

Syrian Christians Immigrants and Refugees

Introduction

First, I would like to note that even though we will focus today on the Christian population in Syria this by no means underestimate the suffering of other groups there. In fact, if the population of Syria is 23 million, I am confident to state that each and every individual of those 23 million people, regardless of their background have lost a lot and suffered from this war, and to a certain degree have been dehumanized.

The Syrian refugees' crisis

The internally displaced: refugees inside their own country

- 6.5 Million Internally displaced; those who had to leave their houses but stayed inside Syria, the majority of them live in the government controlled areas
- Many have been forced to move multiple times because the battle lines have kept changing—pushing people one way and then another.
- It is worth to mention here that the Christians in Homs city, the city which claimed to be the capital of the revolution, were among the first to be forced to leave their homes, that was as early as summer of 2011, even though things were not militarized to a high scale yet, the hostile atmosphere in the city against Christians was clear. For example people would find flyers advising them not to buy Christian properties as those will be distributed for free after the revolution.

The refugees in the neighboring countries: victims of crimes organizations and human trafficking

- Over 4 Million refugees are distributed between Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey.
- *Jordan*: 600 thousands refugee. The first camp to be built for Syrian refugees is Al Zaatari camp was built in the middle of the [Jordanian](#) desert; over 80 thousand people live there with extremely difficult living conditions. For many residents, accessing basic services is a daily challenge as health and education

services can be far away from where they live. Also, we have a high level of reported cases of sexual violence and rape there.

- The camp is famous for Child Marriage; a typical story would be of 13 or 14 year old girl marrying a 40 50 or even 60 year old wealthy man from the Gulf States like Saudi Arabia or Kuwait for a few hundred dollars. The marriage would last a week or so then the girl would be divorced. For many Syrians living in Jordan's urban areas and refugee camps, [marrying off girls at a young age](#) is a desperate attempt to ease the financial burden on families who have little or no income and are trapped poverty. Other common reason for child marriage in Jordan are the protection of young girls—especially in the refugee camps, where girls are at risk of sexual violence
- During the first quarter of 2014, 32% of all registered [marriages of Syrian refugees in Jordan](#) involved girls under the age of 18.
- The Jordanian authorities justified such practices by claiming that the girls themselves and their families agree on such marriage, so there is nothing they can do. However, It is worth to mention here that the consent of these girls to the marriage is irrelevant because the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation" is the very definition of trafficking according to the international law.
- Another feature we have in the camp is recruiting soldier children and sends them back to Syria. Mainly Al Nusra Front and the Free Syrian Army are recruiting those children, and they are not hiding this, in fact they are quite proud of it, and they show it at every chance.
- **Turkey:** we have 1.7 million refugees live there. The Turkish borders are functioning both ways; sending tens of thousands of ISIS foreign fighters and jihadist with their arms into Syria from one side. And exploiting refugees from the other side, beside child marriage, prostitution, recruiting children soldiers, we have high number of repeated incidents of organ trafficking. On their borders with Europe over one million passed last year through organized crimes organizations and traffickers by the sea into Europe. It is worth to mention here that such activities, on such high scale, would not be possible to happen without the Turkish government's support or at least consent.
- Under these circumstances people have started looking for other places to seek asylum, and a main destination became Europe.

The refugees in Europe: The Failure to deal with the crisis

- What is correct for Europe here is correct for the U.S. as well, In Europe as in the US the main mission to deal with the crisis is to find the balance between the humanitarian aid and the security issues. The result was a complete failure and neither was achieved. Enough already was discussed on the media regarding this issue, but I would just like to raise few quick questions.
- How come Syria was able to host over 2 million Iraqi refugees after the war on Iraq for over a decade, and how come a country like Lebanon with its extremely limited resources and economical social and political problems have the ability today host over 1.7 million Syrian refugee, meanwhile Europe with all its weight and resources stands paralyzed in front of half of that number.
- How come countries like the US and EU members always find the resources to carry military actions in other countries but not the resources to rescue?
- The U.S. and the EU are directly involved in the Syrian crisis and accordingly the level of that involvement requires same level of obligations to deal with the humanitarian crisis. Maybe, the responsibility to protect shouldn't be only about military engagement, which by the way proved its complete failure, rather it should be also about humanitarian relief.
- As for the security concerns here in the U.S. for example, though they are real and legit, addressing and dealing with the problem is not. The fact that if only one out of 10000 refugees might be a terrorist would disturb the whole country doesn't mean the solution is to not taking any refugee. Because if we want to apply the same logic, then we should also not take any tourists, we have almost 65 million of them coming to the states every year, and at the end most of the Paris attackers were French citizens not Syrians. Hence, when you are a terrorist it doesn't matter if you enter the country as a tourist or as refugee, your legal statute is irrelevant. We shouldn't either forget about the other nationalities from 82 countries as those form tens of thousands of ISIS fighters.
- The other question we need to ask those politicians and governors who are arguing that we can't host refugees because we really don't know who those people are. Then, if they really care, doesn't only make sense that they ask who are we arming in Syria?? If someone is applying all their legal documents to us, and going through all the security checks and interviews we ask, and we still can't determine if they are a refugee or a terrorist, then how we are distinguishing between a moderate rebel and extremist and we are sending them arms and funding?? Isn't this a question worth to ask?

The affect of the crisis on the Christian population

Christians in Syria before the crisis

- Other than the fact that a Christian cannot be a president of Syria according to the constitution and few other rules in the personal status law, there was no significant discrimination against them. In fact, they were considered among the most privileged in the Middle East and the Arab world. Participating in the public life with no problems, they have enjoyed the freedom of religion and celebrated their holidays along with the rest of the Syrian society. They constituted 7 to 9% of the population.

Inside Syria: how the Christian population was systematically targeted and the difficulties the Christians are facing.

- During the last wave of violence, throughout the Middle East and the Arab world the pattern is the same. Christians are murdered in mob violence or by militant groups. Their churches are bombed, and their homes looted. Eventually, quite many of them have left. The images emerged from Iraq to Libya and Egypt were pretty much the same.
- As for the war in Syria, it has shaken the foundations of the Christians there, while many refused to leave their homes and decided to stay, the majority has already left. Christians faced a systematic targeting, and killing, beheading, kidnapping, crucifying among other atrocities were committed. One Christian village after the other has been besieged and its residents were faced with the choices of leaving, paying unbearable amount of special taxes, or converting to Islam. The most important and historical Christian areas were seized and attacked. This led to the displacement of large numbers of Christians in Syria and to the destruction of many of their churches and property.
- The two main leaders of the Orthodox Church in Syria have been kidnapped since 2013, still missing without a trace. Archbishop Gregorius Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syria Orthodox Church and Bishop Boulos Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox.
- In Aleppo the second largest and the economic capital of Syria, the situation for Christians is “desperate”. Archbishop Jeanbart’s reported that his own cathedral has been bombed six times already and now it is unusable, “We are facing the rage of an extremist jihad; we may disappear soon, the Christian communities,” he said, “Are the prime target of the so-called caliphate’s religious cleansing campaign.”
- One of the most painful moments for Christians was when al-Nusra Front militants stormed the archaeological and historical city of [Maaloula](#). Maaloula

was one of the oldest Christian communities in Syria, where for 3000 years Aramaic—the language of Jesus Christ—is still spoken. In September 2013 a Jordanian suicide bomber exploded a truck at a Syrian army checkpoint at the entrance of the town. Eight soldiers were killed immediately. Then hundreds of extremist jihadist stormed into the village screaming Allah Akbar and shooting gun fire in the sky, the battle of Maaloula, a UNESCO-protected town, had begun. These groups stole the valuable icons from the monastery and the churches, destroyed the rest, burned down people houses, and drove out Christian residents. After that, nearly the entire population of the city fled. They also kidnapped the 12 nuns of the monastery to exchange them for their captured fighters. Eventually in April 2014, the Syrian army took back control of the city. Today, unfortunately, out of 12 thousands, only around 150 Christian families have returned.

- Going back to the story we started with and the City of Homs, what happened to the Christians in that city can be told through a story of a church, a church that goes back to the year of 50 AD. One of the oldest in the world, just as old as the Christian community in the city, Saint Mary Church of the holy belt has a significant historical and religious importance, and it contains what is believed to be a section of the belt of the Virgin Mary. The church was attacked, bombed, burned, and its sacred graves pulled off. Recently, when Homs was freed from the militia groups, Christians rushed into their destroyed houses, and many tried despite the tremendous difficulties to bring life back to the church as to the city, but sadly enough the truth is only few have actuality returned.

The Christian world position from the crisis

In Syria as in Iraq previously, the clear dramatic drop of the Christian population are self evident on how they were left alone and unprotected

- When Dr. Marinus asked me to address the Christian world position from the crisis, I had to stop and think for a quite lengthy time... what is the Christian world really?? Maybe this can be a topic for another discussion. But If what is meant by the Christian world Europe and the US, then they have imposed economical sanctions on Syria, just as on Iraq before, such sanctions have proved they affect civilians rather than regimes. Further, the most important thing that have actually harmed Christians in Syria is that the U.S. administration and EU governments like the British and the French have armed, supported and funded those who killed and targeted Christians, they called them moderate rebels and freedom fighters while the church in the East and people were screaming they are terrorists, but they didn't wanna listen they had their own

political agendas filled with interests and strategies. Eventually, for those governments and politicians, the Christians were nothing but collateral damage. If the Christian world is the Church then the Christians of Syria were left alone, beside some prayers here and there and minimal donations no real actions were taken. Christians of the East were not only left alone, they were betrayed and the blame of their expiration from the land of Christianity should be buried by the whole Christian world whatever we mean by that.

What could be done, and how can we ease the humanitarian crisis of the Syrian refugees

- In the Levant, the land of Christ, where Christianity has started, flourished and survived for over 2000 years, sadly enough, we have to realize that the damage is already done, and Christianity is on a quick path of disappearing there. In Iraq pre-2003 Christian population were around 1.4 million. Now estimates put it around 260,000. Before 2011, the Christian population in Syria was estimated to be around 1.5 million. Today, within five years of the crisis over 700,000 of them have fled the country.
- What we can do is some damage control. To help those who are still in Syria we need to stop doing what we are doing, lift the sanctions, stop sending weapons and arms to militia groups, let the political settlement take place and stop exploiting the suffering of the Syrian people for the benefits of one party or the other. Also, Churches in the world need to reach out to the Syrian churches and ask them what they want, what kind of help needs to be provided as they would know the best.
- As for those who decided to leave; we really need to help them out. For us here in the U.S. we need to understand the conflict each Christian faces when leaving Syria, knowing that his or her decision is actually affecting the whole long rooted existence of Christianity in that land. We need to know that those people have been trying really hard to stay home because it is part of their identity and they feel a historical and religious obligation to stay, so they were literally forced to leave.
- Also we need to know that the mass majority of them do not want to come to the States as refugees. These are well educated people, not looking for financial assistance, not even looking for better lives, in fact, most of them have never thought of coming here, but the brutal war forced them to look for the safety of their families. These people have already lost years of their lives and future during the war and now decided to move on. So many of them are applying for student and work visas for example, however, it is almost impossible today for them to obtain such visas, which is becoming like public punishment, assuming just because you are Syrian then your intentions once

you get here is to apply for asylum or become illegal immigrant. Others are applying through their families here for immigration and the process again for Syrians are taking ages to be done. The result is hundreds and hundreds of American Syrian citizens' families are separated due to the refusal or delays in issuing their papers. The massive unreasonable delays of the legal status issues and administrative proceedings led to the loss of more and more of years for these people. At the end, closing our doors against them made them victims again of another practice related to the war.

- Some argues that Syrian Christians should not be treated with privileges based on their religion, which is a fair principle, but making them pay the price of security issues unrelated to them is a complete unjust as well.
- As for the refugees, it is argued also that Christians should not have a special treatment, which is again a fair in principle because assigning refugee status or offering asylum must be done on the basis of vulnerability and need. However, Christians are among the most vulnerable. In fact, America's Syrian refugees are 2,184, which is quite shameful frustrating number by the way, only 53 of them are Christians, meaning if the Syrian Christians are 7 or 8% of the population and the US has less than 2% of them then the numbers says that practically there is a discrimination against the Christians refugees.
- At the end, to sum up we have to know that ISIS, representing the rise of fundamentalism in the region and the world has destroyed so much already in Syria and Iraq, 2 civilizations that gave a lot to humanity. ISIS and other extremist groups have targeted world heritage historic sites, they targeted churches and mosques, civilians and societies, and in the 21 Century when people are literally being crucified, burned alive, beheaded and when women are being sold in public auctions in the streets as sex slaves and the world is closing its doors against them, when we have resources to bomb and arm but not to save, in such a world, ISIS and what it represents is wining this war over both the Christian and the Muslim worlds.

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