The Future of Christians in the Middle East

On 7 December 2016, the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (European University Institute) hosted a workshop on the situation of Christians in the Middle East. Bringing together religious figures, youth activists and scholars from both Europe and the MENA region, this workshop aimed to tackle the following key issues: what are the challenges and threats faced by Eastern Christian actors today? What strategies and responses have they adopted? How can Christians play a mediating and peace-building role? In order to preserve anonymity and ensure free speech, all discussions were held under Chatham House Rule.

A religious minority in the Middle East, Eastern Christians (90% Orthodox, 10% Catholics) have recently entered the international spotlight. The European Union in particular has suddenly found itself at the forefront of the defence of Christians in the Middle East, warning against the dangers of majority oppression and religious extremism. By presenting Christians as a community under stress, Western countries and Russia – which tend to see themselves as their ultimate defenders – have paradoxically been exacerbating sectarian tensions. The emphasis on religious identity as the criteria for humanitarian relief is in fact a double-edged sword that has certainly helped tp protect Eastern Christians, but that has also contributed to the fragmentation of the region along confessional lines.

Since the collapse of secular nationalism (i.e. Baath, Nasserism) – to which Christians are historically close (e.g. Michel Aflaq) – and more recently since the Arab Revolutions, we witness a revival of community feeling and a fallback to the smallest common denominator (tribe, confessional group, neighbourhood, etc). In fact, the disappearance of Arab nationalism – which endeavoured to overcome local identities to forge a feeling of national belonging (Nasser being a prime example) – and the growing trend of ethnicisation of religious groups (Assyrians for instance seek to be recognised as an Assyro-babylonian ethnic group enjoying its own independent state on the Kurdish model) raise serious challenges to current model of the Arab state.

In this context of renegoziating the identification process, Christians are often expected to behave as a tribal group. The sharing of a religious identity is wrongly interpreted as a factor facilitating group cohesion and autonomy, automatically granting Christians with the ability to organize and protect themselves. In Syria, however, the vast majority of Christians not only refuse to be actively

involved in military conflict, but even deny being an actor in a war they do not consider to be theirs for both religious (peace is posited as a biblical value) and political reasons (taking up arms would *de facto* make Christians a party in the conflict, thus feeding the vicious circle of violence and civil war).

Christian actors – and faith-based actors in general – seem instead to have an increasing role in the field of social and cultural activities (schools, hospital, etc) as well as mediation. They often enjoy good reconciliation skills due to their proximity and close relationship with the local population. Mediation is in this sense neither a business nor a scientific object, but it is primarily dependent upon one's capacity to build confidence. On the one hand, political actors are usually rejected because of their alleged bias in favour of one party. On the other hand, actors that are not involved in the public sphere do not have enough charisma and influence in order to be trusted. Consequently, religious actors are often favoured due to their political neutrality, their interest in peace and conciliation, and above all the quality of their connections with the local population.

However, the political role of the Churches in favour of the central regimes tends to delegitimize Christian actors as impartial mediators. In fact, since the Arab Revolutions Christian actors have split between official figures supporting the regimes and youth activists (e.g. Maspero youth union in Egypt) contesting the political choice that their Churches have made without consulting them.

Simultaneously, the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, from which hundreds of thousands of Christians had to flee their villages, as well as the tensions between Christians and Muslims in Egypt and Lebanon, and the inability of dictators (Bachar al-Assad) or alike to protect religious minorities (anti-Christian protests in Egypt) leave Christians no choice but to escape from their countries. In Syria and Iraq, many Christians were kidnapped and/or killed by ISIS, while in Egypt the Coptic Church's support for military intervention against the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood and the growing radicalisation of Islamist youth generate violent actions against Christians (the most recent being the killing on 11 December of 25 Copts in a church in Cairo).

By way of consequence, we observe at once the Churches' support towards authoritarian regimes and the exile of Christians (especially the youth) out of their country (about 400,000 Syrian Christians have fled). In addition, this emigration reveals a profund divide between an educated urban elite, which can afford to travel, and a poor rural population emotionally attached to its lands. The Christian elite's escape will most likely constitute a major challenge after the war, both in terms of reconstruction and of Christian involvement in the reconstruction process. Whether Christians will be able to provide qualified people for post-conflit reconstruction will prove critical for their political future in the MENA region.

Moreover, for these two aforementioned reasons (Churches' support for the regime; emigration of the Christian elite), there is a considerable risk that Churches will prove unable to recreate a pact with local actors and will instead globalise themselves – at the expense of their local communities – in order to obtain the upper hand over the Eastern Christians diaspora. Their subsequent de-nationalisation – which is already ongoing in the case of the Syriac Orthodox Church – would thus likely create a cleavage between an emigrated Christian elite and the

remaining poor Christian community in the Middle East, who have been abandoned by their Churches and have been tempted to follow the trends of ethnicisation and milicianisation. If the Churches are not able to reconnect with the local Christian communities, there is high chance that religion will be tribalised.

In the meantime, envisioning the future of Christians in the Middle East entails waiving the claim that it is morally imperative to defend minorities – which has marked the reapparition of the "just cause" in western discourse – at the benefit of a more pragmatic approach that acknowledges the mechanisms of society fragmentation, communautarian fallbacks, exacerbation of religious identities, and militarization of religious tensions. First, there is a need to stop labelling Eastern Christians as the natural target of radical Islam (which is in fact persecuting everyone) in order to de-substantiate the sectarian-based narrative, and second, to make sure that Christians will have a political role in the post-conflict era (by providing support to Christian elites).