

The Decline of the Christian presence in the Near East: Causes and Consequences

The decline of the Christian presence in the Near East seems inexorable. It can be useful to study its causes and consequences in different countries and compare them with those specific to the Holy Land.

If we look at the history of the entire Levant region over the last century, we see that the decline of the Christian presence began with the decay of the Ottoman Empire and the genocide of the Armenians during the First World War. This event, which affected all Christians, was perpetrated in the name of a new national and religious identity promoted by the “Young Turks.” The crisis of the inter-ethnic and religious coexistence that had prevailed in the Ottoman Empire started with the new Turkey that emerged from the defeat in the First World War.

After the First World War, the victorious powers, mainly Great Britain and France, divided the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire through the League of Nations' "mandate system," creating states like Iraq, Transjordan (later Jordan), Palestine (under British mandate), Syria, and Lebanon (under French mandate). These new state entities, often with artificially drawn borders, did not always reflect local ethnic and religious realities, sowing the seeds of future conflicts. The fall of the Ottoman Empire was not just the end of a political entity but a watershed event that redrew the map and history of the Near East, giving rise to challenges and conflicts that persist today.

The continuous outflow of Christians from the Levant accelerated during the Lebanese Civil War, with the dissolution of Saddam Hussein's regime, then with the emergence of ISIS, and finally with the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. In the Holy Land, it is largely due to the consequences of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The causes of this phenomenon are therefore to be found generally in wars, persecution, and discrimination, and in the growing sense of instability caused by the fall of regimes that, in fact, protected the status quo for Christians. These events have destroyed a system of civil coexistence among different religious faiths that had lasted for centuries. In addition to violence, persecution, and conflicts, there are socioeconomic reasons and the hope of many Christians to achieve better living conditions in welcoming Western countries.

Why is this phenomenon a cause for concern? For a Christian, the answer is obvious: this is the land where our faith was born. But for others? For others, including moderate Muslims, the departure of Christians should be seen with concern because in a complex society like that of the Near East, Christians—though internally divided among different denominations and rites—are traditionally elements of dialogue and moderation, and the foundation of a coexistence that is not always easy to achieve.

But in each country, this phenomenon has had common elements and different nuances.

Lebanon

The decrease of the Christian presence in Lebanon is a complex and multifactorial phenomenon whose causes are rooted in the country's recent history and sociopolitical dynamics. Emigration waves began as early as the 19th century and intensified in the 20th with the end of the French mandate, but they peaked during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), which caused a deep fracture within the Christian community. The violence, devastation, and uncertainty about the future

pushed tens of thousands of Christians to seek refuge abroad. Added to this are recurring economic crises, corruption, and tensions due to the rise of radical Islamism.

Christians in Lebanon have also historically had a lower birth rate compared to the Muslim population, especially the Shia population. This, combined with emigration, has progressively altered the demographic balance that in the past saw Christians as a majority or on par with other communities. This has had political repercussions. The Lebanese constitution, which assigns the presidency to a Maronite Christian, was designed at a time when Christians constituted the majority. The demographic change has made this structure increasingly difficult to politically sustain, fueling tensions. Lebanon's involvement in regional conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Syrian Civil War, has had a direct impact on the country's security and stability, with devastating consequences for the Christian community, which has felt increasingly isolated and at risk. During the civil war, rivalries between different Christian factions weakened their cohesion and political influence, making the Christian community less capable of acting as a united bloc in the face of external challenges, with a profound impact on its own identity and the political stability of the country, which was based on a balance among the different religious faiths.

Iraq

The conflict in Iraq and the deposition of Saddam Hussein had a devastating impact on the Christian population. Saddam's regime, while not democratic, maintained a certain degree of stability that guaranteed "protection" for religious minorities, including Christians. With the fall of the regime, the situation drastically worsened, leading to the progressive marginalization and persecution of Christians. This resulted in a mass exodus: it is estimated that before 2003, there were over 1.5 million Christians. In the following years, their number was reduced to a few hundred thousand, with the concrete risk that their presence could completely disappear. They have become easy targets for extremist groups and sectarian militias, with attacks on churches, kidnappings, and murders. The arrival of ISIS further aggravated the situation, causing a mass flight from the Nineveh Plain, the heart of the Christian presence in Iraq.

The power vacuum allowed for the rise of extremist forces and destabilized the delicate inter-ethnic and inter-religious balance of the country, transforming the Christian population into a persecuted and largely uprooted minority.

Syria

Similarly, in Syria, the end of the Assad regime, which in some way was protective of Christians, has had a complex impact on the Christian population, which now faces an uncertain future. Despite the promises of the new government leaders, there have been numerous episodes of sectarian violence, attacks, and religiously motivated discrimination, which have pushed an ever-increasing number of Christians to leave the country. The Christian population, which before the conflict amounted to about two million, has been drastically reduced. The uncertainty has not completely extinguished a certain cautious optimism, and in some cities, such as Aleppo, there are signs of a slow recovery, and Christians are noted for their commitment to promoting dialogue among the different factions by reopening churches, schools, and hospitals.

Jordan

Although the country is considered one of the most tolerant in the region towards Christians, who in Jordan enjoy a certain religious freedom and a relatively privileged position in the social and economic fabric, their percentage of the total population has drastically decreased over time. In the 1950s, Christians constituted almost 30% of the population. Today, estimates vary, but they are between 2.8% and 6%. The decline is mainly attributable to a strong Muslim immigration that has decreased the Christian percentage, but also to strong waves of emigration and to certain isolated but frequent forms of discrimination, especially against Christians converted from Islam, or in cases of mixed marriages, which are rooted in the country's tribal system. Compared to other countries in the Near East, Jordan has a better situation for Christians, but their numerical decline is a fact.

Palestine

Finally, regarding Palestine, the decline of the Christian presence is due to a multiplicity of co-causes, the first of which can be traced back to the situation of conflict, violence, and political instability. In addition to the direct victims of the conflict in Gaza, whether from armed violence, hunger, or disease, we must add the continuous tensions and abuses in the West Bank, which have created a climate of insecurity that has pushed many Christians, who had the possibility, to emigrate in search of a better life. The attacks and violence against them by extremist groups have been growing with the intensification of the conflict. The occupation of territories, expropriations by settlers, and restrictions on freedom of movement imposed by the Israeli authorities (such as the construction of the separation wall) have made daily life extremely difficult for Palestinian Christians, limiting access to work, education, and even to their own families. The demolitions of Palestinian homes and the vandalization of the water systems of entire villages are the result of a clear plan for the removal of Palestinians from the territory and the creation of spaces for Israeli settler communities. The practice of self-demolition of homes, imposed by the colonizers, adds a psychological trauma to the material loss of the home and the separation from one's roots, since entire families must knock down their own homes to avoid fines or arrest. The tolerance of the Israeli judiciary towards verified violence committed by settlers against the Palestinian population and the lack of prospects for an end or a limit to this situation have generated a profound sense of discouragement, especially among young Christians, who feel increasingly "unwanted" in the land of their ancestors and seek opportunities elsewhere. Psychological warfare is an integral part of this strategy aimed at freeing up space for Israeli settlements and generates a significant increase in hospital admissions for victims of mental violence.

In addition to the violence in Gaza and the expansion of settlers in the West Bank, a significant factor is the economic crisis for a large part of the Christian population in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, which depends on tourism and hospitality activities linked to pilgrimages. The war, following the pandemic crisis, has accentuated the dramatic collapse of the presence of pilgrims, leaving thousands of people without sources of income. Many work permits for Palestinians have been revoked by the Israeli authorities. Many Christian-Palestinian workers have been replaced by immigrants from other parts of the world.

Not least is the reason to be found in direct attacks on freedom of worship, acts of violence and discrimination against people, and the desecration of churches, religious symbols, and cemeteries by extremist elements, particularly from ultra-Orthodox Judaism, which have contributed to creating a constant threat for Christians.

In a general sense, it can be stated that with the decline of the Christian presence, the Near East risks increasing its instability, especially since no state can be considered self-contained but lives in a reality of close interconnection. The land of Jesus, in particular, where our faith was born, has one more reason to fear this phenomenon and seek to stop it. The absence of a Christian presence would risk reducing the places of the preaching and passion of Our Lord to simple archaeological or tourist sites. But in a broader sense, its isolation and marginalization by religious fundamentalism, both Islamic and Jewish, deprive the entire region of a source of social and ultimately also political balance.

The Christian community therefore looks to the Order of the Holy Sepulchre as an indispensable support. We must respond responsibly to the danger, within the framework of the mission assigned to us by the Holy Father to support the Christian presence in the Holy Land. We must become aware of this phenomenon and study effective forms of opposition. In this context, the appeal of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem and Grand Prior of the Order, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, to make every effort in the educational formation of the new generations and to offer them dignified job opportunities appears more than justified: only with this support, in addition to our prayer, will this small but essential minority of faithful be able to mature the strength and self-esteem necessary to understand the meaning of their presence as Christians in these Holy Places. This entails an ever-stronger commitment on the part of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre alongside the Patriarch, in his formative, educational, and social assistance role, reviewing if necessary the forms of its humanitarian support and emergency management.

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