

A Christian voice from Syria : Bishop Armash Nalbandian, Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Damascus

By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, from Nicosia

HRWF (14.11.2017) – On 9-10 November, the Conference of European Churches (KEK-CEC) held a conference on the protection of places of worship and holy sites in Nicosia (Cyprus). Bishop Armash Nalbandian, Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Damascus, shared with the audience the experience of Christians suffering from the war in Syria.

Christians in Syria

Under the 1960 census, Christians constituted just under 15% of the population (about 1.2 million people out of 8 million). No newer census has taken place since then and there are no reliable statistics. Current estimates number at about 8-10% (1.5-1.7 million out of 17.2 million), due to lower birth rates and higher rates of emigration compared to their Muslim compatriots.

In Syria, Islam is not a state religion. The country is secular, which ensures equality for members of all religions. Christians can buy land and build churches. Clerics are exempt from military service and schools provide Christian and Muslim religious instruction. Unlike other Arab countries, Syria fights against fundamentalism. Emigration is a serious problem for the Christian Churches as many Christians have left Syria since the 1960s.*

“Christians in Syria were never a closed community”, said Bishop Nalbandian.

“We are part of the indigenous population of the country but we shared everything with our fellow brothers who chose the Muslim faith. We built this country together and occupied the most prestigious positions. Both Christians and Muslims have a difficult life. We are victims of unemployment, robberies, kidnappings, killings, shelling... We may have different views on political issues but we agree that they are to be solved in a democratic way, not by jeopardizing our country’s safety and sovereignty.”

“In 2013, two of our own Metropolitan bishops of Aleppo, Mar Gregorios Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church and Paul Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch were kidnapped, and their driver was murdered, while they were delivering some humanitarian aid to some displaced families in the region. This deeply affected the Syrian Christians because they were messengers of peace and they were fighting for the good of all human beings.”

Christians’ toll of the war

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis seven years ago, 200 churches and more than 1800 mosques have been damaged or destroyed. More than 10 million Syrians, including 40-50% Christians, lost their homes and many are now refugees.

The Armenian Community of Syria has also suffered from the war. According to some approximate statistics, there have been:

- 200 human casualties
- 450 injured
- 1200 houses bombed and partly destroyed
- 200 houses totally destroyed
- 900 damaged houses (broken windows, doors, etc.)
- 120 victims of kidnapping (two of them were killed and six are still missing)
- 3300 stores and small or big workshops damaged and

looted

- 19 schools attacked and partly destroyed, damaged and looted
- 8 cultural centers destroyed
- 15 community buildings (hospitals, orphanages, homes for elderly people, etc.) damaged or destroyed

Religious extremism

Bishop Nalbandian added:

“Today, ISIS and other extremist organizations are killing in the name of Islam and religion, imposing shariah, and categorizing others as infidels or takfirs. These are common practices. Millions of Christians and non-Christians in the Middle East currently suffer from religious extremism, war, religious and ethnic cleansing. Sunnis are killed by Sunnis, Shias are targeted by Islamic fanatics, Christians and Yezidis were expelled from their homes and towns. Children have lost their parents. Millions of people are prevented from living peacefully because of fanaticism and terrorism. This is genocide.”

Conclusions

In a communiqué released after the conference, the participants expressed, among other things, deep concerns that many sites of religious or spiritual as well as of historic and cultural significance have over the past decades become focal points of violence and intolerance and/or suffered from hostile acts, especially but not exclusively in conflicts and wars, both from states and from third parties.

**This information is referring to the situation in Syria prior to the outbreak of war in 2011.*

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