

## In Iraq as in Syria, foreign troops cause only troubles, Jordanian priest tells Alain Juppé



Fr Rif'at Bader tells the French foreign minister, who boasted about his country's commitment to Eastern Christians, that the flight of Iraqi Christians is evidence of the contrary.

If the West really wants to something for the Middle East (and not only for Christians), it must invest in education, media, health care but especially work on solving the Israeli-Palestinian problem.

*Amman (AsiaNews) - Fr Rif'at Bader, director of the Catholic Media Study Centre in the Jordanian capital, wrote a letter in response to an article by French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé that was published in several newspapers around the world. In his article, Juppé praises France for coming to the defence of Christians, urging Syrian Christians to fight more decisively against Bashar Assad. Here is Fr Bader's response, which he sent us (translated from the French by AsiaNews)*

Your Excellency,

I, like others, read your article ("Eastern Christians and Arab Springs" in La Croix, 28 February 2012), which was translated and published in various newspapers, including newspapers in Jordan, like El Rai, on 1 March 2012.

I am writing you today, from Jordan, even though El Rai says that your article is not about Jordanian Christians, and that what you write is a personal opinion. Let me point out, Sir, that, for Eastern Christians, the Christian identity is the same everywhere, even though there may be some differences in terms of the security and freedom people enjoy in going about their business, helping the development of their countries. Yet, your letter, which you sign as the minister of Foreign and

European Affairs, has undoubtedly an official character.

In any case, I want to thank you for talking about the Christian "presence" in your article. Unfortunately, our local newspaper translated [the term] into Arabic as "existence". I checked the French newspaper and noticed that you mention "presence", not "existence". Did Arabic-language newspapers make a mistake perhaps and say existence in lieu of presence? Or are we back to the simple notion of Christians' geographical and demographic existence, unconcerned by the efficient, cooperative, resourceful and positive contribution they have made in the past, make in the present and will make in the future? Your Excellency, there is a great difference between existence and presence.

In your article, you spoke about our Christian brothers in Iraq. They have been massacred and their numbers have dwindled. Indeed, in their case, it is a matter of existence, more than presence, a problem that can only be solved with peace.

Your Excellency, you did not however mention the causes that once again transformed the problems Eastern Christians face into one of sheer existence. What has been happening in Palestine, the Holy Land, for decades has had an impact on Iraq, i.e. the military interference of foreign powers into [the region's] countries and peoples. This has divided the Arab world into small countries, and has certainly affected Christians. Christians like Muslims have had to leave Jerusalem the Holy City, and others towns and villages because of the Israeli occupation. Likewise, Iraqi Christians have been dispersed without a possibility of return because of the occupation by US troops supported by many Western countries.

By chance, I wrote this article right after saying goodbye to an Iraqi family (the Rassams), who lived in our parish in Jordan for eight years. They knocked at the door of every embassy, and finally the Embassy of New Zealand took pity on them, and now they will be on their way two days from now.

I will tell you the truth. It is with a heavy heart that I think about their departure, knowing that they will never return. Who caused their misfortunes and suffering? Who caused them to leave without seeing their dear homeland? Could Western countries not have exerted all their influence to create peace and welfare rather than flood us with nice empty words? Instead, all that the efforts of the Security Council, the United Nations and the civilised nations did was to provide the world with the lugubrious images of the trial, conviction and execution of a former president who left behind him pain and suffering. They especially provided the pitiful sight of Christians knocking on the doors of your embassies in a way that deserves pity.

In your article, you mention your meeting with people wounded in 'Sayidat al Najat', the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Rescue, and that was good, but King Abdullah bin al-Hussein of Jordan did it before you. He opened the door wide open for more of our Iraqi brothers than you mention. The United Nations and Christian organisations like Caritas Jordan, have provided medical and food aid, and continue to do so. The issue goes beyond accepting a few wounded people or families. It is time to stop such crimes, which are not only against Christians and worshippers, but are crimes against humanity. Who prepared the ground for this "work" against in places of worship? Did the Western governments not lead the world into believing in the presence of dangerous chemical weapons [in Iraq] and of the need to overthrow the dictator? Would it not have been better to have employed educational and humane means instead of trying to [to impose] with tanks an illusory democracy?

Is foreign occupation not the essential cause of what we see today? We had not seen for generations churches on fire or destroyed with people praying inside. We had to wait for the 21st century to see such horrors live on TV. From the outside, the cause, Sir, does not seem clear; it appears hidden after the arrival of extremist groups and slogans that call for the elimination of others. The real cause however comes from outside.

Eastern Christians are an integral part of their countries. They have been faithful in their work and have been exemplary in serving their societies and Churches, this to the extent the various governments allowed them. The Arab spring is not a catastrophe for Christians even though in some countries more should be done in terms of democratisation. In any event, Christians are not the problem; they are part of their nation; what happens to others happens to them, for better or worse. A real Arab spring would be to let the people choose their leaders and not you choose their leaders.

Now, after welcoming so many Syrian refugees in Jordan, we must pause to think. Are we on the brink of second "exodus", an exodus of Christians who will come to your embassies and knock on your doors? I hope not. I would rather hope to see the promises you mention in your article realised.

If thousands of Christians do leave Syria, they will be accompanied by non-Christians. This is a human and national disaster, not one for Christians alone. Similarly, where will Iraqi Christians who fled to Syria over the past few years go? They will become refugees again. What more can you do but make promises that neither feed nor enrich anyone?

In the past, towards the end of the Ottoman period, France was a party to a programme of foreign guarantees in which various nations chose to protect a specific Church. Today, Eastern Christians no longer trust foreign guarantees. What they want is sincere and effective action, one that is clean and without sordid goals, in order to pursue the Middle East peace plan. The main problem is the Palestinian question and the possibility for the faithful to visit the Holy Sites. What is Europe doing for people from Bethlehem who are not allowed to reach the Holy Sepulchre, ten kilometres from home? The Latin patriarchate built several buildings to house families in and around Jerusalem but have we heard of any foreign government helping with these projects? Is it not true that foreign governments only talk about helping?

Christians who attended the Synod of the Catholic Church (for Middle Eastern Churches) in the Vatican found help and encouragement in the Churches of Europe, which made a real contribution by way of Church organisations like Caritas who helped schools, universities, hospitals and local associations. It is necessary today to support Christian media and research centres so that Eastern Christians can speak for themselves and the world listen to them. You said that you want to listen to the voice of Eastern Christians. The latter do not speak about their governments. What they want is for you to continue to work for peace; this will contribute to security, justice, equality and citizenship for all, not only some.

Sir, we thank you for your concern but the inhabitants of these countries, including Christians, expect more from you than words.

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Fr. Rif'at Bader - AsiaNews