

[A New Minority in North Africa: The Maghrebi Christians under the Rule of Islamists](#)

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On 14 April, 2007, FFI posted my article where I commented on a paper that was read at the “**Conference on the Plight of Minorities and Women in the Middle East and North Africa.**” The conference was held in Zurich, Switzerland, between 24 and 26 March, 2007. The paper’s title was: “*Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun: (The Muslim Brotherhood) Source of the Persecution of the Minorities and Women.*”

Another subject that came up at the Zurich Conference was the status of *Maghrebi** Christians, a topic that is seldom mentioned, or discussed in Arab publications. The title of the paper was: “*Masihyyou al-Maghreb fi Hukm al-Islamiyyin.*” (*The Maghrebi Christians under the Rule of Islamists.*) It was posted on the online daily, *Elaph*, on 10 April, 2007. The following is a translation of the text, followed by my analysis and comments.

“The region known nowadays as the *Arab Maghreb* (North Africa) was, up to the 7th Century, inhabited by Jewish and Christian people. Later on, they converted to Islam. During the 19th Century, they stood firm against all attempts of Christian evangelism. However, a new phenomenon has surfaced during the last few decades, namely the embracing of the Christian faith by North Africans. This fact raises several questions as to the **importance of these conversions, their causes, and the dangers that threaten this minority of “New Christians.”**

First, we deal with the *New Christians*’ phenomenon throughout the Arab Maghreb

1. The Rise of this Phenomenon

“In a sense, this phenomenon is not restricted to the *Arab Maghreb*, as there are indications that a number of Muslims are embracing Christianity throughout all the continents, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and in Asia. As to the *Arab Maghreb*, this phenomenon has drawn the attention of the media. For example, the weekly journal, *Jeune Afrique*, devoted three reports on this subject with respect to Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. In March 2005, the French daily *Le Monde*, devoted a complete report about this topic. And *Al-‘Arabiyya TV* channel telecast two reports on the subject that were recorded in the *Kabyle* region of Algeria.

“*Jeune Afrique* estimates the number of people who have embraced Christianity in Tunisia to be around 500, belonging to three churches. A report on the website of “*Al-Islam al-Yawm*” prepared by *Lidriess el-Kenbouri*, dated 23 April 2005, estimated the number of European evangelists in Morocco, around 800. Quite often, their evangelistic efforts are successful. The report further added that about 1,000 Moroccans have left Islam during 2004. The magazine “*Al-Majalla*” in its No. 1394 issue, claimed that the

number of *New Christians* in Morocco is around 7,000; perhaps the exact number may be as high as 30,000.

“The report in the French daily *Le Monde* claimed that during 1992, between 4,000 and 6,000 Algerians embraced Christianity in the Kabyle region. By now, their numbers may be in the tens of thousands. However, the authorities are mum about this subject; as an Algerian government official put it, the number of those who have embraced Christianity is a **state secret**.

2. The Most Important Factors for Conversions to Christianity

“First factor: The violence of the fundamentalist Islamist movements.

“In a statement by a former member of the *Algerian Nahda Movement* **made to *Jeune Afrique*: ‘I observed that during my imprisonment, there was no difference between the police’s treatment and that of the Nahda.’ This factor played a greater role in Algeria in the aftermath of the terrible massacres that began in 1992. A Christian evangelist working in Algeria said: ‘These terrible events shocked people greatly. It proved that Islam was capable of unleashing all that terror, and all those massacres! Even children were not spared during the uprising of the Islamists! Women were raped! Many people began to ask: ‘Where is Allah?’ Some Algerians committed suicide! Others lost their minds; others became atheists, and still others chose the Messiah!’

“Second Factor: The failure of the political regimes.

“According to Sebastian Fateh, of the **National Center for Scientific Research** in France, the Maghrebi states tried to apply, during the last four decades, various political regimes, such as nationalistic, Islamists, and dictatorial types. **Thus, the embracing of Christianity by people of the region represents another attempt to discover the proper regime; since all the previous ones had failed.**

“Third Factor: The religious training within the family.

“The report of “*Al-Majalla*” mentioned above, included the testimony of a young Moroccan woman who embraced Christianity: ‘*Our father used to order us to pray and read the Qur’an; when we disobeyed that command, he punished us with beatings. He told us that if we refused to wear the hijab, we would suffer in hell.*’

“According to her testimony, *this young woman’s relation with Allah was devoid of love*. A Christian Moroccan aged 30, involved in spreading his faith declared: ‘*Many of us regard Islam as a social fetter, a shackle, or a handicap.*’

“Undoubtedly, the religious education offered in Muslim countries depicts a *sadistic and fearful view of Allah, whose punishments are severe. He must not be questioned about what He does; only his followers are questioned about their acts*. No doubt that the horrific massacres perpetrated by the Islamists in Algeria, did contribute to the success of the evangelistic work both in Algeria, and in the surrounding countries. But why are

people choosing specifically Christianity?

“Fourth Factor: The geographical and linguistic factors have played an important role in the conversion of Maghrebi people to Christianity.

“This is especially the case with France which has welcomed many Maghrebi immigrants. We should not forget the existence of Christian churches in some of the big cities of North Africa, nor the impact of five Christian satellite TV stations that telecast their programs in Arabic. The young Moroccan evangelist estimates that personal contacts are responsible for 60% of conversions; while the role of the **Internet** is around 30%, while those who embraced Christianity through the work of foreign missionaries tends to be around 10%

“Quite often, the **“New Christians”** testify to the fact that **what they discovered in their new faith is love; it was the major factor in their conversion.** These are some of their words:

‘We found out that in Christianity, God is love,’ ‘God loves all people;’ ‘What attracted us to Christianity is the teaching that God is love.’

“Second, what is of concern for us at the Zurich ‘Conference for the Defense of Minorities’ in our part of the world, is the danger surrounding these New Christians, a danger that will increase should the Islamists assume power in North Africa.

3. The Present Danger:

“Even though the various constitutions of the Maghrebi states guarantee religious freedom and the fact that the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (Section 18) supports freedom of belief; *New Christians* do face serious dangers due to the *fatwas* prescribing severe punishments for the sin of **“radda”** (apostasy). Actually such *fatwas* are being issued by the Islamists. Here we may refer to the *Algerian Front Islamique du Salut FIS*, and the Moroccan *Justice and Development Party*, as well as the *Justice and Benevolence Movement*, all clamoring for the application of the *Medieval Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence) with respect to the sin of apostasy. Their pronouncements may lead some crazy person to take it upon himself to punish apostates with the ultimate penalty, namely the shedding of their blood. In this respect, we should not forget the law passed by the Algerian Parliament on 20 March 2006 requiring the punishment of any person **‘who makes, holds, or distributes any pamphlets, audio or video cassettes, or any other method that aims at shaking people’s faith in Islam.’**

4. The Future Danger when Islamists assume power in North Africa.

“The greatest danger will be faced should the Islamists take over governments. This danger already exists in Morocco, where opinion polls indicate that the **Justice and Development Party** is expected to win the elections planned for the latter part of this year. In that case, it would not be beyond the realm of the possible that terrible massacres

will take place when thousands of those who had voluntarily converted to Christianity, would lose their lives, notwithstanding the existence of **Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights** that guarantees freedom of belief. A former Algerian government official warned that the future wars in the Arab Maghreb will be “**Huroub al-Radda**”*** (Wars against the Apostates), i.e. wars between Islamists and those Maghrebi Muslims who had left Islam.

“Taking the above into consideration, I believe that it is of utmost importance that the **‘Organization for the Defense of Minorities’** that would come out of the **Zurich Conference**, should adopt the cause of our brothers in humanity. It is necessary that we invite representatives from these groups in North Africa to join our new-born organization. We should cooperate with Arab and international organizations dedicated to the defense of human rights, and lend our support for this North African religious minority. These new Christians are facing dangers coming from those fundamentalist North African movements whose actions have taught us that they do not hesitate at committing the ugliest crimes. We should never forget that **FIS (Islamic Salvation Front)** filled the streets, valleys, and mountains of Algeria during the 1990s, with blood and corpses. In the same way, Moroccan Islamists are following the footsteps of the Algerian radicals, committing crimes against the security forces, tourists, members of the Jewish community, and students. This is why we must remain on our guard!”

Analysis

The purpose of the paper was to draw the attention of the conferees to the existence of a **new minority in North Africa** that deserves recognition and protection. While the Islamic **Shari’a** allows for the existence of Jews and Christians within **Daru’l Islam** by granting them the **dhimmi status**, the same law prohibits **radda** (apostasy), and punishes a **murtad** (apostate) with death.

Comments

This paper about **Maghrebi** converts to Christianity is of great significance. Muslims never cease to boast about converts to Islam from other world faiths, but they are loathe to acknowledge that some of their own faith do leave it, either to embrace a no-faith worldview, or to become members of another religion. The tradition that began immediately after Muhammad’s death in 632, and which forced Arab tribes who had gone back on Islam to return to Islam, is still in force fourteen centuries later.

The deep reason for forbidding **radda** is to maintain the very *raison d’être* of Islam. Muhammad declared himself to be the last prophet of Allah. Therefore, there could be no new prophet to supersede him; nor could the previous revelations given to the prophets that preceded him be considered as authentic; since as Muslims contend, they have all been corrupted. Islam remains the only true religion, and Muslims must never consider leaving their faith, for the sin of apostasy is just as serious as the sin of **shirk** (belief in

many gods.)

However strict the laws of apostasy may be, the fact is that some Muslims are converting to Christianity. This is not propaganda emanating from the Christian side. The paper I quoted above made it clear that these conversions are taking place, and gave anecdotal accounts about the reality of these conversions, based on Arab and non-Christian sources.

Most of the testimonies of the converts pointed to the fact that what attracted them to the Christian faith was something that was totally lacking in their own tradition. Allah seemed to be unconcerned about his creatures; all he demanded was blind obedience. They craved for love, and they discovered that message in the Christian faith. That's the summary reason for their conversion.

In reflecting on the report given at the Zurich Conference, I could not help noticing this total lack of *quid pro quo* that exists between Islam and the rest of the world. Muslims living within traditionally non-Muslim lands, enjoy total freedoms of worship and proselytizing. They build mosques everywhere, and engage in aggressive *da'wa* (calling people to Islamize.) And when non-Muslims embrace *al-Sirat al-Mustaqeem* (the Right Path=Islam), they broadcast that on all types of media. On the other hand, *dhimmi*s in the lands of their ancestors, are not allowed to build new churches, and are forbidden to propagate their faith outside their own people! And woe unto any Muslim who considers embracing a religion other than Islam. After all, the Holy Book declares: "*Inna'l Deena 'inda'l Allahi al-Islam.*" "*Certainly the only acceptable religion with Allah is Islam.*" [3:19]

The relation between Islam and the rest of the world is marked by asymmetry. Muslims may and do enjoy all kinds of freedoms and privileges in the lands of the *Kuffar*; however non-Muslims are not granted the same rights and privileges when they live in *Daru'l Islam*. Western politicians don't seem to notice this anomaly; while most Western academicians don't appear concerned about this lack of *quid pro quo* in the Islamic world. In our globalized world, this state of affairs should not continue. The existence of these *New Christians* of North Africa must be acknowledged; they need our love and our concern. We should not allow them to be eliminated, if the Islamists succeed in taking over the governments in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.

**Maghreb*: Derived from the Arabic noun that denotes the Western regions of the Arab world, in contrast with *Mashreq*, or Eastern regions of the Arab world. In contemporary Arabic, *Maghreb* signifies North Africa, while *Mashreq* has been replaced by the term *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (Middle East) *Maghrebi*: the Arabic adjective that refers to North Africans in general, and specifically to Moroccans.

** *Nahda*: Arabic for *Awakening*; in Algeria, it is the name of an Islamist group.

****Huroub al-Radda*: This is a reference to the wars against those Arab tribes who defected from Islam, after the death of Muhammad in 632 A.D. The first Caliph, *Abu Bakr* launched several campaigns against them, and forced them to return to Islam.

Huroub is the plural of ***Harb*** (war); ***Radda*** is the Arabic term for ***going back*** (on Islam) i.e. committing the sin of ***apostasy***. The word for apostate is ***murtad***.