

Palestinian Christians Are Not Suffering at the Hands of Muslims

By Raja G. Mattar

A few weeks ago I received by email an article by a Dr. Walid Phares titled "Arab Christians who are they?" Initially I brushed it off as rather inconsequential, but it subsequently came to my attention that Dr. Phares is promoting some rather bizarre ideas about Arab Christians on the lecture and TV circuit in the U.S., contesting their Arab ethnicity and claiming their persecution by Muslims. Being an Arab Christian myself, I would like to use some of the views of Dr. Phares as an entry point to highlight the falsities being promulgated by him and a few others under the guise of scholarly studies. Sadly, many of these anti-Arab activists fit the characterization of 'self-hating Arabs'.

Arab Christians have always existed in the Middle East, and long before the advent of Islam. In Lebanon today they number about 1.3 million (about one-third of the population) mainly of Maronite denomination. In Syria they number approximately two million (or about 10% of the population) which include a significant community of Maronites. In Egypt, Christians, mostly Copts, are about 4.5 million, or about 6% of the population. There are one million in Iraq of various denominations, or about 4% the population. The Christians of Palestine and Jordan may number 600,000, but so many population shifts had taken place that it is difficult to venture a reliable estimate.

The Christians of Lebanon, Syria and Palestine played a pioneering role in reviving Arab culture from the comatose state it was in under the Ottomans. The renaissance of Arab culture owes a great deal to the many Christian Arab scholars who were among the forerunners in shaping Arab national identity. The Maronites role, in particular, was of major cultural importance. In Lebanon they are the backbone of its cultural diversity. A Saudi friend once commented that if the Maronites did not exist we would have to invent them!

There have been occasional claims that the Maronites can trace their ancestry to Phoenicians. This is a myth intended to distance the Maronites from their Arab roots. The Maronites were inhabitants of Orontes (Al-Assi) valley in Syria. They are most probably descendants of some Arab tribes who never converted to Islam. The eminent Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi (incidentally, a Christian) in his 'A House of Many Mansions' [1988] states (ch. 6): "It is very possible that the Maronites, as a community of Arabian origin, were among the last Arabian Christian tribes to arrive in Syria before Islam.... Certainly, since the 9th Century, their language has been Arabic, which indicates that they must have originated as an Arab tribal community....

The fact that Syriac remains the language of their liturgy... is irrelevant. Syriac, which is the Christian literary form of Aramaic, was originally the liturgical language of all the Arab and Arameo-Arab Christian sects, in Arabia as well as in Syria and Iraq." Salibi also notes (in ch. 4), that Patriarch Istifan Duwayhi, a Maronite historian of the 17th Century, points out that the Maronites "had to move their seat out of the valley of the Orontes to Mount Lebanon as a result of Byzantine, not Muslim persecution." Salibi further goes on to say: "Between 969 and 1071... the Byzantines were in actual control of the Orontes valley.... They must have subjected the Maronites to enough persecution to force them to abandon the place and join

their co-religionists in Mount Lebanon.... In Muslim Aleppo, however, the community survived, as it does to this day." El Hassan Bin Talal (former Crown Prince of Jordan and a prominent scholar) in his "Christianity in the Arab World" [1994] (ch. 7), emphasizes: "It is possible that the Maronite Church would not have survived the Byzantine re-conquests in Syria between the 10th and 11th Centuries... had the Byzantines ... succeeded in occupying the whole of Syria, leaving no parts under Muslim rule, where dissident Christian groups could find refuge from Byzantine persecution."

I hope we can put to rest the myth of the Maronites as descendants of the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians lived mainly on the coasts of Lebanon and Syria. If one wants to belabour the subject their descendants are obviously the coast dwellers, mainly the Sunnis. In any case, the Greek historian Herodotus wrote in the 5th Century BC, that the Phoenicians themselves were Arab tribes from the Arabian shores of the Red Sea.

Dr. Phares in his article mentions "pogroms of the Copts in Egypt". This a serious and misleading accusation. The term pogrom means organized and systematic killing of an ethnic group usually sanctioned by the government. There may have been occasional sectarian clashes, but I have yet to come across a historical record to the effect that the Copts, or any other Arab Christian group for that matter, having been the target of pogroms. (The only recorded massacre of Christians was in 1860 in Mount Lebanon, and the origin of that unfortunate event was a social rebellion by Maronite serfs against their Druze overlords). Pogroms were an invention of Christian rulers in Europe, mostly directed against Jews - for which Palestinian Arabs, both Christian and Muslim, have been paying dearly as the Christian West tries to atone for its sins at their expense. This Western guilt complex, nurtured continuously by Zionist propaganda, has resulted in a tomblike silence over the atrocities perpetrated by Israel over the past 60 years.

It is often mentioned that the Copts of Egypt are descendants of the Pharaohs. But so much history had elapsed between the disappearance of the Pharaohs and the arrival of Islam, that this claim appears questionable, and in any case the Muslims of Egypt have every bit as much right to it, if indeed that claim is anything more than intellectual hair-splitting.

The article in question also claims that the Christians remaining in Palestine "are experiencing one of their most severe choices: surrender to Islamization, or join the pan-Middle East Christian boat..." This is a flagrant a distortion of reality. Palestinian Christians are not suffering at the hands of the Muslims, but at the hands of the Israelis, and the bullet-scarred statue of the Virgin Mary in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is a poignant testimony to this fact. We are witnessing before our very eyes the gradual de-Christianization and de-Islamization of Arab Jerusalem due to persistent Israeli measures aimed at deliberately destroying the Arab character of the City, while the Western world, spearheaded by successive U.S. Administrations, displays utter insensitivity, if not outright acquiescence, to this demographic crime.

Dr. Phares talks about the Muslims "demonizing those who have formed their national state, Israel." He seems to believe, along with many others, that the Jews of Palestine were a large community dispersed by the Romans and now entitled to return to their 'homeland'. According to Israel Finkelstein, an Israeli Archaeologist, in his monumental work 'The Bible Unearthed' [2001], the Hebrews were never a large community, never had a substantial kingdom, never were in Egypt (the

exodus from Egypt is just a myth). The number of Jews dispersed by the Romans from Palestine was minimal; most Jews remained in Palestine, some gradually became Christians, and, some further on, Muslims.

The bulk of the Jews who have been pouring into Palestine for decades under the so-called 'Right of Return' have no demonstrable kinship to the Hebrew inhabitants of Palestine in Roman times. The fanatical settlers - especially those of East European or Russian origins - who claim to return to their 'ancestral land' are, as advanced by Arthur Koestler (a Hungarian Jew) in his scholarly work 'The Thirteenth Tribe' [1976], descendants of the Khazars, southern Russian tribes who converted to Judaism about 740 AD (ch.1). Their Empire collapsed after their defeat by the Russians late in the 10th Century and they dispersed all over Europe. Alfred Lilienthal (an American Jew) in an article written in 1981 titled "Zionism and American Jews" confirms: "In The Thirteenth Tribe, Arthur Koestler, supported overwhelmingly by such anthropologists as Ripley, Weissenberg, Hertz, Boas, Mead and Fishberg, proves that the vast majority of today's Jews are descendants of the Khazars of South Russia.... The Ben-Gurions, the Golda Meirs, and the Begins, who have clamoured to go back 'home,' probably never had antecedents in that part of the world."

The Arabian Desert and the area around it gave birth to a number of tribes and civilizations - Phoenicians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Hebrews, Canaanites, Nabateans, etc. These tribes continuously drifted out of the desert into the fertile areas of the Levant and the Nile valley. Their languages were very similar, one could even call them dialects of the same language. Even present-day Hebrew shares remarkable similarities with Arabic. These tribes had different religions. At one time most were pagan, some were Jewish. With the advent of Christianity some became Christian. Thus Christianity was not an ethnic denomination but a religion adopted by many of these tribes. Many of the great Arab poets of pre-Islamic times were Christian, (Imru'-al-Qays, Amr ibn-Kulthum, Tarafa ibn al-Abed, among others).

The language prevalent in the Arab world today is called Arabic, but it is no more than the dialect of one major Arab tribe, Qureish, which became the language of the Qur'an. That language spread like wildfire in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine and northern Egypt because the people in these areas were effectively already speaking dialects of the same language.

What used to be known as Bilad Al Sham (Greater Syria, if you will) was Arabized long before Islam. To quote Salibi again (ch. 5): "Since pre-Islamic times, Mount Lebanon appears to have been densely populated by Arab tribes...." In ch. 7: "To maintain that the Syrians came to be Arabized after the conquest of their Country by the Muslim Arabs was simply not correct, because Syria was already largely inhabited by Arabs - in fact, Christian Arabs - long before Islam."

When Islam expanded out of Arabia into what is now called the Middle East, most oriental Christians (Monophysites, Maronites, Nestorians) were in deep political and theological conflict with Byzantium. Many gradually converted to Islam, including the largest Arab tribe, the Taghlebs, who converted sometimes in the 10th Century. These Christian Arab tribes may have found in Islam with its insistence on the indivisibility of God ("La Ilah Illa Allah" meaning 'There is no God, but God') a simplified version of their faith. The process involved no coercion. The only battles that took place were with the Byzantines. Most Christian Arabs - in fact all, except the Melchites who were allied theologically with the Byzantine Church) - cooperated actively with the Muslims, with many actually fighting alongside the Muslims

(folklore has it that the Arab saying: "My brother and I against my cousin, and my cousin and I against the foreigner" dates from this period).

Numerous small, dissident Christian sects - among them the Copts and the Maronites - survived and even prospered under Islamic rule, while their equivalents in Christian Europe disappeared under official persecution. Many researchers going through the tax records (the Zakat paid by the Muslims as compared to the tribute, called the Jizya, paid by non-Muslims, mostly Christian) of the early Islamic rule of Syria and Egypt came to the conclusion that as late as the 12th Century, i.e. six centuries after the rise of Islam, the majority of the population of Syria and Egypt was Christian, hardly indicative of any Islamic coercion to convert. A quote from the eminent Bertrand Russell, a Nobel Prize winner, may be in order at this point:

I have always been told throughout my youth of the fanaticism of the Mohammedans, and especially that story of the destruction of the library at Alexandria. Well, I believed all these stories, but when I came to look into the history of the times concerned, I had a great many shocks. In the first place, I discovered that the library of Alexandria was destroyed a great many times, and the first time was by Julius Caesar. But the last time was supposed to have been by the Mohammedans, and for this I found no justification whatsoever. Nor did I find that the Mohammedans were fanatical. The contests between Catholics, Nestorians, and Monophysites were bitter and persecuting to the last degree. But the Mohammedans, when they conquered Christian countries, allowed the Christians to be perfectly free, provided they pay a tribute. The only penalty for being a Christian was that you had to pay a tribute that Mohammedans did not have to pay. This proved completely successful, and the immense majority of the population became Mohammedans, but not through any fanaticism on the part of the Mohammedans. On the contrary they, in the earlier centuries of their power, represented free thought and tolerance to a degree that the Christians did not emulate until quite recent times. Bertrand Russell (Eng. philosopher, 1872-1970): "Reading History As It Is Never Written" [1959] of prime historical significance is the fact that in the early stages of Arab rule, Christians Arabs played a crucial cultural role, highly appreciated by the Islamic rulers. Due to their familiarity with the Greek heritage, they helped translate the legacy of Greece to Arabic, giving an intellectual boost to the emerging Arab civilization which was later, through its outposts in Spain and Sicily, to rouse Europe from the slumber of its Dark Ages.

Is there such a thing as an Arab ethnicity at present? I think not. There is no group of people in the world that can claim pure ethnicity, except perhaps in some remote islands. Let me take as an example France, which is proud of its cultural, historic, and moral heritage. Most of Southern France is Italian in its ethnic origins; farther west it is Basque; up north, it is Breton and Norman. Paris was a haven for refugees throughout its history. Even Napoleon, to whom the French pay homage, was from Italo-French Corsica. Can one claim that there is such a thing as, ethnically, a French race?

There is, however, such a thing as an Arab culture. Apart from the obvious racial minorities (Christians and animists in Southern Sudan, Kurds in Syria and Iraq, Berbers in North Africa, and a few others), the rest of the population is culturally Arab. Culture is the language they speak, the poetry they recite, the songs they sing, the foods they eat, the music they dance to, and the history they share.

Trying to find ethnic slots in which to place various peoples is first an exercise in futility, and second in racism. Cultures do exist, however, and whether we like it or

not, whether some scattered thinkers in and outside the Arab world like it or not, whether some self-hating Arabs like it or not, we are - for better or for worse - part of the Arab Culture. Arab Christians have contributed a lot to this Culture and they should be proud of their contributions. Those who deny this heritage are reneging on their cultural roots and trying to identify with some extinct civilizations. They are turning their backs on the Christian giants of Arab Culture - the Gibrans, the Naimehs, the Bustanis, the Yazigis, the Zeidans, the various Khourys, the Abou Madis, the Maaloofs, the Al-Akhtals (old and new), and yes, the Fayrouzes, the Rahbanis, the Al Roumis - and trying to find their heroes in the tombs of Byblos and the sarcophagi of Egypt.

Needless to say, many Arabs are dissatisfied with the current state of Arab affairs. Things do look frustrating, depressing and seemingly hopeless. During such periods of national malaise, there is a tendency among some intellectuals to deny even belonging to their own Culture and to find an outlet in esoteric ideas and fanatic ideologies. That is one of many reasons why Communism took over Russia, Nazism took over Germany and radical Islamism is now holding itself as an alternative to secular Arabism. But the current torpor in our political landscape is no reason to create an imagined identity for ourselves from the ruins of defunct civilizations. Nor is it sufficient justification to distance ourselves from our Arab Culture and attach ourselves to a technologically and militarily superior West, whose past and present morality - massacres, wars, religious pogroms, colonialism, and ethnic cleansings, up to and including Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, Bagram and the unconditional support of Israel's genocidal policies - are hardly occasion for great pride.

There are many agitators who have a political agenda and are keen to distort history and statistics to fit such an agenda, imagining ethnic differences where none exist. They are either alien to this Culture - or have alienated themselves from it - and are trying to fabricate falsehoods and pass them on as history to uninformed listeners or readers. They are trying to invent for Arab Christians an artificial identity antagonistic to the environment they have always been part of, not realizing - or maybe they are - that by nurturing such a rift they might be creating among Arab Christians an anti-Islamic 'fifth column', disloyal to its own Culture and probably imperilling whole Christian communities in the Arab Middle East. And for what? To toady to Israel and its patrons in the U.S.?

The millions of Christians are a dynamic part of the Arab landscape and should remain so. They should cooperate with the Muslims to develop a secular society where all citizens are equal, regardless of religious affiliation or ethnic (imagined or real) background. They should not be encouraged to adopt a confrontational attitude towards their compatriots, and they should refuse to become pawns of foreign powers trying to dominate, destabilize, and re-colonize the Middle East, as exemplified by the enormous military and financial backing bestowed over the years upon Israel and the recent military assault on Iraq. Perhaps the imperative of Christian-Muslim harmony applies to Lebanon nowadays more than ever.

We Arab Christians should avoid at all costs to forge alliances with any new crusaders against Arabs or Islam. We should support the Arab's struggle today against these neo-crusaders who are masquerading as liberators and democracy promoters, and who are trying to disfigure Arab history and reshape Arab Culture and values. Our contributions to Arab Culture are immense. We really don't need some cultural defectors to instil in us a persecution complex and a hostile mindset towards our fellow citizens, when we should act, as we always did, as bridges between the Arab world and the West.

Arabs - Muslims and Christians - have their hands full right now trying to field the onslaught of Zionist and neo-conservative propaganda spewing out of the West, without having to contend with a contingent of self-hating Arabs in their midst. In this charged political atmosphere of demonization of Arabs and Islam, we should reclaim our role as defenders, interpreters, interlocutors, spokespersons of our geographical hinterland, of our Arab depth. We have helped the nascent Arab Empire in its early years gain access to the Greek classics; we have helped reawaken Arab identity from its Ottoman stupor. Let us not allow Western and/or Israeli fundamentalists to cast a pall over it again.

When the Crusaders entered Jerusalem in 1099, we, Arab Christians, were massacred along with the Muslims. The brutality in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan clearly demonstrates that the morality of the new crusaders is no better than

Morality of those who came here centuries ago.

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