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## MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIANS IN DIASPORA AND THEIR POLITICAL ACTIVISM TOWARDS THEIR COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

Artur Boháč\*

### ABSTRACT

A contemporary globalized world brought intensive research of diasporas and their connections to their countries of origin to social sciences. These two-way connections are economic, cultural and political. This text was focused on political activities. Transmigrants can be politically active or passive towards their homelands. Transmigrants are usually interested in the events in their homelands where their relatives still live. They benefit from modern technologies, and several authors speak about digital diasporas. These diasporas monitor persecution in their homelands. They establish organisations to boost their fundraising, inform the public and to lobby the governments, primarily in the West, and supranational institutions. The emergence of Middle Eastern Christian diaspora is connected with armed conflicts, religious or ethnic discrimination in the Middle East in the last two centuries. The decline of Christians in the Middle East relates to their massive emigration to Western countries. This article attempted to gather theoretical information about diaspora activism, bring some innovative typologies, present the general attitudes of Middle Eastern Christian transmigrants towards their homelands and show specific strategies of the Assyrian and Coptic Middle Eastern Christian stateless diasporas. The emphasis was put on the comparative method. The author identified various tactics and group opinions among Coptic transmigrants, represented most visibly by laical modernist and church traditionalists, while the Assyrian transmigrants are politically more coherent in criticizing governmental structures. However, members of both groups think they do their best to improve the living conditions of their coreligionists in the turbulent Middle East.

**Key words:** Middle East, Christianity, diaspora, transnationalism, activism

### Introduction

The attention in the text is paid to the Christian communities originally from the Middle Eastern heartland, from predominantly Muslim and Arab countries, namely Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. These immigrants especially

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inhabit the states of the Euro-Atlantic civilisation where they benefit from liberal achievements. The number of Christians in observed Muslim countries was estimated at 11 million before the Arab Spring because of outdated censuses, censuses not focused on religious affiliation or the fear of Christians to reveal their faith (Boháč 2010b, p. 22-23). Christians are a minority in terms of numbers as well as power. Minority mistreatment is a major source of the conflicts in the region. Most post-Ottoman states did not develop a national identity encompassing their multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, what led to intrastate and international conflicts (Chapman, 2012). There are also hidden conflicts that are not often reflected in the media. Discrimination of Christians or attacks on them based on religious or ethnic hatred and perpetrated by governments, organisations or individuals belong to these conflicts. Studied diasporas attempt to foster awareness of mentioned problems and improve the status of their coreligionists. They established organisations to inform the Western public, lobby Western institutions to create pressure on the governments in their homelands. The Middle East faces the emigration of Christians. It started in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and led to the creation of numerous diasporas including billionaire **Charles Slim Helou**, former tennis player **Andre Agassi**, musician **Mika** and political scientist and **Donald Trump's** adviser **Walid Phares**. Christians were overrepresented among Middle Eastern immigrants, but since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, many Muslims leave their homelands and the ratio is more proportional.

Middle Eastern states, in contrast to Western states, are considered as not-free (Egypt, Iraq, Syria) or partly free (Jordan, Lebanon) by Freedom House (2017) and as authoritarian (Egypt, Jordan, Syria) or hybrid regimes (Iraq, Lebanon) by Economist Intelligence Unit (2017). The impact of Islamic traditions on a political and social environment is difficult to measure, but Shepard's classification<sup>1</sup> is quite reliable (Shepard, 1987). The impact of Islam on the citizens is traceable through the sociological surveys (Poushter, 2016). Islam heavily influences the social status of Christian minorities (see next chapter for details). The theme of Middle Eastern Christians is politically loaded. Middle

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<sup>1</sup> Shepard's classification measures the influence of Islam on a political culture based on the evaluation of complexity and authenticity. Complexity means the scope of implementation of *sharia* in politics, personal status of citizens, banking, clothing policy and penology. Authenticity means the willingness of the government to accept Western ideas and technologies. Authenticity is more difficult to measure than complexity. The classification was quantified and expanded on the human rights by Daniel Price (Price, 2002).

Eastern states deny any discrimination or deny the existence of the minorities, particularly ethnic ones<sup>2</sup>. There are many studies characterizing diasporas in the general sense (Vertovec, 1999) or describing national diasporas and their activism, primarily on social media (Bernal, 2006, Naghibi, 2011) and other tactics (Baser & Swain, 2010, Marzouki, 2016, Yefet, 2016). The goal of the article is to characterize Middle Eastern Christian diasporas, their identities and relations towards churches and states and to bring innovative typologies of their activities. Diaspora activities are illustrated by the actions of the Assyrian and Coptic diaspora, the two most active groups.

## 1 Middle Eastern Christianity and Historical Roots of Current Problems

Studied minorities have a distinct religion, concretely Christianity. But some branches of Middle Eastern Christianity, including Coptic and Assyrian churches, are coupled with a specific ethnicity, endogamy and are not missionary oriented. These churches became worldwide religions because of migration. The vast majority of Middle Eastern Christians is an autochthonous population. They mostly belong to the Monophysite (the Armenian Apostolic Church and Coptic Orthodox Church) or Dyophysite (Nestorian – the Assyrian Church of the East) interpretations separated from the Orthodoxy. There are also Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant adherents in the region. Uniates are Christians originally belonging to non-Catholic branches who recognised the superiority of the Pope (Nisan, 2002). Other Christian communities arose through migration or conversions among Christian sects. Conversions of Muslims are almost impossible due to strict Islamic laws. Most active in converting autochthonous Christians were Roman Catholics, nowadays most active are Evangelicals. Proselytism is not welcomed by affected churches which even cooperate with Muslim governments to eliminate it. Islam based on the *Quran*, *Hadith* and *Sunna* classifies society into two entities, Muslims and non-Muslims. Christians, Jews and other monotheists were called *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book). The People of the Book were labeled as *dhimmi*, protected people, who could live and practice their religion and had autonomy in educational, religious and family affairs. They had to pay

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, the minority name is changed, e.g. the Kurds in Turkey were called Mountain Turks till the 1990s and the term Arab Christian is misused and related to ethnically non-Arab populations such as the Assyrians.

special taxes and respect discriminatory rules (Henderson, 2005, p. 156). These conditions led to a gradual replacement of Christians with Muslims after the Arab conquest in 7<sup>th</sup> Century.

The Ottoman Turks established the system of *millet*s, which incorporated the main denominations of the Empire, Muslim, Jewish, Greek Orthodox and Armenian. The Ottoman Empire perceived its inhabitants as consisting of different religions than different ethnicities (Belge & Karakoç, 2013, p. 4). Representative authorities of the *millet*s were religious leaders. The *millet* system brought an identification of the community with the religion. Christian minorities in the weak Ottoman Empire of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century enjoyed the protection of European colonial powers which led to the legal equality conceded to non-Muslims (Nisan, 2002, p. 145). There occurred revolutionary nationalist ideas in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Christians who collaborated with the armies of the Triple Entente urged for the establishment of their states during World War I. The Armenians cooperated with Russia, the Assyrians with the UK and the Maronites with France. The Maronites got the state Lebanon, but Assyrian efforts were not fulfilled. The Copts stayed loyal to the Egyptian anti-British nationalism. However, mentioned collaborations, together with the old trauma from the Crusades, led to popular Muslim perceptions of the Christians as a fifth column of the West. Christians in the mandate states had autonomy in education, religion and family affairs as in Ottoman times, but Muslim domination was limited<sup>3</sup> (Muzikář et al., 1989, p. 39). After World War II. all European mandates ended, and the new superpowers were not interested in the question of minorities. Then, Middle Eastern Christians were victims of nationalism, suppressing ethnic and ethnoreligious minorities, socialism, inhibiting the role of religions, and Islamism, connected with an implementing of *sharia* law and suppressing religious minorities. *Sharia* is one of the pillars of the judiciary and legislation in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Syria. There is still an autonomy in religion and family affairs (partly in education) for Christians and the current state is called the *neo-millet* system. Egyptian and Syrian presidents must be Muslims due to the constitutions. The Christian presence in the judiciary, army, administration or politics is disproportionately low in Egypt, Iraq and Syria. The specific case is Jordan, where Christians are overrepresented

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<sup>3</sup> *Sharia* was applied only in family and inheritance affairs of Muslims.

because of the malapportionment and special seats in the parliament<sup>4</sup>. Several modern branches of Christianity (e.g. Evangelicals, Seventh-day Adventists) not considered as the religions of the Book are forbidden or very limited in most Middle Eastern states. Christians face higher rates of terrorist attacks or communal violence, especially in the states with powerful Islamist groups (Egypt) or a weak central government (Syria, Iraq).

Minorities are expected to be pro-democratic. The situation is different in the Middle East with a political role of religion and existing cleavages<sup>5</sup>. Authoritarian regimes may be more positive for Christians than relatively democratic regimes which could lead to the deeper implementation of Islam (Belge & Karakoç, 2013, p. 2). Most Christians and their leaders promote autocrats as **Abdel Fattah el-Sisi** in Egypt, **Abdullah II.** in Jordan or **Bashar Assad** in Syria, who limit the power of pro-Islamist majorities. An ecclesiastic hierarchy has a priority on the freedom of conscience and the security of believers. The governments fiscally support a loyal clergy on the one hand and on the other hand clerics may be tracked by secret services. More liberal attitudes are visible among laity, especially in the diaspora, oriented towards human and political rights. Diversity of opinions leads to the quarrels between clergy and laity and people in their homelands and the diaspora. Most disloyal among observed groups are connected with a distinct ethnicity and efforts of autonomy, e.g. the Assyrians (Phares, 2001, p. 64). The Assyrians attempt to establish an autonomous region in the Nineveh plains<sup>6</sup> in Iraq as a haven not only for the Assyrians but also for other Christians, the Yezidis and Shabaks. Due to Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution, the Assyrians can ask for autonomy and relevant proposals exist. In north-eastern Syria, the Assyrians cooperate with the Kurds to establish the autonomous region Rojava (Teule, 2012, p. 190-192). These activities are suppressed by Middle Eastern governments advocating territorial integrity. There is also the challenge of contrasting perceptions of human rights in the Islamic world (*The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam* from 1990) and

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<sup>4</sup> Christians (and Muslim countrymen) are preferred to counterbalance the influence of the urban, Palestinian and pro-Islamist electorate via quota system and the creation of electoral districts with divergent ratio of voters to representatives (Moaddel, 2012, p. 130).

<sup>5</sup> These cleavages express the division of the Middle Eastern societies and they differ from the cleavages in the Western states, because of the importance of ethnic, sectarian identity and derived loyalties sometimes connected with anti-democratic strategies (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006 in Belge & Karakoç, 2013, p. 2).

<sup>6</sup> The autonomous region should consist of three districts of Nineveh Governorate: Tel Kaif, Al-Hamdaniya and Al-Shikhan. The region is a part of Arab Iraq with a strong Kurdish presence.

in the UN (*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* from 1948 and *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* from 1966). Controversies are connected with gender, minority affairs, religious and political rights in the Islamic declaration (Price, 2002, p. 214).

Middle Eastern Christians use emigration to safer and democratic countries, cooperation with secular governments to restrict Islamists, cooperation with other oppressed minorities, civil activism with the encouragement of diaspora and non-governmental organisations and separation from Muslim majority (ghetto mentality) to improve (or keep) their status.

## 2 Typical Features of Contemporary Diasporas in a Globalising World

The concept of diaspora (from Greek word *diaspeirein* for dispersion) related to the groups with specific historical circumstances as Greeks, Jews or Armenians (Baser & Swain, 2010, p. 39, Yefet, 2016, p. 1208). A diaspora is a group living outside its homeland in many host countries with a continual presence.

Typical features of diasporas are intensive communication between members of the diaspora in host countries and in the homeland, collective consciousness and memory and vision of a return to the homeland.

**Martin Sökefeld** approached diasporas as transnational imagined communities (Sökefeld, 2006 in Baser & Swain, 2010, p. 42). Diaspora consists of people of various generations, classes, education, political ideologies and attitudes towards religion. It is possible to distinguish three basic types of diasporas:

- state (national) diaspora more or less supporting current governments in their country of origin, for example, the Turkish diaspora in Europe;
- state (national) diaspora opposing current governments in their country of origin, but with strong national identity and pride, e.g. the Cuban diaspora in the USA;
- stateless diaspora is connected by common ethnicity or religion distinct from the majority population in the homeland and united around the idea of secession, autonomy or improvement of living standard of a community. This type of diaspora is coupled with loyalty to its territory of origin, but not a country of origin, and belongs to the most dynamic ones (e.g. the Assyrian diaspora).

We can also observe that members of diasporas have more linkages with communities within the homeland because of modern communication means than with the host country. Long-distance nationalism can be also observed in terms of preserving the original culture. Then we can observe multiple identities which may be complementing or contradicting. There is also a hypothesis claiming that hardships in settling and assimilation of a diaspora in a host land lead to an increased focus on their erstwhile homeland (Demmers, 2007 in Baser & Swain, 2010, p. 38).

Voluntary diaspora was created predominantly as a result of economic migration. Voluntary diaspora does not plan to go back to a country of origin, but it does not mean inactivity towards a homeland. Voluntary migration is more usual for a state diaspora backing political regimes in their countries of origin, e. g. the Turkish diaspora in Europe. Forcible diaspora is a product of discrimination, life threat or expulsion in the country of origin. Involuntary migration is more usual for a state diaspora opposing current political regimes in their homelands or a stateless diaspora. Involuntary diaspora has a plan to return to its homeland one day, e. g. the Assyrian diaspora in the West.

**Steven Vertovec** (1999, p. 3) uses the term ethnic diaspora which can be applied to communities with specific ethnoreligious beliefs. An ethnic diaspora includes historical and actual conditions, characteristics and experiences of a group. A typical feature of an ethnic diaspora is triple relation between global dislocation of diaspora and maintaining of ethnic identity, country of diaspora current stay and relations connected with the territory of that stay and country of origin.

Not all Middle Eastern Christian immigrant communities are of ethnic character, but ethnicity can be replaced by religion and related communal proximity. **Vertovec** (1999, p. 3-13) made also a typology outlining the basic streams of transnational thinking. Social morphology means creating human communities across borders or regions. This networking has been highlighted by the expansion of Internet coverage. Digital diasporas have been created by the Assyrians and Copts, whose fates are discussed on thousands of websites, blogs and forums (Boháč, 2010a, p. 71). Shared consciousness of transmigrants is connected with their identification with companies and locations. They have solidarity with the communities with a similar fate. We can observe solidarity among Middle Eastern Christians, regardless of a country of origin or a Christian denomination. This non-sectarian cooperation is a new phenomenon due to the problematic history of cohabitation between Middle

Eastern churches. Cultural reproduction is certain cultural hybridity which is evident especially among young transmigrants. Identity is a social construction and people in a global age have more identities due to the advances in information and travel. The avenue of capital is connected with financial flows between the transmigrants and their countries of origin. Transmigrants usually reside in countries with a higher standard of living than their countries of origin. Remittances contribute to the development of communities or regions where people have relatives living abroad. Remittances can exacerbate conflicts in the country of origin because they increase the economic differences between people. In the context of the Middle East, where family and community ties are traditionally strong, this phenomenon occurs. *Political engagement* of transmigrants means political activities in their homelands and attempts to influence politics there. They are involved in the activities of international non-governmental organisations dealing with human rights, ecclesiastical charities and exile political movements. There is frequent lobbying of politicians in receiving states or international organisations by diaspora organisations such as Coptic ones in the USA (Yefet, 2016, p. 5-11). Reconstruction of a site is a strategy of transmigrants pursuing the spirit of former home into a new settlement by shaping of space. An example is a Lebanese town Anjar, inhabited by Armenians, who fled the genocide in the Ottoman Empire in Musa Dagh mountain. The city districts were named after original settlements.

Popular in diaspora communication and publishing are social media that enable people to communicate despite a long distance. Even people in peripheral regions have an occasional approach to the Internet using smartphones. In the broader Middle East, there is 142 millions of Internet users and 76 millions of people with Facebook profiles (Internet World Stats, 2017). The social media important for activism are Facebook, MySpace, webs such as Wikipedia, blogs such as Tumblr and microblogs such as Twitter and content communities such as YouTube or Flickr. There are also plenty of classic websites connected with diaspora organisations.

Religion is an important element of diaspora identity. Communities of a universal religion (e.g. Islamic *Ummah*, global Christendom) can be considered as transnational communities, religious identity can be more important than ethnic or national identity. In the case of Middle Eastern Christians, adherents of universal Churches are usually a part of a national immigrant community or larger universal Christian group such as Greek Orthodox or Roman Catholics. These adherents are affiliated to their church and to their states of origin and

are not much politically active in the homeland as well as in host societies. They do not express specific identity and cooperate with other Christian groups as well as Muslim and other non-Christian groups originally from their homeland or region. Communities of a local religion or specific religious branch (e.g. the Armenian, Maronite, Assyrian diaspora) are different. Religions are perceived in an ethno-nationalist way and they are an integral part of communal particular identity. Churches are the main representatives of a community or a nation. Paternalistic churches influence their adherents regardless of their location. A separate grouping is symptomatic for these churches and related communities. Adherents of these groups are politically active in host societies and in a homeland, if possible. These groups create a distinct identity what may lead to non-cooperation with other groups originally from their homeland or region.

These two types of diaspora groups do not have to be in conflict. Middle Eastern Christians, regardless of a religious branch, cooperate in activities against terrorism or in support of equality. However, they may have different opinions on governments in their homelands when stateless diasporas of specific ethnoreligious branches (e.g. the Assyrians from Syria) are more critical towards regimes than mostly loyal national diasporas of universal religions (e.g. Greek Orthodox people from Syria). Churches and church organisations perceive themselves as part of a state nation and do not create special identities or claims. They respect the attitudes of their church patriarchs who usually cooperate with governments in their countries of origins. They are not too critical towards Muslims and governments, and they attempt to play the role of a bridge between the world of Islam and the West. Laical organisations put an accent on a distinct identity in contrast to official national, cultural or regional identity. American laical organisations of the Copts label themselves as Coptic organisations, not Egyptian, Middle Eastern or Arab not only because of ethnoreligious pride but also because of the risk of confusion with Muslims, Arabs and related prejudices in the host country (Yefet, 2016). These organisations prepare educational and political actions. They lobby the government and non-governmental organisations and attempt to prevent assimilation of their community, but they respect the norms of a host country. They may be in conflict with churches because they find church attitudes towards the governments in their countries of origin too cautious.

### **3 Middle Eastern Christian Diasporas and Their Activities**

Nowadays, Middle Eastern Christian migration is a small part of the migration flow from the Global South to the Global North. In earlier periods Christians tended to migrate within Islamic empires. Conservative Christian European states refused to accept Middle Eastern Christians stigmatised as heretics. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, there appeared signs of protection of Middle Eastern churches from the Vatican and the Protestant churches. In the period after World War II., the desire for a convergence of Christian groups grew stronger and the WCC (World Council of Churches) was founded. Roman Catholics are not members of the WCC, but they held various conciliatory meetings with the patriarchs of Oriental Churches. Ecumenical processes occurred also in the Middle East. The MECC (Middle East Council of Churches) and the ATIME (Association of Theological Institutes in the Middle East Association) were founded as the offshoots of the WCC. The MECC is headquartered in Beirut, and it attempts to build civil society in the region, prevent the Christian exodus and encourage an interreligious dialogue with Islam (Bailey & Bailey, 2003, p. 25). Declining numbers of Christians are symptomatic for the Middle East. The biggest migration waves from the region were caused by the unpredictable situations as the Simmel massacre of Assyrians committed by the Iraqi army in 1933, Lebanese civil war, two wars in the Persian Gulf, short period of the Muslim Brotherhood's regime in Egypt, civil war in Syria and the rise of the ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, *Daesh*). Some of migrating Christians came back to their homelands after the end of critical situations<sup>7</sup>, but most of them stayed in exile. The migration of Christians has increased since the decolonisation of the region. Churches in the West attempt to help immigrants with practical issues and preservation of their identity in a new environment. The most popular destination of studied immigrants is the USA, particularly cities as Chicago and New York. Large communities of Oriental Christians live also in Canada, Australia, Sweden, France, Russia and Latin American countries. Popular countries among studied transmigrants are deductible from the church administration of observed churches that have administrative units in immigrant countries. Ethnoreligious churches (e.g. Assyrian Orthodox Church, Coptic Orthodox Church) occasionally send a clergy from the Middle East to administer churches in

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<sup>7</sup> Iraqi Christians mostly returned to their homeland from exile in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon after the Second Gulf War.

diaspora and to maintain a liturgical language. There are also laical organisations focused on human rights (Chapman, 2012).

Emigration reduces not only the minority's number but also its social, cultural and political potential in its homeland. The proportion of seniors and women is increasing as men of working age go abroad. In 1914, Christians represented 24 % of the population of the Ottoman Empire and today they do not represent more than 10 % in any of the studied countries except Lebanon (Pacini ed., 1998, p. 22). Most Middle Eastern Christians have relatives living in exile. Immigrant families help newcomers with accommodation, employment and other concerns. Many Christian students who have gone abroad for education did not return back after graduation. In their homelands, they would have trouble to find adequate employment because of inefficient local economies and their adherence to Christianity. Middle Eastern Christian diaspora political activities make Christians disloyal to their homelands in the eyes of the Muslim majority, despite the efforts of loyal clergy. Unfortunately, some campaigns of the diaspora are quite aggressive and may damage the credibility of a church in a country of origin.

A church is considered by the government to be the main actor of maintaining communal identity responsible for its adherents in the sense of the *neo-millet* system (Belge & Karakoç, 2013, p. 4-7). But the influence of a church in the diaspora with more communal actors is limited. Church in a homeland sometimes attempts to censor radical opinions of diaspora towards the Middle Eastern governments. Middle Eastern Christian diaspora activism involves:

- Public protests are the most popular method of social activism. Diasporas put their causes in an international context which may catch more attention from the public or the government in a host country and even indirectly lead to political action (Baser & Swain, 2010, p. 42-48).
- The Internet and alternative media activism are a relatively cheap and effective method of connecting diaspora communities, host countries or homelands. Many diasporas have their own satellite televisions, both religious and laical channels.
- Lobbying of governments, individual representatives of state power and political organisations, primarily in important countries or political integrations, is usually not an affair of individuals, but organised diaspora groups such as ACA (American Coptic Association). Lobbying may lead to the pressure towards governments in countries of origin, direct intervention or even military operation (Yefet, 2016, p. 5-6). There

is a cooperation with think-tanks with similar opinions, especially conservative right ones like Middle East Forum led by US political commentator **Daniel Pipes**.

- Pressure through own diaspora politicians elected in host countries or diaspora political parties established in host countries is typical for the Western environment with strong diaspora presence. There are diaspora politicians in the West who are members of established political parties based on ideology or politicians who are members of new diaspora political parties with ethnic or religious specifics. **Anna Eshoo** is a member of the Democratic Party and the US representative of the Assyrian and Armenian origin. Middle Eastern Christian diaspora does not have ethnic or religious political parties active in the host countries' politics, but Muslim immigrants do (e.g. Islam Party in Belgium, Denk in the Netherlands).
- Cooperation with other churches or Christian human rights organisations, religious (Voice of Martyrs, Open Doors USA) or non-religious (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Minority Rights Group International). We can notice raised awareness about the fate of mostly non-Catholic Middle Eastern Christians in the Roman Catholic Church. Visits of the Middle East were made by Popes **Benedict XVI**. and **Francis**. Popes had meetings with politicians and Christian, Muslim and Jewish clerics and they condemn terrorist and other violent attacks and guardedly criticized the status of Christians in Middle Eastern Muslim countries.
- Cooperation with other diasporas is typical for communities with similar religion or historical experience, for example, the Assyrians and Armenians who collaborate in the effort of the recognition of the genocide of their nations in the Ottoman Empire.
- Signing petitions and creating campaigns are popular non-violent strategies, how to influence people in the host country. The Internet is full of diaspora petitions. The Assyrians are engaged in organising petitions related to the planned Assyrian autonomous region in Iraq, Assyrian genocide *Seyfo* recognition, etc.
- Memorials and commemorations of historical events make the problem of a diaspora permanently more visible. Memorials might be a target of vandalism committed by members of diasporas with opposite interests, e.g. national diasporas denying the claims of stateless diasporas. The

memorial in Sydney was vandalized in 2015 and sprayed with swastikas and slogans against Assyrians and Armenians. These slogans may lead to a Turkish immigrant community (Aubusson, 2015).

- Extreme activities like hunger strike or self-immolation are not used by observed groups.

### **3.1 Assyrian Issues and Activities**

The Assyrians are typical stateless diaspora with distinct Neo-Aramean language and religion. Their original homeland is located in south-eastern Turkey, north-eastern Syria, northern Iraq and north-western Iran. They inhabited the same territory as the Kurds, their age-long rivals and their settlement is relatively compact in this territory. Nowadays, approximately 0,5 million Assyrians live in the Middle East and 3 million in the diaspora (UNPO, 2008). Assyrian emigration outside the Middle East started during the genocide committed by the Ottomans and continued during the events in Iraq in the 1930s, the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, Turkish-Kurdish conflict in Turkey in the 1980s and post-1990s wars in Iraq and Syria. The Assyrians are religiously divided, causing further difficulties. The most active part of the Assyrian nation are adherents of the Assyrian Church of the East who declare a kinship with the ancient Assyrians. Several adherents of other Assyrian sects as the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Syriac Catholic Church deny the Assyrian identity. They promote their particular identities, Chaldean and Aramean, languages (dialects) and Arabic or they perceive themselves as members of the Christian minority loyal to an existing state. Adherents of mentioned churches were predominantly urban populations who had to deal with Muslim rulers frequently whilst adherents of the Assyrian Church of the East lived in the country (Teule, 2012, p. 180-184). The Assyrian Church of the East has its patriarchal see in Chicago whereas other sects have the sees in the Middle East. This also plays a role in identity problems of Assyrians and differences in their political attitudes. The Assyrian Church of the East does not only maintain Assyrian religious identity, but also the literacy in Assyrian. Laic diaspora is also active in creating educational websites and software to strengthen literacy in Assyrian (McClure, 2001, p. 114). An important institution for these activities is the AAS (Assyrian Academic Society) in Chicago. The Assyrian Church of the East is politically active what is uncommon among Middle Eastern churches. In light of constructivism, it is difficult to find

the truth about the identity of Assyrian subgroups. A nationality became important in the region in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century under the influence of European thought. Several authors use compromise terms Chaldo-Assyrians or Chaldean-Assyrian Syriacs (Hanish, 2008, p. 42-43). In the article author uses term Assyrians for a whole group, focuses on the Assyrian nationalism (Assyrianism) and does not focus on particular identities which could complicate the text. Assyrians have their flag, national anthem, and their creation are coupled with diaspora activities.

The Assyrians strive for political emancipation from the Arab, Turkish, Persian or Kurdish governments. The Assyrians faced genocide in the Ottoman Empire and Assyrian authors regard the Simele massacre also as genocide. The Assyrians were victims of **Saddam Hussein's** campaign *Al-Anfal* (spoils of war) of de-kurdification of Northern Iraq (Teule, 2012, p. 186). Acts of martyrdom are important for Assyrian identity. Their genocide in the Ottoman Empire is not so famous as the Armenian genocide and was recognised by Sweden, Armenia, Netherlands, Austria, Germany and several federal states of the USA and Australia. Turkey denies the Assyrian genocide as well as the genocide of Armenians. Several memorials of the genocide have been built in Western countries with an Assyrian presence. Most Assyrians have moderate separatist tendencies and they support Assyrian autonomy because of the religious and ethnic discrimination in their homelands. They submitted petitions to the League of Nations requiring their own state because the British promised them sovereignty in so-called Assyrian Triangle in Mesopotamia. However, after World War I., the UK had opposite geopolitical interests. The Assyrians were loyal to the British mandate rule in Iraq, and they formed military forces called Assyrian Levies (Donabed, 2015, p. 414-415). Levies helped to suppress pro-Nazi coup in Iraq, but they were disbanded when British troops left Iraqi military bases in 1955. From the 1950s to 2000s Assyrian autonomy efforts in Iraq were totally suppressed as well as in Syria, Iran and Turkey.

The fall of **Hussein** meant a revival of Assyrian emancipation activities in Iraq, but Assyrian visions of the democratisation of Iraq were not fulfilled. The Assyrians became a target for Sunni and Shia radicals. Due to the current political situation, the most probable is partial Assyrian autonomy within Kurdish Rojava in Syria. The Nineveh plains plan in Iraq, where have majority of autochthonous Assyrians lived, was delayed by the conquests of the ISIL and related massive emigration. The Assyrians are almost not present in political bodies of the Middle Eastern states and if they are, they used minority quota

seats introduced in the last decades. There are five Assyrian MPs in central Iraqi Parliament and five in the Kurdish Parliament. In Iraqi Kurdistan, there are also Assyrian ministers. Generally, the Assyrians have the best living conditions in Kurdistan in terms of the Middle East. They have relative religious, cultural freedom and their own militias. That is why many Assyrians moved from Arab Iraq to Kurdistan (Phares, 2001, p. 64). In Turkey, there is one Assyrian MP elected for secularist and pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party, in Syria no MP and in Iran, there is one seat reserved for the Assyrian community. Iranian Assyrian deputy is **Yonathan Betkolia**, general secretary of the AUA (*Assyrian Universal Alliance*). One big exception was **Tariq Aziz**, Assyrian (Chaldean) former Iraqi deputy prime minister loyal to **Hussein's** Arab nationalism.

The Assyrian diaspora has created many political organisations, their offshoots and transnational institutions. Some of them are active in the Middle East. The AUA is Assyrian umbrella organisation and its goal is to spread the Assyrian name and protect the human rights of the Assyrians in their homeland. The AUA is the Assyrian representant in the UNPO (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation) (UNPO, 2008). The ACE (Assyrian Council of Europe) lobbies in Brussels. The AANF (Assyrian American National Federation) is a federation of Assyrian organisations in the USA. It was found in 1933 in the year of the Simmel massacre. It is focused on Assyrian human rights and culture, it organizes educational activities, youth camps and workshops. Mentioned organisations cooperate with Assyrian political parties in the Middle East, e. g. Iraqi ADM (Assyrian Democratic Movement) or illegal Syrian ADO (Assyrian Democratic Organisation) (Boháč, 2010, p. 69-70). There are several politicians of Assyrian origin in the West. US Representative for Democratic Party **Anna Eshoo** is a founder of Religious Minorities in the Middle East Caucus (activities as the Nineveh Plains Resolution or the Genocide Resolution). Unlike most pro-Middle Eastern Christian Western politicians, **Eshoo** is a liberal. **Ibrahim Baylan** is Swedish minister and Social-Democratic politician supporting the recognition of the Assyrian genocide. There are also five Assyrian members of the Swedish Parliament. The Assyrian question is raised not only by politicians of Assyrian origin. Former Republican US Congressman **Henry Hyde** cooperated with the lobbyist organisation AAL (Assyrian American League) and he had an influence on the recognition of Iraqi ADM (Assyrian Democratic Movement) as a part of Iraqi anti-Hussein opposition (Michael, 2003).

Also, celebrities of Assyrian origin attempt to improve the status of the Assyrians in their homeland. US actress and novelist **Rosie Malek-Yohan**

testified before the US Congress and the House of Commons in the UK in the case of the Assyrian plight in Iraq. She compared that situation with *Seyfo*, the genocide described in her popular novel *The Crimson Field*. Swedish journalist and author **Nuri Kino** is an author of the books about Iraqi Assyrians, and one of them was dedicated to the Minority Rights Group International. He also created the film about the Assyriska football team. The team from Swedish city Södertälje was founded by Assyrian immigrants and still has a significant number of Assyrian players (Bet-Alkhas, 2006). Assyrian transnational media are important for maintaining Assyrian identity and literacy. There are Assyrian satellite televisions as Ashur TV opinion linked to the ADM and located in the USA. US Assyrian diaspora also publishes many Internet magazines as Zinda Magazine, Nineveh Online and Assyrian News (McClure, 2001, p. 115). Assyrians have their agency AINA (Assyrian International News Agency) providing news on Assyrian-related issues with headquarters in Chicago. AINA articles are cited by important mass media. Assyrians in the diaspora are engaged in protesting against actual violent events in their homelands. Demonstrations with Assyrian flags and various banners are held in Western cities as New York, Sydney or London, especially after the terrorist attacks committed on the Assyrians in the Middle East. The Assyrians also struggle for recognition of their genocide in the Ottoman Empire and they build memorials of the genocide.

### **3.2 Coptic Issues and Activities**

The Copts do not belong to typical stateless diasporas because they mostly consider themselves as true Egyptians along with Muslims. The Copts constitute approximately 10 % of Egypt's population, and they live in large cities like Cairo and Alexandria as well as in the country of Upper Egypt or the Sinai Peninsula. The vast majority of the Copts are adherents of the Coptic Orthodox Church but there are also Coptic Catholics or Protestants. Nowadays, the Copts are linguistically fully Arabized, and Arabic is a predominant language in church rituals<sup>8</sup>. The Coptic language is kept alive by a few enthusiasts. The Copts do not have autonomist tendencies, although their diaspora is active in the questions of religious freedom, politics, discriminatory Egyptian laws and had an impact on strengthening Coptic civil society and promoting Coptic identity in

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<sup>8</sup> Liturgical languages are usually more resistant to the assimilation than languages of daily communication in terms of the Middle East.

Egypt (Henderson, 2005). The absence of autonomist tendencies can be explained by a dispersed settlement of the minority and specific historical conditions. Copts are systematically underrepresented in the public sector. The exception was **Boutros Boutros-Ghali**, former minister of foreign affairs and general secretary of the UN. The Copts do not attempt to create a special Coptic political party. Political parties based on religion or ethnicity are banned in Egypt. Another problem of Copts is prevalent violent attacks on them. The Egyptian state is sensitive to criticism from abroad related to the Coptic question, often rejects any discussion and perceives criticism as a foreign conspiracy against national integrity. Communal violence against Copts in Egypt is interpreted by the government as terrorist attacks against the whole Egyptian society regardless of faith. It is obvious that Coptic diaspora activities mostly contradicts the state policy. Both the Egyptian government and opposition dominated by Muslims are against any foreign involvement on behalf of Copts and criticize Coptic particularism because all Egyptians have problems with poverty, unemployment, etc. (Ibrahim, 2015). Coptic emigration to Western countries began after **Gamal Nasser's** *coup d'état* in 1952. Nowadays, there live approximately 600 000 Copts in the West due to the estimations. Hundreds of local Coptic Orthodox churches are directed by the Patriarchate of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Alexandria based in Cairo. Diaspora church is focused on maintaining the religious identity of Copts (also via the Internet), philanthropy and is far from criticism towards the Egyptian government (Yefet, 2016, p. 1208-1209).

Various political protests, petitions and lobbying are organised by Coptic laic organisations. The ACA (American Coptic Association) is the oldest Coptic diaspora organisation, its foundation is connected with the imprisonment of Coptic patriarch, Pope **Shenouda III.**, who refused to cooperate with pro-Islamist **Anwar Sadat's** government in Egypt because of its inactivity in the question of frequent attacks on Copts in the 1970s. Coptic lobbying in the US Congress led to the pressure on the Egyptian government and the release of the Pope. It led also to the Freedom from Religious Persecution Act of 1990 and the activities of the USCIRF (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom) authorised by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Freedom from Religious Persecution Act of 1990 became an important part of the US foreign policy that involved sanctions against the states violating religious freedom. USCIRF is a federal government commission annually reviewing violations of religious freedom abroad. There are many Coptic

organisations all around the world such as US Copts, Coptic Assembly of America, ACM (Australian Coptic Movement) and the BCA (British Coptic Association) with its Internet activities. Coptic diaspora is very active on the Internet which is an alternative source of information about the Copts because Egyptian media are not much interested in Coptic topics (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 2591). The Coptic Orthodox Church collaborates with the Egyptian regime, although young **Shenouda III.** had not been afraid to criticize the government. Later he started to cooperate with the government and rejected political activities of his community and the diaspora in return for guaranteeing relative security of Egyptian Copts (Henderson, 2005, p. 159-165). His successor **Tawadros II.** continues in a similar way.

There are Coptic laic intellectuals as **Samir Marqus** (Marqus, 2000 in Yefet, 2016, p. 1213) or **Hani Labib** (Labib, 2000 in Yefet 2016, p. 1213) condemning diaspora activism as anti-Arab and anti-Islamic agenda exacerbating problems and supporting neo-colonialism. According to them, the Coptic question can be solved within the Egyptian framework, concretely through a reformed conception of Egyptian citizenship. Another Coptic group is liberal idealists who supported the 2011 revolution against **Hosni Mubarak**, despite the recommendations of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The majority of the Copts feared the rise of Islamists and finally were satisfied when the Egyptian army led by **Sisi** overthrew the government of the Muslim Brotherhood. **Sisi** attempts to be seen as a protector of Egyptian Christians, he stood for easing the conditions for church building and renovations, a higher percentage of Coptic politicians in the parliament (via quota system) and he attends Coptic Orthodox religious ceremonies. **Sisi** is the most popular Egyptian president among the diaspora, so the criticism of the Egyptian government has decreased a little. Coptic activists from the diaspora have organised many petitions connected with the Coptic question, one of the actual is connected with the visit of **Sisi** in the USA (Makar, 2016).

Well-known pro-Coptic politician of non-Coptic origin is **Fred Nile** from Australia. He is a member of New South Wales legislative council for the Christian Democratic Party, an admirer of **Donald Trump** and he is famous for his critical opinions towards homosexuals, liberals and Muslims. He pointed out discrimination of the Copts in Egypt many times, he collaborates with Coptic diaspora and he also attempted to put the Muslim Brotherhood on the list of terrorist organisations (Fred Nile MLC, 2017). There are many Coptic satellite televisions such as Coptic Sat TV, Logos TV residing in the West. Aghapy TV

and Coptic TV have their headquarters in Cairo and have views particularly in the USA and Australia. These Egyptian TV stations are allied with the Coptic Orthodox Church and they have to cope with state censorship (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 2592).

Extreme diaspora activism can be harmful to Egyptian Copts. **Zakaria Boutros** is the individual who receives media attention, although he does not have significant support of the diaspora as well as the Copts in Egypt. **Boutros** is a former Coptic priest because the Coptic Orthodox Church cancelled his priesthood because of his anti-Islamic positions which irritate not only Egyptian Muslims. Al-Qaeda put a bounty on his head. **Boutros** is a founder of US Al-Fady channel and associate of Christian conservative Al-Hayat TV channel located in Cyprus (Marzouki, 2016, p. 271-272). Both channels are Arabic. Another controversial person from the diaspora is **Nakoula Basseley Nakoula**, US Copt who filmed the Innocence of Muslims and was influenced by **Boutros's** teaching. This anti-Islamic film denouncing prophet **Muhammad** as a paedophile caused the rage all around the Muslim world (Los Angeles Times, 2012, Marzouki, 2016, 164). The trailer of the film starts with the scene of Muslim persecution of Egyptian Copts. Coptic Orthodox Church leaders had to denounce this movie to prevent Copts to be targeted by angry Muslims.

## Conclusion

In many cases, Christians are the only non-Muslim population in the Middle East which represents a valuable force for the pluralism. Their emigration is a loss for the region. Let's commemorate the role of Christians in the development of the Ottoman Empire from Oriental despotism to a relatively modern state with democratic outcomes in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The future of Christian minorities is connected not only with the solution of political issues, such as Iraqi and Syrian questions but with the secularisation and modernisation of Arab societies towards the American model of the nation. Regimes of relatively secular autocrats are a short-term solution. Christian strategies for survival oscillate between loyalty to Muslim governments and self-determination with territorial claims. Another alternative is emigration. Both studied Assyrian and Coptic diasporas preserve a distinct identity in host countries, although they are functioning parts of host societies without social or economic problems and they partially accepted the identity of host states. They do not have bigger issues with integration probably due to some cultural proximity, although they belong to

involuntary diasporas with strong connections to a homeland or visions of return. They are politically active non-state actors, but the level of political activism or criticism towards homeland governments and the involvement of their diaspora churches is variable in time and space. The goals of diasporas are determined by many factors as shown. Relations of diasporas with coreligionists of the same denomination, other Christians and non-Christian compatriots are connected with actual diaspora tactics. In contrast to the Copts and Assyrians with their predominant particularism, diasporas of universal religions are able to suppress several differences and cooperate within the wider national and religious communities. These diasporas are prone to the assimilation in wider immigrant communities or majority society in host countries.

The Assyrian and Coptic diasporas are vibrant, but they are not geopolitically important, so they have a problem to attract the attention of the global players preferring tactful relations with Muslim majorities in the strategically important Middle East. They raise the question of human rights and religious freedom via their own associations or in cooperation with various laic and religious organisations. At times they are quite radical and insensitive in their criticism, and they cooperate with conservative right parties and in some cases far-right politicians in the West. Therefore, they may be accused of Islamophobia.

Activities of studied diasporas are positive for their coreligionists in their homelands, but there are exceptions unnecessarily irritating local governments and Muslim citizens. Church leaders in the Middle East then have to publicly apologize for exaggerated activism of diaspora. The Assyrians have all signs of a nation and poor relationship with the central Iraqi government which denies all autonomous or separatist tendencies. They cautiously prefer the cooperation with the Iraqi Kurdistan in the Middle Eastern region. The Assyrians have better developed political organisations and parties than the Copts who still mostly rely on the recommendations of their church. Moreover, geography plays an important role. The Assyrian Church of the East with the see in Chicago is quite progressive and encourages political activism and self-determination activities of the Assyrian people worldwide, whilst the Coptic Orthodox Church with the see in Cairo is dependent on the Egyptian government and rejects similar activities of the Copts in Egypt and diaspora. Coptic churches in the diaspora are subordinated and loyal to the patriarch see in Cairo. Coptic Orthodox Church oscillates between political passivity and wary support of authoritarian

practices of Egyptian military leaders for decades. Actual support for president **Sisi** is more honest than the loyalty to previous Egyptian presidents because he really improved the political and social status of the Coptic minority. Laic Coptic organisations are still unsatisfied and demand more changes in Egyptian society and democratisation of Egyptian politics. They also promote particular Coptic identity distinct from Egyptian, predominantly Muslim, identity and demand reformed conception of Egyptian citizenship. Their approach leads to clashes with the Egyptian government as well as the church. Meanwhile, the majority of the Copts in Egypt consider themselves as Egyptians, want to live peacefully with their Muslim neighbours, do not have any separatist tendencies and have good relations with Sisi.

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