Islamism and the Future of the Christians of the Middle East by Habib C. Malik is a straightforward piece capturing the tragic decline of the indigenous Christian community in the region. Since the September 11 attacks, much of the scholarship has focused mainly on Islamic trends in Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, in hopes of clarifying the misunderstandings between East and West. But Malik’s work sheds light on an often neglected aspect of this relationship—the “relic status” of indigenous Christians. Jerusalem, for instance, was twenty percent Christian in 1948, but is currently less than two percent (p. 7). Likewise, half of Iraq’s 1.4 million Christians have fled the country since the American invasion in 2003 (p. 8). In light of these alarming statistics, Malik tells the story of Christians in the Middle East, “the trials they face, their options, and their prospects” (p. 9).

Although four chapters long, the book can be divided into three main parts, with chapters one and two describing the history and current state of indigenous Christians. Despite originating in the Middle East, Christianity never took root in the region. With the coming of Islam, along with various other political events—ranging from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the invasion of Iraq—many Christians have emigrated to the west, or even converted to Islam, to avoid becoming scapegoats. Furthermore, Christians in the region have often exercised a degree of passivity in the midst of Islamic extremism. Malik then focuses on the two biggest Christian communities in the region—the Copts in Egypt and the Maronites in Lebanon. While the former, characterized as protected peoples or “dhimmi,” have struggled to safeguard their community, the latter have dominated the political system, and carved a free standing for themselves in the midst of a Muslim majority.

In the third chapter, Malik explores the many factors resulting in a decreasing Christian population. Perhaps the most significant factor is the fact that many Christian communities in the Middle East lack a proper protection against rising religious fanaticism, which discourages Christians from returning to their homes. Malik then discusses the rise of Sunni and Shiite Islamic fanaticism, which in general is rousing much popular support due to the failure of Arab secular governments at improving the standard of living for their people and the nation in general. In the last chapter, Malik poses his thoughts on the future of Middle Eastern Christians. Although Europe has shown occasional sensitivity, US policy focuses more on repair the relationship between East and West. However, in places like Lebanon, there is an increase in number of priests, exemplifying that several Christian communities are solidifying their identity as “Christians.” Ultimately, Malik concludes that the same rights Muslims demand in the West should be granted to the Christians living under Islamic majority rule in the East.

The most interesting aspect of Malik’s piece is the way he interprets the infamous dhimmi concept. Meaning “protected peoples,” scholars have often applauded the policy of dhimmitude, marking it a sign of tolerance in Islam. Yet Malik argues that dhimmitude actually subjugated Christians under Islamic legal and political rule. Marginalizing Christians as strangers in their ancestral homelands, dhimmitude reduced such demographic to second class citizenry. Another significant element was Malik’s explanation of Christian attitudes towards Sunni Salafism and Shiite followers of Wilayat al-Faqih. If an Islamic state were to be established, several Christians would prefer Shiite rule, since Christian communities still exist in Iran, whereas any such traces have been eradicated in Saudi Arabia.

In the future, Malik may consider expanding his study by examining opinions and perspectives of Muslims at the “Arab street” level, by interviewing common Muslim lawmakers, and even mixed families.
to see how each sect views the other, and to see if there is any potential for such outlook to change. Malik may also want to study other predominantly Islamic countries – like Indonesia – and compare the treatment of minorities to that of the Middle East. In this way, scholars may not only learn more about Islam, but also try to determine the degree in which culture plays a role.

*Islamism and the Future of the Christians of the Middle East* is an excellent starting point for Middle Eastern scholars in general striving to comprehend the current livelihood of minority communities in the region. It is also a valuable contribution for Levantine scholars, specifically those analyzing the political divide in the Lebanese Christian community between the Saudi influenced March 14 alliance and the Shiite led March 8 alliance. With various threats, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the ever decreasing trend in Middle Eastern minorities is alarming. The region will lose the richness and diversity that marked it for centuries.

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