

Middle Eastern Christians

Two thousand years after the time of Christ, Christians in the region of his birth face an uncertain future, with discrimination, low birth rates and outward migration all contributing to falling numbers among some of the oldest Christian communities in the world.

The region today known as the West Bank (part of Palestine) is of particular significance to Christians as the land of Christ's birth and much of his ministry. Christians in the West Bank face a double challenge. For the most part Palestinian Arabs, they suffer from all the restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation; as a minority within the Arab population, they run the risk of exclusion by their Muslim neighbours. In general, however, relations between the Christian and Muslim Palestinians have been largely peaceful, and in some areas specific accommodation of Christians in the political process has been achieved. Both the mayor and deputy mayor of Bethlehem are required to be Christians, for example. Nevertheless, the poor security situation, coupled with Israeli imposed curfews and labour restrictions, combined with the loss of tourist income to Christian holy sites, has led to emigration by many Palestinian Christians. The Christian Palestinian population generally supports the aspirations of the Palestinian people overall for an end to Israeli occupation and the achievement of full statehood. Christians in Israel proper are similarly a minority within a minority. Around 2% of Israel's population is Christian and most are Israeli Arabs, who constitute approximately 16% of the total population. Although the Israeli state in theory guarantees full freedom of worship, Christians, in common with other Israeli Arabs, suffer from land restrictions and other anti-Arab discrimination. In addition to Arab Christians, there exists in Israel a community of Messianic Jews – Jews who have accepted Christ – and a vocal Christian Zionist movement with links to evangelical US movements. The Christian Zionists, being fanatically pro-Israeli, are largely at odds with their Arab Christian co-religionists.

Lebanon is the only Middle Eastern country where, in modern times, Christians have been politically as-

endant and where they continue to be a significant political force. Under Lebanon's 'confessional' constitution (See 4.04) the President of Lebanon must be a Christian. Officially, the Christian population stands at around a third. However, this is certainly an over-enumeration, as the last census was conducted in 1932. During Lebanon's civil wars of the mid 1970s various Christian movements, most notably the Phalangists, acted as allies and proxies of Israel. Direct Christian military influence has since declined, although the Lebanese army officer corps continues to be largely drawn from the largest Christian denomination, the 4th century Maronite church, which is in communion with Rome but retains much of its own liturgy. Poor security and civil strife, plus strong cultural links between Lebanese Christians and Europe, America and Australia, have encouraged large-scale emigration, contributing to falling numbers.

Egypt has, proportionately, the second largest Christian population in the region with some 16% of the population being Christian, largely from the ancient Coptic confession, which uses a language descended from that of ancient Egypt. Copts have increasingly found themselves under both informal and official harassment and restrictions as well as suffering from a declining security situation. In December 2007 riots were reported between Coptic and Muslim demonstrators in the south of the country.

Syrian Christians are able to worship freely and openly, but their declining numbers is an issue. Jordan's 4% Christian minority is similarly suffering a gradual decline. Churches must be registered with the government, and proselytizing Muslims is not permitted. Conversions from Islam are not permitted, and Christians who have converted from Islam are subject to official persecution.

Christian populations in selected Middle Eastern countries

Iran: 0.6% of population.
Mainly Armenian.

Iraq: 2.7%. Chaldean-Assyrian.

Israel: 2.1%. Greek Orthodox; Catholic.
Also Messianic Jews and Christian Zionists.

Jordan: 4%. Catholic,
Greek Orthodox.

Egypt: 16%. Coptic.

Lebanon: Officially 34%. Maronite,
Greek Orthodox.

Syria: 9.4%. Greek Orthodox,
Catholic

West Bank/Gaza: 2.4%.
Greek Orthodox, Catholic.

Christians in Iraq have been subjected to harassment since the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein, prompting widespread emigration. Christianity has had a foothold in Iraq since the second century and is home to the ancient Chaldean-Assyrian sects. Chaldeans are also to be found in Turkey, where the secular constitution in theory preserves full religious freedom. Christians have, however, been subject to bureaucratic and other petty restrictions in practice.

Iran's tiny Christian minority, largely of the Armenian confession, suffers from informal discrimination, although the religion is recognized in the constitution. In the Gulf states, Christianity, at least among the indigenous population, is almost wholly suppressed and conversion from Islam to Christianity is subject to severe penalties, including floggings and, occasionally, the application of the death penalty. In most Gulf states expatriate workers have, in theory, some freedom of religion, but public expressions of Christianity, any efforts to promote the faith, and religious gatherings, are all subject to very severe restrictions.

Yemen

Principal protagonists



Mainly Sunni Yemeni government.

Zaydi Shia insurgents.

Al Qaeda attacks.

Nature of conflict

Intra-Muslim Sunni/Shia conflict

☠ 800.

👤 Up to 100,000 IDPs.

Population/ethnic composition

Yemen population: 22.2m. Arab 92.8%, Somali 3.7%. Religious mix: Sunni, 60%; Zaydi (Shia) 40%.

Territorial extent

Primarily the northern Sa'dah and surrounding regions, but clashes reported in San'a and elsewhere.

Yemen total: c 528,000 km².

Timeline

- 30 Oct 1918: North Yemen independent of Ottoman Empire as Zaydi Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen.
- 30 Nov 1968: South Yemen (Aden) independent of Britain. Later forms People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY).
- 27 Sep 1962: Monarchy overthrown. Yemen Arab Republic proclaimed.
- 22 May 1990: North and South Yemen unified as Republic of Yemen.
- 21 May-7 Jul 1994: Resurgent PDRY in rebellion.
- Jun 2004-present: Zaydi insurgency.

Current status

Unstable. Insurgency continues.



Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the Arab world, has suffered debilitating internal conflict throughout much of its modern history. From 1918 until 1962, northern Yemen was ruled by the Mutawakkilite dynasty, whose kings, as heads of the Zaydiyyah sect within Shia Islam, exercised both spiritual and temporal power. In 1962 the monarchy was toppled by military officers backed by Egypt, and civil war continued until 1970. Following unification of north and south Yemen in 1990, Marxists in the south sought a resurrection of their People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, plunging the country again into civil war, albeit briefly, in 1994.

In the 21st century, religious divisions have proven a source of renewed conflict. Since mid-2004, Zaydi Shias have been in armed insurrection against the central government, which is largely Sunni. Initially led by Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, and, subsequent to his death at the hands of government forces, by his son, the rebels claim they are fighting Sunni discrimination. Fighting subsided in 2006, but flared again in 2007 and 2008.

The insurgency is primarily in the extreme north Sa'dah region and the eponymous city, where 18 worshippers were killed in an April 2008 explosion at the Ben Salman mosque (the al-Houthi faction denied responsibility.) A series of further mosque attacks continues during May 2008, and the rebels accused the government of causing widespread civilian casualties during airstrikes against Shia targets.

The Yemeni government, which also faces pressures from Al Qaeda linked Islamist factions and a potential renewal of Marxist insurgency in the south, accuses the Zaydis of seeking a return of the theocratic monarchy deposed in 1962. It has also accused Iran of financing and directing the uprising. While this explanation is perhaps tenable, it is worth noting that the Zaydiyyah sect, which rejects the concept that imams are infallible or that they receive divine guidance, is regarded as heretical by many Shias and diverges sharply from the conservative interpretation of Shia that is the official ideology in Tehran.