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Christianity in the Middle East

REPORT I



www.christianitymiddleeast.gr
info@christianitymiddleeast.gr

Sotiris Roussos

Coordinator

Zakia Aqra

Research Team

Stavros Drakoularakos

Charitini Petrodaskalaki

Ilias Tasopoulos

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Egypt's Coptic community

The Egyptian Copts are the oldest Christian community of the Middle East, and amount to approximately ten million people, or around ten percent of the population of Egypt. The official percentage is unavailable due to the lack of an accurate population census during the last few decades. Nonetheless, their population makes them the largest religious community of the country, after the Sunni Muslim majority. Despite the fact that ever since the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the end of the Mubarak era their numbers are gradually diminishing because of emigration, the Egyptian Copts remain an important presence in the country's everyday social and political life. There are four main axes that shed light to the trajectory of the Coptic community in Egypt: first, the concept of Egyptian national identity, which does not necessary include the Coptic community; second, the problems that arise from the needs for religious freedom; third, the societal and sectarian context in which the Copts go about their lives; and, fourth, the renewed presence and participation of the Coptic community in Egyptian politics.¹

The Egyptian national identity and the Copts

While the discourse related to Egyptian national identity has been ongoing for the past decades, the years following the Arab uprisings provided additional food for thought concerning the place of the Coptic Christian community in society. The relationship with the previous Mubarak administration which lasted for three decades was considered a mostly positive one in regard to the protection of Coptic religious rights. However, the rise and fall – via military coup – of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) party to power during 2011-2013 brought back to the forefront the Sunni Muslim aspect of the Egyptian citizen with implications on the relationship between Sunni Muslims and Christian Copts. After the military coup of current President al-Sisi, who overthrew the MB administration of elected President Morsi, Coptic Pope Tawandros promptly declared their support for the new President, who was bringing back an authoritarian government akin to the Mubarak one. It is of note that their public support to the military coup was met with violent protests by Muslim Brotherhood partisans and destruction of Christian churches and property, particularly in the Minya region.²

¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "USCIRF 2020 Annual Report", 2020, 66-68, <https://www.uscirf.gov/publications/2020-annual-report>.

² Ramazan Kilinc, "Mubarak's lasting legacy on Egypt's Coptic Christians", *The Conversation*, March 17, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/mubaraks-lasting-legacy-on-egypts-coptic-christians-132835>; Johannes Makar, "How Egypt's Copts Fell Out of Love with President Sisi", *Foreign Policy*, December 9, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/09/how-egypts-copts-fell-out-of-love-with-president-sisi/>; Jason Brownlee,

Although current President al-Sisi soon affirmed his belief that the Egyptian Copts represent as much a vital and equal part of Egyptian society as the Muslim population, proclaiming that “we are all Egyptians, first and foremost”, it became evident in the years that followed that the path to equal citizenship for the Copts would certainly be a long and difficult one. During the past decade, attacks and social discrimination of the Coptic community was made more public via social media and the internet. Past transgressions that would very rarely see the light of day are now readily available through information dissemination. Nonetheless, the publicized aspect of the attacks against the Copts is largely promoted from independent media, rather than from official sources. Hence, while President al-Sisi was the first to yearly attend Coptic Christmas celebrations in an effort to show his support and recognition of the community and to push for the reconstruction and inauguration of new churches in central cities, it remains to be seen if al-Sisi’s calls for a rapprochement between Copts and Sunni Muslims will have a concrete impact rather than a symbolic one.³

An important aspect in the Copts’ bid for recognition as an integral part of the Egyptian national identity is the fact that the Coptic community was not a migrant one. Instead, its indigenous presence was established throughout past centuries and its influence in Egyptian culture is evident through the number of churches, monuments, their shared history and customs. Copts consider themselves authentic Egyptians and part of the Arab world. At the same time, the religious aspect of their identity associates them with the western world and acts as a dividing factor in Egyptian society. The problem that arises is directly related to the two sides of Egyptian Coptic identity. On the one hand, the Arab Egyptian side includes the Copts in the dialogue concerning national identity. On the other hand, the Coptic religious side relegates them to the status of minority in contrast to the Sunni Muslim majority. While the minority aspect provides specific religious rights and protection, the Egyptian national one equates their identity with the one shared by the majority of the Sunni Muslim

“Violence against Copts in Egypt”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November, 2013, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/violence_against_copts3.pdf.

³ Ahram Online, “‘We should always be together,’ Sisi says at the Nativity of Christ Cathedral”, January 6, 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/359031/Egypt/Politics-/We-should-always-be-together,-Sisi-says-at-the-Nat.aspx>; Al-Arabiya, “Sisi makes surprise Coptic Christmas visit”, January 7, 2015, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/01/07/Sisi-becomes-Egypt-s-first-president-to-attend-Coptic-Christmas>; Sarah Yerkes, “What Egypt under Sissi is really like for Coptic Christians”, *Brookings*, June 20, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/06/20/what-egypt-under-sissi-is-really-like-for-coptic-christians/>; Egypt Today, “Sisi congratulates Egyptian Christians abroad on Easter Sunday”, April 16, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/84793/Sisi-congratulates-Egyptian-Christians-abroad-on-Easter-Sunday>.

population. Needless to say, the above arguments complicate the Egyptian identity narrative and create a roadblock for a seamless inclusion of the Coptic community.⁴

Religious freedom challenges

Coptic Christian religious freedom is officially protected by the Egyptian constitution, as it is one of the three recognized Abrahamic religions: Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Religion freedom boils down to the freedom of openly building and attending places of worship and cemeteries, as well as conducting mass and religious celebrations. In essence, freely presenting one's religious identity should be protected against radicalism or sectarian strife. While the above is constitutionally established, the fact of the matter is that the situation on the ground leaves a lot to be desired. Copts daily face religious discrimination and are often the victims of attacks, either by Egyptian religious radicals, or by foreign terrorist elements, such as Islamic State fighters. Moreover, Islamic State leaders have called the Copts their favorite prey, often supporting violent and bloody attacks in the Sinai region.⁵ What is more, finding out the religious identity of the Coptic community is easy enough when taking into account that they often have a tattoo of a cross on their wrist. As such a placement is in plain sight, Copts are easily identified and suffer the ire of part of the population in difficult times.⁶

Following 2013 and the attacks later on by radicals, President al-Sisi personally vowed that the Egyptian military would rebuild the numerous Christian churches and sites that were destroyed or rendered unusable. Although this promise was followed through and is still underway, the issue of legal and illegal church-building remains a constant in domestic politics along with the inauguration of new churches – such as in the future administrative Egyptian capital. The problem arises from the large number of unofficial churches throughout Egypt. These were built without official sanction and are often at the epicenter of sectarian dispute. Nonetheless, efforts to normalize the unofficial

⁴ Randall P Henderson, "The Egyptian Coptic Christians: The Conflict between Identity and Equality," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 16, no. 2 (2005): 163-64; Jacques van der Vliet, "The Copts: 'Modern Sons of the Pharaohs'?", *Church History and Religious Culture* 89, no. 1 (2009): 278-280; Yvonne Joshua & Haddad Donovan, "Good Copt, Bad Copt: Competing Narratives on Coptic Identity in Egypt and the United States", *Studies in World Christianity* 19, no. 3 (December 2013): 208-210.

⁵ Samuel Tadros, "Coptic Christians: Islamic State's 'Favorite Prey'", *New York Times*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/opinion/coptic-christians-islamic-states-favorite-prey.html>; Al-Jazeera, "Sadness and pain' as Egypt's Copts bury bus attack victims", November 3, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/3/sadness-and-pain-as-egypts-copts-bury-bus-attack-victims>.

⁶ Bard Helge Kartveit, "Egyptian Copts Under Attack: The Frailty of a National Unity Discourse", *Middle East Institute*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/egyptian-copts-under-attack-frailty-national-unity-discourse>; BBC, "Egypt Copt attacks: 'I feel so scared'", April 10, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39553079>; Amira El-Fekki & Jared Malsin, "Anti-Christian Violence Surges in Egypt, Prompting an Exodus", *Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/anti-christian-violence-surges-in-egypt-prompting-an-exodus-11556290800>.

churches were promoted in recent years via a 2016 bill. Up until September of 2016, the building of Coptic Christian churches was governed by laws which originated from legislation based on Ottoman rulings. As a result, the construction and renovation of Christian sites was deemed a privilege and permitted only after the agreement of the highest authority. Notwithstanding the ample criticism aimed at the swiftness with which the law was drafted and approved, as well as the human rights issues some of its articles implied, a number of positive outcomes of the law's passing came to the forefront. In the years that followed, Coptic churches were inaugurated and reopened, with building underway in regions such as New Cairo and Qena. While the law on building and renovating churches lacked provisions related to religious pluralism which many sceptic Coptic and human rights activists had been asking for, especially since it concerned merely the rights of the Coptic population, omitting other religious denominations. The main issue concerning the Coptic community was that the provisions were vague and failed to clearly present a path for the resolution of problems related to church legalization. Nonetheless, the bill brought much-needed guidelines to a situation that was previously regulated by the Ottoman Edict of 1860 and the law of Ten Conditions of 1934. As such, the new law brought to the table an adjustment to the highest authority granting permission. Hence, the permission of building or renovating a church would be granted by the local governor after factoring in security concerns. As a result, the governor retained the right to approve or deny the construction of the church within four months of the request. However, if no answer was provided within 120 days, then the permit would be granted automatically. Another important provision concerned the size of the church and its annexed surroundings. Moreover, it stated that the size of the building should be in proportion to the local Coptic Christian population and to its growth. What is more, this implied that if the local Coptic Christian population was small in contrast to the rest of the population, then a church could not be permitted to be built, essentially limiting the needs and the right of freedom of religion of the Copts in the region. Despite the efforts of the lawmakers, the church-building law was hindered by the hastiness with which it was written and failed to properly fill the prior existing legal vacuum. Nonetheless, the law was eventually welcomed by the majority of the Coptic population and the Coptic Church, and was certainly considered at least as a step in the right direction, one which opened up the discussion further and could pave the way for better all-encompassing legislations in the future. For the time being, however, the approval rate for new churches or for church renovation is especially slow. And while President al-Sisi has proclaimed that every major city will have a Christian church, the process for the official requests makes these procedures public and frequently anger part of the neighboring population, who in turn demonstrate

against them.⁷ As a result, security-related issues come to the forefront pausing the concrete application of the church-building law.⁸

One important issue related to religious freedom is the disdain of religion prosecutions or “hisbah lawsuits” (i.e., accountability lawsuits), which have been on the rise since 2011. The disdain of religion law was added to the Egyptian Penal Code in 1981 and does not apply exclusively to the religion of Islam, but to all three officially recognized religions by the Egyptian state. Its offenders can be sentenced from six months to five years of prison time. Nonetheless, the people that are usually penalized via the disdain of religion law are Coptic Christians, Shia Islam practitioners and atheist citizens. Although the “hisbah lawsuits” concern Islam-related acts, Christianity is not left out of the loop. It should be underlined that Islam-related cases are more preponderant and make for better headlines. While the subjects of the penalization are often related to the depiction of the Prophet or texts alluding to Islam, the offenders come from a wide range of Egyptian life: from bloggers, journalists, writers and artists to political, media and religious personalities.⁹

It should be noted that in rural areas such as the Minya region, abductions of young girls occur frequently. These are the result of the belief that Coptic girls need to be saved from their current religious predicament and more often than not culminate in forced conversions and marriages or even trafficking, never to be seen again. According to Coptic Solidarity, more than fifteen minor girls go

⁷ France 24, “Copts attacked in Egypt’s south over homes used as churches”, September 1, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180901-copts-attacked-egypts-south-over-homes-used-churches>.

⁸ Sonia Farid, “Egypt’s law on the construction of churches sparks ire”, *Al-Arabiya*, August 27, 2016, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2016/08/27/Egypt-s-law-on-the-construction-of-churches-sparks-ire->; World Watch Monitor, “Church construction slows under Egypt’s new church-building law”, December 21, 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/12/church-construction-slows-under-egypts-new-church-building-law/>; Middle East Eye, “Egypt’s law on building churches dashes Christian hopes for equality”, April 27, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/egypts-law-building-churches-dashes-christian-hopes-equality>; Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, “Closed on security grounds: Sectarian tensions and attacks resulting from the construction and renovation of churches”, November, 2017, <https://eipr.org/en/publications/closed-security-grounds-sectarian-tensions-and-attacks-resulting-construction-and>; Egypt Today, “Egypt’s cabinet: 64 churches, Coptic buildings legalized nationwide”, April 2, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/83276/Egypt-s-cabinet-64-churches-Coptic-buildings-legalized-nationwide>.

⁹ Mohamed Saied, “Blasphemy trials on the rise in Egypt”, *Al-Monitor*, May 1, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/egypt-lawsuits-religious-hisbah-freedom-expression.html>; Aswat Masriya, “Egyptian author sentenced to five years for insulting religion”, June 16, 2013, <http://en.aswatmasriya.com/news/details/13066>; World Watch Monitor, “Copt sentenced to three years in prison for ‘blasphemous’ Facebook post”, December 12, 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/12/%C2%AD%C2%ADegypt-copt-sentenced-to-three-years-in-prison-for-blasphemous-facebook-post/>; Sudarsan Raghavan, “Widening reach of blasphemy law, Egypt targets poet for Facebook post on sheep”, *Washington Post*, March 31, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east-re-energizing-blasphemy-law-egypt-prosecutes-for-a-facebook-post-on-sheep/2016/03/30/2fb4ce9c-df42-11e5-8c00-8aa03741dced_story.html.

missing every year from the Minya region alone. The judiciary's response is considered lackluster as the girls are usually deemed to have left willingly albeit through coercion, leaving little room for further investigation and official involvement.¹⁰

Sectarian strife and social discrimination

The Minya and Sinai regions remain at the epicenter of sectarian attacks and radicalism during previous years due to the fact that they largely host the majority of the Coptic population apart from Cairo and Alexandria. Although within the latter two cities the Coptic community is better protected due to their importance, it is not however immune to instances of sectarianism or extremist attacks such as church bombings. Nonetheless, ever since the first church bombings of the late 2010s, Christian celebrations are more heavily protected and church entry is heavily scrutinized. Nonetheless, various random attacks still occur, ranging from personal vendettas to religious or societal differences.¹¹

Especially within the Minya region, the informal customary method of reconciliation hearings or mediation sessions take the place of formal investigations in sectarian disputes. The hearings are usually comprised of representatives of Al-Azhar University and the Coptic Church, as well as other Muslim and Coptic personalities. The downside to this process is that – more often than not – the culprits are not brought to justice for their crimes against the victims, and, as a result, sectarian incidents reoccur. In other words, the reconciliation hearings effectively place the situation into a never-ending sectarian loop and end up relegating the members of the Coptic community to second class citizens, whose rights are not considered equal to the ones of the majority of the Egyptian population. The most prevalent reason for sectarian dispute is the rumor or belief that someone is planning to build or is secretly building a church. This cause, in numbers, takes precedence over incidents occurring over interreligious romantic relationships or theological arguments.¹²

¹⁰ Coptic Solidarity, “Jihad of the womb: Trafficking of Coptic Women & Girls in Egypt”, September 20, 2020, <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/jihad-of-the-womb-report-fa.pdf>.

¹¹ Crux Now, “Latest attack on Coptic Christians highlights religious violence in Egypt”, October 16, 2020, <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-middle-east/2020/10/latest-attack-on-coptic-christians-highlights-religious-violence-in-egypt/>; Al-Monitor, “Egypt foils possible terrorist plot against Coptic Christians”, October 15, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/34-egypt-foils-possible-terrorist-plot-against-coptic-christians>.

¹² Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, “EIPR warns of increasing sectarian attacks in Minya governorate and urges state institutions to enforce the law and initiate social dialogue on the church construction law”, July 18, 2016, <https://eipr.org/en/press/2016/07/77-incidents-sectarian-violence-and-tension-minya-governorate-january-25-2011>; Sonia Farid, “Is Upper Egypt becoming the epicenter for sectarian violence?”, *Al-Arabiya*, July 29, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2016/07/29/Is-Upper-Egypt-becoming-the-epicenter-for-sectarian-violence->; Middle East Monitor, “8 arrested in clashes between Muslims and Copts”, November 27, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201127-egypt-8-arrested-in-clashes-between-muslims-and-copts/>.

Copts and Egyptian politics

The expression “religious revolution” was first used in 2015 by President al-Sisi within his public addresses. The objective was to supplant radical discourse within Egyptian society against non-Muslim communities, specifically the Coptic Christian one. Furthermore, intention was to hinder radical ideas and elements from fueling intolerance, violence and hate speech in Egyptian society and politics. The initiative’s message essentially called for religious reform on different aspects of Egyptian institutions, from the Al-Azhar University to the Egyptian media and the judicial institutions. Despite initial internal conflict between Al-Azhar and the government, the initiative was considered partly successful as citizens slowly started seeing changes in their everyday life, such as the creation of fatwa kiosks and the promotion of prewritten sermons for the imams’ Friday prayers. Despite the eventual retraction of these two initiatives, during the following years, Al-Azhar attempted to strengthen its image as a moderate representative of Islam by opening channels on social media, by participating in international summits on religion, as well as by promoting and channeling the virtues and the openness of Islam in regards to other Muslim denominations and other religions.¹³

The publicized friendship and relationship between Coptic Pope Tawandros and President al-Sisi is still ongoing ever since the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood. Although certainly considered beneficial in regard to the fight against social and religious discrimination of the Coptic community, the relationship raised some questions concerning the political leadership of the Egyptian Copts. In other words, Coptic civil society was promoting a more secular approach to the advancement of Coptic rights, one grounded on a political electoral base rather than on a religious one. Hence, it is of note that the Christian candidates in recent House of Deputies elections reached a record number. In addition, a Coptic Senator became the first Egyptian female undersecretary of the Senate. The latter should be considered positive aftereffects of the relationship between the current administration and the Coptic community, paving the way for the establishment of diversity in Egyptian politics. It remains to be seen, however, whether these developments will be reflected on the

¹³ Ahram Online, “Pre-prepared Friday sermons are of legitimate national interest: Egypt’s endowments minister”, August 2, 2016, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/1/236736/Egypt/Preprepared-Friday-sermons-are-of-legitimate-natio.aspx>; Sarah El-Sheikh, “Metro fatwa kiosks: Egypt’s way to change religious discourse?”, *Egypt Today*, July 30, 2017, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/14569/Metro-fatwa-kiosks-Egypt%E2%80%99s-way-to-change-religious-discourse>; Amr Leheta, “Revolutionizing Religion in Sisi’s Egypt”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2, 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/revolutionizing-religion-sisis-egypt>.

everyday social life of Coptic Christians, both in cities such as Cairo and Alexandria, as well as in Upper Egypt and rural regions.¹⁴

¹⁴ Amr Emam, “In Egypt, Christians competing strongly for parliament seats”, *Al-Monitor*, October 10, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/10/egypt-christians-participate-parliament-elections-muslims.html>; Egypt Today, “The Coptic senator who became the Egyptian Senate's first female undersecretary”, October 20, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/93318/The-Coptic-senator-who-became-the-Egyptian-Senate-s-first>; Agenzia Fides, “Candidacy of Coptic Orthodox priest in the elections reopens the debate on the participation of the clergy in politics”, October 1, 2020, http://www.fides.org/en/news/68744-AFRICA_EGYPT_Candidacy_of_Coptic_Orthodox_priest_in_the_elections_reopens_the_debate_on_the_participation_of_the_clergy_in_politics.

Christian community and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The Holy Land is home to very few Christians amounting to approximately 3-4% of the total population in Israel and Palestine.¹⁵ Even though the Christian community is mostly dominated by the Eastern Orthodox Church and particularly, the Greek Orthodox, it is very diverse: from Ethiopian, Armenian, Coptic and Syrian Orthodox Christians to Catholic Churches such as the Chaldean, Melkite and Maronite Churches, albeit fewer.¹⁶ Within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, be it in Israel or Palestine, the Christian community endures similar hardships with the Muslim population. Yet, it is necessary to examine the Christian community in Palestine (West Bank and Gaza) and Israel separately due to the different socio-political dynamics within each.

Palestine

The majority (98%) of the Palestinian Christian community lives in the West Bank and 2% in Gaza. The Israeli occupation of Palestine is central for every Palestinian as it has negative implications for every aspect of their life. Palestinian Christians are not exempt from the occupation policies such as restrictions on movement, settler attacks, confiscation of land and other insecurities related to the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom has recognized that the Israeli security Wall for the past 20 years has been affecting the Palestinian Christian community. More specifically, the illegal Israeli separation Wall in the West Bank, has ‘made it particularly difficult for Bethlehem-area Christians to reach the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and it made visits to Christian sites in Bethany and in Bethlehem difficult for Christians who live on the other side of the barrier, further fragmenting and dividing this small minority community’.¹⁷ The situation for the few thousand Christians in Gaza is even worse, not only due to the fact that Gaza remains an open-prison and remains besieged for over 13 years, but also due to the fact that –more often than not— they are not granted permission by the Israeli authorities to visit the Holy sites and their families in the West Bank during Holiday seasons.¹⁸ In addition, the recent US-led ‘Deal of the Century’ has

¹⁵ Pew-Templeton: Global Religious futures: Comparing Christian communities in Palestinian territories and Israel, <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/compare/#?c0=166&c1=106>

¹⁶ Felix Dane and Jörg Knoch, "The Role and Influence of Christians in the Palestinian Territories," *Kas International Reports* (2010)

¹⁷ U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom “2019 Report on International Religious freedom: Israel”, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/israel/>

¹⁸ Reuters, “Israel bars Gaza's Christians from visiting Bethlehem and Jerusalem at Christmas”, December 12, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-gaza-christmas-idUSKBN1YG2E9>

further accelerated the Israeli annexation of Palestinian lands, which, in turn, has directly impacted the Palestinian Christian community as much as any other Palestinian. According to Minority Rights Group International report 2018, ‘demolition of Christian areas in the West Bank remains a serious issue’, particularly in the Palestinian Christian town Beit Jala, including the creation ‘of the separation barrier [...] [that] cut[s] Palestinians off from their olive groves - a vital source of livelihoods and cultural symbolism - and ease the expansion of the nearby Israeli settlements of Gilo and Har Gilo’.¹⁹ It should be mentioned that the Christian community does not distinguish itself from the rest of Palestinian population when it comes to the national identity. In fact, a couple of weeks before the Christmas Eve of 2017, the Christian community protested against the US decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital ‘by turning off the lights on the Christmas tree outside Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity, the traditional birthplace of Jesus’, hours after Trump official announcement.²⁰ The Palestinian Christians have actively participated in civil resistance against the Israeli occupation forces on the side of their compatriot Muslims.²¹

These hardships of living under Israeli occupation are threatening the existence of Christians in Palestine, the cradle of Christianity. The decline in the Christian population in Israel/Palestine in the past century is tremendous. According to a study, in Bethlehem the Christian populations went ‘from 84% in 1922 to only 28% in 2007; in Beit Jala from 99% to 61% and in Beit Sahour from 81% to 65% during the same period’. It should be noted that the conditions generated by the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian Authority chronic corruption are the primary reason for the migration of the Palestinian Christian community. A public opinion poll among Palestinian Christians, conducted by the Research and Survey Center²² found that a high number of Christian Palestinians want to migrate in the West primarily due to financial instability, which is an inevitable element under occupation, and not due to persecution due to their religion. It is important to mention that beyond the Israeli occupation, the Palestinian Christian community in the West Bank widely enjoys religious freedom. A recent study found that half of the Christians in Palestine feel that religious freedom is

¹⁹ Minority Rights Group International, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, “Palestine: Christians”, May, 2018, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/49749cd12.html>

²⁰ Maayan Lubell, “We are one’: Palestinian Christians and Muslims unite against Trump’s Jerusalem call,” *Reuters*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-israel-religion-idUSKBN1E61SB>

²¹ Independent, “Christian prays alongside Muslims in Jerusalem to diffuse tensions over holy sites”, July 24, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3oO3s0E>

²² Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, “Migration of Palestinian Christians: Drivers and Means of Combating it”, 2020, <https://pcpsr.org/en/node/806>

“high or high enough” with an additional quarter reporting “medium or average” (27%).²³ Yet, much controversy has been raised over the years regarding the non-recognition of Evangelical churches in Palestine. The indigenous Christian populations of the region have always viewed foreign missionaries with suspicion. In the fall of 2019, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas officially recognized the Evangelical church,²⁴ perhaps a desperate move to appeal to the American Evangelicals who support Israel.²⁵

Finally, it should be noted that the Palestinian Christians are cautious about being in a Muslim dominated society and, by extension, they are hesitant to address non-religious related concerns to the Palestinian Authority. As all Christians in the region, the fear of igniting sectarian tension holds the community back from genuine prosperity.

Israel

The Christian community of Palestinian origin in Israel, including Jerusalem, are known as Arab Christians. According to Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) Israeli Christians constitute 2% of the population of which 77.5% are Arab Christians and comprise 7.2% of the overall Arab population of the country.²⁶ The Arab Christians are mostly concentrated in the north (70.6%), more particularly in Nazareth, Haifa, Jerusalem and Shefar'am; while most non-Arab Christians are located mostly in the Tel Aviv and Central Districts as well as the north.²⁷

The segregation of the Christians, along with other non-Jewish communities in Israel, was crystalized when the Israeli parliament, Knesset passed the “Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People”, in 2018, according to which the “law determines, among other things, that the Land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people; the State of Israel is the nation state of the Jewish People, in which it realizes its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination; and exercising the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique

²³ Jayson Casper, “Why Many Christians Want to Leave Palestine. And Why Most Won’t,” *Christianity Today*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/august/palestinian-christians-survey-israel-emigration-one-state.html>

²⁴ Jayson Casper, “Palestinian Evangelicals Gain Official Recognition”, *Christianity Today*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/november/palestinian-evangelicals-gain-official-recognition.html>

²⁵ For more on how the Evangelicals supported the US’ foreign policy in the region see CRPME Report, Religious Pluralism in the Middle East: Report 2017 – IV”, 2017, http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/images/files/crpme_report_4.pdf

²⁶ Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, “Christmas 2019 – Christians in Israel”, December 23, 2019, <https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/mediarelease/Pages/2019/Christmas-2019-Christians-in-Israel.aspx>

²⁷ Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, op. cit.

to the Jewish People”.²⁸ This has enhanced the violence between the ultra-orthodox Jews and other non-Jewish communities in Jerusalem, including the Christian one, according to the most recent report on International Religious Freedom in Israel by the US State Department.²⁹ It should be noted that Israel condemned the aforementioned US report of 2019, suggesting that the Christian community has no restrictions from Israel, maintaining that it has never curtailed religious freedom.³⁰ Yet, there are many instances when the Christian community has been discriminated for their faith. The most recent event, on December 4th, 2020, Gethsemane Church, in Jerusalem, was vandalized by an Israeli extremist.³¹ The perpetrator was arrested, given that attacks to religious sites is a criminal offense in Israel.

The Pew Research Center reported that 73% of Christians do not view Israel as a democratic state as it ‘cannot be a democracy and a Jewish state at the same time’. Interestingly, the Christian and Muslim Arabs (mostly Palestinians) share common views on various issues regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; more specifically, ‘Israeli Christians have political views similar to those of their fellow Arabs on several other issues as well. For example, majorities of Christians (80%) and Muslims (72%) say the Israeli government is not making a sincere effort to achieve a peace agreement with the Palestinians, and most Christians (79%) and Muslims (61%) in Israel also say the continued building of Jewish settlements in the West Bank hurts Israel’s security. And Israeli Christians (86%) and Muslims (75%) both overwhelmingly say the U.S. is too supportive of Israel’.³² This stance of the Christian community explains its limited participation in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), which remains a fundamental concept in expressing allegiance to the State of Israel. As the army is mandatory for Jews, some of the other communities may volunteer; only 137 Arab Christians, according to reports, ‘Christians volunteering for the army has remained relatively steady, ticking up only slightly from about 40 year in the past to around 50-55 annually’.³³

²⁸ 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, op. cit.

²⁹ 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, op. cit.; also see Stuart Winer, “Police forcibly remove Coptic priests blocking workers from Holy Sepulcher”, *The Times of Israel*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/police-forcibly-remove-coptic-priests-blocking-workers-from-holy-sepulchre/>

³⁰ Marissa Newman, “Israel pushes back on US report spotlighting religious freedom woes”, *The Times of Israel*, July, 8, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-pushes-back-on-us-report-spotlighting-religious-freedom-woes/>

³¹ Daoud Kuttub, “Palestinians thwart arson attack on Jerusalem church”, *Arab News*, December 5, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1772571/middle-east>

³² Becka A. Alper, “5 facts about Israeli Christians”, *Pew Research Center*, May 10, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/05/10/5-facts-about-israeli-christians/>

³³ Al-Arabiya, “Push to recruit Arab into Israeli Army”, December 27, 2013, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2013/12/27/Push-to-recruit-Arab-Christians-into-Israeli-army>

The Christian minority in Israel is susceptible to hate crimes by only a part of the Jewish community. The Israeli state has put in place many laws to guarantee the freedom of religion. However, there is little effort by the side of the state to cultivate an inclusive mentality within the population and work through notions such as pluralism and mutual respect. It may be argued that much like other countries in the region where Islam is dominant within the political structure, the Jewish character of the State of Israel hinders—by default—any genuine progress on those notions.

Christian community in Lebanon

The devastating massive explosion of Beirut's port on August 4th, 2020, had damaged East Beirut, mostly Christian neighborhoods of Mar Maroun and Achrafieh, amongst others. This was the latest incident that pushed Pope Francis to call for worldwide prayer for Lebanon on September 4th.³⁴ Beirut's blast caused irreparable damage to the capital of Lebanon with huge human and material costs, leading to (another) government capitulation. As dreadful as that was, it seems that it was merely the tip of the iceberg.

The endemic and chronic corruption in Lebanon generated a multidimensional crisis that became apparent in 2019, which only worsened with the global pandemic and Beirut's blast in 2020. Although these developments are not directly linked to the Christian community, they do have direct negative implications on the quality of life. Beirut, as one of the most religiously diverse cities in the entire region, hosts most of Lebanon's Christian community. What constitutes a threat to the community is not the lack of political participation as the country holds high the authority of Christians within the realm of polity. For example, as per tradition, the Lebanese President has always been Christian Maronite (while the Prime Minister Sunni and the Speaker of the Parliament Shia) and the governor of Beirut Greek Orthodox (while the mayor is Sunni Muslim). The confessional division of the polity dictates the traditional hierarchy of the religious components of the country and its direct relation to the population. Within the Christian community, the Maronite Church has been the most dominant due to its political activity. Even during Lebanon's independence from France, the latter 'attempted to guarantee the safety of the Maronite community by drawing boundaries that would ensure a permanent Maronite majority'.³⁵ Beside the Maronite Church, there are other Catholic denominations such as the Melkite Catholic Church, Assyrians and Chaldeans. There is also a vivid Eastern Orthodox community, which includes Syriac, Greek and Armenian Orthodox. The structural entrenchment of the Christian community in Lebanon is not limited to a simple division between Christians and Muslims but also within the Christian community itself, which is reflected in the Lebanese Parliament. Overall, the 11 Christian sects hold 64 seats, of which over than half are allocated to the Maronites (34 seats), the Eastern Orthodox hold 14 seats, the Melkite 8, the Gregorian Armenians 5, Catholic Armenians 1, Protestants 1, and other Christian minority groups, 1.³⁶

³⁴ Robin Gomes, "Pope calls for day of prayer, fasting in solidarity with Lebanon", *Vatican News*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-09/pope-audience-lebanon-appeal-day-prayer-fasting-sept4.html>

³⁵ Ronald G. Roberson, *The Eastern Christian churches: a brief survey*. Pont. Institution Studiorum Orientalium, 1993.

³⁶ Mostapha Diss, and Frank Steffen, "The Distribution of Power in the Lebanese Parliament Revisited." GATE WP 1723 (2017).

Consequently, the main concern is that while Lebanon is still the most Christian populated country, this should not be taken for granted. The last official census, which was in 1932, reported that 53% of the Lebanese population were Christians. The most recent estimates, based on unofficial studies and reports, within the 2010s,³⁷ are approximately 32-41%, rendering the Muslims a clear majority in the country. The shrinking of the Christian community in Lebanon is inevitable, given the persistent instability of the country between wars and assassinations and now, even more so, with a devastating economy that seems to have no hope in the face of the endemic corruption and the political impasse that has become more palpable in the last year. In this sense, it may be argued that it is not the concept of religious persecution of the Christian faith that has pushed the Christian population to flee; instead, it is the financial hardships and political corruption that is pushing the Lebanese middle class, most of which is Christian, to seek better quality of life in the West. In turn, given the significant role of the Christian community in creating and building the modern Lebanese state,³⁸ the vacuum that is slowly growing due to the Christians absence will jeopardize Lebanon's prosperity.

Having said that, given the fact that the foundation of the power-sharing system of the country is sectarian, the latter is permanently a notion that generates fear. A fear that the country may be driven to another civil war similar to that of 1975, which ignited by the Christians and Muslims been locked in an armed struggle and ended after 16 years leaving Lebanon in rumbles. Therefore, both the polity and people always make an effort to de-sectarianize political tensions particularly between Christians and Muslims. Nevertheless, it seems that the Lebanese political scene is much less equipped to do the same regarding the Sunni-Shia rift in light of the intense Saudi-Iranian rift in the region. It was even more challenging for Lebanon to maintain a safe distance from the negative implications of the Syrian crisis; not only the burden of hosting over 2 million Syrian refugees since 2012, but also the Syrian sectarian tensions that have been spilling over since 2012 in Lebanon.

What is interesting though, is the role of the Christian institutions in the multiple political upheavals of the country. More specifically, the role of the Maronite religious leadership in the civil-political relations in Lebanon beyond the Christian community. Patriarch Boutros Rai, the leader of Lebanon's Maronite Church, is a very active figure. In almost every political, financial or any other sort of disaster, the Patriarch is swift to make public announcements that warn against any further

³⁷ Agenzia Fides, "Statistical projections: the demographic decline of the Christian population has stopped", January 10, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3qPgrAR>

³⁸, Paul Tabar, "Lebanon: A country of Emigration and Immigration," *Institute for Migration Studies*, 7, (2010), <https://documents.aucegypt.edu/Docs/GAPP/Tabar080711.pdf>

instability of the country. He is received by various foreign delegations almost as a head of state, mirroring his role in maintaining stability in Lebanon. It is important to note that Patriarch Rai is following in the footsteps of his predecessor, former-Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, who – in his time – played a crucial role in raising ‘global awareness of the combined Syrian and Israeli occupations of Lebanon’.³⁹ What is central in the statements of the Christian leadership is Lebanon’s necessity to remain neutral to all regional developments. As the Patriarch posted on his website a couple of weeks after the Beirut’s port explosion:

“Lebanon’s neutrality is the guarantee of its unity and its historical position, especially in this phase full of geographic and constitutional changes. It is its strength and guarantee of its stability [...] A neutral Lebanon is able to contribute to the stability of the region as well, defend the rights of the Arab peoples and the cause of peace, and play a role in weaving healthy and secure relations between the countries of the Middle East and Europe, by virtue of its location on the shore of the Mediterranean.”⁴⁰

By the same token, the Maronite Catholic Church took a strong stance in favor of the uprising of October 17, 2019, which was led by hundreds of thousands of Lebanese demanding the end of the endemic corruption of the country.⁴¹ This was echoed by all the Christian community denominations and was expressed by a common communique broadcasted live.⁴² According to Archbishop Paul Sayah, deputy for external relations of the Maronite Church, what is of highly importance in the ongoing demonstrations is the resilience of the protesters to sectarian manipulations. In his own words, the protests ‘have united people who would normally be divided along religious and sectarian lines’. Thus, it is clear that this is an uprising of the people against the political establishment. For over a year now, Lebanon’s economy has been on the verge of total collapse with a political leadership reluctant to endure the political and financial costs of saving the country.⁴³ Lebanon has witnessed the Christian religious leadership taking the role of the mediator in this time of turmoil. The Church was not hesitant to tell the protestors to ‘give room to the new government’ in January.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the Maronite church has condemned various practices of the government regardless of the religious

³⁹ Fiona McCallum, *Christian religious leadership in the Middle East: the political role of the patriarch*. Lewiston, (NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ Courtney Mares, “Catholic Leader outlines vision for Lebanon as the ‘Switzerland of the East’”, *Catholic News Agency*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/catholic-leader-outlines-vision-for-lebanon-as-the-switzerland-of-the-east-59966>

⁴¹ Linda Bordoni, “Church in Lebanon stands with the people demanding justice and transparency”, *Vatican News*, December 17, 2019, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2019-12/lebanon-archbishop-sayah-maronite-church-political-crisis.html>

⁴² Reuters, “Give Lebanon’s cabinet a chance, say Christian religious leaders”, January 28, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-christians-idUSKBN1ZR1JF>

⁴³ Linda Bordoni, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Reuters, January 28, 2020, op. cit.

dynamics. For instance, Patriarch Rai has warned both Sunni politicians, such as Hariri, but also Christian politicians, such as Aoun, earlier this year asking them to “avoid the quagmire of interests” and “secret bilateral deals and promises.”⁴⁵ Regardless of the dynamics between the Christian and Muslim political parties, the religious leaderships of the Christian communities have maintained a steady role in mediating between the political establishment and their communities.

Despite the dire political and financial situation of Lebanon that seems to only get worse, Lebanon is the only country in the region that Christians do not have a minority status for the time being. Even if the role of the Christian community is guaranteed within the political structure and governance of the country, the shrinking demography of the community due to financial and political crises, raises the question of how much longer can Lebanon remain the last bastion of Christianity in a turbulent region.

⁴⁵ Reuters, “Lebanese Christian cleric to Hariri: avoid 'secret deals' in forming cabinet”, October 25, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-patriarch-idUSKBN27A0FL> ; Reuters, “Lebanon's top Christian clerics blast politicians as hunger, hardship bite”, July 5, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-cleric-idUSKBN2460NK>

Turkey's Christian communities

The Christian community amounts to around 100,000 people in Turkey. They are mainly composed of the following Christian denominations: Armenian Orthodox, Aramean Orthodox, Chaldean Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Protestants. The Aramean Christian community, specifically, has grown in numbers due to the Syrian civil war and the refugee influx. The Arameans have found shelter in churches – mainly in Istanbul – with their fellow faithful. As a result, their numbers have been ranging between 10 and 20,000 people. In the South-East of Turkey, the remaining Aramean community as well as their cultural heritage has been caught in the crossfire between the Turkish government forces and PKK fighters. At the same time, the Protestant community is facing a wide variety of problems, ranging physical and personal attacks to a lack of official recognition from the state as a religious community. To work around this vacuum, Protestants are organized informally around association buildings and offices. Viewed in retrospect, the Greek Orthodox community has been more fortunate in seeing its religious rights respected to greater, albeit restrained, effect, mostly due to their official recognition by the Turkish state in its early beginnings. The problems concerning the Christian community of Turkey are twofold: on the one hand, the challenges related to freedom of religion and the impact of conspiracy theories as they pertain to Christian leadership have made a comeback during the 2010s; on the other hand, the predominant issue of church conversions is captivating the majority of the Sunni Muslim population, placing into jeopardy the shared history and culture of the Christian communities.⁴⁶

Freedom of religion and conspiracy theories

From the early 2000s up until the mid-2010s, the general assumption was that Christian minorities residing in Turkey were living under better conditions than in previous decades. The reason was that the newly elected AKP government was promoting religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence through its policy of strengthening Turkey's European accession bid and, at the same time, ensuring that the Kemalist interests would be ill-equipped to stage a military coup. In essence, pushing for European accession and presenting interreligious dialogue as a domestic policy guideline would effectively shield the government from the possibility of being overturned. However, the following decade ushered a shift in the way that the Christian communities were perceived. In the early 2010s, the AKP had further established its hold over Turkish politics via subsequent electoral procedures

⁴⁶ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "USCIRF 2020 Annual Report", 2020, 82-83, <https://www.uscifr.gov/publications/2020-annual-report>.

and was able to act independently of Kemalist interests. As a result, the European accession negotiations were no longer considered a priority. Thus, the relationship with the Christian communities fell on the wayside in favor of the promotion of the Turkish Sunni Muslim aspect of national identity.

Nonetheless, the cracks in the peaceful coexistence with the religious minorities would mostly surface following the failed military coup of July 2016. Since then, vandalism attacks against Christian churches and cemeteries multiplied. Despite coming together and immediately denouncing the attempt and its engineers, the leaders of the religious communities were soon embroiled in as the orchestrators of the coup and as traitors to Turkish unity, aiming to topple the Erdogan-led government. These theories spread via the media frenzy that followed the societal and political chaos in Turkey, and even though easily debunked, grabbed a hold on the people's mindset, ensuring a strained and unpleasant coexistence for the years to come. The leaders of the religious communities remained silent on the matter, perhaps waiting for the storm to pass, and kept on supporting Turkish policies. As a result, during 2018 and the Turkish operations against the Kurdish forces in Northern Syria, the majority of religious leaders declared their support and wished a quick resolution to the matter, to no avail.⁴⁷

What is more, the state of emergency, which was declared following the coup and aimed at “purging” Turkish society and Turkish institutions from the “Gülenist influence”, essentially granted free reign to conspiracy theories against religious communities and freed officials from resisting the urge to apply controversial and sometimes xenophobic-fueled rhetoric to their discourse as a tool for political propaganda. The results were felt by the Christian communities on both a societal as well as an institutional level. Media-wise, Christian Protestants seem to have borne the brunt of this rhetoric by seeing their pastors deported, denied entry to the country and jailed on account of potential security concerns.⁴⁸

The main argument that articulates this shift in focus is related to the attempt to form or consolidate Turkish national identity. In this particular instance, the main drive would be to create a

⁴⁷ Uzey Bulut, “In Turkey, Even Dead Christians Aren’t Safe”, *American Conservative*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/in-turkey-even-dead-christians-arent-safe/>; Ahval News, “Christians in Turkey targeted by Erdoğan-linked magazine, church attacked”, May 13, 2020, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-religion/christians-turkey-targeted-erdogan-linked-magazine-church-attacked>.

⁴⁸ Derek Kim, “World Evangelical Alliance Calls on Turkey To Review Decision to Expel 60 Protestants”, *Christianity Daily*, October 12, 2020, <http://www.christianitydaily.com/articles/9977/20201012/world-evangelical-alliance-calls-on-turkey-to-review-decision-to-expel-60-protestants.html>; Amberin Zaman, “Turkey expels Protestant missionaries for 'threatening public order'”, *Al-Monitor*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/07/turkey-expel-ban-protestant-missionaries-threat-public-order.html>.

Turkish national identity, which would promote harmony and unity in the face of a Turkish existential threat as exemplified by the perpetrators and orchestrators of the failed coup. As such, there would be no room for different religions within the identity of the Turkish national citizen. Citizens of non-Muslim faith would be considered outsiders or even pawns of foreign powers, which aim to destabilize and profit from the trials that Turkey has to deal with both on the domestic as well on the regional front. As a result, a mentality of 'us versus them' is slowly articulated, influencing Turkish society as a whole. The immediate aftereffect of a policy focused on Turkish identity is the establishment of restrictions, which hinder both religious freedom in the country and prevent foreign religious missions from entering Turkish territory. Both religious communities and missions are considered as potential threats to Turkish integrity and sovereignty leading to cases of forceful exile, denial of entry or imprisonment, as in the well-publicized case of Protestant pastor Andrew Brunson.⁴⁹ The latter was released and returned to the United States after two years of detainment on the basis that he was working either with the Gülen Movement or the PKK. It is of note that since then, Protestant missions are no longer welcome in the country and emigration requests are rejected. Although Protestant faith is not recognized in Turkey, its followers are also considered to aim to proselytize the Sunni Muslim population and to alter the religious tenets of Turkish identity.⁵⁰

In more recent developments, Armenian Christians were once again the subject of verbal and physical attacks, due to the renewed Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Thus, when it comes to the domestic political scene, religious identity can sometimes turn into a trigger for conflict as well as a tool serving political propaganda. Turkish domestic and social media seem to have adopted a regressive attitude against Christian minorities which, associated with a growing anti-European and anti-American sentiment, enables an ever-growing conspiracy-based narrative highlighting scapegoating and promoting marginalization and discrimination.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Amberin Zaman, op. cit.

⁵⁰ Umut Can Adisonmez, and Recep Onursal, "Governing anxiety, trauma and crisis: The political discourse on ontological (in)security after the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey", *Middle East Critique* 29, no.3: 303-304; Daren Butler, "With more Islamic schooling, Erdogan aims to reshape Turkey", *Reuters*, January 25, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-education/>; Verda Kymyonok, "Erdogan Appropriates the Cultural Heritage of Turkey's Minorities", *Orient XXI*, April 16, 2020, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/erdogan-appropriates-the-cultural-heritage-of-turkey-s-minorities,3802>; Open Doors, "Christians in Turkey nervous as country moves in Islamic and nationalistic direction", October 22, 2020, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/christians-turkey-nationalism/>.

⁵¹ Murat Yildiz, "'They are scared': Armenians flee Istanbul amid anger over Nagorno-Karabakh", *Middle East Eye*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-armenians-istanbul-flee-anger-nagorno-karabakh>; Ayla Jean Yackley, "Minorities in Turkey on edge amid threats, attacks", *Al-Monitor*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/turkey-minorities-threats-attacks.html>.

Church conversions

The trend of converting Christian houses of worship into mosques did not begin with the Hagia Sophia. Byzantine churches holding the status of state museums and cultural heritage sites have been slowly, but steadily, converted into mosques during the 2010s. Such are the cases of the St. John Stoudios in Istanbul and the Hagia Sophia in Nicea. On May 29th, 2016, the anniversary celebrations for the conquest of Constantinople took place, along with public prayers and demonstrations for the right to pray inside the Hagia Sophia Museum. Soon after, Koranic readings were broadcast from inside the Hagia Sophia building complex, while, during November 2016, Friday prayers were read, and a full-time Imam was appointed. Despite the prompt reaction of Greece, the International and Christian communities, and UNESCO – referencing the Hagia Sophia’s World Heritage Site status as a cultural monument – the events of the months that followed cemented the perception that this offence would not be limited to a one-time occurrence. Feeding fuel to the fire and, concurrently, giving in to popular Muslim demands, prayers were held again during June 2017 in the presence of State officials.⁵²

The Hagia Sophia was converted into a museum in 1935 following a decision by Mustafa Kemal in order to promote the secular western aspects of modern Turkey. Yet, this decree, 85 years in vigor, was overturned on July 10, 2020 by Turkish courts, via the rejection of the authenticity of Kemal’s signature on the document itself. The day following the court’s verdict, President Erdogan signed the decree with which the process for converting the Hagia Sophia museum back into a mosque would begin immediately, with formal prayers taking place in the coming weeks, on July 24.⁵³ In addition, the popular and political success of Erdogan’s symbolic gesture to the Turkish Sunni Muslim population paved the way for additional future conversions. What is more, the conversion of the Chora Museum in Istanbul back into a mosque as well would soon follow suit.⁵⁴

⁵² Hurriyet Daily News, “First call to prayer inside Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia in 85 years”, July 2, 2016, <https://www.hurriyettailynews.com/first-call-to-prayer-inside-istanbuls-hagia-sophia-in-85-years-101161>; Asia News, “Muslims in front of the St. Sophia "mosque" for the conquest of Constantinople and the neo-Ottoman glory of Erdogan”, May 30, 2016, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Muslims-in-front-of-the-St-Sophia-mosque-for-the-conquest-of-Constantinople-and-the-neo-Ottoman-glory-of-Erdogan-37627.html>; Asia News, “Erdogan is preparing to pray in the Hagia Sophia next Friday”, July 4, 2017, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Erdogan-is-preparing-to-pray-in-the-Hagia-Sophia-next-Friday-40413.html>.

⁵³ Amberin Zaman, “Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia holds first Friday prayers since reconversion to mosque”, *Al-Monitor*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/07/turkey-hagia-sophia-muslim-prayers-mosque-controversy.html>.

⁵⁴ Ragip Soylu, “Turkey goes back to the future as Hagia Sophia set for Islamic prayers”, *Middle East Eye*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/quran-recitation-conquest-hagia-sophia-istanbul>; Burcu Karakas, “Like Hagia Sophia, Turkey to reconvert Chora Museum into mosque”, *Deutsche Welle*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/like-hagia-sophia-turkey-to-reconvert-chora-museum-into-mosque/a-54713753>.

In light of the latest electoral turnout of 2018-2019, the recent conversion to mosque initiatives as spearheaded by the Hagia Sophia fit into a renewed narrative of reaching out to the AKP's religious conservative base to the detriment of past secular and liberal supporters. The homogenization of Turkish religious identity deals a severe blow to religious pluralism within Turkey as it curtails past positive developments in this regard. Although the leadership of the Christian and other religious communities usually remain silent on such issues, it seems that the Hagia Sophia affair was the straw that eventually broke the camel's back. Specifically, in early November, Bartholomew, the Ecumenical patriarch criticized mosque conversions in a public statement as offensive to Greek-Orthodox identity, history and culture. Moreover, during the same month, a group of Orthodox Christians took legal action against the Hagia Sophia reconversion by submitting their request to the Turkish Council State. However, bearing in mind that the Council State was the one who dismissed the Kemal's signature on the conversion document as not authentic, any hopes or promises regarding a potential reversal of the President's decree should most definitely be taken with a grain of salt.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Demetrios Ioannou, "Bad news' for Turkey's marginalized Christians", *Politico*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/05/turkey-christians-hagia-sophia-392125>; Matt Hadro, "Hagia Sophia as mosque has global implications for religious freedom", *Catholic News Agency*, July 17, 2020 <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/hagia-sophia-as-mosque-has-global-implications-for-religious-freedom-experts-say-30375>; Marian Demir, "Bartholomew I slams the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, says it offends Orthodox identity, history and culture", *Asia News*, November 9, 2020, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Bartholomew-I-slams-the-conversion-of-Hagia-Sophia-into-a-mosque-says-it-offends-Orthodox-identity-history-and-culture-51013.html>; Ahval News, "Orthodox Christians in Turkey seek reversal of Hagia Sophia conversion", November 9, 2020, <https://ahvalnews.com/hagia-sophia/orthodox-christians-turkey-seek-reversal-hagia-sophia-conversion>.

Iraq

Iraq is home to one of the oldest continuous Christian communities in the world. However, their population has plummeted in the last two decades, from approximately 1.5 million prior to 2003 to a population of 200,000 and 250,000. It is estimated that 67 percent are Chaldean Catholics and 20 percent adhere to the Assyrian Church of the East; the rest are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Anglican and other Protestants.⁵⁶ The vast majority of the Christian population is concentrated in the Nineveh plain and inside the Iraqi Kurdistan Region; Iraqi Christians make up about 7 percent of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) inside the KRG.

The need to preserve their ethno-religious identities is evident among the Christians in Iraq, and it is a direct result of the escalating discrimination and persecution they face in the last two decades. Extremist groups, such as the Al Qaeda and ISIS, who have targeted them for the Christian component of their identity, and sidelined any trace of their ethnic or denominational particularity.⁵⁷ However, that does not mean that the Christians in Iraq are a homogenous group. On the contrary, there are a number of issues that lead to intercommunal disagreements. The most important one is the issue of their ethnic identity and appellation; while most believed that they share a common identity, as they share the same linguistic characteristics, and that they belong to the Assyrian nation regardless of their religious denomination; others disagreed, refusing to subsume the Chaldean people under the Assyrian label, projecting their religious identity versus their ethnic.

Another factor that divides the Christian community is their political affiliation. It is noteworthy that the region where Iraqi Christians primarily reside, the Nineveh Plains, fall into Iraq's disputed territories, claimed by both the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi Central Government. More often than not, the Iraqi Christians have to choose whether to align themselves with the Iraqi Central Government or with the KRG. In terms of political organizations, it brings the Assyrian Democratic Movement on the side of Baghdad and the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council on the side of Erbil.⁵⁸ Some Christians complain of attempts to make the region more Kurdish, while others claim that the Kurdish population is inherently more tolerant of minorities.

⁵⁶ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq", June 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iraq/>.

⁵⁷ Yasmeen Hanoosh, " Minority Identities Before and After Iraq: The Making of the Modern Assyrian and Chaldean Appellations", *The Arab Studies Journal* 24, no. 2 (2016): 32.

⁵⁸ CRPME, *Untying the Knots of Religious Diversity in Iraqi Kurdistan: Deploying Pluralism against Barbarism*, Special Report, no.2, (December 2016): 15, <http://www.crpme.gr/reports/crpme-special-report-no-2-untying-the-knots-of-religious-diversity-in-iraqi-kurdistan-deploying-pluralism-against-barbarism>.

However, forcing them to choose sides might cause retaliation or discrimination. There is also a small part of Assyrians that favor the idea of creating an autonomous Assyrian zone.

The last point of contention for the Christian communities is the increasing militarization of Christians; generally, the religious leadership opposes militarization of the Christian community. For example, in July 2019, Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Louis Raphaël I Sako claimed that forming Christian militias contradicts Christian spirituality, and urged the youth to join official Iraqi Army or the Peshmerga forces.⁵⁹ On the other hand, Christians generally welcome the presence of Christian militia. Bartalla city council member Jalal Boutros stated that the Christian militia Nineveh Plains Units is “part of our identity and protect it and validates our presence”.⁶⁰ This creates a rift between political and religious leadership. The idea of Christian militarization is closely linked with the idea of an autonomous – or even independent – Christian area.

Security Concerns

Security is the number one issue for Christians in Iraq. However, the threat for their security mainly comes from the security forces themselves. The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella group of various militias, mainly backed by Iran and operating with the permission of the Iraqi government, are now controlling the areas that they liberated. However, they are often being accused of human rights abuses, and also attempting to further their own political agenda, by exploiting Iraq’s weak infrastructure, and setting up their own check point system and recruitment offices.⁶¹ Particularly in the contested area of the Nineveh Plains, some of the militias operate with effective impunity, and the central government does not have the ability to control them or enforce the laws. For example, the PMF in the Nineveh Plains refused to disband and integrate into the Iraqi Army, as per the Prime Minister’s request in July 2019.⁶² In case of crimes of human rights violations, the arrests of fourteen members of the Kataib Hezbollah group this summer, who were eventually released after the militia entered the heavily guarded Green zone, proves that the government is technically unable to

⁵⁹ Carol Glatz "Chaldean Church says so-called 'Christian' militias are not Christian", *Angelus*, July 26, 2019, <https://angelusnews.com/news/chaldean-church-says-so-called-christian-militias-are-not-christian/>.

⁶⁰ Al Arabiya, "Wary of Shiite militia, Iraqi Christians fear returning home", February 11, 2019, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2019/02/11/Wary-of-Shiite-militia-Iraqi-Christians-fear-returning-home>.

⁶¹ Paul Gadalla, “Three years after the Caliphate, Iraq’s Christians find little incentive to return”, *Atlantic Council*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/three-years-after-the-caliphate-iraqs-christians-find-little-incentive-to-return/>.

⁶² Philippe Atallah "The Future of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/08/the-future-of-the-iraqi-popular-mobilization-forces/>.

administer justice.⁶³ The fact that they have not left the towns they have liberated shows that they will likely occupy towns indefinitely.

The Shabak and Babylon Brigades, the two primary Iranian-backed militias operating in the Nineveh Plains, have been the subject of several complaints from the Christian population. According to a recent survey, 24 percent of Christians claim that their family has been negatively affected by a militia or other hostile group; this included trauma, theft, displacement, threats of violence and injury. It is noteworthy that in some cases people were unwilling to name the specific offender.⁶⁴ In addition, Christians have reported abuse, harassment and delays at numerous checkpoints, thus impeding their movement in and around several Christian town in the Nineveh Plain.⁶⁵ Christian merchants have been forced to pay bribes for allowing goods through at checkpoints or opening a shop.⁶⁶ In addition, there have been reports of threats and harassment of Christian returnees by the Shabak fighters in various Christian towns, such as Bartalla and Qaraqosh, including destruction or theft of their belongings.⁶⁷

Apart from the problems in their freedom of movement, corruption, economic impact and human rights abuses, Iraqi Christians feel threatened by the changes in their towns. In general, due to the demographic shift in the Nineveh Plains between 2014 and 2020, Christians are complaining of demographic displacement in favour of the Shabaks and Sunni Arabs. Bartalla, a town with a 95 per cent Christian population until 2003, is now predominantly Shabak, as most of the town's Shabak population has returned, compared to about 7 percent of the Christian families.⁶⁸ In addition, there are reports that government officials sought to facilitate demographic change by providing land and housing for Shia and Sunni Muslims to move into traditionally Christian areas.⁶⁹ The PMF are heavily involved in this process as well. In Tel Keppe and Batnaya, the Babylon Brigade has been accused of facilitating demographic displacement; in Bartalla, the Shabak Militia has been accused of doing the

⁶³ Mustafa Salim and Louisa Loveluck, "New Iraqi leader tries to rein in Iran-backed militias, but task proves daunting", *Washington Post*, July 3, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/new-iraqi-leader-tries-to-rein-in-iran-backed-militias-but-task-proves-daunting/2020/07/02/4963bcaa-baea-11ea-97c1-6cf116ffe26c_story.html.

⁶⁴ ACN International, "Life after ISIS: New challenges to Christianity in Iraq", (June 2020): 38, <https://www.churchinneed.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Report-on-Christianity-in-northern-Iraq.pdf>.

⁶⁵ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op.cit,

⁶⁶ Xavier Bisits, "How Iran-backed fighters are making life hell for Iraq's Christians", *America Magazine*, February 27, 2020, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/02/27/how-iran-backed-fighters-are-making-life-hell-iraqs-christians>.

⁶⁷ Kurt Werthmuller, "Policy Update: Iraq: Protecting Religious Minorities in Northern Iraq", *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, (February 2020): 2-3, https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Iraq%20Policy%20Update_0.pdf.

⁶⁸ Paul Gadalla, op. cit.

⁶⁹ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op.cit,

same.⁷⁰ In addition, Christians in the PMF-controlled towns reported that they felt pressured to adhere to Islamic practices, and avoided celebrating their religious festivals in some cases.⁷¹ In some areas, militias have been accused of positioning Shia Muslim shrines in front of Christian monuments, as a form of intimidation.⁷² In Bartalla, Christians claim that the actions of the 30th Brigade are threatening their way of life; these actions include the establishment of the militias' headquarters in the Christian sub-district is causing anxiety, along with other tactics such as the control of real estate in Christian areas, and other forms of harassment.⁷³

The ongoing presence of the PMF remains the most urgent and destructive obstacle facing Iraqi Christians, and other vulnerable minorities in northern Iraq.⁷⁴ The genuine fear of the PMF forces, along with the possibility of ISIS resurgence, is the reason that Christians continue to maintain their own militias; some of these groups received support from the central government in Baghdad through the People's Mobilization Committee, which oversees PMF forces; others received assistance from the KRG, while a small number of Christian armed units push for their regions' independence from both governments.⁷⁵ While most of the Christian militia have been disbanded, the continued presence of the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) shows that they continue to feel the need to have role in their own security.

The NPU is a predominantly Syriac Catholic and Syriac Orthodox militia, operating under the National Security Services of Baghdad. The NPU's existence is a sign of the Christian minority's tenacity, and of how Islamic State's emergence deepened ethnic and religious fractures in Iraq, despite efforts to present a common front. Formed by the residents of the Nineveh Plain and Assyrian Democratic Movement officials, in order to secure the continuity of the Christian presence in their historic homeland. They mainly operate alongside the Shabak militia, who control all surrounding area. Their presence is generally welcomed by the Christian population, and the return rate of Christians in areas controlled by the NPU is much higher than other areas.⁷⁶ What is more, there are concerns that should the NPU leave the area, the Shabak militia will take advantage of the situation, afflicting the Christian community. However, there are serious doubts whether it would constitute a reliable defense

⁷⁰ ACN International, op. cit.: 44

⁷¹ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op.cit.

⁷² ACN International, op. cit.: 40.

⁷³ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op.cit.

⁷⁴ Kurt Werthmuller, op.cit., 3.

⁷⁵ Saad Salloum, "Iraqi Christians take up arms to regain lost land", Al Monitor, August 19, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/iraq-nineveh-christians-armed-militias.html#ixzz6gsSfgl8e>.

⁷⁶ Assyrian Policy Institute, "Contested Control: The Future of Security in Iraq's Nineveh Plain", June 1, 2020: 42, https://50f3ad00-5b28-4016-898f-6130d301c97a.filesusr.com/ugd/6ae567_98f8f8912baa40949a18a3a0b717eaea.pdf.

in the case of ISIS resurgence.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, there is opposition to the presence of the NPU as well; Christian religious leaders in Iraq have also expressed concerns—and in some cases, opposition—to the presence and the existence of Christian Assyrian security forces.

It should be noted that the Babylon (50th) Brigade also claims to be Christian militia, as it has a Chaldean Christian leader; however, its members are primarily Shia Arabs- who do not originate in the Nineveh Plains – and Shabab fighters, while the group itself is politically aligned with the Badr Organisation, an Islamist Shia political party. Its leader, Rayan Kildani, enjoys little support from his community or Iraqi Christian clerics and was sanctioned by the US Department of Treasury for human rights abuses.⁷⁸ In addition, there are signs that the Babylon Brigade is actively acting against the Christian communities' interests. Christians are accusing the Babylon Brigade of falsely representing Christians, especially since the Babylon movement won the two seats reserved for Christians in the Iraqi parliament in 2018.⁷⁹

What is more, on the top of the list of the security concerns for Iraqi Christians is the threat of the Islamic State (ISIS), which is the main reason behind their mass exodus after 2014, and one of the main reasons that hinder them from returning home. The impact of the systematic targeting of Christians, the kidnappings, rape, torture, destruction of churches and other religious items, is heavily imprinted in the collective memories of Christians.⁸⁰ Many of those who remained in Iraq feel insecure, believing it is likely or very likely that ISIS or a similar group will return in the next five years, particularly as the US forces are continuing to withdraw from Iraq.⁸¹ All these brought another level of complexity to the Christian – Sunni relations, as many minority groups believed that their Sunni neighbors were linked to ISIS' rise, or at least did not oppose it.⁸² Even if the group does not currently hold any territory, it still maintains a presence in the area. For example, in 2019 ISIS burned the farmers' crops in the Nineveh Plains, in the border between Iraq and Syria, while it has claimed the

⁷⁷ Assyrian Policy Institute, op.cit., 44.

⁷⁸ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Persons Associated with Serious Human Rights Abuse and Corrupt Actors in Iraq", July 18, 2019, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm735>.

⁷⁹ Akbar Shahid Ahmed, "A Mostly Non-Christian Militia Won 2 Of Iraqi Christians' Parliamentary Seats. Now Christians Want Trump To Intervene", *Huffington Post*, May 23, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/iraq-parliament-christians-badr-organization_n_5b05dfd0e4b07c4ea104961f.

⁸⁰ Huma Haider, "The Persecution of Christians in the Middle East", *K4D Helpdesk Report*, (February 2017): 6, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/59786a0040f0b65dcb00000a/042-Persecution-of-Christians-in-the-Middle-East.pdf>.

⁸¹ ACN International, op. cit.: 51.

⁸² Khogir Wirya and Linda Fawaz, "The Christians: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict", *MERI Policy Paper*, (September 2017): 9, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/The-Christians-Perceptions-of-Reconciliation-and-Conflict-Report.pdf>.

deaths of at least 37 Iraqis in the same year.⁸³ In February 2020, the prime minister of Iraqi Kurdistan, Masrour Barzani, claimed that even if the group has lost its leadership, ISIS is very much intact, and manages to carry out 60 attacks a month in Iraq alone.⁸⁴ In the first quarter of 2020 alone, 566 ISIS attacks were reported in Iraq, showing that the frequency and intensity of attacks has gone up. The pandemic and U.S. drawdown have exacerbated the daily problems, allowing ISIS fighters to fill the vacuum that troop movements leave behind.⁸⁵

What is more, in the past few months, due to Turkey's military operations inside Iraqi territory, many Iraqi Christians have been forced to evacuate their homes. The Operation Claw Tiger started on June 17, affecting more than 2,000 Christian families and leaving more than 22 churches closed.⁸⁶ The objective of these military operations is to make the inhabitants flee from these areas, in order to create Turkish bases from which to launch targeted ground operations against elements of the PKK. In Duhok province in the KRG, most of the majority Christian villages were evacuated; since the beginning of 2020, at least 25 Christian villages in northern Iraq have been emptied of their original population.⁸⁷

Christian Returns and Christian Emigration

One of the most pressing matters of the Iraqi Christian community is the return of the tens of thousands who fled since 2014, particularly the internally displaced persons (IDPs). Soon after the military defeat of ISIS, small numbers of families began moving back to secured towns. In 2018, their number increased, as the situations in towns improved, bringing back utilities such as water, electricity and security; yet by 2019, the pace of returns had slowed down. It is estimated that between 30 and 50 percent of Christians have already returned to their communities of origins, mostly from within

⁸³ Rudaw, "ISIS claims responsibility for fires on Syria-Iraq border", June 21, 2019, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/210620191>.

⁸⁴ Mike Giglio and Kathy Gilsinan, "The Inconvenient Truth About ISIS", *The Atlantic*, February 14, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/02/kurdish-leader-isis-conflict-iraq-iran/606502>.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Dent, "US Policy and the Resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria", *Middle East Institute*, (October 2020): 3, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/US%20Policy%20and%20the%20Resurgence%20of%20ISIS%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20%20.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Ahval News, "Turkish military incursion preventing Iraqi Christians from returning to villages - report", September 1, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/201-turkish-military-incursion-preventing-iraqi-christians-from-returning-to-villages-report>.

⁸⁷ Dana Taib Menmy, "Christians driven from homes in Iraqi Kurdistan by Turkish offensive", *The National*, July 22, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/155-christians-driven-from-homes-in-iraqi-kurdistan-by-turkish-offensive> see also Asia News, "Kurdistan, Christian villages hit by Turkish raids against the PKK", September 15, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/205-kurdistan-christian-villages-hit-by-turkish-raids-against-the-pkk>.

the KRG region; in the Nineveh Plains, a predominately Christian area, only 40 percent of the displaced Christians have returned.⁸⁸ According to the Nineveh Plain Reconstruction Committee, who planned for the resettlement of the region after ISIS, a high number of internally-displaced Christians initially said they wanted to return home, but eventually, only one-third of Christians decided to return home, because of the economic and security concerns.⁸⁹ In November 2020, about 200 displaced Iraqi Christian families have returned from the Iraqi Kurdistan region to their areas of origin in the Nineveh governorate.⁹⁰

One of the pressing matters for Christians who wish to return home, is the retrieval and the reconstruction of their properties. During 2019, a committee of security officials and Christian religious leaders was created by the government, to facilitate the return all Christian properties in Nineveh to their Christian owners, returning tens of houses.⁹¹ Christian leaders worked individually to help Christians return to their homes, and Yonadum Kanna, a Christian MP said he managed to return 180 homes in 2019.⁹² Most Christians managed to repair their homes with the help of foreign aid organizations, providing funds and living conditions for those who will remain in their homes for two years.⁹³ What is more, many international organizations have initiated the reconstruction of various important Christian monuments. As part of the “revive the Spirit of Mosul” project, a collaboration between UNESCO and the UAE, the Al Saa’a Church has been renovated, as where Christian and Muslims have joined forces for the initiative, while the Al-Tahira Syrian-Catholic Church recently started construction.⁹⁴ Another Catholic charity supported the reconstruction of a church in Qaraqosh.⁹⁵ Similarly, a group of young Muslims renovated the Syriac Catholic church Mar Toma in Mosul, in hopes of encouraging

⁸⁸ Kurt Werthmuller, op.cit.: 2.

⁸⁹ Matt Hadro, "Iraqi prime minister tells Christians to come home, but is it safe?", *Catholic News Agency*, August 21, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/177-iraqi-prime-minister-tells-christians-to-come-home-but-is-it-safe>.

⁹⁰ Middle East Monitor, "200 displaced Iraq Christian families return to Nineveh", November 13, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/288-200-displaced-iraq-christian-families-return-to-nineveh>.

⁹¹ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op.cit.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Rose Gamble, "Catholic charity to repair 2,000 homes for Christians returning to Iraq", *The Tablet*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/8556/catholic-charity-to-repair-2-000-homes-for-christians-returning-to-iraq>.

⁹⁴ Emily Judd, "ISIS tried to destroy this church, now Muslims and Christians join hands to rebuild", *Al Arabiya*, May 17, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/93-isis-tried-to-destroy-this-church-now-muslims-and-christians-join-hands-to-rebuild>.

⁹⁵ Ragheb Elias Shaba and Maria Lozano, "Iraq: a beacon of hope for Christians of Qaraqosh on the Nineveh Plains", *Church in Need*, August 4, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/174-iraq-a-beacon-of-hope-for-christians-of-qaraqosh-on-the-nineveh-plains>.

Christians to return to the city.⁹⁶ Christian leaders have voiced concerns that, due to the economic impact of COVID-19, overseas Christian agencies that assisted in their reconstruction efforts will soon face financial challenges.⁹⁷

On the other hand, the Iraqi government's attempts at reconciliation and reconstruction are limited. Upon his visit to Mosul and the Nineveh Plains in June, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi stressed out the country's dire economic situation, in order to reduce reconstruction expectations.⁹⁸ At the same time, the central government pushes for the return of internationally displaced persons in their places of origins. The ministry of Migration and Displacement announced that many camps and governorates will be closed at the beginning of 2021, as part of a plan to return 1.5 million displaced people to their original areas.⁹⁹ Human Rights organizations such as the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor warned that the decision to close the camps may leave many people homeless. In addition, the largest Christian center for displaced people in the capital was shut down by the Human Rights Commission in June, due to COVID-19.¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, the majority of Christians remain displaced, and their return is a thorny issue due to the many challenges the Christians have to face. Moreover, the total destruction of some regions, in addition to the security concerns and the dire economic conditions, are forcing many Iraqi Christians to emigrate. A large share of Christians in the Nineveh Plains is unemployed, underemployed, or in a job inappropriate to their training or qualifications; yet, according to a survey, security and political reasons are still the primary driver for emigration. As a result, many Iraqi Christians search for a better future, even if it means forever leaving the country of their ancestors. "People can't work and earn a living among ruins. There's little incentive to return" said Reine Hanna, director of the Assyrian Policy Institute.¹⁰¹ In some areas, the population started to decrease due to emigration. For example, in Qaraqosh, or Baghdeda, a predominantly Christian town, the total population decreased in three months from 24,000 to 21,000. It has been reported that 57 percent of

⁹⁶ Syriac Press, "Young Iraqi Muslims revive Syriac Catholic Mar Toma Church to encourage return of Christians to Mosul", October 27, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/267-young-iraqi-muslims-revive-syriac-catholic-mar-toma-church-to-encourage-return-of-christians-to-mosul>

⁹⁷ Kevin Clarke, "Christians in Northern Iraq face a second Covid-19 wave (without enough hospital beds)", *America Magazine*, October 19, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/242-christians-in-northern-iraq-face-a-second-covid-19-wave-without-enough-hospital-beds>

⁹⁸ Alissa J. Rubin, "In Iraq, a New Prime Minister Takes Stock of His Bloodied Land", *The New York Times*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/16/world/middleeast/iraq-prime-minister-mustafa-kadhimi.html>

⁹⁹ Middle East Monitor op. cit.,

¹⁰⁰ Asia News, "Bishop Warduni: Baghdad Christian refugee centre closed because of COVID-19", June 16, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/126-bishop-warduni-baghdad-christian-refugee-centre-closed-because-of-covid-19>

¹⁰¹ Paul Gadalla, op.cit.

Iraqi Christians in the Nineveh plains have considered emigration, while 36 percent expects to leave Iraq in the next five years.¹⁰² With that rate, it is estimated that the Christian population in Iraq altogether might fall to 23,000 in 2024.¹⁰³

Fearing that Christianity will soon be an extinct religion in Iraq, many church leaders and other Iraqi officials call upon Christians to return to their homeland, but to inspire them to stay in order to halt their emigration. In August 2020, the Iraqi Prime Minister stated that the Iraqi government is “serious about providing assistance to our Christian families and solving their problems. We are glad that Christians will return to Iraq and contribute to its reconstruction”.¹⁰⁴ Church leaders hope that the announcement that Pope Francis will visit Iraq in March 2021 will lift the spirits of Iraqi Christians, and inspire those far away to return. Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphaël I Sako stated that “the prospect of the pope's visit will be a consolation for many”.¹⁰⁵ However, the security concerns, the economic situation, the lack of large reconstruction projects, will continue to factor into the Iraqi Christians’ decisions.

¹⁰² ACN International, op. cit.: 32.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Assyrian International News Agency, "Iraqi Prime Minister Urges Assyrians to Return to Iraq", August 11, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/173-iraqi-prime-minister-urges-assyrians-to-return-to-iraq>.

¹⁰⁵ Claire Lesegretain, "Cardinal says papal visit to Iraq will encourage return of Christians", *La Croix International*, December 9, 2020, <http://christianitymiddleeast.gr/resources/newsfeed/320-cardinal-says-papal-visit-to-iraq-will-encourage-return-of-christians>.

Christians in Syria

Christians form a significant part of the country's population, as an established minority in Syria. Before the start of the civil war, over 2 million Christians were estimated to live in the country, constituting almost 9% of the total population. This number varies from 1.7 to 2.3 million, which is very difficult to estimate exactly due to the events after 2011 and the displacement, internally and abroad.

Christians in Syria can be divided into a wide range of denominations, as there are several groups of Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Catholics, Chaldean, Assyrian Orthodox, and Syriac Orthodox among others. The majority of Syrian Christians belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, most of them Arabs, while the second largest grouping is attached to the Armenian Orthodox Church and the ethnic Syriac Orthodox Church with 89,000 members.¹⁰⁶

Large populations of Christians can be found in the major cities of Damascus and Aleppo, which has had the biggest number of Christians in Syria, including many Armenians, and other cities such as Hama and Latakia. Damascus contains important communities of all Christian denominations represented in the country, while one of the largest Christian population is located in Homs, where there are mostly members of Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch. Christian populations can also be found in other places apart from the cities, such as the northern region of the Hasakeh Governorate.

However, the Christian population has considerably decreased because of Christians fleeing the country during the civil war. The number of Christian refugees and displaced persons has risen to over 1 million, which means that over half of the total population has left their home. Sunni Arabs comprise most of the refugees, around 4.5 million, and the Christians follow. The significant numbers of Christians fleeing the country are partially explained by their educational and professional status and their financial advantage, which could cover transport and passage expenses, allowing them to leave their place of residence, as their stay becomes unbearable.¹⁰⁷

Many wish to emigrate from the country, as there are many factors leading them to this decision compared to other communities. Violence and persecution have been added to the limited employment opportunities along with the declining economic conditions. According to a study, the percentage of Syrian Christians that want to leave is much higher, reaching 35% in comparison to 8%

¹⁰⁶ Open Doors International, "Vulnerability Assessment of Syria's Christians", June 2013, 9-10, 29 <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/research/2572679>.

¹⁰⁷ Jeremy Weber, "God at Work along the Refugee Highway." *Christianity Today* 60, 2, (March 2016): 26–33.

of Syrian Muslims.¹⁰⁸ This isn't possible however in several cases. Christians have been moving within Syria because of the restrictive cost of leaving the country.

Although military conflicts and jihadi attacks have receded in Syria across the country, the dangers for Christians still lurk. As the Syrian civil war seems to be in the final stage, the Idlib province has been the exception, where the last major battles of Syria's civil conflict take place. In some cases, the developments before the latest events have been overwhelming for Christians. In places such as Tel Abyad, almost all Christians (and Kurds) were driven out of the city by ISIS fighters back in 2013.¹⁰⁹ Nowadays, the concentration of the opposition fighters in a final refuge in Idlib and northwest Syria continues to place severe burden on the Christians. Almost all Christians from Idlib, Raqqa have left and moved west to Latakia, Tartous, and south to Damascus.

The religious minorities in the areas that Turkey seized after its operation in Syria since 2016, such as Afrin, continued to experience severe difficulties in their everyday life, especially displaced Yazidis and Christians.¹¹⁰ Religious freedom are under attack by mainly Turkish military and their allied Syrian Islamist fighters, while Christians have not been able to practice essential services in these places.

Villages in the north of the country have been without electricity for months, after bombings from Turkish-backed forces, while the condition of the Syrian economy means that a part of the population is on the verge of starvation. Furthermore, Turkey and Turkish-backed forces are actually 'weaponizing water' in northeast Syria as, since the latest offensive in 2019, resulting in taking control of the Allouk water station, they have been interrupting water pumping. In addition, this malicious practice has been repeated several times since the start of the year.¹¹¹ This has aggravated the living conditions for vulnerable communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, as protection from the virus is obviously inadequate.

The fighting has created one of the worst humanitarian crises of the war, and the situation seemed even more serious, until Russia and Turkey intervened and signed a ceasefire. While the latter has brought calm to the region, violence has not been subsided completely and Christian communities

¹⁰⁸ Todd M. Johnson & Gina A. Zurlo (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021), cited in Olivia Wilkinson & Susan Manar, "Understanding recent movements of Christians from Syria and Iraq to other countries across the Middle East and Europe", *Open Doors International*, (2016): 9.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ International Christian Concern, "Turkey: Challenges Facing Christians 2016-2020", (2020): 27-30, <https://meconcern.org/2020/12/07/turkey-challenges-facing-christians-2016-2020/>.

¹¹¹ Human Rights Watch, "Turkey/Syria: Weaponizing Water in Global Pandemic?", March 31, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/turkey/syria-weaponizing-water-global-pandemic>.

continue to struggle. The destruction of the tangible cultural heritage in the region is irreversible in some cases.¹¹²

As the Christians were caught amid the battle between the Turkish forces, the Syrian government and the Kurds, an even higher percentage of the population left the Kurdish areas. Militant organization have been confiscating houses and businesses of Christians there, while many Christian families have abandoned the region to head abroad or to areas inside Syria, leaving all property that they could not carry with them.

As the countries in the region do not recognize conversion from Islam, Syria was a place where people were free to worship without hindrance and legally change their religion, facilitating the growth of the Kurdish Christian community. Evangelical Kurdish churches can be found in Kobani, Amouda, and Afrin in Syria. However, since the invasion in January 2018, Turkish forces have controlled the nearby city of Afrin, which previously enjoyed rights and freedoms. As a result, the 300 Christian families who once resided in Afrin have fled, and the church has closed.¹¹³ A hearing of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom documented how Christians were severely persecuted while Turkish forces forced demographic change by moving Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other parts of the country into the homes of those who have been forced to flee.¹¹⁴ In addition, an independent report described how civilians residing in the Afrin (and Ra's al-Ayn regions of Aleppo and Hasakah Governorates) witnessed an onslaught of violations perpetrated by members of the Syrian National Army as well as shelling and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices.¹¹⁵

In many Syrian cities, numbers of Christians have dwindled, while some communities have lost their previous sense of belonging. This is mostly seen in Aleppo, where many Christian communities have now dispersed and are not as compact as in the past. Christians are mostly hurt by this crisis, as they constantly fear for their safety and are unable to find solutions to their problems.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Assyrian Policy Institute, *Erasing the Legacy of Khabour: Destruction of Assyrian Cultural Heritage in the Khabour Region of Syria*, March 2020, www.assyrianpolicy.org/erasing-the-legacy-of-khabour.

¹¹³ Nadine Maenza & David Alton, "The Untold Story of Syrian Kurdish Christians", *Providence*, October 12, 2020, <https://providencemag.com/2020/10/untold-story-syrian-kurdish-christians/>.

¹¹⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Hearing on safeguarding religious freedom in northeast Syria", June 10, 2020, www.uscifr.gov/events/uscifr-virtual-hearing-safeguarding-religious-freedom-northeast-syria.

¹¹⁵ UN General Assembly 45th session of Human Rights Council, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic", 14 September–2 October 2020, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/45/31>.

¹¹⁶ Janos Besenyo, "Christians in Syria and the civil war" in Peter Bátor & Róbert Ondrejcsák (eds.) *Panorama of global security environment*, (Bratislava: Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs, 2014).

Many Christians have also left Aleppo, a city that became a key battleground in the war between the Assad regime and the opposition as well as Homs, another epicenter of violence. There are some Christians now that have returned and attempt to return to their previous situation.¹¹⁷ Christians, however, are discontent with the poor public services provided by the state and accuse the regime of focusing its investment on the coastal region only.¹¹⁸

Although the Assad regime has retained control of Aleppo, the living conditions for most of the population are not sustainable, especially for Christians in lower positions within society, and those in need for humanitarian assistance. The Syrian state apparatus may have been altered due to the civil conflict, making it extremely difficult for refugees or immigrants to return to their home.

As the government forces have also retaken regions such as Latakia, Tartus, the Christian Valley in Homs, things have been relatively quiet for Christians there. The population has not returned to its previous way of life and this certainly is a factor that does not facilitate the return of those who wish to come back.

Some Christians are returning from Lebanon because of the current financial crisis there, although this is mostly located in regions along the coast. In Aleppo, there have been reconstructions of churches, houses, and schools, but a significant return has not taken place yet, neither there, nor in other regions in the country. A glimmer of hope for return to Syria has appeared though, as some Christians have returned to the northern Hasakeh area, after they had fled to Lebanon some years ago. There are also Christians in Jordan that consider returning to Syria, because of the growing poverty in their host country.¹¹⁹

Recently, on the other side, Christians, who had originally stayed in Damascus, have now decided to leave the city to move to other places or even to other countries. Apart from the security situation, the rate of inflation and lack of work opportunities in Syria is making it difficult for all Syrians. In northern Syria, a lack of trust in Syrian state institutions meant that some had withdrawn savings from banks only to have that money stolen. Unemployment, the lack of future choice and safety foremost remain the most important factors which concern Christians. It remains to be seen whether they could revert to their previous ways or whether there is a cultural change to their behavior. In Darayya, a place where Christian communities are historically located, there were only around 100

¹¹⁷ Maria Ximena Rondon, "Christians who fled Aleppo now returning with help from local Church", *Catholic Register*, July 1, 2017, www.catholicregister.org/home/international/item/25571-christians-who-fled-aleppo-now-returning-with-help-from-local-church.

¹¹⁸ Georges Fahmi, *The future of Syrian Christians after the Arab Spring*, (Florence: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies-European University Institute Working Paper, 2018), 14.

¹¹⁹ Op. cit. Olivia Wilkinson & Susan Manar, 16.

Christian families remaining out of many thousands before and they have now almost all left after the Syrian government wanted to exploit the area for other uses, while in Qamishli, a town of 40,000 Christians, and many more in the past, it is estimated that half have left.¹²⁰

Many Christians had also left northern Syria, with no intention to return.¹²¹ Christians from Idlib, Aleppo, Kobani and other regions had fled to Tartous and Latakia for protection among a larger Christian presence, leaving behind the elderly people.

The human casualties have not changed the current composition of the population of Syria, as a large percentage comes from the Sunni Arabs, who constituted nearly 60% of the total state population when the civil war started in 2011. Nonetheless, Christian casualties influence proportionately more their percentage, as they number considerably less. At the same time, the rates of natural development have declined but certainly not stopped.¹²²

As health institutions in Syria are now having considerable difficulties, the operation of Christian hospitals -Catholic ones for instance in the Italian and French hospitals in Damascus, and the St. Louis Hospital in Aleppo- help vulnerable Syrians free of charge and provide aid and hope. Covering the cost for the medical case for those in need is obviously very important,¹²³ and the importance rises as Syria's main cities of Damascus and Aleppo have now plunged into a deep economic crisis.

One of the most worrying developments is the further deterioration of the country's economic activity, as the financial crisis accelerates. The currency crisis, which led to the depreciation of the local currency and the prohibition of the use of foreign currencies as payment for commercial transactions, has been having devastating effects on the population. Along with the coronavirus pandemic, this has led to rapidly rising food prices, food insecurity and growing levels of poverty climbing towards 90%, while the financial crisis in Lebanon brought also dangers of famine.¹²⁴ At the same time, the protective measures for the coronavirus pandemic have also contributed to the disappointment of the

¹²⁰ Ibid, 9

¹²¹ Kamal Sido, *Rojava - 'Protection Zone' for Religious and Ethnic Minorities in Northern Syria?*, (Rojava: Society for Threatened Peoples, 2016), 9, 15-16, 20-21.

¹²² Michael Izady, "Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity", *School of International and Public Affairs of Columbia University*, 2018-19, <https://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml>.

¹²³ Dale Gavlak, "Catholic hospitals in Syria working to help indigent patients" *Catholic News Service*, July 17, 2020, www.catholicnews.com/briefs/catholic-hospitals-in-syria-working-to-help-indigent-patients.

¹²⁴ Reliefweb, "Cash crash: Syria's economic collapse and the fragmentation of the state", July 13, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/cash-crash-syria-s-economic-collapse-and-fragmentation-state-july-2020> Benedikt Barthelmess & Liam Carson, "How is the crisis in Lebanon impacting Syria's economy?", August 28, 2020, www.mei.edu/publications/how-crisis-lebanon-impacting-syrias-economy, op. cit. 45th session Human Rights Council/UN General Assembly.

population, as they cannot participate in large numbers in religious ceremonies or other social gatherings.

This pressure is being transmitted to the international community, especially as Syrians continue to suffer and humanitarian aid to victims is much needed. An answer to these severe challenges is not easy to be found in the coming period.

Christians in Iran

The discussion for US intervention regarding Iran was often on the table, as Tehran continued to press on sensitive Christian chords.¹²⁵ For example, when the Syrian government announced plans to build a replica of Hagia Sophia, with support from Russia, as a protest against Turkey's decision to turn the renowned church into a mosque, Ali Akbar Velayati - a senior advisor to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei - praised Turkey for reconverting Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, as state-run Anadolu news agency reported.¹²⁶ These discussions flared when the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan was raging for two months and neoconservatives in Washington were pushing the United States to side with Azerbaijan, as they viewed the Tehran government as dangerous for the region's minorities.¹²⁷ This however subsided with the defeat of President Donald Trump and the victory of President-elect Joe Biden.

In Iran, Christians are considered to be in a safer position as they are in better condition than other minorities, since the populations are being treated better by the Iranian state and enjoying more religious freedom nowadays. According to the leader of the Tabriz diocese, Archbishop Sepuh, the state sometimes supports them, and sometimes – not, in the educational sector for example.¹²⁸ This statement carries importance as it is shared by an official from the Armenian community, representing thousands of Christians. Armenians are regarded as a religious minority by the state and mainly live in cities and large towns, such as Tehran, Isfahan, Tabriz, Urmia and Arak and are constitutionally guaranteed two seats in the parliament. It is estimated that 150,000 Christians live in Iran, making the Armenians the largest denomination of the Christian minority. The Armenian Apostolic Church has three dioceses in Iran: the Tehran or Central diocese, which is the newest and the most populous; the Isfahan and Southern Iran diocese; the Atrpatakan diocese; while there is also the Assyrian Church of the East of Iran, the Catholic Church of Iran, the Chaldean Catholic Church of Iran, the Armenian Catholic Church, the Roman Catholic Church, in addition to various other denominations.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Asia News, "US and Iran escalation worries Christians in the Middle East: Enough violence and conflict", October 1, 2020, www.asianews.it/news-en/US-and-Iran-escalation-worries-Christians-in-the-Middle-East-Enough-violence-and-conflict-48989.html.

¹²⁶ Ahval News, "Top Iranian aide praises Turkey's Hagia Sophia conversion", August 2, 2020, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-iran/top-iranian-aide-praises-turkeys-hagia-sophia-conversion>.

¹²⁷ Eldar Mamedov, "How U.S. hawks' fixation on Iran endangers Middle East Christians", *EurasiaNet*, October 31, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-how-us-hawks-fixation-on-iran-endangers-middle-east-christians>.

¹²⁸ Gohar Iskandaryan, "The Armenian community in Iran: Issues and emigration", *Global Campus Human Rights Journal* 3, (2019): 134.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

However, reports have surfaced about past events, such as long-term prison sentences that were pursued wrongfully or forced people out of the country.¹³⁰ The case of Dabrina Bet Tamraz that received international attention, has highlighted the crackdowns against Evangelical and Protestant Christians in Iran.¹³¹ At the same time, there are a lot of incidents reported that point to plenty of hardships for the Christians. Iranian security forces have arrested a female Christian Protestant convert in Tehran, after searching her home and confiscating her personal belongings, while an appeals court in Iran has denied a Christian couple custody of their adopted daughter after they faced criminal charges for their faith. Moreover, there are sentences for Christians woman to being lashed and spend months in prison. The 80 lashes given to two Christian converts in the past two months for drinking wine as part of Holy Communion is a typical example. There are also institutional barriers for the minorities and the Christians in particular. The tactics that the government reportedly uses is for controlling the expansion by forbidding non-compliant dioceses from building new churches or even from repairing existing ones. At the same time, the tactics undermine the leadership of the Christian hierarchy and demonize the Christian community through state propaganda.¹³²

In November, the UN's General Assembly, the Third Committee particularly, has passed a resolution expressing "serious concerns" about the situation of human rights in Iran, including "severe limitations" and "increasing restrictions" on religious freedom. The resolution lists a number of other rights violations against both recognised and unrecognised minorities, including "harassment, intimidation, persecution, arbitrary arrests and detention, and incitement to hatred that leads to violence". Iran dismissed the accusations as legally unfounded. However, Iran has barred entry for UN human rights investigators for the last few years, while international rights groups are denied access to the country.¹³³

This affects many more people than until recently. The number of Christians in the country is far greater than it has been reported. International Christian organisations have been arguing that there

¹³⁰ "Victor Bet-Tamraz reflects on 10-year sentence that forced him out of Iran", *Article18*, September 20, 2020, <https://articleeighteen.com/features/6893/>, Michael Lipin, "Iranian Christian Activist Hailed by Trump Says Iran Detaining 15 Other Christians" *Voa News*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/voa-news-iran/iranian-christian-activist-ailed-trump-says-iran-detaining-15-other>.

¹³¹ Joe Snell, "Iran's Christians face renewed fears ahead of Christmas", *Al Monitor*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/12/iran-tehran-religion-persecution-christian-tamraz-christmas.html> Church in Chains, "Iran: Story of the Bet-Tamraz family Part 4: Dabrina", May 12, 2020, <https://www.churchinchains.ie/news-by-country/middle-east/iran/iran-story-of-the-bet-tamraz-family-part-4-dabrina/>.

¹³² Mansour Borji, "A recipe for intolerance: Iran's blueprint for cracking down on Christians", *Middle East Institute*, December 9, 2020, www.mei.edu/publications/recipe-intolerance-irans-blueprint-cracking-down-christians.

¹³³ Iran International, "UN Resolution Condemns "Blatant" Human Rights Violations In Iran", November 19, 2020, <https://iranintl.com/en/iran/un-resolution-condemns-blatant-human-rights-violations-iran>

may be as many as one million secret Christian believers in Iran, and this has now been proven by a recent survey by a Netherlands-based research group.¹³⁴

Christians in Iran continue to face arrests, interrogation, and the denial of their right to education. The discussion for intervention and foreign meddling actually serves as a smokescreen for the real issues that the minorities face. The improvement of human rights in the country to the standards that the international conventions have set, to which Iran is a signatory country, has not yet become the focus of attention.

¹³⁴ Christianity Today, “Researchers Find Christians in Iran Approaching 1 Million”, September 3, 2020, <http://bit.do/fMyjy>.

Christianity in the Middle East

www.christianitymiddleeast.gr
info@christianitymiddleeast.gr

