

THE CHRISTIANS OF THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE CURRENT TURMOIL

- The Palestinian case -

The Middle East and the Arab world in general (not to say, more widely, the Muslim world) pass through a critical period in its history, which will determine, in an unprecedented manner, its future. We know that of the Christian communities living in the different countries of this region (Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine/Israel) of which they form an integral part. It is these Christians in the current turmoil which is rife in the Arab world? I was asked to present a point of view on the situation and the attitudes of the Palestinian Christians in respect of current convulsions. The, but can we separate the Palestine of the rest of the Arab world? Can we separate the Palestinian Christians of the rest of the Christians of the Arab world? I do not think, despite the specific situation of each country. In effect, what is happening in each of these countries has, in one way or another, a profound impact on the other. It is for this reason that my point of view will develop in two parts. In a first time, we'll take a look on the "arab spring" and on the situation and attitudes of Christians in the framework of these events, to move, in a second time, to the situation and the attitudes of the Palestinians and the Palestinian Christians.

Preliminary remarks

The approach of the Arab world and its Christians is, in my opinion, incomprehensible, if we do not take into consideration certain carried-tees, which have a profound impact on what is happening in this part of the world and therefore also on the Christians of the Middle East, including the Palestinian Christians. I lists quickly:

A strategic region: the Middle East represents a strategic region of first importance, being at the confluence of three Continents (Europe, Asia and Africa). The major roads of the world pass through this region (Suez Canal, Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Bab Al-Mandeb). The major powers may not avoid englo-ber this region in their strategic vision: dominate this region is in fact nothing less than dominate the world.

Incalculable wealth: In addition to its importance strate-Belgium, this part of the world accumulates incalculable wealth (oil, gas, petrodollars...), which remain and will remain for a long time even the nerve of the world economy.

The cradle of the three monotheistic religions: This region is the cradle of the great ancient civilizations, as also of the three monotheistic regions, which have played and still play a major role in its destiny, for better or for worse. And if we remember the ever-expanding role of the religions in the current identity of the peoples of this region, we can see that it is decisive.

The centrality of the Palestinian question: The problem of Palestine traumatizes the people of this region.

If the political regimes relegate it to a lesser plane, the question continues to hold a preponderant and decisive place in the minds of the people. Since its creation, one could say that the State of Israel is, directly or indirectly, at the heart of all the major events which have caused havoc in the region in the modern age.

Chronic instability: Since the beginning of modern times, the Arab World has been losing speed. The world is changing at a giant's pace, whereas the Arab World is in the throes of striving to keep up with the changes without leave respite. This causes a state of chronic instability at all levels (political, economic, socio-cultural and even religious), which open the way to manipulation, internal and external, which never cease to call it into question.

From the above, one can see that our region, one can no longer say strategical or key, leaves no one indifferent, because it is at the centre of nations' stakes. In which each one seeks to dominate it in its own interests. In fact, the great international powers, regional or local, never cease to interfere in its affairs, whether directly or indirectly, in an effort to gain a winning card with a view to profit at all levels. Such a situation cannot but engender conflict, battles of interest and war, which claim victims, whose number continues to increase in a dramatic fashion. The Christians of the Middle East have not stayed on the margins of the strife, but have had to suffer more than the others.

ARAB SPRING or WINTER?

The popular upheaval of these last years has surprised the whole world, may be even the protagonists. In fact, many thought that the populace had attained a level of lethargy, such as to make their uprising almost impossible. This situation was convenience for the great powers, because it allowed them to dominate this area of the world through dictatorial and oppressive regimes, which left the population out of the decisive events ruling their future. Now, all of a sudden, the peoples have risen in an unprecedented manner in order to bring about dramatic changes. In all the countries of the Region, and in the different layers of the population, this uprising has caused immense enthusiasm. In fact, these peoples have had to suffer at the hands of these regimes, from the political, economic and social point of view. Consequently, they could only consider these events as positive.

But very soon these events began to take a particular turn, causing the great regional and international powers to intervene in a massive way and work to direct these up-risings to suit their own political and economic interests, under the umbrella of democracy, of liberty and human rights. Thus, the Islamist trends – Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists above all – strongly organized and taking advantage of a lapse of power, succeeded in filling it and to put in place Islamic regimes with, it would seem, the complicity of great powers, that saw in these regimes possible allies. But all this did not agree with the aim of the popular masses, especially the young people, who did not find in this evolution the realization of their aspirations. That is when many started to ask questions. Where are we going? Towards something better or worse? Is not the Arab Spring turning into winter? What form will Arab societies take? At present no one is able to give a definitive answer to these questions, while, on the ground the struggle is going on in confusion. The whole world is in a state of anxiety over this phase of instability which risks bringing about, with all its attendant negative repercussions: deterioration of the economy, unemployment, emigration, terrorism, etc. Egypt is a typical case. The popular forces which brought the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies to power, are the very same that caused their fall, with the help of the army. Therefore, uncertainty reigns, but one thing is certain: things can never ever be how they were before and a step back is impossible. The popular masses have taken the floor, and they are not ready to give it up/leave it, despite all the internal and external pressure.