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## **Change hearts to fight religious persecution**

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Iraq's north is ground zero for the region's religious wars. Many of the victims of the Islamic State have fled to Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan, an autonomous region whose people long have desired independence.

The region today contains well over a million people displaced from persecution and fighting elsewhere. The human flood started more than a decade ago, with a sustained attack on Christians by Islamist extremists in Iraq. More recently the Islamic State has conducted a murderous campaign against Christians, Yazidis and other religious minorities.

Refugees are hard to miss: Death, prison, mistreatment, and hardship await those stuck under the Islamic State.

Even when ISIS is defeated the status of Christians and other religious minorities will remain precarious at best. Unfortunately, religious persecution is not a temporary response to a rare moment of conflict. Instead, it is the norm in Muslim majority nations across the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.

U.S. officials have never felt comfortable confronting the crime of religious persecution. They have few answers to offer other than pressing unwilling governments to better protect politically unpopular minorities.

Thus, to counter the underlying intolerant ideologies and theologies, argued Tina Ramirez, head of the group Hardwired, you "have to deal with human dignity of the other and freedom of conscience." In her view, "building local leadership" is the only way to get long-term results.

"With this model you replicate the process. Local people need to take up religious freedom themselves," she explained.

It should be obvious that religion cannot be separated from international affairs. Much Middle Eastern terrorism against Americans and others is blowback for U.S. military and political policies, but theological acceptance, even encouragement, of violence acts as a powerful accelerant. Religion also underlies the repressive nature of most Arab and Islamic regimes.

Thus, any response to issues of violent extremism must take religion into account. American officials should continue to press governments of Islamic nations to change oppressive policies.

A number of worthy organizations combat religious persecution. But Hardwired, formed by Ramirez, a former Capitol Hill staffer long dedicated to the cause of religious liberty, attempts to address the issue by changing the way contending religious groups think in persecution-prone societies.

Hardwired teaches religious minorities how to press for freedom of religious conscience for all and religious majorities why they should respect the freedoms of those in the minority. The group explains that it seeks out local leaders in government, education, journalism, business, law, faith, and more. And the effort is working, moving people, one-by-one, to support more tolerant policies and societies.

Christians and other religious minorities obviously need to learn how to better organize and defend their right to practice their faith. But they also need allies among religious majorities to turn religious freedom into a legal principle and political practice.

Despite all of the good done by Hardwired, the overall task of promoting religious liberty in the Middle East obviously remains daunting. Hearts and minds need to be changed.

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