

Arab Spring, Christian Fall? – The situation of Christian minorities in the Middle East after the Arab Spring

Lt. Colonel János Besenyő,
Geoinformation Service of the Hungarian Defence Forces and Roland Gömöri,
University of Szeged
June 2013

Introduction

The phenomenon of the “Arab Spring” has intrigued the analysts of the topic since its sudden upsurge in 2011, who, until now, have examined more and more aspects of this revolutionary wave that has caught us by surprise.

One of the most neglected of these aspects is the issue of the Christians living in Arab countries. When discussing the Arab world, we tend to focus instantly on the Muslim communities, while significant Christian minorities can be found in several Arab countries.

Christianity has been an important part of the Middle Eastern culture far before the appearance of the Arabic (Muslim), and then the European colonizers.¹ The early Christian religion has defined the Middle East of the Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Besides the fact that the population of these territories was mainly Christian before the arrival of the Arabic conquerors, the seat of three of the five patriarchates of early Christianity could be located in the region: one in Antioch² (the modern city of Antakya in Turkey), one in Alexandria (in Egypt), and one in Jerusalem (in Israel). The situation of the local communities was changed radically by the Arab conquests of the 7th century, but the position of local Christians deteriorated truly only after the Crusades. By now they have become minorities in every current Middle Eastern country, compared to the basically Muslim population.

The number of Christians does in fact dwindle: only narrowly 1 percent of the 2.2 billion Christians of the world lives today in the Middle East and in North Africa.³ In the last century a major change occurred: Christians are only 4 percent of the region’s population, compared to 20 percent a century ago, thus they can be declared the world’s smallest regional Christian minority. For comparison: 93 percent of the population of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) is Muslim, and 1.6 percent is Jewish.⁴

Of the Middle Eastern Christians, the Coptic community of Egypt and the Syrian Christians assume the most significant role, but the numbers of these groups have shown a major drop due to local events (persecution of Christians, migration). Lebanon, while it is not

¹ Amira El Ahl, Daniel Steinvorth, Volkhard Windfuhr and Bernhard Zand: Fighting for their Survival: A Christian Exodus from the Arab World, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/fighting-for-their-survival-a-christian-exodus-from-the-arab-world-a-457002.html> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

² In the last centuries the patriarch of Antioch had his seat at the Syrian city of Damascus, instead of the city of Antakya, where only a minimal population of Christians lived. This has been changed by the civil war of the last years. Source: The Economist. 2012. Christians in the Middle East. A new spokesman.” <http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2012/12/christians-middle-east> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

³ Pew Research Center: The Global Religious Landscape, http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/globalReligion-full.pdf (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

⁴ Raymond Ibrahim: “Muslim Persecution of Christians: January, 2013.” Gatestone Institute. 2013. <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3641/muslim-persecution-of-christians-january-2013> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

affected by the affairs of the Arab Spring, must be highlighted: a continuously decreasing, but still outstanding proportion of the population is comprised of different Christian religious groups that hold significant political positions, uniquely amongst the Christian minorities of the Arab countries. Attention should also be paid to the communities living on the territory of Israel, Jordan and Iraq.

In the first part of the paper, we will review the situation of the Christian groups in Middle Eastern countries before the Arab Spring. The second part will discuss the major changes caused by the Arab Spring amongst the Christian minorities. Finally, the possibilities implied by the emigration of Arab Christians will be outlined.

The major Christian communities of the Middle East

Egypt: the Copts

The Coptic Church in Egypt is one of the most defining Christian communities in the Middle East, although their numbers are gradually decreasing in the country since the events of the “Arab Spring”. The Coptic Christians – who amount to nearly 10 percent of the Egyptian population – think of themselves as the descendants of the ancient Egyptians and the Muslim Arabs arriving in the 7th century are considered occupiers.⁵ The Coptic Church has seceded from the then united Christian Church due to a theological dispute, but on most matters its views are now similar to the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Besides the Copts, there are also other Christian religious communities in Egypt, but their numbers are negligible compared to the Egyptian population. The situation of Egyptian Christians has not been free of problems, even before the protests on the Tahrir Square of Cairo. Under the Mubarak regime, while they were not subjected to direct persecution, harsh restrictions were placed upon the freedom of religion, for instance the construction or renovation of a Christian church was linked to high-level governmental permission.⁶

Syria

Syria is the other country of importance in the cradle of Christianity, the Middle East, that possessed a significant Christian minority, but their numbers are continuously and sharply

⁵ Colin Chapman. 2012. “Christians in the Middle East – Past, Present and Future.” *St. Francis Magazine* 8 (1): 68. <http://www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/SFM6ColinChapman.pdf> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20742256> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

decreasing due to the current civil war and the resulting mass emigration. The two main Christian religious communities are comprised of the followers of the Greek Orthodox and the Greek Catholic churches.

In the period before the “Arab Spring”, Syria was one of the countries where the situation of Christians was quite satisfactory. The role of the two Assad regimes is decisive in this.⁷ The Assad family that has led the country for the last forty years, originates from the members of the Alawite Muslim community, who themselves are also a minority in the country, and have a peripheral status in the Muslim religion.⁸ Both communities add up to about 10-10 percent of the Syrian population, and the Assad regime has favored the Christians (besides the Alawites) in the politics of Syria.⁹

Iraq: from Saddam Hussein to the American invasion

The Christians of Iraq, like many other communities of the region, look back at a rich history. Christianity has been present in Iraq since the 2nd century, represented mainly by two churches: the Chaldean and the Assyrian Church. Besides them, many other Christian Churches have smaller communities in the country.¹⁰ The situation of Iraqi Christians could be called relatively good under the Hussein regime, owing also to the secular nationalist ideology of the Baath Party.¹¹ For instance, an Armenian Christian has spoken of Saddam Hussein as “the best possible protector of Christians.”¹² This has changed drastically following the Iraq War and the toppling of the Hussein regime. Colin Chapman calls the situation after 2003 basically an ethnic cleansing; although there are no official statistics, the number of Iraqi Christians plummeted greatly, with most of them fleeing to Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Today they are only 0.8 percent of the population.¹³

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15239529> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

⁸ Kristina Kausch and Richard Youngs: Europe in the reshaped Middle East, p. 76.

⁹ *ibid.*, illetve Chapman, *op. cit.* 88.

¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15239529> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

¹¹ Amira El Ahl, Daniel Steinvorth, Volkhard Windfuhr and Bernhard Zand: Fighting for their Survival: A Christian Exodus from the Arab World, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/fighting-for-their-survival-a-christian-exodus-from-the-arab-world-a-457002.html> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

¹² Chapman, *op. cit.* 88.

¹³ Pew Research Center: The Global Religious Landscape, http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/globalReligion-full.pdf (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

Lebanon's confessionalism system

While Lebanon is not one of the countries directly affected by the “Arab Spring”, the need for completeness requires that we discuss the state that gives home to proportionally the largest Christian community of the Middle East. Besides this, Lebanon is the only country of the region where Christians have real political power. 39 percent of Lebanon's population is comprised of different Christian communities; the Lebanese government recognizes 17 diverse religious groups in the country, 12 of these are Christians.¹⁴ The religious communities of Lebanon are also important politically, although after the civil war between 1975 and 1989, concluded by the Taif Accords, purely political cleavages have also appeared in the Lebanese society. The Christians, especially the Maronites have a traditionally remarkable role in Lebanon. The history of the Maronite community can be dated back to the 8th century, and the second largest Greek Orthodox minority of the Middle East also lives in Lebanon. To date, the Maronites have an outstanding role amongst the Lebanese Christian communities: the Maronite patriarch has a major influence upon the decisions of the Lebanese Christian political bloc.¹⁵

Under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, a certain grade of autonomy and legislative immunity was provided for the Christians of the region in the framework of the so-called *millet* system¹⁶. In the later Maronite politics, the preservation of this privileged status was fundamental.¹⁷ After the First World War, Turkish influence was replaced by French mandatory supervision, and the protection provided for religious minorities by the *millet* system was replaced by the favoring of Maronite politicians by the French. The unique political system of Lebanon, the so-called confessional system has been established under this *de facto* French colonial rule, based on which Lebanese politics are defined mainly by religion even today. The foundations of the system have been laid down by the National Agreement of 1932 that has distributed proportionally the political positions between the religious communities, on the ground of the national census, conducted also in 1932. The parliamentary seats were divided in the ratio 6 to 5 between Christians and Muslims. They have also agreed

¹⁴ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

¹⁵ Speidl Bianka. 2009. “Lebanese Christians and Shifts in Political Power: from Taif Accords to the Second Lebanon War.” *Mediterrán Tanulmányok* 18 (1): 79.

¹⁶The improvement of the *dhimma* system traditional to Islam (in this case, in exchange for a special tax, certain religious communities, like Christians, received limited freedom of practicing religion). The *millet* system was different because it also provided legal, and limited administrative autonomy to Christian communities. Source: Speidl, *op. cit.* 80.

¹⁷ Speidl, *op. cit.* 79.

upon the following: the President will always be a Maronite, the Prime Minister a Sunnite, and the President of the Parliament a Shiite.

The National Agreement of 1932 was also one of the main causes of the civil war that left deep wounds on the modern history of Lebanon. By 1975, the ratio of Lebanese Christians and Muslims changed in favor of the latter, who wanted to secure the changes in a new Agreement. The Christian communities naturally insisted on upholding the favorable status quo. Besides the controversies of the confessional system, the influx of Palestinian – mostly Muslim – refugees after the Jordanian “black September” presented additional problems, as they increased even more the majority of Muslims in the country.

The Palestinians have provided the direct *casus belli* to the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War, after in 1975, the tension between the Palestinian refugees and the Christian Phalangist militia peaked to the point where minor fights broke out between the two sides. The Lebanese Muslims intervened on the side of the Palestinians. By June 1976, the central government had practically collapsed, prompting the invasion of the Syrian Army – who had the blessing and the support of the international community, especially the United States. This step was welcomed in Lebanon mainly by the Maronite community.¹⁸ In 1978, the Israeli army also intervened, expecting to solve the Palestinian problem by participating in the conflict. While both the Syrian and the Israeli forces acted on the invitation of the Maronites, in both cases, their intervention has not achieved the results that Lebanese Christians were hoping for: the civil war that ended in 1989 brought the defeat of the Maronites, both militarily and politically.¹⁹ The Taif Accords of November 1989 did not dissolve confessionalism, thus upholding the main cause of the Christian Muslim conflict – that can break out again anytime – in the country. The 1989 Accords brought only a minor change in the system: the ratio of political positions between Christians and Muslims has been changed to 1:1, the religious criteria for the leaders of the country remained part of the Taif Accords.²⁰

In the last 20 plus years the problems remained almost the same: unlike the politically mainly unified Sunnite and Shiite communities, the Christians are split into several major groups. The main issue was of course Syria, remaining in Lebanon as an occupier even after the Accords, and it withdrew its troops only in 2005, due to the strong international and Lebanese pressure.

¹⁸ Speidl, *op. cit.* 82.

¹⁹ *ibid.* 83.

²⁰ Hilal Kashan: Lebanon’s Shiite-Marionite Alliance of Hipocrisy, <http://www.meforum.org/meq/pdfs/3310.pdf> (accessed: 2013.05.02)

Today there are four main Christian political streams: the pro-Syrian Christians, supporting a solid Lebanese-Syrian relationship and – until 2005 – the Syrian occupation; the now peripheral “Westocrats”, who favor strong ties with the West; the Christian nationalists, according to whom it is not possible to agree with Muslims, and a federal state based on autonomous religious regions is needed. There are also the secular nationalists, who, while originating from the Christian population, oppose political sectarianism, federalism, or any other notions based on primordial ties.²¹ They are also the only Christian political force that denounces politics based on religious or clan interests, thinks in national terms, and urges the reform of the Lebanese political system.²² The latter stream was the most popular Christian political group in Lebanon at the time of the Syrian withdrawal in 2005.

The Lebanese politics, while still founded on confessionalism, increasingly operate along purely political cleavages. Today neither the government, nor the opposition is homogenous politically. The majority of the Sunnites stand by the government, the opposition is comprised mostly of Shiites, but the Christians are divided between the two sides. The Shiite Hezbollah operates together with the secular nationalists, represented by the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and led by Michel Aoun, one of the most popular generals of the 1975 civil war.²³ Meanwhile, the Christian nationalists and the “Westocrats” support the Sunnite government. The main challenge of the Lebanese Christian minority is that, unlike their Muslim counterparts, they cannot form a unified political bloc that can at least agree on certain fundamental matters concerning Lebanon as a whole.²⁴

The Taif Accords and the confessional system is another issue. The Christians, as stated before, are divided between the Sunnite government and the Shiite opposition. As a numerically major political force (although they amount to only 38.3 percent of the population)²⁵, the Christians would have to initiate the reform, facing two major problems. Firstly, Christians would be the minority that loses the most by such a reform. Secondly, they do not want to draw attention upon the controversies of the Lebanese socio-political structure, knowing that such a move would anger their Sunni and Shiite allies.²⁶

²¹ Speidl, *op. cit.* 86-87.

²² Speidl, *op. cit.* 87.

²³ <http://www.tayyar.org/Tayyar/FPMParty/GMA/Biography/> (accessed: 2013.05.02)

²⁴ Speidl, *op. cit.* 84-85

²⁵ Pew Research Center: The Global Religious Landscape, http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/globalReligion-full.pdf (accessed: 2013.04.28)

²⁶ Hilal Kashan: Lebanon’s Shiite-Maronite Alliance of Hypocrisy, <http://www.meforum.org/meq/pdfs/3310.pdf> (accessed: 2013.05.02)

“Arab Spring”, Christian fall?

It is not the aim of this essay to analyse the causes of the events of the “Arab Spring”. Firstly, it is yet an unfinished process, and to unveil its actual reasons such information is needed that will be available only after the end of these events. Secondly, when examining the changes in the situation of Christian minorities, not the causes, but the consequences of the “Arab Spring” are of importance. There are only scarce scientific sources discussing the Arab Spring, thus the exploration of the topic is possible mainly through individual case studies and press sources. It presents another problem that the majority of the experts of the “Arab Spring” focus mainly on the Muslim majority society, and ignore the role of the Christian minorities during the events.

The situation of Middle Eastern Christians has fundamentally deteriorated following the “Arab Spring”. The main cause is that during the revolutions in the region, the former dictatorships, mainly led by secularists (Gaddafi in Lybia, Mubarak in Egypt, Assad in Syria), have encountered a movement fond of Muslim fundamentalism that, among others, stood against the presence of other religions (thus Christianity) in Middle Eastern societies.²⁷ Local fundamentalists, be it based on Sunni or Shia Islam, are of course not the products of the “Arab Spring”, the revolutions have rather helped the upsurge of the political Islam that was forced to be in opposition earlier. The former secularist regimes and the social-political failure of their leaders have contributed to the popularity of the Islamist opposition.²⁸ The antipathy of Islam (and especially its fundamentalist streams) against Christianity can be traced back to many reasons. Aside from the apparent theological differences, the main cause may be that Muslims identified Christianity with the West that appeared in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century as an invader of the region, and then supported Israel in unison. Thus they drew a parallel between the former invaders and the local Christian communities.²⁹

It is another great problem of the region’s Christians that they cannot rely on substantial foreign support: here the indifference of the political West coupled with the pragmatist-realist foreign policy of today’s “world policeman”, the United States of America, that places its more important economic, political, and security interests before the local

²⁷ Habib Malik. 2011. “The Future of Christians in the Middle East.” *Defining Ideas*

<http://www.hoover.org/publications/defining-ideas/article/62216> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

²⁸ Besenyő János. 2011. „Arab tavasz» – politikai rendszerváltás az észak-afrikai arab államokban.” *Kül-Világ*. 8 (4): 71. <http://www.kul-vilag.hu/2011/04/besenyoy.pdf> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

²⁹ Habib Malik. 2011. “The Future of Christians in the Middle East.” *Defining Ideas*

<http://www.hoover.org/publications/defining-ideas/article/62216> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

Christian minorities' calls for help.³⁰ The case of the patriarch Bechara Rai underpins this argument, who in 2011 visited the then French President, Nicolas Sarkozy. He warned the President that the Syrian and Lebanese Christians would be endangered if the Assad regime were removed by the opposition with Western support.³¹ According to the patriarch, the "Arab Spring" is rather like fall for the Christians, which is proven by the case of Libya, Tunisia and Egypt.³² The patriarch travelled from France to the United States, where he would have met President Obama. But the President of the US called off the appointment, as he might have presumed that the patriarch is a supporter of Assad. This claim was not supported by any facts, however. The patriarch only wanted to warn the heads of Western states not to commit an error similar to the one in Libya, where they supported those very forces that fought against the Americans and their allies in Iraq and Afghanistan.³³ Although the two presidents could have thought that the concerns voiced by the religious leader are baseless, the period since then confirmed the patriarch. By these days, Syrian Christians are not protected by the regime anymore and became open season for certain groups of the Syrian opposition who kill them simply because they are Christians.³⁴ Thus an exodus started towards the neighbouring Lebanon. However, Christians are not safe even there, so a number of them have tried to flee towards Europe and the US.³⁵ The change in the numbers of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries can be seen on the following graph.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Fady Noun: Patriarch Bechara Rai and the "Arab Spring." Tensions with Paris and Washington, <http://onecatholicnews.wordpress.com/2011/09/30/patriarch-bechara-rai-and-the-arab-spring-tensions-with-paris-and-washington/> (accessed: 2013. 05.02)

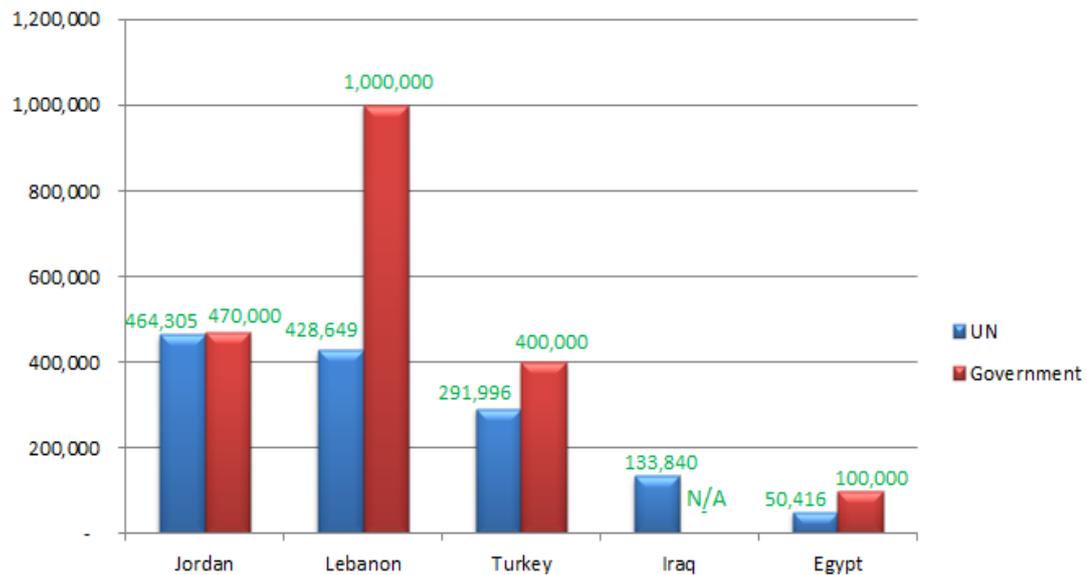
³² Besenyő János. 2011. „Arab tavasz« – politikai rendszerváltás az észak-afrikai arab államokban." *Kül-Világ*. 8 (4): 71. <http://www.kul-vilag.hu/2011/04/besenyoy.pdf> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

³³ Besenyő János-Marsai Viktor: Országismertető-Líbia, 85-91.

³⁴ Ulrike Putz: 'We're Too Frightened to Talk': Christians Flee from Radical Rebels in Syria, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/christians-flee-from-radical-rebels-in-syria-a-846180.html> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

³⁵ http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18563_162-57570633/christians-threatened-by-syrian-war-flee-to-lebanon/ (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

Total Syrian Refugees Per Country By Date



Source: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/syrian-refugees-per-un-and-goverments-estimates.png>

Even before the “Arab Spring”, emigration has been the typical solution for the Christians of the region. In 1948, Christians constituted almost a fifth of the citizens of Jerusalem, today this rate is less than 2 percent. Almost 80 percent of the population in Bethlehem was Christian for centuries, today this is less than a third, and it is still decreasing.³⁶ As discussed before, the Christian populace of Lebanon also shows the signs of demographic contraction, and two-third of the Iraqi Christians (around 1 million people) had to flee the country.³⁷ The collection of accurate emigration data is hampered by the fact that most states do not distinguish migrants of the basis of religion.³⁸

About migration, it is important to note that the main motives of Christians, who emigrate in masses towards North America, Europe and Australia, are not the religious differences, but the economic reasons that stem from religious discrimination. The religious factor cannot be ignored, of course: these communities are under increasing pressure due to the Islamist movements that gained strength during the “Arab Spring”. However, the real

³⁶ Habib Malik. 2011. “The Future of Christians in the Middle East.” *Defining Ideas* <http://www.hoover.org/publications/defining-ideas/article/62216> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

³⁷ Kenneth Katzmann: Iraq: Politics, Governance and Human Rights, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21968.pdf> (accessed: 2013. 05. 02)

³⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/9798777/Egypt-Coptic-Christians-fleeing-country-after-Islamist-takeover.html> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

cause is that they cannot find work as Christians, cannot cover their expenses and they have a pessimistic vision about living in their mother country in the future.³⁹

Hereinafter the situation of the Christian communities will be discussed in each country.

Egypt: from the Tahrir Square to the Muslim Brotherhood

In Egypt, during the events of the “Arab Spring”, Christians and Muslims have initially protested together against the Mubarak regime on the Tahrir Square of Cairo that became of symbolic importance. It is one of the memorable scenes of the Egyptian revolution, when the praying Muslims are encircled by their Christian peers, defending them against the forces of the government.⁴⁰

However, the relationship of the two defining religious communities of Egypt, the Muslims and Copts, deteriorated after the Morsi regime’s and the Muslim Brotherhood’s rise to power. While Christians were tolerated in Egypt before, by now the majority of the religiously increasingly intolerant Egyptians (74 percent of the population) demands that Christians subject themselves in every issue to the regulations of the Muslim religious law, the sharia.⁴¹ This contributes largely to the fact that the members of the Coptic Christian community persistently migrate abroad, while in the country the atrocities committed against them are more and more common. The main targets are Coptic churches and buildings of the Church, besides this, the believers themselves are also in danger, especially the women. In the last few years there have been around 550 cases in Egypt where Christian women were abducted, held captive, raped, and forced to convert to Islam; these cases became more frequent after the “Arab Spring” and the strengthening of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴²

For instance, the most serious religion-based assault of Egypt’s modern history was on New Year’s Eve of 2010 – still before the fall of Mubarak – a car bomb was detonated in Alexandria next to a Coptic church, the explosion claimed 23 victims.⁴³ There were pogroms aimed at Copts also in the first two months of 2013: in January, another church was targeted by a car bomb (that the authorities defused in time). Moreover, several attacks were

³⁹ Chapman, *op. cit.* 86.

⁴⁰ Chapman, *op. cit.* 87.

⁴¹ Pew Research Center: The world Muslims: Religion, Politics, and Society, http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Muslim/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf (accessed: 2013. 05.02)

⁴² Raymond Ibrahim: Death to Churches under Islam: A study of the Coptic Church, <http://www.meforum.org/3492/churches-under-islam> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

⁴³ Raymond Ibrahim: “Muslim Persecution of Christians: January, 2013.” Gatestone Institute. 2013. <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3641/muslim-persecution-of-christians-january-2013> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

committed against Christians that the authorities have refused to investigate or to provide safety for Christians. A family was sentenced to 15 years in prison for converting to Christianity. This can even be considered a light sentence in light of the fact that an increasing number of Egyptians (86 percent) supports the execution of people converting to the Christian faith.⁴⁴ In February, another Coptic church was set to fire in the province of Fayoum.

The main concern can be attributed to several factors in Egypt. Although President Morsi issued a New Year message, calling Egypt “one homeland for all”, for both Christians and Muslims, the Coptic community is exposed to constant threats from the Salafist opposition of the current Egyptian government, who represent the really hard-line Muslim religious stream.⁴⁵ The majority of the atrocities against Copts can also be attributed to Salafist groups, whose increasing influence in Egyptian politics could lead to the institutionalization of religious intolerance.⁴⁶ A good example of this influence as well as another problem is the issue of the newly accepted constitution that provides more space for the Islamic law, the sharia. This will undoubtedly favor the Muslim majority to the “tolerated” Coptic minorities.⁴⁷

Libya: after Gaddafi

Two years have passed since the start of the movement in Libya that, after a year of protests and then civil war, toppled – with international support – the regime of Muammar Gaddafi whose reign lasted for more than forty years in the country. However, the internal security of the country has not stabilized since the fall of the dictator; this is also shown by the events of last September in the city of Benghazi, when the Libyan ambassador of the United States was killed.

Up to this day, security is guaranteed in Libya by the various militia groups. The main reason is that the police and the military cannot uphold order, thus the transitional central

⁴⁴ Pew Research Center: The world muslims: Religion, Politics, and Society, http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Muslim/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf (accessed: 2013. 05.02)

⁴⁵ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/9798777/Egypt-Coptic-Christians-fleeing-country-after-Islamist-takeover.html> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28).

⁴⁶ Lorenzo Vidino (ed.) 2013. “The West and the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring”. *Foreign Policy Research Institute*. 67. http://www.fpri.org/docs/201303.west_and_the_muslim_brotherhood_after_the_arab_spring.pdf (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

⁴⁷ Raymond Ibrahim: „Muslim Persecution of Christians: January, 2013.” Gatestone Institute. 2013. <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3641/muslim-persecution-of-christians-january-2013> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

government is compelled to entrust the militias with the tasks of the security forces. Besides corruption and security risks, it presents a huge problem that the Libyan Christians are exposed to atrocities committed mostly by the more Islamist militias. For instance, in 2013 two churches were attacked over the period of two months. The first attack occurred on 30 December, when a church near the West Libyan city of Misrata was shaken by an explosion, killing two people and wounding other two. The second of these attacks was committed on 28 February, when armed militants assaulted a church, wounding a priest and his assistant.⁴⁸ On 27 February, militias in Benghazi raided a Coptic church, rounding up about 100 Christians, accusing them of being missionaries and planning to convert locals to Christianity. Several of them were subjected to torture, during this one captive died. Also in February, militants forced an order of Christian nuns, operating in the country since 1921, to leave the country.

It could present another problem that the Libyan social-political elite is currently working on the country's new constitution, that – like in Egypt – would emphasize the role of sharia in the Libyan legal system, according to recent plans. This would also deteriorate the situation of Christians in the country.⁴⁹

Syria: Christian Calvary – next to Assad

Syria is in a special position compared to other countries affected by the events of the “Arab Spring”. While in the aforementioned cases of Egypt and Libya Christians were tolerated minorities, in Syria they supported traditionally the Assad family and the Alawite⁵⁰ minority⁵¹. Thus Christians were confronted by a serious dilemma during the “Arab Spring”: should they support the regime or the opposition? The majority of Christians stand by the Assad regime,⁵² but there are some Christian groups that support the opposition. The latter are optimistic, believing that upon the ruins of a civil war a religiously more tolerant Syria could be constructed, where Christians and Muslims can live side by side. The former think that if the regime falls, an Islamist state would be created in Syria, where Christians would face persecution.⁵³

⁴⁸ Raymond Ibrahim: „Muslim Persecution of Christians: February, 2013.” Gatestone Institute. 2013.

<http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3641/muslim-persecution-of-christians-february-2013> (accessed: 2013. 04. 29)

⁴⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21457879> (accessed: 2013. 04. 29)

⁵⁰ A variant of the Shiite Muslim faith.

⁵¹ Chapman, *op. cit.* 88.

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20742256> (accessed: 2013. 04. 29)

Lebanon: next to a civil war

Lebanon was not affected directly by the events of the “Arab Spring”, due to two main factors. Firstly, the political structure of Lebanon differs from the classic secular dictatorships of the region (the confessional system was already discussed beforehand); secondly, the country still has not recovered entirely from the civil war of the past decades.

From a geopolitical and social aspect, the civil war in the neighbouring Syria could mean a problem for the sensitive religious-political balance of Lebanon. Lebanon has strongly depended on Syria in the past decades (Syria was an occupier of Lebanon until 2005, as well as the main foreign supporter of the Shiite movement of Hezbollah).⁵⁴ With the civil war in Syria, this traditional support seems to cease, but in the light of recent tendencies this seems to be only temporary.⁵⁵

The refugee issue is another great problem. According to the data of the UNHCR⁵⁶, there are currently almost 450,000 Syrian refugees in the Lebanese refugee camps. There are no details about the proportion of religions amongst the refugees, but their growing numbers point towards a scenario similar to the events of 1975, where in this case the Syrian refugees would act as catalysts. A civil war triggered by such a scenario, or by the spillover of Syrian events would only worsen even more the situation of Lebanese Christians.

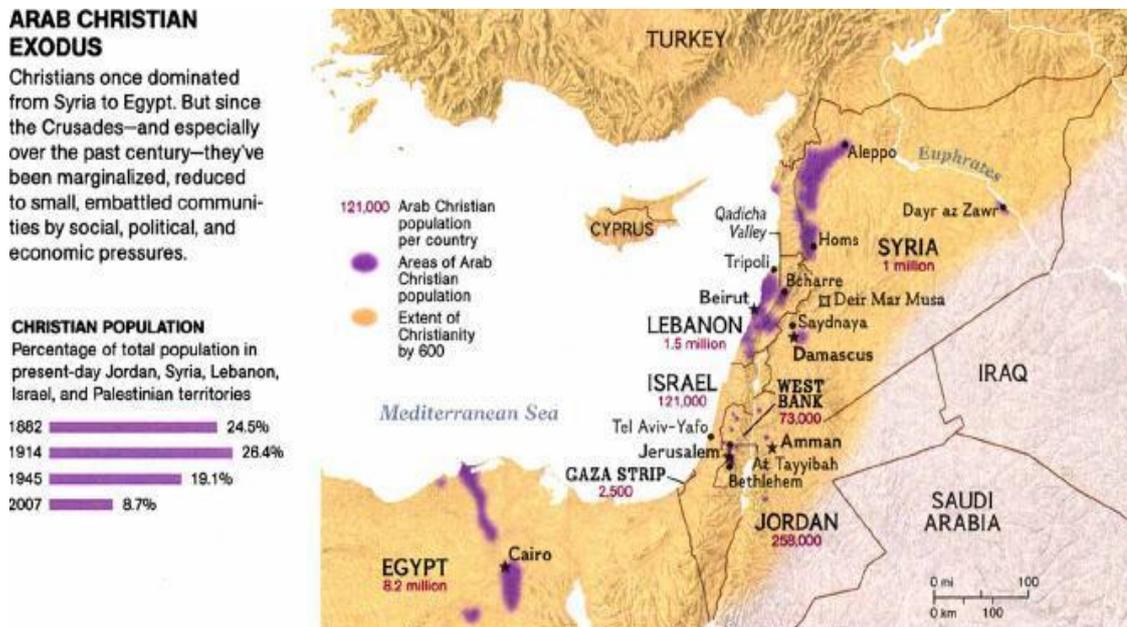
⁵⁴ Example: Speidl, *op. cit.* 89.

⁵⁵ Taking into account the expansion of Iran in the region, who is the other main sponsor of Hezbollah.

⁵⁶ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122> (accessed: 2013. 04. 29)

The possibilities implied by the migration of Christians

In the last decades, the majority of Christians living in the Arab states have already fled, thus the social influence of those remaining has decreased significantly; they have become marginalised, as seen on the following map.



Source: <http://christiangepolitics.blogspot.hu/2009/09/arab-christian-exodus.html>

The Arab Christians flowing from the countries affected by the “Arab Spring” (a typical example is Egypt, from where the Copts are emigrating in large numbers) choose Europe, besides the United States and Australia, as their destination. The question is: are the Arab Christian migrants a burden or a relief for the demographically aging Europe?

The decreasing number and proportion of Middle Eastern Christians can be attributed to two reasons: the lower birth rate, compared to Muslims, and the high emigration rate that was further increased by the “Arab Spring”. Not all of these migrants are educated or wealthy; this is especially true in the case of the majority of the Christians who fled Iraq. But most Arab Christians are well-educated and affluent, have acquired good language skills at religious schools and the strong international support network eases migration for these Christians.⁵⁷ The example of Egyptian Copts must be highlighted, as they are much better trained than their Muslim counterparts, moreover, they have been in better economic positions

⁵⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20742256> (letöltés ideje: 2013. 04. 28), valamint Keith Crane, Steven Simon, Jeffrey Martini: Future Challenges for the Arab World, The Implications of Demographic and Economic Trends, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2011/RAND_TR912.pdf (accessed: 2013. 05.02)

in Egypt.⁵⁸ There are no accurate data, since immigrants are not tracked on the basis of religion, but it is estimated that about 100,000 Copts have left Egypt in 2011.⁵⁹

Most of Arab Christian migrants are assimilated easier in Europe, and thus pose a much lesser security threat; meanwhile the Arab Muslims of Europe present recently an increasing internal challenge in their host countries.⁶⁰ Besides this, Arab Christians are better educated and more affluent than their Muslim counterparts.⁶¹ All of these factors would facilitate the assimilation of the arriving Christians: by welcoming them, Europe would receive better educated, more tolerant, religiously and culturally more similar, homogenous citizens.

Conclusion

In the third year of the “Arab Spring” it can be observed that the more radical Islamist streams become more and more significant in Middle Eastern politics, gaining decisive positions – except for Algeria and Libya – from Rabat to Gaza, and they have an important part in the current events in other countries (see Syria).⁶²

The expansion or, as seen in Egypt, constitutionalization of political Islam deteriorates even more the troublesome relationship of the Muslim majority population and the Christian minorities. The changes of the “Arab Spring” give causes for concern for many liberal and

⁵⁸ Besenyő János. 2011. „»Arab tavasz« – politikai rendszerváltás az észak-afrikai arab államokban.” *Kül-Világ*. 8 (4): 71. <http://www.kul-vilag.hu/2011/04/besenyoy.pdf> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

⁵⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/9798777/Egypt-Coptic-Christians-fleeing-country-after-Islamist-takeover.html> (accessed: 2013. 04. 28)

⁶⁰ In several cases of the last years, the Muslims arriving in Europe tried to put pressure on the population of their host states, sometimes with physical force or threats. They also question the laws and traditions of the tolerant states welcoming them. Let us think about how we would react in Budapest if the „sharia commandos” that operate in British cities would harass tourists in shorts and the Hungarian ladies that in their opinion are not dressed appropriately. One of the actions of these British „commandos” can be watched here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCsG-u2GtZE> (accessed: 2013. 05.02) The actuality of the problem is proven by the fact that the French, who were one of the most tolerant and accepting countries of Europe in terms of Muslim immigrants - <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/pdf/7-6-06.pdf> (accessed: 2013.05.02) - increasingly turn them down. According to a survey conducted by Le Monde, 74 percent of the French consider Islam an intolerant religion, and are aggrieved that these Muslims do not accept the values of the French Republic. The Muslims are denounced not only by right-wing politicians, who traditionally oppose them, but also by left-wing forces, and by an increasing number of liberal citizens.

http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2013/01/24/la-religion-musulmane-fait-l-objet-d-un-profond-rejet-de-la-part-des-francais_1821698_3224.html (accessed: 2013. 05. 02). Similar trends can also be observed in those European countries (the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, etc.), where larger numbers of Muslims are present. Soeren Klein: Amnesty Int’l Report: Blind to Muslim Threats to Europe, <http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/amnesty-intl-report-blind-muslim-threats-europe> (accessed: 2013. 05. 02)

⁶¹ Lawrence Solomon: Christian exodus could fuel Middle East decline, <http://opinion.financialpost.com/2013/03/28/lawrence-solomon-christian-exodus-could-fuel-middle-east-decline/> (letöltés ideje: 2013. 05.02)

⁶² Vidino, *op. cit.* 2.

non-Muslim groups, since the commitment of these Islamist groups is questionable towards the values of democracy and fundamental rights, especially the freedom of religion and expression, as well as the rights of women. Besides this, the Christian communities that were already on the social-political periphery of society in most of these countries become even more marginalized due to the expansion of political Islam.

As numerous examples during this paper have shown, Christian minorities are the target of atrocities in several countries and this fuels further their emigration from the cradle of Christianity, the Middle East. The mass emigration of Arab Christians cannot be ignored by Europe either, as – besides the United States – it is one of the main destinations for the Middle Eastern migrants, as well as a transit area for those travelling towards the US.⁶³

The future of Christian minorities hugely depends on how the Christian world (Europe and the United States) will be able to put pressure on the leaders of the concerned countries to respect the rights of religious minorities and provide effective protection for them. Otherwise the leadership of these countries, and the migration wave prompted by the measures of these leaders could present a serious economic, humanitarian and security threat for the Mediterranean.⁶⁴

⁶³ Keith Crane, Steven Simon, Jeffrey Martini: Future Challenges for the Arab World, The Implications of Demographic and Economic Trends, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2011/RAND_TR912.pdf (accessed: 2013. 05.02)

⁶⁴ Lawrence Solomon: Christian exodus could fuel Middle East decline, <http://opinion.financialpost.com/2013/03/28/lawrence-solomon-christian-exodus-could-fuel-middle-east-decline/> (accessed: 2013. 05.02)

Bibliography:

Amira El Ahl, [Daniel Steinvorth](#), Volkhard Windfuhr and [Bernhard Zand](#): Fighting for their Survival: A Christian Exodus from the Arab World,

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/fighting-for-their-survival-a-christian-exodus-from-the-arab-world-a-457002.html>

BBC News: Guide: Christians in the Middle East, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15239529>

BBC News: Slow rebirth for post-revolution Libya, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21457879>

Besenyő János. 2011. „»Arab tavasz« – politikai rendszerváltás az észak-afrikai arab államokban.” *Kül-Világ*. 8 (4): 51-75. <http://www.kul-vilag.hu/2011/04/besenyoy.pdf>

Besenyő János – Marsai Viktor: Országismertető, Líbia, MH ÖHP Tudományos Tanács, 2012, Székesfehérvár, http://kalasnyikov.hu/dokumentumok/orszagismerteto_libia.pdf

Colin Chapman. 2012. “Christians in the Middle East – Past, Present and Future.” *St. Francis Magazine* 8 (1): 67-97.

<http://www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/SFM6ColinChapman.pdf>

The Economist. 2012. “Christians in the Middle East. A new spokesman.”

<http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2012/12/christians-middle-east>

Fady Noun: Patriarch Bechara Rai and the “Arab Spring.” Tensions with Paris and Washington, <http://onecatholicnews.wordpress.com/2011/09/30/patriarch-bechara-rai-and-the-arab-spring-tensions-with-paris-and-washington/>

General Michel Aoun Biography, <http://www.tayyar.org/Tayyar/FPMParty/GMA/Biography/>

Hilal Kashan: Lebanon’s Shiite-Maronite Alliance of Hypocrisy,

<http://www.meforum.org/meq/pdfs/3310.pdf>

Raymond Ibrahim: “Muslim Persecution of Christians: January, 2013.” Gatestone Institute.

2013. <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3641/muslim-persecution-of-christians-january-2013>

Hozzáférés: 2013/04/28.

Raymond Ibrahim: “Muslim Persecution of Christians: February, 2013.” Gatestone Institute.

2013. <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3641/muslim-persecution-of-christians-february-2013>

Raymond Ibrahim: Death to Churches under Islam: A study of the Coptic Church,

<http://www.meforum.org/3492/churches-under-islam>

Iraq. *The CIA Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>

Keith Crane, Steven Simon, Jeffrey Martini: Future Challenges for the Arab World, The Implications of Demographic and Economic Trends, RAND, 2011,

http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2011/RAND_TR912.pdf

Kenneth Katzmann: Iraq: Politics, Governance and Human Rights,
<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21968.pdf>

Kevin Connolly: Syria war fuels Christian flight from Middle East,
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20742256>

Kristina Kausch and Richard Youngs: Europe in the reshaped Middle East, FRIDE, 2012, Spain, 178.

La religion musulmane fait l'objet d'un profond rejet de la part des Français,
http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2013/01/24/la-religion-musulmane-fait-l-objet-d-un-profond-rejet-de-la-part-des-francais_1821698_3224.html?xtmc=ipsos&xtcr=2

Lawrence Solomon: Christian exodus could fuel Middle East decline,
<http://opinion.financialpost.com/2013/03/28/lawrence-solomon-christian-exodus-could-fuel-middle-east-decline/>

Lebanon. *The CIA Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html>

Habib Malik. 2011. „The Future of Christians in the Middle East.” *Defining Ideas*
<http://www.hoover.org/publications/defining-ideas/article/62216>

Richard Spencer: Egypt's Coptic Christians fleeing country after Islamist takeover,
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/9798777/Egypt-Coptic-Christians-fleeing-country-after-Islamist-takeover.html>

Soeren Klein: Amnesty Int'l Report: Blind to Muslim Threats to Europe,
<http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/amnesty-intl-report-blind-muslim-threats-europe>

Speidl Bianka. 2009. “Lebanese Christians and Shifts in Political Power: from Taif Accords to the Second Lebanon War.” *Mediterrán Tanulmányok* 18 (1): 77-100.

Pew Research Center: The world Muslims: Religion, Politics, and Society,
http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Muslim/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf

Pew Research Center: The Global Religious Landscape,
http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/globalReligion-full.pdf

Pew Research Center: Muslims in Europe: Economic worries top concerns about religious and cultural identity, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/pdf/7-6-06.pdf>

Ulrike Putz: 'We're Too Frightened to Talk': Christians Flee from Radical Rebels in Syria,
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/christians-flee-from-radical-rebels-in-syria-a-846180.html>

Site of UNHCR, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>

Lorenzo Vidino (ed.) 2013. “The West and the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring”. *Foreign Policy Research Institute*.
http://www.fpri.org/docs/201303.west_and_the_muslim_brotherhood_after_the_arab_spring.pdf

Clarissa Ward: Christians, threatened by Syrian war, flee to Lebanon,
http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18563_162-57570633/christians-threatened-by-syrian-war-flee-to-lebanon/