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The Christian dilemma in the Mideast

Joe Ferullo | Jul. 6, 2011 NCR Today

A good friend of mine took his family on a trip to the Mideast a few weeks ago, including a couple of days in Israel. Through his sister, who lives in the region, he reached out to a driver, hiring him to transport his family and act as a guide.

The driver was Palestinian, and took his clients through the Israeli walls, guards and checkpoints around Gaza and the West Bank -- a system of protection that my friend said could only be described as something close to aparthied.

And yet the Palestinian driver was a reluctant supporter of the Israeli government. The biggest reason for this: he was a Christian.

His fear, as he watched the Arab Spring bloom around him, was what would happen to Christians without Israeli oversight: would Hamas be as even-handed? Or Fatah? He doubted it.

His dilemma is the same one facing Christians across the Mideast, from Iraqis post Saddam Hussein to Egyptian Coptics after the fall of Mubarak. It is an uncomfortable and thin line to negotiate: freedom versus the very real protection offered by dictators and strongmen in an overwhelmingly Muslim area.

The latest aspect of this push-and-pull arises in Libya. *The Los Angeles Times* profiled [1] Giovanni Innocenzo Martinelli, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Tripoli, who has stirred controversy with mild support of Moammar Kadafi and strong condemnation of NATO bombing raids.

Martinelli, 69, was born in Libya during World War II, the son of Italian farmers who settled there during the long colonization of the country by Italy. He was educated back in the motherland, ordained a Franciscan, then returned to North Africa to nurture the remaining Catholic population there in the early 1970s.

Martinelli has come out strongly against the NATO action in Libya, telling the *Times* "bombing is always an immoral act," and that the use of violence to stop violence is never a good strategy. The Vatican has also called for dialogue and diplomacy to end the conflict in Libya, but Martinelli has gone further -- apparently, the *Times* writes, with the Pope's blessing.

He has resisted opportunities to condemn Kadafi, citing instead accomplishments: a social welfare state, relative equality for women, and -- most important -- liberty of worship.

Read deep into the *Times* report, and Martinelli's dilemma comes into sharp focus: Masses in Libya draw Catholic immigrants who have come to the oil-rich country from around the world -- Filipinos and other South Asians, sub-Saharan Africans, as well as Italians.

Some, the *Times* writes, are evacuating Libya and its uncertain future -- but for many more, the church remains a pillar of stability during a time of extreme political change throughout the area.

Christians in the Mideast are caught between these fierce forces of change and brute strength -- finding a way through this epoch with their safety intact and the future of the church secure at its most ancient origins will not be simple.

As the driver from Palestine told my friend, right now there is no good choice.

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[1] http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-libya-bishop-20110703,0,287540.story