

Arab Christians: *Citizens Not Minorities*

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The reactions of Arab Muslim commentators to the last slew of hate crimes against Arab Christians in countries like Egypt and Iraq have been almost without exception beneath the gravity of the situation. Despite the variety of voices and opinions, most commentators fall back on the old and tired arguments of denial of responsibility and blame of others, usually external enemies either of the nation or of Islam.

Very few try to explain the crimes within the local context in which they were committed. Even fewer are those who see them in relation to their most direct and disquieting cause: the fading away of civil rights under the yoke of dictatorial regimes, military occupation, militant sectarianism, and disintegrating social fabrics.

Most outrageous is the reaction of the regimes' apologists. They contend that the regimes bear no responsibility for any aspect of the crimes committed under their usually watchful eyes and exacting security apparatus. Instead, the regimes are said to have been doing their best to protect the Christian minorities. They have even been granting these same minorities more privileges than before. All attempts to blame them either directly or indirectly for what is happening are therefore unwarranted.

The most ridiculous denial came from two high-level spokespersons for governments in these countries where atrocities take place. They both rejected out of hand any allusion to the fact that the government's excessive displays of Islamicity in its policies, media, and overall image may have played a role in the Islamic public's lukewarm condemnations of the crimes against the Christians if not in encouraging the criminals in the first place. For example, in Egypt, one of these high-level officials, usually careful in presenting his evidence, used the preposterous argument that the government is in fact partial to the Christians. As proof he pointed out that the government in the last ten years has "allowed" the Christians to build 150 new churches, as if building churches is a gift of the regime not a right of the citizens. He, moreover, chose to overlook the fact that 120000 new mosques were erected, with or without permits, during the same period in Egypt.

The second group is that of the conspiracy theorists. Most of them point to Israel as the real perpetrator of these crimes. Israel, they rightly reason, has set the stage for the rise of demands for religious states in the Arab world by insisting on its Jewishness as the basis of its statehood. Therefore, Israel is the premier potential beneficiary from any conflict that would split the Arabs into hostile factions so that its aberrant model of exclusive Jewish state can be seen as the norm in a region divided into ethnic, sectarian, or religious states. Since the hate crimes against Christians (and also those against Shi'ites, Sunnis, and Yazidis in Iraq) seem to lead in that direction, it follows that Israel is the most probable culprit, although of course there has been no material evidence of its involvement in the last few years' crimes.

Other conspiracy theorists propose Iran, the United States, or a sinister combination of the secret services of all three nations in addition to some Arab collaborators, which are supposed to execute the crimes either directly through secret agents or through naïve and angry young men who are manipulated by infiltrators. Of course the readiness of those recruited local angry men to kill their fellow citizens is never seen as an alarming phenomenon in and by itself. It is enough to lay the blame on the alleged foreign conspirators and cast the locals as misguided or brainwashed fringe groups.

The largest group of commentators, unsurprisingly, is that of the Islamic apologists. They all insist that "Islam" is innocent of the atrocities committed in its name by all the criminal organizations currently operating across the Islamic world from Morocco to Afghanistan that use Islamic names and Qur'anic quotations to justify their hideous acts. This argument is very problematic and hard to sustain, for who holds the legal right to represent "Islam" and deny other claimants such rights of representation? Why should the assertion by an Islamic faction that Islam is blameless be more correct than the contention of another faction that it is killing in the name of Islam? Who is the judge or the arbiter, and on what authority? These are old and unresolved questions. They go back to the beginning of Islam. Since the death of the Prophet in 632 C.E., Muslims in fact have never unanimously accepted one authority to represent them or to exclusively speak in their name or the name of Islam.

Historically, there have been many compelling examples that would support the claim that Christians have been collectively persecuted under Islamic rule, sometimes by angry mobs fired up by a real or perceived insult to Islam or Muslims, but at other times by the Islamic authorities themselves. Of course there have also been many examples of the opposite: Christian communities prospering under Islamic rule and living in harmony with their Muslim neighbors. The mere fact that Christian communities have survived for 1500 years under Islamic rule in contradistinction to the elimination of all Islamic communities from Medieval Europe is itself a proof of a higher level of tolerance of difference among medieval Islamic authorities than Western ones. But those were the medieval times, when regimes represented religions and acted in their names. Islamic regimes treated their non-Muslim subjects according to their understanding of Islamic law. They tolerated them, considered them defended minorities (*dhimmis*), taxed them higher than Muslim subjects (*jizya*), and occasionally exploited their weaknesses or took out their wrath against them. Christian European regimes, on the other hand, just eliminated or exiled their non-Christian subjects or converted them under duress.

Things, however, changed with the rise of modern states. Subjects became citizens and civil rights became universal law. Modern states too acquired a different mandate: they are supposed to represent the interests and respect and defend the civil rights of all of their citizens irrespective of their religion, sect,

or ethnicity. They have no business meddling in their religion. Nor do citizens have any rights to discriminate against other citizens because of their religion. Of course, in real life citizens discriminate against other citizens for a variety of reasons. But the state and the culture at large have a duty to punish and admonish all outward manifestations of such discrimination and to try to change the dominant discourse of discrimination through education.

This is the missing dimension in the Arab reactions to hate crimes today. Instead of debating whether this side or that is to blame or to exonerate, commentators should stress the direct link between the preponderance of hate crimes and the unpardonable failure of both modern Arab state and contemporary Arabic culture to uphold the principle of citizenship as the only measure to treat anyone, whether he/she belongs to a minority or a majority.