



North Africa: Freedom of religion for Christians since the Arab Spring - Change and continuity

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Introduction

Since the dawn of the 21st century, one of the most significant and ongoing political developments that we have witnessed in the world is the series of popular uprisings which rocked the Middle East over the past few years.¹ Starting with Tunisia and spreading like wildfire throughout the region, the Arab Spring has led to the fall of dictators who were seemingly unshakable and, for better or worse, has changed the political landscape of the region.² It is now over five years since the Arab Spring began in Tunisia. When it started, many thought that freedom and democracy would flourish as soon as the dictators were gone. Others disagreed. So what has changed over the past five years, especially for vulnerable groups in the region like Christians?

This research paper focusses on five North African countries, namely Egypt³, Libya⁴, Tunisia⁵, Algeria⁶ and Morocco⁷ and seeks to assess how the Arab Spring has affected Christians in these countries. The objective is to determine what has changed and what has remained the same for Christians in northern Africa in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Due to the varying size and importance of these countries (as well as the different degree to which they were affected), the extent to which the situation in each country will be discussed will also vary. Clearly, the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) has made the situation more complex. In some countries the Arab Spring was followed by chaos and a complete destruction of state institutions and structures. This made life easy for radical jihadists to emerge under different names, most notably IS. Libya is a typical example of this, but Egypt is also struggling to deal with militant insurgency in the Sinai desert.

Most of the dictators in the region had built the functions of the state around themselves rather than state institutions. After their fall, many countries were forced to start building fresh frameworks for both government and state. In some of the countries that have been part of this transformative process, the dust has yet to settle and it is very difficult to say with certainty what the ultimate outcome of the Arab Spring is. Nevertheless, given that half a decade has elapsed since the onset of this momentous political upheaval, it can still be useful to take stock of how the Arab Spring has affected Christians in the region, particularly Christians in North Africa.

Such an assessment can only be provisional as there are ongoing activities very much linked to the uprising. Yet for all those who are concerned with the fate of Christians in the region it is

¹ For comprehensive introductions to the Arab Spring, see Lynch, Marc and Sullivan, Claire H., *The Arab Uprising: The Wave of Protest That Toppled the Status Quo and the Struggle for a New Middle East*, 2012; see also Gelvin, James L., *The Arab uprisings: what everyone needs to know*, Oxford University Press, USA, 2015.

² Ibid.

³ For further information regarding the situation of Christians in the country in 2015 see <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/WWL-2016-Compilation-2-Long-profiles-Edition-2016-02-01.pdf>, p. 122, last accessed on 15 March 2016.

⁴ Ibid., p. 55, last accessed on 15 March 2016.

⁵ Ibid., p. 174, last accessed on 15 March 2016.

⁶ Ibid., p. 200, last accessed on 15 March 2016.

⁷ For further information regarding the situation of Christians in the country in 2015, see <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/WWL-2016-Compilation-3-All-WWL-documents-not-including-Country-persecution-dynamics-Edition-2016-01-28.pdf>, pp. 22-23, last accessed on 15 March 2016.

essential to advocate effectively for Christians whose plight as a persecuted religious minority seems to have become worse than it was before the Arab Spring.

1. Tunisia

Tunisia is the country where it all started. It was Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian, for whom the misery and indignity of life under Ben Ali's dictatorship had got beyond what he could tolerate, and who set himself on fire in protest and set the whole Arab world aflame.⁸ Five years later, Tunisia would seem to be the only country to come out of the Arab Spring in a clearly better situation than before the uprising.⁹ As such, lauded for the relatively peaceful and inclusive democratic transition it has managed to undergo, Tunisia is also a very interesting case study of how the Arab Spring and the changes it brought about affected Christians in the region. This is not to say the transition was smooth. In fact, initially, the downfall of the dictator paved a way for Islamists to take control of the government.

Tunisia is a predominantly Muslim country with the number of Christians estimated to be around 25,500 Christian in a total population of 11.4 million.¹⁰ Most of these are foreigners or descendants of European settlers from colonial times.¹¹ The majority of Christians in Tunisia are Catholic (and mostly expatriates), although there are a small number of Protestant and Orthodox Christians.¹² During the years since the headquarters of the African Development Bank was moved to Tunis from the Ivory Coast, the Christian employees of this large continental bank have swelled the number of Christians in Tunis.¹³ It is also important to note that there are Tunisians from a Muslim background who have converted to Christianity, although it is difficult to come up with credible figures as to their numbers.¹⁴

Before the Arab Spring, expatriate Christians in Tunisia enjoyed freedom to worship within certain restrictions imposed by law.¹⁵ The Tunisian state, by virtue of a treaty with the Vatican, gave official recognition to the Catholic Church.¹⁶ This allowed Catholics in Tunisia to worship and practice their religion more openly. However, certain restrictions remained in place: Proselytization and religious activity in the public sphere outside of the premises of churches

⁸ See Fahim, Kareem, Slap to a Man's Pride Set off Tumult in Tunisia, New York Times, 21 January 2011, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/22/world/africa/22sidi.html?_r=2&pagewanted=2&src=twrhplast, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁹ Diamond, Larry, Tunisia Is Still a Success, The Atlantic, 23 March 2015, available at, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/tunisia-is-still-a-success-terrorist-attack/388436/>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

¹⁰ About Tunisia, see <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/WWL-2016-Compilation-2-Long-profiles-Edition-2016-02-01.pdf> p. 174, last accessed on 15 March 2016.

¹¹ Pfannkuch, Katharina, Christians in Tunisia Cause for Concern, Qantara.de, 9 October 2013, available at <http://en.qantara.de/content/christians-in-tunisia-cause-for-concern>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Marzouk, Zeineb, Crossing Over: The Struggles Of A Tunisian 'Apostate', Tunislive, 15 June 2015, available at <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2015/06/15/crossing-apostate-tunisia/>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

¹⁵ Maksan, Oliver, Tunisia: The Muslim nation where Christians enjoy relative freedom, Catholic News Agency, 1 November 2014, available at, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/tunisia-the-muslim-nation-where-christians-enjoy-relative-freedom-74844/>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

¹⁶ Ibid.

remained banned.¹⁷ Therefore, it could be said that although there was a degree of freedom of religion, the scope of this freedom was very narrow and it did not allow Christians to openly profess their faith in public and preach the gospel to non-Christians.

In addition to the official restrictions imposed by the state there were also significant societal restrictions. The situation was particularly difficult for Tunisians who converted to Christianity from Islam. These converts were subjected to enormous pressure from their family, friends, neighbors and colleagues to renounce Christianity. They were often ostracized and persecuted by their loved ones.¹⁸

One of the things that has not changed in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, is this societal pressure and persecution of those who convert from Islam to Christianity. In fact this pressure has become worse, since, after the collapse of the former regime that had kept a tight control on society, militant Islamic groups are now using their newfound freedom to preach intolerance and violence.¹⁹

After the Jasmine Revolution, the new democratic political dispensation has created an opportunity for Islamic militancy to rise. Compared to the period before the Arab Spring, it can be said that Christians in Tunisia now face potentially more risks from militant Islamic groups and are suffering an increase in societal pressure and persecution.²⁰

At the same time, Christians in Tunisia have also benefited and their situation has improved in some respects. This is particularly true in relation to the newly adopted Tunisian constitution, although its practical impact still has to become clear.²¹ However, the new constitution is not perfect regarding freedom of religion. Some argue that by declaring that the “state has a duty to protect religion, [the new constitution is] paving the way for future laws prohibiting blasphemy and curbing freedom of expression.”²² The most popular Islamic political party in Tunisia, the Ennahda party, has been accommodating the interests of secularists and liberals. Despite the insistence of more radical Islamic political parties calling for the inclusion of provisions in the constitution making sharia the supreme source of law in Tunisia, the Ennahda party - in collaboration with secular and liberal parties - has resisted these calls.²³

Furthermore, the new Tunisian constitution grants Tunisian Christians more robust freedom of religion by stating that it “guarantees freedom of conscience and belief, the free exercise of

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See footnote 14.

¹⁹ Tunisia, The Voice of the Martyrs, available at <https://www.vomcanada.com/tunisia.htm>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Seymour, Julia A., Christians cautiously optimistic over Tunisia’s new constitution, World News Group, 28 January 2014, available at http://www.worldmag.com/2014/01/christians_cautiously_optimistic_over_tunisia_s_new_constitution, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

²² Ghribi, Asma, The Problem with Tunisia’s New Constitution, Foreign Policy, 14 January 2014, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/09/the-problem-with-tunisias-new-constitution/> last accessed on 15 March 2016.

²³ Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda edges away from Sharia, BBC News, 26 March 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17517113>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

religious practices...".²⁴ This is an important gain for Christians in Tunisia and a positive and promising change.

Nevertheless, societal attitudes and intolerance are still a problem. The instability and chaos that have come about in the rest of the region after the Arab Spring, also have a spillover effect in Tunisia. As a result, the threat of militant Islamic groups and violent attacks against Christians has increased in Tunisia.²⁵ The majority of Tunisians and the government of Tunisia seem determined to protect the international image of Tunisia as a tolerant country that has made a successful transition to democracy.²⁶ This desire of the government, if genuine, together with the new constitution, work in favor of Tunisian Christians who are eager to enjoy true freedom of religion and belief and freedom from the fear of persecution.

The future situation of Christians in Tunisia is very much dependent on the extent to which the government will be able to fight violent Islamic militancy and suppress the growing persecution of Christians, particularly the growing violence directed against them. It is also dependent upon the extent to which the society at large internalizes the values of tolerance and openness which underlie the new constitutional order of Tunisia.

2. Morocco

Morocco is one of the northern African Arab countries which has been least affected by the Arab Spring. Although there were protests inspired by events in Tunisia and elsewhere in the region against the political status quo in Morocco in 2011, these protests were peaceful and did not lead to a radical transformation of the political order in the country.²⁷ The protesters were mainly interested in demanding political and constitutional limits to royal prerogatives and the introduction of something close to a constitutional monarchy. The king was responsive to these demands and set up a commission to propose constitutional reforms.²⁸

This commission drafted a new constitution which reduced some of the powers of the king and empowered a democratically elected parliament as well as a government led by a prime minister.²⁹ Nevertheless, the king still retained significant powers as commander in chief, supreme religious leader in the country and chairperson of the council of ministers.³⁰ The draft

²⁴ See Article 6 of the Tunisian Constitution, available at

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia_2014.pdf, last accessed on 8 April 2016.

²⁵ Tunisia attack highlights threat of violence spilling over from Libya, Washington Post, 20 March 2015, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/security-bolstered-across-tunisia-as-rallies-decry-reach-of-terrorism/2015/03/20/a214fee4-ce79-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html, last accessed on 18 February 2016.

²⁶ Mksan, Oliver, Despite terror attack, Christians in Tunisia have reasons to remain hopeful, Catholic News Agency, 9 July 2015, available at <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/despite-terror-attack-christians-in-tunisia-have-reasons-to-remain-hopeful-85514/>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

²⁷ Bozonnet, Charlotte, Political stability in Morocco cannot silence the murmurs of discontent, The Guardian, 9 March 2015, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/09/morocco-reform-protest-arab-spring>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Morocco's King Mohammed unveils constitutional reforms, BBC News, 18 June 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13816974>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

³⁰ Morocco approves King Mohammed's constitutional reforms, BBC News, 2 July 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13976480>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

constitution introducing these reforms was ratified by a referendum which was followed by a parliamentary election.³¹ In the general election conducted in 2011 under the new constitution, an Islamic party called the Justice and Development Party won the majority of seats in the parliament and was able to form the government.³² Therefore, one can say that Morocco has been successful in avoiding the political turmoil that rocked other Arab nations in northern Africa and in the Middle East.

This continuity in Morocco's political landscape can also be observed in the situation for Christians in the country. The number of Christians in Morocco is estimated to be 27,100, of whom most are expatriates.³³ There are however a number of Moroccan Christians who find themselves subjected to persecution and pressure by family, by society and to some extent by state actors.

Morocco, unlike most other Arab states in the region, does not have a law criminalizing conversion from Islam to Christianity.³⁴ However, proselytizing is proscribed and punishable under the Moroccan Penal Code on the basis of a vague provision within the Criminal Code which criminalizes "shaking the beliefs" of a Muslim.³⁵ The police are known to use this provision to harass and bring criminal charges against those who convert from Islam to Christianity.³⁶ As a result, most converts choose to meet in secret in underground house churches and take great precaution not to draw attention to themselves, making any accurate research near-impossible.³⁷

In addition to such harassment by the authorities, converts are also subjected to abuse, threats and harassment from their colleagues, family members and neighbors.³⁸ This state of affairs, prevalent in Morocco before the Arab Spring, still persists without much change.

Although there were attempts to introduce a robust freedom of religion provision in the 2011 Constitution of Morocco, these attempts were resisted by the Islamic Justice and Development party.³⁹ The fact that this Islamist party is the same party that ultimately won the general election in 2011 does not foreshadow bright days for freedom of religion in Morocco.

While there currently seem to be two centers of power in Morocco, i.e. the monarch and the government, it is likely that in due course the government, dominated by Islamist parties, will become more powerful and assertive. Such a development might undermine freedom of religion

³¹ Ibid.

³² Morocco votes in first poll since Mohamed VI's reforms, BBC News, 26 November 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15884484>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

³³ See <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/WWL-2016-Compilation-3-All-WWL-documents-not-including-Country-persecution-dynamics-Edition-2016-01-28.pdf>, p. 5. Last accessed 15 March 2016.

³⁴ See Pew Research Center report, available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/28/which-countries-still-outlaw-apostasy-and-blasphemy/> last accessed on 8 April 2016.

³⁵ Graves, Kacie, Christians in Morocco: A Crisis of Faith, US News & World Report, 30 September 2015, available at, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/09/30/christians-in-morocco-a-crisis-of-faith>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Saidi, Jamal, Moroccan Converts to Christianity told their stories, Morocco World News, 10 February 2013, available at <http://www.morocccworldnews.com/2013/02/77798/moroccan-converts-to-christianity-told-their-stories/>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

in Morocco in the future. However, as things stand now, for Christians in Morocco little has changed in their situation as a result of the Arab Spring.

The Moroccan state is sensitive about keeping up its international reputation and seems intent on presenting itself as being a tolerant, liberal state that respects the religious freedom of minorities.⁴⁰ In January 2016 Morocco hosted a meeting attended by the leaders of many Muslim countries in order to issue a declaration regarding the protection of religious minorities in Muslim countries.⁴¹ Nevertheless the resolve of the authorities to protect freedom of religion seems to be limited and does not go far enough to allow Christians to worship, preach and practice their faith in public without hindrance. There have also been some alarming incidents such as the fatwa issued by a Muslim cleric calling for the killing of Christians.⁴² Such incidents cannot be understood in isolation from the overall rise of Islamic militancy in the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

Despite the fact that Morocco has been spared the instability and chaos that the Arab Spring caused in other countries in the region, it has not been immune from some of its effects as these kinds of incidents indicate. But generally, as far as Morocco is concerned, it is safe to conclude that the Arab Spring has not changed the situation for Christians dramatically.

3. Libya

Unlike Tunisia and Morocco, Libya - the classic failed state - is an example of a country in which the situation for Christians has changed dramatically since the Arab Spring. Unfortunately, this change has been a downward spiral. Before the Arab Spring and the total breakdown of law and order in Libya, the situation for Christians in Libya was comparable to that in Tunisia or Morocco. There were an estimated 300,000 Coptic Christians and 80,000 Roman Catholics in Libya and almost all Christians in Libya were foreigners.⁴³ Expatriate Christians in Libya did not enjoy full freedom of religion and belief in Libya under Gaddafi. However, each Christian denomination was allowed one place of worship in each city and Christians were allowed to worship in public.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Christian migrant workers were allowed entry into Libya and the state tolerated the importation and distribution of Christian literature as long as it was not in Arabic.⁴⁵ However, the activity of Christian groups and organizations was closely monitored and even if there was no legal prohibition on the conversion from Islam to Christianity, any attempt at proselytization

⁴⁰ Seymour, Julia A., Eleven lawyers plead for jailed Moroccan Christian, World News Group, 14 October 2013, available at http://www.worldmag.com/2013/10/eleven_lawyers_plead_for_jailed_moroccan_christian, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁴¹ See <http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/>, last accessed on 31 March 2016.

⁴² Christians in Morocco Fear Fatwa Portends Harsher Treatment, Morning Star News, 4 May 2013, available at <http://morningstarnews.org/2013/05/christians-in-morocco-fear-fatwa-portends-harsher-treatment/>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁴³ Nzwilli, Fredrick, Christians in Libya cast anxious eye at religious freedom, The Washington Post, 10 January 2014, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/christians-in-libya-cast-anxious-eye-at-religious-freedom/2014/01/10/eda2c72c-7a26-11e3-a647-a19deaf575b3_story.html, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁴⁴ Libya, International Religious Freedom Report, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, And Labor, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2001/5613.htm>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

was prohibited.⁴⁶ State authorities arrested and persecuted Christians suspected of proselytizing.⁴⁷

In addition to such restrictions on freedom of religion from the side of the state, there was also significant persecution and pressure on Christians from society.⁴⁸ The potential for such societal or horizontal persecution was partly reduced by the state repressing militant and radical Islamic views. The regime viewed Islamic radicalism as a threat to its survival and control of political power. As a result, the state monitored the teaching of clerics and tried to clamp down on teachings it considered were promoting militant and radical versions of Islam.⁴⁹ The tight control that the state exercised on all groups and society accorded Christians in Libya a degree of protection from societal persecution and the threat from militant Islamic groups. Therefore, the unintended consequence of a strong autocratic control under the dictatorship of Gaddafi in Libya provided some security and a modicum of freedom of worship for Christians in Libya.

The events in Libya that led to the fall of Gaddafi and the upheaval and mayhem that followed are well known. To recap these events briefly, in 2011 protests inspired by the Arab Spring began against the Gaddafi regime.⁵⁰ These protests quickly escalated into an armed uprising. The situation turned into a civil war that the rebels won, partly due to support from Western governments including airstrikes against forces loyal to Gaddafi.⁵¹ Once Gaddafi was defeated, the various rebel groups that had raised arms against him and who had formed the National Transitional Council (NTC), now turned against each other. Libya now finds itself mired in a full-fledged civil war with different militant groups fighting for supremacy.⁵² The internationally recognized government of Libya currently does not have full and effective control over the whole country.⁵³

The militant groups presently competing as major players in the Libyan civil war include the Libya Dawn, the Libya Shield and other pro-General National Council groups as well as the national army and the Zintan, al-Sawaiq, al-Qaqa battalions.⁵⁴ These groups are largely tribal and regional armed forces. In addition to such groups, the ongoing conflict in Libya is also fueled by jihadist groups such as the Islamic State (IS), Ansar al-Sharia which is Al-Qaeda's Libyan affiliate, Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, Derna Mujahidin Shura Council, Ajdabiya Revolutionaries Shura Council.⁵⁵

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See Ibrahim, Raymond, How The West Destroyed Libya, Frontpage, 12 January 2015, available at <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/249242/how-west-destroyed-libya-raymond-ibrahim>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁵⁰ See August, Peter Finn, The rise and fall of Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi, The Washington Post, 21 February 2011, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-rise-and-fall-of-libyan-leader-moammar-gaddafi/2011/02/21/gIQA32NsdJ_story.html, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁵¹ Stephen, Chris, Five years after Gaddafi, Libya torn by civil war and battles with Isis, The Guardian, 16 February 2016, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/16/libya-gaddafi-arab-spring-civil-war-islamic-state>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid. See also: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/62af406d297c401a88c9f9401f308481/libya-eastern-government-declares-martial-law>, last accessed 19 June 2016.

⁵⁴ Guide to key Libyan militias, BBC News, 11 January 2016, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19744533>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

In this melee of armed groups and jihadist outfits, the situation for Christians in Libya has become difficult beyond imagination. Christians in Libya have been subjected to the most violent and horrendous forms of persecution since the start of the Arab Spring.⁵⁶ The general environment of instability coupled with the growing influence of jihadist groups in Libya means that the situation in Libya after the Arab Spring is definitely much worse than before the civil war.

The changes that have been brought about in Libya as a result of the Arab Spring have not been changes for the better, particularly as far as Christians are concerned. This has been made abundantly clear with videos released by the IS in Libya showing the beheading of Egyptian Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians.⁵⁷ The absence of law and order has also made life for converts from Islam to Christianity even harder. Equally important is the fact that, following the fall of Gaddafi, other Islamist groups left Libya taking with them large quantities of ammunition and weapons and have been creating chaos in other countries of the region - for example, the Islamist group currently active in Northern Mali.

4. Egypt

Egypt is another country where the Arab Spring made the situation for Christians worse. Estimates for the size of the Christian community range today from 9 to – 15 million out of a total population of 93.4 million. Egyptian Christians (belonging mainly to the Coptic Church of Egypt) are not only a significant minority in the country but constitute the largest Christian population in North Africa.⁵⁸ Given the ancient roots of the Coptic Church in Egypt, the historical significance of this Christian community is also of great importance not just for Egypt and the region but also for Christianity as a whole.

During the reign of President Hosni Mubarak, Christians were a persecuted minority⁵⁹ but they did enjoy some security and protection from the worst forms of persecution and attack that they might have had otherwise faced from militant Islamic groups.⁶⁰ Salafist groups were considered to be a threat to the national security of Egypt when Mubarak was in power. Their activities were suppressed by the regime and they were constantly monitored.⁶¹ However, the Egyptian state under Mubarak was not really interested in respecting the religious freedom of Christians

⁵⁶ See for example Black, Ian, Isis claim of beheading Egyptian Copts in Libya shows group's spread, The Guardian, 15 February 2015, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/15/isis-21-egyptian-coptic-christians-beheading-libya>, last accessed on 17 February 2016; see also Mclaughlin, Elliott, ISIS executes more Christians in Libya, video shows, CNN, 20 April 2015, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/19/africa/libya-isis-executions-ethiopian-christians/>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ About Egypt, Open Doors Analytical, see <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/WWL-2016-Compilation-2-Long-profiles-Edition-2016-02-01.pdf>, p. 122. Last accessed 14 March 2016.

⁵⁹ Shaker, Anna Maria, Egypt Before the Protests: Thirty Years of Religious Persecution, Fordham Political Review, undated, available at <http://fordhampoliticalreview.org/egypt-before-the-protests-thirty-years-of-religious-persecution/>, last accessed on 17 February, 2016.

⁶⁰ Tobia, P. J., Why Did Assad, Saddam and Mubarak Protect Christians?, PBS, 14 October 2011, available at <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/mid-easts-christians-intro/>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁶¹ Kneil, Yolande, The complicated legacy of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, BBC News, 25 January 2013, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-21201364>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

and in recognizing them as Egyptians with equal status as their Muslim compatriots. Egyptian churches were subjected to very restrictive zoning and building permit laws that made it nearly impossible to repair old and damaged churches.⁶² The situation was made even worse because some churches which had been attacked and severely damaged by mobs could not rebuild their places of worship due to these restrictive permit requirements that were deliberately used for persecuting Christians.⁶³

Furthermore, even during the reign of Hosni Mubarak, those who perpetrated attacks against Christians were not brought to justice. Christian victims of violent attacks were frequently pressured to take part in “reconciliation sessions” that enabled the perpetrators of the attack to walk away without being held accountable.⁶⁴

After the Arab Spring and the fall of President Mubarak, the situation for Egyptian Christians became even more precarious. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Mubarak, radical Islamic groups were able to become more assertive and openly call for violence against Christians.⁶⁵ The groups which had operated hitherto underground were now able to officially engage in politics and organize political parties.⁶⁶ Such a permissive environment allowed militant Islamic groups to become very active and influential. The transitional military administration did little to protect Christians from increasing attacks and hostility against Christians.⁶⁷ In fact, soldiers killed scores of demonstrators who went out to protest the plight of persecuted Christians in Egypt.⁶⁸

In 2012, after what initially seemed to have been the first democratic elections in the history of Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was able to secure the presidency through its candidate, Mohamed Morsi.⁶⁹ Christians did not fare any better under his administration. The attacks and hostility against Christians continued unabated and many Christians were forced to opt for exile to escape the increasing influence of radical Islam and the risk of persecution.⁷⁰ When President Morsi was ousted by widespread popular demonstrations, the Coptic Church in Egypt lent its support to the military takeover of power.⁷¹

⁶² See: Egyptian Coptic Christians revolt over halted church-building, The Guardian, 24 November 2010, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/24/egypt-christians-cairo-church-building>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Shea, Nina, Egypt’s Copts: Will the Region’s Largest Non-Muslim Religious Community Simply Disappear?, New Republic, 10 June 2011, available at <https://newrepublic.com/article/89737/egypt-coptic-christians-muslim-brotherhood-arabs-islam>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁶⁵ Malik, Habib C., Violence Against Egypt’s Copts In An Intolerant Arab Spring, News Week, 16 October 2011, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/violence-against-egypts-copts-intolerant-arab-spring-68277>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Kirkpatrick, David D., Church Protests in Cairo Turn Deadly, The New York Times, 9 October 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/10/world/middleeast/deadly-protests-over-church-attack-in-cairo.html?pagewanted=all>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁶⁹ Weaver, Matthew, Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohammed Morsi wins Egypt’s presidential race, The Guardian, 24 June 2012, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/middle-east-live/2012/jun/24/egypt-election-results-live>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁷⁰ Glainmay, Stephen, Christians Uneasy in Morsi’s Egypt, The New York Times, 15 May 2013, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/16/world/middleeast/christians-uneasy-in-morsis-egypt.html?_r=0, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁷¹ Fahim, Kareem, Islamists Step Up Attacks on Christians for Supporting Morsi’s Ouster, The New York Times, 20 August 2013, available at

Angered by the military ousting of President Morsi, Islamic militants increased their attacks against Christians whom they blamed for supporting the military in taking power from the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷² As things stand at the time of writing, the former leader of the army, General al-Sisi, eventually became Egypt's president. His sweeping popularity was based on the perception that he was saving Egypt from the iron grip of radical Muslims. The presidential elections came after a national vote for the adoption of a new constitution.⁷³

In many respects, the al-Sisi administration resembles the reign of President Mubarak. However, the general environment has become more hostile to Egyptian Christians than in Mubarak's days. The emergence of Islamic insurgency in the Sinai and the enmity that supporters of the popular Muslim Brotherhood feel towards Christian Egyptians for their perceived role in toppling the Morsi administration make the situation of Christians in Egypt far worse than it was before the Arab Spring. From 1 November 2013 to 31 October 2014, 43 Christians were killed and 58 churches were attacked.⁷⁴ From 1 November 2014 to 31 October 2015, 12 Christians were killed and 69 churches were attacked.⁷⁵

Nevertheless many argue that Egyptian Christians are faring much better and are more secure under the presidency of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. President al-Sisi made history by being the first Egyptian head-of-state to attend a Christian mass in 2015.⁷⁶ Both in 2015 and 2016, President al-Sisi made an important symbolic statement by attending a Christmas Eve mass in an Egyptian Coptic church and making statements that assured Coptic Christians of the protection of the state from attacks by Islamic militants.⁷⁷ President al-Sisi went even as far as apologizing for such attacks and promising the material support from the state in the reconstruction of churches that had been destroyed by Islamists.⁷⁸ He was also very quick to condemn the attack against Christians that occurred in connection with allegations of an affair between a Christian man and Muslim woman in May 2016,⁷⁹ promising that the perpetrators of the attack would be brought to justice.⁸⁰ Because of these symbolic gestures, statements and practical measures he has taken, President al-Sisi enjoys the support and approval of the majority of Coptic Christians in

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/21/world/middleeast/attacks-rise-against-egypts-christians.html>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Perry, Tom and Fick, Maggie, "Egyptians back constitution, opening way to Sisi presidential run", Reuters, 16 January 2014, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-referendum-idUSBREA0F0IZ20140116>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁷⁴ See <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/World-Watch-List-2015-Report-Part-3-Other-background-articles.pdf>, pp. 12-13. Last assessed on 1 April 2016.

⁷⁵ See <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/WWL-2016-Compilation-3-All-WWL-documents-not-including-Country-persecution-dynamics-Edition-2016-01-28.pdf>, p. 18. Last assessed on 1 April 2016.

⁷⁶ Egyptian president attends Coptic Christmas Eve mass in Cairo, The Guardian, 7 January 2015, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/07/egypt-president-sisi-coptic-christmas-mass-cairo>, last accessed on July 6, 2016.

⁷⁷ Egyptian President Attends Coptic Christian Mass in Cairo, Newsmax, 6 January 2016, available at <http://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/egypt-president-abdel-fattah-al-sisi-attends/2016/01/06/id/708463/>, last accessed on 6 July 2016.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Egypt: President Sisi promises justice after 70-year-old Christian woman stripped and beaten, Christian Today, 27 May 2016, available at <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/egypt.president.sisi.calls.for.justice.after.70.year.old.christian.woman.striped.and.beaten/86972.htm>, last accessed on 6 July 2016.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Egypt.⁸¹ Noting this fact, one journalist observes that “conditions for Christians in Egypt are markedly better. Many see Abdel Fattah Sisi....as their protector, sent to deliver them from the rule of Islamists.”⁸² The fact that President al-Sisi ordered air strikes against IS militants who had executed Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya was also seen as an important demonstration of the president’s determination to build a more inclusive Egypt.⁸³ His call for a more tolerant interpretation of Islam and the fact that he has repeatedly embraced the pluralistic religious composition of Egypt has also reinforced the view that President al-Sisi is a friend of Egyptian Christians.

However, others contend that the situation of Christians under the current administration is more complicated. Critics point to the fact that prosecution against Christians for alleged instances of blasphemy have continued under al-Sisi’s regime.⁸⁴ In relation to this, one researcher and author who focuses on the issue of freedom of religion in Egypt notes:

“Despite Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s many pluralistic words and gestures—which have won him much praise from the nation’s Christians and moderates—he appeases the Islamist agenda in one very clear way: by allowing the controversial defamation of religions law, colloquially known as the “blasphemy law,” to target Christians and moderates in ways arguably worse than under the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi.”⁸⁵

In addition to the increased use of blasphemy laws against Christians, others have also pointed to the continued impunity that is prevalent in favor of those who commit violent attacks against Christians.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the longterm risk of the identification of Christians with an increasingly autocratic and repressive regime also gives rise to serious concerns. Noting this risk, one researcher asserts that “the Coptic Church has tied itself to his [President al-Sisi’s] rule, which grows ever more repressive. If he falls, Copts again could find themselves targeted, but this time by a much wider proportion of the population.”⁸⁷

Therefore, while the administration of President al-Sisi could be considered a definite improvement on the situation of Christians from the days of the Morsi presidency, many of the

⁸¹ Egypt’s Christians already have a Savior, they need a friend, *Crux*, 3 July 2016), available at <https://cruxnow.com/all-things-catholic/2016/07/03/egypts-christians-already-savior-want-protector/>, last accessed on 6 July 2016.

⁸² Egypt’s Christians feel safer under Sisi, but bias and injustice persist, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 March 2016 available at <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-egypt-copts-20160305-story.html>, last accessed on 6 July 2016.

⁸³ Egypt’s Copts praise Sisi but await more tangible support, *Reuters*, 21 May 2015), available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-christians-sisi-idUSKBN0061A720150521>, last accessed on 6 July 2016.

⁸⁴ Sisi Is Condoning the Persecution of Christians, *Newsweek*, 3 June 2016, available at <http://europe.newsweek.com/egypt-sisi-condoning-persecution-christians-433604?rm=eu>, last accessed on 6 July 2016.

⁸⁵ Ibrahim, Raymond, Blasphemy Convictions Intensify In Sisi’s Egypt; Sisi must start walking the walk and not just talking the talk, (front page Magazine: 7 April, 2016), available at <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/262421/blasphemy-convictions-intensify-sisis-egypt-raymond-ibrahim>, last accessed on 6 July, 2016.

⁸⁶ Yerkes, Sarah, What Egypt under Sisi is really like for Coptic Christians, (Brookings Institute | June 20, 2016), available at <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2016/06/20-egypt-coptic-christians-yerkes>, last accessed on 6 July, 2016.

⁸⁷ Egypt’s Copts Likely to Find Persecution Ahead from Increasingly Repressive Military Regime, (*Huffington Post*: 05/14/2016), available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/doug-bandow/egypts-copts-likely-to-fi_b_9972810.html, last accessed on 6 July, 2016.

problems encountered by Christians in Egypt have persisted till this day and the actions of the presidency of al-Sisi has yet to measure up to his rhetoric. Be this as it may, President al-Sisi's administration seems to be the better alternative as compared to the realistic alternatives in contemporary Egypt.

5. Algeria

Algeria was not affected significantly by the Arab Spring.⁸⁸ Although there were some demonstrations starting early in 2011, these did not last long and were less dramatic compared to what was going on in the rest of the region.⁸⁹ According to some analysts "the [protests] were contained swiftly and without [major] bloodshed by a large, well trained, well equipped, and well paid police force."⁹⁰

Analysts argue that there are two main reasons why this was the case. The first reason is the fact that Algeria had already in the last century experienced a similar situation to that which Egypt and other Arab countries are now going through after the Arab Spring. So, in a sense, Algeria was inoculated against the effects of the Arab Spring. In 1989, after the end of the Cold War, Algeria had experimented with democratic reforms as part of what is considered its third democratic wave. At that time, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), the ruling party that had been in power in Algeria since independence, introduced multi-party elections in response to popular protests against its rule.⁹¹ But when Islamic parties won the first election held after these reforms in 1992, the military leaders annulled the results, declared a state of emergency and the country went through a bloody civil war.⁹² Hundreds of thousands of Algerians were killed or disappeared as a result of that conflict.⁹³ Therefore, Algerians were very wary of risking further violence when it came to the Arab Spring and demands for political reform. The fear of a repeat of the instability and chaos of the early 1990's made Algerians reluctant to join the Arab Spring bandwagon.

The other reason why the Arab Spring did not find a receptive environment in Algeria is the fact that the Algerian government was able to appease the public with various subsidies and benefits.⁹⁴ The wealth gained as a major exporter of oil and gas enabled the regime to assuage public discontent by directly providing housing, credit and all sorts of financial and material

⁸⁸ Daoud, Kamel, The Algerian Exception, The New York Times, 29 May 2015, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/30/opinion/the-algerian-exception.html>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Zoubir, Yahia H., Algeria After the Arab Spring: Algiers Came Out Ahead—But the Good Times Could Be Over, 9 February 2016, Foreign Affairs, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/algeria/2016-02-09/algeria-after-arab-spring>, last accessed 12 March 2016.

⁹¹ Khan, Mohsin and Mezran, Karim, No Arab Spring for Algeria, Issue Brief May 2014, Atlantic Council Rafik Hariri Center for The Middle East; see also Daoud, Kamel, The Algerian Exception, 29 May 2015, The New York Times, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/30/opinion/the-algerian-exception.html>, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

benefits. It also helped that President Bouteflika made some political concessions including the lifting of the state of emergency.⁹⁵

Therefore, the Arab Spring did not occur in Algeria. As a result, one cannot talk of what has changed and what has not changed for Algerian Christians as a result of the Arab Spring. However, it is important to note that Christians in Algeria live in an oppressive environment where they do not enjoy freedom of religion. Christians are persecuted both by the state and the Muslim majority population in various ways. It is estimated that Christians in Algeria make up less than 1% of the population and could be as many as 39,200.⁹⁶ Christians are not allowed to worship freely in Algeria because the state prohibits all non-Muslims from engaging in worship in venues it has not registered and recognized as places of worship.⁹⁷ The state has criminalized all meetings for worship or religious activities outside places it has registered as a place of worship.⁹⁸

Furthermore, Christians have difficulty in having the state register their places of worship and in getting permits to build churches. They are also harassed and persecuted on the basis of laws that make it a crime to put pressure on a Muslim to abandon his faith.⁹⁹ This vaguely worded criminal provision banning proselytization is invoked against Christians even when they have not attempted to convert a Muslim to Christianity.¹⁰⁰

The state of religious freedom for Christians in Algeria was deplorable before the Arab Spring and things have not changed much as a result of the Arab Spring taking root in the region. However, there is no doubt that if the current regime were to collapse under a revolution similar to the Arab Spring, the situation would be much worse for Algerian Christians since this would mean the return of Islamic militants whose hostility to Christians would be much higher and virulent than that of the current regime.

In this scenario it is probable that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) would unleash vicious attacks on Christians. AQIM has been kidnapping tourists in the country to help sustain its operation with the ransom money they have been collecting mainly from European countries. According to reports from 2003-2013, "AQIM has made over US\$200 million through the Kidnapping For Ransom (KFR)."¹⁰¹ AQIM also funds its operation by engaging in "human trafficking, and drug running in the largely ungovernable areas of southern North Africa and the

⁹⁵ Bensemra, Zohra, Algeria lifts 19-year-old state of emergency, Reuters, 24 Feb 2011, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-emergency-lifting-idUSTRE71N6VS20110224>, last accessed on 17 February, 2016.

⁹⁶ About Algeria, Open Doors Analytical, see <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/WWL-2016-Compilation-3-All-WWL-documents-not-including-Country-persecution-dynamics-Edition-2016-01-28.pdf>, p. 4. Last accessed 15 March 2016.

⁹⁷ Research and Analysis Report: Spurt in Christian Persecution in Algeria Needs Attention, WEA-RLC, 30 May 2011, available at <http://www.worldea.org/news/3525>, last accessed February 17, 2016.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Algeria Upholds Conviction of Convert from Islam, Morning Star, 13 February 2013, available at <http://morningstarnews.org/2013/02/algeria-upholds-conviction-of-convert-from-islam/>, last accessed 17 February 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Algerian faces 5 years in prison for sharing Christian faith, World Watch Monitor, 3 December 2012, available at https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/article_2840831.html/, last accessed on 17 February 2016.

¹⁰¹ See <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kerryadolan/2013/12/16/the-secret-of-al-qaeda-in-islamic-maghreb-inc-a-resilient-and-highly-illegal-business-model/#32532a312b96>, last accessed on 15 March 2016.

Sahel.”¹⁰² There are also reports that suggest the drug cartels from Latin America are working with al-Qaeda in the region. One US military official was quoted saying “Al-Qaeda is profiting from the drug trafficking trade going through its areas.”¹⁰³

It is also important to note that in Algeria, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), who won the elections in 1992, blames the West for the annulled election of 1992. As a result, they target Christians since the Islamist parties regard them as symbols of Western nations.

Conclusion

As the analysis of the above five North African countries shows, the situation of Christians in the region is marked both by change and continuity. The Arab Spring has brought about a modest progress in the constitutional status and freedom of religion of Christians in Tunisia. However, this seems to be a rare instance of a change for the better. Particularly in Libya, the change brought about through the Arab Spring has intensified the persecution of Christians.

It would be fair to conclude that the Arab Spring has unleashed the latent forces of Islamic militancy and exposed Christians in some countries of the region to the most violent forms of persecution. Christian communities in the region are facing an existential threat and a very grim future. The tragic fate of Christians and the overall precarious situation of the Church in the region are very alarming.

As has been noted, there are also continuities with regard to the situation of Christians in the region even after the Arab Spring. This is particularly true as concerns the societal persecution Christians are subjected to in these countries. Since the Arab Spring, the ostracization, cultural marginalization, harassment and pressure Christians are subjected to in the region has continued and in some cases it has become worse.

It seems that when celebrating the Arab Spring, most analysts have failed to heed to warnings about the dangers of “illiberal democracies”.¹⁰⁴ American Ambassador Richard Holbrooke once said of a liberal democracy in relation to the 1996 Bosnian election: “Suppose the election was declared free and fair, [and the people who won the election are] racists, fascists, separatists, who are publicly opposed to [peace and reintegration].”¹⁰⁵ Thus, even if in some countries free and fair elections can be held, we should nevertheless be wary of the outcome. For example, the election of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was properly done but it turned out the Muslim Brotherhood was planning to undermine democracy by restricting freedom of religion, freedom

¹⁰² See <http://www.361security.com/analysis/aqims-funding-sources-kidnapping-ransom-and-drug-running-by-gangster-jihadists>, last accessed on 15 March 2016.

¹⁰³ See <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/2010/0115/Air-Al-Qaeda-Are-Latin-America-s-drug-cartels-giving-Al-Qaeda-a-lift>, last accessed on 14 March 2016.

¹⁰⁴ See Zakaria, Fareed, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (Revised Edition), WW Norton & Co., 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Cited by Zakaria, Fareed, *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy*, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1997-11-01/rise-illiberal-democracy>, last accessed on 14 March 2016.

of assembly, freedom of expression and other fundamental principles that are crucial for pluralism.