



Policy Alternatives, 6 December 2017

Aleppo Christians: A Turbulent History and the Path Ahead

→ Roger Asfar



A picture of the destruction of the Holy Church of Saint Mar Assia al-Hakim in Aleppo, Syria, February 2017 © Youssef Badawi / EPA



The Syrian conflict erupted six years ago in 2011, and its long-reaching consequences have affected all communities in Syria. This article will focus on the ramifications of the conflict on the Christians of Aleppo. Through examining the collective history of Aleppo Christians over the past two centuries this article will focus on events that shaped collective memory and incidents of persecution against Christians. This will allow for a discussion of the Christians' position on the revolution, in particular why the majority do not support the revolutionary movement. This article will demonstrate that this position is not solely due to the Christians' loyalty to the Assad regime but also because of the history of living in fear in Aleppo.

History of the Persecution of Aleppo Christians

Christians of Aleppo have been subjected to a long history of persecution and injustice. However, under the rule of Ibrahim Pasha, they were treated particularly well. At the time the Egyptian rule withdrew from the city, tensions between Muslims and Christians were growing. The fair treatment of Christians and departure of the Egyptian government were a catalyst for the "Aleppo events" of 1850. This massacre resulted in numerous death and injuries as well as the destruction of Christian homes, churches, and Archdioceses. The central Ottoman authority responded swiftly to the incident, however, it was not taken as seriously by the local authorities as the perpetrators were not adequately punished and material losses were not fully compensated. These incidents drove numerous Christian families to leave the city. Those who remained believed that their Muslim neighbours preferred that the Christians live under *dhimma*, or the status of a protected citizen instead of a free citizen. This incident remains imprinted on the collective memory of Christians in Aleppo and the stories from this period are handed down from generation to generation, even a century and a half later.

The "Aleppo Events" had a tremendous effect on the conditions of Aleppo Christians. Around the same time the Ottoman Institutions, or *Tanzimat*, came into effect as a means of countering European influence and strengthening a weakening empire. Under the *Tanzimat* numerous reforms occurred and all the



Arab Reform Initiative

Sultan's subjects became equal. However, these reforms were never fully implemented and were not regarded favourably by most Muslims. Furthermore, in 1860, a civil war broke out in Mount Lebanon between the Druze, Muslims, and Christians, which spread to Damascus. The violence was largely perpetuated by the Muslims and Druze, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Christians. Following the conflict in Mount Lebanon and Damascus Christians lived in fear of the violence spreading to Aleppo. While this never happened, the news coming out of Lebanon and Damascus did nothing to quell their panic.

However, Muslims eventually grew more accepting of the new status quo for Christians, allowing them to feel secure. This new-found security led to the establishment of the Azizia neighbourhood, which is still considered, at least symbolically, as the Christian centre in Aleppo. Following Azizia, additional neighbourhoods including Al Nayal, Al Hamadiyah, Al Suleimaniya, and Al Jabiriya were founded. From 1860 onwards, the Christians of Aleppo had a substantial role in local government. At times, there were up to three Christians on local councils, they held half of the seats in the provincial governing board, and often headed the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce.

However, this new-found security was short lived. Christians in Aleppo once again became concerned for their safety under the bloody reign of Abdul Hamid as many Armenians were persecuted during the Zeytoun rebellion. As a result, Aleppo welcomed many Armenians, Christians, and others from the city of Mar'esh. Following the rebellion, the *Jizya* tax imposed on non-Muslims was eliminated in 1910, and as World War One began Christians of Aleppo were forced into military services. Instead, many chose to flee the empire, which when combined with famine and war casualties, caused the number of Christians in Aleppo to decrease significantly. After the Armenian genocide of 1915, tens of thousands of Armenians fled to Aleppo, however, some of them were sent to other cities, such as Hama and Deir Ezzor. After nearly three years, the Ottoman authorities permitted nearly 60,000 Armenians to return to Aleppo.

Tensions between Muslims and Christians continued to build well into the twentieth century. In October 1936, the Sunday market clashes between Muslims and Christians led to the death of two Christians and one Muslims, as well as injuries on both sides. These events opened old wounds and were all too



Arab Reform Initiative

reminiscent of the events of 1850 and 1860. It was later revealed that the clashes were started by a paramilitary offshoot of the fascist and sectarian Catholic Youth Group, known as the White Badge. The group disbanded following the Sunday Market clashes and after revelations that it was backed by different intelligence forces. In fact, the group's leader was employed by the French army as head of intelligence in Aleppo. Once again, Christians, out of fear and for peace of mind, moved into established Christian neighbourhoods. Thus, the divisions between Christian and Muslim neighbourhoods gradually grew, until there were only a few Christian families left in the predominately Muslim old city. Today, the only proof that Christians once lived in the old city are the surviving city records.

Following Syrian independence and the end of the French mandate in 1946, the Baathist party began their ascension to power. The Baathist government began nationalizing agricultural land and factories in 1958, which affected Muslims and Christians alike. Yet again, Christians felt threatened and fled largely to Lebanon. This time, however, they escaped with means and as traders, intellectuals as well as industrial leaders. Aleppo lost some of its most capable citizens; those who could have become true leaders.

Authority over the lives of Christians continued in 1967 when the government took control of the private Christian schools. This represented a large setback to the Aleppo Christian community and caused them to lose more faith in their country. These schools had been an influential part of the city and brought Muslims and Christians together. Many years later, at the beginning of Hafez Al Assad's rule, a court ruling declared the takeover of the schools illegal and the government was ordered to relinquish control and to return the schools to the Christian community. However, this ruling was never implemented. The government claimed that while they trust the Christians they cannot grant this concession. If they did the government would be obliged to grant similar permissions to far less trustworthy and loyal groups.

The late twentieth century saw increased insecurity for Christians as well as increasing rifts between Christians and Muslims. The Lebanese civil war reminded the Christians of their precarious position in the region. During times of conflict, most notably in 1967, 1973, and 1975, the Syrian government instituted compulsory military service, which sparked another wave of Christian immigration



from Syria. Additionally, The Muslim Brotherhood was active in Syria from the late 1970s until 1982. This episode, yet again, threatened the Christians and made them distrustful of Muslims. Being part of the Muslim Brotherhood became synonymous with being an extremist or a terrorist, causing the divide between Muslims and Christians to deepen.

The Christian collective memory was shaped by the numerous experiences under the Ottomans, the French mandate, and Baathist rule. Even when Christians were outwardly calling for co-existence, they were passing down memories of those events through anecdotes. The role of Muslims in protecting their Christian neighbours, standing up to the perpetrators of the Sunday Market clashes, and in protesting the burning of the Christian schools alongside the Christians in 1945 and 1956 are rarely mentioned. The only evidence of this Muslim support is speeches and reports from external observers. Likewise, the church rarely used its influence to promote awareness and coexistence. The church was not immune from corruption and suffered from regular interference of security and intelligence forces. Gradually, the church’s influence was weakened and became synonymous with nepotism and corruption.

Table 1: Christian Population in Aleppo

Date	Muslims	Christians	Jewish	Total	
1821	-	-	-	400	
1890	-	-	-	120,000	
1900	69,646	27,060	7,666	104,372	26% Christian
1901	76,329	24,508	7,306	108,143	22.5% Christian
1922	~100,000	~50,000	6,000-7,000	156,748	~30% Christian
1944	-	112,110	-	300,000	37% Christian
2010	-	160,000	-	-	
2016	-	30,000	-	1,000,000	4% Christian

As demonstrated in the table above, the Christian population has fluctuated since the nineteenth century. Christian emigration has caused the population to decrease. With the influx of Armenians fleeing persecution the Christian



community increased dramatically in numbers between 1900 and 1944. In addition to the Armenians, Syriacs from Southern Turkey, Orthodox Christians from the Iskanderun province, and Syrian Christians from Jazira, Wadi Nasra and the countryside of Jisr El Shoughor also adopted Aleppo as their home. In fact, the original Christians of Aleppo quickly became the minority as Christians from elsewhere flooded in. This population increase impacted the representation of Aleppo Christians in the government. In the mid-1930s, Christians had five seats in parliament, which increased to seven seats in the 1940s. Today, despite an increase in the total number of seats in parliament, Christians are only allotted three seats, split between the Catholics, Orthodox and Armenians.

When considering the Christian population in Aleppo it is important to note that official sources avoid providing exact figures for the number of Roman Catholics, a sect that has always prided itself on being the dominant Christian group in Aleppo before 2011. Sources often place the population at around 20,000, and while this number might have been accurate in the early 90s an estimated 35% had already left the country by then. Today, there are no more than 6,000 Christians left in Aleppo, most of whom are women or over the age of sixty. In March 2016, Archbishop Antoine Odo, stated that a third of Syria's one and a half million Christians, according to him, have fled Syria since 2011.

Christians and the 2011 Syrian Revolution

For decades prior to the revolution, the government implemented certain policies that gave Christians special privileges. In reality, these “privileges” were rights that should have been afforded to them in the first place. These so-called privileges included the right to worship, the right to attend church, the right to celebrate religious holidays, and the right to form church-affiliated civil society groups. Additionally, Christians were guaranteed a set number of seats allocated to Aleppo in parliament and were well represented in different ministries.

Despite these privileges, the government viewed Christians as a group instead of individuals, which is a common practice in dictatorships. In this sense, Christians were not treated as citizens. Although it appears contradictory, the government



Arab Reform Initiative

simultaneously encouraged the growth of the Christian community while reserving the right to curb it when necessary. These policies were not haphazard, and have been more visible, at least in the media, under Bashar Al Assad than his father. Internally, these policies were designed to make Christians feel like a favoured minority, in order to create a bond between the Christian minority and the government, which represents the Alawite minority. Externally, these policies were intended to portray the Syrian government as a protector of Christians, a minority in a turbulent region regularly targeted by Sunni extremists. This image the government created has ensured the support of the majority of the Christian community since the beginning of the revolution in 2011.

Despite the Christian loyalty to the state, the revolution and corresponding military response has pushed more Christians to leave Aleppo and Syria altogether. This was especially the case following the bombing of Christian neighbourhoods by armed opposition groups, forced military conscription which was equated to suicide, and the abduction of Aleppo's archbishops. The rates of emigration during this last wave were the highest since the 1822 earthquake. However, the Christians that remained have been involved in relief efforts within the government-controlled areas. This came naturally to the Christians because, unlike many Muslims at the beginning of the revolution, they had experience with civil society groups due to church-based fraternities and scout groups.

However, this loyalty did not create a desire among Christians, except for Armenians, to join any of the "National Defence" militias. This was due to the guidance from spiritual leaders who did not condone carrying arms. On the other hand, Christians took a clear stance in support of the government and denounced any opposition member, be they Christian or Muslim. This position was apparent through different interactions in person and on social media. However, it is important to note that most Christians in Aleppo live in the western part of the city, which has remained under government control. The few Christians in eastern Aleppo fled their homes once the area fell under the control of the opposition. In contrast to the west, eastern Aleppo is mostly inhabited by Sunnis and is a poor neighbourhood, ignored by those living in the west. Furthermore, Christians and Muslims in western Aleppo interacted with the east, however, the Christians did not have the same affinity for the Muslims of eastern Aleppo. Additionally, the



impact of the shelling of western Aleppo perpetrated by armed opposition groups in the east cannot be discredited. The shelling targeted the entire western part of the city and did not discriminate between Muslims and Christians. Thus, socio-economic and religious factors as well as violence shaped how Christians would later react to the government's actions towards the eastern part of the city.

After the opposition and other armed groups lost control of eastern Aleppo, a Christian shop owner in the Aziziya neighbourhood hung pictures of Bashar Al Assad, Vladimir Putin, and Hassan Nasrallah in the city's main square to thank them for liberating the city. Visually, this made it appear as if the Christians were celebrating the displacement of the city's Muslims after months of brutal shelling. At around the same time, there was a proposal to build a medical clinic to provide emergency assistance to Christians. The Christians declared their intent to return to Aleppo once the government completes its takeover of the eastern part of the city. To date, first-hand accounts from residents contradict this statement. However, only time will tell if it is true.

Conclusion

The majority of the Christians, especially in western Aleppo, have chosen to support the Syrian regime in the revolution. This position is disheartening but can be explained by a long history of persecution and injustice against them. These events date back to Ottoman Syria when massacres drove Christians from their homes out of fear for their lives. While the situation of Christians did improve over time, memories, and accounts of this turbulent history remain vivid.

Today, Christianity seems to be disappearing from the Middle East with the rise of religious extremism. It seems possible that Aleppo Christians, like the Christians in Iran before them, will gradually become nothing more than exhibits in a museum. An end to the conflict will not ensure the Christians' return to Aleppo, as there could still be threats from the government militias and intelligence groups. Sadly, attacks on residents and their homes are almost a daily occurrence in the city. For Aleppo to repair its relationship with the Christians there needs to be a new generation of Christians not burdened by the past or by religious and social discrimination. This, however, will not be possible as long as the current



government remains in power.



Arab Reform Initiative

About the author

Roger Asfar

Syrian journalist and researcher

About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

arab-reform.net

contact@arab-reform.net



© 2017 by the Arab Reform Initiative.

To view a copy of this licence, [click here](#)