

Interview with Lebanese historian Habib Malik about the future of Christian Minorities in the Middle East

“Jihadis not to blame for all Middle East Christians’ woes”

Habib C. Malik, Associate Professor of History and Cultural Studies at LAU Byblos, has written widely on the Middle East. In this interview conducted in October 2018 to mark the start of the second CSI lecture series on minorities in the region, Dr Malik outlines the pressures Christian communities are facing and explains what is needed for religious pluralism to survive.

Q. Christian communities are dying or being stamped out in many countries of the Middle East. Is Christianity in terminal decline in the region?

A. My simple answer is, no, Christianity in the Middle East is not in a terminal state. Christians have been faced with numerous difficulties throughout history and some form of Christianity has survived. The vast majority of Middle Eastern Christians are not really free communities. They have at some point or other succumbed to a second-class subordinate status in various Muslim-majority contexts.

Historically and sociologically, Christians have suffered and continue to suffer. There are new and ominous threats to them now: radicalization as a result of jihadism, the competition between two kinds of radicalism in the Islamic World – the Mahdist apocalypticism of the Iranian regime, which is a Shi’ite kind of jihad not necessarily directed against the Christians but not hesitating to sweep them along in its path, and the classic versions of Sunni jihadism inspired and funded by Saudi Wahhabism. These are old/new dangers, they have always been there but now they are exacerbated.

Q. How would you describe the pressures Christian communities are facing?

A. The direct pressures of course are from the hostility in the neighbourhood. But there are two other forms of pressure: one is a kind of sustained external indifference, if not neglect, and it varies from country to country and group to group. And the other component is internal corruption. You can’t always blame the hostile jihadis or the indifferent westerners for all of your woes. There has been consistent failure to actually rise to the occasion, to appreciate what’s at stake in terms of the future of your community, and to act in ways that would preserve and promote that community.

The politicians wield a considerable amount of influence on many in the rank and file. And sadly they operate out of venality and out of self-interest much more than for the welfare of the community, so that’s an additional factor that needs to be mentioned in terms of the challenges facing the continuation of Christianity in the region.

But I think all the challenges, daunting as they are, will not empty the region completely of Christians.

Q. What can we in the West do to help?

A. I think the churches in the West, certainly the Vatican, are very concerned and would like to be able to do something. Governments are less so, and that's been the big challenge Christians have faced: how to draw attention to their plight and see it included in the western political agenda that would then translate into some sort of protection. That's been the real challenge, how to inject this dimension into western policies without appearing to be angling for a Crusade.

Churches have a different set of priorities. At the end of the day the churches need to remain involved and in the West they can have their own channels of dialogue with governments that would make some difference. And I might add also the interesting new Russian factor. From a Russian perspective, the Middle East is like part of their 'near abroad'. And they woke up to this with the Chechen problem, which is a direct conduit bringing this radicalism from the Middle East all the way to Moscow. So they are much more aware of these issues than the West is.

Q. How can the Islamist radicalization taking place across the Muslim world be stopped or even reversed?

It can't be stopped with the wave of a magic wand, but the way things are going, much of it will fizzle out when the resulting violence and inhumanity are completely exposed. The threat to Christians is itself threatened by change. Right now, the way the Saudis define their enemy it's Iran, it's not the Christians. The way Iran defines its enemies, it's the house of Saud and whatever groups they finance. So there is a very clear divide and vehement Shi'ite/Sunni animosity that's not going to go away anytime soon.

In the middle of that, we have the Christians and the Yazidis as not only collateral damage but as actual targets. They were targeted deliberately in Iraq. Incidents like that if they happen too frequently will put a very severe dent in the Christian presence in the region. But luckily, the people who do this are also preoccupied with fighting each other. This is a situation where the more big powers enter into the picture, the more things balance themselves out in a very complicated way and somehow vulnerable groups like the Christians and others manage to endure.

Q. The war in Syria appears to be drawing to a close. What do you expect a post-war Syria to look like?

A. There will definitely be a strong Russian footprint, and not just a footprint but a considerable presence. There are many complicating factors but I think the United States and Russia can arrive at some kind of agreement to wind down and finally put an end to this whole Syrian tragedy.

The complicating factors, of course, are three and they are not Arab – they are Turkey, Israel and Iran. Essentially each one of them wants some piece of the action. Most of what we read is that there's only the Idlib obstacle and then it's straight sailing from there. No, it's going to be a little more complicated than that because you have to take Turkey, Iran and Israel's interests and desires into account to a point where you can come up with some sort of settlement that would at least minimally satisfy if not balance and neutralize their requirements. That's going to take time.

Q. What are the prospects for democracy in the region?

A. Let me start by saying that I think the United States was sincere at the outbreak of the very-poorly named Arab Spring when they kept repeating this mantra of democracy, freedoms and human rights. I don't think it was a conspiracy. Many in the Arab world think it was all nonsense and a big game. I don't think so. But I think so many things have been botched along the way, especially by US policies. And the Arab terrain in many ways was just not prepared.

The dictators will tell you, our people are still not prepared to embrace freedoms and democracy and they use that as an excuse to remain dictators. But I have another take on this. Arab intellectuals throughout the 20th century made the wrong choices from what was on offer by way of ideologies from the West and Soviet Russia. They went for nationalism, fascism, socialism, communism – anything but liberal democracy. Why? Because they fell for the Leftist Cold War propaganda that said the US is an imperialist power, so anything coming from there is bad. That just eliminated liberal democracy with one stroke. And what did the intellectuals do? They embraced all of these failed ideologies from Europe's dark moments in the 20th century and they refashioned them into grotesque things like the Baath party. That basically created the authoritarian military regimes of the region, the Saddams and Assads. And that in itself created its opposite, which is the Islamist resurgence, where we are now.

So there is deep culpability, I think, on the level of a sustained failure by the Arab intellectuals of the 20th century, especially the middle decades, to import or embrace liberal democracy. If you haven't done that the ground is not ready to parachute these things down suddenly because a few Egyptians or Tunisians decide that things are bad and we are going to go into the streets. Many others are going to come and seize the initiative.

Q. Lebanon came through a long civil war and has a sectarian-based political system. Could that serve as a model?

A. Lebanon is a country that has literally a million problems. But, remarkably, Lebanon despite these one million problems continues to be the freest Arab society. Why? Well the answer, very bluntly, is that Lebanon continues to harbour the last remaining FREE native Christian community. When Muslims live side by side and interact over long periods of time with free Christians, they tend to change, imperceptibly, and they change for the better. When Muslims live side by side and interact over long periods of time with 'dhimmi' Christians they don't change. So freedom to me is the essence. And Lebanon has it.

And here we have a better chance of addressing western leaders and politicians by telling them that the survival of religious pluralism in the Middle East is a good thing for you and for the region. The key to that survival is free Christianity. That happens to exist only in Lebanon today. For God's sake, do your best to preserve it! This train of thinking, I think, does resonate, not just with the churches in the West but with some leaders as well.

Q. You say that Lebanon is the only place with free Christians. How does Syria fit into that? There isn't a tradition of political freedom there but there's broad freedom for religious communities.

A. Yes, except that the Mukhabarat [secret police] are there every Sunday in church when the priest gives the sermon. We don't have that in Lebanon. These things are seen in terms of gradations. Syrian Christians are for the most part much more 'dhimmi' than Lebanon's Christians have ever been or ever will be. The Syria-Lebanon border is a real one, even though right now it's very porous,

because on one side, namely Syria, if you give the Christians even a small amount of freedom they regard this as an incredible development. Just move across the border to Lebanon and the reverse is true. If you take away even a small amount of the freedom that the Lebanese Christians have, this is regarded as a calamity. So what does this tell you? It tells you that on the one side they haven't been used to freedom so any freedom is extremely valuable, and on the other side because they've been used to much more freedom any diminishing of it is calamitous. That's a real border.

The other thing I would say is that it's very true that there are some 'freedoms' offered by the Baath party but that should be put into context. If Assad stands next to ISIS, Assad looks good. Anybody who stands next to ISIS is going to look good. So from a Syrian Christian perspective, if these are my choices, either ISIS or Assad, of course I'm going to go with Assad. It's the classic choice of the lesser of two evils. But we shouldn't overlook the fact that that's also an evil and that this comparison makes that evil look good because the other is beyond the pale.

@ CSI, December 2018

