

## KŘESŤANSKÉ OZBROJENÉ SKUPINY

### Zapomenutý aktér blízkovýchodních konfliktů

## CHRISTIAN ARMED GROUPS

### A Forgotten Actor of the Middle Eastern Conflicts

*Marek Čejka*<sup>a</sup>

#### Abstrakt

Text se zaměří na několik oblastí moderních konfliktů na Blízkém východě, kde jsou násilné křesťanské aktivity přítomny, a zasadí je do typologie násilných nestátních aktérů (VNSA) Phila Williamse - od agresivně-dominantního násilí usilujícího o zachování politického statu quo přes nacionalistická osvobozenecská hnutí až po čistě obranné násilí.

#### Abstract

The text will focus on several Middle East conflict areas where Christian activities and violence have been present in the modern history of the region. In the light of Phil Williams's violent non-state actor (VNSA) typology, it will explain the concept of Middle Eastern Christian violence - from the aggressive-dominant violence seeking to maintain political status quo, through nationalist-liberation movements, to purely defensive violence.

#### Acknowledgment

I would like to thank prof. Miroslav Mareš for his expert advice. The article was created as part of the project IGA FRRMS MENDELU No. 2020/009.

#### Klíčová slova

VNSA; křesťanství a násilí; militantní křesťanství; Blízký východ; občanská válka v Libanonu; občanská válka v Sýrii; konflikt v Iráku po r. 2003.

#### Keywords

VNSA, Christian Violence; Christian Militancy; Middle East; Lebanese Civil War; Syrian War after 2011; Violence in Iraq after 2003.

---

<sup>a</sup> Department of Territorial Studies, Mendel University. Brno, Czech Republic. [marekcejka@yahoo.com](mailto:marekcejka@yahoo.com). Researcher ID: D-9495-2018.

## INTRODUCTION

As a minority in the Middle East for centuries, local Christians have often got into troubles during various conflicts in the region. This issue needs to be taken into consideration in a wider historical perspective, as they have been the target of attacks by Muslims, by other religious groups (e.g., the Druze) or even by the European Christians during the Crusades. In the modern conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the attacks on the Egyptian Copts, terror against Christian communities in Algeria after 1990 or the unprecedented violence against Syrian and Iraqi Christians after 2011 by radical Islamists can surely be mentioned.

Although in the current conflicts - especially in the contemporary Middle East - the lives of Christian communities are often threatened, the history of Christianity is also strongly linked to violence. In the public debate, these facts are not emphasized too much, which may have various reasons (selective, ideological or purposeful interpretation of history, etc.). However, not only many experts (most notably, Mark Jurgensmeyer, Gilles Kepel, Ghassan Hage, or Jonathan Fine<sup>1</sup>) draw attention to these facts, but we could find also self-criticism from Christian own ranks, for example, directly from the present Pope Francis.<sup>2</sup>

In the pre-Enlightenment period, Christianity, especially Catholicism, showed a high level of religiously motivated oppression and violence. It accompanied the Christianization of Europe and other parts of the World, while genocidal brutality was recorded mainly in Latin America. The massacres were an accompanying phenomenon of the Crusades, when not only Muslims and Jews, but also Middle Eastern Christians of non-Catholic churches were murdered, while such extreme behaviour as cannibalism of the Crusaders was recorded.<sup>3</sup> Another bloody chapter consisted of various types of suppression of "heresy" and schisms, which sometimes resulted in large confessional conflicts, the most brutal of which was the Thirty Years' War, at its time one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history. The Spanish inquisition, the consequences of Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, and the support of slavery by some churches in the United States can also be counted.

The Enlightenment and the general secularization of the Western world manifested itself, among other things, in great decline in the influence of Christianity on politics, but it did not result in the extinction of Christian violence. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for

---

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., JURGENSMAYER, Mark. *Terror in the Mind of God, Fourth Edition: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017; JURGENSMAYER, Mark "Christian violence in America" in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 558, Issue 1, 1998; KEPEL, Gilles. *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993; HAGE, Ghassan. "Religious Fundamentalism as a Political Strategy: The evolution of the Lebanese Forces' religious discourse during the Lebanese Civil War" in *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol 12, Issue 1, 1992; FINE, Jonathan. *Political violence in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> HALE, Christopher. "Pope Francis Slams Donald Trump's Notions of 'Radical Islam'" in *Time*, 3. August 2016. Available from: <http://time.com/4436759/pope-francis-trump-radical-islam>

<sup>3</sup> RUBENSTEIN, Jay. "Cannibals and Crusaders" in *French Historical Studies*, No. 31 (4), 2008. pp. 525-552.

example, we can observe the strengthening connections between some conservative Christian circles and sharpened nationalism, more specifically between fascist formations in Frankist Spain, Salazarist Portugal, Ustasha Croatia, the fascist Slovak State, and elsewhere (the so-called clerical fascism).

The conflicting line “Catholicism vs. Protestantism” also became a distinctive feature of the Northern Irish conflict (“The Troubles”), defined by ethno-religious identity. Also, in another ethnic conflict in the crumbling Yugoslavia, belonging to Catholicism or Orthodoxy was an inseparable feature of the identity of many Croats and Serbs.

Quite specific violence with Christian features can be found in the USA (Ku-Klux-Klan, Timothy McVeigh, “anti-abortion” terrorism, armed sects, Christian militias and various fusions of Christianity combined with white racism), India (National Liberation Front of Tripura), Norway (Breivik’s massacre), or Uganda (Joseph Kony’s “Lord’s Resistance Army”). Christian violence has also seen very specific forms in modern conflicts in the Middle East. The aim of this text is to clarify and classify them.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Recent research into the violence of religious communities has been dominated mostly by studies of various forms of radical Islamism. Unlike the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Islamist and nationalist-secular violence prevails in today’s Middle Eastern conflicts, while Christian armed groups (or at least commanders and leaders of Christian origin) have come to the background. There is also a link to the general decline of Christians in the Middle East, which has had very complex causes. In modern Middle Eastern conflicts, various forms of radical Islamism prevail among the religiously motivated types of violence, yet, this is not always reserved for radicalized Muslims. In this regard, much attention is paid by Israeli experts to political violence associated with Judaism.<sup>4</sup>

If the scientific attention is also paid to Christian violence, it happens particularly in the case of research on the Lebanese Civil War between 1975 and 1990.<sup>5</sup> However, the focus on today’s turbulent Middle East has turned to different areas, where Lebanon and the enormous violence of the Lebanese Civil War have been replaced in terms of both victims and methods by even bloodier events in Iraq and Syria in the first and second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Violent Christian groups are present in these conflicts, too, but their purpose is usually defensive.

In the context of this article, a Christian armed/violent group is primarily an organization that oscillates from a religiously and culturally-supremacist motivated identity-based violence (in the sense of the Lebanese Phalangists) to a purely symbolic and cultural identity defensive violence (a number of Christian groups in Iraq). In this context, groups in which some of their leaders and members have professed Christianity are also mentioned,

---

<sup>4</sup> E.g., SPRINZAK, Ehud. *Brother against Brother - Violence and Extremism in Israeli Politics*. New York: The Free Press, 1999; PEDHAZUR, Ami and PERLIGER, Arie. *Jewish Terrorism in Israel*. Columbia University Press, New-York, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., HARRIS, William. *Faces of Lebanon: Sects, Wars, and Global Extensions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

although these groups have not exercised religiously or identity-driven terror (as in some Palestinian groups).

This text will attempt to clarify a certain deficit linked to the lack of information on Christian VNSAs, not only to provide their systematic overview, but also to include them in Phil Williams’s violent non-state actor (VNSA) typology.<sup>6</sup> Williams distinguishes between six VNSA groups: warlords, militias, paramilitary forces, insurgencies, terrorist organizations, and criminal organizations and youth gangs.

Williams’ theory of VNSAs is well suited for this case, not only because it comes from a respected scientific authority, but it is also well applicable to the field for its conceptual neutrality and clear and well-arranged conceptualization.

**Table 1: Main attributes of the Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) according to Phil Williams**

	Motivation	Change of status quo	Strategy	Structure	Who They represent
<b>Warlords</b>	Economic	No	Control of territory and warlord’s interests by military power	Hierarchical, with warlord on the top and trusted subordinates under warlord’s control	Interests of warlords or their tribe/group etc.
<b>Militias</b>	Political	No	Control of territory of a weak/failing state	Irregular armed forces lacking a charismatic leader	Can represent specific ethnic, religious, tribal, clan or other community groups, but could be also in the service of the state
<b>Paramilitary forces</b>	Political	No	Control of territory of weak/failing state	Highly fragmented, frequently reorganized	An extension of the government forces, but usually poorly trained, lightly equipped
<b>Insurgencies</b>	Political	Yes	Territorial grasp and seizure of power through	Attempt to replace existing and create new hierarchical state structure,	Can represent specific ethnic, religious, tribal,

---

<sup>6</sup> WILLIAMS, Phil. Violent Non-State Actors and National and International Security. *International Relations and Security Network*, 2008. Available from: <https://bit.ly/33SN5rq>

			the revolution- ary takeover and replace- ment of the ex- isting govern- ment, through the use of sub- version and armed conflict	<i>or</i> emulate/establish an autonomous state within tradi- tional ethnic or re- ligious territorial bounds, <i>or</i> establish them- selves as alterna- tive governance to the existing state	political or other groups
<b>Terrorist or- ganizations</b>	Political	Yes	Indiscriminate violence, espe- cially against ci- vilian targets, motivated by anarchism/anti- colonial- ism/leftism/re- ligion. Some may have their social enter- prises to pro- vide services for their support- ers.	May be close to in- surgency. May change from hierarchical local presence to decen- tralized global presence. May transform into social movement / political force or criminal enterprise.	Interests of anarchists / anticolonial nationalists / radical left- ists / reli- gious radi- cals
<b>Criminal or- ganizations and youth gangs</b>	Economic	No	Use crime as their business strategy. Sometimes co- operate with politically aimed VNSAs.	Usually transna- tional, from hierar- chical to decentral- ized	Mafia-style organizations Drug traf- fickers Financial fraudsters Criminal gangs

Table: Author (according to Williams 2008).

## THE NATURE OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND VIOLENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East is still inhabited by large Christian communities: In absolute numbers, most Christians live in present-day Egypt, accounting for about 10% of the Egyptian population (15-20 millions of Egyptians), while the largest percentage of Christians is present in Lebanon, accounting for about 31-35% of Lebanese population.<sup>7</sup> But they are also pre-

<sup>7</sup> BBC. Guide: Christians in the Middle East, 11. Oct. 2011. Available from: <https://bbc.in/3ozPajZ>

sent in other Middle Eastern countries, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine. The manifestations of violence and radicalism have mainly occurred in Christian communities located in areas exposed to violent conflicts.<sup>8</sup> These are mainly:

- the territory of Lebanon in which the Civil War took place between 1975 and 1990;
- Palestine, where Christians have been involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1948 (and in previous Zionist-Arab conflict in the British Mandate of Palestine);
- more recently, the territory of Iraq and Syria, where part of the Christians were engaged in conflicts that erupted in the territory of these countries in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Regarding the very nature of Christian violence in the Middle Eastern conflicts, it should be stressed that - with some exceptions - it is usually not a form of religiously motivated violence in the sense of, for example, radical Islamism, but rather a violent expression of identity. Christian radicals usually do not want to create any form of theocracy based on religious law analogic to the Muslim idea of Caliphate, etc. Instead, they prefer to:

- maintain the status quo, or, respectively, define themselves toward other communities, in particular, the Muslim and Druze ones (Lebanon);
- defy the occupation within the mixed Muslim-Christian societies (Palestine);
- Christian identity may serve as a sealant in defensive resistance against particularly aggressive forms of radical Islamism (Iraq after 2003 and Syria after 2011).

### **The Beginnings of Christian Violence in Modern Middle Eastern Conflicts**

As a religious minority in the Middle East for centuries, Christians have been sometimes subject to persecution and, in some cases, violence, mainly by the majority Muslim communities. The forms of violence which sporadically occurred in Christian communities at that time were mostly self-defensive (e.g., in the 1860 Mount Lebanon civil war). While at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only very isolated cases of direct Christian violence still could be found, the same cannot be said about the spreading hatred toward other communities.<sup>9</sup> Middle Eastern Christians had traditionally closer ties with European/Western ideas than Muslims, also the “traditional” European Christian prejudices against Jews were rooted in their communities earlier than among Muslims.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in 1840, the so-

---

<sup>8</sup> In this context, it is worth mentioning the case of the Egyptian Copts, which are the largest Christian group in the Middle East and have also been the target of radical Islamists many times, but no relevant radical groups have emerged in their environment. This is related to their complicated but relatively positive relationship with the Egyptian regime, which many Copts supported and which, in turn, provided them with protection and at the same time used the Copts politically. See also: KILINC, Ramazan. "Mubarak's lasting legacy on Egypt's Coptic Christians" in *The Conversation* (17. 3. 2020). Available from: <https://bit.ly/3gFMTRL>

<sup>9</sup> See MAKDISI, Ussama. *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; SALIBI, Kamal. *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> See MAKDISI, Ussama. *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019.

called “Damascus affair” took place, in which a group of Syrian Jews was charged with a ‘blood libel’ in the case of a ritual murder of a Capuchin monk by local Christians.<sup>11</sup> Similar anti-Semitic prejudices arrived in the Muslim or Islamist environment only later, especially during the emergence of political conflicts in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (especially during the Zionist-Arab conflict) and through Nazi propaganda targeting Arabs and Muslims during World War II.<sup>12</sup>

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, violence became an accompanying phenomenon of some of the more radical forms of Arab nationalism. The first Arab nationalists (but not automatically proponents of nationalist-motivated violence) were Arab Christians, such as Francis Marrash, Ibrahim al-Yaziji, or Naguib Azoury. They sought for, above all, the literary and cultural revival of Arabic and formulated a political programme in which they defined Arab nationalism mainly against the Ottoman rule. In modern times, Christians have usually represented the most westernized and most secular part of the population in Arab societies, which was related both to the natural Christian contacts to the West and the strong missionary activity of various Western churches. Thus, their perception of Christianity in various forms of Arab nationalism was mainly identitarian, and less theological, and could also serve as a delimitation against pan-Islamic tendencies competing with various forms of Arab nationalism in the time of its upsurge. Christian nationalists thus primarily preferred to create a unifying (pan)Arab national identity and usually did not emphasize their confessional affiliation in the first place. Thus, Middle Eastern nationalisms, following the European model, evolved as essentially secular, but this did not mean that religion (including Christianity) could not serve as an important binder in them. In the Middle East, different types of nationalisms have crystallized (e.g. pan-Arabism, pan-Syrianism, Baathism), which may have accentuated certain religious elements or, on the contrary, completely refrained from any inter- and intra-religious sectarianism.

In the period between the World Wars, a number of Middle Eastern nationalists became fascinated by the then conservative and authoritarian movements and leaders with fascist tendencies, especially by Benito Mussolini. Later, Hitler and Nazi Germany were also inspiring and influencing, for example, for the Christian nationalist Antoun Saadeh and his vision of pan-Syrianism and “Greater Syria”.<sup>13</sup> Nazism and the Spanish Fascist Phalangist Party became an example for the Lebanese Christian party Phalange (*Kataeb*). The unifying motive of these formations was the building of national ideology and mythology, discipline-based social order, emphasis on conservative values, and resistance to various left-wing political thought.

## THE MOST IMPORTANT CASES OF CONNECTION BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND VIOLENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

### Christian Political Violence in Lebanon

---

<sup>11</sup> FRANKEL, Jonathan. *The Damascus Affair: “Ritual Murder”, Politics, and the Jews in 1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> HERF, Jeffrey. *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*. Yale: Yale University Press 2010.

<sup>13</sup> SAMAHA, Nour. “The Eagles of the Whirlwind” in *Foreign Policy*, 28 March 2016. Available from: <https://bit.ly/3oBxZi6>

The most brutal forms of terror associated with Christian groups in the modern Middle East can be found in Lebanon during the Civil War (1975-1990). Until its outbreak, Lebanese Christians, especially of the Maronite Church, dominated Lebanese politics, and through it also other religious communities in the country. Lebanese Christians were often showing their cultural superiority over other communities. One of its expressions was, for example, the mythical “Phoenicianism”, by which they wanted to strengthen their cultural superiority over Arabs and Arab forms of nationalism.<sup>14</sup> The war was preceded by the polarization in Lebanese society after the Second World War and the destabilizing influence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lebanese society was religiously very fragmented. Tensions between Lebanon’s main communities - Christians (mainly of the Maronite rite), Sunni Muslims, Shiites, and Druzes - gradually escalated. Also, a large number of Palestinian refugees had come to Lebanon, which contributed to demographic change in Lebanon, and the Christians eventually became a minority in the country. The anti-Israeli operations of radical Palestinian groups from the Lebanese territory worsened Lebanon’s relations with Israel and dragged the country into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The fragile balance between religions in Lebanon quickly ended and the government lost control over the state. In 1975, members of the Phalangist party were among the main actors in the outbreak of the Civil War in Lebanon (1975-1990). The slaughter of a bus full of Palestinian refugees by the Phalangists in revenge for the attack on the Maronite church was the main impulse for the conflict.

The Phalangist Party had existed in Lebanon since 1936, when it was founded by Pierre Gemayel (1905-1984), later Lebanese president. As the Lebanese football team captain, he was fascinated by the discipline of Nazi Germany and by personal impressions from the Berlin Olympics.<sup>15</sup> The direct inspiration for the founding of the party was the Spanish fascist Phalangist party. The main motto of the Lebanese Phalangists was: “God, Nation and Family”, and the visual appearance of member uniforms was close to the uniforms of European fascist movements, including the use of the fascist salute.<sup>16</sup> In the 1960s, the party formed its militia, which later came into conflict with other Lebanese armed factions, mainly the Palestinian one. It was headed by William Hawi (1908-1976) and after his death by the founder’s son Bashir Gemayel (1947-1982).

The link between the Phalangists and Christianity was relatively strong, but not at the level of religious fundamentalism, rather, emphasizing Christian identity, power, and dominance over other Lebanese communities. Therefore, it was ideologically closest to European clerical fascist movements from the time of the Second World War. Christian symbolism was widely used by the Phalangists, which was further strengthened by the formation of a Phalangist coalition with other Christian parties and militias under the name “Lebanese Forces”. As their symbol, they chose a stylized cross, which turns into a dagger at the bottom. Christian symbols also appeared as crosses in the form of chains,

---

<sup>14</sup> KAUFMAN, Asher. “Phoenicianism: The Formation of an Identity in Lebanon in 1920” in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Jan., 2001, pp. 173-194.

<sup>15</sup> FISK, Robert. *Pity the Nation, the abduction of Lebanon*. New York: Nation Books, 1990, p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> MOUMNEH, Nader. *The Lebanese Forces: Emergence and Transformation of the Christian Resistance*. Hamilton Books, 2019, p. 16.

bracelets, tattoos, etc. on the bodies of Phalangist militiamen. Pictures with Virgin Mary sometimes adorned their weapons.<sup>17</sup>

An important element of Phalangist violence is not only an effort to eliminate external, but also internal enemies. There were numerous power struggles in the Lebanese forces that grew into brutal violent conflicts. The best known is the bloodshed that is associated with the control of the Lebanese forces of the Phalangists under command of Bashir Gemayel. In 1980, he ordered to massacre the members of another Maronite militia called "Tigers" (*Numur*), and this event began to be called "Day of the Long Knives". Other very brutal commanders of the Lebanese forces were Elie Hobeika (1956-2002), responsible for the massacre in the Palestinian refugee camps Sabra and Shatila, and Samir Geagea (born 1952). After the end of the Civil war, he was imprisoned, but now he is again in charge of the Lebanese forces. The Phalangists have separated themselves from the Lebanese forces in the second half of the 1980s and now they operate as an independent entity, which is no longer as influential as before.<sup>18</sup>

Phalangism is still an influential component of Lebanese politics. After the Civil War, its ideological and militant forms somewhat dulled, which was related to the mentioned power disputes within the movement and, at the same time, to the dynamics and reconfigurations within the Lebanese political scene, manifested in the inclination of some Christian leaders and entities toward former political opponents (e.g., alliance of former Christian general and contemporary president Michel Aoun with Hezbollah). Phalangism has strong factions beyond the borders of Lebanon - especially in the USA, Brazil, Argentina, and Australia, where large communities of Lebanese Christians live.

A specific case of Christian militia was the South Lebanese Army (SLA), which split off from the Lebanese army in 1976. It was headed by Major Sa'ad Haddad, a member of the Greek Orthodox Church. Between 1982 and 2000, SLA was supported by Israel. It had built its position in southern Lebanon in a belt of about 20 kilometres above the Israeli border, where it helped protect Israel from infiltration and shelling. The members of the SLA were not only Lebanese Christians, but sometimes also Shi'a Muslims, who were often very anti-Palestinian. After Israel's departure from South Lebanon, some of SLA members took advantage of the offer of asylum in Israel.

In terms of Williams's typology, the Maronite Christian VNSA and South Lebanese Army could be classified primarily as militias, overlapping sometimes with warlordism. The warlord in the case of Christian militias was represented by the charismatic and brutal leader Bashir Gemayel. Christian militias acted in the spirit of typology as irregular troops in the territory of a weak or collapsed state, they represented a specific religious group (or a part of it), and often had a tribal dimension (for example, the Gemayel clan). They were also close to very weak/dysfunctional Lebanese state institutions (in the case of SLA, to the Israeli government), but they were not subject to their direct control.

Last but not least, it should be mentioned that the role of Christian groups throughout the Lebanese civil war often shifted from paramilitary forces (when Gemayel and Kataeb

---

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g.: Defencetalk. *Lebanese Civil War - World at War*. Apr 9, 2007 [online]. Available from: <https://bit.ly/3IZxdK1>.

<sup>18</sup> SELA, Avraham. *The Continuum Political Encyclopaedia of the Middle East*. New York, London Continuum, 2002, pp. 550-565.

were in the government) to more of militia and warlord category. Moreover, Marada (a personal warlord-type group) or Tigers (as Chamoun’s paramilitary group) had a very different profile from the Lebanese Forces and Phalange. Lebanese Christians were also present in a number of other Lebanese armed groups, such as Palestinian, secular, Nasserist, but their presence in these groups was rather marginal, and therefore not within the scope of this article.

**Table 2: Main Lebanese Christian VNSAs in the Lebanese Civil War**

	Motivation and connection to Christianity	Change of status quo	Strategy	Structure	Who they represent	Possible VNSA type
<b>Lebanese Forces</b>	Political  Umbrella organization of Maronite parties and their militias	No  Usually strongly reactionary forces  Recognition of the existing Lebanese state	Control of territory of weak/failing state Lebanon	Irregular force with a charismatic leader	Representing the wider Maronite Christian community	Paramilitary/Militia
<b>Kataeb party</b>	Personal/political  Political party with militia	No  Usually strongly reactionary forces  Recognition of the existing Lebanese state	Control of territory of weak/failing state Lebanon	Irregular force with a charismatic leader	Representing the Maronite Christian community, sometimes with a tribal accent	Paramilitary/Militia
<b>Marada brigades</b>	Political  Political party of warlord Sulaiman Frangieh with militia	??? No	Control of territory of Zgharta and environs	Irregular force with a charismatic leader	Representing the Maronite Christian community, sometimes with a tribal accent	Warlordist
<b>Tigers</b>	Political	??? No	Control of territory of central Lebanon	Irregular force	Representing the Maronite Christian community	Paramilitary

	Militia of the National Liberal Party					
<b>Guardians of the Cedars</b>	Political  Militia of the National Liberal Party	No	Anti-Palestinianism, control of Southern Lebanon	Irregular force	Representing the Maronite Christian community	Warlordist
<b>South Lebanese Army</b>	Political  Christian commanded and dominated	Sui generis  Preserving Lebanese existence with attention to Israeli interests	Control of territory of weak/failing state Lebanon with attention to Israeli interests  Fighting Palestinian militants and Hezbollah	Irregular armed forces	The people of South Lebanon (mainly Christian, to some extent also Shia and other communities) who opposed the violent activities of Palestinian militants and later Hezbollah	Militia

Table: Author.

### Christian Self-Defensive Political Violence in Current Conflicts in Syria and Iraq

After the outbreak of the conflict in Iraq following the US invasion in 2003 and after the start of the Syrian war in 2011, respectively, non-Sunni Muslim and non-Muslim minority communities became a frequent target by Salafist jihadist groups, mostly affiliated with Al-Qaeda and later the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In limited cases, Christians also became targets of Kurdish militias.<sup>19</sup> With parts of Iraq and Syria in anarchical and very dangerous situations, accompanied by brutal violence, in which the central state was unable to maintain security and order, many vulnerable communities, including Christians, began to form their defensive units. As the conflicts in Iraq and Syria became linked, especially through the existence of ISIS in both states, after 2011, we will deal with both Iraqi and Syrian Christian armed groups in a common subchapter.

In the Iraq/Syria conflict, one can find armed groups composed of Syrian and Iraqi Christian denominations, who claim to be of various ethnic (or ethnoreligious) origin - Arab, Kurdish, Assyrian, or Armenian. As many Christians are located more in the northern parts of both countries, where also numerous Kurds live, many of them are characterized by

<sup>19</sup> SAFI, Marlo. *Assyrian Christians Face Persecution by Kurdish Nationalists*, 25 September 2018. Available from: <https://bit.ly/33WM7KQ>

cooperation with Kurdish organizations and militias (in Syria often with those in the Rojava region, and in Iraq often with the Peshmerga) operating in a geographically similar area. They also usually share similar enemies in the form of radical-Islamist groups (offshoots of Al-Qaeda, An-Nusra, ISIS, and others). In this respect, the minority communities are usually pragmatically close to the attitudes of the Iraqi or Syrian official governments, or close to the positions of those they believe can ensure their security. Like the Kurdish troops from Rojava, some Christian units have Western volunteers in their ranks. But unlike in Rojava, they do not usually claim to be leftist, but rather right-wing and supporting the “Christian civilization”; they may include, for example, former British far-right skinheads and hooligans close to the English Defence League or members of various other European anti-Islamic and anti-immigration organizations.<sup>20</sup>

Overall, the situation with the founding, merging or extinction of various VNSAs in the Iraq/Syria conflict is very confusing. The emergence of the highest number of Christian armed groups is dated around 2014, which is seen as the year of ISIS’s main rise. The table shows some of the most important Christian defensive militias active in the mentioned conflict (the total number is higher):

**Table 4: Christian VNSAs in Iraq/Syria conflict after 2003 and 2011, respectively**

	Motivation and connection to Christianity	Change of status quo	Strategy	Structure	Who they represent	Possible VNSA type
<b>Syriac Military Council (Syria)</b>	Self-defence of part of Assyrian Christians	Depending on Rojava’s current attitude to the Syrian regime	Defensive  Cooperates mainly with Kurdish forces.	Hierarchic  Following the Kurdish example, they also have a female unit.	Assyrian Christians in province Al-Hasakah (since 2013)	Militia/ Insurgency
<b>Guardians of the Dawn (Syria)</b>	Self-defence of Arab Christians  Concept of Christian „holy struggle“ <sup>21</sup>	No	Christian pro-government militia	Hierarchic	Part of Arab Christians in southern Syria	Militia/ Paramilitary force

<sup>20</sup> NEUHOF, Florian. Anti-Isis foreign legion: Ex-skinheads and angry white men swell ranks of Christian militia fighting Islamic State in *Intentional Business Times*, 13 July 2015. Available from: <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/anti-isis-foreign-legion-ex-skinheads-angry-white-men-swell-ranks-christian-militia-fighting-1510550>

<sup>21</sup> Theological concepts of the “holy struggle” of the Guardians of the Dawn wing called “Lions of the Cherubim” are further discussed, e.g., here: <https://bit.ly/3pYQnlK>.

<b>Sutoro Police</b> (Syria)	Self-defence of Assyrian Christians	Depending on Rojava's current attitude to the Syrian regime	Semi-police troop, loyal to the authorities of Kurdish Rojava	Hierarchic	Part of Assyrian Christians in Kurdish areas of Northern Syria	Militia/ Insurgency
<b>The Gozarto Protection Forces - Sootoro</b> (Syria)	Self-Defence of Assyrian Christians	No	Semi-police troop, originally loyal to Rojava, later to the Syrian regime	Hierarchic	Part of Assyrian Christians in Kurdish areas of Northern Syria, loyal to the Syrian government	Militia/ Paramilitary force
<b>Dwekh Nawsha</b> (Iraq)	Self-defence of Assyrian Christians	No	Assyrian Defence Militia against ISIS in Nineveh, Northern Iraq	Hierarchic	Assyrian Christians in Northern Iraq (Nineveh plains)  Foreign Christian fighters from the West	Militia
<b>Nineveh Plain Protection Units</b> (Iraq)	Self-defence of Assyrian Christians	No	A militia of Assyrian Christians in northern Iraq, founded in 2014 to defend against ISIS	Hierarchic	Assyrian Christians in Northern Iraq (Nineveh plains)	Militia
<b>Lebanese Resistance Brigades</b>	Self-defence of non-sectarian com-	No	Established in 1998, supported anti-Israeli activi-	Hierarchic	Multi-confessional and anti-sectarian	Militia

(Lebanon, Syria)	munities (including Christians)		ties, Hezbollah and continued their activities during the conflict in Syria, where their volunteers went to fight mainly against ISIS.		units close to Hezbollah, including Sunni, Shia, Druze, and Christian.	
------------------	---------------------------------	--	--	--	--	--

Table: Author.

According to Williams’s typology, the Christian VNSAs in the Iraq/Syrian conflict can be usually classified as militias, as they were/are irregular troops in the territory of a weak or collapsed state (more specifically: in the areas of conflict-torn Iraq or Syria outside the governmental power). Mostly they did not primarily oppose the political status quo, but if, for example, some Christian units in northern Syria cooperated with the authorities of Kurdish Rojava, they could share their tendency toward autonomy or even independence with them. The vast majority of Christian militias in Iraq/Syria fought for the Christian cause rather from point of view of their identity, but some of the groups or their wings (such as the wing of the Guardians of the Dawn militia) also showed theological concepts of the Christian “holy struggle”.

### Christians as Perpetrators of Violence - the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Violent Activity of Christians not Explicitly Based on Christian Identity

Like in Lebanon or Syria/Iraq, the role of Christians in Palestinian radicalism can be perceived primarily from the perspective of identity. In Palestine, moreover, Christians lack the element of aspiration to dominate Muslims or other communities, which is given both demographically (Palestinian Christians traditionally represented a significantly lower percentage of society than Christians in Lebanon), as well as by the specifics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the prevailing forms of Palestinian nationalism. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Palestinian politics was dominated by an “Arafatist”, a more or less secular type of nationalism, which built the unity of the Palestinian nation on the solidarity of Palestinian Arabic-speaking Muslims and Christians (or even Jews, if they were strongly Anti-Zionist<sup>22</sup>). Arafat himself married a Palestinian Christian woman, which could be also partly a gesture of political significance to show the unity of Palestinian Muslims and Christians.

Unlike in Lebanon, no radical group has been established in Palestine which would want to unite only Christians in the struggle for the Palestinian cause. Thus, the violent activities of Palestinian Christians were either:

- based on individual political activity;

<sup>22</sup> RABKIN, Yakov. *Threat from Within: A History of Jewish Opposition to Zionism*. Zed Books, 2006.

- based on the membership of Christians in VNSAs, often strongly secular ones.

Some of the most prominent cases of Palestinian Christian violence/terrorism cannot be categorized as a result of the activities of VNSAs, because they were acts of individual terror. Most notably, it was the assassination of US senator Robert F. Kennedy by Sirhan Sirhan (b. 1944). The perpetrator was a native of Jerusalem from the Palestinian protestant family and, as a refugee, he acquired Jordanian citizenship. In 1968, he murdered R. F. Kennedy in Los Angeles for his responsibility for weapon support of Israel. Sirhan Sirhan was a deeply religious Christian, who, at the time of the assassination, was an evangelical Christian and also a member of the mystical Christian order of the Rosicrucians.<sup>23</sup>

Hilarion Capucci (1922-2017) was a Caesarean bishop of the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church, a native of Syrian Aleppo. Although officially based in Israel, he became a great supporter of Palestinian nationalism. In 1974, Israeli security forces detained him in an attempt to smuggle the weapons designed for one of the armed wings of the PLO to Palestine in his car. He was sentenced to a twelve-year sentence by an Israeli court. Many Palestinian radical groups sought his release, but he was finally freed only after the Vatican's intervention in 1978.<sup>24</sup> Capucci was the most important Christian religious leader ever involved in Palestinian radicalism.

Concerning Palestinian VNSAs and Christianity, the main founder of PFLP, George Habash (1926-2008), had an identitarian connection to Christianity, being from an Eastern Orthodox family. Another important leader of PFLP, Wadia Haddad (1927-1978), was a close associate of Habash. He also cooperated with well-known international terrorist Carlos "The Jackal" and in 1976 organized the kidnapping of an Air France plane to Entebbe together with German radicals. He came from a Palestinian family of the Greek Orthodox Rite.

According to Williams's typology, PFLP would most likely be among "insurgencies", as it is seeking Palestinian statehood. "Organized and armed political struggle to take power through a revolutionary coup and replace existing government" is also a typical feature of PFLP.

There is a very thin line between insurgency and terrorism, but PFLP did not primarily focus on the targeting of civilians in a manner typical for terrorist organizations. If this happened, PFLP's actions would fall into the anti-colonial and left-wing waves of terrorism.<sup>25</sup>

Another Palestinian Christian Nayef Hawatmeh (b. 1935) from a Palestinian Catholic family was the founder and leader of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), which split from Habash's PFLP in 1969. Both organizations were very similar in their ideology and radicalism, as was also the identitarian concept of Christianity of their

---

<sup>23</sup> KLABER, William, and MELANSON, Phil. *Shadow Play: The Unsolved Murder of Robert F. Kennedy*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2018. See also <https://www.biography.com/crime-figure/sirhan-sirhan>

<sup>24</sup> BBC. Hilarion Capucci: Arms-smuggling archbishop dies aged 94, 2 January 2017. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38489550>

<sup>25</sup> WILLIAMS, Phil. *Violent Non-State Actors and National and International Security. International Relations and Security Network*, 2008. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2LmULfh>

leaders and some of their members. According to Williams, DFLP can be characterized similarly as PFLP, i.e., mainly as “insurgency”.

Chris Bandak (b. 1979) is a Christian of the Greek Orthodox Rite of Bethlehem, who was the leader and member of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades and Tanzim Brigades during the Second Intifada. He was imprisoned by Israelis for killing several Israeli civilians. Bandak’s birth house is located near the Basilica of the Nativity, which was understood symbolically by some radicalized Palestinian Christians. Bandak was released in 2011 in exchange for the freeing of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit imprisoned by Hamas. Bandak’s activities in the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades and Tanzim Brigades, targeting civilians, could be classified as terrorism (as were many other attacks by both organizations).<sup>26</sup>

**Table 3: Palestinian VNSAs connected with Christians**

Organiza-tion	Motivation and Con-nection to Christianity	Change of sta-tus quo	Strategy	Structure	Who they represent	Possible VNSA type
<b>PFLP</b> <b>(The Popu-lar Front for the Lib-eration of Palestine)</b>	Revolution-ary leftist Palestine, the defeat of Israel  Leaders and members of Christian origin: nota-bly, <b>George Habash</b> and <b>Wadia Had-dad</b>	Yes	Secular radicalism and ter-rorism based on Palestin-ian na-tionalism and Marx-Leninist ideology	Hierarchical	Secular and leftist Palestin-ian Mus-lims and Christians (opposed to Arafat’s concepts, DFLP, and other Pal. insurgen-cies)	Insurgency
<b>DFLP</b> <b>(The Demo-cratic Front for the Libera-tion of Pal-estine)</b>	Revolution-ary leftist Palestine, the defeat of Israel Leaders and members of Christian origin: nota-bly, <b>Nayef Hawatmeh</b>	Yes	Secular radicalism and ter-rorism based on Palestin-ian na-tionalism and Marx-Leninist ideology	Hierarchical	Secular and leftist Palestin-ian Mus-lims and Christians (opposed to Arafat’s concepts, PFLP and other Pal. insurgen-cies)	Insurgency

<sup>26</sup> MISKIN, Maayana. *PA Minister Praises Terror*. Arutz Sheva, 5 July 2009. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2lvLOz3>

<p><b>Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades and Tanzim Brigades</b></p>	<p>A secular organization close to Fatah</p> <p>Notable members of Christian origin: <b>Chris Bandak</b></p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>Secular radicalism and terrorism based on Palestinian nationalism</p> <p>Attacks on Israeli civilians</p>	<p>Decentralized</p>	<p>Secular Palestinian Muslims and Christians, ideologically close to Fatah and Arafat</p>	<p>Terrorist organization</p>
---	--	------------	--	----------------------	--	-------------------------------

Table: Author.

## CONCLUSION

Christian radicalism in the Middle East is not generally represented as such a significant militant trend as radical Islamism in the modern Middle East, but it cannot be overlooked, at least in the context of some conflicts (Lebanon, Palestine).

Christianity plays mostly an identitarian - not theological - role in conflicts in the current Middle East (but there are exceptions - see Guardians of the Dawn militia above), which distinguishes it from radical Islamism. Christian radicalism was manifested in the most brutal and aggressive forms in the Civil War in Lebanon, while its most defensive character was (or still is) present in the conflicts in Iraq and Syria after 2003 and 2011, respectively.

It can be assumed that there are currently several factors that will probably reduce the likelihood of radicalization of Middle Eastern Christians in the future:

- Overall, the number of Christian communities in the Middle East is decreasing (natural decline, Christian emigration, consequences of conflicts and ethnoreligious cleansing), and this demographic decline could probably also be interconnected with the potential for violence of various types (including defensive). For the sake of completeness, however, it should be added that the radicalization of Christian communities can sometimes have its resources in the diaspora, and even demographically weakened Christian communities could still be a very important source of political support for the local political regimes (e.g., Assad's regime in Syria).

- Lebanon, despite many crises, resisted the revival of civil war or direct involvement in the Syrian conflict. Christian militias officially disarmed after the end of the Civil War and the Taif Accords (although there is still the possibility of their reactivation) and the number of Lebanese Christians dropped slightly. Christians are nowadays also more politically split among competing political Lebanese political factions.

- The time of the Palestinian radical left-wing fronts, whose leaders and members were often Palestinian Christians, was mainly related to the Cold War period. At present, Palestinian religious radicalism is dominated mainly by radical Islamist Hamas.

- The original conflict in Iraq and Syria which started in 2003 (2011) is visibly losing ground, ISIS has been defeated territorially, and the central governments of both countries have

strengthened their role. Thus, the existence of Christian defence militias is gradually losing importance. For the sake of correctness, however, it must again be said that it remains a question in what form it will be possible to restore the national armies in both countries. Many militias remain active or ready to reactivate and there is also often significant tension on the Syrian-Turkish border.

In terms of Williams's typology, Christian VNSAs in the Middle East are mainly militias (armed groups of Christians in territories of weak or collapsing states such as Lebanon or Syria/Iraq during the respective civil wars). In some cases, it could be a combination of the militia and insurgency categories (or militias and paramilitary units loyal to the regime - e.g., the Gozarto Protection Forces-Sootoro), or a certain symbiosis between militias and warlordism (e.g., Bashir Jumayil in the case of the Lebanese forces). In the case of Palestine, Christian violence was often not organized by the VNSA, rather, it was sometimes represented in individual acts of violence (e.g., acts of Sirhan Sirhan or Hilarion Capucci). Other Palestinian organizations, such as PFLP, DFLP, in which Palestinian Christians played an important leading role, can be categorized mainly as insurgencies. They are not Christian VNSAs in the strict sense of this term, but mostly secular-nationalist and leftist organizations, while their leaders - Christians - still identify themselves with Christianity as an important element of their identity.