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The Republican Party's policies are killing Middle East Christians

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Christians in America remain free to celebrate Christmas. Not so for 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.

Presidential contender Sen. Marco Rubio has denounced the lack of "attention paid to the plight of these Christian communities in peril." He criticized the Obama administration and called for action.

Rubio's concern no doubt is genuine. However, the Republican Party's policies have hurt and will continue to hurt Christians around the world.

No single action was as injurious to Middle Eastern Christians as the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In this repressive but secular dictatorship, Christians were free to worship and work.

However, Washington's intervention triggered a sectarian conflict which drove out hundreds of thousands of Christians, spawned a new al-Qaida organization that morphed into the Islamic State, and tolerated ruthless Shiite rule that encouraged Baathists and Sunnis to support Islamic State. Absent U.S. President George W. Bush's Iraq folly, backed by Rubio and most of his competitors, the Islamic State (IS) extremist group wouldn't exist.

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 vacuum partly filled by the Islamic State, which publicly murdered Egyptian Copts who were working in Libya.

Syria is engulfed by a hideous civil war. President Bashar Assad is another secular dictator, coming from the minority Alawite sect. While he used fear of potential religious persecution for his political benefit, Christians and other religious minorities have good reason to be terrified about a Syria after 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 jihadis and largely nonexistent and ineffective "moderates." Yet Rubio and most of the other Republican contenders want to oust Assad, who possesses the most effective force opposing Islamic State.

Should Rubio and company succeed, the likely fate of Christians is grim. Noted the U.S. State Department: In Syria “IS required Christians to convert, flee, pay a special tax, or face execution in territory it controls, and systematically destroyed churches, Shiite 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 simply: “You Americans don’t know what you are doing.”

Almost as bad is Washington’s reflexive support, endorsed by Rubio and the rest of the GOP presidential gaggle, for ruthless Islamic regimes throughout the Middle East and beyond. For instance, despite complaining about foreign blasphemy laws, Rubio declared that the U.S. must “reinforce our alliances.” Some of his Republican competitors are even more insistent.

Yet Saudi Arabia is essentially a totalitarian state, without a single operating church (or synagogue or temple) for non-Muslims. Noted the State Department: “The government harassed, detained, arrested and occasionally deported some foreign residents who participated in private non-Muslim religious activities.”

Coptic Christians remain victims of persecution, discrimination and violence in Egypt even after the military ouster of the Muslim-dominated government of Mohammed Morsi. The GOP wants a closer embrace of General-President Abdel Fata al-Sisi, who is more repressive than Hosni Mubarak.

Finally, Rubio’s slavish political commitment to the Israeli government, mimicking every other GOP presidential candidate, hurts Christians there. When I visited, Christians in the West Bank, who live and worship openly, complained far more about the impact of the Israeli occupation than activities of the Palestinian Authority.

State acknowledged numerous problems. Israeli settlers made more “price tag” attacks on Palestinian Christian than Muslim sites in the West Bank. “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.”

As Rubio argued, Americans should remember the plight of Middle East Christians. At the same time, Americans should remember that Republican support for promiscuous U.S. military intervention and Islamic dictators did much to bring down disaster upon Middle Eastern Christians.

Unfortunately, doing more of the same in the Mideast, as Rubio and most Republicans propose, would only yield the same result. They should stop turning misbegotten neoconservative crusades into America’s foreign policy.

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