EUROPE, ISLAM AND THE MODERN *DHIMMIS*[1]

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Abstract:
This article considers the troublesome fate that many Middle Eastern Christian communities faced once the terrorist organization known as the *Islamic State* achieved its goal of declaring an Islamic Caliphate. In our opinion, destroying the millennia old Christian communities of Syria and Iraq does not only amount to an incommensurable human tragedy, but also to a profound and terrible loss in terms of the cultural heritage that these communities were preserving. For *Christianity*, a term rarely used as most Christian countries both Western and Eastern are now secular and hardly in touch with their religious identity, these events amount to an epochal change. What is even more peculiar is that the last remnants of Christian Churches in the Middle East are wiped out consecutively with the reaffirmation of old Islamic institutions devised exactly to protect Christian communities. Clearly, though argued differently by their fundamentalist supporters, the old Islamic Empires have nothing in common with new Caliphate rising now on the ruins of Middle Eastern national states.

Christianity in the Islamic ecumene

For many observers the unbelievable collage of violent images streaming out of the Middle East, once the Arab Spring failed to fulfill its democratic impulse, could hardly be toppled. Unfortunately, this perception lasted only until an offshoot of *al-Qaeda* and of its Syrian branch, *Jabhat al-Nusra*, branding itself as the *Islamic State*(IS), unleashed its terrifying campaign across the Middle East. Following the demise of authoritarian regimes and the high hopes for successful democratic transition, such developments testify again to the chronic instability of the region. Nevertheless the recent revolutionary events started by the *Tunisian Jasmine Revolution* baffled many experts and scholars that evaluated them, due to the fact that they were articulated around democratic issues. For societies that never really got acquainted with democratic practices and values as such, to place so much weight firstly on personal freedom and democratic rights and secondly on economic security seemed as no less than a fundamental shift.

If they continued previous democratization waves was indeed a matter of debate (see Huntington 1991: 12-34), but lacking Islamic/Islamist overtones in articulating demands was completely unexpected. Furthermore, as the Egyptian experience has proved, Muslims and Christians would show an incredible level of unity when confronted by the repressive state apparatus of President Hosni Mubarak, which again added to the novelty of the phenomenon. Christian protestors shielded Muslims praying from interfering regime forces, and like all other groups participating in the revolts paid a heavy price. To understand the importance of this attitude we must consider the numerous difficulties and discriminations, both legal economic and social, that Egyptian Copts suffered in the last decades since the 1952 Free Officer's Revolution. Though advertising socialist principles and ideology, both Gamal Abdel Nasser as well as his confidant and colleague in the Free Officers movement, Anwar El-Sadat, supported Islamization policies during their presidencies. The social influence of the Coptic minority was reduced not only through nationalization that confiscated land and industrial assets, but also through their constant exclusion from holding important positions in administration and education(McDermott 2013: 185-195;). The Egyptian case is far from the exception in the region, though important because the country harbors the largest Christian community of the Middle East.

The history of the old Christian communities of the Middle Eastern lands is one complicated not only by their complex religious identity, but also by their continuous existence and survival in an Islamic context. While still a significant component of the various Islamic Empires, their place and safety was indeed guaranteed by the juridical provisions of Islamic Law (*Shari'a*). This protection, though hardly fixed and complete as it required submission to the Islamic power of the day, was supplement in the colonial period by European powers searching for allies in the region. Religion was again the cornerstone of Western involvement as it facilitated access for indigenous Christian groups to education through the medium of a vast network of missionary schooling systems. In turn accessible Western style education translated into a significant cultural and economic advantage, one that would elevate the status of Christians to a new social standing (Lewis 1993: 143-145). Ultimately, such associations and patronage came at very high cost, as it made them an easy target for Islamist discourse and movements, once the colonial powers were losing their grip on the Middle East.

In this respect, the Hamidian era massacres directed against Assyrians and Armenians of the Ottoman Empire are hardly singular cases of violence against Christian communities. But they are important because they were ultimately the result of not only Western encroachment on Muslim lands, but also of an assertive fundamentalist Islamic ideology known as *Pan-Islamism*. Initiated by the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909) with the tremendous help of Islamic intellectuals like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, this ideology offered a different path than the European inspired reform programs initiated by the early 19th century sultans. Focusing on the political capital harnessed by advancing religious unity throughout the Muslim world, Abdul Hamid also invested all his empire's resources in the revival of Islamic symbols of political power namely the *Caliphate*. For many at the time the "the chief practical use of his claim to the position of Khalif" was legitimizing "anti-Christian fanaticism" (Buxton 1909: 24; Wilson 1916: 59). Still, reasserting images and symbols of past Muslim political preeminence in a time characterized by Western advance and military pressure was indeed a lucrative way of coagulating support around the embattled Empire, but it also responded to a deep need expressed by Muslim societies. Pan-Islamism was appealing because it restored the rights of the Muslims in the Empire by making void the Western inspired Imperial Rescripts of 1839, 1856 and 1869 as well as the Constitutional Act(*Kanûn-u Esâsî*) of 1876, which tried to establish an "Ottoman nation"(*Osmanli Milleti*) and thus juridical equality among all subjects of the empire. The famous contemporary historian and politician Cevdet Paşa (1822-1895) described the general feeling in the Empire after the proclamation of the 1856 *Hatt-i Hümâyun,* also part of the Treaty of Paris of 1856, in the following words: "Today we lost our sacred national rights which our ancestors gained with their blood. While the Islamic nation used to be the ruling nation, it is now bereft of this sacred right. This is a day of tears and mourning for the Moslem brethren" (Mardin 2000: 18; Mehmed 1976: 351-355).

Defensive modernization programs (Young 1982: 83-92), like the one adopted by the predecessors Sultan Abdul Hamid did not only failed to stop Western advance but also fueled Islamist ideologies. In the case of Christian, Jewish and other religious communities it signaled the end of the old *Pax Ottomana*, in which peace and a measure of religious tolerance was ensured for as long as the Muslim *millet* enjoyed political prominence. This is probably the reason why when nationalist movements took hold of the Middle East at the beginning of the 20th century, Christians were among

their most ardent members. For many of them the period of massacres and discriminations that characterized the dissipation of Ottoman power in North Africa and the Fertile Crescent could only be stopped by adhering to imported European secular ideologies. Nationalism in this instance was extremely appealing, because it relegated religion to the confines of a now-to-be-defined national cultural heritage. It was certainly possible to hope that Christians could become full citizens in a society built not on religious demarcations, but on modern principles. The main challenge for many resided thus in finding a place for a religious (and sometimes ethnic) community, one that would not interfere with the new political arena. For a while at least, national states ruled by authoritarian regimes proved a safe haven for Christian communities and their involvement next to secular leaders can hardly be missed.

Islam, Europe and the memory *dhimmis*

Long before being forced to adopt Western ways in order to survive, the Muslim empires were for centuries the living image of worldly political success. Beginning with the 7th century, Islam, and the extraordinary civilization that arose as a direct result of its incredible military and spiritual success found few insurmountable boundaries in spreading its message across an unprecedented geographical area. Indeed, by the end of the 16th century, seen from outside it was hard to challenge the almost universal quality of the Islamic civilization (Hodgson 1993: 97). On their side, the armies of Islam had an undeniable advantage against any foe, for they were charged with spreading throughout the known world the final version of God's revelation to humanity. In doing so, the Arab armies living in their conquest the *Djazīrad al-`Arab* encountered many other forms of prophecy, some valid but distorted and now superseded - like the Jewish and the Christian versions, others fundamentally lacking the monotheistic credential and protection the former Abrahamic religions were supposed to enjoy from now on.

Paradoxically the very first resistance Muslim armies encountered came from Arab tribal elements that have already infiltrated the Syro-Mesopotamian Byzantine border and converted to Christianity. Establishing temporary kingdoms they acted as a buffer zone between the empire and the lawless desert. The Ghassanids in particular, settled on the lands south of Damascus, stand out through their early conversion to the Monophysite branch of Christianity before immigrating to the North of the Peninsula. Though their role as a Byzantine client kingdom came to an end

with the defeat of Emperor's Heraclius on the Yarmuk river in 636 by the troops of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattāb(634-644**)**, their strong adherence to the Christian faith did not. As today's surviving Christian communities of the Middle East prove, this process of preserving the faith took place in many other cases where the Byzantium Empire lost territory to Islam (Soudel, Sourdel-Thomine 1975: 28-48; Hitti 2008: 3-32; 33-70). For Christians though, for a while, there was always the choice of migrating towards the lands still under the political authority of the Christian Emperor of Constantinople. This option was not available for the Persians, once Sassanid armies were defeated at Qadisiyya, on the Western bank of the Euphrates. The old rival of the Byzantines will now become fully integrated in the Islamic nascent world, but the memory of the ancient Persian empire will never be lost on the intricacies of Iranian identity (Lewis 2000: 55-61).

In 1453 when Sultan Mehmet II conquered Constantinople, Europe, the last remaining stronghold of *Christianity*, seemed the next logical step of Muslim conquest. As the Eastern part of the continent was being slowly integrated into the empire, the full conquest of Western Europe was considered as no more than a question of time. Already in 846 A.D. an Arab naval expedition managed to ransack Ostia, reaching the walls of the cherished imperial capital and almost fulfilling one famous hadith which granted believers conquest over Rome. When Constantinople fell, it defined almost a millennium of unchecked advance and Islamic military success which in turn fostered an unshaken confidence in the final advance of the Islamic message. It was indeed an immense feat for a civilization which saw its humble beginning in the exile of an austere and small religious community from the Arabian city of Mecca at the beginning of the Islamic era. As historian Bernard Lewis assures us, for every Muslim of the day, "Islam itself was indeed coterminous with civilization, and beyond its borders there were only barbarians and infidels." This confidence, one that could be easily translated into a European setting, was far from misplaced when we concede that Islam "created a world civilization, polyethnic, multiracial, international, one might even say intercontinental."(Lewis 2002: 3-6).

Nevertheless Europe never stood idle in front of this Muslim "repeated aggression" and up to the dawn of the modern age, Islam actually can be considered to have acted as a "violent midwife" to the nascent Western European civilization (Cardini 1999: 3). One reason stands in the fact that

offering a coordinated military response proved beyond the powers of Christian rulers. Though spiritually defining themselves as part of *Christendom,* European monarchs made numerous attempts at bridging the religious gap that stood between them and the Muslim powers of the day for the sake of military or strategic gains. On the other hand, when conditions were auspicious European knights and kings would full heartedly attempt at bringing the Middle Eastern lands back into the Christian fold. The medieval Crusades, though rightfully branded by David Hume as"…the most signal and most durable movement of human folly that has yet appeared in any age or nation" remain fundamental for assertive Christian spirit of the Middle Ages (cited in Nigel 2006: 7-10). Regardless, two centuries of Frankish (*Christian*) rule in Syria and Palestine was unable to unsettle the Islamic character and coherence of the Middle East, but had a tremendous impact on European identity. It would also familiarize the Christians with Islam and its civilization to an unprecedented level, while also clarifying countless misconceptions that clouded this relationship (Tyerman 2004). During the Renaissance, equally mixed feelings of fear, inferiority and also true admiration towards the Islamic world triggered the European inquisitive humanistic interest to focus on the philological study of Arabic sources. Here, the religious interest is clear as many Christian sources were written in Middle Eastern languages like Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic but there is also a more deep interest for the great works of antiquity that have survived only through their Muslim custodians (Lewis 1993: 12-13; 101; 14). Beginning with the 16th century the unstoppable wave of Muslim conquest was beginning to fade. Surely Muslim armies were still victorious and hardly challenged but they were unable to advance in the heart of Western Europe. This did not mean that Europe did not fear Islam anymore as French historian J. Delumeau proves in his exceptional work *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of the Western Guilt Culture*. He shows that behind the great achievements of the Renaissance, of discovering the New World, Europe still remains gripped by a tremendous fear instilled by the Islamic alterity. Victories like Lepanto(1571) or the successful defense of Vienne in 1529 in front of Suleiman the Magnificent, and later could offer little comfort for societies that were being constantly engaged in a religious discourse that institutionalized the fear of the *Turk* (Delumeau 1990). But rare victories against the Muslim world would soon become the norm once the Muslim armies would crumble for the second time in 1683 in front of the Hapsburg's capital. From now on, Islam will find itself on the defensive, first in Central Europe and then slowly throughout its global dominion.

Until that unfavorable time, there remains the question of the complex civilization that Islam built and supported. First and foremost in the lands stretching from the Himalayans to the Atlantic Ocean, Arabic, the medium of Revelation par excellence, was ensured a sacrosanct status. Unlike the already exhausted Latin or Greek of premodern Christendom, the language of the Prophet was to become in the Islamic world the lingua franca of government and commerce, science and philosophy and above all, religion and law. Supervising the complex Islamic legal system, compiled in the Shari'a, were the autonomous groups(classes) of religious scholars(teachers) and doctors of law, known as the *ulama*. Their knowledge of Islamic law ensured that their advice and decisions in matters pertaining from family law to commercial life gave Islamic societies an incredible level of coherence. Architecture played again an increasingly unifying role as the minaret of the mosque has universally adorned every Muslim town, once the Umayyad dynasty adopted them in Syria. Muslim towns, organized in self-sufficient, almost autonomous neighborhoods, supported influent *Sufi* brotherhoods(*tariqa*) centered on their holy shrines, offering a popular mystic debouche to the legalist, strict requirements of orthodox Islamic theology. The pious foundations(*waqf*) support the economic needs of Islamic learning institutions (*madrasahs*) or sometimes the needs of the poorer classes. The great commercial roads of Antiquity, inherited by Islam are successfully maintained and fueled by its merchants, artisan guilds and bazaars. Thus, a religion whose Prophet was he himself a merchant and whose metanarrative is punctuated by commercial allegories was governing at the end of the 16th century the biggest commercial system the world has ever known. The human and cultural mobility required by the maintenance of the great commercial routes contributed, without question, to the great level of coherence of Islamic civilization, but it was by far not the most significant. Instead the fifth pillar of the Islamic belief system, the annual Hajj, or pilgrimage, as sole "concession to traditional ritual" that Islam makes, constituted through the impressive human migration that it requires a perpetual reaffirmation of Islam's consciousness and universal collective identity(Ansary 2009: 195-198; Gibb 1962: 64-70; Lapidus 1975: 364; Lewis 1990: 79-87).

In this complex and imposing social structure construed on a laborious network of interconnected legal schools, theological sects mirrored by a myriad of communal and religious associations and allegiances, Christians that did not renounced their faith would still find a place for themselves. Living in the *dār al-islām*, the land where Islamic law and political power

were paramount did not implicitly brought the rights and advantages that Muslims members of the *umma* enjoyed. For them personal security, property rights and revenues derived from war booty were ensured both by their membership in the Islamic community and also through their political contract with the Caliph. Still, Christians were seldom considered enemies unlike their brothers living outside Islamic rule, grouped into what was usually refer to as *dār al-kufr*(*abode of unbelief*) or *dār al-ḥarb*(*abode of war*). For those that acknowledged Muslim rule, both Christians and Jews the juridical dispensations of Shari'a confirmed their status as *dhimmis*. The term, defined in early Islamic period as including mostly Christians and Jews because they belonged to the select group of *ahl al-kitāb*, meaning "people of the book", recognized that both religious groups have received a valid yet now corrupted divine revelation. In the Islamic society they enjoyed an intermediary juridical status, which placed them between infidels and Muslims. Still they were closer to infidels because although practicing a corrupt monotheism they failed to recognize that the Prophet Muhammad received a new revelation. As long as they did not question Islam's supremacy by abstaining from publicly supporting and advancing their faith and paid a special tax called *jizyah* , the practice of their religion and the managing of their communal affairs were left to themselves (Black 2011: 13; Crone 2005: 358-359; Lewis 1991: 66-67; Lewis 2010; Pipes 2003).

The juridical classification of *dhimmis* allowed for the manifestation of a rare case of religious tolerance in a time marked by extreme forms of violence. Because the Quranic injunctions require that there should be "no compulsion in religion"(Quran 2:256) extreme acts against groups who refused to convert were rare. One of the common misconceptions in Europe and elsewhere was that Islam was spread by sword and forced on local Christian populations. Clearly this was not the case, as it was not the case regarding Islam's supposed simplicity. Having its origins in the cosmopolitan merchant cities of Western Arabia for later to have its centers of power transferred to the sophisticated urban centers of Levant and Fertile Crescent in the Islam always maintain a certain bourgeois sophistication and tolerance (Brown 2000: 27-28). Regarding the Christians it is clear that the Quran is moreover sympathetic on them a fact which has to be attributed to the fact that they did not take part in the Medinian fights for power like the Jewish tribes (Djaït 1985: 9-10). Still at times, either hardship or political turmoil would cast a shadow on the protection offered to Christian communities. Only twenty years after the beginning of the *hijra* Caliph Umar expelled Christians and Jews from the territory of Hejaz (Lewis 2010: 5). Later on, during the Abbasid period dress regulation were

imposed on Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians which involved wearing yellow headgear and other accessories so as to set them apart from the mass of believers. Still such manifestation of violence and repression were rare compared with the violence unleashed on these communities in more modern, enlightened times.

The challenge of the modern world

Out of all the civilizations that during the 19th century became the focus of expansive European colonial policies, none posed more challenges than the one built upon the Islamic revelation. Impressive as their historical record was, the Ottoman, the Mughal or the Iranian Qajar Empires were all brought to their knees by the modern, more technologically advanced colonial powers of Western Europe. Indeed, they were no match for an expanding industrious Europe, determined to carve out its own dominion in the Muslim lands. The Russians advance in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe, the Dutch conquest of the Indonesian Archipelago, the British dismantling the Mughal Empire after their victory at Plassey and their 1882 occupation of Egypt, the French and later the Italians establishing colonies in North Africa, these were all powerful signs of decline for Muslims everywhere. At their height European colonial empires incorporated more Muslims subjects than the most powerfull Muslim rulers of the day. Spiritually this translated into a great opportunity for Islam and its religious authorities as the European administrators found this to be the only way in wich Muslim societies could be successfully governed. The importance given to religious authorities was thought to immediatelly translate into enhanced "social discipline and control" (Motadel 2014: 1-34). Clearly this is reminescent of the times when Napolen, having already destroyed the Mamluk power, was still not in control of Egypt as he lacked the support of religious authorities. When the situation turned critical in Octomber 1798, as a result of a planned census, the people of Cairo will stage their opposition around their spiritual leaders. Despite his sympathetic proclamations towars Islam, Napoleon Bonaparte will violently suppress the revolt and in the course of the fighting his cavalry will plunder one of the most repected centres for learning in the Muslim world, the Azhar University (Pagden 2008: 390). But even when colonial adminstrators were perfecting their techniques in administrating indigenous colonies, the issue of Christian missionarism was always limitated to the already existing Christian communities. Fearing sectarian conflicts and having already integrated Islamic institutions in the

framework of Imperial rule, European governenrs regarded religios prezelytim as harmfull to political stability. This policy of neutrality, even mild support towards Islam, made missionaries to blame the colonial political establishment as focused exclusivelly on trade, „the only Gospel which most Englishmen care now to preach" (Smith 1874: 51).

In the case of the Ottoman Empire, the last remaining politically relevant Muslim power apart from the more feeble Qajar Empire, scholars aiming at identifying a temporal starting point of decline found it difficult to reach a unified consensus. To some extent, minding the exceptional periods of reforms and stability inaugurated in the 17th century by the dynastic Köprülü family of Viziers, environmental changes and growing demographic pressures brought new challenges to every agrarian empires during the 16th and 17th centuries (Fukuyama 2012: 214-225; Mantran 2001: 206-209). Thus many have focused either on the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, or on the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca signed with the Romanovs. The treaty was a huge diplomatic accomplishment for Russia, Empress Catherine II describing it as a triumph 'the like of which Russia has never had before.' Though territorial gains were not to be discarded the Russian managed to extract from the Ottomans via their diplomatic ingenuity the right of intervention in the affairs of the Empire when the interest of orthodox Christians were being threatened (Lewis 2000: 278-281). This concession fuelled the desires of other European powers to become protectors of religious minorities in the Empire, thus effectively giving them a valid and easily justifiable reason for intervention.

On the other hand, in some parts of the Ottoman Empire, specifically those that have reasserted a measure of independence in respect to the central power, like the Egypt of the modernizer autocrat Muhammad `Ali, Christians were again becoming involved in state policies. In 1832 his son Ibrahim will manage to bring Syria under Egyptian influence transferring here many of the reforms that were already changing Egypt. Though the Egyptian hold on Syria lasted only until 1840, an impressive number of reforms were being introduced in this period. The most contested and one which ultimately prompted the revolt of the Muslim population was the one which granted fiscal equality to the Christian minority. Nevertheless, despite its temporary character, the Egyptian occupation of Syria played a formidable role in the birth of modern Arabic coupled with the political aspiration later to be found in the germs of Arab nationalism. The Arabic literary renaissance which takes place here was possible not only because of the educational system put in place by Ibrahim in his short Syrian

adventure, but most notably due to the Christian heritage of the region. Structured around old loyalties, the Arab society of the Levant still manifested many particularities that were later to become the cornerstone of Arab cultural and social revival. United by language and centuries of mostly peaceful coexistence the traditions of the local populations were similar despite their segregated religious affiliation. When the tolerance of the Egyptian regime towards Western Christian missions and missionaries became apparent, a situation quickly grasped by both France and United States, the Christian element of the region was transformed into the medium through which the Arab *al-Nahda*(*awakening*) could begin (Antonius 1955: 24-37; Commins 2004: 134-135).

The modern rebirth of the Arab language which in turn supported all major cultural and social changes in the region was greatly helped by an American Presbyterian missionary under the name of Eli Smith. A member of the *American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*, Smith learned Arabic and, taking advantage of Ibrahim's tolerance in Syria, he will establish after 1834 a typography in Beirut dedicated to printing books in Arabic (Leavy 1993: 7-22). Greatly helped by the two local scholars Butrus Bustani and Nasif Yazegi he will translate the Bible into Arabic. They will also play a fundamental role in developing and printing the first school manuals for the local Christian educational system which in 1860 already numbered 33 schools. Only six years later the Syrian Protestant College of Beirut will open its doors followed shortly in 1875 by Saint Joseph's University under Jesuit patronage. Many other learning organizations will folK8low their example but what's even more surprising is that the locally supported Syrian Scientific Society will denounce the missionary element and will establish itself as a cross-religious organization. It will be here in this learning environment that a new modern Arabic culture will evolve. But as today the period will be marked by massacres and tribulations of which the Christian minority will not be spared. The specific social structures and medieval landowning arrangements of Syria and Lebanon will increasingly come under threat by the reforms of the Ottoman *Tanzimat*, and in 1860 will culminate with the massacre of the Christians in Damascus (Antonius 1955: 44-53).

Having such a huge influence in accepting and transmitting the initial impulses for modernization, Christian communities always remained conscious of their fragile position outside the relative protection ensured by the now defunct Muslim Empires. They were not *dhimmis* anymore, though

could hardly be accepted as citizens by the new national state in which they were now living. That is in the modern, fully developed sense of the term and not a juridical surrogate that would maintain or preserve their previous state of submission. Certainly, this is a credible reason why the ideologues of Arab nationalism will focus on theorizing Islam as a cultural heritage, using the much publicized catchphrase, religion is for God and the homeland is for everybody. The first decades of the 20th century witnessed an ambiguous relationship between Arab nationalism and Islam, which despite its Christian influences never really lost its spiritual Islamic legacy (Massoulié 2003: 38-39). Arab Christians in particular will be easily drawn to the promise of a nationalism that eluded religious differences. Their involvement in the Arab national movement, as illustrated by Michel Aflaq, the chief ideologue of socialist *Baath* party, is prompted by the possibility of occupying a position of equality in a community in which language and culture offered the most important credentials (Lewis, 1993: 143-144; Brown 2000: 119-121). And for while at least, this proved fairly accurate as many progressive political leaders were ready to embrace such views. In Egypt the *Wafd* party of Sa`ad Zaghul will give a new standard of religious tolerance, integrating in its first cabinet members of both the Christian and Jewish minorities. For the Lebanese philosopher and politician Antoun Saadeh the founder of the *Syrian Social Nationalist Party*, the Syrian nation was the result of a long historical genesis circumscribed to a specific geographical thus owing less to language and religion. This perception, hard to maintain outside the hardline followers of his party, will be tested to its limits by the religious and ethnical complexity of the region. Still relevant in the region, even after the First World War, European mandate powers sought new ways to improve their position by playing on the identitarian sensibilities of Middle Eastern minorities. Supported by them the Copts will focus on their Pharaonic ancestry while Nestorians were assured of their Assyrian heritage as were the Lebanese Maronites of their Phoenician roots (Massoulié 2003: 40-47).

Conclusions

It is somehow ironic that ISIS or Islamic State would try to revive the old institutions of the golden Islamic age, and do this exactly in the same area in which the first signs of modernity were recorded in the Arab world. It is also unconceivable that after almost two centuries of attempts at integrating modernity into an Islamic context such medieval expressions of violence are still possible. In 1990 an article written by Bernard Lewis entitled *The Roots of Muslim Rage*, described the same "surge of hatred" or

complete "rejection of Western civilization [...] and the principles and values that it practices and professes" that we find today reaching a paroxysmal level with ISIS. But despite its attempts at recruiting Westerners for terrorist missions, the terrorist organization focuses on those at hand, meaning mainly religious minorities or secular intellectuals and activists. Destroying archeological artefacts of ancient civilizations, enslaving Yezidis, blowing up shrines or churches or offering *dhimmi* status to the Christians ready to pay the *jizyah* tax falls into this pattern of erasing the recent history of the region in hopes of establishing an Islamist utopia. For the Christian communities of the Middle East this might prove to be the final chapter of their existence in a land that has harbored Christianity from its very beginnings. What is even more appalling is that Christians in Egypt have been subjected to an unprecedented wave of attacks after the ousting by the military of the Muslim Brotherhood's first elected president, Mohamed Morsi. Unfortunately, if the current state of political uncertainty and violence continues across the Middle East the fate of the Christian communities is uncertain to say the least. Their disappearance will indeed grant fundamentalists their long awaited wish but it will not bring back the days of conquest or solve any of the complex issues that many of the societies in the region face. If anything it will put an end to an enduring chapter in the religious history of the Middle East and will add another layer of mistrust to an already burdened relationship between Islam and Christianity.

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