

HOW CHRISTIANS AND OTHER NATIVE MINORITIES ARE FARING IN THE UNFOLDING ARAB TURMOIL OF 2011

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1. Preamble

Ever since the self-immolation on 17 January 2011 of that desperate Tunisian vegetable vendor the Arab Middle East was plunged down a spiral of turbulence and popular agitation hitherto unseen in the region. High hopes stand uneasily alongside deep fears as they mark the attitudes and expectations of both participants and spectators in these unfolding events. At stake are the future prospects of several intertwined components: political regimes, ingrained outlooks and behavior patterns, freedom or continued enslavement, popular aspirations for a better life, and native minority communities.

The minorities of the region, especially the Christians, feel uncomfortably exposed at this time. Religious extremism of the Salafi variety¹ threatens to target them if developments take a nasty turn in some of the countries like Egypt and Syria experiencing tumult. The obverse is also true: if certain countries continue unaffected by the changes occurring all over the region, this too could have a detrimental effect on the future of minorities in the Middle East. The elephant in the room in this regard is Saudi Arabia whose fanatical version of Islam, Wahhabism, and the ability to export it region-wide if not beyond have been at the root of minority worries. It would be supremely ironic as well as historically tragic if the movements currently underway to liberate the Arab peoples from tyrannical rule were in some twisted fashion to result in a curtailment of freedom of religion for precisely those groups whose presence in the region offers hope for sustained pluralism and communal diversity.

Where the Arab world is headed, and the effects of the ongoing metamorphosis on the region's minority communities, are topics treated in this study. In addition, some suggestions are offered as to what truly concerned

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¹ Salafis and Salafism refer to a fundamentalist Sunni movement to return to the presumed uncontaminated purity of the 'good Salaf' or the dawn of Islam at the time of the Prophet.

people and groups outside the Middle East can do to fortify religious freedom and protect susceptible communities. In the Middle East in particular religious freedom is inextricably linked to the very existence and continuity of specific indigenous minorities like the Christians.

2. Minorities, historical narratives, primordial aggregates

As the Arab revolts of 2011 sweep tsunami-like through one country after another we see little media attention being devoted to the plight of native Christian and other minority communities throughout the turbulent region. How these communities are being impacted by the ongoing upheavals and the far-reaching changes these upheavals are inducing are topics at best of marginal interest to the outside world. The same sadly was true for the embattled Christians of both Lebanon and Iraq during the years of turmoil experienced by those two Arab countries since 1975 and 2003 respectively. The results were widespread decimation, dislocation, and demographic shrinkage of these two ancient communities of Lebanese and Iraqi Christians.

Whether or not 2011 in retrospect will be viewed as the Arab 1989, in reference to the anti-communist revolutions in Eastern Europe, or the Arab 1848, in reference to the popular revolts with constitutionalist, socialist, and nationalist undertones that swept across the continent that fateful year, is a matter left to future historians. But one thing is certain: glib analogies bridging deceptively similar events in the civilizational West and beyond it suffer from the inherent limitation of real differences between pluralism under an overarching umbrella of shared values on the one hand, and the plurality of often viciously clashing worldviews on the other.² In other words, ethno-religious minorities living outside the West, understood in the broad cultural-civilizational sense, face uniquely perilous challenges of an existential nature. For these communities questions of religious freedom are viewed and articulated, in the first instance, as questions of freedom from religious persecution. The Western secular mind, however, with its ingrained materialism and absence of any sense of the transcendent, remains insensitive to, and unmoved by, instances of religious persecution occurring beyond the strict confines of the West. The language of Article 18 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights appears to be losing its luster, and even its relevance, for these Western secularists. The adverse effects of this indifference

² See Habib C. Malik, 'Democracy and Religious Communities: The Riddle of Pluralism' published in the proceedings of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, *Democracy – Reality and Responsibility*, Acta 6, Sixth Plenary Session, 23–26 February 2000, Vatican City 2001, pp. 367–401.

on the indigenous minority communities of the Middle East including the Christians are grave indeed.

Except for Sunni Muslims, everyone else in the wider Middle Eastern region belongs to a religious or sectarian minority. Even the Shiite Muslims, who are a clear majority in countries like Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain, constitute a minority when compared numerically to the Sunnis, who make up 85 percent of Muslims worldwide. Moreover, Sunnis have experienced centuries of being in power during which they ruled through successive empires over vast territories that contained a variety of native Muslim and non-Muslim subject minority communities. During the best of times these minorities were tolerated merely as second-class subjects deprived by law of many basic rights. The *dhimmi* system was applied to those the Koran refers to as 'People of the Book', namely Jews and Christians.

Contrary to romanticized depictions in many historical accounts by Western and other scholars from the early 20th century and before, dhimmitude was not a tolerant acceptance of Jewish and Christian minorities but a system designed to bring about their gradual liquidation. The cumulative and abrasive effects of the various *dhimmi* restrictions that included paying a special tax, not marrying Muslim women while the reverse was allowed, not building new places of worship or renovating existing ones, not carrying arms, and much more, were to drive individuals in the targeted communities either to conversion to Islam, or to emigration. Wherever dhimmitude prevailed relentless dehumanization resulted over time and the psychological residues of centuries of this corrosive process have been devastating for the *dhimmi* populations.

The history of Middle Eastern Christians rooted in their ancestral lands reveals two distinct narratives: a predominantly *dhimmi* one, and a relatively free one. The vast majority of these Christians, namely those living today in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and the Palestinian territories, fell into dhimmitude at one point or another during the centuries since the rise and spread of Islam and were relegated to a subordinate and progressively inferiorized status. The remaining Christians, principally those of Lebanon, managed to avoid dhimmitude and remain freer than their other regional coreligionists. The rugged topography of their mountainous land, especially during the pre-technological era, helped them evade the ravages of conquest and subjugation.³

³ On dhimmitude and the two narratives see Habib C. Malik, *Islamism and the Future of the Christians of the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2010), pp. 9–27. See also George Sabra, 'Two Ways of Being a Christian in the Muslim Context of the Middle East' in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Routledge: January 2006), pp. 43–53.

These two divergent narratives mean the two groups of Christians involved have very different experiences as regards a central human aspiration which is freedom, and the related basic human component which is dignity. As a result their views of themselves, of one another, of other minorities, and of the ruling Sunni majority are far from identical. *Dhimmis* by and large tend to be pusillanimous and sycophantic toward their oppressors, while free Christians prefer an attitude of defiance with all the risks this entails.

If the current turmoil moving across the Arab landscape is going to make the region, or significant portions of it, devolve into its primordial aggregates, an examination of the possible fate awaiting minority communities the ‘morning after’ becomes imperative, particularly as it relates to the vital issue of religious freedom. By primordial aggregates is meant the underlying ethno-religious, sectarian, and tribal map that was concealed – in many cases artificially – beneath hastily cobbled mandate arrangements like the post-World War One Sykes-Picot agreement sectioning the Levant into British and French spheres of operation, with those funny straight lines traversing the desert and serving as the borders between newly designated states. Similar arrangements eventually produced today’s Gulf Sheikhdoms as well as North Africa’s distended states following the defeats of Vichy France and Fascist Italy and the departure of the French from Algeria. Decolonization after 1945 dragged on for twenty years and set the stage for the emergence of a string of independent Arab states many of which soon fell prey to successive military coups and the dictatorships they spawned. The first of these occurred in 1952 in Egypt with the Officers’ Revolution that brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power.

3. Stressed communities

Even during the rare periods in the Middle East when a general calm seems to prevail minorities tend to feel insecure and stressed. In times of adversity the usual perils are multiplied, the uncertainty increases, and so does the stress. A quick survey of the various native minorities in the region can help isolate the elements informing this stress and uncover its deeper reasons.

Foremost among the minorities for our present discussion are the native Christians. Altogether they number somewhere between 10 and 12 million and are spread mainly in Egypt, Iraq, and the Levant. Since the start of the Arab upheavals in early 2011 the Christians of both Egypt and Syria quickly found themselves caught in the midst of impending momentous changes with little clarity as to the effects these changes would ultimately have on their wellbeing.

Egypt: The Copts are an ancient community in Egypt with roots going back to Mark the Evangelist and to the Desert Fathers who launched monas-

ticism at the dawn of the Christian era. Today, they number roughly around 10 percent of the Egyptian population (some 8 million) and are scattered throughout Egypt with no particular concentrations in any part of the country. As the Egyptian revolution that broke out on 25 January 2011 progressed and pressures mounted on the Mubarak regime attacks began to occur with greater frequency against Copts and their churches. Such attacks were not new, and the Copts had been the recurring targets of sporadic vicious assaults on many previous occasions usually when militant Islamists clashing with the authorities took out their anger and frustration on them, or when individual incidents between a Copt and a Muslim mushroomed to become a confrontation between the two communities. As *dhimmi*s living under Islamic rule the Copts never really knew a free existence. They have always subsisted at the mercy of the vicissitudes characterizing the fault line between a repressive regime and Islamic extremists.

Anecdotal evidence confirmed partially by later trials of figures from the fallen Mubarak regime revealed that some of the attacks on Coptic churches had been instigated by these regime elements as a cynical attempt to deflect the focus of the popular protests away from the beleaguered regime and in the direction of fanning religious hatreds – the regime’s counterrevolution, as it were. The subsequent emergence of popular patrols organized jointly by Muslims and Copts to protect churches in Alexandria and parts of Cairo suggested a determination on the part of the anti-regime protestors to shield their revolution from being derailed in this malicious direction.⁴ But the attacks persisted, and on May 7 and 8, 2011, in the northwest Cairo suburb of Imbaba, clashes broke out between Copts and Salafis because the latter were enraged that an alleged Coptic female convert to Islam had been detained against her will at a local church. The results of the violence were 12 Copts dead, over 200 wounded, and the burning of the church in question. Other churches were also attacked and looted by mobs of fanatics incited by Salafist preachers. Predictably, the authorities – in this instance the army that took power after Mubarak was toppled – like the previous regime did not lift a finger to stop the attacks, a fact that led to several days of angry public protests by the Copts demanding justice for themselves and swift punishment for their attackers.⁵

⁴ A blast occurred in Alexandria at the Al-Qiddisain Church on January 1, 2011. For more on this and related attacks see www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12101748 and www.businessweek.com/news/2011-01-01/church-bomb-kills-21-wounds-79-in-alexandria-egypt.html

⁵ See Nina Shea, ‘The Persecution of Egypt’s Coptic Christians Continues’ posted on May 10, 2011, *National Review Online* [www.nationalreview.com].

Christians in Egypt as in other volatile parts of the Arab world face a grueling dilemma: under the Moubarak regime, and despite the apathy of the authorities toward their hardships or even occasional conniving in exacerbating them, Copts were not looking at the prospect of outright annihilation or mass persecution as they surely would under an Islamist regime. And yet these same Copts cannot in good conscience remain supportive of corruption and abuse on a wide scale in government, nor are they willing to endure the indefinite and systematic marginalizing of their ancient community in the workings of government, not to mention in Egyptian society at large. The ambivalence resulting from this dilemma was detected in traces of vacillation within the Coptic leadership during the early days of the Egyptian revolution. Pope Shenouda, the Copts' chief spiritual leader, in an official statement on February 15, appeared to be praising both the youth of the revolution and the army while not openly calling for the regime's demise.⁶ In an interview that appeared a few days later on 27 February, and after enumerating a string of attacks on his community, Pope Shenouda says: 'I cannot deny that we had good relations with President Moubarak as a person. That's why I see it a personal obligation of loyalty not to mention bad points but rather to remember the good ones'. He went on to add that the problems Copts faced 'were mainly due to those surrounding [Moubarak]'.⁷

With Moubarak out of the picture, the Salafists and their only slightly milder cousins, the politically well-organized Muslim Brotherhood, are poised to make a serious bid for power in Egypt. The Copts sense this danger acutely and have begun to trickle out of Egypt in a new wave of emigration that bodes ill for future prospects of pluralist diversity in the Arab region.⁸

Syria and Iraq: If Egypt's Copts are afflicted with an unsettling dilemma that places them uncomfortably in an equivocal position with respect to an authoritarian state, the same dilemma but more acutely pronounced besets the Christians of both Syria and Iraq where power was firmly held by the ostensibly secular Baath party headed by minorities in both countries.⁹ Under Saddam Hussein's repressive Baath party control in Iraq where the minority Sunnis monopolized power for decades, and under Syria's Baath

⁶ See <http://smsgmission.org/news%202011.pdf>

⁷ See <http://britishorthodox.org/1676/pope-shenouda-comments-on-the-egyptian-revolution/>

⁸ See Nina Shea, 'Egypt's Copts: Will the Region's Largest Non-Muslim Religious Community Simply Disappear?' *The New Republic*, June 10, 2011 [www.tnr.com].

⁹ The Baath is a secular ideology of Arab unity based on adversity toward Israel and Western imperialism. Its founder, Michel Aflaq, was an Orthodox Christian from Syria.

regime run with an iron fist by the Alawite minority's Assad family, the Christians enjoyed protection from Islamist extremism and some modest privileges including occasional government and army appointments.¹⁰ It is not surprising therefore that Iraqi and Syrian Christians were generally supportive of their respective single-party dictatorships mainly out of fear of the worse alternatives.

The impact of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq on the country's Christians was adverse and life-altering. The collapse of Saddam's regime took away an insulating layer over the Christians and exposed them to escalating brutal attacks from Islamists affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Internal displacement largely to the Kurdish north plus accelerated emigration abroad dispossessed close to 50 percent of the roughly 1.4 million Iraqi Christians that include Chaldeans, Assyrians, and assorted smaller denominations. Some moved to neighboring Syria where they were generally well received; others ended up in Lebanon where their treatment has been far from exemplary; however, the majority simply relocated to the West, principally to North America. The sad plight of these Iraqi Christians has been nothing short of tragic, and the scandalous neglect of their fate by Washington has been glaring. As ancient communities deeply rooted in their homeland these Christians never wanted to leave until an unfortunate confluence of circumstances forced them out.

In Syria, where the regime remains robust despite ongoing random challenges to its totalitarian grip on power and the bloody violent response it has undertaken, Christians also find themselves caught in a difficult situation. By remaining silent they cannot escape feelings of guilt in being complicit with the cruel violence visited by the regime on the people in many parts of Syria. At the same time they realize that the downfall of that same regime would certainly expose them to reprisals from militant Islamists among the majority Sunni population. A carefully worded statement about the events in the country put out by the Jesuits in Damascus conveys elements of this intractable dilemma being endured by Syria's Christians. Calls for national unity, open dialogue, freedom of expression, and the rejection of violence on all sides cascade with obvious unease one after the other throughout the statement. Without blaming any party for the violence the statement refers to feelings for individual liberties and demands that 'the citizen be an actor in the transformation of this society'. It continues: 'Un-

¹⁰ Alawites, or Alawis, are an offshoot esoteric sect of Islam who revere Ali and are therefore close to Shiite Islam. They are found mainly in Syria.

fortunately, confusion has taken the upper hand, opening the way to violence. The rejection of the other person, as we all know, is the principal cause of violence which in its turn calls for more violence. At the moment we are observing efforts to foment trouble leading to a religious war which threatens to disintegrate our society'.¹¹ In fact, as of this writing no attacks have happened against Christians as such, or their places of worship in Syria. But high anxieties about the future persist. The Christian and Sunni bourgeoisie in Syria's major cities are supporters of the Assad regime because their interests and privileges are intertwined with it, but this is not the case for the bulk of the members of these two communities. A split in the army along Sunni-Alawite lines could usher in a protracted civil and sectarian war that might result in the breakup of the country. Christians would surely have plenty to worry about in the event that such a scenario unfolds.

Lebanon: Since the recent revolts in the Arab world erupted in Tunisia at the start of 2011 Lebanon has been eerily and uncharacteristically quiet. For years prior to this Lebanon endured civil strife and external occupation while its neighbors basked in a prolonged calm with interludes of prosperity. Lebanon's Christians, constituting today roughly a third of the total population of about 4 million, remain the freest in the Arab world. They are composed of Maronites, Orthodox, Melkites, Armenians, Syriacs, Latins, Protestants, and others – all can pray and publish and preach and proselytize freely and openly like the case is in any of the Western democracies. Despite the intense battering the country has gone through since 1975, Lebanon's civil society continues to be freer than its Arab counterparts. Beirut serves as a listening post for the grievances, conditions, and aspirations of the surrounding Arab Christians as well as their regional breathing lung and window on the rest of the world.

Because Christians are located on both sides of the current political divide in Lebanon that pits Saudi Arabia supported by its regional and international allies against Syria and Iran, dangers of renewed Christian-Muslim clashes as was the case between 1975 and 1990 are low. However, a violent sectarian confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites would spare no one and would drag the Christians willy-nilly along its path of self-destruction. The calm is precarious but holding on that particular Sunni-Shiite demarcation line in Lebanon, but this could rapidly change if, for example, matters were to deteriorate greatly in neighboring Syria between the ruling Alawite minority who are close to the Shiites and the Sunni majority. Lebanese of all stripes

¹¹ 'Statement of Jesuits in Syria', Damascus, June 7, 2011 [see www.zenit.org].

apprehensively eye developments across their long common border with Syria even though the vast majority of them show little appetite for revisiting the horrors of internecine carnage that marked their recent collective past.

And then there is the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), set up by the United Nations to investigate the killing in 2005 of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and some 20 other prominent politicians and public figures dispatched by car bombs between 2005 and 2009. Many allege the tribunal is politicized and is being used as a tool in the hands of the United States and Israel to bludgeon Hezbollah, the leading Shiite pro-Iranian paramilitary organization in Lebanon, which is reportedly implicated in the murders of Hariri and his associates under orders from Damascus. Others defend the tribunal as the only international mechanism that has a chance to uncover the truth about the assassinations, bring the perpetrators to justice, and end the cycle of bloodshed with impunity in Lebanon. Whatever the case might be regarding the STL, most Lebanese are averse to having its indictments serve as the trigger for renewed sectarian fighting in Lebanon. The perennial issue in Lebanon as far as the Christians are concerned is whether the last remaining free and open Christian community in the entire Middle East, namely theirs, will survive or perish. Severe attrition has already occurred in terms of the toll emigration has taken on the community in recent decades as a direct consequence of the pressures of warfare it has withstood with great difficulty. More hemorrhaging would be nothing less than calamitous with irreversible results.

Other stressed minority communities include Palestinian and Jordanian Christians in whose societies Salafism is on the rise as witnessed by Hamas in Gaza and the Islamists in Jordan. The myth that Palestinians are blind to religious and sectarian differences, and that they are all unified against their common enemy, Israel, has been steadily eroded ever since Islamists split Palestinian ranks, sidelined women, purged non-Muslims, and Islamized the resistance. Interestingly, hardly any of the demonstrations across the Arab world are raising anti-Israeli and anti-American slogans, or chanting in support of Al-Qaeda and the Salafist Jihadis.

Non-Christian minority groups throughout the broad region from Morocco to Iran encompass Alawis, Druze, Kurds, Bahais, Amazigs, Jews, and others. All encounter challenges in their various lands. Alawis are fighting to retain power in a brutal regime ruling Syria for the past four decades. Druze, a minority Islamic offshoot rooted in parts of Lebanon and Syria, tend to side with whoever appears dominant at any given point in time – this is their time-honored survival strategy. Kurds are ethnically non-Arab, but they are largely Sunni Muslims spread over five states with the highest concentrations

being in Iraq and Turkey. Numbering over 20 million, they have not succeeded in carving out their own independent state of Kurdistan. Bahais belong to a universalistic and peaceful religion that syncretistically combines ingredients from Christianity, Islam, and ancient Persian creeds. They have been heavily persecuted in Iran where their once-thriving community is practically exterminated. Amazigs are non-Arab tribes of Berber stock found mainly across the Maghreb up to western Libya where they have been subjected to a campaign of ethnic cleansing by Colonel Mouammar Gaddafi. Jews are still living in small numbers throughout the region except in Morocco where they retain a sizeable community. Israel is the new Jewish homeland and enjoys considerable power including nuclear capabilities; however, it continues to be rejected by a good portion of its Arab and Iranian neighbors. And then there are the Sunnis in Bahrain who are a ruling minority over a Shiite majority, and the Shiites in eastern Saudi Arabia's oil-rich region who are a minority in the Sunni-Wahhabi Kingdom.

4. Arab youth and Arab intellectuals

The common cry around the Arab world today as the popular uprisings intensify and move from place to place is the call for greater respect for human rights. The Arab masses, composed predominantly of young people, have articulated their priorities: they want basic freedoms, an end to repressive regimes, better living conditions and economic opportunities, social justice, political pluralism, free elections, and democracy. What they are not interested in are the hackneyed causes of yesteryear: the anachronistic anti-colonial and anti-imperialist jargon that blames every frustration on America and Israel and depicts them as the ultimate causes of all Arab ills; the liberation of Palestine and the destruction of Israel; and the Salafist, Jihadist, and Takfiri hate-filled ideology of Al-Qaeda. None of these familiar clichés of violence and extremism are on the minds of the peaceful demonstrators in towns and cities all over the Arab world – the Facebook generation. This means the biggest losers alongside the culpable authoritarian governments are the ideologues of a bygone era and their remnant representatives today: Iran's theocrats, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Salafis and Al-Qaeda wherever they happen to be lurking. Happily, these have so far failed to appeal to the hearts and minds of the region's rebellious youth.

This sudden and unforeseen spectacle of active protest around the Arab world does not emerge in a vacuum but comes out of a historical context: it is a damning indictment of the colossal failure of the dominant breed of Arab intellectuals during the 20th century. Leading figures among the Arab intelligentsia of the last century saw fit to import wholesale the concepts

of socialism and nationalism – the two ideologies that were directly responsible for the two World Wars and the unprecedented carnage they precipitated – and to create local Arab hybrids out of them. These hybrids went under the names of Arabism, Arab Nationalism, Baathism, Nasserism, Jamahiriyyism (Libya), and similar variants. What they bred were the military coups and consequent dictatorships of the middle decades of the 20th century that repressed their own people, hid behind verbal support for the Palestinian cause while perpetuating the suffering of Palestinian refugees in squalid camps, and lost every war with Israel.

Many of the key thinkers behind this wayward enterprise were Eastern Orthodox Christians harboring a deep-seated *dhimmi* complex.¹² Their subtle survival strategy was to alter the Muslim majority's focus on religious differences by concocting, and then championing, causes in the service of which they enlisted this same dreaded majority. The few voices of dissent from dhimmitude found themselves swimming against the prevailing current and crying in the Arab intellectual wilderness whenever they preached alternative ideas like liberal democracy, human rights, and basic freedoms. They were straightaway labeled traitors to the Palestinian or Arab or Salafist causes and accused of being agents of imperialism and Zionism.¹³

Eventually, when it became all too apparent that the regimes born out of these unfortunate ideological importations were not meeting any of the needs and aspirations of their people but instead were instilling terror and torture under the guise of a peculiar Arab version of secularism, the unsurprising Islamist backlash occurred. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its sister organization in Syria, followed closely by more determined Jihadis and Salafis across the region, had several violent clashes with the authorities in those two countries and elsewhere, while local minorities ended up invariably as collateral damage. Now, with Arab youth marching to a different and refreshing tune that repudiates in essence both the autocrats and the theocrats, and vindicates those vilified liberal thinkers who, against tremendous odds and with little success, tried to point the way forward, the region's minorities may at last have a chance to break free of their shackles and lead a more decent and dignified existence. But both the besieged regimes and the anachronistic religious fanatics are still far from being defeated, and the road ahead is strewn with lethal landmines, especially for native minorities.

¹² Habib Malik, *Islamism and the Future of the Christians of the Middle East*, pp. 50–54.

¹³ Charles H. Malik (1906–1987), an Orthodox Christian from Lebanon and the present author's late father, was one of these intrepid voices.

5. Dangers and weaknesses

Several dangerous scenarios could result from an unforeseen turn of events in those countries experiencing the momentous transformations induced by what has come to be called the Arab Spring. In other words, this budding spring could in a variety of ways be hijacked to end up a prolonged and dreary winter for the peoples of the region including minorities. Repressive regimes themselves subject to counter pressures from their masses led by an organized opposition might still find ways to survive through a combination of brutality and clever reinvention of themselves under altered circumstances. The army in Egypt, replacing the fallen Mubarak regime, has promised national elections in the country, but if the generals begin to savor power too cozily, they just might decide to hang on to it. Complicated internal, regional, and international factors pertaining to Syria have colluded to increase the longevity of the ruling Alawite regime that has applied bloody use of force to silence the opposition.

There is as well the ever-present danger of the Islamists seizing power, or arriving at it through the ballot box and then deciding to stay – a case of ‘one man, one vote, *one time*’, so to speak. Even though the youth of the revolts don’t appear attracted by any overt Islamist platform or slogans, these extremist religious groups are in fact the most politically organized ones in many of the countries experiencing turmoil. It is not inconceivable that they will win elections and then decide to terminate the democratic process that allowed them to win in the first place. Non-Muslim minorities and women of all faiths will have plenty to fear from such an eventuality because the looming prospect of implementing *Shari‘a* (Islamic law) that relegates them to a subordinate and dehumanized status will be palpably real at that point.¹⁴ There are some in the West who argue that Islamists should be allowed to come to power, and to fail. The argument is based on the assumption – probably accurate – that Islamists don’t really possess any viable solutions to the complex social and economic challenges of modernity, and that therefore their remedies will be exposed as inadequate and will be rejected by the people. Even if this prediction proves true, it is easy for those ensconced thousands of miles away to make it while the region’s vulnerable minorities will have to suffer through the experiment and its consequences

¹⁴ I found the recently published collection of essays by Ibn Warraq (a pseudonym for a former Muslim from the Indian subcontinent who opted out of Islam and now lives in the United States) to be highly informative on *Shari‘a* totalitarian nature; see *Virgins? What Virgins?* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2010), p. 258.

like unwilling guinea pigs in a laboratory. Besides, there are no guarantees that the outcome of Islamist failure will unfold as smoothly as stated.

And what about the prospect of open-ended chaos in one or some countries let alone across the region? What would that do not only to minorities but to international stability and to the long-term regional interests of the big powers? Given the tribal composition of many of these societies, the latent ethnic divisions, the seething sectarian animosities, the gaping socio-economic disparities, and the endemic resentment against authoritarian rule, unresolved local clashes could degenerate into the festering internal conflicts characteristic of failed states like Somalia. Minorities of all stripes would stand to lose in a big way under such emerging conditions of instability and chaos.

Perhaps the greatest long-term danger facing everyone in the Arab region would be for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to escape the changes demanded by the youthful protestors: greater openness and liberalism and respect for pluralism and human rights and democratic institutions and essential personal and group freedoms. And since the ruling Saudis have going for them the fact that their country remains effectively the West's gasoline filling station, the West itself will help the Kingdom's dynasts resist these very changes that come out of the time-honored repertoire of universal values so much revered and alive in the West itself. Or at best the West will choose to look the other way and maintain a deafening silence. The West does this with little sense of hypocrisy and in the certainty that it is protecting the global stability of, and accessibility to, a vital resource: energy from fossil fuels. But such an attitude is very cynical as regards the general welfare of the peoples of the Arab region and of the Arabian Peninsula in particular. If the only effect on the Kingdom of these historic and unprecedented revolts is going to be that a few women dared to drive cars around Riyadh and Jeddah only to find themselves arrested by the authorities for breaking an utterly irrational law prohibiting females from driving, then the future looks quite bleak for the whole region despite any other gains scored here or there by these same revolts. The toxic effects of the Saudi-funded Koranic *madrassas* strewn around the Arab and Islamic worlds – those same institutions of fanaticism that were the breeding grounds for the violent terrorists who created Al-Qaeda and perpetrated 9/11 – represent the greatest danger over the long haul that threatens to undo the liberal achievements of the Arab Spring. They are also a mortal danger on minorities, moderates, women, and just about any enlightened element in a predominantly Islamic society.

All these dangers, potential or actual, when coupled with the inherent weaknesses of native Middle Eastern minorities, especially the Christians,

present a formidable set of existential challenges that threaten the very survival of such precarious communities. These weaknesses include steadily dwindling numbers due to emigration, a history of dhimmitude that has inflicted indelible psychological damage on these communities, little or no appreciation by the outside world of the grave ordeals afflicting these communities, internal divisions, and mediocre leaders both political and spiritual. When it comes to the numbers game the demographic battle appears to be a losing one with chronically low birth rates among Christians, a belief system that stresses strict monogamy, a high premium placed on education that tends to depress the number of offspring per family due to the associated economic costs, and difficulties of divorce as an option.

Complicating the picture further are Western Evangelical attitudes that tend to preach to Arab Christians a reductive and truncated theology of passivity dispensing with the need for earthly freedom. A true believer in Christ, so goes the sermon, can remain faithful to the deepest tenets of his/her faith under any earthly circumstances. Imagine for a moment where we would be today if the Poles living under communism had embraced this quietist position in the 1980s, or if the President of the United States had done so the morning after 9/11! While this dogma is not disputed in the absolute, left as such without contextual grounding it risks peddling bad theology since earthly freedom is certainly a virtue in itself that if possessed by a believing Christian would unfailingly enhance spiritual wellbeing, guarantee religious liberties for individuals and groups, and allow such free communities to be active in history for the propagation and anchoring of the precious truths to which they cling and by which they live. One has to wonder whether these same Evangelicals would practice what they preach if and when their own freedoms that they often take for granted were to be seriously threatened in any way.

Then there are the so-called Christian Zionists constituting a fringe of the Evangelical movement and exhibiting a peculiar blend of Dispensationalism and Restorationism. They regard the state of Israel, established in 1948, as a fulfillment of Biblical prophecies and the prelude to the end times. Their eschatology confuses politics with theology in a brazen manner that permits them to proceed to offer full material and moral support to Israel and Israeli interests. Serious problems arise when these groups come to the Middle East and begin to convey the impression, deliberately or inadvertently, that their beliefs are somehow shared by their local coreligionists the Arab Christians. This immediately evokes in suspicious and indiscriminating Muslim minds unwarranted associations that automatically incriminate the native Christians as supporters of Israel, misrepresent their true beliefs,

and label them latter-day Crusaders or agents of imperialism – all the way through the familiar roster of baseless and poisonous accusations. The last thing the Christians of the troubled Middle East need today is this kind of gratuitously tendentious affiliation. If this is the taint marking Western attention to their just cause, they would much rather carry their crosses by themselves and with dignity as they have done for centuries.

6. Possible outcomes, what real help entails

During this period of transition throughout the Arab world – a period that may be of long duration in certain countries – specific hazards beset the region's minorities. But what are some possible outcomes when all the dust has settled? The reversion, alluded to earlier, to primordial aggregates is one distinct possibility, at least in those areas exhibiting greater local tribal or sectarian differentiation. So as to avoid the emergence of sectarian enclaves that would fragment the landscape in a manner not conducive to stability, institutionalized federal alternatives need to be seriously explored. The model of the state that the region received from the European Mandate period at the start of the 20th century was a unitary one molded in the image of the two leading European powers at the time, France and Britain. Perhaps when all the current upheavals have subsided the time will have come to entertain a new model that would be more fitting for accommodating the micro-heterogeneity in terms of socio-cultural and ethno-religious variations marking these societies. And such a model can only be a federal one.

The beauty of federalism is that it is a malleable concept able to be tailored to fit almost any set of givens. With the exception of the former Yugoslavia and for reasons unique to it, federal states have proven to be some of the most successful in the world. Federalism is ideally suited for divided or composite societies, which are societies that feature a number of distinct minority communities living side by side.¹⁵ The objective of such a system would be to provide protection to these communities from the specter of demographic fluctuations and disparities and therefore the danger of a tyranny exercised by the majority. This is particularly vital in a Muslim-majority setting where historically minorities have not fared well under the rule of the majority, whether Sunni or Shiite. If the West therefore wishes to see democracy increasingly take root in the Arab and Islamic worlds, it

¹⁵ See Xan Smiley, Middle East and Africa editor, *The Economist*, 'Arab Federalism, Anyone? An Idea whose Time is yet to Come' November 15, 2007, from *The World in 2008* print edition [www.economist.com/node/10122329/print].

is incumbent that the emphasis be placed squarely on minority rights instead of on majority rule.

Taking Lebanon as an interesting example we see that although the country is officially a unitary state its composition and its constitution contain elements of a *de facto* federalism. Eighteen separate religious sects or denominations under the two broad headings of Christian and Muslim are recognized by the constitution, and so are unique laws covering the personal circumstances for each one of them. Lebanon has also enjoyed an advanced level of religious freedom both within and across its communal components, and even a peaceful coexistence among its various sects during the country's calm periods. Proposed improvements to Lebanon's complicated internal power-sharing formula have included a two-tier parliament with one chamber consisting of all the communities proportionally represented; a rotation among the leading sects of the three key posts of president, prime minister, and speaker of parliament; and the addition to the 18 recognized sectarian communities of Category 19, the non-denominational or secular option, which anyone above the age of 18 can freely opt to join. Despite the geographic segregation among the communities that the years of war exacerbated in Lebanon there remain considerable mixed areas, especially in and around Beirut and other cities. The type of federalism best suited for Lebanon would therefore not be based on geography, but would be constitutionally grounded and centered on the distinctive unit of the religious community.

However, federalism does present its own set of challenges. A heated debate has raged over the issue of a unified history book for all of Lebanon's high school students with proponents saying this would strengthen the concept of citizenship and help unify the country further, while opponents present the counter argument that any such single history textbook with one prescribed narrative covering controversial past events would be tantamount to totalitarian brainwashing through an 'official' version. At the same time, watering down the points of historical contention in any textbook would risk producing a sanitized and therefore useless version of the past. A compromise solution might be to have one textbook that features several varying accounts of the same disputed historical incidents presented side by side for the student to choose from. Attention to such details in the Lebanese context is a healthy sign and shows an acute awareness of the intricate pitfalls potentially facing minority communities as they attempt to coexist peacefully and interact with any prevailing majorities around them.

Federalism for a country like Iraq could also feature elements of power-sharing among the different communities, but there the Kurdish situation in the north will require careful consideration in order to balance Kurdish

aspirations of self-determination with Turkish and other neighboring sensitivities. Should matters deteriorate in Syria to the point of a Sunni–Alawite break, an Alawite enclave could emerge along the northern coastline to include the hills to the east. Such a fragmented Syria could spell disaster for the Alawite minority in the long-run if animosities with the Sunnis of the interior remain high, and the Christians of Syria would not be better off either under such fragmented conditions. A fascinating case is that of Sudan where for the first time in Islamic history a territory under Islamic rule has voted by referendum to secede and form the independent Republic of South Sudan composed of mainly Christians and animists. This isn't federalism or confederalism; it is complete separation and is unprecedented in the world of Islam except maybe for East Timor.

Side by side with federalist ideas have come calls to deconfessionalize the political system in composite societies like Lebanon's and to introduce wholesale the notion of secularism. While secularism is a product of the modern age in the West and comes not without its own set of problems as regards religious freedoms, it is basically alien to the Near and Middle East where ultimate identity for individuals and communities continues to be defined in religious or sectarian terms. Embarrassing and inconvenient as this fact about the East may be to the modern Western secular mind it remains a stark reality that one cannot ignore. To their credit, the Ottoman Turks who ruled the Middle Eastern region for some four centuries recognized the givens of religious and sectarian differentiation and decided to work with them rather than to obliterate them by force. The result was the Millet System that guaranteed a significant degree of local autonomy for each religious community in mixed areas of the Levant while maintaining umbrella Ottoman rule above everyone through a governor directly answerable to Istanbul. Accepting the reality of religious sects in the Middle East and their intimate intertwining with conceptions of communal identity and personal and group self-perceptions seems a more practical course to follow than the sudden parachuting of secularism onto a terrain still unready to receive it. Laying the foundations for a gradual evolution toward a greater acceptance of the secular alternative in a Muslim-dominated place like the Middle East appears the wiser and more viable approach. For Islam, where politics and religion are fused by doctrinal decree, to begin to swallow their separation is something that will require much time and painstaking efforts. Two things need to be learned by the Sunni majority in the Arab east: that inevitably they will have to share power in specific regional contexts and sometimes yield it altogether in favor of other groups; and that the burden of reassuring existentially anxious minority communities falls on their shoulders as the majority free of existential phobias.

Federalism carefully considered and creatively applied to the heterogeneous parts of the Arab region could serve as a roadmap toward the reshaping of these parts in ways more in harmony with their eclectic makeup and more faithful to the furtherance of human dignity within an accepted pluralism. On the other hand, secularism as a blanket panacea for the region's ills remains an illusion and might be useful only in very circumscribed contexts such as Category 19 in Lebanon. What then can sincerely concerned outsiders offer the region and its beleaguered minorities, moderates, and women by way of tangible help that addresses concrete and pressing needs? Real help coming from these external quarters would entail the following:

- Whenever possible and using all means available the spotlight of international publicity should be shone on any and all of the abuses of regimes and religious extremists throughout the Arab region. Nothing helps the weak and vulnerable more than getting the truth of their plight out to the rest of the world.
- Truly concerned outsiders can organize to put pressure on their own governments to in turn pressure local abusive authorities and hold them accountable.
- Related to the previous recommendation is the idea of reciprocity. Muslim immigrants arriving in the democratic West are assured beforehand of protection under the rule of law, respect for their basic human rights, a considerable amount of personal and group freedoms far exceeding what they had in their countries of origin, and much more. If in advance they didn't expect this to be the case, they wouldn't be heading in droves to the West as they have been for years. Western governments therefore must demand of the home countries of such Muslim immigrants a modicum of reciprocal treatment for those countries' native non-Muslim minorities and women of all religious affiliations.
- Thought must be given in universities, churches, research centers, independent think tanks, international and non-governmental organizations, civil society forums, intellectual circles, and wherever serious thinking and strategic planning normally occur to the viability of creating an international mechanism for the monitoring and protection of religious freedom. The challenges of implementing such a mechanism outside the West, and particularly in the Islamic world, are daunting. But the difficulties of the proposition are outweighed by the benefits that would accrue from getting it right.
- As much as possible a way needs to be found in which cozy arrangements with entities like Saudi Arabia for purposes of guarding the material interests of the West are not done at the expense of the welfare of the Middle

East's Christian and other minority communities. Some fidelity to the West's basic values ought to survive such interest-driven deals.

- Help the region avoid costly and potentially risky experiments such as the coming of Salafists to power 'in order to have them fail'.
- Beware false distinctions between so-called 'moderate' fundamentalists and 'radical' fundamentalists. Such misleading discourse was a favorite pastime among academic and think-tank types on the eve of 9/11, and now it seems to be making a regrettable comeback. All Salafists without distinction are bad news however one slices it.
- Re-evangelize the West, and the East will be helped. Remember Hilaire Belloc's words: '[Islamic] culture happens to have fallen back in material applications; there is no reason whatever why it should not learn its new lesson and become our equal in all those temporal things which now *alone* give us our superiority over it – whereas in *Faith* we have fallen inferior to it'.¹⁶
- Promote inter-Christian ecumenism, especially between Orthodox and Catholics. The year 2054, the thousandth anniversary of the Great Schism, is not far off, and a historic rapprochement between those two churches can only rebound positively upon Christians of the East.
- Forge direct links on the deepest levels with native Christian communities in the Middle East and help them not to emigrate by working closely with civil society institutions and credible NGOs to create for them economic opportunities at home.

These are only some suggested practical steps outside sympathizers can take to help indigenous Christian and other minority communities survive and even thrive in their ancestral lands where they want to remain.

7. Conclusion

What is unfolding all over the Arab world in 2011 is highly significant in the sense that the region will look quite different when all the upheavals have subsided. Arab youth are genuinely dissatisfied, and rightfully so. Change for the better is long overdue. The hazards of a transitional period such as this one are many and they could derail lots of the expectations for positive change; however, the risk simply has to be taken, and even in the worst of outcomes something good no matter how modest will endure.

¹⁶ See Hilaire Belloc, 'The Great and Enduring Heresy of Mohammed' (March 1936), republished in Gabriel Oussani and Hilaire Belloc, *Moslems: Their Beliefs, Practices, and Politics* (Ridgefield, CT: Roger A. McCaffrey Publishing, no year), p. 160.

The globalized world in which we live allows people who have not known a free, prosperous, and democratic existence to view on a regular basis how others elsewhere in the world are enjoying the fruits of such open societies. For example, through the medium of television – not to mention magazines, the internet, social media, Skype, Blackberries, iPhones, etc. – ordinary Syrians are watching Turkish soap operas dubbed in Arabic that show them how their own lives can be better like the ones in the Muslim-majority country next door. The same is true for all Arabs watching films that feature life in the West. It used to be said that the ubiquitous export and crass display of American popular culture has its downside, and it certainly does; however, in this context a much simpler process is silently underway: relentless exposure to a different, freer, and seemingly happier life. Over time this can only be infectious in a revolutionary way.

Not only are the old ideological slogans of the 20th century that placed the blame for all Arab misfortunes on others virtually absent from the protests; so, to a large extent, is the conspiratorial mindset that afflicted the earlier generation. Only the regimes under attack are the ones incessantly pointing the finger at the United States, Israel, Al-Jazeera, Al-Qaeda, European colonialists, etc., as the real causes behind the turmoil. But the youth are not listening. They know what they want, and they know who the real culprits are.

It would be a cruel misconception to conclude from the anxieties expressed by Middle Eastern Christians about the future that somehow they can only feel safe and secure under repressive regimes. They are certainly not allied to repression, nor are they dependent on it for their survival. Their legitimate fears stem from the ominous prospect that Islamist groups could reach power and create circumstances that would be detrimental to their well-being. Generally speaking, Christians are not taught to dissimulate or lead a double life as a survival tactic like other minorities often do. Their honesty and openness should not be held against them. It is true that Syria's Christians lived under better conditions before the Baath and the Assads seized power; this fact may have been obscured after four decades of Baathist rule, but it cannot be denied. Egypt too was more open and democratic during the early decades of the 20th century than it became under Nasser, Sadat, or Mubarak. Christians there led freer and more productive lives in the earlier Egyptian period, and they contributed significantly to what came to be called the Arab cultural renaissance. Henceforth, and with prospects of opportunistic Islamist resurgence occurring regardless of where the priorities of Arab youth really lie, these Christians need to be prepared for a possible rough ride ahead. They also need to guard against the tendency among some Europeans to welcome them as convenient 'spare parts' that would replace, or at least ease, the influx

into Europe of increasing numbers of Muslim immigrant workers. Displacing the Christians out of the Middle East is no solution for Europe's Muslim immigration problem. Creating conditions in the Middle East for a freer life and better economic and political prospects for all, Muslims and Christians alike, is the only way to proceed.