

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea? Re-Examining Christian Engagement with Ba’athism in Syria and Iraq

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Abstract: *This article re-examines the dominant scholarly perception that Christian support for Arab Nationalist regimes is primarily a product of fear of Islamism. After a brief examination of the Christian origins of Ba’athism—a form of Arab Nationalism—the author argues that a more granular understanding of the current Christian politics of Syria and Iraq reveals that while some Christians have supported regimes out of fear, there is also significant strain of active, positive support, though to what extent this is a product of Christian identification with Arab identity requires further research. The study employs an examination of posts from pro-Assad Syrian Christian Facebook pages.*

Keywords: Christianity, Arab Nationalism, Ba’athism, Syria, Iraq

Introduction

The perpetration of mass violence in Iraq and Syria by the nations’ respective self-identified Arab nationalist leaders Saddam Hussein (1979–2003) and Bashar al-Assad (2000–) horrified many. So, too, has the ultraviolence of various Islamist insurgency groups in both countries. The influence on, and support for, Hussein and al-Assad’s authoritarian regimes by some Christians can appear bafflingly at odds with certain apparent Christian moral imperatives. However, a granular examination of the complex socio-political matrices underpinning the experiences of Christians in both contexts may help to elucidate their ostensibly enigmatic support. Syrian Christian philosopher Michel Aflaq’s Arab nationalist ideology—“Ba’athism”—helped shape both nations’ postcolonial political identities. We will question whether this supposedly secular and religiously tolerant ideology helped Hussein and al-Assad win Christian support, or if such support is a product of Christians being caught between the idiomatic *Devil and the deep blue sea*.

In Iraq, we argue that before the war, many Christians were often *united* in their opposition to Hussein’s repressive policies, though *divided* on

the alternative. However, with hindsight and experience of the dangers posed by radical Islamist groups, many mourn the loss of Hussein's religiously and culturally repressive, but politically stable governance. Meanwhile, in Syria, though some strands of what we will call a "lesser evilist" toleration of al-Assad do exist, the Ba'athist Party has succeeded in embedding a moderate sense among many Christians that they are stakeholders in the state, thereby winning support, and occasional exaltation—arguably a rare feat for Christians in the Middle East. Further, this Syrian Christian support is heightened—sometimes to a violent level—by the blueprint of Iraqi Christians' ominous experiences under Islamism post-Hussein.

What is Arab Nationalism?

We must first define "Arab" and "nationalism." The diversity that exists among "Arabs" regarding traditions, dialect, and culture is vast, and one so-called "Arab" in Algeria is likely to have a different experience and identity to another in Jordan. Language is a key characteristic that unites the "Arab" social group.¹ Though this is not to say that all Arabic-speakers are indeed "Arabs" as many millions of Muslims outside of the confines of "the Arab world" like Iran and the Philippines speak the language as the Quran was first written in Arabic.² Islam is also often considered a uniting element for Arabs. Yet, many non-Muslims like Christians and Druze have historically been identified—or self-identify—as Arabs.³ Without committing to asserting that Arab-ness is *either* primordial *or* socially-constructed, on a functional level it is perhaps best to theorize Arab-ness as a group and individual identity. This identity is generated by contextual individual and collective interaction between contemporary and historical, geographic, linguistic, and cultural experiences, attitudes, and worldviews—often constructed in response to the alterity of the respective encroaching colonial forces of the Turkish

¹ James Craig, "What Is an Arab?," *Asian Affairs* 28, no. 1 (March 1997): 43–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/714041321>.

² Firoozeh Papan-Matin, "The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1989 Edition)," *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 1 (January 2014): 159–200; Cesar A. Hidalgo, "Language Choice in a Multilingual Society: The Case of the Philippines," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 130, no. 1 (1998): 23–33, <http://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.1998.130.23>.

³ Saad Ibrahim and Richard C. Martin, "Arab Islamic Societies," *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions* (October 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195137989.003.0040>.

matter. Though some appear to resign themselves to a *lesser evilst* attitude and others are even involved in attempting to overthrow al-Assad, there remains a striking, substantial portion of Christians who actively, sometimes fervently, support al-Assad viewing him as their protector and ally. As the examined Facebook groups indicate, to many Syrian Christians, al-Assad is not simply the *lesser evil* or the “Devil They Know”: he is a guardian worthy of veneration who defends them from near-certain annihilation at the hands of vicious radical Islamist groups like ISIS.

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