

Democracy: an obstacle race

Eastern Christians and power

A minority with ancient roots, Christians are not foreigners in the Middle East and have often held positions of power. They are very much involved in the transformations underway in the area and are surprisingly siding with the establishment.

by Antonio Ferrari

The bomb that devastated the heart of Damascus in late February - scattering deadly shrapnel the length and breadth of one of the capital's "institutional" neighbourhoods - left dozens dead and hundreds wounded. Shrapnel also hit the offices of one of the most renowned Palestinian leaders in the Arab world, Nayef Hawatmeh, wounding him, albeit not fatally.

Born in Jordan and wed to the cause of the Palestinian people's emancipation right from the start, the founder and undisputed leader of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and a resolute Marxist, Hawatmeh is also known for his religious affiliation. He comes from a Catholic Bedouin family and - among his many distinguishing characteristics - has remained loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, even if he has contemplated, and perhaps even decided to return to Palestine. Not to Ramallah, representing the secular world that he has always belonged to, but to the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, which today has essentially become the hub of resistance against the Israeli occupation. Hawatmeh's Christian affiliation is especially intriguing to those who superficially claim that the only Christians in the East are foreigners, immigrants,

Westerners, priests, nuns and religious and secular missionaries. This analysis is wrong because many forget (often out of thinly veiled vested interests) that a huge majority of the area's Christians - actually almost all of them - are native to the region. They also have deep-seated roots in the Middle East that date back well before the advent of Islam and its subsequent expansion.

This does not mean that the Christians in this vast area, which includes Turkey, have a trouble-free life. On the contrary, the exodus continues. But not because the presence of Christians is irreconcilable in a land that is almost entirely Muslim, but because Islamic radicalism, and the propaganda that partly fuels it, has at times turned into a violent "Christian witch hunt", with devastating consequences.

One need only have an open mind and study the invaluable role of the region's Christians to understand just how essential their presence was - and still is today - in reinforcing the culture, civilisation and progress of the Near East. Anyone interested in the subject should read Prince Hassan Bin Talal's wonderful book *Christianity in the Arab World* (available in Italian as well). Brother to the late King Hussein, Crown Prince for



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over 30 years and uncle to current sovereign King Abdullah II, Prince Hassan is a direct descendent of the prophet Mohammed. Indeed, the Hashemite family is the only one clearly entitled to lay claim to this lineage. As a staunch Muslim and mediator between diverse cultures and religions, Prince Hassan rightly recognises Christianity's decidedly central role in the history, growth and



Hanan Ashrawi, the intrepid and prominent peace activist who belongs to the Anglican-Christian minority. Suha Arafat, the widow of Yasser Arafat, was born into a highly respected Christian family from Ramallah; she converted to Islam in order to marry the chairman of the PLO and subsequent president of the Palestinian National Authority.

In Syria, Christians are a solid and deeply rooted minority with very close ties to President Bashar al-Assad. Naturally, not all of them share the bloody methods of the Alawite regime, now seeing increasingly harsh and equally ferocious opposition. But they fear that the fall of the regime will lead to a structural collapse of the entire country and that the new victors, the Sunnis, will embrace the most extreme and radical forces of Islam, which could unleash a campaign of revenge. Similar to the one that took place in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Saddam, like al-Assad, was part of a minority, and the Christian Caldei, another minority, were largely favoured at the time. So much so that the second most powerful man in Iraq and symbol of the country's regime, was Tariq Aziz, a Christian whose power stretched far beyond his role as Deputy Prime Minister.

Lebanon is a case apart. There, the Christian Maronites, who recognise the supremacy of the Papacy and can be considered the most significant component of Eastern Catholicism, are not only the founders of the State but also form the backbone of the Republic. Once in the majority, the Maronites have been demographically overtaken by Shiites, but they are undeniably essential in ensuring balance in an extraordinary yet fragile country, whose

development of the Middle East. It should come as no surprise, then, that one can find Christians in every Arabic and Muslim country, often holding important positions. Having begun our brief overview in Palestine, it should be pointed out that the most intransigent leader of Palestinian radicalism was a Greek Orthodox Christian, Doctor George Habash: the founder, and heart and soul

of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Another Palestinian Christian is Hanna Siniora. A Catholic, he spearheaded negotiations with his Israeli counterpart when Israel banned all contact with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), and is a man who has always stood out among the intelligentsia of the occupied Palestinian territories. Then there is

Constitution stipulates the president of the Republic must be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni and the president of parliament a Shiite. The Maronite patriarch is as powerful as the head of government, and even foreign languages have adapted to the religious divide: Arab Christians are fluent in French while Muslims prefer English. Paris, which Beirut considers its Western sister city, is the favourite capital of Maronites, while London is the preferred Western destination for Muslims.

In Egypt, President Mohammed Morsi, who is part of the Muslim Brotherhood, promised roles of power to the Christian Copts. But these promises have remained just that, reigniting ancient resentment and jealousy. The country's largest minority, the Copts claim to be the true descendents of the Pharaohs.

An overwhelming majority of Muslims considers them as brothers who share their love for the East, but there is also an undercurrent of envy and intolerance, a disastrous stance if the country truly wants to build a new unity. Copts in Egypt can also aspire to positions of power and government, yet the highest title one has ever reached was Deputy Prime Minister for Foreign Affairs (Boutros Boutros-Ghali). Whereas Jordan has had a Christian serving as a full-blown Foreign Minister, Marwan al-Muasher, considered one of the most capable and influential diplomats in Abdullah II's kingdom.

It may surprise some to learn that Christians enjoy relative freedom in Iran, just like the Jewish population, which is prominent in the bazaar and many commercial activities. Jews own almost

all the antique shops in Tehran. They lower their store shutters and stop working every Friday just before sunset, only to raise them again after sunset the following day, at the end of the Sabbath. In Turkey, Christians are also highly respected by the country's moderate Islamic prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In spite of the dangers, ambushes and violent crimes that have befallen priests and other Christian representatives, nearly the entire electorate of the non-Muslim minorities voted for the AKP, the prime minister's Islamic party. The most eminent Christian in the country is Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, who has never had any doubts about the secular radicalism of Turkey's 'deep state'. As he told me in an interview: "The Ottoman Empire was better". **E**



Beirut, Lebanon. A priest uses ash to draw a cross on the forehead of a Maronite Christian during the Christian Easter celebrations.

Contrary to what is often believed, almost all eastern Christians are indigenous.

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