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Genocide Proceeds Against Christians and other Mideast Religious Minorities

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ERBIL, IRAQ—Kurdistan in the north of Iraq has become a refuge for Christians and other religious minorities in the midst of the Islamic State's murderous rampage. In response the Republican-controlled House voted to designate the Islamic State's murderous campaign against Christians and Yazidis as genocide.

It's an ironic judgment from a body controlled by the political party most responsible for the rise of ISIS—absent George W. Bush's foolhardy invasion of Iraq, the deadly movement would not even exist. Nevertheless, Secretary of State John Kerry last week used the term for the first time regarding the Islamic State, declaring that it "is responsible for genocide against groups" including religious minorities.

The abundant crimes of Daesh, as it also is known, constitute an unprecedented religious war against members of minority faiths who until recently largely lived in peace with their Muslim neighbors. While Christians and other religious minorities suffered pervasive discrimination and persecution by such U.S. allies as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, these groups were largely unmolested by the secular dictatorships of Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Indeed, a Christian woman was better off living in Baghdad or Damascus than in Riyadh or Islamabad.

Alas, George W. Bush's botched campaign against non-existent Iraqi weapons of mass destruction unleashed a tsunami of Islamist brutality. Newly empowered Shia turned the state against formerly ruling Sunnis, who responded with a virulent insurgency and indiscriminate terrorism. Christians, who possessed neither militia nor safe haven, suffered grievously, with hundreds of thousands driven from their homes, many fleeing to Syria.

The collapse the latter into civil war left Christians (and other religious minorities) poised uneasily between the government and insurgents, with many leaning toward the former. After all, they lived the show in Iraq and didn't enjoy the ending. Worse was to come from the Islamic State, an outgrowth of al-Qaeda in Iraq which allied with disgruntled Sunnis to defeat Baghdad's forces in Iraq and displace both government forces and more moderate insurgents in Syria.

As ISIS created its "Caliphate"—establishing its rule over a sizeable amount of territory—the group expanded its depredations against most everyone, including unreceptive Sunnis, but especially Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities. Hence the brutal campaign detailed in the nearly 300-page report, "Genocide against Christians in the Middle East," issued by the Knights of Columbus and In Defense of Christians, a group which focuses on the Mideast.

This sustained Islamist attack targets the roots of Christianity. Believers were first called Christians in Antioch, Syria (Acts 11:26). Iraqi Christians, known as Assyrians, were converted to Christianity 2000 years ago, apparently by St. Thomas. Christianity predated Islam by hundreds of years and was subjugated through military conquest, not converted through spiritual persuasion. Nevertheless, the Christian community remained vibrant and contributed greatly to Muslim-dominated societies in succeeding centuries. Even in recent years Christians enjoyed surprising influence and authority. A Christian founded the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. In Hussein's Iraq a nominal Christian, Tariq Aziz, held multiple high public positions.

Today, however, the very survival of Christianity in its birthplace is in question.

The report argued simply: "ISIS is committing genocide" against Christians in Iraq, Libya, and Syria. "Killings, rapes, torture, kidnappings, bombings and the destruction of religious property and monuments are, in some instances, a matter of public record." But the document adds much more detail, reporting crimes largely hidden from public view in the West. Nor is this all. Explained the authors: "We are now being sent new stories and new evidence daily. So what is known about ISIS' genocidal atrocities will only increase, and the known scale of the horrors that have occurred can only expand with time."

The words of ISIS are clear. The organization publishes a magazine named *Dabiq*, the place where the movement expects to destroy the "Crusader army," meaning Christians. This is no metaphorical quest. Explained the Islamic State: "We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women, by the permission of Allah, the Exalted." If today's ISIS killers fail in this regard, "then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at the slave market."

Nor is this viewed as a battle against secular armies. To the contrary, stated the Islamic State: "It will continue to wage war against the apostates until they repent from apostasy. It will continue wage war against the pagans until they accept Islam. It will continue to wage war against the Jewish state until the Jews hide behind their gharqad trees. And it will continue to wage war against the Christians until the truce decreed sometime before the Malhamah. Thereafter, the slave markets will commence in Rome by Allah's power and might."

Some policymakers mistakenly believed the assault on Christians was limited—for instance, mostly occurring in Nineveh in 2014. However, noted the study, "Christians have been attacked throughout the region, not simply in the Nineveh area or only during the summer of 2014. Christians have been attacked and killed by ISIS and its affiliates in Syria, Libya, Yemen and surrounding areas." Indeed, the violence began in Iraq shortly after the U.S. invasion by ISIS' predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The Islamic State claimed to represent historic Islam and convinced some observers that it had replicated the practice of levying the jizya tax on Christians, otherwise leaving them at peace. That is not true. Rather, explained the study, ISIS purported to employ theological concepts which may "mean something contrary to historic Islamic practice" or "nothing at all." In this case, jizya proved to be a ploy, "almost always a term for extortion and a prelude or postscript to ISIS violence against Christians."

In Nineveh, for instance, demands for the tax preceded “killings, kidnappings, rapes and the dispossession of the Christian population.” In Raqqa the practice was employed only “after ISIS had already closed the churches, burned Bibles and kidnapped the town’s priests.” Scholar Alberto Fernandez called the concept “more a Salafi Caliphate publicity stunt than a careful recreation of jizya as practiced by the early Caliphs.” It seems even ISIS, which positively gloried in its murderous ways, hoped to mislead its opponents as to the nature of its campaign.

Unfortunately, there is no reason to believe that the Islamic State will change its behavior as long as any Christians or other religious minorities survive under its control. Argued the report: “Thousands of Christians, Yazidis, Shia and Sunni Muslims, Turkmen, Shabaks, Sabean-Mandeans, Kaka’ en Kurds, and Jews have been—and will continue to be—targeted for extermination because of their religion by a well-financed and highly-organized network of criminal gangs.”

Yet to describe the Islamic State’s crimes in generalities does not adequately communicate the truly horrific nature of its campaign. The NGO Shlomo recorded 1131 Christians murders between 2003 and 2014 in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, with more than 100 more since then. Patriarch Ignatius Youssef III Younan of Antioch, Syria believed more than 500 Christians in Iraq and more than 1000 in Syria were murdered. The Archbishop of Aleppo, Syria, Jean-Clement Jeanbart, said that hundreds of Christians have been killed or kidnapped in his city and perhaps thousands in Syria as a whole. Others have been slaughtered in Libya and elsewhere.

While widespread murder is the Islamic State’s most odious crime, the group inflicts grievous harm on those it does not kill. Those interviewed for the report cited all manner of bodily harm: “Choking, beatings with guns and electrical cords, mock executions, and withholding of food and water in the extreme heat are commonplace.” Rape also is widespread, with more than “1500 Yazidi and Christian girls” taken as sex slaves. As in ancient times, they are sold and shared like chattel. At least 380 Christians are known to have been kidnapped in Syria and more than 150 have been seized in the Nineveh Plain since 2014. Such activities create “mental traumas” akin to PTSD, “Including intrusive thoughts of their captors, overwhelming emotions of fear and grief, and nightmares.” In some cases, such as women repeatedly raped by ISIS fighters, there is “acute mental distress, even total mental breakdown.”

Moreover, the Islamic State coerced religious conversion. Dozens of Christians have affirmed Islam “after being deprived of food and water, and being beaten and threatened with death.” This process might seem unimportant to nonbelievers but, reported the authors, “the violation of conscience—the spiritual rape—involved in a conversion through force works a state of mental and spiritual unrest that is difficult to put into words.” A coerced conversion against one’s beliefs “introduces fear, uncertainty, guilt, and shame into the most important and intimate relationship one can experience.”

There also is robbery of most everything Christians possessed—“homes, businesses, money, jewelry, clothes, and supplies.” ISIS members often returned to steal more. Islamic State fighters seized the luggage of Christians forced into exile. Those left in their homes were denied electricity, sanitation, and water.

Finally, there is religious cleansing. For instance, “Christians were rounded up into busses and driven out to a remote place to fend for themselves. Sometimes this was next to a river they had

to cross, sometimes it was in the middle of the desert.” Left without food and water, many had to walk for hours to reach safety. All told, noted the report: “ISIS generally operated with extreme indifference or hostility to the survival and well-being of its Christian victims.”

The report included detailed lists of crimes committed against Christians and Christians known to be murdered, as well as summaries of witness statements. These highlighted the tragedy that has overwhelmed the region’s religious minorities. Those who escaped reported brutality, beatings, kidnappings, disappearances, expulsions, ransom demands, detentions, looting, churches vandalized and destroyed, homes seized, forced conversions, coerced marriages, and killing. Perhaps the saddest cases, tragically common, involved family members who chose to remain after ISIS’s arrival, believing that the situation would quickly return to normal. Many since have not been heard from and their fate is unknown.

Among the creepiest evidence of the depravity of the Islamic State is the “Subject/Prices of Selling Spoils of War” flier reproduced in the report. Almost beyond belief, this price list for sexual slaves has been confirmed as genuine by Zainab Hawa Bangura, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sexual Violence in Conflict. The document complained about a drop in “demand in women and spoils of war” which cut ISIS revenues. Thus, the “caliphate” set price controls, with the penalty of death for any violations. Prices started at 50,000 dinars for a Christian or Yazidi woman between 40 and 50 and rose to 200,000 for any Christian or Yazidi child from one to nine. Only foreigners, as in “Turks, Syrians, and Gulf Arabs,” were allowed to purchase more than “3 spoils.” Bangura explained that such “spoils” often were first offered to Islamic State leaders, next to wealthy Gulf Arabs, and then to local fighters.

Included within the report is a memorandum from ADF International detailing the extraordinary damage done Middle Eastern Christians. While Christianity is the most victimized faith worldwide, noted the group, “the persecution of Christian and other religious or ethnic minorities in Syria and Iraq differs significantly from the rest of the world due to the magnitude of the persecution and the intent behind it.” The number of Christians in Iraq is estimated to have dropped from 1.4 million in 2003 to 275,000 today. In Syria the number has gone from 1.25 million in 2011 to about a half million today.

As the Knights/IDC report substantiates, there is no doubt of widespread genocidal persecution of religious minorities. The biggest challenge is what to do about it. Many who pushed for the designation of “genocide” hoped to force a response from Washington. But there is little military option. After all, foolish U.S. intervention triggered the crisis in Iraq and Libya and exacerbated the conflict in Syria. Indictments under the International Criminal Court would provide moral satisfaction, but the Islamic State must be defeated for any prosecutions to occur. Indeed, defeat itself is the most important way to stop ISIS activities, and is primarily the responsibility of the Middle Eastern nations under attack from Daesh.

Perhaps the most obvious response by Americans would be to offer more humanitarian aid and accept additional refugees. Despite security fears, the Islamic State is unlikely to attempt to use refugees, who typically wait years for resettlement, as a means to attack America. However, Muslim refugees could be taken in by the Persian Gulf States. Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities lack any comparable Mideast sanctuary: only Lebanon is hospitable to non-Muslims, and is overwhelmed with refugees of all faiths.

The slaughter of Middle Eastern Christians and other persecuted faiths is one of the great tragedies of our age. The Knights/IDC report helps bring the Islamic State's many crimes to life. There is no panacea, no easy solution to the ongoing conflict. But Americans can act even when their government cannot. Today they should act even if their government does not.

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