



Religious Persecution in the Middle East Threatens Us All

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As the latest terrorist atrocity in San Bernardino demonstrates, radical Islam can kill anywhere. However, the problem is far worse in the Middle East. The botched U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq dramatically accelerated the exodus of Christians. The chaotic outcome of the “Arab Spring” further spurred their exit. Today the Islamic State is attempting to complete a process of genocide/ethnic cleansing.

In *Christian Persecutions in the Middle East: A 21st Century Tragedy* (St. Augustine’s Press), George Marlin, Chairman of the Aid to the Church in Need-U.S.A., highlights the tsunami of religious persecution.

Many American Christians were unaware of the significant role their co-religionists traditionally played in the Middle East. Marlin notes: “Since the Islamic conquest of the region in the seventh century, indigenous Christian communities have remained a vital part of the Arab world, with the faithful among the leading creators of that civilization.”

Yet religious minorities have been rewarded for their efforts with exile, brutality, and death. The violence grows out of beliefs and traditions within Islam. Noted Marlin: “current persecutions inflicted on many Christians in the Arab world is an extension of centuries of Islamic law, discrimination and societal bias, which have relegated Christians, as well as other minorities, to second-class citizenship.”

Marlin describes the growth of Christianity in the Mideast. The Christian presence diminished after Islam’s armed conquest of the region, but survived, at least until recently.

Islam arose in the Seventh Century and advanced through war. In this way Islam was very different from Christianity. Explains Marlin: “Unlike Christ’s apostles, who preached to all nations but did not coerce or threaten non-believers, Muhammad told his followers that they had a duty to wage holy wars.”

Once adopted by those in power, most notably Rome’s Constantine, some Christians also used the sword to promote their faith. However, Christianity spent its formative period as a persecuted

minority faith. Once conquered by Muslim armies Christians became second class citizens, or dhimmis, tolerated but usually far from political power.

Although terrorism only recently has become a prominent tool of Islamic extremists, Mideast Christians long were targeted by radicals. Marlin notes that the “social and cultural Christian prominence flew in the face of radical Islamist goals as well as a traditional second-class status of Christians in Muslim society that had once been the norm.”

Over time violence became the norm against Christians in many of their traditional homes. But sustained brutality turned into an epidemic after the U.S. ousted the secular dictator Saddam Hussein from Iraq and Syria’s secular dictator Bashar al-Assad lost control of much of his nation.

Warns Marlin, “In its reign of terror, ISIS has not only murdered Christians or driven them from their homes; it has also destroyed scores of ancient Christian shrines, churches, monasteries, relics and a host of historic documents and manuscripts.”

Marlin offers a synopsis of the status of Christians in key countries in the region. Nowhere is the news particularly good. There is intolerance and occasional violence in Turkey. In Egypt Copts remain victims of systemic discrimination and frequent violence.

Although Christians remain far better protected in Lebanon than elsewhere in the region, their numbers are falling. Martin warns that “many Christian leaders fear that latent persecution and the Islamization of Lebanese society pose a growing threat to those freedoms.”

Iraq and Syria are catastrophes. Although Saddam Hussein was a tyrant, he focused his attentions on political opponents. But not the Islamic State, which has initiated a new, more intense, round of persecution.

Syria once was a haven for Iraqi Christians, but they have been caught between the Assad dictatorship and increasingly radical insurgents. If Washington foolishly attempts to oust the Damascus government without reasonable hope of a responsible successor regime, the situation facing Christians will worsen.

Iran and Saudi Arabia present more conventional cases of pervasive persecution, though the latter, an American ally, is by far worse. The “Christian” state birthed from Sudan’s long conflict, South Sudan, itself collapsed in conflict resulting mass death.

The challenge which Marlin so ably describes is playing out before our eyes every day. Ultimately, everyone in the region will pay a high price if Christianity disappears in the face of overwhelming violence. Christians would be merely the first victim. Others, including Muslims, would not be far behind.

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