

THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

An exploration of Christian-Muslim Relations in Syria. 2000 – 2018

**Contextualising the religious landscape, historic and contemporary dynamics
in Christian-Muslim relations, and Eastern Christian frameworks of
engagement.**



Photo: A. Ashdown. Damascus. September 2017

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University of Winchester.

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This thesis offers a new and authoritative contribution to knowledge and understanding of the historical and contemporary Christian-Muslim context in Syria, and a resource for the further development of interreligious relations in Syria and the region, and the vital role that the religious leaders will continue to have as bridge-builders and peace-makers in future.

Andrew Ashdown
May 2019

University of Winchester

Abstract

**An exploration of Christian-Muslim relations in Syria. 2000-2018.
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This study explores, from a Christian theological and ecclesial perspective, Christian-Muslim relations in Syria between 2000 and 2018. Focussing on research undertaken within government-held areas during the Syrian conflict, it offers an original contribution to scholarship on the context in modern Syria. Providing the historical and contemporary context for the interreligious dynamic, I introduce and describe the plural Christian and Muslim landscapes that have cohabited and interacted in Syria prior to and during the Ottoman period and in the century since, and how this relationship has been impacted by the conflict. I examine the complex issues that underlie the relationship, particularly the roles of culture and religious leadership, and challenge the view that the analytical concept of sectarianism is adequate to describe the complex communal frameworks in the Middle Eastern context. Rather 'sectarianism' is understood as a primarily western discourse that misleads western understanding of the regional communal dynamic. I also examine the important influence of Islamism on religious and political developments in recent decades, Islam's struggle in grappling with modern Statehood, increased 'secularism', and how to ensure that freedom of religious expression and practise for all communities is sustained in Muslim-majority contexts.

The wider context of the religious landscape is evidenced through substantial qualitative fieldwork. Building on previous research into the nature of religious leadership, the study demonstrates that Near Eastern religious leaders create a model for interreligious relations, seek reconciliation between different groups, and promote humanitarian initiatives for their communities. Examining Eastern Christian theologians and their approaches to Christian-Muslim relations, the study posits the view that Eastern Christianity in Syria is marked by deep ecclesial plurality and a long-standing engagement with Islam. Moreover, the theology and spirituality of the 'Antiochene paradigm', inhabiting the same cultural environment as Islam, is uniquely placed to play a major role in dialogue as Christians and Muslims face increasing political and religious challenges. Its potential in this respect has been under-recognised.

The thesis offers an original contribution to knowledge and understanding of the changing Christian-Muslim dynamic in Syria and the region. Most importantly, the thesis offers a new understanding of the religious landscape, and a door to exploring how Eastern Christian approaches to Christian-Muslim relations may be sustained and strengthened in the face of the considerable religious and political challenges faced by both communities today.

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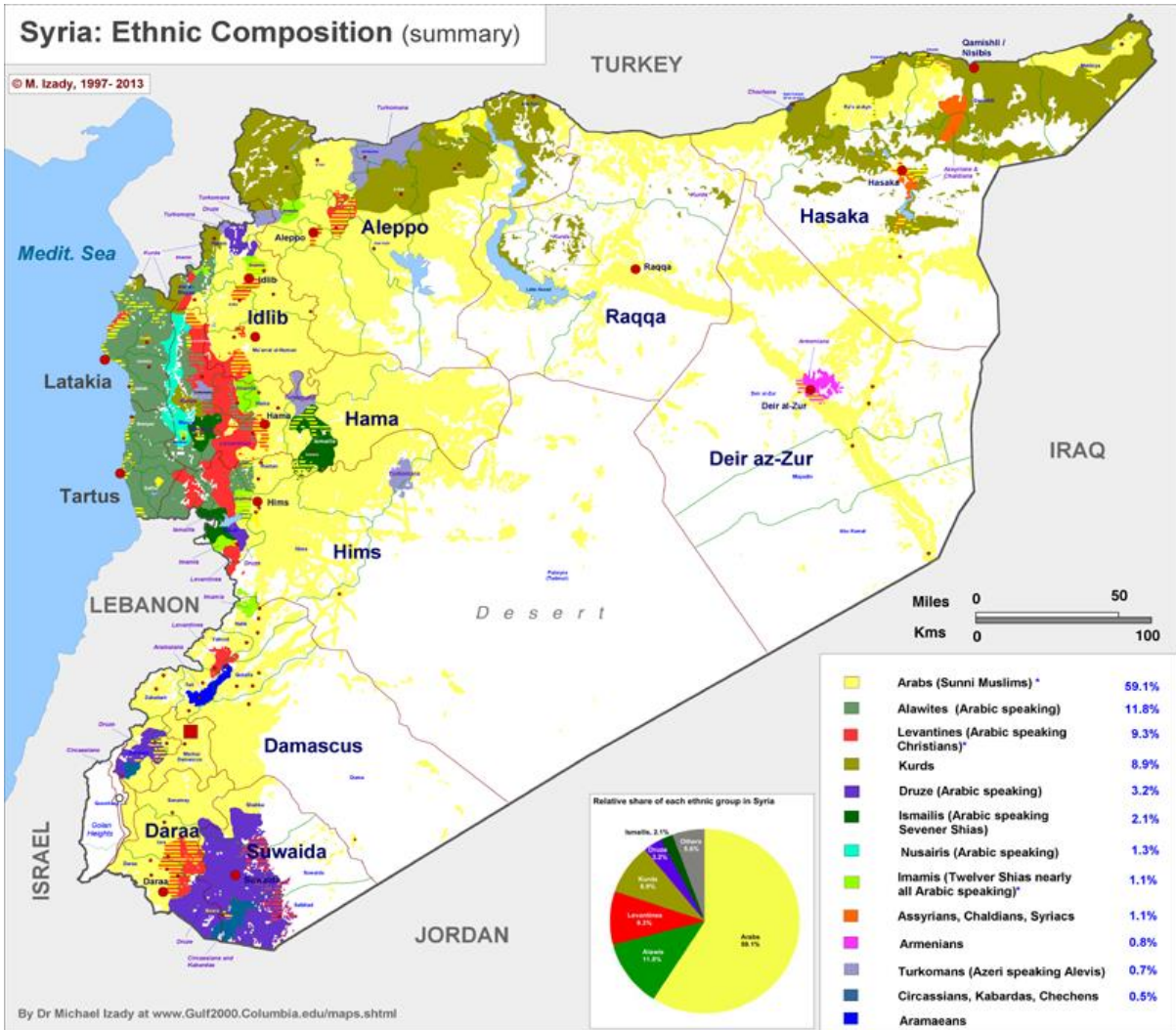
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Map of Syria. Ethnic composition



Map produced by Dr. Michael Izady for Gulf 2000 Project. 2000
www.gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml

Introduction

Considering Christian-Muslim relations in Syria 2000-2018, this study places in context, from a Christian theological and ecclesial perspective, the contemporary and historical interaction of Christianity and Islam in Syria, up to and including the recent Syrian conflict. With research undertaken in government-held areas during the conflict, the thesis offers an original contribution to scholarship on the historical and contemporary religious dynamics in modern Syria and develops our understanding of the significance of the Antiochene Eastern Christian paradigm for the future of interreligious dynamics in the region. Prior to 2011 this subject had received little scholarly attention. Some studies had examined Christianity in Syria, and others Islam in Syria, but there has been little authoritative description of the modern history and character of Christianity in Syria, and almost no engagement with the Christian leadership inside Syria during the war.

Since 2011, there have been a plethora of articles and publications about Syria. Almost all their sources are from outside Syria and have prioritised perspectives of the multi-factional groups opposed to the Syrian government, the majority of which hold to Islamist ideologies. Few have attempted to address the multi-dimensional contemporary communal dynamics within government-controlled areas of Syria, and none have reflected upon Christian perspectives. This study therefore contributes to a significant gap within the literature – an area of discourse that for practical and political reasons, was completely neglected outside the country throughout the conflict. Given that the majority of the population remaining in Syria during the war, and the majority of the internally displaced within the country lived within those areas, excluding their relational dynamic and experience represented a huge gap in contextual understanding.¹ Yet, this is what western academic, religious, political and media discourse did for most of the eight year conflict. This is the first study that seeks to fill that gap. In a highly charged context, academic rigour requires that different contexts are examined and understood. This is particularly important when one is considering complex communal frameworks that are undergoing situations of rapid and traumatic change.

¹ Balanche notes: “The most diverse and populous area is the one controlled by the regime’s army. Although many of this zone’s residents are Alawites—that is, followers of the Alawi branch of Shia Islam—the majority are Sunnis, and many minorities have fled there as well. In contrast, rebel zones are almost exclusively Sunni Arab. The few minorities who lived in these areas have fled or been forced to convert to Sunnism.” (Balanche, 2018, p. xv) In 2015, it was estimated that 10 million of the 16 million Syrians inside Syria were in government-controlled areas. (Balanche, 2018, p. 13)

This study places this dynamic within the wider religious and geopolitical context. Most scholarship views the region from external historic and cultural perspectives that have had major geopolitical influences upon the region. The wider geopolitical context is undergoing major political, cultural and religious upheaval that is having a profound impact locally and regionally, and upon communal relationships and demographics.

The interreligious dynamics explored here are affected by a confluence of regional forces that have had multiple influences, and have created a distinct and dynamic religious context. The following have all been instruments of profound change in the region: the development and influence of Sunni Islamism during the last century; the Shi'a revival in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and the Gulf, and the increasing tensions between these two expressions of Islam; the civil war in Lebanon; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and recent developments in Israel; the Iraq war and the consequent existential threat to Christian communities in Iraq; western interventions in Afghanistan and Libya; the effects of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. Combined with changing geopolitical alliances between Saudi Arabia, Israel, Europe, America, the Gulf and Turkey, and Iran and Russia's role in the region, it is evident that the complex geopolitical and communal dynamics of the whole region are being reframed.² A realistic understanding of the cultural, religious, historical and contemporary landscapes in these contexts is therefore vital to informing and helping navigate the future direction of communities within these complex changing societies. This study attempts to meet that challenge in the Syrian context.

How do culturally plural societies respond to this complexity? Lebanon, with its similar social and religious make-up of society but different political structures to Syria (communal as opposed to lay-oriented Constitution), posits one model of managing communal difference. The changing demographic in Syria as a result of the war will certainly affect communal relationships, and understanding those changes, both locally and within their wider context, will be essential to establishing a long term peace in the post-conflict human landscape.

Reflecting this, the study explores how the complex trajectory of the conflict which has involved multiple players has impacted Syria's communities. In a context in which plurality has been embedded in society, many Syrians dislike any discourse that suggests a 'sectarian'

² For more on the Shi'a Revival, see: (V. Nasr, 2016) (Nuruzzaman, 2019). Also, for analysis of Russia's role, see: (Centre for Mediterranean, 2019) *Russia in the Middle East. The Russian Bear in Mind*.

narrative. Hence this study also explores the appropriateness of the term ‘sectarian’. Western political analysis has given little meaningful attention to the inter-communal character of Syria within government-held areas. I suggest that the misrepresentation of this inter-communal identity has created a self-limiting and misleading political framework for understanding the political religious context within Syria, which this study seeks to address.

Written from a Christian perspective, this thesis considers the Eastern Christian theological and ecclesial contributions to the interreligious context prior to and during the Syrian conflict.³ Reflecting on the contribution of several indigenous Christian theologians from different Eastern, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant traditions, the thesis explores how the theology, doctrine and traditions of the eastern churches – the ‘Antiochene paradigm’ - contributes to enabling a constructive engagement with the Muslim community in the Middle East, especially in the face of growing rigidity in Islamic thought and the increasing impact of militant Islam.⁴ Following the thought of such theologians as Clement, Massignon, Khodr, and other contemporary Eastern Christian leaders, the thesis considers how the long history and experience of Christian-Muslim encounter can inform western Christianity’s encounter with Islam, both in the aftermath of the brutality of war in Syria, and amidst the inevitable consequences both regionally and beyond. The thesis also explores the role of Protestant expressions of Christianity in the Eastern Christian paradigm. Due to the historic ‘othering’ of Eastern Christian traditions within Protestant discourses, there have been tensions between the two religious cultures. However, significant efforts are currently being made to restore ecumenical trust and discourse.

Exploring the role of religious leadership in Syria and in the region, a role rooted in cultural and historically evolved frameworks, this study suggests that it has been widely misunderstood in western discourse, and that the lack of engagement by western leaders with religious leaders in Syria has led to an imbalanced understanding of the social, cultural, political and religious realities within the country. Additionally, this study extends previous study of religious leadership in the region and explores how models of Eastern Christian leadership are informing the nature of religious leadership in the region, and their representational, bridge-building and reconciliation capacities in situations of conflict.

³ For a helpful brief introduction to some of these issues see: (Hamid, 2014).

⁴ The ‘Antiochene paradigm’ theme explored here develops the academic contributions of Massignon, Clement, Khodr, Sudworth and Hugh-Donovan.

Christianity has been present in Syria since its earliest days, and prior to the rise of Islam was the dominant faith in the region, a fact little appreciated in western imaginations of Syria. Given the existential threat of violence in the region when extreme religious ideologies or political interests threaten the fragile balance between multiple communities,⁵ many Syrian Christians and Muslims as this study shows, stress that the historic presence of the Christian faith in the region should always be protected. Ever since the emergence of Islam, the two faiths have engaged, mutually influenced each other, and notwithstanding occasional periods of hostility, have coexisted.⁶ Both have diverse and long-established traditions in Syria, with Christian denominations from all five ecclesiastical ‘families’ of churches, existing alongside broad expressions of both Sunni and Shia Islam. In Syria, this plurality of religious and cultural expression involves multiple communities living alongside each other. Though there have been instances of inter-communal violence, most notably in 1840 and 1850, and inter-communal tensions, this plurality has for the most part been characterised by an attitude of mutual acceptance and tolerance (Goddard, 2000; S. H. Griffith, 2008).

Thus, despite the restrictions on ‘minority’ communities of Ottoman systems of governance, no one community has in the past been able to dominate religious and political discourse.⁷ This coexistence is real, but the nature of Christian-Muslim relations is varied and complex and differs according to context (Rabo, 2012, p. 79). And it has been impacted by the conflict. As Najib Awad writes: “Underneath the external façade of variety, colourful interaction and interreligious coexistence ... lurks another more sophisticated, and less ideal and bright, history”, wherein Christians have at times been reduced to a “homogenous *millet*” struggling to survive as a minority, and identified negatively by some Muslims, with western powers whose people happen to share the same religious faith (Najib Georg Awad, 2012, pp. 66-67). Nevertheless, Christians and Muslims for the most part hold equal status in the law under the Constitution, something that is widely applauded and allows a high degree of religious freedom. However, the plurality of personal status law is based on mandatory religious affiliation, and this can sustain religious division and create discrimination where gender is

⁵ For an introduction to militant Islamism, see Chapter 2. See also: (Sivan, 1985) (Calvert, 2010) (Lefevre, 2013).

⁶ Understandings of ‘coexistence’ will be considered in Chapter 3.

⁷ The issue of when the concept of ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ communities emerged will be explored (Makdisi, 2000). Whether the analytical framework of ‘sectarianism’ might be an over-simplified designation imposed on a highly complex multi-layered communal relational context will be considered.

concerned (Eijk, 2016). Moreover, the President must be Muslim. For these reasons, the designation of 'secular' to the Constitution requires qualification.⁸

Until the start of the conflict in 2011, Syria possessed one of the largest concentrations of Christians in the Middle East. Their origins are closely linked to the origins of Christianity (Anthony O'Mahony, 2013, p. 232). The diversity and complexity of the ecclesial context in Syria, with its Oriental, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant expressions; and of the Muslim presence has been under-recognised, both in academic study hitherto, and in analysis of the current context.

Interest in the religious, social and political context in Syria has increased dramatically as a result of the conflict. In 1997, William Dalrymple wrote an account of his 1994 journey around the Middle East, and his encounters with Christian communities in the region. *From the Holy mountain* instantly became a best seller, and opened people's eyes to an interreligious context in the region of which many westerners were unaware. In this book, Dalrymple mentions a meeting with Mar Gregorius Yohanna Ibrahim in Aleppo, (one of the bishops who was kidnapped in 2013, whose fate is still unknown). Dalrymple quotes him:

Christians are better off in Syria than anywhere else in the Middle East. Other than Lebanon, this is the only country in the region where a Christian can feel the equal of a Muslim. In Syria there is no enmity between Christian and Muslim. If Syria were not here, we would be finished. Really. It is a place of sanctuary, a haven for all the Christians: for the Nestorians and Chaldeans driven out of Iraq, the Syrian Orthodox and the Armenians driven out of Turkey, even some Palestinian Christians driven out of the Holy Land by the Israelis (Dalrymple, 1998, p. 150).

This was a view commonly expressed by Syrians prior to the conflict, and a reality that the conflict has profoundly strained, and in some cases fractured.

However, we must not be oversentimental about the coexistence that has largely prevailed in the region. Many Eastern Christians comment that their continued presence in the region has in recent decades required a degree of personal and institutional caution at a religious, social

⁸ Family and personal status laws in Syria, originating in Ottoman systems of governance, have always been marked by legal plurality that have made it difficult to uphold the Government's secular ideology. "The government has been engaged in a delicate balancing act of, on the one hand, upholding its official secular discourse and policies, and, on the other hand, maintaining the status quo and appeasing, most importantly, a significant segment of its conservative Sunni Muslim citizens." (Eijk, 2016, p. 207)

and political level. The dramatic reduction in the percentage of Christians in the region during the last forty years is witness to the strain under which Christian communities have lived for a whole variety of social, religious, economic, and political reasons. Najib Awad, an expatriot Syrian Christian living in the United States, describes the history of Eastern Christians, as “a multifarious, sophisticated narrative of ‘perpetual strife for survival as a minority in a non-Christian majority world,’” that is being put under even greater strain by the heightening of Sunni-Shi’a religious tensions, and the rise of “terrorist Islamic entities” (Najib George Awad, 2017, p. 65).⁹ He also writes: “The external rich history of plurality that is portrayed via the architectural versatility hides underneath it an internal, parallel history of suffering, uncertainty, fear, pressure, difficulty, death and perpetual strife for survival as a minority in a non-Christian majority world” (Najib Georg Awad, 2012, p. 89). This is a reality that cannot be ignored, and that Christians and Muslims in the wider region will need to address in the years ahead if coexistence is going to prevail.

[A historical background to Christian-Muslim engagement in the Middle East.](#)

The long-standing coexistence of Christianity and Islam, with varying degrees of tolerance over the years is well documented. Moreover, when Islam presented itself, it did so in a context that was already deeply religious and plural. In this plural context, all communities have, to a greater or lesser degree, been represented at all levels of society. This makes for varied relations where shifts in power can powerfully impact inter-communal relations. Today, it is believed that Christians still make up around 5-7 per cent of the population.

Ever since the inception of the Muslim faith, there has been dialogue and cross-fertilisation of beliefs and philosophy. Mohammed himself is believed to have met and debated with Christian monks and Jewish communities and it appears that his thoughts and actions were influenced by Jewish communities and by the practices of Christian monasticism in the Arabian peninsula. Certainly, both Jewish and Christian writings and thinking find echoes in the pages of the *Qur’an* (Goddard, 2000, pp. 19-24), and some Muslim faith rituals and practices find their origins in early Christian and monastic practices. This is reflected in some Qur’anic sayings which declare that not all ‘People of the Scripture’ are alike, and that those who ‘believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct... and vie with one another in good works. These are of the righteous. And whatever good they do, nothing will be rejected of

⁹ Also (Najib Georg Awad, 2012)

them' (Volf, 2010a, p. 48).¹⁰ The *Qur'an* records a heated debate concerning the divinity of Christ between the Christians of Najran and the Prophet himself, which indicates that Christians were allowed freedom of worship and a degree of acceptance at the time (Ayoub, 2007, p. 35). As Ayoub writes: 'From its inception, Islam was nourished by the piety, lore and spirituality of the people of the Book, Jews and Christians. In ancient Arabia, it was the desert monks who provided healing and hope, faith and fulfilment for generations of men and women' (Ayoub, 2007, p. 17).¹¹ Thus, initially, under Muslim rule, Christians were generally well treated, as long as they did not try to unsettle the balance of power (Goddard, 2003a, p. 19).

Syria's tradition of plurality and diversity means that the country has always been a place of refuge. Survivors of the Armenian and Syriac genocides in 1915 sought refuge in the country, and in the 1950s the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate moved to Damascus after a thousand years at Deir ul Zafaran in Turkey, becoming the worldwide headquarters of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Indeed, three Patriarchates – the Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox and Greek Catholic – are all situated in Damascus. Before the start of the current conflict, Kurds, Palestinians and Iraqis all found refuge in the country. Nevertheless, although Jews, Christians and Muslims, along with other minority groups, lived in relative harmony in the Middle East until the turn of the 20th Century, the history of Christianity under Muslim rule generally in the region, despite substantial engagement, for many reasons has been one of 'continuous, if gradual, diminishment' (S. H. Griffith, 2008, p. 14).¹²

Varying attitudes towards Christians are expressed in the *Qur'an*. This reflects changing contexts as Islam grew in power and influence, and as some Christians 'became less receptive to some of Muhammad's theological claims' (Goddard, 2000, p. 26). As the Muslim community expanded, it increasingly came into contact with Eastern Christian, Byzantine, and Zoroastrian faith communities that surrounded the region. On the one hand, this resulted in theological dialogue on key commonalities and variations of belief; and on the other, as Muslim rule became more established, there was a need to establish 'a more conciliatory approach to the existing population' (Goddard, 2000, p. 46). There is much debate as to why Islam spread so quickly from the Arabian Peninsula to North Africa and Europe. Two key reasons are that so much of the Christian world at the time was bitterly divided; and that Muslims offered a

¹⁰ Q: 3:113-115 See also: Q 49:13, Q 2:62, Q 5:69

¹¹ Q 3: 59-63

¹² See also: (Hanna, 2007).

greater degree of protection to the local population than Byzantine rulers. It was in these early days of Muslim expansion that the system of *ahl al-dhimma* (the People of the Covenant), was established for those who were *ahl al-kitab* (People of the Book), namely Jews and Christians (Goddard, 2000, p. 46). There is also much debate over the extent to which this system was both a system of protection and a system of domination in which *dhimmis* were regarded as second class citizens.

During and following the rule of Caliph Al-Ma'mun (813-833), considerable dialogue and development in Islam took place. He established the *Bayt al hikma* (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad 'whose purpose was the translation of Greek and other works into Arabic... Emissaries were sent to Byzantium to find and purchase both scientific and philosophical works' which were then circulated throughout the Islamic world (Goddard, 2000, p. 52). This encounter with western philosophical ideas engendered much debate, 'and awareness of the need to present the doctrines and religious arguments of the others on their own terms before refuting them' (Zebiri, 1997, p. 138). Christians, such as John of Damascus, 'the first Christian to have made a serious attempt to study and understand Islam', were influential in the Muslim court (Zebiri, 1997, p. 24). As already mentioned, the development of this relationship was partly rooted in the adoption, as early as the 9th Century, of Arabic as the primary liturgical language of the indigenous Churches. The use of the Arabic language in the first centuries of Islam's emergence, was instrumental in enabling both theological and philosophical debate with Islamic scholars. The topics most vigorously debated usually centred around Christological and Trinitarian doctrines; the prophet-hood of Muhammad; the revelatory status of the Qur'an; the Christian veneration of icons and crosses; and what constitutes true religion (S. H. Griffith, 2008, p. 78).

During the 7th to 10th Centuries of the Christian era, as Islam spread across the region, amidst the flowering of Islamic art, architecture, philosophy and theology, there was considerable engagement between Muslim, Christian and Jewish philosophers and theologians, who were even included in the Courts of the Caliphs. During the Umayyad and Abbasid periods in Damascus and Baghdad respectively, Christians, being familiar with Greek for cultural purposes, Arabic in daily living and Syriac for daily life, offered education to Muslim Arabs, and were instrumental in administrative and civic functions of the Caliphate, as well as in strengthening Islamic engagement with science and philosophy.¹³

¹³ See: (Diab, 2017)

Under Caliph Mutawakkil (822-861CE) however, further development of the *Shari'a* law saw a shift from widespread engagement with the Christian faith and philosophy, to a greater suspicion of Christians and their faith. As Ayoub puts it: 'With the development of the schools of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the deepening conflict between Christendom and the world of Islam, the people of *dhimmah* came to be regarded as a special category, not only different from but also inferior to Muslims' (Ayoub, 2007, p. 37). This development ultimately resulted in Islam becoming a 'closed' religion. Nevertheless, the designation of Christians as *ahl al-kitab* – a familial term, 'People of the Book' – remained.

The subsequent centuries saw a significant series of encounters between Islam and Christianity. The Crusades, which initially targeted Eastern Christians, Muslims and Jews, and happened at a time when the Arab world was flourishing in science, philosophy and medicine, left a lasting legacy of mistrust in the Arab world for Western Christianity, both among Eastern Christians and Muslims– a legacy that continues today and which is only deepened by contemporary western policies in the region. The Crusades also resulted in a revival of Islam and a deeper encounter for Christians with the Muslim faith (Goddard, 2000, p. 91). It was out of this encounter that the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable (1092-1156) proposed a systematic study of Islam. His achievement provided 'an alternative view which was influential in some circles', and which did 'have some later influence' (Goddard, 2000, p. 96). Francis of Assisi, who travelled to Egypt to meet with the Sultan in 1219, was also instrumental in the Catholic Church in demonstrating a different approach towards Islam, and continues to have relevance for the study of Christian-Muslim relations (Saxby, 2006).¹⁴

We cannot overestimate the importance of Al-Ghazali in the development of Muslim thought and philosophy in relation to other faiths, and in relation to Islamic understandings of faith and reason. His forty volume work, *Iḥiyā' 'ulūm ad-dīn* ('The Revival of the Religious Sciences') brought together Sunni theology and Sufi mysticism and had a profound impact on Islamic thought. Also influential was the Muslim Kingdom of Granada, which inspired the translation of Arabic and Greek works into Latin, and the establishment of Arabic schools across Europe in the 14th Century (Goddard, 2000, pp. 96-99). At the same time, the Mendicant Missionary Orders of monks, inspired by Francis' visit established a different model for inter-faith

¹⁴ See also: (S. M. Thomas, 2018).

encounter.¹⁵ Meanwhile the presence of the Crusader Kingdoms in the Levant ensured a depth of encounter between Eastern and Western Christians that was to strengthen the Christian presence in the region.

The 15th Century saw the collapse of the Muslim State in Spain, the discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus, and Vasco da Gama's discovery of the route around the Cape of Good Hope, making possible more substantial contact with the Muslim communities of Asia. As the Muslim world became surrounded by European influence, so theological attitudes within both Christian and Muslim faiths became more exclusive.

The 17th and 18th Centuries again saw a shift amongst Christian missionaries in their approach to the Muslim world, influenced by the universalistic approach of the Jesuits, and such figures as Francis Xavier in South India and Japan; Matthew Ricci in China, and Robert de Nobili in India. 'These figures are outstanding because of their sensitivity to local cultures and religion, their insistence on the importance of learning languages, and their flexibility in seeking to make Christian ideas comprehensible in the local idiom' (Goddard, 2000, p. 120). The Jesuits particularly, with their understanding of 'the ability of human nature to participate in the work of redeeming grace' were instrumental in inspiring a new dialogue with those amongst whom they lived and worked (P. L. Heck, 2009, p. 56).

The balance of Christian-Muslim relations was destabilised by the relaxing of *millet* laws by Egypt in the 1830s, and the *tanzimat* reforms in the Ottoman Empire in 1839 and 1856. These saw the approval of freedom of worship, and the granting of equal political status to the *ahl al-dhimma*. Given the number of Jews and Christians in Government service, and the economic advantages and higher education that many possessed, many Muslims feared that equal status would damage the Islamic character of the State and endanger the dominant position of Muslims in administrative circles. Taking advantage of this new freedom, simple acts such as the ringing of Church bells or public Christian processions helped result in serious Muslim riots against Christians in Aleppo and Damascus in 1850 and 1860 (Ma'oz, 2014, pp. 242-243).

The modern rise of nationalism, and the colonialism and missionary endeavours of the 19th and 20th Centuries further impacted relations between Christians and Muslims, and contributed to

¹⁵ For a helpful discussion on St. Francis' encounter with the Sultan, see:(Saxby, 2006) Also: (Anthony O'Mahony, 2017).

the Sunni Islamic revival under scholars such as Sayyid Jamal al-Din 'al-Afghani', Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Abduh, Sayyid Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi, Hasan Al-Banna, and Sayyid Qutb, who in their different ways sought to respond to the challenges to Islamic faith presented by modernity, and to strengthen Islam in a way that engaged relevantly with the modern world in a manner true to the tenets of Islam.¹⁶ These scholars are the founding influence of Islamic currents in the contemporary world, including the Muslim Brotherhood, which sought a return to 'pure' Muslim principles in both faith and politics, and rejected the western secularism with which Christianity was associated. This has been a very significant factor in recent political developments, the rise of sectarianism, and the violence that have taken place in the region, and in the criticism of the Baathist governments in Baghdad and Damascus.¹⁷

It can be seen from this brief historical survey that dialogue and encounter of some sort has been experienced throughout the history of Christian-Muslim relations. It has taken place both at an institutional level, and through individual debates between Muslim and Christian scholars.

It is impossible to practise Christian-Muslim dialogue today without acknowledgement of the historical relationship of Christianity with imperialism, colonialism, and recent conflicts (Zebiri, 1997, p. 29). Today, 'Muslims are deterred by what they see as Western perpetrated global injustice, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict' (Zebiri, 1997, p. 36). Indeed, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been a major political aspect of Syrian domestic politics, and many Palestinian refugees have been allowed to settle in the country. Centuries of Christian-Muslim engagement have been deeply affected by recent western interventions in the region, and the growing perception amongst many Muslims that indigenous Christians somehow belong to a 'western' faith, whose political intrusions have wrought upon the region violence, corruption, destabilisation, injustice and hypocrisy. This is not to absolve the corruption and oppression of many Arab governments. Indeed, the fact that some governments have been perceived to be more secularised and 'western' in their sympathies and alliances, and following policies that serve the needs of the wealthy rather than the poor, has allowed Islamist ideologies to influence the politically or economically disenfranchised.

¹⁶ For a summary of the influence and thinking of these scholars, see: (A. Rahnama, 2005).

Several other factors that have affected the increasingly fragile Christian-Muslim relationship in Syria. Among them has been the more juridical emphasis in Sunni Islam and its demand in recent decades that the application of *Shari'a* law should be *the* major source of legislation, versus the more progressive Sunni and Shi'a Muslim communities, who, along with other minority communities, value the diversity of Syria's faith communities, and fear the limitation upon personal freedoms that the imposition of Islamic law would entail. This fear has been enhanced by the radical Islamism that has been unleashed by most of the militant groups that have been operating in Syria during the current conflict.

Understanding the current context.

There are multiple reasons why the violence reached the levels that it did during the Syrian conflict. The study will explore the extent to which religious ideology and internal and external social, cultural, economic and political factors played a role in exacerbating tensions, and how Syrians view the multi-layered dimensions of the conflict. The degree to which this conflict can be considered 'sectarian' will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Nor should it be forgotten that Syria has historically been a place of refuge for multiple communities. Over the years, the country has hosted millions of refugees, amongst them Armenians, Syrians, Kurds, Palestinians and Iraqis. Many have stayed and made their home in the country, their religious, cultural and social traditions adding to the rich diversity and complexity of Syrian society (Chatty, 2017).

Syria contains some of the most diverse expressions of Islam and Christianity anywhere in the world. Learning from their historical and contemporary relational dynamic, and from Eastern Christian theological engagement with religion and politics in Syria, especially from their response to conflict, offers the possibility of discerning new frameworks for dialogue in the complex religious contexts that are emerging in the region. This study provides a platform for these evolving relational dynamics to be considered.

The religious and political context in the Middle East has been deeply affected by the constantly changing multifactional and multidimensional nature of the conflict. And the religious and social demographic that emerges from the displacement or migration of millions of people is likely to have a further significant impact on society. To what extent will the increasingly juridical emphasis of Sunni Islam in Syria and the wider region affect the plurality of religious 'space'? How will Sunni citizens in a 'secular' State negotiate the changes in Sunni

Islam? How will other communities negotiate that change? What impact does the increasing influence of Shi'a Islam have on the religious dynamic, especially given Syria's close relationship with Iran? Will the impact of religious reform in Russia in relation to both Christianity and Islam be relevant to Syria, given Russia's influence and role in Syria? Will minority groups have the same freedom of expression in the future? The changing face of communal identity in the region will impact Syrian society, and these are necessary questions, even if unarticulated in the public sphere. Hopefully this work will provide context to explore these questions further.

Given the changing religious dynamics in the world, the increasing radicalisation of some expressions of religious discourse, and the fact that in 2010, about 31% of the world's population were Christian and about 23% of the world's population were Muslim, understanding the complex history and dynamic evolution of Christian-Muslim relations, and the fears posed by the rise of religious extremism is of profound importance.¹⁸ This study seeks to learn from that evolving context, so that we can discern how a hopeful, constructive and positive dynamic can prevail and inform the wider political and religious context.

My encounters with the rich diversity of the Christian and Muslim presence in Syria have inspired an in-depth and on-going engagement. When the conflict broke out, it was evident that the religious context in Syria was understudied and little understood outside the country, and that a greater understanding was much needed. From a social and religious perspective, both prior to the conflict and even in its midst, Syria represented one of the most diverse and pluralistic contexts in the region. To lose this identity would be catastrophic for all the communities in the region. It would also have a serious impact on the place and role of women in Syrian society who, particularly in urban areas, currently enjoy more social and cultural freedoms than women in most countries in the region (Ventura, 2018). Throughout the conflict, in the face of radicalised ideologies and increased sectarian tension, diverse communal groups have continued to coexist. Understanding and engaging with the way in which these groups have achieved this is one step towards preserving Syria's historic diversity. It will also help us discern how Christian and Muslim communities can recover trust, tolerance and peaceful coexistence and respect, not just in Syria, but in the region and beyond.

¹⁸ <https://www.reference.com/world-view/percentage-world-christian-4baefda21d3bfcfd> (Accessed 7 October 2018)

All visits in Syria have been in government-held areas of the country, or areas that have been recaptured from militant factions. It has not been possible or feasible to enter areas under the control of militant opposition groups, though I have visited some of these regions shortly after their recapture by government forces. This is relevant to the research findings. It was estimated in December 2017 that 75% of the population of Syria who remained in the country lived in government-held areas, including 6.3 million internally displaced people who had fled from areas controlled by the militant opposition.¹⁹ These inevitably included persons who supported the militants. Damascus, Homs, Aleppo and Lattakia being the most populous cities, contain members of most communities, and are largely representative of the wide communal make-up of Syrian society. At the time of the visits, they also included millions of internally displaced people who had fled areas that were not under government control. I have sought out varying voices from all these and other more rural areas of the country. I have only on a few occasions experienced reluctance to converse. People have usually spoken remarkably openly, often with passion and conviction. Many have been keen to share their experiences and their views. All quotations and references in this thesis are shared with consent.

This research represents a 'snapshot' of the religious context in Syria taken during a traumatic period in the country's history. I make no claim of a singular narrative across the complex social and religious landscapes across Syria, with its diverse expressions in rural and urban, different class, ideological or social contexts. My conversations have however crossed many of these boundaries, and it has been humbling to engage with Syrians during this time. Many have opened their hearts, shared their stories, and offered generous hospitality. At the time that this research was undertaken, few foreigners were visiting Syria, and the reality of life 'on the ground' inside government-held areas of the country was rarely reported upon. This study therefore offers original insights and perspectives that have been under-represented in western discourse but which have lasting relevance for the interreligious landscape.

¹⁹ At the time of writing, (December 2017/January 2018) this was a constantly changing figure as more areas were re-taken by the Syrian Government from militant factions, and as more refugees and internally displaced persons return to their homes in government-held areas. The key areas that remain outside government-control at the time of writing, are those north of the Euphrates (the 'Kurdish' areas); areas in the south of the country, adjacent to the Golan Heights; and a shrinking area in Idlib Province.

The UN confirms that between the months of January and June 2017, approximately 600,000 refugees and internally displaced persons returned to their homes, primarily in the Aleppo area. ¹⁹ See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-40460126> "Syria War: Almost 500,000 refugees return in 2017 – UN." 30 June 2017

The Framework for this study.

Chapter 1 contextualises the complex ecclesial mosaic that makes up the Christian presence in the country, which goes back to “the origins of Christianity itself.” (Anthony O'Mahony, 2013, p. 232), and in which the full breadth of ecclesial expression in all five Christian ‘families’ of the Church are to be found. (See also Appendix 1). This diversity brings both enrichment and challenge to the religious life of the country, and to the ontological life of the Church communities.

Similarly, it is essential to understand the broad expressions of Islam that are represented in the country, which are as equally diverse as the Christian presence, and which represent almost every wing of Islamic theology and political tendency. Chapter 2 explores this mosaic and considers the role of political Islam in Syrian society in recent decades, and its significant impact on Christian-Muslim relations in the country.

Chapter three considers some of the Christian responses to Islam, and explores the role that models of religious leadership have played both historically and contemporaneously within the context. A further section considers the extent to which sectarianism exists and has influenced recent developments within Syria, and examines the concept of ‘sectarianism’.

Chapter four examines in more detail the history of Christian-Muslim relations in Syria, and explores how Christian and Muslim communities have related to each other in the midst of the conflict, with particular consideration for how the conflict has impacted that engagement. Interviews with a range of religious leaders, and a reflection on the experience of Syrians in Maaloula , Aleppo and Sadad inform this chapter. Analysis of a questionnaire undertaken with Syrians from different communities, that deals with these issues is to be found in Appendix 5, and further informs the findings in this chapter.

Finally, we consider how a number of Eastern Christian theologians, representing the ‘Antiochene paradigm’ of Eastern Christianity have contributed to the theological underpinning, and practical effectiveness of Christian-Muslim engagement in the region, and reflect

on how the combination of local practice and Christian theology, evidenced by on-the-ground research, might inform the future development of inter-religious relations.²⁰

This study is focussed on the subject from a Christian theological and ecclesial perspective. A detailed study of Christian-Muslim relations from a Muslim perspective requires further study. More importantly, an engaged Christian understanding of this dynamic is vital for the continued flourishing of the Christian presence in the region.

As an evolving society in which complex interreligious dynamics have been at work throughout its history, contemporary Syria represents an ideal context for cutting-edge research into Christian theological and political thought in Muslim-Christian relations. My distinct contribution is to understand Christian-Muslim relations in Syria in the context of evolving questions about the roles of religious identity, religious leadership and the challenges of Christian engagement with Islam. And of the particular but under-recognised value of Antiochene theological and ecclesial contributions to that discourse.

²⁰ I agree with Georges Khodr who believes that “Eastern Christians are better qualified for dialogue with Muslims than Western Christians. He calls attention to Arab Christians’ knowledge and appreciation of Islam, as well as to their contribution to Islamic civilisation.” (Hirvonen, 2013, p. 67)

Methodology

This research has involved an interdisciplinary engagement including academic research and qualitative ethnographic fieldwork inside government-controlled areas of Syria, examining the historic and contemporary dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations in Syria in the midst of a conflict that has profoundly altered society and the wider political context for Christianity and Islam. The fieldwork took place during eight visits to Syria between 2015 and 2018, and has drawn on the experience of previous visits to Syria in 2003, 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2014. In Syria, all recent research visits have been in government-controlled areas, including areas recently recaptured from militant control when visited. Interviews have also been conducted with church leaders, academics, and Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and in Erbil, Iraq.

Personal context

Since 1982, I have been a regular visitor to the region, and started visiting Syria in 2003. Prior to the conflict, I led groups to Syria and visited independently. In these years many Syrians expressed the belief that political and economic reforms were creating a strong future. The tourist industry was developing, with increasing numbers of tourists discovering the country's abundant historical treasures.²¹ In 2010, months before the outbreak of the crisis, historic sites were being restored, tourist facilities developed and infrastructure improved. Simultaneously, there were tensions and a more visible presence of conservative Islamic influence on the streets. Economic, social and religious strains were clearly exacerbated by the presence of over 1.5 million Iraqi refugees in Syria's towns and cities, and a million people who had migrated from the rural areas into the cities as a result of the devastating drought which began in 2006 (Chatel, 2014), (Shahi, 2018).

Since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011, I have visited Syria ten times, and have travelled widely throughout government-held areas of the country, including areas most affected by the conflict, experiencing car bombs, shelling and street battles. Entering the country at the invitation of religious leaders, I have had remarkable access to large areas of the country and a wide variety of people. I have met hundreds of ordinary Syrians including Sunni, Shi'a, Alawites, Druze and Christians of all denominations, and by visiting camps for the internally-displaced, have been able to talk with many who fled militant-controlled areas. I have also

²¹ The Syrian Tourism Ministry noted a 40% increase in tourists between 2009 and 2010, and had planned to open 85 new hotels in 2011. <https://www.thenational.ae/business/travel-and-tourism/syria-sees-tourist-numbers-leap-40-1.583832> (Accessed 21 April 2019).

met faith, civic and political leaders in Damascus, Homs, Saidnaya, Maaloula, Aleppo, Daraa, Tartous, Deir Ezzor, Lattakia, and the leaders of most internal political parties.²²

A few of my recent visits have been as a member of faith delegations at the invitation of faith leaders, that have included members of the House of Lords and senior clergy. This has given me access to a wide variety of people, including senior religious and political figures in a more formal context, but also the opportunity to build contacts and friendships. On most other occasions, I visited the country at the invitation of Church leaders, staying with friends, and travelling extensively in the country without official accompaniment. For example, during a one month visit in May 2017, my travels throughout Syria were at no point accompanied by any 'official'. This has been possible because I have built trust and been transparent about my interests and intentions. Had this not been the case, the same freedom of movement may not have been possible. Trust has developed by listening and sensitively negotiating profoundly sensitive and complex dynamics, without prejudging, and without imposing external prejudices. With trust established I have been able to engage in semi-structured interviews and informal conversations.²³ Undoubtedly, the fact that few foreigners have attempted to enter Syria and engage with ordinary Syrian people, or with religious or civic leaders in an open-minded way, has enhanced the opportunities I have been offered to engage and learn.

My visits to Syria have included first hand witness of the impact of violence. In 2014, two men were blown up in a car by an in-coming shell within 50 metres of my hotel room, and I watched as two further shells landed near crowds on their way to work. During the same visit I travelled to meet terrified displaced civilians on the edge of Yarmouk refugee camp, which had been occupied by militant factions, and heard their traumatic stories. During the same week, not an hour went by that random shells were not falling at points all over the city. Later that year, I visited families of the victims of a car-bomb that had exploded two days before in Homs, and was attending a reconciliation meeting of Shi'a, Sunni, Christian leaders and local civic leaders in Homs, when gun-battles and shelling erupted just a block away. Some months

²² Apart from the National Progressive Front in the Syrian Parliament that consists of nine parties dominated by the ruling Ba'ath Party, who make up the main political framework in Syria, there are some twenty internal opposition parties. See : <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/syria/political-parties.htm> These opposition parties are not to be confused with the militant groups involved in the conflict that international media refer to as 'opposition'.

²³ Following the criteria of Merton and Kendall (1946). See (Flick, 2015, pp. 140-141)

later, I conversed with soldiers at a checkpoint in Homs, just 24 hours before they were all killed in a car bomb explosion at the same location.

I have stayed in three monasteries during my visits: Mar Mousa Monastery near Nebek, the Monastery of St. James the Persian at Qara, and St. Sergius Convent in Maaloula. Whilst staying at Qara for three nights in 2015, ISIS front lines were just one kilometre away, with shells falling and gun-battles taking place each night adjacent to the monastery. I was also in Aleppo when the city was finally re-captured in December 2016 and was one of the first foreigners to enter East Aleppo, hours after the last snipers had been cleared from the east of the city, meeting hundreds of people as they emerged from terrifying ordeals, and witnessing the celebrations of tens of thousands of people in Aleppo on the first night in four years when there was no shelling or bombing in the city.

This study therefore emerges, not simply from an academic interest, but from a long-term engagement with Syria and the wider region, during which relationships have developed and insights gleaned and evolved over an extended period of time. During this time I have had to learn how to engage with the deep social, religious and political complexities of the constantly changing context. This means that my methodology has been fluid and flexible. Sometimes, research can only be achieved through the building of trust and relationships. An illustration of the fragility of this engagement, and the care and sometimes circular approach that has to be taken, is that on two occasions, I have unintentionally offended interlocutors by suggesting a negative interpretation of a given reality. On each occasion, it was a misunderstanding of intention, but could have been damaging, and though I reconciled with the persons involved, their trust in me was damaged. During visits, notwithstanding generous hospitality and warm welcome, I have sometimes had to be aware of suspicion towards me as a foreigner, but this has usually transformed into appreciation for being genuinely interested in the nature and well-being of Syrian society.²⁴ Whatever people's political persuasions or religious affiliation, many Syrians feel betrayed by the international community's political and military policies and there exists a suspicion of western political and religious interests in the country.

The dynamic of western Protestant encounter with Orthodox and Eastern Christianity has long been a sensitive one, and being a Church of England priest has added another layer of

²⁴ An example of this suspicion is that in June 2018, following negative British media coverage of a visit to Syria of which I was a part, I was reliably informed that a member of Syrian security had raised the question with a Syrian Government Ministry whether or not I was in fact a spy for the British government.

complexity to my conversations and interactions. For these reasons, it has not been sufficient to hold to one or even a handful of ‘models’ of encounter in order to learn, discern and engage. In such a complex and conflicted social, religious and political context, I have had to frame semi-structured conversations carefully in order to elicit open responses.

My commitment to this subject has been personally, emotionally, financially and professionally costly, and therefore a degree of subjectivity is inevitable. However, I believe that the kind of breadth, depth and quality of experience, engagement and encounter that I have received in Syria, can bring to light deeper insights, truths and perspectives than are possible from a distant ‘academic’ approach. Nevertheless, I have sought to bring academic diligence, thoroughness and integrity to all encounters and reflection.

For all these reasons I have become increasingly aware of the complex historical, theological and political dynamics that have moulded, and continue to mould, Christian-Muslim relations in Syria and in the region. Despite the conflict, communal coexistence remains visible on the streets of Syria in daily life. People from different communities continue to live, work and socialise together. Churches and mosques are often sited side by side. And freedom of worship, religious identity and practice are enshrined in the Personal Status law of the Syrian constitution²⁵ (Eijk, 2016). This characteristic of Syrian society has remained unchanged in government-controlled areas of the country throughout the crisis, and is one reason why many Syrians are quick to deny – and be offended by - any suggestion of sectarianism in Syrian society. (See Appendix 5).

Those with whom I have engaged have represented all communities. Diverse political points of view have been expressed to me in multiple conversations throughout the country, and some of this diversity is to be found within the questionnaire responses. Syria is often referred to as a ‘dictatorship’, or a ‘police state’ (Baczko, 2018; Lesch, 2013; McHugo, 2014). There is a complex ‘security apparatus’ that is clearly unpopular and leads to caution in political discourse. But during conversations in homes, restaurants and in both private and public meetings, people have often expressed diverse views quite openly. It is very common to hear criticism of corruption within society or within government bodies. But the popularity of the President personally appears widespread. It is frequently expressed in conversation both

²⁵ Article 3 of The Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, 2012 stipulates: “The State shall respect all religions and ensure the freedom to perform all the rituals that do not prejudice public order. The personal status of religious communities shall be protected and respected.”

privately and publicly with spontaneity and authenticity. On the regular occasions when the President appears unannounced at public events, or in people's homes, at special events, or in the streets, in mosques, schools or churches, he is swamped by enthusiastic crowds. The thousands of people celebrating spontaneously on the streets of Aleppo when the last district of East Aleppo was recaptured by the Syrian Army in December 2016, and in Damascus after East Ghouta was liberated in May 2018, both of which I personally witnessed, were full of unconstrained and visibly authentic loyalty for the Syrian Army and President.²⁶ In an article entitled '*Pax Syriana: The staying power of Bashar Al-Assad*', Alam writes:

The clichés in Syria never worked: despite the usual Sunni v Shi'a debate and dictator v democracy argument, these were always too simplistic and rhetorical for a multi-ethnic state such as Syria. Similarly, most observers ignored the Christians of the Arab world, and Syria was the heart and birthplace of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the only place in the world where Aramaic was spoken, the language of Jesus. As Christians were being killed in Iraq post-2003, thousands came to seek shelter in Syria, and once the war in Syria started in 2011, these same Christians saw the same killers reappear in Syria this time. Almost all the Christian groups in the region and Arab world have stood in full support of Assad during this war. Indeed Syria has always been seen as the bastion and pillar of Eastern Christianity and the most tolerant country, which Pope John Paul II stated as a model of how other countries should be like (Alam, 2019, p. 7).

Undoubtedly, conflict is lucrative for some, but the vast majority of Syrians are weary of war. Most people are appalled at the violence unleashed by the conflict, realise that the multiple militant factions are divided and that most have promoted a sectarian, radicalised ideology. Thus, whatever people's political opinions or allegiances, many people have expressed the belief that the militant factions are incapable of forming a united government or preserving

²⁶ A writer from Aleppo writing under the name of 'Edward Dark', a frequent critic of the Syrian government wrote on 31 March 2015: "A regime that has no support among its own population cannot survive years of civil war, no matter how powerful it is or how much support it gets from abroad, it just goes against all logic. A large part of the Syrian population still inside the country still supports the regime. Many are from Syria's numerous and diverse religious minorities, but a sizable number are also from the Sunni populations in the large and cosmopolitan cities of Damascus and Aleppo." <https://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/syria-why-assad-still-power-544952547> (Accessed: 7 October 2018) And writing in 'The Spectator' magazine in July 2018, John Bradley admits: "Far more important for Assad is that, in the eyes of most of the Syrian people, he is a hero — and not least for having saved their bacon by wiping out Islamic State." <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/07/assad-is-back-for-good-in-syria-and-with-trumps-blessing/> (Accessed: 7 October 2018). This is not to deny the very different attitudes of exiles and those who oppose the government.

the secularist and pluralist framework of Syrian society.²⁷ As the war has evolved, so too have people's views, opinions, and in some cases, allegiances.

When I met the Syrian Ambassador in London in 2005 to prepare to lead a group visit to the country, he acknowledged that there would be security keeping an eye on the group, but stated that this was both for our, and for the country's safety. He said that the threat of outside influences wishing to destabilise the country could not be underestimated. With the benefit of hindsight, he has been proved right. Whilst Syria is an authoritarian State and the Parliamentary system is not 'democratic' in a western sense, nevertheless there is a system of proportional representation. In fact, there are more Christian and more female Parliamentarians in Syria than in any other country in the Middle East. Notwithstanding political limitations, Syria's secular-based constitution provides far greater social and religious freedom than many other countries in the region. This has particular relevance for all religious identities.

During my visits to Syria, I have encountered conflicting narratives between realities on the ground and those presented in the international media. In the face of such conflicting accounts, I do not seek to take a one-sided approach, but rather to enable narratives to be heard that most media outlets, and many scholars have ignored. This may in part be because few have sought to listen to voices, or been able to witness realities inside government-held areas of Syria, or have prioritised the voices of exiles or people inside areas controlled by militant groups. I believe that the fact that I have engaged with Syrians inside government-controlled parts of the country is a necessary part of scholarship on Syria, and lends a uniqueness and authenticity to this study. My hope is that through this study conflicting accounts may be better understood. It also seeks to offer a Christian perspective of the interreligious dynamics that are built into Syrian society, how they have been impacted by the conflict, and how they might be transformed into a source of good in the future.

Research Design

This study uses an empirical qualitative approach to explore links between the context and dynamics of the Christian and Muslim structures of Syrian society. The design used is similar to that proposed by Maxwell (2002), which considers the goals, conceptual frameworks, research

²⁷ This interview with respected Middle Eastern Analyst, Sharmine Narwani, offers an informed analysis that illustrates this: <https://www.salon.com/2019/04/21/reporter-sharmine-narwani-on-the-secret-history-of-americas-defeat-in-syria/> (Accessed: 21 April 2019).

questions, methods and validity as “an integrated and interacting whole, with each component closely tied to several others, rather than being linked in a linear or cyclic sequence.” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 216). The issues that influence the historical and contemporary context and relational dynamic of Islam and Christianity in Syria are inter-connected. Thus, they are explored together.

The study takes a sociological approach accepting that truths can be ascertained by observation, experience and enquiry. Christian-Muslim relations as a subject cannot be neatly defined or summarised. It has multiple and diverse expressions, both between and within different contexts. Whilst I am sympathetic to a paradigm that recognises that theories can be generated, hypotheses tested and knowledge produced by collecting facts, the fact that positivism rejects ‘values’ renders it inadequate in my view as a paradigm to be solely adopted when exploring religious and social matters. In their detailed study of the Civil War in Syria, Baczko, Dorrnsoro and Quesnay undertake a critique of what they term the ‘neopositivist’ “obsession with quantification mistaken for scientificity” which they say “obscures serious methodological problems” in data selection, category definition and interpretation (Baczko, 2018, pp. 6-7).²⁸ This is one reason why, in addition to the multiple complexities and challenges of undertaking interviews that can be quantitatively analysed in the context of the Syrian conflict, the quantitative element of this research – analysis of a questionnaire - has been placed in an appendix.

My research seeks to examine the historical, practical, social, theological and religious structures and mechanisms, under which Christian-Muslim relations have developed and been lived out in Syria, in contexts of both peace and conflict. The aim is to understand the expression and experience of Christian-Muslim relations in the challenging circumstances of Syria; how these have been impacted by the conflict; and reflect on how the eastern Christian paradigm might inform their positive development and expression in the future. Contextualising this epistemology within the framework of existing knowledge is essential to understanding its current expression.

Given the complexity of the subject, in order to establish a contextual understanding and to discern a realistic ‘picture’ of how we view the development of the Christian-Muslim dynamic

²⁸ The Baczko, Dorrnsoro , Quesnay study: *Civil War in Syria. Mobilization and Competing Social Orders*, published in 2018 by Cambridge University Press, was based on research undertaken exclusively within ‘rebel’ held areas of Syria, and with opposition figures in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. They argue for a sociological approach to the study of Civil wars. Their study is based on interviews with 162 individuals, and other informal encounters. In this, their methodology is not dissimilar to mine.

in the face of current challenges, I have used a varied methodological approach: one that examines current literature on the subject, uses an interpretative approach to contextualise my own experiences, and reflects on eastern Christian theological contributions to the subject. It is these that are going to most inform future Christian-Muslim encounter in the region. This may be considered ambitious, but it is only reflection on these aspects, each hitherto understudied, that is going to enable a new epistemology of the subject, and provide an original contribution in the field of Syrian studies and interfaith relations in the country.

Strategy

The design and strategies used in the study were not established from the beginning but evolved over a period of time as the research took place. The research context and design illustrate why a variety of qualitative and interpretative strategies and approaches are adopted to produce effective results. I use both inductive and deductive strategies (Maxwell, 2005).

My starting thesis is that a broad spectrum of Christian and Muslim expression has lived side by side in Syria for centuries, with - notwithstanding periods of tension during different eras - a level of mutual engagement within a context of pluralism and diversity that has been understudied in western discourse (Goddard, 2000; Griffith, 2008). This pluralism and diversity has been influenced by the location of Syria as a crossroads of trade, culture and empire, between Europe, Africa and Asia over millennia. The survival of this pluralism within everyday Syrian society, and peoples' determination to maintain it, even in the face of religious radicalism and sectarian violence, helped inspire this research.

From the inductive perspective, only one aspect of my study involves quantitative data of analysis and this is to be found in Appendix 5. Qualitative analysis - Interpretation of experience, conversations with many individuals over an extended period of time, reflection on responses to the questionnaire, consideration of contextual realities, and the academic publications of experts, all help to inform the findings. One could ask if overall inferences from such processes are reliable, or question whether 'generalisations' or claims based upon this process, can be assumed to be correct. That is a valid question. By the very nature of the subject, there are a variety of conclusions that, though inter-related, are complex and multi-layered. Thus, the research combines interpretative processes, with deductions from the research contributing to how the findings can most effectively inform future developments. In 1971, Wallace proposed that the two strategies are not mutually exclusive (Blaikie, 2007, pp. 79-81).

Huberman and Miles (1988) recognised that a qualitative, realist approach to research requires less hard data, and, allowing for the relevance of personal feelings, intentions and experience, enables a more unstructured approach to the gathering of sources, material and the generating of a contextual understanding of the realities and processes leading to the outcomes described. However, this requires an understanding and reflection of motives, prejudice, bias and validity. In the past, personal experience has sometimes been viewed negatively in the research world. But increasingly, the value of personal experience and perceptions has been acknowledged. They are “not simply a source of ‘bias’,” but can provide valuable insight and data (Maxwell, 2005, p. 220). Strauss and Corbin (1990) recognise that “the touchstone of your own experience may be more valuable an indicator for you of a potentially successful research endeavour” (Strauss. A., 1990, pp. 35-36). Strauss adds that ‘experiential data’ offers a worthwhile source of insights, hypotheses and validity. This is relevant to this research, which builds on years of experience and insights developed through on-going engagement with the subject.

Academic research into literature relevant for this study has been undertaken in England. Literature covered includes books and journal articles by western and eastern Christian scholars, Muslim Middle Eastern scholars, western and Middle Eastern political historians. Subjects explored have been: the history and theology of eastern Christianity; Islam within Syria; political histories and accounts of Syria and the neighbouring region; studies on sectarianism and political Islam. I have also visited and interviewed academic figures and institutions in Lebanon. I have sought to encourage honest and open input and reflection from interlocutors, conscious that each person (including myself) brings their own context, interests, prejudice and perspective to the subject, and have therefore sought to interview a range of people, who reflect diversity of thought in the subject.

Limitation of research to within government-held areas might attract criticism of bias.²⁹ However, substantial material is available from the perspective of militant-controlled areas, where the population is now less representative of wider Syrian society (Balanche, 2018). This study seeks to fill a gap in contemporary Syrian scholarship. In the company of delegations and in formal meetings, discourse was restricted. However, in most other encounters, there

²⁹ This criticism is rarely levelled against academic scholarship that has prioritised discourse from within ‘rebel’-held areas. Nor against media and other agencies whose sources throughout the Syrian conflict were almost exclusively embedded within areas under militant control, and whose narratives generally received uncritical acceptance without any attempt to investigate alternative perspectives from government-controlled areas.

was considerable freedom of discussion and open conversation. Far from my identity being a hindrance to conversation as might be expected, it seemed to encourage candid dialogue.

Lebanon offers a useful context in which to explore this subject, for Lebanon and Syria share close religious and institutional affinities. In terms of communal diversity, a shared history in the Ottoman Empire, and issues faced in the field of Christian-Muslim dialogue and relations. Additionally, the patriarchates of three of the major Churches in Lebanon- Greek Orthodox, Greek Melkite, and Syrian Orthodox – are all to be found in Damascus (Chapter 3). However, one has to be aware of the political sensitivities and complexities that exist between the two countries, which affects political views and relationships between faith communities.

Qualitative methods of research have been undertaken throughout Syria during several visits, meeting with a broad spectrum of people, in a variety of contexts representing the diverse and varied ways in which Christian-Muslim relations have been impacted by the conflict.

Interviews have been undertaken with Christian leaders in Syria and in Lebanon to explore contemporary and historical theology and praxis and to discuss the role of faith communities in conflict transformation and peace-building in Syria. Semi-structured, non-directive in-depth interviews have been undertaken with key figures, both lay and clergy, who are involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue, and a written questionnaire has been given to willing participants (Appendix 5.) I have also had numerous informal conversations.

Here, I must distinguish between the process applied to the interviews and the questionnaire. Interviews have taken place over a period of time, and have allowed for in-depth questions and answers related to the subject. These have been open conversations. It is not possible to analyse these conversations in any quantitative way. I have therefore used an Interpretative paradigm in reflecting on and analysing these interviews to inform my thinking and thesis.³⁰ Some quoted excerpts from such conversations have been included in the thesis, but they have not been recorded in detail, other than by informal notes. In order to minimise any possible discomfort or fear of disclosure, no voice recorder has been used. Consent has been received. When I have mentioned to Christian and Muslim faith leaders in Syria that I am undertaking this research, there has been warm approval, and a recognition that such a study is needed and could be valuable.

³⁰ The interpretative paradigm, as formulated by Wilson in 1970, recognises that subjects ascribe meaning to objects, experiences, events, and that these “subjective viewpoints become an instrument for analysing social worlds.” (Flick, 2015, pp. 24-25)

The questionnaire consists of four fixed questions.

1. Are interreligious relations important to you and to your faith traditions?
2. In what ways was Christian-Muslim coexistence visible prior to the conflict?
3. In what ways has the conflict affected Christian-Muslim relations?
4. Do you think each faith community needs to restore trust and maintain positive coexistence and respect? How?

Though I have met and had informal conversations with some of those who responded, a majority of responses were completed online. I have analysed all the responses to the questionnaire quantitatively and qualitatively. In the questionnaire, carefully framed open questions explored the experience, motives, purpose and method expressed in Christian-Muslim relations in the country, and considered what has been successful and not so successful in the context of conflict. Understanding the sensitivities of the subject that I am studying, and the reluctance that many Syrians express in engaging in any kind of perceived sectarian analysis, I have had to frame the questions in ways that will not offend, and will encourage open, honest responses. Of course, this cannot be guaranteed. But doing so appears to have achieved its aim. Consideration has been given to the impact of the conflict on inter-religious dynamics, and to the role that styles of leadership in the context play in both intra and inter-religious relationships. (Appendix 5).

It is impossible for any researcher to claim neutrality. With my substantial experience of Syria, I bring my own experience and understanding of the context. However, I have tried not to impose personal bias. My position as a Church of England priest and my desire to encourage Syrian voices to be heard and expressed, has seemed to encourage openness and trust from both male and female interviewees. Since Anglican Church membership in Syria is very small, and has little influence in the ecclesiastical and political context in the country, I could be seen as comparatively 'neutral', in a way that I would not if I belonged to any of the Christian denominations with strong ecclesial interests in the country.³¹ As I have indicated, being 'Protestant' could raise suspicion of underlying ecclesial agendas, but the ability to build relationships has substantially reduced that suspicion.

In all contexts, I have made clear that I do not 'represent' the Anglican Church in any official capacity, and that this is an independent study. That has alleviated concern of underlying interests. And the cultural context means that my age, maleness, and ordained status have

³¹ All Saints Church, Damascus is the only Anglican Church in Syria. It has a congregation of about 80 Sudanese (former refugees) and 40 Syrians. The Church is run by local lay leaders and has had no priest in residence since 2011. It comes under the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem.

inspired respect. It has been interesting and unexpected, that the fact that I am middle-aged, male and ordained, has elicited a remarkably open and friendly response from male and female students. They have been the most responsive to discussion and critical debate. Holding religious or political status can have a restrictive impact on encounters, However, I have not sensed this to be the case in the majority of my encounters. This may partly be because encounters with foreigners have been a rarity in Syria in recent years.

Given the academic basis of this work, a word on terminology is necessary. Mainstream media refers to fighters opposed to the Syrian government as 'rebels'. This term is problematic for three reasons. Firstly, the term suggests a bias that implies political legitimacy and support for 'rebel' groups. (Those who support them tend to use the term 'rebels'. Note that this is the term used by most western media who have been consistent in their support for these groups. Most Syrians who oppose them reject the term 'rebel' and regard them as 'terrorists'³²). Secondly, the groups that mainstream media term as 'rebels' in fact consist of multiple factions with little cohesion, the majority of whom hold to Islamist ideological positions, that both unites and divides the factions (Baczko, 2018). They also include tens of thousands of foreign fighters who cannot be regarded as representative of the Syrian people or of Syrian opinion. Thirdly, many Syrians inside Government controlled areas of the country regard them as 'terrorists'.

Much testimony from people whose towns and villages have been attacked by militant groups; from fighters who have laid down their arms; and evidence left behind by the factions themselves in areas where they have been defeated, suggests that those whom the West has regarded as 'moderate' have worked alongside radicalised factions since very early on in the conflict. This has also been widely documented in published articles and recent books on the subject. Having had many conversations with people who were involved in early demonstrations for political reform, it is true that at the earliest stage of the conflict, demonstrators included students and professionals. But according to accounts that I have heard from people who were involved, many who sought peaceful change and reform abandoned the demonstrations when they became violent and were infiltrated by external operators. As Dam writes:

Whatever the truth, it is clear that by June 2011 violence and counterviolence had increased to such an extent that any return to peaceful discussions and dialogue

³² The militant groups that the west terms 'rebels', and many Syrians refer to as 'terrorists', daily commit random acts of terror, targeting civilian areas and civilian infrastructure. Hence, 'terrorist' could be a valid nomenclature under the dictionary definition of what terrorism entails.

between regime and opposition had become extremely difficult. No less important was that the Syrian Revolution had already, to some extent, been kidnapped by radical Islamists (Dam, 2017, p. 87).

However, to term all these groups 'terrorists' - the designation used by many Syrians of all communities - could suggest an alternative political bias. To use the term 'opposition forces' would also be inadequate, given the widely acknowledged existence of tens of thousands of non-Syrian participants amidst those forces. Whilst these groups do oppose the Syrian government, the extent to which foreign fighters are involved limits their legitimacy in 'opposition' to the Government, but suggests that they are rather fighting a proxy war.³³ Additionally, there are several internal opposition parties in Syria, many of whose leaders I have met, who oppose the fighting factions and any violent opposition, and whom many Syrians recognise as the 'internal peaceful opposition'. I have therefore chosen to use the terms 'militants' or 'Islamists' depending on the group referred to for those fighting against the Syrian government. When I use the term 'rebel', it will be only done so in italics, in order to recognise that this is regarded by many as a flawed and inadequate designation. Where I quote Syrian voices, I will use the term that they have used.

It has not been possible to visit areas controlled by militant groups. The risk of kidnap and death would be high, as these areas are controlled by multiple militant factions, where persons who adhere to a different ideology to those in control, or are perceived to have connections with the Syrian government, are often murdered. Most of the civilians of these areas have fled, either abroad, or into government-controlled areas, and there are few if any Christians in these areas (Balanche, 2018, p. xv). Most external refugees and internally displaced originate from these areas. Thus, any attempt to interview in those areas would put myself, and anyone I attempted to interview at life-threatening risk. Any remaining civilians in these areas are likely to be supporters of the militant groups, or could risk execution if they expressed an alternative view to those held by the occupying forces. Therefore, these areas can no longer be regarded as representing the social and religious diversity that still prevails within government-controlled areas of the country. This means that I have met few, even among the

³³ This fact is widely acknowledged. See: (Phillips, 2016) *The Battle for Syria. International Rivalry in the New Middle East*. In 'Shadow Wars', Davidson, speaking of a 'domestic nucleus of opposition', writes: "Even if most of the Syrian population remained loyal to the government, as also initially seemed to be the case in Libya, it became increasingly apparent that such a nucleus was to serve as the conduit for external support and perhaps even a full-scale intervention." He continues: "By 2012, with the Syrian uprising still not having evolved into a fully national revolution or even a sectarian civil war, there was a growing realization that much more direct support was required" (Davidson, 2016, pp. 316-318).

many who fled from 'rebel'-controlled areas (the majority of whom are Sunni), who support the militants. Certainly, given that most of the militant opposition follow an Islamist ideology (Baczko, 2018; Lister, 2015), it is almost impossible to find a Christian, whatever their political views, who supports them.³⁴ Interestingly, I have found far more reticence by civilians to share views in refugee camps in Lebanon and Iraq than in Syria itself. Might this be because the residents of these camps are mostly Sunnis, who may fear radicalised Islamists in their midst?

Given that this research reflects on the interreligious dynamics from a Christian perspective, it is accompanied by theological reflection on the contribution of a number of eastern Christian interlocutors, including Georges Khodr, Patriarch Aphrem, former Melkite Patriarch Gregorios Laham, Archbishop Jeanbart, Antoine Audo, Paolo Dall'Oglio, and indigenous Protestant thinkers. Each of these figures have been active and influential participants in the development of Christian religious and political thought, especially as it relates to Christian-Muslim coexistence before 2011 and during the on-going conflict in Syria. Although most have been widely quoted, their contributions have not been studied to date. I have had the privilege of meeting and interviewing most of these figures, and have read writings published by them in English and French.

In summary, my perspectives on this study have been moulded by a lifetime in the Church, over thirty years visiting the Middle East, multiple conversations with Christian and Muslim friends in the region, and numerous visits to Syria and Lebanon. That breadth of experience brings I believe an authenticity to the subject, the results of the research, and my interpretation of them.

The validity of these findings rests on the comparison and evaluation of multiple sources: academic writings by experts; conversations with a wide variety of people; interpretation of questionnaires; and reflection on personal experience. The criteria that I have followed in choosing and analysing sources, whilst being aware of the particular complexities of gathering reliable information in the midst of conflict, has closely followed those recommended by Lincoln and Guba in 1985: trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (Lincoln, 1985). Despite the variety of communities in the Syrian context, general positions on certain questions from a wide sample can be ascertained. From these

³⁴ Syrian Christians who originally supported the opposition include ex-patriot intellectuals. Christians in Syria who had sympathies with early demonstrators, speak of suspending their support when the demonstrations became violent and sectarian in tone. Some fought with the militants (Baczko, 2018, p. 108). Chapters 4 and 5 of this study outline more common Syrian Christian perspectives on the conflict.

positions, a picture emerges of a context in which there is yet hope, and which offers positive precedents and models for moving forward in a complex, changing relationship that is challenging and of importance and relevance, not just for Syria and the Middle East, but for the wider context as well.

Literature Review

Studying the Subject

Prior to 2011, little academic material was available in English on Syria and the Syrian religious landscape. Studies have been undertaken on Christianity in Syria and on Islam on Syria, but specifically on relations between the two, there has been little research. Since 2011, there has been a glut of publications about Syrian politics and history, and some of these can be found in the bibliography, but all of these have been written through a particular academic or political lens, and perspectives of Syrians from inside government-controlled areas of Syria are hard to find. Even though tolerance and engagement have for the most part been a defining feature of Christian-Muslim relations in Syria for centuries, the theological and practical nature of that engagement has not been studied. Until 9/11 little attention was given to the subject, but since the tumultuous events that have recently engulfed the region, an examination of how Christian-Muslim relations have been positively modelled in the past, and how they are impacted by conflict, has become profoundly timely and relevant. In recent years, there has been increased study of Christianity in Syria and the wider region. There has been an even greater explosion of study of Islam, and particularly the rise of religious extremism. It is impossible to examine issues of faith in Syria without exploring the communal and political dynamics in the country. Many works on this aspect of Syrian society have been published since the start of the conflict in 2011. However, no study has been undertaken on the inter-religious dynamics in the country in recent years from the Christian perspective. In this literature review, I will therefore take the main individual themes of the Research subject and identify some of the literature that is available around them. Connections with this literature help inform and focus the fieldwork. The themes identified are: Christianity in Syria and its theological approach to dialogue, Islam in Syria, Muslim and Christian Relations, and the political context.

Christianity in Syria

In recent decades, the study of Christianity in Syria has been a specialised area of research. Middle Eastern Christianity had previously been an under-recognised and poorly understood aspect of the religious mosaic in the region. Indeed, many people in Europe and America were unaware even of the presence of indigenous Christians in the region. As far as Syria is concerned, both academic study of the subject, and media coverage of the regional conflicts, has highlighted both the Christian presence and some of the challenges they face. Until

comparatively recently, studies of Syrian Christianity were focussed on the theological contributions of early Christian writers, such as St. John of Damascus, or Ephrem the Syrian. Sebastian Brock of Oxford University is generally regarded as one of the foremost scholars in the field of Syriac language and studies. Since the 1970s, his works have focussed on the language, culture and theology in which Syriac Christianity emerged, and its interaction with its local context. For the purpose of this research, his writings provide a useful background and comparison with the writings of Middle Eastern theologians on the subject.

An important recent contributor to the study of Christianity in the Middle East has been Sidney Griffith (b.1938) whose main foci have been Arabic Christianity, Syrian monasticism and Muslim-Christian relations. His work: Griffith, S. H. (2008) *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque. Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* is a key introduction to the subject, and the history of Christian-Muslim engagement and coexistence in the region. A key motivation for Griffith is that “the intellectual heritage of the eastern Christians belongs to the whole Church, and we are the poorer without any knowledge of it” (Griffith,2008,p. 3). He has also contributed many articles to journals, such as: (S. Griffith, 2001) 'Melikites', 'Jacobites', and the Christological Controversies in Arabic in Third/Ninth Century Syria. In: D. Thomas, ed. *Syrian Christians under Islam, the first Thousand Years*, which help inform and develop an understanding of how early Christological controversies have moulded the nature, development and diversity of Christianity in the region. Similarly, Dr. Erica Hunter, Senior Lecturer in Eastern Christianity at SOAS in London has contributed much to the study of Syriac Christianity in Iraq and Syria in numerous journal articles and chapters in books on the subject.

David Thomas has been another significant contributor to the field of Syrian Christianity. His edited collection of writings: (D. Thomas, 2001) *Syrian Christians Under Islam, the First Thousand Years*, which includes contributions from Sidney Griffith and Samir K.S, is an important collection of studies of Syriac Christian writings from the first millennium of the Christian era, their impact upon the Christian communities at the time, and the Christian engagement with the rise of Islam, which was ambiguous. Christians were very much at the heart of early Islamic life and of the caliphate, and were instrumental in translating Greek texts into Arabic, so enhancing Islam’s engagement with philosophy, science, literature and medicine.

Yet at the same time, Christians were subject with others to *dhimmi* status which placed limitations on their capacity to advance within society. The status of Christians and other

minority groups during the Ottoman period is of profound importance, and has influenced the way that minority communities have seen themselves and been treated throughout the region. Benjamin Braude, whose work focuses on racial, religious and ethnic identity in Muslim culture, makes a significant contribution to this history. The two volumes that he edited with Bernard Lewis in 1982, entitled *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire; The Functioning of a Plural Society*, have been very usefully condensed in 2014 into an abridged edition: (Braude, 2014) *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire..* This work examines the impact of the *Millet* system on the economy and social structure of Ottoman society.

A further seminal work in this field is an edited collection of significant writers on the subject of Christianity in the Middle East by Andrea Pacini: (Pacini, 1998) *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East*. Drawing together a wide range of scholars on the subject from a more recent perspective, the collection of articles includes studies of Christian-Muslim relations, political contexts in the region; the phenomenon and reasons for Christian emigration from the region, Christian Identity, and Social and Economic contexts in individual contexts.

A more specific relevant dimension to this research is the role and relevance of models of religious leadership in the Middle East, especially that of eastern Christian Patriarchal traditions. Fiona McCallum from the University of St. Andrews has led the way in this research. Her contributions include: (McCallum, 2007) The Political Role of the Patriarch in the contemporary Middle East. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 43(6), pp. 923-940.

(McCallum, 2008) The Maronite Patriarch in the Contemporary Era - Tradition and Challenges. In: (A. O'Mahony, 2008). *Christianity in the Middle East. Studies in Modern History, Theology and Politics*. pp. 39-67;

(McCallum, 2012a) Christian Political Participation in the Arab World. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23(1), pp. 3-18

(McCallum, 2012b) Religious Institutions and Authoritarian States: Church-State relations in the Middle East. *Third World Quarterly*, 33(1), pp. 109-124.

These studies add an important insight into how the role of leadership in the respective faiths significantly impact upon interactions between Christians and Muslims, and Christian development within the Middle Eastern context. The role of social, civic and religious hierarchies, and Church-State relations (particularly the *millet* system) have often secured a sense of religious independence for Christian communities in the region, but they have also sometimes restricted the capacity of Christian communities, by virtue of established systems

of governance and hierarchy, to adapt in relation to changing political and social circumstances.

Some work has been recently undertaken exploring what it means to be 'Christian' in the Middle East, especially given the rise of radicalism, political Islam, and persecution of minorities in the region. A short book, edited by Mohammad Girma and Cristian Romocea, was published in 2017 entitled: *Christian Citizenship in the Middle East: Divided Allegiance or Dual Belonging?*. This work takes a look at what Christian citizenship means within a Middle Eastern context. It is positive that it includes reflection by Middle Eastern Christians on issues of identity and belonging within the region. Its weakness is that its contributors come from a western Christian background, and live mostly outside the region.

A similar work, published in 2012, and written by one of the contributors to the aforementioned *Christian Citizenship in the Middle East*, Najib George Awad, also addresses the place of Christians in most recent times. *And Freedom became a Public Square. Political, Sociological and Religious Overviews on the Arab Christians and the Arabic Spring*, looks at the role of Christian communities in Middle Eastern societies, and the potential they have as mediating communities in the midst of conflict, as 'bridges' between western and eastern societies.³⁵

A recent and important contribution to the study of what it means to be Christian in Muslim countries and to the concept of secular nationalism, is a collection of essays edited by Kail Ellis and published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2018 for series on Minorities in West Asia and North Africa. (Ellis, 2018) *Secular Nationalism and Citizenship in Muslim countries. Arab Christians in the Levant*. This work, written in three parts, examines the historical roots, context, cultural and political contributions of the Christian communities of the Middle East. It goes on to examine more recent issues of human rights and persecution and how sectarian and political conflicts are impacting the Christian communities in the region.

Most of the contributions from Middle Eastern Christian writers, whether as books or journal articles. including those upon whose work I am reflecting - Georges Khodr, Antoine Audo and Paolo Dall'Oglio - are published primarily in Arabic or French. As yet, no detailed study of their writings has been undertaken. However, articles that have been published in English are helpful. These are mentioned in the section below on Muslim-Christian relations in Syria, which have been their primary focus. An interesting study on the relation between George

³⁵ See further critical reflection on this book in Chapter 3.1: Christian responses to Political Islam

Khodr's spiritual theology and Karl Rahner's theology, and how the two engage with an eastern Christian theological approach to the Middle Eastern context, has been written by Sylvie Avakian: (Avakian, 2012b) *The 'Other' in Karl Rahner's Transcendental Theology and George Khodr's Spiritual Theology*. (Aviakian is a lecturer at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut). This has helped inform my reflection of the Christian theological contributions of the chosen Christian figures in the research, who are deeply influenced by the mystical theology of the early 'Fathers', who suggest like them, that man is "naturally oriented towards God and the possibility of self-transcendence"³⁶, and adopt an Aristotelian approach to experience and religious engagement. A useful contribution to an understanding of Christian-Muslim dynamics in Syria during the last century is the detailed history of Maloula in French by Frederic Pichon, and published in Beirut.

Very important to the development of academic research in the subject of Middle Eastern Christianity, has been the Centre for Middle Eastern Christianity at Heythrop College, London University, and in particular the work of Anthony O'Mahony. Sadly in 2018, Heythrop College closed bringing to an end over two hundred years of academic research and excellence hosted by the Jesuits in London, but Blackfriars, Oxford has now become the base from which O'Mahony is able to continue his work nationally and internationally. O'Mahony has edited nearly twenty volumes or special issues of scholarly reviews, and has contributed numerous articles on the subject of Middle Eastern Christianity to different journals. Among the collections of works published by Heythrop are: A. O'Mahony, A. Ed. (2008) *Christianity in the Middle East. Studies in Modern History, Theology and Politics*. London: Melisende, and: O'Mahony, A. Ed. (2010) *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East*. London, New York: Routledge. Bringing together respected academics in this field of research, these collections, along with others, provide up-to-date critical studies and analysis of different aspects and complexities of the diverse context of Christianity in the region.

It is indicative of the relatively recent importance laid on the subject that academic reference works have only comparatively recently been published. The Cambridge History of Christianity volume that deals with Eastern Christianity, though first published in 2006, was republished in paperback only in 2014: (Angold, 2014) *The Cambridge History of Christianity. Eastern Christianity*. This work, by examining different denominations in the region, seeks to summarise the story, diversity and influence of Eastern Christianity upon the Christian world as

³⁶ Aviakian,S. (2011) *The 'Other' in Karl Rahner's Transcendental Theology and George Khodr's Spiritual Theology*. P.216

a whole. A paperback edition of Blackwell's Companion to Eastern Christianity, which was first published in hardback in 2007, was published in 2010. (Parry, 2010) *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*. Offering introductory but fairly comprehensive articles to the history, theology and context of the eastern Church, this is one of the few available works to do so. In 2014, Northern Illinois University Press published: (Noble, 2014) *The Orthodox Church in the Arab world, 700-1700. An Anthology of Sources*. The back cover of the book states: "The first of its kind, this anthology makes accessible in English representative selections from major Arab Christian works written between the 8th and 17th Centuries. Until now, the vast majority of these important texts have remained unpublished or unavailable in English. Translated by leading scholars, this anthology encompasses the major genres of Orthodox Christian literature in Arabic."

In 2018, a major contribution to the study of Christianity in the region was published by Edinburgh University Press as part of an on-going project to publish a complete series of 'Companions to Global Christianity'. (Ross, 2018) *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia*, is a comprehensive reference work examining the Christian demographic, ecclesial, and theological landscape of the region. This is an invaluable contextual resource for understanding the Christian presence in the region.

Whilst studies in English are now recognising the diversity of the history, theology and ecclesial and liturgical expression of the Christian traditions in the Middle East, there is considerable work to be done in translating and studying the writings of contemporary eastern Christian theologians and academics.

Muslim-Christian Relations in Syria

This is the area of study that is most under-researched, which is surprising given the level of historical engagement and coexistence between the faiths over the centuries. Anglican Bishop, Kenneth Cragg was the leading western scholar to have explored the subject of Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East. His seminal work first published in 1956, *The Call of the Minaret* has been reprinted many times since, and was foundational for the development of research into Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East. Cragg's engaging approach with Islam, has nevertheless been criticised for being 'orientalist' and missionary by design. "A.L.Tibawi went so far as to describe Cragg as 'frankly a missionary whose object is to convert Muslims to Christianity or at least make them accept Jesus not simply as one of God's prophets but as Christ, the Son of God.'" (Goddard, 2003b, p. 91). However, others have followed to expand on his work and take a more contemporary approach.

Vatican II's 'Nostra Aetate' has had a profound impact on the development and study of inter-faith, and Christian-Muslim dialogue and relations. In turn, it is believed that Vatican II was influenced by the religious, political and theological thought of Louis Massignon, whose belief in the divine inspiration of Islam, and the shared concepts of sacred hospitality and mystical substitution in both Islam and Christianity, allowed for close engagement between the faiths. See: (Krokus, 2012) Louis Massignon's influence on the teaching of Vatican II on Muslims and Islam. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. 23:3, 329-345.

(Hugh-Donovan, 2014) Louis Massignon, Olivier Clement, Thomas Merton, Christian de Cherge: Radical Hospitality, Radical Faith. *A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*, 55(3-4), pp. 473-494 also develops this theme. Massignon had a deep influence on Jesuit priest, Paolo Dall'Oglio, who sought a spiritual encounter between Islam and Christianity through the monastic tradition of hospitality and dialogue. See: (Anthony O'Mahony, 2015) Louis Massignon: A Catholic Encounter with Islam and the Middle East. In: *God's Mirror. Renewal and Engagement in French Catholic Intellectual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth Century*.

Other scholars who have deepened understanding of Christian-Muslim relations generally are Sidney Griffith and Hugh Goddard, whose writings include his classic and invaluable introduction to the subject: (Goddard, 2000) *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. In Goddard, H. (2003) Challenges and Developments: Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 3(2), pp. 15-35, he provides insight into the historical complexities of current Christian-Muslim interactions.

The writings of Richard Sudworth, a Church of England priest who was appointed Inter-faith Adviser to the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2018, and who wrote his PhD Thesis on the subject of the Church of England and Islam, provide a helpful contemporary Anglican perspective on the subject of Christian-Muslim relations. Sudworth, Richard J. (2013) *The Church of England and Islam: contemporary Anglican Christian-Muslim relations and the politico-theological question, 1988-2012*. [Doctoral Thesis].³⁷ His writings since have focussed on how Christianity has sought to engage within the context of the political challenge of Islam. ((Sudworth, 2013) Christian Responses to the Political Challenge of Islam. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 24(2), pp. 191-211. (Sudworth, 2014) Responding to Islam as Priests, Mystics and Trail Blazers: Louis Massignon, Kenneth Cragg, and Rowan Williams. *A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*,

³⁷ (Sudworth, 2017)

55(3-4), pp. 451-472.) Sudworth follows Massignon, Cragg and Rowan Williams in identifying mysticism and sacred hospitality as key ways in which Christianity and Islam can continue to engage with Islam in the context.

The importance of Middle Eastern theologians in their engagement with Islam has until now been underestimated. Most of their writings however are in Arabic. Heidi Hirvonen has produced a useful study of the different perspectives of four Lebanese thinkers (including George Khodr) as regards Christian-Muslim dialogue: (Hirvonen, 2013) *Christian-Muslim Dialogue. Perspectives of Four Lebanese Thinkers*. In this work, she reflects on the doctrinal, ethical and social dimensions of dialogue from the four perspectives, and suggests models of coexistence based on moral, social and ethical commonalities.

Antoine Audo, the Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo has been an important interlocutor in Syria . In spite of the difficulties of dialogue, (largely due to Muslim restraint he says), he believes that engaging at social, ethical and doctrinal level is vital to mutual understanding and coexistence. See: (Audo, 2010a) Eastern Christian Identity: A Catholic Perspective. In: A. O. & J. Flannery, ed. *The Catholic Church in the Contemporary Middle East*. London: Melisende, pp. 19-38
(Audo, 2010b) Isaac of Ninevah, John of Dalyatha and Eastern Spirituality. *One in Christ: A Catholic Ecumenical Review*, 44(20,2), pp. 29-48.
(Audo, 2010d) The Synod of Bishops: The Catholic Church in the Middle East. *One in Christ*, 44(2), pp. 196-210.

Two useful books examine the philosophy, praxis and theology of Paolo Dall'Oglio in the field of Christian-Muslim dialogue at Mar Mousa Monastery. They are both published in French. In (Dall'Oglio, 2009) *Amoureux de L'Islam, Croyant en Jesus*. Dall'Oglio himself presents his vision of Christian-Muslim dialogue from a passionate perspective rooted in Christianity, and the vision and theological heritage of Massignon. In (De Montjou, 2006) *Mar Mousa. Un Monastere, un homme, un desert*, De Montjou narrates the experience of spending time at the monastery and interviewing Dall'Oglio.

The lack of published works on the specific subject of Christian-Muslim dialogue in Syria contributes to the importance of this research. The profoundly complex context of conflict is what adds to the research's relevance.

Islam in Syria.

This is perhaps the most complex area of the subject. Understanding the development of the 'Islamic Revival' in the 19th and 20th Centuries, and the Muslim Brotherhood that emerged from it, is essential to informing the diverse context of Islam 'on the ground' in Syria. Four key works have informed this dimension of the study. (A. Rahnema, 2005) *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* provides an excellent introduction to the key figures who have influenced the Islamic Revival in the Middle East and South Asia. (Wickham, 2013) *The Muslim Brotherhood. Evolution of an Islamist Movement.*, offers a detailed analysis of the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Although the Syrian Brotherhood differs to a degree and claims to be a separate organisation (which is debatable), the Egyptian origins and principles of the movement remain relevant. The history, role and factions of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria are examined in: (Lefevre, 2013) *Ashes of Hama. The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*. Also important is Thomas Pierret's work: (Pierret, 2013) *Religion and State in Syria. The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*. This is a detailed study of the Syrian Ulama from 1946 onwards, and examines the complex dynamics of Islam in the last 70 years, that have helped mould the current situation.

Very helpful to understanding Islam's approaches to other communities is a work by Yohannan Friedmann. Published in 2003, (Friedmann, 2003) *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam. Interfaith relations in the Muslim Tradition*, examines how Islam deals with various aspects of social and religious issues in society as they relate to minority, and particularly Christian communities in their midst.

Beyond these works, I have been dependent on a variety of journal articles, most of which trace the rise of salafism and exploration of sectarianism in Syria. See for example: (Phillips, 2015) Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(2), pp. 357-376. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1015788> (Accessed 6 October 2016), (Drevon, 2016) Embracing Salafi Jihadism in Egypt and Mobilizing in the Syrian Jihad. *Middle East Critique*, 25(4), pp. 321-339.

Accessing any writings by Syrian Sunnis in English is difficult. So I was very fortunate to be given a copy of a report co-ordinated by Sheikh Muhammad Abu Zeid in Lebanon, describing a range of contributions by Sunni scholars in Syria to the Syrian Crisis. (Zeid, 2015) *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis. A report on Islamic Discourse between a culture of war and the*

establishment of a culture of peace, was published in March 2015 by the Adyan Foundation in Beirut, with the support of Korad Adenauer Stiftung in Germany.

A fascinating development within the Islamic community in Syria took place in November 2017. During a visit to the Grand Mufti of Syria, Dr. Hassoun, on 28 November 2017, he gave me copies of three newly published volumes that were shortly to be distributed to every mosque in the country. In November 2017, the Ministry of Awqaf in Syria declared that every mosque in Syria should utilise these volumes that provide frameworks for teaching Islam. Two volumes address “The Intellectual and Ideological basics of combating the Extremism and Takfiri terrorism and so-called Political Islam”, and a further volume offers a systematic framework for how sermons should teach Islam and challenge extremism in every mosque in the country.³⁸ This is a significant development that will no doubt be seen by some as a means of asserting religious and political control, but it is primarily intended to challenge the rise of radical Islamism, and the teaching of preachers who have been educated in the Wahhabi traditions. As far as Christian-Muslim relations are concerned, this can only be a positive thing for the country, as it attempts to encourage moderate Islamic tradition, and respect for pluralism.

Politics in Syria

If one is to engage in a study of Christian-Muslim relations in Syria, it is impossible to separate religion from politics. Prior to 2011, there were few books available on the political history of Syria. It was a ‘niche’ subject. Since then, there have been a plethora of publications examining both the history of Syria, and the political context of the conflict. The lack of introductory material available is exemplified by the fact that when McHugo published his work: (McHugo, 2014) *Syria, From the Great War to Civil War* London: Saqi Books, it immediately became a bestseller, and within a year had been republished in paperback as *Syria, A Recent History*. Understanding the Alawite community is essential to understanding Syrian politics. Four useful books have been published in this respect. (Kerr, 2015) *The Alawis*

³⁸ Syrian Arab Republic Ministry of Awqaf. (2017) *The Intellectual and Ideological basics of combating the extremism and takfiri terrorism and so-called the Political Islam. Vols 1 &2* Damascus
Syrian Arab Republic Ministry of Awqaf (2017) *The general approach of the Friday sermons in the mosques of the Syrian Arab Republic. The whole modern religious speech. The pulpit is a public site that has inviolability, rules and origins.* Damascus

of Syria. *War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*, brings together a variety of scholars to explore the history, culture and politics of the Alawite community. (Goldsmith, 2015) *Cycle of Fear. Syria's Alawites in War and Peace* offers a more detailed historical analysis. Meanwhile, (Dam, 2013) *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society under Assad and the Ba'th Party* presents a detailed account of how the Assad family came to rule Syria. In 2016, Stefan Winter published (Winter, 2016) *A History of the Alawis*. Examining historical records, the book challenges traditional understanding of Alawi exclusion from local societies. A useful work for understanding the role of minorities in Syria is: (White, 2011) *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East. The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*. White proposes that the concept of 'minority' has only come to have any real meaning since the rise of the nation states, and that until these develop, "there is no reason for members of specific communities to start to see themselves as linked to all other members of the same communities within the state, whether as majority or minority." (White, 2011,p,61). This would explain the long history of relatively peaceful coexistence.

An earlier work has been helpful in exploring what 'democracy' means in the Middle East. (Salame, 1994) *Democracy without Democrats* covers two centuries of political development within the Middle East, and seeks to approach the subject from a Middle Eastern perspective.

Other very recent works that address the conflict include: (Lister, 2015) *The Syrian Jihad. Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*. Lister offers the most detailed analysis of the rise of the Islamic factions fighting in Syria. (Baczko, 2018) *Civil War in Syria. Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* is an informative field-work based insight into the development and structure of the militant groups and the institutions that they sought to establish. Meanwhile, (Phillips, 2016) *The Battle for Syria. International Rivalry in the New Middle East* examines the crucial role that external influences and international interests have played in feeding and prolonging the war. There are also many articles appearing in journals on the political and religious dimensions of the conflict in Syria.

In 2017, Nikolaos Van Dam published a new book entitled, (Dam, 2017) *Destroying a Nation. The Civil War in Syria*. Like most western academics, Van Dam is highly critical of the record of the Syrian government, but this work is also very critical of the brutality and fragmentation of the multiple 'opposition groups'; realistic about the level of violence that they have perpetrated, and of the external influences upon and support given to those groups from an

early stage in order to promote a 'war by proxy'; and critical of the west's refusal to engage with the Syrian government, acknowledging that this refusal has helped to prolong the conflict.

Understanding issues surrounding sectarianism is crucial to reflecting on matters relating to plural, diverse societies, especially in the Middle East. One recent work that very helpfully informs this study. Published in 2017, (Hashemi, 2017) *Sectarianization. Mapping the new politics of the Middle East* explores why sectarianism has become such a destructive force in the Middle East today and attempts to explain how this has happened, and what it means for the future.

Ussama Makdisi offers a further important contribution to understanding Ottoman society and its continuing influence on sectarian dynamics in the region in: (Usama Makdisi, 2000) *The Culture of Sectarianism. Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon*.

It is worth noting that almost exclusively, the books and articles that are being written on the history and politics of Syria are from 'western' academics, perpetuating a 'western' perspective both on the history and the politics. An example of a western academic who challenges the mainstream academic presentation of the Syrian conflict is offered by Stephen Gowans. (Gowans, 2017) *Washington's Long War on Syria* examines, as the back cover quotes, the "decades-long struggle for control of Syria, and demolishes each and every argument Washington, its allies, and the mainstream media have advanced to justify the unjustifiable regime change in Syria".

Since the start of the Syrian conflict, there has been a significant increase in academic scholarship about Syrian history and politics. The Centre for Syrian Studies' at the University of St. Andrews, and publishers such as C. Hurst & Co, and Saqi Books in London, have played a major part in this increase in Syrian studies. Among the works published are: (R. Hinnebusch, Zintl, T. , 2015) *Syria. From Reform to Revolt. Vol.1. Political Economy and International Relations*. And (Salamandra, 2015), *Syria. From Reform to Revolt. Vol 2. Culture, Society and Religion*. But almost all Syrian voices that have been a part of this academic debate in Europe or America are from the exiled or ex-patriot Syrian community, (only some of the works quoted above contain articles or chapters from Syrians, all of whom are political or academic exiles) and there is a significant disconnect between the voices, views and experience of exiles, and those of Syrians 'on the ground.' Academic integrity requires that alternative narratives are considered, even, or perhaps especially, when they challenge the mainstream agenda. Given the complex and multiple narratives that exist in and regarding Syria, it remains to be

seen if internal Syrian academics will at any point in the future find a voice and a platform in the international community.

This study seeks to offer insights into the Christian-Muslim interface as experienced by Syrians inside Syria, whilst also taking note of Syrian voices outside Syria, both before and during the conflict, and as such represents an original contribution to academic scholarship on Syrian society.

Chapter 1

Christianity in Syria. – The Ecclesiastical mosaic

1.1 Introduction.

This chapter presents a brief survey of the history and diverse ecumenical expressions of the Christian presence in Syria. It introduces the important role that Christianity has played through its encounter with Islam, in establishing and rooting within Syria a culture of religious and social plurality which continues, despite the trauma unleashed by the recent conflict, to offer hope for the future. Exploring the historical background is essential to understanding the contemporary religious context and why it is so relevant to the wider contemporary Christian-Muslim dynamic.

The Christian landscape in Syria illustrates the plurality and confluence of eastern Christian communities in a way that is almost unique anywhere in the world. Damascus is home to the three Antiochene Patriarchates: the Eastern Orthodox, the Oriental Orthodox, and the Greek Melkite, and every ecumenical family of the Church is represented in the country.

The religious and cultural identity of Syria is profoundly influenced by the history of Christianity. It has a rich, complex and ancient identity, emerging as it does at the crossroads of some of the great cultures of the region. Yet, despite the fact that the Middle East is the “place of origin of Christianity” and that “eastern Christians constitute one of the largest Christian traditions in the world”, Christianity in the Middle East until recent years has been significantly understudied (Anthony O'Mahony, 2017, p. 159). Since its earliest days, Christianity has been present in the region. Within a few years of the resurrection, we read in the book of Acts of St. Paul heading to Damascus to persecute an already established Christian community in the city.³⁹ St. Luke tells us that it was in Antioch in Syria that Christians were first labelled as such (Acts 11:26), and the many remains of Christian Churches and buildings dating from the earliest days of the Christian faith in the region witness to the strong presence of the Christian faith at the time.⁴⁰

³⁹ Acts 9:1-22

⁴⁰ For helpful reference works on Eastern Christianity, see: (Angold, 2014) (Parry, 2010) (Ross, 2018)

1.2 The early centuries

Prior to the conquest of the Middle East by Islam in the seventh century, there was a diverse Christian presence on the fringes of the Arabian peninsula and along the Euphrates. Throughout the third and fourth centuries of the Christian era, monks and missionaries had preached in the region, and many tribes had been converted (Hanna, 2007, p. 58). The evidence and remains of these monastic and hermit communities are spread across the region, and monasticism had a deep impact on the practice of Islamic devotion – an influence that continues in Syria today.⁴¹ In the dying years of the Roman and Greek Empires, many Arab and Yemenite tribes migrated from all over the Arab peninsula to the region of the Euphrates and Tigris, and were converted. The trade routes in turn spread the Christian faith throughout the Arabian Peninsula; to Abyssinia in the south, and north and East to Persia and beyond. The poet Hassan Ibn Thabit (562-674CE) who travelled from Medina to Damascus, provides in one of his poems a wonderful image of the local Christian community during Lent: ‘Passover is approaching, the children are hastily threading coral wreathes/ They compete in reciting prayers to God and all imprecations to Satan/ Prayers to Christ in that monastery and supplications of priests and monks’ (Hanna, 2007, p. 56). And Khalidi, writing from a Muslim perspective on Islamic theocracy, and presenting a positive slant on Christian-Muslim engagement in early Islam, writes : “From inscriptions, from Syriac, Ethiopic, and Byzantine sources, from modern analysis of pre-Islamic Arabian poetry, from newly discovered early Islamic materials, a picture is emerging of a pre-Islamic Arabia where diverse Christian communities, in Arabia itself or in its immediate vicinity, purveyed rich and diverse images of Jesus” (Khalidi, 2001, p. 4). It is to be remembered however that Islamic origins lie in a Judeo-Christian paradigm, and whilst providing an Islamic perspective on Christian roots, Khalidi tends to understate the Judeo-Christian origins of Islam, promoting instead an Islamic understanding of the person of Jesus.

Such was the influence of the eastern church, that at the Holy Synod of Nicaea in 325CE it was reported that the Patriarch of Antioch, a Syrian, “governed a jurisdiction that extended all over the continent of Asia, even including India” (Murad, 2007, p. 89). Moreover, Syriac Christianity was a ‘genuinely Asian Christianity’.⁴² It did not come with the European ‘cultural, historical

⁴¹ For a thorough study of the impact of early monasticism, see: (Chitty, 1966).

⁴² See (Heyberger, 2010) *Eastern Christians, Islam and the West: A Connected History*. Also: (Anthony O'Mahony, 2017) *Eastern Christianity and Jesuit Scholarship on Arabic and Islam. Modern History and Contemporary Reflections*.

and intellectual trappings' of the streams of Christianity that developed in the West, but was rooted in the Arab world and shared the same culture, traditions and social customs of the region (Brock, 1985, p. 15). The spread of Christianity throughout the Middle East meant that languages spoken by Christians then, as now, would have included Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Greek and Arabic (S. H. Griffith, 2008, pp. 8-9). By the time Islam emerged, Christians were 'by far the majority of the population' from Alexandria to Persia, and from the Arabian peninsula to North Africa.

Given the cultural and linguistic diversity and plurality of the Christian communities across the ancient world; and the political tensions both within the region and between east and west, theological interpretation of doctrine varied widely as Christians sought to define their message in the light of local philosophical and cultural traditions (Emma Loosley, 2010).⁴³ Indeed, many have argued that this diversity, fragmentation, and lack of 'empire-wide identification' may also have later facilitated the Muslim conquest when it came (Tomass, 2016, pp. 30-31).

Theological disagreements in the early Church, rooted in Christological debates concerning the nature of Christ, were to help cause the fracturing of the Christian community that remains a characteristic of the ecclesial context today. Once the Edict of Toleration was issued in Milan in 313CE, Christians were able to focus on defining the faith which until then had been persecuted. Christian Centres had already emerged in Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Rome and Constantinople, with the eastern Churches holding very different theologies to those of the west, and, with linguistic differences as well as political and social issues adding to the controversies that raged. The first schism occurred after the Council of Ephesus in 431CE, when Nestorius refused to recognise the status of Mary as *Theotokos (God-bearer)* preferring the title of *Christotokos (Christ-bearer)*. In this debate lay the question of Jesus' divine and human status. The long-standing Christological debate between the theology of Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius focussed on the extent to which the humanity and divinity of Christ were united. The Antiochenes believed that the Alexandrian position implied a divinity that did not allow for the humanity of Christ, whilst the Alexandrians believed that the Antiochene position implied two separate beings. The Council of Ephesus preferred the definition that Jesus was both fully human and divine, having two natures. Thus, those faithful to Ephesus

⁴³ See also: (Anthony O'Mahony, 2013) Christianity in the Middle East. Modern History and Contemporary Theology and Ecclesiology. An introduction and Overview.

became known as 'miaphysites', a term that remains today for the family of Eastern Churches that hold to this theology. The schism that followed Ephesus was to act as the 'midwife' in the creation of the Church of the East (Emma Loosley, 2010, p. 5).⁴⁴

In 451CE, the Council of Chalcedon affirmed the dual divine and human nature of Christ in one person. The consequent schism resulted in the creation of the Miaphysite family of Churches, a family that were well established by the end of the sixth century, and spread from the Levant to Central Asia. There were several attempts to heal the divisions, but as Brock states: "The division became fossilized as a result of the Arab conquests of the 630s, since the anti-Chalcedonian churches, located in areas which came under Muslim rule, were now separated politically from the Byzantine Empire and the Christian West" (Brock, 2008, p. 19). It is partly this political and physical separation that has enabled the history, theology and heritage of the Eastern Churches to remain so distinctive and separate, and until recently under-studied and under-recognised in the West.

Most Syriac-speaking Christians prior to the Islamic conquest followed a Christological formulation rooted in Cyril of Alexandria's theology (d.444), the so-called 'Jacobite' or 'Miaphysite' position; or expressed by the inappropriately labelled 'Nestorian' theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca 350-428).⁴⁵ Thus, "already at the time of the Islamic conquest and throughout the early Islamic period, most Aramaean Christians, along with the Copts in Egypt, and the Armenians in Cilicia and the Caucasus, did not accept the 'Byzantine' imperial orthodoxy of the first six ecumenical councils" (S. H. Griffith, 2008, p. 13). Those who did accept the Byzantine Orthodox positions came to be known as 'Melkites' ('Imperialists', royalists'), who held to their Byzantine liturgical traditions, but were keen to be faithful to their eastern roots. They were the first to use Arabic as the language of liturgical use. (S. Griffith, 2001, p. 9; S. H. Griffith, 2008, p. 11) The earliest known 'Melkite' theologian to write in Arabic was Theodore Abu Qurrah (ca 750-825) who was known for his sustained theological

⁴⁴ For studies of the Church of the East: (Wilmhurst, 2011); (C. Baumer, 2006)

⁴⁵ The title 'Jacobite' refers to an itinerant preacher named Jacob Bardaeus who travelled widely in the region espousing the views of Cyril of Alexandria. He played a formative, but not exclusive, role in the creation of the Syrian Church. (E. Loosley, 2008) Peter, Paul and James of Jerusalem. In Ed. O'Mahony, A & Loosley, E. *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East*.

However, it should be acknowledged that the terms 'Jacobite' or 'Nestorian', being associated in the west with 'heretical' theological positions, are both inadequate to express the theology upheld by these oriental Churches, and are regarded locally as insulting to the Church of the East, which is one of the most ancient of Christian Churches, and one of the most important, extending as it did from Syria to China and throughout Central Asia.

defence of Christianity against Islam (Lamoreaux, 2005). Thus, by the time of the Muslim conquest, the schisms within the Christian community meant that distance had already developed between the eastern Christians of Antioch and Alexandria , and Rome and Constantinople. The Church ‘families’ that existed at the time were as follows:

1. The Oriental Orthodox (non-Chalcedonian) Churches: Armenian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox.
2. The Byzantine (Chalcedonian) Greek Orthodox (‘Melkite’) Patriarchates of Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria.
3. The Church of the East.

One branch of the Syrian Church that did not reject Chalcedon, was the Syriac Maronite Church. Found mostly in the Mount Lebanon region, the Maronite Church was named after the 4th Century hermit – Mar Maroun, “whose ascetic life attracted disciples who founded a monastery in his memory”. It maintained relative autonomy under Muslim rule, and continues to be the most numerous group of Christians in Lebanon (McCallum, 2008) and a self-governing eastern Catholic Church following the Antiochene tradition, in full communion with Rome. For many Lebanese, the Maronite Church represents the indigenous Christian heritage of Lebanon, and continues to have a significant political influence in Lebanese society. Christian communities, including the Maronites, were persecuted during the Mamluk period, and Maronite survival and growth was largely due to their presence in the remote mountains of the coastal region. It wasn’t until the Crusader period that they were rediscovered, and in supporting the Crusaders, their importance and influence grew (R. Haddad, 1970, p. 10). Maronites were Invited to teach eastern languages and literature in France and Italy during the Middle Ages, and it is partly due to their educational ministry in Europe that the western churches began to become aware of the importance and presence of the eastern Church. Today, the Maronite Church plays a unique role in Lebanese national identity, operating an elaborate institutional infrastructure of schools, universities, hospitals and social ministries within civil society, out of an organisational structure rooted in monastic life. Chartouni writes:

“Although far from being a unique example of nativist rejection of Islamisation, the Maronite Church was the only one that succeeded in questioning the dhimmitude organisational pattern and its subculture.”(Chartouni, 2018, p. 116)

1.3 Encounter with Islam

Doctrinal controversies and Byzantine persecutions of the ‘heretical’ Christians of the east weakened Christian communities in the region, and ensured that when the Arab armies invaded in the seventh century, they were vulnerable to conquest. Eastern Christians whose cultural and spiritual home was far removed from Byzantine Europe, felt alienated under Byzantine rule. Benjamin Braude writes:

The theological disputes between the central government in Constantinople and the provincial populations in Egypt and Syria (that is, historic Syria, made up of today’s Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel/Palestine) weakened the bonds of loyalty that the periphery might have felt for the core. Although all were Christians, the divisions between the Copts in Egypt and the Jacobites in Syria, on the one hand, and the so-called Orthodox, on the other, were so great that many of the non-Orthodox – after the initial chaos of military conflict – could almost welcome the Muslim invaders as liberators from the persecution they had endured under Byzantine theological oppression. (Braude, 2014; *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, 2014, p. 7).

Sidney Griffith posits a more nuanced approach. He notes that the Muslim conquerors, in areas of the Levant over which they assumed control, found Christians in the region already “in a state of theological and cultural diversity”, which they continued to express under Muslim domination, adopting Arabic and incorporating themselves into “the ways of life of the Islamic polity” which “they helped to create”, thus identifying firmly with the new world of Islam. Griffith further points out that by the time western Christians re-entered the region during and after the crusades, the indigenous Christians living alongside the Muslims, “had already begun their long slide into that demographic insignificance in the Middle East that is the fate of their communities in modern times” (S. H. Griffith, 2008, p. 13). Modern judgement on the historic narrative of Christians acquiescence with Islamic rule is rendered more complex by Griffith’s research.

Initially, under the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus (661-744), and then under the ‘Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad (750-1258), and notwithstanding the legal requirements of non-Muslims under the ‘Covenant of Umar’, which included the *al-jizyah* poll tax for ‘protection’ of non-Muslim subjects, and the second-class civil and social status that *dhimmi* status established, Christians were able to enjoy a period of relative stability under occupation (S. H. Griffith,

2008, pp. 14-18).⁴⁶ During this period, Christians adopted the language of Arabic, and became vital conduits of Greek philosophy and theological dialogue, taking an influential administrative place within the courts of the Caliphs. In 775, the Patriarch of the Church of the East moved from Seleucia –Ctesiphon to Baghdad, becoming “the most influential non-Muslim at the Court” (Berg, 2010, p. 253). Most famous was Patriarch Timothy I (780-823), who was involved not only in politics and religious dialogue, but also in the expansion of the Church.⁴⁷

During the 8th and 9th Centuries, Syriac scholars from all the Churches were involved in the ‘Translation movement’ undertaken by the Abbasid Caliphs, during which a huge amount of Greek philosophical, medical and scientific works were translated to Arabic, mostly by Christians (Emma Loosley, 2010, p. 15). It is worth noting, with Samir, that “the merits of Arab science in the mediaeval era are often extolled. It is too often forgotten or unknown that although the Arab world of the time was certainly Muslim in structure, the scholars who held philosophical, scientific and linguistic knowledge were mostly Christians, not Muslims, and that those who imparted this knowledge from Greek or Syriac, were almost exclusively Christians” (Samir Khalil Samir, 1998, p. 82). As “heirs of Syrian and Greek cultures, these sons of the Arab world (the Christians), were vital intermediaries for the transmission of science to the new rulers” (Hechaime, 1998, p. 156).

However, a degree of tolerance and coexistence did not mean that life as a Christian among Muslims was without difficulties.⁴⁸ It is true that there were few persecutions, but incidences of hostility between Muslims and Christians are recorded, and freedom of religious observance was restricted. Given that Islam was a new religious and political movement, it was inevitable that there would be violence. As Islam emerged, it developed a strong sense of hierarchy in relation to other religions. Non-Muslim religious communities were classified in Islamic law according to their relationship to Islam, but even though Christians and Jews were classified as ‘*Ahl al-Kitab*’, (People of the Book), they were still ‘*kuffar*’ or ‘unbelievers’, and had a *dhimmi* status, that required payment of the *jizya* tax to guarantee their safety and place in the *Dar al-Islam* (Abode of Islam). Muslims also had strict rules about apostasy and inter-religious

⁴⁶ The ‘Covenant of Umar’ is named after the stipulations and treaties concluded during the time of the second Caliph Umar 1 (634-644) with cities conquered during this period.

⁴⁷ A reflection and commentary on Patriarch Timothy’s debate with Caliph al-Mahdi in 781CE, can be found in: (Samir K Samir, 2001) *The Prophet Muhammad as seen by Timothy 1 and other Arab Christian Authors*. In. (D. Thomas, 2001) *Syrian Christians under Islam, the First Thousand years*.

⁴⁸ For a study of the history of Christians and Jews under Islam, see: (Ye’or, 1996).

marriages.⁴⁹ For the purposes of this study, it should be noted that this attitude towards Christians continues amongst many Islamic scholars, and even today, marriages between Christians and Muslims are frowned upon.⁵⁰ Since Syria has agreed a Constitution in which minority communities are protected under Syrian law, many Christians believe that their freedom of religion and status within society would be compromised should the country adopt an Islamic Constitution, which is the declared intention of most of the groups who wish to see a change of government.⁵¹

Under Muslim control, calm prevailed as long as Christians did not upset the balance of power. "If you had no political demands, if you did not aspire to power of any kind, everything was fine. You were free to develop within your own culture and within your own religion, as long as you accepted the supremacy of Islam" (Samir Khalil Samir, 1998, p. 71). Viewed as a '*dhimmi*' people, and as 'People of the Book', Christians could be granted protection and peace in the *Dar Al-Islam* (House of Islam), as long as they paid the *Jizya* tax. This could place great financial strain on Christian communities. The application of *Shari'a* Law on non-Muslims restricted the personal freedoms of Christians. They wore distinguishing clothes. They were forbidden to practise certain trades and from taking positions of responsibility in politics or the army. They were permitted to worship freely, but processions, public Christian symbols, and proselytization were forbidden. Marriage between Christians and Muslims was only allowed if the Christian party converted to Islam. Conversion the other way around was forbidden. This regulation remains to this day and has clear demographic implications as far as the Christian and Muslim population are concerned. For all these reasons, Christianity saw a significant decline in numbers during the period of Muslim rule.

The Crusades presented a period when Eastern and Western Christians once more encountered each other.⁵² Flannery notes that "when the city of Edessa became the first Latin

⁴⁹ For an account of the struggles of '*dhimmi*' status in Islam, see: (Friedmann, 2003) *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam. Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition*.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Qur'an* Al-Ma'idah 5:5 "The Qur'an explicitly forbids marrying idolaters (2:2,21; 60:10-11), but this verse allows intermarriage with the People of the Book, suggesting the possibility of extensive social relations between Muslims and members of these religious communities." Ed. Nasr, S. H. (2015) *The Study Quran*.

⁵¹ An internet search of 'Are rebels in Syria 'moderate'?' or 'Rebel groups in Syria and Islam', produces dozens of articles from numerous sources which provide justification for this fear.

⁵² The Crusades represented a period of encounter, negotiation, pacts and conflict between the western invaders and the Indigenous Arab communities. The memory of the Crusades remains strong and continues to inform the attitude of some Muslims to western Christianity. There was brutality on both sides. An excellent account from an Arab perspective is to be found in: (Maalouf, 1984) *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*.

State in the East during the First Crusade (1098-1144), relations between the Syrian Church and the Crusaders were generally cordial” (Flannery, 2008, p. 143). It was during this period that the seeds were sown, and the first tentative steps were taken, to talks about union with Rome. As O’Mahony writes: “In the thirteenth century, Catholic missionaries, Dominicans and Franciscans had been active among the faithful of the Church of the East”, and this was to lead in 1445 to a union between the Church of the East and Rome. Henceforward, the term ‘Chaldaean’ “has been used for those members of the Church of the East who are in union with Rome” (Anthony O'Mahony, 2017, p. 167). With the exception of the Maronite Church, it would be some centuries before Catholic Churches of the East were formed.

1.4 Christianity under the Ottomans

Under the Ottomans, conditions once again improved for the Churches, and “the percentage of Christians in the Fertile Crescent tripled” (Fargues, 1998, p. 52). There are several reasons for this, one of which was undoubtedly the *millet* system, under which legal recognition and a degree of administrative autonomy was given to religious communities. *Millet* bodies, which included the churches, became intermediaries between the Church and the State, and the Patriarchs were given political authority and status within their communities and in the State. The churches were able to manage their own civil, penal and taxation administrative affairs. Requirements for conversion in the event of inter-religious marriage, and the *Jizya* tax, were gradually removed. And the requirement that all Ottoman subjects, regardless of their ethnic or religious status, should serve in the army was altered. Non-Muslims – in return for payment of an exemption tax – were excluded from the requirement for conscription. Other forms of discrimination such as restrictions on land purchase were also removed. Under the ‘*tanzimat*’ – the period of political and economic reform undertaken by the Ottoman Empire between 1857-1860 - the economic and social incentives for conversion to Islam were substantially reduced, creating increased opportunities for minority communities and serious tensions with some Muslim groups.⁵³ The *Tanzimat* reforms were in part at least “meant for international consumption at a time when the Ottomans desperately needed Britain’s help” (James A Reilly, 2019, p. 56). Christians also had a lower death rate than Muslims, partly because they were

⁵³ See: (Issawi, 2014) The transformation of the Economic position of the *Milletts* in the Nineteenth Century. See also: (Ma'oz, 2014) Communal conflict in Ottoman Syria during the reform era.

heavily concentrated in the urban and coastal areas where standards of living were better, and wider contact with the Mediterranean world was possible.⁵⁴

This Christian encounter with the West during the Ottoman period was further secured by the sending of Capuchin, Carmelite, Jesuit and Dominican Catholic missionaries to the east in the 17th Century; by the arrival of western diplomats, and the establishment of Catholic educational institutions. Under this influence, further schisms formed within the Oriental Churches. As early as the 15th Century, in response to the Ottoman threat, there had been attempts to unite the Catholic West with the Byzantine East. At the Council of Florence in 1439, religious leaders had almost reached agreement in the union of east and west, but this had been rejected by a majority of monks, authorities, and the populace in the East. A Union had even been proclaimed in Hagia Sophia in Istanbul on 12 December 1452, but this was only seen as provisional until the threat of the Ottomans disappeared, and was never accepted by most eastern churches. With the fall of Constantinople on 29 May 1453, the Council of Florence became obsolete. In 1662, the Syrian Catholic Church was formed after a schism with the Syrian Orthodox. The Greek Catholic 'Melkite' Church was formed in 1724. In 1741, the Maronite Church adopted Roman customs and united completely with Rome, but retained their Syriac liturgy. The Armenian Catholic Church was established in 1742. In 1847, the Latin Patriarchate was settled in Jerusalem, and in the 19th Century, a Coptic Catholic community was established.

Thus was created the Eastern Catholic family of Churches, who remained faithful to Eastern liturgy, but came under the authority of Rome. The Melkites were the first, in the seventeenth century, to adopt Arabic as the primary liturgical language. Robert Haddad identifies three reasons for the adoption of Arabic within Christian liturgy: the decline of Syriac as a vernacular tongue; the concentration of Melkite communities in urban centres that were dominated by Arabic literary culture; and the reduced influence of Byzantine Orthodoxy (R. Haddad, 1970, p. 20). This strengthened the distinctiveness of the Eastern Churches and stressed their indigenous nature within the eastern context. Additionally, between the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the Ottoman conquest of Syria in 1516, the Orthodox churches of the East had been largely cut off from the Patriarchate in Constantinople. Thus they had developed a degree of ecclesiastical and cultural independence (R. Haddad, 1970, p. 21).

⁵⁴ See: (Fargues, 1998) *The Arab Christians in the Middle East. A Demographic Perspective* In Ed. Pacini, A. *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East*

In the period before the nation states were created in the twentieth century, the main identity marker for the people of the region, given their religious and tribal diversity, was their religion. This means of identity, formalised by the Ottomans in the *millet* system, allowed a degree of legal and religious autonomy within the juridical framework of Sunni Islam, but it also laid the foundation for potential sectarian division when political or religious dissension occurred. As Phillips writes: “Politicised sect identity in Syria developed alongside, and interacted with national identity.....Politics remained mostly local, with tribe, class and region as important as religion or sect, depending on context” (Phillips, 2015, pp. 363-364).⁵⁵

The *Tanzimat* reforms that found expression in the Edict of Gulhane in 1839 and that were further developed in the *Hatt i-Humayun* Decree in 1856, were rooted in increasing levels of trade and communication between Europe and the Ottoman Empire. They involved a western-inspired radical transformation of every aspect of Ottoman society – military, economic, social, intellectual, legal and political (Braude, 2014, p. 273), and sought to modernise the economy and administration and centralise Ottoman power (Pacini, 1998, p. 6).

Hashemi writes:

For the first time in the history of any Muslim state, in 1839 the Ottomans implicitly accepted a revolutionary political equality of Muslim and non-Muslim subjects. They declared this equality more explicitly in 1856 and finally, announced it constitutionally in 1876. The *jizya*, or poll tax on non-Muslims, was abolished in 1855. A concept of secular Ottoman citizenship was introduced in 1869. The Ottoman purpose in this massive ideological and legal reordering of the empire or *Tanzimat* was clear: it was to stave off further European intervention and to consolidate imperial power (Hashemi, 2017, p. 27).

The reforms however evoked considerable Muslim opposition. With improved communication and trade links, including railways, telegraph and steamships, between Europe and the Ottoman empire, Europeans tended towards Christian trading partners in priority to Muslim colleagues, and sought to secure their own interests within the region (Ellis, 2018, p. 36).

⁵⁵ For a study of the development and impact of the ‘Millet’ system, see: (Braude, 2014) *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*. This book challenges some of the foundational “myths” of the *millet* system, arguing that its development was more gradual than traditionally understood.

Christians benefited economically more than their Muslim neighbours, and became more confident in their social and religious expression.

Braude writes:

Broadly speaking, the development of Muslim antagonism toward Christians during the reform era was linked to new socioeconomic changes in Syrian towns. On the one hand there was the remarkable and conspicuous economic prosperity of many Syrian Christians and their rapid emancipation from the old restrictions on their public conduct. On the other hand, there developed a growing economic gap between Christians from upper and middle classes and Muslims from the middle and lower classes; the latter, as well as some rich Muslims, also suffered from the new economic and political developments (Braude, 2014, p. 246).

Additionally, some Muslims, particularly amongst the *Ulama*, opposed the principle of freedom of worship and feared that the equal status given to Christians would damage the Islamic character of the Ottoman state, and damage their political influence in the government institutions. However, criticism of the *Tanzimat* reforms was not confined to Muslims. Many Christians were concerned that the new arrangements diminished the influence of traditional ecclesiastical establishments, and were not pleased that the new freedoms removed the waiver of the requirement for Christians to do military service.

Braude writes:

Yet although religio-political causes, and motives of self-preservation, played a dominant role in shaping the newly emerging Muslim-Christian conflict, social and economic forces (as well as cultural, psychological, and other factors) were also interwoven into that complex fabric of inter-group relations (Braude, 2014, p. 242).

It was not long before these multiple tensions erupted into violence. In 1850, an anti-conscription protest in Aleppo, coinciding with the rise of communal economic tensions, developed into a massacre of Christians in the city. Ten years later, a mob turned on the Christians of Damascus. These massacres “coincided with a civil war in neighbouring Mount

Lebanon between Maronite Christians and Druzes, - a war which also ended in 1860 in utter defeat and massacre of Maronite Christians in several towns” (Hashemi, 2017, p. 28).

Hashemi continues:

But these events were not about Christianity or Islam. Instead these events pointed to a very specific nineteenth century moment that witnessed three things happening simultaneously. The first was the sudden, top-down disestablishment of the system of symbolic and legal Muslim supremacy without any cultural preparation on the part of Ottoman Muslim elites whose empire was under enormous European military, political and economic pressure. The second was the reality of western imperialism that claimed to protect the Christians of the Orient who were themselves increasingly associated with Europe. The third was the agency of some local Christians and Muslims who adopted a more strident perspective on their new-found rights in a rapidly changing imperial landscape (Hashemi, 2017, p. 29).

Throughout this period of reform, especially in Mount Lebanon, it was Europeans who sought to influence the balance of power, providing resources and managing local power structures. Indeed, it could be suggested that it was a perceived European threat to Islam and Ottoman power that represented one of the greatest sources of Muslim antagonism towards Christian communities, who were seen to be intimately partnered with European interests – a perception, influence and legacy that remains present today.

As Makdisi writes:

On its terrain, Europeans, Ottomans, and locals were locked in a war over the meaning and direction of the *Tanzimat*, which itself contained several overlapping discourses of religious equality, Islamic tradition, political legitimacy, past glory and present sovereignty, all framed implicitly by a Europe-dominated modernity (Usama Makdisi, 2000, p. 57).

The result was a series of political compromises concluded by the Ottoman and European powers, that institutionalised political structures in such a way that complex plurality can only

be resolved through a system of communal representation – a modified form of the *millet* system.

Despite the fact that the massacres resulting from the *Tanzimat* reforms took place over a hundred and fifty years ago, they have left a lasting memory. In one of the Christian villages that was attacked and suffered sectarian murder at the hands of jihadi groups during the recent conflict, a villager said to me: “We are afraid that this will happen again. They attacked us a hundred years ago. They have turned against us now. And we are afraid that they will wait for the next opportunity to do the same again.” I have heard similar comments in different parts of Syria. It is one example of how the recent conflict has damaged trust and interreligious relationships.

However, sensitive issues of trust are not confined to interreligious matters. They also exist ecumenically. During the formation of nation States, and the colonial endeavours of the 19th Century, there was an increase in Protestant missionary activity, and the region witnessed the arrival of an array of Protestant denominations. Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Evangelical churches all established themselves in Syria and throughout the Levant, to create the fifth family of Churches in the region. All have added to the complex, diverse – and sometimes conflicting – Christian mosaic in Syria and the wider region. There have inevitably been times of tension between the faith communities. To many these developments have been a source of Christian enrichment and diversity. But this is not necessarily how all Syrian Christians see it. Some believe that this multiplication of Churches, and the significant and influential presence of western Christianity, has from an eastern orthodox perspective, “increased disunity, division and conflict in the body of the Church.”⁵⁶ This remains a profoundly sensitive matter for the Orthodox churches of the east, particularly given the numerical growth in some of the Protestant churches in recent decades. The author has heard this view expressed in dialogue with Christians in Damascus, Aleppo and Beirut, during regular visits to both Lebanon and Syria.⁵⁷ There also exists a perception that in some cases, the provision of aid by some

⁵⁶ Quoted from an unpublished lecture: His Eminence Metropolitan John, Archbishop of the Antiochene Orthodox Archdiocese of Western and Central Europe. (2010) *Christians in the Middle East*. Lecture Given at St Botolph’s Church without Bishopsgate, London. 12 June 2010.

⁵⁷ A good example of this tension is this article in ‘Christian Today’ magazine dated 16 May 2017, in which Fr. Alexi Chehadeh of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Damascus, expresses concern that aid from the Protestant churches of the west are negatively impacting eastern Christians. Whether true or not, the article highlights the tensions that exist in some quarters between the ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ churches. An additional complexity is that some Orthodox Christians do not place any distinction between the various ‘evangelical’ or Protestant denominations, but view all of them with equal

Protestant churches to Syrian refugees, whatever their status, has been accompanied by 'soft' forms of evangelism (Kraft, 2017). Nevertheless, although work remains to be done in promoting ecumenical as well as inter-faith dialogue, and proclaiming an ecclesiology that "proclaims unity in diversity", shared suffering during the recent conflict has strengthened ecumenical relations and cooperation within Syria (Anthony O'Mahony, 2013, p. 240).

1.5 The twentieth century onwards.

Towards the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1914, Christians numbered about 24% of the population of the Empire, and 30% in the area of Greater Syria, which includes Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Palestine, and Christian communities played a key part in the social, political, economic and religious landscape of society (Fargues, 1998, p. 62). But with the factors previously described: the rise of the nation states; the fall of the Ottoman Empire; the British and French Mandates in Palestine and Syria; and the emergence of the Muslim renewal movements; this situation was to dramatically alter.

As nation states developed, religious identities were manipulated and used to promote ruling agendas within emerging countries. The British and French Mandates in Palestine and Syria played a crucial role in developing this tendency and establishing a power framework that differed to that which existed under Ottoman rule. Perceived economic and political injustices within the nation states fractured societies and religious communities. During the French Mandate, ecumenical differences arose between the Catholic denominations that 'by and large welcomed French rule', and the Orthodox Christian communities that 'sought to strengthen ties to their Muslim compatriots in the name of Syrian and Arab identification' (James A Reilly, 2019, p. 97). The betrayal of political commitments to indigenous communities at the end of the Mandates, including the marginalisation of minority non-Sunni groups, and the establishment of the State of Israel, which resulted in the dispossession of several hundred thousand Palestinians from their homelands, created communal, State and religious tensions that remain to this day. Additionally, the Lebanese war; American interventionism in the Gulf and in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya; the 'Arab Spring'; the 'War on Terror'; the growth of Sunni-Shi'a tensions, and the rise of political Islamism – have all contributed to the destabilisation of the region, and the mass emigration of Christians from

suspicion, and as having a common identity.

<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/evangelicals.are.destroying.our.church.says.syrian.orthodox.leader/109191.htm>

the Middle East to other parts of the world. In parts of Iraq, Christian communities that dated to the earliest days of the Christian Church have almost disappeared, and in other parts of the region, the ancient presence of Christianity is under threat, or reduced to such a degree, that the Christian influence on Arab society as being part of the historical essence of that society, is being seriously eroded.⁵⁸ This changing context could profoundly alter the framing, balance and the culture and history of the religious communities in Syria and the region.⁵⁹

The 20th and early years of the 21st Century have been devastating for Christian communities throughout the region. In contrast to the figures quoted above, it is estimated that today Christians make up less than 4% of the population of the Middle East. In Syria, of an estimated population of Christians of 10-12% prior to the conflict, it is impossible to provide accurate figures, but it is thought that half or more have left the country.⁶⁰ In December 2016, Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo, Antoine Audo suggested that three quarters of the Christian population of Aleppo might have left the city by that date, leaving an estimated 40,000 Christians in the city.⁶¹ In Palestine, Christians now number less than 2% of the population.⁶² In Iraq, Christian communities have been decimated by the war and by flight from ISIS persecution. Thus, it is possible to say that “ninety years have wiped out four centuries of Christian resurgence” (Fargues, 1998, p. 63). The rise of the nation states has helped provide the context in which this decimation of the Christian communities has taken place. However, there is another story. And that is that modern Syria has been a place of refuge for Christians during a century of crises: for Armenians and Syrians displaced during the Ottoman period in the early years of the twentieth century; for Palestinians in the mid-twentieth century; and for Iraqi Christians during the 1990s and 2000s (Chatty, 2017). Crucially, the country, home to three eastern Patriarchates, Syrian Christianity has played an important part in the renaissance of Eastern Christianity in the Levant, and in increased western awareness of the importance of these churches for ecclesial liturgy, history and doctrine.

⁵⁸ <https://www.christianpost.com/news/80-percent-christians-forced-flee-iraq-since-2003-open-doors-uk-170976/>

⁵⁹ For a helpful article on the current threats facing the Church in Iraq, and the challenges of ‘living with Islam’ in this context, see: (Girling, 2015) ‘To live within Islam’: The Chaldean Catholic Church in Modern Iraq. 1958-2003. Also: (Girling, 2018) *The Chaldean Catholic Church: Modern History, Ecclesiology and Church-State Relations*. London: Routledge

⁶⁰ Some estimates of numbers of Christians leaving, and remaining in Syria have been published in a report by Open Doors: *Those who Remain: Christians in Syria and Iraq*. Published 1 May 2017.

⁶¹ Interview with Bishop Audo on 17 December 2016 in Damascus.

⁶² For an excellent wide-ranging collection of essays on the subject of Christianity in the Holy Land, see: (Ateek, 2007) *The Forgotten Faithful. A window into the life and witness of Christians in the Holy Land*. Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center.

In Syria, religious communities for the most part coexist, and possess no political or geographical centre. Christianity is therefore a natural part of the established 'mosaic' of Syrian society, and inhabits part of the 'sacred space' that makes up the diverse religious communities in the country. This is visible in the abundance of mosques and churches that stand side by side in the country's cities, towns and villages. As an increasing number of studies on religious leadership in the region, particularly in Lebanon, are discovering, communal identity has been enhanced by the implementation of the nation States. Prior to their establishment, communal identities were distinct, but the structure of the nation States, building on the Ottoman legacy, bureaucratised religious difference, ensured "the compartmentalization of religious and secular institutions" (Henley, 2015, p. 166), and institutionalised both Christian and Muslim religious systems and hierarchies that had previously been more fluid than imagined, and that had crossed the boundaries created by Statehood.

Eastern Christian communities now find themselves in a changing context and a period of profound uncertainty. Yet, despite the conflict, Syria has remained one of the most religiously diverse countries in the region, with a historic heritage of coexistence in which religious communities, until the start of the Syrian conflict, lived in comparative stability and mutual respect. This does not mean that communities have not prioritised their own interests or that tensions have not existed. This study explores how, even amidst the horrors of the conflict, many Christian and Muslim communities in Syria have continued to engage and work together, and attempted to reconcile and serve their suffering communities.

1.6 Ecumenical developments and recent challenges.

Despite the political insecurity and conflict during recent decades, substantial progress has been made in ecumenical relations in the region. It is hard to overstate the impact of the establishment of the World Council of Churches in 1948, and of Vatican II and *Nostra Aetate*, in challenging the Churches to reflect on their ecumenical differences, and to posit a more inclusive view of other faiths. The encyclical of Pope Pius XII, *Sempiternus Rex* (1951), was profoundly influential in motivating subsequent ecumenical developments. The encyclical acknowledged that the ecclesial schism between eastern and western Churches at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 was based on theological misunderstandings. In 1993, the Joint

Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church issued the *'Balamand Declaration'*. This declaration sought to end the concept of 'uniatism' by which it was believed that 'true salvation' only exists within one church or another. The Declaration acknowledged the right of the eastern churches to exist and that individuals should have freedom of conscience in practising their faith. The Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches declared themselves to be 'sister' churches, and that rebaptism is both unnecessary and should be avoided. Whilst the issue of relationship between the national church, diocesan churches and regional Churches has not been resolved, this was a significant moment given the millennium of fractured relations, and the Churches are aware that a more effective ecumenical relationship is necessary (Anthony O'Mahony, 2013, pp. 240-241). In 1996, the Synod of the Melkite Churches of Antioch affirmed the intention to bring the two Antiochene Patriarchates into a closer union. As yet, the fulfilling of this intention has not been possible due to concern over how such a union might impact their wider relations.

It is not surprising that there should be theological difficulties in overcoming a millennium of schism, but churches in Syria and the region recognise the need for ecumenical cooperation. In the face of the conflict in Syria, ecumenical cooperation and engagement has increased between all the Churches, and inter-religious cooperation has grown. Speaking prior to the Syrian conflict, Antoine Audo, the Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo, echoing many Christian leaders in the region, wrote: "The vocation of Eastern Christians will be to become a bridge, or better, a model of communion between the Christian west and the Muslim world" (Audo, 2010a, p. 17). He further suggests that "a spirituality of communion, rooted in the person of Christ, may allow each Church to be itself in its liturgical and patristic tradition, at the same time opening itself in a spirit of welcome for the other, and of dialogue" (Audo, 2010c, p. 198). In a conversation in Damascus in December 2016, Bishop Audo confirmed that this was now more important than ever.

The Churches in Syria, even before the conflict, faced challenges. These included: the diversity of Churches and divergences in identity and theology; the reality of being a numerical minority in a multi-religious and ethnic context; the fact that ties with the West and western Christianity can be seen both as an asset and as a threat by non-Christian Syrians; and the level of emigration.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, Habib Moussalli presents an interesting account of Christianity in Syria in 1998 when he noted that “the Syrian State can be said to be the guardian of the Church in some ways, an official protection which is not without benefits” (Moussalli, 1998, p. 289). He wrote:

The Patriarchs are building everywhere in Syria and work is proceeding rapidly. The Christian communities are completely free to buy land and to build as they please, whether churches, clinics, blocks of flats for new, young families, or multipurpose buildings for catechism or youth clubs. Besides giving its permission, the State also provides the construction materials (iron, concrete, piping, and so on) at a subsidized price, the same as for government projects. We can suppose that the fact that the Church is building in Syria today is a sign of its confidence in the future... From a careful observation, it could be honestly concluded that there is no form of persecution against Christians in Syria. There is complete freedom of worship, which is guaranteed by the constitution. Christmas and Easter are official holidays and some liturgical celebrations are broadcast on radio and television.... There are always two or three Christian ministers in the Council of Ministers, and they are there undoubtedly more on account of their technical expertise than their religious affiliation (Moussalli, 1998, pp. 286-289).

This ‘protection’ which the State has afforded the Christian and other minority communities, in comparison to the sectarian violence that they have suffered at the hands of the militant groups fighting the government, helps to explain the position that Church leaders have maintained during the conflict. But this is not an idealised account. Moussalli speaks in the same chapter of the “constant sense of insecurity, a desire for extra security” that Arab Christians feel, which comes in part from continually feeling “a sense of belonging and estrangement at the same time. Thus without feeling confined in his Arab Christian identity, he nevertheless feels the constant need to reinforce it, to retrieve it, to enrich it and to stress all its nuances.... In his desire to claim both history and modernity, his Christian roots in a predominantly Muslim world, and his openness towards the West, he has the ability to assimilate or distance himself.” Add to this the sense of threat from “the religious revival in Muslim circles on a social and political level” and we see the potential vulnerability of the Arab Christian identity (Moussalli, 1998, pp. 289-290).

Since the start of the conflict in Syria, Christian emigration from Syria has multiplied significantly. Razek Siriani writes:

No wonder Christians in Syria felt threatened and unprotected when the uprising started in March 2011 and even more so when it later took on a militant aspect. Christian communities felt that the rise of militant Islam against the ruling regime, and

its initial success, would threaten their very presence and protection as a substantial minority group in the country. This led to a mass exodus of Christians, particularly intellectuals and young people, from Syria. This has come about not because Christians feel unaffiliated or disloyal to their land, nor because they feel they have no stake in its future. The reason for the large-scale emigration is that many Christians feel that their lives and the lives of their children are threatened by a grim and uncertain situation. They fear that a society marked by tolerance, safety, plurality, coexistence and a mosaic type of life will probably be replaced by one that is exclusive, monolithic and fanatically Islamic. Such fears are not exclusive to Christians. Many Muslims have opted to leave the country for similar reasons, particularly those whose political affiliations make them feel vulnerable. Yet, many Christians, despite the atrocities and difficulties of life in a war situation, have opted to remain in the country or have left only as a last resort (Siriani, 2018, pp. 108-109).

Because of the level of emigration, there is an even greater need for further ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and co-operation. For the loss of Christians in Syria and in the Levant is a dangerous threat to the pluralism within Levantine society, and the longstanding social, economic, political and religious traditions and dynamics that have enabled the cohesion, stability and coexistence of different religious and cultural communities in the region. As part of this, a recovery of the theological traditions of the east, particularly Patristic theology and Spirituality, with its unique oriental roots and character can contribute much to strengthening a shared Christian identity within the Middle Eastern context.⁶³

For a brief survey of the five 'families' of the church in Syria, including statistics, see Appendix 1.

1.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have briefly examined the complex history that has produced the diverse Christian presence in Syria, and the factors that have affected and are affecting Christianity's contemporary existence and inter-relational dynamics within the Syrian context. Syria holds a unique place. From here Christianity emerged and spread eastwards and westwards. The theological controversies that raged during the early centuries of the Christian era resulted in ecclesiastical schisms that produced diverse ecumenical expressions which remain today. Meanwhile, Christianity's engagement with early Islam was significant, and helped to establish a level of coexistence that enabled Christians for the most part to survive and flourish, even as a *dhimmi* community, and despite periods of serious tension such as the inter-religious riots and attacks in Damascus and Aleppo in 1860. During the four hundred years of Ottoman rule,

⁶³ See: (Audo, 2010b) Isaac of Ninevah, John of Dalyatha and Eastern Spirituality. In *One in Christ: An Ecumenical review*. 44.2. 29-48

the *millet* system, whilst limiting the Christian communities in some respects, enabled a degree of institutional and administrative independence that preserved their status and religious freedom within society. After the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, institutional independence was preserved within the structures of the new nation States, and in Syria specifically, freedom of religious expression remains enshrined within the Syrian Constitution.

In the light of the Syrian conflict, a degree of fracturing and lack of trust has inevitably developed between members of different religious and communal identities. As we shall see, religious leaders, even in the midst of conflict, are working together to encourage and restore trust within and between their communities. In many respects, the challenges presented by substantial emigration and brutal conflict have strengthened ecumenical relations between the Christian communities as they recognise their need of each other in order to maintain the stability and influence of the Christian presence. This study considers the means and effectiveness of that process. One area where hope lies is in the fact that most Syrians, of whatever faith community, and despite the trauma that the whole country has experienced, are keen to preserve the rich diversity and plurality of the country, within a secular framework that respects and protects all groups within the country.

However, the future remains unpredictable and uncertain. What will the Christian presence look like after the conflict? With an estimated 50% of Christians having emigrated, how will the churches survive? How will each of the faith communities adapt to the new ethnic, religious and social dynamics created by the loss of millions of citizens, both by death in conflict, and by emigration? As Fr. Alexi Chehadeh, Greek Orthodox Archimandrite says:

We have always had complete freedom of faith and worship and we still do. But faith leaders will face great challenges. The balance of Christians and Muslims has changed. But there are many other changes. We now have a serious gender imbalance. It is estimated that because of the numbers of deaths of young men in the Syrian army, and the level of emigration of young men, 70% of Syrian society are now women, and 30% are men. There are also many widows that we now need to support.⁶⁴ The destruction of factories and major infrastructure, means an increase in unemployment, and that could have an impact on social stability. People will be less likely to be able to afford a higher education. These are social problems. There is no place for sectarian ideology, and we cannot afford to talk of religion as a factor of

⁶⁴ For a helpful insight into the status of women in Syrian society, see: (Ventura, 2018) 'Thank God we are in Syria!' Modernization, Interfaith Relations and Women's rights in Syria before the Arab Spring.' (2000-2010)

division. Rather, we need to serve the needs of society, and play a part in healing society.⁶⁵

Despite the emigration of many Christians during the Syrian conflict, those who remain are determined to preserve the Christian presence, and Christianity's vital role in preserving the religious space in which diversity and plurality can flourish. It is a wish shared by many Muslims in the country who commonly say that "without the presence of Christians, Syria will lose something vital to the quality and plurality of its identity."⁶⁶ As Sidney Griffith writes: the "intellectual heritage of eastern Christians belongs to the whole Church and we are the poorer without any knowledge of it" (Griffith, 2008, p. 3). This study adds to our knowledge and understanding of the context, in the hope that post-conflict, trust can be restored.

What this chapter has not addressed is how the 'Islamic renewal' movement from the 1930s onwards, has impacted not just Islam, but the fragile Christian-Muslim relational dynamics in the region. In order to understand this, it is now necessary to introduce the equally diverse and complex Muslim mosaic within Syrian society.

⁶⁵ Interview with Archimandrite Alexi Chehadeh. Director of DERD. Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. Damascus 31 May 2017

⁶⁶ Quoted in an interview with Bishop Antoine Audo in Damascus. 17 December 2016.

Chapter 2

Islam in Syria – the Muslim mosaic.

2.1 Introduction

Just as the Christian mosaic in Syria is pluralist and complex, the Muslim mosaic is multi-layered and diverse. This chapter describes key elements within the Muslim landscape in Syria, the history, nature and evolution of which has profoundly affected the Christian-Muslim dynamic. It explores the importance of the rise of Salafism and political Islam in the twentieth century, and identifies different expressions of Islam within the country. (Also included in Appendix 2). Finally, a reflection on recent developments in Sunni Islam in Syria helps inform the context in which post-conflict inter-religious dynamics might develop. The landscape of Islam in Syria cannot be separated from regional developments in Islam in recent decades, particularly the titanic tensions between Arab Nationalism and political Islamism, as expressed in Egypt, Libya and Iraq (Gerges, 2018), or the complex geopolitical dynamics between Sunni and Shi'a across the region (V. Nasr, 2016) (Nuruzzaman, 2019).

Most figures put the percentage of Sunni Muslims (including Kurds) in Syria prior to the current conflict at approximately 74% - a majority, but one that is far from uniform in political, social or religious adherence and practice.⁶⁷ Remaining Muslim groups, including Alawites, Shi'a, Druze and Isma'ili, amounted to a total of about 16% of the population. This communal balance, and the fact that the Alawite/Shi'a minority have held the axis of power for over forty years, and promoted secular modernity, has in part helped fuel resentment amongst some Sunnis that has long pre-dated the current crisis. The government has tried to quell communal tensions by including significant representation from all communities within Parliament and leadership in the Army, and encouraging religious freedom for minorities. However, all communal groups in the country have been accused of manipulating communal tensions on occasion for political advantage.

At the time of writing, and given the displacement and emigration of so many Syrians, it is impossible to provide accurate figures for any of the communities that remain in Syria. The dominance of Sunni Islam within Syria belies the fact that the Sunnis themselves are diverse

⁶⁷ According to most available figures. For example, see: <https://fanack.com/syria/facts-and-figures/> or: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html/> (Accessed: 10 December 2018) See also: (Balanche, 2018, p. 13).

and represent different shades of religious and political adherence with local and regional variations. Just as some Sunnis espouse strictly conservative Muslim practices, so there are many Sunnis in Syria who welcome the religious and social plurality and diversity of the country, and the secular basis of the Constitution. As Thomas Pierret writes: “There is no such thing as a unified ‘Syrian’ religious scene” (Pierret, 2013, p. 12). There has always been a “regional fragmentation” in the Syrian *Ulama*, with a particularly strong rivalry between the two urban centres of Aleppo and Damascus. It is important to recognise that many Sunnis support an Arab nationalist perspective as opposed to that of political Islamism. Tension between these two paradigms have heightened significantly in recent years and contributed to political unrest.

The demographic change caused by the conflict is likely to have significant implications. The departure of an estimated 50% of Christians from the country; a reduction in other minorities; and a rise in the percentage of poorer Sunnis due to the socio-economic crisis, and the emigration of many professional Syrians; will lead to a changing demography that is bound to have an impact on the socio-economic and politico-religious make-up of the country.

2.2 The Islamic ‘Reform’ movements. Salafism and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Islam has been profoundly impacted by the developments of the Islamic ‘reform’ movements in Damascus and Cairo. Of these, the *Salafi* movement has been instrumental in moulding the development of Islam in the last century across the Arab world. Defined as a return to the original teachings of the *Qur’an* and the *sunna*, there is debate as to whether *salafism* emerged as early as the late 19th Century, or primarily in the early 20th Century, but it played a major part in influencing the shape of political Islam in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and setting agendas for renewing the strength of Islamic civilisation within the modern world (Lefevre, 2013, pp. 3-17).

Essentially, the Salafist movement sought “a return to the ideas and morals of the era of the Prophet Mohammad – that is, claimed textual literalism – at the expense of Islam’s subsequent rich tradition of religious interpretation, law and practice” (Abdo, 2017, p. 46). The *salaf* are regarded as the first three generations of Muslims, from the time of the Prophet, and *salafism* represents the following of the traditions and teachings of those elders.

Louis Massignon was instrumental in introducing *salafiyya* theology to a western audience, as an intellectual movement that was committed to modern reform in the Islamic world. He suggests that the *salafiyya* movement was founded in the 19th Century by Persian Shi'a scholar Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897). Lauziere argues that Massignon was misleading in presenting Rida in 1925 as a "current leader" of the *salafiyya* movement, and was mistaken in suggesting that *Salafism* existed in the late nineteenth century. He argues for a more gradual and nuanced development in the *salafiyya* movement in the early years of the twentieth century (Lauziere, 2016, pp. 37-41). In any case, the movement sought to reconcile the teachings of Islam with the modern world and the realm of science. Afghani saw the movement as a reawakening of Islam in the face of western colonial influence and propounded an early form of Islamic Nationalism resting on the faith of the Prophet.

It was however Afghani's most prominent student, Egyptian Mohammed Abduh (1849-1905) who laid the foundations for the *salafiyya* movement. Abduh had a greater interest in intellectual matters than political, and sought to reconcile the philosophy of the 'enlightenment' and the western emphasis on 'reason', with the Islamic demand of faith and the primacy of *Allah* in all things. His emphasis on the heritage of the Mediaeval *Mu'tazalite* theologians (especially Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina) who had introduced the concept of reason to interpret Islam and its scripture was met with acute opposition from the *ulama*.

Syria's situation between Europe, Asia and Africa and as a place of encounter for cultures, philosophies and faiths, is one reason that Syrians pride themselves on the diversity and religious plurality of Syrian culture. But given the historic importance of Syria during the Umayyad period and beyond, it is not surprising that Syria has also been an important locus of Islamic scholarship. Paul Heck notes:

Syria has long been a center of religious renewal, including such figures as Umar b. Abd al-Azīz (d. 720), al-Awzāī (d. 774), Abū al-Alā al-Maarrī (d. 1058), al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Ibn Arabī (d. 1240), Sib Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1256), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) and Amad Kuftārū (P. Heck, 2004, p. 185).

It is notable that the most influential Muslim theologian and jurist for conservative Islam spent most of his life in Syria. Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328 CE) was a proponent of Hanbali theology (Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, 780-855 CE), which is the foundation of purist *Salafi* thought and expression. But his writings and thinking have been widely used to develop and promote

Wahhabi and *Salafist* principles.⁶⁸ Hanbal and those who adhered to his theology, rejected speculative theology (*kalam*), and metaphorical interpretation (*ta'wil*), and “conceived of Salafism as a purist approach to Islam, characterized by an adherence to neo-Hanbali theology, an abhorrence of innovation, a strong commitment to the use of scriptures as proof texts, and a desire to recapture the unique truth of Islam – that is, the purported orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the pristine Muslim community” (Lauziere, 2016, p. 99).⁶⁹

Opposition to *salafi* tendencies was inevitable given the peaceful coexistence with minorities in the country, and the popularity of *sufism* in 19th and 20th Century Syria. And it was this feature of Syrian society that initially encouraged the Syrian *Ikhwan*, when it was founded to claim to be more politically moderate.⁷⁰ However, *salafism* also developed in accordance with the sectarian ethos of particular centres, most notably the contrast between Aleppo, with its abundance of *sufi* scholars and tradition, and Damascus, which had a more *salafist* approach to Islamic development (Lefevre, 2013, pp. 4-11). Thus, two *salafist* trends developed. The first had more in common “with the Hanbali school of Islamic law, the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah and the *Wahhabiyya* movement, than with Al-Afghani or Abduh.” The second “evolved into Arab-Muslim nationalism,” sections of which eventually endorsed *Wahhabi* ideology (Tomass, 2016, p. 91).⁷¹

During the 19th Century, Islamic *jamiat* – clubs or societies that promoted intellectual or political goals amongst ordinary people—developed throughout the Ottoman Empire. These were important for establishing a sense of Muslim identity, particularly under the French Mandate, when many felt that they had to defend Islam against western influences. Salafism was a more elitist movement that sought to gain influence through educational and judicial systems. It produced several journals, which gained a wide readership amongst lawyers, academics and civil servants. Together, these movements “provided the political and organisational basis upon which the Islamic movement was to structure its actions”(Lefevre,

⁶⁸ For studies on the rise of Sunni Muslim fundamentalism, see: (Sivan, 1985) (Calvert, 2010) (A. Rahnama, 2005)

⁶⁹ Further 19th century Syrian figures who influenced the development of *salafism* in Syria include Damascene Jamal al-Din Qasimi (1866-1914), who advocated a *salafism* that sought reformation of religious doctrines and Ibn Hanbal’s literal interpretation of the scriptures. He also declared *sufism* to be ‘un-Islamic’. Another component of Syrian reformism is represented by ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1849-1902) in Aleppo and Tahir al-Jaza’iri (1852-1920). These figures had a social-political focus on reforming Islamic societies. Both were initially opposed by the majority of Ulama (Pierret, 2013, pp. 102-103).

⁷⁰ *Ikhwan* is the name given to the Muslim Brotherhood.

⁷¹ One of the most significant Syrian propagators of the restoration of Arab political power according to *Wahhabi* ideology was Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib (1886-1969).

2013, p. 19). Thus emerged in 1946 the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (*Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*).

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949).

Focussing initially on education, the movement moved into politics, and by the 1930s had become a violent protest movement, first against British rule, and then against the Egyptian government. A military officers' coup in July 1952 brought them to prominence, but a failed assassination attempt on Nasser in 1954 led to life imprisonment for their leader Hasan al-Hudaybi, and a coup attempt in 1965 led to the execution of many of their leaders, including Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), whose influence continues in the movement (Gerges, 2018). Qutb, who was educated in both Egypt and America, developed a hatred of western lifestyles and attributed the weakness of Arab societies to their own infidelity (*khiyana*) to Islamic principles.⁷² None of these figures differed greatly in their theology from Al-Wahhab.

However, the Muslim Brothers, in common with their modern counterparts, and unlike close adherents of *wahhabi salafiyya*, adopted modern clothing and acceptance of the nation state, as a means to fulfil their ideology. Despite their apparent willingness to consider welcoming aspects of modern life and State systems (Lefevre, 2013), they nevertheless sought "to create an authentically Muslim state with an elected leader that would eventually embrace all Muslim peoples. The aim of this Islamic State would be to enforce Muslim law within its border and to send out missionaries to evangelise Islam throughout the world" (Tomass, 2016, p. 94).

Lefevre claims that the Syrian Brotherhood "was in its origins a peaceful group committed to the principles of constitutionalism and political liberalism", and that apart from its confrontation with the Ba'ath party in the 1970s and 80s, it remained a peaceful movement (Lefevre, 2013, pp. 19-20). This claim could be vigorously debated. The Syrian *Ikhwan* certainly proclaimed from the beginning their commitment "to a democratic form of government" (Lefevre, 2013, p. 27) and were distinct from their counterparts in the rest of the Arab world, in that they were "militantly fundamentalist in tone but distinctly modernist in concept" (Humphreys, 1979, p. 6). He does admit however, that it was "bound to remain part of the wider *Ikhawani* framework which tied it to its Egyptian founders" (Lefevre, 2013, p. 20), and that their violent history, both in Egypt, and in Syria, has led to deep suspicion of the movement on the part of the Ba'ath Party and many Syrians, including Sunnis, who wish to maintain a secular constitution. There remains deep scepticism amongst many Syrians at the

⁷² '*Khiyana*' is the Arabic noun for 'unfaithfulness', 'infidelity', 'betrayal'. '*Kufr*' is the Arabic noun for 'unbeliever', 'atheist'.

claim of a moderate, peaceful basis to the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Given the support that exiled Muslim Brotherhood leaders and their followers in Europe and America, have consistently given to fighting Islamist factions in the war in Syria; and the alliances that “moderate” *Ikhwan*-associated groups have made with extreme Islamist factions, whilst claiming to desire ‘freedom’ for all sections of Syrian society, has increased scepticism amongst many Syrians. The sectarian violence of those groups during the conflict raises serious questions about the depth of their tolerance and political Islam’s peaceful intentions (Fuller, 2003, p. 29).⁷³

At Syrian Independence from France in 1946, the National Bloc that had led the nationalist struggle came to power. But it soon faced many other parties, including the newly formed Ba’ath Party, founded by a Christian, Michel Aflaq, and a Sunni colleague: Salah al-Din al-Bitar; and the newly formed Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood clearly represented a political challenge, so the government dissolved their alliance with the *Rabitat al-Ulama* (Union of Ulama), transferred their property to the *Waqf*, and closed down the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood newspaper *al-Manar*. The failure of the new government to address the 1948 establishment of the State of Israel caused further tensions resulting in a coup in 1949, during which secularist reforms were imposed and the *Ikhwan* once again disbanded. A few months later, a subsequent coup and elections within the Assembly were held, during which three *Ikhwan* members were elected to Parliament, two of whom became ministers in the new government. During debates in Parliament in 1950, the Muslim Brotherhood members pushed for a clause in the Constitution that Islam should be enshrined as the ‘State religion’. After much debate, a compromise was agreed, that whilst Islam would not be declared as the ‘State religion’, a clause would be inserted into the Constitution that stated that the Head of State should be a Muslim, and that Islamic Jurisprudence – *fiqh* – should be the main source of legislation. The pressure that the Muslim Brotherhood applied on this matter earned them

⁷³ Fuller suggests an Islamist “shift in orientation towards moderation and democracy,” as follows: “The majority of Islamist movements have long since reached the conclusion that democratization is the best overall vehicle by which to present their agenda to the public and to gain political influence... Islamists are becoming prime advocates of concepts of democracy and human rights, precisely because they are the primary victims of its absence.” (Quoted in: Awad, Najib G. (2012) *And Freedom became a Public Square. Political, sociological and religious overviews on the Arab Christians and the Arabic Spring*. p.42) Awad goes on to suggest that the “long standing, conventionally claimed phobia of an Islamist ruling system in the Arab world of the Near East are no longer the most accurate lenses one should use to read the recent Western powers’ views and visions about what the situation would mount to in the Arab world in the light of the latest uprisings.” (Awad, 2012, p. 43) It is remarkable that Awad, a Syrian Christian living in America, could have such confidence one year into the conflict in Syria. Since Fuller’s assessment in 2003, and Awad’s in 2012, the actions of multiple Islamist movements across the Middle East, Africa and Asia might suggest that this has proved to have been a vain hope.

support from the Syrian *Ulama*, but the latter were also furious at the *Ikhwan's* acceptance of the compromise. Earlier political battles in the 1940s however, between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Communist Party, during which the *Ikhwan* called for Muslims to follow the teachings of Mohammed, rather than Stalin or Lenin, had further increased their popularity. By the 1950s, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had become a significant part of the State apparatus.

During the 1950s, influenced by the nationalist trends across the region, and inspired by Nasser in Egypt, the secular Ba'ath party made substantial progress in Syria. By 1954, in the face of growing popularity for the Ba'ath Party, severe repression from the Government of Colonel Adib Shishakl in Syria, and the suppression of the Brotherhood in Egypt, the Syrian Brotherhood decided not to contest elections. Instability in the country led to a decision to accept a 'Pan-Arab Union' with Egypt in 1958 which created the 'United Arab Republic'. This however was short-lived, especially as part of the agreement had been that the Ba'ath Party should be dissolved, and that most of the leadership of the UAR was perceived to be in the hands of Egyptians. A coup by Syrian Military Officers in 1961 (mainly from Muslim minorities), the re-establishment of the Ba'ath Party in 1962, and a further coup on 8 March 1963, placed the Ba'ath Party firmly in control of the country – a move that would have profound significance for Syria to the present day. As one considers the complexity and political tensions of Syrian society in the first half of the twentieth century, the influence of what Syrians perceive to have been outside interference in their internal affairs cannot be overstated, when it comes to understanding the political psychology behind the growth of the Ba'ath Party, and the attitudes of Syrians to subsequent developments in the country and to Syria's relationship to the wider world.

From their respective inceptions, there were tensions between the Ba'ath Party and the Syrian *Ikhwan*. These were rooted in ideological differences between the political Islam of the *Ikhwan* and the secularism of the Ba'ath Party, but Lefevre identifies other factors that nurtured discontent. He claims that "large sectors of Syrian society had become alienated by the regime's policies in virtually every aspect of life." These include; a bias towards rural areas; socialist policies; an alleged 'sectarian' make-up of the party; and a sense of some areas being privileged over others (Lefevre, 2013, p. 43). All of these to a degree contributed to an increasingly polarised political scene in Syria during the 1970s, and eventually to the terrible massacres, committed by both the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Syrian Government against them, in the 1980s. Since the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood has been outlawed in Syria. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leaders in exile, who remain bitterly opposed to the Ba'ath

Party, and continue to hold to a conservative Islamic ideology, have been calling for ‘regime change’ ever since their exclusion from Syrian politics, and have played a key role in advising western governments, and in the ‘High Negotiations Committee’ of the Syrian Opposition, which represents the ‘rebel’ factions in Syria.⁷⁴

This discussion illustrates that whilst the plurality of the Levantine religious landscape has encouraged diversity and coexistence, the seeds of *Salafist* ideology were already present in Syrian Islamic traditions and scholarship. However, external influences upon the *Salafist* and *Wahhabi* tendencies in the Syrian Islamic landscape during the last century cannot be overstated. Many Syrians with whom I have spoken around the country recount how *salafist* influences have been strengthened by the numbers who, in the decades prior to the current conflict, travelled to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf to live and work, and who on their return to Syria, invited imams from these countries to preach in their mosques. Many of these, funded by their own countries, preached strict *salafi* and *Wahhabi* principles.

Political Islam continues to represent a huge challenge to the region. As early as 1994, Kramer wrote: “Wherever, over the past two decades, Arab regimes have embarked on a course of political liberalization, loosening the restrictions on political articulation and association, Islamist activists have emerged as the strongest force of opposition” (Kramer, 1994, p. 202). Democratic processes, not least as witnessed during the ‘Arab Spring’, have allowed political Islam to take the ascendancy. And yet, the radical Islamism that has emerged has often challenged the freedoms that democratic process seeks to secure. This is undoubtedly one of the key reasons that the multiple Islamist groups fighting against the Syrian Government have failed to secure the support of most ordinary Syrians.

2.3 Other factors affecting the Islamic ‘landscape’.

Religious landscapes are also impacted by political developments. The position of the religious minorities in Syria in the 19th and early 20th Centuries was “considerably affected by political interference on the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire by France, England and Russia”. The French in particular, “favoured the military recruitment of special detachments among Alawis, Druzes, Kurds Circassians and other minorities” (Dam, 2013, pp. 3-4). This represented a reversal of the military role of minority groups, and enhanced their status, and power potential in the region, increasing resentment from some amongst the Sunni majority, who

⁷⁴ For a further detailed study of recent developments in Salafism in the region, see: (Cavatorta, 2016).

were “appalled by the introduction of French imported secular norms, which, in their eyes, threatened the Islamic traditions of the Syrian province”(Lefevre, 2013, p. 13). This resentment continued to grow under the Ba’thist secular constitution that protected minorities, who were seen by some as being vassals of the occupier, refusing to establish an Islamic Constitution.

Nevertheless, it is possible for communal, religious, tribal or socio-economic factors to be over-emphasised when attributing rising tensions in Syria. Other factors such as ideology, inter-generational conflict, personal ambition, corruption, the rural/urban interface, and outside interference can and have also played a part in the development of conflict (Dam, 2013, p. 12). External interference particularly, has played a significant role in the development of the war in Syria since 2011 (Phillips, 2016).⁷⁵ Indeed, many Syrians argue that although sectarian tension has been provoked and manipulated in the course of the war, the diversity of the faith communities in themselves has rarely in Syria’s history had a causal influence in destabilising the country.

In the years prior to the Syrian conflict, several factors were influencing the landscape of Islam in Syria. These include: the polarisation of some communal groups; the strengthening of *Shari’a* law in conservative *Sunni* ideology; the secular constitution of the country; the rise of the minority communities; the presence of large numbers of refugees from Iraq and Palestine and their respective communitarian allegiances; the rise of Shi’a influence in the region; the impact of “post 9/11 wars launched by the United States and its allies” (Drevon, 2016, p. 322); and decentralised authority within Sunni Islam, which makes any cohesive or united response to political, economic and social upheavals, almost impossible to achieve.

Tensions between *Sunni* and *Shi’a* have been exacerbated not just by the ascendancy of Alawi power in Syria, but also across the region by the Shi’a “revival” that followed the fall of the Ba’athist Government in Baghdad, and which has been “fired by the intervention of the West in Afghanistan and Iraq which have unleashed historic religious forces to fuel an age-old antagonism between the two sides that had not been anticipated by Washington or London” (Anthony O’Mahony, 2006, p. 4). The shifts in power that have been unleashed by these interventions have profound implications for the region and the heightening of communal tensions, especially between the *Sunni* majority and *Shi’a* majority nations, and their

⁷⁵ External interference from an early stage is often cited by many witnesses in the conflict. In April 2015, a leading member of the Internal Syrian Opposition told me that he had been told in 2010 by an external opposition figure to prepare for an uprising that had already been planned.

respective allies. Indeed, Abdo argues that the uprisings of the inaptly named ‘Arab Spring’ “occurred on the heels of a surge in *Shi’a* power in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon”, and that the violence that has followed is not just a result of political rivalry, socioeconomic grievances, and international interventionism, but that “the *fundamental* cause of the violence lies elsewhere”. “Islam itself,” she says, “is being rethought and revised in the midst of political upheaval in the Middle East” (Abdo, 2017, p. 46). *Sunni/Shi’a* tensions should not however be overstated in the Syrian conflict. Sunnis who support the secularly-based Constitution and the pluralist nature of Syrian society have been as much victims of *Sunni* jihadist violence as anyone else. And the majority of the Syrian Arab Army are *Sunni*.

Shi’a and *Sufi* traditions have historically had a significant influence on Islam in Syria, both in Aleppo and Damascus. The Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus, (burial place of the daughter of Ali , the founder and most celebrated martyr of *Shi’ite* Islam and granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad), and the Shrine of Hussein in the Ommayad Mosque in Damascus are of global significance for *Shi’a* Muslims, and despite several car bombs planted by jihadists in the vicinity of Sayidda Zeinab in recent years, both shrines have remained well visited by *Shi’a* pilgrims from Iraq, Iran and other parts of the Middle East, throughout the conflict.⁷⁶

The recent conflict in Syria has had a traumatic impact upon every aspect of Syrian society, and the extent to which the communal and religious ‘balance’ of society has been altered has yet to emerge. Inevitably relationships between religious groups have been strained. Of particular concern will be whether those *sunni* who hold to a more conservative *salafist* ideology will accept the secular space that is likely to prevail constitutionally. It is to be hoped that the plurality of Islam within Syria will survive, and will once more be able to flourish. It is much more likely to do so under the secular constitution, which allows the dialogical space that the secular and religiously plural can cohabit and make their respective contributions to society.

In order to understand the Muslim landscape in Syria, there follows a brief survey of the various Muslim communities.

2.4 The Alawi

Alawites represent the largest and most important minority *Shi’ite* group in Syria. Their importance is heightened by the fact that the ruling Assad family are from this group and have

⁷⁶ For a study of issues surrounding the *Shi’a* presence in Mamluk Syria, see: (Winter, 1999)

promoted Alawite ascendancy within all circles of Syrian society. Significant Alawite communities exist across Northern Lebanon, the Syrian coastal mountains and plain, Turkey, and into Syria. Prior to the conflict, it is believed that they comprised “12 to 15 percent of the Syrian population, or approximately three million people” (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 6). Due to the importance of their political role in Syria in recent decades, and their influence on the country’s religious landscape, the following summary will be more detailed than that of other Islamic communities discussed in this chapter.

Alawi faith was founded on the beliefs of charismatic Shi’a theologian, Muhammad ibn Nusayr al-Bakri an-Namiri (d.883 or 873). Born in Iraq, he “declared himself to the *bab* (door) to the eleventh Shi’a Imam, al-Hasan al-‘Askari” (Farouk-Alli, 2015, p. 31). Although regarded as heretical by other Shi’as, Nusayr (Alawis were called ‘Nusayris’ until the twentieth century) gathered a group of followers. After his death, he was succeeded by a Persian Sufi who travelled to Egypt and deeply influenced another Sufi, as-Sayyid al-Husayn ibn Hamdan al-Khasibi (d.974) who later settled in Aleppo and established a Sufi order there. In turn, al-Khasibi influenced Abu s’id al-Maymun at-Tabarani (d 1031), who lived in Aleppo and Latakia, and whose doctrines became the basis of the Alawi faith. Compelled by persecution, the Alawis settled primarily in Syria, and in their early days there, experienced a degree of security and integration. In the city of Harran (now in Turkey) they mingled with philosophers, Sabaeans and astronomers, and “many of the pagan aspects of Alawite tradition have been attributed to the interaction with this city” (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 19). The Byzantine sack of Aleppo in 962; the resumption of strong Muslim (*Sunni*) power in the city in 1025; and the arrival of the Seljuk Turks in 1070, significantly reduced their influence, and forced many into the mountains, where their isolation and exclusiveness gave them the scope to consolidate their doctrines, and where evidence suggests that conversions of some of the local Christian Maronite and Shi’a populations took place (Goldsmith, 2015, pp. 13-43).

Alawis root their beliefs in the traditional religious notion that humans were expelled from heaven for their disobedience to God. Subsequently, God has appeared seven times in the persons of Abel, Seth, Joseph, Joshua, Asaf, St. Peter, Ali ibn Abi Talib, and then in the imams as far as the eleventh Imam. “However, the true character of the Essence is hidden by the presence of the Veil in Adam, Noah, Jacob, Moses, Solomon, Jesus and Mohammad.” Those who recognise the Essence – the Alawite faith claims hidden religious knowledge - are freed from the body, and return to its ultimate place with God (Tomass, 2016, p. 76). Amongst the Shi’a, Alawites are alone in regarding Ali as an Incarnation of God Himself, and part of a divine triad along with Muhammad, and Salman al-Farsi, a companion of the Prophet, one of the

primary reasons that they are labelled heretics by other Muslims. They are believed to have adopted some Christian practices, most notably the use of wine in rituals, and the celebration of Christmas being two examples. Their doctrines however are rejected by both *Shi'a* and *Sunni* alike, though more severely by *Sunni*. Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) was the first senior Muslim theologian to charge Alawi with being infidels. In 1305, partly concerned at the need for Islamic unity in the face of the Crusader and Mongol threats, Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (d.728CE) ruled that the "*Alawiyya* heresy is more severe than the Jews and Christians, and even the Brahmins who worship idols" (Tomass, 2016, p. 78). Following this judgement, over 20,000 Alawi were massacred. Similar judgements were given in 1516 and 1820 which saw further massacres. During these persecutions, the Alawi fled to their mountain strongholds in a pattern of persecution followed by gentle re-integration, that continued for several hundred years. As Farouk-Alli writes: "The lot of the Alawis was thus never enviable. They were at best tolerated and at worst the victims of terrible persecution" (Farouk-Alli, 2015, p. 33). Their self-imposed 'entrenchment' in the mountains meant that they could rarely be subdued, and also strengthened their sense of distinct identity, whilst at the same time enabling them to be incorporated into the Ottoman system of 'millets', earning a source of income through their agricultural trade with the coastal plains (Goldsmith, 2015, pp. 38-39).

A recent study of the Alawis (Winter, 2016) challenges the traditional view of the Alawites as a marginalised and systematically persecuted sect. Winter, through studies of numerous Ottoman records suggests that the Alawis were in fact throughout their history integrated into wider Syrian society, and that whilst sources "tell of fiscal exploitation, war and migration," they also speak of "alliances between Bedouin and 'Alawis, promotions to government office, and intercommunal friendship" (Winter, 2016, p. 10).

Goldsmith, hinting at this more nuanced history, identifies four stages in the increased integration of Alawites into Syrian society, leading towards the position that they now hold. The first was the decline and collapse of the Ottoman Empire between 1832 and 1918. This was followed by Alawite involvement in the French-sponsored Alawite State from 1919 to 1945, which was part of a deliberate 'divide-and-rule' policy engineered by the French. This "sought to pit Syria's ethno-religious minorities against the *Sunni* majority", and enhance divisions between urban and rural classes (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 58). Following the French withdrawal in the 1930s, the Alawites made a "pragmatic decision....not to oppose the sect's incorporation into the majority *Sunni*, independent Syrian State." From 1946-1963, they sought active involvement in Syrian society and "played a part in the development of political ideologies for a religiously diverse state." Finally, from 1963 to 1971, the Alawites supported

the Ba'th party's rise to power, and the ideology of cross-sectarian social engagement. Following Independence, the Alawites, along with other minorities, sought advancement within the State, but "the only real path to a stable income for the economically disadvantaged Alawites remained the military" (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 68). Meanwhile, increasingly well-educated Alawites began to engage in national politics. The *Sunni* majority were prepared to tolerate this as long as they didn't threaten the unity of the State.

Throughout their history, whether in isolation or engaging with the nationalism and secularism of the Ba'ath Party, Alawites never lost their strong sense of '*asabiyya*' (tribal solidarity and identity). In the 1950s, they successfully promoted themselves as 'Orthodox' Muslims, and in 1952, the Mufti of the Syrian Republic recognised the Alawite faith as part of the Twelver Shi'ite faith. Subsequently, in 1958, the Al-Azhar school in Cairo formally recognised the Twelver Shi'ites as "religiously correct" (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 73).

There remains debate as to the extent to which the development of Alawite power was initially motivated by communal interests. Through years of persecution and insecurity, their strong sense of '*asabiyya*' was natural. The Ba'th Party ideology allowed them to integrate into the State system, meaning that, as Goldsmith puts it, "many ordinary Alawites went from 'serving the notables and the feudal lords to serving the new Ba'thist men' who became the new 'lords' of Syria" (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 76). Their main motivation at this point may have been simply to gain equality within the Syrian State. Opposing groups however, in a sign of mutual distrust - saw this as a deliberate action to gain advantage.

The 1920s onwards, partly in response to the Mandate and the growth of Christian models of institutionalised education, saw a revival in traditional religious education, and an effort to 'reform' Islam and *Shari'a* law (*fiqh*) to make it applicable to the needs of the modern world. The University of Damascus, and its Faculty of *Shari'a*, created in 1954, was part of this process (Pierret, 2013, p. 38).

Immediate post-independence governments "chose to manage Islam by establishing formal institutions and regulations", placing the local muftis under the authority of a Grand Mufti in 1947, and in 1949, "giving the government ownership of all mosques in the country, even those built with private funds" (Pierret, 2013, p. 18). By contrast, the Ba'ath Party, in order to limit the influence of the religious ulama on government policy, refused to allow them a place within the State apparatus. Ironically, Pierret points out, "the exclusion of the religious elite...enabled it to devote all its energy to community work, with the result that it played a major role in setting in motion the Islamic 'awakening'" (Pierret, 2013, p. 22). During this

period, the *ulama* created many Islamic *madrasas* under the influence of local religious leaders, that became instrumental in strengthening more conservative Islamic adherence. Thus ironically, Ba'athist secularism indirectly strengthened the position of those who wished to instil 'traditional' religious Islamic values.

Between 1958 and 1961, the attempt to create an Egyptian-Arab republic under Nasser (the United Arab Republic) – a decision ratified in Syria by exclusively *Sunni* Officers - saw increased sectarian tensions, as power was transferred to mainly Egyptian figures, and the power of the Ba'th Party was curtailed. The Separatist coup that followed (1961-1963) was led by Damascene *Sunni* officers, a situation that hastened their demise as non-Damascenes were alienated. When the military coup of 1963 took place amidst numerous army purges, *Sunni* representation in the military was weakened, and the Ba'th Party called up military figures of a minority background to help establish control. At the time of the coup Alawis comprised five of the fourteen members of the Ba'thist Military Committee. That Alawi officers subsequently played an important role in the military is not surprising. Indeed, the leadership of the Committee was in the hands of three Alawis: Muhammad 'Umran, Salah Jadid, and Hafiz al-Assad. These played a key role in transforming the Ba'thist armed forces, and were subsequently accused of polarising the armed forces through appointments at all levels, in order to secure sectarian interests and power. Examining the history of this period closely, it should be noted that it is unfair to accuse any one group of operating for sectarian interests. All groups it seems were acting accordingly.

Meanwhile tensions between military leaders increased amidst changing allegiances. In December 1964, Alawite Major-General Muhammad 'Umran was expelled from Syria, accused of being responsible for sectarian tensions in the military. But confrontations between the most important military figures continued. Alawite General Salah Jadid's sectarian policies threatened to undermine Alawite gains, and in 1968 Hafiz al-Assad, seeing the need to deepen trust between different communities, moved to secure the loyalty of a majority of important military units. By November 1970, Hafiz al-Assad "had assumed control of the levers of power in Syria and Jadid was arrested and imprisoned. Assad enjoyed the backing of the key units in Syria's military, which by then had Alawites loyal to him in most of the key positions." (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 80)⁷⁷ The more pragmatic Assad was now in control of both the Ba'th Party and the Army.

⁷⁷ For this period of Syria's history, and reflection of the sectarian issues within the Syrian military, see: (Dam, 2013, pp. 15-47); (Goldsmith, 2015, pp. 45-80); (Kerr, 2015)

As far as the *Ulama* were concerned, the political uncertainty of the period, meant that during the 1960s, most of the most influential founders of the Faculty of *Shari'a* went into exile, leaving it exposed to the influence of more traditional clerics, the most famous of whom was Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti (1929-2013), who was "a staunch critic of the Muslim Brothers" (Pierret, 2013, p. 38),(Christmann, 1998). Nevertheless, members of the Muslim Brotherhood continued to teach at the University throughout the 1970s – a period that saw a significant growth in the development of private religious institutions founded by local sheikhs and largely untouched by the authorities. Such was the lack of interest by the Ba'ath Party in State-run religious institutions, that Islamic seminaries were not included when private schools were nationalised in 1967 (Pierret, 2013, p. 43). Throughout the 1960s, there was an "increasingly clear separation between the religious and the secular" (Pierret, 2013, p. 63). Tensions within the Muslim Brotherhood between those who sought violent confrontation to attain power and those who did not wish for violence, eventually led to a split in the organisation. And tensions between the *Ikhwan* of Aleppo, and the Sufi community who had a significant influence in the city also increased (Lefevre, 2013, p. 88).

Hafez al-Assad took power in November 1970, in a move that saw the ascendancy of the Alawite community for the first time in their history. Goldsmith writes that during the period of Hafez al-Assad's rule, the Alawite community became "increasingly obscured", partly due to the fact that Hafez, for very pragmatic reasons: discouraged sectarian discourse in the country, and was aware that the international community were scrutinising developments (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 82). Recognising the need for the support of all communities in Syria, Assad incorporated non-Alawites into the power structure. He also appointed many Alawites into senior government, military and security roles, and drafted a new constitution in 1973 removing the requirement that the President must be a Muslim. Given that some Sunnis still regarded Alawites as not truly 'Muslims', some non-Alawites claimed this new constitution, though secular by intention, was based on a sectarian agenda. It is recognised however that Assad's intentions could not be defined simply as sectarian. He genuinely supported a secular ideology, but needed sectarian particularity in order to maintain power. In an interview with Leon Goldsmith in 2011, Alawite Sheikh Nasir Eskiocak said:

When Hafez al-Assad took the power, Syria was held stable by him for thirty years. He was taking care of Syria and its rights. On one hand he ruled in a very dictatorial way but fair; he had dictatorial power, but fair and with justice.....Hafiz al-Assad....didn't use tyranny, he used equality and rights and the Syrian people were so satisfied with

him that they replaced him with his son Bashar al-Assad. He was a conciliatory ruler who helped conciliate... with righteousness and equality (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 87).

The secular basis of the Syrian Constitution in a country so communally and religiously diverse as Syria raises a serious question over what gives any person or group of people the 'right to rule'? Does a communal majority automatically have that 'right'? And is such a 'right' questionable if the ideological or religious principles adopted by or imposed by that majority, become detrimental to the freedom and well-being of 'minority' communities? Many Syrians have continued to hold that until the conflict began in 2011, the governments of both Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad held the social and religious 'balance' and freedoms of Syrian society, as long as they did not "prejudice public order", in a way that was exemplary in the region.⁷⁸

Notwithstanding this, President Assad's promotion of family members to senior positions in powerful departments of government, and corruption in government departments, became a source of discontent for many Syrians. In a later echo of some of Hafez's policies, during the years leading up to the Syrian conflict that started in 2011, it was corruption amongst the elite and in the government, the abuse of power particularly in the security apparatus, and the perceived neglect of the rural poor that were the main sources of complaint amongst the population.

By the early 1970s, the rise of a militant wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, the 'Fighting Vanguard', led to stronger political repression of the group, including the arrest in 1973 of Marwan Hadid, the leader of its militant faction. However, the massacre of 83 Alawite cadets at a Military Academy in Aleppo in June 1979, led to even tighter government control and suppression. In 1980, Hafez al-Assad narrowly escaped an assassination attempt. In retaliation, a massacre was ordered in the prison at Palmyra, where many of the militant Muslim Brotherhood supporters were being held. This massacre which reportedly killed several hundred prisoners, is an indication of the level of hatred that already existed and continues to exist, between the Alawite community and the Muslim Brotherhood. This also set the scene for the events of February 1982, when, following an Islamist uprising in Hama, one of the primary strongholds of the 'Fighting Vanguard', the Syrian government besieged the city and put down the uprising in a brutal battle and siege. The numbers of those killed is

⁷⁸ The constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic that was passed in 2012 guaranteed religious freedom in Article 3 and Article 33 as follows: "*The State shall respect all religions, and ensure the freedom to perform all the rituals that do not prejudice public order; The personal status of religious communities shall be respected and protected.*"

disputed. One thousand Syrian soldiers were killed. Estimates for militants and civilians killed range from 1000,⁷⁹ to a probably hugely exaggerated figure of 40,000.⁸⁰ This event does however remain seared in the consciousness of Syrians, particularly those who supported either wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. Following this defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood, many were imprisoned and executed, and many fled the country. Some of these were to become leading exiles who have consistently urged western governments to overthrow the Syrian Government, both under Hafez al-Assad, and his son, Bashar al-Assad. Though the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood had originally taught a modern interpretation of political Islam, that aimed to respect and promote democratic principles, the Islamic movement's firmly sectarian tone divided the movement and led to a level of violence that further nurtured its radicalisation.⁸¹

Throughout these years, international events, global economic interests, and religious displacements have played a significant role in moulding the political, communal and economic developments in the country. External influences that were destabilising the State of Syria and enhancing sectarian tensions include: the 1967 Six Day War with Israel when the Golan Heights were occupied; the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990); the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon (1982); the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988); the legacy of the Cold War geopolitical ambitions of the 'Super-powers'; the Gulf War (1990-1991), and the Invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁸² It is well known that some of the 'Fighting Vanguard' travelled to join Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan "where their skills and networks were enhanced and their ideology strengthened" (Pierret, 2013, p. 141). Syria had a tense relationship with Iraq, which remained, prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein, a steady provider of funds and arms to Syrian militants. Thus, during the Iran-Iraq war, Syria improved relations with Iran, an alliance that has remained strong and influential.

Russia has also played an important role as an ally with Syria, with major strategic and economic interests. Russia's only naval base on the Mediterranean is at Tartous, and she has access to the oil and gas fields and pipelines. But Russia has also taken a sophisticated approach to Christian-Muslim relations. Russia has not only sought to counter militant Islamism, which has been a growing threat within her own borders, but has linked the Eastern

⁷⁹ Syria. Bloody Challenge to Assad. *Time*. 8 March 1982
<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,921108,00.html> (Accessed: 6 March 2017)

⁸⁰ Syrian Human Rights Committee, 2005

⁸¹ For a study of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, see: (Lefevre, 2013) And for the wider background to the Muslim Brotherhood: (Wickham, 2013).

⁸² The geopolitical ambitions of the global powers in the region go back to the 19th century, with constant competition between the European States and Russia for political and economic influence. Some of this is told in (Fisk, 2006). See also: (Davidson, 2016)

Christian presence and role in Antioch to that of Christianity in Russia and positioned herself as a saviour of the Christian presence in the Middle East.⁸³ This is notably in contrast to the U.S. and European alliance whose policies have favoured the Islamists opposing the Syrian Government. This strategic positioning represents a major re-framing of the political, cultural and religious geopolitics of the region.

2.5 Recent developments in Sunni Islam in Syria.

In 2015, a report, under the co-ordination of Lebanese scholar Sheikh Muhammad Abu Zeid, was produced that sought to “shed light on the role of Sunni Muslim religious discourse in the Syrian crisis ... and how to assess this discourse and turn it into a tool to end violence and build peace”. Produced with support from Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in Germany, the report, entitled ‘*From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*’ was published by the Adyan Foundation in Beirut. The report explores the history of Sunni theological interpretations of *Jihad*; assesses how these have influenced the Jihadist conflict in Syria; and offers a new model of how *Jihad* can be interpreted in a non-violent way. It

“attempts to point the way towards an alternative religious discourse that builds for a post war era, so that religious discourse might become a tool to build, reform and protect, not a toll to provoke and mobilize for war and conflict.....so that religious discourse might be part of the solution and not the problem.”⁸⁴

Given its intention and origin, revealing some of the ideology behind the militant opposition in Syria, the report is worth considering in some depth.

Amongst the examples cited is the influential thinking of Abu Musab al-Suri (b. 1958). Al-Suri is “an Islamic preacher, Mujahid, writer and lecturer.”⁸⁵ Born in Aleppo, he joined the ‘Fighting Vanguard’, and was a follower of the militant thought of Marwan Hadid. He was in the higher military command of the ‘Muslim Brotherhood’ during the conflict in Hama, and was a member of Al-Qaeda. Al-Suri’s reputation was enhanced by the publication of his book *The Global Islamic Resistance Call (Da’wat al-muqawamah al-islamiyyah al-’alamiyyah)* which seeks to provide an intellectual and political basis for bringing together multiple Jihadist factions globally into a unified force.

⁸³ For a report on Russia’s role, see: (Centre for Mediterranean, 2019) *Russia in the Middle East. The Russian Bear in Mind*.

⁸⁴ Back page of the report: (Zeid, 2015) *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*.

⁸⁵ *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*. P.25-27

Al-Suri provides a critique of why Jihadism has not been widely accepted in Syria. He even acknowledges: "It is known that those who are committed to their religion in this nation, as well as its scholars, revival circles and religiously committed individuals do not follow the *Salafi* trend in their majority."⁸⁶ The weaknesses *Jihadis* exhibit that Abu Musab Al-Suri identifies include: a general lack of knowledge; the low educational, behavioural and moral levels manifested by young men who embark on jihad; ignorance at all levels of knowledge, particularly in political, security and scholarly realities; the promotion of exaggeration and extremism as "trademarks" of religiosity; the absence of constructive self-criticism; "the prevalence of 'each Mujahid for his own', " without guidance or constraints; and the inability to build their own project."⁸⁷ These characteristics have been frequently alluded to in conversations that I have had with Syrian politicians from different parties, and with Syrian soldiers, who show no fear of the jihadists they are fighting, for many of these reasons.

The Adyan Foundation notes the writings of Dr. Muhammad Al-Habash. (b. 1962). Married to the granddaughter of renowned Sufi Scholar and former Grand Mufti, Dr. Kuftaru, Dr. Habash was deeply influenced by Sufi thinking (Pierret, 2013, p. 130). He has degrees from Damascus, Beirut, and Khartoum Universities, and is author of more than 50 books in the fields of Islamic culture and dialogue of civilizations. He recognises pluralism as a key feature of Islamic life, and his argument "for an Islamic rejection of what he calls the 'monopoly of salvation'" caused considerable debate in Syria (P. Heck, 2004, p. 185). In 2003, he was elected as an independent member of the Syrian Parliament, and was a supporter of the Syrian Government. But following his severe criticism of the Syrian Government after 2011, and his support of the demonstrations, he left Syria in 2012, and is currently associate professor of religious studies at Abu Dhabi University and an adviser to the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue.

Habash's contribution is his understanding of the origins of extremism and ISIS. He does not accept the view that it is purely an externally created phenomenon. But rather he writes that "ISIS is the last step in a chain of inevitably ascending dialectics emanating from the acts of oppression that the people suffered under their tyrannical regimes, and mixed with the eager wishes longing for a just world which we portrayed in our desperate religious discourse under the title of the caliphate."⁸⁸ Al-Habash acknowledges that the characteristic of Syrian Islam is

⁸⁶ Abdul-Hakim, Omar (Abu Musab Al-Suri), *Da'wat Al-Muqawama Al-Islamiyyah Al-'Alamiyyah*. P.610-611 Cited in *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*. P.37

⁸⁷ *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*. P.39

⁸⁸ Quoted in: *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*. Pp 46-49

not one naturally inclined to extremism. In a speech at the UPF Interfaith Consultation on the Crisis in Syria, held in Amman, Jordan from 11-13 October, 2013, and published in the journal, *Dialogue and Alliance*, Vol 27, No 2, 2013, he states:

Almost all Syrians are moderates and centrists; they do not support the war and destruction but instead seek reconciliation and coexistence. I would say that the majority in Syria is a silent majority that has nothing to do with this war and is not a party in this conflict.

The extremists of the regime and the opposition pose a real threat to the life of all Syrians. What is needed is a unified position to outlaw violence in all its forms and to invite everyone to lay down their arms and engage in the dialogue of reason and logic....

We call for the departure of all strangers who entered Syria to participate in the war, especially when they increased the pains and suffering of the people; the people have tasted the greatest scourge and harm from the actions of these groups.⁸⁹

The Adyan Foundation report suggests that the most important point to note from Dr. Habash's contributions is his admittance "that religious discourse is responsible for today's violent reality, without exempting the other factors of their responsibilities," and that "such an admission calls for a serious and radical revision of the Islamic religious discourse, as well as its methods, connotations, and the messages it contains, if we are to restore this discourse to the authentic values of Islam, including freedom, justice, dignity and humanity."⁹⁰

After surveying some key thinkers in Sunni Syrian Islamic thought, the report concludes that, notwithstanding the generally moderate nature of Levantine Islam, Jihadi culture and the exclusive culture found in the most extreme fatwas against non-Muslims and "dissenting Muslims", is "a culture that is inherent in the Syrian awareness." One of the consequences of this, the report concludes, is the rivalry that will exist as a result of any revolution, evidenced from the 1980s onwards, and especially during the Syrian conflict.

These findings admit the presence of radicalised thinking embedded within Syrian society since the end of the Ottoman Empire, a fact alluded to and feared by a number of Christians and Muslims with whom I have spoken in Syria. Those involved in creating the report admit that Jihadi culture represents a threat to Syrian youth and to the plural culture of Syrian society; that an emphasis on a violent interpretation of *Jihad* has "marred the concept of *Jihad* and the image of Islam, not to mention as well as spilling innocent blood and destroying the country's

⁸⁹ <http://www.upf.org/resources/speeches-and-articles/5718-ma-al-habash-the-crisis-in-syria>

⁹⁰ *From the heart of the Syrian crisis*. p.49

infrastructure". They therefore urge that the concept of *Jihad* follows the lines of "intellectual, jurisprudential and doctrinal approaches" that do not advocate violence and exclusion.⁹¹

These conclusions show that the fear expressed by both Christian and Muslim Syrians of Islamic fundamentalism and extremism as practised by Islamist forces in the country is understandable and justifiable. As Thomas Pierret writes: "Despite the very sensitive character of such a claim in Ba'athist Syria, political reformists do not hide the fact that they are indebted to the Muslim Brothers" (Pierret, 2013, p. 138). That is why there remains profound suspicion amongst many members of religious minorities - and Sunnis - who value and wish to preserve the plurality and diversity of Syrian society, of those who have sympathies or associations with the Muslim Brotherhood.

2.6 Interpreting *Jihad*.

In trying to address this concern the Adyan Foundation report proposes an alternative understanding of *Jihad*, as suggested by by Jawdat Sa'id (b.1931). On the basis that "it goes without saying that Syria enjoys a confessional, sectarian, nationalistic and intellectual diversity, which renders it impossible that its environment is one solely of a violent Jihadi religious environment, as some might think," Jawdat Sa'id seeks to eliminate violence from Islamic communities. In fact, he has been called "the Gandhi of the Arab world".⁹²

Jawdat Sa'id is a Syrian intellectual born in the Syrian Golan.⁹³ He completed his secondary education in Egypt, where he was influenced by the Pakistani thinker, Muhammad Iqbal, and the Algerian thinker, Malik Bennabi. His works are dedicated to the theme of non-violence. Having witnessed the violence in both Egypt and Syria in the 1950s and 1960s, he writes:

The disease of violence is not restricted to the youth only, although they are the ones more susceptible to carry it. The entire world is inflicted with this germ: the left-wing and right-wing alike, and even the hidden corners of Sufism harbour the genes that carry these cultural legacies ...we carry the germ of the failed son of Adam whose method for solving the problem is embodied in his saying to his fellow brother: 'I shall kill you'.⁹⁴

⁹¹ *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*. pp 50-52

⁹² *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*. p.55

⁹³ For further comment on Jawdat Sa'id, see: Pierret, T. (2013) *Religion and State in Syria*. 133-134

⁹⁴ Sa'id, Jawdat, (1993) *Math'hab Ibn Adam Al-Awwal: Mushkilat A-'Unf Fil 'Ilm Al-Islamiy*, Dar Al-Fikr. 5th edition, Damascus. P.236 Quoted in *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*. pp56-57

Jawdat Sa'id affirmed that violence and regime change have only exacerbated problems in society, and "forced the Islamic world into vicious circles of violence,"⁹⁵ and advocated that the Muslim world should learn from European civilisation that at least sought to establish legal and political systems that respected the rights and equality of all. He believes that good governance cannot be achieved under compulsion. Rather, it is achieved by following a peaceful example. Non-violence, he maintains, is a means of achieving change. He outlines the characteristics of non-violence as:

1. Not getting involved in acts of killing.
2. Not imposing any opinion by force.
3. Willingly bearing pain for the said principles and not inflicting pain for them.
4. Dedicating oneself to the cause and directing and guiding others in that cause.
5. Making people understand what holding on to principles means.

He then identifies the traits that characterize the methodology of non-violence as:

1. Creating a favourable atmosphere for understanding, thinking and exchanging advice.
2. Individuals making the effort to be an example in this respect.
3. Ensuring that this effort entails good, so that it is reflected on everyone.
4. Ensuring clarity, honesty, and transparency and a strong foundation.
5. Eliminating fear from imprisonment, ordeals and misery
6. Stripping one's opponents of the arguments and pretexts they use to persecute peacemakers.
7. Identifying righteous models to join the ranks of the just.
8. Awakening the spirit of *Ijtihad* and renewal, and avoiding conventional imitation and dependency.⁹⁶

Jawdat Sa'id then proceeds to provide textual proofs for his proposal from the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*, and rational proofs from the evidence of history. From these he suggests that misinterpretation of the real meaning of *Jihad* has "infected the Muslim mind" and caused considerable harm to Islam.⁹⁷ What is needed is a change in the culture of Islam to one "that rejects violence and adopts positive, peaceful methods for change." He continues: "Our situation will not change unless we change our own conditions....thus, brotherhood, cooperation and happiness will take the place of pain, blood and war."⁹⁸

A difficulty with this positive interpretation is that this is not how *jihad* has been understood by many of the militant groups who have sought to change the status quo in Syria, or how it

⁹⁵ *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*. p.57

⁹⁶ *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis* p.60 Summarised from: Sa'id ,Jawdat (1993) *Math'hab Ibn Adam Al-Awwal: Mushkilat A-'Unf Fil 'Ilm Al-Islamiy*, Dar Al-Fikr. 5th edition, Damascus.pp 93-94

⁹⁷ *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*. p.64

⁹⁸ Sa'id ,Jawdat (1993) *Math'hab Ibn Adam Al-Awwal: Mushkilat A-'Unf Fil 'Ilm Al-Islamiy*, Dar Al-Fikr. 5th edition, Damascus.p.95. Quoted in *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*. p.64

has been experienced by non-Muslim communities in Syria during or before the conflict. Although the term literally means 'struggling' or 'striving' for good over evil, which can be both a spiritual and a physical struggle, *Jihad* has come to be associated, both in the west and in the east with "aggression and struggle for a religious cause" (Siddiqui, 2007, p. 85). The Qur'an uses the term in a variety of meanings. They range from warfare (Q 4:90; 25:52; 9:41) to contemplative spiritual struggle (Q 22:78; 29:6)(Esack, 1997, pp. 106-107). For many Muslims, *Jihad* has been understood as a spiritual battle between right and wrong lived out in one's daily life. This is sometimes called the 'greater' *jihad* - the struggle of a believer to fulfil his or her religious duties. Whereas the *jihad* of the Sword – the physical struggle against the enemies of Islam, was reportedly spoken of by Mohammad as the 'lesser' *jihad*. It is fair to suggest that the majority of Muslims in Syria prefer the moderate Islam that coexists alongside other communities. Nevertheless, it is the latter understanding of *jihad* that has taken more prominence in the ideology of *Wahhabism* and the militant *Salafist* tendency. And this has caused real fear amongst many Syrians about the influence of militant interpretations of *Jihad*.

Siddiqui writes: "Mostly, the Qur'an places emphasis on peace and avoidance of any transgression, 'If your enemy inclines towards peace, then you also incline towards peace and trust in God (Q8:61). However, the *Qur'an* also contains verses which urge the believer to kill the enemies of Islam in self-defence"(Siddiqui, 2007, p. 85) (eg Q 2: 191-193; 9:5). We cannot avoid some of the harsh and exclusivist *Suras* in the *Qur'an*. Indeed, there are over a hundred verses that speak of war with non-believers, and these have often been emphasised by Islamist scholars who have wanted to return to a 'purist' understanding of the *Qur'an*. It is therefore clear that how scholars interpret scripture today is one of the great contemporary challenges for Islam and communal stability. And whilst many in Syria say that the conflict is not a religious or a sectarian one, there is no doubt that religious and sectarian identities, and a more aggressive interpretation of *Jihad* adopted by militant groups fighting against the Syrian Government, have played a major role in moulding inter-communal attitudes.

The Adyan foundation report goes on to outline the religious, political, social and economic challenges that will face Syria at the end of the war. These include the cost of reconstruction, the scale of humanitarian need including provision for orphans and widows, the treating of the injured, and the healing of sectarian tensions, and asserts that "the Jihadists are unable to confront any of the aforementioned challenges."⁹⁹ The report therefore proposes that there should be a serious and far-reaching religious discourse, that shifts from one in which religion

⁹⁹ *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*. p.87

is used “to legitimize and sell the culture of violence, war and fighting,” to a discourse that “lays the foundations of a culture of peace and construction.”¹⁰⁰ It concludes that Islam needs to recover its ancient traditions:

..to repay evil with good; to spread the value of doing good; not to hold anyone responsible for a sin they did not commit; to show justice and equity, even with violators; and to be gentle and soft in overcoming crises and adversity.¹⁰¹

I have spent time on this report because it represents a comparatively recent attempt (2015) to address some of the purportedly religious principles held by members of the militant opposition in the Syrian conflict. It is an attempt to recover what many regard as the true nature of Syrian Islam, that has been for the most part, notwithstanding elements of governance previously discussed, an Islam of tolerance, respect, and coexistence. Evidence and experience from within areas controlled by those groups help discern whether or not those principles have prevailed.

2.7 Preserving pluralism

The preference for a pluralistic understanding in Syrian society is well illustrated by the current Grand Mufti Dr. Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, who succeeded Dr. Ahmed Kuftaro as Grand Mufti in 2005. Dr. Hassoun is Sunni by identity and comes from Aleppo. He has been deeply influenced by Sufi philosophy, and is a passionate advocate for inter-religious dialogue and understanding, and the protection of religious minorities within Syria. On January 15, 2008, he spoke to the European Parliament in Germany, saying: "I am Sunni in practice, Shiite in allegiance. My roots are Salafi, and my purity is Sufi." Dr. Hassoun very much encourages the preservation of safe religious space for all communities.

It has been a privilege to meet with Dr. Hassoun on many occasions. He always speaks of the importance of the Christian presence as an integral part of the fabric and make-up of Syrian society. In fact, his statements on inter-religious matters have drawn much criticism from those who hold to a stricter interpretation of Islam. During a meeting in September 2016, he said:

If the Prophet asked me to abandon Jesus, I wouldn't have followed Mohammad. God is in my heart. People are more important than any Temple. Religion should never be a cover for politics. All human beings are brothers. We are all related in God. If there is a God, we will be asked one question on the day of judgement: 'Did you love

¹⁰⁰ *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis.* p.87

¹⁰¹ *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis.* p.91

another?’ So religion must be the bridge that connects us. Let us meet in mosques and churches and synagogues. Let’s give our children flowers of love, not seeds of hatred, or they will ask us: ‘Why didn’t you teach us how to love so that our flowers will be your perfume?’

In 2012, Dr. Hassoun’s son was assassinated. At his son’s funeral, and on national television he forgave his son’s killers and invited them to put down their weapons and come and talk. The reply he received was that they would kill him. He said when reflecting on this: “I am Abel, not Cain. I won’t carry weapons. If they want to kill me. So be it.”¹⁰² Dr. Hassoun is one of the most significant figures in Syrian Islam. He regularly engages with Christian leaders and is loved and respected by many. He is also hated by Islamists for his pluralist views and the fact that, like all Grand Muftis in the Arab world, he is an appointee of the Government.¹⁰³

In November 2017 a significant practical initiative to provide frameworks for teaching Islam that challenge ‘*takfiri*’ ideology was implemented by the Syrian Ministry of Awqaf, when it produced three volumes for use in every mosque in.¹⁰⁴ Rooted in the principle that “the pulpit is a public site that has inviolability, rules and origins,” the Awqaf produced these volumes in the hope that the mosques may be “a beacon of science, ethics, values, education, and an oasis of tranquillity”, and the Friday sermon a means of “scientific, moral, social and economic renaissance.”¹⁰⁵ This development will be seen by some as an authoritarian means of controlling the mosques, and it is true that the Introduction includes an intention to “strengthen the belonging to the homeland”.¹⁰⁶ But this is a constructive response to the challenge of Islamist ideology, and an attempt to moderate the teaching of preachers who have increasingly been educated in the Wahhabi traditions in recent years.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Quoted during a meeting with Dr. Hassoun in Damascus in September 2016.

¹⁰³ The Grand Mufti has been accused of “threatening to send suicide bombers to the West”. This follows a mistranslated speech that he gave in Arabic in 2011. Dr. Hassoun clarified his position in Der Spiegel magazine in November 2011. He said: “I didn’t threaten to send suicide bombers. I merely described a scenario in which it could easily emerge from the situation, and I warned against what could happen. Sentences were taken out of context and given a different colouring.”

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-syrian-grand-mufti-assad-could-step-down-after-free-elections-a-796363-2.html>

The following link contains the transcript of an interview with Dr. Hassoun, by Eva Bartlett on 2 October, 2018: <https://www.mintpressnews.com/interview-grand-mufti-ahmad-badr-al-din-hassoun-syria/252590/> In it, Dr. Hassoun addresses criticisms made in the international media.

¹⁰⁴ See Appendix 3 for a detailed description.

¹⁰⁵ Introduction to “*The General Approach of the Friday Sermons of the Syrian Arab Republic.*” Ministry of Awqaf. 6

¹⁰⁶ Introduction. *The General Approach..* p.7

¹⁰⁷ For a more detailed analysis of these documents, see Appendix 3.

Throughout the Arab world, the Ministries of Religious Endowments (*Awqaf*) are government ministries responsible for the endowments and affairs of the mosques. This includes a degree of State control over Muslim religious affairs, and Syria is not unique in this. Nevertheless, in the 1960s, the Syrian government had “displayed a striking lack of interest in the development of the religious bureaucracy”, thus creating a situation of indirect rule where there was no “centre”, and “no ‘peripheral ulama’ either, but only clerical factions with varying degrees of proximity to the State” (Pierret, 2013, pp. 19-20). In 2009, Pierret wrote: “The Syrian regime never possessed sufficient means and religious legitimacy to set up the institutional tools that would have enabled it to produce a Sunni clergy that was sympathetic to the Ba’th Party’s ideological orientation” (Pierret, 2009, p. 82). And so its “preferred strategy for managing the Sunni elite has been the co-optation of personalities who have a genuine social base” (Pierret, 2009, p. 74). This changed in 2008 in Syria, with an emphasis on institution building, reducing the influence of the religious elite and of Islamic tendencies in social sectors. In order to preserve secularism, “prayer rooms in shopping-malls were closed, the myriad religious symbols displayed on cars were prohibited in order to curb the expression of sectarian identities.....wearing of the *niqab* was banned in universities....and women-only parks were reopened to men.” (Pierret, 2013, pp. 214-215). This - and the tensions between the State and the *Ulama* that accompanied it - was the situation when the ‘Arab Spring’ erupted in 2010.

There is no doubt that the Ministry of *Awqaf*, like its’ sister ministries in the Arab world, wields significant control on religious matters. And the level of control is likely to continue in a post-conflict situation that has seen so much sectarian violence. Speaking in April 2018, the Syrian Minister of Religious Affairs said: “Everywhere we work in partnership with mosques and churches to put an end to extremism. In mosques, we want to explore the Qur’an in a modern way. We are learning how to fight terrorism with moderate Islam. Syria is a place where moderate Islam lives. The *takfiris* are being defeated because the religious culture here is not one of extremism, but is rooted in moderate Islam.”¹⁰⁸

However the Ministry’s publications or the Ministry itself may be viewed, the battle against radicalised Islam is one that we all share, and the desire to challenge it is one that deserves encouragement. In these publications, the Syrian Government is seeking, on its own terms - just as the Islamists seek to do on theirs - to establish new discourses in which the plurality of Islam can be included whilst radicalised ideological discourses are excluded. The structures in

¹⁰⁸ Meeting with Minister of *Awqaf*, Sheikh Dr. Mohammed Abdul Sattar Al-Sayyed, Damascus. 15 April 2018.

place to do this in Syria are not ours to change, but as people of faith facing similar doctrinal and religious challenges, we can learn from the context, and perhaps offer to bring academic and practical expertise to the process.

For explanations of further expressions of Islam in Syria, see Appendix 2.

2.8 Conclusion

That religious identity has played a role within the conflict in Syria cannot be denied. If we were to ignore the complex mosaic of religious identities in Syria in reflecting upon the conflict, we would be understating the capacity for religious identity to shape society, particularly one so diverse as Syria. However, by the same token, if we overstate the role of religion in the conflict, we obscure the multiple social, political, economic, environmental and historic causal dynamics, both internal and external, that have shaped the path of the conflict since its inception.¹⁰⁹

This chapter has outlined the complex diversity of the ‘Muslim mosaic’ in Syria, and acknowledged and examined the long-standing presence and influence of *salafi* and *wahhabi* influences in some sectors of the Muslim community in Syria. The development of political Islam in recent decades has had a huge impact on Syria’s civil, religious and political landscape. Recent theological reflection within *Sunni* Islam as illustrated by the Abu Zeid study, has sought to address those elements of *salafi* and *wahhabi* interpretation that have led to violence.

The publications produced by the Syrian Ministry of Awqaf (See Appendix 3), also show that an attempt is being made by the Syrian Government, within a complex Islamic landscape, to create a new Islamic discourse for the future on their own terms, that can include plurality in Islam whilst excluding radicalised religious ideological discourse.

Given the sectarian expression of some of the violence that Syria has experienced, and the fact that the religiously plural society within Syria has nevertheless survived, it is to be hoped that such reflection can re-frame the ‘space’ within *sunni* thought in which the principles of coexistence, tolerance and mutual respect in a broad religious landscape can be re-established.

¹⁰⁹ See: Lakitsch, M. (2018) Islam in Syria. Spotting the various dimensions of Religion in Conflict. https://www.academia.edu/37188821/Islam_in_the_Syrian_War_Spotting_the_Various_Dimensions_of_Religion_in_Conflict?auto=download&campaign=weekly_digest. (Accessed: 17 August 2018) www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/2018,9,236;doi:10.3390/re19080236

Study on how Islam responds to modern society and pluralism is essential to the future stability of intra-Islamic and inter-religious dynamics.

Amongst the issues to be examined further is the relationship between Islam and modern Statehood and how it might in the future hold religious and cultural diversity in a dialogical relationship without domination. With its greater flexibility in theological discourse, Christianity is more able to hold complexity and diversity in positive tension, and this is a major contribution eastern Christianity can make to the plural communities of the modern Arab States with a Muslim majority.

Notwithstanding the political complexities and multiple layers that exist within Syrian society, it can clearly be suggested that Syria's social and religious make-up continues to provide the 'architecture' for sustaining religious and social multiplicity and plurality. However, the stability and protection of this multiplicity can only be ensured if all communities continue to be protected within the political framework of society, a framework that, secure within a secular constitution, will need to be re-imagined and re-structured to accommodate the religious and social demographic changes in post-conflict Syria.

Before we examine contemporary Christian-Muslim relations in Syria, it will be informative to consider the cultural contexts, hierarchical structures, leadership roles and the extent to which communal identities influence those relations.

Chapter 3

Cultural contexts that influence Christian-Muslim relations

3.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the status of the Christian presence within the Arab world, and how 'being Christian' is 'modelled' in a Muslim-majority society. It examines the role that religious leadership has played in preserving the stability of this complex cultural and religious landscape of sometimes competing identities. Finally, the chapter considers the extent to which 'sectarianism' plays a role in Syrian society.

Christians are involved at all levels of Middle Eastern society (McCallum, 2012a, p. 3). This brings benefits, risks and vulnerability when State policies or actions diverge from religious principles. Throughout the region, when States have failed to deliver economic development, political participation, or basic security, religious leaders have often been able to exercise a significant political role within their society (McCallum, 2007, p. 923), (James A Reilly, 2019, p. 180). Following both Arab tradition and through the Ottoman '*millet*' system, the heads of the Churches continue to possess and wield considerable spiritual and temporal authority, both within and on behalf of their own communities, and are able to access and influence the political leadership of nations. This can have both positive and negative implications, especially as regards democratic processes both within the Church and their constituents' political engagement beyond it.

However, being able to exercise influence within authoritarian political systems is seen as an advantage for Christian communities, for it can offer security and status to faith minorities. This often encourages Christian leaders to engage with authoritarian States (McCallum, 2012b, p. 110). It does not imply uncritical support by Christian leaders for all the policies of particular governments. Rather, it enables Christian communities to be a force for good and a balance within society. There can also be benefits for both State and religious institutions in their support of each other, especially when alternative forces threaten the social, religious, political and economic stability of a nation, as could be argued, has been the case in Syria. In some contexts, through strategies of engagement and disengagement, the Church has been a real

force for change in oppressive contexts, as was the case in South America, Palestine, South Africa.¹¹⁰

By contrast, Islam does not have a hierarchical structure in the way that Christianity does. Gathered around the *umma* – the community of Muslims – and without influential institutions such as the Vatican or the Anglican Communion, Muslims “align themselves with one of the main legal schools and follow the teachings of particular individuals”. The hierarchical system created in Islam, and practised by Muslim countries throughout the region is for the State to appoint a *Grand Mufti*, and several *mufti* of cities “to supervise the quality of the *imams* (mosque leaders) under them”. Well aware that Islam can be used as a tool for mobilising populations, governments often implement Islamisation policies, and fund religious establishments, to counteract such a possibility (McCallum, 2012b, p. 111).

At times, the diversity of the Christian Churches in the Middle East has been a burden for Christians in the region, and historical doctrinal splits have been difficult to heal. However, in recent years, there have been significant moves towards ecumenical understanding, and these have increased, especially in Syria during the years of conflict. The main issues facing Christians in the Middle East are emigration, and political, economic and security concerns. These are not unique to Christians, but in Syria since the start of the conflict in 2011, it is estimated that over a half of the Christian population has emigrated. In parts of Syria where Christians have lived since the earliest days of the Church, the very presence of Christians is threatened. Yet, the indigenous Church remains deeply relevant within Syria, and the Church continues to have a future. Given the demographic changes in the country because of the war, the future may look different, but the presence and influence of the Church will continue to play a significant role in Syrian society.

3.2 Exploring the status of the Christian presence in the Arab world.

Fiona McCallum identifies several factors that explain the continued relevance of the Churches in the region. The Churches “provide and maintain the identity of the specific group, and are often the only organisations which include all members of the community.” The “patriarchal system of governance...endorses church involvement in political and societal matters,

¹¹⁰ For an excellent study of how Palestinian Christian liberation theologies have challenged the hegemony of both Jewish and Christian Zionism, see: (Kuruvilla, 2013)

especially through the church figurehead, the patriarch.” Additionally, “their acceptance of a close relationship between Islam and the state has also had a cultural impact on the Christian communities”. By accepting the role of the Islamic State, they become *dhimmi* (covenanted people) and so are allowed freedom of worship, protection by the State, and autonomy in religious matters. Modern Church-State relations in the Middle East are affected both by government policies, and by the security that they are afforded. Thus, the rise of Islamist movements which threaten the security of minority groups in the region means that Christians will be inclined to support the governments that secure their protection (McCallum, 2012b, pp. 115-116) (Samir Khalil Samir, 1998). Although Syria’s Ba’ath Government operates a system of secular nationalism which “promotes loyalty to the State over any other identity”, it allows ‘freedom of personal status’ as far as religious identity is concerned, and a kind of reinterpretation of the *millet* system is in operation.¹¹¹ Christian communities are run with a degree of autonomy as regards Church and social matters, and the Church leaders have regular access to State officials and branches of the Government. State and religious leaders from the different faith communities (Christian and Muslim), including the President, will often gather to celebrate festive occasions together (McCallum, 2012b, p. 121).¹¹²

Speaking of Christian political participation in the region, it is important to recognise that most of the issues affecting Christians affect everyone regardless of religious or ethnic identity. Arab States have struggled, since their independence, to address the multiple challenges facing the region. Issues of socio-economic inequality, poverty, unemployment, lack of investment in education, health and social services, and corruption, all contribute to the challenges faced by citizens of those countries (McCallum, 2012a, p. 6). These challenges have been compounded by political and religious rivalry, war, and external military and economic intervention, and further exacerbated by the population explosion in the region. Moreover, it is estimated that 60% of the Arab population are under the age of twenty-five.

McCallum identifies three models of Christian political participation in the Arab world: ‘Individual participation’; the concept of ‘loyal citizens’; and Institutionalising identity through a system of ‘quotas’ (McCallum, 2012a, pp. 8-15). Individual participation expresses how Christians have been deeply involved in Arab political life in the Levant since prior to the creation of nation States. For example, in Syria, a Greek Orthodox schoolteacher, Michel Aflaq,

¹¹¹ Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic. 2012. Article 3.

¹¹² For more detailed analysis see: (McCallum, 2007) (McCallum, 2008) (McCallum, 2010)

was a co-founder, with a Sunni colleague, Salah al-Din al-Bitar of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party. The Ba'ath Party sought an inclusive vision of Arab nationalism, maintaining that cultural unity was more important than "religious, sectarian, tribal, racial and regional factionalism" (Dam, 2013, p. 15). It was built on the principles of "political participation, economic development, Arab unity, and the liberation of Palestine", but unfortunately in time became "associated with authoritarianism, corruption, wealth inequality, regional rivalries and military failures" (McCallum, 2012a, p. 9). This contributed to the rise of political Islam and the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country, with devastating consequences. Nevertheless, Christian participation within the national institutions, in Parliament and in the Cabinet remains, even if it is impossible for a Christian to reach the office of President. It is likely in the Syrian case, that the size of the Christian community in Syria is a strong incentive to ensure their participation. Notably in 2017, the Syrian Parliament elected a Christian, Hammoudeh Sabbagh to the role of Speaker.

A second approach sees Christians as 'loyal citizens'. Evident where both secular and Muslim political and legal systems are in place, Christians are allowed participation on the basis that they are 'loyal' to the country. In reality, there may be a fairly low level of representation, and not on equal terms. Egypt is an example of this approach. For Christians, this "does not appear to deliver the conditions required for their full and equal political participation" (McCallum, 2012a, p. 12).

The third approach institutionalises the ethnic and religious distinctions within the political system, by allowing political participation using quotas according to the make-up of the country. This system seeks to "ensure the representation of groups within society that would otherwise be marginalised "either by their low numbers or by their society's traditions (McCallum, 2012a, p. 13). Such a system operates in Jordan, Iraq and the Palestinian Territories.

A recent study explores the question of Christian citizenship in Muslim-majority States. Published in 2017, *'Christian Citizenship in the Middle East. Divided Allegiance or Dual Belonging?'* considers options facing the Christian communities in the face of conflict, oppression and violence (M. Girma, Romocea, C., 2017). Only one of the contributors, Issa Diab, lives in the Middle East, in Lebanon, and entitles his chapter, *'A Place to Call Home.*

Middle Eastern Christian Experience on the Intersection of Two Allegiances.¹¹³ Diab praises the positive contributions made by Christians in the formation of Arab society, and in the 'renaissance' of Arab culture that took place in the Levant and in Europe. He suggests this took place in three stages. The first is the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries when Christians from the Levant studied in Europe, and established the Maronite School in Rome, which in turn "built a historic and cultural bridge of cooperation between Europe and the Levant" (Diab, 2017, p. 95). The second in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the establishment of Christian Institutions in the Levant, and the translation of the Bible into Arabic, which "caused a spiritual revival in Middle Eastern Christianity" (Diab, 2017, p. 97). Finally, the end of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century saw the emergence of Christian thinkers who "played a historical role in the revival of Arab heritage and literature" (Diab, 2017, p. 98). Additionally, Diab observes that Arab Christians played an influential role throughout the twentieth century in Arab Nationalist movements, notably in Palestine, Iraq and Syria. He concludes that the importance of Christianity in relation to Islam lies not in numbers, but "in the amount of Christian authenticity lived by Christians" (Diab, 2017, p. 101), a sentiment expressed by many Christian leaders in the current climate.

'Christian Citizenship in the Middle East' offers a helpful biblical analysis on how Christians existed as a minority in the early Church, and suggests a contrast between Greek and Babylonian models of citizenship that have influenced the societies in which we live. Looking at the author of Daniel, in the Old Testament, Girma suggests that Daniel offers a model of 'constructive disruption' within a society in which his people were persecuted. Whilst Paul in the New Testament presents a model of 'internal transformation', in which as citizens of the Kingdom of God, we are 'in the world, but not of the world'. Girma proposes that as Christians we are called to live in a state of 'critical engagement' with the world in which we live (M. Girma, 2017, pp. 23-41), a proposition with which few Christians would disagree.

In another chapter in the book, and speaking from a Protestant perspective, Najib Awad, a Syrian Christian expatriate who lives in the United States, offers a searing critique of 'the fallen-ness of ecclesial prelates' in the region generally and in Syria particularly, and a pessimistic outlook on the future of the Church in the region, which he partly blames on the indigenous Christian leadership. He makes no secret of his bitter opposition to the Syrian

¹¹³ *Christian Citizenship in the Middle East*. P 83-102

government, and his resentment of the Christian leaders for their 'support at all costs of the ruling, tyrannical and corrupted regime' (Najib George Awad, 2017).

Christian leaders in the region have indeed been criticised for supporting authoritarian leaderships, and have been perceived to do so to protect the interests of the communities under their charge, and to ensure the survival of a secular, rather than sectarian basis to their constitutions.¹¹⁴ However, evidence suggests that given the extent of the suffering that their people have experienced in Syria, the Christian leaders who have stayed in the country, and who have taken a stand against militant Islamists have earned much respect amongst many of their people. Nor have the Christian leaders been silent in the face of concerns about some of the policies and actions of their Government. Christian leaders often meet with Government leaders, including the President, and regularly raise matters of concern with them. Revd Harout Selimian, the President of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Syria says: "We support the legitimate government, and the secular constitution, but we are also a critical voice. We are the 'ph' balance in Syrian society."¹¹⁵ In this sense, being loyal citizens has enabled Christian leaders to be a bridge between the people and the authorities at a time when Christian communities have desperately needed pastoral care and physical security, and this position strengthens their capacity to play a part in reforming the system.

I have given some attention to this book, *'Christian Citizenship in the Middle East'*, because it has been read and promoted in ecclesiastical circles in Britain. It presents a western Protestant perspective, by mostly western contributors, on the issue of Christian citizenship in the Middle East, the achievements of the western Church in the Levant, and its engagement with the Christians of the East. It must however be recognised that there has long existed a western Protestant ecclesial culture and missional hermeneutic that has been suspicious of Eastern Christian culture, and in some expressions has been dismissive of it. Too often the voices of the Eastern Churches have been neglected in the west.

Nor should we forget, or be insensitive to how western churches have at times been perceived to be a threat to the ethos, presence and ministry of the Eastern churches in the region. And

¹¹⁴ For example, on 20 April 2018, the 'Church Times' published an article entitled, 'The Syrian Churches are in captivity to Assad'. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/20-april/comment/opinion/the-syrian-churches-are-in-captivity-to-assad>. I was in Syria at the time and discussed it with several Church leaders who were deeply offended by the accusation, and dismissed it as a complete misrepresentation.

¹¹⁵ Revd Harout Selimian. Speaking at a Conference on Christian-Muslim Relations, at Kanamai in Kenya on 23 May 2018

their influence has at times provoked the accusation from Muslim communities that Christians are shaped by, and support a western political and religious agenda. This perception, though inaccurate from a political perspective, but not entirely unjustified from a structural and theological perspective, presents a real danger to the Christian communities in the region, and is one of which western Christians need to be aware. The Protestant Churches of the east, themselves indigenous to the region, face a constant tension between the theological and spiritual heritages of the east and west, and the difference in structure between the eastern and western churches where western churches tend to be more “congregational and democratic in nature”, whilst eastern church structure tends to be more “hierarchical and autocratic in nature” (Najib Georg Awad, 2009, p. 288). In 2018 and 2019, very intentional moves to enhance and strengthen ecumenical understanding and co-operation have been undertaken through the meetings of the Middle East Council of Churches and heads of Churches in the region.

This is one of the key reasons why western theologians and leaders need to listen carefully to the experience of Eastern Christians of all denominations as regards Christian-Muslim relations.¹¹⁶ Georges Khodr, the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Mount Lebanon, and one of Lebanon’s most respected Church and spiritual leaders argues that Eastern Christians “are better qualified for dialogue with Muslims than Western Christians” (Hirvonen, 2013, p. 67). He cites the long-standing contribution of Eastern Christians to Islamic civilisation, and their knowledge and appreciation of Islam having lived alongside Muslims since the emergence of Islam in the region.

In Syria, Christians are officially treated as indistinct from other members of Syrian society, but in reality, the government ensures that they are represented at all levels of the political sphere. For this reason, like many Muslims who benefit from the secular basis of the Constitution, Christians are fearful of the impact that an alternative Islamist regime might have on their social and religious freedoms. This fear has only been exacerbated by the brutality and extremism that has been displayed by the Islamist factions during the Syrian conflict.

3.3 The role and influence of Leadership in the Middle Eastern context

It is often said that, given traditional models of leadership in the Arab world, western-style 'democracy' is not possible in the Middle Eastern context. These models of leadership are deeply embedded within the leadership of Arab religious communities. So if we are to understand the nature of Christian-Muslim relations in Syria, it is necessary to understand the influence that leadership plays in the engagement of each community with the other, and with the political authorities in their country.¹¹⁷

Leadership within Arab Society has both cultural and religious elements. Whilst Christian models of leadership have a different theological basis to those of Islam, ancient cultural traditions and customs continue to play a major part in determining how Christian communities relate to their society and those in authority. David Grafton writes: "The traditional authority of the Arab Shaykh, as an either benevolent or authoritarian leader, is embedded deep within Arab culture" (Grafton, 2012, p. 19). Many Arab Christians, who emerge from the same culture as their Muslim compatriots, share the same view of authority and leadership. Thus "democratic tendencies within Arab society manifest themselves very differently from Western, and especially American, republican democratic institutions. It is our contention," writes Grafton, "that political society in the Arab Middle East is a reflection of the family, and its leadership is bound up in the cultural reference of the *shaykh*" (Grafton, 2012, p. 20). This has profound implications for the ways in which laity and clergy relate to their leaders, and in which Church leaders relate to those in positions of power in a country.

Since earliest times, family and tribe have played a foremost role in Arab society and identity. This was as much the case when Arabs received the Christian revelation at Pentecost, as it was when Mohammad gifted Islam to the Arab world. In this context, kinship was the "primary social glue" (Watt, 1968, pp. 6-9) that bound extended families, and "in which mutual obligations and responsibilities were held in common" (Sudworth, 2013, p. 191). Since the rise of Islam, despite Christian theological challenges to Arab models of leadership, the latter have often prevailed, especially amongst eastern Christians, whose liturgy has been in Arabic, Syriac or Coptic, and who find their cultural home and identity in the Arab world.

¹¹⁷ For studies on sectarianism and religious leadership in the region, see: (Henley, 2015). And other articles and chapters by Henley.

Notwithstanding the tribal context into which Mohammad was born, Muslims believe that he created a new tribe, which was established by the *hijra*, the migration of Mohammad and his followers from Mecca to Yathrib, (later Medina) in the year 622CE. This represented a new social structure in which all people held “political equality before God”, and in which God “is the only legislator” (Sudworth, 2013, p. 192). As the new Muslim community settled in Medina, divisions arose between the followers of Islam and those of other faiths and who retained tribal beliefs. So it was that distinctions developed between the *dar al-Islam* (the abode of Islam), and the *dar al-kufr* (the abode of unbelief), and the *dar al-harb* (the abode of war). As Griffith notes: “not only did Muslims rule, and their Arabic language become the medium of public discourse, but also the public space, the cityscape, the landscape, and the public institutions all conspired to display the public culture of Islam in its formative period” (S. H. Griffith, 2008, p. 14). Early passages within the Qur’an indicate a respect for plurality, especially for the *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book). As Ayoub writes: “Islam saw itself from the beginning as yet another expression of the Abrahamic faith and obedient submission (*islam*) to God. This faith, moreover, was not limited to Abraham; rather, it was the faith of all the prophets before and after him, including Moses and Jesus” (Ayoub, 2007, p. 18).¹¹⁸

However, the presence and the challenge of other faith communities, already present before Muhammad died, and the tensions they created, led to less accommodating views towards Christians and Jews, and the belief in the superiority and uniqueness of Islam as the final revelation of God to His people (Shah-Kazemi, 2006).¹¹⁹ It should be noted that Islam as it developed, was revealed and formulated in Medina, at a point when Muslims were in the majority, and were more critical and assertive in relation to other communities.¹²⁰ Given that no thought was given to the successor to Muhammad, after his death, the “binding force for the community of believers”, became the “divinely ordered mandate of the Prophet” (as revealed in the *Qur’an*), and the sole authority of God in all matters (Sudworth, 2013, p. 193).

The first few centuries of Islam were rich in philosophical and theological engagement, drawing upon the expertise of Jewish and Christian theologians and philosophers in the fields of interpretation and jurisprudence. This was an age where Qur’anic principles were brought to bear in the fields of science, law, Islamic thought and politics. Alongside this, there

¹¹⁸ See also Q 22:17

¹¹⁹ See also: (Esack, 1997) (Sachedina, 2001) (Askari, 1985)

¹²⁰ For a study of the development of Islamic tradition in relation to other faiths, see: (Friedmann, 2003) (Arnaldez, 1994).

developed a more conservative approach to Islamic thought that followed a strict view of *Shari'a* law as based exclusively on the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna* (the sayings of the Prophet). A literalistic return to this kind of Islamic jurisprudence has been at the heart of some of the Muslim 'reform' movements that have developed in the last century in Egypt, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which in turn have had a profound effect on recent Islamic political developments.¹²¹

In recent decades, scholars have grappled with the interface between Christian and Muslim theological, cultural and religious approaches to authority, tradition, and democracy. Kenneth Cragg sought within Islam and through the concepts of Shi'a martyrdom and Sufi mysticism, the resources to argue against the 'will-to-power' in Islam and the 'possibility of divine restraint' in relation to the other (Sudworth, 2013, p. 198). For Pope Benedict however, Christianity fuses reason and faith, whilst Islam proclaims a God who is absolutely transcendent. Consequently, as Sudworth puts it: "Secular liberalism forces religion into the private realm, yet, paradoxically, becomes incapable of countering the very public challenge of religious violence that an absolutely transcendent God presents. If there is no mediation between the imperative of divine law, rationality has no place and plural conceptions of the good become impossible" (Sudworth, 2013, p. 198). Similarly to Pope Benedict, John Milbank, speaking as an Anglican, states that "through its traditional character of reason", only Christianity can provide the genuine platform for respect for plurality and diversity, a view commonly held by many Christians within Syria (Milbank, 2009, p. 277).¹²²

However, there is also plurality within Islam, and the history of the faith communities within Syria and other parts of the Levant clearly witness to the ability of Islam to reckon with the place of minority communities and plurality within society. Salame argues that the problems of instituting democracy in the Middle East lie not in Islamic tradition but in cultural and historical contexts (Salame, 1994, p. 64),¹²³ a suggestion often acknowledged by Arabs in the region. Similarly, Egyptian sociologist Halim Barakat cites Arab authoritarianism, Zionism and 'western hegemony' as the primary reasons for the lack of democracy in the Middle East, and that authoritarian States have appropriated Islam to justify their positions (Barakat, 1993, p.

¹²¹ For an excellent summary of the contributions of key figures in the 'Islamic Revival' of the early 20th Century, Sayyid Al-Afghani, Muhammed Abduh, Mawdudi, Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb etc; see: (A. Rahnama, 2005).

¹²² See also: (Milbank, 2006)

¹²³ Quoted in (Grafton, 2012, p. 21)

277). So the lack of 'democracy' (itself a 'western' concept of Greek origin) reflects numerous internal cultural, social and religious dynamics and realities, as well as resistance to external political pressures. Barakat agrees that 'Orientalists and Islamists' alike "agree that religion constitutes the most significant force shaping Middle Eastern societies", but criticises the "exclusive emphasis on religious texts and the projected normative order" as providing a "static conception" of Muslim society (Barakat, 1993, p. 119).

Clearly, the significance of political thought in Islam and Christianity, the doctrine of God, the nature of revelation, and the fallibility of humanity, are key areas of debate, as Islam and Christianity consider their relationship within the context of contemporary religious diversity and the rise in political and religious fundamentalism. Equally however, as Grafton argues, "Both Christian and Muslim expressions of political structures, economics, gender relations, and religious authority originate from the primal social conceptualisation and expression of the Arab family system" (Grafton, 2012, p. 22). This under-studied cultural root of socio-political Arab life should, believes Grafton, form the basis of discussion on the role of democracy and leadership in the Arab Middle East.

All Arab cultures operate within hierarchical structures, which are structured in a 'patron-client' system. Through a 'patron' individuals are able to access services, benefits or people in positions of authority – for example the *Shaykh* or the Patriarch. These patriarchal systems, in which 'father' figures wield authority and expect obedience, prevail across the Arab world in educational, religious and political institutions (Grafton, 2012, p. 24).

Hisham Sharabi identifies four features of modern Arab political culture. Firstly, Arabs identify with their family, tribe and religious community. Secondly, these family dynamics are reflected within political (and sometimes religious) society. Thirdly, society functions "in absolutes" as regards these family and political relationships. And fourthly, ceremony, ritual and custom, rather than "spontaneity, creativity and innovation" govern society (Sharabi, 1988, p. 61).¹²⁴ All of these operate within the context of tribal solidarity – the social construct into which Prophet Muhammed was born, and which has deeply influenced the way in which Arab societies and institutions – including non-Muslim institutions - have developed.

¹²⁴ Quoted in: (Grafton, 2012, p. 25)

Just as under the early days of Islamic rule, local autonomies were respected as long as they submitted to Muhammad's authority, so under the Ottomans, the tribal identities were codified. Communities were recognised on the basis of religious confession, and "each community had its own specific communal laws dealing with taxation, marriage and divorce and inheritance" (Grafton, 2012, p. 26). Some, such as the Maronites of Lebanon, or the people of Kuwait, were granted sovereign territories. Others were assimilated into a larger State – the Kurds, Druze, Shi'a, as well as Armenians, Greek and Oriental Orthodox, Chaldean and Assyrian Christians. Given that the concept of nationality did not really emerge in the Arab world until the nineteenth century, the notion of one's family *balad* (Home/place of origin), and one's religious affiliation was deeply rooted and remains so to many Arabs of all faiths. Whilst in western democracy, the concept of equal citizenship within nation States under an elected authority takes prime place, in Arab societies, the modern leader of the nation has become a parallel of the *shaykh*, who wields authority and respect over tribal flocks who are given a new corporate identity under the nation.¹²⁵

3.4 Religious leadership in Lebanon. Religion and politics in the Levant.

Lebanon represents an important regional dynamic in sectarian relations and religious political engagement. Syria and Lebanon possess similar pluralities although they operate within different State structures. Lebanon's Constitution is confessional. Syria's is based on secular ideology. The importance of this difference cannot be overstated. However, the structures and roles of religious leadership within the two countries are similar and therefore deserve reflection.

Henley describes religious leadership in Lebanon as "inherently ambiguous, combining two roles, that of spiritual authority on matters of religious doctrine and behaviour, and that of public spokesmen for broader religious communities" (Henley, 2016b, p. 1).¹²⁶ He goes on to suggest that because religious leaders are selected "by elite institutions, not by popular mandate", they are not representative interlocutors for the people. Despite the fact that they are invested in preserving the security and well-being of their communities, and challenge sectarian rhetoric, Henley argues that their confessional status sustains sectarian identity, and that their involvement in local, national and international politics erodes trust and arouses

¹²⁵ For a detailed study of the *Millet* system, see: (Braude, 2014).

¹²⁶ See also: (Henley, 2016a) '*Between sect and State in Lebanon. Religious leaders at the interface.*'

suspicions. All leaders tread a 'fine line' between varied responsibilities and representative roles. As Henley writes and as previously intimated, Middle Eastern religious leaders are "integrated into, or at least heavily invest in, the modern state order" (Henley, 2016b, p. 15). This provides benefits but also leads to vulnerability and the possibility of compromise - a risk wherever 'Church and State' have a close relationship.

Lebanon was created in 1943 in the aftermath of the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Second World War, partly as a place of protection for the Maronite Christian community, who formed the majority of the population in the Mount Lebanon region. The region had been perceived by colonial occupiers as comprising a collection of divided and insular communities in which religious identity was the primary marker (Henley, 2015; Usama Makdisi, 2000; White, 2011). The independence and role of the Maronite Church in the national political structures sought to ensure that it could never be deemed simply a *dhimmi* community subject to Muslim rule (Henley, 2008, p. 355). The 'National Pact' of 1943 requires that the President is a Maronite Christian, the Prime-Minister is a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of Parliament is a Shi'a Muslim. This political framework seeks to ensure wide communal representation in government but also imposes a sectarian dynamic on the political structures and nature of Lebanese society. It could however be argued that the pact successfully ended a twenty-five year civil war, and has sustained a fragile but economically prosperous peace ever since.

Nevertheless, as far as religious identities are concerned, Henley writes:

The foundational image of confessional representation intentionally and overtly lent the authority of the two religious leaders – patriarch and mufti – to the legitimization of the State. Yet it also created an assumption that they 'represent' Christians and Muslims (Henley, 2015, p. 157).

Henley argues that religious leaders, whether Christian or Muslim, who are appointed by elite institutions, and who hold both religious and political roles, are unable to truly 'represent' their constituents. The geographical boundaries established by the creation of Lebanon also had a serious impact on regional inter-religious dynamics, cutting across long established communal networks, and necessitating a realignment of institutional responsibilities and relations, that weakened the central religious authorities.

Throughout its short history, there have been tensions in Lebanon between the communal wishes and needs of the people, and the policies of religious leaders who have had to consider their wider representational roles. During the Civil War (1975-1990), fierce tensions arose

between the monastic orders who supported militancy and viewed their position as a matter of survival, and the Patriarchal hierarchy of the Maronite Church, who urged moderation and reconciliation (Henley, 2008, p. 357). This tension between the hierarchy and its constituents was illustrated when Pope John Paul II declared that Lebanon was ‘more than a country, it is a message of freedom and an example of pluralism for both East and West’ (John Paul II in *L’Osservatore Romano*, 2 October 1989, cited in Irani, 1994, p.187). Henley notes the following powerful response:

Before his election to the Lebanese presidency, Bashir Gemayel spoke for many Maronites in saying that ‘the Vatican should understand that Christians in Lebanon are not guinea pigs for the Christian-Islamic dialogue in the world’ (Irani, 1988, p. 38).(Henley, 2008, p. 360).

In other words, outsiders should not project onto complex societies with broad sectarian landscapes, dynamics that may not naturally prevail. Henley argues that the ambiguity of religious leadership in combining both spiritual and political roles, whilst holding responsibility for places of worship and education, legal matters of personal status, and employment of clerics, limits their capacity to ‘represent’ ordinary people. Nevertheless, the political establishment internally and internationally believe they do. Henley admits that religious leaders ‘reflect a series of paradoxes that greatly complicate any facile interpretation of their roles’, and that ‘they have not incited sectarian hatred, and may in fact, be well placed to defuse sectarian tensions’ (Henley, 2016b, p. 4). Moreover, even though religious leaders may not have broad popularity, they ‘have a public platform and institutional resources that can leverage a wide audience whether or not they are popular’ (Henley, 2016b, p. 11). Very often, it is their skills in diplomacy that makes them appropriate candidates for their office, and therefore whether or not they truly ‘represent’ all their constituents, they are well placed to be voices for national unity and the common interest.

As previously stated, although the status of faith leaders in Syria and Lebanon is similar, the political context is different. In Syria’s ‘secular’ Constitution, ‘sectarian’ identity is only enshrined through the Personal Status Laws, and the fact that the President must be Muslim. All other offices may be held by a member of any community. Currently, the elected Speaker of Parliament is Christian. Naturally, Christian and Muslim institutional structures of religious authority differ. Nevertheless, the representational role given to religious leaders in the political sphere, rooted in the Ottoman *millet* system which allowed freedom of religious practise and jurisdiction, enables religious leaders to have influence at the political level –

usually seeking (as we shall see in Chapter 4) to establish communal harmony, reconciliation and peaceful resolution to conflict. Hence the role of religious leaders in Syria and in the Levant continues to be of importance and potential for peace-building in a post-conflict context.

The hierarchical structure prevalent within the eastern ecclesial tradition is not one that sits comfortably in the western or Protestant theological or social ethic. There has long been a hermeneutic of suspicion between the western and eastern churches in this respect. Whilst some suspicion remains, indigenous Protestant Christians have been working hard in recent years to overcome it. As noted, the nature of Eastern church leadership is rooted in ancient cultural and social traditions. (For example, customs associated with meetings with Church leaders in the region are reminiscent of meetings with leaders in eastern tribal culture.) It is notable how in many countries in the Middle East, Christian and Muslim leaders are regularly in attendance side by side at national events, a fact highlighted in their media. This has been particularly so in government-held areas of Syria throughout the conflict, in towns and villages nationally. Their symbolic role, whatever the depth of their communal 'representation', is of profound importance in moderating society and ensuring respect for religious plurality. With the recent increase in sectarian violence, States have been noticeably more attentive to their religious leadership and to symbols of religious harmony.

Notwithstanding western suspicion of the eastern ecclesial leadership model, it is interesting how the Arab Protestant Church leadership in the region are also modelling their leadership on that of their eastern ecclesial counterparts. Doing so enhances their role and presence as equals within the religious and political landscape, at a time when religious influence is of vital importance in nurturing peace, understanding, dialogue and reconciliation. In this way, they become active participants in the process of seeking change at a national level. This does not preclude the laity from being active participants within their communities at a local level. It is common for local Christians to joke about how far removed their leaders are from common issues affecting the daily life of their people, but it is equally common to hear the same people speak with pride of their leaders in their representational role at a national level, as they seek to stand up for the common good and the well-being of their communities. Whilst Henley and others may offer some justifiable doubt about the capacity of the religious leadership in the region to truly 'represent' their ordinary constituent, his recognition of the positive national

role that religious leaders can play remains equally valid, and perhaps of especial relevance amidst the heightened political challenges and complexities of the current time.

3.5 Does 'sectarianism' play a role in Syrian society?

It is often said that prior to the Mandate and before the rise of nationalism in the Arab world, ethnic and religious groups were "fairly tolerant in their attitudes towards one another," and a peaceful coexistence prevailed (Dam, 2013, p. 2). This was particularly so in Syria where most communities spoke Arabic. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire had a profound impact on the Muslim world. Its dismemberment "marked the end of a political, social, and religious order that had shaped their patterns of behaviour for 400 years" (Farouk-Alli, 2014, pp. 213-214). Multiple communities existed, and wherever multiple communities exist, there is a natural allegiance to one's own communal grouping. This can create a 'sectarian' dynamic, which, even if most of the time beneath the surface, can erupt for any number of reasons into mistrust, suspicion, conflict, and even violence.¹²⁷

The English Oxford Online Dictionary defines 'sectarianism' as "excessive attachment to a particular sect or party, especially in religion."¹²⁸ The word 'excessive' is key. Everyone is attached to their own family, kind or religion. They may feel strong associations to the place where they live or the country of their birth. Such normal attachment is not 'sectarianism'. Certainly, the multiple communities in Syria each have such an attachment. But when it is perceived that a particular group or identity is marginalised or disadvantaged in some way, then 'sectarian' tendencies can arise, and these tendencies will usually emerge from the party experiencing a sense of marginalisation, whether real or not. This has been the case among sections of the Sunni community in Syria.

The French occupation "sparked the Great Syrian revolt of 1925, which was the first mass movement against colonial rule in the Middle East (Farouk-Alli, 2014, pp. 213-214). White argues that the whole concept of 'minority' only came to have meaning in the years following the First World War. 'Minorities' became identifiable as such he says, "because they were now resident in states which had majorities; whereas, previously, these groups had mostly been living in multinational or, rather, non-national states" (White, 2011, p. 23). John McHugo

¹²⁷ For a recent study of sectarianisation, see: (Hashemi, 2017) '*Sectarianization. Mapping the new politics of the Middle East.*'

¹²⁸ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sectarianism>

suggests that the Mandate period was the era when the spectre of sectarianism was deliberately stoked in order to 'divide and rule'. Such activity has often been practised in Africa, Asia and in the Middle East in order to promote western interests. In a narrower understanding of the causes of sectarianism, McHugo identifies three factors that launched sectarian consciousness in the region: first the Balfour Declaration which sought to establish a 'Jewish home' on Palestinian soil; second the belief that western governments sought to establish a Maronite dominated state in Lebanon to protect Christians at the expense of Muslims; and third, the sense of solidarity among Muslims when mandatory power sometimes excluded them (McHugo, 2015, pp. 175-176).

However whilst communal identity has often been enhanced by external influences, it has always been present. McHugo's analysis underestimates the significance and importance of communal identity during the Ottoman period and how the changes brought about during the *Tanzimat* period in the 19th Century enhanced the status of different communities within Ottoman society. Abdo writes: "The peaks and valleys of sectarian identity in Arab societies have always depended on the social and political context" (Abdo, 2017, p. 61). However, Hashemi and Postel argue that:

Viewing the region through a sectarian prism clouds rather than illuminates the complex realities of the region's politics. The current instability is more accurately seen as rooted in a series of developmental crises stemming from the collapse of State authority (Hashemi, 2017, p. 19).

Meanwhile, the residual influence of the *millet* system continues. The autonomy granted to and retained by different religious and communal groups, whilst on one level liberating communities to observe their own religious and social traditions, also separated them. And the function of religious leaders as bridge-builders between communities and authorities could also separate them. Henley, writing of the Lebanese context, states: "Even as religious leaders generally defuse sectarian tensions, they also function as the keepers of social boundaries between sects. The sectarian personal-status courts and school systems that fall under these leaders' legal remit were initially intended to provide for freedom of religion, but they have ended up severely restricting people's freedom to live outside of a confessional framework" (Henley, 2016b, p. 17). Additionally, in matters of trade, finance, transport, agriculture and industry, the *millet* communities excelled and dominated, thus creating further communal

tensions which in turn influenced the movement of Islamic reform that developed in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries (Issawi, 2014, pp. 159-183).

Sectarianism is difficult to define. Diverse communities that have coexisted for centuries need not be 'sectarian' by nature, but can become so as perceived threats emerge within society. Sahner defines sectarianism as: "the activation of religious identity as one of the main principles of social and political life." Existing in diverse religiously mixed societies that coexist, it is "an instrument of differentiation, powering identity formation in times of peace, though especially in times of conflict with the social and religious 'other'" (Sahner, 2014, p. 83). As has been suggested, with the exception of major periods of unrest, prior to the Mandate period, communities may not have regarded themselves as 'sectarian' in the modern sense, but rather as belonging to different communal groups within society. Older generations throughout the Levant commonly say: "We never used to know or care whether our neighbour was Christian or Muslim." (I have frequently heard the same said by Syrians referring to Syrian society before the current conflict.) Makdisi identifies the explosive colonial encounter between the "Christian" West and the "Islamic" Ottoman Empire as being the point that "profoundly altered the meaning of religion in the multi-confessional society of Mount Lebanon because it emphasised sectarian identity as the only viable marker of political reform and the only authentic basis for political claims", and goes on to contend that "sectarianism as an idea draws meaning only within a nationalist paradigm and hence that it belongs to the modern world" (Usama Makdisi, 2000, pp. 2,13).

So a valid question to ask is: "Where do sub-state identities come from?" (Phillips, 2015, p. 361). Haddad, like Benjamin White, roots sectarianism in the pre-modern era. Taking Iraq as a case study, he believes that the 'myths' of Sunni-Shi'a hostility, that were grounded in history, lay dormant, but were "ever ready to be reawakened and revised to suit the needs of a future crisis" (F. Haddad, 2011, pp. 17-20). Meanwhile, Zubaida argues that "while sectarian divisions have always existed, their present form of politicisation have to be understood in terms of political manoeuvring by state actors and sectarian entrepreneurs" (Zubaida, 2014). Or as Heyberger writes, echoing White and Makdisi: "Far from timeless, sectarianism was a nineteenth Century construct that was part of the process of creating nationalist identities" (Heyberger, 2010). This too is debatable. Given the existence throughout history of multiple communities in the Middle East, the Arabian peninsula and Central Asia, encounters through

trade, movements of population, and competing interests in land and resources, it could equally be argued that sectarian tensions have always been present.

Makdisi places the modern expression of sectarianism in the Middle East in the nineteenth century and in three waves. He writes: “Intercommunal violence between Muslim and Christian Ottomans occurred primarily in the nineteenth century; that between Arabs and Jews occurred mainly in the twentieth century, and that between Sunni and Shi’a is unfolding before our eyes in the twenty-first century.” (Ussama Makdisi, 2017, p. 25). Makdisi then identifies three inter-related factors that contributed to sectarian developments: the rise of ethno-religious nationalism (leading for example to the creation of a Maronite-majority State in Lebanon); the rise of sustained western imperialism; and the Ottoman ‘reformation’ that “changed the logic and definition of empire” (Ussama Makdisi, 2017, p. 27). These are all valid points, but once again, they are open to debate, and to a certain extent depend on how one interprets the term ‘sectarian’.

As far as Syria is concerned, the country’s communal make-up is some of the most diverse in the region. That Syria has been a place of refuge throughout history for different ethnic and religious communities from situations of conflict in the surrounding region has enhanced this fact. This communal diversity has created at times a delicate sectarian balance, but Syrians pride themselves on their historic coexistence, and the religious freedoms that have more or less prevailed within Syrian society. Many have argued that the evolution of the Syrian conflict has served to amplify pre-existing communal differences and grievances (Abdo, McHugo, Pierret, Goldsmith), and the research undertaken here suggests that this is certainly the case. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood, militant groups and western politicians have blamed the rise of ‘sectarianism’ in Syria on political manipulations by the Assad family. However, the extent to which policies prior to the conflict were deliberately ‘sectarian’ rather than simply providing political, social or economic advantage, is a matter of debate. Some take a more pragmatic view that ‘sectarianism’ in Syria existed long before Hafez Al-Assad came to power in 1970. Evidence shows that communal identity was fuelled by all parties following the Mandate partition of Greater Syria.¹²⁹ The French preferred to ‘divide and rule’ and encouraged sect and religious differences (James A Reilly, 2019). Hence, Phillips terms the Syrian conflict not a ‘sectarian’ one, but ‘semi-sectarian’. Dam concludes similarly: “The fact

¹²⁹ I prefer the term ‘communal’ to ‘sectarian’. I believe that the term ‘sectarian’ has been over-played in the Syrian discourse, and that the complex history of the communal dynamics within Syrian society have been under-studied and under-acknowledged.

that sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism were major factors in the struggle for power does not imply that other elements such as socio-economic and ideological factors, were not important too, or could be ignored” (Dam, 2013, p. 136).

I suggest that ‘sectarianism’ is a western analytical framework that has problematised western analysis of a complex multi-layered communal plurality that has coexisted for centuries until recent times. Western narratives have tended to simplify these communal relationships around a narrative of ‘sectarianism’ that is inadequate to express the complex plurality of communal dynamics. It is a self-limiting political framework that has misunderstood the complex communal and religious dynamics of Syrian society. Reacting according to this narrative since the early twentieth century has had disastrous consequences for these dynamics in the region and has helped sectarianism take root, particularly within the Sunni-Shi’a relationship.¹³⁰

Certainly, ethnic ties were used in Syria to monopolise power, but as Dam writes: “In the period after 1970, Syrian foreign policies have as a whole been more consistent and continuous. In the al-Assad era, Syria was able to develop into a major regional power in its own right, no longer subservient to the traditional power rivalries between other Arab countries in the region such as Iraq and Egypt, as had been the case in the past” (Dam, 2013, p. 137).

Syria’s economic independence prior to the conflict had been a source of pride to Syrians. The country was a producer and exporter of oil. It was self-sufficient in the production of food and exported high quality wheat and cotton. The country was also the largest producer and

¹³⁰ This suggestion is corroborated by a 2015 report produced by the RAND corporation for the US Army., entitled: *Sectarianism in the Middle East. Implications for the United States.* https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1600/RR1681/RAND_RR1681.pdf In the summary, the following is stated: “Increasingly policy decisions are being based on the assumptions that the Middle East is riven by a purely dualistic sectarian war between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, that sectarian identity is immutable, and that the underlying sectarian problems in the region are intractable.....Our research shows that the assumptions behind some of these recommendations are often flawed, incomplete and misleading. While sectarian identity is certainly relevant, it is often less relevant than economic, geographic, political and other social identities; in most cases these identities are deeply interwoven.” It continues: “Sectarianism is one of many competing regional identities in the Middle East,” and “the nature of sectarianism differs significantly by country across the Middle East.”

exporter of pharmaceuticals in the region, supplying all its own medicine needs, and producing most of its own clothing. The education and health systems were both of a high standard, and free to Syria's citizens. It is argued however that corruption failed to enable the financial benefits of the economy to reach most ordinary people, and that this contributed to growing dissatisfaction within sections of the population. In addition, as O'Mahony put it: "The Syrian Government introduced neo-liberal economic policies but tried to implement them on the basis of a socialist structure. The two do not mix."¹³¹

A second question is why has it been possible for ethno-sectarian/communal ties to be violently mobilised? Kaufman provides a helpful analysis. He contends that the normal order in any multi-ethnic environment is coexistence, but that plurality involves a permanent threat of violence if communities' interests or well-being are threatened. Kaufman suggests that communal ties only turn to violence if there are "ancient hatreds" between communities, if there is economic competition between communities, and if ethnic communities have been manipulated by elites in order to further their own ambitions. Any of these, combined with the opportunity to create division, and the presence of fear of communal unrest within the population if any particular group is treated with priority, can create tensions that risk social instability (Kaufman, 2001). In the Syrian context, all of these conditions have prevailed. And at times all elites have manipulated them: the Ottomans, The French Mandate, the politicians in the unstable period of the 1950s-1960s, the Muslim Brotherhood; and the Ba'ath Party – all have "publicised sub-state ties for short-term political gain" (Phillips, 2015, pp. 362-363). Pinto for example cites the promotion of the Shi'a religious sites in Syria as a place of pilgrimage for Iranian, Lebanese and Iraqi Shi'a pilgrims, as a means of "legitimising Shi'a Islam in the Syrian religious landscape" and helping to "bolster the Islamic credentials of the Alawi community" (Pinto, 2017, p. 130). It could however equally be argued that the Shi'a presence and the Shi'a holy sites have always been a legitimate part of Syrian society.

Phillips contends that "politicised sect identity in Syria developed alongside, and interacted with, national identity" (Phillips, 2015, p. 363). It is true that the Ottomans discriminated against Christians and Jews, that 'minorities' such as the Alawites and Druze were occasionally persecuted, and that there was a sense of difference, but discontent was rarely politicised and only happened (such as the anti-Christian rioting in Damascus in 1860) when group economic interests were perceived to be at stake, following the *tanzimat* that declared all religious

¹³¹ Anthony O'Mahony. In conversation, 16 January 2018. See also: (J.A. Reilly, 2019, pp. 150-190)

groups and communities to have equal rights in the Ottoman Empire (Ma'oz, 2014). The Sayfo Assyrian and Armenian genocides are two very significant exceptions to this reported stability. Under the French Mandate (1920-1946), sect identities became politicised, to the point of dividing the country into statelets according to sectarian majorities. This was contrary to the wishes of the people themselves, and the division did not last. So it was that in 1946, Independence was granted to Syria.

Nevertheless, even after independence the State of Syria remained unstable. Between 1946 and 1970 when Hafez al-Assad took power, there were no fewer than eight coups. In 1963, the Ba'ath Party was formed, dedicated to inclusivity and political secularisation. However, communal identity continued to play a major role beneath the national 'vener'. The reason that the armed forces contained a predominance of Alawi officers was not exclusively 'sectarian'. Sunnis had traditionally disdained military careers, which had offered poor minorities a means of social advancement. Whilst Christians have an important presence within Syrian politics, much of the 'sectarian' dimension of Syrian politics remains rooted in the Sunni vs Alawi and Shi'a divide. None of this can be explained without understanding the place of the Alawis in Syrian society (See section in Chapter 2.)¹³² or events in the past four decades.

When Hafez al-Assad was appointed in 1970, he handed key government positions (Defence Minister, Foreign Minister and Vice-President) to Sunni allies. Enemies referred to the government as an 'Alawi regime'. Whilst it is true that some Alawis received patronage and economic advancement from the government, nevertheless, Sunnis and other members of Syrian society all played significant roles in government and military structures. Assad promoted national identity and encouraged an inclusive national identity. Unlike in Iraq, where political expressions of Shi'a Islam were repressed, Hafez al-Assad "prioritised Sunni culture."¹³³ He had Alawis integrated. (The Lebanese Shi'a leader, Musa al-Sadr, had been persuaded to declare Alawis 'Twelver Shi'as', not heretics, but true Muslims, in order for Assad to become President.) "With Asad at the helm," writes Farouk-Alli, "Syria underwent a

¹³² For further detail about the Alawis, see: (Goldsmith, 2015); (Kerr, 2015); (Winter, 2016).

¹³³ Shi'a Muslims were often targeted during the rule of Saddam Hussein. See for example a Refugee Board of Canada report entitled: *Iraq. Treatment of Shi'a Muslims, particularly those in opposition, by Iraqi officials. (1999-2002)* published online by UNHCR.

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/3df4be4d4.html>. See also, article in Smithsonian.com dated December 2003 entitled: *Iraq's oppressed majority*.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/iraqs-oppressed-majority-95250996/>

remarkable transformation after 1970. Over the course of the next few decades, the country was refashioned from a weak and unstable state into a regional player... making Assad one of the most prominent leaders in the Middle East” (Farouk-Alli, 2014, p. 218).

Whilst Alawis became the new ruling elite, Sunni Islam was taught in schools. This had the unintended effect of strengthening sectarian beliefs, as Sunnis gained a belief in their superiority, and Syrians lacked education in the beliefs of the minority communities who in turn felt less valued. The result was a combination of “cultural empowerment but political disempowerment” (Phillips, 2015, pp. 365-366). Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood had grown in power. Its militant wing, the ‘Fighting Vanguard’ sought a sectarian and violent overthrow of Assad. From 1976, it started assassinating Alawi figures and distributing sectarian propaganda, especially in Hama and Aleppo. This in turn strengthened sectarian beliefs amongst some Alawis. The culmination of this in the uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982, and the massacre and expulsion of the Muslim Brotherhood that followed is well documented. Even so, Assad retained much popularity, and many Sunnis rejected the Muslim Brotherhood’s extremist agenda.

On Hafez al-Assad’s death in 2000, he was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad. Bashar genuinely sought to reform the country. Both he and his younger brother married into Sunni families. Politically, Bashar al-Assad removed many of his father’s old supporters, but made the ruling elite more Alawi-dominated. President Assad has himself commented on the difficulty he faced in implementing reforms because of the influence of the ‘old guard’, and the bureaucracy of the government apparatus.¹³⁴ His economic reforms sought to liberalise the economy and produce a ‘social market economy’, but substantially reduced the budgets for social services and the military, and had to be operated under a bureaucratic system that limited their effectiveness. The management of these new economic opportunities was handed to government elites, many of them Alawis, opening up opportunities for corruption and claims of sectarian manipulation. The reforms also had the effect of cutting subsidies at a time when the country faced added political, economic and environmental strains. In 2005, the withdrawal from Lebanon and the international sanctions that followed were a major economic loss to Syria. Between the years 2006-2010, the reception of over a million Iraqi refugees into Syria placed further economic and social strain upon the country. Concurrently,

¹³⁴ In a meeting with President Bashar al-Assad in September, 2016, he commented that he had been unable to make reforms as quickly or as thoroughly as he wished, because of political and bureaucratic pressure.

a devastating drought in the north-east of the country resulted in the movement of over 300,000 people into impoverished areas around Syria's cities.¹³⁵ All these factors had significant social, economic and sectarian implications, but "in spite of the potential for sectarianism to grow under Bashar al-Assad's rule, ethnographic research, conducted in 2007-2010 suggested that most Syrians didn't outwardly project it" (Phillips, 2015, p. 368).

According to most with whom I have spoken the demonstrations that took place in 2011 were, at least initially, not primarily sectarian by nature.¹³⁶ There certainly was a sectarian element amongst some Sunni Islamists, encouraged by external players, who wished to overthrow the Alawite-dominated government. But for most Syrians the demonstrations were about the need for political reform, and were based primarily upon economic and political discontent: economic discontent because of a belief that the government was failing to address the economic needs of the country, a failure partly resulting from the liberalisation of the economy; and political discontent with the country's security apparatus and corruption within elements of the political elite. There were, at least initially, moderate voices.

Goldsmith writes: "Both the Damascus Spring and the fall of the Iraqi Ba'athists had raised the expectations of many Syrians for political change, yet both had ended in disappointment. Several years on, disillusionment and frustration, exacerbated by high unemployment, high inflation and the effects of the on-going drought, were setting in among a growing portion of

¹³⁵There have been claims that an inadequate response to the needs of the rural poor during the drought helped instigate discontent. However, Louis Allday, who worked at the British Embassy in 2009 disputes that this was intentional, and argues that the Syrian government was both deeply concerned, and offered food assistance programmes, livestock feed subsidies, agricultural subsidies, loans and grants. Ultimately though, "the Syrian Government was simply overwhelmed by the scale of the drought (and its subsequent effects); it did not possess the ability – financial, logistical and otherwise – to respond adequately to it and did not receive sufficient funding from international donors to help account for this deficiency." <https://www.counterpunch.org/2015/09/11/want-to-know-whats-really-going-on-in-syria-warning-itll-take-you-more-than-5-minutes/> Accessed 23 October 2017

¹³⁶Balanche argues otherwise: "Analysis of the revolt's geography suggests that the country has major (perhaps irreconcilable) sectarian fissures, despite official denials by the regime and opposition alike. The demonstrations that swept Latakia, Baniyas, and Homs in 2011 occurred only in the Sunni districts of those cities. In the suburbs of Damascus, most Druze, Christian, Ismaili, and Alawite districts did not join the protest movement, but outlying Sunni towns did. The demonstrations in Jdeidat Artouz, a Druze/Christian area, and Bab Touma, the capital's main Christian quarter, were largely undertaken by Sunni residents. In response, the older Druze and Christian inhabitants mobilized against what they considered aggression by newer inhabitants who practiced a different religion. Meanwhile, the Sunni inhabitants of Douma, Deraa, and other rebellious districts around Damascus rose to defend their territory against regime aggression." (Balanche, 2018, p. 5)

Syrian society” (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 188).¹³⁷ However, Christopher Phillips adds: “..the Alawi-Sunni division should not be overstated. While sectarian resentment existed among *some* Sunnis towards some Alawis, and some Alawis reciprocated, it would be inaccurate to say these feelings were widespread and prominent across both communities... the lack of sectarian slogans in early protests suggests this wasn’t initially the main source of frustration” (Phillips, 2016, p. 48). This statement is echoed by many conversations I have had with Syrians who were involved initially in the demonstrations. Sectarian discourse they say only emerged from those with an Islamist agenda, and many demonstrators withdrew their support for the demonstrations when sectarian discourse and externally provoked violence became entrenched in the protests, at an early stage. As the complex dynamics of the conflict have constantly shifted, so too have people’s understanding and opinions.

In a major study published in 2018, Balanche suggests that sectarian identity, originating in the *millet* system, is rooted in Syrian society, and that “the war has compelled Syrians to cling to their sectarian identities more tightly, whether out of socio-economic self-interest, or simply to survive”, and goes on to suggest that the main factions within the conflict are divided along broadly sectarian lines, namely “the multi-sectarian regime zone, the Kurdish-controlled SDF zone, and the Sunni Arab rebel zone” (Balanche, 2018, pp. xi,xv). The influence of regional alliances deepened the sectarian nature of the conflict, for example the Iranian Shi’a alliance with the Syrian government along with Hezbollah’s commitment to protecting Shi’a religious sites in Syria, whilst Saudi and Gulf support for the Sunni Islamist insurgency “accelerated the alignment of actors along sectarian lines, pitting the ‘Shi’a crescent’ against ‘Sunni encirclement’” (Baczko, 2018, p. 156). (Isamil, 2011). Baczko admits however to the stability and plurality that had prevailed prior to the conflict, when he writes that “the territorial fragmentation”, (since the beginning of the conflict), “meant the end of ethnic and sectarian balances previously maintained by the regime, which had co-opted allies by applying political and economic rather than identity criteria” (Baczko, 2018, p. 257).

Nor should we exclude the important part that international politics and global intervention played in promoting and supporting the uprising (Phillips, 2016). In November 2015, I travelled with one of Syria’s leading Internal Opposition figures from Damascus to Homs. As we journeyed, he told us how in 2010, he had been contacted by a member of a militant group

¹³⁷ Mahmoud claims that opposition groups did not have sectarian intentions (Mahmoud, 2016). Meanwhile, (Schmoller, 2016) examines the sectarian impact of the conflict in a case study amongst Syrian refugees in Austria.

in Turkey to be told: “Get ready. The war is coming. It has all been planned.”¹³⁸ Friends who participated in early demonstrations but quickly withdrew when they became violent, state that there were foreign elements within the demonstrations who were deliberately stoking violence. All these factors combined to help create the events of 2011.¹³⁹

I believe that sectarian divisions have been overstated as a cause of conflict in Syrian society. Writing in 2013, Daoudy stressed the strong nationalist identity that prevailed in Iraq and Syria and suggested that “the myth of sectarianism” is more accurately “a battle of realpolitik over conflicting interests.” Daoudy notes that whilst armed resistance have “turned to religion to draw strength and mobilisation,” in the rest of the country, all communities “share a fear of radicalism and a descent to chaos as the country follows in the dreaded footsteps of neighbouring Iraq.” Daoudy continues: “The real divide is not religious or sectarian but geopolitical, and foreign intervention is not motivated by religious affiliations nor the promotion of democracy.” Rather “Syria is being sacrificed for the sake of foreign interests.”¹⁴⁰ (The fear of what happened in Iraq cannot be underestimated when it comes to understanding Christian attitudes and allegiances in Syria.)

In an article in 2014, Camille Otrakji suggests that, as in most pluralistic countries, sectarianism within Syrian society represents a ‘bell-shaped curve’. At its peak – ‘moderate sectarianism’ - is where members of different communities feel a sense of superiority to others and may feel discriminated against. This is a normal feature of society that exists to a degree in all societies. Those who hate other communities and/or support sectarian violence are, like anywhere else, a small minority, and cannot be said to ‘represent’ the Syrian reality. Otrakji reminds us that Syrian society is not physically divided, but that in most towns and cities, communities live side by side. He goes on to illustrate how sectarianism is a “complex construct” of six types, some dangerous, and others benign. Dangerous tendencies include ‘defensive’ or ‘fear-driven’ sectarianism where people feel the need to stay with their own group for protection; are convinced of their religious superiority; have military or economic power; and jealously guard

¹³⁸ Journey from Damascus to Homs. 26 November 2015.

¹³⁹ For a further study of external factors that nurtured the conflict in Syria, see: (Gowans, 2017).

¹⁴⁰ Daoudy, M. (2013) *Sectarianism in Syria: myth and reality*. www.opendemocracy.net/marwa-daoudy/sectarianism-in-syria-myth-and-reality (Accessed: 3 October 2018). There are many who argue otherwise. See: (Postel, 2018) Playing with fire: Trump, the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry, and the geopolitics of sectarianization in the Middle East. *European Institute of the Mediterranean, Mediterranean Yearbook 2018*, 58-63. (Accessed 21 January 2019). Also: Nuruzzaman, M. (2019) Contemporary Shia-Sunni Sectarian violence. *Oxford Bibliographies in International Relations*. DOI: 10.1093/obo/9780199743292-0249 (Accessed 21 January 2019).

their cultural tribal sectarianism. The most dangerous sectarianism is hate-driven and committed to violence for perceived infringement of rights.¹⁴¹

The diagram below comes from Otrakji's article. The curve is not static. It can be heavily 'weighted' in either direction, but the extent of weighting will depend on the level of 'balance' between different communities, and on the state of stability or security that prevails.



Whilst arguing for less of a sectarian dynamic in Syrian society, we cannot dismiss the influence of existing developments. Abdo suggests, notwithstanding the economic and political contexts that helped nurture sectarian division, that “without religious identification the conflicts would not have flared to the degree they have done today” (Abdo, 2017, p. 7). She argues that the West has failed in its dealings with and interventions in the Middle East, to recognise the importance that religion plays in these societies. Partly because of this, “longstanding notions of religious identity and sectarian affiliation have supplanted the postcolonial project of Arab nationalism, thereby creating the opportunity for violent extremist groups, such as ISIS and Al Qaeda, to fill the resulting vacuum” (Abdo, 2017, p. 6).

¹⁴¹ Camille Otrakji. An American plan to divide Syria, a European plan to decentralise it, and a Russian dialogue conference. Published in: <http://creativesyria.com/syriapage/?p=582> November 11th, 2014. (Accessed: 15 January 2018) Used with permission.

Nevertheless, many Syrians maintain that at the beginning of the Syrian conflict, although communal identity is a part of the make-up of Syrian society, it was not prioritised in social discourse. The conflict however developed profoundly sectarian dimensions, with militant parties playing the sectarian 'card', often with devastating and brutal affect, in order to achieve their goals. Many Syrians who participated in the early demonstrations say that when overtly sectarian slogans emerged, they were alienated and quickly withdrew support.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered the importance of religious leadership roles within Syrian society, and the extent to which 'sectarianism' plays a part in Syrian society. Heads of Churches continue to hold considerable spiritual and temporal authority and play representative roles that affirm confessional, local, national and international identities. These roles are rooted in and have been moulded by the cultural and historical context, and have enabled them to exercise a significant, and not uncritical, political role in society, but can also, by their very nature have communal implications. Nevertheless, notwithstanding debate as to the extent to which religious leaders are able to 'represent' their constituents because of their privileged status and conflicting roles, eastern models of religious leadership have allowed for positive political participation at a national level and ensured the 'space' for plurality and diversity in political discourse, therefore having a positive impact on society, especially in times of tension and conflict. In chapter 5, I will suggest that Eastern Christian leaders and theologians represent a modern paradigm of Antiochene tradition; that some have become 'modern Church Fathers', and have the potential to create a new conceptual framework for political/ecclesial representation, theological dialogue and humanitarian outreach.

The chapter has also considered the definition and origins of 'sectarianism'. What does 'sectarianism' mean in a society as culturally and religiously diverse as Syria? We have seen how some scholars have suggested that sectarianisation of communal identities is rooted in the colonial encounter between the West and the Islamic world, and the establishment of the modern State. It is clear that sectarianism has broad and varied expression in different contexts and is rooted in diverse causes that negatively impact relationships between different communal groups. I maintain that the term 'sectarian' is an analytical framework that has over-simplified and damaged our understanding of the complex communal landscape and interactions of Syrian and Levantine society. And that whilst sectarian expressions of violence within the Syrian conflict have damaged communal relations in Syria, appreciation of plurality

within society has not been destroyed. Notwithstanding the fact that communal identities have helped shape, and been manipulated by the conflict, it has also rearticulated and given new meaning to communal relationships. Many Syrians still reject 'sectarian' discourse, and wish to retain a diverse, pluralistic society, in which communal identities are respected and protected under a secularly-based Constitution. Herein lies hope for the future.

Having reflected on the importance and diversity of Christian and Muslim communities in Syria, and the factors that influence religious life in the country, it is now time to consider how Christian-Muslim relations have been expressed in Syria, both immediately prior to the conflict, and in its midst.

Chapter 4

Christian-Muslim relations in Syria.

4.1 Introduction

With more than half the world's population being either Christian or Muslim and with extreme ideologies increasing and placing profound tensions between the two faiths, an understanding of the political and social dimensions of Christian-Muslim encounter has never been so urgent (Hirvonen, 2013, p. 1). It is often forgotten that most Christians in the Levant share the same culture, language and customs as their Muslim compatriots, and that through centuries of coexistence they are well-placed to reflect on the means and methods of Christian-Muslim dialogue that have been adopted in the past, that have prevailed in the present, and the possible impact of recent events on future engagement. Despite the political and religious limitations placed on them over the centuries, and the devastating impact of recent conflicts, Christians have continued to be resilient and influential. The experience of the Christian-Muslim interface in Syria in the face of radicalism and conflict has the capacity to inform other contexts that are encountering these challenges.

A brief account of the history of Christian-Muslim relations in the area is provided in the Introduction to the thesis. In this chapter, after reflecting on more recent developments in Christian-Muslim dialogue, we shall explore inter-religious dynamics in Syria prior to and during the recent conflict through the lens of the voices of Syrians on the ground. (Appendix 5, offers analysis of responses to a questionnaire). These voices represent continuity between historical and contemporary interreligious relations and illustrate a variety of different interreligious dynamics in different contexts. A more detailed reflection of the conflict in the Christian villages of Maaloula and Sadad, and in the city of Aleppo, provide varying perspectives on how the conflict has impacted Christian-Muslim relations.

4.2 Some developments in dialogue.

Muslims have always been the less enthusiastic interlocutors when it comes to Christian-Muslim dialogue in the Middle East. This is partly due to differing theological understandings of the status of faith, but also because of the part western Churches have played in colonialism

and proselytization; and because of suspicion at political policies vis a vis Israel and other areas of the region (Fischbach, 2015, p. 428). Until the 1970s most participants in interreligious dialogue were official representatives. It wasn't until the 1980s that the "range and depth of dialogue began to expand" into topics relevant to ordinary faith communities (Fischbach, 2015, p. 429). Following the Ta'if Agreement that ended the Lebanese Civil War in 1989 and established the Confessional Constitution for Lebanon, inter-faith dialogue became fashionable. In 1993, the Islamic-Christian National Dialogue Committee was founded "to promote better mutual understanding between the country's different religious communities" and to ensure the prevention of future conflict (Goddard, 2003a, p. 32). In the same decade a number of universities established programmes and centres for religious dialogue. Amongst them was the Centre for Christian-Muslim Studies at Balamand University (founded in 1995), which remains an important centre in the region (Fischbach, 2015, p. 430).

However, the success of these developments remains debatable. According to participants, discussions have often avoided contentious theological issues. Whilst helpful to positive relations, "such dialogue was unable to effectively contribute to the building of an inter-religious community" and had limited outcomes (Fischbach, 2015, p. 431). In 2002, the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, under the auspices of the Middle East Council of Churches set up a series of inter-religious meetings called 'Forum of Muslim-Christian thought'. These conversations, honest and genuine in both approach and outcome, have included faith leaders, academics, and members of the public, and have continued to produce meaningful discussions and engagement with difficult topics.

On September 12, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI delivered a lecture at Regensburg reflecting on the issue of religious dialogue.¹⁵¹ In it he quoted Byzantine Emperor Manuel Paleologos speaking in 1391: 'Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by sword the faith he preached' (Volf, 2010b, p. 19). Although in the context of his lecture, Pope Benedict was contrasting different attitudes within the *Qur'an* to religious compulsion, the reaction was immediate and shocking.¹⁵² Demonstrations erupted all over the Muslim world, and the comments were

¹⁵¹ For an analysis of Pope Benedict's position regarding Christian-Muslim relations, see: (Rocco, 2017).

¹⁵² A less widespread, but similarly unexpected and intense reaction followed an interview in February 2008, when the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Most Revd. Dr. Rowan Williams, spoke on a Radio 4 programme about the importance of Shari'a law for Muslims in Britain. See BBC News Website 7 Feb 2008. 'Sharia Law in UK is Unavoidable': <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7232661.stm>

condemned by political and religious leaders worldwide. Given the heightened sensitivity surrounding Western intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan at the time, the consequences could have been devastating for Christian-Muslim relations.

Instead, on October 13, 2007, 138 Muslim scholars and theologians, representing almost every shade of Islamic theology and opinion (including the current Grand Mufti of Syria, Dr. Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun), issued 'A Common Word between Us and You' to Christians around the world. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan writes: 'Our goal was very clear. We wanted – and want – to avoid a worldwide conflict between Muslims and the West. We wanted to – and must – resolve our current crises.....we had honestly... only one motive: peace' (Volf, 2010a, pp. 5-6). Pope Benedict's lecture was what triggered the initiative, but it would be naïve to imagine that the political and religious realities of western policies and actions in the Middle East were not also a motivation.

Given the prevailing political and religious realities, Muslim scholarship was taking a uniquely reconciling initiative. At the heart of the message were two things: the recognition that 'whilst Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions – it is clear that the *Two Greatest Commandments* are an area of common ground' (Volf, 2010a, p. 45); and a genuine concern that 'Muslims and Christians together make up well over half the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world' (Volf, 2010a, p. 28). Despite the differences between the faiths, the theological basis for this common ground – 'a shared Christian-Muslim commitment to love of God and love of neighbour' (P. L. Heck, 2009, p. 1) is substantial and significant.

The fact that this was an initiative that came from the Muslim world is unusual. Muslims have often regarded dialogue as being a western Christian initiative in which Christians have set the agenda. This initiative however presented a willingness to dialogue with a confidence strengthened by the rise in Islamism and the spread of Islam. And the invitation was offered at a time when the reputation of Christianity had been profoundly damaged by the political actions and policies of Western governments in the Middle East; when religious identity or interpretation had been used as justification to engage in violence; and when secularism was having an increasingly global impact on world religions.

The 'Common Word' document was clearly an invitation to Christian leaders to engage in dialogue and find a common ethic. Since its publication the response from the Christian world has been cautious. And in the current context of regional conflict and the reduced trust between the faith communities, genuine dialogue between the communities has proved difficult. However, in the current context, the need for 'dialogue', mutual co-operation and shared humanitarian action has once again been highlighted. The signed declaration of a common humanity, between Pope Francis and Dr. Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in Abu Dhabi in February 2019 represents a hopeful step in that direction.

In what follows, we shall explore how conflict has influenced the practice of Christian-Muslim relations in recent years and how this praxis might provide a basis on which to build for dialogue and co-existence in the future. Assessing the reality of Christian-Muslim relations as experienced 'on the ground' in Syria, and being realistic about the attitudes and challenges that prevail, is crucial to determining how those relationships might most effectively evolve in a post-conflict situation.

4.3 Praxis of Christian-Muslim Relations in Syria – prior to and during the Conflict.

Christian-Muslim relations have found positive expression for centuries in Syria. But before continuing, it is necessary to re-emphasise the sensitivity of raising the subject in Syria. Some Syrians suggest that even to discuss Christian-Muslim relations is to impose a 'sectarian' dimension into a religious landscape that is not sectarian by nature. Indeed, many Syrians reject any suggestion that the roots of the conflict lie in sectarian agendas. Rather, sectarian identities have been used to fuel and define aspects of the conflict by parties who wish to destabilise the country. In 2015, Hakim Khatib, of the University of Duisburg in Germany, writing of his research into the politicisation of Islam in Syria noted that "based on several interviews with Syrians for this article, they all refused calling the events in Syria a civil or a sectarian war. ... Therefore religion can be looked at in this context as one of the variables, an important one indeed, and not the sole driver for actors in the conflict" (Khatib, 2015, p. 346). He also acknowledges that influential *salafi* preachers, and Muslim Brotherhood supporters in

Syria have frequently used religious terms in their speeches, and that this “raises suspicion for other minorities and other Islamic currents within the Sunni sect” (Khatib, 2015, p. 346).¹⁵³

As in other parts of the Middle East, Syria has a system of religious ‘registration’, which “identifies which legal code applies to citizens for family matters such as marriage, children’s education, divorce, custody of children, burial rites and inheritance” (Jonathan Andrews, 2016, pp. 15-16). This religious registration permeates society and classifies people according to their religious identity. In Syria, religious registration is stated on birth certificates and marriage documentation, but not on identity cards. Religious identity is restricted to Muslim, Christian or Jew, with all non-Jews and non-Christians being identified as Muslim. Prior to 2011, religious conversion was not illegal but was strongly discouraged. Throughout the region, conversion from Islam can have serious social consequences for individuals. Women registered as Muslim were not allowed to marry non-Muslims – a restriction with which many citizens have expressed dissatisfaction. There is no law against proselytising, but it is strongly discouraged for fear of creating inter-communal tensions. Christian and Muslim festivals are recognised as public holidays, and the State is religiously tolerant (Jonathan Andrews, 2016, pp. 239-241). Throughout the conflict, the principle of freedom of worship has continued, and although prior to the war, gatherings other than services required permission, Church properties have become major centres of humanitarian care for anyone affected by the conflict. Whilst religious registration may be regarded as restrictive, and has the potential to lead to discrimination, confessionally-based personal status laws nevertheless seek to enable specific identities to be sustained and protected, and, in a plural society such as Syria, affirm the value of differing religious statuses as integral to society. For this reason, whilst there is certainly scope for reform of laws surrounding religious registration, many religious leaders would not wish to see religious registration removed.

In modern times, the first Syrian religious leader to get involved in interreligious dialogue was the late Grand Mufti Ahmed Kuftaru (1915-2004). With a classical education in Islamic Jurisprudence and taught by *Sufi* scholars, Sheikh Kuftaru was a strong advocate of interfaith dialogue. Deeply influenced by Sheikh Kuftaru, Mohammad Al-Habash (b. 1962), a professor of Islamic sciences, joked in 2006 that Syrian Christians and Syrian Muslims are “beyond dialogue”, because “coexistence is well-ingrained in the Syrian tradition” (Ali-Dib, 2008, p. 98).

¹⁵³ Khatib refers to Adnan Al-Aroor, a Salafi cleric from Hama, who lives in exile in Riyadh, and Zuhair Galem, the spokesman of Muslim Brotherhood in Syria.

The current Grand Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Dr. Ahmad Hassoun likewise passionately supports interreligious coexistence, engagement and respect, and the secularly based Constitution of the Syrian State, which protects all religious minorities. Ali-Dib points out however that when it comes to Christian-Muslim dialogue, leaders of the two faiths often have different priorities. Christian leaders prioritise ‘the good’ that comes from inter-religious dialogue through minimal doctrinal agreements, and Christian ‘love’, whilst Muslim sheikhs tend to view dialogue as a process of ‘rectifying the image of Islam’, and calling for a joint approach towards opposing immorality and atheism (Ali-Dib, 2008, p. 95). This difference of approach is mirrored everywhere and often creates difficulties for dialogue.

The 20th and early years of the 21st Century have been devastating for Christian communities, not just in Syria, but throughout the region. The conflicts in Israel/Palestine, Iraq and Syria; the rise of political Islam and of ‘Islamic State’ and of their Islamist allies, have profoundly affected Eastern Christian communities. In territories controlled by Islamist fighters in Syria, there are few Christians left. Of an estimated population of Christians of 10% prior to the conflict, it is thought that up to half have left the country. In December 2016, Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo, Antoine Audo suggested that three quarters of the Christian population of Aleppo might have left the city by that date, leaving an estimated 40,000 Christians in the city.¹⁵⁴ In May 2017, Ibrahim Nseir, Presbyterian Minister in Aleppo told me that 90% of his congregation had emigrated.¹⁵⁵ Today, taking into account the emigration of Christians since the start of the conflict, it is believed that the percentage of Christians remaining in Syria are now around 5-7 per cent of the population, almost all of whom are to be found in Government-held areas of the country.¹⁵⁶ Those that lived in areas now under ‘rebel’ control have either left or been killed. In Iraq, Christian communities have been decimated by the war and the flight from ISIS persecution. Thus, one can say that “ninety years have wiped out four centuries of Christian resurgence” (Fargues, 1998, p. 63).

Syria and Lebanon have greater religious diversity than almost anywhere else in the region. Prior to the Syrian conflict, all religious communities lived in comparative stability within a plural society. Christians and Muslims who remain, though deeply hurt and affected, have remained true to this strategic vision despite a profound fracturing of trust. Churches and

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Bishop Audo on 17 December 2016 in Damascus.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Fr. Ibrahim Nseir on 26 May 2017 in Aleppo.

¹⁵⁶ The Edinburgh Companion to Global Christianity volume: “Christianity in North Africa and West Asia” (2018) quotes a 2015 figure of 6.1%.

mosques still stand side by side. Christians and Muslims still share festivals both publicly and with friends.¹⁵⁷ In May 2017, the Mother Superior of the Convent of Our Lady at Saidnaya told me: “The local Muslim community have continued to pray at the Convent and protect it throughout the crisis. All people should come to Saidnaya, and thank the people (Christian and Muslim) for their defence and their sacrifice.”¹⁵⁸ Despite the horrors of the conflict, local religious leaders continue to engage and work together, as they attempt to reconcile and serve their suffering communities, and the thousands of internally displaced, most of whom have fled ‘rebel’-controlled areas.

Since the start of the conflict, opportunity for structured religious dialogue has been limited, and is seen as a ‘luxury’, not a priority. However, ecumenical and inter-religious relations at a senior level have been positive, focussing on the need to offer practical assistance to the multiple communities that they serve and of which they are a part. Christian and Muslim leaders in Syria are working daily on humanitarian, pastoral and reconciliation initiatives, in these ways, and in seeking to preserve the plural essence of Syrian society, they find commonality of purpose, and are having a significant impact. In a sense, the Church leaders are fulfilling Bishop Audo’s wish, when he wrote prior to the conflict: “The vocation of Eastern Christians will be to become a bridge, or better, a model of communion between the Christian west and the Muslim World” (Audo, 2010c, p. 17), a view he confirmed as being as relevant and as important as ever when I interviewed him in December 2016. Echoing this vision, the Syrian Orthodox Bishop of Qamishle, Bishop Maurice, said: “The leaders of the denominations are now very close. We are called to present the face of Christ to the world, and in unity is our strength.”¹⁵⁹

The conflict has undoubtedly created a loss of trust between members of different religious communities at ‘grass roots’ level. The significance of this should not be underestimated, especially where Christian communities have suffered death and destruction at the hands of Islamist extremists. The Salafist tendencies and extreme ideologies held by most of the militants have been well documented, even by those who supported their actions (Zuhur, 2015) (Lister, 2015). Healing and the rebuilding of trust in these communities will take a long time, and religious leaders are already playing a significant part in striving to lay the

¹⁵⁷ Christmas has been publicly celebrated with particular enthusiasm in recent years in towns and cities across Syria, and especially in Aleppo and Damascus since the defeat of Islamist militants.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with the Mother Superior of Saidnaya Convent of Saidnaya at Saidnaya. 17 May 2017.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Bishop Maurice, Syrian Orthodox Bishop of Qamishle, in Damascus. 29 May 2017.

foundations for that process. But even so, there remains widespread resilience and will in Syrian society to preserve tolerance, mutual respect, and coexistence.

After sharing the tragic story of events in the Christian town of Maaloula, which was taken over by radical Islamists in 2013, and where three Christians were murdered in the village, and a further six kidnapped and later murdered, one of the town's priests, Fr. Nabil Wakim, said: "Our presence in the Middle East is a witness. This is our land and we will not leave it."¹⁶⁰ It is documented that the groups that occupied Maaloula included those designated by the international community as 'moderate rebels', fighting alongside those designated 'terrorists'. Most Syrians refer to them all as 'terrorists', as they have all brought terror to local populations and uprooted peoples' lives. Equally, many Christian leaders speak of the danger of the western Church's acquiescence with western political policies in the region, and their impact on the rise of Islamic extremism, not just in the Middle East, but around the world. Rather than acquiescing with western policies, Christians in the West, says Revd Harout Selimian of Aleppo, "should be helping Christians in Syria to remain where they are, and to be light and salt within Syrian society beyond the conflict."¹⁶¹ There remains a fear that even if extremist forces are defeated, their influence could re-emerge at a later date amongst any remaining and returning Syrians.

The uniqueness and diversity of the Christian presence in Syria, and the depth of its historic roots, means that Christianity is part of the fabric of Syrian society. This is a view shared by many Muslims in the country who commonly say that "without the presence of Christians, Syria will lose something vital to the quality and plurality of its identity."¹⁶² Most Syrians share the hope that the diversity and plurality of the country can be preserved, and trust restored, so that Syria may once again be a beacon of religious diversity and tolerance. Echoing many Muslims to whom I have spoken, a twenty-five year old Muslim man from Damascus wrote on 15 May 2017: "I grew up in a Christian school. I can only describe my experience as positive and amazingly beneficial. I would definitely enrol my future children in a Christian school." A Muslim woman aged 25 from Lattakia wrote: "I do not believe the conflict has affected our relations. I have not changed the way I interact with Christians and I will never do. As a

¹⁶⁰ Fr. Nabil Wakim, speaking on 1 May 2017, at St. Saviour Monastery near Saida in Lebanon. .

¹⁶¹ Revd Harout Selimian, President of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Syria, speaking in Beirut 15 May 2017

¹⁶² Quoted in an interview with Bishop Antoine Audo. Damascus. 17 December 2016.

Muslim, I believe there should be this sense of positive coexistence between us.”¹⁶³ Another Muslim man aged 52 from Aleppo wrote: “We need to return to our history and see how our forefathers coexisted. No one in the West or East can lecture Syria on coexistence. As a Muslim, we are ordered to be kind to all humanity and help them survive.”¹⁶⁴

In a global context in which extremist ideologies are on the rise; where there is increased persecution of Christians, and where tensions between Christianity and Islam in some contexts are perhaps at their highest level ever; an understanding of the political and social dimensions of Christian-Muslim dialogue and encounter has never been so urgent (Hirvonen, 2013, p. 1).¹⁶⁵ Sharing a common culture, language and customs with their Muslim compatriots, and through centuries of living alongside them, Middle Eastern Christians are well-placed to reflect on the means and methods of Christian-Muslim dialogue that have been adopted in the past, those that are effective in the present, and the possible impact of recent events on future engagement.

Harout Selimian, President of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Syria says that the pillars of Christian-Muslim relations in Syria are the shared culture, music, food, history and language. “Syrian society has long been one of tolerance in which communities did not distinguish between religions, but shared the same land and resources. This culture is what needs to be nurtured and recovered in order to restore peace and understanding.”¹⁶⁶ Echoing many others, Syrian Orthodox Bishop Maurice says: “Ours is a long-standing culture of peace. Before the war, we had no problem with Christians and Muslims. We have been far removed from violence.”¹⁶⁷ As Greek Orthodox Archimandrite Fr. Alexi Chehadeh said: “Historically, Islamic society in Syria is not the same as the extreme Islam that is being imported from outside.”¹⁶⁸

So what is the reality of current attitudes and inter-religious engagement in Syria, and what are their implications for future frameworks of Christian-Muslim coexistence and reconciliation amidst the conflict in the country? How does the dynamic of the changing religious environment – the threat of violence, the changing demographic, the juridical emphasis in

¹⁶³ Response to Questionnaire online. 15 May 2017

¹⁶⁴ Response to Questionnaire online. 16 May 2017

¹⁶⁵ For example, see the report ‘Persecuted and Forgotten?’ Executive Summary Report of Aid to the Church in Need. 2017.

¹⁶⁶ As discussed in an interview with Revd Harout Selimian in Aleppo on 27 May 2017

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Bishop Maurice in Damascus. 29 May 2017

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Fr. Alexi Chehadeh in Damascus. 31 May 2017

Sunni Islam – impact on the way Syrians practise their faith? Interreligious engagement in Syria has always been and continues to be practised at various levels – the personal and local; the institutional and regional; and the national. That breadth of encounter and experience has the potential to inform a much wider religious discourse. For some, the encounter is purely cultural and social. For others, there is a desire rooted in faith to sustain religious plurality. Some have had their respect for religion challenged by sectarian expressions of violence (Appendix 5). Religious leaders are seeking to respond to these changes in a variety of ways, but their voices are rarely heard or listened to outside Syria.

At the local level, Christian and Muslim faith leaders have been instrumental in working together to initiate efforts to provide relief to local citizens, and to the Internally displaced in their midst. Pastorally, they respond daily to bereavement and loss. Often, they share the leadership of local community events in a highly visible way. In some towns and villages, local Christian and Muslim clergy meet on a regular basis to discuss ways in which they can share in practical responses to the multiple needs of their people. At local civic events, whether held at a mosque or Church, the Christian and Muslim clergy will almost always stand side by side as a visible witness to their mutual respect. In May 2017, joined by hundreds of townspeople, I processed with local Greek Orthodox and Sunni Clergy down the main street of Dara'a to open a Community Centre, partly funded by the Greek Orthodox Church, for use of all members of the community in the town.¹⁶⁹ I attended similar events in Homs, Tartous, and Aleppo, and joined members of GOPA-DERD as they delivered new water tanks to areas of East Aleppo

¹⁶⁹ The standard version of events that led to the uprising in Syria suggests that it began with a spontaneous demonstration by civilians to a brutal response by the Syrian authorities to anti-government graffiti by a number of teenagers in the southern town of Daraa in March 2011. The research of a Syrian writer living in America, Sarah Abed, however suggests that the reality is more complex than that. Her article below reflects what townspeople, including local religious leaders, told me, when I visited the town in May 2017. <https://sarahabed.com/2017/08/15/syria-2011-a-four-month-timeline-of-the-western-manufactured-uprising/> On 28 May 2017, I visited Daraa with a Greek Orthodox Archimandrite. During a meeting with the Governor of Daraa, Mohammed Khaled al-Hanou, he said: "Daraa was a prosperous town and a prosperous district. We had over a thousand schools in the area, seven Colleges, five universities and seven public hospitals. During the years prior to 2010, over 50,000 people from the area went to work in the Gulf States, and this had a negative role in Daraa. It was also very vulnerable to insurgents because of the long and open border with Jordan. Nothing is true about what the media say happened here. The demonstrations started from the Omar Mosque, and they started to shoot at the police and the people from there. The Media Centre broadcast this and the next day they burned the media centre. In the first days of the crisis, violent demonstrators burned four hundred schools. They destroyed clinics and burned thirty ambulances. Syrian history goes back thousands of years and we are proud of our social cohesion and the secular State. This trouble has come from outside." See also Steven Sahiounie: <https://ahtribune.com/world/north-africa-south-west-asia/syria-crisis/1135-day-before-deraa.html>

liberated in December 2016.¹⁷⁰ In one East Aleppo district, the local Sunni Sheikh embraced me with the words: “Welcome. Thank God you are here. We are brothers.”

The story of Qara exemplifies the coexistence that has for the most part prevailed in Syria, and the importance of monasteries within the religious landscape.

Qara is a village in the Qalamoun region south of Homs, in which Sunnis have lived side by side with Christians for centuries. Several important Christian communities survive in this area, which was a place of refuge for Christians during the Mamluk battles against the Crusaders in the 13th Century CE. Qara is home to two eleventh century churches, one of which was converted into a mosque by the Mamluks. The local Syrian Catholic community have since built a modern church.

One kilometre from the village is the seventh century Monastery of St. James the Persian inhabited by a community of monks and nuns. Reputedly founded by Empress Helena, it is one of a string of monasteries that acted as places of hospitality and prayer en route to Jerusalem from Europe. It surrounds a Roman tower with thick walls, for monasteries had to be heavily fortified against the armies that marched across the region, and the bandits who preyed on the travellers using the trade routes that passed through here from Europe, Asia and Arabia. The monasteries were places of hospitality for travellers, and of refuge for local people during times of strife, no matter what their religious or communal identity. They have played an important role in Christian-Muslim encounter and dialogue in the region.

The monastery at Qara was in ruins when discovered by Mother Agnes Mariam de la Croix in 1994. With the permission of the Greek Melkite Bishop of Homs, the monastery was restored and a community moved in in 2000. Between 2011 and 2013, the area was surrounded by 60,000 Islamist fighters, and in 2013 the area and local village were occupied by ‘ISIS’. During this time, the monks and nuns remained, sealing themselves inside the monastery, along with dozens of local Christian families who came to them for refuge. By night Sunni villagers, risking death if they were caught, smuggled food for those inside. After the village was liberated, the villagers worked together to restore the ancient and modern Churches in the village that had been badly desecrated by the occupiers. Such stories are not unusual in Syria. When I visited

¹⁷⁰ GOPA-DERD. Greek Orthodox Patriarchate Association – Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development

the monastery in November 2015, Hezbollah fighters were protecting the monastery and the area from ISIS front lines just one kilometre away. The monastery's protectors, all Shi'a Muslims, declared their respect for religious pluralism, and stated that they would give their lives to protect the Christian presence in the country.¹⁷¹

Both Christian and Muslim communities have been instrumental in working alongside aid agencies to provide relief services to Syrian society. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate's Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development (GOPA-DERD) is one such initiative.¹⁷² Managing and funding dozens of charitable relief initiatives across Syria, using hundreds of well-qualified volunteers, the Charity manages numerous projects providing rehabilitation and shelter programmes, community centres to support skills development projects for IDPs, children's support and education programmes, women's empowerment projects; provision of water supplies; psycho-social support; small business loans and grants; and fund-raising for medical equipment in hospitals and clinics. Most importantly of all, amongst the tens of thousands of beneficiaries, no preference or priority is given to any particular group or faith. And similar projects are run by most Christian denominations and faith communities, serving those in greatest need.¹⁷³

Christian and Muslim charitable initiatives on the ground play a vital role in implementing welfare and development projects wherever there is need. These challenge a sectarian understanding of the post-conflict context and offer models and examples for restoring and rebuilding civil and religious society. A contrasting interpretation is provided in a chapter entitled 'Christian charities and the Ba'thist Regime in Bashar al-Asad's Syria'. De Elvira discusses the increase in numbers and status of Christian charities in Syria both prior to and during the conflict (Elvira, 2015, pp. 92-109). Whilst suggesting that the multiplicity of these charities is partly due to inter-denominational competition, Elvira acknowledges the non-communitarian beneficiary policies amongst them. She also argues that the privileged status of Christian charities in relation to Muslim organisations includes freer interaction with international organisations and fewer legal restrictions. This Elvira argues is a sign of a deliberately constructed "wider and deeper compromise between a 'minority-led' regime

¹⁷¹ Christians in Iraq may have had a different experience with Shi'ite fighters.

¹⁷² See: www.gopaderd.org

¹⁷³ The Syrian Orthodox Charity that is equivalent to the Greek Orthodox 'GOPA-DERD', is named 'St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee' (EPDC), and like GOPA, operates numerous initiatives and projects around the country for development and relief aimed at those most affected by the conflict. Like GOPA, the charity is partnered with several major international charities.

aiming to preserve its power and a Christian minority afraid of losing its autonomy in a Muslim-majority country”, and represents a compromise by the Christian community in supporting the ‘regime’ (Elvira, 2015, p. 109). Whatever elements of truth may lie in such an analysis, this negative political conclusion ignores multiple other factors as regards the privileged status of Christian charities. These include the non-communitarian and non-politicisation of distribution, specialisation of services (for example for the disabled), clarity of administrative processes, and delivery of services.

At a regional and national level, faith groups have been instrumental in helping implement the national Reconciliation project, a project overseen by Dr. Ali Haidar, until December 2018 leader of the Syrian Social National (opposition) party and Minister for Reconciliation in the Syrian Government. This work is based on the principle that “there is no resolution to conflict except a political one. Violence will not achieve a resolution.”¹⁷⁴ The intention is that local reconciliation initiatives will pave the way for a process of national dialogue. The Reconciliation process is based on the following steps.¹⁷⁵ An area is chosen in which to initiate direct contact with fighting groups, in order to achieve a ceasefire and the laying down of arms. If the fighters refuse contact, local religious leaders mediate. The first step is to ensure that foreign fighters leave the area. Syrian fighters are given the choice to continue fighting, or, if they have not served their required National Service, to join the Syrian Army or the police, in which case no action will be taken against them. Once an agreement has been made, the priority is to remove weapons, maintain stability, and resume normal services of electricity, education and health care, which are provided free of charge. This reconciliation process has resulted in ceasefires in dozens of towns and villages, with many fighters laying down their arms, and many others being allowed to transfer to areas under ‘rebel’ control.

Faith leaders and unpaid volunteers are deeply engaged in this process. One Sunni Sheikh with whom I spent a morning in Homs in 2014, was shot dead two weeks later when he approached a ‘rebel’ group to try to begin a dialogue. However, despite the fact the process has been instrumental in bringing about an end to fighting and sieges in many areas of the country, including in Homs, Darraya, Mohammadiya, and Madaya, it has been strongly criticised outside Syria, for effectively ensuring a status quo that favours the government. However, although many Syrians are pleased to see an end to fighting, many are unhappy that those whom they

¹⁷⁴ Quote by Dr. Ali Haidar, Minister for Reconciliation. Interviewed in Damascus on 5 September 2016

¹⁷⁵ These steps were described by Dr. Haidar during a meeting with him in September, 2016.

regard as terrorists are allowed as part of the initiative to proceed freely to other areas of the country. From a western perspective, this process may have flaws, and the term 'reconciliation' may be inadequate to describe it. Perhaps if the process were termed 'ceasefire negotiations', it may more accurately reflect what is taking place, but the process has undeniably achieved positive results and saved lives on the ground. If therefore the international community were to engage with Syrians inside the country, this could be one area where international support and expertise could be offered to assist the process of peace-making and peace-building in such a way that leads to genuine reconciliation between different factions. When I asked Dr. Haider if he would welcome engagement with experts in the field of reconciliation who have experience of working in other global conflicts, he warmly welcomed the suggestion.

At a national level, senior faith leaders have been a consistent witness to Syria's historic respect for plurality and diversity. They are commonly seen together at civic and religious national events, and support the government of Syria and internal opposition leaders against violent opposition. Echoing most faith leaders in Syria, His Holiness, the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II says: "We are not ashamed to oppose people who kill us and bomb us. We are in support of a legitimate government and we see no alternative. If we stood with the West, we would have Mullahs ruling us now. There would be no secular opposition. We do not want Shari'a law and theocracy."¹⁷⁶ In a similar vein, retired Greek Melkite Patriarch Gregorius III Laham says: "The world should cease arming and supporting people of violence, and bring all parties together in a shared political process. Outsiders have no right to dictate who is or isn't a part of that process. Who leads the country should be chosen by Syrians, not by external powers. For the sake of Christianity, and for Christian-Muslim relations worldwide, the Church should be listening to people of faith from the lands of their birth."¹⁷⁷ Others have stated that the Church's political stance is not about supporting one party or another, but about protecting social and religious freedoms, and the plurality and diversity of the country.

The Grand Mufti of Syria, Dr. Ahmad Badr Al-Din Hassoun, is one of the most moderate Muslim leaders in the Middle East, and a highly respected Sunni thinker in his own right. He is

¹⁷⁶ Speaking at the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate in Damascus on 2 September 2016.

¹⁷⁷ His Holiness Patriarch Gregorius III Laham, speaking at the Melkite Patriarchate in Damascus in November 2015

passionate about the plurality of Syrian society and the equal place that Muslims, Christians and Jews, have always had, and should continue to have, within it. Typical of his inclusiveness are the words he spoke to the German Parliament in 2008, "I am Sunni in practice, Shiite in allegiance. My roots are Salafi, and my purity is Sufi." And in September 2016, he said: "Whether you are Buddhist, Christian, or atheist you are my brother. We are all related to God, and He is a God of Love."¹⁷⁸ Sadly, Dr. Hassoun has been vilified by many Sunnis for his liberal Muslim stance towards other religious groups, his sympathies with Sufi spirituality – which has long played an important role in Syrian Islam - and for being, like all Grand Muftis in the region, an appointee of the Government.

On Christmas Eve, 2017, the UK 'Sunday Telegraph' published an article by Bishop Antoine Audo, Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo. Speaking first of the work of Caritas in Syria, of which Bishop Audo was President, he wrote:

"I am convinced that our work changed the attitude of the Muslim majority towards our Christian community. We served the poor without discrimination or fear. This was new to Syria, where people tend to see a duty only to their family or tribe. During the hostilities, we were at risk from the militants and safe only in government-controlled areas, but that has eased as rebels retreat."

He continued:

"At the start of the conflict, militants tried to pit Muslims against Christians, but they failed. Our country has a rich culture and history to which Syrians are loyal, regardless of religion. Syria is more than one man: this is not well understood in the West. It is very important that we continue to represent Arab Christianity, to show the Muslim and Arab world that there are Christians with whom they can have a dialogue. We must do all we can to stay and maintain our presence, but Christians in Syria have lost confidence that they can have security and stability. That is what they will pray for this Christmas."

Bishop Audo's statement is a true reflection of what many Syrians passionately affirm: "Our country has a rich culture and history to which Syrians are loyal, regardless of religion." But as we shall see when considering the results of a Questionnaire, the impact of the conflict on inter-religious relations varies according to different contexts and the degree to which the conflict has affected communities. The occupation of the village of Maaloula by Islamist forces, and its aftermath, offers an insight, even whilst villagers emphasise that what happened was not 'sectarian', but politically and ideologically motivated, of how inter-religious

¹⁷⁸ The Grand Mufti of Syria, Dr. Ahmad Badr al Hassoun, speaking at his home in September 2016.

attitudes have been impacted by violence, and how the impact of this changing religious dynamic presents challenges for the future.

4.4 Maaloula

Maaloula lies in the Qalamoun region, where Christianity settled early in the Christian era. 'Maaloula' means 'the entrance', which refers to the narrow pass at the foot of which the village sits, and that features in the story of St. Thecla, a disciple of St. Paul who lived and died here and whose shrine is a place of pilgrimage for both Christians and Muslims. There is evidence of human habitation for the last 10,000 years. Situated dramatically against a rocky escarpment 60kms north of Damascus, this small Christian town has been a place of pilgrimage for centuries, and is one of the few places remaining in the world where Aramaic, the language of Jesus, has survived as a spoken, rural dialect.

The village has a majority population of Antiochene Greek Orthodox and Melkite Greek Catholic Christians, (who use the Arab language in their oriental Byzantine liturgy), living alongside a minority Muslim community. Apart from a few periods of tension, particularly in the nineteenth century, the Christian and Muslim communities have lived side by side for centuries. The village's isolation until recent decades is one reason that the community resisted Arabisation and Islamisation, thus preserving its western Aramaic linguistic heritage for so long. Maaloula used to be home to about 15,000 people some decades ago, but in 2004, the Syrian Bureau of Statistics gave the full-time number of residents as 2762.¹⁷⁹ However, this number increased dramatically during the summer holidays, when families from Damascus would come to stay in the village.

Tradition describes how St. Thecla, a first century disciple of St. Paul, who vowed to devote her life to Christ, fled persecution and found refuge in Maaloula. Thecla was widely venerated in the early Church, and in the Eastern Churches continues to be regarded as a role model for women.¹⁸⁰ Prior to the conflict, pilgrims from all over the world climbed the steps above St. Thecla Convent to visit her tomb in the cave where she resided. In September 2016, I returned to the shrine. Picking through rubble in the desecrated convent, past smashed mosaics, and

¹⁷⁹ http://www.cbssyr.org/new%20web%20site/General_census/census_2004/NH/TAB03-17-2004.h

¹⁸⁰ Traditions about St. Thecla are to be found in a second century text entitled *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*

the burnt-out Church, I climbed to the cave, to find the shrine blackened by fire – icons stolen or destroyed, and the altar smashed by the militants who had occupied Maaloula in 2013. Visiting again in May 2017, the Convent was already in an advanced state of restoration. By September 2017, the restoration was almost complete.

On a cliff overlooking the town of Maaloula stands the Melkite Greek Catholic Monastery of St. Sergius (Mar Sarkis). Built on the site of a pagan shrine, and with a marble altar that predates Christianity, parts of the Church date to the 4th Century. Some of the wood in the walls of the Church has been carbon-dated to over 2000 years old. The monastery also contained unique Byzantine icons which were either stolen or destroyed during the Monastery's occupation and use as a Headquarters by Jabhat al Nusra. As with the Convent of St. Thecla in the valley below, pilgrims used to come from all over the world to visit this church, but during the occupation of Maaloula by the Islamists, the Monastery was occupied as a headquarters by the fighters, from which snipers would fire on the villagers below. (On 17 September 2013 a local farmer was shot dead from this monastery whilst collecting water from the village spring in the centre of the village.) The Church was badly desecrated and damaged in battle. Since the liberation of the town in April 2014 by the Syrian Army, the Monastery has been fully restored. A leader of the local Christian community, Abdo Haddad has been instrumental in negotiating the return from Lebanon of some of the items that had been "looted and smuggled by the traitors".¹⁸¹ The monastery is once again being looked after by a local priest, Fr. Abdullah, and a 'family' of staff who welcome guests, maintain the monastery, and tend the fields.

Maaloula's history has always been fragile. Situated in a remote area of the Qalamoun, the village sits at the head of a fertile valley. Farming is the main local industry, and Maaloula is known for the quality of its produce. Pichon records the hypothesis that the Christians of Maaloula are descendants of a nomadic tribe who originated in Mesopotamia north of the Euphrates, and fled the Muslim invasion. Some settled in the ante-Lebanon range, and others in the Hauran region in southern Syria. However, this hypothesis has not been proved, and Christian monasteries already existed in the town prior to the Muslim conquest. Whatever their true origins, the area's inhabitants are known for their courage, and from the earliest years of the Muslim conquest, local Christians resisted Islamisation (Pichon, 2010).¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Email Correspondence with Abdo Haddad, 2 September 2017

¹⁸² For a local history of Maaloula, see: (Nasrullah, 2007). '*Ma'loula. A tale of man and sanctity of land and tongue.*'

One of the most famous features of Maaloula's cultural history is the celebration of the Feast of the Holy Cross which takes place on 14 September each year. The feast commemorates the finding of the 'true Cross' in Jerusalem in the fourth century, by Empress Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine. Tradition states that she ordered fires to be lit on high mountains across the region, to mark a signal until it reached the Emperor. The night before the celebration, bonfires are lit on the summit of both mountains north and south of the town to mark the start of the feast. For centuries, and continuing to the present day, thousands of people gather to mark the occasion. Two other important celebrations in Maaloula are the Greek Orthodox Feast of St. Thecla on 27 September, and the Greek Catholic (Melkite) celebration of the Feast of St. Sergius on 7 October. In celebrating these feasts, authentic Eastern Christian traditions are preserved, and remain of global religious and historic significance.

During Ottoman times, owing to the economic disadvantages faced by *dhimmis*, limitations in transport links, the riots of 1850 and 1860, and the political instability of the French Mandate, the village saw a steady decline in its population, with families moving to the growing and developing cities of Damascus or Beirut, or as far afield as South America. However, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, an increasing number of visitors: European academics, orientalist, travellers and pilgrims, were drawn by the unique religious, cultural, anthropological and linguistic heritage of the village, and helped raise awareness of the village's historical and religious significance. For despite its relative proximity to Damascus, its uniqueness had been preserved by its' geographic isolation. After independence, the fortunes of the village improved further as villagers were able to articulate the unique Aramaic and Eastern Christian identity of the community, in the context of a nationalist vision that sought to include and celebrate the multiple identities that existed historically within Syrian society (Pichon, 2010).

The years 1831 to 1860 were tense for the region, and have not been forgotten. In 1831, the Egyptian army, supported by western powers, conquered the Ottoman Province of Syria. In 1840, the Ottoman Pasha reconquered the area, but unrest and violence continued. These years coincided with the period of Ottoman *tanzimat* reforms that lifted economic restrictions on *dhimmi* populations, and re-framed the *millet* system to allow legal protection and a degree of independence in religious and social law, to minority groups. But it also reduced the power and economic freedom of local land-owners, creating resentment and political discontent. The

reforms were intended to improve life for non-Turk subjects, enhance civil liberties, liberate economic policies, and grant more equality of status to non-Muslim citizens, but the process of economic and political modernisation was seen by many Muslims as an example of excessive foreign influence in the region. It also served to centralise power, and included an unpopular general conscription into the Ottoman army, which could be waived by the payment of an exemption tax. Ironically, given the professional status of many non-Muslim citizens of the Ottoman Empire, further resentments developed as it was often these who could afford to pay for exemption. The Qalamoun region was one area in which bandits, and rebels opposed to the reforms, operated.¹⁸³

In 1850, the Shi'ite governor of Baalbeck, Muhammad Harfouch, rebelled against the Ottoman government, and his rebels took refuge in the vicinity of Maaloula. Pichon notes that: "It seems that the inhabitants of Maaloula had no participation in the events, refrained from aiding the rebels and collaborated effectively with Mustafa Pacha, " (the Ottoman governor).¹⁸⁴ But in the belief that St. Sergius Convent had given refuge to the rebels, Ottoman soldiers nevertheless attacked both convents, raped a number of women, and slit the throat of twenty-two villagers. The Greek Orthodox Bishop of Maaloula was reportedly one of those killed. Further unrest (and massacres of Christians) that took place in Damascus and Aleppo in 1860 added to the communal memory of Maaloula, and helped precipitate further emigration from the village, particularly to the Christian quarters of the Old City of Damascus.

Maaloula also featured in the 'Great Revolt' by Syrian nationalists against the French Mandate in 1925¹⁸⁵. The Christian communities in Maaloula -particularly the Greek Catholics - faced a difficult dilemma in that they had been protected by the French, and did not wish to participate in the uprising. When nearby Nebek became a centre for militant groups, the militants demanded assistance from the village in order to fight the Mandate authorities. The people of Maaloula refused, and were attacked. Churches were set alight, and in October 1925, a battle took place between residents and the militant groups for two days, whilst the women hid in caves above the village. Amongst the defenders, only two were killed, whilst the attackers suffered many casualties. A siege followed through the winter, with the French authorities providing support to the village, but was finally called off, following agreements between the French occupiers and the militant fighters. Maaloula's appeal to the French

¹⁸³ Pichon, Frederic. (2010) Kindle version. Location 2501.

¹⁸⁴ Pichon, Frederic. (2010) Kindle version. Location 2525. My translation.

¹⁸⁵ Pichon, Frederic. (2010) Kindle version. Location 4174-4390

authorities in this period adds complexity to the historic understanding of communal dynamics, and the loyalties of different Christian communities. As Pichon notes (my translation of the original French): “History has shown that except for rare exceptions, Catholic populations were the only ones to support the French Mandate, whilst Orthodox and Muslims opposed them.”¹⁸⁶ Indeed, it was reported by “Sisters of the Holy Heart” that during the siege, some Orthodox and Muslims left the village, and in 1926, (as was to be the case ninety years later), a number of Muslim villagers joined the attackers.

These experiences in the 19th and early 20th centuries in Maaloula, illustrate the complexity and sensitivity of communal loyalties, and the fact that tensions that arise at different times and underlie the plurality of the context are both inter-religious and ecumenical. And when they do find expression, they often do so for political rather than religious or sectarian reasons.

Notwithstanding the positive coexistence that was re-established between the communities in subsequent years, historical memory has established a lasting concern amongst Maaloula’s residents of the possibility of communal tension that could evolve into sectarian violence. The events of 2013 brought that memory to the fore, to the extent that most villagers are reluctant to allow the return of fellow citizens who supported the ‘rebels,’ on the basis that they worry that their hatred will only remain dormant until another opportunity to resort to violence appears.

The story of the occupation of Maaloula by multiple Islamist factions, and its subsequent liberation, offers a poignant ‘window’ into the damage that has been done to the multiple communities in Syria during the course of the conflict. As Abdo Haddad says, “Our souls are fractured”. This fracturing reflects the pain of the challenge presented to the coexistence and trust that had for so long prevailed for the most part in Maaloula, and in Syria itself. In Maaloula, the most traumatic fact for the Christian community is that – reopening communal wounds and memories from past events - some local members of the Muslim community provided arms and fighters to the terrorist groups and participated in the looting of homes, the desecration of shrines, and the killing of residents. Yet, like so many others throughout Syria, Abdo stresses that he does not see this as a conflict between Christians and Muslims, but

¹⁸⁶ Pichon, Frederic. (2010) Kindle version. Location 4366.

rather as a defence of Syria itself, and the coexistence, plurality and diversity which has been at the heart of the nation for generations.

Having visited Maaloula several times prior to the conflict, it was deeply poignant to visit the town several times between 2015 and 2018 after its occupation by terrorists and subsequent liberation. In May 2017 I was privileged to meet a group of refugees from the village at St. Saviour's Monastery not far from Sidon in Lebanon, and a few days later, to attend a moving memorial service in Lebanon, to six young men who had been kidnapped in 2013, but whose bodies were only found in 2016, and formally identified by DNA samples in 2017. In the Church were several hundred refugees from Maaloula, the pain of their experiences and their loss and exile deeply etched on their face.

The militants first occupied the northern lands of Maaloula in December 2012. On 8 February 2013 they occupied the spectacularly located 4 Star Safir Hotel overlooking the town, making it their headquarters. This had been a beautiful and much-loved hotel in which I had stayed twice prior to the conflict. But today it stands in ruins.

The first major attack occurred on 4 September 2013, when a suicide-bomber exploded a massive car-bomb at the entrance gate to the town, killing several soldiers at the checkpoint. This was followed by co-ordinated attacks against Syrian army positions near the town. As a local farmer, and other witnesses said:

The fighters included people from the Free Syrian Army, the Al Farouq Brigades, Ahfad al Rasul, Jabhat al Nusra, Jaish al Islam, Ahrar al Sham, Jabhat Islammiya, Palestinian Hamas fighters (Jabhat Tahreer al-Qalamoun), and Jabhat al Ruhr Qalomoun. Amongst them were fighters from Libya, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Uyghur Turkic Chinese as well as Syrians.¹⁸⁷

Abdo Haddad stresses: "We must emphasise that the so-called 'moderate' 'Free Syrian Army' were major partners in all of these. There was no distinguishing between the 'moderate' groups and the extremist factions." On 7 September 2013, the militants broke into the town and entered the home of Antoinette and her brother Anton. Antoinette is still suffering from her injuries, and her grief is deep. She still lives in the small house that changed her life, and it was there that she told us how she, her brother Anton, her elderly and sick father, her aunt,

¹⁸⁷ Interview with refugees from Maaloula. At St. Saviour Monastery, Lebanon. 1 May 2017

and her brother-in-law and nephew, Serkis and Mikhael, hearing the shouts of 'Allahu Akhbar' from terrorists as they broke down the door and entered the courtyard, hid in the small cave at the back of the house that acts as a store room. On being called out and told they would be safe, Anton, Serkis and Mikhael went to talk to the fighters. Once they were out, the terrorists nevertheless fired into the home, wounding Antoinette in her hiding place. Terrified and injured, Antoinette heard what followed. "The terrorists demanded that Anton recite the *Shehadeh*. Anton's reply was: 'I was born Christian and I will die Christian.'" They shot him dead, and Serkis and Mikhael were each murdered as they too refused to convert. It wasn't until four hours later that local Defence Fighters were able to rescue Antoinette and her surviving family from the home.¹⁸⁸

A few days later on 7th of September six young men were kidnapped. What is particularly difficult for the Christian community in Maaloula to forgive is the fact that "four of the six young men were kidnapped by their Sunni neighbours who were working with the terrorists. And then they were executed by the Maaloula Muslim Leader Emad Diab and his local gang."¹⁸⁹ Their bodies were finally discovered in 2016.

Most of the residents of the village escaped on 7 September via sewers out of the village, leaving local Defence volunteers. The following weeks and months saw a long and difficult battle between the Maaloula Defence force, with the Syrian Army and Hezbollah, and the terrorist factions to recapture the town – a battle that cost the lives of over 200 Syrian Army soldiers. During this time, the terrorists "brought in looting gangs to the town. They wrote on the doors of houses either 'This is a Muslim house', or, on Christian homes, 'We will slaughter you.'"¹⁹⁰ By the time Maaloula was recaptured, "ninety homes were destroyed; no church was left intact. The terrorists dug up graves and desecrated bodies. They destroyed farms, and cut down fruit trees."¹⁹¹

On 2 December 2013, Jabhat-al-Nusra kidnapped thirteen Greek Orthodox Nuns from the Convent of St. Thekla. They were held for three months in various locations, finally ending up in Yabroud, before negotiations involving the Qatari, Lebanese and Syrian governments resulted in their release on 9 March 2014, in exchange for 150 women detained in prisons in

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Antoinette in her home in Maaloula. 3 September 2016

¹⁸⁹ Abdo Haddad writing in an email correspondence dated 2 September 2017

¹⁹⁰ Interview with refugee from Maaloula. 1 May 2017

¹⁹¹ Sarkis Raiham, a local farmer, speaking at St. Saviour Monastery, Lebanon on 1 May 2017.

Syria. At the time of writing, the nuns were living in safety in another Greek Orthodox monastery in Syria, awaiting the completion of restoration work on the Convent of St. Thekla.¹⁹²

On 14 April 2014, the town of Maaloula was finally recaptured, but its shrines and a large majority of homes in the Old Town were very badly damaged. A year later, a statue of the Virgin Mary, introduced by the 'Syrian Trust', a charity presided over by the First Lady of Syria, Asma Assad, was placed on one of the rocky pinnacles overlooking the town to replace the one that had been destroyed by the Islamist fighters. Since then, substantial works of restoration have taken place at both the shrines – Mar Thecla and Mar Sarkis – as well as local Churches, and local homes.¹⁹³ The villagers who have remained and those who have returned are keen to see the town returned to its former glory, and for most of its residents to return. At the end of 2014, there were 1400 people in Maaloula. In 2017, there were just 800 people in the town. Those who could return but haven't are reluctant primarily for economic reasons. The town still lacks an adequate transport system, and much infrastructure has yet to be fully restored. In May 2017, there was still fear that terrorists who had not been completely expelled from the Qalamoun region, might return and attempt to attack the village again. But once they were defeated in the area, it was hoped that the rate of return would increase.¹⁹⁴

Many citizens of Maaloula are keen to stress the historic coexistence in Maaloula, and resist a sectarian narrative. Rather, what happened is seen as politically motivated, with an external religious agenda – namely that of those who adhere to *Salafist* and *Wahhabi* ideology. For most, the deepest hurt is that some of the residents of Maaloula assisted the terrorists. As one resident put it bluntly: "This is not about Christianity versus Islam, but about patriots versus betrayers of the country."

Mr. George Reihan from Maaloula said: "We spent hundreds of years living together without a problem. It was only after residents of the village went to live and work in Qatar and Saudi

¹⁹² The following article from 'Al Monitor', dated 11 March 2014, details the negotiations leading up to the release of the nuns. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/03/syria-nuns-maaloula-released.html>

¹⁹³ See also: <https://www.sott.net/article/331705-Eva-Bartlett-Overcoming-savagery-treachery-Maaloulas-heroic-defenders-fight-for-the-future>. In this article, Eva Bartlett recounts her visit to Maaloula, and interviews with a few of the same figures mentioned here.

¹⁹⁴ Discussions with refugees from Maaloula at St. Saviour Monastery, Lebanon, 1 May 2017.

Arabia, and returned with sectarian tendencies that tensions developed.”¹⁹⁵ Fr. Fadi Barkil, also from Maaloula, spoke similarly. His own brother was kidnapped, but freed after a ransom was paid. Another young member of the family was however killed in the conflict. This had a huge emotional impact on the whole family. He says:

Before the war started, Muslims and Christians were united together. We shared our celebrations and our family events. It is the war that has caused the separation and severely damaged relationships. But we still thank God for our lives. We are told to love our enemies. We are ready to do that, but on the human side, there must be justice. Christianity started in the Middle East and we hope it will continue for many years. But we need people to return. We need help to rebuild the homes and the shrines. In Lebanon and Syria, Christians are learning and teaching what it means to be disciples. Christians in the West should join us in that discipleship.¹⁹⁶

In Maaloula, someone wishing to remain anonymous gave a more nuanced account that suggests a complex process of developing communal distrust in recent decades.

In Maaloula we had good social relationships until the 1980s. Then it began to diminish and Muslims distanced themselves. Initially there was tension between Islamists and the Government, with Christians in the middle. At first, Muslims didn't want to displace the Christians but wanted to be in charge of the town. But later, a fanatical dimension developed amongst some residents. Christians and Muslims had always been careful not to hurt each other. We shared life in most fields and in joyous and sad occasions. But we were always conscious of differences and were afraid to speak about them. There were good relationships on the surface, but they couldn't go deeper. A lot of foreign hands contributed to this weak point in Syrian society. They drove a sectarian wedge between Sunni and Alawite, and later with the Christians. The beginning of healing will be addressing some of these problems. But we cannot address them until the end of the war. Up until now, about 300 families have returned. Of these, about 20 are Muslim, but otherwise it is forbidden for the Muslims to return. It is too complicated and we are too afraid. But we will have to deal with it.” And in a comment typically courageous of local Syrian Christian communities, the speaker added: “Despite the very bad situation, we are here by the grace of God. Maybe we need it to shake us and wake us up; to think about our problems, and to use this experience to learn for the future.”¹⁹⁷

A further historical insight was added by a member of the Maaloula Council. “Our problem began with the Ottoman occupation. Many of the villages in this area were Christian, but when there was drought, the Ottoman authorities refused to help the Christians unless they

¹⁹⁵ Mr. George Reihan speaking with other Maaloula refugees at St. Saviour Monastery, Lebanon. 1 May 2017

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Fr. Fadi Bakil. Zahle, Lebanon. 2 May 2017

¹⁹⁷ Interview in Maaloula. 16 May 2017

became Muslim. Many converted.” This comment reflects an ambiguous attitude towards the Ottoman era held by many Christians, who regarded it, despite its longevity, as a period of ‘occupation’. Echoing everyone else I spoke to, he continued:

For us, 1946-1982 was a good period. It was the rise of the *Ikhwan* (The Muslim Brotherhood) that started the deterioration. Many Syrians also went to Saudi Arabia and converted to Wahhabi ideology. Since the 1980s, there has been a changing mood between Christians and Muslims. We started having criticism about the Church bells ringing, about the cross on the hill, and the lighting of fires on the Feast of Mariam. The extremists waited for their moment. When the terrorists came, some local people chose to work with them. There were Saudis, Turks, Afghans amongst them, and local people received many *Ryals* (Saudi currency) to work with them. Before the war, I worked at a clinic in a neighbouring village. The Muslims would come to me for treatment, and many chose to support the Syrian army. Maaloula was a centre for education, health care, and for some of the finest traditional industry in Syria. Some people no longer trust the Muslims and say they cannot return. They fear that they will wait again for the right moment to try to do the same thing. We don’t know what to do.¹⁹⁸

The importance of the Ottoman era as far as Christian-Muslim relationships are concerned are often referred to in conversations, and hint at underlying historical communal tensions. A resident of Maaloula who wished to remain anonymous said:

Our problem in Maaloula and in neighbouring Christian villages began with the Ottoman occupation. Difficult circumstances forced some Christians to become Muslim. I think we are living in a very significant period. Events since the start of the ‘Arab Spring’ are as important as the fall of Constantinople in the sixteenth century. If terrorist groups succeed here in Syria, then maybe they will succeed in Europe. The Syrian army is preventing this from happening. Maybe, our Syrian martyrs are dying to protect Europe.¹⁹⁹

A leading elder of the community, echoing a theme repeated by many Christians in Syria – bewilderment at the collusion of western Christians with those threatening Syria’s plurality, and awareness of possible consequences said:

What are the western churches doing supporting the terrorists? I am warning you. This extreme ideology will come to the west. I have no problems with Muslims. We lived with them for years. But there are two faces. Once the flow of money started to come from the Gulf to the terrorist factions, even some of the young men I taught became more and more extremist. A little before the crisis, we noticed that two schools in the village started to wear uniforms from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. When the

¹⁹⁸ Interview in Maaloula with Dr. Joseph Saadeh, Local Councillor and Dentist. 14 May 2017

¹⁹⁹ Interview in Maaloula. 14 May 2017

crisis started, some civilians suddenly became militants, and even wrote ‘No religion but Islam,’ and ‘we will come back and slaughter you’ on our doors.²⁰⁰

A local Christian shop-keeper made a similar point:

We are good people and we deal with people in good faith. Many Christians bring Muslims to work with them – and many Muslims want to work with the Christians, because they know they will be treated fairly. Maaloula was attacked one hundred years ago by Muslims. They have done so again. And we fear that if they come back, they will wait for the right time and do so again.²⁰¹

Everyone I have spoken to in and from Maaloula believes that events there represent a lesson for the wider world. The documented collusion of western nations with the forces that destroyed Maaloula and threatened the cohesion of Syrian society, and the silence of western Christian communities in the face of the persecution of Christians by extremists in Syria, has not been lost on both Christian and Muslim Syrians who value the pluralist tradition of the country.²⁰² Fr Nabil Wakim, Superior of St. Saviour’s Monastery in Lebanon says:

Jesus told us to always tell the truth. If the west doesn’t tell the truth, and stand by the Christians of the East, it will be the beginning of the end for Christianity in the West. Christians there are contributing to the persecution of the Churches in the East, but instead, they should be supporting us.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ Interview with a village elder in Maaloula. 20 September 2017

²⁰¹ Interview with a shopkeeper in Maaloula. 15 May 2017

²⁰² In a House of Lords Debate on Syria on 20 September, 2017, Baroness Caroline Cox asked what types of assistance the British Government provided to the Syrian opposition between 2015 and 2017. Lord Ahmad, Minister of State for the Commonwealth replied: *“Through the cross-government Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) for Syria the UK is supporting those groups opposed to Daesh and Assad as well as Syrian civilians and their communities. This support to the moderate opposition has included political support and non-lethal equipment. In terms of equipment, we have provided communications, medical and logistics equipment. We have also provided equipment to protect against chemical weapons attack. For security reasons we do not disclose the names of groups supported. The UK does not supply weapons to anybody in Syria. The value of the CSSF for Syria is £69 million in the current financial year, was £64 million in 2016-17, and £66 million in 2015-16.”* On 14 December 2017, in response to a tabled Parliamentary Question (HL4196) concerning support to armed opposition groups in Syria, Lord Ahmad replied: *“In partnership with other donor countries Her Majesty’s Government provides a range of support to Syrians to help save lives, bolster civil society, counter extremism, promote human rights and accountability, and lay the foundations for a more peaceful future. This financial year, we have allocated over £60 million through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). Of this, £10 million has gone to armed opposition groups, in the form of non-lethal assistance and lifesaving support, helping them protect civilians from the threats of both the Assad regime and extremists.”*

²⁰³ Fr. Nabil Wakim. Speaking at St. Saviour’s Monastery, Lebanon. 1 May 2017

In Maaloula, a local shopkeeper added: “Christians are taught to love one another. Where is the support of western Christians for us here? If this continues, what happened here in Maaloula will happen in Europe.”²⁰⁴

But the Christians of Maaloula are not depending on external support, and are adamant that it is up to Syrians inside Syria to determine their own future. Fr. Tawfiq, the Melkite Parish Priest of St. George’s Church in Maaloula says: “Theologically, we are fighting a battle with the forces of evil. We will learn for the future. As Christians, we have a major part to play in making Syria a better society and restoring hope and trust, and we have a lot to offer. We will be true, frank and strong in belief.”²⁰⁵ Many are keen to stress that they do not see this as a sectarian issue. Abdo Haddad, a leading figure in the Maaloula community said:

Whether we are Sunni, Shi’a, Druze, Alwaite, Orthodox, Catholic, we are all Syrians. Christians have a key part to play in the future of the country so long as we recognise that we are Syrians first. This is not a civil war, but rather a war against our country by foreign invaders. Fundamentalist Islam is not a religion. It is a political ideology. It is not Christianity against Islam. It is our government and President who hold our country together. Without them, minorities will be driven out.²⁰⁶

Despite the pain of what has happened, and the fear of what the future could hold, the people of Maaloula exhibit a remarkable degree of resilience, and a determination to ensure that Maaloula will once again be the place of peace, hope and faith that it has represented for so many generations. The Head of the Maaloula Council, says:

What we need is a period when Truth can be told followed by a process of reconciliation. The conflict has caused great tensions. We want to overcome them, and ensure that we can all live with equal rights and free from any extremist ideology.²⁰⁷

The speed with which restoration work of homes and churches has been undertaken, even whilst the war continued in other parts of the country, is witness to the will of the people to survive and flourish, and of the symbolic cultural and religious importance that Maaloula holds in the country as a whole.

²⁰⁴ Maaloula Shopkeeper. Speaking in Maaloula on 15 May 2017.

²⁰⁵ Fr. Tawfiz, Priest of St. George’s Melkite Greek Catholic Church, Maaloula. 16 May 2017.

²⁰⁶ Abdo Haddad, speaking to a British delegation in Beirut. 29 April 2017

²⁰⁷ Conversation with Head of Maaloula Council. Maaloula. 15 May 2017.

4.5 Aleppo.

Whilst Ma'aloula provides a 'window' into the inter-communal context within a rural Christian village in Syria, the city of Aleppo offers an insight into the urban context, and how the multiple communities within the city, influenced by the city's importance as a centre of trade, have evolved and related through different historical periods and under numerous internal and external influences. This account focusses on the impact of the recent conflict on communal relations.²⁰⁸

Before the conflict, the journey to Aleppo was an easy four-hour journey north from Damascus, along the main highway through Homs and Hama. However, during the conflict, the journey was much more difficult and dangerous, involving a diversion that extended the journey-time by at least three hours. The highway between Homs and Aleppo passed through territory occupied by multiple militant groups, controlled mainly by the notorious Jabhat al-Nusra faction, an Al-Qaeda affiliate. The alternative route was only marginally less dangerous, following a narrow corridor between territory controlled by ISIS on one side, and Jabhat al-Nusra on the other. For six years, this was the only means by which the city of Aleppo – just under 2 million people – could be supplied with food, medical supplies, and fuel.

To reach Aleppo required a turning east from Homs, past the town of Al-Salamiyeh, (a centre for Ismaili Islam and the burial place of the father of the current Aga Khan). Politically, Al-Salamiyeh was an early centre for the 2011 demonstrations, but allegiances remained loyal to the government, when, for over four years, the town was regularly attacked by surrounding Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS forces battling the government for control of the only route available through which the city of Aleppo could receive supplies. In one of the deserted towns in this area, we saw graffiti insulting a local Saudi Sheikh who had preached Wahhabi ideology and encouraged the town to rise up against the government. Many Syrian Sunnis are resentful of the role that extremist Islamic ideologies have played in destabilising the country.

The road continues about sixty miles eastwards along the main road to Al-Raqqah, to the Ithriyah junction, just short of what was then ISIS-controlled territory, where a further road heads north across the desert to Khanasser. This journey was one of the most dangerous in Syria, and had regularly been attacked both by ISIS and Jihadist groups, who occupied large

²⁰⁸ A brief history of Aleppo in Appendix 4 contextualises the city's communal landscape.

swathes of territory either side of the highway. Buildings and villages along the way had been destroyed, and both sides of the highway were littered with the burnt-out remains of vehicles – cars, buses, lorries - that had been shelled or ambushed by the militants. The road's vulnerability was enhanced by the fact that it passes through flat, open desert. From Khanasser, another site of many battles, the route to Aleppo continues along the western edge of Lake Jabboul (the other side of which was ISIS territory), and finally along the notorious 'Castello Road', which was under constant attack by multiple 'rebel' factions, into Aleppo. For six years, this route remained the only means of access for the 1.8 million inhabitants of government-held West Aleppo, who were in effect under siege from the ISIS and Jihadist factions that surrounded them.

It was along this road that I travelled twice during the 'rebel' occupation of East Aleppo, and thrice after the city had been liberated. On two of those occasions, vehicles were attacked within hours of our passing by.

The journey took nine hours from Damascus, when in September 2016, I led the first British delegation to visit Aleppo since 2012 – a delegation that included three Peers from the House of Lords, Baroness Cox, Lord Hylton, and Anglican Bishop, Rt.Revd Michael Nazir-Ali. En-route, we stopped at a check-point in Homs for refreshments, and talked with the soldiers there. The following day, a car bomb exploded at the same checkpoint, killing all the soldiers and over forty civilians in their cars as they waited to pass. It was one of four car-bombs that exploded in different cities in Syria that day, resulting in dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries, but which went unreported in the western media. Such attacks committed by militant groups in government-controlled areas of Syria on an almost daily basis were rarely reported in the western media.

Arriving in Aleppo was a surprise. Passing through the destroyed remnants of areas of the city that had been recaptured from 'rebel' groups, and at times with banks of dirt and buses thrown on their sides to protect passing vehicles from the possibility of sniper fire, one suddenly entered government-controlled West Aleppo, where 1.8 million people live. In the space of a hundred metres, one passed from streets of destroyed buildings, into a vibrant, busy city. Shops and cafes were open and operating. People and vehicles filled the streets going about their daily business. The world had been given the impression of a destroyed city, and indeed much of it was, but the reality of daily life for the majority of the city's population

in the western part of the city, which was under constant attack by militant groups, was rarely mentioned in the media. Here, people of all communities, living together, were able to get on with their lives, notwithstanding that no area of the city was safe from the constant shelling and gunfire that was randomly directed hourly into busy neighbourhoods.

According to the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics and the Aleppo City Council, prior to the conflict, the population of Aleppo was just over 2.3 million in 2005. The current population is estimated to be about 1.8 million, although this figure is changing as civilians are returning in significant numbers to the city. Prior to the conflict, the city consisted of roughly 80% Sunni Muslims, 12% Christians (of whom about 30% are Armenian), 7-10% Kurd, and the remainder being other minority groups. Aleppo saw a huge influx of Armenian refugees during the 1915 Armenian genocide in Turkey, and again in 1923, following the withdrawal of French troops from Cilicia.²⁰⁹

When the demonstrations started in Syria in 2011, most people in Aleppo remained supportive of the Syrian government. It wasn't until 22 July 2012 that eastern areas of the city were occupied by thousands of 'rebel' insurgents. Soon afterwards, they were joined by thousands more jihadists comprising many different nationalities. Thus began the battle for East Aleppo that lasted until December 2016, and that displaced, killed and injured, tens of thousands of people.

In the light of the suffering inflicted upon the city, this study seeks to understand how the conflict has impacted inter-communal relations in Aleppo, and how religious communities are responding to the trauma experienced by the city's citizens.

In September 2016, a group of British Church and political figures that I was leading arrived in Aleppo as guests of the Armenian Evangelical Church in the city to a banquet held to celebrate our visit. Armenians have been present in Aleppo for centuries. During the Ottoman period, many Armenians moved to Aleppo from Eastern Anatolia to take advantage of its economic opportunities, and by the sixteenth century, Armenians were helping to run the silk trade with Iran. The Armenian population substantially increased following the Armenian genocide in 1915.

²⁰⁹ For a brief history of Aleppo, See Appendix 4.

As the first foreign group to visit Aleppo during the battle for the city, over 250 Armenian Christians had gathered in a restaurant to welcome us. A classical string quintet played music as we ate, accompanied by the sound of explosions and gunfire. At one point I remarked to the person next to me, "That was close." He replied, "Of course, we are only three hundred and fifty metres from the frontline." The dinner continued. Everyone there had been experiencing constant shelling and sniping from the 'rebel' groups for four years. It had become a kind of 'normality'. On one day alone during our visit in September 2016, the University of Aleppo was hit by four shells killing a number of staff and students, and we were prevented from visiting some churches in the city due to shelling in the vicinity by 'rebel' factions in the east of the city. Our Armenian hosts were hospitable and welcoming, but urged us to challenge the Christian community at home, asking why the West was supporting Islamist groups that were targeting and threatening the existence of the Christian community, not just in Aleppo, but in Syria as well - a question repeatedly asked by both Christians and Muslims on all of my visits to Syria.

Haroutoun Selimien, the President of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Syria, remarked in April 2017 that despite the profound suffering for all communities, the war had had some positive impact for the Christian community in Syria. He said:

"Our survival has given us a strong character, and has taught us patience and what it means to hope. We are having to learn what it means to live out our Christian faith and to tolerate others. Regarding Christian-Muslim relations, we continue to live in harmony despite the crisis, and there is no discrimination in our schools. Sometimes, some become fanatical. But whether they are Christian or Muslim, that is dangerous. We always talk together. But our dialogue is not a religious dialogue. It is a dialogue of life."

Speaking of the role of the Church, he added,

"As Christians, Jews or Muslims, we share the same culture, and in Syria we have a culture based on tolerance. We share the same land, the same history, the same resources. It is on these bases that we succeeded in living together. We need to build on that and ensure that that knowledge and experience is shared with the next generation. The Church will assume its responsibilities to be light and salt within Syrian society beyond the conflict. All the eleven Christian denominations in Syria have the same word and same story on this....we are an integral part of Syrian society. Most Muslims who have remained in Syria have a different vision from those who left.

They see their destiny tied to Christians. Indeed, many beg us not to leave. The Church worldwide should be supporting Christians to stay, not to leave.”²¹⁰

This message echoes many conversations held with other Church leaders in Syria, and with ordinary Syrians from different religious communities. The closeness of the relationship with the Muslim leadership in Aleppo was confirmed when prior to our departure, twelve senior Muslim leaders from the city joined a service at the Armenian Evangelical Church in the city. At a meeting with them afterwards, the Sheikhs affirmed their respect for the Christian communities, their abhorrence of Wahhabi ideology, and their support for the Syrian government.

In December 2016, I was invited to join Vanessa Beeley, an independent investigative journalist, and Jan Oberg, a Danish peace researcher and Chairman of the Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, based in Sweden, in Aleppo.²¹¹ I had no idea at the time that I would be in Aleppo at the historic moment when East Aleppo would be retaken by the Syrian government from the Islamist groups that had occupied it since 2012. I travelled independently from Damascus to Aleppo in a taxi. The western media narrative for many months had been of the Syrian government attacking and besieging innocent civilians in Aleppo. Realities on the ground challenged that narrative. Rarely was it mentioned or shown that all the areas of the city under government-control were under constant attack from ‘rebel’ shells and snipers, with schools, hospitals, colleges, churches and busy streets being regularly targeted, with the loss of many civilian lives. Nevertheless, in government-controlled areas, people were free to go about their daily business. Cafes, shops, businesses were open. The streets were busy. People continued to attend churches and mosques.

My first night of this visit was the night of the final battle to defeat the fighters in the east of the city. Staying on the 19th floor of the only major hotel to have stayed open during the course of the conflict, I had a view across the city and of the battle as it happened. I was told that that the day before the final bombardment, several thousand civilians had been able to leave the area, and that it was mostly fighters who remained in the vicinity. The following

²¹⁰ Quotes taken from Interviews with Haroutein Selimian in Beirut on 29 April 2017, and in Aleppo in May 2017.

²¹¹ Vanessa Beeley is an independent Journalist who has visited Syria several times during the conflict; travelling extensively in the country, and speaking to thousands of ordinary people on the ground, including highly significant locations. Her findings are painstakingly researched, and she has spent much time in East and West Aleppo researching the events that took place in the city. Some of her many articles, including eye-witness accounts, can be found on her website: www.thewallwillfall.org.

evening, it was declared that the city had been “completely liberated”, and the city erupted into celebrations. The streets were filled with thousands of people cheering and letting off fireworks, sounding car horns and flying the Syrian flag. One taxi-driver that we hailed down was in tears of joy behind the steering wheel, and said, “Thank God, thank God, the killing will end now.” For the first time in four years that night, there was no sound of shelling or gun battles in the city. A few days later, thousands of Syrians from all communities celebrated together as a huge Christmas tree was lit in the city, and for the first time in four years, Christmas was publicly celebrated.

On December 13th, Vanessa, Jan and I were the first foreigners to visit areas of East Aleppo just hours after the last snipers had been cleared from the district. We joined Fares Shehabi, an independent MP for Aleppo and Chairman of Aleppo’s Chamber of Commerce, in visits to the Sheikh Jarrar Industrial Estate on the edge of Aleppo; and to Aleppo’s Old City, the Citadel and the Umayyad Mosque.

The destruction of Aleppo’s industrial cities has been little mentioned in writings about the conflict. Sheikh Najjar Industrial City was one of Syria’s main centres of production.²¹² Prior to the conflict, it contained over a thousand working factories and had a further two hundred under construction. After the Industrial Estate’s occupation first by ISIS, and then by the ‘Free Syrian Army’ in 2012, 675 factories were dismantled; their equipment taken to Turkey, and then the factories destroyed. Fares Shehabi’s own Olive Oil factory was stripped and used as an ISIS headquarters. When the area was taken back by the Syrian government, Mr. Shehabi used his factory as a school for local and internally displaced children, with over a thousand children attending the school in three shifts. Some of the children are orphaned. In almost all places that the Jihadists occupied, they used school buildings as headquarters for militant factions, centres for weapons storage or local courts, and forbade education.

On 14 December, we took a taxi, without official accompaniment, to visit the main registration centre for internally displaced persons at Jibrin, where all civilians fleeing from East Aleppo were being received. No international media were present. The displaced persons were being registered for humanitarian reasons and being given access to services, before being free to leave either for relatives if they had them, or to reception centres where accommodation,

²¹² See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-economy-insight/hard-choices-for-syrian-industrialists-in-ruins-of-aleppo-idUSKCN1C71B8> (Accessed: 16 August 2018)

food and other services were provided. In the previous two weeks 95000 refugees had been registered, but it was estimated that a further 10,000 had not been registered. There were thousands of people there who had arrived within the last couple of days.

The centre was well organised. Syrian Red Crescent tents offered information about social welfare facilities available, and free medical attention. Ambulances were on hand to transport emergency patients direct to hospital. Free food was being distributed by the Syrian Red Crescent and the Syrian Army, and a convoy of Russian lorries was providing aid. On site, a Russian field hospital offered immediate medical treatment. The sense of relief among the thousands of refugees was palpable. All were keen to talk and said the same thing - that they had been living in fear. They reported that the fighters had been telling everyone that the Syrian Army would kill anyone who fled to the west, but they themselves had killed many who tried to leave – men, women and children. One woman broke down in tears when she told how one of her sons was killed by the ‘rebels’ a few days previously, and another kidnapped. They had also killed individuals who showed signs of supporting the government. The refugees said that the ‘rebels’ told them that only those who supported them are true ‘Muslims’, and that everyone else are ‘infidels’ and deserved to die. They told us they had been given very little food; that aid that reached the area was often refused to them or sold at exorbitant prices. Likewise, most of them had been given no medical treatment. (A doctor who had been working with refugees from East Aleppo for weeks had told me the previous evening that in an area recently liberated, a warehouse filled with brand new internationally branded medicines provided by western charities had been discovered.)

Most of the displaced said that they had had members of their families killed by the militants and spoke of widespread murder, torture, rape and kidnap by the jihadists. They said if anyone left their homes, their properties and belongings were confiscated and stolen. One old man in a wheelchair who was being given free treatment in the Russian field hospital said he had been given no treatment for three years despite asking, and cried: “Thank God we are free. We now have food. We can now live our lives. God bless the Syrian Army.” All were visibly profoundly relieved, and happy to be free. One woman said: “This is heaven compared to what we have been living.” Everything that I have seen and heard in Aleppo; from civilians in East and West from all communities, and from talking with doctors, faith communities, and with soldiers, and witnessing and risking bombardments on both sides, convinces me that the

reports in the western media have at best misrepresented realities on the ground during the conflict in Aleppo.

After the events of December 2016, the international media went silent on Aleppo. The U.N. reported that of the 135,000 people who emerged from 'rebel'-occupied areas in the weeks prior to the city's liberation, 115,000 fled to the comparative safety of government-controlled areas of the city, where they were provided with food, accommodation and medical assistance. The remaining 20,000, which included the fighters, were transported in safety to Idlib. No media sought to speak with the citizens of East Aleppo about their experiences, despite the fact that they were now accessible and eager to share the realities of what life had been like under the control of the militants in the east of the city.²¹³

In May, 2017, I returned to Aleppo as a guest of the Greek Orthodox Church to visit some of the projects run by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, Department of Economic Relief and Development, (GOPA-DERD) in the city. 'GOPA-DERD' was set up in 1994 "with the purpose of serving the other, regardless of his religion, race or colour".²¹⁴ It is the largest charitable organisation in Syria after the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, with thirteen offices in towns and cities throughout the country. The organisation manages numerous projects in support of local communities, particularly those in most need. It has thousands of volunteers - highly

²¹³ Mainstream media and social media have played a crucial role in influencing public opinion about the Syrian conflict. International mainstream media have depended almost entirely for their information upon sources from within 'rebel' controlled areas, who have a clear and fixed agenda. Reports from these areas have rarely been able to be independently verified, and yet have usually been accepted and quoted uncritically by news networks, government bodies and NGOs. Another source very regularly quoted and uncritically accepted by international news agencies and by government departments has been the 'Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.' This 'observatory' is run from a house in Coventry UK, by a Syrian, Rami Abdurrahman, who left Syria over fifteen years ago, and who, according to people who knew him in Lattakia, has long hated the Syrian government. His networks in Syria are all from areas controlled by the militants, who have been provided by international agencies and governments with sophisticated media facilities. As Zeian Karam wrote in 19 October, 2013: "Almost every opposition-held neighbourhood now has a media centre complete with high-definition cameras, satellite connections and software for secure uploading, many of them funded by Gulf Arab supporters. Syrian video activists regularly receive training from NGOs, with funds from abroad."

(<https://globalnews.ca/news/912375/social-medias-role-in-the-syrian-civil-war/>)

By contrast, daily attacks and atrocities committed by jihadist groups on government-held areas have rarely been reported, and the opinion of ordinary Syrians in these areas rarely sought, quoted, or given credence. However, numerous attempts have been made to discredit, vilify, and alienate voices that have presented a narrative different to that which mainstream media has sought to convey.

See: (Herrero-Jimenez, 2018). Accessed on Academia.edu. 16 July 2018.

²¹⁴ From the 'Faith in Action' Booklet outlining the work of GOPA-DERD. It can also be viewed on www.gopaderd.org

qualified staff with multiple expertise. Programmes include health and education projects, distribution of welfare, psycho-social programmes for those affected by conflict, shelter programmes aimed at restoring schools, hospitals and homes, water provision programmes, vocational training programmes, community based organisations programme working with local organisations and associations to implement approved local projects, and small grants programmes. It includes initiatives throughout Syria for providing safe, child-friendly spaces for play, education, and psycho-social welfare, especially for those most traumatised children.

It was inspiring to visit some of these projects in Aleppo, particularly in the devastated eastern part of the city. Staff are chosen according to expertise, not according to faith. And most beneficiaries are Muslim. Returning to East Aleppo five months after the liberation of the city, streets were coming to life and rubble had already been cleared from the streets of many districts. The area around the Citadel had been cleared and families were gathering in pride to visit this great symbol of the city. Infrastructure was already being restored. One of the projects that I visited was the provision of large water storage units to districts in East Aleppo devastated by the conflict. As I approached one community centre in East Aleppo where people were returning to their homes, and being assessed for their needs, the local Sunni mukhtar greeted me with a hug and declared: "Welcome. You are my brother." We visited a hospital where GOPA-DERD has helped provide a kidney dialysis unit. One wing of the hospital had been destroyed by a 'rebel' rocket attack. In other centres in East Aleppo, volunteers were training residents in vocational training projects – hair dressing, clothes making, baking, leather working, carpentry to name but a few. Those being trained were being paid for their work, women and children being the main beneficiaries.

The situation for the churches in Aleppo continues to be difficult. No figures are available, but estimates suggest that 50% of the Christian population have left the city. The figure could be higher. This raises serious challenges for the life and work of the community. Church buildings have been destroyed in 'rebel' attacks. Church families have lost homes and loved ones. Economic hardship, only increased by sanctions, make it near impossible for churches to raise funds for their own maintenance, let alone offer the most basic needs and provision of water, food and shelter to its congregations. Nevertheless, the Church endeavours to do so. For example, the Presbyterian Church in Aleppo, like its sister churches continues its ministry through schools, "99% of whose pupils are Muslim". "There is no evangelism, but we work hard to teach our pupils the principles of tolerance and acceptance," Revd brahim. The two

schools run by the Church between them serve over 600 students. They have both been damaged by jihadist attacks, and there is a need for new computers, new transport, and new playgrounds. Revd Ibrahim was adamant that the Church worldwide should assist the Church in Syria to enable it to remain, and to sustain and strengthen its work and pastoral care and ministry.

I asked Revd Ibrahim about the role of Christian-Muslim relations in the country. He replied:

It is the responsibility of religious leaders to ensure good Christian-Muslim relations. Keeping Christians secure is the responsibility of Muslims. And protecting Islam from Islamophobia is the responsibility of Christians. Islam of the Levant is not the Islam of the Gulf. Islam has to face Wahhabism, and Christians must not despair, but be honest. We fear democracy because it will bring immature people to authority. Before speaking about democracy, we have to educate people about what democracy means, and choose leaders on the basis of their qualification. Keeping the political system that we have is an assurance of preserving Syrian society. Any change that brings fanatical Islam will be a catastrophe for the country. The Government understands the uniqueness of the minorities and gives us freedom to practise our faith. But leaving politics aside, the Church should support the churches here in order to help us to continue our ministry and presence.²¹⁵

Despite the many challenges facing all communities in Aleppo, the faith communities continue to do what they can to serve the people, no matter what their religious or communal identity. There are signs of hope. In December 2017, the people of Aleppo once again joined in city-wide celebrations – both to mark the first anniversary of what most Syrians regard as the liberation of the city, but also as Muslims and Christians together to celebrate Christmas, a celebration that has been denied wherever ‘rebel’ factions have upheld their sectarian rule.

In December, 2017, the Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo, Antoine Audo, wrote an article in the Sunday Telegraph. He wrote:

For the first time since the Syrian conflict began, this year you can see Christmas trees in Aleppo. There are lights in homes and in front of churches. It is a sign of hope. Daily life has improved in some respects. Food and medicine are available, though very expensive. The Christian area in west Aleppo was relatively undamaged, but East Aleppo, where rebels were once in control, is in ruins, and 30,000 children are without a father.

I was shocked at the devastation to east Aleppo. I met people living in miserable conditions, and I could see the hardship and poverty. Aleppo was once a vibrant city where communities flourished, seeing this was horrifying. The poorest and most

²¹⁵ Interview with Revd Ibrahim Nseir, minister of the Presbyterian Church in Aleppo. 26 May 2017

vulnerable were left behind. Many of the older people I meet tell me that they don't have children or relatives anymore, everyone has gone.

I have just stepped down after six years as president of Caritas Syria, which sends 25 aid workers to east Aleppo every day. I am convinced that our work changed the attitude of the Muslim majority towards our Christian community. We served the poor without discrimination or fear. This was new to Syria, where people tend to see a duty only to their family or tribe. During the hostilities, we were at risk from the militants and safe only in government-controlled areas, but that has eased as rebels retreat. However, west Aleppo will never be the same. Before the war, the majority of Syria's 1.5 to 2 million Christians were in Aleppo, but nationally about half have left, and in this city, the proportion is higher. In buildings where one family might have been Muslim and the rest Christian, it is now the other way round.

At the start of the conflict, militants tried to pit Muslims against Christians, but they failed. Our country has a rich culture and history to which Syrians are loyal, regardless of religion. Syrian is more than one man: this is not well understood in the West.

It is very important that we continue to represent Arab Christianity, to show the Muslim and Arab world that there are Christians with whom they can have a dialogue. We must do all we can to stay and maintain our presence, but Christians in Syria have lost confidence that they can have security and stability. That is what we will pray for this Christmas.²¹⁶

Also in December 2017, the Baptist Evangelical Church in Aleppo, known as the 'Living hope for family ministry', wrote a newsletter to supporters at a UK Medical charity called 'PRIME'. The letter speaks of how 'Aleppo was bombarded daily between 100-350 mortars and rockets and shells. The Christian community was targeted heavily; resulting in thousands of them fleeing Syria as refugees to neighbour countries or outside of the continent and many other thousands were displaced into other safe cities in Syria as IDPs. ' Yet, despite the suffering, the 'lack of tapped water, no electricity, no net connection, lack of fuel and very limited transportation....malnutrition' and 'lack of education', the Church 'played an essential role in Aleppo and in Syria in general'."²¹⁷

Haroutoun Selimian, Minister of the Bethel Armenian Evangelical Church in Aleppo, wrote a positive assessment in his Christmas 2017 letter:

Yesterday, the 22nd of December, 2017, the joy of Christmas pervaded the hearts of the Aleppians, since it coincided with the one year anniversary of the liberation of Aleppo. In fact, we cannot forget what was happening in Aleppo: the rockets that

²¹⁶ Article by Bishop Antoine Audo, Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo. Published in the UK Sunday Telegraph, 24 December 2017.

²¹⁷ Newsletter written by Jany Haddad, Minister in charge of the Aleppo Baptist Evangelical Church. December 2017.

were falling on us, the houses of unarmed people; the streets; the hospitals; the churches and the mosques ... we find it hard to describe all the atrocities we have been through ... Each of us has endless stories, describing the suffering of our loved ones in the past years ...

The Armenian Protestant and Christian Churches in Aleppo and the inhabitants of Aleppo, prayed together... At the end, God responded to our prayers. He gave us the biggest gift we could have dreamed of - the cease-fire agreement between the Syrian Arab army and the armed forces who occupied 60% of the lands in Aleppo.

When the army officially declared Aleppo a city free of militants, for us, it was a gift from heaven ... It was a liberation. This is why we remember with joy the memory of the birth of our city and the beginning of a time of peace, which we hope will last forever.

We also extend our gratitude to every brave soldier in our army, to every citizen who took up arms, joined the army to defend families and restore peace. We pay homage to our brave martyrs, who died while protecting the people of the city ... We salute all the inhabitants of Aleppo, who have suffered the weight of the years of war with patience and heroism. They stayed in their city and refused to leave, insisting on hoping for a better tomorrow ...

We also applaud all parties who were misled by oppressors, but eventually returned to homeland through various reconciliations. Aleppo needs us all in order to recover, and we encourage all our children to play their role in the process of restoring and reconstructing the destroyed buildings and houses.... We should also help injured people physically, mentally and spiritually.

Syria is recovering. God has promised us this peace and the preservation of all the people of our city with good and peace.²¹⁸

It is clear that despite the devastating impact of the war in Aleppo, the considerable destruction of infrastructure and neighbourhoods in the east of the city, and the departure of so many of their constituents, religious communities, with the help of certain international charities, are playing a significant role in providing welfare and rebuilding society in the city. This outreach is also having a positive impact on Christian-Muslim relations and restoring trust amongst those who are benefitting from these ministries.

It is also clear that centuries of religious and cultural plurality will not be destroyed by a few years of conflict. Christmas 2018 was celebrated in Aleppo with even more vigour than the previous year, and restoration and rebuilding work across the city continued at a rapid pace.

²¹⁸ Christmas letter 2017, of Revd Haroutoun Selimian. Armenian Evangelical Bethel Church, Aleppo. No. 6. December 2017

Despite the trauma and violence, it is clear that hope will triumph and in time, the city and its people will recover.

4.6 Sadad.

In May 2018, en route from Deir Ezzor to Mar Mousa monastery, through territory recently liberated from ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra control, I visited the village of Sadad. Sadad is an ancient Christian village, sixty kilometres south east of Homs, which is thought to be the 'Zedad' mentioned in *Numbers 24:8* and *Ezekiel 47:15* as part of the north eastern boundary of Canaan. It is one of a group of predominantly Syriac Orthodox Christian villages in the area where, like Maaloula, Aramaic is still spoken. Welcomed by Suleiman Khalil, the Mayor of the village, I was told that I was the first foreign priest to visit Sadad since the start of the war. When the local Syriac Orthodox priest was called and told that an English priest had come to visit, he arrived with a beaming smile, and would not let go of my hand as we toured the village and Churches.

Suleiman Khalil is an inspiring figure. He returned to Sadad in 2009, having lived in the United States for nine years, and was elected Mayor shortly after the beginning of the war in 2011. Interestingly he relates how in 2011, "we saw Islamists arriving with weapons in Homs. They were inciting people against non-Muslims."²¹⁹ Despite the temptation to leave at that time, he determined to stay to serve his village.

Prior to the war, Sadad was a village of 15,000 people, but by 2013, the population was 2000, as residents fled before advancing Islamist fighters.²²⁰ Situated on the edge of the desert, but close to the Homs highway, Sadad had long been a trading centre for the Bedouin. The village has fourteen Churches of different denominations, some of them containing historic frescoes desecrated during the jihadist occupation. Suleiman Khalil proudly recalls how ecumenical relations have always been good but have been brought even closer by the village's war-time experiences.

In 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra and FSA fighters took control of the town for a week. Suleiman Khalil stresses that Jabhat al-Nusra, an Al-Qaeda affiliated group labelled a terrorist organisation by

²¹⁹ Interview with Suleiman Khalil at Sadad. 2 May 2018

²²⁰ <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-christians-race-across-war-torn-syria-defend-besieged-town-sadad-1528105>. See also: <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/syria-massacre-christians-sadad>

the international community, was operating (as at Maaloula and Saidnaya) alongside the Free Syrian Army, which the international community labels a 'moderate rebel' group. He says: "Is a Nusra gun better than an FSA gun? They are all the same. There are no moderates."²²¹

During the occupation, churches were desecrated, houses and stores destroyed, and forty-five Christian villagers were killed, several of them tortured to death, and some bodies thrown into a well. Following a call from the Mayor, Christians and Muslims from neighbouring villages joined the Syrian Army in the battle. Sixteen villagers were killed fighting alongside the army – ten of them Muslim, six of them Christian. Suleiman emphasises that local Muslims had always lived happily alongside their Christian compatriots, and that their support continued throughout the years in which Sadad remained at the frontline of the conflict.

In November 2015, Sadad was once again attacked, this time by ISIS, after ISIS captured the nearby town of Mahin, five miles away. Almost two hundred Christian fighters from all over Syria arrived to defend the village and were joined by Muslims from the Syrian Army and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. When ISIS had captured the town of Qaryatayn, near Sadad, they had declared that they "would kill all the Christians in Sadad".²²² Remembering what had happened a year before in Mosul, and in 2013 in Maaloula, the Syriac Christians of Sadad were determined to defend their town. So with the help of Christian fighters from all over Syria, local Christian and Muslim fighters fought off the ISIS offensive, and became a symbol of Christian resistance to Islamist terrorism. It was the first Christian village to successfully fight off ISIS.

Western media have occasionally referred to 'Christian militia' in Syria 'supporting Assad'. Using such terminology in a way that has negative connotations is unfair and misleading.²²³ In the context of brutal conflict in which sectarian identity has been used to promote hatred and division, it is understandable, and in this case positive, that local Christian populations would wish to support a fellow Christian community that is under existential threat. Christian 'militia' in Syrian communities are simply local residents who take up arms in order to support the regular army against the threat of militant jihadists. In several cases, fighting alongside

²²¹ Interview. 2 May 2018.

²²² Quoted by Fr. Luka Awad of the Catholic Diocese of Homs in: <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-christians-race-across-war-torn-syria-defend-besieged-town-sadad-1528105>

²²³ For example, see this CNN Report of 4 February 2013, entitled: 'Christian militia standing behind Assad'. (Accessed 23 July 2018) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQIrSR6tKJg>

Muslim residents, they have been instrumental in the defence and liberation of their communities from terrorist occupation.

Walking through the streets of Sadad, signs of conflict remain. Buildings show the scars of battle, and though Churches have been restored, their frescoes have been desecrated. Walls in the village display pictures of those martyred during the various battles. But the village is peaceful. Sadly, only 3000 of the original 15,000 inhabitants remain. The Mayor is trying hard to encourage residents to return, but until the country is more stable and employment prospects have improved, many will stay away. And the longer people remain abroad, the less likely they are to return. Nevertheless, the community tries to remain upbeat. Suleiman tells how the community is pulling together, and how its experiences have strengthened the sense of determination. He has started a Quail egg project, and already owns several hundred birds. He says:

We wish to put the years of war behind us and to restart our life. I encourage everyone who has suffered in the war to get back to nature, to grow vegetables or chickens, and to start small-scale income-generating projects. The more people get involved, the more we can stop people from leaving. Sadly, we have lost the emigration war, but we still have hope that those who are here will recover their roots, and others will return. But sanctions are affecting us badly. It is difficult to get the machinery we need. Nevertheless, we are rebuilding and developing projects.²²⁴

I asked Suleiman: "What is your message to the West?" He replied:

Be careful. As Eastern Christians we have paid the price of your policies. It is behind us now. But what we experienced here will come to Europe. The attitude of the West is shameful. We have been fighting terrorism and extremism, and you have been supporting extremism. There are many types of Islam, and if you wanted to find moderate Islam, then come to Syria. It is not the same as Saudi or Iranian Islam. In Syria, we have eighteen different religions, and there was never a difference between them. Now the extremists have left, we are working to recover our good relations. Our faith is very important to us. We are staying faithful. If we get back to the spiritual life, our community will recover.

As I walked through Sadad, arm in arm with the local priest, villagers waved and smiled. I was told it was encouraging for them to see a foreign priest paying an informal visit – a sign they said, that things were changing. For me too, Sadad is a symbol of hope, courage and perseverance. The villagers, deeply traumatised by a war that no-one wanted and from which

²²⁴ Interview with Suleiman Khalil. Sadad. Syria. 2 May 2018.

they long to emerge, are allowing the best values of their faith to drive their vision and determination to move forward. In practical ways that enhance community, the people of Sadad, with the help of their Mayor and religious leaders, are an inspiring example of a community seeking to restore the social and religious balance of a society that has been profoundly damaged, but which, might yet emerge stronger, wiser, and despite it all, united.

4.7 Conclusion.

It is hoped that these few case studies and eye-witness accounts of different contexts in the midst of the conflict, combined with the questionnaire analysis in Appendix 5 provide a helpful insight into the complex and evolving dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations in Syria. All the research undertaken confirms that inter-religious relations in Syria are complex and multi-layered, yet, whilst answers to the questions posed in the questionnaire vary, a degree of consistency emerges. Although the way that different communities identify themselves and relate to each other is nuanced, and notwithstanding that religious and political contexts in different periods of history have created a complex ontology in Christian-Muslim relations which has at times led to communal violence, nevertheless it is clear, on the surface at least, that over many years, Christians and Muslims have coexisted with a degree of tolerance and engagement that has long been a source of pride to many Syrians. As Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem of the Syriac Orthodox Church said at a meeting in Damascus in April 2018:

Christians and Muslims lived together for 1500 years with occasional difficulties, but with mutual respect. This is not a civil war. Some Syrians were used by outsiders to rise against each other. We were not a perfect country, and we still do not have a perfect regime. We still need reforms, but we never imagined that these reforms would come at such a high price.

Echoing many Christians and Muslims I have spoken to, he continued: “In our daily lives, we never recognised each other based on religious affiliation. Religion was a private matter.”

There is sadness amongst both Christians and Muslims that relationships have been negatively impacted by the conflict, and there is a notable, almost apologetic criticality, amongst some Muslim respondents about those who have interpreted religion in a way that has led to and promoted sectarian violence. Responses to the questionnaire and in multiple interviews, suggest that whilst trust between communities has been damaged by the conflict - particularly by the violence of Islamist factions towards any who do not support their ideology – there is a

widespread will and desire to restore the sense of plurality and mutual respect for which Syrian society has been known for much of its history. Perhaps because of the respect for religious faith and identity embedded in Syrian society, most seem to recognise the value of a secular constitution which respects, values and protects all communal identities. Most are adamant that the conflict is not religious by nature or origin, but accept that sadly religion has been used to stoke sectarian conflict for political goals. Given that religious identity plays an important role within the make-up of Syria's plural society, the inclusion of faith communities and faith leaders in processes that seek reconciliation and the re-framing of Syrian society in the post-conflict context will be vital. Religion is a crucial factor in the cohabitation of the public sphere. In Syria, religious leaders and communities have played a crucial role in the provision of humanitarian care for all, pastoral care of communities, cease-fire negotiations, and restoring inter-communal stability. Any non-recognition of this fact in any peace-building processes could be damaging to the process.

There is clearly evidence that communal tensions have always been present to a degree, but there is debate as to the extent to which communalism influenced the conflict. Class-based and rural-urban variations in levels of communal integration affect that dynamic. Any process of reconciliation and restoration of trust will take time, but since many believe that respect for plurality and diversity is built in to Syrian identity and way of life, many remain hopeful that reconciliation – in the long term - is possible. Others however fear that trust has been damaged irrevocably. Syrian Christians witnessed what happened in Iraq, and received over 330,000 Christian refugees from the brutal sectarian violence there. They have witnessed brutal sectarian violence committed by Islamist groups against Christians and other minority groups during the Syrian conflict. However much Islamists claim to consider the interests of all Syrians, there has been no evidence of this in the conflict. As stated in a 2015 article:

The treatment of minorities under Islamist parties remains an open question and claims of good will may mask different realities. Even the most liberal exponents of the Muslim Brotherhood have taken special care never to describe their Syria as 'secular', but only 'civil', with the broader explicit goal of an 'Islamic state' still affirmed (Farha, 2015, p. 185).

No wonder most Christians have supported the secular government which has protected their social and religious freedoms and identity.

When one is talking about such a diverse society, and reflecting on the experience of a whole nation that has differing geographic, socio-economic contexts, it is difficult to make general statements. However, I believe we can conclude that, notwithstanding the significant challenges of recent decades, the rise of religious extremism and sectarianism in the region, and the fracturing of trust that the recent conflict has provoked, Syria has been a society in which coexistence between multiple communities has largely prevailed and has been valued in order to preserve the pluralist identity of the nation and the protection of all communities within it. The way in which these realities have been held in tension have laid the foundations for the restoration of religious coexistence and mutual respect, even in the face of the violence and fracture that has taken place.

The findings of this study suggest that whilst communal tensions have always existed within Syria and have been used by both internal and external forces in the country to stoke division and violence for the purposes of political change, sectarianism has been overstated as a cause of the conflict in Syrian society. As Sheikh Dr. Ahmad Samer Al-Qabbani, Director of the Damascus Endowments of the Awqaf stated at a meeting in Damascus in April 2018:

In Syria, we had a Christian Prime-Minister who was much loved, and a Christian Minister of Religious Affairs in a Muslim-Majority country. The Speaker of Parliament is also a Christian, and all the religious leaders meet together regularly. When His Holiness, the Patriarch speaks, he speaks on behalf of Christians and Muslims. One of the aims of the war was to create a sectarian conflict.

Clearly, cordial relationships between religious leaders do not automatically imply the same amongst 'lay' citizens, but this public dynamic is illustrative of the interreligious culture in Syria. Undoubtedly, political and economic dissatisfaction and wider geopolitical factors all contributed to the descent into violence in the country, and most Syrians that I have spoken with have repeatedly stressed that religious identity is not important when it comes to personal relationships, and that the conflict is not and never was a religious one.

Nevertheless, without question, the war has changed the character and religious geography of Syria. With so many millions of *Sunnis* having left the country, there may be an increased percentage of other religious communities existing within the country. How will those communities reframe their relationship with one another? As Syrians have experienced the violent consequences of an exclusivist juridical interpretation of the *Qur'an*, will there be a reconstruction of *Sunni* religious thought that is more easily able to accommodate diversity? If

sunni Syrians who have supported exclusive ideologies return, how will they be able to find space within a society that affirms religious plurality, and amongst a population that profoundly fears the threat of intercommunal violence?

How *Sunni* Islam engages with the modern world, and with religious plurality, is an on-going debate that has been taking place for the last century and that affects Muslims – and Christians – everywhere, but some resolution is going to be required if a peaceful balance is to be achieved in the region. Additionally, if there is a belief that majority status provides a ‘right to rule’, then if there were ever *Sunni* rule, would it be able to establish a pluralising space within the country to allow genuine freedom of religious expression? Most Syrians that I have met fear that this could not be guaranteed, and that *Sunni* rule would mean the disappearance of the Christian presence – as has happened in parts of Iraq - and of the freedom of religious space for minority groups. Part of the difficulty for *Sunni* Islam is that there is no *Sunni* central authority – other than that created after the development of nation states – namely the institution of the ‘Grand Mufti’. Hence the importance of the Grand Mufti in the Syrian Islamic discourse.

In the midst of this changing dynamic, we must not forget the tension between *Sunni* and *Shi’a*, the provocation of which has opened a multiplicity of conflicts in the region and has seen an increase in *Shi’a* influence in several States, namely Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and Syria. This dynamic, and the regional influence of *Sunni* Saudi Arabia and *Shi’a* Iran and their respective allies has certainly been used as a provocateur in the Syrian conflict (Vali Nasr, 2007). It is widely acknowledged that the Syrian conflict at the very least became a proxy war. Indeed, many believe that internal discontent was provoked in order to become a proxy war to implement external interests.²²⁵

Nevertheless, the resilience of the Syrian people is well illustrated in the lives of those who have remained in Syria, and in those who have returned to their homes. The speed of rebuilding of homes and restoring of infrastructure in places like Homs, Aleppo, or Maaloula, has been remarkable. Even amidst scenes of destruction, a sense of ‘normal’ life began returning to streets that only months before were deserted battlegrounds. And significant

²²⁵ For studies exploring these factors see:(Phillips, 2016); (Davidson, 2016).

numbers of people began returning to their homes comparatively soon after areas had been cleared of militants.²²⁶

Syrian society is complex, multi-layered, and culturally, religiously and socially diverse. The severity of the conflict has caused profound suffering and loss to every member of the Syrian population. The level of violence perpetrated against different communal groups in the name of religion has deeply affected many people's attitudes towards extreme Islamist ideology, and they fear its ascendancy. But as we have seen, most refuse to allow this sectarian agenda to affect everyday relationships and have a deep desire to restore peace and mutual respect, though it will take a long time for trust to be restored, and pain to heal. Religious leaders are already playing a key role in seeking peace and striving to be bridges of reconciliation and have done so throughout the conflict.

It is precisely this history of plurality and diversity, and the desire of most people to preserve these qualities, that makes Syria potentially a model for Christian-Muslim engagement in the face of conflict and beyond. Recognising the historic coexistence of Christian and Muslim communities in the Levant in general and in Syria in particular, and writing from a Christian perspective, it is instructive to reflect on models and dynamics of Eastern Christian engagement, for it is Eastern Christians who have lived alongside the Muslim majority for so many centuries. And it is in learning from this dynamic and the Eastern Christian contribution to it, that we may find a key to peaceful coexistence in the future. It is to consideration of these matters that we now turn.

²²⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-40460126> Syria war: Almost 500,000 refugees return in 2017 – UN. Also: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-47260450/the-syrians-returning-home-after-years-of-fleeing-war?fbclid=IwAR0QzxFn62kJfQkH33hpkUOtO0KuDDpYI-VmmHtgjs8zoyuuWVP1gDyJECs>

Chapter 5

Eastern Christian approaches to Christian-Muslim engagement in Syria

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have contextualised, historically and contemporaneously, the Christian and Muslim presence and dynamic within Syria.

This chapter will examine some uniquely Eastern Christian approaches to the Christian-Muslim interface in the region, in the light of past and present cultural and religious contexts, and of the trauma inflicted by the Syrian and other regional conflicts. The regional and local political, economic, religious and social developments of the last century have all impacted upon every aspect of Syrian society. This chapter will consider, through the lens of a number of key Christian theologians in the Antiochene paradigm, how the Christian community has responded to those forces, bringing distinctly Syrian ideas and thought into the discourse. The rise of Islamism and political Islam in recent decades has eroded the level of dialogue that took place between Christianity and Islam in the early centuries of the Islamic era until the twentieth century. There has consequently been a shift in Christian self-identity amongst some Arab Christian denominations in the Middle Eastern milieu to a more assertive self-definition and a less accommodating engagement with Islam. At the same time, Christian communities continue, out of their own ecclesial and mystical traditions, to make a positive contribution to political religious discourse amidst the complexity of the multiple internal and external forces which affect them. As O'Mahony writes:

Samir Khalil Samir of the Pontifical Oriental Institute asserts that Middle Eastern Christianity is significant due to its cultural richness, its pride in apostolic origins that go back to the beginning of Christianity, its rejection of the term 'minority,' and its understanding of its vocation as a unifying bridge between cultures, civilizations and religions, both East and West (A. O'Mahony, 2018, p. 66).²²⁷

This uniquely eastern ecclesial paradigm is important, not just because it represents 12 percent of the global Christian population (A. O'Mahony, 2018, p. 61). It includes Greek,

²²⁷ See: Samir, K,S.,2003. *Role culturel des chretiens dans le monde arabe*. Beirut : Cahiers de l'Orient Chretien. Beirut.

Byzantine, Syriac and Latin traditions that create a longstanding plurality that affirms the diversity of Arab culture. This plurality goes back to the early Arab Church Fathers who debated both amongst themselves, and with emergent Islam. The interlocutors that follow show that the paradigm of dialogue and diversity both ecumenically and inter-religiously follows a continuous and on-going tradition for Eastern Christianity until the present day. The Patristic tradition is a living one. This identity of eastern ecclesial and Islamic plurality is one that contemporary western theologians have struggled to embrace, preferring a more unified perception of the Arab paradigm. Indeed, in recent decades Arab identity has become increasingly contested through the lens of different cultures. Yet, plural Antiochene, Eastern Christianity has an ancient lineage, which, crucially, sustains a tradition of diversity in Syria, evident in all the religious communities, and which has been under-studied and under-recognised in wider discourse.

In this chapter, brief reflections on the contribution to the field of Christian-Muslim engagement in the region, of Eastern Orthodox Bishop Georges Khodr and Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio reveal the influence and relevance of eastern spirituality in inter-religious dialogue in the Middle East. Notwithstanding the controversy that surrounded him, the uniqueness of Fr. Paolo was that he represented a western ecclesial theological discourse that entered into a depth of living conversation with Eastern Christian identity that is rare in western discourse. Further discussion of the contributions of Melkite Patriarch Gregorius Laham, Melkite Bishop of Aleppo Jean-Clement Jeanbart, Chaldean Bishop Antoine Audo, and the Syriac-Orthodox Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem consider the complex social and interreligious dynamic for the eastern churches, particularly during the conflict. Finally, I examine the complex influence and place of the Protestant churches within the same dynamic. Understanding these Christian relationships is essential to understanding the wider communal context and the role that the Christian communities play in Syrian society and within the political sphere.

In recent years, most religious leaders in Syria have spoken both privately and publicly of the need for reform in Syrian society, but have argued that reform should not be imposed from outside. Given the secular basis of the constitution, and the degree of independence granted by the Personal Status Laws, religious leaders have been able to rely on their own communal resources to make a difference in society. Christians are more able to contribute to wider society in a State in which communal groups have equal status. This non-sectarian vision of Statehood is different to that of Islam, and represents one of the key contributions that the

Christian community can make to the preservation of diversity, plurality and respect within Syrian society. The Christian vision of Statehood cannot control the State, but it can, by means of a dialogical relationship with the State and with other communities, seek to ensure that no one community is dominant. One of the fears for Christians and other minority communities in Syria, is the possible creation of a Sunni State. This is a critical dilemma in aspirations for 'democracy' within Syria. Given the communal balance in Syrian society, 'democratic' ideals suggest that the sunni majority should be in power, but would a sunni government follow a democratic system of governance? Christians currently play a key role in balancing the complexity of the communal dimensions of Syrian society, and seeking to ensure that no one communal group is overly dominant. This role is rendered even more significant by the impact of wider religious and geo-political contexts on Christian attitudes towards the current and future trajectory of interreligious and political trends.

5.2 Early engagement with Islam

From the earliest days of the emergence of Islam, local Christians began to 'take on the outward trappings' of the culture of Islam, and, through the adoption of Arabic as their liturgical and theological language in the first half of the eighth century C.E, were able to undertake a distinctive theological and philosophical discourse with their Muslim interlocutors. This combined Greek philosophy with a distinctively oriental theological and philosophical understanding (S. Griffith, 2001, pp. 9,16).

The existence of a specifically eastern discourse with Islam has long been under-recognised and under-studied in the west. Until recently, much study of the history of the Church in the East has been approached from a largely western perspective. It is only in recent decades, and thanks to the work of such scholars as Sebastian Brock, Kenneth Cragg, Sidney Griffith, Hugh Goddard, David Thomas, Anthony O'Mahony and Erica Hunter; and their engagement with Middle-Eastern Christian and Muslim scholars, that the specifically eastern theological dynamic throughout the history of the Church in the Middle East, has come to the attention of scholars in the West.²²⁸

²²⁸ In the UK, the Centre for Eastern Christian Studies at Heythrop College, London University (which sadly closed in 2018), and the Living Stones organisation with its annual journal (www.livingstonesonline.org.uk), have also contributed to this growing scholarship on Eastern Christianity.

One of the earliest and most influential Syrian Christian theologians whose spirituality and theology was rooted in the Eastern context was John of Damascus (ca 676-749). Born into a prominent devout Christian family, his father held high public office under the Caliph of Damascus, and prior to his ordination, John himself is said to have been an administrator to the Caliph (Akbari, 2009, p. 204). Educated under a monk named Cosmas, John was tutored in theology, became a monk at the Mar Saba Monastery in the Judean Desert, and in response to the Christological controversies raging in the early Church, and to the challenges of the Islamic movement, produced one of the greatest theological works in the history of Christianity – ‘The Fount of Knowledge’.²²⁹ John was one of the staunchest defenders of the Chalcedonian cause in the East, and of the veneration of icons. Writing in Greek, his works were being translated into Arabic by the tenth century (S. Griffith, 2001, p. 21), and his contributions to Eastern Christianity embraced law, theology, philosophy and music. His liturgy is still being used in Eastern Christendom.

Following John of Damascus, Theodore Abu Qurra (ca750-820) was the first Christian theologian to write in Arabic. Like John of Damascus he defended the veneration of icons, responded to the doctrinal challenges of Islam and “promoted the dogmas of the ‘six Councils’” which were to become the touchstone for Chalcedonian orthodoxy (S. Griffith, 2001, pp. 38-39).^{230, 231}

In the 12th Century, Paul of Antioch, a Greek Melkite Bishop of Sidon, corresponded with the great Muslim thinker Ibn Taymiyya in a letter notable for the way it sought to engage with contemporary Muslim thought. The writings of Ibn Taymiyya remain very influential in contemporary Islam, and are used as a foundation for *salafi* and *Wahhabi* theology. In the early Islamic era, Patriarch Timothy 1 (d.823) an East Syrian Patriarch engaged in a famous debate in Arabic with the Caliph al-Mahdi in Baghdad in 781, in which detailed discussion took place on the role of biblical prophets. Whilst concluding with a positive assessment of

²²⁹ See Chase, F. (transl.) (2015) *Saint John of Damascus. Writings*. Exfontibus.Co. (pp v-xxxviii)

²³⁰ See also: Lamoreaux, J. (transl.) (2005) *Theodore Abu Qurrah* Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press.

²³¹ Other Christian writers who engaged in early discourse with Islam in Arabic include Theodore Bar Koni, an apologist of the Church of the East, who lived circa eighth Century; Ibrahim al-Tabarani, a Melkite of the ninth Century who argued against the prophethood of Muhammad and the divine authorship of the Qur’an; Abd al-Masih al-Kindi, an East Syrian in the early ninth century, who was equally dismissive of the status of Muhammad on moral grounds; ‘Amra b.Matta, an East Syrian of the eleventh century who wrote the first Arab Christian encyclopaedia; Ibn al-‘Ibri (d.1286), a Syrian bishop who wrote a history of Islam from a Christian perspective.

Muhammad, Timothy nevertheless denied his prophethood. All these encounters affirm the quality and breadth of early debate between Islam and Christianity; the knowledge that scholars had of each other's faith, and the importance of this dialogue for Christian-Muslim relations in the Arab world (Samir K Samir, 2001, pp. 75-106).²³² This dialogue took a number of forms: the use of letters; summaries of doctrine; dialogical accounts of encounter in a question and answer format; and open debate. The last of these may have "provided the basis for many of the literary compositions written in Arabic and Syria during the early Islamic period" (S. H. Griffith, 2008, p. 103).

What is clear is that this dialogue was not a one-sided affair. And whilst Christians sought to translate Aristotelian Greek thought into Arabic and Syriac to better explain their confessional formulas and ecclesial identity, many Muslims found themselves adopting elements of Hellenism into the intellectual framework of Islam (S. H. Griffith, 2008, p. 158).

5.3 The 20th Century and beyond.

The 20th Century saw a wave of political developments that have profoundly influenced Christian-Muslim relations in the region. The end of the Ottoman Empire; the carving up of the Middle East between French and British control in 1916; the creation of the nation states which in turn affected the communal balance of their residents; the development of political Islam; the establishment of the State of Israel and the subsequent Israeli/Palestinian conflict; the Civil War in Lebanon; the Iranian revolution; the invasion of Iraq; the events of the so-called 'Arab Spring' – have all contributed to the strengthening of *shari'a*-based political Islam, and the weakening of the Christian communities in the region.

The work of Christian scholars during the 20th Century and into the 21st Century, has been instrumental in sustaining dialogue and providing a framework for strengthening and developing Christian-Muslim relations in an increasingly tense and fractured political and religious context. The work of a number of eastern theologians will be introduced here, who have been active and influential participants in the contemporary development of Christian religious and political thought, especially as it relates to Christian-Muslim coexistence in Syria and Lebanon in recent times. They are: Georges Khodr, (b.1923), Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon; former Greek Melkite Patriarch Gregorios III Laham (b.1933);

²³² A work that outlines the contribution of several other Middle Eastern theologians is: (Noble, 2014).

Archbishop Jeanbart of Aleppo (b.1943); Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius II Aphrem (b.1965); Antoine Audo (b.1946), Chaldaean Catholic Bishop of Aleppo; and Paolo Dall'Oglio (b.1954), Jesuit Priest and founder of the community at Deir Mar Mousa, who was kidnapped in Raqqa in 2013, and whose fate is unknown. I will then consider the place of Protestant influence in the Middle East inter-religious dynamic. Thus, considering a broad perspective of responses from across the ecumenical landscape in Syria, I hope to present a picture of commonalities that are faced and what we may learn from the various approaches in which the eastern Churches address them.

Western understanding of the Christian-Muslim dynamic is indebted to the work of Louis Massignon (1883-1962), a Greek Melkite priest, who was instrumental in raising the profile of Christian-Muslim dialogue within the Catholic Church, and is believed to have made a decisive contribution to the Vatican II document, *'Nostra Aetate'*.²³³ As Paolo Dall'Oglio writes: "Louis Massignon is more than a teacher. He is a source of inspiration and an intercessor for my spiritual growth and my mission in the Islamic world" (Dall'Oglio, 2008, p. 329). His influence however went far beyond Catholicism. The Shiite scholar Ali Shariati (1933-1977) who played a role in the revival of religious thought in Iran in 1979, studied with him.²³⁴ Massignon was particularly aware of the hardening of doctrinal thought in Salafist circles, and the entry into politics of modern Islamism, particularly in the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, initially in Egypt, but also in Syria and other parts of the Middle East (Anthony O'Mahony, 2015, p. 243). Theologically, he viewed Christianity and Islam through the lens of the martyred Muslim mystic Al-Hallaj (857-922), seeing in him a parallel with Jesus (Anthony O'Mahony, 2015, p. 235). He regarded suffering as a fundamental window into the nature and mystery of God, expressed both in Islam and Christianity; and that our response to suffering is one of hospitality, mutual compassion, and commitment to 'the other' – the stranger.

Massignon regarded Abraham, the founder of the Abrahamic faiths, as the model of this hospitality. Through mystical engagement with each other, (Massignon was also influenced by the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld), Massignon understood Islam as a mediator of Grace, and a "providential guardian of the Holy Places". He sought to communicate this vision "through scholarly work, and through the sodality of prayer (*badaliya*)" (Anthony O'Mahony, 2015, p. 238). He saw in Islam "a providential role, a charisma of Islam and therefore of its

²³³ See: (Krokus, 2012) (Anthony O'Mahony, 2015) (Krokus, 2017)

²³⁴ See:(A Rahnema, 2013) Shariati was a charismatic teacher who sought to blend Islam and Marxism, and profoundly influenced the development of Iranian political Islam.

Prophet in the coming of the Kingdom of God”, that is “in no way separate or separable from the role of Christ in the salvation of each man and woman” (Dall'Oglio, 2008, p. 332). In turn, he believed that the Syriac Catholic rite, rooted in eastern tradition, could help explain Islamic thought to the West. Furthermore, he believed that “the healing of divisions between eastern and western Christians, and of the antagonism and warfare between Islam and Christianity during one and a half millennia could flow from a spiritual experience of God, practised and lived by believers open to dialogical encounter with the other” (Hugh-Donovan, 2014, p. 476).

Massignon’s contribution was not just spiritual and theological. He also played a significant role in the political administration of North Africa and Syria, arguing for a greater role for the Arabic language, and the emancipation of Islam within modernity. Throughout his life, Massignon’s practise of contemplation and engagement with people was rooted in the belief that God loves all equally, and that through ‘sacred hospitality’, we could encounter the divine in the ‘Other’ (Sudworth, 2014, p. 458). This spiritual approach would receive a more than sympathetic ‘audience’ in Eastern Christianity, whose origins are deeply intertwined with the spirituality of the desert, and its encounter with the Arab world.

A further influential writer who stresses the importance of the Antiochene paradigm in Christian-Muslim relations is the French Orthodox lay theologian Olivier Clement (1921-2009). For Clement, “relationality is part of the mystery of God, and constitutes the vocation of the created being” (Hugh-Donovan, 2016, p. 123). Clement cites the work of Massignon and Khodr as illustrating the unique eastern Christian contribution to the Christian-Muslim dynamic. However, he warns of two faces of Islam of which Christianity needs to be aware when engaging in dialogue. These are represented by the respective writings of Mohammed Talbi (1921-2017), who regards pluralism as an essential characteristic of all religions, and Tariq Ramadan (b.1962), who regards the west as hostile to Islam and desires an Islamisation of the west. As Hugh-Donovan writes:

Talbi engages and takes interest in European thought and Christianity, for Ramadan, the west is a space for Islam to reassert its old dominance. (Hugh-Donovan, 2016, p. 137)

Eastern Christianity has had to engage with Islam for centuries in a way that western Christians have not.²³⁵ It was only in the 20th Century and following Vatican II that the importance of this inter-religious dynamic and eastern Christianity's contribution to it was recognised. For this reason, John Paul II, deeply aware of the divide between western and eastern Christianity, declared that the universal Church "needs to learn to breathe with 'two lungs'" (A O'Mahony, 2009). But more than this, given the complex contemporary dynamics within Islam as it grapples with the rise of political Islamism, increased *Sunni-Shi'a* tensions, and how it engages with the modern world, the on-going presence and engagement of the diverse Christian presence presents a challenge and opportunity for dialogue and discernment, especially for strengthening the political, communal and religious space in which all communities can continue to coexist and flourish in the post-conflict context.

Syria is central to this Eastern Christian dynamic. Home to each of the three Antiochene Patriarchates, it also became home to many Assyrian Christians, and a major centre for the Armenian community following the Armenian genocide in 1915. As a result of the Iraq war and the Syrian conflict, many Christians have emigrated, but the plural nature and resilience of Eastern Christianity in Syria remains strong. And its historic and contemporary ecclesial and theological contribution to interreligious relations make it potentially a vital resource for the future.

5.4 Georges Khodr (b. 1923)

Of all contemporary Eastern theologians who have explored Christian-Muslim relations and dialogue, and who have played a transformative role in Orthodoxy in Lebanon and Syria, perhaps the most influential has been Georges Khodr, the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon. Over the space of fifty years, he has written countless articles (mostly in Arabic), in which he "rekindles and reawakens the Christian theological flames of the early centuries that present the primordial and the simple Christian message of divine love" (Avakian, 2012a, p. 39). His writings are rooted in the Patristic heritage of the Eastern Church, and influenced by the mystical theology of the early Fathers, in whom he finds a theology in which the relationship of Christians and Muslims is enhanced and enriched by a common understanding of the 'Other'. For oriental Christianity, the Church Fathers represent a

²³⁵ For a reflection on how Orthodoxy has encountered Islam in recent decades, see: (Sharp, 2014) *Modern Encounters with Islam and the Impact on Orthodox Thought, Identity and Action*.

foundation for Christian faith and understanding because they are closest to the teachings of the apostles, and because they “bring spirituality and theology together” in a way that allows for the Divine Mystery to be revealed to and within all of humanity (Avakian, 2012a, p. 66).

Avakian writes:

The notion of divine mystery and the unknowability of God, the pneumatological paradigm, the importance of human response to divine love and grace, through which the divine image would be actualized, Khodr’s anthropological and universalist position, according to which, it is the whole of humanity that together form the divine image, his insistence on ‘secularization’, all these elements together contribute for a Christian theology that has a genuine potential to meet the Other, not only for the sake of meeting or accepting the Other, but for the sake of a genuine maturity in Christian faith and for self-knowing (Avakian, 2017, pp. 182-183).

As the Christian denomination in the region with the most numerous adherents, the Greek Orthodox contribution to Christian-Muslim relations in the region is important. Deeply rooted in the Byzantine tradition, the Eastern Orthodox Church was deeply impacted by the advent of the Ottoman Empire and the imposition of the *millet* system, which, despite its limitations allowed a certain flourishing of the Christian communities. Roussos attributes the “outstanding economic and social record of the Christian minorities” in the nineteenth century to “their participation in expanding sectors of the economy, the foreign protection they enjoyed, their favourable situation following various reforms in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, their Western education, and the help they acquired from their co-religionists outside the region”(Roussos, 2010, p. 108). Following the collapse of the Ottoman State however, the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch had to renegotiate its status in a context that was overwhelmingly Muslim. This involved celebrating and affirming its indigenous Arab identity and promoting secular nationalism in order to secure equal status with Muslims.

The identity of the Eastern Orthodox community in Syria is complex. It forms part of the Eastern Orthodox world and sees itself as indigenous to the Arab world. (Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Eastern Orthodox Church in Syria has had an Arab Patriarch unlike the other Patriarchates in Jerusalem, Alexandria and Constantinople, whose senior clergy have all been Greek nationals.) More numerous in Syria than in Lebanon, the Eastern Orthodox have “walked a thin line between Arab-Syrian nationalism, and Lebanon’s uniqueness as a place where East and West could meet on an equal footing” (Roussos, 2010, p. 114). Having previously sought to indigenise its theological contribution within the culture of

the Arab world in order to establish its eastern identity, it is an identity that is once again being contested and debated in the light of the rise of political Islam and Islamic extremism.

In the 1940s, Georges Khodr was instrumental in developing an 'Orthodox Youth Movement' which sought a move away from ethnic Orthodoxy and a renaissance of the Greek Orthodox Church through its spiritual life. The movement set up educational centres throughout Lebanon and Syria, and these helped in the formation of a new generation of clergy and religious leaders. It also led to a resurgence in monasticism and to the establishment of new centres of theological study. Most notably Balamand University in Lebanon, founded in 1988 by Patriarch Ignatius IV Hazim, has become a leading educational institution in the Middle East.

Khodr was born in Tripoli, Lebanon in 1923. His childhood and youth were spent in an Islamic quarter of the city, an experience that came to symbolise for him the 'coming out' of the Christian communities from their ghettos in the Arab world, into full participation in the life of their countries (Avakian, 2012b, p. 103). Khodr believed that Christians should be fully a part of the Islamic World with equal rights and dignity and that they should know their compatriots through a deep relationship with and participation in their life and faith.

The basis of Khodr's apophatic theology, (following Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Maximus the Confessor) is the "impossibility of describing the essence of God", which remains an "incomprehensible mystery" (Avakian, 2012a, p. 41). In one of his most influential articles, Khodr writes: "If obedience to the Master means following him wherever we find traces of his presence, we have an obligation to investigate the authentic spiritual life of non-Christians" (G. Khodr, 1971, pp. 118-119). Thus, starting with the Mystery of God as Creator, the mystery of God in Christ, and God as Spirit, Khodr explores the implications for God's and our relationship with all humanity, one of the most significant of which allows for the possibility of the hiddenness of Christ within other faiths. (Here, Khodr echoes Karl Rahner's Transcendental Theology.) Khodr maintains that the only name given to God is "Love" (1 John 4:8), and if so, then it is love that expresses the divine work in Christ and in relation to the "Other" (Avakian, 2012a, pp. 43-44). "Love," he states, is "the Cradle of Faith."²³⁶ Moreover, echoing Maximus the Confessor, he speaks of the "deification" of humanity, through this Divine Love, bringing humanity into union with the divine and so

²³⁶ This is the title of an article by Khodr. "*Al-Mahabbah Matrahan Liliman*" (Love: A Cradle of Faith) *An-nahar*. 15.05.1999. Quoted in Avakian: *The Mystery of Divine Love*. P.50

breaking down the barriers that exist in humanity. For him, echoing again the early Fathers of the East, faith, spiritual experience and transformation take priority over reason (Avakian, 2012b, p. 109).

At the core of Khodr's theology lies a reflection on what he calls the 'Economy of the Spirit'. It is this 'economy of the Spirit' which makes the presence of Christ possible and the living of authentic spiritual lives "possible for all human beings, regardless of any religious restrictions" (Avakian, 2012b, p. 121). He writes: "The Spirit operates and applies His energies in accordance with His own economy and we could, from this angle, regard the non-Christian religions as points where His inspiration is at work" (G. Khodr, 1971, pp. 125-126). If that is so, then Christ cannot be "owned" by some people and not by others, and we have a duty to discern Christ in others.

Avakian identifies five major themes that resonate through Khodr's position on interreligious dialogue and relations (Avakian, 2017). First, the human being is made in the image of God and therefore all human beings are of infinite value. Second, the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be confined to the boundaries of the church and Christians cannot claim exclusive ownership of the Truth. Thirdly, the Word is present in every existing thing and the creative energy of God is revealed in his people. Fourthly, we cannot know the full mystery of God, but can only encounter him through spiritual prayer and reflection. Lastly, the final consummation will involve the removal of all ugliness and wickedness and salvation for all. The Church is called to be the sign of God's love for all his people. Alongside this, Khodr believes that "only within a secularized state Christianity might have the potential of an actual existence and coexistence with other religions" (Avakian, 2017, p. 193). For only under a civil rule deprived of all exclusivist inclination, can sectarian prejudice be overcome.

Khodr criticises western theology for its exclusive dogmatism, and believes Eastern Christianity's mystical approach to theology represents a truer reflection of Christian theology and spirituality. "We are called to be Christians, not Crusaders", he writes (G. Khodr, 1981, p. 176). Often, he uses a methodology in theological dialogue that takes steps towards Islam. For example, in order to facilitate understanding with Muslim scholars on the subject of Incarnation, he says "Christ is our Qur'an".²³⁷ Khodr urges a "new type of religious

²³⁷ Khodr, G (1987) *Al-Kalimah wal-jasad (The Word and the Flesh)* An-nahar. 29.03.1987. Quoted in Avakian *The Other in Karl Rahner's Transcendental Theology and George Khodr's Spiritual Theology*. P.180

conversation... not those so-called ideological conversations limited to concepts and doctrines where none regarded and addressed his partner in reality, but genuine dialogues, from one open-hearted person to another". For, he writes: "we may be outsiders to one another in dogma, but none are outsiders to humanity and to the God with whom we have to do" (G. Khodr, 1981, pp. 163-164). For Khodr, the pervasiveness of western thought and civilisation is spiritually destructive, since the West tends "to consider man as the centre of the universe" (M. G. Khodr, 2016, p. 97). However, eastern spirituality, particularly that of the desert with its spirituality of detachment and pursuit of truth, is the place where the spiritual life can become "incarnate in history as a movement, ready to be transmitted by utilizing the instruments of knowledge, even politics itself" in the service of humanity (M. G. Khodr, 2016, p. 97). Khodr believes that whilst "European societies are faltering because they have fallen into the sin of the builders of the tower of Babel," eastern culture and spirituality have the capacity to "help Europe to transcend itself" and to be spiritually renewed in the service of humanity (M. G. Khodr, 2016, p. 103).

Khodr's theology and writings have both theological and political relevance, especially for Christianity's engagement in the Middle East. As regards Lebanon particularly, with its confessional constitution, he has often been critical of the Orthodox Church's willingness to step back from political engagement and decision-making processes, believing that Christians need to be actively engaged within society and community-development. He believes that the confessional status of the Lebanese Constitution pitches religious groups against each other, resulting in each bidding for power and influence over the other.²³⁸ Rather, he believes, faith communities should work together for the freedom, equality and needs of all people. This approach, rooted in the riches of Eastern Patristic theology, and "in a theological-philosophical language that is neither alien nor exclusive to any of the followers of the two religions" clearly has continuing relevance in the region, and could continue to be helpful for Christian-Muslim relations in post-conflict Syria (Avakian, 2012a, p. 67).

In December 2017, I had the privilege of meeting with Bishop Khodr at his home in Lebanon. He was deeply reflective and not optimistic about the current prospects for the development of interreligious relations and dialogue. Echoing others with whom I have spoken, he was disappointed at the lack of depth in Christian-Muslim dialogue in recent years. One of the

²³⁸ For a helpful exploration of this issue, see: (Fischbach, 2015) *Interfaith Dialogue in Lebanon: Between a Power Balancing Act and Theological Encounters*. Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations,

reasons he suggests is that “contemporary Islam is complete in itself. All contemporary Islamic thoughts are justifications of the truth of Islam”. Additionally, “many Muslims feel deeply and profoundly that the West is orientated against them.” Speaking from decades of engagement with and reflection on the subject, Khodr continued with a message that I believe is both challenging and has lasting relevance:

We as Christians are not courageous enough to face this reality. We are not hopeful enough to see that sometime Islam could evolve in a way that could make itself more engaged in human destiny and the suffering of humanity. I feel that Christians too are still rooted in hierarchies, priesthood, and old allegiances of theology. We lack a real theology of engagement with the world. The situation is very difficult. Many Muslims and many Christians forget that God is not thought; God is love. It is our duty as Christians to reveal the love of God in our dealings with others and with the world. This is what we can teach our Muslim friends. If we look back to the Christians in the first century, we can rediscover something of our faith. They were not concerned with politics. They were mixed with the population keeping the faith. They lived the gospel. To be witnesses of the gospel in our daily lives - this is the way forward.²³⁹

Khodr’s spiritual and theological legacy and influence remains strong in Eastern Christian circles in Lebanon and Syria. Presented with the level of sectarian violence unleashed during the Syrian and Iraq conflicts, his theology looks even more challenging, and some may say unrealistic, especially as many Christian communities wish to strengthen their sense of Christian identity. And yet, it is recognition of the diversity that Khodr’s theology embraces that makes his contribution of lasting relevance to the religious landscape in the region.

5.5 A Melkite Contribution: Patriarch Gregorios III Laham (b.1933) and Jean-Clement Jeanbart (b.1943)

The ‘Melkite’ Greek Catholic Church is the Catholic counterpart of the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchate of Antiochate.²⁴⁰ ‘Melkite’ refers to the Syriac and Arabic word for ‘King’, reflecting the Church’s acceptance of the Council of Chalcedon (451) as promoted by the Byzantine Emperor. The Greek Catholic Church is the largest Catholic community in Syria, which, though in communion with Rome since the sixteenth century, has had an uninterrupted line of Catholic Patriarchs since 1724. It was given legal recognition by the Ottoman government in 1848, when it moved its Patriarchate from Lebanon to Damascus.

²³⁹ Interview with Bishop Georges Khodr. Broumanna, Lebanon. 1 December 2017.

²⁴⁰ See: (Galadza, 2010) (Robertson, 1990, pp. 98-101) (A O'Mahony, 2018, pp. 271-284)

The Melkite Church, as one of the most influential of the oriental churches in the region, has the potential to offer a uniquely eastern contribution to Catholic spirituality and theology, though the dominance of western Catholic influence within the Church continues to create tensions between its eastern and western expressions of ecclesiology and theology. An example of this tension is illustrated in Rome's response to the improving relationship between the Greek Melkite and Orthodox Churches in Syria, Galadza writes that

Melkites and Orthodox have come to develop extremely good relations, in part because of shared difficulties with Islam and the absence of ethno-national issues dividing them... In 1975, the Melkite Synod requested permission from the Vatican to inaugurate 'double communion' (with Rome and the Orthodox), but it was denied. An official bilateral dialogue with the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch was inaugurated in 1995, and that same year saw the most pioneering event of contemporary East-West ecumenism in the 'Zoghby-Khodr' initiative: Bishop Zoghby signed a declaration stating: 'I believe in everything taught by the Eastern Orthodox Church, and I am in communion with the Bishop of Rome within the limits recognized by the Holy Fathers of the East during the first millennium and before the separation.' Georges Khodr, the influential Orthodox Metropolitan of Byblos and Batroun officially declared: 'I consider this profession of faith by Bishop Elias Zoghby to create the necessary and sufficient conditions to establish the unity of the Orthodox Churches with Rome.' Rome has refused to sanction this initiative" (Galadza, 2010, pp. 312-313).

Of all the Churches in the Middle East, the Greek Melkite Church has been the most involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue. The former Patriarch Gregorios III Laham (Greek Melkite Patriarch from 2000-2017) was a strong advocate for Christian-Muslim dialogue and stressed the indigenous roots of the eastern Christian community. These roots he said gave a uniqueness to the Christian presence and a responsibility to eastern Christians to remain. Patriarch Gregorios wrote:

Emigration is certainly a natural right for people everywhere, but emigration from the Middle East is something different, because the Middle East is the cradle of Christianity. Eastern Christians incarnate this Christian presence in the cradle of Christianity....Jesus is an Eastern citizen, a compatriot of mine, since I am an Easterner. If Christians emigrate, it is as though Christ were leaving his country and homeland.²⁴¹

In his many articles, sermons and speeches, Patriarch Gregorios regularly called upon Muslims and Christians, as fellow Arabs with a common heritage, to work together to relieve suffering and improve society, and sought to relate Christian theology in a Muslim context and establish

²⁴¹ Patriarch Gregorios III Laham (2017) 'On the occasion of the Feast of the Nativity 2016. 'Christ was born in Palestine: Christianity was born in Syria.' In *I am with you always. Vol. IV. Pastoral Letters of Patriarch Gregorios III from 2013-2017*. Fairfax, USA: Eastern Christian Publications. 265

commonality of principles. The “mission, role and service” of eastern Christians he wrote, is to be the “real manifestation of Christ God, Lover of mankind”.²⁴² In 2013, Patriarch Gregorios summarised what he called ‘The Challenges facing Arab Christians’ in the Middle East, for a Conference bearing that title hosted by King Abdullah of Jordan in Amman in 2013. The list that Patriarch Gregorios compiled can be viewed in Appendix 7.

Archbishop Jean-Clement Jeanbart was born in 1943 and ordained in 1968. He succeeded Neophytos Edelby as Greek Catholic Archbishop of Aleppo in 1995. Throughout his ministry, Archbishop Jeanbart has affirmed the importance of Christian-Muslim dialogue and co-existence in Syria. He says:

Before the war clergy and sheikhs treated each other without difference or distinction. We had very good relations. But the war has created some barriers. Nevertheless, we intend to restore harmony, and religious leaders are trying hard to be an example.²⁴³

Living in Aleppo throughout the conflict, Jeanbart has been an outspoken critic of western support for militant groups. In 2015, he pleaded with the British Government to “stop investing in jihadis and mercenaries who are killing anyone who is saying anything about freedom, citizenship, religious liberty and democracy.”²⁴⁴

An examination of some of Jeanbart’s writings and reflections adds a helpful Syrian perspective on Christian-Muslim relations in Syria, both prior to, and since the start of the Syrian conflict.

During a Conference in Abu Dhabi on 10 March 2008, Jeanbart opened his speech by remarking to the assembled delegates:

In truth, our sacred books, our religious thought, our moral laws, our arab culture, our shared hope and our common belonging to the same nation all indicate that there is

²⁴² Patriarch Gregorios III Laham (2017) ‘On the occasion of the Nativity 2013. In *I am with you always*. 75

²⁴³ Interview with Archbishop Jeanbart. Aleppo. 29 April 2018. It is sad that critics of Syrian Church leaders outside the country sometimes see their efforts at modelling religious harmony in the midst of the conflict as politically motivated. Such a view does not give sufficient credit to the longstanding nature of inter-religious relationships in Syria and the inter-religious ‘culture’ of the country. See also a video made with Archbishop Jeanbart in Aleppo on 29 April 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbvmhU4RzGo>

²⁴⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrian-archbishop-pleads-for-uk-to-stop-backing-anti-assad-islamist-groups-a6697226.html>

woven a solid canvas for the strengthening of harmony, fraternal friendliness and friendship that exists between nationals of our countries in this part of the world.²⁴⁵

This sentiment echoes the writings of George Khodr, and of many other eastern clergy, who rightly emphasise the indigenous roots of the Christian community and the cultural heritage and history that they share with their Muslim compatriots. Jeanbart continued by acknowledging that the presence of numerous conflicts in the region might challenge this statement, but declared that developments in civilisation, science, encounters between cultures and communication were bound to create confusion and tension in the face of ignorance, but that these would nevertheless “erase ignorance and activate the spirit of openness between humans from one place and across countries and continents”. They have the capacity to enrich culture and understanding of one another and of the world around us. The Orient should be “proud to have been the cradle of religions and the nursery of all that these religions have given to humanity, such as moral values and well-anchored social rules, which facilitate common life between men and women”. Moreover, “religious feeling” is “rooted in contemporary Arab society” and “allows the citizen to develop his personality and to quickly reach human and social fulfilment”, inspiring respect of the other. It therefore has the capacity to improve relations in society and “develop the climate necessary for a peaceful and evolving human life”. For Jeanbart, the true expression of religion is practise of the virtues, the most important of which he identifies as diligence in work, sincerity, faithfulness, generosity, forgiveness, reconciliation and love. When religion does not practise these, he says, it is failing.

For Jeanbart, morality and religion are inseparable. Respect for and acceptance of the other, moral integrity and good dealings with others, are integral to both Christianity and Islam. And these are the roots that Middle Eastern society needs to recover, helping to construct a society that is “socially coherent” and in which people respect each other, and in which individual and corporate human rights prevail. Jeanbart cites both the gospels and the *Qur’an* and *Hadith* to affirm the importance of both Christians and Muslims working together to achieve these aims.

As previously mentioned, Christian leaders in Syria have been criticised by some for ‘siding’ with the Syrian Government. Such a view underestimates the influence of the historic role of

²⁴⁵ ‘*Le discours religieux qui éclaire et la rencontre civilisatrice entre les peuples.*’ Speech in Abu Dhabi, 10 March 2008. All quotes regarding this speech are my translation from a typed copy in French given to me by Archbishop Jeanbart on 23 April 2018, which itself is his translation from the original Arabic.

religious leadership that prevailed in Ottoman society, and the social, cultural and religious complexity of the contemporary context in which religious leaders play an important representative and intermediary role, and sometimes act as a 'critical voice' between their communities and the political leadership of the State. In his speech in Abu Dhabi Jeanbart offers a helpful comment on this:

Our Christian membership may seem to some to align us with membership of a party or a group that imposes on us a specific way of life and perhaps even a specific political commitment. This may appear to others as an obstacle or hindrance that would prevent us from fully integrating into our Arab societies. The truth is very different.

It is true that Christianity dictates precise and clear religious duties, which are part of our commitment to life, and it also demands of us specific moral values that we realize in our daily relations with others. It is also true that the fact of being Christian distinguishes us in society when we adhere to Christianity with seriousness and sincerity. It neither allows us to abandon others, nor does it allow us to distance ourselves from social action, from national service, or from devoting ourselves to acting in the fringes of popular movements. It does not forbid us from joining national parties that are working for the good of the country and are fighting for its progress and prosperity, unless these movements or parties are atheists and fight religion and who, by refusing the participation of believers, exclude them.

Jeanbart concludes:

In our country our situation presents us with numerous favourable opportunities for establishing constructive and good relations with our fellow citizens, and those with whom we work in multiple contexts: cultural, scientific, social, political, artistic, and economic. Every day and every moment, we meet and exchange with them. It is a reality that we cannot escape and which at the same time is our Mission and our way to please Almighty God. Our common life with Muslims is a dominant aspect of our Christian life in this region of the world, which is dear to us. Thus it always preoccupies us, in our thoughts and our actions.²⁴⁶

Echoing a tendency identified by other church leaders in the region, Jeanbart acknowledges that theological dialogue on key Christian doctrines remains difficult. The Divinity, Resurrection and Lordship of Christ are all "beyond dialogue" he suggests. However, theological dialogue might be possible on the Unity of God, the sanctity of Mary, and of Jesus as Master and Prophet. Jeanbart writes:

Both from a Christian point of view and from a Muslim point of view, dialogue remains in the present circumstances limited to the sphere of social and humanitarian Affairs.

²⁴⁶ For further discussion on the relationship of religious leadership to the State in the Middle East, see Henley (2015) '*Remaking the Mosaic. Religious leaders and secular borders in the colonial Levant,*' and (2016) '*Religious Authority and Sectarianism in Lebanon.*'

This dialogue, even if it is limited is always cordial and remains beneficial in a mixed and plural society.²⁴⁷

Despite the limits of dialogue, Jeanbart advocates interreligious dialogue on matters relevant to social and ethical values, as a means to deepening conversation:

It is useful to have a dialogue at the individual level. Personalized and sustained friendship at the individual and group level is likely to lead to community dialogue at a later stage. To go in the opposite direction would risk difficulties caused by the constraints of sectarian pressure often present within Muslim communities. An enlightened tolerance, avoiding key principles, can with time, develop the good disposition of listening essential to a true useful and constructive dialogue. In any case, cordiality is a 'must', and is the gateway to good relations.²⁴⁸

As Jeanbart frequently cites, and as I have witnessed on numerous occasions in Syria, relationships between most Christian and Muslim leaders remain good, and in the public sphere religious leaders seek to model a relationship of trust and confidence before a society where relationships and trust have been fractured by the conflict. Reflecting on the common history, and on the social and economic life which Muslims and Christians share in Syria he writes that this relationship extends beyond the leaders:

The language of the most enlightened laymen among our fellow Muslims draws from this friendly terminology. Good will on both sides allows a serene conviviality and a comfortable neighbourhood. Christians and Moslems from the city of Aleppo, for example, who have known each other for a long time and whose ancestors have lived together for centuries, come together and nurture feelings of mutual trust and friendly respect.²⁴⁹

In a document predating the Syrian conflict and entitled '*Musulmans et Chretiens. Convivialite et dialogue*', Jeanbart poignantly notes:

'Peace' remains the fertile ground for the growth of mutual trust, which is indispensable for any loyal dialogue and sincere friendship between men of good will. We are currently witnessing an obvious tendency towards openness and listening among many Muslims. Never in the history of the Middle Eastern Church have we been able to see so many Islamo-Christian encounters and so many budding friendships between the religious leaders of the two sides.

²⁴⁷ Commentary on a section entitled 'Inter-religious Dialogue' in an unpublished paper entitled 'The plight of Christians in the Middle East'. 9 January 2015. Translated from a document in French.

²⁴⁸ Taken from of an unpublished document written in French by Archbishop Jeanbart in 2009 and entitled: '*Avec L'Islam: Un dialogue humain et social.*'

²⁴⁹ Translated from an unpublished document in French entitled: '*Musulmans et Chretiens. Convivialite et Dialogue.*'

This vision was clearly expressed in another speech Archbishop Jeanbart made to a distinguished gathering at an Iftar meal at the Episcopal House in Aleppo on 14 September 2009. The gathering included the Governor of Aleppo, the Grand Mufti of Aleppo, and Christian and Muslim leaders, and the paragraph offers an insight into the representative and leadership role that the religious leaders play in Syrian society, in affirming the plural values that most religious leaders in Syria hope to sustain.

May each one of us do this for the progress of our national community, so that it can offer its members a dignified and peaceful human life, and to the different local denominations the serenity, allowing them to slowly wander to others, to meet and establish, among themselves, bonds of deep friendship and feelings of solidarity aimed at the building of an evolving society, both united and plural, where each believer can enjoy all his rights and where each individual is aware of the duties imposed on them by their belonging to this dear country of ours.²⁵⁰

However, the war has hugely impacted society, and inter-religious relations have been strained. In 2015, in a speech in New York, Archbishop Jeanbart said:

For decades Syrian Christians lived peacefully in a society alongside a Muslim majority which was tolerant. [...] This is no longer the case. Syrian Christians are disoriented by the implosion of a way of life that was quiet and safe. They are afraid to leave their houses, they avoid going out of their cities or villages, or do so only to move to other regions where they hope to find a safe refuge. In dangerous zones like Aleppo and villages close to Turkey, what terrorizes the population more than the fighting and the bombing, are the kidnappings, the snipers, car-bombs, the shelling and the looting... all this culminating in the manifestation of ISIS. Christians are victims of a war of destruction led by a certain nations taking advantage of unrest. These foreign elements have promoted a brother vs brother war. They have injected arms, money and tens of thousands of fighters, jihadists, fundamentalists, foreigners and mercenaries, recruited from many different countries.²⁵¹

In a Pastoral letter on 25 March, 2018, Archbishop Jeanbart recalled how even his residence, bishopric and Cathedral had been repeatedly targeted during the occupation of East Aleppo by militant groups. But more seriously, speaking at a Conference a few months earlier, he said:

The prosperity which Aleppo enjoyed and which placed her among the most important cities of this region has lost its aura. The innumerable attacks which have destroyed its

²⁵⁰ Translated from an unpublished copy of the speech in French, given to me by Archbishop Jeanbart.

²⁵¹ Talk delivered at *Edward Cardinal Egan Catholic Center at New York University*, on April 28, 2015. Published as: 'Syrian Christians are caught between Civil War and Islamist terrorism', in *Christians in the Muslim World*. 11 June 2015

factories and its flourishing industry, its infrastructure and social and administrative institutions, its commercial area and its legendary souks, its ancient homes, its schools, and its hospitals have reduced the city to misery and its population to extreme poverty. Through the destruction of this city, Syria has lost one of its main sources of economic growth and social improvement.... Aleppo was not alone to suffer, many other cities in the country have been the target of a similar dreadful disaster.²⁵²

In 2015, Jeanbart spoke of the role of the Church as follows:

Since the beginning of this senseless war, the Church – while encouraging the regime to enact the reforms desired by the majority of citizens – has called for an end to armed conflict, has called for negotiations to achieve a political solution to this crisis. The Assembly of Bishops of my country, along with the Pope, has not ceased to call believers to prayer, the fighters to lay down their arms, and nations to cease military interference.²⁵³

And in an interesting reflection on the causes of this disaster, and in response to criticism that Christian leaders failed to support the ‘rebels’, the Archbishop wrote:

We cannot see anywhere, in all these events, evidence of a revolution or a search for betterment and the improving of the life of the citizens of this country. Rather, we ask ourselves every day, is this revolution really a movement of Syrian citizens looking for freedom and democracy and a better life, or is it not a devastating invasion of our land, more terrible than the invasion of the Huns in the 5th Century and the Tartars in the Middle Ages? This pretence of a revolution for liberty and betterment does not care about the life of the people it purports to serve, nor about the security of its inhabitants, nor about their subsistence nor the future of their children.Some opponents wonder how it is that religious leaders and bishops are not the first ones to support the rebels, but the facts are evident. In everything we have seen that this uprising has nothing to do with freedom and democracy. If it were the case, it is undeniable that the Church would have been the first to become an ally of the unrest and the leader of those asking for substantial reforms in political governance and in the administration of public goods, beginning with the suppression of dictatorship followed by a democratic passage of power. What Christians want for the short term and for the future, is to arrive at a non-confessional and pluralistic political system enabling each citizen, whatever his religious beliefs, to live in peace in his country and to participate in public life, with all the duties and rights which real citizenship requires.²⁵⁴

In another document entitled ‘The plight of Christians in the Middle East’ dated 9 January 2015, Jeanbart makes clear that inter-religious tensions have been heightened by Salafist

²⁵² These paragraphs are copied from the script of an unpublished talk that Archbishop Jeanbart gave on 5 December 2017, handed to me by the Archbishop.

²⁵³ Talk in New York. 28 April, 2015.

²⁵⁴ From the script of an unpublished talk that Archbishop Jeanbart gave on 5 December 2017. Translated from French.

tendencies that have infiltrated the country over recent decades, and that the majority of Syrian Muslims have always respected Christians. Jeanbart believes Christian-Muslim tensions in Syria have been heightened by Islamic influences imported from outside the region that are not representative of Syrian religious traditions.

In the face of the economic and social hardships created by the war, Jeanbart, like other Church leaders, has continued to place a high priority on the continuing provision of education, medical welfare, skills training, housing assistance, and basic food provision to those in greatest need. And in March 2018, following the return of tens of thousands of internally displaced people to their homes in Aleppo after the liberation of the city in December 2016, Jeanbart was able to offer a more positive assessment. In doing so, he refers to the humanitarian and charitable projects with which his Church is engaged. He wrote:

Now, with the freeing of Aleppo, we see signs of hope rising on the horizon. Better security and the reopening of public services give some tranquillity to our faithful. There is now water and electricity in the homes. Slowly, economic life has begun and the most valiant are finding work. We are very happy to see the young people who have been prepared in our professional schools find work. "To Build and Stay", our association for local development has been able to renovate 800 apartments and some 50 workshops and stores which had been damaged by rockets. Our Solidarity Fund has made 200 loans so far in order to help our young people begin their own projects enabling them to live and advance with pride.²⁵⁵

However, despite these positive developments, emigration of Christians remains a major concern. A large percentage of Christians in Aleppo left the city during the years of the conflict for fear of their lives.²⁵⁶ Others have left because of the economic hardship caused by the loss of work, the destruction of industries, and the impact of sanctions. Jeanbart, along with other Christian leaders, has appealed to the West to assist the Churches of the east to enable their people to return or stay. Funds have been set up to support Christians in travel expenses to return to Aleppo, and in the rebuilding and renovation damaged homes.

²⁵⁵ Easter Letter from Jean-Clement Jeanbart to his congregations. 25 March 2018. The 'Build and Stay' fund "allows workers – carpenters, plumbers, teachers, lawyers, craftsmen and others – to re-establish themselves professionally, to buy the equipment and supplies they need to get started again; to rebuild the city of Aleppo and their own lives."

²⁵⁶ There are no official figures for the numbers of Christians who have left the city. Figures vary according to denomination. For example, some denominations report emigration in the region of 50%. The small Presbyterian community in the city is reported to have lost 90% of their congregation to emigration.

The emigration of Christians from the region has been a concern shared by both Muslims and Christians for many years now.²⁵⁷ It remains a growing concern for the well-being and stability of the historically plural and diverse nature, framework and shape of Levantine society. Girling identifies four factors for the emigration of Christians that has afflicted the region in recent decades:

(1) Interventions of external state to alter local governments, as has happened in Iraq, Libya, and Syria; (2) disinclination by the numerically largest religious tradition in the region – Sunni Islam – to help sustain societies capable of plurality; (3) a lack of overarching vision and willingness to cooperate among churches to secure their presence; and (4) migration in search of a better life and employment.²⁵⁸

In December 2017, Jeanbart quoted an article published on 29 January 2002, by the Lebanese Newspaper, An-Nahar, in which Saudi Prince Talal Bin Abdulaziz al Saud declared that the emigration of Christians

will result in long term effects in the future of our Arab world... The Arab Christians formed one of the pillars of both old and modern Arab construction... Their survival...is to prevent draining an important section of the creative, scientific, cultural and intellectual potential of the Arab world. They are also keen elements of economic power in trade, industry, finance, professional specialization and workmanship. In short, if the emigration of Arab Christians continues, it will be a deep blow pointed to the core of our future.²⁵⁹

Such a view has been expressed by both Muslim and Christian leaders and citizens at most meetings I have attended with faith, civic and community leaders in towns and cities across Syria during the last few years. The importance of the Christian presence, and condemnation of sectarian violence has always featured in conversation.

As the war approaches an end in Syria, Archbishop Jeanbart is keen to encourage and enable Christians to remain in the country, and to repair the relationship of trust between Christian and Muslim communities. He also holds that Christians have a major role to play in the restoration of political and religious stability in Syria.

²⁵⁷ For a helpful article on the issue of emigration of Christian Arabs from the region, although focussed on Christian emigration from Palestine, see: (Sabella, 1998) See also the Chapter on 'Emigration' in: (J. Andrews, 2018) *The Church in Disorienting Times. Leading Prophetically through Adversity.*

²⁵⁸ Girling, K. (2018) Displaced Populations. In. Ross, K., Tadros, M., Johnson, T.M. (eds.) *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia.* 427-438

²⁵⁹ From An Nahar Newspaper. 29 January 2002. Quoted by Archbishop Jeanbart in Talk given on 5 December 2017.

To ensure political stability, it is essential that Christian leaders, both lay and religious, are given a voice and presence at the negotiating table. Christians can act as bridge-builders between Shiites and Sunnis, and they can help develop a political system that ensures the rights of all citizens.²⁶⁰

He appeals to Christians outside Syria to support the Christians of the land to stay, not to leave. Asked what he would say to Christians in Europe who have been critical of Christian leaders in Syria, he replied:

Jesus told us that the truth shall set us free. One of the most important principles of Christianity is truth, and it is a duty of all Christian believers to understand what is true. It is a huge injustice to judge others when you do not have all the knowledge or the facts to understand the truth. So do not judge us, but come and see for yourselves, and find out the truth of what we have been through here. The soil of Syria is blessed and holy, because it is mixed with the blood of many martyrs who were faithful to God.²⁶¹

All churches in Syria undertake projects to encourage members of their congregations who have remained to stay, and to enable those who have left, to return. In February 2019, John Pontifex of Aid to the Church in Need UK, wrote an article describing the support that the Catholic Charity is giving to Christian communities in Homs to assist the return of Christian families who fled during the occupation of the Christian Quarter of the Old City by Islamist groups. He wrote:

An action plan to enable thousands of Christians to return to their homes in the Syrian city of Homs was agreed in a house-repair scheme involving Church leaders and a leading Catholic charity.

At the meeting in Homs, the leaders of five Church communities signed the Homs Reconstruction Committee agreement, in which Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need will repair 300 homes as part of the first stage of the plan.

In the second phase, a further 980 homes are due to be rebuilt – 80 from the Melkite Greek Catholic community, 600 Greek Orthodox and 300 belonging to Syriac Orthodox families. ACN will support part of the project.

Highlighting the significance of the agreement, ACN Middle East projects coordinator Father Andrzej Halemba said: “The agreement is one of the most critical steps forward in the recovery of the Christian community in Homs. The commitment to rebuild so

²⁶⁰ Talk in New York. 28 April, 2015.

²⁶¹ Quoted in an interview with Archbishop Jeanbart in Aleppo on 29 April 2018. For further reflection on this, see a video interview I conducted with Archbishop Jeanbart at his residence in Aleppo on 29 April 2018. http://anglosyrian.press/Aleppo_archbishop/ For a questionnaire compiled by Archbishop Jeanbart in 2015, exploring the Challenges facing Christians in the Middle East, see Appendix 2.

many homes offers the light of hope for people desperate to return to the city that is one of the most important for Christians in the whole of Syria.” Since the crisis in Syria began in 2011, ACN has completed 750 projects involving 150 partners. With more than 12,500 homes destroyed in Homs and 37,500 badly damaged, many Christians have been living in displacement in the nearby Valley of the Christians for up to seven years. At the height of the conflict in 2014, there were less than 100 Christians remaining in Homs Old City and targeted attacks by Islamist extremists forced nearly 250,000 to leave.²⁶²

The many projects undertaken by Christian denominations to support local communities across Syria are a vital contribution to preserving the Christian presence and the plural religious landscape in Syria.

5.6 His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II. Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church (b. 1965)

The Syriac Orthodox Church is part of the Oriental Orthodox family of Churches and traces its roots to the apostolic ministry in Antioch.²⁶³ The Oriental Orthodox family includes the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Malankara Orthodox Church in South India, the Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches, and the Armenian Apostolic Church with the Holy See of Etchmiadzin. They share full Communion with each other, each have their own Pope, Patriarch or Catholicos, and reject Chalcedon. Following the Council of Chalcedon (451CE), the Oriental Churches were isolated from Roman and Byzantine Christianity.

The Syriac Orthodox Church has a rich history and liturgical tradition. Situated originally in Antioch, the See was forced to move in the 6th century owing to persecution. In the 13th Century it settled at the monastery of Deir al-Hananyo, otherwise known as Deir ul-Zafaran in Mardin in Eastern Turkey, where the Patriarchate remained until 1933. Following the Sayfo massacres and further political and religious instability in eastern Turkey, the Patriarchate moved to Homs, and then in 1959 to Damascus. Today, Damascus is the headquarters for the global Syriac Orthodox family, one of the most significant eastern Christian communities. In the early centuries of the Christian era, Edessa played a significant role in the development of Syriac liturgy and literature and in the translation of the Bible, but since the end of the

²⁶² <https://acnuk.org/news/stria-house-repair-plan-offers-fresh-hopes-to-christians/> 20 February 2019. (Accessed: 26 February 2019)

²⁶³ See: (Shemunkasho, 2018) Oriental Orthodox. In: *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia*. 247-258. See also: www.syriacpatriarchate.org Accessed: 1 August 2018

Ottoman Empire, Syria has become an important centre for the Syriac and Armenian Christian communities.

In 1995, it was reported that there were 89,000 Syrian Orthodox in Syria, representing about 10% of the Christian population.²⁶⁴ Due to political instability and religious persecutions in the region, the Syriac Orthodox Church has declined in the Middle East, but grown significantly elsewhere, particularly Europe, Lebanon and America. Patriarch Aphrem was born in Qamishle in Syria and studied in Lebanon and Egypt. From 1996 until his election as Patriarch, he served as an Archbishop in the United States, and was instrumental in international ecumenical initiatives. Amidst the conflict, the Syriac Orthodox presence in Syria has remained influential and significant in its work. The Patriarchal Headquarters at Maaret Sainaya continues to train clergy from all over the world. Reflecting the Church's worldwide emphasis on education and ministry amongst young people, a new University was opened by the Syrian Orthodox Church in Sainaya in 2018. The humanitarian charitable work of the Church in the midst of the conflict through the St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee, operates throughout Syria and is benefiting tens of thousands of people.²⁶⁵ Meanwhile, Patriarch Aphrem's representative role as religious leader both nationally and internationally is significant and effective. And it is in this role that his many speeches offer a window into a Syrian Christian response to the contemporary context and to Christian-Muslim relations in the country.

The importance of the indigenous presence of Christians in the Middle East is often stressed by both Christians and Muslims in Syria. For many Syrians, the loss of a Christian presence would signal a devastating blow to the plurality and diversity that has been a feature of Syrian society for centuries, and would risk opening the gates to the domination of extreme political and religious ideologies in the national arena. In a lecture in 2015, entitled, 'Do Muslims need Christians in the Middle East?', Patriarch Aphrem reminded the audience that in the early years of Islam, many Christians who were tired of being persecuted by their co-religionists "for refusing to accept the Christological definitions of the Council of Chalcedon", welcomed Muslims "as liberators". Subsequently Christians were employed during the Umayyad and Abbassid caliphates to run state affairs.²⁶⁶ Ever since, Christians have played a leading role in

²⁶⁴ See Chart. Page 250.

²⁶⁵ <http://www.epdc-syria.org/index.php> Accessed: 1 August 2018

²⁶⁶ <http://syriacpatriarchate.org/2015/01/muslims-need-christians-middle-east/> Accessed: 1 August 2018

the fields of philosophy, education and science in the Arab world. They have also contributed to the establishment of political parties, including the Ba'ath Party. Patriarch Aphrem continues:

“I believe that Muslims need Christians to challenge themselves to live in a pluralistic and multi-religious society where they can affirm their religious identity without being afraid of the other..... Living together should be conceived by Muslims and Christians alike as a divine vision and plan. We Christians believe that God has placed us in the region with the mission of spreading love, tolerance and enlightenment.”

The Syriac community however has been subject to extreme persecutions. During the Sayfo massacres of 1915 that coincided with the Armenian genocide, it is estimated that over 500,000 Syriacs were murdered, ostensibly for ‘interfering’ in the politics of the Ottoman Empire. Extreme atrocities were perpetrated against Syriac Christians, crimes that have been largely ignored outside the region. But recent massacres by ISIS of Syriac Christians in Iraq and Syria have reignited awareness of this history. The kidnap on 22 April 2013 of two Aleppo Archbishops, Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Mar Yohanna Gregorios Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi, has also had a profound impact on the Christian communities. (At a meeting of Christian and Muslim religious and civic leaders at the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate in Aleppo on 18 April 2018, a picture of Archbishop Ibrahim was carefully placed on his empty chair in the centre of the audience of hall). In response to the increased rise in sectarianism both in Syria and across the Middle East, Patriarch Aphrem says:

Fanaticism and religious extremism should not be allowed to spread in the region. It should be made known to all that Christians will not abandon their faith or alter their way of living because of the ideology of individuals and groups to whom moderation is foreign and tolerance is alien. We will continue to live in peace with the millions of peace loving Muslims, Jews and other religious groups in the Middle East. As Christians, our mission is to spread love, peace and harmony in the world.

Building a culture of peace should be a common goal for all of us in order to prepare a better future for generations to come. In so doing, we need to draw on lessons learnt from our past experiences.....Furthermore, the most adequate assurance for Christians to remain in the Middle East is a strong secular government where all citizens are equal and where Christians do not feel that they are treated as second or even third class citizens. The international community, no matter how sincere they are in their concern for Christians in the Middle East, will not be able to protect them. Migration, on the other hand, is not the solution for Christians. They need to be encouraged to stay in their homeland. Nonetheless, they can only do that when there is a strong secular government that is able to protect all citizens regardless of their religion or ethnicity.

Building bridges with Muslim societies is highly needed; joint initiatives to promote common values such as respect of human beings and human rights should be

organised. These initiatives should aim at developing ways to combat religious extremism on the one hand and secularization of the society and its moral structure on the other hand.

Islamic religious leaders are specifically urged to distance themselves from narrow interpretations of Koranic text and to promote moderate teachings which encourage tolerance and acceptance of the other.²⁶⁷

Patriarch Aphrem has been a strong critic of western support for militant groups. Speaking at the launch of a Report on Religious Freedom at the House of Commons in London on 24 November, 2016, he said:

It is very important to identify who our persecutor is. Indeed the report on freedom of religion suggested that the persecution of Christians in Syria is done by both State and non-State groups alike. We do not see it as such. The Syrian government has always been supportive of Christians. In Syria, violence against Christians is inflicted by the terrorist groups, including ISIS and Al-Nusra Front (Al-Qaeda), who desire to wipe us out of Syria. It is not the government, or any official state authority that is committing violent attacks against Syrians. In Syria, all discrimination and persecution that the Christians are currently suffering from, are carried out by the terrorist groups, some of which are internationally recognised as ‘moderate opposition’.

He continued:

We urge all authorities not to adopt the ‘wrong reading’ of the situation and not to commit the fatal mistake of ‘justifying the wrongdoer’. This will turn against us all.

As Christians, we believe in non-violence; therefore we encourage dialogue, especially among religious leaders of all groups. Interfaith dialogue is not an option. It is a necessity. Moreover, we appeal to the consciences of the Western leaders and the media: It is time you stand up for freedom; especially religious freedom of Christians and all minorities fighting for survival in their home countries. This could be done by:

- Stopping the flow of arms to terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq under the claim of supporting moderate opposition.
- Creating a safe haven for Christians in Iraq.
- Supporting national armies in Iraq and Syria in order to eliminate terrorism.
- Supporting a strong government in Syria, that is able to protect all the citizens alike, where all are based on the principle of citizenship with equal rights and obligations.
- Adopting a peaceful resolution that ensures that national dialogue and reconciliation among conflicting groups is the way to reach peace in these countries.
- Humanitarian efforts to the displaced, including emergency aid for displaced people and refugees in neighbouring countries.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Talk entitled: “Observations on Muslim-Christian relations in the Middle East”, delivered at Yerevan State University, Armenia, on 13 October, 2014. <http://syriacpatriarchate.org/2015/01/observations-muslim-christian-relations-middle-east/> Accessed: 1 August 2018.

²⁶⁸ Keynote speech at the Launching of a Report on Religious Freedom by ‘Aid to the Church in Need’, at House of Commons, London. 24 November, 2016. <http://syriacpatriarchate.org/2016/11/keynote->

This talk represented a direct challenge and rebuke to British policy, and as one who was present at the event, the lukewarm response of the British politicians, Church leaders and representatives of NGO's in attendance, was noticeable. Patriarch Aphrem has consistently called for an end to all violence, and peaceful, diplomatic solutions to conflict. In the promotion of peace, Christians do and should play an integral part. Speaking in Berlin in 2017, he said:

The International Community bears a good part of the responsibility for the conflicts and wars in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Iraq. Some countries continue to stand on the wrong side of this war. Some international and regional powers are still supporting terrorist organisations with funds and arms.

A political solution for the conflicts in the Middle East ought to be the prime concern of the International Community, which should commit itself to peace through negotiation and diplomacy, for the sake of ending the violence..... In addition, the International Community should work to secure the return of refugees to their homes and lands where they can live in dignity and enjoy basic human rights...

At the end, we should keep in mind that violence and religion do not go together. Christians are invaluable peacemakers without whom the Middle East would certainly fall into the hands of extremism and fundamentalism. It is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that Christians remain in their countries. And that religious fanaticism and terrorism of all kinds is dismantled in all its forms, especially getting rid of the ideologies that are the cause and the basis for terrorism.²⁶⁹

These statements encourage the restoration of peaceful coexistence, and the establishment of a society in which all live in equality and freedom. Along with most Christian leaders in the region, Patriarch Aphrem affirms diversity and plurality as an integral part of Middle Eastern society. And like other religious leaders, Patriarch Aphrem believes that religious leaders continue to have an important role to play in the region. At an International Conference in Athens in 2017, Patriarch Aphrem identified five areas of 'common concern' which he said "require common action and firm commitment by religious leaders". These are: protecting life, affirming diversity, rejecting extremism, overcoming violence, and striving for peace with justice.²⁷⁰

[speech-at-the-launching-of-the-report-on-religious-freedom-in-the-world-house-of-commons-london/](#)

Accessed. 1 August, 2018.

²⁶⁹ Speech entitled: "Christianity in the Middle East: Challenges and the Future." At the opening assembly of a Conference of the same title in Berlin. 20 October, 2017.

²⁷⁰ Summary of a speech at the 2nd International Conference on Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East. 29-31 October, 2017, Athens. Published by *Antelias News*, Lebanon 1 November 2017. Issue number: 47E/17

At a Conference for World Mission and Evangelism in Tanzania in 2018, Patriarch Aphrem summarised his position as follows:

- Our presence is a necessity not only for Christianity to continue in the land where it was born, but also for the people of the area. Christians have always been an essential element of reconciliation and bridge building among different ethnic and religious components in the region.
- We need to bring hope to our people that they still have a future in their homeland by tending to their needs, both in terms of security and financial help. For that, all churches in Syria have been actively engaged in relief efforts as well as in development projects to create job opportunities for our people.
- Interreligious dialogue on the academic level alone is not sufficient; we need to initiate joint activities such as workshops, seminars and camps among Muslim and Christian young people.
- We need the support of our brothers and sisters throughout the world in two main areas: in terms of advocacy and development.
- Christians can only survive under secular governments where they could be treated based on the principle of citizenship with equal rights and obligations.²⁷¹

Two weeks after speaking these words, a group of which I was a part met with Patriarch Aphrem in Damascus. He said to us:

Your presence here is an indication of your love for us and your desire to seek the truth. God loves all people and our duty as Syrian Christians is to express that love in our country. Syriac Christians have always been children of martyrdom. We are a Church of martyrs. We were never an established or State Church. But we have faith and perseverance, and we will continue to be witnesses of God's love and presence in this place, whatever it costs us. We need the Church worldwide to help enable the local Church to fulfil that mission in this place.²⁷²

Syriac Orthodox St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee. (EPDC)

In terms of eastern Christian approaches to Christian-Muslim relations in Syria, the impact of the humanitarian work of the eastern Churches for the people of Syria, irrespective of ethnic or religious identity, especially during the war, cannot be overstated. Mention has already been made of the Greek Orthodox charitable work of 'GOPA-DERD', the largest NGO in Syria

²⁷¹ Keynote Address at Conference of World Mission and Evangelism. 13 March 2018. Arusha, Tanzania. <http://syriacpatriarchate.org/2018/03/keynote-at-the-conference-of-world-mission-and-evangelism-arusha-tanzania/> Accessed: 1 August 2018.

²⁷² Meeting with Patriarch Aphrem at the Syrian Patriarchate, Damascus. 15 April 2018.

after the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. Almost every Christian denomination in Syria is undertaking humanitarian work, between them serving millions of the most vulnerable people wherever in the country they are able to operate. Church charities can only operate in government-controlled areas of the country. However, they have been quick to identify needs and implement humanitarian projects in areas liberated from militant control, as soon as these areas become safe. This has facilitated the return of internally displaced and refugees to areas that remain habitable. By virtue of the human demographic, the vast majority of beneficiaries are Muslim, and no distinction or prejudice is made in who is entitled to care.

The Syrian Orthodox Humanitarian work is operated through the 'St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee' (EPDC), which focusses on development and relief for those living in poverty. Qualified volunteers operate in their respective fields. In May 2018, I was a guest of EPDC volunteers in Deir Ezzor. Since the liberation of the city in November 2017 from four years of ISIS siege, the EPDC has been running projects in the city amongst some of the tens of thousands of internally displaced civilians from the surrounding areas. There are clinics specialising in women's and children's needs, educational projects, and welfare projects in the internally displaced camps. Prior to the war, Deir Ezzor was a mixed city of Christians and Muslims. During the occupation and siege by ISIS, most of the Christians left and some were killed. St. Mary's Syriac Orthodox Cathedral is now in ruins and I was told that only one Christian remains resident in the city. But as one resident put it: "Before the war, we always had a good relationship and there was trust and tolerance between the Christian and Muslim communities." Which is why EPDC volunteers from all over Syria have been warmly welcomed in the city and their projects are well attended. Fear remains however amongst both Muslims and Christians that ISIS will return, and that some extremists sympathetic to ISIS remain hidden among the population.

Projects that EPDC operate include humanitarian assistance for those in most urgent need; a variety of medical services through a network of qualified doctors and nurses; psycho-social support for children traumatised by the war; educational programmes; grants in certain circumstances to enable students to continue their education; vocational training for women, men, young people in skills ranging from needlework, hairdressers, maintenance of computers, household and electrical appliances, languages and administrative work; creation of job opportunities; urgent financial aid projects to those whose lives are at risk from terrorist attack or abduction, particularly children and women; capacity building projects, and peace-building

initiatives in local communities. Operating on the basis that every human being is a child of God and deserves respect, the 'EPDC' seeks to "make peace a part of everything we do", to "distribute resources in ways that minimise conflict" and "to advocate for all activities that will lead to a more peaceful world."²⁷³

The women's clinic that we visited in Deir Ezzor was treating 80-100 patients a day. The children's clinic was treating up to 50 children a day. Doctors and nurses also told us that malnutrition is the most common ailment amongst children, but that most are psychologically damaged by the war. Availability of drugs, particularly costly drugs for major illnesses such as cancer is profoundly impacted by international sanctions.

In the educational project for displaced children, which families access voluntarily, five classes with about 30 children in each class were operating simultaneously. Classes included reading, writing, drawing, poetry, theatre, dance. The project had had to establish three shifts during the day to accommodate demand. As we left, a new shift was about to start, and dozens of children were waiting excitedly outside to begin their classes.

Such projects are replicated in dozens of towns, villages and cities across Syria by churches and faith communities, working in partnership with local and international charities. Of course, the humanitarian initiatives of all the faith communities combined are insufficient to meet the scale of need, but they are and will be an essential part of the process of rebuilding the country, and in the long and difficult process of healing and reconciliation that needs to take place in the years ahead, but which already lay a foundation for the recovery of trust and improved interaction between communities. As yet, these initiatives have been under-recognised and under-supported by the international community.

5.7 Antoine Audo (b. 1946)

Antoine Audo SJ, is Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo. The Chaldean Church is of Syriac culture and tradition in full communion with Rome. It emerged from the Church of the East due to a schism over succession in 1552 and continues to use the Syriac liturgy, and Arabic in certain urban areas. Relations between the See of Rome and the Churches of the East have improved considerably since Vatican II, though relations between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian

²⁷³ 'Our values' page in <http://www.epdc-syria.org/index.php>

Church remain strained.²⁷⁴ The Chaldean Church, whilst being Catholic, remains a truly indigenous and eastern Christian expression of the Church in Syria. Through Audo, the Syriac culture in this expression of the 'Antiochene paradigm' is in dialogue with the Arabic culture and Islamic religion.

Born in Aleppo in 1946, Audo became Jesuit in 1969 and was ordained priest in 1979. Following studies in Damascus, Paris and Rome, he has held teaching posts at the Universite Satin-Joseph in Beirut and at the Universite Satin-Esprit in Kaslik. Both the Jesuit and Carmelite order (which has a historic presence in Aleppo and Baghdad), have had a strong presence in the Middle East and have contributed to the emergence of a distinct Eastern Catholic tradition. Reflecting a common concern for both Christians and Muslims in the region, Audo has been "very concerned in his work to identify the relation between religious tradition and modernity" and "about the plurality of religious expression as a continuing element of Christianity and the Islamic tradition" (Anthony O'Mahony, 2017, pp. 181-182).

Like Khodr, Audo's theology and spirituality is deeply rooted in the Patristic tradition. Audo reminds us that Eastern spirituality embraces a variety of traditions emerging from the schools of Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople, and includes Armenian, Coptic and Syriac traditions (Audo, 2010b, p. 29). Quoting Isaac of Ninevah, a great 7th Century eastern mystic, he concludes that "Love is the source of all that is good. It is God, Christ par excellence. Whoever has found Love will 'eat' and 'drink' Christ" (Audo, 2010b, p. 32). Referring to John of Dalyatha, an 8th Century mystic living in the area currently bordering Iraq and Turkey, Audo posits the view that, because of its Semitic roots, eastern spirituality is "more poetic and symbolic than philosophical and rational" (Audo, 2010b, p. 39). Its result is a desire to be united in God and His Will, which is the vocation of all Christians.

In another article exploring eastern Christian identity, and making connections between eastern mysticism and modernity, Audo compares two "visionary and prophetic spiritual figures": Monsignor Neophyte Edelby (920-1995) and Fr. Afif Osseirane (1919-1988). Each of them were rooted in Arab Muslim culture and lived through the independence of their countries, the creation of the State of Israel, and the Lebanese Civil War. Both were fluent in Arabic and conversant with Islam. According to Audo, Edelby was a sage, and Osseirane a prophet. Edelby's way of life is described as a constant following of the virtue of *moussayara*,

²⁷⁴ See: (Girling, 2012).

which might best be described as ‘walking with’ – a “feeling of profound, complete, concrete charity towards everyone, as brothers and sisters in humanity.” It is “an attitude of welcome, of patience, of balance”, and is therefore expressed in “harmony, moderation and serenity” (Audo, 2010a, p. 23). Consecrated a bishop in 1962, and Syrian by origin, Edelby played an active part in Vatican II, helping to bridge the gap between the Catholic and eastern Churches (Audo, 2010a, p. 26).

By contrast, Fr. Osseirane, who came from Lebanon, was a convert from Shi’ite Islam who became a priest. He maintained a deep loyalty to his home, family and to Islam, and as a result enjoyed the respect of both Christians and Muslims. His life, rooted in prayer and devotion, was deeply influenced by Charles de Foucauld. We are told that Fr. Osseirane influenced many Muslims around him, “but without any tendency to proselytism or fanaticism, as many Muslims who were close to him have borne witness” (Audo, 2010a, p. 28).

From these two figures, Audo draws the conclusion that Christians are called to witness in a Muslim environment “through their prayer life and an attitude of adoration”, which can transform them into icons. Audo writes: “Dialogue between reason and faith, communion respecting difference, a flight from violence in order to affirm trust in oneself and in others, these are demands which challenge our intellect as Christians and Muslims in search of peace and justice” (Audo, 2010a, p. 29).

Audo acknowledges that this dialogue is not easy. In an interview in December 2016, he stated:

Christians accept plurality. We cannot reflect on our shared existence in Syria without dialogue, but this is often more difficult for Islam, which finds it difficult to enter dialogue at a critical and historical level, and often, dialogue will consist simply of affirmative speech. Islam in the Middle East cannot get away from the struggle with modernity, and faces a problem with the idea of secularism, as this attacks something very deep within Muslim thought. But there is a difference between public and private speech, since many Muslims recognise that without Christians, Syria will lose both its quality of life, and its unique identity.²⁷⁵

In summary, Audo affirms the importance of the identity of Eastern Christians. This identity is rooted in the Middle Eastern world and is communitarian in spirit, hospitable, and exists within the Muslim world, but too often becomes inward and distrustful of others. He states that

²⁷⁵ Interview with Bishop Antoine Audo in Damascus. December 2016.

Christians should engage politically, socially and culturally both with Christians and Muslims, and that the inter-religious encounter that takes place daily, should develop into deeper dialogue that is lived out and respectful of the other. Notwithstanding the risk of a tendency to activism in this approach, the spiritual traditions of the East have the capacity to inspire and deepen spiritual engagement and understanding with Islam (Audo, 2010a, p. 35). Audo continues: “A re-reading of the contribution of eastern Christians to the development of Arab and Muslim civilisation allows us to envisage ways of openness, trust and conversion.” Most importantly, eastern Christians have “opened up spaces within the fabric of Muslim-Arab culture, spaces of freedom and communication between faith and reason”, and are uniquely placed, in a context where Arab Muslims feel threatened in the face of modernity and globalisation, to enable dialogue with Muslims, and with them, “to create paths to the universal” (Audo, 2010a, pp. 36-37). “Finally,” writes Audo, “true Islam must understand that it will not be able to modernise itself without there being peace with Christians. This road to peace will lead it to be liberated from all its complexes of fear of the other.” The vocation of eastern Christians is therefore “to become a bridge, or better, a model of communion between the Christian west and the Muslim world” (Audo, 2010a, p. 38).

If there is anything positive to come out of the traumatic events of recent history in the Middle East, it is that they have led to a reassessment of the interreligious relationship. Notable in this respect was the international inter-faith meeting on ‘Human Fraternity’ that took place in Abu Dhabi on 3-5 February, 2019. The result of this was a joint declaration signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Cairo, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, and endorsed by Christian and Muslim leaders from throughout the region, entitled: ‘A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together’. This declaration potentially goes beyond the ‘Common Word’ declaration of 2007 in affirming the importance and value of our common humanity, states:

In the name of God Al-Azhar al-Sharif and the Muslims of the East and West, together with the Catholic Church and the Catholics of the East and West, declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard. We, who believe in God and in the final meeting with Him and His judgment, on the basis of our religious and moral responsibility, and through this Document, call upon ourselves, upon the leaders of the world as well as the architects of international policy and world economy, to work strenuously to spread the culture of tolerance and of living together in peace; to intervene at the earliest opportunity to stop the shedding of innocent blood and bring an end to wars, conflicts, environmental decay and the moral and cultural decline that the world is presently experiencing.

We call upon intellectuals, philosophers, religious figures, artists, media professionals and men and women of culture in every part of the world, to rediscover the values of peace, justice, goodness, beauty, human fraternity and coexistence in order to confirm the importance of these values as anchors of salvation for all, and to promote them everywhere.²⁷⁶

The document goes on to stress the nature of dialogue:

Dialogue, understanding and the widespread promotion of a culture of tolerance, acceptance of others and of living together peacefully would contribute significantly to reducing many economic, social, political and environmental problems that weigh so heavily on a large part of humanity;

- Dialogue among believers means coming together in the vast space of spiritual, human and shared social values and, from here, transmitting the highest moral virtues that religions aim for. It also means avoiding unproductive discussions;

- The protection of places of worship – synagogues, churches and mosques – is a duty guaranteed by religions, human values, laws and international agreements. Every attempt to attack places of worship or threaten them by violent assaults, bombings or destruction, is a deviation from the teachings of religions as well as a clear violation of international law;

It is clear from this initiative, and from examples of inter-religious engagement in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt, that some significant figures within Islam are seeking to rethink the position of Islam in relation to Christianity and the political situation in the Middle East, fulfilling the hope that Christians can be a bridge to peace and reconciliation. Many religious leaders of the region are echoing this direction. For the trauma of the conflict in Syria, and Iraq, has been a regional trauma. And out of that trauma has emerged a desire to construct different types of relational discourse, and ‘push back’ against sectarian dynamics.

5.8 Fr. Paolo Dall’Oglio. SJ (b. 1954. d. ?)

In the field of Christian-Muslim relations in Syria in recent years, few have been more influential or controversial, than Paolo Dall’Oglio, an Italian Jesuit priest who founded the Community of Al-Khalil at Mar Musa Monastery, a community rooted in the Syriac Catholic tradition. Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi (The Monastery of St. Moses the Syrian) lies in the cleft of a mountain in the desert east of Nebek, 80 kms north of Damascus. The monastery itself is believed to date from the 6th Century but had lain in ruins for centuries, before Paolo visited it in 1982. Paolo was ordained a priest in the Syrian Catholic rite in 1984, having received a

²⁷⁶ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html (Accessed: 26 February, 2019)

degree in Arabic language and Islamic Studies. The PhD that he was awarded in 1989 was entitled 'About Hope in Islam'.

In 1992, Paolo founded the mixed ecumenical community of 'Al-Khalil' (the friend of God) at Mar Musa, and dedicated his life to restoring the Monastery and establishing a centre for Muslim-Christian dialogue. Following the restoration of the monastery in the 1990s (including the Church with its beautiful 11th or 12th Century frescoes), the Monastery became a centre for Christian-Muslim encounter and hospitality; a place where Christians and Muslims from all over the world would meet together and learn from each other. Paolo identified something crucial within Syrian Christianity – that monasticism in its Christian sense is deeply Syrian, and is an eastern religious tradition with which Islam has been familiar from its earliest days. It therefore offers a distinctly eastern Christian platform for inter-religious dialogue and engagement, with which eastern religious culture can relate.

Paolo was a critic of the Syrian Government, and was expelled from Syria in 2012, but returned to the country and was kidnapped by 'Islamic State' fighters in Raqqa on 29 July 2013, whilst apparently trying to act as a negotiator between opposing groups of Islamist and 'Islamic State' fighters. Rumours have circulated that he was executed shortly afterwards, but though these rumours are believed to be credible, they are unverified.²⁷⁷

I stayed at Mar Mousa twice prior to the conflict. The many foreign visitors present reflected the fame both of the monastery and of its founder. The services, conducted in Arabic and Syriac, included elements of Islamic and specifically sufi influence. The monastery represents a good example of monastic revival in the eastern tradition, which has been taking place in recent decades in Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Egypt. It is an "ecclesial expression of the Syrian Catholic Church", following the eastern Catholic tradition, deeply influenced by the eremitical tradition of Charles de Foucauld and the religious ideas of Louis Massignon, and seeking to reinvigorate the Christian encounter with Islam in a form with which Islam has been familiar since its emergence in the 7th Century (Anthony O'Mahony, 2013, p. 236).

This depth with which Paolo, emerging from a western ecclesial tradition embedded the community in the eastern ecclesial Arab landscape and entered into dialogue with Islam is

²⁷⁷ Fr. Paolo recounts his own story and experiences in: (De Montjou, 2006) *Mar Moussa. Un monastere, un homme, un desert.*

almost unique. At the heart of this experiment in Christian-Muslim encounter was the liturgy, which was performed in both Syriac and Arabic. As Dall'Oglio writes:

“The cultural and religious intention of the monastery was to find and rediscover some essential aspects of ancient monasticism in the region. The re-founding of the community is due to the conviction that this monasticism is one which early Islam knew, frequented, respected and protected ever since the seventh century.”²⁷⁸ (Dall'Oglio, 2009, p. 25).

For Paolo, deeply influenced by Massignon, the monastery sought to become a place of genuine encounter between Islam and Christianity; an encounter linking both spirituality and politics. This link, which represented a unique contribution in the Syrian ecclesial context, he believed was found in two concepts: that of “*ta'arruf*” or “getting to know each other”, “through knowledge, experiential understanding and unconditional love” (Ali-Dib, 2008, p. 107); and through “*baddaliya*” (mystical substitution). These could be achieved through an inculturated hospitality, theological dialogue (in the language of Arabic), through solidarity with the Muslim community, through ecumenical worship and mystical communion. At an event held in Beirut in 2018 to commemorate Fr. Paolo's work, Fr. Salim Daccashe, a Jesuit Rector in the United States said:

The great question for Paolo Dall'Oglio was: What does Islam tell Christians? By the same token: Towards what does Christianity lead? Following Charles de Foucauld and Louis Massignon, his two great spiritual masters, Paolo thought that the Muslim religion, by the mystery it posed for Christians, pushed the Church towards greater radicalism in the imitation of Christ, towards more humility, spirit of acceptance and service.²⁷⁹

Striving to put these principles into practice, the community has been instrumental in the fields of interreligious dialogue and community service since its founding. It was not however always easy. The first planned interreligious conference was cancelled by Syria's Catholic authorities, and it was the then Grand Mufti, Kuftaru who persuaded Fr. Paolo to persist. Even then, Paolo “found it difficult to recruit speakers, either Christian or Muslim,” and those that did attend in 2006 repeatedly “strayed into international politics” (Ali-Dib, 2008, p. 109). A critique of his pastoral and interreligious engagement might be that in an attempt to be true to

²⁷⁸ My translation of the original in French.

²⁷⁹ <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Fr-Dall'Oglio,-the-extreme-sacrifice-of-a-radical-witness-of-Christ-to-build-bridges-towards-Islam-45440.html> Accessed: 1 January 2019.

'orthodoxy', he prioritised Sunni Islam over other expressions of Islam.²⁸⁰ Could it be suggested that, despite the depth of his engagement, like other westerners, he struggled to adequately grapple with the plurality of Islamic expression? These difficulties illustrate the complex challenges and limitations of trying to undertake successful inter-faith conversations in Syria, and elsewhere.

Since the start of the conflict, when few have been able to visit, the members of the monastery have continued their lives of prayer, even in the absence of Paolo, and have focussed on community service, especially amongst the internally displaced in the area.²⁸¹

In May 2018, I revisited Mar Mousa and spent a night at the monastery. A few members of the community had remained at the monastery throughout the time that the area was occupied by militant groups, and workers had also stayed to protect the monastery. The members of the community were reticent about talking about what happened during that time, but acknowledged that when militant fighters visited the monastery, it was a difficult experience. Speaking of the role of the monastery, one of the members said:

After what happened in this country, the Church should be showing people the love of Christ more than at any time before. As Christians, we have a responsibility to explain that this conflict is not about Islam. Christians and Muslims have always lived together, though not always perfectly. Many Muslims tried to help the Christians and protect them in this area. If the Church is to operate, we have to give a good witness and be positive. Today there is a separation between the hierarchy of the Church and the people. Many young people are fed up with doctrine and theories and high level spiritual goals. We are living life on the ground, and the whole society has been deeply damaged. There is also fear. Many people, Christians and Muslims are afraid of the power of the mosque. Many people say: 'I am afraid that my friend of today is going to be my enemy of tomorrow'. And there is a growing disillusionment especially among young people with religion and Churches and hierarchies. There is a need for spiritual transformation in both Christianity and Islam. We want to continue to be a place of hospitality and a place of dialogue. But we have realised that dialogue can sometimes be not only painful but very costly indeed.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ This echoes Massignon's work who critiqued Shi'ite and Alawi Islam and prioritised Sunni Islam. See also: (Anthony O'Mahony, 2015) Louis Massignon: A French Catholic encounter with Islam and the Middle East.

²⁸¹ A complementary discussion on 'kinship' between Christian and Muslim worship can be found in: (Laing, 2013) '*A provocation to mission: Constance Padwick's study of Muslim devotion.*'

²⁸² Interview at Mar Mousa Monastery. 3 May 2018. These views echo similar comments made by Christian laity and leaders in other parts of Syria. See also a video of one of my interviews at Mar Mousa, May 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ewd6SNNy2M>

The experience and popularity of Mar Mousa as a place of inter-religious encounter, particularly prior to the conflict suggests that the Christian monastic model of hospitality which is well established in Syria, provides a safe 'space' for dialogue in religion and politics. How Mar Mousa meets that challenge in the light of the changed post-conflict social, cultural and religious demographic in Syria, in a spirit of reconciliation and service, and without the leadership of Paolo, will require careful discernment in partnership with members of all communities.

5.9 The Protestant and Evangelical Churches

Thus far, emphasis has been on the contribution of the Orthodox and Eastern churches to the interreligious dynamic. Though numerically small compared to other ecclesial groups, the contribution of Arab Protestant and Evangelical Churches to religious discourse in the Middle East should not be underestimated. Protestant and Evangelical Arab Christians have been termed a "double minority" - a "numerical minority within a Muslim majority", and "a minority within a Christian minority" (Raheb, 2018, p. 269). Nevertheless, their contribution to religious discourse, education and health provision, economic and political participation are significant. According to the most recently available figures, Protestant and Evangelical Christians number only about 0.3% of the population (Siriani, 2018, p. 103). As we shall see, there has historically been a problematic relationship between the Protestant Churches of the Middle East and those of the Eastern and Orthodox traditions. Questions of identity arise at the interface between Eastern Christian and reformed western tradition. However, ecumenical relations have much improved in recent years.

The Protestant presence in the Middle East dates to the early nineteenth century, the first Protestant congregation being formed in Beirut by the 'American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions' in 1827. By the second half of the eighteenth century more Protestant churches were established throughout Lebanon and Syria. In 1920 the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon was formed (Raheb, 2018, p. 259). For all churches, the term 'evangelical' is an adjective describing the Christian ministry of proclamation – something to which all Christians are called. However, in Germany in the nineteenth century, the term became associated with Protestantism in Europe, and has become widely used as a noun to denote those who follow this tradition (Wahba, 2018, p. 285). Wahba summarises the Evangelical presence as follows:

The Evangelical tradition was introduced to the region by Anglican, Lutheran and Presbyterian missions from the late eighteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century the Presbyterian presence was the most dominant, and this continued until the mid-twentieth century, when other Evangelical communities, such as Baptists and Pentecostals, started to flourish in the region. The early Anglican and Presbyterian missionaries initially sought to reach out to the larger Muslim population. They faced significant challenges and so turned to the Christian communities, which were largely Orthodox. By the mid-twentieth century the presence of various Evangelical communities alongside the dominant Orthodox churches was very much in place. At first, many Evangelical churches adopted the worship style, theology and organisational structures of the Western churches from which the missionaries came. However the shift to indigenous forms of worship, theology and administrative systems was quickly realised. After all, North African and West Asian Christians have a long history of Christian tradition, and they are very much aware of it. Today, there are more contemporary Christian songs and lyrics in Arabic than in any other language” (Wahba, 2018, p. 286).

The National Evangelical Synod of Lebanon and Syria and Lebanon is a member of the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC), the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) (Raheb, 2018, p. 259).

The ministry of the Protestant and Evangelical Churches in the Middle East has been significant and influential in three key areas: the preaching of the gospel through teaching, translation of the scriptures, and use of media including social media and broadcasting channels such as SAT-7; in education, both through the many Evangelical schools that operate throughout the region, and through educational and theological Institutions such as the American University, the Near East School of Theology, and the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, all in Beirut; and through the provision of social services, such as the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD), whose work includes the provision of humanitarian aid and educational support to Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

A further ministry has emerged within the context of the conflict in Syria – initiatives in which churches seek to train their members, particularly young people, to be ambassadors of respect, reconciliation and peace-building. The ministry of the ‘Awareness Foundation’ is one such initiative. Founded as a charity in London in 2003 by Church of England Syrian priest, Fr. Nadim Nassar, the ‘Awareness Foundation’ has in recent years established two ecumenical educational programmes for children and young people that have been successfully piloted in Syria and Iraq – the ‘Little Heroes’ programme for children, and the ‘Ambassadors for Peace’

programme for young adults. The foundation website page for the 'Ambassadors for Peace' programme describes it thus:

Ambassadors for Peace is an ecumenical education programme for young Middle Eastern men and women enabling them to build bridges of mutual respect and understanding in their diverse communities. In this way they can contribute to the healing and strengthening of the fabric of society...Through this programme, we support Christian presence in the Middle East by encouraging Christians to play a full role in the wider community as an indigenous part of society. In addition to building bridges between the Christian denominations, the Ambassadors learn how to repair relationships and rebuilding trust with neighbours of other faiths.²⁸³

Each of these ministries confirm the importance and positive influence of the indigenous Protestant and Evangelical presence within the ecumenical and inter-religious context in the Middle East, despite their comparatively small numbers. Nevertheless, there have always been ecumenical and interreligious tensions between the Protestant and Evangelical Churches and the Oriental and Orthodox denominations. Some Orthodox perceive 'western' Christians to have a history of 'stealing' Orthodox Christians into the Protestant and Evangelical fold, and in recent years, there has been concern that in some cases, evangelical activity, particularly amongst Muslims, has been linked to the provision of humanitarian aid (See (Ferris, 2005); (Clarke, 2007); (James, 2011); (Kraft, 2017)). This concern in the Middle Eastern context is partly rooted in a historic culture of suspicion towards Protestant and Evangelical ministries which, by virtue of their ecclesial associations, have often been perceived as having a 'western' cultural, social and political allegiance.

Reflecting on the post 'Arab Spring' context, a study entitled 'Christian Citizenship in the Middle East. Divided Allegiance or Dual Belonging?' added a helpful contribution to this debate from a Protestant perspective (M. Girma, 2017). The study explored the dichotomy between the concept of citizenship rooted in 'historical situatedness', and the concept of citizenship that by virtue of religious identity demands responsibilities transcending 'situatedness'. In the Introduction, Romocea writes: "Throughout the history of the Arab Region, Middle Eastern Christians, inspired by the teachings of the scriptures, have lived at the intersection of two allegiances: allegiance to their Christian mission, and allegiance to their Middle Eastern citizenship" (M. Girma, 2017, p. 19). This, argue the writers, has political implications, and means that ultimately Christian values and morals must form the basis for any Christian vision

²⁸³ <https://www.awareness-foundation.com/ambassadors>

of citizenship, which must be “built on the basis of rights, responsibilities and human dignity over and above the particular interests of states” (M. Girma, 2017, pp. 20-21). This clearly presents Christian communities and their leaders with particular challenges within their political and religious contexts.

In 2006, Dr. George Sabra, Principal of the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, wrote an important article confronting this issue. Entitled ‘Two ways of being a Christian in the Muslim context of the Middle East’ (Sabra, 2006), Dr. Sabra discusses the dilemma of being Christian in a predominantly Islamic context. He suggests that there have been broadly two ways in which Christians have responded to this reality. The first he sums up in the phrase, “Avoid estrangement with Muslims at all costs”, which results he suggests in an openness to the Islamic context, and a desire to find common ground for sustaining coexistence. The second he sums up in the phrase, “Save Middle Eastern Christianity at all costs”, an approach that affirms the distinctiveness of Christianity in relation to Islam and seeks to preserve Christian freedom and identity (Sabra, 2006, p. 44). These two responses to Islam have only been possible he says because there is a third ‘player’, and that is the ‘western’ factor. Sabra reminds us that ‘western’ influence is nothing new. Even in the time of Jesus, Middle Eastern society was influenced by Greek philosophy and language, and since the fifth century, the eastern churches have been divided by the Byzantine Christological controversies.

Helpfully, Dr. Sabra describes these two positions, designating the first with the title ‘Arab Christian’, and the second ‘Eastern Christian’. The first underlines the sense of self-identity with Arab culture, history and Islamic civilisation, whilst the second does not limit Middle Eastern Christianity to an Arab identity, and underlines “a critical distance from Islam and Islamic culture and tradition” (Sabra, 2006, p. 46).

The ‘Arab Christian’ position, which has tended to prevail until recent times and has been associated with the Oriental and Orthodox Church positions discussed in this study, has supported Arab nationalism and tended towards an anti-Ottoman, anti-Western, and anti-Zionist position. For example, it was a Greek Orthodox Syrian Christian, Michel Aflaq (1912-1989) who helped found the Ba’ath Party in Syria, and a Lebanese Greek Orthodox Christian, Antun Sa’adeh (1904-1949) who founded the Syrian National Socialist Party. Dr. Sabra identifies Bishop Georges Khodr, who describes Eastern Christianity as being “outside the

West, not only doctrinally but also politically and civilizationaly” (Sabra, 2006, p. 47),²⁸⁴ as being a leading defender of the ‘Arab Christian’ position.

The ‘Eastern Christian’ position, which has tended to come to the fore in recent years and particularly amongst the Protestant churches, holds to the “freedom and integrity of the Christian existence in the Middle East”. It emphasises Christianity’s distinctiveness in the face of Arab and Islamic identity, and there is “a sense of identification and continuity with the West”, which means that East and West are not in conflict with one another, and that ‘Eastern Christians’ are more ‘at home’ in the worldwide Christian family. One of the most significant proponents of this position was Dr. Charles Malek (1906-1987), a Lebanese academic and philosopher (Sabra, 2006, p. 48). He stressed that the relationship between East and West is historic, not imported, and that western civilizations have left a lasting “imprint” on eastern Mediterranean culture and history. This pro-western attitude is reflected in sympathy towards western politics, a connection with the ‘West’ that has led to ecumenical and interreligious tensions, and to suspicion of those who hold to this ‘Eastern Christian’ position. However, at the same time, a majority of Eastern Christians are Arab by ethnic identity and are proud of being so. Most Eastern Christians grapple daily with the complexity of possessing multiple identities and remaining true to their religious identity in their historical, cultural and religious contexts.

Sabra points out that the ‘Arab Christian’ position prevailed for most of the twentieth century, but at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the rise of Islamism has challenged this position. He writes: “Those Christians who have engaged in and promoted Christian-Muslim dialogue in the last three decades or so have, by their own admission, suffered great disappointment and frustration. The Islamist fundamentalist resurgence is like a huge wave that has engulfed the results of the old dialogue and set the clock back many years” (Sabra, 2006, p. 51). These words, written five years before the start of the conflict in Syria, echo comments made by several interlocutors during the course of this research, who have identified practical engagement and cooperation for the benefit of Syrian society as a whole, as being more important, pressing and productive than theological dialogue.

²⁸⁴ Quoting from: Khodr, G. (1981) *Al-masihyya al-arabiyya wa al-gharb*, In *Al-masihyyun al-arab: dirasat wa-munaqashat*. Ed. Elias Houry. Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Abhath al-Arabiyya.106

Bearing these factors in mind highlights the need for an authentic Arab/Eastern Christian contextual theology in defining the vital place and role of Arab/Eastern Christians within the Middle Eastern cultural, religious and political context. The two 'ways' of Christian self-identification are both present in Syria and represent different lenses through which the Christian communities see themselves. Nor are they mutually exclusive. As Sabra says, both outlooks have "some truth" and therefore remain part of the dilemma of being Christian in the Muslim context.

That dilemma reflects for Protestant Christians what might be termed a 'cultural disorientation' between western and eastern Christian identities, despite the fact that Christianity has eastern roots. A Jesuit scholar of Coptic origin, Fadel Sidarouss, argues that as a Church with eastern origins, western Christianity inherited an 'alterity' which enabled a natural dialogue with other philosophies and with modernity. However, for centuries, having adopted a Christian culture, the western church has not, like the eastern church, had to engage with a different 'other' in its midst. Thus, "when they enter into relationship with an other – we think here of Islam – they do so in an apologetic and defensive rather than dialogical manner" (A. O'Mahony, 2018, p. 70).²⁸⁵ By contrast, the eastern church has existed for centuries within plurality, in ways the western church struggles to inculturate. This ability to engage with the 'other' at many levels gives Eastern Christianity a natural capacity to build bridges.²⁸⁶ This suggests that there is room for synthesis in Sabra's helpful analysis.

Given the fragile situation for Christians throughout the Middle East, and in some parts of the region, an existential threat to Christian communities, there have been considerable efforts to improve ecumenical relations in recent years. The positive contribution of all ecclesial denominations to the societies in which they live is mutually recognised. However, there remain long-standing theological and ecclesial tensions between the Eastern churches and those of Protestant origin that are difficult to resolve. Without question, as we have seen in the above discussion, the western churches are bearers of westernised ecclesial structures and theological traditions, some of which sit uncomfortably with those of Eastern Christianity. The latter's Patristic traditions and spirituality of the desert with their emphasis on hospitality and

²⁸⁵ See also: Siadarouss, F., 2008. Pour une Theologie contextuelle dans l'Orient Arabe contemporain. *Quo Vadis, Theologia Orientalis ? Actes du Colloque Theologie Orientale: contenu et importance*. Textes et etudes sur l'Orient Chretien, No.6. CEDRAC. Beirut : Université Saint Joseph.pp 215-237

²⁸⁶ For a helpful collection of essays on these matters, see: (Ellis, 2018). 'Secular Nationalism and Citizenship in Muslim countries. Arab Christians in the Levant.'

engagement with alterity (as discussed in the sections on Khodr and Dall'Oglio) offer rich resources for interreligious dialogue in the Middle Eastern context. This tension represents a dilemma for Protestants indigenous to the Middle East whose origins lie within that cultural, historical and social framework. The Protestant churches stand in an ambiguous position, on the one hand existing apart from western society and in an eastern culture, whilst on the other standing at the confluence of western theology and philosophy. This means that they can become alienated from Arab culture and from Eastern Christianity. As carriers of western ecclesiology within an eastern ecclesial context, they possess, to coin a phrase first used by Anthony O'Mahony, a "self-alienating ecclesiology" which creates a natural ecclesial tension in both theology and structure with other churches in the region, that is felt by clergy and laity alike.²⁸⁷ This ambiguity is illustrated in the self-presentation of many Protestant Church leaders in the Middle East, who, when in company with Eastern Church leaders and at formal events, often adopt 'Patriarchal'-like traditions in dress and custom in an apparent attempt to affirm their equality of status.

Protestant Christianity, with its emphasis on Incarnational theology brings huge benefits to the region in the fields of education and social welfare. Eastern Christianity, with its Trinitarian theological roots and affinity to mysticism is gifted in reflecting relationality amidst plurality and complexity, and depth of spirituality in the midst of struggle. In recent years, the Eastern Churches have also made significant strides in the fields of monasticism, theological training and Christian education. The two wings of Christianity and their theological approaches are of course related to each other, and each brings strengths that could enhance and complement the other. What blessings could be wrought if the two wings saw each other not in competition with each other, but each bringing vital and complementary contributions to the Christian presence in the region.

This tension requires further study for the sake of all Christian communities in the region and for clarity in the interreligious relationship. This thesis proposes that in the history of eastern theology and spirituality, and in the history of Eastern Christianity's engagement with Islam lie significant resources for engaging with the complex interreligious dynamics that currently prevail in the region, and perhaps for the strengthening of the ecumenical dynamic in the region as well. After all, the cultural and spiritual roots of global Christianity are to be found in

²⁸⁷ The phrase "self-alienating ecclesiology" was used by Anthony O'Mahony in an informal discussion around this aspect of the study.

the region. And a rediscovery of these resources enhances their potential application in a western context, as awareness of Islam is increasing, and as the danger of radicalisation linked to conflicts in the region, is being felt globally.

Despite issues of conflict, and theological and ecclesial tensions, relations between religious leaders remain good. Ecumenical meetings and conferences are regular. For example, each year the Institute for Middle East Studies holds an International Conference at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut which brings together leading religious figures from around the region and from all Christian denominations to address key issues facing the churches in the region.

In April 2018, I met with Dr. Riad Jarjour, a Syrian Protestant Christian who was Chairman of the Middle East Council of Churches between 1994 and 2003. He identified four key challenges currently facing the Churches in Syria: the unity of the Church; the emigration of Christians; the Church's ability to face religious extremism; and the challenge of religious and communal co-existence after the war. In all of these he said, the Protestant churches have an important role to play, and because of their historic relationships with the western churches, have the potential to be voices that could be heard in the west. The Middle East Council of Churches could also play a role as a platform for Christian witness beyond the region, but its inability in previous years to find a united voice has been a source of disappointment and sadness, and affected its capacity to witness effectively to the challenges with which the people of the region were confronted.²⁸⁸

However, as previously stated are signs of renewed ecumenism. It is remarkable that the newly elected General Secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches is a woman, Dr. Souraya Bechealany. During the winter of 2018, Dr. Bechealany undertook a series of meetings with the Heads of the different denominations represented in Middle East Council of Churches. These meetings sought to address some of the complex issues addressing Christian communities in the region, and concluded that unity of purpose and mutual acceptance is vital for the survival and prospering of the Christian presence in the face of the many challenges that the Churches face. And at Christmas 2018, the Middle East Council of Churches launched an educational initiative – a series of twelve short documentary films entitled 'Bridges to Bethlehem'. Filmed in six countries (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, UAE, Egypt and Iraq), the series

²⁸⁸ Meeting with Dr. Riad Jarjour. Damascus. 23 April 2018.

represented “churches from all four ecclesiastical families of the Council — the Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical families.” Distributed globally on social media the films showcased “the rich diversity of tradition surrounding the celebration of the coming of the Christ child across the Middle East” – a diversity of which many Christians around the world have until recently been unaware.²⁸⁹ Increased global awareness of this Christian presence and its rich diversity will surely help ensure its survival, improve its relational dynamic, and strengthen the positive role that it can play in the causes of reconciliation and the restoration of peace in the region.

Echoing other Church leaders with whom I have spoken, Ibrahim Nseir, the Presbyterian Minister in Aleppo speaking in an interview with independent journalist Vanessa Beeley on 31 December 2018, said:

We must re-prioritise our schedule, our agenda, and make sure that it is not only political, but that we address all issues – religious, educational, health care. We must rethink our priorities to ensure a future of peace and stability. At the end I believe strongly that all the negative consequences of this terrible war will be transformed into positive consequences if we address them in the right way. Out of adversity are born the greatest opportunities for the future of Syria and humanity.²⁹⁰

Despite all the suffering, the division and the pain that the recent conflict has caused, such a vision offers a platform for hope and transformation.

5.10 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the historical and contemporary encounter between Christianity and Islam, noting that from its earliest days, Islam engaged with Christian theology and philosophy. Massignon believed that Islam could be a ‘mediator’ of divine grace, and that the hospitality of the desert (*badaliya*) represents a model for encounter and dialogue. This profoundly influenced the thought and ministry of Paolo dal’Oglio and the monastic community that he established at Mar Mousa in the hills above Nebek as a place of Christian-Muslim dialogue, rooted in *ta’arruf* – deep engagement with ‘the other’- in Syria.

²⁸⁹ <https://en-gb.facebook.com/MiddleEastCouncilofChurches/> Accessed: 2 January 2019

²⁹⁰ <https://21stcenturywire.com/2019/01/02/syria-the-western-rogue-states-must-confess-their-crimes-against-humanity-and-be-held-accountable/> Accessed: 2 January 2019

In recent decades, eastern theologians have explored these themes. Bishop Khodr in Lebanon has led the way in developing an indigenous theology of Christian- Muslim dialogue. At the heart of his theology, rooted in the Patristic tradition, is the pneumatological paradigm which understands the creative Word of God to be present in all things, and the human being in the divine image. Thus we are called to be channels of the grace and love of the Holy Spirit, and to recognise the divine that is in the 'other', which renders inter-religious dialogue an imperative. Bishop Audo states that dialogue is none other than the work of the Kingdom, and that our vocation as Christians is to be a bridge. Echoing Khodr, Audo affirms the global importance of eastern Christians, both as the descendants of the first Christians, and for their experience as fellow citizens with the Muslim community since its founding. Jeanbart and Aphrem likewise stress the importance of Eastern Christianity as located within the cradle of religions, and as rooted in Arab culture, for modelling the Christian-Muslim dynamic. Some of these Church leaders have become akin to modern 'Church Fathers', echoing the Patristic writers and providing modern context to the deep wells of cultures and traditions that make up the Antiochene paradigm. For all these leaders, Eastern Christianity play a vital role in working with other each other and with other faith communities in peace-building, reconciliation and meeting the pastoral, spiritual and humanitarian needs of the people. As such, global Christianity needs to rediscover the importance of the Antiochene Christianity which offers an inherent paradigm of engaging with alterity, and particularly with Islam, that western society lacks. This is of crucial importance as that encounter becomes ever more complex.

Space does not allow a detailed analysis of the contributions of these interlocutors. I believe their words are self-explanatory and summarise well the vision and different perspectives of the key issues facing interreligious dynamics. They also offer a potential platform for enhancing religious peacebuilding and future study.

Despite the diversity of the Christian landscape in Syria illustrated and represented in this chapter (Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental and Protestant), and the shift in self-identification (Arab Christian vs Eastern Christian as identified by Sabra) that some Christian communities have been making in recent years in relation to the wider religious and political context, there is significant commonality in the issues and possible responses that different Church communities identify. This chapter has highlighted the various ways in which Christians from these diverse traditions have grappled both with their eastern identity and theological origins, and the unique challenges of the contemporary regional context. There remains a

commitment to the preservation and improvement of interreligious relationships, but given the level of suffering and destruction experienced within Syria, and the fragmentation of society, priority has been given to the humanitarian response, and the restoration of positive relationships. Certainly, awareness of and pride in eastern Christian identity has been heightened in recent years by events in the region, but Arab identity itself in relation to religion has become contested given the rise in militant Islam.

All Christian denominations agree that the dynamic engagement between Christianity and Islam in the early centuries had a lasting, mixed and evolving influence on the relationship between the two communities. A further re-reading of the Christian contribution to the development of Arab and Muslim civilisation will help understanding of the intrinsic indigenous roots of Christianity that pre-date Islam within the region. For the Orthodox and Oriental Churches, the monastic movement, the spirituality of the desert (and particularly the theme of hospitality that emerges from it), and Patristic theology offer a key to reconnecting with the spirituality and culture within which early Christianity engaged with Islam, and to challenging the exclusivity of the militant Islam that has come to dominate some elements of recent Islamic resurgence, and the ideology of most of the militant factions in the Syrian conflict. Similarly, a recovery of the recognition of Arab plurality in both religion and culture, and Eastern Christianity's capacity to engage with that plurality offers further potential for grappling with the post-conflict context in Syria and the changed communal dynamics. This could be an important focus for future study and dialogue. However, most Christian and Muslim leaders regard theological dialogue in the midst of conflict and the immediate post-conflict context as a 'luxury' that is outweighed by the immediate overwhelming humanitarian and pastoral needs of traumatised communities. Nevertheless, such dialogue will be a necessary part, not only of the healing process, but of establishing stability in Syrian society.

Notwithstanding ecumenical theological tensions, the unity of the Churches in cooperating with their Muslim counterparts on a practical and relational level enhances the ability of the religious communities to model reconciliation and rebuild trust where it has been fractured. All faith leaders spoken to in the course of this research have stressed the importance of cooperation in the field of humanitarian work and reconciliation between communities. To a degree this has already been evident in local contexts on the ground in Syria particularly in the work of local reconciliation committees.

However, amongst Christians and many Muslims, there is a real fear that the rise of Islamism, even though its most violent expressions are being defeated, might lie dormant in loyal adherents until the next opportunity arises to assert itself. This fear alone is a cause of continued emigration, and will be a challenge to overcoming barriers of trust between communities.²⁹¹ It is likely that security policies in post-conflict Syria will by necessity be taking this risk into account.

In Chapter three, issues of leadership and a perceived disconnect between the interests and views of religious leaders and lay people have been discussed, with religious leaders being perceived as being too closely aligned with political leadership. Religious leaders have certainly played an important leadership role during the conflict, most taking a critical stance against violence and radical ideology, being involved in local and national reconciliation initiatives, and advocating for the preservation of Syria's secular constitution and the religious and ethnic mosaic of Syrian society. In the context of a society that has experienced conflict which has had a notably sectarian dimension, religious leaders can and should play a central role in the process of reconciliation as bridge-builders and peace-makers. And the need to rebuild Syrian society, which will include the necessity of political dialogue and reform, will require continuing prophetic leadership. George Sabra suggests that Christian engagement with politics in the Middle East context should shift from an understanding that focusses on challenging forms and methods of political action and control, to seeking a re-definition of the meaning of the word 'politics' that is relevant to every aspect of people's daily lives, much according to the model of Jesus' 'political' engagement.²⁹² The ability to be simultaneously critical, prophetic, and constructively engaging with those in power, in order to help play a transformative role in society, represents an ongoing challenge for the churches.²⁹³

Furthermore, the issue of disillusionment amongst many young people with established religion as a whole has also emerged. Whilst many Syrians express pride in the secular constitution and wish to preserve it, atheism is not a state of being with which Levantine culture is familiar. Religious identity is a part of Middle Eastern culture and society. Cynicism

²⁹¹ The fear of continued or future sectarian prejudice and violence in Syria is one of the stated reasons why some refugees do not wish to return the country.

²⁹² Sabra, G. (1993) "Al-Kaneesah wal-Syyasah." ("The Church and Politics") In: *Resalat al-Kaneesah 2, 5-10*. Quoted in: Awad, N.G. (2012) *And freedom became a public square*. Zurich, Berlin: Lit Verlag. 151-155

²⁹³ The Jesuit Statement on Syria issued on 7 June 2011 offers one model of how this might be achieved. <https://zenit.org/articles/statement-of-jesuits-in-syria/> (Accessed: 18 April 2019)

and disillusionment with religious institutions and matters of faith amongst the young is a matter of concern for religious leaders of all persuasions, but could be viewed as an understandable reaction to the level of violence experienced and suffered, and will need to be handled with sensitivity and understanding by religious leaders and ordinary members of all communities.

Despite the conflict, ecumenical tensions, and the serious impact of emigration, the humanitarian work that the Churches undertakes reaches throughout Syria and touches people of all religious and ethnic backgrounds. Despite its complexity, the Christian presence in Syria, though seriously weakened, remains a dynamic, diverse, influential and vital part of Syrian society. Its engagement at all levels of society and with all communities, notwithstanding its' historic and necessarily ambiguous relationship to the State, represents a positive foundation for learning from the conflict, and helping the country move forward positively in restoring trust within society, reconciling fractured communities, overcoming sectarian fears and prejudice through constructive models of interreligious dialogue, encouraging and nurturing frameworks for political dialogue and developing shared responsibility in civic society. Plurality and difference define Syria. This plurality represents both a challenge and a resource for the future. Whatever the future holds, it is hoped that the political space that emerges will be a dialogical one which the secular and diverse religious mosaic of Syrian society can peacefully and constructively cohabit.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have contextualised and introduced the complex breadth of the religious landscape in contemporary Syria, and have explored how the historic relationship between diverse expressions of Christianity and Islam has influenced, and been impacted by the conflict. I have examined how their interactions historically and contemporaneously have helped mould complex social, political and communal dynamics. And I have considered cultural traditions of religious leadership in relation to the political landscape, and whether or not the term 'sectarian' is adequate to describe the complexity of the communal relational landscape. Finally, I have considered Eastern Christian responses to the Christian-Muslim dynamic, and posit that the Antiochene paradigm of Eastern Christianity, rooted in plurality, offers an established and culturally sensitive theological framework for understanding Christian-Muslim relations and engaging in dialogue.

Whilst there has been a growing body of helpful research undertaken about the Syrian conflict itself, the faith-resourced, non-political focus of this study has been under-researched. Material relating specifically to the interface between Christianity and Islam in the country is extremely limited. With substantial qualitative research having been undertaken in government-held areas during the conflict, this study is an original and relevant contribution to understanding the religious dynamics prior to and during the recent conflict. And it adds significantly to studies of Christianity in the Middle East referred to in the Bibliography.

Practical challenges faced in undertaking fieldwork research inside Syria have been described, and the cultural, social, political and religious sensitivities required in engaging with people traumatised by and involved in the conflict, have been taken into account. I have been allowed a remarkable degree of access to a wide cross-section of people and places in parts of the country under government control, including areas in conflict, often without official accompaniment. But I have not risked accessing areas under the control of militant groups opposed to the Syrian government. Whilst the conflict has formed the backdrop for much of this research, it has not been within the scope or intention of this work to examine in detail the political, social or economic factors surrounding the conflict. The Bibliography points to studies that offer analysis of those subjects.

Whilst other research projects have been undertaken during the conflict 'on the ground' in areas under militant control (Baczko, 2018; Lister, 2015), I am not aware of any research having taken place during the conflict in government-held territory, where the majority of the Syrian population inside Syria, including the majority of the internally displaced, were residing (Balanche, 2018, p. 15). This work therefore, both as a resource on the historic and contemporary religious dynamic, and as a 'snapshot' from within government-held territory in Syria during the conflict, represents an original contribution to an understanding of the Syrian context both before and during this period.

As in all complex conflict situations, there are other perspectives. The voices recorded here cannot of course claim to represent all Syrians, or all Syrian Christians, but they do represent a significant constituency of Syrians from different communities. This study therefore offers a range of perspectives from the faith dimension of Syrian society that cannot be ignored if one is to understand the dynamic complexity and breadth of the Syrian context, and if we are to discern possible solutions for the restoration and renewal of post-conflict Syrian society. In the conclusion of a work published in 2018 by the Centre for Syrian Studies at St. Andrews University, (a Centre that has consistently prioritised the accounts of Syrian external opposition groups) Imady and Hinnebusch admit that "The Syrian Uprising has significantly challenged some of our most basic assumptions about states and society in the Middle East", and call for "new, and innovative, scholarly approaches to the Syrian Uprising" (R. I. Hinnebusch, O., 2018, p. 335). Whilst this study is not about the Syrian Uprising, and whether or not the reader agrees with all its findings, the subject of this study, namely the place and role of the diverse religious communities in Syrian society, cannot be excluded from consideration when seeking to understand the wider context of events in the country. It is precisely in strengthening an understanding of that context, that this study makes a significant contribution.

So what are the main conclusions of this research?

The study has shown that Syria is a plural society in which multiple expressions of both Christianity and Islam have coexisted within certain parameters for centuries. However, the religious, social and cultural dynamics of Syrian society are complex and multi-layered, and vary across different historical, political, social and geographical contexts. During the conflict, Christian and Muslim leaders in areas remaining under Government control and in areas

restored to Government authority, have maintained a good degree of interaction and co-operation, particularly in modelling and being a visible witness of mutual tolerance and respect in the public arena, and in assisting processes of reconciliation and peace-building, in a context that has seen extreme violence and human suffering. This interreligious dynamic is increasingly echoed across the region.²⁹⁴

This study has considered the plurality of Sunni Islam in Syria ranging from a minority who follow *wahhabi* ideology, to the many Sunnis who support a secular-based Constitution. Some of the roots of the recent conflict are to be found within Islam itself. Tensions such as the sectarianisation of the space between Sunni and Shi'a have been long-lasting but have increased in recent decades and represent a real threat to regional communal stability.

The study is placed within the context of an on-going and constantly evolving violent conflict in which multiple factions, both domestic and foreign, representing differing political, ideological and sectarian interests, have fractured the nation and been supported by conflicting international strategic alliances. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have died and almost half the population has been displaced.

The study has necessarily placed the subject within its broader context. The importance of the changing geopolitical dynamics in the region due to recent conflicts, and particularly the increased influence of Russia, Iran, and China have been mentioned. Multiple external factors have helped lay the foundations for the instability that erupted into the devastating conflict, and added to the strengthening of communal identity. They include: the colonial imposition of the nation states; the rise of political Islam in the 20th Century, (particularly in Syria under the *Ikhwan*, the 'Muslim Brotherhood'); the tension between 'secular' nationalism and Islamism; the growing influence of *Salafi* and *Wahhabi* tendencies in Sunni preaching that followed the return of thousands of Syrians from studying and working in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf in the latter decades of the twentieth century; the Iranian revolution; the US invasion of Iraq and its fallout; the so-called Arab spring; the failure of economic reform within Syria for multiple reasons; and the changing geopolitical dynamics between nations. For all these

²⁹⁴ For example, in Egypt, Coptic Pope Tawadros II and the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar have played a major stabilising role during political unrest. And in February 2019 In Abu Dhabi, Pope Francis and Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Dr. Ahmad Al-Tayyib issued a joint declaration on Human Fraternity and World Peace. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-02/pope-francis-uae-declaration-with-al-azhar-grand-imam.html> (Accessed: 15 April 2019)

reasons the *Awqaf* and the State have increasingly sought to curb the influence of radicalised groups and more rigid Islamic ideologies.

The future of the Islamic landscape in Syria is difficult to predict. The emigration of millions of Syrians is likely to produce a different religious landscape once the conflict ends. Although many will return, many others will not. Will the numeric balance between Sunnis, Shi'as and Christians, change? Will the more juridical approach within Sunni Islam allow for 'secular' space and expression within Syrian society? Will Syria's alliance with Russia, Iran and Lebanon increase the influence of Shi'a Islam in Syria, and how will this impact the interreligious, particularly the *Sunni-Shi'a*, dynamic?²⁹⁵ Without question, *Shi'a* influence in the region has grown in recent years, particularly since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and the fact that the Syrian alliance with Russia and Iran has prevailed in the conflict means that the influence of that presence will increase. This likelihood has implications for both religious and geopolitical dynamics in the region. Whatever dynamics emerge, *Sunni* Islam needs to re-frame its religious thought in a way that relates to and embraces communal diversity, especially as Syrians who fled the conflict return.²⁹⁶ How will the different communities negotiate these changed dynamics? Acknowledging the fear that violence is an existential threat, especially after such a violent conflict, they will need the wise assistance of community and faith leaders to do so successfully and peacefully. After all, whilst having primarily political roots, religious and communal identity has certainly informed the conflict.

The future role and identity of Islam in Syrian society, and its relationship with modern Statehood will be crucial to the nature and stability of the society that emerges in the years to come. The importance and plurality of Islam within Syrian society has been under-researched and its significance underestimated. The extent to which contemporary and particularly juridical expressions of Sunni Islam are able to sustain the space in which religious pluralism and freedom of religious practise and expression are maintained, will determine future levels of communal trust and the survival of religious plurality in Syria. Therefore, study of and engagement with these issues within Islam are essential to assisting an emerging understanding for the future.

²⁹⁵ <https://syriacpatriarchate.org/2018/11/meeting-with-a-russian-delegation-damascus/> (Accessed: 15 April 2019)

²⁹⁶ See note 288 on UAE Declaration.

Meanwhile, it is estimated that 50% of Syria's Christians or more have left the country since the beginning of the war. How many will return? What impact will this have on Syrian society, and on its plural nature and Constitution? It is almost impossible to predict the answers to these questions at present, but remembering the catastrophic impact of events in neighbouring Iraq, they will be necessary dimensions to research in the future.

This study has considered at some length the Christian contribution to the religious space within the Syrian context. Since the birth of Christianity in the region, this has been significant. The breadth of the Christian presence has been both an enrichment and a burden to society, with meaningful ecumenical engagement sometimes remaining a challenge. Aspects of Christian practice in Syria have sought to make a major contribution to the interreligious dynamic. The monastic expression of Antiochene theological and spiritual traditions has represented a particular point of connection and engagement with Islamic practice and belief, as evidenced at Mar Mousa and Qara.

Meanwhile, led by the religious leadership, one of the most effective means of engagement during the conflict has been that of humanitarian and peace-building work. Some feel that the trauma of conflict has rendered theological dialogue a "luxury". However, given the trauma to society; the impact of radicalisation on attitudes to religion; the depth of the damage to interreligious trust; the need for societal, community and individual healing; and the need for the international community to learn from what has happened in Syria and the wider region, it will be vital to restore a process of theological engagement and reflection to address complex religious issues. Of particular importance will be the ability of Islam to embrace plurality. Radicalisation of Muslim identities and the increase of ideological violence gives new urgency to the need for theological dialogue.

In addition to exploring Eastern Christian religious thought on contemporary interreligious engagement, Appendix 5, (the Questionnaire Analysis) provides responses from mostly Muslim interlocutors to questions about that dynamic. For the most part they confirm the assertion that Syria's broad religious landscape is largely one of coexistence, but vary in their responses as to how interreligious relationships have been affected by the conflict. For a small minority, the affect has been significant. The majority spoke of some impact whilst some spoke of no impact at all. Some Muslim respondents recognised the need to recover recognition of

plurality in Islam. All concluded that peace is desirable and that healing can only begin when the conflict was ended.

Christianity has an enormous contribution to make to this discourse. The breadth of the Christian presence distinguishes Christianity in Syria and enhances the character of religious pluralism that so many Syrians wish to preserve. The shared culture and experience of the Eastern Churches makes them a powerful resource for the worldwide Church in discerning and developing future models of Christian-Muslim engagement. The ecumenical 'Antiochene paradigm,' rooted in cultural, theological and historical frameworks familiar to both Islam and Christianity, and holding an important position within the wider ecclesial and political context has been neglected by the worldwide Church for too long. This study rearticulates that paradigm within a global Christian context, and explores the nature of the indigenous Protestant place within it. The Antiochene Patristic theological and spiritual approaches to interreligious dynamics, given contemporary voice by modern theologians and Church leaders, some of whom have become contemporary 'Church Fathers', have a much more important role to play in interreligious engagement than has hitherto been recognised.

Christianity's global and cross-cultural reach has enabled the Church to be a 'bridge' between Syria and the international community. However, for Christian leaders, it has been very difficult to position themselves in a highly charged conflict. This study has shown that the relationship between Church and State is more nuanced than has sometimes been suggested. It is rooted in Arab cultural traditions and Ottoman political structures and represents an important and necessary 'bridge', advisory potential, and corrective to the State. This study thus provides a window on the inter-communal nature of Syrian society that has hitherto been given little meaningful attention.

Christianity has the potential for bringing a helpful political, social, religious and cultural contribution, because it encourages cultural complexity and diversity and the equal distribution of resources, in a way that radicalised political Islam does not. Would a Sunni State not also be a dominant State? Could it ever be 'democratic'? Is there a conflict between what might be called the 'right to rule' and the need for pluralising 'space' within society? Christians have always wanted reforms that sustain a balanced, modern State that rejects sectarianism. They cannot control the State but they have understood its fragility and can help nurture equality, and a system that is not antagonistic towards plurality. Post-conflict Syria will need

to find a way of dealing with this complexity and the multiplicity of identities. Christian communities elsewhere have played a major role in reconciliation initiatives and in helping to re-write State Constitutions in post-conflict or trauma situations, precisely because of this strength within Christianity. The potential dangers to the plural nature of Syrian society shown in the conflict, have evoked an even deeper awareness for many, of the value of religious diversity. This has been expressed in the heightened significance given to shared religious celebrations across Syria during the conflict, especially in areas liberated from militant control.

Christians are facing major challenges, some of which they share with Syrians of other faiths. First is Christian emigration due to multiple factors including conflict, the rise of radical Islamism, economic hardship and political insecurity.²⁹⁷ These raise challenges for plurality in Syrian society and the survival of Christian institutions. Second are ecumenical tensions which continue to need attention. Third are interreligious tensions which as we have seen, have increased during the conflict, despite the underlying desire to preserve Syria's tradition of plurality, diversity, tolerance and respect. What will coexistence 'look' like in post-conflict Syria in the changed religious, cultural, and social circumstances? Notwithstanding these challenges, Christianity survives in Syria and continues to play an important role in society. In a post-conflict context, the Christian teachings of forgiveness, hope, love, and peace, have the potential to be a prophetic witness to the need for and the implementation of dialogue, engagement, reconciliation and peace-building. Many Church leaders are already striving to fulfil those responsibilities.

This thesis has covered a subject, with fieldwork evidence, about which little has previously been written, namely the nature of Christian-Muslim relations inside Syria prior to and during the course of the Syrian conflict. The importance of the Eastern Christian landscape in this respect cannot be overstated. There has always been a lacuna in this area of scholarship which this study seeks to address. Its intention is to provide context and insight for further study and reflection. Despite the complexity of, and the trauma experienced by, the Syrian conflict, or perhaps *because* of the complexity and severity of recent events, the resilience of the religious communities and the survival of the interreligious dynamic in Syria, provide a crucially relevant 'case-study' in exploring and understanding models of interreligious tolerance and engagement in the face of conflict. Whilst much scholarship is exploring the

²⁹⁷ See: Interim Report: 'Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO support for persecuted Christians'. Published 2 May 2019.

political implications of the Syrian crisis, understanding the religious dynamic in Syria is crucial to understanding the social and political context and will be essential to the healing of post-conflict Syrian society.

Further opportunities for understanding the interreligious dynamic might include: an appraisal of models of engagement, dialogue and religious peace-building that have been practised in Syria; the specifically Eastern Christian (Antiochene) theological contributions that can be made to theological dialogue and religious practise; religious representation in the political landscape; and the implementation of reconciliation initiatives during the conflict, and how these might be developed, improved upon and expanded in the future.

Given the global rise of religious nationalism, the experience of the religious communities in Syria in facing religious and sectarian radicalism and violence whilst preserving the secular 'space' within Syrian society, has much to teach Christians and Muslims in other parts of the world (A. O'Mahony, 2018). Additionally, the tensions between the Iranian/Russian/Syrian/Hezbollah alliance versus the Saudi/Israel/US/UK/Europe supported elements within Syrian society inevitably have an influence on the Sunni/Shi'a interface. The level of influence that Russia has had upon the trajectory of the conflict has been considered. One can validly ask if the renewal of Russian religious identity (both Christian and Muslim) might feed into the Syrian context, and whether or not this has influenced Russian policy in the country (Cousins, 2013).²⁹⁸

Whilst many scholars have lamented the lack of interlocutors for political conversation within Syrian civil society (R. I. Hinnebusch, O., 2018), this study shows that faith leaders play an important 'bridging' role between civic society and those in power. Their participation in any dialogue post-conflict will be vital. This thesis contends that western narratives have oversimplified the communal framework of Syrian and Middle Eastern society. Imposing a narrative of 'sectarianism' underestimates the complex history and multiple layers of communal relationships, and has helped fracture and perpetuate misunderstandings of the nature of Syrian society and its relational dynamics, which religious communities are better able to manage than imagined. The survival of plurality within Syrian society despite the severity of the trauma inflicted upon it suggests the truth of this proposal.

²⁹⁸ For a major report on Russian influence in the region, see: (Centre for Mediterranean, 2019).

Many religious leaders and lay volunteers were involved in the 'reconciliation' initiatives that were undertaken in Syria during the conflict. These sought to end fighting and re-establish plurality in areas of conflict. Widely critiqued by foreign observers, whatever weaknesses these processes may have entailed, they successfully achieved their goal in dozens of towns and cities across Syria. Whilst it is up to Syrians to decide upon and implement their future, many religious leaders are open to harnessing the expertise of those in the fields of reconciliation and peace-building, to assist in creating effective processes that help communities to re-integrate with each other and achieve a lasting peace.

Religious leaders and members of faith communities should play a proactive role in the path of peace and justice, and in political, social economic and religious spheres. They acknowledge the importance of ecumenical and interreligious understanding and respect, and renewed commitment to and a re-framing of dialogue and co-operation in the service of all communities. In this, Syrian Christians play a vital role. They are not just a 'minority', but are a vital and dynamic part of Syrian society who are able to hold a crucial 'space' for religious, social and communal identity for all communal groups within Syrian society.

Christianity and Islam are diverse and long-established traditions in Syria. Their historical precedent of coexistence and their theological, social and political frameworks present for Christian theological thought on religion and politics, an opportunity to discern new frameworks for understanding and engaging 'mosaic' societies. Contemporary Syria has always offered, and even during the conflict, continued to offer, a cutting-edge context for Christian theological and political thought for Muslim-Christian relations; not just in Syria, but more widely in the Middle East and beyond. This research provides new understanding of the contemporary and historic praxis of Christian-Muslim relations in Syria. Additionally, by articulating the importance of Antiochene Christian ecclesial and theological influences on interreligious dynamics, the thesis points towards future frameworks for interreligious dialogue, coexistence and reconciliation.

In summary, combining open fieldwork with critical historical and Christian theological reflection, this research makes an original and significant contribution to understanding the diverse religious landscape and multi-layered Christian-Muslim relations in Syria, in a way that has not previously been attempted. Providing insights into interreligious praxis prior to the conflict and in its midst; the study contributes to an understanding of the effects of conflict on

interreligious relationships. This has significant implications for understanding, developing, and applying frameworks of Christian-Muslim coexistence and reconciliation, not just in Syria, but also regionally – in Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey, and wherever Christianity encounters Islam. At a time when Islam is grappling with how to reconcile its own thought and principles with the social, ethical and cross-cultural challenges of the modern world, and when religious extremism is a growing phenomenon globally, the need for interreligious understanding and dialogue, particularly between Christianity and Islam, has never been greater.

Syria has been through one of the most violent conflicts the world has seen in recent decades, and the interreligious dynamic has survived. It is bruised and damaged, but it has survived. Until now, the interreligious context in Syria has been insufficiently understood and studied. This research offers a clearer understanding of that dynamic and glimpses of hope amidst the tragedy. And in a reframing of Eastern Christianity's ecclesial, theological and spiritual traditions, lies the potential for discerning new frameworks of religious and political relationship and engagement wherein plurality may be embraced and sustained, and long-term peace might be achieved.

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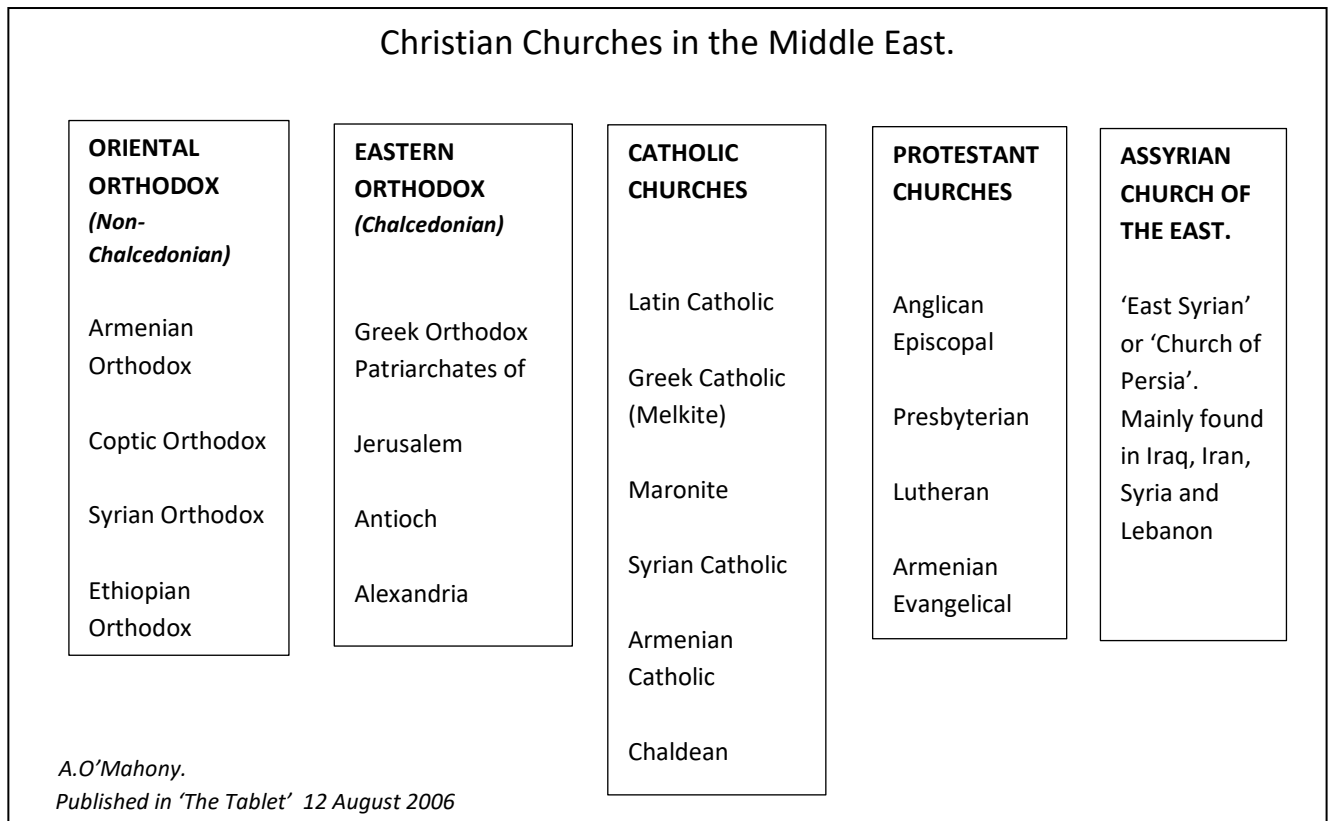
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Appendix 1.

A brief survey of the five 'families' of Christian denominations in Syria



Oriental Orthodox

The Oriental Orthodox churches (Syriac, Malankara Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean and Armenian Orthodox Churches) have their roots in the Middle East and India, and regard themselves as having apostolic origin. In full communion with each other, the churches emerged in their current form through their rejection of the Chalcedonian definition of the nature of Christ, and their preservation of eastern forms of liturgy, language, theology and structure. They distanced themselves from the Byzantine empire, and experienced persecution from the west. Classical Syriac remains the liturgical language of the Syriac Orthodox Church, which continues to have a significant presence across Syria, particularly, in Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Qamishle and Hassakeh. However, it is estimated that approximately half of the Syriac Christian community in Syria have emigrated during the

war.²⁹⁹ Due to the emigration of Christians from Syria and Iraq, the Syriac Orthodox Church now has growing congregations across Europe, North America and Australasia.

During the course of my research, I was a guest of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate on several occasions, and visited destroyed Syriac churches in Deir Ezzor and Homs, as well as Syriac communities in other parts of the country, and the worldwide headquarters of the Syriac Orthodox Church at Ma'aret Saidnaya, where the theological seminary continues to train priests from around the world, and where a new Syriac University (the 'Antioch University') was opened in September 2018. Nurturing secular and religious education is seen as a primary ministry within the contemporary Syriac Orthodox Church. The abduction of Archbishop Mor Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, the Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo, along with Bishop Boulos Yazigi of the Eastern Orthodox Church on 22 April, 2013, continues to affect the attitude of the Christian communities in Syria towards the conflict, and their sense of self-identity as a church that has inspired generations through its perseverance amidst persecution. Despite the impact of emigration, the Syriac Orthodox Church is determined to maintain a significant and influential presence in Syria, and this is evidenced through the ongoing development of its monasteries, churches and educational institutions (Bailey, 2010; Brock, 2010; Hunter, 2014; Shemunkasho, 2018).³⁰⁰ The current Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, His Holiness Mor Ignatius Ephrem II, is much loved by his worldwide flock, and has been an influential voice for preserving the plurality and diversity of Syria, and protecting the Christian presence in the country.

Eastern Orthodox

The Eastern Orthodox Church encompasses the patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. It regards itself as representing the true descendants of the early Church and its' theology and faith is rooted in the Bible and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed, as defined within the first seven councils of the early Church, in which the Church of Antioch played an important part. Accepting the formula of the dual nature of Christ agreed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451CE, the Eastern Orthodox are sometimes termed 'Chalcedonian'. The oft-used term 'Greek Orthodox' is misleading since it implies deeper ties to Greece than are actually present in all its autonomous expressions.

²⁹⁹ This was the estimate given by His Holiness Patriarch Mor Ignatius Ephrem II, during a visit to London on 28 October 2018.

³⁰⁰ See also: (Abdul-Nur, 2016) 'The Faithful presence of the Syrian Orthodox in a challenging Milieu.'

The Patriarchate of Antioch has faced several schisms over the centuries, including the debates over the Chalcedonian definitions which led to the creation of the Oriental Orthodox churches. The Eastern Orthodox have had close engagement with Islam over the centuries, and whilst Greek still dominates the patriarchates of Alexandria and Jerusalem, the Orthodox Church of Antioch perceives itself, and is perceived by Muslims as an Arab Church, whose liturgy is Arabic. The Eastern Orthodox have played a significant role in the development of Christian-Muslim understanding. The Church has always been committed to religious and cultural plurality and diversity, and is the largest denomination numerically in Syria. The current Eastern Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch is His Beatitude John X Yazigi. (Bailey, 2010; Roussos, 2010; Tamer, 2018).³⁰¹

Eastern Catholic

The Eastern Catholic churches are a complex ecclesial and cultural reality in Syria and the Middle East. The Latin Catholic church, whose presence in the region goes back to the Middle Ages, is joined by six eastern Catholic churches, namely the Maronite, Melkite (Greek Catholic), Armenian Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, Coptic Catholic and Syrian Catholic churches. Many of these eastern expressions of the Catholic church, though they are related to Rome and have adopted some traditions from the Roman Catholic church, have their roots in the Orthodox tradition, and cherish their eastern identity. Although numerically smaller than their Orthodox counterparts, the Catholic churches represent a significant and influential minority in the region.

In Syria, the Greek Melkite Catholic and Armenian Catholic churches together represent the most numerous Christian denominations, but both have seen a serious decline in numbers due to emigration during the conflict. The Greek Melkite Church, which has strongly protected its' eastern religious identity, has been particularly influential, along with the Eastern Orthodox, in the sphere of Christian-Muslim dialogue, with the now retired Patriarch Gregorius III Laham devoting much attention to this ministry. Since June 2017, the Patriarch of the Greek Melkite Church has been His Holiness Joseph Absi.

³⁰¹ See Appendix 8 for a speech by Patriarch John X, presented in December 2018, summarising his position on this subject.

The Chaldean Catholic church emerged in the sixteenth century over a leadership dispute. It follows the East Syriac liturgy and is small in number in Syria but more numerous in Iraq where the Patriarchate is located. The Syriac Catholic church emerged in the eighteenth century from the Syrian Orthodox Church, but prides itself in its apostolic heritage. Both Syriac and Arabic are used in the liturgy. In Syria, Syriac Catholics are most numerous in Aleppo and eastern Syria, where the church manages many educational institutions. The Armenian Catholic church has its origins amongst those Armenians who supported the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The church suffered grievously during the genocide that followed World War 1. As a minority community, the Armenian Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical churches share good relations and collaborate closely, as I have witnessed when visiting their communities in Kessab and Aleppo. In Syria, the Armenian Catholic community are most numerous in Aleppo (Bailey, 2010; Anthony O'Mahony, 2010; A O'Mahony, 2018; Whooley, 2010).

Protestant Churches

The Protestant Churches are numerically small in Syria and in the region, but due to their commitment to the building of educational, health and social welfare institutions, their influence is significant. Their presence in the region goes back to the American missionary movements during the first half of the nineteenth century, the first Protestant congregation in the Middle East being formed in Beirut in 1827 (Raheb, 2018, p. 256). In the Middle East, the Protestant churches, including the Anglican, Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations, are all titled 'evangelical'. However, the 'mainstream' Protestant churches are to be distinguished from independent evangelical Protestant groups that were part of a wave of evangelical missionary activity in the twentieth century that established new independent evangelical churches, some of which sought to convert non-Christians and members of the indigenous eastern churches to their fold. This has been a source of tension, not only amongst Protestant denominations, but between Protestant and eastern churches, particularly as eastern churches tend not to distinguish between different Protestant denominations. In Syria there is a very small Anglican presence (based solely in Damascus, but overseen by and part of the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem), a modest Lutheran presence, and several established Presbyterian churches in different parts of the country. They are all members of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon and the Middle East Council of Churches. There also exist a range of independent, autonomous evangelical churches that are not a part of the Middle East Council of Churches, that have small congregations in Syria and across the region.

Raheb describes the Protestants in the region as a 'double minority' (Raheb, 2018, p. 269). Numerically, they are a minority within a Muslim majority. But as Protestants, they are also a Christian minority. Nevertheless, although the roots of the Protestant churches lie in nineteenth century missionary activity, the Protestant churches are indigenous Arab communities who use Arabic for liturgy and worship. The western origin of the denominations can be a challenge within the Middle Eastern context and particularly as regards perception in relation to eastern Christians, but the Protestant churches meet this challenge by developing contextual theologies, and placing a high priority on theological education, and ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.

The mainstream Protestant churches come under the Fellowship of the Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC). This organisation brings together fifteen reformed, Lutheran and episcopal churches from Algeria to Iran and from Syria and the Gulf to Sudan. In recent years, this Fellowship, in response to the aforementioned challenges, has played a major role in strengthening theological education, deepening ecumenical dialogue with all the churches in the region, and encouraging inter-religious dialogue (Bailey, 2010; Raheb, 2018).

Assyrian Church of the East

This is one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, tracing its origins to St. Thomas. Its field of influence stretched across Mesopotamia, from Syria to Iraq, Iran, Central Asia, and even according to some historians as far as China. Between the sixth and thirteenth century, the Church of the East was a major missionary church that was known for its scholarly activity, and its study of Greek philosophy. From the fourteenth century onwards, the Church of the East was virtually wiped out during the Mughal invasions, and suffered successive persecutions in subsequent centuries, including a genocide during the First World War. Today, Syria is home to a small number of Assyrian churches particularly in the North East of the country, where they have suffered further persecution from ISIS and Islamist militant factions. The recent conflicts in Iraq and Syria have therefore further reduced the number of Assyrian Christians through emigration. The liturgy, which dates to the fourth century, is conducted in Aramaic, the eastern dialect of classical Syriac. The Catholicos-Patriarch, His Holiness Mar Gewargis III, resides in the northern Iraq (Bailey, 2010) (Christoph Baumer, 2006).

Christian communities in Syria. Population in 1995.

Though out of date, and not in itself definitive, this table provides some indication of the make-up of the Christian communities in the country prior to the conflict.

Christian affiliation in Syria; Number of adherents of each Church in Syria in 1995

Greek Orthodox	503,000	Latin Catholic	11,100
Maronite	28,000	Protestant	20,100
Melkite	111,800	Syrian Catholic	22,400
Chaldean	6,700	Assyrian (Church of the East)	16,800
Armenian Apostolic	111,800	Armenian Catholic	24,600
Syrian Orthodox	89,400		
TOTAL:	945,600	Percentage of Population	6.4%³⁰²

Christian communities in Syria. Population in 2015

The following figures are found in Ross, K., Tadros, M., Johnson, M., (Eds) (2018) Christianity in North Africa and West Africa. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. p.103. They are based on figures published in: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo (eds.) (2017) World Christian Database Leiden. Boston: Brill The figures will already be out of date. Comparison with the table above combined with factors that have affected Christian numbers since, suggest that the data in both tables is unreliable, but is useful for indicative purposes.

Tradition	Population	Percentage of overall population
Anglicans	4,600	0
Independents	4,600	0
Orthodox	714,000	1.9%
Protestants	33,500	0.2%
Catholics	386,000	2.1%
Evangelicals ³	11,400	0.1%
Pentecostals	22,800	0.1%
TOTAL	1,136,000	6.1%

³⁰² Compiled by Y. Courbage and P. Fargues. *Chrétiens et Juifs dans l'Islam arabe et turc. And by N.H. Horner.* Taken from : Fargues, P, (1998) The Arab Christians of the Middle East, A Demographic Perspective. In Ed. Pacini, A. *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East, The Challenge of the Future.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. P.61

Appendix 2. Expressions of Islam.

The Shi'a 'Twelvers'.

These make up the largest *Shi'a* group, and form the majority of the populations in Iraq, Iran and Southern Lebanon, and Bahrain (Tomass, 2016, p. 70). They assert the legitimacy of a succession of twelve imams, starting with Ali, and finishing with Muhammad al-Mahdi (869-940). The *Ismaili* are an off-shoot of this group who dissented on aspects of *Shi'a* theology and succession. The Druze are a further dissenting group, and the Alawites too emerged from the Twelvers, but developed a distinctive theology and structure.

The Twelvers follow closely the religious practice of the *Sunna*. Fasting and pilgrimage, and the honouring of the Imams are essential to their devotion. Like other Muslims the place of *Qur'an*, *Hadith* and consensus (*ijma*) are central to law-making. The key difference with the *Sunna* is that the Imam's deduction (*qiyas*) of the sunna is regarded as infallible. His role is "to rule over the Islamic community, to explain the religious sciences and the law, and to be a spiritual guide to lead the people to an understanding of the inner meaning of things" (Tomass, 2016, p. 71). He is appointed by the previous imam. The Twelvers believe that the identity of the twelfth Imam, (the "*Mahdi*") has been hidden by God, and will be revealed at the Day of Judgement, when he comes with Jesus "to end tyranny and injustice" (Tomass, 2016, p. 71).

Some of these beliefs are held to be heretical by some *Sunni* Muslims. Nevertheless, Syria contains a number of important Shia shrines..

Ismailiyya

The Ismailis are a *Shi'a* group, named after those who believe that Ismail, the son of the sixth imam, Jafar al-Sadiq, held the right to succession after his death in 765. Though his brother Musa became Imam, when his line ended with the death of the twelfth Imam in 874, some Ismailis claimed that Ismail had never died and that he would reappear as Mahdi (Tomass, 2016, p. 72). The Ismailis were a secret movement that sought revolt against the Abbasid State and the *Sunna*. In 899, the Ismaili leader in North Africa, Ubayd Allah, declared himself al-Mahdi, and in 909 as Caliph until his death in 934. The 'Fatimid Caliphate' that he founded ruled North Africa and the Middle East until 1171. The Fatimid Caliphate had a significant influence in the Muslim world, at its height stretching across the whole of North Africa and

Arabia and across to Syria and Iran, and were responsible for the building of the Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo. Nevertheless, the challenge of the *Sunni* majority in their realms who despised their theology, and the loss of credibility by the self-‘deification’ by Caliph al-Hakim (996-1021) hastened their decline. After his death, his military officers became rulers of the State, and the last of these, Salah al-Din, finally abolished the Ismaili Fatimid State in 1171 and “proclaimed the return of Sunni Islam as the religion of the state in Egypt” (Tomass, 2016, p. 73).

The Ismaili state was dominated by hostility with the Sunni majority. Killings and counter-killings were common. Ismailis kept their faith secret, and would publicly murder civic figures who opposed them. Thus they earned the nickname ‘*Al-Hashishiyya*’ - ‘Assassins’.

The Ismaili caliphate moved from Persia to British India, and continues today in the person of Shah Karim Aga Khan. Small communities exist all over the world, and some remain in Syria. They distinguish between external and inner aspect of religion, the truths of which are to be found in unchangeable laws and scriptures. They believe that history progresses through seven eras, each inaugurated by a prophet, which thus far have included Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. The final prophet it is believed will reveal all Truth and sit in judgement over humanity.

The Druze

The Druze sect derives from Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Darazi (d.1020), a Turkish Ismaili preacher from Bukhara who “gained favour in the court of the sixth Fatimid Caliph, al-Hakim bi Amr Allah (985-1021)” (Tomass, 2016, p. 81). Al-Hakim was known for occasional persecution of Christians and Jews and forced conversions to Islam (Walker, 2012, pp. 205-214). In 1020, al-Darazi declared Al-Hakim’s divinity, which caused riots and his own (al-Darazi’s) disappearance. In the years following his death, the group was organised into a sect distinct from the Ismaili community, and, as a result of persecution, fled to the mountains of Southern Syria, where they remain a closed sect until today in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The Druze believe in the reincarnation of souls (for those who hold to Druze beliefs) until perfection is reached. They do not allow intermarriage with members of other sects and keep their belief systems and their communities separate from others. They are regarded as ‘infidels’ (along with Ismaili and the Alawi) by many Sunni theologians. A majority of Druze in Syria live in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, and in the Hauran plains at the foot of the Golan Heights. They also live in Lebanon. The Druze have primarily supported the Syrian

Government, but have had to remain politically cautious given that many of them either live under Israeli rule, or in areas under the control of anti-government militants.

The Sufiyya

The spirituality of the Sufi movement has played an influential part in the spread of Islam and its doctrines and practices have influenced Muslim thought and expression in Syria and throughout the region. In the twentieth century however, pressure from the rational thinking of the west, the rising trend of Islamic fundamentalism, the juridical emphasis of Sunni Islam, and the secularisation of Syrian society, saw a decline in the Sufi brotherhoods. In 1925, Turkey banned Sufi activities, and some families emigrated to Syria, where Sufism had been a feature of both urban and rural Syrian society. Despite the decline, in the later twentieth century, increasing interest in oriental mysticism in the west saw a revival of Sufi activities.³⁰³ (Prior to the conflict, performances of the 'Whirling Dervishes' were a popular tourist attraction in the restaurants of Damascus and Aleppo, and were presented as a significant part of Syrian Muslim heritage.)

The heartland for religious Sufism in Syria was Aleppo (Pinto, 2016, p. 201). Other significant Sufi families lived in Hama and Damascus, and during the Ottoman period, members of their families became established merchants, administrators and politicians.

The origins of Sufism are thought to lie between the eighth and tenth centuries C.E. It emerged as an ascetic movement that rejected material pursuits and sought satisfaction, not simply in the observance of religious ritual, but in surrender to God. The origins of the name are disputed, and include reference to the following Arabic words: '*suffa*' meaning the stone seats on which the group of followers slept in the Prophet's mosque; '*saff*' meaning the line of prayer; '*safi*' meaning purity; or '*suf*' which means 'wool'. The Sufi wears a garment of wool to distinguish himself as an ascetic – a practice of early Christian monks in Syria and Mesopotamia prior to the rise of Islam. The word could also derive from the Greek word '*Sophia*' for wisdom. Sufi practices are rooted in eliminating the distractions of the self. This is achieved through breathing techniques, the chanting of the name of God, reciting poetry, listening to music and dancing. For the Sufi, the ecstasy that can result is being absorbed into the very nature of God. Some orders of Sufism practice more extreme forms of ritual practices. One such practice is the *darb al-shish*. This practice, of piercing parts of the body

³⁰³ Weismann, I. *Sufi Brotherhoods in Syria and Israel – A Contemporary Overview*. www.ou.edu/mideast/additional%20pages%20-%20non-category/sufism%20in%20syriawebpage.htm Accessed 20 January 2018

with skewers- or other practices such as eating glass, walking on fire, stabbing oneself – without there being any evidence of harm, are regarded as miraculous acts (*karamat*) which seek to prove advancement along the mystical path.³⁰⁴ There is debate between Muslim groups about whether or not these practices can truly be viewed as Islamic. Some regard them as heretical.

There are many well-known Sufi writers. One of the most famous is Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111) from Iran. In his most celebrated work *Revival of Religious Sciences (Ihya' 'ulum ad-din)* al-Ghazali “synthesised Muslim theology and mystical internal knowledge” and argued that Islamic doctrine and practice could lead the way to the realms of higher mysticism (Tomass, 2016, p. 87). Perhaps the most influential Sufi was the Andalusian Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240) who travelled in the Middle East and settled in Damascus. Al-Arabi taught that we should submit totally to the will of God and that Islamic law is a path to achieve that goal. Central to Sufi practice is the guidance of an elder. Sufism is thus divided into different orders, each of which have their own history, rules, hierarchy and spiritual practices. The orders have survived, and Sufism and “broader doctrinal trends” have tended to be supported by the Syrian Government, partly, claims Pierret, because they “prevent personalisation of religious leadership” and so represent less of a threat to State control (Pierret, 2013, p. 101). But in recent years, Sufism has been under increasing persecution from extreme Sunni groups, and its shrines have been attacked and destroyed in ISIS-controlled areas of Iraq and Syria.

The Naqshbandi brotherhood is the most active in Syria. It combines orthodoxy with a socio-political orientation, branches of which are to be found all over the country.³⁰⁵ The Naqshbandis have been criticised for being closely associated with the Syrian government, but this relationship can be understood as a means of being able to influence political leadership. Writing in a personal blog article, Vladimir Akmedov writes that: “In general, the Sufis get along with the government and to some extent represent the official political Islam.”³⁰⁶ They are close to the government partly because they withdrew from active politics and focussed on being a “religious, doctrinal and intellectual movement.”

Two important Sufi figures in the field of Syrian Islam are Sheikh Dr. Ahmed Kufaro (1915-2004) and Dr. Muhammad Sa'id Al-Bouti (1929-2013).

³⁰⁴ For a study of these practices in Syrian Sufism, see: (Pinto, 2016)

³⁰⁵ Weismann, I. *Sufi Brotherhoods in Syria and Israel – A Contemporary Overview*. www.ou.edu/mideast/additional%20pages%20-%20non-category/sufism%20in%20syriawebpage.htm Accessed 20 January 2018. See also: (Abu Manneh, 1982)

³⁰⁶ <https://yallasouriya.wordpress.com/2016/10/12/the-role-of-sufis-in-the-syrian-uprising/>

Dr. Kuftaro, an ethnic Kurd, was one of the most prominent representatives of the Naqshbandi religious establishment in Syria. He received a strict Sufi education, was a popular religious broadcaster, and was rewarded for his support for the government by being appointed Grand Mufti in 1964 (Pierret, 2013, pp. 48-49). Kuftaro created a network of educational and religious and welfare centres, and was a strong advocate of Inter-religious dialogue and women's rights, as well as teaching a modern form of Sufism rooted in the *Qur'an* and *Shari'a*, that sought to engage with social affairs. He affirmed the need to interpret Islam in relation to the present. In an article published before Kuftaro's death in 2005, Itzchak Weissmann of the University of Haifa declares:

On the other hand, Kuftaro and his associates are keen to demonstrate to the Salafis that the Sufis' inner search of God has not diverted them from active participation in Jihad.³⁰⁷

But the '*jihad*' of which Weissmann speaks is a re-framing of the term, that is rooted in *Ijtihad* (individual reasoning) and is contrary to the juridical emphasis of *taqlid* (imitation) as espoused by *salafi* ideology. (We shall examine this crucial concept of *Jihad* and its profound impact on the Syrian conflict later in the Chapter).

Dr. Muhammad Sa'id Al-Bouti, another ethnic Kurd, was "considered to be one of the most famous contemporary scholars in Syria."³⁰⁸ An immensely popular Sufi leader, he was a broadcaster and professor at Damascus University (Christmann, 1998). Al-Bouti was "fiercely hostile to the Salafi doctrine that was permeating the Damascus branch of the Muslim Brothers" (Pierret, 2013, p. 79). He was opposed to political Islam and supported the government against the actions of the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, the violence of the clashes between the Muslim Brotherhood 'fighting Vanguard' and the government in the 1970s and 1980s inspired him "to approach the phenomenon from his scholarly and intellectual position". The result was his book *Jihad in Islam, How do we understand it? How do we practice it?*" which was published in 1993 in Arabic and in English in 2006 (Buti, 2006). Al-Bouti supported but re-framed the concept of *Jihad* declaring that the violent actions of the

³⁰⁷ Weissmann, I. *Sufi Brotherhoods in Syria and Israel – A Contemporary Overview*. www.ou.edu/mideast/additional%20pages%20-%20non-category/sufism%20in%20syriawebpage.htm Accessed 20 January 2018.

³⁰⁸ Research Co-ordinator, Sheikh Muhammad Abu Zeid. (2015) *From the heart of the Syrian Crisis*. A Report on Islamic Discourse between a culture of War and the establishment of a culture of peace. Adyan Foundation. P.41

Jihadists are nothing less than a revolt against the general principles of Islam, and was a critic of the protests at the beginning of the Syrian conflict. Unfortunately, Al-Bouti was seen to be too close to the government and to the Presidency for his writings and his views to be taken seriously by the Jihadists. In 2013, he was killed by an explosion whilst teaching at the Iman Mosque in the centre of Damascus.

Sheikh Dr. Ahmad Badraddin Hassoun, who succeeded Dr. Kuftaro in 2005 as 'Grand Mufti' of Syria, is another Sunni scholar trained in the Shafi'i school of Islamic Jurisprudence, who is influenced by Sufi theology. The Shafi'i school acknowledges five sources of jurisprudence: the *Qur'an*, the *Hadith*, (the sayings associated with the Prophet), the *Ijma* (the consensus of Muhammad's companions); *Ijtihad* (reasoning where consensus cannot be found); and *qiyas*, which is a process of deductive analogy between the *hadith* and the *Qur'an*. Dr. Hassoun, whose father was also a sheikh from Aleppo is well known for his encouragement of inter-religious dialogue and passionate support for plurality, diversity, and religious freedom in Syrian society. In a meeting with him in 2017, he said:

"I am not just for Muslims, but serve everyone whatever faith or none. To Christians I say, 'If you are a Christian, hold onto the message of Christ, because it is from *Allah*. If you are a Muslim, hold onto the Prophet, because he is a universal messenger. If you are a Jew, you worship *Allah*. If you are an atheist, you are a brother. When I go to a Church or a Mosque, I go to see one God. We are all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. *Allah* is not to be found in a mosque or a church or a temple. God is in our heart."³⁰⁹

The Sunni

Sunnis make up about 80% of the world's Muslim population, and are the majority of the population of Syria. In all the Arab world, only in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain are they a minority. Like all faith groups, Sunnis are diverse in their practice, belief and adherence. In Syria, they range from those who hold to a Wahhabi ideology to those who live predominantly secular lives whilst remaining faithful to their religious identity.

Sunni identity developed in response to Shi'a allegiance to Muhammad's daughter Fatima, and his cousin Ali as the hereditary leaders of the Muslim community. For the Shi'a, the refusal of the newly formed Islamic community to accept their leadership meant that both the Umayyad and the Abbasid caliphates were illegitimate. The Sunni however, saw the leadership of the Islamic community as residing in those who observed the teachings of the *Qur'an* and the

³⁰⁹ Meeting with Dr. Hassoun, Grand Mufti of Syria in Damascus. 28 November 2017.

Hadith, and who were endorsed by the religious authorities. Those who followed them became known as the *Ahl al-Sunna*. They accepted the first four caliphs as rightful successors to the Prophet Muhammad.

The *Qur'an*, *Hadith (Sayings)* and *Ijtihad (Interpretation)* are the foundation of Muslim law on all things to do with daily life. The science of these religious laws is *fiqh* (Jurisprudence). In Islamic law, four schools of jurisprudence and interpretation are accepted, based on the teachings of four scholars of the first three centuries of the Islamic faith: the Hanafi; Maliki, Shafi and Hanbali schools. Each of these are represented in Syria, with the more conservative Hanbali school playing a significant role amongst the urban *ulama*. However, most Syrian clerics follow *Ash'ari-Maturidi* theology which emphasises *tawhid* (the oneness of God) and *ilm al-Kalam* (the science of discourse) – which might be termed ‘moderate rationalism’. The fact that a majority of Sunnis in Syria follow this more rational approach to Islam, is one of the reasons that respect for minorities and a willingness to accept a secular State has prevailed in Syria for so long. However, the influence of *salafi* trends within Sunni Islam in Syria during the last century cannot be overstated.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs in Syria (*Awqaf*), an Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments in Syria, officially administers religious institutions. However, not desiring to be under Government control, many local *ulama* have set up independent religious institutions. Simultaneously, the Ba'ath Party has sought to allow religious institutions a degree of freedom, partly to limit their influence at a State level, but also “not to antagonise certain neighbourhoods” (Pierret, 2013, p. 42). This independence though has ironically allowed the more conservative trends within Syrian Islam to develop, and so foster hostile attitudes towards the secularity of the Syrian constitution – a hostility enhanced by the significant Islamic influences from Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran.

Wahhabism

Wahhabism has been an increasingly important and growing phenomenon throughout the Arab world in recent decades, and its ideology, characterised by religious intolerance and political authoritarianism, lies at the root of many of the actions and ‘beliefs’ of the so-called ‘Islamic State’. As Patrick Cockburn writes, this movement has been “taking over mainstream Sunni Islam. In one country after another Saudi Arabia is putting up the money for the training of preachers and the building of mosques” (Cockburn, 2014, p. 6). This was particularly true in Syria in the years leading up to 2011, when as previously mentioned, many Syrians spent time working in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf; were influenced by the Wahhabi doctrines that were

espoused in the mosques there, and were sharing those doctrines on their return home. Given the economic disparity in the country; corruption and political suppression in civic and government departments; and resentment at the imbalance of power in Syria, such conservative and extreme Sunni teachings found willing audiences amongst some Syrians who felt politically and economically disenfranchised.

Wahhabism takes its name from the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (1703-1792), an eighteenth century religious scholar who sought a return to what he believed to be the 'pure' practices of Islam. Following Ibn Taymiyya's emphasis upon Islam as obedience to the rules espoused in the Qur'an and the Hadith, Wahhabism urges Muslims to follow these rules literally, and denounces any belief or practice that violates the Islamic understanding of monotheism as heresy. Such heretics are to be regarded as infidels and apostates, and beheading is advocated as the punishment. There is no religious hierarchy in Wahhabism, and therefore every Muslim has the right "to attribute unbelief (*takfir*) to potential infidels or apostates and to fight them" (Tomass, 2016, p. 89). This goes some way towards explaining the widespread brutality of the actions of the 'Islamic State' group in Syria. Furthermore, it becomes incumbent upon every 'faithful' Muslim to practice *jihad* against those who do not accept *Wahhabi* doctrine. Wahhabi doctrine also forbids any form of innovation (*bida*), and only interpretation (*ijtihad*) that specifically agrees with the Qur'an and the Hadith is allowed.

Upon meeting with the ruler of the House of Saud, Muhammad Ibn Saud (d.1765), the two men agreed that religious authority should remain with the house of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, whilst temporal authority should rest with House of Ibn Saud. Following the House of Saud's conquests of Mecca, Medina, southern Iraq and Syria in the early 19th Century, *Wahhabi* doctrine was imposed upon the regions. Regarding any form of shrine as idolatrous, many Muslim and Christian shrines have been destroyed wherever *Wahhabi* doctrine has prevailed. The pace of this destruction has been hastened in recent years, particularly in Mecca, where buildings dating from the time of Prophet Mohammed have been destroyed in order to prevent the possibility of 'idolatrous' associations. The destruction of churches, shrines and mosques, has likewise been a feature of 'Islamic State' violence in Syria.

After a period of defeat in the 19th Century at the hands of the Hashimid Clan, Saudi rule, with British support, was established once again in 1927. Today, *Wahhabi* influence has spread throughout the Middle East, South Asia and Africa, as foreign workers in Saudi Arabia are obliged to send their children to Saudi schools that teach *Wahhabi* doctrine. These in turn

return to their countries influenced by their teachings. Wahhabism is the underlying ideology of many terrorist movements, including the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and 'Islamic State'.

Appendix 3

Syrian Ministry of Awqaf. Publications for combatting extremism.

In November 2017 a significant practical initiative to provide frameworks for teaching Islam that challenge 'takfiri' ideology was implemented by the Syrian Ministry of Awqaf, when it produced three volumes for use in every mosque in. Two introductory volumes consider "The Intellectual and Ideological basics of combating the Extremism and Takfiri terrorism and so-called the Political Islam". Using Qur'anic references and *Hadith* and a strongly critical rhetorical style, these volumes challenge Wahhabi ideology, and the political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood. The third volume offers a systematic framework for teaching Islam and challenging extremism in every mosque in the country.³¹⁰ Rooted in the principle that "the pulpit is a public site that has inviolability, rules and origins," the Awqaf produced these volumes in the hope that the mosques may be "a beacon of science, ethics, values, education, and an oasis of tranquillity", and the Friday sermon a means of "scientific, moral, social and economic renaissance."³¹¹ This development will be seen by some as an authoritarian means of controlling the mosques, and it is true that the Introduction includes an intention to "strengthen the belonging to the homeland".³¹² But this is a constructive response to the challenge of extremist ideology, and an attempt to moderate the teaching of preachers who have increasingly been educated in the Wahhabi traditions in recent years.

The Ministry of Waqf declares that terrorism and extremism are a global problem, and that understanding their origins and beliefs are vital to confronting them. Indeed, according to the Ministry, "any efforts to confront ISIS and other kinds of terrorism and religious extremism that do not study the Syrian case and interact with it are going to be insufficient and short-sighted". Therefore, the Ministry of Awqaf sees its responses, which seek to identify "the

³¹⁰ Syrian Arab Republic Ministry of Awqaf. (2017) *The Intellectual and Ideological basics of combating the extremism and takfiri terrorism and so-called the Political Islam. Vols 1 & 2* Damascus
Syrian Arab Republic Ministry of Awqaf (2017) *The general approach of the Friday sermons in the mosques of the Syrian Arab Republic. The whole modern religious speech. The pulpit is a public site that has inviolability, rules and origins.* Damascus

³¹¹ Introduction to "The General Approach of the Friday Sermons of the Syrian Arab Republic." Ministry of Awqaf. 6

³¹² Introduction. *The General Approach..* p.7

ideological and legislative real and true roots of terrorism and religious extremism” and counter their effects in the Syrian context, as being of international relevance.³¹³

The strategy outlined by the Ministry includes:

- Developing a charter of religious speech
- Publishing a document “that sets missions and standards of choosing people responsible for religious rites and duties.”
- Publishing a “legislative approach” to confronting religious extremism and ideology.
- Launching training and qualifying courses about jurisprudence for all scholars and preachers.
- Nurturing moderate religious media to challenge extremist religious channels
- Launching a project “for developing religious education curricula in all universities, institutes and schools.
- Launching a project for developing “youth religious speech (future preachers)”.
- Launching a project for “interpreting the Qur’an in a modern and advanced way to confront the basic principles of the extremist ideology”.³¹⁴

As a foundational framework for teaching in the mosques, the Syrian Ministry of Awqaf has adopted what it terms “Important pillars in the Reform and Development of Religious Speech”. In the volume entitled “The General Approach of the Friday Sermons in the Mosques of the Syrian Arab Republic”, the Awqaf identifies seventeen “pillars” or principles to be adopted in all preaching in Syrian mosques, each justified by Qur’anic or *Hadith* quotations. They are, (as quoted in the volume):

1. Analysis rather than indoctrination.
2. Belonging to Islam does not conflict with belonging to the homeland. (Citizenship)
3. Non-separation between rituals and intentions.
4. Transfer of the religious text does not conflict with the mind.
5. Focus on the moral aspect of the call to Islam.
6. Depth in understanding the texts and not flattening the mind.
7. We must understand life so that we can apply the Qur’an.
8. Dependence on the biography of the Prophet peace be upon him in the interpretation of texts.
9. Drop text on reality. (Applying texts to real life).
10. Moderation alone is not enough.
11. The method of dialogue with opponents of opinion.
12. The Imams of the doctrines left us jurisprudential judgements and did not leave any sects for us.
13. Arabism and Islam are an identity that cannot be renounced.
14. Correct the concepts and terms.
15. Religion is not the cause of extremism but the distance from religion.

³¹³ Syrian Ministry of Awqaf. (2017) “*The Strategy of Confronting ISIS terrorist extremist ideology and draining its resources.*” Unpublished document received during meeting with the Minister of Awqaf, Sheikh Dr. Mohammed Abdul Sattar Al-Sayyed, Damascus. 15 April 2018.

³¹⁴ The Syrian Ministry of Endowments. (Waqf) (2017) *The Strategy of confronting ISIS terrorist extremist ideology and draining its resources.*

16. The pulpit is a public site that has its rules and controls and it is not a personal property of anyone.

17. Youth are the wealth of the homeland.³¹⁵

After establishing and explaining these frameworks, the volume identifies guidelines for preachers which include; emphasising respect and tolerance for others, ensuring appropriate qualifications and adequate preparation for preaching, respect for human rights, concern for social issues, abiding by religious traditions, avoiding political judgements and comment, supporting humanitarian events, continuing training, and abiding by Ministerial circulars. There follows a list of thirty “Duties and Tasks of Friday *Khateeb*s in Mosques”, which include requirements of behaviour, education, opposing extremism, and upholding national unity.³¹⁶ The rest of the volume presents a range of suggestions for sermon themes, on matters relating to faith, morality, social cohesion, science, education, culture, health, environment, religion, and national events, providing Qur’anic and *Hadith* supporting references, to cover annual, monthly, weekly, daily and spontaneous programmes for preaching.

Further to the establishment of the programme, the Ministry seeks to implement these ‘pillars’ by establishing religious youth groups, developing a Shari’a curriculum that includes modern interpretation of the Qur’an, establishing an approach to women’s organisation, developing the use of religious media, drawing on the resources of the National Institute for the qualification of preachers and Imams, and the University of the Levant for Islamic and Arab Sciences, and launching a project “for the ethical building of Society”.

³¹⁵ Ministry of Awqaf, (2017) *The General Approach of the Friday Sermons in the Mosques of the Syrian Arab Republic*. 18-46

³¹⁶ A ‘*Khatib*’ in Islam is an Orator who delivers the sermon in the mosque.

Appendix 4

A brief history of Aleppo

Aleppo is one of the oldest cities in the world, and was always an important city geographically, politically and economically. Human habitation has been recorded in the area “from at least the 5th millennium BC” (Mansel, 2016, p. 1). Throughout history, the town’s position between Europe, Mesopotamia, Asia and Arabia, has meant that it has been a trading centre for empires, and a place of prosperity since ancient times. During the Middle Ages, it was a hub for the Silk route, and records reveal that the city traded in goods from as far afield as Britain and China. In the 13th Century, Syria was ruled by the Mamluks from Egypt, but when the Ottomans conquered the area in 1516, the people of Aleppo, “exasperated by Mamluk over-taxation and lawlessness”, welcomed the Ottoman conquest, and when a rebellion broke out in 1520 in Damascus against Ottoman rule, the people of Aleppo remained loyal to the Ottomans (Mansel, 2016, p. 3).

During the Ottoman Empire, Aleppo was a cultural and economic hub. Then, as now, it was home to multiple communities – Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Jews. One of the ways in which the Ottomans managed to keep foreign allies was to “incorporate different peoples and religions in its administrative and financial structures” (Mansel, 2016, p. 7). Syrian *Ulamas* or religious authorities regarded the Ottoman Sultan as foreign, but nevertheless, local *kadis* (judges) and *sheikhs* generally went to Constantinople for training. From the 16th century onwards, Ottoman architecture – khans, mosques and fountains – were to be found all over the city, adding to the diverse Umayyad, Ayyubid and Mamluk buildings for which the city is famous. As Mansel writes: “By 1600 there were fifty-three khans and fifty-six souks in Aleppo” (Mansel, 2016, p. 12). These were the most extensive in the Middle East and stretched for twelve kilometres. So whilst Aleppo remained an Arabic-speaking city, with a Muslim majority, it also became a cosmopolitan, international city hosting merchants and consulates from all over Europe and the Middle East, and pilgrims heading to Jerusalem.

In religious terms, Aleppo included communities of Christians and Jews as well as Muslims. In the 17th Century, the Jewish population numbered about 5000, living in their own quarter. Whilst communities lived in their own vicinities and close to their places of worship, Aleppo was known for its coexistence, and there were rarely incidents of violence. Dress regulations

helped to identify members of different communities. Non-Muslims were required to wear dark colours, whilst bright colours were reserved for Muslims (Mansel, 2016, p. 27). But properties could be sold easily. Churches could be renovated and built, and clergy could dress according to their tradition. Islamic courts at the time “accepted the oath of a Christian on the Gospels, and of a Jew on the Torah” (Mansel, 2016, p. 27).

The arrival and presence of the Catholic Church did however create ecumenical tensions. Catholic missionary orders – Franciscans, Capucins, Jesuits, Carmelites, and others – arrived in the 16th and 17th centuries. The target of their missions was not the Muslims, but the Orthodox. The missionaries were possibly partly encouraged in this regard by the long-standing allegiance of the Maronites in Lebanon to the Pope. And in 1649, not long after their arrival, the King of France, “without informing his ally the Ottoman Sultan”, “took all Catholics in the Empire under his protection” (Mansel, 2016, p. 32). By the early 18th century, many Orthodox Christians in Aleppo had become Catholic, creating a lasting tension between Catholic and Orthodox leaders in the region.

Aleppo declined during the 17th and 18th centuries. Reasons included power struggles between Janissaries, (shopkeepers and artisans who had been soldiers and claimed to still be so, in return for tax privileges) and the *ashraf* (nobles of the city who claimed descent from the Prophet); tax riots; and attacks by Kurds on the trade route between Aleppo and the port of Iskenderun. An earthquake in 1822, and increasing religious tensions, enhanced by Ottoman defeats and European interference, added to the decline (Mansel, 2016, p. 39).

In 1831, Mohammed Ali Pasha, governor of Egypt occupied Syria. International pressure forced the Egyptians to withdraw in 1840. During this time, the people of Aleppo remained loyal to the Ottomans, whose reforms (*tanzimat*), which had begun in 1839, increased the prosperity of non-Muslim citizens. In 1849, Greek Catholics were formally recognised by Constantinople. The tensions that this created were soon to erupt.

On 17 October, 1850, “communal rioting wracked the city of Aleppo in northern Syria. The total number of those killed in the violence directed against the city's prosperous Christian minority was not large. Yet, the fact that the riots had occurred at all was a demonstration of the fragility of the city's social and political order” (Masters, 1990, p. 3). During two days of violence in the Christian quarters, churches were attacked, Christians were killed and homes

were looted by Muslim crowds. The unrest was quelled by the governor acceding to some of the rioters' demands. However, the situation remained tense. Troops arrived from Constantinople, and Bedouin tribes who supported the rioters arrived to confront the authorities. When a report reached the Ottomans that their troops had been killed – a report that proved to be untrue – the Ottomans responded. Bruce Masters writes:

On November 5, the Ottomans, supplied with new British artillery, began to shell the center of the insurgency, the quarters of Bab al-Nayrab, Banqusa, and Qarliq. Following the bombardment, a house-to-house battle ensued. By November 8, the Ottomans had prevailed and Consul William Werry could report: 'I avail of it to acquaint Y. E. that the sultan's government has been re-established here, but not without a severe conflict between the military forces here and the insurgents, who have been entirely subjugated, and the Quarters they inhabited have been destroyed and burnt, perfect tranquility exists in every part of the city.' The cost in lives lost had been heavy to both the Ottoman army and the insurgents, but the authority of the Ottoman state had been restored.' (Masters, 1990, p. 7)

Scholars have recently argued that the sectarian violence that occurred was a crisis of the Ottoman Empire's incorporation into the modern economic system, in which the Empire's economic system was subordinated to the European system, which created advantages for minority communities and a shift in power that heightened communal tensions (Masters, 1990, pp. 9-20).

Following the crisis, order was restored. Victims of the revolt were compensated, and some notables who had joined it were banished. Churches were given money for restoration. The Governor made a point of supporting and attending local Christian-run events (Mansel, 2016, p. 41). In Aleppo at least, the Ottomans were regarded as protectors of the minority communities, and when the 1860 riots took place in Damascus, Aleppo was comparatively calm. Prosperity returned to the city, and religious tensions were defused. French connections were strengthened, and by the end of the 19th century, the city had become modernised.

The Ottoman Empire's alliance during the First World war with Germany and Austria was to secure its downfall. Arab nationalist leaders were condemned and hanged, engendering hatred for the Ottomans. Although Aleppo escaped the fighting, the city could not escape the Ottoman destruction of the Armenians. With the help of Arab forces, the British Army started a revolt against the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. Damascus fell on 1 October 1918, and on 25 and 26 October that year, Ottoman forces left Aleppo. The French Mandate that

followed (according to the Sykes-Picot division of the Middle East, secretly agreed in 1916) established Damascus as Syria's capital, and the centre of administrative institutions. This subordination of Aleppo to Damascus created tensions and divided loyalties, made worse by the fact that new post-war frontiers cut off Aleppo from the city's previous economic hinterlands in Turkey and Iraq. Aleppo's sympathies lay more with the Turks than with the French. This also created a communal tension, between Muslims who disliked the French Mandate, and Christians, who preferred the protection that the Mandate offered them. This of course added to the longstanding perception amongst some Muslims that Christians in Syria support and are supported by the west – a perception that has at times had significant implications for inter-communal relations.

Nevertheless, Aleppo remained a multi-denominational city. Mansel records that in 1930, "out of a population of around 220,000, approximately 52% were Muslim, 16% Christian (mainly Catholics but excluding Armenians), 4% Jewish and perhaps 28% Armenian – many still living in refugee camps on the edge of the city" (Mansel, 2016, p. 51).

Following the end of the French Mandate and the establishment of Syrian Independence on 1 January 1944, most Syrians united behind the new administration. Unfortunately, the first anti-Jewish riots were sparked by the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Most Jews left Aleppo at this time, but not all to Israel. Many emigrated to Europe and America.

In the post-independence period, the people of Aleppo continued to feel that the city was under-represented in the Syrian Parliament. But nevertheless, Aleppo flourished. The city was able to build on its historical, cultural and religious heritage, and religious and social cohesion was restored. In 1993, the Syrian and German Governments signed the Project for the Restoration of the Old City of Aleppo, which had been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1986. The city also continued to be an economic 'powerhouse' for the Syrian Republic and the region.

Appendix 5.

Syrian perspectives on Christian-Muslim relations - a Questionnaire analysis

The methodology in undertaking this research has included eyewitness visits to multiple locations in Syria, informal interviews, and an invitation to respond to a written questionnaire. I have tried by various means to ascertain the opinion and experience of ordinary Syrians across the communal spectrum of Christian-Muslim relations.

All my visits during the war have been in government-controlled areas, or areas recently recovered from 'rebel' control, since it was impossible for foreigners to travel safely within 'rebel'-controlled areas, all of which were controlled by extremist Islamist factions. Any attempt to travel in those areas would involve a very high risk of kidnap and death. It was estimated at the time of writing that roughly 75% of Syrians who lived inside the country, whatever their political persuasion, were in government-controlled areas, and therefore the sample, though small, could be considered to be representative to a degree of Syrian society. Whilst voices from within 'rebel'-held areas are necessarily excluded, nevertheless, I have spoken with many internally displaced persons from those areas representing different age and communal groups. Many who have fled areas under 'rebel' control speak of people being at risk of execution if they oppose the ideology of the occupiers in those areas. Therefore, views gauged from those areas may be less reliable and less varied than those received from government-controlled areas, where people, contrary to popular belief outside Syria, are much less restrained about expressing their views than is sometimes suggested.

As part of understanding the methodology used in this study, it is necessary to distinguish between interviews and the questionnaire. Informal interviews were undertaken with religious leaders or others, either individually, or on a few occasions in the company of members of a delegation. These took the form of conversations, which flowed naturally in various directions that were relevant to the subject. I tried to follow a Naturalist approach, believing that these encounters enable us to access "authentic accounts of subjective experience."³¹⁷ These

³¹⁷ Note: Silverman, D. (2014) *Interpreting Qualitative Data*. Los Angeles, London New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC.: Sage. P. 178 Silverman writes: "Naturalist interviewers want to access the *subject* behind the person given the role of interview respondent. Their particular concern is with *lived experience*. Emotions are treated as central to such experience. " In 1970, Denzin offered three reasons for this preference: 1. "It allows respondents to use their 'unique ways of defining the world'. 2. It assumes that no fixed sequence of questions is suitable to all respondents. 3. It allows respondents to

conversations were not recorded in their entirety, but involved occasional note-taking, from which quotations have been taken. They have taken place in Damascus, Maaloula, Saidnaya, Homs, Aleppo and Lattakia. Undertaken with a range of people from different backgrounds, these interviews have sought to further establish, through an interpretivist approach, an understanding of the ontological status of Christian-Muslim relations in the country from informed figures, who reflected a variety of opinion, insight and experience.

The questionnaire process was different. Firstly, I created four questions, that sought to encourage open and honest responses. The questionnaire used was the same for all participants, identified only by faith, gender, age and location. Their identity will remain confidential. Responses have been written in both Arabic and English, with reliable translations being offered by someone who understands the importance of accurate translation. A questionnaire allows the approach to be focussed, though on a few occasions, it has been part of a wider interview. The questionnaire has been administered by me alone, directly or online. I have not needed an interpreter with me, because many Syrians speak reasonably good English. On the few occasions where English language has been difficult, I have had, with the consent of the interviewee, someone with me who can interpret. The fact that each interviewee brings their experience, social, cultural and religious perspective to the questionnaire allows a diversity of voices to be recorded. Responses have reflected that diversity, as the analysis of the questionnaire shows, and this adds authenticity to the study as a whole. Those who responded were keen to do so. Whatever their different responses were, they all felt that the subject was of importance.

In the introduction to the questionnaire, I described who I am and the purpose of the study. The introduction emphasised that the identity of respondents would not be requested or revealed. The only information sought of the respondents were sex, age, religious affiliation, and the town in which the respondent lives. How I would choose respondents to the questionnaire was initially unknown. My intended approach was to discern upon meeting people, who might be open to responding to a questionnaire before broaching the subject. That discernment would depend upon the openness and confidence of the interviewee, and

‘raise important issues not contained in the schedule.’ From Denzin, D. (1970) *The Research Act in Sociology*, London: Butterworth. Quoted in page 179 of Silverman (2014) Silverman also points out that “taking ‘emotions’ as self-evidently present in what people say can lead to analytic laziness,” and possible distortions in self-presentation depending on the influence of experience and intentions conveyed. Silverman (2014:181) Hence, I have chosen to use a variety of approaches in the overall study and in the questioning.

the sensitivity of the context. As it was, I need not have worried. Early in my visit to Syria in May 2017, I was invited to join an informal English conversation class, with a variety of male and female students of different age-groups and different backgrounds. When I mentioned the questionnaire, they were all keen to participate, and took copies for their friends. Subsequently, one of them posted the questionnaire online, and a number of responses were received by that medium.

The questionnaire consists of four fixed questions. Remembering that discussing inter-religious relations can be interpreted by some as imposing a sectarian agenda in a context where to do so can offend, framing of the questions required sensitive consideration, and acknowledgement of that reality. In addition to risking a sectarian interpretation of raising this subject, some may feel that it is insensitive and inappropriate to be exploring this subject in the midst of a war in which millions have suffered and died, and in which sectarian identities have been used to provoke violence. I am sympathetic to these feelings, though as has been explained, this study is intended to be a positive exploration of the subject in order to better understand the realities in Syria, and how they might inform a positive approach both in Syria and elsewhere in the future.

Forty people, 18 male and 22 female, from a cross-section of religious communities, age-groups and locations within Syria, responded to the questionnaire. The four questions asked of each one were: 1. Are inter-religious relations important for you? Do you think, from your own faith tradition, Christian-Muslim relations are important? 2. In what ways was Christian-Muslim coexistence visible prior to the conflict. Please describe in your own words. 3. In what ways has the conflict affected Christian-Muslim relations locally? In what ways have the communities continued to live and work together through the conflict? 4. Do you think each faith community needs to restore trust and maintain positive co-existence and respect? If so, what do you think needs to be done to enable this to happen? Do you think this is an important part of what it means to be Christian/Muslim? Their responses are analysed using a descriptive-interpretive approach. Even in this comparatively small 'sample' base, the responses to the questionnaire offer an overall picture of themes that can be 'coded' and analysed in a variety of ways.³¹⁸

³¹⁸ A 'grounded' approach allows for the construction of a theory using the analysis of data, as introduced by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, and elaborated further by Glaser in 1978, and by Strauss and Corbin in 1990 and subsequent years. In this process, themes are identified and differentiated, in ways that allow a variety of interpretative approaches to the material found. This has been the case for my

Below is a table that identifies the age range, sex, and religious affiliation of the participants. It is interesting that marginally more females (22) responded than males (18). Early concerns had been that women may be reluctant to respond. This concern perhaps reflected an external preconception about Arab societies that had been imposed on the context. The reality that women showed more enthusiasm in responding than men is indicative of the nature of Syrian society and the fact that women in Syria play an important role in Syrian society and are generally well educated. It could also indicate that since the beginning of the war, there are substantially more women in the country than men. This is partly due to the fact that many are in the army, or have been killed in the fighting, whilst many more have left the country, not necessarily for political reasons, but often for economic reasons, or a desire amongst some to avoid military service.

	Total	23-29	30-39	40-55	80+	Muslim	Christian
Male	18	6	6	5	1	15	3
Female	22	8	11	3		21	1

When we come to religious affiliation of the participants, of the forty respondents, only four were Christian. This is an accurate representation in percentage terms of the religious make-up of the country. Of the thirty-six Muslims who responded, twenty-one were women, and fifteen were men. This may have been a surprising statistic, but for the reasons outlined above. Interestingly, of all the Muslims, only one self-identified as a Shi'a. This could be because all the others were indeed of Sunni origin, but could also be because of a reluctance to provide a 'sectarian' designation. One young man from Damascus, in the box for religious designation declared himself to be 'Atheist', though his subsequent responses showed him to be of Muslim background. Whilst many Syrians may identify themselves as 'secular', it is highly unusual for someone in the region to self-identify as 'atheist'. This particular respondent was vehement in his response, speaking of the "religious bigotry" that dwelt in Syrian society beneath the surface, and declared that the "hidden hatred" that existed in each community had come to the fore in the conflict. Notwithstanding whatever personal reasons he may have had for such a response, the fact of his response reveals this to be one of the complexities and ambiguities that exists in Syria that cannot be ignored, even if it is not commonly declared.

Questionnaire. See: Flick, U. (2015) *Introducing Research Methodology* London: Sage Publishing Ltd. Pp 178-185

The same respondent continued to affirm the need for continued co-existence, but on a practical, humanitarian level, rather than a religious one, rooted in mutual respect.

Another young male from Damascus identified himself as 'Syrian'. This is very common in Syria, where many people will prioritise their national identity above their religious identity, and where loyalty to nation before ethnic or religious affiliation is often perceived as a means of reducing the dangers of sectarian identification. This is well illustrated by a friend who lived in Aleppo throughout the years of conflict in the city, who wrote at Christmas 2017, "I am not Christian, I am Syrian." The aforementioned respondent from Damascus continued: "In Syria, there is no difference between the faith groups. We are one people joined by love to each other." He continued: "I have a Christian friend who was with me during national service. Only his name told me he was Christian." Syrians of all communities have often said to me that they only know the religious identity of their close friends or neighbours because of their names, but that this has never affected their relationships. This is echoed in another 55 years old Muslim respondent who wrote: "First of all, we are Syrians regardless of sect." It is common in a conflict situation to want to emphasise commonalities, though I would suggest that this desire to do so amongst so many Syrians represents more than simply an aversion to naming sectarian difference, but rather is embedded within the ethos of Syrian society.

Though putting national identity above communal identity is clearly a matter of public pride for most Syrians, and is often genuinely affirmed, it is not necessarily always the case on a personal or communal level. When one speaks to individuals, most will naturally speak of their own community as 'us', but the 'other' as 'they', and when doing so, will often reveal a degree of prejudice, criticism or fear. It is a common feature of human existence that people will identify first with those who are of the same family, tribe, faith or community, and this is especially the case in societies such as Syria's, which are made up of multiple, plural ethnic and religious communities. This, along with the historic factors discussed in the section on 'Sectarianism', is why I prefer the term 'communal' to 'sectarian' when speaking of Syrian society, and believe that the 'sectarian' label has been overplayed in order to enhance political agendas and narratives.

In age terms, there was an equitable spread of respondents between the ages of 23 and 55, with the majority in their thirties, and one respondent in his eighties. This too is a fairly accurate representation of the Syrian demographic. Of those in their thirties who responded,

the majority were women, possibly because most men of that age would likely be in the army. The majority of respondents were from Damascus, three were from Aleppo, one from Daraa, two from Hama, and one from Lattakia, and one Syrian responded online from Saudi Arabia. Reflecting the findings of the informal interviews, responses to the questionnaire indicated subtly different experiences or views according to location, and revealed an interesting variety of attitudes. It is interesting that one female respondent in her thirties from Damascus returned a blank questionnaire. There could be any number of reasons why this was the case. She may have considered the subject too sensitive. Discussing the subject at all may have offended her. She may have been suspicious as to how the information would be used. The fact that she returned the questionnaire, even though blank, was a statement in itself, but it is impossible to determine exactly what that statement might be.

Question 1: Are inter-religious relations important to you? Do you think, from your own faith tradition, Christian-Muslim relations are important?

Few respondents offered any significant reply to question 1 other than a simple 'yes'. The majority were keen to provide a fuller answer to question 2, the answers to which indicated a very strong affirmative response to question 1. In conversation with some of the students before handing out the questionnaire, it was clearly self-evident to them that inter-religious relations were not only important, but a fact of life within Syria, both prior to the conflict and in the midst of it, and an important dimension of both the Christian and the Muslim traditions as far as they were concerned. This was reflected in all my conversations and interviews throughout Syria, and is visibly evident in the way of life in the towns and cities of the country, where for generations, Christians and Muslims have lived, worked, socialised and on special occasions even prayed, side by side. There is a distinction however between active inter-religious relations, and the more common phenomenon of striving to ensure community cohesion. The evidence from interviews and questionnaires, is that to a degree, both prevail within Syrian society. Syrians will commonly share each others' festivals. They will even pray together on special occasions. And a degree of dialogue has in the past taken place between Church leaders, though this has not always been easy. On the other hand, Christians and Muslims in Syria share their daily lives together. They have co-existed on many human, social and practical levels. Both principles of inter-religious relations and community cohesion have been present to varying degrees within Syrian society.

Question 2: In what ways was Christian-Muslim co-existence visible prior to the conflict?

That there was Christian-Muslim co-existence prior to the conflict was unanimous. A Christian woman from Damascus wrote: "There was no problem socially before the conflict. We had peaceful co-existence and shared our festivals." An Ismaili Shi'a from Salamieh in Hama province wrote: "We never thought religion would be a problem. In Deir Ezzor, Christians, Kurds and Muslims were integrated and had free practice of religion." A 54 year old Christian male wrote of "long term co-existence", and that "the country is for all". A young Muslim, echoing other respondents said: "We used to share festivities, and all our joys and sorrows." A female Muslim in her thirties wrote: "At university, I was not influenced in my dealings with others by their faith. I had a girlfriend who didn't wear a headscarf, and only found out online that she was Christian. That didn't change our relationship."

This reference illustrates how in Syria, most women, particularly in town and urban environments have freedom of choice as far as their dress is concerned, with Muslim women free not to wear a hijab if that was their choice. Prior to the conflict, it was not unusual for the streets of Damascus or Aleppo to be likened to the streets of Paris, for the freedom, variety and style of women's dress. Prior to 2011, I remember this being a source of mild disapproval for some more conservative Muslim friends, and was indeed a source of disapproval for strict, traditional Muslims, and conservative Sheikhs who increasingly from the 1950s onwards taught *salafi* and *Wahhabi* inspired moral principles. For many women in Syria however, this freedom of dress is one of pride, and many women have spoken of their fears for the freedom of women, should the strict conservative practices promoted by the 'rebels' prevail in their society. Do these responses indicate that religious identity was ignored in order to preserve co-existence? I think there may be an element of this. It is common for Syrians to say: "Religion never mattered in our society." And on a relational and social level, this appears to have been true.

Another male Muslim in his thirties wrote a more nuanced comment: "We had excellent co-existence before the conflict. Interaction could be limited to each community or in certain areas, but when in university, work or clubs, relationships happen naturally and beautifully. Being a Muslim defines my identity, but Islam instructs us to be kind to non-Muslims. I don't differentiate according to faith." Another young Muslim woman aged 24 wrote: "I don't care about religions. I respect all people for their humanity. I was very happy to share Christian

festivals and to live in a Christian neighbourhood. We loved each other a lot.” Similarly, a young man wrote: “I am a Muslim who grew up in a Christian school. My experience was always good.” Supporting friends of other faiths at festival time is often mentioned by Syrians of all faiths. Christmas particularly, is a time when Christians and Muslims celebrate together in the streets. Christmas trees are lit in towns and cities throughout the country, and people from all communities play in bands and sing carols together. In December 2016, following the liberation of Aleppo, the Christmas tree lighting in the city was an occasion of a huge outpouring of joy in the city, and since then, Christmas tree lighting ceremonies have been celebrated with great enthusiasm in towns and cities throughout Syria.

All three respondents from Aleppo spoke of the importance of Christian-Muslim relations in the city’s history. A 39 year old Muslim male from Aleppo writes: “We lived together as friends, colleagues, neighbours for hundreds of years. Christians are a part of Syrian society.” A 52 year old Muslim man from Aleppo also writes: “We used always to live together. Religion was a personal issue. I went to a Christian school and so did all my brothers and sisters. Near my village is a Christian village where all the people came to greet on our holy days. We do business together, play games together. I do not choose my friends because of their religion. We used to live without a problem for 2000 years. I put full responsibility on western policy and media for the deterioration in Christian-Muslim relations.”

The theme of studying together and common social life is echoed in most of the response to the questionnaire, and in numerous conversations had with Syrians around the country. It is also visibly evident. Visiting schools and universities in Syria, one is struck by the diversity of the students. Sunni, Shi’a, Christian, Alawi, Kurd, Druze can all be found in the same class. Not only that, but because Syria has for so many years been a place of refuge, one will also find Iraqi and Palestinians students mingling with the others. The same is true when visiting restaurants and cafes. Syrians are proud of the fact that the plurality of the country is more visibly evident in the streets and Institutions than almost any other country in the region.

A question might be asked here as to how to define religious coexistence? Has religious identity been ignored in order to peacefully co-exist? Or have there been concerted efforts to build interreligious relations? To a certain extent, both may be true. Certainly faith leaders have made significant efforts to model Christian-Muslim relations, and to deepen understanding and mutual awareness of each other’s faiths. Dialogue has taken place at a

senior level. And more importantly, Christians and Muslims have been seen to co-operate in offering care and welfare to citizens who have lost home and loved ones. Responses to interviews and the questionnaire would suggest however that on a private and personal level for most ordinary people, there is felt to be little need or desire to deeply understand the religion of the other. Religious belief is regarded as a private matter, and is treated with respect. However, the sharing of key festivals between Christians and Muslims is commonplace. This is one of the key features of the plurality of Syrian society of which Syrians are proud.

This was put quite strongly by a young Muslim woman from Damascus. “We are more than brothers. We pray together. Christians are my brothers. We feel unity in spirit and there is no difference. We respect each other and there is no difference.” This emphasis on unity is often stressed amongst Syrians, no matter what their religious or communal background. It might be said that it is often affirmed even more strongly in the face of the violence that the country has experienced. For the majority of Syrians that one speaks to inside the country have no desire for the religious and ethnic plurality and diversity for which the country is famous, to be threatened. There is a deep fear amongst Christians and many Muslims in Syria, of the sectarian damage that extremist Islamist ideology can do to communities and the plural identity of the nation as a whole.

Question 3. In what ways has the conflict affected Christian-Muslim relations locally? In what ways have the communities continued to live and work together through the conflict?

This question produced by far the most substantial, varied and interesting responses from the participants, and also an interesting degree of vehemence in some of the replies. This vehemence may have been due to the sensitivity of the question, and the reluctance in Syria to even engage in a discourse that might be interpreted as ‘sectarian’, especially as sectarian and religious identity has been used, especially by extremist terrorist groups to promote and effect such intolerable levels of violence during the war. However, sensitivity to the concept of sectarianism in Syria has long been present. As Nikolaos Van Dam writes when discussing the concept of sectarianism in Syria: “When it comes to loyalties or allegiances, quite different factors can play an equally or sometimes more important role, such as ideology, social class, inter-generational conflict, personal ambitions and opportunism.”. He continues: “Perception was not less important than intention, as it could create a sectarian dynamic that could not

easily be undone.”(Dam, 2017, pp. 18-19) The history of Syria proves this point, and has caused deep fear and reluctance to engage in any discussion that might even be perceived to have a ‘sectarian’ agenda. Hence the sensitivity with which this study has had to be approached, and the misinterpretation and suspicion of intention, to which it could be, and to a few, was subject.

The responses to this question enabled at least one quantitative form of analysis to be undertaken, that is extremely informative. The responses will be explored in further detail shortly, but one aspect of the responses could be categorised in tabular form. This was whether the respondents felt that the conflict has had a serious impact on inter-religious co-existence in Syria, ‘some’ impact on religious co-existence, or no impact at all. The results are as follows:

To what extent has the conflict impacted Christian-Muslim co-existence in Syria?

	Serious impact on co-existence	Some impact on co-existence	No impact at all on level of co-existence
Christian male		2	1
Christian female		1	
Muslim male	3	9	2
Muslim female	1	14	7
Total	4	26	10

It is notable, and some would be surprised, that only four people (10% of the respondents) stated that the conflict has had a ‘serious’ impact on co-existence. And that none of these were Christian. Might this partly reflect the fact that the Christians who responded were all from Damascus? Would people from Christian villages or towns that were destroyed by militants, and where Christians were targeted have responded differently? In villages and towns where some of the Muslim inhabitants took sides with the militants, there is an understandable fear about allowing members of those families to return, and anxiety about the lasting influence of Islamist ideology beyond the end of the war. Christians throughout Syria often emphasise that this is an aspect of modern Islam of which the world needs to be aware, and which represents a threat to peace everywhere. At the same time, many regard this not as a specifically religious issue, but rather an ideological and political one, and acknowledge for example that Muslims who do not hold to an extreme Salafist or Wahhabi

ideology have also been targeted. It could also be argued that if Syrian society tended not to be based on religious identity prior to the conflict, (partly because of a fear of increasing the risk of sectarian unrest) then it might be claimed that the impact of the conflict on co-existence may not have been significant.

The responses of those who identified a serious impact are instructive. One was the self-declared atheist who spoke of the “religious bigotry....dwelling in society”. He even declared that this “hidden bigotry has come to the fore. I would say in the majority.” This is a response that cannot be ignored. Some academics have argued that there was a latent sectarianism in Syrian society which, once released, made the violence and fracturing of Syrian society inevitable. The research undertaken for this project suggests that there is truth in this, but that what was perceived to be sectarian disenfranchisement rested in sections of Syrian society who valued their religious identity over and above the identity of the whole. A young Muslim woman who acknowledged that “relationships were good in work or study” prior to the conflict, added, “but generally Christians do not want to mix their personal relationships and are more likely to enclose on themselves.” This is common to all minority communities in any context. She continued: “The crisis has had a big effect. In offering social services, communities prefer their own followers. The majority of Christians have stood by the Government and defended them. This has led to a division between the supporters and opponents of the regime. Relationships will be very difficult for those who have stood by injustice and because Christians have stood by the regime.”

This was one of the few responses that included a clear political statement, and shows that the sample was not of like-minded participants. Her comment about communities ‘preferring’ their own, is true on a certain level, and is also a natural feature of plural societies. Yet, in the many welfare initiatives that I have witnessed, run by Church communities in Syria during the last few years, it is precisely their treatment of all recipients equally no matter what their religious or communal identity, that has inspired and touched the communities in which they have served. This respondent’s final statement: “Islam is my existence and my identity,” has been a cry of Sunni Islamists for decades in Syria, who have been opposed to the secular constitution of the Syrian State.

A similar response was received from a thirty-one year old Muslim from Daraa. He wrote of Christians as “our partners” and acknowledged that “though there is not wide co-operation,

there is mutual respect". Nevertheless, he was scathing about the attitudes of some during the conflict "who celebrate when someone is killed because they belong to the opposition are criminals. I refuse to be glad when a shell lands on anyone. Moderate Muslims are sad about death on all sides. Some moderate Christians however put a 'like' on Facebook when an opposition Muslim is killed. This is the worst criminality I can imagine. We are going to have to work together. We should come down with an iron fist on sheikhs or priests who do not want to see coexistence. See on the media the degree of sectarian behaviours that have happened. Priests and sheikhs are to blame." This is an interesting allocation of blame upon religious leaders.

Finally, a young Muslim from Damascus wrote a nuanced account: "I am a Muslim who grew up in a Christian school. My experience was always positive. But the war has impacted very badly. Fear has been planted in the hearts of Christians and minorities, particularly in Damascus. The sectarian actions of the opposition have increased these fears. Before the crisis there was a good relationship. Our dentist was a Christian and we were friends. Now she is much more cautious, and we only have a business relationship. There is a need to restore trust, and to redefine ourselves and our identity as Syrians. If you look at the map of the conflict, it is closely related to the sectarian make-up of the country." And in a final comment, he writes: "Islam can offer good values for society." The theme of trust is widely reflected, both in the responses received to the questionnaire, and in conversations that I have had with many Syrians around the country. The desire and the will to restore good relationships is widespread, but these responses illustrate that trust between communities has been sorely eroded during the years of the conflict.

It is interesting that 25% of respondents stated that the conflict has had "no impact" on Christian-Muslim relationships, and that these remain good. Is it also significant that the majority of these responses were from women? Is that reflective of the stronger tendency for peace-making in women? On the evidence of the majority of responses, can one say that the conflict has had "no impact" on relationships? However this may be interpreted, this is a significant result that cannot be dismissed or ignored. For it is true that when one discusses the subject, this is the response given by many individuals. The reasons for this may be many. There is a degree of insistence in some of the responses that perhaps reflects the widespread desire amongst most Syrians to preserve the country's plurality and diversity. For example, a fifty-five year old Muslim woman wrote: "Everything is fantastic. We should continue to

encourage co-existence and tolerance. I am Syrian first. My religion is something between me and my God.” A younger woman wrote: “There is no difference in the relationship between faiths. There is an indirect impact of lack of trust, but generally the situation is good and even the crisis has made us share our sorrows.” Those respondents who declared ‘no impact’, tended to be those who recognised a mutuality in the suffering. A 44 year-old Muslim man wrote: “There is no discrimination between Christians and Muslims in day to day relationships. The Christian-Muslim relationship has even been affected positively. The Church has been distributing food in Ramadan to all people regardless of religion. Trust has not been affected for those in educated society. There is mutual respect. It is external parties who are trying to create problems, especially through media. Religious leaders work to increase harmony and to create joint charitable activities. I am proud to be Muslim and to co-exist with others.”

The man who identified himself simply as ‘Syrian’, wrote that “in Syria, there is no difference between faith groups. We are one people joined by love to each other. Nothing has changed. Many Christians and Muslims drink coffee together. Some Churches give help to everyone.” The self-identification as ‘Syrian’ reflects a common reluctance amongst Syrians to differentiate along sectarian lines. A young woman from Damascus wrote: “We are more than brothers. We pray together. Christians are my brothers. We feel unity in spirit and there is no difference. Being a Muslim woman, I have to respect others no matter what their background. There is no difference. It is the media that tries to spread lies.” A further response from a young woman in Damascus offers an interesting defence of the Muslim faith: “Nothing has changed. But I prefer not to have a relationship outside my religion. Being a Muslim woman obliges me to defend the rights of my family, and requires the best of manners. There is a pledge between us and the *dhimmi*s that we should not harm them. Our religion is a religion of manners.” One wonders to what extent, deep concern and embarrassment (even shame?) that so much extreme violence has been perpetrated in the name of Islam, might have influenced such adamant claims that there is ‘no difference’ between Christians and Muslims? Might there be a desire amongst some to avoid any language that might be construed as being ‘sectarian’? If so, it would be natural to say that all is well. Notwithstanding that, cynicism should not prevent us from being open to the possibility that the interlocutors really mean what they say.

An apologetic defence of Islam features in a number of the responses. For example, another young woman from Damascus writes: “Islam is a religion of care and generosity in which

Christians are valued. We work together and share friendships.” And then, she continues: “Muslims in general had more empathy with the protestors and later with the rebels. Christians in general are more conservative and feared change. For me, I didn’t experience a change in my relationship with Christians. The conflict has shown us that we should have more honest dialogue about the type of society we need to co-create in order to co-exist. Ordinary people should start to think about and discuss that, and leaders should open the space for that.”

A further political comment is added by a young man from Damascus. “The majority of groups live harmoniously and work together. We celebrate festivals. The majority are wary in case the regime falls. There is no damage religiously, but there is a political divide. The difference and divide is between supporters and opposition to the government, whatever their sect.” This view has been echoed in a number of private conversations had with friends. A Christian woman who works with colleagues from different communities said to me: “We have always got on together, and we never worried about our religious identity, but trust has broken down. We do not know who supports whom, and we dare not talk about it.”

The only Christian who identified ‘no impact’ is a middle-aged male who writes: “I did not notice a change in Damascus. Love and respect for each other still exists. But there have been changes in areas deeply affected by the conflict.”

Each response contains its own truth, and is true for the person who is conveying it. Therefore, none of the responses can be dismissed outright.

It is to be expected that the largest number of respondents (65%) declared that the conflict had had some impact on Christian-Muslim relations. The greatest impact on Christian-Muslim relationships is declared to be lack of trust, which is mentioned in the majority of responses. And yet, most respondents assert, as is plainly evident on the streets of villages, towns and cities throughout Syria, that this has not prevented daily social co-existence, or co-operation in working together for the welfare of communities.

For some of the Muslim respondents, there is an awareness of the need to recover the priority of moderate Islam. As one woman put it: “We need to recover a truer understanding of Islam, that we are a religion of mercy and good behaviour. And we need to remember that there are

bad people in every community and every place.” An added dimension of this was referred to by one respondent who wrote. “Christians are understandably worried. But I have not noticed a difference between Christians and Muslims. There is rather a difference between Islamic groups. The problem lies with Muslims themselves.” A young Syrian woman from Saudi Arabia responds similarly: “The conflict has distorted the image of Islam and brought hatred between Muslims. It has not affected all Christians who continue to look at Muslim friends in a positive way. Each of us is responsible to show our faith in the best way and respect other religious beliefs.” Echoes of this are to be found in the response of a young man from Aleppo, who wrote: “Most Christians know that Muslims will not harm them. Churches were protected by Muslims. Islam teaches we cannot harm any one of the people of the book. We need to return to our history and see how our forefathers co-existed. Stop listening to outsiders. No one in the West or East can lecture Syrians on co-existence.” Another young man from Aleppo writes similarly and echoes many Syrians when he adds: “We lived together as friends, colleagues, neighbours for hundreds of years. Christians are a part of Syrian society. Some support the regime. Others the opposition. The war is about right and wrong, not between religions. Time will heal, because this is the nature of Syrian society.”

Question 4. What do you think needs to be done to enable faith communities to restore trust and maintain co-existence and respect? Is this an important part of what it means to be Christian/Muslim?

Respondents were unanimous in replying positively to the second part of this question, and some of the responses shared above reflect that understanding. The responses to the first half of the question, about what needs to be done to restore and maintain positive co-existence and respect, were also consistent. Education, communication, social activities, and joint charitable work, all feature significantly in the responses, as areas in which the Christian-Muslim dynamic in Syrian society can be enhanced.

An Ismaili woman from Hama wrote: “ We continue to teach diversity and tolerance, and do social activities for youth of all communities.” Another from Damascus wrote: “We need to conduct religious awareness programmes and teach people about the faiths, and continue social functions to restore connections and respect,” whilst another woman from Damascus wrote: “We need to build social cohesion and fight ignorance.” Education features in a number of other responses from both men and women: “It is important to find ways of mutual

love and respect, and to find compatible living formulas, especially through activities and education about each other nationwide.” Similarly: “It is very important for education to instill the values of harmony and joint charitable exercises,” and; “More communication and respect are needed,” and; “In safe areas of the country, people support and listen to each other. We should have common education and entertainment activities, and joint meetings in both official and non-official ways.” Another writes: “To continue co-existence, we have to continue humanitarian work, both practically, and with respect for each other.”

In conclusion, the responses to the questionnaire reveal a diversity of attitudes to Christian-Muslim relations. This is to be expected, and adds authenticity to the sample. Most agree that relations have for the most part been positive, but there is divergence of opinion in how effective interreligious relations have been in the past and how they have been impacted by the conflict. This reflects the variation of the level and nature of engagement according to context, and that the conflict has impacted different communities in different ways. That trust between communities has been damaged is evident, but most clearly wish to see the restoration of co-existence and co-operation, at least on a humanitarian level. Whatever their personal and political views, all respondents desire an end to the conflict so that healing can begin, and a new era of peace, and social, religious, and political reform can be initiated.

Appendix 6

The plight of Christians in the Middle East. A Questionnaire for reflection. Archbishop Jean-Clement Jeanbart

In January 2015, Archbishop Jeanbart drew up a document entitled 'The plight of Christians in the Middle East'. It takes the form of a questionnaire designed around a series of themes, to enable Christians in Syria to reflect on their context and experience, and to discern what they imply for the future Christian presence and its place in the religious and social framework of Syrian society. Written when the conflict was at its height, the questionnaire is copied here as a helpful framework for reflecting on these themes, and for identifying some of the main issues that are confronting the Christian community, and the nature of the Christian-Muslim dynamic in Syrian society, as it begins to approach a post-conflict reality.

1. Political:

- a) Can Christianity survive in the Middle East and how?
- b) Besides persecution are there other factors that threaten Christianity in the Middle East?
- c) Is the conflict in the Middle East a clash of civilisations?
- d) Is hatred of Christians in the Middle East directly linked to hatred of the West?
- e) Can someone be both Christian and Arab in the eyes of a Muslim Arab?
- f) Could there be an autonomous Christian enclave in the Middle East?
- g) Who really 'owns' the land of the Middle East?

2. Islam:

- a) To what do you attribute the rise and appeal of radical jihadist Islam?
- b) Has ISIS expanded the battle from territorial cleansing to conquest of souls?
- c) What are the tenets and basis of moderate Islam?
- d) Is there a moderate Islam? How can it be defined politically, socially, culturally and spiritually?
- e) Can 'Mosque and State' ever be separated in Muslim societies?

3. Persecution:

- a) How is Christian persecution carried out in the Middle East?

- b) How did Christian communities survive the waves of persecution in the past?
- c) Describe the experience of being a persecuted minority in the Middle East.

4. Social:

- a) The Western perspective points at the role of Christians in Arab societies as contributing to the common good. Are Christians perceived that way by Muslims too?
- b) What have Christians in the Middle East accomplished, in terms of peace-making, healthcare, education, etc?
- c) Why is Christianity vital for the region? Can you imagine the region without Christianity?

5. Inter-religious dialogue:

- a) What is dialogue from a Christian perspective?
- b) What is dialogue from a Muslim perspective?

6. Leadership:

- a) What is the calling of the Church in the Middle East, in our time?
- b) What are your Church's biggest needs today?
- c) What are the main challenges that your Church needs?
- d) How would you consider the laity with regard to the questions above?
- e) Is there an absence of lay leadership in the Churches of Middle East?

7. The humanitarian crisis:

- a) Please identify the main aspects of the crisis.
- b) Discuss the magnitude of the crisis.
- c) Outline the needs, the urgencies and the practical solutions that will alleviate the humanitarian crisis.
- d) Explain how the Church is managing the crisis.
- e) How is the crisis affecting specifically women, children, and the elderly?
- f) What are the expectations of the refugees from the Church?

8. The story of the individual:

- a) Share with us about a specific story of an individual affected by the crisis.

- b) What is the emotional toll of this crisis? Please touch upon the despair, the loss of dignity and other aspects of this suffering.
- c) Have you, personally, faced evil?
- d) How you think this time of adversity has affected people's faith?

Appendix 7

‘The Challenges facing Arab Christians in the Middle East’ Patriarch Gregorios III Laham. 2013

In 2013, Greek Melkite Patriarch Gregorios III Laham, summarised what he called ‘The Challenges facing Arab Christians’ in the Middle East, for a Conference bearing that title hosted by King Abdullah of Jordan in Amman in 2013. The list that Patriarch Gregorios compiled is revealing and provides a helpful perspective in the context of this study, and in reflecting on ways forward for the faith communities. It is therefore quoted here in full:

- The challenge for Christians is being citizens in the full sense of the world.
- The challenge for Christians is to believe in freedom without restrictions imposed by their Muslim brothers on their worship and faith.
- The challenge for Christians is to secure the opportunity for study, work and employment and make a living alongside their Muslim brethren.
- The challenge for Christians is not to feel that they are second-class citizens because they are not Muslims.
- The challenge for Christians is that they would like to hear verses from the Holy Bible mentioned on the media with the same respect and appreciation as verses from the Qur’an.
- The challenge for Christians is to see the education curriculum at all levels reflect a spirit of religious freedom, equality and acceptance of others and respect for religion and belief; and to ensure that religious education is for all students without any discrimination, each according to his religion and belief.
- The challenge for Christians is to work together in collaboration with Muslims for the development of their communities in genuine co-existence as true custodians of the above-mentioned values.
- The challenge for Christians to Muslims is to feel that their Muslim brethren’s security guarantees their own security and stability.
- The challenge for Christians comes from the division of the Arab world, which is the cause of tensions in our society between Christians and Muslims. Given a united Muslim Arab world, I would guarantee you that all my Christian spiritual children would go on living here and would not emigrate.

- The challenge for Christians is one of feeling excluded and marginalized....which stems from an experience of being shut in, withdrawn, not involved in political parties and not participating in political life... Give Christians a role, an opportunity, a position, share, employment... I would guarantee that we could solve the majority of problems and challenges that Christians face.
- The challenge for Christians is to succeed in making Muslims feel that they are their partners at home and in all walks of life.
- The challenge for Christians is to participate in the renaissance of the Arab and Islamic nation. In particular that they have a tremendous potential to be partners for their Muslim brothers and sisters in the development of their community, country, home town or village and district. Christians have the potential of being a factor for cohesion, and neighbours and partners for their Muslim brethren in their homeland. Their fellow-citizens can benefit from these energies, which are available in our Christian schools, and our charitable, social, medical, cultural, educational, artistic, and technical services, which are open to all, and benefit numerically more Muslims than Christians.
- The challenge for Christians today in the Arab world is to feel that the Arab and Muslim world needs them, values their presence, activities and services..
- The challenge for Christians today in the Arab world is to feel that the Church the predominantly Muslim Middle East is the Church of the Arabs and the Church of Islam; that it is a Church with the Arab world and for the Arab world, for its prosperity, progress and working to highlight the image of Islam through the reality of life at home and abroad.
- The Christian challenge is to feel that security for Christians depends on that of their Muslim brethren. Muslims must also feel that their own security is bound up with that of their Christian brethren. This has been a theme in all my talks, conference and forums and in my congratulations for Eid al-Fitr for 2013 CE.
- The challenge for Christians in the Arab world, and the so-called Arab Spring, is for them to have a role in the evolution of the situation in the Arab world, and in resolving the crisis in every Arab country. It is not permissible to marginalize or exclude them or forget or trample on their rights and identity. Christians are an integral part of the Arab world and its crises, problems and challenges, just as they are also part of the solution and building a better future for the rising generations...

- One of the major challenges confronting the Arab Christian community is a divided, predominantly Muslim Arab world. Most dangerous is the split in the Islamic world and the growth of fundamentalist Islamic movements, movements in which there is no room for the other, other thought, other opinion...
- One of the major challenges for the Arab Christian community is the integration of religion, the state and society into one, paving the way for outrages to civil liberties and to equality and freedoms of all kinds.
- Another challenge associated with the previous challenge is the concept of the nation. This can be understood in a way that eliminates the concept of a homeland for citizens in a plurality of groups of citizens, with a pluralistic fabric in a pluralistic society.

Patriarch Gregorios concludes these points by asserting that the response that is needed “is a joint Muslim-Christian responsibility” but warns that Islamic fundamentalist and extremist movements are causing fear for Christians and Muslims alike. Reminding Muslim compatriots that Arab Christianity predates Islam and that many Muslims descend from Christians, he warns that unless Christians and Muslims challenge extremism and fundamentalism together, emigration of Christians from the region will continue, and that the pluralist identity of Arab society will be permanently damaged.³¹⁹

³¹⁹ Patriarch Gregorios III Laham. (2017) ‘On the occasion of the Nativity 2013’. In, *I am with you always*. Vol. IV. 76-80

Appendix 8

His Beatitude John X Patriarch of Antioch and All the East

Our Loving Coexistence with the Other: The Way to Peace and Achieving Citizenship

Speech presented at a Conference organised by the Conference of European Churches and Cumberland Lodge on “Coexistence and Citizenship” London, UK, 14–16 December 2018.

Introduction

Firstly, I would like to thank you for your kind invitation to participate in this conference, which carries a special importance in terms of timing, content, and location. I also express my great joy for its convening. I regret that an unforeseen situation will not permit me to come to England in person. The land and people of England are very dear to my heart, since God had allowed me to serve there as an Archbishop for five years, from 2008 to 2012. I have delegated my beloved brother, His Eminence Silouan (Oner), Metropolitan of the British Isles and Ireland, to represent me in this conference, and to convey my sincere love to all of you and my best wishes for a successful conference, yielding fruitful results benefiting the countries of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt and the entire Middle East .

In my speech today, I will talk about the situation of the Christians in the Middle East and their relationship with the Muslims. I will also review the situation in Lebanon and Iraq, and present a message offered by the people of the Middle East to the world .

Dear sisters and brothers,

I write to you from the Antiochian Orthodox Holy See, where the disciples were first called Christians. From Antioch, the Christian message spread to the entire world by St. Paul, the Apostle of the Nations, to whom the Lord appeared at the gates of Damascus. St. Paul was blind when he entered the city of Damascus, and when was enlightened when he left this city, ready to preach Christ the Savior, and to sacrifice his own life for this mission.

It means a lot to be able to write to you from Damascus, from its historic gate, a history that stretches from eternity, from the seat of the Apostolic Patriarchate of Antioch, from a land whose churches stand in the shadow of the Umayyad Mosque, and whose mosques are filled

with the smell of the churches' incense. To write to you from Damascus means that I am sending rays from the deep history of holiness that cannot be overshadowed, no matter how the hands of terrorism try to eradicate the damascene stones, human beings, or trees. There, where St. Ananias, one of the Seventy, and the first bishop of Damascus lived, founding the very first parish; there, the Umayyads built the first state of Islam, and the latter spread from Damascus to the various parts of the world. Thus, we are the children of these nations, brothers in humanity and in history. We are brothers in terms of living in the same geographical area, an area blending all its components in the crucible of citizenship. We are also brothers in coexistence, in living together in the Middle East, and in sacrificing ourselves in defense of our homeland. "The soil that was mingled with the blood of martyrs did not examine if this blood was Christian or Muslim: this blood is the blood of truth, and when we are able to pour our blood freely on the soil of our homeland, a strong tree sprouts, defying the abominable storms, that the voice of truth remains in this world," as our predecessor, the Thrice blessed Patriarch Elias IV said. After this brief introduction, I would like to turn to the situation of Christians in the Middle East .

Christians and the Situation of the Region

The events happening in the region call for everyone to stand right and ponder. As Eastern Christians, we have had enough terror, bloodshed, or forced displacement. We pay, like others, the tax of terrorism and the pursuit of self-interests. Our human being is not a commodity in the market of arms and other markets!

We are here to make our voice heard again: the blood of the Christians in Egypt is our blood, and the houses of the Christians in Iraq are our houses, since we are brothers in history and geography with the Muslims of this East, and with all its other components, whether minorities or majorities .

In the midst of the so-called Arab Spring, we Christians had our crosses broken, our bishops kidnapped, and our churches destroyed. Here, in the context of our Christian-Muslim fraternal relations, we also say our mosques were destroyed, our homeland was swept away, our children were displaced, and we were forced to pay a tribute.

What is happening in the East is the destruction of human civilization in the full sense of the word. It is even the obliteration of the historical identity. Our land was not created to be a breeding ground for the conflicts of others. Our human being was not born to die as a refugee.

Our children were not born to drown in the seas. It is better for those who seek to protect Christians to strive with all their might in order to bring peace to Christians and all citizens. Peace and terrorism cannot coexist. We are seekers of peace, and not of protection. Our loving homeland, the first and last, is this land in which we were born, in which we shall stay -being firmly rooted in the power of hope- and in which we will die, regardless of the harshness of time .

We as Christians have never been factionalists, and we refuse to be dhimmis. We have always been concerned with fateful issues related to our country. We are not a minority, and we refuse to be called a minority, because a nation is not built on the logic of majority and minority, but on the logic that the little leaven leavens the whole lump. We are from the yeast of this East, and our message is not restricted to a specific denomination or community. If Iraq suffers, our churches suffer, and if Lebanon suffers, our most holy shrine of the Shaghoura suffers. If Syria cries, our church bells ring in sadness, and if the Holy Jerusalem grieves, our hearts are troubled. We are from Syria, and Syria is part of us. Syria is the country from which we draw our identity, our sense of belonging and existence .

There is no doubt that we are in a region that is filled with complications, but none of these has discouraged us, and we will not be discouraged, since we shall keep our eyes fixed at the sight of the Cross. We have faith in Jesus Christ, and at the same time we persist on living in this land which He blessed by His presence. If the Cross has revealed the face of Christianity on earth, the light of the Resurrection has glorified the body of the Crucified One, and poured joy into the hearts of the disciples and in the hearts of all men. We have been entrusted with the Christian faith from our inception. We have preserved this faith for two thousand years in our original land of the East; a faith which we had never used as a tool to become introvert; and a faith we embodied and incarnated as true brotherhood. When we say brotherhood, we do not just mean a communal life, but also a one, united life with our Muslim brothers, despite all the bright or dark ups and downs that occurred in history .

Christians shall stay in their land no matter how hard the difficulties are. The face of Christ cannot be eclipsed from the East. We as Christians do not want protection from anyone. Make peace prevail in our country. This is what we need, since we will not leave our land. The protection of the East and its people occurs by silencing the roaring noise of wars. Its protection is formulated by looking with a human eye to all that is taking place, and not with

the eyes of the self-interests. We are sons and daughters of this land and have a cause. We are not acquainted with takfirism, violence, killing, terrorism, and kidnapping that we see in many places. The language of terrorism, takfirism, and kidnapping is strange to the past and present of the Middle East .

In spite of all that has is happening, I would like to assure you, my brothers and sisters, that we, in the Church of Antioch and All the East, live in great hope. We believe that encounter, dialogue and coexistence with other religions, societies and cultures is the basis for a lasting reconciliation and for the formulation of a true peace among humans .

We and the Other Components Are Partners in the Homeland and Share a Common Destiny.

I want to assure you that the Christian presence cannot be understood from the perspective of minorities and majorities, but from the perspective of the cultural, social and political roles in all stages of history. I also would like to stress the role of the Antiochian Church, which does not accept the spirit of exclusiveness and introversion. Our Church has always been a bridge relating various civilizations and languages. Societies in general are in need of a culture of love, not of a culture of murder and intimidation. The culture of love is founded only on the principle of respect for the other as he or she is, without discrimination between one brother and another, Thus, our culture in these countries is a culture of peace, a spring of joy, and a voice of truth .

By the grace of God, we, as Christians, have been living in the East for two thousand years, and we have coexisted with our Muslim brothers for many centuries. The actions happening today in the East from intimidation to kidnapping and desecralizing affects both the Muslims and the Christians, the sheikhs, the priests and the bishops alike.

The difference of religion does not separate us, but rather enriches us in many areas of life. Here, I would like to recall that Christians and Muslims have built a common eastern civilization. They are united by the one destiny. We may be born from our parents having each a different religion, but our human identity brings us together in fraternity and oneness of life, witnessing to the Lord of heaven and to the Light of His peace. Here we read in the Quran: "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you." (Al-Hujurat 13). We also read in the first letter of St. John: "God is love." Through our love for the other people, even if coming from diverse religions, we are endowed

with the mission to witness to the One Lord, Creator of all, the Master of love. We are not here to beautify the image of our coexistence and brotherhood as Muslims and Christians, but to say that humanity was built by the intersection of civilizations and the interchange of religions .

Accordingly, we affirm that we have good relations with our Muslim brethren. We also share with them our future and our hope to survive the remnants of this common crisis. Thus, our call today is for each of us to join hands in order to build our societies and our countries. Forbearing Christianity and tolerant Islam are the two lungs of this East. The affability of both Christianity and Islam is the core for the peace in the East and the world. Perhaps the most precious thing that God gave us in the Orthodox Church of Antioch is the Orthodox identity. This identity has an oriental affection, an existential character of dialogue, a sense of belonging to the nation, and a commitment to act as bridge of communication between both lungs. It is our proudness and responsibility to be among the line of Antiochian Patriarchs who were given the title of "Patriarch of the Arabs" by their Muslim brethren. This title is a proof that our Antiochian Church has always been on the side of the national and humanitarian causes of this East, and a refuge of love for all without exception. Therefore, She has been, in the eyes of all citizens of the East, a shelter that voices a great concern for the human beings' causes, for their goodness and prosperity .

It is therefore necessary to allow for the language of tolerance in all the local, regional and global meetings, to find its way to the minds of all people, and to dominate all issues that concern our Arab, Muslim and Christian society. The most cherishing subject in the world is to meet with other people. We have had a long experience of encounter. What if this other is to whom God Himself chose to witness as a Creator, and as a Lord and a Master of love and tolerance. We, our brothers, are called in this conference to cultivate the seeds of openness and tolerance, and not only in our hearts and your hearts, for yours and ours are filled with these seeds. We are always called upon to nurture them in the world, in all human beings, despite the difficult challenges of some periods. We assure the whole world that we are advocates of peace, and we want to build our homeland on the foundation of citizenship and respect for others. We declare through this forum that we believe in coexistence, love and the acceptance of others. Everyone knows what Christians have offered in various fields. We always want to emphasize the oneness of life, fate, and future of all.

This is in relation to what is going on in Syria.

As for Lebanon's delay in forming the government due to local, regional and international political tensions, we strongly call from here for the preservation of our beloved country Lebanon as a country of citizenship, and to strengthen the state's authority by supporting the constitutional institutions in it, in order for it to remain a forum of enlightened thought and culture, and a place of coexistence and citizenship. We also call on all parties to adopt the principles of peaceful and rational political and religious discourse, in order to avoid all political and religious consequences, which may result from deliberate or unintended extremism. This adoption helps to promote the national partnership and communal living that guarantees the continuity of constitutional life. Therefore, it is very important to preserve the constitutional life of this country as a practical interpretation of shared living and citizenship, and abandoning the sectarian logic, replacing it with the logic of crucible life of the nation, which is implemented through the concerted efforts of all its children .

We also raise the voice for Iraq, which is drained by terrorism and suffers from economic and security instability, forcing its citizens to emigrate or to be displaced, as a tax to be paid. I assure you that Lebanon and Iraq are the lungs of Syria and that the south side of Syria is Jordan, where Christ was baptized in its river. Therefore, the peoples of these countries interact intensively with each other, and events in one of them, affect the entire region, not just in terms of security, but also politically, economically, and humanitarily. Each of us has a role in the quest to rebuild the region, because its stability positively affects the world in general, and Europe in particular .

The Relief and Development Work of the Patriarchate

According to the above, the Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East established the Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development, which is considered as the largest, Christian based, non-governmental relief and development organization in Syria. Its aim is the rebuilding of humans, reconstruction of houses, and restore nature, in all the provinces and regions of Syria. Through a team of 1600 members, it implements dozens of relief and development programs, and provides humanitarian assistance and prepares programs that serve both the Christian and the Muslim. Our department's services has reached nearly 2.5 million beneficiaries of all religions, ethnicities and races, indicating that the church does not discriminate between Christians and Muslims, because all are brothers, and what brings them together is greater than what divides them. From here, the Antiochian Church seeks to be,

through all its charitable arms, standing next to the suffering people, and working through various relief efforts to unite the wounds of those afflicted, in an attempt to put the smile of Christ on their faces .

The work of the Patriarchate in terms of relief efforts confirms, without a doubt, what we say about ourselves, that the Christian presence is not understood from the perspective of minorities and majorities, but from the perspective of its civilizational, cultural, social and political role in all stages of history. Therefore, we thank all our international partners, both in Syria and abroad, who seek to serve the Syrian people, alleviate all its economic and psychological burdens, and contribute to the reconstruction of what was destroyed at all levels, which would reflect positively on Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan. At the same time, we stress the role of the United Nations, in all its institutions, in intensifying its efforts to put an end to the wars, to adopt peaceful political solutions, and to support the return of the displaced people and refugees. We also appeal to the international community to intensify its efforts to directly support the financing of local relief organizations in Syria, in order to save the money that is being paid here and there by intermediary, third –party, organizations .

Our Message to the World

Our role, wherever we may be, is always to bear the pain, sufferings, and concerns of our people, especially in the midst of the situation Syria is going through. Our message today to the entire world: stop the cancer of strife, takfirism, and terrorism before it spreads to the world, and work to establish peace in the East .

It is time for the world to wake up and realize that establishing peace is what reassures, and that emigration, or rather forced displacement, is only a burden on the emigrant people and the immigration countries, and not at all part of the solution, but rather an inevitable negative consequence of the dilemma. It is time for the world to realize that takfirism, terrorism, and kidnapping, and sectarianism, are the first national security threat against all peoples, and not just in the Middle East. I do not blame others for the war that is taking place in the East, and I do not claim that neither my people, nor the state regimes of the East are ideal, nor do themselves claim this. The external face of the crisis, however, has not just overshadowed, but also surpassed everything. The biggest loser in the market of multifaceted self-interests is the innocent human being.

From here, I call on the world to seek a peaceful solution to end the misery of the Syrian people and the peoples of the region, who are suffering from the consequences of the devastating war, which has resulted in enormous economic and living difficulties. Therefore, I also draw your attention to the need to lift the economic sanctions on the Syrian people, who pay the high tax of war and destruction. I also underline the unity of Syrian territory and the need of concerted efforts for the reconstruction of this country, in order to facilitate the return of its children and help those who have remained in the country, to live there freely and with dignity.

On the other hand, we must address what we are witnessing today of absurd exploitation of religion and subjecting religion to political ends. From this forum, I call on all religious leaders from all countries, to raise together the slogan of "Faith for Peace", so that we all become resounding advocates of peace, in a world that is in dire need of a message of peace.

Today, we are called upon to meet and stand in solidarity, in order to present together to the world a true model of peace in relationships, concepts, and approaches, and internal, regional and international collaboration. This is how we give peace to people and witness that the true peace that dwells in the human heart, individually and collectively, is alone capable of healing every wound in historical memory and in human relations.

I am absolutely certain that what brings our peoples together, despite the differences of their religious, social and cultural affiliations, is much more than what divides them. In our East, we have always appreciated the value of coexistence with our brothers from other religions and cultures. We have learned that pluralism is the vital domain for human enrichment, cultural interaction, and creativity at the levels of thought, art and beauty. There is no doubt that it is about time for the experience of suffering to bring our people closer, rather than to divide them, and to open the way for humanity to rethink the priorities of political, social and religious action in our modern era. We desperately need a common action to heal our societies with genuine reconciliation and tolerance.

We need to move together towards reconciliation, stressing the respect for human rights and international charters in this regard. Therefore, we must engage in dialogue and become acquainted with each other, whoever this other is. Does each one of us realize the extent of his or her responsibility to remove the culture of disunion among peoples? Do we seek to overcome

the barriers of history and build a better future for the children of the East and the world?

Concerning the future of Syria, a peaceful solution must be found to the Syrian crisis, a serious pursuit of reconstruction must be applied. Reconstruction, however, can only be valuable by human renewal, and by helping the citizens remain steadfast in their own land.

We want the return of all the kidnapped people, primarily Bishops Boulos (Yazigi) and Yuhanna (Ibrahim), to which the world turn a blind eye. It is a great wound for all of us, but it gives us the determination to remain steadfast in our country. If some believe that such actions will lead us to leave our country, they are wrong. We reiterate our call for peace, stability and prosperity.

We join the collective voice of the free people in this world, and look together, with all those who are suffering, to the governments of the United States of America, the Russian Federation, the European Union, the United Kingdom and the relevant regional countries, hoping to push for finding peaceful solutions for the world and the Middle East, for Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and all the region. We always hold the deposit of peace and the good news of salvation, joy and truth. For the Church is the Pillar of Truth in the midst of this troubled world, and continues to testify the Truth, even if She is raised on the Cross on the likeness of Her Master.

I conclude by saying that we are messengers of love and peace. We call on all to unite, build the country, and preserve the dignity and life of the human being. We call upon the entire international, global community to know that our approach is to achieve justice and peace, and to promote the concept of citizenship and respect for human rights. We call on all to push for a peaceful solution for everything that is happening the region, and particularly in Syria. We pray for peace in the East and throughout the world. I reiterate my sincere thankfulness for your kind invitation, and wish you a fruitful conference.

JOHN X

Patriarch of Antioch and All the East