

ARETE

POSITION PAPER

Christians in Syria and Egypt under the Egyptian Ottoman Rule

January 14, 2016

Rachel Naguib

INTRODUCTION

In some Islamic societies, the question of the conditions under which Christians lived remains contested. One of the most strident disputes is the one over the writing of the past about the territories of the Ottoman Empire and how they dealt with the minority groups. In other words, the use of violence against those who were seen as outsiders of the boundaries of the Islamic territories was the endogenously selective memories of former atrocities as well as defeats. There are numerous political activists and statesmen who want to establish Islamic governments in states that are home to non-Muslims. On the one hand, this can provoke fear in the other religious minorities. On the other hand, this can be fervent optimism for others since the Muslims promised the same levels of both justice as well as security for their fellow non-Muslim subjects. This was the case in Egypt and Syria under the same Egyptian rule starting from the 1800s. In this paper, I will answer the following questions: How did the Ottomans sultans deal with the Christians in Egypt and Syria between 1830 and 1860? To elaborate, I will shed light on how the Christians were treated under the same ruler in the 1830-1860 and whether they faced the same destiny or not. I will argue that although the Christians in Egypt and Syria were under the same Ottoman ruler and there was an introduction of modernization policies to achieve equality between Muslims and Christians, there were other factors that made the Christians in Egypt and Syria face different consequences. I will first explain who are al-Dimmis, the positions and situations of the Copts under the rule of Muhammad Ali and the Christians in Syria particularly their massacres of Christians in 1850 in Aleppo and in Damascus in 1860.

AL-DHIMMIS

To begin with, the non-Muslims, such as Christians, who live on *dar-al-Islam* lands, where the Shari'a law was enforced, are known as *ahl-al-kitab* or People of the Book. More specifically, these people are al-Dhimmis; the Jews, Christians and Sabaens. They have to accept the rules of the Muslims and live under specific conditions. There are various Muslim jurists who use some verses from the Qu'ran to justify legal values for *al-Dhimmis*. For instance, verse 9:29 in the Qu'ran states that, "Fight [...] from among those who are given revelatory books, until they pay the poll tax (jizya) from their hands in a state of submission (saghirun).¹ Nevertheless, it is unclear who are precisely the people identified and what does it mean state of submission? These jurists proposed that the jizya, which is paid by men, has to be paid by al-dhimmis for two main reasons. Firstly, they will acknowledge their position as second-class subjects and their submissive to the Muslims. Secondly, it was seen as pact of protection or protégés.² To elaborate, *al-dhimmis*, paid *jizya* for exchange of protection from the enemies. It was to "designate the sort of indefinitely renewed contract through which the Muslim community accords hospitality and protection to members of other revealed religions, on condition of their acknowledging the domination of Islam"³. Their status as *dhimmis* did not require serving into the army. For example, regarding the Copts in Egypt, Edward William Lane said that they "enjoy an immunity for which they are much envied by most of the Muslims: they are not liable to be taken for military service."⁴ This means that Christians were not seen as an honor for any sultan or prince to employ a Copt to fight against a Muslim enemy.

THE COPTS IN EGYPT AND MUHAMMAD ALI

The Christian community in Egypt is known as the Copts, which derives from the Greek, Aiguptos, Arabized into Qibt, and then angelised into Copts.⁵ They are perceived as a 'minority under threat'.⁶ Over 60 percent of the Copts live in Upper Egypt, mostly in both provinces Assiut and Minya and roughly 25 percent of Egyptian Copts live in Cairo and six percent in Alexandria.⁷ In the 1800s, it was

¹ Choudhry, Sujit. *Constitutional Design for Divided Societies: Integration or Accommodation?* Oxford: Oxford UP, p.273. 2008. Print.

² Ibid.

³ Grafton, David D. *The Christians of Lebanon: Political Rights in Islamic Law*. London: Tauris Academic Studies, pp. 20 2003. Print.

⁴ Lane, Edward William. *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. New York: Dover Publications, p. 367.1973. Print.

⁵ Pennington, J. D. "The Copts in Modern Egypt." *Middle Eastern Studies* 18.2 (1982): 158-79. Web.

⁶ Ibrahim, Vivian. *The Copts of Egypt: Challenges of Modernisation and Identity*. London: Tauris Academic Studies, p. 3. 2011. Print.

⁷ Pennington, J. D. "The Copts in Modern Egypt." *Middle Eastern Studies* 18.2 (1982): 158-79. Web.

estimated by the British travel writer Edward Lane that the number of the Muslim Egyptians was 1,750, 00 and that of the Copts was 150,000 Copts.⁸ During this period, the Egyptian society witnessed numerous economic and political changes that led to relative prosperity and progress for the Christian community and the destruction of several inherited institutions and their re-organization. These changes did not happen out of vacuum. In 1811, Muhammad Ali, the founder of the modern Egyptian state, was the absolute ruler of Egypt. Although, his ethnic origin is highly contested, he was born to an Albanian family and was a member of the Ottoman elite.⁹ He did not want to introduce the modernization policies in Egypt under the direction of the Ottoman Sultan but rather as a separate entity from the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, this will allow him to not only consolidate his power but also to secure the future of his dynasty. His policies as well as strategies were founded on the creation of not only strong but also contemporary modern military power, creation of a new educational system, the reconstruction of the administration and the modernization of industry.¹⁰ Under the rule of Muhammad Ali, the Copts witnessed a renaissance based on a class structure. More specifically, a class of Copts became enriched due to their administrative skills that led them to excel and their overseers of both possessions and lands. There was a shift in the Copts status from a dhimmi to a subject.¹¹

Muhammad Ali also pursued a strategy for the inclusion of all Egyptians and supported the concept of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims, including Copts, within the territory of Egypt. Muhammad Ali states that [he does] not wish there to be any difference between my subjects based on differences of religion, the only difference is the way that they pray in their temples.”¹² For example, for the first time, he allowed Christians to ring the bells of churches, to wear cross in public and facilitated pilgrimages to the Holy Land, which was restricted in the previous centuries. In 1830, regarding the political participation, four Copts were nominated to the position of provincial governors. In addition, in the field of finance, the Copts craved out a niche for themselves. There were many of them who were employed as tax collectors, private landowners and land surveyors.¹³ For instance, Basilios Ghali, a Copt, was perceived as the right hand of Muhammad Ali since he was the chief responsible for the collection of taxes.¹⁴

In addition, in 1855, the Copts were exempted from *jizya* and, in 1856, the Humayuni Decree enlisted Copts in the military.¹⁵ To elaborate, this decree sought to achieve

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 14

¹⁰ Ibrahim, Saad Eddin. *The Copts of Egypt*. London: Minority Rights Group, p. 11.1996. Print.

¹¹ Tadros, Mariz. *Copts at the Crossroads: The Challenges of Building Inclusive Democracy in Contemporary Egypt*. Cairo: American U in Cairo, p. 28. 2013. Print.

¹² Ibrahim, Vivian. *The Copts of Egypt: Challenges of Modernisation and Identity*. London: Tauris Academic Studies, p.15. 2011.

¹³ Ibid. p.18

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibrahim, Saad Eddin. *The Copts of Egypt*. London: Minority Rights Group, p.11. 1996.

equality between both the Muslims and Christians. Therefore, it will remove discrimination between people, particularly Muslims and Copts, whether on the basis of religion or ethnicity. This equality was supposed to help support the modern state. However, the Ottoman Humayuni decree is problematic. One of the articles in the decree include that the Copts have to obtain a sultan decree and a license in order to build churches. Moreover, the distance between a mosque and a church should not be less than one hundred meters. Also, the Copts have to obtain an approval form their neighboring Muslim community before building churches.¹⁶ This raises numerous questions of religious freedom and equality between Muslims and Copts. Hence, the façade of having equality between Muslims and Copts existed, but, in reality, it was limited and restricted. This was also the case with the Christians in Syria in which numerous laws and policies, under the same Egyptian rule, were introduced in order to have equality between Muslims and Christians. However, the Christian Syrians witnessed another destiny because of other factors and circumstances that played a crucial role in their destiny.

CHRISTIANS IN SYRIA

Under the Egyptian rule and occupation, there were also some reforms that were introduced into Syria, as there were in Egypt. Muhammad Ali appointed his son Ibrahim Pasha to govern the conquered lands. There were profound changes in every aspect the Syrian society. Geographically speaking, one of the largest concentrations of Christians in the Ottoman Arab lands was Syria, *bilad al-Sham*. Christians were to be found in the four Syrian provinces: Tripoli, Aleppo, Damascus and Tyre but the largest communities were in Aleppo as well as Damascus.¹⁷ With the exception of Hebron, they were also present in all the cities of Syria. In the early centuries of the Arab rule, most of the Christian Arabs were Orthodox and were called *Melkites*, the king's men.¹⁸ The Muslims imposed this name on certain Christians, the ones who were true to the faith, particularly the faith of the Byzantine emperors. Nevertheless, later during the Ottoman conquest, the Christians took this name as a badge of pride.¹⁹ In addition, they called themselves *Rum*, which means Orthodox Christians, Anatolians, Greeks, Byzantines. *Rum* can also mean Ottomans. As a result, this opens doors for ethnic misidentification by all non-Christian Orthodox communities such as Catholics.

The Egyptian régime introduced a radical reform, in terms of undermining the role of local leaderships. For example, the regime established their officials as the sole authority and the Ulema were deprived by their influential role when the regime

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Masters, Bruce Alan. *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism*. New York: Cambridge UP, p.49. 2001. Print.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 49

¹⁹ Ibid.

secularized the judicial system.²⁰ As a result, the role of the Muslim court is limited to certain matters such as property holdings and personal matters. This creates a feeling of discontent in many Syrian towns and many notables took part in an active part in the rebellions. Another two main causes that led to the popular unrest is the conscription of the young Muslims as well as the imposed personal tax, known as *ferde*.²¹ This was a burden on the population and was regarded as a humiliation since taxes have to be levied only on Christians, not the Muslims. Also, what filled the cup of the resentment to overflowing under the Egyptian rule is other issues related to the status of Christians related to Muslims. More specifically, the European consulates were set up, foreign activities were expanded, the missionary activities were permitted and the Christians were granted full equality and therefore, complete honor and security. The local Syrian Christians have association, in terms of religious as well as cultural connections, with European powers and Catholic centers in Europe.²² These relations expanded in the eighteenth century.²³ One can argue that, as a result, the Christian Europe and the Christian community in Syria were strengthening and the Ottoman power was declining. There was a common belief in Syria that “the European powers are hostile to the Turkish authority in Syria and in union with the Christians they wish to upset it.”²⁴ It goes without saying that this led to the main blow to the pride of feelings of the Muslims. On the other hand, this led to the joy, self-confidence of the Christians. Sometimes, Christians were granted more rights than the Muslims; they were exempted from conscription. These profound changes of their status made them richer and more acceptable in society and public administration. In these circumstances, it was a surprise if the Muslims dislike the Christians and occasionally involved in anti-Christian hostilities. There were Muslim leaders who completely disapproved the use of violence and protected Christians. Although there were some Ulemas who used their influence and their position, heads of the religious institutions, to subvert the privileges of the Christians, others backed the all anti-Christian riots.²⁵ The impacts of these changes will lead to certain consequences on the long term. It is important to look closely at the *longue durée* of the radical changes in society and feelings of the people towards one another.

CHRISTIANS IN ALEPPO

²⁰ Ma‘oz, Moshe. *Ottoman Reform in Syria and Palestine, 1840-1861; the Impact of the Tanzimat on Politics and Society*. Oxford: Clarendon P.14. 1968.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ma‘oz, Moshe. *Ottoman Reform in Syria and Palestine, 1840-1861; the Impact of the Tanzimat on Politics and Society*. Oxford: Clarendon P.210. 1968.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid., p. 225

Although Aleppo witnessed a gradual economic and security improvements,²⁶ this economic development did neither benefit all segments of society nor work to ameliorate their living standards equally. The ones who prospered when the merchandise of the European flooded into Aleppo were not the Muslims but rather both the Christian. While Christians began to enthusiastically celebrate their wealth and the status they achieved, others particularly Muslims were unhappy. The poor Muslims were affected by the rising prices and lost out of the imports. Thus, some of them lost their livelihoods as traditional crafts. In addition, the newly constituted municipal advisory council, *sura-i belediya*, allowed Christians to have a voice.²⁷ Having a voice means that the feelings, thoughts and viewpoints of the Christians will receive a fair hearing and the others will recognize them. The Armenians in 1831 and the Melkite Catholics in 1848 were officially recognized as *millet*s.²⁸ They were also permitted to construct their churches, as it was the situation of the Copts in Egypt under the same ruler. Equally important, however problematic and raised concerns by the Muslims, there was a remarkable change in the traditional relationships between the state and its Muslim subjects. To elaborate, the Muslims believed that the patrimony of Islam was sold out by the Muslim Ottomans to the Franks, Christians. This led to another reason for their discontent of the Muslims. On the one hand, the state demanded an increase in the Muslim responsibilities in terms of universal conscription as well as taxation. On the one hand, this means that the privileges of Muslims were reduced compared to the other non-Muslim neighbors, Christians.²⁹ Hence, this will make them lose their legally sanctioned superiority vis-à-vis Christians. This means that the compact between both the state as well as Muslims unraveled. As a result, they tried to get imperial orders to prevent the construction of new church, however, they failed. Therefore, they occupied a church declared it as a mosque. They also went to the governor of Aleppo, Mustafa Zarif Pasa, in order to demand the abolishment of the poll tax on all adult male that was implemented as well as the end of the conscription. A mob started to target Christian suburbs, homes, newly built churches. In 1851, “688 homes and thirty-six shops looted and partially destroyed, along with six churches including the patriarchate of the Melkite Catholics and its library and archives.”³⁰ The British consul J.H. Skene said that:

The Christians of Aleppo are a keen, money-making people, clever in trade, miserly at home, abject without support, and insolent when unduly protected. This was merely a reflex of what they suffered in the massacre of 1850.³¹

²⁶ Eldem, Edhem, Daniel Goffman, and Bruce Alan Masters. *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir, and Istanbul*. New York: Cambridge UP, p.69. 1999. Print.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Eldem, Edhem, Daniel Goffman, and Bruce Alan Masters. *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir, and Istanbul*. New York: Cambridge UP, p.70. 1999. Print.

³¹ Ibid., p. 71

The massacre of the Christians was not only damage for their property but also for their morale and collective psychological trauma persisted among them.

CHRISTIANS IN DAMASCUS

Another massacre of the Christians in Syria was on June 6, 1860. This was another sectarian anarchy rocked Syria, but this time was not in Aleppo but rather in Damascus. An incident that took place in the village of Beit Meri in 1859 between the Muslims and the Christian Maronites has spread to Damascus in 1860. To elaborate, there was a conflict, a low-level armed strife, that has extended to other sects in the Lebanese Mountain and has also spread and intensified in the east and south. The Ottoman troops played an important role to help the Muslims prevail. As a result, two main Christian cities, Zahleh and Deir al-Qamar, were occupied.³² In addition, they were ransacked. The major massacres, where 1200 to 2200 inhabitants in a city that counted four hundred residents, took place in Deir al-Qamar. The Maronites suffered a brunt of casualties.

With neglect, collusion, and participation from the troops and commanders of the Ottomans, the Muslim mob targeted Christians, notable in Bab Tuma. This violence came suddenly and without escalating. The massacre of civilians remained for eight consecutive days, which resulted in six thousand deaths and the destruction of Bab Tuma.³³ On the one hand, under the command of the foreign minister Fuad Pasha, a 15,000 strong contingent of Ottoman troops dispatched in the country.³⁴ On the other hand, France sent six thousand troops. Consequently, the Ottoman took crucial measures in order to prevent the extension of foreign military intervention. They acted firmly against the perpetrators of the atrocities. Fuad Pasha restored order after dozens were condemned to death and the military tribunal set up in Damascus dealt with severe sentences. Furthermore, those who did not prevent the massacres and those who participated in the slaughter were severely punished. The Ottoman ad hoc military tribunal tried the local Muslim Damascenes and the Turkish commanders who allowed this massacre to take place.³⁵ Dozens were also sentenced to hard labor. The sultan instructed Fuad Pasha to restore peace and that “those who dared spill human blood, you will endeavor, after an investigation, to punish on-the-spot, by observing the prescriptions of the criminal code.”³⁶ The legal tone expressed that based on the Islamic law, all Christians have to be protected and under both the criminal code and the divine law, the responsible should be brought to justice. Even

³² Mallat, Chibli. *Philosophy of Nonviolence: Revolution, Constitutionalism, and Justice beyond the Middle East*. N.p.: Oxford UP, p.247. 2015. Print.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Eldem, Edhem, Daniel Goffman, and Bruce Alan Masters. *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir, and Istanbul*. New York: Cambridge UP, p.71.1999.Print.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 249

the highest Ottoman in Syria, the governor of Damascus, was not only arrested but also executed.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the Christians in Egypt and Syria were under the same rule of Muhammad Ali and that there were the same modernization policies of inclusion of Muslims and Christians to become equal, they witnessed different destiny. The Christians in Egypt enjoyed equality, however, the Ottoman Humayuni decree was problematic since it restricted the freedom of Christians in terms of obtaining a Muslim approval and a sultan decree as well as a license to build churches. When Muhammad Ali has occupied the large parts of Syria in 1830, he appointed his son Ibrahim Pasha to govern the conquered lands. Nevertheless, the destiny of the Christians in Syria was different; it was has wrecked by massacres and civil wars. There were other factors that led to these massacres compared to the situation of Christians in Egypt. For example, the limitation of the role of Ulema and the expansion of the European consulates and the missionary activities provoked the Muslims in Syria. Another factor that played a role is that, in some circumstances, the Christians were given more rights than Muslims. Muslims became unhappy when Christians became wealthy and that the poor Muslims were affected by the rising of prices. Also, the relationship between the state and the Muslims started to change when the state imposed taxation and universal conscription. This led to the reduction of their privileges vis-à-vis the Christians. In addition, one can argue that the periods between 1840 and 1860 are characterized by dovetailed peasant revolutions, sectarian civil war and in the killing of Christians in Mount Lebanon that had a significant impact and the Christians in Damascus in 1860. Christians suffered the disruption of inter-communal violence in 1850 and 1860 in Syria. As a result, the Christians in Syria and Egypt faced different consequences since there were other factors that played a role in Syria but were absent in Egypt.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Choudhry, Sujit. *Constitutional Design for Divided Societies: Integration or Accommodation?* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Eldem, Edhem, Daniel Goffman, and Bruce Alan Masters. *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir, and Istanbul*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Grafton, David D. *The Christians of Lebanon: Political Rights in Islamic Law*. London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2003.
- Ibrahim, Saad Eddin. *The Copts of Egypt*. London: Minority Rights Group, 1996.
- Ibrahim, Vivian. *The Copts of Egypt: Challenges of Modernisation and Identity*. London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2011.

- Lane, Edward William. *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. New York: Dover Publications, 1973.
- Mallat, Chibli. *Philosophy of Nonviolence: Revolution, Constitutionalism, and Justice beyond the Middle East*. N.p.: Oxford UP, p.247. 2015. Print.
- Ma'oz, Moshe. *Ottoman Reform in Syria and Palestine, 1840-1861; the Impact of the Tanzimat on Politics and Society*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1968.
- Masters, Bruce Alan. *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Pennington, J. D. "The Copts in Modern Egypt." *Middle Eastern Studies* 18.2 (1982): 158-79.
- Tadros, Mariz. *Copts at the Crossroads: The Challenges of Building Inclusive Democracy in Contemporary Egypt*. Cairo: American U in Cairo, 2013.