



A Conflicts Forum Monograph

# **Arab Christians in the Levant and their Relationship with Muslims**

By Ghassan Shami

February, 2009

Conflicts Forum: Beirut - London - Washington

## **Arab Christians in the Levant and their Relationship with Muslims**

When the Arab-Islamic army reached Bosra, a town in Horan -- the capital of the Arab Province during the Roman and Byzantine eras (AD 634), and the first town in Bilad e-Sham (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine) to be conquered by Arabs in the reign of Caliph Abu Bakr a-Siddiq -- the town inhabitants assisted the army in fighting against the Byzantines. Furthermore, when Caliph Omar bin al-Khattab came to organize the administration of campaigns, he stayed in Horan. The town is filled with the memories of Prophet Mohammed's coming to meet Monk Bahira and the news of the Christian Ghassni Kings, who were allies to the Byzantine State. (1)

When the two commanders Khaled ibn al-Waleed and Abu Ubaida al-Jarrah arrived in Damascus in September AD 635, Mansour bin Sarjoun -- the grandfather of Saint John of Damascus (a translator and finance manager to the Byzantines and the envoy of Governor Thomas, the brother-in-law of the Emperor Heraclius), negotiated with Khaled ibn al-Waleed requesting security for his people and the inhabitants of Damascus: the document is called Khaled's Covenant. This was the first conquest of Damascus. Afterwards, following the Yarmuk Battle in July 636 and the defeat of Emperor Heraclius' army, the latter re-entered Damascus and kept in it fifteen churches, including that of John the Baptist (later the Umayyad Mosque) and seized the houses of the fleeing Byzantines. When Caliph Omar came, he would not take *Jizyah* (tribute) from the larger Arab Christian tribe of Taghlob.

The same happened in Jerusalem when the Patriarch of Damascus Sophronius handed over the city to Caliph Omar in AD 638 -- the Omar Covenant. (2) Then, Patriarch Sophronius invited him to pray in The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, but Omar refused lest Muslims should later claim the site.

As such Muslim Arabs easily conquered the Christian Bilad e-Sham, as the inhabitants did not regard them as aliens, but as cousins -- though they viewed the Byzantines as foreign rulers. That is why Heraclius had that famous cry as he was coming out through the northern mountainous gates of Torous in which he expressed grief after more than one thousand years of Roman-Byzantine control: "Farewell Syria, farewell my beautiful region."

The majority of the Aramaic inhabitants of cities, rural areas and semi-deserts of Bilad e-Sham were Christians; among their larger tribes were Taghlob and Ghassan whose patron saint and the flag they flew was Mar Sarkis (Sergios, Serge, Sergi); the Kalb Tribe that fanned out from Damascus to the deserts of Tadmur (Palmyra) and Hims from which Caliph Moawia bin Abi Sofian married his famous wife Maisoun (the mother of his crown prince and successor Yazid I); the tribes of Qoda'ah, Lakhm, Jitham, Bakr, Tai and other tribes, had continuous relations with the Arab peninsula tribes. Nevertheless, if we are to thoroughly understand these ties, we have to go back to the dawn of Islam and its emergence along with its relation with Christianity in order to understand the size and nature of the intertwinement between the two faiths and their followers in three domains: the religious, social and economic-political relations.

1. Religiously: Before Prophet Mohammed's (AD 570-632) *Da'wa* -- call -- began, Christianity had permeated Bilad e-Sham since the early centuries after Christ (630 bishops took part in the Council of Chalcedon, in AD 451) most of whom were from the Levant, including 17 bishops from the Bosra County, ten from the Petra County in Arabia and 130 bishops from Antioch. In Mecca, the Prophet's home, they were few. However, the Prophet worshipped in the Cave of Hiraah near the town with Priest Waraqa bin Nawfal who, as his title indicates, was a Christian that read the Gospels and knew Hebrew. He translated the

Gospels into Arabic and witnessed the outset of the Islamic faith. He had the Prophet marry his cousin, the wealthy merchant Khadija bint Khwailid. Warqa was the first to predict that Mohammed would be a significant man.

Furthermore, when Mohammed controlled Mecca and entered al-Kaaba to destroy the idols, he also ordered that pictures be obliterated. However, he put his palms on the picture of the Christ and his mother and said, "Erase everything except that which is underneath my hands." He lifted his hands off the picture of Jesus the son of Mary and his mother. He, moreover, he married Maria the Copt.

The Quran mentions Christianity and the Christians in 117 verses, most of which are lenient and approach relations with Christians in a fashion different from that of other religions. In Sura Maida, verses 82-83, it states: "Thou wilt find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe (to be) the Jews and the idolaters. And thou wilt find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe (to be) those who say: Lo! We are Christians. That is because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not proud."

Quranic rulings do not equate Christians with infidels, nor does it force them to embrace Islam or pay the Jizya. It has permitted Muslims to eat Christians food and marry their women. The Quran regards Christians as "People of the Book" and sets out ways to deal with them: if they maintain their faith they should pay the Jizya -- in contrast with the pagans who have no choice other than to embrace Islam or be fought by the sword.

The religious discussions that Mohammed had with the Najran delegation show the extent of closeness between the two faiths. We can, for example, note that Mohammed sent his followers to the Christian king of Abyssinia in order to protect them from the injustice of his people and we note also his close relationship with Monk Bahira in Bosra e-Sham. This demonstrates that

religious ties between the two faiths were not and are not based on cancellation but rather on an endeavor to induce Christians to convert to the new religion of Islam.

Nevertheless, with the passage of time and the emergence of Sunni sects, Christians were and have been treated differently in Fiqh, i.e. in Islamic jurisprudence. The Malki sect, for example, did not take a great interest in them, but rather viewed them as a group of the “People of the Book” who were subject to the rulings pertaining to Ahl al-Thimma (free non-Muslims), while the Shafie and Hanbali sects only took one tenth of their value from them in commerce.

The Shafie sect has been known to be distinctively strict with Arab Christians. It excluded them from the “People of the Book” category and degraded them; it forbade marrying from them and eating their prepared (slaughtered) foods. Furthermore, Hanafism shared some of the Shafi'ism strictness in treating Christians -- such as forcing them to wear certain costumes and barring them from freely exercising their rituals as well as restricting their movement and residence.

2. Socially: The spread of tribes and their intertwined interests in grazing, economy and politics along with their identical customs from the Arab Peninsula (its semi-deserts, Mesopotamia and the Upper Peninsula) provided the Prophet and the new faith with fertile soil, since the tribes were made of phratries and septs connected with marriage or blood regardless of the geographic remoteness. This was demonstrated when the Christian tribes that were far from the call outside of Mecca did not see the new religion as a strange thing; they rather assisted the Islamic army in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the large and widespread Taghlob tribe, about which it was said “Had Islam delayed a little, the Taghlob people would have controlled the entire area,” assisted Saad

bin Abi Waqqas in the decisive battle of Qadissiah on tribal grounds, although they were Christians.

The marriage relationships remained intertwined throughout the long following decades, for members of the same family or some tribe phratries, such as the Taghlobi Hamadanis, embraced Islam, while other members or septs remained Christian. In Damascus, for instance, the Ghassani kings were invested in the Virgin's (Mary) Church. Although the city became the capital of the Arab state in the Umayyad era, it did not have even one mosque until thirty-five years after it had been conquered. Then the Umayyad mosque was built by local Christian and Byzantine hands. Al-Akhtal al-Taghlobi, the Umayyads' poet laureate, even went into the caliphs' palace wearing his alb and cross.

3. Economically and Politically: After the establishment of the state -- specifically during the Umayyad era -- Arab Christians were relied on for the implementation of governance, particularly those who were experienced in the ranks of the Byzantine rule in the affairs of state administration, taxes, finance, mail and other domains. Therefore, it was not unusual to see a continuation of the presence of the Sarjoun household in Damascus as ministers who worked for the Umayyads (AD 661-750). In the earliest era of their rule, the Sarjouns organized the Umayyads' divans (the ministries), with the provinces and continued to do so as the Islamic conquest extended eastward to China and westward into the Far Maghreb. During this period, tax collections increased -- as more taxes were imposed to cover the state expenditure. With the agreement of Yazid (the brother of Muawia, the first Umayyad caliph and the governor of Sham), Christian Syrians trained Arabs coming from the peninsula in politics and administration. Yazid, moreover, relied on Christian tribes for defending his post and appointed known qualified Christian individuals in the state's sensitive administrative and financial posts. Yazid also created a finance ministry that

included financial, military and naval affairs and handed it over to Sarjoun bin Mansour, the father of Saint John of Damascus. This family served the Umayyad Caliphate for sixty years.

Henri Lammens notes: “The number of Muslims in the late first hegira century did not exceed 200 thousands, whereas there were four million Syrians.” Then, some tribes converted to Islam to be spared the Jizyah. This made Muawia bin Abi Sufyan stop Islamization in the areas surrounding Damascus. The interconnectedness between Christians and Muslims was so immense that it has been shoved into the middle of a theological debate between the Monophysites (3) and the Chalcedonians (4) -- that is between those who believed in Christ's one nature (comprising the vast majority of Arab Christians) and those who believed in the Christ's two natures: the divine and the human. Muawia gathered some of the followers of the two doctrines and favored the Chalcedonians. That was naturally due to the tense relations between the Umayyads and the Byzantine state, as well as the ebbing and flowing borders between the two and the decisions on who would pay the Jizyah and in what areas. These examples include the withdrawal or pulling back to the boundaries of the Byzantium of the Marada and Jarajimah who used to protect the desert arc from the Bedouins' attacks on behalf of the Byzantine empire.

A host of factors have combined to unite the Arab Muslim conquerors with the Arab Christians in Bilad e-Sham -- including their joint affiliation, their common language and Syrian antipathy against the Byzantines. The Byzantines regarded Syria as crop granary and a dairy cow whose people they had exhausted with taxes. The majority of the inhabitants of Damascus, for instance, were Arab Christians whose nationalism had overcome their religious affiliation with the Byzantines, especially as they regarded the Muslims as a new Christian denomination after a period of over a thousand years of Greek-Roman-

Byzantine exhaustion. Besides, the creed of the Arab large major tribes, Taghlob, Ghassan and Kalb, was monophysite, i.e. different from that of the Chalcedonian rulers of Byzantium. Thus, they sensed a brotherhood of blood and a similarity in religious views with the new Arab conquerors; for this reason they were ready to warmly welcome the Arabs as members of the same family -- just as they had with the Persians in AD 547 before Heraclius defeated them. The famous ecclesiastical historian Ibn al-Ibri writes: "The God of revenge has sent us the Arabs to rid us of the Romans' injustice. They did not return to us our churches, for each has kept what he had possessed; nevertheless, God has extricated us from the Romans' cruelty and spite." That is why the Syriac Monophysite Christians named Caliph Omar bin al-Khattab as "al-Farouq," which means the liberator and the rescuer.

The relationship between the Christians and the Umayyads had its ups and downs after AD 693, during the reign of Abdel-Malik bin Marwan; after the Arabs' ferocious wars with the Byzantines (705-715) Abdel-Malik arabicized the divans and ordered that crosses be smashed (AD 700) and the execution of Christian Byzantine army prisoners. Al-Waleed I took a section of John the Baptist's cathedral, which had been a pagan temple, and built the Umayyad Mosque on it. However, he kept John the Baptist's head and revered it with a special dome inside the mosque. Furthermore, the conditions of the Christians worsened during the reign of Omar bin Abdel-Aziz (AD 717-720) who honored them in the beginning of his reign, though he later turned against them.

Arab Christians were subjected to paying the Jizyah: though the special treatment that the Najran and Taghlob tribes received was due to their wealth and power. Religiously speaking, however, Christians continued to freely practice their rituals except for some hardhanded periods during which they were banned from missionary work: particularly during the reigns of Omar bin



Abdel-Aziz in the Umayyad era and the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi (AD 775-785). Both called on the Christian tribes of Tanokh near the city of Aleppo to convert to Islam. When they refused many were killed and their churches destroyed, though about 400 of these Christians embraced Islam. Although there was a ban on building new churches, this was not implemented at all times, for monasteries and churches were built during that period.

Practically, Christianity in the Arab peninsula was not able to resist Islam's political power and religious dimension, whereas the Syriac and Greek Christianity in Bilad e-Sham was able to continue and survive. Such was also the case in Iraq.

Arab Christianity was not a reclusive religious minority; for it has nearly totally intermingled in the earlier Umayyad and Abbasid societies. This has, perhaps, contributed in widening the framework of Islamization. Some Arab Christians converted to Islam when the faith was initiated in order to preserve their interests (Sadat Humair), while others embraced it due to the fact that they had not been Christians for long when Islam came (Kalb, Dawmat al-Jandal and Abdel-Qais in Bahrain). Those in whom Christianity had been deeply rooted (Najran) maintained their faith and were later deported. This fact should not diminish the pressures by some caliphs and clerics that made some tribes and individuals abandon Christianity.

The intertwinement, moreover, included the movement, with the passage of time, of some eastern Christian customs to Islam: such as the adoption of five prayers a day, *wudu'* and ablution before prayer, the Qiblah, minaret, mihrab, mosque, vows, censers in mosques and funerals -- most probably, Christians also adopted Tajweed, the artistic recitation of the Quran, from the melodization of the monks' praises. As for Hajj, Christians used to go on pilgrimage to

Jerusalem and a-Rasafah (Sergio's tomb) and Mount Sinai; as such is the issue of sanctuary (the boundaries of the church or temple that cannot be violated while what is within them has the right of asylum and safety) and the *Tawaf* (circumambulation) as Christians used to circumambulate churches and religious shrines; as for the *Zakat* (almsgiving), this is an imitation of the Jews and Christians who used to pay the tithe for the service of the priests and the temple; the rosary; and fasting as eastern Christians fasted for thirty days.

Until the present time, Muslims visit Christian shrines such as Saidat Sidnaya (the Lady of Sidnaya) and the Monastery of Saint Georgious in Wadi a-Nasara (the Christians' Valley) in Syria and regard Saint George (al-Khodor) as a patron saint. In fact, al-Khodor is one of the most popular saints in the Levant, while other families offer vows to give their children the names of Muslim holy men or Christian saints.

In fact, after the movement of the Islamic rule to Baghdad during the Abbasid state (AD 749-1258), Christians maintained their presence in the fields of science, administration, medicine, philosophy and music, for they have brought a great deal of the human heritage to Arabic. Moreover, during the reign of Harun a-Rashid, Emperor Charlemagne was allowed to restore churches and build the Church of the Virgin in Jerusalem.

However, the collapse of the first Abbasid era; the coming of the Persians, Turks and Seljuks; the Abbasid caliphs' turning into puppets in the hands of their army commanders; the dismemberment of the central Arab state, and the emergence of scattered small states in e-Sham, Egypt and Maghreb (Tuluni, Akhshidi, Fatimid, Seljuk, Turk...) led to the deterioration of the Arab Christians' conditions. Their presence was subjected to different moods and fatwas. In spite of this, they began (in AH 300) to celebrate their masses in

Arabic, honorably hold their funerals and mark their feasts, although there was some strictness towards them as of the second half of the second century (AH) when they were forced to wear certain costumes, were prevented from practicing their religious rituals in the cities built by Muslims such as Basra, Kufa and Baghdad, and had their travel and residence restricted. Although rulers did not always strictly apply these regulations, they were often implemented in times of crises.

The Christian presence in the Euphrates region, for instance, decreased during the tenth century AD due to the destruction of many Christian centers as a result of the political unrest and the conflict between the Hamadanis (a sept of the Taghlob tribe that have embraced Islam) and the Turks and Romans. There was also an internal war among the Taghlob clans in the ninth century. Christians were, moreover, defeated and slain by the Qarmatians in the Nasibeen area in AH 316. Part of them (Banu Habib, with about 1000 knights), moved to Byzantium. The Arab Christian tribal congregations declined in the tenth century; those who remained Christian mixed with the rest of the Christians in Syria and Iraq, while some tribal clans remained in Horan and eastern Jordan.

The Crusades (AD 1096-1291) brought nothing to the Levant Christians other than more crises in their relations with Islam. For when the crusaders entered the city of Antioch (AD 1098), which had been the historic capital of Syria and enjoyed an excellent religious position (the Seljuks had been in the town for only 14 years), they killed 100,000 people including many Monophysite, and even Royal Chalcedonian, Christians. Not only that, the crusaders also seized the monasteries and turned them into islands of the Latin rite. That is why when the Mamluk Sultan Baybars I occupied Antioch (in AD 1268), he killed 17,000 of its people and captured 10,000 others before he left it to be burned, looted and destroyed. In fact this is what the Mamluks (AD 1268-1516) did in many

cities. The crusaders did the same with Jerusalem when they occupied it in AD 1099; they killed 70,000 of its Muslim and Christian inhabitants; for they could not entertain the possibility of coexistence between Islam and Christianity, especially as most of the soldiers were tramps, highwaymen, or fortune seekers who believed that Muslims had burned the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This is the reason that many people immigrated from Jerusalem and the villages in its environs to Damascus where they lived in an area that is still called Mohajereen (immigrants).

Christianity's patriarchal headquarters were moved to Damascus after the destruction of Antioch in an indication of the Arab Christians' adherence to their Levantism and relations with Muslims. The Patriarchate of Antioch and the entire Levant has maintained its name; it is the seat of the patriarchs of the Greek Orthodox, the Roman Catholic and the Syriac Orthodox churches, while the Maronite Patriarchate kept the name of Antioch, but its seat is currently in Bkirki, Lebanon -- as is the case of the Syriac Catholics.

Between the Byzantine campaign -- launched by Emperor Nicephorus II Phocas in AD 968 --and the crusades, the major Christian region (what is currently called the "Dead Cities" in the areas of Aleppo and Edleb), became an area of conflict. Nevertheless, the Arab Monophysite Christians opted to stay in the Arab-controlled areas; even the headquarters of their patriarchate in Dair Emianos or Dair Tal Ada al-Kabir near Dair Simaan al-Amoudi remained in place throughout that period. The patriarchate did not leave the area until the crusaders invaded the region in AD 1104. The patriarchate moved to Diar Bakr in AD 1030 and remained under Arab rule. However, the leaders of Chalcedonian Maronites or the Religious Melkites had another opinion; for although they continued to inaugurate their patriarchs in Bait Maroun Bait Maroun Monks' Monastery in Syria until the tenth century (and in this century

north Lebanon became their homeland and the seat of their church), they were in conformity with the crusaders; for in the spring of AD 1099, when the crusaders arrived at Arqa in Akkar (North Lebanon), they were met by a delegation representing the Georgios patriarchate who was apparently convinced of the fall of the Byzantine power and the rise of that of the Church of Rome. The patriarch therefore dispatched representatives that accompanied the crusader delegation to Rome to announce the good news of the occupation of Jerusalem. The ties of friendliness extended throughout the crusader presence only to grow more influential later after the affiliation of the Maronite Church with the Papacy and the West. The unity between the Maronite Church and Rome took place in AD 1180.

4. The Mamluk Era (AD 1250-1517): The Mamluks are a dynasty of soldiers who were slaves of Turkish origin in central Asia. They ruled Egypt, Bilad e-Sham, Iraq and the Arab peninsula, defeated the crusaders, confronted Tamerlane, and recovered what the Tatars had occupied in Bilad e-Sham and Iraq, including Baghdad. The Mamluk era was one of instability and war and was bad for the Arab Christians. They were undermined and isolated in their neighborhoods and villages. Although they played a role in commerce and science, they were regarded as a lower class when it came to politics, a condition that worsened when the Ottoman conquest took place. After the fall of Constantinople (AD 1453), the Ottoman Empire (AD 1299-1924) moved eastward. Sultan Selim I defeated the Safavids in the Battle of Çaldıran, controlled Iraq and Azerbaijan (AD 1514), entered Bilad e-Sham and Palestine (AD 1515) -- after defeating the Mamluks in the Battle of Marj Dabiq -- and seized Egypt after the A-Ridania Battle (AD 1517). The Ottomans gained the upper hand in the Arab world and moved Prophet Mohammed's Caliphate seat to Constantinople.

The Arab Christians suffered under the Ottomans as they were subject, once again, to the moods of the walis (governors) and to compulsory recruitment during wars. They were, furthermore, banned from walking on the sidewalk, but were required to walk in the middle along with cattle and wagons. They were prohibited from wearing headdresses. Consequently, as the French Revolution (AD 1789) began and its ideas of liberty, justice and equality gradually reached the east Mediterranean, and with the coming of Napoleon's campaign to Egypt and the Arab Orient (AD 1798-1801), there was an opening in the wall of relations East and West and among the Levant's religious and social components. Therefore, the notions of liberation started to roll and grow for over another hundred years, for the Levant, during the Mamluk and Ottoman eras, had drowned in overwhelming ignorance and illiteracy, and the intellectual elites had to revive the language, nationalist feelings and the affiliation to the region since the era of nationalism had set out in the West. Furthermore, there was that heritage that the Arabs of the Levant regarded as great.

Thus, the Lebanese and Syrian Christians contributed in the Arab Reconnaissance era by the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century through reviving the Arab language and the nationalist feelings opposite the Turkish state (Nassif and Ibrahim al-Yaziji, Master Butros al-Bustani, A-Shudiaq, Arida Adib Is'haq, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Shibli A-Shmail). These reformed contributed to pushing new translations, launching new newspapers in Beirut, Damascus, Aleppo and Cairo; and engaging, along with the Muslim elites, in political activism. Thus, and many of them, their politicians and those who serve the public were hanged, side by side with Muslims in Beirut and Damascus during the late Turkish era. As for the secular parties in Bilad e-Sham, their founders were Orthodox Christians: Antoine Saade (1904-1949) -- the founder of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party which is strict on the issue of separating religion from state -- was an Orthodox Christian from Shwair in Mount Lebanon; Michel 'Aflaq, the founder of the Ba'th (Revival) Party, who

has said, "Arabism is a body whose soul is Islam," was from the Sunni Maidan neighborhood in Damascus; and the founder of the Arab nationalist movement was George Habash, an Orthodox Christian who established the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

The current map of Oriental Christianity extends to cover the principal cities of Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine; northern Jordan, Houran, from Damascus to Aleppo, Hims, Hamah, Latakia, Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, Sour, Jerusalem, the Galilee, the villages and towns of Lebanon, until the Syrian Semi Desert, Sadad, al-Qariatain, the countryside of Hims, Hamah and Tartus along with their churches, monasteries, customs, traditions, rituals and spiritual courts; for in the town of Qara (which is home to the famous partitioned Mar Yaqoub Monastery) between Damascus and Hims, there are families (such as Breidi) that include Muslim and Christian cousins. The Akkar Parish still includes Syria's Wadi 'Nasara (the Christians' Valley), an area of more than 48 towns which enjoys a high level of culture and education. Regardless of the political borders and divisions, the inhabitants have commercial and social relations with the Islamic milieu, an indication that coexistence and harmony is possible on the grounds of citizenship.

The ties between Christians and Muslims in the east Mediterranean has been distinguished with accepting the other as the other is, with their customs, traditions and worship. This is a historic reality based on the fact that the two sides know that they are native residents; the Christians, rather, have a sense of seniority. Therefore, the relations of neighborhood, economic interests, social participation in times of sorrow and funerals have continued; nevertheless, mixed marriages have been few after the Christians turned into a minority. Besides, the families that have been religiously divided practice their religious rituals and worship while recognizing their origins. The families' movement in

Bilad e-Sham before the Sykes-Picot partition and the emergence of national states contributed in decreasing the level of closeness among these families.

The Levant Christians still regard themselves as entrusted with the Christian heritage. They see themselves as the native residents of the land in spite of the immigration of historic communities such as the Assyrians, Chaldeans and Syrians. However, Orthodox Christians, for instance, are still proud of their roots in the Levant, and so are the Catholics and some Maronites, for in spite of the Westernization attempts and the sway of the Western civilization, they maintain the conviction that the relationship with Islam must always be governed by citizenship and the division of rights in the national state.

It is natural for the West to find odd the Islamic-Christian coexistence in the Levant. But there is a historic heritage from the crusades to now. There are also relations resulting from the Ottoman experience in Europe, from the immigrant refugees from North Africa (which has continued into our own time) and the place of Islam in the political conflict against the former Soviet Union. In modern time, the West came to know Islam because of the rise of the salafism of Jamal Deen al-Afghani and Mohammed Abdo, which came as a reaction to the Western colonial era. Rather, the Islam that the West currently knows, and the media has contributed in inflating its image, is the Jihadi Takfiri abolishing Bin-Laden Islam; it is the Wahhabi Islam (after Mohammed bin Abdel-Wahhab -- AD 1703-1791) who founded in the Arab peninsula a movement that viewed as a salafi reference the thoughts of Ibn Taimia (AD 1263-127) who is related to the thought of Ibn Hanbal.

The West has seen the manifestations of this Wahhibi Islam in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and the World Trade Center. However, the other Islam (in mixed regions such as Bilad e-Sham), is different and related to the West's



civilized achievements, although it rejects the notion that Muslim countries should be occupied by the West, and rejects the existence of Israel as a Western state in its midst.

Therefore, through the historic Christian-Islamic relation in the Levant, the West that does not have colonial ambitions and views the Levantine Christians as a proper intermediary. However, I believe that the West needs an intermediary with the Muslims of Bilad e-Sham, for their elites have studied in its schools and universities; as for the Christians, they have played, since the early Islamic centuries, the role of protection; delivering thought; translation; and building bridges with the West. This is also what happened during the Renaissance and enlightenment period and is still happening -- provided that their historic particularity in the Levant is maintained and that there is no interference in their relations with their countrymen who are followers of other religions.

---

*Ghassan E-Shami is a Lebanese writer, Journalist and Researcher.*

---

Footnotes:

(1) The Covenant of Khaled bin el-Waleed upon conquering Damascus: "In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent. This is what Khaled ibn el-Waleed has offered the people of Damascus when he entered the town. He has offered them security for their selves, their money and their churches; the wall of their town shall not be destroyed; none of their houses shall be seized. They have in this [paper] the word of Allah, the covenant of His Messenger (peace be upon him), of the caliphs and of the believers that they shall not be harmed if they (the people of Damascus) gave the Jizya."

(2) The Covenant of Caliph Omar bin al-Khattab upon the handing over of Jerusalem: "In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent. This is what the servant of Allah, Omar bin al-Khattab, the chief of the believers, has offered the people of Illyaa' (Jerusalem) of security: granting them safety for their selves, their money, their churches, their crosses, that who is sick or sound and the remainder of their people. Their churches are not to be taken, nor are they to be destroyed, nor are they to be degraded or belittled, neither are their crosses or their money, and they are not to be forced to change their religion, nor is any one of them to be harmed. No Jews are to live with them in Illyaa' and it is required of the people of Illyaa' to pay the Jizya, like the people of the cities. It is also required of them to remove the Romans and the thieves from the land; and whoever amongst the people of Illyaa' comes out, their selves and their money are secure until they reach their destination; and whoever amongst the people of Illyaa' that stays, they are safe and they have to pay what the people Illyaa' have to pay of the Jizya; and whoever amongst the people of Illyaa' that wishes to depart with their money together with the Romans, leaving their churches and crosses behind, then their selves, their churches and their crosses are secure until they reach their destination. As for those from other countries who are in Illyaa', those of them who wish to stay can stay, and they have to pay what the people of Illyaa' have to pay of the Jizya, and those who wish can return to their people, and nothing shall be taken from them until their harvest time comes.

Upon what is in this [treaty] is the word of Allah, the covenant of His Messenger, of the caliphs and of the believers if they (the people of Illyaa') gave what was required of them of the Jizya."

Drafted and Written in AH 15: Omar ibn el-Khattab

The witnesses upon this are Khalid bin el-Walid, 'Amr ibn al-'As, Abdur Rahman bin Awf and Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan.

(3) Monophysitism (the one nature of the Christ): Churches believe that the Christ is one, a real god and a real human. He is not only human in form; he is rather corporeal and real. He has the perfection of the human nature and the perfection of the divine nature united in him without mixing, mingling or change. The doctrine was officially established in the era of Emperor Justinian I (AD 527-565) upon encouragement from his wife Empress Theodora.

(4) Chalcedonian: (AD 451) a council that was held in the city of Chalcedon and advocated the one nature of the Christ. The notion "one nature" was originally mentioned by Pope Cornelius in his famous saying, "one nature of the word incarnated god" also "Master Christ, one Christ, one Lord, one nature, one will."

#### Arab References:

- Al-Balathri: Fotouh al-Buldan
- Ibn Qutaiba: Oyoum al-Akhbar
- Ibn Asaker: Tarikh Madinat Dimashq

- Ibn Shaddad: Tarikh Dimashq, al-A'alaq al-Khatira fi Thikr Umaraa e-Sham wal-Jazeera
- A-Tabari: Tareekh a-Rusul wal-Muluk
- Ibn el-Batraq: Nazm el-Jawaher
- Ibn al-Ebri (Gregorios): A-Tareekh al-Kanasi, A-Tareekh a-Siriani, Tareekh Mukhtasar a-Dual
- George Haddad: Fat'h el'Arab li-Sham
- Philip Hatti: Tareekh Suria wa Lubnan wa Filasteen, translated by George Haddad and a group, Beirut, Dar a- Thaqaafa, 1958
- Al-Mufassal fi Tareekh al-Arab Qabl al-Islam, Dr Jawad Ali, volume one, Dar al-Ilm lil-Malayeen, Beirut 1969
- Lois Shaikho, A-Nasraniah wa Adabuha bain Arab al-Jahiliah, Dar al-Mashreq, Beirut, second edition, 1989
- Yaqout al-Hamwi: Mu'jam al-Buldan
- Ihsan Abbas: Bilad e-Sham fil Asr el-Amawi, the Amman edition
- Al-Mutran Yussef a-Dibis: Tareekh Suria a-Dunyawi wal Madani, Beirut, al-Matba'a al-Umumia, 1983
- Habib A-Zayat: A-Room l-Malakyon fil Islam, Harisa, Lebanon, 1953
- Asad Rustum: Kanisat Madinatullah Antakia, 3 volumes, A-Noor Publications. A-Room wa Silatuhum bil- Arab, Al-Matbaa l-Bulosia, 1983
- Al-Batriarch Zaka l-Aoul 'Eoas: Kanisat Antakia Siriania Abr l-Usur, Aleppo 1981
- Jean Maurice Fiea: Ahwalu Nasara fi Khilafat bani el-Abbas, Darul-Mashreq, 1990
- Abbot Mitro Haji Athnasio: Mawsuat Batriarchiat Antakia Tarikia wal-Atharia, volume 5, 1997.

Non-Arab References:

- H.lammens,la Syrie,précis historique,1921,études sur le règne de mo awia ,études sur le siècle omayyades.
- J- -S.Trimingham Christianity Among the Arabs in the PreIslamic Times, Longman, Coadon, 1979,p.1
- J.de goeje, memoires d histoire et de geographique orientales, 1900, la conquete de la Syrie.
- Canivet,p:le christianisme en Syrie des origina a l avenement de l islam, Saabrucken 1989.
- Edelby,Neophytes: l autonomie legislative des chretiens d orient sous la domination musulmane de 633-1517,these inedte,Rome 1950.
- Moorhead, J:the monophysite response to the arab invasion, in byzantion 1981.
- Sartre,m:bostra.des origins a l islam,paris 1985.

*This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union.  
The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of Conflicts Forum and can  
under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.*

© Conflicts Forum, [www.conflictsforum.org](http://www.conflictsforum.org), February 2009

**Conflicts Forum:**

Beirut + 961- 3-803-028

London + 44 - 207-871-9558

Washington +1- 202-470-1114