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Mideast Christians Are Being Killed -- As A Result of Republican Party Policies

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As in years past at this time of the year Christmas trees filled homes and nativity scenes sprouted on lawns across America. Despite annoyance with sometimes ham-handed attempts to subsume Christmas in generic “holiday” celebrations, Christians were free to celebrate their faith as in the past.

Not so tens and perhaps hundreds of millions of believers abroad. Murder by such groups as the Islamic State and Boko Haram topped pervasive persecution and discrimination in many nations. The Pew Research Center figured that Christians are harassed and harmed in more than 100 countries, the most of any religious group. Christians are particularly vulnerable to government abuse, especially in Muslim-majority states.

On Christmas Eve Senator and presidential contender Marco Rubio penned an article decrying the lack of “attention paid to the plight of these Christian communities in peril.” He criticized the Obama administration (naturally) and promoted the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (appropriately). Rubio also called for diplomatic, financial, and military support for Christians abroad.

Rubio’s concern no doubt is genuine. However, the policies implemented by his party and advocated by him and his fellow GOP presidential contenders have hurt and will continue to hurt Christians around the world. The best that can be said for Rubio is that he may be ostentatiously oblivious rather than calculatingly malicious. In contrast is former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who actively aids Israeli settlers in the West Bank, harming Christian and Muslim Palestinians alike. And Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, who last year used a conference of persecuted Christians as a campaign prop to proclaim his everlasting fealty to Israel.

No single policy was as injurious to Middle Eastern Christians as the invasion of Iraq. In this repressive but secular dictatorship, Christians were free to worship and work. The ruling Baath Party was formed by a Christian; under Saddam Hussein a nominal Christian, Tariq Aziz, was foreign minister and deputy prime minister. However, U.S. intervention triggered a sectarian conflict which drove out hundreds of thousands of Christians (many to Syria), spawned a new al-

Qaeda organization which morphed into the Islamic State (now killing Christians in Iraq and Syria), and tolerated ruthless Shia rule which encouraged Baathists and Sunni tribes to support ISIL (enabling its unexpected victories). Absent George W. Bush's Iraq folly, backed by Rubio and most of his competitors, the "murderous terrorist organization," as Rubio termed the Islamic State, wouldn't even exist.

The result, as the Department of State explained in its latest religious liberty report: "The security situation in the country deteriorated sharply during the year and the government lost effective control of significant terrain to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This resulted in increased levels of violence and lawlessness in that territory, as well as a destabilization of security throughout the country. Freedom of belief and practice was severely limited in areas beyond the government's control, where ISIL targeted religious groups it considered heretical in a systematic campaign of atrocities and forced expulsion."

Thank you, Sen. Rubio and fellow Republicans.

Most of the usual GOP suspects, starting with Rubio, also backed the Obama administration's decision to intervene in the Libyan civil war. This misbegotten policy left two competing governments, multiple armed militias, loose weapons permeating the region, and a geopolitical vacuum partly filled by the Islamic State, which publicly murdered Egyptian Copts who were working in Libya.

In its religious liberty report admitted State: "While the constitution bans discrimination based on religion, the government did not prevent violent extremist groups from taking advantage of the post-revolution security vacuum to attack religious minorities, and did not investigate crimes against religious minorities or religious sites." Moreover, "Coptic Christians were targeted in several incidents."

Thank you, Sen. Rubio and GOP neoconservatives.

Then there is Syria, engulfed by a hideous civil war. Bashar al-Assad is another secular dictator, coming from the minority Alawite sect. While he uses fear of potential religious persecution for his political benefit, Christians and other religious minorities have good reason to be terrified about Syria après Assad. After all, many of them fled Iraq, where they've seen the ending of the movie: it isn't pretty. Opposing Assad are unashamed extremists and jihadists and largely nonexistent and ineffective "moderates," who upon losing surrender personnel and weapons to unashamed extremists and jihadists. Yet Rubio and most of the other Republican contenders want to oust Assad, who possesses the most effective force opposing ISIL. Several of them also want to confront Moscow, even shoot down Russian planes, over its support for the Assad government.

Should Rubio & Co. succeed, the likely fate of Christians is grim. Noted State: "With the worsening conflict, the government did not control significant terrain within the country, rendering it incapable of governing those portions of the country." What happened there? "Extremists groups targeted Shia, Alawites, and religious minorities with killings, kidnappings,

torture, and arrests in the areas of the country under their control.” More specifically, “ISIL required Christians to convert, flee, pay a special tax, or face execution in territory it controls, and systematically destroyed churches, Shia shrines, and other religious sites.”

On a recent trip to Jordan and Lebanon I met with several Christian aid workers active in Syria. Most complained about U.S. policy targeting Assad. One said to me: “You Americans don’t know what you are doing.” Christians must fear more than jihadists. Joseph Khourieh, a Syrian Christian whose family fled to Lebanon, told the *Washington Post*: “They were targeting Christians because they thought we had more money to pay ransom.”

Thank you, Sen. Rubio and Republican hawks.

Almost as bad is Washington’s reflexive support, endorsed by Rubio and the rest of the GOP presidential gaggle, for ruthlessly Islamic regimes throughout the Middle East and beyond. For instance, though Afghanistan has fallen off the political radar screen, Rubio sees no end to Washington’s Quixotic, 14-year attempt to create a democratic, centralized state in this inhospitable nation. He insisted the administration leave 10,000 troops there to allow the next president to “set a responsible long-term policy,” likely a permanent garrison to defend the corrupt, incompetent government in Kabul. After all, he declared, Afghanistan—despite the quick defeat of al-Qaeda, which relocated elsewhere, and irrelevance of the Taliban, which wants to rule locally, not strike overseas—“is our problem.”

Yet Afghanistan is one of the worst states for Christians. Explained State: “Governmental practice and laws, however, limited freedom of religion, particularly for religious minorities. According to the courts’ interpretation of Islamic law, Muslims can be punished for converting from Islam to other religions.” Moreover, “Public opinion continued to be openly hostile toward converts to Christianity and to organizations that proselytized.”

Thank you, Sen. Rubio and Republican Party.

More broadly, despite complaining about foreign blasphemy laws, Rubio declared that the U.S. must “reinforce our alliances.” Some of his competitors are worse. Jeb Bush was particularly insistent about rebuilding “our relationships with allies and key relationships in the Middle East, including the Persian Gulf states and of course Egypt.” New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie worried about the Obama administration having hurt the feelings of Saudi Arabia’s king. Most GOP candidates back Riyadh’s foolish war in Yemen. It’s bad enough to subsidize prosperous, populous, and democratic nations in Asia and Europe which don’t feel like paying to protect themselves. But in the Middle East Washington’s posse is filled with bad actors which mistreat Christians.

Saudi Arabia is essentially a totalitarian state, without a single operating church (or synagogue or temple) for non-Muslims. Noted State: “The government detained individuals on charges of violating sharia, committing blasphemy, sowing discord in society, and insulting Islam.” Moreover, “the government harassed, detained, arrested, and occasionally deported some foreign residents who participated in private non-Muslim religious activities.”

Egypt has the largest Christian population by proportion outside of Lebanon, yet Coptic Christians remain victims of persecution, discrimination, and violence. This after the military ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government of Mohamed Morsi. The Obama administration ended up embracing the country's new pharaoh, General-President Abdel Fata al-Sisi, who is more repressive than Hosni Mubarak. The GOP wants an even closer relationship.

State identified many problems in Egypt: people were prosecuted for religious defamation and blasphemy; "police and security officials reportedly failed to respond in cases of kidnapping and extortion of Christians"; "accountability for previous sectarian crimes was uneven"; so-called "reconciliation" sessions were used to insulate violent Muslims from responsibility for attacks on Copts; "Christians in Upper Egypt, however, were targeted for kidnapping and extortion disproportionately"; and "Building and re-building churches in the absence of anticipated legislation was sometimes met with societal resistance, occasionally turning violent."

Other allied/friendly Islamic states with high government restrictions or social hostilities toward Christians include the Central Asian "stans," Indonesia, Pakistan, and Turkey. The more support lavished on such "allies," the less credibility and clout the U.S. has in advocating religious liberty.

Thank you, Sen. Rubio and fellow GOP presidential wannabes.

Finally, Rubio's slavish political commitment to the Israeli government hurts Christians there. "We need to stand strong with Israel," he declared, mimicking every other GOP presidential candidate, all of whom have shamelessly claimed to love Israel more than everyone else ever has and ever will. Worst may have been New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, who declared "Our commitment to Israel must be absolute." Although he professed to be a tough guy, he groveled before billionaire Sheldon Adelson, apologizing for accurately describing the West Bank as "occupied territory."

Israel welcomes Western Christians for their political support, not religious convictions. Arab Christians don't even receive that benefit. Vandalism and harassment of Christian property and clergy, respectively, by ultra-Orthodox activists is common. Benzion Goptstein, head of the extremist group Lehava, recently called Christians "vampires and blood suckers" who should be expelled.

Christians in the West Bank, who live and worship openly, complain far more about the impact of the Israeli occupation than activities of the Palestinian Authority. On one trip to Israel I had dinner with several Arab Christians in Bethlehem—located in the occupied West Bank—and they talked of inconvenience, hardship, harassment, and discrimination. An American who left his job as a policeman in Minnesota to marry a Palestinian woman told how he came to fear the police, that is, the Israeli security forces. Melkite Catholic Archbishop Abuna Elias Chacour asked why, for U.S. Christians, "does friendship with Jews mean enmity with Palestinians?"

State acknowledged numerous problems. Jewish settlers made more "price tag" attacks on Palestinian Christian than Muslim sites in the West Bank. Arrests and prosecutions are rare. Lehava is one group perpetrating attacks on non-Jews. "Societal attitudes toward missionary

activities and conversion to other religions were generally negative.” Israel’s visa issuance process “significantly impeded the work of Christian institutions.” Arab clergy “faced long delays in receiving visas, and sometimes authorities denied their visa applications.” Israeli security barriers, built on Palestinian, not Israeli, land, impeded activities by clergy and congregants. In contrast, “Relations between Palestinian Christians and Muslims were generally good, with both groups focusing more on ethnic and political similarities than religious differences.”

Overall, when it comes to religious liberty Israel is not as supportive as most American Christians probably imagine. The singular determination of Rubio and the other GOP candidates to win votes from Christian Zionists, irrespective of the basic rights and liberties of Palestinians, would preclude any Republican president from pushing to improve the status of Christians living in Israel or under Israeli occupation in the West Bank.

Thank you, Sen. Rubio and fellow Republicans.

As Rubio noted in the *Washington Post*, Americans should remember that in the Middle East, “due to the scourge of radical Islam, some churches that have existed since the Book of Acts are on the brink of ruin.” At the same time, American voters should remember that Republican support for promiscuous military intervention and Islamic dictators is what loosed this scourge upon Middle Eastern Christians.

Unfortunately, doing more of the same in the Mideast, as Rubio proposed, would only yield the same result. Is he more interested in promoting misbegotten neoconservative crusades or helping persecuted Christians? As candidates, his and his fellow Republican contestants’ answer is clear. We can only hope and pray that they might answer differently as president.

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