

No cuddling

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Turkey as a problem case for Christians in the Middle East

Recently, reporting on the situation of Christians in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria, but also in Turkey, has fallen out of focus. But Turkey continues to try to assert its claim to hegemony in these areas. This has consequences for the religious minorities.

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The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the suppression of the call for human dignity in Syria from 2010 onwards triggered a flight movement of dramatic proportions in the Middle East. In Iraq, it was initially mainly members of the non-Muslim minorities - Christians, Yazidis, Mandaeans/Sabeans who were driven to flee after 2005/2006, primarily by the threat of radical Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda. Later, from the summer of 2014 onwards, it was the so-called Islamic State which, as a result of its genocidal campaign of conquest, provoked a new, huge movement of Yazidis fleeing from their ancestral settlement areas in the Sinjar Mountains in north-western Iraq and of Christians from the Nineveh Plain and the city of Mosul in northern Iraq.

There is little point in dwelling at length on the actual number of Christians remaining in Iraq and Syria: Numbers in the Middle East are always meant to convey a message, such as that of the size and importance of a particular group. They should therefore be treated with caution. It is nevertheless credible that around 200,000 Christians still live in Iraq today, that is about 13.5 per cent of the approximately 1.5 million Christians who are said to have lived there in 2003.

It is also credible that around 330,000 Christians still live in Syria today, which - depending on whether around one million or even one and a half million Christians lived there in 2010 - is 34 or only 22.5 percent of the Christians who are said to have lived there in 2010. A look at the recent development of the Christian population groups in Iraq and Syria shows that there have hardly been any significant migration losses in the last four or five years.

Perfidious defensive measures by the EU

Does this mean that this is due to positive developments on the ground and therefore the exodus could be stopped? No! People who want to flee simply no longer have the opportunity to leave Iraq or Syria or even to make their way west, for example to Germany. The EU-Turkey Agreement of 18 March 2016, which was concluded at the instigation of Germany in particular, is responsible for this. Even before the agreement was signed, Turkey hermetically sealed its borders with Iraq and Syria. And the lengthy, costly and dangerous alternative route via Lebanon, taken mainly by Christians from Iraq and Syria, is no longer an alternative.

And not only since the devastating explosion in the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020, which also

significantly affected Christian districts of the city. In addition, during the Trump presidency, the USA has hardly taken in any members of religious minorities from the Middle East, for example Christians. After all, quite a few of those already living in countries of first admittance - Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon - some of whom have been living there for up to ten years or more, have managed to find refuge in other countries of the Western world: In Australia and Canada, and most recently in New Zealand.

Recently, reporting on the situation of Christians in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria, but also in Turkey, has fallen out of focus. Public interest has focused on Afghanistan and then on the refugee drama on the Belarusian-Polish border. Misjudgements could have been prevented in both cases if politicians had dealt with the foreseeable developments in a timely and well-founded manner and drawn appropriate conclusions. The fact that this did not happen in a publicly comprehensible way certainly has to do with the federal elections and the fear of a new refugee crisis in the run-up to them.

Feared refugee flows from Afghanistan have been (and are) on their way west for some time, refugees from the Middle East, especially from Iraq and Syria, could set off at any time. The perfidious defensive measures of the EU and its member states, like those of Turkey most recently, will only slow down their advance towards the West in the long run, not prevent it. Only a fundamental paradigm shift in the foreign policy of the EU and its member states towards the actors in the region could bring this about.

Particularly with regard to Turkey, the cuddling course must be abandoned and foreign policy realigned if one wants to do justice to one's own claim of fighting the causes of flight. The actions taken so far are due to the fear that Turkey could interrupt or even stop the application of the so-called EU-Turkey Refugee Agreement. Among other things, this has also led to Turkey's hegemonic and imperialistic behaviour in the region not being denounced in Brussels or Berlin with the necessary clarity.

Among the Christians in Turkey, but also among the Christian population in Armenia, Iraq and Syria, Turkey's behaviour has led to massive uncertainty with regard to future prospects. Iran, for its part, is a troublemaker in both Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, it maintains good relations with Christian Armenia, which also has to do with the fact that Azerbaijan is supported by Israel. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh cannot simply be described as an interreligious conflict. Things are more complicated, it is about consequences of territorial decisions from the early days of the Soviet Union and about Armenian, Azerbaijani and Turkish nationalism.

And even though the conflict has flared up again in recent weeks, there is hope. In Turkey, there is always talk of rapprochement with Armenia, despite the continuing smouldering conflict in the region. If a rapprochement were to take place, it could lead to an easing of the permanently precarious situation of the Armenian minority in Turkey (about 65,000 people). The up to 100,000 Armenian labour migrants living illegally in Turkey, whom the Armenian communities in Turkey cannot or do not want to take care of under the current conditions, would no longer have to live in constant fear of deportation.

And Turkey could open up an additional, albeit small, market. More important for Turkey and its protégé Azerbaijan, however, would be above all that the establishment of a corridor from the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan - so far only accessible via Iran - through Armenian territory to Azerbaijan would then be conceivable.

In Iraq and Syria, too, Christians and other non-Muslim minority groups are not the primary target of Turkish state aggression. In north-eastern Syria, these are the Kurds, namely the partisans of the Kurdish separatist PKK from Turkey. They are organised in the PYD, militarily active with the US-backed YPG and dominate the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria.

Massive population exchange

Turkey, however, is not ready to accept a 'Kurdish state' on its border with Syria. With the military operations Shield Euphrates (2016-2017) and Olive Branch (January-March 2018), Turkey tried to bring the Kurdish-populated majority areas in northwestern Syria under its control. This has been the case in the region around Afrin since 2017. A massive population exchange was the result. Christians and converts have long since left the region. With reference to an intergovernmental agreement from the 1990s, Turkey claims the right to pursue the PKK and its entourage - including its Syrian offshoot, the PYD - across the border in order to repel attacks by these groups.

Although there have been no such attacks, this does not change Turkey's claim and resulted in Turkey launching another military offensive (Operation Source of Peace) in northern Syria in October and occupying Syrian territory on the Turkish border between the towns of Tell Abyad (Gire Spi) and Ras al Ayn (Serekaniye) at a depth of up to 40 kilometres. It is thanks to Russian and American pressure that Turkey has not extended its campaign of conquest. To save face, it was offered mixed Russian-Turkish military patrols in the west of the mentioned area and American-Turkish military patrols in the east.

Turkey intended to settle a part of the majority Arab Syrians living as refugees in Turkey in the areas to be conquered in northern Syria. This would have meant another population exchange, which - in line with Turkey's wishes - would have mainly affected Kurds. Most of the Christians have already fled the region now occupied by Turkey in the course of the Islamic State's campaign of conquest in autumn 2019. However, Christians continue to live in the neighbouring regions of northern Syria to the east, including the towns of Hassake and Kamishli. This is the only place where Turkey has not been able to gain a foothold.

This is mainly thanks to the YPG, which is supported by the USA. However, Turkey has by no means ceased its military activities in the region. This includes, for example, regular artillery shelling of the area around Tell Tamer on the northern course of the Habur River, where there were 35 villages inhabited by Assyrian Christians until the IS campaign of conquest in February 2015. This also includes the regular interruption of the already precarious water supply in the region and the targeted burning of fields in north-eastern Syria by artillery fire. Most recently, Turkey has also regularly had drones bombard targets in north-eastern Syria, taking civilian casualties in the process. Moreover, Turkey's claim to the area in question is repeatedly emphasised and an imminent attack announced. The fact that this has not yet happened is undoubtedly due to Turkey's complex relationship with Russia and the USA, which has so far forced Turkey to exercise restraint.

In Iraq, the PKK has retreat areas in the border region of the Autonomous Kurdistan Region (AKR) with Turkey, the main settlement area of the Kurds in Iraq, but also in the Sinjar Mountains - until 2014 the settlement area of the Yazidis. Turkey dominates the AKR's economy and nominally maintains good relations with the Kurdish regional government, but it reserves the right to take military action against the PKK in the region at any time. It also sees its actions covered by the irredentist narrative: parts of the region (Mosul, Kirkuk) were illegally taken from it by the treaties signed after the First World War.

Turkey exerts pressure on non-Muslim minorities

The Scientific Service of the Bundestag has repeatedly stated that Turkey's military action in Iraq is contrary to international law. However, the Grand Coalition did not take note of the corresponding expert reports - they had been requested by MP Sevim Dağdelen (LINKE). For years, Turkey has been bombing alleged PKK positions along the Turkish-Iraqi border and in the Sinjar region, which is a good 100 kilometres from the border, as part of martially named military operations. It has expanded the presence of ground troops, established numerous military posts and begun using combat drones. Christian villages have been targeted repeatedly in recent months - fortunately, there have been no victims so far, but the inhabitants have fled their villages.

However, it is not only Turkey's claim to hegemony that is causing uncertainty among the population in northern Iraq, especially among Christians and Yazidis. It is also the relationship between the government of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan (ARK) and the Iraqi central government, which has not yet been conclusively clarified. This has implications for the security of Christians in the Nineveh Plain outside the ARK, which has long been protected by the Kurdish Peshmerga, but is actually the responsibility of the Iraqi central government. And the latter leaves this task to Shiite Popular Mobilisation Units, which the Christians do not trust. The Christian militias are small in number and, beyond their propagandistic overconfidence, are not in a position to guarantee the protection of Christians.

All this is overshadowed by the continuing general insecurity in Iraq, which also has to do with Iraq's complex relationship with Iran and the USA. Iran's growing influence seemed clarified by the outcome of the recent parliamentary elections, as Shiite opponents of Iran won the elections. However, an assassination attempt on the prime minister, presumably orchestrated by Tehran, has shown that Iran is not prepared to back down. Against this background, decisions by the USA to practically end its troop presence in Iraq in the near future are not good news.

What is of central importance with regard to the Christians in Armenia, Iraq and Syria, but also in Turkey itself with regard to Turkey's actions, is the so-called collective memory. This is the memory of the genocide (genocide) of the Armenians (Aghet = catastrophe) and the Syrian Christians (Sayfo = sword). Every Armenian, Assyrian, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic or Chaldean Christian in the region has ancestors who lost their lives during this genocide. Collective memory is the corresponding narrative that is passed down from generation to generation. It becomes present anew every time Turkey verbally attacks or actually assaults these groups, as if a new genocide were in the offing.

In Turkey itself, this was most recently the pressure exerted on non-Muslim minorities to publicly solidarise with and endorse military operations in Syria and Iraq, but also Turkish support for Azerbaijan in the conflict with Armenia. The Armenian minority was also intimidated by regular demonstrations by Turkish nationalist groups in front of Armenian church and civil society institutions. All Christians felt the corresponding pressure. This also applies to the dispute with Greece, Cyprus and the EU over the continental shelf, which is disputed from Turkey's point of view, and test drilling by Turkish research vessels in Greek and Cypriot waters in the northern Mediterranean.

Turkey has even brought up the renegotiation of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne - the basis of today's Turkey's existence. The government-driven nationalist upsurge in Turkey, which is mainly due to the falling sympathy ratings for the ruling AKP party and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, went so far that last year buildings inhabited by Christians, for example in Istanbul, were once again marked as such.

The picture drawn so far may seem bleak with regard to the future prospects of Christians in the region of the Middle East. But time and again there are also rays of hope for the Christians on the ground. One such ray of hope was Pope Francis' visit to Iraq at the beginning of March. For a long time, many did not believe that he would actually fly to Iraq. The situation in the country was and is too opaque. Precisely for this reason, the Pope's trip must be understood as a sign of encouragement for Iraqi Christians to remain in the country despite all the difficulties. And it was precisely in this sense that the Chaldean Patriarch, Cardinal Raphael Sako, also promoted the idea of the Pope's trip.

What did the trip achieve de facto? Certainly, it was a clear sign to the Iraqi leadership, the influential Shiite clergy, but also to the Christians on the ground that the Pope personally, but also the Church in Rome, have not forgotten Iraq and its Christians. Whether the Pope's trip has also opened up new perspectives for the Christians in Iraq beyond that day remains to be seen.

While the Pope undoubtedly wanted to send a credible sign of encouragement to the Christians in the region with his trip, this is not so clear from many other statements from church and political circles,

especially in the West. There is talk of the need to maintain a Christian presence in the region. Expressed as a wish, this is absolutely legitimate. However, if one takes into account the claim of the people in the region to respect for their human dignity, the Western wish that Christian presence in the region must be preserved quickly gets a stale aftertaste. At the latest when one realises that Christians in the region in particular are in a constant state of tension between political realities and their collective memory.

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