

Why Christians in Syria Love the U.S., But Despise Its Pro-British Policies

by Hussein Askary

March 10—As the British Empire accelerates its game-plan for regime change in Syria—merely a way-station on its way to thermonuclear confrontation with Russia and China—some voices in that nation are raising the alarm over the danger of religious wars. We at *EIR* are determined to let their well-founded warnings be heard.

- Some Relevant History -

Before the Crusaders came to the Eastern Mediterranean and Syria in 1096, Christians, Muslims, and Jews had lived in peace and harmony for more than 300 years. The Holy Land of Syria was cleansed of the remains of the rotten Byzantine Empire by the Muslims, who enjoyed the support and respect of the Christians after the decisive battle of Al-Yarmouk, in which the Muslim army defeated the Byzantine Army of Emperor Heraclius in 636. Christians were protected in their cities and towns, and freedom of religion was granted without interference from the Muslim state.

Christians were not obliged to join the Muslim armies, but had to pay Al-Jizya, a tax to the Muslim state. Christian priests, monks, the old, disabled, and poor were exempted. On the other hand, Christians did not have to pay Al-Zakat, which was an obligatory tax for all Muslims.

Christians were integrated into the Islamic Renaissance which flourished in Baghdad and Damascus in the 9th and 10th centuries. Christian scholars in Syria had the great advantage of speaking and writing Greek, Assyrian, and Arabic. Many were recruited to the House of Wisdom in Baghdad in their youth, to help translate from Greek the greatest works of philosophy, astronomy, geometry, and medicine. Hunayn bin Ishaq, his son Ishaq bin Hunayn, Thabit bin Qurra, Johanna ibn Al-Batrik, and Ibn Al-Homsy are some of the most prominent Christian translators who enriched the Islamic or Arab Renaissance with the great works of Plato, plus those of Aristotle, Galen, and many more Greek scientists and philosophers.

When the Crusaders came 200 years later, this humanist Islamic culture had dwindled, and had been weakened by the power struggle among Arab, Turkic, and Persian elites. The Christians, especially during the late Crusades, were caught between the mad Venice-directed Crusaders, who claimed to be Christians, and the barbaric Turks who claimed to be Muslims. During the long sieges of cities in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean coast, Christians were regarded as “traitors” and “fifth columnists” by both sides of the conflict. The Crusades had no moral basis in any religion, but were geopolitical, imperial wars for the benefit of the Venetian empire, just as Tony Blair’s, George W. Bush’s, and Barack Obama’s regime-change wars in Southwest Asia are for the benefit of the brutish City of London Empire today.

Christians are caught in the same dilemma today, especially in Syria. After seeing their cousins in Iraq being forced into a mass exodus, thanks to the Blair-Bush extended invitation to al-Qaeda and the Wahhabi/Salafi terrorists to open shop in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, Christians have had second thoughts about the real purpose of the Western support to the so-called Arab Spring which was transformed from a revolt against the unjust global economic and social order, into civil wars.

Now that it has become evident that the U.K., the U.S., and France are working hand-in-hand with al-Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist groups, backed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, Christians in the region, in addition to a great majority of Syrians from other faiths and political colors, are becoming aware that it is their nation-state, not the Bashar Assad regime, which is the real target of this policy.

Christian Leaders Speak Out

The strongest denunciation of the current policy, targeting the sovereignty of Syria, was issued by Mel-



The groups who want to destabilize the country are a minority in Syria, and have foreign support, as can be seen in this photo: A sign, in English, reads, "Thank you BBC," a reference to the British Empire's main news service.

kite Roman Catholic Archbishop of Aleppo, Jean-Clément Jeanbart, in an interview with reporters from the International Catholic News Agency (APIC) and the French daily *Le Figaro*, which published it on Feb. 17.

"We are afraid. We have always lived in a safe country. We do not want to be like Iraq. And the evolution of the transitions in Libya and Egypt do not reassure us," Jeanbart had declared to *Figaro* Jan. 11. The Archbishop spoke out against the international media, declaring that it is mostly opposed to the Syrian regime, and too often spreads false reports about his country. But in one case, *Figaro* journalist Georges Malbrunot pointed out that the French reporter Gilles Jacquier, who was hit by a shell in Homs on Jan. 11, was killed by protesters. "They fired on a pro-Assad protest. The direction from which the shells came was obvious."

The Archbishop denounced the media propaganda: "No one in the media speaks of the infiltration in Syria of extremists and mercenaries from Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, some from Afghanistan.... From without, we see the West attacking our president, and from within, we see groups of armed Muslims who come to sow terror and death in certain zones of the country. Unfortunately, several thousands of innocent civilians and soldiers—at least 2,000 soldiers, police officers, simple civilians—have been victims of the hate and hostility of these groups. They have often been savagely tortured, mutilated and killed."

Archbishop Jeanbart had warned in November 2011, as the attacks on Syria from outside intensified, that the operation against Syria had nothing to do with democracy and reforms. During a visit to Spain and

Switzerland in November, he told APIC, "In the field, the situation is quite different from what one sees at home on television.... Aleppo is about 20 minutes from the Turkish border. The border is open, and many people come there by car to do their shopping. There are only a few hundred Syrian refugees who have settled in southeastern Turkey, while the Aleppo Governorate has about 5 million inhabitants. They registered many simple travelers as refugees."

He said that he himself has not seen the fighting, but certain of his priests had witnessed the carnage committed by unidentified armed groups terrorizing the population, as in Jisr al-Choughour. "If the UN speaks of 3,500 dead, it may be correct, but there was vio-

lence on both sides. Thus, in these figures there are many security force members and soldiers, because the armed insurgents without hesitation shot at law enforcement."

The groups who want to destabilize the country are a minority in Syria, and have foreign support, including certain Gulf countries or Sunni fundamentalists, such as the Salafist group close to al-Qaeda based in Tripoli, Lebanon, noted the 68-year-old Archbishop. He deplored that television stations such as Al-Jazeera or Al-Arabyia transform a demonstration of hundreds of opponents into thousands of adversaries to the ruling regime, and when the majority who are in favor of Bashar al-Assad take to the streets by the millions in Aleppo, Damascus, Latakia, and in other cities, they are depicted as being only a few thousand.

"I daresay that President Bashar al-Assad has great support ... from no less than 75% of the population in cities and in rural areas. The vast majority of Syrians do not want an Islamic regime. The new defense minister Gen. Daoud Rajha is a Christian, as is the director of the Central Bank. Bashar al-Assad is an educated man, a doctor, who has studied and lived in Europe.... I hope that Syria will not be the fourth country to experience a sudden overthrow of power, after Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. It would be a catastrophe for the entire region, not just for Christians," he emphasized.

"The abolition of the principle of citizenship, which guarantees equal treatment for all minorities—Christians, Druze, Shi'a, Ismaili, Alawite—and a return to sectarianism would be an unmitigated disaster," he continued. This would cause a great exodus among the

1.7 million Christians who, for half a century, have experienced real friendship with the Muslim majority of the country: The Syrian Christians fear the establishment of a fundamentalist Islamic regime that would impose Sharia, the Islamic law. He pointed out that under the pretext of “democratization,” they are preparing for a much worse situation should the current regime suddenly collapse, because the vacuum would then be immediately occupied by the fundamentalist movements which are well organized.

“For us, Muslim-Christian conviviality is not an empty word. There is no discrimination against Christians, neither from the point of view of the State, nor from the law,” said Jeanbart. But today the danger of sectarianism, eradicated for nearly four decades, has resurfaced. And the emigration of Christians, which had slowed during the last ten years, risks picking up with renewed vigor, he explained. He is convinced that Christian young people should remain in the country to fulfill a mission. “Is not Syria, after Jerusalem, the first home of Christianity?” Seat of a diocese since the end of the Third Century, Aleppo has known a Christian presence since the time of the Apostles, but today, more than 200,000 Greek Melkite Catholics, originally from Aleppo, live abroad. “Our young people are literally sucked into the diaspora. Yet the government does protect us...”

Reform, without Violence

Archbishop Jeanbart, like most other Christian leaders in Syria, has also voiced his support for political reform, freedom, equality, and social justice. They do not like to be viewed as supporters of the regime for their narrow interests, but are fully aware, as patriots, of the dangers that are lurking behind the current Western/Saudi-backed operation against their country.

In the meantime, in neighboring Lebanon, the leader of Maronite (Catholic) Christians in Lebanon, Patriarch Beshara al-Rai, with 1 million followers in Lebanon, and many more in Syria, expressed similar concerns about Syria. In an interview with Reuters Middle East chief Michael Stott, published March 5, he said: “We are with the Arab Spring, but we are not with this spring of violence, war, destruction, and killing. This is turning to winter... We say that we cannot implement reforms by force and arms. No one can guess the scale of the great losses and damage



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Al-Rai drew a parallel to the situation in Iraq: “How can it be an Arab Spring when people are being killed every day? They speak of Iraq and democracy, and 1 million Christians out of an original 1.5 million have fled Iraq.

“Syria, like other countries, needs reforms which the people are demanding,” he said. “It’s true that the Syrian Ba’ath regime is an extreme and dictatorial regime, but there are many others like it in the Arab world. All regimes in the Arab world have Islam as a state religion, except for Syria. It stands out for not saying it is an Islamic state. ... The closest thing to democracy [in the Arab world] is Syria. ... We are not defending it. But we regret that Syria, which wants to take a step forward ... is undergoing this violence and destruction and [use of] power and weapons.”

Al-Rai also expressed his concern that extremist Is-



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lamist groups are getting foreign support. “It’s not the people who want them. There are countries behind them, supporting them financially and militarily and politically,” he said. “Moderate people do not want them. . . . We do not speak out against any sect, and we do not fear moderate Islam. We fear the extremist groups that use the language of violence.”

Al-Rai said the Lebanese were divided by events across the border, and he feared the shock waves could have an impact in Lebanon, home to Shi’ite and Sunni Muslims, Maronite and Orthodox Christians, Druzes, and Alawites—the same sect as Assad. “God forbid that the conflict turns into a sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Alawites. In Tripoli, we have Alawites, and the situation there is like a fire [smoldering] under the ashes.”

A Special Relationship with America

The Greek-Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, Ignatius IV Hezim, who is the spiritual leader of the largest Christian community in Syria, is a good example of Syrian leaders who have a special relationship to America, while being patriots of Syria. In a March 8 interview with [LPAC-TV](#) (see below), Patriarch Ignatius denounced the foreign attack on his country, and the media disinformation which is leading to sectarian and religious strife.

Born in 1921, Patriarch Ignatius belongs to a generation in Southwest Asia which was looking forward to see the United States taking the lead in the world for freedom from British and French colonialism following World War I. Before the war had ended, the whole region was under the yoke of the backward Ottoman Empire. The British and the French, who had urged the people of the region to support them to get the Ottomans out, and promised them independence, betrayed those people. It was revealed later, that already in 1916, the British and the French had signed the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement to divide the spoils of the Ottoman Empire between them. When that betrayal was revealed, the people of the region revolted and called upon the U.S. to come to their aid, because they knew it to be a nation with no imperial past, which had fought against British imperialism, and which harbored the highest aspirations of freedom, independence, and national sovereignty.

Under pressure from patriotic forces in the U.S., pro-British President Woodrow Wilson was forced to reject the British-French secret treaty, and to allow a special commission to survey the opinion of the people



The Greek-Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius IV Hezim, spiritual leader of the largest Christian community in Syria, reflects his generation’s love for America, which is strongly attached to the images of FDR; Eisenhower’s opposition to the British-French-Israeli aggression against Egypt in 1956; and to President John F. Kennedy.

in Syria and Mesopotamia (Iraq) about what type of mandate they wished to have in the transitional period towards independence.

The most interesting finding of the commission, called the King-Crane Commission, after Charles Crane and Dr. Henry King,¹ was that the peoples of the region rejected British rule, and demanded an American mandate. Their findings “showed that the people knew the grounds upon which they registered their choice for America. They declared that their choice was due to knowledge of America’s record, the unselfish aims with which she had come into the war, the faith in her felt by multitudes of Syrians who had been in America; the spirit revealed in American educational institutions in Syria, especially the College in Beirut, with its well-known and constant encouragement of Syrian national sentiment, their belief that America had no territorial or colonial ambitions, and would willingly withdraw when the Syrian state was well established, as her treatment both of Cuba and the Philippines seemed to them to illustrate; her genuinely democratic spirit, and her ample resources. From the point of view of the desires of the ‘people concerned,’ the Mandate should

1. For a thorough review of the commission’s work and the circumstances surrounding it, see Dean Andromidas, “When America Fought the British Empire and Its Treacherous Sykes-Picot Treaty,” *EIR*, Jan. 27, 2009.

clearly go to America. The commissioners, therefore, recommend, as involved in the logic of the facts, that the United States of America be asked to undertake a single Mandate for all of Syria.”

King and Crane rightly identified the nature of the British mischief as they wrote: “We should hardly be doing justice however, to our sense of responsibility to the Syrian people, if we did not frankly add some at least of the reasons and misgivings, variously expressed and implied in our conferences, which led to the preference for an American mandate over a British mandate. The people repeatedly showed honest fear that in British hands the mandatory power would become simply a colonizing power of the old kind; that Great Britain would find it difficult to give up the colonial theory, especially in case of a people thought inferior; that she would favor a civil service and pension budget too expensive for a poor people; that the interests of Syria would be subordinated to the supposed needs of the Empire; that there would be, after all, too much exploitation of the country for Britain’s benefit; that she would never be ready to withdraw and give the country real independence; that she did not really believe in universal education, and would not provide adequately for it.”

Patriarch Ignatius’s reference to the American University of Beirut (called the Syrian Protestant College until 1920) is interesting, as he himself and many Arab intellectuals of all religions were educated and introduced to the ideals of the American Revolution and Republic there. It was American missionaries who, during the American Civil War in 1862, suggested establishing these schools in the region, which would follow the American educational system, but not pursue a sectarian evangelical mission.

The college’s own definition of itself states: “This college is for all conditions and classes of men without regard to color, nationality, race or religion. A man, white, black, or yellow, Christian, Jew, Mohammedan or heathen, may enter and enjoy all the advantages of this institution for three, four or eight years; and go out believing in one God, in many gods, or in no God. But it will be impossible for anyone to continue with us long without knowing what we believe to be the truth and our reasons for that belief.”

It was such ideals that young students, including Patriarch Ignatius IV Hezim, were introduced to at a time when Ottoman oppression and British colonialism showed their ugly imperial face to the people.

It is in this light that the deep appreciation and love

expressed by Patriarch Ignatius towards America should be understood. His generation’s memory of American politics is strongly attached to the images of Franklin Roosevelt; Dwight Eisenhower’s opposition to the British-French-Israeli aggression against the young, independent Egypt in 1956; and to President John F. Kennedy.

Interview: Patriarch Ignatius IV Hezim

Here are excerpts of the interview with Patriarch Ignatius IV Hezim conducted by Hector Rivas from La-RouchePAC, and Hussein Askary from EIR.

Rivas: In the United States, there’s a lot of confusion about the situation in Syria. So, I was hoping you could tell people what, in your view, is going on in Syria, and the situation there, and what the sentiment of the people in Syria is?

Patriarch Ignatius: Well, I know one thing, that we are, up until this time, even this hour, we are in the country, and we feel that we will not, you see, be face to face with a bad situation or something like that, because we feel that maybe we have until now lived the best way, in the open.

And we wish peace; we wish everything well to this country, because until now, we know that all people do not like it, but we don’t know really why, and no people have shown that there is a substitute for the future. We don’t see absolutely anything, and we find we don’t have to go from that which is a concrete situation [now], to a situation that we have no idea about, that doesn’t exist up until now.

And further, there is no reason, really to try to make a whole movement to say which is human, and causing another [to be] unhuman.

This is what we feel really, in order to be sincere about this situation in which we live. You see, there is nothing against—a kind of movement, let’s say—against the Christians, or something like that. We don’t have it. We still are living, we have our churches, we have our schools, and we live as well, you see, as all the Muslim people in this country. . . .

Askary: Would you like to say something in Arabic and I translate it into English?

Patriarch Ignatius: What I want to say is that I

wish that the United States, which we love because we are related culturally.... We learn in its schools. We make our schools similar to American schools, our cultures are not unfamiliar.... Therefore, I wish it to be positive because it can be positive.

Askary: So, you are against any military intervention by the U.S. or Europe?

Patriarch Ignatius: I don't understand military matters. I don't understand fighting and people killing each other or using violence. I don't want anybody to be hurt. The framework we work within is a framework in which we don't want anybody to be unhappy, or not have a good living, or be oppressed, and so forth. I say these things in the church here in Damascus, and I don't hesitate ever to say these things, and I don't hear anybody protesting or complaining about what I say.

My hope is that the U.S. does not become cheap, and go the same way as the others. We love America and we have 50% of our children living over there. When we travel to America, it feels like going home. And when we return from [America], we are very joyful, and we have a lot of people over there whom we

love. We know America is a new world for civilization. This is my opinion.

Final Comment by the Author

It is this spirit of love which unites many people in Southwest Asia with what they regard as the "real America"—not the America which betrayed them by succumbing to the British colonial schemes in the 1919 Versailles Treaty; nor the America which betrayed them again after the death of FDR; and not the America which has betrayed them time and again after the murder of John F. Kennedy, by siding with the British Empire, and becoming a silly parody of empire.

It is happening all over again under Obama, who is wholeheartedly embracing the British Empire's schemes. It is this terrifying fact which is bringing the whole region to the brink of total disintegration and religious war, and the world closer to a thermonuclear holocaust, as American patriot Lyndon LaRouche has been warning.

This war is not about the survival of Christians, Alawites, or Bashar al-Assad. It is about the survival of civilization in the form we have known it so far.

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