christians preceded Arabic-speaking Muslims.

Similarly, others will point the finger of blame at Caliph Omar I, who added Syria, Palestine and Egypt to the growing Muslim empire in the 630s. To be sure, the indigenous Christians were given the choice to embrace the new faith or become an underclass; and in Egypt and Palestine, there were mass conversions leaving a minority of subjugated Copts and Greek Orthodox Christians.

It is also true that some Christians in Syria under the spiritual leadership of Maro opted for a third course of action: they fled. They left their homes and lands and moved to the impregnable shelter of Mount Lebanon, seeking refuge in the caves of the Qadisha Valley. But it is worth setting the record straight concerning this first of many subsequent waves of Christian emigrations: the flight of these early Maronites predated the arrival of Islam by at least a century. They were not running from Islamic hordes – as is mistakenly retold even now to Christian children across the region – but from Byzantine coreligionists who put them to the sword as heretics.

While the process may never be fully reversed, Arab governments can and must take the lead in curtailing the current drain of Christians. They can do this by recognizing that Arab heritage owes as much to Christian Arabs as it does to Muslim Arabs. By invoking a strong sense of shared destiny and with the right incentives, many first- and second-generation Christian Arabs in the West could even be lured back to the region, bringing with them much-needed talent and resources. This, after all, is essentially what happened to Joseph and his family after they were forced to leave Bethlehem, only to return from Egypt in more auspicious times and with a wiser son.

Iraqi Christians

Last month, a senior Iraqi cleric in London called on Iraqi Christians to flee the country because they were being targeted by al-Qaeda, hinting at the Iraqi government's incapacity to keep them safe. Archbishop Athanasios Dawood's call came in the wake of a spate of attacks against the ancient Christian community, including the four-hour bloodbath in Our Lady of Salvation Cathedral that resulted in the death of more than 50 people.

While political and religious leaders from across ethnic and sectarian lines in the country have appealed to Christians to stay, many are heeding the Archbishop's call and feel that after years of violence and devastation, they have no other option but to emigrate. The assault on the cathedral was only the latest in a long list of attacks on Christian places of worship; since the start of the Iraq war in 2003, some 46 churches and monasteries have been bombed.

Indeed, an unholy trinity of armed conflict, economic hardship and persecution has already compelled more than half the Christians of Iraq to flee, and a new wave of displacement could irreversibly devastate the dwindling Christian community. According to a report by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, only half of the pre-2003 Iraqi Christian community is believed to remain in the country; other sources estimate that up to two-thirds of Iraq's Christians have fled since 2003, leaving fewer than 450,000, from an estimated 1.4 million Christians during Saddam Hussein's rule. Without tribes or militias to protect them, Christian communities are among the most vulnerable in the country. The fledgling Iraqi Security Force, which has been plagued by corruption and, in some cases, infiltration by extremist groups, has abjectly failed to protect Christians and other minorities.

The events in Iraq are also alarming Christian communities across the Arab region, who worry of a knock-on effect. These demographic changes have not been limited to Iraq. To be sure, the entire stretch of the ancient Fertile Crescent – from the Tigris and Euphrates to the Upper Nile – has witnessed a major upheaval of Christian Arabs over the past century. Christians used to make

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The world needs to pay attention to the exodus of Christians from Iraq and the wider Arab region because many of those leaving belong to the educated middle class and tend to be more open to democratic ideals. Aside from raising the level of local Arab talent, encouraging Christians to remain adds to the liberal notion of diversity in which all cultures, races and belief systems are deemed to be of equal value and merit.

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