

The Intolerable Life of Dhimmis In 19th Century Damascus

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By Jacob Thomas



My interest in the life of Dhimmis (Christians and Jews) under Islam goes back to my childhood. I am an Eastern Christian from the Levant and I was a Dhimmi. As soon as I became aware of my cultural environment, I discovered that fact. I belonged to a minority group. That's quite disturbing to a child, especially if it is a constant topic of discussion as it was for me as I listened to my father's stories at meal times. His experiences while serving as a soldier in the Ottoman Army during WWI were a large part of the subject matter of the many stories he related to his family. By the time I began my schooling, I realized that something quite unusual and troubling must have occurred way back in history to put me in a special category of humanity that was considered to be inferior to others.

My formal education took place when the French were in control of the northern part of the Levant (Syria and Lebanon.) We were taught the history of the Middle East, which took into consideration the many people groups that made up its character. Thus, we learned about all the ancient peoples such as the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians,

the Aramaic-speaking people of Mesopotamia and Syria. But no sooner than the French left the Levant after WWII, than the teaching of history, at least in Syria, changed drastically. The country's leaders were not as enlightened as the European colonists had been about teaching history. The children were soon given a new interpretation of the area's beginnings. It was as if the Levant's history actually began with the Arab conquest, and everything that had preceded it was of no consequence!

Many years later, I remembered this shift in educational philosophy when reading V. S. Naipaul's book "**Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among Converted People.**"* He described how Islam changes everything including the history of nations its followers conquer:

"Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert's worldview alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand years can remain unresolved; the turning away has to be done again and again. People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of the converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can be easily set on the boil." P. xi

My background as a Dhimmi child thus left me with a keen and personal interest in the history of Dhimmis. I was therefore intrigued to recently find two articles (24 and 31 May, 2009) in the Arabic-language website of the daily *Al-Awan* relating to the lives of Dhimmis in 19th century Damascus, which at the time, was an important part of the vast Ottoman Empire. The author had access to several original documents, both in Arabic and in Western languages, with many details that one rarely finds in academic books on Middle East History.

Here are excerpts from the articles, followed by my analysis and comments:

"The plight of Dhimmis living under Islamic rule remained the same for centuries. Their treatment was deplorable. They were regarded as third-class citizens. That changed when the Ottoman Sultan Abdel-Majid proclaimed the *Tanzimat* or reforms that altered the lives of Dhimmis in the Ottoman Empire. These are undisputable historical facts.

"Nevertheless, the claim made by most Arab writers and apologists that "**History has never known any kinder conquerors than the Arabs,**" is mere propaganda. In fact, to speak about this legendary love and utopian tolerance that portrays Muslims as "**United Nations peace envoys**" amounts to a falsification of the history of Islam.

“For example, at the very dawn of that history [in Arabia,] the massacre of *Bani Quraiza* occurred and took the lives of 600 to 900 Jews. Their heads rolled into the trenches they were forced to dig! Another shocking event was the attack on the Jews of the *Khaybar Oasis*, which resulted in the killing of its men, and the “distribution “of its women as concubines for the victorious Muslim men!

“The reputed Arab ‘tolerance’ manifested itself in the horrific massacre of *Imam Hussein*, the grandson of Muhammad, by the army of Caliph *Yezid bin Mu’awiya*, the founder of the Arab Islamic Umayyad Civilization!

“It is not my intention to defend Christians and Jews, and to attack Muslims. My goal is to unmask those terrible deeds in Islamic history that have been glossed over by Arab historians who are unwilling to admit their mistakes. Perhaps by pointing to such events, I may succeed in forcing them to adopt an attitude that is in harmony with the rest of the civilized world.

“This brings me to my main subject, “*Accounts of the Lives of Dhimmis in 19th Century Damascus under Ottoman Rule.*”

“The Ottoman Turks occupied Syria in 1516, after defeating the Mamluks. Their treatment of the Dhimmi population remained unchanged from that prevailing under the previous Islamic regimes until the promulgation of the *Tanzimat* (Reforms) of Sultan Abdel Majid (1839-1861.)

“These were the regulations that governed the lives of Christians and Jews in Damascus under the Ottoman rule prior to the reforms mentioned above:

“A Dhimmi could not criticize the Qur’an, or claim that it had been altered; he could not say anything derogatory about the Prophet, or Islam; he could not attempt to change a Muslim’s religion, rob him of his fortune, or make an attempt on his life. During a time of war, a Dhimmi must not help the enemies of Islam.

“Furthermore, Dhimmis were required to wear clothes of a different color than Muslims’ clothes, and have belts around the waist. When at their places of worship, the loud ringing of bells was forbidden; when reading their Scriptures, they could not raise their voices; they were refrained from drinking wine in public. Their homes were not allowed to be higher than Muslims’ homes; Dhimmis were not to bury their dead in secrecy and express their grief in low tones without raising their voices. Dhimmis were not allowed to ride on horses, but only on mules and donkeys!

“Any non-compliance with the above-mentioned regulations was considered a breach in the *Covenant of Dhimma* which made a Dhimmi liable to insults, and sometimes led to his death by the orders of the governmental authorities in Damascus.

“Another example of Christian humiliation occurred in Damascus. When leaving his home, a Christian was required to have a sac slung over his shoulder, in order to be ready to accompany a Muslim on his way to the market and carry (in his sac) the groceries of that Muslim “boss”! Quite often, such a Christian might spend most of his day in this forced and degrading service to unknown Muslims he had met by chance!

“And as these events multiplied, it was the custom among Christian families when visiting their friends to inquire, *‘How many times were you forced today to carry the bag for the Muslims you had encountered?’* And, *‘On your way home, how often were you slapped by Muslims?’*

“The level of persecution of the Christians in Damascus would increase whenever the Ottomans were fighting European powers. This happened during the Greek revolution early in the 19th century, and in the wars between Turkey and Russia. The height of persecution of Christians took place in Istanbul (Constantinople) when the Sultan ordered the execution, by hanging, of the Orthodox Patriarch and several of his priests on Easter Sunday.

“The conditions surrounding the lives of Dhimmis in Damascus continued to be in state of flux, depending on the wars between the Ottomans and some European powers. Finally, a new and better era began when Ibrahim Pasha, the son of Muhammad Ali Pasha of Egypt, liberated Damascus on 15 July, 1832, and declared the equality of all the citizens of Damascus, whether they were Christians, Jews, or Muslims.

“Now Christians and Jews were allowed to wear bright colored clothes, and ride horses, and were no longer required to dismount upon meeting a Muslim on the road. Ibrahim Pasha declared that a Dhimmi’s testimony against a Muslim was to be accepted in the courts. All the rules and regulations that had been instituted to humiliate Dhimmis were abolished as Ibrahim Pasha sought to create a secular state in the Levant as inspired by the country he admired so much, namely France!”

Analysis

The author of the two articles, by drawing on original sources describing the life of Dhimmis in 19th century Damascus, has added to the literature of these persecuted people, by going to the actual sources. These sources demonstrated the complete falsity of the claim that Islam’s leaders treated with kindness the conquered peoples who did not convert to Islam.

Comments

Many Western political leaders show their ignorance of Islam when they assume that Islam was or is a peaceful religion. Their public pronouncements of this ongoing theme, does not contribute at all towards a real change in the status of Christians and Jews living

in *Daru'l Islam*. It is therefore heartening to read in an Arabic-language website articles that do not hide the past discriminatory and humiliating status of Dhimmis. Even though in the past the Jewish population of the Arab world was higher, it is now almost non-existent. The change came with the birth of the State of Israel in 1948. As for the Christian population of the Middle East, their numbers are dwindling as well and in an alarming way. Even after the liberation of Iraq from Saddam's brutal regime, the plight of its Christian population has deteriorated, with thousands being forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries and throughout the Western world.

As I noted in my 7 June, 2009, article, "**Islam's Law of Apostasy in our Globalized World**":

"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."

I am thankful that an Arab intellectual has addressed the readers of *Al-Awan*, (most of whom are of the rising generation,) by calling upon them to rid themselves of the myths that glorified Islamic history. It is to be hoped that when confronted with the truth, they will be more receptive to the principles that govern countries of the free world. A good beginning would encompass believing all citizens are worthy of dignity, respect and equality.

*Naipaul, V.S. *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples*. New York: Random House, 1998