

The Gulf war and the Christian Arabs

by Dr. Geris S. Khoury

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Many world leaders in East and West, have exploited and misused religion and tried to inject God as an integral part of the Gulf crisis. Each side tried to say that God is standing on their side in fighting the enemy. At the same time we saw that many world leaders who took part in the war were praying and asking divine help to win, instead of working and praying for dialogue, justice, and peace. Of course they prayed for their thrones and for the success of their sophisticated weapons as well as the annihilation of their enemies. Only at the end did they pray for their soldiers. From a Christian point of view, these prayers are no different from the hypocritical Pharisees' prayers about which Jesus had a clear position.

Our God, in Whom we believe, is the God of all, for He created all of us in His image. He is a Father for all of us and not only for self-serving leaders. God is with those who are with him. And whoever is with God cannot liquidate his fellow men who are in the image of God. For if someone shoots a human being it means he is shooting God and his conscience.

So consequently, all those who wanted God to be on their side and all those who misused religion in this war and thought that God was with them, were unrealistic and wrong. God is with those who are praying for more dialogue, justice, peace.

Today, after the war, many of our friends in the West are asking us: How could this Gulf war affect the Arab Christians? Such a question is legitimate and of course they are asking it because they are worried and confused. This because Iraq declared a Holy War (*jihad*) against its enemies and spoke about a new crusade because they saw Mr. Bush and Queen Elizabeth praying for the annihilation of the Iraqi soldiers.

The truth is that religion does not have anything to do with this war and never was a reason: not during the Crusades or before or after. Religion is a source for love, for justice, and peace. Colonialism and imperialism were always reasons for enmity, invasion, and oppression. The Gulf war was, for

us, a colonialist and imperialist one which we Christians in the Middle East were against.

Since the beginning of the crisis, many Eastern Church leaders warned about the dangers of the war and how it could negatively affect the Christian presence in the Middle East. Such a position was understood by some Western Church leaders and organizations but many didn't hear us or understand that.

But once again, the Eastern Church tried to overcome the crisis, especially in Iraq, Jordan, and in the Holy Land, by having a clear position which can be summarized as follows:

1) Yes to more dialogue and encounter and yes to the international law and to the application of all United Nations resolutions regarding the Middle East.

2) No to the Western presence in the Gulf and no to the imperialist war and to negative Western interfering in the Arab world.

This position of the Eastern Church is not a new one. It's historical and we can find a real identification of the Arab

Message of Pan-Islamic Conference to the Pope

"The Muslim people and states are available to consolidate the dialogue with Christians," reads a message sent from Jeddah to Vatican City by the general secretary of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Hamid Algarid, on March 7. Algarid's letter wishes "full success" to the "historic meeting," and stresses "great attention" with which the Islamic world has looked at the repeated appeals of the Pope in favor of "a peace in the Middle East, based on law, justice, and equality."

The letter also says that it is necessary to consolidate the Islamic-Christian dialogue, which "represents a determining factor for peace and progress of humanity, particularly in those regions where Muslims and Christians have lived close to each other for centuries and share the same dangers and hopes. Christians and Muslims still today fear the tragedies which have caused generations of martyrs, in particular in the Middle East, and hope that all this does not continue, and that the peoples of this region, so dear to our believers' hearts, do not continue to be subjected to injustices and to inequalities." Algarid in particular mentioned the Palestinian people, victims of a "grave injustice which has lasted too long."

Eastern Church with the Arab Muslims. This is because the Eastern Christians were persecuted by Western Christians on many occasions: during the Byzantine period, during the Crusades, during this century and up to the present. More than that, the Eastern Church paid a very high price because it was used as a cover for the protection of Western interests in the Middle East, in general, and in the Holy Land in particular.

For example: The West, instead of using the spiritual wealth of the Eastern Churches, used their financial weakness and sent missionaries formally to help, but in reality to divide the Christian community. Another sad example is the agreement between Western countries and the Turks in which they divided the holy places between the different denominations, and, as a result the churches in the Holy Land (The Holy Sepulchre or the Nativity) had to be shared among many denominations. The result is struggle, disunity and confusion. . . . Such sad agreement which is known by the name of "status quo" was concluded by the Turks in order to please some European countries and protect their interests in the Holy Land.

In our recent history and in these days while some of you in the West are worrying about the future of the Arab Christians in Islamic countries, we see that your governments are directly encouraging Islamic fundamentalism. I think so because Western countries are financing some Islamic movements in their attempt to create divisions, disorder, and instability in the Arab countries, and such a situation is in favor of Western interests.

On the other hand, because the West is ignoring the rights of one people and doesn't work on just political solutions but supports the oppressors in their oppression, this policy makes people become fundamentalist and fanatical.

After this war in which Iraq, the Arab country that believed in the "Arab national thought," lost the war, there is the risk that fundamentalism will attract more people as a political alternative. Personally, I hope that this will not happen and if Iraq lost the battle this doesn't mean a failure for "Arab national thought."

However, even under Islam we don't feel in danger. They protected us through the centuries while the Western Christians persecuted us. The Eastern Church was able to live under Islam and will continue to do so since it is a Christian and Islamic church. It's Christian because of its creed and doctrines, and it is Muslim because of its culture, language, history, spirituality, and life. This church is an inseparable part of the Islamic Arab world and only our Arab identity and our Arab national aspirations and the Arab Islamic world can protect us Christians in the Middle East. This doesn't exclude dialogue, encounter, and collaboration with the West as long as we do not compromise our future for Western interests. Dialogue can resume if the West respects our dignity and freedom. We are ready to share but not to serve.

Interviews: Palestinian leaders

Muslim or Christian, Palestinians are one

Before their meeting with the Pope on March 14, some of the leading members of the Palestinian delegation from Jerusalem discussed their visit to the Vatican with Umberto Pascali.

Geries Khoury

Director of Al-Liqa center and leader of the delegation to the Pope. He reported on March 12; "Just yesterday, a personal representative of the Pope came to Jerusalem and lit a candle at the Holy Sepulchre on behalf of the Pope, to symbolize the lights of peace."

EIR: What can you tell us about your meeting in the Vatican?

Khoury: I can tell you a few points we will touch on, both in the document we will deliver to the Pope and in public conferences afterward. First, I want to restate our respect for international legitimacy with the hope that the United Nations may serve the whole world and not only the powerful. Second, we demand the enforcement of all the resolutions of the U.N. concerning the Middle East and in particular Palestine.

We request that Israel recognize Resolutions 242 and 338. We ask the international community, all the peoples and their leaders to save justice and to make every effort to apply this international legitimacy to Palestine and to recognize the right of the Palestinians to decide their own future and to create a democratic and free state on the Palestinian land occupied by Israel in 1967, and to recognize the PLO as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

We reiterate the unity of the Palestinian people, Christians and Muslims, and stress again that the aim of the Palestinian fight is only the freedom of this people and not the oppression of any other people.

Bishop Lufti Laham

The Greek Catholic Melchite Patriarchal Vicar of Jerusalem, and chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Al-Liqa Center.

Laham: Before the explosion of the war the Holy Father