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## “Oriental Christians” in France and in Syria : Political Stakes and Redefined Identities

by Claire Lefort, January 2019



*The Virgin Mary of the Syrian village of Maaloula was destroyed when the village was taken over in 2013. A new statue was erected at the same place on June 13, 2015. On that day, families from the village, State officials and religious leaders gathered in the main square, adorned on that occasion with the national flag and a giant portrait of Bashar El Assad. © Smallcreative/Shutterstock.com*

# NORIA

## CLAIRE LEFORT

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**Since 2013, the wars in Iraq and Syria have revived the persecution of Christians of the Middle East as an issue in Europe, in the context of Islamist targeting of religious minorities. The French case is especially revealing of the NGO, ideological and political movements that have emerged to advocate for the “Christians of the Middle East”, or “Oriental Christians” (in French, “Chrétiens d’Orient”, “Christians of the Orient”). The use of this term is far from reflecting the diversity of Christian standpoints with respect to these wars. Rather, both in France and in Syria, it contributes to processes in which identities become redefined.**

## INTRODUCTION

The term “Chrétiens d’Orient” (“Christians of the Middle East”, hereafter: “Oriental Christians”) is widely used in France to designate Christians in the Middle East. It refers to a historical tradition according to which, since Saint Louis and Francis I, France is purported to be their protector. The term first appeared in the context of the massacres of Christians in Mount-Lebanon and Damascus in 1860. These massacres had a strong impact on French public opinion, prompting military intervention and a surge of humanitarianism. Organizations to support these “Oriental Christians” were therefore set up, starting with the Catholic charitable organization L’Œuvre d’Orient. The use of this term, however, strengthened by the use of capital letters, also implies projecting upon these Christians a fixed identity, reducing their identities to religious and doctrinal variables only. It encompasses Christian populations that are in fact defined by the variety of their ecclesiastical

affiliations and socio-political conditions<sup>1</sup>, relating to them as if they were homogenous. Far from designating a homogenous group, or one concentrated in a given territory, the term seeks to paper over a shifting social and political reality—even while many of the members of these Christian communities have often formed diasporas the world over<sup>2</sup>.

The term “Oriental Christians” therefore channels a historical and Orientalist inheritance. Since 2013, use of the term has witnessed a massive resurgence. Since then, events in Iraq and Syria have revived the issue of the persecution of Christians in the Middle East, in the context of Islamist targeting of religious minorities. In this context, new organizations have emerged to “rescue these persecuted Christians”<sup>3</sup>. A variety of political players have become involved: MPs gather in working groups on the issue<sup>4</sup>; town halls have been emblazoned with banners proclaiming their solidarity with these Christian communities<sup>5</sup>; politicians have taken their defence at the European Parliament<sup>6</sup> and the United Nations<sup>7</sup>. My aim here is to show that the proliferation of these initiatives tends towards stripping complexity from a plural reality—and towards accelerating processes that redefine the identities of

those Christian communities still present in the Middle East.

The following analysis is based on a twofold ethnographic approach, conducted both among the purveyors of this solidarity movement in favour of “Oriental Christians” and among its beneficiaries<sup>8</sup>. During the six months of my fieldwork, from February to August 2016, I was a member of a French NGO working on these issues (henceforth “the NGO”), enabling me to study its operations and their dynamics. In the course of 2017, I then added observations conducted during events organized by this same NGO in France, as well as interviews with former volunteers who had travelled to Syria.

## FRENCH YOUTH MOBILIZED FOR THE DEFENCE OF “ORIENTAL CHRISTIANS”

In 2013, after the village of Maaloula in Syria was captured from the Syrian regime, a new NGO for the defence of “Oriental Christians” was founded. At first, it was close to far-right political circles, and focused on French Catholic and conservative audiences, targeting a youth audience especially. The core of its activities involved sending “volunteers”, aged on average between 18 and 30, to Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. This movement was embedded within a broader rationale: acting to defend Christian values and heritage deemed “under threat, both abroad

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1. See Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens d'Orient*, PUF, 2017

2. Today, except for the Copts in Egypt, all Oriental churches number more faithful in the diaspora than they do in their historical homelands. See Heyberger, *op. cit.*

3. The quotation is excerpted from a French organization's fundraising documents.

4. See e.g. the “[Working Group on Oriental Christians](#)”, that numbers nearly 115 MPs.

5. See the “[Town Halls In Solidarity With Oriental Christians](#)” [website](#).

6. See for example [Mireille d'Ornano's speech](#) in May 2017.

7. [Laurent Fabius speech](#) to the Ministers' Meeting of the Security Council (27 March 2015).

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8. Laetitia Atlani-Duault, *Au bonheur des autres: anthropologie de l'aide humanitaire*, Paris, Société d'ethnologie, 2005.

# NORIA

and at home”<sup>9</sup>. This NGO was set within the context of the conservative “Manif Pour Tous” (“Demonstration For Everyone”)<sup>10</sup> and “French Spring” movements, that draw French youth from primarily Catholic and conservative backgrounds<sup>11</sup>.

These moves enter into the pre-existing construction of the Catholic imaginary; they aim to respond to the need to “organize the Catholic struggle for their own survival in a secularizing society”<sup>12</sup>. As Father William Marie Merchat, manager in charge of youth pastoral activities for L’Oeuvre d’Orient in Alès, put it: *“More and more, among young Catholics, we witness a feeling of being in the minority. This nurtures a feeling of insecurity, and with it a stronger assertion of identity. Certain parties and movements draw on these feelings, including within the Church: traditionalist movements that in some sense use the persecution of Oriental Christians to call for a new Crusade.”*<sup>13</sup>

As such, these trips to assist “Oriental Christians” enter into a policy to develop a strong identity for such youth. A former volunteer in Syria emphasizes that: *“Travelling to the field on behalf of this NGO enables building up a real network. For several weeks, we gather among others of the same age cohort, from the same social environment, who share the same*

*opinions. [...] When we get back to France, one has to be careful to take some distance from that experience in order to avoid the “syndrome of the volunteer just back from the field,” who has been moulded into the perfect little pro-Assad soldier. When you’re 20, you get worked up fast, outraged by the terrorists’ abuses—regardless of whether they’re called ISIS, Al-Nusra, or the Free Syrian Army.”*<sup>14</sup>

No substantive training is provided to these youth before they leave for the field, making them especially impressionable once they arrive there. Once they are confronted with complex social and political realities that they struggle to grasp, their only reference-point is their “team leader”<sup>15</sup>, who is often close to traditionalist or far-right circles. In Syria, volunteers are therefore confronted with pro-Assad and pro-Russia discourse, leavened with conspiracy theories close to those promoted by the notorious 9/11 “truther” Thierry Meyssan<sup>16</sup>. A former volunteer emphasizes that *“The NGO’s goal is very clear: to spread and to normalize the Assad regime’s narrative, by demonstrating its logic and its coherence. It goes like this: granted, Assad has perpetrated many abuses, starting with what goes on in the regime’s prisons. But given that the United States do the same thing... [...] This side of the NGO’s activities is quite blatant: many new volunteers first show up quite suspicious towards the regime, having absorbed Western media narratives. But after some time with us, they leave again with far more conciliatory ideas [with respect to the Assad regime]”*<sup>17</sup>.

9. Extract from materials provided to new volunteers (February 2016).

10. In reference to the French “Mariage Pour Tous” (“Marriage for Everyone”) law passed in 2013 that legalized gay marriage.

11. One indication of this is that the “Manif Pour Tous” Twitter account added to its handle the *noun*, the Arabic letter “N”, that was used by Daesh (Islamic State, ISIS) to label Christian houses when it took over Mosul in the summer of 2014. Adding the *noun* to Twitter handles has since been taken up as a symbol of support for “Oriental Christians”.

12. Denis Pelletier, Jean-Louis Schlegel (eds.), *À la Gauche du Christ: les chrétiens de gauche en France de 1945 à nos jours*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2012.

13. Camille Lons, « Une compassion très politique pour les chrétiens d’Orient sur fond de crise identitaire des Français catholiques », *Orient XXI*, 26 April 2016, [online](#), consulted 23/03/18.

14. From an interview, 12/02/2017.

15. The employee tasked with managing volunteers and the NGO’s activities in the field.

16. See e.g. [this article from 11/09/18](#).

17. From an interview, 08/02/2017

## THE FRENCH POLITICAL ADVOCACY MOVEMENT FOR “ORIENTAL CHRISTIANS”

Beyond the humanitarian question, this movement advocating for “Oriental Christians” also serves conservative political goals—and a kind of moralizing proselytism. On the one hand, the stated goal is to provide “material and psychological help to Oriental Christians.” On the other, it is to “sensitize French public opinion to the dangers that confront Oriental Christians today, in order to rebuild the weakened link between France and the Oriental Churches”<sup>18</sup>. This discourse reactivates the tradition according to which France is the protector of “Oriental Christians”. But, under cover of spreading the point of view of “Oriental Christians” and offering “a different perspective” on unfolding events in the Middle East, the goal is to defend Bashar Al-Assad’s authoritarian response to the 2011 uprisings. Their description of how the regime’s recapture of East Aleppo, that had been in opposition hands since the summer of 2012, goes as follows: “12 December 2016 will go down in Syria’s history as the first day of the liberation of Aleppo. After five years of war, five years of fighting, five years in which death and destruction were omnipresent, the armed groups that occupied the Eastern part of

18. From the NGO’s official presentation on its website, consulted 20/02/2017.

*the city finally agreed to hand in their weapons. The streets are filling up, the locals are celebrating what they had stopped daring to hope for, and civilians of East and West mix together, one people once again, the Syrian people, that kept their dignity despite the horrors visited upon them, and that mounted incredible resistance against barbarism.”*<sup>19</sup>

This communications strategy thus took part in rehabilitating Bashar Al-Assad’s regime. In this narrative, Assad remains a dictator, but his abuses are often glossed over or justified. Portrayed as the “Christians’ protector”, he is above all a “lesser evil” in the current situation, as much as he is the only figure deemed capable of “protecting Christ’s disciples against the barbarism of Islam”<sup>20</sup>. These narratives were echoed in

certain French political circles. In January 2015, for instance, the NGO organized a meeting between the Cross-Parliamentary France-Syria Friendship Group (most of whose members are from the conservative “The Republicans” party (LR) and His Eminence Jean-Abdo Arbach, the Archbishop of Homs, Hama and Yabroud, in order to “gather information on the concrete situation of the Syrian population, and especially of the Christian minorities.”<sup>21</sup> Members of the NGO also took part in several meetings of the Study Group on Oriental Chris-

19. From the NGO’s official presentation on its website, consulted 26/02/2017

20. From an interview, 08/02/2017

21. See the account published on 21/01/2015 and available [online](#).

tians at the National Assembly, directed by Valérie Pécresse (LR) and made up of many right-wing MPs from “The Republicans”, “Republic, Arise” (Nicolas Dupont-Aignan) and others affiliated with the “National Rally” (RN, ex-National Front) (Gilbert Collard). This lobbying of French parliamentarians also takes the shape of meetings organized between Bashar Al-Assad and certain MPs, such as MPs including Thierry Mariani (then-LR) and Nicolas Dhucq (LR) in January 2017. At the end of 2014, after Robert Ménard (RN) was elected as Mayor of Béziers, the NGO’s members enabled Béziers to be twinned with Maaloula, the Syrian Christian village that was turned into a symbol of the persecution of Oriental Christianity<sup>22</sup>. Finally, the political movement for “Oriental Christians” was also expressed through cultural events. On 23 June 2016, an “Evening at the Invalides for Oriental Christians” drew more than 2,000 participants, among them such figures as Jean d’Ormesson, Michael Lonsdale, Rachida Dati, Philippe de Villiers and François Fillon. At the time, Fillon was a candidate for the Presidency. The stance he took on this issue, expressing his willingness to collaborate with the Assad regime to enable the protection of “Oriental Christians”, illustrated the impact of such advocacy in spreading a certain kind of narrative concerning Syria.

22. The majority-Christian village of Maaloula is north-east of Damascus. Its inhabitants still speak Aramaic (“the language of Christ”). Violent clashes with *jihadis* took place there between September 2013 and April 2014. The NGO’s website (consulted 22/11/18) stated that: “In September [2013], the village of Maaloula was attacked by terrorists from the Nusra Front. Its churches have been burned, its people massacred or forced into exile, absolutely destitute”.

## FROM CHRISTIANS IN SYRIA TO “ORIENTAL CHRISTIANS”: THE SELECTIVE REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITY

In the humanitarian field, this advocacy movement for “Oriental Christians” works according to a selective principle of solidarity, prioritizing members of the same faith-based community. The movement has little involvement in humanitarian coordination networks; it conducts its activities through direct communication with representatives of local churches that support the regime<sup>23</sup>, and only takes into account lists of beneficiaries provided by these churches. Save for a few projects directed at groups of Sunnis, Yezidis and Sabeen-Mandaean, this approach rests on targeting beneficiaries according to religion, at the expense of other kinds of belonging or other social links. It therefore makes the choice of a sect-based analysis of the conflict, widening divisions between communities and setting up Christians as the privileged of the humanitarian field.

23. Christians make up around 6% of Syria’s population. Their religious representatives and the regime are strongly linked together: since the 1970s, the election of these representatives by a synod is only formalized after ratification by the regime. See Anna Poujeau, *Églises, Monachisme et Sainteté. Construction de la communauté chrétienne en Syrie*, PhD thesis in Social Anthropology and Ethnology, Université de Nanterre - Paris X, 2008.



*Maaloula, the convent of Mar Taqla (Holy Thecla). Located northeast of Damascus. This predominantly Christian village, where Aramaic («the language of Christ»), is still spoken was the scene of violent fighting against jihadists between September 2013 and April 2014. © Pavel Sepi/Shutterstock.com*

Beyond this, the very use of “Oriental Christians” as a category elides the varied stances of Christian Syrians. Indeed, the closeness of many religious leaders to the regime is far from being universally shared. It has prompted a divide between these leaders and some faithful—a divide that only grew wider in the wake of the 2011 uprisings. At first, the uprisings portrayed themselves as being a cross-community movement. As such, while leaders of the Orthodox and Catholic churches officially endorsed Bashar Al-Assad’s regime, other leading Christian figures, such as the filmmaker Bassel Shehadeh, were becoming symbols of the revolution.

***Yet the fact that some leading figures in the Christian community opposed the regime is rarely mentioned in Western media.***

Yet the fact that some leading figures in the Christian community opposed the regime is rarely mentioned in Western media. Many in politics and the media tend to favour a sectarian analysis of the conflict in Syria, echoing the regime’s strategy of representing Syrian minorities as the victims of an Islamist threat, in order to divide the opposition. The solidarity movement for “Oriental Christians” partakes of the same approach. Through its close collaboration with Christian prelates who are often close to the regime, it reports the testimonies of only one segment of the Syrian Christian community. It therefore

# NORIA

contributes to the portrayal of “Oriental Christians” support for Bashar Al-Assad’s regime as the choice of a “lesser evil”<sup>24</sup> faced with the *jihadi* menace—and as justified by a necessary solidarity between “minorities” against the Sunni majority’s political demands.

## CONCLUSION

The advocacy movement for “Oriental Christians” illustrates how activism on behalf of this specific category is constructed on an ideological basis. “Oriental Christians” have thereby become a specific category for

the activity of these NGOs, and for the political goals of conservatives and the Syrian regime, which grants these players distinctive status. It also echoes the tensing-up of certain Catholic conservative circles on the question of identity, worried about declining religious observance, the rise of Islam, and the negation of the purportedly Christian values that France—as the Church’s “eldest daughter”—is here supposed to embody. But the use of the term “Oriental Christians” has further consequences. In giving voice to only one segment of the Syrian Christian communities, it performatively takes part in the interpretation of the war as being religious and civilizational.

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24. Extract from an interview, 08/02/2017

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