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THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Matthias Riemenschneider

The Middle East and North Africa are the cradle of not only Christianity but also of two other great religions, Judaism and Islam. Despite a mutual origin, pressure is building up on the Christians in this region. The Christian community, although well acquainted with its minority situation in the eventful history of the Orient, is increasingly losing faith in a future that guarantees them a secure existence.

In an expanding Islam in the Arab world, where tensions in society and economy are additionally exacerbated by a religious narrative, the living quality for Christians as a minority amongst Muslims is restricted manifold – even up to targeted terrorist attacks.¹ Christians are not only turning their backs to Iraq, where the situation for Christians at present is the most threatening, to find better living conditions in other countries.² The Catholic-Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria, Bishop Antonius Naguib, at the

1 | The country specific information in this article is based on information which has been collected by Thomas Birringer (Abu Dhabi), Léa Collet (Amman), Felix Dane (Ramallah), Lars Hänsel (Jerusalem), Andreas Jacobs (Cairo) and Thomas Schiller (Rabat). These reports were collated in early to mid-February 2011. The political upheavals which are currently raging in the region could not be appropriately dealt with in the article. At the time of writing it was not possible to foresee the effects of the political changes on the situation of Christians.

2 | About the situation of Christians in Iraq e.g. cf. Oliver Ernst, "Eine Stimme für die irakischen Christen" (A voice for the Iraqi Christians), in: <http://kas.de/wf/de/33.22565> (accessed April 26, 2011). In April 2011 the Iraqi Member of Parliament and Chaldean Christian Luis Caro Bender described very clearly the difficult situation of Christians in his country. Also the still remaining Christians in the country are considering more and more to emigrate.

occasion of an extraordinary synod for bishops of the Middle East in October 2010, pointed out that the percentage of Christians in the population of the Middle East was about 20 per cent only a century ago. Today it is only nearly five per cent, with a declining tendency.³

Nevertheless it is not appropriate to generally speak about a persecution situation of Christians. The situation of the individual countries of the Middle East and North Africa is too different and needs to be looked at closer.

THE SPREADING OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

In the countries of the Maghreb (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia) there is no longer a traditionally Christian population, although the heritage of Augustine, the father of the church, has close ties with the region in its cultural tradition. In these countries Christians are mainly foreigners, i.e. migrant workers, refugees from Black Africa or few Europeans who stayed on in the country after the end of colonial rule. About one per cent of the population are Christians.

Also in the countries of the Arabic Peninsular, which have united in the Gulf Cooperation Council (Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, Yemen is an associated member), there are no indigenous traditional Christian communities. Bahrain and Kuwait are the exception, as there are very small indigenous Christian communities living there. For historical reasons, the Anglican Church within the Christian communities in these countries is relatively strong. There is a Roman-Catholic diocese each in Abu Dhabi and Kuwait. Most of the Christians are migrant workers without citizenship. Due to the partly extremely fast development, the number of Christians also changes fast. The part of Christians in the population of Yemen and Oman is about one per cent, in Qatar, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia it could be at least ten per cent and it could be well above that in the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait.

There is a Roman-Catholic diocese each in Abu Dhabi and Kuwait. Most of the Christians are migrant workers without citizenship.

3 | Deepa Babington, "Arab Christians face political Islam threat-official says", *Reuters*, October 11, 2010, in: <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFTRE69A4AO20101011> (accessed May 4, 2011).

Until today the Aramaic, the Hebrew dialect that Jesus had spoken, is still the current language and church language in Iraq.

In Iraq, the biblical Mesopotamia, Christian tradition goes back to the 2nd century. The Assyrian Church of the East attributes their tradition to the Apostle Thomas. Until today the Aramaic, the Hebrew dialect that Jesus had spoken, is still the current language and church language. It was in the 16th and 17th century, when some Assyrian bishops of the church so far separated from the Western church, accepted the Roman creed. By the thus initiated Schism, the Chaldean-Catholic Church, united with Rome, was established – a church, which about two-thirds of the Iraqi Christians belong to up to the present. The Armenian Christians are the third large group, who immigrated into the country after the Turkish persecution in 1917.

No other Christian denominations in significant numbers were able to establish themselves in Iraq, the reason being mainly historic. "Apart from many political factors, it was however, the Western U.S. American missionaries, who caused immense harm to the "Apostolic Church of the East" in the 19th century. With the aim to missionate Muslims – which was not successful – the local traditional churches were undermined and weakened."⁴ During the last census in 1987, there were 1.4 million Christians registered in Iraq, about four per cent of the population. At present there are an estimated 400,000 Christians remaining in the country.

4 | Rev. Thomas Pietro Peral, "Vergesst nicht für uns zu beten. Besuch einer ökumenischen Delegation bei den Christen im Nord-Irak," Munich, January 2011. He carries on: "And it is bitter and lamentable to observe that following the Iraq war of 2003, U.S. American fundamentalists send out their bible troupes in the shadow of the U.S. army. This is the very much the case in Iraq and strengthens the Muslims' fatal and wrong equalisation of Christianity and the Western World. No resident Christian in Iraq has invited these missionaries, nobody wants to equalise Christianity and the Western culture. However, this is exactly what is being done, to the detriment of the Christians in the country. Nobody wants to equalise Christianity and Western culture. Fact is that this is exactly done, to the detriment of the followers in the country." The author is member of the church council of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Bavaria, in charge of Ecumene and World Responsibility. He headed the journey of an ecumenical delegation to Iraq in June 2010.

Also in Syria there is a long Christian tradition.⁵ The Christian part of the population is about ten per cent, but is however declining due to a low birth rate and a tendency to emigrate. The orthodox denominations are the largest Christian group in the country, who come under the Greek-Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and the whole of the East. The second largest Christian group are the Catholic churches united with Rome. It was only with the mission movements in the 19th and 20th century that also small Protestant communities were established. Subsequent to the second Iraq war, many Iraq Christians found shelter in Syria.

Even during the period of the Ottoman Empire in Lebanon, Christians remained a majority. At the founding of the Republic of Lebanon in 1926, 84 per cent of the population were Christians. The last census in 1931 still showed Christians to have a 51 per cent part in the population. For political reasons there were no more censuses, as especially the Christians feared that by establishing the actual proportions of religions and denominations, the result could lead to shifting the well balanced power between the population groups. Especially during the Lebanese civil war many Christians left the country. At present their share in the population is estimated with about 39 per cent, compared with about 27 per cent of Sunni and Shiite Muslims.⁶ The Maronite-Syrian Church of Antioch represents the majority of Christians in Lebanon (approx. 21 per cent) a church, united with the Catholic Church in Rome and the Syrian Orthodox Church (approx. eight per cent). The Greek-Catholic Church and the Druze represent about five per cent of the population of Lebanon.

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The area of today's Jordan is mentioned in many biblical stories, so e.g. as the East Jordan Valley or the area of the Samaritans. East-Jerusalem was under Jordanian authority until it was conquered by Israel during the Six-Day-War in 1967. Today about six per cent of the population belong

5 | Cf. Martin Beck, Léa Collet, "On Syrian Politics and its Christian Minority", in: *KAS International Reports* 12/2010, 72-86.

6 | Cf. *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html> (accessed May 5, 2011).

to the Christian minority, who mainly belong to different orthodox churches. There are also small Roman-Catholic as well as Protestant communities. The also existing evangelical communities are mainly regarded as a disturbing factor in the country, due to their missionary orientation that is seen as endangering the good dialogue between Muslims and Christians. There are also a great number of Christian migrant workers and refugees from Iraq living in Jordan.

Egypt also has a long standing history of Christian tradition. The Holy Antonius, as a hermit, established the Christian monasticism. Despite the Muslim conquests starting in the 7th century, the Christian population apparently held their majority right into the 15th century. The Coptic-Orthodox Church, to which 90 per cent of the Christian Egyptians belong, is the largest Christian minority in all of the Muslim dominated Arabic countries.⁷ Until today this church is shaped by a very lively tradition. The churches are full and, despite restrictions by authorities, there are new churches and monasteries being built all over the country; and the monasticism is booming.

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Even many Muslim Egyptians are proud of the long Christian tradition in their country. A massive disruption of the relationship between the religions was the military coup in 1952. Christians were connected to the former colonial rulers and were suspected to be the Fifth Column of the Western World. Subsequently Christians were removed from leading public positions.

The Arabic nationalism, co-founded by the Christians, was originally meant to emphasise the religious neutrality. The therein contained equality of religions was first of all revoked by a political separation, followed by a religious separation. President Anwar El Saddat declared himself President of a Muslim people. Subsequently the resentment against the Christian population increased and parallel societies were established, into which the Muslims as well as the Christians retreated.

7 | Cf. these details with Andreas Jacobs, "Under Muslim Rule – On the Political and Social situation of Egyptian Christians," in: *KAS International Reports* 12/2010, 16-33.

There are places and landscapes in Israel and the Palestinian areas, featuring in biblical stories, which play an equally important role in Jewish and Christian tradition. This region also contains sites which in Islamic tradition were places of revelation such as Hebron (location of the tomb of Abraham) or Jerusalem, from where the prophet Mohammed ascended to heaven. After the end of the 2nd Jewish war in 135, part of the Jewish population left the country. Christianity was able to expand very much through the intensive missionary work amongst the non-Jewish population, the so-called Heathen Mission; and after having been appointed state religion by Constantine, represented the majority of the population. The conquest by the Arabs, who took over the political rule after the collapse of the Roman Empire, did not change the situation very much. Judaism and Christianity were considered as revealed religions by the rulers and their followers had some restricted state protection as "People of the Book". Jews as well as Christians had to pay a special tax. It was only after the various crusades between the 11th and 13th century, that the situation of the religions changed. The Jewish population had been murdered by the bloody pogroms of crusaders or had been mostly dispersed. The military defeat of the crusaders meant an enormous loss of importance for the Christian population, and a large part of the population converted to the Islam.

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The Christians living in Israel and the Palestinian areas these days are mainly Arabs. In Israel their share in the population is about two per cent, in the Palestinian areas about 1.4 per cent. They belong to a greater part to the Greek-Orthodox Church.⁸ The Christian denominations in Israel are like a microcosm of the Christian world. Practically all Christian denominations are present.

8 | Cf. Lars Hänsel, "Christians in Israel – A Complex Question of Identity," in: *KAS International Reports* 12/2010, 34-52; Felix Dane and Jörg Knocha, "The Role and Influence of Christians in the Palestinian Territories," *ibid.*, 53-71.

RELIGION IN DAILY LIFE AND THE LEGAL STATUS OF CHRISTIANS

In the Maghreb no other religion than the Islam has any significance in daily life. There is no officially established interreligious dialogue.

In the Maghreb there is no religion other than Islam which has any significance in daily life, even though its culture still bears historical traces of the past influence of the Jewish and Christian faiths. For example, some traditional Moroccan cuisine can be traced back to Jewish dishes. Still, there is no official, institutionalised interreligious dialogue in the Maghreb. All religious communities must be registered. Only the Catholic Church in Tunisia has succeeded to establish a legally secured church hierarchy. Apart from pastoral work – mainly with foreigners and migrant workers – the churches in these countries are mainly involved in social projects, especially refugee work and diaconal work.⁹

According to the constitutions of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, the Islam is state religion. As there is no valid constitution in Libya, the status of religions has not officially been fixed. The “crime” of apostasy does not exist in the Algerian penal code.¹⁰ However, parliament in 2006 passed a law about “Conditions and Regulations for the practise of non-Muslim services”, which made work for the churches all over the country more difficult. First and foremost this law was directed against the Evangelical and Pentecostal Preachers, who had been very active amongst the Berber population in Algeria (and Morocco) and were able to present a series of conversions to Christianity, without however, putting any value on building up a community structure in its common sense.¹¹

In Morocco only Muslims and Jews can obtain full citizenship. Christians are granted complete freedom for practising

9 | The author and the editors thank Padre Hans Vöcking, Cologne, for his helpful information about the Maghreb.

10 | The expression apostasy describes the turning away from a religion by a formal act (e.g. leaving the church or converting to another faith or religion). Although the Quran does not prescribe a penalty on this side, for turning away from Islam, according to certain traditions the Prophet is said to have mentioned a penalty. According to the classical Islamic law, the publicly announced apostasy is punished with death, if the demand to return to the Islam (istitāba) is not followed.

11 | Padre Hans Vöcking, n. 9.

their faith. According to the understanding of the Moroccan state having religious freedom does not include the right for Muslims to change religions.

The states united in the Gulf Cooperation Council grant religious freedom only restrictedly and in accordance with the traditional customs; Saudi Arabia does not have religious freedom at all. There are diverse restrictions to the daily life also elsewhere. Non-Muslims are often not allowed to stand for parliament (Bahrain is an exception, where this was possible so far). Apart from that Muslim women are not allowed to marry a non-Muslim husband.

Christian communities in the smaller Gulf States and Oman are however allowed to practise their faith without restrictions, privately or within the church grounds. Many times the rulers make available to them a plot of land or a building. Church towers or crosses that can be seen outside are however rather unusual. In all these states Christian communities must be registered. Exceptions are the United Arab Emirates, where only the ruler of the relevant Emirate can grant official status to a community, and Saudi Arabia, where Christian communities are altogether not allowed.

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In most of the Gulf Cooperation Council states the indigenous population is a minority. The migrant workers are the majority and they come mainly from Muslim countries. Foreign Muslims often take higher public and economic functions. This is however, also true for the many Western, mostly Christian foreigners. But with regard to the numerically important countries of origin of Christian working migrants in the Gulf region, Christianity is like a "servant girl religion".

Under President Saleh in Yemen, religious freedom has been guaranteed formally. The government must authorise all places of worship, including the Muslim ones. However, Christian services in a private setting are allowed without restrictions, as well as carrying Christian symbols. Non-Muslims, although they are not allowed to stand for office, are however permitted to become a member of a Yemenite party, with the exception of the Islamic Islah party. In order

to understand the situation, it is important to differentiate between foreigners, who are comparably able to practise their religion freely and Yemenites, who have converted to Christianity. The death penalty for converting exists in almost all Gulf States.

The construction of a Roman-Catholic church in Sana'a is being planned at present. The Yemenite government has yet to give permission to build. The old building of the Catholic Church in Aden (South Yemen) had been confiscated under the Communist Government of the former Peoples' Republic of South Yemen. Following the unification of North- and South Yemen in 1990 the Catholic Church was to have the plot of land returned to it or was to be compensated. As an exchange, the Church asked for a new plot of land in Sana'a. So far, churches existed mainly in the former communist south of the country, hardly any in the Muslim North. Yemen does not maintain diplomatic relations to the Vatican.

In Oman Christian communities are mainly established in the city centres. In 2006 the Oman government sent a newsletter to all non-Muslim religious leaders, assuring them to respect the individual right to a religious freedom according to their values and customs. The Islamic communities as well as the Christian services are only allowed to worship in the places assigned and registered

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to them. Building new places of worship must be permitted by the government. Religious scripts have to be announced to the government before they are imported, Christian missionary work is expressively prohibited. Interreligious dialogue is well supported by the government. Sultan Qabos donated a chair for Religious Science at the University of Cambridge. Furthermore the government finances forums which are examining the different trends in Islam. The Sultan's open attitude that, over the past few years, has been modernising his country slowly and continuously, is however not shared by all of the people.

Church representatives of the United Arab Emirates praise the tolerance of this society. Christians in public life are treated with respect. The Roman-Catholic-, Anglican and the

Coptic Churches dominate the capital Abu Dhabi. The U.S. Presbyterian Church was there long before oil was found, with programmes for medical treatment and education. The communities are allowed their own communion- or confirmation teaching. The German schools in the country are also allowed to teach religion class. Since 2007 the United Arab Emirates maintain diplomatic relations with the Vatican; in 2010 a woman was appointed ambassador.

In Qatar Muslims and non-Muslims are subject to a legal system which connects secular and Islamic legal principles. A Christian religious community must have at least 1,500 members to be registered in Qatar. Church representatives report that at present registration becomes increasingly more cumbersome. In Qatar also an intensive interreligious dialogue exists, which is promoted by the ruler's family.

In Bahrain and Kuwait, registration processes for non-Muslim communities are very complex. However, registered communities in Kuwait are allowed to ring their church bells. Also religious literature and symbols can be imported. Services of not registered communities in private homes are permitted, even if they are officially not allowed. In Bahrain and Kuwait Islam lessons are an integrated part of the Curricula in public and private schools. In Kuwait however, the participation of non-Muslims is not obligatory. Both countries maintain diplomatic relations to the Vatican. The Kuwaiti Emir visited Pope Benedict XVI. in 2010.

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THE INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE REINFORCES CHRISTIANS IN THEIR MINORITY POSITION

By order of the Bahrain government a number of conferences took place over the past few years with regard to the intercultural dialogue, to which scientists and theologians from different cultures and religions had been invited. Neither of the two countries has laws which provide punishment for converting respectively apostasy. The converts are however faced with a number of social and profession discriminations. Here, as well as in Kuwait, even though less intense, conflicts between the Sunni and Shiites dominate the debate about religious minorities.

Kuwait has introduced a quota system for foreign clerics, who can be invited to Kuwait by Christian communities. The number of permitted visits has been considered as insufficient by the seven registered churches. They also consider the accommodation made available to them for holding services as inadequate. When trying to apply for building permits for new buildings, all responsible people reported massive problems. At present Kuwait is internally discussing a new church building.

Saudi-Arabia's interpretation of Islam does not recognise any other religion. Exercising a non-Islamic religion publicly in Saudi Arabia is therefore prohibited. Ordained clergymen of Christian churches are not allowed to enter Saudi-Arabia to celebrate services with the members of their churches. Most of the Christians in Saudi-Arabia are Philippine migrant workers.

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Article 2 of the Iraq Constitution passed by act of parliament in 2005 constitutes that each Iraqi has the right to freely exercise his religion. The Islam is, however, state religion and the most important source for legislation. It has been demanded many times to restrict the validity of the Sharia proviso in the Constitution to the Muslim part of the population. A public Christian life in Iraq is not possible at present, even though five of 235 seats in the Iraq Parliament have been taken by Christians.

In Jordan Islam is state religion and the source for legislation. The Constitution guarantees all citizens equality before the law, independent of their religion. However, some laws give an advantage to Muslims over Christians – especially in case of a marriage between a Muslim and a Christian woman, where she must submit all her rights with regard to the religious education of their children. In case of the husband's death, all rights on education of their mutual children are transferred to the family of the deceased husband.

Nevertheless, the coexistence of religions in Jordan is still regulated by tolerance and mutual understanding. The interreligious dialogue is being promoted energetically by the royal family. Prince Hassan bin Talal has thus

founded the "Royal Institute for Inter-faith Studies". King Abdallah II. in his very first "Amman Address" in November 2004 made the case for tolerance and inter-religious dialogue. Visiting Jordan, Pope Benedict XVI. called this country "a model of Christian-Muslim coexistence". The Christian churches have some religious courts of their own, which are occupied with questions of civil status law. The Jordan Parliament has allocated ten per cent of mandates to Christians. The present parliament has nine Christian Members of Parliament.

In Syria 75 per cent of the population are Sunni or Shiite Muslims. Despite this fact, Islam is not the state religion. Syria sees itself as a socialist, secular Arab republic. The founder of the Arab nationalist state party Baath, Michel Aflaq, was a Christian. The legal situation of Christians is equal to that of the Muslims, the religious status is not marked in passports. According to the Syrian Constitution, Islam is the main source for legislation. The family law, however, has been transferred to the religious communities themselves.

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As there are no civil marriages in Syria, mixed marriages – which are also rejected by many Christian communities – are only possible if the partner converts. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is prohibited and socially not accepted, as is the Christian mission among Muslims. There is religious freedom in Syria, as long as it does not oppose the autocratic regime as political power, which is why some Christians are involved in the governmental structures of the current regime. Many Christians see the (secular) state more as a guarantee for their security. Nationalism unifies the Syrian society. Political conflicts are very rarely religiously motivated. Religious communities enjoy autonomy more or less, especially with regard to the family law. Churches and religious institutions can be built without problems, some of the Christian festivity holidays are officially recognised. It also happens that religious leaders visit each other at important Christian festivities.

Syria is, however, an autocratic state and therefore there are severe repressions, which do not concern religious conflicts though. Christians are no more and no less victims

of state restrictions and persecutions as Muslims. The radical Islam only has few followers in Syria. This may also be the result of the state security forces and the military having bloodily stopped a revolt of Muslim Brothers in the town of Hama in 1982. It is said that there had been at least 20,000 deaths – and subsequent persecutions by secret services.¹²

With a “National Pact” in 1943 Lebanon declared its independence. The Lebanon Constitution defines the state as secular and pluralistic. All religions enjoy complete faith and freedom of conscience. Also in the agreement at Ta’if in 1990, when the Lebanon civil war ended, the religious parity was confirmed. 50 per cent of all seats in parliament are reserved for Christians. The most important public offices are furthermore traditionally distributed in accordance with a fixed key of religious affiliation. According to this, the state president must be Maronite Christian, the prime minister Sunni Muslim and the speaker of the parliament Shiite Muslim.

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There is no mention of religion in the Lebanese passports. Since February 2009 it is also allowed to remove the religion from civilly registered documents. Christian as well as Muslim religious festivities are national holidays. Private law is – similar to Syria – a matter for the religious communities. There are no civil courts, which makes inter-confessional marriages complicated, if not impossible.

Political conflicts, which have burdened the country heavily until today, are only partly due to confessional reasons. To this end, Shiite Hezbollah has many Christian and Sunni followers; the 14th March Movement, which has been characterised as being pro-Western, unites on the other hand Christians and Sunni; and the party of Druze Walid Dschumblatt is equally followed by Christians and Muslims.

SITUATION OF COPTIC CHRISTIANS IN EGYPT

Also in Egypt Islam is the official state religion and basis for the legislation. In the context of the current changes and the discussion on constitutional reform, the country's

12 | KNA report of March 31, 2011 – Iiknnk-BD-1534.21WU-1.

Islamic identity is being hotly debated. Parallel to this, the present Constitution guarantees the freedom of faith and the liberty to practise their own religion. Despite of this, not registered religious communities, as e.g. the Bahais, are repeatedly subject to state repressions. Also the Copts often complain about a manifold of daily discriminations and disadvantages.

There are no further rights laid down in the Egyptian Constitution with regard to rights for Christians. For years a unified law for constructing churches has been discussed. Constructing churches is still subject to a series of sometimes considerable restrictions. Church law is recognised by the state. The Egyptian state applies (Christian-Orthodox) family law. In case two partners belong to different denominations, all family legal questions are judged by the Sharia. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is officially not possible. Converts are subject to being harassed and discriminated. Also, the members of the Coptic Church are restricted in their freedom to make decisions. The Church excommunicates female members who marry a Muslim and demands the Muslim to convert to the Coptic-Orthodox faith, if he wants to marry a member of this church.

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Religious parties are so far prohibited in Egypt. There is thus no political force closely related to the Christians. Additionally, there is no official representation for Christians in Parliament. Compared to this, in Egyptian daily life Islam and Christianity play a prominent role. Religious faith largely structures the family and also the private sphere. The Sunni Islam, Christianity (with its numerous denominations) and also Judaism (in its orthodox and liberal shape) are state approved religious communities. The Religion of each Egyptian is marked in the identification documents. There are some legal and political restrictions by the state. Officially, however, Christians are part of the Egyptian society. Christian life and Christian culture are, to a certain extent, promoted by the state.

Christian churches in Egypt are not united, e.g. in shape of an ecumenical church council. The Coptic-Orthodox Church considers other denominations with distrust and rejects

cooperation. Especially the Protestant Churches are viewed very sceptically, as a conversion to Protestantism allows a divorce which is completely rejected by the Orthodox

Church. Furthermore the Coptic-Orthodox Church does not consider an interreligious dialogue with the Islam necessary. Informal every day contacts are however usual. The Vatican has maintained an institutionalised dialogue with the Al-Azhar University for years; the results however, are modest. Church representatives complain about the Muslim side of not being able to see the necessity for an interreligious dialogue.

The Basic Law in the Palestinian Territories declares the Islam of being the official religion. The fundamental right for freedom of religion and worshipping is guaranteed and respected by the ruling institutions. The Israeli side is however interfering with the freedom of worshipping. Due to the Israeli control points, which can be temporarily closed, it is not always possible for Palestinian Christians to visit their religious places in East Jerusalem or Bethlehem. There are no further restrictions for Christians in the West Jordan Valley. They have their own churches, sometimes visible from far away.

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According to a representative study amongst the Palestinians, 21 per cent of the Christian Palestinians find their identity in the Christian faith. The majority of Christian Palestinians, though, consider their nationality (33 per cent) and their ethnic origin (25 per cent) as paramount. The religion influences their family life and many Christians arrange their daily life and work according to the Church festivities. Cross religion marriages are not accepted among the Palestinian population, and as the religious institutions have a monopoly where the civil status is concerned, there are thus no exceptions. Changing religion is extremely difficult if not impossible exactly for the same reasons.

A number of ministerial decrees have especially been made for the Christians and guarantee this minority special rights and the protection of their faith. They comprise e.g. setting up a government committee for Christian Affairs (Presidential Decree of 2007), a Council of Ministers' decree

which regulates the weekends for Christian private schools, as well as a law that demands a minimum of six Christian representatives in Parliament. Additionally the Palestinian Basic Law explicitly states that there must be Christian chairmen of the council respectively mayors represented in ten communities in the West Jordan Valley. This guarantees the Christian minority some influence in politics, even if the dominating Fatah and Hamas have not so far allowed any further groups to have political status.

Despite their small proportion in the population, Christians do have a considerable influence on politics, economy and culture in the Palestinian Territories. Due to the great number of Christian schools, which have an excellent reputation, Christians generally have a higher degree of education compared to other parts of society. Unemployment, being about ten per cent, is also far below the national average. This of course offers Christians better chances on the employment market, especially in sections where higher education is required.

The situation in Gaza Strip is however different from that of West Jordan Valley. The very small Christian community there has been the victim of several violent attacks by radical Islamic groups. These, however, are directed more against the alleged "Western style of life" than against their religion as such. According to the ruling Hamas, they consider themselves as patron saint of the Christians in Gaza and confirm their solidarity. But most of the time they hardly react to the violent actions.

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CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE HOLY LAND

In the Declaration of Independence from 1948 the State of Israel guarantees complete freedom of religion. Accordingly, Christians, as all citizens, enjoy the freedom of faith and conscience as well as the right to freely practise their religion. Many Christians as a minority within the Arab sector increasingly feel the socio-economic and religious pressure of the Muslim majority. However, there are no further legal regulations which touch the daily life of Christians.

Most of the Christian communities are “recognised churches” in Israel and thus autonomous with regard questions of civil status. These churches have their own courts that decide according to the relevant canon law, and appoint their own judges. This ruling has existed since the Ottoman times, when the Sharia was the official civil law; non-Muslim religious minorities, however, were autonomous in questions of civil status. Jurisdiction of Israeli civil courts is referred to when parties do not want to appear in front of religious courts regarding guardianship, adoptions or questions about inheritance.

The majority of the Jewish Israeli accepts the Chief Rabbinate exclusively with reference to all civil status questions, who only allow marriages within the Jewish religious community. Therefore cross religion as well as secular marriages can only be performed abroad. The possibility of civil marriages has been brought before the Knesset as a legislative initiative. So far Parliament has not yet passed this law.

The interreligious dialogue in Israel has increasingly gained importance during the past few years. That refers above all to the Christian-Jewish dialogue. There are three factors which have contributed to a better relationship between Jews and Christians in Israel: First of all the visits of Pope John Paul II. and Pope Benedict XVI. following the commencement of official relations between Israel and the Vatican in 1993 have contributed to the Catholic Church to be viewed positively and have resulted in an intensive cooperation. Above all that, the Christians, well integrated in the Jewish majority society, have contributed to a new Jewish understanding of Christianity. The third factor is the many Israeli organisations engaging themselves in a Jewish-Arabic as well as inter-religious dialogue, where not seldom an unproportionate number of Christians take part. Christians, in the manifold societies of the Middle East, have an important bridging function. “Arab Christians are tied into Arab culture and understand Islam, but their religious roots lie in Judaism. Their experience of living in both cultures could make them a bridge between Jews and Muslims in Israel.”¹³

Christians in Israel, well integrated in the Jewish majority society, have contributed to a new Jewish understanding of Christianity.

13 | Hänsel, “Christians in Israel,” n. 8, 51.

PROHIBITED MISSIONARY WORK IN ISLAMIC COUNTRIES

Tolerance and religious freedom are very much subjected to religious and society standards which, in individual cases, deviate from the West European definition of religious freedom. This difficult tense situation can be explained e.g. with the practise in Yemen. As already mentioned Yemen regards itself as an Islamic country that recognises religious freedom. Foreigners are allowed to practise their religion freely even beyond official registration. Death is however the penalty for a Yemenite citizen, if he converts to Christianity.

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Islam in general prohibits converting to another religion, as a turning away from the religious community and thus factually from their tribal community. The understanding beyond this thinking is that whoever accepted Islam (as the true religion) and then turns away by converting to another religion turns away from God and the true faith. The apostate denies God and gives room to disbelief within himself.¹⁴

In the Islamic legal tradition, the theory has been developed that apostates must be punished with death also in this world. During the past decades a discussion has taken place between Islam theologians and legal scholars, whether the Quran indeed prescribes a punishment in this world or whether it is not really God's task in the next world to punish apostates.

Arab-Islamic scholars are mostly unified in the presumption that privately carried out conversions should be judged differently to the publicly confessed conversion, which is understood as a denial of God and vituperation of Islam. The Great-Sheikh of the Al-Azhar-University, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, explained: "Not everybody, who turns away from Islam, must be sentenced to death according to Islamic law. He will only be punished with death if he has caused harm to the Islam. If you are a Muslim and want to be a Christian, then go in peace – main thing is that you have converted. You are free to convert to Christianity or

14 | Cf. Sura 16, verse 106 and Sura 3, verses 86-91.

Judaism. But do not say Mohammed, our Prophet, is a liar! Then we must kill you, because you spread lies.”¹⁵

It must be mentioned that in Yemen at present there are no specific charges against Muslims who have converted to Christianity. However, in June 2008 a convert and his partner were arrested in Hodeida because of “Advertising for Christianity and handing out Bibles”. In June 2009 nine foreigners were abducted in Saada, amongst them a German evangelical family of five. And although there has not been an official statement by the abductors, it is presumed that they aroused interest with Islamists because of their missionary activity.

A religious freedom, even with restrictions, is expressively rejected in Saudi-Arabia. The Saudi King considers himself as protector of the holy places in Mecca and Medina.

In Saudi-Arabia, according to their laws and society practise, there is no other religion but the Islam that is recognised or even only tolerated. A religious freedom, even with restrictions, is expressively rejected. The Saudi King considers himself as protector of the holy places in Mecca and Medina. Non-Muslims are not even allowed to enter these places. Accordingly, it is prohibited all over the country, to exercise a non-Islamic religion. There are no officially recognised churches or community centres. Services even in private surroundings are prohibited. The moral- and religion police force have carried out many raids over the past few years and arrested prayer leaders, unofficially acting priests and members of the congregation.

The prohibition for ordained clerics, as official representatives of their churches, to enter Saudi-Arabia, affects especially the Roman-Catholic and Orthodox Christians, where administering the holy sacraments during the service takes up a very special importance. By this law every form of exercising a non-Muslim religion is pushed underground and criminalised. In March 2010 an Indian Christian service was dissolved by a raid. The priest and several believers were arrested and locked up for several days. Bibles and devotional objects were confiscated. There are further reports on arrests of members of religious minorities. Even the visit of King Abdullah at Pope Benedict XVI. in

15 | “Der Islam,” Folge 5: “Kopftuch – Glaube – Politik” (The Islam, Part 5: “Headscarf – Belief – Politics”), a film by Ulrich Baringhorst and Andreas Achenbach, WDR 1996.

November 2007, considered as being sensational, has not changed the Saudi monarchy's attitude towards religious freedom, which is basically considered problematic.¹⁶

UPSETS IN SOCIETY AND THE INCREASE OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

Since the outbreak of war in Iraq in 2003 many Christian have been victims of violent acts and attacks, which were explicitly directed against their religious community. As the violent acts increased between 2006 and 2007, many Christians were forced to live in isolation or to keep their faith secret. Some Christians, who had been working for the U.S. army, were described as traitors by Iraqis and became targets for terrorist attacks.

With more radical forms of Islam developing, who are increasingly gaining influence on public life, many Christians had to pay protection money, women were sometimes forced to wear a headscarf and Christian alcohol sellers were attacked. A further problem is the hate speeches in mosques. From view of Christian churches, however, it is difficult to stop public hate speeches against Christians, as many Muslim clerical leaders cannot assert themselves against the mosque preachers and their views.

An incident, which shocked the Christian community especially badly, was the abduction and murder of the Chaldean Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho in Northern Iraq in 2008. In October of that year there were a series of attacks directed against Christians in Mosul, which started the exodus of 12,000 Christians. In 2009 several Christian churches were attacked, especially in Bagdad and Mosul. Christmas 2009 brought assaults in front of a church in Bartala (Mosul), where Christians fought with Shiite Shabak. In March 2010, a further ten Christians were murdered in Mosul and subsequently 4,300 Christians fled mostly to the Niniveh plain. During a further attack on the Church Sayidat al-Najat (Our Lady of Salvation) on 31st October 2010, for which the terror group Islamic State Iraq claimed responsibility, about 60 people died.

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16 | Bishop Paul Hinder, Apostolic Vicar of Arabia, emphasised e.g. at the occasion of King Abdullah's visit to the Vatican, that religious freedom in Saudi-Arabia still presents a problem.

The situation in Egypt is less worrying than compared to Iraq, but from point of view of religious freedom and human rights still also unacceptable.¹⁷ "The political and religious discrimination was followed by social discrimination – on both sides. While under every president, including Mubarak, the idea of equality for all Egyptians was upheld and the existence of a religious minority within the country has been denied, Muslims and Christians alike increasingly withdraw into their own communities. At roughly the same time the background and circumstance of violent attacks against Christians were changing. Whereas they had previously been carried out by militant extremists with a clear political agenda in exposed areas (churches, monasteries), they now stem from the center of the Muslim (and Christian) population and often result from trivial arguments."¹⁸

Last year there were several terrible acts of violence against Christians. In January 2010 there was a drive-by shooting attack on Christians in front of a church in southern Egypt which left seven dead. In March around 3,000 Muslims attacked a Coptic community in north-west Egypt. In November 2010 there were many days of unrest, again in the south of the country, and Muslim groups destroyed Coptic Christian districts. Twelve people were killed in these attacks. On January 1, 2011 there was the devastating suicide attack on a Coptic church in Alexandria, leaving 23 people dead.

This list of violence describes a highly tense social situation. Still, it does not explain sufficiently the background of this violence. Cornelius Hulsman, head of the Centre for Arab-West Understanding, emphasises that attacks on church goers in Egypt is a fairly recent phenomenon. Most former attacks were directed against the churches and not the church goers. Attacks did not occur during or subsequent to services. The explanation of the Mubarak government that the suicide attack in Alexandria had been an attack by foreign extremists of the terror network al-Qaida is only part of the truth. Al-Qaida and other extremist groups are only supported where, due to great

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17 | Cf. Jacobs, "Under Muslim Rule," n. 7, 16-33.

18 | Ibid, 22.

social injustice, the population is highly discontented. Only in such a climate is it possible to enthruse people for the ideas of extremism and recruit individual people to die for the cause, whose aim it is to weaken governments in the countries attacked by them. Even before the demonstrations which led to the downfall of President Mubarak, Hulsman analysed: "The Egyptian government enjoys little support in the Egyptian middle- and lower classes. Caused by the attack and subsequent clashes between Muslims and Christians this support will decrease further."¹⁹

Hulsman mentions in his report that Muslim as well as Christian youths resent Mubarak's government badly. "We are treated like dirt', explains a Muslim hairdresser who lives in a Cairo slum, where houses are built so closely together that the sun hardly ever reaches the ground. Young Muslims and Christians complain mutually about the lack of jobs and bad payment of the few offered jobs. In a surrounding that offers young people so few chances, it is not surprising that some of them are attracted by extremist groups."²⁰

Denomination based tensions in Egypt are mainly caused by constructing churches and conversions. Despite of bureaucratic obstacles during the planning and approval of new church buildings, a series of new churches were built during the past few years. However, due to the lack of basic legislation there is no transparency for outsiders to understand the decisions.

Despite of bureaucratic obstacles during the planning and approval of new church buildings, a series of new churches were built in Egypt during the past few years.

A similar situation happens with conversion procedures. "An estimated thousands of Christians convert to Islam every year. Vice versa there are probably less than a hundred cases. There are no official documents for conversions. Therefore the quoted figures are only estimated values. The Egyptian security service has such documents, which are certainly not being made public."²¹

19 | Cornelius Hulsman, "Die Hintergründe des brutalen Anschlags auf eine koptische Kirche in Alexandria am 1. Januar 2011" (The background of the brutal attack on a Coptic Church on January 1, 2011), in: *Menschenrechte* (Human Rights) 41, Missio International (ed.), Aachen 2011, 7.

20 | Ibid, 7 et seq.

21 | Ibid, 24 et seq.

The Coptic Church objects the conversions of their community members to Islam. They are of the opinion that no practising Christian can reject his faith and that thus a conversion does not happen voluntarily. In addition, in a religious country such as Egypt, a conversion is considered a disgrace to the family honour. Furthermore Muslim as well as Christian families are of the opinion that "this shame must be removed – if necessary by an honour killing. This happened equally with Muslims and Christians, although the figure of honour killings is not very high."²² The social ostracism is widely spread, whereby the family cuts all ties to the person who converted and declares that the other religion has forced him or her to convert.

In connection with the attack on the Coptic Church in Alexandria on 1st January 2011, there was a mention of names of two women who had declared that they wanted to convert to Islam. It is said that both women had been hindered by the Coptic Church to carry this out. Wafa' Costantine and Kamiliya Shihatah, who are both married to Coptic priests, wanted to force their husbands into divorce by converting to Islam. Several indications confirm that the Coptic Church, that strictly rejects divorce as well as conversion to Islam, has exercised enormous pressure on these two women.²³

Several indications confirm that the Coptic Church has exercised enormous pressure on two Coptic women who wanted to force their husbands into divorce by converting to Islam.

There were little indications up to the middle of April 2011 about the sort of impact the overthrow of President Mubarak's regime will have on the coexistence of Muslims and Christians in Egypt. Perhaps it can be seen as an encouraging sign that during the restless days after the 25th January, when the police retreated completely from public view, and armed thug squads and looters walked through the towns, no churches were attacked or Christians been harmed.

SUMMARY

Christians are in a minority situation in all countries of North Africa and Middle East. However, their situation is very different depending on the country. It stretches from

22 | Ibid, 30.

23 | Ibid, 8-10 and 30-32.

mutual tolerance and a peaceful coexistence to the experience of targeted violence against Christians and church institutions.

Almost all countries mention religious freedom in their constitutions. Granting it in daily life, however, is done according to traditional Islamic rules. Decently practised faith is mostly tolerated. Where church constructions are concerned, or employing a cleric from abroad, the restrictions to the sovereignty of the religious community vary. The measure of freedom or restriction is not only dependent on cultural and historical factors in these countries. It also depends on how serious an interreligious dialogue is pursued by all sides.

In Western countries the understanding is that human dignity and religious freedom are natural rights and comprise that people can change their belief or also the so-called negative religious freedom of not having a belief at all and also the right to marry across religious (and thus also social) borders. This understanding of religious freedom is often not only rejected by the Muslim majority society, but also by Christian churches in these countries. Especially where jurisdiction of civil status lies in the hands of religious communities, the freedom of individual decisions comes second behind the religious and social standards.

A targeted Christian missionary work in Arab-Muslim countries is seen as an attack on the state. The traditionally rooted churches in these countries keep well back on mission work, and where the work exceeds pastoral work, they engage in medical-charitable work and educational areas. Moreover, Christian mission collides with the Islamic based theological prohibition of apostasy. Especially mission work by Evangelical and Pentecostal groups is seen as a disturbing factor even in countries with good Islamic-Christian coexistence. Every conversion shatters the concerned families and the social surrounding, which can easily lead to violent attacks in an already politically tense situation.

Every conversion shatters the concerned families and the social surrounding, which can easily lead to violent attacks in an already politically tense situation.

The critical situation of Christians in many Arab countries is also due to the increasing islamisation in the societies of these countries. In the opinion of the Catholic-Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria, Bishop Antonius Naguib, difficulties in the relationship between Christians and Muslims generally occur when the Muslim side cannot distinguish anymore between religion and politics.²⁴ Naguib commented the situation during a special synod of bishops in the Near East in the Vatican in October 2010.

At this very synod Rabbi David Rosen from Jerusalem held a speech in which he said: "The wellbeing of Christian communities in the Middle East is nothing less than a kind of barometer of the moral condition of our countries. The degree to which Christians enjoy civil and religious rights and liberties testifies to the health or infirmity of the respective societies in the Middle East."²⁵ Rosen emphasised that regardless of the difficult situation, it is especially Christians in their very special way who start an

According to Rabbi David Rosen, the future depended upon the question, whether Muslims could see the Christian and Jewish presence as an integral part of the region.

interreligious dialogue, which can lead to a better understanding of the religions among each other and also to a social cooperation. Christians should not be left alone with these efforts. The future depended upon the question, whether Muslims could see the Christian and Jewish presence as a completely legitimate and integral part of the whole region. Rosen emphasised that the conflict was not a new one. "Those who claim that 'occupation' is the 'root cause' of conflict are at best disingenuous. This conflict had been going on for decades long before the Six-Day-War in 1967 as a result of which the West Bank and Gaza came under Israeli control. 'Occupation' in fact is precisely a consequence of the conflict, the real 'root issue' of which is precisely whether the Arab world can tolerate a non-Arab sovereign polity in its midst."²⁶

24 | Babington, "Arab Christians face political Islam threat-official says", n. 3.

25 | Intervention of the special guest, Rabbi David Rosen, Advisor to the chief Rabbinate of Israel, Director of the "Department for interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee and Heilbrunn Institute for international interreligious Understanding", in: *Synodus Episcoporum – Bulletin*, October 8-13, 2010, 18.

26 | Ibid.

The politicisation of Islam may be the consequence of an Israeli-Arabic conflict that has not yet been solved. In some countries Christians are the valve by which the pressure of a conflict is released. Bishop Paul Hinder, Head of the Apostolic Vicariate of Arabia in Abu Dhabi, pointed out rightly that at present more Muslims are victims of terrorist attacks than Christians. The situation of Christians in the region is an important aspect, however the question of security concerns all.²⁷

An objective description of living conditions of Christians in the Arab countries must point out a series of shortcomings. Such a description contains, however, also the understanding that the greater number of religious conflicts are caused by social and political tensions, where religion is exploited for other purposes. Christians and their communities in the Middle East and North Africa should not be left alone by their brothers and sisters in faith in Europe. This is a difficult task which requires a delicate touch, as many Christian groups and their predecessors are viewed by the region's Muslims as being a gateway to Western culture. Any legitimate support of the persecuted communities must be done in such a way that it does not run the risk of being seen as an abuse of religion. An ecumenical delegation which visited northern Iraq in June 2010 found itself constantly being asked by Iraqis to show them solidarity in their faith to give them the strength to carry on: "Don't forget to pray for us".²⁸

The greater number of religious conflicts are caused by social and political tensions, where religion is exploited for other purposes.

27 | KNA-Press release of February 22, 2011, KNA Iikmlt-BD-1527.14MI-1.

28 | Pietro Peral, "Vergesst nicht für uns zu beten," n. 4.