
Guest Commentary

The Christians of Lebanon

by George Larin

George Larin, a leading French specialist in Near Eastern and Middle Eastern affairs, has contributed the following background analysis of the events in Lebanon. Although EIR's editor-in-chief strongly disagrees with some of the ideas raised in the article, especially its final recommendations, we publish it here as part of a necessary debate on the tragic situation in Lebanon and the fight against Syrian terrorism and expansionism, as well as the danger of Shi'ite fundamentalism.

Lebanon is a very small nation: It stretches a mere 200 kilometers from north to south and averages 50 kilometers from west to east, or some 10,000 square kilometers. On the edges of the flat Syrian desert, Lebanon is the country of the mountain. An Arab proverb says: "The desert belongs to Arabia, the Nile to Egypt, and the mountain to Lebanon." These mountains have always served as a refuge for the persecuted peoples of the Near East. This led, over many centuries, to the constitution of a mosaic of religious and ethnic communities who sought peace and tranquillity in the wild valleys of the Lebanese mountain.

Three million Lebanese and 1 million foreigners live in Lebanon today; 20 communities live side by side. The Christian and Muslim communities are of largely equal number, the Muslims being marginally larger.

Lebanon is also the sea and the world at large: The network of the diaspora, 3 million people in 5 continents, is as numerous as the residents of Lebanon itself. Once one takes the diaspora into account, the Christians become by far the majority of Lebanese. The regional context weighs, however, very heavily on Lebanon.

Between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf there is a predominantly Arab society of some 55 million people (100 million if one counts Arabized Egypt). Seven to nine percent of these are Christians. History broke up this society into a multiplicity of ethnic and religious communities, Muslim and Christian, each of which is highly homogeneous and cohesive. It is upon this variegated human map that more or less artificial frontiers were traced in 1920 following the defeat of Turkey, delimiting Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Transjordan . . . states without a real foundation as nation-states,

states composed of a mix of different communities. Hence their fragility, given that the allegiance of the individual is above all to the community (and not the state) which is not national but transnational (the communities overlap many countries).

Yet, this broken-up Arab society, structured communally, divided into artificial and fragile states, aspires to unity. It searched its cement initially in the form of nationalist, lay, modernist pan-Arab ideology. The thinkers of the "Nahda" (Arab renaissance) referred back in their quest to the only great Arab empire, that of the Ommeyyades, later pursued by the first Abassids, who for more than a century (661-780) extended their power and demonstrated their pride. This movement was launched in Egypt by Mehemet Ali against the Ottoman lord and oppressor from 1800 to 1840. More recently, the idea described above took on various forms, notably the "Fertile Crescent" idea pushed by Iraq or the "United Arab Republic," initiated by some Egyptians. When

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the Palestinians installed their army in Lebanon (which became stronger than the Lebanese army with 25,000 to 30,000 men in arms), they did so in the name of Arab fraternity (Cairo accords of 1969). The Syrians today in their military occupation of large parts of Lebanon declare themselves "at home" in the name of the "Arab nation," arguing, "We are one people in two states." Yet, this pan-Arab movement has suffered only failures: Today the Arab world is more divided than ever before, the modernization of society has not occurred and, most significant of all, the Arab armies have lost all of their wars against Israel.

This failure of pan-Arabism helps to explain the turn of many Arabs towards religion, hoping to find unity in and by Islam. Their one-time oppressor and Lord, the Ottoman empire, is frequently evoked today as a once world Islamic power. Islam, which does not distinguish the sacred from the profane, is sought to structure civil society as a whole, the political as well as the religious realm. A powerful Islamic movement with political aims (to seize power) has thus emerged, fueled by the Shi'ites of Teheran, blowing power-

ful storm winds over Lebanon, inflating in particular the veils of the Lebanese Shi'ites (who now number 700,000-800,000), making them demanding and conquering.

Tiny Lebanon has therefore become the prey of a multitude of predators; the Palestinians who tried to create a state within a state, threatening the State itself (1969-1982); the Israelis who reacted by going in to destroy the "Palestinian state" in Lebanon (1982); the Syrians who sought and seek to transform it into its protectorate; the Iranians finally who are trying to extend to a Lebanon in a state of disaggregation their Islamic revolution. The predators tear each other apart . . . but they do it in Lebanon . . . the Lebanese communities are pawns, cannon fodder in this torment which overwhelms them, torment controlled by these large regional powers.

The Lebanese communities

The regional population context is predominantly Sunni Muslim. This "governmental" Islam, which has asserted its power for centuries in the region, notably when the Turks governed the Arabs, treated what it considered to be Muslim heresies very harshly. Some of the latter sought refuge in Lebanon: Hence the mountain received the Druzes (who number 200,000-250,000 today) and Shi'ites. The mountain also gave refuge much earlier to persecuted Christian Arab minorities who sought refuge and freedom of religion in the faraway valleys of Lebanon. These Christians, just as those of the whole of the Orient, are the vestiges of the early Christian communities which were submerged though not absorbed or converted by the wave of Islam in the 7th century. Islands under the cross in a Muslim sea.

Of the Arab Christians of Lebanon, there are those of:

- Maronite rite, who number 700,000, representing half of the Christians of Lebanon. They are Catholics (attached to Rome).
- Greek rite, who number 350,000-400,000, some of whom remain attached to Rome, the others being Orthodox.
- Syriac rite, who represent some 30,000 believers, some Orthodox, some Catholic.
- Chaldean rite, 11,000 either Catholic or Orthodox.
- Latin rite, 20,000, all Catholic.
- Protestants, 30,000.

There exist also non-Arab Christians: The Armenians, both Catholic or Orthodox, are some 250,000. They have their own specific rite.

The Christians, therefore, represent a short 50% of the resident population of Lebanon, or a large majority if one would include the diaspora. Hence, the argument invoked by their enemies, that they are the minority and hence to be pushed aside, is ludicrous. Even if it were true, it cannot be legitimately used to dispossess them of their slightly preeminent place in the state apparatus of Lebanon: Are not all Arab regimes in the Orient (Syria, Iraq, Jordan) minority governments? Why should the Lebanese Christians alone be thus dispossessed?

The hard core of the Christians are the Maronites. From the 5th century they have constituted a cohesive nation, assembled around their church and Patriarch. It is thanks to them and their then-alliance with the Druzes that Lebanon realized a large degree of independence while under nominal Turkish sovereignty for over five centuries, from 1290 to 1840. At the time, the Maronite and Druze mountain was strong. The Muslim armies who passed through the area prudently made a detour around the natural fortress, but did not penetrate. The Sublime Porte (Istanbul) negotiated with

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the Patriarch of the Maronites and the Emir of the Mountain. This privileged situation permitted the Christians of Lebanon to escape until very recently from the apartheid statute which Koranic law reserves to the "peoples of the book" (Jews and Christians).

The apartheid statute (the 'dhimma')

In its traditional interpretation (the Sunna), the Koran institutes a triple juridical inequality in Muslim society, that is: the supremacy of men over women; of masters over slaves, of Muslims over Jews and Christians. The statute of "dhimma" expresses this last inequality. The *dhimmi* or protected Jew or Christian cannot marry a Muslim (the reverse is possible though the children then become Muslim), must acquit himself of a special tax (the *gizia*), cannot testify against a Muslim in court, cannot govern Muslims (hence the scandal of state power by Christians or Jews in Lebanon or Israel), is forbidden access to Mecca or Medina, the holy sites of Islam, etc.

Hence Islam defines a secondary status for the "peoples of the book" in return for the tolerance given to them. This status is analogous to that of a cow in a field, free to move within their pasture but not beyond it. This statute of apartheid

eid has not changed for over 12 centuries and has been thought, reasoned, theologically and juridically justified. The "protection" accorded to non-believers is not a right in the sense of law but a favor which can be rescinded at any time. The sword of Damocles is thus permanently held high over the head of the Jew or Christian. It is to be noted that this reasoning is applied by many Muslims also to the State of Israel: Were Israel to become integrated into a "federation of the Middle East" as proposed by some, it would in effect become a *dhimmi* state. The logic of this is implacable in that Islam not only recognizes but claims the Jewish prophets. Hence, in this logic, Islam has a rightful claim to appropriate the territories of the Hebrew people today, accused of corrupting the message of Islam transmitted by the prophets of Israel. It is clear, of course, that Israel cannot accept such a perspective.

As far as the Christians of Lebanon are concerned, let us listen to what the young President Beshir Gemayel had to say. He was assassinated, alas, in 1982, probably on Syrian orders, because his popularity and support were vast, including in the Muslim community, and he would have been able to resist Damascus. He said: "The existence of Lebanon where the Christians are not submitted to the *dhimma* is a question of life or death for us."

This is the real background of the Lebanese drama. This specific problem, the question of the survival of Christians not subservient to the *Dhimma*, is the key to the crisis. Until recently, that survival was a result of the tenacity of the Maronites who always were the pivot of Lebanese national identity and the spearhead of resistance against hegemonistic plans. It is they who made Lebanon into a State of Law, of respect of human rights in the midst of an Orient filled with dictatorships. These *free* Christians, alone in the Orient, were furthermore a hope for their fellow believers in the rest of the region, all of whom were under the constraint of an apartheid statute.

Today, however, the situation of these free Christians is tragic.

The genocide of the Christians of Lebanon

The Christians are suffering in Lebanon the pressure of fundamentalist and intolerant Islam, that of Khomeini and Qaddafi, who seek to establish an Islamic government in Lebanon. They are submitted also to the terrorist and military pressure of Syria which desires to incorporate Lebanon into itself (today, Syria's army controls half of Lebanon). Although these two pressures are antagonistic, they both seek to destroy Christian presence, destroying its culture and the hope for democratic reconstruction.

In 1975, the Christians were disseminated throughout Lebanon, in the furthest reaches of the country, in the smallest towns. They constituted the cement holding together the diverse Lebanese communities; they cohabited together with Sunni, Shi'ite, and Druze Muslims; on a local level in spite

of temporary flareups of communal tensions, Lebanon was generally peaceful prior to 1975.

Since 1975, this Christian web progressively retracted under the effect of combats, multiple massacres, and permanent insecurity. Over 200 villages were evacuated in traditionally ethnically mixed regions or historically Christian areas. Some villages were systematically looted, burned to the ground, destroyed. The Christians today are regrouped in zones which are either controlled or encircled by forces hostile to them (the Shi'ite militias, the Druze, or the Syrian army). In these areas, they are virtual hostages. The only remaining area where they are "free" is in East Beirut, Junieh, Byblos, and Douma—representing a mere 1,000 square kilometers. Over 1 million Christians are pressed in this hideout while, in the surrounding mountains, the canons of the Syrians survey their plight.

The interminable war, instigated from scarred the country, with innumerable victims: 150,000 dead, 400,000 wounded, 30,000 handicapped, 70,000 orphans, 750,000 refugees. In this sea of distress, the Christians have been most affected. Although all of the components of the country live in permanent fear in this drama, the Christians alone are threatened in their very existence. Half of the Christians of Lebanon have been uprooted and have become refugees within their own country. Many, to escape their situation as hostages, have flooded into the above-mentioned hideout where they have no hope for the future. If a solution is not made possible rapidly, this displaced people will soon start a mass exodus.

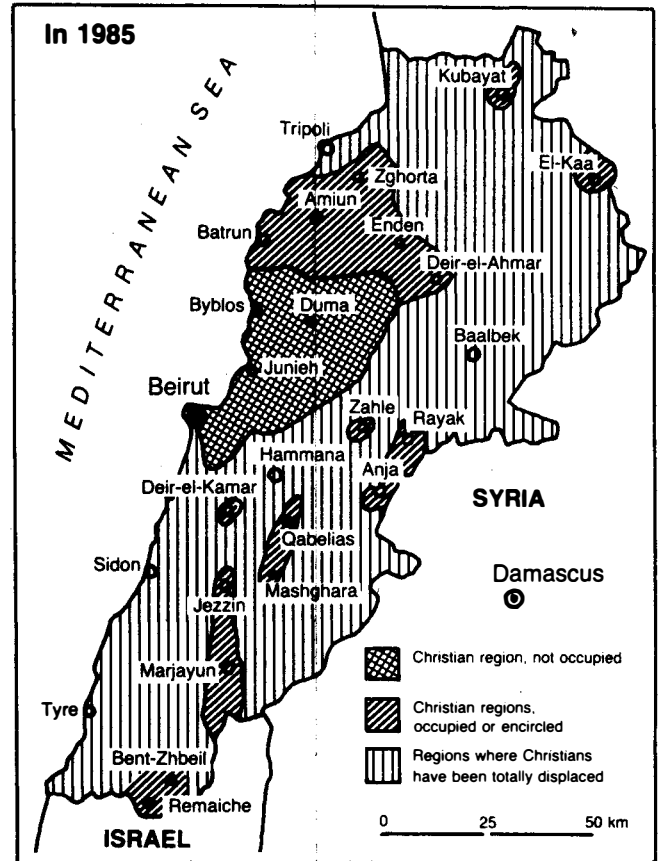
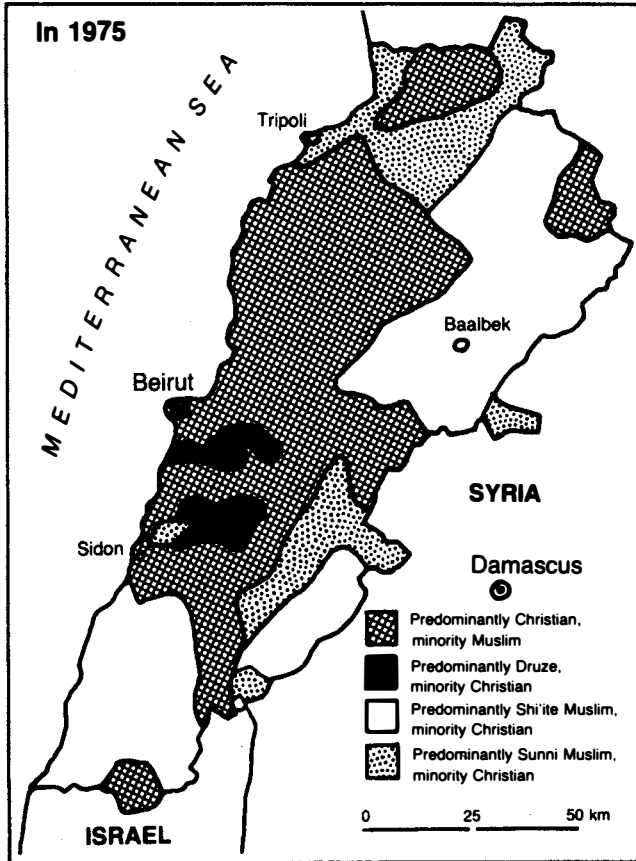
Genocide does not necessarily imply the extermination of all—as Ibrahim Chebli, a Lebanese Maronite intellectual, notes—but sometimes merely the total political destruction of a human group, breaking it apart into broken individuals submitted to the law of force alone. People who will be "tolerated" only if they submit.

This process of extermination by erosion is ongoing. In this sense, genocide is occurring, and a dictatorial state of a Syrian pro-Soviet or Islamic fundamentalist variety is on the horizon. The United States and the West as a whole, confronted with this, manifest total indifference.

Indictment of Western indifference

The military withdrawal of the Multinational Force from Beirut in early 1984 by the West (U.S.A., France, Italy, Great Britain), the removal of Western support for Lebanese President Amin Gemayel, enormously encouraged the fanatic extremists and the bloody Syrian dictatorship. This pull-back in the face of guerrillas of oppression and ignorance, this withdrawal in the face of the state terrorism of Damascus, precipitated the abandonment of the Christians of Lebanon. Today, Mr. Dean Brown, ex-special envoy of the United States to the Middle East and president of the Middle East Institute, declares (during a conference in Paris in early May 1986): "If you ask me what the importance of Lebanon is in

The Christian presence in Lebanon



U.S. policy, I will answer: close to zero!"

This deliberate policy of withdrawal and loss must be reversed: We must gain conscience that the defense of the Christians does not entail declaring a holy war against Islam, a *jihad* in reverse. The defense of the Christians is not merely the defense of one mortally threatend ethnic group, which in itself would be good reason to defend them. To defend the Christians is to defend essential Western values: the respect of human rights in an oriental context where human rights are systematically violated; the defense of the Christians thus means the defense of not only the Christians, but all Lebanese. The Muslim regimes are watching this process closely. In the Orient, where everything is judged confessionally, the Western powers can only be reliable allies if we prove we defend our allies including our fellow believers. Do we hope to win over Arab regimes by dumping our historical friends, the Christians of Lebanon? This is a major, fundamental political error.

We must support the inner core, the Maronite nation which has always resisted. We must do so in priority for its institutional representatives: the Patriarch, moral guarantor of the nation (presently Monsignor Sfeir), and the President of the Republic. The Christians must above all be supported

against the Syrian diktat and Iranian fundamentalism. Against the hegemonistic will of the Muslim fundamentalists, we must especially help the Christians through the institutions and the state apparatus.

Against the Syrian diktat, we must help the Patriarch and President politically, militarily, economically, culturally, educationally. Peace in Lebanon must be implemented among the Lebanese themselves. There can be talks with Syria, but we cannot allow that they impose their peace. Above all, we must maintain the institutions of the state, that is, a presidential system sufficiently strong to avoid permanent recourse to Syrian arbitrage (traditionally, the Lebanese state is multi-confessional with a Maronite President).

This is what is involved in the defense of Lebanese sovereignty and in that sovereignty's power to protect the Christians. By saving the last bastion of free Christians, free of Syrian diktat or the statute of apartheid, we can save Lebanon.

At a time when an intolerant version of Islam is rumbling in Teheran and Tripoli whose aims of conquest are vast, at a time when Soviet-linked Syria seeks to annex new territories, the Christian resistance of Lebanon is an advance post of the combat for freedom and democracy. Let us support that.